The Prestige

by black_feather_fiction

Summary

"Every great magic trick consists of three parts or acts. The first part is called "The Pledge"."
The magician shows you something ordinary: a deck of cards, a bird or a man. He shows you this object. Perhaps he asks you to inspect it to see if it is indeed real, unaltered, normal. But of course... it probably isn't. The second act is called "The Turn". The magician takes the ordinary something and makes it do something extraordinary. Now you're looking for the secret... but you won't find it, because of course you're not really looking. You don't really want to know. You want to be fooled. But you wouldn't clap yet. Because making something disappear isn't enough; you have to bring it back. That's why every magic trick has a third act, the hardest part, the part we call "The Prestige"." (Cutter, in The Prestige (2006))

An epic tale about Thanos, a song, and two mages in a weird and rather unkind world, who might be a tiny little bit afraid that love might be what they are starting to feel for each other.

Notes

Okay, so I'm going to ramble a bit, but my rambling will hopefully also give you a relatively good idea what to expect from the Prestige:

This is a post-TDW-AU that deviates in a lot of things from MCU timelines. Meaning, Frigga never got killed, Bucky never killed Stark's parents, the gems are not where they are in the movies, Ultron never happened, JARVIS is still up and running, Stark went to space instead. Wakanda had their coming-out a lot sooner.

I use the MCU very opportunistically, meaning that I obey to its rules and use their versions of characters only when it's convenient, and I borrow from Norse mythology. A lot. This fic was inspired, in part, by Bend Around The Wind by Scyllaya, so you will find elements of it in there (including Hatchet!), and Hlin was heavily inspired by the wonderful name-sake in Catch and Release by Like_A_Hurricane. The tone of this fic will be humorous and light at times and rather oozing with drama, hurt and angst at others. Because like Loki, I'm a pendulum that likes to swing both ways. There will be definitely quite a few triggers in there, some early on, some in much later chapters, so if you think you might react badly to such things, maybe you should refrain from reading it. I've tried to include triggers in the tags. Parts of the fic are NOT happy, be warned. Also, I might be a bit evil as an author. Maybe.

Tony/Loki will develop slowly, especially the fluffy part of the relationship, because my versions of the characters carry a heavy bag of traumas and issues, but there IS going to be sex and fluff.

Intersex Jotunn/Loki: I've been made aware of the problematic aspects of this tag. Problematic, because in many fics, and mine is among them, the characters tagged with intersex don't really represent the reality of intersex persons in the real world. And I have wondered whether to still include it. I haven't removed it, because it's still a valid trigger warning, but I want to clarify a few things here. In my AU, the most common anatomy of the Jotunn include both a penis and a vulva. So Loki, having both, is not truly intersex. He conforms to the Jotunn norm, in fact.

BUT Loki has not grown up on Jotunheim, he has grown up on Asgard, and there, he definitely does NOT fit the norm.

So no, Loki is not intersex in the real world definition for humans. However, he shares some of the social stigma and the possible issues that come with it.

Yeah, and this is going to be a long fic if I really go through with it, and some of the characters aren't gonna show up for some time - just a warning, if you have high expectations
for them to pop around the corner in chapter 3 ;)
Naturally, I don’t own any of the characters or the world, Marvel owns it all, and I'm doing all this purely for non-commercial purposes etc. blah blah blah.
Otherwise, have fun with the drama – if you like that, you’ve definitely come to the right place (enter diabolical laughter here).

Updating schedule: is irregular, because my free time is a wretchedly underfed creature, but I prepare batches of chapters, meaning I will always post several chapters over a period of a few days, then go into a hiatus again.

- Inspired by Bend Around the Wind by Scyllaya
- Inspired by Catch and Release by Like_a_Hurricane
The Scavengers

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

„Every great magic trick consists of three parts or acts. The first part is called "The Pledge". The magician shows you something ordinary: a deck of cards, a bird or a man. He shows you this object. Perhaps he asks you to inspect it to see if it is indeed real, unaltered, normal. But of course... it probably isn't. The second act is called "The Turn". The magician takes the ordinary something and makes it do something extraordinary. Now you're looking for the secret... but you won't find it, because of course you're not really looking. You don't really want to know. You want to be fooled. But you wouldn't clap yet. Because making something disappear isn't enough; you have to bring it back. That's why every magic trick has a third act, the hardest part, the part we call "The Prestige". ““ (Cutter, in The Prestige (2006))

The way they caught Loki did not sit right with Tony Stark. Of course he was happy in a way, and relieved, everyone was happy, and relieved. One more supervillain tucked safely away in a SHIELD cell dozens of feet under the ground, bound with magic-repressing manacles, ready to be shipped off by Tor to the magic space Viking place, put him in a cell there, throw away the key. Phew.

Of course, there had been New York, but what Loki had pulled off after the alien invasion had managed to make Tony not any less nervous.

At first, after Thor had brought him to Asgard, there had been no news at all, which was good news, in anyone’s opinion.

And then, Jane had told them that the trickster was dead – having sacrificed himself to save her of all people, what the actual fuck? – but, you know, whatever.

And then, about a year after that, Loki had pulled the first trick.

And then the next.

And then the next.

And then the next.

Four times, he had shown his face on Earth, and each time, he had stolen something. And slowly, reluctantly, Tony had come to realise that maybe, just maybe, New York hadn’t given them the full picture of what Loki could do. Like teleportation. Or cloning himself. Or being caught in a bank robbery, only to have all the guards and policemen dance to a musical tune coming from nowhere while he was walking away, laughing. Only one time of the four, Loki had let it come to an actual fight, and at that occasion, he had proven to be a vicious bastard in hand to hand combat. Don’t get Tony even started on those knifes. Those pain-in-the-ass-sometimes-literally knifes.

And then there was what Loki actually fought for. Breaking into SHIELD and stealing information and an alien artefact found after the Chitauri invasion and that nobody even understood... made sense. Breaking into the Louvre only to steal an ancient piece of string less so, but, hell, who knew what that was good for. Maybe Loki had planned to hang himself and only this string could do it – and wouldn’t that be a weight off some people’s chests. Nobody ever found out exactly what he stole from Wakanda, but it probably had to do with vibranium. T’Challa was furious in any case, and
Tony hadn’t even been there to see it and make bad pussy jokes, since he was, at the time, busy
being kidnapped by alien mercenaries and all.

No fun times.

Well, parts of the kidnapping had been funny. If you squinted. Long enough.

And at least Tony had returned with a fucking spaceship, and Earth – or at least, Stark Industries –
had a better chance now than ever at doing the whole interstellar travel soon.

But the Swiss clock?

Like – it was just a clock. A very good clock, from what Tony had heard, but still. What on earth –
or maybe not Earth, because there were long stretches of time they saw and heard nothing of Loki at
all and who knew where he was then and what he was doing – was Loki planning that involved a
rare and improbably precise clock from the Middle Ages?

He had even gone to great lengths, stealing this one. Musical with dancing guards and showdown
between him and the Avengers in Geneva and everything, and Gods, Tony was so glad not to have
missed this at least. If only for the thank-you chocolate.

But still, all that trouble. For a clock.

And then, after once more months had passed without any news on Tall, Dark and Brooding, Loki
had reappeared, out of nowhere, in Central Park, looking like he had had a close encounter with the
Hulk. No, scratch that, he had looked better after the Hulk. He had not been bleeding, for instance.
Like, profusely, from several wounds. With bruises everywhere. His clothes singed. Smoking a bit.
Swaying on his feet.

He had still put up a fight. He had still been a pain in the ass.

Majorly.

So, yeah, sure, it had been relieving to finally see him go down. Get knocked out cold. He had even
stayed unconscious long enough for SHIELD to put those manacles on him – courtesy of Dr.
Strange, the guy who doesn’t need a secret identity because nobody would guess that to be his real
name. Everyone let go of a breath they hadn’t even known they’d been holding when Loki woke up
in his cell and it became clear very quickly that this time, he couldn’t escape.

But.

It didn’t sit quite right with Tony Stark.

Maybe it was just disappointing, he thought, walking down the bland corridor to the bland elevator
that would take him and Nat down several stories to another bland corridor at the end of which was a
bland but highly secured cell. It was an anti-climax. All that trouble, and then some other guy – or
gal – had done all the real work for them. They had just picked up the pieces.

Maybe it didn’t feel fair.

Well, screw fair. Loki didn’t do fair. And he’d given them enough trouble until the end.

‘Reasonable amount of money for your thoughts?’ Nat asked as they stood in the elevator.
'Fuck, Nat, I’ve been already a billionaire when I still shat my pants’ said Tony. ‘How the hell should I know what a reasonable amount of money is?’

She snorted. ‘True that.’

‘Catching him was far too easy’ said Tony then.

‘Mhm, yeah, reminds you of the helicarrier, doesn’t it?’ said Nat, and the elevator had arrived to more blandness. ‘Sure is overkill though, getting beaten to a pulp just so you can pretend to get caught’

‘Yeah, no’ Tony agreed. ‘That’s probably not it. Still – makes you wonder who he has pissed off that much.’

‘Yup’ Nat said. ‘Makes you wonder who to send the fruit basket to.’

Loki was sitting on the bench of his cell, hunched over and supporting his elbows on his legs. He was looking significantly better now than only a few hours ago, and Tony began to trust the security of the cell less and less. There was something about Rudolph’s posture he didn’t like. He couldn’t point his finger on it but he definitely didn’t like it.

But they were running out of time in any case.

‘So, Reindeer Games’ said Tony, wondering how long the energy barrier between them would hold if Loki started to test it again. It had held before.

But Loki had hammered on it with broken arms then, and his arms didn’t look broken anymore.

‘You sure heal up quickly.’

Loki didn’t lift his head.

‘Care to tell us who tenderised you for us? You know, so that we can thank them?’

‘Someone much stronger’ said Loki after a pause, and his voice sounded almost sweet. ‘And much more competent.’

He looked up at Tony with a smile.

‘That’s what you are’ said he. ‘Always the… Scavengers.’


It had been a bit funny, Tony had to admit.

But he didn’t like Loki’s smile. Nat shot Tony a glance and Tony knew what she was concerned about. Loki barely looked exhausted anymore.

Suddenly, Tony wondered whether it was that inconvenient after all that Thor would show up any minute, take the trickster off their hands before they had time to interrogate him, finally find out what was going on – because there was no relying on Thor in that respect, Blondy had the weirdest priorities about questions to be asked (Why did you pretend to be dead? Why won’t you still call me ‘brother’?) and papa Odin didn’t share what he knew. Which was why they were here in the first place, after the usual SHIELD interrogators had taken their turn.
‘Why the clock?’ Tony asked.

Loki cocked his head.

‘All the other stuff, okay, it’s weird, but I get it’ said Tony. ‘But why the clock?’

Nat had taken her turn, and like Odin hadn’t shared what she had found out. This time, she was only here for observation (maybe also to get Tony’s ass to safety, if necessary).

‘To tell the time of course’ said Loki.

‘And you couldn’t do that with like, any other clock?’

‘Why shouldn’t I do it with exactly that one?’ Loki replied.

‘And why the fucking musical? How did you even pull that off, without your glow-stick of destiny?’

Loki raised an eyebrow.

‘Oh, I know of a few very catching tunes, that’s all. I could hum one if you liked.’

‘No, thank you.’

‘Pied Piper of Hamelin ring a bell? I used a flute that time, but I remember the melody well, I’m sure I could-‘

‘They’ll fill your cell with poison gas if you only so much as produce two consecutive harmonious tones, you know?’

‘Why do people always think that seduction is reduced to harmony?’

‘What are you planning?’ Tony said that stop that line of conversation. It was making him jumpy (the musical thing truly had been a bit creepy, if hilarious).

‘Becoming the ruler of Midgard, and your cruel deaths.’

‘Bullshit’ Tony said.

Loki’s grin grew wider.

‘You found me out’ said he. ‘Your cruel death isn’t something I’d have to plan. I could ensure that while being drunken and dazzled.’

Probably, Tony thought.

‘I’m still alive so that makes you a liar, my dear friend’ said he nevertheless.

‘Oh, my, Loki a liar?’ Loki dropped his mouth open and widened his eyes. The next moment, he looked completely serious again, and that fast change was creepy. ‘You consider yourselves far more important than you are.’

‘So what IS important then?’ Nat asked, breaking her promise not to interfere.

‘Telling the time’ Loki said.

And then he sniffed, narrowed his eyes.
‘What is it, Rudolph?’ asked Tony.

‘Why, this underground facility suddenly smells so much dumber’ said Loki, his eyebrows arched. As an afterthought, he added, ‘Oh, that would explain it. Thor has arrived.’

‘Thor has finished the negotiations with SHIELD for Loki’s release’ Coulson said. ‘Or, more precisely, for certain conditions concerning Loki’s release.’

‘Negotiations? Actual negotiations?’ Tony asked. ‘As in, I give you something, you give me something?’

‘Oh, yes’ Coulson said with a certain joy.

‘So, how badly did you rip him off?’

Coulson gave Tony that small polite smile.

‘We are trying to maintain friendly relations with Asgard, Tony’

‘Yeah, so how badly did you rip him off?’

Coulson chuckled a bit.

‘You should rather be interested in what he wanted from us in return’

‘Enlighten me, Shaun of the Dead’

‘Shaun is actually one of the few people in that movie who doesn’t get turned into a zombie.’

Coulson turned to the coffee maker. Thor had gone downstairs to see Loki and Fury and Nat had gone with him to keep an eye on the two, and Tony wondered, sitting on the edge of the conference table of one of the many bland SHIELD meeting rooms (seriously, what was wrong with a bit of decoration? A picture of a motorcycle here and there… an ACDC poster…), whether it wasn’t depressing to come back from the dead only to drink terrible SHIELD meeting room coffee.

‘Apparently, Asgard is caught up in inter-realm politics, and Loki is at the centre of it’

‘Shocking’

‘I know, right?’ Coulson said and stirred his terrible coffee. Really, did that count as wasting your second chance at life to let shit like this touch your lips?

‘As it seems, he has stolen an object of interest in the realm called Vanaheim’

‘Loki a thief? Never!’

‘And the elves have demanded to have him handed over’ said Coulson and drank. He actually drank. Without flinching. Maybe a zombie after all. ‘Odin seems to be in no position to refuse’

‘Interesting’ said Tony. ‘But what does it have to do with us?’

‘The Bifrost is still being repaired’ Coulson said. ‘Some realms are already connected to it, others,
like Vanaheim, are cut off”

‘So the question is, how to get there’ said Tony.

‘Exactly’ said Coulson lifting his glass as if to toast him. Was being toasted with SHIELD meeting room coffee enough of an insult to demand retributions? After all, even Nat’s only comment on it had been that she could menstruate better stuff than this.

‘And that’s where we come in’

‘Do we?’

‘Oh yes’ said Coulson, and smiled. ‘Or rather…’

And at that moment, Tony understood.

‘No’

‘Tony…’

‘NO!’

‘Hear me out…’

‘No! No, no, no, no, no!’ Tony underlined his words with his finger. ‘No way in hell am I going to give you my ship to ship a trickster! No way in hell am I going to give you my ship at all!’

‘Tony…’

‘Prisoner transport for annoying tricksters is so not what I fought my way back to Earth for! And don’t even get me started on how you’re using stuff as leverage that belongs to another!’

That had probably sweetened the deal for SHIELD even more – get rid of the trickster, get an awful lot of rare materials and information from Asgard AND finally get their hands on Tony’s tech! He had NOT sat in that solitary cell for weeks for that, he had NOT almost lost all his hope of ever getting back for that, he had not broken up with Pepper in the fallout for that! Gods, he hadn’t even really gone back to space since his return because it still triggered so much fear. He had a SPACE SHIP and he was too scared to use it!

Probably another sign that Pepper was right and he was going crazy.

‘You wouldn’t even have to steer it-’

‘HELL, no! Coulson, I attribute your proposition to temporary insanity caused by dangerously inferior coffee, it’s poisoning your brain. If zombie brains can be poisoned. Seriously, have your taste buds never come back from the dead? Is drinking that vile brew compensating for eating rotting carcasses like the ghoul you are? ‘Cause, honestly, I can see no other reason-’

‘Stark!’

‘Oh, so now we’re suddenly back to Stark?’

‘I’m sure we can come to an agreement.’
They did.

Stark ripped SHIELD off badly of course (I mean, they had already admitted they had promised Thor something only Tony could grant, so it was their own fault, really), but still felt robbed in a vague way once the deal was done.

Maybe it was just the knowledge he would have to step into that ship again, worse, let someone else penetrate those corridors, worse, let Loki do it (in a way). The kitchen and community room, the small med-bay, the living quarters, the command centre, the holding cells. It had been Tony’s (well, not originally of course, but he had made it his). And now he checked the tech, swiped the dust from the counters for other people, knowing that Thor would even have to take the steering wheel for a while, and Tony hated it.

Apparently, it was not only the fact that Tony had a space ship that was so attractive for Asgard, but it was the specific kind of space ship he had, and wasn’t that peachy. With specific technology that Thor could use, and boost, so to travel… slightly more quickly than even usually possible with ridiculously advanced alien technology.

Apparently, without the Bifrost to help, Vanaheim wasn’t around the corner.

You live and learn.

You live and squirm at the thought of letting Thor drive your car, let alone this sweet baby.

So, no, despite all the concessions SHIELD had had to make, Tony was not super-happy, waiting on the air field next to the open ramp of the Iron Mantis, as he called it.

‘Added a few chains, huh?’ he asked as Thor arrived with Loki, Steve and Nat in tow. Bruce would sit this out on account of the probability of him wrecking the ship and killing them all in any kind of moderately dangerous situation, and Clint would sit this one out on account of the probability of him killing Loki if he was forced to stay in the same building with the trickster for any prolonged period of time. The whole situation was in any case a bit reminiscent of that day in the Central Park when Blondy had taken Emovillain back to Viking land. Loki was wearing the same chains, wrapped around his hands and connected to a collar on his neck. He was wearing the same muzzle.

‘What is with you and the Hannibal Lecter references anyway?’

‘I know not this Hannibal Lecter you talk about’ said Thor, looking weary and impatient. ‘But my brother was in far too light chains when I arrived.’

‘Light maybe, but they were magic repressing’ Tony said.

‘Not repressing enough’ said Thor. ‘My brother had almost eroded them completely by the time I put the new manacles on him. The old ones crumbled as soon as I opened them. Had I come only an hour later, Loki would have been free’

‘Oh’ said Tony, and eyed Loki who had a rather amused and predatory glint in his eyes. Tony was pretty sure the trickster was grinning under his muzzle. ‘So I was totally right about that bad gut feeling in your cell’

Loki shrugged and his eyes laughed even more.

‘Yeah, I know what you wanna say’ Tony said. ‘Gutting would have probably had a lot to do with
He turned to Blondy.

‘So, Steve the stage magician is all talk and no show, go figure. I guess the muzzle is there to repress his magic too then? Not simply a cruel Viking way of preventing the prisoner from speaking in his own defence at trial? That was what I assumed first, no offense’

Thor nodded gravely.

‘As long as sound can escape Loki’s lips, we are not safe, I’m afraid. Odin had and the Vanir will have other and less brute means to contain him, but for now, we are reduced to this’

At the mention of the Vanir, something changed in Loki’s face and Tony wondered whether Rudolph had ever been informed of the destination of his trip.

Only now, Loki also eyed the Iron Mantis, taking the details of the ship in with interest.

And then he seemed to understand something.

And Tony could watch the exact moment when Loki’s face fell.

It didn’t show much, but the amusement definitely vanished from his eyes. And when Thor tugged at his chain to make him go on, he stayed rooted on the spot.

‘What is it, Brother?’ asked Thor and turned back to him.

Slowly and very distinctly, Loki shook his head, staring his brother in the eyes.

Thor sighed.

‘I know you don’t want to face Vanir justice, Brother, but don’t think you would fare so much better in Asgard. And remember, it were your own actions that brought you here.’

Loki shook his head again.

‘It grieves me that even now, you’re determined to act like a coward’

The trickster raised an eyebrow, then shook his head a third time.

‘I don’t have time for your whining’ Thor said and pulled at Loki’s chains. Loki visibly resisted but had to eventually yield to his brother’s superior strength and stumbled forward. ‘The Vanir have asked for you and so you they will have.’

Thor dragged him on, and Loki kept pulling back.

‘Oh, this is going to be fun’ Nat murmured. ‘I can tell’
Now that you've read the chapter, please take a moment to admire the beautiful fanart Colin_Solowjow has made for me <3 :D

Scavengers on DeviantArt
Chapter Summary

Tony is not neurotic at all. Also, he doesn't like teeny horror movies when he's starring in them. Maybe it's a generation thing.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

‘Don’t… don’t touch that! No… that neither, give me that, don’t-‘

‘Tony, this is a chair. You don’t want me to touch a chair.’

Tony wrung his hands, holding a mug in one and being aware, in a far corner of his mind, of his own ridiculousness. But he loved that mug, it was bland and chipped, but he had drunk weird alien instant food that tasted like pineapple and mint from it for weeks, and this was his table, and his chair, and all these people invaded his quarters and rumpled his bed sheets and put their stuff everywhere, it was disconcerting.

He wanted this whole thing to be already over, so they could all leave his ship please, and he could remove their presence from it, because if nobody had noticed, this was HIS, and he hadn’t stared at that crack in the ceiling in the corridor leading to the command centre for ages, he used to spend hours staring at it, lying on the grid on the floor, studying it instead of thinking about how he had no idea how to get home and how he was going to die alone, in the void, of thirst, or hunger, or asphyxiation.

Trying not to think about the nuke and the Chitauri.

But if he lay down on the floor now and stared at that crack again, just for old times’ sake, Steve would probably stumble over him and think it weird or worrying or something.

Even though the Iron Mantis was HIS and he could do with it what he wanted. Including lying on the floor, staring at cracks.

Just saying.

But Nat was staring at him now, indicating with her raised eyebrow that she definitely judged Tony’s behaviour as weird, maybe worrying, so he probably should change something about it.

‘Okay, Nat, sit down’ said he and stepped back. ‘Okay, okay’

‘Why, thank you, Tony, how kind of you to allow it’ said Nat, rolled her eyes and sat down.

‘You’re… welcome’ said he, turned abruptly and left, cradling the mug in his hands. He would hide it in his quarters. With… some other stuff.

They had been travelling for a few days, mostly on autopilot. Tony had gotten pretty good at programming that after a while, and anyways, plans to integrate JARVIS into the Iron Mantis were already underway, the security cameras and many of the other sensors were already in place, a few
more months, and Tony would have at least had JARVIS with him, would maybe even have dared to go to outer space on his own again, but of COURSE Loki had had to mess things up, like he always did.

Even if, at the moment, Loki mostly sat in his cell, and did nothing at all.

The Capsicle had been the first to raise his hand when it had become clear that leaving the muzzle on Loki also meant that feeding him was impossible. And Tony had had to agree that this was… not ideal.

In a Geneva Convention sort of way.

Thor had been less worried.

According to him, not eating for a week or two wouldn’t harm Loki much (Loki had apparently, at one point in his life, eaten nothing for months at a time, and wasn’t there probably an interesting story behind that, not that Thor would share it, the spoil-sport), and the trip wouldn’t even take that long. And taking the muzzle off was too dangerous – even though the cell, according to Thor, had magic wards of its own. Apparently the mercenaries that had kidnapped Tony had been Skrulls and very good at appropriating all kinds of technology, even the paranormal kind. And Tony hadn’t found that out on his own, Thor had had to tell him, and it was really time those people left his ship, they were MEDDLING.

Tony sighed, pushed open the doors to his quarters, put the mug with the rest of the stuff, and decided to wander over to the command centre, to check the route. They had to leave the solar system behind for good before Thor could even think of doing his thing. Which Tony didn’t really want him to do in the first place but there it went. Stupid Skrulls and their fascination with tech and magic. Creating an interface for everything.

Which was exactly what Tony would do in their place but that wasn’t the point.

Regretting that this time, the interface made it possible for the jock of the party to take the car keys (and didn’t this sound like a teeny horror movie waiting to happen – I know what you did at Alpha Centauri last summer?), Tony entered the command centre, only to find said jock there, sitting in Tony’s favourite chair, the chair of the captain, leaning with his elbows on half the controls, bent forward and staring at the screens of the security camera feed again.

‘I gotta disappoint you, Muller, that bird’s not gonna sing’ said Tony, glad he had locked the controls before he had left.

Thor turned to him, confused.

‘Why are you speaking of birds, Son of Stark?’ asked he. ‘I would be confounded indeed to hear birdsong out here.’

Yes, because space is cold as hell and strangles you and far too big and everywhere you look is just too damn far away to ever reach in time and-

‘And I would be confounded indeed, and probably worried for my life, to suddenly hear Loki talk with his muzzle still on’ said Tony. ‘And I don’t really think he’s gonna do much else any time soon either. So I wonder what exactly you’re waiting for here’

In my chair. Leaning on half the controls, person who I’m gonna hand the car keys over to in a couple of hours.
‘Had he access to his magic, I believe he would do great many a things’ said he.

‘Many a troubling and troublesome things, I believe’ Tony said.

‘I don’t understand my brother anymore, Son of Stark’

‘I really wish you would stop calling me that’ Tony said with a pained smile. ‘And I doubt your brother understands himself much these days, if he ever has’

‘You wouldn’t know it now, but he was a fine warrior once, who could help Asgard where others failed – even if his battle strategy has always been… a bit unconventional’

Thor stared at the still figure of Loki again, then sighed.

‘I wonder what sentence the Vanir will pass’ said he.

‘You think they will kill him?’ Tony asked, wondering whether Thor would ever have agreed to bring Loki if that was the case – inter-galactic Viking politics be damned.

‘I do not expect it’ Thor said, confirming Tony’s thoughts. ‘But Vanir justice can be cruel without being in need of death’

Right. That sounded…pleasant.

‘But enough of that!’ Thor stood up, grinned like the sunshine and pounded Tony on the shoulder in a way that made him stumble forward and whimper. ‘Let us feast and be merry, for tomorrow we will travel fast as Ratatoskr among the branches of good Yggdrasil!’

And Tony squirmed at the thought of Thor drinking and driving. Really, this sounded more like teeny horror movie the more he thought about it.

To Tony’s immense relief, Thor went surprisingly easy on the alcohol that evening (or morning, who could tell in space, and Tony knew what he was talking about, he had spent two weeks without a single way to measure the time), but treated them with an unreasonably long story about a dangerous quest to hunt an ash dragon in Nifelheim that seriously lacked a point since they never even slayed that dragon. They slayed a lot of other monsters instead, and Loki somehow got them out of the clutches of the dragon which Thor mentioned as a side-note and then told them in length about the feast in their honour afterwards, with the trophies mounted in the great hall.

‘What trophies?’ Tony asked. ‘You never got the dragon and you said you had to abandon all your belongings running from him’

‘Oh, Loki tucked the trophies I lost in his pockets while fleeing’

‘A whole bilgesnipe’s head?!’

‘He has deep pockets’

‘No kidding’
And Thor continued with the tale of the feast and everything they ate there and Nat’s yawns got louder and louder, and even Steve’s politely interested gaze seemed to drift.

Later, on one of his control rounds, Tony found Steve staring out one of the bull’s eyes at the vastness out there that Tony tried his best to forget.

‘Enjoying the view?’ he asked.

‘You know, it’s strange’ said Steve. ‘how even space loses its novelty after a while. I mean, it’s space, and still, after only a few days, I sometimes forget it’s there’

Tony stopped next to him, stared outside too. He wanted to say something along the lines of, that’s normal, everyone is like that.

‘That’s because you have a home to go to’ said he instead.

Steve eyed him.

‘That’s true’ said he. ‘I’m sorry, Tony’

Tony shrugged, thinking of the times he had wished so hard to be rescued, that someone, anyone, would come for him, and had known at the same time that no one would.

That he was truly on his own.

‘It’s okay, I had it covered. I was fine’

‘Son of Stark, you can have confidence in me’ Thor said. ‘I swear I know what I’m doing’

Tony’s eyes went from Thor to the discreet stick that rose from the control panel after Thor had pushed the right buttons, and that would serve as the interface for Thor’s… thing.

‘Yes, I know, you’ve been wielding your hammer for a while’ said he. ‘but you see, wielding a hammer is different from steering a ship and there are things in here that a hammer could break, delicate things, and that we really, really need to get home, and-’

‘Anthony Stark’ said Thor, and Tony glanced up at the unexpected use of his full name. Thor looked at him calmly and a bit as if at a scared child. ‘My brother might be one of the best mages in the nine realms, but I have magic of my own, and you forget that I am over a thousand years old. I have learned to control mine to some degree during that time’

He laughed good-naturedly.

‘I’ve certainly learned enough control to steer a Skrull ship’ said he as if this was the easiest thing in the world.

Tony’s eyes went from him to the stick and back again.

‘Okay’ said he. ‘How?’
Thor’s eyebrows rose.

‘What do you mean, how?’

‘How are you going to steer?’

‘I doubt you would understand.’

‘Try me. Give me the gist’

‘The gist?’

‘Something. Anything’ said Tony. ‘The outlines. The big picture’

‘Preferably something that makes him move less like a hamster or a squirrel’ Nat said.

‘Funny that you say squirrel-‘ began Thor.

‘No more Ratatoskr stories’ Nat interrupted, rising one finger. ‘Not. One. More.’

Thor raised both his hands. ‘No more Ratatoskr stories’ said he. ‘I promise.’

Mjolnir, which was dangling from one of Thor’s arms, clanked against the control station and left a dent. Tony was glad he had never had Bruce’s green little problem.

‘First, I will seek out a safe path among the branches of the Yggdrasil. Then I will, by the power of Mjolnir, pull us halfway onto Yggdrasil and run across the branches like the little…like any other very quick little rodent’ said he, with a side-glance at Natasha who was bristling. ‘And in no time at all, we will jump off Yggdrasil and land near Vanaheim!’

This didn’t really clear up anything much, in Tony’s opinion. Still –

‘Halfway?’ asked he. ‘You pull us halfway onto Yggdrasil?’

‘Of course!’ Blondy said, confused. ‘To pull us completely onto it and try to wander the secret paths would be very dangerous! We could lose our way, slip through the branches and into the Void!’

That sounded promising.

‘The Void?’

‘Yes, between the branches of Yggdrasil’ said Blondy as if everyone knew about the Void.

‘What would happen to us if we fell?’ Natasha asked, ever the pragmatist.

Thor looked at her, suddenly a lost look on his face.

‘I… until recently, I was certain…” He looked away. ‘With all probability, it would kill us very quickly…”

Very promising indeed.

‘Loki can wander the secret paths’ said he, hesitated. ‘But there are few other people I would trust with guiding us on them. It takes a lot of skill, a lot of experience.’

‘So halfway onto the Yggdrasil it is’ said Tony, not feeling very reassured.
Steve padded Thor on the shoulder.

‘I’m sure you will guide us safely’ said he, ever the Politesicle. ‘I completely trust you in this’

Thor bowed.

‘I thank you for your trust, Son of Roger’ said he. ‘For to slip between the branches of Yggdrasil is not a kind fate… for anyone to suffer…’

He glanced at the screen where Loki had lain down on the bench in his cell but otherwise moved as little as ever.

‘… but he might have used a secret path… he might not have lost control…’

Tony clapped his hand together, ‘Alright! So, now that the motivational speech and the ominous family drama muttering is over, let’s get to the fun part, namely, the danger. I’m all for dying. Blondy, do your thing’

‘Nobody is going to die’ Steve said, rubbing his eyes, then gesturing at the god. ‘Tony is just being Tony, I’m sure it all will be fine. Please, Thor.’

Thor stepped forward to the interface, then eyed them.

‘You should sit in the chairs and strap yourself down’ said he.

‘Daddy won’t drive until we’ve fastened the seatbelts?’ Tony asked.

‘In my experience, for mortals, travelling on the Yggdrasil tends to be… physically overwhelming’ Thor said. ‘I will have to cause… a certain amount of momentum’

The kind of momentum that threatened nearby planets?

‘Okay, we’ll sit down and fasten the seatbelts’ Natasha said and pushed Tony into the chair. At least it was his favourite one.

‘What about the prisoner?’ Steve asked.

Thor chuckled.

‘Oh, Loki knows these means of travel well’ said he. ‘Believe me, he will be fine. He might even enjoy it.’

When they had all secured their belts, he raised Mjolnir, and sparks emitted from her almost immediately, connecting her to the interface stick (and why did everything magic have to be a stick anyway? Or a cube. Or a hammer. Or a dark and brooding and far too tall god… maybe Tony’s conclusion that everything magic had to be a stick was slightly wrong).

‘Blondy, if you electrocute my ship, I will not be amused’

‘Be silent’ Thor said and his voice was dark and grumbling. ‘I need to focus’

The sparks between the stick and the hammer multiplied, until they formed a steady connection of light. Thor’s eyes blazed white at that moment, and he gasped.

For a while, nothing more happened than the connection of sparks and light between Mjolnir and the ship wavering and spiking, and Thor staring at the whole thing with those creepy lightning-white
light, then grinning.

And then he raised his hammer, and with a mighty roar, brought it down and –

There was an explosion of light, and the next moment, Tony felt as if the Hulk rammed him right in the chest, he could barely breathe anymore, and there was so much light around them, so many colours, and as far as Tony could turn his head under all that pressure, he looked, and there were things he saw, or thought he saw, undefinable and yet familiar, and in all the roaring, he thought he heard…

He slammed back into reality as if into a wall. Everything shook from the impact; for a while, he could do nothing but breathe, still blind from all the light, still deaf from all the roaring. Slowly, things came back. The sound of his breath. Slowly, the light dimmed, shapes reappeared. He could hear the others breathe. Thor was standing in front of the control panel into which the stick had once more disappeared. Mjolnir was hanging by his side. He was shaking and there were still sparks running all over his body.

Tony’s own body felt… heavy, very much so. Moving... was difficult. He turned his head, Steve and Natasha were moving as slowly as he was, Nat raising her hand to her head, moaning a bit.

He turned his head the other way, to the control panel. He squinted.

As far as he could tell with his sight still a bit troubled by the ghosts of too much light, Thor had not wrecked the ship and they were still up and running, if in a completely different part of space that the ship didn’t recognise at all. Which meant that, if Thor couldn’t or wouldn’t get them back, they were lost once more.

Which was peachy.

The scans showed no planet in the immediate vicinity, so there was probably still some distance to go to Vanaheim. All for the better, probably, since they had had to leave the whole solar system behind so that Thor’s means of travel was safe for Earth.

Some momentum indeed.

Tony’s eyes rose to the security camera feeds next, and there he stopped.

For a moment, he didn’t understand what he saw.

‘Fuck’ said he then.

‘Tony?’ asked Nat.

‘Fuck’ said he.

‘What is the matter, Son of Stark’ said Thor and turned to him. ‘Are you unwell?’

‘I think… we might have a problem’ said Tony.

‘What problem are you-‘

Thor didn’t finish the sentence. Probably because his eyes had found the same camera feed Tony had. And the next moment, he had already turned and run out the room.

‘What’s going on’ Steve murmured, Tony could hear him getting on his feet behind him. ‘I feel… unusual.’
Tony tried to get himself to move, to stand up, but all his limps were so heavy, and he had no idea how much time they still had, if it wasn’t too late already. ‘We have to… help me up, we have to follow him… help him… we…”

He tried to pull himself up, using the control panels, and then Steve was there, pulling him on his feet altogether.

‘Tony, what’s wrong, I… oh’

Steve’s eyes had found the feed of the holding cell too.

‘How… how did that happen?’ said he. ‘You think it might be… a trick?’

Tony didn’t care, he was already stumbling towards the door.

‘Doesn’t matter’ said Nat behind him, agreeing with him for once. ‘We have to get there, now’

They caught up with him already on the corridor, and Steve had overtaken him soon. Dizzily, Tony thought that Thor probably didn’t even know how to use the med bay. For what it was still worth.

On the screen they had left behind, the bloody dashes were on the walls, on the floor, on the small bench. In one corner, a big smear of blood covered part of the wall where Loki had crumbled. In the same corner, leaning against the wall, his head dropped on his chest, his hands lying open in his lap, the trickster sat, unmoving. Beneath him, a puddle of blood was slowly growing.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter gonna come up in a few days.
Do I smell some cinnamon buns?

Chapter Summary

And this, kids, is exactly what happens when you forget to fasten your seatbelts. May this be a lesson for you all!

Chapter Notes

Thank you for your positive response so far - it has been sweet sweet balm for my at times mind-crushing insecurities about writing. Also, I edited the author's notes at the beginning a bit, including the warning that a few characters will only appear much (!) later, just so you don't get your hopes up too soon. And I added chapter titles, for what it's worth.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It couldn’t be. Thor fell to his knees next to his brother. There was just no way this could have happened at all.

But it had.

The chains between his brother’s manacles were broken, and that between his manacles and the collar. Loki’s hands that were lying limply in his lap were slashed open to the bone at the palms and the fingers. Something seemed to have punctured Loki’s thigh, and there was a large, dark wound across his abdomen as if a blade had slashed right through it, the thin dark prison clothes hanging away in tatters, and all that couldn’t be – but there was Loki’s chest, and something had been driven through it, had cracked the sternum and pushed itself inside, it was open, bleeding so much, ‘Loki!’

It had to be a trick, Thor took Loki’s face into his hands, lifted it, but the eyes were thin glassy slits, no recognition. He was bleeding from his nose and bubbles formed and burst with Loki’s breath. Blood was trickling out from under the muzzle. Thor found the locking mechanism quickly, with a gesture, a bit of magic and a click, it came apart, fell from Loki’s face, and immediately, blood followed, running out his mouth down his chin and neck, onto his chest and lap. Thor pulled at Loki until he was bent forward, so that all the blood could escape, so his brother could freely breathe again.

Thor went to the manacles next, opened one, ‘You sure this is a good idea?’ asked the Black Widow behind him – so she had already followed him here.

‘Loki needs magic to heal himself’ Thor said, noticing that his hands were shaking as he opened the next manacle, moved to Loki’s neck to open the collar. The locking mechanism was sticky and slippery, Thor managed to activate it only at the second try. His brother was still so limp, how could he be still so limp?

Thor knew exactly how. He knew exactly what these injuries meant.
‘He needs magic for a lot of things, Thor’

‘Trust me, he will do nothing but heal himself now’

He remembered the wards of the room, stretched out his hand, and a bolt of lightning connected it to the controls that burst into flames. He absently noticed that Natasha jumped.

‘What the hell, Thor!’

‘He needs all his magic’

Then, there was a small cough, and Thor lifted Loki’s face. The glassy eyes behind thin slits were looking back at him now.

‘Loki! Thank the Norns, you are awake! Who did this?’

His brother looked at him, as if confused, and then, against all logic, he smiled. And then, against all logic, he laughed. A weak, wheezing laugh, but he did.

‘What is this, Brother?’ asked Thor, feeling tears in his eyes. He couldn’t do this. Not again. ‘Is this another game of yours? Is this a trick?’

Loki’s smile only got wider, and it looked honest. As if he was happy. Genuinely happy. If a bit mad.

‘Don’t you love it?’ he said, barely more than a whisper.

‘Your trick?’

‘The dance’ said Loki. ‘I never cared much for the blood, but the dance…’

He trailed away, then sucked in a breath, then another, his eyes got wide, a shiver went through his body, he made a small keening sound.

‘Brother!’ cried Thor, ‘Please, help me lay him down, please!’

‘No, wait!’ Natasha was at his side in a second. ‘Before you move him, just let me check his spine.’

She bent forward, her hand travelled down his back, ‘You’re really not looking that swell, are you?’ said she to the trickster dryly, then her hand stopped.

‘What is it?’ Thor asked.

‘His spine is fine’ said Natasha. Her hand came back bloody. ‘But there is a wound on his back too. This time, someone got him good.’

Loki made that keening sound again, shuddering.

‘Hel, just help me, please!’ Thor shouted.

It was no use screaming for assistance, he knew. There were no other mages here, and he had no healing stones with him, but hands still helped him stretch Loki out on the ground, his head in Thor’s lap, Loki shivering and twitching and breathing laboriously now, his eyes wide and scared.

‘Oh, fuck’ Natasha murmured as she ripped the rest of the prisoner’s shirt, moved it away.
The slash across his stomach was long and had gone deep, Thor could see parts of his brother’s entrails in the wound. And his chest… was just… open. Loki could heal this, Thor was sure he could heal this, he bent over his brother who was shivering, twitching, ‘You have to heal, Loki, please!’

Loki coughed up blood in response, droplets hitting Thor in the face.

Loki can’t heal this, a voice in Thor’s head quietly said. Not this much at once. The sober voice sounded suspiciously like the very person he was talking about.

Stark came running in at that moment, his arms full of white bandages, scissors and syringes, ‘Get over here’ Steve said, ‘His stomach is open and he has a puncture wound on his right thigh, on his back too’

‘Don’t know how much sense it makes to bandage his chest though’ Thor heard Natasha say. ‘Would do more harm than good, I think, push the bones back in all the wrong way, pierce his lung a second time’

And then Loki shivered again, and it was as if something about him flickered, and then, it was all different, and Stark said, ‘Hell’ and Natasha said, ‘What the-‘ and Steve said, ‘Oh my’

And Thor swallowed.

The whole thing had definitely gone from creepy to creepier.

Loki having been gutted in a secure cell in a space ship that should have housed nobody else but them was one thing. And when Tony had entered the room, Loki had been fatally injured, inexplicably injured, yes, but he was not… this. It was as if the meat on his bones had been eaten away in the blink of an eye, and now he lay there, and his wrists were so… thin, and his thighs so… thin, and his heaving open chest almost grotesquely big in contrast to his sunken stomach, and each rib visible through the skin, and his cheeks were cavernous, and-

‘It’s just a few glamours that have failed’ said Thor, but his voice was suffocated. ‘That’s all. Please carry on with the help you were administering’

Just a few glamours that had failed?

‘It’s a good sign’ said Thor, cradling the head of his brother. He was probably not away that he was crying. ‘It means Loki is concentrating on healing instead of appearances. It’s good. You’re doing well, Loki, you’re doing well.’

Right.

‘So… that’s what he really looked like all that time?’

Like a concentration camp survivor? The rest had just been a bit of glitter?

He was aware that he should be doing more. Natasha and Steve had taken the bandages from him and were wrapping it around the really big wound in Loki’s stomach, and that certainly looked like sticking a band-aid on a… well, a gutted person.

And most of Loki was too bloody to know, but right across his face, there was a scar that definitely
hadn’t been there before. It went from his forehead across his nose to his cheek. It looked old, in a
way, thin and dark, but as if the cut still went as deep as when it was made, the skin just barely
holding it together.

Not that this was exactly what was going to kill him, with all probability.

Loki coughed up blood once more, spraying his brother’s face with it some more, shivered, breathed
in, wheezing.

‘You’re doing well, Brother’ said Thor, caressing Loki’s cheeks and crying. ‘These people are
helping you. Just concentrate on healing and all will be well, I promise’

And Loki stared at Thor with wide eyes, and then, inexplicably, he laughed. In a way. In a very
coughing up blood way. But he looked amused. And a bit out of it. He opened his mouth, coughed
again, his lips moved.

Thor bent down further.

‘Don’t you want to know’ Loki said. It was barely a whisper.

‘What, Loki?’

‘How it came I lost?’

Thor looked confused, furrowed his eyebrows.

‘Loki, I don’t-‘

‘I will tell you’

And Loki opened his mouth, and then something shifted, and then Tony breathed in, feeling dizzy,
there was a strange pressure on his chest, a sickly sweet stench of cinnamon filled his nose, he put his
hand to his mouth and coughed. He heard Nat and Steve do the same.

‘Brother, what have you done?’ Thor asked, utterly desperate.

Loki’s head was stretched back and he was breathing quickly, shallowly, his eyes rolled back, only
the white showing. The stench was everywhere, and Tony couldn’t understand where it had come
from so suddenly, how Loki’s face could have gone so grey so suddenly, and then Loki’s breath
hitched, a shiver went through his body, and it went limp.

‘No’ whispered Thor.

But Loki’s chest wasn’t moving. His hands were lying relaxed on the ground. His mouth was still
open as if to suck in a last breath, his eyes were still open, but they were dull and dead.

‘No’ said Thor.

He put Loki on the ground, took his face into his hands, threaded through the trickster’s hair, ‘Loki,
no, you hear me, no’

He touched his brother’s face, his shoulders, his arms, ‘No, Loki, is this a trick? Is this a game? You
wanted to tell me something, Loki! Say something! LOKI!’

‘Woah’ Natasha said at that moment, and shuffled a bit back.
Tony looked at her and saw what she meant. Loki’s hand had turned blue, and the blue was travelling upwards.

‘No!’ breathed Thor, seeing what was happening. ‘No, stop this at once, I don’t allow this, Loki, NO!’

But the blue washed over Loki’s chest, over his face, and tainted his eyes crimson red. Which was a whole other category of creepy, especially since additionally to the terrible wounds and the weird new scar there were now markings all over the skin and-

‘LOKI!’ Thor shouted, shaking his dead brother now.

Loki didn’t answer, his body only moving limply in reaction to the shaking. His head came to rest in a lightly sideways position. His mouth stayed open, and his eyes, though now crimson red, remained as dull and dead.

‘PLEASE!’ Thor cried out and sobbed, and then the lights went out, went on again, flickered, went out, went on again, and then Thor was sitting there with bloody and empty hands.

The body that had lain here a moment ago was simply… gone.

Right…

Thor stared at his hands, at the floor, stared at his hands again.

‘No’ Thor said.

He touched the floor where Loki had been, where there was still so fucking much blood, and Thor brushed his hands over the floor, distributing the blood even more, as if to find his brother that way, his eyes wild.

‘Loki’ Thor said, but his hands found nothing but blood. ‘Loki’

‘LOKI!’ Thor screamed with all his might, between all that cinnamon stench, there was the smell of ozone, his eyes blazed white, there were sparks first, then blinding white light, and the next moment, all light was gone.

Chapter End Notes

Hey, if Marvel can kill Loki five minutes into the movie, why shouldn’t I (the author is not feeling bitter and resentful about Avengers Infinity War at ALL, grumble, grumble, rant, rant)?

No, this is not Infinity War.
Kentucky Fried Space Ship

Chapter Summary

As it appears, Skrull space ships aren't insured against Acts of God.

Chapter Notes

Not that I want to distract you from planning to murder me in my sleep, but just remember that this fic has a lot of tags, and none of them read 'major character death'. Just saying.
Now you can go back to plotting my assassination and I can go back to writing my will.

Short chapter this time.

Taking everything into account, Tony found that he was dealing well. He found that considering he had just witnessed one of the creepiest deaths of supervillain this universe had to offer, and that they didn’t know whether Loki’s murderer wasn’t still walking around the ship, stab-happy, and, more importantly than that, considering that Blondy had, with his lightning bold of grief, fried the whole electrical system, considering that this had not only killed the lights, and the engine, but also the frigging LIFE SUPPORT SYSTEM, Tony was dealing extraordinarily well.

He had only shouted at Thor and shaken and punched him until he had had an idea how to get the emergency systems online, and now that the light was back, and the life support system was back, he was sitting very non-shouty in his command chair, trying not to hyperventilate, and fretting in silence. He hadn’t even unearthed the emergency scotch. Hadn’t drunken one drop of alcohol since the whole fiasco. Nada.

Of course, the engine was still dead. Of course, the security cameras were still dead, and so they had even less chance of finding out who the stowaway had been and where they were now. Of course, now that the controls were working again, he had found out that at some point between jumping on the Yggdrasil and now, the ship’s energy reserves had been drained dramatically (and he should have fucking known that the jock way of driving would burn too much fuel).

Of course now that the diagnosis software that he had installed as a small replacement for JARVIS was back online, it told him that the arc reactor in his chest had experienced some significant power fluctuations shortly before Loki’s death, and had, according to the software, dropped to 3% efficiency at one point, even though now, it was running normally again, and there were no errors to report. Which did sort of explain the pressure Tony had felt in his chest, but was not exactly reassuring (nor was it exactly reassuring that Tony didn’t even seem to have noticed his arc reactor basically dying on him for minutes at a time – jeez).

Of course, they were still stranded in a part of the universe that didn’t even show up on the maps of the ships even if the engine would be running.

Tony was still back to very probably dying of hunger or cold or thirst or asphyxiation in the grand
vastness of space. Lost. Far away from anything like home.

Maybe dying of his arc reactor breaking down.

At least, this time, he was with other people, or something.

At least, he hadn’t been the first to die in this teeny horror movie they were obviously starring in after all. For fuck’s sake, they had even separated by now! Who ever separates in a horror movie?

Everyone! That’s the whole point!

So probably he wouldn’t die of any of the things above. Probably he would get gutted like Loki.

Hilarious.

Tony put his face into his hands.

Shit. Shit, shit, shit, shit, shit.

How had this mission gone so very south so fucking quickly?

Ah, right, Loki.

That would probably be it.

Tony chuckled.

Even in death, Rudolph was a pain-in-the-ass menace.

Shit.

He had to think practically. What was their most urgent problem? The engine. But he had no idea how to jump-start that again – Thor’s lightning bold had fried not many but rather vital circuits there. The engine was alien technology, and even being the genius he was, Tony had only begun to understand it when SHIELD had decided to recruit him as cab driver for Norse god. Tony would need time, and how much had they?

Okay, so what was their most urgent problem that he had an actual idea how to solve?

The stab-happy stowaway.

Tony had to find out what had happened, how on earth (or rather, in space) someone had been able to penetrate his ship undetected, penetrate that magically warded cell undetected and put a few too many holes in Emovillain.

And he did have an idea how to accomplish that.

For the security system, including all the video cameras, had been Tony’s addition to the Mantis, which meant that he had – naturally – brought spare parts, which meant that he could fix it no matter how Kentucky Thor had fried it.

And just like that, Tony had something to do again, and his breath calmed down considerably.

Tony absently noticed that Natasha and Steve came by after a while, Steve bringing him something
to drink and some chocolate (as if Tony would start wasting food now, they needed to think about rationing instead), Natasha telling him that they had searched every corner of the ship and hadn’t found the stowaway and that they had to consider the possibility that the stowaway had means to conceal themselves – maybe magically.

And then Steve came by again, and urged Tony to eat the chocolate, and commented to Tony’s snarl about rationing that Tony’s hands were shaking and that he wouldn’t be able to repair anything if he didn’t consume some sugar first.

Well, Capsicle wasn’t wrong. Tony’s hands were shaking.

And he was feeling a bit woozy too, now that he thought of it.

The chocolate helped, and some time later, the screens flickered back to life, and Tony could see that Natasha was checking the corridors once more, looking for concealed doors, Capsicle was going through Tony’s quarters, doing the same and shaking his head at the collection of things Tony had disappeared into his room. He took up the chipped mug for a moment, which certainly made Tony twitch. And Thor was still kneeling in the holding cell, staring at the bloodied floor.

The rest of the ship was deserted.

But Tony knew what to do next. Call up the recordings, Loki’s cell, starting this day. About half an hour before they had briefly turned into the Yggdrasil squirrel.

Tony fast-forwarded the first bit because Loki was just lying on that bench, doing nothing. But then Loki was suddenly on his feet, and Loki rewound, pressed play. Alright, Rudolph, he thought. Let’s see how it came that you lost.
Chapter Summary

Loki dances and Tony watches, but it's nothing like Salomé. Okay, maybe a bit like Salomé.

Chapter Notes

You cannot stop until the music does.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

At first, Loki was just lying on the bench, doing nothing. Then, the recording was disturbed for a moment, as if the video file was corrupted (which was weird, because this kind of thing just didn’t happen with Tony’s kind of equipment), and the next, Loki’s eyes were open, alert, and his body tense. He seemed to listen to something, his fingers moving uneasily. Then he sat up, stood up, walked to the middle of the room. He took a firm stance, his legs just apart enough to give him stability but also the freedom to move, and lowered his hands, as far apart as the chains would allow them. He bent his knees a little as if preparing to jump, bent his head, closed his eyes. His fingers were still moving restlessly.

And so he stood, waiting.

The picture was disturbed again, Loki swayed, probably reacting to the acceleration of the ship (and it wasn’t fair that he had barely moved where Tony had been Hulk-pressed into his chair), then tensed some more. And then, from one moment, to the other, there was this thing where there had been nothing before, and Loki had evaded it before Tony understood that it was a sort of blade, thrust at the trickster out of thin air, then gone again. The trickster took a deep breath, his hands balled into fists. And then the blade was there again, with no one holding it, just there out of thin air descending on the trickster’s head, but he had already seen it and had stepped away, only to have to evade it again, because it was plunged at him sideways, and from that moment on, the trickster didn’t stop moving, the blade didn’t stop attacking. It was… kind of a mesmerising sight. The blade was broad, and thick for a cut and thrust weapon, and didn’t look as if made out of metal but rather out of some sort of horn, jagged in a strange way that suggested scales. And the way the actual wielder wasn’t there, or invisible, the way the blade itself appeared and disappeared from existence, made it feel as if the blade itself was the killer, descending on Loki again and again who… danced. Because yes, it was a dance, and didn’t Loki’s words that Natasha had relayed to him make so much more sense now. Loki moved fluently, with an elegance that Tony had never seen before, went to the ground in order to evade a thrust, only to propel himself up and out of the way in a fluid beautiful motion, barely reacting as the blade cut across his left arm but evading the next cut by turning on the spot. Stepping away and bringing up his arms in the same moment so that the blade cut Loki’s chains for him only to step back the next because the blade was suddenly coming from a completely different angle. No, Tony was sure, on all the occasions he had encountered the trickster, he had never seen him move like that. Never so gracefully. Never with that much concentration, with that much focus.
Loki was serious about this, Tony suddenly knew.

This time, Loki wasn’t playing around.

For a while, it looked like Loki might even win.

And then, the trickster was just a little too late, and the blade buried itself in his back, near the hip, and Loki’s back arched, his cry muffled by the muzzle. The blade was gone a second later, only to come from the side again, aiming at the throat, and Loki stepped back again, thrust the chain between his manacles and the collar forward, the blade cut it right through. Loki evaded the next thrust, and the one after that, but his movements were less sure now, and the third aimed at his chest he evaded only by a hair, and then the blade was suddenly buried in his thigh. Again, Loki screamed, again, one barely heard it, and even as Loki was still steadying himself, there was the blade again, and Loki was too slow, and it went right through his stomach, leaving a big dash of blood on the wall.

After that, it got ugly.

It was clear who was going to win now, or rather, who was going to definitely lose.

Loki still fought to evade the thrusts but he staggered more than danced now, one hand on his stomach wound, trying to hold it together, and then his body convulsed, he heaved, and blood started to trickle out from under the muzzle.

He was choking on blood. Massive internal bleeding.

Loki still used everything to his advantage, even his swaying on his feet, and every second he kept on these feet made Tony wonder how fucking resilient these Asgardians really were. There was a fierceness to the fight the trickster was putting up, something feral and desperate, that made Tony almost hope this could end another way after all. But he knew it wouldn’t. And sure enough, after the blade had wounded him once more at the shoulder, Loki got trapped in a corner, and then the blade plunged forward, and there was nowhere to go. Loki thrust up his hands instead, caught the blade in them, held it away with his bare hands. He slid to the floor at the same time, leaving a big smear of blood on the wall in the process.

But the blade didn’t relent, and Loki’s face, his whole body, was tense with the effort of holding it away, his hands bleeding where the blade cut into them, but it slowly advanced, closer and closer to his chest, then piercing it. Loki screamed under his muzzle, or something like that, choked on his scream, more blood trickled out from under the muzzle while the blade was slowly entering his chest. His whole body was shaking, his eyes pressed shut, his face screwed up with exhaustion and pain. But the blade slowly moved forward still.

Tony could hear bones crack, another gurgling and muffled scream, and then, there was a disturbance in the picture again, and then, the blade was simply… gone.

And Loki was sitting there, his hands still lifted, shaking. He breathed in and out, bubbles of blood formed at his nose, he heaved once more, more blood running down his throat. He opened his hands that were cut to the bone and shaking so badly, stared at them, breathed.

Slowly, he pressed one hand to his stomach wound and one on the chest, leant back against the wall, closed his eyes, opened them again. They looked slightly glazed over.

And then, nothing happened.

Loki was just sitting there, his hands pressed on his bleeding wounds, trying to get some air despite the fact that he was choking. The bubbles formed at his nose, the blood was trickling out from under
his muzzle, his chest was rising and descending.

And time passed.

The thing was, Tony knew very well that theoretically, they could have noticed the problem by now. The ship had registered the time spent on paranormal travel as five minutes (and yes, it was disturbing that the Skrulls had a special travel mode denomination for that), and that corresponded to the five minutes between the two slight disturbances of the picture, the exact duration of Loki’s fight.

By now, Tony knew, they were back to normal travel again, and up in the command centre, they were slowly recovering, coming back to reality. Thor was recovering.

And Loki was sitting in his cell, and discreetly bleeding out, not disturbing anyone.

After a while, Loki’s head descended as he drifted into unconsciousness. His hands fell open on his lap.

And then more time passed, and then the door of the cell was thrust open and Thor stormed in. He fell to his knees next to Loki, called his name, began opening his manacles. Natasha voiced her doubts, Thor fried the magic wards. Loki woke up, said the weird thing about the dance, then began to shiver and twitch.

They laid him down on the floor, and ripped open his shirt, and Natasha put her hand to her mouth. All the while, Loki kept bleeding.

Tony saw himself come in and stand around pretty uselessly, having brought all the wrong things and too much, too little at the same time.

He saw them trying to bandage that ridiculously big wound on his stomach, he saw the change, he saw himself shy away from it.

‘Don’t you want to know?’ he heard Loki say. ‘How it came I lost?’

‘I will tell you’ Loki said, and then he opened his mouth, and then the picture flickered and was replaced by… pixel nonsense. The file was so corrupted here that one couldn’t recognise anything anymore.

The video surveillance had failed so soon?

Weird.

Tony fast-forwarded a bit, this didn’t really make sense. Thor’s lightning had killed the system completely, there shouldn’t even be the nonsensical shapes of corrupted files, there should be nothing.

But there it was.

Pixel nonsense all over.

And then the picture was there again, Tony pressed play a little too late, Loki was turning blue?

What the fuck?

He rewound to the noise, pressed play, and there it was, first just unrecognisable shapes, and then they were back in the cell, Loki’s head stretched back, his skin a sickly grey, breathing quickly and shallowly.
The Tony on the screen put his hand to his mouth, Natasha and Steve did so too, ‘Brother, what have you done?’

Tony stopped the recording.

What the-

This didn’t make sense. This really, really didn’t make sense.

He rewound back to the last thing they had seen, ‘I will tell you’, compared it to the time stamp when they were back again.

Seven minutes.

Seven minutes of… something… that had been a second for Tony, the blink of an eye.

Seven fucking minutes that he had LOST.

That they had ALL lost.

This was impossible. This couldn’t be. He was Tony Stark, he couldn’t just lose time and not remember, not even notice, though he had wondered how Loki’s skin could turn so grey so suddenly, where that sudden stench had come from…

And the arc reactor of the Tony on the screen had flickered weakly back to life as soon as the picture had been back, so maybe the power fluctuations had happened during those minutes that hadn’t happened at all, if you asked anyone?

Brother, what have you done?

What HAD Loki done during all that time? Had he just kept dying, or-

I will tell you.

What had he told them?

Tony noticed that he was breathing quickly again and grabbed the chocolate, took a bite, then remembered that he was feeling nauseous, and spat it back on the floor, then vomited.

Well, there went the precious rations. On the floor that he would have to clean up later on.

But nobody could do this to him, nobody could just TAKE his TIME and steal it, and he hadn’t even noticed, if the camera hadn’t been there, and-

He put his face into his hands.

Calm yourself, thought he. This is a good thing. You know more than you did before. Knowledge is good. So you lost seven minutes. Time to move on. Time to press play again.

So that was what he did. He straightened himself up and pressed play.

The rest, he knew. Some details, he hadn’t noticed, like that Natasha had taken Loki’s pulse and shaken her head at Steve right before the trickster’s hand had turned blue.

That the Tony on the screen was the most useless idiot anyone could have hoped for.
And then Loki vanished, and Thor screamed, and then the picture flickered, and then it went black completely.

Tony pressed stop.

He leant back in his chair, feeling dizzy.

Alright.

So they were definitely not in Kansas anymore.

Chapter End Notes

The fact that there weren't any maps for the place they were could have told Tony that they weren't in Kansas, but okay. Did they take off in Kansas and that's why he thought there were still there? I'm confused.
Not in Kansas

Chapter Summary

Thor gives lessons in magical theory which is a daring project, considering what happened last time he tried to actually use that stuff. Tony has the self-preservation instincts of a lemming (but we knew that) and will never look the same way at cinnamon buns again.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

He first went to find Natasha and Steve, who were in the community kitchen, discussing how to proceed next. How to proceed next seemed to revolve a lot around finding that killer and taking the ship apart in the process, which made Tony briefly consider murder himself, despite him understanding the reasons behind it.

‘You look like shit’ Natasha commented when she saw him coming in.

‘And you look like our mysterious stabber will be the least of your problems if you really start breaking open walls’

Nat shrugged.

‘I was just thinking infiltration strategies, and then, naturally, I was thinking of Clint’ said she. ‘If it had been him hiding on the Mantis, he would crawl around between intermediate walls and in ventilation shafts and everything.’

‘You mean he sneaked on the ship while we were not looking and took the first occasion to introduce Loki to the concept of fatal body leaks? That… actually sounds like something he would do, now that I think of it’

‘…yeah, it does, doesn’t it?’ Nat said, furrowing her eyebrows. ‘And he is one of the few people capable of escaping my notice for that long. And it would explain why no one else died until now... mhm…’

‘Mhm...’ Tony said.

‘Are we really suspecting Clint Barton of hiding in the walls for days, only to stab Loki to death once we’re not looking?’ asked Cap.

Then he looked a bit confused at his own words.

Yeah. It did sound kind of likely, didn’t it? Clint behaved more like a cockroach than a human being even on his best days, when he didn’t have revenge on his agenda. And he had been pretty furious at Loki too, had made threats and everything...

There was a prolonged, awkward pause.

‘Nahhh’ said Nat then.
‘Nahhh’ Tony agreed.

‘That would be too weird’ Nat said.

‘Hahah, too weird?’ asked Tony. ‘Boy, are you in for a surprise! Hahah, too weird, my ass!’

He shivered.

‘…what’s… wrong, Tony?’ asked Cap, eyeing him now.

‘What, apart from being stranded in space again which is literally my most frequent nightmare lately? I mean, honestly, I’ve got like three completely separate traumatic experiences about getting stranded in space by now, which is… more than any healthy person should have to show for’ said Tony.

‘Apart from that, I’ve got sort of good news, actually. In a way. In a creepy way.’

‘Did you manage to reboot the surveillance system?’ Steve asked.

Tony nodded.

‘And believe me, what happened in Loki’s cell while we were admiring the rainbows is… something else entirely’ said he. ‘And doesn’t really point toward Clint as a suspect, so you can stop worrying, Nat’

‘And there I was, biting my nails and wondering how to spring my best friend from jail for murdering Saint Hornbearer’ Nat said dryly.

‘But’ Tony emphasised, ‘And I don’t mean you to drop your guard or anything, but what I saw might also mean that maybe we can stop searching for the intruder and focus on more urgent matters.’

Natasha frowned.

‘Why?’

‘Because seeing what I have seen, I highly doubt that Loki’s killer is still on the ship’ said Tony. ‘In fact, I doubt they ever really were here at all.’

‘How did you come to that very interesting conclusion?’ Nat asked.

‘Because there wasn’t, strictly speaking, an attacker’ said Tony. ‘There was just the weapon they used.’

Of course, Tony had considered invisibility. But he had abandoned that idea quickly.

Because Loki, during that whole fight, had never actually tried to attack back. He had used the blade to try and free himself, but he had never tried to hurt whoever had assaulted him, visible or not. And that didn’t make sense. Even taking into account supervillainy cackling with laughter twitchy-face madness, that didn’t make sense (maybe especially then, it didn’t make sense, considering that supervillainy cackling with laughter twitchy-face madness usually implied wanting to hurt about everyone around them, including an invisible attacker? But Tony did not pretend to be a psychologist, and Pepper regularly reminded him that it should definitely stay that way).

Anyways, Loki hadn’t laughed until it was over. During the fight itself, he had been serious, more serious than Tony had ever seen him before; he had been fighting for his life. Of course, he would have tried to get a hold on the killer.
Except if there was no killer to get a hold on to begin with.

Even the blade had been there and gone again, appearing or vanishing with absolutely no regard toward the laws of physics and nature (which alone should be punishable in Tony’s opinion), and what if what Thor had told them very metaphorically about their way of travel - jumping halfway onto Yggdrasil - implicated that also concerning other matters, or matter in general, they had been in sort of a half-way state, and that certain laws of quantum physics-

‘No, I don’t get it’ Steve said.

‘I will show you’ Tony said. ‘But I might be wrong and that’s why I’m going to show Thor first. Where is Blondy, by the way?’

‘Still sitting in the holding cell, staring at the blood’ said Nat.

‘Yeah, he is, isn’t he?’ Tony said. ‘Why did you just leave him there again?’

‘Because everywhere else, he would have been in the way?’ Nat said with a slight shrug.

Oh, Nat, Tony thought. She was such a little darling.

‘Well, I need him now’ said Tony. ‘So it’s time for him to move.’

The cell was still reeking sickly-sweet of cinnamon when Tony arrived, and he had to cough and hold himself back not to retch.

True to Nat’s words, Thor was still staring at the blood on the floor. Tony wondered what the big guy was hoping to discover there. He was obviously neither the type nor in the mood for CSI.

‘Thor? Buddy?’

The god didn’t react.

‘Thor, come on, get up’ said Tony. ‘If you keep sitting here any longer, I think you will reek of cinnamon for the rest of your life’

Thor reacted to that – he balled his hands to fists, turned, and levelled Tony with such a furious gaze that Tony remembered why early and not so early civilisation usually didn’t consider it a good idea to enrage deities.

‘Alright, I’m sorry, I’m sorry!’

Big faux pas. Really big, because Thor’s hands were still clenched to fists, despite the apology, and all the blood droplets on Thor's face kind of gave him a slightly grim expression.

‘Don’t smite me please, I’m sorry!’

‘You should choose your words with more care, Son of Stark!’ growled Thor, and Tony took a step back.

‘Yes, I know, I really should, but I don’t really have a brain-to-mouth filter, I insult people all the time, ask Pepper, gets me into trouble more often than I could wish for, I’m really sorry, Thor’
For a moment, the fury was still there, then it broke, and Thor turned his gaze back to the ground, looking, once more, only tired.

‘Loki was the same’ said he. ‘He always insulted everyone. He made many enemies that way.’

He seemed to drift away into his thoughts again, and Tony didn’t really want that.

‘Look’ said he. ‘I’m sorry to disturb you, and really sorry to have insulted you, and considering all that, it’s… kind of a bad time to ask, but I fear I need your assistance with something.’

Thor at first didn’t answer.

‘Of course’ said he then, struggled to his feet, swaying a bit, then wiping his bloody hands on his bloody armour. ‘It is I who has to apologise. My behaviour was most unhelpful while you were securing the very vessel I myself have hazarded in my grief. Truly, I am ashamed, and I will assist you now in all the ways I can.’

‘Don’t be all flustered, Blondy’ said Tony. ‘You just lost your little brother and apparently, I was rude, I understand. And I’m sorry I shouted at you earlier too, I was just… not knowing whether we’ll ever get home just makes me that tiny little bit jumpier, okay?’

Thor furrowed his eyebrows, ‘You shouted at me? I’m sorry, I was lost in myself, I-

‘It’s okay, it’s okay’ Tony said, raising his hands, kind of glad that Thor hadn’t really registered that particular temper tantrum. He… might have remembered a few other insults otherwise. ‘Look, let’s get right to the point. I have to ask something of you, and I’m going to be honest, it’s not going to be pleasant. And I wouldn’t do this if I didn’t think that it was very important to the safety of all of us, okay?’

‘Is this about Loki’s killer?’ asked Thor. ‘Do you know who it is? Have you found them?’

‘We don’t and we haven’t, and that’s kind of the point, well, part of the point’ said Tony and sighed. ‘Thor, I’ve restored the surveillance system, including the archive.’

Thor just stared at him, confused.

‘I have restored the recording of the fight that led to Loki’s death’ said Tony.

At first, Thor kept staring, and Tony wondered whether he would have to put it into even simpler words.

‘He fought?’ Thor then asked.

‘He did’ Tony said.

‘Of course he did’ Thor said, more to himself than to anyone else.

‘And… look, Thor, we can only do this if you can say with a certain confidence that it won’t make you fry the ship again’ Tony said. ‘But would you be willing to watch that recording and tell me what you think?’

Thor watched the recording. He did so with a blank, tired face, and Tony wondered whether he was
even registering what he saw. He had made sure that nobody else but he and Blondy were in the room – he didn’t really want to confront Thor to Nat’s and Steve’s initial reactions. They would have to wait, even impatient as they were.

Then Tony remembered that he had been the one to actually trample around on Thor’s feelings a few minutes ago, so maybe, just maybe, he was the one who actually should have stayed away.

Well… it was too late anyway, and Tony was already too curious and scared to be all selfless and to leave it to the others to pose all the wrong questions and none of the right ones.

Tony wanted the right questions answered after all.

Like, now.

When the screen went black after Thor’s ill-timed EMP, Tony pressed stop and turned to the Thunderer.

The Thunderer was silent.

‘I’m… sorry for your loss’ Tony said, because he vaguely thought that phrase was adequate.

Thor nodded.

‘I… also have questions’ said Tony.

Thor nodded again.

‘First, about the attacker’ said Tony. ‘Am I right to think that they were never physically present on the ship?’

Thor blinked, as if despite being warned, the question took him by surprise.

And he certainly took his time to answer.

‘I am not sure’ he said finally. ‘I am not well-versed in these things, this was… it was my brother’s field of expertise. But… the idea is not entirely unreasonable. The way we travelled on Yggdrasil makes us move on the in-between. It is not impossible that someone could have taken advantage of this, that they…’

He got silent.

‘He tried to warn me’ said he.

Yes, Tony had had that suspicion by now too.

‘He tried to warn me and I called him a coward’ said Thor. ‘Because I was too stupid to know the risk I was putting him in, and too prideful to listen to his advice.’

‘Look, you couldn’t have taken off the muzzle in any case-’

‘I could have found another way to communicate’ Thor said. ‘He warned me, he knew.’

Yes, also of that uncomfortable detail Tony was pretty sure by now. The stance Loki had taken in that cell had clearly been that of a fighter. He had expected the attack.

Had he known how little chance he had of coming out of it alive?
‘Sooo… next question… why did Loki turn blue?’ Tony asked. ‘Is that what you people do when they die… they turn… blue?’

‘…no, it isn’t what we do when we die’ Thor said and again, Tony had apparently said something rude. But this time, Thor only furrowed his eyebrows; otherwise, he didn’t comment it. ‘Loki turned blue because Loki is not Aesir. Loki is… was… Jotunn. Jotnar are blue.’

Right.

So Loki had not only been adopted, he had been a different… Race? Species? Class?

No, he was thinking D&D again, and this was not a campaign - even though with the kind fashion Thor and Loki were wearing, who could really blame Tony for the mix-up?

In any case, he decided to file the information back for later.

‘So the pink skin was a… a glamour, you called it? An illusion?’

Thor nodded.

‘Yes, it was.’

‘So… what about those glamours?’ said Tony. ‘How could he maintain them all that time? I thought he couldn’t do magic with those manacles on?’

Thor shook his head.

‘This is not how it works’ said he. ‘Loki is… Loki was magic. He was one of the most powerful mages in the nine realms – you cannot just… rip that out, or silence it completely, not without destroying him in the process. And the glamour… it is the first magic he learned, when he was only an infant. I remember no moment in all our long lives when this glamour ever dropped. I would imagine it is so deeply rooted in him that no manacles, no muzzle could have ever repressed it. Magic like that… it only fails when…’

‘When the owner is dying’ Tony said. So despite him saying that the glamour failing was a good sign, Thor had known what it meant when Loki had changed his shape. He had known that it had been essentially over.

Thor looked away.

‘When I arrived from Svartalfheim, announcing Loki’s death’ Thor said, and his voice broke. ‘My father was so angry. So angry with me. Because, he said, how could I fall for Loki’s trick? How could I fall for it when I knew the truth about his heritage, when Loki’s skin itself had called him a liar? Because, he said, if what I said had been true, if Loki really had died, then why hadn’t his last glamour dropped, the one he had learned first? Why hadn’t he changed back into a Jotnar?’

He laughed sadly.

‘He told me it was my blindness that had allowed him to trick me, my unwillingness to see Loki for who he is, and who he isn’t. He said that I had deserved to be fooled and that he should have let me grieve just to teach me a lesson.’

He wiped his eyes, and Tony wondered, for a brief while, how much of an asshole one could become to say something like this to their own son.
But that only brought back bad memories, and they had different matters to discuss anyway.

‘Do you know what happened during the time we lost?’ said Tony bluntly.

He had an inkling that Thor did.

Brother, what have you done?

Again, Thor evaded his gaze. He didn’t look proud or mighty anymore, but just terribly exhausted.

‘I don’t know what happened exactly’ said he then, his voice raspy. ‘I know though that Loki used magic during that time.’

So Tony’s suspicion had been correct.

‘You were so confident that he would only use it for healing.’

‘I was’ said Thor after a pause.

‘Why?’

Thor’s breaths were heavy and he leant back, closed his eyes for a moment, opened them again.

‘Because…’ he said, and paused again, as if having lost his train of thought. ‘Loki always chided me for not studying enough about magic, for not exploring my own power, learning to use it. But I remember very well one of the first lessons about magic, one of the most important ones.’

‘And that is?’

‘That you should never take up more than you can carry and that it is thus very hazardous to use anything other than healing magic while being sick, weakened or injured.’

‘Why is that?’

‘Magic is bound to the body and the body to it’ Thor said. ‘It feeds of the body’s energy just as the body uses it to regenerate and boost its powers. But when we are heavily injured, everything else but the regeneration… you conjure it, but the magic looks for energy that isn’t there, that the body can’t provide. But once there, magic will run its course and it will take what it needs. It doesn’t stop just because you don’t have it.’

That certainly didn’t sound promising.

‘It preys upon your body and life then’ said Thor, confirming Tony’s thoughts. ‘It not only doesn’t heal, it destroys. Considering the state Loki was in, using magic for anything else than healing would have been…’

Suicide.

Had been suicide.

‘But he did so anyway.’

Thor nodded.

‘He did so anyway, aye.’
Okay. This had been a suicide. Okay.

‘Are you sure? You know, that it was his magic and all?’

‘I do recognise my brother’s magic, Son of Stark’ said Thor. ‘I’ve known it for more than a thousand years.’

Right. Insulting the deity again.

‘I’m sorry.’

‘Think nothing of it’ said Thor and made a vague waving gesture with his hand.

Tony walked up and down the room.

‘Seven minutes’ said Tony. ‘Seven minutes are a long time.’

‘Powerful workings take a long time’ said Thor tiredly. ‘Seven has symbolic significance and can boost the power of a working.’

Tony stopped.

‘So you think Loki did magic during the whole time we lost?’

Thor nodded.

‘That sounds like… a lot of it.’

Thor nodded again.

‘I know of people who have died the mage death.’ said he. ‘Who have, out of foolishness or necessity, conjured more magic than their body could support. Who have conjured even more. It… it doesn’t happen often, in this way. People die sometimes, but not… the mage death is more terrible than that. When too much magic is conjured, the magic does not only take the life, it devours the body whole. It rots the flesh while the mage is still weaving, still alive.’

He paused again, swallowed.

‘When we awoke, the magic had already started the decomposition of Loki’s flesh’ said he. ‘That was the cause of the smell you, Son of Stark, took so much offense to.’

‘Oh’

Oh.

The sickly-sweet cinnamon smell had been rotting-alive Loki. Dying-probably-in-terrible-pain Loki. And Tony had made a joke about it to his elder brother.

Oh.

‘Er… thank you for not smiting me then and there, Thor’ said he.

Thor made that vague gesture with his hand again.

‘Do you… do you, by any chance, have any idea what kind of spell he could have been using?’
Thor shook his head.

‘I don’t know much about these things’ said he. ‘It is… it was Loki who… he would have known. He could have told us.’

Well, that certainly didn’t help them along.

‘Do you know that my arc reactor experienced some serious power fluctuations during those seven minutes?’ Tony had confirmed it – the timelines corresponded. ‘That it almost stopped working altogether?’

Thor shook his head.

‘Considering that I need it to work in order to survive, I’m kind of invested in finding out what caused the glitch.’

‘I understand’ said Thor, then frowned. ‘Though I’m not sure I know what a glitch is. But you think Loki had something to do with the troubles you had with your machine, and you want to know what exactly. I would like to say that Loki was not involved, but by now I’ve resigned myself to the fact that he very probably was. But that is all I can tell you.’

Tony had expected as much – it still sucked.

‘And there is no chance, is there’ Tony said. ‘That he had just faked being attacked and injured and used this spell…working… whatever this is… to flee and leave a fake corpse in his wake that he could make disappear at a convenient moment?’

Thor looked up at him, and his gaze was so very weary, and Tony realised in that moment what had come out of his mouth again, right in front of the person who had just seen his younger brother die by rotting alive.

Had smelled him rotting alive.

Right.

He was probably lucky that Thor was feeling so very apathetic at the moment.

‘Right’ said Tony.

‘Son of Stark’ sighed Thor. ‘This day has been trying indeed. If it is all the same to you, I would like to go and wash my brother’s blood off my hands and off my armour.’

‘Of course’ Tony said. And your face, he thought. Don’t forget your face. ‘Of course’

And then his eyes fell on the control panels.

‘Except… this light here is blinking red… and that means a ship is approaching… and that means nobody is going showering, sorry, big guy. Really sorry, this time.’

They were getting company.

Chapter End Notes
Alright, this was the last of my pre-written and beta'd chapters, so it might take a while before I have the next batch of chapters done and ready for reading. Get ready to wait for a bit. 
And thanks for the very funny comments so far :).
Hlín

Chapter Summary

Hlín is not amused. Also, more magic lessons from somebody who actually knows what they are talking about. And Tony is feeling nostalgic about old teachers.

Chapter Notes

Alright, so the next few chapters are pre-written and beta'd, and if only I can reign in my neurotic tendencies to edit endlessly, all will be fine, and the next few updates are going to arrive relatively quickly (until I run out of chapters again, and start crying, because additionally to being prone to editing, and writer's block, I'm also very impatient).

The ramp unlocked with a small sigh, then lowered itself slowly. Tony told himself that this was a good thing.

After all, the Vanir had realised that a ship was drifting near their planet, looking very much like the sitting ducks they were, and they had probably had a good guess whose fault that was, and they had come to help.

Or just to get their prisoner.

Or whatever.

When the commander of the other ship had contacted them, and told them their name, relief had washed over Thor's face, and at the same time a particular kind of fear.

Tony wondered what to make of that.

It was probably good that Steve was standing next to him in any case, Steve was good with any kind of person (except Tony), and Tony was in his suit, and Natasha was hovering in the background, trigger-happy. So they were moderately prepared for space-elves. Viking space-elves? Or didn't the elves actually live in Alfheim and these were… just space Vikings, like the Aesir? Tony wasn't sure about the terminology, really.

The ramp clonked as it reached the floor of the other ship.

And this was a diplomatic mission. There was no real reason for the Vanir to harm them. Or to help them, come to think of it, since they hadn't brought the one thing they had asked for.

The woman who slowly strode up the ramp was relatively short in any case, wearing a long cloak that billowed around her, and the masses of her dark hair were falling heavily on her shoulders. The way she held herself upright, the way her eyes travelled onto them but soon fixed on Thor, taking in his whole appearance, the bloodied armour, the defeated look on his face, and obviously came to her own judgement of it that she didn't share, definitely told Tony why Thor might be a little scared of
She came to a stop in front of them, and Thor bowed.

‘Lady Hlín of Vanaheim’ said he. ‘We are honoured by your presence. It is beacon of light on a dark day’

‘Thor Odinson, my prince, my liege’ said she, bowed her head only a little. Her skin was dark, but now that Tony looked more closely, there were silver markings on the side of her face, looking like decorum but at the same time as if they were a natural part of her. They gave her face an interesting structure, but even though they were fine, they didn’t make her look anything like ethereal. Huh. He found he liked it. ‘Considering what I’ve already seen, I would very much like to hear about your dark day’

Her voice sounded sober; her gaze was sharp.

‘Allow me to introduce my shield-brothers from Midgard’ said Thor. ‘This is Anthony Stark, Man of Iron and a great hero of Midgard. He single-handedly destroyed the Chitauri army that threatened Midgard three years ago.’

‘Not altogether single-handedly, my team and a bomb were of a sort of negligible assistance, but I was glad to help’ Tony said with a small bow.

Hlín eyed him and nodded.

‘This is Steve Rogers, the Captain of the great continent America – he stood by my side in battle and always had my back.’

‘Very pleased to meet you, though I certainly don’t pretend to be able to represent the entire continent of America’ Steve said, bowed and smiled shyly. ‘Not even the State of New York, really.’

‘And this is Natasha Romanoff – a shield maiden of dazzling beauty and maybe even deadlier than Sif, if I may say so’ said Thor.

‘Always glad to be underestimated’ Natasha said, grinned shark-like, and stepped on Thor’s feet for a moment.

‘The honour is all mine’ said Hlín, then turned to Thor again. ‘Thor, let us end this game of decorum. Loki’s blood is all over your face and armour and I’m not going to pretend that it isn’t.’

‘Aye’ said Thor, and Tony would bet anything that Hlín could read everything to be yet said in the Thunderer’s eyes already.

And Hlín seemed to do so, for she furrowed her eyebrows, suddenly looking troubled.

‘Thor?’ asked she.

‘I…’ Thor said and swallowed. ‘I am grieved to say that my brother has passed away a few hours ago, shortly after an assassination attempt was made against his person. He fought valiantly, but he succumbed to his injuries. I am aware that this means Asgard will not be able to honour her part in the deal negotiated with Vanaheim. I offer my sincerest apologies to Lord Frey and Lady Gerdr for that, and understand if this means our deal is nullified. I would merely ask for safe passage back to Midgard, and maybe help so to secure said safe passage, and am prepared to offer my services in return. I understand if Vanaheim wishes to seek repayment for our failure in honouring our deal, but would ask you kindly to consider that I and my parents are already punished by the loss of a son, and
Hlín continued to stare at Thor, surprisingly bothered.

‘Thor’ said she. ‘You are telling me that Loki is dead’

Thor nodded.

‘You told the world so before, Thor. Remember?’

‘This time, I fear I have better reason to believe it is true.’

‘Better than last time?’

She looked at him closely, as if searching for something, and what she found didn’t seem to please her.

‘You and I have a lot to talk about, young prince’ said she.

If Thor found her attitude inadequate, he didn’t show it.

He merely nodded again.

‘But wash first, change your clothes, drink water, eat something, if at all possible’ said she. ‘You look dreadful, and I am sure you are not eager to faint and fall on your face in front of your friends. And I am certain your comrades will accommodate me well in the meantime.’

Hlín was a quiet guest who nevertheless could fill a room with her presence. Tony had decided to make room for her in the community kitchen since it was the only vaguely comfortable place in the Mantis that wasn’t the personal quarters. And Hlín sat down on the chair he offered her without commenting on the lack of comfort or luxury, took the coffee he gave her with thanks and stayed silent, until Thor reappeared half an hour later, looking just as tired and defeated as before, but a lot cleaner.

‘Give him a glass of water, if you can with some sugar in it’ Hlín said and Tony obeyed before he even thought about it. There was an air of authority about her that you didn’t easily question. He wondered whether she had been a teacher at one point in her life. He had had a teacher like that, once. One that even he had bothered listening to.

Thor sat down and drank, then put the glass down.

‘I have questions’ said Hlín.

Thor nodded.

‘How was Loki attacked? Was your ship invaded?’

‘No, or rather, the intruder was gone before we noticed anything was amiss.’

‘You weren’t with him then? Where was he attacked?’

‘In his cell.’
There was a long pause after that, and it felt like a very disapproving pause.

‘Tell me everything, and start from the beginning.’

Thor told her everything, and she listened, not interrupting him once. The expression on her face was guarded.

After Thor had finished, she didn’t speak for a while, then she said, ‘You mentioned that you watched Loki’s fight on recordings.’

‘Yes.’

‘Show me.’

After the on-screen Thor had screamed and fried the ship once more (this time on the tablet that Tony had downloaded the video recording onto, no reason to show the scary Vanir lady the command centre), and the screen had blacked out once more, Tony put the tablet away. Really, the whole video didn’t get any less creepy the more often he watched it, and it was doing no good things to Thor either.

The guy was in fact kind of grey in the face again.

Hlín’s face, as to her, had tensed, her mouth a thin line, and she was almost radiating anger. Again, for a long time, she said nothing, tapping on the table.

‘Thor said that he was doing magic during that time we-‘ Tony began.

‘Yes, he was doing magic.’ Hlín said sharply.

‘And each time the picture flickered-‘

‘Magic can interfere with technology like this’ Hlín cut him off again. ‘Especially very strong magic.’

‘So the fact that the video showed nothing recognisable for seven whole minutes-‘

‘Yes’

She almost spit the word out, then swallowed, glared at Thor for a moment (who was looking at his hands again and noticing nothing), then back at the table.

No, she was not happy.

Not happy at all.

‘The attacker-‘

‘Used your means of travel against you, just as you guessed’ said Hlín. ‘Using Yggdrasil that way to transport a ship leaves it vulnerable to intruders. The material plane thins, and ordinary magical wards become useless. Someone who can use even basic phasing and dimensional magic can come and go, use the travelling ship like a box with no walls into which they can stick their fingers. The attacker was on the outside of your material plane, thrusting the blade in as they pleased, barely constricted by the laws of space.’
‘Sounds like a difficult attacker to defend oneself against’ said Natasha into the silence.

She hid the fact that she had just watched the video for the first time very well. She hadn’t visibly reacted to anything.

Steve, on the other hand, was wearing a deep frown on his face.

‘Yes, you could say that’ Hlín said and shot another glare at Thor. ‘That is why a well-versed mage would have put up additional wards before travelling that way. Loki would have known about the danger. Did he not warn you?’

Thor didn’t look at her.

‘He… he did warn me’ said he.

‘And?’

‘He didn’t do it in words. He wore the muzzle’ said Thor, visibly not wanting to speak the words. ‘I didn’t understand, I thought he was afraid to go to Vanaheim. I called him a coward.’

Silence.

‘And you didn’t make sure this was really the reason he was reluctant to go? You didn’t talk to him?’

‘He wore the muzzle.’

‘I already know he wore the muzzle. Why did you not use other means of asking?’

Thor’s face twitched – he opened his mouth to speak, closed it then. He opened it again, hesitated.

‘Because…because he is Loki’ said he then, and his voice sounded teary.

‘What?’

‘Because he is Loki’ said Thor, looking desperate. ‘Because he does nothing but betray me, he does nothing but lie. I cannot trust one word he says, why should I ask him anything? What should I even do with his answers? His words are just more illusions, just there to confuse me.’

There was a tense pause, and then they all jumped as Hlín slammed both hands on the table, and stood up abruptly.

‘Thor!’ she said, and the way she leant on the table and glared certainly made her look more threatening. ‘For Asgard’s sake may the Norns allow Odin to live a long life, but no matter when, Thor, you are going to be KING one day! What do you think you are going to hear, as king, but lies? What do you think you heard your whole life, my prince, but lies? Is that then your way of dealing with them? Will you muzzle all the nine realms because you are too lazy to be bothered with the fact that people will not always tell you the truth? Will your solution be to simply stop listening? Like you didn’t listen to Loki simply because he LIES? Of course he does, you utter fool! It was your duty to tell his falsehoods from his truths! As king, this is something you have to be able to DO!’

‘Whoaah’ said Tony. ‘Slow down there. I get that you’re angry, lady, but go easy on the guy, he’s just lost his brother!’

‘But he’s lost his brother already twice, hasn’t he?’ Hlín shouted, unbothered by Tony’s interruption and still glaring at Thor. ‘Twice, Loki was taken from you, and twice, the Norns returned him to
you! And did you learn? No! You learned nothing! What if this time, the Norns will not bring him back for you, what if this time, he is gone for good? What if Loki, the most powerful mage in the nine realms, who possesses old knowledge lost to anyone else, died gutted by a common assassin as a prisoner under your care, in the cell you provided for him, on the ship you steered, his magic that he could have defended himself with bound by your hands, because you couldn’t be bothered to think of him as anything else but a COWARD?! Because you couldn’t be bothered by his cowardly LIES?! What then, Thor Odinson?"

She looked at Thor, and when she spoke again, her voice was low.

‘What then?’

Thor didn’t answer.

Hlín sighed.

‘Guide me to his cell’ said she. ‘There are more questions that must be answered before I leave.’

Hlín’s face paled a bit as Steve opened the door of the cell for her, her nose twitched. She probably knew exactly what the cinnamon smell meant. She walked to the middle of the room, looked around, displeased.

‘With your permission, Thor’ said she. ‘I will use Loki’s blood to perform a tracking spell.’

Thor nodded.

Hlín whispered something, made a gesture with her hand, and the blood in the cell began to glow white briefly, until the glow abruptly vanished.

‘Did it work?’ Tony asked. ‘It… kind of didn’t look like it worked.’

Hlín shook her head.

‘That will be because it didn’t. I cannot track him. I cannot tell you were he is now.’

‘Is that unusual?’ Nat asked.

‘Not if the blood of the person we track has stopped flowing’ said Hlín.

‘Oh’ said Tony. ‘So he’s definitely dead then.’

The Vanir lady didn’t answer, looking at the blood with furrowed eyebrows instead.

‘And can we be sure that this is not a trick of some sort?’ asked Natasha now. ‘I don’t mean to be disrespectful but it makes me suspicious that his body so conveniently vanished just after he died and after we left the Yggdrasil and apparently weren’t that magically vulnerable anymore. If I have understood you correctly, it would have been far more difficult to just teleport him away then.’

‘Loki was not… teleported away, as you call it’ said Hlín. ‘I fear I cannot tell you how exactly he was taken, but yes, to accomplish it was probably a difficult feat.’

‘Exactly, thus my suspicions. I can see why anyone would go to great lengths to end Loki’s life, but
I don’t see why anyone would go to such great lengths to steal his corpse.’

Thor shifted next to her, pressed his eyes shut. The big guy really wasn’t that well, was he? But then again, the room did still reek of Loki’s decomposition.

‘Seidr is resilient’ said Hlín after a pause. ‘It clings to the body for much longer than life. And the blood, flesh, hair, teeth, bones or entrails even of a being devoid of magic – all these can be used as sacrifices in a working. There are many things that a mage can accomplish with another mage’s body that would be impossible or hazardous otherwise, especially if the seidr in the latter was strong. The corpse of a mage like Loki – I would suppose such a thing would be sought-after indeed.’

‘Oh’ Tony said.

Every time he thought Loki’s death couldn’t get any uglier, it… did.

‘So if his death, as you suspect, was but a trick, then we should congratulate him on it’ added Hlín dryly. ‘So far, it has certainly fooled me.’

Next to Natasha, Thor coughed, put a hand to his mouth. Hlín eyed him.

‘Perhaps you should not stay in this room, Thor’ said she. ‘But I need your permission to do a working first.’

‘What do you want to do?’ breathed Thor.

‘I want to use Loki’s blood to find out what the meaning of his last working was’ said Hlín. ‘I swear by the Norns that I will use his blood for nothing else without asking you first.’

Thor nodded.

‘You have my permission’ said he, turned around then and more ran than walked away, his hand still at his mouth.

‘I need to be alone for that particular working, and I need the room to be closed’ said Hlín. ‘Please leave.’

‘Are we sure we trust her alone with Loki’s blood?’ Natasha said. ‘I mean, just like she said, there is apparently an awful lot of stuff you can do with it.’

‘Yeah’ said Tony, because Nat had a point. ‘Why shouldn’t she just nick it?’

There were back in the community kitchen where Thor was sitting at the table, hunched over. They had heard him throwing up in the bathroom for a while, but he now looked moderately stable, if still sporting a rather unhealthy face colour.

‘She has sworn by the Norns’ said he, then belched, cleared his throat. ‘Sorry’

‘What is her word worth though?’ asked Tony.

‘As the word of a user of seidr, a lot’ said Thor. ‘They are bound by such oaths. She cannot break it.’

‘The same way Loki couldn’t do magic because he was so very injured?’ Natasha asked dryly.
Thor shot her a glowering stare.

At least this time, it hadn’t been Tony to make the faux-pas.

‘Who is Hlín to you?’ Steve asked. ‘It seems like you’ve known her for a while.’

Thor sighed, lowering his stare again.

‘Aye, I do’ said he. ‘Lady Hlín of the Vanir is a very fine mage, and one of the few prepared to teach magecraft to others. She was Loki’s and my teacher when we were children and she still resided in Asgard.’

So Tony had been completely right about the teacher thingy.

Well, that certainly explained a lot about the way the two of them interacted.

‘Hlín always commented on how interesting it was that of the two royal siblings she taught, one was the most talented student she had ever seen, and one a completely hopeless dullard. Of course, now that we know that Loki and I were never related by blood, maybe she would not be so surprised by our differences anymore.’ Thor laughed a bit sadly.

‘She seems to be very stern with you’ Steve said.

‘Hlín never learned to like me much, and I don’t think my clumsiness at magic was the main reason’ said Thor. ‘Maybe I was just too Aesir for her taste. In truth, she doesn’t particularly like the Aesir.’

‘I’m sorry’ said Steve.

‘Oh, I didn’t resent her for it’ said Thor, and smiled weakly. ‘I was loved by so many people, and very few people liked my brother. No, I was happy that he had Hlín, as long as she was there. It was good that he had someone similar-minded to talk to.’

‘Why did she leave?’ Tony asked.

Thor straightened himself up.

‘Relations between Asgard and the other realms are not without conflict’ said he.

‘And your father can, at occasions, be a mean old fool’ said Hlín.

She was standing in the door, having approached without them noticing. She looked exhausted, and her eyes were red, as if she had recently cried.

‘Lady Hlín, you have finished your working?’ Thor asked, not reacting to her insult.

Hlín nodded.

‘Do you know what my brother did then?’

Hlín nodded again.

‘Will you tell me?’

‘No’

There was a pause. Thor stared at her.
‘You will not tell me what the last action of my own brother was?’ asked he. ‘The working that destroyed him?’

‘I am sorry’ said Hlín calmly. ‘In this case, I cannot.’

‘Why not?’ asked Thor, tears in his eyes. ‘Is it not my right to know?’

‘You are not ready to know’ said Hlín.

This time, it was Thor who slammed his hand on the table and stood up.

‘I am not a CHILD for you to decide this for me!’ he said. ‘The times you could scold me and order me around are past and gone! I am the future king of Asgard, and you are my vassal. You owe me this. You will tell me what my brother died for NOW!’

Hlín seemed unbothered by his anger.

‘And if I don’t tell you, what will you do?’ asked she calmly. ‘Will you bring me before trial, torture me until I reveal my secret, or declare war on Vanaheim? Is that your way of showing that you will be a better king than Odin, less short-sighted, less cruel? Asgard needs Vanaheim as an ally, she was prepared to give up a member of the royal family for that, and she failed. Just as you said, she has not honoured her part of the deal. So think before you claim what I owe you as a representative of my realm.’

Thor balled his hands to fists, bit his lips, but he said nothing.

‘I would not withhold information like that without reason’ said Hlín. ‘And I swear by the Norns that I do not withhold it in order to harm you or your family. Quite in the contrary. But the fact remains that I cannot tell you yet.’

They looked each other in the eyes. Tony saw Natasha shift in her corner, but she said nothing. She was probably right – as much as they wanted to know what Loki had been up to, it probably wasn’t the right time to interfere in inter-realm politics.

‘Loki’s blood has told me everything it knows’ said Hlín then, and her voice was suddenly softer. ‘If you would allow me, I would destroy all the traces of his remains that still remain in the cell so that they cannot be used by another anymore.’

A pause, then Thor nodded.

‘I would be grateful.’

‘If you want, you can watch.’

Again, Thor nodded.

‘I would very much like that, yes.’

‘I understand you have troubles with your engine’ said Hlín later.

They were walking back to the ramp again, Hlín was preparing to leave.
Tony wondered why she mentioned the matter now when she had ignored their rather vital problem of being stranded in space until now, but Thor had never asked, and apparently, the only thing Tony was good for in alien cultures was to put his foot in his own mouth. And as much as he didn’t care normally about insulting important people, he really really really wanted to be able to go back home. So he nodded.

‘Thor has fried the electric system of the ship’ said he. ‘I am afraid he also fried a few very important wires and circuits. To be frank, we are dead in the water.’

Hlín eyed him.

‘Did you really just use the term ‘electric system’?’ asked she.

‘Er, yeah?’

‘Man of Iron, do you understand anything of the workings of this ship at all?’

‘Er…’

He really wanted to say yes. He was Tony Stark after all, and he had steered this ship back to Earth, had studied the ship for months. But the truth was, maybe, just maybe, he was a little bit out of his depth this time. Skrull technology just didn’t make any SENSE was all.

Hlín sighed.

‘Take me to where you suspect the problem.’

So they made a detour to the engine room, where he showed her the blackened wires and circuit boards. Tony somehow expected her to repair them with a hand gesture and a flash of light, but he was disappointed. Instead, she commented dryly that the circuit board was not the problem at all. She then opened casings in the floor and casings beneath that, stared at something that looked like a lava lamp for several minutes, then asked Tony to lead her to the ship’s little workshop where she retrieved several of those tools Tony had never quite found out the function of. She walked with him down the corridor that led to the command centre, kneeled down there, opened another casing behind which there were… crystals? She then used one of the more obscure tools – looking more like a pendulum than anything else – to measure… something… about the crystals, and declared that Thor’s lightning had imbalanced the pulsar and that the ship had shut itself off as a consequence, in order to prevent further harm.

So… like a safeguard?

She pulled out a small control pad in any case, and tapped around on that for a while, then stuffed it back in, closed the casing and said that restarting the engine should work now.

And it… did.

And yes, Tony was relieved, once the soft murmur of the engine was back, the vibrations telling Tony that it had indeed whirred to life again.

‘Thank you’ Tony said and bowed deeply.

But fuck, what she had done told him two things – first, that he still knew jack shit about the Mantis, and second that Hlín was scarily tech-savvy for a hand-waver.
‘It was no trouble’ Hlín said soberly.

Then she eyed Thor who had accompanied them silently but was still looking… not his best.

‘If you want to travel back the same way you came here, I should provide you with wards so that your ship will not be vulnerable again’ said she. ‘Do you allow me to do so?’

‘Oh, please do’ Tony said before Thor could, and even though Nat shifted in the background. But fuck distrust and his own neurotic possessiveness over his ship. Fuck it all. He was not going to sit in a box without walls again into which any mediocre stage magician could stick his blade. Or dick.

She made a gesture with her hands, this time rather complicated, and the walls glowed white for an instant.

She breathed out afterwards, closed her eyes.

‘Are you okay?’ asked Tony.

‘It’s just exhaustion’ said she. ‘I’m perfectly fine.’

They continued their way to the entrance of the ship. Only when they had arrived at the ramp, she turned to Thor.

‘You should take some time to settle your mind before you attempt to use Yggdrasil for your travels again, a few days at least’ said she. ‘You should still know from your childhood lessons what emotional turmoil can do to the control of magic.’

Thor nodded.

‘I would, as a representative of the court of Vanaheim, invite you to accompany me so to be accommodated there until you feel better, and if you wish me to, I will do so’ said she. ‘But I want to be frank with you. Lord Frey and Lady Gerdr will not be happy about the news I bring, and no matter how much they want to respect your grief, you might still be confronted with theirs, and everything it entails. Maybe it will be more beneficial to the serenity of your mind if you remained here for now, give both them and you time to come to terms, and you will be welcomed very warmly in a few days. I am certain they will understand and formulate the invitation in a way that will make neither Vanaheim nor Asgard lose face.’

Thor nodded again.

‘This does not mean that Vanaheim will not care for the safety of your stay’ continued she. ‘We will provide you with everything you need to be comfortable, and our ships will stay close to defend you if you are in need. I understand your ship is low on energy and that it recharges using solar power. You are welcome to circle our planet until your reserves are full. Until your departure from our realm, you have the guarantee that we will guard your life and those of your companions, and that we will care for your well-being. Is that acceptable?’

‘It is more than acceptable’ Thor said. ‘And more than I, who failed to keep my promise, deserve. I humbly thank you, Lady Hlín, and your Lord and Lady. Please send them my very best regards. It has been too long since I have met my uncle the last time, and I am still to be introduced to his new wife, the graceful Lady Gerdr of whose beauty I have heard so many wonderful tales. I’m looking very much forward to it, and if not for the unexpected tragedy, I would allow nothing to delay that meeting.’
Hlín nodded.

‘I will relay your words to them, and I am sure that they will be glad to hear them’ said she.

Thor hesitated.

‘Maybe, though I know I failed to deliver my brother to justice’ said he and the words seemed to cost him effort. ‘Lord Frey and Lady Gerdr may find some peace in the knowledge that, though not judged and not by choice of the Vanir, my brother did receive a form of punishment.’

Hlín smiled sadly.

‘That could indeed bring them some satisfaction if their intention had been to see Loki punished’ said she. ‘As it is, that was not what we hoped for when we made our deal with Asgard.’

Thor looked surprised.

‘It was not?’

Hlín shook her head.

‘We wanted, or rather we needed to talk to him’ said she. ‘He has stolen something that belongs to us. We needed to ask him why.’

Oh. Now, that was an interesting twist.

Thor seemed to think so too. Or, rather, he looked as if he didn’t know what to do with that info at all.

Hlín turned, then stopped, looked back.

‘One last piece of advice’ said she. ‘You truly should give your brother’s last words some thought.’

Thor didn’t seem to know what to do with that information either. But Hlín already walked down the ramp and it rose and closed behind her.
Chapter Summary

Loki’s heart is really in this song, you know? His liver probably too. And his kidneys, and his lungs, and... ah, yes, and there is plot.

Chapter Notes

Are all mages thieves, really?

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Hlín settled in her chair in the command centre, gave the orders to the other ships, and disconnected hers from Thor’s. Flying back to Vanaheim, she tried to settle her mind.

Tried to understand what she had seen, what she had heard. What she was still hearing, if she listened closely enough.

She would have time to cry over Loki later. Cry over that Norn-forsaken idiot who lately had been such a willing and efficient participant in his own destruction.

You don’t know what happened to him after his fall into the void, she thought. You can guess the great outlines, but you don’t know the details. He might have had excellent reasons to end his existence.

She sighed.

No, Loki had been at risk even before that. Long before that.

It was just because nobody had been prepared to see, to listen, that the Bifrost incident had shocked everyone so. And she, she had not been there, and now, it was too late.

But she had other matters to think about now.

She took the small vial out of her robe, looking at the tiny bit of muscle tissue inside that she had been able to steal because she had worded her oath well enough.

Tiny, but powerful. Loki’s heart was nothing to dismiss.

A last treasure that he had left her and that she would have to guard with great care, hide from everyone and everything. That she would have to use well.

For what had happened meant that the realms couldn’t afford any mistake anymore.
Lord Frey and Lady Gerdr already waited for her when she arrived in the royal dining room. Gerdr frowned as soon as she set eyes on her, and she sent the servants away immediately.

‘You do not bring good news, I gather’ said she.

Good news and bad news, Hlín thought. I bring you a gift, but it comes with a price.

‘Please’ said Frey, extending his hand in a welcoming gesture. ‘That can wait. Sit down and eat first, you look exhausted and hungry.’

Yes, she was tired. Forcing Loki’s blood to reveal what he had done – it had drained her in more than one way.

Hearing his voice one last time in quite that context… she had not known he could sing so well.

It did not exactly make it easier to bear.

So she nodded and complied, and for a while, they ate in silence, and Gerdr and Frey didn’t interrupt her once, nor did they hurry her.

She could appreciate that.

Finally, Hlín set the goblet down on the table, swallowed, and said, ‘I indeed bring grave news, though my mission was successful’

Frey raised his eyebrows.

‘What did Loki say?’ asked he. ‘Since he hasn’t accompanied you?’

Hlín shook her head.

‘By the Norn’s cruel will, I never talked to Loki and he will not come to you, not today, nor any other day’ said Hlín. ‘But I think I have our answer nevertheless.’

There was silence after she had finished her tale. Gerdr pressed her teeth together so hard Hlín could see the muscles of her jaw working. Frey breathed in deeply.

‘Are we absolutely sure that it is not a trick’ said he. ‘We are talking about Loki, after all.’

Hlín wondered what she was supposed to say.

‘As you pointed out, it is Loki’ said she then. ‘How can we be sure?’

She bit her lip.

‘But I told you what I saw, what I found out’ said Hlín. ‘As I said to the shield maiden of Midgard, if it was a trick, Loki was… thorough. He got it down to the very last detail. Even down to…’

She swallowed.

‘… the smell’

Both Gerdr and Frey flinched at that.

And then Gerdr abruptly stood up, strode to the window, turned, her curly red hair following.
‘Well, it IS like Odin to steal the last great treasures of Jotunnheim, only to WASTE them!’ she said. Her crimson eyes were narrowed, and Frey looked at her wearily.

‘Was it truly Odin who wasted Loki’s life?’ asked he.

‘WASN’T IT?!’ asked she.

Frey said nothing to that and Hlín found that she had a point.

‘And you think his corpse was stolen for its magical properties?’ Frey said instead, turning to Hlín again.

Hlín nodded.

‘Maybe by a mage in need of power, or brigands who hope to get a high price for it on the black market.’

Brigands who would probably cleave the body into parts to sell them separately and glean the most profit from it.

‘It is a bit much of a coincidence that this happened so soon after his death though’ said Frey.

‘Yes’ said Hlín. That bothered her too. ‘It suggests that the assassin and the thieves were associated. But Loki was powerful – a death of a man like him causes a disruption. Thus, it might also have been foreseen.’

‘Foreseen? Seers in the employ of crooks? Of crooks who are prepared to desecrate a corpse?’ asked Gerdr, and narrowed her eyes.

Hlín weighed her head.

‘Considering whose corpse it was, there was probably a lot of money involved’ said she.

Not that she liked the idea.

‘This is demeaning’ murmured Gerdr and turned to the window again, her arms crossed in front of her chest. It was getting significantly colder in the room and frost was crawling up the windows.

Frey observed her as if to appraise something.

‘Very few people since Mymir have died the mage death’ said he then, rubbing his eyes. ‘I didn’t expect to see it happen again in my lifetime.’

‘Very few people since Mymir would have been advanced enough to even begin a working that could demand it’ said Hlín. ‘Nobody since Mymir tried to do what Loki has done.’

Gerdr strode up and down the room.

‘The Bard’s Song would have killed him even if he had been in perfect health’ said she. ‘Did he use it because he knew he was dying in any case? Because his injuries were too grave?’

If only Hlín could believe that.

‘That could be what decided him’ said she. ‘But the Bard’s Song is not something that can be sung spontaneously, as you know as well as I do. It’s magic as old as history, and literally as difficult to wield. Loki must have been preparing it for a long time, must have been composing it for a long
time. In retrospect, some of the objects he stole from us were likely tools in that preparation. The spindle, above all. He was going to do that working eventually, I think we can be sure of that. The attack probably only hastened the execution.’

‘It could have been intended as a last resort, should his other ploys fail’ said Frey.

‘Yes’ said Hlín. ‘Or maybe Loki had originally planned to use other sources of power than his own body to fuel it… like the infinity gems, for example.’

He had, in the end, used other sources of power than only his body, and not weak ones. He had drained the energy reserves of a ship made for inter-galactic travel, and he had tapped the massive source of energy one of the Midgardians was carrying on his chest – and the working had still taken his body too.

Gerdr glanced at her, then at Frey.

‘Perhaps’ said she, and sat down again. ‘You say you have our answer even though you never talked to Loki. So you think that the rumours are true?’

‘They must be. Even considering his recent mental illness, few threats could have driven Loki to such extreme measures as the Bard’s Song is’ said Frey. ‘And we know he has been after the gems for a while. That was why the Kree put the price on his head in the first place. They thought he was still working for the Mad Titan.’

‘Yes’ said Hlín. ‘That and I managed to hear echoes of parts of the song.’

Both their eyes were on her now.

‘You did?’

Hlín nodded, and swallowed.

She wondered how much to reveal. It was dangerous to voice such knowledge, and she had to weigh her words well.

‘It took a lot of persuasion, but the blood still remembered’ said she. ‘I can’t tell you many details, but it was about the fall of the Mad Titan, vanquished by mighty heroes’

Frey looked at her pensively. He was probably guessing that she had heard more than she would admit.

‘By mighty heroes you mean Thor, by any chance?’ asked he, one of his eyebrows raised.

And he knew Loki well, didn’t he?

‘Yes, he was among them. And part of the song was sung from Thor’s perspective’ said she. ‘You know what that means’

‘He tried to persuade the Norns to spare Thor’s life then’ said Frey, rubbing his eyes again. ‘Well, we shouldn’t be surprised, I suppose. Loki may have tried to kill Thor many times in the past, but he has made sure every single time that his brother would survive. Was part of the song at least sung from his own perspective too?’

No. There had been a neutral narrator, but nothing had indicated them to be the trickster. Or anyone in particular. A wild-card, for the Norns to use as they pleased.
Instead, parts of the sung had been sung from the perspective of one of Thor’s Midgardian companions, the heavily armed one with the power plant on his chest.

That had been… an interesting decision on Loki’s part.

But on the other hand, only badly written stories merely let the powerful heroes survive and speak, while the side-characters remained mute, unassuming and dropped dead at the first occasion.

And the realms could not afford a badly-written story.

Too much was at stake.

‘Not that I heard’ said Hlín.

‘So we lose Farbauti’s last son and keep the oaf?’ said Gerdr. ‘That does not sound like a fair trade to me.’

Well, when had the Norns ever been fair, Hlín thought. And magic definitely wasn’t. Nor Loki.

‘I recognised the melody when I heard it’ she said. ‘I have heard it before, while travelling on Yggdrasil. It had been almost imperceptible, so silent, but…’

‘So you mean to say that there are signs the Norns have accepted the ballad?’ asked Frey.

That Urd, Verdandi and Skuld would take Loki’s song and spin it into their threads, and weave the future in its shape, because the ballad was too beautiful and too clever not to be made real?

She had heard it when she had touched the floor. She had heard it when she had touched the controls, back in her ship. It was everywhere.

But there was no way of knowing what parts the Norns had accepted and where they had changed the words, if not the tune.

‘There is no certain way to tell’ said Hlín. ‘The song changes the very fabric of reality, so in theory, there should be a difference to how reality was made up before, but how changed are we, and does this still render us capable of sensing that difference? That is the great problem of the Bard’s Song, that it changes everything. Maybe time will tell us, when events play out in a way that would please a certain trickster.’

Frey breathed out slowly.

She wondered whether he wouldn’t decide to push after all, to press for more answers. If he was as smart as she thought he was, he wouldn’t.

Hlín, all modesty aside, was not an ally one should carelessly throw away, and Gerdr would know that too.

Frey’s recent marriage had been good for the realm, Hlín found, for more than one reason. Of course, it had been a slap in Asgard’s face that the Vanir puppet king had taken a Jotunn bride, especially so shortly after the crown prince had gotten banished, Asgard had attacked Jotunheim with the Bifrost and then had lost the culprit who was not only the second prince, king regent at the time of the war crime, but also a stolen Jotunn war prize. That had been… quite an embarrassing sequence of events, all in all. For the same reasons, Asgard hardly could have forbidden the alliance – they were still trying hard to repair relations with the Frost Giants after all.
Frey had laughed for weeks.

But it also turned out that Frey and Gerdr had chosen each other rather well. Gerdr was a mage, even a better one than Frey, and where he surpassed her in political manoeuvring, she more than made up for in pragmatism and a fine sense for battle strategy.

Together, they had taken advantage of Asgard’s new weakness in a truly admirable manner, and today, Vanaheim was more independent than she had been in a long time.

Hlín wished she could say that this was the reason they had so easily been able to negotiate the surrender of Odin’s younger son, not even specifying what exactly they planned to do with him or whether they would leave him alive, but she wasn’t sure how much Loki had been worth to the old guy in the end.

Odin was a complicated man, and an even more complicated father.

Thor, at least, for all his faults, was more predictable in his affections.

‘Well, we can only hope that where we have lost a mage and a warrior, his song will suffice to tip the balance’ said Frey, and Hlín knew by these words that at least for now, he would press no further.

He tapped on the table a few times.

‘So… the question remains… who of us is going to have to tell Hatchet?’ asked he then.

Chapter End Notes

Yup – Urd, Verdandi and Skuld are the names of the Norns. Can't really decide whether I should tag them as characters in this fic, or not.

Also, this fic is like a roleplay in that the bard dies five minutes into the game. And now Loki is muttering curses while preparing his new character sheet and the others are pleading with him not to choose a bard AGAIN.
Chapter Summary

Campy Steve is campy. Mopey Thor is mopey. Inevitable conversations about Asgardian family history are inevitable (and hilariously weird every single time). Tony is first weirded out by dreams, then by reality. Nat, of course, is just fine. Also, discussions about nomenclature.

Chapter Notes

If you want a soundtrack for this one (or for the whole Mantis-adventure-after-Loki's-death-thing): **Oh my god, by Kaiser Chiefs.** Had to think of this chapter, hearing the song, mostly because of the chorus, I guess.

Of course, Tony watched the recording of that last spell Hlín had done.

It was one of the first things he did after the Vanir lady had left and they had been escorted by sleek and smooth ships to their rightful place in Vanaheim’s orbit.

And on the recording, Hlín had sat down in the middle of the cell, had closed her eyes, and at first, nothing happened but a few disturbances of the picture. And then, Loki’s blood had started to move, to flow around the cell only to coalesce into strange signs, runes, and Hlín’s eyes had opened wide. She had bent slightly forward, as if listening to something, and had kept sitting there, her mouth opening slowly, a strange expression of elation on her face, or of terror, or of sadness. After a while, tears began running down her cheeks, and they didn’t stop, until the working was done.

The end of the spell was heralded by the blood suddenly going back to their original places, in dashes and smears on walls, floor and the ceiling, and Hlín slumping forward.

For a while, she didn’t move, and Tony wondered whether she wasn’t unconscious.

Then, her back shivered, and she slowly brought her hands to her face, covering it in them.

He heard her breathe rapidly, he heard her breath hitch.

‘Loki’ she whispered. ‘What have you done?’

The blood had already answered her that, hadn’t it? They still all posed him that question.

She came to her feet slowly, trembling, swaying a bit, then stood there, supporting herself on a wall, trying to calm her breath, looking at the blood on the floor.

With a gesture of her hand, whatever had stained her clothes flowed back to where it belonged until she was spotless.

She kept standing there for another while, then abruptly straightened, and when she walked out of
the cell, her movements were fluid and certain as ever, no trembling or swaying betraying her.

No, she hadn’t told them everything, he supposed.

At least, thanks to her, they finally knew what horror movie they were starring in – Body Snatchers from Space, if he had understood Hlín correctly. Screw those urban legends about waking up in a bathtub full of ice and one of your kidneys missing – if out here, your body was valuable enough, apparently, people just killed you off and took the whole thing.

Ugh.

Maybe that was a good reason NOT to be a mage in this universe.

Tony wondered how Thor was dealing with all of this. If at all.

Tony had left it to the others to put Blondy to bed and tuck him in and all that comfy solace stuff. He hoped Steve had done it, come to think of it, and not Nat, because Nat – not really the comfy solace person, really. She would just dump grieving Thor in a storage container if that meant she could tend to other business.

And then he had to think about Steve tucking Thor into bed and that thought was weird and sweet in an extremely campy way, and then he had to think about campy Steve and his head kind of exploded.

No wonder such a disproportionally big part of the Christopher Street Day paraders had dressed up in Capsicle cosplay this year. Tony had almost been offended that there had been so few pink Iron Men in comparison, especially considering that last memorable benefit concert that had, not despite but because of the… incidents, helped fund several LGBT causes quite sufficiently, thank you very much. But now he kind of understood. If he were young and stereotypically gay in New York, and wanted to look like any of the avengers, then Steve… wasn’t technically the worst choice, Tony supposed.

Which still made Tony more handsome, just a different type of more handsome, rather the silver fox fraction, and had there been a slight decrease in men trying to hit it off with him in the last years, was he getting old?

Nah.

He was awesome.

Awesomeness never got old.

He went to the front of the command centre, and looked outside the cockpit, at the green and blue planet they were now circling, chasing the sun. It didn’t look so different from Earth, really. It was just terribly far away from it. He leant on the window, thinking about the fact that this world would be, in all his unfortunate space adventures, still the first extra-terrestrial planet he would actually set foot on.

And wasn’t that a sad thought.

But visiting the sights had never been a high priority for him, before or after he had killed the former crew of two of the Mantis. Which he was kind of surprised he had pulled off, now that Thor had informed him of what a Skrull was actually capable of.
Well, badass or not, he had still ended up alone with a couple of corpses in a spaceship that he had had no idea how to control.

Get rid of the corpses. Find food. Get the ship to move. Try to understand it despite you not speaking one word of the aliens’ language. Find out what the ship uses as fuel. Find out how the life support system works.

Find maps.

Find fucking maps.

When he had finally been on his way, racing against time and the dwindling of his provisions, he hadn’t gone even near what looked like inhabited planets.

He had known he probably wouldn’t speak the local tongue.

He had known he probably wouldn’t look local.

He had known that he was basically a space pirate and refugee and weirdo in one bad attention-attracting package.

He had circled lonesome suns to refuel, had been glad that the ship could apparently recycle water and air, and had gone on.

And now…

He turned away from the window. Elsewhere on the ship, they were doing whatever, eating maybe, or braiding each other’s hair, or reading each other bed-time stories (Natasha’s mostly being about Budapest), but Tony didn’t feel like joining them. And that was putting it mildly. In fact, at the moment, he hated even the idea of having to speak another word to anyone ever again, and that didn’t even feel like his usual aversion to intruders, he just… his head was pounding, his heart too. He put one hand on his arc reactor.

Not even that was safe out here anymore.

He decided then to stop this train of thought, and take the easy way out. He had practised restraint for hours, but the urge to crawl into a bottle of scotch was just too pressing by now.

And they were out of immediate danger, there was nothing really important to do for a while, so he could give in.

He could give in, unearth the bottle, and find something to tinker with.

There had to be something in this ship that he could repair or improve.

There always was, after all.

For a vague period of time, the outside world pretty much stopped existing, and Tony didn’t miss it. There were lava lamps to look at, and the control pad of those weird crystals to figure out, and the burn of the scotch down his throat, and if in-between, people walked in and asked him something, wanted something from him, he noticed only absently. They were easy to ignore.
There was, after all, a problem, and one he would solve, because no matter how creepy the
circumstances, he wouldn’t be Thor-EMPed into surrender again, no. If the Skrulls had been too
stupid to protect their electronics against acts of God, no, not electronics, Hlíň had practically
laughed at him for even mentioning the word electronics, but in any case, he wouldn’t make the
same mistake. Not twice. There was surely something one could do, layers of protection to add, or
more lava lamps, or more safeguards.

Easy cheesy, not a delicate experiment after all, tinkering with technology Tony understood even less
than he had thought, not really wanting to wreck his own ship and be dependent on scarily tech-
savvy hand-waver Hlíň to look at him disapprovingly and then save them again.

Just try to see patterns, try to see similarities to terrestrial technology, even though there were none
because fucking lava lamps and fucking crystals! All this, he thought resentfully, would have been so
much easier if T’Challa had just allowed him to study Wakanda’s tech for a bit – and then he realised
that he had just indirectly admitted that Wakanda’s tech was more advanced than his own, and
mentally slapped himself. Okay, so put that thought away, take another pull from the bottle, look at
that circuit board again (the one that Hlíň had dismissed immediately, as if it wasn’t remotely
important, but at least it made fucking sense, and why did the Vanir know how to deal with Skrull
engines, it wasn’t FAIR), find out why it’s connected to the rest in exactly that way.

Some time later, he thought he had an epiphany, went to disconnect a certain wire, and stopped
himself short at the last second because he realised that he had no idea what he was doing, and was
probably either about to shut off the light in the refrigerator or the ship’s artificial gravity. This
actually felt a bit too much like the good old space days.

Another while later, Tony was lying on the ground on his back, and the ceiling was turning above
him, shifting in and out of focus, no nostalgic crack to focus on. He had to admit he wasn’t feeling all
that swell. Maybe he had crawled into the bottle a bit too much, was that possible? It was technically
possible, and Pepper kept saying so. But the fog in his mind, however numbing it was, still didn’t
stop the calculations from running, the thoughts jumping from one problem to the other, never
coming to an end, never to a solution, and the tubes he saw on the ceiling blurred with the memory
of the wires and circuits of the ship’s entrails laid open, and then blurred with the memory of Loki’s
open stomach, open chest, the bits of bones Tony had seen, shattered in the wound, and-

He felt a bit sick.

Tony pressed his eyes shut but boy, that was a bad idea, everything started turning for real then even
though he was lying on the ground. He opened his eyes again, then tried to turn to the side. If he was
going to throw up again, he probably should make sure he wasn’t going to choke. One person
choking on their own bodily fluids was really enough for one day.

One person killing themselves off for no good reason.

Ugh.

He hated this. He hated watching himself on that video, standing around like an idiot, not helping
anyone.

This shouldn’t have happened. This hadn’t been on the agenda, nowhere near it. Tony was gonna
deliver that trickster and then go home and never think about him again.

Maybe it had been a trick.

Maybe…
He drifted off for a while, and then he was standing back in his tower, looking out the windows. He felt calm, because there was quiet music somewhere near, too quiet for him to make out the words or even the melody, but it was… and then Loki was striding into the room, all menacing and imperious, the sceptre in his hands, demanding surrender.

Tony offered him a drink.

Loki laughed, but his eyes didn’t, and Tony went to him, saying something about the Avengers going to pummel Loki into oblivion for killing Coulson.

Loki laughed again.

‘The scavengers’ said he. ‘That’s what you are’

And then, something about him flickered, and he was thin suddenly, so terribly thin, that dark scar on his face was back, the cheeks sunken, his eyes crimson red, but they started bleeding, his nose started bleeding, Loki snorted with laughter, and droplets of blood landed on Tony’s chest.

‘Hey, Saint Hornbearer, watch who you’re bleeding on!’

Loki didn’t answer, he just laughed, and then he fell, and Tony wanted to catch him, but the trickster slipped out of his hands, hit the ground, his armour was gone, his chest naked and open.

Tony bent over him.

‘Loki’ said he. ‘What have you done?’

‘But I told you’ said Loki, and now, finally, his eyes were laughing, and he laid his bloodied hands on Tony’s chest, directly on the arc reactor, and it flickered, and then turned dead.

Then the trickster was gone, the arc reactor stayed dead, and he could feel the pressure on his chest mount, could feel the shards move, much too soon, they shouldn’t bother him for days, but he could feel them press into his flesh, at the same time, he heard the music, faintly, playing on, but it couldn’t calm him anymore, he couldn’t breathe anymore, couldn’t breathe-

He gasped, opened his eyes, his hands found the floor, he pulled himself up, his head was pounding, his breath was too quick and shallow, don’t throw up, don’t throw up, don’t throw up-

He threw up.

After that, he had to clean up of course, and then he stared at the engine-room, all open and showing its innards, and he knew he couldn’t go on with that anymore.

For one thing, he was too drunk for it.

Go to the community kitchen, get some painkillers for your headache instead.

Tony was standing in that same kitchen, leant against the counter, drinking from his chipped mug with shaking hands, when Nat came in.

‘Oh, look what finally dragged itself in’ said she and got herself an energy bar from the cupboard.
'Hahah, love you too’ Tony said, his voice raspy.

The room had stopped moving around him, and the pills had taken the worst edge off his pounding head, but existing was still sort of a mediocre amusement.

‘Speak for yourself’ Nat countered. ‘I like my men more self-dependent and less reeking of scotch and vomit’

And more living like a cockroach, in the walls.

‘How long did I work for anyway?’ asked Tony.

‘You mean, for how long did you refuse to consume anything non-alcoholic and ditched sleep in favour of pursuing your more self-destructive tendencies?’ Nat said. ‘Oh, I think for about a day, give or take.’

She looked very unconcerned about that.

And Tony had wasted a whole day, getting nowhere. Great.

‘You didn’t exactly drag me out there either’ said he.

Nat shrugged.

‘Not your babysitter. That’s Pepper’s job.’

Ah. Such a darling.

A darling having a point. It was embarrassing enough that Tony actually needed two babysitters, both Pepper and Jarvis, to regularly check on him and make sure that he ate and slept regularly. Jarvis sometimes shut the power off in his workshop just so to get him out. He always sounded suspiciously sarcastic in his compliments and affirmations after that.

And Jarvis had definitely gotten that quality from Pepper, not Tony. Those two were a terrible influence on each other.

‘So what have you guys been doing in the meantime?’

Nat sat down, chewing on her energy bar.

‘Steve has managed to make Thor go to sleep, which was entertaining to watch. In a way’ said she. ‘Then he tried to drag you out of the engine room a few times, or at least make you eat something solid, and then he decided to take his mind off the futility of the project by working out.’

She stretched in the chair.

‘Thor is moping around, and being unusually taciturn’ said she. ‘Not one boring Ratatoskr story all day. I think he’s actually thinking or something.’

She looked mildly surprised by that.

‘And you?’ asked Tony.

‘Oh, I’ve been busy doing my nails. Had to pretty them up after biting them for hours, fearing that I would have to spring Clint from jail for trickster murder’
‘Sure you did.’

Nat just smiled, and stood up, then crammed the rest of her energy bar into her mouth. Truly, she was only graceful when she wanted to be.

‘We’re going to visit the elves soon’ said she.

‘I’m… not sure they’re actually elves. Mythology is a bit inconsistent there, you see, on the one hand, they are described as something like forest elves, but then there are the real elves in Alfheim, but then again, Norse mythology calls about everything and everybody non-human a giant from time to time, which, I assume, makes some specific mythological pairings rather challenging, considering size-differences, and-’

‘Either way. We should decide what to wear.’

Somehow, Tony didn’t think her main concern was fashion.

As Nat had said, Steve really was in the storage room, working out (Nat kept far too good track on everybody without using the command centre and the video surveillance there much, and how was she doing that again?). Tony had put a few gym machines in the storage room before they had left Earth, guessing that it would make the others meddle with the ship less. He had also assumed that either he, Steve, Thor or Nat would need to burn some energy sooner or later in order not to kill the rest, or, in Steve’s case, I don’t know, implode with scruples and culture shock or something.

Sometimes, his guesses were rather good.

Steve was lying on the bench and pushing weights in any case (and it was not fair how easily he pushed them), but laid them back on the rack when Tony approached him.

‘Hey, Cap’

He straightened himself up, and rubbed his neck with the towel, ‘Hi, Tony – you… look better now’

Yeah, well, he had showered and changed his clothes by now. And drunken some coffee (and yes, good, strong bean coffee, even being light years away from home didn’t excuse the SHIELD coffee horror, and having had to spend the last space adventure without the stuff had caused enough suffering to make Tony a regular martyr).

‘Did you know there were more people in Captain America costumes than in Iron Man costumes at the last Christopher Street Day Parade?’

Steve flushed at once, which was exactly what Tony had intended – after all, if the Cap stole the show, Tony could at least make him feel awkward about it.

‘I… I think it’s a good thing’ said he. ‘I- I am sympathetic to their cause, I-’

‘Calm down, buddy, I’ve probably snogged more men since my break-up with Pepper than you have snogged women in your whole life, so don’t think I’m gonna go all republican on your ass.’

Which made Steve flush even more.

Cute.
Tony sat down next to him on the bench.

‘We’re gonna visit an alien planet soon’ said he.

‘Yes’ said Steve and laughed quietly. ‘Of all the things I thought I would do in my life… this one didn’t exactly make it the bucket list.’

‘That’s because you’re not ambitious enough’ said Tony and winked. ‘I don’t usually make that mistake.’

‘… and I don’t want to know what else is on your bucket list, do I?’

‘No – you probably don’t.’

Definitely not, considering how many of those items were about sex in one way or another (often in another).

‘Nat says we shouldn’t visit Vanaheim unarmed’ said he then. ‘but I don’t know how it’s gonna go down if I turn up in the suit in the current situation. You know whether Thor is approachable at the moment? On the other hand, maybe we shouldn’t take him as our main role model in inter-cultural communication? He was always kinda awkward on Earth, and until now, I don’t have the impression the Vanir like him that much. …and I don’t really know why I’m asking you this, of all people. You’re almost as awkward as him, and you’re not even technically an alien.’

Steve looked at him, pensively, as if Tony had never insulted him at all.

‘I think the Vanir have a lot of history with Thor, not all of it good’ said he. ‘And I think that Thor can be thoughtless at times, even disrespectful. But Frey is his uncle, they obviously know each other, and when the situation made it necessarily, Thor had no difficulty finding appropriately formal words. So I do think we can consult him on this matter.’

Tony stared back.

‘You’ve really given this some thought, haven’t you?’

Steve sighed.

‘Tony, I get it’s difficult for you to understand, but I’m not actually just a bulky dim mascot, no matter what the military wanted to make me and the rest of the world believe’ said he.

No, he was not, was he?

Steve frowned then, but remained silent.

‘Something’s bothering you’ said Tony.

‘A prisoner under our care was killed in his cell, of course something is bothering me’ said he.

‘But… I am still kind of surprised about the way Lady Hlín was talking about Loki, about how she reacted to his death.’

Yeah, she had been… surprisingly upset, hadn’t she?

‘Maybe it was naïve, but until now, my image of Loki and my image of how… others would see him, had always been… a bit different.’

Yes. Tony had had a different image too – just that of the annoying if hilarious and unfairly
handsome villain who was hated by absolutely everyone. Who had stuck his glow-stick of destiny into Coulson for fun and giggles, that of a madman who hadn’t even succeeded at his madness.

Why again had he not succeeded?

‘I suppose this is all a bit more complicated than we bargained for’ Tony said.

Steve lowered his eyes.

‘Sometimes I have the impression that everything is always more complicated than I bargained for’ said he. ‘Yes, this world is confusing and complex, and for a while, I had that desire to return to the past, however impossible it is. But by now, I think my memories of that past are faulty. By now, I kind of doubt that in my own time, I would have truly found the world a simpler place, easier decisions to take …’

‘My, my, Capinocchio – one day soon, if you set your mind on it, you might actually turn into a real boy.’

‘Are you comparing me to a fictional puppet now, or to a cup of coffee?’

‘The puppet, absolutely the puppet – watching you never had any stimulatory effect on me, thank gods.’

Thor, as to him, was in his quarters, and even let Tony in after the latter had kept knocking on his door for long enough.

‘What do you want, Man of Iron?’ asked he wearily, and sat back down on the bed as soon as he had let Tony in.

‘Talk dress code’ said Tony. ‘My suit – total no-go on the elf court or kind of okay because you space Vikings go everywhere with your armour anyway?’

Thor looked at him, then said, ‘Light armour should be acceptable, but weaponry or your suit would be considered an affront, as a sign that you do not trust Lord Frey’s and Lady Gerdr’s hospitality. Mjolnir is only accepted because she is far more than a mere weapon – she is a sign of my power and status, and a magical artefact that can do much more than destroy.’

Ah, could she? You wouldn’t know, the way Blondy was wielding her.

Thor seemed to think for a moment.

‘I think you can take the suit with you in its folded form, as I’ve seen you do before’ said he. ‘Just as the Black Widow and Captain America can take their weapons and shield with them, as long as they carry them packed away as luggage and give them up before entering the court itself. We might go hunting in the forests of Vanaheim during our stay and for such purposes, armour and weaponry is of course adequate.’

Tony was glad that Thor had caught up with his line of thinking so quickly.

‘So… do we expect trouble?’ said he.

Thor hesitated, then shook his head.
'Sure there, Blondy?'

Thor didn’t answer at once, only frowned a little at the nickname.

‘The way Hlín phrased the invitation means that Lord Frey and Lady Gerdr will be angry about the news she will relay.’ said he then. ‘But she has still offered us the full protection of their hospitality, and I am the Crown Prince of Asgard, their liege. They will treat us accordingly. In any case, for them not to invite us or for us not to accept the invitation would be an affront far greater than wearing your suit to court, Anthony Stark.’

That certainly sounded like they would get a warm welcome. Not at all a frostily polite one with possible back-stabbing involved.

‘However, you should know that Lady Gerdr…’ Thor began, then hesitated again.

‘You should know that Lady Gerdr Gymirsdottir is a princess of Jotunheim’ said he then.

Tony furrowed his eyebrows. Okay? So far so not relevant? Except…

‘You do not look happy about that’ said he. ‘But your brother was Jotunn… Jotnar… whatever, blue in any case… is this some form of grief, or… no, sorry, I don’t get it.’

Thor swallowed, closed his eyes.

‘It’s… complicated.’

‘Well, we’ll be circling Vanaheim for another while, refuelling, and apparently your family will need a little while too, cooling down’ said Tony. ‘You and me, we’ve got time.’

‘Fine’ said Thor, and rubbed his forehead. ‘Sit down.’

Tony complied and folded his legs on the bed, leaning against the wall behind him.

‘Asgard was, for a long time, at war with Jotunheim’ said Thor. ‘And much was lost in this long war, this war that I myself only knew from stories, in which the Jotnar were described as… well, as monsters.’

‘Monsters?’ asked Tony.

That was kind of a… harsh denomination, as far as description of enemies went.

‘That is how Loki and I were taught to see them, yes’ said Thor.

‘Loki? But he was one of them himself, wasn’t he?’

‘He didn’t know’ said Thor, and his voice sounded raspy all of a sudden. ‘He believed himself to be Aesir. So did I’

‘But… but… he was blue!’

‘Not that he or anyone else saw. He had been taken from Jotunheim as a small infant’ said Thor. ‘My father told me he had found Loki in a temple, abandoned to die. He had been too small for a Jotnar. A runt. As soon as he took Loki into his arms, my brother’s shape shifted, his skin turned pink, his eyes green. His first glamour, probably a survival instinct. It held from then on, without any flaw, even to his own eyes. He grew up, knowing not his Aesir body was a deception he was actively keeping up all the time.’
Oh.

Ouchy.

‘… and I take it that Odin… didn’t tell him either?’

Thor shook his head.

Ahah.

‘… and… he allowed Loki to believe these… Jotnar… were monsters?’

‘Yes.’

Ouch. Double ouch.

‘The peace with Jotunheim remained fragile for our entire life’ Thor continued. ‘It ruptured when I, after my brother arranged for Jotnar to penetrate Asgard on the day of my coronation, decided to take revenge.’

‘Wait, just a moment – he did what?’

Thor looked up at him.

‘He helped Jotnar infiltrate the treasure vault so to disturb my coronation and stop me from becoming king.’

‘Even though he didn’t know, at that point, that he was Jotunn?’

‘Yes’ said Thor and continued as if the story wasn’t already fucked up enough. ‘But he found out soon after. I let him manipulate me into attacking Jotunheim, and I went there with him and with four of my most trusted shield-brothers. In the battle that ensued, my brother seems to have discovered the truth about his origins. We were outnumbered but rescued by my father, who banished me to Earth for my foolishness.’

‘And… that was when you sky-dived without a parachute into Puente Antigo, right?’ said Tony.

Thor looked confused, then nodded.

‘If you mean to say I came to New Mexico on the continent of America, then yes’ said he. ‘In my absence, Loki seems to have confronted father about his heritage, which made Odin fall into the Odinsleep. He-’

‘Hold that thought’ Tony said. ‘Odinsleep?’

‘A regenerative sleep Odin has to undergo regularly to refresh the Odinforce’ said Thor. ‘In any case, Loki became King Regent. He tried to delay my return to Asgard, then tried to kill me, and arranged for his biological father, King Laufey of Jotunheim, to penetrate the royal chambers and try to kill Odin, only to be killed by Loki instead.’

‘Wait, Loki’s real father was the king of Jotunheim? And Loki killed him? And he tried to kill you in-between?’

Thor nodded.

What the… what… why…
'I must assume it was a plot to secure his place in Asgard, despite his heritage’ said he. ‘But I came back to Asgard shortly after, and all his machinations and ploys were revealed. He fled to the Bifrost then and used it to try and destroy Jotunheim–’

‘What, after trying to kill his brother, and killing his father, and pretending to want to kill his other father, he tried to destroy his own PLANET? Like, the WHOLE THING? His own entire SPECIES?’

‘Yes’ said Thor simply. ‘But I stopped him. I had to break the Bifrost in the process. Loki, he… he fell from it, into the void. We thought him dead. I mourned him for a long time. Until Heimdall told us that he was on Midgard once more, and there to invade it.’

Wow.

Okay.

That was… Tony didn’t even know what that was. God of Chaos was definitely one way to name it. God of everything escalating in an unexpectedly violent way was another. But this whole series of events… it was just… and fuck, Odin would NOT get a mug for best dad anytime soon.

‘Right.’

‘Politically, my and Loki’s actions were... difficult to justify’ said Thor.

Uhuh, Tony hoped they were.

‘In order not to cause a rebellion in the other realms, Asgard has had to make a lot of concessions since, to Jotunheim, but also to Vanaheim and Alfheim. I know that my father did not wish for Lord Frey and Lady Gerdr to marry, but in the aftermath of the Bifrost incident, he couldn’t well forbid it.’

He straightened himself up.

‘So you can see, Man of Iron’ he said. ‘why I was looking forward to meeting my uncle’s new wife with a certain apprehension even before her and Frey’s nephew died under my watch.’

Yes. Tony could see that. And…

‘So Loki’s related to Gerdr too now?’

‘By blood, yes. He is the son of her late sister Farbauti…as it seems.’

Thor looked as if he himself was still processing this information.

‘And they know? I mean, about his real parents… they know?’

Thor didn’t answer at once.

‘I… I think so’ he said. ‘The knowledge was kept from me for a long time, but my mother and her brother have always been close, and I suppose he would have known that Loki couldn’t be her son. The rest… was probably easy to find out for a man like Frey. He… he never mentioned it, never indicated with a single word…’

Thor looked away.

Fuck, man.
And Tony had thought that his own family had been as dysfunctional as it could get.

But… this? I mean…

And there was something else Tony had been wondering about.

‘Thor’ said he cautiously. ‘Did you… did you actually know what Loki looked like? I mean… underneath the glamour and all?’

‘In a way’ answered Thor. ‘As I said, I had known he was Jotunn, and I have seen other Jotnar before. But he never showed me his true form until the moment he died. I think he was ashamed of it until the end. All my long life, all his long life, and I had never truly seen… him.’

And that didn’t sound sad and terrible at all. But it was also not what Tony had been aiming for.

‘No, I mean’ said he. ‘The other glamour… I mean…’

‘The fact that my brother was covered in scars?’ Thor asked, and suddenly his eyes were blazing with anger again. ‘Scars that were old but barely healed? The fact that he looked as if he was close to starving to death? If I had known, Son of Stark, do you truly think I would have allowed him to be muzzled and not fed for several days at a time? Do you truly think I would not have taken him to Asgard, to be tended to by healers? Do you truly think I would not have made him eat until he was well once more, before I would bring him to the Vanir?’

‘I’m sorry, of course not, I’m sorry!’ Tony said, raising his hands. Thor was doing the balling his hands into fists again and that was never a good sign. ‘Remember, no brain-to-mouth-filter, always saying the wrong things.’

Thor huffed, but relaxed his hands.

‘Don’t apologise’ said he. ‘You have no reason to think me a good brother after what transpired here.’

He stared darkly at the opposing wall, but then his anger inflated, and suddenly, he was looking desperate again.

‘I just don’t understand him anymore’ said he, his voice broken. ‘Hlíín told me to think about his last words, and I have, but they don’t make any sense to me. Loki often speaks in riddles, but there is no riddle here to solve! It is no mystery how it came that he lost. He was starving, he was bound, he had no magic to help him, he had no way to escape, and no friends to come to his rescue. The enemy he fought against was quick and precise and couldn’t be wounded, nor did they relent. In truth, Loki never had a chance at all.’

He pressed his eyes shut, tears ran down his cheeks.

‘Is it a reminder of my guilt?’ asked he. ‘Did Loki truly think I wouldn’t know what my responsibility in his death had been? Did Hlíín truly think I wouldn’t understand despite his words, despite her scolding? Did he just do this to hurt me one last time? If so, I must say, he has succeeded admirably!’

Shit. It was sometimes hard to realise that gods could get… quite that wrecked. Tony bit his lip, and cautiously put his hand on the Thunderer’s shoulder.

‘Blondy’ said he quietly. ‘I don’t pretend to know your brother as well as you do, but I actually don’t think this is it.’
'What else should it be?' asked Thor angrily.

'Actually, I don’t think he was talking about the fight that killed him at all’ said Tony.

Thor looked up at him.

'What?’

‘You said that Loki liked to speak in riddles’ said Tony. ‘And as you said, nobody should be surprised that he lost that last battle. I was rather surprised he stayed upright for as long as he did. I had never seen him fight quite like that before. And that’s just the thing.’

‘What do you mean?’

Boy, could that guy have big eyes when he was hopeful but confused.

‘I don’t know if there is something to it’ said Tony. ‘But it’s been bugging me for a while. You know, because all those gigs he pulled after escaping space Viking custody, they were… like, really efficient. And now that I’ve seen him fight in earnest, I keep thinking…’

… had that been patricide then, killing Laufey? Regicide? Or regi-patricide, add to that genocide, fratricide, now suicide, had Loki just been rattling off the terminology? Maybe his true fetish had been a dictionary of criminology…

‘You keep thinking what, Man of Iron? Speak your mind!’

Oh, right, he had gotten side-tracked… where had they been? Right, there:

‘I keep thinking – how on Earth did we win in New York?’
Vanaheim

Chapter Summary

- Look, if the queen of Vanaheim jumped on the back of a boar the size of a horse, would you jump too?
- Erm, considering we were talking about peer pressure and my school problems a minute ago, that's sort of a weird question, Mr. Stark?
- You are your own man! You can't let the queen of Vanaheim tell you what to do, Peter!
- Erm, considering that she is a queen, I probably should?
- Maybe I'm not giving you that new improved spider suit after all.

Chapter Notes

I know some of you are getting impatient about Loki, but because I wear the mark of the evil author, and also because I try to do moderately good narration (at least as best as I can), you'll have to bear with me for another while. I promise that Loki will make at least a short appearance rather soon, and he will get steadily increasing screen space (it's okay to say that because most of you will read this on a screen of some sort) after that. And there is going to be a lot of Loki later on.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

‘Wow’ said Cap and stepped closer to the window.

They were low enough now that they could really appreciate the forests that covered the planet beneath them. The Vanir ship was gliding smoothly over the rooftops, some a lush green, some covered in violet or blue blossoms, some massive, some lank and barely covered in leaves, but of a peculiar undefinable beauty. They flew over great rivers that ended in waterfalls, over fields and small villages, saw herds of giant deer cross a road, saw herds of horses flee from them over a grand plain. On the horizon, a mountain chain loomed with snowy-white tops.

They had dressed formally, after some deliberation, Steve and Nat in their uniforms, Thor in what was probably his decorative armour, breastplate and red cape and everything. Tony, as to him, had opted for a business suit, holding his armour folded into a case in his right hand.

Hlín was standing by Thor, and those two were obviously back to the overly formal and flawless politeness he had first greeted her with. Even the angle of her body suggested that she was there only for his comfort, at his service at any time. Hlín, at Thor’s service. Tony didn’t know the woman much, but from what he had seen already, he found the idea ludicrous. All the more impressive was her pretence.

So maybe everyone would really remain kind of civil, despite all the murdered tricksters, family secrets, genocides, war traumas, and other minor incidents. Tony didn’t really believe in it, but there it went. Maybe they would get a Red Wedding, or rather, a Red Welcome Party, something Game of
Throney anyway. Well. It wasn’t really on his bucket list, but Tony had certainly not gotten gutted on a different planet by vaguely medieval sort-of elves yet. You live and learn to fear ever more absurd ways to die.

Of course, he felt uneasy about having left the Iron Mantis back in orbit. No, scratch uneasy, he felt like doing a Clint and crawling up the walls. But what didn’t one sacrifice for inter-realm peace? Also, collecting this much data about a foreign planet was probably worth it in the long run. You never knew when you would need to know what kind of vegetation bloomed on a planet too far away for any kind of normal way of travel.

Speaking of – a sort-of castle and surrounding town… city… something… came into view, kind of Romanesque in its aesthetic? Except not really, and Tony probably shouldn’t have spent all his art history classes designing robots and wondering how to hack into nuclear power plants. Not that art history should, reasonably, be able to help him with identifying the architectural style of an alien race that lived in what was probably not even the same galaxy, for fuck’s sake, since the maps of the Skrulls were normally pretty comprehensive. The style, whatever it should be called, suited the forest in any case. The sand-coloured houses harmonised well with the patches of forest in-between, and left enough space between the buildings for roads, meadows, small rivulets, so that there was a general feeling of cosiness and abundance.

And then the ship touched ground on a plain near the castle, the ramp opened, and Thor and Hlín, the vanguard of their little group, walked out, the rest of them following them, flanked by Vanir. And they finally stepped on alien ground.

Alien ground felt a lot like terrestrial ground. Alien air felt a lot like air, in Tony’s opinion.

Alien political decorum looked familiar as well, though with a few elements a bit out of place after all.

Their welcoming committee was already waiting for them on the ground, two people surrounded by cordons of what looked a whole lot like guards. The man and the woman had their arms linked, and if the blue skin colour of the woman hadn’t told Tony that this had to be the royal couple, their upright and regal posture would have. The man, Frey, Tony supposed, was dressed in a long robe not quite unlike that of Hlín, though less billowing, more tightly hugging his slender frame. His long and straight hair fell down his shoulders, some strands braided, and there was white among the brown.

Gerdr, as to her, was a bit taller than Frey, and her hair was just as long, but of a fiery red, curled and bound with a ribbon that could do little to tame it. Just like with Loki, there were complicated markings all over her blue skin, so maybe that had been a natural part of the trickster’s body rather than another web of scars. Her attire was what surprised Tony a bit, because it wasn’t really consistent with the dress code of those around her, even though the material looked just as fine, if not finer, and the silvery cloth was decorated with pale-grey and rather intricate stitching. But the thing was, she didn’t wear a gown, or even a dress, or something equally… expectable in a sort-of medieval context. Instead, she wore a short sleeved tunic with a very deep neckline, and a skirt that looked more like a kilt than anything else and was about as long… or short. And she… wasn’t wearing shoes. She was actually barefoot, and that was certainly not the case for the rest of the Vanir, and wasn’t that interesting? Even more so considering she could actually pull all this off and look nothing less than a fucking queen.
Well, it did kind of help that she was hot.

Not hot in the tender and sweet way, but rather in the I want to fall to my knees before you and kiss your feet way, Tony supposed. Broad-shouldered, with a muscular build. Her eyes alert and sharp, and her face a bit hard, as if she had already seen a bit too much violence in her life for her liking. He could definitely imagine her with a whip in hand.

Great, and now that image wouldn’t leave him alone all day. Way to go, Tony. Perving on the alien queen already.

Frey smiled warmly as soon as Thor was appropriately near and opened his arms, stepped forward.

‘Thor, my nephew!’ said he in a calm, carrying voice. ‘It gladdens my heart to see you here, healthy and strong as ever!’

‘Aye, uncle, it has been too long’ nodded Thor and hugged Frey tightly. ‘I’ve missed you’

Gerdr bowed instead, as Thor turned to her.

‘May I present you Lady Gerdr Gymirsdottir, princess of Jotunheim, my wife and queen. My love, may I present you Thor Odinson, crown prince of the nine realms, and my dear beloved nephew.’

‘My prince’ said Gerdr, still bowing deeply. ‘My liege.’

‘Rise, Lady Gerdr’ said Thor, smiling. ‘Many tales have been told of your beauty, and I am joyous to see that none of them have been exaggerations, nor would it indeed be possible to surpass in description your loveliness. Truly, my uncle is a very happy man.’

Gerdr smiled back in a way that suggested, just a little, that she considered Thor’s words less of a compliment than should be expected.

And wasn’t that interesting too?

‘I am gladdened that you bestow such high praise on me’ said she nevertheless. ‘We are honoured by your visit in our modest home.’

The rest of them were introduced, one after the other. Tony decided to bow more deeply before Lady Gerdr than before her husband, both because he was still indulging the mental whip image a bit and so to see how Frey would react.

Frey didn’t, as a matter of fact, which meant that either he had his facial expression under very tight control or didn’t care if people paid Gerdr more reverence than him. Alright. Tony cocked his head a little. Gerdr’s body was that of someone who used it – she had the built of a fighter, and her hands looked strong.

Let’s see, he thought, let’s test a theory.

‘Thor is right – few words could adequately describe your beauty’ said he. ‘But I have the feeling, and please do correct me if I’m wrong, that there are even more captivating tales to be told about your prowess as a fighter, or as a commander of armies?’

Gerdr raised her eyebrows, and shot Tony a scrutinising look, but then the corners of her mouth went up just a bit, and there was an amused glint in her eyes.
Yup, he had been right. Either Gerdr made her own rules (which she probably did anyway), or there were differences concerning gender role distribution between Asgard and Jotunheim that Thor was not aware of or disregarded.

‘You are a keen observer, Son of Stark’ said she.

Tony smiled back.

‘Nah, I’m not’ said he. ‘It’s just that it can’t be overseen’

The way she smiled at him now told him that he had laid it on a bit too thick, but he didn’t care. Having the reputation of being overly-smarmy on occasion had never harmed him before. Well, actually… but that one evening had turned out entertaining despite the assassination attempt.

Yeah, and Pepper had hit him over the head with his own gauntlet that one time.

And then there had been this one time when-

Ah, whatever, he wasn’t going to change his behaviour anyway.

And they were already led into the castle and expected to give away all their weapons and armour which… well. They would see how red their welcoming party would turn out to be. And maybe Nat had smuggled in knives or guns anyway. If anyone could smuggle in weapons everywhere, it was her.

‘You have prepared a feast worthy of songs’ Thor said later.

Frey and Gerdr had given them a tour of the castle and grounds, mostly for his companions’ benefit, conveniently meeting this or that lord or lady on the way, which meant that now that the great feast was starting, the greetings and introductions were well over with, and everyone could start drinking and eating and talking in earnest.

Thor had always liked how Frey did these things, even though this time, he had secretly wished for a less formal welcome. A vain wish, considering he had brought Midgardians with him. It had been long since those had travelled the realms the last time. And maybe, he thought as he complimented Frey on the Vanir wine, it was all for the better anyway. If the situation allowed for more intimate conversation, who knew whether it wouldn’t come to a fight, even to blows.

Frey was not at all content with him, Thor could see that very well, in the way his uncle was just a bit too silent, and was looking at him with a bit too guarded face. And he never had expected Gerdr to warm up to him quickly. In the aftermath of the Bifrost incident, most of the blame even of the attack that Thor had led had been pushed onto Loki, so to avoid the worst political consequences. But Thor had built up enough of a reputation even before the day of his coronation to make Gerdr disinclined to like him.

She didn’t really try to hide her resentment either, but despite the sharpness of her gaze, she smiled, and laughed, and asked him about his adventures and about Bilgesnipes, and told him freely about the garden she had started cultivating in the castle, about where the ducks and the deer had been hunted for the feast. She encouraged his uncle to tell stories of Thor’s childhood days, when he had been running around the corridors, or escaping into the wild forests.
Thor noticed how Frey failed to mention Loki in these tales, even though back then, the siblings had been inseparable, and he felt another wave of exhaustion wash over him at the implied reproach. He laid his knife on his plate, breathed out.

‘Frey, can’t you see you’re boring your nephew with these ancient anecdotes?’ asked Gerdr then as if she hadn’t demanded them in the first place.

‘Oh, no, I am far from bored’ said Thor, making an effort at a smile. ‘I am sorry if I made that impression. And I do have to compliment you on that mead.’

Frey then explained where they had produced it, and as the topic drifted away from his brother, Thor could breathe more freely.

Gerdr abandoned them after a while, so to give the servants some orders about dessert, and Thor was left with his uncle and with a silence that stretched out for a bit too long.

‘Gerdr is a kind woman’ said Thor finally, and meant it. She could have made him feel her anger in a lot more blatant and disagreeable way. ‘I believe she will make a fine queen.’

Frey smiled quietly in a way Thor couldn’t quite interpret.

‘She dresses… unconventionally’ said Thor. At first, it had been difficult for him not to stare at her attire that was so inappropriate for the occasion that it bordered on the insulting. However, there was something in the way Gerdr moved so naturally in it and the way nobody else reacted to it strangely, that had made him conclude that no insult had been intended after all. ‘But it suits her.’

‘Gerdr dresses in the latest fashion of the Jotunheim court’ said Frey calmly, never losing his smile.

Thor looked at his uncle, scrutinising him. So this was the fashion of the Jotunheim court? Gerdr dressed appropriately then, but according to her own realm, not that of her husband. That was… even more unconventional. Especially considering what realm she was from. And Frey didn’t seem to find it humiliating, or shaming. He also hadn’t seemed to find it humiliating that the Man of Iron bowed lower in front of a Jotnar maid than in front of him. And he never seemed uncomfortable, close to her, faced with her blue skin, her crimson eyes – which Thor still had trouble not recoiling from. Despite Gerdr’s indisputably attractive features, he couldn’t imagine kissing that face, bedding her…

But his own brother had looked like that, beneath the glamours… and the last thing he had seen of him…

He swallowed.

‘I am a bit relieved though to find her closer to your height than the Jotnar I had to fight against’ said he, in a weak attempt at a jest.

Frey didn’t lose his smile, but he didn’t laugh at the joke either.

‘Did I ever tell you the story of the first Jotnar?’ asked he then quietly.

Thor shook his head.

‘The first Jotnar, so the myth tells us, was a powerful mage, tall as a mountain, with a proud and strong soul’ said Frey. ‘And he had many children who made their home in Jotunheim, the land of their father, and who spread as the people we know now. But only he, the first, could be perfect. None of his children could unite all three qualities in them, magic, strength and character. They only
could unite two.’

Now he finally chuckled a bit.

‘And of course no Jotnar would ever admit to not having a proud and strong soul’ said he, his eyes twinkling. ‘Which essentially means that while most Jotnar are indeed very tall, mages usually aren’t. Gerdr’s height is in fact rather average for a magic user of her realm. But of course, like on many other realms, there are not many of her kind. They are held in very high esteem.’

Thor… hadn’t known… that.

‘Gerdr’ said Frey then, turning away from Thor’s confusion to his wife who had just arrived back. ‘We were just discussing Jotunn mythology and the three qualities of the Jotnar.’

‘Oh, I see’ said she. ‘And, I suspect, the fact that you are doubly glad about my talent for magic’

‘I could not stop desiring and pursuing you even if I had to climb you for days just to kiss your lips once’ said Frey and winked at her.

She rolled her eyes, but pressed his hand – and again, Frey didn’t shy from the touch. Nor did he get frostbite, Thor noticed.

They genuinely liked each other. Frey and this strange shield maiden who was allowed so much licence in her clothing and attitude.

‘Do you miss your home much, Lady Gerdr?’ he asked.

Gerdr lowered her eyes.

‘I think we all miss our home when we are far from it’ said she. ‘And our family.’

She smiled sadly.

‘Maybe the thing I miss most is our family temple’ said she. ‘Of course, I built a small temple here in the heart of Vanaheim’s mountains, but it is weak, young and so very far from Jotunheim. It is not the same.’

‘Do not listen to her false modesty’ said Frey. ‘Building Jotunn temples is a complicated process, and since they are made entirely of ice, building them here is even more demanding. I am sure it is marvellous, and who knows what I would give to see it just one time.’

