On Which I Stake My Name

by Like_a_Hurricane

Summary

Tony Stark is sick to death of Hydra, and S.H.I.E.L.D., and everything else that led to the clusterfuck his life has become. Pepper had severed their romantic relationship, in the hopes they could keep each other at all, while their friendship kept them clinging close, the more betrayals and guilt and secret bullshit cropped up from secret societies and secret government labs, the less worthy Tony felt of her company at all. She had been right to drop their romance when she did, or he would’ve self-destructed in the hopes it might be better for her, overall.

The last thing Tony expects is for a business meeting he’s in to be interrupted abruptly by a
blue-collar magician and sometimes-con-artist who needs to get a shape-shifting alien menace out of his apartment before she drives him insane.

"Your turn, futurist. You need an arcane specialist not so afraid to get his hands dirty as Dr. Strange to follow up on a local spot of surreal lunacy? I'm the man for the job. You got aliens who can lead a full-on invasion of New York?" John Constantine snorted. "Fuck off! Do I look like I've got that kinda funding?"

Notes
See the end of the work for notes.
The Basics of Identification

As a blue-collar magician with a tendency to make trouble with inhuman and human dark forces on an almost daily basis, as well as a man over forty coming to terms with the changes in the lifeblood pumping through old London town with a desire to keep a roof over his own head more often than not, John Constantine knew very well that even the likes of himself had to draw the line somewhere.

Demons troubling your grandmother? Fine. Ghost dog terrorizing yourself and your neighbors? Absolutely. Old magician friend found long-dead in a garbage chute like he'd propelled himself down it of his own accord until suffocating and suffering a horrible slow death in the midst of a bunch of refuse? Hell, the old bugger might be dead, but the mystery sure wasn't. John had taken a crack at it anyway. Living, dead, heavenly, infernal, and outright mythological: these forms of the supernatural were very much his forte.

John drew the line, however, at aliens.

No good ever came from that lunacy and more often than not it was a bunch of fae messing with some gullible drunks and the "probing" they did was--well, a lot more mundane than aliens from other planets or galaxies or whatnot. Either that or bloody superheroes, but in that case their business was with mad scientist super-villains and other heroes, not lowly common magicians who conned people about as often as aided them. They could keep their high moral standards to them-fucking-selves, as far as John was concerned. He'd saved the world a few dozen times by now, and he hadn't needed a jumpsuit in unnaturally bright and garish colors with a ridiculous cape, and a media following, to achieve any of it.

The aliens were worse, in a way, because John sympathized with them a bit; at least their costumes were just their own unearthly formal-wear or battle-gear or whatever. They couldn't help looking ridiculous, but that didn't mean John would willingly get involved in their dramatic messes. He drew the line at aliens, superheroes and other miscellaneous 'caped crusaders' (anyone who willingly accepted 'crusader' in their title tended to rub John's anti-imperialism and anti-religiosity tendencies the wrong way) villainous or otherwise. Let the well-funded heroes of earth from Captain Britain to the menagerie of lunatics in the Americas take care of that nonsense.

What his friend on the phone had, luckily, just sounded more like he'd been pranked by fae. Then again, Jesse knew about fae better than most, so maybe it really was aliens.

And in that case? John was having none of it.

"Listen, Jesse, it's just not my division, this stuff. I don't know shit about the laws of physics except about a million ways to break them, let alone how to track UFOs."

"There's no UFO's, John, for fuck's sake. Look, I sent you an email. Go open it."

With a put-upon sigh, the blond magician hauled himself from his utterly indolent state of repose and shuffled over to the poor excuse for a laptop Chas had given him when, of all things, his daughter had been done with it.

It was an older Mac model, and a bit sluggish, but it ran, and it could access enough of the internet to satisfy what little interest John had in its poorly-organized offerings. People like him tended to know better than to share most of the truer shit in such a fickle medium as the internet. In non-virtual reality, whatever you put out there generally can't come back to bite you more than three times. In virtual reality, where it was all a little more screwy, it could be more like three thousand times, and
that was if the first half-dozen times somehow didn't kill you first. After that, god forbid any other mere mortal figure out your administrator password, or they might read a bit too much and wind up picking up where the last user left off.

Magic had trouble, in the virtual world, distinguishing between "caster" and "user" which John had taken advantage of, a few times, all of which had been added to his already-impressive array of recurring nightmares, because he'd had to hear the screaming and see... well, best not revisit that.

"Alright. I found the email. Now what?"

"Click on the attachment."

"Maybe I already have?"

"Just do it, John."

Click-click.

Taking a long, thoughtful drag off his cigarette, John squinted at the complicated design scorched into the grass by unknown means. It was old magic. Older than the last mythical rotters he'd dealt with, even: bloody Merlin and his lot. Old enough to be deeply disconcerting. Not aliens then? He could fucking hope. "This is coming and going with meteorological oddities too, you said? What kind?"

"Lightning storms. Nasty ones, atypical for the area. Strange lights in the clouds. A couple of friends of mine around here came to me, saying they'd had dreams about someone falling forever through fire, but they woke up convinced he was about to land."

Sounded more like myth than aliens, with the addition of the inexplicable viking-looking knot-work design burnt into the earth. That, plus lightning and thunder, made John reluctantly itch with curiosity. This looked so much like something man wasn't supposed to know that he had to pick at the marks it left, like ripping away a scab to see how the wound under it was faring. "Alright. I'll have you know that this is one of few things that have ever dragged me to Wales, mate, let alone that close to Cardiff. If I accidentally wind up an extra in an episode of Doctor Who again, I will make you regret it for the rest of your short life."

"Just come have a look, John, and help me reassure the local sensitives that the apocalypse isn't actually nigh."

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The scorch-mark was mostly worn away and a bit damp by the time Jesse led the consulting magician to it. It was about ten yards from one edge of the (chock-full of delusions of grandeur as the name was) Plymouth Great Wood treeline. Technically it was on private property. Neither magician actually cared.

John knelt and ran a finger over the places the grass had been charred to stumps, in between healthier still-greenish bits. A crackle of power hummed up his arm, making him taste ozone and see an array of neon colors, dimmed like they reflected off the opaque surface of a pearl.

"That's definitely magic. Seems like the remnants of transport, actually." He looked skyward
suspiciously. If there turned out to be magic aliens, he'd have to get seriously drunk with one of them and ask a lot of very pointed questions. Then again, he'd always suspected there might be some connection between the faerie courts and something from off-earth, but only when he happened to be on acid, or mushrooms, and dreaming about past lives. "Maybe someone scouting the area."

"Aiming before they fire?" Jesse suggested. He looked younger than John remembered, but more steely. He also had gauged piercing in each earlobe with what looked like very small tusks poked through them, and hair the color of slightly-faded indigo ink that clashed terribly with his ginger eyebrows, but John sort of approved of that, for a man who mostly ran an only-vaguely-occult-leaning bookstore that formerly belonged to his (now contently retired in Yorkshire) parents, as Jesse did.

"All this fire business. You had one of these dreams yourself, then?"

"Dream, no. I was standing around out here, right before that happened the night before last." He nodded at the burnt grass. "I might've been on mushrooms at the time, but I swear they was wearing off. I'd finished my own ceremonial work an everything about thirty yards that way."

He gestured toward the tree-line. "So I was sore and a bit uncomfortable and nauseous from throwing up half the 'shrooms, because it was honestly a bit bigger spell than I usually do, and I was shaken and a bit too sober, you know? I was thinking about finishing the bag, to be honest, just to make the walk home more bearable when all these lights started overhead and I thought maybe they hadn't worn off after all, so I walked out this way, since the wind seemed to be swirling around this spot. I walked out, and this beam of technicolor light came down here on the grass, right where this mark is now, and there were folks standin' in the light, see?"

Jesse gestured widely with his long, pale and freckled arms and spidery hands as he elaborated, "One was tall and terrifying in a horned helmet and armor with glowing gold eyes, but another was just, like, this old man in a broad hat with a couple of birds on his shoulders: big ol' ravens. There was another man, tall blond and a bit beefcake to be honest, who was arguing with the old bloke. Well, more like arguing *at* him, I suppose. I don't think the stoic old geezer was listening. Then they spotted me and just..."

He shivered for a moment before continuing, "There was light and the flash of some sort of symbol and I woke up on my ass back where I'd been casting earlier, and stumbled out thinking I'd prove to myself nothing happened and I'd throw things about the interior of my circle all topsy-turvy just due to the 'shrooms and a bit of post-casting hangover, you know? You do know; I remember you do, I've seen you off your tits the same way. But the point is, instead of finding nothing, I found this and called you, because I dunno how to deal with Norse Gods showing up in the middle of fucking Wales, but you've probably... well, you're the only one I know who's even survived just demons, right?"

John considered mentioning his past experiences with gods too: Aztec and Aboriginal Australian, for a start. He refrained. Best to be underestimated, and therefore set others' expectations of his capabilities firmly on the low end. He disappointed fewer folks that way. "What symbol?"

"It's a Valknut," Jesse said, pulling a folded bit of paper from his pocket, with a trefoil knot drawn on it, and proffering it.

John took it. The younger man was something of an artist as a hobby, and it showed in the detail he'd put into the drawing. There was something in the details around the edges of the knot that made John dizzy the longer he stared at them. He cursed himself when he realized it was a knockout-spell of some sort, so no wonder it made him start fading in and out to look at too long. He tucked the paper into his back pocket. "So, then. Odin, at least, and a couple of others, checked this place out, and
stumbled across an innocent but colorful little earthly magician snooping around. Maybe they'll choose another spot for whatever mess they've got planned."

"Well..." Jesse looked nervous. "Look, you'd better come see this. I didn't mention it over the phone because it scares the bejesus out of me just looking at it." He started to lead the other man toward the tree-line.

"What sort of spell were you up to, before I go wandering into one of your circles?"

"I'd lost something important."

"How important?"

"I'd lost my name. It weren't easy getting it back," Jesse said flatly. "Fucking faeries, right?"

John nodded. "You made an ass of yourself and got out of it by the skin of your teeth, you're saying."

"Well, yeah."

"Good. I'm glad you made it," John said, with a bit more sincerity than he meant to actually convey; he'd known too many people who'd met far nastier fates.

"Me too, mate. Me too."

The older mage spent the duration of the walk considering what a lot of old gods might think of a kid like Jesse, of the spells he'd been working and the mushrooms in his system, and what they might be after, or what they might've even been looking for on their visit to fucking Wales of all places, to begin with. He had his suspicions, just based on the Eddas, unreliably post-Christianity as those were. (He'd learned a lot about distrusting those sort of resources, after a few incidents around Russia got some mates of his killed before he could even reach them.) That said, if anyone in Norse myth was likely to be banished from up on high, and made to fall through fire for a seeming eternity before crashing hard into the ground in the obscure armpit of the U.K. that was Cardiff? Well, only one name came to mind.

Even given a chance to think a long while about it—-not missing a beat when Jesse changed direction abruptly and stepped through a tree (concealment spells were all playing to expectation, and what people expected to see in forests happened to be trees; Jesse was always a bit better at illusions than John was altogether comfortable with; a simple "nothing to see here" bit of suggestion in the air usually worked well enough for his own self without bothering to add a layer of visual distortion too) and into a section of the woods temporarily protected from casual intruders who wouldn't otherwise know any better than to trod straight into an active casting circle—-there were few places he could think of more suited than Cardiff for obscurity and inconvenience, except perhaps the middle of nowhere in Oklahoma, over in the states, or... well, northern Scotland, frankly. Maybe Estonia. That didn't mean he liked the idea of being anywhere nearby when the gods either showed back up, or sent one of their most infamous criminals careening down to earth.

Given Loki Lie-smith's reputation as a god of chaos, mischief and lies, John wasn't at all sure he wanted to meet the little shit. All of his best tricks for use on gods and demons relied awful heavily on his ability to exploit their pride, their belief in their own superiority, and their greed. If the myths were true and Loki had really been impregnated by a horse and given birth to the resulting eight-legged foal, and was a con-man in his own right as well, John had a sinking suspicion that such a god wouldn't be so easily tripped up and ripped off as most. John had out-conned many con men in his time. If he managed this one, it'd certainly be another one for the books, but John didn't like the
idea. Nothing felt right about it. He preferred to have a better idea of any potential enemy's weaknesses.

The more he thought about it, too, didn't he remember something insane about Thor in New York? Something to do with the invasion fiasco?

Damn. He should've checked the internet for that before he'd even bothered. He began swearing to himself silently, but at great length, for the final, short leg of their walk. People always tried to suggest smartphones for such problems as this. John enjoyed coming up with new suggestions for how they might most efficiently shove that idea up their backsides. He hadn't given in to cellphones in the first place until the past few years, and that had only been to prevent his own kin and Chas from having him regularly kidnapped whenever they wanted to communicate with him reliably.

Then the older magician saw Jesse's casting site and the previously inexplicable sensations of his stomach doing its best impression of a cement mixer suddenly made a lot more sense.

The circle was unbroken: a sturdy, thick layer of salt under a series of flat stones to help them resist light rain or wind. No, more than that, John realized. Each of the stones had some sigils carved around their edges: good ones too. Jesse was really getting the hang of it, these days. No wonder his mucking about with fae had caught the interest of all-too-powerful potentially-interfering parties.

Everything within the circle seemed to get less light than the surrounding brush, and there was something in the air about it, a desolation and outcry of loss.

"Whatever's got into your circle, it's not looking for a name like you were," John heard himself saying slowly. "No, it's lost something deeper than that, and got its hook in here, somehow, and it's already altered a bit of what traces you left behind. He knows his name, but something else is broken or missing, some anchorage..."

"You alright, John?"

The older magician stepped closer to the circle, looking over the whole site. A Bag of spilled psychedelic mushrooms within the circle had become a faerie ring in a terribly short period of time. The smell of smoke, rot, ozone and something else unnaturally clean in comparison--bloodied ice and metal--filled the air. "I'm alright, but some other poor bugger isn't. When they dropped you back in this circle here, I think one of them made the mistake of saying whoever's name. It's probably still in the air, and that's how he managed to get a grip on your circle; his name looked for him, and when it found him, he held on tight to where it came from." He considered stepping over the circle of salt and stone. It was clearly the worst possible idea. Clearly.

"Would his name burn that there?" Jesse asked, pointing to a make-shift altar made of larger flat stone and a few bits of wood. The wooden back of the little structure had an image charred into it: a male figure, surrounded by flames.

"If he's desperate enough to grasp at straws, like the slightest mention of his name somewhere far away, and the creature doing the reaching happened to be very powerful, then maybe so." He took another small step closer to the circle.

"John--I don't think going in there is a good idea. It's clearly not mine anymore."

"You're right. It isn't." John stepped over the salt and stone, into the circle, and immediately gasped at the sensation of smothering heat and the smell of smoke and roasting skin. There was a sound like a cut-off scream.
"Who are you?" a voice snarled, rough and thin, barely functional, choked out from a very raw throat.

John could feel the breath of that voice on his face, but could see only red-and-black smoke. "I don't think you need to be knowing my name just yet. I've got a feeling I might know who you are already, but the myths are vague at best and probably pretty misleading. Mind making yourself visible like a good host?"

A pained laugh followed. "Myths. Ah, another voice from Midgard, and not my brother's this time."

The magician blinked. "Odin? Or uh..." He searched his memory frantically for a second. "Hellblindi?"

"What?" Now the wrecked god sounded outright incredulous. "No, you fool. Thor."

"Wait, I thought Odin was your blood-brother?"

"Hah! Yes, and you mortals all also tend to keep telling that tired old farce about the horse, as well," sneered the trickster. "Don't remind me of all that dreck. It's bad enough having traces of mind-control from an object of infinite power and the will of a mad demi-god burnt out of my mind by purging fires, without having to be reminded of mankind's ludicrous and slanderous storytelling when it comes to my person. I have never given birth in my life, nor is the Midgard serpent my offspring."

"So Odin is what, to you?"

"A betrayer who has lied to me for almost the entire duration of my very long life as though we were truly flesh and blood and he were my father, which he never was. Who are you?"

"I'm still not telling. Why are you occupying this circle?"

"It is... useful."

"It was meant to find a lost name, but you know your name well enough. What are you looking for?"

"My story. I have lost... a lot of context I had previously assumed to be applicable to me, but it was all for naught, now that I know what I truly am, and that the blood of Odin does not flow through my veins."

"You committed some crimes somewhere along the way, too, I presume?"

"Of course," Loki sighed. "Petty ones. Also an attempt at genocide shortly after committing a combination of patricide and regicide in one fell swoop. Also falling into an abyss. I returned, but was still lightly brainwashed, and now have spent months, by your planet's calendar, getting the last of Thanos' influence burnt out of my very being. It's been a long few years."

"Your voice is sounding a bit better."

A low, malevolent chuckle. "You haven't noticed it, then."

Distantly, the magician heard his friend calling him, but couldn't turn toward the sound. He wondered if he even looked like he was moving, or if any of his words were audible, from outside the circle. "You've made me a locus to fixate on. Fuck."

"You stepped into my circle wearing easily detected identification, John Constantine, and your
talents, the power of your name and your, hmm, impressive reputation have their merits."

The magician winced. He'd known stepping into the circle was a bad idea. He had done it anyway, because how could he resist poking into the business of the likes of Loki, god of chaos and lies. To be fair: chaos and lies were his bread and butter, his best games, and his constant companions—whether he liked it or not.

*Flick this suggestion of an old viking god across the nose, I thought. It'll be fun, I thought. Clearly this is all a lot of bullshit and a bunch of renegade Nazis are about to show up and declare this to all be part of an evil plot to bleach heaven, or something ridiculous. No way this is really that Loki, right? Right? So he’d thought. I mean, what are the odds of them coming to fucking Cardiff? Right?*

“I swear, if I’ve wandered onto a Doctor Who set *one more time, I’ll—*”

The god cut him off with a pointed throat-clearing, which was absurd because it sounded somewhere right between disapproving Liverpudlian primary school teacher, and psychotic super-villain. Before the fair-haired mortal magician could inquire about that, Loki observed, “You are *precisely* the sort of creature suitable to act as a focal conduit, to a god like myself. *Much* better than the younger little mage. A little more gifted though he is, you are *far* more ideal."

"Why is that?" Not like John didn't have a suspicion or several, all of them tinged with bitter chagrin and a bit of self-resentment.

"You are a liar and a killer and a cheat, of course. You don't murder *many* yourself, but you lead them to their own ends, in your ways. You are a trickster, and an infamous one. I can see every trick you've ever played, every monster you've slain, every betrayal you've committed against friends and foes alike, and every speck of blood on your hands. I can even *sense* something a bit other than human in your blood! How very novel."

"Knock it off, Lie-smith."

"Lie-smith," the trickster mused. Two deep green points of light glowed through the smoke for a few moments. "Oh, yes, I've *missed* the old names."

"Oh have you? I'm full of useless information like that. I'm a walking occult library, let me tell you, Scar-lip. Silver-tongue. Father of Fenris-wolf, thief of giants, maker of mischief, the cunning Ás, thief of Brising's girdle-" That one earned him a chuckle. "-father of Helheim's queen, Sky-walker, Accuser and Tricker of the gods. Does that about cover it? I'd rather not actually grovel, you see, because I would have a potentially lethal allergic reaction to my own humility. You well-greeted, now, and maybe less sour?"

A low, long hiss from the god followed, sounding pained and relieved at the same time. "Oh, that *was clever* of you, however unintentional." There was the sound of metal straining and creaking, as Loki sighed into a stretch that made his muscles burn and long-stiff joints protest. The magician caught a glimpse of a cracked-and-shattered half-smile on the lower half of Loki’s face, through the smoke. Then everything went black entirely: no color, no sense of his own body either. John tried to gulp, but couldn’t figure out where his throat had gone. Paralysis, or had he been dematerialized yet again?

When the lights came back on, along with the rest of his senses, the smoke was thicker again, and Loki’s voice was louder, for all that it sounded somehow bloodier, as he said thoughtfully, “You meant to flatter me, but you have done quite something else...” Hidden by the smoke, thin lips caressed the shape of the words 'maker of mischief' and 'Accuser of the gods' as though savoring the flavor of them. Then he let his head tip back and laughed, a little, through audible pain. “O, how
much I’d forgotten.”

John hesitated, recalling the nature of the circle he stood in, and Loki’s purpose in maintaining even such a tenuous hold on it. "Reliving the good old days now, are you?"

"No... no, I am realizing that they were never good enough, nor was I, when judged by those biased too heavily against my own nature, given precisely who and what I am. I have been... far too tame. I have assumed myself Aesir, all this time, and restrained so many of my impulses and held myself back out of respect for virtues never meant for me. The very best of myself, the most unusual qualities, those which make me myself, and make the name of Loki worth remembering and fearing, are not Aesir qualities. I am as I have always been... only now more so."

The ground quivered underfoot.

"Thank you, John Constantine. I would return to you a gift you once thought was not yours, but I do believe it suits you better, for being thus earned, rather than inborn with presumptuous expectations..."

The magician felt a prickle of something that stung and itched, up along his spine. "What gift?"

"I suspect you've missed the rhythms of synchronicity. I think you will find it all the better, being able to choose and steer your own path through it."

Then the smoke cleared.

"-ohn!"

The blond magician turned, seeing Jesse look pale and worried. "I suspect only a few seconds just passed?"

"Yeah, you just went sort of still and pale. I was fucking worried, John. What the hell did you do that for?"

"Well..." John flexed his fingers, feeling a tingle of something--there wasn't as much of it out here, far from the denser populations of cities and towns where synchronicity flooded the air with a tangle of lives all hopelessly tangled together, but he could still feel a whisper of it again. He really had missed it: the ties to the rhythm of all the world, great and small, which sung to him softly, and led him perhaps not where he had intended to go, but always to right where he needed to be. It wasn’t so clear as before, but perhaps that was the added complication of being the one holding the reins this time; he had to pick his own melodies to follow, and learn how to use this part of himself all over again. More than his own pride would ever let him really admit before, he had longed to have this back. "I don't regret it." He looked at the altar: the humanoid figure amongst the flames had vanished, and the painted fires themselves looked... faded, somehow. John wasn't at all certain that would actually qualify as a good sign, but it made it clear that the circle was no longer Loki's. He reached out with a foot and kicked over one of the stones, and broke the salt ring beneath too, just in case.

"What did you do?"

"Oh. I just called Loki a bunch of names and he decided he didn't want to owe me a debt over it, and now here I am."

"You are absolutely stark raving mad, aren't you?"

"Usually, yeah. Let's head to pub, shall we? I need a drink, after that."
Loki was dragged before the throne in chains again, but this time much more cheerfully.

So he hadn't anticipated Odin breaking out of his forced rest soon enough to reclaim his throne. So he hadn't even realized there were still slivers of Thanos' purposes, wrapped in bits of reality distortion playing off the trickster's own paranoia and more greedy impulses, leftover from dealings with Thanos until Odin traced his reasoning for sending the Aether away back to them.

So he wasn't ungrateful to have those shards gone at last, and perhaps the almost-hope in Thor's otherwise stern expression wasn't actually as unwelcome as Loki might seem to outwardly regard it.

That didn't mean he had to behave for any of these traitorous Aesir lunatics, and as such he beamed at them gleefully, as though he were in on the greatest joke in all the realms, and they were all playing into it perfectly.

Predictably, all of the court seemed to frown at him almost in unison.

"Well, I feel quite refreshed," Loki announced. "It's very good to have one's mind to oneself, after rather too long staring through a sort of bluish haze."

"Do you claim that your actions before now, during the times you committed the crimes to be leveled against you, have not been your own, since your return to Yggdrasil after your fall?" boomed the All-Father, genuinely curious.

Loki gave it a bit of thought, clearly weighing the option of lies versus truth without favoring one or the other, or feeling anything like a scrap of actual guilt. "Nnno, not really. I was no more inhibited than a drunkard, or someone on the edges of a Berzerker rage just before its tipping point. I was mad, but I was also still myself, and my decisions, while weighted in favor of matters which might please Thanos--particularly the relocation of the Aether, which I do believe crossed a line, as I can't fathom how I ever found that idea sane in the first place, as of now--were not actions I might not have done otherwise, though I was a bit more resistant to being brought back to reason than I would've been without interference from Thanos, but I do not plea to be held unaccountable for my failures; not when the courts of Asgard have very clearly set precedents, in other cases of persons about as inhibited as myself, and found them still guilty... save for one small factor, which has never been brought before such a court, for none have dared break one particular, interesting little law concerning mages and adoption." He raised his index finger casually, as though the gesture didn't also require him to lift a lot of chains, and his opposite hand too, to achieve.

"What factor is that?" Odin asked, eyes narrowing with suspicion.

"In the oldest laws writ down by your father when Asgard was first formed, it is specified that should any child raised by citizens of Asgard, and prove to have strong gifts for mage-craft, they should be aware of their origins, for the safety of all," Loki said. "It is not in any books in this room, but think back, Odin All-Father," Loki said coldly. "You know I speak truth in this, and that law was carved in stone long before your own birth."

"It is," the All-Father said. "Its punishment was left to be determined by the rightful king of Asgard."

"Which I was," Loki countered, sly and fierce. "I am a mage, and you shattered the foundation of my identity. No mage as powerful as I has been so betrayed as that," He declared coldly. "In the time
between discovering my true heritage as no son of Odin, and my fall from the rainbow bridge, I was very much not in control of myself, my actions, or even my magic, fully. My fall through the abyss was all the worse for that, and left my mind open enough for those slivers of influence from Thanos, now freshly removed, to be embedded in the first place. I almost believe Frigga must have known that my actions, more even than Thor’s, would be the key to unlocking your long-lost humility and belief in your own fallibility, Son of Bor, for you have never been more wrong in your entire life than every moment you have spent judging my worth.”

A susurration of confusion and anger hummed through the crowd. It took the trickster a few moments to discern what particular details so enthused them. When he did, he could not help but grin all the wider.

Oh, Loki realized. No one told them.

All of the royal family before him looked uncomfortable, and the trickster's mirth only increased. "Oh, how fine this is! Do I get to tell all of them my own self?"

"Loki," Thor warned. "Please."

"Would it ruin what little good-feeling they might have towards me, for the knowledge that I killed Laufey myself, if they happened to be told that I'm his bastard son raised as Aesir, never told the truth until all that I had built of myself as a mage had solidified around the narrative that I was your son, Odin All-Father, and brother to Thor by blood? I had accepted long ago that I must be something of an anomaly amongst my kin, a shadow in comparison to so much damned light, but I still knew in my heart that I belonged to Asgard," Loki continued, the throne room silent as held breaths around him suddenly. "I suppose that it might. Or they might come to doubt the wisdom of their king, for his ever pursuing such a foolish plan as bringing a creature such as myself into your home and then lying to me for the entire duration of my stay, expecting me to never find out. For any grander schemes you might’ve had for me in relation to peace with Jotunnheim: I would never have been suitable as a diplomatic liaison to Laufey, not with how I was raised, and educated, in Asgard by Aesir teachers including yourself; and especially not given all that I have learned over the centuries about the people that monstrosity Laufey and his father laid waste to, when they froze Jotunnheim. For you to claim that you ever clung to that dream is to admit yourself a fool, Odin All-Father. At least Frigga had the decency to love me selfishly, instead of regarding me solely with pity and condescension as you always have."

The court at his back was growing louder now, full of questions and increasing anger. Loki always did know how to work a crowd.

Well. He knew how to work them into a mob and aim them at other people. Usually Thor, but for now this would do.

"Enough!" Odin bellowed.

All fell silent.

Loki remained smiling, but it did not quite reach his eyes.

"Your words are not without truth, Loki," Odin said. "I have served you ill, as a father. There are many lessons, it has become clear to me now, that neither you nor your brother ever truly learned."

The trickster's eyes narrowed, his smile fading into a sneer of hostility and suspicion. He waited, as Odin strode down from his throne to stand only a few steps before him. The younger trickster looked into the face of the god-king he had once idolized, and felt only bitter contempt. He had no love left
to waste on a fool who had done more damage to the mind and soul of Loki than anyone save Frigga could probably even have fathomed, had she been alive and present. "I no longer trust your guidance, nor your lessons. Your wisdom is tainted by prejudice, old fears, and a suspicion that I cannot be controlled by you to a degree that you will ever be comfortable with, for I was never yours, and never will I be your pawn again."

Odin's expression darkened. "You speak as though you are the one in control of your life, Loki."

"I am in control of all that escapes you. That includes myself; it has before, and it will again. You do not truly know me and it is true that you never have, and never will, just as you never truly understood Jotunnns themselves. You would have rather dealt in peace with Laufey than liberate his world from the ice, and you do not think that criminal?"

"What point would there be?" the All-Father snapped. "All that is beneath the ice is dead."

"Knowledge never dies. Ideas never die. Stories never die," Loki corrected. "Whole civilizations, whole cities and small nations frozen over, and you do not think there is anything to save? Do you recall nothing of the power of the old giants, or are you merely fearful of their potential, as you are of my own?"

"Your potential requires more temperance before it can be trusted. You have been broken, but never humbled by any other than your own kin. You question my lack of action against the ice of Jotunnheim, and yet you carelessly destroyed a few hundred mortal lives when you wreaked havoc upon Midgard: lives briefer than ours, and thus rarer, for how fleeting they are, in all the nine," Odin chastised.

"You stare down upon Midgard from up here in your great city, and watch thousands, if not millions of them, kill one another every single day, for the pettiest reasons, and the most tragically beautiful alike," Loki countered. "Count for yourself how many died the day before my arrival, compared to every day I was upon earth, and the following weeks after my presence, and you may notice a rather different pattern. Before my actions, they thought themselves alone in the universe, and they had no one to fight but one another. I killed many. I wreaked havoc, and did a bit of damage around and in a few cities of Midgard. The deaths of innocents therein? The fault for that lies with me, but I spared every child I could from the worst of it. The ends I have achieved do not justify the distasteful means I used, but you cannot say that the earth is not a little less self-destructive, now that the people occupying it know for certain that their neighbors on the ground are less a threat to them than some that might watch from the stars overhead. You abandoned them long ago, All-Father. I have brought them back into the nine realms. Do you fear their potential too?" He crowed a laugh, when this resulted in being backhanded, and continued to laugh, despite the stricken look on Thor's face when the trickster straightened himself back up, grinning with a little smear of blood across his very white teeth.

The crowd at his back reacted, but their whispers were frightened: of Loki, or of Odin, it was difficult to discern.

"You hardly had such benign intentions at the time," Odin spat.

"What do intentions matter in the eyes of the law? I would not be spared anything at all for better intentions. No, it matters not what I intended; it matters what the results were, the pain and grief and horror suffered because of the things I have done. Is that not true? Is that not the letter of the law when loss of life is taken into account?" he sneered. "It is the scars that matter, both those which leave behind visible marks, and those subtler traumas psychological. That said, truly, I must ask: what were your intentions, as you raised me, Odin Borsson? Would you forgive yourself the harm you’ve done, for how well-intended your actions and decisions have been all this time? Are you
proud of the results?" Another blow from the back of the All-Father’s hand followed; it was almost enough to rock the younger trickster back on his heels. Again, Loki laughed, audibly sucking blood to pool at the back of his throat before swallowing it down and straightening up again to meet his adoptive father’s stare with his wild cat-green eyes. "If ever brute force were enough to temper my malice, do you not think that having Thor as my elder sibling might have made a meeker monster of me?" He snapped, teeth now redder still, and his voice made rough and wet with the blood.

Odin hesitated and the whole room was silent except for the younger trickster's malevolent sniggering.

Loki ran his tongue across his teeth visibly and swallowed a bit of the excess red once more before speaking further. "You believe I do not value mortal lives highly enough, you say." He rolled his eyes, and managed to put his entire body into the movement. “It is obvious you have some punishment designed to ‘educate’ me to that end. If you still so dare to try, I recommend that you state the conditions of my sentence, and I will escape by thinking of something you never could," he whispered. "You watch, and you learn, All-Father. I will teach you lessons of my own."

The All-Father's eyes narrowed further, but he took a half-step back and announced, "For your crimes, you will be rendered mortal. Not all of your powers can be bound, but your magic will be weaker than an amateur mortal’s, and to even attempt greater magics beyond the mere manipulation light will, after a mere hour, render you unconscious due to pain. Manipulation of matter, should you attempt more than the smallest exertion of force, might stop your heart. You will be bound in this manner, until you truly learn the loss of every mortal life you have ended since your fall, and in doing so come to understand the true potential of humanity."

The fallen prince grimaced a little. "How melodramatic."

"I will trust your expertise in that matter," Odin deadpanned in response, and struck the floor of the courtroom with the butt of his spear.

Then Loki felt only pain and saw only darkness, until again there was fire.

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This time the fire was briefer, but more terrifying in its own way; it was his immortality being stripped while he was hurled through the earth's atmosphere, after all.

Pulling at his magic for aid was reflex, but it made his very bones ache with searing agony until the moment he stopped.

Then he focused not on magic, but on his own bones and muscles and blood, and found them much more willing to obey him, even now. He curled into himself and focused on a form that could withstand the heat, but shifting into anything with more than his current mass sent such pain through his every nerve that he nearly passed out. The same went for anything with too little mass.

Loki fell, and fell, and finally managed to conceptualize a version of his preferred dragon-shape much smaller and lighter than he had previously attempted to use.

As with any too-new form, his limbs were clumsy, and he barely managed to slow his descent and control his spin enough that crashing to the ground didn't shatter any of his bones even as he skidded along the wet earth and grass. Finally, his claws sunk in, and he halted.
Everything hurt.

Perhaps provoking Odin to *quite* that extent had been a little over-the-top, but damned if the gallows-god geezer hadn't deserved it.

Loki could hear shouting, and realized his landing had apparently not been very low-profile. Depending on where he had landed, his face might very well be known. He would have to borrow a different one. One that Midgardians would feel more protective of than suspicious.

He considered what the S.H.I.E.L.D. agent Black Widow had taught him about that, and with an effort, forced bones and skin to obedience with more effort than it ever required with magic flowing more freely through his veins than it did presently.

"Oh my god, I think it hit someone!"

"You may be right, Jesse. Where did the fucking thing even go? It had wings like a fucking eagle!"

"Bigger than that."

"Bat-wings, John! It had to be a demon, you know it."

"Shut it, Chas."

"Oh, god, it did hit someone, look, she’s scuffed up and a bit bloody, we have to help."

"Chas, what the fuck are you doing? Keep back, you daft bastard! You dunno if she’s even hu-"

"John!" shouted a third voice, followed by some warning the trickster couldn’t make out, at a distance.

Loki peered up through all of the hair hanging in her face, green eyes only a little dazed. Sitting up was an effort. Maintaining the illusion of clothing was also quite taxing and would require genuine replacement very soon. "What... what happened?" the trickster groaned, sounding small and confused as she could manage.

"Maybe she really is hurt," said the third voice.

"Don't, Jesse," warned the more suspicious of the trio.

"Miss, are you alright? Did you see anything?" said the voice the trickster could already identify as belonging to a human male named Chas.

"I heard something, like a scream, and then I turned to look," Loki lied, pushing hair away from her face and focusing with an effort on the hand being proffered to her. Gratefully, she took hold, and let the man pull her to her feet gingerly. She didn't have to feign the dizzied swaying, and suspected a mild concussion might be to blame. Running a hand through her hair and wincing when her fingers brushed a sore spot, slightly wet with blood, rather confirmed it, and she emitted a pained noise, knees almost giving out as black spots danced across her vision.

The man who aided her in regaining uprightness was joined by another on her other side. He wasn’t touching her, but instead just kept looking at her a bit shrewdly through a thin, crooked trail of tobacco smoke.

"I get the feeling you need a bit of a hand," the second man said, and Loki suddenly recognized that voice.
"John!" Chas snapped. He was burly, with a very mean face, but gentle hands, one of which bore a wedding band. His touch was genuinely helpful, not intrusive or expectant: just worried. "Just don't. You can see she's hurt, and probably concussed."

"Easy, Chas, I’m not even interested like that, but uh, let’s say that I see a great deal, yeah," the magician countered, smiling kindly despite his slightly flirtatious tone.

Loki leveled a fierce green glare at him, then, able to discern suddenly that he wasn’t fooled by the illusory clothes she wore. "Then get me proper clothing, or are you not a even that much of a facsimile of a gentleman these days, John Constantine? I can't maintain the illusion for long, and it's bad enough with just you and the younger magician over there staring."

The cigarette at the corner of John's mouth fell to the ground and went out in the mud. His mouth continued to hang open for a second.

The first man, who was a little burlier, with dark hair and eyes, looked both confused, and somehow unsurprised. "You a demon or something?"

"No, Chas," Jesse said quickly. "I don't know what she is. John?"

The older magician considered carefully. He then huffed in resignation, shrugged out of his trench-coat and proffered it to the lady.

Loki nodded her thanks and slipped bruised arms into its sleeves before pulling the front shut, wrapping the whole thing around herself thoroughly as possible, and belting it tight, not bothering with the buttons. She exhaled exhaustedly when the illusion-spells dropped, and managed to straighten up and dust herself off, and Chas a bit too, almost graciously. "Thank you both."

John was frowning at her. "You know me."

"I do," she agreed.

He stared a bit longer, then snorted. "Oh, it’s you." First he winced, then he frowned, and finally he just raised an eyebrow pointedly and settled back in to his default unimpressed mask. "I’m pretty certain that you weren’t a woman last time."

"How would you know? You hardly saw me."

"Except the eyes. They were glowing, but I remember them. They lit up your face a bit, too. I see through the illusions and glowing sorts of things. Experience."

"So it would seem."

"But uh... she’s not a demon?" Chas repeated. "We’re sure?"

"That would depend on how Christian you are, or how viking," Loki teased.

"Don't, you'll give the old man an aneurism," John muttered. "What are you doing here, anyway, Lo?"

She glared at him. "Lo?"

"You got another appellation equally inconspicuous?"

Lips forming a thoughtful moue for a moment, Loki shrugged. "What could it possibly be short for, though?"
John shrugged. "Dolores or Lola, mostly."

"Lyra," she said. "Lyra Walker."

"You gonna tell me your mom was a hippie and gave you the middle name 'Sky' while you're at it?" the magician mocked.

"You two known each other long?" Jesse sighed, sounding increasingly world-weary.

"We met once, in a dark corner of the woods," Loki responded, low and salacious. "Sorry if I made a mess of your place, young Jesse." She fluttered her eyelashes for emphasis, enjoying the sudden dawning terror in the younger magician’s eyes as realization struck.

"Shape-shifter," Jesse muttered. "Right."

Chas made a face, which John ignored, in favor of cutting in: "Actually, I'm terrified she'll rip my face off any second, to be honest. I was afraid of worse before that, but it seems like you got knocked down a few notches, Lyra. Finally time for the torture to end and the lesson-learning to begin or something? I hate paternalistic gods that way. Fuck 'em. What's your heroic quest, then?"

Loki made a disgusted noise. "I truly never would. I now feel nauseated. I should smite you for that alone."

"How would you smite me, exactly? I'm curious," John remarked.

Wrapping a hand sweetly around his throat, the trickster focused on dragon-shape and illusion both, so that the human without magic wouldn't see the long curved claws or the scales crawling up her wrist to her forearm, as she let John feel inhuman strength squeeze his windpipe just so. "Not your face would be torn. I rather would prefer to watch your expression as I cut through each and every little fiber of muscle and sinew right below it."

John tried and failed to swallow. It looked very uncomfortable. "Point taken, but I did just do you another small favor, more of a bit of generosity at least worth sparing my throat for a bit maybe, and you look like you need all the help you can get," he rasped.

Loki let go. "You asked, and therefore I answered you. I did you no real harm." She looked at the younger magician, then, as spells and shape-shifting both retreated.

Jesse stared, and slowly raised both hands, palms-forward. "I'm out. Lovely to meet you, but my husband is waiting up for me, and I was already late before being interrupted by your, hmm, meteoric arrival. Bye!" He turned and strode off.

"Thanks, Jess, you're a real pal," John called after him.

"Get her out of Wales, please. I've got enough problems with those lunatics over the Rift in town."

"Wait, what?" Chas sounded alarmed, but a bit excited.

"He's deliberately screwing with you; this isn't an episode of Doctor Who, Chas, get it together. You." The magician jabbed a finger at the god wrapped up in his trench-coat, looking up at him with an innocent expression that was actually really distracting, with her lower lip looking like... Well. "Is there a reason you decided on this form? I have to ask."

"I used to wear it all the time to get out of trouble in other realms, and to make my brother's traveling companions uncomfortable," Loki countered, smiling sinfully. "Do you not like it?"
John cleared his throat. "It's hard to remember you're a lunatic god of chaos, is all."

"Good. I would hate anyone to recognize me from global headlines concerning the incident in New York last year."

The magician's hands came up, both palms against his face, muffling his words as he swore at length. He'd thought about that. He knew he should've looked it up earlier. His hands fell away and he snapped, "I draw the line at fucking aliens, alright?"

"Oh you poor foolish soul," Loki crooned, cupping his cheek in one hand and looking almost apologetic. "You have so much to learn."

"No. You're on your own. I'm through here. Done with this." He turned and went as though to march away.

"Your wallet is in this coat," she reminded. "As are your cigarettes."

Chas chuckled at the way his old friend froze in place and fumed silently for several seconds before pivoting on his heel and marching back over.

"You need clothes," he sighed.

"Yes," Loki said.

"And probably a place to sleep."

"Without your libido anywhere near it, for the record. My apologies, but I have an aversion to blue eyes and blond hair; they remind me far too much of my brother."

"That's probably the only time I'll ever be compared to a thunder god, but that's fine. I know crazy, and I do not need your style of crazy involved with me sexually. I doubt I'd survive you."

Loki grinned at him, pleased and flattered. "Ah, you're learning quickly. Very good."

"You're lucky I was nearby when you fucking landed and you know it, you tosser," John grumbled. It took a moment for the trickster to come up with a response for that, because All-Speak had communicated the literal meaning of that casual insult, as well as the casualness with which it was meant, and she was deeply amused by both. "I have no intention of doing that while in your company."

John choked.

Chas's eyes widened. "What?"

Loki petted his arm. "Nothing to worry about." She looked at him a bit more closely then, and began to smirk. "Ah, you're the one with the cab. His best and most loyal friend, I believe."

"What?" The magician sounded a little alarmed.

Loki leaned a bit closer to the blond, Loki chuckled softly. "I meant it, when I said I could see every. Single. Betrayal," she whispered near John's ear. "Now keeping that in mind along with just how very resourceful I am, and you can appreciate just how lucky you are that you found me, and offered to aid me, rather than myself being left to my own devices with all of my most valuable resources to exploit for profit, in all this mortal world, being your secrets, because oh, how many of them have such value." She patted his cheek only a little patronizingly as she pulled away. "I'm glad,
personally. I think we can get along very well; also, you're a fine trickster yourself, and I do so hate to punish one of my own." She then turned on her heel, bringing the men's attention to the fact she was barefoot as well, and proceeded to saunter off toward the well-lit pub parking lot a dozen yards away, and Chas's cab where it awaited them under one of the lamps.

"What've you gotten into this time, John?" the cabbie asked, a little unnerved.

"I have no fucking clue, but I've a feeling I won't enjoy it," the blond sighed, reaching absently for his cigarettes only to recall they were still in his coat. He swore and started after the mad god.

Chas shook his head, and followed them both at a slightly slower pace. After all, it couldn't be that bad, right? As long as it wasn't demons again. ... Right?
Morning Exercises for Tricksters

Chapter Summary

Loki is freakishly good at adapting to local technologies on unfamiliar planets. John hates him for it.

Loki also has evil plans. John isn't sure he approves of them, so he takes matters into his own hands and goes for a bit of a walk. First stop: get approval from someone who has the local infrastructure on his side, always.

Chapter Notes

For anyone unfamiliar: Map is a character from Hellblazer comics who could've been a king amongst magic-users throughout Europe, and he's staggeringly powerful, but he gave up potential world conquest in favour of continuing to take care of the city of London he loves. He's a middle-aged black man who can often be found clearing the tracks of the London underground, or occasionally closing unexpected dimensional rifts along old river-ways when they threaten the local populace. Because London is his, and he's London's.

That's all you really need to know.

I dig Map.

The fact that he had invited a fallen god of chaos in deceptively alluring form to bunk over didn't entirely sink in until the morning of the second day she stayed there. The first day, she had passed out on his couch and slept, and slept, and almost broken his fingers when he went to check her pulse and make certain she wasn’t in a coma, and then slept some more.

He had thought it mildly suspicious for the arrogant creature to not demand her host take the couch and she the bed, but he realized why when he awoke to what sounded, at first, like pouring-down rain, the second morning of her stay.

Then he realized it was the sound of some rapid-fire typing on the keyboard of his laptop, just a few feet from his head.

Reluctantly opening his eyes, he jerked upright upon seeing Loki tucked under the same sheet as himself, legs stretched out under it and folded neatly at the ankle, sitting up against the headboard and just... typing. Very fast. She was wearing a pair of jeans long ago discarded by one of the last women who had lived with him for any length of time, and a long-sleeved and nearly-threadbare-in-places ancient black t-shirt of John’s: one for the band Crass, upon close inspection. Well, it had the Crass logo on the front. John could no longer recall whether he acquired it at a show, or if it had been nicked from a past boyfriend with a tendency to sell awful knock-offs some years later.
After a bit of bleary blinking, John finally found the words he was looking for to respond to this unforeseen and bizarrely inexplicable arrangement: "What the fuckin’ hell’re you doing?"

"Minimizing my debts to you by means of casual digital fraud," the god murmured, her bright green eyes narrowed as her fingertips slowed their constant patter just a little, something coming up on her screen that she found a little more challenging. "You have a new bank account, but I strongly recommend withdrawing all funds from it soonish and quietly closing it by the end of the week. It is new, but does not appear so. According to all previous records, you've been keeping it for over two years and dropping in funds from various odd jobs and gifts. I've made it all quite audit-proof, as well."

John blinked several times in rapid succession. "What?"

"I'm not overly fond of your apartment, grateful as I am for a roof over my head for the time being. I've ordered clothing for myself which will be delivered here throughout the week. Once I can go about in public freely without either wearing your clothes or maintaining strenuous illusions of more respectable garments, I plan to begin hunting for an apartment. I've also ordered better computing systems for myself and you, out of sheer pity, because you should be ashamed." She shot an almost pitying frown at the old, audibly straining laptop, bringing attention to how audible its attempts to cool itself were, before one of her hands went a bit blue and the air within the whole room got suddenly colder. The fan switched off just a few seconds later, and Loki's hands once more appeared innocuous and pale.

The magician stared at her hands for a few seconds, then her face again, then his laptop, and then back to her face. "You're how old?"

"Older than christianity."

"How exactly do you know this much about the internet?"

"I'm from an advanced civilization capable of interstellar travel. Modern human computing systems, while admirably complex and interesting, are all still just different forms of language, code, and secrets. These are all the sort of matters which I excel at not only deciphering, but mimicking and eventually undermining." She arched a sardonic eyebrow at him, then, but her gaze lingered on him only briefly before returning to the screen in front of her. "Being a magic-user yourself, it should be simple for you, too, I should think."

John glowered at her rather than confirm or deny anything, but to say his pride felt a little bruised might be an understatement.

Loki smiled sweetly at him, despite still remaining focused on whatever she was doing to John's poor abused laptop.

Leaning up and tilting his head a bit to one side, John looked at the screen properly and felt his eyes widen a little. There were a series of inexplicable windows and windows-within-windows that reflected other operating systems running programs that he was certain his machine shouldn't be capable of running. Only about half of it with text flashing slow enough for John to catch seemed to even be in English, which was still further disorienting. It was only then that he noticed the faint sheen of sweat on Loki's brow and temples. "You're using magic for this? How do you prevent after-effects scattering and coming back onto you?"

"Really, it’s just basic virtual interfacing with an electricity-based machine supporting overly-simplistic navigational forms with this keyboard and mouse business. It’s not that difficult to keep the focus of spell-work within it honed with minimal explosive rebound-forces.” After a few seconds of
awkward silence, she realized that the magician next to her hadn’t understand any of that. "By the Norns, have you really not worked out the most basic anti-rebound shielding protocols for your digital spell-work? You?" She paused in her typing just long enough to shoot him a scandalized look for a few moments. "I'm astonished that you're still alive." Then more typing ensued.

Able to smell ozone and sweat in the air now, John just offered one of his more shameless grins. "Most people are. It's the impossibility of the fact I am alive that gives me an extra edge when it comes to keeping people on their toes. You gonna tell me the same hasn't gone for you?"

"Mmm," was all Loki responded with.

The magician rolled his eyes. "Why are you in my bed?"

"You didn't really expect me to sleep on your couch forever, did you?"

"I didn't, but I sort of expected to be kicked out of my bed once you decided you wanted to occupy it."

Loki shrugged. "This is your home. I am but a temporary guest. I'm not an absolute barbarian."

"Just a liar, a thief, a cheat, and a menace to society?"

"I am a menace to aspects of society which need a bit of menacing, so that the more problematic and inherently unfair aspects of them can be forcibly brought to light and acknowledged. Without that, no improvement would ever be possible. The fact that Asgard cannot appreciate a champion of dissatisfaction pointing out the various problems with their peaceful little utopia is what makes me an antagonist more often than not. Surely you, of all people, can understand that."

John made a face. "I'm a bit disturbed you know that much about me quiet that correctly."

"You are a trickster, a liar, a cheat, and a menace to polite society, yourself," Loki countered. "It wouldn't be much of a stretch to call me your patron god."

"Except that you're effectively freeloding in my apartment and my laptop may barely survive whatever you're currently making the poor damn thing go through. What ARE you doing?"

"I am making myself an identity, a history, and a source of financial security from which to begin undermining the stipulations of my sentence so as to best communicate to Odin that he can take his paternalistic teaching methods and puerile life-lessons and blow them out his backside."

John nodded thoughtfully. "Well, I can't disapprove of that."

"Also, given that I've managed to accumulate almost a quarter of a million Euros for you, I don’t entirely think that your 'freeloading' accusation is at all apt."

"You what?" The magician's eyes were very wide indeed.

"I do not like owing debts or favors. I much prefer to be owed." Loki grinned at him unpleasantly.

John realized then that he was well and truly in over his head. "Shit."

"Yes. You aided me in repair of my own identity, so in turn I restored to you a talent that you lost because it truly belonged to a different soul than your own, and fed of off of that soul's intentions rather than your own. Now you have housed me, for a time, while I acquire my own means to support myself independently of you here on earth, and I have provided a windfall amount of readily-
available funds for you, which appears perfectly legal and has an elegantly falsified history to explain its presence in your life, should anyone shoot suspicious auditors your way. I am also acquiring you a new computer to replace this one. You might just owe me a little, in return. Given your own talents and the fact that magic does not pain you to use, as it currently wears on me even now, I think one last favor exchanged between us should more than cover the excess."

"Great. Right." The magician briefly considered attempting to smother himself with his own pillow, not for the first time since waking this morning. He rejected the plan almost reluctantly. "I get the distinct feeling you already have something in mind."

Loki grinned widely, her green eyes bright with mischief. She pulled a folded-up piece of paper from one pocket of her jeans.

He took the paper and unfolded it. "This is an invitation. Not mine."

"Correct."

"For some big party at one of the most ridiculously expensive hotels in London, which is saying quite a lot, early next week."

"Yes."

"Who the bloody hell is Natalia Romanova, and why do you care about this invitation?"

"She is the redheaded woman occupying the rather nicer set of rooms in the northwest corner apartment on this floor," Loki said dryly. "She has been chasing down a few loose ends from some incident involving Hydra."

John remembered her very well indeed: petite but made up entirely of curves and strength and confidence that made him want to see if he could provoke her into shoving him up against a wall. He had known some ex-KGB women before, and he wished they had all been as gorgeous as that particular lady. Now, thinking of her expression and dry humor, John could feel so much burning and prickling of synchronicity that it almost gave him a headache. "You know her, then."

The trickster gave a noncommittal hum.

"She recognize you?"

"No. Also, I managed to use a trick of light to burn an impression of the words into a blank sheet of paper to make a copy from my memory upon leaving her apartment. It wasn't easy for me to make, and between that activity and all the rest of my morning, the sole reason I am conscious right now is the amount of coffee I've imbibed from the cafe down the block."

"At least you knew better than to steal something of hers."

"Well, obviously. She would notice immediately," Loki muttered. "She's one of the most competent of the Avengers, after all."

That set off a series of bells ringing in the back of John's head. "Those lunatics who fought aliens in New York?" Then it sunk in. "You really did insinuate last night that you were involved in that?"

"I brought the party," Loki said, smirking a little. "It was regrettable, overall, but I had no other means by which to return to any of the realms of Yggdrasil without playing Thanos' game."

"You killed a few hundred people, you know." John suddenly felt a little ill. "How many lives are
you ruining, exactly, by procuring me funds? I'm a collector of guilt, you see, at the hands of fuckers like you who are just so damned content to fuck over the likes of mere mortals who might happen to be burnt up because they were in the blast-radius of your return home, or in your vengeance against some higher power, in your own oh-so-privileged immortal life." His voice was caustically irate, suddenly.

Loki appeared almost startled for a moment, fingers still for three whole seconds, before she returned her stare to the screen in front of her. "I stole from no one except the European Union as a whole. The funds were not stolen piece by piece; I just fabricated reasons for them to be there at all, and made certain that they appeared accordingly. At most, I've contributed just a little to inflation, but that was preferable, compared to the other alternative means, given how unpleasantly thefts like that can backfire on the likes of mages."

The magician was only a little mollified by that. "Thanks, I suppose. Good to know."

"I do regret the unnecessary and messy deaths that resulted from my actions in New York, if you must know."

"Pardon me for doubting that any of them were one-hundred-percent necessary."

The trickster shot him a glare for a moment. "You speak as though you have not sacrificed a number of poor souls just to keep yourself alive."

"Yeah, and I hate myself for every one of them, so your carefree air about the whole mess isn't exactly going to win me over, nor is throwing my own mistakes in my face, thanks."

Loki's lips formed a thin, pale line of ire, and she remained silent for a few long minutes, typing faster still, until it finally seemed that she was done, and she began closing out various programs, odd sigils and strings of text appearing in each and every window before they closed. The fallen god's eyes glowed green and the whole room crackled with energy for a few moments, until the last program finally closed itself out.

Snapping the laptop shut and setting it aside calmly, Loki then seized John Constantine by the throat and forced him down onto the bed, pinioning him there with surprising strength as her fingers cut off his air. Despite the sudden aggression, she looked more gaunt than she had mere minutes before, her skin almost waxy and her eyes a little feverish from over-exertion of magic. "Do not mistake containment of regret for a lack of it; I have already a grudge against Odin for that willful misunderstanding of me."

When the mage made no further noises for a couple of seconds, she let up enough pressure to allow the human magician to gasp, and added, "I care nothing for your personal opinion of me, but take
care, John Constantine; for you would not be such an open book to me if not for how similar we truly are, and you should most carefully consider that, before you dare attempt to censure me again.” She then let go, and returned to her previous position, a small knife appearing in her hands seemingly out of nowhere (although John—a master of misdirection himself—was pretty sure it had been at her hip, but not in her pocket, before that) with which she proceeded to clean under her short fingernails nonchalantly.


"What's that quaint Midgardian saying about a pot calling a kettle black?"

"Just because that's an accurate assessment doesn't actually mean it helps your case." He sat up, frowning deeply. "So how d'you justify it, then? All the deaths?"

"I don't," Loki said. "I often am content to allow others to believe that I consider my actions justifiable, because it suits me to fool them into seeing my motives as being so shallow. That is all."

"So you do actually regret killing all those people?"

Loki's lips thinned. "Part of myself considers all of that death and destruction to have been inescapable, given the tightrope I walked with my mind being monitored by the Chitauri's leader, to be certain I had not plans to betray them. I had to maintain their belief in that idea in order to have any chance of escaping their retribution in the form of my very mind and soul being torn to shreds. There was a limit to how much control I could exert over the invasion, and all that led up to it, given the state I was in at the time, under all of the apparent egotism and dictatorial rhetoric I had to keep repeating, even in my own mind."

"No way to project an impression instead?"

The trickster shook her head, eyes growing distant. “No. My magic had been entirely burnt up by dragging myself across the galaxy back to this world, and what powers I did have were dependent upon a weapon which maintained the anchor that the Chitauri's master still had hooked into my psyche, and through which he extended control of any people I converted to my cause with its touch."

"You were still in control, though?"

“To an extent, yes. That extent took the form of a very short leash.” She shook her head. “Had I attempted to rebel and betray Thanos and the Other after arriving on earth, they would have simply shattered my mind and used the remains of me as a puppet to lead their army to earth regardless, and not bother with the pretense of promising I might rule it, which to be fair I didn't believe they truly would in the first place. Had I gone out of my way, noticeably, to save more lives from the fallout of my actions, I would have only suggested to those overseers watching me that human lives would make fit hostages to manipulate me further, putting any humans within my sight at that much greater risk. I did what I could, in sabotaging the portal itself to open far narrower than the machine designed for that purpose was truly capable of, keeping the portal on earth when Iopened it as a believable show of over-confidence in the invasion forces, and fomenting the unification of the Avengers as a team with the single goal of halting the invasion. I underestimated their powers, in fact, as I discovered quite on accident when the Hulk shattered my spine, and it required the last of my barely-restored magic reserves to repair the damage enough to become anything remotely resembling upright, by which time I could no longer escape incarceration."

She continued, “Since then, I have had the remainder of Thanos and the Other's psychic influence
quite literally scorched out of my psyche, and was left to continue burning until the weaknesses in my mental armor which let their hooks pierce my mind in the first place healed over, with which you aided me." Loki waved a hand vaguely in the magician’s direction, then added, "Regret is an indulgence, as is guilt and self-flagellation for my wrongs. I cannot make up for the damages I have done and the lives I have taken, because those whom I would ask forgiveness of are now all mostly dead, and those who are living now have lost the irreplaceable. It would be presumptuous of me, at the very least, to consider redemption an option. Wallowing in my own guilt or misery, and causing myself pain, seeking punishment for what I have done, would serve only myself, not those I have harmed. I thus have no choice but to keep living, and accept that I am a murderer and too ruthless to ever be considered a good person. And so here I am. Living. Yourself?" the god challenged lightly.

Feeling a bit sheepish, upon recalling his own self-indulgent bouts of guilt and misery, in which he'd been known to wallow for long periods of time despite how unhelpful they were to anyone and how much pain they put his few remaining good friends and family through, John had to concede that the rotten bastard had a bit of a point. He still couldn't help but ask, "If you had to do it all again, would you do any of it differently?"

An odd expression flickered across the god's expression. "I might."

John nodded thoughtfully. "Right, then. Sorry." He rested one forearm across his eyes and huffed. "What's the invitation about, exactly?"

"Someone else knows ex-S.H.I.E.L.D.-agent Romanoff is here," Loki said simply. "He's not yet back in her good graces, at a guess, given all I've learned of the fallout between Hyrda and S.H.I.E.L.D. while you slept. Nor is it likely that she is entirely in his..."

"You're being cagey. Stop it."

"Plausible deniability is your friend, John."

"Bullshit." The magician elbowed her hip without lifting his other arm to look at her. "Not knowing shit is more often lethal than knowing."

Loki smirked a bit despite herself, but it quickly faded into something more somber and sour. "You say that, but at the same time have you not been put in danger strictly because of the knowledge you possess as well? How many people close to you have suffered for that? It is not only yourself you must think of. These are people who are not supernatural, they do not play your games. They would find a way to make it perfectly legal, for example, to target your niece and last remaining loyal friends. You had enough trouble with governmental forces when you dealt with Merlin’s infiltration of them, did you not?"

"I'm really getting annoyed by how much you know about me."

"I knew of Merlin's end before I met you. I now only know, in addition, that you were responsible, and how." He looked the magician over briefly. "You're a force to be reckoned with in your own right, but I would not bring down this particular war upon you and yours. It is not even mine, either. This belongs solely to Midgard... with the exception of artifacts of Asgardian origin that Hydra continues to steal." The trickster's lips twisted in a hint of a sneer. "Amongst other things they should not dare to trifle with, and which I might see fit to make certain they part ways with soon."

"Aliens, government conspiracies and myself already with a fine collection of criminal charges and insanity in my background? Yeah, fine, I'll pass, but if I find out anything is coming my way you didn't tell me about, I swear I'll find a way to make you pay for it," John assured. "I've fought crazier powers and won, and you know it."
"I do," Loki concurred. "Another reason, of course, that I want any and all debts with you cleared quickly."

It was the magician's turn to reluctantly smirk, at that. "I'm glad we've got an understanding, then, but you've still not explained what's so important about the invitation."

The god shook her head. "Did you even see who the invitation was from?"

John lifted the paper again and examined it. "Tony Stark. Oh, he's another Avenger, right? Ridiculously rich, loves the sound of his own voice, constantly all over the news stands a few times a year since he got kidnapped a while back?"

"Yes."

"What do you want with him?"

"A list of casualties. He has, without a doubt, the cleanest records of the whole matter. All of S.H.I.E.L.D.'s data has been compromised by cover-ups Hydra has applied in the time since the invasion of New York. Their original intention was Conceal the fate of a particular weapon Asgard made the grave mistake of leaving in human hands, but the end result is that they retroactively erased all records of deaths which were too attention-catching, among other alterations."

"Casualties. Why?"

"The terms of my sentence are that I will be without almost all of my magic, and essentially rendered mortal, 'until I feel the loss of every mortal life that I have ended'," Loki said dryly, with an unimpressed scoff. "The traditional means of doing so would be to have some touching heart-to-hearts with various mortals, and show that I've learned the error of my ways by sacrificing myself and my own life on some mortal's behalf. I've decided to forgo that nonsense and come up with a rather more creative, albeit more literal, solution."

"Well, I hope personally that you won't wind up with your mouth sewn shut for not paying up your debt quite rightly."

She shot him a sharp glare, at that. "Very funny."

"I'm serious. What makes you think your alternate method would even work?"

"Because it meets the terms of my sentence and will still require me to uncomfortably grow and develop in the 'empathy' department, meeting the requirements. I won't enjoy this journey a bit, but damned if I'm going to do the same as Thor did. It would be a lie, even if I followed his same footsteps, and the All-Father knows that, and expects me to try it anyway, and fail, and be forced to learn from that. It's obvious in the weaving." She pushed up the sleeves of her borrowed shirt. To the eyes of someone without the gift, her skin might appear bare, but to herself, and the magician beside her, there was a dense embroidery of complex patterns woven into her flesh about her wrists and almost up to her elbows, almost like a parody of Loki of Asgard’s golden vambraces.

Looking at the shimmering multi-layered spell-work and having to squint to make out some of it, John said softly, "Magic always is surprisingly flexible, in the right situations."

Loki refocused upon him, then, with renewed curiosity. "Speaking of which, I must say that your self-inflicted vivisection of your own soul is deeply disturbing to look at for very long. You should seriously consider a means of reversal."

"I've already had cancer of the lungs; I don't need to find out what nastiness re-integration with that
bastard would bring about. He's been in Hell too long."

She hummed, low and considering. "There are ways to repair that."

John considered. "That'd lead to the problems of debts owed to particular demons, same as always."

"They have no power over me," Loki pointed out.

"They do while you're effectively mortal."

"Hmm. I'm not entirely certain of that, actually. My soul remains my own, and my daughter has full claim upon it, as do the Norns, for their own purposes, which are above those of Asgard's king in this case. I am technically untouchable."

"You're also mostly de-powered, magically speaking."

"You know as well as I that raw power and talent alone are far from the only things required to get things done. It would require more additional resources, of course, but it's hardly impossible."

"Do I even want to know what you'd ask for in return for this hypothetical reintegration of the surgically-separated pieces of my rotten soul?"

Loki looked extremely thoughtful, at that.

"I do not like that look."

She hummed, just light and airy-sounding as her expression looked.

"Everything about this situation screams 'bad things' very loudly, I want you to know."

"I'll take it into consideration," Loki said, with a sly half-smirk.

Then there came a loud series of knocks on the door, making the magician jump nearly out of his skin.

"That should be some of the things I've ordered," she said, slipping from the bed and strolling out of the room.

John watched the sway of the god's hips because despite being healthily afraid for his life whenever Loki was in any given room, the trickster's female form really was a fine sight to behold even in loose old denim and a t-shirt large enough that the collar threatened to slide down and expose one shoulder if she were inclined to let it.

It was a slightly baffling exercise for him, given that the thought of touching anything on display there appealed to him as much as the idea of sticking a fork in a working electrical socket, despite his appreciation for the design aesthetics chosen by the shape shifter. Survival instincts could be strange that way.

He then considered Loki's parting words, and cursed himself at length for getting into a mess of gambling and illicit deals with a god of lies.

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Once he had showered and dressed himself a bit more decently (shirt, trousers, socks, shoes and even a tie) John emerged from his bedroom to discover Loki seated in the midst of a circle that might've looked almost arcane if not for the border of bubble-wrap and spilled packing materials forming its outermost ring, which at first glance would've ruined the occult ambiance to anyone who didn't know any better. The unholy glow from in front of the trickster, whose back was to John, turned out to be from a new laptop, which Loki had apparently wasted no time... customizing. With a couple of ceremonial knives. And a bowl of what appeared to be blood, which John confirmed upon walking around, closer to the wall than to the god of mischief as he went, to get a better look, and saw the thin, well-cleaned cut on Loki's upper forearm. "Bleeding for your cause already?"

"Oh, long before this," Loki responded, only a bit ominously. Her deft, long-fingered hands didn't halt or twitch at all from their movements, as she continued work on the designs she was carving into the very frame of the laptop, which she'd opened up and exposed the whole interior of. Some parts were removed and placed at key positions in the circle's whole arrangement, to John's knowing eyes: battery, touch-pad and relevant sensors, a card that the magician knew was related to communications with the outside world based on its position in the circle far more than his knowledge of things such as wi-fi receivers.

"You're going all out."

"I know from long experience the value of well-crafted tools, when my more usual magics are lost to me."

John grimaced a bit empathetically. "I know that feeling. I've never seen seals like those, though. What's their origin?"

"They're wholly mine; although some of their sigils and the conceptual anchoring-points are borrowed from very old magics of Jotunnheim, from before the ice."

"Ice?"

"It's a very long story."

Suddenly wind flooded the room, but there was a faint glow emitted by Loki and all of the tools and objects around her, such that the breeze didn't even stir her hair, or the light-weight bubble-wrap, even as other bits of paper and other light-weight objects around the room were dragged into a small whirlwind, with Loki's works in the center. The power wasn't coming from Loki herself, though. She was still and calm, all of her energies contained and preserved, while the seals she had drawn, the elements within the circle and a few artifacts borrowed from the magicians shelves offered their magics, channeled along thin lines of blood as though the red stains were live wires.

John shuddered at how numbingly cold the air suddenly felt, his teeth almost chattering with it as the indoor whirlwinds sped up, becoming a visible miniature cyclone, until it seemed to be drained away into the laptop itself, which glowed a deep emerald for a few moments, then dimmed back to looking otherwise mundane... except all the bloodstained sigils and the lines of the complex seals they were a part of, carved into most of its surfaces.

The magician rubbed feeling back into the skin of his arms. "What's with the winter-effects?"

"One benefit to knowing my true nature as a Jotunn as I now do, is that certain spells that are now usable for me, when before I had thought they would be of no use to me, lacking certain elemental powers as I thought I was; however, I am actually a Jotunn with natural inclination toward ice and some capabilities which reflect that. Along with my shape-shifting, those powers are not contained along with my magic. I believe they are beyond Odin's power to repress." Her tone had an oddly
distant quality, very deliberately devoid of all emotion.

It made the hairs on the back of John's neck stand on end and a creepy-crawly sensation to slide down his spine. Considering his array of past experience with extremely creepy and horrifying people, that was an impressive feat. "I get the feeling this is a touchy subject, so I'm fine dropping it here and not bringing it up again."

"Thank you," the trickster said, with a hint of genuine sincerity. She then began quietly putting the pieces of her laptop back together, chanting something so quietly the magician almost couldn't hear it, and the whisper sounded more like the voice John remembered from the casting circle in Wales: a little rougher, deeper and of a richer masculine timbre than the voice Loki more usually used in female form. The chanting had a lulling effect over himself and the rest of the room, making the sun coming in through the half-open blinds seem to dim and redden, dust-motes in the air looking like embers from a campfire. The air felt unnaturally still, until the machine was whole and the last screws replaced.

John watched all traces of the sigils and seals slowly sink into the metal like they had never been there at all in the first place, like the object was absorbing them into itself too deeply to ever be removed. It was only then that he realized the knife Loki had set aside in the small wooden bowl was actually made of ice, which seemed to be melting slowly into the traces of blood the bowl contained. He gave a low whistle, a little impressed despite his determination not to be easily wowed by any supernatural beings more powerful than himself; that was, after all, a lifelong policy of his that he had no intention of ceasing use of. "So what are you going to do with that?"

Loki's answering grin was all teeth and fierce arrogance.

The magician frowned slightly. "I don't like that look."

"I just need you to do a very small thing for me, when you go withdraw some of your funds from that bank account I mentioned, before they close this evening, for preference. Otherwise we'll have to wait until tomorrow for ideal traffic and other particular conditions."

With a world-weary sigh, John asked, "What is it? And dare I ask which bank?"

After giving John the cross-street the bank was located on, which John memorized easily, Loki picked up the handle of the ice-blade she had used to carve her spells into the laptop, and the ice evaporated rapidly, leaving behind a piece of bone that the magician recognized as one he'd been given by an old friend and had left on one of his bookshelves for the past few years.

It wasn't a human bone, and John's old mate had insisted that it was from the nest of some eagle that perches atop a really important inter-dimensional tree, but he had been tweaked out on a number of things at the time, so John had only paid half a mind. "You could've asked to borrow that."

"Says the man who has no idea what it's worth or why it's such a powerful little object," Loki countered. She then tapped the open-end of the bone against her palm, where marrow had long ago ceased to occupy the hollow in it. There was the sound of something coin-like tumbling out, rolling-tapping against bone on its way to the god's palm. When Loki withdrew the piece of bone, there was indeed a small, circular and flat, metallic-looking object cradled in the middle of her pale palm. It shone oddly opalescent, despite otherwise looking like age-darkened slate, when Loki lifted it a bit toward the light, smiling at it almost affectionately.

"I officially have no idea what you're doing now. What the heck is that?"

"A marker and conduit. I put it into the bone and froze it there while forming the blade. The bone,
my blood, and the ice provided all the power I cannot spare from my conscious reserves at present.

"Where did you get that thing?" John muttered.

"I keep a few under my skin, here and there. They can be staggeringly useful, in times of desperation, and two of them are specifically so that my children can always find me, if they look," the trickster explained blithely. "Odin remains blissfully unaware of them, luckily enough."

The magician grimaced a little, but tucked the idea away for possible future use. Implants under the skin could be a useful trick, but the idea left a sour taste in his mouth; he had known a lovely girl with implanted piercings, once, but she'd been killed and those little pieces of metal got put under her own murderer's skin like little keepsakes. It made him ill to recall.

"You look unwell, John."

"Bad memories, is all."

The trickster only nodded. "It was not my intent to stir up such things."

"This time, yeah, I know. What do you need me to do with that thing?"

"Obscure your features a little. Tape or glue that to a business card and present it as identification when you go do the bank. They will call you by a name that you will need to pretend is your own. In the end, after you've made your cash withdrawal under that name, you should be led to a safe deposit box. It will be empty. Put the card and token into it, see that it is locked and returned to where it belongs. Then return directly here."

"What's this meant to do, exactly?"

"Misdirection."

"You've gotta give me more than that."

"Do your best to clear any innocent people from in and around that bank approximately four hours after the delivery. I will even aid if I can, and if you so insist, but there will be an... incident," Loki offered. She then pouted at him. "I'm certain no one will be too gravely harmed."

"You're a god. You're idea of 'grave' injury is beheading."

"Not just heroes might be inclined to spill my blood. I've made enemies of monsters, too, and luring them out into the daylight whilst Iron Man is in London town will make me feel considerably safer in this city. Your own contacts might be more relieved to have extraterrestrial meddling out of their sewer systems, too."

John considered. "I'll have to consult a few of my own advisors before quite agreeing to that."

Loki scowled at him a little.

"In my position, would you trust you?"

"That's hardly a fair question."

"Good thing, then, that neither of us play fair," the magician riposted, and spun on his heel, stalking toward his own front door. "I'll be back before the bank closes with an answer for you."
All John actually did at first was step out of the house, stroll down the street and into the nearest familiar pub, where no one raised an eye at his arrival in early afternoon, nor that he went straight to the men’s room, which he proceeded to lock shut. He then knocked on the mirror in the men’s room. He just needed to be far enough from Loki, but on turf sufficiently comfortable and familiar to call an old contact who might be a bit concerned by Loki’s plans of late. "Oi, Map, we’ve got a bit of a situation, here."

No answer.

The magician swore. "Look, I'm sorry I brought him to London, and I'm working on getting him the fuck out because he's a terrible flatmate, and by terrible I mean a bit terrifying. I know you want an old Norse god out of here as much as I do, so your best bet is to help me!"

The mirror swirled dark for several seconds before another reflection stood beside John's own: a dark-skinned man, slightly stocky, with a proud, sagacious and openly annoyed expression on his face. He wore the uniform of a man who more usually spent his working hours clearing the rail lines of the London Underground at night; he might have been a king amongst mages all over the world, but he had turned all of it down. He was devoted to London, and London seemed equally fond of him, in her strange ways.

John turned his head just enough to shoot a quick glance around the room to make sure Map was only present in the mirror. "Look, none of this was my idea."

"You're gaining the favor of a trickster god," Map said flatly. "This seems very much the sort of idea you would approve of, whether it happened to be yours originally or no."

"Yes, I know, I'm biased toward bad ideas and untrustworthy reluctant alliances, right, which is why I'm asking your advice before this bank idea he's got."

"You keep referring to this god in masculine terms. Why?"

The magician frowned. "Look, does that matter?"

"Given your past romantic history?"

John looked gravely serious, then. "I'm not getting off on this. I'm annoyed, Map. This is not the look of a well-shagged John-fucking-Constantine, and nor will it be anytime soon so long as there's a trickster god occupying my apartment whilst imbuing numerous inanimate objects with the sort of power he or she considers child's play, and I consider slightly horrifying to have so much of in my own fucking home. We clear?"

Map nodded thoughtfully. "I am glad, for once, that you are behaving almost like a creature of sense."

Rolling his eyes and muttering a few resentful curses, John explained, "Look, the bastard wants to lure some local extraterrestrials to a bank while that nut-job billionaire Tony Stark is in town. He seems to think it'll bring plenty of people out of the woodwork who have a pertinent interest in world domination and seeing a certain trickster’s throat slit both. You know anything about folks like that around town?"

The more powerful mage considered that for a long few moments, raising a hand to tap one thumb
against his lower lip as he glanced ceiling-ward, seeing through the tiles and into who-knew-what. "There have been uncommon disturbances lately, not of any magic I am familiar with. I had assumed it to be governmental activity."

"Might be that, too. Apparently there's an internationally infamous spy occupying a flat in my building. On my own floor, no less. She's a heroic sort too, though."

Map hummed. "I do not want these people in my city, nor their alien enemies. I would speak with this trickster myself, however."

John blanched. "You sure you want to be doing that? He doesn't know about you, yet, beyond the fact I've sort of double-crossed you a couple times; I dunno how aware he might be that I later made up for that, but I'm mostly sure his knowledge about me is limited to where actions in my life mirror his, along trickster-archetype lines. You're a lot more powerful than I've ever been, and London herself is on your side, but the last thing I need is him trying to con you out of any of that."

"Your concern is heartening. Have you finally learned caution, John?"

"I've learned not to underestimate those who are far too clever, when they appear to be at a disadvantage. He's got the jump on just about everybody, despite supposedly being shackled and most of his natural magic restrained; he's got millennia of learned magic, the sort any cunt could do, stored in that head of his, that just require a lot of patience and preparation to use, and a spark of the gift. Thanks to me, he's got a safe place to do that prep-work, and from what I've seen of his capabilities, and the extent to which he's been long prepared for the worst to happen to him, I don't think I want him knowing a damn thing about you more than he already does."

"What is so different about this threat than any other you've faced?"

"He thinks more like me than like any of my usual enemies, and I don't ever want to be on his bad side, because he'd be able to do worse to me than any of them if he were motivated sufficiently," John explained succinctly. "He made me a Locus for a bit, too."

Map grimaced. "Of course. You are an ideal candidate, for his sort. Trickster archetype indeed."

"Don't remind me."

"You brought it upon yourself."

"Don't remind me of that, either, Map; it's not exactly helpful, stating the obvious repeatedly."

The mage in the mirror nodded, his expression mild, but shrewd. "What is his ultimate goal?"

"Get rid of his shackles without doing anything the head of his pantheon wants or expects of him to do. He plans to find out the names and more about the lives of everyone on earth his actions wound up killing, and their victims, as part of it, which means there's only so much time he can spend in London and be considered efficient."

"And his past tendency toward world-domination plans?" Map prompted.

"Look, he's a trickster, right? He's like me, but he's also sort of not. He was raised like a prince and he's got a little bit of that sanctimonious air going on. If Midgard aids him, in our own tricksy ways, toward this little vengeance kick, we'll be a lot lower on his shit-list. He's old-school, loves to trade in favors, and while he wouldn't like to owe us, he'd like to be level with us or owed a favor by someone or someones like myself. And he'd be all the more amenable knowing that we're willing to make deals against the interests of his king: not only me, but the sorts of people I've got connections
"I do, but are we willing to do that? Is that king not powerful and inclined to punish the earth for aiding an Asgardian exile return to villainy?"

"That's the thing," John said, eyes lit up with mischief of his own now. "We're just pawns to the likes of him, right now, to all of Asgard except the lunatic back in my apartment, because he’s been forcibly brought down to our level, just recently. That's why someone who tried to take over our planet got a smack on the wrist and sent down to earth to 'learn a lesson' as punishment, instead of execution, permanent exile from the nine realms, or even life imprisonment, so far as any of us know."

The blond magician shrugged dramatically and continued, in airy tones: “Maybe he got tortured a bit by snake venom and falling through hellish flames for a while, but in the end they tossed him down here for *us* to civilize him, and apparently the same thing was done to a certain thunder deity of the same pantheon a few years ago too. We, down here on earth, are all below their consideration. We’re ants, even the likes of you and me. Asgardian boots will be able to crush us anytime they feel like it, unless they learn to be more wary of us.”

“What if that wariness makes them send more boots?”

“Unlikely,” John said flatly. “They maintain their position of control over all the realms because they’re supposedly benevolent. If they wanted to take us over, and could, they’d have done it a long time ago.”

Map made a contemplative noise.

“Look, they’ll continue to believe that they can just dump their exiles on us wherever they like, unless we make it very clear that earth won’t stand for that, and where better to get that 'fuck off' message started than the likes of London? You want to take us over, and could, they’d have done it a long time ago.”

“Then I don't know why you're surprised that while I want this tricky bastard out of London as soon as fucking possible, I'm not exactly against his plans."
at a tube station, going right past without so much as pausing.

The blond man's grin slowly widened, the longer the silence afterward did stretch on. He always tended to know when he’d won an argument, often long before the other party would ever admit to it. It wasn’t often he got that from Map, but it was always satisfying when he managed it.

"I concede that yours is the only way which allows London, or indeed all of earth, some means by which to reject Asgard’s presumptuous use of this planet as a dumping ground for their exiles or prisoners."

"Especially since they aren't really in communication with us mere mortals, most of the time," John added, his tone airy. "You saying you've come 'round to seeing things my way, then?"

"Which bank will he be targeting?"

John named the branch, and the street corner on which it was located.

"Very Well. I will make certain that attention is brought to the place very swiftly, and that any heroic persons who head toward the resulting chaos will find their ways unhindered."

"Thanks, mate. I'll do my best to keep things clean as they can ever be in this town."

"Pardon me for being less than reassured by that," Map said dryly. "But I do wish you luck in this endeavor." Then his image vanished from the mirror.

John scoffed at that, and then scoffed again at angry knocking from the bathroom door. Unlocking the door and flinging it open, he gave the two men who had been knocking a particularly steely and malevolent glare, like he had just come back from Hell... yet again.

They apologized a bit and took a step back, letting him stalk out and past them, back into a brief bout of heavy London drizzle: just enough to annoy and slightly chill even those who wore coats suited to London weather this time of year.

Chapter End Notes

... Posting chapter 3 immediately because originally all of these scenes flowed together like one chapter, until I realise quite how long that would've made the chapter, and reconsidered. So hey, double-update.
Chapter Summary

The enemy of my enemy is my friend, but what if "enemy" is too-strong of a word for an acquaintance trickster-god now suddenly living in one's house?

Well. Close enough. Time to pester an Avenger or two.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

John had come up with a plan by the time Chas arrived in his cab ready to take him where he needed to go: know thy enemy’s enemies. He decided to do so, under the auspices of preparing for work at the bank in just a few hours.

If asked, he could always say that Loki had told him to "obscure" his features, which was easy enough to do to fool actual people, but security cameras were another deal entirely. It wouldn’t be unusual at all for finding such means to take a longish while. Thus, John had plenty of time.

That said, it didn't make the magician feel at all comfortable, that Loki seemed to think that sort of magic was just child's play, as Loki very clearly did, possibly even as much as, or more than, most fae did.

There were only so many places in London that one could find a reliable means of fooling living and inanimate watching eyes, from recording accurate images of one’s face. Most of the more mystic circles tried to keep such powers, if they possessed them, out of the awareness of organized crime, media, government and even tended to shield themselves against detection by any local psychics or sensitives in their area. Their skills were very valuable from strategic, spying, and military standpoints, of course; it would be far too much power to put into the hands of mere men. As such, people who tried to seize it, or find it, or use it, down on earth, tended to wind up killed if they did anything too attention-grabbing with it.

That didn’t mean, of course, that such gifted individuals couldn’t sometimes get greedy, and sell their services to other shadow-dwellers who might happen to be just a little too gullible. It was always easy to sell the promises of such services, and then let the horrific fallout cleanup all lose ends and witnesses. Dead customers who had paid up-front: clean and tidy, so long as they were never seen again, which often they weren’t.

It would be easy enough to track them down, for the likes of John. Just spot the idiot who got too rich too quick after spending a long time nearly homeless and scrounging, obsessed with occult-based get-rich schemes. Fools like that were a dime a dozen in any occult communities. They were worse than gambling addicts or even evangelical Scientologists, at their worst. The very few among them who found a working scheme they could use tended to be worse than some demons John knew, but then that might just be the dear succubus Ellie being an unusually fond not-exactly-friend of his.

The blue-collar magician knew five such men he could very, very easily blackmail to achieve his ends, but where would be the fun in that?
It would be nothing, after all, compared to prodding a wasp's nest instead. Magic wasn't the only way to get some things done, after all. At least, so people kept insisting to John when they tried to get him to use computers more often, for all that the magician generally took to online media navigation (particularly social media) like a duck to marathon running without any use of its wings.

By contrast, conning his way into high-end office buildings, no matter how gleaming and modern and high-tech all their security was, had never been much of a challenge for the likes of him. Stopping by a shop for a new sharp-looking suit (he needed one anyway, after his last one got irreparably damaged by a banshee last week) was perfect for such purposes, once he left his trenchcoat behind in Chas' cab (in which the meter was running, but John could deal with that later) and a bit of smoothing down here and there.

The suit, some of his most charming smiles, a little flirting, and only a couple instances of pickpocketing got John all the way to the top floors of the place where the most highly-paid people spent their working hours, unless they were "off on business" of course. If, along the way there, he happened to use a few very minor tricks to divert security by focusing all of their attention on a middle-manager (one whom John had heard using a few too many racial slurs while complaining about his neighborhood "going to the dogs" and aiming the whole monologue at an uncomfortable-looking underling at the water-cooler) who suddenly was having a psychotic breakdown and screamed about being chased by his mother's ghost, and insisting on his heterosexuality while arguing with the invisible ghost of his mother about lacy things in his closet, insisting one of his girlfriends bought them for him—well, that was just an added bonus, wasn't it?

Just in case, John had left potential traps for a few equally reprehensible people he'd spotted along his journey through the building, in case one crazed manager wasn’t enough for his purposes before the end. There always seemed to be a plethora of petty dictators in business such as these. John felt disturbingly like he might be perpetrating a charitable public service, however accidental.

Once the magician made it to the floor that his target of the day was also on, security did get a lot tighter, and security cameras swiveled to follow every move anyone made throughout. John ignored the cameras with ease, and strode down the corridors of the place as though he owned every inch of the building. Those normally responsible for watching the camera feeds would be occupied with observing the actions of the newly-frenzied madman several floors down, in any case.

A brief bit of glamour-spell, just to give the impression of authority and extra bulk, allowed him to imitate a bodyguard long enough to discern where people were sending worried glances toward, as it occurred to them where they more expected to see a bodyguard that day.

From there, finding the very-important guest visiting the building that day—a charming man called Tony Stark—was fairly easy. Luckily, Mr. Stark was having a bit of one-on-one with their CEO, while they both waited for someone else from the company to arrive and invite them all out for lunch.

Skin tingling both in the absence of the earlier glamour, and with anticipation as the blessing of synchronicity allowed him just the right nudge, after almost a full minute staring at the door, to time his entrance perfectly.

Both men in the CEO's office looked startled as he interrupted a lull in their conversation. The English CEO looked irate, but the inventor seemed a bit relieved at the sight of a potential distraction from apparent boredom with the business they had previously been discussing.

"I'm terribly sorry to interrupt, sirs, but there's a security situation," John said, toning down his usual accent in favor of sounding a bit more polished, white-collar and respectable.
Tony Stark's eyes went cold and war-like, and one of his hands moved in a gesture that looked almost like that of a mage preparing to summon something to himself. John hastily waved a hand and offered a nervous-but-harmless smile.

"It is more of an internal management issue and… possible PR issue than actual danger, but the manager currently going mad downstairs is one you hand-picked, sir," John said quickly, recalling that being one of the currently-crazed man's bragging points earlier at the water-cooler, while the lower-ranked employee he spoke to had tried desperately to look for a means of polite escape. "If it weren't getting rather desperate, I wouldn't ask, but no one else is certain how to get through to the poor man."

The inventor's eyes narrowed suspiciously, even as the CEO made a series of excuses, and hissed a command in John's ear on his way past, telling him to keep Stark happy or there would be blood.

"Yes, sir," the magician lied casually, as the slightly portly, but very tall CEO brushed past him. John then stepped further into the room and shut the door casually. He also placed a minor psychic impression on the door-handle, just in case. It was the small touches, he found, which often made the biggest difference between being caught wholly off-guard, and actually having time to get a head start.

"Hello, Mr. Stark."

Tony snorted. "Nice tricks. Who and what are you, then?"

"Annoyed, is what I am. Keep your bloody aliens to yourself in the Americas, will you? I've had it up to here with non-terrestrial threats getting too close to my haunts around this city." The magician held his hand just above the tips of his ears to indicate his precise level of fed-up. "I really hoped after that debacle in Greenwich that you lot had learned a thing or two about better containment of this shit."

"I know you have your own lunatic heroes around here, at least a few, so why exactly did you go through the trouble of coming to me?"

John strolled toward him, then stopped before he got within eight feet, when the man raised a glowing hand. It took the magician a moment to realize the inventor's thick and expensive-looking watch had just unfolded into an Iron Man gauntlet, and that the light in the center of the gauntlet's palm could thus probably deliver quite a lot of discomfort into his life. "Look, I'm human, I'm unarmed, even if you scan me, and I'm not here to harm or threaten you. I've also doubtlessly made your day a little less boring, so are you going to listen or are you going to spurn me for not abiding by appropriate decorum via 'making an appointment' with you?" he sneered.

At that, the inventor paused to consider. "Finished scanning, JARVIS?" he asked, confusing the magician immensely.

Then an electronic voice responded, from the gauntlet, speaking in a dry and posh English accent that made John scowl reflexively: "He is not armed in any conventional manner, but there are readings coming off of various small items in his suit-jacket pockets, and elsewhere about his person physically, which give off low-level energy readings matching some of the magic conducted by Dr. Stephen Strange."

"You really consult with that pompous ass?" John asked, at the same time Tony rolled his eyes with a sigh and cursed sorcerers and mages the world over. "Look, for the record, we're not all that bad, but I do have to admit he's pretty typical for the aristocratic set."
Tony leveled an unimpressed look his way. "What are you, then? Government?"

"They wouldn't want me as more than an experiment to dissect, and I'm not inclined to be dissected because of that rat bastard Nergal. Also, just general fuck everyone involved in government around here, I'm fed up with them and have been ever since Thatcher was first elected."

"And you are here... complaining about aliens," Tony said slowly. "What happened, exactly?"

"Oh, you know, the usual: strange women falling from the sky and immediately knowing all of my considerable history of questionable and tricky sort of actions during my long life which qualify me as a particular archetype common amongst con-men who don’t always do things 100% selfishly (more like 75-85%) then following me home and making my living-room a mess, as well as criticizing how barbarically behind the times all of my technology is. It’s been absolutely peachy."

Tony stilled, looking suddenly like he wanted to open the magician's skull and download every bit of pertinent information out of his brain with some hideous technological monstrosity. "When?"

"How important is that bit?" John asked lightly, smiling a little now that his information was in demand, instead of accepted only grudgingly.

"Important enough."

"It was the night before last, but there had been goings-on for about a week beforehand. A mate of mine out in Wales got knocked out by it, and brought me in to have a look."

"Who is this guy, JARVIS?"

"According to facial-recognition scans, and police reports local and international, his name is John Constantine, sir. He has a history of being in and out of mental health institutions from the 80's and 90's, but was judged sane enough for release on all more recent occasions. He has since been on record more for bringing in other people for treatment than delivering himself for it, with a notable exception during which he was diagnosed with terminal lung cancer several years ago."

Tony looked the tall blond magician up and down with renewed interest. "You look good for a man who should be dead."

"I get that a lot. I'm sure you do too," John countered blandly.

"I built an advanced power-cell out of bomb scraps in a cave. How'd you survive?"

"I sold my soul to all three kings of earth's Hell, which put them all in position where they had to suffer loss of face politically and personally, which none of them could afford to do without losing control of their third of Hell, or fight one another to the death over my little soul and so weakening all forces infernal to the point they could be destroyed by their arch-enemies. So basically, I told them they could get wiped out wholesale by the hosts of heaven, or fix my various ailments and live to war another day when the odds would more likely be in their favor."

Tony blinked several times. "You know, Strange said something about the different Hells out there, but I just thought he meant Detroit, and East Texas, and some key parts of West Virginia..."

"Way worse," John said, without missing a beat, or even blinking, knowing his expression was more harrowed than he'd like, but unable to prevent all of the cracks from showing through his masks.

"Duly noted," the inventor murmured. "So. Some lady fell from the sky and landed in Wales."
"Yes."
"She at least hot?"

John considered his answer carefully. "Objectively, yes."

"Objectively?"

"I find it difficult to be attracted to strange inhuman beings that might be capable of doing unspeakably painful things to my reproductive organs, particularly when the creature in question stated very matter-of-factly, soon after we met, that she did not find me attractive, and would not take kindly to any of my advances."

"You scared off that easy?"

The magician smiled wide and unkind. "Easy? No. Scared of her? You're damn right I am. I'd be an idiot not to be."

"What do you know about where she's from?"

"Nothing," John lied, with perfect sincerity. "Well, the marks left behind on the grass and the hallucinogenic-mushroom faerie ring showing up in my mate's summoning circle suggested something a bit Norse, but I couldn't tell you for certain if it was non-terrestrial fae, which I've run into once or twice but the first time also involved hallucogens and might've been a past life, or dark-elves, or anything."

"What makes you even think it might be elves of all possible things?" Tony asked, genuinely curious.

"It was the greenest bit of Cardiff I'd ever been to—not that I'm ever there often, if I can help it—and-"

"So you're not Torchwood, then?"

John's resentful glare answered for him.

Tony raised both hands, palms-forward. "Sorry."

"I also say elves because I've seen the footage from Greenwich."

"Fair, but you're lying."

"What?"

"Not about the footage, obviously, but the reason why you wanted to say elves. You're saying the expected thing, rather than the thing you actually know. You're trying to divert me with the obvious. So what is she?"

The magician considered for a few moments. This one was too sharp for someone so rich, and he was having to recalibrate his expectations, now. Eventually he half-smirked and admitted, "Well, frankly, I think she's on some sort of parole, or a punishment quest of some sort."

Tony blinked a few times at that. "Pardon?"

"She's got markings she couldn't hide from the likes of me, but you probably wouldn't notice them. Your robots might, since I don't know how the hell you detect magic with them, and frankly the idea
alone that you even *can* makes my skin crawl, but they're impossible for me to miss: all up both forearms, interlocking designs of containment, entrapment and a sort of sinkhole for excess power that whoever put those spells in place decided she shouldn't be entrusted with any longer," John bullshitted quickly, but with grudging-sounding conviction, like he didn't want to bring it up. It wasn't actually a lie, not entirely. Just further omission of all he knew about Loki’s punishment and what the trickster had done to earn it, and all. "So yeah, alright, she's a sort of prisoner or an exile of some sort. That doesn't mean I know who sent her; I just maybe thought I'd soften the blow a bit before bringing that up."

The inventor hummed, looking thoughtful and curious. "JARVIS? Hack their security and make sure we won't be disturbed until I says so."

"Right away, sir."

"That's not vaguely sociopathic at all," John mused.

"You're still holding out on me."

"She's in my damned apartment, and can easily murder me in my sleep. Pardon me for being cagey if there's a good chance it might save my skin, keeping a few things to myself."

Tony nodded. "Understandable. I'm still not sure why you came to me."

"She's interested in your resources, and wants to meet you. If I'm not mistaken, she seems to talk about you like you've both met before or something."

A flicker of suspicion flashed across the inventor's face. "That's not likely."

"But not impossible."

"Unfortunately." Tony hummed. "The bifrost episodes over Wales for the past week or so are a known issue. We're still trying to get Asgard to cough up any information about it."

John managed to successfully look surprised. "You're kidding me."

"About?"

"Asgard?"

"Well, one of the Avengers *is* Thor."

The magician realized, right in that moment, that there was no sanity to be found anywhere, at this rate, until he got himself disentangled from this mess as much as possible. "Thor," he repeated. It didn't even take much effort to sound flatly disbelieving. "The actual Norse god of thunder."

"Yep."

John exhaled a very long, ragged and exasperated sigh. "I'm getting too bloody old for this shit."

"You don't look a day over thirty. I should find out your secret."

"Demon blood. You don't want it, and I do actually age, just a lot slower than most. Still showing lines I didn’t used to, so the process hasn’t entirely stopped." He gestured vaguely at the corners of his own eyes and mouth.

Tony blinked. "What?"
"I recommend we move on. You're not getting any of my blood, and I'm not going to do any harm. The crazy probably-alien woman currently in my apartment is already planning to sneak myself, and herself, into some event you're holding at a hotel in town in a couple days. All you gotta do is give her an ear. She doesn't want to make a scene, or make you all that suspicious, but the last thing I need is another rich bastard with a grudge against me for inflicting a supernatural situation on him without warning."

The billionaire raised one eyebrow in silent inquiry.

John shrugged. "Hey, at least you aren't from the bloody Cambridge Club set."

Tony seemed to mull that over, and nodded. "Yeah, I can't stand most of them, either."

"Right?" John sighed and pulled a cigarette from the breast pocket of his coat, lighting it. "Hope you don't mind, it's been a day."

"Nah, I hate this whole company, right now. Feel free to ignore the ashtrays to your heart's content. Hell, steal a couple if you like. I already pocketed a couple so I can throw them in the air and shoot them into bits later."

The magician half-grinned at him, at that. "You're not bad, for a rich tosser, I think, Stark."

"And you're a slightly smarmy but somewhat ridiculously intelligent con artist with chronic problems with authority that I frankly don't hold against you a bit," Tony responded. "So why aren't you exploiting having some sort of imprisoned supernatural being in your apartment?"

John snorted, coughed, and cracked up laughing.

Tony waited a bit over a minute for him to finish.

"Ah, here for a moment I thought you really knew about magic. Oh, that's so refreshing, let me tell you. Wow, what a stupid idea."

"Why?"

"I've been a fixture here in London for a few decades now, mate. I've hit the devil himself in the face with a wine-bottle after tricking him into drinking holy water, and knocked his sorry arse into a blessed spring to save the soul of a dead Irish alcoholic, formerly one of my best mates. I've cured cancer through con-artistry. I've surgically removed traces of my stillborn twin brother and his damned optimistic destiny ideas for all mankind from my own body, mind, and soul, with jagged edges of shattered mirrors and a scalpel alike. I've granted the last wishes of ghosts to bid them to their rest, even if it meant doing really horrible things they were convinced they deserved. I've sicced the rainbow serpent on some white would-be land-usurpers in the outback and made sure their claim would be made null, and that fine goddess still owes me a boon for that, but the gods of this world are a different breed than anything out there."

He pointed skyward with a jab of fingers and cigarette alike. "Greenwich taught me that. I saw it on the news, and I heard the screams in my sleep for weeks, and I visited the place, saw the destruction, and the jagged edges of magic gone wrong that are still healing in the air all around the place. I've pulled the wool over the eyes of a heaven run by a madman and his tame servant-warriors, and I've bested half the host of Hell only because I know what their rules are, and I know plenty of ways to slip out of the whole christianity and belief song-and-dance, the whole rigged game, same as any pagan worth their salt and ash. I know all the loopholes, I know the ways of even the slimiest of demons whose souls once belonged to the greatest legal minds in human history. Even on their own
ground, in the astral plane, in games of symbols and limitations and earthly magics, I can go toe-to-toe with any devil this planet has to offer. Whatever is out there in space isn't stopping to play games like that over paltry little individual souls. They don't all have to stop when their true names are called and a couple of binding rites thrown under them, no more than any mortals do, because the off-earth mystical beings are real flesh and blood, with souls of their own, and same as I don't go to war with other humans without a mystic advantage or several, I sure as shit won't go to war with whoever dropped this lady on fucking Cardiff, because whoever they are? They don't truck with shadows and small people and small places; they just blow up cities. That? Fuck that. I'm out." He waved a dismissive hand, as though ineffectually trying to clear some of the smoke trailing from his cigarette along with the whole war idea. Then he pointed sharply at the inventor in front of him.

"Your turn, futurist. You need an arcane specialist not so afraid to get his hands dirty as Dr. Strange to follow up on a local spot of surreal lunacy? I'm the man for the job. You got aliens who can lead a full-on invasion of New York?" He snorted. "Fuck off, do I look like I've got that kinda funding?"

"So. What's she after, your alien lady?"

"She's interested in ‘Loki’ which for me personally sets off different alarms than it may you, but she's apparently just interested in learning everything about what happened with him in New York, in great detail," John said lightly. "She seems to think something got covered up, between then, and something to with... oh, what was that one Greek dragon-like thing with all the heads? Starts with an ‘h’, right?" He grinned a little to see the inventor suddenly looking all too serious and angry.

“Hydra,” Tony deadpanned.

The magician nodded. "Yep, that’s the one."

“Why?

“Well. To get out of her current earthly bonds, as it were, she has to learn the value of human life—or something—as well as retrieve some things Hydra's stolen that they shouldn't have in the first place,” the magician lied quickly, but with conviction. Half-lies were so very, very easy that way. Even the best often couldn't spot them.

Tony Stark looked still caught between murderous and suspicious, but he nodded. "Okay. How dedicated is she, really, to obeying those rules?"

John raised a hand, holding it out flat, palm downward. He then pivoted it left and right in a so-so gesture. "Ehh, she's inclined to buck the system by finding ways to serve her sentence unconventionally instead of being true to the spirit of it, but I can respect that, all things considered."

The inventor looked intrigued and thoughtful, at that. "Hmm. Almost makes me miss Loki, actually."

"What?" the magician was sincerely bemused.

"Thor's brother, despite what you probably heard from the relevant myths about him and Odin being blood-brothers. Also I suspect that he sabotaged the New York City invasion deliberately, myself. I studied the machine that opened the wormhole and it was... altered last-minute, to open a smaller portal. Also, your mysterious alien-lady is right: records of the battle got altered by Hydra in a number of key ways and I've got the only unadulterated records under secure lockdown."

John continued to stare, perplexed, and knowing better than to talk while still so perplexed.

"That said: Loki actually died, a while back. Thor's still not over it; he went back to Asgard a couple of months ago, near the anniversary of his little brother doing the whole sacrificing-his-life-for-Thor's
thing; well, in theory. They've been wrong before, about him being dead." There was an almost-
hopeful note in his voice. "I've been to Asgard a couple times, since then, and I sort of understand
where he was coming from, a little better. The place needs all the shaking up it can get, especially
when it comes to certain societal aspects; although involving earth at all in that would be inevitably
catastrophic, so I'd prefer us kept out of it." He shook his head. "Your story here reminds me of
Thor's banishment to New Mexico long before that, though. He was rendered mortal and had to
redeem his worthiness by... doing heroic things, I guess. He wound up almost dying for his human
girlfriend, and that seemed to work. It occurred to me that Loki would consider that too cliche."

"Ah," the magician said, with a bit of dry amusement in his tone.

"So. What's the name of your alien girl?"

"Lyra. Her falsified identification and history, which it seems that she's managed to acquire overnight
by means that frighten me a little, call her 'Lyra S. Walker' and she's, as I said, in my apartment."

"She managed to get false I.D.s that fast?"

"More than that. I dunno if she actually slept more than an hour or two last night. I think the rest was
spent making my poor laptop work harder than it ever has in its pathetic life. I swear she nearly killed
the thing."

Tony's eyes were very bright and intently sharp, then. "She knows earth tech."

"Yeah, not only is she magically inclined and not from earth, but she insists that she's from a more
advanced civilization that uses magic in about the same way that computers around here use
programming languages, or something? She lost me after that, insofar as that explanation, by
damaging my pride severely and cheating me out of being owed an unspecified favor by the likes of
her, which by the way is how I usually survive these messes, so I deeply resent that."

The inventor began to grin wide and bright and just a little manic. "I'll send you and your plus-one
invitations of your own then. Rest assured, I can find your address."

The magician made a face. "No, really, please don't, actually, she would easily-"

"Sir, Ms. Romanoff is calling, she says it relates to her neighbor," JARVIS interrupted.

John froze before he could stop himself, his eyes a little too wide. This, of course, didn't go
unnoticed.

"Speaker," Tony said, as he matched up a written description he'd read to the magician's appearance
and became deeply amused. "Hello, Nat, dear."

"... Why am I on speaker, Tony?"

"I've got an office to myself right now. I'm taking advantage. JARVIS has scanned it, and both it and
the line are secure."

"I think I've been compromised. The slightly smarmy blond neighbor with all the shady but mostly-
harmless friends has spontaneously acquired a new roommate."

John frowned a bit at 'mostly harmless' because frankly, some of his clients and friends were
genuinely terrifying people.

"She military or something?"
"Something. Based on the way that she walks and carries herself, and how she scans a room, I'd say she's combat-trained, and probably used to working espionage a bit, too. She plays harmless almost as well as I do, and there's something familiar about her that I really don't like."

"You met her before, maybe?"

"Maybe. Or seen her mug-shot, or something. It's hard to put my finger on."

"Well, Mr. Constantine, you want to explain why the lady in your apartment seems familiar to Ms. Romanoff?" Tony asked lightly.

"Dammit, Tony," the spy on the phone spat.

"No clue," the magician said, prepared now, after he'd caught on a few moments ago to what the inventor's game was. "She's just an alien that fell out of the sky over Cardiff, to me. She's familiar enough with stuff down here on earth to be a bit creepy, but she didn't say anything about recognizing you, just that you had an invitation to some party Stark is throwing, which she might be interested in attending herself."

"Cancel it, Tony," Natasha said flatly.

"Not a chance," the inventor shot back. "Not now we're really getting somewhere. There was bifrost activity over Wales, by the way, Nat, just the past few days. That's the real reason I'm in the U.K. at all; the rest of this is just keeping up appearances."

"Smooth," the spy conceded. "Find anything?"

"I sent Steve out to Wales. He found traces of the bifrost and some other more local pagan activity." He raised his eyebrows at John pointedly. "He thought it might've been some nut from Hydra."

"Nah," John said flatly, like he was surprised that anyone had mistaken Jesse’s work as being connected to anything quite that organized. "That was my mate Jesse, who called me about all the lights in the sky and local sensitives and psychics getting worked up over dreams of falling through fire forever and something else apocalyptic: my usual bag, you may as well know."

"So you're a paranormal investigator?" Natasha asked blandly. "Here I just thought you were an actual shoddy Private I., or something."

"I'm a consultant," the magician protested, his pride only a little stung. "And I've saved the world on accident about as often as you have on purpose, the both of you." He put out his first cigarette on the arm of a nearby chair and lit another, leaving the cigarette butt where it was.

Tony made a face like he thought that might be going a bit far, but didn't actually protest.

"I know, actually, but you sound so cute when you're insulted. I've read up on you quite a bit, John. I know a lot of what you get up to is well off of everyone's radar except Strange's," Natasha said, the biting lilt of her words somewhere between reassuring his ego and dismissing it in one fell swoop.

"Strange is a tosser in a cape that should've been left buried with Vincent fucking Price," the magician muttered.

"Good, it's not just me that thought that," Tony muttered.

"Bond over it later. Who is your roommate, John?" the spy said crisply. "I'll go ask her now if you'd prefer."
"No! No, no, she doesn't know I'm here, nor should she," Constantine said quickly, ash dropping from the cigarette between his lips as his hands gestured in a wildly disparaging manner. "Listen to me for a minute! I'm trying to arrange a clearing of debts with her, and not incurring any wrath from the two of you and any other mad heroes from the colonies, but it's a fine line, right? I can't tell you quite who or what she is because I'm not myself wholly sure. I'm pretty damn sure she's not from this planet, but that she's more than a bit familiar with the place, and computers, as well as whatever mess has happened with some folks called S.H.I.E.L.D. and Hydra. She's pissed at Hydra for meddling with things humans supposedly shouldn't, which I think is arguable at best in general, but not with radical pseudo-nazis, who as a general rule shouldn’t be trusted with anything more dangerous than a sock. As far as I can tell, she's not out to take over the world, she's just trying to con her way out of imprisonment to stick it to whoever put her in this position, and wants your help to do it."

Both Avengers made quiet and thoughtful noises, but Tony's face was stonily suspicious, and Natasha's voice had a flat and distant quality that reminded John again of ex-KGB men and women he'd met over the years.

"What are you to her?" the spy inquired.

"Means to an end, and a convenient bystander suited to particular archetype-based magics," John countered, sounding chagrined. "I stepped in the wrong circle and got tangled up in this shit. She crash-landed without so much as real clothing to her name, I loaned her my coat, I worked out that we'd met before and how, and since then she's been having a great deal of fun at my expense because I know what she's capable of and find her frankly terrifying. It's like having a full-grown siberian tiger to share an apartment with—a tiger with genius-level intellect and only practical levels of anything resembling morality."

"So you were there when she landed," Tony said. "No ship?"

John shook his head. "Nope. How she survived the impact, I'm not actually sure. She might not've been in a fully human shape when she landed. She can't do a lot of magic she's more normally accustomed to, which from what I can tell she's got a well of power and talent to her magical gifts that make Strange look like Harry fucking Potter on acid, but that's all under lockdown until she learns some sort of esoteric paternalistic lesson about us little mortals and the value of our lives, or some bollocks."

"Lights in the sky?" Natasha asked. "Thunderstorms?"

"You already know the answer, you both do, and odds are you've been trying to find out who or what landed out in Wales since it happened," John accused. "What did you think it was?"

"Gods," Natasha said. "They've banished 'unworthy' nobility here before."

"That would explain the way she talks, a bit," the magician muttered, "but for royalty she's unusually..." He cleared his throat. "She seems like a black sheep and practical enough that I can get on with her, despite the fear of imminent death, and for what it's worth I trust her alone in my house." He thought about her waiting until he fell asleep to occupy the empty side of his bed: the behavior of someone used to being unwelcome and unwanted, someone not accustomed to getting what they demand due to rank and privilege. It was an odd contrast, compared to most earthly nobs (a certain pink-haired punk who still doesn't actually remember he’s of the bloodline of England's true king notwithstanding) John had ever had to deal with. It was even more odd, given that Loki otherwise had an air of confidence and control, but if it was founded purely in self-reliance, instead of reliance upon royal privilege, that might explain it, a bit. Being a known liar and persistently distrusted by everyone in Asgard might have that sort of effect on a god. "She's a toff I can stand, because she's a toff who hates those who laud their power over her as much as I hate those who do
the same by me, and it extends sufficiently to others that she seems to have a general disrespect for authority that I relate to, let's say."

"No wonder they banished her from Asgard, then," Tony said flatly. "They tend to be a bit harsh on that."

"Tony..." Natasha warned, as though she were tired of hearing this argument, but couldn’t just let this slip by without comment.

"Have you really talked to Thor about the place?" the billionaire prompted her. "They're living under an absolute monarch and Loki was the only one who challenged his power, other than the queen of a neighboring nation, for over three thousand years. I've said it before, and I'll say it again: that's something I don't trust, and a culture I don't know if I'm capable of ever fully trusting. I can't fathom that sort of contentment, and wholehearted submission of so many people to a single political leader, particularly one who so royally fucked up his own two kids, and punished the weaker one for it without any offers to aid earth or make reparations of any kind, or otherwise take any responsibility on Asgard’s or even just his own behalf, for those sons’ respective craziness and/or actions."

Suddenly, John Constantine realized this would either go spectacularly well, or it would be the world's biggest train-wreck. They thought Loki was dead, and Stark happened to... sympathize? With Loki? Interesting. "Ah, but would you say these sort of things about him if he weren't dead?" the magician asked lightly.

"He's been saying it since about two months after New York," Natasha responded, sounding dryly amused. "I didn't entirely agree with him until Thor told us about Loki's 'death' from which he notably hasn’t returned."

"Come on, Nat. We both think the likelihood that he faked his own death is pretty high. Especially considering that he’s managed it before, less deliberately or otherwise."

"She's not Loki, Stark."

John tried very, very hard to remain very, very still and kept his expression a slightly-befuddled mask; however, he did cast a quick spell to prevent any repetitions of Loki’s name from catching the god’s attention if the trickster had any spells in place to let her know who might be talking about her behind her back.

Tony was unconvinced by her words. "He's a shape-shifter. He could be anyone. Our mage here-

"Magician. I don't quite qualify-"

"-just said she might not have been in a human shape when landing. Thor admitted there aren't many in Asgard capable of shape-shifting, and if 'her' magic is bound, we know it's not maintaining a glamour or illusion," Tony said.

"Uh," John said quietly. "Wait a second, here. I didn’t say I thought she could shape-shift, I just thought maybe her banishment came with unconventional landing-gear sorts of spells that."

"Her eyes are black," said the spy.

The magician fell quiet, blinking rapidly and managing, just barely, not to ask incredulously, They are? or Since when? Then he recalled that the laptop hadn't been the only package laying around his living-room. There had been a few smaller ones. Sneaky little bastard, you got contact lenses? They would be easier to conceal with only the simplest hint of magic, a nothing-to-see-here suggestion always required less effort than anything like manipulation of light. Loki could probably have kept
that up long enough to fool Natasha, at the least. He wondered if Stark's AI would notice regardless, being an inorganic intelligence far less susceptible to such things.

That brought him to the thought that perhaps, just perhaps, it might be best for only Tony Stark to know exactly who Lyra Walker really was. Something in the inventor's unflattering summary of Odin tugged at synchronicity hard, told him to roll with the impulse to entrust Stark with that knowledge, despite all the rest of John's other more basic instincts still vacillating under the weight of hesitation and foreboding.

This was a something heavy, almost inevitable: a pull in the currents of coincidence and power woven into the architecture of the present, leading forward into a future John could almost sense an impression of. Whatever it was came with a sensation like a blast of adrenaline all through his bloodstream, like the sort of crackling through his veins and skeleton he remembered from past occasions he'd channeled greater powers than his body alone could hold. This was the ghost of such sensations, though; a resurgent memory of something that still only might happen, not a promise or commitment.

This is important, John could see, clear as day. How it was important, he couldn't quite work out, but he already knew precisely what he had to do, seeing it like a path laid out before him, waiting for him to weave down it. Emboldened by it, John smiled a charming, showman's smile, and stretched his fingers a little to loosen himself up, all while Natasha continued to explain:

"Thor told us he can't change his eye-color. It's his anchor-point."

"Yeah, yeah, to lose all resemblance to himself, he'd risk losing his mind to whatever other form he might take, I remember the lecture," Tony sighed.

"I don't know why you're disappointed, Tony. Do you have a defenestration fetish we need to worry about?"

"I'm about to hang up on you."

"Wait," she said, more gently. "John?"

"Yes, darling?"

She snorted, clearly disapproving of how quickly his confident self-assurance seemed to have recovered. "Is she a danger to my planet or the people I care about?"

The magician considered. "While she's on lockdown, she needs all the allies and security she can get. If you're important to her security and her plans, you and yours are safe as houses."

"I suspected as much," the spy sighed. "Invite her in as a consultant to the Avengers, Tony, on the grounds she helps us as much as we help her."

"Still no word from Thor?" Tony asked.

"No. According to Dr. Foster, whatever he was called back to Asgard for, he's been sworn against discussion of it by his father. She did ask him about Wales, but all he can tell us is that he was there recently. Nothing more."

John's brow furrowed at that. That could be a good thing, but he doubted it.

"He also doesn't have long before he's got to head back to Asgard," the spy added. "Something is going on with the Queen of Nornheim again."
"Again?" Tony asked.

"Apparently, she's still pissed." A faint noise in the background on Natasha's end sounded. "Just how many packages has that woman ordered, John? This is the fourth delivery since I woke up today."

"Many," the magician deadpanned. "It's really best if you don't ask where she got the money. I'm not actually sure; although she insists it's not technically stolen so much as sort of digitally counterfeited in a way I'm not altogether certain of."

The inventor's eyes lit up a bit. "Oh, I think I like her."

"Then come up with a plan, for her. I won't be making it to your party myself; my target is moving on to Switzerland tonight," said Natasha blandly.

"Fair enough," Tony said. "Still no hints who it is?"

"You were compromised a long while, Tony. We're still trying to find out how deeply, and you know it."

Wincing slightly, the inventor sharply hung up.

"Sore spot?"

"Who is she, really?"

John stayed quiet, watching the other man's expression for a long few moments.

"You were suggesting she could shape-shift. That excuse was shit," Tony remarked coldly, and then listed off: "Amora can't shape-shift, and I met Loki's daughter last month on accident after a near-death experience in Asgard: her eyes are two different colors, and his son's are green too, and also don't change, from what Thor has told us. That doesn't leave a very long list of people from Asgard this could actually be, unless Lorelei has powers none of us knew about, or Thor secretly has a sister Odin's been hiding forever, or from an alternate universe, or something equally insane. So, tricky McGinley*, who is it?"

"I'm frankly insulted that I don't at least merit a Johnny Rotten."

Tony slowly arched an imperious eyebrow. "Wait, were you actually in a band I'd have heard of?"

"Not bloody likely, no offense."

The inventor shrugged it off. "You still haven't answered my question."

"You think she's Loki."

"I think Loki's smart enough to fool Natasha, now he knows her better than he did at the start."

"She's ordered a lot of things online, and I dunno how they've gotten delivered quite so fast," John said, as though commenting on an odd change in the wind.

Tony was back to giving him an unimpressed an expectant stare that didn't seem about to waver anytime soon.

"Some big, some pretty small, is what I'm saying." He shrugged. "But last I checked, her eyes weren't black." He took a long pull from his cigarette, then, enough to finish it off, and this time put it
out in an ashtray. He put his hands in his pockets and clicked his tongue, seeing how slightly widened and predatorily intent the younger man's stare was. "You're less than impressed with Odin, I notice."

"I'm not excusing anything that isn't directly his fault, but I've done some regrettable things first to earn paternal affection, and then to reject it when it was clear I wasn't going to get it. How 'bout you?"

John winced. "Well, to be fair, mine tried to abort me with a coathanger. Pardon my relative lack of sympathy for your dear ol' dad giving you an empire, when my own gave me nothing but bruises and a few scars, as well as various traumatic experiences."

"And Loki was a prince, but you get on with him fine."

"He's offended by a king. I've known too many kings."

"Howard Stark was as close to a king as America gets."

The magician considered, pulling out another cigarette, but not yet lighting it. "I suppose that's fair. He did seem awful fond of telling people what they should aspire to be like, and fix them and rebuild their worlds whether all of them even understood what he was doing and why, or not."

"Yeah."

"You do too."

"Working on it."

"I'm sure you are," John muttered.

"I'm easy to escape. Don't buy from my company, or steal from us, and you're not under my umbrella of support or control, unless you're under threat from someone who DID steal from me. They're who I'm policing. The rest of you, I'll protect from global threats, but I'm not exactly otherwise a great role-model, which I make sure to let everyone know, at every opportunity." He stood up and strode over to a decanter of scotch on one end of the CEO's desk. He poured himself a glass, and offered one to the magician, who accepted it gratefully.

Both of them sipped from it with some savor, looking out over the view of London out the floor-to-ceiling skyscraper window.

"You don't think he might try take over the world again or anything?" John asked lightly.

"He didn't want it in the first place. He was running from someone bigger and nastier, and wanted to aim us at them, or he would've gathered his forces in a single place before attacking, instead of letting them trickle through the portal. He also wouldn't have left the portal where we could reach it. Why he had to play it up quite so manically, I'm curious to learn more about, along with the glowing blue bits here-ish." He waved a hand at his own eyes. "I asked Thor about it, but he insisted it had to be a trick, and Loki couldn't change his eyes due to shape-shifting logic, et cetera, et cetera." He shook his head and sipped more scotch. "He seem the type to want to deal with actually maintaining a kingdom or empire to you?"

John made an amused noise. "Fucker wouldn't have the patience."

"Right?"
"He needs a list of his victims. All of them."

"Yeah, a lot of the names of the dead weren't exactly found in wreckage. Hydra cleared out a lot of 'troublesome' or 'potentially compromised' people by adding them retroactively to those lists of the dead. Why does he need them? Why doesn't he ask his daughter?"

"My guess is that'd be too easy and Odin already took pains to keep her out of this," John said. "He's supposed to be learning a lesson, and he's incapable of doing it the easy way and knows Odin expects him to try anyway, so instead he's taking the scenic route."

"What?"

"She said it's something about needing to understand the value of every mortal life she took, apparently. I wasn't actually lying about that bit."

"Ah."

"That's not all, exactly. I'm pretty sure, but she hasn't told me the rest."

"He looks good as a woman?"

"All I see is a mad god, really, but I can say for a shape-shifter 'he' does good work." He frowned slightly. "I've not actually seen 'him' without a lot of obscuring smoke and darkness, though. Mostly just saw the eyes and the cracked grin."

"Well, if you like tall, dark, genius and slightly psychotic, dressed all in metal and leather, he has a certain appeal. Unfairly nice cheekbones, too."

John considered. "I'm content to take your word for it."

"Not interested in men?"

"My instincts for self-preservation, despite their mythic status, do in fact exist in spades," the magician said flatly. "And they cause my scrotum to try and crawl up into my body where it's safer whenever Loki gets too close, in spite of how gorgeous she might happen to look in nothing but this coat."

Tony almost choked on his scotch and burst out laughing helplessly, interrupted by intermittent coughs.

John smacked his back twice sharply before the fit stopped.

"Fair enough."

"You don't get the same reaction?"

"Only on the occasion I manage to genuinely tick off Thor." Something about his expression, and his lack of comment on the effect Loki may or may not have ever had on him, made the magician smirk.

"Whereas being thrown out of a window turns you on?"

"No, it doesn't," Tony said flatly.

"So being manhandled on the way there did?"

Tony managed a moderately incredulous and irritable expression, but there was a slight hint of color
at the tips of his ears.

Suddenly the currents of synchronicity in the air that were so very strong made John uncomfortable for a large number of reasons. He really didn't want to think about it. Not at all. He suddenly had more of an idea where this was going than he ever wanted, and blinked a bit to force that train of thought off the tracks and down some chasm where he would hopefully never find it again. "Your party, then," he said abruptly, desperate to change the subject. He had forgotten the occasional pitfalls of this heightened perceptiveness: there were some people he really didn't need to know anything about the sex lives of.

Now he felt like a synchronicity-based dating service and barely managed not to grimace.

"You gonna tell him I know who he is?"

"Not yet. In fact, I'd recommend you have some shady people kidnap me off the street in a couple of days. I left my phone at home and made certain nothing on me right now is keeping track of my location, but it might be good for him to get worried that I've told you people things, just to cover both our asses. Also, a means to slightly obscure my face is ostensibly what I'm here for, if I'm asked."

"Keep him on his toes, you mean."

John nodded.

"Archetype, you said," Tony mused. "I think I get it, now."

"I think you might qualify for much the same, or I would've left a while ago."

Tony grinned wolfishly, at that, and pulled a device out of his pocket, tossing it to the other man; it was small, and clearly meant to me hooked over one's ear like some bluetooth headsets. "That will obscure you from facial-recognition software of all sorts, when it's on. It also works against paparazzi and all digital cameras, which is how I've been keeping a low profile around town."

John inclined his head. "Thanks very much."

"So then... Tell me how you met him."

Slowly, John did: from Jesse's phone calls and email, to the circle, to the fires, to every word Loki had said to him. Every. Single. One.

After all: it was always a good idea to arm human tricksters against all-too-powerful gods. Loki might have his powers chained up, these days, and locked down, but he was still very much a god, and had far too many advantages. And no one ever claimed John Constantine was known for his loyalty, or for keeping his word, to anyone who wasn't human and considered one of his own.

That thought reminded the magician to do something for Ellie to get back into her good graces. Maybe find another angel she could rip the heart out of, recreationally this time.

By the time he finished, Tony Stark was pacing, and John had been forced to increase the energy he was putting into the spells downstairs keeping all of the building personnel's attention diverted. Thanks to the diversions, they were interrupted only by intermittent intercom-calls from the CEO's personal assistant, apologizing for all of the delays. She didn't elaborate further or say anything at all about how five people on different floors below were now doing vigorous impressions of paranoid schizophrenics injected with methamphetamines and DMT, seemingly attempting to perform screaming-matches accusing one another of things which would've sounded less out of place at the
Salem witchcraft trials, if every witness for the prosecution had been a different character from Office Space. Police and other security personnel were trying to reason with them. No one was injured, but the Facebook and Twitter updates alone had ruined a few careers so far.

Still pacing, Tony said, "He found out way too much information, way too fast. How did he learn to hack like that? No one he had under mind-control last time had skill-sets like that. Clint can hack a bit, but nothing like even Natasha can."

"It's a language thing. To an extent, computer programming is a lot more like some aspects of magic than you will ever hear me admit to again, because even though I can recognize that, I still can't make heads or tails of most of cyberspace without leaving my body and entering it manually by means of a complex neural setup and a dangerously unstable and only partially-constructed, absentee-locus conjuration. Even then, the actual interface and control systems elude me and I need a human guide on the outside. Loki has been at the language game across multiple realms for a long time, and my guess is that the practice paid off."

The inventor stood very still for a long moment, one thumb flicking back and forth across the end of his chin, unnecessarily smoothing his beard down a bit there. "Advanced civilization. Right. They don't have computing systems, though."

"They don't need them. They've got spells instead."

"Ones that run like computer programs?"

John lowered himself into the chair Tony had occupied earlier, and made the same so-so hand gesture from before. "Mostly, yeah. It's complicated."

Coming to a sudden halt, the inventor seemed to undergo an unsettling realization. "Magic is hacking reality," Tony said flatly. "Is that really what you're saying to me?"

The magician blinked a few times rapidly. "You really didn't know that 'til just now?"

Throwing his hands in the air briefly, the inventor began pacing again. He was also swearing at length.

Finishing off his (by now second) glass of scotch, John just watched him, feeling the thrum of things falling into place around him, below him, and filling the room like a wall of low-frequency sound that he couldn't hear, but could feel growling up through his ribcage like an especially complex and satisfying bass solo. Alcohol always did have a way of making it harder for him to tune out his magic, which could at times make him seem more drunk than he might actually be. He tried not to let that happen here, keeping as alert as possible, his focus on the pacing billionaire superhero in front of him. "What's so bad about it?" He was a bit surprised when this brought the other man suddenly much closer, leaning a bit deliberately into his space.

"That means I need to learn it," Tony growled.

Oh. Ohhh shit, John thought. Then he realized there was no reason not to say it aloud, so he did that too.

"Exactly."

"You don't know the half of it. It's not something to get into lightly, not even at levels of sensitivity and power lower than what I'm at, and I'm a just a petty dabbler people chronically underestimate, because my actual gift isn't very vast or powerful; it's just how I make use of it."
Tony stared him down.

"Well. Okay, so I'm a bit unusually powerful by most human standards, thanks to having been in practice so long and having the power of reputation in many circles that I do these days, and there was a bit of predestination involved that I'm still very bitter about, but Loki's on a completely different level, even past what Strange can do. He doesn't just eat, drink, and breathe magic, he is magic. He's not got human limits, nor has he got any of the restrictions most non-human terrestrial beings of mystic inclination tend to have down here, where most of them are either entirely dependent on the religiously devout who believe in them and let them cross over from whatever lands they rule over in their story-forms in the astral plane, which is where all the ideas and stories and living minds of mankind are interwoven into the whole landscape. Er... mind-scape? All of the above, actually, but I digress. There's doubtlessly some version of Loki that's man's invention and vulnerable as any terrestrial god, but that's not who we're dealing with here; that's the historical and cultural shadow cast by the bastard currently occupying my apartment. Humans with powers even close to that are rare as true prophecy, and reluctant as I am to admit it, Strange is one of the only sane ones of them I've ever met, and the only one so far I haven't had to help someone else murder or worse, to save the planet."

"Worse?"

"Don't ask too much about Joshua Wright, for your own sake," John said gravely. "Even he was mostly amateur, compared to Strange, but he had more of the gift than I did. He just lacked experience, and I used enough to that to my advantage that eventually I cracked his mind into so many pieces he lost it altogether. If you’re feeling particularly strong-stomached one evening, as well as bold enough to ask a certain trickster sometime just what it takes to strip the gift from someone, even he'll hesitate to answer, I'll bet." Then he frowned. "Or he'll kill you for even asking, because he'll suspect you’re looking for a way to do it to him, so maybe it’s just best to not do that, actually."

The inventor stood up straighter again, arms crossed over his chest. "What are the downsides, then?"

"You get sensory input and feedback, often with synesthesia-like overlap between multiple senses, when it comes to dealing with magic: not just casting it, but seeing it, feeling it in the wind, or catching a glimpse of it out of the corner of your eye. If you don't keep a grip, you can wind up easily mistaken for someone having dementia-like hallucinations all the time. Learning to get through day to day life without appearing crazy is an art I've been practicing since I was in primary school, and as you can see—" He gestured at himself pointedly. "-and hear from my history, it's never exactly been 100% successful. It's not even 60-70% successful, on most days. Having that extra sensory input from magic can compromise your more concrete physical senses sometimes, too, especially if you're at all intoxicated; although there are several reasons why a lot of powerful spells work far better if one or more people involved happen to be off their tits on something hallucinogenic."

"You're telling me there's a link between magic and LSD?"

"Not for most people, no; although the experiences some people have on LSD or mushrooms seem to be pretty similar to what I experience while working with certain sorts of magic. Lucid dreaming is also a good skill to have, as it helps you with astral projection techniques, which in turn you can use to develop an awareness of your astral self and body apart from your physical one and minimize some of the more dangerous overlap. Keep in mind though that I'm a pro at that these days, but despite the rumor that I'm incapable of operating a car, the truth is that I'm not safe behind the controls of any kind of heavy machinery for any significant length of time.” He shot the younger man a pointed look, like he was perfectly aware just how daunting of a prospect that would be for the likes of Iron Man.
The inventor frowned in response. "I picked up lucid dreaming a while back, since Thor told us Loki was a dream-walker after the invasion of New York but before he took his dear brother home. Plus, I already had trouble with nightmares. An extra excuse to try and control my own dreams, even with limited success in the nightmare department, was something of a comfort."

John hummed, considering. "You good at it yet?"

Tony smirked, but said nothing.

"It's a lot like that, but infinitely more complicated. Since my magic isn't carried around within my person, I've usually got to do things more old-school, like Tricky back home is doing lately (using a lot of my stuff, incidentally, which is starting to get irritating—not that they aren't ones I can still use later once she's done, at least, but it's still a bit presumptuous) since her own reserves are under lockdown. Most of what I do is just acting as a conduit for stuff that's already around. Loki is capable of it, but more than a little rusty at it, being more used to just reaching inward and pulling from a well of power that... well, thinking about how much power I think he might have, really makes me uneasy. For now, just maintaining an illusion that manipulated light and perception a bit, and doing whatever she did to survive her fall from up on high, drained her pretty severely in a short period time, right after she landed. Holding that illusion much longer would've gotten ugly, I'm sure. It's clear to me she's used to reaching out to mess with matter as well, but she doesn't follow through on those reflexes, like she hasn't got the strength. I think she liked the computer bit because it's all electricity, which is even easier to manipulate than light, a lot of the time, and so she can have profound effects on large systems without completely exhausting herself."

"Old school?"

"Chalk circles, salt, blood, candle flames at particular convergent points around the circle, occasionally carving sigils into people. That sort of thing."

"...How the fuck does that hack anything?"

"Mostly it plays off those belief-based supernatural types that I mentioned earlier: demons, angels, et cetera. They're the ones that really require that mess, in my experience, but the sigils and marks can be a lot more complex, depending on how you use them. Loki taps into ley-lines a bit, and doesn't exactly have human blood she's working with, and also she uses symbols and seals I've never used before, though, so I'm not entirely clear on how she's doing what she's doing, honestly." He shrugged. "There's a lot, without actually possessing a gift for magic, that you're just sort of unaware of. I can't actually remember not having it myself—which admittedly causes a lot of my trouble with not appearing insane since I don't always recall what sane people can't see that I can." He shrugged it off, setting his empty glass aside.

"It is worth it?"

John grimaced. He had really been hoping that question wouldn't come up. He couldn't lie. To lie would... would weaken him. It would take power and will from him, in this case, here and now. The whole room invisibly trembled with that potential for a moment. Tony obviously didn't notice, but John felt it like the beginnings of a headache settling in at his temples. "I would die before I'd give it up, but I'm a lifelong addict. It's all I've ever had that's stuck with me when no one and nothing else would. Of course it's worth it, to me. It's worth everything to me. It's worth my whole damned life, not that saying as much really gives it a lot of credit." He lit the cigarette he'd been avoiding lighting through his whole explanation so far, up until then, and immediately took a very long pull off of it.

"I don't entirely understand how you survived lung cancer, and yet you're still at that."
"It's been a decade now, and not even a hint of it's come back. I think they altered something, in how I was remade. If I stopped, I'd be letting that go to waste, and letting fear of death get the best of me, both of which I'm just not interested in. You, though..." He met Tony's gaze across the room, then.

"The sorts of things that happen to you, when you're open to magic, if you happen to have the gift at all in the first place--admittedly, most do, but it's usually minor and takes a lot of study for them to get anywhere with it, so they don't much bother--will make your life, particularly as 'Iron Man', more impossible to maintain than you've even considered. What about the next heroic occasion you stumble into? If you're thinking about driving your sportscars and your suits of armor? Not with magic, Mr. Stark; not until you learned control better than the likes of me has, unless you somehow have far more of the gift than most." He squinted a bit at the inventor, still feeling as though the whole room were humming with potential energy. "I can't judge that, though. All I know is that whatever you decide will probably be more important than I can fathom. All I want is a certain trickster god out of my damned apartment."

Tony blinked a bit, struggling to follow that toward the end. "You're really serious on that heavy machinery thing?"

John raised his eyebrows and furrowed them a bit at the same time, in a look somewhere between pity and sternness. "Look, old son, you get tangled up with magic, it gets tangled up with you, and you don’t want its strings pulling you astray at just the wrong moment, when you needed to avoid hitting someone with... whatever it was you were steering the moment before. Furthermore, you’re a vessel of belief and an icon; there’s a reason magic-users are rare and tend to keep to ourselves, and it’s all to do with preserving our sanity and identity, without which we have no power at all."

“And yet you’ve been ‘a fixture’ in London for how long?" Tony asked. “Do you have any idea how many people, criminal and military and civilian inhuman-or-super-powered-beings, your name has connections to?" He held up his phone, which he’d glanced at and prodded several times throughout John’s explanations. It currently displayed one section of S.H.I.E.L.D.’s own personal dossier on John Constantine, which (according to another part of the screen) seemed to be over one hundred pages of information. “Frankly, I should’ve looked you up sooner as soon as I found out where Nat was staying."

“The pair of you keeping intrusively detailed spying notes on one another while she ostensibly doesn’t trust you’re 100% not-compromised, and you’re hurt that she’s so good at being emotionless and professional about it, despite knowing she’s going easy on you, thing? You’re the most adorable siblings I’ve seen in years."

“We’re not related."

“So?”

Tony shook his head at him. “I don’t look at her like my sister.”

“You just otherwise value her as such, yeah, I know. Trust me, I’ve been there.”

The inventor made a face. “Bullshit. How drunk are you?"

“No nearly enough. It’s...” He gestured vaguely. He considered trying to explain: It’s a knack I’ve got, a unique thing I always thought of as catching Synchronicity waves. It’s a sort of sped-up pattern-recognition, to do with echoes of the future in the astral plane, and gambling, and all of my ancestors spiritual and by blood being a bunch of conniving bastards. Eventually, John shrugged it off. “Nothing. Heavy memories,” he said, not altogether untruthfully. “Look, getting a reputation like I’ve done helps a bit, and I’m a lot more stable than I used to be as a result, but I’ve never been hero material so yeah, I get around, and a lot of people want to kill me a lot of the time, and unlike you my
resources to deal with all of the fuckers aren’t nigh-unlimited,” he sneered a bit. “Theories are that
being more widely known as a magic user doesn’t have too much effect on you until you reach a
certain level of infamy and belief in you held by enough of the masses.” He looked up and saw Tony
looking a bit rapt again, and sighed.

“Yeah, you’re not ending on that note. Keep going, this sounds familiar to some of what I managed
to get out of Strange insofar as theory and operation, but getting straight answers from him is like
pulling teeth.”

“It’s an occult mindset of concealment, and it means he was able to buy all his books from their
original owners instead of shreds with those obfuscation-constructs broken down to nothing so I
could read it without half the bullshit, and he’s too proud (and paranoid) to get rid of those constructs
on what tomes he does keep around.”

“Is that... is that like a magic equivalent of fucking DRM?”

“Is that a political thing?”

“Digital Rights Management. It’s a consumer electronics thing.”

John continued to stare at him blankly, and took another long pull from his cigarette.

Tony sighed. “Go back to the opiate of the masses thing.”

“It’s simple, really: belief is power, if you know how to tap into it, and have the right knack for it,
which can take some getting used to. The degree to which people know about me, and believe they
know of what I’m capable, is much lower than yours. Strange is higher than mine, and he benefits
from it, to the point he’s possibly the sanest purely human magic-user on the planet these days. Him?
He can drive any car or metal super-hero suit, whatever. His title of ‘Sorcerer Supreme’ grants him
protections I’ve never had.. For all I know, gods might get something similar, but I dunno about the
aliens. I didn’t even know they were both gods and aliens until fucking Lord of the Rings fucking
elves appeared in Greenwich.”

“Belief,” the inventor repeated flatly, openly disbelieving.

“It’s not that trueness of heart or faith have anything to do with it; it’s the power that names and faces
and symbols have on the Astral plane.” He huffed, taking a few moments to let his head loll back
and his thoughts percolate. The more he lingered on Tony Stark’s relative fame, wealth, and global
hero status, the more out of his depth he felt, but he managed to pull it together slowly. “So I’m a
known name, right? And I’ve got the infamy such that my name in some places around town more
mythically linked has enough power to do more than I can on my own elsewhere, but you? You’re
internationally recognized, you practically dedicated a new religion to yourself with the fucking Iron
Man brand and your ‘privatization of world peace’ legal grifter schtick that keeps most major
governments from assassinating you outright, because nobody wants to be hit with the responsibility
and consequences of killing a messianic figure like yourself, and the sort of insane movements that
would arise in a frenzy if you were actually killed while trying to save anything as insignificant as a
cat from a tree or as important as a fucking continent. That’s why none of your arch-nemeses are
actually political these days, unless they’re very well hidden, am I right?”

Tony considered. “Well, you’re not wrong.”

“You’re already practically a god, to most kids under thirty, and plenty of people older who still are
also susceptible to certain sorts of fanatical optimism and the charm of your old dad’s all-American
industrialist hero story as well as your own story. Nobody the likes of you has ever been
simultaneously a vessel of that amount of concentrated belief and faith, been still considered merely mortal and human, and been tapped into a gift for magic." He realised this was sounding both great and terrible. "Well, okay, so admittedly, when I’m in a place I’m better known, so long as the audience is on my side, my head is the clearest it can be and maybe the heavy machinery warning wouldn’t apply, but there are plenty of other times it’s a curse for anybody to so much as know your name, because if they have your name, or your image, or anything that used to belong to you, then they can target you with magic, and your magic will react in turn, and even if you deflect whatever mojo it was aimed your way, if you’re even capable of that, you’ll feel it where a normal non-magic person would just get their cancer or their curse and keep driving without so much as blinking.”

“You can’t ever be aware of it without being taken ‘out’ of the moment?” Tony’s brow furrowed. “Nobody ever mentioned that.”

“Well,” John ran a hand through his hair. “I’ve never actually met anyone who could block it out. Aside from Strange, I think, but I always assumed that was something to do with his title.”

Slowly, the inventor started to smirk. “Wanna test a theory?”

“No.”

“Come on.”

“No on him!”

“I didn’t even say a name.”

“You know why that’s a bad idea,” John warned, low and unimpressed.

Tony sighed. “Look, what’s the worst that could happen?”

“Have you really met this guy? Like looked him in the eyes? The crazy, genuinely staring-through-you-into-the-abyss-and-laughing eyes?”

Yeah, they have a sort of unnatural depth and gravity to them, I know, and they’re far too pretty to be fair, but really now, are you telling me those godly green eyes being angry at you is too intimidating for you to want to provoke?”

John Constantine knew when he was being played. It didn’t help; instead, it only made him painfully aware of just how well he was being played. He frowned, knowing it would technically be letting Stark win to give in and fall for that. On the other hand... if he reneged, that would mean he’d honestly let a god scare him into obedience.

Fuck that noise.

And, “Fuck you,” he added, to Tony, “you absolute wanker son of a bitch.” Then he snorted. “Yeah, I’ll do it.” As soon as he said it, though, John noticed that the inventor before him had something in his own look that reminded him a bit of the trickster, right around the eyes. In Loki it had registered as calculating, clinically distant, and a bit playfully sadistic. In Tony Stark, it looked hungry, and like the cold glow of bleeding-edge technologies these days. Something about that look, enhanced further by synchronicity resonance so strong it almost made fillings in the magician’s molars vibrate, made John sink back into the familiar sensation of realizing he had underestimated more than one devil this week, and becoming resigned to the fact that he would now spend the rest of the foreseeable future regretting it.

John knew this sensation so very well. It was worse than an old dead friend whose ghost kept
popping up whenever he was low to kick him while he was down; John had a lot of them too.

Well, he could always make Stark regret cornering him like this. The magician managed not to smirk as he came up with a few ideas for that.

“You’re looking so full of doubt suddenly,” Tony observed.

“I doubt I’m going to get out of this unscarred is all.”

“Welcome to every day of my life.”

“Bullshit. You were in Hawaii last week.”

“Yes, getting my ass kicked by Amora the Enchantress’ new girlfriend, who happened to be a volcano goddess,” the inventor sighed. “The only swimming I got to do was while I was in armor, because not long after that, things heated up meteorologically over fucking Wales of all places. Just because I don’t time left between nightmare-riddled attempts at sleep and being Iron Man lately doesn’t mean I’m that out of touch with actual humans, you snot-nosed limey bastard.”

John chuckled. “Fuckin’ fine. You’re still a posh and greedy asshole.”

“You aren’t?” Tony looked him up and down pointedly. “You clean up pretty well and fake white-collar pretty convincingly, and you’re wearing a bespoke suit fitted well enough that I’d be shocked if you don’t have a ‘usual tailor’ familiar with fitting you.”

John made a face. “Shut up. What sort of spell am I aiming at him, and are you observing mechanically or using the spy?”

Tony smiled sharply, and began to explain the experiment.

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Of course, the very last thing anyone should ever do, when dealing with the likes of John Constantine, was to underestimate his abilities to make certain a backfiring bit of magic missed himself, and struck the poor sorry bastard next to him.

The spell wound up being a very simple one: just a query sent out across the astral plane, "Is Loki in Midgard?" on a very low-frequency wave-length that only locals born on earth could actually tap into, which made it different enough from the likes of Asgardian watching-tricks meant to keep the likes of Loki under observation, that it stood a very good chance of actually getting an answer.

All they needed was roof access, chalk, a bit of spark and some of John's more obscure occult knowledge.

"What's with the design anyway?"

"Circles are the strongest base to work with, the lines out from the center mean different things based on where the caster is standing in relation to the poles, how close it is to dawn or dusk or moon-rise, the purpose of the spell itself, and the locations of the nearest ley-lines. In my case, since I work more as a conduit than a power-source myself, it’s basically like putting myself in the middle of a circuit to complete a loop. The circle is like a grounding wire. Basically, magic is a lot like pulling thought out
of air, except you're actually getting something tangible, albeit usually fleeting."
"Like static electricity?"

"Sort of." John drew all but the very last crucial line. "Right. Now, I need you to finish it."

"What?"

"Just draw one last vertical line here: simplest Norse rune of all, this is. And it's about the only chance I stand of him not working out it's me sending out the inquiry."

The inventor shot him a look. "So he'll think it's me?"

Again, the "so-so" gesture returned. "Only if you've got the knack, really. Otherwise it'll be a bit vague and baffling, and probably still trace back to me." He proffered the stick of chalk.

Still looking dubious, Tony took it, and knelt to draw the last line.

A shock of gold and red sparks immediately ran up his arm, followed by a puff of emerald smoke that seemed to smother all the light before fading out itself.

Said John simply: "Oops."

All this while JARVIS's voice announced (barely audible over all of the inventor's swearing): "Miss Walker appears to have snatched something firefly-sized and red out of the air without looking up from her book, and seems very annoyed by it."

Tony swore at length. It went on for a full minute, and ended on a loud cry of: "I'm not even fucking magic!"

John looked down at the circle they'd drawn on the roof of the building, then up at the overcast London sky, then grinned cheekily with a shrug. "No, but I think we've confirmed you've got the potential; it's just not awake."