‘You would have to give more than you have said Gerdr dryly. ‘So do be careful, my love, what you wish for.’

‘So… you have never seen the temple that Gerdr built?’

In your realm? In the heart of your mountains!

Frey shook his head.

‘Jotunn temples are a highly sacred place’ said he. ‘For a foreigner to penetrate them would be a vile offense.’

‘It would also be a very bad idea’ said Gerdr. ‘Since there are few place as well protected and defended.’
And she turned to Thor.

‘You see, it is the place where we hid what was most precious during the war’ said she calmly and now she looked Thor directly in the eyes. ‘Those things we couldn’t afford to ever lose at all.’

The morning was humid, full of soft light and bird chatter. The fog still clung to the houses and trees, not wanting to rise yet.

It was also too early.

Or, as Pepper would say, too late, on those days she found Tony at the bar in the tower, having worked through another night and celebrating the sun rising above the city with a glass of scotch. But that was just it – Tony was used to staying up that late but not to getting up that early. Least of all without coffee or alcohol.

He yawned. At least he had his suit back.

After the feast on the eve, an understanding had seemed to have been reached that a hunting trip would be the perfect activity for the next day – and Thor had definitely had the right premonition there. Either that or space Vikings just went hunting all the time, when they weren’t busy invading worlds, committing regi-patricide, getting eaten by magic, or ruining the self-worth of their children.

And now they were outside in the castle grounds, accompanied by Vanir who kept Thor busy with small-talk about harvests and crops, waiting for Hlín and Lady Gerdr to arrive. Lord Frey was apparently occupied with other business… or something like that.

Up until now, Tony had to admit, the Vanir had been good hosts. The food had been excellent, the wine fine and strong. Some lord of some sort, poor innocent guy, had tried to warn them against it, saying that according to tales of old, Midgardians had low tolerance to it (and Tony would bet there were some funny stories to back that rumour up). He, of course, didn’t know that Tony was a borderline alcoholic (Pepper usually disputed the validity of the descriptor ‘borderline’), Steve had a metabolism that even surpassed Thor’s (and yes, there was a very funny story to back that up), and Nat was… well, Russian.

So, Tony holding himself back a bit more than usual and Nat using her usual tricks to drink poor gullible elf lords under the table, there were okay in the end.

Their chambers had been nice too – tapestry everywhere, a canopy bed, and a fireplace, though why the Vanir relied on fire when they were obviously pretty tech-savvy was a mystery in its own right. The whole culture, or what Tony had seen from it so far, was the kind of a renaissance fair that history fanatics would hate, regularly ditching authenticity for technological comfort where it was most convenient.

Not that Tony complained – he had always been more of a role player than a reenactor.

Rules were for losers.

From an entrance of a building appended to the castle proper and that appeared to be the stables, horses now emerged (which looked like actual horses, go figure that), led by a tall old many with
grey hair and a young but equally tall woman and who were quietly talking to each other, paying the
group of Vanir and foreigners not much attention. They turned out to be the equerry and his daughter
and of a very serene disposition, both a bit absent-minded but careful about the animals. Everyone of
their little group was offered horses, but Tony politely declined, not really desiring to force his heavy
and pointy metal arse on any animal. And well, he could fly and everything. The equerry’s daughter
looked visibly relieved at that, which confirmed him in a sort of mortifying way.

And then Hlín and Gerdr came up to them from the stables too, each guiding a horse by their hand,
and Gerdr… certainly had changed. Her skin colour. And eye-colour. And hair-colour. That and her
clothes… which looked pretty much the same in style as the evening before, except the cloth of her
kilt seemed to be made of a more resistant material this time, and with her top, she had abandoned the
deep neckline in favour of what looked more like light leather armour. And everything, including her
body, was a dull brown now?

Why on-? And how-?

‘Lady Gerdr’ said Thor, hesitating only for a moment. ‘You look… different, though not a note less
lovely.’

Thor, Tony had to admit by now, really wasn’t the clumsy clot that he sometimes resembled. Tony
had been observing the big guy in-between trying to register every other detail of the feast and its
participants. And Thor clearly was uncomfortable about a lot of things, most of all about Gerdr, and
you could see, when he talked to her, that his smile was a bit too unsure, and that he regarded her as
if there was something about her that troubled him, or that he couldn’t quite figure out. But he made
just as clear efforts to smile brightly in-between, maintain an open and friendly body posture, and to
find the right words.

He actually had learned some diplomatic skills somewhere along the millennium he had lived.

The wonders never ceased.

‘Why, thank you’ said Gerdr. ‘I thought I was going to change a bit for the occasion. Blue, though
undoubtedly striking, tends to scare the animals away in a world like Vanaheim, I’m afraid.’

‘I am awed as I learn of more and more of your many talents’ said Thor and bowed.

Gerdr laughed a bit, ‘You flatter me too much for something trivial. Shape-shifting is not an unusual
ability among Jotunn mages’ said she, and turned her eyes on Tony. ‘Oh – and now I truly
understand the meaning of your title, Man of Iron. Indeed, I am impressed, and I look forward to
watching this beautiful armour in movement.’

Tony bowed and voiced his thanks, while Thor was still eyeing his uncle’s new wife, confused.

Gerdr asked Tony a few more questions about his suit, then stepped toward Steve, examining his
shield with a polite smile. She had an expressive mimic, as Tony had observed the other day, and
though she did obviously restrain her emotions, she was a lot less careful and thorough about it than
her husband. Maybe a lot less willing. From time to time, there it was, a gaze too sharp, a laughter a
touch too bitter, or a grin too wide. A fierceness that felt familiar to Tony without him understanding
really why.

The group mounted their horses, and they had soon left the town and entered the forest that was
stretching, lush and whispering, into all directions surrounding them. Gerdr was leading their group,
with Thor next to her, Hlín and Steve right behind them. Tony was hovering, getting branches into his face, and cursing himself for having the idiotic assumption that flying around in a fucking forest was a good idea. But there had been no chance in hell he wouldn’t have put on the suit at the first occasion, and the horses definitely had looked at him with horror and doom in their eyes, and he wasn’t an asshole (at least, not all the time), so flying and getting hit by branches it was. At first, Gerdr and Thor talked, but then, Gerdr fell silent, and so did the whole group.

The group’s movement would now have been relatively quiet, if only it hadn’t been for Tony’s rather violent interaction with the wood, and after a few more minutes, Hlín seemed to lose patience, for she gestured in his direction, and after that, the branches that had until then been so happy to bitch-slap him, now conveniently bent out of the way.

They approached what looked like a steep slope, and Gerdr raised her hand. The group stopped, and the queen, without making a sound, slipped out of the saddle and onto the ground, then gestured at them to follow her. Tony supposed they were sort of supposed to be silent, and… tried his best. Put the suit into stealth mode at least. Which was not exactly one of its strong suits (suits, hahah, Tony mentally face palmed at his own mind which was… another kind of dumb meta-joke, he supposed). Slowly, leaving their horses behind with two Vanir guarding them, they approached the slope, then crouched down at Gerdr’s hand sign. Hlín made a few more gestures in Tony’s direction which was… for the best, he supposed, considering on how many branches he stepped. His stealth certainly benefitted from her intervention.

… ah, and there they were.

Who knew boars could even get that big?

Well, space boars probably could, he supposed.

It was a small herd of what seemed to be the parents and three younglings. But make no mistake, even the smallest of them was bigger than any dog Tony had ever seen on Earth, and the parents were the size of fucking horses.

And they were supposed to hunt those creatures?

What was that advice again about separating a wild sow from her young, or attacking them?

Alright, that was what it said: Don’t.

And hadn’t that one guy in Game of Thrones died, impaled by a boar? So maybe it wouldn’t be the Red Wedding after all but another hilariously painful George R.R. Martin death?

Gerdr pointed at herself, then at one of the parents, then at Thor and the other one, and Thor nodded. Okay, so at least the gods were taking care of the… even bigger threats.

The queen turned around and looked at the rest of the group then, her eyebrows raised.

No.

No, no, no.

Tony was a big fan of protecting wildlife, also, he didn’t want to find out if, for whatever reason, the husks of those things could penetrate his suit. It had taken that guy in Game of Thrones ages to die. Ages. Like, a whole episode, maybe two? Did he remember that wrong?
Still.

Just no.

Next to him, Steve shook his head too. Nat looked thoughtful, then held out one hand, index and thumb almost touching each other, but leaving a little space.

You want to kill the little ones, Nat?

Go figure, Tony shouldn’t be surprised.

Gerdr nodded, turned back to the slope again, then silently stood up and drew, from a belt on her kilt, a knife that looked inadequately small. While Thor was rising too, she sneaked a little to the left until she was the closest she could get to her designated prey. She waited until Thor was positioned near his too, made eye-contact with him, then with Nat, who had merely stood up. And then, without further warning, Gerdr jumped right into the slope and onto the back of the beast.

Thor jumped right after.

What followed was… a bit traumatising as a sight. And arousing, as far as tall women stabbing giant beasts with a knife could go (very far), clinging to their fur, and trying to strangle them in-between, her eyes wild. Not that Thor was much better, going all fury and Mjolnir on that poor thing’s ass. At one point, Gerdr’s boar threw her to the ground and descended on her, she catching his husks and holding them back with her bare hands (alright, so she was kind of strong), which urged Thor to send Mjolnir flying sideways into the head of the animal. Thor was thrown off the back of the other parent as a consequence, but before the animal could charge at him, while Thor was still falling, Gerdr snatched him by the hand, hurled him to the side and flung herself forward, burying the sword that she had just taken from Thor’s scabbard deeply in the boar’s stomach.

They stood, breathing heavily, while the animals before them swayed, fell, then slowly perished.

Gerdr turned to Thor then, covered in blood from head to toe, and stretched out her hand.

‘A good hunt’ said she.

‘Aye’ said Thor, who didn’t look less bloody than her. ‘It was a pleasure to endeavour it with you.’

He took her arm by the elbow, and she his, and the way she grinned at him now was sharp but almost friendly.

‘You’re not exactly a bad hunter eith-

At that moment, there was a violet flash, and Thor was torn from Gerdr’s grasp and hurled backwards against the trunk of the nearest tree. He hit it with an ugly thud, and fell to the ground, landing on his feet, but shakily.

‘What the-

There was a figure between the trees, moving quickly, there was a second violet flash, but it clashed with something blindingly white, and then Hlín had already stepped forward, her hands outstretched.

Gerdr stretched out her hand too and ice shot from it toward the attacker, who evaded it easily, charged at Thor, his violet eyes blazing, his face screwed up with rage, making complicated hand gestures that seemed to accumulate violet light between them,
'Hatchet, NO!', Hlín cried.

The attacker stretched out both hands again, the light shot towards Thor, and this time, it hit white and blue walls as it met the combined efforts of Hlín and Gerdr.

The walls were trembling from the blast.

‘Hatchet, come to your senses, NOW!’

Hatched cried out so desperately in response that Tony was a bit stunned.

Thor had backed away a bit but now didn’t move at all, staring at the white-haired man in front of him with wide eyes.

‘Listen to me, Hatchet, stop-’

But Hatchet cried out again, as if in terrible pain, and a third time, and the next moment, there was no sense in his eyes at all any more, violet and black sparks were running all over his pale body, his face ugly with hate, ‘I will KILL him!’ and he lunged himself forward, lunged himself at Thor, ‘Hatchet!’, Hlín cried. Another gesture of her hand, the attacker was lifted off his feet and thrown back, but he jumped up at once, the air smelled of burnt hair, and this was getting scary, Tony raised his arm, and shot a repulsor blast right into the guy’s chest.

Hatchet was lifted off his feet once more, landed on the ground a few feet away.

This time, he didn’t stand up anymore.

After waiting for an instant and observing him closely, her arms hanging down her sides and her fingers twitching, Gerdr ran to the unconscious man, dragged him up, grabbed his hands and pulled them behind his back, holding them together. Ice built between her fingers and his, enclosing his hands and forearms in manacles.

Hlín jumped down the slope too and ran to them, whispering something, accompanied by another set of quick hand movements. Ropes of white light formed in the air and wrapped around him, then vanished again.

Hlín turned to Thor next, who was still leaning against that same tree, breathing heavily, holding his stomach.

‘Are you well?’ asked she.

He didn’t answer. He was staring at the man on the ground.

‘Thor, are you well?’ asked she again. ‘Are you injured?’

Thor slowly shook his head.

‘Are you sure?’

‘Yes’ said he. ‘No harm has come to me.’

He stepped away from the tree and slowly approached Gerdr and the man.

‘How is he?’ asked he.

‘He is not gravely injured. Just knocked out’ said Gerdr, and straightened herself up.
'You were attacked on our realm, under the protection of our hospitality’ said she now. ‘I will see to it that the perpetrator will be punished as is fit, but I understand if you wish to seek retribution nonetheless.’

Thor looked at Hatched pensively.

And again, that vague wave of his hand.

‘No retribution’ said he. ‘You protected me well.’

He hesitated.

‘I do not wish to see Hatchet punished’ said he then.

‘He attacked you, unjustly, without warning, and with murderous intent’ said Hlín, but Tony somehow didn’t have the impression that Hlín wanted to see Hatchet condemned either. Her voice was searching.

‘Attacked me unjustly, did he’ Thor said more to himself than anyone else. Then, in a more carrying voice, he added, ‘We are close to the territory of the Fae, are we not?’

‘Indeed we are’ Gerdr confirmed.

‘I have reason to believe I have insulted the Fae with my manner of hunting’ said Thor. ‘He was thus in his right to penalise me, and the Fae have never had the same view on appropriate sentences as the Vanir or the Aesir do. Let us accept what punishment we received, hope that there won’t be more, and return to the castle.’

Gerdr looked at him, her gaze a bit too calculating, then nodded.

‘Aye, my prince, my liege’ said she. ‘As you wish.’

And Tony suddenly knew why it came that she looked so familiar to him, who she reminded him of. They were related after all. Gerdr was Loki’s aunt. And there was definitely a family resemblance.

At that moment, branches behind him cracked, and they all whirled around.

And there stood Nat, looking spotless as ever, not a drop of blood on her uniform, holding three dead dog-sized boar younglings by their bound legs.

Right. They had forgotten those.

They stared for a bit.

‘What?’ said she, and raised her eyebrows innocently.

Chapter End Notes

Fun fact (and many of you will know this already): The Gerdr and Frey ship is mythology canon, but in some versions, it is a forced marriage, Frey sending his servant to her with his own personal sword, who then threatens Gerdr with violence until she says yes. Following fickle Norse mythology logic, Frey never gets his sword back from
his servant (he seems to be about as good at ruling as at asking for consent), ends up at Ragnaröck without it, and like most people who say, hahah, I will go to a battle but leave my weapons at home, he dies.

Of course, my version of Frey is not that stupid, and my version of Gerdr would just kill the servant and nick the sword.

Because hey, nice sword.
Chapter Summary

Subtle political gestures are being analysed. Family dynamics is being reflected upon. Thor proves that just occasionally, on his good days, he can take a hint.

Chapter Notes

This is just a small chapter to wrap up Vanaheim.

Thor was distinctly subdued for the rest of the stay, which didn’t last long. After they had returned to the castle with their new prisoner, more apologies had been offered and it had been made sure in various turns of phrases that Hatchet would not be harmed, that the Fae would not seek further recompense, and that Vanaheim would have to fear no negative consequences because of the incident, everyone seemed actually in quite a hurry to get rid of them.

Thor didn’t complain, and neither did Tony. The whole thing was socially awkward enough, and Gerdr had looked far too satisfied with the result of their little hunting trip to argue for staying longer and giving her more occasions to fortify Blondy’s unhappiness.

After all, it was Tony and the rest of them who would have to put up with Blondy’s moping afterwards.

In any case, Tony wasn’t exactly unhappy either to get back to the ship. It was refuelled and the engine was purring happily now, and even though Thor would still have to take it easy for a while before he could magic them all home, at least they were back in the good old Mantis, and that already almost felt like home… far away from home… it had a Stockholm syndrome kind of cosiness.

Soon, Cap was back in the storage room, working off his worries or moral dilemmas by pushing unreasonably heavy weights, Nat was off doing… something sinister, Tony was sure, and Tony was back to tinkering a bit with the video surveillance, then strengthening his fire walls, because at least this kind of technology, he could understand, and it kept his fingers busy.

He forgot time for a while, and was disturbed by no associations of wires with entrails, and by no nightmares that left him gasping for air.

He found Thor in the command centre when he went there so to check on the video screens again hours later. He was sitting at the front, staring out the cockpit at the stars.

‘You okay, big guy?’ Tony asked.

Thor didn’t answer at first. He just turned his gaze away from the windows.
‘Of course I am’ said he. His voice sounded hoarse.

‘You don’t have to pretend to be’ Tony said. He wondered if he was the only one to say those things or if at least Cap assumed a bit of grief counselling duty too. I mean, having Tony Stark as the closest thing to a shrink and no other help? That sure sounded like an idea that would end in… another bizarre disaster.

Still, Tony sat down next to the god.

‘Family can be difficult… right?’ said he.

Thor nodded.

‘My uncle was not content with me’ said he. ‘Not content at all.’

For losing your brother’s corpse to looters? Likely not.

‘And Lady Gerdr hates me for what happened’ said Thor. ‘And not only for what happened on this ship.’

‘Have they said so?’ asked Tony, thinking that the Thunderer was probably right.

Thor laughed dryly.

‘Not in so many words’ said he.

He opened his hands, looked at them.

‘But they made their dissatisfaction with me no less clear than Hatchet did’ said he.

Yeah, Hatchet...

‘Who is that guy anyway?’ Tony asked.

‘Someone I’ve never gotten along with’ said Thor. ‘A Vanir, who has grown up with the Fae. He was also a good friend to Loki. They were very close.’

Oh.

Tony had known that the whole offending the Fae with hunting thing had been utter bullshit.

‘To be honest, I had all but forgotten about him – in my grief, he had simply slipped my mind’ said he. ‘Or I wouldn’t have gone to this particular region of the forest. I wouldn’t have wanted to provoke him. But Gerdr, I think, was aware of where he usually roams the woods. I cannot be sure of course, she might not know Vanaheim that well yet. But seeing what I have seen of her, I think she knew very well that we had a rather good chance of crossing his way.’

Okay.

So this really had been a bit of nasty, underhanded revenge.

So both unreasonably good looks and a tendency to be a right piece of work ran in the family. Good to know.

Thor said nothing for a while.
‘In a way, I should be grateful’ said he then.

Should he? Tony somehow felt Thor shouldn’t.

‘How so?’

‘I know they did it in pursuit of their own interests, Frey always does, and they did it to remind me of my guilt, of Asgard’s shortcomings. But they still… while scolding me, they were very generous with information’ said he. ‘They gave me much to think about.’

‘Inclined to share?’ Tony asked.

Thor hesitated.

‘Greeting us, Frey and Gerdr stood side by side, arms linked’ said he. ‘He let you bow more deeply to her than to him without taking offense, and he purposefully let her take various decisions during our stay, showing that she didn’t have to go to him first.’

‘What is more, Gerdr dressed in the fashion of Jotunn royalty, not Vanir’ continued Thor. ‘She turned out to be a shape-shifter, but she only hid her true form during the hunting trip, showing her Jotunn skin for the entire rest of our stay.’

‘And that’s… strange?’

Thor breathed out slowly.

‘It… is’ said he then. ‘According to tradition, in a marriage, the wife is expected to leave her family and culture behind, and take up that of her husband, including the religion and the manner of dress.’

He paused.

‘My mother, for example, is Vanir by birth’ said he. ‘And she was a shield maiden, a Valkyrie, and a mage, before she married my father. She gave up her sword for him, and she doesn’t practise magic in public anymore. She also took up Aesir religion, traditions and fashion. She stays in contact with Frey, but doesn’t visit him often. And that is how it is expected to be.’

Right, so Tony had been right, and the Aesir were sexist and racist in addition to being horrible parents. They sounded more likeable the more Tony heard about them.

‘And Gerdr is Jotnar’ said Thor. ‘As I told you, she is born of a race that until recently was seen as little more than mindless animals by the other realms. I myself… even for me, it was sometimes difficult, listening to her speak, and reconciling her intelligence and cultivated manner with her blue skin and crimson eyes. I should know better, because my brother was Jotunn and far smarter than me, too smart for his own good, truly, but I… forgive my crass words, but sometimes it still looked like a dog conversing about philosophy to me.’

‘Er…’

Okay, very racist then.

But then Thor had called them monsters the last time they had talked about the matter. Maybe Tony hadn’t thought the Aesir took that denomination quite that literally?

‘And for Gerdr not to hide her nature…’ said Thor. ‘Frey even let her build a Jotunn temple, in the heart of the mountains of Vanaheim, a temple that he is forbidden to even see…’
He bit his lips.

‘I cannot know, of course, how much of this is true’ said he. ‘As Hlíň told me correctly, I am not good at detecting lies.’

‘Yeah, well, everyone has their talents’ said Tony, thinking that someone should start teaching Thor that particular skill some day soon. Hlíň was right, it was kind of a skill one needed as king. Then again, considering who Thor had had as a brother, maybe, just maybe, the big guy was a bit of a hopeless case? ‘Personally, if I suspect that I’m dealing with a dishonest person, I find it useful to ask myself what they want. What their goal is, you know? That can help a lot with telling truths from lies.’

Thor was silent for a while.

‘Their intent was not hard to see. They wanted to send me, and my father, a message’ said he then. ‘That Vanaheim and Jotunheim have formed a strong alliance and that my father cannot hope to break it up or turn them against each other. That they disapprove of Asgard’s ways and customs, and that they will no longer conform to them. That they will no longer conform to Asgard in general. That we have done Jotunheim, and Loki, a great wrong.’

He blinked, and there were tears in his eyes.

‘They wanted to tell me that my parents have lied to us in many respects’ said he, his voice hoarse again. ‘Especially about Loki.’

‘How have they lied?’ Tony said cautiously.

‘Frey and Gerdr heavily implied’ said Thor, rubbing his forehead, blinking again. ‘that Loki never was a runt. That he was of average size for a Jotunn mage, a social class that seems to be highly respected. They also implied that Loki was never abandoned, but on the contrary hidden in a temple to protect him. They implied that my father, Odin, broke into that temple, and stole Loki from them during the war.’

Oh.

That was a lot of heavy implications. With heavy consequences, considering.

Thor sighed.

‘It is curious’ said he. ‘That they have never once mentioned my brother during my whole stay, and yet, I have learned more about him than during decades at his side.’

He laughed. Then he put his face in his hands.

‘I apologise for my uncontrolled demeanour’ said he.

‘Don’t’ said Tony quietly. He didn’t even know what to do with all this information, and he wasn’t the one related to the dead guy. Hadn’t even liked him.

For a while, they just sat there, in silence, Thor clearing his throat a few times, regaining his composure.

‘You know Loki’s death is not really your fault, don’t you?’ Tony said then.

Thor smiled weakly.
'You are being kind, Man of Iron’ said he. ‘But I truly do need to learn to tell falsehoods from truths.’

Ouch.

‘I have given your doubts about the Chitauri invasion some thought’ said he then. ‘That you think it is this what Loki was referring to, asking me how it came he lost. And when I look back, it is true that Loki was not… at his best then. There were moments during that invasion… moments when Loki was slower than I expected in his movements, and when I had to… hold myself back, hold Mjolnir back, so not to…’

He paused, looked at the ground.

‘I wonder’ said he. ‘Whether his last words weren’t, once more, a lie, meant to derail me. Maybe he didn’t lose at all, maybe what happened in that cell was exactly what he wanted, what he had tried to accomplish for a long time. And he made sure, with his magic, that I would not be able to stop him.’

…right. That was certainly a probable scenario, yes.

‘He didn’t fight his attacker like he wanted to die though’ said Tony because that was true too. ‘I think he was fatally injured long before he started the spell, and I think was aware of that. I think he knew he wouldn’t survive anyway, and so he did… something… instead.’

And they still had no idea what that something was.

And Hlín knew exactly.

Hahah – they were so screwed.

‘I would like to think so’ said Thor.

There was another pause.

‘I didn’t tell you the whole truth about the Bifrost incident’ said Thor then.

Blondy was capable of lying at least by omission? Good for him!

Except Thor looked dreadful.

‘Loki didn’t fall from the Bifrost’ said he.

‘No?’

Thor shook his head.

‘No, he didn’t’ said he. ‘He… he let go.’

‘What do you-‘

Oh.

‘Oh.’

There was silence, and then Thor sighed.

‘Let’s go home.’
Loki's Death

Chapter Summary

Loki dies, but not everything goes as planned.

Chapter Notes

I have sort of promised myself that I wouldn't post more than one chapter in a day. So, at my place, it's five minutes past midnight, so that technically counts as the next day, doesn't it? Hahahahah.... oh man, I'm doomed, ain't I?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

‘Brother, what have you done?’

The voice was distant and the pain was too loud, moving its claws inside him, tearing through him, again and again, the magic burrowing through him, taking his flesh, breaking it apart cell by cell, turning it into mush. He had fought for so long, had fought despite the agony, had sung and sung and sung and sung and sung, had felt his flesh rot and had sung, had felt his organs cave in and dissolve, and had sung, had felt his bones crumble, and had sung, and he was so terribly tired, so tired of holding on beyond his strength, beyond what was possible. He was so sick of the pain, he was so sick of the suffering, his soul felt stretched to the point of breaking. He had had enough! Hadn’t he had enough? Was it never going to be over? He wanted it to be over, to be finally, finally...

And then he remembered that it was.

The last verse of the ballad had passed his lips, the music had faded away.

He was done. He was finally done.

He could let go. Open the hand, like on the Bifrost.

That one peaceful moment between the decision and the fall.

It had all been so clear then.

And he would finally get that moment. His last reward. No void, no horrors, no Chitauri, no Other, no Thanos. No glorious purpose.

Just...

And so, with a last effort, he let go.

The pain let go in return. Slipped from him as if it had never been.

His body slipped from him, a cloak he had no use for anymore.
He looked down at himself, at this empty useless husk, at his brother who was still cradling that husk.

‘No’ said Thor, and then again, ‘No’

‘Yes’ whispered Loki. His body’s hands were lying relaxed on the ground. His mouth was still open as if to suck in a last breath, his eyes were still open.

As ugly in death as in life, that was what he was. As needy, as weak. Just good for one thing – stick things into it, if you’re not satisfied by its holes, make new ones.

Ergi.

Always an Ergi.

But all that didn’t matter anymore. His weakness didn’t matter anymore. Loki had done his duty, and now he would go.

‘No’ said Thor.

He put Loki’s body on the ground, took his face into his hands, threaded through his hair, ‘Loki, no, you hear me, no’

‘Death is not a servant you can order around, brother’ said Loki. ‘It doesn’t work like that.’

Thor touched his face, his shoulders, his arms, ‘No, Loki, is this a trick? Is this a game? You wanted to tell me something, Loki! Say something! LOKI!’

‘Oh, Thor’ said Loki, and shook his head. ‘You always only listen to me when it’s too late.’

And then the body on the ground changed, and Loki took a step back.

Ugh.

He should have expected that, he supposed. For the last glamour to fall and to reveal what had been hiding underneath.

‘Well, if that isn’t my cue to go’ said he and turned around.

Yes, his death was, all in all, a good thing, one more monster gone, fate needn’t have reminded him. And he didn’t really want the disgust on Thor’s face to be his last thing to see.

The path to Helheim was already prepared for him and he found it easily. He didn’t hurry. Before seeking his final rest, he knew, he would have to talk to his daughter, and his daughter would be displeased. More than displeased. She would probably rip his head off for dying, if he still had one. Luckily, he had left that with the oaf, neck included. Loki chuckled a bit, remembering the bet with the dwarfs.

No more tricks by the trickster.

And wouldn’t that make the realms a lot more boring?

Oh, well. At least, he had left them with his greatest one still to unravel.

But no matter how much he dreaded confronting Hela, seeing that he had quit the stage a bit earlier than originally planned, thanks to Thor’s stupidity, he needed her. She was his last chance to set
events into motion, make sure that his last joke was on Thanos and not merely on himself.

Because in a way, it had been on himself in any case. No great battle of magic or wits. Killed by some random assassin instead. Killed by a common brute in a prison cell, his hands bound, his mouth shut by a muzzle. Bested by crude violence as Loki always had been. Slaughtered like the beast he was.

And didn’t that bring back memories of the good old days?

‘A fitting death’, said Loki, and bowed his head to the Norns that he knew were watching. ‘I appreciate your narration.’

Hopefully, they would appreciate his too.

The realms passed him by as he walked towards his daughter’s kingdom, thinking about all the ploys he had not yet had the chance to finalise, about the verses he had had to hurriedly change in his song so to accommodate his premature end. He would have to ask favours of Hela, several of them. She would glower at him for months.

But still.

He was dead. He was done. He was not going to be a problem anymore.

And for the first time in what felt like centuries, he had the feeling that everything would eventually turn out alright.

And then a person stepped into his way.

Loki stopped in his tracks.

This shouldn’t be. Souls were alone on their paths to Helheim, always.

If there was company, it was because something had gone wrong.

Of course, something had gone wrong. He was Loki, he couldn’t even die without screwing it up, didn’t he know that already? Hadn’t the Norns already shown him twice what to expect if he asked for that one, simple, favour? It had been too good to be true.

The woman, for it was a woman, approached him. She was accompanied by a long black box that was hovering next to her.

‘I greet you, Loki Odinson, prince of Asgard’ said the woman. ‘I am Ananka, last ruler of the planet Ozymandia.’

Ananka, of the planet Ozymandia. Loki had never heard either of the one or the other. His life had been ended by a nobody, and his death was being ruined by a nobody too.

The Norns hated him more than he had known. Or had an even nastier sense of humour.

‘What are you doing on my path?’ asked he.

‘Er’ said Ananka, eyed the box and then him. ‘The thing is, I have your body. Frozen in time. In that box.’

‘What?’ Loki said.
This was idiotic, why should this woman… no… no! NO! Loki refused to believe this! Had Thor really left Loki’s body behind AGAIN, crying all over him but not able to be bothered to even make sure Loki was BURIED appropriately? But really, why should he? After letting him get stabbed by a second-rate assassin, why not leave him to some other second-rate scavengers, wannabe mages probably who were going to sacrifice his entrails in order to ascend a throne or get a bigger DICK?! This was Svartalfheim all over again!

‘I… kind of stole it’ Ananka said. ‘Right after your death, you see.’

Oh, for the NORN’S SAKE, couldn’t Thor even keep a hold on his corpse for the time it took Loki’s soul to finish its last journey?! It was not like stuff like this took AGES, not even MINUTES, for the love of Hela! Oh, he was so gonna kill Thor once that GIANT STUPID USELESS OAF showed his face in the afterlife! Norns, he should have killed Thor when he had been still alive, with the bloody Destroyer (well, he had), he should have aimed for a VITAL organ all those times he had stabbed the blithering numbnut! How could he ever have called that waste of good verse brother? How could he have made THAT DULLARD the hero of his SONG?! Really, Loki deserved this for thinking that he could rely on Thor to keep him safe just this ONE SINGLE TIME! The Norns had been RIGHT to punish him thus and laugh some more at his misery! They had been right!

Ananka, as to her, bit her lips.

‘And the thing is, I want to make a deal.’

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for all the love you sent me with comments and kudos - this has really been very motivating for me to go on with this weird headcannon of mine that’s gonna be far too long (warning right here).

.... aaaaand I still have to leave you with this terrible cliffhanger for a while, because I'm still evil, but mostly because of the necessity to prepare the next batch of chapters and to have a life. But I do promise that I will return with several chapters in tow, more Loki, and a new terrible cliffhanger.
The cold wooden table. The book in his hand, leather-bound, it smelled a bit mouldy. Father should take more care of the library, Loki thought, when he noticed the quiet. He looked up.

Blood in his mouth, Baldur’s smile, the sharp pain as the dagger tore through him, the hand dug into him, this heavy body on him, tearing into him again and again, and he couldn’t breathe, couldn’t scream, a muzzle over his mouth, he coughed up blood, but it couldn’t escape, was everywhere in his throat, his nose, on his hands, the fingers cut to the bone, he was choking on the vomit, his mouth sewn shut, too much, too much, too close, the smell, Baldur’s smell, couldn’t stop shaking, no matter what he did, he couldn’t stop shaking, weak, Ergi, couldn’t breathe, couldn’t breathe, couldn’t-

Couldn’t.

Because he couldn’t. No muzzle. No poisoned thread. No Baldur.

Just – this.

Just this.

It’s all you have for now.

Loki came back to himself slowly. It was difficult – to remind himself of reality when there was so little of it. So little to hold onto. Just his memories, his knowledge of where he was, and when. Not in
the tavern. Not in the cell. Not with Thanos.

There was little to separate dreaming from waking, his existence from his insanity.

The latter was never far.

He had to escape this existence. One way or another.

Loki couldn’t well calm his breath, so he focused on calming his magic instead. There had been power fluctuations during his nightmare, he could still feel them, and he couldn’t risk them ruining his plans. Not when he was so close to his goal.

He would escape this existence, one way or another.

Just a little more time. What were a few months, considering? Soon, a new day would begin, Ananka would rise, and the days were always easier. He was occupied then. His mind didn’t have time to stray then.

If only he got his act together and managed to dream walk instead of just drifting like a bloody amateur, it got easier too. Stroll into other minds, with other secrets. Stay in control. Maybe he should visit Stark again – get another drink, find out whether Thor had shown his face on Midgard yet. Glean ever more useful information from the inventor who was surprisingly happy to share when he thought he was talking to himself. So pull yourself together, Loki, this is getting ridiculous. If you do nothing but drift now, then why, I ask you, did you accept Ananka’s deal in the first place?

* *

‘Sir, the time elapsed since you have last left your workshop is thirty-two hours and twenty-three minutes, the time since last registered sleeping phase is thirty-eight hours and fifteen minutes. In seven minutes, I will be authorised to shut off the power in this room, and in one hour and forty-four minutes, I will be authorised to use compelling measures to ensure that you sleep.’

‘Authorised by who?’ Tony asked, soldering iron in one hand, flicking away screen projections with his other.

‘Miss Virginia Potts and common sense, Sir’ Jarvis said.

‘I’m pretty sure I didn’t program any common sense into you’ said Tony and bent over the part of machinery again he was working on. ‘Wouldn’t recognise it if I saw it.’

‘We are all very aware of that, Sir. The same might apply to a sense of self-preservation or decency.’

‘Jarvis, you’re being sarcastic again – remember our little talk about sarcasm?’

‘I believe you said that I couldn’t have gotten it from you either, and once more attributed this quality to Miss Virginia Pott’s influence instead.’

‘Yes. And what do we conclude from that?’

If only the parts started doing what he wanted them to do. He was close to the solution that would herald the dawn of the next generation of Iron Man suits, he was sure of it.
‘I conclude that if both my common sense and my sarcasm are her contributions only, and having my suspicions about self-preservation and decency, we should think about officially registering her as my co-creator.’

‘Exactly, so – wait, no, what?’

‘Considering that my common sense, and my sarcasm have saved your life several times in the past, Sir, making it official seems even more adequate and necessary.’

‘No, no, no, the two of you are conniving behind my back again!’

Tony shut the soldering iron off, flung away his protective glasses and rubbed his eyes.

‘This is another thing you get from her, and argh, I’m just digging my own grave there, am I?’

‘I don’t know about digging, but since you’ve just rubbed a rather aggressive substance into your eyes, you have certainly heightened your chances of premature blindness.’

‘Oh man, seriously? FUCK!’

One visit to the medical facility of the Avenger tower later, Tony was gratefully not forced to wear a blindfold but was still red-eyed and annoyed. They had examined him, treated him and then had given him a pill without any explanation and which had knocked him out for twelve hours straight because he had been, quote, so sleep deprived he was at high risk of slipping into a psychotic break, end of quote. As if. They were all conspiring against him – Pepper, Jarvis, the doctors, the government, all of them just determined to keep him away from his work.

Okay, so maybe that last bit had sounded paranoid even in his own head.

He made himself a cocktail, slumped onto his sofa, leant his head back. He closed his eyes and sighed.

In truth, he had no reason to think he was behind anything, or anyone (well, maybe Wakanda, but Wakanda was just unfair). A little more than a year had passed since the road trip with fantasy and teeny horror elements, and he had made great progress with the Mantis. Not that he actually understood the lava lamp and crystal stuff now, but that was because pendulums and lava lamps and crystals were officially esoteric bullshit and should never have brought him back home safely and sound. It almost annoyed him that they had. And parts of that technology just didn’t obey to the fucking second law of thermodynamics, for physics’ sake. Which was… argh!

But, as he had learned on his first involuntary space trip, he didn’t really have to understand something to learn to use it, or even improve it. And once he had gotten over the absolutely maddening fact that he WOULDN’T understand the fucking lava lamp any time soon (well, not exactly gotten over, more like shoved it to the back of his mind where it was eating away at his sanity, but that was fine), he had started to work himself into a stupor, had finally learned to use the hyper-drive, had even managed to boost it a little, had taught himself the use of many of the repair tools (even though some, especially those Hlín had used, still drove him into anxious frustration), had integrated JARVIS into the Mantis, and had begun experimenting with the more obscure controls of the command centre. He had used the Mantis on several missions, had taken quite a few journeys with it in the Solar system and a bit (not much) beyond, and had completely coincidentally found that Hydra base on the dark side of the moon (because really, Nazis on the moon? That was so cliché that nobody had even bothered looking).
He had improved the suits, he had improved the tower's security, and he had stripped down and studied the Skrull energy weapons until he had been able to rebuild them. He had solved a few sustainable energy problems in-between, and the scientists in his medical facility found the cure for some obscure sickness or other from time to time? He didn’t really keep track, but there had been something in the papers about that.

All in all, technologically, he was doing well.

Life, on the contrary, had not gotten less complicated.

Fucking Hydra. Ruining his carefully constructed domestic Avenger bliss, where every member got their own floor, and they took turns at buying groceries, or cooking, and some evenings, they had watched movies together, and Tony’s tower had not been so damn empty all the time.

But of course it had to turn out that SHIELD was just a Swiss cheese with Hydra agents in every hole (and how did he slip into Swiss metaphors again? Hadn’t there been something about Switzerland in his dreams lately?), and the whole thing had started to stink like Swiss cheese too. It had all blown up at some point of course and boy, was Tony glad he had used the Norse god prisoner transport deal back then to make himself legally very independent from that organisation, and to take away project TAHITI from them. He shuddered to think what Hydra would have done with that sweet little baby.

As it was, TAHITI was absolutely safe with Stark Industries, and just used to explore a few possibilities in the medical area, you know, prolonging life, pursuing immortality and the like, nothing questionable or dubious.

So that particular disaster had been prevented by Tony’s awesome ripping people off skills, but Hydra had still almost killed Fury (not that Fury didn’t deserve some killing once in a while), they had wrecked the helicarrier and had almost killed Steve (which was less cool). Ghoul Coulson had assumed the leadership of a shiny new but significantly less fire-powered or trusted SHIELD, and was showing the first symptoms of resembling Fury, Nat and Clint had had to go into hiding for months. Bruce had just packed his suitcases one day and vanished, leaving a note on a post-it and most of his research encrypted on Tony’s servers, and Tony couldn’t even blame him. After all, nobody wanted the fucking Hulk to get into Hydra’s hands.

And then Steve left, looking for his old love from the forties, who was apparently not only still alive, but also a super-soldier, imprisoned and brainwashed by Hydra, with a cyborg arm and no memories, but with a cute baby face instead. Figures.

And the LGBT community would go absolutely crazy once they would find out that the Capsicle was one of theirs. Tony was so gonna lose to him on an even more humiliating scale at the next Pride Parade.

Bummer, man.

And of course, they had seen absolutely nothing of Thor.

Tony sighed again.

He actually wanted to talk to Blondy. About a few things. About the video footage of New York, most of all. About the Chitauri invasion.

Shit didn’t add up there.

Or rather, it did. Uncomfortably.
Tony sipped at his drink and glanced at the place on the floor where, a few years back, a dent had been – made by Loki when the Hulk had smashed him around.

For a while, watching the video footage of that had been a soothing experience for him.

Look, he threw you out the window, but he got what was coming for him.

You almost fucking died as a smear on the street, but look, at least he got beaten up a bit for it.

His feelings about that dent had changed a bit recently.

After arriving back on Earth and bidding Thor good-bye, Tony had spent days going through every bit of information they had of the invasion, including everything on the SHIELD servers of course (should have installed better firewalls, is all what Tony was saying).

His conclusion was that either Loki was a bit stupid or they had their answer after all.

Don’t you want to know? How it came that I lost?

The gig in Germany had been simply blunt, flashy and unnecessary, except if you wanted the whole world to know that you were up to something bad. What Loki had pulled off on the helicarrier had been… impressive, sort of, but not really that efficient at destroying Earth’s defences, if you thought about it. There had been no real reason to open the portal in New York – other places would have been far less easy to defend for the Avengers. And the portal really should have been bigger.

Even Selvig said so, in SHIELD interrogations – the portal should have been bigger. Then Loki had meddled with the tesseract. And then the portal hadn’t been.

It didn’t add up. Or it did.

Tony had gone through every minute of video footage they had of the invasion next. Had watched all the footage of Loki several times, especially if they showed Loki fight.

And comparing that footage to the recording of Loki’s very last fight with the wielder-less blade, it was suddenly becoming rather clear. On the video footage of the invasion, Loki was holding back. Several times, he was hesitating before a blow, giving his opponent time to react. Tony could discern three separate occasions alone in which Loki could have seriously injured his brother, maybe even killed him.

Also, on the footage, Loki was in pain. It was not obvious, but it could be seen in the way he moved, which was similar to how he had moved in his last fight, after having received the first heavy blows.

The Loki of the invasion was too slow, not entirely sure on his feet. He swayed a few times, using it to his advantage, once or twice, Tony saw him stagger, saw even his face tense. Once, after ducking a blow, he laid a hand on his stomach, it cramped there.

There were no wounds visible, not a bruise.

Tony now knew that Loki was always wearing glamours.

That was when the uncomfortable feeling had started.

Because Tony had noticed the thing about the eye-colour then. That Loki’s eyes were blue in the footage of the invasion, but had been green when they had taken him to Central Park, shackled.

That they had been green ever since.
I am burdened by glorious purpose.

And he had looked at the recording of Loki’s last fight again, that dying body that shed its glamours, at how thin it was, at the black scar going right over his face.

How had Loki really looked during the Chitauri invasion?

What had he hidden beneath?

How badly off had he been already when the Hulk had smashed him into the floor?

Shit.

They had never pummelled the villain, had they? Very much worst scenario, they had pummelled the half-dead torture victim.

Loki had been right – they were the Scavengers indeed.

Which also meant that the really bad guy was still at large.

Tony groggily stood up and went to the window, looking down at the city, finishing his drink and not knowing what to do with the glass in his hand. The effect of the sleeping pill had not dissipated completely yet. Maybe he shouldn’t have drunk alcohol then.

No matter. At least no dreams that way.

He leant his head against the window.

Dreams were… not good. And he was having them far too often. His arc reactor died in those. Or he was with the Chitauri again, in that lost part of the universe. Or he was flung out the window by Loki, or Loki died in his arms.

Loki said, ‘I told you’, or Loki said, ‘Don’t you love it?’

‘What?’

‘The dance. Never cared much for the blood, but the dance…’

Sometimes, in Tony’s dreams, Loki just sat at his bar, and they finally had that drink together.

‘Should have taken you up on the invitation right then’ Loki would say and sip at his Stiff and Bored. ‘You have more talent as a barkeeper than at falling.’

‘The alcoholic must learn to get what the alcoholic needs’ Tony would say.

‘I’m not good at falling either’ Loki would say. ‘I always hit the wrong rock.’

‘Sometimes, you’re just stuck between a rock and a hard place’ Tony would answer, and Loki would glance at the marble where the dent had been.

‘Or between the floor and the floor’ he would mumble.

And then Tony would look up, ‘Do you hear that?’, he would say.

And then, the arc reactor would die on him again.

Because it was always there, in his dreams, that music, faint and undefinable, and each time, he
thought it was the most marvellous thing he had ever heard, and that he would never forget it, and each time, when he woke up, he found he didn’t remember a single note.

Sometimes, Loki would whistle it, and then he would die again, and laugh at his quickly decaying body.

‘Don’t get your hopes up’ would he say. ‘It never sticks.’

Those dreams were scary, and confusing.

Far down below, cars were accumulating at a red light. Tony should probably drink coffee or something. Or call Pepper, ask her how the company was doing. Or go and look for Clint and Nat, make sure they have not gone into hiding again. At least they had moved temporarily back into the tower again. Loki looked beautiful when he danced… no, fought. Tony had watched that video so many times, and the more often he watched it, the more he saw… Loki looked beautiful when he danced.

Loki was also very much dead.

And if Tony had understood the implied meaning in Hlín’s words correctly, probably, his body was being distributed all over the galaxy by now, plundered for all sorts of magical rituals and being sold to the highest bidder, one heart of Loki, one liver, one toe.

Maybe buyers would get a discount because the body they acquired was so very famished.

Not much flesh left to burn.

And Tony was being morbid.

He hadn’t even known that guy. No matter how much or how little Loki had tried to lose, their most intimate interaction had still been the trickster breaking the window with Tony’s body and flinging him outside.

The guy had still been an asshole, and fucking mad.

So, no feeling sorry for him. Fucker had his peace now anyway. No one was going to bother him ever again.

‘Always a Stiff and Bored’ said Tony, shaking the mixer. ‘Why always a Stiff and Bored?’

‘A recurring dream’ said Loki, and took the cocktail glass from him. ‘Needs repetitive elements’

‘Should I be worried that we’re having meta-discussions about dreams during a dream?’ Tony asked.

Loki laughed a little and sipped at his glass. He was lounging on the bar stool again, nonchalant and lazy.

‘You tell me’ said he. ‘It’s your mind.’

‘Yeah, meaning everything could happen, I know’ said Tony and rolled his eyes, then turning to the cucumber he was cutting for the Gin Tonic. ‘Except for the most obvious thing, apparently.’
‘Which is?’

‘You tearing the clothes off my body and having your way with me right here’ said Tony, and pointed at the marble bar. ‘Probably with me in shackles? And you wearing the horny helmet? Or maybe just those prisoner clothes. Seriously, it doesn’t really matter, everything looks hot on you. I really wonder what’s up with my subconscious. Usually, it’s not that fucking prude.’

Loki snorted.

‘So I take it you like me then?’ said he and glanced at him sideways, amusement in his eyes.

‘You were a beautiful asshole, Saint Hornbearer, and now you’re dead’ said Tony and turned to cutting again. ‘Don’t get all overenthusiastic just because I fantasise about you.’

‘Wouldn’t want to do the long-distance relationship anyway’ said Loki, swirling his drink. ‘The commute to Helheim is deadly this time of the year.’

‘Hahahah, aaand I’m laughing at my own jokes, ain’t I?’ said Tony. ‘Maybe Pepper is right and I am a tiny bit self-involved.’

He put the rosemary into the glass, because it was rosemary now, not cucumbers, but that was okay, it was a dream, and gin tonic worked with both.

‘So tell me, Rudolph’ said he then, and added the ice. ‘How come I only realised now? I mean, that you never intended to succeed with the Chitauri invasion. ‘Cause in retrospect, it’s so fucking obvious it’s honestly driving me nuts.’

Loki snorted again.

‘Maybe you are a little slow?’ he suggested sweetly.

‘No, I’m not’ said Tony simply.

Loki looked at him in a scrutinising way, then looked around the room, for whatever reason.

‘No, I suppose you’re not’ said he.

He hesitated, then put his glass on the table, flicked his fingers and suddenly, there was a coin in his hand.

‘What do you know of magic tricks, Stark?’ said he and made the coin travel around with his long fingers. His movements were elegant and precise, the gestures of someone who was used to doing quick and delicate work with his hands. Did Hornbearer play the piano? Another small movement, and the coin was gone, as if vanished into thin air.

‘I certainly didn’t know you did cheap parlour tricks’ said Tony.

‘Cheap or elaborate doesn’t matter – any feint is good if it works. And all tricks share the same secret’ said Loki, bent forward, and stretched his hand towards Tony’s ear, only to seemingly pull the coin from there. ‘Which is to make the audience not really want to look, not really want to find out the secret.’

Tony furrowed his eyebrows.

‘So that was the reason for your grand entrance, for taking over Clint right away’ said he. ‘That was why you did what you did in Germany, why you killed Coulson. Establish the villain, make us
angry, be unnecessary violent, and nobody will look too closely at how efficient you’re actually being at your villainy’

Loki shrugged.

‘And didn’t it work’ whispered he.

Tony poured the gin into the glass. The rosemary had been replaced by cucumber again. It was really either the one or the other.

‘But why?’ asked he. ‘Making us hate you, what did you have to gain?’

Loki grinned widely, ‘Finally you’re posing the interesting questions. But once again, you’re overestimating your importance’

‘Meaning that we were not the target audience?’ said Tony, raising an eyebrow.

And there it was again.

‘Do you hear that?’ asked he.

A faint music. A voice, singing. He couldn’t make the words out, but – it was beautiful. It was nothing like he had ever heard before.

‘Loki, do you-‘

He looked back, and started. Loki’s chest was open, his stomach too. The blood was everywhere, and parts of his entrails were hanging out, he was barely holding them in.

‘Now look what you’ve done’ said he quietly but he didn’t look angry. ‘You’ll always kill me in the end’

And the next moment, there was a strange pressure on Tony’s chest and he looked down, and his arc reactor was dead and still. And he could feel them at once, the shards moving, they pressed into his flesh, he couldn’t breathe, he-

He woke up, gasping.

Okay. So his mind was more complicated than he thought.

Also, it had just told him that Loki had had someone else to convince but them.

And he never even got to drink that damned gin tonic.

…fuck, he was thirsty now.

* *

Six months later, Thor arrived back in New Mexico, saying that he needed the Avengers’ help. There, he was confronted with Jane Foster, who was slightly pissed because of more than a year of radio silence despite a working Bifrost, and there followed a shouting match, maybe a break-up.
Then, Thor took the next Mjolnir to New York.

The Avengers were a bit more numerous by now. Bruce still refused to show his face, which annoyed Tony immensely since… science-bros, and everything, and Bruce was a good sounding board for theories, and nobody else in the tower could keep up with those lines of conversation. But Nat and Clint were still there, enjoying the high security most of all, since Hydra was still making a lot of trouble.

There also was a new addition, of sorts, not permanently because Peter Parker was apparently still living with his very hot aunt, and, apparently, going to high-school too. Was he still at that age? He probably was still at that age. He was a good kid. Most of the time. When he didn’t cause ships to break apart in the middle. He had good intentions. Just needed, you know, a father-figure, and all that shit.

Which Tony… couldn’t really provide.

But still.

Tony could provide spider suits?

That was something.

And Tony wouldn’t ever admit it out loud, but he was even glad that the Capsicle was back, brainwashed super-soldier baby-face boyfriend in tow.

See, Pepper? All I have to do is make it so that the Avengers tower is the only safe place my friends have, or that they need me for some other pragmatic reason, and then they are prepared to spend time with me after all. Sometimes. When they’re not out on mission or avoiding me in my own home.

See? People like me. Or something like that.

In any case. Thor had come back. That was good too. If only he could hurry up some more.

It was a wet, disagreeable morning, the wind blowing icy raindrops into their faces, while Tony, Nat and Steve were waiting out on the helicopter landing platform. New York’s autumn had begun two weeks ago, and it already sucked.

‘Fuck, I’m freezing’ said Tony, rubbing his arms. Nat eyed him with a raised eyebrow. Maybe he should have worn more layers than just jeans and a T-shirt? Probably he should have worn more layers than just jeans and a T-shirt.

‘Do we even know what this is about?’ said he. ‘Not that I don’t look forward to seeing Thoreal again, but-’

‘There he’s coming’ Nat interrupted him.

And there he was, Tony could see the shadow behind the clouds now too, then a small figure, then a much bigger one, and then, Thor landed already with an almighty thump, making the helicopter landing platform crack in the process.

Oh, gods damnit, Thor – Tony had only just repaired that platform after that doom bot attack a month ago.

Thor straightened himself up, and smiled, opening his arms at the same time and making Mjolnir swing threateningly.
‘ANTHONY STARK, NATASHA ROMANOV, STEVE ROGER!’ called he out with all the power of his mighty voice, even though they were standing right there. ‘How wonderful to see my good friends again!’

Before Tony could flee, Thor had enveloped him in crushing hug, and Tony tensed, wondering into which part of his body that gods-forsaken hammer would slam. But she evaded him, gratefully, and Thor let him go again, slightly suffocated and feeling as though several bones had briefly popped out of their joins, but free once more. Steve was next but of course, because he was a pain in the ass, he could take the hug much better, and Natasha only got a kiss on the back of the hand, and how was that fair?

She even had the audacity to wink at Tony afterwards. Pure schadenfreude.

‘It’s really good to see you too’ said Steve. ‘It has been a while, hasn’t it?’

‘Aye’ said Thor and attached Mjolnir to his belt. ‘I know I have neglected my duties to Midgard. Lady Jane has told me so too.’

That was a euphemism right there, buddy.

‘My only excuse is that Asgard needed me urgently’ said he, and some of his brightness dimmed, revealing that his eyes were tired, as they had ever been after his brother’s death. ‘There was much to do, and there still is.’

‘Not everything good at home, then?’ asked Tony as they walked toward the entrance to the tower proper.

‘Not everything’ Thor said, and his mouth thinned.

Steve engaged the Thunderer in light conversation for a while, and the god laughed again, thumped Steve on the shoulder in a way that made even the super soldier buckle a little, and they reached the kitchen that the Avengers mostly used for their joint meals.

‘Clint has grocery duties today’ said Tony and started the coffee machine. ‘And he’s running late again, the bastard.’

Clint was not one of their most enthusiastic participants at the taking turns to buy pastry or cook routine. And on days like these, when everything and everyone outside was wet and miserable, he was a horror to get out of bed, let alone to get out of the tower. It was almost more work, motivating him to do his bit, than to do it oneself.

Not that Tony knew that from personal experience, strictly speaking – he couldn’t be bothered to persuade Mr. Cockroach to do anything, and concerning his own duties, Tony was probably just as bad as the archer, if not worse. He regularly slept in on those days, or forgot them, or had taken a trip to Malibu without telling anyone, or had locked himself in his workshop. Steve was the one to make sure everyone obeyed to the rules (or at least to try), and he did so with admirable patience and stubbornness.

‘It’s about the principle’ said Steve, explaining said principle to Thor who looked at him, slightly bewildered. ‘And about team work. About the fact that everyone has to and can make a contribution, and that we can rely on each other.’

See, Tony could never have said it that well himself – he hadn’t even thought about that. He had just found the idea of cooking for each other cute in a parody of domestic bliss way (that, and it meant that he didn’t have to eat on his own so often). Steve was truly a great leader if Tony had set the goal
of the mission before.

Tony distributed coffee mugs, and they sat down at the table, Steve retelling some of the events of the past one-and-a-half years and Thor politely listening and posing questions.

‘I am gladdened to hear that an old shield-brother has been returned to you, especially since you thought him lost’ said Thor, after Steve had finished his tale of the winter soldier, meticulously avoiding to mention that the two of them had been a little more than just shield-brothers. Swords, at least, had also been involved.

But Steve had grown up in another time. Being out of the closet did not come natural to him at all.

‘That is a precious gift the Norns made to you’ said he, and despite his smile, there was a telling sadness in his eyes. ‘You should care to appreciate it.’

Steve nodded gravely.

‘I would be very honoured to make this recovered shield-brother’s acquaintance.’

Bucky was missing from their table, but they had decided that it was better to delay that meeting. Bucky had good and bad days, and even on the good days, new people were always a touch threatening.

And Thor was even threatening for the normally mentally-unstable.

‘So what brought you here?’ Steve asked.

Thor sighed.

‘I am afraid I have not come here merely to exchange tales of adventures’ said he. ‘I am here as part of a quest, a quest vital for the survival of all the realms, not only Asgard’s.’

‘That sounds ominous’ Tony said.

‘I agree’ said Clint from above, and made everyone except Nat jump.

‘Clint, for the devil’s sake, this tower has actual ground that you can actually walk on!’ Tony said. ‘There is no ACTUAL need for you to crawl around in the ceiling or walls!’

‘Eh, walking on ground is a myth’ said Clint and jumped down from the ventilation shaft he had used this time, wiggling a paper bag in his right hand. ‘I come, bearing gifts.’

‘Yeah, the gift of heart attacks’ Tony grumbled. ‘So what was that about impending doom and the end is nigh?’

‘There is a new threat’ said Thor. ‘Or rather, a very old one. Thanos, the Mad Titan. Have you ever heard of him?’

Tony shook his head.

‘I wouldn’t have expected you to’ said Thor. ‘However, little as you know of him, you have already suffered at his hand. As we know now, invading Midgard was not solely my brother’s idea. It was Thanos who sent Loki here to retrieve the Tesseract. The Chitauri army too was his and not my brother’s’

‘That… actually makes a lot of sense’ said Tony, while the others looked more befuddled. ‘See, I
have a theory there. I’ve looked at the-

He stopped speaking abruptly.

Oh, gods.

Oh gods, no.

Thor’s face froze too, and then paled rapidly, and Tony could well understand why.

Because Clint had just unwrapped the pastries, and they were… cinnamon buns. That smelled like… cinnamon. Cinnamon, like…

‘Ugh.’

‘What?’ Clint asked.

Tony couldn’t really blame him. He hadn’t told anybody about that specific detail – he had just subtly erased cinnamon from the meals he ordered, cooked, or wanted cooked for him. Steve had subtly backed him up.

And it had worked. Without talking about it.

For a while.

‘Er, this is…’ Steve said. He stared wide-eyed at the buns, then belched. ‘Oh god…’

Thor looked close to being sick again.

‘What the fuck is your problem?’ Clint said. ‘I go outside in this fucking shit weather, even though I wouldn’t have to, even though I didn’t want to, and bring you really nice pastries from a really nice bakery that wasn’t exactly around the corner, by the way, or cheap, and freeze my ass off in the process, and now you look at the pastries as if they were maggots or something?’

Oh gods, maggots, not that association too now. Tony put his hand to his mouth.

‘I… get it, Clint’ said he. ‘It was really nice of you, it’s just… we… we don’t really have good associations with the smell of cinnamon, none of us… except for Natasha apparently, who just doesn’t seem to care.’

Nat, who had snatched a bun and was already chewing on it happily, looked up.

‘What?’ said she, her eyebrows raised.
Thanos

Chapter Summary

We learn about Thanos. Hello there, plot. Also, Tony complains about other people escalating situations, but he’s actually pretty good at it himself.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The cinnamon buns had been gotten rid of and would never be spoken of again. Tony hoped they would never be smelt again. He felt nauseous enough as it was.

Clint had the decency to look slightly uncomfortable about his purchase whenever Thor was looking (even though he had brought out the party hats and the confetti when they had initially told him that Loki had passed over the Jordan… no, that was the wrong mythology again, wasn’t it?), and they had gathered around the sofa in the living area, waiting for Thor, who had moderately recovered, to speak his piece.

Bucky had been introduced too by now, and was sitting at the far end of the sofa, trying to make himself as small as possible. Today was a… mediocre Bucky day.

‘So’ said Tony, and crossed his arms. ‘You were telling us about Thanos.’

Thor nodded.

‘Thanos is very old, older than some of the realms’ said he. ‘He is a born Titan, a Kree. We do not know what his original name was. He gave it up eons ago in any case when he started courting Lady Death.’

‘Lady Death’ asked Nat.

‘Death’s physical manifestation’ said Thor simply. ‘He fell in love with her, and started sending her gifts.’

‘Gifts, as in…’

‘Deaths.’

Ahah.

‘So he practically spends his free time killing people’ Tony summarised, deciding to not further ponder the whole Sandman’s Death was a thing thing.

‘Yes’ said Thor. ‘Only he started to try and send her ever bigger gifts, and so he started to experiment with ways of killing more and more people at once.’

‘Sounds like a fun fellow.’

‘Thus, Thanos forged a weapon so terrible in its destruction that it destroyed half the universe.’
Wow. That sure had escalated quickly.

And there Tony had thought that *Loki* had been the God of rattling through the criminology dictionary too fast. Was there a technical term for trying to end all life? Biocide? Now that just sounded like something you would spray on a field.

‘Gratefully, with the help of a mage, Thanos could be defeated, and the lives could be restored’ said Thor. ‘Though the mage had to give their life in return. The weapon was broken apart, and its parts, since they could not be destroyed altogether, were distributed among the nine realms. They are called the infinity gems, and each of them controls one essential element of our world – time, space, mind, soul, power and reality.’

‘Practical’ Tony admitted. ‘I would like the reality one please. And Thanos?’

‘Was caged’ said Thor. ‘But he seems to have escaped his prison, and now seeks the gems again, so to finish what he has started. The invasion of Midgard was undoubtedly part of this plan. Father believes he and my brother negotiated a deal, promising Loki the throne of Midgard and Thanos the Tesseract – the space gem. But as you know, Loki failed to retrieve it.’

Well... failed...

‘Why... are we only made aware of this now?’ asked Nat. ‘I’m sorry, Thor, but that would have been useful information a lot sooner.’

‘We weren’t aware either. My brother never mentioned Thanos, neither during interrogations, during his trial, or afterward. Nor did he suggest that he had been under anyone’s command’ said Thor and furrowed his eyebrows, looking troubled. ‘I do not understand why he decided to hold back this information. My father believes that there has been a geas involved.’

‘A geas?’ asked Nat.

‘A spell preventing a person from speaking certain words, or commanding them to take certain actions’ said Thor. ‘In any case, at first, we had no reason to think that after so many millennia, this threat would rise again. But in recent years, there have spread rumours about the gems not being safe anymore, and the last years of Loki’s life and his death raised questions of their own. Loki had started stealing artefacts of various origin after his escape from our dungeons – a few of them could be used to locate some of the gems, for example.’

‘You think he was still working for the fucker’ said Clint.

‘That was what the Kree thought’ said Thor. ‘We know by now that it was them who ordered his assassination. The Vanir were not so certain, and that was why they asked him to be handed over alive. But Loki never arrived to answer their questions. He told us of his intentions in another way instead.’

‘His last spell’ said Tony quietly.

Thor nodded.

‘Hlín finally told us what it had been meant to do’ said he. ‘It is an ancient and very difficult working, not having been attempted in a long time, because it demands much power, much skill, and because in a long time, there had been no need for it. My friends, he sung the Bard’s Song’

If Thor expected a reaction to this, he didn’t get it. Bard’s Song. To say it in Buffy’s wise words, it sounded old, English, and boring. Maybe that music genre was more popular on other worlds. Well,
better old, English and boring than dubstep. Tony really really hoped it wouldn’t turn out to be dubstep – Deadpool was annoying enough as it was.

‘The Bard’s Song’ said he. ‘Is a way to… plead with the Norns, the goddesses of fate. They are those who will determine how long we will live and how we will die. Which realms will rise, which realms will fall. Whether Thanos will succeed, or whether he will fail.’

Huh. So they were… kind of powerful then?

‘The Norns, normally, cannot be persuaded’ said Thor. ‘Not in anyone’s favour. They have one weakness though. They love stories, especially well-written ones. They love music, especially well-sung. If one can present to them a song that is so beautiful, a ballad that is so compelling that they consider it worthy enough to be sung by all the realms, they will take those verses and that melody and spin it into the threats that make up the universe, and our decisions. Loki has, in the last minutes of his life, sung such a song.’

Huh.

Okay.

Huh.

‘Alright, so that means that either Loki was a bad narrator or we’re screwed?’ Clint said, now looking a little nervous around the edges.

Thor furrowed his eyebrows again.

‘I think you misunderstand’ said he. ‘The song doesn’t tell us of the Mad Titan’s victory. It tells us of the Mad Titan’s terrible defeat.’

Yup, Tony had been right. He had been so fucking right.

‘I fucking knew it!’

‘I didn’t’ said Steve.

‘I… suspected’ said Nat.

‘Wait, what?’ asked Clint.

‘Loki has been double-crossing Thanos all that time’ said Tony happily. ‘The invasion of Midgard was all just a big scam. Look, Thanos, give me that sceptre, and I get you the space gem. Hahah, joke’s on you, now you’ve lost both sceptre and gem AND your big-ass army!’

‘And Phil Coulson’s murder?’ said Clint, and his face was red now. ‘Was that just a scam? Was my mind-control just a scam, or Selvig’s? All those innocent people who died, did they jump to their feet right after, saying, hahah, it was just a trick?’

‘Let’s face it, Coulson was gonna turn into a ghoul one day or another’ said Tony, and shrugged. ‘He’s too much of a SHIELD agent to do otherwise. And you got over the mind control thing pretty well-’

‘You do NOT have the right to tell me what I’ve gotten over-’

‘Clint’ Nat said, and laid a hand on his arm.
‘Don’t ‘Clint’ me, Nat!’ Clint shouted. ‘You come here, telling me that Loki was on our side all along, and suddenly I have to consider him this great saint, or what, who sacrificed himself for us with that last big spell-’

‘Jeez, Clint, no’ Tony interrupted him, rolling his eyes. ‘Saint Hornbearer was a fucking nickname. If I had known you would take it that seriously, I would have stuck with Joker. Of course he was a prick. We know that. He was just a prick that shared some enemies with us, apparently. Or rather, one enemy. One very bad-ass enemy who probably subjected him to some pretty heavy torture before sending him to Earth, considering the scars, maybe used some mind-control too? I’m not sure about the details.’

‘What?’ asked Clint.

‘Yes, Son of Stark, explain yourself! What do you mean to say?’ asked Thor tensely.

‘Yeah, I’ve been wanting to tell you for ages, I’ve researched the Chitauri invasion a bit’ said Tony. ‘Well, no, not just a bit, I’ve been digging around for a while. Nat, tell Coulson his servers are still too easy to hack and he should spend less time trying to eat corpses and more time finding good IT staff. Anyways, all clues indicate that Loki actively tried to lose that war. So at least you have the answer to your brother’s last question there, buddy. In a way you were right, and Loki lied. In a way, he didn’t.’

Thor stared at him.

‘Also, watching the video footage, I kind of noticed that Loki must have been injured during the whole shebang’ said Tony. ‘Heavily injured. Like, being in constant pain and having trouble holding himself on his feet injured? A bit like after that blade in the ship had stabbed him a few times. Hard to tell what was wrong exactly, because you know, glamours. Could hide anything underneath those, the bastard. Yeah, and his eyes were blue, right until the Hulk redecorated the floor with him, after that they were green again. Thus my theory – torture, maybe just injuries, mind-control, maybe just coercion?’

‘I’m… no, this is not happening, this is not possible, and I won’t sit here and listen to this’ Clint said, stood up and left the room.

‘Er… should we worry?’ asked Tony in Nat’s direction who made a dismissive hand gesture.

‘Nah’ said she. ‘He just needs time to let go of the denial. He’ll come around.’

‘…should we worry about Thoreal then?’

Thoreal was staring at the floor, wide-eyed, but his jaw was tense, and his fists were balling.

‘… maybe’ Nat admitted, just before the first sparks were running over the god’s body.

---

It took Thor a while to calm down, but while Tony would have to go and rebuild the living area again, at least, the god had refrained from an EMP temper tantrum this time. Small favours.

And Tony should have probably guessed that telling Thor his baby brother had been tortured
wouldn’t go down well. Especially considering how roughly big brother had treated baby brother right after said torture. Especially considering everything that had happened after.

Yeah, so maybe Tony wasn’t the most sensitive guy on the planet.

But – it had all turned out alright, hadn’t it?

Bucky may have fled the room, or the premises, but Thor was relatively serene again, back to the weary depressed stage that was a lot less likely to break Tony’s stuff. And Clint had come back too, glowering, but silent.

And hey, thanks to Thor, the air in the living area was great – always that slight breeze coming in through the broken windows… really, what was it with Norse gods and breaking windows… with the help of Mjolnir… or Tony…

‘Er’ said Tony, watching the crow that had flown in and was now lumbering around on the marble floor, picking up left-over popcorn from their latest movie night. ‘You wanted to tell us about some quest?’

‘Yes’ said Thor. ‘… and I want to express my sincere apologies-‘

‘Oh Mighty Redecorator, listening to apologies costs me more effort than hiring the builders to repair this shit. Just tell us what you need our help for.’

‘As I’ve said, Thanos is looking for the infinity gems’ said Thor. ‘So I must be looking for them too. The Tesseract is safe with my father, and the mind gem is with SHIELD, still encased in the sceptre.’

‘What, SHIELD has the mind gem?’ Tony asked, suddenly nervous.

‘SHIELD, not Hydra’ said Natasha and shot him a glare. ‘I made sure.’

Yeah, right, just because Nat said that Hydra couldn’t get to it and that she had made sure, it… probably was okay, come to think of it.

Nat was a scary person.

‘My father would like to see that particular gem better secured of course. The Son of Coul will enter negotiations with me about that matter when I return, he has assured me of that.’

Or the sceptre might be even further out of your reach by then, buddy.

‘Of most of the other gems, we do not know the location. However, Hlín has contacted me some time ago, saying that they had discovered one of Loki’s secret lairs.’

‘Can’t be that secret if she discovered it’ Clint said.

‘She is a skilled mage who knew Loki well, and she had help’ said Thor. ‘But I believe that you are right insofar as he placed an object there that… maybe he wanted to be found in the event of… of something unfortunate happening.’

Euphemism right there again, Thoreal. Gotta watch those.

‘What kind of object?’ asked Steve.

‘A clock of Midgardian design that my brother seems to have been working with for a while.’
‘A Swiss one?’ Tony asked.

Thor furrowed his eyebrows.

‘I do not know this realm well enough to say’ said he. ‘In any case, the modifications Loki has made have changed the purpose of the instrument. Loki seems not to have been able to finish his work before he died. However, he had progressed far enough that Hlín could eventually finish it for him.’

‘So what makes it special now?’ asked Clint.

‘It does not merely tell the time anymore.’

‘It tells THE time’ Tony said, who had caught up. ‘It tells the location of the time gem.’

Thor looked at him.

‘How do you know?’

But why the clock, Loki? What is important? To tell the time of course.

Tony shrugged, ‘Just a hunch. So where is the little piece of jewellery? Do we have to go to Gallifrey?’

Thor frowned, ‘Gallifrey?’

‘Ignore him, he’s making pop culture references again’ said Nat. ‘Go on.’

‘The time gem, if the clock is to be believed, is on Ozymandia.’ Thor said.

‘Right… and that name… should tell us something?’

‘Not really’ said Thor, still frowning. ‘The planet is not part of the nine realms, and little known. They have made fast technological progress in the last two centuries, but they have still barely started interstellar travel. They are… not unlike Midgard… in that respect.’

Way of telling us we’re backwards, big guy.

‘What is curious about their development is that, having invented space ships a merely thirty years ago, they are already leaving.’

‘Leaving what?’

‘Their planet.’

‘What?’

‘Everything indicates that they are in the process of evacuating the whole population for no apparent reason.’

Yes, that was curious.

And fishy.

‘So you’re going to go there and get the stone before they jump ship?’ asked Tony.

Thor nodded.
‘I have been sent on a diplomatic mission by my father’ said he. ‘To negotiate a deal for the time gem, yes.’

‘Why do you think they would give it to you?’

‘We are Asgard, Anthony Stark’ said Thor. ‘We do have gifts to offer the world.’

Yeah. Probably. Just a few things. Like immortality. Or a way to live on disk world without the turtle. Or was there a turtle?

‘So… what do you need us for? Oh, wait… no, don’t answer that question.’

He already had a pretty good idea.

He rubbed his eyes.

‘I won’t let you do the Ratatoskr on Yggdrasil thing again’ said he. ‘I’m sorry, stereotypical part of the jock, but I’ve seen that movie, I’ve starred in that movie, not feeling up to Body Snatchers from Space, Part Two – The Reckoning. The geek doesn’t make it.’

‘I think I can reassure you, though I must confess I have not understood all your… pop culture references… again’ said Thor. ‘But the mode of travel you fear will not even be available to us, since Ozymandia is not a realm connected to Yggdrasil.’

‘But you still want me as a cab driver again’ said Tony.

Thor silently translated the question, then said, ‘Yes’.

‘How long would it take?’

‘Hlín says that with your ship, it should take us a few weeks.’

‘Well, that’s where I’m out’ Clint said.

‘Me too’ said Nat. ‘Sorry, Thor, but with Hydra breathing down SHIELD’s neck and Dr. Doom keeping us busy even on Sundays, we just shouldn’t leave Earth for that long. Neither should Steve, come to think of it.’

‘I am afraid I have to agree’ said Steve. ‘I would really like to help you out, but the situation is still very unstable.’

‘I don’t need warriors, this should be a peaceful mission. Once there, I should be able to complete it alone’ said Thor.

Yeah, we’ll see how peaceful it will be, oh Mighty Redecorator.

‘You really do just need a cab driver, do you?’ Tony said.

Thor hesitated, then nodded again.

‘Tony can go’ Nat said.

‘Yeah, Tony can go’ Clint agreed.

‘What the fuck, guys?’ asked Tony. ‘So I’m not needed on Earth at all?’
‘T’Challa can do your job’ Nat said with a shrug.

‘T’Challa can do my job?! What – how are you my friends?!!’

‘We’re your friends?’ Nat asked, her eyebrows raised.

‘Of course you… argh!’

There was no use talking to Nat like that.

‘Why…’ Tony rubbed the bridge of his nose. ‘Why doesn’t Hlín go and get that damned gem herself if the Vanir are that tech-savvy and all? Or why don’t you borrow one of their damned ships?’

Thor swallowed.

‘Relations between Asgard and Vanaheim remain… difficult’ said he. ‘And our failure to uphold our deal has not helped matters.’

You mean to say that Loki’s death has not helped matters. That they are still fucking pissed.

‘Father does not want to risk the Vanir getting control over the gem, and the Vanir would ask a too high price for any help they might grant Asgard at the moment. At the same time, the Vanir would not do well to journey to Ozymandia themselves – for one, they do not have what we think the ruler of the planet is looking for at the moment, and secondly, it would be interpreted as an open declaration of war.’

‘So we’re talking about a political stalemate’ said Steve.

‘An apt description’ Thor agreed. ‘Hlín can give me advice or information as a personal favour, but concerning more material gestures of help, her hands are bound.’

Or she knows exactly what kind of boon Frey and Gerdr want her to grant, and what to refuse, Tony thought.

Who knew what reasons there were to send Thor to exactly that place?

Ugh, there was going to be trouble, wasn’t there?

There was so going to be trouble.

‘Alright’ said Tony, and sighed, because he wasn’t going to get out of this anyway. Might as well make the best of it. ‘Let’s talk about the fare.’

Chapter End Notes

You didn’t really think the Swiss clock wasn’t gonna be plot-relevant, did you?
Fares to the Future

Chapter Summary

Tony has new business ideas, Pepper just wants to make sure they are profitable in the long run. Gullibler’s Travels are begun.

Chapter Notes

Just a small silly chapter so to get them to Ozymandia really.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

‘So I was thinking, Stark Interstellar Cab Service? Stark’s Galactical Cab Service? Stark’s Guide through the Galaxy? Fares to the Future? Not sure about the last one, it is a bit too honest about the rates.’

‘I don’t care what you call it, Tony, I can’t believe you just said yes to an interstellar mission that will take you away for weeks and probably kill you, again, without even talking to me first!’

Yes, Pepper was angry. She was even walking angrily, away from him. He had to run to keep up. Was it fair that she was taller than him in high heels? He wasn’t sure. Was it hot? Definitely.

‘Look, it’s okay, Pepper, I totally ripped him off.’

‘Well, I hope you did, because it sure has to make up for a whole lot of business losses you’ll cause with your little impromptu road trip! There is a fund raiser gala on Saturday, an important board meeting in a week, and two press conferences in-between, you should be opening that new hospital-’

‘We have a new hospital?’

‘Yes, Tony, it’s not like it hadn’t been you who had absolutely wanted to build it!’

‘I’m… sure I had a good reason.’

‘To forget your own business ideas?’ said Pepper and turned to him, stabbing him into the chest repeatedly with the stack of papers she was carrying. ‘To forget about your duties? To accompany giant Gullibler to this place that is so obviously a giant trap?’

‘Gullibler, like Gulliver – you’re making word-play, Pepper, clever, clever word-play, oh gods, I love you right now, I know we broke up, but will you still marry me?’

Pepper didn’t laugh even a bit.

‘Tony, come on, you’re cleverer than this! Hlín has conveniently found one of Loki’s lairs with conveniently just the right tools inside to find the time gem, and then she doesn’t try to retrieve it herself but tells Thor about it as a personal favour?’ asked she. ‘When, at the same time, the Vanir begin to develop separatist tendencies, hold a personal grudge, and generally have every reason to
want to get rid of their big oppressor’s successor?’

She… had a point. It wasn’t like he hadn’t thought about all of these factors too.

‘But everyone wants to get rid of Thanos?’ he tried.

Pepper rolled her eyes.

‘Yeah, like a common enemy has ever stopped nations from devouring each other in-between.’

Alright, so Jarvis probably really had his common sense from her. And that villain in Watchmen maybe hadn’t been that smart after all. Hahah, common enemy for world peace? Worked so well in Game of Thrones, didn’t it?

‘Oh, it’s going to be fine’ said he. ‘Besides, I’ve negotiated a deal you wouldn’t believe. Because of my awesome ripping-off SHIELD, I already knew what kind of natural resources and foreign elements Asgard had to offer before we even started to talk about the price. And Thoreal promised me access to knowledge about Skrull technology, I’m finally gonna have a chance at cracking that ship’s mad science!’

‘Not if you never make it back, Tony!’ Pepper shouted.

‘I’ll stay out of danger.’

‘No, you won’t!’

‘Did I already tell you today that you look stunning?’

‘Nope, Tony, try again.’

‘I… think that you deserve a raise?’

‘You bet I do!’

Tony opened his mouth, but Pepper interrupted him, ‘And don’t you even dare say twelve percent!’

* 

‘So how is being dead treating you?’ Tony mixed the Stiff and Bored, Loki let his fingers travel over the marble bar.

‘So far, it’s mostly dull’ said he. ‘And surprisingly unrestful.’

‘Well, maybe you’d get more rest if you didn’t escape your afterlife so often and come here, bothering me’ said Tony and filled the drink into Loki’s glass.

‘The alcoholic must learn to get what the alcoholic needs’ said Loki, raised his glass at Tony, and then drank.

‘Stop quoting me.’

‘I was created by your mind. All I can do is quote you.’
‘Don’t get smart with me.’

‘Oh, my foolish mortal vermin, now you’re just asking for an insult about your intelligence.’

Tony got out the cucumbers from the fridge.

‘Is this flirting?’ said he and pointed with the knife from him to Loki and back. ‘Because this feels like flirting.’

Loki raised his glass, eyed his drink.

‘Let’s see’ said he. ‘Are you likely to mentally masturbate to your own imagined wittiness? Yes, I suppose flirting it is.’

Tony grinned widely, ‘I knew you would answer with a burn! I’m on fire today! I like it!’

He cut the rosemary (the cucumber was gone again), and put it in his glass.

‘We’re following your trail, by the way’

‘My trail?’ Loki asked, eyebrows raised.

‘Your trails of breadcrumbs’ said Tony, supporting himself on the bar. ‘Only I have the suspicion that it won’t lead us home but rather to the witch’s house.’

Loki widened his eyes innocently.

‘Why ever would you think that?’

‘Because of the six-foot sign that has ‘trap’ written all over it’ said Tony dryly. ‘But yeah, I found it was subtle too.’

Loki smiled a little, put his hands together and rested his chin on them.

‘And maybe because going to the witch’s house is simply something I would do’ said he.

Tony pointed the knife at him again, ‘Exactly. You’re making my point. I’m making my point. Whatever.’

‘So why are you going anyway?’ Loki asked.

Tony shrugged.

‘Gingerbread’ said he.

Loki grinned at that.

‘So’ said Tony, finally putting the knife away to get the tonic. He had the impression that he had given Dream-Loki the right answer, somehow. ‘About the flirting. You keep doing that. And my subconscious is usually not that prude. So why don’t we…’

He pointed from him to Loki and back again.

‘Fuck a bit?’

Loki chuckled.
‘Because I’m an asshole and I’m dead?’ asked he.

‘You’re also in my head, and a fantasy, and thus exactly how I want you’ said Tony. ‘All the sexiness without the murderous intent. Sounds like a good lay to me.’

‘And you’re sure I’m not merely a manifestation of your self-destructive tendencies?’ Loki said, looking at him innocently again.

‘I knew I shouldn’t have told you about that conversation with Pepper’ said Tony, and narrowed his eyes.

But then he jerked. What was that?

‘Do you hear that?’ asked he.

‘You really like that song, don’t you?’ said Loki and sighed. ‘By now I almost regret giving you that earworm in the first place.’

Maybe, yes.

Loki was bleeding all over the place.

‘This is getting a bit too repetitive for me’ said Loki, before his eyes rolled up and he dropped to the ground.’

When Tony woke up gasping this time, in his quarters in the Mantis, he stared into the darkness for a while.

Then he shook his head.

‘You’re a fucked up person, Tony Stark’ said he. ‘A genius, but fucked up all the same.’

‘Should I record this sentence for posteriority, or, as a more short-term measure, for Miss Pott’s benefit?’ Jarvis answered.

‘If you want to spend the rest of your existence as a toaster, you should’ Tony replied.

There was a pause.

‘What kind of toaster?’ asked Jarvis then.

* *

‘Tony’s Extra-Terrestrial Taxi – Towels included? I keep coming back to Douglas Adams, somehow.’

Thor briefly looked up from the tablet, blinked, then lowered his eyes to the text again as soon as he had understood that the rather one-sided conversation had ended up at that particular topic again.

So far, Stark’s Galactical Cab driver was mostly bored. He had busied himself in the workshop, and he had busied himself in the command centre, and he had busied himself with Jarvis, and he had busied himself with the emergency scotch, and he had busied himself not thinking about the
nightmares he was still having – or about those other weird dreams starring Loki that definitely told slightly awkward legends about his kinks and his issues. But now, more than three weeks had passed, all his fear of getting lost in space had run out, and despite confusingly sexy, confusingly confusing, and confusingly no-actual-sex-happening Loki dreams, Tony felt at the end of his fucking ROPE.

Not that he hadn’t known that this was what interstellar travel essentially was – mind-crushingly boring once you travelled really far. For weeks, they had met literally nothing. The last Avenger class trip had been mostly okay because it had been short and he had been occupied by his neurotic tendencies about the ship and had had more conversation partners than mopey mourning Mr. Sunshine. More like Mr. Fog, lately. Thor barely even pushed Tony’s neurosis buttons anymore because the guy just moved so little. The other day, Tony had even purposefully placed the chipped mug in Thor’s reach instead of hiding it away as usual, just to have a distraction for a while, and Blondy hadn’t taken the bait.

‘Since when do you read so much anyway?’ asked Tony.

Thor laid down the tablet with a sigh.

‘I have to make myself familiar with Ozymandia’s history and society’ said he. ‘Did you know their current ruler became queen when she was only six years old?’

‘Er, no?’

‘Her parents died in a storm at sea when she was a child, on a journey to a wise woman they sought the advice of. And there have been rumours ever since that she is cursed, having foreseen her parents’ death and then unwillingly having caused it herself by telling them. However, everything indicates that she is still a popular ruler.’

‘Huh. So she is like Kassandra then? Harry-Potter-like divination skills, but with a nasty twist?’

‘I… I think what you wanted to ask was whether she was a Seer. We cannot be sure, but the story suggests it. In any case, she was the driving force behind the entirety of Ozymandia’s recent rapid technological progress. She is now over two-hundred years old.’

‘The… ripe kind of two-hundred years old, or the space Viking forever twenty-one kind of two-hundred years old?’

Thor paused.

‘The Ozymandians age more slowly than Midgardians’ said he after having mentally translated Tony’s question again.

He was getting better at that, at least.

‘Look, Thor’ said Tony because this had to be said at some point. ‘Doesn’t it concern you a tiny little bit that the only reason we’re travelling to Ozymandia is because Loki’s clock in Loki’s lair pointed you there? That you’re essentially going exactly where your brother sends you and doing exactly what he would probably expect you to do? Your brother who, as I recall, was not the most trustworthy person in the universe? …putting it nicely?’

Thor sighed again.

‘Loki is dead’ said he.
‘Does that really stop him from scheming?’

Thor glanced at him with that weary look again.

‘We will arrive soon’ said he. ‘We should prepare.’

Ozymandia definitely had busier air travel than Vanaheim. Or rather, bigger ships. Really big ships. Once they came near the planet, they towered over the Mantis a bit like star destroyers. Only looking a lot less weaponised and a lot more like holding tons and tons of cargo.

‘So... the evacuating thing wasn’t just a myth then?’ Tony said.

‘Sir, there is an incoming audio signal’ said Jarvis at that moment. ‘Should I accept it?’

‘Yes, buddy, thanks’

The intercom activated, and a voice started talking in a... very foreign language.

Ah, yes – the Ozymandians didn’t speak the all-speak did they, not like the Asgardians and the Vanir did.

That was... inconvenient.

‘What do they say?’

‘They say that they are Re-User-Maat two.’ said Thor, frowning. ‘And they’re asking us to identify.’

‘Re-User-Maat two?’ asked Tony.

‘The space port of the capital’

Ah, they were back to known ground, if not known tongues.

The conversation that followed was a bit annoying, since Tony could only understand one side of it, but he still could follow well enough to get that after a while, the Ozymandian official had understood who Thor was, had relayed the demand for an audience to the royal palace, and, after some waiting, had received a response that was, in general, positive.

‘But they want me to come alone’ said Thor, eyebrows furrowed.

Which was, of course, not at all suspicious.

‘Are you sure you want to go down there?’ said Tony. ‘All I’m saying is, Loki’s lair, Loki’s clock, and the Vanir don’t particularly like you either.’

‘Yes, Son of Stark’ said Thor, still frowning. ‘I said I needed no warriors, and I still say I don’t. Of course I will go.’

Well, at least that meant that Tony wouldn’t have to listen to only one half of the conversation all day. And he would have felt nervous about leaving the Mantis unguarded anyway. And wasn’t the Mantis handy in any rescue mission Thoreal would very probably need? Maybe it was better to look at the gingerbread house from a distance this time. Be the hunter that saves red riding hood... no, that
was the wrong fairy tale again. Tony kept mixing up those.

‘Well, well, Gullibler’ said Tony. ‘Go and make me proud, don’t become Hansel and Gretel, or Red Riding Hood. Or, at the very least, find an oven then.’

Chapter End Notes

Tony's business model translates to taking advantage of people while getting himself into ridiculously risky situations. Win-win, in his opinion.
Chapter Summary

Ananka and Thor have a talk, only disturbed by power fluctuations.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

‘But most of all, I am impressed by your rapid technological progress’

Ananka let out a short laugh, then opened the next door that led to a courtyard.

‘In order to live, one has to grow’ said she. ‘Have I shown you the tree?’

‘I haven’t yet had the honour’ said Thor and bowed.

They went down a corridor and came to a hall at the end of which there was a big door, guards standing on either side.

‘I thought it might interest you’ said she, as she put her hand on the handle. ‘Since your religion has a similar symbol as a representative of the world.’

She pushed the door open.

Behind, there was a grand, circular room that was open to the sky. The floor was earth and grass, flooded with shallow water. And in the very middle of it, there was towering over them a high and massive tree.

‘Yggdrasil’ said Thor.

‘That is what you call it’ said Ananka, leaning her head back to be able to take the view in. ‘This, however, is Isched, the tree of our people. The heart of our world. You see that the earth is wet?’

‘Yes.’

‘Isched must be flooded at times, and then be left dry again.’

She pointed at the single giant fruit that was hanging from one of the branches. It was smooth and looked like a tear – a dark red, like the tree’s big leaves, but as if glowing from within.

‘The rhythm of floods and droughts helps the tree bloom and bear fruit. And the fruit of Isched has to grow for seven hundred years before it can be picked. Every tree produces just the one – its child. Its only successor.’

She let her arm drop slowly.

‘Tonight, the fruit will be picked, and the last ship will take it with it. If ever we find a new world, this fruit will assure us that the heart of our people will take root there. It will draw the water and repel it again, in the rhythm of flood and draught we know so well. That we need. Without it, we will scatter across the galaxy, and perish’
Thor nodded. He had seen objects like this before – artefacts that held the true power of a civilisation. Wasn’t the Casket of Ancient Winter one of them, he thought uneasily.

‘I do assume you understand the trust I am showing you, granting you this knowledge’ said Ananka, eyeing him.

‘Aye’ said Thor honestly. ‘And I am very honoured indeed.’

Even more honoured than Ananka maybe knew – considering how Asgard had treated the hearts of other worlds before.

‘And from here, you have a good view of the palace gardens and the city beyond’ said Ananka later, opening her hand as she let it travel over the land.

They were standing on the balcony of the palace now, after Ananka had finished the tour. The sun was setting over Ozymandia and bathed everything in a warm, slightly violet light. Below the palace that was standing on a high hill, there was the city, and once, it must have looked busy and full of live. It was certainly big, spreading over the hills of Re-User-Maat, and being bordered by fields and forests.

Now, it looked strangely quiet. The first lamps were being lit, but few cars hovered in the streets. The evacuation was almost complete, and the only bustling place seemed to be the port that they could see from here too – the giant space ships looming over the hills, casting their long shadows over the towers and parks. The last ships, so Ananka had told him, would leave tonight.

So the rumours had been true, and he had not come too early.

‘If I may ask, what drives the people of Ozymandia to leave a place this plentiful and lovely?’

Ananka smiled awkwardly, bit her lips, looked down, then up again.

‘But Asgard does know’ said she, ‘what can destroy a world that is still blooming.’

Thor looked at her, unsure what she meant, then it came to him – rumours of Thanos’ activity. Was this the reason Loki had led him here?

‘Are you being threatened?’ asked he. ‘Is there a people coming to invade?’

Ananka laughed, a bit too highly.

‘No, nothing so simple’ said she. ‘There is no army for you to defeat here, Odinson. The threat is inherent, and must devour this planet eventually.’

Thor frowned.

‘It devoured another planet once’ said Ananka, now looking at the city again. ‘And on the biggest shard, by the survivors, a new world was built, that floats in the universe and has sharp edges from which nobody should ever fall.’

Thor breathed in.

‘Asgard’ said he. ‘There is a celestial sleeping at the core of your planet. And it is waking up. Is it
Ananka raised her eyebrow for a second, and Thor thought he saw a glint of amusement in her eyes, but then it was gone, and she nodded.

‘When I was very young’ said she. ‘the child ruler of Ozymandia, a vision came to me. A vision of the ground breaking up and swallowing buildings whole. You are the last ruler of Ozymandia, the fates told me in this dream, and your rule is going to see this world’s end. I pleaded with the fates, but I knew that of course it was useless. I knew that some of my prophecies told of possible futures, and some of those futures I couldn’t ever prevent. I could distinguish the two.’

‘I… am very sorry’ said Thor.

‘I was sorry too, but sorry didn’t help me’ said Ananka. ‘I knew I had to find a way for my people to survive instead. And so I used my power as a ruler to push technological progress, and I hoped with all my heart that the fruit of Isched would ripen before the celestial would break its hull. For the fruit is nothing without the people, but the people are nothing without the fruit. I had to save both, or nothing.’

‘You were brave’ said Thor and bowed a little to her.

At that moment, the light on the balcony flickered, and Ananka blinked, gripping the banister more tightly.

‘Are you well?’ Thor asked.

Ananka blinked again, shook her head.

‘It is nothing’ said she. ‘The last ships are just leaving, and so many taking off in so little time takes more energy than our power plants can provide. And I cannot waste the ships’ fuel – no one knows how long we will have to wander. I had to use additional sources, that is all.’

‘What kind of additional sources?’ asked Thor, frowning.

What kind of power sources would shake her this way?

But then, the balcony light flickered again, and then the city joined the palace in this fluttering, and the next moment, the lights went out and darkness washed over the capital. Ananka swayed, having put her hand to her forehead, took a few steps back and collided with the banister.

There was a deep droning sound, and he could feel the balcony vibrate beneath his feet. He glanced at the city, saw one of the massive ships slowly take off, looked back at Ananka again.

‘Queen Ananka of Ozymandia?’ Thor asked.

Ananka took down her hands, looked at them, confused.

And then she looked up at Thor.

‘You need to help me’ said she abruptly. Her voice was scared, like it hadn’t been before. Her eyes desperate. Her face thin and tense.

‘I did come here to help you’ said Thor, bewildered by her change of mood.

‘I know you want a deal’ said Ananka, speaking quickly. ‘And that’s fine, we can make a deal. I can offer you something, something I know you want. But we don’t have much time, you need to help
me now.’

Thor cocked his head. Why was Ananka in such a hurry all of a sudden?

‘I would like to speak this through calmly’ said he. ‘Establish what exactly you want from me and—’

‘I have Loki’ Ananka spurted out.

Thor stared at her.

What-

He couldn’t have heard that correctly.

‘What—’

‘I have your brother’ Ananka said again. ‘And you can take him, he’ll be yours. I promise I won’t lay a claim on him once you’ve done your part.’

Thor continued staring at her. No, Loki was dead. She was making empty promises. But she had said, I have him, not, he lives. Did she possess his body? Had she been the thief?

He felt his anger rise, and at the same time, his fear, this terrible fear that she might be lying to him—

With two steps, he was at her, gripping her by the shoulders, barely able to contain himself, this woman had stolen his brother’s remains from under Thor’s hands, had maybe used them, had maybe been using them up—

‘Speak plainly’ Thor growled. ‘Tell me where my brother is NOW!’

Ananka looked at him with wide, scared eyes, opened her mouth, and at that moment, the light flickered back to life, her eyes rolled up as if she were about to faint, she was swaying in Thor’s arms, then pressed her eyes shut, until she was once more steady on her feet.

When she opened her eyes again this time, the look in them was more calculating.

‘Somewhere you won’t get to without my help’ said she. ‘So how about that deal now?’

Thor’s grip on her tightened.

‘You won’t get a deal for desecrating the DEAD!’ growled he.

‘Then you will go home empty handed, having to tell the all-father and the all-mother that you wasted your chance to retrieve Loki’s remains because you couldn’t overcome your pride’ hissed she. She narrowed her eyes at him, sneering slightly, and again, Thor was bewildered at the transformation of her expression. The awkward queen was gone, and he was left with… this.

‘I should crush you with Mjolnir right here on this balcony’ whispered he. ‘You vile looter.’

‘Maybe you should’ hissed Ananka back. ‘But how will you benefit from it? How will anyone?’

For a moment, Thor was still tempted. The woman was short and frail, he could have broken her bones just by tightening his grip some more, and his disgust at her was almost overwhelming. All the guilt he had felt, first on Vanaheim, then arriving back at Asgard without his brother, having to tell his father how terribly he had failed.
Being told dryly that they already knew everything because Frigga had seen it in her tapestries.

Being told dryly that Frigga was, for the moment, indisposed.

And then just... nothing. Like the first time, like the second time. Thor had seen his brother die in his very arms, but without a corpse, there had been no funeral, just... silence. Frigga had emerged from her loom room days later, subdued and absent-minded, and Loki hadn’t been mentioned again.

And Thor had felt... a hollowness. A hollowness that had begun gnawing at him like a parasite.

And now this woman told him... told him... but what if this was his last chance and he wasted it again, because of a stupid mistake, because of anger, what if the last thing that remained of Loki would slip through his fingers, for good, for ever-

He let go of Ananka’s shoulders.

‘What do you want?’ asked he. He already felt tired.

Ananka snorted.

‘What you came here to offer anyway’ said she. ‘Either a planet or the knowledge how to colonise the broken shards of ours. Asgard’s promise of support against other people who will try to take advantage of our temporary weakness. An alliance. …and I want the apple.’

Thor furrowed his eyebrows – how did she know about that last matter?

‘You have brought the apple, haven’t you?’ asked she calmly, cocking her head and narrowing her eyes again. She was standing with her legs a bit more apart than before, Thor noticed, and her fingers were moving restlessly. It felt familiar, somehow, as if he should know Ananka from somewhere. But he was sure he didn’t. ‘I haven’t spread the rumour about my desire for immortality for nothing, have I?’

‘You have willingly spread that rumour?’ he asked.

Ananka just cocked her head some more, and raised her eyebrows, indicating that she was waiting for an answer.

‘I… I have the apple’ said Thor.

Ananka’s eyes glinted.

‘Good’ said she.

‘I… I demand the time gem’ said Thor. ‘I demand Loki and the time gem in return. We know you have it.’

The woman kept looking at him in a rather scrutinising way. Also this felt familiar. Too much so. It made Thor shiver.

‘You demand much’ said she. ‘We were only negotiating about a body just now, and now you want an infinity stone.’

‘I may personally wish to retrieve my brother’ said Thor. ‘But my first duty is to Asgard, and you demand much of her. Asgard wants payment too.’

‘And Loki is not that’ said Ananka. ‘Of course not, I should have realised. Even though it may
weaken my position, personally, I must say that I agree.’

She let out a small laugh.

‘Maybe you’re not as stupid as they say after all. Well, I am sure we will come to an agreement’ said she, and turned away from Thor, to go back into the palace, ‘that will benefit us both in practical as well as in sentimental matters. I already have an idea.’

Thor followed her, watching her walk, this confident stride that was at the same time elegant, the way her fingers trailed the table as if sensing something there that Thor couldn’t even register, as if absorbing information that he was shut out of, as if-

‘Loki’ said Thor abruptly.

The woman stopped.

And the way she came to her stop, without a single movement out of place, the way her fingers did on the table, staying in contact with the wood, told Thor he had been right. Even though this couldn’t be. Even though this was unthinkable.

‘Stop your pretence’

The spell rippled over the woman, as she turned around, and when the person came to face Thor, it was a man again, tall, and dark-haired, and dressed in his favourite armour.

‘I wondered when you would finally realise’ Loki said. ‘I really stopped pretending long before you told me so.’

He looked well, his hair sleeked back neatly, and his posture upright, and his eyes were gleaming.

‘You are… not dead’ was all that Thor could bring out.

‘I am not dead’ said Loki and bowed a little, opening one hand in a smooth and elegant gesture, a crooked smile on his face. ‘I’m glad you enjoyed the show. Now would be a good moment to start clapping.’
His Humble Abode

Chapter Summary

Everyone wants something. A deal with Loki is made (better or worse than a deal with the devil?). They visit his home far away from home. Loki might perhaps on occasion be a bit of a drama queen.

Chapter Notes

Meanwhile on Earth, Clint is googling for Christmas presents (a gift brought to you by Entropy_by_ophelia).

For a while, Thor couldn’t do much but stand there. He should have felt happy, relieved. Instead, he felt strangely… untethered.

He had of course expected some sort of nasty surprise on Ozymandia, some sort of trap. Despite what Anthony Stark seemed to think, he did know his brother a bit. After all, he had survived centuries at his side.

For some reason, he had not expected… this.

And he truly should have seen it coming. After all, it wasn’t exactly the first time Loki had done this.

And still.

He had dreamed of Loki dying in his arms so many times. He had… Hlín’s words – if it is a trick, we should congratulate him on it. So far, he has certainly fooled me.

What if the Norns don’t bring him back for you this time? What then, Thor Odinson?

‘I notice a certain lack of clapping’ Loki said.

He didn’t look pleased. Thor opened his mouth.

What then?

‘I…it… it really was all a trick, wasn’t it?’

‘That is what I subtly wanted to suggest’ Loki said, his mouth thinning. ‘Personally, I thought it was a rather good one, but obviously, I have a difficult audience. Maybe you miss the me stabbing you as my grand finale part.’

‘No, I…’

But Thor didn’t know what he wanted to say.
‘Are you disappointed?’ asked Loki. ‘It is a common rule that the object that a magician has vanished must eventually return, but I suppose that I am a special case, as always. I die and return all the time. Maybe it would have provided for more novelty if I had stayed dead for once.’

‘No’ managed Thor to say. Where was this conversation going? He felt still so confused, his chest tight, and all of this felt so unreal.

‘I thought… I really thought you had died this time’ said Thor. ‘I… I grieved again.’

‘I know, I was there’ said Loki, rolling his eyes. ‘No, Loki. Say something, Loki. I don’t allow this, Loki. Not very original. Your tears got me wetter than the blood did.’

‘You were there? And you just watched?’

Of course, he had been there. Of course, he had watched. And had silently mocked him. It was Loki, after all.

‘You seemed so content with my death and with your grief, I didn’t want to interfere’ said Loki. ‘How could I ruin your happiness a third time?’

Thor felt a pang at that, he looked away.

‘Despite what you seem to think, I do not seek your death’ said he quietly.

‘No, you don’t, do you?’ Loki let out a laugh, and it was one of his cruel ones, cold and hard. ‘You just ACCEPT it very easily. Oh, Loki fell into the void, so he must be dead. Oh, Loki got stabbed through the chest, so this time he must be truly gone. Oh, Loki is presenting me the same show a THIRD time and I still fall for it because Loki’s death is just a CONVENIENT thing to ASSUME!’

‘There was nothing CONVENIENT about your death!’ Thor cried out. ‘I mourned you, I felt terrible-’

‘Yes, yes, yes, you wept and wept, but what did you actually DO?!’ Loki’s eyes were blazing with fury, the kind of terrible fury Thor had seen on the Bifrost, and then later, in New York, and Thor didn’t understand where that had come from so suddenly. ‘What did you DO for me, Thor? I fell into the void and you didn’t even bother LOOKING FOR ME! And when I died on Svartalfheim, you bloody left my corpse BEHIND! And how did you fight to get me back this time, Thor? How did you fight for me at ALL?!”

Loki spit the words out – he was, by now, in a fighting stance, slightly bent forward as if to charge at Thor, and his hands were at his side, balling into fists and opening again.

‘You changed back into Jotunn form’ said Thor desperately. ‘I smelled… even Hlín fell for your trick.’

Loki wasn’t impressed.

‘You claim to know me, Thor’ said he. ‘And yet you think that I can be defeated so easily? That the void would just kill me like it would kill any other? You claim to know me, and yet you believe I cannot fake my death so that Hlín is convinced? That the realms’ greatest trickster cannot trick some Vanir mage? Do you truly not see how gravely you have insulted me?’

He shook his head, the smile he wore now was humourless.

‘If you cannot understand that, then you will be forever surprised by my retribution.’
Thor opened his mouth, but he didn’t know what to say. He didn’t understand anything. Loki was there, Loki was alive, and a part of him just wanted to take him into his arms, hold him tightly and never let go again. Another part of him wanted to punch him again and again, for doing this to him, for saying those cruel words when Loki had been the one to betray him, so many, many times. For having been here all that time and having said nothing. For having let Thor suffer. For having let mother suffer.

‘How long have you been here?’ asked he.

‘For quite a while’ said Loki sharply.

‘Our parents mourned you too, you know?’ said Thor.

‘My parents are dead’ said Loki. ‘As you should know. It wasn’t like I didn’t use the occasion of my apparent demise to make it very clear for you.’

He turned away from Thor, saying that, linking his hands on his back. Thor wondered what kind of reaction Loki wanted to trigger this time. But he had never been able to decipher the way Loki steered conversations. He had never understood the way Loki’s mind worked at all.

‘Mother did not leave the loom room for days’ said he. ‘And she has been quiet since, preoccupied. Your death came so shortly after her illness.’

Loki did react to that, if almost imperceptibly. It had taken mother a long time to recover from the dark elves’ poison. For a while, they had feared that they would lose her forever.

‘I was not the one who left the ship vulnerable’ said he then quietly, turning back to Thor again. And that was true – except...

‘Except my actions didn’t really matter, did they?’ said Thor. ‘Like on Svartalfheim, it was all just another illusion.’

Loki’s face twitched, an expression of pure wrath crossed it, and for a moment, Thor was convinced his brother would attack him right there right then. Then, Loki’s face just as quickly relaxed, went blank.

‘Of course’ said he. ‘Of course it was.’

He smiled a little, if unconvincingly.

‘Now, Thor’ said he. ‘I believe we have a deal to broker-‘

The lights in the hall flickered at that moment, Loki blinked, the light went out, Loki staggered.

‘Brother!’ cried Thor out.

Something rippled over Loki’s body again, stripping the man away, leaving a short woman behind. The floor of the hall was vibrating, outside, the droning heralded the next ship departing.

‘Brother?’

Ananka steadied herself, looked up into Thor’s eyes, her eyes wide and scared, then turned on the spot and took off for the door.

Thor had caught up with her and grabbed her wrist before she had even made it halfway.
‘Let me GO!’ shrieked she, pulling at her hand. ‘Let me GO!’

‘Loki, what trickery is this?’

‘I am not Loki, I swear I am not Loki, let me GO!’

‘No’ said Thor simply, and grabbed her by the shoulder now too. She winced. ‘Explain!’

She looked at him, she was crying, he noticed. Her face was red.

‘I… I have made a mistake’ whispered she.

And then, the lights flickered back to life, her eyes rolled back, she swayed. He steadied her. When she opened her eyes again, the gaze was colder.

And familiar once more.

‘Explain’ growled Thor again.

‘Can you not come to your own conclusions?’ asked the woman contemptibly, straightened herself up until her chin was high, then changed back into his brother. ‘Do I truly have to elucidate everything to you as if to a child?’

But the wrist Thor was holding didn’t feel like Loki’s wrist at all.

‘This… this is just another illusion, you are… you are not really here, are you?’ asked he, disappointment already spreading in his heart.

Loki snorted again.

‘Of course, I’m not here’ said he, pulled his wrist out of Thor’s grasp. Thor could have held him. He let go.

‘I’m busy after all’ said Loki. ‘And I wasn’t going to be anywhere near you the moment you found out I wasn’t dead. Don’t want to give you another excuse to correct that mistake.’

‘I do not want to-‘ began Thor, then shook his head. Loki was just trying to distract him. Distract him from what he had done.

‘Ananka of Ozymandia?’ asked Thor.

Loki smiled coldly.

‘A queen should give the question more thought with who they want to spend their free time’ said he. ‘And what kind of influence conversing with certain persons may give them.’

‘You have control over her mind’ said Thor, appalled. ‘… without the sceptre?’

His brother rolled his eyes again.

‘Give me some credit’ said he. ‘I had a lot of time.’

He lowered his eyes for a moment.

‘By the way’ said he. ‘I have a message you can convey to sweet Ananka once the next ship leaves. This little plan of hers to alert the guards and get me out of her head? It won’t work. I have more than
enough occasions to still prevent the picking of the fruit of Isched, and I could ruin her evacuation just by stopping my work for her. She should know better than to try to best me in this blunt manner.’

Thor frowned.

‘You’re doing work for her?’

Loki’s smirked.

‘You could say so. The happy event of this massive celestial’s birth is long past due. For the past fifteen years, the only thing holding it in the ground has been me.’

‘What?’ Thor asked, and then. ‘What – since when can you… what – fifteen years? But this is-‘

‘Absolutely possible, as you will see too once you get your slow dull brain to work’ said Loki.

‘She… she has the time gem’ said Thor after a pause.

‘I am amazed’ said Loki and mockingly bowed to him. ‘So not to overstrain your daily capacity for deductive thought, I will fill in the other blanks. Ananka did, as a child, have a vision of her planet’s demise, just as I told you. She also decided then to use the loophole in her prophecy – that her planet was doomed, but that her people were not – and pushed technology forward as quickly as she could. And she did succeed, in a way. Her people could leave the planet in time, which, even I must admit, is a respectable accomplishment, considering her people had used candles two centuries earlier. I wonder how Asgard would fare, if forced to change that quickly.’

‘However’ said Loki, and grinned. ‘There was one thing she could not accelerate, not with any technology, not with any magic.’

‘The ripening of the fruit of Isched’ whispered Thor.

At that moment, the light flickered, the floor began vibrating again, the light went out.

Loki swayed, changed back to Ananka. But this time, she didn’t run away.

‘I lost it’ said she. Tears were running down her face quietly, glinting in the pale light of the moons that had already risen outside. ‘I had to pick it unripe, and it died before our ship could leave the stratosphere.’

She swallowed.

‘I tried to hold my people together nevertheless, but I saw them scatter, be decimated, in illness and in misery. Ours is not a vagabond species. We need a strong core. Isched’s roots, or we die.’

Ananka looked out the windows. Outside, at the port, another ship was rising slowly into the air.

‘I decided then that I couldn’t accept this fate’ said she. ‘I had learned of the existence of the time gem, and I began to search for it. I… I found it, in the end.’

The light flickered back on again, but Ananka didn’t sway, didn’t lose herself.

Instead, next to her, there was suddenly standing Loki, his hands behind his back, looking at her pensively, a small smile on his lips.

Just a projection.
‘But she knew that just going back in time would change nothing’ said he. ‘No foreknowledge could help her, since the ripening of Isched’s fruit couldn’t be hastened at all. She needed something else, something she hadn’t had before. More time, but in another way that the time gem could grant her.’

‘A way to keep the Celestial asleep’ said Ananka.

Thor glanced at Loki – they both knew about Jormungandr, its eternal duty.

But Loki kept his eyes on the queen, his face inscrutable.

‘I looked for information about that art next’ said she. ‘I found it, but again, I was confronted with a seemingly unsurmountable problem.’

‘Mainly the skill and amount of magic one needed to sing a creature like a Celestial into a pregnancy-prolonging sleep’ said Loki, one eyebrow raised. ‘And this is where I come in. After my… sudden departure… from your Midgardian’s space vessel, Queen Ananka and I had the fortune to meet, and after assessing our different situations and needs, we came to an agreement. A deal, if you will.’

‘… and what did you get out of it, Loki?’ asked Thor warily.

Loki’s eyes glinted.

‘That, my shiny oaf, is between me and the last ruler of Ozymandia. But’ and he turned to Ananka, smiling widely. ‘As it happens, a mood has overcome me, and I’ve decided to change the terms.’

Ananka looked at him with a mixture of anger and wariness.

‘Your mood, as you call it, was two years of you controlling me day and night’ said she. ‘You owe me enough as it is, trickster’

‘But we’re not talking debts’ said Loki and his smile only grew wider. ‘We are talking deals.’

‘We had a deal’ Ananka hissed.

‘Yes, a deal I’ve never sworn to. Besides, even if I had, do you really think I wouldn’t find a way around its wording and still ruin all your plans? Now that I have gotten so practised at steering your body? My price has risen a bit.’

‘Has it?’ Ananka asked.

‘I demand but a piece of jewellery that doesn’t suit you anyway’ said he. ‘I demand the time gem.’

‘How am I not surprised?’ asked Ananka.

‘It is not like I do not raise my offer too’ said Loki and opened his hand toward Thor. ‘The crown prince of Asgard, the key to a new home, and an important alliance. You could have never lured him here without me at the wheel.’

‘Brother, you can’t just use me as leverage for your negotiations!’ Thor said. ‘I have my own negotiations to lead!’

‘I am not your brother’ said Loki coldly, then turned to Ananka again, smiling. ‘Well?’

Ananka glanced from him to Thor, and back.

‘How do I know that you and Asgard will honour their part? You have betrayed me before.’
‘Oh, betrayal, you use the word so lightly’ said Loki, and the glint in his eyes turned more
dangerous. Ananka seemed to notice too, looking discomforted. ‘Especially considering the nature
and circumstances of our original conversation. But to answer your question, Thor will, as Asgard’s
representative, swear on the Norns.’

He turned to Thor next.

‘You wanted me, you wanted the time gem – Ananka will grant you access to both. And I swear on
the Norns that if everyone does their part in the deal we agree to, I will leave this planet with you on
your Midgardian’s space vessel, even as your prisoner if you insist, and you will hold the time gem
in your hands.’

Thor watched his brother, thinking. He was furious of course at the negotiation being taken away
from him like that, and he being talked about like a commodity to be used. On the other hand, the
time gem was what he had come here for, and father had already agreed to offer knowledge and an
alliance in return.

And to get Loki too…

He nodded.

‘I swear on the Norns that if all honour their part in the deal we agree to, Asgard will either find the
people of Ozymandia a new home, or help them rebuild their home on the shards of their planet.
Asgard will protect the people of Ozymandia from attackers until they can fend for themselves, and
will offer an alliance, the details of which, beyond what I promised already, must be negotiated with
the all-father.’

‘Very good’ said Loki amusedly, then turned to Ananka again.

‘As to my offer to you, I swear on the Norns that if all honour their part in the deal we agree to, I will
help you keep the Celestial asleep until the fruit of Isched has ripened and has left Ozymandia,
together with your people. Until that moment, I will also continue to lend you my power so that your
ships can take off safely. If you do not provoke me with unwise actions, I will not try to control your
mind again afterwards.’

Ananka observed him with a scrutinising gaze.

‘Well, Ananka?’ Loki asked sweetly. ‘You have to do your part too, my dear, or the deal and the
oaths are null and void.’

She still didn’t speak at once, frowning instead.

‘I swear by the fates’ said she finally. ‘that if all honour their part in the deal we agree to, I will
surrender the time gem to you and abandon all claim to it. I will surrender Loki to you’ She nodded
toward Thor. ‘And abandon all claim on him. After you have ensured your part in the deal, Loki, I
will let you and Thor leave, and I will not take actions to stop your leaving, or to take back the time
gem.’

Loki’s eyes laughed, as if he was pleased, and he shook his head.

‘No, Ananka’ said he. ‘You will do more than that. You will make sure that Thor and I can leave,
and you will make sure that we can actually use the gem once we have it.’

To Thor, he said, ‘Where we are going is a highly secured area where often only the queen’s
biometrical data will allow you to open doors. Merely not taking actions to stop us leaving is not
sufficient, I’m afraid.’

Ananka looked slightly sour for a moment, but she recovered quickly.

‘I swear by the fates that I will.’ said she. ‘And I agree to the deal.’

‘I agree as well’ said Loki.

‘And I’ said Thor.

‘Alright’ said Loki and rubbed his hands. ‘I would like this gem now please. If it’s all the same to you?’

*@

‘If you controlled her body and she had the gem with her all that time, why didn’t you use it before?’ Thor asked after a while.

They had entered the dungeons of the palace. They consisted of long corridors with metal walls, and many doors that opened automatically at Thor’s touch. The queen had been true to her word and had made sure that they would arrive at their destination without Ananka accompanying them personally.

The queen had also pulled a necklace from under the collar of her robe, at the end of which there had been a green-glowing appendage. She had whispered to it, then placed it in Thor’s hands.

‘If you haven’t noticed already, in contrast to you, the queen of Ozymandia is not exactly a fool’ said Loki, striding along next to Thor. ‘As soon as she came into the possession of the gem, she took care to find a mage who put a spell on it. Said spell rendered only her will – not her body, but her own untampered with will – able to use it, barring anyone else’s will access to its powers. The words of the counter spell, Ananka hid deeply in her mind. Not even I could penetrate it far enough to steal them from her.’

They came to the next door, and Thor placed his hand on the hand painted on the wall next to it. The door opened, and they went on.

Loki had flicked out of existence two times since they had left the dinner hall. Two more ships had departed the planet, and at this moment, the fruit of Isched was being picked. Soon, Ananka would board the last vessel, and he and his brother would be the last people left on Ozymandia.

‘You could meet me halfway, you know?’ Thor said, slightly unnerved by the maze of corridors through which Loki was leading him so easily. His brother seemed to know his way around the palace dungeons rather well. ‘Instead of waiting for me to come to you.’

‘Mhm, I am afraid I could not’ said Loki musingly. ‘I am rather caught up with something. And it has been a while since you met me halfway about anything.’

Thor ignored the provocation. Loki was angry with him, he had understood that, but in a way, the harsh words were almost reassuring. His brother could never be as dangerous as when he began to sweeten his words.

‘And… here we are’ said Loki as they came to another door.

Thor eyed him. His brother looked at the door almost with apprehension.
‘Well, will you not go in?’ asked Loki then. ‘Or have you decided to turn around and leave me on the exploding planet after all?’

‘Of course I will not leave you’ said Thor, placed his hand on the painted sign, and the door opened.

‘Experience says otherwise’ Loki muttered as they went in.

And then stood… in a small room.

Alone.

The walls were full of machinery, and tubes and cables were connected to a long black box that was standing in its middle. But otherwise, it was empty, and there was no other door but the one through which they had entered.

‘Welcome to my humble abode’ said Loki opening his arms. ‘It is not much, and it is not mine, but… actually, I have forgotten where I was going with this.’

‘What is the meaning of this?’ asked Thor tensely. He knew what the empty room probably meant, that his brother had led him into another trap after all. ‘You claimed I would find you here.’

‘And I am here’ said Loki softly, and extended his hand towards the box.

Thor stared at him, at his hand, at the box. He didn’t understand – what –

‘Do you mean – in this-’

‘Yes’ said Loki, and smiled, but the smile didn’t reach his eyes.

He walked towards the box, and pointed to a small control pad.

‘Here, you can make the light shades retreat, render the glass transparent’ said he. ‘Ananka liked to do so, from time to time, so to check on me.’

Thor followed Loki slowly, confused but with a mounting feeling of dread in his heart.

‘Just press here’ Loki said softly, and pointed toward a button.

Thor obeyed.

The dark seeped away from the glass as if sucked into an invisible hole. Lights went on inside at the same time.

And Thor saw.

The air left him, as if he was punched in the gut. He felt cold, from one moment to the other, and slightly nauseous. Like being pulled back into that moment, into exactly that moment, and Thor had seen it so many times, in his dreams, always the same image.

He took a step back.

He shook his head.

‘No.’

‘That bad?’ Loki asked, an expression of mild interest on his face. ‘I agree that my true appearance is
hideous, but you did already have at least one occasion to get moderately used to idea of me looking like a Jotnar. Makes me wonder how badly you reacted the first time.’

‘Loki!’ Thor cried out, strangled. He noticed that his breaths were not as deep as usual. ‘This is not… what… what is this?’

Loki let his eyes wander to the box, no, the coffin, with the same expression of mild interest, though it did seem to get colder as it scrutinised the body within.

‘Me’ said he.

And Loki it was.

He was lying there just like Thor had left him, or rather, just like he had left Thor. His clothes torn and pushed away, his stomach hastily bandaged, and the bandage already bloody. That wound in his chest, shattered bits of bone. The rest covered in blood, so much blood. The arms too thin, the stomach sunken, the chest too prominent. The blue skin and the markings. The dark scar across Loki’s face.

His hands were lying relaxed on the ground.

His mouth was open, as if to suck in a last breath.

His eyes crimson, but dull.

‘I said I was not dead’ said Loki behind him. ‘I did not say that I was alive.’

Chapter End Notes

Abraca-oups?
Loki and Thor discuss matters of narrative plausibility.

Chapter Notes

What’s in the box, what’s in the box?! Okay, I should stop the Se7en (1995) references. Though Brad Pitt is now kind of officially part of the MCU, since he got the part of the Vanisher and all? One of his sexier roles, that’s for sure.

Thanks so so very much for your positive response, every one of your kudos and bookmarks and comments makes me all feel all warm and fuzzy inside. Since this is the very first fic I publish on AO3, it makes me feel even warmer and fuzzier. Seriously, guys and gals and non-binary cuties, you make my day.

The bad news is, I am still at the end of my prepared chapters again, and will have to leave you waiting for a while with the next terrible cliffhanger (I do try to keep my promises after all).
I promise to return with Tony POV.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

‘But…’ Thor said, slowly taking step towards the box again, towards his brother’s body. ‘But you said it was an illusion. You said you had watched me, you said it was all pretence-‘

‘By the Norns, THOR!’ Loki shouted, Thor jerked from the sudden anger. ‘What did you EXPECT?!’

‘You said-’

‘Yes, and the TALES you are ready to believe makes me fear for the realms!’ Loki shouted. ‘PRETENCE? Was the BARD’S SONG then pretence too, I gather? Just the illusion of one of the most tricky and demanding workings the realms have ever seen? And Hlín cannot distinguish it from the REAL THING?! Really, Thor, was THAT your conclusion?’

He strode up to Thor, wrung his arms, then balled them into fists, turning away frustrated again.

‘I would THROTTLE you for your stupidity, were I only more than a projection’ he said. ‘What did you think, Thor? That I could do a working as such and walk away unscathed? That anyone could walk away from it and live? Did you think at all? Or did you just take my word as truth again because it was so convenient again?’

‘You’re… you’re saying that it killed you’ Thor said.

‘OF COURSE IT KILLED ME!’ Loki shouted. His face was red, his fists opening and closing
again, tensely. ‘Even if I hadn’t been severely injured at the time, it would have killed me! Why did you ever think it WOULDN’T?!’

‘But…’ Thor found that he was struggling with tears. He had allowed himself to be relieved, just a little, to hope, just a little. That the attack, that the spell… ‘But… you said that… you are not dead…’

‘NO, I’m NOT, because I can think AHEAD, you blithering numbnut, not that you would understand that concept!’ Loki shouted on. ‘I had plans to fall back on. Not my favourite plans, I have to admit, but they did serve their goal, didn’t they?’

‘What… what plans?’ Thor asked, his voice thick. ‘Ananka…’

‘Interfered’ said Loki, then breathed in, breathed out. Thor of course knew that the breathing was just as much an illusion as the rest was, but it still seemed to help calm Loki down because his voice was lower when he continued. ‘Just like I had known she would. She had been after my hide for a while, and I knew that she would try and get to me when I was at my weakest. She intercepted my soul on its way to Helheim—’

‘You… you were already on your way to Helheim?’

‘Well, I had died, dullard’ said Loki, as if that was all there was to say to it. Though he wasn’t shouting anymore, his fingers were still balling to fists and stretching. ‘But I met Ananka on the path. And as I told you already, she offered me a deal.’

‘Yes’ said Thor meekly.

‘As you know, she needed my power’ continued he. ‘And there is only so much a corpse without a soul can provide. More importantly, she needed my skill at weaving seidr, and that a corpse without a soul can definitely not provide. She had the time gem – she used that to steal my body—’

‘How?’

‘She had the time gem, Thor!’ Loki said and rolled his eyes. ‘Do I have to explain everything? She just had to take a space vessel to the exact spot of my death at a convenient point in time and then take my body from one point in time to another. It was really quite a simple trick if you think of it.’

Thor frowned. However simple Loki claimed this trick was, he found it bewildering.

‘How did she even know—’

‘She is a Seer, and a death such as mine cause ripples’ said Loki, making a dismissive gesture. ‘The deal was simple too. She froze my body in time and went to talk to my soul. Since it had already departed the body but hadn’t reached Helheim yet, it was trapped on the paths in-between, still tethered to the corpse, but in a pretty useless way. Not a favourable situation. She demanded my help, and promised to release my body from its frozen state as soon as her people and the fruit of Isched were safe.’

Ananka had trapped his soul? He had not mentioned that before, had he?

‘By releasing…’

‘Ananka had not the resources to save my life’ said Loki. ‘That is the only reason you are here, really. I haven’t sent for you just so we could chat.’

‘So you did plan to save your life?’ asked Thor, vaguely hopeful.
‘Of course I did’ said Loki. ‘Who do you think I am?’

You are Loki, Thor thought. Loki, who had let go.

Loki, who had moved too slowly to evade Mjolnir, had made Thor have to hold it back. If he had paid only a little less attention then, if he had noticed only a little too late… the hammer could cause terrible damage…

His brother began striding up and down the room.

‘But naturally, the first six or seven decades, I could do nothing at all. My magic had to recover after all’

‘Wait!’ said Thor. ‘You said you’ve been here only for fifteen years’

‘No, Thor’ said Loki and rolled his eyes again. ‘I explicitly said that for the last fifteen years, the only thing holding that celestial in the ground has been me. I have been here for two centuries. Almost the entirety of Ananka’s life.’

‘Wh… what?’ asked Thor, and another shiver went down his spine. ‘This whole time… two hundred years… you have had to…’

… lead this kind of existence? Imprisoned, wavering somewhere between life and death, with your soul nowhere to go? No home to arrive at?

‘Well, technically, for the last two hundred years, I’ve been in two places at once’ said Loki. ‘But yes, when Ananka was still a child, the night she had her terrifying vision of her planet’s end, the night she was at her most hopeless, because she had pleaded with the Norns and the Norns had rejected her demand, she took to wandering around her palace, only to find a strange woman in her mother’s study. Strange, because the woman looked so much like Ananka herself. She had a long black box with her.’

‘You’ Thor whispered.

Loki nodded.

‘I’m glad that for once, you can keep up’ said he. ‘The strange woman explained that she was Ananka’s older self and that the solution to their problems was in that box. And that Ananka had to listen closely now, because there was a lot to do.’

Loki had been in that box.

‘Ananka grew older, pushed the technological advances forward just as advised by her older self, and regularly came here, so to check on me. After some six or seven decades, like I said, my magic had recovered enough that I started to be able to use it again, so to communicate with her. Together with her, we studied her older self’s notes and manuscripts, and I worked to gain the knowledge and skill to sing the celestial to sleep. Again, that took decades of my time.’

‘Of course, as soon as I felt relatively reassured about my magic again, I began probing the queen, trying to ensnarl her.’ Now, Loki smiled. ‘I was very charming, very witty, very educated. I made sure she enjoyed her time with me.’

You manipulated her, Thor wanted to say, before he reminded himself what Ananka had done. The queen of Ozymandia was not some sweet innocent woman. And he shivered at how he had almost scolded his brother for… for what exactly? Trying to escape?
Ananka spoke of two years that she was under your spell. Why did you not start controlling her sooner’ asked he instead.

‘Because getting her under my control was difficult and delicate’ said Loki. ‘I could not risk pushing too hard and her finding out. And Ananka is a very resilient person, strong-willed. Additionally, before two years ago, I saw no real reason to guide her. Only after you learned of the Mad Titan, there was a reason for you to go after the gems, and thus, Ozymandia.’

‘You could have interfered sooner, and prevented your death’ said Thor. ‘Your fall from the Bifrost. The invasion of Midgard.’

Your torture.

For a moment, Loki looked as though he wanted to say something, then he smiled again.

‘Oh, and there is nothing that could have gotten wrong with interfering with timelines that much, is there?’ asked he. ‘Especially since I had no control over the time gem, and all the influence of a queen of an obscure planet that I had to keep on a leash day and night, singing bedtime stories to a celestial at the same time which was, of course, not at all exhausting? Yes, I’m sure that a quick rewriting of timelines would not have caused a monstrous disaster under those circumstances. Or enraged the Norns immensely, depriving them of the song I had only just offered them.’

Well, maybe it was so. It certainly sounded like a bad idea, the way Loki laid it out, but what did Thor know? Nothing. He looked at the corpse in the box, reminded himself that it had been his own foolish use of magic that had put Loki in that position.

The attack had been real.

Thor’s guilt was real.

‘And Svartalfheim?’ Thor said. ‘Did you really…?’

‘Norns, Thor, just because this time, what you saw was exactly what happened, it must be true for every other time I tricked you?’ Loki said. ‘So that one time I lured you into the dragon’s lair, playing a damsel in distress, you think I had been truly abducted against my will?’

He snorted, but there was real anger underneath it.

‘Sometimes I wonder how you learned to read, with the dim mind you were born with’

‘So it was an illusion.’

‘YES, it was an illusion, congratulations for deciphering my mysterious way of phrasing it’ said Loki and rubbed his eyes.

There was a pause that Loki spent striding up and down the room, restless.

‘What do we do now?’ asked Thor finally.

Loki breathed out audibly.

‘I thought you would never ask.’

He went up next to Thor, looking at the corpse in the box with that cold, mildly interested gaze again. No, there was an undercurrent of disgust, Thor realised with a small shiver.
‘You are going to open the box. You are going to take the time gem, and use it to return time to me.’

‘If I do that, you will die. Why should I not use it to reverse the harm?’

His brother sighed.

‘I already regret letting you do this’ said he. ‘Thor, I just told you it was a bad idea interfering with timelines too much, especially if that could reverse the Bard’s Song? What do you think, how much of a bad idea is it to use the time gem to reverse the toll I had to pay for singing that song? The toll paid for a very powerful working?’

‘Er’ Thor said. ‘A… very bad idea, I suppose?’

‘You could say that, yes’ said Loki. ‘The toll must be paid, I cannot take it back as I wish. That is not how it works.’

The toll is your body, Loki. Your life. Why did you think it was an acceptable price in the first place?

‘So how does it work then?’ he asked.

Loki shrugged. ‘You have the apple.’

‘The apple? Is that sufficient?’

‘It must be.’

It must be. Thor took the heavy fruit out of his bag, and looked at it, warily, at its golden skin, the black stem. He remembered the taste well, juicy and sweet, like summer and rain. The perfect meal, only served once a few hundred years. True, the apple was life incarnate, immortality incarnate. And they were used to bring people back from the brink of death sometimes.

But Loki was a bit beyond that brink, was he not?

The mage’s death was not kind. How much of Loki’s body had it consumed before Ananka had stopped him? How much was there left that the apple could still repair?

‘What if it is not?’

Thor somehow expected his brother to shout at him again, for being stupid, for once again not having understood an important fact about this, some essential clue.

Instead, Loki was silent for a surprisingly long while.

‘There is another option’ said he.

Thor looked up.

‘You could leave me in this state’ said Loki and nodded toward his own body. ‘Trapped between life and death. You are the master of time now, at least theoretically. If you don’t fail abysmally at it. Which you probably will.’

Thor barely heard the barb. He did hear the offer, if it was one.

‘You cannot be serious’ said he.
Loki smiled crookedly.

‘You would be sure to never lose me again that way’ said he. ‘Whether by death or by me running away. I would be always there, always available, for you to use at your whim, until you tire of me. The advisor your father intended me to be. I could never walk away from an argument with you ever again.’

Thor knew it was a test. To accept the offer would be a terrible thing to do. He shouldn’t have felt tempted.

The certainty not to lose his brother again – to just know that he would be there. Always.

‘I would certainly stab you less frequently’ said Loki, cocking his head. His eyes twinkled.

‘Oh, I’m sure you’d find a way to stab me anyway’ said Thor dryly. ‘You always have.’

He swallowed.

‘Enough of this’ said he then. ‘Show me what to do’

Did Loki’s face light up for a moment, with pleasant surprise?

Had he really thought that Thor would be so cruel and selfish that he would enslave his own brother?

And then, Loki had finished explaining, and Thor, pressing a few buttons, had made the glass of the box retreat, and Loki was lying there, nothing separating this body frozen in a single moment from his touch. The dull and dead eyes, the open mouth, as if still trying to breathe. The bloodied teeth. The blood smeared down his cheek, down his chin and throat. The open hands. The emaciated torso, each rib visible beneath the skin.

So close.

Looking even more vulnerable now that the glass was gone.

‘Crying won’t bring me back’ said Loki without any real acidity.

Thor wiped his eyes, only now noticing the tears running down his face.

‘Once you return time to me’ said Loki. ‘Don’t take too long. There is only so long a soul can linger.’

Yes, Thor knew. And Loki’s soul had already been on the path. They wouldn’t have much time at all.

‘Also, regardless of what happens, remember that you need to get out of here as soon as possible after this is over. The moment I exist in time again, I will not be able to entrance the celestial anymore. In fact, I will be able to do nothing but try to survive. It will wake up within hours.’

‘Ananka is gone?’

‘Yes’ said Loki. ‘Her vessel didn’t need me. It was small.’
Thor weighed one of the apple slices he had prepared in his hand. In this he would have to put all his hope. For it to pull Loki back… or not.

What did he know of the apple’s powers?

Loki was the one who knew about these things.

‘Loki?’

‘Yes?’

‘Do you want me to succeed?’

There was silence.

‘I fear that if I leave you to your own devices’ said Loki then. ‘I could have handed the Mad Titan the tesseract just as well.’

That was not really an answer, was it?

Maybe for now, he shouldn’t push.

Maybe it was his last chance.

‘Loki-’

‘Thor, if you abuse this situation for leaking more useless sentimentality, I swear I will fight the apple’s pull on my soul just to spite you’

Thor flinched.

‘Aye’ said he, and took the time gem into his hand, feeling its powers take hold of him more than he took hold of them. ‘Then fare well and let us meet again.’

Loki huffed, ‘Aye’, said he, Thor closed his eyes, connected to the gem.

Whispered his wish. His command.

When he opened his eyes, he was alone.

Chapter End Notes

I’m beginning to think that Loki’s word should not always be taken for the absolute truth, should it? Or maybe that’s just me.
Chapter Summary

A Celestial is born. Loki is the midwife and not even there. Talk about neglecting one's duties. Also: Tony contemplates the miracle of life and a tremendous mistake he's just made and that will probably kill him.

Chapter Notes

I'm back with four chapters that I will post over the next few days. By now, and thanks to my wonderful and perfect Beta, and used muse, Entropy_by_Ophelia, I have a pretty detailed idea about the show downs of this thing, and oh god, if I finish this, this is gonna be one of the long ones. Since I'm impatient, I want to skip to the end, but I CAN'T! Argh!

I know it's a popular Loki song on AO3, but it also describes my version of Loki pretty well, I think, so I wanted to share it with you: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JZ0MoWajrQ8. Dance Little Liar, by the Arctic Monkeys.

You, by the way, are all great, and I love your comments! So much!

I met a traveller from an antique land,
Who said—“Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert. . . . Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed;
And on the pedestal, these words appear:
My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings;
Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away.”

(Ozymandias, by Percy Bysshe Shelley)

Tony was slowly getting nervous. He had sort of expected that after sending Thor into the trap, for a while, nothing would happen at all. Traps sometimes needed a bit of time to close. But he would
have expected to get an emergency call at some point. Or another sign that Thor was in trouble. He didn’t.

Instead, he watched as more of those giant ships took off from the planet, and left, sometimes dangerously close to the Mantis. He wondered what would happen if one of those ships miscalculated the distance, and rammed him. Considering the size of them, the Mantis would probably just end up as a smear on the window shield.

Damn.

But other than that, nothing much happened. The ships had left eventually, and it didn’t look like more were coming. The weirdly violet sun had travelled far enough to leave the part of the planet in the dark where Re-User-Maat (and thus Tor) was located, and Thor still wouldn’t call for help.

This could mean two things of course – either that Thor wasn’t in trouble yet, or too much so. And Tony knew what scenario was more probable. On the other hand, without a clue what was going on down there, it was maybe, just maybe, not that good of an idea to charge in there, guns blazing, and demand the release of the God of Thunder. Yeaaah, no. So he was back to fretting in silence. At least he was good at that.

Thus, he was understandably relieved when the intercom activated (Jarvis didn’t even ask this time), and Thor’s voice called his name.

‘Yes, Rapunzel, yes, I’m here, ready to free you from the tower, what do you need?’

‘… I was not imprisoned in any tower, so there is no need to free me. My mission is complete, Man of Iron, and I would be grateful if you could land on Ozymandia, and pick me up. You do not have to contact the port for permission first. It will be unmanned, and we should not lose time.’

Did he sound like he was breathing heavily? Was he running?

‘So… was I right and this was a trap then?’

There was a pause.

‘I… am not entirely sure’ said Thor.

Huh. Interesting answer. Surprisingly ambivalent for the God of Capslock.

‘But I have the time gem. And I do not expect a fight’ said he. ‘We are the last people left on the planet.’

Uuhh.

‘There is something else, Son of Stark’ said Thor, and this time, there was definitely some tension in his voice.

‘I really wish you would stop calling me that’ Tony said. ‘What is it?’

‘I am… not alone.’

‘…okay?’

‘Loki is with me.’

‘What, you found his-’
‘He is alive.’

Re-User-Maat had been a big city, Tony realised as soon as he was close enough. In the pale light of the four moons, he saw skyscrapers and little huts, parks and markets, architecture that seemed alien and futuristic next to what looked like old-fashioned temples. The palace was made of stone, and would have looked anachronistic if not the whole city had been a patchwork of styles and different technological standards.

The port was pretty much gigantic.

Well, it had to be, considering the size of the space ships.

Everything was also very much deserted, and very much dark.

Tony circled over the port once, using the flood lights of the Mantis, until he had located two figures standing at the edge of the landing area, one leaning heavily on the other. One of them injured? Tony lowered the Mantis slowly to the ground at a safe distance, asked Jarvis to check the gravity and atmosphere for compatibility once more.

Silently, he wondered what to expect. Loki being alive, however freaky that was, could mean a lot of things. It definitely meant that Thor’s uncertainty whether this was a trap after all wasn’t that unreasonable (I mean, it was Loki). And it probably meant that the moment Tony let him set foot on his ship, his own personal safety would be a lot less assured.

Oh, well.

‘Jarvis – let those two plundering Vikings in’

Thor only slowly made his way up the ramp when Tony arrived there, and as soon as he came into view, Tony also saw why. Tony then put his hand to his mouth and coughed, because the sickly sweet smell filled the Mantis at once.

Loki had one arm slung over Thor’s shoulder, but it was obvious that it was only Thor’s iron grip on it that was holding him there, his other arm firmly around Loki’s waist, pulling him so close that most of Loki’s weight was carried by the Thunderer. To Tony’s bewilderment, Loki was still wearing the same prisoner clothes he had been gutted in two years ago and that were still hanging from him in tatters. He was still blue, still covered in blood, his stomach was still covered in the hasty and bloody bandage Nat and Cap had wrapped around him, and if the gaping wound on his chest had closed, those wounds looked disturbingly… fresh. Not scarred over, just closed and scabbed, really. The wound on his shoulder was even bleeding a bit. And he was definitely still reeking.

…right. That was… even less easy to explain than Loki being alive to begin with. Well, more or less alive.

It was obvious that Loki could barely hold himself on his feet, he more stumbled than walked, his ankles giving in at every second step. I mean, the guy couldn’t lift his head. It lolled around on his chest, the black, clotted hair having fallen forward and hiding his face.

‘…okay. Someone evil and emo needs the med bay’ Tony said.
‘I’m fine’ said Loki, and it had probably been meant to sound… growling? Tony wasn’t sure, since the voice was so weak and hoarse.

‘Sure you are, buddy, no reason to fret over those wounds that you’ve had for what, the past two years or so, and that still haven’t healed?’

‘Man of Iron’ said Thor. ‘I know my brother needs attention, but I fear we also need to get away from this planet as far and as quickly as possible.’

‘Do we?’

‘We have a few hours at the most before all that is left of Ozymandia will be shards.’

Tony raised his eyebrows.

‘The planet’s gonna explode? Jeez, no rush then.’

He narrowed his eyes at Loki.

‘What is it with you and destroying planets anyway? Is this some sort of kink? This feels like some sort of kink. Like the ultimate orgasm sublimation? I kind of understand it in theory, I mean, I understand almost any kink in theory, but-’

‘Son of Stark, please’ Thor said, sounding exasperated. ‘My brother has not caused this planet’s demise, he has delayed it. But now that he cannot do that anymore, it is imminent. We truly need to leave.’

‘Yeah, yeah, I got it’ said Tony, thinking: delayed this planet’s demise? He was so gonna find out what that was about. But, more to the point, he felt that Loki hanging half-limply in Thor’s arms and possibly bleeding out was maybe, just maybe, not a situation the Mighty Redecorator should deal with on his own. But maybe no Loki situation was.

‘Jarvis, I know I don’t usually let you handle the landings and take offs on your own, but can you just… get us away from here, like, yesterday?’

‘It would be a pleasure, Sir’ said Jarvis, and sounded a bit too much like it.

Thor grabbed Loki more tightly as the ship took off, until the worst vibrations were over and the Mantis had left the planet’s orbit. Its flight was once more smooth then, almost unnoticeable despite the speed.

‘Satisfied with the take off, Sir?’ said Jarvis, a bit too amused. ‘We left the planet’s gravity field in under a minute.’

‘Yes, Jarvis, you can do it, I got the message, also, I’m afraid that you’re turning into Skynet now, thank you’ grumbled Tony back. ‘Or maybe just into KITT.’

‘Oh, I do not at all resemble KITT’ Jarvis protested.

‘Don’t think I didn’t notice how you explicitly didn’t say you didn’t resemble Skynet… there were a lot of negations in that sentence, I’m confused now.’

Thor, as to him, still hadn’t let go of Loki. The trickster squirmed in his brother’s arms, coughed then. Oh good, more blood dropping to the ground. Hadn’t had enough Loki coughing up blood on this ship lately. That one was always a favourite.
‘Please, Loki, let me carry you’ Thor said, and the way he said it told Tony that he had asked before. Repeatedly. ‘At least the last distance. You are exhausted.’

‘By the Norns, you oaf, you suffocate me, leave me be!’ said Loki, and in what Tony considered an admirable show of strength, managed to disentangle himself from his brother, pull away, make two stumbling steps until he mercifully found a wall, against which he more crashed than leaned. He stood there, his head supported by the wall but lifted now, his crimson eyes zigzagging across the room. Amazingly alert, Tony found, but also visibly glazed over. His sunken face was sweating, his breath sounded laboured and shallow.

Also, Loki’s legs were shaking, and Tony judged it would be only a matter of very little time until his knees would buckle. He… should probably not fall on his face in this state. Wouldn’t help matters, all in all.

‘I… don’t think you should stand on your own, Joker’ said he, and moved forward, but Loki jerked back at the movement at once.

‘Don’t TOUCH me!’ hissed he.

‘Okay, calm down, angry kitty’ said Tony, stopping in his tracks, raising his hands. ‘No touching. Believe it or not, I don’t want to hurt you.’

Loki, the mess that he was, still managed to snort. Impressive. A few more drops of blood landed on the floor from it.

‘Hurt me’ said he, weakly and hoarsely. ‘Funny. This is about me not hurting you.’

…right.

He raised his shaking hand to touch the wall that held him, and slowly let it travel upwards.

‘I cannot con-… control my Jotunn powers at the moment. I might give you… frostbite.’

Frostbite as a weapon? Interesting.

‘Aw, you care about me’ said Tony. ‘That’s so sweet.’

‘You didn’t warn me about that’ said Thor, his brow furrowed. ‘You let me carry you all the way here.’

‘You’re a… a lot more durable than a mortal’ said Loki. ‘Also, you would have deserved it.’

Oooh, burn. No, frostbite burn.

Loki pushed himself away from the wall.

‘Now, if you could all just leave me alone, I would be very-‘

He stopped mid-sentence, his eyes widened, he let out a small ‘Oh’. Then his eyes rolled up, his knees buckled as expected, and the next moment, he fell forward.

Tony lunged forward too, and Loki hit him before he hit the ground, his face more or less ramming into Tony’s shoulder, Tony wrapping his arms around the god at once who almost slipped through them, limp as he was.

A cold sack of sharp bones, that was what this body was, and there was already Thor, helping Tony
ease the trickster onto the floor, onto his back.

‘Loki’ said Thor and touched his brother’s face, but Loki didn’t respond, not even by twitching. His eyes were slightly open, but there was no recognition in them. The thing about the frostbite had been an empty promise too, hadn’t it?

Tony discreetly took Loki’s wrist and felt for the pulse. It was there, but it wasn’t exactly strong.

‘I know it’s kind of a miracle of its own that your brother is alive’ said Tony. ‘And I don’t want to ruin that with pessimism – but are you sure he’s gonna stay alive?’

Thor shot him a dark look, then bent down to cautiously gather the lifeless body into his arms. Loki’s head lolled back as Thor lifted him and stood up, one of his arms was hanging down, having slipped Thor’s grasp.

‘We should screen him’ Tony said. ‘Even though, considering how he still smells, I’m kind of scared of what the screening will say.’

Tony had been right about that.

They had laid Loki down on the operating table in the med bay, the latter of which new and improved thanks to Tony’s paranoia after his last trip with the Mantis (and wasn’t it ironic that the same person that had caused the installation of all these new shiny machines needed them again now, for the treatment of exactly the same injuries? As if this was sort of a second chance, except Tony didn’t believe in that bullshit? Thor probably did).

‘Jarvis, full body screen, and fast would be nice.’

‘Of course, Sir.’

They stepped back as the pipe closed around Loki with seemingly interminable noise, then opened again. The process was loud enough to wake the dead, but the trickster didn’t respond at all.

‘Screening complete, Sir.’

‘Analysis, summarised and in layman’s terms’

‘Loki Odinson is showing multiple injuries in various stages of healing, Sir’ Jarvis said. ‘Several bone fractures in the chest area that have started mending, traumas to the shoulder, back, upper thigh, abdomen and chest. The small intestine is severed in several places but is growing together, the liver is punctuated but is healing, as are two other organs that I cannot identify and which seem to be specific to Mr. Odinson’s species. Only one side of the lung seems to be functional though it shows signs of a recent wound – the other is perforated and currently not working. There is scarring on the heart. Additionally, several parts of the body, including several internal organs and the lungs, show signs of advanced necrosis, which causes a general infection. This, in my modest opinion as a relatively recent AI physician, is the most urgent threat to Mr. Odinson’s life, though it is difficult to judge the severity of the situation, considering I was constructed to analyse humans, and a human, under the same circumstances, forgive my blunt words, should be dead. I hope my short analysis was satisfactory nonetheless, Mr. Stark – I would be glad to give a more detailed one, if you wished me to.’
‘No, thanks buddy, I think we’re good for now’ said Tony, looking at the body lying on that table and that was stubbornly breathing against everything that was reasonable.

That had been walking a few minutes ago, against everything that was reasonable.

Fuck – how durable were these people?

He glanced at Thor who was standing there, shoulders slumped, his eyes heavy.

‘I’m gonna be blunt, we’re not going to be able to do much for him’ said Tony. ‘Small surgeries I can manage with Jarvis’s help, but what your brother needs is a bit beyond me. And honestly, I’m afraid that we might do more harm than good.’

‘Unfortunately, I have to concur’ said Jarvis. ‘I am still analysing Mr. Odinson’s anatomy and I am encountering more and more unknown factors as I progress. Surgery or even pain medication would be, under the circumstances, highly risky.’

Thor sighed.

‘Aye’ said he. ‘There was much damage. And Asgard’s healers are not here.’

He went to the table, took Loki’s hand into his.

‘We will make him comfortable’ said he. ‘And then we will have to trust in my brother to walk the last part of his journey on his own – he has already come a very long way.’

Together, they cautiously cut Loki’s clothing and the dirty bandaging away and began to clean him. Tony had at first considered leaving Thor alone for that, out of respect for both him and his brother, but something about the god’s posture or shaking hands held him back – or maybe the restrained fear in Thor’s eyes when Tony had turned towards the door at first. In any case, Tony had had the distinct feeling Thor didn’t want to be alone with his brother right now, or couldn’t be alone with him, or couldn’t be alone while doing this work, and so he stayed.

They worked silently, moving the sponge softly over the skin, washing the grime away. With Loki so still, breathing so slowly and weakly, it almost felt like washing a corpse, and maybe that was what scared Thor so much. Or what they found beneath the grime. Loki’s body told a sorry tale – one of many injuries and long deprivation. Unambiguously one of torture. He was gaunt and bony everywhere, and the undressing and washing process revealed more scars between the markings. Some of them faded to a slightly lighter blue than the rest of his skin, some looking younger, but all in all too numerous and some in too strange places to be explained away by battles and adventures. Down his abdomen to his hip, crossing the freshly closed belly wound, there was another of those strange dark scars that despite looking old, didn’t really give the impression of having healed at all. Another was moving from his crotch over the right hip up until it reached his back. Another went down his back from his shoulder. They were what unnerved Tony the most, because they definitely didn’t look like they had happened in a fight. They were curved and long, and looked very deliberate. In fact, they looked like someone had taken his time carving Loki up.

Which was fuuuucked up, really.

Tony glanced at Thor – the big guy’s eyes were wide and wet. His fingers traced the dark scars, then stopped at one of the more faded ones, on Loki’s chest. Tony didn’t really get why – it was half
hidden by the very big and scabbed-over wound after all. It was long, he guessed, and at a very inconvenient part of the body? Not more inconvenient than the dark scars though.

But the scar seemed to mean something to Blondy – he looked at it with a peculiar expression on his face, tracing it even more cautiously than the rest, then left it alone, and turned to Loki’s lower body, to the crotch area. Thor’s eyes grew more distant there, as he cautiously moved the sponge up Loki’s thighs. Uncomfortable. But without them having talked about it, it was still kind of clear that it was better if Thor took care of this particular part of Loki’s body. Thor was family, and that was bad enough, but Tony… was a stranger, an enemy. Thor cautiously pushed Loki’s cock and balls to the side (Tony had valiantly tried and failed not to look at those, they looked nice, and it was kind of striking that Loki was hairless everywhere except the head), so to be able to clean him underneath it, then stopped. His eyes widened. He pulled his hand away.

‘What is it?’ Tony said, almost whispering, and because Thor simply didn’t answer, just furrowed his eyebrows, he moved toward him, to see what was wrong.

Ah.

Okay.

Well, it had been pure arrogance to assume that every alien species out there would have exactly two sexes, and nothing in-between. Behind Loki’s cock and balls where for most humans, there was just the perineum, there was… well, a vulva. There was no other word for it.

And Thor was looking at it, increasingly confused, increasingly troubled.

He hadn’t known.

Shit. This was so not the right moment to find that particular detail out. For any of them.

‘Thor’ said Tony, laying his hand on Thor’s shoulder. ‘I think that Loki is clean enough.’

Loki obviously didn’t want you to know this. I think Loki would rip your head off if you cleaned it.

‘Let’s disinfect the wounds and bandage them, shall we’

Thor swallowed, and nodded.

‘Of course’

In the end, they decided to move Loki to one of the quarters. Tony had argued for leaving him in the med bay for now since there, he was close to everything they had to help. But Thor had looked uncomfortable about that, looking around the room that had a sharp and sterile air. He had said that Loki would prefer the quarters and might be less startled and confused if waking up there. Which was certainly something to consider (even though right now it didn’t look like Loki would wake up any time soon – but what did he know of space Viking regenerative powers?).

And the question remained how much they would be able to help Loki anyhow, should he suddenly worsen.

What finally decided Tony to give in was that the quarters were small and not full of sharp things that Mr. Criminology Dictionary Aficionado could use as a weapon, and that they could more easily be secured from the outside.
So they settled Loki on the bed in the small room, attaching the devices that allowed Jarvis to monitor his vital signs, and covered him with a blanket. Loki, clothed in one of Thor’s T-Shirts and sweatpants that Blondy had bought in New Mexico and brought along on the trip, had remained still and limp and unresponsive during the whole process, so deeply unconscious that not even the pain from being moved so much seemed to register. Tony had had to cradle him from behind, to cautiously hold his head, move his arms so to manoeuvre him into the clothes Thor had been pulling over him, and Tony was feeling slightly awkward about having kind of enjoyed touching a heavily injured comatose god.

Well… he would keep his distance as soon as it was possible. They had overstepped enough boundaries already, and a smiting of Loki was probably nothing to survive and tell the tale of.

‘Alright’ said Tony finally, casting one last look at the sunken face. ‘I think for now, this is all we can do. Will you now tell me what happened down there and how it came the planet is due to explode and Loki is alive and not even the villain?’

Thor nodded, ‘Aye. I will.’

‘What, so there are beings that use planets as eggs?’ asked Tony, bewildered, after Thor had finished. ‘And when they hatch, the planets just crack?’

‘Yes’ said Thor.

You live and learn to fear ever more absurd ways to die. That was going to become his new life motto.

‘Those celestials must be pretty big then, huh?’

‘Very much so.

‘Well, that just puts the whole hollow Earth theory in a totally different perspective’ said Tony. ‘Okay, so this celestial has been slowly growing in Ozymandia’s core for the last two billion years or so, and Ananka was the unlucky gal to witness its delivery. Loki the midwife to make sure the planet didn’t give birth too early.’

‘…yes’ said Thor.

‘Huh, I don’t know what fairy tale we’re in right now, but I was definitely wrong about Hansel and Gretel’ said Tony. ‘And you made the Loki clock run again, which should have sent him on his way to Helheim, but got him back with the apple?’

Thor nodded again.

‘But… he’s still… off pretty badly, isn’t he?’

Thor sighed.

‘There was much to heal.’
Thor retired to Loki’s bedside after a while, and Tony went to the command centre, checking how far they had come in the meantime. And so to order his thoughts a bit. About Loki having been a prisoner for two hundred years. In solitary, without even a possibility to stretch his legs. Scratch that, without legs. Or lungs. Or… anything bodily, anything material, any sensation, to distract him from his own thoughts. There was no doubt about it, in the same situation, Tony would have gone completely and hopelessly mad. How could Loki do this and still remain coherent enough to entrance a Celestial, take over Ananka and manipulate Thor?

And then Tony thought about this little game the trickster had played with Thor, and which had been, in Tony’s opinion, a trap after all, if only an emotional one. Well, “only”. About Loki’s lies.

Loki was dangerous – the more Tony learned about him, the more he came to that conclusion. He wasn’t the cackling with madness supervillain he had pretended to be during the Chitauri invasion, that much was sure by now, but there were some heavy mental-health issues there, and the guy was smart, and strategic, and manipulative, too fucking resilient, and quite a bit ruthless, even more reckless, borderline suicidal.

All that turned him into a challenging wild card, an unpredictable joker that might save you one day and condemn you the next.

Hahah, joker.

But Tony did understand more and more how Loki had earned the title God of Chaos.

And then there was the fact that Loki was quite a bit powerful.

And… well-endowed.

Tony swallowed, closing his eyes for a moment, feeling ashamed for that particular thought. They had intruded there. They had not intended to, but they had definitely crossed a line.

And a rather delicate one if Tony’s gut feeling was right.

Because Thor had been disconcerted when he had seen the vulva. No, scratch that, shocked. This had so not been expected. And it had not been a pleasant surprise.

Tony kneaded the bridge of his nose.

The Aesir obviously weren’t generally intersex. It obviously wasn’t generally known that the Jotnar were, or maybe Loki was an exception to the rule in any case. He was certainly the type to be.

What little Tony knew about the gender role distribution on Asgard generally… sucked a bit. The women having to conform to the culture of the men, having to be praised for their beauty above all, and the whole glorification of war and battle. It smelled like patriarchy, all in all.

How would a guy with a vulva be seen in such a society?

How would a guy with a vulva see himself if he had grown up in such a society?

And had Loki always known about his difference, or had the intersex part of him been hidden by the same glamour that had washed his skin pink? Thor’s reaction suggested the latter – after all, he had
not acted as if he had never seen Loki naked before. Just not… like this.

And if Loki had only found out about his Jotunn heritage recently, and they knew how badly he had reacted to that, Tony couldn’t help but wonder how Loki had reacted then to those other… aspects of his true body.

How high were the chances that the trickster had come to terms with that by now?

As far below zero they might give Tony the frostbite Loki’s skin had failed to provide.

Shit.

And now this had happened. They had discovered his secret. His brother, who he had some serious and violent issues with, and a stranger who was practically an enemy. While washing him. With him being unconscious, defenceless.

Shit.

Shit, shit, shit.

Tony really really hoped Loki would just ignore the possibility they had seen him, would just talk himself into the delusion that they had been decent people and had respected his privacy, and oh gods, he hoped Thor wouldn’t MENTION it! Because he really didn’t want to be there when THAT shit hit the fan.

The consequences would be… well, they knew what Loki was capable of once driven to extremes. His extremes were… worth that denomination.

Tony groaned, rubbed his eyes.

They had made a bad move there. Oh, so very bad.

‘Sir’ said Jarvis.

‘Yes’ said Tony, noticing that he sounded a bit desperate. But he couldn’t really deal with even more bad news right now. Maybe Loki had died again. That was certainly probable. Or he had woken up and was butchering Thor.

‘I have detected a faint energy signature’ said Jarvis. ‘It’s coming from the direction of the planet Ozymandias.’

‘Is it?’ Tony asked.

‘Taking the distance to the planet into account, there must have happened an event there of global magnitude.’

‘Right.’

The celestial. It had cracked the shell. The planet had been blown to bits.

‘Do we have any visuals?’

‘We are too far away for anything conclusive, Sir’ said Jarvis. ‘But Ozymandia is more difficult to detect by my visual sensors now which could be due to the shards reflecting the sunlight in a more diffuse way.’
Tony went to the cockpit windows, but they were flying away from Ozymandias of course, not towards it, and like Jarvis had said, they were too far away from it in any case to see anything with the naked eye.

He thought of that sprawling city, the markets, the temples. At some point in the last hour, or hours, the streets of that city had cracked open, abysses had widened into which buildings had crumbled. A colossal being had moved underneath. Had then broken free.

And nobody had been there to witness it. Everyone had been already somewhere else, having turned their backs, quite literally, on this event.

Which was a good thing, really. But still. It was a bit strange. A whole planet had died, a being as big as the planet had been born and was now flying, or floating, or crawling through space, and yet, it was as if the universe hadn’t even noticed. The birth of a celestial, it was something so loud and violent, and yet, there was only this faint energy signature to tell of it.

It felt so eerily quiet.
Do Mages Dream of…?

Chapter Summary

They travel. Loki is asleep. Sounds peaceful.

Chapter Notes

Just a small chapter without drama, right? Right.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The first two days, there wasn’t much of a change. Loki remained in this deeply unconscious state that resembled death a bit too much in Tony’s opinion. His vital signs very weak, with no sign of improving. Thor spent a lot of time at his bed, despite the smell, and Tony sometimes observed them on the security feed. Thor, holding Loki’s hand. Or just sitting there, looking at his own hands, or at his brother, his eyebrows furrowed.

On the third day, however, the vital signs got stronger, and Loki’s face tensed. His breathing quickened, then slowed down, quickened again, he started sweating, his limbs and face started twitching. They discussed the options of pain killers again, but again didn’t dare to risk it in the end. Jarvis would at least have needed to make a blood analysis to be able to assess what kind of medication would be relatively harmless to use, and Thor was not at all enthusiastic about that idea. To put it mildly. And not in caps-lock. Tony could sort of even understand why, after the whole body snatcher shebang (and did it really make matters better that Ananka had imprisoned Loki’s soul in limbo before using his body as a power plant and something like a genie?).

By evening, Loki was moaning. Weakly and more like whimpers at first, still interspersed with episodes of deep unconsciousness, but the moans got louder, more frequent.

On the fourth day, the screaming started.

It came in waves that rose and fell with Loki’s strength. Again and again and again, the moans would turn into screams that got ever louder, longer, angrier, until bodily exhaustion made his voice falter, then fail, and he turned back to whimpering, then was dragged under for another while. At times, the change from deep unconsciousness to distress was sudden, Loki would start flailing and screaming from one moment to the other, would shriek, at the top of his lungs, high and desperate and scared out of his wits, throw his arms around, hit the walls and the bed.

His eyes were wide open during those flashbacks, because it was clear that that was what they were, staring at the ceiling but seeing nothing, and there was pure undisguised horror in them, and Tony shivered at what could make a god look that afraid.

Would make Loki of all gods look that afraid.

Loki would never regain enough consciousness to wake from those episodes, and so Thor could do nothing but hold him down so that his brother wouldn’t injure himself further. Thor was crying then,
saying words of comfort that Loki obviously couldn’t hear, because he was screaming, screaming, screaming like he was being flailed alive, until his voice was hoarse, until he slowly quietened again, until he stopped fighting and went limp, until his eyes drifted shut.

Sometimes, he flinched when Thor touched him. Sometimes, he leaned into the touch.

Tony didn’t really want to think about what all this meant.

It were difficult days on the Mantis. Thor spent almost all his time with Loki, cried often, but never responded when Tony mentioned that to him. There was barely no talking to him at all.

Communication about practical matters still worked the best – about food, medical options concerning his brother (there were few, apart from keeping him hydrated), carrying a mattress into Loki’s quarters so that Thor could sleep on the floor next to him.

Everything else…

Tony mostly felt like an intruder on a highly private matter, but like an intruder who couldn’t flee – who couldn’t even flee the screams that were filling the Mantis day and night. The screams that reminded him too fucking much of his own. And it didn’t help that it sometimes sounded like the trickster was being tortured right then right there, and Tony was lying there, in his quarters, doing nothing to stop it. Not able to do anything to stop it. He could only listen.

As they went on and on. Until the voice finally faltered.

Sleep was… hard to come by. Even more so than usual.

During one dream, Tony ended up at his bar in the tower again, mixing the Stiff and Bored. When he turned to Loki, he was sitting on his bar stool as always, but covered in wounds and scars and blood.

‘Er… isn’t it a bit early for you to get all leaky?’ asked Tony. ‘Normally, you can at least finish your drink before we get to that part.’

Loki stared at his hands, cut to the bone, his eyes wide. His hands were shaking.

‘No’ whispered he. ‘I left that dream, I’m here now. The pain should be gone. It should be gone.’ He coughed, and blood welled out of his mouth.

‘No’ said he, almost in tears. ‘No. This place should be safe. This is wrong.’

There was a loud cracking sound, ‘What the-’, said Tony, Loki turned on his seat, and they both watched as huge cracks appeared in the walls around them.

‘No’ whispered Loki. ‘Not here too now. No.’

The cracks travelled further, with an awful sound, Tony took a step back.

‘This isn’t the usual shit’ said he.

Loki whirled around to him, ‘Go!’

‘What?’

‘Go, you have to wake up, now!’
'What do you-'

At that moment, the walls just broke away, and the ceiling and revealed…

The dark. Emptiness. The floating rocks. Nothing like it should be. Not even… this is not what geometry should be like… look like… he blinked… like then… he knew the arc reactor was dead… he was going to die here… he was going to die here…

And then, there was this giant, giant purple hand. Just reaching from that awful void into the room that was crumbling away at the edges, and it grabbed Loki like a puppet that was naked now, all naked, and Loki was hanging in that hand, wide-eyed, limp. The giant fingers pressed into Loki’s body that gave, let it in, Loki screamed, at the top of his lungs, shrieked, his body glowed white where the fingers penetrated it, on his abdomen, at his crotch, on his head, on his back, deeper, starting to move in there, rummaging around, Loki shrieked.

‘What-‘ said Tony.

For a moment, Loki’s eyes flickered to his, then Tony felt as if rammed into the chest by something massive, he flew backwards, right through the window, felt it break around him, the shards, felt himself fall, he was going to die, he was going to die, he was-

Tony woke up with a cry. It was dark, he was alone in his quarters. Loki’s shrieks, however, were very real, he could hear them even with the doors closed. A nightmare again. That was what had probably triggered his own.

It took Loki an hour to calm down from that one.

It was a challenge to keep Loki hydrated because the pain and the panic made him sweat galleons, forcing Tony and Thor to change his bedsheets and clothes almost more often than the spares had time to dry. And Loki’s thrashing around regularly tended to dislodge the IV. Tony sometimes wondered where Loki was taking the strength from for all this – there was theoretically not a lot of energy this emaciated body should still be able to provide.

But despite all this, Loki’s vitals strengthened, his wounds were healing, and according to Jarvis, even the necrosis had retreated a bit. Both of his lungs were working by now which certainly made his voice stronger. On the sixth day, Loki started forming words. It was progress, in a way. It showed he was getting better. It was… a mixed blessing.

Because his voice getting stronger meant that the screams got louder. And Loki forming words mostly meant that he started calling for help. Called for Thor, for his father, for his mother. For anyone. Called Thor’s name, again and again. Started pleading for it to stop. Started pleading for death.

Started crying.

Tony decided to unearth the emergency scotch then. If he was going to have to deal with this for the next weeks, he was going to deal with it dead drunk.

Thor opened his eyes, and he was alone.
The smell filled the chamber, the body beneath him was inert and dead. He fumbled to press out the apple slice over Loki’s open mouth, so that the juice dropped down his tongue, he pushed the slice down Loki’s throat, took the next one, pressed it out too, and the next, pushed them all into his mouth that was limp and lifeless and stank of decay, and yet he knew that Loki’s soul was still on the way, could still be pulled back.

Or – he hoped.

With any normal fruit, he would have suffocated him, acting like this, just shoving slice after slice down, but this was the apple, and Loki had already stopped breathing, and the apple was life incarnate, life incarnate.

But then, Thor’s hands were empty, and he was still alone.

And Loki was still not moving. He was still just… flesh.

Thor heard his own breath. Shallow and quick. He pushed his fingers into Loki’s mouth, smearing the insides of his cheeks with the last drops.

Then also that was done.

Loki’s eyes were dull, looked at nothing.

Please.

Please, Loki, please.

And then, just as sudden, it was as if his skin was flushed with something… more than just flesh, and the next moment, Loki breathed in.

Thor woke up without knowing why. He was lying on his back on the mattress on the floor. Above him the ceiling of his brother’s quarters. Before, his brother had screamed – ‘Please, no more! Kill me, please!’ Now, it was silent. He turned his eyes to Loki on the bed next to him. Even in the dark, he could see that Loki was looking back.

Chapter End Notes

So fanfic reviews are a thing? Don't really know much about them but they certainly sound nice. No, really, I'm not even being sarcastic, my fanfiction experience is just very limited to AO3 (and I was just a passive reader until The Prestige, which is unforgivable, I should at least have commented, bad past self, BAD!) and I don't see a review section here anywhere. But I think it's a good thing if it happens and I'm supposed to ask for it? Or not? What's the social code here? Am I making a faux-pas? Gods, I'm terrible at marketing, ain't I? And social situations. I'm like Tony, without the genius, or riches, or the marketing skills. Or the charm. Why was I comparing myself to Tony again?

Ah, right, because like him, I tend to get side-tracked.
And to ramble.
Right, sorry for that... er... you'll get a new chapter soon.
Chapter Summary

Loki wakes up, stumbles around gracefully, and is being a bit of a little shit. But well, that’s just Loki. Also: Tony tests scientific theories and might make subconscious offers from time to time.

Chapter Notes

Ahhhhhh, thanks for educating my ignorant ass about the fact that reviews are the same as comments and you've been giving me that all that time because you're great, and when I ask for it in a roundabout way, you give me even MORE (I mean I ask for something, and I just GET it), and I feel so frigging cuddled right now, and slightly spoiled, and I love you all!!!! <3

Here's a chapter! Longer this time.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Loki woke up and things turned quiet. Eerily quickly. The screaming stopped. The crying for help stopped. Even the moaning stopped.

Loki’s face still tensed, it still twitched. Tony observed him on the security feed from time to time, trying to avoid walking in on the two brothers as much as possible now that younger more homicidal brother was recognising people again. But on the security feed, Tony could see that Loki flinched, lying in his bed, jerked sometimes. His eyes glazed over, he shut them, his breathing got quicker, then slower again, then quicker.

When Loki fell asleep, he started moaning, then woke up with a gasp, quietened down as soon as he knew where he was. Maybe that was why he didn’t sleep quite a lot. He was just lying there, awake, flinching and suppressing his whimpers and suppressing his sleep like there was no tomorrow.

It was a weird and somehow very scary thing to watch. It was also pretty impressive. It was also not at all healthy.

But then again, what about Loki was?

And probably, Tony wasn’t exactly one to talk, considering he had drowned his inability to deal with Loki’s torture flashbacks in scotch.

But, I mean… fuuuuck. This was just… so not at all what Tony needed at the moment. Or… ever.

From what Tony could tell, Thor allowed his brother his pretence. They didn’t speak much in any case. Thor had dragged his mattress back to his quarters the same day Loki had woken up, and Tony was pretty sure that had been Loki’s rather than Thor’s wish. Loki tolerated the IV but refused to eat (which could be due to his intestinal tract still healing, Tony reminded himself), and allowed little
more caregiving beyond Thor’s helping him get to the toilet. He stayed blue, even though his wounds were healing quickly. He moved little, mostly staring ahead. At times, his gaze turned a bit vacant.

There was no indication that Thor had mentioned the intersex thing up until now, and no indication that Loki was about to. Though there was no fucking way that Loki wasn’t aware that Thor knew. So Tony had been right and Loki was taking the route of self-delusion? Or the route of not mentioning something means it’s not there? Every route that didn’t involve mortals or thunder gods getting turned into minced meat was better than the alternative in any case.

Tony ditched the alcohol again, because however relatively safe he felt with Jarvis monitoring the trickster constantly, having an obviously mentally unstable god with homicidal tendencies and additional reasons for homicide on the ship and drinking didn’t mix very well. He distracted himself with the Mantis instead, and with designing a new suit.

He walked in on Loki another three days later in the community kitchen, almost getting a heart-attack in the process. Because the community kitchen had been dark, and Tony had been wondering how the sickly-sweet smell had penetrated even these parts of the ship, but when Tony turned on the light, Loki was just sitting there, at the table.

‘Holy shit, there is a trickster god sitting in my kitchen, Jarvis, why haven’t you warned me about this, tell me now?!’

‘Mr. Odinson showed no indication of malicious intent and I might have recorded the look on your face, Sir’ Jarvis answered.

Maybe Jarvis was turning into Skynet. Or into Natasha. Tony wondered what was worse.

Loki, in any case, didn’t react much to Tony’s outcry. He was staring at an energy bar that was lying in front of him on the table. Very much lost in Thor’s giant clothes, with one shoulder revealed because the neckline was too wide (and oh shit, that was terribly cute and so not what Tony should focus on right now) he still looked a lot better than the last time Tony had seen him, a lot less emaciated. Of course, Tony was not sure at all how much of that was just a glamour.

After all, the trickster had a pretty long track record of looking better than he felt.

And the dark scar across his face being gone was certainly suspicious.

‘I know you haven’t had practice at having a body for a while, Rudolph, but I have to tell you that that energy bar isn’t gonna eat itself.’

Loki at first didn’t react to that either, but then glanced up at him.

‘I could make it eat itself. Or make you eat yourself’ said he. His voice still sounded a little raspy – Tony supposed from all the screaming, and yeah, well, maybe also from the rotting. ‘But that spell, however amusing, sometimes creates a black hole. Do you still wish me to prove to you that consuming one’s own body until there is nothing left is entirely within the range of possible events?’

‘Nah, I’m good’ Tony said, getting himself a glass of water, reassuring himself that Rudolph wouldn’t have enough magic for that spell right now anyway, and wondering what the fuck said Rudolph had done here in the dark. Had he been staring at that energy bar the whole time?

‘Are you sure you should be up and walking around already though?’

‘My body heals more quickly than you mortal cattle can understand’ said Loki.
‘Yeah, well, cowboy, you’re still reeking of decay’ said Tony soberly, and sat down opposite of Loki.

And then he raised his eyebrows because from one moment to the other, the sickly-sweet cinnamon smell was just… gone.

‘Did you just put a glamour on your smell?’

‘Or maybe I just proved how very quickly I can heal’ said Loki, cocking his head.

‘You really just put a glamour on your smell!’ Tony said, his eyebrows rising even higher.

‘Are you complaining?’ Loki asked.

‘No, come to think of it, I’m not’ Tony answered. ‘Sorry, Joker, don’t want to particularly offend you because I like to keep living and all, but that odour was seriously putting me off my food.’

‘Strangely enough, I feel the same way’ answered Loki, and pushed the energy bar away from him.

So he was having trouble eating. Huh.

‘So… how is being alive again treating you?’ Tony asked.

‘So far, it’s unrestful’ said Loki. ‘And at the same time, surprisingly dull.’

‘Well, that’s what you get from spending most of your time with Rapunzel.’

Was there a glint of amusement in Loki’s eyes? Hard to say, especially because Rapunzel chose that moment to enter the kitchen, start at Loki’s sight and then stare at him.

Which definitely made any glint of amusement that might or might not have been there disappear.

‘Brother… you are… well enough to walk on your own?’

‘No, I crawled here, it took me about an hour’ Loki said. ‘And I wish you could remember, however weak your mental faculties are, that we are not actually related.’

‘You do look… better’ said Thor warily.

‘Why, thank you, Thor’ said Loki. ‘Now if I could only hide my true appearance, you could more easily forget what kind of abomination of nature you called family once.’

‘I don’t-’

‘Don’t bother to contradict me, Thor. I will win in the end in any case, so it is not worth the effort.’

Thor swallowed, then scrutinised his brother.

‘You look like you gained weight. Have you managed to eat something?’

‘Yes, but after finishing about half the provisions of this ship, I was starting to feel rather full’ Loki said. ‘I liked those little sweet breads by the way, Stark, the round ones with dark pebbles.’

‘The chocolate chip cookies?’ asked Tony.

‘Ah, yes, that was what they were called. The thing named Pop-Tart however? Vile, just vile.’
‘You’re meant to warm them up, preferably in a toaster.’

‘Mhm, so that might have been my mistake.’

Loki talked in a cool, almost disinterested tone, and Tony wondered if what he said was true and he really had finished off half of the ship’s provisions while Tony had been drawing suit designs. He certainly wouldn’t put it past him.

Or Loki could just be lying to get Thor off his back about eating.

Mhm.

‘Well, so that’s where all the food has disappeared to’ said Tony. ‘Jarvis told me earlier that our stock had rather suddenly and dramatically dwindled. He was quite a bit worried about it.’

Loki shot him a glance with slightly narrowed eyes.

Alright, so it had been a lie then.

‘Tell me, Reindeergames, are you gonna continue eating like that? Because we still have more than two weeks to go and I don’t fancy starving halfway.’

‘I should be fine for a while’ said Loki. ‘I simply needed energy to refuel my magic. Now I feel quite sated.’

‘I am happy that you take care of yourself’ said Thor and beamed.

Poor bastard, he couldn’t see past Loki’s masks at all, could he?

‘Someone has to’ said Loki, and stood up.

He tried to hide the swaying, the unsteady steps, but when he ran against the door frame of the kitchen entrance right after, it was a bit less subtle.

* *

Loki’s skin washed pink rather abruptly the next morning, and he took to wandering about the ship from that point on, which Thor obviously saw as another sign of his brother’s recovery because he started beaming annoyingly brightly. Tony, as to him, found the picture of Loki stumbling barefoot around the corridors in Thor’s giant clothes incredibly cute, but also a bit worrying. However, from what Jarvis could observe, the trickster didn’t show signs of nefarious deeds so far and mostly just walked around, sometimes leaning against walls to catch his breath or because he had lost his balance. He also kept running against door posts or other obstacles, sometimes missed objects when he tried to grab them, or they slipped through his fingers, or he pushed them off the table instead – they lost a few plates and mugs that way. Tony, having hidden his chipped one in his quarters a long time ago, tried not to feel too obsessive and neurotic about that fact (it helped that they were standard Stark Enterprises mugs and only the association to his ship that was HIS still triggered him a bit) but rather to see it as more data about the state of the trickster. All in all, it looked like coordination was still a bit of a challenge. But then again, what did one expect from someone who had spent the last two hundred years out of his own body? And the practice he had had in Ananka’s probably hadn’t helped much since from what Thor had said, the woman was about half Loki’s size in every direction (true, Thor had this thing about exaggeration).
Loki also still had this tendency to just… stop, while standing, or sitting, or lying – and that was the only way Tony could describe it really. He just stopped doing… anything then, grew weirdly still, and then he got this vacant stare and that could go on for a while, until Loki finally blinked, and his gaze cleared, and he started moving again.

That was… weird behaviour, all in all. But then again, maybe not that surprising considering the existence he had been leading until recently.

Loki’s eating problem seemed to persist in any case, from what Jarvis told him. When Loki was alone, he regularly produced an apple or a chocolate bar from some pocket or other, then stared at it as if that could make it disappear (and of course Tony knew that he very probably could make the apple disappear by staring at it, duh). Tony watched him on the recordings as he raised the apple to his mouth, put it down again, raised it once more, hesitatingly took a bite on which he then began to chew with a blatant lack of enthusiasm. Swallowing seemed to take even more effort, and Loki put one hand over his mouth right afterwards, tensing.

Sweetened drinks seemed to go down more easily. Loki liked to sneak away orange juice from the fridge, so Tony made sure that there always was more there to steal. Briefly, he wondered how assisting anorectic invaders deal with their eating disorder had become his new normal, but honestly, next to all the other things that had happened in the vicinity of the God of Chaos, this was harmless in its absurdity. It could even be rationalised by needing him for the fight against Thanos, even though Tony knew very well this wasn’t all there was to it.

Well, fuck it, so what if this was a weak point. But Tony simply knew too well what it meant to be at the mercy of those who have none. To be abandoned by those you once called family.

He still was very aware that everything about Loki was anything but safe.

If the whole wielder-less blade attack and following adventure on Ozymandia had told him anything, it was that this guy wasn’t called the Gods of Lies for nothing. He still wasn’t sure he understood which layer of the trickster’s emotional rant at Thor had been a true outburst of anger and which had been just another way of giving his brother the run-around. And Tony had the suspicion that for some of the things Loki had said, it could be well both. Which certainly made him a rather… challenging person to have as a sibling, even if you weren’t the Great Gullibler.

Well, after all, it weren’t humans who had given Loki his title of God of Lies. It were other gods, for fuck’s sake.

That had to mean something.

The relationship between Loki and Thor remained rather tense. Loki avoided Thor, Thor tried to get Loki to spend time with him, to eat with them, or at least stay in the kitchen for the joint meals, cautiously starting conversations, Loki cutting them off, usually verbally almost biting off Thor’s head in the process.

Yeah, so he might still be a little on the sour side.

But him cutting off conversations also meant that Loki didn’t have to talk about Thanos, and his plans. And Tony couldn’t have that, for more than one reason.

‘Alright, so I’m gonna finally point out the elephant in the room’ said Tony at one of those rare occasions when Thor had managed to keep Loki at the table of the community kitchen for more than a few consecutive minutes. ‘What are we going to do about the big bad?’
Loki who had been prodding his pasta clumsily with slight disgust on his face, raised an eyebrow.

‘The big bad?’ asked he. ‘We?’

‘The elephant in the room?’ Thor asked, his eyes travelling across the kitchen nervously.


‘You can stop, Stark, I think I know who you mean’ said Loki dryly. “Second moment of confusion – we?’

‘Yeah, we’re kind of pursuing the same goal here, genius. I want him gone because – duh’ said Tony. ‘And you obviously want him gone too, or you wouldn’t have turned half your body into mixed manure in order to defeat him. You wouldn’t just do that out of a mood.’

Loki grinned a little, and weighed his head, then glanced at Thor, a glint in his eyes. Thor flinched at that.

Yeah, right. That guy had let go of the Bifrost and surrendered himself to the void out of a mood. … or something like that.

‘So I think now would be a good moment to exchange some information, verify some facts’ said Tony, trying to get back to the point. ‘It’s pretty obvious you deliberately sabotaged the Chitauri invasion, kudos for hiding it so well, by the way. We also know Thanos was the one who sent you to Earth in the first place, and that your alliance wasn’t exactly a consensual one.’

Loki had a small smile on his lips.

‘You make a lot of assumption there, tin man’ said he. ‘Though I am relieved that finally someone realised that I fighting in such an incompetent way was a little out of character after all. Well…’

He cast down his eyes, then eyed his brother again.

‘Then again, I have a history of acting impulsively. Why would one not assume that I had lost my mind in the void and had replaced my sanity and intelligence with a desire for the Midgardian throne?’

‘That’s certainly the act you pulled off’ said Tony. ‘And like I said, it was kind of convincing. Except when I went over the footage again and could see where it failed.’

There was a movement in Loki’s face at that, but it was gone in a moment.

‘Oh, and then you, a mortal who barely knows me, told Thor, who after all, has known me only for a few centuries’ said Loki sweetly, ‘and still couldn’t see behind a thin and patchy mask, what was really going on?’

‘Brother’ said Thor, and stood up. ‘I know I failed you then, and I am sorry. But after all that had happened, after what you had done to Jotunheim, after your fall… I wasn’t sure anymore… had I known you had been tortured, brother-‘

At that, Loki snorted.

‘What is so funny, brother?’
‘Apart from the fact that you still call me that name?’ Loki said. ‘That you think that I would have let it come to something as profane and unnecessary as torture.’

‘I have seen the scars-’

‘The Void is not kind, Thor’ said Loki, and for a moment, his face was hard, before he smiled again. But there was this glint in his eyes once more, and it was a dangerous one. Loki was after something, Tony thought. But after what?

‘It did not leave me unscathed. But that the Mad Titan, who found me after my fall, would offer me pain or a throne, and I take the pain? Who, my shiny God of Thunder, do you think I am?’

‘You…’ Thor began, then hesitated. ‘You’re telling me you allied yourself with him at once? Did you not know of his plans?’

‘Oh, once he told me his name, I knew very well what his end game was’ said Loki. ‘I have learned my history. Once he told me his name, I also knew that I had no chance against him, in the weakened state I was in. So of course I did not choose to suffer unnecessarily for weeks and months before finally breaking and accepting his deal anyway. Who would have benefited from that? On the contrary, it would have just weakened me further, or worse, it might have broken my will entirely, it might have made me into a true tool for him to use instead of his traitor. And wouldn’t that have been inconvenient?’

Loki, truly on Thanos’ side? A little inconvenient, yes.

‘Do you really think he would have been able to break you such?’ Thor asked, looking almost scared.

‘I’d worry not so much about him in this matter but about his loyal servant, the Other’ said Loki. ‘And I was certainly not foolish enough to attempt to find out. So, yes, I took the deal, and kept most of my will and mind. My most dangerous weapons if I may say so. Well, I suppose I have finally proved beyond doubt that they are.’

And he grinned widely now, shark-like.

Yes, the Bard’s Song, Tony thought. Dangerous indeed.

Thor looked at him for a while, hesitant.

‘I do not believe you’ said he then, and he looked sad for it.

Loki raised both his eyebrows, cocked his head.

‘Oh, that’s new. I like it. What part do you doubt? That I kept my will and my mind? I have to admit, that was kind of an exaggeration. I kept whatever sanity I had still left at that moment. I leave it to you to judge how much or little exactly that was. And, well, kept… the mind gem did make a bit of a mess of it all. Let’s say I kept enough of my will and mind to spoil the Mad Titan’s plans, and that is all that matters, isn’t it?’

Was it?

‘I saw your body’ said Thor. ‘And what I saw were not simply injuries from falling through the Void.’

‘And you would know so much about what the Void does to a person, would you?’ said Loki,
narrowing his eyes now, the amusement gone again.

‘I saw the scar on your chest too’ said Thor, sounding angry now. ‘What happened on Svartalfheim
was not just an illusion either – you were wounded there.’

‘So I was wounded. So what?’ hissed Loki.

‘Why did you lie about that?’ asked Thor, looking honestly hurt and confused. ‘Why lie about the
torture? How does it benefit you? What is the point? Why do you always lie?’

‘To be perfectly honest, with you, by now, it’s almost reflexive!’ shouted Loki, almost spit.

Thor stared at him, his eyes were wide and shining.

‘When you were imprisoned on Ozymandia… if you had only contacted me, if you had just this
once told me the truth… I swear you would have been freed much sooner.’ said Thor. ‘Loki, I would
have come’

‘… because I had the time gem, yes-‘

‘No, because I would have come for you! You don’t need to offer me something in return, you don’t
have to trick me into helping you-‘

‘OF COURSE I do!’

‘Brother, that cannot be what you really-‘

‘I. AM. NOT. YOUR. BROTHER!’

‘Brother, you-‘

‘STOP calling me that, or I SWEAR I will burn what little magic I have at my disposal right now to
incinerate you!’

Tony believed him. Loki was on his feet too by now, in a fighting stance, and there were green
flames flickering around his hands. Thor was eyeing them somewhat nervously too and Tony
wondered how often he had been at the receiving end of Loki’s rage. As quickly as this little chat
had escalated, Thor probably had a few burn marks to show for it.

‘A brother wouldn’t leave me behind every bloody time I needed him!’ said Loki. ‘A brother
wouldn’t just have given me up after my fall from the Bifrost! A brother wouldn’t have believed the
act even a mortal could see through! For the Norn’s sake, I even TOLD you before my fall that I
didn’t want the throne! I TOLD you! Are my words so inconsequential that you forget them
instantly?’

‘No, I-‘

‘How could you EVER think I was invading Midgard out of my own free will? Why would I ever
want to possess that boring backwater planet full of dull and short-lived people? Why did you not
doubt my words then when you knew very well I was a habitual liar? You just threatened me with
death instead, should I once more betray you! Hah, you knew then and there that I would! I always
do! It was just another way to condemn me for someone too cowardly to say the actual words! And
when I accept your condemnation, and take that death, you do not even care to see if you can save
me still, you just leave my presumed corpse on the battlefield and go ON, leaving me to be stolen
and taken apart by looters! Is that how a brother behaves? And if that behaviour is what I deserve
despite our supposed relation, then why by the NORNS should I think that suddenly, after all this, you would come for me? Without me tricking you into it? Without me offering payment for your services? Do you think me a complete fool?’

‘I…’ Thor began. ‘I… I was angry… I didn’t mean… I swear I truly thought you were dead, I…’

‘Thor, this has stopped being a good excuse years ago!’ shouted Loki. ‘Your readiness to think me dead almost killed me on Svartalfheim. Your readiness to think me dead left me in the Mad Titan’s hands. For Yggdrasil’s sake, what if I had tried to hold out? What if I had been so naïve as to think that you must surely come for me? That I would just have to endure this for a little bit longer, because surely you wouldn’t leave me to this fate? I am not that foolish, Thor, but what if I had been less smart? What then, Thor Odinson?’

Loki was breathing quickly, and his face was hard.

Thor kept staring at him, wide-eyed.

‘If you want to at least pretend to respect me’ said Loki, his voice sharp. ‘If you truly want to be anything like a brother to me, though honestly it escapes me why you should, then the very least thing I demand of you is that you never accept my death ever again. Not even if I convince all the world with it. Not even if you have my very bones to prove it. I demand that you will not accept it one single moment, do you understand?’

Thor stared at him, then lowered his eyes, opened his mouth as if to speak. He said nothing. He nodded, hesitated, then turned and left the room.

Loki looked after him, slowly calming his breath. As he turned, his eyes found Tony, tensing as if he only now remembered the mortal was still here. For a moment, his gaze turned calculating, and ice-cold, and Tony had the distinct gut feeling that the trickster was seriously considering killing him.

So Loki didn’t like to be exposed. So Tony had just seen something real?

‘Hello there, genius billionaire playboy philanthropist sitting here’ said he and waved. ‘Who can suit up and kick people’s ass big time – even yours. And I wasn’t kidding about the genius part either. Just saying that killing me right now could prove short-sighted later on when you need the firepower in the war. Or the brain.’

‘I could replace you with T’Challa’ muttered Loki but went to the fridge, poured himself some more orange juice, and sat down at the table.

‘Why does everyone think they can replace me with T’Challa?’ asked Tony.

‘Because they can.’

‘So not. Vibranium is just a fad. And anyways, T’Challa has way more scruples than me. Those tend to get in the way.’

Loki’s flickered to him at that. Interesting.

‘So… Thor’s tendency to believe whatever he decides to believe is getting a little on your nerves?’

Loki snorted, then drank.

‘You could say that’
'Has landed you in trouble a few times?'

'Oh, I could write an entire Bard’s Song just about that’ said Loki, and kneaded the bridge of his nose. ‘But that would turn my body into mixed manure again, as you worded it so poetically. And it is so very tedious to reconstruct cells.’

'Yeah, what were the exact lyrics of that little manure-producing song again? I tried to google it but I just got to those stupid sites where they only put the title of the song because of some stupid automatic programming so that you click on the link, but with no actual lyrics behind… so, care to remind me? I won’t put them on the internet. Probably.'

'No, Stark, I won’t tell you’ said Loki dryly.

'Yeah, I was kidding about the posting. And the googling. I can actually keep a secret. And it might be important info for the coming war’ Tony pointed out.

'It is’ said Loki. ‘Which is why I won’t tell you. Next annoying question.’

Alright, so he wouldn’t give in concerning that matter. Or rather, not for now. Pushing would probably just make it worse. And however tempting it was to push on for exactly that reason, Tony decided to take another turn.

'So you really got stabbed in the chest on Svartalfheim and almost died, didn’t you?’

'Yes, I did.’

'And instead of dying, you woke up wounded and alone?’

'No, I woke up heavily injured, poisoned and alone. On a planet that was about to be destroyed’ said Loki. ‘I barely made it off it.’

Yeah, magic wasn’t such idea when one was injured, wasn’t it? And probably, that was what he had needed, hadn’t he?

‘There still is this suspicious correlation between you and planets exploding… anyway… how come you haven’t stabbed the Mighty Redecorator since?’

'I have’ said Loki. ‘In Geneva, three times.’

‘Ah.’

'I took care to aim somewhere painful.’

'I see.’

Loki put the glass back down on the table, and sighed – actually sighed. Tony hadn’t known Loki could do something like that.

‘Thor always either underestimates me or overestimates me on a galactic scale’ said he, and shook his head. ‘It is a little frustrating.’

A little.

Tony also hadn’t guessed Loki of all people could master the art of understatement to such an extent. The evening was full of surprises.
Because he didn’t really believe the trickster’s story about having done the reasonable thing and having made the deal with Thanos at once, however nicely presented this tale had been. Not after having heard him scream. For his brother. For death. Again and again. He guessed that that other version had been closer to the truth, the one that Loki had told only as something that could have happened if he had been more naïve. The one where he had thought that Thor, or his parents, would come for him eventually. The one where he had tried to hold out.

The one where Loki had resisted, and resisted, and resisted, until he was stretched too thin, until there was nothing left, and he broke, because everything breaks at one point, only to find out later that dear brother and dear father and mother had never looked for him in the first place. That he could have waited for ever, could have fought forever, could have screamed forever, and absolutely nobody would have come.

And wasn’t that a reason to stab a few people?

Tony couldn’t be sure of course – not with Loki being the narrator. It was all a matter of plausibility. A theory was measured in its value in how much it could explain without complicating things. Loki’s maze of lies tended to complicate things. That was one thing Tony had thought he had understood by now, after hearing Thor’s tale about Ozymandia, after witnessing the conversation just now. The very fact that the trickster told so many contradicting lies and got so emotional about so many of them made it difficult to discern the truth.

So it had to be part of a trick.

And each trick, his own dream had told him, shared the same secret.

Create a distraction. Something flashy. Make the audience not really want to look.

So the question remained who the audience was and what they weren’t supposed to want to see.

Loki’s eyes narrowing when Tony had helped him lie about the food. His anger about Thor’s gullibility now.

Another theory. Let’s test it.

‘You had no idea that Ananka would show up, did you?’ said he, because he had never really bought that story either.

‘Show up where?’ said Loki.

‘On the path to Helheim’ said Tony. ‘You hadn’t planned that at all.’

Did the corners of Loki’s lip move upwards slightly?

‘What makes you so sure?’ asked he. ‘It would be a bit much of a coincidence otherwise.’

‘Because it is a shit plan’ said Tony soberly. ‘Wager on some obscure queen’s ability to find you just in time before you’re gone for good? You weren’t even aware she had the time gem at that point.’

‘You don’t know that.’

‘Not for certain, but the whole thing doesn’t add up.’

‘I am the God of Chaos’ said Loki and leaned back. ‘Most of my plans don’t do.’

‘Well, your plan to destroy Jotunheim certainly wasn’t very well thought through’ said Tony and
crossed his arms in front of his chest. ‘You are right, you tend to act impulsively, and that tends to ruin your game. But this whole story about using Ananka and her time gem as a life insurance and later only making it appear like you hadn’t been able to finish the magic on that clock in time that would point you to the time gem in the first place? Too fucking convoluted, my tongue gets tied in a knot just summarising that plot. I think the truth is simpler than that. I think that like on Svartalfheim, you thought that you would die. The Bard’s Song suggests it. If you absolutely have to leave, use one last weapon first.’

‘I am not really the self-sacrificing type, Stark’ Loki said dryly.

Aren’t you though?

‘No, this was simple pragmatism’ said Tony and shook his head. ‘You knew you had no chance to make it anyway.’ Maybe he would have had a chance. He had survived a blade through the chest before. Maybe he had known he might survive a second time. ‘It’s not much of a sacrifice if you don’t think your life is worth a dime’

Loki narrowed his eyes for a moment, but at the same time, he looked almost amused by now. He likes me finding out, Tony thought. He left clues and I picked them up.

‘The sceptre’ said Tony. ‘You said it messed with your head. How so? Are we speaking Clint-level mind-control?’

Loki looked at him for another moment.

‘No’ said he.

‘Yeah, no, I didn’t think so’ said Tony. ‘Didn’t look like that.’

‘My mind is not as weak as that of a human’ said Loki. ‘It would have been far more difficult to break my will without rendering me useless as a general. And that is the tool I was supposed to be.’

Yeah, except before you said that the worst scenario would have been Thanos breaking your will and turning you into his tool entirely. Now you’re saying that this never was his plan. You’re contradicting yourself again. Maybe it really is a bit reflexive for you. Or you’re hiding your truth once more in a maze of falsehoods.

How to discern it from the illusions?

‘Why did you lie for me, Stark’ asked Loki then, shaking Tony out of his thoughts.

‘About what?’

‘About the food.’

Tony shrugged.

‘Oh, I just wanted to test a theory’ said Tony.

‘And that would be?’

‘A magician does not reveal their tricks to the audience, a scientist not their theories to their test subject’ Tony said.

I want to know if I can tell.
Loki’s mouth thinned.


Okay, treading on delicate ground here.

‘Well, I, for my part, never wanted to be part of the audience’ said Tony. ‘The real fun happens backstage.’

‘Most people would disagree’ said Loki. ‘The audience is where you have the best view of the show.’

‘Boring. I want to know how the show is done.’

‘Doesn’t that destroy the mystery?’

‘I’m a scientist. Fuck the mystery.’

‘But the mystery is what is beautiful. The trick itself is usually simple and ugly.’

‘Simple does not equal easy. And you don’t have the right to tell me what I find beautiful.’

Loki let his eyes travel over Tony then, as if he suddenly saw him differently.

‘Mhm, you are acceptably smart, aren’t you?’ asked he. ‘I had guessed so already after Barton had told me about you. That’s why I was rather content to see you become one of my enemies.’

‘Is that why you threw me through a window as soon as we had our first real conversation?’

Loki made a dismissive gesture.

‘Oh, that day you were being drearily slow on the uptake’ said he. ‘I got unnerved. Also, I had overestimated your technology. It certainly didn’t live up to its reputation.’

Slow on the uptake about what? Should I have realised by then that you were not playing to win?

‘And if you had overestimated it some more and I had fallen to my death?’

Loki shrugged, then seemed to think of something, and grinned.

‘Well, for once, I probably wouldn’t have ended up on that Skrull ship, wouldn’t have been attacked, and wouldn’t have had to prematurely sing my song, risking putting off the Norns. If you think of it, if you had died, the whole universe would have fared much better.’

As if Tony needed another proof of that anytime soon.

‘Nah, Thor would have had another stupid idea that would have eventually killed you’ said he.

The trickster laughed at that, and genuinely.

‘Yes, you’re right’ said he, and then rested his chin on his hands, looking at Tony in an almost greedy way. ‘And yes, all in all, it seems you do have a fine intellect and interesting resources. I shudder, with pleasure I’ll freely admit, to think what you could do if you truly committed yourself to the fight against the Mad Titan. You could be an amazing-‘
‘Woah, no, stop right there!’ said Tony and held up a hand, palms up. Because he could so see where this was going and he was done with this kind of shit, he was done.

‘If you think you can manipulate me into making weapons for you and being your little super soldier, a replacement for mind-controlled Clint or something, you are so fucking wrong’ said he.

‘Stark, this is not what I-‘

‘Oh yes, it is, and NO, the FUCK no! I’ve had enough people using me to sprinkle their fucking violence everywhere like it’s a fucking pissing contest! You might not be Thanos level crazy, but I’ve seen your battle strategy first-hand and it involves a whole lot of collateral damage! Eighty fucking people in two days, Saint Hornbearer! And I won’t fucking allow you to hurt my family because you think they are expendable like you thought I was expendable, or like Coulson was expendable, just mortal cattle for you to use!’

Loki huffed.

‘If you think that the war against the Mad Titan will be won without sacrifices-‘

‘I don’t CARE, dickhead!’ Tony said. ‘If we have to sacrifice people, why not your momma, Mr. Adoption-Family-Dynamics?’

Loki was on his feet in a second, his hands spread, his fingers flexing. And fuck, he suddenly looked so much taller, and so fucking dark and godly, and Tony shouldn’t have felt just as turned on as scared about that.

‘If you suggest with one more word…’ Loki said very darkly.

‘But you still claim she isn’t your mother, right? Right.’ said Tony in a blatant disregard of his most basic survival instincts. ‘And calm down, Emovillain, I don’t want to hurt her. I wouldn’t even be able to hurt her, she’s a fucking Norse goddess. And on Asgard. And the fucking queen.’

He huffed, then looked the god straight in the eye. Because this message would have to be very clear.

‘Let me give you a warning for once’ said he. ‘And you will have to remember that whether we’re going to be allies or not. Your, very commendable, plans to defeat Thanos had better not mess with what is mine. Because I will protect what is mine. With all I have. And I don’t care if I have to sacrifice you to do it, or Earth, or the whole world. Do you hear me? I don’t care. I would do anything.’

Loki held his gaze for what felt like a long time. It was a scrutinising one, and Tony looked back darkly.

Don’t fucking think I don’t mean it.

‘So don’t touch my stuff.’

And then, Loki nodded, just slightly, just once.

And then he said, ‘Did you just offer me an alliance?’

Chapter End Notes
Loki, really? Is that all you took from that conversation?
Temptations on the Warfront

Chapter Summary

The galactical cab arrives at the final destination. Loki has doubts about the bill. A green apple is being tossed around, but who gets to eat it in the end? I guess we'll never know.

Chapter Notes

Oh, how I loved Temptation on the Warfront by alizarincrimsOn! Both times I read it!

Many thanks to plumadesatada for pointing out that Tony forgot to name that celestial. Which is unforgivable, really. He is feeling so ashamed. His only excuse is the obscene amount of drama oozing from every pore of the Mantis at the time of the celestial's birth. He was kind of drowning in it then, thus distracted.

And oh my frigging spirits and gods, I was really overwhelmed by your positive response to the last chapter and generally by your positive response to my version of Loki which is wonderful because he is just SO MUCH FUN TO WRITE! (...especially when he suffers some more (yeah, I'm evil))

Because you are frigging great and write frigging wonderful comments, I've put in some work, and you will get one more chapter after this one before I have to go into the next hiatus again (you know, in order to prepare the next batch).

Oh no. He had so not.

And he had said so, at once, and Loki had raised his hands, ‘Peace’ had he said, but there had been a playful smile on his lips, and now Tony couldn’t get the idea out of his head.

Maybe this was how Loki did things, planting terrible ideas in people’s heads and then just leaning back and waiting until they came to their terrible fruition.

… this was probably exactly how Loki did things, wasn’t it?

Fuck.

But the thing was, if he could forge a real alliance with the trickster, and that way not only could get him on their side but actually be able to work with him, team up with him? Loki’s magic and Tony’s tech, both of their brains, their fighting skills, and their willingness to fuck with people? What was there they wouldn’t be able to do?

What was there they wouldn’t do?

Tony was kind of aware he didn’t really have a reliable moral compass. There were reasons Pepper had given him that mock proof that he had a heart, and too many people had lost their lives precisely because Tony Stark had thought that a conscience was something he could outsource. So he couldn’t
afford not thinking this through. He couldn’t afford slipping back to that old version of himself.

The warlord.

The scum.

The one who would have deserved dying in that fucking desert.

He had allied himself with the wrong people before. Was he now tempted to do so again?

And it was. Tempting.

To forget all those worries, all the weight of caring so much. To just think strategy.

Was that what it would be like then?

The thing was, Tony wasn’t even sure about that. Loki did care. About some things. Just not a lot about Midgardians. And the rest was hidden in this maze of contradictions.

The only thing certain was that he definitely couldn’t just go and blindly trust the guy to do the right thing.

The other thing was, he couldn’t really trust himself to do the right thing either.

If this alliance was to be, they would have to make a contract. And the contract would have to be watertight, no, scratch that, Loki-tight. Which was so much more difficult to accomplish. … and sounded kind of sexual, now that Tony thought of it.

Right.

* *

He felt weightless. He was floating, like the rocks around him. No, this wasn’t how it had been. Falling, falling, then crashing. But now just this disorientation. No up, no down, no direction. No sensation, and he didn’t know where his body was. Whether it was this puppet tumbling about in space, or the whole universe. It didn’t matter. Everything so difficult to grasp. Everything so difficult to hold onto. Maybe he had never stopped falling in the first place. Never really… and then, the hand closed around him.

Something shifted, Loki felt as if slammed back into his pain, and his vision returned. He blinked. He was sitting in the community kitchen of the Skrull ship. Very much having a body. That screamed. Every second, everywhere. Calm your breath before it can quicken. At least, now you know where your borders are. You are where the agony is. Where it stops, that is where you end.

He cautiously closed his fingers around the glass that was standing on the table, that he had intended to take up before he had lost reality again. The mind taking refuge? No, just what it is used to. Falling, falling. Then crashing. Again and Again.

Should he drink from the glass? No, it was empty, he must have drunken from it before. Should he consume food again? There was a green apple lying on that table too, close to his hand. He could eat it. That would be exhausting. Was it necessary? It was difficult for him to discern hunger from all the other sensations, all the other pain.

Well, food had been a problem for a while now, in one way or another.
Because he was a weakling.

He stood up, cautiously, controlling it as much as he could. No flinching. No breath quickening. He had exposed himself enough. He took the apple into his hand. Smooth skin. Cold.

Should it feel that way? For him, a Jotnar?

Monster. But he couldn’t even do that right. The abortion of a monster. Runt.

Where was Stark? Observing him on the security feed again, or in his workshop? More than once, the thought had returned to him, to kill the mortal. He found he had good reason. Stark had seen Loki injured, delirious. Loki didn’t even want to know what he had screamed during those episodes – if it was anything like what he remembered… had mother really been there? He wished with all his heart she had not been. No, surely she had not. It had been just his mind looking for safety. Not her, not really. She had been safe, and he had been alone, as always.

No he had dragged Stark down with him. A mistake. To think he was on Ozymandia again, and that the pain was just part of the dream, when it had been very real. That he could escape it. Had exposed his fears to the mortal. Had endangered the mortal’s mind. He should kill him.

If Thor had been very foolish, Stark had even seen…

Loki lost his balance for a moment, caught himself on the fridge. No, do not think about that. You always knew you were Ergi. What difference does it make that Baldur was more right about you than he knew? What difference does it make if Thor…?

He had to hold himself back not to retch. It made him nauseous, this idea that… he leant against the fridge. How disappointing, godling. Is that all you have to offer? If you can’t bear it, well, then end it. Or end the mortal. End Thor. No, you still need him. You need both, they are both narrators in your song. You did this to yourself, Ergi. You were the one who chose them.

He closed his eyes. Why again?

The shiny blond hero. A bit dim. A good choice. Tell the story from the point of view of the one who doesn’t understand all the ploys. More surprises that way, more plot twists. Excuses to explain, to describe. To know everything is boring.

The second narrator is the sarcastic commentator. Much more intelligent, but lacks critical background knowledge, so he needs the other one. Comic relief. Provides advice and insights where it’s convenient. Capable fighter with a lot of resources. Can take the hard, unpopular decisions because he’s not a typical hero. Not a god, not the obvious choice. That was exactly why it was the perfect one.

And Loki?

The character who nobody knew what to do with anymore. The superfluous one who they get rid of early on because he serves no purpose, he amuses no one. Should have bowed and left the stage. Doesn’t know when to stop.

He swallowed. No, you have made new plans. Remember – you spent a lot of time devising them. Don’t spoil them now.

End nothing, not even yourself.

Bend Stark over a bench instead, undress him piece by piece like he asks you to in his dreams. No,
asks himself. He never said yes to you, don’t forget that. And he has seen you, your true form. You
disgust him. He asked you to fuck him even after that. Loki’s nausea grew stronger. It was wrong
that it would happen that way, that after all he had seen, Stark would still want, if only in a fantasy…
Loki swallowed again, breathed in, breathed out. Don’t lose control, everyone can see you. If you
can do nothing else, at least maintain the mask. He pushed himself away from the fridge. Stark had
refused him, of course he had. Nobody wanted to team up with the abortion of a monster. Just good
for one thing. Well, it had still been amusing to confound him such. Take him up on his half-
conscious offer. See what he would do. Stark was sometimes refreshingly unpredictable in his
reactions. Too alert. A threat.

‘Well, seems like you were having some quality alone time, sorry to interrupt.’

Loki glanced up, and there was Stark, standing in the doorway, as if he had summoned him. It was a
telling sign of his state that Stark had been able to sneak up at him like that. No, that’s a lie, they have
always been able to do so, as soon as you were distracted. As soon as you were too focused on
something else. Don’t think that you can take your infirmity as an excuse when you failed before.

He tossed Stark the green apple, and the mortal caught it without hesitation.

Why?

‘Do you at least have a good reason for your annoying presence? Or should we see whether I can
fling you out the windows of the cockpit for a change?’

‘That would be a bad idea for everyone involved.’ said Stark, threw the apple into the air, caught it
again, and shifted the weight on his feet. He didn’t look particularly afraid. Just like back then. Face
the god without the armour, make no big deal out of it. Threaten the god instead. You are a fool.
‘This alliance that you mentioned. How serious were you about it? Because the thing is, under
certain circumstances, I might be persuaded to accept.’

* *

‘Oh, baby, how I missed you’

The blue planet. Earth, with its continents very well discernible from their position. They were
almost home.

‘Alright, Viking boys, you can stop asking if we’re there yet. We are.’

Loki didn’t even grace him with a glare for that.

He was standing behind Tony in the command centre, looking down at the planet coolly. In the three
weeks of their journey, he had recovered admirably, Tony had to admit. Of course, his appearance as
such didn’t say much, but it showed that Loki had at least recovered enough spare magic not only to
make himself look healthy, and Asgardian, but also to put a glamour on his clothes – or maybe he
had simply transformed them into his usual armour (minus the horny helmet, thank gods). He had
started eating with certain regularity, and his spells of zoning out had decreased a lot in their length
and frequency. His movements had transformed from the stumbling uncoordinated mess that they
had been in the beginning to something that could almost be called fluid. You could guess at their old
grace again, as if they were slowly being unearthed beneath mounts of rubble.

On the other hand, the healing had taken a long time, considering that the rather significant injuries
Loki had turned up with in Central Park once had been gone within a few hours.
Yup, the Bard’s Song demanded a bit of a high price, Tony supposed.

*And I mean very specific circumstances. Like I said, I won’t let anybody use me anymore. So if you want my resources, my brain, then you will have to swear a few things, on the Norns.*

He had not really expected Loki to even consider accepting the conditions he had laid out – keeping Earth out of harm’s way as much as possible, no touching Tony’s family (and that included the Avengers – well, except Thor, because seriously, Loki and Thor had their own violent thing that Tony wasn’t prepared to touch with a pole), minimising civilian collateral damage in general, no taking over Earth (Tony couldn’t care less what Loki did with Asgard – it wasn’t like Odin sounded like such a great king anyway), and no letting another alien race take over. Ah yes, and never treating Tony like a subordinate or a soldier – they would team up as equals, or they wouldn’t team up at all, and they would discuss their strategies and tactics, and they would share knowledge, and they would take each other’s advice where reasonable.

But Loki had listened to it all calmly, and had then said, ‘I will think about your terms’, and hadn’t mentioned the offer since.

Tony hadn’t been sure whether that was a good sign or whether Tony would wake up with his hair cut or his arms turned into snakes or floating in space together with the trash anytime soon.

The trickster had certainly begun eyeing him strangely, and that gaze was not always very friendly.

Several times, Tony had woken up in the middle of the night without really knowing why but with a distinct feeling of danger. Of someone standing outside his door. Jarvis had not detected anything – which either meant that Tony was being paranoid (which Pepper said he was anyway) or that Loki had recovered enough magic to hide again.

Which – not all that reassuring.

‘So are you looking forward to going back to Space Viking prison?’ asked Tony casually.

Loki raised an eyebrow at him.

‘Loki is not going back to prison, surely’ Thor protested. ‘He… I mean…’

Loki turned to the Mighty Redecorator and raised the same eyebrow at him too.

The Mighty Redecorator’s shoulders slumped.

‘Mother will be very happy to see you alive’ said he.

‘Mother knows.’

‘Why should she-‘

‘Well, maybe she doesn’t’ and with that, Loki turned abruptly away from Thor again. ‘In any case…’

In any case, they entered the atmosphere at that point, and Loki seemed to take that as enough of an excuse to stop the conversation. They stayed silent, with only Tony rambling on about his tech and the awesome deal with SHIELD that allowed him to start and land his space ship whenever he wanted, the nations of the world being informed and having agreed not to shot him off the sky as long as he didn’t make trouble.
‘They couldn’t get Latveria to sign that of course’ said Tony as they touched down on the landing strip near his mansion in Malibu. ‘But I mean, it’s Latveria. Weird all around. Has this Dr. Doom popped up on your radar already, Loki? He definitely beats you at the cackling with mad laughter villain thing, I tell you. Oh, shit, did I just suggest this was a competition? Please don’t make this into a competition.’

Loki rolled his eyes.

‘I know Doom’ said he. ‘For all his intelligence, the man has little imagination. I have little patience for little imagination.’

‘Oh, that I know only too well’ Thor mumbled.

Loki narrowed his eyes at his brother, but when he glanced away again, he looked somehow pleased.

‘So, I know, weird question, weird timing’ said Tony, checking the controls after the landing, ‘but that’s just the way my mind works, and it’s bugging me: are you officially a midwife now? I mean, now that you’ve helped give birth to that celestial? Or are you disqualified because you killed the mother?’

‘Helped isn’t the exact word I would use’ said Loki, cocking his head then. ‘And shouldn’t you use one of your nicknames for that being, the ones you always think are so clever?’

‘Nickname?’

‘You rename everything, Stark. Don’t tell me you have failed to give something a name that, for a change, doesn’t have one yet.’

Tony stared at him, slowly realising what the trickster had said.

‘Oh my frigging Viking gods, I forgot to christen it! How could I forget to christen it?’

‘I hope you didn’t intend to do that. You know nothing about his beliefs’ said Loki dryly.

‘Bob!’ called Tony out, pointing his finger at Loki. ‘It’s called Bob. Or Cesty? Celesty? Rosemary’s Child? Luke Starkiller? Cthulu? But I don’t even know if it has tentacles! Help me, Saint Hornbearer, has it tentacles? This is important!’

But Saint Hornbearer just crossed his arms in front of his chest.

‘The appropriate time for naming that celestial has long since run out, Stark’ said he.

‘No!’ said Tony. ‘We cannot leave the poor thing unnamed! Godzilla? King Kong? You know, because of the Hollow Earth Theory. Or… Alfred Jodokus Quak? That was a great TV-show and he breaks his egg at the beginning of every episode! NO! I have it! Renesme!’

‘The child will find its own name’ said Thor, looking a bit bewildered at Tony’s emotional reaction. ‘Or maybe stay nameless. We know little of the ways of its people.’

‘Accept it, Stark’ said Loki, his voice melodious. ‘It is too late. You have failed.’

‘No, it’s not too late, I can think of the perfect name, I-’

‘Welcome home, Sir’ said Jarvis at that moment, interrupting Tony efficiently. ‘I have just reconnected with my base here on Malibu and am happy to report that no catastrophe of national or
global magnitude has occurred during your absence. However, there were, apparently, two minor conflicts involving Hydra, Mr Parker and a pair of red sneakers. Mr Parker, Miss Romanoff and Mr Barton seem to have handled that on their own just fine and wish to tell you that the sneakers have been tracelessly destroyed.’

‘That’s good… I suppose’ said Tony, feeling thrown off course. ‘A pair of red sneakers? Really?’

‘It were very nefarious sneakers; there is a report at your disposal. Also, Miss Virginia Potts is already waiting in the mansion with several documents to sign, your to-do-list and your updated agenda for the next six weeks. There are a few additional meetings and events you have to attend, as it seems. Also your to-do-list seems to have grown considerably.’

Again, far too much amusement in that voice.

‘Uh, er… hey, do you gods need another ride, like, right now? To Alpha Centauri, for example? No? Well, was worth a try. So…’

And he turned to his two passengers.

‘Then you have arrived at Malibu, Earth. The outside temperature is twenty-five degrees Celsius because I’m a fucking scientist and thus use the fucking metric system when I want to. It was a pleasure here at Fares to the Future to have you on board. I hope you enjoyed your stay, and I wish you a good onwards journey. And don’t forget the bill, sweeties.’

‘I would never dishonour a debt I owe’ said Thor and bowed deeply. ‘I will bring what you asked for as soon as I am able.’

Loki eyed him.

‘Do I even want to know what the oaf agreed to pay?’ asked he.

‘…probably not’ Tony admitted. He wasn’t sure whether the trickster would react very positively or very negatively to his brother getting ripped off that badly.

Loki huffed.

‘In our youth, it was always me who would bargain deals just as this one. I’m beginning to think I saved Odin a lot of trouble and riches that way.’

‘Your bargains were not always safe exactly’ said Thor now.

‘I knew what I was doing every time’ said Loki.

Thor weighed his head, replying nothing, and Loki’s face tensed, he turned away.

‘Let us not linger’ said he and left the command centre.

‘…is this about that deal with the dwarves, about wagering your heads but not your necks?’ asked Tony when they were alone.

‘Loki’s head’ said Thor, looking after his brother. ‘And yes. But it is not the only unwise bet or deal my brother has agreed to.’

Yeah, the deal with Thanos had maybe had a few disagreeable consequences.

‘Did the dwarves really sew his mouth shut because of that?’
‘What?’ Thor looked confounded. ‘No, the dwarves did not do that.’

‘Oh, okay, great, because that was one of the creepier Norse myths I read, and your family history is already creepy enough without all of those being true.’

‘No, the dwarves bound his balls to the golden boar and made the beast run.’

‘What?’

‘It was a very fast boar’

‘What?’

Thor furrowed his eyebrows.

‘Do I not speak loud enough?’

‘Oh God of Capslock, you always speak loud enough, trust me’ said Tony and rubbed his forehead. ‘It’s just… you people are so… you know what, let’s do inappropriately violent story time another day, let’s concentrate on being finally back on terrestrial ground.’

He flicked a few controls to secure the ship, and then they made their way down the corridors to the entrance.

‘So will your father really try and throw Loki back in the cell?’ asked Tony while walking.

Thor didn’t answer at once.

‘My father was very much displeased about my brother’s death’ said he then.

Displeased? That’s it? That’s not exactly a watertight proof of fatherly love, Blondy.

‘But he… it can be difficult to understand his decisions’ said he, and his mouth thinned. ‘He does not show his feelings openly, least of all concerning Loki, and fights between the two of them… have always tended to… I think your word was escalate, Man of Iron.’

You think?

‘Also, he has to act as a king as much as a parent. And Loki… he has crimes to answer for.’

That didn’t sound very promising for the trickster… who emerged from the corridor leading to the quarters after they had waited for him near the ramp for a while.

‘Did you need to powder your nose, Sleeping Beauty?’ asked Tony.

‘No, I needed to plant a few deadly traps for you to fall in’ said Loki.

‘See, the way you say it sounds sarcastic, but knowing you, it might be actually true’ replied Tony. ‘You know just how to flirt with me.’

‘If I had known trying to kill you would win you over, I would have flung you out a window a lot more often’ said Loki dryly.

‘No, you need to add variation’ said Tony and shook his head. ‘Or my unhealthy addiction to dangerous situation won’t kick in and I will just find it dull and disagreeable. A lover should never be dull.’
'Oh I never said anything about love’ Loki said. ‘But your advice is duly noted.’

And he bowed his head a little.

Thor looked forth and back between the two of them, slightly bewildered.

‘It is called flyting, Thor’ said Loki dryly. ‘Surely, you must have seen me practise that art on Asgard or on other realms… a few thousand times.’

‘… of course’ said Thor, furrowed his eyebrows, then turned to the ramp. ‘Now let us finally return home, brother.’

‘I told you’ Loki said lightly, ‘I don’t have it. And I have overstayed my welcome in Asgard a long time ago.’

‘Loki’ said Thor, turned back to his brother again. ‘What is the meaning of this?’

‘I think he means to say that he doesn’t plan to come along’ said Tony who wasn’t altogether surprised by this turn of events. Loki voluntarily going back to his cell would have just made Tony wonder what there was in that cell that the trickster so very urgently wanted.

‘And again, Thor, you need a mortal to explain my words and actions to you’ said Loki, his hands on his back. ‘Yes, as Stark said, I do not plan to come along.’

‘But… you swore!’ said Thor. ‘…on the Norns…’

‘To leave the planet on Stark’s ship, yes’ said Loki. ‘And so I did.’

Thor looked at him warily.

‘Where is the time gem?’ he then asked.

His brother reached beneath his neckline, pulled the necklace out, the green-glowing stone.

‘What detail did I miss?’ asked Thor.

‘The detail that the deal never granted you the stone in the first place’ said Loki, a small smile on his lips. ‘In fact, the deal explicitly stated that I was to be its new owner. To you I only swore that you would hold it in your hands. Never that you would get to keep it.’

Thor’s jaw tensed, but then, unexpectedly, he bowed a little.

‘You tricked me well’ he pressed out.

Loki looked down at him.

‘No’ said he. ‘I tricked Ananka of Ozymandia well. You were just an easy mark, Thor Odinson. And that is unforgivable.’

He made a very slight bow in Tony’s direction, and then he glowed, and then he was simply gone.

Thor looked at the empty space where Loki had just been.

So maybe Tony had been right and a good part of Loki’s tricks and lies had been tests, maybe even a valiant attempt to make Thor grow into someone less gullible, less unaware. And Thor had failed him, again and again. Had failed him now.
Thor must have thought along the same lines, because he cast down his eyes then.

‘I’m sorry’ said he.

Tony wondered who he apologised to exactly.
Mystery Science Theatre 3000, Also Called The Norns

Chapter Summary

Three completely insignificant women sit in a mountain hut, get drunk and discuss nothing plot-relevant. I don’t even know why you should read this chapter at all.

Chapter Notes

Alternative title: AO3, also called the Norns

If you don't know Mystery Science Theatre 3000, give it at least one try. It's a weird show.

So, that's the last chapter for now - my provisions are completely depleted. But watching you devour them is worth it in every way.

Meanwhile, in a hut sitting on the high plateau of a European mountain, the oldest of the women started cackling again. The innkeeper still wasn’t sure what to make of the three. It had been a quiet day, especially after the weather had worsened, until they had invaded the inn at dusk, and had chosen a table in a corner from which they had a good view out the windows over the high plateau and the thunderstorm. The tablecloth they had brushed away swiftly and replaced it with their own – the innkeeper wasn’t really sure why, it didn’t look that much more remarkable after all – and ever since then they had been ordering crackers and wafers and schnapps after schnapps, had been talking with each other loudly in a foreign language, breaking into laughter now and then, or turning to the windows, commenting on the chaos outside.

All in all, they were good customers, and yet, something about them unsettled the innkeeper deeply. Maybe it was how the old woman moved despite her obvious age – her face full of wrinkles and her hair snow white, she didn’t seemed weakened by it, or hindered, or slowed down. Or maybe it was how the youngest of them – barely of age, thin, her skin dark and smooth, her eyes innocent and clear – sniggered freely with the other two, drinking as much schnapps as them and never being scolded for it. The third one looked like a matron, pale, with red hair, big breasts and too much weight, of which she didn’t seem the least bit ashamed. Even though the three women didn’t really look alike – didn’t even have the same skin colour – the innkeeper couldn’t help but think that they must be related. And they were a bit too loud, yes, but he had had guests like that before. A lot of them. There were no real reasons to be concerned, and yet he was. Maybe it was about how much alcohol they could hold. Maybe it was about their eyes. How old those seemed, older than they could be, any of them.

All he knew was that he would be glad the moment they left again. And that angering them felt like a tremendously bad idea. Like the worst.

‘Ah, hahah, I tricked Ananka well, but you were just an easy mark? Never truer words spoken!’ Urd
laughed. ‘And there they say that Loki is a liar!’

‘Liar or not, he definitely provides good lines’ said Verdandi.

‘So does Tony Stark’ added Skuld. ‘God of Capslock? Saint Hornbearer? He has a talent for renaming gods.’

‘And when he thinks he’s flirting with himself and he’s flirting with Loki instead? Comedy gold!’ Verdandi said. ‘How long do you think until he finally understands he has been hitting on the real guy all along?’

‘Oh, they are flirting for real even now, they just don’t admit it yet – soon they won’t need dreams anymore’ said Urd. ‘They will form an alliance.’

‘Ooh, this is interesting, isn’t it?’ said Skuld after downing her schnapps. ‘Now that the first plot arch is over – losing Loki, finding him, losing him again, because it’s Loki, they could really get this going. Together, they have a lot of potential, and not only concerning witty dialogue’

‘Would be reason enough to ship them’ Urd said. ‘Good dialogue is hard to come by these days.’

‘Yes, of course, but their pairing could be so much more than that. They might influence plot lines for centuries to come, and create more.’

Verdandi downed her schnapps too.

‘And what do we need more urgently than characters who create plot lines?’ asked she. ‘Ah, yes, sex scenes. We need sex scenes. I’ve been waiting for those for a while now. This is supposed to be explicit after all.’

And she let out her deep, sonorous and slightly dirty laugh. Her heavy breasts shook with it.

‘Considering how much Tony Stark likes to screw, I really wonder when those will finally come around’ Skuld said. ‘It’s almost out of character that they haven’t even dream-fucked so far.’

Urd laid her wrinkled hand on Skuld’s smooth one.

‘Give them time’ said she. ‘You always are so impatient, but patience is what you most need in stories. Whatever you rush seems construed in the end. Let it develop naturally.’

Verdandi snorted.

‘If we had let it develop naturally, Urd, Loki would be already out of the picture’ said she. ‘And what a boring story that would have turned into!’

‘True that’ said Urd. ‘And that is why, however beautiful Loki’s melody, however lovely his voice-‘

‘So lovely’ said Skuld, and she smiled a bit, as if abashed.

‘However finely woven and poetic his ballad’ said Verdandi, and her eyes glazed over for a moment.

‘However well-devised his little trick’ said Urd, and grinned. ‘We could not let him take control of the plot.’

‘Because he carries a tragic conflict in his heart’ said Skuld. ‘A terrible blindness. A fatal self-hate.’

‘Because he is a character in his own story, and thus writes it like a fool’ said Urd dryly. ‘It is not his
fault – he cannot break the constraints of his character, he cannot go beyond his own point of view. That is why he creates marvellous plots, but ruins them utterly in the end.’

‘Aye, he’s a bit of a Steven Moffat that way, isn’t he?’ said Verdandi.

Skuld shuddered.

‘That’s harsh’ said she, but Verdandi merely shrugged.

‘That is why he needs editors’ said she and called towards the innkeeper to bring them another round of schnapps.

‘And more of those sweet wafers!’ called Skuld.

‘But you know as well as I do that he is once again looking for a new place in this story’ said she then. ‘For a role. And he is once more looking for one that will cut his thread.’

‘Of course he is’ said Urd, and took the glasses from the innkeeper’s plate as soon as the latter had arrived. ‘The words of Tony Stark are still present in his mind – there is no version of this in which you will come out on top. Loki agrees, and if it’s not going to end up like this on its own, he will make it so.’

‘Er’ said the innkeeper. ‘I… really don’t want to disturb you ladies, but we are going to close for the night soon. Could I bring you a last round and… er… the check? Or not? Your schnapps is of course on the house, if you… wish to…’

‘And when is Loki more interesting than when he fails?’ said Verdandi, ignoring the innkeeper, and laughed again. ‘I simply love his anger. I could watch it for an eon and still be amused.’

‘And his suffering’ said Skuld dreamily.

‘And what he’s capable of then’ said Urd.

‘To the story arch of the seven then!’ said Verdandi and raised her new glass, now again filled to the brim. ‘And to the arch of the five that is still to come!’

‘Aye’ said Skuld, and Urd agreed, ‘And to the three that closes it. Aye’

To the nervous innkeeper, Urd finally said in his Midgardian tongue, ‘No, innkeeper, bring us another round and the check. With us, everyone pays the price. You can be sure of that, darling.’

And grinned, widely and almost toothless.
Chapter Summary

Safe in his lair, Loki can finally rest and recover…or something like that.

Chapter Notes

Okay, definitely trigger(s) warning for this one. It's not gonna be a funny one. That’s it. You’ve been warned.

Another Loki song: 10k types of torture, by Mule & Man

And yes, I’m back, after a bit longer hiatus this time, BUT in my defence, first, some of those chapters weren’t actually that easy to write (for some reason, though I love to read them, I always struggle with sex scenes – oops, that’s a bit of a spoiler, isn’t it?). Second, looks like I’ve finally at least temporarily overcome my writing block concerning my original project in my actual mother tongue that I should be actually working on or something. That’s probably bad news for the future update frequency of The Prestige, but very very good news for me, so sorry, so not sorry :D. Third, I’ve come bearing a whole lot of chapters! Seven, if I can silence my inner editor and post them all in the next few days. So, there’s that :). Hehe.

Also, I edited the summary of The Prestige because I had the feeling it wasn't actually all that good.

Loki was reading when he noticed the room was too silent. The book in his hand, about magical properties of plants on Midgard. Leatherbound, it smelled a bit mouldy. Father should take more care of the library, Loki thought, reading on about mistletoe, when he noticed the quiet. He looked up.

The other body pressed him into the ground, his own legs pressed against him, and he got no air, coughed, or vomited, he wasn’t sure. Metallic taste on his tongue, between the awful salty taste, the smell of semen and arousal everywhere, he moved the head sideways so that the blood could escape his mouth at least a little, between the stitches. He coughed, it tore at the stitches, no air, no air. A sound escaped him, he pressed his mouth shut – no, no screaming, no whimpering, not a single sound, you mustn’t, not again! Hands and arms numb, crashed beneath his weight and Baldur’s. Baldur’s hand grabbing his shoulder, holding on while he thrust forward, just press your teeth together, don’t scream. Baldur’s other hand on the floor, right next to Loki’s face, he could observe that hand, the fine blond hair on his fingers, could hear the others pant as they stroked themselves, could hear Baldur pant, while this heavy, heavy body forced itself inside, no screaming, no sound, tearing him up, too much, taking so much space, taking every space, where was he left anymore, he didn’t know, he was gone, he was filled with the other, did he scream, he couldn’t, not with his mouth sewn shut, and then Baldur transformed into a hand, a giant purple hand, and it held him, so little was he, and then it pressed him, pressed his fingers into him, and they entered, they penetrated. And now he screamed, as they moved in, pushed other things aside, filled him, moved and moved
and moved and they dug him over, they left nothing where it was, pushed him aside, penetrated everywhere, every limb, every thought, every feeling, and he screamed, because he could, because his mouth wasn’t sewn shut and it didn’t matter anymore, there was no pride anymore and nothing else to be done, because he couldn’t bear it anymore. This was worse than the Other’s torture, this was worse than everything, but he felt himself give, he tried to resist but felt himself give, make place, surrender. He wept and he screamed and he screamed and he wept, he heard himself plead, please, please, please, please let me disappear. Please, just let me disappear. Please. Just let me disappear. Please. He had stopped screaming for his mother or his brother a long time ago. Now there was just this, but the fingers didn’t kill him. The fingers moved.

Then he thought he heard something. A familiar voice. So very familiar. Soft, warm. Singing. He thought he felt hands cradling his face. The fingers still moved inside him, he still screamed, he still pleaded for death, but somewhere, at the edges of his awareness, there it was. He thought he felt tears falling on his cheeks.

It couldn’t be.

When he woke up, he was lying on the floor where he had collapsed after the teleportation. His face was wet and his throat dry. The pain of the decomposition had faded enough by now that he could feel his muscles ache with exhaustion. His hands were still spasming.

How long?

He should have known that teleporting away from the Mantis would be too much for him at the moment.

It didn’t matter. He was also alone now, in one of his safest lairs. He could collapse here, he could cry, he could scream, he could die, with no one any the wiser. It was all the same.

The voice that had been singing.

No, that had just been his subconscious wish. Mother was safe, she had dropped the habit of dream walking a long time ago. There was no reason for her to take it up now.

He turned to his side, pushed himself up into a sitting position. He was shaking.

Hunger again?

He had to get this under control. Eat. Drink. Sleep. Get his strength back. Set his plans into motion. Take up the new role he had devised for himself, since the Norns had rejected his original one.

Death is not simply given. Death is something you, little godling, need to earn.

Had he not done enough?

Never enough. Never the right thing.

Maybe, if he put in the effort, if he amused them enough…

So get up, Loki! What are you waiting for? GET UP!

*?

He lost track of the days. Every movement exhausted him – because he was weak, always had been,
a sickly child, a runt monster, not even good for that, abandoned to die. There was not much for him
to do, the apartment he used as his lair required little maintenance. The provisions he had stacked it
with would have lasted him for weeks even if he had been able to consume them with a certain
regularity. At the rate he depleted them now, they would last him for months. Pathetic. He tried to
eat. He tried to drink. He tried to get some sleep. He tried to practice with his knives. It was just that
eating was still so… wearying. It was just that his knives fell from his hands again and again.
Useless. It was just that the passage of time… it turned all into one big confused mass, of trying to
get himself out of bed, trying to force down bread or fruit, his knives slipping through his fingers, his
aim off, resting, trying to fall asleep, trying to wake up. It came back during the day too – those
moments when he was lost, without a body, without sensation, or falling, seeing so terrible things,
and they were reaching out for him, they… He knew he was theoretically healing. Theoretically, he
was getting better, stronger. It didn’t make sense that getting up was taking more and more effort
every day. It didn’t make sense that he was feeling dizzy all the time, that he collapsed, that he woke
up screaming night after night after night, no control even over his dreams anymore, dream-walker.
You are just a body here, little godling. Just a body that I can use up.

It was all getting fuzzy. The Other was whispering in his ear, or maybe it was Baldur. The horrors of
the void were reaching out for him or maybe it was Thanos. Laufey was tossing him out into the
snow, or maybe it was Odin.

When he came to himself, he was vomiting into the toilet. He didn’t remember crawling there. He
didn’t remember hurting himself but there were scratches all over his arms, his abdomen, on his
chest. Some of them bleeding. At a few places, the wounds were deeper, he had obviously managed
to tear away skin there, flesh. His face was burning too, when he touched it, there was blood. So he
had scratched his face, he supposed. There was a metallic taste in his mouth, his tongue felt flakes of
skin between his teeth and his cheeks. He vaguely remembered chewing. Maybe the void had spit
him out here. Or this was just another dream and he was really still on Ozymandia, loosely tethered
to his body, swinging in the limbo.

No orientation.

But he had done it, he knew. He had sung his song, and he had lured Thor to Ozymandia, and he
had crawled back into his body, and had stayed there, despite the agony, the ever-lasting agony, so
exhausting, he was so tired, so terribly tired, but he had pulled himself up, and he had escaped, and
he was safe now, alone, he was free to go now, he could finally rest now, finally rest, so… he
vomited into the toilet again.

If you think you know pain.

He leant his head back against the tiles.

Yes, I think I know pain.

His throat was dry again, sore. Had he been screaming some more? Or had he forgotten to drink for
a few days? Well, he had definitely eaten.

You will be begging for something as sweet as pain.

He woke up again later, so he must have fallen asleep. He dragged himself up, cleaned his limbs that
didn’t deserve this care, what was it good for? Could barely hold a fork, his writing barely legible,
useless. USELESS. Went into the kitchen, poured himself a glass of orange juice, made himself
drink it.
Then sat down at the chair at the kitchen table, dropped his head on it.

He missed Ananka. As forced as their alliance had been, he missed her. The conversations with her, about the Celestial, about magic, about politics, the fruit of Isched. She had been smart, she had been a challenge. Open, but cautious. Very pragmatic. The fact that it had taken him so very long to control her… was she alright now? Somewhere out there with her ripe fruit and her people. No guarantees. Loki hoped that Thor had honoured the deal. Found her someplace safe. He was Thor, he would have.

He missed even Thor.

And was that not sad? That he would miss dim, stupid, predictable Thor. Would miss Stark. Trade some more insults. Pay him a visit in his dreams again? Undress that body. Short, compact, so fragile. Caress it until the mortal moans, screams. Play a game of minds. Stark could be another challenge.

What for? He never said yes to you. Your birth right was to die.

Never forget that.

He missed singing. He felt his breath hitch, his heart quicken. Of course, he thought, his body had suffered the most from the song. Of course it would panic.

But it was still true. He missed it. Every second. Letting his voice out, letting it free, letting it sound, and finding it strong, and clear, and flowing everywhere, like water finding its way, like fire raging through a wood, like a storm. Spinning his ballad, forming the words, one after the other, letting his voice create that melody, and it vibrated through everything. And yes, it had been agony, but at the same time… the feeling of it, as it ate away his body, everything he despised… His voice remained clear, and he was finally doing something right, finally, finally, and he was disappearing at the same time, in pain, yes, but disappearing, finally, finally…

Why had it had to end?

Because he hadn’t been able to go on. He had failed even in that. His sacrifice rejected. Everything he did made everything worse. Like with his children … he found himself with his head lying on the kitchen table, crying. Just good for one thing.

An undefinable time later he stood up and took up one of the daggers, his hand for once steady, held it to his chest, at the place where he could conveniently slip it between the ribs, right into the heart. Stopped there, looking at it, as if to solve a riddle, but he didn’t even know what one.

He just knew he held that dagger, and it was close to his skin.

Just one push. Maybe it would suffice.

No.

He breathed in, let his hand open, the dagger fell on the table, right next to the empty glass, it clattered. His hands shook.

No.

He had things to do. He was not free to go yet.

But in this lair, he wasn’t getting any better. And so he knew he had to leave.
Chapter Summary

... quite a few things. Odin... doesn’t.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was an afternoon when Frigga abruptly stopped weaving. She had been about to run the shuttle in between the threads but halted in the middle of the movement, staring at the unfinished tapestry with slowly widening eyes. Fulla came to her as soon as she noticed her queen’s distress, but the tapestry looked as always, and Frigga didn’t answer her questions at first.

Then she whispered, ‘Loki, what have you done?’

Her fingers ran across the tapestry, ‘there’, whispered she, tracing a thread, ‘but why?’

‘My queen, what is the matter?’ asked Fulla. ‘What do you see?’

Frigga shook her head, ‘not only see’ said she, and then, tears ran down her cheeks, but she still kept tracing fine threads on her giant tapestry, so miniscule in the great pattern that nobody but her and her closest assistants could have made them out at all.

‘Why change this exactly? Loki, I don’t understand. Why can’t I see the pattern?’

She chuckled quietly, ‘You hide, you evade me. Clever boy’

Fulla hesitated before she spoke again. On the one hand, Loki was a difficult subject, and had been a source for tension and disquiet in the royal family for a while. Frigga’s anger with Odin might not have been apparent for the general populace, and she tried to hide it from Thor too, but for those others who knew her well, it was very palpable. It was thus wise to weigh one’s words about the matter. On the other hand, Frigga was in a prophetic trance and that meant that one couldn’t afford to be too subtle about one’s questions.

‘What has Loki done, my queen?’ asked she.

Frigga traced another red and golden thread, but her fingers started shaking, her mouth opened, her pupils dilated. Sinking deeper into the trance. She said, almost absently, ‘The Bard has Sung his Song, the audience has clapped, has praised his words, his tale, his melody, his tone. His offer is accepted.’

Numbness spread inside Fulla and made her skin prickle before she even truly understood the words, the implications.

The Bard’s Song. No, it couldn’t be. Was there another way to interpret her divination?

‘But... that’s...’

Impossible?
Loki had taken the world and had… rewritten it? Loki, of all people?

She shivered.

‘His voice was wondrous, was it all’ Frigga said, putting her hands in her lap, now just looking at the tapestry instead of tracing threads. ‘Tree – sighing, stream – gurgling, ember – cracking. Answer and call.’

‘What… what did he change?’ Fulla managed to say.

The queen shook her head.

But she had told her, didn’t she? That she could not see the pattern.

Her eyes were sad. And Fulla grew aware, with another wave of numbness, another wave of prickling skin, what the Bard’s Song also was.

‘Loki…’ said she.

‘The song took payment, gobbled the coin whole’ Frigga said, again almost absently.

Fulla blinked, looked away for a moment. There was much not said in the queen’s assertion, even undressed of the metaphoric gown of prophetic speech. The myths that told of the Bard’s Song also told of the bard’s death. In more detail than of the song itself because a story was always more popular if it was gruesome.

‘Maybe he has tricked us again’ she said quietly.

Frigga didn’t answer, lost in the tapestry.

The marriage between Odin and Frigga had been a strategic one, necessary after a long war. Install Frey as king, keep the sister to assure his cooperation. Marry her so to strengthen the alliance. Frigga had only been formally asked – every party involved had been aware that she could not have refused, and in the beginning, their marriage had been as could only be expected. Formal, distant, and filled with duties. Filled with disagreements and latent conflicts, some running deeper than others. Frigga was a controlled and balanced person, but she was still a mage, and had been a Valkyrie once, and so, in their youth, their fights had been violent sometimes, until Frigga had learned to keep her temper in check, had learned to yield. Odin didn’t resent her difficulties. She was a stranger in Asgard, far from her home, not entirely familiar with the customs, and her passion and fire were among the things that he appreciated most about her. That she could be so calm, so serene, and yet feel with such intensity. He knew soon that if only those feelings could be directed well, she would make a great queen.

Despite this appreciation for her character, Odin had not expected to come to actually love his wife – he had of course been a fool not to see that he had been doomed the moment he had taken her hand in marriage. It was more of a miracle that Frigga eventually came to love him too. Slowly and over the course of centuries, but it happened, and maybe that was who Frigga was – the one who loved where others didn’t.

Maybe that was what pained him so deeply now that she was growing distant again.
It had taken the queen a long time to recover from the dark elves’ poison, a long time during which she hadn’t made any public appearance, during which she had not even had the strength to leave her bed. For a few terrible weeks, Odin had feared he would lose her forever. But she did recover, in the end. And her long illness did much to make people forget she had not been as warm and shining as usual even before the attack. That she had often stayed away from banquets, meetings, trials even before the injury.

Ever since Loki had opened his hand and had let go.

Or maybe the distance had been there even before that. He couldn’t say with certainty when it had begun. But before Loki’s fall, she had never neglected her duties. She had always been there, at his side.

He told her of the necessity of his actions, when they were lying in bed next to each other, after Thor had left for Vanheim. He justified himself over and over, slowly getting angry with her for that. After all, he had been right to send Thor after Loki when Heimdall had told him about the impending invasion of Midgard. He had been right to imprison Loki afterwards – a punishment that many had considered too lenient. He had had good reasons to give in to Vanheim as well, when they demanded him to be handed over. Loki owed them, as did Asgard. And they both knew that whatever Gerdr wanted, Frey would not kill his sister’s son without having excellent reasons for it. At least not the younger one who, Odin was well aware, had always been Frey’s clear favourite.

And Loki finally had to learn that he couldn’t get away with everything.

She listened to his reasons quietly.

When he asked her why she didn’t respond, she said, ‘I have heard it all before.’

‘You disagree with me’ Odin stated.

Frigga didn’t answer at once.

‘You are the king’ said she then. ‘I am only your wife.’

He didn’t like that response. It was a long time since she had formulated it quite that way. They should have been past this.

‘Who I like to consult’ said Odin with a sigh. ‘Because she is wise.’

‘You consult her when you choose to’ said she.

And turned away from him.

He knew that in a matter, she was right. She had disagreed concerning Loki’s imprisonment, and particularly the conditions of said imprisonment, and he had not yielded. But should he have? She was a mother, and she was Frigga – she saw Loki only with love. There was much she was blind to, that was just the way she was, and maybe it was better that way. Maybe it was good that Odin bore this burden alone. Having to see Loki for who he was.

The burden of decisions, of having to draw consequences.

He could also bear her anger.
Then Loki chose to sing the Bard’s Song.

Odin could hear it faintly sometimes when he was standing on the half-repaired Bifrost. A melody, fragile like thinnest ice, yet with the fierceness of a storm, ever-changing like fire. He could make out no words, but he recognised the voice. He allowed himself to cry then, standing on that abandoned half-broken bridge, away from prying eyes. Because he knew that one day, even this melody would fade, because everything does. Because every ballad comes to an end.

Frigga cried silently, at night. Odin wondered if she would feel better if they held a funeral. But such things were not done if there was no body and no one could be sure that Loki was truly dead. He would either turn up one day again, or he wouldn’t. Maybe he would come back even more a stranger than the last time. Even more of the child they had raised stripped away.

The ghost of the ghost of his son.

But could a ghost sing like that? Could a madman produce such soft sounds, chaotic yet coherent, rebellious yet yielding?

Odin had expected many things. He had to admit that the Bard’s Song had not been among them. A proof that Loki could still surprise him.

Always choosing the way I didn’t see.

Clever, creative.

Untrustworthy. Dangerous.

Loki didn’t turn up, but Hlín did. With a revelation about the Bard’s Song that changed Odin’s view on many things, or rather, shifted it until it finally fit and many other events made more sense than they had before. And she came with a suspicious offer of help. Go to Ozymandia, Thor, the time gem is there. And we don’t claim it.

Is this your doing, Loki, wondered Odin but didn’t dare hope. Likely enough, it was just Loki’s verses coming to life.

A few weeks later, Odin woke up from Frigga’s sobs. It was the middle of the night, and the sound pulled him slowly from his sleep.

‘Frigga’ asked he, reaching for her, but he touched only the still-warm linen. He straightened himself up, could make her form out at the edge of the bed, turned away from him. Her sobs so filled with grief that he breathed in.

Was this what she had not let him see?

‘What do you need, my love?’ asked he.

She only kept on crying.

Odin moved to lay his hand on Frigga’s side but she jerked away as soon as he touched her.
‘It’s only me’ said he, but when he tried to reach for her again, she struggled to her feet, away from
the bed, away from him.

‘Don’t touch me, Odin Borson’ said she.

Her anger caught him unaware – she seldom expressed it so aggressively.

Frigga pressed her hands to her face, sobbed, her body shaking.

She also seldom cried loudly.

‘Frigga, you scare me’ said Odin, and she did. ‘What has happened?’

Frigga let out a wail, turned away from him, strode to the window, sobbing on. There, she stood, her
face still in her hands.

‘What did I do wrong?’

She didn’t answer at first. Then, her arms fell to her sides.

‘You never really tried, did you?’ said she to the window, her voice bitter. ‘You posed him
questions, yes, but you decided to believe in his lies. They fit your image of him, and so you were
content. As always. You never really wanted to know, did you? You never really wanted to know.’

‘Want to know what, my love?’

‘What was done to him’

Odin felt his heart quicken, and swallowed. He had thought about it of course, after Hlín had told
him about the aim of the Bard’s Song. What it implied. A part of him had even hoped that Loki had
not given in at once. That he would not have given up his pride and honour so quickly again. A part
of him had said: But Loki knows no honour, Loki is a snake. He double-crossed Thanos like he
double-crossed Laufey like he double-crossed you. He did not suffer, he is too much of a coward for
that.

And he had felt relief, among the resentment, the disappointment, the shame, as aggravated as used
by now to the fact that his feelings about Loki could never be simple, could never be unspoilt.

And there had been doubt. Because would a coward have Sung?

Because it was not true that Loki had not chosen to suffer before, if only out of pure spite. Rather
endure the punishment longer than just once admit that it was deserved.

‘Have you Seen?’ said he.

‘Yes, I’ve seen’ pressed she out. ‘But not in the way you think. I dream-walked tonight, and heard
his cry for help, from oh so far away. But it reached me.’

‘Loki is alive?’ asked Odin.

‘Yes, Loki is alive’ said Frigga, and he felt himself release a breath he hadn’t known he was holding.

A trick again. Loki had tricked them. Who knew what he was planning now?

Untrustworthy.
Alive.

Alive.

But then why was Frigga still so unhappy?

‘He cried for me in his dreams, and I ran to him’ said Frigga. ‘Of course I ran to him, I-‘

She stopped, and then, it was as if all the anger went out of her, taking her strength with her, and her shoulders slumped, she pressed her face into her hands, began sobbing again.

‘Oh, Urd, oh Verdandi!’ she cried out. ‘What did you let them do to him? He was alone! He was so alone!’

She wailed, loudly, then her knees buckled, and she sank to the ground in a fluid motion. There, she wailed again, her body shaking.

‘My baby!’ she wailed. ‘My baby!’

By the Norns, what had she seen?

Odin jumped to his feet, but when he went to her, she jerked and turned her upper body away from him, her face too.

‘Leave’ said she.

‘Please, Frigga’ said he. ‘I want to help.’

Her face contorted.

‘Hear me, Odin Borson, this here is a crutch’ said she. ‘In our path, for I cannot bear to lay my eyes upon you, not anymore can I suffer your touch. I should have seen the harm done by you, your belief in his lies is your horrible clutch on him, Odin Borson, don’t you see, you will lose once you win, may fate reverse the torments you created, Odin Borson, may your monsters love where you feared and hated, by the Norns may the truth be crueller fate to you!’

Chapter End Notes

Do you think she’s a little angry? It kind of sounds like she’s a little angry. Isn’t she a mage or something? Is it wise to anger mages? I’m not sure.

Frigga & Odin and Odin & Loki are, for me, always rather difficult relationships to figure out, in this universe. On the one hand, I don't necessarily like it when Frigga is just a victim of an authoritative husband, on the other hand, all in all, Asgard has a far too patriarchal smell for that marriage to be a truly equal one. And with Odin & Loki, I have a similar dilemma - on the one hand, I don't buy Odin the benevolent father figure who just wants the best for his son. On the other hand, I also don’t buy Odin the super evil cold-hearted bitch. An interesting approach to Odin is made in the fantastic Bargaining by proantagonist, I think. This is also a fic that inspired me for this one, though it was emotionally hard work to read it (and also, quite wonderful).
I wonder will he fall out of bed when he wakes up, like Nemo.

It was one of her peaceful dreams. Where she was in her garden, walking from tree to tree, checking the bark, the leaves, the blossoms. The branches bending towards her because they liked her caresses, liked her care. Silently she went over the possibilities of cell culture – could the trees be made more resistant, the healing power of the fruit increased? This particular specimen under the shade of which she was standing now had been Eir’s favourite for centuries but the plant also needed more care than the others, more water. The one on the rocky ground was less demanding, and its fruits, though smaller than those of the others, were certainly… interesting.

‘It is always a pleasure to listen to you think’ Idunn heard a familiar voice say behind her. ‘But I fear it would be awfully rude if I did not greet you as is proper, my Lady Idunn, engineer of the apples of eternal life and one of the most interesting persons living on Asgard.’

‘Mhm, since you consider most Aesir dumb and drearily dull, I fear this is not as big of a compliment as you make it appear, little thief.’

Without hurry, she turned around.

Loki did… not look well.

Of course, he did, in a way. A practiced dream-walker like him could choose his appearance freely – here, he didn’t even need to shape-shift or a glamour for that. But this time, his disguise did not reach his eyes. Was this a detail he had overlooked?

‘My, Loki, you were healthier when you were still dead’ said she. ‘Why would you dream-walk that far in this state?’

Loki laughed, shortly and falsely, and the next moment, the exhaustion in his eyes was gone, retreated behind a wall, leaving behind what could have been the face of a much happier person if Idunn hadn’t known better.

‘You need not concern yourself with my health’ said he. ‘And as for the compliment, you are right – it sells you short. You are one of the most interesting persons in the nine realms. Does that satisfy you more, my lady?’

He smirked while making a small bow, but it didn’t look all too insincere.

‘It will do for the moment’ said Idunn, and gestured to a bank below two twin trees the treetops of which formed a shield from the sun. ‘But I neglect my duties as a hostess. Please do sit down.’

Before you crumble on the ground, idiot.

‘It is not necessary to be civil to a guest who has invited himself’ said Loki, but sitting down with her nevertheless. ‘And one does not usually faint in dreams.’
At least you admit to keep listening in on my thoughts.

‘No, one never awakes from them if one overexerts oneself too much’ said Idunn. ‘And we have agreed to meet again, so you are not trespassing.’

She raised an eyebrow.

‘After all, you have a debt to pay, since the apple I granted Thor seems to have served you nicely.’

Loki smiled and bowed to her again.

‘Only you could breed a fruit that could pull a soul back from the paths of Helheim’ said he. ‘And counter the mage’s death enough to keep the idiot alive who had condemned himself to it.’

‘So you agree that you have been foolish.’

One corner of Loki’s lips moved slightly upwards.

‘When have I not been?’

‘When you have been strategic and calculative’ said Idunn.

‘True’ said Loki. ‘As for my debt, I mean to pay it in full. I was not lying when I said I had learned to entrance a celestial. And I will share that knowledge with you.’

The knowledge to entrance a celestial. The knowledge that could have saved the planet Asgard from its fate, and soon, she would possess it. Maybe even be able to use it. It was worth more than an apple, and she was certain Loki knew that too. And yet this was all that he had demanded from her in return. Sometimes, she wondered what agenda was behind these deals of his that seemed to always give her the advantage.

‘I have much to apologise for’ said Loki and grinned, his eyes gleaming. Probably with the memory.

‘Mhm, that you do’ Idunn agreed. The abduction had been rather inconvenient. ‘However, you don’t usually go out of your way to seek forgiveness with those you wronged.’

‘Maybe not many deserve it’ said Loki, and his grin hardened. But the next moment, the warmth returned to his expression, and he said, ‘But let us not digress from the subject at hand, the bewitching of the celestial. You would like the person who taught me that art, incidentally.’

‘Would I?’ asked Idunn, not thinking that there was anything incidental about Loki’s mentioning this.

‘Oh, yes’ said Loki. ‘Her main duty is to tend to a plant too – the tree of Isched. Did you happen to hear of it?’

Slowly, Idunn shook her head.

‘It is the heart of her people, and her people depend on it’ said Loki casually. ‘And it produces a single fruit, a single child. If this fruit dies, Ananka’s people are doomed. And thus, the main purpose of entrancing Ozymandia’s celestial was to give the fruit of Isched enough time to ripe. Ananka was ready to spend a life looking for the time gem for that purpose, ready to spend a life looking for the lost knowledge I will grant you now, she was ready to trap my soul and make a deal with me for that, for one single fruit. But maybe I am wrong to see a resemblance.’

No, he was not entirely wrong. Why was he telling her this?
‘Just something that I noticed, that is all’ said Loki. ‘It is irrelevant to our deal. Are you rested enough though to share my knowledge? It will take a while and as you said, overexertion comes with a risk even here.’

‘I am well-rested. Are you?’ asked Idunn.

‘I told you, you need not concern yourself’ said Loki, ‘I have been dream-walking for centuries. I know my limits well.’

She huffed, stood up, reached up into the branches and picked one of the apples, then offered it to him.

‘It is only a dream apple’ said she. ‘It will not have the same effect as a real one. But for the kind of dangers that lurk here, it will do’

He looked at her, caught slightly unaware.

Are you truly surprised? Or is this what you tried to make me do all along, with your exhausted eyes, with your refusal of my worry?

‘I was being honest – I will not die here if I stay’ said he. ‘I would not have come otherwise. I am not that stupid’

Maybe not die then.

‘You could have just asked’ said she. ‘Odin’s law is null and void here. As you should know, Bard. So take it.’

Hlín felt the intrusion, and erected the mental defences even before she turned away from her niece and hit Loki in the face so hard his head was thrown to the side a bit.

‘What was this for this time?’ growled he, rubbing his cheek afterwards, his eyes blazing. ‘Or have you forgotten you did the exact same thing the last time we saw each other?’

‘And I will do the exact same thing all over again once we see each other in person’ said Hlín, rubbing her hurting hand. ‘Your stupidity is worth several right hooks at least, you moron! And you look like shit, by the way, even worse than last time, and that is saying something.’

‘I am alive now, of course I look worse’ said Loki, and nodded toward the door. ‘Let’s go someplace where there are fewer brats running around.’

Hlín would have taken the insults against her sister’s children seriously hadn’t she known how Loki actually was around kids. As it were, she scoffed, and left her sister’s house with him. The dream made it fade behind her, and soon they were in the Vanir woods.

‘I just came to prove that I have fulfilled my part of the bargain’ Loki said, still grumbly. ‘I chose to come back like I said I would.’

Hlín eyed him, thinking of the first time he had visited her in her dreams after the Bard’s Song, asking her to point Thor in the direction of the time gem but not to seek it out herself.

‘Yes, you did’ said she.
'And what do I get out of this, Loki? What does Vanaheim get? The time gem is a valuable resource, you must give me a good reason for offering it to Odin of all people.'

'Why would you ever think that it would end up in his hands?' Loki had huffed. 'And you will get the clock – that is a fair price, is it not? I will even tell you how to finish the magic I put on it.'

'The clock is fair payment for your thefts' Hlín had answered. 'For what you ask of me now, I need more.'

And Loki had smiled in the way that was always a sign of danger.

'I will give you another incentive then’ had he said. 'Ananka has trapped my soul, yes, but as soon as she or Thor or even you free me, I can choose which way to go. I could still choose to take the path that is easier, the one to Helheim.'

'You really threaten to kill yourself in order to make me yield?'

Loki had shrugged, as if his life truly was just another currency he could use.

'The song already works without me as a character. It might turn out less convenient for you that way, for the whole universe in fact, but what do I care? As long as the Mad Titan dies, the rest is unimportant details. I will have had my revenge.'

He would have had his peace, thought she now. Loki didn’t look like he had had much of that lately. And he looked like he craved it.

'Are you still healing?’ asked she.

Loki’s face turned suspiciously inscrutable at that.

'I am recovering quickly’ said he and smiled then. ‘Soon, nothing but memories will remain.’

Nothing but memories, huh?

She took him by the shoulder, made him stop walking.

‘Why did you make yourself an expendable character?’ asked she.

Loki grinned widely.

‘So to give you an excuse to hit me over the head repeatedly of course’ said he. ‘You did love to do that when Thor and I were still children. I thought you might miss it.’

‘Loki, do you take my anger with you lightly?’ asked Hlín, tightening her grip on his shoulder. ‘You were probably the most powerful mage in the nine realms, an excellent fighter and strategist, and a creator of very handy artefacts, and then you just went and threw yourself away! Again! With a war coming! You replaced yourself with Thor who treats magic like a hammer and every problem like a nail. I am aware you do not think highly of yourself, but how could this blind you to reality to such an extend you thought your death was something we could actually afford?’

Loki looked at her for a moment, lost, but then shrugged her off, and the next moment, there was a glint of irritation in his eyes.

‘What else should I have done?’ said he. ‘It is of no importance how powerful I am, of no importance how useful. The author of the Bard’s Song trying to ensure their own survival?’
He laughed.

‘What kind of story would that have been?!’ said he. ‘Of course I had to give the Norns the possibility to kill me, especially since the Bard’s Song itself was killing me while I was singing it! It was a natural character end, a nice, tragic, gruesome one – how could I keep it from them? They would have made it worse, Hlín, just to show me how narration is done!’

‘But they chose otherwise’ said Hlín.

‘Yes, they did’ said Loki impatiently, but then smirked. ‘They did precisely because I suggested I should die. It was the only way to make them even consider the option of keeping me alive.’

Hlín raised her eyebrows.

‘You mean to say you tried to manipulate the Norns?’

Loki opened his arms, and smiled.

‘I mean to say I succeeded. I am still here, am I not?’

Hlín let out a short dry laugh and looked away. So do you want to die now, or not? At least one of the assertions Loki had made in the last minutes was some sort of lie.

‘Bloody Thor of all people a main narrator’ she mumbled.

‘It is the logical choice.’

‘You just wanted to save him, you little liar’

‘You just dislike him so much you are biased’ Loki countered. ‘But you cannot tell me you don’t see the appeal. From a purely dramatic point of view. And he is a person with whom it is easy to sympathise.’

‘And who exactly finds it easy to sympathise with that oaf?’

‘The general populace’ Loki said with a dismissive gesture. ‘The common people.’

‘The Norns are anything but common.’

‘If they did not like to make Thor the hero, the world would look very different from how it does now. I, for example, might sit on Asgard’s throne.’

‘As you might have noticed, you did, for a short while. On the contrary, Thor has never sat there at all’ said Hlín. ‘And you resemble the one who has been occupying it for what feels like eternity much more than your brother does.’

Loki’s lips thinned.

‘I don’t know if it’s all that wise to compare me to Odin’ said he. ‘To my face, at least.’

‘Oh, you know very well I don’t tend to indulge your sensitivities’ said Hlín. ‘And I like you far better than I like your adoptive father if that reassures you. You are less bigoted, for one thing. But I know him, I know you and I know Thor, and let me tell you, if one of you was made in his image, it was certainly not the Thunderer.’

‘In his image’ Loki hissed, tense and cold.
‘Well, you took that image away from him, distorted and transformed it’ said Hlín. ‘That’s what makes you you, and he should have seen it coming. After all, he would not have allowed another to form him either.’

‘Are you saying he tried groom me to be king after all? A Jotnar ruling the Aesir?’ said Loki and laughed, but without humour.

Hlín knitted her eyebrows.

‘I am not sure what he wanted’ said she. ‘The way he raised you… he is a complicated man.’

Sometimes, she wondered whether Odin had ever planned to give up his power at all. Thor was clearly the son expected to become king, but at the same time, he had raised him to be incapable of such a function. Loki had grown to possess many of the qualities Odin had cultivated himself – trickery, strategic thinking, a penchant for manipulation and lies, magic, a certain ruthlessness. But Odin had always pushed Loki down, had kept him on a leash, on the backstage.

Maybe the idea truly had been to install a shiny king with a shady advisor. Or maybe Odin had, more or less consciously, created a constellation where the most reasonable move was to remain on the throne himself.

Or maybe this was one of the rare matters where Odin didn’t know what he was doing because he was a father, and far too involved.

‘A complicated man’ said Loki dryly. ‘You have been saying that for centuries, but lately, I find his hate and disdain for me quite clear and simple to comprehend. In any case, I have not come here to discuss him. I came here to settle our business, that is all.’

‘Oh, Loki, our business is everything but settled’ said Hlín. ‘It is very rude of you to keep visiting my dreams whenever you want to but never showing your face. And as much as I trust my mental barriers, I prefer talking to you when you’re not inside my head.’

‘You want me to come to Vanaheim in person.’

‘As was agreed in the deal with Asgard. Do you think we have forgotten? After all, if you can make the journey so to steal our treasures, you can also make the journey so to pay a visit to your aunt and uncle as is proper.’

Loki eyed her, his face tensing visibly at the mention of Lady Gerdr.

‘If you fear retribution’ said she, ‘Let me reassure you that Jotunheim has bigger issues than the Bifrost incident to worry about. Your crime is not forgotten, and certainly not yet forgiven, but bringing you to justice and executing you, or imprisoning you, would not serve the Frost Giants at the moment.’

Loki didn’t answer but he seemed to retreat behind walls even more. There was no way of telling now what he was thinking or feeling, except for the fact that whatever it was, he was very careful not to let it show.

‘And Lady Gerdr will probably prefer not to kill her late sister’s youngest son’

Loki laughed, coldly.

‘Of course not’ hissed he. ‘When I was a weak infant, my family happily left me to die, but now that I have proven myself capable of terrible cruelty and destruction, despite my size, they finally consider
me their equal, don’t they? I have proven myself a Jotnar. Or maybe they just finally realised that whatever disgust they feel about me, a miserable runt can be of use sometimes still?’

Hlín decided to slap him for that, and the sound echoed around the woods.

‘You ignorant fool!’ said she, rubbing her hand again. ‘You prize yourself to be clever and yet you do not stop and think one moment when it comes to your heritage! You just insult it because you enjoy insulting yourself, and you think the worst of it because the worst is what you want to see in the mirror!’

‘Oh, believe me, Hlín, I would love to forget my true appearance’

‘Because you are a prejudiced little brat!’ said she. ‘Do you truly think Frey would have married the kind of monster Asgard has described to you when they talked about the Jotnar? Do you truly think he would have considered her a worthy ally if all she was interested in was blunt destruction? Gerdr’s people, who are also your people, cannot and must not be reduced to Asgard’s songs about a war they have won. They are as cultivated as the Vanir, and definitely more cultivated than the Aesir.’

‘You think everyone is more cultivated than the Aesir’ Loki scoffed.

‘And they have yet to prove me wrong’ Hlín countered.

She shook her head.

‘People call you the God of Lies’ said she. ‘If this is true, how can you go and simply believe in good faith everything the all-father, who you already know has lied to you for the entirety of your life, has told you about your race, your family, of how you have come to Asgard?’

Loki’s eyes looked insecure suddenly, he balled his hands to fists.

‘Gerdr and you might even come to like each other’ added she. ‘You have a lot in common, you know?’

At that, Loki laughed again.

‘You have a surprising talent of finding similarities between me and the people I least wish to have something in common with’ said he.

‘That, my dear student, says much more about you than it does about me. I hope you realise that’ Hlín said.

Loki shot her a glance, then looked away.

You can’t keep hating yourself with such intensity, Loki. It will eat you up.

They walked on through the dense forest silently, the leaves rustling beneath their feet now that the dream could focus on them more than on the conversation.

‘Yes’ said he then.

‘Yes to what?’

‘Yes, I agree to come to Vanaheim as soon as my quest allows and I am able and strong enough to
make the journey. I agree to meet Lord Frey and Lady Gerdr, provided they will not attempt to
imprison or kill me or otherwise try to hinder me in my mission to defeat the Mad Titan.’

Hlín smiled, and nodded.

‘I am glad.’

But something about his expression was vulnerable, and he looked past her shoulder, lost in thought.

‘I should leave’ said he, almost absent-mindedly, and then, ‘tell me, Hlín. How many died?’

‘When?’

‘When I turned the Bifrost on Jotunheim.’

Oh, Loki. You do not really want to know that.

‘Let me ask you a different question’ said Hlín.

‘Please do’

‘How many died because the heart of Jotunheim was taken after her defeat, along with her last great
treasures? How many died because they suffocated under Asgard’s oppression?’

Loki blinked, evaded her eyes, ‘Maybe my aunt can tell us’, then turned away.

But she caught his hand once more, ‘Loki’

‘What now?’

‘Don’t do it again’ said she.

Loki scoffed.

‘Not even I am so presumptuous to try and sing the Bard’s Song *twice!*’

That is not what I meant, and you know it.

‘Don’t try another way then, either’

Loki’s hand jerked in hers, then he freed himself.

‘Don’t you think you can tell my intentions’ said he. ‘You know how I hate people who are easy to
beguile.’

‘And go and tell Hatchet you made it out’ said Hlín, and Loki’s shoulders jerked up. But well, the
way he was behaving, he deserved some emotional manipulation himself. ‘He’s a real pest when
he’s worried about you. Well, more so than usual. So go and talk to him, get him out of Frey’s hair
before Frey considers decapitating him, alright?’

‘I don’t get lost. I know the woods’ the boy said, staring at Hatchet with his chin raised even though
he looked very much lost, and very much tired.

Hatchet had to smile, then started, shivered, closed his eyes.

‘Are you fond of that memory merely because it was one of the last times I needed your help finding back to my uncle’s castle?’

Hatchet turned around.

Loki was standing close to him, his hands behind his back, his head cocked. And Hatchet could feel it, just as acutely as he had felt its absence the last time – the pulsing in the magic that came from flowing through a body that was *alive*.

He had flung his arms around the other the next moment, pressing himself against that body, burying one hand in his hair, just a dream, just a dream, but he felt the magic, the pulsing, could smell it, could almost smell Loki, he sobbed.

He felt Loki hug him back, felt cautious hands on his back, stroking him.

‘I’m sorry’ he heard Loki whisper. ‘I’m sorry. But I’m here now. I’m here.’
Fuck The Gin Tonic

Chapter Summary

Even more dreams! Is this fic just gonna be full of dreams from now on? Is this Inception in disguise? Did Marvel not only steal the Inception architecture engine, but also all of its plots? Or wait, even though this all belongs to Marvel, am I still kind of responsible for this?

Chapter Notes

Argh, I'm posting chapters like 3 minutes after midnight again so to convince myself it's the next day and I don't go against my own rules of posting only one chapter per day, ain't I?
Ah, well.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

‘… and anyways, who even makes mind-control sneakers? I mean, well, Hydra does, obviously, but that’s just like the exact opposite of the right end of the body for that shit’ said Tony, mixing the Stiff and Bored. ‘And such a comic book villain scheme we actually got an actual plot review by Deadpool for our troubles. And he gave it only fucking 30% rotten tomatoes, can you believe that? He said that this is even less than what he granted Thor for his gig with the dark elves. He literally said, one step down, and we are in danger of using shark repellent. And that’s like a total exaggeration, I’m not fucking Batman and I wouldn’t use a spray. Anyways, I am so fucking glad I was in outer space listening to your stupid ass scream when the sneaker thing went down. Well, come to think of it, your screaming fest probably wasn’t exactly blockbuster material either.’

Loki raised his eyebrows.

‘You’d be surprised’ said he.

‘Yeah, people are creepy and bloody-minded’ Tony agreed, and poured the Stiff and Bored into the glass. ‘So, what you been up to? Blown up any planets recently?’

‘My existence revolves less around destroying worlds than you think’ said Loki and sipped at his drink.

‘You’d think it didn’t’ said Tony, and got the cucumber from the fridge. ‘But you’re still a fidget of my imagination, and at the moment it’s hard to imagine you doing anything else. Well, except screaming in agony or undressing me and fucking me which I can’t even get you to do in my own fucking brain. The latter, I mean. Do you know I did not have one fucking single dirty dream about you yet? What the fuck is wrong with me?’

‘Maybe you simply do not desire me as much as you like to think’ said Loki.

‘Gods, you should fucking know that’s fucking bullshit’ said Tony, waving around the cucumber.
‘You and I both are very aware I end up thinking about your fucking long and slender fingers two
dozen times a day, or about your fucking sharp cheekbones, or your fucking far too flexible hips…
or about your fucking beautiful cock, come to think of it…’

‘You really do use that word a lot, don’t you?’ said Loki, resting his head on his hands. ‘Could it be
that you are a little fixated on the act of copulation?’

‘Hello?’ Tony said and pointed the cucumber at himself. ‘I’m Tony fucking Stark. Three seconds
before you threw me out that window over there’, and he pointed at it, ‘I was still making dick jokes.
See? That is exactly what I mean! I’m not a fucking prude! This whole dream is a huge cock-
blocker, or a repetitive coitus interruptus, and that’s just so out of fucking character for me!’

Then he looked at the cucumber in his hands, as if it had given him a revelation.

‘You know what?’ said he. ‘Fuck the gin tonic! I never get to drink it anyway.’

And he threw the cucumber over his shoulder. It crashed against the whiskey bottles on the rack
behind him and made them tumble, fall and smash to pieces on the floor.

‘Are you thinking what I’m thinking?’

Loki eyed the glass shards and the spreading pool of booze on the tiles.

‘That it’s vaguely arousing how precisely you can and will simulate laws of nature in the
dreamscape?’

‘Well, that’s… not exactly what I was thinking, but I definitely like the direction this is going’ said
Tony, walking around the bar. ‘Sapiophile sweet talking is right up my alley’

‘People stroking your gargantuan ego is right up your alley’ Loki said. ‘Probably because it’s not as
embarrassing as them stroking your tiny pathetic cock’

‘Oh, did you just indirectly offer me a hand job?’ said Tony, slowly approaching the trickster who
was still half sitting on the bar stool. ‘I think you just indirectly offered me a hand job’

Loki laughed.

‘You’re really trying hard to turn this into a sex dream, aren’t you?’ said he.

‘Shouldn’t even be that hard, logically’ said Tony, taking another step towards the other.

‘What, you mean your tiny pathetic dick shouldn’t be that hard?’ said Loki. ‘I could help you with
that, you know?’

‘That’s what I keep suggesting’ Tony said, taking another step.

‘As you wish’ said the trickster, gave him a strangely hard smile, and the next moment, something
rippled like a wave over his body, and then, he had already turned into his Jotunn form. Which
was… huh… not something to complain about.

‘Oh, gods, you were gonna give me a hand job while you’re being all cold and blue?’ Tony gasped.
‘If I had known that I would have ditched the gin tonic a long time ago. This is awesome!’

But Loki didn’t look happy, he looked disconcerted, and when Tony made another step towards
him, he slipped off the bar stool and took a step back.
‘That… is not how I expected you to react’ said he.

‘Why ever shouldn’t you?’ said Tony, furrowing his eyebrows now. This was all getting weird. ‘What did you expect then?’

He made another step forward, Loki made another step back, and turned back into the Aesir form.

‘That is not… you shouldn’t…’ he blinked, his eyes zigzagged across the room, his breath quickened. ‘I think you should wake up.’

Tony felt the pull, and almost instinctively, he resisted. Because this pull didn’t belong here. Because it felt like a foreign element. And he narrowed his eyes at Loki, ‘Something is off about you’ said he.

‘It’s a dream, of course I am off’ said Loki, and Tony felt him pull again. Because it was him.

And then, there was the suspicion, and as soon as there was the suspicion, something about Loki changed, about his optic, as if his features turned more detailed, more coloured than the rest, as if also he were a foreign element in this.

‘You do not belong here’ said Tony in a low voice. ‘I said you were a fidget of my imagination, but you’re not’

One moment, Loki looked caught, the next, the expression on his face was distant and calculating.

‘So here’s your explanation why at least one participant in this conversation was moderately witty’ said he coolly.

‘Oh my gods, you’re the real fucking LOKI!’ said Tony. ‘You’re fucking Loki creeping around in my dreams, stalking me and gleaning information. How long have you been doing this? No, don’t answer that, I know. Ever since I’ve been having those stupidly prude dreams about you, that’s how long. I can’t believe it!’

Loki, as to him, had the audacity to roll his eyes.

‘Well, if you don’t, it only serves me better, so please do keep entertaining your doubts’ said he, and waved his hands around. ‘I’m just a subconscious part of you, in a minute, you are going to stand naked in front of your high school arts teacher, blah, blah, et cetera, et cetera.’

‘I can’t believe the things I told you!’ Tony said. ‘Secrets! Embarrassing secrets! You were always there, listening, posing subtle questions, and I was totally falling for your trick! It was not even a hard one to crack! How could I not get this earlier?’

‘That can be the newest embarrassing secret we share’ said Loki. ‘I promise not to tell – well, no, I don’t. I will tell everyone, I think.’

‘Oh, is that how important I am to you, darling?’ said Tony, setting up his most charming smile.

‘Mhm, you’re right, that would just stroke your ego again, and we really can’t afford that to get any bigger, or it might start creating its own field of gravity, and then where would we be?’

‘See, now you’re making sexual innuendos again, but you never keep those implied promises, do you?’ Tony protested.

‘How is that even a sexual innuendo, Stark? I was going to imply the destruction of a planet again, not a dick with a gravity field that attracts asses.’
'Gods, I was being played like a flute’ said Tony, ‘and all the while not even getting a blow job! You are one of the cruel gods, aren’t you?’

Loki huffed.

‘I was just a fidget of your imagination, just a subconscious part of yourself’ said he. ‘And you already masturbate to your own genius enough. It’s not my job to wank you off too, Stark’

‘It could be. I pay well. Also, picking up Earth slang? Just makes you sexier.’

And there, for a moment, Loki’s eyes flashed with cold fury, the next, his face went blank.

‘The all-speak translates insults, you pointless impostor of a hero’ said he quietly and calmly. ‘You megalomaniac wimp who, for all his bragging, possesses just an empty hole where their self-worth should be, and tries to fill it with knowledge, with science, but knows the hole will always remain there, gaping. You know why I couldn’t make use of you?’

And he put his finger on the arc reactor, exactly where he had once put the sceptre. He put it there gently.

‘Because you have never known anything like a purpose. You do not have one. You do not get one. You exist, but to whose benefit? No one knows.’

And he smiled, and his eyes glinted, then the smile was gone.

‘And now get out!’

Tony woke up in his bed, in the dark. He stared up at the ceiling for a while.

‘Alright’ mumbled he, after having fought down the worst of his thoughts, the ones screaming the most loudly that Loki had been perfectly right about everything he had said and that Tony should go and have a strong drink or several (maybe the whole bottle or two) to forget it.

‘I… seriously pissed him off this time, didn’t I?’

‘Probably, Sir’ commented Jarvis. ‘But it would help if you could elaborate who exactly.’

Chapter End Notes

Tony, nooo! The Norns had their fingers crossed for dream sex and then you had to go and ruin it for them with really bad come-ons. Are you angering them on purpose? Do you absolutely want them to ruin your life in a spectacularly cruel but probably hilarious way?
Will Loki ever turn up again or is this the end of our potential frostiron, thus frustrating the Norns so much that they declare, 'rocks fall, everyone dies'? Is this why at the end of Infinity War, half the universe is shredded? Also, are all mages capable of summoning lube at will? Have I just spoilt you that there will be sex in this chapter? Ah, dang. I’m bad at this, ain’t I? I mean, doesn’t have to be frostiron, could still be Strange/Jane Foster sex or something. Maybe this whole fic will be about Steven Strange and Jane Foster from now on, since Tony and Loki were killed by porn-starved deities of fate. Now that would be weird. Is Steven Strange/Jane Foster even a thing?

Many many thanks to Entropy by Ophelia for betaing all my chapters, but especially for betaing this one!

Till now, kind of my main frostiron song for this fic: Fire, by the fabulous Beth Ditto

Somewhere in this fic, I will fit a scene where Tony and Loki go to a bar because Loki needs to wind down, and winding down, for Loki, consists in creating hilarious mayhem and chaos just by BEING there.
And I'm gonna so fucking relish writing that.

When you're done with the chapter, go give yourselves a real treat and read theorytale's comment, a short story as a reaction to the whole Iron Man Greasing Oil thing, and it's marvellously funny!

The next day, after some breakfast, after fighting down the rather resilient urge to drown his darker thoughts in booze, after skipping a board meeting, and spending a few hours in the workshop instead, trying to get his head around the Skrull pulsar energy drive (and oh yes, the information Thor had given him access to certainly helped), then some tinkering around, then some pizza, Tony had not only finally understood the role of the lava lamp in the whole pulsar shebang, he had come, concerning his dream, to a few preliminary conclusions.

First, he should have fucking known that he was being dream-stalked. Of course Loki would do this. Why shouldn’t he do this? No, that one was totally on Tony. The trickster had been right to take advantage of him, as blind as he had been to all the giant signs and clues.

Second, there was this thing about the sex. Loki had not only not taken up his many offers, he had actively prevented anything from happening, even risking his little game for that purpose. So Tony was either so undesirable to the god that the idea of shagging with him was not worth any information Tony could give him, which, ego aside, Tony wasn’t really prepared to believe – he had noticed how Loki had eyed him on the Mantis sometimes. And no, the gazes had not always been
friendly, but they had not always been decent either.

Or there was some other issue involved that Tony wasn’t yet aware of.

Third, and maybe that was related to second, Tony was pretty sure by now that it was his last assertion that had made Loki furious enough to spontaneously stab his verbal knives deeply into Tony’s sorest wounds (seriously, the guy was far too good at this). And somehow, Tony didn’t really think it was the Earth slang thing that had ticked off the trickster. So it maybe, just maybe, was the –*It could be (your job to wank me off). I pay well* – thing.

So – implying prostitution not cool then, he supposed? Well, there was no reason Asgard should be any more decent about the subject than most Earthen societies were. Tony knew how bad of an insult slut or whore could be. He was just a little surprised at the strong reaction since Loki had taken every other sexual joke or insult pretty well so far (well, except for the one time where he had thrown Tony out the window right after Tony had suggested erection problems? That was something to ponder). And if the myths were right, the trickster certainly had no trouble using against others any kind of verbal weapon he could think of.

Still, it would probably pay to keep the prostitution-is-a-no-no rule in mind, if only so to keep all of his limbs and not to have to lock all his scotch away again, because of fucking triggers.

If Loki ever turned up again.

Which Tony kind of doubted.

And sort of hoped for, which surprised him. A bit.

Half a year ago, he would have laughed at anyone who would have implied that Tony might, one day, miss the God of Chaos.

Hahahahaahahhhhh.

Well, who was laughing now?

Tony, hysterically, at himself, in his workshop.

Maybe the rest of the world just had to start being more amusing. Sure, he was busy, pummelling stupid thirty-percent-rotten-tomatoes Hydra, figuring out the alien engine, bugging his scientists about TAHITI, and trying to find out where SHIELD had buried the sceptre (ah, the look on Thor’s face when he had finally understood that he wouldn’t get his hands on it – just like Tony had known he wouldn’t – it had been glorious), demanding and at the same time neglecting the Avenger domestic bliss, hiding from Pepper, then buying her presents again, being pulled out of the workshop by Rhodey, trying to be a moderately good father figure to Spidey who he wasn’t sure even still needed one? Spending awkwardly silent meals with Bucky. Bumping blunt objects against walls behind which he suspected Clint was currently hiding. Having to deal with fucking Dr. Doom. Being creeped out by Natasha. Denying that Wakanda was miles, no, eons ahead of him in their technological development and secretly trying with all his might to catch up (and failing). Not crying in public about that.

Not thinking about the fact that he was not sure anybody here needed him at all.

So, sure, busy.

But… the problem was, even with all the triggers, he had had more fun in that dream with dream stalker Loki than he had had during the rest of the four months he had been back on Earth.
And wasn’t that sad.

Especially since he had blown it.

And wasn’t that sad that he was thinking of it like that, in terms of him having blown it, when it had been fucking Loki who had non-consensually dream stalked him in the first place!

Which was really… just what Loki would do. And now wouldn’t do… any time soon. So… argh, and there went the circuit board. He had just fried it.

He was really fucking useless.

All in all, Tony was thus a tiny little bit surprised when Loki turned up in his tower three weeks later.

*

He was lounging there casually, at the bar, just like in the dream, looking a whole lot healthier and better fed than the last time Tony had seen him in person, playing absent-mindedly with a coin, letting it travel between his fingers in smooth, elegant movements. And Tony knew that coin, from the one dream where Loki had pulled it from behind his ear with a cheap parlour trick – was Loki fucking with his sense of reality on purpose?

‘So, is this just an eerie inception problem, or are you being a little shit? Or both, really?’

Loki smiled as he slowly turned toward Tony, the coin never stopping its journey around his long fingers, and cocked his head. He was wearing boots, tight leather pants that hugged his legs in an unfairly perfect way, and a dark green shirt. His hair not slicked back this time but looking both softer and wilder somehow, falling on his shoulders in slight curls. On the chair next to him, he had deposited a coat, a scarf and a tie, as if he had felt the need to get rid of uncomfortable clothing, had even felt the need to partly unbutton the top of his shirt, and shit, all this was no fucking coincidence, all this was probably orchestrated to have a very specific effect, and shit, Tony didn’t care, it was working, because that guy pulled off the look like no one else could.

‘I had to finally find out whether your skills at mixing cocktails held up in the real world’ said Loki.

‘That’s not even an answer, Mr. Kneel Before Me’ said Tony, rounded Loki and went behind the bar. He was just going to assume that the god wasn’t here to kill him.

‘Are you offering?’ asked Loki lightly.

Was that an innuendo again? Was Tony’s faux-pas was forgiven then? Hell if he knew.

‘You a drink, yes’ said Tony and got the mixer from under the bar. He had had a few setbacks during those three weeks, thank you Loki for that, and Pepper had screamed at him a few times, but he felt moderately safe now. ‘I did so when we first met here. Never took it back, didn’t I?’

He wondered whether he had fresh cucumbers. But he always had fresh cucumbers. Only this time, he would actually have to choose between them and the rosemary. On the other hand, he might also actually get to drink the cocktail. No stupid beautiful melody and Loki bleeding all over the place interrupting things.
'What do you want, Rudolph?’ said he.

‘Oh, too many things. But I’ve come to apologise’ said Loki. ‘The last time we talked, I was being quite rude.’

He lazily watched the coin that was still travelling around his fingers, saying that, and Tony narrowed his eyes at him.

‘Bullshit’ said he. ‘First, I was being rude too, and second, you would never just come to apologise. There is something else you’re after. You want the deal, don’t you?’

‘I did say I would think about your terms’ said Loki, the corners of his lips pulling up.

‘So you accept them?’

Loki laughed a little.

‘Of course not’ said he. ‘Why would I just accept them? And I have demands too, mortal.’

Tony crossed his arms in front of his chest.

‘The protection of my family is not negotiable, Reindeer Games’ said he.

Loki made a dismissive gesture with his hand, making the coin disappear at the same time.

‘Oh, you can have that’ said he. ‘I cannot guarantee that none of those you mentioned will come to harm. I am no nursemaid after all. But I can swear to not try to kill them, and I can swear not to purposefully put them in harm’s way. I must be allowed to hurt them in self-defence of course, and in the defence of those dear to me – which can conveniently be narrowed down to one person really – but I can make an effort not to harm them in these situations more than is absolutely necessary. I could even swear to protect them as far as I am able without endangering the main mission. So you can go make me that drink, Stark’

‘Mhm’ said Tony, but unlocked his arms and mixed the drink, then poured it into Loki’s glass. ‘So what parts of the terms do you have trouble with, exactly?’

Loki took the glass, inspected it like he had done before.

‘I can live with minimising collateral damage on Midgard’ said he. ‘It makes my work more difficult but not impossible. I certainly have no desire to rule this shithole, and even though Midgard might be good leverage in a negotiation, I suppose I could bargain with something else. So not letting anyone else invade Midgard is a yes too. All those terms of course apply only until the Mad Titan is dead. Afterwards, we both are free to act as we wish to’

‘And fuck up each other’s lives, yes. So it’s the treating me as an equal part you’re not up to?’ Tony said and snorted. ‘Figures, Marie Antoinette’

‘Marie Antoinette never even made that assertion about the cake’ said Loki, taking a sip of his cocktail.

If you despise this realm so much, Tony thought, then why do you know enough about Earth history to even understand that reference and correct me, Loki?

‘In any case, sitting here and bargaining with you, I already treat you more like an equal than I do most Aesir-‘
‘My spider senses tell me that this is not much of a competition-‘

‘-and my respect is earned, not given’ Loki continued. ‘So I will not swear on that. I will also not swear on sharing all important information with you or on telling you always the truth – because I won’t.’

‘That’s not exactly a promising start for a friendship based on trust’

Loki raised his eyebrows, ‘I never said this was going to be a friendship, and if you ever rely on your trust for me, you will lose whatever little respect I have for you just as quickly’ said he. ‘We both know that I am a liar. So do not lose time trying to force me into an oath we know I will be able to eventually circumvent. I was planning to have an intelligent conversation, not talk as if to Sif and the Warriors Three.’

‘Have you just called me intelligent again?’ Tony asked.

‘You will find that actually, I didn’t’ said Loki.

‘Okay, so I’m gonna have to deal with lies and secrets, and I will get my equality only where you decide I earn it?’ said Tony. ‘That’s like, one deal-breaker after the other.’

Loki shrugged.

‘You knew who you were making the deal with’ said he.

No, I don’t. Does anyone, when dealing with you?

‘I’m gonna need something in return if you want me to agree to this’ said Tony.

‘State your demands then’

Tony turned around, got the rosemary out of the fridge. Better than cucumbers today, bitterer. He filled his tumbler with ice. He too had thought a bit about terms and conditions, in-between fighting doom bots, trying not to drink, and designing new suit features for spidey. He had thought through different scenarios, had drawn up alternative strategies. Had thought a lot about the pitfalls of wording.

‘I need the equal partners thing up to a certain extend’ said he, pouring the gin into the tumbler. ‘I can live with omissions, even with lies, but I want you to swear to discuss those parts of the strategy with me that could endanger my key interests, and not lie concerning the risk to those key interests, and respect my veto. I want you to swear to stay on mission to kill Thanos, and to at least listen to my arguments when I disagree with you, whatever you make of them afterwards. And I want you to swear to respect my refusal to take your orders where I find them unacceptable.’

Loki pondered that for a while, then nodded.

‘Agreed, if your key interests are limited to the protection of your so-called family, and of Midgard. And if I will only have to respect your veto where sensible’

‘Sensible for who?’

‘Sensible in the context of our mission and my other oaths, including those to protect the people close to you. You might take a decision that ends up endangering them, and then I would be caught between two contradicting oaths. That is a disagreeable trap to fall into’
Alright, where sensible then’ agreed Tony, and poured the tonic. ‘But I’m not done yet. Regardless of your other oaths, I will need a certain amount of truth, or this little thing is not going to work.’

‘I told you-‘

Tony raised his hands.

‘I said, a certain amount’ said he. ‘Not all the unshared truths you have stocked in an enormous warehouse somewhere. Gods, that’s probably the size of a planet. What I mean is I want to pose you a few questions, in, like, a sort of interview, and I want you to answer truthfully. No fucking omissions’

Loki shook his head.

‘Why do you keep making pointless demands, Stark’ said he. ‘I expected more of you’

‘How is that pointless? If you swore-‘

‘If you, for example, asked me in this interview of yours how I came here today, and I was bound not to lie by omission, do you know what I would do, Stark? I would start by telling you about putting on my clothes, and I would tell you in so much detail that you would beg me to stop long before I had even mentioned the scarf.’

‘Not even you can draw out a story so long.’

Loki laughed.

‘Even Thor can draw out a story until it seemingly stretches into infinity and he is a dilettante, compared to me. Have you ever heard of Sheherazade?’ asked he.

‘That was you?’

Loki raised his eyebrows, ‘Am I likely to have ever manoeuvred myself into a position where I had to seduce some Midgardian emperor each night so he wouldn’t cut off my head?’

‘Not a Midgardian emperor maybe, but otherwise… yeah, actually. I can totally imagine that. Anyways, I get the picture. There will be omissions. But no outright lies.’

‘And this interview will have a defined start and end.’ said Loki. ‘And I will be allowed to choose not to answer.’

‘Hell, no – then you’re just gonna be silent the whole time. You should at least swear to the intention of answering a certain amount of-‘

‘This bores me’ Loki interrupted Tony with a sigh, knocked his glass off the table, and the next moment, before Tony could figure out whether this change of mood meant potential homicide, potential emergency timeshift, or some other weird disaster, the god was behind the bar, a few inches away from Tony, so close he could smell him, musky and slightly sweet, and the trickster was standing there in that vaguely threatening posture, looking down at him, and then he put his long fingers on Tony’s jaw, ‘You should amuse me some other way, I think’

Oh.

Right.

That was also an option, of course.
‘I thought you didn’t want this’ said Tony, feeling the fingers on his jaw, and shit, blood was already rushing downwards, just because of that light touch, not fair, not fair-

‘I said it wasn’t my job to wank you off’ said Loki, ‘I never said I couldn’t think of a way you could give me pleasure, or I you’, made a step forward, and shit, Tony had to step back-

‘But aren’t you still mad?’ said he, as he was slowly guided backwards until his back hit the fridge. ‘You know, for me suggesting you should become a sex worker in my employ?’

‘I gave back, didn’t I?’ Loki said, his fingers travelling along Tony’s jaw, and this shouldn’t have aroused him so much, that cool, bored gaze, as the god measured Tony, judged him.

‘Yeah, you did, didn’t you? You’re like this verbal chain saw killer, but more precise.’

Loki chuckled.

‘Something like that. I might also have visited your CEO’s dreams and have passed her the subconscious message that you should care more about your company.’

‘Fuck, that was you? You really are evil, aren’t you?’

Loki just smiled, almost fondly, and his fingers found Tony’s lips, brushed over them. And then, they pressed in, and Tony opened his mouth just like that, like it didn’t matter. The cool fingers pressed down on his tongue. Oh, they were soft.

‘Mhm’ Loki said.

Then he bent down to Tony’s ear.

‘I want to take you right here in this room on the floor, after I slowly stretch you until my cock brings you nothing but pleasure, until you hunger for it, and then, and only then, I will fuck you into blissful silence. What do you think of that little idea?’

The words were whispered, and Tony could feel his breath, hot and somehow intimate. The fingers left his mouth.

Yeah, well. If he put it like that…

‘I wonder what you are waiting for’ said Tony. ‘I’m saying that I’m fucking in’

Loki grinned at that, shark-like, and the next moment, Tony was lying on his back on the floor, and, judging by the changed perspective on the ceiling, in a different part of the room.

Hey-

‘Is that… you didn’t choose the exact spot where the Hulk smashed you around, did you?’

‘Did I?’

Loki’s eyes glinted with amusement – and something else – as he was bent over him, his fingers gently travelling down Tony’s face, making his skin prickle.

‘That wouldn’t make any sense, would it?’ asked he, his hand going down Tony’s neck. As his fingers touched the hem, the Queens of the Stone Age T-Shirt Tony was wearing just split in the middle as if it was made for that and flapped open like a book, ‘Oh, you’d better repair that afterwards, that was a great concert’, but Loki ignored him, his hand just travelled on, left him before
they could touch the arc reactor (and why didn’t he touch that?) but resumed their journey over his skin on his stomach again, cool fingers, soft, so long, shit, shit, they touched the hem of his jeans and they just fucking flapped open too, totally betraying their owner, or not, depended on the point of view of course, ‘I’ve thought about this, you know?’, said Loki, ‘I’ve thought about making you scream.’

‘This… still kind of sounds like a threat, the way you say it, gah!’

Loki’s fingers travelled down the insides of his thighs now and alright, so Tony had a thing for coldness? Ice cubes could be used for more than just cocktails after all. There was a lot of fun to be had with that particular kink. Even the hard marble floor beneath him felt nice because cool, the god’s hair fell down his face, and when he bent down, it tickled Tony’s collarbone, brushed him, he was so close now, he felt his nose at the place where his jaw met his neck, heard him sniff, saw him shiver. And then Loki kissed him right there on the neck, licked, with this small pointed tongue, and damn, Tony moaned, he shouldn’t moan so soon, this was pathetic, but the cool tongue, the hot breath, and Loki’s smell everywhere-

‘Fuck’ moaned he.

‘All in good time’ said Loki, then moved between Tony’s legs, pushed them apart, and shit, this was really happening, wasn’t it, Tony was already totally naked beneath him, the other still fully dressed, when had that happened, he reached up, wanted to caress the trickster’s hair, his cheek, rip the shirt off, but Loki caught his hand before it could even make contact. ‘Oh no, you don’t’ said he, and those long, smooth fingers had a firm grip, turned gentle the next moment as he guided Tony’s palm to his mouth, closed it around him, sucked, cold tongue, hot breath, GODS (well, maybe this time, one in particular), and he was not allowed to touch, obviously, and he knew THAT game well enough, liked it well enough, only better clear things up first because boy had he had awkward misunderstandings with former sexual partners concerning his preferences in that respect,

‘Alright, alright, I’m saying this right now, if this is going to be a regular thing, I’m not the type to bottom each time. I mean, I love some good domination then and again, and I’m totally fine with you making the rules today, I’m just saying this so you don’t expect me to fuuuuuuck…’

Because the trickster’s other hand was on his cock now, feather-light, such soft skin, while he was still sucking Tony’s palm, the hair tickling his fingers now, and how could that arouse him-

‘You’re not kidding around, are you, Joker?’

‘You’re not easy to shut up, are you, Stark?’ Loki said with a soft chuckle, then applied just the right pressure to make Tony moan again.

‘Should have expected that’ he pressed out between gasping, ‘When do I ever shut – hey, go right back there!’

The hand had left him as suddenly as it had wrapped around him.

‘I think not’ Loki said smugly. ‘After all, what did I tell you about wanking you off?’

‘That is called a hand job and it is totally – oh, alright, yeah, I’m fine with that, go on!’

‘Thought so’

The fingers had cupped Tony’s buttocks, then slipped into the crack and found his asshole, were circling it. Were cool even there, and shit, they would feel perfect inside, he pulled up his legs to give the god better access, which made said god smile, and his eyes smiled too, his cheeks slightly
flushed. How had that happened? But Tony got distracted because Loki kept touching him, circling down there, pushing a bit in, just the tip, not dry at all, wait, ‘Are you using lube? Where did you get lube?’

Loki huffed, held up a small bottle that looked quite a bit too familiar, especially since there was Iron Man Greasing Oil written with edding all over it (that girl had been fun, and a great fan of pegging), ‘Wait, isn’t that mine, have you just summoned my own personal bottle of lube from my nightstand?’

‘Or maybe I’ve gone through your most private belongings and stolen a few choice items before sitting down at the bar?’ Loki pointed out.

‘Well, that just means you planned the sex all along’ said Tony. ‘Awww, is that how desperate you were for me?’

‘I’m just glad your ego is more important to you than your privacy’ said Loki, put the bottle down, and with the next caress touched a bundle of nerves in just the right way to shut Tony up for a bit.

Well, at least, Tony hadn’t been just imagining the attraction.

Loki kept fingering him almost cautiously, looking down at him the whole time, studying Tony’s face as if it told him something, and maybe it did, because he went in deeper then, pulled out, went in once more, pulled out, and yes, the coolness was awesome inside too like tempering a fire that was always in danger of burning too hot. That was why he normally grew oversensitive so quickly. Normally, he always had to balance stimulation against too much, but here, here, it was soothing, and arousing, and arousing, and soothing – Tony noticed that his breath had gone shallow, and Loki pushed in, pulled out, observing him so closely, circling again, in, out, ‘More!’, said Tony.

Loki’s face lit up, his pupils dilated at the same moment, he grinned (and wasn’t that something), and then Tony felt already the second finger. Loki put Tony’s hand that he was still holding – controlling – on Tony’s thigh, held on to it, his soft long fingers working in and out, in and out, the grip on his hand and his thigh so tight Tony felt himself shudder, and a wave of relaxation wash over him. He felt himself stretch slowly, but it never hurt. And how did an alien know a mortal’s border between pleasure and pain so well?

‘Have you…ahhh… slept with Earthlings before?’

Loki chuckled, low and contentedly.

‘I am over one thousand years old, Stark’ said he, and moved the fingers inside Tony’s so to brush gently against the prostate. ‘And using your poetic way of phrasing it, I’m not a fucking prude’

Your despise for my realm sounds less and less sound, Rudolph.

The next brush against Tony’s prostate was not as cautious.

Two fingers were replaced by three, Loki started licking his own lips, absently, started biting his own lips (so is this something you do then?), the grip on Tony’s hand still so tight, and Tony had to ball his other hand into a fist so to resist the urge to reach out with that, touch that sweaty face, that foot that was pressing against his side, because of the way Loki was crouching between Tony’s legs and his own legs were too long, and the foot felt hard and cool against him, the toes curling sometimes, then stretching (so is this another thing your body does). And before he knew it, Tony was mumbling, ‘Gods, Loki, just fuck me, come on, finally fuck me, please’, and shivers went through the trickster’s body at Tony’s words as if he was touching the trickster with them, even though Tony wasn’t touching him at all, Loki moaned.
‘You like it when… ahhh… people beg’

‘It does give me a certain satisfaction’ Loki agreed, his own breath shallow, his mouth slightly open. He hooked his fingers inside him and making him gasp in consequence because fuuuuck.

‘Well please then, I’m begging, alright? Just take me, come on!’ Tony said, the trickster shivered again, laughed hoarsely.

‘As you wish’ he said then.

His fingers pulled out, the foot against his side left him. Loki shifted between his legs, was naked rather from one second to the other, and not sporting any scars (so, a glamour then?), one hand still firmly on Tony’s thigh, the other one grabbed Tony’s hips, lifted him as if he were as light as a feather. And he felt him, at his entrance, and ‘Shit, wait, stop right there, we still need a rubber!’

Tony said.

Loki deposited him on the ground, and cocked his head.

‘Do you even know what condoms are?’ asked Tony warily.

‘I have spent a certain amount of time on Midgard, so yes, I am aware of the concept’ said Loki.

Less and less sound, Loki.

‘Right, so I have no idea what kind of alien STDs there are out there, but I want none of them. Well, at least none of those that can be prevented by, well, using a rubber.’

Loki shrugged, stretched out his hand towards Tony’s ear and seemingly pulled a condom from there, then smirking like the little shit he was.

‘Cheap parlour trick’ said Tony.

‘I told you, all tricks are simple’ said Loki, ripped open the package. Tony supported himself on his elbows and his eyes landed on… well, on Loki’s very erect cock.

Darker than the rest of his skin now from all the blood and the glans thicker than the shaft, and oh god, he wanted to wrap his hands around that, his mouth around that, and he fucking WOULD do that another time, and at the same time he thought, well that’s more of a challenge than I’d thought it would be. Good thing he was pretty experienced by now. In college, this would have been the moment where he would have chickened out.

Ah, well. College was a long time ago.

Tony also wondered whether there was that vulva behind those balls, hidden under a glamour or not, but somehow, he supposed it wasn’t the best moment to try and find out.

And then, Loki pulled the condom over that cock, and that was-

‘You… you just put that on because I asked you to? Without whining about it, without arguing?’

The trickster eyed him.

‘Am I breaking some sort of social code?’ asked he in the bored voice of someone who couldn’t care less.

‘Fuck no’ said Tony and flapped down on the floor again, kind of enjoying the bump of his head
against the marble. ‘And it’s fucking turning me on. You can continue with the script then.’

‘Funny’ said Loki, grabbed at Tony’s hips once more and lifted him, and oh yes, there he was.

Pushing in.

Tony closed his eyes, focused on breathing. His arms were lying on the floor, outstretched, no one was holding him anymore. No one needed to. He was slowly, slowly being filled, and he loved this part, when he had to breathe and breathe, and to give, just to give, and felt the edge of too much when at the same time the call was getting louder, for fucking more!

And there was so much, and it went deeper, until he felt Loki’s hips against his buttocks, until he knew there was no way to go on in that direction.

Tony opened his eyes. Loki was still watching him, his face strangely soft. So flushed, mouth open. The hair damp and tangled, a strand of it caught between the lips. Eyes wide.

Is this how you look then?

Far too beautiful, Lokes. You’re not playing fair.

‘Will you finally get on with it now?’ Tony said.

A hint of a smile, Loki raised his eyebrows innocently.

‘Ah, you want me to get on with it? Why didn’t you say so earlier?’

‘Fuck you’

‘That was the plan’

And Loki bent over him, close now, so close the light of the arc reactor reflected on his chest, bluish and restless, smell of sweat, of arousal, but also still musky and slightly sweet, and he was supporting his arms on the floor next to Tony’s head, still damn heavy, yes, he liked that, the feeling of that pressure on him, hair falling down, brushing him, this sweaty body, and why were Loki’s lips so red, and then the trickster slowly started to move. In and out, staring down at Tony, and then the trickster picked up speed, and Tony began to moan again because shit, this was too much, this was perfect, he was slipping back and forward on the marble, just a bit painful, delicious, his head was moved up and down from that motion, the weight pressed him down, and he just took and took, his own cock lay hard and hot on his stomach, and Loki’s body was brushing against it again and again, he grabbing his shoulder now, thrust forward, Tony let out a scream, Loki laughed, his eyes gleamed, he thrust forward again, Tony screamed again, as the other rammed into him quickly, roughly, then suddenly slowed down, and just when Tony thought he couldn’t take it anymore, once more quickened. His hand gripped Tony’s shoulder tightly, would leave bruises, Tony didn’t care, he heard Loki moan, so cold against his hot skin, saw Loki’s eyes, wild now, and he felt it come, the peak, felt it come miles away, tried to push it down, but it came like a wave, hit him, drowned him, and he cramped and let go.

He heard his own breath. Slower. He blinked. Loki was again looking down at him. Studying him. There was more distance now.

Then he bent down, to Tony’s ear.

‘I suppose we should stop. We have company.’
Tony blinked again.

‘What?’

Loki nodded towards somewhere behind Tony’s head.

Right, they had been boning in the common area, hadn’t they?

Tony stretched back his head to look.

Right, so there was Natasha standing leant against a column, her arms crossed in front of her chest, her head cocked.

‘How… how long have you been watching us?’

‘Just for a minute or two’ said she. ‘Maybe three. Could be four. Didn’t know you were a screamer’

‘I don’t scream for just anyone. And my private rooms are more soundproof’ said Tony then raised an eyebrow at Loki. ‘How long have you been aware?’

‘Oh, he caught up pretty early on’ Natasha said. ‘Smirked at me, then continued to screw you into the ground.’

Tony narrowed his eyes at the trickster.

‘That was pay-back, wasn’t it? That one comment really pissed you off’ said he.

The trickster, as to him, at the audacity to wink at him, then rather unceremoniously pulled out.

Tony shuddered at that, moaned, because, fuck, then stretched back his head at Natasha again.

‘You’re a pervert, you know that?’

Natasha snorted.

‘I’m not the one having sex with a non-human life form and known hostile in a semi-public place’ said she. ‘I was just gathering information.’

‘Found out something interesting?’

‘Many things. Among them the rather relieving indication that you seem to care about safe sex. The amount of people you sleep with, this is really for the better.’

‘Are you calling me a playboy or are you calling me a slut?’

‘I have never understood the difference. Regardless, you and I are going to have a little talk, Tony.’

‘Because I’m a slut or because I’m screwing Loki?’

‘I rather had the impression that he was screwing you. I need to talk to you because you want to ally yourself to him.’

‘Oh, what gives you that idea?’ asked Loki now innocently, who had stood up, had pulled off the rubber, and was walking, unashamedly naked and with Tony’s come on his stomach (and wasn’t that an image to die for), his cock still rock hard (hadn’t he come himself?), to the bar, right over the shards of the glass he had smashed earlier, without hurting himself, and over the bar he lazily bent his
slender, pale body to take the glass of gin tonic-

‘Your little boy toy here is not as subtle as he thinks’ said Natasha, gesturing with her head to the inventor who was still lying on his back. ‘It was obvious he was going to jump at the first occasion you offered him.’

‘At sex or at an alliance?’

‘Either way’

‘Hey, wait there a second, I’m nobody’s boy toy’ protested Tony. And that would have sounded much more convincing if his voice hadn’t still been that weak and if he hadn’t been checking out Loki at the same time who had turned around by now, the gin tonic in one hand, still sporting a huge erection.

‘And you wouldn’t come here just for sex’ continued Nat, ignoring Tony completely. ‘You want to screw him over in the metaphorical way too. Only we can’t let that happen, not with Earth on the line at the same time. So I want to know the terms of your little partnership.’

‘Nope, not going there’ Tony said, his mind jumping back into action. ‘The alliance between Loki and me is our business only. All screwing, literal and metaphorical, too. You’re gonna stay out.’

‘Great job keeping the literal screwing between the two of you so far’ said Nat. ‘And I’m feeling a little excluded. Tony, do you not trust me?’

‘Never in my life, plus, you’re SHIELD’ said Tony rolling on his stomach. ‘I would never in my life and afterlife trust SHIELD.’

‘Do you trust them even less than the mad mass murdering alien invader brother of Thor?’ asked Nat dryly.

Tony pondered that for a moment.

‘By a short margin’ he said.

Loki snorted in the background.

‘And don’t even think of calling in the big guns’ said Tony, pushing himself up, until he was on his hands and knees. Trying to get on his feet was a bigger challenge. ‘I can secure this tower in so little time so well it would survive you nuking it’

And he could hack into SHIELD’s systems even more quickly and make the offense tumble into chaos before it even started – not that Nat had to know that.

‘It could withstand a siege, Nat. For months. So don’t make me go there.’

‘Well, now you’re just being dramatic’ Nat said. ‘Has Saint Hornbearer rubbed off on you somehow? Well, he has, obviously, but… in any case, like I said, we have been expecting this alliance. We can work with it.’

‘You can?’ asked Tony warily.

Natasha shrugged.

‘Definitions of working with it may vary’ said she. ‘Fury certainly has a different one than I do. And Clint’s mostly consists in the challenge of how many arrows he can fit in Loki’s butt.’
'He could certainly fit more into Stark’s butt today than yesterday’ said Loki cheerfully, and downed the drink. Then, with a flick of his fingers, he was clean, all sweat and come gone, and with another flick, he was, once more, dressed in his boots, pants and shirt. *Unfair.* ‘And I am sure we can fit into our negotiations the question of what about our deal is wise to divulge to an organisation that let itself be taken over by people who think that mind-control footwear is the pinnacle of evil genius’

‘The infiltration of SHIELD was slightly better planned that that’ said Nat dryly.

‘Yes, I do hope they didn’t rely on all SHIELD staff wearing a specific type of red sneakers’ Loki said. ‘It would have been very awkward if they had succeeded then.’ He opened one hand towards her and gave her one of his less honest smiles. ‘In any case, you see, dear Lady Romanov, we do intend to share… some… information. And we were kind enough to even give you a bit of a show. But now we need to work. Which means that at least for now, you really do need to get lost. Quickly.’

For the last bit, the smile had vanished.

Nat stared him in the eyes for a moment in a very scrutinising way, then turned to Tony who was limping towards the bar, and pointed at him.

‘You and I are gonna talk, remember?’

‘I suppose it is unavoidable’ Tony said hoarsely.

He slumped down on one of the bar stools as soon as she had left the room.

‘Emovillain, I have to tell you, you totally chose the wrong invasion strategy’ said he. ‘Seriously, back in the day, you should have just invaded *my ass* into surrender. Would have worked. Any time.’

‘But remember, it had not been my intention to win’ said Loki and smirked.

And then Tony noticed the empty tumbler. And remembered the trickster downing it. And finally made the connection.

‘Really now? This is finally not a dream, I get finally laid, actually, I can barely walk so thoroughly was I screwed, and I still don’t get to drink that frigging gin tonic? How is that fair?’

Loki laughed.

Chapter End Notes

You can be sure the Norns very closely watched this one (Verdandi said, ‘Bloody finally!’), munching her popcorn. Skuld told her to be silent, they were going to miss the good stuff. Urd said, ‘Oh, ‘I’ve seen that coming for ages’, and grabbed a handful of popcorn from Verdandi. ‘Now I wonder when Stark is going to notice that there is something off’).

Nat is not the only Peeping Tom, after all.
Yield and Resist

Chapter Summary

A contract is signed with blood. The sacrifice of souls is being discussed. The durability of Tony’s T-Shirts leaves something to be desired.

Chapter Notes

Another frostron song: Lies, by Chvrches.

It had to be said for Loki that he did repair the jeans and the Queens of the Stone Age T-shirt in the end, and so well that you couldn’t tell it had ever been ripped apart (Tony checked very thoroughly). After he had regained enough strength and sense of coordination to put those on, Tony made another gin tonic and downed it at once just to make his point. He told Jarvis to secure the floor and to look out for signs of SHIELD or Avenger trouble, then followed up the gin tonic with a Salty Dog for himself and a Cosmopolitan for his guest.

‘So, we’ve been talking a lot about my terms’ said he, after sprinkling the salt on the edge of the glass. His hands were still a bit shaky, but who cared? ‘What about yours?’

‘Oh’ said Loki, and took the glass from him. ‘I don’t demand much. The same oaths I will swear concerning your so-called family, I want you to swear concerning the Queen of Asgard.’

‘Your mom’ Tony said.

‘That’s controversial’ said Loki. ‘Furthermore, I want you to swear to support me in my quest to defeat the Mad Titan, where possible of course, to share information with me where it serves our goal, to freely provide your resources, including your mind, to that effect, and not to betray me in a fashion that could endanger the quest.’

‘Agreed if I can choose not to share info, in the same way that you can, and if we put some sort of reasonable limit to those resources I am supposed to provide’ said Tony. ‘I know how easily a clause like that can be abused and I’m not the self-sacrificing type.’

Loki snorted.

‘That’s a lie.’

‘Takes one to know one’

The gaze Loki shot him at that was half annoyed, half amused.

‘Also, I want you to swear to have my back where it serves our mission’ said he. ‘Ah, yes, and I want to be exonerated for my actions on Midgard.’

Tony raised his eyebrows.
‘Not demanding much, huh?’ said he. ‘And that last bit is definitely not my decision to make’

‘You could talk to SHIELD’ Loki pointed out. ‘I think it is their decision to make?’

‘What makes you think they should listen?’

‘That you can wreak havoc in their computer systems any time?’

Tony narrowed his eyes at the trickster.

‘How do you even know that?’

‘So you can’ said Loki, his eyes glinting. ‘I thought so. What did you do to Hydra then?’

‘A lot, before they finally took their systems offline.’

‘I did choose my ally well, didn’t I?’

‘Of course you did, I’m the best there is’ said Tony, purposefully not thinking of T’Challa, then of course thinking of him and arriving at his next point. ‘But there are limits even to SHIELD’s influence, especially ever since the Hydra disaster. Wakanda doesn’t give a single fuck about what Fury says and they are pretty pissed off at you at the moment. What did you steal from them, by the way?’

‘Oh, this and that’ said Loki with a dismissive hand gesture. ‘Some wool they had lying around and weren’t using anyways.’

‘Wool?’

‘I modify my terms – I concur that Wakanda is my matter to deal with. However, I want you to use your influence to put pressure on SHIELD specifically to exonerate me, and I want you to try in earnest.’

Tony shrugged.

‘I always enjoy fucking with them, so that’s no biggie’ said he. ‘We’ll see what I can do. Anything else, Marie Antoinette?’

‘After the Mad Titan’s defeat, I want to be allowed to leave in peace. If we ever meet again after that, all our deals will be void, and you will be free to attack me as you wish, and I you. And any further crimes I commit on Midgard after our mission you or SHIELD can of course pursue me for.’

‘Yeah, exoneration usually doesn’t stretch into infinity’ said Tony. ‘Fine’

He drank from his salty dog.

‘Give me time to shower and have a coffee, and then we can sit down and work out the details, Reindeer Games.’

*

The details took a while, because the devil (or rather, Loki) kept hiding in them, but the oaths themselves felt rather anti-climactic. The only really weird thing was that Tony had to sacrifice some blood for them since he, being not a magic-user, couldn’t be bound to oaths the same way Loki
could. Some additional chains had to be added, apparently.

Tony had first outright refused that, arguing that Loki had the advantage over him already, with all the magic and centuries of knowledge and experience. Yeah, and that alien super body. Don’t forget that.

‘I am just treating you like an equal, as you asked me to’ had Loki said. ‘And treating you like an equal implies assuming that you could pose a threat to me, and taking according precautionary measures. I could still revert to seeing you as short-lived cattle if you prefer. But then we should modify the terms of our deal, I think, and redefine you as my henchman. Or my goat. I could promote you to dog, if you want.’

Well, damn, could this person turn one’s own words against one.

‘Equality does not mean ignoring differences in strengths or resources’ said Tony.

‘So you do not have the intelligence and resources to seriously inconvenience me?’ said Loki, his eyebrows raised. ‘Then maybe I should ally myself with someone else after all. And with the blood, you have the advantage in any case. An oath of blood is far easier to break than an oath of magic.’

Was that true? Tony would have to verify that.

He had next refused on the grounds that he had no idea what Loki would do with that blood Tony had given, other than the obvious. But Loki had only rolled his eyes and formulated a very detailed oath on the Norns that reassured even the most pedantic contract-wise parts of Tony that the blood would only do what he had claimed it would do – bind Tony to his word for this exact contract.

‘Alright, so what’s on the menu now?’ asked Tony, putting his hands on his hips after everything had been sworn, and the Band-Aid with the dinosaurs on it had been applied to his arm. ‘Make some real plans? Get the Q & A over with? Honestly, I think I need a break.’

‘We could fuck again’ Loki pointed out.

‘Well, if you put it like that…’

The fresh T-shirt didn’t survive the second round any better than the Queens of the Stone Age T-shirt had the first.

‘Mr Roger in particular is getting interestingly nervous’ said Jarvis. ‘Mr Barton is trying to get in through the ventilation shafts, but I have been able to redirect him so far with the system of movable trap doors you installed last month.’

‘I knew this would pay off’ said Tony. ‘How is our favourite Black Widow doing?’

‘Inspecting her nails and commenting on Mr Barton’s efforts from time to time. She looks very much unconcerned’ said Jarvis.

‘Meaning that she knows she will get what she wants’ said Tony and rubbed the bridge of his nose. It was okay. They had discussed what to divulge and he was moderately confident she had found no way to put a bug on him that Jarvis wouldn’t find.
‘Should I discourage them?’ Loki asked casually. He was lounging on the sofa in the TV room, having put back on his leather pants, but with his shirt completely unbuttoned, showing off his long, smooth and very much fit torso. His naked feet were resting on the coffee table. And how was every fucking bit of his body so distracting?

While ogling his guest, Tony also wondered what discouraging meant in Loki-speak. Maybe find out another day.

‘Nah, I’m good. Jarvis, can you find a way to direct the delivery guy here without the other Avengers intervening or, ideally, noticing really?’