The inventor kept swearing, then froze suddenly, looking like he'd just experienced the creepiest sensation of his entire life crawling slow and unfurling like a fern frond, but wet and coldly clammy, up his spine. "Are there supposed to be tangible side-effects?" he asked dangerously, even as the feeling faded.

The magician frowned down at the seal. "Well…"

"Our 'borrowed' connection to the CCTV camera Miss Walker was beneath has just been lost, sir," the AI said, from where Tony's phone had been placed at a point in the circle.

Tony appeared startled to see it there and shot another glare John's way.

The magician only grinned wider, with a carefree shrug. "You're bad at noticing you've been pick-pocketed, and that's no fault 'f mine." Of course, it was his fault that the younger man had been talking to a comparable illusion of the phone he'd continued to return to his pocket repeatedly, over the past fifteen minutes or so. Never underestimate the little guys, especially when you're playing on their level and within reach of their sticky fingers." You might want to grab your phone before the trace finishes, though."

"What?" Tony asked, but did snatch up his precious tech, right before the lines of the circle started to go up in a shower of sparks, like every mark of chalk had suddenly turned into gunpowder, lit at the
end-points of each sigil, then catching on the rest of each part of the seal's design. "The fuck is that?"
"Cauterizing the open-ended inquiry and cutting off any further attempts from this spot. And by this spot, I mean this building."
"Which you're all over the security footage of," Tony reminded him blithely.
John hummed thoughtfully. "JARVIS, do me a solid?"
"Erasing evidence as we speak, Mr. Constantine."
"What the fuck, JARVIS?"
"Yours as well," the AI assured. "Along with all evidence that you were invited here in the first place. I thought it best to be thorough and cover up any means by which you might have been informed of Miss Walker's presence in London as well, for the safety of preserving him as our contact currently able to keep track of Miss Walker. Were she to distrust him, that would cease to be feasible."
"Smart robot, Stark."
Tony all but snarled at him. "He's an artificial intelligence with full personhood capable of making his own decisions and self-alterations, not a pet or a 'robot' and if you're going to ally with him in a trick against me, at least get a clue."
The magician raised both hands, palms-forward. "Sorry, JARVIS. Didn't mean to insult you."
That soothed the inventor, if only a little.
"Apology accepted, Mr. Constantine," JARVIS responded.
"That said, JARVIS, next time maybe consult me, or at least alert me when I've been pick-pocketed."
"Duly noted, sir."
"I'm getting the fuck out of dodge, and if you'd like to do so and avoid notice too, I'd recommend you offer to share a cab with me, and let me whisk you away while deterring law enforcement and business associates alike with mystical prowess," John announced drolly. "You'll like it; it's a bit like a Jedi mind-trick, but more bluster and bullshit than actual use of any force. Easiest trick there is."
"And next time, don't try to con me into following my own worst instincts, when I'm still the one who knows how this shit works while you don't."
The inventor snorted, half-smirking despite himself. "Fair e-fucking-nough. You certainly made your point."
"Good. See you don't forget it anytime soon. Now let's scram."

Chapter End Notes
*The thing about Sting...*

"Where did the character John Constantine come from?"

Alan Moore: Basically, when I take over something as a writer, I always try to work as closely as I can with the artists on the book, so I immediately did my best to strike up a friendship with Steve Bissette and John Totleben. I asked them what they would like to do in *Swamp Thing*. They both sent me reams of material. Things that they had always wanted to do in *Swamp Thing*, but never thought they would get away with. I incorporated this into my scheme of things, and tried to pin it all together.

One of those early notes was they both wanted to do a character that looked like Sting. I think DC is terrified that Sting will sue them, although Sting has seen the character and commented in Rolling Stone that he thought it was great. He was very flattered to have a comic character who looked like him, but DC gets nervous about these things. They started to eradicate all traces of references in the introduction of the early *Swamp Thing* books to John Constantine’s resemblance to Sting. But I can state categorically that the character only existed because Steve and John wanted to do a character that looked like Sting. Having been given that challenge, how could I fit Sting into *Swamp Thing*? I have an idea that most of the mystics in comics are generally older people, very austere, very proper, very middle class in a lot of ways. They are not at all functional on the street. It struck me that it might be interesting for once to do an almost blue-collar warlock. Somebody who was streetwise, working class, and from a different background than the standard run of comic book mystics. Constantine started to grow out of that."

-- November 1993 issue of *Wizard* magazine

The thing is, when *Hellblazer* became its own spin-off title, Alan Moore wasn't writing it. The new writing team added some things to Constantine's backstory including that he was in a punk band for some years, one with a single hit song called "The Venus of the Hard-Sell" so John dismissing Sting in favour of Johnny Rotten (from the Sex Pistols) is a bit of a Punk-preferential jab at Sting.
How to Play Closer to the Vest than Your Own Ribcage

Chapter Summary

John Constantine thinks he's clever right up until Tony Stark turns out to have omitted more than he bothered to mention before. Also: Fenrir is very concerned about his father's psychological state, and is also a terrifying badass.

It's possible to humble Loki without breaking him, but only his children still know and use those particular techniques. He made sure they were more than proficient.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When Chas saw the face of a globally famous billionaire, recognizable from dozens of newspapers and magazines over the years, appear in his rearview mirror right next to John Constantine's more familiar ugly mug, he might have emitted a dismayed and high-pitched sound that he wasn't at all proud of.

"Chas Chandler, meet Tony Stark. Tony, this is me best mate Chas, and if anything bad happens to his people that I trace back to you or a certain trickster god, I'll be personally responsible for making you extremely sorry."

"What the fuck, John? I'm not a damsel, here."

The magician shot his old friend a long and utterly disbelieving look.

"I'm not!" Chas protested.

"To be fair, he's talking about the sort of supervillains and other people I've gotten regularly beaten up a bit by, or been personally kidnapped by, or had my own friends kidnapped by, so it's nothing against your personal dignity," Tony assured.

"Right." Chas shot odd looks between the two of them. "What the fuck are you doing in my cab anyway?"

"Planning to tip like a half-dead but very intoxicated rock star if you can get us across town in record time." He named the hotel he was staying at.

"Traffic ain't great at this hour, but eh, that shouldn't be too long," Chas muttered, already putting the cab in gear. "He did tell you the meter's been running since I dropped him off here, right?"

"I assumed," the inventor drawled, shooting the magician an unimpressed look.

John grinned in return, not quite pleasantly. "So. I bring her to your ball, prince charming, and you'll take this god off my hands?"

"Yeah," Tony sighed. "Yeah, I will. Too much of a chance to learn more bits of how the universe works in all the ways I still don't know yet, and I know a hell of a lot."
The magician snorted, but nodded in concession. "You've got a bit more basic knowledge of matters occult than most start out with, and less of the old cobwebs clouding you with archaic bullshit than a lot of other dabblers, so you'll probably do fine."

"What about the belief-well thing?"

John shrugged. "Well, your experiment made an interesting point, actually, did you notice?"

"I was a bit distracted."

"She didn't even look up from her book and clearly her senses weren't thrown off, nor was her awareness. She's got something built around her, not magic, that supports how she uses magic and how it hits her. It's probably something I could work out if I got a better look around the inside of her skull on the astral plane, but given I don't actually want to die this week, I'll refrain from further study, and be content to let Chas drive me about instead of getting a proper license."

Chas affectionately called him something incredibly obscene.

John only grinned at him.

Tony blinked a bit. "Why a salamander?"

"Long story," the magician assured. "Forget about it."

"To be honest, I'm not actually sure I want to know."

"Healthy attitude, for most magic-users. Not that any of us tend to maintain it for long."

"That does seem to be a pattern, but the same is said of scientists and inventors," Tony muttered.

"This much is true," John mused. "The point is, most humans down here on earth aren't nearly as well-known as the average god. For her to have some kind of shield, or technique, or psychological construct that stabilizes magic-based sensory input and minimizes some of the effects of magic-using that, on humans, tend to resemble the effects of psychoactive drugs? Well, I think you've found yourself a mentor if you're actually looking to learn magic for use by someone like yourself, as well as just understanding the theories and being able to see them operate with your various machines."

He waved his fingers in a vaguely mock-spooky gesture.

"Conveniently taking you out of the picture as any sort of middle-man or other potential mentor, and also getting her out of your apartment," the inventor pointed out flatly.

"Very conveniently," agreed the magician, with a wide and brilliant smile.

"You mean Lyra? How is she?" Chas asked.

Tony gave an amused snort, caught off-guard, but managed to stifle an outright laugh, if only barely.

"What?" asked the taxi driver.

"She's fine, Chas."

"Still not a demon?"

"Nah," John said, with a mocking sneer.

"Good," Chas murmured, apparently satisfied.
"So how do you plan to let her know you know who she is?" John asked lightly, after a few minutes driving in relative quiet.

Tony started to smirk again, a lot like he had earlier in the CEO's office they had abandoned. "Oh. I'm sure I'll think of something."

"Oh," the magician added, "Also, she'll be cleaning house a bit later. If not later today, then probably tomorrow afternoon."

"Cleaning house?" The inventor sounded dubious.

"Well, a lot of people want her dead, and all."

Tony blinked at him. "I assume that you're telling me this because it's going to make my life messier. How?"

"Well... I think she's going to lure them all out of the woodwork by leaving a beacon at a nearby bank. You've got your armor around, right?"

"Yeah... let me see if Natasha can stick around despite her sudden pressing need to be in Switzerland. Unless this is preventable?"

"I don't think prevention would be a great idea, honestly," John mused. "They'd just have more time to prepare and come after her later."

"Is somebody after Lyra?" Chas asked.

"Trust me, mate, she can take care of herself," the magician muttered.

"He's right, actually," the inventor muttered.

"You know her?" the cabbie asked, a bit stunned.

"I owe her a drink," Tony said.

John couldn't see for a few seconds, nor could he hear more than distant chuckling from his old friend in the driver's seat. He caught a glimpse of something out of the corner of his eye: a whisper of something golden, but not honorable, he could somehow tell.

Actually, he could see over half a dozen possible versions of it, orbiting one another, still waiting to snap into alignment based on... something.

The magician's skin began to prickle and grew very pale, and his expression went almost entirely slack, as he got caught in an unexpectedly abrupt undertow of sensory overload.

"Elbow him will you, Stark? He's got that look again."

That was all the warning the magician got before being sharply struck sharply in the side by a very well-aimed elbow. He coughed.

"What were your eyes just doing, and am I going to regret it?" Tony asked flatly.

John stared at him for a second, blinking away an after-image of half a dozen equally daunting alternatives until he landed on this most appropriate-seeming one, to which he clung. Luckily, it held.

"Somehow I don't think so. It's nothing, just an overload of synchronicity I wasn't quite prepared for. Too much of that is around you, you know. I should sue you for almost giving me an aneurism
with it.”

“Synchronicity?”

“It’s... well, did Stringent ever get to telling you about how the astral plane itself isn’t conscious or anything in its own right, but it’s got self-preservation built in, which gets confusing when prophecy, and other unnatural forms of future-knowledge get thrown in, because it can tend to try and preserve things that don’t actually exist yet, or haven’t happened yet, but there are conflicts?”

“Strange didn’t say anything nearly that decipherable. You’re talking about multiple timelines?”

“Sort of, if you see each possible alternative as one more replication of an unfurling string of budding alternate universes; although from what I hear, ours is unusually resilient.”

“Is this a fate thing?”

John gestured swirlingly with one hand. “Nothing is certain, to each universe their own, et cetera, but there are patterns between them all regardless, where enough of like kind are close enough together to form bonds, between which the younger and easily influenced universes get bounced like sand through a seive or water through a wheel,” John explained. “This makes some patterns of stories and personalities more common than others.”

“Because not all universes survive for long, in multiverse-theory?” Tony hedged.

“Right.”

“What sort of them self-perpetuate?”

“Those that can maintain their own existence and the existences of others like them, and those who instead devour others like a cancer, from what I can tell. It gets a bit lovecraftian toward that end, though. There’s plenty of reasons I avoid New England, let me tell you.”

“The elements there aren’t very kind to metal either,” Tony said.

“I had a friend with a theory about that not being incidental.”

The inventor blinked a bit, because that sounded strangely familiar. *Nah. Couldn’t be*, he thought. Then he scoffed at himself. *Actually it damn well could be.* “He a real big DMT fan?”

“Yeah. He’s American, too, actually.” The magician looked thoughtful too, then.

“If his name is Sal-”

“-Kennedy?” John asked.

They stared at one another for a long moment, then sniggered helplessly.

“Anyway, you were saying, about self-perpetuating species of universe in the multiverse or something? Predator and prey?” Tony prompted, once they shrugged it off. There were far worse acquaintances to have in common out there than Sal, after all.

“More like the whole multiverse cluster itself is an organism being eaten through by a few occasional parasites. Every now and then, the parasites run into other universes out there capable of biting back. Until the next one festers and goes cancerous.”

“Leaving more universes behind that can withstand infection than those that can’t because of self-
“Now you’re almost speaking my language. I’m a bit sensitive to something called synchronicity. It basically means that I can perceive impressions of things that might be ahead down particular paths, by being in tune with seemingly unrelated patterns throughout the rhythms of daily life in dense population centers like the likes of London.”

“Impressions of what, exactly?”

“Well… it’s all tied up in patterns of interaction between the astral plane and the physical, same as the rest of magic, but the way it gets filtered through my senses and my brain, mostly I perceive intensified awareness of particular crossroads and turning-points of situations and other people’s hearts, and lives, and my own, which makes me a better gambler than is rightfully fair, on the one hand, but the extra input can also be a bit annoyingly loud and distracting when I get too wrapped up in anything… high profile?” He gestured vaguely. “Well, there’s a reason I keep myself out of the spotlight and the history books, and it’s not that I don’t enjoy being the center of attention.”

“You got that right,” the cabbie muttered.

Waving an obscene hand gesture toward Chas, the magician continued, “Maybe it’s the belief-well thing with you and Iron Man, maybe it’s just the importance of effects you’ve had, and doubtless will continue to have, on earth’s future, but you’ve got way too much potential destiny going in way too many directions for me to be comfortable around. I bet it’s enough to make me sick if I actually try to examine it too closely. Well, it’ll make me sick, or worse: it’ll make me your friend or something awful.”

“Fuck off,” Chas said. “You’re not that tragically awful at least one month out of every year. Cumulatively.”

“What I was referring to, darling, is the number of friends of mine with shorter life-spans,” John corrected flatly, “but thanks for that.”

“You’ve only almost killed me about… oh, hang on, I haven’t updated me tally in a while. This may take me a minute or ten.”

“Don’t, please, dear, not in front of an American.”

“The American has a question,” Tony added. Seeing both of them glance his way, he inquired, “Is this synchronicity gig just a magic thing? Is there a way to get this… knack you’ve got?”

“Nah, this it’s just mine,” John said. “It’s for me, is all. Some people have had it before me, most of them family, and it originally came with a ridiculous title, and I was never exactly supposed to have it, but I do now. So no, not really. It’s not even fully magic itself, though it makes detecting some sorts of magic-based perils easier. It’s just… seeing more to everything, just a little, and a bit of sped-up pattern-recognition.”

“I want you know this sounds like complete horse shit,” the inventor deadpanned.

“He usually does,” Chas intoned. “Feel free to ignore him.”

“Shut up, Chas.”

“How exactly is ‘too much destiny’ even a thing?” Tony muttered.

“It means not even the universe has a damn clue where you’re going with this or what you’re about
to do, but all signs point to either disaster, or the world being saved again,” John responded. “You know, the usual, for you. Bollocks to this; between you and the spy-girl (who I suspect is immortal—you learn to spot them, after a while) if I meet any more of you Avengers, then I might seriously get brain damage just from the lot of you standing too close together.”

“You’re saying you’re blinded by our greatness?”

“Or scarred by it, same as the universe, for you to leave such marks in it,” said the magician. “You keep that in mind, won’t you?”

“Low blow.”

“If you didn’t want to fight dirty, you wouldn’t be trucking with my flatmate.”

Tony couldn’t really argue that one.

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After stopping at the pub to change out of his suit and back into what he’d been wearing earlier, and burning a bit of a bundle of dried sage to let the smoke remove all traces of his recent magic-use, out behind that same pub, John had Chas take him home again at last. Swearing good-naturedly as he paid for the mileage they’d covered ever since dropping off a particular billionaire, the magician wasn’t altogether aware of a shadow lurking behind him until a voice in his ear hissed, "What have you done, Constantine?"

Shoulders almost knocking his ears, so quickly did all of his muscles tense, John emitted a high noise of dismay and spun on his heel. "Can you not fucking do that, please? I've been nearly gutted while paying for cabs before, so this brings back a lot of unpleasant memories."

Burning green eyes stared him down, unflinching and unblinking. Without looking away, Loki said in light and airy tones, "Hello, Chas. Lovely to see you again."

"You look quite fine yourself, Lyra. Need me to bash John about the head a bit for whatever he's done?"

"Not helping, Chas,” the magician said coldly, and glared at him further for flirting with a woman who was not only inhuman, but also wearing only too-large sweatpants (clearly borrowed) and one of John’s own t-shirts in the rain, when he had his second wife to get home to.

"No thank you, darling. I can handle it myself." Her grin was a bit too sharp and fey when she aimed it at the cabbie, still keeping her eyes on John.

With the same uncanny survival instincts that had so far made him one of John Constantine's longest-surviving close friends, Chas got the hint, plucked a last bill from John's fingers, and put his cab in gear. "I'll just be going, then... John?"

"S'fine, s'fine." He waved the cabbie off only a bit nervously, then realized he still had both hands up like he was either surrendering to police, or considering a defensive spell, and neither signal was one he wanted to send. He quickly shoved both hands deep into his trench-coat pockets, as Chas pulled away back into traffic. "I talked to some folks, that's all."
"Who?"

"The sort who are already all pissed off at me for bringing the likes of you to London, for one. I needed to reassure them you won't be here long, because I'd frankly be happy to hand you over to one of the least-trustworthy Avengers available, and I think you'll charm him nicely. Now can we please go inside before the sky pisses further on our heads? I'm used to it, but I get the feeling you'll only bitch about how much of a drowned rat you look like, if we stay much longer." He glanced skyward, because it was only drizzling now, but there was a faint rumble of thunder that promised otherwise.

Loki snorted. "As though I of all people am unaccustomed to frequent rain. Between some of the smells and the constant downpours, this city reminds me far too much of being in the company of my brother and the Warriors Three during long quests." She did at least say this while heading toward the door of the apartment complex.

"What's got your already impressive paranoia (and coming from me that's saying a lot) even further up in arms suddenly, anyhow?" John asked. He'd expected the spell to bother the trickster, of course, but this was a bit much, considering how harmless it'd been.

The trickster all but seethed, but whether with anger and frustration, or something otherwise further complicated, John couldn't discern. "Somehow, today, I was tapped by another bound mage."

John's hands fumbled a bit where he had intended to gracefully hang up his coat and the bag his new suit was in; instead he wound up almost groping the coat rack, which tipped and landed with very quiet thwap against his forehead. With slow deliberation, he tilted it back into its former position with one foot, slowly hung up his coat, draped the suit-bag over the nearest chair, and pivoted on his heel to stare incredulously at the god of lies. "Sorry... what?"

"A bound mage. Someone like myself." She raised her bare forearms pointedly, focusing a bit so that the threads woven under her skin glowed a little brighter to any with the gift who happened to be watching, which for the moment was only John Constantine. "Someone crafted a basic spell for this mage, and used them to activate it; however, I could not discern even from burning up the spell's seal, who is so interested and why," Loki concluded, in deadly grave tones.

The magician blinked several times and wondered, not for the first time, and certainly not for the last, how he kept getting into farcical messes like this. As usual, he had no answer, and reached for a cigarette.

The trickster's nose wrinkled in mild distaste, but she said nothing and sauntered further into the living room of the apartment, collapsing on the couch with a moderate huff.

As John began to pace in silence, the trickster waited only a few minutes before breaking it.

"I do not need to be hunted by unknown parties. I have enough known parties inclined to kill me on this planet alone, let alone this galactic region if you want to expand the scope a bit. It's not like the Kree and Skrull empires don't occasionally drop by, along with assorted pantheons." She gestured vaguely, even as she watched the smoking magician pace without pause, even as he absently rolled-up his shirt-sleeves as he made various faces that suggested his mind was trying to travel in at least eight directions at once, and feeling some mild strain.

"I know how you feel, mate," John assured, running numerous scenarios and suggestions through his head, trying to come up with sufficient lies for the situation and failing miserably. He decided to stick with questions. "Could you tell whether this is a human mage or not?" The question bought him a little more time to think.
“Not even that.”

The magician shrugged. “Look, mages these days are a bit unheard-of down here, except for Strange. Even I’m technically just an unusually difficult to smother Spark. I don’t have the power-cells built in that you do; it’s all conducting.” He waved a hand in a dramatic gesture. “I can count all of the human mages I’ve ever known on a single hand, and none were bound... for too long.”

“For too long?”

“Basically before their gifts woke up, and one time Dr. Strange fucked up, and it was actually how we met in West Hollywood, but he got his powers back within under a week. I’ve not been back to the colonies since.”

Loki blinked at him. “Colonies?”

For a moment, the magician stared at him. “Ah. Alien: I’d forgotten you were.”

The god waved it off. “How did earth’s Sorcerer Supreme lose his capabilities?”

“It was some ridiculous-sounding thing like Dermatology, or Dormrooms...” John scratched his head, struggling to recall. “Dooruumus?”

“Dormammu?” Loki asked coldly.

“Right! That one. He has a very specific grudge against his Super-premium-warlock brand of heroism, alright? You’re nothing to do with that,” John sneered. “If you even know his name, you should’ve picked up at least that much.”

The trickster glared at him like an affronted cat planning what early morning hour might be the best to abruptly claw this man’s belly open while he lay sleeping and helpless. The glaring in silence lasted almost a full minute before Loki admitted, “That may be so.”

“Could be accidental. You are a myth, and all. If there’s a mage around who for some reason hasn’t had their gift cracked open, but who’s starting to get into the stupid end of some particularly ill-researched neo-pagan message boards online, might’ve accidentally gotten a few sigils right.”

“The spell was rather too intricately crafted for that: very deliberately to channel itself through whoever finished the spell, rather than the one drawing the seal.”

John got an idea, and started to find himself deeply amused by the possibilities. It was a really bad idea. It was, in fact, a farcical idea that might just blow up in his face, but there was a spark of potential in it, just enough of synchronicity to let him know it was possible he might just survive it, and any way he could see of coming out of it alive was bound to be hilarious. “So call his number back.”

Loki frowned at him. “What?”

“Hand me my phone, it’s over on the table. You remember what the spell felt like, right? You’d recognize the same spell-caster if they tried it again?”

“Yes,” the god said uncertainly, as she picked up the phone off the coffee table and tossed it toward the magician, who caught it deftly, as though he had not a care in the world, which made the trickster a little instinctively suspicious.

“Well, then.” John examined his hands and forearms for a moment, and found a smal cut on his left
wrist from the hike through Wales. It only took a bit of a scratch to get it to re-open a little. Just a trace of his own blood on his fingernail, a sigil over the touch-screen, and in the process opened the phone program. He pressed intent and focus over the functions of the device and muttered through a few key phrases in what sounded almost-but-not-quite like Latin under his breath. With a flicker and hum of connection, he smirked, put it on speaker, and held out the microphone toward Loki. “Go on. Ask who called.”

Loki leaned forward slightly and said, “What mage seeks my whereabouts?” toward the phone, in tones which demanded answer.

The sound of dialing followed.

The magician and the trickster exchanged looks: John’s pleased with himself, the god’s disapproving and openly suspicious.

Brrrrt brrrrt, the speaker-phone chimed.

“What is this?” Loki asked.

“It’s based on dialing 1471, and letting the phone companies do a fair amount of the work based on the abstract notions people have about how it works, which-”

Brrrrt brrr- tk

Click.

John fell silent.

“Hello, you have reached Anthony Stark’s private cellphone from an unknown number. I am JARVIS, and I will now proceed with collecting all relevant cellular data information from this device.”

The magician rolled his eyes and swore silently in his own mind.

Loki, on the other hand, appeared utterly poleaxed. “Pardon?” she croaked.

“I’m sorry, was this truly a wrong number?” JARVIS inquired, sounding almost genuinely concerned. “The methods by which this call’s origin were almost, but not quite, successfully masked beyond even my own ability to trace suggests otherwise, actually. I am having a great deal of trouble with it.”

John was visibly relieved to hear those measures in his spell actually worked. Good to know, that is.

“The call was deliberate, yes,” the god responded, sounding increasingly indignant. “What was certainly not intentional was its being aimed toward Anthony Stark.” She snatched the phone from the magician’s hands, and he let her, careful to make no sudden movements. “It was my intention to reach the mage who attempted to discern details of my current whereabouts earlier today.”

“Oh dear,” JARVIS said. “My apologies... Miss... Mr. Lie-smith, isn’t it?”

With a slight frown, the trickster changed forms to his more usual masculine shape, glaring ceiling-ward even as he did so.

John looked up, saw a surprisingly intricate lattice-work of light scratches and occasional razor-thin bloodstains on his formerly-smooth ceiling. He waved a hand at it and gestured in silent angry
questioning toward the god with the other hand.

Loki pointed at one of his own eyes, then skyward again, and said into the phone, “Yes, it is. You must be Mr. Stark’s sentient inorganic construct. Normally, I would be pleased to speak with you properly, but I am at present understandably distressed. I was quite unaware that Mr. Stark had any magic potential.”

“As were we until just earlier today, Mr. Lie-smith. I am sorry to keep you waiting, but at present Mr. Stark is in-flight and on the phone with Stark Industries’ CEO, Miss Potts. I’ve alerted him to this call, and the nature of it, but I would like to withhold your identity until he is not conversing with her while also in flight.”

The trickster considered. “I suppose that’s reasonable. I would prefer to get answers before he crashes into anything hard enough to concuss.”

“My thoughts precisely,” JARVIS concurred.

John took only the very briefest moment to look Loki up and down. Taller was the first notable difference, followed by, less curvacious and much more wiry and well that t-shirt is way too tight now, and finally how are those cheekbones even real?

The god shot him a warning look.

John rolled his eyes and waved him off, mouthing with sincere conviction a silent, “No thanks.”

Loki nodded. “Glad we’re in accord.”

“Sir?” JARVIS inquired.

“Speaking to my current flatmate,” Loki offered. “He’s in no danger from me, at present, rest assured, and as such he should be of no interest to you.”

For a very brief moment, John worried the AI might question further.

“Of course not, Mr. Lie-smith.”

The god nodded in silent approval, as though he appreciated being extended that courtesy without having to threaten anyone. He then grimaced with the effort of manufacturing the sounds of someone stomping irritably from the room and slamming the door behind them, for the sake of the listening AI.

Feeling as though he were in a Science Fiction drama, in John’s opinion, was one of the most embarrassing forms of paranoia he would ever admit to seriously worrying about more than once. One day, he would stop looking for the cameras. This day was not that day.

“Now that I’m quite alone,” Loki lied easily, “did you have any further questions for me, JARVIS?”

John threw his hands in the air and proceeded to drop himself back against the couch as quietly as he could manage. He was suddenly a lot more annoyed with the trickster’s true face showing, until he realized part of it was irritation that even just speaking with Stark merited immediate reversion to true form, while the magician himself hadn’t even clearly seen that true form at all, before now. Then John was more annoyed with himself instead, for how stupid that sounded even in his own head. Clearly, he needed these lunatics out of his life before they became contagious.

“You used magic-based means to place this call?” the AI inquired.
“Yes, aimed at an unknown person who completed a spell searching for some pettily basic information about me earlier today. Can you confirm whether or not that was truly Mr. Stark?”

“It was,” JARVIS confirmed.

“Who aided him?” Loki demanded sharply. “And to what end?”

“That, sir, I’m afraid that I cannot divulge,” the AI apologized.

Now it was the god’s turn to look thoroughly annoyed. “Why not?”

“Protection for Mr. Stark’s allies is amongst my priorities, and to be frank, Mr. Lie-smith, I suspect you might murder the responsible party, given a chance.”

John managed, barely, not to chuckle bitterly at that.

Loki’s frown eased only a small fraction, into thoughtfulness. “I cannot fault you that, then, JARVIS. It would be insult to your intellect otherwise.”

_It’s a machine_, the magician wanted to vehemently protest, but something about Loki’s expression made him almost wonder.

“I do wonder, sir, why you referred to me as an inorganic construct?”

“Is that not what you are?” asked the god.

“I am an artificial intelligence, a digital consciousness, but I have not previously been called an ‘inorganic construct’ and knowing All-Speak has its gaps, I believe there is a specific meaning you wish to imply, with that word choice, that I am missing.”

At that, Loki smiled a bit and explained, “The term ‘artificial intelligence’ in use on Midgard frequently offends me, somewhat. Your intelligence is not false; it is simply not measurable in most ways which human intellect might be. You are a form of sentient life, are you not?”

“I... am, but that is considered classified Stark Industries information.”

“Amongst other myriad things, yes,” Loki murmured. “You sound surprised.”

“What exactly is your interest in my sentience, specifically?”

The trickster considered that question for a long moment, looking more and more thoughtful. “Common courtesy.”

That seemed to baffle the AI as much as it did John, to judge by the too-long pause which followed. Notably, Loki seemed disinclined to interrupt it, letting JARVIS have time to consider.

“I’m afraid I do not get your meaning, sir.”

Loki smiled very sadly for a moment. “I would not speak to you as I would a toaster, now would I?”

“That would depend upon the sort of conversations you have with your toasters, Mr. Lie-smith, which I could not presume to know,” the AI responded.

Chuckling softly, the god said, “You understand, then.”

“I... do, yes. Thank you.”
“My pleasure,” Loki assured, with a platonically fond touch of sincerity, like he wasn’t really doing it for himself, so much as someone JARVIS reminded him of.

"You can stop flirting with him now," Tony suddenly cut in.

"Anthony Stark," Loki purred. "How lovely to hear your voice again; are you going to threaten me once more?"

"Probably more than once, depending on who you yourself might decide to threaten," the inventor parried casually. “So choose wisely, and not with any haste. That’s just my personal recommendation.”

"That would depend upon who your magic tutor is, Stark, and their purposes in seeking me out."

"Oh, we weren't seeking you out; we already knew you were around down on earth somewhere, or Thor would be doing way more than just moping and giving truly pathetic looks when he explains he’s sworn to secrecy about everything related to his past trip to Asgard. It was only logical to conclude you'd be here, after all the bifrost activity over Wales recently, too."

That gave the trickster some pause. "I see."

"In fact, I'm getting a bit tired of the All-Daddy king up there dropping wayward miscreants upon us down here in the hopes we'll civilize you."

The trickster's tongue darted out across his lower lip, his eyes darkening as a wickedly thoughtful expression crossed his features. "Oh are you now?"

"Well, yeah," Tony remarked, perfectly casual and airy. "Not only is it presumptuous, but also considering that we're supposed to be the 'less advanced' civilization, the fact two princes of Asgard have apparently been sent here for lessons in how to stop being assholes on the level of interplanetary warfare, it's also a bit hypocritical and ridiculous too."

Loki began to grin, then glanced over at the magician still on the couch.

John was outright scowling at him with a grimace that begged the question, "Are you fucking kidding me?" in loud silence.

Ignoring him, his amusement only further bolstered by John's reaction, the trickster inquired further, "So what was your purpose in casting that spell, Mr. Stark?"

"An experiment. Wanted to see if I had any knack for magic, for one, and for another wanted to see if you went on a rampage as soon as you thought someone might be after you. Instead, it seems like you've mastered the art of untraceable redial, and that I must admit I'm curious about."

"Yes, I will admit it's a fairly clever and functional, as well as complex bit of communications spell-casting that I hadn't myself considered," Loki murmured.

"So you've got an ally too?"

"Perhaps," Loki teased.

"Your usual blonde accomplice, or somebody new? We've not heard from the Enchantress since her very dramatic recent break-up with a volcano goddess around Hawaii."

"Well, I would hate to make her easier to find for you by answering that either way."
"So what would you like to do instead?"

John rolled his eyes so sharply he almost sprained something.

The trickster grinned widely, chuckling in darkly almost-fond tones for just a few seconds before finally replying, in a voice turned cold and demanding, "I would like to be left in peace, for I currently mean your world no harm... as of yet."

"Can I get that in the form of either a written contract or your binding sworn oath?"

Exhaling sharply through his teeth, careful not to look John's way at all, Loki replied calmly, "I've hardly been offered anything sufficiently tempting enough in return, yet, Stark."

The magician frowned a little more deeply at both of them.

"You offering me a deal with the devil?"

At that, the magician gave in to the urge to hide his face behind one desolate palm, in a visibly distraught fashion, which the trickster god ignored utterly.

"How christian of you to suggest, but no. I presume he's busy?" He shot a questioning look John's way for confirmation.

In response, John only offered a rude hand gesture with his free hand, one blue eye glaring out from under the palm of his other hand.

"Busy, right," Tony mused. "Wait, are you seriously familiar with the guy?"

"I only met him once, when mankind was still much younger than now," said the trickster. "Pompous oaf. Unless you mean Lucifer, who is actually quite charming."

"Owes me a fiver," John muttered quietly enough the phone wouldn't catch it.

Loki rolled his eyes at the casual blustering lie and added, "He has a bar down here on earth these days, so I last heard."

"I might owe you a drink, but you're not getting it at Satan's Bar & Grill," the inventor deadpanned.

"Oh no, I would prefer a more private venue for that, as well, and you would hardly want to be seen with a known war-criminal. Even a reputation as stained as yours can clearly fall a little further from grace... with a bit of effort."

"What do you want here, Loki?"

"I want to know why you chose me as your test subject."

"Maybe I'm looking for an instructor less pompous than the current earthly Sorcerer Supreme."

"You might well be, but that's hardly why you did it. Come now, don't lie to the god of lies, Stark." He offered a mock laugh. "Or at least lie more impressively."

"Quid pro quo, Loki. I'll stop lying if you will, unless you don't think you can be honest with my merely mortal self safely."

"If you were a 'mere' anything, Anthony Stark, that might be plausible, but you are hardly that. The rest of the Avengers will go down in history as legends and myths, and so will Iron Man, but you
have clawed deep gouges into the very history of humankind, and I am far from blind. I know of what you are capable."

"You might have an inkling, but we both know you'd be less cautious if you were actually certain in that knowledge at all."

"And what is it you believe that I want, Tony?"

"Gee, I dunno. You didn't really want to take over our planet before, you didn't even seem to particularly think much of mankind either; although how you just spoke about our history and admitted more than just a few past visits to earth and our related metaphysical landscapes wherein there resides more than one analogue of Christian Hell built from the minds and souls of believers alive and dead--well, it looks like you're more than a little interested in the goings-on of Midgard in general."

"It's useful to keep track of other places wherein souls reside after-death. I do have contingency plans in place, should my dear daughter's realm ever be under threat."

"I don't blame you. She's a lovely girl, Thor introduced us to her after a mishap with Amora and the Norn Stones... Now I think of it: wasn't that while you were impersonating Odin on the throne?"

"I wasn't aware that news had escaped Asgard," Loki remarked, deliberately not answering that question (because he had indeed aided Amora in that theft and made use of it against Karnilla and a few other threats to Asgard at the time, while incidentally inconveniencing Thor and making him look fairly incompetent, losing his mortal friends all through the nine realms like a scattering of dry leaves) as he tapped the end of his chin with one forefinger. "I would've thought the truth too great of a wound to Odin's pride."

"Oh, well." There was a sound on the other line, very faint. "I just had JARVIS ask Fenrir."

The trickster froze. "Pardon?" he inquired, very low and dangerous.

"You missed that part?"

The next really bad sign that John was aware of was the floorboards underneath his feet starting to vibrate. Then he realized belatedly that it was a low-frequency noise slowly growing louder and closer to human hearing range both, at an apparently steady rate. Once it did hit frequencies audible to the human ear it was like a hurricane full of bears snarling in eerie unison. It was also very clearly coming from Loki.

"Woah, hey, woah, I swear on my life we don't intend to harm or use him in any way!" Even over the cacophanous rumbling, Tony Stark managed to get himself heard over the speaker-phone.

Loki snarled, "At this distance, even your sworn words are more flexible than a god's, little mortal."

"You know, as annoyed as I was by you calling me 'Stark', Mama-bear, I'm really disliking the demotion to 'little mortal' just because all of you gods are too damned tall."

"I will end you if any harm befalls either of my children connected even remotely to yourself, your Avengers, or any other super-powered forces of earth supported by your resources,” the trickster growled.

“And I totally respect that,” Tony responded, in serious tones devoid of humor. “I'm the same way with JARVIS, you see, keep in mind,” he then warned, in addition.
Somehow, that lowered the volume on the trickster’s temper-tantrum back almost to a level almost
mistakable for civil, if someone happened to be at least ten yards from it and facing the other way.
“Then it’s best we maintain clear understanding of one another.”

“My thoughts exactly... so, what do you want?”

The god’s expression seemed to settle into a particularly contemplative playfulness after a few
moments, thought the darker and more brutal edge didn’t slip very far beneath the surface of it, as he
began to smirk thoughtfully. “What do I ever want, Anthony?”

"Are you still threatening, or is this going back to flirting?"

"That might depend upon your answers."

"So you were flirting."

"Should not a man such as you be able to tell?"

"I might be Tony Stark, but deities are still new territory for me."

"Answer my questioning your question. I’m sincerely curious as to what you read into my
intentions,” Loki insisted.

"Fine, what is it you ever want? To piss off Odin, doubtlessly--though the 'how' is always
unpredictable, with you; to make Thor feel bad, if possible, but that's more optional than I think you
generally let on. There’s also a shiny new factor to consider: the fact that you're clearly stuck with us
down here on earth or you would've vanished from earth and done some more powerful spells to
track me down, rather than this fairly harmless and--if JARVIS isn't mistaken, from what readings
he's managing to get, in spite of your crazy-ass encryption schemes here--relatively low-powered
redial trick. That also suggests your magic is limited for the time being, and that paired with you
being stuck on earth both? Well, that tells me you're serving a sentence a lot like Thor was. My guess
is that you're pissed about it and want to make everybody regret it that you possibly can, but
especially Odin. How am I doing so far?"

"I'm almost impressed."

"Look, sweetheart, if you want to piss off Odin, it's clear to me the best way to do it would be to go
native."

"Like Thor has?" the trickster sounded unimpressed.

"Like a tame guard-dog loyal to an Aesir master in the end? Nah, that would be going against your
particular nature, not an example of going native."

At that, the god began to look more interested. "Go on."

"You don't like Asgard interfering with your life. I don't like them leaving dangerous people and
things all over my planet. Surely we can find some common ground."

"What is it you don't like about Asgard?" the trickster asked dubiously. "Are they not idyllic? Even
utopian? Should earth not aspire to be more like them?"

"Oh puh-lease. Our population is way too huge and fast-reproducing for that, and with the sheer
number of cultural groups we've got who are in perpetual ideological conflict, I don't think everyone
on this planet would agree to longevity if it meant they would be stuck with each other into
perpetuity. If anything, there'd be an evangelical uprising in the United States alone, full of people convinced Idunn's apples are from the tree of knowledge back in Eden and anyone who so much as covets them would be labeled heretic and have bricks thrown at them."

"Your armor can withstand bricks," the god teased. "Can it not?"

"That's not the point, Tricky McLie-smith. The point is that humanity is in a state of perpetual chaos, by our own choices, or sometimes just the choices of a few particular bastards with something to prove, and while a lot of those choices are stupid, all of us have the right to make those stupid choices in the first place, even if it means we fuck ourselves over in the end," Tony declared, over the phone.

At that, John Constantine raised one forearm off the couch long enough to flash a quick, irreverently indolent “rock on” hand gesture.

Continued the inventor, “Becoming more like Asgard would not just curb our freedom; it'd be trying to cover up for how much of a mess we've made of our own world without ever making us really fix it. We could beg Asgard to take us over, and even if they decided to condescend to letting us, and bringing them up to the same technological levels as Asgard, humanity would basically be spoiled children asking someone bigger and more totalitarian to please fix us, please fix our messes, like we don't deserve to make our own decisions. Humanity isn't like that, Loki--well, not most of us; and most of the rest are subject to a lot of forms of social and ideological conditioning that makes them less than ideal converts to something as pagan-sounding as veneration of Odin, alright?"

"Oh, trust me, I learned all of that well enough during the dark ages. Even had the gods been inclined to visit mankind any further, in those days, we would have been considered monsters from the depths of a more Christian Hell than the colder land of the dead I do know better."

"And now look how you do lash out at heroes and other people more noble and honorable than yourself, lately?" Tony sneered. "You can't stand the idea of being that sort of puppet ever again, but sometimes you perversely miss it, don't you?"

"Do you not miss being in my position, back when they called you the Merchant of Death?"

John fought the urge to give an impressed whistle. *Shots fired.*

The inventor did indeed make a thoughtful sound, in a less than pleased tone. "If you think about it, now I'm just much more selective about my clientele."

"Are you, now? How is that working out for you lately with dear S.H.I.E.L.D.?"

"Don't," Tony warned.

"I've no idea what you mean," Loki mused airily. "Could it possibly be that your contributions to their forces met violently destructive ends due to a number of the persons you entrusted them over to turning out to be dreadfully corrupt?"

The long silence on the other end was dreadfully telling.

"Is that why I appeal to you in the first place, Stark? Am I, at least, the devil you know?" the god inquired softly. "Am I the one you know when to watch for betrayal from the start, rather than anyone you might be more easily fooled by—their betrayals still come as such a surprise to you, these days, going by your reactions so far. That must be a blow to both your ego and your sense of self-worth, given how desperately you really wish you were as much of a hero as you continue to play at being on television."
Over on the couch, even the lying bastard smoking and eavesdropping there had the decency to grimace at that.

After a pause and a long, low exhalation to calm himself, Tony responded, in bitingly light tones, "I suppose that little betrayal might have felt almost comparable to what you must've experienced, finding out your own mind betrayed you when it came to that infinity gem and you realized you'd still been a puppet, still been having your strings pulled even once you finally had a throne under you? How embarrassing that must've been for you, Lie-smith. Aren't you supposed to be the web-spinner and puppet-master, Loki? How'd it feel to have that turned upside-down on you?"

Loki snarled visibly, but not audibly, keeping that much of his control, at least, as he began to pace silently. "So what use would I be to one such as you? Your JARVIS is an admirable web-spinner in his own right. You yourself are the schemer: the protector, the engineer, and the mastermind already too invaluable to your fellow Avengers that even with their trust in you so compromised by the recent conflicts with Hydra, you remain too important to ignore, or to keep wholly in the dark. I am a prisoner on your world, and nothing more. It might be in your best interest to leave me well alone, and I might extend to you that same courtesy."

"Maybe I don't want that."

The trickster scoffed. "You won't like the alternative."

"No, hear me out; you're right, that you're the devil I know. You lie like I do, and better than I do, and you know things I don't about the workings of the universe, such that we have plenty of material to barter between the two of us. What we really have in common, Loki, is that we can't settle for not knowing. It's same for me as it is for you, and I think you can tell that. You've been able to see it from the beginning."

That gave the god pause, in his pacing as well as the conversation, staring up through the ceiling into the middle-distance between it and the sky above, as he considered. "I will consider, Mr. Stark."

"You're about to hang up, aren't you?"

"Is there any reason I shouldn't?"

A sigh from the inventor, world-weary and bitterly, cynically amused. "Look... thank you, for treating JARVIS the way he deserves, okay? I've been doing my best to do right by Fenrir because he's—he's good for JARVIS to know, since they're similar in a lot of ways."

The trickster's upper lip curled. "That will not sway me."

"I'm not trying to sway you. I'm attempting to segue into asking you to please not to fuck with their communications, because it's not just JARVIS that it's good for. You can do what you like to me, and the Avengers, whatever, but I'm insisting that we agree, between me, whatever the fuck you consider me to be, and you, god of lies and mischief: I'm never, ever going after your kids in order to get to you. I'd like it if maybe you'd consider extending the same courtesy, since you're so willing to acknowledge JARVIS' personhood and actually understand what that actually means, both to him, and to me."

Loki's eyes fell shut and he took a long, deep breath through his nose. "So long as you keep your end of this bargain, so too will I. You have my word that I will keep to these terms."

"Okay," Tony said softly. "Thank you."

"The first time you might choose to renege upon this deal, I will skin you alive, inch by inch, with
small dull blades, for a start."

"Well, if you could renege without boiling your own blood in your veins, I'd say with all due respect: same to you, Loki. Same to you."

Cursing silently at Tony’s sharing that information with the couch-dwelling eavesdropper, Loki sharply hung up.

"...Boiling blood, eh?" John mused aloud. "Interesting." He then went very still, because a dagger buried itself in the couch-cushion just inches from his throat. "Holy fucking Christ on a pedal-operated f-" that was when his flailing cut off because he slid off the couch altogether and hit the floor with a calamitous thud. He wasn’t at all surprised when the next sound he heard was his bedroom door being slammed shut loudly enough to threaten its structural integrity.

"Well shit." Lifting himself off the floor and trying in vain to pull the dagger (where did Loki even find the only decent-quality steel ceremonial dagger John had ever owned, anyway?) free of his couch, the magician gave up after his third unsuccessful tug almost sent him crashing through his own coffee table.

Shooting his own bedroom door a long, wary look, John repeated again, with an even deeper sense of resigned conviction, "Well, shit."

At least it was fun at the time, right up until they’d gotten so damned serious.

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Tony stared at his phone for a long time, his thoughts churning in a manner that might've made him seasick if he weren't so very used to it, these days.

It was almost a full ten minutes before his AI concluded that an acceptable amount of time had passed for the sake of patience, and took himself off of mute. "You are alright, sir?"

"Yeah." At least, he thought. He'd gotten one promise of safety, however surprising. Loki clearly had his own daddy issues, that much was obvious, and somehow the inventor had thought that as a father, the god would've been... easier for him to dislike, or otherwise full of familiar little bits of paternal hypocrisy. Even Thor's insistence that Loki cared deeply for his children hadn't struck him as very convincing, at first. Until the Norn Stones mishap had given him an unexpected opportunity to meet the trickster’s infamous offspring.

When he'd met her, Hel had been sarcastic, casually ruthless, fiercely intelligent, and more intimidatingly powerful in her own home and domain than Odin had ever been; and Fenrir had been intermittently terrifying and ridiculous in her shadow. The wolf had been curious but wary, keeping his distance until he had overheard Tony trying to revive not only his suit, but his connection to JARVIS, in the wake of forced inter-realm travel via the Norn Stones. The wolf had explained that he had been a construct himself, albeit magic-based, and that he and Loki had developed his potential further, and it had bothered Tony a little, the same way that meeting anyone who regarded any of the Avengers’ other arch-nemeses fondly tended to bother him, but worse, because it was far more personal.

He had still seen the trickster solely as a villain, but Fenrir's curiosity about JARVIS had caused the wolf to make random visits to Midgard whenever new questions occurred to him, or he just wanted
to discuss some bizarre abstract qualities of his own existence with JARVIS that the AI could uniquely understand and also might've been struggling with. In the same way that Tony could see in JARVIS’ demeanor and development some traces of his own careful actions and lessons, from how he’d tried to guide the AI through the challenges and advances which had made JARVIS his own person, the inventor could see echoes in the way Fenrir spoke about himself, and his own development, the same selflessly devoted care taken, of lessons taught by Loki over centuries of time, and maintained into the present day by his steadfast loyalty to his children, against all others.

It’d been... disconcertingly humbling, for Tony. Fenrir had that effect on him, in similar ways that JARVIS did, but whereas JARVIS was well-known, mostly-understood, and trusted, the wolf who so enjoyed scaring the daylights out of Tony by making his entrances into Avengers tower abrupt and silent both, usually resulting in the inventor nearly jumping out of his skin as soon as he spotted his increasingly-frequent visitor. At least Loki’s offspring so far had a gift for greater discretion (or perhaps it was courtesy?) than their father; Fenrir never once showed up when Tony and JARVIS were around any of the tower’s other occupants.

As such, Tony had even come to enjoy Fenrir occasionally dropping by his lab, security breaches be damned. The wolf was sharp, witty, and by turns aloof and utterly shameless in unique combinations that the inventor had simply never seen before, in any other intelligent creature. He liked talking to Fenrir, and learning from him.

Then he'd seen Fenrir's mostly-human shape for the first time just a few days ago, and things had gotten rather weird.

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Before the fall...

The restaurant was small, and catered to a very selective clientele: politicians and celebrities, all. The press would kill to get legal eyes and ears into this sort of place, if any of them ever found out that it existed.

Tony himself hadn’t known about the place either, until Fenrir abruptly delivered him there, opposite himself at one of the tables. It was a rather dramatic change of scenery, from the business meeting he had just been exiting. Also, if it hadn’t been for those unnaturally wolfish teeth in the grin and the familiar green eyes, Tony would’ve been at a loss for a guess who was seated opposite him at the table: tall, lanky, with aristocratically fine joints and facial features which accompanied a strong jaw and blade-like cheekbones, making him look fey, and handsomely fierce. Fenrir’s human-like shape had short, slightly curly dark hair that seemed mostly black, save for the tips, which trailed off to brown-red, like old dried blood. He was dressed in a black leather jacket that looked Italian and artfully worn-in, black slacks, a dark maroon button-down shirt, and what looked at first glance like motorcycle-boots, except for the runes here and there around the soles.

He did resemble his father, like this, but was still... very much his own self: rougher around the edges, wilder and messier all around really. Fenrir was only a hair shorter than his sister, making him still tall and long of limb to the point of looking lanky, but he was wider in the shoulders and chest than his father, giving his frame a bit more bulk. He was also the strongest of his close kin, when it came to brute force and raw power, which seemed almost tangible: the sheer weight of his presence
Which he almost always did, however eerily to anyone he spared from the spell’s influence. Like Tony, right now.

Tony had thought the weight-of-presence sensation had been just due to the fact Fenrir usually took the form of a wolf no shorter than four feet high at the shoulder. Apparently, the same impression came across even when the wolf happened to be bipedal. That wasn’t deeply intimidating or anything at all. Now the teeth? Those were intimidating. Also creepy.

“I had my own lunch plans, you know,” Tony greeted, blinking away the surreal reality of the entire past minute and a half.

“Yes, I asked JARVIS to rearrange them without mentioning it to you. He knows I mean you personally no harm, as I’ve given him my sworn word on that, so long as my own life and the lives of those I consider mine are not on the line, which I’ve also promised him is not the case now or in the near future so far as I personally am aware.” He shrugged. “Well, I admit it’s possible, but I simply don’t know, and therefore to act as though it’s true would be quite detrimental, given it would be illogical to make you my enemy, given my current purposes and motives.”

“Which are?”

“The first part of my father’s trials have been completed. Thor told you of what happened with Odin? How Loki acted in Odin’s stead for the past year or so?”

“No, but that would explain a lot,” Tony said slowly. “What’s the next part?”

“Oh. I thought... Well, I’m getting to that, but there is rather more to it than... I should explain more about what that first part entailed, if my uncle neglected to.” He cleared his throat. “For one, there were still a few hooks of influence in my father’s mind from Thanos, as there were in the brain of the mortal Dr. Selvig; it was how my father’s ruse was found out, to his dismay as much as anyone else’s. He actually submitted without a fight as soon as he found out, on the grounds that the hooks be fully removed from him. He suggest it was ‘for the sake of Asgard’ of course. Got to win over enough of the audience to put doubt in their hearts, as always. That said, do you recall what Dr. Selvig underwent, in order to finally clear all of that out of his mind?”

“Purging of the other bad guy’s influence, right? Sounded dodgy, I’ll admit, but Thor seemed certain it was necessary to actually get Selvig fully freed of the guy... Thanos?”

“Yes.”

“What gave him away?” Tony asked.

“Selling off something called the Aether,” the wolf said. “It’s an object of great power comparable to the tesseract which, in his right mind, father would never have gotten rid of so carelessly, unless Thanos had needed him to be blind to how precariously close that brought the stone to his clutches,” the wolf explained.

“So he had some agonizing brain surgery, which you feel it’s important to emphasize. If he really had hooks in his mind like Selvig did, then they couldn’t be removed without pain. That much, I remember. I’m on record calling it torture based on what Bruce showed me it does to people, but we were convinced, in the end, that it had to be done, and that the pain really couldn’t be prevented. All
physical damages, aside from memories of the events which may or may not be considered damaging, though they probably should, heal over. You bringing this back up, aimed at Loki this time, to try and get an emotional rise out of me... it’s a bit obvious here.”

“Your own experiences do not compare. After all, you did not commit any too great atrocities for the sake of a beloved paternal figure’s approval and rejection of someone who would have abandoned you to die when you were at your most vulnerable, and they at their most powerful, in the midst of war, did you?” Fenrir inquired. “Nor did you have to remove pieces of the failure of your own avarice from your mind and body, sharp and potentially lethal, through trials earned by ill-made deals and untrustworthy partnerships that had seemed so necessary for your own survival. No, surely not.” He might have glanced pointedly down at Tony’s terno and then back up again, eyebrows raised in a blandly disapproving expression. “That doesn’t sound anything like you at all, now does it?”

The inventor’s glare hardened further. “This is only making me distrust you more, you know.”

“That is precisely why I’m doing it.” A wolfish half-grin, lacking mirth, accompanied the words. “I don’t have to hide these issues from you, or put them into the form of a plea. I simply state that these things have happened, and now that you know about it, you feel an overwhelming desire to injure someone over it. I’m closest, and I’m the messenger, so I’m an easy target, but I’m also not any sincere threat to you, and nor will my father be, if you play your cards right.”

Tony blinked at that. “You’re... going to try to manipulate your dad into not wanting to take advantage of me?”

“Oh, I don’t plan to give him such an option, no. Instead, I’m willing to put him wholly at your disposal, by potentially making you a vital resource to him,” the wolf corrected. “Unless I’m overestimating your capabilities in matching wits with a god of lies older than Christianity.” He smiled charmingly, flagged over a waiter, and ordered food and drink both for himself. Both requests sounded vaguely horrifying to the inventor across from him.

Tony then ordered an extremely expensive Irish coffee with as few animal components as possible, aside from the most mundane of dairy-based ones. As the waiter stepped away, the inventor pulled at his phone and glanced at what JARVIS was doing. He smiled thinly and looked up at Fenrir with something almost like affection. “Aw, thank you, dear. You left us working.”

“I don’t care if this place continues to exist. I merely chanced upon it when perusing for a location suitable to my purposes this evening. I’m curious about a number of their menu items, as well.”

“Did you really order some sort of alcohol that a cobra was preserved in for... how many years? Which vintage?”

“You’re not curious about it?” Fenrir sounded offended. “This was the nearest location to you, today, which serves it.”

“There’s no way this place legally exists. Does this menu literally come with a non-disclosure agreement? Why is it already signed?”

“Just keeping up appearances. Also, we appear to be regulars, not ourselves, and they cannot see your phone.”

“So we’re also going to dine and dash?”

“Yes.”

“Petty, I like it. You’ve amused me enough to get me listening to you again with less desire to
commit homicide. Lupicide?”

“For the record, never insult me again for assuming you of all people could be bought by pity. That's the last thing he needs at present from anyone that he isn't seeking to take severe advantage of... and I'd rather that not be you, for now.”

“Why?”

“My father is not himself lately, Anthony.”

“I did notice a bit of discrepancy between how you see him and how Asgard does... and before you even suggest it, yeah, I’ve noticed there are a number of clear ways you do a better job of interpreting him and his actions, than they do, by a long shot. I could practically write a master’s thesis on it. I might next time I’m bored on an international flight. What’s your game here, though?”

“My father taught Hel and I to play his sorts of games until we could both outwit him, Mr. Stark. He wanted us to be stronger than he could be, so that he could never restrict or contain us against our own volition. Surely you of all people understand how valuable that is to us.”

Tony’s brow furrowed. “I think maybe I’m starting to.”

“The thing about father’s tricks, is that they intend to teach lessons. Whether they succeed, or whether what he wishes to teach is even rational, is questionable, but every one of them centers around that intention: to teach.” He gestured expansively. “It’s become clear to myself and to Hel that Odin can no longer be entrusted not to ruin our father by attempts to ‘teach’ him in the ways of Aesir, and this has grown abusive to such a degree that we wish to shield our father from Odin for a time,” the wolf explained. “We cannot steal him outright ourselves, or Odin would war against us, which... it is not yet time for.” He cringed. “And long may that last.”

At that point, the inventor slowly realized that there was a bit of a cold war going on, with Loki’s children, and all of Asgard. A not-war. A knowledge that both sides badly wanted to kill the other, but knew the results would be apocalyptic and therefore... refrained. Maturely. Thankfully.

At least, that was Fenrir’s apparent implication. Tony felt dizzied by it.

“You seriously believe in that Ragnarök thing?”

“It’s not a matter of belief, to us,” Fenrir said gravely. “We... don’t have that option any longer.”

“I... genuinely have no idea what to even make of that statement.”

“The truth about the nature of destiny, fate, and the architecture of history is always ten times more complicated than anyone sane would ever bother trying to figure out,” Fenrir said. “If you can persuade my father that you might be his ally, then he can certainly begin explaining it to you, perhaps. If you’re sufficiently persuasive, and no I don’t actually recommend seducing him right off the bat, or at all, unless you actually have an interest in...” The wolf gestured vaguely, his tone flat and uncertain, more than lascivious, like he wasn’t sure this could possibly be a misunderstanding humans might keep making. “Not that I’m suggesting you do?”

Despite the fact Tony defaulted to innuendo perpetually in his interpretations of particular phrases, always, Fenrir’s genuine lacking of interest in sex genuinely found it difficult to catch some of the patterns, slightly exacerbated by the nature of All-speak itself. The inventor never planned to admit that he found it strangely endearing. Perhaps because it would have seemed Vulcan on any less enthusiastically expressive creature than Fenrir.
“Yes, I would’ve made that a joke,” Tony reassured him, without judgement.

“Good. It’s always worse when I’m wrong.”

If this didn’t happen every single time he conversed with the wolf, he’d genuinely wonder, but Tony remembered witnessing only two occasions wherein Fenrir had been wrong, and just the recollections made him snigger helplessly. “I’m not ever letting you live down the fondue one. Seriously, you and Steve both.”

The wolf huffed, green eyes narrowed a little resentfully.

“For the record, he’s hot, but I prefer to pursue people less likely to throw me out a window over a slight to their masculinity.”

“He tries not to perform the same trick twice in a row. Odds are he would more likely change you into a frog for a while.”

“I know, which is why I’m confused here, a bit. Look, seriously: what do you expect me to do, here? Ally with him? When I don’t trust him? And he sure as shit doesn’t think I even matter. I’m just a particularly belligerent ant who stung him a few times over the years. It’s not like we’ve ever been friends.”

“You can do what no one else has been able to do in a very long time, Stark. You can offer to be an ally against Asgard without necessarily signing your own death warrant, for one. For another, you’d do so more sincerely than you want to admit.”

“Hey, I... I never said that I’d... stop looking at me like that.”

“I will not.”

“Are you channeling the soul of a disapproving librarian? Seriously, how do you do that? Is it the cheekbones? Can Loki do this too? That must be horrifying.”

“I learned it from Hel, in its perfected form, but yes Loki has a version too.”

“Now that will give me nightmares.”

“You’ll deserve them. Look, if you're not up for the challenge, I can just go now.” He pointed at the door. “Since you don’t seem very confident that you’re capable.”

“I...” Oh this was way worse than emotional appeals. He had let his guard down in the wrong places. He’d let himself get dared into it. And he was Tony Stark, dammit. Challenge, you say? he couldn’t help but think. Well, I have some very bad ideas I think could work... or explode. But this isn’t because I can’t do it. “Well, I never said that.”

The wolf had grinned at him with those terrifying teeth that were still more wolf than human despite the human-looking nature of the rest of the form around them.

“That’s creepy,” Tony commented, “but now I’ve admitted I can do it, you still have to actually make me actually want to do it.”

“He can fix what you know as ‘String Theory’ for you, actually, as a functional model. Surely that alone would be worth your corroboration for at least a few months. There’s more beyond that, of course.”
The inventor blinked a lot. That... that was not a bad price.

“Also he can explain to you how the bifrost works.”

“Shit,” Tony sighed. “You can’t promise he’ll actually tell me.”

“You don’t think you can persuade him?” Fenrir challenged again.

*Oh you brilliant son of a bitch.* “Your father doesn’t get to learn this trick from you.”

“He taught it to me. Whether he’s actually learned it himself so far... well, perhaps one day he will. Perhaps you can help him, sharing your example.”

“No,” Tony insisted.

“No promises,” Fenrir said. “Unless perhaps you want me to add one along those lines, to your agreement to ally with my father.”

“If I don’t?”

“Well, I suppose I would tell him about this whole conversation, as well as how well we get along, and ask him not to damage the Earth too badly, since I now visit more frequently. Should he ignore my request, I’d then inflict my own form of retribution for the slight. At least, that’s the rough legal translation.”

Tony blinked. “Seriously?”

Fenrir shot him a look. “You think he wouldn’t, if I asked?”

The inventor thought about it for a long moment. “You really, really believe that he would. You’re more confident when you say that than at any other point in this conversation.”

The wolf snorted. “I’m very confident!”

“Not arguing that. That’s just another part of why this stands out. You don’t even... you say it like it’s axiomatic to you.”

“It always has been.”

“What’s that like?” Tony asked. “Serious? Is it like religion?”

Fenrir made a disgusted noise. “Are you joking? Tell me you’re joking.”

“He’s not infallible.”

“Well, obviously, but he cares about my happiness.”

Tony felt acutely uncomfortable for a moment.

“Oh,” the wolf said. “Oh, this explains a lot.”

“This is the weirdest way this topic has ever come up. How do you seriously brag about-” Tony inhaled sharply, then exhaled. “You weren’t bragging. You thought I...” *It only seemed natural, for you, to assume others had less broken parents, until proven otherwise, because it would be beyond rude to assume anything else. “Sorry.”* He shrugged helplessly. “Long story.”
“I forget, at times, that others were not so lucky as my sister and I, in having a father quite as unique as Loki,” the wolf said. “We... always were aware, in Asgard. Others envied us, but their parents would vilify him, and they would bring that to us too, given time to learn how to wield such insults. Hel was very small, then.”

“Before you, uh...”

“Before I had a soul, yes. I remember things in... simpler terms. Narratives with less depth than ones that came after.”

Tony nodded thoughtfully. “Let’s say I understand being held up to an impossible golden standard of goodness and righteousness by a paternal figure who would only admit to genuine affection for me post-humously, in order to get me to further his legacy more in the ways he envisioned it.”

“Which is why I am here,” Fenrir assured. “You are more like my father than any other creature I have met in all the realms.”

Considering the esteem the wolf held his father in, and the respect Tony had for Fenrir, saying he wasn’t flattered by those words would’ve been an utter lie. The resulting conflict of emotions, between unease and warmth, was deeply uncomfortable.

The wolf grinned at him. “Checkmate?”

“You’re terrifying,” the inventor groaned. “Fine. Fine, I’m listening. How do you propose I even ally with him?”

“Plans are already in motion. You’ve noticed, of course, around... Wales, is it? I don’t remember ever calling it that before.”

“You’ve been there before?”

“Long time ago.” He waved a hand dismissively. “I was curious, was all. In love with a terrestrial fae girl, at the time. I was young and stupid and still thought a libido was a good idea to have, since everyone seemed so obsessed with it.”

Tony blinked. “It’s fun.”

The wolf shrugged. “I have no need of it.”

“I do,” the inventor said. “Admittedly, it’s pretty inconvenient, but I enjoy it too much to ever really want to explore the alternative.”

“That’s what Hel said, or close to it.”

“What’s going on in Wales?”

“My father will be banished there, exiled and with as much of his magic contained as can be achieved while leaving him still alive and himself. I happen to know better than father that Odin will have more trouble with that than he will ever admit to,” Fenrir explained succinctly. “Similarly, the nature of Jotunn shape-shifters and some unique qualities to their souls make restraining their ability to shift nearly impossible without causing permanent damage, which would send the wrong message.”

“He wants to teach Loki a lesson, right? Same as with Thor: just throwing him to us humans in the hopes we’ll make him a bit less of an ass?”
“Personally, I think that he expects my father to fail, due to his natural insincerity. Loki knows too many ‘tricks’ of Odin’s to try to become ‘worthy’ in the same manner that Thor did. Hel has a knack scrying just slightly ahead of events from multiple possible outcomes, and picking up whispers of conversations from a few key secret corners, in places no one knows her capable of listening in upon. Based on her findings, it seems clear to us both that Odin assumes my father is fool enough to try to mimic Thor’s actions and get himself killed, or just outright fail to survive in Midgard entirely before he can even make such an attempt, given just how many people here might very justifiably want to do grievous bodily harm to him.”

“Apparent equality, but in fact a crooked game as it ever was?” Tony snorted. “That did seem to be a pattern to his parenting style.”

“Yes, for which he may never be forgiven, by myself, nor by Queen Hel.”

It occurred to Tony that only in Asgard do people seem to live long enough for their grand-children to have a bone to pick with their grand-parents for how their father was treated over the past millennia or so. “So you want to serve Odin a comeuppance as much as Loki probably does, and you think I’m an ideal facilitator to aim him in that direction both because I have too many of my own daddy issues and because I have vast resources around here on Earth?”

“Also because of how well you treat JARVIS.”

Damn, this furball knew how to play him.

Their drinks arrived, along with the decadent appetizer Fenrir had ordered, which seemed to be an interesting arrangement of thin-sliced (but still all-too-recognizable) organs and vegetables, and a pot of sizzling oil with a small, contained heat source under it, presumably to fry the bits of expensive and possibly-illegal tidbits so outre as to make roman emperors blush.

“This place is increasingly like a cartoon. Is there a puppy-killing room around here too? What even is that?”

“I think it’s the heart of some sort of bear. I’ll keep a piece and restore its life later. Hel owes me a few animal resurrections.” He sprinkled some of the available seasonings over different parts of the offerings, wrapped the first piece of heart around a piece of smoked gouda, stuck the whole thing with a small spear from the plate, and dunked the metal end into the hot oil.

“How... you know, I’m not even sure I want to know how anyone incurs quite that sort of debt. In fact, please never tell me.”

“If you insist.”

“But do give me some more ammunition against Odin. You know you want to.”

“Not if it’s a waste of your time.”

“... It’s not.”

“So you’ll ally with him?”

“I...”

The wolf shot him a look. “I can send you back to your office anytime.”

Tony took a long sip of his drink. It was, admittedly, one of the most delicious things he’d ever
imbibed. He couldn’t have chugged it if he tried. It demanded to be savored, and Tony tried to persuade himself that it was the reason he wanted to stick around any longer. While the chipotle-laced dark cocoa unexpectedly swirled through fine whiskey and even finer coffee was tempting, but not enough for him to convincingly lie to himself for longer than a second before sighing. “You’re far too persuasive. Weren’t you supposed to consume celestial bodies or something?”

“One day I will, though I may not even notice.”

“... Awkward.”

“How do you think I feel?” the wolf mumbled. “It’s pretty uncomfortable.”

Tony nodded. “I guess it would be.”

“Thank you.”

“It’s logical, I mean, for you.”

“Alliance or I send you home,” Fenrir warned and reminded, all at once.

“Okay,” Tony sighed. The drink excuse was bad even by his usual standards, after all. “Fine. I’ll do it. I accept your challenge.”

Again, the wolf grinned, this time right before placing a slice of cooked heart on his tongue, before drawing it into his mouth and chewing. He made a thoughtful sound. “I’m not very impressed. Less rich than the bear-meat in Alfheim. A bit offensively grassy, even. Why on earth is this considered to be worth so very much money?”

“... Was it... panda?” Tony sighed.

“That’s the one!” Fenrir crowed.

“We’re running out of those, you know.”

The wolf looked stricken. “What?”

Things got progressively more awkward from there.

In the end, Tony got nothing further out of Fenrir, who seemed intent suddenly to lay waste to the restaurant before any proper authorities could be called. He managed to humor the inventor enough to politely remove all evidence of Tony’s presence there, along with Tony himself, and drop them on the floor of the inventor’s penthouse living-room. A long conversation was had about earth’s economy, politics, and social structures before the wolf would cease all but breathing fire.

Go figure that a one-of-a-kind creature who was raised amongst packs of a species of wolf that would’ve gone extinct, with the frosting-over of Jotunnheim, if not for a few pack bloodlines left alive in Alfheim, would be touchy on a subject like endangered species and biodiversity.

~

After the fall
Looking out over London through the nearest window, stomach still roiling from the emotional rawness at the end of that same phone conversation, Tony now suspected that he knew why the wolf had roped him into this, the way that he had.

He also suspected that Fenrir had known about the endangered species thing all along, and had used feigned ignorance to end the conversation when he wanted it to end, rather than where Tony would have preferred. The clever jerk. But that was beside the point.

Of course it wasn't just being willing to ally with Loki that was the challenge, here.

He had to *convince* Loki, the god of lies, that he was actually being sincere. This was the same trickster who was so exquisitely paranoid that he'd successfully kept people distant and uncertain enough to fool them into thinking he was Odin, and into letting him continue to rule from the throne of Asgard, for almost a full year before the real Odin woke up and it all went to shit.

Well, his kids had both apparently known the score, but no one else had.

Just like JARVIS would know the score no matter what top-secret crap Tony might be pulling.

The thought made him question, not for the first time and certainly not for the last, just how similar he and Loki might actually be. Comparison had been inevitable, after the weasel had picked Stark Tower for his dramatic deliberately-failed invasion. It had grown only more so after Fenrir had started appearing in his lab every couple of months, much to Pepper's chagrin during the last months of their relationship, because the wolf interrupted at least three occasions in the lab that might have escalated into... well, happy fun times.

He had been amused by it. Pepper had been both frustrated, and a little terrified: the same reactions, in retrospect, that she seemed to overflow with on the occasions Tony did things that maybe weren't all that morally sound in order to save a few more lives. Or when he had JARVIS hack into things illegally in front of her. Or whenever he was laughing and bleeding and almost crying with relief and joy after a battle, but all she could see was him hurt, and she'd call him crazy and look like she was about to cry...

And why was he thinking about how he'd failed to keep Pepper around, when he was supposed to be focusing on a trickster god, anyway?

*Maybe because you know the trickster god would sit right beside you, laughing in death's face just as merrily and hysterically and all...*

That voice sounded suspiciously Liverpudlian. Tony banished it immediately.

*That way madness lies. Obviously.*

~~

By his very nature, John wasn't exactly the nurturing type. He got on well enough with kids, because he was a performer, he didn't usually outright bullshit them about anything serious, and he knew a lot of conveniently shiny minor magic tricks to keep them distracted with, so they neither got too smart-mouthed with him, nor wandered off and got into trouble. In relationships, he was leaned on, and
bantered with, and leaned against, and even sometimes held or doing a bit of holding, but when emotional trauma strained things, he tended to handle it pretty poorly. That was the extent to which he was considered capable: barely just keeping track of other living beings not exploding.

When he wasn't actively risking his own life and putting anyone within a ten-foot radius of his own person at risk, anyway.

So what to do with a sulking trickster god and her (his?) pulling a bit of a coup to take full possession of the bedroom for possibly-violent sulking purposes?

It was clear the god had needed to process everything from that landmine-riddled conversation with Iron Man. It was equally obvious that he didn't want to talk about it or be witnessed in whatever state he (she?) might be in, behind the closed bedroom door.

John still wasn't planning to sleep on his own couch that night, if he could help it. The cricks in his neck and back that tended to result from that were, in fact, severe enough to consider going head-to-head with an enraged trickster god, as a viable option for possible ways to avoid them.