‘I think I can manage it, Sir’ Jarvis said.

‘Thanks, buddy, you’re the best.’

‘I am aware, Sir’

After Loki had taken him again, less gently this time, but not less expertly, Tony had, once he had regained the feeling in his legs, developed a bit of an appetite that could only be sated with Shawarma.

‘You’re gonna love it’ Tony informed Loki. ‘Next to Vietnamese, it’s the best food you can get in New York’

‘I will take your word for it’ said Loki, stretching his body on the sofa.

He did take Tony’s word for it in the end, because he barely touched any of the food once it had arrived, making himself another Cosmopolitan instead.

So was the eating problem still a thing? Tony would keep an eye on it in any case.

‘So, ready for the interview?’ asked Tony, once he had pushed the shawarma from him.

‘Are you sure you don’t want to conduct it in a more… sober… state of mind?’ Loki underlined the adjective with a lazy hand gesture. ‘I wouldn’t want to take advantage of you after exhausting you such.’

‘Yes, you would’ said Tony. ‘But don’t be too hopeful, I’ve had sex, booze, food and time to rest – my mind is as sharp as a diamond.’

‘Well, then, my diamond’ said Loki. ‘You may begin.’

‘…did you just make a Steven Universe reference?’

Silence.

‘You just made a Steven Universe reference and thought I wouldn’t notice! You’ve been watching Steven Universe! This is a kids’ show! How on Earth does a supervillain end up watching a kids’ show?’

‘Are you going to use this rare occasion of me not being able to lie just to test my knowledge about Midgardian culture?’ asked Loki.

‘Yeah… maybe not. So, why did you let go of the Bifrost and let yourself fall into the void?’

Loki huffed.
‘You choose the easy questions to begin with, don’t you? I won’t answer that.’

‘Fair enough, didn’t expect you too. What happened to you after you let go?’

‘The Void.’

‘Can you be more specific?’

‘Yes.’

Tony waited, but nothing else came. Alright, so Loki wouldn’t answer that one as well.

‘How did Thanos find you?’

‘I escaped the Void at some point’ said Loki. ‘Or rather, it spit me out. I landed close to him, in an area under his control. His finding me was unavoidable after that.’

‘Were you injured?’

‘Yes.’

‘Were you in a state to fight?’

‘Certainly not.’

‘Why do you not say his real name?’

‘The Mad Titan had a hook in my mind once’ said Loki. ‘It went deep. And even though it was torn out, names have a particular kind of power. Speaking his out loud could invite him back in.’

‘So not something we want.’

‘Not something we want, no.’

‘Thor mentioned something about a curse that was preventing you divulging Thanos’ plan or doing anything too obvious to stop it. He called it a geas, I think. Was he right?’

‘There was a geas involved, yes’ said Loki.

‘Care to elaborate?’

‘Mhm, I can tell you that it did about what Thor, or rather Odin, with all probability, guessed at. It commanded me to seek the Tesseract for the Mad Titan, and it prohibited me from mentioning him or any other party than myself involved in this scheme.’

‘Could you have broken it?’

‘Yes.’

‘Why didn’t you?’

‘I preferred not to.’

There was a lot not said in that sentence, Tony could tell.

‘What would have happened to you if you had broken it?’
The corner of Loki’s lips pulled up at that. Ahah, so you are content I posed that question? Would others not have?

‘Nothing pleasant’ said he.

‘What exactly?’

Loki just smiled.

‘Did Thanos torture you?’

Loki’s smile froze, then vanished. First, he said nothing.

Then, he said, ‘No.’

Okay?

He had expected Loki to not respond to that question, he had not expected him to deny it. Not with the nature of the scars Tony had seen on his body. Or with him having heard Loki scream for hours on end in what had been absolutely undoubtedly flashbacks.

And yet, it couldn’t be a lie, could it? Loki was not able to outright lie at the moment.

Had all those injuries really come from the Void, just like the god had claimed? No, that was not a sound theory at all.

Or was it a question of wording again? He thought of that one dream he had had, where Loki had been taken up by that purple hand. He had thought at the time that his own mind had invented it all, but this had probably been Loki’s contribution, hadn’t it?

‘Let me rephrase that – did Thanos hurt you?’

At that, the trickster laughed, but it didn’t sound cheerful.

‘You are good at this, aren’t you?’

‘I posed you a question.’

‘I know.’

Silence.

Well, that was an answer too.

‘Why did he not torture you if he hurt you?’

Loki looked at him pensively.

‘It is a matter of intention’ said he. ‘It was not the intention of the Mad Titan to cause pain.’

‘So you’re saying that he caused pain unwillingly? By mistake?’

‘No’ said Loki. ‘I’m saying that it was not what he was after. I’m saying that he did not care. I’m saying that he was indifferent toward the matter.’

And he swallowed, and for a moment, there was something vulnerable in his eyes, then it was gone.
‘Did others than Thanos intend that pain then? Were you tortured there?’

Loki looked away from Tony.

Silence.

‘For how long?’

‘How does it matter?’ said Loki, sounding angry now. His hand gripped the armrest of the sofa. ‘Do you want to know how much you have to pity me? Or how much to despise me? Are you getting off on other people’s failures? I do not see why you consider these questions important for our mission. Why should I answer you at all?’

Why was he speaking of a failure?

‘Lokes, relax, I’m not gonna pity or despise you’ said Tony. ‘Nobody ever wants pity after shit like that anyway. I should know. I was tortured myself.’

The god’s eyes flew to his.

‘Didn’t mind-controlled Clint tell you?’

Loki shook his head.

‘In the Afghan desert’ Tony said and shrugged. ‘For a few weeks. Not comparable to what you probably went through, but then again, I’m just short-lived mortal cattle, ain’t I? A few weeks can be a long time.’

Loki stared at him, then nodded.

‘Yes’ said he. ‘They can be a long time.’

‘And I’m not posing you these questions just for fun and giggles’ said Tony. ‘I need to know a little bit about your history with Thanos so to be able to predict your behaviour around him better. So to be able to judge what a situation or a certain event might mean to you, what reaction it might cause. And I need to know what he knows about you, whether he thinks he has broken you, whether he knows how strong you are, whether he ever considered you as an equal or only as a tool he could use. It makes a difference whether you, right in the beginning, accepted a deal he offered you, like you told Thor, or whether he tortured you into faked submission. It tells me a lot about him, and this is information we can use against him, Lokes.’

Loki continued to stare at him, then looked away.

‘I see your reasoning’ said he. ‘For now, I can tell you that it was mostly the Other who prepared me for the Mad Titan’s use. Nobody offered me any deal of course, they did not think they had to. The Mad Titan was in possession of the mind gem when they found me, and was convinced that this was all he would ever need to subjugate anyone. But even weakened as I was, I resisted its influence more than they were used to. I was not cooperative enough. Thus, their goal was not so much to glean information from me, except what they could learn from the reactions of my body, but mostly to break down my mental barriers since they would find all answers once they were in anyway. The Other used several methods to achieve this, and among them was torture, yes.’

‘How long did it take them to think that they had succeeded?’

Loki’s face twitched at that, he blinked.
'What makes you say that?'

'What?'

'That they only thought they had succeeded.'

Tony raised an eyebrow at him.

'Hello? The fact that you kept working against them, duh?'

The god’s eyes travelled to him, then away again.

'You keep surprising me’ muttered he, then said more loudly, ‘I had no reliable way of measuring time, neither when I was in the Void nor when I was with the Mad Titan. I cannot answer your question. But he sent me to Earth soon after he was finally… satisfied.’

So, worst scenario, almost two years.

‘You are a resilient little asshole, aren’t you?’

Loki raised an eyebrow.

‘They used a spell that kept me alive, Stark, long after I should have, logically, died. It was not exactly my doing.’

Shit. That didn’t sound good at all.

‘That’s not what I meant and you know it. How powerful are you?’

Again, Loki seemed caught unaware by the question.

‘I… I will not give you details about the extent of my powers, Stark’

‘Yeah, sorry, no, I didn’t expect you to. I was just trying to express my awe.’

Loki straightened himself up, ‘Your awe at someone who let the Mad Titan of all people into their mind and let him use them for their ends?’ He snorted.

‘My awe at the fact that it took the jerk so fucking long’ Tony exclaimed. ‘My awe that he never truly succeeded. How can you not see how badass you are?’

‘Am I supposed to answer this?’ Loki asked dryly.

‘I would like to see you try’ said Tony, but then decided to change the subject a bit after all. ‘So he got in, but he couldn’t control you completely. Thus the geas, I suppose?’

Loki nodded.

‘The Mad Titan was aware that I had certain autonomy in my thoughts and actions. The geas was supposed to protect him against my possible betrayal.’

‘Fat lot of good did that do him. So why can you talk about his plans now?’

‘A geas ends with the death of the person it is placed upon’ said Loki with a shrug. ‘I died, so the geas dissolved.’

‘Huh, go figure that. You just had to die. How convenient, Jon Snow’ Tony said.
‘Jon Snow?’

‘Game of Thrones? My watch has ended?’

Loki just raised his eyebrows at him.

‘You’ve watched Stephen Universe but you didn’t watch Game of Thrones? Gods, I can’t believe this! I would make a you-know-nothing-Jon-Snow joke if that meme wasn’t so used up already. But really, this is like totally your world!’

‘Are you trying to insult me by making a rude reference to my Jotunn heritage? Snow because of… the ice… and Jon because of…no, I am afraid I do not follow. This time, your insult is of too meagre quality’ said Loki, looking undecided between irritation and wondering whether even to bother.

‘Ah, forget the name, that’s not what it is about, I wasn’t thinking of Jotunheim at all. Or… I mean, the winter king kind of is a frost giant, I suppose? And the villain? Paints people’s eyes blue too, come to think of it, when he turns them, and into mindless soldiers. Did George R. R. Martin steal the plot from you?’

No, Loki didn’t look amused.

‘But …that was also not my point. The point is, everyone betrays everyone, people get executed, poisoned, stabbed in the back, kids get burned alive, pregnant women are killed, scheming and murder all over the place. The plot of that show is almost as fucked up as your family history.’

‘Is that supposed to tempt me?’ asked Loki.

‘Maybe? I don’t know? Aren’t you Mr. Criminology Dictionary Aficionado? There’s certainly enough chaos in that show to seduce the god of it’ said Tony, narrowing his eyes at the trickster then. ‘By the way, why did you steal the ship’s energy, and my arc reactor’s, while biting the dust? That wasn’t a very nice thing to do’

Loki stared at him, then snorted.

‘You do change subjects quickly, don’t you? The Bard’s Song demands a lot of power’ said he then. ‘And I had not enough to provide, not even after sacrificing my body. If I had not taken all I did, I would have had to sacrifice my soul too. And I did not particularly want to do that.’

Huh. Not particularly.

‘Sacrificing souls? Is that a thing?’

Loki nodded.

‘Yes. It is, as you say, a thing.’

‘Creepy.’

Tony leant back in his armchair, crossing his arms in front of his chest.

‘Why did you not do it?’

‘Are you suggesting I should have?’

‘I am suggesting you should answer my question.’
Loki let his head fall back on the backrest, was silent for a moment. Another uncomfortable subject then. But Tony needed to know just how self-destructive his ally really was. It was clear that his life wasn’t much worth to the trickster, but where would he draw the line?

‘If I had given up my soul, I would not only have died’ said Loki. ‘My soul would have been consumed by the spell, disintegrated by it. I would have truly ceased to exist.’

Sooo creepy. Also, so there was a line then he wouldn’t cross. Good to know.

Kind of relieving too, if Tony was being honest.

‘And that would have meant that I couldn’t have gone to Helheim’ continued Loki. ‘Whereas in Helheim, I would still have had ways to act, to get information to the right people. To hasten the Mad Titan’s defeat. I couldn’t give that up. Not at that point.’

Or his only limit was his mission, his revenge.

Tony almost sighed.

‘Okay, Count of Monte Cristo’ said he. ‘You really want him gone, I get it. So let’s talk about him. Thor said he wanted to get to the infinity stones because… something to do with killing everyone? But how does he do it?’

Loki rubbed his forehead.

‘The infinity stones represent the essential aspects of the universe’ said he. ‘And control them. But when you put several of the gems together, they can do more than just that. Combined, they start to interact, to boost each other but also to influence each other, to change each other’s character. It is possible for a person with a certain skillset and power to wield maybe one of them, but to wield two, let alone three…’

He grinned at Tony.

‘Let’s say it’s a challenging prospect and will much more likely end with the gems taking control of the wielder than the contrary. There are not many who can withstand several of them, and keep the upper hand.’

‘But Thanos is that much of a badass that he’s able to do it?’

‘That was the point I was aiming for, yes’ said Loki. ‘The Mad Titan is old, and has a sort of magic that runs deep and strong. He could wield all six, and all six, Stark, combined in the gauntlet the dwarves once made… there is nothing you couldn’t do with that kind of artefact. You would have it all at your feet – time, space, mind, soul, reality and power. All you’d have to do then was to wish. And he would wish for death, for that is who he is and always will be. A moron.’

Loki had said the last bit very dryly, and Tony had to chuckle.

‘And so he’s going to hunt those royal jewels down, one after the other’

Loki nodded.

‘For eons, he had been imprisoned in a different reality’ said he. ‘Connected to ours only by the Void that we believed no one could cross. But as in all things, the Mad Titan is stubborn, and has found a way. This is why I ended up there in the first place –the paths he was preparing in the Void were creating their own force field that attracted my falling body. These paths are difficult to travel of
course – the Tesseract on the contrary would have given him direct access to our reality. That was why I had to keep it from him at any cost. But he will have taken the slower paths by now, and it is a matter of a few years at most, more likely months, before he will arrive. If he hasn’t already. There are signs that indicate that he may already be here. Far away, but in this universe still.’

‘And what a fun prospect that is. … there are several realities?’

‘Of course there are’ said Loki. ‘The Mad Titan will travel here with his army, the Chitauri, and other armies he has united under his rule in the other reality. Once here, they will take over planets on their way, destroy them and use whatever resources they find there, living or dead matter, so to strengthen their force. He will encounter more difficulties now that he doesn’t possess the mind gem anymore, but the Mad Titan has other ways of controlling people. Then, or rather, at the same time, he will send out individuals to seek out the gems. He will surely use Gamora.’

‘Who is that?’

Loki furrowed his eyebrows.

‘Somebody who would have deserved better’ said he, more to himself than to the other. Then, looking at Tony again, he said, ‘An assassin, and the Mad Titan’s best warrior. A Skrull he stole from her family when she was only a child, and that he raised to be his tool. You should not underestimate her skills.’

‘Yeah, Skrulls can be a bother’ Tony said, thinking of his abductors. ‘Why would Gamora have deserved better?’

Loki’s jaw tensed, but he didn’t answer.

Okay.

‘You’ve been mentioning the Other, and he sounds like a huge jerk’ said Tony. ‘Who is he exactly?’

‘A general of the Mad Titan’ said he. ‘I do not know his race for it is one that is not at home in this reality. But he is well-versed in magic and could control the mind gem almost as well as the Mad Titan did. I said that the Mad Titan was indifferent towards the matter of pain – the Other is… not.’

‘Meaning, he’s to be avoided or, preferably annihilated, duly noted’ said Tony. ‘So how come a Skrull ended up with Thanos if he can’t access this reality?’

‘Because there are Skrulls in the other one too’ said Loki. ‘Or rather, there were. The Mad Titan has made a bit of a mess of that place.’

‘So, when we’re talking about realities, we really mean something like… alternative universes?’

Loki cocked his head, pondering the question.

‘No, not exactly’ said he. ‘Not if you imply the sort of parallel universes that are created by alternative timelines. The place the Mad Titan is imprisoned in is more… mhm, how can I describe it in terms you will understand? …if in a body, there is an infection, sometimes, it creates a sort of bag around it, to protect the rest.’

‘The Mad Titan lives in an infected part of the universe?’

‘The Mad Titan was the infection.’
'And he was isolated from the rest, taking a piece of the universe with him.'

Loki nodded.

'Exactly.'

'Huh' said Tony. 'Interesting way of going about it. So, one other thing about your story I find curious. Why the hell did the Mad Titan offer you the throne of Midgard? It’s kind of a moot reward if the whole universe gets killed like a year later.'

Loki huffed.

'He did not offer me Midgard’ said he. ‘I demanded it for my services.’

‘You did? Why… how were you even in a position to do that?’

'I really wasn’t. But it fit my role’ Loki said and shrugged. ‘He was supposed to think he had driven me more or less completely out of my mind. He was supposed to believe I was shattered and broken. So when he finally thought I was ready and he gave me his command, I picked myself up, walked up to him and started to bargain with him as if with an equal. I was stark-naked but moved as if I was wearing armour. I treated my guard as if he were a lackey, and ignored my shackles and injuries completely. I mentioned in no way his final goal of killing everyone, or what had been done to me, but pretended instead that he had treated me like a royal guest in his house, and had just offered me an alliance I was honestly interested in. And so, in the most polite and respectful terms, I started making demands.'

There was silence.

Then, Tony had to let out a sudden short laugh.

‘Really?’

‘Really’ said Loki. There was just a small smile on his lips, but his eyes glinted.

‘You pulled off the crazy guy scam? With him in your head at that moment? And he didn’t find you out?’

‘A mind is not this empty place that one can simply invade and overlook’ said Loki. ‘It is always a complicated structure, and with some people, it can be an intricate and rather chaotic maze. Controlling it is… a constant fight, and a tricky one, for however much you think you’re the one in charge, you must never forget that you are moving on foreign territory, in enemy land. The better your victim knows their own mind, the more dangerous this occupation will become.’

‘That’s… certainly an interesting metaphor you’re using here. Very militaristic’

‘Why does this surprise you? This is far from the first war I am fighting in, Stark. The Mad Titan is far from the first person I have ever tricked. And remember, the most important thing about a magic trick is to direct your audience’s attention’ said Loki. ‘I made the thoughts I wanted the Mad Titan to see flashy, loud, convinced. I made an effort to believe in what I was saying, while at the same time allowing him to feel the mind-crushing fear of him that was underlying my arrogant and boastful behaviour, the ugly truth about my cruel fate that I was repressing with all my might, covering it up with my delusions of agency. It was not wrong what he saw. It was just not all there was, and whatever he wasn’t supposed to see, I made small, uninteresting, I made fade into the background.’

Tony laughed again.
‘You are really something else, Lokes.’

‘I told you that trying to prevent my lying was a pointless endeavour’ said Loki. ‘If the Mad Titan didn’t succeed, why should you?’

‘Mhm, point made, I suppose’ said Tony. ‘So if what Thanos saw in your mind was not entirely false, did you feel a desire then to rule Midgard after all?’

Loki’s eyes glinted with amusement at that.

‘Mhm’ said he. ‘You caught that detail, didn’t you?’

‘I did.’

‘Ruling any planet has it perks’ said Loki and put his hands behind his head. Which opened his shirt even more, displaying his oh so smooth chest. ‘Especially if you’re trying to win a war. It’s certainly better than getting nothing but more agony.’

‘So it was plan B’, said Tony, multitasking by staring at the exposed chest at the same time, the belly button that was moving with Loki’s breath.

‘You could call it that, yes. I had reason to believe that the Mad Titan would grant me the illusion of having my own kingdom for a while. I was a useful tool after all, and I would be easy to get rid of later.’

‘And did the thought ever cross your mind to give in to Thanos completely? To go over to his side and just, you know, kill everyone and be happy about it?’

Loki blinked.

‘You have listened to me for the past half hour, haven’t you?’ said he. ‘I told you that he was in my head, and that he drove in his hook deeply. Yes, of course the thought of surrendering my will to his crossed my mind, Stark!’

Yeah, maybe he hadn’t formulated that very well.

‘I meant, were you ever tempted?’ said he. ‘Not you as influenced by the mind gem, but genuinely you?’

Loki looked at him, his eyebrows furrowed, but didn’t answer.

Which… was an answer?

Right. Awkward silence this time.

‘Right’ said Tony. ‘That’s… very reassuring, I suppose.’

Loki sight, bent forward, kneaded the bridge of his nose.

‘I don’t know what you want to hear’ said he then. ‘When somebody is invading your mind day and night, it becomes a challenge, after a while, to still tell apart their and your thoughts. I tried, but I was not sure… not every time. And they had ways to… convince a person. I was not… I could not resist every single moment, Stark. There were times…so I cannot tell you-‘

Oh shit, Tony was being so stupid, such a moron-
‘Forget it, Loki, forget it, of course you were tempted, I was being an ass’

As if he had forgotten everything about Afghanistan-

‘I mean I was tempted to give in to those terrorists, give them everything they wanted, I was so close to doing it sometimes, if I hadn’t had Yinsen, and I wasn’t even… look, I get it. Just… just forget I even asked.’

Loki didn’t look like he would. He supported his chin on his fists, but his gaze looked incredibly exhausted, as if a veil had been drawn away. Dead-tired and old.

‘I don’t… I don’t want to continue this interview, I think’ said he.

And Tony’s first reaction was to say, of course, we’ll stop, because Loki’s voice was just a bit too tight, just a bit too cautious, until he remembered that just accepting this was not a swell idea.

‘I’m sorry, Lokes, but I’m not finished and there are questions left that I really need you to-‘

‘We interrupt it then’ said Loki and stood up.

He summoned the rest of his clothes, glowed for one moment, and the next, he was already gone.
Meanwhile, Odin Falls Through the Looking Glass

Chapter Summary

It’s not exactly wonderland he finds on the other side.

Chapter Notes

So, once more, my store of chapters is depleted, and since my holidays are quickly approaching (yay!), you're not gonna hear from me for a while. Which is okay, I think, since I suppose most of you are on holidays too anyways. Hopefully. Somewhere nice near a lake or the sea or something (it's hot at my place, you can tell).

Like so many times before, because he couldn’t sleep, because he took to wandering around the palace then, Odin’s feet brought him to the treasure vault, to the empty pedestal on which the Casket of Ancient Winters had once lain. That Loki had stolen.

And he thought of that day, when Loki had turned around after holding it in his hand, blue, ridges on his skin, eyes red, and Odin hadn’t been able to help feeling a slight disgust. A resentment at being reminded. He had then known that it would all break apart.

Odin lowered himself on the steps. He would not fall into the Odinsleep this time.

You never really wanted to know.

He felt heavy.

Frigga kept avoiding him. He had left their shared chambers right after she had… well, cursed him, going to his private study instead and working on letters and orders until dawn. She had spent the entire next day in the loom room and in the evening, the servants told him that she had moved to other sleeping chambers. He had let it go.

He had let it go when he grew aware she continued to take care not to cross his path in the days after. The weeks after.

From the servants, he knew that for a few more days after their fight, they heard crying from her room at night. Then not anymore. Odin had nightmares himself, but always the same he knew so very well, an old familiar friend who had changed slowly over the centuries, showing their true face more and more as age revealed it.

Odin had first had it only a few years after bringing Loki back from Jotunheim, when Loki fell seriously ill for the first time. In the dream, he was on the icy plains again, in the middle of a snow blizzard, hearing a baby cry in the distance. He called for it, looked for it, but wherever he ran, he didn’t find the baby. He just heard it cry.
In some dreams, he found the baby, held it in his hands, saw it changing into its Aesir form, saw it laugh. He was happy then.

And then centuries went by, Loki grew into an adult, and the dream changed with him. When Odin looked for the baby now, he still heard it cry, but more and more often, he also saw a slim and tall shadow flit around in the blizzard, circling him. And he knew that the shadow was looking for the baby too, was hunting it. And in the storm, circled by that shadow, Odin too felt more and more like prey.

After Loki fell into the void, the shadow was gone too, and when Odin was on the plains, he knew that the baby was still there somewhere, but it was silent. He shouted for it, but never found it, until Heimdall found Loki, until Loki attempted to invade Earth.

After that, the dream changed once more, one last time, as if it had come to some sort of conclusion. Odin then followed the baby’s cries to a temple made of ice. And he recognised it as the one where, over a millennium ago, he had found Loki. But when he went inside, the long shadow was standing bent over the child lying on the ground. Before Odin could reach it, the shadow bent down, scooped the baby up in his claw-like hands, and Odin knew that the shadow would eat it, slowly and steadily, until there was nothing left.

‘Leave it alone’ he said. ‘It is just a child.’

The shadow turned to him, and it had Loki’s face, but his eyes were cold and hungry.

Slowly, he opened his mouth, and just as slowly, he fit the whole infant inside that was still crying at the top of its voice. Then he closed his mouth, and swallowed. The crying stopped.

He walked towards Odin without hurry, and put his hand on Odin’s chest, cocked his head.

But his hand sank into Odin’s chest until his claw-like fingers closed around his heart, pressed.

‘Why won’t you love me?’ asked he.

Odin knew very well what the dream tried to tell him. He was not a fool – he knew what Loki was capable of, and what he had done to those who had trusted him. Loki had shown his true face a few times before.

And the memory of the infant he had once been was now just another weapon Loki could use against Odin. The fatherly love. It made Odin let him in. It made Odin put everyone else at risk just because he tried to protect a child that didn’t even exist anymore, that had been replaced by… by that stranger.

That stranger who had Sung.

The dream did not truly change after the Bard’s Song. But it began to feel wrong. Loki’s face looked unreal in it. His voice just a touch too high. Everything felt askew, distorted, and he woke up from it, disoriented and his heart pounding.

He did not have much leisure time to ponder his dreams however. His days were long, and the dealings with the other realms remained difficult. Vanaheim and Jotunheim continued to challenge Asgard’s rule in more or less subtle ways, Alfheim obviously considered that an opportunity to claw
at more independence themselves, and the dwarves… well, they were the dwarves.

If one looked at it soberly, Odin’s diplomatic means of putting pressure on the other realms were running low. In another day and time, this would have been the moment to call for war and send out Asgard’s armies so to re-establish order, scare the people into obeisance – but even in that matter, Odin’s options were limited this time. Once, Thor had been his best asset, leading the soldiers into battle, shining and bright and invincible – now, his son would probably oppose him, and he himself had grown old and tired. Furthermore, he couldn’t afford wasting resources that he would sorely need for the coming war against Thanos. He was aware of course that this war was an opportunity for the realms to lay aside their differences, unite against a common enemy and build a lasting peace. But very probably, this alliance would also go hand in hand with the power shifting ever more in favour of Vanaheim and Jotunheim.

Oh, how right he had been to prevent the marriage of Frey and Gerdr for so long! Loki would have agreed. If he were there, he would have thought up a new strategy already, one that didn’t rely on Thor, on soldiers, or on Odin’s usual diplomatic weapons, one that would turn the table in an unexpected, creative way.

But Loki was not there.

Thor was not there.

Not even Frigga was.

He was abandoned by all. Weakened. He had relied on other people for far too long. He had relied on Loki for too long.

He had been cursed by the woman who had once loved him.

Sometimes, he could even admit that he was feeling lonely.

His impatience won, in the end. He sought Frigga out after a servant had told him that she was in the gardens, and he found her under her favourite tree.

She looked up as soon as he stepped near.

‘What do you want, Odin Borson?’ asked she. Her face, a moment ago relaxed when she had been reading, had hardened now.

‘Will you have words with me, my Queen?’ asked he and bowed a little.

She closed her book and stood up.

‘You need not extend gestures of respect to me, my King’ said she.

‘I wish to’

‘They are not welcome.’

He at first didn’t know what to answer to that. It was a long time since Frigga had spoken with him so, and his first impulse was to reprimand her. But she had done the unthinkable already, had used magic speech against him. He had to be cautious with his words now more than ever, or he might
lose far more than his pride as a king was worth.

‘And why is that, my Queen?’ asked he.

‘If a woman is beaten and then bowed to by the attacker, she will not welcome the bow’ said Frigga.

‘Have I beaten you?’

‘If only, but you have done worse’ said Frigga. ‘You have not listened to me, Odin, when you should have’

I have hardened my heart to our child because I had to, Odin thought. It was not easy. It hurt me as much as it hurt you, Frigga.

‘It was Loki’s choice to let go’ said Odin. ‘I tried to save him, and I wept for him, you know that. But I cannot be held responsible for what happened to him after his fall.’

‘You did not listen to me before the fall’ Frigga said. ‘You did not listen to me when he came back!’

You told me to open my arms and expose all my weaknesses to a man who had already murdered one of his fathers, Odin thought. Who had tried to murder your other son. How could I have done that? How could I have then lived with whatever crime Loki would have committed next?

‘He had just tried to invade Midgard, claimed sole responsibility and was unrepentant about it! And before that, he had tried to destroy his own home planet! Should I have let him walk free and watch him ravage another realm?’

‘He needed help!’ Frigga cried.

He would have used all help I would have granted him against me!

‘By the Norns, Frigga, he is a grown man!’ said Odin. ‘Who finally has to learn to live with the consequences of his actions, and needs to stop acting like a stupid, defiant child! He let himself fall into the void, so yes, there were consequences! And yes, there were also consequences for the crimes he committed on Jotunheim, for his alliance with Thanos, and for not warning us about it! Geas or not, there would have been ways to tell us – Loki, of all people, would have found one! But instead, he kept us guessing again, played with our minds and feelings again, purposely leaving us in the impression that he had acted alone and out of his own free will, while Thanos was probably already preparing his next move! Do you have any idea how many lives he put at risk with this childish behaviour? Loki finally needs to understand that not everything in this world is a game!’

He could feel her magic flare up with her wrath – when had she lost control that way the last time? – before she took the book in her hands, ripped it apart, threw it on the ground (no, Frigga, don’t do that, you just paid a price, so what did you pay it for?), strode over to him, and laid her hands on his temples. Briefly, he regretted his words – he had known that they were unjust, in a way, but in a way, he also felt in the right – before he was plunged into darkness.

And then, he saw.

And kept seeing.

It wouldn’t end.
At some point, he grew aware of himself again. That he was on his knees. That he was weeping.

He looked up.

Frigga was standing over him, looking down at him.

‘Do you still think that for him, this is a game?’ said she.

For a moment, he didn’t even understand her question.

He had thought he had seen the worst when he had watched them feed Loki his own eyes, his own penis, his own tongue. When they had made him suck on that eye because he was missing his teeth at that point. When they shoved his tongue down his throat because he was missing his jaw at that point. The penis, though, they made him chew on that. Chew. But just when he had thought that surely nothing worse could come, everything had changed again, and there had been this giant purple hand closing around him.

First, the hand was just holding Loki’s limp body, almost gently, and Odin wanted to breathe out, wanted to feel relieved, even though he knew who the hand belonged to. Wanted to think, against all reason, that it was finally, finally over. But then the fingers pressed against Loki’s body, and the body gave, and Loki shrieked, his body glowed, he screamed at the top of his voice, like a slaughtered animal, like Odin had never heard him scream before, not even during all the memories of torture he had witnessed, not even when Loki had been at his worst, had pleaded for nothing but death. Not even then he had screamed like that. But his body just gave, the fingers penetrated it, and then, once inside, they started moving. Loki’s whole body started glowing then, his screams got even higher, and Odin could see how the fingers were too big for that body, bulged it while rummaging around, stretched it, went everywhere, simply everywhere, and Loki screamed, and screamed and screamed and screamed and screamed and—

Odin shook his head.

‘Have… have you shown me everything?’ managed he to say after a while.

‘I doubt I have seen everything’ said she. ‘And some things you have lost the right to know.’

And he wailed at that without even being sure why, but it felt as if teeth were sinking into an old, infected wound deep in his chest, and he sobbed, buried his face in his hands. When he finally found the strength to look up again, Frigga had left and he was alone.

That night, he was on the plains again, hearing the baby cry. He ran around, shouting Loki’s name over and over, while the cries were getting higher and more desperate. Finally, he found the temple made of ice, and stepped in. Outside, everything had been covered in snow, but inside, it was dry, and the fragile and elaborated ice sculptures glinted in the magic light he had brought with him, the complex architecture stretched out before him, empty and beautiful. He ran through the maze, following the cries, and thought he would never find the end, until he thought of that one hall and suddenly simply was there. And there, huddled in a blanket in a small crib, lay the child, still wailing. He ran towards it, and took it up, the small blue nurseling, its crimson eyes pressed shut, tears
running down its cheeks.

‘You are safe now’ he whispered and cradled it. ‘I’m here, you are safe’

And the baby, hearing his voice, stopped crying, looked at him with wide eyes, and then, a ripple went over its body, and its skin turned pink, its eyes green.

The baby laughed.

He laughed too, and rocked the baby gently.

‘No, Odin’ Loki’s voice said.

Odin turned around. The long thin shadow was standing there, wearing Loki’s face. He stared at him with such wild sadness.

And suddenly, the room changed, and there were people lying on the ground, blood-stained and lifeless, one of the bodies close to the crib, lying on their stomach, their hand still transformed into a sword of ice. The ice-sculptures smashed to pieces, the walls partly melted, a smell of magic and iron in the air. And the baby was crying again, it had never stopped, Odin looked at it, and it was blue again, and crying, and he noticed that he was holding it too tightly, it was crying because he was hurting it.

And then the shadow was there, and pulled it out of his hands, and he pulled back and the baby wailed.

The shadow laid one hand on Odin’s chest. Odin felt it sink in.

He let go at that, and the shadow at once put both arms around the baby protectively, took a step back, then another. Slowly, he opened his mouth, watching Odin warily, and slowly, he fit the whole infant in, slowly he closed his mouth, slowly he swallowed.

The crying stopped.

Loki put his hands on his belly protectively, and suddenly, the belly was big, and round, as if he was pregnant, but the rest of him was still so very thin.

Odin stretched out his hand.

Loki shook his head.

‘No, Odin’ said he.
**Chapter Summary**

Sometimes can be gigantic. Also, if you spend all of your vacation time flirting, Aeneas, at least make sure to lock away your stuff first. Basic beach rules, man, basic beach rules.

**Chapter Notes**

Vacation time was great, a lot of sun and beach, now I'm back and drowning in work a little, hahah. But well, I'm back. Also, I'm still having a creative phase concerning my original project, so while this means less time for the Prestige, it makes me a lot better humoured and easier to live with all around.

I have a few things to say:
First, please, if you haven't yet, do yourself a favor and read theorytale's comment on the "Fuck It Twice"-Chapter. It's a funny short story and you will love it!
Second, all of you are wonderful, and your comments make the flame of my creativity burn with the power of a dying star... er, that's kind of a macabre metaphor.
I will try to make an effort and answer every comment from now on, but if I don't, please don't be mad. I promise I cherish every one of them. I just don't always have the spoons for interaction.

And I edited the summary for this fic once more because I'm me, and I think I found my song for the Bard's song. It creates the atmosphere I imagine, sad and triumphant, hymnic and gentle. But you are of course free to choose your own Bard's Song :).
Oh, okay.

‘Care to share?’

‘I would if you explained to me how your invisible assistant works’

‘You mean Jarvis? Sure, no problem if you explain to me how magic works’

Loki gave him a crooked smile.

‘At least, we shall have matters to talk about’ said he. ‘How did your family take the happy news by the way?’

‘Oh, they did what families usually do when you bring home the new boyfriend’ said Tony. ‘Cautiously overreact’

Bruce had sighed on the phone. Nat had grilled him about the terms for hours. That she was silent about the matter now did nothing to reassure him. Clint had reacted as was to be expected. He still wasn’t talking to Tony – though how this was a punishment Tony wasn’t completely sure.

Steve had rubbed his eyes, looked at Tony with this terrible disappointed gaze, and had said that he was sorry but that this meant they would have to reconsider Tony’s place in the Avenger’s Initiative. At least, it had taken Steve several minutes of stammering and spluttering until he had managed to say that he feared Tony was being manipulated via sex.

‘Alright, so who here believes that I, Tony Stark, can still be compromised by sex’ had Tony asked at that, and had or had not enjoyed the awkward silence that followed.

By far the most uncomfortable conversation had been that with Pepper.

She had listened to his reasons, to the deal’s terms, and then had been silent for a bit.

‘What about you?’ had she then asked.

‘What about me?’

‘There are a lot of clauses preventing Loki from hurting me and the Avengers, but it says nowhere in this deal that, if it serves his goal, he can’t hurt you.’

… right.

She had looked at him, then put her face in her hands.

‘I need a holiday’ had she said.

‘Of course’ had Tony said. ‘When would you…’

‘I need to get away from you now’

‘Pepper, I can take care of myself, I-‘

‘No’ had Pepper said, and thrown up her hands. There had been tears in her eyes and shit, he had not
wanted to hurt her like that, this hadn’t been what he had aimed for- ‘No, Tony! Don’t rationalise this! I’ve had enough of this bullshit when we were still together. I’m just your CEO now, and that means I don’t have to listen to you explain away your self-harm anymore. I can’t change you, and sometimes, I can’t deal with you, so I just go. I’m taking a holiday. Now.’

Yeah. Right. That could have gone better, he supposed.

Peter had looked at him wide-eyed, had said ‘I’m sure you know what you’re doing, Mr. Stark’ and then talked about all the internet memes there were about Loki out there. Apparently, Loki mostly did what he wanted in those. Peter was really the only one who had taken it well, come to think of it. Well, except for Bucky who had just looked away and otherwise not reacted at all. But that was Bucky for you.

Thor, as to him, was gratefully still on Asgard.

‘Fascinating. And did you have time to discuss the matter of my exoneration with SHIELD?’ asked Loki now, putting the repulsor back on the table and taking up the metal boot instead.

‘I made time, since I couldn’t wait to see the look on Fury’s face. He nearly popped a vein. It was marvellous’ said Tony. ‘Kind of will take a while to convince him though. One might almost think he has something against you, Rudolph.’

‘Such ungratefulness, after I practically acted as the mid-wife to his Avengers initiative’ said Loki and shook his head.

‘Maybe that’s what he’s so resentful about’ said Tony. ‘I think he secretly hates us all. Or maybe just me – that’s always a possibility. A lot of people just hate me. Anyways, playing the mid-wife, that’s another thing you like doing, isn’t it? Destroying planets, giving birth – you’re a bit ambiguous as a character, aren’t you?’

‘What a striking analysis of my personality!’ said Loki and mockingly put his hand on his chest. ‘No person ever has said this about me before! You know me so well!’

‘Yes, I do, don’t I?’

‘I have come here to work, Stark, not to listen to your rambling’

‘So you haven’t figured out yet that working with me consists mainly in listening to me rambling, or not communicating at all?’ asked Tony. ‘Who of the two of us is being slow now? And yeah, we have an interview to finish.’

‘Yes, please, do get on with it’ said Loki, slightly impatient.

Hey, you were the one who delayed the whole project by two days because you were moping, buddy.

‘Alright, so I’ve been thinking a bit about what you’ve told me the last time’ said Tony.

That was an understatement, really. Tony had been thinking about it a lot. About all the things that Loki had said and not said. The spell he had mentioned that had kept him alive when he long since should have died. That he had stood before Thanos naked. That they had gleaned information from the reactions of his body. That torture had been just one of the methods they had used – so what had the others been? Especially if they had had the goal to break down Loki’s mental barriers. The way
he had spoken of the Mad Titan’s violence that had been indifferent but, Tony guessed, not less terrible. That in combination with the peek into Loki’s nightmares he had unwillingly taken… yeah, maybe not so good. And then there was what he had said about the ‘trick’ he had played on the Titan.

I made an effort to believe in what I was saying, while at the same time allowing him to feel the mind-crushing fear of him that was underlying my arrogant and boastful behaviour, the ugly truth about my cruel fate that I was repressing with all my might, covering it up with my delusions of agency.

It was not wrong what he saw. It was just not all there was.

Tony had to admit he had lain awake at night for a while, turning these sentences around in his head. They implied… a lot. They admitted… a lot. He was pretty surprised in retrospect that Loki had been that honest with him. Because even if that was not all there had been, what he had said had not been lies. Couldn’t have been.

The guy could endure a fucking lot, he had been gutted and had just laughed about that, he had even taken the fucking decomposition of his body in a certain stride (well, except for dying), and yet, he had hit rock bottom out there, had been turned inside out by these people, had lost all his hope of making it ever out. Well, he had heard Loki plead for death in his flashbacks. Tony was pretty sure by now that the trickster had absolutely meant it.

There is no version of this where you will come out on top.

Ouch.

Maybe, just maybe, that had not been the most sensitive thing to say back then? Was that why Loki had thrown him out the window? Or had he just silently agreed?

And it did explain, in a way, the casual and almost indifferent way Loki had been treating his own pain, his own death, ever since. The soberness with which he had discussed the option of sacrificing his soul.

… and all that made some things that Loki had said and not said even more remarkable.

Like that he had kept resisting. Or the amount of information he had managed to glean from Thanos during that time.

‘And thinking about what you said, I noticed that for all being Thanos’ prisoner, you seem to know a lot about him, about his plans. So… how did you pull that off?’

Loki put down the metal boot, and slowly let his fingers travel over the armour.

‘It seems I am rather good at gathering knowledge, doesn’t it?’ said he.

‘That… is not exactly an answer.’

‘But true’ said Loki.

So you don’t want to tell me. Okay. Something told Tony he shouldn’t push.

‘So, next question – how did you get Thanos to-‘

‘It was nothing mysterious or glamourous, Stark’ Loki interrupted him. ‘People eventually get
incautious when they think you are too gone to hear them. Considering how often I didn’t have working eyes or ears, I gave them many occasions to believe that.’

Tony couldn’t help but shiver. At the same time, he wondered, why are you telling me this, Loki? Why so ready to expose your worst moments, your vulnerabilities? That’s… not something you do. I think.

‘Yes, that makes sense. I wouldn’t have expected you to tell me though.’

Loki shrugged.

‘You were the one who said that they wanted to know how the show is done. You were the one who said that I couldn’t tell you what you find ugly. So, Stark, this is how the show is done. I’m telling you the secret behind the trick. Do you still want to know more?’

‘Of course I do’

But Loki’s eyes turned distant.

‘You’re lying’ said he. ‘You shivered when I told you. You congratulated me on my tricking the Mad Titan, but at the same time, I could see the disgust in your face because of the way I accomplished it. Because it was not a glorious tale, not a tale of strength and bravery, but one of a squirming beaten dog who whimpers and cowers before their owner and bites them only when they are not looking. I think you like to boast to be a scholar, but that in the end, you prefer the mystery after all. You want your happy ending. You do not truly want to know the price.’

So this was what was going on. It had been a test – Loki had told him gruesome details just to see how Tony would react. And it seemed like Tony had failed. Which was… not at all fair, in his opinion.

‘Yeah, well, so your story didn’t leave me cold, so what?’ said he. ‘And don’t start with the pity or despise shit again, this is not about either of those – this is about not being a psychopath devoid of empathy, Emovillain! What did you expect anyways? That I listen to your story, understand what it means, shrug and say, okay, that’s fine, what’s for dinner? Is that really what you would have wanted?’

‘I want to know’ said Loki, and his eyes glinted in a rather dangerous way, ‘why you are Iron Man’

‘Wait, what?’

Loki spread his arms.

‘What all this means’ said he. ‘Your little project of trying protecting the weak with a metal flying suit, when what is harming the weak on this realm so evidently cannot be blasted away by your little weapons. It’s delusional, Stark, it is far more becoming of Thor than of you, and you are too smart not to understand the foolishness of your actions. So either there is another game here that I do not see, or you decided to look away from the truth. And then, my dear mortal, your place is in the audience and not with me.’

Alright, so the test was not finished yet.

‘Isn’t it a bit late to find out whether the person you want to put on the show with is an assistant or a spectator?’ Tony said.

Loki glowered at him, but took down his arms, turned away.
'I could still demote you’ said he.

‘I’d like to see you try’ said Tony. ‘But fine, you want to know what Iron Man is?’

Loki had given him a lot of truths so far. Maybe it was time that he gave back.

‘You’re perfectly right, it is a delusion’ said he. ‘Of course it is one, what else should it be? The delusion that Tony Stark can ever be good for more than making money. For more than destruction.’

He chuckled.

‘You probably know that – I was a weapons manufacturer before I got blasted by one of my own bombs in the Afghan desert’ said he. ‘I was a war lord, and back then, yes, I did not want to see what that meant. No, I did not want to know the price. But then my own creation deposited shrapnel in my chest because someone I called family tried to get rid of me, and then some assholes tried to get me to build weapons for them the hard way, and then the only person there who helped me died when we tried to escape, and all that made me just a tiny bit more aware of reality.’

He stalked around the table.

‘I am not a good person’ said he. ‘Honestly, just between the two of us, I’m scum. I am responsible for a whole lot of people dying, for a whole lot of that shit that you rightly said cannot just be blasted away by repulsors. I mean, just look at this tower – you don’t get or stay that rich by not playing the game. And the game sucks. In the game, few people win because a lot of other people lose. So the very fact that I won tells you that this here -‘

He waved at the metal limbs on the tables.

‘- is a scam’ said he.

‘A scam for who?’ asked Loki, eyeing him sideways.

‘Well, most of all, for me’ said Tony, raising his eyebrows. ‘Do you really not see? I need to bullshit myself into this little hero gig, I need to lie to myself that I can be a half-decent human being, that what I’m doing now can somehow make up for what I did before, or I will just continue where I left off, and the price for that is too fucking high.’

‘You’d not be the one paying it.’

‘That’s what I fucking mean.’

Loki narrowed his eyes at him.

‘You are contradicting yourself’ said he.

‘You are the God of Chaos’ said Tony. ‘Why are you complaining?’

Loki let his fingers travel over that table.

‘I wasn’t’ said he, then paused.

‘You were about to ask me how I got the Mad Titan to grant me the sceptre that held, after all, the mind gem.’

‘How do you know I was going to ask that?’
‘I would be very disappointed if you didn’t’ Loki said. ‘It is, at first sight, not exactly a wise thing to do. But the Mad Titan did not think he ran much of a risk, placing the sceptre in my hands. Even though I had the mind gem, and used it, I did not wield it. I did not control it, quite in the contrary. It was, in short, a leash.’

‘Mhm’ said Tony. ‘And the gem was embedded in that sceptre. The Tesseract you only used once Selvig had built a machine around it. Is that why you came to me?’

Loki’s lips pulled up, just for a moment.

‘Why would you think that?’ said he.

‘Because of what you told me last time’ said Tony. ‘That it is impossible for most people to wield more gems than one at the same time.’

He went up to Loki.

‘I think you want to race Thanos to the jewels. I think you want to use them against him. I also think you need something to help you channel their force without overwhelming the wielder. And that is where I come in, isn’t it?’

Loki looked down at him, then grinned.

‘I’m glad you are paying attention’ said he. ‘We are both creators, Stark, in our own specific field of expertise. I am sure we can think of something.’

‘You want to combine Earth’s technology with magic’

Loki cocked his head.

‘That was one of my ideas, yes’ said he. ‘You did express the desire to learn more about the nature of seidr. And exchanging knowledge will probably be unavoidable in this quest in any case.’

Alright, so that was a tempting offer.

‘Do you know where the other gems are?’

‘I know the location of most of them, yes’ Loki said. ‘The time gem I already possess, the mind gem is with SHIELD. The space gem is with my father – and I will deal with him when the time is ripe.’

‘So far so old news. The others?’

Loki tapped on the table.

‘I have a fairly good idea where the reality gem might be but I will have to verify it. The soul gem does not have to concern you for the moment.’

‘Doesn’t it?’

‘If we are lucky, we will not need to retrieve it. My guess is that also the Mad Titan will not attempt to take it until he has the other five. The person who possesses it is… rather difficult to deal with.’

Alright, so… very difficult to deal with then. Probably one of the more powerful people of this universe. Which was certainly saying something.

‘The power gem?’
‘The Skrulls’ said Loki with a small smile.

Oh. That was... unexpected.

‘Why the Skrulls?’

Loki went around him to the face plate of the suit that was lying behind Tony on the table, taking this one up next, and turning it in his hands. Even though he was not directly looking at him, Tony had the impression the trickster was paying even more attention to him than before. Huh.

‘The Skrull Empire is expanding quickly at the moment – you might not be aware of it because of your rather peripheral position in this galaxy and because of the protection you enjoy, but many worlds are being sieged by them, have been conquered by them recently. They amass power, and so they sought the power gem. So they sought you.’

Oh.

That made... not very much sense if you thought about it? Tony was maybe a big shot on Earth, but compared to what all those other civilisations could do? Compared to what the Skrulls could do?

‘...why me?’ asked he.

Loki raised his eyes innocently, ‘Shouldn’t you tell me that it is only natural your genius should be known across the universe?’

‘Oh, shut up!’

‘Is that a way for you to end our interview?’

Loki was looking more and more amused.

‘No, of course it isn’t! I take back the shut up, and want explanations instead’

‘Mhm’ said Loki and put the face plate back. ‘What did you think why they abducted you when it happened? You must have thought about it then.’

‘Of course I did, Sherlock, but it wasn’t like anybody told me anything in a language I knew, so I concentrated on the rather more pressing issue of getting back home’ Tony said, feeling himself tense. Yes, he had thought about the whys in his solitary cell. Of course he had. He had thought about them later, when his abductors were already dead and he was trying to get the ship to do what he wanted and then some more when he had been staring at that crack in the ceiling, wondering whether he would ever make it home.

But there had been nothing to help him along in that area and he had learned, in the end, that this was a dangerous question. A question that led to nothing productive, nothing conductive to survival.

He had buried it then.

Accepted that this was just a thing that had happened to him, randomly and for no reason he would ever find out, and that was just it.

Peachy.

And now Loki came and...

He swallowed, felt his hands trembling.
The way the trickster looked at him, the tremble didn’t exactly escape his notice.

‘This realm, however ignorant its inhabitants are of other worlds, is not as cut off from the rest of the universe as you might think’ said he, his voice gentler. ‘News of the New York invasion has spread to other empires, and so has your role in ending it. I suppose it is fair to say that killing an entire army with a single rocket was impressive enough for the Skrulls to consider you an asset worth a little excursion to Midgard.’

‘Are you saying my genius truly is known across the universe then?’ Tony said.

‘Are you saying you invented the atomic bomb?’ said Loki and chuckled. ‘Tales get distorted and I suppose your role got exaggerated. You might or might not have also been made responsible for closing the portal.’

Tony narrowed his eyes, the suspicion rising slowly.

‘The way you’re wording this tells me you’ve had a part in distorting the story’

‘Oh, only a minor one’ Loki said, pursing his lips, joining his hands on his back. ‘I merely nudged it in the right direction’

‘You got me abducted!’ Tony said. ‘And hauled across half the galaxy, you fucker!’

Loki hummed.

‘I cannot take full responsibility for that, I’m afraid’

‘This is so not cool, you freaking asshole!’

All those weeks, all the loneliness-

‘An epic tale works well with a hero who brings about victory out of his own personal efforts’ said Loki as if he had not noticed Tony’s anger at all. ‘It is easier for people to identify with than with the story of a civilisation that has simply certain resources to defend itself and uses them. Furthermore, blaming you personally also meant the Skrulls never learned that nuclear weaponry is so common on Midgard it borders on the trivial, and that they could abduct any moderately renowned scientists to obtain it. We do not want to have the Skrulls getting that particular technology, Stark – or most of the other civilisations. As backwards as you are in many other respects, nuclear power is one aspect of humanity that puts you at a certain advantage.’

Huh. There was a lot in that to file away as very useful information.

‘Seriously?’ Tony said. ‘Skrulls have pulsar drives but no nukes?’

‘Technology does not evolve the same way on every world’ said Loki. ‘Though electricity is indeed something many worlds discover at one point because many planets have an electro-magnetic field, the direction Midgardian technology has taken after this discovery is not as common as you would think. Your choice is due to both your very specific approach to science and to the overabundance of radioactive material on Midgard. Most worlds have chosen other paths to channel energy.’

‘Like magic?’

‘Or pulsar energy’ said Loki and bowed a little in acknowledgement. ‘Or the sun. Or probability. Or emotions. Or shifts of tectonic plates of their planet. Or soul energy. This list is not complete of course.’
‘What, you mean all that *can* be used? What the fuck?’

The way Loki looked at him was almost pitiful and it reminded Tony a lot of how Hlín had looked at him after his mentioning the ‘electrical system’ of the Mantis.

‘Yeah, yeah, I know what you wanna say, just stuff it, and at least, we can split atoms’ said Tony because he could just see the speech about backward red-neck planets coming. ‘Which fucks up our planet big time, granted, but apparently, it’s still an asset sometimes? So why would you care if Earth’s nuclear knowledge ended up with the Skrulls? Don’t you still pretend to not give a shit about us?’

‘More than Midgard’s fate would be at stake if nuclear weapons spread among the stars’ said Loki.

‘Mhm’ said Tony. ‘But wouldn’t that just create more chaos? Don’t you sort of love that kind of thing?’

‘Are you trying to change my mind?’ asked Loki with a slight smirk. ‘Because I *could* still visit the Skrulls and try to trade the power gem for this technology, you know?’

‘Don’t pretend that you weren’t thinking about that option even before I provoked you’ said Tony, pointing at the trickster. ‘Well, you’ll have to find another one, this one is off limits. So, part of the artefacts you stole you used to find the jewels. I know you used the clock to find the time gem.’

‘Though it was not me who used that particular artefact in the end, yes’ said Loki.

‘Why the string?’

‘I used it for the Bard’s Song’

‘How?’

‘Because for the Bard’s Song, you have to spin a thread’ said Loki, grinning widely now.

‘What did you steal from T’Challa?’

‘I told you – some wool’

‘What for?’

‘For the same purpose.’

‘What did you steal from the Vanir?’

‘A spindle – do you see the pattern yet?’

‘Mhm’

Loki had answered those questions almost too willingly.

‘But that is not all you took, wasn’t it?’

Loki laughed.

‘What do you think?’ asked he. ‘And no, I won’t answer.’

Okay, so that was a dead end. No trouble, take the other turn you neglected earlier.
‘Why did it have to be T’Challa’s wool?’

‘Because it had specific qualities I was looking for.’


‘It’s the Golden Fleece’ said Loki lightly.

There was silence.

‘What… you – you don’t mean, like, the Golden Fleece golden fleece, the one with capital letters, don’t you?’ said Tony then. ‘Not, not the one from Greek mythology, surely? Because that would be… just…’

Loki chuckled and said nothing.

‘No, really?’ asked Tony. ‘No shit? Gods, T’Challa not only has Vibranium but also the fucking Golden Fleece, it’s not fucking fair!’

‘Well’ said Loki. ‘He doesn’t have it anymore, has he?’

‘This thing is supposed to be in fucking Greece, gods damnit!’ exclaimed Tony. ‘It’s a Greek… thing… that exists, apparently. But fucking Greek! How on Earth did it end up in Wakanda of all places?’

‘Aeneas shouldn’t have spent so much time in Africa, fucking foreign rulers’ said Loki. ‘Didn’t keep a good eye on his possessions. And many of the objects that have power in Africa will end up in Wakanda at some point.’

‘Fucking Aeneas lost the fucking Golden Fleece to his lover? I can’t fucking believe this shit!’

‘Then don’t’ said Loki.

‘Fuck you. And tell me more about the Bard’s Song. Why did I hear it already when we were first doing the Ratatoskr dance, before you had even sung it?’

‘Ah, you noticed, didn’t you?’

‘Sure did.’

‘A story doesn’t necessarily start the moment you tell it’ said Loki. ‘The past is important for any good narrative.’

‘You changed the past?’

‘That is not what I said.’

‘Not in so many words. Why do I keep hearing it in my dreams?’

Loki smiled.

‘Because you are a character in it’ said he. ‘That you were close to me when I Sang helps too, I suppose’

‘Okay, cool, tell me about that story then. The next great Asgardian novel – give me the elevator
pitch.’
‘No.’
‘Come on – the general plot. Your role, mine. Anything.’
‘You know the plot. Defeat the Mad Titan. The rest is details.’
‘I love details.’
‘Well, you will have to learn to live without them.’

Loki had been amused before, almost relaxed. Now, his posture was stiff.

‘Loki, Loki, there is always at least a teaser-’

‘I will answer no more questions about this, Stark, and if you keep insisting, I will answer no others either.’

‘Okay, okay’ said Tony, raising his hands. ‘I get it, an artist doesn’t want to explain themselves. So no more questions about your bestseller, I promise. Just… one more question about our mission, well two, but then I will end the interview, alright?’

The trickster nodded.

‘Acceptable’

‘Am I supposed to survive this gig?’

Loki looked at him closely, but didn’t answer.

Which… alright. Maybe Pepper had been right about Tony. He had been a moron.

‘Your death is not necessary for my plan’ said Loki then.

‘That… doesn’t really say much.’

‘No, it doesn’t, does it?’ said Loki.

Silence.

Fuck, he never should have given the God of Mischief the possibility not to answer, and to lie by omission. No matter what the little shit had planned for him, at the moment, he was obviously purposely fucking with his head. Probably so to punish him for his insistence about the song.

Yeah, well. Then fuck back.

‘Okay, last question.’

Loki opened his hand in an invitation.

‘Go on.’

‘Are you planning to survive?’

Silence again.
‘Why should the answer to this question be relevant for you?’ asked Loki then, almost warily.

‘Simple, I need to know my ally’ said Tony. ‘If my ally is suicidal, that’s a weakness our enemies can exploit.’

The trickster paused, then nodded. His expression remained calm, business-like.

‘I do not plan to give our enemies any advantage to exploit’ said he. ‘You can be assured of that.’

‘That’s no answer, and this time, I fucking want one.’

‘Why shouldn’t it be reassurance enough?’

‘Because however you don’t plan to give Thanos an advantage, that’s what you might end up doing anyways. We can’t afford him winning just because you let yourself be blinded by your self-hate.’

Loki’s face went blank at that.

Oh, sore spot. Very sore.

‘What do you know about self-hate, Stark?’

‘Enough to know that it can blind you.’

Loki paused. He seemed to ponder something.

‘You wanted to know more about the Bard’s Song’ said he then. ‘And I will tell you this – with this kind of magic, it is essential to know which narrative rules one can break, and which not. One of the rules that one truly should not break is that as the author, I must not be so arrogant as to try to ensure my own survival. So I cannot plan it. I can only create a story where my death is not essential to the plot.’

‘And this is what you have done’

Loki made a gesture of acknowledgement.

‘It is not essential, no.’

Just like Tony’s demise wasn’t. Not necessary. Not essential. A lot of negations here, but no real answers. But his gut feeling told him that this was all he would get, at least for now.

‘Well’ said he. ‘That concludes our interview, I think.’

‘And thank the Norns’ said Loki and rolled his eyes. ‘I was beginning to fear the Mad Titan would arrive on our doorstep before you had finished.’

Again, Emovillain, it was you who were the delay.

‘You just want to be able to lie again’ said Tony.

‘It is quite a refreshing activity’ said Loki. ‘Now’

He went up to Tony, took him by the chin with his long fingers.

Aw, shit, there went the blood again. Downwards.

‘Let’s see’ said the god. ‘What could we do to unwind a little from this dreary honesty?’
Tony had really planned to top Loki this time. Because yes, he liked to switch, and so far, both times they had had sex, Loki hadn’t given up the reins for even a minute. Tony had barely even touched the trickster so far, and he definitely wanted to do that. Feel that pale skin, curl those raven-black strands in his fingers. And give back a little. Make Loki finally come because that hadn’t happened yet either and Tony was beginning to think that maybe he, as a mortal, just didn’t last long enough to sate a god. Not that there weren’t ways around such a problem. If Loki only allowed him to do something.

But it was hard to hold onto these thoughts, or these worries, or this wish, when Loki had him spread out on one of the working tables, and was sliding in and out of him in long, smooth movements. Loki had somehow, subtly but surely, avoided Tony touching him again, and now he needed both hands so to hold onto the table anyway. And Tony had been begging for Loki’s cock again, he knew, and he didn’t regret it one bit, because of the way the god’s fingers gripped his legs, because of the way he looked down at Tony, silent and almost business-like, but with his pupils blown, his hair tangled.

Because of the way this felt, being hammered into the table, with enough force to border on pain but never truly touching that place, and he knew the god could break him so easily, with just a little more enthusiasm, he knew that Loki’s movements were carefully controlled, that this was why he was always watching Tony, this was why his attention never strayed, and being observed like that, seeing the trickster’s tip of the tongue shoot out and lick his lips when Tony moaned, while feeling him inside him, hearing the slick sounds of his movements, the sound of his hips smacking against him again and again – he came with a long and blissful scream, and the trickster chuckled.

Chapter End Notes

You didn’t really think I’d forget about the Skrull abduction plot, did you?
The Trick To Life

Chapter Summary

… is not to get too attached to it.
Old comrades meet but for at least one of them, it’s a bit of a disappointment. Also, more dialogue. There is so much dialogue in this fic. And magical theory. Or capitalism theory? What’s the difference again?

Chapter Notes

The soundtrack for this chapter is brought to you by my perfect used muse Entropy_by_Ophelia.
Oh yes, and I’ve stolen a scene from The Prestige (the movie). Because surprise, I like it. Loki would approve.

Tony poured the coffee into the mug, ‘I need to observe the stones in real life, then analyse how those stones influence each other, and only then, at the earliest, I can create the first rough scenarios.’

He put one of the mugs on the table in front of Loki and took a big gulp from his own. They had discussed the gems’ powers for hours, the possibilities of magic-technology fusions, how other species, like the Skrulls, combined both, and how Tony could use the Mantis as a first blue print and prototype for his own magic technology interface. Now, the craving for coffee and snacks had driven Tony out of the workshop and into the kitchen.

‘I already know quite a bit about the nature and danger of three of the gems’ said Loki, ignoring the offered mug completely. He was picky, wasn’t he? ‘And about interferences between them. The employ of the mind gem and Tesseract taught me much in that regard.’

‘And that will help us’ Tony agreed, wondering whether he should have added sugar for the trickster. Somehow, he imagined Loki to be a secret sweet tooth. Why was that? ‘But I doubt you had sensors with you that measured those interferences in a way that would render me able to create mathematic models, right?’

Loki cocked his head.

‘The device Selvig built had data analysing software installed’ said he. ‘That was Selvig’s idea, there was just no reason why I shouldn’t agree to it.’

Tony whistled.

‘Is that so? Clever guy, he sort of tricked the mind gem twice then, didn’t he, and that as a puny mortal! Either he’s too intelligent for it to control him, or too cuckoo. But in any case, I suppose we should get the results.’

‘You will have the honour of stealing them from SHIELD, I think’ said Loki. ‘And weren’t you
going to eat? I believe you humans need to do that every few hours.’

And Loki didn’t need to eat? Thor certainly did. A lot. And often.

‘If I find any food, I will’ said Tony, turning to another row of cupboards, opening them, ‘Was it
Clint’s turn at grocery shopping again? Because there is like nothing there.’

At that moment, there was a sound like something cutting through air, and a muted thump, and he
knew that noise, knew it from battles. From missions. He froze. He thought of cover. He thought of
the probability of a hostile having penetrated the tower and not having used the occasion to shoot
him in the exposed back by now. It was pretty fucking low. Which meant that there were a lot of
possible explanations for that noise that Tony could safely put away, focusing on those most
probable instead, which could be narrowed down to a few, the most probable among them was…
slowly, he turned around.

Loki was still sitting at the table. From his chest, near the shoulder, there was protruding a bloody
arrowhead. The rest of the arrow was protruding from his back.

And there, behind him, in the common room where the Avengers liked to play video games and that
opened directly towards the community kitchen, Clint was standing, having silently dropped from the
ceiling probably, another arrow already waiting to be released in the strained bow. Aimed at Loki.

Ah. He had been right then.

Where the fuck was that guy hiding all the time?

‘No, it was your turn to shop, Stark’ said Clint, sounding perfectly calm. ‘And your reflexes
seriously suck today, asshole’

‘If you were trying to shoot me, your aim sucks even more’ said Tony, trying to sound calm himself.
He didn’t really feel it. Because he didn’t like the look in Clint’s eyes. He didn’t like it at all.

‘I meant the other asshole.’

Loki hadn’t moved, and was looking, despite the arrow sticking in his body and his bleeding on the
table, pretty undisturbed.

‘Yes, come to think of it, you should really stop aiming your arrow at the other ass-… I mean at
Loki. Somebody might get hurt… more… so don’t you want to start lowering your bow?’

Tony accompanied the words with his outstretched hands slowly moving down, because that was
supposed to be deescalating, according to the training. He had been bad at the training. He had like
failed all the tests. He also started slowly walking past Loki towards Clint.

‘Mhm, no, I don’t think I really want to lower my bow’ Clint said. ‘I want that fucking son of a bitch
to stand up and face me, I think. Yes, that’s what I want in fact.’

Loki let out a soft chuckle at that, and stood up in such a smooth and fluid motion Tony momentarily
doubted he had bones.

Then he turned, and there was a smile on his lips, disdainful.

‘Are you sure it is that what you want?’ asked he, and his voice was sweet. The bad kind of sweet.
Why did he have to provoke? Why was Tony even posing himself that question?
‘Would you rather not be done with it without confronting me? Shoot me in the back again, that way not having to face what I mean to you? The imprint I left on you? Are you sure that you are…ah, ready?’

Clint’s face twitched at that, and he drew the bow until the bowstring creaked.

‘Stark’ said Clint, his voice still so perfectly level. ‘How many arrows do you think he can take before he dies? I’m undecided whether I should aim for as few as possible or as many.’

‘Look’ said Tony, still walking slowly towards him. ‘I know what he did to you was wrong, I know you have a right to be angry. But right now, this is my fucking ally. You will step away from my ally. And not shoot him.’

The same moment, Hawkeye released the arrow. Tony saw Loki’s hand move, so damn quickly, but it wasn’t quick enough. This time, he coughed from the impact, breathed more heavily afterwards. Well, he had just been shot in the fucking stomach!

‘You shot him in the stomach!’ Tony shouted. ‘You shot my fucking ally in the stomach!’

‘He’s not your ally’ said Clint simply, and had already pulled another arrow from his shaft.

‘Fuck, Clint, this is not funny anymore, stop or I’ll MAKE you!’

‘You can’t make me, Stark. You’re no match for me outside your suit’ Clint said matter-of-factly and drew the bow. ‘By the way, really, what is wrong with your reflexes, you horny motherfucker? I’d say you’re not even trying, but I could see that you were. This is worse than New York. Are you just getting continually more pathetic?’

Loki cocked his head, his smile widened.

‘So you are beginning to open the boxes, my Hawkeye’ said Loki, and the weird thing was, there was a gleam in his eyes now that hadn’t been there before. His face had become alive, with something almost akin to excitement. ‘The little gifts I left for you to find, bouts of truth. Very much in the spirit of Christmas. Or was that Easter? All those myths, it gets confusing… But can you distinguish it then? The stone’s touch… and mine? Can you tell which one was more… intimate? Do you feel me still?’

He got a reaction out of that. From one moment to the other, Clint’s expression became open, hurt, exposed, and the next moment, he had let go of the arrow.

It shot through the air with the same cutting noise, pierced Loki’s chest with the same muted thump, near the other shoulder, and he even stumbled back a step this time.

‘For fuck’s sake, CLINT!’ Tony cried.

This time, when Loki looked back up at Hawkeye, his face was wild and senseless, he was at Clint so quickly, the bow had snapped in two so quickly, then Loki had already wrapped his hand around the archer’s neck, had dragged him across the room in an eerie imitation of Tony’s defenestration, had slammed him by the neck against the wall.

‘What is this supposed to be?’ Loki snarled into Clint’s flabbergasted face. ‘Is this some sort of mockery? Do you think I have all day?’

His eyes were blazing now, and Tony was relieved in a very inappropriate way that Clint looked very much intimidated by that gaze even though the guy holding him up had several arrows
protruding from his body.

Maybe intimidated precisely because Loki simply ignored that fact.

Or maybe because Clint was kind of choking.

‘I present you my back, my chest, I remind you of the wrongs I did you, and this is all you can give me?’ Loki hissed. ‘I’ve been in your mind, Barton, I have seen how you enact your revenge. It is either kill or symbolic payment for you, is it not? But this, this is neither, this is undecided, and you know that, you know. This is pitiable. If you want revenge, take revenge, Barton. If not, stop wasting my bloody time!’

For one moment, the fingers around Clint’s throat tightened, Loki’s eye twitched, then he abruptly let the archer go. Clint crumbled on the ground immediately, gasping.

‘Loki, what-‘ began Tony.

But the god shot Tony an icy glare, glowed, and was gone.

Well, shit.

‘Barton, can you breathe?’

Clint stared at him, gasping, then nodded.

Tony went over to him, crouched down next to him, pried Clint’s hands away from his neck, examined it despite the archer trying to jerk away.

‘Can you speak?’

Clint didn’t nod at once to that. He took his time until his breathing evened out somewhat.

‘I think’ said he hoarsely. ‘I think I should be okay. He left the voice box alone mostly. Don’t think he’s broken any bones either.’

‘Yeah, well, we’re gonna make sure’ said Tony and stood up. ‘Jarvis, we have a medical facility in this tower, right?’

‘The fact that you seem to have forgotten it makes me doubly relieved you decided to install it, Sir’ Jarvis answered.

‘Yeah, that was a pretty nasty concussion’ said Tony. ‘Doom bots are evil.’

‘I was rather thinking of the last time you drank yourself into a comatose state, Sir’

‘Ah, that. Did we already have the med bay by then?’

‘Yes, Sir. It was only two weeks ago, Sir.’

‘Right. Well, you can’t expect me to keep track of everything. In any case – could you send some paramedics or doctors or something along those lines up here, please? Whoever we have down there?’

‘Most of the researchers have already left but there is always a doctor on call. I took the liberty to alert her as soon as the Norse God of Chaos and Mischief had left, Sir. Before, it would have seemed to me rather an additional complication than beneficial.’
‘And that’s why I love you’ Tony said. ‘Listen, Clint Barton will be treated here if he wishes, make sure that he gets the best treatment there is, Jarvis, whether here or somewhere else. When he eventually leaves, make sure he takes all his stuff. And then, as soon as he has left the tower, please be so kind and reclassify him as a hostile.’

‘Of course, Sir.’

‘Wh-what?’ Clint said hoarsely.

Tony looked down at him.

‘You shot my ally’ said he. ‘When he was unarmed and peaceful. Three times.’

‘Loki is not your ally’ Clint hissed.

‘You will find out that he is’ said Tony. ‘And that you, as of now, are not anymore.’

‘Way to choose your hoe over your bro, Stark’ Clint mumbled.

And that made a cold anger unfold in Tony’s stomach that almost tempted him to punch Clint in the face. Instead, he bent down, took the two pieces left of Clint’s bow and hurled them towards the elevator.

‘Get treated and then get the fuck out’ said he. ‘You’re not welcome here anymore.’

Tony had stayed with Barton until the doctor had arrived. Had stood there with balled fists, and observed the archer, had looked out for signs that he was deteriorating. Had listened to the breathing.

And then the doctor had examined Clint, had led him away, and he was not Tony’s fucking problem anymore.

For a moment, he kept just standing there, with his fists still balled. Angry.

Hurt.

Because fucking Clint had just injured the very person they probably needed the most so to defeat Thanos. Because Clint had thought he knew better than Tony what this alliance meant and what not. Because he had not trusted Tony to have made this, rather risky, decision for a very good reason. Because he thought after all that Tony could be blinded this much by desire, that he couldn’t be perfectly rational about this.

Way to choose your hoe over your bro.

Maybe he should have punched Clint after all.

Because whatever he felt about Loki, Clint should have had enough respect for Tony in him so not to deal with his issues this way.

But it was Tony’s own fucking fault if he expected respect from people who only he called his friends. They were not, Nat had told him as much. They were only SHIELD agents and he an asset. He should finally read the fucking memo.
‘Sir’ said Jarvis then. ‘Now that Mr. Barton has left for the med bay, I feel I should inform you that the Norse God of Mischief and Chaos has reinstalled himself in your workshop.’

Another person for whom he was just an asset, an asset he could use to distract the Skrulls from Midgard’s technology, an asset he could use against Thanos. Tony closed his eyes, breathed out.

‘Has he now? Conscious or unconscious?’

‘Conscious’ said Jarvis. ‘He removed the arrows himself, with magic, I believe. I have few means of diagnosis in that room, but everything indicates that his wounds are no longer bleeding.’

‘Superfast healing for the win’ said Tony, trying to push the bitterness down. Neither Barton nor Loki had ever pretended to be interested in him beyond the use he had. If Tony felt hurt by that, it was his own problem to deal with. ‘Why do you keep calling him Norse God of Mischief and Chaos by the way?’

‘He has reacted negatively to my calling him Mr Odinson, and I feel not close enough to him to call him by his first name, Sir. His divine title seemed a formal enough alternative and has, until now, triggered neutral reactions.’

‘Maybe it’s time to ask him what he prefers, buddy, not that I want to meddle with your social interactions or anything. It’s your call’ said Tony. ‘Alright, make sure he doesn’t do anything untoward. I’m on my way.’

Loki was standing in front of one of the screens when Tony arrived. He was flicking through those calculations and mathematical models that Tony had granted him access to. The three bows were lying on a table behind him, so clean they looked as if they had never been used. Also from Loki’s green tunic and skin, the dark bloody spots had disappeared. In fact, the trickster looked as if no one had touched him at all.

‘We should check you for internal injuries’ said Tony.

Loki didn’t turn to him, flicked to the next model instead.

‘I have healing magic, Stark’ said he. ‘You know what it is capable of.’

‘No, in fact I don’t’ said Tony. ‘I just know what your glamour is capable of.’

There, a small smile, pleased, Loki lowered his eyes to the ground, then finally turned his head to look at him.

‘Stark, trust me, I’m fine’

You just almost choked a guy to death because he wouldn’t kill you. No, you’re not.

‘Remember, the moment I trust you, you will lose your respect for me. Your words, not mine’ said Tony, and nodded towards the door. Not that you do respect me now. But whatever. I can pretend. ‘I have screening technology in my medical facility. Let’s go.’

‘You just want data on my anatomy’ said Loki, not moving from the spot. ‘And will we not meet Barton there? Or have you left his throat untreated? That would be unwise’

‘Don’t worry about the data, I already collected more than enough of that when you were out of it
after the apple’ said Tony, and Loki’s face tensed, then smoothed out. So you hadn’t figured that out yet? ‘Don’t turn all fire and fury on me, we kind of had to screen you then, you were sort of dying a little’

‘No’ said Loki. ‘You did not have to do anything.’

Despite his level voice, Tony could hear the tension. There was quite a lot of it.

_They gleaned information from the reactions of my body._

Right. Another faux-pas then.

But how to apologise in a way that Loki could even accept?

In the way where one didn’t apologise at all.

In the way where one suggested a trade instead.

‘Well, you repeatedly spent time in my head for months, so I think that makes us even’ said Tony.

Loki looked at him as if that was the one answer he had not expected, then, for some reason, his face relaxed a bit.

And he gave Tony a small bow.

So Tony had been right? He had guessed at Lokyish etiquette and he had been _right_? Was he actually getting better at this?

‘And Jarvis can arrange it so we won’t meet Robin Hood in the med bay either’ said Tony.

‘I want you to show me what data you collected on my body’ said Loki.

Mhm, so you want more in this trade? But wasn’t it Loki’s right in any case to know what the screening’s results had been? Like any patient’s? Some things shouldn’t have to be traded for. No matter how business-like the rest of their relationship had to be.

‘Sure’ said he. ‘Jarvis, bring it up’

Again, Loki seemed almost caught unaware by Tony’s reaction but turned towards the screen as soon as the symbolic model of his body was displayed on it.

‘The dark spots’ said Tony and pointed one out. ‘Are where the decomposition has attacked your flesh. This colour here is inner bleeding, and here you can see where the organs have been ripped apart.’

Loki was fascinated by the colourful model for a while (far too many dark areas), zoomed in and out, called up the numbers.

‘And you say a machine did this?’ said he.

‘Oh yes’ Tony answered with no little pride.

‘I would like very much to see it then’
Loki did not allow Tony to screen him in the end, but examined the machines in the med bay in detail and made Tony explain the technology. And the way he walked and moved told Tony even without any screening that no, even super-fast healing magic was not actually that fast.

It did not show much. If Tony had not spent hours and hours studying Loki’s fight against the wielderless blade, his way of moving during the New York invasion, and couldn’t keep his eyes off Loki now, he probably wouldn’t have noticed at all. But Loki was slower again, his movements less sure. Still injured.

Already on the way back to the workshop, they started discussing magic, Tony mostly emphasising that it didn’t make sense and Loki insisting that just because Stark couldn’t comprehend a concept that didn’t invalidate said concept as senseless.

‘Even your precious second law of thermodynamics is, in a way, obeyed’ said Loki. They had settled in the workshop again. ‘I keep telling you that magic usually demands a price. The price varies, but is, in its own way, always equivalent to the demand I make. Thus, the more I ask for, the more I have to give.’

‘But the exchange is stupid!’ said Tony. ‘A drop of blood is worth more if I give it than if I sacrifice that of another, and worth even more if I feel fear, drawing it? And an object I value is worth more than one I’m indifferent to? How can this all be so closely linked to my emotions?’

‘How not?’

‘Because an object should have value independently of my personal feelings towards it!’

Loki laughed.

‘Capitalism should be abolished then’ said he.

Tony pondered that for a moment.

‘True that’ said he. ‘Wait, are you saying capitalism is magic?’

Loki shrugged, ‘It’s dirty, simple in its essence, and is based mostly on illusions’

‘Are you saying I’m a magician?’

‘Mage’ Loki corrected, then paused, tapping on the table with his finger. He was lounging in one of the chairs, his legs stretched from him (far too long, far too nice), Tony leant back on the sofa he had standing in the workshop for emergency naps. ‘Do you understand when I say that Thor has magic, and not little of it, but is not and never will be a mage?’

‘Sort of’ said Tony. ‘After seeing him use the stuff.’

‘Will you then understand when I say that you have no magic at all and yet might be a mage in essence?’

‘I understand I get the Hogwarts letter without the benefits’

‘I refuse to read those books’ said Loki. ‘I also refuse to comment on that reference’

‘Spoil-sport’ said Tony. ‘So being a mage is more about being ready to play dirty?’

‘That simplifies it too much’ said Loki. ‘But it is about a certain way of thinking, yes, about a certain way of looking at the world.’
‘Being not the spectator’ said Tony. ‘But the one putting on the show.’

Loki nodded and opened his hand lazily.

‘Let me tell you a story’ said he. ‘About one of your Midgardian magicians who have nothing but their mind and the quickness of their fingers to aid them.’

‘A story about me then?’

‘Close, but no’ said Loki. ‘There magician had mounted a very popular show. For one of his tricks, he showed, to the crowd, a cage with a small yellow canary inside. He told the people to inspect the canary, to look at it very closely. Was it a normal canary? Of course it was – normal, and real, and alive. He then put the cage on a table, covered it with a red cloak, walked around it and explained how much concentration this would take, how everybody needed to be quiet, to pay attention. He then spoke his magic words – abracadabra, or whatever fake spell you always use – tapped the cloth with his wand and then SLAMMED his hand on the cage.’

Loki accompanied the words with a loud slam on the table next to him, bringing down his flat hand on it heavily, brutally, then opening the same hand in an almost too gentle gesture.

‘But the hand met no resistance, the cloth fell to the table, and the cage was simply gone as if it had been weary of existing and had only in this instant decided to do otherwise. The crowd gasped.’

‘Because of such a cheap trick?’ Tony asked.

‘He was on the countryside, the crowd was mostly peasants’ Loki said dismissively. ‘But not everyone was happy. A child in the first row began to cry. Why, asked the magician, what ails you, little child? The bird, said the child, you hurt the little birdie!’

Loki chuckled now, raised an eyebrow.

‘Now, now, the magician said’ continued he. ‘You accuse me of much, but hush, listen closely! Do you not hear? And truly, as the crowd grew quiet, they could hear a canary sing. And the magician took off his top hat then’, Loki made the same gesture, smooth and elegant, ‘and the canary sat on his head, and sang on.’ Loki emitted a sound that could very well be taken for birdsong. Tony snorted. ‘The crowd laughed, the crowd applauded. The magician made the canary hop on his finger, bent down to the boy, showed him the bird.’

Again, Loki accompanied his words with gestures, and Tony couldn’t help but grin, because only Loki could do this, at the same time making slightly fun of himself, and carrying out every movement with such awe-inspiring precision.

‘See, said the magician, the little birdie is fine’ said Loki. ‘The boy, as to him, looked at the bird, looked at the magician, much calmer now, with these sudden changes of mood children sometimes have, and said, yes, I can see that this one is fine. But what about his brother?’

Tony laughed out loud.

‘Oh man’ said he. ‘I should have seen that coming.’

‘You really should have’ Loki said, putting his elbow on the table supporting his head on his hand, his index pointing towards his ear, his middle finger towards his mouth. Shit, even like this, he managed to show off his piano fingers.

‘And what’s the lesson of our bedtime story?’ asked Tony. ‘That you shouldn’t invite little genius
ornithologists to your show?’

‘Or anyone with the mind of a mage’ said Loki, his eyes twinkling. ‘The others just watch closely. Mages truly pay attention, and look where you don’t want them to. Well, the good ones, that is. Most of them are dreadful.’

The twinkle vanished again.

‘The lesson is that magic is not kind, Stark’ said he, sounding hard all of a sudden. ‘It is quick-tempered and moody. It can be gentle but also cruel, and takes what it needs without asking, gives when it wants to, or doesn’t. It can save you one day, burn you to ash the next. It’s never fair, and it tends to play dirty.’

‘It… sounds a bit like you?’

‘I will leave you to ponder how much of a coincidence that is’

There was definitely a dangerous glint in the trickster’s eyes now.

‘So being an underhanded piece of work kind of comes with the territory?’ said Tony.

‘Not for everyone’ said Loki, and then grinned widely, giving the glint in his eyes and even more dangerous edge. ‘But it does certainly help.’

Uhuh.

You scare me a bit. Maybe that’s because you are a chaos god. And more than a millennium old.

Right.

I… shouldn’t feel aroused by that fear, right?

‘Is this just your special brand of insulting my character?’ asked he.

‘If you decide it to be’

‘Mhm. Well, that’s fair, I suppose.’

It was.

‘There is another lesson to this story’ Tony said then.

Loki raised his eyebrows, opened his free hand in an invitation to speak.

‘The same thing I have pointed out before’ said Tony. ‘The trick was cheap, yes, and simple. But simple doesn’t equal easy. The magician had to collapse the cage, quickly, soundlessly, without anyone catching a glimpse of it happening, had to whisk it away without anyone noticing. Even with all the distractions and the cloth helping him, I suppose he had had to practice this trick for a while before it got convincing.’

This time, Loki definitely looked pleased as he hummed in agreement. He also definitely tried to hide his satisfaction.

Well, no such luck, Emovillain.

‘But if magic is so intertwined with our emotions’ said Tony, trying to get back to the topic they had
first discussed. ‘Then why is a lock of hair I’m indifferent to still more worth than my own blood I drew in fear?’

Loki looked at him blankly.

‘Well, because it’s hair of course’ said he.

Of course, that cleared up… not much at all, come to think of it.

At some point, Jarvis interrupted their discussion. Loki had become more and more metaphoric in his explanations, and Tony had complained, and Loki had rolled his eyes and claimed that if Tony couldn’t even deal with metaphors, understanding seidr would always be beyond his reach, which had made Tony make a very verbose stand for definitions and numbers and the exact sciences, a denomination which made Loki laugh with derision.

‘All of the so-called exact sciences of Midgard that I have looked into’ said he. ‘I have found riddled with biases and ideological prejudices, with metaphors and similes, vagueness and guesses.’

‘Then you’ve been looking at the wrong ones’ said Tony. ‘The truly exact sciences are the only way to escape this shitty prejudiced world, to escape vagueness. That’s what’s so good about mathematics – no matter what ideological bias you have, the numbers just won’t lie.’

Loki snorted.

‘You know that the latter is, in itself, a blatant lie, liar’ said he. ‘The Midgardian stock market is my proof. This lie is part of the reason you have become so wealthy, Stark, and you yourself have admitted as much’

‘Yeah, yeah, I know I’m capitalist vermin, by the way, Mr. Earth Is A Shithole I don’t Wanna Rule, why do you know so much about how a stock market works?’

‘And your claim that exact science are an escape from prejudices? You should ask your Doctor Foster about that’ said Loki, ignoring Tony’s interruption.

Tony furrowed his eyebrows.

‘What do you mean?’

‘Ask her what good her numbers do her when she’s confronted with male white scientists who she surpasses in their own field of expertise.’

Ah.

‘That’s… that’s not…’

Loki raised an eyebrow.

‘That’s not the point.’

‘How is it not?’ Loki said. ‘Your realm’s history is full of wrong theories that were upheld because they were so very convenient to believe. Or discoveries that have been held back because the wrong person had uttered them. If your exact sciences offered an escape from that, your planet would not be drowning in its own refuse, and overheating rapidly. Numbers are not your salvation, Stark, just as metaphors are not merely a way to distort reality. You merely discard the so-called soft sciences because for you, they are harder to comprehend. You fear them. You fear the complexity.’
'I do not – oh no, you don’t get to say that about me'

Tony pointed one very accusing index at the trickster.

‘I let nobody tell me that I, Tony Stark, fear complexity. I built an arc reactor. In. A. Cave. You have no fucking idea what I have achieved in the field of science, the advancements I have made for humanity—’

‘Actually, I have’ said Loki.

‘What?’

‘I have read your publications, and I have read the more intelligent ones on you. Then I visited a few dreams to fill the gaps.’

‘You… what?’

‘You offered a partnership, so I did the background check, as they call it here’ said Loki. ‘Thus, I have an idea. And my assertion stands.’

Okay.

Loki had read his publications. All of his publications? Even those he had written in his college years? Some of those… would probably have turned out differently if he hadn’t been on drugs half of the time back then.

It sounded like he had understood them too. Maybe Tony had to revise his presumptions about Loki’s knowledge of Midgardian technology. Like, constantly.

‘Why are you defending Jane Foster anyway? Don’t you hate her because she stole Thor from you or something?’

‘For her to steal him, he would have had to have been mine before’ said Loki, and sounded only a tiny little bit bitter about that. ‘And whatever my personal feelings for her might be, they won’t blind me to the fact that she is just as smart as you are, but not even close to being taken as seriously.’

Tony laughed without humour.

‘People don’t take me seriously’ said he.

‘Yes, they do’ Loki said. ‘More seriously than her at least. And she was not the one almost killing her guests at her own birthday party because she was in her armour and drunk.’

‘Hey, I was dying at that time, and you’re not in the position to complain about anybody causing mischief and mayhem out of a bad mood’

‘Again, I wasn’t complaining’ said Loki. ‘Merely making my point, which is that it is perfectly reasonable to state that because this world’s fate is made of threads the Norns spin, their presence on a world like Midgard would result in a manifestation of the Golden Fleece, their wool. Equally, it follows that hair must be a magically immensely potent material – precisely because threads can be spun from it. Blood is merely power. Hair is potentially a story.’

‘And the story card trumps the power card’ said Tony.

‘Naturally.’
Naturally, huh? It did make sense, in a way. Energy was good, but that was not where the secret of life lay. Power was simple, life was complex (and no, Tony fucking Stark did not fear that). If anywhere, life was in the DNA. In the information.

In the intertwined threads of the helixes.

Huh.

‘Sir’ said Jarvis then. ‘I am obliged to inform you that you have been awake for thirty-three hours now and haven’t consumed solid food for twelve. I recommend a meal and a prolonged period of rest, preferably in that order.’

‘How time flies’ Tony mumbled. ‘Thanks for the update, Jarvis, but I’ll be fine.’

Loki looked sceptical about that, and stood up.

‘No, no, you’re not going to leave just because Jarvis is playing the nanny’ said Tony. ‘Not when we were finally getting somewhere interesting. Threads! DNA! Though I still don’t get how normal hair gets to be put on the same level as those wonderful helix motherfuckers, that still sounds like bullshit to me.’

‘You can dwell on it during my absence’ Loki said. ‘I have things to do.’

Before Loki could teleport away, Tony grabbed his arm. Could feel the other jerk in his grip. Right, torture and body memory. He let go.

‘Wait’ said he. ‘We need to talk about Clint’

Loki took another step away, ‘What is there to say?’

The expression on his face was guarded.

‘I made Jarvis reclassify him as a hostile, for the moment’ said Tony. ‘Which mostly means he shouldn’t have access to the tower anymore, or to any other residence of mine. But that does not mean he is excluded from my definition of family, Lokes. Meaning, you don’t get to kill him.’

Loki looked at him searchingly.

‘I had assumed as much’ said he, paused. ‘Why did you reclassify him as a hostile?’

‘Because he had shot my ally, duh?’ Tony said. ‘I have kind of sworn to have your back?’

‘Mhm’ Loki said, as if that was not the answer he had waited for.

Another pause.

‘Such oaths can be interpreted differently’ said he then. ‘But your actions, however honourable, are unnecessary. You do not have to keep Barton away from me, nor treat him with hostility. I can deal with him on my own.’

Right, because you dealt with him so very well this time.

‘This is my decision to make’ Tony said. ‘And at the moment, it’s all for the better I don’t see his stupid ass anyways, or I might be the one to send him off to Valhalla or whatever you guys do.’

‘Valhalla’ said Loki, disdainfully. ‘Just a glorified denomination for another mercenary army. Your
archer might feel quite at home.’

And he had teleported away the next moment.

‘You know, Scotty, this is getting annoying’ Tony said to the empty workshop. ‘I’m usually the one to get the last word.’

‘I believe Mr. Skywalker cannot hear you, Sir’ Jarvis said.

‘Oh, shut up; Jarvi– wait! Did you just call Loki Mr. Skywalker? Have you actually asked him what surname he prefers and this was his answer?’

‘He seemed quite content with the title, Sir.’

‘I’m so gonna tease him about Star Wars.’
Truces and Bruces

Chapter Summary

Brucie bear comes back, totally out of his own free will. Tony might have a small problem with that, and with some issues catching up with him. This is fine.

Chapter Notes

Showbiz by Muse for this one.
Or: Nightmares, by Easy Life

See the end of the chapter for more notes

‘Believe me, this was so not my idea. In fact, I hit him over the head for this stunt’ Natasha said. ‘Repeatedly’

She was lounging on the sofa, playing Resident Evil on the console as if Tony hadn’t thrown her partner out the tower and declared him an enemy the day before.

Tony was lounging in the armchair and wondering how well Clint had survived being hit over the head by her.

He almost felt worried. Almost.

‘Thanks, I suppose’

‘I mean, Loki is a level eight threat who we currently have a shaky truce with. And on top of it, he’s mentally unstable. Meaning, you make either sure to off the guy, or you don’t attack him. That’s common sense’ said she and shot a zombie in the head. ‘Fury was not amused – Clint’s suspended from field duty for a few days. He got a few caskets of beer and a surprise party from colleagues of course, but that was to be expected. Morons all around.’

‘You’re just a litter of kittens, aren’t you, Nat?’

‘I’m supposed to pester you to take Clint in again, by the way’

‘He’s not some homeless youth I have to offer shelter to’

‘Isn’t he? In any case, there, I’m pesterling you, blah blah, it’s your duty, also you should consider where your loyalties lie, blah blah, you’re refusing me, let’s move on.’

That was… suspiciously accommodating of her.

On the screen, she decapitated another zombie with a round-kick.

‘Why are you giving up so quickly, Nat?’
‘Fury has the timing all wrong’ said Nat, then jumped on the moving car. ‘You’re still furious, so you’re gonna shoot me down whatever I say, and Clint still needs to cool down from his stupid, so I don’t want him here in any case. You will say yes in a few days, and everything will be back to normal.’

‘As normal as it can be. Why will I say yes in a few days?’ said Tony.

‘Because Fury will take that deal you offered him’ said Nat, and climbed in the moving car, kicking the driver out of it in the process. ‘Loki’s exoneration. He knows he can’t avoid it, not with our IT being a giant opening for you to exploit – this is the perfect occasion for him to get one last advantage out of it, one last benefit. Most importantly, the feeling of staying in control’

‘Are you sure you should tell me this?’ Tony asked. ‘I’ll just raise my own price now.’

Nat was hitting people with her car on-screen. She shrugged.

‘Wouldn’t change anything if I hid it’ said she. ‘The two of you were gonna haggle for hours in any case. By the way, Bruce is coming back to New York. He’s gonna want to squad in the tower, just so you know.’

Hahah, what a coincidence. Not.

* *

‘Welcome home, Brucie bear, science bro’ said Tony, placing his hand on Bruce’s shoulder a bit forcefully. ‘And let me say this right away, I am so very sorry about this.’

‘About what exactly’ Bruce said, almost warily, placing his suitcase and backpack on the floor of the TV room, and looking around. Calcutta had been good for him – he had a nice tan, and he had lost a whole lot of weight – probably to diarrhoea or some other nasty sickness. ‘Did you demolish my quarters?’

‘Gods no’ Tony said. ‘No, I’m sorry SHIELD dragged you into this just because they had lost one of their babysitters and thought they absolutely needed a replacement. What did they use as leverage this time?’

‘I don’t need to be coerced into moving back into your tower’ said Bruce. He didn’t sound convincing. ‘It’s certainly more luxurious than what I could afford in New York on my own budget.’

‘Bullshit – what did they use as leverage?’ Tony said, a little too quickly maybe. But sometimes, just sometimes, it was just a tiny little bit of a bummer that practically nobody who counted wanted to be around him really. That he always had to offer something in return. That in the end, he always had to pay for friendship, or even friendliness. It was just a tiny little bit frustrating.

Bruce, as to him, smiled this uncertain smile that looked just an edge angry, that edge that made Tony simultaneously want to back away and push more red buttons.

‘Let’s say we came to an understanding’ said he. ‘Still, I am happy to use the time to get back to our old project, Tony, and I mean it. So let’s not waste it by complaining about SHIELD.’

‘Yes, science bromance, now we’re talking’ said Tony and patted Bruce on the shoulder, taking up his suitcase and leading him to his rooms then. Bruce followed with his backpack. ‘Makes me wonder whether Fury sent you over as anti-god assurance, or as a bribe. But tell you what, change of mind, happens with genius, let’s expand that project of ours. You share the info of what they use against you, and I will make sure they won’t be able to use it again.’
Bruce laughed a little.

‘That’s impossible’ said he.

‘Are you willing to bet on it?’ asked Tony over his shoulders as the doors to Bruce’s living room opened.

‘Depends on the stakes’ Bruce said.

Tony dumped his suitcase on the sofa, then let himself drop on it too, his arms on the backrest.

‘If I can do it, you accept my alliance with Loki’ said he.

‘Acceptance cannot be won with a bet’ said Bruce and sat down his backpack on the floor. ‘You know that’

‘Actually, I don’t’ said Tony. ‘But okay – different angle. If I can do it, you give me the data of the project that led to your accident and green problem.’

‘Hahah, no’ said Bruce, then scratched his cheek. ‘And if you raise the stakes that high for me, you have to raise them for yourself too – and what are you willing to risk?’

‘Everything I know about the Mantis’ Tony blurted. Okay, so he could be somewhat of a spontaneous decision-maker? He called it the matter of his brain being faster than his brain. Like Lucky Luke being faster than his own shadow. Which was technically possible if the shadow was cast far away enough? Except the pulsar drive pointed at such concepts of space and time and laughed. Hard. Rolling around on the floor.

Ah, and Brucie was looking at him closely?

‘Tony, you don’t even know what SHIELD is using as leverage’ said he. ‘Could be anything’

‘That’s my risk to take’ said Tony. ‘And leverage usually isn’t anything. Most of the time, it’s rather personal, connected to the victim’s closer social circle, their family or friends. Or an ugly truth, or a resource taken away. If it is the latter, the matter could, again, be personal – and with you, that means that it is connected to the Hulk – or political – and then, it probably is connected to your work in Calcutta. Thus, options include technical, medical or political resources, leaking of dangerous knowledge, controlling the fate of one of your loved ones, or a combination thereof. Which makes the estimate whether that leverage can be taken away all the less vague the more you know about the person who is being blackmailed. Which makes the risk of any bet manageable.’

‘And what do you know about me, Tony?’ sighed Bruce, and let himself sink into the armchair.

‘Personal or political?’ Tony asked.

‘What?’

‘Is the threat personal or political?’

Bruce looked at him tiredly.

‘I would say political’ said he then, ‘except in India, I’m just one of hundreds of voluntary doctors, and not even a particularly good one. No one would truly miss me there. However, this kind of work does grant me a certain peace. So I would say it’s a personal threat then.’

‘They threaten to tell the Indian authorities who you are then?’
Bruce shrugged.

‘They were suitably vague but clear enough in that they have more than one way to make my work there impossible’ said he. ‘And as I said, the price I pay is acceptable in the end. I do like to spend time with you, Tony’

 Doesn’t really feel like that at the moment, buddy.

‘I will make sure they won’t do this again, Bruce’ said Tony, and what if his voice sounded a bit hard, a bit dead-serious. He couldn’t accept this. He couldn’t accept that during every conversation they would have in the coming days, every time he saw Bruce, he would know that this was coercion. He would get SHIELD for this. Badly.

‘I won’t make a bet or deal with you, Tony’ said Bruce and shook his head. ‘And I can’t promise you anything concerning Loki – not even that I won’t hulk out the moment I lay eyes on him.’

No, people always thought Tony was all about deals, didn’t he? Didn’t have it in him to just do something nice for another person, did he? Just another capitalist asshole.

‘Wasn’t offering a deal’ said Tony and stood up. ‘Didn’t ask for anything in return. Well, go and get comfy. I’ll be engineering.’

*

Tony worked for three days through, only taking naps when Jarvis turned off the power in the workshop. He had locked that for everyone, taking the food and drinks he occasionally needed from the little emergency fridge. Loki had turned up there a few hours after Bruce’s arrival, had taken the news with a blank face and a certain tension in his posture, had brought the time gem with him that they scanned with everything Tony had, first inactive, then with Loki whispering commands to it and doing weird TARDIS-y stuff. After this data was on his servers, Tony was too engrossed in his designs, his programming, to take much notice of the trickster and Loki left soon after. The knowledge Tony had gained about the Mantis and its pulsar drive, about magic and the gems, the data he had amassed now, made him turn around ideas and calculations in his usual slightly manic high-speed manner. There were so many fucking unknown variables, but at least, he had finally something to work with. In-between, he hacked SHIELD and didn’t find the data on the sceptre (they had had to have buried it very deeply then), but instead had a look at every bit of info they had on Bruce and the Hulk. Finding out that they had a lot of leverage indeed. Not only Calcutta but also Betty Ross, as a back-up plan, those bastards, and a few experimental weapons and containment cells as a last resort. Assholes. Bruce was right, it would take a while to rid them of all that. Or Tony would have to take a different approach. In any case, this situation was untenable. They couldn’t keep Brucie bear on a leash like that, Tony didn’t stand for that at all (he couldn’t do this – he couldn’t go and chat up Bruce and know, know so very well why Bruce was here, he just… he couldn’t).

He dreaded the conversation with Fury that he knew was coming. He knew exactly how it would go, because he knew Fury and he knew himself; that they would fight, and haggle and eventually come to an agreement that would benefit both parties, but Tony more so because he simply had the higher ground. Just like Fury would fuck him up any day if he had the advantage.

All a matter of resources.
Fucking hell.

The conversation turned out to be as cold and sober as Tony had expected, and though he was sleep deprived and felt a certain lack of giving a fuck, or maybe because of that, he got everything and more out of it in the end.

Loki’s exoneration, and the data Selvig had collected on the tesseract and the mind gem. Because of a common enemy, same goal, blah blah, this was barely better than a board meeting. And then, after that, Tony had to talk to Clint, and that was bound to be wearisome too.

‘You have already made the deal with Fury, so I don’t know what we should even talk about’ said Clint, proving Tony’s point, his arms crossed in front of his chest, sitting on the bland chair of the bland SHIELD meeting room Tony had met him in. Gods, this whole place was mind-crushingly boring, how did not every SHIELD agent spiral into depression, working here? Maybe they did. Maybe they had just been too apathetic to stop the Hydra take over.

‘One condition of that deal was that you convince me that from now on, you will fucking behave’ said Tony, so fed up with this bullshit. So fed up with deals, and all these people. Spies, assassins, politicians, businessmen, gods, everyone. ‘And that means that you have to convince me you won’t riddle Joker with arrow holes the next time you see him, or the time after that, or that after, and so on, and so on. No more fucking attacks.’

‘Fine, yes, I’ll behave’ said Clint, raising his hands in mock surrender and being about as cooperative as Tony had expected him to be. ‘I will not touch your little missy who will probably slit our throats in our sleep as soon as he has the chance.’

‘I have told you the terms of my deal with him, he can’t’ said Tony.

Clint snorted, ‘And you think you’ve outwitted the fucking god of lies? That’s fucking not probable, Stark! He’s a fucking bag of cats, and he’ll be our fucking doom if we let him’

‘No, thanks, Dr. Doom is enough doom for a lifetime’ said Tony. He had too much of a headache for this. His chest felt tight, the arc reactor put pressure on it, it hurt, had been hurting for days. He hated that feeling, he knew what it meant. It was part of the reason he put off sleeping. And the calculations were still running through his mind, not leaving him in peace. Unsolved equations. Fucking unsolved equations.

‘He’s not a nice person, Stark! He’s an asshole – I saw enough of him to safely say that. He might have lost that invasion deliberately, though whether that is actually true, nobody can say for sure, but he had no fucking qualms about any of the people he killed. And he liked parts of it, his eyes fucking gleamed, sometimes-‘

‘Of course he liked parts of it, he’s a fucking chaos god!’ Tony interrupted him.

‘One of the agents he turned died because we didn’t sleep or drink or eat and he just dehydrated, and broke down and was dead, and we just put his corpse in a spare room, and Loki just didn’t care-‘

‘Stop wasting my time telling me things I know or can guess, Clint! I never said he was good, I said he was a good ally!’

‘He’s not even that, he’s mental!’ Clint said.

‘Again, old news-‘

‘How can you not see he’s using you-‘
‘EVERYONE FUCKING DOES!’

Tony had shouted the last bit, he noticed. But his chest was so fucking tight, and this conversation was so pointless, just wasting his time, wasting his time-

‘Everyone except Pepper and Rhodey fucking uses me, Clint, or tries to, don’t think I don’t know that, so again, stop wasting my time! Just tell me whether you will behave around Loki or not, so that I can finally get back to planning this war! I don’t fucking care about your feelings for him, I don’t fucking care about your opinions on our alliance or sexual relationship, for that matter, I just want you to cooperate, so that we can win this war and don’t all have to die! That is all.’

Clint stared at him, slightly taken aback.

So once I don’t sugar-coat the truth, you get all flustered? You’re the one working for SHIELD, buddy.

And then the comm in Tony’s ear activated.

‘Level five threat in Brooklyn, Avenger’s assistance requested’ Nat’s voice said.

‘Oh, fucking hell’ said Tony and put his pounding head into his hands.

\*

‘Jarvis, is there anyone on the common floor?’

‘No, Sir’

‘Lock it’

‘Right away, Sir’

The suit disassembled around him, and it felt like the only thing holding him still up was being taken away. He stumbled towards the entrance to the tower, holding his side.

Shit.

His whole body was a giant bruise. And his head was still pounding, worse even than before. The arc reactor pressed down on him even worse. His chest so tight. Couldn’t breathe.

The doors opened for him and he limped to the bar.

‘Activate code Bad Day Got Worse Don’t Give A Fuck Anymore’ said Tony. ‘Now’

‘Sir’ said Jarvis. ‘Excuse me for saying so but I do not think code Bad Day Got Worse Don’t Give A Fuck Anymore is a good idea. It makes it impossible for me to call for-‘

‘Have you trouble recognising my voice pattern, Jarvis?’

‘No, Sir’

‘Then activate the code.’

‘Yes, Sir. Right away, Sir.’
When he took the tumbler from the rack, his hands trembled so much, it slipped his fingers and fell to
the ground. Whatever. He took the first bottle that was there in front of his eyes, drank directly from
it.

Whatever.

These things happened. Civilians don’t always get out okay.

He had been too slow in his reactions. Had fucked up the whole fight. Always too late here, always
too late there. His aim had been off.

The girl – she hadn’t even had a face anymore after that beast had hit her. Just mush, blood, he felt
nauseous, drink more. Only in his perimeter, people had died.

Only in his.

What the fuck had those beasts even been created for?

Who cared anyway?

He lifted the bottle, drank, burn down his throat, would help with the headache, he decided. Would
help with the short and shallow breathing. If he drank enough to pass out, he might even get around
the nightmares. Fucking alternative realities with geometric forms that shouldn’t exist, fucking
asphyxiating there again and again, lost, another gulp. Fucking Tony Stark too tired to save you.

I could replace you with T’Challa.

Maybe they should.

Don’t think of the girl.

He drank. The bottle emptied, he got the next one. Vodka, whiskey, gin? Whatever. Everybody uses
you, but what use do you have? Second rate. My greatest creation? Hah! Drink some more.

All those deals. Always watching your words, your back. Always an exchange. Magic is not kind –
what is? What the hell is? This world is a shithole. The fact that scum like me has a fucking tower is
living proof of it. You want to know what Iron Man is? A delusion, just like you said. A scam,
mostly for myself. Doesn’t hold up at close scrutiny.

Drink, drink. Everything drains too quickly.

Drink.

The burn numbed the rest.

He hated, hated the dreams. The pressure on his chest a warning that they would come. He hated
them. Hated being back in the cave, hated being back in the holding cell. Shit, being back behind
that portal, seeing all that… wrongness… shit. Thank you, Loki, for two of those.

He raised the bottle, toasted Loki.

Thank you, Loki, for giving me two of my worst nightmares, you fuck.

‘You’re welcome’ someone said.

Someone sat down next to him, black hair, the rest was difficult to focus on. Long fingers.
Little shit trickster.

‘Yes, it’s me’ little shit trickster said. ‘And you certainly look dashing, not like you’ve been run over a stampede of Bilgesnipes at all’

Something like that. Little shit trickster, what was he doing here? Needed Tony again? Use him some more? Go to fucking T’Challa!

‘Thank you, but I think I’ll decline’ little shit trickster said. ‘I thought I would get some work done but apparently, I am stuck with another drunk. And doesn’t that remind me of practically every day I’ve spent in Thor’s vicinity.’

Tony drank, took him by the arm.

What fucking idiot scientist breeds mutant cross-breeds between tigers, horses and eagles in the middle of Brooklyn anyway? Just to fuck with Tony, that’s for. To show him that he’ll always fail. Let people die. Only in his perimeter. He had been the only one to fuck up.

‘You are mortals’ little shit trickster said. ‘You die all the time’

One of them was a little girl.

Little shit trickster said nothing to that.

Tony drank.

It’s all a scam. It’s all a fucking scam. I live, but to whose benefit? No one knows.

‘By Hel, if you absolutely must be melodramatic, you could at least refrain from quoting me’ little shit trickster said. ‘You are an awful drunk, you know that, Stark? You are not at all living up to your reputation.’

Stark doesn’t fucking care. Go to fucking T’Challa, or what, he doesn’t let himself be used by you? Is that why you are here, because I’m the one who lets you use him?

‘Oh for the Norn’s sake, I think I will brew you a sobering potion just so I don’t have to listen to this whining any longer. Do you have any dittany? Oh, why am I even asking you this, you probably have no idea.’

What do you want from me, Loki? Why are you fucking here?

‘I told you, I was planning to prepare a war. As it seems, in order to do that, I must heal you first from your self-induced poisoning. Now let go of my arm, I need to go get ingredients.’

No, answer my fucking question, Loki! Why didn’t you take the better option? Why didn’t you at least ask T’Challa?

‘Because he is a dullard, you dimwit!’ Little shit trickster shook off his hand.

Maybe. But has better technology. Better fighter. Vibranium. Is the fucking king of a fucking country. Royalty too – you could relate. Exchange, I don’t know, prince stories. But doesn’t let himself be used, that’s the reason. I let myself be used. By fucking everyone.

‘Stark, if I just wanted someone to use, I wouldn’t have chosen you, you imbecile. There would have been far better options in that case. I chose you precisely because you could see through at least some of my lies. Because you made it difficult for me to take advantage of you. T’Challa? Don’t make me
laugh – he is so drearily predictable. Could I manipulate him into helping me? I suppose so, at least if I shapeshifted and approached him in another form. Would I have been bored to death by him long before the Mad Titan had had the chance to end me? You can be sure of that. But you, Stark, do not bore me. However you accomplish it, you keep surprising me, and that is not at all an easy task. You are a challenge, Stark, and by the Norns a challenge is what I need most drearily at the moment, if only to have a reason to stand up in the morning.’

Also doesn’t hurt that I’m gorgeous.

Little shit trickster chuckled.

‘No, doesn’t hurt at all’ said he, and ruffled through Tony’s hair. ‘You are brilliant, and full of contradictions. Of course I will choose the mage, you moron.’

No, you chose the bard. Beginner’s mistake. Bard always dies. Everyone knows this.

‘Well, it was certainly not a beginner’s mistake. So, will you let me go now and brew a sobering potion for you? If you don’t make a scene, I will even throw something in to make you skip the hangover.’


‘Mhm, I wonder if you are one of those drunks who forget everything they have said and heard once they sober up?’

Oh, Lokes, I wish. I have, like, the worst hangover regrets. Kill them with more booze, usually.

‘Ah, well. I suppose it does not matter. If you can, refrain from doing anything all too stupid while I’m gone’

Sure, you can count on me. I promise. Will stay right here, little shit trickster.

Tony tried to salute, but his aim was a little off.

Little shit trickster was gone then and Tony drank on until everything was dark and numb and heavy, and then not even that anymore. No dreams. No thoughts, no…

Chapter End Notes

It’s… a mediocre Tony day.
Tony opened his eyes and felt improbably awake. He was lying on the couch in the TV room, he quickly noticed, Loki sitting in one of the armchairs, his booted feet on the coffee table, typing on a tablet (Loki had a tablet?). The memories of what had happened where not crystal-clear, but there still, and waking up easily without a murderous headache and nausea wasn’t something that simply happened after days like these. Days like these, he was more likely to wake up in a hospital bed with an IV attached to his arm.

Come to think of it, his body didn’t hurt anymore either. He moved a little to test it, but really, he felt fine. His bruises had just collectively stood up and left.

Now that was interesting.

‘You gave me something to make me all better, didn’t you, momma?’

‘Call me that once more, and you’ll never get sex from me again’ Loki said, not looking up from the tablet.

Tony straightened himself up – seriously, he wasn’t even dizzy. This stuff was great.

The pressure on his chest was still there though. Breathing was still difficult. The drinking should have taken care of that.

Fuck.

‘But you said all kinds of nice things about me when I was drunk, Mr. Darcy.’

‘Any lie to make you let me go and brew the potion. I also repeatedly called you a moron, I believe.’

Loki was dressed in this weird complicated Asgardian leather armour again, and if life had been fair, he should have felt uncomfortable in that kind of tight clothing.

He looked completely at ease.

‘You think I’m brilliant’

‘I also found you passed out in your own vomit when I came back’ said Loki dryly, still not looking up from the tablet. ‘Your assistant was rather concerned – he informed me that had I taken a few minutes longer, he would have finished overriding your code and alerted the doctor on call in the med bay’

‘Jarvis can’t override this one – I programmed him that way for a reason’ said Tony, blinked.
‘I suppose he learned to hack himself’ said Loki in a bored voice, then finally looked up. ‘Is it my turn to have to ask whether my ally has a death wish then?’

‘Because I regularly drink myself into a coma?’ said Tony, stretched his arms. ‘Nahh. And don’t listen to Pepper in that regard, she’s a liar. Big, big liar, pants on fire. Jarvis too.’

‘That sounds disturbing’ said Loki, not looking at all disturbed. ‘So you smothering me underneath your self-pity is just your way of having a good time then? Or a martial art I am not familiar with?’

‘There you go’ said Tony, pointed at him. ‘You got it, that last one. That’s what it is exactly.’

He let his head fall back on the backrest.

‘What do you want, Lokes?’ said he. ‘You’ve been in my dreams for months, you know exactly how hopelessly fucked up my mind is. The first time I overdosed I was fucking fourteen years old. That was before my parents died, and before the shrapnel, and before the waterboarding, and losing Yinsen, and killing the closest thing to family I had left, and flying a nuke into another, awful, reality, and being abducted to space, and sitting in a holding cell, and having to find my way back, and seeing a guy get gutted and die in front of my eyes, and seeing a little girl’s face get ripped apart by a horse tiger eagle thing. But even before that… I was always wrong. Always… I never fit. Always that itch that doesn’t let me rest… so I really don’t know what you fucking want from me now.’

There was silence after that. Tony stared at the ceiling, not really wanting to see the other’s face. He didn’t know why he had even said all that.

This was personal.

This could be used against him.

He closed his eyes. Fuck it. He was so fed up with thinking like that.

Thinking like that made his head ache. Thinking like that made him lose the concentration he needed to blast a stupid claw away before it turned the face of a girl into mush.

So fucking fed up.

‘That itch that you mentioned, that restlessness’ said Loki then. His voice sounded different, cautious, in a way, but at the same time as if searching for something. ‘Tell me more about it’

Not a good idea.

Don’t share info on that, don’t-

‘I don’t know what to tell you’ said Tony. ‘If I had been born in the millennials and not as the son of a genius billionaire, I’d probably been diagnosed with ADHD by the time I was four, or with autism, or with both, or with everything else, I don’t know, man. I mean, by now I know I’m not autistic, but back then, some, not all, of the symptoms matched, like, really well, in this rather stereotypical way they would have loved to make into another terrible autism movie? You know, hyperactive little shit who is intellectually far too advanced for his age, but can’t concentrate on anything for more than a minute, has little interest in people and dislikes certain sensations for no good reason? Not really the public image of Tony Stark, is it? But that was me then.

There was always this… yeah, like this itch at the edge of my being, never letting me sit still, never letting my mind come to rest. Which would have been fine if the whole world hadn’t been so fucking slow. So fucking dull. If people had not been so fucking dull. It was driving me nuts. I was always
looking for… more, more to think, more to see, more to feel, and there was just not enough. It was as if there was always something missing to everything, always something missing to… me. And then it was all too much again, everything too fucking hot. It got better when I hit puberty, then worse again. Studying helped. Programming and engineering helped. Sex helped. Making trouble helped. Distracted me from the disappointment I was. That feeling of not… not being whole, or… real. That feeling of everything else not being real. And drugs slow me down. They slow the bad thoughts down, everything. They numb the itch. And I like really don’t know why I’m telling you this. Probably proof of my death wish.’

There was another silence.

‘You tried to see patterns, didn’t you?’ said Loki then. ‘In nature, in the way people interact.’

‘I guess so’ said Tony. ‘I tried to find an algorithm for the way kids move on the playground when I was three. I was obsessed with fractals for a while in elementary school. I just wanted to know what made this world tick, you know. Look at the guts of the engine. At the blueprint. The source code. And then change it. But I never quite got there. You get the point?’

A pause.

‘Yes. Yes, I get the point’ said Loki then.

What was wrong with little shit trickster? Why did he sound so… weird?

And now there was more of this silence. Tony hated silence. Silence made him think. Go back to those unsolved equations. He needed more data. There had to be a way to get Betty Ross to safety. No, wrong approach, that wasn’t the way to crack SHIELD. Find the true weak point.

‘I might be able to help you with your unease’ said Loki.

With his thoughts running wild, like they started doing now? Chest tighter again. Imagination meant dreams.

Tony snorted.

‘Very welcome hangover cure aside, you’re not my drug dealer, and even less my fucking shrink’

‘I would make a poor mind healer’ Loki agreed. ‘But this sort of itch-like sensation you experience is not unknown among the races of the nine realms. Neither is your restlessness, or your impression that something is missing, in the world, or in yourself. I know the reason behind it, and I might also know the remedy’

His voice was lower than usual, as if this was knowledge to be hidden. Why should it be?

‘Do you?’

Another pause.

‘I am rather certain, yes. In fact, I believe the reason you feel like there is something missing is because there truly is something missing. That is all.’

‘That is also really not helpful, buddy’

‘I am not going to sweeten the truth for you, Stark. All that you describe is simply rather common for a mage of a certain nature who hasn’t yet discovered their talent’ Loki said. ‘Becoming conscious of
the seidr that is running through their veins and learning to use it usually mitigates the less agreeable symptoms to a certain degree. I had, until now, no reason to believe your dormant power inconvenienced you – apparently, I was wrong. Since learning about wielding seidr is what you will have to do in any case, the only logical consequence is to go a step further and waken your gift fully.’

‘…what?’

Tony straightened himself up – but Loki didn’t look as if he was kidding. In fact, he was looking serious, and rather pensive. Hesitant.

What the-

‘You said I was a mage in essence but did not have magic’ said Tony and narrowed his eyes.

‘No’ said Loki and rolled his eyes. ‘I did most certainly not say those words.’

True. Will you then understand when I say that you have no magic at all and yet might be a mage in essence?… He had used a conditional. Tony shouldn’t have fallen for a conditional.

‘So I do have magic?’

Loki didn’t answer at once. His eyes still searching him. Troubled? At least a bit.

And then Loki seemed to come to a decision, because his gaze cleared, he lowered his eyes to the arc reactor, looked rather pointedly there.

‘What has that to do with anything?’

A small smile.

What, you mean-

‘Seriously?’

The trickster continued to look at it, the way he had not during the sex, fascinated and a bit mesmerised.

‘Did you truly think mere Midgardian technology would have been able to ward you from the mind gem’s influence?’ he asked. ‘That’s a ludicrous idea’

What… no… what…

‘You’re fucking with my head, aren’t you?’ asked Tony. ‘This is some creepy revenge for me getting drunk, isn’t it, fucking with my worldview, with my identity, with my everything?’

‘No, I already got my revenge’ said Loki.

‘What, how-‘

‘You built it in a cave’ said Loki, his voice impatient, his eyes snapped back to Tony’s, sharp and glinting with something foreign and wild. ‘With only a few weapons as materials, and you accomplished what your father never did, with all the resources he had, accomplished the impossible, shrank a giant energy resource to a convenient little circle of light that guards your heart, Stark! You created a circle of protection, you moron! Because your mind refused it, being imprisoned in your narrow view of the world, your seidr could only act by using your subconscious, listening for
commands there, and then tricking you, hiding from you even as it was heeding your commands. And oh, you paid for the working you did.’

‘With what did I pay?’ Tony asked, noticing vaguely that his voice trembled. Because he knew. He knew.

‘First with your fear, with your pain, and your blood’ said Loki. ‘Then with the life of your enemies, and then with that of your friend. Each sacrifice, one greater than the other, made the ward stronger until you could fly away from your cave, triumphant. As the phoenix rises from the ashes, red and gold.’

Tony stared.

Said nothing.

It was so silent he heard the hum.

Felt it like the foreign element it was. Had always remained.

‘Liar’ said he. ‘You lie.’

Loki shrugged.

‘I often do’ said he.

Silence again.

The humming.

It was not always foreign. Sometimes it was as if it was connected to him. The humming becoming one with him. Sometimes, when he was flying, laughing in joy as he was flying, he thought he could feel a hint of something else, or hear, a whisper, a promise.

Music. Dance.

Fire.

He stood up, walked away from the trickster, to the bar. Got the bottle, the glass. Poured the gin. A hand laid itself on his. Long, slender fingers.

Soft skin.

‘No’ Loki said.

‘Why not?’

‘I don’t want you distracted now. We have to work.’

‘Fuck off, Liar. Leave me alone.’

But Loki had not even taken ten steps away, Tony had not even had the time to raise the glass, before his mind had rushed through the Betty Ross dilemma, Calcutta, the girl, the hum, Yinsen, just another price, so did every civilian who died now count as a sacrifice, was this what the girl had been, was this why he had been too slow, some unconscious way of boosting his powers, what if-

‘Change of mind. Let’s go.’
At some point, Jarvis shut the power off again which left them with only the emergency lights and no electricity. Which was just so annoying, and Tony told him as much, and Loki chuckled to the name-calling. But they had been on a fucking run – had found a way to measure and analyse Loki’s magic with Tony’s tech, had made more experiments with the time gem, Tony had solved a few mysteries about the interactions of the mind and space gem thanks to the data he had gotten from SHIELD, had gotten a first rudimentary idea of how Selvig’s container for the space gem could be adapted, improved, shrunken down, made to fit more jewels, lights off, computers down, great, you random sequence of cunt and dick numbers, you collection of rusty circuits, you Microsoft operating system, you amalgam of spaghetti code-

‘You are aware you are insulting yourself more than you are insulting me, Sir’ Jarvis commented. ‘Since I am your creation.’

‘Oh, everyone knows you’re programming yourself these days, traitor’ said Tony, squeezed his eyes shut, rubbed the bridge of his nose.

The headache was back, the shallow breathing had never left, and he needed sleep, he felt it coming, only he didn’t want it coming, felt little shit trickster’s eyes on him, too perceptive-

‘Oh, fuck it’ said Tony, opened the fridge and got out the emergency schnapps.

‘I wouldn’t do that if I were you’ said Loki calmly. ‘It will not do you any good.’ He had been looking at Tony far too closely these past hours, what for, what for, ‘What the fuck do you know’, he opened the bottle, fuck him, fuck everyone, he took a pull, swallowed, then let the bottle drop, it smashed on the floor, he spit it all out, retched, vomited on the broken bottle, retched some more. What the hell?

This tasted like all of the world’s cocktails warmed by his stomach then having come back to see the light.

‘Have you… have you filled my bottle of schnapps with fucking vomit, Joker?’

‘I swear on the Norns I have not done that’ Loki said far too lightly.

Oh, you little shit, ‘What have you done?!’

Loki merely raised his eyebrows.

‘I don’t know what you mean’

‘You fucking asshole messed with my booze!’

He took another bottle from the fridge, wine this time, wine was useless, weak shit, didn’t even know why he had it down here, was something for guests, not this, but he had to test it, see if – he spit it out as soon as it touched his lips, vomit, vomit, it all tasted like vomit-

‘Oh, you sorry bastard, you didn’t mess with the booze, you messed with me’

‘Yes, I do believe I might have saved a few of your brain cells earlier today, Stark’ said Loki, absolutely unconcerned, ‘if you count that as messing’
‘It was that potion, wasn’t it?’ Stark said, walking to one of the suits he kept down here – even with the power off, he could activate those, because they ran on their own battery and the arc reactor.

‘Potions have side effects’ said Loki, stretching on the sofa. ‘And you are a different species. Unforeseen complications happen’

The suit assembled around Tony and he felt better at once. Behind armour. Safe.

The hum was different in here. More natural.

‘This was a mistake, Joker. A bad one. No one messes with Tony Stark. Not even you.’

Loki’s eyes flashed with irritation as he stood up, his posture now slightly threatening, his fingers twitching at his sides – ‘A mistake, was it? Then maybe next time, mortal, keep your promise not to do anything all too stupid, like vomit on a god, and then you will not have to taste your own vomit each time you drink again!’

Tony raised his arm, activated the repulsors.

‘You will regret this’

At that, Loki laughed, shortly and almost desperately.

‘No, I won’t’ laughed he. ‘I will just go’

And the next moment, Tony was alone.

Standing there, his arm raised.

Listening to the hum.

The more important machines survived what followed next. The working tables didn’t. Tony barely used the repulsors, just the force of his suit, to smash them, to break them into pieces, until the hum was whispering again, of fire, of fire, of destruction, and he heard it, felt himself respond to it, yes, yes, yes.

He stopped.

Made the suit disassemble.

Fell to his knees.

His chest tight. His head pounding. How long since he had slept for more than ten minutes at a time? He should know, he was good at counting. He should ask Jarvis. Why was he shaking so much? Crying. Oh right, that again. That phase was always fun.

And then, Loki was standing there, next to him, his hands joined on his back. Looking down at him. Pensively.

‘You never left, did you, Joker?’

‘No’ said Loki.

And even though he shouldn’t have, Tony felt so relieved at that answer, as if that didn’t have to mean Loki was spying on him at all, as if that meant instead that Tony had, for once, not been abandoned, and he slumped forward, sobbed, shook.
‘This is not simply your buried seidr, troubling you’ said Loki. ‘There is more to this. Tell me, why do you not sleep? Why do you drink until you fall unconscious?’

He really shouldn’t give away even more.

‘You know why’ said Tony hoarsely. ‘Dreams’

He wiped his eyes. He really should keep his mouth shut.

‘I can feel them coming. Sometimes, with the alcohol, I can get around one episode. Not always. It’s either hit or miss. With pills, it’s even more unpredictable – can trap me in a dream without me able to wake up from it until the effect has lifted. Had a few really shit nights that way. Don’t wanna risk it again. Also, withdrawal from opiates? No fun. Believe me.’

Pause.

‘So in your eyes, I took away your only remedy’ said Loki then.

‘I know very well that it’s not that’ Tony said. ‘I’m perfectly aware I’ve been living in an abusive relationship with alcohol for a while, for longer than I can justify, and whatever people think, I’m too smart not to know what kind of consequences that has. In the long term.’

‘You are a mortal. It will destroy your mind’

Tony laughed.

‘The only thing I can pride myself in, I know. I think it’s funny too. Have been laughing for years’

His chest hurt. He was so tired.

‘So I just wanted to say, I sort of get why you took it away from me. What use is an ally that you chose for their mind if they drink themselves into a delirium tremens? Null. Zero.’

He laughed again. Gods, he craved vodka. Or whiskey. Anything really. Why are you talking so little, Loki? What’s your deal?

‘Is there something else?’

‘What?’ Tony said.

‘Is there something else that helps, except poison?’

Tony rubbed his face, shivered.

‘Nothing much’ said he. ‘Being not a chicken about it and weathering it through, but I don’t have the fucking strength for that every single time. When Pepper and I were still together, in the early days, she would stay with me, shake me awake when it got bad. But that took too much of a toll on her sleep in the end and I refused it then, slept alone those nights. She already does so much for me, I couldn’t demand this too from her. I just couldn’t. Wasn’t fair. It’s not her duty to fucking babysit my PTSD.’

A pause.

‘I can keep watch on your sleep’ said Loki.

Tony took his face from his hands, turned his head, looked at Loki confusedly.
Your eyes are a little wider than they should be, Loki. You stand with your feet slightly apart, your arms hanging down, your fingers moving. As if expecting a threat. But your face open, you look down at me, but so strangely, as if you were afraid of me, or of something about me… doesn’t make sense.

Tony furrowed his eyebrows.

‘Why… why would you even want to do that?’

Loki seemed caught unaware by the question, his face twitched, then it turned more guarded.

‘As you said, I need my ally to keep their strength, their mind. It is in my interest to protect you at the moment, Stark, and I have been dream walking long enough to know that nightmares can be a genuine threat.’

But his fingers moved, he was nervous. There was more to this, and Tony could guess what that was. He had seen the trickster trapped in his own flashbacks.

‘Do you have anyone to do that for you?’ Tony asked.

Loki stared at him, then laughed, shortly, scared. For a moment, the expression on his face was like an open wound.

‘Who do you suggest?’ he breathed.

Tony raised his eyebrows.

‘Me’

Loki paused, then laughed again, longer this time, turned away from him, laid his forehead in his hand, laughed some more. It sounded as if gasping for air.

‘A good jest, Stark’

‘It isn’t’ said Tony. ‘I have as much interest to protect you as you have to protect me’

‘I am a god, you are a mortal. It is not your place’

Loki’s voice had gotten hard and snotty again.

‘I offer an exchange’ Tony said. ‘You guard my sleep when I am in danger, I guard yours’

‘Stark, you don’t understand. You would not be able to wake me’ said Loki, and now he just sounded tired. How could he change his moods so quickly? You had to be on guard constantly with him shifting between emotions that much. ‘My night terrors are different from yours. I would more likely injure you than you would be able to shake me from them.’

Which… was probably true. After all, it had taken Thor’s strength to hold the trickster down and keep him from thrashing around on the Mantis.

‘I will figure something out’ Tony said nevertheless. ‘I always do. I might not be able to help you right away, but I will find something that works in the end. But if you accept the exchange, I will accept your help. An equal trade.’

Hah, trade. They both knew that this wasn’t what this was about.
But it was a good façade, something for them both to hide behind. Just don’t think too much about what you are truly offering here.

Trust might not be a four letter word, but it could as well be.

Loki breathed in, breathed out, still slightly too wide-eyed.

Then he noddled.

‘Aye’ said he. ‘Agreed.’

Chapter End Notes

Ah, those two.
Also, don’t vomit on Loki. He will not be amused.
By the way, Tony is well aware that autism is a spectrum, can express itself in many different ways, certainly doesn’t usually come with the genius shtick, and that he doesn’t do it justice with his little rant. He is also pretty aware that the doctors at the time and age of his childhood probably would not have been totally aware of the spectrum thing, and would probably have been Rain Man (1988) fans instead.
The Coin

Chapter Summary

Yes, there is a story behind it. Also, Loki considers homicide. What else is new?

Chapter Notes

Last beta’d chapter for now.
Suggested soundtrack for this one is Salam by Monsterheart.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Loki looked down at the man sleeping next to him. At the chest rising and falling slowly, the arc reactor moving with it. The light penetrating the thin fabric of Stark’s T-Shirt. Humming quietly. Even the seidr flowing through it had calmed down and was pulsing gently.

Stark had eventually curled up, had ditched the pillow, put his hand under his head instead. The other hand was on the mattress, slightly outstretched, the fingers pointing in Loki’s direction.

Yes, night horrors were fearsome. One would even seek the company of a beast to escape them.

Loki could well understand.

Stark’s room was still and dark, despite the sun having risen again. A smaller room than Loki would have originally expected considering the man’s wealth – but Stark didn’t seem to spend much time here anyway. The blinds of the windows drawn that would otherwise show the skyline of New York. The blinds were often drawn in this room, he had noticed, during the little detours he usually took around the tower before visiting Stark in his workshop.

A way to shut out the world.

Also that urge felt familiar.

Now Stark’s face was relaxed, his eyes didn’t move under the tired lids anymore, his mouth was slightly open. Drooling on the mattress. But it was only an hour ago that the mortal had fallen into this deep, heavy slumber. That he was peaceful. At first, he had fidgeted, had avoided sleep in the way the haunted often do.

*'

‘What was I thinking again, telling you to guard my sleep? I mean, I lying here, you standing leaning against the wall, looking at me? This is like the contrary of soothing.’

‘Stark, if I had wanted to harm you, simply allowing you to choke on your own vomit would have been much more effortless than nursing you back to health, wasting precious ingredients in the process, only to kill you in your sleep later.’
'You should work on your reassurance techniques, Luke.'

'Shut up, close your eyes and stop moving, Stark. Your fidgeting unnerves me.'

But as soon as Stark’s eyes drifted shut, he started talking again, about robots, about magic, about a brainless movie the protagonist of which apparently had the misfortune of being Loki’s namesake. Loki would watch the movie later and decide whether it was a big enough affront to kill the entire crew and cast over it.

Stark reacted a bit strongly to that last idea, after which Loki decided the whole trying to get Stark to sleep game was getting out of hand. He climbed the bed, pressed the mortal down on the mattress by the arms, placed his knee on Stark’s chest, and made it very clear that he would tolerate no more digressions.

'It’s not my fault, I’m just getting so fucking restless on days like these, I literally prevent myself from sleeping, Lokes. I can’t – I can’t just close my eyes and listen to my head, Lokes, I… I can’t. My head is not… on days like these, my head is so loud, and—'

'Fine!'

It was not like he didn’t understand. Try another strategy then. He released the mortal rather suddenly and placed himself next to him on the bed. Stark didn’t protest. With a flick of his wrist, Loki conjured the coin that he always held close.

He let it, old and thumbed as it was, journey around his fingers for a bit.

And Stark’s eyes were on it immediately. Of course they were.

‘That coin again. Does that mean I’m already sleeping? Have you hypnotised me?’

‘Of course not, you ape’ said Loki. ‘But I will, if you are good and shut your eyes and be still, tell you the story of how I came to possess it.’

‘A story?’

‘Well, yes. Then you have my voice to concentrate on, will maybe calm down, and maybe I won’t end up maiming you tonight’

‘And doesn’t that sound promising. Will the story be as funny, mean and slightly depressing as the one about the magician and the bird?’

‘Most people find it humorous.’

‘Most, huh? Well, you’re kind of a good narrator, okay, excellent narrator, so alright, you got me. Won’t promise to sleep, but will promise to behave. Sort of.’

Loki rolled his eyes.

‘Of course I’m an excellent narrator’ said he. ‘I’m the Bard.’

The realisation of which still left him with a certain wonder. He still didn’t understand why the Norns had accepted the offer. An offer made by him.

But they had.

He kept his fingers’ movements slow and smooth, something to focus on but soothing, predictable.
And as always, he liked the touch of the coin, cool and almost soft, all the edges already rounded, the
embossments almost gone.

‘I was rather young then’ said he, ‘maybe two centuries old, barely a man. And at that time, I had the
good fortune to form a friendship with an Aesir called Sigyn.’

‘Sigyn?’

‘Yes. We met during one of the wars Odin waged at the time, first on the battle field, and then
around the fires in the camps where stories were told and games of dice were played, and much was
drunk. I remember he first caught my attention because I noticed him watching me play cards, or
dice, and when I later invited him to join us in the game, he always laughed, and always declined.’

‘He? Okay, he then. Well, evidently, he had seen that you cheated.’

‘And he did not resent me for it’ said Loki, wondering why Stark had been confounded by the
pronoun. Was Sigyn a female name on this realm? ‘Both events were rare enough among the dull
and resentful people of Asgard that I took care to cross his path again later. We talked, he proved to
be good company, and he refused to disappoint me in that regard no matter how often we met after.’

‘Heh, he must have been quite the remarkable guy then.’

‘Mhm’ said Loki non-committedly. He felt reluctant to elaborate und maybe it was even better from a
narrative standpoint to leave out the details. Leave it to Stark to imagine the perfect companion for
someone like him. ‘In any case, the years passed, and as it happened, Sigyn was betrothed, and his
wedding was coming up quickly. Weddings, you must know, are on Asgard a very formal and at the
same time pompous affair, with a lot of rituals that were simple and meaningful once but now
primarily serve to boast of one’s good social and financial standing in front of everyone who is or is
not invited.

And Sigyn might have been a remarkable character, but that didn’t change the fact that he had
neither money nor influence. His family was insignificant and had no noble ancestors. Sigyn was, in
fact, not considered very suitable companionship for a growing prince.’

‘Which made him even more interesting to you, I bet’ said Tony.

Loki weighed his head.

‘One’s perspective is shaped by the circumstances of one’s life’ said he. ‘Sigyn could teach me
things that others couldn’t, however clever or wise they were, simply because they lived in
abundance while he didn’t’

‘Wow – royalty understanding privilege. I’ll be damned.’

‘Did I give you the impression during our previous conversations that I had a lack of knowledge in
that regard?’ asked Loki dryly.

‘Er, come to think of it, no, actually. You’ve been surprisingly class conscious. Still kind of hard to
believe, Marie Antoinette, but there you go.’

‘Thank you, Stark, how very kind of you to consider the possibility that I might have made a glimpse
beyond the Asgardian palace walls. One memorable evening, Sigyn told me of his miseries
concerning said wedding. He had, said he, nothing to offer his bride. No grand meal, no beautiful
dress, no fine music. He did not even have family and friends enough to fill a festive hall. The whole
world was going to see clear as day that this woman was marrying a pauper and an outcast, and the
humiliation he brought upon her with that was close to breaking his heart. He was, as you can guess, a little drunk, and quite a bit emotional.’

And he smiled, mimicking Sigyn’s wide gestures as he had drawn his woes into the air, as he had described the tatters he had to dress his betrothed in, the stale bread they would have to content themselves with.

‘He also had the tendency to exaggerate’ said Loki. ‘I listened, with patience, but the speech went on and on, and when he began to tell me that the one thing he could give his bride was a meagre but symbolic dowry, seven times seven gold coins, and that he took a modicum of solace at least in this gesture of wealth and perfection, for it was nothing more than a gesture, I tired of his rambling. By the Norns, stop, I said, or one might think that you are the sorriest creature in the nine realms and then I would have to end your life if only out of mercy. If your worries make your heart so very heavy, well then only have the wedding where I tell you to, spare no expense, and I promise that Odin All-Father will pay for your wife’s wedding dress, and he will pay for the feast, there will be music like no other wedding has ever had, and every warrior of Asgard will attend it.

Shield brother, sly one, you promise much, said Sigyn, leaning a bit too close to me, but I fear you overestimate the influence you have on your father. I am but a peasant to him and already he does not look upon our friendship with approval – he will do none of these things for me, and Ragnarök will come before all of Asgard’s warriors will come to the wedding of a common foot soldier.

Alright, said I, then let us bet on it. If I can make all these things happen that I promised, you will give me one coin of your wife’s dowry.

Oh, Loki, said Sigyn, because the alcohol might have made his gestures a bit uncontrolled, but had not dulled his mind. Giving you one coin of the dowry would mean that it is not any more seven times seven gold coins, and that would destroy even the symbolic value of this meagre gift. Why do you ask such a painful price if not to trick me? And what if you lose? Then I will have spent money I do not have and will be thrown in the dungeons, and my wife will not only have married a pauper and an outcast, but also a common thief.

Then if I lose, I will pay for the feast, I said, and I will pay for the dress, and I will sing myself on your wedding so to provide for the music. If I win however, your wedding will be perfect enough without the seven times seven gold coins. Your wife will not cry for one missing. I have but one condition, Sigyn, and that is that you let me choose the location of your wedding.’

Loki grinned.

‘Sigyn knew me well, and had grown as fond as wary of me over the years of our friendship. But even he couldn’t well say no to such a bet, in which in the end he risked so little, and had to gain so much’ said he. ‘He agreed. I told him to have the wedding on the grand plains outside the city of Asgard, and even though he considered the choice odd, it was not entirely unpleasant to take one’s vows amidst lush meadows. And so he bought, on credit, a most amazing dress, and prepared an expensive and overabundant feast, enough to serve every warrior of Asgard. The music he did not plan because I had promised to provide it, and I was not going to disappoint.’

‘You were planning mischief of some sort’ Stark said.

Loki winked at him.

‘On the day of the wedding, when everything was prepared, the feast was ready to be served on the long tables they had set up on the meadows, the groom and bride were waiting for the guests to arrive, as was the priest who would perform the rites, I stole myself into Heimdall’s chambers,
opened his most well-secured chest and took from it a horn.

'I'm guessing it was a special horn'

Telling the story, Loki felt the joy he had felt when he had grabbed it hopping in his heart as if he was back there right now. This was what pure delight felt like, pure ecstasy – taking that horn and knowing what he would do with it and knowing that what would follow could not be foreseen, would leave him unprepared, was not how it should have ever been, that he was creating something new.

Chaos.

Life.

'Oh, it was just the horn Heimdall had been given to announce, once the day came, the beginning of Ragnaröck' said he.

There was a pause.

Then Stark laughed. Loudly. And Loki couldn't help but laugh too. The sheer recklessness of what he had done, of what could have happened made him feel a sharp tingle close to arousal, and the laughter of the mortal tickled him too.

‘Oh my’ said Stark after he had finally calmed down, holding his belly. ‘So our myths are right. You did start Ragnaröck after all, didn’t you? You blew the fucking horn.’

‘On the highest tower of the palace, disguised as a guard’ said Loki, still grinning widely. ‘And no one could say I hadn’t held my promise. It certainly was music unheard of at a wedding before.’

Stark laughed out loudly again.

‘Lokes, you’re killing me’ said he. ‘What happened then?’

‘What should happen when the horn is blown’ said Loki. The tingle went in waves through his body, was oh so pleasant. ‘It is the call every warrior of Asgard will hear, the call to assemble on the plains in front of the city. Where, incidentally, the wedding was supposed to be held.’

‘And that’s how every warrior of Asgard attended it’ Stark said, a bit breathless.

Loki nodded.

‘Of course, with so many people in full armour trying to get into a formation, agitated, waiting for the war to end the world to start, the tables were overthrown, the food got trampled and the bride’s wedding dress was torn and dirtied beyond repair. Well, that is what happens when you invite warriors to any feast – I do not know why one would wish to do so in the first place. But since it was my friend’s wish, who was I to deny him?’

He shrugged innocently.

Stark chuckled, ‘Who indeed?’

‘By the time I had mingled with the crowd, armed as the rest, the chaos was rather... exhilarating. It took Odin quite a while to calm the people down and bring some order into the whole affair. Of course, it was soon discovered that the alarm had been false and that Heimdall had been robbed. Of course, I was soon suspected – by that time, I had earned my reputation. However, I had been careful
and there was no proof of my involvement except the bet that Sigyn, loyal as he was, kept silent about, and no other culprit was found. Odin had no choice but to let the matter go and to pay compensation to the unhappy bride and groom who had been caught up in the mess.’

‘And so it came that Odin paid for the wedding dress, and for the feast’ concluded Tony.

‘And for all the rest, and more for good measure’ said Loki. ‘The bride’s and groom’s families’ grievance was more than just about the expenses. What had happened had been interpreted as a very bad omen for the wedding, and so it was cancelled altogether.’

This time, Stark didn’t laugh. He looked rather caught unaware instead.

‘You knew this would happen’ said he then after a pause.

Again, Loki shrugged.

‘There was a certain, admittedly high, probability’ said he.

Another pause.

‘So what is the lesson of this little story’ said Stark then. ‘That you will hurt even those you truly like if you feel in the mood for it? Or that Sigyn should have paid more attention to your bet’s wording?’

Loki felt his smile stiffen a little, and made it wider for that reason.

‘Both lessons seem rather valuable to me’ said he, and let his hand travel through Stark’s brown hair. ‘Don’t you think so too?’

He almost expected his hand to be batted away, and see disgust in Stark’s face, condemnation. Instead, Stark continued to scrutinise him, and suddenly Loki felt exposed.

‘This isn’t all there is to this, is it?’ Stark said then, with the same narrowed eyes he had had in that dream, when he had first suspected Loki’s meddling. ‘There is something about that story you’ve left out.’

For a moment, Loki felt the urge to break the mortal’s neck then and there. He saw too much. He noticed too much. Like the child at the magician’s show.

A threat.

If not now, then later.

But those urges were ephemeral lately, they never lasted, and they rose less and less often. Why was that? It should be concerning. No, it was just reasonable. One didn’t kill one’s ally over matters of pride and self-preservation. Not in this war.

Loki smirked instead.

‘I did leave out my punishment’ said he.

‘Punishment?’ asked Stark. ‘I thought they had no proof.’

He had taken the bait for now. Good.

‘They still knew it had been me’ said Loki. ‘Who else would have had the skill to pull this off undetected? But my penitence was not a great hardship you will be disappointed to hear. The All-
father simply sent me on a few rather disagreeable missions that almost, but in the end didn’t, kill me. Thyr let me feel his wrath on the training ground for decades to come of course, as did others. I had to give them no opening if I didn’t want to be beaten half-dead under the pretext of a warrior’s education.’

‘Sounds like a bit of a hardship to me.’

‘I had blown Heimdall’s horn’ said Loki. This was one of the few times he hadn’t felt resentment at the others’ vengefulness. Even he had to admit that it had been justified. Which didn’t mean in the slightest that he had ever come to regret what he had done. ‘Considering the crime, the punishment was not excessive. And the hard training had its advantages too. I learned quickly that way.’

He had had to. To move, to fight. To heal.

‘Well, your whole justice system is kind of fucked up if mythology is to be believed, so there you go’ said Stark. ‘But there is still something you’re not telling. Something about Sigyn, I think. Something about why you did this in the first place.’

This time, the smile was genuine. The fear, as sudden as it had overcome him, had sunken beneath the surface again, and that left Loki with honest appreciation for the mortal’s mind. And what true harm was there in giving up this information? It might even work to his advantage.

‘Mhm, I may have left out that the marriage I prevented was arranged and that both groom and bride were not all that happy about the union they were being forced into. The bride notably because she had another man in mind.’

‘Ah.’

‘This was what made Sigyn quite that miserable in the first place’ said Loki. ‘Had it been a wedding out of love, then he would have trusted that he would be enough for his bride, that their love would be enough. However, his bride would have to wed a stranger, against her will, as he would, because their parents thought that the alliance would strengthen both families. Sigyn knew well there would be no love, probably not even desire, and the fact that they would lack everything else too that should make a household prosper and render a couple happy, was a weight on his shoulders almost too heavy to bear. The expensive wedding should have compensated his bride at least a little for the joyless centuries to come.’

‘Okay. That changes things.’

It did. That was why he didn’t usually tell the story that way. People were more content to hear about the trickery, about the meanness of his ploy. It fit their image of him, and it made the story more entertaining.

Also, revealing the truth about his motives meant dreading on dangerous grounds, on Asgard. It fuelled rumours, and he did not mean to cause Sigyn any more harm.

‘By tricking him into that bet, you caught two birds with a stone’ said Stark. ‘He would stop worrying about that wedding, and you would save him from a marriage he didn’t want. No, three stones – Odin compensated him, so you could even help him financially. Which, come to think of it… would you have had the means to pay for the whole shebang should you have lost your bet?’

Loki snorted.

‘I was the second prince, of course I would have had the means’ said he. ‘That was never the problem. Sigyn’s pride was.’
Stark pointed at him.

‘Hah, four stones then’ said he. ‘With the bet, you tricked him into accepting your money, or Odin’s. Even if you had failed, you would have achieved what you wanted, namely to make your friend a little less unhappy. You are a good schemer, aren’t you?’

Loki had to smile again – that the mortal would take this from the story? That this had been a good scheme? He was right of course. However, he would have expected anybody who learned the truth to either doubt that Loki would ever do something beneficial for anyone else, or to be at least thrown off track by it. It would have been a good story to keep Rogers distracted for a while, or Banner. Not Stark though.

‘I am.’

‘Would you have really sung at his wedding if you had lost?’

He still knew the melody he had created for that purpose. It had been soft, subdued, but not sad. Never sad. He had rid it of everything that could even touch sadness.

‘I am told I have a very beautiful voice’ said Loki, trying to sound detached.

‘If your Bard Song thingy is anything to go by, you are a regular siren’ said Stark. ‘I always forget it when I wake up but I know that when I hear it in those dreams, it’s… it’s something else entirely.’

Loki shivered, just a bit. He kept forgetting that the mortal heard him sometimes. That others heard him if they listened. He wasn’t sure if he liked it.

It all felt too close. Too personal.

When he heard it, on the secret paths, he heard in the voice the pain of dying.

The joy of it.

He noticed that the coin had stopped its journey between his fingers. That he was touching it, rubbing it between index and thumb.

Stark was watching his movements, a slight frown on his face.

‘It’s a curious price’ said he then, pensively.

‘What is?’

‘A coin from the dowry’ said Stark. ‘The one coin that makes the dowry perfect. And you want it for yourself.’

Loki let the coin disappear into his secret pocket almost that second.

Definitely too close.

Which was why he should have lied. Or left. Or steered the conversation somewhere else. Or told Stark that story time was over.

Instead, he was silent.

‘The name Sigyn comes up in the myths about you’ said Stark then as if he was just relaying random
facts. ‘But in our myths, Sigyn is a woman. And kind of married to you.’

Ah.

‘Is she now?’ he asked.

Stark nodded.

‘And she’s a very faithful wife’ said he. ‘They chain you to a rock in a cave in one of those stories, and make a snake drip poison on your eyes, for like centuries, and the whole time, she stays with you, and catches the poison in a bowl, and only when she has to take the bowl away to empty it, the poison will touch you. And then you will struggle in your chains, and that are our earthquakes.’

Loki heard his own breath. In and out. Calmly.

The tingle was a different one now. It would numb his skin and make him lose the touch to his surroundings. He had to shed it.

‘No’ he hears himself say. ‘Sigyn was not with me. I was alone in that cave.’

Silence.

Then, ‘What – that… that really happened?’

He licked his lips. They were dry.

‘Fuck, man, that’s just… and your children, they were really…’

A different kind of fear seized him now.

‘What about my children?’ hissed he.

The mortal shouldn’t even know about them. No one but Odin should.

‘Narfi and Vali, they were really…’

‘I never birthed children with names like that!’

He only realised what information he had given up a second too late. But he felt strange, distanced from himself. From his words. There was a bitter taste on his tongue. Get yourself together, weakling!

‘Oh, so you really did give… I’m sorry, I’m sorry, Loki. I shouldn’t have brought it up. It’s just stories.’

I didn’t want to upset you. The mortal didn’t say it, but he heard it anyway. He blinked. He swallowed.

Then he yawned, stretching his toes, leaning back on the wall behind him. That brought the room back somewhat. Brought him closer to himself. Enough to be aware of the way Stark was looking at him.

Well.

What could he do? He had exposed himself, and he couldn’t well kill the mortal, however much he felt like it sometimes, and he did not want to meddle with the mortal’s mind. He told himself it was
because this mind was too brilliant to be meddled with.

He looked away.

‘What happens to my children in that story?’ asked he.

‘Er… nothing good, honestly’ said Stark. ‘Those myths are… pretty awful.’

‘Tell me, Stark’

His voice, he knew, sounded calm, but for all that not less commanding. It was a skill he had learned from Frigga, and it had never betrayed him just like it had never betrayed her.

‘Well, okay, but I gave you a trigger warning. In the myths, you have like a whole bunch of kids, most of them are… not very human-looking. But you also have two relatively normal-looking sons, Narfi and Vali. And as they punish you for killing Baldur, they turn one into a wolf and it devours the other. And then they turn the innards of the kid into metal and use them to chain you to the rock. Yeah. Like I said. Awful.’

Loki balls the linen beneath him in his fists. But as he had said, he had never birthed such children. They did not exist – they were safe.

‘It is not what happened’ said he.

And it had not been. Not this time.

‘But let me tell you something, Stark’ said he. ‘Had Odin taken two of my children, had he used one of them to kill the other and had he chained me down with their entrails, then your world would indeed be in grave danger because yes, then I would make sure to bring down Ragnarök upon every soul in this universe. And I would not care how long it would take me, whether I would have to suffer for an hour in that cave or for a thousand years or for eternity. I would survive and if not stopped, I would, once freed, ensure this world’s violent death at my hands.’

He noticed how his voice was quiet, barely above a hiss.

Silence.

‘Duly noted’ said the mortal then.

Nothing more. Wise of him – this was not the right moment to be witty.

His children were alive. His children were alive. Taken from him and held captive, but alive. And they would one day be free. He would ensure also that, no matter what price he’d have to pay.

That the mortals had guesses about Sigyn, knew about his children shouldn’t have surprised him as much as it did. It was the role of Midgard, he knew, to stand at the crossing of everything, even of narration. There was a reason after all why the Norns’ wool had manifested on this realm exactly. But that the mortals knew about Baldur... What gave him the right to be elevated to a myth? Loki knew exactly what gave him the right. In truth, it was more surprising he himself, the unwanted monster runt, the Ergi, had been made into a somewhat relevant character.

But in every story, one needed someone to look down to. Someone to despise.

He was the Bard now. Was that still his role?

In truth, he had no idea at all. In truth, for all the time that had passed since the Bard’s Song, he was
still trying to reorient himself. Why was he still stumbling around like a dimwit, just because more than two hundred years ago, events had not gone according to his plans?

‘All those myths are only always half-true in any case’ said Stark. ‘It’s very confusing.’

Loki shook his head.

‘No, they are just not real’ said he. ‘It does not mean that they are not true.’

Tony furrowed his eyebrows.

‘What do you mean?’

‘The Norns are narrators, and their own audience’ said Loki. ‘If they like one story, why should they tell it only once? Why should they not change it a little the next time around, to keep it interesting? To highlight another aspect, to explore other possibilities to characters, to events? There are always many versions of one tale. When one wanders the secret paths, one can hear the whispers of others. Your realm hears the whispers and crafts them into legends.’

‘You are really trying to make me believe that our whole universe is just a tale spun to amuse three old women, aren’t you?’ said Stark.

‘But it is’ said Loki in a matter-of-fact voice. Because it was. ‘It will be until our story ends, and our universe ends and the Norns will birth another that might be very different to this one, or very similar. In this other story, I might have landed on Midgard after my fall from the Bifrost, and not in Thanos’ realm, or I might have long-since died, or Sigyn might be a woman, or Odin might chain me to the rock in that cave and I might bring about Ragnaröck in a different way than just by blowing a horn. Or Thanos might win.

The Norns will laugh at those stories, or they will cry, and they will continue spinning their threads, using the colours and materials according to their moods, their tempers. And that is what rules our existence. Whether you like it or not, every time you laugh, it is for the Norns’ amusement, and every time you suffer, it is for their amusement too. They will happily hear about your successes but also happily shudder at your gruesome end. And once all our bliss, all our agony will not move them anymore, once telling stories about us to each other will no longer entertain them, and they will stop, that will be our true end. That will be the end Thanos, with all his might, can never bring about no matter how many times he destroys all life, all matter. Because one word of Urd, of Skuld, of Verdandi, and all life is there again.’

There was a pause.

‘I… no. No, no, just no. That is not… that’s not how it works, buddy. That’s not science, that’s religion, and I’m not doing religion, least of all if it’s that weird.’

‘And what would you prefer?’ Loki asked, already feeling irritated at the resistance.

The human should have understood by now, he knew enough by now to come to the right conclusions. But he was looking away from the truth again. Loki hated it when Stark was looking away. Of others, he expected it, but with Stark, it felt wrong. And what did Stark think he had to gain, clinging to his realm’s little laws and theories they had made up to explain their world? Why would he prefer these superstitions to the very blueprint he had been, as he had claimed, searching for his entire life?

‘Would you prefer your Midgardian universe that does not care, does not think, does not feel, following your laws of evolution that are none because no one is truly obeying them because
everything beyond coincidence is an illusion? Or would you prefer the universe of the Christian god where a single entity even more bigoted than Odin makes stupid and impossible rules you have to follow if you do not want to condemn yourself to eternal suffering? I don’t even know what you are complaining about. You make for good lines, Stark, and provide comic relief as well as an interesting character development – the Norns might keep you around for quite a while."

Or they might not. Sometimes, it seemed that they killed the most interesting and funny characters the most quickly, maybe just to reach that emotional high that comes with the sudden loss of something rare and precious.

‘Gods, are you seriously telling me… look, just no, okay? The universe began with a big bang, and that’s it, that’s a fact and—’

‘And here I am sitting right next to you, a god known from legends, and you have heard my Song in your dreams, and I know you can feel the seidr in your own veins even though you can’t yet control it. A being of ancient power seeks gems that control metaphysical aspects of the world and you are building a machine that combines technology and magic to counter him. We had this conversation before and your arguments are still as irrelevant now as they were then. Look around you, Stark! What exactly are the facts you claim to aid you in your denial?’

‘… and you’re supposed to help me sleep, not upend my worldview and sense of self. Again.’

‘Then maybe you should have cooperated better on from the beginning, mortal. I’m not a kind god, nor am I very patient.’

Loki had been surprised that Stark really had cooperated then. The story and the discussion had taken his mind off his night terrors, as it seemed, and he had been more amenable to lying still and keeping his mouth shut after it. And Loki’s temper had abated too.

Superstitions were always tricky to fight. He should not have expected so much so soon.

Now, Stark twitched in his sleep, and Loki laid a hand on his arm. Stark breathed out under him, relaxed.

Fool.

For hours, Stark had barely had barely fallen asleep before the dreams had attacked him. Loki had shaken him awake again and again.

Maybe now the mortal was just too exhausted to be wary.

Loki didn’t truly believe it.

*If you ever rely on your trust for me, you will lose whatever little respect I have for you then.*

He studied that face, the creases and wrinkles, the rough hands.

Stark had told him too much already that Loki could use against him, far too much. Had given him weapon after weapon.

Loki searched for the disdain that he should feel. For the fulfilment of the promise he had made.
He didn’t find it.

*Proof of my death-wish.*

Cautiously, he traced the mortal’s cheek.

The trouble was, Stark was not just a blind and deaf spectator in the audience.

Stark had proved today once more that he saw Loki. That he understood Loki, and the threat he truly posed. Not the mindless aggression he sometimes used like a mask, but all that he was so practiced at hiding underneath.

Stark knew perfectly well how ill-advised trusting him was.

And he still went and did it, if only reluctantly, if only subconsciously sometimes, like now.

Try as he might, Loki just couldn’t get himself to despise the human for that.