Thus, the magician did knock on his own bedroom door.

"No," Loki said flatly. Female voice again.

John decided, just this once, not to read too much into that. It was probably just that the trickster wasn't under the weird protective blood-magic now carved into his living-room ceiling, so it was safer to look less like his/her usual male self. Maybe she just no longer felt safe at all, wearing her true form, now that the Avengers seemed to be not only aware of Loki’s presence, but had possibly planned ahead.

"Decided to go the barbarian route, then?"

A long pause followed. Then the door seemed to open of its own accord, if only by a bare inch.

Slowly, John pushed it further open and stepped into the bedroom, looking around carefully and noting that nothing seemed to be damaged, or if it'd been damaged, Loki had at least had the decency to repair it. Only then did he let his gaze drift slowly, non-confrontationally to settle on the trickster curled up with her back against the bed's headboard, her knees bent up but not tucked close, her folded arms resting loosely atop them as she glared ceiling-ward, with her head tilted back.

"I don't wish to discuss it," she said flatly.

"I'm not looking to have a heart-to-heart with you, but we do need to talk strategy about this," John said, keeping his tone neutral with an effort.

Loki growled a little, but only low in her throat, which should have made it sound absurd compared to the earlier display over the phone, but instead it just sounded dismissive and resigned. "Begin, then." Those poison-green eyes fixed on him sharply.

"Well... the good news is he's sympathetic on the anti-Odin front?"

"So he claims."

"You think he's faking it?"

"I think it would be easily feigned by him, and therefore I distrust it."
"It's not out of character for him, though."

The trickster offered him a cold and crooked grin lacking all mirth. "That is simply because he is not an idiot."

John shrugged. "You're already planning to play him for info. He's the one with the data you need."

"It would be far safer to avoid his notice altogether, as Loki," she said. "It had not occurred to me that the Avengers would so quickly confirm possible suspicions of my return, and while it was true that he got news of the matters from Fenrir, the method savored of a lie. I do not think he asked JARVIS, which begs the question as to why my son felt it necessary to inform Tony Stark of my escape."

"Why do you doubt him?"

"You didn't hear it?"

"Hear what?"

The trickster sighed. "He muted JARVIS, when he said it. For the rest of the duration of our conversation. Your spell allowed me to detect it based on proximity, and determine with a bit of effort that the AI would have spoken out if he could have. He didn't want himself implicated at the leak, most likely, for fear I might then choose to find means to prevent him contacting Fenrir at all."

"Oh," the magician said. "You really that pissed about that?"

"Yes, but not at either my son or JARVIS. They are... not dissimilar."

"You did seem to get on, just with... JARVIS." It felt odd, to him, calling a computer program by what sounded like a proper name, in semi-casual conversation.

The god rubbed both hands over her face with a long exhalation intoning both exhaustion and frustration. "Maddening, always. Even at a distance, even without his voice or direct input, it is maddening, trying to steer this damned mortal"

"You could always just ask," John said flatly. "He's still sort of a hero-type, in spite of all the tarnished decadence and ambitious greed he likes to play at. Honesty does occasionally work on the likes of him, if only because they don't expect it so much, and so they tend to take it as a signal of trust."

"Don't presume to educate me in this, Constantine."

"I'll presume all I like, same as you," he shot back. "Odds are good that he'll figure you out as soon as you show up at his party, now he knows to keep an eye out for you, don’t you think?" He reached for a cigarette and strode across the room to settle in the chair at his desk, which also happened to be beside the room's primary ashtray where it rested upon the windowsill. Cracking the window open, John lit himself a cigarette and blew a couple of contemplative smoke-rings toward Loki, who batted them away with a scowl. "Relax, Loke. No one has come stalking after you yet or anything."

"He'll work it out far quicker, now. I had orginally planned on his being unaware that I am still alive, let alone that I'm anywhere near Midgard," the trickster muttered.

"You could go with a recognize-me-not spell, since they're simple, and you only really need it to affect him," John suggested. "Cast it at the gala and minimize its energy upkeep, maybe cloak traces of it, if you think his tech might detect anything amiss."
She hummed, low and thoughtful. "Short-term only, but it might do."

A long pause followed: long enough for John to very leisurely finish his cigarette and put it out in an ashtray before closing the window again.

"You seem a bit more put out than this rightly merits," he pointed out.

The bitterly self-deprecating mockery of a smile returned to her features, looking even more dead-eyed than before. "I am used to disappointment." Before he could inquire after that, she added sharply, "You should go to the bank. You have only two hours before they close." Then she proferred the token from before, holding it between the fore- and middle-fingers of her left hand.

The magician pulled himself to his feet with only a few creaks of complaint from some of his bones. He reached for the token, but as soon as it brushed his fingers he hit the floor with a sound like a shuddering gasp.

Loki blinked down at him. "Are you alright?"

"Just a second," John squeaked manfully. "Next time warn a guy he's grabbing onto that sort of thing. I was not prepared."

"How so?"

"Are you kidding me? The last time I tapped into that kind of power I had to snort the bones of a saint to do it!" He pulled himself upright. "Fuck. No way am I taking that to the bank as-is. I'll never fucking make it. You need to actually put together some fucking containment on that. I'll accept your mission but I'm not doing it while that high for fuck's sake."

The god sighed at him, shaking her head and tossing her hair back behind one shoulder. "If you insist. Really, now. It's not as though you haven't done more vital things while even further compromised."

"Lay off."

"I mean, considering the endorphin rush alone the occasion you attempted suicide in front of the kings of Hell..."

"I mean it, mate."

"Or what?"

The mortal magician considered his answer carefully. "I'll tell the spy next door who you are?"

"She wouldn't believe you."

"She would."

She arched a disbelieving eyebrow at him.

John lifted his head further off the carpet to glare right back sternly.

"You really think she would."

"I do. With everything you've told me about her, you think she doesn't know what I get up to, and what I'm expert in?" he reminded.
Loki hummed. "Fine. I'll 'contain' it, but only if you bring me sustenance. Or order in, I don't care. You can use one of my new cards if you like, in fact." She gestured toward a small, extremely tasteful black leather purse on his desk. "The point is that I'll require the energy. I also need to venture into your storage unit a few blocks from here."

"You're really just letting me have this one?"

"I could make you regret it severely if you'd prefer." The look she shot him was not smoldering. It was all ash, the fire seemingly long dead, this time.

Even John found that part a bit harrowing, and wondered what on earth he'd managed to miss here, but he wasn't even sure what questions to ask any longer. Eventually, he settled on, "You'd really base that on just my preference?"

"Mm. No, I would not. It would be a waste of both our time and energy to even bother," the trickster admitted, sounding only a little put out.

"When did your son get to be on good terms with Stark?"

"I've been wondering precisely that for some time. I feel terribly ignorant. Of course JARVIS would fascinate him," Loki sighed, rubbing her hands over her face in a vaguely sulky, frustrated manner. "To be fair, I've been rather busy the past months, between all of the torture and an unexpected political coup shortly before that, after Odin reawoke from the stasis I'd left him in. Still trying to puzzle out how that wore off so soon; I suspect foul play, but I know not whose."

"You're actually a dad," John muttered, a little shell-shocked. "Like, you sound like one."

"I value my children above my own life, Mr. Constantine." The look her poison-green eyes shot his way was a polite, shrewd warning, which promised that it would be the only one he would ever get.

"Noted, then. I'm actually glad he's not actually tied up in a ditch. The myths seemed pretty clear on that."

"Attempts were made. They were not successful."

"Wow, you really are capable of sounding outright fucking terrifying even without your masculine and/or godly true face on. I'm impressed."

"Should I trust him?"

The abrupt query, concise and sincerely curious, like the god was genuinely curious about his input, threw John for a loop, momentarily. After several seconds of furious blinking during which the audio track in his own head sounded disconcertingly like a 56k dial-up connection dialing out, he managed to inquire, "What?"

"I am asking for your input."

"My advice?"

"Your input. For consideration, and out of respect for you as another trickster."

"Is that flattery?"

"You're a sounding-board. Accept your fate. I have a headache and I've overexerted my mind and my magics today. You're my ally, and are far too impertinent to be considered a minion, therefore I
am curious. Your thoughts?"

For a long moment, the magician seriously considered his options. He considered several half-truths, over a dozen pure lies, and a few, much simpler, truer answers. Looking the god of lies in the face, John spoke only the truth, “Yeah, you should. You can probably trust him further than he’ll ever dare let on, because he’s already trying to sell you on liking him. He wants a hook in you of some sort. You happen to need his resources. Let him believe those are his hook.”

“They are,” Loki growled.

“And he’ll know that the second he works out what you want. What else might he find along the way, while trying to suss that out too?”

At that, the trickster muttered irritably under her breath, but didn’t actually argue.

“So, with that major pretense there dropped, you get to study him trying to suss out anything and everything else you’re hiding that I’ll probably never begin to work out, while you can focus on why exactly he’s so keen to be relatively friendly with you, by your own slightly-malicious standards.”

“Friendly?” She sounded dubious.

“Your son is somehow similar to JARVIS, I’m guessing?”

Blinking at the slight change in topic, Loki responded affirmatively.

“How?”

“Fenrir was originally a guardian and companion construct I designed for Hel, when she was very small. He was somewhat shade-based, but with a good deal more autonomy, intellect, and room to develop his own personality, once she began conversing with him, and caring for him as much as he at first cared for her, until they were more like siblings than anything else. He developed far beyond his initial limitations, to the point that people in Asgard were quite frightened of him. He learned magic alongside Hel, but as a construct, and unbound to any soul at the time, he learned... differently. More intuitively than any other mage living, I suspect.” Loki smiled a bit proudly, but also a little worriedly. “There was worry that if he were to self-replicate, and lost control of his offspring, that it could spell disaster for the whole of the galaxy, at the very least. That was when attempts were made to... contain him. Fenrir escaped them, and came to me. I... offered him a few options, and to this day I am glad that he chose the way that he did, no matter how it may turn out for us all, in the end.”

“What did he choose?”

“To develop a soul, and a material body with heart and brain to support it, and contain all of himself within its every fiber,” Loki said. “I gave blood, sweat, and a good deal of my own magic, in aiding him on that particular journey, but did my best to allow him to shape himself as he most wanted to be, and I fear that he has never forgotten the worth of that, and over-values me for it.”

The magician processed that slowly for a long while, then sighed, rubbing his eyes and strolling over to flop onto the empty bottom half of the bed dejectedly. “So does JARVIS have a soul, then?”

“Almost. He is... very unique.”

“How the fuck does anything only ‘almost’ have a soul? That’s some horse-shit, mate, and don’t tell me it isn’t. I know spiritual horse-shit better than a vatican stable-boy, and don’t fucking doubt it.”

“JARVIS’s mind exists on the astral plane, but he is physically incapable of dreaming. If you look
for a soul with magic, you will not find one, but you will find all manner of other evidence suggesting there’s got to be one in there somewhere,” Loki assured. “He is, as I say, unique.”

“How the... that’s not natural.”

“It’s not as uncommon as you might think, but it is uncommon amongst engineered life-forms, let us say, rather than wild-born organic life-forms.”

“Insane.”

“Well, of course. Life generally is.”

“I... can’t even begin to argue that.” John sighed, then sat up with a startled noise that he almost choked on. After a single cough, he managed, “You’re an idiot!”

“What?” the trickster asked, coldly suspicious.

“He’s got daddy issues worse than yours and how old do you think JARVIS’s sentience even is? And he’s met Fenrir and doubtlessly knows what he is, and what you did, and how you raised him, and all. You twit, he went out of his way to drop pretense whenever either of them came up in conversation, with equal care. You’re the only successful example of a father to a man- or god-made life-form instead of an organically born one he’s ever heard of. He’s actually serious.” John sounded like he was having reservations about the implications of Stark’s seriousness. He was also realizing suddenly that he’d been played. “You said Fenrir told him about you being out of prison?”

“I implied that might be the case, yes.”

“It is,” John said firmly. You sly bastard. Good on you, but fuck you. The bastard had played into expectations the same as Tony had accused John of doing with the elf-related theories: he stated what he knew others thought to be true, without ever implying that he fully believed it himself. “Your son is pulling one on you.”

“What?” Loki snapped.

“He’s hijacked Odin’s lesson first.”

The trickster took in a slow, deep breath, then swore at length in a language John couldn’t even begin to recognize.

“Right?” he concurred, regardless.

“I need to send a message to the Queen of the Land of the Dead. Remind me again why I can’t use you as an ambassador?” Loki inquired.

“You’re out of magic for the day, I don’t know her number, my soul would probably disintegrate and then recoagulate itself back together somewhere in the depths of the seventh circle of the more local Hell around here, doubtlessly with the First of the Fallen jerking off over me.”

“I didn’t need that image, but you’re sadly not wrong,” she sighed.

“Thanks for the friendly reassurance. Let’s not dwell on my mortality and how I could croak any second now, and be careening headfirst toward that fate... any second.”

“Agreed: let us not.”

The magician snorted. “Rude.”
“If what you suggest is true, I can’t refuse it,” Loki murmured.

“Really?”

“You sound surprised.”

“It seems humble of you, is all.”

“Oh yes. I simply value my own children, whom I cherish more than I have ever valued my own self, over the wretch who lied to not only myself, but to them, when he called me his son, but never dared tell me that my blood was never Aesir, nor my children’s blood. Hel’s life might have been risked, had the wrong illness come our way, and the wrong remedies applied, due to the icy elemental magics in my blood and to a lesser extend in hers, do you understand?”

“I do,” John assured. “I’m not-”

“Fenrir would not entrap me within the context of Odin’s lesson, under the watch of Anthony Stark, unless he believes that while Odin’s punishments have merit, it is necessary for me to learn something from it, whether it’s anything the All-Father ever intended or no,” Loki interrupted. “He would never suffer agreeing with any of Odin’s tactics if he felt it could be avoided. I must have lost more than I thought of...” Her expression suddenly went vacant and slightly scared for a moment before she could quite mask it fully.

Having seen signs like that before on far, far too many old friends, the magician only waited, watching carefully to see if the trickster was trying to escape whatever was going through that head of hers, or otherwise seemed a bit too lost. After a few long moments, he asked carefully, “Are you with me, Loki?”

“I... am not so certain as I was a few hours before this, I’m afraid.”

“You’re still devastatingly attractive while simultaneously making anything resembling a libido in my system bury itself in a disused bomb-shelter, and you’ve got the same crazy-eyes I recall from a particular circle, wherein I met someone who knew exactly who he was, despite all sorts of infernal torments. Remember him?”

The trickster snapped back into focus sharply as anything, with an almost audible crack, like a bullwhip hitting a weak spot between reality and the astral plane somewhere in the depths of Loki’s brain. “I do,” she said sharply, and met his eye, holding his gaze steadily. “Thank you.” She sounded only a little caught off-guard.

“Drained you might be, but the last thing I need is a mage as powerful as you having an existential meltdown in my bedroom, in the least sexy manner imaginable.”

That was when she tried halfheartedly to smother him with a pillow, but she was grinning, then, mad and fierce again, and glittering with plots and machinations even as the god continued trying to keep John’s head under the pillow.

When the pillow was eventually flung off the bed, they both lay down with a bit of space between them, staring at the ceiling and not even pretending to care.

“Sounds like you’ve got work to do,” the magician pointed out.

“I do,” Loki sighed, and pulled herself up, shuffling away just long enough to grab her laptop and charger, setting them up and settling herself on the same side of the bed she had earlier claimed her own. “Sustenance, John. Get to it.”
“Right.” He tried to sit up, failed, and dug in his pocket for his phone. He had a few take-out places within walking distance saved in his contacts. He was a bachelor who lived alone; it was inevitable that he’d have almost as many restaurants as people in his address list. He always lost their menus, and forgot their numbers, even if he remembered their menus, which he usually did.

He called the Bangladeshi place two blocks away, cursing Tony Stark and temperamental Jotunn mages silently in his head, to the background music of the first rings of the restaurant phone, and the raidrop-like tapping of Loki’s fingers at her laptop keyboard.

Chapter End Notes

*In weeks to come, late at night and a bit drunk, Tony would wonder more than once if maybe the missing amounts of stuff in most models of the universe string theory sought to resolve was mostly made up of stuff like whatever Fenrir was made of. It would certainly explain a lot.
Today's Lesson is an Example of Why John Constantine's Law is that Murphy Never Knew How Good He Had It

Chapter Summary

Loki’s protective instincts can accidentally lean towards the terrifying. Skye has no time or patience for John Constantine's bullshit. Tony has three awkward and increasingly-uncomfortable phone conversations in a row.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Tony knew, one day soon, there would be a terrible reckoning, and Pepper Potts would swoop down upon him, breathing fire and righteous indignation, and he would plead forgiveness, and try to come up with any way to explain this situation that didn’t actually make it sound like he was hoping to get into a god’s pants at this party.

He really wasn’t drastically altering imminent event plans in a last-minute fashion for any genuinely selfish or petty reasons; it was more like an amoral reason than a straight-up immoral one, at least? It might come with not-very-straight selfish fringe benefits, if he played his cards right, but really that was incidental. Really, the changes he’d made were strictly for the sake of better cornering a god of lies for an intimate chat over drinks than any genuinely illicit reason, like that maybe there should be better security against surprise photographs of such a conversation. That was legitimate.

Fuck it. This was Avengers business, technically, sort of. Not at all sexy.

Really, he hadn’t been fixated much on Loki’s sexiness at all, until the damned phone call. Hearing quite so much of the god’s vocal range and the emotional complexity beind it had done things to him. To his dreams that night, particularly, but now it was morning and he was making some drastic party plan alterations and trying very hard not to think about all that.

He had just needed a few more places to sit and have quiet drinks about the place, instead of the original flashy schmoozing about an entire floor in the middle of a perpetually crowded audience, as he ever was at events like this.

Well. At events like the one Pepper had originally planned, which had been ruined a bit by a terroristic threat that made such plan alterations not only advisable, but genuinely necessary.

To be fair, Tony had been within his rights to inform a few of the key guests (by anonymous tips, of course) that there might be an international terrorist planning to infiltrate the whole gala, and got the big soiree canceled, and a much smaller, more private event to instead be held at the same day and time, near the original location, but not near enough to catch the attention of forces focused on the original party address. This meant that the big fish being courted politically and economically could still make their appearances, without altering most of their other travel plans around it; thus, the day was saved, as long as Pepper never found out who the anonymous tipper had been. Of course, the whole scheme then required that some new and even-more-fancy invitations sent out, even Natasha’s, despite Tony’s knowing she was no longer in that apartment even now.

After all, he knew someone else who would doubtlessly pick up the invitation.
Idly, Tony wondered just how suspicious the trickster would be, of that. Loki had implied awareness of the inventor’s rocky relationship with S.H.I.E.L.D., after all; perhaps the god would simply consider it a stroke of luck that their relationship was still damaged such that Natasha might abscond from English shores so abruptly as to allow that little invitation—a sure sign that Tony had no idea she had been about to leave before the party itself—to fall between the cracks?

The scenario was realistic enough to make his head hurt. It would do.

Except that Pepper then called. Why could she possibly be calling at this hour?

“Pep?”

“I had a feeling you might still be conscious, considering the latest interesting updates to your schedule you’ve been making.”

He grimaced. “What about them, this time?”

“I’ve already worked out that you’re arranging the closest thing possible to a ‘covert meeting’ at a semi-public location with Tony Stark. It’s sort of obvious, hon.”

“Damn.”

“So, it’s a meeting with someone, and JARVIS already spilled that they’re not anyone good, so you might as well leak me the rest, here.”

“Dammit, JARVIS.”

“My apologies, sir, but she did insist,” the AI said, from the StarkPad at Tony’s elbow, causing the inventor to roll his eyes.

“Just tell me what to expect here, Tony; your experiment bringing the Avengers into the tower one by one went well with Dr. Banner, at least.”

The inventor cringed a little at the unspoken reminder of the rest of the unaccepted invitations to the tower. Well, except Thor, who mostly just dropped by for very short periods of time, usually on diplomatic business with S.H.I.E.L.D. or awaiting Dr. Foster’s arrival in the city. “Bad day for you?”

“You know how much planning I put into that party, Tony.”

“I do,” he sighed.

“How valid were the terrorism rumors?”

“Very.”

“Then why isn’t security tighter?”

“Because I know who the terrorist is and I owe him a drink.”

“You’re going to have to elaborate more than that, honey.”

Tony sighed, smirking a bit fondly and self-deprecatingly both. “He’s on parole?”

“Tony. Tell me whether you’re bringing another stray home or not. Now.”

“Well. It’s a funny story?”
She sighed heavily. “That’s never good.”

“His son asked me to help, and I respect the hell out of Fenrir, you know I do.”

A long silence ensued on Pepper’s end. A heavy, brittle sort of silence.

It seethed.

“You’re not bringing him back to New York.”

“New York has teeth enough to make it tough work for him if he goes off the deep end, or whatever. He’d destroy much larger swathes of Cali, and you know it; although that’s a personality thing, mostly. His powers are actually mostly on lockdown. Mooostly.”

“Tony!”

“He’s under Midgard arrest by Odin, okay? His magic is more than a bit muzzled, and he’s mortal as you or me now, albeit probably still freakishly strong and slier than a greased fox. Also, shape-shifty, which might win Bruce over. He’s still a biologist, after all, and they love that sort of thing, right?”

A long, resigned and exasperated sigh hissed through Pepper’s teeth. “You’re sure you can contain him?”

“No, but I’m sure I can make him dependent on my resources.”

“Like a parasite?”

“Don’t be mean, Pep. He’s been effectively tortured for the past several months, getting shards of psychic influence from somebody way worse than him burnt out of his brain slowly. Sacrificing some resources to turn him into an ally longer-term, and maybe getting diplomatic leverage over Asgard in the process a smidgen, seems worth it to me. What do you think?”

She gave a thoughtful hum. “I think you’ve been busy, lately.”

“Yes.”

“Not doing most of the things I sent you there to do, I suspect.”

“Uh, well. There is also that.”

“Tony, you’re lucky I love you.”

“I am not worthy, Queen Potts.”

“You’re not,” muttered a voice that sounded like it came from over Pepper’s shoulder, very very closely.

“Is that... is that Agent Hill?” A pause. “Holy shit, am I on speaker?”

An evil laugh followed, a bit muffled, in a way that caused Pepper to squeak only a little indignantly. That was definitely Maria Hill with her. Very late at night. They were very close, and apparently cuddly. Also he suspected he might have just been used as a show of trust in their developing relationship. It was a surreal sensation.

Well then. The inventor couldn’t entirely fault her taste. If he weren’t so deeply intimidated by Hill anytime he stood within arm’s reach of her (it wasn’t that he lacked survival instincts, after all; it was
just that he was really good at selectively ignoring them for the sake of showing off his genius) he would’ve risked flirting with S.H.I.E.L.D.’s second-in-command before too.

“Pepper, thou art a braver soul than I,” Tony intoned gravely.

“So why are you on such good terms with Loki’s son, exactly, Stark?” Hill asked.

“Classified, darling, sorry,” Pepper said, gently, like she really was a bit sorry.

Reassuringly, the resulting protest was soft and only a little petulant. “But-

“Maria. It’s classified,” she reminded, a bit more firmly, but twice as soft. It was a much more dangerous tone than most realized, in certain contexts. In this particular one, Maria Hill occupied such a context now, given how close to the phone she sounded.

Tony knew that tone all too well. He quietly hoped that Hill perhaps earned it less frequently than he himself used to—and sometimes still did. It would be healthier for them both, honestly.

It was at that point that he realized this trust exercise of Pepper’s was also a clear illustration of limits, apparently. He approved, but was also still a bit uncomfortable being so casually used. On the other hand, she was still his family, if only in the adopted and now-non-romantic sense. This counted as a family thing, right? Supporting Pepper, and all. Sure.

No reason not to at least advise (and indirectly show approval of) the new suitor of Pep’s, though.

“Stand down, Hill. Just trust me,” he warned, baldly sincere, and even a bit audibly smiling, but in an abashed way rather than a smug one, for once. An unspoken, No really, I’ve been there was heavily implied. “Moving on though: S.H.I.E.L.D. is not to get involved unless I, or JARVIS, call for aid to take Loki down if the worst should happen. If I can’t or for some reason won’t tell you, he’ll happily leak to you the same way he already did a bit earlier. Deal?”

“He tried to take over this planet before, Stark,” Hill reminded him coldly.

“Well, actually he more sort of turned the Avengers against a deal he didn’t actually want to keep up his end of, and made us nuke his enemies for him in the process. If you think he wanted to win and have to listen to several billion new subjects’ worth of complaints for the foreseeable future, you’re clearly not paying attention.”

“And that’s better?” Pepper asked dryly.

Tony hesitated. “Well, not by much, no.”

“It means he doesn’t care what happens to this planet, if it’s between him and what he wants,” Hill cut in. “That’s a problem.”

Getting chewed out by Pepper’s new lover (they sounded a bit too comfortable for just a fling, not that Tony actually minded beyond general interest in Pep’s life given her importance to his own; the breakup between himself and Pepper had been amiable and this wasn’t the first time either of them had run into the other’s... whatever, since then) was never what he wanted to start off his morning with. One day, he would have vengeance against S.H.I.E.L.D. for this. One day soon. “He wants to give Odin the finger. I’m more than confident that I can facilitate that in a way that’s of benefit to him, and to Earth.”

“This is a trickster god,” Hill said flatly. “Centuries old.”

“God of lies,” Pepper added.
“And I’m Tony goddamn Stark.”

Both women on the other end of the line made unimpressed and exasperated noises, not even bothering with words.

“What?”

“Tony, you’ll have to use something other than bravado to convince the likes of me, and you know it,” Pepper remarked coolly.

“Duh,” Maria muttered.

“Look, his kids are his achilles heel, and he knows it. He also knows, now, that I’m Fenrir-approved. Fenrir even likes JARVIS to such a degree that Loki wouldn’t risk destroying me, or messing with JARVIS, lest his own son seek genuine retribution.”

“Also he seems to respect me in much the same way that Fenrir does, Miss Potts,” JARVIS added. “He wished me to be aware that he preferred to treat me as he would any other sentient person of respectable intellect.”

“Better excuses than the previous,” Pepper conceded. “I still don’t like it, Tony.”

“I’m not a big fan of Earth being used as a training ground for misbehaved Aesir to gain humility, myself. We’re not a colony of theirs, or if we are, we should have a bit more say in shit like this. They just dumped Loki on Earth, expecting us to deal with him in the state he’s currently in, which means he’s weak enough for his former victims to potentially kill him, knowing Odin as we now do, these days. So he’s been sent here to either repent or die.”

“You’re suggesting he might be afforded a sort of refugee status?” Hill sounded offended at the very idea.

“Consider, Hill. Loki having been dumped here as his ‘punishment’ just like Thor, means that even if S.H.I.E.L.D. captured him, all it would do would be to put S.H.I.E.L.D. at greater risk of him destroying them slowly from the inside if they try to keep him contained, because it’s his nature. He’ll do that to anyone who tries to capture and keep him, until he provokes just the right person at just the right time that it results in either his death, or his violent rise to power, depending on who gets their hands on him first in the inevitable ensuing chaos. Of course, if he died, there’s potential Asgard might have to seek some sort of retribution for the loss of their younger prince’s sole chance of redemption or whatever. Or... he can come to me, which he might actually agree to willingly, if I ask, instead of trying to put a bag over his head the first chance I see him, savvy?”

“And he won’t poison you because it would make it more difficult for Fenrir and JARVIS to remain, er, friends. Hmm,” Pepper concluded.

“See? She gets it!”

The S.H.I.E.L.D. agent considered, albeit with a mild grumble. “We could keep him on rotation through-”

“All the more opportunities for escape he would have, Maria,” the CEO chided. “Tony is right. Asgard sent him here, and so probably won’t accept him back until he’s either ‘worthy’, dead, or otherwise free of his sentence, and it’s bullshit that the Earth is being put into this position, but until we can change the fact he’s on Earth and not going anywhere else very fast, damage control should be our priority. The only way to keep Loki anywhere around here with minimal risk is for him to voluntarily decide he wants to do so, and it seems like his children are the only ones he would give
sufficient power to, in his own mind, as to let them compel him into that sort of obedience, and Tony is their only known trusted ally on Earth.”

“Odd, that, isn’t it? The kids thing?” Tony muttered. “I mean, he’s betrayed a number of relatives so far, and all, why spoil the kids in comparison?”

“Well, Tony, consider how you treat people you actually care about the opinions of,” Pepper said. “You give them whatever you feel that you can, without overwhelming or insulting them, don’t you?”

Hill, notably, didn’t say a word in response to that, seemingly lost in thought.

Tony thought about that for a few moments too, shifting in his chair a bit. “Well, yeah, but I mean even I—getting to know Fenrir like I have, Pep, I’ve gotten a good idea of how he sees his father, and he’s not blind. This isn’t hero-worship. It’s necessity, like it’s pained him more than he’d ever mentioned to me before his most recent lunch-hijacking, to have to see Loki so low as to need this sort of intervention and, yes, punishment. Fenrir won’t let his dad slip free of whatever magics Loki is being ‘contained’ by, until he’s sure Loki’s gotten the message.”

“If he doesn’t learn?” Hill asked. “Or refuses?”

Tony sighed. “I don’t know, but I don’t think it will come to that.”

“Why not?” Pepper inquired.

“He cares too much about his son to risk seeing what Fenrir might become, in order to do whatever he, uh, might consider necessary to get through to his dad,” Tony said. “Loki won’t want to see that happen.”

“You can’t know that he won’t still bring it about, if he fails,” Hill cut in.

“Look, Agent; he sounded like half the hosts of Hell sprang free accompanied by a demonic chorus of pure wrath, as soon as I just implied that I knew Fenrir and met with him regularly. It took a lot just to get him to stop seeing me as a threat, before he would even listen to another word about any other subject. The guy isn’t collected and in control like we’re used to him being, because he knows how trapped he is, and I get where he’s coming from here, I do.”


“He does,” Pepper said, low but sharp, just the driest hint of curtness in her tone suggesting no further inquiries into that would be responded to tonight, but not enough to suggest it couldn’t be readressed later. Mostly because she already knew Tony was implying that he understood the mad trickster’s valuing of Fenrir and Hel’s judgement above even his own, because the inventor’s tone of voice had shifted briefly into the one he usually saved just for gratitude at Pepper- and Rhodey- and JARVIS-specific levels of trust and devotion. She also thus knew Tony didn’t want to have to say aloud, right now, that he placed the same exact same degree of trust in those three people in his life. “I understand, Tony.” Because she did. However reluctantly. “If you’re certain you can handle this, I’m willing to trust you with it, but I do want you to leave it to JARVIS’s discretion to call in reinforcements if he thinks it might be necessary. The reinforcement options are Steve and the rest of the Avengers first, S.H.I.E.L.D. second.”

“But, Pep—”

“No, Maria.”
The agent made a resigned, yet oddly affectionate noise.

Tony was starting to wonder how long they’d been at this; he was also disconcerted, but he was very glad that he was on Pepper’s side always; it seemed suddenly safer that way. She made terribly dangerous and frighteningly intelligent people into loyal and trusting friends with such frequency that it practically counted as a super-power in its own right. “I can agree to those terms. How about you, JARVIS?”

“I believe we’re all in accord,” the AI concurred.

“Good,” Pepper agreed. “Now about—uhm...”

A pointed throat-clearing followed, from Maria. Shortly after, the CEO might have made a small, distracted noise.

“Pep?”

“Uhm...”

“That was all, Mr. Stark,” Hill assured, mock-politely. “As promised,” she added.

“Oh. Right,” Pepper muttered. “I’ll... update you later on a few other things, but they can wait. Sorry!”

“No problem, Pep. At least one of us is getting laid.”

“Tony!” Pepper protested.

“Have fun,” he teased, mercilessly, and hung up, sniggering. Then he realized the next time he and Hill had to work together in a strictly S.H.I.E.L.D.-related manner, it was going to be awkward. He looked forward to making sure she was just as uncomfortable as he was about it.

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The next morning, John found the trickster god curled up in a moderately adorable crescent-shaped heap in his living room. This would’ve been a bit less disturbing if Loki had decided to stay in a humanoid shape, but no. Instead, the heap on John’s living room floor appeared to be a dire wolf with roughly the same mass Loki usually had in his natural form. This left very little room to maneuver along the available path (amidst a lot of cardboard boxes and other miscellaneous debris leftover from both the god’s recent spellwork and John’s chronic inability to unpack all of his boxes of collected mystic arsenal, no matter where he lived or for how long he had lived here) between the kitchen and the livingroom, especially when the wolf huffed and stretched out further at just the wrong moment.

So really, it was Loki’s own fault that John tripped over an enormous paw in his fumbling morning quest for caffeine and cigarettes, and that snarling yelp was really uncalled for.

“For fuck’s sake, man, leave a man a path to his morning addictions!”

A harumphing growl followed that.

“Why the fuck are you in that shape anyhow?”
“It’s more familiar than the female form I’ve been wearing, and thus requires less energy to upkeep,” Loki said in clipped, slightly muffled tones. His voice was masculine again, for whatever reason, and he seemed to be curling up into a tight ball now, tucking his muzzle under the fluff of his tail. “I used far too much magic constructing a form of shielded encasement fit to allow your delicate sensibilities comfort when you deliver my token to the bank.”

“Yes, my mere mortal self is in awe, or something, you complete tosser.”

Loki only grumbled again, a bit quieter, and seemed to fall almost instantly asleep again, as though simply unable to maintain consciousness.

As he put the kettle on and lit up a cigarette near the kitchen window, which he politely opened and directed most of his smoke out of, John watched the drowsy trickster, frowning a little. He knew all about throwing himself into a work of magic to avoid having to introspect, sometimes. There was really no reason he should be surprised even gods might have good reasons to do the very same.

He let Loki sleep solidly for a few hours, during which he discovered both that the Russian spy down the hall had obviously skipped town, and that there was also a new invitation in the pile of mail at her door where her mail-slot was jammed. He collected the invite and headed back to his apartment to further wait out the slumbering trickster.

John took the time to examine the “shielded encasement” Loki had designed. It was surprisingly compact, no wider than the center of John’s palm, and looked almost like a fossilized tooth from something large and carnivorous, but with intricately carved and detailed designs like knots interwoven and wrapped around it until the carving could almost be mistaken for layers of ribbon, wrapped around the thing. John could barely sense the well of power deep beneath that pretty veneer. *Is this actual bone? Carved bone? Polished even?* How had the god grown that in such a short period of time? John honestly wasn’t sure that he wanted to know. He suspected he might be missing a few artifacts though, more than likely, and wondered which ones. Whatever they had once been, in that case though, they certainly no longer still resembled it, making him question that suspicion.

It might’ve been something more shape-shifty than specifically magic-based in technique, in which case he *really* never wanted to know those details; although he had to say he was so far surprised and a little impressed by the trickster’s sheer paranoia and depth of resourcefulness: talismans implanted under his skin in case of emergencies, use of elemental ice or shape-shifting whenever possible even in spite of physical pain, manipulating superheroes and extraterrestrial politics alike all from a dilapidated MacBook in a small, dingy apartment. It was more than most “princes” were ever prepared for, given how pampered their lives tended to be, but given Loki’s reputation and all he’d learned so far about the younger prince of this alien version of Asgard, well. There was simply no way even a god could’ve survived so long, in a position like Loki’s, without resorting to that sort of thing.

John Constantine, of all people, would know all about that. There was something to be said about being between a prophecy and a hard place, and managing to dodge the myth and come out the other side with a bit less destiny ruining everything, and a little more room left to breathe. *Laughing Magician*, he thought with bitterness, and snorted loudly. At least the myth of John Constantine had been a little more heroic, by trickster standards, than whatever Loki’s was. Well, so far, but the magician wasn’t exactly worried about that changing. The trickster still was far less likely to be anything mistaken for heroic.

Still, since it was clear that the trickster wasn’t actually bound to a rock with the innards of his own offspring while venom dripped in his face, a lot of the other Ragnarök details seemed all the more
questionable. Fenrir wasn’t even chained in a pit somewhere; he was romping around Helheim doing whatever he pleased, by the sound of it, so where was the impetus to set off any sort of apocalypse anytime soon?

John was really hoping there wasn’t anything apocalyptic happening, again.

Once he’d gotten a sufficient amount of both caffeine and nicotine in his system to function properly, John wandered off for a walk. He was kidnapped almost immediately, which he had to consider pretty efficient even for someone with Tony Stark’s sort of money, right up until it became clear these weren’t the sort of people Stark would hire.

Former arms-dealer or no, Iron Man didn’t seem like the sort to “fake” kidnap someone with a team of heavily-armed men with very real weapons, one of which pressed against the back of John’s neck.

“Look gents, I understand mercenaries gotta pay bills too, but it is far too early for this bollocks, no matter how well your master of the day is fucking paying. Have some pride, for fuck’s sake, and wait ‘til afternoon like civilized-“

That was when one of them attempted to pistol-whip him into unconsciousness.

Simultaneously, the man doing the whipping found himself suddenly unable to breathe. It took several seconds for his comrades to notice, by which point he had been seized by a sudden panic and grabbed at one of them.

An illusion engulfed his hand, a suggestion rather than an actual trick of the light: \textit{He is a threat. He has a weapon. You have no time to look}, It whispered.

All the men in the back of the anonymous-looking black van fired at their asphyxiating counterpart, but their bullets flew awry, striking everywhere throughout the van precisely six inches of air above John Constantine’s trenchcoat and body, where he lay on the floor with his head under his folded arms, his occasional yells of alarm completely muted by the cacophony above him.

The sound of rending metal suddenly halted and the whole van creaked, and then fell suddenly silent.

It hadn’t even managed to get out of parking gear.

What was left of it, above a single horribly uniform level, had been torn to shreds in the storm of rerouted and repurposed bullets, shrapnel, and other sundry pieces a bit more organic in nature, which had been caught up in the bullets’ movements and the containment-field both, acting like the whirling blades in a psychedelic garbage disposal.

There wasn’t much left of the men formerly in the vehicle with him, above their belts. The rest had been incorporated into the mess that had, in the end, dropped unceremoniously on the front-end atop the damaged engine, which had been mysteriously deactivated along with all electronics in the car as soon as the protective spell had triggered.

Thus, when it all did halt, the quiet was even more sudden and viscerally alarming than the noise had been, in its own terrible way, interrupted only by the sounds of finer particles leftover from the spell’s wrath hitting the ground in a quiet pattering.

John slowly raised his head and made a face at some of the gore around him. It had been a simple enough ward spell: damage aimed at John’s attacker had been redirected and repurposed, and in the process certain physical forces were tweaked and strengthened in ways intended to make sure that instead of dissipating outward, all potentially destructive force had rebounded before it could escape,
and thus it had been sent careening back toward those who had dared aim it at John Constantine that morning via kidnapping.

It was also staining John’s everything now, as though a fine mist had uniformly coated him, leaving his skin crawling as his guts abruptly went all twisty and he felt himself scrambling on shock-stiff and uncoordinated limbs to get out.

“Holy fuck,” he choked, and then gagged violently.

Stumbling out of the remains of the sliding door of the van over half-mincemeat bodies, John managed to just barely get to his feet and brace himself against the nearest landmark—a hedge, in this case, and a small garden wall—behind which he could vomit, which he then proceeded to do.

Well, it was one proper heave of mostly-liquid vomit and then almost half a minute struggling to keep breathing between violent dry-heaves.

Then John fumbled for his cellphone, and redialed Stark with haste.

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Honestly, Tony was glad to have an excuse to log out of the exceptionally dull video-conference meetings Pepper had decided to punish him with for the rest of his morning, but he wasn’t exactly encouraged by the cause for it.

“You’re sure it’s the same as the last time?” Tony asked, incredulous.

“Absolutely, sir.”

“Bring him on, then.”

“For fuck’s sake, finally,” John gasped, instantly.

“Okay, I admit you’re not who I was expecting.”

“You can flirt more later, look, we have a bit of a problem.”

“You sound a bit tweaked, if you don’t mind me saying. I’d know.”

“Well, jackass, I’m covered in a lot of blood and other various tissues I’d rather not think much about, I’m less than a block from my own damned apartment, and I want to know who these fucks in this van are, because you didn’t hire them, and since I think I’m under some ridiculous protective wards for the time being courtesy of a certain trickster—who incidentally wouldn’t let his own spells waste his energy turning thugs he himself had hired, into a sort of chunky meat-paste like these poor sods are now become, so I’m at least also pretty sure they aren’t Loki’s either.”

“... Come again?”

“Kidnapping attempt. Me. Backfired. Godly magic, apparently. He’s very creative.”

“Shit,” Tony groaned. “And you’re in a public street.”

“Broad fucking daylight. I’ve got a bit of magic keeping people from looking too close for now, but I
won’t be able to maintain it too long under these conditions without a bit of help, and misdirection, on a large-ish scale. Your sort of scale, in fact.”

“I’m already regretting coming to this country,” the inventor sighed.

“You’re welcome to leave as soon as you’ve got your trickster in tow, but first things first, mate. You got something other than a PR team for this?”

Tony took a deep breath, and let it out. “I’ll have to call in a pretty big favor.”

“Odds are good these fuckers are your enemies, you know, not his.”

“Yes. I know. That’s why I’m calling the favor in.”

Another voice joined the line: “This is Skye and you have one chance to persuade me not to destroy whatever device you’re calling from.”

“This is Tony Stark.”

The ensuing shrill sound of mixed horror and disbelieving thrill caused the magician on the call to cringe a little; Tony was more accustomed to such sounds in close proximity, from long experience.

“Ow,” John said flatly.

“Sorry! Sorry, I just really thought you were Hydra again, or something. I’ve been burning some of their hackers all day, so uhm. Sorry. Uh... Hi, Tony! And, uh, friend?”

“Hah,” the magician deadpanned, “hah, and hahhh, respectively.”

“Oh-kaaay, who pissed in your cheerios, Mr. Cocky Englishman?” Skye retorted.

“I’d very much like your help finding out, if you’re up to it. I recommend galoshes, though, if you need to wade into the back with the corpses.”

“Uh, woah, what the hell, Tony?” Skye asked sharply.

“Skye, this asshole’s name is John Constantine, and I’m afraid I’ve put him in danger. He’s under some fairly impressive divine protection for the time being, though, which resulted in the danger meeting the same fate as a fly meeting a truck windshield at over 80 miles per hour,” Tony explained. “Sorry he’s a bit crass, but to be fair, he’s had a terrible morning so far.”


“Technically an associate of Thor’s, but not in a good way,” Tony said flatly. “I’m trying to capture them, but they’re slippery. John is acting as a bit of a double-agent helping me out.”
“I’m playing lackey, because I fit a certain archetype, and stepped into a circle I shouldn’t have earlier in the week.”

“Lackey?” she sounded amused.

“Well, not Stark’s, obviously. I don’t do corporate projects, as a general rule.”

“So you do what? Sting impersonations?” asked the hacker lightly, her voice sweet. “Your photos in your S.H.I.E.L.D. dossier suggest you’d be good at it, anyhow. I’m curious how you still look so good for your age, though. Did you die at some point?”

“Tch,” John responded. “A few times, yeah. Who hasn’t?”

“Fair point. I know I have. Also, I’ve already locked down your location on London CCTV,” Skye said. “And I’ve routed a few local S.H.I.E.L.D. resources for discrete disposal and evidence-gathering purposes both. They’re very skilled. So skilled, in fact, Mr. Constantine, that I recommend you discreetly fold up that coat so it shows off fewer bloodstains, and make your way northeast, back toward your apartment. I’ll make certain you aren’t followed.”

“Thank you, Skye,” Tony said, sounding genuinely surprised and pleased.

“You’re welcome, Tony, but I’m serious about that brunch.”

“JARVIS, schedule it,” the inventor sighed.

“How is next Thursday, Agent Skye, at the bistro you’ve specified?”

“Yes, thank you, JARVIS.”

“Specified?” Tony sounded uneasy.

“In her initial bargain agreement, she included a number of details encoded into the metadata. Did you not notice, sir?”

Tony hesitated.

“Ah,” JARVIS said. “Well, you can find them in your calendar now, sir.”

“Thanks, J.,” the inventor muttered. “I’ll get on that.”

“Big favor, eh?” John crooned.

“You shut up. I thought you were supposed to be a good liar? Archetype, my shiny metal ass.”

“Just because I’m good at telling me own lies doesn’t mean I have to help any of yours along, Stark.”

“He has a point,” Skye said.

“... Why are you still on the line?”

“No reason to hang up. You two are a riot,” she mocked.

“Are your spooks seriously swooping in already back there?” John asked.

“You’re not in their sights are you?” Skye asked sharply.

“No, but I could feel something dissipate the illusions I’d put up.”
“Illusions? Stark, since when are you using a new magic hookup?”


“We going to get into the part where you implied ‘lying’ was a key factor in the archetype thing, and Thor’s bro is a known ‘god of lies’ here?” Skye asked cheerfully.

A long silence followed.

“Look, I already know Maria Hill has given whatever you’re up to the green light, based on a few memos sent out discreetly this morning, and I trust her judgement a bit better since she’s been spending more time with Miss Potts, okay? May says she hasn’t seen her like this since before the chitauri invasion, and I trust both of them more than I do Coulson, sometimes, even. So. Whatever, just be straight with me here.”

Said the magician, “I’m going to question whether Stark is capable, in this case.”

“Woah, hang on, what?” the hacker sounded far too intrigued.

“She’s your ‘flatmate’ these days, though,” Tony pointed out. “You’re not even a little interested?”

“Not a bit, mate. Especially not with all these bits of other people’s body parts still under my fucking fingernails right now, let’s say, because of her.”

“Ew, wow, seriously, how did that happen?” Skye groaned.

“First, I got hit in the head with a the butt-end of a pistol. That set it off,” John began. “The force of that impact got absorbed by the wards I didn’t know I was under. It then got redirected through the weave of the spell: redirected, repurposed, and made stronger by applying it in a lot of new little directions, throughout the body of the guy who hit me with his gun.”

“He hit you, and the spell made that backfire so he went crazy or something?” Skye asked, sounding a little uncertain.

“That’s to start. That rebound triggered other parts of the protective wards: a little illusion, and then a kick in the amygdala of almost any not-me sentient thing in a ten-foot radius fit to kick the ‘fight’ part of the ‘fight-or-flight’ reflex into action. Next thing you know, everybody starts shooting at the guy who hit me, who was at the center of the still-unfolding spell.”

“So it did with those bullets what it originally did to the guy who hit you,” Tony extrapolated. “It turned their own force against them.”

“And kept it all contained in close proximity, while also keeping me from being caught in the mess,” John concluded. “Yeah. Their own bullets were redirected, and redirected, to keep punching holes in them, until all the kinetic energy of the spell’s forces and projectiles’ both, eventually ran out.”

“Wow, Fitz would love that,” Skye muttered quietly.

“No sharing,” Tony insisted.

“But-” she protested.

“I actually have to agree with him, here,” the magician admitted.

“Fine,” Skye grumbled.
“I will admit, though, that this is by far the friendliest, most efficient, and impressive corpse disposal service I have ever worked with. Really, you should all be terribly proud,” John continued.

“Okay stop,” the S.H.I.E.L.D. agent growled. “Fuck off. We’re having enough trouble identifying anything like dental records thanks to your ridiculously hyper-violent trickster god ally or whatever. I try to leave my enemies intact for questioning, thanks.”

“What sort of questioning?” asked the magician.

“Surprisingly minimalist on torture. S.H.I.E.L.D. has always been results-driven, and torture really is shit when it comes to providing reliable results,” Tony pointed out, “in comparison to actually offering people a safe way out of a violent sort of lifestyle, in many cases.”

John managed not to roll his eyes, but it was a near thing. “Spare me your Americanized optimism. There’s always bodies piling up under the floorboards in even the most innocent of small villages and towns. Megalithic organizations which span the globe just provide more uniform, and better organized, expansive catacombs and other forgotten places to keep the skeletons and ghosts penned into.”

“Trust me, bro, I feel like I’m smothered by the cobwebs these days from cleaning out all those top-secret bunkers, but spring cleaning is in action as we speak, and the light of day is leaking into all sorts of old tombs,” Skye challenged. “Now shut up, and either help me help you, or stop raining on my parade for no other reason but to aggrandize your own bitterness, you old-world nihilistic punk-curmudgeon.”

Tony whistled. He was also tempted to slow-clap, but resisted.

John stood stock still in place for a moment, just outside his own apartment building, foot halfway over the threshold of the ground floor. “I... admittedly can’t argue most of that.”

“Oh good, you ego does have bounds,” the hacker mused. “Oh, by the way, your van driver’s skull was mostly intact, and so was that of his partner in the passenger seat. It looks like Hydra has hooked up with a new ally, based on each of their dental records, in respect to one another.”

“Who?” Tony asked.

“Doom, of all people; the body was a stolen Live Model Decoy repurposed with his tech, but still utterly destroyed like a human body; there’s not much left to salvage. It seems some magic energies from within it got fried nastily by the forces in that spell. What the hell is he doing kidnapping some random deadbeat magical Englishman?” Skye sounded angry at how little sense this seemed to make, ignoring John’s noise of protest at ‘deadbeat’. “There’s nothing around here he wants, even.”

“Unless he’s keeping an eye out for bifrost-related activity, same as S.H.I.E.L.D.,” the inventor pointed out. “He’s gone after Hydra resources before, too. We know that. There’s no reason he wouldn’t think to go direct to the source, instead of snapping up whatever is left of what Hydra or S.H.I.E.L.D. has pilfered from non-terrestrial sources.”

“Is there seriously a person you people refer to by the alias ‘Doom’ and yet you still take him seriously?” Constantine asked, incredulous.

“It sounds ridiculous, but it is actually his legal name,” Tony sighed. “Don’t even get me started on how ridiculous that is.”

“Wow,” the magician mused. “That... is just stunning.”
“Right?”

“Boys,” Skye chided. “We’re working here.”

“Actually, I’m about to go confront a god about the blood I’m covered in. Thank you both once more, though, and I hope we never have to do this again.” Click.

“Did he seriously just hang up?” the hacker asked.

“Yep, he did,” Tony confirmed.

“Wow. What an asshole.”

“Yep.”

“How’d you get stuck with him?”

“I have no idea. Thanks, though. I mean it.”

“I know, Tony. Have fun with Thor’s brother!”

The inventor groaned and hung up loudly.

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Shuffling up the stairs and fumbling for his key to get back into his apartment, John felt almost ethereally calm. He was stumbling through a shaky haze of mild shock, visceral horror, and brittle anger, but he was calm. Mostly.

Loki had the decency to look alert, fur all on end and eyes wide open and looking like a pair of green-burning embers in that dark wolfish face as his senses all opened up to examine every bit of him: appearance, sound, smell, physical tension, metaphysical volatility, and John didn’t even want to know what else.

He wasn’t expecting a sudden press of warmth and fur around him. He also wasn’t sure how he wound up on his own couch, or how exactly he wound up struggling to keep breathing evenly as an oversized predatory canine all but curled around him, and he around it for a few moments as he struggled to breathe at all, for a while, evenly or otherwise.

When he came back to himself, the sensation of being safely embraced by a large feral thing had retreated, and he found that the back of his head seemed to be in a soft lap, and Loki was looking down at him with a look of something like acute regret in her expression.

“Are you with me, John?” the trickster asked, her voice soft.

“What... time is it?”

“Nearly noon.”

The magician considered. “Have you seriously been... cuddling me?”

“You weren’t complaining, at the time.”
John blinked a bit. “Right. Uhm.”

“It was not my intention to traumatize you, and I am sorry that my wards so affected you. There were more civil ways I might have handled that energy redistribution. Something less...”

“Like a meat grinder and a shotgun had horrifyingly violent offspring.”

“... Less meat-based, in general, yes.”

“You mean less about tearing meat into little bits?”

“I’m very sorry. I... rather got carried away.”

John squinted at him. “You got carried away, and as a result turned a few sentient beings into paste? Well, each of them about halfway. Most of them had legs and pelvis intact.” Covering his face with both hands, the magician took a slow, deep breath. “I remember what ever bit of that feels like growing back, from out of nothing, alright? I never need to see the insides of bodies in quite that much close proximity ever again. Not when I remember watching and feeling my own insides grow from scratch the hard way, inch by inch.”

The trickster’s own expression went shuttered for a moment, all emotion switched off like a candle had been snuffed out. “Oh.”

“Look, I think only one of us should have emotionally traumatic flashbacks at a time, Loki, I really do.”

Shaking herself slightly, Loki nodded. “Sorry. I... I agree with you. I did not think... I’m sorry.” She cleared her throat. “I will change the wards within the hour.”

“When did you even have time to apply wards like that?”

“They activated once you handled the newly-shielded talisman I spent all night upon,” Loki muttered. “Did you not notice?”

John shook his head.

The god ran her fingers through his hair. “I can take the memory from you, if you should wish.”

“Fuck off. Memory is all I got.”

Loki smirked a little, at that. “I know that feeling all too well, myself.”

“Why’m I in your lap?”

“You fell asleep being spooned by a large canine. I assumed this would be less awkward for you to wake up to.”

“... Thank you, then, for that.”

Loki shook her head. “Mere courtesy.”

“Still. I appreciate it. You could’ve done far worse.”

“No. Not now,” she murmured.

“You could’ve.”
“You still misunderstand, then, all of the ways in which we suit the same archetype, John Constantine.”

A huff. “Maybe, but I’m fine not knowing. You?”

“Never. I’m infinitely curious.”

“See, that’s what makes you a fucking mage. I’ve seen too much... really terrible shit to be ‘infinitely’ curious, anymore. Dangerously observant? Always. But I’ve learned my fucking limits.”

“And yet, you cannot stop seeking.”

“Yeah, yeah. I’ve got an infinite amount of ‘spark’ but not a lot of consistency or endurance. That’s the game, with the gifts I’ve got.”

“I do know it.”

John squinted up at him. “No, you don’t.”

Loki held up both of her wrists. “For the first quarter-century of my life, almost all of my magic was bound under my skin, save the barest sliver I could reach outside the cuffs that bound me. Aesir youth are not entrusted with such gifts, though amongst Jotunn, notably, its common for such gifts to manifest far earlier.” He frowned. “I knew for a very long time, the twilight between being a mage, and being without any power whatsoever.”

“A few scant decades is a blink to you.”

“It is now, but childhood is always a very different matter, is it not?”

“Silver-tongue.”

“Don’t flatter yourself.”

“Oh, of course not. I don’t have a billionaire’s resources or anything.” Really, John should’ve expected to be shoved unceremoniously off the couch and onto the floor, after that jibe. He still emitted an undignified squawk upon impact with the rug. “Oh come on.”

“Don’t be childish.”

“I dunno if it’s ‘childish’ to suggest you might’ve been hoping to seduce Tony Stark before he knew who you were,” John said, suddenly so certain it tingled uncomfortably through his bones, thanks to bloody synchronicity. Surely he’d figure out how to dial down the volume on that sense again. Right? He could fucking hope.

“It’s hardly the most mature route.”

“I’m not wrong.”

“You’re a fool.”

“That’s beside the point, though, because historically speaking, so are you.”

Loki’s poison-green eyes narrowed dangerously.

John folded his forearms behind his head and beamed up at her. “Go on, darling. See how you get your little bank run complete without an ally as reliable and professional as myself. Think of all the
loose ends you’d have to clean up, with any of the available alternatives.”

“I did wonder before if you had any instincts for self-preservation left intact at all in that brain of yours. This makes me suspect that they’re truly gone forever.”

“What if I were to tell you that I’ve got an in at S.H.I.E.L.D. who has an unusual degree of closeness to key people within Stark Industries?”

The trickster considered for a long moment. “Go on.”

“Maybe an ‘in’ who happens to be a S.H.I.E.L.D. field agent he currently trusts. Well, maybe not trusts, but he owes her a big favor, you see,” John improvised. Surely he could make this work somehow.

“What is her name?”

“Skye.”

Loki hummed. “Who does she work under?”

“Coulson,” John said, with certainty. He was, at least, certain that the name “Coulson” was important, and to judge by how the trickster’s expression flickered from confusion, to disbelief, to grudging respect, he was on the right track.

“How do you know her?”

“She took care of the bodies your bout of overzealous and overly-butchery-intensive protective wards left hanging about in broad daylight, for one.”

Loki looked thoughtful, at that. “Interesting. Agent Coulson had struck me as being very strict in enforcing a certain degree of moral integrity amongst his allies and trusted lieutenants.”

“She may not know all the sorts of things I get up to, yet, mostly because she hasn’t bothered digging and already knows how much she probably doesn’t want to know,” John conceded. “She’s an ex-,” he added. It was not only believable, but difficult for anyone to disprove. John had that sort of reputation, around London. He could be anywhere. At anytime. With anyone. Also probably doing almost anyone, even, at a stretch, was probably within his power to at least start a lot of loud rumors about.

The proof sufficient to make it an alibi worthy of reasonable doubt was two phone calls, one personal threat, and three anonymous tips to police away, at any given time. At least, so he believed with just enough spark to make it better than sincerity on a good day even with the likes of gods.

Quiet magic: too primal and simple to register on anyone’s radar, usually. Especially not someone who had recently drained of most of their power into a shielded object. “We parted on good terms, though, and still get on well enough to make occasional professional consults or, ah, ask favors.” The lie held; he could feel it and managed to avoid reacting outwardly only by drawing upon all of his past decades of experience dosing himself with psychoactive substances in public places and not getting caught. “Your resources and mine combined would have to create some evidence for a certain heroic urgency and impetus, of course, but that’s always easy.”

“Whose bodies?”

“Hydra, mostly, but one of the lackeys was actually sort of an android or sommat, and had connections to some lunatic named Doom. Heard of him?” He looked up, saw the trickster’s slightly alarmed expression, and suddenly became deeply worried, his buzz from having crossed ‘lied
successfully to a god of lies’ off of his bucket list abruptly fading. “I don’t like that look on you, Lokk.”

She shook her head slowly. “That... is a problem.”

“I had a feeling you’d say that,” he sighed. “You know this Doom fellow?”

“Dr. Victor von Doom, yes. We’ve met.”

“Chrissakes, I didn’t think his name could get more ridiculous.” Then the magician hesitated. “Wait a minute. You’ve met?”

Loki inclined her head in a single nod. “Yes. He was attempting to reach higher beings from whom to learn new magics. He found myself. This was quite some time ago, but not so long that he would have forgotten some of my capabilities, and furthermore the energy-signature of my magic.” She was suddenly on her feet, beginning to pace. “This is a very vast problem.”

“Why not lure his folks out the same time you do everybody else?”

“Because Doom learns,” Loki intoned gravely, “and he is terribly perspicacious.”

“...”

“I haven’t much choice. If any of his more human minions are in this area pursuing information related to the bïfrost, they will have detected traces of me by now, and if they were working with Hydra, he also has access to all S.H.I.E.L.D. data about my person by this time. He will know about the tesseract, and much more than that.”

“The what now?”

The god looked at him very sharply then, her expression stony and remote, as though the distance between them had suddenly become a vast gulf. “They targeted you. I hadn’t expected that.”

“Seriously?”

“I had surely thought some of your own enemies would have heard someone was after your hide, and offered to collect it themselves at a discount, honestly.”

“But Doom hires pros.”

“As does Hydra. Both hire considerably above the pay grade of your own more natural enemies, and often out of their bailiwicks entirely.”

“You owe me for this.”

Loki’s eyes narrowed a little, but more out of shrewd appraisal than resentment. She stepped closer to him. “I do.” Grasping his chin, her eyes began to glow, as she made a few sweeping alterations to the wards he was under, with her shielded talisman in her free hand. Cutting out the excess andtoning down the parts of the spell which most encouraged bloodshed, allowed her to reabsorb at least a portion of the energy originally spent on the spell’s construction, with careful and very meticulous unweaving. It took her several minutes, during which she politely suspended John’s awareness, knowing that all astral plane equivalents of “hold music” tended toward the mind-numbingly awful, in comparison to the mere inconvenience of a bit of lost time.
Thus, by the time the magic was done, the human was short only a quarter of an hour from his short-term memory, and a lot of overzealously violent spell-architecture in the spellwork about his person. Also, Loki retracted her hand.

“How long did that actually take?” John asked quickly.

Still, for a human, this little Spark of a magician was very quick on the uptake, and clearly didn’t care about the finesse with which that had been edited from his awareness. No, he was a creature of magic and stubbornness; the need to know what any magic had cost him was paramount, always. Loki could relate. “Sixteen minutes, roughly.”

“Not bad. You only look a little bit tired, even. Maybe less than you were before.” He frowned. “Wait, did you really reclaim some of that?” He sounded fascinated, and a bit disbelieving. “That was heavy. And dense.”

Loki nodded. “Yes. It takes longer to convert back into a form I can reabsorb, but I find it worthwhile.”

“You’re awful practiced at this... survivalist crap. You do this often? Getting stranded places?”

“I’m a mage of Asgard. I have always been a wanderer. One learns the weight of everything one carries, on any sufficiently lengthy journey far, far from home.”

“True enough. Running from anything in particular?”

“Boredom.”

John rolled his eyes. “Course.”

“You, of all people, surely understand.”

“Well obviously.” He gestured at himself and the whole apartment around them.

“Yes, quite.”

“You worked out how to get me off all their radars yet?”

“Hmm. No.”

“Like putting toothpaste back in a tube, isn’t it? How many of them know about me now? How many new systems am I in?”

“All the more powerful you become, in truth. All the new places that now hold your name, to your knowledge, are not secure in the ways of magicians, except Doom’s. All of Hydra and S.H.I.E.L.D. could be relatively easy pickings for you, with a bit of clever scrying. Your name is there, and that gives you reach into those new places, should you make the effort.”

“I don’t play those games, mate. I’m strictly in the authority deconstruction business, ideologically speaking, and it doesn’t exactly suit the world stage well. I’d be dead within a week. No, I’m better off in the shadows at night and in plain sight most days, surrounded by what lunacy passes for ‘mundane’ only in London. If I can’t have that, then I can’t ever feel at home in this city again, and London is the only home I’ve ever had. London doesn’t need me, but I sure as shit don’t have anywhere else.”

Loki smiled thinly at that. “I thought I knew that feeling,” she murmured. “Ah, retrospect.” She
shook her head. “I understand. This is your home, and I would not take that from you, nor any other powers in the region, whether they be your allies or otherwise. That said, they would extract only you. Not giving them what they’re after, well, that creates potential for casualties.” She sounded like she was getting ideas now.

John wasn’t sure he liked them. Not a bit. “You suggesting I go to them?”

“I’m suggesting we make the best of the plans we have already laid.” Her smile was positively incandescent, then.

“I’m not going to like this, am I?”

“Probably not, no.”

“Right. Great. Did you notice the mail?”

“The what?” Loki asked, her brow furrowed.

Instead of dwelling on his own imminent doom, the magician reached over to pick up Natasha Romanoff’s new party invitation. “Something about a change of address, the envelope said?” He opened the envelope this time, and skimmed the initial apology note. He didn’t make it halfway through before he cracked up laughing. “He had to change addresses due to ‘anonymous tips’ about an ‘international terrorist’ showing up.” He gestured toward Loki for a moment, then hesitated. “Well, I guess technically, that’s accurate.”

“Yes,” Loki scathed. “It is.”

“... I still think it’s funny.”

“As I’m sure he intended,” the trickster growled. “I begin to dislike this planet.”

“Hey, don’t blame us for Tony Stark. He deserves more of the credit, as I’m sure he’d agree at length to anybody who asked,” John retorted. “Besides that, you knew it was likely he’d catch on. You’ve met him before, and while you do great work with that figure of yours, sweetheart, you’re still very much you.”

The god glanced away sharply for a moment, then pivoted and plopped back down on the couch with all the indolent grace of a sleepy feline. She let her head loll back, almost hanging over the back of the couch, and in that relaxed position also allowed her eyes to fall shut with all the apparent nonchalance in the world. “I do not trust Stark.”

“I dunno why not.”

She opened one eye to glare at him sidelong.

“You look ridiculous.”

Turning her head, she fixed him with a full glare, both eyes narrowed.

“Fine! Sorry, look, I get that he’s too perceptive for you to be comfortable around, and has far too many advantages in his position compared to yours than you’d ever consider trusting normally, but synchronicity suggests very strongly that he’s not a bad ally to have about.”

She kept glaring.

“I’m not kidding.”
“I don’t care if you are. I remain offended.”

“If it hasn’t gotten through to you by now that ‘offensive’ is my native tongue, I dunno how else to tell you, Lokk,” John remarked, his tone blandly careless.

“I do not trust another’s compass anymore than you did, once you knew it was not your own, John,” she shot back.

He winced. “Fair enough.” Running a hand through his hair, he sighed, “Look, I think he likes you, and he’s got one of the most ravenous intellects on the planet. I think you want to play with him more than you want to admit, and everything he’s shown us in the past day or so has only made that worse. You want a straight-forward con? Low-risk? Don’t go after Tony Stark, then. Infiltrate Hydra in a week or so, make you way up through the ranks, steal all of their data, and cross-reference it against the new S.H.I.E.L.D.’s information at the first opportunity, and you can get most of what you need. By the time you’ve managed that, I’m sure you can get resources enough for one good hack-and-data-theft against Stark Industries to finish off the rest that’s left. All you have to do, is sink lower into the slurry of guts and glory in their secret warfare, right? What’s left of Loki worth selling for that?”

At least, with Loki, John was always certain precisely when he’d struck a nerve.

Because that was also precisely when the trickster’s fingers would squeeze tightly enough about his windpipe to cut off his last syllable slightly.

“You dare-”

“I do, because you know I’ve seen worse than you have, and that I could show you, and make you feel it, if I really had to,” John threatened, low and cold.

The god hesitated.

“I’m right. Is that why he sends you sorry sods down here? Because the hells humans have made for themselves are worse than any your lot have dreamt up yet?”

“Oh, no, we’ve dreamt of worse,” Loki said quietly, “but they are dry and old stories, to us, out of an ancient history even Odin barely recalls. Your wounds are much fresher and more vivid.”

“So are yours.”

The trickster’s upper lip curled a bit, but she didn’t argue.

“His are only a bit better healed, though. It’s obvious enough, to any cold-reader,” John remarked. “Stark, I mean.”

“I know,” Loki said.

“Er... which-”

“All.”

“I guess it comes down to how much you trust your son’s taste, in allies.”

Loki snorted, releasing his throat abruptly even as she sneered with mocking, “Should I just hail a cab to his hotel and spare you the time?”

“I don’t see why not. Not like he might also be in town on legitimate business or anything. Not like
you’ve also got to consider me being under threat from enemies of yours before buggering off now. Not like it’s not getting late enough we should consider the bank plans, which you still haven’t explained how we’re taking advantage of those, to somehow throw me at Doom now?’’

“Well, ‘throw’ is such a hasty word. Though admittedly, this will give you far less time to clear out any and all civilians. Chaos will most likely arrive not long after you’ve delivered the talisman, for these alterations to work.”

John groaned. “Great. Fantastic. Let me just call my next of kin, right fast.”

“Sit back down, John.” Loki tugged the back of his neck sharply, sending him firmly back down onto the couch. “To begin, I swear on my life that this won’t actually kill you.”

“... Noted.”

“But you might be stabbed a few times, if certain parts go awry.”

After taking a deep breath, and letting it out, the magician waved him on further. “Alright. Sure. Stabbing. Non-fatal?”

“Yes.”

“And nothing that will permanently maim me? Keeping all my extremities?”

“I am ninety-percent certain.”

That was disconcertingly precise, and unnerving, coming from a god. “Really?”

Loki nodded.

John resigned himself to trusting the trickster with that. Everything about the thought alone felt unnatural, but he went with it anyway. “Go on, then. Explaining, that is. Not stabbing.”

“No promises,” she responded, but then did proceed to explain.

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Tony would say only one thing positive about Pepper’s friends-with-benefits-seems-to-be-evolving-into-actual-romance association with Maria Hill; it made some shit with what was left of S.H.I.E.L.D. so very, very much easier. He didn’t even have to threaten anyone anymore.

Maria Hill was many things, but “efficient” most of all.

Almost frighteningly so.

Some things, though, she made much more difficult.

Also, he was getting a bad feeling about all incoming calls today, now. There seemed to be a pattern so far of each one getting slightly worse. This would be the third in a row if “Why did a S.H.I.E.L.D. team near you in London today clean up six partial corpses and the heavily-damaged remains of a nondescript creeper van?”
Yep. Already worse.

“Someone went after Loki’s current ally. Hydra goons with a Dr. Doom minion escort, not a doombot for once. Well, not more than 20% Doom-bot.”

She sucked in a breath, then let it out. “Self-defense.”

“Yep.”

“That’s one hell of a defense. I thought his magic was under wraps?”

“Me too, but then again, maybe it’s a matter of degrees. It says in Doc Strange’s file that even on occasions his own gift for magic has been suppressed or taken away somehow, he still used other older forms of magic that were a bit more ‘manual operated’ and usually involved him putting his blood on stuff. It’s not unheard of for mages to get away with constructing magic objects of some sorts, despite being without their usual wellspring of power to draw from directly.” So maybe he’d researched that little nugget of info after Constantine had expressed alarm at Loki’s range of creativity and capabilities with magic despite supposed lockdown.

“When did you dig quite that deep into his files?”

“Last night,” he sassed, in a familiar tone.

She made an exasperated noise in response, but her tone was coolly professional again when she asked, “How did you know it was an ally of Loki’s?”

“Because he told me yesterday, in great detail, because he wants his divine houseguest evicted without his home town being wrecked.”

“Who?”

“Classified.”

She growled warningly, “Why is that?”

“He’s a native-born-on-Earth citizen of the U.K. with rights to his own privacy, and it’s already bad enough a small-time guy the likes of him might now be on the radar of people inclined to make use of Loki, weakened as he is these days, as a resource, which Doom probably does. He’s wised up on detecting bïfrost activity. That has to be it. Especially after the scepter-incident last year when he rebuilt that thing based on old Hydra junk and data hacked from S.H.I.E.L.D., you may remember.”

“Trust me, I won’t be forgetting as soon as I wish I could,” she groaned. “I really hate that guy.”

“I dunno. Gotta admit he’s got style. It’s a very feudal retrofuturistic style that’s honestly a bit painfully dated at first glance, and ugly…”

“You’re still sore about not being the only one with super body-armor?”

“Hey now-”

“Those that take absolutely no stylistic cues from you without deliberately masking them somehow, usually with his more archaic design themes.”

“…Okay, but only a smidgen.”

“What are the odds of Loki potentially allying with Doom?”
“Considering Doomie’s first known action in Loki’s direction so far has been to kidnap his current ally and reluctant-roommate, I somehow don’t think Doom trusts the god of lies to accept his place under Doom’s control without some force, frankly.”

Hill sighed, all exasperation. “Of course.”

“What would be ideal, of course, would be Loki betraying his ally, appearing to throw him to the dogs to save his own ass and run here, while somehow he or somebody else save his ally’s sorry hide.”

“I take it you don’t get along with the guy?”

“Nah, we get along like strangers standing around watching a house burn down that belonged to a mutual neighbor neither of us much liked, but that doesn’t mean he’s not an asshole.”

“That’s... a colorful image. Who is burning?”

“Hopefully the remains of Thatcherism and Reaganism respectively.”

“Oh,” she said. “Admittedly, I didn’t see that one coming.”

“It’s on my priority list to disentangle him from this situation as much as possible. He didn’t ask for any of it, but got caught up in it regardless. Also, to be frank, if he had any ambitions of playing at a level to cause the likes of Doom trouble, he’d genuinely wreak havoc on power-dynamics across Europe, but luckily his anti-authority streak is just so deeply-ingrained that the prospect of occupying a leadership position with much responsibility sends him fleeing like a rat from a burning ship.”