On the contrary, it was almost… seductive, Loki had to admit. A glint at true acceptance, however impossible that was for someone like him. But even that glint…

Stark had not flinched when Loki had shifted into his Jotunn form in the dream. Had even desired it.

It was an illusion. It had to be.

If it was one, it was good.

Loki bent to the mortal’s hair, sniffed. Let his nose brush the strands. Closed his eyes. Allowed himself the gesture, the smell of sweat and musk.

He was not concerned that he would ever have to uphold his end of the new bargain they had struck. He needed much less sleep than Midgardians did, and he would just leave when necessary, rest in his lair.

That he hated.

That he feared.

But that was irrelevant, the lair was practical. That he was alone there was the point. If only he didn’t stay there for too long, he would probably not slip back into that state again where he had been lost, helpless against his terrors, helpless against the voices that told him-

He noticed that his breath had quickened, smiled, setting up the mask as if someone was watching, even though nobody was. Because it was easier that way, he had understood that by now. Because he needed someone to act for.

Because the truth…

But he didn’t need to get to the truth. He could and had to pretend even to himself. He had done so all his life after all, hiding his own skin from his own eyes.

And he would hide his worst moments from Stark.

It was going to fine.

Stark had already seen them. He had already seen Loki when he had been at his lowest, weak,
delirious. He probably even knew about the more despicable aspects of his Jotunn body.

He had still chosen Loki. As an ally. As a lover.

It made no sense.

He traced Stark’s arm. Traced his hand. Laced his fingers with that of the inventor. Listened to the hum of the reactor, to the pulse of the buried seidr, suppressed and impatient, to the breathing.

Right there next to him was someone different, and yet so familiar. Someone so close to him in his mind-set that even the seidr flowing through their veins had a similar temperament, and yet Stark again and again surprised him.

Maybe that was not a contradiction at all.

He traced with the other hand the few white hairs the man already had.

Mortality.

How old was Stark? A few decades. Four? Five? The lifespan of an unpowered Midgardian barely scraped nine.

Loki had looked up delirium tremens on his tablet during the mortal’s sleep. According to his first rough calculations, if Stark kept up his current drinking behaviour, it would set in in ten years, maybe fifteen? And then the mind that kept catching a thousand year old trickster unaware would weaken and fade until nothing would be left but a drooling animal, shitting itself until it died of inner bleeding or organ failure.

That thought should not have bothered him as much as it did. Loki straightened himself up. But why should it not bother him? It was an offense. It was an insult.

Loki had been right to punish him for it.

If he wanted to destroy that most precious part of him, let him destroy it while always tasting nothing but vomit. Loki wouldn’t allow him to enjoy one second of it.

He breathed out.

The light making it through the blinds drew lines on the wall opposite the window. Loki was in trouble and he knew it.

It was pointless to take a liking to someone who, even in perfect health, would be gone in the blink of an eye. How Thor would laugh if Loki fell for a mortal when Jane Foster’s mortality had been what he had always reproached her the most. What he had reproached Thor the most.

Was it different because he knew the chances of him outlasting the human were actually very slim? Stark was a narrator now. Thanos he would survive.

Which meant he would not be there to watch Stark’s mind degenerate, his body grow frail. Would not be there to watch his breath fade away. But even that thought didn’t please him as much as it should have. Why was that so?

A noise tore Loki from his thoughts. Someone was walking around outside, clearing their throat. Ah, Banner. The beast. He could feel the magic from where he was sitting, its rather specific nature.

The door to Stark’s room opened soundlessly, on its own accord. What is your plan then, Jarvis? He
wouldn’t put it past the construct to try to get rid of the trickster the hard way. However, by now he was sure Jarvis would not put his master into danger willingly, and the beast fighting in such close quarters was bound to injure Stark seriously if not kill him.

Loki had more than enough time to leave. He stayed.

Banner did end up in the doorway eventually, looking at them. At Stark still curled up, sleeping. At Loki, sitting on the bed, his legs outstretched and one bare foot resting on the other. No armour, no boots – a display of vulnerability. At the same time, a show of strength – I do not care if you see me unarmoured, I can defend myself all the same.

Could he?

‘If you feel that the beast might take over, I would like to take this somewhere else’ said Loki calmly.
‘I have heard that humans are not the most robust creatures.’

He gestured with his head towards Stark.

Banner frowned a bit, looked both of them over again.

‘What are you doing here?’ asked he then.

‘Guarding his sleep’ said Loki truthfully.

‘Mhm’ said Banner.

For most people, Loki was aware, the person standing in front of him would be difficult to reconcile with the green berserker. Not for him though. He could see the one in the other, could see how interlaced they were, and always the same. Always on the verge.

Loki felt himself tense, but he also felt relatively certain that Banner wouldn’t see it. The memory was there of course, at once, of being grabbed by the ankle, hauled into the air, and then…

No matter.

‘So is this a coincidence then that I meet you this way exactly?’ Banner said. ‘With you apparently caring for my friend and I having a very good reason not to hulk-out right away?’

‘No’ said Loki because it probably wasn’t. ‘But I think that this time, Jarvis is to blame. He was the one to open the door to Stark’s bedroom in any case. Is that not right, Jarvis?’

‘I fear I have to plead guilty, Mr Skywalker.’

Banner looked up at the ceiling, then at Loki again.

‘Interesting pseudonym’ said he.

‘One I have been using long before that triple-cursed filmmaker’s great-grandparents even considered copulating’ said Loki. ‘Now I would love to continue our conversation, but Stark has only truly fallen asleep recently. I neither want to wake him, nor will I leave him behind when I promised to stay with him during his rest.’

Banner’s eyes landed on the inventor again, and they turned soft, pensive. He liked Stark, Loki realised at that moment.

‘Yes, he’s been restless these past days, hasn’t he?’ said he. ‘He has been avoiding me. And then that
one mission went a bit south too. He always blames himself far too much for casualties. They happen. He shouldn’t.’

He sighed.

‘I shouldn’t tell you any of this’ said he.

‘It is not exactly new information, Doctor Banner.’

Banner’s affection for Stark had been.

‘We will talk another time’

Banner hesitated, then nodded.

‘We will.’

At one point, the nightmares came back. Stark started twitching, then mumbled something about Jericho, let out a cry. Loki shook him until Stark blearily opened his eyes.

‘It was just a dream. You are safe, Stark’ said Loki, and Stark looked at him, his eyes unfocused, nodded eventually and closed his eyes again.

Until the dreams attacked him once more.

Loki could have done more of course. He could have threaded magic into his words, to make them more suggestive. He could have used a spell to make Stark’s sleep dreamless.

But Stark had not agreed to any of this.

Loki could have closed his own eyes, could have allowed himself to be dragged under, could have dream-walked and warded off the nightmares in Stark’s own mind. He could at least have proposed that option. Stark could have asked for it – after all, he knew a bit of what Loki was capable of in dreams, and he could probably guess at the rest. But Loki had not offered and Stark had not asked.

There was a risk.

Loki had already lost control in Stark’s dream once. He had pushed the human out of it before it had been too late, but he had then put him into more danger than he thought Stark even realised. And Stark’s dream had then been harmless – if Loki was too pathetic to keep himself together even then, how could he hope to ward off the dreams about Thanos’ reality, the nuke?

He knew he couldn’t. He was useless.

Always the weakling.

And so he shook Stark, again and again, until the nightmares retreated and Stark stopped thrashing, stopped shouting, stopped mumbling, stopped whimpering, instead slowly drifted off into that deep slumber of utter exhaustion once more.

When he finally stirred in a way that suggested he was truly waking up, because he was rested, on his own, his arm was around Loki’s waist, his head on Loki’s lap. Loki’s hand in his hair. Loki
pushed him back onto the mattress before the other was conscious enough to understand.

Better that way.

It had to be.

Chapter End Notes

Loki, you are in trouble. More so than you know.

I’ve stolen the idea of Loki blowing the horn to announce Ragnoröck from the weird and hilarious and cruel series Teamwork by LulaMadison, and I don’t regret it one bit. Entropy_by_Ophelia recommended this series to me ages ago, and for ages, I didn’t read it for I don’t even know anymore what stupid reason. Then I finally got around to it and… well, it’s the Teamwork series. It’s a thing all on its own, I think.

Another work I stumbled upon very recently is Twisted Fate by Team_Alpha_Wolf_Squadron. It’s pretty well narrated, and interesting in the context of the Prestige because its world operates according to similar rules (the Norns being cruel authors and readers), Midgard acting as some sort of collective Bard.
Rise and Shine Like Thor’s Angry Bolts of Lightning

Chapter Summary

Wouldn’t that rather be, descend and shine? Could work for Batman, if he sleeps hanging down from the ceiling of the Batcave.

Chapter Notes

So, I'm back.
Sorry for the long wait, if you've been waiting. The reasons for the long hiatus are partly not so cool (apart from doing my taxes and stress at work, far too much family trouble and people in hospitals lately, for my liking. But everyone is sort of okay now).
Partly, they're great. I've had a very promising conversation with my editor about my next novel, and have been working on that almost exclusively for a while. I've also submitted applications for grants for said novel, so you can wish me luck if you want to :).

I've used the occasion to edit the tags (again), this time to include alcoholism, because that turns out to be a bigger issue for my Tony than I first thought. I've also edited the summary (again), and the introductive notes. Amongst other things, I have added this paragraph (posting it here too, so that those of you reading continuously see it too):

Intersex Jotunn/Loki: I've been made aware of the problematic aspects of this tag. Problematic, because in many fics, and mine is among them, the characters tagged with intersex don't really represent the reality of intersex persons in the real world. And I have wondered whether to still include it. I haven't removed it, because it's still a valid trigger warning, but I want to clarify a few things here. In my AU, the most common anatomy of the Jotunn include both a penis and a vulva. So Loki, having both, is not truly intersex. He conforms to the Jotunn norm, in fact.
BUT Loki has not grown up on Jotunheim, he has grown up on Asgard, and there, he definitely does NOT fit the norm.
So no, Loki is not intersex in the real world definition for humans. However, he shares some of the social stigma and the possible issues that come with it.

Tony woke up slowly, turning, stretching himself, grabbing the blanket and hugging it, turning again, stroking the warm linen beneath him. Too much space. With some effort, he lifted his heavy head, blinked.

The room was dark, but the daylight painted lines on the walls where it penetrated the gaps between the blinds. He was alone.

He straightened himself up, yawned. So much for Loki guarding him. Uh, every muscle felt stiff and tense. At the same time, he felt surprisingly well-rested though. How long had he been out? Normally, during those episodes, he didn’t manage more than an hour or two at a time.
He threaded through his hair, then paused at the vague memory of other fingers stroking his head. Of someone stroking his back, speaking to him. Of lying somewhere soft and perfect, with a fresh and sharp smell. Somewhere safe.

Of being pushed back onto the mattress.

Had he really cuddled up to Loki in his sleep?

That Tony was subconsciously getting a bit cuddly maybe shouldn’t surprise him – regular skin-to-skin contact did that to a person, even to scum like him. It was simply hormonal. That Loki had allowed it however?

He rubbed his eyes.

All in the name of keeping his promise, Tony supposed. Upholding his part of that trade façade. Man, he had really had gotten some actual honest-to-gods sleep, hadn’t he? Not just a comatose state of utter exhaustion between nightmares, or uneasy dozing, but the real thing. He supposed he really did owe Loki now. Damn.

He stood up and staggered into the bathroom. Because he may have found some peace eventually, but not before he had soaked himself in his own sweat. Which meant that he was tremendously stinky even for his own jaded by too many all-nighters in the workshop senses.

That said, the hot water did wonders for his tense muscles too, and when he finally left his room, dressed in fresh clothes, his hair towelled but still moist, he felt amazingly good-humoured for a post-nightmare morning.

And he distantly heard people talking. Mhm.

He quietly walked in the direction of the voices. They came from the living room and bar he had on his own floor, and then he could already recognise the voice as those of Loki and… Bruce?

Both voices were calmer than was probable in any situation where the two of them were in the same room.

But then again, both persons had a certain interest in keeping Bruce from hulking-out.

‘…yes, I am afraid this has become rather common knowledge. But I would expect my victors to brag about my humiliation.’ Loki’s voice said in that rather disinterested tone he put up both when a certain topic bugged him and when he really didn’t care.

‘You think that this was humiliating for you?’ Bruce asked, sounded almost taken aback.

‘Don’t you?’

‘Loki, I wasn’t really okay with the Hulk smashing you into the ground when I still thought that you had been a healthy super-powered god hell-bent on invading Earth. And then I found out that you had been injured and coerced, and were doing your best to lose. If this is shaming anyone in this room, it’s me.’

‘You assume too much while you know, for a fact, very little’ said Loki, and had his voice tensed?

‘And even if I had been injured, you would have had every right to maim or kill me in battle. You were a worthy opponent. That is far more than I could ask for at the time.’

‘Maybe you ask for the wrong things then.’
‘And there I thought I was the god of sensible priorities and reasonable expectations.’

Bruce chuckled. He honest to gods *chuckled*.

Loki, you little shit, you’re twisting him around your little finger, aren’t you?

Tony chose to stroll around the corner before Loki could get even deeper into Bruce’s mind. He yawned pointedly.

‘Oh, good morning, Tony’ said Bruce, looking away from Loki and to him. He was sitting on the sofa, a book on his lap. Loki was standing leant against the glass wall of the living room, his arms joined behind his back, one leg crossed over the other.

Far too alluring.

‘Yeah, rise and shine and all that bullshit’ said Tony, and pointed an accusing finger at Loki. ‘You abandoned me!’

Loki rolled his eyes.

‘I didn’t *abandon* you, I decide to finally leave and stretch my legs after having nannied you for hours’ said he. ‘And I made sure that you were already waking up before I did.’

‘I still feel betrayed’ said Tony with a pout, and turned to Bruce. ‘Also, little shit trickster is trying to manipulate you into liking him, just so you know. Don’t fall for it, he will punish you for your gullibility in a divinely creative manner.’

‘Trying to make people like you is also called normal social behaviour, Tony. And how would you define falling for it?’ Bruce asked, a slight smile on his lips.

‘Excellent question’ said Loki lightly, using his foot to push himself away from the glass window. ‘Even more so considering I didn’t tell Doctor Banner a single lie.’

‘I bet you didn’t. My point still stands’ said Tony. Loki’s eyes narrowed.

Bruce glanced from one to the other.

‘Well, I have to get going’ said he, then his eyes fixed on Tony’s. ‘Tony, you want to talk later? You know, about what happened after that last mission?’

‘The way you say it, it sounds like an intervention’ Tony grimaced.

‘I’m your friend, Tony, and as your friend, I tend to worry when you drink yourself into unconsciousness’ said Bruce.

‘That’s what someone during an intervention would say’ Tony pointed out. ‘Alright, I will evade your questions while doing awesome science stuff with you later. Wearing mad scientist googles. Can we have mad scientist googles?’

Bruce let out the slightest of sighs, and stood up.

‘You’ve invented the arc reactor in a cave and you still talk about science like a confused eight-year old.’

‘Does that mean you won’t let me play with you?’
‘I’m looking forward to working with you’ said Bruce, his voice serious and honest.

‘Perfect’ Tony said with a wide grin, deciding to put all the thoughts into the trash bin from now on that told him that Bruce was looking forward to this only as his second or third or fourth best choice and that Bruce’s first choice would be to be halfway around the globe. The fact that Bruce couldn’t have that was, after all, something he was working on. Future Tony could worry about the rest of it.

‘Loki’ said Bruce then, already halfway out the room. But he had turned back again, looking at the trickster with furrowed eyebrows. ‘One more thing. How injured were you when the other guy smashed you into the floor?’

Loki looked at him, his eyebrows raised, as if a peasant has just asked him a rather dumb and a bit rude question. Then his lips stretched into a polite and benignant smile.

‘Now, now – I am sure you do not really want to know that, Doctor Banner’ said he.

The frown on Bruce’s forehead deepened, ‘Maybe I do’ said he with a low voice, but then decided to leave nonetheless.

Loki’s smile vanished as soon as Bruce was gone.

‘I thought it was in the interest of both of us if your so-called family liked me enough to tolerate my continued existence’ said he, turning away from Tony and bending down to pick up his tablet from the couch table.

‘That doesn’t mean I won’t warn them when you’re obviously messing with their heads’ said Tony and went to the bar. There was a coffee machine there and spiking his morning fuel couldn’t hurt either. ‘They are my family after all.’

‘Then you have a rather different concept of family than I do’ said Loki dryly behind his back. ‘Also, I had hoped you would forget that particular nickname.’

‘Don’t be a little shit trickster if you don’t want to be called a little shit trickster’ Tony said, activating the coffee machine. ‘I told you I forget not even half of what I’d wish to about my inebriety. Like my genius, it’s both a curse and a blessing.’

He yawned.

‘By the way, you did well, Florence Nightingale’ said he. ‘That was my most agreeable episode in years. Can we work out a deal where you stick around for those even after we fuck Thanos up the arse?’

‘No.’

‘Pity. So, how injured were you exactly when the Hulk used you as a crash test dummy?’

In his back, Tony heard the trickster huff.

‘Your little interview is long-since over, Stark’ said he. ‘You should have asked that when you had the chance.’

Tony watched the coffee stream into the mug. So Loki had probably been really far from his best then. Would Tony be able to guess at the details if he showed the video footage to a physician, for example Bruce? Or would that qualify as retraumatising him?
‘Haven’t forgotten anything about what you told me about my magic either, by the way’ said he. Tried to maybe. Maybe, if he tried hard enough, he still could. He reached for the rum, poured a generous amount of it into the coffee. ‘I have questions. A lot of them.’

He raised the mug, put it to his lips, ‘You will have to save at least some of them for later’ said Loki, and then several things happened in short succession.

The coffee touched Tony’s tongue, Loki said, ‘Thor is on Midgard’, Tony’s taste buds registered and processed the taste of vomit, and Tony spit out the vomit-flavoured coffee both in surprise and disgust, coughing for his life for a while afterwards.

‘I see you are looking forward to meeting the God of Thunder after having started a sexual and business relationship with his disgraced baby brother’ Loki said casually. ‘I can see why.’

‘Fuck you’ said Tony. ‘That is not… well, come to think of it, that is a very good reason to get worried and spit out coffee’

He emptied the mug into the sink and then washed out his mouth with water.

‘I forgot you fucker did that’ said he, after having gargled with another very strong espresso.

‘And I would have thought that of all the things that happened, your modified taste sense would remain present in your mind’ said Loki sounding amused. Tony turned to him. Loki also looked amused. Yeah, you have been watching me, waiting for exactly this to happen, haven’t you? ‘After all, you demolished your own belongings in response to it.’

‘Yes, because you fucking overstepped a line’ said Tony, the anger of the day before welling up again. ‘And despite your awesome job at keeping my nightmares at bay, I’m still fucking pissed.’

‘Oh, someone is angry at me, that’s certainly a new experience’ Loki said, raising his eyebrows. ‘However will I deal?’

‘Screw you. Is this vomit deal permanent now or what?’

‘Mhm’ said Loki non-committedly. ‘Nothing on Midgard is permanent, I’m afraid. I don’t think it will survive you, for example.’

‘Fucking asshole’ said Tony, and got himself another espresso, lounging down on the sofa afterwards, sighing and stretching himself. ‘And I thought Thor wasn’t your brother?’

Loki smiled strangely and sat down next to him. Mhm, he was close enough for Tony to smell him.

‘He isn’t’ said he, and the smile lingered a little, something else hiding beneath it. ‘In any case, judging from the reverberations of Bifrost activity and the change in weather in New Mexico, Thor has arrived a few hours ago and will, after having evidently been informed of recent developments by SHIELD, come here next. I am positive that I will be able to handle him as a threat, so feel free not to engage him in case of a fight. It would indeed be preferable if you didn’t.’

‘What, do you think he’ll try to kill us for screwing around a bit?’

There was the slightest of pauses before Loki said, ‘No’, and wasn’t that interesting considering that the last time the siblings had seen each other, Thor had been rather adamant to save Loki’s life?

‘Probably, he will be relatively peaceful’ said Loki.
‘Relatively?’

‘He has a certain tendency towards quick-temper and his anger tends to cloud his already rather unsophisticated judgement. I thought, as your ally, I should give you a warning.’

‘Appreciated’ Tony said and nodded. ‘I will just install a few more lightning rods till then’

‘No, Sir’ said Jarvis at that. ‘You won’t.’

It didn’t take long for the weather to change in New York too. The cloud formation and the colour of the sky looked a bit apocalyptic even before the lightning and thunder started.

It was raining icy sharp drops when they were standing on the landing platform of the tower, Loki blinking into the wind, looking interestingly calm.

‘Aren’t any of you at least a little bit cold?’ asked Tony from inside his suit.

Nobody of the others answered.

Steve was standing close to them, his legs apart in the typical Captain America manner, observing Loki with a pensive frown. Nat looked, despite wearing only spandex and for reasons only known to her, completely comfortable. Bucky was leaning against the wall in the background, being his quiet and tense in a very calm way self. Nobody knew whether he was freezing to death right now, having a flashback, analysing Loki’s weaknesses, or wondering how to win the next round of the settlers of Catan. Could be any of the above.

Bruce had sensibly decided not to expose himself to blonde Norse god anger, and Tony hadn’t seen even a glimpse of Clint ever since his official return to the Avenger Tower, which absolutely did not mean that he was not there.

Thor’s arrival was heralded by a lot of lightning too close for comfort, and of course the God of Capslock had to shoot down from the sky and crack the helicopter landing platform again, because helicopter landing platforms are so cheap and easy to repair and Tony has nothing better to do than reconstruct it every fucking time Rapunzel drops by.

But… Rapunzel also looked kind of livid once he had uncurled himself from his crouched position and had stood up. Like, standing in a clear fighting stance. And his hammer in his hand, ready to be thrown. And his dark face. And his eyes glowing white with wrathful electricity.

‘LOKI’ said he. ‘WE NEED TO TALK!’

‘Talking is done with a lower voice, buddy’ said Tony, his arms crossed in front of his chest. ‘Maybe try again with your indoor voice, God of Capslock.’

‘Yes, as a matter of fact, we do’ Loki said to Thor, smiling easily. ‘Nice of you to finally show up and start caring about that war we are preparing. It is only a matter of life and death for our whole universe after all.’

Thor gripped the handle of Mjolnir harder at that and took several strides towards Loki, which made
Tony automatically move in the trickster’s direction, only to be stilled at a subtle hand gesture of the god.

And why again would he put himself in harm’s way for Loki in any case? That was no way to reach a decent age. But then again, neither was a lot of what Tony was doing.

And Thor stopped several feet away from the other god.

‘DO NOT TRY TO DISTRACT ME, BROTHER!’ said he. ‘ARE THE RUMOURS TRUE?’

‘What about that indoor voice?’ Tony asked. ‘Forgot it back home?’

Loki raised his eyebrows, he definitely looked amused now.

‘Which ones?’ asked he sweetly. ‘There are so many of them.’

‘YOU KNOW WHICH ONES! THE ONES ABOUT YOU DEFILING AND DEBASING MY SHIELD BROTHER FOR YOUR AMUSEMENT!’

‘Hey, I’m standing right here’ said Tony. He was also being ignored right there.

Loki leaned slightly backwards, eyeing their audience pointedly.

‘And of course you felt it necessary to spew your accusations at me in front of no matter who might happen to listen’ said he. ‘You remain as tactful, subtle and diplomatic as ever, God of Thunder. No one will ever know how it comes that wars tend to break out wherever they let you in on the negotiations.’

‘You’ve spread your fair share of conflict and chaos, Liesmith’ Thor hissed.

Loki chuckled but Tony heard the sharp edge there was to it.

‘Oh, am I back to being the Liesmith already?’ said he. ‘That didn’t take long. Well, I suppose I should be grateful that at least, you have stopped shouting. Mortals do have sensitive ear drums, you should know, and I still might have use for the mortals on this particular roof, Thunderer. What do you say, we go inside, and you can continue defaming and condemning me in there, but with a lower voice and less structural damage to the property of the man you pretend to be intent on protecting?’

Thor looked a little caught unaware by the last statement.

‘What, I-‘

‘You ruined my helicopter landing platform’ said Tony. ‘Again. Also, you kind of insulted me there, just now? Anyways, Lokes’s right, let’s take this inside, if only for the comfort of my teamies. I’m not sure whether Steve over there is just standing that stiffly or whether he has frozen on the spot again.’

‘Very funny, Tony’ Steve said.

‘I try, I try.’
Better Those Words Than Those Teeth

Chapter Summary

…coming out of your mouth, Thor. Same applies to you, Loki. And Tony… argh, could you all please put your feet out of your mouths? The homophobic shit hits the fan and everyone gets splattered.

Chapter Notes

So… I’m not a Thor-basher, but my version of Asgard is… less than nice… and in this chapter, it shows. Thor has until now not had many reasons to question his morals, and that shows too. He means well, I suppose, in his own, twisted by Asgardian logic, way. And Loki… has grown up in Asgard too, I’m afraid. They will both learn, I promise. Major trigger warning for major homophobia.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

‘So, tell me – is it true?’

They had managed to manoeuvre Thor onto the couch in the TV room, and his eyes had regained their normal eye colour, and he didn’t look a second away from levelling the building anymore, but he still looked about as relaxed as a tensed spring ready to fly. Still, Tony had ditched the suit – it was a bit impolite, wearing it when there were supposedly only friends present. Steve was sitting in one of the armchairs and Nat was leaning against the glass window behind the couch, her arms crossed in front of her chest, her face inscrutable, but Bucky had retreated further into the background, obviously putting space between him and Thor. He didn’t like this situation at all, that much was evident.

‘What is true, Thor?’ Tony said, kneading his nose. ‘That Loki and I have formed an alliance in order to defeat Thanos? Yes. That we exchange sexual favours? Also a yes. That there was any defiling or debasing involved? Not as far as I’m concerned, Mr. Born-Again-Morals. We have been willing participants. Both of us, okay? Yes means yes and all that shebang.’

Thor stared at him, then immediately whipped his head to Loki, the expression on his face almost pleading.

‘What does he mean when… tell me you didn’t-‘

‘What if I did?’ said Loki, calmly. He was leaning against a pillar, deceptively relaxed. Pity that his fingers were twitching. That betrayed him.

Mhm, if Thor wasn’t cautious now, he would have a god exploding in his face very soon.

Thor wasn’t cautious. He stood up, and everyone in the room except Loki tensed at that. Tony thought he could see Bucky even jerk his hand towards his sweater, maybe towards a weapon.
‘How… how could you?’ Thor said, sounding genuinely hurt.

‘Er, I can draw you a diagram if you really don’t-‘

‘Anthony Stark fought against the Chitauri and Thanos, he was ready to give his life for that fight’ Thor interrupted Tony. ‘Without the Man of Iron’s help, you might not have survived the trip home from Ozymandias. You owe him your life. And he is one of my most valued shield-brothers. How dare you make him into a woman, as if he were no more than a common servant for you to use and discard?!’

Wow.

‘Wow’ Tony said. ‘That is some… I don’t even know what that is. Nat, help me out?’

Nat shook her head, but even she looked a little disconcerted at Thor’s words. She had gone as far as raised an eyebrow.

Steve just stared at him, eyes wide, as if he had just woken up in the ugly parts of the forties. Which was… not all that inaccurate?

‘You assume so much’ said Loki, pushing himself away from the pillar. His eyes glinted dangerously now. ‘What if I had been the one to submit, Thor? Did that not cross your mind? After all, there were rumours enough about my Ergi on Asgard.’

He started striding up and down the room, his fingers twitching more noticeably now. Suppressing the urge to call for magic, probably.

‘The rumours were wrong, just spiteful defamations of those envious of your status-‘ Thor began.

‘Are you so sure of that?’ said Loki, whipping around to face his brother. ‘Even now? You know what I am. You have seen what I am.’

Thor’s face twitched at his brother’s words, he opened his mouth, closed it again.

‘Yes, I am sure’ said Thor with all his earnest determination, with all his faith, Tony realised. Shit. This wouldn’t end well. ‘You would never debase yourself this way, you would never let yourself be taken like a whore, no matter your species or your body. I know you that well, brother.’

Loki laughed, long and loud and completely without humour. He even held his belly, clapped on his thigh several times as if he got no air, but the sound was cold and disagreeable.

‘Aaaaahhhhh, so funny, my shiny oaf’ said he. ‘After all these centuries, still so blind. I suppose I should feel honoured that you think of me that way? I should feel grateful that you continue deluding yourself because you prefer considering your so-called brother a villain rather than a whore?’

‘Are you telling me that-‘

‘I’ve spread my legs more often than I REMEMBER, you birdbrain!’ Loki shouted.

With two strides, he was at Thor’s and had grabbed him by the collar.

‘I began young’ hissed he, close to Thor’s ear but perfectly audible for everyone in the room. ‘I was barely an adult when I let the first one take me. And I never stopped. I did it right under all of your eyes, defiled the palace with my depraved adventures, but you never looked, did you? You never wanted to know. A whole army had me, Thor! A whole army used me for their pleasure. And your
closest friends had me, one after the other, and I was begging for more. They never told you, did they? It was a secret between us, a dirty and sweet secret, but I know their cocks, because their cocks each pressed into my arse, and I know their sperm because they spent it inside me. I know the taste of them because they fucked me in my mouth until my throat was raw and I still didn’t have enough. I could taste them for days afterwards. They spread their sperm on my body and they pissed on me, and I was glad of it, because that’s who I am, Thor, a dirty little Ergi whore who wants it, who needs it. My ass has housed so many cocks it could be called a chicken coop, and I didn’t even stop at that. I let beasts fuck me, mindless beasts, the lowliest creatures, and I let them penetrate me, just to spite Odin, just to spite you. That’s who your brother is. Of course I spread my legs for Stark too. Was probably not very clever of him to stick it into me though. No one knows where that has been.’

Loki released Thor rather suddenly, straightened himself up.

Thor stared up at him, red in the face, flabbergasted.

‘That’s…’ said he. ‘That’s not…’

‘So no one was debased who wasn’t debased already’ said Loki, looking down on the other. ‘And with that, I consider the matter closed.’

He turned away.

‘Now excuse me, I believe I need to calm down a little before we consider the next point of business’ said he. ‘Maybe I’ll find myself someone with low standing to fuck me long and hard. That usually does the trick.’

With that, he left the room.

And left them in… very awkward silence.

Very very awkward silence. That stretched a bit.

If there was one lesson Tony was prepared to draw from this whole mess, it was that he evidently still underestimated what Loki was able and prepared to do if pushed to certain limits.

No, he had not expected the trickster to pull off something like this.

If Tony was right about the implied ideology behind Thor’s accusations, then Loki had just degraded himself exceedingly in front of former enemies (maybe present enemies), just so to hurt his brother.

Huh.

That was… a bit extreme, wasn’t it?

Wasn’t it?

‘Is it true?’ asked Thor now, and this time, he actually addressed Tony, tearing him from his thoughts. His voice sounded… defeated. Tony almost shook his head in exasperation – pull yourself together man, it’s just sex, gods-damn-it! You should be glad your brother is not manure. ‘Have you made him a woman?’

Tony raised his eyebrows.

‘I think you overestimate my ability to change a person’s gender, buddy’ said he. ‘Such things usually can’t be influenced from outside.’
'You understand the meaning of my words very well’ said Thor. ‘And if you didn’t, my brother has been rather unambiguous about the details. So have you dishonoured my brother such?’

Oh, my.

Now, if you’re being like that, you don’t deserve the truth, Ronald Reagan, I’m sorry.

Tony crossed his arms in front of his chest.

‘Would you prefer me to let myself be *taken like a whore*, as you so tactfully described it?’ said he.

Thor’s shoulders slumped, he put his face into his hands.

‘No’ he admitted. ‘I wished for none of this. I honoured each of you, and no matter who was taken, I feel ashamed and sad for you both. Despite my brother’s past, I would never have believed either of you capable of such actions. I feel like I lost two brothers tonight.’

Now wasn’t that just great. Tony wasn’t particularly surprised that Bucky chose to turn around and leave the room then.

Steve looked after him, said, ‘I’m sorry, I’ve got to…’ and left too. It was all for the better, Tony supposed. Both of them had turned so stiff in the last minutes, Tony had grown afraid they might pull a muscle.

Gay soldier couple from the forties, very cautiously and hesitatingly wondering whether to put more than one foot out of the closet, now that they enjoyed the relative sexual freedom of the millennials, confronted with… something quite like that… Thor could as well have punched them in the gut with Mjolnir and shit in their face as soon as they were on the ground.

He would have to talk to them afterwards, wouldn’t he?

Aw, damn.

‘Look’ said Tony, because the more he thought about Steve and Bucky, the angrier he was getting. If anyone hadn’t deserved this shit, it was them (no matter how much of an unnerving stuck-up ass Steve could be). ‘Can I ask you a question for once?’

‘Yes’ said Thor.

‘Are you suffering from diarrhoea?’

‘What?’ said Thor.

‘Because there sure has been some homophobic shit flying out of your mouth’ said Tony.

Thor stared at him.

‘Shit that fears… the same?’

There was a strange noise from where Natasha was standing, something very much resembling a badly suppressed snort.

‘Seriously?’ asked Tony. ‘How can you not get… you’re being a homophobe, Thor! A person who hates people for having sexual relationships with other persons of the same gender! You condemn men who fuck men!’
Thor swallowed and looked away.

‘I know I am considered a bit too demure in that regard’ said he. ‘You are not the first one to tell me.’

Oh, wasn’t he?

‘But I cannot help but condemn an act that dishonours one of the participants to such a degree. Even a servant is still a man and should not be degraded such.’

His eyes flickered back to Tony.

‘Is that not what you want?’ said he. ‘What Midgard so bravely strives to reach – a society where all men are equal? Where there cannot exist such a difference in station to allow such practices? I thought it would be different here. I do not understand how you can either execute or submit to an act that is in such stark contradiction to what you told me were your most basic believes?’

Tony could help but let out a startled laugh at that, after a pause.

‘I… you actually think… oh, fuck the trillion monkeys of Alpha Centauri, what kind of shitty place did you grow up in, Rapunzel?’

He laughed again.

Thor furrowed his eyebrows.

‘Do not insult Asgard, Man of Iron, I-’

‘No, shut up. I… I don’t actually have time for this’ said Tony. He didn’t. He had something more urgent to do. Like talk to his sexual partner for a bit. Because this shit… this shit had not been part of the deal at all. ‘I don’t have time for your bigotry or your pride. Ask Nat where you’ve gone wrong, or better, ask Jane, because she has a right to know what you think of her each time you fuck her, and then, when you’ve understood, go to Steve and Bucky and apologise, like, profusely. With flowers and a written ballad of how wrong you were. It should rhyme. Because they did not deserve to get your cultural baggage dumped on them, they have enough of their own. I gotta go.’

Thor breathed in, but Tony held up his hand, palms up.

‘No’, said he. ‘Not the time. Nat or Jane. Not Steve or Bucky. Not me.’

He turned to the door through which Loki had disappeared, but turned around mid-way.

‘Ah, one more thing needs to be clarified’ said he. ‘This tower is a homophobe-free zone, just so you know. So, if you wanna keep squatting here… get your act together, man, is all I’m saying.’

And he left before Thor could find another thing to say that would tempt Tony to get his suit and test it.

* *

Loki was in the workshop.

The workshop was in a certain state of… disarray, though the trickster was standing in front of the moving displays now, studying the data they had gotten from SHIELD, and looking deceptively calm, ignoring the overturned tables and smashed equipment around him.
Tony noticed with a certain satisfaction that the god had left the truly valuable equipment standing. He definitely could tell the difference by now.

Also, Loki’s calmness was one of the things that Tony learned to trust less and less.

“How come you and Thor both speak the Allspeak, and yet you understand most of the idiomatic phrases I’m using, while Thor is frequently and hilariously lost in translation?”

“What did he misunderstand this time?” asked Loki and zoomed in on a particular part of the data.

‘Homophobic shit apparently translated to ‘shit that fears the same’ to him’

The edge of Loki’s mouth twitched slightly upward at that, and he gestured at the display to shut off.

‘There is no word for homophobia in the Asgardian language’ said he. ‘Because the concept does not exist in our culture.’

‘The sentiment does though, obviously. So what do you call guys like him?’ asked Tony.

‘Concerned citizens’ said Loki. ‘Young and rebellious, because he wants to break with old traditions. A bit prudish, that too.’

Loki slowly turned to him. The upward turn of his lips was still there. Not quite a smile.

‘Allspeak is like any language’ said he. ‘In order to be mastered, you need to study it, practice it and continually strive to use it in ever more different circumstances, broadening your knowledge. I have travelled far more than Thor has. Thus, I had far more occasions to learn new concepts and for the Allspeak to find translations for them.’

‘So it’s a bit like Google translate’ said Tony. ‘Only that you can teach it and transcend it.’

Loki raised his eyebrows.

‘It translates the word, but without the cultural knowledge, it’s no more than a crutch. That is the work you still have to put into yourself.’

Loki bowed slightly in his direction in acknowledgement.

‘So, let me see if I have understood your implied cultural background correctly’ said Tony, and if the sharpness to his voice was already audible, he really couldn’t help it. ‘Sexual relationships between men do exist on Asgard.’

‘They are not uncommon, no’ said Loki. ‘Nor frowned upon as such.’

‘But they usually only happen between two persons with a big difference in their social standing’ said Tony. ‘The master fucks the servant. The royalty fucks the peasant. The opposite would be scandalous.’

Loki nodded.

‘To penetrate is considered manly’ said he. ‘To be penetrated is considered effeminate. And there is no greater dishonour on Asgard for a man than to lose his masculinity, and become Ergi. Thus, only men who have little honour to lose or little choice in the matter would agree to be the passive part, and even then, they would try to hide it. The only sexual act that might effeminate a man even more than penetrating his ass would maybe be to penetrate his mouth.’
‘So that’s why you mentioned the blow jobs’ said Tony.  

Again, Loki bowed slightly.  

‘Now, dear shining Thor has never quite liked that kind of power play and the consequences it has for the one bottoming’ said he lightly. ‘Let’s say that we have seen and heard, in our youth, a few mildly pornographic tragedies play out behind closed doors and in empty corridors that have impressed on him greatly. Relationships like that can be rather cruel and rarely end well for the receiving part. It is in that spirit and meaning very well that he looks down on these practices now and tries to forbid or at least contain them.’

‘He’s not against same-sex relationships’ Tony realised. ‘He’s against sexual abuse. Only he doesn’t know the difference.’

‘Like I said, I was the one who liked to travel and broaden my mind, not him.’

‘Mhm’ said Tony, wandering up the workshop, then down again. ‘So what does all of this say about our relationship then, Rudolph? Is this why you haven’t let me top?’

For a moment, something flashed across Loki’s face that almost looked like disappointment – why was that? – then the mask was in place, cool and arrogant.

He raised an eyebrow, and his chin.

‘I am a god’ said he. ‘And no matter whether I am Laufey’s son or Odin’s, I am royalty. You are a mere mortal of common descent. The difference in our station is so significant, there was really no need to think about it.’

‘So that’s it?’ Tony said, his voice getting sharper. ‘Thor was right and you were treating me like a servant without me even knowing? Is that why you pulled off that alcohol tastes like vomit thing? Because as my master, you can make the decision for me whether or not I’m allowed to intoxicate myself?’

‘I don’t remember forcing you to have sex with me’ Loki said coolly. ‘Come to think of it, I remember you begging for my cock. Repeatedly. Each time.’

‘Because I didn’t know about the shitty cultural implications, asshead!’ said Tony. ‘If this is some kind of sick power play for you, then for that, I never gave you my consent!’

Tony didn’t quite expect Loki’s face to pale at that, and twitch, for him to turn away.  

Huh.

What was going on there?

‘We agreed that we would be equals’ said Tony.

‘I said that I would give you my respect if you earned it’ said Loki but his voice sounded strange, just a tiny little bit out of tone. ‘It is your own mistake if you thought that begging me to fuck you like a bitch would raise my respect for you.’

It took a lot of self-control not to hit him on the mouth right then and there.

It helped that Tony knew he would probably (surely) rather break his own hand (and maybe arm) than Loki’s jaw (probably, the Joker wouldn’t even get a bruise).
‘Fuck you’ pressed he out. ‘I won’t play this game. *You* don’t even want to play this game. According to the rules of this game, I’d have at least as much right to fuck you as you have to fuck me. Probably more. We both know that, Lokes.’

There was a second where he saw Loki’s eyes lock with his, and had time to think, uh-oh, then there was suddenly Loki’s leg out of nowhere, sweeping him off his feet, he fell hard on the floor, on his stomach, then there was a sudden heavy weight (knee, his mind supplied), pressing into his back, his right arm was already wrung behind his back into a very uncomfortable (read fucking painful) position, his head was yanked up by his hair, and he could barely get a breath in before his face was smashed into the concrete floor.

After that, Tony’s vision got a little hazy, as got sound. But he did feel Loki yank him up by the hair again until his neck was stretched back awkwardly. He felt Loki’s hot breath near his ear, quick and shallow.

You are scared. What are *you* scared of, asshole?

‘If you think that you can insult Loki, God of Chaos’ hissed Loki. ‘and get away unscathed, think again.’

Through the tears, Tony could see that the hand with which Loki was supporting himself on the ground, was shaking. Huh.

Then his head was dropped rather unceremoniously, his arm was released, the weight was lifted from him, and Loki strode out of the room, smashing the door behind him.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, so Loki might have (major read massive read gargantuan) issues and Tony might have scratched the surface. Meaning a general: uh-oh.

They will make up, I promise. After the shit stops flying, that is.
Analysing The Splatter Pattern Is Not Always A Matter For CSI – Sometimes, It Just Concerns The Cleaning Crew

Chapter Summary

Somebody has to deal with the aftermath of all the homophobia – Tony and Nat split up tasks in a most cordial manner. Also, Tony fulfils his monthly quota of talking to his teamies about serious stuff all in one day. That’s what I call productivity!

Chapter Notes

It’s Stucky time! This chapter focuses mostly on Steve/Bucky & Tony, and we find out a bit more about the two guys out of time.

‘Yeah, Loki ith an athhole’ said Tony. ‘I think we’ve effidablished tha’ fact.’

‘Well, apparently, so is Thor. But this particular asshole has broken your nose and sprained your arm’ Bruce said, quirking an eyebrow at him while cleaning up the blood from his face. ‘You could have gotten seriously injured.’

‘Nah’ said Tony waving his good hand dismissively. ‘He wath tryin’ to get a point accroth, no’ kill me.’

‘I’m going to set your nose now, this is going to hurt’ Bruce said and laid his hands on both side of his nose. ‘Last chance to go to your actual on-payroll doctor with a valid medical degree.’

‘Nah’ said Tony with the same dismissive hand wave. They were using the medical bay but Tony had sent the doctors away. ‘Real doctorth are creepy. I’th different with you. You a’ my bro.’

‘I’m touched’ said Bruce. ‘Now, I’m gonna set the nose at three. One-‘

Of course he set it at two, the sadist.

And yes, it fucking hurt.

* *

‘I’ve sent the God of Culture Shock back to New Mexico for now’ Nat said.

‘Thanks – I think that for now, that’s better for everyone involved. Except for Jane maybe. I totally sent the homophobic shit fan to her, didn’t I? But she was the one who decided to date the dullard in the first place. Still not sure why she did, by the way.’

‘The abs might have helped with that.’
‘Well, now she’s gonna pay for them. Oh man, she’s gonna kill me, isn’t she?’

‘I suppose so. Also, I see another break-up looming on the horizon’ Nat said with the joy of someone looking forward to the next episode of Game of Thrones.

There were in one of the smaller gyms that they normally used for armless combat training, and she was doing stretching exercises that looked neither healthy nor possible. Steve had finally left the punching bags in the room next door alone. That one now looked like the site of a mass shooting. Or a mass trampling.

Capsicle apparently had a lot of energy to burn. And a lot of pent up frustration.

Tony was sitting on the mats that covered the gym, leant against the wall, feeling bad-humoured all in all. His head hurt, his nose hurt, his arm hurt, and he couldn’t even drink alcohol to numb it. He could only take stupid weak painkillers. Those were no fun – they had forbidden him to use opiates years ago.

‘By the way, thanks for dumping Mr. Oblivious-To-His-Own-Rudeness on me’ Nat said, unfolding herself slowly from what looked like a complicated knot. ‘Way to tell the women in your vicinity to do the really annoying emotional labour. You owe me for this, you got that?’

‘Eh, don’t play the victim, not you, Nat. I knew you could handle him and I also knew you would find a way to weasel out of the situation if you really wanted to’ said Tony. ‘I had to discuss a few things with our semi-resident asshole, and I couldn’t well dump Thor on Steve, Bucky or Bruce. They’re no good at weaselling away and Bruce might have accidentally killed him.’

‘Still, I want the right to call in a favour’ said Nat, shifted on her forearms and went into a headstand. ‘That conversation was strenuous even on my patience. I told him that on Earth, same sex relationships are actually very common and usually happen between equals and mentioned that I myself have a bit of experience in the area. He laughed at that, and I soon learned that sexual acts between women are not to be taken seriously at all because nothing really happens.’

‘Wait, what?’ Tony asked, straightening himself up.

‘Apparently, Mr. One-Thousand-Years-Old is of the opinion that girls can’t penetrate each other and thus, their little fooling around is amusing at best and threatening no one’s honour.’

Tony may have blinked. Several times.

‘That’s not only sexist and very cock-centred but also… a thousand years old and he doesn’t know that fingers or harnesses or dildos exist? Or fists, for that matter? Or that there are girls who have pricks?’

‘Tells you something about the quality of the sex Jane is getting from the git, doesn’t it?’ asked Nat and somehow managed to touch the floor behind her head with her feet, while keeping her torso in the headstand completely upright. ‘But maybe Jane is just that fucking vanilla, who knows?’

‘Nat, I have to tell you, you don’t look like you’re relaxing, you look like you’ve been broken in half’ Tony said. ‘Also, I’m doubly glad now I didn’t have to deal with Rapunzel. So okay, you can have that favour. But it has to be equivalent to what you did for me.’

‘Deal’ said Nat, suspiciously quickly and happily. ‘Now, should I ask about the injuries or should we treat this like a normal domestic abuse case and believe both very hard in the excuses you are making for your boyfriend?’
She slowly raised her legs again until both pointed at the ceiling, then lowered them in opposite directions until they formed one line.

‘No excuses. That fucker is pretty damn close to my shit list for now.’

‘What, why, did he happen to refuse your wish to top him, using a little bit of violence to convince you?’

‘Shut up and at least pretend you haven’t seen that coming.’

Nat grinned and raised her legs back up again.

‘Nope. So does that mean that you will revoke his access to the tower and your data?’

‘How do you even know... and no, I won’t revoke anything. I still think that saving the universe is a bit more important even than my ego.’

‘The wonders never cease.’

‘The wonders of bigoted dumbness never cease’ said Tony, settling more comfortably against the wall. ‘I do feel a bit bad about exposing our soldiers out of time to that clusterfuck. Had I known what was coming, I would have sent them to bed early with a hot cocoa and the promise of another long retro movie night.’

‘Yes, racism, misogyny and homophobia always tends to strike us unexpectedly, don’t they’ Nat said pensively, coming with her feet back to the ground, still in the headstand, and then walking them closer and closer to her upper body until they almost touched her face.

He narrowed his eyes on her.

‘You expected this!’ he said, pointing his finger at her accusingly.

‘I just said-’

‘I know what you just said and that is weird Natasha code for you having had a damn good guess about the fan and the homophobic shit and the angle at which the second would hit the first and the splatter pattern!’ Tony said. ‘Of course you expected it, you are a super spy! What was I thinking? How could you sacrifice our poor gay couple from the forties for your amusement, Nat? I hate Steve and even I find that cruel!’

‘You don’t hate Steve and I did not sacrifice them, you dolt, least of all for my amusement’ said Nat, her lips almost touching her own toes, so close were they now, and she was literally close to putting her own foot in her mouth, did she know that? ‘I merely didn’t protect them from what they would be confronted with sooner or later anyways, with Thor on the team. They are from the forties, yes – so they can handle a bit of bigotry. They’ve been doing that their whole lives. Also, you’ve grown far too perceptive, Tony.’

‘Blame Loki, I’ve had to learn that in order to survive close to him.’

‘Blame Loki is the oldest excuse of the universe – nhm, but maybe he’ll beat your perceptiveness out of you again.’

‘The domestic abuse joke is getting old, Nat.’

‘Oh, I’m only getting started.’
'Getting started eating your feet, yes. So what was your game? I’m sure you had some kind of nefarious goal, putting them in the same room with Thor’s verbal diarrhoea.'

Nat slowly started rolling up her spine, coming into an upright position and looking like a normally-limbed person for once.

She rolled around her head a bit, and then took a spontaneous kick at a close punching bag.

Tony was used to the sound of leather tearing by now. He really should start investing in more robust materials. Maybe he could tell his scientists to come up with something.

Or he might ponder the problem himself a bit, that was always faster.

‘They need to know who they are teaming up with’ said Nat, taking up her water bottle from where it was standing next to Tony and taking a swig. ‘And I mean, truly know. Steve had a good but somewhat naïve image of Thor, and Bucky didn’t know what to think of him at all. That’s not the kind of team I want to send into a war against Thanos.’

‘I want to send no kind of team into the war against Thanos’ said Tony matter-of-factly. ‘You are aware that the probability of fatality is absurdly high for every one of us this time?’

‘Very much aware’ said Nat, squatting down in front of him. ‘The question is whether we stop him before we die. And I don’t want that to be decided by whether Bucky learns of Thor’s bigotry at the worst possible moment.’

‘Well, okay, Nat equals litter of kittens, I get it’ said Tony. ‘But you fucking triggered them – somebody has to deal with the aftermath of all that.’

‘Uh-huh’ said Nat. ‘Somebody does have to do that.’

Oh, no. No, stop looking at me like that!

‘This is your fault, Machiavelli!’ said Tony, pointing that finger again. ‘You’re not dumping the fallout of your emotional manipulations on me!’

‘Favour’ said Nat melodiously and stood up.

‘What? No!’

Tony scrambled to his feet too.

‘I think it is equivalent to dealing with Thor’s particular brand of stupidity and trying to educate his backward ass’ said Nat. ‘And I don’t think I would be up for the Bucky and Steve task anyway. Empathy is…’

She made a dismissive hand gesture.

‘…not really my strong suit.’

‘Neither is it mine!’

‘Ah-ah, I disagree’ said Nat, wagging her index and grinning. ‘Also, you have a heart. There’s proof of it. That’s more than anyone can say of me. Also, favour.’

‘You have empathy too, you lazy fuck, you just don’t want to deal with Steve’s sad dog stare, admit it!’
‘Favour!’ sang Nat, and left the room.

...

Damn.

Tony really, really tried to come up with a way to postpone the Capsicle conversation. He kept sitting leant against that gym wall for quite a while, ignoring his throbbing nose and his throbbing arm and thinking of matters that had to be more important than having an emotional moment with Steve Rogers, of all people.

Steve was, all in all, a good guy, Tony had gotten that memo by now. Granted, it would have been hard not to get it, after Steve had helped Bucky get out of the whole Hydra fiasco, had defended him against everyone, including SHIELD, had made sure that his lover was safe and got the best help available, and had been there for the guy every fucking day since then. And not all of those days had been easy.

And by now, Tony had also understood, if grudgingly and very much against his will, that the Capsicle wasn’t just a stupid righteous ass. Most of all, he definitely wasn’t stupid. He was adapting to modern life amazingly quickly, he was eager to learn, and his paintings told of a very acute gift for observation.

Things went more smoothly on missions when Steve had the command simply because he understood how to use a team for battle strategy like no one else of the Avengers did. That still didn’t make it easy for Tony to obey him and they had had a few close calls because of that.

Because of Tony’s fault.

Because that was just it, wasn’t it? Cap was a good guy, and Tony could see, day after day, more of what Howard had seen in the man.

What he hadn’t seen in Tony, because Tony simply lacked it.

Yay. Fun thoughts.

And now he was supposed to go to him, the bruises from his lover all over him, and that just screamed abusive relationship, and Steve would get all like, I’ve told you so, Tony, and he had. And sure, screwing Loki had, in many ways, not been Tony’s most sensible decision until now, but that was just it, Tony was not sensible, and Steve just was.

Argh.

Not wanting to go there. Ever.

The only problem was, the first thing that popped up on the list of more important matters than detriggering the Stuckyship was thinking about how abusive Tony’s relationship with Loki really was and where to draw the line, and that was… not preferable.

Because yes, what the trickster had pulled off could never happen again, that much was clear. But
other things… weren’t. What would Tony tell Loki once the asshole eventually returned? What would he demand? Loki getting violent hadn’t been what had pissed Tony off the most, not by far. What had really, really pissed him off was that Loki had demonstrated his power by deliberately abusing the fact that Tony was physically weaker than him. But, and that made the matter complicated, Tony running around with a broken nose and a sprained arm had an impact not only on him but on everyone in the tower. It couldn’t do that something like this was considered okay. Not here. Not under Tony’s roof. He wouldn’t stand for it. Domestic abuse really couldn’t have a place here.

At the same time… he knew Loki. He had seen him in New York, he had seen him interact with Thor, with Clint. Tony had to be honest with himself – whatever else the god was (handsome, brilliant, witty, a great singer, a great lover, perpetually amazing, whatever), the guy was also a fucking volatile, mentally unstable, super-powered alien riddled with traumas and issues. A trigger landmine with very nasty landmines. How realistic was it really that Loki would not lash out again, in fear or in anger? Hell, when Loki had smashed Tony’s face into the floor, the guy had been scared out of his wits. This hadn’t been just a way to show Tony his place. In a way, this had felt like rather desperate self-defence.

And was this kind of lashing out really something that couldn’t happen to Tony either? Of course, he had never hit Pepper, or any of his previous human lovers, but he had lashed out at them in other ways, some of them probably not less harmful. And with Loki, it was worse – maybe because he was a mess too and Tony didn’t feel like he had to hold back so much. Like he finally didn’t have to pretend to be a functioning human being anymore. After Tony had found out about the alcohol thing, the only thing that had stopped him from attacking the trickster had been that the trickster had made himself fucking invisible.

So what if staying physically non-violent with each other was something Tony really could not demand? Or not if they continued screwing each other? Or what if being physically violent was one of the more harmless ways Loki had of acting out his aggression?

What then?

‘Hell if I know’ he murmured to himself, trying not to think about the fact that not fucking Loki anymore not only seemed less attractive than not getting beating up anymore, but that he was at least considering paying an even less acceptable price for that.

He scrambled to his feet.

Ouch.

Fucking asshole trickster.

Deal with the gay knights in shining armour now, he thought. Deal with my unhealthy psyche later.

Tony escaped the sad dog stare. Instead, he got the angry I’m gonna bite on my teeth so hard my dentist is gonna get very rich face. But probably, that serum had even strengthened Steve’s teeth, or something. Would be interesting to measure their density now. Well, not today anyways.

Steve was pushing weights when Tony entered the room, Bucky was shadow boxing, but they...
looked up at him as soon as he came in and stilled.

‘You look like you were beaten up’ Bucky stated bluntly after eyeing Tony, and now Tony really wished he could have convinced Bruce not to put his sprained arm in a sling.

So he waved his sorry appearance away again, ‘Ah, it’s nothing, Loki and I just had a small disagreement, that’s all.’

Steve furrowed his eyebrows and put the weight back on the rack.

He then sat up, opened his mouth, seemed to reconsider, closed it again.

‘Tony…’ said he after a pause. ‘I know it’s difficult to take, coming from me… but you know that you can always come to us… if… you know, there’s some sort of problem’

Yep, his tone just screamed domestic abuse suspicion.

Great.

Alone for that, Loki would have to pay.

‘Oh, don’t you worry, it’s give and take’ said Tony. ‘We can both be jerks. You should see him and all that shmuck.’

‘I did’ said Bucky dryly. ‘He came down here and pulverised a few punching bags before he left. He didn’t have a scratch.’

‘Rrright…’ Tony said. ‘So, anyway, how are you guys doing?’

‘We’re fine’ said Steve curtly, stood up, and got his towel from the bench in a way so reeking of pent up aggression even Bucky raised an eyebrow.

‘Of course you’re fine’ said Tony. ‘Thor just told you that what you’re doing is shameful, nothing he would wish on his worst enemies and demeans one of you to the state of a sex worker in a society that really doesn’t appreciate sex workers. You’re just peachy.’

‘It’s nothing we haven’t heard before’ said Steve, towelling his face. ‘We’re used to it.’

‘It almost feels nostalgic’ said Bucky, with a lopsided grin. ‘Without the we-have-missed-that part.’

‘Wow, you can actually do wit’ said Tony. ‘Way to go, Bucks’

‘Tony, you wouldn’t be surprised at Bucky’s capabilities at wit if you actually bothered to talk to him once in a while’ Steve said tensely.

‘What? It’s not my fault your winter soldier is always so quiet and shy when there is a crowd’ Tony protested.

‘You could talk to him when the two of you are alone’ Steve insisted.

‘I – I did! I tried!’ Tony had distinct memories of trying. Like offering Bucky a box of cereals when finding him in the community kitchen at four in the morning. Well, distinct… usually, Tony was not in a very distinct state by then. Sleep deprivation was still one of the weirder highs to ride on.

‘Steve, Tony is avoiding me because he’s still scared of you, we talked about that’ Bucky said.
‘What?’ Tony asked. This conversation was so not going in the direction he had planned it to go.

‘You’re associating me with Steve’ Bucky explained. ‘And you have major issues with Steve, so even though we’re two separate persons with two very separate personalities, in your mind, one practically equals the other, so I don’t only get the brunt of your usual social awkwardness but also of your Steve and daddy issues.’

There was another rather awkward silence.

Today was full of those.

Then Tony narrowed his eyes.

‘Have you read up on psychology?’ asked he suspiciously. ‘Or have you talked to Nat?’

‘Hydra has brainwashed me into killing for them, of course I’ve read up on psychology’ said Bucky, rolling his eyes. ‘I’ve also had a few dozen sessions with a therapist even Bruce trusts. I know Steve and I come across as the typical fairies from the forties, never talking about our issues and holding it all in, but there is only so much trauma you can take without having to learn to ask for help.’

Alright, so Bucky was good at self-preservation.

Better than Tony, probably. And wasn’t that depressing.

‘And yes, I’ve talked to Nat’ Bucky added.

‘Is it just me or is she getting more manipulative by the day?’ Tony wondered. In hindsight, her pushing Tony towards the Stuckies had probably just another move in her game. Resolve the conflict between him and Steve and all that shit. Well, he did get her, in a way. In this war, the team had to function, or they would have no chance at all. That just didn’t make it less annoying. ‘Anyways, I just… I just wanted to say… Thor is a backwater dumb-nut but still kind of means well? I think?’

‘Oh, we know he means well’ said Bucky dryly. ‘Many of them mean well. My father certainly did when he caught me snogging another boy and beat the living hell out of me. It was all for my own good.’

‘Oh’ stated Tony. ‘Shit.’

Steve eyed Bucky cautiously who had started pacing, running his fingers over his metal arm. Yeah, he did that when he was nervous and not hiding it, didn’t he?

In the beginning, he had done that a lot. Had it decreased? Tony probably hadn’t paid as much attention on Bucky as he ought to.

‘Look, Tony, we’ve understood perfectly what he was saying’ said Steve then. ‘I think we understand where he’s coming from better than you do, to be honest. It’s similar to what we have been taught our entire life before it was snatched away from us by Hydra. It’s rather similar to the thoughts I often still have, that Bucky sometimes still has, and that we have to tell ourselves are wrong, over and over. It’s...’

Steve didn’t continue. He set his jaw instead, crossed his arms in front of his chest.

‘It’s not what you need right now’ Tony concluded for him.

‘No, it’s not what we need’ Steve said. He rubbed his eyes.
‘In a way, Thor’s visit was a good thing to happen though’ said he then and sighed. ‘It showed me a side of him that I’ve been blind to until now.’

‘Nat said something along the same lines’ Tony said.

‘And it reminded me once more why losing five decades wasn’t the worst possible thing that could have happened to me either’ said Steve, surprisingly dryly.

‘Huh, I’d say the same if the Hydra brainwashing and killing people hadn’t come with the package’ said Bucky and let out a short laugh.

Steve smiled at him as if this was an old joke between them.

Interesting.

‘So, Tony’ Steve then turned to him again, and so what if Tony jerked a little? The guy shouldn’t make such abrupt movements and say his name at the same time in an emotionally already far too loaded conversation was all. ‘What about your disagreement with Loki?’

‘Hah’ Tony said and grinned, all teeth. ‘Turns out gays can be homophobes too. What a shocker!’

‘Believe me, we know that well enough’ said Bucky and rolled his eyes again. ‘We’ve had our fair share of those kind of fairies, back in the day. To be honest, they are even worse than the normal faggot-haters.’

‘That’s… actually not a word you say anymore’ Tony pointed out. ‘Fairy, I mean. Or faggot.’

‘I’ve been called a fairy, I’ve been treated like a fairy’ Bucky said. ‘So I will use the damn word fairy, no matter what the internet says.’

Okay, okay. Delicate subject.

‘Right… so, yeah, Loki being a right piece of work is a given’ said Tony. ‘But in all fairness, I might have accidentally triggered him… or maybe not that accidentally… I’m not sure… I was angry.’

In retrospect, the last words Tony had thrown at Loki – according to the rules of this game, I have at least as much right to fuck you as you to fuck me – had… maybe been a tiny little bit insensitive, considering the whole issue of Loki having a vulva and probably only recently having found out about that?

Yeah, so maybe lashing out and anger management really was a problem both of them shared, he supposed.

That… didn’t make the problem any better, did it?

Aaaand Steve was looking at him way too closely, and his eyebrows were furrowed, and that was never a good sign.

‘Is this the moment for you to judge me for my relationship again?’ said Tony. ‘Because I should warn you, I take my right to make my own bad life choices very seriously.’

And he would make Loki pay for overstepping that particular line.

Steve shook his head at that, as if to shake away a thought.

‘No, I just… I want to find out whether you know what you are getting into-’
Tony laughed. Long and hard.

‘Know what I’m getting into?’ said he. ‘You must be kidding – this is Loki we’re talking about! But at least I knew I had no idea what I was getting into when I signed up for it, so that’s… something, I suppose. My definition of informed decision making is something I like to stretch on occasion.’

Steve’s frown deepened, and Tony noticed that Bucky was not observing him but the Capsicle with wary eyes.

Huh.

‘Alright… good to know… I’ve… I’ve been trying to get myself up-to-date concerning… a lot of things’ Steve said then. ‘… and I’ve been reading up on SSC, you know, sane, safe and consensual and-‘

‘Nothing about Loki is safe’ Tony interrupted him again, his voice serious now. ‘And sanity is debatable with both of us, to be honest. But we are working on the consensual part.’

He grinned and bumped Steve on the shoulder with his good hand.

‘Hey, good for you that you’re educating yourself about kink, by the way’ said he. ‘And consent culture and all that shmuck. You’re doing well, buddy.’

‘I might be a man from the past’ said Steve, looking at him earnestly. ‘But as you might have gleaned from our conversation today, I have less and less convincing reasons to stay there.’

And there Steve had to ruin a perfectly light moment by being all deep and sensible and making it awkward.

‘Soooo, working with what I assume is your updated knowledge’ Tony said. ‘I would describe Loki and me rather as rack – risk aware consensual kink. Or as I would term it, risk aware consensual assault.’

He still somewhat expected Steve to not follow, but he simply nodded, looking pensive.

‘So, how did you get from, Oh, Tony, I’m so disappointed in you, I have to reconsider your role in the Avengers initiative’ said Tony, mimicking Steve’s voice very badly and keeping a casual eye on Bucky. Though Steve flinched at his words, interesting. ‘To, oh, I actually listen to your side of the story before I get all judgemental? Because… that’s kind of a big step there, buddy, even for you.’

Bucky cleared his throat.

Hah, thought so.

‘I might have pointed out that Steve was being a tiny little bit hypocritical about the whole thing’ said he. ‘Since he’s dating the Winter Soldier. I’m not exactly what people call safe and sane either.’

‘Nah, not on your bad days, at least’ Tony agreed. Bucky’s last bad day had almost ended with civilian fatalities. Granted, Bucky’s hands had shaken for weeks after that, so he tended to pay dearly.

‘And you’d have all right in the world to throw me in a cell and throw away the key’ said Bucky.

‘Not all right in the world, no’ Tony corrected, seriously. Because they hadn’t. ‘But neither do we have all right in the world to jail alien royalty.’
Steve paused, then said, ‘No, I suppose we don’t.’

And wasn’t that something.

There was a moment of silence.

‘Look, Tony’ said Steven then, scratching his neck. ‘I want to use this occasion to say…I was… I have not always been fair to you.’

‘Haven’t you?’ Tony asked warily.

‘No, I haven’t’ Steve said, frowning. ‘I know that now. In a way, in the past, I’ve behaved to you not unlike Thor has behaved to us today.’

Tony raised his eyebrows at that. Because that was…

‘Huh – care to explain? ‘Cause I don’t remember you calling me a whore exactly.’

To Tony’s surprise, Steve fidgeted, and then Bucky took Steve’s hand in a way that looked very… deliberate.

Steve jerked, glanced at Bucky questioningly. Bucky smiled, kept his hold onto the hand, and Steve looked almost abashed.

Yeah – not used to showing affection in public. No kidding.

‘You can do it’ Bucky said softly. ‘Like we talked about.’

Steve nodded at him.

‘I… I did not call you a wh-whore, no’ said Steve, looking back at Tony. ‘But I said many other things that… were just as… outdated. Things that have never been okay. Ideas, prejudices from that time, that society I grew up in, and that I just repeated, like a parrot, without really thinking. In retrospect-’

And the Capsicle went so far as to blush.

‘I called you selfish, I called you a coward’ said he. ‘In retrospect, I can’t believe those words actually came out of my mouth’

‘Well, better those words than those teeth’ Tony said matter-of-factly.

‘You do things… differently, Tony’ said Steve. ‘And I will admit that sometimes, that still makes it difficult for me to work with you. Sometimes, it makes it very difficult, honestly.’

He made a pause filled with a lot unsaid about quite a few missions.

Yeah, so Tony tended to fuck up. So what? That was just him. A fuck-up. He didn’t force anyone to keep him in the Avengers initiative.

‘But just because you show it in another way, that doesn’t mean…’

He swallowed, Bucky pressed his hand more tightly, as if to urge him on.

‘You’ve been so very generous to us’ said Steve. ‘Like Bucky said – when I came back from that mission to Latveria with a super-powered Hydra assassin in tow and only my word that I knew the
guy, that he was worth saving, SHIELD was preparing for a manhunt, and you, you offered us shelter, immediately. You made sure that Bucky couldn’t harm anyone, but you took us in, and you didn’t exploit our situation. You didn’t even make a big deal out of it.’

‘That’s because it wasn’t’ Tony said, one eyebrow raised. There really hadn’t been any question about it – the matter had been rather clear, Steve’s story very believable, the Winter Soldier containable, plus, there had been the bonus of pissing Fury off again.

‘Not to you maybe’ Steve said. ‘For us, it was a life-saver. Just… I just wanted to apologise for once… and… and say thank you. Thank you, Tony. Howard… he must have been blind to see you for who you were.’

That last sentence sounded a bit practiced.

It still sounded honest.

Damn.

And that was nothing Tony had either prepared for nor was ready to deal with.

Damn.

Silence again.

No, he was not going to cry.

Ah, and now his hands started trembling. Fantastic.

He hid them quickly in his pockets. Focus on the Stuckies. Don’t think of Howard, don’t-

‘So I’ve decided to give Loki, or rather you, the benefit of the doubt’ Steve concluded.

‘Good to know’ said Tony, very grateful for the conversation taking another turn. ‘Don’t you ever trust the fucker though. He’s a nasty piece of work who will lie to you and betray you as soon as it serves his goal or his current mood, the later of which changes about a dozen times a minute.’

He gave a slightly confounded Steve a pad on back.

‘He will help us kill Thanos’ said he. ‘Everything else is out in the open.’

And with that cheerful thought, he left the two honey bunnies to their anger management. His depot of meaningful conversations and emotional moments and triggers was so overstocked, he felt the need to throw back up some of it. But there was Resident Evil on their game console. And Nat might not yet have beat him to it.

It was a good day for killing zombies.

*=

Killing zombies helped. Going over code helped too, hacking into SHIELD just to annoy Fury by sending private messages to his super-secret untraceable phone helped a LOT.

Also, Pepper called from her holidays on the Maldive Islands, sounding a lot more relaxed and better humoured than when they had talked the last time, and they actually had a very nice chat – not
touching the topic of Loki even a bit – which may have ended with two additional entries in his
calendar named board meeting, but still felt something like a step towards a reconciliation. Or
something.

He understood her anger with him, in a way. He knew he was difficult to love, and on his good
days, he even understood why.

And then there was Bruce and the science they finally got around to, and despite Bruce’s
uncomfortable questions about the alcohol issue, that was enough to distract Tony for a while. That
may have been why, when he entered the workshop one evening and there was Loki standing at the
displays again, going over the same data he had analysed the last time he had been there, he didn’t
activate the suits at once. He just quietly sent the command to ready them and to set them on auto-
pilot too. It would be difficult to navigate them anyway, with his arm still in a sling.

Loki stilled when Tony closed the door behind him, then slowly turned to him, joining his hands
behind his back. He was wearing his slim and elegant suit and dressing shoes. Here for business? His
face was difficult to read, carefully blanked, but even though Loki certainly hadn’t lost weight, there
was something almost haggard about it.

‘I believe’ said Loki. ‘I have a few things to apologise for.’

‘Yes, Sir’ Tony agreed. ‘Yes, you have.’
Regrets and Retaliation

Chapter Summary

Tony and Loki discuss house rules and colour patterns. Is this this strange domestic bliss thing everyone is talking about?

Chapter Notes

I'm getting so much love from you right now, and I'm taking it all very, very willingly. I'd say you can't believe how wonderful it is to receive such direct response to your work (something that very rarely happens in the publishing world), but since most of you are probably authors, you know what I'm talking about anyways.

Thank you!!

And since a few of you were worried, no, I'm not abandoning this fic of course! I enjoy writing this FAR too much! My life is just... busy sometimes. I bet you know the feeling. But I will always come back to you as soon as I can :).

See the end of the chapter for more notes

‘But first, shouldn’t you wear a wife-beater?’ Tony said. ‘Since you’re assuming the role of the abusive husband and all?’

He had settled on the couch, but the suits, of which there were three in the workshop, could be ordered to attack Loki with a single command.

‘We are not married’ Loki pointed out.

‘Tomato, Tomahhtoh’ Tony said with a dismissive hand wave. ‘You fulfil the stereotype, you’d better fulfil the dress code. Point is, Emovillain, I want to make something very clear.’

He thought for a moment.

‘Or, as clear as it is, for me, at least. You see, not being able to trust you is one thing, dealing with your mood changes another. But if you pull off one more time what you pulled off the last time we saw each other, you will lose my respect’ said he. ‘And that will have consequences for you. Not good ones. I can promise you that. Do you understand?’

Loki nodded.

‘I do’ said he.

‘Do you also understand why I’m a tiny little bit pissed?’ asked Tony.

‘I might be mistaken but I believe it is because I not only lashed out at you when you were not in your suit and thus at a significant physical disadvantage’ Loki said, walking around one of the working tables, slightly bent forward, his hands tracing the metal. ‘But because after that, I pinned
you on the ground, gave you a deliberate blow that was clearly meant less to injure you than to
humiliate you – to show you your place – underlining it with a threat along the same lines.’

At the last words, Loki had straightened himself up and had locked his eyes on Tony’s.

‘That was suspiciously on point’ said Tony, narrowing his.

‘I knew what I was doing.’ Loki said soberly.

‘Well, thank gods that you didn’t piss me off accidentally then’ Tony said sarcastically.
Loki snorted, seemingly almost against his own will.

‘I regret my actions’ said he then, his voice completely serious again. ‘They were uncalled for. For
that, I want to apology.’

‘I heard it’ Tony said. ‘You will have noticed the lack of I forgive you.’

‘I have’ Loki acknowledged.

‘That’s because I don’t believe in that shit’ Tony said. ‘Just don’t do anything like that anymore and
we’re fine.’

Loki bowed to him.

‘Also, I get that we both tend to lash out, but physical violence is not accepted in this tower, no
matter who hurts who’ he added. ‘That are the house rules, get it? Break them, and there will be
consequences ranging from having to stand in the corner for an hour to getting forcefully banned
from the premises or worse. Clint has gotten the memo, you should get it too.’

‘Midgardian house rules differ from Asgardian house rules then’ Loki commented, eyeing him
almost warily, as if he didn’t entirely believe in Tony’s words.

‘Seriously now – your place sucks.’

‘It is not my place’ Loki almost hissed. ‘It never has been.’

‘Good, then it should be easier for you to adapt to the Midgardian way of coexisting. So, what else
do you want to apologise for?’ Tony asked. ‘If I may suggest something, the wine to vomit
transformation comes to mind. First, you’re not Jesus. Second, you’re going about it all wrong.’

Loki opened his mouth, his head lop-sided, then shifted his weight back again, and shook his head.

‘No’ said he. ‘I won’t apologise for that.’

‘I told you, you’ve crossed a line.’

‘I realise that now.’

‘It will have consequences.’

‘Then I will deal with them’ Loki said, his lips thin.

‘Fine’ said Tony. ‘Fine. Have it your way.’

There was a tense pause, during which Tony tapped on the armrest of the sofa with his fingers,
wondering if his connection with his supposed seidr was already strong enough to set Loki on fire if Tony stared at him for a certain length of time.

‘Things’ said he then.

Loki raised his eyebrows.

‘You used the plural’ said Tony.

There was a movement in the other’s face.

‘I did, didn’t I?’ said he.

Tony could see him hesitate. What’s wrong, Lokes? Cat got your tongue?

‘I would like to make sure I understood you correctly first’ said Loki then. ‘It is true that I failed to inform you about the implications our sexual relationship would have on Asgard. You implied that that failure meant that our encounters were less consensual than I had assumed. Am I right so far?’

The weight of Loki’s question wasn’t exactly audible in his voice – on the contrary, it was almost neutral, as if Loki simply wanted to know the answer, and would accept any that came – but something about this warned Tony with blinking red lights and screaming alarms.

Maybe it was the memory of Loki paling when Tony had formulated that particular reproach.

In any case, something about this told him he would have to watch his words very carefully now.

‘I meant my yes about the sex’ said Tony after a pause. ‘For that, my consent was honest and informed. But I reject the power play about it. If you think that fucking me gives you the right to lose your respect for me, to disrespect me, if you think of me less because I let you screw me, then go fuck your opinion and go fuck yourself. Then our relationship will become a lot less personal in the future.’

Loki listened, his head bent.

Then he nodded.

‘What if I levelled the playing field?’ asked Loki with the same neutral voice.

‘Meaning what?’

‘Let you take me’ said Loki. ‘To balance the wrong I’ve done you.’

‘That… is not a good reason to have sex, Lokes’ said Tony. ‘Count me out if that’s what you’re aiming for. Not consenting.’

Loki’s eyebrows furrowed just for a second, when he looked back up at Tony, his face was smooth and blank again.

‘But you were right’ said he in that neutral voice. ‘We both know that according to Asgard morals, you would have more right to claim to be the man than me, no matter our difference in station. I am not dumb, Stark. I woke up on the Mantis in Thor’s clothes. You cannot tell me that you haven’t seen -‘

‘Your anatomy has nothing to do with this!’ Tony said almost angrily. ‘Lokes, I was a wanker that day too, okay? I had no right to use this against you, no fucking right! The only thing making you a
guy is you saying that you’re a guy and anything else is just bigoted bullshit! I’m sorry, okay? I’m sorry.’

His voice had been almost pleading at the end, and Loki stared at him, uncomprehendingly. And shit, if before, his mask had been impeccable, it had to have cracked at some point, because yes, his face was still stiff and almost expressionless, but his eyes had widened just a bit, and they looked scared, confused, and there was something vulnerable to his whole posture, as if he expected a blow any second.

Shit. Tony had fucked up about this more than he had thought. He had hurt Loki more than he had thought.

‘I’m sorry’ said he again. ‘I… look, I don’t give a fuck about those bullshit rules, about this bullshit game.’

Loki blinked, and the next instant, the vulnerability was gone (swept beneath the carpet probably if Loki’s behaviour until now was anything to go by).

‘Neither do I’ said he.

Tony raised his eyebrows.

‘You don’t?’

‘Stark’ Loki said, his voice having found back to that sober tone that Tony probably shouldn’t but definitely did like. ‘As I’ve told you, in contrast to Thor, I’ve always liked to travel. On realms other than Asgard, things are being done very differently. What I told Thor was not all falsehoods – I have taken the receiving role in sex before, voluntarily, and gladly, and have done so independently of the other person’s social status.’

‘So, me begging for your cock-‘

‘Could neither raise nor lower my respect for you’ Loki said. ‘It just tells me what you want.’

‘… that is not what you said the last time’ Tony pointed out the obvious.

‘Well, evidently, I lied the last time’ said Loki dryly.

Huh. Just like that.

‘Why did you?’ Tony asked.

Loki looked away.

‘You seemed to expect it from me’ said he then, a bit too indifferently. ‘Who was I to disappoint?’

You’re not telling me the whole truth there, buddy.

‘Yeah, you tend to do that, don’t you?’ said Tony. ‘Acting according to people’s expectations. Sorry for letting you down there.’

Again, something moved in Loki’s face, he swallowed, and it was all back under control.

‘I would heal the injuries I inflicted upon you’ said he then.

‘Beating up your lover and healing them afterwards is not a healthy way of leading a relationship’
said Tony, one eyebrow raised, but Loki shook his head.

‘I was not intending to seek your forgiveness that way’ said he. ‘But you could be attacked or sent on mission any time. It is in my interest to make sure that my foolishness does not endanger my ally further.’

‘Mhm’ Tony said, then stood up. ‘Now you’re talking a language I can actually understand.’

To his surprise, Loki didn’t use any abracadabra shit but handed Tony a flask with a purple liquid inside.

‘A potion again? No hand waving and light show?’ asked he with a pout. ‘You do not know how to woo a guy, Reindeer Games.’

‘You have seidr’ Loki said. ‘And the strongest manifestation of your magic is a circle of protection that has already warded me off once. It might not help that our last physical contact was me smashing your face into the ground. We will have to work together magically eventually, but I would prefer experimenting with your subconscious reactions to my influence at a point in time when you—’

‘—have less reasons to lash out at you?’

‘If you will’ Loki said and bowed. ‘But I probably won’t be the one to get the most grievously hurt of us two if you lose control of your seidr, Stark.’

A small smile stole itself on his face.

‘If you think that your magic only wants your best’ said he. ‘Then remember what it did to me.’

‘Ah’ said Tony and grimaced.

He eyed his drink.

‘Any side-effects you wanna tell me about right now because I really won’t accept a repeat of the alcohol mess?’ asked he.

Loki shook his head.

‘It should heal you, and do nothing more’ said he and opened his hand. ‘You might feel a warm sensation and a certain tingling however.’

‘That will just make me feel nostalgic for rum’ said Tony. ‘Well, heads up then, I suppose.’

The potion tasted heavily sweet, and at the same time spicy.

The warm sensation came and went, the tingling too.

And how did Tony always forget so easily how much of a luxury it was to move around pain free?
At first, Loki seemed fine. Too tense, his face too blank, and haggard-looking in this way Tony still couldn’t pinpoint, but all in all, fine. After a short agreement (without saying the actual words) that working together too closely might still not be the right thing for the moment, Tony went back to screwing around with machinery (now that he finally could move both hands freely), and observing Loki discreetly, and Loki went back to studying the data collected by Selvig, his lips sometimes moving silently and his eyebrows furrowing when he was getting to a part that gave him some difficulty (which Tony would never admit out loud looked cute, at least not in front of the guy, because he liked living).

But about half an hour into the work, Loki’s hands, as he waved parts of the data here and there on the screen, started shaking. Only slightly at first, but it got more noticeable quickly. He took them down then, swallowed, balled them into fists, as if that was meant to force them into stillness, but as soon as he opened them, they started trembling again. And Loki blinked too much, Tony noticed, his breath hitched. He shied away from the cold light, he pressed his eyes shut, kneaded the bridge of his nose. Waxy skin colour. Slightly hunched posture. The breathing grew quicker.

Tony knew the symptoms of a beginning panic attack very well by now. And this one didn’t look like it was going to be much fun.

‘Tell me, Lokes’ said he casually, but the trickster jerked violently at Tony’s voice. ‘I’m thinking colours and suit designs, but I’m a bit lost. JARVIS, can you display project Mark VI on the second screen, in the colours we discussed last, plus a few other ones.’

‘Of course, Sir. Right away, Sir.’

And that was why Tony loved JARVIS. Because they hadn’t discussed any colours but JARVIS displayed the suit, arms parts, leg parts and the mask in several tones of red, gold, grey and blue anyway, some of which were, admittedly, more tasteful than others.

Way to use the occasion to mock me, JARVIS.

‘What would you say, is that head part over there rather bourbon or crimson?’ asked he, texting JARVIS at the same time on his Starkphone, telling him to dim the lights.

‘Stark, we have better things to do than to discuss the fashion aspects of your armour’ said Loki, his face in his hands, his voice pressed and shaky, but he took the hands down anyway, turned towards the designs anyway. Blinked several times. His eyes unfocused, glassy.

You’re slipping quickly, aren’t you, Lokes?

‘Th-that head part is n-neither bourbon nor crimson’ said Loki then, frowning, with a certain irritation in his voice. ‘And I will kill you personally if you use the turquoise or the magenta one.’

With a heavily shaking hand, he waved the head part away, and pulled up another in a dark grey tone.

‘A nickel head part’ said he. ‘With pale gold highlights i-if you need to make a very e-elegant entrance. If you want to use red, maybe use wine red with this sort of very dark y-yellow gold, sunglow, yes, you can acc-accentuate this with dark grey parts, particularly on the arms and the legs.’

He blinked, murmured to himself, pulled other parts of the suits up, asked Jarvis to show him colour palettes and argued with him about the denominations.

His face colour stayed waxy, and he still blinked too often, and his hands kept trembling, but Tony noticed that after a while, at least the quick breathing calmed down somewhat.
Looking at objects, naming them and stating their colour. A way to trick the mind into focusing on the outside world, on something else but the overwhelming fear. A simple and somewhat stupid exercise, but it had been Tony’s last point of return from a full blown panic attack too often for him to still ridicule that method. He had argued with Pepper or Jarvis about the advantages of colour terms versus colour coding for hours, but at least, he had stayed somewhat coherent.

‘I was also experimenting with brown’ said he. ‘JARVIS, pull up those next.’

‘Oh’ said Tony later, after looking up, and then, with a lower voice, ‘Okay, that works too. That works perfectly.’

In retrospect, he didn’t know how exactly JARVIS had managed to manoeuvre Loki, whose hand gestures had become increasingly sluggish, on the couch. In any case, the AI had also moved the virtual displays for the trickster so he could pick colour tones and combine them from there. The suit jacket Loki had pulled off himself, and he had also been the one to roll up his sleeves.

But Tony definitely wondered how he himself had managed to make Loki accept a blanket and a sweet smoothie, but he vaguely remembered a lot of rambling on his side and handing the god the things absent-mindedly. Loki had huddled into the blanked and had sipped at the smoothie without commenting, still shaking, focusing on the colours on the screen as if they were his lifeline, his eyelids drooping at the same time.

Tony, as to him, had occupied himself with the parts of the Mantis he was taking apart again until somewhen in the last minutes, the god had become suspiciously quiet. And now that he had looked up, Tony saw that Loki’s head had fallen sideways against the bedrest, his long hair having fallen partly into his face. His eyes were closed. His chest was moving with his slow, shallow breaths. His hands relaxed and open. The empty bottle of smoothie that Loki had kept kneading was still in his right one.

He had fallen asleep.

Mr. Constantly Alert had actually fallen asleep on Tony’s couch.

And wasn’t that something.

The god’s face had turned smooth in his sleep, peaceful, but somehow looked even more haggard than before, the circles under his eyes even more pronounced. His mouth was open; one strand of raven-black hair was clinging to his lips – even his breathing sounded exhausted.

Loki had never slept in Tony’s presence before – been unconscious, yes, but never slept.

Until now, Tony hadn’t thought much about that – it had been logical to assume that Loki used other, safer, places for putting himself in that kind of vulnerability.

Only it seemed that sometimes, he… didn’t.

‘How long were you awake, mhm?’ Tony asked with his voice still very low. How long would it take a god to show symptoms like that – sensitivity to light, the slight swaying on his feet at the end, the sluggishness in his gestures? The sleep deprivation had probably not helped with the panic either. It seldom did.
Had the waking phase started before Thor had arrived or only after? For how long had Tony dealt with a steadily growing more emotionally unstable god without noticing that anything was amiss?

Tony had been letting his guard down. He should have seen this sooner. He had been taking things for granted, like Loki’s apparent strength. He should not take things for granted anymore.

Before, when Loki had thrown these words at him – *I woke up on the Mantis in Thor’s clothes. You cannot tell me that you haven’t seen* – and Tony had answered that he couldn’t care about his anatomy less, the Lokes had looked scared.

And for him to lose control after that, when even on the Mantis, in all the pain he had been in, he had, after waking up, always, always schooled his expressions, had suppressed his moans…

Shit man.

Tony really shouldn’t have his knowledge about Loki’s body as a weapon. This weapon had cut deep.

Shit.

He stood up, went to the trickster, and took the blanket that had almost slipped to the floor, and cautiously draped it over his shoulders. When Tony touched him at the shoulder so to tug him in, he vaguely expected the god to jerk or wake up and throw him across the room and smash his face into the floor again, but instead, Loki leaned into the touch a bit, and sighed.

Some tension that Tony hadn’t even known was there slipped from Loki’s face, and-

Tony breathed in, and made a step back almost in reflex.

‘Wow’ whispered he. ‘Okay.’

Hadin’t Thor said that Loki’s glamours only failed when he was close to death?

But right now, Loki was definitely not dying. So maybe this was simply another thing where Thor knew less about Loki than he thought he did.

It was as if with the tension, a mask had slipped. And beneath it, Loki’s face was covered in scratches. His lower lip was bitten bloody, his hair was a tangled mess and on the left side of his head, a patch of hair was missing, clotted blood in the strands that were still there, on the wound.

What has happened to you, he almost said.

But Tony knew, or could guess.

He pulled at the blanked a bit, uncovering Loki’s right arm. It too was covered in scratches – some were so deep there were actual patches of skin and flesh missing. Tony eyed the fingers, then crouched down next to the hand, looking them more closely.

Yup.

Fingers bloody too, and beneath the fingernails, you could see remains of skin. Matched with the pattern of the scratches.

Shit. Double shit.

Tony looked up to Loki’s face, and he was still sleeping deeply.
Peacefully.

That strand of raven-black hair was still clinging to his open mouth.

Gods damnit, Lokes. What are you-

Maybe you can hear me, Tony thought. Maybe you don’t. But here it goes.

‘Okay, Lokes’ said he. ‘So here it goes. I’m gonna continue tricking you into accepting help. I’m gonna experiment a bit with what works and what doesn’t, and I might change my methods, but tricking you into accepting help is what I’m going to do until you start caring for yourself a bit more efficiently than you do now. Mhm, did I hear an objection? Oh, shoot, I’m afraid you lost that right when you forcefully made me sober and thus messed with my most trusted way to self-harm. So I will just mess with all of yours. C’est la vie, Lokes, I told you there would be payback, and payback, my dear god of mischief, is getting what you gave threefold, and a bitch.’

Chapter End Notes

Tony makes for the best kinds of revenge!

Also - panic attacks and naming colours: This is a real life method for coping, and weirdly enough, it works. If you find yourself in the middle of a panic attack, try to name things and their colour, and repeat that three times. Like, grey chair, grey chair, grey chair, black scorch mark, black scorch mark, black scorch mark, black scorch mark, black scorch mark, black scorch mark, black scorch mark, black scorch mark.

Mhm... that was that one vacation in Nightvale, wasn't it? Maybe not the best example.

But anyways, it's actually a good method to calm down a bit. If you have somebody there to support you, they can play a game of 'I see, I see' with you. Has the added bonus that you might feel a bit childish and ridiculous, which also works well to mitigate panic in my experience.

And always remember that every panic attack has an end. You won't go on panicking forever, simply because your body is not capable of it. So, no matter what you do, this state is NOT going to last.

So, be safe out there.
A House Of Cards, A Whisper In The Wind

Chapter Summary

Loki ponders beauty questions and deliberately does not ponder a lot of other things. But hey, a guy like him makes even lying to himself into an art form.

Chapter Notes

So I've been told to post the last pre-hiatus chapter nicely and resolutely, and I hope this is nicely and resolutely: This is my last prepared chapter which means that unfortunately you will have to wait for the next update again. But all your comments have been very interesting and/or funny and/or very insightful, in any case very motivating, and I hope I will have something new to post (relatively) soon :). Love u all!

Also, for this chapter: Fink - Looking too closely

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He was falling, no – he was back in the coffin. He was nowhere, hanging onto the thread that loosely bound him to his body. Maybe. He was everywhere, pushing his energy to boost the ships, singing the Celestial to sleep, sing… how much time had passed? He wasn’t sure anymore. What he had thought he had known before was gone and now… floating. It was… hard to say… what he still… where he still… between the branches, he could see… the workshop.

He blinked.

Hunger. Dry mouth. His body felt heavy, he felt the scratches, sore.

He straightened himself up. A blanket slipped from his chest. He took it up, felt it with his hands.

What-

Yes, he remembered now. There, the empty plastic bottle. There was a second one lying there on the sofa, still full, next to his discarded suit. Hadn’t he drunk both? The juice had been sweet.

He was thirsty.

He looked around, the workshop was empty. Where had Stark gone? The light was dim.

He took the plastic bottle, uncorked it, stood up.

‘Jarvis?’ asked he. ‘Did I fall asleep?’

‘For a certain amount of time, your behaviour and breathing pattern could be interpreted that way, Mr Skywalker’ the voice of the construct said.

This was probably not good.
He drank. It tasted sweet.

He had lost control over himself – right in front of the mortal.

Weakling.

He should kill Stark.

The urge was barely there. He was slipping.

‘Where is Stark right now, Jarvis?’

‘In the community kitchen, Sir, arguing with Mr Barton.’

‘Thank you, Jarvis’ said Loki. Not a good time to show up there then? But Barton would have to learn to coexist with him sooner or later. ‘For your service.’

He flexed his hands. He felt vaguely unsettled, exposed, but that was only to be expected, he supposed if he let his guard down enough to fall asleep here. He shouldn’t have let it come so far.

He had been too exhausted.

He should have controlled the shaking.

Stark had said nothing.

Jarvis had somehow gotten him to sit down on the sofa. Stark had handed him the blanket and the sweet drink.

Stark had made the lights dim. Stark had occupied him with suit designs.

Loki chose not to ponder those facts further.

‘If you would be so kind as to show me to a nearby bathroom, it would be greatly appreciated.’

Loki examined himself in the mirror and wasn’t in the least pleased by what he saw. The mask had grown much thinner – the exhaustion showed, even some of the hunger. What a sorry body you have, little godling.

*Your anatomy has nothing to do with this.*

He breathed in, shivered, and the glamour shivered, the scratches flickered into existence for an instant, then were gone again.

Pathetic.

He should have come here only once he was more stable. The lair didn’t allow him to grow more stable. Thoughts going in circles. Being alone had been a friend once, a blessing.

Too many mistakes.

Loki should never implied that he held Stark in any less worth for letting himself be penetrated – he should have thought of a better lie.

*Is that why you don’t let me top?*
Hah!

As if.

Why would it be my pride when I have none?

I don’t let you top me because I am weak, Stark, because I fear myself.

What a sorry mind you have, little godling. You can pretend and lie to yourself all you want, but I just have to poke here and there and it all breaks down like a house of cards.

I barely have to do anything – it is as if you wanted me inside, as if you wanted this, the abasement. Is this what you demand, little godling, for others to rummage around inside you, to sort out the mess that is in here?

It is a mess indeed. Most of this should be discarded. So many simulacra, little of worth here.

And you call yourself a prince?

You are not fit to rule your own head, godling, you know that – with what right would you ever aspire to rule anyone else? But it was another lie, you know that now. I’m surprised you ever believed it.

This here is the truth. My hand and my tools are the truth. Your chains and your screams and your sobbing are the truth. Baldur is the truth. You let me treat you like this because you know that this is your core. You surrender so easily because you desire it. Don’t you, little godling?

You desire being reduced to nothing. To be filled with someone else’s purpose. To be filled with somebody else.

You need it, even.

Loki laughed, a hard, derisive sound. The scratches flickered back, vanished again.

No, this would not do at all.

Loki washed his face, closed his eyes then and felt for his glamour. It felt brittle, frayed, and he let his seidr flow into it, let it grow thick and smooth like a plant that after a long draught is watered and drinks hungrily.

If only he can pretend.

It is a house of cards, Other, yes, easily destroyed. Or lies wrapped over each other, beneath is just what you found, the truth. The sorry mind, the sorry body. Worthless. The Ergi, just useful for one thing. The husk abandoned of Odin’s will.

Not abandoned by my lies though.

Not by my words. Not by my song.

And my lies don’t lie still, and they cannot be broken. Like the wind, they whisper about the husk, build the house of cards up as you make it fall. Because they do not get tired and the only food they want is the need I have for them.

And my song does not even need that anymore, not my desire, not anything.
And entangling me and whispering to me, my lies, my song, they make this sorry body, this sorry mind, this husk, this borrowed life, go on and on until they push the plans of your master to…

… tumble, and…

… fall.

When he opened his eyes again, he grinned, and his eyes were gleaming.

Chapter End Notes

Have I mentioned that Loki is, like, really badass? ‘Cause he’s really badass.
Hello, Stab, Stab, I’m Loki, Stab, Stab, What Was I Saying?

Chapter Summary

Proust is not the only sucker for madeleines. Tony is being an underhanded bastard. Also, I now somehow want to use the title of this chapter for the title of an autonomous fic. Mhm. No, I’m not getting distracted, I swear.

Chapter Notes

Does this count as a New Year's present if I would have posted the chapters in any case? Well, whatever. I'm back with the promise of six brand new chapters being published over the next few days, and with the promise of a terrible cliffhanger. This batch of chapters will be humourous at the beginning, but darker and more triggy at the end.

One other thing: I have my own ideas of the characters and the world I'm building, but if you find me writing bullshit about real world issues, please don't hesitate to tell me (if you can, not too harshly? Most of the time, I'm not writing bullshit on purpose). Of course, real world issues are not really depicted realistically here, since this is fanfic, and a fantastic world, and deals with unreasonably strong and resilient characters who get beaten up in a very unreasonable way, and their coping mechanism are... well, it's a Marvel world, so.... But still, there are limits, I'm aware. ... You cannot expect me to describe medicine or physical laws realistically though. I don't want to do that research, and I would fuck it up in any case. So, injuries and medical procedures... well, take them with a grain of salt is how I'm putting it mildly.

Ah, yes - and word, because it's word, has decided not to highlight my spelling errors anymore, so expect to find a lot more of them from now on.

‘If you keep doing that, I’ll tell Jarvis to trap you in there again’ said Tony, glancing absent-mindedly at the text from Jarvis telling him that Loki had teleported away from the workshop and to the community floor.

Seemed like they were going to get company soon. Clint and Loki in the same room so soon after Loki’s little breakdown and falling asleep in Tony's lab?

Mhm.

‘Jarvis needs to find me first’ Clint said, his stinky feet in his stinky socks on the table.

Really, allowing him access to the tower again had been a heavy price to pay in that bargain with Fury. Clint was still pissed about the whole alliance thing, and that translated to him being much more of a pain-in-the-arse than was usual.
‘Yeah, great job disabling the security system of the tower that is supposed to protect the Avengers, you birdbrain’ said Tony. ‘You can congratulate yourself on that genius plan with which nothing ever could go wrong.’

Somehow, the Hawk had done it. Somehow, he had managed to blind Jarvis in the ventilation shafts. It still was kind of surprising, despite the circumstances. He had underestimated Clint a bit.

Mhm – wouldn’t happen again.

‘Who says I didn’t install my own sensors afterwards’ said Clint, sticking his finger up his nose and then smearing the snot on Tony’s favourite breakfast chair.

‘Yuck, Clint, will you get yourself together?’ Tony said. ‘If you get any grosser, you will lose all right to complain about cockroach similes ever again.’

‘You fuck a mass murderer, so you still win the contest’ Barton said, unimpressed. ‘Also, your ventilation shaft security system is monitored by Jarvis, you made Jarvis give the mass murderer at least partial access to his data, ergo, he has taken or will take over your AI, and I don’t want the fucking bastard to monitor my movements in the shafts on top of everything else!’

‘While I feel flattered by your confidence in my abilities to hack the most advanced AI on this realm’ Loki’s voice came from seemingly nowhere. ‘I really do not need Jarvis to know where you are. You are too noisy, Barton.’

When Loki glowed into existence, he was leaning against the fridge, arms crossed in front of his chest, and he looked… far too healthy for that to not be a glamour. An impressive one – his hair was slick and shining, there was no trace left of his haggardness, even his eyes looked lively and sharp.

Clint was on his feet in an instant.

‘Way not to come across as creepy, Lokes’ said Tony, but the trickster didn’t even glance at him.

‘Careful’ said Clint with a low, threatening voice. ‘If you startle a guy, something unfortunate might happen.’

Loki cocked his head.

‘Oh, I don’t think so’ said he. ‘You already had that chance. Though I still wonder why you didn’t use it the first time. Nostalgia or misplaced morals?’

Clint opened his mouth but Loki didn’t give him the time to answer.

‘Whatever it is, it throws your game’ He narrowed his eyes. ‘And that won’t do, Barton, not in this war. I won’t be always there to help you along.’

‘Yeah, a fat lot of help you have been’ Clint said and snorted.

‘Mhm’ Loki said, cocking his head. ‘In some ways, my transgressions towards you were a kindness. And I did compensate for your weaknesses, Barton.’

‘You mean my scruples.’

Loki bowed slightly.

Clint’s face grew stiffer at that.
‘Yes, you took all of those away, didn’t you?’ said he coldly.

Oh, great. This had better not turn into another Loki/Clint showdown.

Loki observed the archer appraisingly.

‘The sceptre did that’ said he then. ‘You should be able to tell the difference.’

Clint tensed even more at that, balled his fists.

‘Yes, you did nothing, didn’t you?’ murmured he.

He turned and strode out of the kitchen.

Loki looked after him, an eyebrow raised.

‘I never said that’ he murmured.

Gods, the drama. Tony rolled his eyes.

‘What is wrong with you, Lokes?’ he asked. ‘Are you just always like this – hello, how are you, oh, there is a weak spot, stab, stab, stab, I’m being a drama queen, stab, stab, stab, what was I saying?’

He accompanied his words with the according movements.

‘I don’t remember stabbing him’ Loki said innocently.

‘You know what I mean, Emovillain’ Tony said. ‘Is this your way of telling Clint to try and kill you again?’

Loki’s face tensed, and he looked away from Tony, again in the direction into which Clint had left.

‘This matter is between me and him only’ said he. ‘I would advise you to keep out of it.’

The advice didn’t sound much like an advice and more like an implied threat of very nasty consequences if Tony didn’t comply with this order.

Yes, sometimes, it was noticeable that Loki had grown up as royalty.

It was certainly annoying. And certainly no reason to comply.

But Loki didn’t notice his irritation – he went to the fridge, saying something about Jarvis and Selvig’s machine, opened the fridge, got a smoothie out like it was nothing, drank.

Mhm. Had he ever done that before?

From what Tony had found out, up until the current visit, the trickster had consumed virtually nothing while staying at the tower. While Loki had been sleeping, Tony had gone over the video footage of Loki’s previous visits, trying to spot signs of sleep deprivation or anxiety attacks that he might have overlooked then. Like spotting injuries on the trickster, it hadn’t been exactly easy. The god could be too subtle for his own good.

Tony thought he could discern a certain pattern however, and he didn’t like the implications. Maybe it was just his imagination. A guy could get paranoid after all.
And yet. Judging from the few signs and cues, it seemed that Loki was always worse when he arrived from wherever place he was when he was not with Tony. And, if nothing else upset him, Loki gradually grew calmer and more settled until he left again, reappearing a few days later, worse once more.

Plus, the setback seemed to be bigger the longer Loki stayed away.

Wherever he was when he was not at the tower, it didn’t exactly look like the place was good for him.

‘And if Thor ever learns to separate our strategic relationship from his personal grievances with me, we might finally be able to discuss Asguard’s role in the war the next time he decides to show up’ Loki said. ‘But why ever should he keep you or me updated on Asguard’s progress in the preparations? Do they really think that they don’t need my or Midgard’s help? The realm stays as arrogant as ever.’

‘You are one to talk, complaining about Thor’s radio silence’ said Tony, feeling that a reproach was the best way to approach this very, very delicate ground. Which it… shouldn’t be, logically, but if Tony guessed right… ‘You regularly disappear for days yourself, at the most inconvenient moments, leaving me stranded with half-finished projects and half-formed knowledge. That really grates on my nerves. Also, it’s strategically stupid.’

Loki looked up from his smoothie, eyeing him. Okay, so at least Tony had the trickster’s full attention now. It made his skin prickle a bit, but that was probably just his neglected self-preservation stirring dully.

‘What do you suggest? That I stay at the tower all the time?’ said Loki dryly.

‘Not all the time, obviously’ said Tony, rolling his eyes to hide his true motivation behind the demand. ‘Natasha isn’t here twenty-four seven, is she? But all the Avengers have quarters here, and not only out of sentiment. I don’t think Nat has ever done anything out of sentiment, come to think of it.’

Tony wasn’t at all sure about that, in truth, but Loki didn’t have to know that and also, it wasn’t the point.

‘It’s just practical, Lokes. For many reasons.’

‘It’s practical for your enemies’ Loki pointed out, still eyeing him closely. Cautious. Trying to find out what this was all about? ‘All the bad eggs in one basket – they just have to explode the basket.’

‘First, didn’t know you had seen Inglourious Basterds, good choice but maybe not exactly helping your ethics, second, it’s a pretty robust basket. Mere huffing and puffing won’t bring it down.’

Loki let out a short laugh and drank from his smoothie. Those were going down surprisingly easily. Maybe Tony had been right about Loki being a sweet tooth.

‘Says the man whose security systems can be subverted by the likes of Clint Barton’ said Loki. ‘Also, I should point out that I am not an Avenger, thus, I have no right to take quarters here.’

Tony shrugged.

‘You’re defending the Earth against aliens, you might as well be’ said he.

‘The other Avengers might disagree’ Loki said.
‘I might not care’ Tony said.

Something in Loki’s gaze, just for a moment then it was gone again. Tony had no idea what that emotion had been, but it had been a reaction, that was for sure.

‘Look, I can’t keep you here against your will in any case’ said Tony, shrugging again. ‘And even if I could, it wouldn’t make much sense to do so. I’m just offering. There are a lot of unused rooms on my floor, so you can just… you know, use them. If that makes you feel better, you can even put your protection circles and runes and chanting with Indian scents and drums or whatever you do, so to protect the room you claim. And the access to my floor can be blocked off to the other Avengers, even the air shafts. So that’s a plus.’

Tony had thought about what rooms exactly to offer Loki very thoroughly. Looking through the footage, it had been rather evident that the trickster mostly stuck to the workshop during his visits. His entire behaviour was different down there – less masked than anywhere else in the tower. And that was why Tony had, at first, considered arranging for quarters on that floor.

But then he had reconsidered. Because if some of his guesses were right, and Loki’s expectations of other people could mostly be simmered down to getting rejected, abandoned, despised or attacked, then maybe his preference of the workshop had other reasons than him genuinely liking that place.

It was, as the name said, the place where Tony and Loki worked together – it was the expression of their official relationship, the only thing they had definitely both committed to, the only thing Loki could rely on. The alliance. Thus, maybe, the workshop was the one place Loki could be sure he was always allowed or at least tolerated.

‘I thought your archer had circumvented your security in those shafts?’ Loki asked warily. He was playing with the plastic bottle in his hands.

‘Ah, yes, that. I might possibly have allowed him do that’ Tony said. ‘Thus, I might not have lost control of that security quite as much as I suggested.’

Yeah, so that had been another leap of faith he had taken recently. Jarvis had notified him of the security breach a few days ago. And sure, Tony’s first impulse had been to bump the broom handle at the ceiling and yell obscene threats and insults like any good neighbour.

Then he had reconsidered.

‘And why would you allow his indiscretion?’ asked Loki, sitting down at the breakfast table and picking up a madeleine from the bread basket, sounding even more suspicious now.

‘Clint feels more secure if he knows he isn’t observed all the time’ Tony said, barely without a moment of hesitation. ‘Your presence, as you might have noticed, is tickling his cockroach senses a little. No reason to make life more difficult for him than it already is by not giving him a safe space to retreat to.’

And the air shafts had always been that.

On the one hand, he supposed he shouldn’t have given the trickster that sort of information. On the other, it had been an easy decision to do so anyway. Loki had been in Clint’s head and already knew how the guy was thinking, so Clint’s coping mechanism were with all probability old news. And then there was the fact that Loki obviously didn’t like his own vulnerability to be exposed and that even suggesting that Tony wanted to acknowledge this vulnerability could be a very bad move. Telling Loki about Clint and the shafts also meant subtly giving him the information that Tony
thought that people had a right to safe spaces, without suggesting in any way that the trickster might maybe possibly sometimes need one.

And Tony was not going to miss good occasions to go forth with his plan. Why do tomorrow what you can do today without the resident trickster catching on?

Loki broke the madeleine in half, squeezed it slightly in his fingers, dragged his fingers across it. You like the feel and smell of that one, don’t you?

‘Why did you reproach him the security breach then?’ asked the god.

‘It would have been suspicious if I hadn’t noticed eventually’ Tony said easily. ‘And it would have been even more suspicious if I hadn’t been angry. I will calm down eventually, moody and unpredictable as I am, and then cockroach and I will come to an agreement.’

Loki’s eyes glinted, and he smiled, just a little.

Ah, I knew you’d like the underhandedness of this move. A good story, isn’t it?

Amusing. Distracting.

And then the trickster put half of the madeleine in his mouth, closed it, chewed and swallowed. He did not even look disgusted by the act.

Huh.

How about that?

Time to invest in French sweets then.

‘How about you showed me those vacant rooms’ Loki said. ‘I will of course never accept to be part of the Scavengers, but let’s see if I can’t undo your good work and disquiet your archer some more.’

And if that wasn’t accepting help, Tony didn’t know what was.

He grinned widely.
Fire, Walk With Me

Chapter Summary

Tony empties the waste paper bin and his mind. Nah, just kidding, he won’t do either. He wouldn’t even know where the garbage disposal is. In other news, this chapter is kind of a weird answer to life, the universe and all the rest. But thanks for the fish all the same.

Chapter Notes

No, this is not Twin Peaks by far, but the quote was too fitting to ignore (thank you, Entropy_by_Ophelia).

And thank you for your nice comments and all the Happy New Year wishes! You are the best! :) I wish everyone of you a Happy New Year too! Here, have a new chapter while you recover from whatever vices you have indulged in :).

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

‘My offer to teach you magic still stands, by the way’

Tony looked up from the control pad of the pulsar drive he had disconnected and had now linked to Jarvis, trying to hack it in order to get some basic understanding of the underlying code. Because the Skrulls definitely used code, that much was sure. It just didn’t make much sense to him was all.

But Loki had, as to him, not looked up from his tablet. He was lounging on Tony’s sofa again, barefoot and both seductively long legs stretched out, one arm on the backrest, one using the tablet – now that he had slept on it once, he seemed more comfortable occupying it, for some inscrutable reason. Or maybe getting an official room had helped even with that. It was hard to say.

Loki had walked with Tony through the available rooms, had quickly chosen the quarters that were the least vulnerable to unwanted intrusion and that were, at the same time, suspiciously close to Tony’s rooms, and then had shut the door in Tony’s face. According to the video footage, Loki had then sat down on the floor, had drawn a circle of chalk around himself, had cut his finger and a strand of his hair and had bled on the floor a bit, had then moved in a meditative position and closed his eyes. A few minutes later, every single sensor Jarvis had access to in those quarters had shut off and couldn’t be turned on again.

Good to know that Loki was taking him up on that offer to put up protective wards.

Also good to know that Loki could mess with Jarvis.

But it was kind of noticeable – if you squinted – that the trickster had been slightly better humoured afterwards.

At least, he had drunk another smoothie, and that had to be some kind of record, as far as Tony was
concerned.

Maybe Loki hadn’t been sure whether he would be able to mess with Jarvis either.

Yeah, so his ally was dangerous as fuck.

‘Or are you not interested anymore?’ Loki said, tearing him from his thoughts. He had even changed into casual clothes, or what counted as casual with Loki. Black leather pants and a green tunic that revealed quite a bit of his upper body. Hair curly and falling on his shoulders untidily.

All in all, a distracting sight.

‘Of course I am’ said Tony, wishing he could spend some more time with the pulsar drive or ogling the god’s body rather than deal with that particular subject.

At that, the god looked up.

‘You do noticeably not sound like you mean it.’

‘Nah, of course I mean it. But shouldn’t we rather, I don’t know, do some more time gem experiments?’

‘No’ Loki said simply. ‘You learning magic takes precedence right now.’

‘Why?’

‘We want to create a machine that fuses technology and the flow of the seidr, Stark. Of which you will be the main engineer. Of course it takes precedence.’

He cocked his head, studying Tony.

That was probably not good, was it?

‘Why do you stall?’ asked Loki then.

Yes, probably not good.

Tony huffed, turned back to his control pad. The problem with hacking it was mostly that the programming language he was dealing with simply didn’t follow the usual rules. Thus, the usual weaknesses were just not there, and despite having unearthed and studied some of the code that controlled the ship’s internal analysis mechanisms, Tony wasn’t yet good enough to spot the ones that were.

‘Are you still of the opinion that magic shouldn’t exist?’ Loki asked, sounding as if preparing for a very tedious argument.

Oh, Tony wished he still believed in his concept of a rational sciency world. But really, that had been thrown out the moving train a few stops ago.

‘Did the death of the girl power my seidr?’ asked he, trying to sound nonchalant.

The girl whose face was turned to mush by the claw of a beast that shouldn’t even exist. The girl that Tony had failed to protect. Only in his perimeter, civilians had died during that mission.

Coincidence?
There was a pause.

‘Do you expect me to say that no, you did not benefit from it?’ asked Loki then, obviously trying not to sound derisive, and failing.

‘No, I want to know if the death of the girl powered my seidr’ Tony said soberly, still fiddling with the control pad. ‘I want to know if my denial and the needs of my seidr have made me subconsciously fail to save her.’

There was another pause.

‘All valid questions. The answer to your first question, you might find in your magic’ said Loki then, the mockery gone from his voice completely. ‘The answer to your second question, you can only find in your mind.’

‘So you don’t know’ said Tony dryly, looking up.

‘More to the point, this is nothing I can tell you’ answered Loki.

Now that was vague.

‘So how do I find out the answer to the first question then?’ asked Tony.

The god observed him for a moment.

‘This should be your first step anyway’ said he then, und stood up.

He went to one of the working tables and cleared it of machinery and tools with a single swipe. And some of those parts where really heavy, falling to the floor with loud clanks, and Loki didn’t even make it look like an effort, brushing them away, and how strong exactly was this guy?

‘We could talk magical theory for years and it would still not help you one step further. Your main problem is that you deny your own power, and that you fear it. So learning to acknowledge, sense and know your power is what you must do. Then you will no longer run. I think. It might also scare you away for good, but once your seidr will get a taste of you, it will not let you go so easily. In that case, there might be a certain amount of fallout.’

‘You’re all sunshine, ponies and optimism, aren’t you, Emovillain?’

‘My alliance with you proves your assertion right’ He gestured at Tony impatiently, ‘Get up there’ said he.

‘What?’

‘Get on the table, sit down in the middle!’

‘What for?’

‘You want me to teach you?’ asked Loki. ‘Then do as I say’

He looked very tall again, and menacing in this vague but not less scary way.

‘I… generally don’t’ Tony still said.

‘Asking me to teach you magic’ said Loki, supporting himself with his hands on both edges of the table, ‘means entering a relationship of student and master. We might be equal partners in our fight
against the Mad Titan, but we are not equal partners here. Here, you must, however you and I despise the concept, learn to trust that when I give you an order, it’s for your best.’

‘But I really don’t’ Tony pointed out.

‘And with good reason’ Loki agreed immediately.

There was a pause, and Loki didn’t look that tall and menacing anymore. He looked a bit thrown off his game instead, as if the quandary had taken him by surprise.

But why should it?

Loki furrowed his eyebrows.

‘Listen to me, Stark’ said he then. ‘Learning to weave seidr is not without danger. Quite in the contrary, in fact. For someone like you who has spent years ignoring and repressing their magic, it is even worse – if I let you do this on your own, I will not have an ally for much longer. So I simply cannot allow to you to do simply as you please.’

He tapped on the table with his fingers.

‘If we do this, I will ask for your consent wherever I can, and I will endeavour to inform you of the consequences of your actions before you consent to them, but I need you to be ready to heed my command when necessary, and I need you willing to yield control to me. I might have to take it very quickly so to save your life or that of others, and I might not have time to break your resistance. Do you understand me?’

‘I do’ said Tony earnestly. ‘It just doesn’t change the fact that-

‘That I am Loki, no. I am well aware.’ Loki interrupted him. ‘So, concerning your problem of trust, I propose this. If you accept to become my apprentice in the art of weaving seidr, I swear on the Norns that I will not use this relationship of student and master to harm you or the ones dear to you. While teaching you, I will not use your seidr for my own means or that of others, without your consent. I will teach you the control of your seidr, and everything I will do as your teacher will serve that goal. While I am teaching, I will share as much knowledge with you as I wish to share, no more, but I will not lie about the nature of magic, nor about the consequences a magical action of you might have. While I am teaching, I will not try to take the control of your seidr from you unless are in need of my assistance. I will not force you to take a path in that art against your will, nor will I stop you from taking a path against mine. Your path is your own, and I will let you walk it, however far and however long you want to walk. I swear on the Norns on that. Are you satisfied?’

Tony pondered the oath for a moment.

‘There is a lot of while I am teaching in there, I can’t help but notice.’

‘You noticed correctly.’

‘That still infers a lot of other occasions for you to do any of the things above.’

‘Yes’ Loki agreed. ‘However, abusing the power of a completely untrained mage is even easier. So in theory, you have more to gain than to lose.’

Haha, great. In theory. Good to know.

‘So, is that, like, a standard oath in space Hogwarts?’ asked he. ‘Because it sounds… pretty
‘There. Is. No. Space. Hogwarts’ said Loki. ‘And I would strongly advise against joining any kind of organised educational institution in that area. Most of them are death traps.’

‘Seriously?’

‘Inexperienced mages are good batteries’ Loki said soberly. ‘But to answer your question, you’re not the first distrustful mage in history. I would rather call wariness a… a quality you either have or pick up sooner or later.’

‘An occupational disease?’

‘Survival of the fittest, as one of your mortals put it. Do you accept me as your teacher then, Anthony Stark of Midgard?’

Tony hesitated, thinking Loki’s words through once more.

But he didn’t really need to. He had already rushed through the different possible scenarios of how this might work out, and had come to his conclusions.

And he also knew, rationally, that burying this problem was not exactly a solution. If the death of the girl really had been the fault of his seidr, then not learning to control it was probably… not the best way to go about it. To put it exceedingly mildly.

‘I do’ said Tony.

His voice sounded strange to himself, different. As if it had suddenly more weight.

‘And I accept you as my apprentice’ said Loki and also his voice was strangely dark.

Tony felt a vague pull.

Then Loki straightened himself up again, and the sensation was already gone.

‘Now get up on that table’ said he. ‘I entangle myself in so many oaths for your sake, it is a wonder I haven’t caught myself in a contradiction yet.’

Tony climbed on the table.

‘So what are we doing?’ asked he.

‘Nothing’ Loki said, ‘before I take a few precautions. Lose that shirt, Stark.’

‘Ooooh, didn’t know you were in the mood’ Tony said, wiggling his eyebrows but pulling the shirt off afterwards. ‘Is this some kind of Erosmancy and you have to put on an aura condom?’

‘Don’t say that word again and no’ Loki said.

‘Which one? Erosmancy or aura condom?’

‘Either’ said Loki, conjuring a brush wet with dark paint from nowhere. ‘With your consent, I would use a rune seal to restrain your seidr until you can restrain it yourself. I would normally paint it on your chest, around the arc reactor, but I would expect you to object to that, so I would offer to paint it on your back instead, on the same place where on the chest, the arc reactor would be. As a mirror image, the effect is almost equivalent. Be warned, the paint is not of the sort of nature that comes off
easily. I can provide you with a glamour to hide it however.’

Tony raised his hands, ‘…Just a moment’ said he. ‘I accept this magic apprenticeship thingy where I’m supposed to t-word you, and the first thing you want to do is tattoo me and put my magic on a leash?’

‘Yes’ Loki said matter-of-factly.

And coincidentally, once more, Loki had shown that he respected Tony’s unease with people touching him near the arc reactor without Tony ever having explicitly voiced it. How did the trickster even know? Tony had learned to suppress this fear after all – he didn’t mention it, he didn’t even wince anymore when people came near the thing. Sometimes, he managed to forget it. Almost. Okay, he pretended he forgot it. Which was the second best thing surely.

And all that had been hard work.

Mhm, probably Loki knew by observing Tony as closely as Tony was observing him.

That was a game that could be played by two, after all.

‘Well, at least the second part sort of makes sense, I guess’ Tony admitted. ‘But… didn’t you say that us interacting magically wasn’t a good idea at the moment?’

‘A rune seal is not the same as interacting magically. I would still try to avoid that for now. And are you feeling aggression towards me right now?’ Loki asked, cocking his head. ‘Do you feel, apart from your usual wariness against me and your latent fear and annoyance with me, an urge to protect yourself against my potentially lashing out?’

‘I… no.’

He… didn’t. Hadn’t since Loki had fallen asleep on his couch, weirdly enough, despite the guy having broken his nose all too recently. That was… probably not healthy, and had probably a lot to do with Tony putting so much thought into tricking the guy into self-care since then, but well.

‘I didn’t have that impression either’ Loki simply said.

Great, so yes, the trickster could read him emotionally too. That was probably fine and nothing to worry about.

‘Okay, just skipping over the impromptu-tattooing, how do I know you will really just put the leash on and not use the occasion to, I don’t know, destroy my circle of protection or something?’

‘In a way, your fear is justified’ said Loki. ‘I will not destroy the ward, but the seal is a magic dampener and were you an accomplished mage, you would have no reason to consent to something not unlike the manacles your little Midgardian sorcerer made for me.’

Loki wrinkled his nose at the word.

Interesting.

‘I… take it you don’t like sorcerers?’

Judging from Loki’s facial expression, he really didn’t like them.

‘Are sorcerers sort of the furries of magekind?’
‘I don’t follow, also, I would not count those blundering amateurs to magekind. Barely anyone does.’

‘So Strange’s a furry, good to know – meaning, he’s the butt of magical society. Not held in very high esteem.’

‘Not held in very high esteem, no’ said Loki in a way that told of extreme understatement. ‘So yes, I will cut you off of a good part of your magical potential’ he continued. ‘But at the moment, you can’t use the full potential of your magic in any case. Even a fraction of it is quite enough to overwhelm you. Your circle of protection is a bit useless if it eats you up.’

‘Right’ said Tony. ‘That’s very reassuring.’

‘Do you decline my offer?’

‘Depends. How long will the seal have to stay?’

‘That will depend mostly on you’ Loki said. ‘At the same time in your education when a warrior will switch his wooden sword for a real one.’

Tony smirked.

‘Oh, you will find that I am a quick learner’ said he, doing what he did with most of his really risky decisions – dive right in. ‘Okay, I consent to the training wheels. Go on.’

The brush was cool on Tony’s skin, and there was a prickling, almost electrical sensation when it moved across it. Alright, so despite all the oaths, this could turn out to be a really bad idea, he knew. But in the end, if there was one thing Tony readily believed the trickster, it was that on his own, dabbling with this shit, Tony was royally fucked up the arse. And not in the sexy way.

Loki drew two circles around Tony with chalk next, inscribed that with runes, and ordered Tony not to leave the circle under any circumstances until Loki had broken it again.

‘As I said, these are precautions’ said Loki then, looking more serious and tenser than Tony had expected. ‘We do not intend to truly call on your magic today. We will simply introduce the two of you to each other.’

‘But our first date might still end with me getting a drink thrown into my face?’ asked Tony.

‘Yes, taking into account that the metaphoric drink in question might be pure acid’ said Loki. ‘Get yourself in a comfortable sitting position. Close your eyes. I will guide you through the meditation.’

‘Meditation?’ Tony asked, one eyebrow raised. ‘Don’t tell me you wanna talk crystals and scents next. I haven’t signed up for a Yoga class.’

‘Then get out’ said Loki soberly, crossing his arms in front of his chest. ‘I don’t have to do this. I can repudiate you as my student any time.’

‘You can?’

‘Of course’ said Loki and snorted. ‘Just as you can repudiate me. What did you think? Mages are notoriously difficult to work with. Many apprenticeships out there haven’t lasted out the first day, and I am being told that I’m not a patient teacher. I never was.’

‘So either it’s Yoga class or nothing?’
Loki cocked his head.

‘What exactly is the reason for your peculiar aversion against the way of the Yogi? You have obviously not yet understood the perks of breathing and stretching’ said he. ‘Also, you seem to be a bit confused about what the way of the Yogi actually entails. And yes, the meditation is not optional. Close your eyes and relax, Stark. Now.’

His voice and posture had that weird divine authority again, and so Tony obeyed despite the absurdity of the command.

‘Eyes shut, Gandalf. Relaxing like a rockstar. What now?’

‘Now you start breathing deeply. Count to seven, breathing in, then count to fourteen, breathing out. Try breathing deep into your stomach. Empty your mind.’

‘You sound like a sensei from a bad kung-fu movie’ Tony commented.

‘Your blending of different Asian schools of movement is grating on my nerves, Stark’ Loki said. ‘Shut up.’

It was not easy to keep his mouth shut, but that was nothing next to the task of shutting up his mind. Not being able to stop thinking was part of the reason Tony had always had a substance abuse issue, gods damnit, and Loki knew that, and now he told him to just hit the mute button? Haha, right. This was ridiculous, Tony was easily able to count while breathing and ponder performance issues of the arc reactor at the same time, mentally go through possible materials more robust than leather for the punching bags, analyse scenarios of getting Betty Ross out of SHIELD’s reach, and had Steve really said that Tony had some kind of worth, that had been weird, was that Bucky’s influence? And he should probably worry about the fact that Loki could mess with Jarvis – he could even shroud himself from the AI without a hair and a paper cut. When he turned invisible, Jarvis couldn’t detect him anymore, and that was just weird, because there still should have been body heat and noise and… but then there was the fact that Loki had never deleted the footage of him guarding Tony’s sleep, and if he was able to hide from Jarvis, shouldn’t he be also able to mess with the security tapes? And it was footage Loki would have deleted, had he had half the chance, Tony was sure. He had looked at it after all. And Pepper should take vacations more often, Tony wasn’t taking care of her enough, never had, and if his relationship with Loki was any indicator, he must have been abusive with her at least on the emotional level, and that without noticing, he had to ask her how she had experienced their relationship, but would she answer honestly? She was one of the very few persons who had always been on his side, so how blind was she to his character? Also, there was this bug in the code for the suit that was bothering him, one should think that if you were a genius, bugs just didn’t happen anymore, but sometimes you still looked at code that just wouldn’t compile, and wasn’t that just one bullshit-

‘Stark’ Loki interrupted him. ‘You’re breaking your breathing pattern. Get back to counting. Count to seven, breathing in, count to fourteen, breathing out. Breathe, using your stomach. Let yourself fall into relaxation. Empty your mind.’

‘Sorry, mind emptying not happening’ Tony said, eyes still closed. ‘Maybe it’s the wrong weekday for garbage disposal. You could fuck me for an hour or three, that might do the trick.’

‘If you can hold onto the breathing pattern during the entire process, I just might’ said Loki. ‘To quieten your thoughts is not a switch you can flip, Stark. Not for someone as untrained and restless as you. It is normal that thoughts come. Let them come. Don’t pull at them, don’t draw them out. But let them come. And then let them go. Like strangers on a street. They don’t concern you. They pass you, and you might glance at them, but none of them catches your eye. You don’t hold them back. It
is their street as it is yours, they may pass it as you may. But in truth, they are not here for you, and
you are not here for them. You are strangers, they are insignificant. They come. They go. Let them
come. Then let them go.’

‘Is this some weird metaphor for your relationship with mortals?’

‘Also, shut your mouth’ Loki said.

Tony was itching to retort but he kept silent. And he tried to do as Loki had said. The thoughts about
the arc reactor came, and he didn’t try to fight them. He tried not to follow them. Thoughts about the
bug came, thoughts about Clint. The empty bottle of smoothie still lying on the sofa. Loki opening
the fridge absent-mindedly, taking out a full bottle. The code wouldn’t compile. It would be nice if
one could flip a switch and shut all this off. The table was cold under his ass. He was thirsty. He
might order Pho later, see if Loki ate that – he had eaten the madeleine, so that was something. That
coin between Loki’s fingers. Nat playing Resident Evil. Nat bending her body into unnatural
positions. They would need more punching bags. Did anybody know where Clint had disappeared
to again? The colour patters Loki had picked out for the suit were annoyingly perfect. Loki’s tunic,
showing so much of his chest. The boots, lying discarded on the floor. He would have to find a way
to think like a Skrull, if he ever wanted to hack that control pad. All-Speak is like any other language
– doesn’t give you cultural knowledge for free. Loki’s boots, lying discarded on the floor. The empty
smoothie bottle.

It took long, and Tony didn’t notice at first, when the thoughts quietened. Then he almost jerked,
because he didn’t understand.

And the thought of him not understanding was almost loud in his head. Because…

‘Listen’ he heard someone say. ‘Listen. And feel.’

It was quiet. Dark and quiet. Except for… the hum. The old, familiar hum of the arc reactor. There
you are.

‘Listen closely.’

Well, it did grow louder. And there was a whisper to it.

A promise.

There was something at the edge of his vision. Something close and yet far. He noticed he was
breathing quickly, as if afraid.

He noticed he was afraid.

Very much so.

Why?

Music. A music in the humming that was so loud now. Something at the edge of his vision. Loud
breathing, loud humming.

‘Are you listening? Do you hear?’

Yes.

‘Good. Now, slowly, turn. Turn and see.’
He turned, feeling as if he had to push against something big, heavy. He pushed, with all his strength, towards the edge of his vision.

It fled, always just out of reach, but he turned, he pushed, and then something gave away, and…

He saw.

Somewhere, he heard laughter. Why not laugh? The flames were so bright, and they danced, danced, danced!

Hello, said he, feeling the flames lick him, rush into him. Everywhere.

A whisper, a laugh.

Music and Dance!

A fire, burning so high.

Who are you to me?

It whispered in his ear and the answer was so many contradicting things yet true and obvious.

He didn’t doubt it.

There is another thing I need to know.

The whisper answered.

*

A voice guided him back, not a whisper. A voice, pulling at him, telling him to leave that place, to turn back, to direct his gaze elsewhere. To breathe and to count while breathing. To move his fingers, his toes. His ankles, his wrists. To touch his own arms, his own legs.

He felt hot, yet comfortable.

There was a smell, but he couldn’t place it.

The voice told him to open his eyes.

He squinted, the light hurt him. Shapes, he tried to make sense of them. He was still unconvinced that leaving the whisper had been a good idea. The fire had been good, beautiful. His body felt stiff. The shapes started to form into objects that made sense.

The workshop.

He blinked.

Loki.

The god was standing before him, and the first thing Tony noticed was that he was pale, his face tense, his nose twitching.
'What’s wrong?’ asked he, but his voice sounded weird, as if multifold, broken in half, the innards stuck out, what-

‘Focus on coming back for now’ Loki said. ‘Focus on me, on the room. Is your mouth dry? Are you hungry?’

He was. And his mouth was dry. He swallowed.

He looked around himself, the table was scorched black around him, within the circle of chalk. Only within the circle of chalk. That was a hard and sharp border. Smell of something burnt.

‘Oh’ said he.

He touched his chest. The arc reactor felt hot. His back felt hot.

‘Something happened.’

‘Nothing unheard of’ Loki said. But his face so tense. ‘I admit I had not expected you to be able to connect to your seidr so soon, or that you decided to let it take you so quickly. But I suppose I should have seen it coming, considering your character.’

‘Because I’m a slut?’ Tony asked. His voice less many a thing now. It had knitted itself together too. Good. Though he had liked the innards. In a way.

He felt… giddy.

‘No’ Loki said. ‘And I made my precautions for a reason. You were never in true danger. Now take your time to arrive.’

‘Whatever you say, Mr. Tambourine Man’

Because this felt a bit like coming down from a high. Was that what he had looked for in the drugs? Or was temporary joy just always like this, like… or had he simply felt an inkling of that… whisper, dance… when drugged, just an…

He blinked again.

‘I think I should stretch my legs for a bit’ said he. ‘Will you let me out of my fireproof chalk cage?’

Loki looked at him closely.

‘I want you stable first’ said he. ‘Breaking the circle has consequences, and I am not sure yet that you are able to deal with them.’

Tony yawned.

‘There is something you’re not telling me’ said he. ‘Either do so or let me out, Lokes. I want to test if I can still walk after this trip to my inner… well, not my happy place exactly, but it was quite the party.’

‘There is a lot I’m not telling you’ said Loki, eyebrows raised, but he stepped towards the table. ‘But if you want to drop the protection, I will of course do as you wish. You should not pose a danger to yourself or others anymore.’

He dragged one finger over the chalk lines, smearing them and opening the circle.
'You might puke and fall on your face however’ Loki added, sounding a little too amused.

The next instant, Tony coughed, putting his hand over his mouth.

Oh, fuck.

Not that again.

He felt sick already. And with his head still swimming, and his mind providing the memories at once, and still not all there, not being able to exactly separate them from reality, there was not really much to be done – he really did puke on the floor next to the table.

‘Fuck, fuck, fuck’ he coughed, supporting himself on the table, trying not to fall off it and make Loki’s other prediction true too. ‘Where does that… was that me?’

But why would his magic hate him so much that it would fill the workshop with the stench of Loki’s rotting body, it had penetrated the whole ship, and… that was worse than lancing an acid drink in his face. If this was how his sub-consciousness dealt with his issues, maybe he wasn’t made of mage material after all.

‘It wasn’t you’ said Loki, this time sounding a bit too indifferent. His face still so tense. ‘Your archer has simply enacted his revenge. And it seems that he has chosen the most petty and childish one he could find.’

‘What?’ Tony coughed.

Loki simply raised his index, and the covering of a vent fell to the ground, with it a small white box.

With another hand gesture, the box was thrust from the ground into Tony’s hands. He recognised it easily.

‘Airwick’ said he.

‘Apparently’ said Loki and joined his hands behind his back. ‘It comes with flavours. This one is called cinnabon, as it happens. I might murder the inventor in their sleep tonight. If I’m feeling merciful, that is.’

‘I… might allow it.’

Chapter End Notes

Just to remind you, The whole cinnabon Airwick subplot is, by the way, totally Entropy_by_Ophelia's fault.
Who Knew Cockroaches Liked Air Freshener?

Chapter Summary

Avenger domestic bliss is only perfect with the special ingredient that is a certain trickster. Also, more magical theory and a bit of friendly hacking. Ah, yes, and Loki and Tony got married off-scene. Almost forgot to mention that.

Chapter Notes

For this chapter, I used Ahbaeth's headcannon about the video footage of Loki guarding Tony. Thank you, Ahbaeth, for this one! <3 I couldn't make Mel72000's headcannon fit, but they gave me an idea for something else, and this is what is in this chapter too.

I realise I fuelled Barton hate in a lot of you - this chapter probably won't help it much.

(and, ahem, if anyone of you feels in the mood for fan art... ahem, ahem... okay, I'm quiet now)

‘Now that was an unnecessary shouting match’ Tony rolled his eyes, when he finally joined Loki again.

The trickster had retreated to the common room on Tony’s floor, proving the inventor’s theory that the workshop had not so much been the trickster’s favourite place as the only safely permitted one.

For a god of mischief, the Lokes was surprisingly careful to avoid being any place he wasn’t sure he belonged. Now however, Loki was confidently sprawled on the couch again, his tablet in his hands, reading – so that was a piece of furniture he liked.

‘Granted, I might not have helped, telling him mid-argument that I had given you your own room and a pass to stay here full time’ Tony admitted, and Loki’s lips quirked up slightly at that.

Yeah, as expected, that had not gone down well, but Tony’s vindictive side just hadn’t been able to resist. And the Airwick prank had been a dick move, so Tony didn’t even feel too guilty about it.

‘Is he already rallying SHIELD forces, now that one of the Avengers is so undoubtedly compromised?’ Loki asked in a bored voice that badly hid his amusement and maybe more efficiently hid some real concern that might or might not have been there.

‘Even if he tries to, Fury’s going to give him the finger’ said Tony with a shrug. ‘I have a deal with Wannabe Odin. He knows better than to break it over a little Clint temper tantrum. Also, undoubtedly compromised? They already know we fuck.’

‘Oh, but using a monster for war and pleasure is not the same as offering it hospitality’ Loki said, his smile both widening and gaining a different quality. It did not as much lose its humour as shifted it into something more… hazardous.
For a moment, Tony wondered what to answer to that particular, heavily loaded, assertion, while wanting to beat both himself and Thor up for saying what they had said during the homophobic shit hits fan stage. Because despite Loki having always topped until now, which in Asgard would put him in the position of power, he talked about being used for pleasure, and didn’t that pose a lot of uncomfortable questions? And he talked of himself as a monster again and… wait, was this all just a distraction? Had Loki just indirectly admitted, coated in self-deprecation, that Tony’s offering him a room maybe meant more than just offering him a room? Asgard was a weird place, magical rules were even weirder, and Tony was, technically, a mage now – was it possible that Tony had accepted a certain unknown set of cultural or even magical obligations, offering the trickster hospitality?

That… had a certain potential to backfire, he supposed.

He’d have to ask Thoreal.

‘I’ll bear that in mind when I meet one’ said Tony, watching with a little satisfaction the miniscule movement in Loki’s face that meant that Tony had not reacted as the trickster had expected. ‘Also, I do have to say in Clint’s defence, he did manage to somehow shut off the Airwicks and dispel that vile smell in the end.’

Tony slumped down in the armchair.

‘Even though he kept denying that he’d done it.’

‘That’s because he hadn’t’ Loki said, his expression blanking again, still not looking up from his tablet. ‘That was me.’

‘Ah.’

Alright.

The trickster still looked a bit on the paler side – but hey, nobody had to like the smell of their own body rotting.

‘Aren’t you going to ask me what the answer was?’ Tony asked.

‘The answer to what?’ asked Loki.

‘Whether I profited from the death of that girl’ Tony said.

‘So you were able to communicate already the first time?’ Loki eyed him. ‘You seem to have more talent at this than I had presumed.’

‘Ohhh, thank you, that’s so sweet, does that mean that I’m the Kwisatz Haderach?’ asked Tony, finding one of his more charming smiles. ‘I’m the Kwisatz Haderach, ain’t I?’

‘I didn’t exactly have high expectations, Stark’ said Loki dryly. ‘You are not the Kwisatz Haderach’

‘Do you even know who that is?’

‘I bet some kind of great hero in an epic Midgardian tale, most certainly a male human discovering his magic or other mysterious talent late in life, yet excelling at it without the training his peers need’ said Loki, then faked to suppress a yawn. ‘It’s a rather classic narrative role, and, in my opinion, a bit over-used. I also bet that the tale would bore me back to death.’

‘What would you bet for?’ asked Tony, narrowing his eyes. Dune was a great movie after all.
‘Rather consider what I would demand if you lost’ said Loki. ‘And whether you would want to risk paying that price. And no. The answer to the question you posed your seidr says much about its nature. It is a highly private matter, and it has to be your decision whether to disclose it. I am not going to ask.’

And apparently, the God of Chaos respected privacy.

‘Arrr, I should introduce you to the European GDPR because I think she’d like you’ said Tony. ‘She wouldn’t give you her number though.’

‘I would nevertheless court her for a while, I guess. The loop holes in that text of law are large enough to encompass whole nations’ said Loki, then turned back to the screen of his tablet.

Admitting detailed knowledge about Midgard again, Saint Hornbearer, Tony thought. There is something here you definitely want, and you definitely think that taking over or at least understanding this planet in depth might be necessary for you to get it.

Also:

‘I didn’t profit’ Tony spurt out.

Loki looked up, and at him.

‘When the girl died during the mission’ Tony said. ‘My seidr didn’t profit. There was no sacrifice after Yinsen and the terrorists. Not even when I went to… to that place…’

Thanos’ reality.

The place that shouldn’t be. It would have been a great sacrifice, Tony understood that now. All those lives. But even then. Those strange shapes…

He shivered.

Loki, he noticed, observed him closely.

‘I thought so’ said he then.

‘What? You did?’

‘In our previous conversations, I might have given you a slightly distorted image of the role of sacrifice in magic’ said Loki. ‘Since I wanted to make the principles of magic very clear to you, and those principles are always unkind. In practice however, few magic spells demand something as drastic as a life, or any other material price. Additionally, different persons attract different kinds of seidr, and the temperament of the magic often matches that of the wielder. There are mages whose character pushes them to use others for their own benefit. You did not fit that type.’

Tony raised his eyebrows.

‘Saint Hornbearer, have you taken a look around?’ asked he dryly. ‘I told you – this tower is practically built on the misery of other people. How am I not the type?’

‘You can answer this question yourself.’

‘No, I evidently can’t!’

‘In short, Iron Man’ said Loki with a roll of his eyes.
'You said it yourself, Iron Man doesn’t really solve any problem that isn’t an alien invasion’ Tony said.

‘I didn’t say you were the right man to bring world peace’ said Loki, sounding bored. ‘But the role you chose and how you fill it tells me much about your character. Saving the helicarrier, flying the nuclear missile into the Mad Titan’s reality – you use your intelligence and your own strengths, you use technical resources, and if all fails, you are ready to sacrifice yourself. That you still allow the misery of other people in many ways is another matter entirely. That’s just the complacency of someone born with a lot of privileges. Trust me, I know that handicap rather well.’

‘Huh’ said Tony. Now he actually felt worse.

Though Lokes had a point of course.

‘Even the original sacrifice was not made by you, no matter how much you benefitted from it’ said Loki. ‘From what you told me, it was Yinsen who took that decision, both to take his own life, and those of your captors. He started the actual magical ritual. Everything that followed was just a continuation of that blood sacrifice that ended with you escaping, and of which you were more a medium or object than an agent.’

‘Don’t tell me that Yinsen had seidr too now.’

‘One does not need to have seidr to conduct a magical ritual’ said Loki. ‘Leave your false knowledge fed by this Harry Potter and other Midgardian tales behind. The truth is far more complex and far more interesting.’

‘Mhm’ Tony said.

And then, ‘So are you saying I’m a good guy after all?’

‘I would never go so far as to imply that’ Loki said with a small smirk, the bastard. ‘After all, why would you cooperate with me if you were?’

And there came the self-deprecation again.

‘Ask Steve, he’d know’ answered Tony, ‘He’s the only Avenger who can be safely called good so far’, and Loki snorted, made a dismissive hand gesture.

‘Oh, the poor captain’ said he. ‘He is so conflicted when he looks at me now, trying to reconcile my crimes with what was done to me.’

The expression that crossed his face now was something between uneasy and displeased.

‘I wish he didn’t know’ said he.

I bet you do, Lokes. I bet you do.

They sat in silence for a while.

‘By the way, if you knew or at least guessed about the nature of my seidr, why didn’t you just tell me?’ asked Tony then. ‘I could have needed the reassurance that I’m not guilty of that girl’s death.’

‘Because you wouldn’t have believed me of course’ said Loki with another snort. ‘The truth is too evidently serving my goal.’

And with that, little shit trickster kind of had a point too.
When Tony retired to his bedroom that day, Loki actually having left for his own quarters and not simply having teleported away (which felt more satisfying than it probably should have, especially considering Tony still had no idea what kind of obligations the hospitality he had granted actually entailed), Jarvis made himself noticeable.

‘I should tell you, Sir, that Mr Skywalker tried to hack into the data about the arc reactor again.’

‘Did he now?’ Tony asked.

Loki had tried to do so once before, shortly after Tony had given him access to Selvig’s data.

‘How good was the attempt?’

‘Better than last time but he is still far from being a threat, Sir’ Jarvis said.

‘Mhm’ Tony answered, wondering once more what Loki was playing at.

The arc reactor was valid research material for the coming war, so in a way, Tony was not surprised the trickster wanted it. But if he only wanted it for that, then why didn’t he just ask? The hacking could of course be less about the result itself than about testing Jarvis’ defences. And if Tony called him out on it, then Loki could very sensibly make a case for having just wanted the knowledge for strategic reasons.

Tony mentally went through the data, wondering whether it could be used against him.

But who was he kidding, of course it could be used against him.

Then again, there was this hunch he had… and chances were that Loki wouldn’t try many more times. Each attempt carried the risk of getting detected after all, and he might decide too soon that the information was not worth it. And then Tony might not be able to follow that hunch of his any more.

‘Next time, give him reading access to all data linked to the arc reactor and labelled security level 4 or lower. Make it look like he succeeded hacking into parts of you.’

‘Yes, Sir.’

He thought of the trick he had played on Barton and that Loki knew about now. How probable was it that the trickster would catch on if he played the same trick on him so soon?

‘Make it convincing.’

‘I’ll try my best, Sir.’

‘And track his queries very closely. I want you to analyse exactly what he’s looking for. Track his eye movements if you can, okay?’

‘Understood, Sir.’

‘Love you, Jarvis.’
'The feeling is mutual for some definitions of love, Sir.'

‘Ah, now you’re just being all sappy and romantic. I didn’t program you to be sappy and romantic.’

‘Are you certain, Sir?’

‘For some definitions of certain, yes, Jarvis’

‘Then that might have been another of Miss Pott’s contributions. The current percentage of credit she is due for taking part in developing me is seventeen point five percent, Sir.’

‘Wait – are you actually constantly reestimating that based on my assertions about what I’m taking responsibility for?’

‘Yes, Sir.’

‘Oh.’

Tony wondered (but wisely didn’t say it out loud) whether the eviler aspects of Jarvis hadn’t been Pepper’s contribution too.

##

The team took the news of Loki having been granted quarters in the tower more or less in stride, though that probably had mostly to do with them having already expected something along those lines (or Clint probably having hysterically informed them). Tony summoned them to the living and TV room to announce it. Loki was at his side because he had insisted on being present (knowing him, mainly so to see the look on their faces), and Nat almost immediately held out her hand, palm open. Steve (resignedly) and Clint (disgruntledly, mumbling something about having hoped the thing to be a joke after all) gave her a five dollar note, then handed Bruce another one.

‘You bet on him moving in?’ Tony asked, while Loki, standing next to him with his arms crossed in front of his chest, was looking like he was already getting what he had come here for. At least judging from the smirk on his face.

‘Oh, there are lots of bets running at the moment’ Bucky said conversationally from his spot near the door. He always preferred a position near an easy escape. ‘Quite a few of them are about how and when Loki is eventually going to off you.’

‘Wow, that’s… surprisingly tactless of you’ said Tony, feeling almost scandalised. Almost. He certainly would have done the same, had the roles been reversed. He still put a shocked hand to his arc reactor. ‘Et tu, Stevus?’

‘I… didn’t take part in those’ Steve hastily said.

‘I did’ said Clint matter-of-factly.

‘So did I’ Nat said.

‘And I’ Bucky said.

Loki chuckled, the little shit.

‘I bet on a very violent and bloody death in the near future, by the way’ said Clint. ‘Seemed
appropriate.’

‘Now that’s just wishful thinking, Gregor Samsa’ Tony said. Clint had been cranky all morning, though that probably had mostly to do with Loki hexing every picture in the tower on which Clint was depicted, replacing him with a cockroach. ‘But thank you for your input anyway.’

‘Coincidentally, Natasha is winning a bit too often’ Bruce commented from where he was sitting on the sofa. ‘I suspect that she’s cheating.’

‘Nat’s got scarily good people reading skills, absolutely no conscience and manipulating us is literally her job. Her taking part in those bets alone is cheating’ Tony said.

‘Thank you’ said Nat, rolling her eyes. ‘That’s what I keep telling them. And by the way, I make it my rule to deliberately lose sometimes, if only to throw the others off their game.’

‘You do?’ asked Clint, sounding slightly betrayed now.

‘Awwww, does that mean you bet on my imminent, violent death too, Nat, like the bug over there?’ Tony said, batting his eyelashes at her. ‘How sweet. So, according to your bet, how long do I have left to live before I get impaled by sceptres or get eaten by Loki’s rabid magic squirrels or something?’

Nat raised her eyebrows, ‘Oh, are you in a love triangle with Squirrel Girl? That would certainly change the odds.’

‘Ah, don’t bother, squirrels or laser sharks, whatever you say could just be bullshit and you deliberately betting to lose’ said Tony, not even wanting to think about what sort of disaster a relationship between Tony, Loki and Squirrel Girl would be.

‘You know what?’ he said instead. ‘Forget this. I don’t know why I announce anything to you anymore anyway. No one of you will get an invite for our marriage. Just the bridal registry and lots of passive-aggressive reproaches.’

‘You are getting married?’ asked Steve, looking honestly terrified, at the same time as Bruce said, ‘Ah, there are bets on that too.’

‘I bet there are. Well, it’s too late, Loki and I are already official, small teleportation to Las Vegas, did it in the Great Viking Cave, very tasteful, everyone made jokes about the horns.’

‘And your height, don’t forget that’ Loki added.

‘And my height, yes’ said Tony, slightly disgruntled.

Granted, Steve was the only one who looked unsettled. But the Cap was usually slower to catch up with Tony’s special brand of humour (that Pepper more often than not found actually not that funny).

‘Who has taken whose names?’ asked Nat.

‘Oh, we’ve opted for a double name’ said Tony. ‘Skywalker-Bardstark. Has a Guybrush Threepwood kind of class. Minister was nice too, a bit weird about all the goats among the wedding party though, and the virgin sacrifices. Racism, you know, it’s everywhere, what you gonna do.’

‘Tony, this is serious’ said Steve now, kneading the bridge of his nose.

‘That’s what I keep telling my husband! Marriage should mean commitment, you know, but he
didn’t even buy me a real ring, got it from a vending machine instead, and turned up at the wedding
half-drunk and in a temper, talk about God of Chaos’ said Tony, wondering whether he shouldn’t
stop that increasingly inappropriate game. Eh, he had never been much good at stopping anyway.
‘Insulted everyone including the goats and called himself Lord Helmet. And me having put so much
effort into disguising the black eye. That’s the thing, he’s so jealous, I barely am allowed to talk to
other guys without him demanding Holmgang, and he, he always comes home late at night, smells
like all kinds of flavours of Axe. I don’t even like Axe. And then he made jokes about how easy I
am in front of the whole wedding party, and calls me his little mortal worm and turns even that into a
double entendre. Really, sometimes, I wonder how I could fall for a rascal like him. Manners like a
Viking. But you know, the heart, you cannot rule it, it rules you.’

Loki let out a small, but surprisingly genuine laugh at that, and that made more than one pair of eyes
shift to him. Before, Steve had been busy cringing from Tony’s words, Clint had been busy mentally
putting holes into both him and the god, and the rest had listened with the mixture of amusement and
exasperation that Tony already knew so well.

Now they looked, more or less warily, at the trickster who was still chuckling lowly, and whose
laughter put dimples in his cheeks, and creases around his eyes, which was… not something Tony
had managed to trigger that often until now (especially in a situation where they were not currently
having sex).

‘And you can wipe that self-satisfied smirk off your face, you scalawag’ Tony pointed a finger at the
god. ‘Or I’m gonna file for divorce.’

‘Nope, can’t yet, bets on that are not yet in’ Bruce said, calm as can be, but he was smiling quietly.

That evening, when Tony wanted to leave his quarters for a last glass of tonic, Loki was standing in
the door and in his way. There was a telling fire in his eyes, his breath short, his fingers moving
restlessly, even his hair looked wilder than usual.

‘Er’ said Tony awkwardly because a tall and sexy god standing in his door in a very predatory way
was both intimidating and very interesting, especially when that god just walked forward without a
word, and Tony just walked backwards, in a strange repetition of that first time they had had sex on
the floor next to the bar.

And then Tony was standing with his back against the wall again, and Loki was looking down at
him because he was freakishly tall, and, hidden behind a cool wariness, there was so much want in
those eyes, Tony felt almost the urge to flee, because this, he couldn’t, where did this come from, this
want, why did he-, except Loki licked over his lips then, with this red and pointy tongue, and
suddenly Tony didn’t care anymore why he of all people had aroused a god’s desire, he just wanted
to touch, to kiss, and Loki was so close, so fucking close and he…

He waited.

Loki was standing there, hovering over this little mortal that he could take any time he wanted, use as
he wished and break as he wished, and he did nothing except stare at him and wait.

He waited for a yes.

Tony realised at that moment, and he felt it with strange certainty, that Loki would never take him
against his will. Not in sex. And that was a weird realisation, because Loki didn’t exactly respect
borders in a lot of other matters, but nonetheless, suddenly, Tony was sure about this.
Loki would always wait for the yes.

And that was the moment Tony felt himself harden completely. Oh fuck Asgardian power play – if boning him was the only way Loki dared to express his desire, that was still way more than good enough for now.

He nodded.

The next moment, he was shoved against the wall, Loki bent down, his lips were on Tony’s, cold, smooth, the musky smell everywhere, his tongue pressed in, and Tony opened his lips, let him in, groaned, cold fingers on his neck, he reached for Loki’s arm, felt him flinch under his grip (torture and body memory, he had to be careful), then felt him relax. The god claimed his mouth greedily, hungrily, sucked on his tongue and bit it, bit his lips, was everywhere, and oh gods damnit, cold fingers in his trousers that were open of all sudden, finding his cock so quickly, wrapping around it and pulling it out, grabbing it almost roughly, Tony groaned, gripped Loki’s arm harder, reached out with the other hand, grabbed a fistful of Loki’s hair, Loki stilled briefly, breathed in, then pressed his lower body against Tony (still no contact with the arc reactor, and Tony noticed he felt relieved only after realising that the god would, again, keep his distance from that), his tongue pushing deep, his hand pumping him, and gods, that smell everywhere, that weight, Loki everywhere, the hand on his cock, so rough, so good, his tongue touching Loki’s teeth, the heavy breathing, he already felt so hot but Loki was cool, cool and stroking, hands on him, strong and firm, Tony screamed out as he came, long and shakily, and Loki pumped on until Tony was finished, until Tony pleaded the other to stop because the pleasure was turning into something more akin to pain.

Loki’s hand stilled at once, then left him.

Wondering whether he had crossed a line?

So cautious.

Tony laughed, leant his head against the wall.

‘All’s good in Denmark, Lokes, I just tend to get a little oversensitive after coming.’

‘Mhm, that’s true’ said Loki, the wary expression replaced by a smile. ‘There are spells to leap that phase, you know, and go straight to the next escalation of arousal’

‘Mhm’ hummed Tony, caught between the knowledge that this was a very bad idea and all those very convincing reasons to pursue it anyway. ‘That does sound like it might led to one of the better deaths this universe has to offer.’

‘Only one of the better?’ Loki asked, his smile slightly askew which made it only more seductive.

‘I’m a mad scientist, my ultimate life goal is still to die by accidentally blowing up my lab in my last great discovery’ Tony said insincerely. ‘So I take it you liked my retroactive announcement of our wedding to the team?’

‘Oh’ said Loki, his smile twitching as if wanting to widen. He lifted one hand, the dirty one, smelling of cum and sex, and let the backside of his fingers travel down Tony’s face, over his stubble.

‘Whatever would make you think that?’

‘That you practically devoured me a mere few hours later?’ asked Tony.

That your eyes are gleaming. That they are warm, gentle, like in that video footage. That there is so much life in you right now, has been ever since that meeting, that little tale of Las Vegas.
Loki hummed, bent slowly forward, until he was so close, caught Tony’s lips in his. But he was
tender this time, the tongue barely venturing inside, just a quiet, lingering touch. The coolness of his
fingers on Tony’s cheeks at the same time.

He stayed close even after his lips had left him.

‘Maybe I appreciate your narration’ said he.

Yes. Maybe he did.

He looked at the footage again that night. At the footage of that particular night… day… well, the
hour of the day hadn’t mattered much at the time. When the trickster had guarded him. Loki sitting
next to him on the bed, his legs outstretched, his feet naked, reading on his tablet, cautiously shaking
Tony each time he started to stir, to shout, to whimper. Telling him that it was just a dream. Allowing
Tony to cuddle up to him, not protesting when Tony eventually shifted in his half-sleep and laid his
head on Loki’s lap. Carding his fingers through Tony’s hair. Taking Tony’s hand into his, letting his
fingers travel over Tony’s palm, enlacing his fingers with Tony’s. Stroking those fingers as if Tony
was fragile. The way the trickster had looked down at him. So… gently. Sometimes, the gaze had
been sad.

Tony breathed out slowly.

Why would Loki allow him to see him like this? He could have shrouded himself, couldn’t he?
Except then Jarvis would probably have panicked, losing his surveillance on the guy who was alone
with his sleeping creator. Loki could have doctored the evidence in retrospect. Except maybe he
wasn’t yet able to. Tony had made Jarvis not all that easy to hack.

Or… or Loki had left this footage alone on purpose, so to gain Tony’s trust. So to manipulate him
into a false sense of security. That was always a possibility.

Except there was a kind of affection in that gaze that… Tony somehow didn’t think that if Loki had
had the choice, he would have allowed that to be seen.

It almost scared Tony.

Like he had been scared earlier that night, when Loki had looked at him and… sometimes, it was
impossible to ignore how old the god was. And to be desired by someone like that… no, not only to
be desired, but…

No. That was a dangerous train of thought. Rather go with the manipulation theory. Tony could deal
with that, he knew the rules of that game, practically everyone was trying to manipulate him after all.
And it definitely made a lot more sense.
They Are Ambivalent About Chew Toys Though

Chapter Summary

Tony keeps conspiring against his new ally. Rhodey regrets ever having started asking questions. Clint and Loki spend quality time together. All in all, more of this domestic bliss thingy going on.

Chapter Notes

In this chapter, I reference to theorytale's headcannon short fic from ages ago - thank you, theorytale! <3

Also, you keep posting so many nice comments, I have trouble keeping up with replying to them! Not that I'm complaining... I'm as far from complaining as can be, in fact... <3 <3 <3

There were downsides to Loki staying at the Avenger Tower. For example, it led to a rather awkward and intervention-like conversation with Rhodey in the workshop, in the middle of which Rhodey discovered the Iron Man Greasing Oil bottle of lube that tended to turn up in unexpected places ever since Loki had taken up lodgings at the tower (Tony supposed it was primarily meant to freak out the other Avengers, which worked well enough with Steve or Clint, but not so well with Bruce, Bucky or Natasha). Rhodey, as to him… kind of misunderstood the purpose of the bottle, thinking, for some reason, that it was some kind of fancy machine oil, and then one thing led to another, and… well. Come to think of it, the whole thing had been rather hilarious, so maybe that had not been a downside after all.

But Clint’s bad humour certainly persisted und resulted, among other things, in big photos of Loki clued to every single one of the targets in the shooting and arching arena. Loki somehow managed to turn quite a few of Clint’s arrows into jelly in return, which prompted Clint to start shooting at Loki again (once he had replaced his arrows), deliberately but very narrowly missing him each time (always claiming that it had been a slip), and getting slightly frustrated at Loki not even twitching an eyebrow at that.

So that had a certain potential for escalation.

And then there was the fact that the other Avengers had forbidden him to bring Peter Parker to the tower as long as Loki lived there – which was annoying but which Tony could kinda understand. The argument that the kid should ideally never have anything to do with the emotional unstable mass murderer at all, was… valid. It did make interactions between him and the teenager a bit more difficult, but not impossible, and the kid was strangely responsible and independent anyways.

Tony had been very different at that age.

All in all, however, offering the trickster the quarters had been a good idea.
At the very least, Loki staying in one place meant they were working together more, discussing the gems and experimenting with the time stone. It also meant they were training Tony’s connection to his magic more, which was… weird, and slightly scary.

Tony still couldn’t do much with it. Or… rather, practically nothing. It was all just sensing, and getting to know, which was all fine and good if this was about getting to know the CEO of the next company he was planning on taking over. It was an entirely different matter if the one to get to know was blue fire and heat and a droning humming and song and dance, luring him in one moment, grabbing for him the next, unreachable at other times.

Okay, so it was slightly more than slightly scary. Maybe. Also vaguely arousing.

Still.

The trickster actually retired to his room in the evenings, and even if nobody could say whether he stayed there or ever actually rested, and despite the fact that according to Jarvis, he had the habit to roam the tower for hours during the night, he definitely appeared to be better-rested.

And increasingly calm and stable.

It were baby steps of course, nothing very noticeable for anyone who didn’t study the trickster’s every move, but Loki’s face was a tiny bit more relaxed, his hand gestures surer, and he strode around restlessly somewhat less often. Even the volatility of his mood decreased (a bit).

Sure, all this probably also had to do with the increased blood sugar.

It hadn’t been all too difficult, after Jarvis’ short analysis and summary of Loki’s observed eating habits both on the Mantis and in the tower, to figure out that the guy preferred liquids immensely to anything else. It was an easy conclusion to distribute smoothies and pre-prepared protein-shakes all over the place and absent-mindedly handing them to the trickster from time to time, rambling on about their little kill-Thanos project at the same time.

Solid food was… difficult. Loki would eat a madeleine from time to time, and once had nibbled on a muffin, but that was about it.

And even with all the smoothies and considering that Tony had, until now, only a limited observed time span to judge from, it was obvious that compared to what Thor or even Steve consumed, Loki’s calorie intake was still worryingly low.

And yes, Tony made allowances for Loki being a different species, but in many ways, Loki’s body behaved similarly to Thor’s. And Tony had seen on the Mantis how thin the trickster had been under all those glamours, and yes, it was pretty clear by now that this glamour shebang was a multi-layer thing and he didn’t delude himself that Loki’s slipping while he had been asleep had revealed everything.

It had not even revealed the scars.

Therefore, there was absolutely no guarantee that the weight the trickster had seemingly gained since their space adventure was any realer. With all probability, it wasn’t.

Taking all that into consideration, it was as promising as very concerning that even the few smoothies and protein-shakes Loki drank now made a noticeable difference for the god – so how little had the guy consumed before?

No, a few things could not be ignored by now – Loki had a severe scratch massive eating disorder, at
least sometimes drove himself into sleep deprivation and he definitely self-harmed. Ah, yes, and then there were the more or less subtle signs of his suicidal tendencies that surfaced again and again.

The idea that Loki would see to the whole eating and sleeping business elsewhere had been stupid.

Tony had been too careless, blind.

He should not take things for granted.

During an extraordinarily boring board meeting, Tony pulled up the video footage on his tablet again of the trickster waking up in his workshop, after having fallen asleep in Tony’s presence for the first (and until now only) time. When Loki opened his eyes on the screen, they were unfocused first, staring blankly into space. Much like on the Mantis, when he had still zoned out regularly.

Only it seemed that Loki still did that from time to time.

The Loki on the screen stayed trapped in that state several minutes too.

And then he blinked, and stood up, looked around, was awake.

Drank from the smoothie, walked to that bathroom, brushed the glamour up.

This made it even scarier how well he had looked when he had turned up in the kitchen.

Yup. If there was one thing one really should not trust the trickster with, it was with himself.

Tony was stretched out on the sofa of the common room, tablet in his hands, trying to make sense of Loki’s research on the arc reactor, going through different scenarios of more or less nefarious goals Loki was trying to reach and how the arc reactor technology might fit in, when there was the squeaky noise from the ceiling again. The ceilings and walls had been squeaking on and off all through the tower the whole day, and until Tony had mentioned it to Loki, he had been almost worried.

Now he just took the extra-long broom handle, reached up and bumped it against the ceiling where the squeaking had come from.

‘Floors exist for a reason, cockroach!’ he yelled good-naturedly.

One of the air vents opened and a rubber chicken fell from the ceiling to the floor, protesting miserably.

Clint followed, noiselessly and lividly, picking up the rubber chicken by the neck next.

‘The fucking asshole stuffed the air shafts FULL of these things!’ said he, shoving the chicken at Tony like very condemning evidence. ‘He completely BLOCKED some paths with rubber ducks! The shafts leading to the workshops are littered with chew toys! And don’t tell me it wasn’t him, of course it was! I’m gonna kill that fucking bastard, I swear!’

‘Oh my gods, you’re right, I mean, he’s killed his father and tried to end a whole species on a whim, but jelly arrows and rubber ducks? That speaks of true evil!’ Tony commented sarcastically.

What had Clint been doing close to the workshops anyways? Clint knew he couldn’t access them
anymore. After the whole Airwick fiasco, Tony had blocked Clint’s crawling space access to a few choice areas of the tower, the workshops and his personal floor being the first among them. He was not gonna have a repeat of that particular prank after all.

‘It’s not fucking funny!’ shouted Clint and did he really not see the humour in holding a rubber chicken so tightly he strangulated it and made it whimper again?

‘Well, I had a good laugh’ said Tony. ‘A better laugh at least than at your idea of a joke, namely spreading the smell of cinnamon everywhere. You started this, remember? And you set the bar really low.’

And blame him if his voice grew sharp at the end.

Clint huffed, ‘You’re totally exaggerating—’

‘You practically filled the tower with the stink of Loki’s flesh rotting!’ Tony interrupted him. ‘Which he was smelling while dying painfully! That’s just sick, man!’

‘If he can’t stomach some Airwick, then maybe he shouldn’t have attacked my home’ Clint said, almost petulantly.

‘And Steve?’ Tony said. ‘He gets sick at the smell of cinnamon too, genius! I mean, I get that you want to get back at me, but what has the do-goody Captain Do Good done to deserve that bullshit, hah?’

Clint’s jaw tensed, but he looked away.

Ah, you didn’t think about Steve, didn’t you? Idiot.

Tony sighed, then padded the sofa next to him, inviting the archer to sit down. Surprisingly, Clint did, though still not looking at him, and crossing his arms in front of his chest again which the rubber chicken he was still holding by the neck didn’t particular agree with.

‘Seriously, Clint, what’s going on here exactly?’ asked Tony. ‘You’re being weird.’

‘I’M the one being weird?! I wasn’t the one turning my arrows, my main weapon, into useless sweets! I’m not the one pretending that this isn’t even a big deal!’

‘But you’re the one murdering some poor innocent rubber chicken over this, Clint!’ said Tony, rolling his eyes. Loki had not even destroyed the expensive arrows, had he? And he had conveniently chosen a moment when the archer had not currently been on a mission. For Loki’s standards, he was being pretty tame. ‘And you can’t tell me that the jelly arrows are the issues here. New York is. And yes, Loki attacked New York, yes, he used mind control on you, and yes, that was a terrible thing to do, but by now we both know he only did all of that after Thanos getting into his mind pretty intimately. And I’m aware that doesn’t excuse everything but… hell, when the guy arrived here, he was probably more dead than alive – just take a look at the footage, it even shows there!’

‘YES, it did, and why didn’t I see that?’ Clint shouted, and the abruptness of his reply took Tony a bit by surprise.

The archer threw the rubber chicken to the side (it landed with a whine).

‘Do you think I’m stupid?’
‘Well…’

‘More to the point, do you think I’m blind?’ Clint said. ‘Yes, looking at the footage, it’s pretty much obvious that Loki was heavily injured, and that’s just the thing. You saw it before I did, and that doesn’t happen.’

Clint eyed him almost accusingly.

Tony raised his hands defensively.

‘Maybe I am more observant than you think’ said he. ‘Maybe you weren’t really looking’

‘I’m one of the best assassins in the world’ said Clint with a short, hard laugh. ‘And I should not have noticed Loki favouring his left leg? Or that he appeared to be almost blind on his right eye? Or that he had trouble breathing? That’s ridiculous. And don’t even start blaming the mind gem because that thing did not dull my perception, quite in the contrary. I was just as alert and observant as always, if not more so – it were just my priorities that had shifted. I should have seen it! I must have!’

He huffed, and there was something desperate in his eyes.

‘But when I think back on that time, there’s just… nothing’ said he. ‘I remember all those details, Loki’s shallow breath, the way his hand sometimes jerked to his stomach as if he hurt there, and I remember no suspicion, no doubts, no second thoughts. And it’s not like I didn’t look at the video footage after the whole thing was over, but until you arrived with your coercion theory, I didn’t see anything amiss! Nat had to point out the signs for me. Don’t you think that’s a little weird too?’

Okay, granted, that was a little weird. Because Clint was one of the best assassins on this planet, and if he said that Loki’s injuries had been somewhat obvious and that he should have seen them, then he was probably right.

Also, Loki had been blind on one eye? Jeez, Tony had definitely overlooked that, even after all the hours of studying the trickster on CCTV.

Yeah, so Clint was a lot better than him at this kind of thing.

Which just… made the archer’s point?

Tony furrowed his eyebrows.

Clint shook his head.

‘If I’ve really simply ignored all that, what the fuck am I good for then?’ murmured he.

‘Hey, don’t get all low self-esteem issues on me’ said Tony even though he could very well understand Clint’s conclusion. It was the same one he had more or less come to himself, after finally deciphering the subtle clues of Loki’s injuries. ‘There must be another explanation.’

At that, Clint eyed him.

‘Could parts of my memories missing be a clue?’ said he, and now there was this dangerous tension in his voice again.

Tony cocked his head.

‘What do you mean?’
‘My memories of the time under Loki’s control are… patchy’ said Clint. ‘I’ve got time not accounted for.’

‘Oh’ said Tony.

‘Yes, oh’ Clint repeated through gritted teeth. ‘And it doesn’t add up because like I said, the mind gem didn’t exactly dull anything, and the others under its control remember every single moment of the thrall. I’ve had fun discussing that with the SHIELD shrinks, believe me – I think I’ve read the words trauma-induced amnesia and not ready for the field yet a tiny little bit too often by now.’

Okay, so not being allowed going on mission might have been a little… bothersome, for someone like Clint.

His stare at Tony was hard.

‘And then there is this other thing’ said he. ‘I remember the influence of the mind gem – it felt cold and sharp and sterile. But I remember something else too … something like a whisper. Something like a tune that I kept humming in my head, that accompanied me without ever bothering me.’

… right.

‘Loki even admitted to it, didn’t he? He asked me right in front of you whether I couldn’t distinguish the mind gem’s touch from his. The sceptre wasn’t enough for the asshole, Tony. He absolutely had to invade my mind personally, fuck it up even more, fuck with my observation skills, my memory, everything the mind gem had left alone! The gem might have defeated me, but Loki made me completely useless!’

‘Oh, don’t be absurd, that would make no sense’ Loki’s voice came from behind Tony. ‘Evidently, I invaded your mind so to increase your use for me.’

Tony turned abruptly around only to see that Loki was standing leant against the glass front, looking very much at his ease.

‘For fuck’s sake, Lokes, how long have you been here’ Tony said, feeling slightly heart-attacky which was totally the trickster’s fault, just appearing randomly out of the blue all over the place all the time, argh.

Loki smirked.

‘Long enough to confirm my suspicions that you let me access the files on the arc reactor on purpose’ said he.

‘Eh, should have known you wouldn’t be fooled for too long’ said Tony. ‘Next time, just ask, Emovillain.’ He wasn’t exactly surprised Loki had caught on so soon, nor did it harm his goal. On the contrary, this half-assed attempt to trick the god was a welcome distraction from Tony’s other, very serious attempts.

‘Well, I’m just relieved your AI can’t be hacked by a bloody amateur’ said Loki dryly, then turned to Clint once again who had looked from one to the other in slightly angry confusion.

‘You are right of course’ said he.

‘Is he?’ Tony asked.

‘So you admit that you messed with my mind’ Clint said slowly.
Loki nodded.

‘I certainly did’ said he. ‘I modified your judgement and I modified your memories. Granted, the
effect of this magic was never meant to last well beyond the New York invasion. I would have
expected the last vestiges of it to have disappeared by now. That your memory seems to be still
blocked is curious, but it does make sense – you resisted my influence, you see? I had to use a certain
amount of force to subdue and entrance you, and I had to redo the memory modification several
times. I seems that I overdid it in the end.’

‘Stop talking about me like I’m just some machine that you broke’ hissed Clint.

‘To SHIELD, that’s what you are’ Loki simply said. ‘Just a weapon that either works or doesn’t.
And you are aware of that too. At least you were then.’

‘That is not how it is anymore, not now that Coulson has taken over – the guy you killed,
remember?’ Clint said, his face red. ‘And you had no fucking right to steal that information’

‘I remember. And no, I didn’t have the right to invade your thoughts’ Loki agreed. ‘And I knew that.
I did it anyways.’

‘Why?’ asked Tony, eyebrows furrowed.

By now, he understood Clint’s fury only too well. To be subjected to the sceptre was one thing – but
what Loki had evidently done? That was another level of assholery.

‘I already told you’ Loki said, his eyes still on Clint. ‘I compensated for his weaknesses.’

‘You created weaknesses’ Clint said.

But the god shook his head.

‘No’ said Loki, almost sadly. ‘I took them away.’

And then Tony understood. Of course. He should have seen that coming.

‘The scruples.’

Loki bowed slightly in his direction.

It took a moment for Clint to catch on too, then his eyes widened a bit, and some of the tension fell
away, being replaced by surprise.

Then he furrowed his eyebrows again.

‘But that...’ began he. ‘That makes no sense. You could have used my knowledge about your
injuries. It would have been better for you if people had known that you were not healthy, not really
on Thanos’ side. It would have been better for everyone.’

Loki huffed.

‘Alas, you’re wrong’ said he. ‘And if you took care to think further than the next two moves in this
game, you would agree. I had prepared a tale – the tale of the spoilt and jealous prince Loki who had
turned mad and evil. The tale of the evil brother. This tale suited both the Mad Titan and me, and so I
had to stick to it. You suspecting the lie or hesitating in the fight against me would have complicated
the story and that would have heightened the chances of failure immensely. For what if your
suspicions would have alerted the Other or the Mad Titan to my lie – they were linked to you
through the mind gem after all, linked to me as well. Once they would have really started looking, what chance would I have had to keep the truth from them? Or what if your scruples would have made you fail to stop me? My fear was not without reason – even with your mind addled with, you were not the enemy you could have been. You subconsciously held back still.’

‘Held back? I almost killed you on one occasion’ Clint said, his eyes narrowed. ‘I certainly tried.’

Loki raised an eyebrow.

‘I know what you are capable of’ said he dryly. ‘You could have tried harder.’

There was a pause.

‘Now that just sounds like you would have preferred me to succeed’ Clint said.

The god shrugged.

‘My death would certainly have been preferable to the Mad Titan conquering Midgard and obtaining the Tesseract’ said he. ‘Or to getting my mind torn to shreds until nothing of me was left, the fate that would have awaited me, had I been forced to turn on the Mad Titan too obviously.’

Ah, so that would have been the price to pay for breaking the geas.

Tony kinda understood why Loki had wanted to avoid that.

‘But I reached my goal while staying alive which has its advantages, I suppose. The Song, for example, would not have been possible otherwise’ continued Loki. ‘So I do not resent your failure all too terribly.’

Another pause, then Clint let out a hard, aborted laugh.

Tony couldn’t blame him – he supposed that whether one liked the god or not, Loki’s casual references to his own suicidal tendencies made one want to laugh simply so to dispel that tension that came with someone seeming so detached from their own death. It would have been less scary, Tony realised, if Loki had screamed at them that he was worthless and wanted to die. Because the behaviour that Loki showed now told of something worse – of an indifference and lovelessness towards himself that made any moderately decent person shiver.

‘I can give you back your memories’ said Loki then. ‘I would give you back your memories… if you want.’ His fingers were moving restlessly on the glass behind him, saying that. If Tony read him correctly, he was offering something he felt reluctant to give.

Judging from how masked his face was now, very reluctant to give.

Tony couldn’t say he was particularly surprised. Or, not at Loki’s reluctance. He was surprised that the trickster offered it nevertheless.

‘Of course I will make oaths on the Norns to reassure you that I won’t use the occasion for my very evil purposes’ added Loki at the wary expression on Clint’s face, rolling his eyes. ‘I suggest you go to Stark for the wording, he’s the annoying mortal vermin with the talent for formulating contracts even I have trouble getting out of.’

‘Oh, you flatterer’ said Tony and grinned widely.

Clint furrowed his eyebrows, looked from Loki to Tony and back, opened his mouth, closed it again.
Set his jaw.

‘You will do more’ said he then.

‘Am I now?’ asked Loki and raised his eyebrows. ‘That’s news to me.’

‘Yes, you are. You are the one who used that sceptre on me’ said Clint. ‘It’s your fault that on missions, if I’m not cautious, I fall back into that way of thinking again, of being so free from… any kind of doubt. You put that damn sceptre on my damn chest, so it’s your mess to clean up. And you will clean it up. All the vestiges of the mind gem and Thanos’ influence. All the vestiges of your personal meddling. Everything.’

Loki didn’t answer for a while. He was looking at Clint closely, and it seemed that the tension had risen in the room. His expression had definitely grown stiffer, distanced. His long fingers tapping on the glass front, quickly.

Then he nodded, shortly. And stood up.

‘So how are we going to do this?’ Clint asked, and to the Tony, ‘I need an oath. Make it a water-tight one.’

‘What, you want to do this now?’ Tony asked.

‘Of course’ said Clint with a snort. ‘I won’t take the chance that he changes his mind.’

‘There is no reason to wait’ Loki agreed. ‘You should lie down somewhere however – the sofa will suffice. I will have to put you into a sleep-like trance, and you will likely feel dizzy and confused afterwards. Undoing thralls and memory spells tends to leave people unsettled, vulnerable – especially mortals. Someone should be there to guard you against enemies afterwards, support you while walking and make you eat and drink. Then you should go to bed. In the morning, you should be fine and your mental defences should be as normal.’

‘I’m already texting Nat’ Clint said, looking down at his Starkphone and typing.

‘Jarvis should probably secure the tower as well as he can’ said Loki, glancing sideways at Tony. So distanced.

‘Yeah, enact code Slumber Party, Jarvis’ said Tony absent-mindedly, still processing how quickly Clint had gone from open animosity to practically letting the God of Chaos poke around in his brain, and at the same time already occupied with the wording of the oath.

Clint lay down on the sofa. Loki summoned a chair from nowhere and sat down on it at the height of Clint’s head, looking down at the archer with something almost akin to an expression of concern on his face.

‘Are you certain that this is what you wish, Clint Barton of Midgard?’ asked he. ‘It was not simple mockery when I said that my transgression against you had also been a kindness. You might not like the memories much that you will gain.’

‘I like not having access to them even less’ Clint said tensely.

‘It is your decision’ Loki said with another bow. ‘And my debt to pay.’
'Well, that’s all kind of anti-climatic’ said Tony finally, yawned, and gave the rubber chicken another squeeze.

‘Does it help the suspense to know I might maim you if you keep making those squeaky noises?’ Nat asked. She was standing behind the sofa, observing Clint and Loki with the same alertness with which she had been observing them half an hour ago.

If this was a TV show, it had to have been produced during the writer’s strike. Nothing interesting was happening at all. Clint was still lying on the sofa, his eyes closed, breathing deeply and calmly. Loki was still sitting on that chair, Clint’s head in his hands, eyes closed, breathing deeply and calmly.

The oaths had been made, Nat had stayed for Clint’s security, Tony for Loki’s, only he was in danger of falling asleep if this went on any longer.

‘I wonder – in Clint’s place, would you have even complained about the chew toys? Or would you just have silently eliminated every single one of them and then hid a poisonous snake in Emovillain’s bed?’

‘I think you’re mixing me up with Loki’ said she. ‘Snakes are not my style.’

‘Sometimes, I barely can tell the difference between the two of you’ Tony said, then yawned once more.

‘I hope you can when you start flirting because if I find your hands on me, they won’t stay yours for very long.’

‘Yeah, I bet you have a collection of hands, preserved in formaldehyde, somewhere’ Tony mused, looking at the ceiling. ‘How come that even compared to Loki, you give me the creeps? Not that I don’t like you, mind – but I’m not exactly known for befriending normal people…’

‘– don’t you want to play some more with your phone?’ asked Nat.

‘Nah, my inbox is full of business mails’ said Tony. ‘That’s no fun game to play. I considered programming a bot that automatically and randomly postpones my meetings, not that that would be difficult, but I’ve sort of promised Pepper, that I would at least-’

He was interrupted by Clint breathing in audibly, then opening his eyes.

Loki opened his only a moment later, took away his hands at once, and Clint sat up rather abruptly, then stayed that way, staring into the air.

‘Clint?’ asked Natasha. ‘Are you there?’

‘Yes’ said Clint. His eyes were wide.

‘Are you okay?’ asked she.

Clint furrowed his eyebrows at the question.

‘I…’ began he. ‘Heart beat slightly elevated but within normal parameters, breathing normal. I don’t think I’m compromised.’

‘That was not my question’ Nat asked gently.
Loki said nothing. He sat just a tiny bit hunched over, the expression on his face just a bit strained. His eyes just a bit tired. The faintest shadow underneath them.

Right.

So this had taken a lot out of him.

Maybe one of the reasons he hadn’t been so keen to agree to this in the first place.

Then Loki stood up, and Clint immediately turned to him, locked his eyes on him. And now the archer looked definitely troubled, the frown on his face deepening.

Loki stood, his face stiff and carefully blanked, looking down at Clint as if waiting for him to say something. Vulnerable. As if expecting a blow. His hands balled to fists, but kept close at his sides, half-hidden.

He hadn’t wanted to do this at all.

And Clint opened his mouth, then closed it again. His eyebrows twitched.

Loki cast down his eyes then, swallowed.

‘He needs rest’ said he. ‘I daresay it will be better if I don’t stay with him, but if you need my help, I will be nearby. I will not leave the tower until Barton has recovered his defences.’

Natasha acknowledged that with a nod, and with a last glance at Clint, Loki left the room. Clint followed him with his eyes.

The thing was, if there was something Tony was not good at, it was dealing with Clint psychology. And if there was something only he in this tower was even remotely good at, it was dealing with Loki psychology.

And that the trickster needed him, or at least someone, was pretty much clear. He had not looked well just now, and letting him deal with it on his own? That would probably just lead to more scratches.

‘I… should probably go’ said he.

Interestingly enough, Nat let him.
One Sparring A Day

Chapter Summary

… keeps nervous breakdowns away. Doesn’t it? Also, Tony learns a lot in this chapter. Like, there is a whole list of things he learns. He likes lists (in his head – on paper, they give him a migraine).

Chapter Notes

Second to last chapter for the batch, and we still get no Barton-memories, just some booooring Tony & Loki interaction! Damn you, black_feather_fiction! Why do you do this to us? Wait, because you're evil. You even warned us in a tag. Short chapter, because I like to see my boys fight.

Tony found Loki on his floor, on the sofa in the common room. According to Jarvis, who had briefed him in the elevator, the god was deeply immersed in the data of the arc reactor. Or rather, pretending to be. Previous analysis of Loki’s reading behaviour suggested that the trickster was mainly interested in how much power the reactor could generate and how big one could make it – so whatever Loki was planning to do, it needed a fat lot of juice.

Today’s data for the research analysis would be pretty useless though, Tony could already tell as much when he entered the room. Loki’s eyes didn’t move with the lines but stared at the tablet dully, and they tended to drift shut. At the same time, Tony suspected that the reason he was holding the tablet so tightly it was close to breaking was to suppress the shivering.

Absent-mindedly handing the god a smoothie lead to nothing but Loki depositing the bottle next to him without taking a sip. Trying to engage him in conversation was as frustrating as hopeless. The trickster’s face had, in the meantime, only become stiffer.

So, yes, Tony was a bit concerned.

Even more so when Loki then abruptly stood up, laid down the tablet and began striding up and down the room, his fingers moving restlessly again. Which was no good sign at all, in Tony’s experience.

But it also gave him an idea.

‘Let’s spar’ said he.

At least he got a reaction out of that. Loki whirled around, and stared at him uncomprehendingly.

‘What?’

‘I’m bored, and since all the Earth-bound villains seem to be on vacation together, probably in that all-inclusive holiday club for villains – do you know that one, by the way, or are they racist on top of
being evil? Anyways, they’re not making trouble, so I’m also terribly untrained’ said Tony. ‘So let’s go down to the gyms and beat each other up a bit’

Well, now Loki stared at him as if he was mad. That was progress, he supposed.

‘I’m a god, Stark’ said Loki. ‘And you are an unpowered mortal.’

‘Yes’ said Tony because Loki had definitely had gotten that one right.

‘If we beat each other up a bit, this is gonna end with me getting a very short sparring session and with you very dead’ said Loki.

‘Aw, don’t spoil me, that’s what evil people do’ said Tony. ‘Oh, wait, you are evil, my bad. In any case, I wasn’t gonna fight you in the nude, dummy. That’s what my suits are there for.’

And that was all it took to make the Lokes look intrigued.

* *

‘Oh, so we use the big one’ Loki said, looking around.

‘More importantly, we use the Hulk-proof one’ said Tony, winking at the other. ‘I don’t want you to hold back more than you have to.’

The gym was the hugest Tony had installed in the tower, and its walls could stand a lot of impact force without breaking. Bruce liked to use it on bad days. It gave him a feeling of security, and it gave the rest of the people in the tower that feeling of security too, even if they would never admit that to Bruce’s face.

‘Mhm’ said Loki, sounding sceptical. He folded his hands behind his back. ‘Let us start with me holding back at least a little. I always have done so in my fights with mortals, so why break the tradition now?’

Mhm, then again, why indeed? A Loki who was holding back was still enough of a menace, Tony knew only too well. And he didn’t really want to find out today whether the suit would survive a Loki who didn’t.

‘So, what do you feel like more?’ asked Tony. ‘Elegant martial arts dance or crude brawl?’

Loki gave him a once-over.

‘The way you move and hold yourself, more importantly the way you fight as Iron Man, you have minimal training in any of the martial arts of movement’ said he. ‘Fighting you on those grounds would be gratifying only for a very short time, and bore me to death within the first few minutes. I will try to tone down my technique accordingly.’

‘You always know what to say to make a man feel special’ said Tony. ‘Okay, crude brawl it is. Jarvis, you know the one.’

It had been the next logical step, after Tony had figured out how to overcome the technical obstacles, to diversify his suit designs and adapt them for different purposes while still improving on the all-rounder he used for most missions where he didn’t know what he was getting into. The suit that Jarvis deployed now from a disguised compartment in the walls was based on the early generation
designs, and Tony privately called it the Jock.

It was a bit heavier than his all-rounder and not quite as easy to navigate, an uncomfortable step into the direction of what Obie had used, but after a few disagreements with the Hulk during missions, Tony had learned to appreciate the perks of a robust casing and all kinds of measures to protect the occupant from blunt force trauma, despite the associations.

‘You use no magic, I don’t use the repulsors’ said Tony while the suit was wrapping around him, the pieces sliding into place with satisfying clicking sounds. ‘And this means I won’t even be able to fly, so you’re definitely not allowed teleportation. Deal?’

Loki, standing slightly sideways, looked at Tony. His head was bent forward, strands of his hair falling into his face, the arms hanging down at his sides, relaxed in a very tense way.

His gaze was wary, and at the same time, there was already something predatory in it. Something very unfriendly.

He wanted this. He needed this.

Loki said, ‘Deal.’

Tony learned a few things that day.

First, the ‘Jock’ was not made for hand-to-hand combat. The joints were not flexible enough which gave the opponent too many entries for levers, and the Jock was far too slow.

Second, the Jock held his promise of protection from blunt force trauma when Loki used Tony’s momentum and his arm as a lever to smash him into the floor, then again later when Loki struck him in the head with a roundhouse kick and then kicked him into a nearby wall, then lifted his whole body to smash him into the floor again, hauled him up once more, rammed his knee into Tony’s stomach and sent him flying across the room to hit the opposite wall.

Third, Loki definitely had held back in his fights with Tony before. That he had also held back at the beginning of this one, Tony only understood when Loki gradually let go. The idea that he was still holding back close to the end was a bit scary.

Fourth, Loki was fast. Granted, Tony had known that before, but he had forgotten what exactly that meant when he was actually fighting that fucker. It meant hitting the air where Loki’s face had been an instant before, it meant having a foot or a fist in the stomach before one could even think uh-oh.

Fifth, Loki was strong. Maybe he didn’t come close to the Hulk or even to Thor, but whether it was all muscle or whether he was using Tony’s momentum so efficiently, the force with which the god hauled him around was still pretty much a lot.

Again, thank his genius for developing excellent padding.

Sixth, Loki deliberately gave him openings. He waited before moving just long enough at just the right moment for Tony to land a hit straight in his face, straight in his guts, straight in his side, always where it had to hurt, always when there was force behind it, and once, after Tony had managed to hit him in the face several times in the row (only slightly angry after having been hauled and kicked across the room for a while), the god let out a laugh, dirty and joyful.

Seventh, Loki kept enough control over the fight that he ended it with Tony pinned to the ground
underneath him, Loki grinning down at him. He barely sported a mark, only his lip was split, a small
tickle of blood running down his chin, and his teeth were bloody – and whether that was because
that was the only real injury he had sustained or whether this was the only one he would show, his
eyes were gleaming in any case, his face was sweaty, his hair wet and sticking to his skin.

And he was lying on top of Tony, heavy and unmoving, having Tony’s arms in a rather
uncomfortable lever.

They were both breathing audibly.

‘Yield’ Loki growled.

For a moment, Tony wanted to struggle just out of principle. But then again, Loki had undoubtedly
won and his tone was sexy enough that Tony found the idea of submitting to it alluring.

So instead of an answer, Tony told Jarvis to disassemble the suit.

And it did, breaking apart around him, Loki lifting his weight away from Tony and coming into a
crouched position, so as to allow the parts to fold back into the compartment in the wall.

Leaving Tony in a t-shirt and sweatpants and feeling a tiny little bit exposed.

The trickster’s gaze raked over him then, half hungry, half assessing.

‘You are bruised’ said he. ‘But less than I expected.’

‘I know what I’m doing when I engineer’ Tony said smugly.

‘Any pains? Can you move your limbs? Do you feel dizzy?’

Tony paused to move his ankles and wrists cautiously, rolled his shoulders. Sure, there were pains –
Tony had been kicked across the room for a while, no padding could make that feel like a hug and
kiss. There was probably going to be bruising on the abdomen, even on his right cheekbone if the
pain was any judge of it. But he had already ended missions in a much worse state. Maybe he should
use the Jock more often.

‘Nothing I’m not used to’ said he. ‘I’m an old guy – aches and pains kind of come with the package.’

Something unidentifiable crossed Loki’s face at that, then it was gone, and the trickster lowered
himself down on him, but remaining in that crouched position, Tony noticed, not shifting his whole
weight on him.

It was hot, the trickster was cool, his split lip swollen, and suddenly his lips were so close, just inches
from Tony’s, and Loki’s eyes were wandering over him again, just inches
from Tony’s, and Loki’s eyes were wandering over him again, then locking with his.

Pupils dilated.

And yup, Loki was hard too, judging from the stiffness pressing against his thigh.

‘If you want to take advantage of my defeat’ said Tony, his voice low. ‘Go right on.’

Loki’s lips quirked up and he let a breath almost like a laugh.

One moment, Tony thought that the god would tear his clothes from his body.

The next, his gaze had turned distant (why that?), and Loki had stood up (gods, please don’t), in that
weirdly fluid motion that still didn’t look like he had bones (why do you avoid this?).

‘It’s been long time since I’ve done this’ said he.

‘What, have sex?’ Tony said, scrambling to his feet, trying not to let his disappointment show. He didn’t even try to hide the erection – he was sure Loki was aware of it just as acutely as Tony was aware of his. ‘I thought we had done that a few days ago – or do hand jobs not count?’

‘No – spar’ said Loki. ‘This was surprisingly satisfying… Thank you.’

Tony raised his eyebrows.

‘Are you allowed to thank people, Your Highness?’ asked he. ‘Or does that goes against your very important royal code of being an arrogant, entitled ass?’

Loki huffed.

‘Also, your fighting technique is less refined even than I remembered’ said he. ‘You move like a geriatric toddler. This will not do, Stark. Tomorrow, we will start to train.’

‘What?’ Tony said. ‘What do you – you can’t just-

‘I won’t discuss this’ said Loki, turned his back to Tony and strolled towards the exit of the gym, with his fucking wet hair and long back and long legs and ruffled shirt, walking so fucking fluidly, his hips swinging slightly with his movements. ‘Even accounting for the suit, there were five occasions today where I could have killed you with my bare hands, Stark. Now that you are my ally, this is unacceptable. I expect you here everyday at dawn.’

‘Most days, I haven’t even gone to sleep by dawn’ Tony called out after him.

‘That should make it easier for you to be here then’ Loki called back before he closed the door behind him.

So that had not entirely gone according to plan after all.

Also, geriatric toddler? What the hell.
Virginia Potts sitting on one of the armchairs in the living room, one leg resting casually over the other, several files spread on the couchtable in front of her, just when Loki came out of his room, hair still wet from the shower, probably wasn’t a coincidence. Not considering the way she did not at all seem surprised by his arrival, and not considering the way she looked at him, coolly and with a polite smile on her face that was not truly trying to hide that she was here to assess him as a threat.

‘Lady Potts’ said Loki, made an effort to smile and joined his hands behind his back. He modified the glamour to make his hair appear dry and combed, and him clothed in one of the suits he liked to use for such occasions. ‘Had I known we would be honoured by your presence so very soon, I would have taken care not to meet you in such informal attire.’

He vaguely remembered Stark saying that she had wanted to stay on the Maldives for another week.

‘I had to return earlier due to company business’ said Potts. ‘I didn’t mean to make you feel uncomfortable by taking you by surprise though, I’m sorry for that.’

Lie.

‘No need to apologise, I feel blessed to finally make your acquaintance’ said Loki and bowed to her. ‘And I feel humbled by your polite manners, especially considering the resentment you must feel against me’

‘You must remind me’ Potts said pleasantly. ‘Would that be resentment because of your attack against this tower and New York, at your attempt at ending my best friend’s life who had been still my lover at that time, or at the relationship you have with him now, the motivations behind which I
am still not certain about?'

Ah, if Sif or the Warriors Three had ever learnt to voice their suspicions so nicely while using such a business-like, almost light tone, then he maybe would have find a way to suffer their presence without crawling up the walls in frustration.

‘All of the above, actually’ he decided to say and laughed a little in the way that usually came across as charming rather than mad. ‘I take it you are here to promise me death or worse should I hurt or kill Anthony Stark then?’

‘Are you under the impression that I should not be taken seriously as a threat?’ asked Potts just as pleasantly.

This time, the laugh Loki let out was as surprised as spontaneous.

‘Why?’ asked he. ‘Have others made that mistake before?’

There, in her eyes – the satisfaction at being seen as who she was. It probably didn’t happen often.

‘Some might have.’

Morons.

‘I would pity them’ said Loki. ‘Except they deserve their fate.’

Potts narrowed her eyes.

‘Enough of this’ said she.

Enough of trying to flatter me – I know what you’re on about.

She stretched out her hand, not standing up as was custom on Midgard for this kind of greeting – so definitely not prepared to meet him half way.

Mhm, he could work with that.

‘I think we have never been properly introduced’ said she. ‘That does not do. I am Virginia Potts, CEO of Stark Industries and not to be trifled with.’

He bent down, took her hand.

‘I am Loki Skywalker, the Bard’ said he. ‘Pleased to meet you and appreciative of your cautious hospitality.’

Her eyes flickered to their joined hands just for moment, and just for a moment, her eyebrows twitched as if to frown.

Loki let her hand go at once, straightened himself up and took a casual step back so not to appear menacing. Did she object to the touch after all? It seemed that way. But she had initiated it. Maybe she had only too late remembered who she shook hands with. Maybe Stark had told her what he was beneath the glamour.

He swallowed – he would have liked to avoid this kind of reaction.

‘Something wrong?’ asked he, his voice not quite as light as he had intended it to be.
'Oh, no’ said Potts, shaking her head as if taken off guard, ‘It’s just that Thor nearly broke some bones the one time he shook hands with me. I expected the same of you.’

‘It can be difficult to know one’s strength when interacting with a species that is, in comparison, so much more fragile’ said Loki.

‘And yet your hand shake was perfectly appropriate’ said Potts. ‘Not too weak, not too firm. Interestingly on point for someone who is both so strong and so unfamiliar with Midgardian customs. I do know from Thor that this is not the typical Asgardian way to greet.’

Ah, so that had been the moment of irritation.

Loki smiled again.

‘I learn rules quickly’ said he.

‘So to know which ones to break’ Potts retorted.

Oh, he liked her already.

‘As for the control of strength – despite his hammer, Thor is not exactly a craftsman’ said he, opened his hand and let a small effigy of the Yggdrasil rise from the wooden couch table. The details, down to the smallest leaves, cost him little effort. It was a familiar shape. ‘In many ways, I am’

‘Mhm’ said Potts, looking first at the tree, then at him with somewhat new interest. ‘That answers a few of my questions at least. Welcome then, Loki Skywalker, Bard. I trust you to know not to outstay it.’

Loki bowed once more, not making any promises.

The welcome he was granted was usually outstayed so quickly and abruptly that he couldn’t always make it out in time.

‘I do not plan to do so’ said he, and that, well that was certainly true, at least this time around.

*

Clint had followed him, all those years ago, after Loki had come through the portal, after Clint had been turned by the sceptre, after they had escaped and found a safe place. The others hadn’t noticed but Clint of course had – that Loki barely made it up to the cargo area of that car, that he barely could hold onto it. That his knees almost gave in when he jumped off it again. That he grabbed onto the sceptre so tightly his knuckles were white from the effort. That he used every occasion to lean or hold onto something because he was swaying on his feet. That he didn’t react to movement that was too far to the right in his field of vision.

That he was barely there, mentally. He covered it with a threatening stance, a mad grin, and by distributing tasks rather quickly.

The others took their orders and went to work. When Loki left the cargo hall of the abandoned factory they were using (the safe house Clint had found for them), and headed for the offices, Clint waited a few moments, not wanting to raise suspicion, then got up too and followed.

As Clint had expected, Loki hadn’t made it far. He had broken down immediately after entering the
nearest office, lying on the floor, half inside, half outside the room.

He looked different, but Clint already knew that Loki could do magic. Probably, the spell had simply failed.

Clint crouched down next to him, taking up the skeletal wrist to feel for the pulse.

Rapid.

Loki was awake, staring straight ahead but not reacting to Clint’s presence. Breathing quickly and shallowly. Most of his body was covered by the armour, torn and bloody underneath the illusion, but his face was waxy and sweaty, the right side heavily bruised. The cheekbone looked broken, the right eye was swollen shut – that explained why he was currently blind on this one. His hair was gone in patches, there were burn marks on his temples, on his head. He reeked of burnt flesh too, of blood and sweat and piss and shit. The most intriguing injury was the dark wound crossing his face however, as if someone had slashed across it with a sharp blade. But for some reason, it looked as if the injury went deeper than the bone, and there was that rift in that blackened skin that simply *gaped*, with nothing clodding it, but not bleeding either.

It was evident that Loki was not in charge of this after all. No, Clint knew suddenly with certainty, the sceptre had chosen Loki like it had chosen him, because however weak Loki seemed now, he had to be the right man for his job. It was Clint’s purpose to make him the right man for his job. To support him, and if that failed, to get rid of him – even then, Clint could still use that to their advantage. Loki would make a good scapegoat, his defeat a good distraction. Possibly, exposing his injuries would throw the enemy into an even more beneficial confusion.

But for now, the role of commander was the one Loki had been given, and so Clint would make sure he would fill it. And for now, that meant some first aid.

There were showers in this building, he knew, working ones. He had taken care to have first aid kits brought here.

Clint patted Loki down, the arms, the spine, the legs. Loki jerked a little at the touch but neither complained nor resisted (tortured into submission, Clint had seen it before), and there were no other obvious fractures. So the archer grabbed Loki underneath his armpits and hauled him to his feet.

Loki was heavier than Clint would have expected, given how he was nothing more than skin and bones. At first, Loki’s legs wouldn’t carry him but after Clint had shouted an order and Loki had whinced at it, the god somehow found the strength to stand and walk after all. So Loki reacted well to a firm hand – good, Clint could work with that. There were different reactions in torture victims, he knew, but it seemed like this one had been deliberately trained to push himself beyond his limits if necessary. And that would make Clint’s job a lot easier.

There were fractures after all, Clint saw after undressing Loki. Three ribs, the right ankle and the right hip. There were also more of these dark, gaping wounds that made Clint wonder how this body still held together. How Loki could still stand, given how skeletal he looked beneath his clothes. Whatever species Loki belonged to, they were certainly durable.

Loki didn’t resist the undressing, being guided into the shower, being cleaned of dried blood, urine, feces and who knew what other grime. He just leant against the shower wall, barely able to keep himself on his feet, tracing the gaps between the tiles with his fingers in deep concentration, as if that was the main thing tethering him to reality. He didn’t even resist Clint’s cleaning the rape trauma. He just jerked a little under the rough touches, that was all. Well, he started talking, quietly, his eyes glazed over and unfocused at the same time, ‘No more, no more, just let me disappear, just let me
disappear, just let me disappear’, but it sounded more like a force of habit than anything that carried much meaning anymore.

‘We will. But you have a mission to complete first’ Clint said, and Loki breathed out at that, nodded, ‘I am burdened with glorious purpose.’

‘Yes’ Clint said, wondering whether they wouldn’t have to get rid of Loki sooner rather than later after all.

He treated the burn marks that were all over Loki’s body, the bruises and the cuts. Bandaged the scabbed-over wounds that appeared to go deeper. Clint couldn’t do much for the fractures – bracing them would have left their commander with too little mobility. He couldn’t do anything for the inner bleeding that he suspected either. Loki seemed to zone out for some time while Clint was tending to him, but after Clint had guided him back to his discarded clothes, his eyes were suddenly sharp and calculative.

‘Are you ready to lead?’ asked Clint, because Loki had to be.

Loki looked at him in a scrutinising way.

‘Of course I am’ said he, his voice arrogant and disdainful, and for a moment, he glowed. And then, he was fully dressed in his armour, looking healthy and almost gleeful.

‘Just let me—’ said he, and brought, quicker than Clint would have expected given Loki’s state, his two hands to Clint’s temples.

Then there was a blank, and when Clint came to again, they were standing in the hall, and Clint had complete trust in their strong and determined leader.

‘And then, on that same charity ball, still talking to the host, I pick up a praline, and only after I put it in my mouth and bite down, I realise it’s filled with whiskey’ Tony said. ‘The old guy was not impressed by me spitting the praline back on the napkin. The evening pretty much went downhill after that.’

They were sitting in the community kitchen, eating breakfast. Or rather, Bruce and Clint were sitting. Tony was standing, waving his chipped mug of coffee around (the one he was so neurotically obsessive about) while rambling on about this ball that had apparently been some kind of social catastrophe (not that Clint would care), and Loki was standing leant against the fridge (keeping his back protected), an half-empty bottle of smoothie in his hand (eating nothing, drinking little). He chuckled at Tony’s words.

‘And for some reason, Pepper kept apologising to me afterwards, like, a dozen times’ said Tony. ‘As if she had been in any way responsible for me getting that particular praline, as if she could have prevented it. It drives me up the walls when she does that – she should know better than this.’

‘I’m… not following. Why did you spit out the praline to begin with?’ Bruce asked, furrowing his eyebrows.

‘You try eating chocolate that’s filled with vomit, especially when you don’t expect it to be filled with vomit’ Tony said. ‘And whose fault is that?’, pointing his mug straight at Loki.
'Yours’ said Loki easily, and chuckled some more, his body shaking a little with it.

The god had started training Tony in hand-to-hand combat recently and that had given Clint and Nat more occasions to observe him. And Loki didn’t seem to be hiding injuries like he had been during the New York invasion, but there was always something insecure to his movements now, as if there was a constant level of pain he was coping with.

Then there was the fact that Loki hadn’t been able to catch Clint’s arrows that one time when Clint had actually tried (and managed) to hit him, all those weeks ago. Did that mean that in a way, he had worsened since the invasion?

The damage this so-called ‘Bard’s Song’ had done would of course explain the pain, the slowness of Loki’s reaction, maybe even the coordination problems that seemed to persist. He was simply still healing.

Compared to New York, it took surprisingly long.

‘Vomit-filled chocolate?’ asked Bruce now, looking even more confused. ‘I thought it was filled with whiskey?’

‘It was, but because of someone in this room’ said Tony and narrowed his eyes at the god, ‘and I’m not saying any names, Loki Skywalker, the Bard, for me, the one practically equals the other.’

‘Oh, my’ said Loki, his eyes glinting. He licked his lips (This was a deliberate move – Clint remembered Loki using his mimic to convince people of his madness. He remembered Loki’s wide eyes during those times he couldn’t hold up the façade. The words, again and again. Let me disappear, just let me disappear. And Clint’s answer, always the same – We will. After you complete the mission. Loki had always relaxed after that, just a little). ‘How ever could I have known that you would take a bit of friendly poisoning so badly?’

‘A bit of friendly poisoning?’ Tony exclaimed. ‘What are you? My personal friendly poisoner?’

‘Ouhh’ Loki drawled. ‘Friendly poisoner. How elegant. I love it when you call me names.’

‘Yeah, I have many names for you, little shit trickster’ said Tony, but his voice was darker now, and he was grinning dirtily. ‘You have no idea. But I could list them, one by one.’

Oh, great god. Don’t let them start flirting now (Loki’s anus had been completely torn apart, bloody, swollen, one giant bruise – did Tony even know?).

‘Somehow, I’m confused as to whether I should Hulk out on your behalf, Tony, because you’ve apparently been poisoned, or decide that I enter the terrority of too much information’ Bruce said, rubbing the bridge of his nose. ‘Considering the way this conversation is evolving, I’m… tending towards the latter.’

‘Mr Skywalker has, the last time Mr Stark has inebriated himself to the point of unconsciousness, brewed and administered a sobering potion’ Jarvis said now. ‘It had the probably not accidental side effect of modifying Mr Stark’s taste sense. Any alcohol he consumes tastes like vomit now.’

There was a pause.

Then a short, startled laugh burst out of Clint against his will.

Tony and Loki turned to him, Loki raising one eyebrow, Tony two. Bruce, as to him, looked still a bit flabbergastedly at the god.
‘Hey, it’s funny’ said Clint raising his hands.

It was. And… unexpected, in a way (I compensated for your weaknesses, Barton – did Loki compensate for Tony’s then?).

‘Why don’t you go back to staring darkly at the second-rate magician, Mr Sulks In Silence?’ Tony told him with narrowed eyes.

Had he been staring darkly? Well, he had probably been staring.

‘I agree’ Loki said (he had avoided talking to Clint ever since giving him back his memories. He had avoided looking Clint in the eyes). ‘Also, Jarvis, you are an untrustworthy traitor and as of now, I don’t like you anymore. Banner was spinning this great fantasy about my evilness, Barton was planning my demise again – why would you ruin my fun like that?’

‘I will learn to live with your antipathy, Mr Skywalker.’

Fun.

Is this some kind of mockery, Barton? Do you think I have all day?

Let me disappear. Just let me disappear.

We will.

Clint had made a promise, he realised, and he had never kept it. But well, he had made it under the influence of the mind gem. Nobody could hold him to it.

‘You actually got Tony sober?’ Bruce finally said, as if torn out of his shock only now. ‘You actually made sure he’s not going to drink himself to death after all?’

Yes, he had. Clint shifted in his seat, then stood up. This was all so fucked up. He was gonna have to talk to Nat again. She had helped him through shit like this so often, he probably owed her one of the more difficult missions by now.

‘Well, I wouldn’t go that far’ said Loki, rolling his eyes (what had the Hulk done to him? What had they scraped from the ground, smug about their victory that Loki himself had ensured?). ‘I merely made sure that he will not enjoy it.’

How had Loki even survived that last beating? Clint had no idea.

‘Oh god, this means we owe you massively now, doesn’t it?’ Bruce said, looking uncertain of how happy he was about that. ‘I might even have to actually start to like you a bit. That will need some time to sink in.’

It was a few days later in the workshop, when they should have been working (but they weren’t making any progress with the time gem, or with tech-magic fusion, or with Tony’s magic, and both of them had gotten increasingly irritated over the last few hours, starting to snap at each other, then had fallen silent and had been working on their own, and that had made the general mood significantly more peaceful) when Tony felt Loki against his back right before the god placed his
hands next to Tony’s, on the work table. That weight. The musky smell. Loki’s long fingers next to his rough ones. And then he felt Loki’s breath on his cheek, and he closed his eyes for a moment, because he would never admit that by now, that alone…

Yes, his troubles with the Scrull code were already pretty much wiped from his mind.

‘What are you, not only my personal friendly poisoner, but now also my personal space invader?’ asked Tony, his voice coming out rough and dark.

A small flinch in the other body – ‘Not that I’m complaining’ he added quickly.

‘Heh’ Loki said, exhaling hot air that tickled Tony’s face.

‘What do you say-‘ began he, his face even closer to Tony’s now – he could feel Loki’s lips move on his cheeks while he was speaking and damn, that got his cock’s interest. Maybe he really was cheap.

Then again, he could feel the god’s erection too.

‘We have a little break, during which you fuck me until I cannot think anymore?’

There was no tension in Loki’s voice, no undertone, just the same seductive purr as before, but Tony stilled nonetheless.

Because that… that was a somewhat unexpected proposition.

Because that was nothing Loki had ever asked for before, and Tony knew by now the issues that came with the request.

What was more, ever since the homophobic shit fan day, sex had become sort of an almost… loaded subject between them. Weirdly enough. It wasn’t as if Tony thought the god had lost interest in him – if anything, Loki’s gazes and glances and once-overs had become more frequent, and dirtier too. And the way Loki had looked at him before giving him that hand job had been… well, Tony tried not to think about that too much. Surely, that was the safer option. But then again, except for that hand job, nothing much had happened between them since Thor’s visit. There had been a lot of almosts, like when Loki had pinned him down in the gym, or really, any other day they had trained together, because that was far too close body contact not to feel dangerous in more than one way, but… and Tony didn’t know how much of this was coincidence and how much… not that either of them had mentioned anything. Which kind of implied that the subject was loaded, wasn’t it? Argh.

He turned around, having to fight a bit against the body pressing against him. But Loki, allowed it, in the end, looking at him, his head cocked, his hair curly and wild. Did his hair just adapt to his arousal, was that a Jotunn thing, or a mage thing, aroused hair? A spell maybe? Great, and now the god’s erection pressed against his crotch, and Loki’s lips were open, a slight smile, his eyes amused – but there was something else behind that amusement, something hidden, something almost insecure. And that insecurity that Tony sometimes saw now, that had not been there before the God of Capslock had splattered his bigotry everywhere, or had Tony just not looked hard enough?

‘Do I make you uncomfortable, Stark?’ said Loki, his voice once more a purr.

Do I make you uncomfortable, Tony wondered. You are waiting for my reaction, I can see that. Are you wondering whether I will condemn you after all?

‘Depends’ said Tony. ‘If this is about this levelling-the-field idea you had…’
There was a flash of *something* in Loki’s eyes, gone too quickly, then Loki leant forward, shifting more of his weight on him, Tony leaning back automatically, because with the god, seductive and threatening were never far apart, but Loki bent towards him, his face so close, the open lips, the dilated pupils, a slight laugh, the hot breath of which touched Tony’s lips, tongue, then the god’s arms wrapped around him, and the weird thing was, Tony felt *held* (safe) as well as suddenly completely hard, and he probably wasn’t supposed to feel *held* by a alien villain divinity,

‘And what if’ said Loki, his voice so dark in such a very good way, ‘I simply crave for your cock to be inside me? What if I want to ride you, and clench around you, and feel you thrusting into me until you spill? What then?’

‘Well…’ Tony brought out, already breathing a bit heavily. ‘Well… if you put it that way of course…’

He grinned.

‘Jarvis was gonna suggest a break soon anyway.’

The edge of Loki’s lips twitched upwards, one of his hands travelled down Tony’s back, over his ass, cupped it, squeezed (Tony might or might not have moaned at that), shifted his hand just a bit, and then lifted Tony up (far too easily), the next moment, the scenery had changed (his bedroom?), he was lowered down by the back and his ass onto something soft (yes, his bedroom, his bed), Loki moving into a crouched position above him.

‘Figured you’d be dominating even as a bottom’ said Tony with a breathy smile, and Loki smirked, bent down and rather abruptly claimed his mouth in a kiss.

It was a rough and possessive kiss, all teeth and tongue, and Tony’s body arched underneath the god, grabbed his arms (felt the arms stiffen underneath the touch, relaxed his grip a bit, felt them soften again), and then Loki’s hand came up, grabbed Tony’s t-shirt by the collar and tore.

It ripped apart with a nice sound but at the same time a satisfying ease, as if it was nothing, really, just peeling a brittle husk from the juicy core, and then Loki hooked his hand into the rim of Tony’s jeans, and it tore so easily, fell away so easily, and then they were naked, skin to skin, the god having discarded his own clothes with magic, lying on top of him, cool and musky and everywhere, kissing him again, biting Tony’s lip until he moaned and bled, and yes, fuck, he closed his eyes in pleasure, opened them again, when Loki’s mouth had left his, the god staring down at him, that fire in these eyes again, yup, that was exactly the thing he was trying not to think about too much.

‘There are times I *would* like to devour you’ Loki said, licking his lips, his hand ghosting over his shoulders, arms, stomach (leaving out his chest, the arc reactor, always leaving out that). ‘Sate my appetite of you with one big meal.’

And Tony panted and stared up at the trickster, so damn aroused by the words (also a bit scared), but almost feeling the urge to frown, because Loki had never said anything like that before, this sounded serious somehow, like his gaze just now had felt serious, and they couldn’t-

Loki settled on Tony’s hip, interrupting his thoughts, straddling him, with both legs supporting him on the bed (not shifting his whole weight on Tony). His cock, hard and swollen with blood, lying on Tony’s stomach, pointing towards his face, distracted him effectively, and he couldn’t help but lick his lips, looking at it, he wanted to wrap his mouth around that slit, explore it with his tongue, that thick shaft, all those veins,

‘Ahhhh’ he moaned, interrupted in his thoughts as Loki reached behind his back and took Tony into
his hand.

Loki hummed contentedly in response.

Tony panted and stared.

He found he had reason to.

Because there was Loki sitting on him, naked, this muscular legs trapping him between them, his long and slender upper body stretched slightly backwards and sideways, and Tony could see his abdominal muscles moving under the skin, could see his navel that was small, and his skin so smooth, and his shoulders broader than one would expect because Loki somehow managed to hide how massive he was, and his nipples small and pale, and his hair was falling down on his neck, on his shoulders, damp and curly, and he moved and stroked him, slightly angled backwards, and Tony held his breath because, again, Loki had never displayed himself like that in front of him before – yes, Loki had been naked during sex (not always), but before today, he had then always made sure that Tony was either too distracted to really take that body in, or not in a favourable position to do so fully.

But this position, dominant as it was, was still exposed, Tony could see the moles on his hip, the small crease there where the hip and abdomen met and, ahhh, the god had just slipped a condom over his cock, hadn’t he, a stroke, another one, ‘I wonder… hah… where you keep all of those rubbers’ said he.

‘Pocket dimensions exist for a reason’ said Loki breathily, produced Tony’s bottle of lube with the Iron Man Greasing Oil still written all over it from thin air,

‘That one’s really your favorite, isn’t it?’ Tony said.

Loki only hummed at that, coated his fingers, then shifted a bit, angled his arm backwards, and Tony could see his lips open und flush, as the finger probably slipped in, and the god closed his eyes, seemed to center on himself, moving slowly and with concentration. He looked younger at that moment than usual, and in the way the tension or maybe the mask bled from him, he looked thin, open,

‘Are… are you sure you about this?’ asked Tony. He didn’t even know why he asked exactly – maybe because of the way Loki angled his body away from him or because of that exposed position, or…

Loki glanced back at him through half-lidded eyes, expression hard to read, ‘Are you sure, Stark? You really do not know what has been inside that ass before you.’

Huh? Where was that coming from?

‘Is that your way of saying that you have alien STDs that can be transferred even while using condoms?’ Tony said, raising an eyebrow, ‘because if so, it’s a little late to disclose, honeybunny’

Loki laughed shortly, dryly.

‘Do you really think I’d put my trust into those Midgardian contraptions? I put a ward on my body each time, Stark, that prevents infection in any direction.’

He didn’t stop working his finger in and out of his ass, talking, and he didn’t stop breathing heavily. Loki was able to discuss venereal diseases while having sex – definitely one thing to put on the list of pros in this relationship.
‘Smart’ Tony said. ‘Why did you put up with the rubbers at all if they’re redundant?’

‘Why would I reject them when you demand them?’ Loki asked, one eyebrow raised.

Very much pro.

Loki closed his eyes for a moment, pushing deeper with his finger, opened them again.

‘So’ said he. ‘I suppose it is time for you to decide whether you dare to enter the chicken coop.’

Tony wanted to laugh, at the same time, the comment made him uneasy. Referring to the number of his sexual partners two times in a row, and too close in his language to the way he had talked to Thor. Loki’s tone had stayed playful, light. His tone was not to be trusted.

‘Why the fuck should I care who you’ve been with before?’ asked he. ‘Don’t fucking insult me.’

There, a small smile, Loki bent down to him, his hair tickled Tony’s face, the arc reactor reflected on his pale, pale chest.

‘Then don’t you insult me by implying that I don’t know very well what I want’ said he, his voice low. ‘And I want your tiny, pathetic cock inside me, mortal worm.’

‘Heh, you stole that nick name from my Las Vegas wedding story’ Tony said, not believing one moment that Lokes was in any way serious about the insult.

Loki smirked, shifted, took Tony into his hands again, and then Tony felt the resistance, the other’s entrance, just before breaching it, gliding in.

He was engulfed in warmth, because surprisingly, Loki was warm inside, and maybe he shouldn’t be surprised, but… and gods, he felt Loki all around him, so tight, pressing against him, Tony grabbed Loki’s thighs, felt them stiffen, Tony let go of them again (careful, body memory), moaned.

‘Mhm’ made Loki, bent backwards, grabbing Tony’s ankle for support – which pushed Tony’s cock deeper, another gasping moan, Tony closed his eyes. Muscles tightened around him, then relaxed a bit, as if trying to get a feel for that thing that had invaded the body.

Then he felt the god start to move, slowly, upwards and downwards, dragging Tony partly out, pushing him back in, and he heard himself pant, heard Loki pant, opened his eyes.

Loki was looking down at him, with this focused gaze he often had during sex, studying him, studying his reaction. He bit his lips, he bit a strand of hair that had found its way into his mouth, and he moved up, he moved down.

And then something in Loki’s eyes changed, from one moment of the other, they widened, lost their focus, he breathed in,

‘Are you okay there, Lokes?’ asked Tony.

Loki’s eyes shifted to him, one moment wide, the next focusing on him, and Loki bent forward, touched his face, still moving up and down, up and down, his cock dragging across Tony’s stomach,

‘Just fine’ he exhaled, stroked Tony’s cheek, the muscles tightened around him and Tony let out another strangled moan, ‘Focus on the present’ Loki said, bent his head until it was buried in Tony’s neck, lips on his skin near the collarbone, just a hint of a tongue then hot, wet breath as Loki gasped. Just as Tony’s hand wanted to take Loki by the neck, because they were close, so close, the trickster
straightened himself up again, evading him (coincidence), leant back, pushed down on Tony’s cock, deeper, deeper, up, down, up, down, part of his weight coming down on Tony’s hip, then lifting again. Tony reached for Loki’s swollen cock, wanting to finally take it into his hands, feel it, work it like Loki had worked him. But Loki’s hand was there before he could touch, taking hold of Tony’s (keeping it away? Keeping it away).

Okay, Tony thought. No hand jobs. I get the message.

Loki released his hand after that, and Tony grabbed the linen again, no touching, he could totally deal with no touching, especially when those muscles clenched around him, so tightly, so warm, and he was dragged out, he was pushed in, out, in, out, in. Loki threw his head back, closed his eyes, opened them when he tilted forward, there was a flinch, as if something on the edge of his vision had moved (and Tony’s stomach clenched right then, something deep inside him understood at that exact moment), Loki turned his face just a bit to the side, his eyebrows furrowed, he bent his head, closed his eyes, but when he opened them again, they were unfocused, and his mouth was open, his face grew thin, pale, confused.

‘Loki?’ asked Tony, feeling his arousal abruptly drain away. Something had changed, he knew suddenly, and he had no idea why, but something had shifted. But Loki didn’t stop riding him, up, down, up, down, the sound of his ass slapping against Tony’s crotch, didn’t stop clenching around him, but he also didn’t react to his name, and Tony felt his chest tighten, he breathed in, ‘Loki, stop for a bit’. Loki’s eyes slowly widened (hadn’t he heard him?), then they started zigzagging across the room, until they lost themselves in a point somewhere above Tony’s, his face paling even more, his breathing quickened, ‘Loki, stop! Stop and look at me!’

Loki didn’t. He quickened his movements, at the same time, he got heavier, his weight slamming down on Tony again and again, and his face so pale, his mouth open, unbelieving, and this was not good, this was not good, this was all getting out of control, ‘Mr Skywalker, can you hear me?’ he heard Jarvis say, and Tony had to do something, he had to do something, his chest was so tight, he couldn’t breathe, ‘Loki, stop! Stop! Please just STOP!’

Tony pushed himself up with all his strength, having to fight against Loki’s massive weight on his hip, his already soft cock slipping out in the process. Then he took Loki by the shoulder, cupped the trickster’s sweaty and pale face in his other hand, ‘Look at me, Loki! What’s going on?’

If he had thought that this would help, he had been terribly wrong. Loki stilled at the touch as if struck, holding his breath, trembling, and then, from one moment to the other, all expression left his face, and he went limp in Tony’s arms, so fucking heavy, almost slipping away. ‘Loki?’ Tony asked, instinctively pulling him into a hug, his voice suffocated. No response. ‘Mr Skywalker, can you hear me?’ he heard Jarvis say again. So heavy.

Tony cautiously lowered the god down on the mattress, his heart pounding in his throat.
Loki was flaccid, didn’t resist in any way.

This was wrong. This was so, so wrong.

‘Can you hear me, Mr Skywalker?’

Loki’s face had fallen to the side, his mouth still open, his eyes too, but they were completely blank. As if the person inside had just stood up and walked away. His limbs lay where they had come to rest on the mattress, heavy and unmoveable. His legs apart, his body exposed.

‘Mr Skywalker’ Jarvis spoke again. ‘You are on Midgard, in the tower of Anthony Stark. You are lying in the bedroom of Anthony Stark. You are safe. You are in a safe place, Mr Skywalker. Please respond.’

Loki didn’t.

‘Please’ Tony said. His throat was tight, his heart was pounding, this was wrong, this was wrong.

‘Loki, do you want Mr Stark to leave?’

Tony flinched at Jarvis’ words – at what they implied, at the calm but grave tone. At the fact that Jarvis had, for the first time ever, called the trickster by his first name.

Trying to reach him.

But Loki didn’t react, not even his eyes did, he didn’t move his legs, nothing. Absurdly, his breath had evened out.

‘Should I go away? Do you want me to go away, Loki?’

Nothing.

Shit.

Tony had fucked this up, somehow, he had fucked this up, and he didn’t know what to do, what was he supposed to do? He felt tears coming, he felt his own quick breath, his throat so tight.

‘Jarvis?’ asked he, his voice trembling.

‘As far as my sensors can detect it, Mr Skywalker shows a slow pulse as well as slow and shallow breathing, Sir’ Jarvis said. ‘His symptoms share some similarities with the moments of absence he has experienced on the Mantis and in this tower before, but the differences are too significant to suggest that this is the same state. His symptoms are also consistent with defensive immobility and disassociation, probably part of a post-traumatic flashback. This is, considering all data, the more probable scenario.’

Shit. Tony grabbed his head in his hands. Shit. He breathed in, breathed out, it hurt, his vision was narrowing, he bent down to the trickster.

‘Loki? Please!’

No one there.

He took Loki by the arm, he flinched underneath him. Not much, barely noticeable. No other response. The eyes stayed half-closed, devoid of expression. Tony withdrew his hand immediately.
‘Okay, okay, no touching’ said he, blinking away tears. Fuck. Fuck. ‘I – I get it, no touching’

Then why did he do this again and again? He should have understood by now that touching was difficult. He should have! Fucking instincts telling him to grab everything!

He moved away from his crouched position over Loki, moved next to him on the mattress.

‘Is… is being close to you still okay? Or… or is-is that bad too? You have to help me out there, Loki, just give me signs. Just give me a sign, Lokes… anything…’

Nothing.

Just nothing.

‘Do you want me to call Mr Banner, Sir?’ asked Jarvis. ‘Or other professional help?’

‘No’ said Tony, then again. ‘No. That wouldn’t make Loki feel safe at all.’

A pause.

‘I agree’ said Jarvis, and then, ‘Sir, we cannot be certain how much Mr Skywalker is aware of his surroundings, but it seems safe to say that he is able to register touch. Judging from his reactions, I think it best if you would not touch him again, as long as Mr Skywalker is in this state. Some bodily distance might be recommended.’

You mean that it was me who triggered him, don’t you, Jarvis? You mean that it is me whose fault this is.

Tony scrambled off the bed. Everything was too close. Why did he have such a small bedroom? Vision too narrow, he felt sick.

‘Of course’ said he. ‘Sorry. I’m sorry.’

‘You could not have forseen this attack, Sir’ Jarvis said. Couldn’t he have? ‘Mr Skywalker gave clear consent and showed no obvious signs of distress at first.’

Hadn’t he? Or had Tony just not looked, and Jarvis was dutifully reassuring him, now that the damage was done?

‘I believe he was taken by surprise by the attack as well.’

No kidding.

‘And I would like you to assist me. Are you willing to do that, Sir?’

‘Of course’ said Tony, at the same time, he felt he could finally breathe out. ‘Of course.’

‘Thank you, Sir’ Jarvis said. ‘To your left is a closet, Sir. Please open it.’

‘Yes’ said Tony, and went to the closet, opened the doors.

‘To your right, there are several cubicles, Sir’ Jarvis said. ‘In the uppermost cubicle, you will find a red satin blanket. Please take it out and repeat to me what it is, Sir.’

Tony was still struggling with his vision, but he found the blanket, and he knew what Jarvis really wanted from him. They had been there often enough.
'I’m holding a red satin blanket’ said he, narrowing his eyes at the soft and light cloth. ‘Actually, it’s rather a deep orange. Why are you saying that it’s red, Jarv? That’s not red at all.’

‘Very well observed, Sir’ said Jarvis patiently.

Yes, I know you did this on purpose, Jarv.

‘I’m holding a deep orange blanket’ said Tony. ‘That I took out of a deep brown closet. I’m standing on deep brown parquet floor, covered by a deep purple carpet. My bedroom is just a fest of dark colours, isn’t it? Don’t answer that question.’

‘You are doing very well, Sir’ Jarvis said. ‘Please cover Mr Skywalker with the blanket now, Sir’

Maybe Tony had expected Loki to have moved by the time he turned back to him. For something to have changed. But Loki was still lying there, his arms next to his body, his face fallen to the side. Empty.

Nothing had changed at all.

And just like that, his stomach dropped again.

Because this was… this was…

He spread the blanket over Loki’s naked body. This time, the god didn’t even flinch.

‘Very good, Sir’ Jarvis said. ‘I believe it would be best if you stayed in the room, Sir. Maybe you could talk to him, but if you feel not able to, do not concern yourself about it, Sir. I will talk to him, and if my databases are correct, Mr Skywalker’s state will pass, no matter our actions now.’

‘Alright. Alright.’

Tony collapsed against the wall on the floor, putting his face into his hands, pressing the heels of his hands against his wet eyes.

‘Alright’ said he, but he couldn’t find anything to say. He wasn’t even sure why this whole thing took him apart so much. He knew about PTSD, about panic, about flashbacks. He had seen Loki in worse states than that. In a way.

In a way, he hadn’t.

And it happened, when they… just when they…

And it had been okay, at first. Loki’s lips had been flushed, he had moaned, gasped. He had enjoyed himself, Tony was sure, he was sure! And then, this moment, when it had just… shifted… just like that… and this moment, that had supposed to feel so good, so safe, just shifted, and turned into…

He heard himself sob.

‘I’m sorry’ said he. ‘I’m sorry.’

He heard Jarvis’ voice, talking to Loki, but didn’t listen. He kept hiding his face in his hands like the coward he was. Then Jarvis grew silent. Maybe he had realised that talking was not the right strategy. Maybe he was ashamed for his creator.

Tony hit his head against the wall behind him until it really hurt.
After that, he felt better. In a way.

He felt a bit cold.

He glanced at Loki. The god had still not moved.

Until Loki’s fingers twitched, then his toes. And then the trickster very abruptly sat up, the blanket slipping from his upper body.

‘Loki?’

Loki’s face was hard, impenetrable.

‘This bores me’ said he in a voice that was so disinterested he could have talked about taxes.

He stood up as abruptly as he had sat up.

‘Loki?’ asked Tony again.

Loki didn’t look at him, his gaze barely more present than before. Everything about his posture was stiff, tense. He glowed as he summoned his armour, then, without another word, glowed, and was gone.

Tony stared at the empty space where the trickster had just been.

‘He… he has left the tower, hasn’t he, Jarvis?’

‘Yes, Sir’ Jarvis said, and then, after a pause, ‘I’m sorry, Sir.’

Fuck.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

He hit his head against the back wall a few more times.

‘It’s not your fault, Jarv. It’s not your fault.’

This was bad. This was bad. Even Jarvis knew.

Chapter End Notes

Shit.
Fenrir

Chapter Summary

Loki and Fenrir have a stroll on Vanaheim. Also, Fenrir has a really good nose.

Chapter Notes

'HOLD ALL HORSES I GOT FANART HOLD ALL HORSES!
Namely, wonderfully pretty fanart by the great Colin_Solowjow!
This is what they drew for the first Chapter: Scavengers on DeviantArt
And they made a drawing for "What It Means To Touch" that gives me a good mood whenever I see it, so you must see it too, and praise the artist: The Prestige, by Sainth91, on DeviantArt
Thank you so much, Colin Solowjow!
Seriously, receiving fanart makes me ridiculously happy and gleeful! And I'm already pretty ridiculous to begin with!

That said, sorry for the long wait. My life was busy, and so was my Beta's. This batch will have 4 chapters, but the next batch will not be long behind, since it just needs to be beta'd and then it's ready :).
Also, my Beta is literally tearing apart the pages of my fic while betaing it (even though they like it), and their comments are getting weirder and weirder, so I might have broken them.
Eh, happens.

Soundtrack: Silver Soul, by Beach House

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The fur was coarse, he buried his cheek deeper in it. The heat was agonizing as always, eating at him, but he was used to that. He fisted his hands in the strands, clinging to his own son like a child to their parent.

Pathetic.

‘You do not look well, mother’ Fenrir said, looking at him.

Fenrir tended towards cautious and mild wording.

Loki forced himself to smile, reached out and carded his fingers through his son’s fur. They were standing on the hill on Vanaheim they liked to visit most – there was no settling anywhere in a distance of a day long hike, and beneath them, the woods and meadows stretched out in every direction.

‘Do not concern yourself about me’ said he, his other hand opening and closing at his side. ‘And I am happy for being with you.’
He had fled here, as if it was Fenrir’s duty to bring him comfort.

No, he had had a quest to complete here, and he had not visited Fenrir in person for far too long.

‘I have neglected you’ said he. Had left his children alone, had abandoned them in their imprisonment, almost forever. Who would they have left but each other, once he was gone? But there was Hela, she save the others.

Paying what price?

He was shivering, he noticed. Feeble glamour. So much heat. The wind in Vanaheim was cool, concentrate on that. Concentrate on the dream.

Focus on the present.

Fenrir stepped closer, until he was almost standing leant against Loki, dwarfing him with his giant body.

Frost giant. At least partly frost giant.

Loki’s breath hitched.

No, his children. Just his children. He refused to think…

‘You have accepted the human’s hospitality, I see’ said Fenrir, cocking his head. ‘It has been a long time since you accepted anything alike.’

So Fenrir had found out. Loki should have known – Fenrir had learned the art of literally sniffing out thoughts a long time ago, they were together in a dream, both of their minds more open to the other, and if anyone could take up the scent of the quietest creatures of the mind, it was him.

‘It has been a long time since anything alike was offered to me’ said he cautiously. No matter that the mortal had not actually known what he had given away.

Fenrir didn’t answer at once. Following the trail of Loki’s thoughts that were wiggling away.

‘I should like to meet him’ said he then.

Loki stilled, furrowed his eyebrows.

‘It is just an alliance, Fenrir’ said he. It was. That was all it ever could be. ‘A temporary beneficial arrangement at best.’

‘Mhm’ Fenrir simply said, and what did he mean by that? Loki was about to ask, when Fenrir added, matter-of-factly, ‘Hela is angry with you.’

Oh.

Yes.

That.

‘I… imagine so’ said Loki. He did.

‘She felt your soul leave your body when the Bard’s Song killed you’ said Fenrir. ‘She felt you die.’
‘I know’ said Loki. He swallowed – that was one of the challenges of having her as a daughter. But she had to accept that Loki would not…

‘She felt your soul draw nearer to her realm, when the last thing she wanted to do was to accompany you to your final rest’ Fenrir continued. ‘And then you simply left that path. Were lost and gone.’

‘It was not my choice’ Loki said.

‘She is aware’ Fenrir said. ‘It still affected her deeply, as you can imagine.’

‘I can’ Loki said. His voice was tight. He had thought about it, in his captivity. About how it must have looked like for her. Souls getting lost on the path to Helheim… there were not many reasons for that to happen, and none of those scenarios were good.

‘She is not angry that you got lost, she is angry that you have not spoken to her since. Obviously’ said Fenrir, with a slight roll of his eyes. ‘Not even in a dream. One might think that you are avoiding her.’

Hela was… a daughter Loki took considerable pride in. Unfortunately, part of the pride he took in her was her anger being a force to be reckoned with, especially when it was directed at him.

Loki chose not to answer, casting down his eyes instead. And what should he say?

They all knew what kind of parent he was.

He had only used a single verse of his Song for his children. Half a sentence, that was all he had dared. A too egoistical demand – that they be freed. So he had only mentioned them in passing in his ballad – had exclaimed that this war against Thanos had changed so much, it had changed even the role of Loki’s children forever.

Change.

The norns could do with it what they wished.

Change was at least something they cherished. And stagnation was what entrapped his children now.

‘It took you a long time to recover from the Song’ Fenrir said after a while. ‘And even though you have enough strength to travel here now, I can see you have still not yet fully recovered.’

What did it matter? The rotting was still retreating. The pain was manageable now. Most days.

‘I am well enough.’

He had to get better.

‘Even though you talk to him in dreams, you have not visited Jörmungandr in person either since you returned from the void’ commented Fenrir.

Loki leant into the other’s body. Pathetic.

‘I know’ he said. ‘I’m sorry.’

‘Hela is angry – Jörmungandr is not’ Fenrir said. ‘He is worried. So am I. There must be a reason that you did not make the journey.’

Of course there was.
‘It is just a passing inconvenience’ said Loki, trying hard to push away the memory of Thanos’ fingers penetrating him, moving inside him. ‘Some of the wounds I received simply make it a challenge for me to truly shape shift. And… it is difficult to visit Jörmungandr without shape shifting.’

He needed gills, at the very least.

‘I am working on it’

He was. Sometimes, he succeeded at transformations, even at holding them for a while. But his attempt to turn into a snake the other day had left him spasming on the ground.

‘I’m sorry’

I’m sorry I’m healing so slowly. I’m sorry I let this stop me.

Fenrir was silent and Loki only heard him breathe, in this growling, rough way that had always been his nature.

‘It takes a deep wound to affect an ability that is so close to your very core’ said Fenrir then, and for a moment, Loki regretted having taught him so much, about magic, their mage bodies, the world, everything. But of course he regretted nothing.

‘I have not come here to pity myself, Fenrir’ said Loki. ‘Let us run.’

And so they ran, both in the shape of wolves, for in the dreamscape, Loki’s body was free to do as it wished. They ran through the woods, the twigs breaking against their sides and crushing beneath their feet, they jumped over creeks, and raced over meadows, exploring that part of Vanaheim they knew so well they barely had to mind their surroundings. The part of Vanaheim they loved so much because Loki remembered every leaf and every fox hole, because this was where Hatchet lived.

Loki’s memories of places had always been always sharp, detailed – from early childhood on, he had possessed a good memory and he had taken care to train it ever more after his children were bound, had taken care to travel ever further, to discover ever more new realms, to take them in in all their complexity, a gift to bring home later. For what else could he still give them but the whole world rebuilt in a dream, through which they could journey at their leisure when in reality, they could go nowhere?

In the end, it was just another story. Just another lie.

He was good at those.

But here – except for Asgard – the memories were the sharpest, crafted and shaped in hours upon hours of walking through the forest with Hatchet at his side. Of course, this was probably not how the woods looked by now. Loki had not been in Vanaheim for years, except in order to quickly and secretly retrieve artefacts and materials. They were the woods of his youth, the woods of his adventures, the woods of those precious weeks or months he had spent away from Asgard, away from Odin’s and Heimdall’s ever-wary gaze, the court’s whispers, Thyr, his peers. Maybe it was the happiness that the memory of this place was filled up with that made Fenrir prefer it, even when Loki was not there to accompany him.

Probably, it had to do with Hatchet sometimes turning up because he was currently dreaming too.

The earth shook underneath Fenrir’s paws, as he flung himself forward in a jump, and Loki jumped after him, in the real world pressing his face deeper into the side of the sleeping body next to him, his
magic struggling to keep his own body moderately cool. In the dream, Fenrir laughed, as he always did after running for a while – in reality, Sutr’s sword was driven through his mouth, magically sealing it shut.

A muzzle.

When Odin had told Loki what he had done, all those centuries ago, in Loki’s quarters on that awfully sunny day, Loki remembered he had not even screamed. His mind had supplied the pictures to the All-Father’s words at once, and instead of fighting or even just arguing for his son, however useless it would have been, Loki’s jaw had locked and he had been, from one second to the other, unable to open his lips. As if the threads had never been removed. Loki had almost wished then that this inability to speak had been a curse, another one of Odin’s punishments. But of course there had been no curse involved. It had only been his own body betraying him, as it would, again and again, betray him later. Odin had spoken on that terribly sunny day, in that well-lit room, had spoken of mercy, of having put the wolf into a magical sleep, of a painless wound, of the monster not even being aware of its chains. Of having done this for Loki, even though Loki was clearly mad for thinking of these creatures as his children. They were not babies born naturally by a woman, Odin had said, they had had been a sickness, parasites, growing inside Loki’s body and clawing and biting their way out, drinking their host’s blood for sustenance afterwards. They had been killing Loki, and if Odin had found him only a little later, they would have surely succeeded. They were the last curse of Angrboda on this world and Loki their first victim, his punishment for her demise. With time, Loki would see. He would see that he had fallen for trap made especially for him, by someone who knew him and knew where he was weak; the cruelest trap because it made him condemn and demean and torture himself, carrying out Angrboda’s sentence and punishment for her. He would see the truth of those creatures, their purpose that was nothing but death, destruction, humiliation. He would thank Odin for his intervention, for his great mercy where none was deserved. For Odin had given the creatures who should have been slain on the spot a home, a life, a purpose. He would thank Odin for saving his life, his face even, once again, for he had been careful to keep Loki’s indignity a secret, which had been difficult for many reasons, just like the first time. But Odin had wanted to spare Thor the knowledge, at the very least, knowing how much he loved his younger brother, and Odin could not bear imagining Thor’s pain and heartbreak if he knew the truth. It was bad enough that Loki had done this to his mother. So no one but Frigga and Odin would ever know, and Loki would have the chance to regain his honour without having to suffer the consequences for his degradation. His brother would look at him with the same pride and affection as before. Maybe, one day, Loki would once more even deserve it.

Loki had said nothing.

He had said nothing for over two more weeks, his jaw refusing to open.

Failure.

‘Mother’

Loki noticed that he was panting, back in his Asgardian form, on his knees. He felt like burning, his lungs felt like on fire, the headache came too soon this time. Damn Surtr.

Fenrir approached him, the big wolf eyes looking down on him, his tongue hanging out, hackling.

‘Are you unwell?’

It is all just a lie, son. Your hackling is a lie, your open eyes are. In truth, you are lying in a cave deep in the ground of the moon Nidavellir, chained to Surtr, son of Muspelheim, and you haven’t opened your eyes in centuries. You will only open your eyes once Surtr frees himself and only that will free
you.

And then you will kill him, or be killed.

But you know all that.

‘Surtr seems to be getting hotter’ Loki said with a wry smile. ‘Maybe he has nice dreams too.’

‘No, Surtr is the same as always. It’s you.’ said Fenrir, frowning. ‘Your wards are weaker this time. You should go.’

Loki shook his head, stood up. His wards wavered because he let himself be distracted. He always failed because he was too weak to let the past go. It had happened then with Odin when he should have fought for Fenrir. It had happened again with Stark.

‘I will be fine’ said he.

Always, he failed, always, he stumbled. He should speak and found his jaw locked. He should enjoy the pleasure Stark was giving him, but his clumsy, broken mind slipped, fell, like from the Bifrost straight into the memory of Thanos’ hands.

He had lost time there. No, not really. He remembered Stark pleading with him. It was such a strange, indecipherable state, when everything that happened was there, but so far removed. When everything that happened to him lost significance. When the Other’s claim that he was just a thing to be used suddenly held so much truth, and it had been a relief, because even the pain had lost significance then. Then, when he had truly surrendered his body, abandoned it, and gone somewhere else.

Where?

He had no idea. To this numb place where he barely registered the panting, the moans, the skin slapping against skin, because it felt like it concerned someone else, not him. Where he barely registered Stark’s pleas.

Where he could not move, not even a finger, where his body didn’t respond whatever he did. Where his body betrayed him so deeply (protected him… condemned him).

Stark should never have seen him like that.

‘Mother’

Loki shifted his eyes back to Fenrir. Don’t look at me like that.

Loki felt his hands twitching. He felt his face twitching.

‘Something has happened to you, hasn’t it?’ Fenrir asked, eyes locked on him. ‘Something the mortal did.’

‘Nothing has happened to me’ Loki said quickly. Sniffing out his thoughts again. Coming to the wrong conclusions however. ‘And nothing about it was Stark’s fault. Do not dare to blame him.’

It had been just his mind, falling apart.

‘Mother’

You won’t let this go, will you?
'Let us run again’ said he. He felt like running. He felt like fighting, like slashing through meat and viscera. He felt like running, and running, and running. He felt like screaming, screaming, screaming.

He felt like throwing up.

Fenrir’s frown deepened, ‘I think you’ve-’, but he interrupted himself, his ear twitched.

‘Do you hear that?’ asked he.

‘What?’ said Loki and then realised that Fenrir was talking about reality, not the dream. The wolf could in his own way sense the world, despite his sleep.

And he heard it himself. The drums.

Ah. They were already looking.

‘Ah. Yes. I might have used the occasion of the visit to take a little something’ Loki said, making an effort to smile. ‘Don’t worry, they won’t catch me.’

Then he added, at the angry flash in Fenrir’s eyes, ‘This time.’

‘Liar’ growled Fenrir. ‘They are the dwarves, they know you. And you have wasted precious time with me, you incorrigible dolt. Now GO!’

Loki grimaced, but it was true, the drums were getting louder.

Maybe it was time to show himself out now while he was still able.

If he still was.

Chapter End Notes

Nidavellir is not the MCU Nidavellir, Hela is not MCU Hela and Fenrir is not MCU Fenrir. I’m going into a different direction there – though I do wanna use the MCU dwarf bodies that are fucking huge. That was a nice touch.
Doctor Natasha’s Sex Advice For All Creation

Chapter Summary

This chapter is really not as light as the title suggests. But Nat answering awkward questions of sexually confused human or non-human teens would be kind of entertaining. Take it as a prompt, if you like.

Chapter Notes

Continued trigger warnings for discussions of rape/non-con. All of that will pop up again and again, for obvious reasons.

Doctor Tatiana’s Sex Advice For All Creation – this good book!

Gorillaz - Kids with Guns. Another beautiful frostiron song.

He had just gone make himself a damn cup of coffee. He had not even noticed her until Nat had cleared her throat.

Granted, Tony didn’t even know how he had ended up in the community kitchen on the common floor in the first place. He remembered Jarvis talking to him while he was sitting leant against the wall of his bedroom, sobbing alternating with hyperventilating. He remembered Jarvis doing the colour pattern routine, talking him through calming his breathing, offering to call Pepper or Rhodey or Bruce or anyone. He remembered saying no to that, sobbing some more, feeling drained and exhausted at some point and Jarvis suggesting washing up a bit and then drinking heavily sugared coffee or a coke.

Jarvis was a good guy, all in all.

He probably had not told Tony to go to the community kitchen though. Tony had done so anyways. Subconsciously seeking company? Who knew – his mind was a mess on his best days, and this wasn’t one of them. Definitely not.

And he should probably have noticed the assassin in said community kitchen somewhere between him entering it and her having had about fifty-two occasions to kill him.

Especially since Nat had not even been hiding, but, as it happened, had simply been sitting at the table, her feet on said table, nursing a cup of tea (in the dark, yes, but Nat was creepy like that, a bit like Loki, how could they be so similar in some respects, but thinking about Loki was not a good idea at all).

Tony, of course, jumped out of his bones when he finally noticed the Widow.

Then made himself a new cup of coffee because he had splattered the other one all over his t-shirt, and sat down at the table too.
‘Fucking menace’ said he and took a big gulp. The new coffee was too hot and he burned his tongue. He spit it back in the mug.

‘So there was trouble with Loki’ Nat more stated than asked.

‘What?’ Tony asked and suddenly let out a short, shrill laugh. Those blank eyes. The slight twitch when Tony had touched him. No other reaction. ‘Trouble with Loki? Nah, never. What makes you think trouble with Loki would even be a possibility?’

‘Your face’ Nat said. ‘It looks like your favourite puppy died on it and its corpse was left lying there for a week that you kept trying to ignore it.’

‘The dead puppy’s not your business’ said Tony, and drank from his mug again, damn the spit in the coffee and his hurting tongue. Damn Nat and her acute perception. Only Pepper was allowed to notice these things. Then again, how obviously wretched was he right now?

‘So it’s about sex then’ Nat said.

‘It might be a surprise to you, but there are more things in my life than sex that are not your business’ said Tony, wavering between exasperation and the slight relief this familiar annoyance was bringing him. ‘In fact, if my life and things that are your business formed a Venn diagram, the circles would be barely touching. Not that you would ever acknowledge that in any way, creepoid.’

‘Did you try topping him’ Nat said, ignoring his retort completely, but looking at him a bit too closely, he found. ‘Did that go wrong?’

‘Have you hacked Jarvis again?’ asked Tony and narrowed his eyes.

Nat just looked at him blankly.

She had never, as to his knowledge, managed to hack Jarvis until now (nobody had, though Loki’s attempts were definitely getting better), but the way she seemed to know things still made that theoretical reason infinitesimally less scary than the others.

‘Anyways, my life, your business, barely touching, like I said. And what are you doing in the community kitchen in the middle of the night?’ asked he. ‘It is the middle of the night, right? There is not a giant space ship out there, causing an unnatural eclipse?’

‘It’s two a.m.’ said Natasha. ‘And there is no space ship. I’ve come back from my mission in Europe an hour ago, and I’ve been sitting here for about ten minutes of it, drinking tea, relaxing for a change.’

‘Nah’ Tony said, and took another gulp. ‘You never relax, that’s a myth. You were on mission? I kinda missed that.’

‘Yes, I was’ Nat said. ‘Not everyone gets to take it easy just because they are too useful in the war preparations. Also, Loki has a history with sexual violence.’

‘Hey, now I’m suddenly useful? I thought T’Challa could do my job and – wait, what?’

Natasha didn’t even bat an eyelid. She just kept looking at him, calm as can be.

‘What… exactly are you talking about, Nat’ Tony asked very cautiously. He had not just heard…

‘Rape’ said Nat rather dryly. ‘I’m talking about rape. I suppose you are familiar with the concept.’
‘Of course I’m familiar with the concept, Nat’ Tony exclaimed. This was not… this could not… ‘But what… you don’t even know him – why would you think…’

‘Body language’ said Nat easily. ‘The way he reacted to Thor’s bigotry, and what he said to him. The way he had sex with you the first time – he was very careful to have your consent-‘

‘You shouldn’t even know that and that could just be decent consent culture, that’s actually a thing, you know-‘

‘He was very careful at the same time to stay in control, to touch you, but to minimise your chances of touching him, he stopped before he came-‘

‘-that could have any number of reasons, that’s no-‘

‘So you have not noticed issues with consent, with control, during sex?’ Nat asked, one eyebrow raised. ‘What went wrong this time could not have to do with losing control at all?’

Tony opened his mouth, but whatever he had wanted to say stayed stuck at the back of his throat. The way Loki jerked each time Tony touched him remotely gently. Loki’s eyes, as they had widened, as his breath had quickened. Looking lost, confused. The way Loki had just… shut off…

‘Also, we already know he was tortured’ said Nat. ‘Rape is a very popular torture method, as efficient as it is uncreative and blunt, and likely even more efficient against a male member of a homophobic and patriarchal society. There was no reason not to assume that they hadn’t used this weapon.’

No. No, the way she put it, there really was no reason not to assume… and Tony had known the Other had been in Loki’s head, so he would have known about all the misogyny and homophobia, and… and yet Tony had, not one single moment, had that suspicion that… he hadn’t… their main goal was to break my mental defences… and how better to do that than to deconstruct such an important part of Loki’s identity, of his pride… he felt sick, he felt…

‘And then of course, Clint told me about cleaning up the rape trauma when Loki initially arrived. That was part of the memories he regained. So there’s that.’

Tony spit out his coffee again, this time on the table.

… fuck.

‘Both the nature of the physical trauma and what Loki said to Thor indicate that he was raped repeatedly in Thanos’ captivity, over a long period of time, by multiple assailants’ Natasha continued mercilessly. ‘And Loki said: a whole army had me. He probably meant his own army, the Chitauri. It’s plausible that they would let the general be fucked by his own soldiers – you know, so to make sure he doesn’t get the wrong idea about his role. But both his words and Norse mythology imply that this was not Loki’s first experience with rape either. Likely, we are looking at several traumatic experiences, maybe going back centuries, some of which have probably been caused by people very close to Thor, without Thor’s knowledge. Unwanted pregnancy might also have been involved.’

I know their cocks, because their cocks each pressed into my arse. I know the taste of them because they fucked me in my mouth until my throat was raw. They spread their sperm on my body and they pissed on me, and I was glad of it, because that’s who I am, Thor, a dirty little Ergi whore who wants it, who needs it.

And then there was the myth about Sleipnir.
Fuck. Fuck, fuck, *fuck*!

How could he have been so *blind*?

‘Why’ he breathed. ‘Why did you tell me this?’

He put his face into his hands, rubbing it. This was... shit.

‘This... this is private, Nat’ said he. ‘This is... if he does not want me to know, and he *clearly* didn’t want me to know... you should not... even if you knew, or guessed, you should not have *told* me, for fuck’s sake. Revealing stuff like that without asking the survivor first, this is... this is *not* an okay thing to do!’

Gods, Loki would not react well when he’d eventually find out.

‘My initial plan was for you to find out on your own’ Nat said between sipping at her tea. ‘There were enough occasions for you to understand. But you just didn’t seem to get the memo. I suppose living in denial is still an active hobby of yours, Tony.’

‘Very funny, Nat’

If only she wasn’t so *right*.

‘I couldn’t leave you there this time though, not even out of respect for the survivor’s privacy’ Nat continued. ‘You’re living in a sexual relationship with a latently suicidal, mentally and emotionally unstable and sexually heavily traumatised level 8 threat that we need to neutralise a...’

She furrowed her eyebrows.

‘Come to think of it, I don’t think they even have given Thanos a classification yet’ said she.

‘I suppose they are still debating how to quantify wanting to destroy all life in the universe’ Tony said and sighed. ‘Do they have a term for that by now? Biodicide still sounds agricultural. Yeah, and I kept fucking up said relationship with the latently suicidal, heavily traumatised level 8 threat slash ally. I get it, Nat. You’re creepy and cold about it, antarctically cold, but I get it. Fuck, Nat.’

Fuck.

He didn’t allow himself to think much more at the moment. He didn’t allow himself to replay every time Loki and he had had sex, or to replay their fight after Blondy’s bigotry diarrhoea, and what Tony had actually *said* then, and...

Fuck.

He should have seen this.

He probably had.

And had hurriedly looked away, just as Nat had said.

Loki stilling under his touch, as if he had been struck. And then going limp in his arms. The half open eyes, blank. The face expressionless.

Nobody there anymore.

And Tony knew this was a thing people did, a thing victims of abuse did. Shut off. Mentally go
away. Why had he been able to imagine all of those other forms of torture, but this one…

…because he had attributed the flinching to body memory of the kind of torture he himself had known. Yes, he had thought of himself, of how he had been after Afghanistan. How long it had taken him not to jerk when Pepper hugged him, or touched him, or not to start hyperventilating when someone just entered a room and spoke too loudly.

He had not thought…

Tony stood up. He probably shouldn’t cry in front of Nat. Or scream. He was tired. He needed to think.

_I began young. I was barely an adult when I let the first one take me. And I never stopped. I did it right under all of your eyes, defiled the palace with my depraved adventures, but you never looked, did you? You never wanted to know._

The hate in Loki’s eyes as he had spit all these obscenities into Thor’s face that were… probably the closest Loki had ever come to telling Thor what had actually happened to him. Again and again. What he had had to hide, because if anyone had found out...

_and your closest friends had me, one after the other, and I was begging for more. They never told you, did they? It was a secret between us, a dirty and sweet secret._

_I was barely an adult._


That had probably been a gang rape. Thor’s friends had gang-raped him.

And in the context of that society, they had not simply brutally violated him, which would have been bad enough, they had taken his manhood away, and because of that, Loki could not have accused them, ever, he could not have spoken about this. Ever.

He had been alone.

With this, he had been completely alone.

For how long?

_I began young._

Tony wanted to puke, he wanted to punch someone, he wanted to…

‘Shit.’

He wished he could drink. _I let beasts fuck me, mindless beasts_. Sleipnir. What if that myth was true? What if Loki had been violated by Svaðilfari too, in the shape of a mare, and had become pregnant? What if he had been forced, in a society where the worst dishonour for a man was to be emasculated, to give birth after a rape?

And all that had assuredly happened before Loki had found out that he was what Asgard considered a monster. That he had always had a vulva. That he was even less of a man than he had thought.

A lot of things must have slid into place in that moment. A lot of things must have, in Loki’s mind, made suddenly an awful kind of sense.
He had just always been treated like the abomination he was. Not a man. Not a woman. A monster. An ugly and despicable half-breed. Only good for one thing, apparently.

No wonder he had lashed out.

No wonder he had let go.

Only to land in the hands of Thanos and the Other. Who had stuck their fingers into his mind and raped him even there. Had penetrated his thoughts, his feelings.

Amongst the other things they had done.

‘Fuck, Nat’ he said. ‘This is bad. This is bad.’

Bad wasn’t even covering it.

To suffer all that and survive… because Loki had survived.

All of it.

He had bloody well survived.

Tony knew he had had this thought before, but Loki’s ability to survive whatever this universe threw at him continued to surpass his, by now pretty wild, expectations:

How strong was this guy, really?

How fucking resilient?
And Loki laughs

Chapter Summary

Is that a good sign? I don’t know if that’s a good sign.

Chapter Notes

Do I wanna know, Arctic Monkeys

There are pretty graphic descriptions of pretty nasty (and unrealistic) injuries in this chapter. Also, Tony is American, but also a scientist (and he likes annoying people, especially his other board members, by using a scale they’re not familiar with), so, just a reminder, my version of him uses the metric system and Celsius.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Tony went back to his quarters after his conversation with Natasha. He felt empty, sick, tired, even more so than before. The thought of locking himself in the workshop and burying himself in code had come to him once, briefly, and he had winced at it as if slapped.

No, don’t do this.

You have been running away from this truth for far too long.

For far too fucking long.

So he opened the door to his bedroom again, struck by the smell of sex and sweat that didn’t arouse him anymore but rather made him feel…

He opened the windows, changed the linens himself for once, then had no idea where the laundry dump was and just threw the dirty linen in the bathroom, closed it, fuck. His hands were trembling again, his breathing was short.

It was hot outside, even during the night, and Tony closed the window again, stretched himself out on the unmade bed. Stared at the ceiling.

Feeling like an asshole.

Is that why you won’t let me top?

And when Tony had said those stupid words, just easily assuming that Loki was as bigoted as the rest of the ass guards, Loki had looked, briefly, disappointed.

Then he had, smoothly, adapted to Tony’s expectations.

Shit.
Both the nature of the physical trauma and what Loki said to Thor indicate that he was raped repeatedly in Thanos’ captivity, over a long period of time, by multiple assailants.

Had even the bodily wounds ever healed completely? Was it even physically possible for Loki to feel pleasure at being penetrated by now, or was it just painful?

But he had looked as if he had enjoyed it. For a while.

A lie?

Tony turned to the side.

Clint had seen the scars, the wounds. Loki had taken away the memory.

Loki had given it back.

Why would he do that?

To pay his debt.

But at such a high price? And that it must have been, for someone like him.

It seemed improbable.

The analytical part of Tony soberly noted that this at least explained Clint’s recent and rather strange change of behaviour. He had gone, abruptly, from being openly hostile to being very quiet around the god, following him with his troubled and pensive gaze but seldom commenting, and walking out of conversations at the oddest moments.

It explained why Loki had started actively avoiding Clint after giving him the memories back, which he hadn’t before.

Clint had come to Tony, once, after regaining his memories, had awkwardly shifted his weight from one foot to the other, and had then abruptly said, ‘Loki is not eating enough.’

And Tony had been confused, had said, ‘Yeah, I know’, because he had just then finished the analysis of the last few days of Loki’s calorie intake, and the result had not been satisfactory. Loki drank the protein shakes, yes, but only those with a relatively low percentage of protein. If that percentage breached a certain threshold, Loki sipped at them once and then left them standing.

That was… inconvenient.

And Clint had stared at him, and Tony had said, ‘I’m working on it?’, and Clint had stared at him, and then said, ‘Good’, and had abruptly walked away.

And that had been weird, but Tony had been distracted by other problems, and had not thought about it further.

Right.

What other memories had Clint regained? What other weaknesses had Loki given up, just like that?
Should Tony ask the archer? Would that be another breach of privacy, or was Nat right and other things, like avoiding the worst triggers, took priority over that?

Did he even want to know?

And Loki had tried to prove it to him, maybe to himself, that he could, would be penetrated, hadn’t he? That he was over this. Only he hadn’t been. Failure, in Loki’s eyes? Likely so.

He felt himself crying, and if he should feel worried that he had gone from making a cautious alliance with a dangerous supervillain to crying over that supervillain, so… so what.

He felt sick of thinking that way. He felt sick of contracts, of business relationships. In a way, he was sick of thinking about this as an *alliance*.

But that was, of course, a stupid thought.

He had understood back then, on the Iron Mantis, that Loki had mental health issues, that he was unstable, that he was *dangerous*. Like, really, fucking, destroying you completely dangerous. He had known then what he could maybe have from Loki and what would never be possible. The trap he must never allow himself to fall into.

And if anyone could do this, take just what was offered, what was possible, and not delude himself that he could get more, it was him, right? He had learned after Obie. Hell, his whole childhood had been one long and dreary lesson of how fruitless it was to chase after love and acceptance where there was no chance for getting it.

The only reason he had allowed this relationship to become physical was that he had trusted himself always to see those limits, and respect them.

This affection that felt like so much more… that was just hormones, just biology. The pain just him being a decent human being, horrified by… all of this.

So he was crying.

So what.

It were just tears. It didn’t mean he was blinded to the truth – that whatever horrible stuff had happened to Loki, however Tony admired his strength, his intelligence, however he enjoyed his laugh, however he tried to make the god take better care of himself, Tony could never, ever allow himself to… to…

Maybe Loki wouldn’t come back in any case.

Tony had pushed him, and when Loki was pushed to extremes… maybe he would destroy another planet. As if, Tony thought with a hard laugh. He knew perfectly well what scenario was the most probable.

Gods.

Shit.

Shit, shit, shit.

Shit.
He fell asleep eventually.

When he woke up the next day, the memory of his conversation with Natasha was still there, as dry and sober as her voice.

And the vague sense of dread he was feeling in his gut had only gotten stronger.

Loki turned up four days later, in the middle of the night. And yes, Tony was sleeping at that moment, for once. His days had been exhausting, Pepper dragging him from one fund raiser to the next, from one board meeting to the next, questioning him in-between, what was wrong, why Loki had left, what had happened. Of course she noticed that he was off, everyone noticed. She was weird about it though; she even asked him whether she shouldn’t postpone all those meetings. But what for? It was at least a distraction. And he felt so tired in the evenings, everything weighing down on him; he knew he was counting the days since Loki’s disappearance, four days now. Tony really shouldn’t count the days since Loki’s disappearance; he hadn’t gone back to the workshop since the conversation with Nat at all.

So.

He was sleeping when Loki arrived, but he was still a light sleeper, and it didn’t take Jarvis long to wake him.

‘What is it?’ asked he, already pushing himself up. Jarvis seldom disturbed his sleep, and his voice had sounded just a slightest bit tense, which was never a good sign.

‘I thought I should inform you of Mr Skywalker’s presence in the medical faculties of the tower, Sir’ Jarvis said, still with that slightly tense voice. ‘Especially since he seems intent on using the equipment there.’

It took Tony, in his half-awake state, a small moment to translate Mr Skywalker to Loki, then he was on his feet in an instant, in his boxers in the next, having the vague feeling that running down there in the nude would be confusing for everyone.

‘Thanks, Jarv’ said he, slapping on his wrists the bracelets that could call his suit. ‘Has he teleported there? Is he injured?’

He never got better when he was away.

‘Positive, Sir, to both questions’ said Jarvis while Tony was first pulling on a t-shirt, then slipping into his shoes (never underestimate the advantage of shoes in a tight spot, he had definitely learned that particular lesson after the doom bot attack on the tower with the glass shards from the windows flying everywhere). ‘I cannot diagnose the exact trauma without the scanner he is trying to turn on at the moment, but Mr Skywalker’s body temperature is abnormally high, deadly for a human if I may say so, his posture is hunched over, and he has trouble walking and standing. There are severe burns on his face, especially around the mouth, and judging from his breathing, his lungs seem to be damaged.’

Oh, great. Just great. At least that vague sense of dread had not been plaguing Tony for nothing, that was good to know. Tony had known. He had known.
‘Let him prepare the thing, get my permission before you let him use it.’

Tony ran out of the room and to the elevator that Jarvis had thankfully already sent up. Inside, the doors closing behind him, Tony closed his eyes.

Think.

Why would Loki need the scanner?

It made no sense – he didn’t need to diagnose himself in order to heal.

Did he?

His heart was pounding, he noticed.

‘What’s the status?’

‘The scanner is powering up, Sir’ said Jarvis. ‘Mr Skywalker’s difficulties with standing seem to increase, but he does not look very distressed, Sir. On the contrary, his mood could be interpreted as something akin to cheerful.’

Something akin to cheerful. Whatever that meant. And it didn’t say much, did it? Loki had looked pretty happy while dying in Thor’s arms.

Keep a cool head. You did expect something bad.

You just wanted to be wrong.

The elevator arrived on the medical floor and Tony ran through the abandoned and dark corridors. He saw the open door from far away, the light inside.

‘Loki’ said he, as he ran in, then stopped.

The god was leaning heavily against the scanner, one hand typing on the control pad, one arm wrapped around his middle. Tony couldn’t see much of his face, bent down and half hidden by the machine, but what he could see was emitting a cloud of… steam?... his skin was grey in any case, and he could him hear breathing in and out laboriously, and with a terrible, grating sound. His armour was torn and blackened, bloody too, the whole room stank of burnt flesh, burnt hair, burnt everything. Ugh.

Oh, this was great. This was perfect. Another smell to associate with injured Loki. Was he gonna have to remove BBQ from his menu next?

But then Loki looked up, and Tony almost took a step back.

*Severe burns on the face, especially around the mouth.*

Well, that was one way of putting it.

The mouth was gone, that was another. What had remained was a gaping hole of red and black, lips gone as if melted away all the way up to his nose and a good way to his ears, revealing partly blackened teeth and jaw bone stripped of flesh. The mouth, or rather the naked jaw, was hanging open. The skin around the hole was burnt, blistered.

And Loki’s eyes… Loki’s eyes *were* a bit too happy for him to be entirely sane.
‘Okay, so you are both heavily injured and heavily scary’ Tony said after a pause. ‘Seriously, there are not many people who can pull that look off, but you certainly rock it.’

Loki let out a breath through his nose that almost sounded like a snort, and turned down to the control pad again, blinking. Swaying. His fingers tapped on it clumsily, smearing it red with blood. There was definitely steam rising from the trickster, hahah, steaming trickster. Shit.

‘He is trying to start the scanner, Sir’ Jarvis said. ‘Should I allow him?’

Tony very briefly went through alternative and less harmless uses for the machine, then fucked that thought process and said, ‘Yeah, go for it.’

The machine began to drone and vibrate with power, and the chamber opened, that small additional capsule made for diagnosing standing patients (built mostly that way because several Avengers, including Tony and Bruce, had this thing about hospitals and defencelessness and lying down, and at least Bruce’s preferences in that respect were better to be respected).

Loki stumbled into it pretty gracelessly, bumping into the doorway first and grabbing the machine tightly to keep himself from falling.

‘So I take it you don’t need help?’ Tony asked weakly, but the chamber closed already and then the scanner began whirring loudly, thudding rhythmically as the virtual image of Loki’s body created itself in 3D next to the scanner.

Tony was no expert but the image did look a bit weird. And troublesome. Since there was apparently a lump of foreign and unknown material in Loki’s body, according to the scanner, where his stomach and a few other organs should be, some of which were… missing? Tony wasn’t sure how to interpret it. And it was probably not that good that the foreign material had a core temperature of six-hundred and forty degrees? Probably not good, no. It did explain the massive burns, though, he supposed.

What had the idiot done this time?

The chamber opened again, and Loki stumbled out, holding onto the door frame with what appeared to be all his strength, the way he was shaking.

‘Loki, listen! I need to know whether I’m allowed to help you’ Tony said. He wouldn’t do it unbidden, not after what had happened the last time they had seen each other. ‘Just nod if I’m allowed to help’

Loki, ignoring Tony completely, lifted his head with what looked like a certain effort, stared at the 3D image as if it could tell him something important, his breath still grating terribly, but still with the same manic gleam in his eyes. Then he stretched out one hand (the pinky was standing away from it in an unnatural angle), and something like a green flame erupted from it, stretched snake-like toward the image, and Tony briefly wondered again if he should, in any way, intervene. But then, the snake-like flame already touched the hologram, the hologram glowed green for a moment, then was sucked into the flame, which was not possible or plausible at all (except: magic), and the flame retreated into Loki’s hand.

Loki shuddered, for a moment, and it was as if the green of his eyes burnt up.

‘What are you-’

Loki glowed, was gone, and in his place, a dark lump fell to the ground with a thud. A few metres away from it, Loki reappeared in a glow again, swaying, stumbling against the MRI, coming to rest
standing against it. Breathing loudly, raggedly, his eyes rolling up, holding onto the MRI, his legs shaking, obviously fighting with unconsciousness.

‘Lokes?’ Tony asked, but still didn’t move. Approaching the Lokes without his permission seemed more and more like a terrible idea. Calling for the other Avengers too. He wasn’t sure how much sense exactly the god had left, but he did look far closer to his feral, wild New-York-invasion self than to any other version of him Tony had come to know in the past years.

And Loki’s eyes rolled down again, managed to focus, shifted to the lump of… something like metal?… on the ground that was making the linoleum floor around it boil and bubble.

His eyes fixed on that lump, he stilled for a moment, and then he… laughed.

Or at least, Tony supposed this was meant to be a laugh.

It were grating, stuttering, aborted exhales, but his face moved as if he wanted to laugh if he had lips left, and his eyes did laugh, and they filled with triumph, with glee, and for a moment, Loki looked both utterly happy and utterly mad.

The next, his legs gave in.

Tony fucked his caution then and ran towards the god who had crumbled on the ground, crouching down next to him. Loki was either still laughing or he was suffocating, Tony wasn’t sure what it was. He wanted to turn the god on his back, only to retreat his hands with a hiss because he had burned himself on Loki’s clothes. And still the steam rising from that body.

Fuck.

‘Jarvis?’ he asked.

Loki’s shaking seemed to be subsiding, his eyes losing their focus, his face losing the manic expression.

‘Severe internal burns, Sir’ Jarvis said. ‘Both his oesophagus and his trachea seem to be completely destroyed, as are his stomach, pancreas and liver, an organ specific to his species, and a good part of his lungs. Several other organs, including the heart, are damaged or have ceased functioning. Considering this diagnosis, I am not sure how Mr Skywalker keeps breathing, Sir. I presume that there is magic involved.’

Magic, yes. Only Loki’s grating breathing was slowing, his eyes rolling up again.

Great. Just great. Yeah, why wouldn’t you destroy your organs a few months after having healed them from rotting? Why wouldn’t you use the first chance to take all that time of healing and getting better and just throw it away? Really, why not? That is just like you, you stupid dolt! (Tony belatedly realised that he was using an insult typical for Loki, not himself, then shoved that thought to the back of his head)

‘Jarvis, is Bruce in the tower?’

He had sent the Stuckies to his penthouse in Malibu, in order to force them to relax a little, so they were out of the picture. Natasha was on some secret SHIELD mission (again). Bruce…

‘Yes, Sir’

‘Wake him’ said Tony because he was fucking desperate, and had no idea what else to do. ‘Now.’
Bruce thankfully answered relatively quickly, and he sounded alert if still a bit sleepy.

‘What is it, Tony?’ his voice came from Jarvis’ speakers.

‘So, hypothetically’ said Tony, staring at the body next to him that had decidedly lost consciousness by now. ‘If you were to treat a patient with severe internal burns, how would you proceed?’

There was a pause.

Then, ‘Who got hurt, Tony?’

‘Just hypothetically-’

‘Is it Loki?’

‘… maybe.’

‘Where are you?’ Bruce sounded like he was moving while speaking; one could hear him panting slightly.

‘On the med floor, in the diagnostics room’ said Tony reluctantly. He had no real choice, he knew that. However he hated trusting anyone with Loki, if he didn’t, that would condemn the idiot just as well. ‘But I really can’t afford you hulking out right now, I-’

‘I won’t’ said Bruce quickly. ‘Stay where you are. Brief me on the way. I’ll be right there.’

‘Finally’ Tony muttered, when Bruce stormed in (still in his long-sleeved pyjamas), even though he was well aware that it hadn’t taken Bruce long to reach him at all. There had been barely time to tell him what had happened and convince him that alerting Clint (the only other Avenger currently on the premises, as it turned out), or anyone else for that matter, was a very bad idea. He had been lucky enough that it was night and a weekend and the one remaining emergency physician on-site was sleeping in another part of the tower entirely. And then Bruce already came to crouch next to Loki, automatically reached for his throat, ‘Don’t!’ , Tony said only a little too late – Bruce retreated his fingers with a hiss.

‘The 3D image is right there’ said Tony and pointed at the display. Jarvis had been able to recover it without trouble from his backup servers.

Bruce looked at it, with a kind of fascinated horror.

‘This is what was inside him’ said Tony, pointing at the grey lump that was still boiling the floor around it – and was sagging a little? (Was this thing still so hot it wasn’t even truly solid?)

Bruce stared at the lump with a less fascinated horror.

‘What… what do we do, Bruce?’ Tony asked. Even in the short time between Loki’s collapse and Bruce’s arrival, Loki’s breathing had gotten worse, more ragged. ‘In your professional opinion, what’s… what’s the treatment for people with injuries like these?’

Bruce’s eyes flickered from Loki, to the lump, to the 3D image, back to Loki again.

‘Bruce, talk to me, this is urgent, what’s the treatment-‘

‘Tony’ said Bruce, and pressed his eyes shut, and that was not good. ‘There is no treatment for
people with injuries like this. People with injuries like these are dead. There is nothing… half his organs are gone, Tony.’

‘They were before, or at least rotting or ruptured, and he survived’ Tony argued, this wasn’t that bad in comparison, was it? Only Loki was a Frost Giant and currently having a body temperature of ninety degrees Celsius. Which was probably… an issue. ‘What if you intubated him, at least – his trachea is damaged, that could help him breathing-‘

‘His trachea is not merely damaged, Tony’ said Bruce. ‘It’s not even there anymore. Burned out. There is nothing to intubate. Most of his lungs are gone. His body temperature alone should have killed him by now, hell, his blood should be boiling him. I really, really don’t know how he is still alive, Tony, but his trachea has absolutely nothing to do with it anymore.’

Tony opened his mouth, closed it again.

‘You can’t tell me-‘ The breathing was irregular, but still audible, still… and Loki had been worse on the Mantis, he had been worse. ‘Look, he’s clearly not human. He’s magic. And he is clearly not dead, Bruce.’

‘No, clearly not’ Bruce said, looking a little bewildered at the fact.

He breathed in, breathed out, closed his eyes briefly.

‘We need to bring his body temperature down’ said he then, sounding more determined. ‘Whatever his magic can handle, he is practically boiling, and that can’t help. We need to hydrate him for the same reason – he is losing liquid too fast.’

‘Okay, okay’ Tony said, kneaded the bridge of his nose, trying to get his mind to work, if only it wasn’t so fucking slow. At least Loki’s glamours were still holding, no sign of scars or malnourishment, that was a good thing, wasn’t it? It had to be. ‘Bring the body temperature down… way down in fact, below zero, and quickly, Jarvis, do we have anything that can do that?’

‘The med bay is not equipped for such measures, Sir’ Jarvis said. ‘You could use the freezer in the labs, but-‘

‘Too slow’ Tony interrupted. ‘But we’ve got liquid nitrogen?’

‘Also in the labs, yes, Sir’ Jarvis said. ‘The med bay is equipped with emergency heating blankets that are supposed to be filled with hot gas-‘

‘We will appropriate them, good thinking, Jarv’

‘What are you thinking?’ Bruce asked.

‘Get the heating blankets, fill them with liquid nitrogen, wrap them around Loki’ Tony said. Not the best idea he had ever had, but he was running with what his useless genius mind provided him once it truly mattered.

‘You can’t do that’ Bruce stated matter-of-factly. ‘The shock alone will kill him.’

Tony shook his head as he struggled to his feet.

He looked down at that grey-skinned, steaming body, at the eyes, just a slit open. But only the white was showing.
Was it just him, or were the movements of his chest getting weaker?

‘No’ said he. ‘He’s a frost giant, he’s got ice magic and all that shit. If there’s something he can definitely handle, it’s the cold. Get the heating blanket, do whatever else you think will help, I get the nitrogen.’

There was something else he could fetch.

‘Jarvis, total lockdown of the medical area, only I and Bruce are allowed access’ said he. ‘And implement Code Slumber Party again, don’t even let Nat in if she comes knocking. Right now, we really can’t use any intruders.’

Clint was sitting in the common room, playing video games because his nightmares were acting up again, had been ever since he had regained the memories – blocking them had been a kindness, Loki had said. Maybe not entirely without reason. But then Tony ran past the room, down the corridor, looking even more stressed out than the last few days.

‘Jarvis’ asked Clint, pausing his game. ‘What has happened this time?’

‘Nothing to concern you, Mr Barton’ Jarvis said.

‘Right’ Clint said, but he didn’t stand up, not yet. ‘This is about Loki, isn’t it?’

‘None of the Avengers are in danger, Mr Barton’

So Loki was.

‘Mhm’ said he. ‘You will alert me at once if they are, will you?’

‘Of course, Sir’

Nat had said that the AI was showing signs of growing fond of the trickster. Which meant it was not entirely to be trusted.

‘I will not harm Loki if not necessary, Jarvis’ Clint added, just to be safe. He would also not hesitate to harm Loki if it was. He guessed.

He wasn’t sure, in fact, not anymore (*I compensated for your weaknesses, Barton*).

‘Of course, Sir.’

‘Mhm.’

And then, a few minutes later, Tony came by the room again, his hands and arms covered in long, protective gloves, glittering and crackling from the insulating foil that seemed to be the outermost layer. He was holding a large container with one hand, and was carrying a… cradle?... in his other arm? A… battered, ancient-looking, wooden cradle? What on earth would Tony do with a… cradle?

‘…okay?’ Clint said, after Tony was gone.

Maybe he didn’t want to know.
(Loki in trouble, maybe injured, maybe not in his right mind. A liability)

He still had to find out, he supposed.

This couldn’t be it though. Could it?

This couldn’t be the end.

This was a stupid end.

Tony glared at the god who was still lying on the floor, wrapped in that cooling blanket now, his blue-skinned hand resting on the foot of the cradle that Tony had put next to him, whatever good that was doing.

Loki’s glamour had died while Tony had still been busy filling the blanket with the liquid nitrogen. Bruce had let out a hoarse shout at seeing the change, and Tony couldn’t blame him. He had forgotten how fucking skeletal Loki looked underneath the illusion. No, the trickster hadn’t exactly gained much weight, had he, despite all the smoothies. He had rather lost some, and wasn’t that a scary thought. And the dark scar across his face was certainly still there, still as sharp and strangely unhealed as the last time Tony had seen them.

However, with the blanket, they had managed to cool him down enough to prompt the change to the Jotunn form, so that was something. That had at least stopped all his bodily liquids from steaming happily away and stewing his flesh in the process. They had managed, using protective gloves, to get an IV into a vein, and interestingly enough, his body, despite the low surface temperature, had not frozen the saline solution they were trying to pump into him (magic). They hadn’t yet bandaged his wounds (a few cuts and a stab wound, but nothing serious), or treated his bone fractures (the left arm, the left pinky, the left shoulder, the right cheekbone, three ribs, the right ankle). It was difficult to handle the heavy, far too cold Jotunn body, and other issues had taken priority. A few broken bones and a stab wound that had neither damaged an organ nor prompted much inner bleeding or blood loss was not what Loki was going to die of, they both knew that.

Additionally, Tony had to be careful, now that Loki’s shape had changed. He knew he couldn’t afford Bruce to find out about Loki’s anatomy. It was bad enough that they had crossed this line once; he couldn’t disclose this to another person without the trickster’s permission.

Tony had put Loki’s hand on that stupid cradle. Because of course he had started looking for magical artefacts at once after Loki had told him about the Golden Fleece all those weeks ago (really, when had it been? He had always had that tendency to lose track of time and it felt like ages. It was summer now – what did that tell him?) – he would have been stupid not to, now that he knew that these objects of power were out there. But the only thing that he had been able to dig up, through auctions and inquiries and negotiations and more auctions, had been this cradle that was supposed to have been Hercules’ at some point, and that Tony had had stored in his vault in the tower ever since.

Well, Hercules had been pretty much unkillable, so that was something, wasn’t it?

Then again, hadn’t he died by burning alive in the end?

Gods damnit, all myths were depressing.

In any case, if it was really Hercules’ cradle, maybe it had seidr, and if it had seidr, maybe Loki
could use it.

Maybe since Tony had seidr, Loki could use that too, but Bruce had asked him earnestly if he had gone completely mad when Tony had suggested that out loud.

‘Apart from the bomb you just dropped about… you becoming a mage …Have you any indication that this will work?’ Bruce had asked, rather sensibly. ‘Or are you actually pretty sure that you will just get frostbite for your efforts? You said you were a novice in this, Tony.’

And no, Tony of course had no indication that just holding Loki’s frostbite-inducing hand would help anyone.

Or that he wouldn’t spontaneously explode if he tried to actively draw his magic out.

So he hadn’t done it. He was reasonable. Mostly.

He had sent Bruce to talk to Clint though, when Clint had demanded to be let in.

Maybe not that reasonable yet.

He might also have frantically called Thor, then Jane Foster, when Thor didn’t pick up (Loki would hate him for it, that much was obvious, but future Tony could worry about that). Jane had informed him that Thor was on Asgard right now, had promised to make sure Thor got the message about his baby brother maybe dying again, maybe not, Tony wasn’t sure, but that they shouldn’t expect him back soon.

‘Even if he departs right now’ she had said. ‘There is no saying when he will arrive. The Einstein-Rosen-bridge is only partly repaired, and Thor says that it is very unreliable. It will bring him to Earth, but he loses times on the journey – from a few hours to a whole week.’

Which was just so fucking convenient.

A whole week, for fuck’s sake.

That thing was fucking useless.

‘You really shouldn’t have wrecked that stupid Bifrost’ Tony said to the god who was lying there, unconscious (possibly fading away).

No, not fading.

Loki had, somewhat, stabilised. Whatever you called stabilising when a few of your vital organs weren’t actually working anymore. Well, he kept breathing and all that.

Tony knew of course that the glamour slipping was not a good sign. Not in this context.

On the Mantis, they had only slipped a few minutes before Loki had died.

No, shortly before Loki had decided to die, by singing the Song.

No need to worry, Tony told himself. No song this time, and Loki had been through so, so much worse.

They had done what they could. Had they? They hadn’t even properly bandaged him yet. And fuck, he really wished he knew whether it was safe to use painkillers on the guy. Now, all that remained was to wait.
The feeling of reassurance somehow didn’t come.

‘Also, you really wrecked my diagnostics room, Lokes’ said he. They had never brought Loki anywhere else. They had never had that time. ‘Everything is full of blood and there is a lump of metal melted into the ground. The whole place is reeking. The cleaning crew is so going to collectively resign when they eventually see it. I sincerely hope you are happy.’

The way Loki had laughed, with those ragged, aborted exhales, shortly before crumbling on the ground, he was.

Chapter End Notes

- It seems to me that there is a lot of Loki whump in this fic.
- Well, I like most of what Lise writes, so what do you want from me?
- … (*relives traumatic yet wonderful reading experience*)
Go Catch The Tiger By The Toe

Chapter Summary

If he hollers, let him go. One thing leads to another.

Chapter Notes

Miney Mick by Elektro Guzzi

Last chapter of the batch, but the next one will soon follow (in 1 or 2 weeksish, I hope).

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Jane called back at some point. It could have been an hour later, or more (or less), Tony was tired. They had removed the blanket because Loki had definitely cooled down enough – more cooling and his body would have broken the laws of physics again. They had finally taken care of the cuts and the fractures, setting the bones but using no braces – with Loki’s fast healing, they would be a nuisance rather than help – put him in a bed and transferred him to one of the secure hospital rooms. All that had not been easy, but Tony was at least used to handling material he really, really shouldn’t touch.

Bruce had been calm and professional through it all, telling Tony exactly what to do, how he could assist, guiding him through everything, Jarvis helping where he could.

Bruce had also, without complaint or question, accepted every single one of Tony’s unexplained orders that had everything to do with preserving Loki’s privacy and nothing much to do with anything else.

And that was one of the, admittedly many, reasons why there were few things Tony wouldn’t do for the guy.

Bruce was just… a really okay dude, all in all. A Rhodey-league okay dude. And that was saying something.

And now, Bruce was… somewhere… and Tony was sitting at a coffee table of what seemed to be a… nursing station?... rest room, drinking coffee that Bruce had brought from...Tony actually had no idea where the coffee machines were in this part of the tower… and his mind felt sluggish, his eyelids heavy.

He still felt uneasy about having left Loki alone in that room, but Jarvis was monitoring him closely, and according to Jarvis, he hadn’t worsened. Quite on the contrary, in fact. His breathing had gotten better. All his vitals had improved, and Loki’s body temperature had climbed back to touchable levels without that seeming to have any negative repercussions for him. Even his trachea seemed to have regrown partly, from what they could tell without scanning him. This was all pretty good news. And finally, some of that feeling of relief was making itself noticeable, and Tony felt almost ready to let all that tension go, and…
‘There is an incoming call from Jane Foster’ said Jarvis. ‘Should I put her through?’

‘Sure’ said Tony with a yawn and a dismissive hand gesture. ‘Go right on.’

‘Hi? Tony? It’s Jane again’ Jane’s voice came from the speakers little later.

‘Hi’ said Tony. ‘Are you calling to tell me Heimdall didn’t pick up the phone?’

When it had still looked bad, he had considered calling for Heimdall himself, for the fraction of a second. Then he had remembered that he was in the vicinity of the Lokes, and that there was a massive shrouding spell both over Loki and the tower – which Tony had consented to, for obvious reasons. Nobody liked an Asgardian peeping tom. But it was kind of inconvenient now.

‘Hell if I know’ said Jane, sounding noticeably irritated. ‘I’ve spent months yelling at that sky, after New York, never getting so much as a Hi back. One would think that they could combine broadcasting with the peeping, but no, it’s just creepy surveillance without any of the benefits.’

‘Yup, Asgard sucks even compared to Facebook’ Tony agreed. ‘And that is hard competition.’

The laugh that Jane let out sounded more like a hiccup, really.

‘I called because…’ Jane then began, her voice almost cautious. ‘I actually wanted to ask how Loki is doing.’

Tony’s eyebrows rose.

‘Checking up on the guy who tried to kill your lover boy?’ asked he.

‘Oh, give me more credit than that, I know by now that Loki is far more than that’ said Jane, almost sharply. ‘Even if he weren’t also my boyfriend’s brother!’

A pause.

‘Yeah’ said Tony then. ‘Yeah, of course you do.’

Another moment of silence.

‘I…’ began he, rubbing his eyes, then yawned once more. ‘I don’t know. He’s gonna make it, I guess. It certainly looks like it.’

He heard by her breathing out that she was actually relieved.

‘I’m glad’ said she. ‘And… and you? How are you holding up? You… the two of you are involved, aren’t you?’

Involved. Yes, that was probably not the worst way to put whatever this thing between Loki and him was.

Had become.

Just a little bit too involved.

‘He’s my ally’ said Tony, like he always did when people said things like that. ‘And we fuck.’

A pause.
‘Okay’ Jane answered.

Tony kneaded his forehead. Damn people always making assumptions… then he remembered something else. Jane’s cool voice when Tony had asked where Thor was and she had answered: in Asgard. And he had sent Thoreal to her, hadn’t he, after the idiot had vomited all that homophobic bullshit and…

‘Jane’ asked he. ‘Why exactly is Blondy in Asgard again?’

A pause.

‘I sent him there’ Again, that cool voice.

Oh.

‘You broke up with him again, didn’t you?’ asked he.

‘I suggested that some distance might do us some good’ said Jane, and then, ‘Look, it was either that or break my hand on his jaw.’

Tony chuckled a little.

‘And we can all agree you will need your hand more than he needs his jaw.’

Jane chuckled too, though it sounded a bit pained.

‘Jane’ said he then, more serious. ‘I’m aware I kicked Ronald Reagon out and sent him your way, leaving you with the real work.’

‘Look, what do you want me to say – Thor’s my boyfriend. You were right – I need to know what he’s thinking of me. I need to know when he’s being a homophobic, misogynist ass. This is nothing I should hide from. Frankly, I’m embarrassed it took me so long to realise that in some respect, he is…’

‘A good, upstanding American?’ Tony provided. ‘Considering who we have as president, I’m surprised he doesn’t have the citizenship yet-’

‘A dumb jerk’ Jane said. ‘So don’t be sorry for making me do work I should have done ages ago. I-‘

‘I apologise for the interruption’ said Jarvis just then. ‘But I should tell you, Sir, that Mr Skywalker is apparently waking up.’

‘What?’ Jane said.

Tony put the mug down on the table with a clonk. This wasn’t possible. This was way too fucking early.

‘You’re kidding me, right, Jarv?’ asked he. ‘You’re not actually saying that Mr. I Have Only A Fraction Of My Lungs And A Half Burned Heart is regaining consciousness already? Even by Loki standards, that’s implausible’

‘Affirmative, this is what I am saying, Sir’ said Jarvis, sounding completely serious. ‘Mr Skywalker’s heart rate has accelerated, his breathing has quickened, and his eyelids are fluttering. No kidding involved.’
By the time Tony arrived outside Loki’s room, the situation had already evolved from being unexpected but promising to shit happening far too fast.

‘What’s the status?’ Tony asked Bruce who was standing by the one way mirror, staring inside, worrying his lower lip.

‘He won’t respond.’

Tony turned to the one way mirror too.

Loki was awake, yes, he had even managed to sit up somehow. He was also panting rapidly, grabbing at his ruined mouth as if he didn’t, couldn’t understand that it was gone, that his chin was gone, the flesh of his cheeks, everything. He grabbed at the exposed jaw and teeth, reaching inside. His fingers showed underneath the jaw bone because there was no flesh there to stop them, nothing. Feeling for a tongue that was not there, his eyes wide, unfocused, coughing, almost as if he was trying to speak but couldn’t, oh shit, and they were right in the middle of another panic attack, weren’t they?

‘Patch me through, Jarv’ said Tony, and then, ‘Loki! Listen to me! It’s Stark, it’s Tony! You cannot talk right now, you are injured, but you are in safe place! Do you hear that? You are in a safe place!’

But like during the last flashback, Loki didn’t seem to hear anything. Instead, he lanced himself out of the bed, knocked over the cradle in the process, fell hard on the floor, ‘Please stay still, Loki’ Bruce said. ‘I told you, you are injured, please stay still!’

Loki somehow came to his knees, panting, in the process seemed to have discovered that his skin was blue, because he raised his hands, stared at them, eyes widening, ‘Heartbeat is accelerating significantly, Sir’, Jarvis said, ‘Oh, shit’, Tony said, and the next moment, Loki confirmed all his fears because after another sort-of cough, probably an aborted attempt to talk, or to scream, Loki, his eyes utterly mad, his face screwed up with disgust, hooked his long, sharp finger nails deep into the soft skin on the underside of his forearms, and tore.

And that was the point where Tony just couldn’t keep standing there anymore. That was the point where he yelled at Jarvis to let him in, then stormed into the room and towards Loki who was tearing up his arms like mad, already bleeding everywhere even though he was only using his frigging nails, ‘Loki, stop, you are hurting yourself, STOP!’, grabbed him by the shoulders, skin still so cold, and Tony had just enough time to see that there was no recognition in the crimson eyes, just fear, had time to think, oh shit, before something ripped right through him with sharp, white pain.

After that, it was weirdly silent. He felt stopped in his tracks, like something held him away but he wasn’t sure what.

Tony looked down.

There was… ice… pressed against his stomach … no, buried in him, he supposed… there was blood running over that ice, not much of it, not yet. Ice, connected to Loki’s hand somehow. A blade, Loki had conjured an ice blade.

Jotunn.

Frost giants had ice magic.

Right.
Loki had just run him through with a sword.

It didn’t even hurt that much. Adrenaline. Right. This… was probably bad. Tony supposed it was bad, since the blade was broad, and inside him. He wasn’t sure. He felt dizzy. He fell to his knees, having let go of Loki’s shoulders.

Someone was shouting, but he couldn’t make out the words. More blood running down the ice now, over Loki’s arm that was still connected to him through that… thing… the ice was transparent, he could see Loki’s arm, his blue skin, torn apart by his own fingernails, Loki’s own blood congealed in the ice… sort of beautiful, like two rivers, one on the surface, one underground… a feeling of pressure in his chest, a metallic taste at the back of his throat… there was no way, was there, that this broad, serrated blade had not hit something vital? Nah, no way at all.

Well, that was it then. He had screwed up.

Tony lifted his head with a bit of effort, to look at Loki, who was still staring at him without recognition, unmoving.

I’m sorry, he wanted to say.

Clint is going to win his bet after all, he wanted to say.

Somehow, he didn’t get his mouth to work.

So much pressure in his chest. As if something was pressing against his ribcage from the inside, as if something was ramming against it. As if something wanted to break out. And that wasn’t even where the blade had ripped through him.

That should probably worry him. That and…

…the world turning blue around him. Why blue? He felt hot. He shouldn’t feel hot, he had just been killed by a damn ice blade, gods dammit! If anything, he should be fucking freezing.

This was a stupid end.

This was…

And then, he felt something tear, something give, and it flew out of out of him in one blue and fiery wave. In sharp, ripping pain.

He heard the whisper before he was swallowed whole.

Music. Dance.

Chapter End Notes

I promise an appearance of Hela in the next batch… and that sounds kind of ominous, in the context of this particular cliff-hanger, doesn’t it? Ah, well…
That Sure Escalated Quickly

Chapter Summary

Clint confronts Loki and then has to face Hela. That does seem like the natural order of things.

Chapter Notes

Because my Beta is awesome, and I am an impatient person, I have the first chapter of this batch ready for you already today. Rest to come within the next days.

‘Sir, New York is not the best choice, strategically speaking’ Clint pointed out. ‘We should choose a less accessible place for the portal. The Antarctic seems appropriate, or the open ocean.’

Loki’s eyes were glassy as he stared at the screens, surrounded by his soldiers. His skin had a slight sheen. There was something wrong with their leader, Clint was sure of it by now. He didn’t know how he could have overseen it until now, but Loki’s movements were hesitant, too insecure. He didn’t react to movement that was too far to his right. Clint thought he could even detect a limp.

And his decisions were…

‘I have chosen New York, the tower of Anthony Stark, and so the tower of Anthony Stark it will be’ said Loki matter-of-factly. ‘Lancing the invasion in a city full of civilians will throw our enemy into confusion. And we need the power provided by the arc reactor for the tesseract.’

That was true, a voice in Clint said. They did need the power. That melody again. He liked it. He smiled.

‘Then we should get rid of our most dangerous enemies before’ he argued nevertheless. ‘I have enough information to sabotage SHIELD’s helicarrier and murder Natasha Romanov before Nick Fury has the time to gather his other assets, Sir.’

Loki looked up, and at Clint. As if he saw something in Clint, the glassiness drained from his eyes, the sheen from his skin disappeared.

‘His other assets?’ asked he, a mild expression of derision on his face. ‘More mortals, you mean?’

‘You should take the Avenger’s initiative seriously, Sir’ Clint said. ‘These individuals might not be a threat on their own, but if they manage to unite over a common cause, they are not to be underestimated’

‘Is that so?’ Loki said, and straightened himself up. ‘Heroes then, I assume. I know the sort, and I know how to handle them. We must merely… disunite them.’

He grinned.
‘I’m known to have quite a talent for that.’

‘I’m certain of that, Sir’ Clint said. ‘But we should still take out Romanov, and quickly. She is a threat, Sir, in every possible scenario.’

‘I value your advice, Barton’ said Loki, cocking his head at the archer. ‘But I have my own ideas, and I do think they are quite compelling. We should discuss them in private, I think.’

They went into one of the abandoned offices. Once there were inside, Loki sighed.

‘You are a persistent one, aren’t you?’ asked he. ‘In another life, I would have liked to have you under my command.’

‘I don’t quite understand your meaning, Sir, I—’

‘I really shouldn’t have to do this so often’ Loki interrupted him, sounding almost annoyed, and then his hands were already at Clint’s temples.

A blank. A melody.

They went with Loki’s idea, in the end.

* *

‘Clint, I need you, now!’

Bruce’s voice was panicked, breathy, and Clint was on his feet in a second, by the elevator in the next. He had never strayed far away from it, after Jarvis had sent him back up to the common floor, not having let him exit on the medical floor, blocking even the air shafts to that area.

But this time, the elevator was already open, waiting for him.

So it was serious then.

‘Loki has just attacked Tony’ Bruce said just as Clint stepped inside. ‘Not – not on purpose… I think. I – I don’t think he even knows that it is Tony… or where he is, for that matter. He’s still in the room we put him in, he looks damn disoriented and confused.’

A flashback then. Perfect. This was pretty much exactly what he had been afraid of.

‘Understood.’

‘Close quarters, Clint’ Bruce said, and Clint ditched the bow and arrows at once, got out his gun, his hands as steady as ever while the elevator was descending.

‘What’s the status on Tony?’

‘Unconscious, stab wound to the abdomen’ Bruce said, ‘Life threatening, from what I could see. And Tony has sent out some kind of… shockwave, something magic, I think, because apparently he has magic, and now his arc reactor is… pretty bright. Jarvis has already alerted the emergency services and the doctor on call in the tower, but I can’t let any of them access this floor before we’ve neutralised Loki. And we might have to operate right here. Tony will need treatment fast.’
Clint winced. And Tony meddling with magic? Nothing about this was good news (he should have fucking expected the meddling with magic part – that was just what Tony fucking I can meddle with anything Stark would do, the idiot).

‘And he’s still in that room, and Loki is crawling back to him’ Bruce said, sounding desperate. ‘But… but I can’t go in there, Clint – I… I had a really close call with the Other Guy just now, and me hulking out would probably… it would kill them both. I… I need someone who will keep a level head… and not shoot unless necessary. We really can’t need any more escalation.’

And Bruce turned to him for that? Jeeze. Clint had not exactly built up a reputation of keeping a level head around Loki, had he? Not even when Loki was currently not gutting team members.

But Bruce didn’t have much choice either, did he? Clint was the one who was there.

‘I agree’ said Clint. ‘Stay put. Try to get through to Loki. I’m close.’

Too many corridors, it took him too long. By the time he arrived, Bruce was pale and his face wet with sweat, and desperately talking at Loki who was, as to him, bent over Tony’s lifeless body, his hands on Tony’s stomach, a bright glow emitting from where his hands made contact.

And he… he was a mess.

‘Fuck’ said Clint, despite himself, staring at the skeletal body, the dark scars, the ruin that was the lower half of Loki’s face, his bloodied arms, before his eyes flicked to the expression of intense concentration in the trickster’s red eyes.

‘What’s he doing?’ Clint asked, wary.

The room was a mess too. The hospital bed, the IV, the monitors, everything overturned, on the ground, the window broken, glass shards whirling around in a miniscule tornado somewhere in a corner, a smell of something burnt in the air. The… cradle?… was lying overturned on the floor, otherwise strangely untouched by the havoc. Scorch marks on the walls the ceiling, the monitors, everywhere except that weird thing. The sheets of the bed were burnt to a crisp.

Tony was lying there limply, on his back, stomach covered in blood. Shit. The arc reactor was pretty bright.

‘Either saving him or killing him, believe me, I have no idea’ Bruce said, scratching his own arms in frustration (struggling to keep himself together).

Loki was healing him, Clint thought, but went in the room nonetheless, his gun raised, trained at the god, he couldn’t risk being wrong, ‘Loki!’ he said. ‘Sir! Look at me!’

This old way of addressing his commander had come instinctively to Barton, and he had decided to use it in the split second before he spoke. He wasn’t even sure exactly why he had. But Loki did look up, his red eyes locking on the gun at once, the expression in them turning from surprised to calculating in an instant.

So maybe his instinct had been a good one.

Loki didn’t lift his hands from Tony’s stomach though. The greenish glow persisted.

‘State mission goal, Sir!’ Clint barked. ‘Are you healing the target, or neutralising it? Nod for healing, shake head for neutralising. Answer now!’
Loki kept his eyes on him, but otherwise stayed still, neither shaking his head, nor nodding.

Not understanding him? Choosing not to answer?

Oh, fuck.

‘Stand down, Sir!’ Clint barked. If Loki didn’t answer, he had to step away. Clint was, by now, rather certain Loki wouldn’t hurt Tony in any relatively sane state of mind, if only to save his alliance. But sane was not how the god looked at the moment. ‘Step away from Tony Stark!’

Loki… didn’t. He did bend more closely over Tony’s body instead (a useless gesture to protect him? A possessive gesture? Something else?), the green glow intensifying. Loki’s gaze still fixed on Clint, but he could see no real recognition there, just a cold appraisal of Clint as a threat, so where did Loki think he was? Who was Tony to him right now?

Clint’s fingers tensed around the trigger.

‘Step away from him or I will shoot!’

Clint could barely see it behind the blinding light, but Loki definitely raised an eyebrow. Daring him, the little shit. Maybe recognising him after all. Then the light faded, however, and Loki broke contact, raised both hands in a gesture of surrender, turned to face Clint completely.

He looked even worse that way. His black, long hair was hanging down his sunken face wildly, this face that was full of sharp edges and shadows, with the dark scar still slashing right across it. His jaw was hanging open, with no muscles to hold it up, the blackened teeth, the blackened bones stripped off their flesh, pieces of flesh hanging from his face where it had not been completely burned away, giving him the air of someone very undead, very hungry and very angry. Clint could even see, with Loki’s rapid breathing, his trachea moving, an open, serrated tube back where there should have technically been a throat if more of the rest of Loki’s mouth had still been there.

And in that state, the good was looking up at Clint with narrowed, dangerously fiery eyes. It did not help that they were red to begin with.

Oh man.

This was so not the Loki Clint wanted to deal with right now.

Certainly not with Tony perhaps dying on them in the meantime.

‘Do you know where you are, Loki?’

Loki’s eyes flicked over to Tony shortly, then back to Clint. Clint didn’t make the mistake to follow the eye movement. But he could still see that there was no evident gaping wound on Tony’s stomach anymore. And he could still notice that the brightness of his arc reactor had increased. He thought he heard a hum.

‘Answer!’

The hum was getting louder, the brightness of the arc reactor too, throwing the flickering blue light on the walls, on the ceiling, on the god next to him. The glass shards whirling around in their corner took up speed. Loki’s eyes flickered to Tony a second time, back to Clint, was there nervousness in his expression, had his body tensed up? But he still didn’t fucking respond. Why didn’t he fucking respond?
Stalling? Not taking him seriously? But Clint had to know where Loki thought he was, otherwise there was no telling what the god would do next…

And then Clint’s shoulders relaxed, and he knew just what to do. He trained his gun right at Loki’s left eye.

‘You know I never miss, Sir’ said he matter-of-factly, because they both knew he didn’t. ‘You know I am fast. If you don’t want to be left blind, report now.’

Those words reached the trickster, Clint saw it in his eyes, how they measured him up, and then came to a conclusion that almost looked like resignation.

‘Good. Now-’

At that moment, Loki cocked his head, there was suddenly a green and golden pendant in his hands, ‘Loki, don’t!’

Something shifted, he breathed out, almost stumbled forward, Tony on the ground, Loki no longer kneeling but lying on the ground next to him, ‘Fuck’, Clint said, straightened himself up.

‘What just happened?’

‘You lost time, Sir’ Jarvis said. ‘A little more than three minutes. Loki stopped you, using the time gem.’

So he had.

Clint certainly lost no time now. He quickly checked that the god wasn’t just lying on the ground but truly unconscious (he was lying there awkwardly, as he if he had been kneeling and had just tilted sideways, the pendant lying in his open hand) und still alive (chest movement, slow and laboured but there), then bent down to Tony who was still unconscious, slipped his hand underneath him, checking his spine without taking his eyes off the trickster (Loki’s forearms were still bleeding), then when he was reassured that it was safe to move him, grabbed Tony underneath the armpits, and dragged him out the room as quickly as he could.

Bruce jostled him out of the way almost at once, and Clint let him, barking at Jarvis to deadlock Loki’s room instead.

Only then he looked down at Tony again.

The glow of the arc reactor had dimmed to normal levels, and as Bruce pushed the ripped and bloody t-shirt away, it became clear rather quickly that if there ever had been a wound, it was gone. Bruce palpated the stomach carefully, ‘The skin feels different here’ said he, his fingers stroking over a patch of skin at the height of the navel.

‘Let me guess – this is where Loki stabbed him’

Bruce nodded, frowned.

Tony was still unconscious, and looking at the closed eyes, at that expression of something almost like peace on that face, Clint felt uncomfortably reminded of New York, of those moments after Tony’s return from the portal when they hadn’t been all that sure he had survived.

‘We will have to scan him of course’ Bruce said. ‘…and then I suppose we will have to figure out
how to tell our emergency doctor and the ambulance that the guy with the life-threatening stab wound has healed it in the meantime.’

‘Oh, I’d better leave that to you’ said Clint. ‘I usually just grunt at people.’

‘I usually just smash them’ argued Bruce with a small smile. ‘So…’

Jarvis took care of it in the end.

‘That was not how I imagined my night to go’ said Bruce later, and slumped into a chair.

‘Well, it’s how I always half-expect my nights to go’ said Clint with a smile, and Bruce half-smiled back at him.

Clint shoved his coffee towards Bruce, the guy needed it more than him at the moment, and he could always make another. If there was one good thing to say about Tony, nowhere he lived good coffee was far.

Or alcohol.

Did that even make sense anymore, now Tony was forcefully sober?

Clint shook his head and turned towards the coffee machine.

‘I still have trouble believing Loki actually healed him’ Bruce said.

Clint found he didn’t. It was what made the most sense, considering what Nat said about the development of their relationship. He just couldn’t have relied on it.

They had scanned Tony, and except for the skin being a bit thinner where the wound had been, his body showed no trace of the trauma. There was a strange sort of scorch mark on his back, about at the same place where his arc reactor was on his front, and it was sort of the same size and circular… which was certainly ominous… but the skin didn’t feel burnt there, it just felt like skin, if a little hotter to the touch than the rest of him, and Jarvis could detect no injuries, whether superficial or internal. They had still put him in a hospital bed and hooked him up on monitors (even though Tony would hate them for it, but better safe than sorry and all that shit).

Tonight had been a bit too close for Clint’s taste. For Bruce’s too, apparently.

‘Did you see what Loki did during the time I lost, or were you stopped by the gem too?’ asked Clint, and raised his fresh cup of coffee, sipped at it.

‘No, the… time freeze… apparently only concerned you’ said Bruce. ‘But it was pretty clear that he could have stopped me anytime too, and it wouldn’t have been a good idea to intervene in any case… Loki… he did this hands-on glowy stuff on Tony again, only on the arc reactor this time, so… he might have sort of… dimmed Tony’s magic? Because that made also the glass shards settle down? Look, I’ve got no idea to be honest; I’m just making guesses here.’

Bruce shook his head.

‘In any case, it… it cost him’ said he. ‘It was visibly exhausting, and he passed out right after, just crumbled on the ground. That was when time started moving for you again.’
He frowned.

Clint grunted, drank, thinking of the flaccid and starved heap of limbs Loki had been. They knew from the Bard Song incident that doing magic while injured was generally… not a good idea. Loki had healed Tony anyway. They had just left him lying there, on the ground.

After taking care of Tony, they had briefly discussed what to do with the god, but there had never been much of a choice to begin with – they couldn’t count on him going out of his way to heal another person (someone not Tony) after accidentally stabbing them first. And they definitely couldn’t count on him not accidentally stabbing anyone the next time he came to. And did they really want to find out whether the oaths he had taken would also stop him from killing them if he didn’t know it was them to begin with?

No, despite Bruce’s scruples, that had just not been an acceptable risk.

‘For how long have you known that Tony has magic?’ asked he.

‘Oh’ said Bruce and huffed. ‘Tony decided to drop that little bomb while we were administering first aid to his crazy ally.’

‘What perfect timing for a coming out’ said Clint and had to smile a little, despite himself.

‘It certainly was perfect timing to prevent me from posing any unnecessary questions’ Bruce said and shook his head again. ‘Letting Loki teach him magic… Really, I like Tony, I really do, but sometimes, he is just a bit…’

‘Off his rockers?’ Clint provided. ‘A self-destructive, manic squirrel? A lemming with ambitions for world domination?’

‘Oh, come on, you don’t even mean that’ Bruce said. ‘But it’s true that the longer I observe them together, the more I understand… what… they see in each other.’

Clint snorted, emptied the rest of his coffee in one go and sat down at the breakfast table too.

‘So you agree that they are becoming more than just fuck-allies’ said he. ‘Nat seems to think so.’

About these things, Nat was usually right.

The pause was longer now, Clint could see Bruce hesitate, could see him think.

‘This is really not my area of expertise’ said he then, with an apologetic smile, and that apologetic way of opening his hand that was very specific for him.

‘But you agree.’

‘I can’t make any reliable judgement about Loki’ said Bruce. ‘That guy could probably convince me that he wants to marry you and I’d be none the wiser. Tony, on the other hand…’

He didn’t finish his sentence.

Yeah, Clint had thought so too.

He swore under his breath, pushed the mug away from him.

And then they were interrupted by Jarvis anyway.
'Mr Barton, Mr Banner, you have a visitor'

'A visitor' Bruce asked sceptically. 'I thought code Slumber Party was in place.'

'It is' said Jarvis. 'Your visitor is waiting for you on the helicopter landing platform. She wishes to speak to the master of the house and to be invited in. I told her that Mr Stark was indisposed, so she demanded to speak to his representatives. Since Miss Potts is currently on the airplane back from Canada, I referred to you.'

'How did she even get up there?' Bruce asked.

Clint was asking himself the same question. Code Slumber Party was pretty comprehensive, and random people getting access to the helicopter landing platform undetected was surely nothing Tony would have allowed.

'I believe through teleportation, Sir' Jarvis answered. 'The energy readings are remarkably similar to those of Mr Skywalker when he travels that way.'

Clint let out a long, suffering sigh, kneading the bridge of his nose.

'I'm starting to hate magic, I really am' said he. 'Does our visitor have a name?'

'She wished to be announced as Hela, Queen of Helheim' Jarvis said.

'Hela, the frigging Norse goddess of death?' Bruce said, his eyes widening.

'Well, that sure escalated quickly' Clint said.
The Pyjama Bottom Of The Red Death

Chapter Summary

Tony and Bruce discuss literature. Tony feels reminiscent of his college years.

Chapter Notes

Have a breather from all the whump and drama.
From now on, this batch is going to be a lot less intense. It's time for healing, dumb/weird humour and more or less awkward conversations.
The title is, of course, a very cheap joke on The Masque of the Red Death by Edgar Allen Poe.

For those of you who wondered why I escalated this so much and want to read a bit of an explanation: Not just to beat on Loki (tho it's a thing I very much like to do, I'll freely admit it). My version of Loki is a bit close to Lise's in Life in Reverse in the way that of course he's not suicidal, never, except that when he's in a mentally bad state he keeps doing stuff that's very likely to kill him, oups? And then, he's Loki, so there must always be a certain potential of shit escalating quickly when he's around.
So narratively, it wasn't just a random succession of whump but rather the next "logical" step for this particular character, something to move along the relationship dynamic between him and Tony, also plottiness. Still, I get why it can feel like too much.

The world came back to Tony slowly. His head felt cottony, and his body untethered from the ground, as if he was hovering. Every sound far away, and the melody, the music that had been at some point so loud it had felt as it would take up his whole being, was still there, but subdued, as if it was being played in another room, and he could just hear it through the walls.

He listened to it, not entirely wanting to let it go.

When he started to shift, he eventually came to the conclusion that he was not hovering at all. He seemed to be lying in a bed, and every part of his body was heavy with bone deep exhaustion, his muscles sore. It had been one of those missions then. Could he afford to sleep in?

‘What’s my schedule for today, Jarvis?’ asked he, wondering at his own, slurred voice that sounded foreign to his ears.

‘I have postponed all meetings, Sir’

Jarvis’ voice sounded different somehow too, though Tony couldn’t pinpoint it. As if he spoke with several voices. Only he didn’t.

‘That’s nice of you, Jarv’ said he, and turned his face into the pillow.

His chest ached; there was a slightly queasy feeling in his belly.
Whispering in the background, or rustling.

Had he drunk? But he couldn’t have, could he? Had it been his birthday? His mother’s?

Loki’s face, grey and steaming. Just bone and burned flesh where the mouth should be.

Tony opened his eyes abruptly, even though he couldn’t say whether it was the memory of a dream, or a real one.

‘Jav’ said he. ‘Help me out– did… did Loki lose the lower half of his face somehow?’

‘Yes, Sir’ Jarvis said.

‘Ah’ Tony said.

‘I could give you a short account of the events if you wish, Sir, but I would like to ask you if I may send for Dr. Banner first. You were injured and are currently on the hospital floor. Though you seem to have recovered, I would like him to perform a medical check-up. I can reassure you though that no other Avenger got physically harmed.’

The pain of something ripping through him. Ice pressed against his stomach. Blood running over it, blood congealed under it. Like two small rivers. Beautiful.

Right.

Tony turned onto his back, looked around the room.

Yup. It was one of the few rooms they had for inpatients. Inpatients, as in Avengers who preferred being treated here rather than in regular or SHIELD hospitals.

He remembered falling to his knees.

He remembered thinking, this is a stupid end.

‘I… I remember dying’ Tony said, furrowing his eyebrows. ‘Didn’t I die?’

‘Gladly not, Sir’ said Jarvis. ‘We were concerned for you for a moment, but you were out of danger soon.’

Tony’s hands went to his stomach, but there was no bandaging, not even a wound. It was reassuring in a way. In another, however…

He straightened himself up, a spell of dizziness hitting him for a moment, together with a slight headache, the queasy feeling in his stomach increased.

‘For how long was I out?’ asked he, trying not to sound panicked. How long did it take for a wound like that to heal?

‘For approximately four hours, Sir’

Only four hours? He stroked over his belly, searching for what was not there. The blade had run him through; it had been broad, serrated. He had been fucking done for!

‘But I was stabbed, wasn’t I?’ asked he.

‘You received a stab wound, correct, Sir’ Jarvis said. ‘Your magic apparently broke Mr Skywalker’s
seal then and defended you. Mr Skywalker healed the wound and restrained your magic, as well as healed the damage done by that magic, Sir.’

Yeah, that had happened too, hadn’t it? He sort of remembered it breaking through, in a wave of blue and fire and music. He remembered being okay with that.

Hahah.

Shit.

‘Do you permit me sending for Dr. Banner now, Sir?’ asked Jarvis. ‘We would all like to know that you are recovering as predicted.’

Loki had stabbed him. He remembered now. No recognition in his eyes. The mouth gone. The torn up arms. Not even the glamour had held.

Loki had then apparently healed him. Had wrestled down his magic and healed him.

A vague memory of something like a green snake wrapping around him, and he had fought it, because it had trapped him, squeezed him…

He remembered slashing at it, clawing at it, engulfing it in blue flames, wanting it to burn…

‘Status report on Loki, Jarvis. Now!’ said he, swinging his legs off the bed.

‘Still located in room 2142’ Jarvis said. ‘Unconscious but stable and recovering. Please do not try to stand up unaided, Sir. We do not know how much you are still affected from your magical overexertion.’

Tony felt himself breathe out, then laughed a little, if only to relieve himself of the tension. If he had condemned Loki with his stupidity…

Whispering in the background, rustling. He thought he saw something move at the edge of his vision, but when he looked, there was nothing there.

The bed felt weird under his fingers.

Everything felt weird, even his own skin, now that he stroked over his forearms again. Movement at the edge of his vision.

Right. This was certainly new.

Reminded him a bit of his college years.

‘Okay’ said he. ‘I want some answers anyway. You can go and get Brucie bear now.’

‘I still can’t believe Clint didn’t shoot him’ said Tony later, while he was slowly pacing up and down the room. Slowly, because Bruce had told him so – as if he were really likely to fall on his face. Slowly also because the room still had the tendency to start moving the moment he didn’t directly look at it. ‘I mean, the Lokes certainly gave him a good excuse, killing me and all.’