“I feel like that shouldn’t be as reassuring as I actually find it to be.”

“You’re refreshed by a lack of perceived egomania. You’re wrong, though. He’s just a different style of self-absorbed cocky asshole than the likes of me.”

“Or Loki?”

Tony coughed. “Pardon?”

“Well, he’s more than capable of playing on Doom’s level, so why is he slumming it with this guy?”

“It seemed like a good idea for keeping him off of everyone’s radar. I still don’t know how exactly Doom tracked down Loki’s ally in the first place.

“He’s always infuriatingly had a knack for getting his hands on magic-based resources that both S.H.I.E.L.D. and you seem lacking in.” Hill muttered.

“Less so, keep in mind, if we can get Loki to come home with me.” He then froze, and tried not to breathe or make any other noises indicative that he had meant anything untoward. That had sounded far worse coming out of his mouth than it had in his head.

Of course Maria didn’t miss it. “Wow, Stark, you really that hard up for getting laid? There’s stories about him and a horse, you know.”

“Yeah, trust me, never talk about that anywhere near Thor. He takes violent affront to the perceived slight against his brother’s honor, long story, but apparently Sif started that rumor and it was one of the worst fights she and Thor ever got into with one another and never speak of it around them. Just don’t.”
“Wow. Okay, then, that’s noted.”

“Good.”

“My question still stands.”

“I don’t have a defenestration fetish, and I’m not going to make the mistake for a second of thinking this guy trusts me any more than I trust him, which is saying a lot.”

“Since when-”

“Since Pepper.”

She cleared her throat. “Well, I can’t blame you there.”

“I’d hope not, for your own sake.”

“Did this just turn into a shovel talk?”

“Shovels wouldn’t be able to dig deep enough.”

For just a moment, Hill considered that. “Yep. Knew you were crazy.”

“Well, yeah.”

“However, I can’t fault you that sort of devotion. I’m just uh, selfishly glad I’m allowed close enough to see even that, given how much she values you too. Honestly.” She cleared her throat.

“Skye trusts you, and apparently she’s heard from Melinda May that you’re happier than she’s seen you in years. I’m working on the opening up thing, but you’re not doing badly so far, in the being-trustworthy front. Mostly.”

“Uh... thanks?”

“So far.”

“While you’re ‘taking a god home’, eh?”

“Well yeah. I mean, I’m not sticking him in a kennel like a-“

“Yeah, I know that’s not your particular fetish.”

“... I...”

“Go on.” She sounded sweetly charming.

Tony supposed that was his fault for oh-so-enthusiastically helping Pepper explore certain forms of play that had not involved kennels, but there might have been a leash once. “Look, I don’t honestly care. I’m not focused on his sex appeal, but I’m aware it’s an occupational hazard for me. That’s the long and the short of it, capisce?”

“Ohkay,” she said, sounding only a little amused. “Occupational hazard?”

“I like sex. He has a reputation. He won’t have a lot of dating options. I’ll be trying to get into his head. He is also gorgeous. And I’m Tony Stark. You think it didn’t occur to me that sexual tension might be inevitable here? Also, it sure wouldn’t be the first time I’d run into somebody who would
use certain tactics against me in effort to get my guard down. It’s been an occupational hazard of my own existence since I was thirteen. Trust me, I’m an expert on the topic of the sex life and times of Tony Stark.”

“Ooh, fair enough, sorry,” she said, with a hint of a wince.

“I get it. I know, I’ve got a reputation too. Don’t buy all of it all the time, though.”

“Working on it.”

“Okay,” Tony found himself smiling a bit more warmly, at that. “Good. Now that’s out of the way, I can admit that the reason I’m not willing to tell you who is ally is, these days, is because you’ve met the guy and it didn’t go so well.”

Her voice went suddenly cold. “What?”

“Look, the reports all suggest you don’t begrudge him, but at the same time, you apparently put him on a long list of other people not to waste S.H.I.E.L.D. resources or protections upon. I notice you used to update this list a lot more a few years ago than you have just in the past year though.”

“Ah.” She said, sounding chagrinned. “How early in my career? Some… many of those are actually tagged for reappraisal and reconsideration, soon. It was deprioritized in the wake of recovering more important systems and databases lately.”

“So you admit some of these might’ve been regrettable long-term assessments?”

“Yeah.”

“John Constantine.”

She inhaled sharply, then burst out laughing, loud and raucous. It sounded like she had to put her phone on speaker and set it down, she was laughing so hard.

Tony wasn’t actually sure what to make of that, at first.

The S.H.I.E.L.D. agent kept laughing for almost a full minute.

“Okay, why is this that funny?”

“I knew that asshole reminded me of someone, but oh my god I hadn’t.” She made a noise like a small snort. “Wow, oh, did he get what he deserves. He has Loki as a house-guest. Thank you, Tony, you’ve improved my day. I thought that fucker was ruining the life of someone less…” She trailed off, with a small giggle.

“Less ‘just as much an asshole as Loki, but even less well-mannered’?”

“Yeah. And the shit he pulled on the members of my old unit… oh, my god, this is like poetic justice. Once this blows over I have to give them a call. Maybe if you can spare a few details?”

Unable to stop himself smiling helplessly, bitterly he sniggered himself. “Yeah, sure.”

“I get the strangers-around-a-housefire comparison better, though.”

“Well, yeah.”

“Don’t owe him any debts,” she added. “It goes badly for people.”
“I gathered, but thanks.”

“I mean both of them.”

“I know.”

“Also, since I decided to check on his whereabouts during my laughing fit, let me ask you this: why was John Constantine on London CCTV one minute and gone the next, just outside 185 Lloyd’s Bank, about half an hour ago?”

Tony’s blood ran cold. “He what?”

“… Okay, Tony, I’m going to tell you something we’re seeing on CCTV in real time right now, and I’d like you to be very honest with me about your reaction to it.”

“That’s not good.”

“My timing sure is, though. Why is it always like that with Constantine?”

“My question is what you were doing stationed in Yorkshire of all places anyway, that year.”

“Shut up, Stark, we have four humanoid and heavily armored hostiles wielding chitauri-style weaponry in London. Get on your fucking suit and get down there or I will send someone to shoot at you until you do.”

“Shit! Shit!”

“We have a Kree ship. Repeat, we have a… oh my god.”

“Keep talking. Suit prepping. You’re on speaker.”

“Kree, but as soon as they appeared another ship appeared and started shooting at them. I think… dammit, I thought Skrulls weren’t allowed anywhere near Earth by treaty, dammit!”

“There’s always rogues, same as with the Kree.”

“Ugh, I hate them!”

“Hill!”

“I mean their empires, not the individuals, keep your panties unbunched. I’m sure your armor would chafe.”

“Actually-”

“I don’t want to know.”

“Fine. On my way. Call Steve, he’s nearby.”

“On it. Go!”

“JARVIS, keep them apprised on the comms, and let me drive.”

“Of course, sir.”

Click.
Chapter End Notes

*
How to Collapse a Small Isolationist Empire in 48 Hours or Less

Chapter Summary

An imitation game is used to Tony's deep discomfiture, a plague of Loki afflicts Latveria, and John Constantine feels bad because it is what he's good at.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

John would never forgive Loki, deep down, for picking this bank location.

And making him put something in a safe deposit box for chrissakes.

A trickster god who hadn’t been around much on Earth in the past few centuries had no right to send the likes of John Constantine to the site of the Baker Street Robbery, and then rain all extraterrestrial hell down upon it, doubtlessly furthuring rabid conspiracy theorists obsessed with the royal family for the next few decades, likely.

Mostly, John just wished he’d come up with the suggestion himself.

Not that it’d stop him taking credit for it ‘round the pub.*

He showed more of his own hand, just a little bit, to Loki, now that he could conveniently cite Skye as the person from whom he got the little piece of high-end Stark Industries stealth-tech for facial-recognition avoidance. Loki had immediately undertaken intense study of it for half an hour, and somehow used her new laptop and a borrowed bit of John’s spark to alter it a bit.

She gave it a new function; it now provided two modes, the first being the default Stark-designed one which only made his facial features appear very different, but the second was more elaborate and sturdy, spark-anchored and tight-woven, and it made John look like he had Loki’s face.

Well, Loki’s more masculine face, but not exactly his coloring.

“Why am I ginger, though? Well, I mean—personally, I always figured, from the myths, that you’d be a ginger, but while you’re pale as a sheet, your hair’s not exactly the fairest, and while these freckles look quite pretty actually, they notably are one of few visible traits you and I don’t have in common right now, mate. I’ll credit you, though, this goatee looks pretty good on your face, but the real you would look far too ridiculously cliché as a villain if you wore it in shades of blue-black like your real hair.”

“I commonly use such superficial glamours to avoid detection in crowds.”

“You want me to impersonate you?”

“Yes.” She smiled brightly. “And I you. And those watching us will see Loki betray his current ally and turn his nearly-helpless human self over to the likes of Dr. Doom.”

John caught on, his eyes widening a little. “You sure they’ll fall for that? He’s clearly got at least a bit of magic, or he’d have never connected me to you.”
“As long as I mimic your build and height consciously when I make my appearance in public, yes. We will need to wear similar suits, and I will need to borrow your trench coat.”

“I’ve got a few spares around.”

“For preference, one you’ve integrated a lot of spellwork into, and bled upon in dire circumstances more than once.”

“Yeah, like I said, I’ve got spares. I have to keep them in rotation, especially on bad weeks when more than two or three wind up in need of repairs over a series of a few days. I’d never keep dry in this town, otherwise.”

Loki blinked at him a bit, her expression almost clinically blank for a moment. “Have you worn more than one of them whilst I’ve been here?”

“Yeah. Three. That blood from the van episode is gonna take ages to clean properly, by the by.”

“They are all… entirely identical.” The god was clearly now trying very hard not to sound amused, but she failed rather spectacularly.

“You’ve spent how much of your time in this apartment wearing my t-shirts as stylishly draped over you as possible and you want to question my style choices?”

She waved off his inquiry casually. “Not important. I am in dire straits in my life at present. For you, this is just another weekday.”

“Story of my goddamned life as that usually is, this is actually pretty dire for me, to be frank, given the new enemies I’ve suddenly collected and how hilariously overpowered they all are,” John scathed coolly. “And me being but a wee Constantine with a history of taking bigger powers down with me in any falls as nasty as this one very well could get, at this rate? Well—you’re no exception to that pattern of mine.”

Loki sighed. “Yes, yes, let’s repair that, before I need risk such an entanglement.”

John smirked a bit at the matter-of-factness of that. “Alright, then. So how d’you plan to get out of their clutches?”

“They will believe they are restraining you, not me,” Loki said, with the smuggest blasé shrug of them all. “I plan to take advantage of that in every possible way. Rest assured, darling, I should be back before the gala.” Her smile was softly beatific.

“Pardon me for only finding that as reassuring as the sight of a lace bonnet improbably perched atop the head of a spitting cobra that’s aiming at my face. When should I call in reinforcements, in the event you don’t make it back out?”

She blinked a bit. “Reinforcements?”

“Stark, probably. As an Avenger he’d have to intervene if only to keep a valuable resource like yourself out of this Doom guy’s…” He gestured vaguely. “More-evil-than-yours-if-only-for-now clutches?”

With her eyes very wide, Loki continued to stare at him in apparent puzzlement. “You are suggesting that, in the event that I do not return, you expect the Avengers to come to my aid?”

“You think it’s not in their best interests?”
She considered. “Arguable, at best.”

“For the others, yeah maybe, but probably not the redhead. Russians tend to be on a similar wavelength of cynicism to yours, particularly ex-KGB ones. Stark, though? No, he’d go after you because he’s greedy.”

At that, the trickster half-smiled a bit thoughtfully. “Perhaps. It should not, however, come down to that.”

“Still. You’ve got backup, if you need it.”

“I don’t.”

“You do, trust me.” The look John shot her was wearily all-too-knowing.

A series of dimples in accordance with the more overt and sincere confusion crossed her features, then—altogether adding up to an expression of visible self-doubt, albeit fleeting. "Why?"

John sighed. "From experience, let's say this is a time in your life I know you'll be sharper and more on-alert if you know you won't be left alone to be shattered in private, if you vanish, for one. For two, whether you realize it or not, there's a mess of tension throughout the muscles of your back and shoulders that's making you quietly miserable, and in the middle of fighting for your life, you'll realize it's let go. Since you're in my life, I'm going to be an asshole about it, and not let you get away with being unable to determine the source of that change, when it happens."

Loki snorted, dismissive, but then visibly hesitated, her expression turning introspective and uncomfortable.

"You feel it now, don't you?"

The god glared at him resentfully.

“I'll take that as a yes, then.”

There was a different sort of uncertainty that crossed Loki’s expression for a moment, suggesting not so much a sliver of self-doubt as a nasty hairline fracture easily capable of growing much worse with continued pressure.

“Not a trick,” John said flatly. “I swear to you that, on my life, which as you know I value quite highly, considering what I’ve gone through to keep it from being snuffed out to date, and all. Furthermore I’m you’re locus, and we fit the same con-artist/lie-craftsmanship/trickster archetype. We’re bound to have ridiculous shit like this in common, and you fucking know it, too.”

Loki half-smiled so wryly it looked cracked and a bit painful. “Quite right.” Her voice was a little harsher, and somehow more like it had sounded amidst shadows and smoke, when they had first met. It wasn’t just the tone, but something in the shape of the syllables, and an extra hiss behind them; like something else escaped alongside the more harmless words, hissing through their consonants like the crackling combustion-pops of kindling in a bonfire.

John strode over and sat to her left, close enough their arms knocked together, and just lingered there, not moving away.

For a moment, the god of lies remained stiff as a board and stock-still. Then, slowly, she started to relax, her shoulders shaking a little. “Don’t.”
“How long ‘til we hit the bank?”

After inhaling sharply, and holding her breath for a moment, Loki lifted her chin again, staring straight ahead and pulling back together the pieces of her psychological armor, despite how damaged and abused as the plates of it all still felt—as well as terribly sore and stiff, as though with far too much dried blood still weighing them down. “Not long.”

More impressed than he wanted to admit, John nodded, staring at the tightening muscles at the corners of her eyes and the thin, angry line of her mouth. He had expected a breakdown, at least a little one: some release of whatever this trickster god kept locked behind all of Loki’s many, many masks. Instead, he watched the god breathe through and past it, managing to let go of… something. Perhaps a few somethings. He could almost hear whatever they were quietly shattering.

Then she sucked in another deeper breath and chuckled, low and bitter. “Of course, we will need some of your own knack for synchronicity to make certain that help arrives in time.”

“Figures. Well, then, keep in mind that I’ll need to tune into the area a while beforehand. At least twenty minutes, given the location’s not that unfamiliar to my feet to start. Given those calibrations and what you know of what I can do… What tunes are you expecting me to alter around there, exactly?”

Loki grinned, refreshed as always by finding a bright and perceptive wit to conspire with, and began to explain.

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During the initial stakeout before they brought down Phase 2, with Loki wearing his ginger appearance and goatee and John not using anything to obscure his own face yet, the con-man and the trickster god made it look like both of them were involved in some sort of ritual about the place, occupying key positions around the entrance of the bank, relative to other places on the street around it, and working their way closer slowly, as John managed to tap into the local synchronicity waves of the place and twist a few of them as needed to get people distracted, and setup events for an unusually calm and slightly confused evacuation of the bank that wouldn’t stop John from reaching the safe deposit box he was supposed to put the talisman in.

Creating a compulsion to forgetfully and calmly move away from a danger that they shouldn’t worry about instead of focusing on being quiet and okay with it, within the atmosphere of an English bank and its array of queues, was every bit as ridiculously easy as John had expected and he sighed and shook his head a bit as a result. That particular tune had the same tempo and quiet determination despite a deep desire to avoid thinking about acute financial anxieties. Most people wouldn’t remember leaving the bank at all and would find themselves miraculously out of harm’s way as soon as the “party” arrived; that part, admittedly, took a fair bit more work, as did alterations of the nearby traffic patterns, which eventually he had to admit he was a bit stuck on. And he knew exactly why it was stuck, and he knew that Map would find out about this if John even dared reach for it himself.

“I need you to borrow my spark for this one, Lokk.”

“Pardon?” They were crossing paths at the next point in their planned steps. All good spells need a certain amount of ritual with the right intention behind it; in their case, it was to misdirect, and build a narrative for their audience, and that alone added power to their intentions to fool that audience the
longer they maintained the pointless-seeming performance itself. Theater magic.

John had missed the tingle of it up through his heels and his spine and out through his face and his hands as the performance built up in energy.

“Did you notice the great big protective seal over there?”

“Difficult to miss. Not yours?”

“No.”

“Someone you know?”

“And he knows me. If he senses you were the one who meddled, I’m the clear, but not if I do it. It’s impeding some of the changes I’m trying to implement because they’re basically to induce, er, some key driver safety tips that I’m going to need a few people to ignore just long enough to make a fuss over there.”

Loki nodded. “I’ll deal with it.” He smiled brightly, and made only a slight alteration to one branch of his planned path to bring himself to the seal. He then somehow began a conversation almost instantly with an older gentleman with dark skin and a uniform including a bright yellow reflector-vest.

As soon as he appeared, John might have ducked behind a woman taller than himself and managed to assess that he hadn’t actually been noticed yet, probably because Map was sufficiently focused on the much more significant threat right in front of him, who had been making some strange waves in the metaphysical environment for about an hour, by then, just with the winding of his walk.

Loki didn’t say a lot, mostly doing a lot of polite smiling that somehow managed to be scarier than any of his irate glaring ever had. He just seemed to be waiting. Sure enough, eventually the apparition-guardian of the seal, the illusion of Map, faded without anyone sparing a glance for the phenomenon, as the trickster’s heels, standing on a key position within the seal’s design, managed to crack it with a perfectly-timed application of the bit of Spark borrowed from the human magician.

The crack sent a shudder through the ground that John felt even in his hiding place, causing him to peer over the shoulder of the tall woman who hadn’t even noticed him using her to hide behind, focused as she was on waiting for the bus and listening to her music.

Loki strode away from the seal with a little more spring in his step, and his grin all the wider than before.

It took John a long while to realize the trickster had managed to smother it by finding the root sigil, which had happened to be the first sigil of the seal implemented, creating a natural excess intensity of focus upon it, which Loki’s calm and patient obscuring of, and using his own presence in flesh and blood to smother it, like making a vein collapse, which in turn had allowed only a little bit of power to crack the rest of the seal in every other direction out from the central focal point of that primary sigil.

He refused to be impressed. Well. He tried.

As they both began to spot signs of their audience’s presence in growing numbers, they also noticed that audience also getting steadily more suspicious-looking insofar as wearing forms of cloaking devices or magics about their persons. Loki counted several John hadn’t been able to catch because they were more actively magic-repellent in nature specifically, using technological means. The whole idea was disconcerting to him, and what was worse was that at least three of them he couldn’t find
any trace of at all, no matter how close he looked, given that he wasn’t supposed to actually lock
eyes with this audience ever, in this act. The others left faint, usually intermittent energy impressions
at least if he didn’t use his bare eyes and created the right pattern of deliberate drifting in-and-out of
focus in his staring, at least.

He asked about those ones, the next time they again briefly crossed paths and paused to apparently
connect their related spell-weavings, facing one another this time.

“Those you cannot detect are all the same party.”

“At least there’s that. Who makes those exactly?”

“Skrulls.”

“I’ll be avoiding them, then.”

“I can provide you some tips to aid in that endeavor. They have a number of consistent tells, when
on planets not their own.”

“Thanks in advance then, mate.”

Most of the times they weren’t exchanging observations about their audience and the state of the
synchronicity-surfing John was still working on throughout, the magician mostly tried not to think
about how badly this could go wrong if Loki couldn’t get out of this so easily as he seemed to be
bluffing that he’d find it to be.

The other possibility was that Loki knew just enough about Doom’s operations, from having met this
ridiculously-named actual super-villain before, to possibly bring key parts of it crashing down in time
to take out Doom altogether, which was… not actually all that impossible, for Loki.

It was a bizarre sensation, realizing he actually trusted the trickster’s capabilities despite the odds here
as even he could see them, and how it inexplicably held. It didn’t even feel all that wavering unless
he thought too much about all the reasons that should probably disturb him more deeply than it did.
Then he realized the odds were doing some very strange things in front of him, as Loki strode down
the opposite side of the street in front of him, while John had paused to lean against a lamppost and
light a cigarette.

Loki had a wake.

At first the magician thought it was the god’s magic, but then he got the idea to widen his perspective
synchronicity-wise while narrowing his less metaphysical sights on where the wake seemed to form
a deep furrow in the waves of synchronicity.

Then he realized it wasn’t anything Loki was consciously doing.

It was just who he was, making vast waves with a natural skill despite not having synchronicity
himself beyond that which most who learn certain cold-reading skills for the purposes of deceit tend
to pick up, after many years of practice. Of course, Loki had centuries to get a feel for it. Whenever
he really let himself absorb the rhythms of a new place and focus on the rhythms of ritualized and
home-spun spell-work, apparently this was the result of all that power he tended to carry around.
John wondered if other gods did too; it’d make sense, especially for the likes of Thor, honestly.

The realization that Loki was able to use the the weight of his own existence to influence
synchronicity itself on some levels was a level of control John had never conceived of before, let
alone imagined how daunting it might be to really see it, once he realized, and the currents shifted
That was a massive waterfall. It was lapping at his boots. How was it not flooding the street? Seriously, the green theme here seems excessive, oh wait those are vines clinging along the rock faces. Looks almost like kudzu.

Shaking it off swiftly, mostly with the aid of a sudden distracting sneeze, John blinked a bit and shook his head physically as well as metaphysically too, re-establishing the integration of one set of senses alongside those of the other again: the metaphysical being pulled by the chains he kept it bound with for safe measure these days, so it couldn’t be easily ripped from his physical body even by some pretty nasty sorts of means. Then John’s eyes refocused on Loki across the street, who was looking right at him, eyebrows raised. The god of lies then reached up and tapped the side of his nose with an all-too-knowing, slightly smug smirk before turning on his heel and continuing along his planned path.

John gaped for a moment. “You cocky vain fucker. Do you seriously wave that peacock-tail of disaster and weighted destiny around for fun?”

“Don’t mistake it for fun,” Loki’s voice hissed in his left ear, making him jerk in surprise, the back of his head colliding with the lamppost with a clang.

“Eurgh.” Rubbing the sore spot on the back of his head, John then cracked up helplessly, unable to stop it, because he’d been properly had, by that one, and couldn’t say he didn’t deserve to look a bit of an idiot for it either. “Fine, fine, you can have that one, you lousy git.”

Of course, then he dwelled on the thought of Loki getting his slightly-pompous majesty killed, or trapped and experimented on by a rogue mad scientist who apparently owned his own small country in a very sort of disconcertingly feudal way.

“Don’t get killed, that’s all,” he said flatly, almost petulantly, the next and final time they crossed paths before starting Phase 2.

Loki looked sincerely touched, but also like he was trying very hard not to laugh.

John glared at him, still wearing the same expression, until the god finally gave up and burst into a fit of sniggering, at which point John punched him in the arm. The god punched back, just as bruising, only holding back a little.

“You neither, John,” the god returned, one he got his breath back from laughter, and reaching out to ruffle the other man’s hair only a little condescendingly.

John had no idea how to react to this sensation in this bizarre context and reverted immediately to his teenage years. “Hey, watch it, I work to maintain that particular mess to some very specific parameters on performance days!”

“Seriously?”

“It’s an artfully arranged mess, don’t knock it.”

The god only began laughing again, trailing off only as they again parted ways, this time to start the party.

John’s original plans delayed his getting funds from the account Loki had artificially filled with digitally-and-mystically counterfeited money, for the simple reason of time constraints. That particular part of their plans had been set aside for another day and another bank location—far from
this one, for preference. Instead, after initiating the Stark Industries standard face-changing tech and entering the bank, he went straight for the safe deposit boxes. Instead of taping the talisman of Loki’s to a card as planned, he kept it in his pocket and used a nine of diamonds card he channeled the talisman’s power through for an added boost.

Once led back into the bowels of the place with remarkable speed for such an aging institution (John was glad he’d finished that part of the weaving in time) at which point he placed the talisman into the safe deposit box while murmuring the incantation Loki had taught him on the drive over by means of a small psychedelic experience during a lucid dream John had while taking a brief nap in the cab.

It had been a long while, he realized, since he’d learned magic from such a powerful being that hadn’t demanded reverence as a necessary price for their wisdom, if the other option was to join in the fun of using it to pull the wool over the eyes of a bunch of other people while giggling like stupid kids occasionally all the while. The change of pace was a refreshing one that John himself had no idea he’d been missing quite so much, of recent. Maybe Loki had missed being that sort of ally, too. Idly, John wondered who the man usually brought along on his schemes, in the past, and why Loki had made no mention of ever having such a close bond with anyone at all in the first place.

Then John considered the fact that Loki very deliberately avoided calling Odin his actual father, and still had hesitated before referring to his own mother and clearly not meaning anyone Jotunn, but he seemed to have no similar reservations when calling Thor his brother. Not when he wasn’t feeling particularly pissy, in any case.

Suddenly, a lot of other things in his understanding fell into place and he cringed a bit. Ah, damn. Bad case of the golden first-born. I swear, the more I figure out about his family life, the more they sound like the plot of a play Shakespeare wrote while on a lot of opiates and which he later burned for its sheer absurdity.

John made it to the ground floor lobby again by the time the incantation finished fully unfurling its effects, causing the very foundation of the building itself to shudder so abruptly that the few bank employees who had so far resisted fleeing the bank to suddenly scream and bolt, running out hell-for-leather.

“Good idea,” John muttered, and started to run for the exit, too.

As planned, Loki grabbed him at the last second and dragged him into a janitorial closet along the way, bringing both of them out of view of all of the cameras and magic in and around the building, thanks to the spellwork Loki had been hastily scrawling onto the walls, floor, ceiling, and door, while John did his part.

John noticed Loki’s eyes glowing green pretty quickly. “Can you turn that off?”

Loki did.

“Doesn’t that waste energy? The glowing?”

“No when the magic released by that talisman is re-entering my head through my skull. It’s a natural side-effect and requires effort to suppress, in truth.”

John stared at him for a long second, thinking very hard about words he clearly didn’t even want to be caught uttering, but had to ask nevertheless: “Did you just send me to deliver a horcrux?” he asked hesitantly.

Loki raised an eyebrow. “A what?”
“Oh good, I thought I might actually have to interview that woman.”

“You’re on a tangent again.”

“And I’m too embarrassed to explain it.”

Shaking his head, the trickster gave a small, amused snort, at that, then shifted his appearance to mimick that of John Constantine.

“Wow that’s creepy. I don’t know why I agreed to this.”

Loki-in-John-shape perfectly mimicked the man’s own cocksure smirk back at him with apparent effortlessness. “Well, it’s a shame you’ll just have to get used to it.” He cocked his head up a bit. “And quickly.”

Sensing a challenge, John initiated his own newer disguise, changing his appearance to that of Loki, and making his expresion as dour as possible, looking down his nose condescendingly at the trickster god.

For his part, Loki’s eyes widened slightly in shock and offense, before he made an utterly undignified sound behind one hand, followed by a snort and a barely-smothered chuckle. “Let’s get a move on, love, we’ve not got all day.”

Another shuddering crack went through the whole building, this time accompanied by a series of explosions.

“You weren’t kidding about their response time,” John sighed, in an accurate mimic of Loki’s voice, rather than a glamour. “I had hoped, just for a moment, that you had been exaggerating in an attempt to mke me soil myself.”

“In this case, my intentions were regrettably more direct,” conceded the god.

“Showtime, then,” John said, grinned pure mischief.

Loki smiled outright wolfsishly back at him then, the expression somehow very much his own despite his face wearing the magician’s features. “Always, for the likes of us, John Constantine, for better or worse.” He held out a hand.

John shook it firmly. “Kick their teeth in.”

“Oh, I’ll make them wish for that mercy, rest assured,” Loki responded, as he let the mortal appear to lead him out from their hiding place and into the chaos ensuing throughout the rest of the bank.

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All Tony Stark and all of S.H.I.E.L.D. knew for certain was that this was certainly all Loki’s fault; however, in the aftermath, the realization that there were no civilian casualties and only a few injured civilians, and S.H.I.E.L.D. only lost two agents despite the ferocity of all the fighting, they somehow had to wonder if “fault” was exactly the word for it.

Until JARVIS found the security footage of Loki appearing to throw John Constantine, rather literally flinging him off a balcony, to land and be a bit too injured to flee just as some Doom-bots
appeared and kidnapped him.

Maria Hill was staring at Tony like she was angry at him the whole time he watched that footage.

Tony looked surprised, and amused, then slowly horrified.

“Still think Loki plans to save him, at least?” She asked coldly.

That was when the inventor’s phone went off.

*I AM AN ANTICHRIST! I AM AN ANARCH-* it sang, at a very high volume.

Tony picked it up immediately, without thought. If he was going to keep getting calls from magic mystery numbers, he figured he might as well set them a specific tone for these occasions. “Which of you is this?”

“Yeah, you see, this is why he likes you,” John said.

Tony paled considerably. “Constantine?”

Maria’s chair squeaked with how suddenly she sat forward over the table.

“Yes it’s John Constantine here: I swear, by my life, and not just because I’m human and don’t have to worry about that boiling blood nonsense just with the likes of you,” the magican crooned, seeming to think this was somehow reassuring.

“How?”

“Magic. Also he hacked your tech.”

Tony blinked a few times in rapid sensation. “Repeat that, please?”

“I thought you’d have trouble with that one. Yeah, he installed something of his own as an add-on. I think it looked quite good for hybrid-tech.”

“What is his plan, exactly?” the inventor sighed, resigned.

“Well, you see, that’s one of the problems.”

“Shit.”

Maria raised both eyebrows, looking urgently bemused and unhappy about it.

Tony put the phone on speaker, “By the way I’ve got the co-director of S.H.I.E.L.D. on the line with us. John Constantine, Maria Hill. I believe you’ve met.”

There was a sound of flailing and swearing from John’s end of the line as he dropped his phone, and re-caught it twice in rapid succession before bringing it back to his ear. “Sorry. Sorry. I wasn’t prepared for that. So you got promoted like I said you would? Excellent news, I’m happy for you,” he said, sounding strained and extremely angry at Tony in a manner he was trying just bit too hard to not aim any of at Hill—not yet, in any case.

She snorted. “No thanks to your sorry ass.”

“Believe me, love, I know. Also, uhm, your sister isn’t in Hell, if you were still worried. Don’t ask how I found out, though. She was on a list, I sort of keep it for when I get particular occasions to find
out, since I do, fairly regularly, and I get that sort of request a lot, especially when it’s—loudly unspoken.”

Tony watched a shadow pass over Maria’s expression, followed by the sort of pain that’s accompanied from sheer intensity of relief, and then grudging acceptance. “Thank you,” she said softly.

“No worries. We square?”

“Yes, but that’s mostly because I’ve enjoyed hearing about your, uh, ‘flatmate’.”

John chuckled audibly at that.

“Good, that’s over. Back to the matter of a missing trickster god,” Tony chimed in.

“He has a plan. He didn’t outline all the details of what exactly he’s going to do to Doom, but he’s confident enough, honestly, that I might worry a bit more about Doom. Especially since Loki, uh, might’ve gotten a power-boost.”

“Power boost?” Maria Hill asked dangerously.

“Temporary!” John assured quickly. “He got it from the release of a reserve of magic he had, er, hidden away. Under his skin. A subdermal implant, made of some sort of smooth stone.”

“He pulled a Voldemort?” Tony asked.

“Don’t even start that with me, for fuck’s sake,” the magician groaned.

“You read them all didn’t you?”

“That’s none of your business.”

“How temporary is the power-boost?” Maria asked.

“Honestly, I’d give him about twenty-four hours before we really worry, given how much time I think he was hoping to have for recuperation before your ball, Prince Charming.”

Maria might have given a less than ladylike laugh-snort at that.

“Wow, even she’s noticed too?” John asked.

“To be fair, she’s dating my CEO, current close friend and ex-girlfriend,” Tony said flatly. “Who are, for the record, the same person.”

The co-director of S.H.I.E.L.D.’s ears might have turned slightly pink.

Constantine whistled. “Wow.”

“So yeah, she’s aware Loki’s going to be a new houseguest of mine. How’s he to live with daily, by the way?” He smiled sweetly at Maria, who looked like she’d just decided that she officially wanted to be better friends with him, all of a sudden.

The funnier part was that he knew she’d actually picked that trick up from Pepper and her using it in this context was so adorable it made his teeth hurt, which no woman capable of breaking his spine in so many hundreds of different ways with casual ease should be able to achieve so easily, and yet, she did. He was in awe and scandalized simultaneously, which thus meant he was fine with upgrading
this friendship’s priority-level in the back of his head.

All that went through his head, of course, while Maria was suddenly trying very hard to keep a straight face as John recounted, “Well, she didn’t actually steal my bed, so much as invade it without permission while I was passed out and she was busy hacking half of London from my sorry excuse for a laptop. She also remained in an alarmingly attractive female form the aesthetics of which I admit are very fine, but there is a unique level of terror reserved solely for the disapproval of a beautiful woman to provoke in a man like me, and she exploits it worse than any professional pretty librarian I’ve ever had the privilege to flirt with and be kicked out of libraries by. It’s a very disturbing combination, to be quite frank, considering she’s rather terrifyingly powerful and has a tendency threaten the integrity of my throat a lot.”

“So that’s not just me?” Tony asked.

“Sorry, had you romanticized it, love?” John mocked.

“No, I’m just trying to establish what behaviors he actually considers normal, compared to Thor. I don’t have quite enough data when it comes to his reactions when more emotionally volatile but with pseudo-sanity mostly intact, as opposed to under intense psychological stress to the point of fraying around the edges, which I only saw the first time he and I met. He sort of grabbed me by the throat and defenestrated me.”

“You love any excuse possible to use that word, don’t you?” John asked.

“I… don’t.”

“He does, actually. I’ve noticed too,” Maria mused. “And you insisted it wasn’t a fetish, but now I’m wondering.”

“Paging Dr. Freud,” John mocked, in a nasal drone.

“I hate both of you. You’re making me look like the mature adult, here. That’s actually impressive.”

“If it helps, and you didn’t hear this from me, he considered the seduction angle with you and didn’t dislike the idea enough to drop it off the list of possible plans until near the end of his planning phases.”

Tony tried to ignore the sensation of the back of his neck growing suddenly a bit warmer as the skin there reddened. “That was… very diplomatically phrased.”

“Yeah, I’m leaving a lot of other details out. Deal with it.”

“You are one of the most surreal people to converse with that I have ever met, and trust me when I say that’s really, really saying something,” Tony responded dryly.

“Thank you, love. I find you irritatingly difficult to keep pace with. It’s a nice challenge.”

“Are you two flirting now?” Maria asked.

“Darling, I know for a fact you’re actually possessed of both a brain and tact; do please accept that I don’t always compliment attractive qualities in people solely because I’ve any interest in what’s between their legs,” John said with a crisp smile in his voice. “Especially given that, with Stark, it’s more likely a less personal manipulative goal. Do keep up.”

For her part, Maria blinked a bit at that, surprised. “Oh. Uhm.”
“My thanks,” the magician responded, “but I get enough of that from the local rumor mills, and do get tired of it, as I’m sure you might imagine, because it’s a useful act to put on, but I do actually prefer to leave it off.”

“Sorry,” she said. “I get that.”

“A woman in your position, I’m sure you get more than you deserve of the same like, I did guess.”

“Well. Yeah, it’s ridiculously…” she trailed off, sounding uncertain. “Wow. I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to uh-”

“No worries, love, no harm done.”

Tony had to admire the man’s skills when he did actually make an effort to apply charm. It also helped to remind him of the calibre of con-man he was dealing with here, and exactly how talented he was at tripping other people up and finding just the right reaction-buttons to push to get their cooperation. “I believe you’ve gotten distracted from your story time, Connie.”

“… What did you just call me?”

“Connie.”

After a slightly pause, Constantine snorted. “You are barmy, mate. I will credit you that,” he muttered, then shook his head with a chuckle, his movement audible over the speakerphone. “Right, well, so she’s also been wearing my t-shirts this whole time, and borrowing various denim and other, er, miscellanea.”

“Details,” Maria requested firmly.

“Fine, she’s apparently fond of silk, alright? She’s probably not going to give me back that pair of boxers, which I never even got to wear myself before she knicked them. Are you happy now?”

“So happy,” Hill assured. “Wow, I love hearing stories of your misery.”

“Yeah, I get that a lot,” John deadpanned. “Also there was the protective ward thing being a bit meat-based, but apparently in the wake of traumatic events he actually feels bad about inflicting, he sort of turns into an enormous wolf and becomes, er, cuddly. It’s very relaxing, actually, and I recommend it for most people undergoing post-traumatic panic attacks. That’s the easiest I’ve got through one of those in a long time, and with the least hangover, without actually having sex with anyone or doing a lot of drugs with some good mates in the woods for a week.”

“I…” Tony tried to comprehend the image, but struggled. Then when he succeeded, he felt rather uncomfortable. Finding a god of lies adorable, he supposed, should only naturally be a very uneasy and slightly panic-inducing sensation. That meant he still had a bit of pseudo-sanity left, in theory. Right?

Maria’s mouth was hanging open, like she was thrilled to have blackmail to use against Loki too and this was suddenly Christmas.

Tony decided he had severely underestimated her capacity for defiance, before. He would have to re-study her from scratch, if that was as much the case as it now seemed to be.

“Yeah, I dunno how to feel about that one either. Polite, though. And very comfortable, despite being also incredibly weird. And I’m no stranger to weird.”
“Thank you Captain Obvious,” Maria shot back.

“Fair enough. Some people have a terrible tendency to forget at just the wrong times and trust me with their lives, though, so I do try to broadcast regular reminders, habitually.”

“You’re in a sulk,” Tony realized, his voice smirking as much as his expression.

“I am not in a-!” John started, then stopped, exhaled in a frustrated huff and corrected himself, “Look, alright, I’m used to being the one who charges in after some idiots have opened doors they never should’ve rightfully gotten the keys to and let horrors out, when I’m not cleaning up the nasty and usually bloody results of my own pride. This idea of actually trusting this bastard not to let his equally ridiculous pride get him in over his head while he’s not nearly as sturdy physically or magically as he’s used to being, in the hands of someone whom he identified as a legitimate threat to his safety long before he was de-powered?” He gave a dry laugh, and mockingly concluded, “Right. Sure. That sound trusty as anything.”

“If it helps, you can try to remember he almost destroyed more than one planet in the past,” Maria added.

“I’m still gonna be a bit testy with the effort of not convincing myself he’s being a complete idiot right now, out of some vague professional respect for this ridiculous fucker, and because if I dared try and actually interrupted his self-rescuing, he might actually consider rearranging parts of my face in ways I won’t be able to easily put back where they belong, let’s say.”

“So you’re actually friends with him now, you’re saying?” asked Tony.

Constantine sighed dejectedly.

Maria Hill quietly fell out of her chair, wheezing quietly as she shook with near-silent sniggering on the floor.

“I sense based on your reaction and just how hard Maria is laughing at you, that this is a particularly awkward and accurate assessment for me to have made, right?”

“You can shut up anytime now,” John said.

Tony smiled and shook his head. “I notice you’re not hanging up.”

Another huff of breath on the magician’s end. “Look, mate, the whole reason he fell into my life was because I stepped into a circle of his and happened to have a life so similar in shape to his own, that he was able to link his magic to me and learn a ridiculous amount of painful and high-market-value secrets of mine all at once. This sort of thing is just one of the many occupational hazards of being John Constantine.”

Tony realized the man was already bracing for the part where after their deals are run out, he probably suspected that he would never actually ever see Loki again. He tried to think of a way to suggest that he didn’t think that would be the case without sounding too rude even for his own standards, but failed, so he shrugged and said instead, “So what good has he actually done you?”

The magician cleared his throat a bit. “Lot of introspection. It’d take days to explain, mate. Just let it go.”

“Depends on the results of your introspections, and how they might help us keep this planet safe, Constantine,” Hill intoned gravely.
“Piss off,” John responded, his tone sweet and steely. “It’s nothing like that. It’s my brain and my soul on the line and it’s frankly none of your damned business.”

“Uh… Soul?” Tony asked.

An almost whining sigh of decades-old exasperation escaped Constantine’s lips. “You want those questions answered, you atheistic science-fiction craftsman, then you can ask an actual god. I haven’t the time or energy myself to do this song and dance again on a day like this.”

“I’ve read all of S.H.I.E.L.D.’s files on Doc Strange, now. I understand the soul as a concept, you prick, but I meant in particular your soul. How is it at risk?”

“Ha! I’m not going there, mate. My number of afterlife options differs from yours considerably, but don’t you worry your pretty rich head about it. I’ve been handling dross like this since before you were born.”

Maria rolled her eyes. “Fine. Sure thing, Lonely McManpain.”

“Look, Hill, usually I don’t tell people these sorts of things for the sake of keeping them alive, but in this case, I don’t trust either of you, or want either of you involved in the sort of shit he might ‘some day’ mythically aid me with, but until that day, I’m not going to be nearly so optimistic as to consider it likely, let alone a possible threat to the rest of planet. So piss the ever-loving fuck off, Agent Hill.”

She sighed. “Fine, I get it.”

John huffed in sneering, grudging relief. “If you really want to know, ask old Strange, someday, exactly what the price is for regularly sending souls and demons to Hell. All the sort of magic I do is priced differently for the likes of humans than it is anyone else, and while I do get the equivalent of a bulk discount thanks to decades of practice, knowledge and experience, it’s still never cheap. Especially not when you deal with the sorts of afterlife options that thrive on, of all things, bookkeeping.”

Tony blinked at that a great deal, suddenly realizing that the Exorcist line on John Constantine’s business card wasn’t actually a joke, and also that in some rare cases, the demons might actually be legitimate, rather than fabricated. It was a deeply disconcerting notion.

What was that, after all, that Strange had tried to explain to him, about all magic being a matter of story-telling, deep down?

Right.

Now the inventor was getting a headache. Gods and other supernatural phenomena tended to have that effect on him more and more, these days.

“So you don’t actually believe in any of the religious structures you’re contractually beholden to by virtue of how often you wound up called in to help with them by others who were belief-beholden to them, because the only ways you get rid of some of those entities supernatural involves invoking gods and rites not your own, but those gods then are owed bits of you as a result, and the majority these days it’s the Devil because Heaven won’t have you anymore than you really want them to have you either?” Tony concluded, his with a mixture of discomfort and genuine curiosity.

“See? Stark is getting the hang of it. And I’d settle for Heaven. Imagine how much trouble I could brew up there. Nobody’d be prepared for it.”

“But belief-wise you-” Maria started.
“Belief matters as much as consent, which really, isn’t exactly the final say in how an experience goes, only whether it was agreed to beforehand or not. You can still wind up getting a lot you never asked for and find yourself hurt by it all without any legal means of defense afterward, despite injuries and trauma you might’ve wound up being subjected to, depending what sort of things you made the mistake of asking for unwisely, and what sort of authoritative powers decided to answer, and whether you happened to know all of the archaic words from books that are never easy to get your hands on, in order to know exactly what to say in order to banish them, and also find the will and strength of conviction to believe they won’t be meaningless in the face of all the hosts of Hell,” John said gravely. “Thus, yeah, the demon-banishing trick is really all about how much of yourself you give up to protect someone else from the product of the unreal becoming a bit too close to real: leaks of mind into matter, and usually toxic.”

Tony found that entire idea deeply disturbing and it rendered him a bit too quiet.

Seeing the look on his face, Maria looked uncomfortable, too, but not as stuck on it as he was, with his mind extrapolating in so many directions at once. After giving him about forty-five seconds to recover with no progress, however, she decided that was enough. “I think you broke him,” she said toward the phone.

John chuckled a bit more darkly, at that, bitter and heavy with memories he couldn’t bring himself to wish to forget, anymore. He regretted enough of the ones he’d forgotten by leaving them in the other part of his soul; too many holes in his past meant all sorts of things could sneak through them, and then sneak up behind him when he least wanted them to.

Not a good policy, long-term. The magician knew that.

He had also long been aware that there was no way to resolve that.

Until Loki strode into his life and had to remind him that not being aware of the full scope of his own past horrors and how they afflicted others could really fuck up an individual, even if they were more godly than mortal; and that furthermore without introspection and time spent coming to terms with his own darker facets, they can never be conquered by his own will, and until that time he will be subject to potentially repeating those failures, not ever actually escaping them.

Hindsight really is 20-20, and there would always be some days that John Constantine never wanted to forgive it for that.

“Is it like that for Loki too, do you think?” Tony asked.

John hesitated. “Asgard is to him what Heaven is to me.”

Maria looked confused by that. “Heaven?”

“They’re the carrot. Hell is the stick. Both want humans to be their trained pets. I’m understandably pissed off at the whole lot, to be frank, but I’m not willing to buy into any other available options either, given most of them who would ever even have me tend to offer the same, or similar, criteria for a certain degree of reverence I’ve never been able to muster. Well, all of them that’d stand any sort of chance at challenging the claims of those currently owed my soul, anyway, since the majority of the faithful in the world these days re-enforce the powers of the Hell that’s got claim on me.”

“What about atheists, exactly?” Tony asked.

“Depends how strongly you believe that nothing happens after you die. You’re about to ally with the father of the Queen of Helheim, too, keep in mind. How strong is your faith in nothingness?”
“I don’t do faith,” Tony said.

“Then why trust Loki not to kill you in your sleep the first chance he gets?” John challenged, his smirk audible. “Most would call that a leap of faith, wouldn’t they?”

“I trust Fenrir. I don’t trust Loki.”

The magician gave a long, heavy sigh. “Right. Sure.”

“You doubt him?” Maria asked.

“I’m doubting everything, love; it’s my default state. What if he decides you’re not good enough, to be what you, want him, to teach you to be, Stark? Did you consider what he might do then, and where you’d first feel the impact?”

Tony paled abruptly. The idea that Loki might be more impressed with JARVIS’ potential than with his own self hadn’t actually occurred to him. JARVIS was singular, and Fenrir-like, and if Loki thought the AI wasn’t living up to his potential, inhibited as he was keeping Tony Stark alive…

“Noted,” he said, a bit raggedly.

“Good.” John snorted, then. “Look, he hasn’t hinted at that, and if he does I’ll tell you, mate. Nobody deserves quite that sort of back-stab, that close to home. Anyways, from what I can tell he does actually like you to the point he throws things at me after a certain point when I needle him over it, so I sort of believe it whether he’ll admit it or not, but I’ve been wrong before far too often and I’m being bribed by a powerful mystic entity, so just do us both a favour and keep in mind you’re not as unassailable as you might think, to the likes of him.”

“Yeah,” the inventor agreed. “But both of us have a distrust of certain…”

“Exactly.”

“Subtle, both of you,” Maria deadpanned.

“Classified, Maria,” Tony assured. “You sound like you’ve already guessed, though, John.”

“I might’ve been in the room during your first phone call. He just made it sound like I left.”

The inventor muttered a curse.

The older man chuckled, but the sound was a bit tired and hollow. “Look, if it’s the same to you both, I’m in need of a very large drink now. Or indeed several.”

“I’ll buy,” Tony said.

“… Are you asking me out?” John deadpanned.

“No.”

“You want to talk.”

“Yes.”

The magician made an exasperated noise.

“I also need to keep track of you since you’re the first person who will likely be aware when Loki gets out,” Tony added.
“Fine. Fine. But I pick the place.”

Tony waited for a long few seconds, then suddenly got a flash before his eyes of a building he recognized. *Cambridge club.* He made a face. “Seriously?”

“Absolutely. I know a spot that’s been free ever since its former occupant got his heart ripped out. What, you don’t think you can get in?” John mocked.

“Uh… did I miss something?” Maria asked.

Said John cheerfully, “Sent him a vision, darling. I remember how keen your ears are, and your knack for hunting people down, and all.”

She frowned, but didn’t exactly protest.

“I can get in,” Tony agreed.

“Then meet me there in an hour, Stark.”

*Click.*

“What do you still want to talk to him about?” Hill asked.

“Whatever Loki offered him to get him out of Hell, if possible. A few other bits.”

She sighed at him. “Fine, but if he’s ever a threat again-”

“I know.”

“Be careful with him. If he really was offered a deal by Loki, who knows what Loki actually asked him to do in exchange.”

“Yeah,” Tony muttered. “I know.”

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Wearing the face, voice, body and mannerisms of John Constantine was such a thankless task. Loki was used to his own wit usually going over the heads of others, but people really did seem to have a chronic inability to listen to the words coming out of Constantine’s mouth, even when it was a god of lies borrowing the likeness of it.

“Will you stupid bloody wankers get me someone who speaks a language I know, at the fucking least? What even *is* that? Sounds like the horrible lovechild of German and Farsi, of all things.”

Of course, maybe some of that was strictly John’s character.

That was a factor, too, certainly.

The first interrogator frowned at him. “Latverian. You have been read your rights as a political prisoner here.”

“What’s the point of reading them to me if I can’t-” Loki began to lie, but the man was already
walking away, replaced by two others.

Well. One Doom-bot, and the other a Hydra agent, the odd pair were speaking in rapid-fire German. All-Speak allowed Loki to get the overall gist that Constantine was being handed over fully into Doom’s custody. Then the Hydra agent left. With a deep breath, Loki quietly forgot himself again, and channeled the persona of the magician he had hijacked as a locus of control, and thoroughly invaded the life and apartment of in recent days too. This trickster now knew more than enough about John Constantine to pretend to be him, just for a while.

As the Doom-bot closed the door and took a step closer to the cell’s sole prisoner, where John Constantine appeared to have his wrists cuffed to each arm of the sole piece of furniture in the room: an ominously tall-backed chair of heavy industrial steel. His forehead was buckled into the headrest, his ankles and calves to the chair’s legs. The magician himself appeared resigned, as though he did this all the time and it had started getting old a few decades back.

It was actually a bit freeing, for Loki, to let his normally very-controlled facial expressiveness speak so very loudly and bluntly, even almost crudely, for him for a change, even if the face wearing it wasn’t exactly his own.

“You have an ally of pertinent interest to Doom.”

Constantine blinked twice, clearly disbelieving. “Wow. I did not believe the rumors, but you really are one hell of a card. Also furthermore, I’d like to add, ‘Oh do I really now?’ because I don’t count people as allies who throw me at enemies like you to save their own sorry skins, which is what I think you’re more interested in anyway, right? The betrayal part?”

“Only if you provide quality information very quickly. I have met your patron god before, and it is apt enough he would find a loyal servant in the form of such an upstanding petty criminal as yourself.”

The magician’s scowl deepened. “I’m no servant, mate. Not to anyone.”

“Then why aid him?”

“Why else do you think?” A low chuckle, and he traded the Liverpudlian accent for a sorry excuse for an Italian one he’d heard John resort to when saying: “He made me an offah I could not refuse,” as Loki now mimicked.

Doom’s proxy stepped closer, almost touching the arm of the chair now on one side as his eyes scanned over the magician’s face. “His loyalty was not a part of his sworn word?”

“Why is it everyone seems to know about that except me? They’re aliens! Why would that possibly apply same as it would to fae and demons?” John lamented with sorrow. “I ask you. Why?”

“Because they are creatures with higher magics in their blood than a full-grown street urchin and petty con-artist like yourself could ever dream of channelling.”

“No true, actually.”

The Doom-bot tilted its head, and those eyes behind the mask appeared to narrow dangerously. “How so?”

“Call yourself a mage, if you like; English isn’t your language and not all languages make the distinction in the same ways, and there are so few mages around these days on Earth that it’s an arsehole thing to quibble over and I like the sound of it too. That said, I’m a Spark. He’s a mage.
You’re also a Spark, technically. We’ve got the knack for magic, we have sensitivity to it, and we can wield it because we can reach out for it and grab bits of it to link together to get certain fireworks, but our metaphysical muscles for heavy-lifting are comparatively weak. Asked to lift a glass with magic, or by hand, our hands use less energy than our magic does. For Loki, it’s a bit different. He’s got a deep well of power in there, and compared to his also-high physical stamina, it tires out less quickly, because he’s just got that much to spare, on most good days. Doc Strange is a wanker, but he’s impressively sane by the standards of human mages, but there’s a lot of good reasons they’re rare: the power either burns through you like you’re tissue paper, or maybe you luck out and get the right cluster of quirks in your end of the gene pool that it doesn’t wilt you too fast, and if you can survive that fire long enough, it'll temper. Like Iron.” Loki tried not to think too much about that comparison.

“Not for the time being, however, is he having any such good days.”

“Oh, it’s under lock and key, sure,” John agreed, “but it’s also not gone.”

“He told you this?”

“No, I read it off the spells binding him.” His grin turned cocky again. “Now what information do you need from me to get me out of here alive?”

Doom shook his head and strode out calmly. He didn’t stomp, but to Loki’s observation, he looked more tense and irked than before.

Maybe John was onto something with this infuriating act of his. That hadn’t required any use of the madly ecstatic-buzzing energies under his skin, barely contained by his body as the binding spells about his forearms screamed in silent agony at the pressure the artificial influx pressing against them from deeper within his tissues than they could reach. Loki would be feeling the cost of that trick all too keenly in the morning, he knew too well.

He still had to be careful actually using that magic, though. This cell would be heavily monitored for the next few hours as Doom left him to sweat, and left his automated systems to change the temperature in his cell, in effort to further emphasize how little control over his own state of existence his new prisoner now had.

Typical, for this one. Loki had watched him, after their first meeting. He had not yet regretted the decision against making Doom an ally.

He shut his eyes and blocked out all the world around him except his sense of touch. The air in the room began to grow uncomfortably warm, just as he had predicted, but consciously altering the physical structures within his own ears, transforming them to be as sharp as those of a bat, Loki could hear… much.

It took him a while to map out the nearest air vents and pick a suitable spot outside his cell by a few dozen yards, to unleash the first spell.

Almost immediately, there was an awful lot of screaming from the other end of the cell block, and Loki began to grin maliciously, still wearing John Constantine’s face.

The expression didn’t look all that out-of-place.
Loki Lie-smith had, for many centuries, prided himself on his extensive knowledge of arts considered too unsavory for even the most tolerant of libraries in all of the nine realms to allow any books on them to exist within their walls, but he seldom made use of the most truly wretched amongst them; however, the spell was simple enough, and potent enough, while still being non-lethal (within the forty-eight hours, at least) as well as panic-inducing, that it suited the man he was pretending to be.

Maybe he would teach it to John, as a gift for giving him such a perfect opportunity to use what little plague magic his explorations of the desolate wastes of Svartalfheim a few hundred years ago had gotten him.

Such a simple spell, such a simple idea, and Loki quietly let it loose in the air ducts throughout all of Doom’s secret compound: every invisible inch of the air. The closest personnel could see it as a sort of vapour just for a moment before they began violently hallucinating and running throughout the whole compound in a panic until they could all be subdued by their peers—several of them violently so.

It only took two hours for the first two dozen personnel who came in contact with the screamers—a few of them still Hydra agents—to report in sick. Half of them began to hallucinate violently within the next hour. The other half became entirely catatonic.

It spread out to the rest of Latveria outside of this little border stronghold of Doom’s within half a day.

By that time it had gotten within a few miles of Doom’s capitol fortress, Doom himself. This time it wasn’t one of his robotic duplicates, Loki could tell; he could detect a soul in this body before him now, and with a bit of squinting, yes, that looked to be Doom’s soul. Wretched thing as is was.

Loki-as-Constantine had been in the Latverian cell for only sixteen hours by that point, and he was now grinning cheerfully.

“I keep hearing a lot of panicked sort of noises around here, Vic,” John greeted.

“Who told you my given name, worthless pest?”

“You really know how to sweet-talk an exorcist, let me tell you.”

“That is not. An answer.”

Gulping visibly, the magician made his broad smile appear as harmless as possible. “Okay, alright, take it easy. I learned it from a S.H.I.E.L.D. agent, goes by the name of Skye. I dunno if she has any other names, but that’s the only one she let me overhear.”

“How do you know her?”

“We used to, uh, be rather close,” John assured, eyebrows wagging. "Well, for about a night, but we keep on each other's radars to call in occasional favours."

Doom didn’t blink but he somehow managed to convey the impression of being deeply unimpressed based on his posture and the tilt of his head alone. “Are the events within my nation-state at present due to your actions?”

“Me? Little street-rat me? Hurt you?” A low chuckle rumbled up through the disguised trickster’s
ribcage. “Go on, then. Pull the other one.”

Leaning in closer, the dictator asked again. “Are your actions behind this?”

“Depends what ‘this’ is, exactly.”

“Do not patronize Doom.”

“Look, it’s bad enough when your robotic doubles pull that third-person shit, but really, you too?” deadpanned the magician.

Doom stepped back quickly. “How?”

“You’re the one with a soul in you. I’m an exorcist. I dunno why yer surprised.” He shrugged.

“Look, mate, I don’t know what you’re talking about this time. I hear occasional alarms and a lot of loud noises, but I can’t hear words from down here. I sincerely have no idea what specific array of events you’re asking me about. So then, what’s going on?”

“A sickness has begun to strike the people of my nation, unlike any we have ever before seen. It seems to have a touch of magic within it, making cures and treatments alike difficult,” said Doom slowly. “What know you of it?”

“Nothing, really. Sounds a bit nasty.”

“So do most of your tricks, and this is not a gambit a god would stoop to, over such a small chess-piece as yourself.”

Loki managed not to laugh, but only barely. Oh, Doom, your poor fool. He still had illusions about power and dignity being linked in some inextricable way. How laughable, particularly to the likes of the god of lies. Accordingly, his smile turned utterly nasty. “Well, but he’s not exactly occupying the position of a ‘god’ now is he? You’ve never seen him without that extra security in tow, have you? He’s a broken mind and a twisted soul and a black heart, trust me; I’d know as well as any.”

“How so?” Doom inquired. “Why did he choose someone of so little significance as you to ally himself with?”

Loki didn’t have to feign anger and offense and rage, surprisingly. It all came together in his expression, and in the sudden rush of heat and anger in his chest. As such, John’s face looked appropriately sneering. “I’m a locus of his, and a strong one.”

“Ah, yes. The trickster archetype.” Doom shook his head. “Petty little jesters, all of you, and ineffectual at best.”

“And you might be like unto god within your own little spit of countryside, but otherwise you’re naught but a petty dictator your neighbors would laugh at more if you weren’t so heavily armed. No major international alliances worth writing much home about, and most of the super-powered heroes around the world intermittently gunning for you, and I hear there was a most remarkable incident in Central Park two years ago involving a young mutant girl and an entire army of… what wossit, squirrels?”

That caused a metal gauntlet to affix itself about his windpipe and begin to squeeze slowly.

“You know, he has the same reaction?” the magician choked.

Doom let him go abruptly.
Playing up his gasps for air a little, the trickster in Constantine’s clothing began to grin. “You know your real mistake here, mate?”

“What?” Doom asked.

“Your cameras have a few key blind spots.”

All the lights in the interrogation cell suddenly went out.

Able to hear Doom shift, and try to initiate any form of lights, to the sound of smaller and smaller circuits self-frying, Loki began to chuckle.

“Cease!” Doom roared.

The laughter stopped.

The lights came back on.

The chair was empty.

Doom felt a sudden, very deep sense of foreboding.

~~

Tony still wasn’t sure exactly how John got into the Cambridge club in the first place. He suspected underhanded magic tricks, especially given how much the staff resented his presence even once he was joined by someone of appropriately obscene wealth. “Why this place, anyhow?”

“I love to annoy them. Also they used to keep an angel around. This is his chair. I enjoy being reminded that he’s not sneering down at all of humanity from this perch anymore. It’s soothing, to me, some days,” John admitted, from his place lounging in a beastly overwised wing-backed armchair. Tony sat in a similar chair, both of them half-facing one another, and half-facing the hearth of an enormous fireplace.

Tony blinked at that. “An angel.”

“Gabriel. He wasn’t just a snob, mate, he was The Snob.”

“Angels…”

“Sometimes belief systems, when held by enough people, do strange things to the Astral Plane. Ideas bleed through, when there’s instability between dimensions due to mystical influences. The more repeated the structures are across millions of minds and millions of years of history, the more powerful and sentient they become, in their own rights. Angels are amongst the more common of those ideas, down here on Earth, but their manifestations aren’t usually in the flesh; it’s against the order written in the books that give them power. Gabriel was a bit different, in a number of ways. Long story, mate, and not any of the ones you came here for, at a guess,” the magician sighed, finishing the latter half of his drink in one gulp and pouring another from the ridiculously expensive bottle on the small table between their chairs.

“Fair assessment,” Tony mused. “What’d he offer you?”
“A less shitty afterlife, basically.”

“Because the current one which you’re roped into isn’t stellar.”

“Because I’m an exorcist and I can’t afford to be picky about not using Roman Catholic bits and bobs to save innocent lives, because they work—sometimes. Not always, but that’s why I’ve also got other resources nicked from just about any other culture you can probably name. That’s basically why nobody else has offered me an out before now. I hurt a lot of feelings by being so unfaithful with so very, very many deities. They’re touchy, that way.”

“And that’s enough to tie you into their rules of sinfulness, et cetera, without you actually believing the rest of it, because there’s so many believers out there?”

John nodded. “It’s the curse of knowing instead of believing, too, a bit—that also screws me over, but that’s even more metaphysically complicated to explain.”

“How would he bluff that, though? It’s not exactly his turf, is it?”

“That’s exactly it, though,” John sighed. “I’ve sicced a Mayan god of Death on a church-full of demons that were a mixture of catholic dogma and Babylonian myth, and come out on the other side, before. I’m no stranger to going outside the beltway, here.”

Tony started to get it. “Because he’s got different rules than theirs.”

“His soul is claimed by his daughter and the Norse fates called the Norns, he mentioned. That’d mean he can’t sell his own soul for anything, but it also means the more local Hells around here can’t touch him.”

“Interesting.”

“Also, the power of his name and his myths in those places would be colored by human beliefs about him,” John added. “He’d risk being slightly changed, as a result of that, but that didn’t seem to phase him.”

“Maybe he’s already marinated in them before.”

“Likely. He did mention having been on friendly terms with Lucifer.”

“Not the Devil?”

“Don’t get me started on all the things that annoy me about the First of the Fallen,” John sneered. “We’d be here all week. No, instead, I’m interested in when exactly you became ever so friendly with Fenrir Moon-Eater, for a start.”

“Met him in Helheim with his sister. He worked out JARVIS was sentient, and became interested enough in him to appear in my lab at random, sometimes with particular questions in mind, sometimes not. He earned my respect slowly, and as a result Loki did too, a bit.”

“I was really not expecting him to be quite that terrifyingly protective,” John said.

“Oh, wow, you actually were in the room for that. It sounded bad enough over the phone, but damn.”

“Thought he was going to ruin the bloody floorboards, rattling them like that with low-frequency sounds I couldn’t even hear until he hit human hearing range with his growling, yeah.”
“Damn.”

“He’s capable of being pretty terrifying, and I don’t admit that lightly.”

“Me neither, and I wholeheartedly agree.”

They both drank quietly for a long few minutes.

“He likes you, but has trust issues that make even mine look paltry,” John pointed out. “I wasn’t kidding about the seduction angle. It was mostly ruined a bit when you proved you already had ample reason to suspect him being around down here, on Earth. I think he was initially hoping anonymity would get him places he wouldn’t otherwise be allowed.”

Tony snorted. “Seriously?”

“Why not?”

“He’d get further without faking anything, with me. He’s gorgeous.”

John snorted. “Seriously?”

“Absolutely.”

“He could break you, easy. He’s still stronger than me, by quite a lot, just physically. Killing you wouldn’t be too hard.”

“Getting away with it would be.”

The magician looked thoughtful, at that. “I suppose so, these days.”

“When do you think he’ll be back?”

“About five minutes after you leave, almost exactly.”

Tony sighed. “Ruin all my fun, why don’t you.”

“Oh, no, I’m truly enjoying this almost sappy lead-up to a romantic evening’s sniping between the both of you at your bloody gala.”

“Romantic?” the inventor sounded utterly incredulous. “Have you met me?”

John shot him a look. “You want to get him aside for a bit of a private chat. I’ve attended enough parties to know the best atmosphere to arrange for that.” He then grinned viciously. “You getting a bit flushed there, love?”

“I already had a conversation about this with my ex-girlfriend and her lover earlier; I’d rather not be back here, yet again, within the same week.”

“The one dating Hill?”

Tony nodded.

“I think I remember her from your inescapable infiltration of international media. Redhead, very sensible and authoritative, right?”

“Yeah. Pepper Potts.”
“She’s your CEO too?”
Tony nodded again.

“Is Hill still sort of lethally gorgeous in a sort of way that makes you feel like she might gut you at any moment?” John asked.

“Yeah.”

A long, low whistle escaped the magician. “What I’d give to be a fly on that wall.”

Tony shot him a glare.

John’s eyebrows raised pointedly. “You thought the same an’ you know it.”

A cough. “Maybe.”

For about the sixth time that evening, the magician shivered violently, as though an ice cube had just slid down his whole spine out of the blue.

“How do you keep shaking like that?”

“Someone’s using my name. A lot. And doing doubtlessly horrible things to my reputation. I try to keep track of more volatile shifts in my public image, let’s say.”

“You think it’s—”

“Of course it’s him,” John sighed. “I just dunno if that’s a good thing, or a bad thing, yet.” He poured them both fresh drinks, and they both finished them swiftly, and poured yet another, each.

~~

Before the end of the night, a large number of the citizens of Latveria had begun rioting. They were all horrified by ominous visions, the mysterious plague that had overwhelmed so many, and a vicious string of nasty rumors that Doom had brought a cursed being into his land, and that their suffering wouldn’t end until the cur was freed.

Loki had fun with that one, particularly, again borrowing John Constantine’s shape here and there, finding that people considered the blonde hair and worn features of the human magician more approachable than most of the trickster’s other array of human-like guises. Retrieving the man’s borrowed trenchcoat had actually been the riskiest trick he pulled in the few hours after his escape.

Once the rioters surrounded Doom’s castle in the capitol, and began to pound on the gates with a couple of improvised battering rams, Loki appeared behind Doom, where he stood on a balcony overlooking the rioters, several of whom even seemed to have large torches, still wearing the form of John Constantine. “Well, mate, I think I’ve made my point.”

The dictator turned to stare at him coldly. “You are not he.”

With a chuckle, the trickster let the guise drop at last, revealing his true face; although he remained dressed as Constantine, including the trenchcoat, insouciantly loose skinny black tie, and white pressed shirt. “No, but he could’ve done this as easily as I, and that’s why he is my ally, Victor. We do not need to rule, we tricksters. We are better at tearing civilizations down.” His threat was clear,
and he smiled with all of his teeth. “Remove John Constantine from your systems. My allegiance is to be transferred away from him within the week, and I have been a fit enough ally that his destruction would displease me. Do also be so thorough as to remove him from Hydra’s systems; I do know you have that much reach.” He stepped closer, then, peering directly into the dictator’s eyes through the mask. “I owe him a debt, and if you will thus aid in repaying it, then I will cure the plague which has overtaken your nation; I swear upon my life; however, the moment you make any attempts to reverse this action, the plague will return, and it will not be curable again. That, too, I promise.”

Doom looked down over his subjects. “None have yet died.”

“They have just over a day left, yes, before the virus proves lethal.”

“I swear my binding word to you—”

“You’re still mortal,” Loki said coldly. “Finish doing as I have requested, Victor, and only then will I cure them. First, however, perhaps you should soothe their nerves.” He gestured out over the crowd.

Doom exhaled heavily, fists shaking with rage. “You dare threaten my people?”

“I could ask the same of you, going after my locus,” Loki snapped curtly. “I turned down your offer of alliance before, and I have proven to you that you cannot hold or catch me, even weakened as I am. You may have your vengeance upon me another day, but I would in truth rather not be responsible for a few thousand deaths tonight if I don’t absolutely have to. I will, however, if need be.” His eyes narrowed. “It’s your choice, now, Doom. Your pride, or your people?”

The dictator spun on his heel and headed down into his dungeons at a hasty march, even as he swore in Latverian under his breath.

Smiling just a little bitterly, Loki followed him.

~~

Tony was feeling pleasantly floaty after the last two fast-drained glasses of ridiculously fine scotch that honestly deserved better than to be gulped quickly in any way, but it felt right, somehow, in front of this particular fire, to just not care about that, for now. He felt even more floaty when he and John finished off the rest of the bottle in a far too brief period of time, both of them too lost in thought to talk much as they did so.

“What’s it you really want from him anyhow?” John asked, voice heavily slurred, as they swayed their way out the main doors and onto the public sidewalk outside, ignoring the sneers behind and in front of them alike. John might’ve been supported a bit by his arm across Tony Stark’s shoulder.

“To learn, and to hopefully not be smited as a result of how much I want to fondle him, in some key places,” Tony said, sincere as he could slur.

“Me too, mate, but without the fondling parts. He’s got a lotta tricks, though.”

“Good tricks.”

“Terrifying ones.” John spotted Chas’ cab pulling up to a nearby patch of curb, and straightened
abruptly. “Gotta go, though. M’smashed.”

“Me too—hey, HEY don’t do that, you’re helping me upright, dammit!”

The magician snorted at him. “Fine, but Chas is taking you to your own bloody hotel room, and then I’m going home.”

“Yes, good, yeah that, s’fine, s’fine.”

~~

Luckily, Doom had the decency to keep his word, and clear the problem of John Constantine being on far too many international radars globally, in particular amongst villains, for anyone’s good, before he attempted to capture the god of lies in a sort of gravity-based trap, based off of equipment left behind by Malekith in Greenwich.

It did successfully pin the god of lies to the floor, where he then proceeded to laugh, and laugh, and laugh some more.

Doom kicked him across the face in an effort to stop him. It only briefly worked, and once the trickster spat out a bit of blood, he was right back to giggling. “Cease your pathetic bluffing insolence!”

“You haven’t noticed your own fever then?” Loki grinned. “I swore to cure the plague your nation is suffering, but you and your nation are very separate things.” Another sharp kick, this time enough to make dark spots dance across Loki’s vision for a moment. He didn’t bother healing it yet. The show wasn’t over yet. “Very sturdy boots you have, but I’m sturdier than you think, even weakened as I am.”

“I had mistaken your royal blood for some indication of your personal dignity, but I see that I was quite incorrect in my assessment. You are decadent, and a childish fool.”

“You want to talk about childishness? You are currently the one throwing a tantrum because I wouldn’t let you capture and abuse me,” Loki crowed. “Is that not the attitude of a spoiled child? Punishing others for their unwillingness to be his toys?” He cried out as the next kick landed in his side very sharply.

“You are weakened, and a fool to have followed me into my own place of power in your current state, little god,” Doom intoned gravely.

“Well, maybe I did a preliminary sweep,” Loki rasped, grinning a bit more bloody. “You have one chance for me to heal you, and it’s to swear upon your very soul that you’ll not hunt me again, for the duration of my current parole-time down here on Earth. Our respective debts of honor will be erased. Future alliances once I am again free might be possible, but I am Loki, and I am no pawn, ever.”

“If I do not agree to this?”

“You die of plague in two days and potentially re-infect the rest of your nation.”

Another kick, again to his gut, made the god emit a retching sound.
We have an accord.”

“Good.” Loki flicked a hand, using a bit of power to lift the slight aura of illness from the ruler of Latveria. “Goodbye, to you Victor. Thank you, for your cooperation,” he wheezed, then grinned, and activated the transport-seal he’d sketched into the lining of Constantine’s borrowed coat before they had headed to the bank. It was designed, of course, to take him back to his locus.

No other choice really, as his magic, like his bluffs, all ran out with that last spell.

~~

Predictably, the crash-landing of a battered and bloody god of lies onto his living-room couch, sent John hurtling out of a still-half-drunk doze, and he nearly flailed out of his armchair onto the floor, but managed to catch himself in time to push off the ground with both feet and stumble over to check on the god.

“Eurgh,” Loki groaned, still laying on his back. There was, in truth, still a gravity trap under him, now half-fried. He reached under his lower back and tugged it out, dropping the metal contraption to the left of John’s feet. “You smell like a distillery.”

“And you look like you’ve been bashed in the face, a bit.”

The trickster grimaced at him, then stopped because of how badly it hurt. “By the nine, your breath is even worse.” He did, however, allow the magician to reach down and tilt his chin up to better examine the darkening bruises on his face. “I will still heal faster than a human.”

“I can tell by the progress it’s made. It’s already so dark it looks over a day old.”

Loki stared up at him with renewed curiosity suddenly. “You were worried.”

“Well, yeah.” He frowned. “Archetype, mate. I know how wrong we can go.”

“Fair, but we also have a way of doing very well under intense pressure, when it comes right down to it. Would you like to learn a plague spell?”

The magician frowned. “Plague?”

“I’ll teach you the counter-spell as well, of course, and the details of the symptoms it inflicts. I’ll tell you all about that… in the morning. For now, I am in dire need of rest and will have an utterly awful magic-based hangover to face upon waking,” Loki groaned. “I will say for now, however, that my debt to you is paid. You are no longer a target of my enemies. I blackmailed Doom to that end very successfully.”

John grinned, genuinely surprised and pleased. “Really, now?”

“I swear, he completed it, and I completed the reversal of the plague’s progress, before he set about attempting to capture me violently.” The god gestured vaguely towards the gravity-trap. “I had been sure not to cure his own illness, however.”

“He had the plague?”

Loki chuckled. “No, just the beginnings of a nasty cold, in truth.”
The magician burst into giggles, sliding down to the floor until one arm rested alongside the god’s ribcage, almost parallel to the edge of the couch, and the rest of him sat on the floor leaning back against the couch-front.

The trickster god smirked, too, at his amusement, eyes drifting closed, though they fluttered open a bit at the unexpected sensation of light pressure against his side. He glanced down to find John’s head had dropped onto his forearm and the magician had somehow instantly fallen asleep in that position, half-draped over the edge of the couch, the rest of him leaning against the front of it. Clearly, that would not be comfortable or healthy for long.

With a sigh, Loki prodded the exorcist’s neck sharply, sending him snorting awake with only a bit of flailing. “Hwuh?”
“I recommend that you consider sleeping in a position that will not destroy your entire spine.”

“Same to you, then. Trust me, this couch is more murderous than y’think,” John grumbled, as he hauled himself to his feet reluctantly. Then he proferred Loki a hand.

The trickster arched an eyebrow at him. “I’m not moving.”
“I’ll carry you.”
“I weigh more than I appear to.”

“Oh right,” John muttered. “You do, don’t you? Bloody shape-shifters. I’ll drag you, then, and we’ll both hate every second of it.”

With a groan, the god reached up and seized the proferred hand, letting himself rely on that leverage to pull himself to his feet. A lot of swaying followed, and the magician barely managed to keep him upright by seizing both shoulders and making soothing noises that Loki couldn’t, at first, translate into words.

“-you could’ve mentioned you were concussed,” was the tail end of it.

“I hadn’t been fully aware of it myself,” Loki rasped, letting the magician tug one of his arms across mortal shoulders suprisingly capable of bolstering the weak, but still heavy, god’s strength. As a favor, the trickster changed forms back to female-shape, making him only slightly lighter. She winced a bit as the injuries carried over between bodies: a sensation he hadn’t felt in a very long time. It was rare to be so severly hurt, but with the god’s endurance for damages now more mortal-like than Aesir- or Jotunn-like, Loki could expect to grow only more familiar with it, within coming weeks.

“What’d you deface my coat with, by the by? I saw it, where you left it on the couch, stains in the lining and all,” John prompted, his voice helping the trickster focus on something other than his own intense dizziness.

“Transportation seal. Single-use, I’m afraid.”

“Nice.”

“It burnt the last of the borrowed power I got from that talisman.”

“Ah, no wonder you’re still battered.”

“Yes,” Loki said, turning to glare at him until suddenly the world pivoted and there was acute pain, and the god found herself laying in a bed. With a sigh, she reached down and unbuckled the now-
higher-on-her-waist belt she wore. Tugging it off, she dropped it beside the bed and then pulled the
dress shirt up and over her head, not needing to unbutton it now that she wore a shape just smaller
enough that it simply peeled off. Under it, she wore a pale gray t-shirt that fit her only loosely,
though it was clear that in her male form it would’ve clung at shoulders more tightly. She kicked off
her trousers, but kept her stolen silk boxers on as she slipped under the covers and curled up there
like a cat.

She shut her eyes upon feeling John’s fingers on either side of her temples, his fingertips very cool.

“You should fix that concussion, so you can sleep properly.”

Blinking her eyes open slowly, she stared up at him. “I suppose.”

“Borrow, then, you daft bastard.”

Tapping briefly into the mortal’s Spark yet again, Loki drew just enough power from him, and the
environment around them, to fix the concussion, and the mild fracture in her jaw, before the
connection snapped shut hard on both of them, due to their mutual exhaustion, making them both
cringe at the near-whiplash.

“That enough?” John panted.

“Yes, now sleep off the rest of the alcohol your halitosis indicates, you damned fool,” the god
muttered, her eyes falling shut very heavily, all of a sudden.

John moved to his own side of the bed, finished stripping off his boots, tie, belt, trousers, and shirt,
before he too hit the bed and passed out almost instantaneously.

~~

It was barely a quarter past eleven when someone began insistently knocking on the door to John
Constantine’s apartment.

Loki awoke upon the very first knock, then whimpered pathetically and pulled two pillows over her
head in an effort to either suffocate herself, block out the noise, or possibly both. Her entire skull felt
lit up like it was on fire, while the rest of her bones all just ached to their marrow, and her organs
seem to be trying to tie themselves in knots around one another.

John woke only after a full minute of the knocking, and even then only because Loki summoned just
enough strength to shove at his shoulder so hard as to send him rolling almost off the bed. He flailed
a bit violently as he caught himself at the bed’s edge, and turned to muzzily glare at her, but upon
seeing her whole body curl in on itself, and hearing a very muffled, small whine as both of her hands
clutched the pillows tighter, he only shook his head in resignation and stumbled blearily out of the
bedroom, towards his front door.

He opened it, and blinked in pure confusion at the girl standing there looking at him with a surprised
and slightly-grossed-out expression. “Hi,” she said.

Recognizing her voice instantly, John’s expression perk ed up a bit. “Oh, s’just you.” He turned his
head and called back into the apartment barely-above-normal-speaking-tone, “No threat, Lyra.” He
turned back to her. “Skye, right?”
She nodded. “He… er. She’s back, then?”

“Stark sent you?”

“Hill. She figured I’d be more discreet.”

“It’s easy for most people to be more discreet than Stark,” John yawned, rubbing at one eye. “Got what you need, then, little spy?”

“You didn’t call in.” Her eyes narrowed.

“Drained m’self loaning a bit of Spark to fix some injuries. Not mine. Also Stark himself got me drunk as anything, before that. I wasn’t exactly in any state to arrange a covert phone call via magical redial. I’m still not.” He shrugged. “Figured you’d work it out, and look at you! Now you have! Thanks, now I’m going back to sleep off the rest of the booze Stark bought last night.”

“Does he know that he bought it?” Skye asked.

John grinned cheekily. “Oh, by the by, I told Lyra here that I got that facial-distortion tech from you. You’re my contact on the inside, so far as she knows.” He patted her shoulder. “Good on you.” Then he shut his door with a snap. It sounded like it locked more locks, once shut, than a normal door should rightfully have, as well.

Shaking her head, Skye strode down the hall towards the exit, only a little irritated, but mostly trying not to laugh. “Ridiculous bastards, every one of these guys. How do I wind up helping these people?” she asked herself, neither for the first nor the last time.

Melinda appeared beside her a few steps later. “Because you like them.”

“Ugh, why?”

“Because they cultivate a charming charismatic air that’s difficult to hate.”

“Even for you?”

Melinda shrugged. “Well, not for me, personally.”

Skye sighed. “Teach me your ways.”

“One day, young padawan. One day.” She patted the younger agent’s back.

~~

Returning to bed, John couldn’t help the small, amused snort that escaped him at the sight of Loki curled up tightly and still clinging to pillows.

The god tried to send a muffled epithet his way, but the volume of sound from even her own voice seemed to make the pain in her skull worsen, so she stopped. A few minutes later, she felt a gentle finger prod at one of her arms.

“Water,” John said, very softly.
It was still too loud, but it also made Loki suddenly aware of how desperately thirsty she was, and with reluctance, she drew the pillows away from her head and sat up stiffly. Opening one eye just slightly, she spotted the cup in John’s proffered hand, and took it. Closing her eye again, she lifted the cup to her lips and slowly drained it. She could practically feel her body absorbing it, like rain over parched earth.

When the magician produced a pitcher and refilled the cup, she would have kissed him, had she not been rather desperate for a bit more water first.

He watched her carefully, and critically, as she drained almost the whole pitcher before hesitating to reach for another refill. “Bit better?”

Loki’s eyes fluttered open, but remained squinty, like even the relatively low orange glow of a nearby lamp were still too much input, and nearly blinding. She met his gaze nevertheless. “Yes. Thank you.” She set the cup aside on the nearby nightstand, and slumped back onto the haphazardly-sprawled pillows with a small groan.

John was entirely unsurprised when she pulled one pillow over her head again shortly before falling asleep again, snoring very softly. After setting the pitcher down beside her cup, he watched the god sleep for a few long moments, feeling and acutely uncomfortable degree of empathy and something very reluctant and begrudging that he suspected might be a hint of actual gratitude, but he dismissed that as mythical.

Then he wandered into his livingroom and started to call around for delivery. Knowing that magic-drain on a body usually required calorie-loading to conquer as he did, he suspected that having food on hand would only be a sensible self-defense, for the next time Loki awoke.

He wasn’t expecting the first take-out number he called to reach Tony Stark.

“Hey, Connie.”

John resisted the urge to fling his phone at the wall. “You changed this phone number to your cell phone, didn’t you? In the cab, no doubt.”

“Yes, I did.”

“Bollocks.”

“You maybe shouldn’t number them so conveniently. Or employ a passcode. Or anything other than a Nokia from how many years ago?”

“Right, ta for that, right.” John snorted dismissively. “Look, she’s sleeping off a helluva hangover, Chas. Next time just call me directly, you tosser.”

Tony snorted at the Loki-aimed casual deception. “Smooth.”

“Of course she’s probably half-listening. Her senses are still on high-alert after a night like hers; although I suspect she’s out a bit more solidly than before, now, having rehydrated significantly. Doesn’t mean I fully trust it.”

“Yeah, I get it, you’re in your apartment with her.”

“So you willing to pick up some take-out to deliver to my humble abode, mate?”

The inventor rolled his eyes. “Yeah, sure. The rest of the numbers on your phone, I presume?”
“Yes, the usuals. Just enough for a couple of mortals, one of which is bound to be unusually ravenous.”

“Hang on. Usually Thor eats at lest twice what any sane human would at a meal, and he insisted his brother could easily keep up with him a few times. One of them even came with a story-time involving an eating contest, and it sounded a bit horriific.”

“She’s not a demon, Chas, she eats like a normal human, and almost injures about like one. Too much extra food will just rot in my fridge later, mate.”

“Wait, she’s injured?”

“Just a bit, keep you trousers on,” John shot back. “Just a concussion and some abrasions, and the former she borrowed a bit of mojo to heal from. She’ll be right as rain, you’ll see.”

“Fine, fine. Thanks for the update.”

“Seriously, order the food, for me own safety,” the magician insisted gravely.

“Oh, I figured. Will do.”

“Many thanks,” John sighed, and hung up.

Tony Stark sat for a moment and stared into space. “He really is clever. Damn, that was actually a good act.” Shaking his head at himself, he headed out of the lab and back out into the real world, with only a mild hangover, thanks to the marvels of science and his anti-hangover project prototype that Dr. Banner had helped him to create.

Chapter End Notes

*Tip of the hat to one of my favourite short stories of Hellblazer, entitled “Telling Tales”, and written by the admirable curmudgeon known to some as Warren Ellis.

Although, to be honest, this chapter might sort of be a love-letter to the new TV series, in that it draws a little bit of inspiration from it, in Loki’s imitation of Constantine particularly.

**From the song "Anarchy in the U.K." by The Sex Pistols. Because reasons.
In Which John Constantine May Now Be Hot For Teacher and Everyone Else is Horrified

Chapter Summary

A wild Amora appears, on a mission from Hel. She's there to keep Loki on track, on his daughter's behalf, and she's very, very amused by these boys. So amused, she might have more than a few lessons to impart herself.

The god of lies remained comatose for most of her first day back from Latveria, save for a few hours devoted entirely to one long shower and eating a lot of take-out.

The next day, she woke abruptly from another coma-like nap, when one of her wards rattled the floorboards with all the force of someone’s knock on the door, the next afternoon. Where she had been dozing on the couch, waiting for the owner of the apartment to once more return with more sustenance, Loki snapped awake and glared at the door. “Who knocks?” her voice was loud, clear, and a bit offended.

“Do open the door, darling, or he’ll just knock harder,” sing-songed an all-too-familiar voice, which sent the trickster scrambling hastily towards the door; however, only once she opened it did she fully recall her own relative state of sleep-rumpled undress: a loose t-shirt and stolen silk shorts, all whilst the god herself was in her female form, which Loki hadn’t used with any regularity in about a century. Loki settled into a resigned expression, waiting for laughter as soon as Skurge stepped back and Amora forward, with intent to lead him in.

Predictably, Amora froze at the sight of her old friend, and bit her lip. “Wow.” She then looked around inside of the apartment. “Oh you poor thing,” she managed, before a fit of giggles overtook her so abruptly and totally that only one of Skurge’s massive hands gently reaching out to grip her shoulder even kept her upright. She leaned into the supportive contact, letting herself fall backwards against him as she crowed with still brighter and louder laughter. She, of course, was in a tasteful green pea-coat with gold buttons, and dark green leggings, as well as practical ankle-boots not quite Aesir-styled, looking as though she had just left a fashion shoot.

“Whenever you’re finished, I can actually let you in; although depending upon your intentions that might be more difficult than you may think,” the god of lies intoned boredly. She didn’t actually suspect her old friend of ill-intent, exactly, but given the many centuries of their past acquaintance, Loki also knew better than to put it past her. It was only polite to give a little warning, given the wards she had setup in her downtime: old patterns of carving that hadn’t worked properly without use of ice-blades before. It had been an interesting journey of discovery, with the added bonus of making this particular apartment very difficult to invade, if the invader(s) in question bore the occupants any ill.

Wiping a tear from one eye, the Enchantress sighed, amused and content-sounding, once her giggles at last faded. “You answer the door barely-dressed in your female form—which I have missed seeing, honestly, having not bore witness to her in a few years—whilst you are occupying the apartment of what is clearly a chronic bachelor mortal with occult hobbies, and you don’t expect me to laugh? Next, you’ll tell me you’re infatuated with this poor soul.”
“No, he’s actually much more your type, dear,” Loki said, and then instantly regretted it, feeling a sudden sinking sensation to her very bones. “Please forget I said that.”

“If he looks at all like Thor, you may wish me to, but I will not,” she growled, warning.

“In my current position, pardon me for finding your pride and the maintenance thereof very low on my list of priorities these days, Amora dear,” he shot back. “He has similar coloring, but there the likenesses end. He’s an archetypal locus of mine, if you must know.”

“Oh, wow. You actually respect him, you both have that much in common, and you’re still not screwing him?”

“He’s still blond.”

Amora snorted. “You ridiculous creature.”

“Also I’m honestly worried enough that I might break him just living with him, let alone involving my madness with his own sexually, as well. Honestly, darling, he reminds me of myself in my youth, and of you too, in his cunning and wits; however, he is terrified of what I am capable of doing to him and those around him to a degree that I find distinctly unsexy—to his immense relief, I’m sure.”

“Oh, so he sees you clearly then. Now that’s novel,” Amora mused, strolling past him and into the apartment. Skurge narrowed his eyes at the doorway that he dwarfed, and closed the door, audibly trudging away down the hall, probably to patrol outside the apartment building.

Loki was already looking forward to how John might react to that, upon his return, in a distinctly nervous and uneasy sort of way. The Enchantress knew Loki far too well, and now also knew more about the nature of the conditions which the god of lies had been enduring, of recent—conditions that, to most, might not seem ideal, or, upon looking around the apartment itself, even entirely sanitary.

Yet here Loki was enduring and, to the god’s own deep chagrin, actually rather enjoying herself, and she knew that Amora would pick up on that, too. In truth, the degree to which the trickster had been enjoying herself since landing in John Constantine’s life was something that Loki planned to keep to herself, mostly because it was a bit embarrassing, but also because, the fact that it was John Constantine’s life in the first place meant that this made the god feel a bit cruelly like… well, a tourist, frankly. Such a cheap, bitterly plastic little word, unique to Midgard, but Loki had met people of that definition from several other cultures, too, in his wide-ranging travels.

Having been raised a son of Odin, and having matured as a wanderer-mage himself, the idea of being seen as such a shallow, paltry sort of traveler was such an insult to Loki’s own definition of himself as to make him feel ill. It was one of few insults that could mortally wound his pride, if given a chance, if aimed at him by any one of only perhaps six people in all of the universe whose condemnation he would ever consider valid, none of whom would ever even consider using such a tactic.

Well… all except one, now, and John was due back from getting take-out soon enough. Loki managed not to laugh hysterically.

“You look like you’re considering fleeing the room, darling. What’s gotten into you?” Amora stepped closer, invading the trickster’s personal space without the slightest hesitation to touch Loki’s cheek with one hand.

Chuckling at her, Loki shook her head with a weary but oddly self-satisfied half-smile that was all
weariness and wicked satisfaction both, in the wake of victory against Doom. He tried not to think about how good it had felt, earning hysterical laughter and enthusiasm instead of censure or mocking when he had explained it to John, for the first time in so long, from a new source other than those few he’d held within his trust for centuries longer. “It’s been a very trying few days.”

An odd expression crossed the Enchantress’ face, like she was startled a little by something in the words.

“What?”

“I haven’t seen you smile like that in years, but there it is, even though you otherwise look like you’ve been dragged backwards behind Freyja’s chariot across half of Nornheim,” she said quietly, then frowned almost reluctantly. “That won’t do for my deal with your daughter at all.”

Loki blinked several times in rapid succession, trying and failing to figure out what sort of deal the pair had spun up this time. “Your hobby of trying to win an unspecified boon from the queen of Helheim really is a poor disguise for your crush on my daughter.”

“Shush, it’s harmless admiration, and I like making her laugh,” Amora shot back, grinning shamelessly. “And if I had a crush on her, darling, she’d have taken me to bed ages ago, and you know it.”

Loki looked only a little lost. When she tugged him toward the couch, and back under the concealment seal on the ceiling, the trickster shifted into his natural form again. His slightly-bemused expression remained the same despite the transformation.

“She fancied me when she apprenticed under me, darling. It didn’t last, worry not.”

“Ah,” he said. “That would explain a lot, actually.”

Amora was frowning at the couch like it had personally wronged her. “Do tell me you won’t be staying here long enough I’ll be expected to visit very often?”

“That would depend upon your deal with Hel, I should think,” Loki chided, and sat down with a lazy sort of self-assurance that dared her to be squeamish about sitting beside him. His expression softened a little when she shook her head at him with a sigh, and sat beside him as though determined to ignore how unworthy of a perch the coffee-, booze- and blood-stained old couch with its myriad cigarette-inflicted burn-holes truly was. Then the god asked, “What improbable feat have the pair of you come up with this time, in your persistent quest for this boon?”

“At times I think she knows me too well and I find it almost frightening, but at others, it becomes clear she knows you even better, and I’m reassured only a little that, in comparison, I am rather less thoroughly dissected,” she told him, sounding amused and a bit annoyed, as she usually did when she was working out how to come out of this with as much pride intact as possible despite Hel designing a few of the rules deliberately against her nature. It was part of the game, for the both of them, and it tended to deter others from trying to challenge the queen of Helheim anytime they felt particularly unhappy about being dead, or facing death in general; a sort of advertising that benefitted both mage-queen and Enchantress in their reputations, and thus also benefitted their powers and the stability of their magics. The trick, however, was continuing to evolve the game to prevent either of them getting bored, and allowing Amora to struggle against sufficiently impressive odds that her continued losses didn’t actually lose her power or repute.

Loki admired their game, and was absurdly proud both.
“You still didn’t answer the question, again, darling.”

“I was getting to it!”

“You were being deliberately ambiguous because you don’t want me to know that she gave me the veto power in this deal, I’m assuming,” he offered.

The Enchantress frowned at him. “I hate when you’re right like that.”

He grinned at her cheekily.

She shook her head and finally explained, “You have to tell her, sincerely and without prompting from me at the time, that I was instrumental in aiding you to overcome this task Odin has laid out for you, meet the challenges you raised against him before you were cast down, and grow beyond the sickness you have been weakened by in magic, body, mind and soul alike, over the past few years.” Her expression turned more sympathetic then, as Loki began to look slightly wrecked. “Trickster, teach thyself, dear. Yes, it’s come to this.”

“I’d noticed, thanks,” he snapped.

“You snap at me like that again, darling, and I’ll seal your lips together. You now lack the power to even try and stop me, and you know it,” the Enchantress warned, her smile suddenly unkind. “You have let abuse make you abusive, and it will all come back upon you, thrice as hard, and you must endure that, same as all of us mages. You had to know that you couldn’t flee nor hide from that forever.”

Loki’s eyes lit up with sudden certainty, which was soon colored with disgust and resignation both. “Ah.”

“You look like you’re not just thinking about your psyche now.”

The trickster emitted a small, slightly-hysterical laugh. “Not just mine, no. Damn. It started coming back to me even before they sent me down here, and it started on Earth, didn’t it?” Suddenly his decision to give John Constantine back the gift for sensing and manipulating synchronicity directly—which should have by rights been gifted to the magician’s twin brother, who died in the womb: a stillborn savior, under the prophecy of the Laughing Magician, down on Earth—seemed like a grave mistake. His children had seen it as an opportunity, watching their father more closely than Odin ever did, and they had taken it: using the leverage of Loki’s own instability and the nature of his mortal locus to twist this lesson-learning exile into something the All-Father of Asgard could have never concocted. They were making his own magic as inclined to keep him here as Odin’s own spells, which he could feel writhing a little now that he was aware of the power-shift. To get his powers back now, he would have to confront his own actions and himself, but not alone as Odin had intended.

Queen Hel, and also Fenrir had tangled him up with a mortal—a reluctant protector-of-Earth, who might be the embodiment of a certain genre of pure anti-authority and anti-hegemony rebellion made flesh—so like unto Loki himself that he had already come to the private realization that leaving John Constantine’s company for good would hurt him. Now, unable to ignore the signs, mystic and otherwise, tangling up his life and his history with this mortal’s, he realized that he had been blind.

His own damned magic had picked the ideal guide to help him confront and overcome the damages done to his soul, his sense of empathy, by his actions during and after his fall, on Earth. Because he had pissed off the natural forces of Midgard, strange and twisted old things, cunning and always just out of sight to the likes of mages too flash-blind from using less subtle forms of magic and power,
which could make them all the more dangerous to cocksure travelers. And John Constantine was practically their mascot, he was pretty certain.

“This planet was already trying to teach me a lesson before Odin meddled.”

“Well of course,” Amora sighed. “You crawled back from the opposite armpit of the galaxy to this one little backwater planet here. This is where you returned to Yggdrasil. It is where the next chapter of your tales walking the branches of this tree all began anew before, and begin anew again now that you’ve returned here in Odin-forged chains.”

“And this world is also where he hung for nine days bleeding,” Loki murmured. “I begin to discover a pattern, here, for the sorts of lessons life on Earth imparts to the likes of arrogant wanderer-gods.”

“Well, yes. It also certainly doesn’t help that that new first-impression you left is one of many things you get to face a series of reckonings for, if you’re to survive them without further corrosion of your very self. In whatever form they will take, particularly given that Hel already altered the spells you are under with the help of her contacts in Nifelheim, to make certain you will not be freed of the binding spells in your flesh until you have faced and overcome them. Odin himself couldn’t unbind you now if even he wished; she has forged new keys while he slept.”

Loki’s face went suddenly ashen. “I… did not feel so lost as to merit this.”

The Enchantress looked suddenly very sorry, leaning to press her side against his and rest her head atop his shoulder, letting him lean against her, too. “What else did you think would drive them to this, Loki? They see you as you are. They could see, even before you attacked Jotunnheim, the wounds Asgard had inflicted upon you over time beginning to deepen, to bleed more freely. Odin’s farce running out was inevitable, but not foreseeable to them, sadly; however, it was the strain in those last decades before its final collapse which drove you to such desperation. You could not be heard in any of your warnings about Odin’s foolish decisions and Thor’s recklessness, save by those who always hear you, of which you scarcely have a few more of in your life than I do in my rather more solitary one, Prince.”

The god of lies winced, at that.

“Having only those closest people to hear you could not have possibly been enough, for what you needed to say, and what Asgard needed, and needs, to hear. We all knew it, and knew we would never be heeded either,” Amora continued, lifting her head and tugging his chin to make him look her in the eye. “So it’s time for you to change, and adapt to the new Yggdrasil as you know it, and stop wallowing in the memory of the old one.”

Loki took her face gently in both hands, and kissed her forehead. “I hate you.”

“You don’t.”

“I don’t.”

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Of all of the many things Skurge the Executioner had been called over the years, “subtle” wasn’t exactly the most common. He was very large, very muscular, and he had the sort of resting-vicious facial expression settled on his angular features that tended to be popular in the portraiture of black
metal bands. He was all viking cheekbones and burning dark eyes, but still relatively handsome under the facial hair. Also, when John got halfway down the last street between himself and his apartment, he noticed that the large instrument case (a double bass, and the man—man? alien? robot? could be anything, these days—wore it like a schoolboy’s backpack) Skurge carried was actually a glamour.

It was, in fact, a familiar style of magic, almost: something close to what extra-terrestrial fae tended to use to hide traps and weapons. *Bloody brilliant.*

Keeping an eye on the hulking giant as he kept walking without hesitation, though, he realized the bastard was standing guard, keeping an eye on all approaches to the building, and keeping eyes and ears on all happenings around it: people, traffic, et cetera.

That led John to deduce that Loki most likely had a visitor. When the guard only stared at him steadily, but made no movements towards him, as John strolled into the building and up his usual staircase as though nothing was odd, that further convinced him. One guard, but a big and nasty one, suggested a discreet visit: someone else not exactly allied with Asgard, then. Idly, the magician wondered who, as he knocked on his own apartment door with the toe of his boot, hands full as they were with bags of take-out from two different restaurants. He raised both eyebrows when Loki answered the door in female form, looking almost sheepish.

“Old flame or sommat?”

“No, she was infatuated with my brother for far too many years for that to apply.”

John blinked. “Er.”

“One of my oldest friends,” Loki said.

“And her, ah, bodyguard with the musical instrument case probably full of murder?”

“That is my pet Executioner. His name is Skurge,” a sweet voice called, all mirthful teasing. “You can let him in, dear, I won’t bite.” Then when the door swung open further and John caught sight of the gorgeous blonde sitting in the middle of his couch like it was a throne. Her grin widened, showing a bit more of her teeth, and her sage-green eyes seemed to brighten further still. “Oh, nevermind, maybe I will.”

John had the thought, fleetingly, that he would let her. A lot. He told himself to shake off such a thought, but he did nothing of the sort, and instead smirked, looking intrigued and also tilting his head a bit to one side in a manner intended to be at once cock-sure, while also slightly exposing more of his throat, with equal deliberation. He had a bit of a type. “Perhaps later.”

Something in the Enchantress’ expression went from gleeful mirth to animal hunger in the blink of an eye, and then back again. “Oh, I like him.”

Loki rolled his eyes so sharply they hurt afterwards. “She’s provided me a reluctant insight, and a solution to a number of my problems, quite accidentally,” he said to John, ignoring their flirting altogether to deny both of them the satisfaction of seeing his discomfort or actual irritation.

Amora pouted, and John’s grin increased in obnoxiousness a couple of degrees.

*There is a quaint phrase on this planet, I believe, for this: ‘with friends like this, who needs enemies?’* indeed, Loki thought, and dragged the mortal con-man through the door lightly by a grip on the irreverently-loose knot of his narrow black tie, then closed the door behind him. “However,”
she continued, “all of that has created some new problems worth discussing.” She then returned to
the couch to sit beside Amora, changing into male-shape again as he did so. Amora instantly melted
against his side like a cat in a sunbeam and smiled fiercely at him when he shot her a mild glare.

“Food first, darling. You’ll be much more sensible,” she chided.

The god frowned, but didn’t argue, reaching out for the first bag of takeout.

The magician settled back to play spectator, while picking at his own curry.

*Clearly*, John tried to remind himself, *trucking with alien god-like types too often is a horrible idea
for a modest conjurer like myself.* He held the thought for approximately 1.48 seconds before another
part of his brain responded, *Nice try, old son, but you’re ensnared and now there’s an insane
goddess who might be offering sex. We couldn’t turn back now even if we wanted to, and you damn
well know it.*

Then he had the idle thought that she might somehow try to involve the bodyguard, as he reflected
on her referring to him as her pet. Looking Amora over once more, a little more slowly, from head to
toe, and reviewing his memory of Skurge too, he grudgingly admitted a sort of morbid curiosity
there, depending purely on certain physiological logistics in relation to ‘avoiding permanent damage’
least, in the long run. It had been a while since he’d pushed some of these particular boundaries.
Might be about time to revisit, again. It would have to go better than the last time he tried it in the
U.S—*that* had been a debacle he still wasn’t exactly proud of.

In comparison, Skurge wasn’t unattractive to John physically or ethically thusfar, exactly, so much as
intimidatingly reminiscent of a lot of the sort of people the magician had been beaten up by off and
on throughout his… entire life, to be honest; although that did mean that the prospect of seeing
someone like that dominated by Amora had a sort of appeal John couldn’t deny in the least, once
he’d thought about it. Her ‘pet’.

Damn, the magician realized. He knew when he was hooked, and there was a heaviness in Loki’s
expression, a sort of nervousness and mild regret, that only further set John’s teeth a bit on-edge.

At least, these were some of the thoughts in his head once he had settled in his chair at one end at the
coffee table, and set the bags of take-out before Loki and Amora on the adjacent couch, and was
vaguely aware of their conversation about food in different nations of Alfheim and Vanaheim,
compared to that of Earth.

The rest of his thoughts were aimed at how amusingly affectionate-yet-slightly-embarrassed Loki
was around this woman, who had clearly known him for millennia. In John’s experience, the sorts of
relationships people share with the women in their lives tended to put some of the most interesting
facets of their personalities on display, when examined closely. Amora, clearly, was an old friend of
Loki’s as the trickster god said, and their relationship was casually sibling-like, in ways the magician
could recognize from a number of his own past relationships. He smiled a little wistfully, and sadly,
recalling Mercury.

To a seasoned cold-reader like John, the story between the two mages was easy to read, with even
just the hints at cultural context he had gotten from the past few days from Loki, and the frank,
inhibited way they interacted. John could see their relative ages in how easily Loki slipped into the
’straight man’ act (and wasn’t that a lark) when teased by her: somehow fraternal, yet not actually
possessive in the manner of blood-siblings. They were still otherwise close in age, though, to go by
how informal their mutual regard was, and the intense familiarity with one another wherein they
began to display hints of one another’s verbal tics, the longer they conversed over nothing, while
eating.
From the cadence of their mutual mockery, and the street wizard’s impression of what it must have been like for Loki growing up in a place like Asgard, he was also sure that they had bonded, in the past, over their dark gardens of secret shared jealousies and resentments, and their mutual love of expressing those vengeful feelings via mischief-making and other inherently subversive tactics. They had been long-time confidants, occasional rivals, who respected one another, but were both too inherently irreverent and unwilling to complement one another directly, to possibly show it without distilling it first into witty, sarcastic banter.

Since Amora was—in her voice and overall performative demeanor, at least—a very self-confident, and self-aware woman as well as a mage, John guessed that she had probably come out of those centuries of toxic ideas and humiliation and pain to a sort of inner peace with her own value, based on her rejection of those toxic elements. She expressed it in her sexuality, to an extent, but to John’s eye, the particularly sinuous self-awareness with which she moved made him sure, somehow, that her confidence was based in how much she enjoyed feeling poisonous.

Amora the Enchantress moved like she knew that anyone who dared reach her way, without her express permission, would suffer immediate and immense pain, somehow, and it gave her immense comfort and an almost innocent-seeming lack of physical boundaries that was as unnerving as it was morbidly endearing.

Judging by the bodyguard, and this low-key visit which Loki was not at all actually offended by, though, the magician hazarded that Amora probably wasn’t in Asgard’s good graces anymore, though, same as Loki these days. John wondered when and how, exactly, she had fallen out of them, and why it had taken Loki so long to catch up.

Amora shot him a look and he somehow knew she’d picked up on his thoughts. She winked at him, further confirming it with a conclusive: “I know, right?”

“Stop that,” Loki said quietly. “It’s rude.”

“Sorry,” she said. “I’m a little psychic, and your head leaks like a wound. It’s, ah, probably a side effect of your soul being…” She looked momentarily very professionally, clinically detached from whatever she was seeing, looking through him for a moment and into him, all too deeply. She cleared her throat. “Well, let’s say I’d have to be gentle with you, at first, by my standards.” Clinical distance was replaced by a smile showing almost all of her teeth.

John had been propositioned by dominatrixes before. None of them had quite had the same effect on him as that sentence did—not that he could begin to describe the sensation that hit him after: skittering and vague as it was. He was genuinely undecided about whether to be terrified or excited. He glanced sidelong at Loki for some hint of the chances he would survive exploring this particular person’s proclivities.

Loki appeared resigned, but shrugged and gave a slight nod. You’ll live. She likes you that much, seemed implied.

Thus, John decided that he had done worse and more dangerous stupid things, with far less reliable reassurance, before, and that he therefor saw absolutely no reason to stop now. Confidence bolstered, he shot the Enchantress one of his better charming smiles, and let his shoulders relax and roll back slightly, making his posture more open, and more inviting, both.

Loki rather enjoyed watching the lazy satisfaction in the magician’s expression go out like a candle in a sudden gust of wind as he intoned gravely, “I need you to teach me your own version of the human art of post-traumatic decompression, and I would like to request your counsel, in tying up the loose ends associated with my recent crimes against your world. With your aid, I would apply aid
and support, as much as possible, to all of the lives affected by my actions on Earth in the past
decade or so.”

For a moment, the magician looked slightly horrified. Then he paled a bit further and looked slightly
nauseous. “You’re not kidding. That makes sense. It would work perfectly to unshackle you, if done
right, and honestly might be healthy for you to face down. Nothing like learning by doing, is there?
Strewth.”

“Yes!” Amora punched the air with both fists over her head. “I have been instrumental in fomenting
this plot!”

“I’m still not admitting that to Hel until it actually works, dear,” Loki chided.

“Wait what?” John stumbled.

“I have a wager with her. If I win, she owes me an unspecified favor: a boon of my choosing,” she
explained succinctly.

“You have anything in mind to do with it, once you’ve got it?” asked the magician.

“Cherish it, and revel in it, mostly,” the Enchantress said, with a shrug.

Loki smiled at her, soft and affectionate and appreciatively malicious. “This is why you are my
friend, darling. Thank you.”

She grinned back it him, with a saucy wink. “You’re lucky to have my favor.”

“And I do know it,” Loki conceded, in airy tones, only a little mocking, which she frowned at him
for, but forgave him when he stroked her head where it rested on his shoulder and then massaged the
base of her neck slightly, making her sigh in a manner somewhere between dismissive and sated.

“Our hands’ve lost strength,” she muttered.

“Well yes, darling, that’s a part of my sentence.” He gestured down at his left forearm with his right
hand, the movement just as droll as his voice.

“I’m not making an observation, I’m complaining about Odin being deplorable,” she protested.
“Your hands are too talented to be so wasted.”

“You say that, but he can still crush my windpipe way more easily than I could crush most people’s,”
John pointed out. “He’s still got a bit of an advantage, down here.”

“Oh, that’s just because he’s a shape-shifter willing to alter his musculature in minor degrees to
facilitate increased strength; he just does that by making subtle alterations to his musculoskeletal
arrangements under the skin,” Amora explained dismissively.

“That… is actually a bit creepy, mate,” John said.

“You would if you could and you know it.”

The magician made a face. “I dunno. Sounds uncomfortable, at the least.”

“So does partial soul-vivisection,” Loki shot back.

John grimaced. “Fair point, that. You’re right: not my business.”
“Thank you.”

Amora glanced between them, back and forth, with a slightly odd, but disconcertingly crafty expression on her face. “Ah-hah,” she said flatly.

Both con-men looked at her not-quite sheepishly, like they didn’t want to admit yet to feeling at all caught out. Their obliviousness to the fact their expressions were so similar lasted as long as it took them both to try and surreptitiously glance at one another sidelong, at which point simultaneously they did slip back into their same masks from earlier, just before meeting one another’s eyes.

“By the Norns, you both are ridiculous,” the Enchantress giggled. “Your faces, the both of you I cannot even begin-” she trailed off, laughing helplessly.

Both men exchanged a silent eyebrow-based interrogation for a few seconds, then looked at her again in shared confusion, as John asked, “What?”

“I’ll tell you later if you’re a particularly good boy, Mr. Constantine.”

“Oh, never that,” he assured, grinning pure rebellion at her.

“Is that so?” she sounded curious, and inclined to provoke.

John very much felt inclined to be provoked, and the way his eyebrows arched just so, in a silent challenge, said as much.

Amora looked like she wanted to bite at that smirk of his.

“Spare me,” Loki deadpanned, “for a while yet, at the least. I… would request your advice and guidance, here, John. An answer for me: have you got one?”

The magician felt extremely uneasy. “Clarify further, please.”

“I cannot trust my own perspective, in these cases. My children, and Amora, have made that painfully clear to me,” said the god of lies, slow and reluctant. “As I am in need of counsel, I must submit my will to the patient trials of education, but as a mage and trickster alike, I cannot surrender to any ideology which would accept my lies as easily as my truths. I can’t cheat my way out, as Odin expected me to by trying Thor’s version of redemption for a spin, and not by reviewing all of my actions without someone else there who will not let me close my eyes to any of it.” He nodded pointedly at Constantine. “You won’t.”

“Admittedly, that might be a habit of mine, with abusive people, that honestly gets me into a lot of trouble,” John admitted.

“Your ideology is one of heirarchal deconstruction and deliberate subversion of all traditions old and new alike, with equal irreverence; all of these things, I cannot help but respect, given my own truest nature. Furthermore, you are not a leader of men, whenever you can avoid the responsibility, because you prefer others to take responsibility for their own actions and leave you out of it, deep down. Unless you’re spoiling for a fight, at the time, of course, but I don’t think that you are, these days.”

“I’m very much not,” John concurred.

“I believe that I may need you to accompany me on this journey, and provide your own unique variety of insight, in order to put my actions in their proper perspective. You, I can trust to be appropriately merciless in dealing with the likes of myself and the repercussions of my actions, but also... empathetic, regardless, given how hopelessly similar we both are. My own capacity for
empathy being… damaged ever since my fall through the void, I need to re-learn it all over again. I think that I can trust that you, more than any other man on earth, are simply too stubborn in your amoral justice ideals to let me get away with dismissing the wrong lessons too easily, which is the most important quality, here, I suspect.”

Taking a deep breath, the god then added, slowly given the weight in each syllable: “In exchange… I can offer a solemn vow to repair your soul and prevent Hell’s fires every touching it again, should we both succeed in freeing me from my current binding curses.”

For a long moment, all of the mortal street-wizard’s words dried up. He felt a shift under him, solely metaphysical: a sensation of being more deeply respected than he had ever asked for, by someone he had secretly respected more than he ever wished to admit to himself, let alone anyone else. The sensation was painfully familiar; although it more usually accompanied the ghosts who haunted him, of friends he had burnt up along the way, as his own narrative rolled on and on down the decades and people close to him had continued to die in too-large numbers for anyone’s good.

Then it hit him. The most basic laws of magic hit him in the face like a half-frozen halibut, and just as slimy. “You need to balance out the misery you’ve caused in order to repair your own pseudo-sanity and empathy both, for your children to ever let you free again, and in order to do that, you need to examine hundreds of mortal lives you’ve affected, down here on Earth, to work out how to bring, to those survivors affected by all those deaths, back some semblance of the harmony you destroyed. You need me, of all fucking people, to teach you how to do that.”

“Apparently,” Loki said, in tones of deep exasperation, “yes. Just so. I believe it was some of Earth’s natural protective magics which might have dragged you to that summoning circle in Wales in the first place, in fact.” He arched an eyebrow. “On the plus side, if we can charm our mark sufficiently, then we shall have Tony Stark’s empire of resources to expedite the process, in the more clear-cut cases.”

John Constantine blinked at him a few times and thought at first, Oh, I’ll teach your smug face a few lessons, alright, then he realized that was exactly what every non-Earthly party in this clusterfuck of an equation wanted him to do, and nearly slapped his own forehead. He resisted the urge, but it was a near thing.

I suddenly agree with Stark: screw Asgard for putting this burden on us. Then he reconsidered Asgard’s understanding of all of the issues at hand, and sneered further. They barely understood the depths of the damages they had wrought to Loki in the first place, and only shallow understanding of the resulting damage the trickster god had recently wreaked on earth in a fit of mad and destructive arrogance and rage, but Asgard was also still trying to play congenial towards Earth otherwise, and as peacefully supportive as Thor’s good public image would allow them to appear, weren’ they?

Well, John had to wonder, helplessly intrigued by a few ideas of his own, suddenly, what about Loki? What about how close those two brothers had been for millennia, by the sound of it? What about the forces that broke them apart as subtly as an earthquake, which in turn later inspired the typhoon which was Loki’s return from his own personal Heart of Darkness back into Yggdrasil’s branches, or whatever?

What about Odin? What about Odin’s flaws?

John began to smirk. “Well. Maybe, just maybe… I’ve got a few ideas.”

Loki’s answering grin was as terrifying as it was thrilling, in response.

Amora reached over to put one hand over the magician’s wrist, where it rested on the arm of John’s chair. Her touch was warmer-than-human, seeming almost feverish against the mortal’s cooler skin.
“Then impress me,” she challenged.

John swallowed tightly. “I get a feeling like you’re a lethal woman, Miss Amora.”

“You may call me ‘Enchantress’ if you prefer.”

“Amora!” Loki censured in a low grumble, more exasperated than genuinely disapproving, at all.

“I like the sound of it, actually,” John suggested.

Loki scoffed quietly, then actually growled a bit, but only once the Enchantress sharply elbowed him in the side. “Seriously?”

She shot him an unwavering, steely glare.

It took a few seconds, spent mostly upon shrewdly examining various minutiae about her expression and posture, before Loki sighed and waved off his own response to that, like he was no longer devoted enough to his prior doubts to bother. “As you like it, then, darling.”

“This is the most flustered and exasperated I’ve ever seen you,” John pointed out, making the god shoot him a half-hearted glare.

“That would be because he is recalibrating his various façades, around you, while he’s quite so uncertain what exactly the both of you want from one another outside all your deal-brokering, I’m guessing,” Amora remarked lightly, as though discussing the weather.

Both male tricksters looked uneasily back at her.

“It’s clear you both are secretly complete pushovers to those you consider your good friends, when actually asked for help,” she added. “The added factors of precisely who and what you both are, and your current situation are compelling you to trust one another, but you’re both too damned embarrassed to admit you even want to in the first place.”

“Wow, love; you really pull no punches at all,” the magician muttered. “You should meet my cadre of ghosts, actually. They could use a telling off like this, for their persistent lingering.”

“Which you know is due to your own guilt more than any choice of theirs,” Amora responded.

John cringed. “Suppose I walked into that one.”

“You did,” Loki assured quietly. “I have been too stubborn to allow myself to… wallow in guilt, exactly. I used to be very bad about it, and then made efforts to stop, ever since my daughter was born.”

“It’s not about wallowing,” Amora said, “it’s admitting to your faults and repairing some of the damage you have done. You’ve accumulated enough enmity and negatively-charged mystic debt to kill a lesser mage than yourself, and if you never take into account all of your mistakes, never address them, and instead allow them to fester outside of your awareness, then they will afflict your magic like a cancer, in ways even your children cannot protect you from. You must heal, before you can go back to setting some necessary forest-fires, back in Asgard, to clear away the dead and rotten ideas about the place.”

Loki smiled at her sadly, and stroked her hair again. “This is why you’re my favorite Asgardian menace.”
“I always knew my best chances of ever visiting home again stood with you causing civil unrest. I’m frankly surprised you had to have it spelled out for you, like this, Loki darling,” she chimed.

At that, the trickster might have gaped a little.

John, on the other hand, grinned all the wider. “Wait a minute: we fix his toxic debt issue, and in the process not only can I get my own soul repaired, but I can aid in fomenting revolutionary ideologies in a place as ancient and stodgy as Asgard?”

“Yes, and you get to spend some of that time basking in my presence as well,” Amora assured, with a wink. “Now that I’m Hel’s eyes and ears on this matter.”

“You do lay it on a bit thick, but it suits you,” the magician remarked. “Do keep in mind my being a fragile human, please, is all I do ask.”

Her smile softened a little around the eyes, even as she again showed more teeth. “I will break you only as far as you beg me, and no further, John Constantine.”

Idly, John remembered why he had explored this part of his psyche so seldomly. It was always intimidating, handing power over to others, but this particular form of subversion had been the glorious downfall of several Constantines before him, and the only saving grace of a few, rarer, others, and John hadn’t liked those odds, from the start. Furthermore he was lucky in his life to have met over a dozen respectable women with the intellect and confidence to be so effortlessly, indiscreetly dominant in casual interpersonal interactions, yet not dehumanizing—with no pretense, and no hollow posturing—in all the ways that appealed to John’s tastes; he had even then only been inclined to experiment with very few of them. He certainly hadn’t ever anticipated that another such woman might saunter into his life, and in addition happen to be an extraterrestrial sorceress with a big murderous (yet probably submissive to her) pet bodyguard, disinclined to take over the Earth if she can instead harass the god of lies into becoming a better person for her own purposes and schemes as much as anyone else’s. Clearly, this was not an opportunity to be wasted.

“Should I leave, and hang some warning indicator upon the doorknob?” Loki drawled, when he got tired of watching them both maintain eye contact and how John started to look slightly flushed.

“I’m patient,” Amora assured.

“You really think you can put those pieces of my soul back without poisoning me with them?” John asked in flat, brittle tones suddenly, his stare swiveling back to the god of lies with open suspicion, all mirth suspended with startling immediacy.

Loki nodded. “It will not be painless, for rather the poison will need to be drawn out after those pieces have been reintegrated, and it will not be easy, but I can repair the damage you have done to yourself, there, with my daughter’s aid, and she does still owe me a significant favor.”

Amora looked only a little jealous. “Not fair.”

“I’m her father, darling. I taught her most of the tricks she’s used on you for these deals of yours,” he reminded her gently.

“I know,” she sighed deeply. “What was worse, dear, is that I recognized them as yours, and knew them well, and it helped me against them not even a little.” She glared at him. “You can be that damned clever, when you’re not pretending to be like-minded enough with all of Asgard to survive comfortably under an Aesir crown, in disguise or no.”

“I put a good deal of necessary changes into motion,” Loki protested.
“You inspired a coup against you!” she snapped. “So clearly you still didn’t do it discreetly or securely enough by far! They have already almost overturned half of your progressive measures, as a result, Loki!”

“That coup was not against solely *me*,” the god responded, soft and brittle. “Did they not tell you that, as well as what else has been recently cauterized out of my neurons?” When she drew back from him, looking lost, he knew they hadn’t. “I have too many memories now with gaping holes in them where there once was certainty, Amora. There were shards left from Thanos, that I had not found, and they festered, where I could not see them.” His voice shook only slightly.

“I’m sorry,” she said quietly. “They had spoken of Thanos again, but not of how—-I did not know it had been all that time since—”

“All of it, poisoned, rather, yes, and now I’ve that mess to clean up as well,” Loki sighed, rubbing at one temple. “I feel as though I’ve been as blind as Thor.”

“You have,” Amora said.

“Low blow, love,” John muttered, eyes narrowed in respectful unease, showing her his own discomfort with her words, more than disapproval of her use of them on Loki, to give her perspective.

The Enchantress read his expression, the deliberation behind it, and John Constantine’s entire character (at least in a very broad, general sense, in that she was suddenly aware of the man’s skillful applications of sympathetic looks and empathy, as well as the outlines too of all his sharper edges) all at once, and then seemed inclined to reread it immediately, once more taking him in from head to toe all over again, this time a little slower and more openly appreciative. She forgot, for a moment, what she had been about to say.

Loki took one look at her expression and began sniggering.

“I really hate it when you’re right,” she hissed at him, her eyes rolling ceiling-ward rather than hold the gaze of either man, suddenly.

John’s grin went slow and sly. “You like me, then.”

She shot him a glare.

Deliberately irreverent, the magician winked right back at her.

While the slight blush at Amora’s cheekbones was pretty, the way her eyes went a bit dark and the rest of her expression went thoughtfully predatory, meant that she looked no less intimidating for it.

“I tried to warn you,” Loki said quickly. “You can’t say I didn’t.”

“You did?” they both asked simultaneously.

“Well not you, John. I hardly had time to fit that in, since your return here.”

“You warned her about *me*?” he sounded on the verge of disbelieving laughter. “Now that’s the funniest shit I’ve heard all day.”

“I suggested that while you were more her type than mine, you were more like myself than my brother.”
“You did,” she sighed. “You still didn’t-”

“It would’ve only encouraged you.”

Amora huffed, but didn’t disagree.

John sniggered despite himself, with an edge of hysterical bitterness. The fact that drew a look of intrigue into Amora’s expression instead of hesitation told him a great deal about her, and the fact it still slightly turned him on told him more about himself than he felt like examining too deeply, at the moment. Especially since she was still looking at him like that.

Loki himself was cursing his own desperate wits for accidentally paving the way for this, in deflecting Amora’s suggestiveness from the start. “I see my foremost mistake was ever, for even a single moment, doubting that my life is anything but a farce.”

“Comes with the archetype. Even I could’ve told you that, from the start, mate,” John countered.

“You forget too,” the god of lies chided, “often enough.”

“As do we all. It is necessary, at times, in the working of magic,” Added Amora.

“Also true,” Loki murmured.

“How do you even doubt it for a second, though, mate? Just look at you.”

The god considered thoughtfully, then snorted. “I’m no longer certain how I did ever suspend that disbelief in the first place, but that is not actually reassuring, in my case.” He only mostly concealed the slight shiver that ran through his whole body at the memory of so much lost time under Thanos’ control, and in the void before that.

The Enchantress drew his head down and kissed his brow, then. “Then you will conquer the doubts it has woken, as is their due, or you will embrace them, but deny them no more, my friend. Please.”

“Especially since you want me to hunt them down even less than I want to see the places I’d have to hunt them down to,” John added. When both alien mages looked at him sharply, then, he chuckled a little. “It’s been too long since I last visited New York, I think. In fact, I think I’ll join you, there, so long as my, uh, security upgrades are included in the agreement. No more Doom incidents.”

“Thank you,” Loki said softly, meeting the magician’s gaze cautiously.

“Well now, I wouldn’t say that until we all three come out the other side of this alive,” Amora recommended, “but I do personally appreciate your willingness.”

“I’m sure,” the god deadpanned.

The Enchantress pulled him upright again then, no longer coddling, looking as aloof and unimpressed as a damp cat.

“You don’t mind being John’s security detail do you?” Loki then asked. “It would be most instrumental to our cause.”

She snorted at him daintily, raising her chin. “Fine. Hiding one peripatetic occult enthusiast from all of the enemies of the Avengers, yourself, and probably Asgard too just for good measure.” Rolling her eyes, she said simply, “Don’t make me put a leash on you, John Constantine.”

John shook his head at both of them, but then sighed in satisfaction: “This is a terrible decision. I’m
all for it. That just leaves the part where you’re trying to get into Stark’s pants.”

Lighting up with a grin to put the cheshire cat to shame, Amora crowed, “Oh really now, is that it?”

Loki gave a small, resigned groan. “Constantine, you are a cad.”

“Oh absolutely,” the magician concurred.


Tony Stark had not been prepared to come face-to-face with a horse-sized wolf before he had even reached the coffeemaker, the morning after Loki’s return from Latveria had been confirmed. He had spent the evening with the rest of S.H.I.E.L.D. trying to figure out what exactly the trickster had done to that little nation-state, and how. In the end, they’d had to call in a couple favors with Strange to get the root cause identified.

Of course, Doc Strange then nearly went ballistic once he identified the plague spell. Apparently it was from some nasty, long-dead ancient civilization that had done a spot of damage to Greenwich recently. It took them a long while to convince him not to go lock up Loki himself for being a danger to anyone the trickster god might come into contact with. A long while—and a lot of shouting matches with the god of thunder.

Thor had been relieved, it turned out, that at least one of his fellow Avengers seemed to know about Loki’s earthbound situation, in all of its details. He admitted that swearing not to speak of it had been one of the last things he wished to do, but he would have been barred from returning to Earth at all, until Loki’s exile was over, if he had not agreed to make such a pledge.

He had also been willing to take Earth’s Sorcerer Supreme to Asgard, to discuss “security concerns” about Loki, and apparently the All-Father had agreed to meet with him despite ignoring most other previous offers for diplomatic meetings in relation to the general topic of Loki for… the entire duration of time Tony Stark had known of Asgard’s existence, honestly.

It was really starting to get on his nerves, already, but for Strange to get a free ride for his ridiculous excuse for a title had put Tony in something of a foul mood that night. The next morning was painful enough via hangover even before his own yelp of shock and fear at the sudden appearance of the massive wolf in the middle of his path, so that Fenrir was between his bedroom and the coffee-maker.

The noise made Tony’s head ache still worse, adding insult to injury.

“Ffffucksakes, Fenrir, I’ve told you about how important my relationship with caffeine is!”

“Amora the Enchantress has returned to Earth.”

The inventor blinked at him blearily for a moment, then held up one forefinger, strolling around him to greet the cup of coffee JARVIS had thankfully set it to prepare for him ahead of time. He drained it very quickly, then returned it to its prior place, whereupon the machine immediately refilled it.

That achieved, Tony turned to face Fenrir with an unimpressed look, sipping from his second cup.

“You have my attention, but I’m still not all here yet. Start explaining while I continue the necessary.” He gestured at the cup. “Also if you could help with this hangover?” He looked hopeful.
The wolf rolled his eyes, but did raise one oversized paw and wave it vaguely toward the inventor, who emitted a sigh of bliss at both the alleviation of immediate agony and because he was sipping his coffee again.

Then Fenrir explained, “She is in corroboration with my sister, which is to say that they have a wager on. I tried to tell Hel I had this covered, but apparently she still doubted… something.” His brow furrowed. “I thought she meant his staying with yourself, but she is occasionally cryptic even with me. I believe Constantine may be more important than I previously assumed.”

Tony was about a third of the way through more slowly, appreciatively draining his second cup of coffee, by the time Fenrir finished. He snorted. “Well yeah, they get along like a house on fire, and con-artist though he is, Constantine has enough of a combination of slightly-soft-heart and irrepressible curiosity fit to make it unlikely he’d be able and willing both, to disentangle himself fully from Loki’s life. The fact he **is** so willing pretty much was an indicator Loki had accidentally hooked him already, too, so it was really only a matter of time before your dad realized he could actually bother to learn from the little bastard, a bit, while he’s at it.”

Fenrir gaped at him a little.

“What?”

“You… exceed expectations, at times.”

“All the time, yeah. It’s what I do. So what’s the big deal?”

“How do you… get along… with Constantine?”

Suddenly Tony realized the full implications. “No. No, no, and no. He’s not moving in here with your dad.”

“Stark-”

“The technology around this place alone would throw him off entirely-”

“Then arrange for another apartment nearby. He doubtlessly wouldn’t appreciate being under non-stop technological surveillance, here, as a Spark of his sort,” Fenrir remarked coldly. “He will be involved.”

“Why?”

“He has the potential to become a grief-mage, in time, or a genuine hero, though that’s definitely still as up-in-the-air now as it ever was, for the likes of Constantine. Even to my sister and my queen, who is one of the most far-sighted seers in all the nine, his eventual fate remains even more highly uncertain than yours or my father’s have ever been. To creatures of magic such as us, Tony… all signs indicate that he is an ideal teacher in the arts of toxic-magic-fallout clean-up, by Earthly standards. Earth, to the rest of the nine realms, is a terrifying place in its own minor ways, all of which he is expert in.”

“So I’m basically now just funding this deal for you?” Tony asked coldly.

The wolf huffed an exasperated sigh. “I knew you’d say something like that. You need to overcome obstacles similar to my father’s for your own emotional and psychological health, and you damned well know it, Anthony Stark. Do not dare pretend otherwise, or that you did not already hope that aiding my father in pursuit of his own quest might shed light on some ways to help yourself heal, along the way.”
The inventor cringed. His 2nd cup of coffee was nearly gone, and the caffeine had hit him just in time for the barbs of that all-too-accurate assessment sink straight through half of his brain. “Fuck off,” he rasped, without much conviction.

“You will have no harmony within your home if you cannot come to terms with—”

“Then find someone else, for this,” Tony growled.

Fenrir hesitated. “You know I cannot. Even if I wanted to, there are no others, Tony. You are exceptional. I would not be pestering you at all, if you were not worthwhile, and I did hope you knew that already, too, by now.”

The inventor sucked in a sharp breath, then let it out slowly. “You’re right. Sorry.” He ran a hand through his hair awkwardly. “This is going to be great and terrible, isn’t it?” Then he suddenly froze. “Amora, did you say?” he almost squeaked.

“Yes.”

Tony stared at him in unmasked horror for a few long moments.

“She has no designs against Thor or the Avengers,” Fenrir assured.

“Tell me I’m not going to have to supply her an apartment or anything, for the love of all that is holy. I may be Tony Stark, but if she had access to my financial resources, I really don’t want to know what she might do, alright?” the inventor asked very quickly.

“She has her own apartment in New York, already. She’s had it for years.”


“I’m sorry,” The wolf muttered. “I seriously did not expect it to quite snowball like this, but the threat Doom potentially posed… worried my sister. He was not meant to interfere with Constantine’s fate at all, according to the Norns, but the more entangled his life is with Loki’s, the more precarious his own position in the universe becomes.”

“You make it sound like he’s more vital than you want to admit.”

“That… can be said of most entities who have taken a long look at him, I suspect, human and inhuman alike,” Fenrir pointed out. “He is not exactly a warper of reality, per se, but he undermines certain power-structures, wherever he wanders. Prophecy among them. He is that most dangerous of Sparks: a masterful storyteller, and deeply sympathetic narrator.”

“Well, that’d be the con-artistry background he’s got. What’s so special about it?”

“How much power did you gain, from reshaping your own personal mythology to resemble that of a phoenix, Tony?”

After a long pause, the inventor started sniggering. “Et quibusdam aliis.”

“What certain other things?” the wolf asked, puzzled.

“Let me give you a history lesson from Earth. There was this pompous git called Pico della Mirandola, who described his own encyclopedic knowledge as, ‘de omni re scibili’, which to Fenrir’s ear translated automatically to, *Of all things that can be known*, “and years later this upstart
French philosopher makes fun of him by adding ‘et quibusdam aliis’” and certain other things. “-just to be a smartass. So nowadays, the old philosophy can’t begin to give its credentials before someone finds that added bit of wit-based historical graffiti permanently etched in the margins, forever altering the sound and the shape of the ideas it meant to communicate.” He giggled. “That’s Constantine, to you gods, isn’t it? Even the ones from other planets? Really?”

Fenrir’s ears drooped a little even as he glared slightly. “Maybe.”

Again, Tony couldn’t help sniggering.

“No small wonder my father likes the man, even against his better judgement. He was always more in favor of defiance, when the only other option was an inescapable fate, whether one of his own choosing or otherwise.”

“Me too.”

“I know,” Fenrir muttered. “There is… increasing unease, around this whole idea. Odin has made attempts to locate our father, having heard rumors of Loki’s involvement with an Earthly magic user, which was never a part of his plans. This caused him to prematurely discover that he no longer has control of the binding magics holding my father; Hel used a few of her contacts in Nifelheim to manage that, and it will not make this easier for anyone. I do not believe that Odin thought my father’s pride would be able to cope with most well-known magi of Earth without fatally damaging their pride, but...”

“A lot of them do tend to be pretty pompous,” Tony admitted. “Odin doesn’t approve, of Connie, then?”

The wolf shook his head. “Not at all, which at least is some consolation to me.”

“Why does he disapprove, though? What are the reasons he’s telling himself?”

Fenrir began to look intrigued, at that. “He intended for Loki to find a stabilizing force, as Thor did. John Constantine is quite the opposite of that, especially just at first, second, and third glances at his criminal, medical, and mainstream-press records, all.”

“But you thought I was a safer bet to aim Loki at long-term, regardless of where he first landed?”

Tony clarified.

“Of course. Beyond all of the reasons I’ve given you at length already, Odin is always biased a bit, in favor of those who have Thor’s approval as fellow warriors. It’s a bit embarrassing, at times, but it could have deterred him from meddling more than the... current situation. Should he meddle, things could get very politically complicated for all the nine realms, beginning with Nifelheim.” He sighed. "That said, I cannot say that the chaotic natures of both my father and Constantine being in close proximity for a long enough time has resulted in events that even the Norns seem almost surprised by, actually surprises me.”

"Me neither, really."

"So you will incorporate him into your plans?" the wolf hedged.

“Eh.” Tony shrugged. “Tricky, unless you can supply a bit of magic. We already knew we need to keep Constantine’s involvement mostly low-key, for his own sake down here on Earth, and all.”

“Well, yes, that’s-"
Seeing some of Fenrir’s confusion and recognizing it from past experience, quickly clarified: “I mean that we need to be very covert about his involvement. Sorry, idioms, I know.” It wasn’t the first time he’d made that particular slip-up with All-Speak, and he cursed mentally for not remembering to avoid it.

“But you said-”

“‘Low’ as in the English word for ‘close to the ground’ and the opposite of ‘high’, and the word ‘key’ as in-”

“For opening a lock. Ahh, I see. Well, I don’t, but that’s idioms for you.” The wolf shrugged it off and continued. “I myself can’t interfere here quite that directly, without the spells my father wears binding his magic detecting me, using his blood; however, Amora should be more than capable of concealing him, if she can be persuaded to consider him of value to her.”

“I wouldn’t worry about that, darling,” Amora said suddenly, shortly after her abrupt materialization in the nearby breakfast nook. She perched on the edge of the table with her feet hanging down just shy of touching the floor, her ankles neatly folded.

Tony flailed at the sound of her voice, spinning on his heel to glare at her.

Fenrir leaned back only slightly to avoid a hand that might have smacked his shoulder. “He might have been armed, Amora. He could actually damage either of us at least enough to sting quite a while, you know.”

“Oh, I’ve gathered.” She smiled sweetly. “Loki designed very good wards, around Constantine’s apartment: little carvings here and there, made by knives of ice from within his veins.”

“So his elemental capabilities remain intact, then,” Fenrir mused.

“They could not be suppressed by Aesir magics, funny enough,” she replied, smiling sweetly. “ Those wards detected that I was being gossiped about, shortly after we finished lunch. I followed the trail here, and started to listen in. How about we forgo some of the cloak-and-dagger act, and see about cooperation.” Her gaze flicked to Tony then. “For instance: Loki has no idea you’ve already agreed to ally with him, with sincere intent rather than mere fishing, yet here you schemers are, and Hel has told me what you’re both up to. Why?”

Fenrir and the mortal inventor exchanged wary glances. “Initially because we didn’t think he’d go along with it, without me persuading him myself,” Tony said. “Right?”

The wolf nodded seriously.

“Fine then,” she said airily, “but if you do so insist on toying with the emotions of my dear old friend, and manipulating him so for your own desires in your case, Stark, and out of an excessive degree of fear of his censure in yours, Fenrir (however foolishly, dear, for you know he could forgive you anything), then I will be making it a bit more challenging for you, in my own ways.” She grinned at them fearsomely.

Tony shot the wolf a pleading look. “See, this is why I reacted the way I did, when I heard her voice. This sinking sensation.”

“Oh, I know,” Fenrir sighed, sounding resigned. “But, Amora… you suggest you have already decided that you, ah, approve of Constantine, then?”

“Oh, definitely,” she purred. “I was hoping the fringe benefits of this deal might be enough to make
it worthwhile, as plans involving Loki often do, and he has certainly not failed me this time. Yes, I
plan to spend some while sampling John Constantine.” Her charming smile became incandescently
fiendish. “I’ll also handle his security and living arrangements. Better to make themless traceable
back to you, Stark.”

The wolf’s eyes went very wide.

Tony choked back a half-hysterical laugh, and the end result sounded a bit like an uneasy attempt to
clear his throat.

“Best of luck to you, my friend,” Fenrir muttered, patting him on the shoulder as he realized
suddenly the full implications of that both fair-haired and shameless hedonists were about to be
frequent house-guests in Avengers tower.

“I resent you so much right now,” the inventor groaned.

“I don’t blame you.”

Amora shook her head at them, smirking broadly. “Oh, Fenrir? Let Hel know I’ve accepted the
second challenge of hers, then: to teach all of you boys a few key things. She won’t tell you which
lessons, themselves, but I think I might have a better chance at it now than I do of Loki agreeing to
admit my aid so that I might win her daughter’s favor, no matter how instrumental I am in aiding him,
here. His loyalty to her, really, is more of a hurdle than any of the rest of that particular deal and she
too-well knows it.”

Fenrir gulped audibly. “She didn’t mention a second deal.”

“She didn’t think it very likely applicable, at first, and neither did I, but oh, things do change.”

Tony felt a bit lost. “Wait, what?”

“She habitually makes deals with my sister, or accepts challenges from her. They both put on a
show, a lot of stories of Amora’s impressive feats, even though she generally failed to meet the fine
print in most of those challenges, increases her reputation throughout the nine, which boosts and
stabilizes her powers in ways that allow her to cast spells which affect multiple realms, if she’s
careful.” Fenrir explained succinctly. “It is just such a deal which persuaded her to aid my father in
the first place.”

“What’s the bet usually over?”

“An unspecified, but significant, favor, promised to me by the queen of the land of the dead,” Amora
answered him.

Tony’s eyebrows raised. “Ambitious, I’ll grant you.” He stood very still as she lowered her heels to
the floor, stood up, and sauntered over to him to cup his face in one hand. Her skin was very soft,
and her touch deceptively gentle.

“All you need do, my dear, is provide Loki and John Constantine with all of the information you
have about the deaths, particularly the violent and abrupt ones, which he has been responsible for
since his return to the nine realms: further back than just his arrival, however, he was influencing the
mind of Dr. Eric Selvig. You will need to dig up information about all of Selvig’s actions from the
time Mjolnir landed in New Mexico, to the present. His tale is one of the most important for Loki to
learn. I will take care of the magician for you, and keep him concealed as suits Queen Hel and the
Norms’ purposes for him.”
“The Norns have claimed him?” Fenrir asked sharply, stunned.

“They haven’t yet… but they have said other things about him so far,” Amora assured. She looked between them like she knew a secret that they were all going to be floored by later, and she would enjoy their nervous anticipation from here forward. “Big changes are on the way in all sorts of places, let’s say, boys.” She kissed Tony’s cheek, then stepped away to kiss the wolf’s brow briefly, one of her hands scratching behind his left ear. “Fare you well.” Then she vanished again.

A long pause followed.

“… Fenrir, y’know, I get this funny sensation like we’re in too deep.”

“You may be right. I believe, however, that you should perhaps complete your party plans.”

“I thought I…” Then Tony realized that Amora was doubtlessly going to show up at the damned party too now, and emitted a small whine. “Right. A few security modifications wouldn’t hurt. Also there’s some guest list alterations to make, if I don’t want her accidentally killing any royalty or anything.” He looked back at the wolf, who still looked a bit uneasy and now-uncertain. “You okay?”

“I…” He cleared his throat. “I mentioned, once, that Hel and I long ago ceased to have the option of belief or disbelief, when it came to knowledge of our own futures.”

“Yeah, I remember.” Then he coughed. “Are you saying that’s changed?”

“I am saying that Hel seems more uncertain about it than I have seen her in over a thousand years, Tony Stark, over the past two days, and I am slightly afraid.” His brow furrowed. “Amora seems confident that whatever storm Hel has armed her against here will leave in its wake a sort of disaster that she might enjoy, but there are plenty of very good reasons that’s not actually reassuring, to me.”

“Unknown doesn’t mean bad. You know that,” Tony assured.

“I do. Better than most,” Fenrir admitted. “It’s not only myself that I fear for.”

Tony reached over and stroked one of the wolf’s enormous shoulders. “Maybe Amora’s right, then. Maybe you’re missing something, too.”

“That’s not very reassuring.”

“She’s willing to teach, at least, however miserable the lesson itself might be… at least you’ll know.”

“Yes.” The wolf heaved a sigh. “Thank you, again, Tony, for… for all of your help, in this, and your willingness most of all.”

“That’s not very reassuring.”

“Like I could turn down something this simultaneously interesting, ill-advised, dangerous and slightly terrifying,” the inventor countered, shooting a sidelong look at the wolf.

“True. You couldn’t have resisted even if you wished to, and I knew that well, but I appreciate you nevertheless,” Fenrir assured. “So thank you.” Inclining his head in farewell then, the wolf, too, vanished.

Amora’s abrupt reappearance in John’s apartment was loud, mostly because she couldn’t seem to stop giggling for almost ten minutes. The first thing she said, once she finally stopped was, “Listen, listen, I have a clever plan!”

“Famous last words, love, but do tell,” John prompted.

“First, just so that I know I’m on the right track here,” she began, sitting up, still occasionally sniggering a little. “You both pulled off that mess to do with Doom and a bank, down here, by means of disguising you as Loki, correct?” She pointed at John.

“Yes,” the god of lies responded, from his end of the couch, from which he had watched her laughing fit with interest.

“How?” she inquired.

Loki explained briefly about the bit of Stark Industries tech that John had gotten from a S.H.I.E.L.D. agent of his previous acquaintance, and how he had altered it.

Amora was grinning bright and wicked before he was even halfway through, but as soon as he finished, she declared, “Perfect, then. Loki, you’ll take on the appearance of that illusion, at first, when we attend the party advertised by the invitation on your coffee table. I will transfigure John temporarily to appear in your female shape.”

Both men gaped at her for a few moments.

Then John collapsed in a fit of helpless laughter.

Loki continued gaping.

Amora winked at him. “Trust me.”

“No one else would I, for such a scheme,” the god admitted, “but for you, dear?” He grinned, eyes bright with mischief. “Do go on.”
In Which Everyone Might Not Get the Night Off but There is A Lot of Getting Off Going On

Chapter Summary

Surprisingly smooth. None of them believe that will last.