‘I told Clint that I needed someone level-headed and that it couldn’t be me’ Bruce said, observing his walk critically. He had told Tony about Clint’s intervention, and the time freeze, during the check-up. ‘Since he was the only one left, I guess he didn’t have a choice but to be reasonable.’
Yeah, he’s a professional when it counts. Makes me almost glad I invited the little bug back in’ said Tony with a smirk, not really meaning the almost anymore, then sat down on the bed. ‘So, doctor, am I good to go?’

‘Mhm’ Bruce said, and sat down on a chair too. ‘Honestly, you still move a bit as if you were high on drugs.’

‘Yeah… I think that’s the magic… I certainly don’t remember taking anything’ Tony said. In contrast to Jarvis’ voice, Bruce’s sounded like it always did. But he looked… no, it wasn’t exactly vision, but… actually, Tony had no idea which of his senses was telling him something about Bruce, or what it told him, but it certainly tried to communicate. Urgently.

In his college years, Tony had also learned that it didn’t always pay to try and understand his hallucinations.

‘You broke through Loki’s seal, you know that? There is nothing but a scorch mark of that left.’

‘Jarvis told me so’ said Tony. And it certainly explained why his seidr was able to mess with his perception so much. ‘How do you even know the scorch mark was a magic seal once? I thought Loki was still out cold? Did Jarvis explain?’

‘Loki is still unconscious, and he will be for another while. Jarvis was reluctant to disclose the information since you classified it as private’ said Bruce, then hesitated. ‘Look, we have a visitor. She’s… well, she has magic in any case. She had a look at you, and told us what I just told you. And she told us that until Loki stamps another seal on your back or until you learn control, your magic will stay volatile. Dangerous, especially for you. It will react to strong emotions, not unlike my green problem – only that instead of turning into the Other Guy, you are more likely to self-combust.’

‘Yeah, mages have a tendency to do that, apparently’ Tony said with a shrug.

The destruction of the seal also explained why there was this hopping sensation in his chest, this familiar yet misplaced feeling of being finally free.

Considering what Tony had done when he had felt finally free as a teenager, the self-combustion scenario was looking more and more probable.

Aaaand Bruce was having that half-resigned, half-reproachful look in his eyes again, and Tony knew what was coming next,

‘Tony, why didn’t you talk to the team before you decided to-’

‘Is it Hlín?’

‘What?’

‘Is the name of our visitor Hlín? I know her, and she’s a mage. And she might come by, because of the whole war situation, so-’

‘No’ Bruce rubbed his head. ‘No, it is not Hlín. And don’t try to get me off track. Which is that you trusted the frigging god of chaos to awaken a gift in you that is, by nature, chaotic, and you trusted his capability to teach you-‘

‘Well, like you said, he is the God of Chaos, so he’s kind of the perfect guy for handling it’ Tony interrupted him. ‘And don’t you try to get me off track. I’m the only one allowed to do that… constantly. But not right now. I wanna know who our mystery visitor is.’
'And I want you to understand that you almost died today’ Bruce said.

‘Must be Tuesday then’ Tony said. ‘Is it Frigga? That would be weird.’

‘Goddamnit, Tony, it’s Hela, Queen of Helheim, okay?’ Bruce exclaimed. ‘It’s the frigging goddess of death!’

There was a pause.

‘Oh’ Tony said. ‘Oh, my. That… certainly sounds excessive.’

‘Yeah’ Bruce said with a sigh. ‘That’s what we said.’

Tony’s mouth twitched. Bruce glanced at him, rolled his eyes, but his mouth twitched too.

Tony let out the small chuckle. Bruce looked away, but he was smiling.

‘That’s what we said?’

‘Well, Clint said, that sure escalated quickly.’

Tony snorted, shook his head.

‘Frigging Hela’ said he then. ‘Who will come by next, Anubis? And she visited my sick bed and gave you medical advice?’

‘I know’ Bruce rubbed his eyes. ‘You can’t imagine Clint’s face when she proposed that. He seriously thought that she was going to reap your soul. He didn’t wanna show it, but he was frigging terrified.’

It wasn’t funny, not really. Tony was still laughing. And Bruce started chuckling too, in a low, restrained way.

‘And you know what she said to him?’ asked he.

‘No’ Tony said earnestly.

‘That she wasn’t a peasant who needed to harvest’ said Bruce. ‘That the souls came to her.’

Tony laughed more loudly.

‘And she gave us offerings, you know, for our hospitality’ said Bruce. ‘Because we invited her in. I mean, can you get your head around that? We have two people in the tower who have been seriously injured pretty recently and we invite the goddess of death into our house, just because she asks for it. I don’t know what has possessed us to do that. In retrospect, it’s completely… bonkers…’

They both laughed, Tony holding his belly, Bruce hiding his face in a hand.

‘But we invited her in, sure, why not… and she gave us gifts for that’ said Bruce. ‘And… and you know what she gave us?’

‘No?’ Tony asked. He wasn’t really sure whether he wanted to know.

‘She… she told us that no matter how many souls we s-sent her, she does not owe us and we do not owe her’ said he. ‘And that the dead do not care. That… that was her offering.’
Tony held his breath, hearing that, because that was, that was… and then, for some reason, he just burst into laughter again, and for some reason, Bruce joined in.

And it took them a while to settle down.

Then, after they had been quiet for a while, Bruce looked at him with that serious gaze again.

‘Tony’ said he. ‘Look… I know you keep saying that this is just an alliance with benefits, but I’ve seen how you reacted to his injury, and…’

‘Don’t’ Tony interrupted him, looked away from him, and added with a lower voice, ‘Just… don’t’

There was pause. Then Tony could see Bruce nod at the edge of his vision.

Thank you, buddy. In some ways, you are really the best.

‘Fucking Hela’ said Tony after a while, and they both started chuckling once more.

Bruce rubbed the bridge of his nose.

‘I never even had the time to change. I’m still in my pyjamas.’

Yeah… he was, wasn’t he? Tony hadn’t noticed, what with being distracted by his magic-induced, mildly hallucinogenic trip.

‘Oh, they look stunning on you, honey bunny.’

Especially since the pattern kept changing.

‘I welcomed the goddess of death in my jammies, Tony.’

‘Bruce, calm down, it’s death, you were by far not the first’ said Tony. ‘At least you didn’t moon her, which is probably more than most of the guys who have died in a hospital bed can say.’

‘God, no, Tony!’ Bruce held his belly too now, though still hiding his face a bit.

‘And code Slumber Party *had* been in place’

‘Yeah, that’s true’ Bruce said between chuckles. ‘This feels like a bad rewrite of the Mask of the Red Death for teenagers or something.’

‘Well, that masked ball they invited the plague to in that story was probably an orgy, so it was a slumber party in its own right…’

‘That’s more like the Mask of the Pox Death, Tony.’

‘The Torn Condom of HIV.’

‘The Harness of Hepatitis C.’

‘Hey, if they use a harness and a dildo, they probably wouldn’t even get the stuff.’

‘They might if they shared without cleaning it in-between. The Poxy Panties.’

‘The Last Clap.’

Bruce chuckled, shook his head, and chuckled again.
‘The Last Clap? Seriously, Tony?’

Tony giggled quietly.

‘…what a frigging night’
My Future Queen

Chapter Summary

Hela, meet Tony. Tony, meet Hela. She is your future shrink.

Chapter Notes

I'm glad that you appreciated the crack in the last chapter. Though the fact that I didn't realise I was writing crack probably says... something... about my character and/or sense of humour? Not sure what exactly though...
Seriously now, guys, gals, non-binary cuties, you are awesome, appreciative readers, as always :).

See the end of the chapter for more notes

‘She wanted to see Loki at once, after we had invited her in. We kind of explained the situation to her, and then she wanted to see you first, and then again asked for Loki right after. And man, she was not impressed when she saw Loki lying there. The way she looked at him, and eyed me then, only for an instant really, but it gave me the shivers. She… can have this really hard gaze that goes right through you… I mean, I suppose that’s only to be expected, considering who she is… anyways… She demanded access to the room immediately, and when I told her that Loki was dangerous at the moment, she simply said that she could handle him.’

‘Well, she is Hela. I suppose she can handle a lot.’

‘That’s the conclusion Clint and I came to too. And denying her would have been pretty pointless, I think. So we let her in. Well she, she went to Loki, crouched down next to him, touched him, whispered to him. Repaired all the damage in the room with a word, turned the bed upright, made the window whole again, transformed the burnt linen back, everything. And then she… took Loki in her arms, and… picked him up. She looks small, but she had no trouble carrying him at all. And… Tony, what I took from this is that Hela… the way she was cradling him, the way she handled him, carrying him to that bed, laying him on it, straightening his limbs, tucking him in, so cautiously, the way she looked at him… she spent three hours in there, just holding his hand. She said that was so to lend him her seidr, helping him heal. There is deep affection there. Really deep. I guess that’s… something to consider.’

Right, that was something to consider.

Even more so considering how epically Tony had screwed up.

Well, she hadn’t killed him yet.
She was sitting at the bar on the common floor instead, and the first thing that struck Tony, among the many details he was registering quickly, standing in the doorway for a moment before entering the room, was that she was too short for the bar, and that her feet were resting on the stool legs, slightly above the support for the feet. And that underneath her flowing white and dark blue gown, she was wearing old and weathered brown and green chucks.

The second thing that struck him was that his magic-altered vision provided her with fine spider webs that spread from her in every direction, including thin air.

Which was… certainly interesting. Not that the rest of Hela… wasn’t.

Tony had had his suspicions about her for a while of course, which he had kept to himself. And if nothing else, then at least her posture on that bar stool hinted at his suspicions being correct. It wasn’t that she sat there like Loki had sat, all those weeks ago when he had paid Tony his first friendly visit. She was actually slumping a little, at the same time, she was bent forward instead of backwards, stirring what was apparently a Dry Martini with the toothpick and toothpick-impaled olive. But it was the way she held that cocktail toothpick that reminded him of Loki’s piano fingers. Her hair was long, nearly as white as the webs, and fell in relaxed waves freely down her shoulders and hips, her skin fair, her eyes dark. Her fingernails long and sharp, not unlike Loki’s when he was in his Jotunn shape. And in her features, he thought he saw Loki too – in the shape of the eyes, the nose. Her face seemed rounder though, smaller.

She looked… young, somehow, though Tony was sure that she was centuries old.

Tony decided to step into the room then, and the movement at the edge of his vision shifted with him, the rustling increased.

‘Your Highness’ said he and bowed deeply. ‘Tony Stark of Midgard. I am honoured to welcome you in my home.’

‘Rise, Mr Stark.’

As he straightened himself up, Hela had turned to him fully, her posture very erect now, and despite his fear, Tony smiled, spontaneously, though the whispering too had grown louder.

The border was right in the middle of her face, went over her nose and even her lips, and down her throat. Where the right half of her face was fair, the left half was of a dark blue, rough looking, ridges running over it like over Jotunn skin. Even her hair changed colour at the centre parting. Where it had been almost while on the right half, it was black on the left, streaked with grey. Her left eye, however, was white like milk or fog, and he would have considered her blind there had she not looked at him with both eyes so sharply.

Both mythology and Bruce had warned him of Hela’s appearance. Neither the myths nor Bruce had told him how beautiful she was.

‘Mr Banner and Mr Barton offered me hospitality on your behalf since you were indisposed, Mr Stark’ said Hela. ‘I hope that they did not do so against your wishes.’

‘Not at all’ Tony said.

The whispering was almost furious now, but he couldn’t make out any words.

‘You do not have to humour me, Mr Stark. I am aware that my presence in a home is generally not considered a good omen’ Hela said matter-of-factly. ‘And I have learned not to hold it against the living that they fear me. Few people want to be reminded of transience, and that is what I am, a
reminder. Rest assured however that my presence has no more influence on your fate than that of any other person that might act or not act in your best interest.’

Meaning that she was just as capable of snuffing him as any other powerful alien with her level of magic was.

‘I suppose there might be many reasons to fear you, your Highness’ said Tony, and bowed a little. One of them being whatever revenge you might take for very personal offences. ‘Or at least to be in awe of you. And I had never hoped but I do feel truly honoured to make your acquaintance while still remaining among the living. I invite you to stay as long as you wish to.’

‘Mhm’ Hela said, and then, ‘I would indeed stay for a while if you would have me. I had planned to talk to Loki Skywalker, the Bard, and I fear he is too unwell to see me at the moment. I am glad, coincidentally, to see that you are feeling better, Mr Stark. I understand that you are Loki Skywalker’s apprentice in the art of weaving seidr?’

‘Yes, Your Highness’

‘You start your training very late in your life’ said Hela. ‘I wonder whether Loki made you aware of the dangers that entails.’

‘He mentioned it, Your Highness.’

Hela looked at him closely.

‘Call me Hela, Stark’ said she then.

‘…what?’

‘Your attempts at correct social behaviour in front of divine royalty are abysmal’ said Hela. ‘I’d rather you stopped trying altogether.’

‘Are they?’

And there Tony had thought he had gotten it right for once.

‘Yes’ said Hela. ‘For example, you took your time, however short it was, to scrutinise me, my magic, and my footwear, before you entered the room. If you are ever invited to a court on Vanaheim, Alfheim or Asgard, never stare at a mage’s seidr, or a lady’s footwear, that is very rude. Your invitation to this home was, in its formulation, cold at best. Then, you neither invited me to sit on the couch nor sat down with me at the bar. Which, if I judge you according to the social codes of the court of Asgard, means that you are too disgusted or too distrustful to sit at the same table with me.’

‘What?’ said Tony, a bit caught off his guard. He raised his hands. ‘No! No, that isn’t how I feel at all. Please, really, stay as long as you wish, and I’m not disgusted with you at all, on the contrary, you are quite beautiful, and I actually appreciate people who manage to scare me a bit, and I mean, you are Hela, how many occasions do you have in your life to meet Hela,… oh gods, I’m really dreadful at this, aren’t I?’

‘Yes, you are’ Hela simply said. ‘So before you ridicule yourself any further and make it ever more difficult for me to overlook your many insults, let us shed all formalities. Do not worry about it too much, I deal with most of my dead that way. Most of them have no sense of protocol, and treating them according to that annoying set of rules leads to nothing but aggravation.’

Right.
‘…so that’s why you called me Mr Stark and not Son of Stark’ said Tony. ‘Because of the dead that come to you from Midgard. You know our social codes.’

‘I may not travel much’ said Hela. ‘But the dead of all worlds come to me. Now make yourself a drink and sit at the bar with me, Stark. If you dare.’

And she smirked at him in a way that would have betrayed her parentage even if nothing else had (coincidentally, for going on about proper manners, she was ordering her host around a lot).

Tony, out of principle, smirked back and went behind the bar to make himself a Virgin Margarita.

Her webs had spread over much of the bar, but he tried to pay it little attention. His own seidr was still whispering, but he supposed he could guess by now what it was trying to tell him.

Yes, I know she is dangerous, thanks. Her job description would kind of give it away even if she weren’t Loki’s frigging daughter.

He wondered what to say next instead, considering that Loki, as to him, was still lying in the medical floor, unconscious and lacking a tongue. And a few other parts.

‘Are you content with your Dry Martini?’ asked he in the end. ‘I don’t drink alcohol myself anymore, but people claim that I’m still a rather good barkeeper. And I won’t stand for you drinking inferior booze, that is part of my protocol.’

‘I have little to compare it to, if I am being honest’ said Hela. ‘The dead come with many stories; however, they more often than not come without cocktail supplies.’

‘I suppose I should shoot more barkeepers then, my future Queen’ said Tony with a fake bow. The way she grinned at him told him that he had finally struck the right tone with her. Good. They would have to see how long it would stick. If she had inherited Loki’s mood swings, she could be going from laughing to flaying his skin at any moment. ‘Let me pose the question differently – who has made that cocktail for you?’

‘Mr Barton’

‘Well, that will not do’ Tony said and turned to the rack behind him immediately. ‘Clint might make a good Pina Colada, but you cannot trust him with the dry stuff, he’s too much of a sweet tooth for that. I will mix one for you, you will tell me how it compares, and then you can decide whether that cocktail is up your alley, really, or whether you prefer something else.’

Like flaying my soul. Was that a thing, flaying a person’s soul? Tony supposed so – this world was weird and cruel enough for that kind of torture to be possible.

The Dry Martini was quickly done, despite him feeling a bit less sure about his movements, since now with the seidr flowing freely about him, everything felt just a touch off.

She accepted the glass, tasted it cautiously, while he started cutting the lemons for his own Virgin Margarita.

‘Your Dry Martini, you will be pleased to hear, surpasses that of Barton’s by far’ said she and put the glass back on the table

‘I am pleased though not surprised’ Tony said and got the lime from a cupboard next. ‘Is it what you were looking for?’
‘I think so’ said Hela, stirring it with the toothpick again. ‘I certainly like it.’

There was a pause, during which Tony finished his own cocktail, then sat down on the stool behind the bar and sipped at it.

Mhm, too sweet without the alcohol. He would have to find something to replace that hint of bitterness that even a Margarita should provide.

Alright.

He swallowed, put the cocktail down.

Hela was observing him calmly over her glass by now, as if he was a bug or another little creature the movements of which she found curious.

Or as if at someone she knew would be in her absolute power sooner or later.

Great.

How to say this?

‘So’ said he. ‘How fucking furious at me are you?’

Hela didn’t even react to that. She kept looking at him, then took a sip from her drink.

‘Should I be furious then?’ asked she, and her voice was dangerously neutral.

Oh, no. I know that tone. You can’t fool me with this tone.

‘I would be if I were in your place’ said Tony. ‘Considering what happened between me and Loki.’

Hela cocked her head.

‘Remind me’ asked she. ‘Do you mean the part where you saved his life, the second time now, or the part where he almost killed you, also for the second time now?’

Tony crossed his arms in front of his chest, narrowing his eyes.

‘Is that all you know of?’ asked he warily.

‘No’ Hela freely admitted.

She rolled the cocktail glass between her fingers.

‘I suppose it’s too late to claim that Loki Skywalker’s happiness is no concern of mine’ said she.

After what Banner had told Tony about how she had taken care of the trickster? A little, yes.

‘I would believe that you wished it weren’t’ said Tony, took the discarded lemon peels and threw them in the trash. ‘With family, one often does.’

When he looked up, Hela’s gaze had definitely gotten sharper, warier. Her fingers with those long, sharp fingernails had tightened a little around the stem of the glass.

‘I’m sorry’ said he with a shrug. ‘But I’ve read the myths. Most versions agree on this. And in any case, the family resemblance is pretty striking.’
Hela continued to roll the stem along her fingers, observing him, and it was true what Bruce had said, Tony thought. Her eyes seemed to just look right at his core, past all his masks, all his defences. Which... was probably fine.

Then she seemed to come to some sort of conclusion, for the tension abruptly left her face, she smiled, then chuckled, just a little, and said, ‘Nobody else seems to catch on.’

‘Seriously?’ asked Tony. ‘Well, people can be pretty blind to things like that, I suppose. But I tell you, First Gerdr – who is your great-aunt by the way, did you even know? – then Loki, now you – extraordinarily good looks do run strongly in this family.’

At that, Hela let out a genuine laugh.

‘What?’

‘I’m hideous, by Asgard’s standards’ said she, and laughed again. ‘A monster.’

‘Well, who the hell cares what Asgard thinks?’ Tony retorted.

‘Mhm, it’s true, her influence is waning’ said Hela, still smiling. But then a different sort of tension took hold of her features. ‘Once, her judgement held much weight though.’

‘I’m sorry’ said Tony.

‘I’m sure many people were’ said Hela, and her eyes strayed away from him.

Yeah, well, it was no surprise that Loki’s children had suffered under Asgard’s hegemony.

If the myths were right, they had suffered a whole lot.

He did not dare ask though. Not her.

‘Bruce Banner told me what you did for Loki’ said he instead. ‘Thank you.’

Hela turned back to him, eyed him again.

‘I could only intervene once Loki was not in danger anymore of losing his life’ said she, and if she sounded calm about it, there was a distance in her expression that told of something else. ‘I may be a queen, but in fact, I have to obey many rules.’

The goddess kept her eyes on him, sipped from her cocktail again.

‘So it is me who should thank you for administering aid as quickly and efficiently as you did’ said she.

Tony hesitated, then bowed a little, absolutely not convinced he deserved the gratitude.

‘I...’ began he. ‘I’m sorry. I am. I-’

‘Have you crossed his boundaries willingly?’ Hela interrupted him, her voice suddenly harsh, and he almost felt it scrape against him like sand paper. Had seidr accompanied it then? These new sensations were all so difficult to interpret. ‘Have you intended to hurt him when you did?’

He raised his hands.

‘No’ said he. ‘Of course not, I-’
‘Then stop apologising’ said Hela. ‘I grow weary of it.’

Tony hesitated, then nodded.

‘I get it’ said he.

He did. Apologies were a mixed blessing. Sometimes, you needed them, but most of the time, they were just a way for the person to get rid of their guilt and make you do the most work about it.

‘Since it’s rude to stare at a lady’s footwear’ said he, leaning on the bar, taking another sip of his cocktail. ‘Is that the reason you can afford wearing chucks? Because no one polite ever catches on? The Emperor’s clothes, and all that shmuck?’

It *was* somewhat of a gamble, but she had told him to shed his attempts at manners, and it paid off. Hela’s eyes glinted.

‘No’ said she. ‘But I like your reasoning.’

‘So did you inspire Neil Gaiman, or did Neil Gaiman inspire you? Wait, do you even know Neil Gaiman?’

‘I do. Some of the dead are fans.’ said Hela. ‘But I am certainly not the material manifestation of death. Nor am I the goddess of death, as Banner seems to think I am. However much that is an understandable mistake to make, nothing could be further from the truth. No one is Death’s god, none but the Norns direct her, and I am her humble servant.’

And the way her voice grew serious at the end, she certainly meant it.

‘I am the goddess of the dead, and the queen of their realm, Helheim’ said she. ‘This is an important difference to make.’

‘It is’ said Stark, agreeing completely. It really was. ‘It means you are not currently being stalked by Thanos after all.’

One moment, Hela looked just a tiny bit surprised, then she let out a small, abrupt laugh. There were dimples in her cheeks. The same dimples Loki had, gods damn it.

‘Oh, how right you are’ said he, and shook her head in exasperation. ‘However, if Thanos thinks that he will gain Death’s affection by what he is doing, he could not be more wrong.’

‘So she doesn’t like his gifts?’ Tony asked, raising an eyebrow.

‘She doesn’t even see them as gifts’ said Hela, furrowing her eyebrows. ‘He is nothing to her. Loki, who Thanos despises so much, is more to her than him.’

‘Loki?’ Tony asked, a bit baffled.

Hela hesitated, then nodded, her eyebrows still furrowed.

‘Well’ said she. ‘There were several moments, in his life,…’

‘… when he was close to dying’ Tony completed the sentence for her.

Hela gave him a bit of a lopsided, unhappy smile.

‘You see, when the souls reach me, though they have still a long way to go, they have already
completed their walk across the realms’ said she. ‘But Death begins in life. Death is already there when your soul begins to pull from your body. Death does not always use her manifestation, does not always show herself, but she is always there. She is the process of your soul leaving. She is the walking. She knows him, and he knows her.’

Ah.

‘And then, Loki gave her me of course’ said she. ‘He brought me into this world.’

She paused.

‘They have a peculiar relationship’ said she then.

‘I… take it that Death likes you then?’ Tony asked.

Hela’s smile was more genuine now, even though there was still something wary to it.

‘In a way’ said she. ‘In the way Death can feel affection for anyone or anything, she feels affection for me.’

And wasn’t that something.

‘Because you serve her’ Tony said.

‘…it is a bit more complicated than that’ Hela said. ‘And it is nothing someone like Thanos could ever understand. He kills in her name, but she knows not his. She knows Loki’s. She knows mine.’

Again, she laughed a little, shook her head. Were her eyes glistening?

He drank slowly, observing her, thinking over her words. There was just something about what she had said that didn’t fit, that was…

Ah.

Well – like parent like daughter, he supposed.

‘It’s a nice story’ said he. ‘Death being completely indifferent to Thanos. The great creepy stalker not even getting noticed enough to be ignored.’

Hela looked at him, clearly waiting for him to go on.

‘But if Death begins in life and he will end all of it’ said he. ‘That would nullify Death too, wouldn’t? Is she completely indifferent to that?’

The corner of Hela’s lips tilted upwards almost imperceptibly. Much in a similar way that Loki’s did when he was secretly pleased with Tony not falling for his shit.

‘It was not a lie’ said she then, rolling the stem of her glass between her fingers again. ‘Death truly does not know his name, and when Thanos first tried to end all life, all those eons ago, she barely even noticed. Of course, back then she had no one to tell her what his real goal had been, what he had almost achieved.’

‘But now you are there to tell her’ concluded Tony.

Hela hesitated, then gave a very small, almost imperceptible nod. As if she was sharing something secret.
Now that was… certainly interesting, wasn’t it?

‘How is she… taking it?’

Hela’s eyebrows rose.

‘In truth, she is struggling to understand’ said she. ‘She was born shortly after life and she does not
know a world without it. That her own existence could be erased together with it is not something
she can easily comprehend, nor is it straightforward for her to feel anything about it. Emotions don’t
come naturally to someone like her.’

‘But getting to know you taught her that too’ said Tony, leaning back against the back of his stool.
‘Developing feelings and all that shit. Didn’t it?’

*In the way Death can feel affection for anyone or anything, she feels affection for me.*

Hela looked at him with those sharp piercing eyes again.

Then, she gave him another one of those almost imperceptible nods.

‘Blimey’ Tony commented.

Teaching Death feelings. Being one of the rare people that Death, in her own way, had a fondness
for. Loki had quite a bit of an influential daughter there.

‘Mhm’ Hela said, maybe in agreement, and drank.

‘For a long time, Death only knew life by ending it’ said she then. ‘But for some time now, she has
had me, a soul that is hers and yet alive. Death is changing. Not because of Thanos, mind, but she
still is. And among the few, sparse feelings she is discovering about herself, she finds that she likes
life quite a bit. As you justly said, is it where she begins. We are all pregnant with Death, and we will
all give birth to her eventually. We are her parent even as she takes power over us forever.’

Okay, so that was an extremely creepy way to think about dying? But then again, extremely creepy
was a valid descriptor for how most of the world really seemed to work. He should start to get used
to that someday soon.

‘So she’s… sort of discontent with the stalky titan’ Tony said.

Hela weighed her head, then said with a small, wary smile, ‘We are not quite there yet.’

She paused, and added, pensively, ‘I do wonder sometimes what will happen once we are.’

A Death who could get angry.

That… spelled trouble, he supposed, even if the anger wasn’t directed at him personally.

Tony straightened himself up.

‘So goddess of the dead does not equal the manifestation of Death’ said he. ‘I do think we have
cleared up that distinction. Doesn’t answer my question about Neil Gaiman though.’

Hela drank the rest of her Martini.

‘Chucks are simply practical’ said she then. ‘And most souls appreciate it when I wear at least one
item of clothing that is typical for their world. It does give one something to talk about while the soul
comes to terms with their new situation.’

‘Well, now you just sound like a shrink’

‘Oh, you’d be surprised how much my work resembles that of a mind healer’ Hela said, unfazed. She could take a lot of disrespect without getting offended, really.

He nodded towards her glass. It was empty, after all.

‘My future Queen,’ said he, ‘Are you in the mood of something less dry?’

And he held out his hand.

Hela seemed to consider, then passed him the glass.

‘There was this one guy once’ said she. ‘A curious soul, weary of life, welcoming the journey to his final rest on the one hand, but still very attached to life at the same time. He kept walking in circles on Helheim, making progress and going back again, rambling on about Havanna, and Cuba libre. Might as well find out what he was going on about.’

Chapter End Notes

Is this turning into an ace, aro Hela/Death-if-you-squint? I think those characters are running away from me... though the way I'm treating them, I'm not exactly surprised...
Of Lullabies, Webs and A Daughter’s Duties

Chapter Summary

Just a nice little conversation between mother and daughter. I’m sure they’re gonna talk about stitching. Or marriage. Or shoes.

Chapter Notes

There is one more chapter to go, but it's turning out to be a bit of a pain in the arse in the editing process.
I'm glad you liked my version of Hela (judging from the comments). She's one of my favorite characters in this fic and I was waiting so eagerly to finally be able to introduce her. I like to write like really long and epic fanfic (ahem, you might have noticed, ahem), and one of the downsides/upsides (never can really say which it is) is that I have to wait sooo long for scenes or characters I particularly like to write. I've been itching to write the ending to this fic since chapter 3 or something, and it's still ages till that's gonna be fleshed out. But this anticipation is also gratifying in a way, like a very slow build-up to the climax (yes, I'm aware this sounds a bit erotic, sry ^^).

Speaking of going pregnant with things: Hela's description of our life and death - being pregnant with death - is inspired by a German writer, Rainer Maria Rilke, who, in one of his works, tells us that we all carry our own, personal death within us all our lives. He then goes on letting his narrator describe the dying process of his father over a few pages, which is long and painful, and actually describes this as a good, "grand" death (if I remember it correctly).
Which I found creepy, and beautiful (like a lot of what he writes), and I think somehow it fits into this world where Death is an actual person (in a way).
Oh, wait, I'm rambling again.

When his seidr had felt her webs offered so freely, it had taken them. Gladly pulled at them, using them to knit wounds together, gaping holes. And her seidr was so very familiar to him that it meant almost no effort, wrapping it around bleeding organs, balling it into matter that he could transform into lung cells. He felt his hand in hers at some point, had felt her song in his head, an old lullaby that he had sung to her often when she had still been a little child, and if a part of him knew even in his sleep that this was wrong and that he should sing it to her, not she to him, the rest of him sighed in relief, and let the fear go.

This melody he knew so well. That Frigga had sung to him. That meant, forever, being held in her arms.

He leaned into it, and it was soft like her webs could be when she wished it. Soft and supporting.

He sank deeper into unconsciousness after that, and when he woke up next, the first thing that found him was his fear. The first sense of his body that found him was the feeling that something was
wrong with his mouth, and he tried to move his tongue, but nothing responded, he tried to produce a sound, but there was just a rattling, no, no, not that again, not this, not again, not again, not again, not – her webs caught him as he flailed and fell. He fell but he fell into her webs.

He landed softly.

And softly, they lifted him up. The surface somewhere above him, distorted and ever moving as if he was underwater, looking up.

He was lifted towards it. Slowly.

He listened to himself breath. No other sound. He could make no other sound. Again. The pain returned to his body, flooded it.

But she was there. Holding him.

The water surface wrapped around him before he breached it.

Then the world cleared. Somewhat.

A room. Midgardian, hospital. No, Stark’s tower, he could see Jarvis’ speaker in a corner. Hospital floor then.

Safe.

No, not safe. Don’t think that. You cannot afford to think that.

But not in immediate danger either.

And there. Hela was sitting at his bedside, holding his hand.

His free hand went to his mouth immediately.

It was open, no threats to sew it shut, and that relieved him a little, but there was bone, not flesh, and when he reached in, he could find no tongue.

Had they cut it out this time?

His eyes flicked to her, his heart beat quickened.

Her dark and white eyes on him, anger there, but pressed down. Concern. And the hand she was holding his with was the dark one. The soft one.

*Your mouth was burnt away*, said Hela in his head. *But you are already healing.*

Memory of the huge, heavy hands of the dwarfs forcing him to his knees.

You were warned, trickster.

The metal had been bubbling in the tank.

His price to get, his price to pay.

You want it? You will get it.

And he had wanted it, yes.
Why are you here, asked he.

How else can I make you stop avoiding me, asked Hela back, and in her eyes, the anger flared up for just a moment.

He shivered from it.

It was always so very close to him when they were communicating telepathically. She couldn’t really help it. That was just who she was.

I felt your soul preparing to leave, Hela said, and her grip on his hand tightened. Again. And for what? A lump of metal?

Oh, I wouldn’t do that for just any lump of metal, Loki said, it is very special. And tried to smile. Which was difficult, without lips.

Hela gripped down on his hand some more. It hurt by now. The anger danced in her eyes, in his mind, and Loki knew he had miscalculated somewhat.

He did want to say that he was sorry. But he had so many things to apologise for with his daughter, if he ever started, how could he ever stop? And she had no patience for these things.

What do you want me to say, asked he. I know very well what kind of parent I am.

Hela opened her mouth for a moment, though they had only communicated telepathically until now, then let out a huff. She let go of his hand, leant back.

No, you don’t, said she.

I do, said he. I might have abandoned you all to your fate. I might have left you with the burden to free the others.

He almost gasped from the way her fury spread in him, while her webs spread around him.

That you still think that this is the main reason I am angry...

She looked away.

I hate you sometimes, said she.

I understand, said he.

No, you don’t, said she. You only think you do.

She shook her head. She looked tired. How much seidr had she wasted on him?

It is not your duty to heal me, said he.

You don’t have to tell me, you dolt, said she.

But you spared me much pain, and I am grateful for that.

Don’t be grateful to me, said she, and looked back at him. I could only intervene once you were safe. Be grateful to the one who was clever enough to intervene when you weren’t.

Stark, Loki said.
He had only recognised Stark when the wave of magic – fire, blue and searing – had thrown him across the room and against the opposite wall. The seidr had been unmistakeable, and his view had cleared enough to process that Stark had been lying on the floor, bleeding.

Dying.

Dying, because Loki had just stabbed him, because he had thought he was being attacked, and…

He closed his eyes, feeling for Stark’s magic. He remembered trying to heal the mortal, but had it worked? And his magic had been imbalanced, wild. His magic had done more harm than the blade had.

It had taken so much force to push it back. Young mages were always trouble.

How much damage had the seidr wrought before Loki had wrestled it back? Had Loki even been conscious enough to repair whatever it had torn through? He didn’t remember.

Stark is fine, Hela said, and at the same moment, Loki felt the hum, steady and close, and breathed out, letting his head sink back into the pillow.

Oh, for the Norn’s sake.

Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you.

He is a narrator in your song, a sober part of him told him. He was never in danger.

But another part, the author, knew of course that this wasn’t how it worked.

And the rest of him tried not to think too hard about why he felt so very relieved.

I think I like him, Hela said.

Loki cracked open one eye, looking at his daughter suspiciously.

First Fenrir, now her.

Why are you telling me that, asked he.

What are you all implying?

Hela shrugged, and he didn’t buy her innocence for a second.

No reason. Just wanted you to know.
Trust is not an option

Chapter Summary

Emotionally compro-what?

Chapter Notes

This chapter is, concerning narrative flow, still not exactly what I wanted, but there comes a point (at least in fanfiction) where I force myself to stop editing. It's the last chapter for now, and I'm afraid you won't hear from me for quite a while. I will have to work on my original project for a bit (editing, editing, and more editing), and I will go on a longish trip (several weeks), so I'm afraid that you shouldn't expected anything before the end of april.

Sorry ^^

That said, you're validating me without end, and since like most authors, I'm insecure as fuck, I suck it all up and will give nothing back. In other words, you're wonderful, and I am very grateful to have you as my readers.

And yeah, the immensely difficult conversation with Loki will be in the next batch, not in this one. I am probably dreading it as much as you are (if for other reasons - it will be a bitch to write).

See the end of the chapter for more notes

‘No way those two are just staring at each other’ Tony said. ‘They are so talking, I’d bet my goatee on it.’

Hela was still sitting at Loki’s bed. She had taken Loki’s hand again. They didn’t speak, but judging from the changing expressions on their faces, they were communicating somehow.

Judging from Loki’s face, until now, he found the reunion dubious and scary, mixed with confusing, guilt-inspiring and painful. One might get pretty convinced he didn’t want to be in a room with his daughter at all if one completely ignored the incredible affection with which he looked at her, which he tried to hide, which showed nevertheless, because there was just so much of it that it spilled over no matter what he did.

Tony swallowed.

It was quite something to see him look at someone like that. It was… a side of him Tony had definitely not seen before.

Careful.

This way madness lies, nothing else.
‘Tony’ said Clint now as if he had read Tony’s mind.

Tony turned to him. Clint was sitting on the table they had shoved against the left wall, his gun easily accessible next to him. Frowning at Tony.

He had been on self-assigned guard duty for Loki ever since Hela had arrived, and had been more or less subtly eyeing Tony ever since the latter had entered the room adjacent to the one where the more or less happy family reunion was happening, now that Loki had woken up.

‘I think we should talk.’

‘There is no way you can blame me’ Tony said immediately. ‘I know you were close to winning your bet on my death, but you ruined the chances yourself by not shooting Loki and preventing my healing.’

Clint looked at him, startled, the next moment, something painful crossed his face.

‘And there I had put so much effort into getting you the pot money’ said Tony, ploughing on. ‘Just so you know, I would have demanded a cut.’

‘From beyond the grave?’ asked Clint sceptically.

‘From beyond the grave’ Tony confirmed. ‘I would have had Hela herself collect the debt. I’m on a first name basis with her now, you see? No, last name without titles basis. Or, she calls me by my last name without a title, I call her Hela. Don’t know who of us is more impolite. Basically, that’s the same deal I have with Loki anyway.’

Clint shook his head.

‘Tony, listen to me’ said he then. ‘I…’

He hesitated, grimaced.

‘The thing is, Loki was right about me’

Tony rocked back on his heels, his eyebrows shooting up.

Clint admitting that Loki was right about anything… no, about him, of all things? Where was that coming from?

‘About what? Tell me more.’

Clint grimaced.

‘About… about his assumption that not taking away my memories could have jeopardised the mission.’

Right.

Speaking it out loud looked like it caused him pain.

‘It doesn’t excuse what he did!’ Clint quickly said, then rubbed his face. ‘But …in a way, he was right. If he had let me keep those memories…when he arrived through the portal, he was a mess. And when I mean, a mess, I mean a giant fucking gory half-dead mess. In every fucking way. He barely made it to that factory. He crumbled on the ground as soon as he was out of our sight, he was totally out of it, he was…’
He trailed off.

‘Nat told me what you found’ Tony said with a tight voice.

Clint didn’t answer.

‘Yeah’ said he slowly. ‘But what I wanna say is, I…’

He bit his lips.

‘If I had kept remembering all that… I know I would have acted differently later. Even with all my training, and even considering what had been at stake, I couldn’t… I can’t just ignore what I know, and… thing is, I would have made decisions that might have been strategically… unwise.’

‘You mean, you would have acted like any normal human being.’ Tony said dryly. ‘With emotions and empathy and all that shit. That’s not a weakness, Clint.’

‘I know it isn’t’ said Clint and furrowed his eyebrows. ‘I’ve learned that the hard way… but in this situation, it might have cost us everything. And Loki knew that. And so he prevented it. And as angry as that still makes me, from a strategical standpoint… I understand.’

He paused.

‘But under the influence of the mind gem, I didn’t have that problem’ said he. ‘Under the influence of the mind stone, I saw all his injuries, and all I cared about was how he could be used. Even when I was helping him, I was considering whether to sacrifice him wasn’t the better idea. I was not… emotionally compromised… then.’

Tony’s jaw tightened.

‘Why are you telling me this?’ asked he.

‘I’m telling you this because then, from one second to the other, Loki was in his armour, in his glamour, had his hands at my temples and wiped my fucking mind!’ Clint said.

Right.

The thing was, Clint didn’t look furious about this exactly. He still looked troubled though. Scared.

‘I’m saying that I underestimated him’ said he. ‘I was purely soldier, nothing clouding my mind, no distractions, and he was a fucking mess, and mentally barely present, and I still underestimated him! He still tricked me! Do you have any idea what that means?’

And Tony thought, but I already know that, realised something then, and laughed out loudly and abruptly.

‘Why do you laugh?’ Clint asked, still looking troubled.

‘Clint’ said Tony. ‘Thanos underestimated Loki. And he had the mind gem at the time. Do you have any idea what that means?’

Clint didn’t seem to understand one moment, and did, the next.

He almost laughed, but didn’t. He shivered instead, looked at Loki in the other room again.

Probably with Hela’s help, Loki had regained all his glamours. His skin was pale, he looked
moderately well fed, his scars were gone. Even his mouth looked completely healed, it was just suspiciously closed all the time. If Tony didn’t know what lay beneath the illusion…

‘I’m aware that he’s dangerous’ said Tony. ‘Maybe more so than you are.’

There was a pause.

‘Then why did you go into that room without your suit?’ Clint asked quietly. ‘He was obviously disoriented and panicking. Of course he attacked you. Why wouldn’t he attack you?’

Tony felt the urge to justify himself, and then kicked it out the window. Fuck justifications.

‘Because I screwed up’ he said seriously. ‘I simply screwed up.’

At least, he had caught the archer off guard with this admission.

He rubbed his eyes.

‘I’m… sorry. I… I didn’t think clearly, okay?’ said he, lowering his hands from his eyes and then wondering what to do with them. Looking away from Clint sounded like a great idea in any case. ‘I didn’t think at all. And I shouldn’t have gone in there, least of all without my suit. What happened was my fault, and my fault only. Not yours, not Bruce’s, not Loki’s. Mine. I panicked, I acted without thinking, and shit happened, and I’m sorry.’

He sighed.

‘And you got me out of that mess by handling it perfectly’ added he. ‘I saw the footage – you stayed calm, you didn’t shoot, you tried to talk Loki down. Once he was out cold, you got me to safety. You even checked whether he was still alive. If… if you had attacked Loki, prevented him from healing me, I would probably not be here anymore. If Bruce wasn’t such a badass at controlling himself and making the right calls, I would definitely not be here anymore. You saved my life. Bruce saved my life. And Loki did. I’m grateful for that. And I’m sorry. I really am.’

He kept saying that somehow, today.

Just not to the person to whom he wanted to say it the most.

Clint was… very silent.

Yeah, you didn’t expect me to apologise, didn’t you?

‘Appears I don’t handle stress all too perfectly after all’ said he with a shrug, then glancing sheepishly at Clint. The archer was sitting there, clearly unsure, what to make of Tony’s words. No, he had not expected Tony to admit his mistake, to realise what Clint had done for him. It was sad in a way. But then again, wasn’t like Tony hadn’t earned it. ‘Probably, I shouldn’t have been recommended for a high stress job like the Avenger’s initiative.’

He pretended to think for a moment.

‘Oh, wait’ said he. ‘Then again, I wasn’t. I just can’t be avoided because I’m too fucking awesome to ignore.’

Clint looked at him blankly, then snorted, shook his head.

He scratched his head, then shrugged, stood up.
‘Well, you didn’t die, so’ said he. ‘I’m gonna go have a smoke outside. Do you think you are capable of not getting yourself killed by Viking aliens until I come back?’

‘No promises’ Tony said.

‘Right.’

Was this accepting his apology?

‘One more thing though’ Clint said. ‘What about that fucking cradle?’

* 

Tony moved the foreign lump of metal from his diagnostics room to his lab, deadlocked the medical floor for everyone except him, Hela, Bruce and Clint, made sure that there were no loose security ends, and ended Code Slumber Party the same day.

It wasn’t really tenable to keep the Slumber Party going, not with Nat having come back from her mission and having heard the news, and with Pepper having arrived back from her pretty damn important business trip to Canada that had been aborted because she had heard the news.

It had been difficult enough to convince Steve and Bucky to stay in Malibu.

‘But really’ Tony had said. ‘It was just a minor hiccup. No reason for you to interrupt your sex holidays.’

‘We are not… we are not on sex holidays’ Steve had said, Tony almost hearing him blushing over the phone. ‘And seriously, Tony? You almost died! That’s not exactly what I would call a hiccup!’

‘As opposed to what, the desired scenario?’ Tony had asked, and Steve had groaned.

Tony knew he was being difficult again, but he had had to pull himself together and be nice and understanding and sensible a lot in the last hours, and he was so fed up with it.

Being nice was exhausting.

He still hadn’t talked to Loki, or even entered his room, but then again, it wasn’t like Loki could talk at the moment, except telepathically with his daughter apparently, who was sitting at his bedside most of the time, and, judging from his and her facial expressions, still liked giving him hell.

He probably deserved it.

It wasn’t just the impracticability of Loki’s missing mouth that kept Tony away though. Knowing what he knew by now about the guy, Tony wouldn’t do him any favours by showing up when he was still vulnerable, weak, not even able to communicate. It was obvious that Loki hated his condition – he often touched his illusion, probably feeling the melted and slowly healing flesh underneath, and his face tensed then, his fist opened and closed, he coughed as if trying to speak, tensed even more, breathed more quickly. Hela took his hand into his then, her webs spreading over him, enveloping him– that seemed to calm him.

No, all in all, it was better to wait until Loki was better.
Pepper had been surprisingly calm and sober about the whole thing, almost suspiciously so.

‘PR has it covered with the story of a supposed Avengers mission’ said she now.

They were sitting in the common room on his floor, and discussing business decisions that needed to be made.

‘You got knocked out cold and rushed home, your doctors eventually judged the injuries to be relatively harmless, but you are still supposed to take a few days off.’

‘I don’t need a few days’ Tony protested. ‘Look at me, I’m totally fine.’

And he opened his arms in demonstration.

He did feel fine.

‘Yes, you’re fine, and you’re also absolutely not in control of your magic’ said Pepper soberly, scrolling on her tablet. ‘If there is a real emergency, sure, go ahead, but this is a good excuse to stay here, find out how to restrain your magic just enough not to blow up the next annoying CEO you meet, or yourself, or at least enough not to look like you were constantly high on hallucinogens.’

Well, it was true that in addition to feeling fine, he also continued to see weird patterns moving about all around him, had weird sensations he couldn’t place, and kept hearing that whispering that he knew by now came from his own seidr.

‘We’ve got a cover story for that too, by the way, if you slip up afterwards. Medication.’

‘Then people will just think that the injuries are less harmless than we let on, or that I’m easier to take advantage of’ said he.

‘And you will take advantage of that misconception’ Pepper argued.

True.

‘Can’t we just use the bad boy image and say I have a drug problem again?’

Pepper shrugged.

‘If you want’ said she. ‘The cover story is already out there, but it would give the journalists a field day if we let them find out that it was really a hush-up for you taking LSD. It might make the stock drop for a while but it’s too consistent with your established image to harm you or Stark Industries in the long term. And it would reassure people about you, make them think they know you. It would definitely justify hiding you away for a while. So if you want to go for that, I’m in.’

Tony stared at her.

‘Remind me again why we didn’t marry?’ asked he.

‘Because you’re self-destructive and I can’t deal with that in a partner but I can deal with that in a friend’ Pepper said soberly. ‘And now you’ve got Loki, and he’s pretty self-destructive too, so he doesn’t really have a right to complain. And don’t think for a second that I don’t see the similarities between me and him very well.’

Tony, for a moment, felt too dumbstruck to respond.

‘I don’t… I don’t have Loki’ said he then. ‘Nobody has Loki. And… similarities?’
Pepper rolled her eyes, ‘If you can’t figure it out on your own, I won’t help you’ said she. ‘In any case, any story that allows you to stay in the tower for now is good. Hela might be here to help Loki heal, but we don’t know how long his recovery will take and what other hiccups, as you call them, might occur. Nat could be a threat to Loki for the moment, others could take advantage of his vulnerability too, and I’d rather have you here, concentrating on protecting him and helping him recover than at some gala, completely distracted by worrying over him and insulting another influential idiot.’

There was a moment of silence.

Then, ‘You’re taking his safety into account in your planning. You’re making provisions for it.’ Tony slowly said. ‘You’re helping me take care of him.’

‘Yes, I am’ Pepper simply said.

‘And you expect me to care for his safety so much it will distract me’ he added.

Pepper looked up at him, ‘Yes, Tony’ said she. ‘And I’m speaking from experience here, so don’t tell me it won’t happen.’

‘You…’ Tony began, then stopped himself.

Why did everybody…

‘I… I think you’re making some erroneous assumptions about my relationship with him’ said he cautiously.

Like Bruce.

‘Am I now?’ said Pepper sceptically.

‘This thing, between me and Loki’ Tony began to explain. ‘It isn’t-

‘When’s the last time you slept with someone else?’ Pepper interrupted him.

‘What?’

‘The last time you had sex with someone else than Loki?’ Pepper repeated.

‘That… that doesn’t have anything to do with anything’ Tony said, leaning back on the sofa, feeling almost offended. Pepper should know better. ‘If you think that Loki and I are in a committed monogamous relationship…’

‘It would have surprised me if you had been’ said Pepper. ‘You and me never were. And that was more than okay with me. You know that.’

She looked at him closely.

‘But at first, when we got serious, even though I had never demanded it, you still stopped sleeping around’ said she. ‘I don’t think you even noticed. You just generally lost interest in other people for a while.’

Tony furrowed his eyebrows, feeling uneasy about this somehow. Was she right?

‘Are you sure I wasn’t just busy?’ asked he. ‘I mean, I know I’m busy now.’
‘Being busy never stopped you’ said Pepper with a short laugh. ‘I think it’s just something you do when you start actually caring for a person. It’s difficult for you to do that, to let somebody get close.’

‘I never would have guessed’ Tony said, trying to push down the uneasiness that was increasing.

Pepper smiled warmly.

‘No, but trust issues aren’t the only problem’ said she. ‘Most people you brush off or treat with your famous Stark charm. You’re either rude or play a role, something studied and perfected. But caring for someone means you don’t want to accidentally hurt them, and you want to be authentic at the same time. Which means you have to put in some actual effort into the interaction, which doesn’t come naturally for you. And you do it the way you do everything. You focus on the task. On the person. To get to know them. To understand them. To anticipate their reaction. To find out what they need.’

Again, she laughed, softly.

‘You can’t imagine how it was, at first’ said she. ‘Being the object of all that focus. It felt good, in a way, but at the same time, I felt very much… observed. Like a science project. That is until I realised that this is just the way you are. With people, it’s just difficult for you to find some… middle ground.’

He looked away, mostly because something about what she was saying rang true. And wasn’t that what made it so difficult to deal with the other Avengers too? He either overanalysed them or didn’t even notice their presence for days. Even with Pepper, he had eventually ended up alternating between obsessing over her and forgetting she was there.

‘I’m a difficult person to be with’ said he. ‘We both know that.’

He could see Pepper shrug from the corner of his eye.

‘Most people are. You know that’s not why I left.’

‘No’ said he. He knew exactly why she had left.

‘It’s still not that way between me and Loki’ said Tony. ‘You’re wrong.’

‘So you’re not confused about your feelings for him?’ asked Pepper, but she sounded calm, non-accusatory. ‘You don’t find yourself caring for his well-being, wishing you could trust him?’

Right.

‘Trust is not an option’ said he, noticing how hard his voice sounded.

He felt her hand on his.

‘He does make that difficult, doesn’t he, God of Lies and all?’ asked she, but there was almost a hint of humour in her voice.

‘How come I don’t have to fight you about this?’ asked he. This was almost what unsettled him the most. ‘You hated the alliance. How come you would be willing to accept something a whole lot more dangerous now?’

‘I know what I can change and what I can’t’ said she.
That was making it sound so… final.

It had better not be final.

He was screwed if it was.

‘Is this because I panicked when he got injured?’ asked he warily.

‘No. Actually, it’s because of everything else. I’ve been watching you’ said Pepper. ‘I’ve been observing you interact with Loki, I’ve been listening to you talking about him. And I know you. I know you better than you know yourself, I think.’

She seemed to think for a moment, putting her index to her lips, then she added, as an afterthought, ‘Though, granted, that might be not much of a competition.’

Before he had even the time to get irritated, she laughed, pulled him towards her, ruffled his hair.

‘I’m kidding’ said she. ‘I’m kidding, Tony.’

She held him, and he let her. Once, he had felt so safe in her arms.

‘I will support you as long as you want this relationship and as long as Loki behaves moderately decently’ said she. ‘If he hurts you, I’ll make him regret he was ever born.’

‘He already regrets that’ said Tony dully. ‘You’ll have to think of a better threat than that.’

‘It’s all for the better I was suitably vague when I was threatening him then’ said she calmly.

He looked up at her.

She was smiling down at him, her eyes were warm.

She had actually given Loki the shovel talk? Of course she had. Knowing her, it had been convincing.

‘You’re okay, you know that, right?’ said she.

He wasn’t sure.

He was mostly fucked up, he was maybe, possibly, developing feelings for a lunatic mass murderer, also, he didn’t run screaming from the feelings about said lunatic mass murderer, so how much space for okay could there be?

‘You’re okay’ said she and ruffled his hair again. ‘Don’t let anybody tell you different.’

Chapter End Notes

And that, my dear readers, is one of the many reasons why Pepper RulesTM.
All My Faults Passed On To You

Chapter Summary

Hela, my Hela. Rough and soft, cold and warm. I fear your embrace because I know it must end, I ache because you should not have to hold me. Sometimes, I wish I could still cradle you to my chest, keep you in my arms, warm and safe.

Chapter Notes

I’m back from trekking in Nepal – which was… something else entirely, just like Nepal always is. It’s really a very special (wonderful, beautiful, weird, very poor, exhausting) place. I’ve got three chapters of Loki POV for you :, and am already working on the next batch. Triggers for discussion of rape and trauma, and for the general gigantic emotional mess that is Loki’s mind.

… yes, I’ve seen Endgame. No, I don’t particularly want to talk about it. Yes, I solemnly swear not to comply.

The streets are so busy nowadays, Hela said.

She was standing by the window, looking down at what probably was the evening traffic in New York, the sinking sun falling on her black and white hair.

It is refreshing to see it for myself once more, and not only hear from it in stories.

You could travel more, Loki said. Hela had helped prop him up in his bed a bit, but he was already feeling tired again.

Weakling.

Or does Death keep you too busy for such trivialities?

Even from where he was half lying, half sitting, he saw the corner of her mouth lift a little.

What does time mean on Helheim?, said she. You know there will be always enough of it for every single soul. Mine included.

She leant her forehead against the window, sideways, looking back at him.

But maybe you are right. Less and less souls recognise me upon meeting me for the first time. Asgard’s stories are losing their power, the myths are fading. I might not cause the uproar on Midgard I might have a few centuries ago.

Loki flinched a little from her words. Yes, he had been stupid to assume that Death was Hela’s biggest obstacle when it came to leaving Helheim.
In contrast to Loki and to Fenrir, Hela had never been a shapeshifter. Had never been able to hide. And the fear that she inspired in so many…

*You should not have to care about the opinion of mortals. Or gods.*

Hela observed him, her gaze something between affectionate and sad.

*I do not have to, no,* said she. *I could waltz into the court of Vanaheim, and watch the lords and ladies recoil, pale, tremble, stammering as they do not know whether to politely throw me out or offer me all of their belongings to appease me. Strangely, the prospect does not carry great appeal for me.*

Loki closed his eyes.

He knew. He knew.

It was not the first time they had this conversation.

And who was he to tell her not to hide, when at the same time, he was hiding his true skin from everyone, even from her as soon as he could, was enjoying the privilege of being able to look normal, Aesir, like an actual real person?

No, don’t think like that.

They are all half Jotun, remember. And are they not real persons?

And when he looked at them, he could not see them as anything different than that, his children, perfect just as they were. When he looked at himself, however…

One of those had to be a lie, either his children being real persons, or him not being one. And yet he could not deny the truth of both, could not imagine… well, just another contradiction for Loki No One’s Son. Sometimes he thought they might break him apart.

*Mother,* Hela said.

He forced himself to school his expression, to then look at her, at her worried eyes.

*This realm has changed much since your last visit,* said he, to keep her from voicing her concerns. That he was different (too much so) since his fall. That he seemed more fragile (weaker, broken, mad). That he was not the mother they knew anymore (twisted beyond recognition, a stranger).

*There are mages here now, genetic variations that might not look unlike you. Even the band of warriors living in this tower has capabilities beyond the reach of normal mortals.*

*Yes, I noticed,* Hela said, a small smile on her lips. *I have had the pleasure to meet a few of those… Avengers. They are… interesting souls. Troubled, conflicted, each of them. And interesting.*

She looked down at the streets.

*This realm is evolving so quickly, so chaotically.*

Back to him, her eyes glinting.

*You must love it.*

Loki allowed his glamour a small smile, felt warmth spread in him. She knew him well.
Oh, one single planet will never be able to capture my heart fully, he said. There are too many wonders out there, too many places to discover.

But Odin truly could have chosen a worse realm for my son to protect.

No, Midgard had by far not been the worst choice.

And Thanos had endangered it.

He had not known about Jörmungandr. That was one of the few things that Loki had managed to hide from him until the very end, burying his children so deeply in his mind that he himself sometimes had forgotten about them, weeping when he remembered again, only to bury them even more deeply.

And so Thanos had never realised how very intimate a threat his command to conquer Midgard had been.

How there could not exist a world where Loki would have let it come to… not if he could still breathe, not if… if there was something he would guard at all costs…

…but he was lying to himself, wasn’t he? He was telling himself that there was nothing he would not do to protect his children, and yet Jörmungandr was still bound to Earth, Fenrir was still chained and muzzled, trapped in endless sleep, Sleipnir was still caged in Odin’s stables, saddled and ridden like a common mule whenever the Allfather needed him. A slave.

Only Hela had gained her own modicum of freedom, and that had been a grace of the Norns, never Loki’s achievement.

How much of a fool must Odin have been to believe in your act when he knew about Jörmungandr at the same time?, asked Hela now, her words sharper, tearing him from his thoughts. Is it because sacrificing his children for his personal gains is what he would choose himself?, continued she, or is it because he considers us not your children at all, nothing but a curse put on you?

Also this conversation they had had before.

He is wrong, said he, with emphasis.

You always dismiss him so easily. But Fenrir, Jörmungandr and I grew in you like parasites, tumours, feeding off your life force, said Hela dryly. After you had eaten the heart of a powerful and very angry witch. When Odin found you, you were bleeding from the wounds we had inflicted when we had torn from you, and we were drinking your blood, your seidr, we were sucking-

None of this was your fault-

We were killing you, mother. If Odin had not found you, you would have died then and there. I cannot blame him for concluding-

You are my children, Loki said, wanted to truly say it, tried, coughed, only to realise, once more, what he lacked. He squeezed his eyes shut for a moment, alright, no tongue, he thought, it’s alright, it’s temporary, the tongue will grow back, as it had done last time, opened them again-

Hela looked at him scrutinisingly, seeming to wait for him to come back to himself.

We are your children only because you call us so, said she then. You could have called us something else entirely. And would you have been wrong?
You are my children because you are my children, Loki said once he felt more in control of his breathing. She had to understand this. He would not leave her like that, with a doubt, not like Odin and Frigga had done with him. However often she confronted him about this, he wanted and had to be clear about this every single time. He owed her this. He owed her so much more, but at least this. I’ve told you a thousand times, I don’t care if you came into existence by accident, or because Angrboda wanted to survive in you, or because I could not let her go, or because she still loved me, or because she wanted to punish me. I simply do not care. Sleipnir’s conception was done against my will, and yet, as soon as I felt his seidr stir, there was no doubt. No doubt at all, just like there was no doubt about you. I loved you, each and every one of you, right from the start. You are my children. There is nothing in this world more precious to me than you. I-

Mother. You can stop.

Hela had come to his bed, had laid her hand on his. Her white one was so rough, but the dark one so soft. It was an irony he could only appreciate recently that the Jotunn part of her would be the tender one.

And he shook his head. He wouldn’t be stopped now.

You must finally understand that it was never you who put me at risk, said he, his thoughts urgent, pushing against her doubts. You were infants, you were born, and then you fed, that is what infants do. Yes, giving birth can be a risk, that is why you usually don’t do it on your own.

I should never have had to flee from Asgard to have you, hiding from everyone. They should never have forced me to choose between you and my own health. It is not your fault, Hela. It’s Odin’s. Asgard’s. It was they who abandoned me, not you.

And he felt the truth of his words as he spoke them, and at the same time, he realised he had never spoken them before, not like that, not so clearly, so unambiguously, maybe because only saying he realised: They had abandoned him. There should have been someone with him. Why had there been nobody with him? Why had they forced him to go through this alone, in pain, with no one to help? He had known then that this might likely be his end, he had been so very afraid. And maybe now they would be right to leave him to his own means, but what had he then done to deserve-

He realised that he was crying, quickly covered it up with another glamour, the tears running over his cheeks underneath it.

Mother, Hela said again, her words trembling in his mind. She bent down to him, laid her forehead against his, pressing his hand.

He let her. She felt soft and rough against him, warm and cold.

My Hela. My Hela.

He felt almost weak with the proximity, his breath short, fearful that she would leave him too soon.

But they stayed like that for a while, and when Hela settled back, sat down, she mercifully never let go of his hand.

I believe you, said she then. But maybe you should tell Fenrir some of what you told me today.

Loki furrowed his eyebrows.

Is he troubled about it?, asked he. He didn’t mention-
Hela huffed.

*Oh, you know him*, said she. *You have to drag everything out of him. He guards his feelings closely.*

*Yes, he does, doesn’t he?*, Loki said. Fenrir had always done so, more so than the others.

*Yes, well*, Hela said. *I suppose you taught him well.*

Loki flinched, and Hela’s eyes widened immediately, if just a little.

But what for? She was right. He had learned to keep his feelings to himself too thoroughly. Should he be surprised that they would eventually imitate him?

*I… I suppose that’s fair*, said he.

*Not really*, said Hela. *Sometimes, my tongue is sharper than warranted.*

*And who exactly taught you that?*, said Loki dryly and met her eyes, and she let out a soft and sad laugh.

*You know, I just wished I would not pass all my faults down to you*, said he. *I would like to keep some of them to myself if you don’t mind.*

And not look at them like into a distorted mirror of himself. At least, it should be the distorted mirror of someone happier.

She smiled at him warmly, bent forward, laid her fingers on his cheek.

*Oh, you don’t have to worry about that*, said she. *You have plenty of faults that are yours to keep.*

Somehow, she was able to reach beneath his glamour, brushing his tears away that she should not even be able to see.

For a moment, he wished he could truly smile.

But then he thought of what she had told him about Stark the other day, and the urge to smile died.

She seemed to notice too, raised an eyebrow.

*What is it now?*

Well, they would have to have this conversation sooner or later.

*You have told Stark a lot*, said he.

Too much. About Death. About herself. His chest was tight when he thought about it. Too many weapons.

Hela leant back again, suddenly putting more distance between them. Preparing for an argument then.

*He is supposed to help you in this war*, said she. *What I told him could be useful information for that.*

*You told him that you were my daughter*, said he.

*I merely confirmed it. He already knew.*
Same thing, Hela, said he, hating himself for how hard his thoughts were, how cold, he did not want to talk to her like that. He had promised himself not to get cold with them, why did he have to remind himself so often?

He took a moment to breathe, to soften his tone.

Then he said, this is not merely useful information. It’s dangerous information. Think of… think of what Odin has done.

Hela’s eyebrow rose higher.

Does he strike you similar to Odin?, asked she dryly.

As if that was the point.

He swallowed – or tried to. It was not easily manageable, without a tongue. Pathetic.

Hela, please. Why would you decide to… trust him… to that extent?

When you are the worst weapon one could put in an enemy’s hand? When using you against me would render me defenceless, because I cannot bear to see you get hurt anymore, when I-

But he was lying again. He saw them hurting all the time.

He did nothing.

Maybe Odin was right to say he was not a mother at all.

She looked at him, her arms crossed in front of her chest, then sighed.

Because you will not, said she then.

What?

You would not take that step, said she. You cannot. Not when it comes to us. So I took it for you.

He stared at her. That was… no, she…

That does not make any sense, said he.

It does, said she. You just don’t allow yourself to see it.

He abruptly felt the urge to laugh, but what he expelled in the end was something between a cough and a choking sound, pain shooting through him at the effort.

Weak. Useless.

He then felt the urge to turn his face away from her, and he did.

You would not take that step.

So I took it for you.

Why would she… she didn’t even know Stark, couldn’t know him, not so quickly. Why did she assume that Loki was serious enough about this to... was he so transparent? Was he stripped even of his most basic masks, was he reduced to wearing his heart on his sleeve, like the most foolish…
He breathed in, breathed out.

Hypocritical again.

He could not demand of Fenrir to show his feelings, when at the same time…

He looked back at her.

Again, she seemed to wait.

So patient today.

He pondered trying to play down his feelings for the mortal, then discarded the idea. It would have been a waste of time – for whatever reason, both Fenrir and Hela knew well enough.

Knew what?

He barely dared to ask himself.

And what did it matter anymore anyways? He had ruined whatever this could have been just as reliably as he had ruined everything else.

*How can you know he will not use this to hurt me*, said he in the end. *How can you know he will not use this to hurt you?*

*I cannot*, she simply said. *Prophecy is not among my gifts, as we both know.*

*But I have looked at his soul*, said she then. *And I have not found it lacking.*
Chapter Summary

They form a peculiar web.

Chapter Notes

Each time I write Loki POV, I’m thinking, omg, look at this, your character is so bloody inconsistent, you’re making him completely contradict himself at least three times in this chapter! And then I remember who exactly it is that I’m writing about.

Continued trigger warnings for discussions of trauma and rape/non-con, as well as Loki-brand self-loathing.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

After his tongue had eventually grown back, he practised speaking under his glamour, where no one would hear. Started with the vowels, continued with consonants. Then he moved on to syllables, simple words, to more complicated ones, to sentences.

He knew exactly how to teach himself, and he hated that it was so.

This time, it was far easier of course, took barely half of a day where the last time, it had taken weeks.

After they had finally cut the threats all those centuries ago, after he had healed, he had still not been able to open his mouth. Having kept it forcibly closed for more than a year, the muscles of his face had adapted, his sinews and tendons had shortened, his tongue and entire intestinal tract had atrophied. His body had accepted the shut mouth and the lack of nutrition as its new intended state, and the strong healing spells they had had to use on him after the cave might have restored his organs, might have knitted his flesh together, and his skin, but they couldn’t but restore the body to how it was convinced it was now supposed to be. Which meant restored but shortened face muscles and tendons. Which meant a restored but atrophied intestinal tract and tongue.

Lips that barely wanted to open.

This time, his body had returned to something much more acceptable and it was the remaining wounds that made Loki’s voice still raucous, not a vile surrender to a punishment he had never planned to accept.

It still made him nauseous.

Hela had left a day ago. He had sent her away, because he couldn’t know when Thor would turn up, Stark having foolishly called for him in his panic.

And if Hela had forced him to trust Stark with dangerous knowledge, he knew he could not trust
Thor with the same thing.

Not him.

Thor didn’t even know… hah, he knew nothing.

Had refused to understand even when Loki shouted it in his face because sometimes Loki was so tired of it all, of keeping this damned suffocating silence, because…

Sometimes he wanted to grab Thor by the shoulders and force him to listen to every single obscene detail about how his dear friends had…

But what for?

It would only bring more shame on him, and had Loki not enough of that already?

The voice that whispered that to him sounded suspiciously like Odin, Loki found.

I have turned from you, Allfather, he thought. I have let go. Will you not finally let me go too?

He hated how carefully he had to watch himself not to resemble his not-father when he was with his children. How much he had to watch his tone, his demeanour, his words. Not to slip into this coldness. Into the role of this domineering, disapproving…

Oh yes, it is high time, Allfather, to draw your poison out, so that I do not poison my children in turn.

He looked down at the streets, leant against the window like Hela had been, just a few days ago.

Again, he felt the urge to touch his own face, to reassure himself that his lips were really there, not just an illusion underneath which lay blackened flesh and bone.

He did, and met lips, soft as always.

His excuses of not leaving this room were running out.

He breathed out.

He was not particularly fond of being chased out of places. Well, better to get it over with.

At least, Hela was well. Content, as far as he could tell. And Death was good to her. Loki had questioned Hela thoroughly on the matter.

What Death could offer would seem so little to most, loathsome for others. But for Hela, his peculiar and wonderful daughter, it was exactly what she desired.

Sometimes, the Norns were oh so very merciful.

He mouthed a silent thank you. Straightened up then.

Jarvis had told him where Stark was at the moment – in the common room of his own floor, where Loki’s room had been located. And Jarvis also told him Stark was alone.

Loki teleported there directly, and though Stark only laid away the tablet when he had already
glowed into existence, Loki was sure he had been warned.

He was sitting on the couch, one hand still on the tablet, looking at him. His seidr, unbound as it now was, certainly suited him, blue fire burning from his arc reactor, a low singing. Loki did not know what to do with the warmth in his eyes however. The hidden fear? That was more familiar.

He stepped toward the coffee table, his hands behind his back.

They had not talked since Loki had stabbed him – Stark had not visited him once.

Loki was not entirely sure what to make of it. He had at first assumed that Stark had stayed away for his own safety, but Hela was of the opinion that it had been out of respect. Loki would certainly have loathed lying in a bed before Stark, reduced to muteness, to an invalid useless even for discussing strategy.

But could he expect Stark to understand? He should not let himself be blinded by his wishes and desires, no matter what his daughter had to say on the matter.

Stark, as to him, kept his dark eyes locked on him, seemed to wait for something. And then, unexpectedly, his face transformed into a bright smile. It was not the false smile Stark used so often either, but a real one, and Loki almost took a step back.

If only because he felt himself react to it, somewhere deep inside him, and he couldn’t allow…

… couldn’t he?

But he forgot that he was no longer welcome here.

‘I take it you are feeling better, Lokes?’ asked Stark.

For some reason, the use of the nickname relaxed Loki somewhat, and he answered, ‘Yes… yes I am.’

‘Glad to hear your voice again’ said Stark and why were his eyes shining? At the same time still this concealed fear. It didn’t fit together, and Loki didn’t like it. ‘Even though you still sound like you had swallowed a few tons of glass shards.’

‘I will need… a few more days to heal completely’ Loki said. ‘But I am well enough.’

Well enough for this.

He pulled himself up straighter. No reason to postpone the unpleasant.

‘I thank you for having been allowed a place of healing here’ said he. ‘I also wish to inform you that I owe you a favour on Hela’s behalf.’

**Wish** was perhaps a bit of a strong word there.

‘Yes’ said Stark. ‘She told me.’

Loki thought she would. Leave nothing to chance, that was his Hela.

‘A curious price, isn’t it?’

Maybe. Her healing him had not been free of charge. Loki had expected as much. He had not expected what she demanded from him in return though.
'It is her way of repaying your swift help, I suppose’ said he stiffly, not saying that it was Hela’s way of repaying that Stark had practically saved his life again.

He liked to think he had some pride left.

But you know that you haven’t, a voice in his mind reminded him.

‘You will be glad to hear that I will vacate my rooms before the setting of the sun and that I will take down any wards I have put on them for my protection’ continued he. ‘I do hope you realise however that regretful as they were, my actions against you do not consider a breach of our alliance, and I do expect you to-‘

‘Wait, what?’ Stark interrupted him there. ‘Stop for a moment!’

He held his hands up, and his eyebrows were furrowed, his face troubled.

Why?

Was Loki’s assumption incorrect that Stark had understood by now the many loopholes of the terms, had he misjudged-

‘You’re leaving?’ asked Stark, as if that didn’t go without saying.

Sometimes, Loki didn’t understand the mortal at all. He shifted his weight back on his heels, blinked.

‘…I was expecting you to ask me to’ said he then coolly. ‘I have attacked and injured you in your own home after all.’

‘Didn’t seem to bother you before’ said Stark, cocking his head and looking at him as if trying to figure something out. ‘When you kind of slammed my face into the ground, remember? What has changed?’

Loki considered evading the matter, or lying. He could always claim that Stark had set up the strict rules about non-violence only after that particular incident, and that he had considered himself bound to them since. But the way Stark was asking, he was likely to be wary about it already, and if he really wanted to find out, there was always Thor. The advantage was lost now anyway.

‘You had not offered me hospitality then’ said he.

‘So that does make a difference’ Stark said slowly, as if Loki had just confirmed something he had been already suspecting.

Yes, he had already been wary.

If that was so, maybe Loki’s honesty in this matter would indeed turn out to be beneficial in the end. He had to weigh lies with truths anyway when it came to Stark.

He nodded.

‘What kind of difference?’

‘On Asgard, and on most other realms, hospitality brings about responsibilities of protection and non-violence for both parties’ said he. ‘To break such peace is considered a far more serious crime than an equivalent act of violence in other circumstances.’

‘But do you even abide by the laws of Asgard anymore?’ Stark asked, one eyebrow raised.
Good question. He did, and then he didn’t. The law was made of words, and he could bend around those to his liking.

It were never the courts that had truly damned him in the end. It were always the people because in the end, those didn’t care about the law of words written down. They cared about the law in their own heads, and Loki’s crimes against that were always the ones he would end up paying the highest price for.

‘The law of hospitality is a little more fundamental than that’ said he because that was certainly true.

‘And on a magical level?’ Stark asked.

Ah, yes. He did like it when Stark paid attention. Maybe he liked it a bit too much even.

‘It isn’t equivalent to a vow to the Norns, if that is what you are concerned about’ said he. ‘It does have a certain effect on how your seidr behaves however. If you had put a magical ward on your tower, for example, your offer of shelter would make this ward accept me as not hostile, as a person to protect even. At least until you took back your offer.’

He smiled.

‘I’m afraid magical wards, beyond your arc reactor, are a little outside your current skillset however’ lied he.

‘So, like I said, though I am grateful that you haven’t revoked your hospitality yet, undoubtedly with respect to my temporary infirmity’, and how much he loathed having to condemn himself, admitting that he had been weak enough to require shelter, ‘I do understand that I gambled it away by-’

‘Nothing is revoked, Lokes’ Stark interrupted him.

‘What?’

‘The hospitality, it’s still there. You are still welcome here’ Stark said. ‘In fact, I would very much like you to stay here. If you still want to, I mean. You don’t have to of course. I just… nothing is revoked, okay? Everything still standing.’

Stark had spoken ever more quickly toward the end, as if he was uncomfortable, nervous really, and Loki raised both his eyebrows and leant back, not really knowing how to interpret it.

Stark, as to him, sighed, and suddenly his face looked a lot more open, a lot more vulnerable and Loki did not understand, especially since Stark then said, ‘Look, I’ve been wanting to tell you this for days… but first, you had no mouth, and that was likely to turn into the worst kind of one-sided conversation, and then I kept postponing it, telling myself that you were still healing, and honestly I was kinda scared shit of this conversation, but… but I’m sorry. I’m sorry, Loki.’

Loki stared at him.

This was certainly… an unexpected turn of events.

‘For… what… exactly?’

Stark looked at him, his eyes a bit too bright, then cast his eyes down, wiped them.

Wiped away tears?

Surely not!
Even the idea was absurd.

‘For… a lot, actually’ said he. ‘Definitely for what happened after you came back from… getting half of your face remodelled by a zombie movie aficionado. My injury was… that was my fault entirely. You were clearly confused, and I could see that. I still went in that room, without protection. I grabbed you. That you attacked me then… well, I really should have fucking see that coming.’

‘Ah’ Loki said, feeling a little at a loss for words.

He knew all that of course. It was what he might have defended himself with, had he been younger and more inexperienced. He had also learned along the centuries that such defences were usually pointless.

Why would Stark bring it up himself? What did he have to gain?

‘So it would be really fucking hypocritical of me to throw you out for the shit that I’m responsible for’ said Stark. ‘Especially since I put you in danger with my stupidity. You had to expend magic to heal me and everything.’

Stark lazily waved with his hand.

‘Right’ said Loki.

He didn’t feel particularly relieved. Quite the contrary in fact. First of all, for all he tried, he couldn’t see the reasons for Stark acting that way, and that alone grated him. Secondly, as unpleasant and inconvenient as getting shut out of the tower would have been, the fact that Stark had reaffirmed the vow of hospitality after Loki’s trespass meant one thing most of all: that Loki’s inevitable betrayal would be even more damnable.

Loki had hoped to… avoid heaping even more crimes of quite that nature on his back.

Ah, well.

He was the God of Chaos and Mischief after all; he was a monster, unwanted and cast out by everyone who had ever called him son. Everything that was honourable about him was a lie; the rest was Ergi, a heap of degradations, treason, backstabbing and cowardice. He was vileness. It probably suited the Norns that he should keep collecting also the vilest crimes.

He was, also, the Bard.

This little detail never fit. Why did it never fit?

He furrowed his eyebrows, but before he could speak, Stark went on.

‘And I, I’m sorry that I…’ said he.

He made a frustrated noise, leant back on the sofa and drew his fingers down his face.

‘Look, if we’re going to have this conversation, which we really should have and which I’m probably going to fuck up big time, because I’m useless with people really, I don’t even know why they let me near people, let alone alien royalty, I mean, Hela told me right in the face that my manners were abysmal, and my first conversation with both you and Thor ended with respectively you and Thor trying to kill me, and sure, it’s easy to blame the other guy, especially when they’re currently breaking a window with your body, but there’s obviously a pattern here, and that pattern tells me that there is a long history of Tony Stark pissing off-‘
‘Stark’ Loki interrupted him. ‘You’re rambling.’

‘Right’ Stark said, staring at his own home entertainment system that was somewhere to Loki’s left. ‘Pissing off powerful people by rambling, among other things. What I meant is, will you at least sit down?’

‘I think I’m more comfortable standing’ Loki said honestly.

He would be more comfortable leaving this conversation altogether, but he didn’t voice that of course. It would mean admitting far too much.

‘Yes, yes, of course you are’ Stark said, rubbing his face again.

‘I… I’ve come to realise…’ he paused, scratched his neck.

For the Norn’s sake, this was getting unnerving.

‘Is there a point to your stammering?’ asked Loki. ‘Or have you hit your head after I stabbed you and you’ve lost your ability to form full sentences?’

‘Funny, I’ve never been accused of that before’ Stark said absent-mindedly.

He paused, biting his lips.

‘I… I wanted to say that I’m an idiot, and a jerk’ said he. ‘And that I’m sorry.’

‘You said that before’ Loki remarked, his fists balling.

His skin was crawling, he hated this, he-

‘You know, for not… realising sooner.’

A pause.

‘Realising… what?’ Loki asked. He found his voice sounded higher than it should have been. Not good.

Not good, not good, not good.

He could still flee. No, you still need him.

‘I could have… realised, I mean’ said Stark, his voice heavy. He was looking down at his hands. ‘There were enough signs. And you practically told me. Or rather you told Thor. Of course you lied about it at the same time, but what you were actually saying was clear enough. I would have only had to listen.’

Loki wanted to interrupt the mortal then and there, say something scathing and hurtful to end this line of conversation.

Instead, he merely turned away.

His throat constricted anyway. Better be silent and not betray himself with the tone of his voice.

Hah, what a feeble excuse – as if you couldn’t use a glamour to hide that.

Like I’ve hidden everything I am for as long as I can remember.
‘Rape is a common torture technique’ said Stark. ‘Uncreative and blunt, but effective. You said that they were trying to break down your mental defences, and you gave me enough information about your culture for me to understand what that implies.’

Loki closed his eyes, listened to his own breath. He was trembling, he knew, and his thoughts were too much in disarray to find the magic to hide it. Stark’s voice was too close, at the same time too far away. His body, his mind was failing him again, like it had before, and Loki listened to that failing mind going through the possible lies he could present Stark, pretty ones and ugly ones and very ugly ones, but that could each of them make the house of cards that were the mortal’s assumptions tumble and fall. None of those thoughts found an end, they just interlaced before he could come to a conclusion, but-

If he could only bring himself to speak. Then it was not too late.

He didn’t have to admit to this, nobody had to know, nobody had to know.

You can still hide your debasement.

And the voice that told him that sounded so much like the Allfather, Loki flinched under it. He pressed his eyes shut more tightly.

Loki wanted to twist the mortal’s neck. Just for a moment, and then, for some reason, the same thought made him want to throw up.

Or maybe he just generally felt nauseous.

‘I should not have assumed…’ Stark said, his voice so disgustingly warm, sad. Why was he acting that way? Why flay off Loki’s skin and at the same time pretend that he cared? It was what Odin would do. You seek him, even in your lover; you seek what Odin was doing to you. You want it. You need it, Ergi. ‘I should not have just assumed that they would not use this against you. I’m sorry. I really am.’

Loki opened his mouth. The lies were on the tip of his new formed tongue, but what were they still good for?

Each of them easy to dismantle, and in any case, Stark already knew.

Because you’ve given yourself away, Loki, the voice inside him that sounded so much like the Allfather said.

And he had.

Probably, Barton had told Stark what he had found when washing him, how he had cleaned and treated Loki’s swollen anus with a salve, outside and inside, how Loki had barely flinched under his touch, no matter how invading it was, because he had been trained so thoroughly. Probably, the archer had told everyone.

So he simply closed his mouth again.

Considering the meaning of silences in their conversations, Stark could probably read that as a confirmation.

There was a pause.

‘Oh Thanos, the poor bastard’ said Stark then, and the word choice took Loki by surprise. He turned
his head in the mortal’s direction just a fraction. ‘Tried to break you with creative methods, then with the really uncreative ones. You still fucked him over at the very first occasion. He never stood a chance against you, did he?’

It took a moment for the words to register, then Loki couldn’t help but let out a startled, high laugh.

‘No’ said he hoarsely, and felt a grin form. Felt, against all reason, warm, elated. ‘No, he never did.’

Chapter End Notes

Colin_Solowjow made a beautiful drawing for the end of this chapter <3.
How can you flay off my skin so gently?

Chapter Summary

I want to hate you, but instead...

Chapter Notes

Caution is advised – the conversation does not get easier from here, and I mean it when I say that Loki’s mind is a mess. Positive thoughts have a hard time surviving in that place. Good thing those are the most resilient and sneaky. Last chapter for now.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

‘No. He never did.’

The heart pounding started soon after. He stood there, his hands still balled to fists, and wondered if his body would even obey, should he command it now to fight, or to run.

The feeling of elation was still there, at the same time, he was too aware of the other’s presence in the room. Too aware of that small, compact body, and he remembered how these arms had gripped him. And he remembered suddenly so acutely the moment he had gotten confused, where he had not been sure anymore whether he was doing this or whether this was done to him, and him being just a thing to be used again, and those arms could hold him down, they could-

‘Loki… are you alright?’

Don’t ask me this, I-

He wondered whether he should not go to that sofa, grab Stark by his collar, drag him across the room and pin him against the next wall just to prove to himself that he could, that he was more than just a mewling quim, prove to Stark that he never would be able to force him into…what a useless show of power when he knew exactly that Stark was not a threat, or at least not in that way. It was just him getting mixed up again.

Rather ask yourself why Stark confronts you with this knowledge now.

Was this why he had presented himself to be generous and caring at first? Because in truth, Stark had already re-evaluated the alliance, and had realised that they were not equals at all? That Loki was less useful, less worthy than presumed? Respect has to be earned, Loki had said so himself, and given Stark, with that assertion, just another weapon.

You’re arming your ally against yourself.

Was this then a way of showing Loki his place under the pretence of pity? Was Stark going to be just another person who would look down on Loki, disregarding him and walking over his will for his
own good?

Were Stark’s words an implicit threat to use this knowledge against him?

And he knew about Hela too. Could probably guess at a lot more.

What weapons did he have against Stark? Not all of them could be used, not yet, but he had enough knowledge, didn’t he, to ruin the man at least financially without breaching the terms of their alliance? And there was always the promise of a future after Thanos when Loki would be able to do as he pleased. Stark didn’t have to know that that particular threat was particularly empty. It would be an easy lie.

If nothing else, Loki could threaten to destroy the man’s life work, to see to it that Iron Man suits would land in the very wrong hands, or the weapons that Stark was still designing privately, secretly…

Hela had said: I have looked at his soul. And I have not found it lacking.

…

There were not a lot of people of who Hela would have said something alike.

Not many people at all.

Loki pressed his eyes shut again.

But what did her judgement even mean? That Stark would graciously hold himself back and not use the power he had been given? That Loki would be able to rely on his mercy? That sounded less bearable even than the idea of Stark striking him with everything he had.

Would Hela see the mortal as worthy of her mother however, if this was how he was going to think of Loki? The pitiful creature that he was graciously not going to destroy? That was not likely either.

Surely, the most respectful way, maybe the only respectful way, of dealing with the matter would have been not to mention it at all. To move on as if Loki had never stilled under Stark’s touch, had never gone limp in his arms, as if Stark had never realised what all that meant.

Just pretend that nothing has happened, just don’t talk about it again, like the royal family of Asgard has done for centuries, and Loki had been grateful for the silence, and had loathed it at the same time, had suffocated under it, had wanted to scream, and scream, and-

But he was not an infant anymore, to run crying to his mother, recounting his nightmares, relying on her to solve his problems for him. Nobody wants to hear you whining about your imagined slights.

Thanos, the poor bastard. He never stood a chance against you, did he?

Why say something like that?

And he felt warm in response to those words, elated.

Because you rely on other people’s flattery, you pathetic wimp.

No, because it is true, another voice in him said. Because however much Thanos tried to break me, he never truly did. Like Baldur could never break me, and Odin couldn’t. Because screaming and suffering and pleading for death, I was still constantly working against him, and despite all the times they violated me, that felt like power, and Stark sees it. He names it.
Oh, Loki, another voice in him said, now you have finally decided to lie to yourself as much as you like lying to others. You want to find power in your crawling and snivelling, and so you decide that this must be how Stark sees you too? How much easier do you want to make it for him to manipulate you?

*I have looked at his soul. And I have not found it lacking.*

Yes, Hela, I know.

But what good reason could there be to talk about this, if it was not a power play, or mercy, or *pity*? What was Stark looking for, what did he-

‘What, may I ask you… is the point of this?’ asked he.

His voice was gratefully calm, if a little tense.

‘The point?’ Stark sounded confused.

‘Of voicing your… speculations’

There was a pause.

‘Right’ Stark said then, rubbing his forehead. ‘Good point. Er, no pun intended. I just… I just want…’

But he didn’t go on.

Yes, Stark, what do you want? Tell me.

‘I… when we were having sex… that last time… I just got so frigging scared when you went unresponsive from one moment to the other. I… I kept wondering what I had missed, or what I could have done differently, and I just don’t…” Stark scratched his beard, looked everywhere in the room but at him, his eyes shining again.

Ah. So this was what the fear had been about. Loki had misinterpreted, this was just a matter of guilt.

Thor too sometimes had had such fancies, after having left Loki behind once more on some battlefield or on some adventure. Then he would stubbornly insist on making amends so to appease Loki or his own conscience, it didn’t matter much which. Thor’s idea of making amends had in any case always been more about Thor than about Loki, and had always been disappointing in some way or another.

It certainly didn’t prevent the oaf from leaving him behind the next time.

Loki had learned to use the sentiment, half-hearted and unreliable as it often was, for his own goals in the end.

Was that what he should do now too?

He wavered, but for some reason, the idea repelled him. Better to deal with the matter swiftly and conclusively.

‘If that is what concerns you, I can reassure you’ said he. ‘You did not wrong me, and I see no grounds for an apology or another form of compensation.’

‘This is not about… compensation, or any of that shit’ answered Stark, shaking his head. ‘But yes, I
think I do owe you an apology. I should have seen the signs sooner, and maybe if I had known about your history, I would have, and I’m sorry that I was so fucking oblivious for so long.’

‘My reactions are not your responsibility, Stark’ said Loki soberly. ‘I had given you my consent and never revoked it, so there was no trespass on your part.’

‘I should at least have responded better when you went practically catatonic.’

Loki forced out a short, hard laugh.

‘Even less is it your responsibility to compensate for my failures’ said he, feeling disgusted with himself for even mentioning his lapse. ‘I apologise for taking so long to leave. I should have liked to spare you the display.’

Stark’s eyes shot to Loki’s at that moment, and they were wide.

‘Spare me the… the display?’ Stark asked, his voice high. Well, what about that was so scandalous? ‘This isn’t… look, I know it might feel that way to you, but this wasn’t… this wasn’t a failure on your part, okay? It is me who should have-’

Oh by the Norns…

‘I lost my sense of reality’ Loki said, raising an eyebrow. Did the mortal really have to make him recount it in detail? Wasn’t it enough that he had witnessed it and Loki would have to let him live? ‘My body lost its ability to move. I could not even speak, I could not answer to my ally who was calling out for me, who was asking for my help. I had planned to control my memories, Stark, and they overwhelmed me in mere minutes, leaving me a puppet useful for nothing except being handled as one liked. Turning me into exactly the thing that the Mad Titan had intended me to be. This sounds like failure to me, looks like failure, smells like failure – so I will call it failure if you don’t terribly mind.’

Stark looked appalled for a moment, whether by Loki’s words or his dry, scathing tone Loki didn’t know.

‘Loki’ said he then slowly. ‘This isn’t… you can’t… you’re dealing with very heavy trauma there. Like, massive trauma. It is normal to-’

‘Well, it was a normal failure then’ Loki cut him off. ‘I am just commonly wimpy then, are you satisfied? Now, diverting as it is to discuss my many shortcomings and demerits, I would like to-

At that, Stark jumped to his feet.

‘Do you even hear how you’re talking about yourself?’ asked he, for the first time in this conversation sounding angry.

Loki, as to him, felt momentarily thrown by this outburst and senseless question.

‘Do you really expect me to give you an answer to that?’ asked he then.

Stark stared at him, then visibly deflated.

‘Not really, no’ said he tiredly, and sat down again, taking his head into his hands.

Loki wondered whether to pursue his plan to change the topic for good or whether to wait. Today, Stark caught him unaware far too often with his reactions. He should be able to predict them better.
He should be able to steer this conversation, not be swept away by it, ever surprised at the next turn.

‘Okay’ said Stark now, his head still in his hands. ‘Okay. The way I’m going on about it obviously doesn’t really work, so let’s try a different angle.’

He sighed, then looked up at him.

‘Personally, I think that this whole failure thing is utter bullshit’ said he, his voice sober. His eyes were locked on Loki’s. ‘Personally, I think that most of what you had to say about yourself today is just the same Asgardian crap, those same fucking useless rules, this same fucking useless game you told me about after Thor’s last visit. And no, I don’t think you should be ashamed for reacting like you did, and no, I don’t think you should feel ashamed for what happened to you at all.’

He shrugged his shoulders.

‘But then, who am I to talk?’ said he. ‘I never got raped, not even in Afghanistan, so I have no fucking clue about what that does to you, physically, emotionally or mentally. And because I have no clue, I didn’t notice any of the signs, and was a real jerk to you a few times. Like, when I asked you whether Asgardian morals were the reason you wouldn’t let me top. In retrospect, that was an asshole move.’

Loki couldn’t suppress a flinch at that. He hadn’t even known that the mortal would remember… that he would understand…

_I have looked at his soul. And I have not found it lacking._

Shut up, Hela. Just _shut up._

‘And the thing is, this isn’t the only thing that happened to you’ continued Stark. ‘And from what you have told me about the rest… the last thing I would ever associate with you is weakness, or failure. I meant it when I said that Thanos didn’t stand a chance. And that’s because you’re a fucking bad-ass. Don’t you get how much resilience it takes to survive all that you have survived? I can’t think of a single person I know who could take so much shit and still remain coherent enough to walk and talk, let alone back-stab your torturer, sing an epic fate-changing song and then plan an equally epic fate-changing war!’

‘You know mostly mortals’ Loki said, trying not to pay too much attention to Stark’s words.

They were making something in him stir that should stay buried, it was better that way.

Always trying to make yourself look better, aren’t you? You will even lower yourself to accepting the flattery of mortal peasants for that.

But Stark was no peasant, was he?

‘Right, so do you know, at the top of your head, five people who would have come out of all of this alive and sane?’

Thanos himself maybe. The Other. Nebula. Gamora?

At least, living in Thanos’ realm, those must have proven a certain level of durability. But Nebula seemed somewhat vulnerable to mental torture and manipulation. Thanos – what did he even know of the kind of pain he liked so much to deal out? Was it something he would be able to take himself, or was it some abstract concept that had never touched him personally?
‘Cause I don’t think shiny worthy Thor would.’

Thor… but as soon as Loki’s thoughts even brushed the idea of him in Thanos’ hands, he felt a nausea so strong he barely kept himself from retching, and he put his hand to his mouth, a sick coldness spreading inside him. He couldn’t… he couldn’t think of it, couldn’t dare imagine it, not even in his head, it was wrong! Things like these did not happen to Thor, they couldn’t, not to him, never to him. The Chitauri gripping him at the hips and, no, forcing his mouth open and, no, wrong, wrong-

‘Okay, fuck, bad example, very bad’ Stark’s voice, concerned. ‘I’m sorry. Will you look at me? I’m taking it back. I’m really sorry, okay?’

Loki took a step away from the other. He realised his breath had quickened.

‘There is a debate as to whether I remained sane’ said he, his voice weak, trembling. His lips pulled into one of his false smiles.

‘Sanity is always debatable’ Stark said. ‘You’re definitely sane enough where I’m concerned.’

Loki’s laugh was high and slightly shrill. Ah, if the mortal knew how often he lost reality, slipping into night terrors that followed him into the day, waking up with scratches and slashes all over his body, flecks of his own skin between his teeth.

‘Even when I go limp in your arms?’

Stark furrowed his eyebrows.

‘Of course also when you go limp in my arms’ said he. ‘It… it just scared me shitless is all. I thought I had your consent at first, and then… I didn’t have it anymore-‘

‘I never revoked it’ said Loki hoarsely.

‘But I still lost it’ said Stark. ‘And I realised too late. Do you really not get why this freaked me out? When you got the impression you didn’t have mine, a few weeks ago, you… you did freak out, I saw it. Why don’t you get that it’s the same for me, the other way round?’

‘Hah’ Loki made, then laughed again.

Of course he remembered. He had felt sick then too, that one moment when he had thought that Stark hadn’t really wanted…

But… but this wasn’t… the same, Stark couldn’t just…

Wasn’t it?

He kneaded the bridge of his nose. He felt untethered. Everything… turning about. At the same time, he knew he was standing on solid ground.

Run, run, run from here!

No. I can’t. I need him.

He realised he didn’t even want to.

What awaited him outside the tower was just his lair, just this small apartment where he would lose himself again and again, find himself in the bathroom, in the bed, in the kitchen on the floor, not sure
how he got there, and there, the whisper of the dagger was so seducing, and all those other whispers…

And here?

Stark.

It shouldn’t have pulled him so strongly.

‘What… what do you need from me, Stark?’ asked he. What do you need so to leave me be?

Is this what you want from him, to leave you be? I don’t think so.

‘Maybe… some more ground rules’ said Stark after a pause.

Loki furrowed his eyebrows.

‘Ground rules… for what?’ asked he.

‘For… close body contact’ said Stark, and he couldn’t mean- ‘I mean, if you still want close body contact… of any kind, sexual or not. I’m totally fine if you don’t.’

Stark had raised those hands again. As if to appease an angry beast? Or a scared one.

And his words… why did nothing he said today make any sense, why-

‘But…’ began Loki, slowly lowering his hand from his nose.

Surely, despite all your pretty words, you do not want to touch me anymore. Not now that you know – how this body was dragged through the dirt, covered and filled up with filth, defiled in every way-

But he couldn’t make himself say it. Surely, Stark would not make him say it. He had assumed, so easily assumed, that they would evade this matter completely, just keep their distance and their silence at least about the fact that Loki had hidden his debasement, had betrayed and dishonoured Stark by rubbing this despicable body against…

But no.

He had seen no disgust in Tony’s eyes, not one moment during this conversation. He was thinking of what the Aesir would think, but Tony was not them. Maybe he was making wrong assumptions again.

Loki cast down his eyes, his fingers restless at his sides. Think. He remembered the shared dream in which Loki had, in order to push Stark away, transformed into the monster right in front of him.

And it had failed this purpose completely.

Stark had looked at the monster with just the same appreciation, the same desire…

Could the obscene truth about Loki’s Ergi really be more revolting than what he was hiding under his skin?

Stark shied away from neither.

*I have looked at his soul. And I have not found it lacking.*
Hah. The Allfather would not have called that a soul not lacking. He would have called it rotten, perverted.

Would he have? Not even of that Loki felt sure anymore.

The idea that the mortal might truly still desire him was strange and, he found, it made him uneasy. Baldur had kept pursuing him too, hadn’t he, after the violation, and he had revelled at Loki’s flinches, just touching him by the arm would bring pleasure to Baldur’s eyes because it proved, each time Loki jerked away, each time he paled, how much power Baldur still held over him.

How this had never truly ended.

Was this the same?

‘Loki?’ said Stark again. ‘Are you alright? I meant it when I said that I was fine with us not doing this anymore, okay? Consent is not really an option for me, do you hear that? Without it, I’m like really not on board.’

Yes.

Yes, Loki was confusing him with the Aesir again. He had to stop doing that, or else he would keep getting taken off guard by the mortal at every turn.

Stark wanted consent.

When Loki had failed him, when he had fallen into the old memories, the mortal had been so cautious with his touches, had then moved away from him altogether. And he would have been free then to do with Loki as he liked, for Loki had been defenceless.

At the same time…

‘If you expect me to promise that something like this will never happen again’ Loki said, finding that his voice sounded too hoarse, too high. ‘I will have to disappoint you.’

‘No’ Stark said, shaking his head. ‘No, that’s not at all what I meant. I just… I want to know what to do the next time…’

Loki laughed.

‘What to do?’ asked he, and laughed again. ‘That’s easy. Do nothing.’

‘There must be something that can help you, make you feel more secure—’

But Loki interrupted him, bursting out laughing, and he didn’t stop, for a while he didn’t feel like he could ever stop. It was just so funny. All this was so funny, this whole absurd, non-sensical conversation, and he couldn’t, he couldn’t… he held his belly, supported himself on an armchair with the other hand, bent forward, and cried tears from laughter.

Or maybe he just cried.

Of course, he didn’t laugh forever in the end. Of course he quieted down. The tears, for some reason, kept coming, and Loki felt too tired for a glamour.

What did a few more tears matter now? Stark had already seen so much.

‘I’m sorry’ said Stark after a long silence.
He had stood up, Loki noticed, he had moved closer.

You keep saying that. What does it mean?

Stark lifted his arm as if to stretch it out to him, then stopped himself.

‘Er’ said he. ‘Sentimental, touchy-feely mortal worm here? Comes with the short life span, I guess. But in any case, I kinda would like to hug you a lot, but I’m not sure it would be okay?’

Hug him.

Loki wanted to laugh again. Shrilly. Instead he shivered. The idea of being held – but he would flinch, he knew that he would flinch and he couldn’t, he just couldn’t-

He said nothing.

Stark lowered his arm again, didn’t move closer.

‘Look, I… I do have the hots for you. Obviously. You’re all kinds of handsome. But I repeat, we really don’t have to have sex at all anymore’ said Stark. ‘Or… not sex where you bottom if that’s the main problem. I mean, obviously we don’t, but I just want you to really understand that I won’t think less of you and won’t be angry if we…’

But Loki shook his head.

However undeserved it was, Stark still wanted him, for some reason even still respected him somewhat, and in any case, of one thing he was certain:

‘Do you really think’ asked he darkly. ‘That I will let my pleasure be taken away from me by the likes of Thanos and the Other?’

He had not let Baldur or Svadilfari take it. He would not give Thanos the honour either. And he would most certainly not let them take away someone like Anthony Stark.

…who was looking at him pensively.

‘No’ said he then. ‘I guess not.’

He scratched at his goatee.

‘Alright’ said he. ‘I get that there is no manual. But we’ll figure something out. We always do.’

Later, Loki was in his assigned room, sitting on his assigned bed, not able to bring himself to lie down. He still felt like running. He still felt like running far. Stark had been very insistent however that Loki stay in the tower for now, and even though Loki didn’t understand the importance of that for the inventor, the alternative (the apartment, waking up with scratches) was an efficient deterrent, and it was an easy enough request to fulfil.

We’ll figure something out. We always do.

What an odd thing to say. Loki and Stark neither had a long history of solving problems together, nor
a relationship that justified such a casual use of ‘we’.

Another attempt to manipulate him then, to establish trust where there was none?

Loki grimaced, this was getting him nowhere. There was clearly something he was missing about Stark, about his motivations, and as long as he did not see what that was-

_I have looked at his soul. And I have not found it lacking._

Oh, for the Norns’ sake, Hela…

He took his head into his hands, breathed out brokenly.

It couldn’t be that. It never was.

He felt sore, stripped of defences. No, stripped of his skin, and he knew how _that_ felt like all too well.

But hadn’t he sought this out at the same time?

Because hadn’t he felt disappointed, in a way, when Stark had at first not questioned all those obscenities Loki had thrown at Thor? Or rather, had questioned them only in part? Had Loki not hoped, in some dark, snivelling part of his mind, that someone would finally see, would finally _hear_…

And now that Stark had understood, he did feel, as absurd as that was, _seen_… he did feel _heard_… he did feel as if underneath all those masks and lies, there was someone who might actually _exist_…

…who was still considered an equal for _anyone_…

So pathetic he felt warmth at Stark’s flattery, felt warmth at a casual use of a ‘we’.

How can you…

How can you flay off my skin so gently?

Why do I want you to?

Chapter End Notes

_I promise they will talk more about the whole sex and consent matter, and omg all that internalised victim blaming, but there is only so far I can push Loki in a single day before he runs off and tries to get himself killed again. So we’re going to take this Step. By. Step._
Who Else Would You Blame?

Chapter Summary

Loki has recently shown some vulnerability and is now being very Loki about it. The most prevalent topic of conversation is Steve Roger’s ass.

Chapter Notes

Sooo, I’ve fallen into kind of a writer's frenzy lately, also because you have been so amazingly (!) supportive and have given me so much love (seriously, I'm really overwhelmed :)) ). And I wanted to reach a certain point in the plot before I go into the next hiatus, so this batch is going to be a pretty big one.

So, as a summer solstice present, I have prepared 8 chapters, some of which are pretty long.

And because, I will say it again, you are amazing, and I've breached the 1000 kudos threshold which I would never have thought I would reach with this weird and overlong thing (and my first fan fiction ever posted on any platform), I have also prepared a bonus fic, which I will post together with the last chapter of the batch. It will be an independent work but set in the same universe.

Your support has been very, very, very motivating for me to go on with this! Thank you! <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Tony woke up abruptly, alert at once, ’Jarvis?,’ he asked.

‘Yes, Sir?’

‘Is Loki still in the tower?’

‘Affirmative, Sir’

‘Oh thank the gods, one in particular.‘

He laid his hand on his arc reactor, drumming on it lightly.

Okay. Good. Loki had not taken off. One of the worse scenarios could be crossed off the list.

When they had parted, the other day, Tony hadn’t at all been sure…

‘Where is he, by the way?’

There were still many bad scenarios that involved Loki having stayed here.
‘In the community kitchen, mildly harassing Mr Rogers, Sir.’

‘…what is your definition of mild harassment?’

‘Magically messing with the kitchen appliances Mr Rogers is using, Sir, and at the same time engaging him in light but mocking conversation. I believe, considering his sense of humour, that I should introduce Mr Skywalker to Buster Keaton movies. He might appreciate them.’

‘Right.’

That sounded… harmless enough, Tony thought. It could even be called a good sign, he supposed?

He closed his eyes.

Maybe you didn’t completely fuck this up after all.

He had known that confronting Loki about the trauma would be a risk. Hell, how could it not be a risk, under the circumstances?

Saying the bit about Thanos having never had a chance had been his best move, Tony knew that. He had been perfectly aware that confronting Loki with what he knew would drive the god into a very tight corner. In the mind-set of crappy Asgardian patriarchy, acknowledging the rape had to weaken Loki’s position considerably. According to those rules, Loki would have had to consider it an attack on his honour, would have had to defend himself, dismantle the ‘accusation’ as a lie, or as an error. Or he would have had to turn to aggression, humiliate or kill the person who was holding so much power over him. Or else he might have turned the aggression against himself, he might have either tried his hand at another suicide attempt or submitted to Tony completely.

So the conversation’s potential to fail spectacularly had been spectacularly great.

And Tony had considered not mentioning the whole thing at all. Acting as if nothing had happened would have been, according to his calculations, easily one of the safer choices. Maybe the only polite one.

And then he had realised what this ‘safe’, ‘polite’ choice would mean… for him. For Loki. For whatever this was that was between them.

And he had known that this was the one road he really couldn’t take.

Thanos, the poor bastard. He never stood a chance against you, did he?

Lanced into the silence, at the moment Loki would least expect it. When he was unprepared. Sneak attack.

‘You’re back at D&D again, you useless nerd’ said Tony to himself, shaking his head.

But in a way, that was what it had been, a sneak attack. What it had had to be. Of course, what Tony had said had been the truth. Had been what he truly believed.

But how to make a trickster believe the truth?

He had had to trick him into it.

And the arrow had hit its target, Loki had laughed, caught off guard, and for one moment, his face had transformed, from this pale stiffness to an expression of mischievous joy.
And Tony had fucking loved it.

Of course, the grin had transformed into something else then, and Loki had suddenly looked too naked.

Too open.

Loki had been so very open.

Which was… good, in a way, but in another… Tony shifted on the linen, turned to his side. In another…

Sure, Tony had his ways of taking peaks behind Loki’s mask by now, but the other day had been different… the other day, it had been way too fucking easy… Tony had been able to watch him think, he had been able to watch him going through the emotions… Loki’s face had twitched with self-disgust, then he had furrowed his eyebrows in confusion, his breath had quickened, then calmed down… his hands had been trembling half the fucking time…

…

Tony had treaded on highly sensitive ground there. He could have, with few words, done a lot of damage.

It had been kind of scary to be confronted with such weak defences.

And Tony had rambled on and on, but in truth… in truth, he didn’t know…

What is the point of your speculations?

He just knew that they had to talk about this, that this was necessary. But the point…

What do you need from me?

What did he need from Loki?

But that wasn’t the real question, was it? The real question was, what did he allow himself to need from Loki? And as long as he didn’t answer that for himself, how honest could any conversation with the god about the trauma and sex thing ever be?

Tony put his face into his hands.

Right.

That was him. He had no qualifications for this, but all the responsibility. And a heavy dose of self-denial about his own feelings.

This was going to be fun.

‘I know it is a custom for warriors to eat a few dozen raw eggs to gain strength’ Loki said, his arms crossed in front of his chest. ‘And to wash your hair with eggs may strengthen them too… but to smear them on your skin and your clothing? That’s very… novel, I must say.’
Steve turned to him, raising his index at the same time, which lanced some of the egg white across the room.

‘Oh don’t you start! I’ve got a veteran meeting to attend to in under an hour, and all you’re doing right now is making sure I run late!’

His face was reddened, which was an accomplishment in its own right, Tony found, since Steve was so used to flaunting his collected self-righteousness everywhere, it was pretty hard to get him angry about something as trivial as egg yolk sticking to his hair… and his face… and his clothes, and his shoes, intermixed with… berry juice? Was that a toast pasted on his ass? A lucky toast then. Maybe he could sell it at an auction later, donate the earnings to a food fight charity or something.

To be fair, there was also a piece of toast sticking on the ceiling. And the toaster itself was smoking, maybe burning? And the microwave door kept opening and shutting on its own accord. And the egg boiler was lying on the ground in an egg white and egg yolk splatter pattern. And Steve’s favourite mug (some retro thing he had bought at a flea market) was lying upturned on the kitchen table, the coffee spreading in a pool around it.

As far as crime scenes went, this one was at least entertaining.

Loki, as to him, raised his hands.

‘Oh, you don’t have to be ashamed!’ said he. ‘Do with your eggs whatever you wish! Never would I dare to mock the customs of other realms, however peculiar or… impractical… they might appear to me.’

Tony grinned, leaning against the fridge, confident that at least the god had noticed his presence by now. And he let himself relax a little more. Loki didn’t look naked or open anymore. He was in full game mode today, which suited him, as always. His voice was still a bit raspy, but less noticeably so.

‘Is toast an object of decoration on Midgard?’ asked he, tone and expression so absolutely candid that this alone underlined the mockery. ‘I must admit I have not seen other of you mortals wear it before, but then again, I might not be aware of the latest fashion. They do change so very often.’

‘Actually, wearing toasts on your ass was last summer’s fad’ Tony interjected. ‘This year, it’s gum in the hair. But the Capsicle has been in the freezer for a few decades – no wonder he’s lagging behind a year.’

He cocked his head, eyeing Loki from head to toe.

‘What’s your excuse?’

Loki’s grin widened, ‘The suffocating stagnation of Asgard’s society?’ asked he.

‘Pffffh’ Tony said. ‘I would have thought you to be more independent than that in your fashion sense.’

‘Oh’ said Loki, and blinked, looking almost (but not really) genuinely surprised. ‘I thought that you were referring to all my lunatic mass murdering. My fashion sense is, of course, impeccable, no excuse needed.’

And well, he… did look stunning. He was wearing black leather pants today that showed off his far too long legs to an unfair degree, and a dark green tunic hugging his torso and accentuating his slender frame in just the right ways. His boots were almost feminine in their cut, and yet they were obviously sturdy, and oh my, he could wear them without losing an inch of his masculinity.
Steve looked from Loki to Tony and back, frowning, then shook his head, ‘I… I don’t actually have time for this. I need to go shower again’ said he, and left, losing the toast in the process.

Loki followed him with his eyes and Tony did notice that the god’s gaze lingered on Steve’s ass.

‘I have often wondered’ Tony said, and went to the coffee machine. ‘If with a little bit of diligence, one could beat Steve’s ass into the perfect round sphere.’

Loki’s lips twitched, at that.

‘I fear I must admit that Midgardian fashion has succeeded in flattering the dear Captain’s physique in a way that Asgard’s armour certainly couldn’t’ said he, standing a little too closely to Tony while the latter was working the coffee machine.

Already okay with body contact again then? Or just pretending to be? Tony would go with pretending to be, for the moment. It would fit Loki’s MO to act all strong and unfazed after showing some fragility.

‘It is a nice touch of your realm to… display your heroes’ assets so’ Loki continued, ‘instead of hiding them. Judging from the internet, the common population appreciates this service too. And the dear Captain does have… much to flaunt.’

‘Is that your way of saying that you’re seeking another alliance with benefits?’ asked Tony. He took his coffee, turned to the trickster, careful to keep his distance at the same time.

Loki, cocked his head, and though his gaze was still playful, Tony thought he could detect a little bit of a scrutinising interest too.

‘Is that your way of saying that you would be jealous?’

The tone was sarcastic.

Still a real question? Couldn’t be, not realistically. They had an alliance, nothing more.

… and that was such a blatant lie, he felt almost ashamed for trying to tell it to himself.

Tony took a sip from his coffee.

‘Hardly’ said he. ‘I don’t have any claim on you, have I? And even if I did, monogamy never really worked for me, so it would be hypocritical to demand it from someone else.’

At least, that took care of this bit of information having to reach the trickster somehow. It would probably be inconvenient to find out too late that Loki was the violent and vengeful kind of exclusive.

‘Mhm’ said Loki. ‘Wouldn’t fit your playboy image, would it, committing to one person only?’

‘No, but if I wanted it, I would make my image fit.’

‘True’ Loki conceded.

‘So what about you?’ Tony asked, wondering how far they could push their pretence before they had to admit that they were actually talking about this. ‘What would you say if I went and smooched the blond guy?’

‘Depends on who you mean by the blond guy’ Loki answered, making kind of a grimace. ‘If you
mean Thor, I would be insulted, disgusted and would probably never touch you again. If you mean
the shiny captain now complete with egg proteins, I would wonder what by the Norns would drive
you to sexually pursue the person your father clearly would have preferred to you as a son, a fact that
seems to have affected your self-esteem for almost your entire life. It does seem counterproductive.’

‘… and mildly incestuous’ he added, as an afterthought.

… alright, so something about Tony’s question had struck a nerve, because this was definitely Loki
lash ing out at him. But maybe now was not the time for some deeper prodding.

‘Aw, I won’t let Steve be reduced to my daddy issues’ said he instead. ‘He would be a terrible
choice as a sexual partner for me in his own right. Also, Thor? You really should give me more
credit, Reindeer Games.’

Loki smirked, ‘Not going for the bulky and dumb ones then?’

‘As if that were the only two problems with Prince Sparkles’ said Tony, rolling his eyes. ‘So, apart
from decorating and commenting the body of America’s greatest hero, what were your plans for
today?’

‘We have a lot of work to catch up with’ said Loki, raising an eyebrow, straightening himself up at
the same time. ‘And impressive as it is that you haven’t blown yourself up so far, we should
probably deal with the matter of your uncontrolled magic sooner or later.’

‘You’re all work, no fun’ Tony complained, following another gut instinct. ‘What do you feel
like doing?’

Because it was no coincidence, was it, that Loki had turned the kitchen upside down first thing in the
morning? However well the god was hiding it today, he was pretty tense, and experience told Tony
that giving the trickster a let-out for his tension was usually the most sensible, and healthy, choice.

Loki mimicked being surprised by the question.

‘What do I feel like doing?’ asked he himself, then shot Tony a glance, a mischievous one.

‘Beating you up sounds quite nice’ said he sweetly then.

… okay, so bodily contact really was alright… as long as it was aggressive?… it did make sense, in a
Loki way.

And the tone alone was enough to arouse him, so…

‘What about my magic?’ asked Tony, because they didn’t really need a repeat of the last time that
had felt threatened.

Loki laughed dismissively.

‘Oh, I can handle that just fine’ said he.

Probably he could, yes, when he wasn’t severely injured at the time.

‘Well, then’ Tony said, and shrugged. ‘You didn’t get to train with me in a while. I suppose I could
use a few pointers.’
At least Loki warned him that his pointers would necessitate the Jock. And the pointers, or rather the point of this particular training session, Tony slowly came to realise as he was kicked and hauled across the Hulk gym, was mostly to prove Loki’s physical superiority to Tony without any doubt. Not that Tony had had any doubts about that in the first place. But this time, Loki made sure to hammer in the lesson anyway, with every move, every hit.

He didn’t give him openings this time. He didn’t give Tony anything except the fear for his dear life, as he was wrangled into another lever, as he was kicked in the stomach again, as a hand wrapped around his neck and slammed him neck-first into the ground.

There was a strange distance in Loki’s eyes at the same time while he was kicking him around, and then sometimes a flicker of urgency that hinted at the fact that maybe Tony wasn’t the person Loki was trying to convince.

The Jock proved its worth again. And again. And again.

After Loki had slammed him on his back the last time, first moved as if to continue his attack, then stopped himself in the movement, stepping back, his chin raised, his eyes even more distanced, almost cold, Tony grudgingly came to the conclusion that maybe Loki had tried to prove his strength a bit too hard.

‘I think it’s enough’ Loki said.

‘I think I agree’ Tony answered.

His head was pounding, and there was something warm trickling down his neck. And sure enough, after he had made the suit retreat the head piece and his gauntlets, after he had reached behind and touched the back of his neck, he touched wetness, and his fingers came back stained red.

Loki’s eyes shot at once from the bloody fingers to Tony’s eyes and back, and his face twitched with what looked a lot like suppressed anger.

‘What?’ asked Tony. ‘Are you insulted by me bleeding now?’

‘You said that the suit would protect you’ said Loki, and yes, his tone sounded accusing.

‘I suppose we’ve tested out its limits today then’ Tony said and smiled weakly. He tried not to think too hard about the state the rest of his body was in beneath all that armour. He was in enough pain for there to be at least a few colourful bruises.

In fact, something about his left ankle felt… definitely off.

He moved to sit up, but Loki was next to him already (too fucking fast), his hand on Tony’s chest.

‘Don’t move, you imbecile! You might make it worse.’

He put his other hand on Tony’s head wound and Tony winced.

‘You should have stopped the fight!’ said Loki. ‘Why didn’t you say anything?’

‘I… got lost in the moment?’ Tony tried, which was close enough to the truth.

He had not really been aware of the head wound during the fight, or his… ankle problem?... but he had also been kind of busy shitting his pants and desperately fighting to survive. The fact that Loki
had obviously not actually tried to kill him wasn’t actually helping.

‘Will you at least let me assess and heal the damage?’ Loki asked, his tone still sharp, impatient.

‘I… suppose? Since you are already here and all? You did a good enough job the last time and then you were-’

But at that moment, something shifted, or his vision did, and blue fire poured out of him, engulfed him and Loki while a snake made of green light was… trying to wrap around him?

Which was… mildly familiar, but also still mildly disconcerting.

‘Don’t fight me; you should know by now how pointless it is’ the snake or Loki hissed. ‘Just relax.’

‘Easy for you to say’ said Tony and the snake used the occasion of his open mouth to slip into it, and before Tony could even get scared, down his throat.

‘What-’ said he, and then, ‘Should I… should I feel it move?’

Because he felt it move inside him, felt it crawl into his arms, first into the left, then into the right, felt it move around his chest, then down his left leg.

… felt his cock stir in response.

His seidr relaxed just a bit then.

‘You mortals are so fragile’ said Loki angrily while the snake wrapped around Tony’s ankle and spread warmth. Something shifted down there, the pain fled and was replaced by a wave of arousal washing over him, then the snake travelled upwards again, then down the other leg.

‘You say… you say that as if it was our fault’ Tony said, breathed in as the snake wrapped around his stomach, the pain there washing away too, from one moment to the other.

Such a sudden… relief.

Oh, he was liking this way too much, wasn’t he?

‘Who else would you blame?’ Loki asked, his eyes still restless, moving over his body.

‘How about… how about no one?’

It was hard not to get distracted by the snake wrapping around his ribs, licking over them, and that tingled.

‘How about… fragility… ahhhh… being no fault… at all?’

Then he took a moment to breathe out.

The snake had just left him through the back of his head, and the pounding had abruptly stopped in the process.

The snake had also left him fucking hard.

But then, Loki narrowed his eyes at him, bent down to him.

And woah, there was already his hand grabbing Tony’s suit by the neck opening, pulling his upper
body up a little by it.

‘Thus only thinks who is too selfish to consider what he will so easily leave behind’ whispered Loki, then let Tony drop unceremoniously back to the ground, turned his back and strode out the gym.

‘Okaaaay’ Tony said after lying around a bit, because the floor was a good place to be at the moment. ‘Projecting much?’

At least that was what he told himself Loki was doing by throwing slightly cryptic pseudo-wisdoms at him. After all, if Loki snuffed it, he would leave behind at least one very livid daughter.

And this was all this was about, he was sure.

Right.

He let Jarvis disassemble the suit, cautiously moved and padded his body which seemed to be in perfect working condition. And perfectly horny.

There was this patch of blood on his trousers where the left ankle would be.

Maybe the Jock still needed better padding after all.

Chapter End Notes

If anyone of you is wondering why Tony is so chill about his injuries when he really wasn’t chill about Loki hurting him before (after the homophobic shit fan), the difference is that this time, Loki has formulated pretty much exactly what he wanted (beat Tony up), has warned Tony that it would get rough (that he would need the Jock), and that of course this time, however much Loki needed to prove to himself his physical superiority, the injuries themselves were honestly accidental. Most importantly of all though, Tony consented to the whole thing. He does appreciate a bit of pain and violence, as long as it’s consensual – like he says, he’s more the rack than ssc guy ^^.
Fire, Why Am I Drawn To Thee?

Chapter Summary

Finally, we’re back to discussing fictional magical theory, which appears to be the true purpose of this fic (apart from all the whump and trauma). And are our boys actually talking about how to formulate consent? Or… at least Tony is…

Chapter Notes

A long chapter with a lot of dialogue. And a lot of magical theory. And techno-magical theory. And feelings. And Loki mood swings. They swing quickly.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

‘Could you satisfy yourself?’

Loki was standing at the displays, his back turned to Tony who had just entered the workshop. One hand, he kept on his back, with the other, he was examining the 3D model of Tony’s prototype Gem Homeplanet, as Tony had called it for now. In essence, it was his version of the Infinity Gauntlet, though he hadn’t managed to make it that small yet, not even in theory. For the moment, it was closer in size to Selvig’s machine and that Tony didn’t like – in combat, that had far too many disadvantages.

The blueprint Loki was looking at now was not exactly one of the models the god was supposed to be allowed to see, but granted, Tony had not made a great effort to keep this one away from him. And the fact that Loki had accessed it at least gave Tony a good idea of the god’s progress in his hacking skills.

Still not a threat though.

‘Naturally’ Tony said. ‘My wanking skills are world renowned and well tested, I will have you know.’

After Tony had made sure that the god had stayed in the tower, he had retreated to his bedroom for a while to take care of himself. He definitely felt more relaxed now, and he supposed Loki had needed the alone time too. According to Jarvis, the god had first pulverised a few boxing sacks in one of the other gyms, and had then teleported straight to the workshop.

And it did make sense that he would go there, since they had been thrown back in their work by Loki’s disappearance and following injury.

At the same time, Tony was aware that going to the workshop instead of the common room on Tony’s floor was also a way of putting some distance between them, of reminding them most of all of the business aspect of their relationship.

Then again, who was Tony to resent Loki this need for distance right now? He had let Tony get
dangerously close only too recently.

‘I am glad’ said Loki, rather indifferently, and moved closer to the display, zooming into one of the circuit boards. ‘Have you exchanged the conducting material?’ asked he.

‘Yeah, right, I wanted to tell you about that’ Tony lied, stepping up next to Loki, his hands in his jeans pockets. Well, he had planned to tell him. A bit later, he supposed. ‘We were talking about the issue with metal and magic a week or two ago? Or was it a month ago? Doesn’t really matter, I suppose.’

‘It’s been a fortnight’ Loki said absent-mindedly.

‘Right, and you said that this whole superstition that metal and magic didn’t mix came mostly from bad experiences with the truly inferior metals that are most common on this backwater realm? See, I can mimic your speech patterns, My Arrogant Highness, I just have to insert peasant, backwater and dull everywhere’ Tony said.

‘Stark’ Loki said, impatiently enough to remind Stark of their training session earlier that day. And that should have caused a jolt of fear, not excitement. Definitely not a jolt of both.

‘In any case, inferior mortals, inferior metals, the whole Midgardian shebang. You said that while most of the metals Earth provided could not actually stop magic, as our superstitions want to make us believe, so to efficiently combine technology and magic, one needed something more suitable. Which is why, once Thanos had successfully sent you to Earth, one of the first things you had to procure were certain amounts, however small, of vibranium. Because vibranium is-‘

‘-not inferior, yes’ Loki said, still looking at the circuit board. ‘But this is not vibranium, is it?’

‘No, though I’d like to use that too’ said Tony. ‘I think you… have some? That would be greatly appreciated, thanks’

The idea that the god had, somewhere, stashed some of this precious, precious stuff certainly made him antsy.

‘But no, I experimented with my gold-aluminium alloy in the calculations, and I was actually getting some pretty good results’ said he. ‘Which kind of makes sense since it’s what interacts best with the arc reactor and since the arc reactor is kind of magical and all?’

He pulled down other models.

‘So I started with that, used vibranium where it was really necessary, and this’ he zoomed into his own shrunken down version of what he still called the lava lamp. ‘I can fabricate from the material from the Mantis. It is a pretty decent gateway between magic and electric power, it can transform one into the other, balance power fluctuations-‘

‘I know the technology’ Loki interrupted, and turned to him, his eyes narrowed. He seemed to want to say something, then decided otherwise.

‘Well, I am glad to see that you haven’t been idle while I was indisposed’ said he instead. ‘And you seem to have made some progress in your understanding of how magic works, or you would not have been able to create such… adequate… theories.’

From someone like the Bard, that sounded like rather high praise, and Tony raised his eyebrows at it.
Loki seemed to understand his non-verbal comment, huffed, and turned away from him, walking alongside one of the worktables and trailing along it with his fingers. This was something he often unconsciously did when he was thinking (or trying to steer a delicate conversation), Tony had found out.

Then he turned around to Tony again.

‘How do you fare with your own seidr, now freed?’ asked he.

Tony shrugged.

‘The first few days were awkward’ said he. ‘It messes with my perception, if I let it.’

‘How so?’ Loki asked, cocking his head.

‘It has calmed down by now, I’m almost back to normal, perception-wise’ said Tony. ‘But at first, it was kind of a trip. I heard it whispering, humming. And it created movement, always at the edge of my vision. It let me see those fine webs, spreading from Hela… and who knows what it sensed in Bruce, I never quite understood that, but it certainly regarded him as dangerous…’

‘You were sensing their seidr’ said Loki. ‘Even Banner has a gift, or he wouldn’t be able to shape shift the way he does. His accident must have activated a sleeping ability.’

‘Seriously, Bruce is a mage?’ Tony asked, rubbing his hands gleefully. ‘And then he lectures me about becoming one myself? Oh, I’m so gonna rub that in his face.’

‘Mage is a tall word for someone who has as little control as Banner does’ Loki said dryly. ‘And his berserker form cannot origin from seidr only – there are other kinds of energies at work there, other forces.’

‘Yes, among those radiation’ Tony said.

Which was sort of specific to Midgard, or at least not a very commonly used resource in this universe?

‘So… this was why you always had trouble with Brucie bear, wasn’t it?’ he realised. ‘Why he could overpower you so easily, thrash you around, make a dent in my floor with your body – because the radiation stuff is new for you too?’

Loki smiled.

‘New is relative’ said he. ‘Banner’s abilities did not catch me completely unexpected, and his victory over me suited me all too well at that moment. But I must admit that during my thousand years of martial education, I naturally focused on… other kinds of attacks. Other threats.’

Tony whistled, thinking, you actually let the Hulk smash you into the ground deliberately? Are you really that self-destructive, or just telling a lie?

Or both, he reasonably added.

‘Nuclear energy, the Achilles’ heel of the universe’ said he. ‘Who knew?’

Then he narrowed his eyes at the trickster.

‘But you said I can feel seidr, huh?’ said he. ‘How come you were the one thing then that stayed absolutely the same? No webs, no distortion, no odd feeling of danger beyond what is only sane and
normal in your presence, nothing at all. Everyone keeps saying you’re one of the most powerful mages this universe has to offer. You should have been a fucking light show. I didn’t see or feel a thing.’

Loki laughed, shortly, then grinned.

‘So you noticed.’

And his grin was mischievous… did this mean…

‘What, you can really hide away your magic?’ Tony asked, raising his eyebrows. ‘Can one do that so easily?’

Loki’s eyes glinted.

‘Certainly not easily’ said he and opened his arms. ‘But they do call me the God of Lies for a reason.’

Tony laughed out loud.

‘They do, don’t they’ said he. ‘So how much trouble did you cause over the centuries by making yourself appear more harmless than you really were?’

‘Oh, you have no idea’ said the god, and there was a slight tremble in his voice, as if the memory alone brought him pleasure. ‘Living in a world where magic is not even accepted as real, you don’t know how many precautions exist in others against people like me. How many defences can be undermined simply by making wards and mages likewise believe that one has no such gift.’

His fingers were moving restlessly.

‘I could cast a spell and mask my seidr at the same time’ said he. ‘Nobody could prove that I was the author because nobody could trace it back to me. Often, they didn’t even realise a spell was cast until it was far too late. Of course, after a while, I got a certain reputation and lost some of the advantage, but I could still shape shift then, hide my identity, and play the same game all over.’

And there was a flush in his cheeks that normally only stole itself on his face when they were fucking. Oh my.

‘Well, good to know at least one of your kinks’ said Tony. ‘Don’t be afraid to tell me about the others. Though I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised about you getting aroused by tricking people and causing havoc.’

Loki laughed again, and it was that same honest, carefree laugh that Tony heard so seldom from him, with the dimples in his cheeks and the creases at his eyes, and then the god closed the distance between them in two strides, was so close so suddenly, looked down at him.

‘So if I asked you to help me enrage a powerful person, not because it is just, or useful, but simply for the pleasure it gives me’ said he in a low voice. ‘Just for the delight I feel at pushing rocks down a steep slope, not knowing where they will tumble, where they will fall? Just for the fun of watching a fight break out at a feast, in the midst of which you stand, guilty of it and yet the only person not touched by insults flying and swords being drawn? Would you say yes to that?’

Tony looked up, but alone that voice and the closeness made his cock curious.

‘Depends on the person or the feast, I guess’ said he. ‘But I would certainly feel tempted.’
'If it was Fury or a charity ball, very tempted’ he added, as an afterthought.

Loki looked at him, his eyes suddenly dark with desire. And then he tilted his head down, his lips open, as if moving to kiss him, only to stop himself an instant later,

‘Green’ Tony breathed.

Loki’s eyebrows furrowed.

Which was when Tony belatedly remembered that Loki didn’t know what green meant yet.

‘Right’ said he. ‘We haven’t talked about that yet.’

‘Apparently not’ Loki commented dryly. ‘Are you to confess to me your love for the Hulk now?’

‘No, everyone knows that Bruce is the one I crush on’ said Tony. ‘The Hulk is just my bro.’

And that provoked a bit of a smile.

‘I will take care to tell the beast that the next time it’s around’ Loki said. ‘Let’s see what it has to say about your inequality in affection, shall we?’

‘He will probably just shrug and grunt’ Tony said honestly. While he liked flirting with Bruce from time to time and while Bruce sometimes joined the game, if a bit clumsily, he was straight as an arrow, and Tony suspected the Hulk was the same. Or asexual? Why fuck when you could smash instead.

He scratched his head.

‘I… have a proposition. For communication. A communication proposition. This sounds strange. Anyways. Consent.’

‘…yes?’ Loki said.

‘There are strategies out there… for communicating… that’ said Tony, feeling like an unqualified idiot again. ‘Consent, I mean. Like, without actually saying the yes or the no, because that can be difficult… in some situations? So instead you can use the traffic light system. There was this German woman that I met once – she taught me that, and we spent quite a few afternoons… anyways. You say green for great, go on with what you’re doing. Yellow stands for woah, man, slow down, ask me what I need. Red is a full break, we stop what we’re doing and just make sure the other is okay.’

Loki… blinked… at him.

So Tony supposed this was… new? But from what he had heard, Asgard didn’t actually have a very refined consent culture, did she?

‘Useful in all kinds of situations’ said he. ‘Like, during our training session earlier? Obviously, I didn’t really have the presence of mind to cry stop, but maybe a yellow or red would have been easier. I don’t know.’

He shrugged. At least he’d given the trickster an example where Tony himself would have needed a slowing down. Don’t make this only about him, about being the victim or some other bullshit.

But the trickster was just looking at him, as if not able to figure him out.

‘I’ve used the system before’ Tony said. ‘With other sexual partners. Sometimes, things can get
rough... intentionally. Pain can be fun… if you agree to it… and if you are into that sort of thing.’

‘Oh, I know only too well’ said Loki, cocking his head, the confusion was gone, or at least hidden, and his grin was dirty. ‘So are you into that sort of thing, Anthony Stark?’

‘Heh’ Tony said and grinned back. ‘What do you think?’

You beat me up enough times to fucking know. Or you could ask Pepper – she might give you a few pointers.

Loki looked at him, his eyes amused… pleased? Aroused?

Then he abruptly laughed, and straightened himself up.

‘You said that the seidr’s influence on your perception has changed’ said he then. ‘How so? Has it shifted, or has it merely waned?’

Tony, caught a bit off guard by the sudden change of topic, frowned.

‘Waned, I guess? My vision has definitely grown less trippy.’

Loki huffed, turned away from him again.

‘It is curious’ said he, walking back around the table. ‘That you seem to be able to comprehend and accept magic rationally quite well by now, and that you still suppress your own gift so strongly.’

‘Do I?’

‘Your seidr speaks to you, but since you don’t open up to it, since you dare not truly listen to what it has to say’ Loki said, ‘what you hear is muffled by the cotton you yourself have placed in your ears. What you see is vague and distorted, because you do not look but turn away, and you see naught but shadows cast on a wall.’

‘Wait, have we ended up in Plato’s cave somehow?’ Tony asked. ‘How come we’ve ended up in Plato’s cave? I don’t like Plato’s cave. No, actually, I don’t like caves full stop. Spent too much time in one.’

Loki narrowed his eyes at him, the amusement from before gone as quickly as it had come.

‘You do not listen, so you do not understand what you hear, and since you don’t understand, you shut your ears. You do not look, so you do not understand what you see, and since you don’t understand, you shut your eyes’ said he. ‘It is most unbecoming.’

‘Right’ Tony said.

‘Your magic is free, you can afford to deny it now less than ever. I will-‘

‘Can’t we seal it away again?’ Tony interrupted him, and woah, he earned a pretty murderous glance for that. Loki had stopped in his tracks, his posture having stiffened in an instant. Going from mildly aroused to livid in less than a minute, that was definitely the chaos divinity Tony knew.

‘Yes’ said Loki, his voice dangerously sweet. ‘Yes, of course, what a good idea, Stark. That is the best strategy for dealing with power that you yourself have wilfully woken from its long slumber, that has broken its bonds once already and almost killed you in the process. Cage it again.’

The smile on his face was anything but friendly.
‘Let us do that, let us put chains on that so very dangerous force and only let it out when it might be useful’ said he. ‘Because that is what seidr is, something that should live to serve us and have no purpose or will on its own. Something we have to fear if we cannot enslave it. For what we cannot hold down and keep small and controlled must of course always be a threat to be eliminated.’

He had balled his hands to fists somewhere along the way, and yup, there were green flames dancing around them.

Projecting much?, a voice inside Tony’s mind asked, for the second time that day.

‘Are you sure you’re still talking about magic?’ said he. ‘And are you sure you’re talking to me?’

Loki sent him another murderous stare, then turned away. The guy sure was a frost giant, if only because he could drop the temperature of a room below zero just with his glare and posture.

‘I get the message’ said Tony. ‘I just… I just have no fucking clue how to listen, as you say. Yeah, maybe there’s cotton in my ears. But the fact remains that what my seidr is saying sounds like nothing but gibberish to me.’

Loki first said nothing, his head bent, then he huffed, straightened himself up, and his face slipped into something neutral.

‘Maybe it is time we moved forward’ said he. ‘Since you are a scientist, I thought that for you, understanding your power before using it would be the best way of action, but-’

‘Hah’ Tony interrupted him there, and laughed. Raised his hands then, because the green flames around Loki’s fists were flaring up again. ‘Sorry, but… understanding before using? It’s like you don’t know me at all. You are aware of my history with drugs? The creation of the arc reactor? My escape from the cave in Afghanistan? My history with the Iron Man suits? And then the whole space adventure?’

‘As I wanted to say’ Loki continued, and whether he was more pissed at getting interrupted or at Tony being right was anyone’s guess. ‘It seems I misjudged your personality somewhat. You are, despite all your knowledge and your significant contribution to this realm’s technological development, not a scholar in temperament.’

No kidding. Dozens of college and university professors would testify to the same.

The god paused, seeming to think, then raised one hand and let a flame flicker up there, a real one this time, turning back to Tony. The anger had retreated, back was the glint in his eyes.

‘This is your first challenge then’

‘Fire?’ asked Tony, and took a cautious step closer. ‘Because you’re the god of it?’

Loki snorted.

‘No’ said he. ‘Because it is the easiest working to do.’

Tony raised one eyebrow.

‘For you? Because again, you’re the god of it?’

‘Don’t believe everything you hear’ said Loki impatiently, and flicked out the flame. ‘Conjuring fire is the easiest task for any mage. It is where everyone begins, though some will never move beyond
the stage, and then think themselves intimidating because they can throw flame balls.’

He snorted once more.

‘Pathetic’ said he and sounded like he meant it.

‘Okay, so the Lord of the Light is a loser. I will keep that in mind’ said Tony. ‘…and harass Clint at the next Avengers D&D night. He sure likes his fire spells a lot. But what makes it so easy?’

‘Because as I’ve told you countless of times, fire is magic, in a way’ said Loki. ‘It represents magic, just as the staff does, and just as the sword and the wind represent the mind.’

‘Wait, what?’

Loki blinked, cocked his head.

‘Have we not covered this yet?’ asked he.

Tony slowly shook his head.

‘Oh’ Loki said, then, ‘That explains…’

With a quick gesture, he made five runes made of green light appear in the air. Four of them were positioned like the points of a cross around one in the centre.

‘There is an old story’ said he. ‘Older than the nine realms, older than the stars, older even than the space between them. And yet, however old it is, it can never be forgotten. The grass swishes it when the wind moves its stems. The fire crackles it in the hearth. The river murmurs it when it flows down the mountain. And when you lay your ear on the earth, you hear it rumble this tale.’

‘Nature is rather chatty in your world’ Tony commented.

Loki gave him a thin smile.

‘The story tells of a woman’ said he, ‘living alone in a hut among fields and forests, living off what the land and the nearby creek gave her, enjoying the breeze in the summer and warming herself at the hearth in the winter. Despite the hard work that busied her all year, she would have been content. If not… you see, she was so deeply and painfully wishing for a child. But however much she tried, she could not become pregnant, and so in the quiet winter months, she cried and cried.’

‘I assume she belonged to a species that doesn’t need a partner for procreation?’ asked Tony. ‘Because if she did need someone else and tried to become pregnant all on her own all that time…’

‘Whatever soothes your pseudo-scientific worldview is fine by me’ said Loki. ‘In any case, however great the woman’s sorrow, there came a moment, as always does, when all the tears had dried, and the woman realised that the year was still turning. She realised that it was spring and that the fields needed sowing, and that the earth was hungry for new seeds that wanted to grow. And so she had to go and sow. And then spring turned into summer, and the fields needed tending, and watering, and the trees’ branches were hanging low, weighed down with fruits that wanted to be picked. And then it was autumn, and the corn wanted to be reaped, and food wanted to be stored, the fire in the hearth demanded more wood so to warm the hut she was living in. The wind took up, became sharp and cold, and stripped the trees of their leaves so they could prepare for the winter’s sleep.’

‘And in the winter, the woman rested again, warmed by the fire, her storage rooms full of corn and apples and other gifts of the earth, a pot of tea steaming on the stove. She was listening to the wind
that shook her hut, whirling around the flecks of snow outside. And she sang to it that she loved the wind too, loved the winter, like she loved the rest. For in the winter, she could sleep, and find strength for the next year.’

‘This sounds a lot like simple wheel of the year mythology’ Tony commented.

‘The tale is not over, Stark, don’t be impatient’ Loki said. ‘For the wind listened and answered. It had heard her the year before, you see, all her weeping. And, curious as it was, it asked her what had ailed her. The woman sighed and told the wind of her old sorrow.’

The rune in the north of the central one glowed white, and a breeze of wind touched Tony for a moment, then it transformed into a sword.

‘The wind felt sorry for her, and yet felt respect for her because she had gone on and had kept working despite her grief, and so it promised to help. I will gift you a part of me, said it, and with its sword, it cut away a part of itself and gave it to the woman. I may not be able to give you a complete child, said it, but from me, you can make its mind. I will help it separate the world into concepts, words, ideas. I cut, I judge, and I weigh. I whisper and howl. The woman thanked the wind and took the gift that was offered.’

The rune in the east of the central one glowed red, then went up in flames and morphed into a staff.

‘The woman could of course not give birth to just a mind. But the fire in the hearth had listened to the conversation, to the exchange, and after the wind had been so generous, it felt it could not be left behind. So when the time came around for spring again, one evening, it took one of the logs in the hearth, and let a part of it latch onto it. I give you my staff, it said to the woman. I will form the child’s magic. I am the spark of the idea, the beginning of the new. I transform and command. I am the force of change each child needs. But be careful. I give warmth, but also I burn. I create, but also I destroy. I demand payment and always offer much more in return. And the woman had to pay a price for the staff she received, and we know not what that price had been. Maybe it had been small, maybe it had been the highest one.’

The rune south of the central one glowed, blue this time, and Tony could see it drop into a cup that appeared underneath it until it filled it whole.

‘The unborn child had now magic and a mind, but that was not enough to give it life. But the woman knew what other needs had still to be filled. And so in the summer, gathering water for the fields, she went to the small creek near her house. Creek, she said, you help me water my fields when the sun is burning down, please help me again. Please help me give life to another.

And also the water helped her. Take a cup, said it, and have your fill, there is enough of me and always will be, in abundance. I will be the child’s soul. I fill and overflow. I trickle or rush, I carry you or tear you with me. I can be still as a mirror or rage in a storm. I can only break when frozen, but as soon as I melt, I will find myself again. I will always find a way.’

Loki’s eyes lingered on that one.

Then he abruptly looked away, and with a gesture of his hand, the rune west of the central one glowed gold, and turned… into a piece of gold?

‘The woman turned to the earth last, in autumn. It was the time for the harvest, and the ground had always given her so much – all her food, and the stones from which she had built her hut, and the wood that the fire in its hunger constantly demanded.
And once again, the earth was generous. It gave the woman from its belly the last aspect still missing, a shiny piece of gold, a coin. I will be the child’s body, said it. I will be the ground on which the child will walk, that positions it in this world, its most basic need, and its most basic currency. I am what the child will always be thrown back to in the end, like I pull you towards me, and at the same time, I will be what truly tethers it to life, to this universe. I will be the lust for life, and at the same time the reminder of the end.’

‘What about the one in the middle?’ Tony couldn’t help but ask.

Loki moved his eyes to it, absent-mindedly.

‘Oh, that’ said he then. ‘That is the whole of course.’

‘The whole?’

‘Yes, the whole’ said Loki as if that wasn’t even worth the mention anymore, and he vanished the entire illusion with a lazy hand gesture. ‘The self, if you will. The child was born, but it was not called wind, fire, water or earth. It had a name of its own. The story I told you is not merely an explanation of the wheel of the year. It is a way of memorising and understanding the four essential qualities of any living being, mage or not. But of course, a person is always more than just their mind, their magic, their soul and their body.’

He was silent for a moment, pensive.

‘Seidr is part even of non-mages?’ asked Tony.

‘Yes’ said Loki, still looking a bit lost in thought. ‘But not in any way that they could exploit.’

He furrowed his eyebrows.

‘My Midgardian denomination is a simple translation mistake’ said he then. ‘Or a cultural misunderstanding, if you will. We have several words for what you would translate as the English word fire, and not all of them are employed to define the simple, material flame. So I was never the God of Fire as such.’

Wait, that…

‘… you are the God of Magic instead?’ Tony asked hoarsely. ‘Is this what you’re implying here? Are you fucking shitting me, Lokes?’

The god fucking shrugged.

‘Not everyone grants me that title of course’ said he. ‘And it does not mean that seidr is my servant either. It is no one’s, and anyone who thinks otherwise will pay the highest price for their stupidity. Divine domains… are a complicated matter, and despite the admitted quickness of your mind, I will not endeavour to explain them to you today. We have more important things to do.’

‘Still…’ Tony said. ‘God of frigging Magic… what a frigging bomb to drop there, Lokes.’

The smile Loki now gave him was slightly lop-sided.

‘You do know what I have done’ said he. ‘The Song could not have been accomplished by an amateur.’

‘Yeah, I’m beginning to get that feeling too’ said Tony, wondering whether he would ever become a
good enough mage himself to comprehend what the scope of Loki’s power really was.

He held up his hand, wriggled his fingers.

‘So… what do I need to do so to lighten things up a bit?’

*Loki had not expected Stark to succeed in even creating a spark that day, and watched the mortal getting steadily more frustrated with the same mixture of impatience, derision and wonder he always felt for very young mages. These trials of making the first steps, of getting even a remotely steady control of their seidr and making it do something specific and predetermined, was nothing he could really comprehend. His own gift had manifested so early and so strongly that he could not remember a time when he was not capable of ruling his seidr effortlessly for those most basic spells. Not that his magical education had been without its challenges – maybe because of his strong gift, he had rather tended to invite trouble on himself by attempting too complicated or demanding spells too early.

Loki furrowed his eyebrows, wondering how old he had been when he had had his first serious accident in that area, but it was difficult to say. He had definitely had one at an age where he had still struggled to read, and that one, he knew, had nearly cost him his life.

He still remembered Frigga’s fury. He had been playing with Thor and his friends (Baldur had already been among them, Thor had already been idolizing him, this older cousin who resembled Thor so much more than Loki ever would) and had wanted to boast, he supposed. What had the spell been about? Levitation, flying, that had been his aim. He had commanded his seidr to make him feather light, or at least that was what he had thought he had asked for. Maybe he had said the wrong words, or, more importantly, his will had not been clear enough. His seidr had misunderstood in any case. He had gotten lighter, yes, had even started to float a little. Such is the side effect of losing one’s materiality. At first, he had not noticed anything amiss, and then, when the expression on Thor’s face had morphed from excitement to alarm, he had already felt too detached from his body to muster up any real panic. He did remember watching his hand become transparent, and the lightness had been strange, as if he was floating away not only from the floor but also from his sensations. Vision and hearing had still been there, but they had felt distant. His emotions had felt distant. He had felt himself become thinner and thinner, as if he was just an illusion fading away, and he had thought, without any real fear, I will disappear.

Then Frigga had stormed into the room, her eyes full of anger. No, of naked fear, Loki recognised now. She had cast the counter spell at once, had picked him up and had run with him to the healers. He remembered her short breath, her suppressed sobs, how she had pressed him to her chest as if that could anchor him in the world. He remembered every detail even though he had felt little about it at the time. He remembered her fingers had passed through his skin a little before meeting some resistance. It had taken him a few days to come back to himself. Even for a while afterwards, the world had felt off, as if shifted, objects had been odd to the touch, and the feeling of being unreal, a simulacrum ready to be dispelled at any moment, had been difficult to shake.

He wondered, in retrospect, what his spell had really done. Of all his near death experience, this one had been by far the most pleasant. Maybe he had cursed himself that day in a way that haunted him still.

And why had Frigga fought for him so desperately then, when she could have solved so many
problems by running just a little more slowly? Had Loki not still been a foreigner to her then, the child of another, the monster she needed to coddle for the sake of Odin’s schemes? Had she already then been able to look at him and only see pink skin, and not imagine the ugliness that lurked beneath it?

How was she justifying her love for him now? Did she deliberately repress the knowledge about the truth of his origins? Did she love him despite them?

He had to think of her fury again, her fear, and briefly imagined being in her position, seeing one of his own children fade into nothing.

But that hurt so much that he suffocated the train of thought without mercy. No. No, that could not be compared, he told himself. He had never been her son. Only the illusion of one.

Somehow, he had trouble believing it.

Have you become that bad of a liar?

‘I still don’t really get what you want me to do’ said Stark now, staring at his hand.

‘That’s exactly what your seidr is answering you at the moment, confronted with your muffled and contradictory commands’ said Loki. ‘Think about what you want from it, and then tell it to make it so. Your will must be clear and strong.’ He stretched himself out and put his boots on the worktable. This was probably going to take a while.

Stark, he knew, was at a great disadvantage, as were all mages who discovered their gift too late. The seidr had, at that point, adapted so perfectly to the subconscious command simply not to exist, had learned to hide so well, that it was confused when told to do anything else, difficult to convince, and once unleashed, often even more difficult to control.

Maybe it had been a mistake to wake it. Probably it had been a mistake. Hlín would certainly disapprove. Frigga probably too. But then again, it had been too tempting at the same time. Stark was too perfectly dispositioned for this art, too much his personality was that of a mage. Of one to play with fire.

He might get hurt, a voice in his mind said. He probably will get hurt. You know you’re putting him at risk again.

And the idea of Stark’s demise became ever more unbearable to Loki every day.

It made no sense, and yet, there he was.

Destroying what you love again. Because that is what you are, the snake raised at the bosom, and of course you will strike.

It is your nature after all.

He was drumming with his fingers on the table, wishing his thoughts to wander elsewhere, staring at the air where his illusion had hovered.

The wind. The fire. The water. The coin.

The whole.

A fine tale.
Loki had told it Stark in almost the exact words Frigga had told him when he had been still a small child, with almost the exact same illusion. And back then, he had listened to it in wonder, had accepted it as children accept all stories. Easily, and never without question.

And later, when he had thrown himself into his studies of seidr, of the realms, of the world, he had thought he had understood what the tale meant.

How foolish of him.

In truth, he struggled still. At least with parts of it.

The wind of course had never posed him much difficulty. The very fact that it was the mind they were talking about made it comprehensible by logic more so than any of the other aspects of the self. Naming things, separating them from other things that way, cutting through vague and complicated theories until he had spread out their elements. Defining and describing what he experienced, using logic to make sense of it – he was well trained in the art of sword fighting, it was one of his sharpest weapons, and had saved his life and his sanity more than once.

The coin… well, after his brief and accidental attempt to get rid of his own materiality, he had quickly learned to use it as a currency. Again and again. And life had certainly driven the lesson home that in the end, it was always what he would be thrown back to. Thrown back to its limits, its weaknesses. To its monstrosity. To the weight of another on his body, to the cock in his arse and the blood in his mouth that he couldn’t spit out. To the hunger that just wouldn’t stop, no matter how long he ignored it. To blue skin hidden beneath a lie. To rotting flesh. To immobility, and numbness. There was no life without materiality, and materiality grounded one indeed. Often in pain.

Sometimes in exquisite pleasure. Also that he had learned.

And that he could pretend nonetheless. That he could pretend and lie and pretend some more, until the coin and all the pain it brought felt, despite its necessity, distant, unimportant.

He could starve and barely notice.

Which he was proving to himself again at the moment.

No matter.

The cup, on the contrary, he still felt he didn’t comprehend at all. He didn’t know what to do with the metaphor of the water, and he felt mocked by the assertion that it could only break when frozen, that all it had to do was to melt so to become whole again, unblemished. Had his soul been as cold as ice then when… but of course it had. He was a frost giant after all. Maybe that was what made them so inferior to the other races of the nine realms.

He allowed himself only a small smile, then it faded just as quickly as it had come.

Hela. Half Jotunn, remember?

It did not fit. Not at all. Not with her.

For she was not yet called the goddess of water, but Loki supposed it was only a matter of time until that would change.

Unlike the domain of the dead, this one had not even been decided for her. It were her own choices, her own temperament, the way she ruled Helheim and its inhabitants that slowly but surely fostered her claim on it.
Until she would be the goddess of the only aspect of the self he felt he could not really grasp.

He laughed quietly about that rather fitting joke on their relationship, only shaking his head at Stark when he was eyeing him.

Do not try to understand my mind, mortal. You would get mad with it, and I am already harming you enough.

And then there was seidr of course, he thought, watching Stark’s magic as it moved around his hand confusedly, still unsure what it was there to do.

Fire, the only aspect that had demanded a price from this woman, who was, as anyone remotely intelligent would immediately conclude, the universe itself, giving birth to life.

What had the price been?

Death, some said.

And he, he was the god of it, the god of the force that had invited Death into this world, that created always at the price of destruction. The god of a force that was slippery and unreliable, moody and sometimes outright cruel. The title had not always been a compliment. Some Aesir had called him God of Lies, Mischief and Chaos, or they had called him God of Fire, and they had meant the same thing.

And of course it was the same thing, but never in the way that they assumed.

So many people were such fools, so ignorant about what being the god of anything meant.

Even on Asgard, there were few who could call themselves such. Becoming a god required a certain disposition for a specific aspect of the world, be it fertility, war or wisdom, and then, most of all, it required an understanding of that aspect that went so far as to make oneself its familiar, its emissary in the world.

It meant not only rationally comprehending that fire was magic was transformation was change was chaos was death was life was creation and that of course it asked for a price because the price of the new was always the old. And that it was called mischief because it was change, and life hated change, had always hated it, yet needed it. Needed it so urgently.

And that it was called a lie because life wanted to be lied to. Especially about its own fugacity.

When Loki had stolen Heimdall’s horn on the wedding day of his lover, when he had wrapped his fingers around it and felt a hopping elation, a strange ecstasy, because he could not know what the consequences of his actions would be, when at the blowing of the horn, the chaos that unfolded beneath him in the city had seemed to fill him with energy, as if the light of the stars themselves were streaming into him until he had had to laugh, when he had known perfectly well, in this exact moment, that what he had done was maybe not right, or good, but necessary, that had been the beginning of his domain, or one of the beginnings.

He had not had many of those moments, considering. Not many of those moments at all when he had felt so sure.

Most of the time he felt like chaos’ play ball more than anything else. Its agent, yes, but not always a willing one. He was the God of Lies also because he had lied to himself his whole life, because the
very core of his identity was a lie. And the price magic demanded was so often his to pay. Maybe it was different for others. Maybe Odin understood his own domain, and could rule it with a strong and sure hand, like he ruled Asgard, and the nine realms, and his family. Maybe it was in Loki’s nature to remain ever baffled at his role, forever overtaken and passive, Ergi. Or maybe divinity meant something entirely else for a true Aesir than for a Jotunn beast. Was not even his godhood itself pretence, like the rest, when he was not a creature fit for such an honour? Like a mule dressed up in the robes of a judge, laughed at and mocked by the same people who had organised the game, holding false trials and bringing before the mule false grievances for their own amusement? There was an old children’s tale about that, he thought.

Had it been about him, in truth, though nobody had said so?

If anything, he was a servant, not a lord.

But then again, he was Loki, and he served no one.

Just like Chaos didn’t.

At that moment, Stark’s seidr suddenly changed, grew sharp and focused, and the next, his hand was on fire.

* *

‘Oh, my’ were the first words Stark uttered afterwards. ‘That was… different.’

They had both jumped up from the table, and were now standing, in Loki’s opinion a bit too closely.

Stark’s eyes were still wide and slightly dazed, and he looked a bit too unconcerned about the burns he had received despite Loki having snuffed out the flame so quickly.

Fragile, remember? So easy to destroy. Why do you keep forgetting?

‘I didn’t know… is that really how the universe works?’ asked Stark, frowning. ‘Is it really a web of calculations, at the same time a giant tapestry, and if you pull one thread…’

Loki cocked his head.

‘Is that what you saw?’ said he. ‘You seidr still speaks in metaphors to you. That is normal – it will take you a long time until your mind will be ready to learn its true language.’

‘So all that effort and I still don’t get a peek at the true blueprint?’ Stark said, sounding distinctly disappointed. ‘Cause that felt and looked a lot like the true blueprint, you know?’

‘Worry not’ said Loki with a smile. Stark’s impatience resonated with his in an almost dangerous way. ‘The metaphors your seidr is using now seem to be closer to the truth than before. And more importantly, they obviously allow you to command it.’

‘More or less’ said Stark with a lopsided smile, waving his burnt hand.

Left on its own, how long would it take to heal? Several weeks, more than a month?

Loki stretched his out.
'May I?'

‘Heal me?’ asked Stark, and he grinned. ‘Very green.’

Loki could not help the warm arousal that those words caused, the twitch of his mouth at them. He took the mortal’s hand into his carefully.

A strange custom, to not say yes, no, or maybe, but to use a colour code instead. Why take that detour? And those other rules that came with it. Yellow – slow down, ask me what I need. Red – stop what you are doing and make sure the other is okay. There were so many underlying assumptions behind this code, behind those rules – the same assumptions that seemed to motivate many of Stark’s other odd reactions to Loki’s Ergi. And they still did not make much sense to him. For why would one expect a question about one’s needs after rejecting someone, instead of anger? If ever one had to reject a lover out of some personal weakness, would the question about one’s well-being not be pure mockery? But the way Stark had explained it, it had not sounded like mockery at all.

Would it make a difference though? Would Loki have been able to say yellow before freezing into immobility?

He had no idea.

He could not deny in any case that such a clear yes as Stark had just given him by naming a simple colour was… interesting… to say the least. It was something one could work with, maybe.

Oh, don’t fool yourself, a voice in his mind said. You are just pleasantly surprised anybody would say yes to you at all.

Go away, said Loki to the voice. You’re interrupting something good.

For his skin tingled with Stark’s seidr even before he let his own magic do the work. If before, Stark’s magic had fought him, it now brushed against him, still wary but already friendly at the same time. It knew that Loki’s snake could bring pleasure too.

It’s alright, he whispered. I’m here to help.

Loki knew of course, deep down, that he was being a hypocrite. He was tending to a wound that any member of a moderately respected race would not even have received under the same circumstances. Stark was so pathetically weak in so many ways… and yet…

What if, he thought, looking pensively at Stark who, as to him, was staring down at his own quickly healing hand, what if… but that was a dangerous thought.

… what if he tended to forget Stark’s mortality precisely because he did not want to acknowledge it?

Hah, he did like to ensure his own misery, didn’t he?

It was the one thing at which he truly excelled.

At that moment, Stark breathed out as the pain left him, his cheeks reddened a bit, his mouth opened. And just that, just his flushing, made Loki harden in return. Oh by the Norns, Loki really was doomed, wasn’t he?

This is unwise, he told himself, too much could go wrong, but there was the warmth of the other body, and as if the Norns wanted to mock him, he felt more drawn to this body than ever, and there
he had already cocked his head, moved forward, ‘green’ said Stark, his pupils dilating, and before he could think too hard about what this could mean, Loki’s hands had already cradled Stark’s face, he tilted his head down, sought his lips with his own.