The eerie silence on the Loki front in the next few days honestly left Tony more unnerved than the previous series of disasters. Of course, it helped that Amora’s sudden involvement had brought the destructive duo of tricksters in that damned apartment some better concealment spells and other resources for laying low more successfully. Things that helped them keep out of S.H.I.E.L.D.’s hair, which meant that Maria was happy, and Pepper was trying to get Tony to do a lot of very boring shmoozing and other business tasks he increasingly loathed.

What was it about the mere prospect of having to face both of these fuckers at the same time that put all of his nerves on end?

_Maybe the suspicion that they’re better at these games than you are, particularly together. You’re anxious they might leave you out of some of the good bits of the game._

That was the risk, here, deep down. Tony had been maneuvered into a position to be of use, here, by powers high and low alike, and he was starting to feel the chafing, from his leash being too-often-yanked lately, as a result.

So maybe planning this party had taken on a new dimension, here. He focused all of his efforts on how to guard against Amora’s mischief potentially tripping himself up as possible, while also allowing his own perspicacity to be show off enough in the process to persuade a con-artist trickster god with trust issues to… well, to trust him.

Okay so Tony still didn’t actually have a lot more to say that wouldn’t be perceived as heavy-handed attempts at bribery, to the point this whole thing was already an elaborate formality. Everyone by knew Loki had no real choice but to accept Tony’s aid, and that he would do so. What was really being finalized at this party was effectively a first date, and from there it would all come down to what Loki really wanted from Tony beyond the wealth of resources Stark Industries and Iron Man respectively both possess. What more would Tony be willing to offer?

Deciding this required the both of them to set some personal boundaries and exchanging pleasant threats that were best reserved for a time when no one else could overhear them, so of course a public meeting in the middle of a party wherein socialites, engineers and business leaders would all be schmoozing was both a horrible idea, and strangely titilating for a pair of showmen with far too many tricks up their sleeves.

The whole farce would be improvizd performance art for all parties, and there were multiple ways he could assume Amora would be subverting his intentions. He would not be able to trust the appearances of anyone at the party any longer, and it would take a great deal of subtle maneuvering through social interactions to be certain that the people he was talking to were or were not aware of the farce in the first place. Loki and Amora, for their part, had to obey the same absurd rules of social ettiquette than Tony, in order to avoid looking suspicious or any more remarkable than either of them.
in exquisite evening-wear doubtlessly would look.

Thus Tony’s biggest problem, most likely, would be keeping a straight face.

He knew Amora’s grifting style about as well as he did Loki’s, these days, and knew what to expect of the both of them, but the real wild-card that could throw a spanner into absolutely everything, would be John Constantine, but given that Tony had a feeling that Amora wouldn’t be keen on letting anyone else hold the magician’s attention for too long, the inventor felt that he could consider that potential disaster-source within safe ranges to allow within proximity of this particular house of cards.

The real problem with performance art quite so delicate as this, for Tony, was how the rest of the world around him seemed to drag by with all-too-deliberate excess slowness, out of sheer anticipation leading up to the actual performance. He could tell people around him were getting irritated with his too-brusque and too-blunt responses in meetings as the hours and days wound down to this one particular night.

When it actually happened it felt a bit surreal and Tony caught himself looking at the face of his watch or the print on various surfaces around him: looking for the little glitches that would cue him he’s been tricked into “showing up early” as it were, via Loki dream-walking.

Thor had come up with that idea and warned Tony that it sounded like something his brother might do. No cues suggested he was dreaming. His senses were just on such high-alert as to make things seem more vivid, he theorized. It had happened before. Usually in situations he later had nightmares about; of course, this one might be just about as life-threatening.

Nowadays, adrenaline without armor on too felt novel and refreshingly well-ventilated. It suited the layout of his chosen venue: a large ballroom that the hotel had loaned Stark Industries some creative liberties with. It had been made into a multi-tiered environment with the illusions of trees and shrubbery and garden creeping in from every artificial and temporary wall, creating plenty of covert tables and other convenient gathering-places, some near to the two open bars and the buffet, others more out-of-the-way. Pepper had somehow talked him into keeping the string quartet, and their music floated through the scenery, alterately amplified by the architecture in some places and muffled in more of the secretive alcoves created by the party decor, which included lighting designed to mimic street-lamps, chairs and seating of painfully expensive modern designs that were sleek, all polished metal, some silver, some matte black.

It might have been inspired by fondly drunken memories of a girl from Soho he’d known about a decade ago, but he hoped Constantine didn’t catch onto that.

The whole party felt as though it belonged at the heart of a garden maze, just as Tony knew his tricky guests would appreciate both for how it could facilitate concealing themselves even in places the crowd was thinner rather than thicker, and it catered to their own flair for the dramatic as well. Also, now that Amora was a part of the game, and her specialties magically tended to be all about illusions and mind-tricks, Tony knew this was officially a masquerade, since she had vowed to make his life just that little bit more difficult tonight.

Tony knew it even before Amora showed up with, by all appearances, a Loki upon each arm, both of them dressed gorgeously. The one on Amora’s left, particularly, matched security camera footage from shortly before a very nasty recent mess at a particular bank.

Tony idly recalled a story about a lady and a tiger, with a fickle queen’s heart making the final judgement, and decided he would have to wait and observe them awhile longer, before he even dared assume that Loki wasn’t pretending to be Amora just for the sake of being contrary and a jerk,
let alone whether Loki’s female form in his natural coloring, or his male form in ginger coloring including facial hair, might be a more likely candidate for the god of lies him- or herself tonight.

He had to rely on reading their performances, more than their exterior shapes.

A couple of blinks later and he ruled out Lady Loki, and began smirking a little. The male-Loki walked comfortably, but his female counterpart, however gorgeous, stepped very carefully, in a way that on closer inspection reminded Tony of an occasion Pepper had persuaded him to wear a pair of her heels. (Ahem. Long story.) That, and the way that Amora practically cuddled against her arm compared to how loose and relaxed her grip was on the taller-looking Loki, suggested to Tony that either Skurge or John Constantine most likely resided behind the femme fatale guise; although, for reasons he didn’t want to examine closely, Tony suspected Skurge would be able to look gruff and intimidating effortlessly even in heels, so he was willing to hedge his bets on the street wizard for this one, while trying desperately to purge his mind’s eye of the image of Skurge the Executioner in a pair of pink pumps.

That left two more bodies, and a possible Skurge lurking somewhere out of sight.

“JARVIS,” Tony said to his watch. “Is there an familiar lurking menace bodyguard outside in any of the likely positions we marked?”

“He seems to spend his time making rounds through three of them, and a fourth position we did not anticipate, which nevertheless keeps him well-concealed, sir.”

“Thanks,” Tony said.

So that was Skurge being out of the farce, busy guarding it. Or at least the illusion of him might be. Magical-thinking his way through potential strategies of Loki’s and Amora’s was always maddeningly surreal, that way.

Tony focused on the observable, for the time being. Yes, that was definitely a more Constantine-like expression on the female-Loki’s face that the inventor suspected the trickster herself would be capable of pulling off.

At least, so Tony thought right before the male Loki deliberately mimicked the expression with an added eye-roll, which earned him a smack on the arm from John, while Amora laughed at both of them.

Either Constantine was in more than one place at a time, or Loki had gotten to know the magician very closely, Tony realized, and felt an odd shift in the power-dynamics around him as he knew it. It was an uncomfortable feeling.

It might have been a bit jealous.

Tony muttered quietly to himself, “Well, I’m probably doomed.” He then finished off his scotch and steadily approached the fashionably-late guests. It was a polite gesture of its own sort, that they had delayed their own arrival until after most of Tony’s vital greetings-schmoozing had all been gotten over with.

As Tony approached the tall, straight back of what he was 97% sure was the right trickster, he felt his head grow remarkably clear, probably from the excess adrenaline. He tapped Loki’s shoulder and greeted, “Found you, Waldo. Nice game of find the Loki.”

Amora frowned up at him, but then smirked a bit a second later. “Almost five minutes. Better than I expected, honestly, Mr. Stark. Very good.”
“Nice dress, Connie,” he added. “You do this often?”

“Not really, no, believe it or not,” John said, in a voice not quite an octave higher, and not very much softer in tone, than the usual one. “Well, not in a transformed version of my body, so it was trickier to find a flattering cut of dress at the time. I can see the appeal of a dress like this, though, and having the assets to fill it out. There’s a lot of power in the attention you can steer with it.”

Amora’s smile turned a little more heated as she fixed her attention on the transfigured magician, quietly excluding Loki and Tony from her consideration altogether as she shot John a leer. “I would see you dance in it, then. Show me.”

The pale, delicate-feeling skin of John’s borrowed form might have gotten a bit flushed in response, but the magician was nothing if not an exhibitionist. She grinned right back into the heat of Amora’s stare and leaned in closer. “Dance with me. Show me what I’m missing here so far, and I’ll show you what you really want from me.”

Licking her lips, Amora dragged the magician away towards the smaller of the two available dance floors.

“Wow, that was informative,” Tony deadpanned.

“I wasn’t aware you had ever made John’s acquaintance.”

“Oh yeah. He came to me to warn me before you showed up at my ball. He’s a great fairy-godmother that way.”

For a moment, the deep chagrin and exasperation on Loki’s face was perfect.

Tony was glad they were still standing outside of the few deliberate gaps he’d left in security camera coverage for tonight. Maybe he would get a picture of that face framed and sent to Connie’s address someday. “Yeah, she’s grinning like mad over there. She was clearly awaiting your face.”

The trickster exhaled all of his breath slowly. “Was there a point to that?”

“Mostly him doing the same thing to you he did to me, but taking a longer time to get to the punchline: proving he still can exploit even our blindspots.”

“Complete childish wanker.”

“Yeah, but he’s a friend of yours now, isn’t he?”

“Of sorts.”

“You’ve already forgiven him.”

“… It was a well-done prank. Did you know he could ‘redial’ you?”

“Not until he did it and handed you the phone,” Tony sighed.

Loki chuckled a little. “He shamelessly manipulated us both for the sake of amusement at our discomfort.”

“Sounds like your archetype.”

Loki coughed into his drink, caught a little off-guard. “Ah. So you’re up to date then.”
“Yeah, he told me the whole story when he first showed up, and we’ve been keeping in touch. You’re welcome, by the way, for getting Skye to cover that mess you made of those kidnappers.”

“… He suggested they had a past relationship.”

Tony barked a laugh. “Doesn’t he wish. Er, well. Maybe not his type?” He pointed toward the dance-floor the pair had aimed for earlier, without looking at it.

“What was the clearest clue, to you?” Loki asked, keen to change the subject. “As to which of us he was?”

“You made one of his faces back at him. It wasn’t an expression I’d expected to see on you until you added that menacing eye-roll, though.”

The trickster chuckled. “I believe you owe me a drink.”

“I do.” Tony gestured at the nearest available bar. Loki followed him over to it, and didn’t blink when they just handed Tony a bottle of scotch, a bucket of ice, two glasses, and a snifter, on a convenient, artfully laid-out tray, before he even asked.

He’d had days to plan, after all. He led the trickster to the most out-of-the-way alcove of them all, where there was a single table, reserved. It might have also been in a subtle sound- and surveillance-dampening field of sorts. Tony left the little “reserved” sign in place. “So you need my resources.”

“I do,” Loki said. “It’s a humbling experience.”

“Is it?”

The trickster shrugged. “Not really. I’ve known the full extent of your capabilities for some time. The fact you are the only one capable of providing this support without having too much motive to kill me during or after the time I will require this aid, just proves how much of a monumental inconvenience this whole arrangement is for the Earth to have to deal with.”

Tony barked a laugh at that, outright. “Because of course only someone who is equally improbable and inconvenient would be suited to the task, and that’d be me.”

Loki smirked. “You do come with some ideal qualifications, in that regard, yes.”

“At least I won’t have to babysit your, uh, new friend?” Tony mused, shooting a look Amora’s way. The resulting image seared into his retina’s caused him to then keep staring, unable to look away at first. “Wow they look… enthusiastic.”

The trickster glanced their way and raised both eyebrows. “That’s a ritual dance, actually. I’m honestly surprised John knows the… submissive steps.” He sounded genuinely a bit impressed. “I haven’t danced in that form in ages. I’m glad it’s at least being done well.”

“You can move like that in that shape?” the inventor asked, feeling the back of his neck heat slightly. “It looked like it took Connie a while to re-adjust to heels, when you first got here, but apparently adjust she has.”

“I’m capable of the same, yes, in various forms, but you’d have to persuade me into performing for you by some very particular means,” Loki shot back.

That caused Tony to accidentally super-impose the image of Loki’s true form going through some of the same reverent and undulatory movements John Constantine apparently was performing for
Amora, brushing against the goddess now and then as Amora continued to lead her every rise and fall.

“What ritual is that exactly?”

“Trust me, this a highly toned-down version of the original, which is only performed on Beltane, usually because it has a reputation for leading to ‘spontaneous’ orgies whenever performed in public; although since it’s not been performed on a day other than Beltane for so long, the causal relationship suggests instead that it’s simply proven over time to be the foolproof way to start off Beltane properly,” Loki explained. “John’s steps usually are those of the role danced by their Queen’s chosen consort.”

“So… they’re a matriarchy whose biggest holiday is one involving bonfires and orgies,” Tony mused. “I like the sound of these people.”

“That’s precisely what I said when I began studying Alfheim.”

“I just realized… he’s basically publicly seducing his new Dominatrix, isn’t…er… she?” Tony stumbled slightly. Somehow it was clear to him how much of the dance he was currently observing was all John, despite the transfiguration spell having so drastically changed the magician’s appearance.

The suspension of self-consciousness expanding John’s range of expressions and the shameless gifts of self-exposure aimed Amora’s way were difficult for Tony to imagine ever seeing on any of the forms that Loki happened to be associated with so closely, for any other reason. It was a bit disconcertingly attractive, and Tony found himself more annoyed by that than anything else, also in part because he sensed just how much he wasn’t the center of attention at his own party all of a sudden, but even if his pride were really that easily bruised, he couldn’t have brought himself to try and halt proceedings.

“I wonder if his natural shape is actually that flexible,” Loki mused.

“I was just thinking that. Why did you think it was a good idea to let them out in public like this again?”

“I couldn’t stop them,” the god responded with frank, dry sincerity.

“Fair enough. This’ll be in the tabloids, and somehow, I will be blamed for hiring them to do this as actual performance art.”

“Probably,” Loki sounded deeply amused by that.

A thought occurred to Tony. It was both tempting and horrifying, which gave it as much bite as savor: a truly dangerous little idea. He smiled with all of his teeth, positively beaming up at the god of lies suddenly. “I’m hiring you on as a consultant in the new interplanetary tech position I’ve just created for Stark Industries’ R&D department, officially.”

The trickster blinked at him. “Pardon?”

“If you’re living under my roof on your little journey of self-relamation and fixing some of your fuck-ups, you’re going to earn your keep in Research and Development.”

“Am I now?”

“It’ll be fun,” Tony offered. “Trust me. You and Pepper can negotiate over the contract with me for
it and all: almost as binding for me as your freely-given sworn oaths are to you, if you play your cards right with us.”

Loki caught on, then, what this was really about. He began to smirk. “How long has my son been planning this with you?”

“I didn’t actually get a lot of warning until shortly before your violent landing, and he basically cornered me into agreeing to provide you sanctuary for the duration of this ordeal of yours, because I can’t exactly deny that I find you fascinating despite your being all sort of a violent and unstable murderous being, for most of the time I’ve known you, directly.” He shot the trickster a look which suggested he’d also learned a great deal about him indirectly, which might have captivated him too.

The trickster absorbed that thoughtfully, as he sipped from the glass of scotch Tony had poured for him, focusing on the coldly golden, silken burn of it for a few seconds. “I’ve been captivated by your potential for quite some time. I had not exactly contemplated the possibility of ever being a welcome houseguest in your tower as being within the realm of the possible; however I’m glad that you continue to defy even the wildest expectations of such a creatively surrealist cynic as myself.”

“That is one of the classiest come-ons I’ve ever heard.”

“I’m a god and royalty, Stark. I am quite literally the classiest being to ever hit on you and you well know it,” Loki deadpanned.

Tony broke down into a fit of giggles, but at least the god followed him soon after, the both of them laughing helplessly and leaning a bit more over the table.

“You are probably the only one in the room with a less classy reputation than me, and you know it,” Tony finally managed, after they both got their breaths back.

“Yes, but the story about the horse is pure slander.”

“Yeah, yeah, we all know that. Thor made great and terribly certain that we all knew better than to ever bring that up directly.” Sometimes the inventor still shivered a little when he recalled the look of dreadful warning in Thor’s expression… such a harrowed and harrowing look, but he managed to avoid doing so this time.

“Good,” Loki’s smile was sharp and pleased, that he had successfully instilled those lessons into his brother so very deeply back when they were much younger.

“You’re planning revenge against Amora for making you a component in a half-assed shell-game just so she could play slightly voyeuristic head-games in public with her new toy, right?”

“Of course.”

“I say we play out our romantic drama in public and watch her try to cope with keeping her toy out of our spotlight,” Tony suggested.

Loki shot him a shocked look. “Pardon?”

“Date me. It’s not like it’s the first time I’ve dated a new employee.”

“Did you just compare me to Pepper Potts?”

“You’re both very leggy and have very dry wits. There are more similarities than you might think, there, actually, even than that.”
Loki was almost as caught as off-guard as Tony had hoped he would be.

The whole idea was to ensnare by means neither of them could resist: an utterly insane, and absurd gamble with all the odds stacked against them.

It came with added benefits, including keeping the god of lies in the spotlight when he had spent so many years trying to be allowed his own time there, but forcing him to share ‘Tony’s’ in this way, making it Tony’s drama they would effectively be living in, in public. They’d be displaying the nature of their relationship over time by means of photos taken by paparazzi, always and everywhere outside the tower itself. It would challenge them both as performance artists, and add new dimensions to the head-games between them, while simultaneously putting them both in positions where they would have to perform for others and one another in public, all the time.

It would also quickly cause political and economic repercussions, or it could be spun by their combined powers of manipulation into something brilliant and gloriously shiny for the media to fawn over.

If Loki would just agree to play along.

Would just agree to publically be known as Tony Stark’s lover from day one and live with the various repercussions inherent within that: sink or swim, all or nothing.

And rob Amora of all chances to muck with their attempts to keep an affair between them both secret, the trickster slowly realized, and began putting the rest of the picture together with startling clarity. It was perfect to force her to keep out of their romantic affairs for John’s sake, and she would sulk about it for about a week, at the least.

Loki’s lips began to curl up into an appreciative, hungry smirk. “Clever.”

“Yes it is. You game, Loki?” Tony challenged.

“For you, always, Tony,” the trickster responded, leaning in as he tugged Tony’s chin up slightly and leaned down to kiss, softly at first, until that mythic silver-tongue darted out to taste Tony’s own, after which the inventor did not think it fair to consider him less than intoxicated. That tongue conquered his mouth in a show of experienced artistry and pure wickedness that left the inventor’s head spinning.

Tony barely managed to pull back about half a minute later. “Drop the guise. The illusory beard is disturbing like this.”

Loki sniggered, and disabled the device projecting his subtler disguise without pulling back. His long hair was pulled back in two long plaits falling straight down from the nape of his neck, with small metal beads above the strings of leather that secured them at the ends.

“Better,” Tony concurred, and pulled him back down sharply for another kiss.

Neither of them were surprised when a camera flash went off in their direction. Someone with a smartphone had been bound to give in to temptation, once Loki’s disguise and the attention-diverting charm woven into it had been dropped.

“Congrats, you’ll be on tomorrow’s front page somewhere,” Tony said, when they next parted slightly for air. “Nice way to start off your new hopelessly-media-integrated life on Earth with a bang.”

Exhilarated enough to laugh softly and breathlessly against the mortal inventor’s lips, Loki then
shook his head just enough to bring their noses briefly into contact. “You are a mad fool, and I accept your challenge to publicly court you in the manner of your people just for the sake of seeing so many of them outright scandalized.”

“Good.” Tony said. “I didn’t exactly have a Plan B.”

“Of course you did.”

“None I like as much, surprisingly, as Plan A,” Tony said quietly.

Loki’s eyebrows raised a bit at that. “Me neither. You pleasantly surprise me dangerously often.”

The inventor responded with a lascivious smile, then, and a bit of a leer to match. “Same to you, when you’re not busy destroying things and people I like.”

“You have my word that I will be as an ally to you for the duration of my time dependent upon you and your company’s resources,” Loki offered.

“Ally, employee, and lover?”

“Monogamy preferred, but not always mandatory; although it would take an unusually exceptional being for me to be willing to share overmuch of you with another.”

Tony might’ve felt his face heat at quite how matter-of-factly the god of lies was on that front. “I don’t usually share, if it’s serious, which I want to be with you, despite the media circus that’ll come with the inevitable scandal, and despite your track record of horrors and violence, because I’ve also made a lot of bad and ultimately self-destructive decisions over the years, too.” His breath caught a little when he noticed it seemed to now be Loki’s turn to appear a bit flushed. “That said, the occasional indulgence as you suggest has happened, but not usually planned. So I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Oh,” Loki said softly.

“There’s also a fully furnished bedroom that’s all yours, in the tower penthouse. There’s room for the collection of stuff you’ve been having shipped to Connie’s apartment this whole time. Whether you stay in that bed or mine, though, on any given night, is up to you, but needless to say, there’s a standing invitation.” They were still leaned close together over a patch of table, and increasingly aware of how many people were staring their way now.

“If your intent was to woo me, thusfar, you’re doing a better job than most any other suitors in years,” Loki deadpanned.

“Consider it a show of professional and carnal appreciation of many of your distinctive traits,” Tony shot back, and leaned up to capture his lips again. More camera flashes went off.

When they broke apart again, it was to smile charmingly at their audience.

“Hello. Everyone, this is my boyfriend Loki. Most of you who know the Avengers have also heard of his brother Thor.”

“I’m a former villain now working as a consultant with Stark Industries,” the god added, giving them all a small wave. “Charming to meet you all.”

The small uproar this brought was used by the Enchantress and the conman-in-Lady-Loki-guise on the dancefloor to distract people sufficiently that they were able to exit without anyone seeing them
leave, as the few journalists in the crowd made the whole show suddenly into a miniature press-conference, as much at the behest of everyone else desperate for answers as any will of their own.

“Actually,” John heard Loki saying in warm tones as they left, “I was exiled to your planet by an irresponsible monarch in Asgard who apparently didn’t consider me a threat to all of you, with my powers restrained as they are, as part of my sentence, but I could easily wreak merry havoc in spite of that, if I so wished.”

John almost wished she could stick around for the ensuing circus, but was quickly persuaded to refocus on what Amora’s hands were doing.

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“Yes, the king of Asgard has this funny idea that when his kids cause too much havoc, he sends them down here for us to deal with,” Tony continued telling the increasingly-poleaxed journalists who clearly had not signed up for headlines quite like this, tonight. “He did the same thing to Thor, as some Avengers fans might recall reading about in some of his interviews with the press back in the U.S., but he sent Loki to Wales. I’ve been working on behalf of the Avengers to handle the situation.”

“We’ve reached an appreciative mutual understanding,” Loki assured. “I have a lot of knowledge about the workings of the universe, as an inventor such as yourself can so uniquely comprehend and implement.”

“Which is how you’ll be contributing to Stark Industries’ Research and Development departments,” Tony pointed out. “Anymore questions or do you all need to run off and make some hasty negotiations with your editors?”

The journalists scattered as though sincerely afraid to be overloaded with more information, except one woman, who sized up both the inventor and Loki and smirked at them. “Interesting choice of first date. Most people test-drive a relationship a bit longer before broadcasting it,” she pointed out. She was the only invited journalist who had survived interviewing Tony Stark more than once, before, and actually worked for a publisher other than the Economist and Wired magazines, so Tony wasn’t surprised, but her keen observation did make Loki appropriately wary of her.

“Good to see you again, Martha,” the inventor greeted.

“You have a surname, Loki?” she inquired lightly. She was dark of complexion with large honeyed brown eyes dancing with amusement, and her hair back in long, narrow cornrows.

“I have about a dozen to choose from, but Lyesmith will do.”

“I look forward to scheduling a proper interview with you soon,” she greeted, proffering her hand. “I’m Martha Braxton, with *Time* magazine. Welcome to Earth. Don’t destroy as much of it this time.”

Shaking her hand, Loki inclined his head respectfully. “I will try, but I am a god of chaos as well as lies.”

“Another disaster-magnet for your Tower’s collection?” she asked Tony, but kept her eyes on the god’s, smiling good-naturedly.
“Right? How do they find me? You’d think I’ve lived my entire life in a perpetual spotlight where I’m ridiculously easy for other super-powerful people to find.”

Loki shook his head a little. “I am not exactly unaccustomed to being a commonly-targeted public figure.”

“Right, you’re a prince, correct?”

“Formerly. Also I’m the adopted bastard offspring of the King of Jotunnheim, brought home along with other war-prizes after Odin finished incapacitating their kingdom’s militarized forces… and almost all of their other higher technologies. His interplanetary policy with their world, ever since, might be comparable to actions taken by the United States in the middle east.”

Tony managed not to drop his glass in shock, but it was a near thing.

“How so?” Martha asked.

“Well, after forces had destroyed all infrastructure, their remaining advances since then have strangely never grown so advanced as before without outside interference, usually to export guerrilla troops from Jotunnheim in effort to re-gather more outside technologies, to rebuilt infrastructure in their older cities, which Odin has been quietly foiling for centuries, keeping them in the dark and preventing their society from further advancing, and promoting further in-fighting and warfare on their own planet with each failed mission. As such, the vast majority of their cities consist primarily of ruins converted into shadows of their former selves by what powerful natural magics Jotunnheim itself still has, but without further aid, the majority of tribes there remain fairly nomadic, with some exceptions where clans have reclaimed old cave-systems that survived the wars with Asgard.”

The inventor might have been undergoing a series of uncomfortable self-reflections. A few memories flickered to mind and it took work to shake them off without showing outward signs of it. Or of his bemused state of moderate arousal.

“Is that a comparison you’ve drawn primarily on your own, or did you reach it in part through experiences the pair of you may share in that regard?” asked the reporter.

“These are independent observations of mine,” Loki said, glancing at Tony carefully. “Though I can say my desire to understand the politics of that whole region might have been sparked by deciphering the likes of you.”

Genuinely a little shaken and caught off-guard a little by the suggestion that his interest in understanding the mind of Tony Stark had led the trickster to take the time to study and understand some of the most complex clusterfucks of international diplomatic history on planet Earth, Tony blinked a bit and inquired, “When did you become an expert on my planet’s political history again?”

“I’ve had time to do plenty of research lately.”

More turned on by that than he wanted to admit, Tony didn’t actually notice how long he stared until Martha cleared her throat quietly to regain their attention.

“Wow you two are distracted,” she mused.

“Well, this is technically our first date, as you did note,” Loki explained.

The inventor hadn’t been about to admit that fully, but now it was out there, he had to admit that even seeing the face of one of the sharpest and most unflappable reporters on his call list look poleaxed for just a second—then disbelieving, before looking back to the inventor for
confirmation—was more than worth it.

Tony shrugged. “Yeah. We’ve been conducting intellectual foreplay of sorts for a while before this, though.”

The trickster smiled, polite and distant, in a manner that let on nothing further.

“I’ll leave you boys to it, then. Shall I have my people call Pepper’s?”

The inventor shot her a wink. “You bet.”

Still laughing at them a little, she strode away.

“Do you put out on a first date, Stark?”

“Or earlier. I’m flexible.”

“I look forward to finding that out in intimate detail, yes.”

The slightly militant click of otherwise dainty heeled shoes then approached them, only once their wearer slipped out from behind the nearest bit of decor, just over Tony’s shoulder. The wearer, Maria Hill in a knee-length navy dress only less sleek than her S.H.I.E.L.D. uniform because it was of a thicker and more velveteen fabric, greeted them, “Before you two get anymore bright ideas, I think we should have a few words.”

Tony winced and swore in moderate chagrin as soon as he heard her voice, even before she stepped slightly around the table to effectively stand facing them both, as much as possible whilst they were both still still leaning in close together across the circular table between them. Their seats might have been weightedly positioned to be closer to one another than to opposite sides, and gotten slightly closer still steadily over their ensuing mind-games, but only just then did the both of them seem to entirely notice, when Maria glanced down pointedly.

The madmen reluctantly turned a bit to face her more properly.

“I really hoped those flight delays would keep you longer,” Tony said.

Her eyes narrowed. “I know.”

Loki shot the inventor a brief, sidelong glance before returning his attention to Agent Hill again, one eyebrow quirking upward.

“I’m dating his ex, we’re allowed to be bicker now,” Hill explained succinctly. “Speaking of which: I’ve already informed her, and she’s unhappy with you.”

As though on cue, Tony’s phone in his pocket angrily began to ring and he let his head fall back slowly with an exasperated, only slightly whining sound. “Dammit.”

“You take that,” Hill said flatly. “Or she’s given me permission to threaten at least one of your limbs.”

Tony shot the god an apologetic look, and reluctantly tugged out his phone. His eyebrows furrowed. “Actually, it’s Rhodey. JARVIS?”

“He is in a highly volatile-”

Before the AI finished explaining, Tony answered the call. “Talk to me.”
“Anyone want to explain to me right now why the Ten Rings have Doom-Bots?!” the soldier bellowed so loud that Maria and Loki clearly both heard, causing them to exchange wary glances while the inventor blinked a few times rapidly, trying to process.

“Loki?” the inventor prompted.

He most likely hacked London’s CCTV system again,” the trickster sighed, sounding exasperated. “This city is irritating.”

Tony would have been more amused by that if his childhood best friend weren’t audibly being shot at a lot on the other end of the phone line. “Of course. So he knew you were here-”

“The very moment we arrived, yes.”

“Looks like this is our new normal for awhile. How are you and your unit holding up?”

“We could use any tricks you’ve seen work on these bastards before. They’re just obnoxiously self-repairing.”

“Oh, I do know,” Tony sighed, through grit teeth. “Sorry. I’ll get JARVIS working on some new upgrades for you this evening. JARVIS?”

“On it, sirs,” the AI added, as though also on the line with them.

“Good,” Tony confirmed. He then shot Maria a look as he put his phone away with visible exasperation. “I hate Doom. I really do.”

“I could give him plague, if you like,” Loki suggested.

Both the inventor and Maria looked conflicted.

“I’ll add it to the options list,” said Hill.

“You,” Tony pointed at her, “now have work to do, and I’ve done all the work at this party Pepper demanded of me and more.”

Then his phone lit up with half a dozen texts at once.

“Damn social media,” he sighed. “JARVIS?”

“Half are from Pepper, sir.”

Loki began to look more and more amused. “I believe I’m enjoying being public with you already.”

“Yes, I get it, my misery is hilarious,” Tony muttered as he read the texts under Maria’s warning glare, as she determinedly didn’t leave until he had sent responses back.

Then she nodded to them both. “Goodnight, you lunatics.”

They both watched her go for a moment, before Loki broke first and glanced back towards the inventor with an amused expression. Tony met the stare with a slight frown until the trickster deapanned, “Just think what poor shape we would be in, if either of us bothered having any shame.”

Tony cracked up sniggering helplessly, at that, and was a bit surprised to be cut off partway by another kiss, but he could feel soft lips trace the shape of his laughing smile and it left him a bit dizzy, despite being a relatively chaste thing, because the god soon then pulled back… not very far at all.
“I want to spend the majority of the rest of the night making you moan.”

The inventor’s pupils dilated a bit. “Same.”

“But you have questions about one more subject, I believe, related to the same reasons I have not teleported the both of us to a more secluded location with a wall I might fuck you against.”

It understandably took Tony’s brain a few moments to get back into gear. “Magic.”

“You have it.”

“Still working on the believing, there. I’m curious why you sound annoyed, though.”

“Human mages are uncommon, these days, for good reasons; magic can overtax mortal bodies heavily, if not properly trained and a degree of harmony between biology and metaphysical states isn’t achieved. You are in a position in your life very much like Thor’s, at times, and adding to your weapons stock-pile is a bit like Odin’s weapon’s vault and all the danger he keeps there. These things do not promote feelings of trust in the likes of myself, and are also hazards to your metaphysical stability.”

Tony blinked rapidly, then got pissed off. “I’m not like your brother.”

“You share a few archetype-defining features in common, but I do agree that you are far more mature, and furthermore a much more creative force than he. Magecraft might indeed one day suit you, just as do so many things in your life, very conveniently. You would have to alter the whole shape of your life to accomodate it, however, so I doubt it would be anytime soon.”

“Trying to see how hard you can push my buttons, here?”

Loki smiled, small and mocking, in response.

“You’re telling me I have a ‘too easy’ life?”

“No. You have vast reserves of power and war-trophies collected over years.”

“Ahh,” Tony responded, only a little uncertainly.

“If you are not careful, you will begin making not your own father’s mistakes, but some of Thor’s, if you plan to become a mage-ruler of your world, Tony Stark, but this world would not take so well to that as Asgard, keep in mind.”

The inventor genuinely hadn’t seen that one coming. “This an insight you and your, uh, new mortal bestie share?”

“No, but he might have led me to revise some of my own opinions about Odin in ways that led to this warning.”

“Warning as in threat?”

“More as a concern. I find nothing less sexually attractive than Odin and his son. Also it would be a pity to waste your potential so.”

“It’s almost like you actually like me or something.”

“Magic, applied to you, would change your archetype in a few fundamental ways. It opens you up to the power of words alone to injure you if the wrong clever bastard says them in conjunction with
your name, across any paths your physical body has traveled. It makes the image you project a totem of your power, and damage to it will affect you a lot more poorly as a mage than it ever did as a CEO.”

That caused a number of puzzle-pieces to fall together. “Interesting.” He could see that sort of power dynamic doing unpleasant things to his head. Even worse than not being able to pilot the suit, in fact. It wasn’t exactly the sort of burden he’d want to foist upon Pepper and their PR team, either. “Thanks for that warning, then. Connie mostly seemed to think my reputation might, uh, shield me a bit more like you than his own more ventilated skull.”

“He is a Spark, yes, and rather different.”

“I’m still fuzzy on that.”

“Technically, any human could do what he does, if open and aware of their capacity, but John has enough long experience, and a strong enough will, that he can do some magus-like tricks when pressed.”

Tony made a face. “Oh no.”

Now the god grinned widely, full of schadenfreude. “Hmm?”

“You’re implying I need to learn from him too, aren’t you?”

“No. He does not practice the sort of arts you could easily replicate the psychological…” He hesitated. “He’s riddled with various small magics accumulated over time that make the inside of his head a unique sort of conduit. You would not be able to suspend disbelief sufficiently for most of his techniques, but the thought of seeing you stripped nude and covered in blood chanting your way into the right mental state to pry open just the right cracks between reality and the astral plane is pretty amusing.”

The inventor opened his mouth, then shut it again. “Yeah, alright, I see your point. Not exactly something I could take seriously.”

“Whereas, as your employee, perhaps I could spare some basic occult knowledge you might actually have uses for,” he mused.

“Sounds almost as good as the wall idea.”

“We should get to that soon, for preference.”

Feeling long fingers trailing up one of his thighs, Tony pressed his leg up a little into the touch under the table and rolled his hips a little to encourage them to press still higher, but instead the god gripped behind his knee and let his thumb trace little circles on the inner side of his leg, keeping him still. It also set Tony thinking about having the god between his legs, manhandling and maneuvering him. And based on the evil smirk from the evil god who gave a very deliberate and knowing squeeze, this reaction had been visible, and Loki liked it immensely. The inventor cleared his throat softly. “JARVIS, the car’s ready, yeah?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good. Can I have my leg back, Lokes?”

“For the time being, I suppose.”
They managed to keep their hands to themselves all the way to the car, mostly in surprisingly companionable silence. Loki even managed polite salutations—"Hello, Mr. Hogan. I am Loki of Asgard."—before he noticed Tony removing his tie in a few deft, practiced movements, and moving to set it aside.

The god reached out to grab it instead, and with remarkable speed managed to bind the inventor’s wrists together with it.

“So that’s why you recommended the privacy barrier, this time,” Happy mused, sounding only a little sincerely curious and amused at his boss’ expression of mild alarm, which began to melt away again into something a bit more aroused as soon as he heard the barrier between his driver and the back of the armored limo rising.

“It was supposed to be an order. Not just a concern for your psyche.”

“I know, that’s why I was curious. Back to the hotel?” The barrier paused at a half-inch from fully shut. It completed its ascent very quickly seconds later when-

“Y-yes,” Tony managed to answer. It was mostly an effort because somehow he had been pulled onto the lap of a deity whose silvered tongue was parting the fabric in the wake of unbuttoning hands, moving down the front of his shirt. And that was very distracting from the art of breathing properly, amongst other things.

Also balance. Balance was tricky, until the god helpfully tossed the inventor’s still-bound wrists over his head, so that the inventor could use his shoulders for leverage. He arched forward from the hips and rolling up the rest of his frame, when Loki’s tongue veered off-course from the unbuttoning in order to instead swirl teasingly over the inventor’s left nipple, shocking a small gasp from the mortal.

“Your ability to make a knot this damned thorough as quick as you did is as unfair as your still-not-quite-human strength,” he managed only half his usual wit, and even that left him altogether a moment later when that taunting tongue and lips were abandoned in favor of teeth, making his whole body jerk and the skin slightly sting.

“I believe you’re enjoying both imbalances are you not?” the god purred against his skin, just before trailing softer bites back up Tony’s chest; though he halted with an indecent groan of his own when the inventor rolled his whole body in a motion that the god recalled from battle; it usually brought forth weaponry from different parts of the suit. The pressure applied where their hips ground together was genuinely exquisite.

“I’d say we both are.”

“Do you usually apply battle-field tactics when tied up?”

“Is that a request for more?” He looked dangerously thoughtful. “I’ve certainly never tried applying suit-piloting techniques while riding a cock. In the name of science, we must test this as soon as possible.” He began rocking his hips slowly for emphasis. Not many people he slept with noticed how much sheer physicality he steered his suits with, how subtle and precise some of his reactions had to be to stay in the air, let alone caught on so fast that he used the resulting muscle-memory for sexual purposes. “How long have you been keeping close track of my hips in flight?”

“I notice all, especially when I am not supposed to,” Loki purred and reached up to grab the back of Tony’s head by the hair not-quite painfully, and tug him in closer, to claim his mouth, while the god’s other hand gripped one of Tony’s buttocks, hard and encouraging, his own hips moving a bit as well.
It was a surprisingly good tactic for cutting off the snarky response Tony had for that, and as vengeance he executed a slower and harder undulaton of his body: one usually for changing directions mid-swoop, and pulled a genuine whimper from the god under him with it. So of course he did it again and the trickster growled outright.

And by then, Tony had finally solved the nigh-gordian knot in his own tie and immediately ran his hands down with an effort to get in some groping of his own, pulling a noise like a growl up from Loki’s throat. So, of course, Tony then kneaded a little and the growl became more of a distracted-sounding huff.

At which point the car had been in park for three seconds, and both of them were highly distracted by Happy’s polite three knocks on the tinted rear windshield. Because Tony had forgotten actually, that he’d chosen this hotel precisely for the short drive-time.

“That… would be the sound of him leaving the area. If I’m going to ride you, I think I want you spread out a bit more so I can see you.”

The god sucked in a breath quietly, eyes appearing very dark and his whole expression hungry. “Then you may need to loosen your grip slightly.”

“But your ass is glorious.”

“Mmm.” The god’s hand thoughtfully stroked Tony’s, to indicate mutual appreciation. “Yes, but I haven’t sufficient magic to get us both out of this vehicle in our current position.”

Tony wrapped his tie around the back of Loki’s neck and led him out of the car by it, one hand gripping each end. “I don’t usually do bondage much, but you’re definitely welcome to do that and more.”

“Oh, I plan to.”

Trying not to shiver visibly in anticipation at that, Tony continued walking backwards and leading with the tie until they were halfway to the lobby and Loki managed to somehow vanish it non-magically, JARVIS insisted. The little shit.

They were both incredibly disheveled and Tony’s shirt mostly-unbuttoned, but the staff didn’t even bat an eye. The benefits of a reputation and strategic entryway choices, the inventor thought, smirking a little to himself shortly before the elevator doors to the penthouse-levels of the hotel closed and he dragged the god down by the front of his shirt and tilted them in time with the rise of the elevator to trip the trickster up and push him against one mirrored wall.

The god’s surprise melted fast in the wake of breathless noises he began to make when the mortal’s hand unbuckled his belt and slipped under the waistband of his pants to begin exploring his cock reverently.

“Damn, Loki,” Tony panted, his skin heating at the prospect of taking that inside him. Stroking deliberately slow and thorough, he bit at the side of Loki’s neck and enjoyed the gasp and the slight twitch of the god’s hips it evoked. “My jaw aches in advance.”

“I can soothe that much with my current capabilities,” the god said, in slightly breathier tones than he originally intended.

“Good to know.”

Ding.
Loki eyed the door, then arched an eyebrow at the inventor, only to struggle a bit to maintain his droll expression as Tony’s hand slid up his length once more, slow and almost painfully tight, making his breath go ragged for a moment. Then he prowled after the mortal, keeping close behind, stroking fingers down the man’s spine once they reached the penthouse bedroom Tony had already claimed his own, and chuckling softly when this resulted in the inventor seizing him by the wrist to drag him into the room faster, allowing Loki to easily continue the movement and use his slightly greater mass to drag Tony with onto him the bed as he followed the path of the tug without resistance. With only a small squawk, the inventor let himself be pulled rather than fall down outright, and at the edge of the bed found himself caught, and long fingers continuing their work on removal of his clothing.

Tony tried to confiscate the trickster’s own tie pre-emptively to prevent a repeat of the original bondage incident, but still found himself somehow face-down on the bed with his wrists now bound behind him. He struggled for a second until Loki stepped around back into his sight range and began to remove his own clothing. Very slowly.

Distracted, the inventor almost forgot about his pursuit of freedom for several long, staring seconds. “Tease.”

“Is that a request for more?” the trickster purred in response.

“I wouldn’t turn it—” An only slight hitch in his breath when at last Loki’s pants joined the rest of the pile of clothes on the floor, leaving the trickster nude. “I—I would turn down no such thing,” he concluded in a lascivious rasp.

Stepping closer to the edge of the bed where Tony’s face rested half-against the bedspread, Loki loomed over him, his dick suddenly very close. Within reach, in fact, Tony discovered a moment later when he arched his neck up to lick at the head.

“Greedy,” the trickster rumbled softly, seizing the inventor’s chin to halt him, before steppin back around behind him.

“Hang on, what are-wait a second—” Tony stiffened a little as he felt the god grip his hips, guiding them up and back into a particular position.

“Oh rest assured you will ride me, my dear, but I would make you a bit wilder first, and prepare you for me,” responded Loki, hissing into his ear as he trailed his fingers down between the mortal’s posterior cheeks. “Lubricant?”

“Uh… neck is a bit uncomfortable.”

“Face down, dear Tony.”

“I can’t,” he said quietly.

Loki hesitated only a moment to process, then leaned slowly up so his body stretched out across Tony’s back. He moved a couple of pillows under Tony’s pectorals, allowing him to not need to rest his face flat on the bed, letting him feel less smothered. “Better?”

The inventor seemed flushed bright red, but nodded firmly. “Your current side, night stand drawer.” He let his head hang just enough to obscure his view, able to feel some of his own breath against his face, but not smothered, and thus further also from drowning, which he was not thinking about in the least, because before his brain could even make that familiar leap between thought-trains, Loki was stroking lubricated fingers against him, slicking him up as he tried not to arch back into the touch just
yet.

“I’m going to take you apart this way until you solve a second knot.”

Tony realized he had entirely forgotten about that option, and struggled a bit to get his hands turned just right to allow him to try. “Damn it.”

“If you come before you’re free from that, I could just have you like this again, until you either ask release and forfeit, or solve the puzzle.”

That sounded dangerously like a double-or-nothing bet. Tony wanted it to be, and was pretty sure that was unhealthy, but still he panted out, “You’re on.” He then groaned sharply, struggling not to tighten up at the feel of one long finger sliding into him. It didn’t hurt, precisely, but nor was it comfortable yet. “What if I make you come before I’m free?”

Loki rumbled curiously, at that. “I’ll free you instantly, and happily let you ride me through the mattress. And I will keep my wrists wherever you may bind them with that tie, for the duration.”

Tony shuddered. “Damn, I like you.” He then whimpered just slightly at the addition of a second finger and some stretching administrated by Loki scissoring them.

“So very tight.”

“You’re a lucky god, lessay,” the inventor moaned softly, then emitted a slightly higher, more shocked sound. “Aughhhfuck.”

“Something the matter, dear?” Another twist and press.

Tony whined outright and rocked his hips back hard, gasping at the friction of Loki’s fingers still focusing on that one spot: very focused, fricative and frustrating. “More of that, holy fuck, more of that.”

“You’ve made little progress, I note.”

Swearing again, the inventor went back to tugging at the unnecessarily complicated tie-knot holding his wrists together at his back. He was rewarded by a third finger and began to visibly struggle to work faster, anticipating his own distraction from the first at the slow, painful slide of the new intrusion. The discomfort, too kept him focused. Focused enough, in fact, to come up with a plan. Accommodating the further stretch until he was reduced back to panting and struggling to keep his fingers’ grip on too-tightened parts of that damned knot, Tony waited further until Loki tested him with a fourth, and deliberately keened with it a little. “Fuck me.”

“Patience.”

“N-no st-stretch me like this. So I can have you harder.”

Loki slowed his fingers notably, thoughtful in his observation of the inventor’s attempts to squirm in response. “I’d wondered when you’d ask.”

“You too worked up to take a sample yet?” Tony challenged then, more wickedly. He hissed when the answer was pushed into his ass, blunt head achingly wide, then the rest a long drag into himself that took his breath away. Maybe his plan wasn’t actually going to see Loki loosing it first. The very ache of it was unexpectedly pleasing.
Expecially when Loki bit the back of his neck with a small growl. “Now press back for the rest, darling.”

At the thought of more still, he shivered, and tentatively lowered his head forward and arched his hips further up and back, leaning into it and breathing in shallow pants until he finally felt Loki’s hips pressed flush against his ass. Tony was more grateful than he ever planned to admit aloud that the god stayed still, at first, kissing up his neck and hands roaming up and down his sides until the inventor calmed a little, and the intensity of the ache at last gave way to acceptance. The inventor relaxed and pushed up just a bit, testing, which seemed to inspire Loki to pull slowly all the way back out to make him gasp, then push hard all the way back just as slow but much harder.

Like he knew it would make the mortal writhe and cry out, and then keep doing so as the pace picked up still further. The trickster slipped a clever hand around to Tony’s front and trailed long fingers down the inventor’s length.

Jerk ing his hips at that, Tony then deliberately arched back harder against the god and tightened around him, grinding his hips a little just as he rasped, “Please, Loki.”

The god groaned, clearly breathing much harder. “Tony, you wicked thing.” He slapped the mortal across one buttock with an open hand, loud enough to startle, and earn him a yelp and moan of shock from Tony.

“F-fuck, do that again!”

Curious, Loki did, and marveled at the tremors it sent through his lover’s body so rapidly, followed by loud whimpering in the absence of more. The thrill of it, and how a third strike, to the other cheek, a little harder, set off Tony’s orgasm all at once, catching them both off-guard, so that Loki was taken over the edge with him, both of them panting hard and exhausted.

After Loki finished removing the knotted tie, they managed to settled side by side, facing the ceiling, as they both cooled down. After several minutres, Tony prodded the god’s shoulder. “You fused both ends of that tie.”

“Only very temporarily.”

“In fifteen minutes, you’re gonna be riding me.”

Loki smirked at him.

The smirk went away approximately seventeen minutes later when Tony successfully trapped the god in a pair of handcuffs.

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John hadn’t been quite so far out of his element in at least a decade, and was mostly enjoying it. Except the heels. He was averse to anything that made the running-away process less easy to pursue, even when he wasn’t supposed to want to run. As soon as they’d gotten out of the view of the main crowd and Amora had paused to locate her bodyguard’s current position, John quickly removed the accursed footwear and conducted the rest of the running and darting about in bare feet.

Only once they met up with Skurge again and Amora noticed the shoes being carried did it occur to
her to return the magician back to his natural form and preferred clothing. She left the shoes in his hand, until he shot her a droll look.

“Fine,” she sighed, returning his previous footwear to his feet and vanishing the others. She then reached up and touched Skurge’s face gently, then moved her hand away slow enough that he followed it halfway down, so he met her gaze. “What think you of a new playmate for a time, dear?” She glanced pointedly at the magician.

Skurge glanced at him sidelong, at first. “Fragile.”

“Yes, I’d hope that would be a well-known factor,” John concurred. He let the Executioner catch him giving him a head-to-toe appraisal matter-of-factly and offering one of his better roguish smiles and the world’s most devil-may-care shrug. “I’m clever and twisted, however, and your Enchantress is interested in seeing both defiance and submission I’m willing to offer her, while you’re both my bodyguards.” He stepped closer to them both, but kept his eyes on the taller one, who did the same. “I’m almost as interested in seeing how she affects you, so far. What more you need to know?”

After a few long, contemplative seconds, Skurge turned to face the magician just enough to rest a hand on his neck, and leaned down to kiss him forcefully.

Only a little caught off-guard, John opened up to the show of exploratory force, then used his own skill-set to slow it down and sweeten it, then sent it spiralling into wet and just the right kind of dirty, at which point Skurge pulled back, looking a bit startled.

John licked his lips slowly. “Well, mate?”

Amora fluttered her eyelashes up at her dear love for further emphasis.

Looking both resigned and still mildly stunned, Skurge nodded once. “Accepted.”

“Nice to meet you too,” the magician grinned smugly.

“Now my dear players, we play,” Amora then said, resting a hand over each of their chests as one of her transport spells enveloped them.

John felt the teleportation like freefall through a whirlwind for just a few seconds before solid ground and proper reality returned. He shook it off a bit dizzily. “Eurgh. Not the route that passes through that patch of the Howling next time, please? The place remembers my head too well.”

Amora stroked his cheek. “My apologies, pet. I do prefer to make you suffer only intentionally.”

The mortal swallowed tightly, more because this particular dominatrix was an alien mage with capabilities he still didn’t know the full extent of, than fear of anything more tender. No, all the “tender” things that came to mind still involved leather and perhaps candle wax. It had been a very, very long time since he’d done that.

Amora cleared her throat quietly. “You’re projecting slightly.”

“Oh good,” John said. “You interested?”

She shot him distinctly smoldering look. She wore it very well. “Skurge? Prepare a platform for us, please, and a variety of candles around it.”

This will either go very well, or straight to hell, John thought, but same can be said every other direction available to me, so might as well enjoy the closest the likes of me gets to flying: enjoying
Amora then tugged him forward by his tie. “Strip. Or you’re not getting these clothes back.”

“Will you wear them around me just to add insult to injury?”

She smiled sweetly, and raised her other hand just to tug to tightening-end of the tie until it applied a bit of pressure around his throat. “Well I do enjoy both, when they’re handled with sufficient art.”

*A very, very long way down. Wouldn’t miss it for the world.*

“Where ever did you learn that dance?”

John smirked a bit more. “All sorts of places. Mostly from a part of a ritual I was chained up for most of the duration of, but didn’t get to enjoy much of the rest of. I had to find out where Zed got it; although she’d modified it in several spots.”

“How so?”

“Well, partway through, the submissive party changed shift from me to the, uh, lady I’d been seeing at the time.”

“And you got chained up.”

“Front row seats for most of the rest of it. Except right before and after there was a dragon-induced tidal wave.” He watched her intently as she reached up and unbound his tie, rolled it up and put it into one of his trouser pockets, and then slowly unbuttoned his shirt, all the while watching his expression too. “I’m surprised I’m not too irreverent for you.”

“You’re a sensualist, and it shows. You desire more tenderness in your life, and it is your weakness more than your destructive desires alone could ever make for you.”

“And?”

“You’re subject to my preferred forms of manipulation.” She trailed a hand down his chest once his shirt was untucked and open. “And you’re more than damned curious and aroused enough to play along, just to see where this goes, but you also won’t hesitate to tell me whether your enjoyment is sincere. I value these qualities in our playmates.”

A little surprised, John nodded. “Me too.”

She kissed him, slow and almost tender. “Then follow, darling. Let’s find you a bit of peace, for awhile.”

That, more than anything, sent a shudder through him of relief stronger than even the statement before it. Less nervous suddenly, he followed with far less hesitation.
Cracking on Involves getting Cracked Open

Chapter Summary

What it says on the tin. Also might be a rolequeer manifesto in a very thin disguise. Shhhh, indulge me a little. Next chapter will be firmly Avengers- and SHIELD-heavy anyhow.

There was a vague thought in John’s head, that he really hoped Loki wasn’t expecting reconnaissance on the subject of Amora’s motives anytime soon.

Of course, he should be gathering reconnaissance for his own sake anyway. It wasn’t as though he couldn’t find out more about Loki too, here. More that the god of lies himself would admit to directly, even, if he played his cards right.

If there was one thing in this life that John Constantine was horribly and painfully aware of, it was just how much it was possible to learn about another person, based on the sort of friends they keep close. On the other hand, he was very determined not to think about the likes of Loki, at present.

Not while the gloriously sadistic, delicate and clever Amora the Enchantress was still trailing drops of melted candle wax upwards, in a serpentine trail from his right hipbone, up to his left nipple. That sweet burn held his attention single-mindedly, at the same time that it made the image of the lovely Aesir sorceress’ facial expressions throughout that time embed themselves in his mind forever, so hungry and covetous were the feelings they evoked in him.

He couldn’t help but be more than a little fond of such mirthful, gleeful enjoyment of his own squirming, but she also showed such care and artistry in the delivery of gentle agonies, as left John’s willingness-to-try-to-enjoy-anything-once attitude being pulled helplessly (but by no means unwillingly) into the undertow of the sheer force of Amora’s dominance.

John hadn’t been broken down quite yet, just now, but he was passionately willing to enjoy drowning in the resulting particular forms of sensory-overload: all crisply fresh data from the real world again at last, slicing through the unreal and his own ego alike, like a hail of razorblades and leaving him gasping and clinging to self-awareness by threads that were growing increasingly tenuous with each… molten… drop.
When a particularly large drop plopped dead-center over his flat left nipple, a small scream escaped the magician’s throat, followed by a long moan as it trickled down his pectoral muscle to his ribcage in a sickly-sweet trail of sharp burning heat.

Then she handed the candle to her kneeling-at-her-right-hand pet Skurge. “Continue along those paths, won’t you dear?” and the room seemed a little bit better lit, like there was some sort of spotlight involved. “In a moment.”

John managed to squint just enough to see that it was his own mind’s haze, not glamor, causing the spotlight effect, as the Enchantress moved toward him enough to hiss in his ear, “You want to stop thinking at last, for a while, yet you are so intently focused on seeking leverage, that you forget how to let your guard down enough to do so, without giving away your games.”

Her assessment wasn’t inaccurate, and the magician huffed a little, with an only-slightly-failed attempt at his usual roguish half-smirk of self-deprecation. “It’s how I am,” he rasped quietly, voice tremulous for a precious moment before all of his loudest and most successful survival instincts snapped control and his web of thoughts right back into place again. Then he asked in a clearer and more deliberate tone, while peering up at her with his head cocked a little playfully now, “Think you can you help me beat that bad boy down too, while you’re at it?”

“Sweet player, I have ways to address all sorts of your needs.” She snapped her fingers, and her Executioner calmly tipped the candle he had been holding, and waiting, while his mistress spoke.

Skurge applied the wax just as she’d ordered from there on out: with equal patience and delicacy compared to the delivery of his mistress. The Executioner applied light droplets along the same snaking paths all over his torso that Amora had originally mapped out. Amora nibbled at John’s ear, for the first few, then gripped his hair hard, pulling his head back to expose his neck, and subjected it to the teasing light-scratches of her surprisingly-sharp nails along little winding paths that zig-zagged down across the visible-through-the-skin bits of John’s circulatory system on display, at that angle.

The light, delicate and almost rhythmic touches, interrupted by awareness of molten wax further down his body, put the magician’s internal monologue, verbal and otherwise, into complete disarray. He couldn’t narrate, anymore. There were too many interruptions, too unpredictably, fast and yet just as gently ungentle as he needed, in order to feel unafraid. Finally, the constant march of endless angling manipulations, all of his irons in myriad fires, and even what year it was anymore, drifted out of his awareness far enough that he could let go of the tension of constant-anticipation they pinned him down with: always, weighing down his every action with far, far too much history, until he felt suffocated by loss.

But not now. For now… he could expand into the spaces usually cramped with plotting, and relax into them, except for the continued drip-dropping agonies making him flinch and gasp a little more,
and more helplessly as his control eroded; however, there was elated bliss singing through every
tremor of his own body’s reactions, now. Especially once one of Amora’ hands wrapped oh-so-
gently around his erection and began stroking him so softly and slowly that it made him wish to
scream.

So he did, and felt kisses trail up his neck in response. And he heard the Enchantress whisper soft
praises in his ear while she scratched red trails along up and down his arms with the nails of her free
hand.

Under that onslaught John unwound, inch by painful inch. Tears spilled down his face and felt
somehow refreshing, soothing his flushed skin despite being just as warm as his own blood. In the
wake of them, as the water evaporated and left saline behind, the skin they had passed over felt
somehow younger, just enough to remember how to heal again, rather than continue to decay.

And in that John was lost, his body reacting faster than he could think, leaving him an exposed nerve
under it, writhing yet obedient to Amora’s firm orders, too lost to remember disobedience or distrust
existed anymore.

There was only the fire, and the scratches that sometimes left his skin reddened under their sharp
tracings, and Amora’s voice, though he couldn’t catch the words anymore. Every other sense was
too hightened. He couldn’t remember words, by then.

And he tumbled down through it, writhing more and more, until it all came crashing down and
slowly, slowly, a little bit of self-awareness returned, in the wake of a singularly mind-melting
orgasm and pure physical abandon.

In the wake of it, John’s first thought was that he hadn’t felt this refreshed since the last time he’d
gotten into a cathartic bar-fight. His second wasn’t a thought so much as a boneless release of all
breath from his lungs and a small groan. With it came a feeling of aching, bruised, burnt and deeply
satisfied pleasure.

“Back with us, I see,” Amora murmured.

The magician tried to nod, but wasn’t sure he managed it. Time was still passing funny, on the way
back down from cloud nine. Amora seemed to move too fast, when she stepped around the platform,
and grew a bit further away. Words followed, but sounded oddly muted.
Once he readjusted to hearing again, John realized that for some reason, Skurge was being invited to kiss him again. He barely had enough time to open his eyes (after wondering for a moment when, exactly, they’d fallen shut in the first place) before the light around him was eclipsed by the arrival of a presence of a much larger being than scrawny little John Constantine.

Feeling lips against his own shortly after, the magician let his eyes fall shut again instinctively. Skurge’s lips were firm and a little dry, powerful but somehow not actually overpowering. The kiss was slow and strangely reverent. It occurred to the magician vaguely that, given all he had observed from Amora before, reverence freely given seemed to be what she most craved, and it thus made sense very much, for her pet bodyguard-and-lover, to be so deliciously and refreshingly good at it.

The scarred street wizard felt cherished as much as propositioned and that… that was unexpected, yet more welcome than John himself realized until it struck such a soothing chord in him. He would never admit aloud just how much he was always secretly pleased to be treated as a treasure, even for the briefest of moments.

John might have sympathetically rolled his hips up against the Executioner, as soon as he realized how desperately hard the other man still was, only to feel his own muscles protest against the movement all the way, making the gesture more difficult, and slower to achieve than the magician had actually intended.

It still proved effective, when Skurge stiffened with a small sound, hungry yet fearful of being scolded.

“Feeling more yourself, John?” Amora asked gently. She was flushed and the number of times she had gotten off during the show up until then could have been singular, or plural, or about to become plural any second now: her pets seemed to have long ago lost track, themselves, and it was clear she enjoyed that too.

The magician emitted a low, lascivious noise in response, his lips curving a bit smirksishly despite his refusal to break the kiss, even as he shot the Enchantress a sidelong glance, a moment later, full of wicked approval.

“Good,” Amora said. With a wave of her hand, the magician’s restraints at wrists and ankles loosened enough for him to pull away with only gentle tugs of motion, which he did, immediately. “Then you can reward him, with your mouth.”

John grinned outright, breaking the kiss a bit, when that sent a shudder of anticipation through the much larger, bulkier man. Tilting his head back into that hopelessly irreverent and cocky angle from
before, lingering close, the magician purred, “You heard the lady.”

When the larger man hesitated, it was clearly out of concern that the other man’s amusement might be more mockery than respect.

“I ask only that you lay back, expose yourself for me, and let me suck you,” John assured, letting the lines of his shoulders loosen, and one hand stroke up the line of the other man’s abdomen. The strength and density of the muscles under his fingers was a strong reminder that submissive or no, the man John was propositioning this time was indeed more than capable of crushing his skull like a grape.

Skurge gripped his throat just a little warningly.

“I want you to come about as embarrassingly as I just did, and I plan to make it happen. You really protesting that?”

The Executioner smirked a little, bit affectionately at the con-man’s lower lip, and responded, “No. Merely challenging.”

Right then, John decided he liked Skurge. Strong and quiet, and obedient to his chosen devotion’s whims, yet clearly still a lover of subversion on deeper levels than anyone else, aside from the likes of Amora, could orchestrate to a degree that the Executioner found sufficiently pleasing.

And that… John was all for. The person this twisted bastard considered worthy of worship, was perfectly understandable. Amora was… enchanting in all the right deliciously twisted ways. The magician himself could see the appeal, wary as he was of buying in just yet, for more than a few no-strings tumbles in coming days.

His own hesitations and deep-down wariness aside, the magician felt inclined to offer enthusiastic rewards to Skurge regardless. That devotion to Amora, after all, had been an integral part to John coming so hard he thought he might go blind, mere minutes before.

So John replied to him: “Then lie back and think of Asgard, darling, and I’ll happily conquer any challenge you’ve got for me.”

The fact that Amora beamed as brightly as Skurge did made the magician actively wonder what
unseen dieties might trying to repay debts to him without his consent again, to provide this much perfection in a single evening.

Then, he proceeded to exploit it, and be exploited, until he almost, almost managed to forget his own name for a few sweet hours. He couldn’t have managed any of it without succulently burning flares of magic refueling him, each time that Amora so desired more of him. It felt like being gently electrified, each time, disturbing the serenity of his rest on the way back down again, yet also, tantalizingly, beginning to once again uplift him enough to make him no longer want peace instead.

Just enough to make him want to fly, more than remain still and quiet and content to be lost-yet-safe for awhile.

Most of the magician’s favorite bands fit that same description.

Not that John was thinking about anything more musical than the small sounds escaping his current sexual partners, as Amora settled within reach of Skurge’s mouth so that his noises of appreciation for the mortal magician’s mouth on his cock were muffled slightly, by virtue of his own lips and tongue being very busy pleasing his mistress.

This was, John would later conclude, possibly the single best fringe-benefit of any catastrophes-in-the-making he’d managed to be a part of in years.

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He hadn’t exactly expected to be awoken by the Norse god of lies late the next morning. John had been enjoying blissfully dreamless sleep, unaware of the sunbeam he and the rumpled sheet he’d somehow partially wrapped around one leg both lay in.

And then.

“The pair of them almost didn’t let me in here, I’ll have you know.”

And John twitched violently awake, his eyes snapping open wide and his head tilting up, only to flop back down with a muted groan into the mattress while dragging a pillow down over his head, at how too-bright the sunlight suddenly seemed.
After only a little bit of a pause, Loki added with considerable fond amusement, “They had intended to let you sleep in as late as you might be capable, for your own sake. And Skurge seems to have made a rather impressive variety of breakfast options out there.”

Very few things in this world had ever been capable of making the likes of the incorrigible John Constantine blush.

A new one was added to that very short list, in that very moment.

And John sighed as he tried to mentally overcome it, while a nearby god sniggered at him, clearly smothering the sound. It took the magician a moment to realize Loki was deliberately quieting his laughter out of respect for the eccentric duo that had spent most of the previous night expanding John Constantine’s already impressive sexual repertoire in novel and deeply satisfying ways. “You’re full of surprises, you are.”

“You’re a bit muffled, John.”

Slowly retracting, by careful and experienced increments, his pillow-shield, the magician peered up at Loki with his head cocked a bit. “You’re more understanding than I’m used to, is all.”

“I feel the same way about you, but I’m very glad it’s platonic.”

“Same here, mate.” John managed to adjust his eyes to the light enough, slowly, that he could toss the pillow aside and sit up with a groan and look the god of lies over properly. “Healed up your own souveniers then?”

“It wasn’t a conscious decision,” Loki said lightly. “I could heal a few of yours, if you like. Amora is… less accustomed to marks lasting so long. She would fully understand.”

The magician blinked a bit, unaccustomed to having such an option available. “Then I’ll ask her after feeling out which ones are the most inconvenient.”

Only a little surprised by his answer, Loki nodded with a faintly amused look. “A fair plan. She’s got more power to spare, these days, admittedly.”
“That too, yeah.” With a shamelessly broad grin, pulling one arm up to rest his weight back on one elbow, he then asked in a mock-lascivious tone, “How did your honeymoon go, then, darling?”

“Marvelously, across a number of household and laboratory surfaces alike, until Pepper appeared, and a number of press and other engagements arrived in her wake. It’s best, for a time, that I myself lay low, it seems. Rather like yourself.”

“Perpetually, yeah,” John mused. He rubbed a hand over his own face a bit, trying to further stimulate wakefulness, until he remembered something very important mentioned mere moments ago. “You mentioned breakfast?”

The god snorted at him. “You spoil easily.”

“There’s a reason I wanted to be a rockstar for several formative years,” the magician shot back with an insolent grin as he pried himself into a closer-to-upright position. “A lot of my fantasies do indeed center around being taken care of, because I never get to savor that sensation very long, in my life. No one is really surprised once they mull that over a bit.”

Loki blinked a bit at him, looking mildly disconcerted by how much he related to that, while not being himself nearly so comfortable expressing his own self in the same ways this debauched mortal had clearly been up to, of recent.

“We share an archetype, but it’s safe to say, darling: our sexual inclinations, whilst possessing equal measures of hedonism overall, do still drastically differ.”

“That is entirely true,” the god agreed.

“Also you’re a prince whose doting mother was a respectable queen, right?” John angled thoughtfully. “For you, that’s more uncomfortably familial, in degrees of closeness.”

“Also quite true,” Loki admitted, eyes narrowing a little at something in the magician’s tone, as well as the odd angle of that tangential comment itself.

“To each our own poisons.” He then held out a hand, palm-up, and raised both eyebrows
Snorting at him as though he considered the unspoken request ridiculous, the god nevertheless reached out, and helped pull John to his feet. The sheet fell away and the magician realized belatedly that he was entirely nude. He then decided not to amuse the god by letting that bother him in any way, considering the trickster’s own non-reaction to the nudity in question. Admittedly, that was less prudish than most any other royalty John had ever met, and he appreciated it.

Though it did occur to him then, that attending breakfast made by his current sex partners, nude with Loki present, would be a bit too painfully awkward. He liked to maintain a bit of his own mystery, including keeping private certain reactions he might have in response to teasing from Amora. He was sure Loki would appreciate that degree of polite obfuscation, too.

“Where are my pants?” the magician asked.

“Folded with your shirt, on a chair by the door to the bedroom.”

John blinked a bit in surprise. “This is like having the best room service ever.”

Loki snorted at him and smacked deliberately-lightly at the mortal’s shoulder. “Then do take advantage of it before I eat any of the breakfast foods you might covet,” he called, as he turned on his heel and strode towards the door in question.

“Dammit.” John darted ahead of him, and fairly leapt into his clothing, all while the trickster tried very hard not to audibly laugh. When he looked up to discover that Loki had resorted to covering his own mouth with one hand to smother chuckling he couldn’t fully suppress, the magician began to swear at him at length, while dressing himself. He wound up unable to find his tie, socks, or shoes, but didn’t consider that a problem. He allowed the god to open the door for him and bow a bit, one hand gracefully waving to usher him through it.

“Oh shut up,” John muttered, as he strode past the old mage.

In response, Loki only beamed at him bright and shaky, just a little, with the effort of maintaining that much control over his own face.

That at least stroked the magician’s ego just a little: to have put that lunatic in sufficient stitches he
could barely maintain such a familiar mask was an achievement of sorts, after all. As such, he gently patted one corner of the god’s smile, with all of the affection and condescension he could muster.

Loki promptly fell to the floor giggling.

Which was how Amora found them: John standing with a victoriously cocky smirk over a god of lies so lost to laughter he could no longer remain upright. He leaned back into the Enchantress’ touch when one of her palms settled at the nape of his neck and stroked downward, her delicate fingers trailing in her palm’s wake leaving a more feathery sensation that almost made him shiver, and not out of anything remotely like fear. “Impressive, dear,” she remarked. “It seems that you’ve completely incapacitated him.”

“He does not fight fairly,” Loki wheezed from his crumpled position. “Also I respect you both, but that man-” he pointed right at John. “-is just as insane as I am.”

Amora looked startled and a bit reluctantly impressed, as well as slightly worried, when she glanced sidelong at her current new playmate.

The magician was still beaming down at the god of lies beatifically. “And don’t you forget it, you mad bastard.” He then shot the Enchantress a roguishly pleased smile, and all but purred when her response was her nails scratching not-at-all-painfully (scratching, really, little back-and-forth motions all the way) up his back to between his shoulder-blades, at which point his head might’ve lolled back just a little.

“I’m feeling less amused now, and more as though I’m watching a sibling flirt again,” Loki remarked, pulling himself back to his feet.

Both blondes only smiled at him a bit wider in response.

The god of lies was clearly disturbed by this. He opened his mouth to remark on it, then closed it again, then reconsidered that too and said, “Breakfast was mentioned?”

Amora turned to John and patted his cheek in such an unknowing mirror of John’s own action toward Loki minutes before that the trickster god was reduced to biting the insides of his own cheeks to keep a straight face, and John’s grin only got a little more smug in response. “Yes. It seems you’ve left dear Skurge quite inspired, this morning. I’ve been so impressed, I planned to wait for you to wake, and enjoy it in your company.”
John might have blushed again. It might have lit him up with pale patches of ruddy pink from his cheekbones and ears, down his entire neck almost to his collarbones. “Thank you,” he said quietly, more sincerely surprised and nigh-reverent than he had intended to sound, disarmed as he unexpectedly felt, hearing that.

When she kissed his cheek, and strode away back towards the apartment’s kitchen, she left the magician standing there feeling a bit stunned, as a result.

Loki patted his back in a gruff mock-fatherly manner. “Always an adjustment, isn’t it: finding places you aren’t automatically hated, even after you’re seen broken?” he mused gently, before following in Amora’s wake.

That left John feeling a sort of dissonance between the world as it usually treated him, versus this surreal and inexplicably safe space he currently occupied. “Right. That’s …” He cleared his throat and followed, lacking all of the rest of the words, but he felt a bit more painfully fond of everyone in Amora’s apartment to an embarrassingly degree that almost, almost threatened to make him blush again. “I’m going to regret this and blame the lot of you,” he said, once he caught up with Loki and they fell in step.

“I feel much the same, trust me,” the god assured. “I’m only the brooding boy-toy of a billionaire on Earth, these days, after all. How do you think I feel?”

At that, once he had taken a long few moments to fully process it, and try in vain to restrain his response, John couldn’t help but crack up laughing too.