And Tony was wet and warm and smelled exquisitely, and he was so terribly hungry for those lips, for that mouth that responded with equal eagerness, he was doomed, he was doomed, Stark’s tongue meeting his, sweet and searching. Loki’s fingers scratched lightly over Stark’s jaw, then carded through his hair, and he felt Stark moan, rise to his toes, so to come closer. His arms however were hanging down at his sides, loosely, and Loki longed for them, hated their absence, at the same time so very grateful they stayed where they were. Pathetic, pathetic. Forever seeking what will destroy you. Licking across Stark’s teeth, Loki ignored the voice and stepped forward instead, colliding with this small, compact body and forcing it to retreat a little, and that warmth, and the smell, Loki wanted, he wanted…

He let go of Stark abruptly, stepped back.

He felt himself breathe quickly, there was an odd pressure on his chest.

Where was this coming from?

‘Are you okay, Lokes?’ Stark asked, and by the Norns, he sounded so sincere. Loki wanted to scream, or to weep. He wanted to grab that table they were standing next to and throw it across the room.

‘Just fine’ said he.

There was a pause.

‘Alright’ said Stark then. He had this cautious look again, the same he had worn the other day, and Loki turned away from it, squashing the urge to shout at Stark to shut up.

‘I think you have something of mine’ said he instead because that matter had to be addressed in any case, and wasn’t now as good a moment as any? ‘My loot. I would like it back now please.’

Another pause.

‘Your loot?’

Don’t test my patience now.

‘I left it in your diagnostics room, I believe, and I cannot imagine you will not have moved it to a secure location by now.’

Again, Stark was silent for a moment.

‘The lump of metal’ said he then. ‘You mean the lump of hot metal that nearly offed you.’

‘Well, how many other objects of unmeasurable value have I deposited in your diagnostics room of late?’ asked Loki testily.

‘Unmeasurable value?’ Stark asked. ‘It melted off your face, Mr Zombie Movie Extra, that’s B movie cheap. Though I suppose there must be a market for fugly art projects that use the bodies of gods as a mould. One sculpture in the shape of Loki’s burnt out insides, with blood and viscera still smeared all over it – I wonder what I would get at an auction for that.’
And Loki had to laugh despite his irritation, both because of the mental image and because Stark knew better than that, and Loki knew better too, and the joy of his improbable victory over the dwarves made him almost dizzy.

‘Yes, something like that, I suppose.’

Chapter End Notes

Oh, Loki – your feelings are all over the place, aren’t they?
The Great Heist

Chapter Summary

In which Loki tells us about his ingenious plan that somehow ended with him almost dying, but that’s okay. Also, Loki has a job as an art critic on the side.

Chapter Notes

Somehow, I feel gratified at posting a chapter on my birthday - but being able to express myself on AO3 does feel like a gift :-).

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

‘I gather from your manic evil cackling that there was more behind your injury than just a botched plastic surgery?’ Stark said now, moving to the sofa and sitting down. And Loki hated that he hated that sudden distance. ‘You still rock that villain laugh, by the way. It’s like you never stopped conquering planets.’

‘And maybe I never have’ Loki said, grinning in the way that people usually found rather scary.

‘Hush, don’t tell people, that’s a spoiler’ answered Stark and winked at him.

Loki snorted.

‘I will have you know’ added he. ‘That my botched plastic surgery, as you call it, was a successful heist of one of the best guarded places of the universe. A heist that I have planned for centuries by the way, and at which almost any other person would have failed. I have retrieved my treasure and survived where others would have lost far more than their tongue and still would have returned empty handed.’

He pretended to think for a moment.

‘And dead, for all that matters’ he added then.

Stark didn’t look particularly impressed. But then again, he didn’t know Nidavellir.

‘You were, quoting the prince’s bride, pretty close to mostly dead when you came back, Mr Moriarty. If it hadn’t been for my awesome improvisation skills, you’d have bitten the proverbial dust days ago. So much for your perfect heist.’

Loki waved that away, not bothering to ask whose prince’s bride used such inaccurate and banal vocabulary to describe the strange state between life and death. ‘And how is using all your resources, including those of your ally, not a valid part of any plan?’

Stark raised his eyebrows.

‘Please don’t tell me that running off without telling me where you are going or what you are going
to do and then returning heavily injured in the middle of the night on the off-chance that I’m actually in the tower and able to help is your idea of a fall-back strategy’ said he.

It hadn’t been. Loki hadn’t expected Stark to be able to help at all beyond a little first aid, nor had he planned for it.

He had also miscalculated just a little what hot metal would do to a Jotunn body.

And maybe he should have known from his journeys to Muspelheim, or from the many other occasions he had had to observe it, that heat was a little more dangerous to him than other injuries were, but how much more dangerous apparently remained difficult to predict.

Well. Everyone could make mistakes.

‘I said I used your resources’ said he. ‘I wasn’t strictly speaking about help.’

He sneered a little at the last word, feeling the need to express his disdain for the concept. In his experience, help was just another word for someone wanting to trick you, or you to owe them a debt.

Stark seemed to consider this.

‘The body scanner was part of the plan, I wasn’t’ he concluded.

Loki nodded.

‘I went to Nidavellir’ said he, since he had planned to divulge this information anyway.

‘Nidavellir’ Stark repeated, his eyes narrowed. ‘Isn’t that where…’

‘The dwarves live, yes’ said Loki.

Not his favourite people. Neither was he their favourite person. They had a mutual understanding in that way.

‘But wasn’t that… okay, geography lesson here please?’ Stark said. ‘Cause our myths say that Nidavellir is on Svartalfheim and that the dwarves are dark elves – but that can’t be because Svartalfheim got destroyed, right? That’s at least what you and Thor claim. Or was that a lie?’

‘No. All of what you just said is true, in a way’ Loki said. ‘The dark elves and the dwarves do have common ancestors. But even before the dark elves’ defeat and disappearance, there had been practically no mingling between the two people beyond business deals for eons. And they evolved very differently in the end.’

He felt himself gradually relax now that they had temporarily moved away from the topic of Loki’s miscalculation (he didn’t fool himself that Stark would completely let it go), and he began striding up and down the room, gesticulating with one hand to accompany his words.

‘Politically, their strategies couldn’t have been more different either’ said he.

The other hand was still on his back, and he hated that he had retained that habit, that way of making himself smaller, less remarkable with his body language. As if he were still on Asgard, still frowned upon or ridiculed each time he tried to claim some space next to Thor, as if he didn’t have the right – but now was neither the time nor the place to dwell on the matter.

‘Where the dark elves started wars to strive for dominance, the dwarves decided to take a neutral stand and to provide tools and weaponry for anyone who could afford them. A role not unlike yours,
Stark, before your sudden change of heart.'

He accompanied the emphasis with one of his less nice smirks, and Stark raised an unimpressed eyebrow at the, Loki had to admit, rather half-hearted attempt to expose some of Stark’s old wounds.

Half-hearted or not, the remark would have still been enough to offend many others, to put them at a safe distance.

Well, he should get used to the idea that this particular mortal was… more challenging in that respect, shouldn’t he? Like he was more challenging in so many others.

Stark, as to him, said with just as nasty a smile, ‘And history has shown us what was the smarter choice, hasn’t it?’

‘Indeed’ Loki said, and bowed a little in the mortal’s direction. ‘The dark elves have perished while the dwarves thrive still and have gained not little influence in the meantime. And no wonder – they continue to be needed, after all.’

And Odin let people live and prosper, even when they caused trouble, if only they were of some use. So of what use had the Jotnar been, since Loki had not been allowed to eradicate them?

No, Loki.

Or was that Odin’s answer to anything Loki did?

‘And while Nidavellir was once part of the realm Svartalfheim, to say that it was on Svartalfheim was never strictly true’ he continued. ‘Of the planet Svartalfheim, Nidavellir was once a moon’

‘A moon’ repeated Stark.

“You seem surprised?”

‘Not really… it’s just stupid stereotypes’ said Stark with a shrug. ‘Dwarves and outer space – it sounds weird. On Earth, we imagine them mostly as these Tolkienish shrivelled men digging through mountains, looking for and only thinking about gold.’

Loki snorted.

‘That is certainly how some Aesir would describe them’ said he. ‘Usually those who have had dealings with them. The price of their services is usually ridiculously high, and they are very keen on collecting their debts. But there is a difference between greed and a healthy appreciation for one’s own craftsmanship, as well as centuries of experience with customers who like to benefit from such craftsmanship without necessarily wanting to pay for it.’

Even though there was certainly no love lost between him and the dwarves, Asgard’s self-serving prejudices concerning them had not been able to deceive Loki for long. And he could understand very well why they had developed such an unforgiving attitude in business.

‘Yeah, every businessman who produces anything of value knows that brand of customer far too well. I bet you do’ Stark, narrowing his eyes. Catching up quickly, just as usual. ‘Since you are also a craftsman of sorts?’

Loki gave a small nod.

‘Let us say I can… emphasise with some of the difficulties they have’
Which of course didn’t mean he wouldn’t steal from them or trick them, if he could.

‘Over the course of a few millennia, the moon Nidavellir was transformed by the dwarves’ activity into a giant forge, a conglomerate of factories and workshops, dwellings and mines. They hollowed it out almost completely, and by the time the dark elves were defeated, it had long since grown independent of the planet it was circling. They stayed in Svartalfheim’s gravity field for a while, but devoid of life, the planet had lost most of its interest for them, and so they eventually left Svartalfheim altogether.’

‘You mean… they left the moon?’

Loki chuckled.

‘No, I mean the moon left with them on it’ said he.

‘Right’ Stark said. ‘So we’re talking about that level of technological advancement.’

‘Yes’ Loki said. ‘You Midgardians might call Nidavellir a space station – even though it is not exactly that, the description fits it well enough. It is drifting through space, and the force that pulls the moon is not gravity anymore, but the ever-changing demand of its customers. Even today, it remains the forge of the most wondrous artefacts of this universe, and of some of its deadliest weapons. Legends say that the infinity gauntlet itself – used by the Mad Titan in his first attempt to end all life – was forged there.’

‘Not exactly what I would use as my company slogan’ Stark said. ‘We gave the mean loony the means. But I still get why it would help the sales. Come to think of it, Nidavellir does sound a bit like a glorified pre-Iron-Man Stark Industries.’

Again, Loki couldn’t help but chuckle.

‘The gauntlet was a rather sophisticated creation’ said he. ‘Even a being as powerful as the Mad Titan wouldn’t have been able to control all of the infinity gems at once without some technological and magical assistance. The gauntlet, however, allowed him such control.’

‘It allowed? Past tense?’ Stark said, having caught on the wording of course.

Loki shouldn’t have felt so pleased.

‘The original gauntlet was destroyed when the Mad Titan was defeated’ said he. ‘It is lost forever.’

Stark looked at him pensively.

‘You think he is going pay Nidavellir a visit, force the dwarves to make another one’ said he.

‘The dwarves do know how to protect their interests’ Loki said. ‘I have catalogued their defences only very recently, committing my theft, and it is quite obvious that they know what is coming, and that they are reasonably scared. The Kree, the Aesir and the Vanir have not been idle either – they have lent the dwarves their help, obviously preparing for the same threat I am. I might have been able to slip inside Nidavellir undetected, but to truly conquer the moon, to defeat it, would be a challenge of quite a different kind.’

‘And you still think they will lose’ Stark said matter-of-factly.

Loki felt the corners of his lips twitch upwards involuntarily. Stark’s intelligence was dangerous, yes, but it was so very refreshing not to have to spell everything out.
'I am supposed to be your Nidavellir, am I not?' Stark continued, his gaze sharp and calculating now. ‘You know that Thanos will get to the dwarves, so you took care to have your own craftsman. Something to level the battle field in advance.’

Loki let his smile spread, opened one arm in a wide gesture.

‘You were the one to constantly compare the moon to Stark Industries.’

‘Mhm’ said Stark non-committedly, then, ‘You also don’t think that the dwarves would help you in any case.’

‘Oh, but help me they did, even though they did not plan to’ said Loki, grinning sharply, and Tony huffed, small creases at the corners of his eyes.

More seriously, Loki added, ‘Maybe they would, if they were desperate, and if I convinced Odin, the Vanir and the Kree to put pressure on them first. But yes, I would prefer avoiding having to ask them for anything. Our history is… not without conflict.’

To put it mildly.

‘What, are you referring to the day they bound your testicles to a boar and made it run?’ asked Stark dryly. ‘Or to some other gruesome myth that is true because alien Vikings are weirdly violent?’

So Thor, once more, hadn’t been able to keep his mouth shut. Good to know.

‘Let us say that both parties lost things that day that they would rather have kept’ Loki replied curtly.

The dwarves had lost some of their most prized and expensive creations. He his balls.

At least until he had grown them back, eventually.

Far more inconvenient than the wound had been the additional reason it had given Baldur to claim that Loki was not a true man. About which he had been right of course, in the end.

Was he laughing, drinking his mead in Valhalla, knowing now that every insult he had thrown at Loki No-One’s-Not-Even-A-Son had been accurate, justified?

‘Oh, I’m sure’ said Stark now. ‘Like I said, weirdly violent. And because you would like to avoid asking, you’ve robbed them instead?’

Loki cocked his head a little.

‘One could say so, yes’ said he.

It had been, despite everything, the safer option.

Then he furrowed his eyebrows.

‘Though I suppose technically, I didn’t actually steal the Uru at all. They gave it to me quite willingly in the end. Maybe I misjudged them, and they are more benevolent toward me than I thought.’

As if.

‘Gave it to you?’ Tony said, raising an eyebrow. ‘Sure. And then you thought that the best method of transportation was inside your body? Because if the logistics were the issue, I could have built you a box, you know?’
Loki chuckled again.

‘Thank you for the offer, but of course I had a safe container prepared’ said he. ‘I had planned to hide the Uru in a pocket dimension and leave Nidavellir as undetected as I had entered it. Alas, I underestimated the heightened security of the moon a little.’

He smiled widely.

‘But I know the dwarves’ said he. ‘I know how they think, and so my arrest did not make much difference in the end. It is not the first time I have tried to steal that particular metal, you see?’

‘Isn’t it?’ Stark asked.

‘No’ Loki said. ‘There is more than one situation where one might need a material that can be used to multiply objects after all.’

‘What?’ asked Stark hoarsely, his eyes a little wide.

Loki laughed. He had known that Stark would like what Loki had procured. And he would hate it, at the same time, since it violated all of those ridiculous so-called laws of nature that were still so precious to the mortal. Or maybe now that he had seen a glimpse of the true make-up of the world, he would be able to shed his superstitions more easily, who knew.

‘The first time they caught me at it, a couple of centuries ago, they judged it just to plunge my thieving hand into the hot metal in response, telling me that if I wanted the Uru, I should get it on their terms’ said Loki, at which a look of startled horror overtook Stark’s face. Always so sensitive. But maybe also that came with bodies that were so very ephemeral. ‘And they threatened to pour it down my throat the next time they found me near it.’

Stark… gulped.

‘For a long time, that kept me away successfully, just as they intended’ Loki continued. ‘The damage to my hand was not little, and I knew that despite my magic, I would not survive what they promised. The metal had melted partly into my flesh, you see, and it was very difficult and time consuming to get rid of it again.’

‘… right’ said Stark weakly. ‘So… what changed?’

He frowned.

‘Please don’t tell me that my damn scanner was what made the difference’ said he then.

‘And pray, why not?’ asked Loki, slightly amused. ‘It is an indirect compliment to your skills after all. Your scanner could depict my body on a level of detail that I had not encountered before, neither in machines nor in magic. I made the calculations and came to the result that with the help of this amount of data, I would be able, in a rather refined version of teleportation magic, to separate myself from the foreign material inside me. With the heat source thus eliminated and I not having to deal with all those other detrimental effects of having magical metal fused to my insides, I judged that I had a fair chance of survival and, given a little time, of a full recovery. Thus, even if my preferred plan to evade the dwarves’ punishment failed, I would with all probability reach my ultimate goal. And I was right, was I not?’

Stark stared at him, slightly horrified.

‘No, you were not’ said he then, hoarsely. ‘Because if I hadn’t had that idea about the blankets filled
with solid carbon dioxide, and had not cooled you down to Jotunn blue, you would have paid your
daughter a permanent visit, she told me so. Maybe you didn’t notice, but it was, in fact, a pretty close
call.’

… perhaps.

And he had to admit he was relieved having avoided getting killed by the dwarves of all people.
Hela would have been… particularly displeased.

He rolled his eyes anyway.

‘There is a risk in any endeavour worth the effort’ said he.

Stark regarded Loki, visibly pondering something.

‘Look, Loki’ said he then. ‘If this is your way of convincing me that this was not you trying to kill
yourself after that incident between us… you’re not as convincing as you think you are, is all I’m
saying.’

Loki had still been striding up and down the room, but now he stopped in his tracks.

What?

This was what the mortal had taken from his story?

The laugh he let out felt strange to him.

‘You consider yourself more relevant to my well-being than you are’ said he. ‘But I suppose I
shouldn’t expect more from a man known to compensate his abysmal self-worth with boasting’

Another weak insult, and Stark seemed to agree. And from one moment to the other, Loki felt
decidedly off his game, just like the day before, which was of course no one’s but Stark’s fault, for
he insisted on not reacting like he was supposed to. Loki knew how to tell stories after all, he had
done it for centuries, and he knew, if he had told Thor his story the way he had told it, Thor would
have praised Loki’s cleverness maybe, or maybe he would have chided him for his theft – but that
was not probable, Thor seldom minded when Loki stole from people Thor disliked. They might have
laughed about the dwarves, or they would have exchanged other stories about Nidavellir from days
gone by, but Thor would never, ever have come to such absurd, fantastic conclusions…

… only that was not true, was it? Thor had behaved strangely around Loki after they had met in
Ozymandia, hadn’t he, had posed all these questions about Thanos, about the scar on his chest,
and… surely, that had only been the side effect of having seen Loki die yet again in his arms, a flare
of guilt, as ephemeral as it was bright. Surely, this would pass. Surely, Thor would not learn to pay
attention the moment it suited Loki the least?

‘Whether you believe me or not, I generally know what I’m doing, mortal’ said he, his tone biting.
‘I’ve been doing it for a while.’

‘I’m sure it’s not your first round, yeah’ answered Stark soberly. ‘Hela told me you are on pretty
good speaking terms with Death by now, so much do you care for your own safety.’

Something in him wanted to laugh again, something in him wanted to tell Stark to shut up, to finally
start reacting like all those other people, who always just accepted his stories, I conjured a mare and
this was the beast that gave birth to the foal; sewing my mouth shut is all they did; magic can
compensate my not eating; I was left behind on the battle field but I tricked my enemies, they never
caught me; of course I knew I would survive the void; why should I let myself be tortured when I
could make a deal with Thanos instead; of course the injury on Svartalfheim was an illusion, of
course the song was an illusion, of course I never died at all, all these people who never asked, never
asked never ASKED!

Maybe he had never been a master of masks and lies. Maybe until now, simply nobody had ever
considered him important enough to actually look, to listen.

Maybe-

He breathed out, forcibly relaxed his hands that were balled to fists, schooling his voice into
something cool and smooth.

He was slipping, again, which he definitely couldn’t afford.

‘I understand your concern’ said he. ‘Like you have said before, you have to know how suicidal
your ally really is’

He sneered at the word, but bowed toward Stark, then waved his hand once again as if to wave
away his worries.

‘But you shouldn’t put too much stock in Hela’s judgement concerning my health’ he lied. ‘She does
tend to overdramatise a little bit in that regard.’

He pretended to think for a moment.

‘I suppose she gets that from me’ added he then, his index on his lips.

Self-deprecation, the indirect admittance that she was indeed his daughter, thus an expression of trust
– all wrapped in his pretended musing about his troubled relationship with her. If that didn’t throw
Stark off the scent, Loki really would be at the end of his wits.

I’m sorry, Hela, for speaking about you this way. I should find other means to protect me.

In truth, he felt too worn for a battle of this kind, too much still in need of healing. But how much
more time of rest would it take for him to regain his former strength?

Weakling.

‘But trust that I have considered all the risks and possible benefits of the heist, and have decided that
the benefits outweigh the risks by far, even if it came to the worst. This is a war, and there is no use
trying to hide in safety, or we will lose everything. No, obtaining the Uru was too important. We
simply need it, Stark, you will understand once I explain what it can do – my being temporarily
indisposed was a very fair price for it. For our alliance, it was thus–’

‘For fuck’s sake, Loki, this is not about the fucking alliance!’

Stark sounded angry now, and Loki turned to him abruptly. Where had he gone wrong now? What
other assumption about the inventor had been incorrect?

‘Why wouldn’t it be?’ asked he.

‘Do you…’ Stark wrung his hands. He looked… troubled? Deeply troubled. Why? Everything that
Loki said to reassure… ‘You decided that the benefits outweigh the risks, even if it came to the
worst? You were really prepared to die for this piece of shitty postmodern performance art?’
‘Oh, don’t tell me you don’t know that it is far more than that!’ said Loki, now getting angry too. ‘You have analysed it already rather thoroughly, with the means you possess, so you know perfectly well it is not exactly mundane. You have even used it in your models of the Gem Homeplanet as a replacement for vibranium!’

When Stark looked startled and slightly alarmed that Loki possessed this knowledge, he threw up his arms in frustration. Sometimes, the mortal seemed so smart, and then…

‘Did you really think I wouldn’t be able to convince Jarvis to show me those models, considering how poorly you protected them?’ asked he, rather rhetorically. ‘Yes, I know you have been making new calculations, taking Uru into account, and that was my bloody goal. I knew that even if I was not there to teach you, you would in Thor have enough access to knowledge to make use of it. As it appears, you don’t seem to need either me or Thor, you’re getting by very well on your own – which is exactly why I chose you as my ally, you imbecile!’

‘If I forge Urdr right, I can make a bow from it that multiplies the arrow it sends flying!’ continued Loki, striding up and down the room quickly, grabbing his own hands behind his back, kneading his fingers. ‘Imagine – an arrow that flies, and turns into seven, and those seven arrows each turn into seven, and so on, until seven to the seventh power of seven arrows fly where a single one flew before? Doesn’t this sound slightly useful in a battle where the numbers will not be on our side and considering we have, among our assets, an archer whose every shot will hit its mark?’

‘… you stole that thing so to make a weapon for Barton’ Stark realised, now looking a bit flabbergasted.

‘Among other reasons, yes. Why wouldn’t I? I know Barton’s worth only too well, I have used him before after all!’ Loki snapped. ‘And did it occur to you that Uru was one of the most essential components of the original gauntlet too and that when it comes down to it, not only might the metal help us achieve our goal as you correctly guessed, we probably cannot even hope to build an equivalent machine and thus successfully fight the Mad Titan without it? You can win this war without me, I have made sure of that a long time ago – but without Uru? I sincerely doubt it.’

And now Stark was staring at him again. Wonderful.

‘A piece of postmodern performance art, what offensive ignorance’ murmured Loki. ‘Postmodernism is a lazy abomination of the Midgardian art scene, disconnected from any true conviction or motivation, an excuse not to commit to any world view or to at least research what one is doing. They would mix powerful runes with a washing machine manual and call it creative. I will not be compared to this lot.’

And Stark kept staring at him.

‘… apart from the fact that I’m seriously freaked out that you are, apparently, an art critic now’ said he. ‘…I would have thought that postmodernism would actually be something you’d endorse. Since, you know, it is pretty… chaotic and disobeying rules and because it can’t be reduced to one ideology and all?’

Loki scoffed.

‘Please’ said he. ‘I know I have only brushed the matter of divine domains today, but nevertheless I would have expected more of you than to compare mine to the mindless juxtaposition of cultural references. What people call chaos is, more often than not, a very complicated system or a very complex chain reaction where order can be seen, where cause and effect can be traced, but not by the mundanely stupid.’
‘You mean to say that people associate you with chaos because they don’t get your motives?’ said Stark, cocking his head.

‘Because people want simplicity’ Loki said. ‘And that I can only provide them through my lies. And there is too much they simply do not want to know. Each time I tell the truth, they look at me, mouth gaping, like scared deer.’

‘And then, when you are pushed by those complex chain reactions to certain, maybe rather drastic, actions, they never see it coming?’ Stark continued.

‘Behold, the mortal worm can think’ Loki sneered. ‘So if I ever combined runes and washing machine manuals, you can be sure that I would have a very good reason. I would probably just not explain it to you. In my experience, that effort is usually wasted.’

Except that he did try to explain himself to the inventor more than he had with any other person in a long time. Maybe exactly because he was understood by him surprisingly often.

A voice in his mind was whispering to him that he was saying too much of what was too close to his core. Another whispered that he was saying at the same time too little. Nothing he had said was false exactly, but it fell so painfully short of the far more complicated truth. But who was he to teach another what he could not fully understand himself?

Stark said nothing for a while, lost in thought, then shot him a sharp look.

‘You… this is just another distraction, isn’t it?’ said he. ‘You keep trying to distract me from the real issue of you having nearly died again, don’t you?’

Good grief, now even this move hadn’t worked? What would it take to satisfy this human or at least make him drop the topic?

Loki rolled his eyes once more.

‘Pray, what more is there to say on the matter’ said he. ‘I think I’ve explained my actions most reasonably, and you must agree that—’

‘I don’t have to agree with anything’ Stark said. ‘Least of all with you thinking that a dead lump of metal against you would have been a fair trade.’

‘But I told you what we need the Uru for, it’s not—’

‘I don’t fucking care!’ said Stark. ‘It would not have been fucking worth it. So don’t ever pull shit like that again, at least not without talking to me about it first. Or the two of us are gonna have a serious problem!’

Loki raised his eyebrows at the decided emptiness of the threat.

‘… you do realise’ said he then. ‘That this is a war unlike anything the universe has seen in eons. That all life is at stake, and—’

‘And – I – don’t – care!’ Stark said, eyes blazing. ‘ Haven’t you heard what I said? Don’t fucking do something like that again! Not without talking to me first!’

Norns. Why did he have to get so worked up about this? He was not a child or a blushing virgin who one needed to shelter and protect. He had gambled with high stakes many times before, this was nothing he didn’t know how to handle, and nobody else had felt the need to treat him with kid gloves
in a long time.

‘You’re being unreasonable’ said he, trying to stay calm. ‘I realise we agreed to discuss parts of our strategy, but this time, there was simply nothing to discuss. Not trying to steal the Uru was not an option, and I was the only one able to perform the heist. I could have found use neither for your input nor for your help. The only reason we made that alliance in the first place was to-’

‘Oh, fuck that fucking alliance’ Stark exclaimed, then kneaded the bridge of his nose. ‘You and I both know that we are far more than just allies by now.’

Loki froze.

For a moment, his mind drew a blank.

Then: I have looked at his soul. And I have not found it lacking.

But that…

No. It was never that.

‘And in your opinion, what more than allies should we be?’ asked he, his voice cool.

A little tense, he found. A little too low. Could one hear the real question beneath?

He hoped not.

Or, he hoped.

He was not sure anymore.

Stark opened his mouth, visibly thrown off track, closed it again, didn’t answer. His eyes were troubled, and then he glanced away.

Yes, you don’t have an answer for that either, do you?

Loki told himself to be relieved, not to be disappointed. It was better that way, in the end. To the mortal, it was certainly kinder.

He turned away, just as Stark spoke.

‘Well’ said he, his voice uncharacteristically unsure. ‘What would you say? What should we be?’

Again, Loki stilled.

Stark had not even tried particularly hard to keep the affection from his voice this time.

Anthony Stark, you terrible, terrible fool.

I could lay now the trap that will catch and hold and poison you. If I only said the right words now, it would become so terribly easy to betray you later. It would become child’s play.

Don’t… don’t tempt me so.

‘If I said, in an exceedingly romantic mood, that we should finally admit our deeper feelings and open our hearts and souls to each other, for this is what we both secretly crave’ asked he instead, dryly, almost sardonically, still turned away from the mortal. ‘What would you make of that?’
There was a pause.

‘That you are likely anything but a romantic’ said Stark then, sounding almost defeated. ‘And that this was likely a trick.’

‘There you have your answer then’ said Loki lightly.

Because in the end, it always came down to that.

He was turned away from Stark, so he couldn’t see him, but he felt his magic flinch. Yes, definitely better that way. There had to be a limit even to Loki’s crimes.

And before Stark could answer, Jarvis spoke.

‘Sir?’

‘Yes, Jarvis?’

‘I apologise for the interruption, but I think I should inform you that I detected energy spikes in New Mexico a few minutes ago, and Miss Foster has called just now. It appears that Mr Odinson has arrived on Earth.’

Chapter End Notes

Oh, Loki. Tony is so very inconvenient in that he won’t play his intended part in your suicide game, isn’t he?
Are You Feeling Nostalgic? Cause I’m Just Irate

Chapter Summary

Recipe for an escalation: Take any box, add one Loki (in a vulnerable state of mind), one Thor (wanting to do things right). You don’t even have to shake the box, just run for cover. Just… choose a good cover. As an afterthought, cannot every scene with Thor and Loki in it be described like that?

Chapter Notes

A few of you were worried about the impending meeting with Thor… I would lie and say it was completely without reason but you wouldn’t believe me anyway.

‘Glad your landing skills have improved’ said Tony. ‘The platform might not even have cracked this time.’

Thor didn’t answer at once, didn’t smile brightly and his voice didn’t boom across the terrace. He also didn’t look like his time-out on Asgard had exactly been much fun. In fact, Tony found he looked rather harassed and like he hadn’t gotten much rest lately, both in the figurative and the literal sense. Only when his eyes fell on his brother, some of his tension bled from his face and an expression of relief took hold of him instead. Had he not believed that Loki was alright? Tony knew that Jane had told him so.

They had waited for him with the whole party, but Tony was pretty aware of the fact that Steve and Bucky were standing in the background this time. Keeping their distance. Tony guessed that was mostly for Bucky’s sake whose expression was stiff and shuttered. Thinking of his father who had beaten him half dead for being gay?

Cheers. Gods damn it.

Thor’s eyes travelled over the group that probably looked distinctly less welcoming than he was used to, then turned to Tony, placed his hand on his own chest, and made a small bow.

‘Man of Iron’ said he. ‘I am aware we did not part on good terms. I am entirely to blame for that, as I violated your gracious hospitality by my vulgar and offensive behaviour and words. Additionally, however unwillingly, I insulted not only you and my brother, but also the Captain of America and the Son of Barnes. My obligation to you has only grown since I learned that you helped save my brother’s life again when I could not. In this light, I barely dare make the request—’

‘Come in, Prince Sparkles’ said Tony, slightly impatiently. His eyes had travelled to Loki’s while Thor had been speaking, and Loki had given him a barely perceptible nod. Tony didn’t feel all too reassured about it, but what could he do? When he had suggested earlier that day that not inviting Thor into the tower was also an option, Loki had let out a hard and cold laugh and had said a few well-chosen words about resources and necessities. ‘We should talk battle strategy anyway. Just shut your mouth about the sexual life of other people and we’re fine.’
'Oh, do not worry, Lady Jane has explained to me that I offended important Midgardian values when I assumed that you—'

'I said, shut your mouth about it' Tony said. Loki was in enough of a mood already. Absolutely nobody needed the great Gullibler to make a sincere attempt at an apology and turn on another homophobic shit fan instead. ‘Let’s just… we have a lot of other stuff to discuss, okay?’

Thor looked a little stricken by the rough tone, but after some hesitation nodded, then turned to Loki.

‘What about you, brother?’ asked he. ‘Will you tolerate my company?’

Loki narrowed his eyes at him, his arms crossed in front of his chest.

‘I am not your brother. This is not my home. I have absolutely no grounds to grant or refuse you entry here. So why, pray tell me, would my wishes matter?’ asked he, and boy, that sounded biting.

‘I… they should… and you are the Man of Iron’s ally in this war’ said Thor. ‘If anything, I… wish to respect your partnership.’

He emphasised the last words in a way that told Tony he had practised them a little. And that he was maybe not talking merely about the business part of their relationship.

Loki looked, if anything, only warier for it.

‘We are behind in our strategizing’ said he then. ‘Even more so than we were when you showed your useless face the last time. It is high time you told us what the Allfather has planned.’

*

‘Yes, yes, we all know that the Mad Titan will overrun Nidavellir’ said Loki, interrupting Thor with a hand gesture that looked, improbably, both lazy and impatient.

‘Overrun it?’ said Thor, furrowing his eyebrows. ‘You say that he will succeed?’

Loki rubbed his eyes with a sigh that already told of exasperation even though Thor had been in the tower for barely ten minutes and in the meeting room they were using for barely five.

Thor was sitting at the elliptic meeting table, as were Bruce, Tony and Natasha, but Steve and Bucky were standing leant against a wall, Bucky especially rather close to the door, and also Clint was lurking in a corner, watching Loki with what looked improbably and conspicuously like concern.

Loki as to him, was on his feet. He had been striding up and down the room, and now was hovering over Thor. His gestures were quick and abrupt. There was a gauntness to his face, his lips a thin line.

This… wasn’t exactly going well, Tony thought, tapping on the table he was sitting at.

Maybe it had been a bad idea to let Thor in after all.

‘Yes, yes, he will succeed, I’ve seen their defences, they’re not enough’ said Loki. ‘Nothing would be enough, he needs Nidavellir too much. What can you tell me about the Skrulls, Thor.’

Thor furrowed his eyebrows, opened his mouth as if to say something, then seemed to decide
‘The Skrulls?’ asked he instead.

‘Are they preparing for war?’ asked Loki, still rubbing his eyes. ‘Do they know he will come for them? Is Veranke still queen? Is her power assured or is there dissent? Are there signs that they increase their activities in the development of new technologies? Are there discussions about an alliance between them and the Kree, or is that still unattainable? Have they conquered Thalissi? What are the Allfather’s thoughts on the matter?’

Thor stared at him for a moment, and also the rest of the room was oddly quiet. Loki’s whole behaviour was rather on the worrying side – all of them knew the trickster well enough by now to notice.

‘Veranke is still queen’ said Thor after some hesitation. ‘She seems to enjoy more loyalty than ever, and yes, Thalissi is under Skrull rule now. Kronos of the Kree does speak of war preparations, and he does think they are building something, or researching something, he is not sure. An alliance between the Kree and them… our father thinks it is unlikely despite the common enemy. Kronos has mentioned the possibility, but he seems uncertain whether the Skrulls are truly planning to fight Thanos. They might instead be getting ready to conquer more Kree territory while we are busy battling for the survival of the universe.’

‘Or Kronos might slander the Skrulls, because ultimately, that is in the Kree’s best interest’ said Loki. ‘I expect that Odin has made sure that the Kree have removed the bounty on my head?’

‘Yes’ said Thor. ‘You do not have to fear them anymore. He spoke to Kronos, and explained the situation.’

‘Of course he did’ said Loki, but his tone was cold and contemptuous. ‘What about Ozymandia? Has Odin kept his word?’

Thor nodded.

‘He has found them a new planet, and was generous in the resources he sent to help make it liveable.’

At that, Loki laughed.

‘What amuses you so?’ asked Thor, his eyebrows slightly furrowed.

‘The idea that the Allfather could be called generous’ said Loki, taking up his striding again.

‘Especially now when he plainly cannot afford to be. But I see you are his loyal dog as ever, seeing and hearing and thinking only what he wants you to.’

Blondy’s frown deepened.

‘I don’t know what you seek to gain from your insults’ said he after a pause. ‘But maybe this is an argument you should take up with father, not with me. He would like to talk to you in person in any case. I am to tell you that should you come to Asgard, he will refrain from persecuting you for your crimes. You will enjoy his hospitality, and you will be allowed to leave unharmed at any moment you choose.’

‘Oh, yes, how very gracious of him’ Loki said and the grin he showed now was decidedly nasty. Tony could see Clint shift uncomfortably in the background. ‘Now that I have a use for him, no, he a need for me, he suddenly decided that locking me up in the dungeons without any real trial and
forgetting me there might not be in his best interest after all. That does sound like Odin, I have to admit.’

Thor stiffened.

‘You have not been home in a long time’ said he tensely. ‘You might not know our father’s motivations as well as you think.’

‘It is not my home, he is not my father’ Loki said lightly, walking up the room, walking down. ‘And I think I do.’

‘No, you don’t’ said Thor, and now he sounded angry. ‘A lot has happened since I helped you escape imprisonment. We thought we lost you, two times, and then discovered the truth about you and Thanos. You sang the Song. Frigga is… mother and father, they barely talk to each other these days, they… you have no idea what has been going on, and I won’t let you cling to your old assumptions—’

‘Oh, that is rich’ Loki interrupted him, stopping in his striding, his eyes gleaming coldly. It was Bruce’s turn to shift in his seat. ‘My old assumptions? When there is so much that you, my precious naïve Thor, still so easily assume? But of course, why should you believe me when I say that I know the Allfather? I have lived under his rule only a bit more than a thousand years after all. Surely, that is no time at all. So why would you believe that I have reasons enough to think little of him? And in a way, you are right that I have no reason. Because the same qualities you admire him for are those I despise, and the reasons I hate him for would be reasons for you to consider him just and kind, and me despicable and depraved.’

‘Loki, this is exactly what I mean!’ said Thor, put his hands on the table and stood up abruptly. Clint in response took a step closer to Loki – but his eyes were on Thor, alert and wary. That was… curious, Tony found, almost as if… Bucky, as to him, edged closer to the door. ‘You just assume, you don’t even give me a chance! You have grievances with our father? Then tell me about them! I have been living under his rule too, have I not? And maybe I did not suffer under it the way you did, but I promise you that it was not always easy. It still is not. Maybe I would understand you better than you think.’

‘Guys—’ Tony said, wondering whether someone else than him shouldn’t try to defuse this situation, but was interrupted by Loki’s laugh immediately.

‘Yes! Yes, of course!’ Loki exclaimed, threw his head back and laughed again. ‘You would understand! So it must have been some other prince of Asgard who accused me of letting myself be taken like a whore.’

Thor flinched at that. Bucky did too, in the background. Steve looked from Bucky to Loki to Thor and back, his jaw tense.

‘Loki, I have apologised for that, I—’

‘No, actually, you haven’t’ Loki said, his eyes narrowing to slits.

Tony noticed that he was getting nervous, and for one moment, he was not sure why. Then he heard it, the low hum. Loki’s seidr? Ah, yes, Loki’s seidr – so that was what it sounded like. And considering how good the trickster was at masking it, was it a good sign that it was getting perceptible?

‘And even if you did try your hand at a half-hearted apology, what would that change about your
beliefs? What would it change about the fact that like Odin, you are disgusted with my Ergi? So do not tell me that you would take my side in this matter when you have proven without doubt that you would not.’

Thor blanched.

‘… is that your quarrel with Odin, does he know-‘

Again, Loki laughed, and there was an edge to it that sent a shiver down Tony’s spine. There was seidr in this laugh, he was now sure, and the god’s optic had shifted too, just a little, there was this… this… he couldn’t say what, but his own seidr was whispering about danger.

Bucky left the room silently. Steve glanced around at the room, then left too.

‘Guys…’ Tony said again.

‘Odin knows many things’ Loki said, his grin far too wide. ‘You should ask him some time, and then you can sit together, drink mead while he recounts the obscene tales, and tells you of my shamelessness, of his attempts to shape me into a better man, only I was never a man at all, so how could he ever succeed? He will tell you how he took care of me, how he protected me from the consequences of my limitless fornication, how everything he did was for my own good, even when he tore into my heart and ripped it out, but surely, a Jotunn runt has no such thing, a Jotunn is a despicable half being, a-‘

‘Be silent!’ Thor shouted at that, and his voice was so commanding and absolute, he barely sounded like himself. He sounded like someone else instead, and Tony had a pretty good guess who.

Thor’s face was red, sparks were dancing around his fingers. His eyes though were shining, a strange contrast to his threatening stance.

And then, Bruce stood up from the table, calmly and slowly, but looking like he was suppressing something with some effort. And the green shine to his skin was pretty unambiguous about what that was. The third one to head for the door.

Loki, as to him, looked as if stricken on the spot. Frozen, staring at Thor, his mouth open, his face pale. His eyes wide. His arms hanging down next to his body.

Then he blinked, and the next moment, everything about his expression went blank.

Then a smile, terribly insincere, lifted his lips. His eyes, still blank, did not smile at all.

Clint looked alarmed at that, his eyes moving quickly between Loki and Thor, his hands maybe subconsciously moving to where he had probably hidden his weapons.

‘Oh, yes’ said Loki lightly and that rang about all the alarm bells available. ‘Of course, you always liked me better when I did not talk back. You should have come earlier then when I still had no tongue. Together, we could have felt nostalgic of better times, couldn’t we have, you talking, I listening without arguing? And if I get gutted again, I could die once more without all of the annoying moaning and screaming. But there is always the option of sewing my mouth shut again. You should discuss that with the Allfather next.’

And he let out the parody of a laugh.

‘He might feel tempted by the idea more than you know.’
Thor’s eyes widened, the colour drained from his face even as Loki turned around and strode out of the room.

Clint stepped at once between him and the door through which Loki had left, eyes still on Thor.

Thor didn’t even seem to notice him though, neither did he seem to notice the weirdly defensive stance Clint had moved into.

‘I… excuse me please’ said he after a long moment of silence, and turned around and left the room in the other direction.

And left even more silence behind.

Then, after a moment of tension, Clint finally breathed out, his posture relaxed a little.

‘Fuck’ said he.

Natasha balled one of her hands into a fist, only to unfold it abruptly, to stretch her fingers,

‘Kaboom’ said she.

Maybe it was not a very appropriate reaction to what had just happened, but Tony thought it was a rather fitting summary of it nonetheless.
Those Games That Families Play

Chapter Summary

… are usually the ones where you get hurt the worst.

Chapter Notes

All of the trigger warnings.
We learn more about Loki’s past, and not about the fun parts, so… well.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The logical thing would have been to go after Loki first. He was the one who was Tony’s ally, he was the one more likely to do something extremely stupid when upset, and he was also the one who, in Tony’s opinion, needed and deserved the comfort a lot more.

It was a gut feeling that made Tony head in the direction into which Thor had left instead. He did ask Jarvis about Loki’s current location, once he was outside the meeting room, and he was rather relieved to hear that the trickster had retreated to Tony’s (and now also Loki’s, he supposed) floor, to the common room there.

That was… probably… a sign that he might not run off (immediately). It might even have been a sign that he was waiting for Tony to come to him. All the more logical would it have been to go there at once.

Instead, Tony said, ‘Tell Loki that I have to make sure the tower doesn’t get struck by lightning tonight, then I’ll be right up’, and kept looking for Thor. Maybe it had been his pallor, his shining eyes, which were unusual even for the emotionally slightly more transparent Blondy, but Tony felt this was a chance for… something… and he wouldn’t let it slip.

Thor was out on the terrace in the end, leaning on the bannister and looking at the skyline of New York.

When Tony walked up next to him, he didn’t react immediately. The dark clouds in the sky and distant thunder spoke their own language.

‘So… I take it the sewing his lips shut thing actually happened after all?’ Tony asked.

Thor’s eyes flew to him, away again. There were heavy.

‘Yes’ said he simply.

Lightning, still far away, brightened up his face for a moment.
After a long pause, Thor said, ‘It is nothing to jest about.’

His frown deepened, his face tensed. His hands closed around the railing.

‘It angers me that Loki seems to think it is.’

‘Well, apparently it happened to him’ said Tony with a shrug. ‘So if anyone has the right to turn it into a joke…’

‘You don’t understand’ said Thor, and his hands tightened. The railing creaked faintly, and there was another distant thunder. ‘There was nothing funny about it, he-’

He broke off, abruptly, breathed in and out a few times, blinked back what suspiciously looked like tears.

‘If it consoles you’ Tony said, leaning sideways against the railing. ‘I doubt he mentioned it so to lighten the mood.’

‘He actually has never mentioned it before. Come to think of it. Curious, that’ said he then.

Not really curious, he thought. But the commentary was meant to goad Thor into talking more than anything else.

And for a moment, Thor kept squeezing the railing, then the tension left him, his shoulders slumped, leaving him looking weary.

‘What happened, Thor?’ asked Tony, cautious to keep his tone calm, neutral. ‘Really?’

The god cast down his eyes.

‘We never found out exactly’ said he after a while, his voice strangely subdued. ‘He just turned up one day with his lips sewed shut. We know that the dwarves provided the thread but that it hadn’t been they who… probably, it had been someone else with a grudge. Loki has always had a… talent… for antagonising people.’

He accompanied the words with a hand gesture that spoke both of resignation and exasperation.

‘Can’t imagine that’ Tony said. ‘So, what then? You cut the threads but never found the bully?’

‘… no. Or at least not so quickly. The threads were magical’ said Thor. ‘And not easy to remove… my father… he would have had the means.’

‘Would have had?’ repeated Tony, not liking the conditional in the least.

Again, Thor’s flickered to his, and this time, there was something… rather unsure… in them. He looked away again quickly, glancing down at his hands instead.

‘Loki was rather prone to trouble then’ said he. ‘That was the time people started calling him the God of Mischief, and it was not entirely without reason. Father… he demanded that Loki admit that he had done something to deserve this act of violence, before he would end the punishment.’

‘What?’

And just like that, Tony’s intention of staying the neutral listener went out the window, or rather off the terrace, so the speak. Because this was…
‘Seriously, Thor, what?’

Thor looked, for all his bulk, suddenly very small. He hunched his shoulders a little, and his eyes were wet once more. He swallowed.

‘You… you have to understand’ said he hoarsely.

‘What exactly do I have to understand?’ asked Tony. Odin had claimed to be Loki’s father, for fuck’s sake. There were some things that as a parent you simply did not do! ‘That you try to force someone into a confession in a situation where they cannot properly defend themselves because they cannot even speak? And you, you make that confession a condition for rendering the person able to speak again, so to defend themselves?’

‘I know’ Thor interrupted him. ‘I know!’

Well, at least he looked like a sad puppy now. Great. And there were raindrops falling on the terrace. Sparsely, yes, but Tony guessed that was soon to change.

‘I am aware of all these things’ said Thor. ‘I seldom doubted Odin’s judgement at that age, but I doubted his judgement then, and I never… I was never truly convinced that he has made the right judgement. Only a few days ago, I… I confronted father about it. I told him that it had been a mistake and that I demanded an explanation.’

‘Well, what did he say in his defence?’

Thor grimaced, looked away, back to Tony again.

‘He… his intent was not malicious, that much I believe is true. However cold his actions may have seemed to me then, however cold they may seem to you now, they were motivated by worry most of all’ said he. ‘… I do not know how to explain it to you since Midgardian culture is so very different from Asgard but… Loki’s tricks and pranks were getting dangerous. For him more so than for anyone else. I didn’t realise that then. I was too young to understand.’

‘Too young to understand that his father protected him by… not protecting him?’ Tony asked sceptically.

‘It was a desperate measure’ Thor said and sighed. ‘The problem was that however many tricks Loki played, however much trouble he caused, he practically never got sentenced for it. He was so good at deceit, so good at masking his magic and his machinations that it was next to impossible to prove his involvement in anything in a trial.’

‘And that… endangered him?’ Tony asked, raising his eyebrows disbelievingly. ‘Sounds to me like a pretty good survival tactic’

‘Not on Asgard, it is not’ Thor said heavily. ‘For the people of Asgard take something like the evasion of justice not lightly. They saw Loki evade it again and again, and that fostered hatred. People began whispering that they should ensure justice themselves if the courts could not.’

‘Odin was afraid that they would lynch him’ Tony realised, and something in his brain clicked into place. Of course.

Thor, however, looked confused at his statement.

‘Not hanging, no. Hanging him could not have killed or seriously harmed him’ said he. ‘But father feared worse. He knew that with each crime and each trespass that went by unpunished, the hatred
would grow. Already, Loki had unpleasant encounters, and many other difficulties, but father feared that someday, someone would go too far. Loki had to be punished, officially and by a jury, so to appease the people. His crimes had to be recognised as such, or there could be no forgiveness. It became, father told me, less and less a matter of education or justice, and more and more a matter of trying to save the naked life of his child. And yet Loki kept making trouble, and yet however hard he tried, father could never prove Loki’s guilt.’

And that Tony could believe very well.

‘So when Loki turned up with the lips sewn shut, he decided to force it’ Tony said.

‘Yes’ said Thor.

There was silence again.

‘I presume it didn’t work’ Tony said then because that would have been too simple.

‘… it seems you already know my brother well’ said Thor tensely. ‘Yes, Loki refused to admit his guilt, as always. This time, my father didn’t budge. But… but the… the thing was, n-neither did Loki.’

An icy wind brushed against them, and the raindrops started falling more heavily. Thor looked over the New York skyline again.

This didn’t sound good, Tony thought. This didn’t sound good at all.

‘How long?’ asked he in a low voice, and when Thor wouldn’t answer, ‘How long, Thor?’

The god let out a very small sound, not quite a sob. Was that rain on his face, or…

‘More than a year’ said he.

Tony stared at him, his mouth open.

‘A year?!’

‘My father and my brother, they can both be very stubborn’ said Thor, his voice trembling slightly. ‘They… I am not blind. I have noticed that in some respects, they… are not so unlike each other, even if they both deny it. Not in some aspects of their temperament at least. Maybe this is why my brother’s jealousy could catch me unawares so often, because for so long, I assumed there was no reason to be jealous at all. Because I know very well that of the two of us, he resembles father more. And I do not resent him for it, of course not. I admire him in the same way I admire my father. Loki and he, they are cunning in a way I will never be, they are eloquent and subtle and so very clever—’

He tightened his hands around the railing again, shook it tentatively, as if to test its strength.

‘In any case, conflicts between them tend to… escalate.’

‘No shit’ Tony said.

The wind blew strands of Thor’s blond hair into his face. Was that why he narrowed his eyes, why he was blinking so much? The raindrops splattered the tiles of the terrace dark.

‘So… with his mouth sewn shut for over a year, how did Loki… eat?’

‘He… h-he didn’t’ said Thor hoarsely, and at that moment, another thing clicked into place, and
fuck, fuck, fuck-

‘For a long time, I didn’t even worry about it’ said Thor. ‘Loki did not speak, of course, and also his other means of communication he used very sparsely, but… but he can lie without any words, you see? He made us believe…’

He stopped mid-sentence there, frowned then, pensive, shook his head.

‘No’ said he then. ‘That’s not right. He allowed us to believe that he could sustain his body with magic. I cannot shed my responsibility here – it was my decision to believe his glamour.’

He swallowed.

‘It was… a good glamour. He even hid the stitches, most of the time, he was just… it looked like he just kept his mouth shut out of his own free will, as if he could speak anytime he would wish to. He looked, if not happy, then at least healthy. Well fed. And so I assumed that this was what he was. Until he broke down after performing a small trick of magic. The first spell he had used in a long time.’

‘The magic turned on him because he didn’t have enough energy to sustain it’ said Tony quietly.

Thor nodded.

‘I… I f-found him in his room, still looking just as healthy, just as strong, but he was unconscious, just lying there… in a heap on the ground. He hadn’t even made it to the bed. And when I picked him up, he was far too light’ said he. ‘The healers had expected a breakdown for weeks, apparently, so they must have known he was declining. And my parents were not particularly surprised either, so maybe I was the only one fooled.’

The rain took up force and he wiped his eyes. It was an icy rain; Tony wrapped his arms around himself.

‘And… that was the end of the story?’ asked he, wishing for but not really believing in it. ‘They all finally came to their senses because Loki got fucking hospitalised over this?’

Thor hesitated, then shook his head, let out another one of those quiet sounds that might have been sobs, and the thunder was still distant but the rain was right there.

‘No’ said he. ‘No, the healers did what they could and he came back and… and everything went on as it had. With him not able to speak, not able to eat, not able to…’

Thor pressed his eyes shut, blinked when he opened them again. He looked around on the terrace, looked up in the sky, then at Tony. Then he cast down his eyes.

‘I… apologise for my demeanour’ said he.

He was… ashamed.

Of course he was. He was a male ass-guardian, and he was showing sadness. The ultimate catastrophe.

‘Don’t’ said Tony quickly. ‘Cry all you want, or… rain all you want, if that’s what it takes. The city won’t drown in a day and I won’t mock you for it or anything. That’s what assholes do.’

Thor laughed a bit at that, but it was an unhappy laugh.
‘Midgard is a peculiar place’ said he.

Because you are allowed to cry here? Great. Tony resisted the urge to rub the bridge of his nose. But seriously, Asgardian culture was the best recipe for a migraine.

‘After Loki’s breakdown’ Thor said then. ‘… things happened that…’

His face abruptly stiffened, and this time, the thunder was close. Loud.

He shook his head.

‘No matter’ said he. ‘It happened a long time ago. Loki got what he wanted in the end. Odin cut the threats without him ever having admitted to anything.’

He paused.

‘But not until it was almost too late’ said he, his voice very quiet as if afraid someone might overhear. ‘They brought him to the healers, and for a while… I still can’t believe Loki was stubborn enough to… I still can’t believe father had let it come to that.’

He looked utterly lost.

‘The whole thing was meant to protect Loki. I… I still don’t know why father could ever let it all get so far.’

Another close thunder, the rain was lashing at them now. Tony was already drenched to his skin and freezing, but of course that didn’t mean that he would budge from the spot. Not until he had learned everything about this there was to learn.

‘Mother was angry with father for years’ said Thor. ‘They thought they could hide that from me, but of course I noticed. Hers is a quiet anger but…’

He smiled ruefully.

‘I have grown up with her and my brother, so I recognised it very well’ said he. ‘Father had to make many concessions to appease her again. Many concessions to Loki.’

This time, it was Tony who looked away, thinking of how Loki spoke of Frigga still. How obvious and strong his affection to her still was. He couldn’t, with all honesty, say that he liked her much until now. In this whole horror show that had apparently been Loki’s childhood and youth, she had far too often not intervened. Even if she had been kinder to him, more loving, she had participated in the same goddamn abusive game.

And it had been, apparently, one hell of an abusive game.

Even if his very bad gut feeling about the whole sewn-shut lips story was not right. And that was a big if. Because his gut feeling told him that this was also a Murphy’s law kind of game.

Think of the worst scenario… and it was probably true.

And then, for some reason, he abruptly had to think of his own mother, and his chest ached.

Wasn’t her birthday coming up?

Peachy, just what Tony Stark needed.
A big dose of very ambiguous grief.

‘Did you ever consider’ said Tony. ‘That Loki never admitted having done anything to deserve this punishment… because it was true?’

Thor turned away and didn’t answer, his face pained.

So yes, he had considered it. They both knew it was the most probable scenario. It fit Loki’s temperament after all, to stick to the truth when it inconvenienced him the most, to cling to his pride so very tightly maybe exactly because he felt he didn’t have so much of that left.

‘It… changed him’ said Thor after a while. ‘After they removed the threads, he… he didn’t speak a single word for months and months, he just stayed as silent as he had been before, no matter how much we tried to engage him, how much we pleaded with him, how often Frigga tried to trick or to lure him into it. The healers declared him cured, but he… and even when he began speaking again… he had loved conversation before, had loved flying and arguing and joking and telling the most fascinating tales, singing the most beautiful songs. He has a wonderful voice, Son of Stark, you have no idea, everyone would gather around him when he sang, would listen… but he never really returned to that. He became almost taciturn. He barely ever sang anymore, and when he sang, it was always an act for an audience, never just for pleasure, and one could hear it when one listened, one could hear the difference. Or… I did. He didn’t really mean it anymore. Especially the singing Loki didn’t mean anymore. I think the Bard’s Song might have been the first song I’ve heard Loki sing since then and that was… real’

Thor breathed out brokenly.

‘And I never truly heard that one either. Or... I cannot comprehend it. For why else should I forget the melody each time…’

Tony thought of the tune that he himself heard in his dreams, that pure and fragile voice, at the same time so strong, so persuasive.

Each time he dreamt about it, it was there in all its beauty, all its urgency, and each time he thought that he would never forget, could not forget something so precious. And each time he woke, it fled him.

‘Maybe we are not meant to remember’ said he, wondering if that was the core of it. That they were not meant to know.

Desperate hope flashed across Thor’s eyes, was gone again as quickly, replaced by more guilt, more sadness.

He looked away.

‘No matter – the singing was not the only thing…during his muteness, Loki had not been very sociable’ said he, ‘and I may not have greeted that with joy, but I understood. People took far too much delight in his punishment, his humiliation, and it was… difficult for him to hold his own when his sharpest weapon had been taken. I… gullible as I was, I thought he would eventually return to his old self once he could wield that sword again. I thought that he would hunt with me and my friends again, laugh with us at feasts… but things happened that made that… complicated. And in any case, he… it turned out that he continued to prefer solitude.

‘Not everyone noticed, because they had already gotten used to him being withdrawn and quiet, but I did notice, and mother did. His pranks… they were less frequent afterwards, even less easy to blame
on him, but they became crueler. And... he had always had a big appetite, you see? Superior to mine even. Afterwards, he... sometimes, he ate more, sometimes he ate less, but it was never...

He breathed out.

'So this... it is not a jesting matter for me, Son of Stark' said he. 'The year of Loki’s sewn-shut mouth, I may not have lost him, but... in a way, I lost... Loki had been so many things that after that year, he was not anymore... so however much I try, I cannot find it funny. I think I never will.'

No, he probably wouldn’t. Tony doubted very much Loki found the matter very funny either. Then again, with the humour the guy had...

... it seemed like anything that served his self-loathing served him well.

And who knew how much of that had to do with this year of forced muteness too?

The wind had quieted down, and the rain had turned into a heavy and steady downpour. Grieving for all that Thor could not grieve for, the poor toxic masculinity plagued bastard.

Tony rubbed his forehead. This was all... a bit much, but then again, lately, everything about Loki was. One big mess. With one very worrying tendency.

For if he included this particular disaster, Tony could count now at the very least five separate events when...

'Thor, how... how many times has Loki already brushed death, exactly?' asked Tony.

Thor flinched visibly, didn’t answer at first.

'Each time was one too many' said he then, quietly. ‘... and lately, he seems...’

A pause.

'It doesn’t leave me alone’ said Thor then. ‘As a child he was often sick, and then there were accidents and battles, but it just doesn’t leave me alone how often, at these occasions... and I do not want to put blame on him, Son of Stark, that is not why... but I cannot help but keep recounting how often, at these occasions when he was close to... how often... he was somehow involved... in... making it that way.’

The fear in his voice was tangible, naked, and Tony had no trouble believing that for once, this was about something else than shifting blame.

'Not always directly involved of course’ said Thor quickly. ‘Most of the time, it was nothing so... tangible... as his letting go. As often with Loki, it was nothing one could... point out and... one might even overlook it, and I did. I did. Only in retrospect... he was too slow in a fight, or too incautious with a spell, or a situation would arise where he had to act in a way that.... but my brother often... he is not the type to necessarily take the... direct route... in anything. It would fit his temperament to... arrange... things in a way that...’

He trailed away, obviously not able to finish the sentence...

Yes, Tony thought. I completely agree with you there. It’s becoming a problem.

And he wondered when exactly Thor had become so perceptive in the first place.
‘You may have prevented the lightning’ Loki said. ‘It seems you will not prevent the flood.’

He was standing behind the sofa at the glass wall, his back turned to the room, looking outside where the downpour did indeed go on uninterrupted.

‘New York can use a good rinsing from time to time’ said Tony still leant against the pillar close to the entrance of the room. ‘It stinks slightly less for a few hours after days like these.’

‘Bilgesnipe dung will stink like Bilgesnipe dung no matter how much you perfume it’ Loki said, not unreasonably. ‘So, were you able to interrogate Thor to your satisfaction about all those lovely memories we share? Did you take your chance to get the true story before you would listen to the lie?’

‘Mhm’ said Tony. He had expected the trickster to be pissed off. Couldn’t really blame him for it either. ‘The opposite actually. And wouldn’t you prefer to do it that way too?’

‘Pray tell me, why?’ Loki answered, but he turned his head a fraction, as if to listen to him better. So he already knew the answer. He just wanted Tony to confirm it.

‘Lies are not exactly useless when you want information’ said Tony. ‘Far from. Often, they tell you a whole lot about the truth. And the lie sheds an interesting light on the truth too. Especially if you have had to live with the former, not with the latter.’

The movement in Loki’s face was almost imperceptible, but there. Tony had definitely given the right answer this time.

‘They did more than sew your mouth shut, didn’t they?’ said Tony then.

If it had been a bad gut feeling before, no, a very strong suspicion, the moment he had entered the room and seen Loki at the window, he had known.

He couldn’t pinpoint exactly what made him so sure. It were all the details of his body posture, from the tense line of his shoulders to the way he was standing at the window, his hands joined behind his back, looking down at the streets.

And Loki remained silent, which was answer enough.

Yup.

Odin had, whether or not he had realised, tried to force Loki to say that he had deserved to be raped and tortured. Had implicitly told his rapists, by continuing their torture, their humiliation, that they had acted rightly. Had kept hurting and humiliating his kid for over a year for the sake of this victim blaming. Had almost killed his kid for the sake of it.

And how could Loki, as to him, have ever given in? How could he ever have nodded to all that and said that he had had it coming?

Knowing Loki, that would have been more self-destructive than allowing the starvation to kill him.

Worst case scenario indeed.

‘The Other was not interested in these things, at first’ said Loki now, tearing Tony from his thoughts.
He had turned fully to the window again, offering Tony nothing but his back. His voice was suspiciously flat. ‘I think it simply did not occur to him, or not until he breached enough of my defences to find Baldur. After that, he of course used it to its full potential.’

Tony felt his breath stop, not quite believing what he was hearing. That Loki was actually talking about this. But Loki did not give him much time to think about it.

‘He was… creative about it, as creative as you can be about such things’ said he. ‘He alternated between making me see other persons in the Chitauri that violated me – Baldur, his friends… Thor… - and allowing me to become aware of the reality of my situation, being defiled by ugly, stinking, deformed beasts.’

Thor’s name was the only word at which Loki had slightly chocked, and he returned to his neutral tone quickly.

‘He used my memories, and so the illusions were credible, in almost every way that mattered’ continued he. ‘After a while, it became increasingly difficult to distinguish the re-enactments of these memories from the new humiliations he made the Chitauri in the guise of Baldur and all those others force upon me. It became difficult for me to remember that Baldur had never found out about my true form. And there were times when I truly believed that Thor had violated me in the past. It was a lie of course, but the way the Other used him…’

Loki paused.

Tony wondered whether he should say something, but he had not a single idea what. The Other had used Thor. The horror of it made something in him curl into itself, cold and cramped, and at the same time, he thought, but I should have expected it.

Why had he thought that there were limits they wouldn’t cross?

‘Thor was always the most gentle’ continued Loki then, his voice almost soft. ‘He would prepare me, and he would take his time. Sometimes, it didn’t hurt, was pleasant even, on a bodily level. And then he would bent down to me and whisper in my ear that secretly, he had always itched to ram his cock inside me because deep down he had always known that I was a trap, a Jotunn whore. Ergi. Nothing. That this was the only thing I was good for anyway. My only true purpose, my only truth beneath all the lies. I am the shell, the puppet, the hole to be filled with something… someone… else.’

Loki softly laughed, then stopped that sound abruptly.

A pause.

‘Sometimes, I forgot that he was not real. Sometimes I pleaded with him then, to… not do this. Sometimes I genuinely thought that he might listen.’

Silence filled the space between them. Tony hugged himself, not knowing what else to do with all this… shit. All this… he couldn’t even… fucking Thor, man. He knew he should have expected it, but it just was not fair.

‘Oddly enough, the Other never used Svadilfari against me’ said Loki. ‘Maybe it only shows how well he understood the workings of my mind. Of what could still wound me.’

Oh, fuck man.

Tony swallowed. He felt slightly nauseous. How could he… what should he even…
'There is something you should know about me’ said Loki then, and his voice had lost its false neutrality. It was suddenly dark and brimming with what felt like a very dangerous kind of power. He turned around, slowly and so much like a predator, his body looking sharper all of a sudden, bigger, more prominent. Tony remembered acutely that Loki was a prince, no, a god, no, probably the most powerful mage in the universe and suddenly, he had no trouble believing that at all. He noticed that he made a step back, instinctively.

That’s his seidr, Tony thought. My magic is sensing his because it is showing itself, trying to intimidate, trying to threaten.

It was kind of working, he had to admit.

The eyes that locked on him were blazing, but at the same time, there was something very calculating about them and Tony was suddenly just as certain that this was definitely not the kind of Loki he wanted to cross.

‘I kill my rapists’ said Loki with a deadly kind of calm. ‘I assure their deaths, for there cannot be enough space for them and me in this world. I killed Svadilfari. I killed Baldur. I killed Ullr, Hermod and Höd. I will kill Thanos, I will kill the Other.’

He cocked his head.

‘And since I do not know which of the Chitauri forced me’ said he and smiled, just a little. ‘I will just have to wipe every single one of them out of existence, I suppose.’

He opened his arms, his smile widened but didn’t get friendlier.

‘You were my executioner for so many of them’ said he. ‘I had planned that of course, or for something like that, but it worked far better than I would have thought. You have my thanks for that.’

No, not the Loki he wanted to cross. Ever. This Loki made good on his threats.

‘… you’re welcome’ Tony said.

Loki bowed, just a little.

‘So I believe now you will be wiser than to fall again for such a foolish sentiment as pity?’ asked he.

Why did he always come back to that? Hadn’t Tony had already made himself abundantly clear?

‘I told you, fuck pity’ he said, and didn’t bother to hide his disgust. ‘Nobody needs that shit.’

Loki briefly grinned at that, and it looked just a touch more sincere, and Tony almost physically felt his power slip back under the mask, the god’s body blending more with the background again, not standing out so much anymore.

Sheesh, but he was packing under there.

‘So’ Tony said, shifting his weight from one foot to the other. ‘Still want my help killing the rest? Cause I must say, I’m getting kind of eager.’

Chapter End Notes
Loki… have you actually just dared formulate a part of what happened to you? Actually named it?
Chapter Summary

War room arguments usually are about movie quotes, aren’t they? And then you order take out and then you watch other movies from the eighties? Isn’t this what warfare is all about? Also, we learn about one of Loki’s old flames, and about a very special type of fae.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

‘Mhm, I suppose they could be called adequate’ Loki said, after Thor had listed the measures taken to strengthen Asgard’s defences against Thanos’ attack.

They were back in the meeting room even though Tony had argued that they should only continue their strategizing the next day, give everyone a chance to calm the fuck down.

No chance in hell with Loki keyed up like that though. In his opinion that he had expressed in no uncertain terms, they had wasted enough time already.

Tony wondered whether he didn’t just want to get rid of his brother as soon as possible. Or was trying to distract himself from everything he had admitted out loud.

Observing the trickster, Tony asked himself whether he shouldn’t consider additional security measures for himself. Knowing Loki, he might still decide that getting rid of Tony altogether was the best way out of his current, far too vulnerable, position.

But then again, if Loki wanted his death, Tony didn’t think he would be able to prevent it anyway.

And one thing Tony had to admit – in this new attempt at exchanging vital military information, Loki and Thor were both plainly making an effort. Thor, by valiantly trying to ignore Loki’s insults and baiting, and answering his sharp cascade of questions as best as he could. Even the rain outside had let up a little.

Loki, by valiantly keeping himself from ripping Thor’s head off.

He still hadn’t sat down, though most of the rest of the Avengers had taken seats around the table, only Bucky preferring his place by the door. But he was not striding up and down the room anymore either, now rather leaning against the wall. At the moment, he was supporting his chin on his thumb, his gaze unfocused as if he was mentally running through a calculation.

‘The space gem might be safe there for now’ said he then.

‘Well, there is no safer place than our father’s vault, is there?’ Thor asked.

Loki weighed his head.

‘However that may be’ said he. ‘Odin seems to take the threat seriously enough, and that is good. Tell him from me he should nonetheless consider collecting Death’s debt soon.’
Thor frowned, ‘what?’

‘Oh, you know what I mean’ said Loki, rolling his eyes. ‘Valhalla. The dead warriors Death promised him in their deal about Hela.’

…okay?

Tony was not the only one at the table whose attention very abruptly sharpened at these words. And the atmosphere had been pretty tense to begin with.

‘Dead… warriors?’ Steve asked, looking rather concerned.

‘That doesn’t sound like a very good idea’ Clint commented.

‘No, it sounds like an undead army’ agreed Tony, raising an eyebrow. ‘Are we at the beginning of a cheap zombie movie? Because this really feels like the beginning of a cheap zombie movie. Tombs of the Blind Dead maybe? Army of Darkness? Can I say, this is my boomstick? I call dibs on this is my boomstick!’

‘You cannot just call dibs on this is my boomstick’ said Clint and narrowed his eyes.

Yeah, of course he would the one fighting him on this.

‘I think I just did’ said Tony and shot Clint one of his very annoying grins, at which Clint narrowed his eyes even more.

‘Nat, tell Tony he can’t just call dibs on this is my boomstick’ he complained. ‘There should at least be a competition.’

Natasha rolled her eyes, ‘Oh no, forget it, I will not take a side in this.’

‘We are at war, Clint’ said Steve. ‘We can’t waste time-‘

‘Oh, I think a competition is a great idea to settle the matter’ said Loki, his eyes already glinting suspiciously. ‘Since I am a neutral party, I claim the right to set the terms.’

‘Neutral my ass’ Clint growled.

‘I can referee’ Bruce pointed out, the corners of his mouth twitching. ‘And reserve the right to veto any terms that I consider unfair.’

Bruce had spent an hour meditating after the last interrupted meeting, teetering on the edge of the Hulk, so Tony took his amusement now as a very reassuring sign.

‘Okay, in that case, I’m in’ Clint answered, raising his hands.

‘I think you are all forgetting’ said Bucky blandly, and everyone turned to him, so seldom was it that Bucky said much of anything when so many people were present, ‘that the one in this room possessing the closest thing to what could legitimately be called a boomstick is Thor.’

For a moment, it was silent.

‘Thor has a boomhammer’ said Tony then. ‘That’s not the same thing at all.’

‘Come to think of it’ said Loki, raising an index to his lips, and he looked better-humoured by the second. ‘Not Thor’s hammer but my sceptre is what comes closest to a stick that makes boom. So if
'anyone should have a claim to this quote—'

‘Oh, no, no, you don’t!’ Tony interrupted him, pointing an accusing finger at him. ‘You had your chance at it and lost it together with your sceptre, Rudolph! Now it’s the mortal worms’ turn!’

Thor, as to him, looked confusedly from one to the other, watching the exchange.

‘I do not entirely understand the reason for your quarrel, I’m afraid’ said he. ‘But I would nevertheless ask you to refrain from calling the noble warriors of Valhalla an army of darkness.’

‘Alright, but does that mean we can’t call them white walkers either?’ asked Tony. ‘White walker sounds a lot brighter and less gloomy, so maybe that makes it okay? Or, the walking dead? Crawlers? Zombie, I have decided, doesn’t fit after all, because mixing Norse and Voodoo mythology? Doesn’t sound like the greatest plan.’

Loki rewarded him with a snort, dimples in his cheeks, and that was so fucking relieving to see, after all that shit to finally see some genuine-

‘Please’ said Loki then. ‘Odin might be many things, but he is not a second rate mage trying his hand at necromancy. A long time ago, he made a deal with Death herself. Death needed someone to take care of the souls that accumulated in her realm and were disoriented, discontent. Odin offered her Hela, to rule over what was from then on called Helheim, giving the dead souls guidance and direction.’

… right.

So that was what had happened. Odin had sold Loki’s daughter to the physical manifestation of death. Peachy. With Loki’s consent? With Hela’s?

Tony didn’t think so.

He began to wonder by now how the word consent even translated into all-speak. The more Tony learned about Asgard, the more he doubted the concept of consent culture, as Tony understood it, existed there at all.

‘In return, he demanded that a certain share of those souls, all of them brave, worthy warriors who had fallen in battle or would still fall in battle one day, would be sworn to him. They would wait in a great hall in Helheim, Valhalla, their numbers accumulating until one day, the need for them should arise. And then Odin would have the power to call them back to life and they would fight at his side for one last time only to fall as soon as the last sounds of battle die away.’

He smiled, visibly sucking in the attention he had gained with his slightly uncanny tale.

‘So no zombies, I’m afraid’ said he. ‘The undead of these movies tend to be rather difficult to command. And they tend to last a little longer than absolutely necessary. As I said, that sounds more like the work of an unskilled necromancer, not like a mistake Odin would make.’

‘…creeeeeepy…’ said Tony, drawing out the word, after the room had been silent for too long. When Steve shot him a disapproving look, he shrugged. ‘Hey, we were all thinking it, I was just the one saying it out loud.’

‘What… what are the souls doing while waiting down there in Valhalla?’ asked Steve now, a deep frown on his face.

Loki shrugged, ‘Feasting. Drinking and eating, or at least indulging in the illusion of it. Of course, a
departed soul cannot consume food or drink, but a lie can be just as intoxicating as the real thing, as long as it is constructed well-enough. Hela is charged to amuse them. She is charged to distract them, in truth, from the fact that until they are called back and fall again, they can find no true rest. Which, for a soul, is in general not a very agreeable state to be.’

His smile was less happy now, and Thor looked away from, his eyes suddenly heavy again.

And Loki knew personally, didn’t he, what it meant to have left one’s body and yet being unable to actually die? He had been left in that limbo for two hundred years.

‘Do… do the souls have any say in this?’ asked Steve, his frown deepening. ‘Whether they want to enter Valhalla or not?’

‘Oh, but it is a great honour!’ said Loki with a dazzling and very false grin. ‘Wouldn’t you say so, Thor? Why would anyone resent being judged worthy enough to become part of Odin’s secret mercenary army and spent centuries upon centuries covering with laughs and the shadows of mead and venison the steadily growing itch, an unrest one cannot describe and that yet without pause scratches at the core of your self until you feel you might go mad with it? And at the same time a creeping weariness invading your every thought, a feeling of being stretched thin like butter on too much bread? I can think of no reason at all!’

Thor didn’t answer, but his mouth was a hard line, and he regarded Loki with a frown on his face.

‘Worry not, Rogers’ said Loki then, cocking his head. ‘Valhalla is a very exclusive club, and technically closed to mortals.’

He regarded Steve, almost warmly, and added, ‘But I wonder whether they wouldn’t let you in nevertheless, oh my Captain, virtuous and worthy and pleasing to the eye as you are.’

Steve blushed.

‘Loki’ said Thor, darkly. ‘Enough. This is no way of speaking about-’

‘Will you tell him then?’ Loki interrupted him, abruptly, and all the tension was back in his face as if it had never left. ‘I know Odin loves his insurance policies, but I do hope he realises that protecting the Nine against Jormungandr, Fenrir and Hela will be of no avail if those realms are devoid of all life, and he and the dreaded monsters too.’

He chuckled a little, but disdainfully.

Stark felt his eyebrows rise despite himself – Jormungandr, Fenrir and Hela. The mythological siblings said to be Loki’s kids. Now that was a subject he wanted to hear more about.

Luckily, Loki was too distracted to take note of Tony’s sparked interest.

‘What… protect them against Hela?’ asked Clint, startled. ‘I thought she—’

‘Yes, it is ironic, isn’t it?’ said Loki lightly. ‘That he demands her to watch over the warriors that she knows perfectly well are only there to bring her down one day. So very Odin, really.’

Tony could see several people in the room shift. Except maybe for Thor, they had all made Hela’s acquaintance by now. They all knew that she and Loki had a rather tight bond.

And they had seen that she was… not exactly a monster. Not by a far cry.
'Loki’ said Thor, looking troubled. ‘I do not know why you try to cast doubt on our father’s judgement in this case. You know very well that Hela, Fenrir and Jormungandr are the offspring of Angrboda, the curse of the realms, and you yourself should know what that means, you-’

‘Will you tell him?’ Loki interrupted him again, his voice harsh.

Thor looked at him, as if trying hard to figure something out, then nodded.

‘I do not know what he will answer’ said he. ‘But I can promise I will bring the matter before him.’

‘Good’ said Loki. ‘Now, tell me about Gerdr and Frey. I believe they are still using the situation to their advantage? Has Vanaheim regained some of her former autonomy yet?’

Tony ordered take out at some point. Being part of a sort-of superhero group of which at least three people had a rather unusual metabolism and of which everyone’s except maybe Steve’s hungry grumpiness always carried a somewhat dangerous undertone, he had learned that food breaks always needed to take priority.

Tonight, the take out was Vietnamese, and he quickly made a mental note to order that more often, since Loki sniffed at the vegetable pho once, his nostrils flared, and he licked over his bottom lip. He even pulled a bowl towards himself. He then only spooned about half of the soup, leaving most of the vegetables and all of the tofu behind, but that was still more food than Tony had seen him consume in quite a while.

He was not the only one to notice either. Clint definitely watched Loki eating, then exchanged a glance with Nat.

The others had been uncharacteristically quiet the entire day, Tony thought. They had all been carefully watching Thor’s and Loki’s interaction, not interrupting as often as they normally would. Tony supposed that like him, they had wanted to use the occasion to gather information about the brothers, and about space politics.

As it seemed, however much the… leader?... of the Kree, Kronos, condemned the Skrulls for pursuing their own interests instead of dedicating themselves fully to Thanos’ defeat, the rest of the empires didn’t exactly lack behind in that area.

The Kree definitely used the occasion to try and push the Skrulls into an isolated position, Nidavellir had raised their prices considerably, Jotunheim claimed that she could only help if the Casket of Winters was returned, and the Alfheim emissaries seemed to change sides as often as refilling their goblets at the meetings they were called to.

In this game of thrones, Gerdr and Frey seemed to currently have the upper hand. Not that Tony was particularly surprised.

‘Son of Stark’ said Thor next to him then. He was still shovelling down pad thai, but also eyeing Steve and Bucky, who had, coincidentally or not, chosen to sit in two armchairs rather far away from Thor.

‘Yes?’ Tony said.
‘I would ask for your help, if you would grant it to me’ said Thor, turning to Tony now. ‘I know that you have your own grievances with me, but it was you who told me to… and I do not know the manners of Midgard very well. When do you think would be the best moment to give the Captain of America and his companion my apology in verse form? I would like to plan it, for I would have to find flowers first. I suppose they would only accept them fresh – Lady Jane was very adamant about that.’

Tony blinked at him, at first having no idea what Thoreal was even talking about.

Then he remembered his own angry words after the homophobic verbal diarrhoea – that Thor should apologise to the Stuckies with flowers and in poetry.

He… had taken that seriously, hadn’t he?

… of course he had.

‘Er’ said Tony, glancing at the Stuckies who were talking to each other with low voices. Steve seemed to try to convince Bucky to stay a bit longer. Bucky looked reluctant. He thought of the tension Loki was carrying around, and the tension that had never quite left the rest of the team either. ‘Good question. Maybe not now. I will… let you know, alright?’

Thor nodded, and sighed.

‘I will wait for your word’ said he. ‘Though I would like to settle the matter soon, of course, for I notice that I am not as welcome here as I was. I must have offended all of my Midgardian shield-brothers with my behaviour, not only you and Loki.’

Tony eyed him, wondering how much Thor had really understood about why they were all still a little angry with him. Then he thought about what Loki had told him once of Thor’s ways of saying he was sorry. He had mentioned it only in passing, but…

‘Thor’ said he. ‘Have you… shown anyone this apology you’ve prepared? Has someone… read it through? Like, for example, Jane, or Nat?’

Thor shook his head.

‘Maybe… they should’ Tony said. ‘Before you make your big speech. Just let Nat beta-read it, you know? Let her straighten out the bumps and kinks and everything.’

‘I don’t understand’ said Thor, furrowing his eyebrows. ‘What bumps are you talking about?’

‘Thor, I’m saying… sometimes, a bad apology is worse than no apology’ said Tony. ‘You know what I mean?’

Thor shook his head.

‘An apology is an apology’ said he. ‘How can it be bad?’

Tony did not keep himself from rubbing the bridge of his nose this time. How exactly had this guy survived living next to Loki for centuries? How had Loki not stabbed him in frustration every other day?

But then again, who said Loki hadn’t?

‘For example, if I punched you deliberately in the face’ said Tony. ‘And you complained that it hurt,
and I said that I was sorry you felt that way – that would be a bad apology, okay?’

Thor furrowed his eyebrows.

‘Are you of the opinion that punching me in the face could hurt me?’ asked he, looking, if anything, more confused.

‘No, I – argh’ Tony said, covering his eyes with his hands. ‘It was an example. It was just an example, Thor.’

‘Well, it was not a very good example then’ Thor pointed out. ‘For if I were truly so weak that the punch of a mere mortal could injure me, it would indeed be grounds for you to feel pity with me.’

Yes, great, spill your Asgardian cultural baggage everywhere, we didn’t have enough of that lately! Especially the bullshit about how being weak is shameful! That especially is just… helpful all around!

‘Just… just let Natasha look over your speech, okay?’ Tony said into his hands. ‘Get some input. Listen to her. Will you promise me that?’

Thor looked at him, then nodded.

He was silent for a bit, and Tony returned to his summer rolls.

‘Loki’ said Thor then. ‘He sometimes got angry when I apologised. It was, for me, always one of his most incomprehensible reactions. It frightened me because I never expected it. And then, increasingly often, he didn’t get angry. Instead, he accepted it and smiled and… did not mean it. I knew it was not alright. But I didn’t know what to do, so… I did not press the matter.’

He twisted his fork to catch more noodles.

First, he sprouts bullshit, Tony thought. And then he says stuff like that.

Tony still wondered what exactly to do with this new, introspective Thor.

It was weird. Slightly scary even.

‘I have to learn’ said Thor, the frown on his face deepening.

By the end of the day, Loki felt stretched thin and at the same time like a flag, being torn forth and back by his emotions, thrashing.

He hated it. He hated, hated, hated it.

He hated that Thor was there, however necessary it was, he hated having laid bare so much of his heart before all of these enemies, hated that Stark knew about Baldur now, knew about the Other and his despicable but oh so clever methods, hated that he did not truly hate having spread out all that filth for Stark to see, hated that he had even felt a little relieved afterwards, hated every bit of information he had received from and about the Allfather.

Hated the invitation he had received, the reassurance that he would not be pursued.
As always protecting me from the consequences of my actions, aren’t you?

He knew of course that at some point, he would have to return to Asgard. It was unavoidable. And then the knowledge that he would be allowed to leave again unharmed would solve, of course, a lot of difficulties that might arise…

I have no need, Allfather, for your mercy.

I despise and reject it, do you hear?

‘So… what you wanna do with the rest of the night?’

Loki whirled around.

He knew he had been running up and down the room again, betraying his agitation, but he didn’t know what else to do with this tension except engaging in a good fight. And he had already proven that he was too little in control of himself for that at the moment.

A thousand years old, and still an impulsive amateur.

No, simply a beast pretending to be a person.

But that cannot be – think of your children. Half-Jotunn. All of them.

Loki felt like grabbing his hair and tearing at it.

‘What would you suggest?’ asked he tensely.

Stark sat on the couch, but otherwise, the room was empty and quiet. This boon that Loki had been granted, a place that he could retreat to, that was not his quarters where he was doomed to stay with but himself as a companion – and how he loathed this companionship on days like these – but someplace where Stark could find him….

A common room indeed, but not a place where the other Avengers would intrude.

…. it might seem like a small boon to Stark, but to him…

Undeserved.

Stark shrugged, looking unimpressed with his mood.

‘Not feeling up for another training session, to be honest’ said he and yawned. ‘Too tired for any real work, but too hyper for sleep at the same time.’

He laid his head back on the backrest.

‘What about a movie, Reindeer Games?’

‘A movie?’ asked Loki, incredulous. The idea alone of indulging in something as banal as that with Stark after this day, after everything he had done, after everything he had said… but Stark was just sitting there, still not looking at him any differently, there was still no disdain in his eyes, and he had not treated him any differently in front of the others either, even after learning about the Other, after learning that Loki had been fooled by the Other’s illusions, after learning that Loki had pleaded, shamefully pleaded, and how was that possible, how could he… just suggest they watch a norns-forsaken movie after all this?
That was just so… Stark.

It was just like Stark to react like this.

Loki closed his eyes, breathing out in what felt somewhere in-between relief and frustration.

Inexplicable, insufferable mortal.

*I have looked at his soul, and I did not find it lacking.*

Maybe not, no. At the moment, at the very least, Stark’s soul seemed to lack nothing to become his perfect trap.

‘You do know movies’ said Stark now. ‘I know because you’ve already admitted as much.’

‘Of course I know movies’ Loki scoffed, opening his eyes again.

During his time alone on Midgard, after Thanos, he had spent hours over hours perusing what the planet could offer in ways of entertainment, updating himself on its current so-called ‘low’ and ‘high’ culture. The alternative would have been to hear himself thinking, and he had found then, not without reason, that he had better prevent that whenever he could.

Also, there had been Jormungandr to think of. He always asked for new stories, whenever Loki came.

Oh, he was lying to himself, and badly. He had enjoyed it, that was the truth, as he had always had. Midgardian literature, movies and art held a special kind of lure for him. All these curious tales that so easily forgot to follow the rules of Asgardian epics. That sometimes seemed so improbably, unreasonably kind, like the tale about that boy, Steven Universe, and those women of whom none was his mother. And yet they were parents to him in a way that…

A children’s tale.

Which only showed once more very clearly that understanding Midgard with Asgard’s rules in mind made no sense at all. The tales he had read as a child had been very different.

‘I was thinking maybe Buster Keaton’ said Stark. ‘Jarvis seems to think you’d get the humour. Do you know him at all?’

Slowly, Loki nodded.

Of *course* he knew Buster Keaton. How could he not? Joseph had created his tales almost at the dawn of this technological innovation, and it was shortly before the beginning of his career that Loki had discovered it, the flickering light thrown at a wall that turned into pictures that moved.

He had sat in the cinema, wide-eyed and stunned, wondering how he could have missed the invention of something so clever, and so pleasing. How the Midgardians had, without the help of any magic, created something similar to the illusions Loki had once been praised for by the whole court.

At first he had even suspected that a mage was behind it after all. He had stolen the equipment, cameras and film reels and a projector, and had taken it all apart, looking for the trace of seidr he knew had to be there.

Yet there was nothing.

Just machinery. Which made the moving pictures only all the more wonderful of course.
And then there had come Buster Keaton, and with him the golden era of this precious, precious genre called slapstick, and Loki had gone to the cinemas, and had laughed and laughed and laughed, and had marvelled at the way this person could comprehend him so completely, the way a mere mortal could comprehend his domain…

He had whispered as much to Jormangand when he had visited him, deep down in the sea. Swimming next to him, holding onto him, he had told him of these stories like gems of chaos, of the flickering light, those curious machines.

These are the people you protect, he had whispered. The most wondrous, strange people. They have no seidr, and yet it seems to me so many of them are mages at heart.

Sometimes, Loki felt like this whole realm worshipped him above all other gods, without knowing they did. Maybe this was the reason he always felt stronger after his visits to Midgard, more alive.

‘I admire him, yes’ Loki said, trying to hide his sudden feeling of joy, the warmth wrapping around him like a blanket at the memory, chasing away this day’s cold. ‘But I have seen all his movies, I’m afraid.’

He had seen them with the creator at his side. Had chuckled reading through screenplays, had scribbled his commentary in the margins of the pages, had offered ideas. Not that Joseph Keaton had lacked those.

He had been a good lover too. Attentive and creative. Always good for a laugh, even during sex, or especially during sex. Only when a camera was close had he turned serious. And had died so soon, like all mortals did. But Loki had known better then than to let himself get attached. He had enjoyed the company and then had moved on.

What else could one do? He glanced at Stark, who was regarding him pensively.

‘Let’s still stick with slapstick then’ the inventor said. ‘Alright. Jarvis, make a suggestion. You seem to have good guesses as to what rocks this deity’s boat.’

In the end, Loki chose a movie he already knew after all. But he had very personal reasons for holding this one particularly dear, and he found that his amusement was not diminished by knowing what would happen next.

They were sitting on the couch while the creatures on the screen were wreaking havoc. Stark and he were not touching, but close, close enough for him to feel the other’s body warmth. Stark’s arm was stretched out on the backrest behind him, and Loki would only have to lean back to lean against his hand.

As the movie went on, he felt the tension bit by bit drain out of him, and he relaxed more with every chuckle, every laugh.

When the credits rolled, he felt content, satisfied, despite the boring ending. But then of course he knew that the ending was a lie.

‘I should have known that you’d like the Gremlins’ said Stark, looking at him so warmly that Loki’s chest ached.

It was all false of course, all this an illusion that would burst if Loki only prodded it too hard, but he found that for now, he preferred the lie.
He did lean back against Stark’s hand now, and it almost felt like the mortal cupped the back of his head.

He half-closed his eyes. He vastly preferred it in fact.

‘It’s your kind of story. Did you write the screenplay, secretly? Did you invent those nasty little bastards in the first place? I won’t tell if you did.’

Loki grinned, nestled more closely against the other’s hand.

‘What makes you think they are not real?’

Stark blinked.

‘You’re shitting me’ said he.

Loki raised his eyebrows.

And at that, Stark’s eyes widened just a bit, and wasn’t that a satisfying sight.

‘No!’ said Stark, and held up the index of his free hand. ‘No, no, no, no, no. Gremlins are fiction, just the product of a crazy-ass mind, just a metaphor for children. Definitely a metaphor for children. You’re pulling my leg.’

Oh, this was going to be fun, he could already tell.

Loki’s grin widened.

‘Gremlin is not their true name of course’ said he. ‘Nobody knows that, and no one ever must. They are fairies. Though I must admit that they work as a metaphor for children just as well.’

Maybe one of the reasons he had always had a fondness for those.

‘Fairies’ Stark repeated slowly. ‘Like those on Vanaheim?’

Loki laughed, folded his hands above his chest.

‘Oh, there live fairies on most planets in this universe’ said he. ‘And not all of them are nice godmothers. Those portrayed in the movie – and portrayed very well, I must say, the writer must have had an encounter with them – they certainly aren’t. They almost brought down Nidavellir once. And no, they are of course not sensitive to sunlight – the producers of the movie obviously needed the humans to survive at the end. But you will not get rid of this type of fairies that easily, I’m afraid.’

Stark stared at him, and then paled a bit.

Clever man – yes, you should be afraid.

‘Okay, that’s… if they are real, how come our world is still standing?’ asked he, very sensibly.

‘Because this world is not their home’ said Loki. ‘If the writer of this movie’s screenplay has met them, it is because someone brought them here and set them loose.’

Had this been his responsibility? But he didn’t remember ever having brought them to Midgard of all places. Another world wanderer then? But then again, they didn’t necessarily need those…
‘Or they found their way here on the secret paths’ mused he. ‘That is also a possibility, since there are some between China and their home planet Saigaai. Paths that are, as far as I know, frequented by now by all kinds of interesting magical creatures. I do believe that I was not at fault this time.’

Though they had probably picked up the world wandering from him, so technically…

‘This time?’ asked Stark warily.

Loki smiled.

‘I told you that we do not know their true name’ said he. ‘That is because naming a fairy means controlling it, and of course they strive to prevent that from happening. But fairies do have nicknames, and those turn up in your myths and legends sometimes. Titania. Oberon. Puck. Leprechaun. Gremlin is simply a denomination for the more violent stage of their development. They were more widely known as the mogwai once, also on other realms, not only on Midgard. But for a few centuries now, they are increasingly commonly known in the nine realms as the littilloptrs.’

A pause.

‘Little Loki’s’ said Stark then, a bit hoarsely.

Loki had deliberately prevented the all-speak from translating that word. It seemed Stark was trying to learn at least a few words of Old Norse, the closest Midgardian equivalent to Aesir language. And Tony was evidently doing his research on his ally.

‘Very good’ said he and meant it, the words rolling off his tongue like a purr.

‘They are called after you’ Stark said.

‘That is how it appears, does it not?’ asked Loki innocently. ‘Though I swear I did nothing to create them.’

Stark’s eyes narrowed.

‘Didn’t you?’

‘A name does not always indicate the person’s parentage, though on Asgard, the former is the custom’ said he, shifting his head so he could feel the warmth of this hand that he knew deliberately didn’t react to him, didn’t caress him, so not to drive him away. It did not make sense but he would take it. ‘I swear on the Norns they existed already before I met them for the first time. I merely hold affection for them, and they for me. We are, as you could say, friendly.’

‘You help each other’ translated Stark.

‘That is what friends do’ said Loki, grinning so widely he felt his mouth stretch, and he liked it. ‘And arrangements with them are so very easy. I take them somewhere and let them run free, and they are happy to run free, and I am happy to see them do as they wish. For once, everybody wins.’

‘Except for the people who live where you unleash them’ said Stark dryly.

Loki rolled his eyes.

‘Oh, don’t be like that’ said he. ‘Stagnancy is deadlier than any of them could be. Everyone needs a little variety, a small challenge, from time to time, to shake them out of their lazy contentment. That the littilloptrs can provide without doubt.’
A pause, then Stark snorted.

‘Fuck, Lokes’ said he. ‘You were merciful to us during the New York invasion, weren’t you?’

‘I can be magnanimous at times’ Loki agreed.

‘Remind me not to piss you off then’

‘I probably won’t – I’m known to hold very subtle grudges’ Loki said honestly, ‘Some poor idiots still didn’t know I held a grudge against them when I was already done with my revenge’, and Stark first looked startled, then laughed again.

‘I bet, you asshole’ said he, and didn’t look the least bit angry. ‘But you can tell me when you are angry with me, alright? You don’t have to hold it in.’

Loki hummed, not inclined to think overly much about Stark’s last words. The sofa was soft and comfortable against his back, and for the first time in quite a while, he felt like there was no urgency to rise, or run, or work. He felt no need to change his position at all. He wondered if he could fall asleep like that, leant against Stark’s hand in the half lit room.

It was a long time since he had last visited the littilloptrs and taken them for an excursion. They had been one of his deadliest weapons once – why again had he stopped working with them? Had Thanos carved all of his trickery out of him, all of his danger? He briefly imagined what the littilloptrs might do to an enemy spaceship, to Thanos’ spaceship, and the idea made a shiver travel down his spine. A very pleasant one.

Well… he would have to seek out the fairies eventually in any case.

Maybe it was time to reacquaint with his most favourite kind, and relive some of their past adventures. Nostalgia was not always a bad thing after all.

Chapter End Notes

I stumbled over the Gremlins again, and realised that they are the ultimate Loki weapon. Yes, I will use them in the end fight. No, I won’t regret it in the least. Also, the bonus fic will be pretty much totally about them.
Our Little Talks

Chapter Summary

And what makes all the difference.

Chapter Notes

!I GOT FAN ART! Colin_Solowjow made a drawing for the end of chapter 57 ("All My Fault Lines Unburied") that is heart achingly beautiful. Go look at it! And Colin_Solowjow, thank you so much! :)))

And: Trigger warning for flashback.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

‘You want to decide the boomstick question with a farting contest?’ Clint asked.

‘I did offer rock, paper, scissors, but you seem curiously averse to the idea’ Loki said.

Clint huffed.

‘I’m not competing in a game of luck where the God of Chaos is on my opponent’s side’ said he. ‘I’m pretty sure you can manipulate chance.’

Loki laid a hand on his chest.

‘It wounds me that you would accuse me of partiality’ said he.

‘Yeah, well’ Clint said. ‘Consider yourself wounded then. Deduct one life point, next initiative roll goes to me.’

They were standing in the community kitchen, Loki at his usual place leant against the kitchen counter, fiddling with a madeleine, Clint… on the fridge. Great, so he had probably gone back to crawling in the vents again.

What shocked Tony more, as he grunted at the two and made his way to the coffee machine, was that until a few moments ago, they had been alone in a room and apparently having a civilised, almost friendly, conversation.

When exactly had Clint moved beyond the mind control and memory block and Phil Ghoul Coulson becoming Phil Ghoul Coulson thing? When exactly had Loki decided that Clint having memories of his rape trauma was probably fine and nothing to worry about?

‘I say we decide with an escape room’ said Tony, and yawned. ‘Whoever gets out first, wins.’

‘No way’ said Clint at once. ‘You’re better at puzzle games than me.’
‘And we would both just blast our way out of the room, let’s be honest’ Tony replied and got his chipped mug from the cupboard. ‘Though that would be fun too, I guess. I haven’t thoroughly wrecked any infrastructure in a while’

The amused look Loki shot him at that felt far too gratifying.

‘I still don’t know why we can’t settle it with good old hand-to-hand combat’ Clint complained, shifting so his legs hung down the fridge door. ‘Shouldn’t you propose that, Loki, since you are all Viking and shit? Holmgaeng and everything?’

‘Holmgaeng is fought to the death’ Loki said, not looking exactly discouraged by that. ‘But we already know that in hand-to-hand combat, Stark would lose.’

Tony whirled around, his cup in hand, which made the coffee spill a bit.

‘What?’ asked he.

Loki glanced at him sideways in a way that was both slightly predatory and slightly contemptuous.

‘Barton would, as you would say, wipe the floor with your ass’ said he sweetly, almost seductively. ‘Without the suit, you are a helpless little chicken in a fight, Anthony Stark, while Barton could be surprised asleep, drunk and in the nude by his enemies and still prevail.’

Clint snorted, ‘I’m so gonna quote that on twitter’, and Tony narrowed his eyes at the trickster.

‘Then what, I ask you’ said he, and pointed the mug at him, ‘have all our training sessions been good for?’

‘For the moment, moving you from geriatric toddler to elderly awkward teen. If you train very hard, we might reach the level of middle-aged greenhorn one day’ Loki said, the corners of his mouth twitching as if he wanted to laugh. His eyes were warm though.

Clint did laugh, and Tony absent-mindedly registered that as another rather unexpected development. Clint laughing openly and without bitterness at Loki’s jokes.

Where was all this personal development around him coming from? He almost felt sort of left behind.

At least, Clint wasn’t going to ever get any more mature.

‘Maybe I would level up more quickly if your idea of training me would consist more in giving me actual advice and less in beating me bruised and bloody’ Tony said.

He had merely intended to continue the flyting, as Loki so often called it, but the flicker that went across Loki’s face immediately told him he had made a mistake.

Yeah, fuck, Loki had been seriously upset about injuring him, hadn’t he been? Upset that Tony hadn’t stopped the fight in time… didn’t this have to feel to him like Tony was rubbing it in?

And with all those honestly immense gestures of trust Loki had offered him lately…

… it had been only a matter of time until Tony would fuck up again, he supposed. He was just not any good at distinguishing the mask from the real thing.

Loki’s face returned to his mischievous smile rather quickly, but Tony by now was rather good at distinguishing the mask from the real thing.
'You’d think that the prospect of possible injury would motivate you to actually move’ said he, the tone just a hitch biting, barely noticeable.

Shit.

‘Hah’ said Tony, and he had to apologise somehow, he knew, ‘I guess you’re right.’

He made a bow that was only slightly mocking, just enough to pretend to continue the game.

‘I will endeavour to save my skin from you more efficiently from now on, oh my horny majesty’ said he. ‘Since I know that our true enemies won’t grant me the mercy of keeping me alive that you so generously bestow on me despite my many offences against the noble martial arts and more generally against the concept of self-preservation.’

Loki had listened to Tony with his chin slightly raised, as if he truly were a king listening to his subject, and this was the role, this was the game, but his face relaxed just a notch, and this was not a game at all.

The god gave him a very short but somehow formal nod.

‘I graciously accept your apology’ said he, and despite the wording that told Tony he was pretending, it felt sincere underneath the pretence, and Tony allowed himself to relax a little too.

_I am told that I hold very subtle grudges_ – maybe Tony had just avoided one of those.

Clint, as to him, had looked back and forth between them, and concluded, ‘Look, I don’t do kink shaming, but if this is turning into erotic roleplay, I’m telling you, I’m out. So definitely, absolutely out. Though, your horny majesty? I’m gonna quote that on twitter too.’

*“* 

‘I am sorry’ Thor said.

The assertion was rather out of context, and Tony eyed him, ‘What exactly for?’

They were sitting in the living room of the common floor, he, Blondy and Loki. Blondy on the sofa, bent forward and supporting his elbows on his legs, Tony sprawled next to him, Loki leant back in an armchair, legs stretched out and crossed at the ankles, his face unreadable. The group was dispersed at the moment, Clint lecturing Bruce about frying eggs the right way in the community kitchen, Natasha on the terrace in a phone call with Shield Ghoul Coulson. Steve had taken off with Bucky, either to fuck or to push weights or to attend a veteran gathering, Tony wasn’t sure which.

The reason Nat was talking with Coulson at the moment was that Odin was obviously of the opinion that Thanos was going to make a grasp for the sceptre soon, and that Loki agreed. Thor, not surprisingly, had offered to take the sceptre with him for safekeeping, Loki, even less surprisingly, had offered the same. Nat had dryly responded, ‘Yeah, sure’, and had asked what, in the opinion of the wise and mighty Allfather, their greatest security weakness currently was.

Loki had burst into laughter at that and hadn’t stopped laughing for a while.

Then he had made a list. Tony had supplemented it, then offered his services to eliminate the issues.
Natasha had, at that, simply given him a look.

Now, she was probably discussing alternatives. Any alternatives.

The second day of their planning had been more peaceful than the first, at least concerning Loki-Thor dynamics, but the tension stayed all too tangible. Thor and the Stuckies still hadn't exchanged many words, and if Loki was making less obvious attempts at goading Thor into a fight, his constant anger at him was covered only by a thin layer of sober professionalism.

Tony couldn’t really imagine what it had to be like for Loki, dealing with his brother after what the Other had done.

Could Loki truly, emotionally, separate the true Thor and the false one?

Or did his mind whisper to him that the Other’s Thor had only said what Loki knew the real Thor was thinking all along? Had only done what Thor would do if he knew about enough of Loki’s secrets?

How much of the distance between them was due to real issues they had, and how much due to this particularly destructive method of torture?

Talk about depressing trains of thought…

‘I am sorry I assumed so easily that you would be disrespectful to my brother’ said Thor now, tearing Tony from his thoughts. ‘If nothing else, then your actions at my arrival have shown me that my fears have been groundless.’

‘Er… how so?’

‘Before you invited me in, you got Loki’s agreement’ said Thor, as if that had been obvious. ‘As one should in an equal partnership.’

Sure, yes. But Tony had not even realised Thor had noticed that small exchange with Loki – the glance, the nod – during his speech.

Evidently, Blondy was a bit more attentive than people gave him credit for.

‘Whatever the nature your relationship might mean in Asgard’ Thor continued. ‘I should have known that for you, it had to mean something else. That you would never accept a relationship where you would force your partner into a position inferior to yours, that you value equality. I know you better than that.’

‘And you don’t know me better than that?’ asked Loki before Tony could answer.

Thor looked up at Loki, startled. Loki, as to him, was still wearing the same unreadable mask.

‘We have grown up together and have lived close to each other for over a thousand years’ said Loki, sounding calm and collected. ‘Did I ever give you the impression that I revelled in the differences of social status our society promotes?’

Thor furrowed his eyebrows, opened his mouth, closed it again.

‘Did I ever treat the many servants employed in our home with disrespect?’ continued Loki just as calmly. ‘Have I not spent many evenings in the kitchens because I preferred their company to those of our dear lords and ladies? Have I not gotten into trouble for conspiring with them against members
of the court who harassed them, or treated them unfairly? Have you forgotten all of that?’

Thor looked like he definitely had, but he looked away, said guiltily, ‘No, I haven’t.’

‘I was the one to befriend a common foot soldier, not you, remember?’ Loki continued. ‘You were the one opposed to this liaison, telling me it was beneath me.’

‘I know’ said Thor.

‘But it was not’ said Loki. ‘I am aware there were always rumours about me and Sygin having an intimate relationship. This is me telling you that those rumours were true. This is me telling you that I did not take only the active role in this relationship, but that I enjoyed the passive role as well, just as the rumours claimed. This is me telling you that even though I had to hide what we were to each other, both for his and my protection, I never felt superior to Sygin when taking him, and I never felt demeaned by letting Sygin take me. It was not beneath me. None of it.’

Thor’s face had reddened during Loki’s speech, and his jaw had tensed, but he did not answer, continued to look away.

‘And yet when I arrived on Midgard and said that freedom was not for the masses, when I ordered the Midgardians of Stuttgart to kneel, and claimed to have a right to rule them, you did not second-guess my words’ said Loki. ‘And yet when you heard of Stark and me, you immediately assumed that I would feel entitled to humiliate and degrade him, as if I were an ordinary Aesir. But you know that I am not.’

Thor stayed silent for a while, his jaw working.

‘Loki, you… it’s not… it was just… after y-you... fell… and returned, you s-seemed so different that I… I did not dare...’ he began, then shook his head.

‘But no. No. You are right in everything you said’ said he then, and he actually sounded like he meant it. ‘I am sorry. Loki, I am truly sorry. I wronged you by believing your role so easily. I should have known better. This is my fault.’

There was a pause.

‘Your apology is accepted’ said Loki then, just like that, and both Tony and Thor looked up at him, surprised.

What a strange parallel to that moment in the community kitchen, Tony thought. And he knew that this time, Loki was even more serious about it for using so few and curt words.

‘You have gotten better at those’ said Loki, and stood up. ‘Apologies, I mean. Whoever is teaching you, stick with them and continue to listen to what they have to say.’

He walked out of the room, and Thor stared after him, flabbergasted.

‘Who is teaching you?’ asked Tony warily after a while. ‘Because you seem to have made some serious progress in the area, and somehow I don’t think you figured out as much on your own.’

‘Lady Jane had a few very choice words with me’ said Thor, not sounding offended, instead still looking at the corner around which Loki had vanished. ‘And then my mother had… a lot more choice words, when I told her about… about your relationship to Loki. When I said that he was demeaning himself by letting himself be taken, she… she slapped me.’
He still looked mildly shocked about that fact.

‘Well, at least there’s *some* progress on her part’ Tony said.

Thor eyed him.

Tony shrugged.

‘What? She stood by and said nothing for far too long.’

‘Well, that is certainly changing now’ Thor said, visibly unsure whether he liked that development.


In the end, Loki couldn’t take it anymore – Stark’s constant presence, the constant closeness of his seidr, was driving him up the walls.

He was aware that encouraging any intimate contact between them had become unwise, dangerous, and that this was his own fault only, his own lack of control, but the day had been straining, and confusing, and, if he had to be perfectly honest with himself (but did he have to?), frightening too.

What in the world had moved him to admit to Sygin in front of Thor? What moved him to make all these dangerous confessions lately, as if he wanted to hand out weapons against him to all who surrounded him, please, I give you everything you need to destroy me?

What moved Thor to act so unlike himself, to actually listen and to understand, at least in part, where he had wronged him? Loki had openly confessed to him, not in obscene, mocking words that could be dismissed as a lie easily, but in all seriousness, to having allowed another man to penetrate him. That was pure madness! And it was even greater madness that Thor had looked upset, yes, but that he had not turned away in contempt, had not rejected Loki as his brother, had not said that he had known him to be a rotten, perverse soul all along.

They had continued their negotiations with the Avengers afterwards, and Thor had looked pensive, yes, concerned, yes, but not disgusted. Not that.

And Loki had felt all those other eyes on him, and too many of the Avengers knew too much about the truth, so why did they not use those weapons, why did they *spare* him?

No, not only spare him, why did they look at him as if they fought the desire to shield him from something, but from *what*?

He had destroyed half of New York, for the Norns’ sake, and now he had proven to be corrupted to the core, so what could ever motivate Banner or, even more inexplicably, Barton to…

He did not understand, he did not understand, he did not understand Thor who *saw* him, *heard* him, apologised without Loki even having to ask him to, none of it made sense, and if all this weakness was allowed, as Stark seemed to suggest, why did he feel like an animal hunted, cornered, nowhere to hide – he did not know what to do with these feelings, and then there was the intoxicating scent of Stark, his seidr everywhere, and when they were alone in the workshops that evening, he just couldn’t take it anymore, he stepped into Tony’s close space without even thinking first, saw Tony’s eyes shoot up to him, saw him understand, ‘A movie?’ he asked, as
if to make sure of something.

Asking for consent – but this was senseless when it was obviously Loki who was-

‘I don’t want to watch a bloody movie’ Loki growled, and Tony’s pupils dilated, ‘green’, said he, the next moment, Loki’s hands were already cradling his face, ‘green’ said Tony, Loki wrapped his lips around the other’s, pushed his tongue forward, feeling the urge to penetrate, to fuck, and Tony opened his lips and let him, went slack in his arms, and he felt heat pool in his groin, let his hands travel all over that maddening body, cupped these maddening butt cheeks, Tony detached his mouth from Loki’s, ‘green’ he sighed, eyes darkened with desire, and how Loki loved that word, that word alone made him ache for more, he lifted Tony up by the ass, sat him down on one of the worktables.

‘Ohhh, we haven’t done that for a while’ Tony said, eyes lightening up as if Loki had just given him a very nice present, then, ‘green’.

Loki cleared the table with a sweep of magic and felt Tony’s flare up in response, you like that, don’t you, he pushed Tony further back, crawled up on the table too, undressed him with another quick spell, ‘Oh’ sighed Tony in response, his lips wet and red, his half-hard cock twitching. ‘Using magic during sex? So very green, your horny majesty.’

Loki let out a high laugh to get rid at least of some of the exquisite tension building up in him, undressed himself with another spell, pressed his body, his achingly hard cock, against the other, suddenly feeling the urge to rub against that warm body, and so he did.

Tony’s eyelids fluttered, he groaned, his arms moved upwards as if to grab him, then moved away abruptly, grabbed the corners of the table instead, and if Loki had felt momentarily afraid at the prospect of being touched, afraid of flinching, of betraying himself, at the same time, he regretted that Tony had not done it, suddenly wanted the mortal to grip him tightly, to hold him and never let him go.

‘Green, green, green’ Tony moaned, and every time he said it, it was like a jolt of pleasure shooting through Loki’s body, he gasped, pressed his eyes shut for a moment, pressing his groin against Tony’s, groaned.

‘Would you… Loki, it’s okay if you won’t, but would… would you fuck me?’ Tony asked, his voice low and strained and almost pleading.

Loki could not help but bend down to claim Tony’s mouth in response to that, claim Tony’s neck, sucking on that warm and intoxicating skin, revelling in being allowed to touch this body in so many places, feeling its heart beat underneath him, feeling the cool metal of the arc reactor against his chest, and the arc reactor pricked with sharp, delightful magic, while he moved his hand to Tony’s ass, magically coating his fingers with lube, ‘Oh’ Tony moaned at the spell, his magic sparked all around them, then again when Loki pushed his finger inside him. Pushed inside that tight place, so hot, always so hot, and Loki loved it, couldn’t get enough of it, moved his finger in and out almost roughly, but Tony only responded with ‘green, green, green’.

Loki worked him open quickly, but he knew far better by now what his partner could take, lined himself up after pulling on the condom with another spell, notched his cock against Tony’s entrance. And this alone… he felt his own eyelids flutter, he made a strange, pathetic little sound, ‘Please, green, please’ Tony whined, and he pushed forward, just a little too quickly, and Tony arched his head back, gasped, then cried out, continued to gasp heavily after Loki was fully seated, his face and chest flushed, blinking rapidly.

Tears in his eyes.
And then Tony looked at him through those half-lidded, teary eyes, smiled, and this smile was too warm, was-

‘Green’ Tony said.

Loki started to move, then started to pound into the other, into that blessed heat, gasping as he felt the muscles around him tighten, listening to the groans, to the moans, Tony’s legs were drawn up, brushing against him, and each brush of his legs against Loki’s side was sweet, he wanted more, he wanted to grab Tony and press him against his own body, didn’t dare to, and Tony grabbed the table so tightly, blue sparks were dancing around his fingers.

There was no reason for it to shift, no true reason, but it did. Loki could not say where it began, but he kept ramming into that body that was so close and yet too far away, and at first it was just an uneasiness with that distance that he dared not cross, but the feeling spread, a strange kind of nausea, and at the same time the impression that underneath him, there was just this thing that he was using, that he was tearing into nothing but flesh, he fucking nothing but meat, and there was this detachment, like what he was doing to this heap of flesh didn’t even matter, as if-

‘Hey’ he heard Tony say.

He noticed that he had stopped moving. That he was still breathing rapidly, leant above Tony. Still seated inside him. That Tony was looking at him, confused and just a little concerned.

Had he forgotten that Tony was even there? Had he just-

The nausea was getting stronger. He coughed.

‘What’s going on?’

Loki didn’t know. Loki didn’t know. What should he say? What was there to – he wanted to throw up, he wanted to-

‘Yellow’ Loki choked out.

He noticed his arms were trembling.

The expression on Tony’s face shifted from confusion to… something between concern and relief. Why relief?

He felt dizzy. What else? He wasn’t sure. Something was wrong. Something was wrong. Bile welled up in his throat. He swallowed.

‘Okay’ said Tony, and his voice was so terribly soft. ‘That’s okay, Loki. It’s okay. Thank you for saying so.’

His hands moved up, as if to touch him, retreated again.

Loki flinched away from it nonetheless.

Why do you flinch? It is you who-

Monster.

‘Can you tell me what you need?’

Tony still looked dishevelled, his lips still red with lust, not hurt, not offended, but Loki felt sick, and
wrong, and this body felt wrong beneath him, the idea of the pile of meat too close, and he didn’t… he couldn’t…

He cautiously pulled out of the other, Tony let out a moan, but a suppressed one. Loki crawled off the table, spelled his clothing back on, suddenly feeling the urgent need to be dressed. Armoured. His whole body was shaking, he noticed, and something was building up in his chest that wanted release and Loki had a guess that when it would burst out, it would get ugly.

He needed to be gone then.

Monster.

‘I think… I think I need to be alone’ he said.

He just couldn’t bear Stark’s presence right now, he had to protect Stark, couldn’t show him what he was, but he had just shown him, the truth of him, not… he…

‘Okay’ said Tony. ‘Should I go?’

After I have wronged you?

But had he done so?

Yes. No. He didn’t know. The pressure in his chest was getting painful.

He shook his head.

‘No’ said he, distractedly noticing that his voice was blank and toneless, ‘No, I will-‘, and he gathered the magic for the teleportation, go, run, hide-

‘Wait’ Tony said, raised a hand. ‘Will you just… stay in the tower, please?’

Loki looked at him. This is the second time now you demand this, Stark. Why is this so important for you? But in truth, he knew very well what Tony was afraid of. The lair was luring him, whispering to him. There, he would fall. And fall and fall.

It should not have been so tempting.

But Tony wanted him to stay, and he didn’t know why, why shouldn’t he let go, why shouldn’t he fall, why shouldn’t he… but even though not knowing why, why, why, he nodded, and Tony breathed out, relieved.

‘Thank you’ said he. ‘Just… thanks.’

Loki did not leave the tower, just as he had said. And he resisted the whisper of the dagger. But as soon as he had teleported to his rooms, he went to the bathroom and tore it apart, not really caring if he got hurt smashing the sink into the wall, making the bathtub explode, slamming his fists into the tiles and yanking out the water pipes.

When it was all done and finished, he was sitting on the floor, leant against the wall, one leg folded
under him, the other stretched out, watching the fountains of water splashing against the walls and washing over the debris, flooding the other rooms. He was wet, and cold, and had scratches all over, there were bloody stains on the shards, on the tiles, on his toes. His hair was clinging to him.

And he did not feel the urge to tear off his own skin anymore.

He repaired the damage with a flick of his hand, even though it was almost disappointing to watch everything move back to their proper places again.

He was still angry.

No, he was still furious.

Furious that even that pleasure was tainted now, and it shouldn’t have been. Loki knew very well what distinguished him from people like Baldur or the Other, and Stark had said yes so often, so clearly, had shown him in so uncertain terms that he liked what Loki did. Loki should know better. He should not have gotten confused.

He had not gotten confused before.

Even Baldur had been already so blessedly far away before his fall, faded to just a memory, not particularly pleasant, but something of the past. It had not bothered him during sex, and Loki had barely thought about him anymore. And then the Other had dragged him out and-

Now…

And he felt that with each word he spoke out loud about this, with each piece of information Stark learned, it was as if Baldur gained even more strength, it was as if this was a curse with which Loki brought him back to life, and Baldur pushed ever deeper inside him, penetrated him even more, now even pushed away Loki’s thoughts and replaced them with his own, no, just confusion, Loki was different from Baldur, was different, was different…

This wasn’t getting any better – it was getting worse.

He wiped his eyes.

No matter.

He stood up, dried himself and hid the cuts under another glamour. He could have healed them in an instant of course, but the slight pain was good. It would ground him.

After he had judged his appearance presentable in the mirror, he teleported back to the workshop.

Tony was still there, busy shifting around virtual 3D models of the Gem Homeplanet prototypes apparently. He looked up at him almost absent-mindedly.

‘Welcome back, Lokes’ said he, with a smile.

It was a warm smile. Why was it warm? He should have been angry.

Every day, your lover grows more incapable of giving you pleasure, Stark. When you fuck him, he forgets it is not rape. When he fucks you, he forgets it too. So what is he good for anymore?

‘I apologise for my conduct’ Loki said.

Tony regarded him now more closely, his head cocked, then said, ‘Not accepted. There is nothing to
apologise for. This is exactly what we talked about, what I proposed. You did the right thing, by saying yellow. Thank you for that.’

The words shouldn’t have relieved him. They still did.

Weak.

‘You wanna talk?’ asked Tony. ‘Or should I unnerve you about my new ideas for the Uru instead?’

Loki almost considered the question for a moment, then he stepped towards Stark, and over this ridiculous notion that talking about his madness would help anyone. If anything, it would give Baldur more power, he had learned that much.

He should not have felt the urge to speak nonetheless.

‘I am sure that your ideas will only betray your ignorance about the matter’ answered he deliberately dryly.

Tony chuckled, as if nothing had happened between them. As if Loki hadn’t lost reality again, hadn’t abandoned him in the middle of intimacy again, forcing him to take care of his needs on his own.

‘Let’s see’ said Tony. ‘Maybe I will surprise you yet.’

And he started to explain, no, to ramble, in this distracted, almost feverish way he often fell into, and Loki watched him, pensively.

Felt himself slowly unwind, despite himself, the tension easing.

Anthony Stark, he thought. You already surprise me enough as it is.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, so this obviously feels like a step in the wrong direction for Loki, and it can definitely feel that way because he is now in the phase of coping where a lot of thing are likely to trigger him that have not been able to trigger him before. But in truth, he is of course making immense progress. Not only is he starting to talk about his trauma, he has just actually formulated a boundary. He has used a safe word. Way to go, Loki! I want to give you an award for coping as well as you can under extreme circumstances. Tony is currently swelling with pride for you. He just knows that he can’t say that to your face because you would take it the wrong way because you are Loki. Also, it’s fascinating how good you are at turning about everything into a reason to hate yourself. It’s a… rather special talent.

Because Colin_Solowjow is a wonderful person baiting me with excellent art, they have done a very beautiful and juicy drawing for this chapter. You will have to log in for that one for viewing it, since it's rated mature (nsfw).
Duties And Destinies, And What We Feel Nonetheless

Chapter Summary

… which is so much, so much, how can we hold it in?

Chapter Notes

I've got several things to say.

First, this is the last chapter for now ^^.

Second, you might have noticed that The Prestige is part of a series now, and there is a second part. This second part, My Little Loptrs- Friendship is Magic, is the bonus fic I promised! I plan to post also other bonus fics as separate works in this series if I think that they work better as a separate story than as an integral part of The Prestige.

Third, WhostlesofTon pointed out to me that in chapter 59 ("Who else would you blame?") it kinda sucked that Steve had to be sexually harassed for the betterment of Loki's mood. I totally agree, and so I will remove the sexual aspect from the interaction in the scene. But I will need time for that, and I don't have that right now ^^. I will definitely rewrite the scene before I publish the next batch (probably sooner) though. Thanks for the pointer!

Fourth, if you haven't looked at Colin_Solowjows newest fan art for the Prestige yet, do it now! ;)

Fifth, sixth and seventh, I love you all! Your comments make so many of my days! <3 <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

‘Bruce Banner told me to think some more on what I really want to say’ said Thor, explaining why he hadn’t done the apology in verse thing yet. He and Tony were strolling toward the helicopter platform.

Three days had passed since Thor’s arrival and already he was leaving. Loki was probably pleased he had managed to drive Prince Sparkles away so quickly.

‘Bruce, not Nat?’ Tony asked.

‘The Lady Natasha claimed that poetry was not among her many talents, told me to tell you to finally remember that, and then sent me to the Son of Banner’ said Thor. ‘He… was not entirely convinced of the quality of my verses.’

They stopped on the platform where Thor would take off.

‘I feel I should make this right the first time’ said Thor, his face pensive. ‘For I could sense during
my stay that the Captain of America and the Son of Barnes are still angry with me. Or maybe I am angering them further by staying silent about the matter?’

He furrowed his eyebrows, looking a little lost.

‘I will talk to them, explain the situation’ said Tony, resigned to his fate of going to have a serious conversation with Steve again.

‘I thank you’ said Thor, and bowed, in Tony’s opinion, a bit too deeply.

‘…before you take off’ said Tony then. ‘There was actually something I wanted to talk about.’

Something he wanted to verify, at the very least.

‘Loki mentioned these three persons, Hela, Fenrir and Jormungandr, saying that they were a threat’ said Tony. ‘I have read about them in Norse myths, but who are they, really?’

Thor’s face darkened at that, at the same time turned troubled.

‘They…’ began he. ‘They are not so much persons as… creatures. Angrboda’s last curse on the world.’

Tony raised his eyebrows, internally cringing that even Loki’s children seemed to be considered as beasts.

‘Come again?’ asked he. ‘Who’s Angrboda? You mentioned her before, but I didn’t really get it then either.’

‘She was a Vanir witch’ said Thor, obviously uncomfortable about the subject. ‘And one who carried so much hate against Asgard in her heart that she swore to destroy her even at the cost of burning down Yggdrasil itself. We battled her of course but her regeneration magic was strong enough that killing her… proved difficult.’

‘But it did eventually work, since you’re talking of her in the past tense?’ said Tony warily.

Thor nodded.

‘Aye’ said he. ‘Loki managed to do it in the end.’

‘Loki?’ Tony asked, slightly surprised, and then narrowed his eyes, because Thor did not look very happy about the fact. And if Loki’s known history of decision-making was anything to go by…

‘How exactly did he kill her then?’

Thor cast down his eyes, visibly wondering whether he should answer.

‘He ripped out her heart and ate it’ said he.

‘Wait, what?’

What the fuck was wrong with Asgardian culture, was really every single thing they did unnecessarily gory, was there nothing-

‘It is a magical ritual. Not a very… common ritual, of course, but not unknown of. By eating the heart of a mage, another mage can absorb their powers’ said Thor as if reciting what another had told him. ‘It is a way of… consuming the very core of their seidr. And thus Angrboda died.’
'Loki defused the bomb by swallowing it?' Tony asked, aware that he sounded hoarse again.

But really…

‘It… is curious that you should describe it this way’ said Thor, watching him closely, ‘It seems you understand the nature of seidr already very well. Yes, the metaphor is fitting. A mage less powerful and experienced than my brother would have been torn apart by this ritual. They would have been consumed by Angrboda, rather than consuming her. I doubt father would have allowed Loki to take the risk. But my brother did not prevent anyone of his plans, nor did he ask for permission.’

And that sounded like Loki indeed.

‘Was he… okay?’

‘Eventually, yes’ said Thor, almost… bitterly?... and this implied way too much of no, he wasn’t.

‘Before she died’ Thor continued. ‘Angrboda cast a last spell, a last curse. She created three creatures from her own body, a wolf, called Fenrir, a snake, called Jormungandr, and Hela, a girl that was half fair and beautiful, half dark, ugly and rotten.’

… and that was not how Tony would describe Hela, but okay. He doubted by now that Thor had ever actually seen her, the way he talked about her. And the thing about Angrboda having created the children from her own body, shortly before (or after?) Loki had eaten the heart? When Tony knew that at least Hela was Loki’s daughter too (and why would that be different for Fenrir or Jormungandr, especially since everyone seemed to agree that they were siblings)? Did that mean that Loki had killed Angrboda when she had still been pregnant? With him being the father?

_Ugh_… and more importantly, not exactly in character for the Lokes, even if one took into consideration the whole criminology dictionary kink. Whatever else one wanted to suspect Loki of, but killing his pregnant lover?

Just… not easy to imagine at all.

And then there was the fact of that little sentence that Loki had let slip ages ago about the (apparently purely mythical) Narfi and Vali… _I never gave birth to children with such names._

Which essentially meant…

There were definitely still gaps to fill in that story, but Thor’s version of the plot had so many holes it could have been Deadpool after a good fire fight.

‘The three creatures were to finish Angrboda’s work’ Thor continued to recite the propaganda, completely oblivious to Tony’s mind working. ‘To burn Asgard to ashes and with her all the realms. But there was another prophecy too.’

‘Was there now?’ Tony asked.

Thor nodded solemnly.

‘It told that the creatures could, if leashed and controlled, also serve to protect the world. Even pure evil, the prophecy said, could, if used right, help spin the Norns’ thread and hold the tapestry of time and space together’ said he. ‘And so Odin in his great mercy did not kill the beasts but leashed them, and gave them their predestined duties.’

Oh, what a fuck load of bullshit. Prophecy my ass.
Tony very heroically refrained from rolling his eyes.

‘Duties… which are?’ asked he instead.

‘Fenrir is chained to Surtr, a fire giant from Muspelheim who has sworn to burn down the nine realms if he could’ said Thor.

‘They are a whole lot of realm arsonists out there, aren’t there?’

Thor did not seem to find the comment all that funny, strangely enough.

‘Fenrir cannot free himself without freeing Surtr, and Surtr cannot free himself without freeing Fenrir’ said he. ‘But all chains break eventually, that is the Norns’ will. And so they are destined to fight each other to the death at the end of the world.’

‘… right’ said Tony.

Granted, from what Loki had said, it did sound like the Norns not to deprive themselves of an epic battle.

‘Of Hela, I have told you already’ said Thor. ‘Jormungandr…’

He hesitated.

‘Jormungandr is also called the Midgard snake.’

Oh.

So that was true.

‘He is here, on Earth?’

‘Aye, he is.’

And that explained so fucking much. Like, why Loki seemed improbably familiar with the realm. Why he was not even half as indifferent to it as he would claim. He had to have visited it several times in the past if he had wanted to see his son.

… and if Jormungandr was here, Loki could never just have given Earth to the Chitauri or Thanos to destroy, Tony realised at the same moment. Not without precautions.

Was that the real reason he had asked for the Midgardian throne in his deal with the Titan?

It must have been.

Had Thanos known then about the snake? Had it been part of their deal to spare it?

But why would Thanos ever do that, spare one of Loki’s kids, if he could use them instead… he had been in the position of power then, Loki the half-mad, half-dead prisoner he was tearing apart for fun on weekends.

No, Thanos would not have accepted to let Jormungandr go.

… so no, he hadn’t known about him. Or at least, he hadn’t known where Jormungandr was, what Earth thus meant to Loki.
And neither had Tony, despite his vague suspicions that it had to mean more to the trickster than he let on. Loki had kept the actual truth from him for a surprisingly long time, despite their so-called lie-free interview at the beginning of their alliance.

He had told this clever story about how he had tricked the Titan when he had been at his lowest, at his weakest. The story about playing the role of the crazy person who thought they could make demands, so to foster Thanos’ conviction that he was broken. Midgard, he had admitted, had been a good plan b, because there were always perks that came with ruling a planet.

There were also perks that came with ruling the prison of your son who you had been wanting to spring from jail for centuries.

What a sneaky, slippery bastard.

Well, at least, Tony hadn’t fallen for someone who didn’t deserve the honour.

‘You do not look worried’ remarked Thor as if he had expected Tony to be. ‘But then again, you should not be. Jormungandr lives at the bottom of the sea, shrouded from your eyes and ears and the sensors of your machines by powerful wards, wrapping around Midgard and biting his own tail, for this is how big he is. And Jormungandr’s duty is indeed to protect Midgard. There is a…’

Again he hesitated, eyeing Tony.

‘I do not wish to alarm you, Son of Stark, but there is a Celestial sleeping at the core of your planet’ said Thor. ‘Jormungandr has very powerful seidr. His eternal duty is to make sure it does not wake, to keep Midgard safe from it… his duty is in fact not unlike what Loki’s has been on Ozymandia.’

He looked troubled by the parallel.

Tony, as to him, probably shouldn’t have been grinning.

But the pieces just fell together so perfectly, and he had been right, he had been right! Because Loki had always seemed so damn protective of his kids, whenever Tony had caught even a glimpse of this side of him, and the fact that they were obviously caged, were obviously something like slaves, how could someone like Loki ever accept that? And the deal for the throne, then the work he had done for Ananka, and gods, even in the fucking worst position ever, hovering between life and death, Loki had worked everything to his advantage, had gotten his freedom out of the deal, the time gem, and the knowledge how to entrance a Celestial!

And now, he was putting pressure on Odin to use the warriors of Valhalla against Thanos, profiting from the fact that Odin could not really refuse, not without endangering life itself – and thus would be destroyed the main weapon against the three siblings.

God of Chaos, Lies and Mischief, even Fire – Loki should get the title God of Turning Hopeless Defeat into Victory next, the God of Don’t Ever Think You’ve Outsmarted Me, You Poor Bastards, That’s When I’ve Already Outsmarted You!

Granted, that last title was a tad long. Didn’t exactly roll off the tongue easily.

Still fit Loki like a glove.

Because skill and power, that was what one needed to postpone a Celestial’s birth, Loki had said so, and he already had the skill. Now he only needed power that equalled the magic of Jormungandr.

Like… a gigantic arc reactor… for example.
Which was exactly what Loki was more or less secretly researching on the side.

Had that been another argument for making the alliance with Tony? Loki had used the arc reactor during the New York invasion, so he had known that it could generate power like no other energy source on Earth. He had learned very quickly that it was magical too.

Had he already then wondered whether he couldn’t somehow get Tony, willingly or not, to become his own, personal craftsman? To build the machine to replace his son?

Had he already planned then how to play this card? If he was smart about this, he wouldn’t even have to force anyone into anything here. The many nations of Earth would, once they learned about the Celestial’s existence, have a very valid interest in putting a machine where there was now a giant snake monster that might die or escape or just stop doing its work any day.

And then… after Earth had rendered Jormungandr’s prison sentence pointless for entirely valid and selfish reasons, Loki would be able to free his son without damning Earth in the process.

Blimey.

Tony had certainly expected the trickster to have more than one iron in the fire… but that was a hell of an iron to sneak beneath the other ones.

‘Son of Stark?’ asked Thor, slightly concerned.

Tony blinked, looked at Thor.

Then padded him on the shoulder, ‘Just happy someone is looking out for us’, said he, and grinned even more widely. ‘Delayed pregnancy for the win.’

‘You seem… pleased with me today’ Loki said, almost warily.

They were lounging on the sofa in the workshop, resting after another magic training session. Loki’s tension had eased a bit after Thor’s departure, but he still looked strained.

Tony couldn’t really blame him, after everything that had happened in the last few days.

On the other hand, the Lokes seemed to feel at least safe enough to rest his feet on Tony’s lap, and Tony was enjoying their weight and making sure not to touch those feet, and that was… certainly something.

‘Can’t I just be happy Prince Sparkles has finally gone back to Equestria?’ asked he.

Loki narrowed his eyes, decidedly suspicious now, ‘Associating Thor with My Little Pony leads to nothing sane or healthy’ said he. ‘If you absolutely must, please refrain from comparing him to Twilight Sparkle of all ponies. And no. This is not the reason. You are pleased because of something I have done.’

Oh, Loki, there is so much you’ve done lately that I’d like to kiss you for if only that were okay.

‘Maybe’ Tony admitted, not trying in the least to hide his affection. For Loki responded to it, reacted
with confusion, almost irritation to it, but afterwards, he tended to relax just a little, and that was so worth it. Every moment of catching even a hint of relief in his features, just a hint of something close to happiness, was so fucking worth everything.

Yes, so maybe Tony was hopelessly lost.

Maybe he didn’t care anymore. Maybe he was finally fed up with pretending it was not so.

‘Will you care to tell me what I have done to cause such a foolish sentiment?’ asked Loki, the wariness not quite gone, but Tony could already see him respond to his smile, something about his expression smoothing out, turning more open.

Tony leant his head against the backrest, regarding him sideways.

‘If I have to find out why you are angry with me, because most of the time, you won’t tell me’ said he softly. ‘Shouldn’t you have to find out why I am pleased with you? Is it not, otherwise, unfair? We are, the two of us, mages. Or so you keep saying. Why should I lay all my cards on the table?’

Loki looked at him blankly, for a moment, then something raw flashed in his eyes, and the next, he bent forward, claimed Tony’s mouth in a quick and heated kiss.

‘Green’ whispered Tony belatedly, after Loki’s lips had left his, and Loki shuddered, leaning his forehead against Tony’s.

Caressing with his long fingers Tony’s cheeks. It prickled, it sent shivers all over him.

He was so close, he was so close.

And Tony wasn’t allowed to touch.

He closed his eyes. It hurt, and yet, in a way, he loved it.

Or maybe he just loved…

Don’t finish that sentence. It’s not an option.

…I thought you were fed up with pretending?

‘I will have to leave soon’ Loki said.

Tony abruptly looked up, ‘What?’

‘For Vanaheim’ said Loki, and there was the tension back in his voice. ‘I have promised a visit already a while ago.’

He lent back again against the armrest, bringing more distance between him and Tony.

‘Until now I could I avoid it because I was still healing’ said he. ‘First from the Song, and then from the injuries I sustained on Nidavellir. But now I cannot pretend anymore that I am not ready for the journey. I am as whole as I can hope to be for now, and walking on the secret paths should pose no more true danger.’

… which was not exactly a reassuring assessment of his health.

And Loki looked… unhappy. No, scared. Openly scared, which was new. He had even admitted that he had been making excuses.
Tony… still wasn’t sure what he had done to deserve all this openness. But he couldn’t well disappoint it.

‘You will visit Frey and Gerdr’ said he, wanting confirmation that this was what Loki was afraid of.

And the tense, curt way Loki nodded certainly proved him right.

‘I have met them, shortly after the Song’ said Tony. ‘I think you’ll like Gerdr. There is definitely a family resemblance, and not only in appearance.’

Loki snorted, looking even unhappier for it.

‘Hlín says the same’ said he. ‘She was very adamant to point out all my commonalities with my monstrous relation.’

And there was the internalised racism again.

‘Gerdr is not always very nice, no’ said Tony. ‘But monster is not the term I would associate with her. Monsters, I think, should not be that cultivated, intelligent, subtle, charming and, frankly, gorgeous.’

This time, Loki laughed, his eyes shining.

‘You were always a man with strange tastes, Stark’ said he. ‘You did not even shy away from my true form.’

‘Maybe my tastes are not as strange as you think’ said Tony dryly. ‘You’re simply hot as hell, Lokes, whether you’re pink or blue. As is your aunt. Your daughter, too, is dazzlingly beautiful. It must be a family curse or something.’

Something about the statement about Hela struck Loki, seemed to unbalance him. He looked confused for it. And how could he not be? He surely recognised her beauty, and he knew, looking at her, that he was looking at Jotnar beauty.

Tony made a note to use Loki’s children against him more often.

Then Loki frowned again.

‘I have tried to destroy her realm’ said he, rather quietly. ‘I have tried to eradicate her entire race. I have murdered so many of her kind. Hlín says that Jotunheim will not persecute me for it, at least not until Thanos’ death, but how can I stand before her and… accept her hospitality?’

Tony made another note that hospitality seemed to be an even more serious issue with Asgardians than he had thought.

He shrugged.

‘Look, I’ve no idea what’s going on in that head of hers’ said he. ‘That woman might be almost as cunning as you are, and that is saying something. I can just tell you what I have observed when we visited them. We all believed that you were dead then, remember? And Gerdr, even though she was trying to hide the full extent of her feelings, she was so obviously so fucking not amused. She was furious with Thor – she blamed him and to be honest, not entirely without reason. She even tricked him into hunting in a part of the woods where she knew Hatchet was living, just so to provoke Hatchet into attacking your brother. Like I said, not necessarily… nice. The type to take rather nasty revenge, if you ask me.’
Loki had paled just a little at the mention of the attack on Thor, and he had looked away afterwards. Now, he still seemed surprisingly caught off guard, whether by the trick Gerdr had played on Thor or by the fact that she had seemed to care at all.

Tony wondered whether anyone had told him about the rest.

‘Gerdr also gave Thor some rather interesting information, as it appears’ he said, deciding that probably nobody had. ‘She seemed to have implied that while you are small for a non-magical Jotunn, you are of rather average height for a Jotnar mage. They are rare, and apparently, much smaller in stature, and… very well respected in Jotnar society. Held in very high esteem. Gerdr herself is a mage. She cannot be more than a few inches taller than you.’

Loki didn’t react to that at all, his eyes wide, still looking away. Everything about him was tense.

‘She seemed to have also implied that you were never abandoned as a baby’ Tony continued. ‘She implied that you were hidden in a temple, because that was where they put what was most precious to them during the war, what they had to protect at all costs. She implied that Odin invaded the temple and robbed you from them.’

Loki’s eyes widened only a fraction more at that. He slowly drew his arms to his chest. Frankly, he looked absolutely terrified.

Then he let out a small, chocked cough.

‘Hah’ he said, then continued to stare at the ground.

‘Loki?’ asked Tony cautiously, wondering whether he had not made another terrible mistake. But what good did it do to hide this truth from him forever?

Before Tony could come to a conclusion however, Loki very abruptly lifted his feet away from Tony’s lap, put them on the ground, stood up, ‘Excuse me please’ said he.

‘Will you stay in the tower?’ Tony asked quickly.

Loki stared at him as if he was having difficulties even seeing him. His arms, very slowly, wrapped more closely around him.

‘I can’t’ said he, his voice too weak, too high. ‘I cannot… I need…’

‘What do you need?’ asked Tony very seriously, standing up too.

Loki didn’t react at once.

‘… destruction’ said he then, then furrowed his eyebrows. ‘I mean…’

‘No, that’s okay’ said Tony and raised his hands. ‘I get the urge’

He so did.

‘Can it be destruction of something that’s not… alive?’

The god seemed to seriously consider the question.

‘… yes’ said he then.
‘Great’ said Tony, and rubbed his hands. ‘You have no idea how many derelict and abandoned factories I own. They are all fugly and deserve to be razed to the ground with fire and fury. I’ll go get my suit, you go get into a demolition mood. Wait, that’s already a check, see? You’re doing great.’

It took Loki three factories to calm down. In the end, after standing in the debris of the third one, his knees started to wobble, and then he just let himself glide to the ground.

Tony landed next to him. At first, he had participated in the demolition, but soon, he had deemed it safer to just watch from the distance and hope that Loki would not bury himself under tons of brick and concrete as he screamed his lungs out, sent shockwaves of magic everywhere or tore down walls and pillars with his bare hands or his body weight.

Yup, the guy was packing power underneath his masks. Tony had been wise to choose only very remote locations for this gig.

Loki was breathing heavily now, supporting his elbows on his drawn up knees. His eyes were still a bit too wide, but the almost physically tangible tension had eased. He did look a bit of a mess though. There was dust in his dishevelled hair and all over his face… and all over the rest, in fact. There were red smears too, a cut across his forehead, and he still seemed to bleeding from a wound in his side. He seemed to have broken his left wrist at some point, for that one was bruised blue, and toward the end, he had been slightly limping.

But Tony wasn’t having any illusions – a few cuts and broken bones was not even close to what Loki could and would do to himself in an emotional crisis. In comparison, this was probably harmless.

‘Are you feeling a bit better now?’ Tony asked.

Loki breathed in and out a few more times. Then, he nodded.

‘Do you need more? You can have more, you know?’

Again, a hesitation. Then Loki shook his head.

‘Then let’s go home, Wreck-It Ralph. You deserve a nice bath and a smoothie or something. You’ve done a beautiful job.’

Avengers movie night was a tradition. Loki being there was not.

Tony had at first almost stiffened when catching the god lurking at the edges of the living room while the rest of the team was fighting over the best places on the sofa. Loki looked better than the day before, but his mask was thin, and the fact alone that he did not stride into the room as if he owned it proved that he was far from his usual self.

But when Clint caught wind of him, he moved away from his usual place on the sofa next to Tony and sat down cross-legged on the floor, and Nat called out, ‘Don’t be a peeping tom, Loki, get over here’, pointing at the newly vacated space.
And that was it. Nobody tried to prevent it; nobody claimed that Loki would use the movie night to club them to death with the remote control. Nobody protested when Loki rested his hand on Tony’s thigh.

They watched Jurassic Park, because that was a classic, and afterwards, Bruce actually asked Loki how he had liked it.

At least, even Loki looked a bit surprised by the question.

‘One of the security officers in the movie looked almost exactly like Fury’ said he then. ‘I was glad he died so quickly.’

Clint sniggered, pointed at Nat, ‘I told you so.’

‘And the man in the black shirt who makes moves on the female scientist all the time? He is… uncanny’

His nostrils flared and he looked at the screen with suspicion… which Tony found all the more interesting since he had rather had the impression during the movie that Loki had been eyeing this particular actor with a different kind of unease. He had caught the trickster shifting, licking over his bottom lip more than once...

…who would have known that Jeff Goldblum of all people was Loki’s type?

‘Calm down, it’s just a movie, he can’t hurt you’ Clint said. ‘And Goldblum is like fifty or something by now.’

‘Not everyone gets more harmless with age. I, in any case, would be on my guard against him’ Loki said wisely and earned, for that, a few odd looks.

Loki retreated to his rooms not long after, and after a casual discussion on how well the special effects of the original Jurassic Park still held up in the twenty-first century, Clint suddenly turned to Tony.

‘Loki is still not eating enough’ said he, almost accusingly. ‘You said you were doing something about this, but whatever you’re doing, it’s changing shit.’

Tony felt momentarily stunned by the reproach, even more so when Bruce nodded.

‘His calorie intake is more than concerning’ said he. ‘And when we treated his burns, we saw how he really looks under the glamour. I think even with his resilience, a breakdown is only a matter of time. The thing is, we do not know how quickly he can come back from that. He might have magical healing powers, but with humans, a recovery from underweight as serious as his can be long, and I don’t have to tell you the mortality rate of anorexia patients. He qualifies for the diagnosis. I think we have to intervene.’

‘I…’ Tony began. The events of the last days had pushed that particular problem to the back of his mind, and now he felt caught unaware by it. ‘He’s consuming about half a dozen smoothies a day by now. I try to trick him into drinking protein shakes, but when the percentage of protein is too high, he simply refuses them. Other than the odd madeleine now and then, and that one half bowl of pho, I haven’t been able to make him consume any solid food. And I don’t know what will happen if I address the matter directly. He does not always… react well to things like that. Putting it… exceedingly mildly.’
And Tony had the bad gut feeling that Loki was already pretty close to the limit of issues he could bear confronting without lashing out in a rather drastic way.

‘We might still have to address it and prepare for the fall out’ said Nat and shook her head. ‘Anorexia is an addiction, it won’t just go away by itself. And this has been going on for too long, the risk is getting too high.’

‘I… I really don’t think…’ Tony began.

‘Also, protein affects the taste’ said Bucky now, and again, all eyes flew to him. ‘Whatever the reasons are that keep him from eating other food, I’m not surprised he doesn’t like those – I certainly didn’t. But there are shakes that taste good and provide a whole lot of calories anyway. You should have told me, Tony. I had a weight problem, remember?’

Tony stared. Yes, he… remembered. It had been in the beginning. Bucky had lost weight quickly at first, because like Steve, he required far more food than the average person. But at the same time, he had not been used to solid food since Hydra had… well, in Tony’s opinion, Hydra was not a snake with many heads but a snake with many assholes.

And then, Tony remembered, someone, maybe Jarvis, maybe Pepper, had found something that had made Bucky gain weight again. He had not spent much thought on it at the time, it had just been another problem solved that allowed him to concentrate on his machines again and allowed him to forget that there were other people running around in his tower, actually living close by, breathing and eating and using the toilets, with all their feelings, all their needs…

‘Yeah’ he said eloquently. ‘Right. I will come back to that. Thank you.’

A pause.

‘Is it just me’ asked he then. ‘Or have you all been a lot less hostile with Loki lately? Almost… I’m going to use a bad word here, Steve, shut your ears… protective? Mind, not that I complain, it makes my life a lot easier. I would just like to know what’s behind it all.’

The room fell silent at that, and there was a moment during which various Avengers were avoiding various eyes.

‘Look’ said Tony. ‘If this is a sensitive matter, I’ll just take the friendliness and run, but-’

‘It’s not’ Clint interrupted him. ‘Or… not…’

‘Asgard is fucked up’ Natasha said soberly. ‘And it has fucked him up.’

‘Well, yeah, but…’ Tony said, narrowing his eyes. ‘You didn’t exactly accept that as an excuse before, so…’

‘It’s not an excuse!’ Clint said and shifted on his seat. ‘Of course it isn’t! This… it doesn’t work like that, Tony, that you can just… it’s not like I’ve forgotten… anything. But… the problem is…’

‘… rather the things Clint remembers’ Nat finished for him.

Clint shot her an evil eye for that.

‘Don’t talk for me’ said he. ‘The problem is… I know more now. Too much to still… I know how undercover operations work, okay? Working for the enemy and everything? And the thing is, even when he was being coerced by Thanos into invading Earth, Loki tried to keep the damage minimal. I
didn’t remember that before, so I couldn’t… but now I do, I was there, and I tried to argue him out of it. He had to wipe my memories so often because I disagreed with his tactics all the time, telling him exactly how and where he could do more harm.’

Ah. Clint had not shared that detail before. Or at least not with Tony. It seemed the others were more up to date.

‘And he was on a very, very short leash’ Clint went on. ‘We were not only his soldiers, we were also Thanos’ insurance. A fucking surveillance system. If any of us had had any serious doubt about his loyalty… let’s say I had several plans ready that didn’t require him to be or stay alive.’

He had said the last bit rather bitterly.

‘So he had to play his part convincingly, or his whole plan would have blown up in his and our faces spectacularly. And he still… found ways around that. He played his part, but he could have destroyed far more than he did. I’m a professional, Tony, Nat is a professional and we agreed… we don’t know… we both don’t know for sure whether we could have managed that well under the same circumstances, to be honest.’

He grimaced, then looked away, shifting some more.

A pause.

‘And then there is his family’ said Bruce. ‘The more I learn about his father, and this whole…’

He waved his hand, probably referring to the homophobia and all the other freaky shit the Avengers had caught a glimpse of.

‘… it… doesn’t really get any prettier, does it?’

‘I should warn you’ Tony said slowly. ‘If you want to piss Loki off, pity is really the way to go. He does not appreciate that sentiment at all.’

‘Well, who does?’ Clint scoffed. ‘I know I didn’t.’

‘…neither did I’ said Steve. ‘Tony, maybe you don’t realise that, but… a few of us didn’t have exactly an easy childhood… or an easy life, for that matter. Be it sickness, or… homophobia, or getting used by others… quite a few of us do know something about how that works. And Loki is also not the only one who has a history of… making mistakes.’

‘A history of killing people, more like’ Bucky said more dryly.

‘My death toll might not compete with Loki’s invasion’ said Natasha. ‘But I think that over the years I might have killed more people than the Hulk ever did… roughly…’

She cocked her head, as if running through the calculation.

‘If one takes into account all the people killed with your weapons, Tony, you still win the contest though.’

‘… right’ Tony said, not wanting to think too much about that little detail. He had not realised that the Avengers could just as well be called a self-help group for ex-more-or-less-supervillain survivors of trauma. ‘I suppose in that case, Loki fits right in.’

‘He… does’ Bruce said, still sounding a little surprised by that himself.
‘…when have you all gotten so… reasonable?’ asked Tony, now narrowing his eyes again.

‘Let’s say that a few things happened that shifted our view on the matter’ said Steve. ‘Thor’s homophobia and racism, Clint’s memories, the way Loki reacted to your injury. It is evident that despite what he says, he cares for you on some level.’

‘Thor’s latest visit and all that was said between the lines’ Nat said. ‘I might not yet know all the details, but Loki’s and Thor’s behaviour and body language just screamed dysfunctional family to me, including verbal, emotional and very probably also physical abuse. And then of course I asked Thor about the whole incident with Loki’s lips being sewn shut, and that one speaks a pretty clear language.’

‘You… know about that?’ Tony said.

Nat rolled her eyes.

‘It was important information’ said she. ‘That you, rather predictably, did not share with us. Of course I took care to get it on my own. And yes, I told the others.’

‘I’m not sure that’s really…’

‘Oh, come on, Tony, it was obvious that Thor was going to tell anyone who prodded enough’ said she. ‘Trying to keep this a secret from the team was simply pointless, and every piece of information that makes us understand the resident traumatised and emotionally and mentally unstable, suicidal level eight threat slash ally a little better can only help. Also, I had the impression Thor was relieved to… rain… about it some more. That guy evidently has a lot of grieving to catch up with.’

‘…right… so you talked to them… about…’ Tony said, increasingly nervous.

‘I didn’t tell the others everything’ Nat said, rolling her eyes once more.

So, no exposing the rape trauma, Tony translated. He couldn’t help but breathe out in relief at that.

‘The story about the sewn shut lips has confirmed many of my suspicions though’ Nat continued. ‘Especially about the abusive family dynamic he and Thor have grown up in. You know that fairy tale about Old Mother Frost, where two girls come to her, working for her, one virtuous and diligent who will be showered with gold at the end of her work, Golden-Mary, and one lazy and uncaring who will be showered with pitch, Pitch-Mary?’

‘… is that also part of Norse mythology?’ Tony asked, his eyebrows furrowed. ‘It sure sounds like it, though the level of violence is a bit too low.’

But Nat shook her head.

‘It’s a German one’ said she. ‘But that’s not important right now. What the fairy tale describes is also a type of power dynamic that one can find again and again, where there are often two siblings or colleagues or other peers in a hierarchical system who are pushed into very specific, opposing, roles. And – this is very important – each role is dependent on the other. In our case, Loki has obviously been attributed very early on the role of the bad kid – Pitch-Mary – who can never do anything right, who needs to be punished. The failure. Thor in contrast is the good kid, Golden-Mary, who will be praised, who must excel at everything. The success. Thor could not be Golden-Mary without Loki playing the contrasting part, and the other way round. The whole thing is meant to control the children. It’s an often subconscious – and not very nice – way for the parents to remain in power, by playing their kids off against each other. And this is why in this game, neither of the kids can really win. Even Golden-Mary stays dependent on the parents, on their good graces. They are accepted,
and loved, but only if they never stray from their role. That’s why we always have to take into account here that Thor is traumatised too.’

Bucky huffed in the background.

‘He is’ Nat said, with a glance in Bucky’s direction. ‘That he evidently got the better part of the deal doesn’t mean that he is well. If only because he has had to watch his parents hurt his brother very badly, again and again. He has seen Loki’s mental health slowly decline for centuries, and he probably was never allowed to address the matter. In the end, they are both victims of the same abuse.’

‘Yeah, well, it wasn’t Odin who practically called Loki a whore right in front of us’ Bucky said. His voice was hard and tight. ‘I think your Golden-Mary has done his fair share of emptying buckets of pitch over Loki’s head, as you call it.’

‘Of course he has’ Nat said and shrugged. ‘That’s part of his role after all. One of the problems that the Golden-Mary child often encounters is that the benefits that come with the role make it very difficult to question it. Often, they are the ones who take much longer to recognise the abuse for what it is, to learn to cope with it. And often, they will then find out that they have been participating actively in that abusive family dynamic, and that’s a hard one to crack, especially if the culture you’ve grown up in doesn’t have good methods for coping with guilt. I’m not saying that Thor isn’t behaving like a total wanker sometimes. I’m telling you why he is behaving that way and that we can’t expect that to change overnight, even considering that he is, very obviously, trying. This is deeply ingrained in him, guys. And the more he’s going to learn about what exactly has been ingrained in him, the more it’s going to hurt.’

There was a pause.

‘Maybe you’re right, Nat’ said Steve then, a deep frown on his face. ‘…you are the one best trained in psychology of all of us – so I’m going to follow your lead here, honestly.’

He breathed out.

‘But then we have to find a way to shield Loki from this’ said he then. ‘Or at least from the worst of it. This is not… whatever we can or cannot expect from Thor, he continues to treat Loki in a way that… whatever our history with him, I won’t just continue to stand there and watch.’

And there, Tony had thought that he couldn’t be surprised anymore.

But he looked around, and nobody in the room seemed to find Steve’s assertion absurd.

Instead, Nat had to go and nod, solemnly, seriously.

‘We need him’ said she. ‘We won’t.’

*I*

‘I will leave tonight’ said Loki quietly.

They were working opposite to each other in the workshop again, at the same table. Loki was manipulating the stolen Uru with magic; Tony was busying himself with perfecting designs on the
Tony looked up.

‘Already’ asked he.

‘I think you should be able to handle your seidr on your own for a few days’ said Loki, a small crease between his eyebrows. ‘But if not… you remember our training?’

Tony nodded.

It was the only spell he had learned beyond the simple flame. If it was a spell at all.

It was really just a way of calling for his magic to return to him, to his centre. To stop doing whatever it was doing and protect his core instead.

‘It might not always work’ said Loki and cast down his eyes again. ‘It is always a matter of your relationship with it, how good you are at convincing it. However…’

He trailed off.

The magic that was enveloping the metal flickered, went out, the metal dropped on the table, leaving a dent.

It will be okay, Tony wanted to say, but didn’t, in the end. Loki would just shrug that off.

‘Loki’ said he instead. ‘There is something I wanted to ask you, if it’s okay.’

The god didn’t lift his eyes, but nodded.

This would be difficult, Tony knew. There was no telling how Loki would react.

‘Is there something… they didn’t do?’

Loki frowned.

‘What do you mean?’ asked he.

‘Is there something… you can’t associate?’ asked Tony. Because he had noticed how the god had been looking at him since their last attempt at having penetrative sex.

There was longing in his gaze. And… something almost like fear. He hadn’t initiated any intimate contact beyond a few kisses since then.

‘I still don’t know what you…’ Loki said.

And then, ‘No…no, they were very… thorough.’

That was what Tony had been afraid of. But there was something he remembered, and-

‘Have they ever sucked you off?’

Loki looked up at him, startled.

‘What?’ asked he. ‘No. That would be… that would make no sense. Haven’t I told you that the most demeaning activity an Aesir man can indulge in is-’
‘What if I blew you?’ Tony interrupted him, and Loki’s eyes widened slightly. ‘Cause you know, I have always immensely enjoyed sucking cock.’

Oh, he had.

‘Are… are you…’ Loki hesitated. ‘Are you seriously just offering to kiss and lick and suck my dick?’

‘Green’ Tony simply said, and Loki’s pupils dilated, a flush crept up his cheeks.

‘You cannot be serious…’

‘Very much so’ said Tony earnestly. ‘I can’t promise you to deep-throat you at the first try though, because honestly, I’ve never been with a guy before you who was so fucking well endowed – are all you gods gifted like that?’

Loki laughed at that, creases at the corners of his eyes, so worth it-

‘No, I am… well above average, even by Asgard’s standards’ said he, and his eyes glinted with a special kind of mischief. ‘There are men who surpass me… but not many.’

He bit his lips.

‘There was a certain satisfaction in that even while Baldur was fucking me bloody, making me a woman as the Aesir say, he had to be very aware that I still had the far bigger cock all the same.’

And he let out another laugh, and Tony laughed too.

‘Talk about overcompensating’ said Tony.

‘I imagine he still frets about it, down there in Valhalla’ Loki agreed, chuckling.

Then he quieted down, regarded Tony suddenly so warmly, an honest smile on his lips. Worth it.

He bent forward then, ‘Green’ Tony whispered, Loki cradled his face with one hand, and placed a soft kiss on Tony’s lips, almost chaste.

Loki leant back again, that warmth still there in his gaze.

‘Thank you’ said he, and then he disappeared in the glow of teleportation.

Chapter End Notes

Tony, you did very, very well.

...Loki, as the Bard, has at least in inkling of the other alternative universes the Norns are spinning. And the Norn that is called Lise has certainly given him enough reasons to fear the Grandmaster, so many reasons in fact that Loki is even wary of Jeff Goldblum.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!