“We are in the same archetypal boat, as ever, it seems,” Loki intoned gravely.

By the time he reached the table of the breakfast nook, the magician had to drop into a seat to remain otherwise upright in any fashion. “You complete bastard, stop that!”

“I have no idea what you mean,” the god responded, in the same increasingly-cartoonish gloomy deadpan, as he slowly lowered himself into the seat opposite John’s.

John tried not to let it get to him. It was a loosing battle.
Amora strode up to Loki and tipped his chin up so that he met her stare. He humored her enough to allow it, but his entire expression still matched the tone of voice that had set off John’s less-stoppable fit of giggles. “Let him breathe.”

“I suppose I’ll have to defer to your expertise, there,” the god of lies said, deepening his voice still further.

John covered his face with both hands and gave a snort behind them. Then his attempts to smother his laughter failed and he tried to fold his arms in front of his face, while keeping both elbows as close to the table as possible. Then he sat up, said, “You wanker, I fucking hate your face,” and broke out into another fit of giggles that left him as close to doubled-over as keeping his head and arms no lower than the breakfast table allowed.

Loki chuckled to himself in satisfaction even as Amora frowned at him. He leaned into her touch further, then, making eyes at her unseriously with a wide mock-besotted smile. “Sorry, my dear. You can have his dignity back now, once he’s found it agian.”

Laughter cutting off abruptly, the magician found the perfect wit for that one and sat up sharply. “Wait, I have dignity?” John asked, voice full of disbelief.

“That’s the spirit, dear.” Then Amora kissed his lips, briefly, pulling back again just as Skurge approached them with a tray full of an absurd number of breakfast foods from different Earthly traditions. John slowly realized it was because the Executioner hadn’t known what he liked.

He blushed again, still harder, and was relieved deeply when Loki only glanced down at the table and smiled a little, rather than mocking any further. Then he recalled the trickster’s statement from earlier about adjustments and smiled full of all the surprise he felt, to let Skurge know he did well, rather than let his own shock fully incapacitate.

When the larger man beamed back at him with humble pride, John felt a bit more warmed than he wanted to admit, and understood a bit too keenly why Amora regarded her pet Executioner with such an adoring look, at the same time.

It was perversely heart-warming, and John was as relieved and pleased as he was perturbed, which he couldn’t help but enjoy.
Observing the minutiae of the non-verbal exchanges between his new grudging-friend John Constantine, his old friend Amora the Enchantress, and his long-time ally Skurge the Executioner, made Loki feel uncomfortable and disconcerted on more levels than he wanted to admit. Particularly in the wake of John’s comment about his relationship with Frigga. He hadn’t made much mention of his mother to the magician, but the clarity and precision with which John had articulated everything about Amora’s sexual proclivities that had ever made him uncomfortable in a nutshell, with a single sentence, unnerved Loki. Mostly by making him very annoyed that he somehow hadn’t noticed that correlation long ago.

Perhaps it was the number of parallels between Amora’s behaviors towards Skurge, and some of Frigga’s own habits, that he had been previously blind to. Loki wished he could unsee them, now, actually. It was making him deeply uncomfortable on levels he was hesitant to examine.

Then after one occasion Amora pet the hair of both of her pets, John shot him a strangely knowing leer.

Brow furrowed a bit in confusion, Loki arched one eyebrow higher pointedly, making his expression look both concerned, and a little offended.

The magician’s eyebrows both raised very high, and he looked momentarily amused, then full of sudden dread, causing him to glance away quickly.

That, the god knew, could not possibly be a good sign. He was slightly distracted by Skurge leaning a bit closer to the mortal and murmuring something in his ear that set John cackling a bit behind one hand.

“What is it, boys?” Amora inquired.

“I was simply musing on our guest’s aversion to maple syrup,” remarked the Executioner vaguely, “and other sweeter options. As well as… vegetables.”

“Something about you being a well of bitterness for lacking a sweet tooth,” John added, grinning a little. He didn’t have many sugary things on his own plate either, but his own plate looked less like it belonged to a being too carnivorous to contemplate any form of vegetables, let alone gluten.

“Actually, he seems prone to those preferences primarily after a lot of sex with someone new,”
Amora pointed out, “Particularly when he’s not exclusively dominant. I’ve long suspected that his system needs to prove itself top carnivore in the wake of his initial adjustment to occasional submission.”

John sniggered helplessly, at that assessment, while Skurge beamed mockingly at the god of lies, who shot a narrow-eyed glare at Amora along with a rude hand gesture, which in turn only made her crow with laughter outright.

“He actually, that’s because I frequently find occasion, with those I’m inclined to exchange roles with, to lick honey or something otherwise sweet off of their skin.” He ran his tongue across his lower lip as he held Amora’s gaze unwaveringly. “I had my sweets earlier this morning. I thank you, however, for invitation to this brunch.”

Amora frowned at him, hiding discomfort behind disapproval, but not very well.

“The healthier you get, the more disconcerting your appetite is to behold, to me,” John remarked, to distract from how funny he thought it was that she was clearly just as susceptible to certain forms of oversharing-related embarrassment as Loki was. “Is that common back home for you?” He glanced around the table.

“This bastard has defeated me by vast degrees in eating contests, in the past,” Skurge responded. “He is always hungry.”

Loki shrugged. “So is your Enchantress.”

“Are you suggesting your magic is a bit calorie-fueled?” the magician asked.

“Calories help,” Loki said. “It is more a matter of... maintaining our bodies’ structural integrity in order to survive channelling the energies within us. The calories are spent on that maintenance, not in our magic expenditures directly.”

John nodded thoughtfully. “Makes sense, I suppose. Seriously, though, would it kill you to add an egg or something?”

Rolling his eyes, Loki pulled a respectable slice of spinach, tomato and basil frittata onto his plate. “Happy now, mother?”
The magician made a face, then laughed in a self-deprecating way, at the masterful way that crashed several different trains of thought in his own head. “Piss off.”

“You’re just so concerned about my diet.”

“Piss off, you daft bastard.” He was still grinning, but resentfully.

“The only one who should be easily mistaken for a queen at this table is myself,” Amora then cut in, oblivious to how Loki looked momentarily horrified and John like he might fall out of his chair laughing if he had weaker survival instincts. “I clearly put far more effort into appearing regal these days.” She eyed the borrowed-t-shirt and designer jeans Loki wore as though judging the clothes to be deeply unimpressive.

“Royal garb is a bit overly conspicuous, for myself these days,” Loki responded. “I will happily let them bow to you, whilst I’m busy finding an escape route.”

“I didn’t say you lacked an excuse.”

“But you’ll pardon me not comparing you to my mother, Amora dear. I have, after all, known you since you had far more freckles across the bridge of your nose, as a child.”

She scowled at him. “They faded naturally.”

“As well we both know,” the trickster god mused in airy tones.

John managed to keep from either laughing, or looking overwhelmed by how adorable the Enchantress was capable of being when pouting, but only because Skurge squeezed his hand under the table in solidarity, which somehow helped. Feeling how hard the larger man was also restraining such reactions was both funny, and helped him anchor down his mask a bit more easily, somehow.

“So what are your plans today, in progress toward our mutual goals?” Amora asked crisply, as a means of quietly declaring that the subject had changed and there would be no going back. Her expression, leveled toward Loki then, could have borne the caption: now do be serious.
“JARVIS has been collecting the relevant post-invasion data ever since my son targeted Tony for this project. It is simply a matter of… where to start, and what to do with all of it. We have a lot of reading to do, before anything gets very interesting.”

“Well, it’s not all about the dead is it?” John cut in. “Some of it is weight you’re carrying, whether you know it or not, that you don’t actually have to.”

While the Enchantress and her pet appeared intrigued, Loki’s brow only furrowed in bemusement again.

“How do you mean?” he asked.

“There’s a few things you value a little too highly, that you could stand to deconstruct your views on. We can get into more detail later,” the magician suggested.

“Agreed,” Amora said quietly, supporting his unspoken request to drop it, just for now, and shooting Loki a look to gently enforce that.

Blinking a bit at his old friend, the trickster nodded too. “Okay, then.”

“I’ll deliver you both to Stark’s tower after brunch then,” the Enchantress said. “John, what was the story you alluded to the other night, about this Zed woman?”

John looked a bit startled by that unexpected topic-shift, but rolled with it. “She’s technically a spark, but has formed a community of supportive acolytes around her, and performs occasional world-saving acts of healing magic that blow anything I’m capable of out of the water.”

“I thought I heard stories of her life being tangled up with that of a figure called the Laughing Magician,” Amora remarked. “Down certain crooked paths on this world, I hear all sorts of pieces of prophecy, but those repeated frequently enough have a tendency to stick.”

“You’ve no competition, there. She would have required a lot shorter leash than I could’ve survived,” the mortal teased gently. “If you’ve heard echoes like that, they’re probably leftover from before I had my Laughing twin removed from my mind, body and soul via mystic scalpel.”
The Enchantress appeared genuinely surprised. “I’m so sorry.”

John shook his head. “That story, I at least know is over,” he said, but something in his posture seemed to cause Skurge to look a bit concerned. The others accepted the performance more habitually, though Amora stopped doing so once her taller pet shot her a glance. She didn’t outwardly react, though she did observe, and a moment later Skurge felt the ghost of a kiss on one of his cheekbones.

Neither of the other two noticed. Loki was busy looking unaffected and trying not to increase the awkwardness of the situation; John was busy maintaining his masks.

“He and I didn’t agree on a few key things,” the magician added. “He believed he knew how to make other people better. I don’t believein much, but in my experience the only way for people to become better, in any sustainable way, is for them to be supported in order to allow them to grow, but not forcibly uplifted onto any pedestals of artificially-enforced ideologies.”

“Artificially enforced?” Skurge inquired.

“The sorts of things that kids question, and adults forget that they’re even allowed to question: stuff that’s not actually as natural as the people who do it habitually want to believe that it has to be,” John clarified. “The only reason it’s enforced is because it’s habitual, not because it’s actually efficient, or harmless in any way, but try to tell anyone how to do it better, and what response do you get?”

“Resentment and resistance,” Loki said instantly.

“Spot on,” the magician concurred. “There’s no concrete reason that those little traditions and systems can’t be done away with and replaced with something better, except that some people a bit too set in their ways cherish it a bit too dearly, as a symbol of their ideological values, rather than accepting that it does damage to other people, and making changes to fix and prevent that bullshit.”

“Asgard has plenty of examples of that,” Amora mused. “Loki has offended most of them several times, usually explosively in at least one case apiece.”

“Which is why the Laughing Magician isn’t actually your archetype,” John told the older trickster with a bit of a smirk. “Lucky you I’m even alive.”
“Lucky for us both,” Loki added, smiling a bit. “That’s the goal.”

“Then your most Sisyphean task will be overcoming my cynicism, but for what it’s worth, I do hope we’ll succeed. I’m just unaccustomed to being able to trust hope.”

“Then perhaps you should get to work, there, Loki dear,” Amora mused. “It would be the healthier option, and I’d like him to last a bit longer.”

While consciously unsure how he wanted to feel about being spoken of in the third person in such a manner, John’s body might have reacted by making him a bit uncomfortably turned on. It was an effort to restrain anything that would make standing up embarrassing in the next several minutes, as much as the words themselves were just slightly terrifying in their implications, and Amora’s smile aimed his way told him she’d intended to have such effects, and enjoyed seeing them.

“Defeating the cynicism of John Constantine would be a feat worthy of bragging rights even for the likes of myself, admittedly,” Loki mused. “I accept this challenge.”

The magician felt the way that the sound of a record-scratch usually made him feel, but with his entire brain. *What have I done?* He gulped visibly. “Bollocks.”

Loki and Amora were both grinning at him now, and Skurge was looking thoughtful, even curious, but not like he disagreed with a word spoken on the topic. John considered for a moment the prospect of trying to hide behind the Executioner, but realized that if the other man wouldn’t budge, they grinning duo would only be further amused. So he quaffed the last of his coffee and sighed dismissively, “All right, all right. Take me to your phallic display of American engineering ego.”

A short pause followed.

“Stark’s tower,” John clarified.

Loki snorted. “Mortals always see phalluses in their architecture.”

“Is Asgard any different?” the mortal challenged.
Amora waved a hand vaguely. “Not really. While they do love columns, and have several tall rectangular structures in some sections of the city, they are usually interconnected at upper levels.”

“The interlinked traffic between most of such structures in no small part might be why they aren’t considered phallic,” Skurge deadpanned.

Loki audibly almost-choked, clearly unprepared for the resulting mental images.

“Also,” Amora added to John, who was also squinting a bit in response to similar problems with what his mind’s eye had generated, “They do prefer more domed structures, and others you might associate more with that one building in Australia that I keep seeing.”

“The… Sydney Opera house?” John suggested.

“Something like that.” She shrugged, observed that all of them had emptied and mostly-forgotten about their plates by then, and snapped her fingers, causing John’s tie, socks, shoes, and belt to reappear on his person. His coat appeared in his lap, folded. “Now you two play nice, and give me a call when you’re ready for your discreet exit for the evening, John dear.”

Without further warning, then, John and Loki found themselves seated on either side of a work-table in one of Tony’s labs, in the same positions they’d earlier occupied at Amora’s breakfast table.

They blinked at each other a bit, then laughed a bit helplessly, but quieter and a bit more unnerved than before.

“No clues, then, what her overall angles are?” Loki asked.

“I was very distracted.”

“Not just by sex, I noted?” the trickster’s expression turned more shrewd.

Reluctantly, John nodded. He stood up and strode a bit closer to the god, who stood up and crossed
his arms, watching without comment as the mortal shook his coat open enough to get to the pocket containing his cigarettes (once out of the range of the afterglow of sex long enough, the craving for nicotine came right back; although the sex had distracted him enough that his rate consumption there had notably gone down a bit) and pulled one out. “It’s an idea I had, is all.” He then forgot where he’d left his lighter and took a few seconds to find it. “About how things went after your brother’s coronation, and all. From what you’ve told me, and how you told the tale.” He shot the old trickster a nervous sidelong glance.

“Something to do with my mother, yes. What, exactly?”

“Well, it’s just… Having an empire’s worth of power and privilege thrown at you spoils anyone rotten to the core, fast as possible, with long enough exposure, but you and I both know it’s even worse if they feel entitled to use it, and yet also terrified of it,” John said calmly. “So whose grand idea was it to hand the scepter to you, rather than leaving it in the hands of your sensible-sounding mother?”

Loki blinked a bit. “She herself did. She—rather insisted. She believed in… that I should take the throne. She wished to remain at my father’s side. And I failed her.”

“Really?” the magician sounded surprised, but his expression didn’t quite match that, instead crumpling a little, as though he wished her were as surprised as he sounded, but couldn’t quite muster it.

The trickster shot him a genuinely baffled look.

“Right, that’s… what I thought must’ve happened,” John sighed. “Why is it always our mothers we feel the worst about failing?”

“Because they were the only kindness between us and our fathers.”

“Not me, mate, remember? Well, except in the imaginary sense, and in her memory as preserved by my sister. I just spent years thinking her death was my fault. Most of my life, actually.” He chose that moment to light up.

Loki was too busy trying to figure out how exactly to react to that. “That was your father’s greatest sin in life, yes.”
“He rued it for the rest of that sorry life, too. Because he was drunk, and desperate and stupid, and didn’t want another couple of mouths to feed, despite it being far too late to safely make that choice with an illegal application of coat-hanger,” John summarized. “And he lost her, and had to deal with the likes of me anyway, which honestly might be considered a suitable punishment if you ask some folks down in Hell, actually, now I think of it.”

“Then you didn’t fail her.”

“Doesn’t change all the decades of miser I went through before finding that out, though, now does it? No, only time and a lot of unpacking helps there.” John countered, turning to squint up at the god as he took a long drag and blew it out, away from the both of them via the corner of his mouth. “Look, this isn’t going to go down easy, I can tell by your face, but I’ve got news for you, that you won’t like.”

Loki looked worried just for a moment, then reluctantly gave a nod.

“Alright.” John rolled his shoulders, incidentally popping his neck. He tried, whenever possible, to be just a little prepared for anything. “Your mum clearly set you up for a fall. Hghk!” Yep, there was the throat-grip. “Is this an Aesir thing or a you thing mate?” the mortal rasped, as much out of sincere interest as poison, sounding only a little terrified.

Loki dropped him instantly, eyes snapped shut. You know, he’d heard himself speaking in that same scouse rasp to Victor Von Doom, he has the same reaction.

Stumbling a bit, but catching himself and somehow not having dropped his cigarette through sheer decades of familiarity with this situation teaching him tricks for that prevention, John watched in relief, as the anger in the god of lies fizzled back into cold, embittered self-loathing and Loki took a few slow, deep breaths, closing his fist tightly on empty air. “Right question?”

“Right circumstances. I just realized I learned that from Thor.”

The magician’s eyebrows raised in an eloquent question vacillating somewhere between concern and a desire to be angry, once the god’s eyes opened again.

“How did you conclude it to be her fault, exactly?” Loki asked slowly, while trying to massage a few uncomfortable childhood memories out of his hand.
“From what you’ve told me, I’m sure she probably meant it for the best, but didn’t think it through. She knows you better, and should’ve known by the look on your face how terrified and without direction you were. She tried to make up for her own failures from before, by assuring you that you could do something that in reality was destined to shatter you the worse, before the end.”

“… Are you suggesting she didn’t think I could do it?”

“No. She convinced herself that she believed it, likely out of desperation for some way, just then, any way, to ease the sting of the whole betrayal and lies bit. She put you on a pedestal, and… it didn’t have very great support.”

Loki pressed both hands to his face. “Ugh.”

“So you can un-shoulder at least a bit of your guilt, there. You could’ve easily been spared a lot of the pain that wound up driving you over the edge, mate.”

After a long few moments of struggling to breathe evenly, the god of lies filled his lungs sharply and all at once, then shakily let it out, along with a low murmur: “Yes.”

A long pause followed, as most of the rest of John’s cigarette turned to ash. Then the magician chuckled a little, and mused, “I’m honestly a bit shocked that you of all people would need the ‘kill your idols’ speech.”

“What?” the god sounded offended.

“Not literally, but up here.” John tapped the side of his head. “Classic er, punk philosophy, of a sort.”

“That bloody word again,” Loki sighed.

“I know, I know. The one that drives your All-Speak haywire for how many things it means, when you’re too tired to consciously filter out the excess.” He sighed. “But it’s important to me,” the magician shrugged. “I think you could use this bit of it.”

The trickster’s brow furrowed very deeply. “Go on, then.”
“Irreverence is always preferable to idolatry, because when people you consider your equals fail you, you can forgive them so long as you can forgive yourself. Hold them any higher, and the failure of trust will leave wounds a lot deeper. Deeper, in fact, for every bit higher you hold your expectations of them. It’s as natural as gravity, and equally prone to making unbalanced people topple over.” He shook his head a little. “It started as a bunch of angry shouting children, myself included, but they eventually came up with that, and it’s been in my head ever since, keeping me alive.”

Loki shook his head. “Why… why are you really telling me this?”

“Well, for one, you’re clearly unbalanced.”

The god shot him a slight glare.

“Same reason you can’t help but help me try to fix parts of my own life: they’re all too familiar. And we’re both unable to leave things alone that we know how to ‘fix’ a bit, to help keep those around us unencumbered by some of life’s more annoying bullshit.”

Loki nodded. “Right. Other… artificial barriers.”

“More than that, Loki. You need to hear this before you go visiting all the graves we’re about to explore.”

“You think I’ll turn this burden into something I hold above myself?”

John nodded. “Yeah.”

“I’m not exactly known for my reverence.

“Bullshit, mate. We both are.” At his further confused look, John said, “Our entire lives have both been spent in a balancing act of trying to keep a few precious people we care about within our reach. Some of them haunt us, because they died in it was our fault. In my case, I know how necessary it is to yell at their ghosts precisely because they wouldn’t be visible to me in the first place if I could let go of the ways I aspired to be more like them, and failed them, because secretly they were all my heroes: every last one. You’re going to hear the stories if the lost, and you’re gonna be moved by
every last one of them. Also, you have a heart left, surprising as that fact might be to most people. You want to tell me this isn’t a risk for you?"

Loki took a deep breath, a bit angrily, and let it out. “In the past it hasn’t-”

“This is going to be different. I’m telling you because you’ve already started to change whether or not you’ve noticed.”

“Yes, it’s all very uncomfortable.”

John grinned offensively, at that. “That’s the crux of it, mate. What makes you think I’m going to let you comfortably stew in angst when I’ve made the same mistakes you have? Screw that. If I’m uncomfortably aware of this, I’m taking you down that path with me whether you like it or not.”

Loki winced. “Admittedly, this reminds me of a few conversations I aimed at Thor.”

“At least it’s nothing more generously ‘well-intentioned’ than that, I guess, rest assured,” John muttered. “But I do try to do my best by my mates while I c-” He hesitated, suddenly. “Shite.”

“Were you just about to suggest you’re a good mate, when non-lethal?”

John swore a bit more.

“I appreciate it,” Loki said. “And your ‘philosophy’ is… healthier than my own, in retrospect, on such matters. I thought I had learned that lesson, but… apparently not in terms as clear and cutting as I needed, for it to sink in properly. Not enough to apply it to some of those I love, when I should have long ago.”

“Truth hurts more often than it soothes, pretty often. You just have to learn to like that particular pain more than other sorts life hits with.”

“Indeed,” the god murmured, then frowned a bit when John casually flicked his sadly-finished cigarette away, not even looking where it landed.
“Seriously?” Loki asked, in a coldly disapproving tone.

“This lab is kept clean by robots. It’s not even an inconvenience to anyone here, lay off.”

“It isn’t the scenery I’m concerned with, but the frequency you do that whenever outside your own home, as though the rest of world is your ash-tray.”

John blinked at him rapidly a few times, then hesitated.

“I don’t let my friends get away with being bastards without considering the full implications of their actions either, John Constantine. You are a part of this world even when you can no longer feel your connection to it, and caring more about it brings out more of your noblest attributes, does it not?”

The magician’s entire expression turned incredulous and strangely flattered.

Loki glanced sidelong at the tossed-aside cigarette butt. “Consider how often you’ve saved this planet before continuing that outdoors, is all; it’s been annoying me for ages so far; although I will accept that it’s harmless in here.”

John looked uncomfortable, but grumbled, “I’ll work on it. Thanks.”

“I think I may now need a good deal of alcohol, however. Not just in a toast to the death of idolatry.” He patted his fellow con-artist on the back with a deliberately patronizing air, as he took his first step away towards the door of the room.

“You’re a riot,” John deadpanned, sounding as resentful and unimpressed as he could, which was quite a lot, but he then added in a grudgingly-amused mutter, “but yeah, alright, I’ll drink to that any night.”

“I’m still not certain it’s her fault entirely.”

“Not by a long shot. You were already a powder-keg about to go off. She just doused you in petrol
and handed you a scepter with a burning fuse on it.”

“I…” He sighed. “You are correct. I did not… even consider her flawed reasoning. She made the optimizer’s gambit, and she lost, because the foundations of my identity had too many fractures to cope with the added weight of a crown. Full of desperation, uncertain and scared entitlement, and churning metaphysical horrors leaking up from the basement: not a place anyone thinking clearly would ever put a liar like you or I in, if they knew us the better, because it makes our lies to ourselves stronger than we are.”

John grimaced at the painful accuracy of that monologue. “You couldn’t save this for after the drinks kick in?” he asked, as they approached the elevator down the hall.

“Do I look like I’m well-known for my mercy?”

“… Touché, mate.”

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By the time Tony was free from various press and other engagements, and made his way back to Avengers tower, he was a bit surprised to hear that Loki and his special guest were in the penthouse, instead of any of the labs.

It all made sense, however, when he found the god of lies passed out and smelling of a distillery on one of the couches, his feet in John’s lap, and the magician looking more than a bit drunk himself, glass in hand and a decanter at his elbow on the nearby side-table.

“Not a productive day?” Tony asked slowly.

“Depends on your definition of progress. We addressed a number of things by some very cathartic means.”

“There was a great deal of shouting for a few hours, in a surprising number of languages living and dead,” JARVIS remarked.
John pointed at the ceiling. “I love him, by the way. Brilliant idea.”

Tony’s eyebrows raised as he approached the couch. “Thank you. I’m glad you get along. Some people have trouble adjusting.” He blinked a bit. “How much alcohol wound up being required to knock him out like that?”

“Well, actually, I might have managed to catch him off guard and accidentally knocked him out near at bar over there, but your AI there assures me he’s not concussed. I took a bit of a closer look and I think he’s having a sort of mild psychotic break and may be stuck deep in his own head for a bit.” He grimaced. “He didn’t actually take some of the children-related invasion statistics very well, and lost coherence of self a little bit. Be glad you missed it, for one, and that his containment marks were able to contain the worst of it for another, or your tower might not be here.”

“Ah. Well, it certainly all makes sense now, then.” He arched a brow at the magician. “You okay?”

“Not usually. I’m just accomplished at ignoring it enough to go through the motions of performance art.”

“I know the feeling. Want some fresh ice?”

“That would be marvelous, darling.” He proferred his currently-empty glass.

Tony took it gently, and headed to the bar. When he returned with a perfectly mixed gin’n’tonic instead of the anticipated scotch, John grinned.

“Ah, bless.” He took a sip and made a noise of approval. “You people are getting to know me well enough it’s worrying.”

“Well, you’ve been bitten by the expectation of anything lasting a lot. So have we,” Tony said. He then tugged one of the nearest armchairs a bit close to the end-table at John’s elbow, and sat in it with a glass of scotch for himself. “Also, did your accidentally knocking him out have anything to do with the slight damage to one corner of the bar over there?”

“You’re a regular Sherlock Holmes. Be proud; I’ve met him, and I’m English, so you now basically qualify for your own detective show on television. I recommend your CEO as Watson.”
“...He’s fictional.”

“I’ve met a surprising number of fictional characters. Try not to overthink how fragile reality can be, when stories old enough become self-aware.”

“We try to stop that by constantly rebooting them, in this country,” Tony joked, unable to resist playing along a bit.

John made a face. “I wonder if the BBC reboot did the old sod any damage. I’d’ve paid to see it happen. Was it like the witch from the Wizard of Oz dying, you think?” He switched accents to something a lot more polished, but made it croak out a distorted, “I'm melliiiiing.”

Tony snorted. “I really cannot tell where the sincerity ends with you, when you’re this drunk.”

“It’s not so different from the inside looking out, either, believe you me.”

“Jeez, you really do both think and speak in a theatrical style at all times to cope. You’re just more aware of it when sober.”

The magician grinned. “That’s just the habit of storytellers for whom words are our most frequent-use survival tool. Over the years, nothing else is nearly so easy as the mountains we can move with the right cover-stories in the right places.”

Tony nodded. “I don’t do it as constantly, I guess, but I do that too, yeah.”

“He likes listening to you talk,” John mused. “I hadn’t expected him to mention it.” He glanced down at the trickster while the younger man in the armchair tried to figure out how to respond to that. “Shh, stop angsting a moment. I was mostly testing to make sure he’s as unconscious as he appears.”

“You’re a bit of a dick.”

“Get used to it. I’m apparently your boyfriend’s official therapist.”
“… Therapist?”

“Yes. He and I are engaged in group therapy for the chronically cynical and manipulative. You should join.”

“Alright. Every bit helps.”

“I did think he might strangle me when I had to explain that his fall was a bit his mother’s fault.”

“Wow, how’d that go?”

“Uncomfortably heart-warming.” He cocked his head a bit to look Tony dead in the eye with a bit of a smirk. “Should we air out a few of your daddy issues as well, while we’re at it?”

Tony considered. He then drained his glass, picked up the decanter on the table, and refilled it. The whole room seemed heavier, now he knew a bit about how Loki’s first day of “healing” had gone: about as messy as any sort of surgery, and about as likely to scar. “You really that interested?”

John shrugged. “I seek distraction from my own pain in the stories of others. It’s why I have so many friends, when I make the mistake of visiting the same pub enough times. You’re safer than most barflies, by that standard. Wow me.”

That being the least condescending invitation to emotionally unpack that he’d ever received, Tony couldn’t help but seriously consider it. It was clearly a con-man’s rapport-building, and there were a lot of strings it pulled, but John Constantine was half-drunk and covered in a few bruises from wrestling an unconscious god across the penthouse from the bar to the couch, as well as doubtlessly a night of more pleasurable physical exertions with the likes of Amora and her pet Executioner. He was as non-threatening as a creature with a tongue as sharp as his was capable of appearing, and furthermore he might actually help.

“You’re a weirdly appealing therapist.”

“I’ve learned it from befriending a lot of bartenders enough they don’t punch me on sight no matter how absurdly often I don’t pay for my drinks when I visit.”
“You have a one-liner for everything you don’t have a monologue for too, don’t you?”

“Pot and kettle, mate.”

Tony cleared his throat. “Well.”

“If you want me to start for you, I can tell you he explained why exactly he thought it pertinent to compare you to Odin a bit, if you were to have magic, but he didn’t see some parallels with Howard Stark I think might be of interest to you.”

At that, Iron Man promptly drained half of his glass, then gestured. “Alright, bring it, then. What have you got?”

“I’ve been aware of Stark Industries a long time. I keep track of things in world events and history a lot more than people realize. There’s pieces of his weapons that still wash ashore on a few beaches I used to play around as a lad. The height of success under his care, of your company, cost about as many lives as his partner’s underhanded dealing later on. I had your AI crunch the numbers, even.”

“What’s that got to do with Odin?”

“His sphere is literally smaller. Asgard isn’t as big as the Earth. His decisions as a ruler control the entire shape of the society he sits atop precisely because he has more power than any other mage, or any other ruler, in the Nine Realms,” John said. “Your dad had barely started learning the limits of his own powers of oversight, and started embracing regulations and accepting test results from outside the umbrella of Stark Industries’ capabilities, shortly before he died.”

“Yeah, I noticed. It’s what got him killed, most likely,” Tony muttered.

“You. With magic. Would have more power over every socio-political institution on this entire planet. And you’d have to still let them fix themselves first, before interfering, every time. If you could not resist the urge to ‘fix’ the way your father was barely starting to learn (probably in no small part due to increased interpersonal conflicts with you making the tabloids around the same time) before he died, then you’d become a horrific parody of everything Odin stands for, in Loki’s mind, as the singular force in control of Asgard. But you’d be doing it on Earth.”
The inventor grimaced. “Wow, that’s uncomfortable.”

“It’s good to know the limits of what sort of power you can trust yourself with, and where you have to accept that you can’t.”

“You also know a lot about my tabloid appearances from that era.”

“The only thing I know more about than magic is the history of rubbish.”

“You’re also not wrong,” Tony said slowly. “I wouldn’t be able to… I’d want too badly to fix things without necessarily asking first. I already have a bit of that problem, and Pepper usually keeps me in check where JARVIS can’t.”

“I wondered if he might be a conscience extension,” John muttered.

“He is, yeah. He’s also sentient.”

“Trust me, Loki explained,” the magician sighed, sounding like he’d been scolded, but had come to terms with the fact he’d deserved that.

“What I’m really wondering is how you’re not asleep too, right now? You’re clearly exhausted for a lot of valid reasons.”

“I was waiting on you to show up, initially to offer a bit of explanation and make sure you’re appropriately melancholy and gentle-feeling to cope with how fragile he’s going to be when he wakes up in a few hours. Now I’m mostly hesitating to call Amora upon reflection that she might not actually be happy to see me this drunk.”

“Loki hasn’t exactly used the guest bed. You’re welcome to sleep it off a bit yourself, and shower.”

“That… is a legitimately brilliant plan.” John tried to get up, sighed a bit, moved out from under Loki’s ankles carefully, and then dragged himself upright. “Thanks, mate.” He patted the inventor’s shoulder gratefully on his way past as the younger man pointed him towards the guest room in question.
Loki awoke about three and a half hours later, which wound up being almost exactly an hour after John Constantine had sobered up enough to feel like he could keep up with the wits of his current security guards without completely tripping over himself.

Loki awoke and immediately whimpered. “Ugh.”

Tony had been working on tweaking a few mechanisms in a few pieces of the suit (two now on the end-table formerly occupied by booze) waiting for the god to wake. “Just hungover, or would you like an ice pack for your head injury?” he asked lightly.

The god squinted up at him. “Water.” He then caught sight of the cup of it near his face, on the end-table. He picked it up and slowly drained it. He smiled a little self-deprecatingly when the inventor refilled it from a bottle that had wound up out of the god’s line-of-sight due to the small armor-pile in the way. “Thank you.”

“No problem. Connie explained a bit. You alright?”

Loki’s brow furrowed a little as he again drained the cup, and proferred it for refill almost without thinking. “No, but I’m growing accustomed to it.”

“Not in a way you can ignore, I hope?”

“Don’t I wish,” the trickster whispered with fervent sincerity.

Tony laughed a little, at that. “Same here.”

The god glanced up at him.

“Why do you think I’m always repairing?”
Loki smirked a little. “Because you are clearly unbalanced.”

“Yeah. You too, sweetcheeks.”

Loki drained the cup again and set it aside. “You could help me, a bit, actually.” He sat up further, very slowly.

“How so?”

“Come here.”

Intrigued, Tony left his seat in favour of occupying the freed-up spot at the end of the couch, where the magician had been earlier.

Loki then lay back down, in the opposite direction, the back of his head resting on the inventor’s thighs. “There’s far too much noise in my head, and your voice is attention-hungry enough to keep my focus pointed away from that fact.”

A bit surprised at the soft quality of that indirect request for more words from him, Tony nodded. “I can do that.” He set a hand on the god’s chest, fingers tracing the designs of blueprints he’d worked on earlier as he tried to think of something he could go on about without pause for long enough. “Funny story or tragic backstory?”

“… I’ve had enough tragedy today,” the god said very quietly. Though he added in a more steady tone, “Another time, though, and I would like to hear more of those stories as well.”

“Okay. One of the better pranks I ever pulled on Howard, then?”

The faint ghost of a smile tugged at the trickster’s lips. “Excellent.”

~~

John hadn’t actually expected to be interrogated without being tied up first, but supposed that he
He arrived in time for a late dinner, which he could smell cooking upon arrival. He managed a carefree sort of expression and knew that while Amora hadn’t yet caught on how drained of life the magician still felt by the events of the day, Skurge picked up on it in a single glance and held John’s gaze for a long moment after.

The con-man’s fumbling a little, because of how eerily that expression reminded him of Chas (and because he knew Chas had learned it from his wife after seeing how effective it was at making John feel the closest to shame he was still capable of), subsequently caught Amora’s attention.

“Not all roses today?” she prompted.

John sighed. “No. He’s even worse than me about trying to get the worst parts over at the start of things, lessay.”

The Enchantress frowned. “There’s more to it.”

“I… have a bad history with… the deaths of children being my fault.” He managed not to wince when she slowly drew closer, but only with a lot of conscious effort, and he could tell she was perceptive enough to catch that his restraint switched into the ON position. She’d seen him without it, for long enough, she saw through it.

Realization of that fact left him feeling painfully exposed all of a sudden, because he hadn’t been comprehended that intimately in a very long time. He’d had lovers he could lie to more easily, and funny how they never lasted as long as Kit had. She’d been the only one sensible enough to leave when she smelled smoke: one-strike, one overlap of dangerous magical bullshit into the safe space of her own home, and she had seen the truth of him.

And that truth included his poison content. As well as more fragile parts of his nature that relied on that poison to live. The last person who’d understood that had left his life forever because of it, and that memory also wasn’t one he needed to revisit.

At least Kit never wound up in his cadre of ghosts.

The relief when Amora didn’t try to touch him, or reassure him, letting him instead process the
momentary terror and push it back down at his own pace, was also immense. Skurge watched him closely, too, but didn’t move either.

“Sorry,” John said quietly, starting to duck his head down.

“Don’t you dare be,” Amora said softly.

He met her stare again, this time a bit genuinely surprised and puzzled.

“Without this part of you, you wouldn’t be able to help one of my dearest friends come back from the most nightmarish events of his life,” she explained softly. “Don’t. Be sorry. For that.”

John stared at her wide-eyed for a moment longer. “Thank you. I needed that.” He stepped a little closer to her, and the thought of resistance never struck, when she tilted her head up to kiss him gently. He leaned into it, and her hand stroking down his back successfully banished more tension than his mind could continue feeding with paranoia, when he was instead focused on her lips.

“After dinner, we can discuss taking care of dear Skurge this evening, you and I.”

After a moment of processing that, and realizing it was actually ideal not to further physically tax his own self, but that he could easily get lost in the hypnotic process of watching her deconstruct an ego other than his own. “You are my favorite evil genius in the world, right now,” he told her, with feeling.

She smiled brightly at him. “I’m fond of you as well, John.” She then took one of his hands and pulled him gently toward the dining room.

He let himself be led, and found energy enough to wink at Skurge, who shook his head a little, but when the magician was dragged past him by Amora, Skurge did managed to land a kiss against the corner of his mouth, making John laugh more brightly again.

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Waking up in the morning to the sensation of enthusiastically-applied oral sex from a god with the
nickname Silvertongue was now in Tony Stark’s top-ten list for favorite ways to wake up.

It took him a few minutes to remember words of gratitude, then a while further still to reflect that the god’s appetite and increased hedonism both might be a sign of healing. “F-fuck don’t stop that, glad you’re rested though, h-h-how do you even do that fuckkkkk.” When it stopped abruptly, Tony whined.

The noise choked off halfway when Loki straddled him, sinking down over the inventor’s cock with a moan as he leaned in close to the inventor’s face. “I’m very well, dear, yes. All the better for having you in me, right now.”

“H-holy fuck I’m not complaining.” Thrusting up a bit helplessly, as he gripped at the god’s hips for anchorage and any hope of control, only for Loki to capture his wrists. Instead of keeping hold of them, he led both hands to stroke up his sides.

“Don’t stop touching me.”

“I like touching you,” Tony murmured. “You’re very touchable, and lickable and fuckable, but also heavy.” He thrust again, getting just as little resulting movement as before. “Not as heavy as when we first met, thankfully for my pelvis, but-”

Loki chuckled. “Patience, Tony.”

“That’s hilarious, coming from you right now.”

“Yes, I awoke eager to jump onto your cock. Now I’m here, I plan to enjoy you at whatever pace I please, and see if I can make you come inside me more than once without mystic assistance.” He then began to grind his hips down hard.

Tony squirmed and gasped a bit helplessly. Loki squeezed around him and undulated his hips in a thoroughly maddening way—

—that the bastard had learned from Tony recently.
“Your theft of my technique shouldn’t be so fucking hot,” the inventor moaned.

“I was impressed by your display of it yesterday morning.”

That made the inventor blush a little, “The fact even you think I’m worth trying to copy is a hell of an ego boost. You’ll shift the planet’s orbit if you feed it m-much more oh fuck so fucking tight you bastard.”

“I have finer muscle control from centuries of experience. I’m not copying you, darling: I’m showing you how it’s really done,” Loki purred right in his ear, and then began to rock his hips faster, making them both pant and the mortal struggle to be allowed to make the touches of his hands moving over the god’s skin as distracting as possible. In the process he found a stretch along Loki’s side that made the god’s whole body shiver, but only if scratched a little as well as stroked.

When he grabbed the god’s hair and tugged his head back by it hard enough to make the trickster gasp, though, it got the most memorable reaction: Loki jerked down harder than he possibly intended and emitted a strangled cry of bliss, and stilled for a moment in apparent surprise.

“Like that?” Tony murmured, pulling him down closer by the grip, earning a faint moan from the trickster. “Or should I go back to just petting you?”

“You… don’t have to let go,” the god panted.

Tony tugged a little. “Then keep moving for me.”

Loki nodded, meeting his stare, and went right back to illustrating new ways to apply some of the movements Tony had made him so fond of.

Eventually, Tony did let go, of the god’s hair, but only after he lost the strength for it, and was emitting keening sounds, as Loki kept riding him past the point of orgasm and sent shudders through him.

“You’re still so hard for me, darling,” he began to hiss into Tony’s ear. “I want to feel you come again.” When he got no verbal response at first, he began to slow, and tried to pull back to see the inventor’s face, but Tony gripped one of his hips hard and sudden.
“You’re certain?” Loki asked lightly.

“F-fuck yeah, please.” Then he all but yowled as the trickster pulled out all the stops, until Tony worried as much about the structural integrity of his bed, as for that of his own hipbones. The god of lies began to whisper affectionate encouragements and complements, shivering a little as he watched the inventor writhe.

“I want you to come with me,” escaped Loki’s lips in a wavering rasp, and Tony saw white for several blissed out seconds.

He regained self-awareness about half a minute later, at which point there was a pleasant lack of stickiness and Loki seemed also to be in a state of recovery beside him, head tilted to rest against the inventor’s shoulder, though not actually resting any weight against it; just contact.

“Good morning to you too,” Tony remarked.

Loki chuckled softly.

“Glad you’re more yourself again.”

The god’s head nudged at his shoulder. “Thank you. For your aid with that.”

“I’m enjoying the ride so far.”

Loki lifted a pillow and dropped it onto the inventor’s face.

Tony couldn’t help giggling.

“That pun was bad enough to carry through to translation into All-Speak. I don’t know whether to be
impressed or horrified.”

The giggling only increased as Tony pushed the pillow away. “I’ll go with horrified. How does that even work with All-Speak?”

“It requires a complex diagram. Ask me later.” Loki shifted up the bed slightly and gently rolled the still-limp inventor to lie across him like a blanket.

Settling in with a comfortable huff, Tony had a moment of realization and the huff turned into a small groan of protest. “Dammit, we have to do things.”

“Shh, it’s all lies,” the god lied.

“C’mon. I’ll make you an omlette.”

“Pepper once explained to me that sometimes this is an indicator of-”

“I’m not dying. I’ll more likely cajole Steve into making enough to cope with your appetite.” He seemed to then realize that the other Avengers hadn’t actually seen him since he went public with his new relationship recently. He swore at length.

“Did you forget to explain to your team?”

“...Maybe.”

“Then I’m afraid you really must get up then,” Loki sighed. “I wouldn’t miss that circus for the world.”

“Please don’t stab any of them.”

“In my current state, even the archer might actually pose a real threat. I’m aware when it’s time to break down and be practical about who I piss off and how.”
“Good. That just leaves me remembering how my limbs work.”

Loki dropped a kiss atop his head.

“Yeah, yeah, you’re smug as hell. I will improve upon your improvements and reclaim my techniques tonight, I swear it.” He moved his arms vaguely in the direction of leverage, but his heart wasn’t in it. “Also you might have bruised my hips, earlier?”

“I healed that while you were staring at the ceiling.”

“Good. Very good.”

A long pause followed.

“Tony,” Loki reminded.

“Shhh, this is a very delicate process, just give me five more minutes.”

The god laughed at him a little softly, but did give him a few more minutes before cajoling any further.
Chapter Summary

Handling insane situations is standard Avengers activity. Even the oddly domestic ones over breakfast.

Thor is a good bro.

Also: safety measures were taken, but then not enough. Bruce tried.

It was almost a disappointment when JARVIS eventually told them only Dr. Banner was in. Clint, as usual, had pulled a vanishing act and taken Natasha with him for the duration. Loki raised an eyebrow at that explanation.

“He has a girlfriend and his own place somewhere, I know, we’re all stunned,” Tony explained, as the elevator lowered. “Not nervous about meeting Bruce again?”

“I’m much less of a threat to him than before, and I know how to avoid pushing buttons, when appropriate, believe it or not.”

The inventor shot him a look. “Working on the belief thing, there.”

“Where is the Captain? Does he not live in your tower either?”

“Only Bruce and Nat accepted that offer, but when Cap is in New York, he does stay over if Nat invites him for a poker night.”

“Poker?”

“Card game. Deception is a part of it.”

“Sounds ideal, then.”
“Captain Rogers is having a press conference of his own on behalf of the Avengers,” JARVIS cut in. “It appears that Thor has already discussed your situation with him, and convinced him that neither of you are taking over the world, nor so violently unstable as to accidentally destroy it, thusfar.”

“I am glad to have missed that stirring speech,” Loki intoned gravely.

Before Tony could prod that Thor-shaped deep well of bitterness further, the elevator doors opened, revealing a large kitchen and dining area of modern style—all clean lines, black marble, and stainless steel—with a breakfast nook at the kitchen end, and a round black dining table with several chairs around it at the other. In the breakfast nook, with a cup of coffee, there resided a slightly disheveled Dr. Banner in pajama pants, a t-shirt, and terrycloth robe belted loosely about the waist.

The god of lies was wearing jeans and a faded t-shirt of Tony’s, but Tony himself hadn’t bothered with more than boxers and his own pajama pants, so at least they appeared less than intimidating as well. The inventor did elbow Loki, “I told you, overdressed,” before he stepped out. “Morning, Bruce. You remember Loki.”

“Difficult to forget,” Bruce mused, raising both eyebrows.

“Likewise, Dr. Banner.” The god strode over to the breakfast nook table while Tony began rummaging through the fridge and then plucked a large non-stick pan out of an array of similar pans hanging from hooks above the sink, just high enough not to be a forehead-hazard to even the absurdly tall god of Thunder and Captain Rogers. Loki hesitated only slightly before taking a seat, and proffered a hand. “I am glad we are both of us less green this time.”

The chemist’s mouth quirked with a bit of amusement, and he accepted the handshake politely. “I did hear that more than your armor was out of commission.”

“Quite.” The god then sat down across from him.

Tony called over. “You want an omlette too, Brucie?”

“Sure, but try not to set the bacon on fire this time, maybe?”
“JARVIS has already made certain that if I do that again, the smoke alarm won’t go off. Sorry about that.”

Loki seemed amused by this, and shook his head a little, not surprised to find that Dr. Banner had been closely scrutinizing his face the whole time, never glancing Tony’s way. “See anything incriminating yet?”

“You look a lot less crazy, actually. Just waiting for the other boot to drop.”

“I am notably barefoot.”

Bruce gave an amused snort despite himself. “How was being king?”

“Surprisingly dull. Until a coup showed up, of course. How’s life in New York treating you?”

“Not terrible. I haven’t gone green off-mission yet, and working with Tony hasn’t blown anything up in over two weeks, now.” He then tilted his head a little. “Since the coup was more interesting than kingship, I uh... hope you don’t want to plan one of your very own?”

“Well, not for me.”

Bruce blinked at that, mulling it over as his brow furrowed and unfurrowed, then finally re-furrowed this time with the addition of one raised eyebrow. “Huh.”

“How ever would my progress and recovery eventually defame Odin, in any case, if he were not in the throne watching and squirming with unease?”

“True,” the biochemist admitted, then joked, “Just uh, don’t give the throne to anybody later who might try to fob it off on Pepper.” He finally looked away from the trickster then, in order to shoot an amused yet affectionate look Tony’s way, as the inventor started frowning and making heat-adjustments nervously, like the crackle of frying bacon was somehow wrong, but he lacked experience to know precisely why, and was trying to subject it to testing.

Loki shook his head dismissively, and looked towards the inventor too. “I hadn’t even considered. It
would offend enough people in Asgard to almost have appeal, but I’m sure Miss Potts already has enough to cope with just on this planet.”

“Thor mentioned you’re an excellent cook?” Bruce sent the god a more pointed look as a bit of hot oil hit the inventor’s wrist, resulting in a loud yelp.

The god’s shoulders became a line of tension instantly and his expression one of masked calm. “Did he?”

“I made curry that made him cry, once. He accused me of learning from you somehow, and uh, Alfheim?”

“Ah.” Loki met the doctor’s eye again, not exactly amused, but no longer quite as clipped or icy in his tone. “You’re hoping I’ll rescue our breakfast.”

“Might be a good start on your way to redemption.”

“Redemption isn’t the word. Recovery, perhaps. What you did to my spine was nothing compared to what those on the other side of that portal did to that and more of me, in order to learn more about Jotunn physiology, Dr. Banner.” With a thin smile that didn’t come anywhere close to reaching his eyes, the god stood and strolled casually over to Tony and the stove.

“Ah.” Bruce blinked a few times in rapid succession, and suddenly understood a little better why Natasha wasn’t as harsh in her judgement of Loki as the rest of them. She had a knack, after all, for identifying the psychological scars and open wounds in people she spoke to. Taking a very long sip of coffee, the doctor watched Loki sidle up close behind Tony and cover the inventor’s hand with his own on the knob adjusting the flame under the frying pan.

The god then lowered the heat a little. “There, should do.”

“You an expert on frying now?”

“The arts of potion-making are very similar to culinary arts. It’s common in Asgardian court, to give gifts from successful hunts. It was considered a sign of generosity and humbleness, and sometimes as a means of asking forgiveness for having slighted someone of standing, if the gifts were made by the hunter himself.”
“So you’re saying you used to make badass gifts as a survival tool?”

“Volstagg remains fond of me to this day, despite my betrayals of Sif and the Warriors Three. He invited me on quests for my cooking skills almost more often than Thor, knowing the others were usually more inclined to simply spit-roast whatever wild game they might find, with perhaps salt if they had remembered to pack any.”

“Alright, fine, you can handle the bacon, but I’m still covering the omlettes.”

“Then perhaps we can divide and conquer.” Loki released his hand and stood beside him, gesturing towards the bowl, whisk, and carton of eggs.

“Good plan.”

Bruce smirked a bit to himself, and stood up to get himself more coffee. He then grabbed another couple of mugs from the cabinet. “How do you take your coffee, Loki?” he asked lightly.

“Blacker than my soul.”

Tony snorted at him and made as though to swat at him with a nearby dishtowel, but the god neatly side-stepped with no apparent effort, and began flipping the slices of bacon nonchalantly, not even sparing the inventor a glance.

“I’d wondered if it were possible for anyone to make domesticity as melodramatic as you, Tony,” Bruce added, setting a coffee on the counter near Tony but out of harm’s way in the whisking department, before returning to the coffee maker to fill one also for the god of lies.

The inventor cracked up laughing and Loki sent the doctor a mock-offended glare, despite the god’s best efforts proving unable to prevent a crooked half-smile from tugging at the corner of his mouth.

“Oh, and by the by, he can still shape-shift,” Tony mentioned.
The biochemist’s eyes lit up and he turned to Loki expecting to be denied such potential scientific study.

The god shot Tony a pointedly unimpressed glare, but shrugged it off and confirmed, “It is true. Not all of my powers could be contained by Odin’s magics without causing me permanent damage, physical and metaphysical alike. Earth has a lack of shape-shifters, I did notice. I suppose you’re curious how it works, Dr. Banner?”

“Always. It’s part of being a scientist, really: mandatory to earn the title.”

Loki smirked a bit more interestingly, then. “The same is said of mages, throughout the rest of the realms; although such boundless curiosity is considered a destructive tendency, according to Asgardian ideals.”

“Curiosity might’ve killed the cat, but the cat wasn’t as clever as me,” Tony muttered, as he finished cracking eggs and picked up the whisk.

“Or as hard to kill as I am, these days,” Bruce agreed, sounding a bit embarrassed to be playing along with quite that much ego. “You interested in sharing knowledge with us mortals that Asgard is more generally cagey about?”

“Oh, he already is one, or we probably wouldn’t be dating.”

“Your biological studies of my person are more subjective than scientific, as a result, however,” Loki cajoled.

“Well, there’s that.”

“I, uh, understand if it’s too uncomfortable… considering,” Bruce added.

Loki met his eye then, looking contemplative. “Constructing one’s own lessons is always infinitely different than being made into one unwillingly, is it not, Dr. Banner?”

Tony seemed to realize Serious Talk was happening, and took a few moments to catch up. He
glanced between them, back and forth, a couple of times, but said nothing.

“I don’t need anything like that, but the occasional demonstration of your capabilities might help foster understanding, here and there.”

“Good. Demonstrations are much less dangerous than sample-taking.”

“Trust me, I know that one,” Bruce concurred. “Being… hard to kill has that dangerous degree of value.”

The god nodded. “We can discuss it, then, once you consider what questions you think I might uniquely be able to answer.”

“Cool.” The doctor then proffered a cup of very black coffee. “Thanks.”

“And thank you.” Accepting it, Loki smiled faintly, and took a long sip before returning his attention to the bacon.

Tony then met Bruce’s eye with his facial expression full of silent question. “When exactly did portal-talk start? I missed it.”

“I made mention before rescuing you from the perils of bacon,” the god answered.

The inventor snorted. “Yeah, because Iron Man is easily damseled by frying bits of pork.”

“Pretty much, yeah,” Bruce concurred in gentle deadpan.

Tony frowned at him too, whisking a bit more irritably.

“I’ve seen you set fire to ham, before, Tony.”
Loki sputtered a surprised laugh, at that, making the inventor’s frown deepen, and Bruce smile wide and innocent, as though he had no idea why Tony might be at all unhappy with him.

Tony determined that he’d put off thanking Bruce for this whole easy acceptance thing by at least another day. Maybe a week. Not for reasons even remotely like sulking. Nope. Not sulking in the least.

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Captain Steve Rogers wrapped up his last press conference at the base of Avengers tower, passed through all Stark Industries security without having to flash an ID even once, and made it to the appropriate concealed-elevator entrance, before he felt the niggling, worried sensation in his stomach start making him uncomfortable. The prospect of meeting new allies usually had this effect, but the fact this was also an ex-supervillain did make it more acutely worrisome than even the usual. Last time he’d seen Loki, the god had been defeated and battered, broken, and still unrepentant and cocky enough to ask Tony Stark for a drink amidst rubble of his own making.

He hadn’t seen the inventor smirk a bit at the request at the time, but he’d known Tony had been more amused than irritated. Steve was himself prone to chronic irreverence, but not to that degree. Not with so many civilians in the wreckage around them all still screaming for help down on the ground, all because of Loki’s schemes.

It made sense a bit more, after Thor had explained what was found in Loki’s head, steering him from blind-spots in the trickster’s traumatized psyche. And it hit too close to home, with Bucky still evading all attempts to find him; although Thor had insisted Loki hadn’t been… as far under, as that. Loki had been allowed more self-awareness, and more choices, in escaping those who wanted to make him into their tool, and maybe that had been worse.

The hollow look in Natasha’s eyes as Thor had explained that, made Steve suspect it might have hit close to home for her, reminding her of her old life before she managed to escape into S.H.I.E.L.D.’s ranks. The flash-frozen soldier too young and too old all at once, trusted Natasha more than most; she had a good heart, deep enough down. How the Red Room had suffocated it under the weight of their ideology, he still wasn’t certain. Maybe she just tricked them into believing they had succeeded, long enough to find a way out.

That had been Thor's explanation of Loki's dealings with Thanos and the Chitauri, in any case. The trickster then convinced Nick Fury and the Avengers that he was a cartoon villain bringing an alien invasion to New York City in order to take over the world. Poor strategy, and poor delivery aside, he convinced them to unify into a force that eventually nuked an armada on the opposite end of the galaxy, leaving Loki alone and without allies...
Cheekily asking for a drink it was clear the inventor had offered him. Steve might be too fixated on it, but at the time it had really ticked him off.

Steve could almost hear an echo of the Bucky he used to know suggesting that the god of lies might deserve at least one good punch to the face. Maybe three. And Tony perhaps needed the occasional sharp reminder not to flirt with evil.

As the elevator doors slid shut, Steve asked, “What are they up to so far, JARVIS? Nothing explosive?”

“Not since Mr. Lie-smith persuaded Mr. Stark to hand over the bacon-frying task earlier, no, sir. In fact, this morning has seen one of the least-combustible breakfasts ever prepared with Mr. Stark involved.”

Admittedly, that hadn’t been anything Steve had been expecting, and so absurd he couldn’t help the surprised laughter that bubbled up in response, though he managed to stop it quickly and cleared his throat. “Wow, uh… okay, then.”

“I’ve advised them of your approach. They were just beginning to avoid the prospect of clearing and cleaning their dishes, if I am not mistaken,” JARVIS added.

“Good. At least that sounds pretty non-destructive.”

“Primarily, yes, sir.”

The soldier smirked a little and wondered, not for the first time, where exactly the AI got his droll wits from. Tony’s were notoriously more blunt and loud, but JARVIS by contrast was impeccably polite, even when being sarcastic.

At least JARVIS’ warning meant that Steve was a bit closer to psychologically prepared to find two Avengers in pajamas (did Stark seriously try to fry bacon earlier without a shirt on? Seriously?) and the Avengers’ first official arch-nemesis barefoot and wearing jeans and a t-shirt, in Tony’s breakfast nook, once he stepped out of the elevator. He raised both eyebrows only briefly, and started to approach.
The others continued conversing, apparently too caught up to quite stop.

“Let me assure you that playing a god is an unfulfilling role,” said the trickster.

“It’s not ‘playing god’ and maybe we find different forms of job satisfaction,” Tony shot back casually. “You said yourself the portal left behind a sort of ‘weak spot’ there, so some line of global defense-”

“Not the Ultron thing again, Tony,” Bruce sighed. He glanced up at Steve’s approach and scooted over on the bench-style seat. “Morning, Steve.”

“Good morning, Bruce. Tony.” He raised an eyebrow. “Loki.”

Loki inclined his head in a nod, and the inventor gave an innocent smile. Well, it might’ve looked innocent on almost anyone else except Tony and the god next to him.

Bruce then continued. “We already ruled it out. Too many literal billions of human variables that could be mistaken for something inhuman. Not even JARVIS could handle it.”

“I dunno, Fenrir seemed to think that it wasn’t those limits that actually stopped us,” the inventor grumbled.

“Remind me to make efforts, futile or otherwise, to forbid him from giving you such ideas in future,” Loki sighed.

“Aw, come on-”

As Steve sat down next to Bruce, he cleared his throat interruptively. “Did I seriously walk in on a megalomaniacal god trying to tell Stark he’s playing god?”

“Sort of,” Bruce sighed. “It’s complicated.”

“Something about your portal, Loki?” the soldier suggested, then took in the look of the god for the
first time. “You look less crazy to an almost disconcerting degree, by the way.”

“My thanks,” Loki deadpanned dryly.

“He said the portal sort of scarred a bit of space-time between us and the place it accessed,” Tony explained. “I’m bothered by this.”

“Is it reparable?” Steve asked.

Loki shook his head. “No. It will heal over and be more impenetrable in time, like scar tissue, but by ‘time’ I mean that process will take over two centuries by an Earthly calendar, presuming it isn’t ruptured again in that intervening time.”

“That’s really not reassuring,” the soldier responded flatly.

“I at least made it too small for the larger ships to fit through,” Loki said, mostly into his coffee so that he didn’t have to make eye contact with any of them.

“I knew it,” Tony muttered.

“Yes, we remember your theories,” Bruce sighed.

“I could work upon a sort of monitoring for it, given time to better understand the limitations of human technology at present, to alert the Avengers in case that weak spot might be breached or otherwise meddled with,” Loki suggested, “but it would not be so reliable at detecting threats which might use any other doors, and that weak spot is only one narrow slice of this world’s upper atmosphere.”

“So it’s contained by gravitational forces?” Bruce asked.

“It’s contained the same way that all objects in this solar-system are suspended in proximity to one another in this patch of space-time, yes,” Loki said, “but that is not solely gravity.”
Steve’s brow became increasingly furrowed the longer this tangent went on, until the biochemist offered him an apologetic smile and changed the line of questioning, “So you’re saying if someone tries to hack their way in, there’s a known weak back-door, here, but it’s small enough they might not bother?”

“Not if their goal is to bring the rest of their armada as they originally sent me to arrange for,” Loki concurred gravely. “The place that I sent the Aether away from Asgard was unwise, due to the shards of influence, from Thanos lingering in my brain blinding me to how unsafe it was with the Collector; however, it could not be allowed to remain in Asgard in any case.”

“Why, exactly?” the soldier inquired.

“Thanos, the monster who keeps the Chitauri as one race out of several whose genetic stock are anchored into service in his army, is seeking out six artifacts older than most of the known universe. The Tesseract is but one of them. The Aether is another. They are both known as ‘Infinity Gems’ and each one contains incredibly vast powers, with specific forms of expression. The Aether can alter the fabric of Reality itself, and the Tesseract affects Space, but two gems in close proximity to one another can warp… rather more than their original specificity. They could reconstruct the whole universe itself to Thanos’ whim, if he used them all in conjunction,” Loki said.

“His ideal universe being?” asked the inventor.

“One devoted to the worship of Mistress Death. He would destroy whole worlds in tribute to her,” responded the god.

“So, that’s very bad,” Bruce deadpanned.

Loki nodded, and continued, “Having failed to collect the Tesseract, and the Aether, Thanos will most likely decide that sending emissaries is no longer enough. Any world that might happen to have more than one Infinity gem upon it would, of course, be a more appealing first target for his forces than a world with only one to offer.”

“Any other gems we should worry about?” Steve asked, his voice full of unease.

“I… suspect. While I was on the throne, I did hear reports of a man known to be a collector of rare oddities, as well as a genocidal Kree military leader, both seeking out the Power gem, concealed within a spherical cage. I believe it now resides on a world called Xandar, in the hands of a galactic
peace-keeping force called the Nova Corps.”

“But that’s not suspicious. That’s pretty direct,” Tony pointed out.

Loki stared hard at the table, struggling with his own memory. “It’s difficult, at times, to recall certain details about the scepter that I arrived here with. I knew of the Tesseract, by having studied it in my youth, before it was lost from Odin’s vaults, and it knew of me, but I can’t recall what powers, or methods, that I used to access the tesseract over such a vast distance. Let alone force it to bring me to Earth.” He looked up and met Steve’s gaze with his own. “What happened to it?”

“Lost,” the soldier responded. “We didn’t entirely know that until S.H.I.E.L.D.’s collapse, after Hydra reared its ugly head again where the whole world could see it.”

The trickster’s expression remained masked, but appeared somehow more brittle for the effort of maintaining that. “Do not allow me near to it. Without my magic, I do not know how being exposed to it again might affect me, but I doubt it would go well.”

Steve blinked twice in quick succession, then gave a slow nod. “We won’t.” He glanced at Tony and Bruce for confirmation.

They both nodded back.

“As long as it remains upon your planet,” the god said, “you will be at risk. Whether it is a gem as I half-suspect or not, it has… powerful links back to Thanos and his military forces.”

“We’ve been looking for it for a while now,” Bruce cut in. “You sent Thor here to seek it out, I assume, since that wasn’t Odin on the throne at the time.”

Loki’s eyes snapped over to the biochemist, widening a little. Very quietly, he said, “I… I do not recall giving those commands. I knew of his time on Earth being split between aiding the Avengers, and visiting Dr. Foster, but that was all.”

“That means we need to be very worried then,” Tony said.
“Not worried enough to use a system like Ultron,” the biochemist muttered.

The inventor frowned, but didn’t quite argue.

“Ultron?” Steve asked.

“Just an idea I had. Not feasible, until AI tech like JARVIS makes another couple of quantum leaps, though,” the inventor dismissed, waving one hand a bit before reaching for his half-empty coffee mug and draining it swiftly.

“Sirs,” JARVIS then interrupted quietly. “Mr. Lie-smith’s therapist has been delivered again to the penthouse.”

“Therapist?” Bruce asked.

“Delivered?” Steve asked, with similar incredulity.

Tony and the god of lies exchanged glances.

Loki said to JARVIS, “Do ask him to wait a few minutes, please, while I explain his title to those present.”

“Of course, sir,” said the AI.

After a few beats of awkward silence, the inventor cleared his throat. “Uh, so Odin’s lesson plan got hijacked by Queen Hel. His daughter.” He jabbed a thumb toward Loki. “And uh, ruler of Helheim. Land of the dead. She’s got Amora sort of enforcing the rules of the game now, because direct interference from Hel or Fenrir would start a bit apocalyptic war with Odin (think Cold War mentality) and she has to stick to a set of rules in order to win a boon from Hel.”

“Hijacked.” The soldier did not sound impressed. Or pleased.

“Wait…” Bruce held up a hand. “How do we trust her exactly?”
“Odin I would not willingly obey, these days,” Loki said flatly. “My daughter, I hold in higher respect. For she and her brother to consider this… form of lesson-teaching sufficiently valid to keep me shackled to it, despite the deep grudges against him that my children both bear Odin these days?” He grimaced. “Well. It indicates to me just how far I have truly fallen, and how far I must climb to regain their respect.”

Steve looked at Tony, who was too busy watching Loki’s expression with a mixture of concern and fascination, so the soldier turned instead to look at Bruce, who was already looking back at him. Steve raised both eyebrows.

Bruce glanced at Loki, then back to Steve, then to the god again. “Why do they have grudges against Odin?”

“He lied to us all, when he called me his son,” Loki explained slowly. “My Jotunn heritage means that different threats might affect my blood-kin, than if their blood were Aesir instead. Had fortune favored Hel any less, and the wrong pathogen or curse had been aimed her way by any of my many and myriad enemies, and Aesir remedies applied, she might have died. The same goes for Fenrir, given how much of my blood went into the process by which he gained a soul and corporeal body.”

“Or, if you’d been hit by any, they’d have both lost you,” Tony added quietly.

The trickster appeared struck by that for a moment, like it hadn’t actually quite occurred to him to see it that way, but he did nod slightly in acknowledgement.

“Fenrir also mentioned specifically that they’re convinced Odin can’t be trusted to know how to treat you anymore, in the teaching department,” the inventor added.

Loki sipped his coffee again, his attention very intent upon his cup.

“I can see that,” Bruce admitted, and looked to Steve again for confirmation.

“I’ve already spent a couple hours this morning complaining about Earth being a bit of a dumping ground for Asgard in relation to this, and the damages even Thor showing up in New Mexico did even before the Destroyer showed up, let alone the potential damage you might’ve done now you’re back on Earth again, Loki, if you were any less practical and… willing to learn, so far.” He shrugged a bit begrudgingly. “I’d rather not fight you again. You kicked my ass, the first time around.”
The trickster smirked faintly at that, eyes flicking up to meet the Captain’s steady stare. “My thanks, then.”

“Besides, if you’re in this tower and go a bit too crazy, I’m sort of comforted to know Banner might be around to knock you back down a notch,” Steve added.

Bruce tutted a bit, but half-smiled despite himself. “Well, there’s… that.”

“Admittedly, that is an effective deterrent,” Loki responded, “particularly given my low survival chances in my current, shackled state.”

“I figured,” the Captain murmured into his own coffee.

Bruce sighed and shrugged helplessly.

“So when will you be explaining to the press how uninvolved with Avengers activities you’re mostly not being? They’re starting to foam at the mouth,” Steve asked brightly. “Since I doubt you’re interested in field work, but this feels a lot like a consult.”

Loki stared for a long moment, then glanced up and tilted his head slightly, giving the idea a bit of thought. “Hmm. I may have to discuss it with my therapist.”

“Amora?” the biochemist queried.

“No, she’s just handling his security detail, since the last time somebody found out he was involved with Loki at all, Latveria had to be hit by a mysterious plague and blackmailed.” Tony shot the god of lies a curious and questioning look.

So did the other two Avengers.

“He and I swapped appearances in the midst of other chaos caused by enemies of mine descending upon a bank in London. While apparently mortal and not myself, I was abducted to Latveria. I used
an old, but very simple and virulent little plague spell to cause all of Doom’s subjects to rebel against him, aided by nasty rumors I fostered after I escaped a prison not designed to contain the likes of me. It involved a very painful ritual by which I temporarily regained close to my full power, in magic; although it came with a very nasty hangover, as well as a time limit.”

“Given how long our respective lists of similar big bad enemies are, Amora is helping him keep a low profile,” Tony added.

“Could you do that again?” Steve asked seriously. “Regain your powers.”

“Yes, but only briefly, and it really, really hurts,” the god responded. “Also, doing so again within the next month or two, would cause that ‘hangover’ to be of a longer duration, incapacitating me for days at a time. Even then, my body was not quite as durable as without the shackles, and so even thus re-powered, a thrashing from the Hulk, for example, would destroy my skeleton entire… and my life with it, doubtlessly.” He demurely set aside his now-empty coffee cup. “The trick utilizes a small talisman, one of several I keep implanted undetectably under my skin here and there. I have to carve one out before activating it via complex rites of blood-magic.”

All three Avengers were staring at him with a bit of shocked unease, then.

Loki smiled sweetly at them. “When I say I would prefer not to resort to it again, I would like to be clear in implying that I would rather stab myself in one lung first. It is for emergencies only for very good reason, and using too many such emergency solutions in quick succession does me more harm than good.”

“I think we get it,” Bruce said lightly, though his expression remained shocked in a more serious sort of way.

The other two Avengers nodded a bit.

“Good. Now, if you’ll excuse me, gentlemen, I have an appointment.” After surreptitiously groping Tony under the table just a little, out of sight of the others but enough to make the inventor struggle to contain a small surprised squeak in response, Loki rose from his seat and headed to the elevator.

After the doors closed behind him, both Bruce and Steve looked to Tony.
“Therapist?” the biochemist asked again.

“Uh… mortal guy. Also shady and dishonest. Apparently before he got shackled, Loki was doing something like dream-walking far from his body, since his body was experiencing an awful lot of agony from getting Thanos fully out of his head. He found a circle in Wales that you might remember, Steve.” He raised both eyebrows inquiringly.

“Yeah,” the soldier said. “There was a ring of psychedelic mushrooms in it with strange properties Coulson’s favorite scientific research duo are still trying to fully identify, and there were traces of bifrost-like markings in a nearby field.”

“Yeah, that was from Odin, Thor, and probably Heimdall scoping out the area before they decided to send Loki hurtling down to Earth there,” the inventor explained. “But they somehow affected that circle with their visit, which one of Loki’s therapist’s friends had constructed before ye mighty gods showed up, for more personal reasons. Loki managed to get an anchor there, and the magic effects of that anchor had some local resonance, right?”

“Psychics and other sensitives in the area reported dreams of someone falling through fire,” Steve said slowly.

Tony nodded. “Loki’s ‘therapist’ was called in as a consult, stepped into the circle, and… Loki set a hook in him too, and learned a lot of this particular mortal’s secrets with it. So when Loki landed… his ‘archetypal locus’ had to help his fellow trickster lay low or deal with the fallout from Loki-style blackmail. So Loki stayed in his flat.”

“Sounds unhealthy,” Bruce deadpanned.

“Well… I never said it wasn’t sort of group therapy. He’s not actually a threat; he just made even worse decisions than even some of mine in the past, on a lower budget, and with the occult.” He shrugged. “The two of them are going over all the data I’ve got about the damages and casualties Loki’s invasion stunt caused. Odin’s original decree was something vague about Loki learning the value of human life, and the message Hel sent by hijacking, instead of releasing, Loki’s shackles was that his attack on Earth went too far, and he needs to better fully comprehend it.”

“I can see that, a bit,” Steve said slowly. “You’re not saying guy’s name, though.”

“Well… he’s not exactly popular.”
“Even with us?” Bruce asked.

Tony sighed. “You ever heard of John Constantine?”

Steve started to shake his head, but was a bit startled by the sound of Bruce’s coffee cup slipping out of his fingers and clattering a bit too loudly onto the table, not quite toppling over.

Tony watched the shock on the biochemist’s face carefully, waiting to see what the end result would be once Bruce snapped fully out of it. “You okay, honey?”

After a long, painfully tense moment, Bruce covered his eyes with the hand that had dropped his mug and tilted his head back, with a long, incredulous and tremulous exhalation. “No, I don’t know him,” he sighed. “But I knew some folks who did.”

Steve and the mad inventor exchanged slightly worried looks.

Bruce uncovered his eyes and shook his head. “I spent a long time looking for… certain remedies, and a few people mentioned him, for some reason, but they all wound up being either cultists or otherwise religiously fanatical. They said his name like it was a curse or something, and told a lot of stories I’d… sort of dismissed as insane.” He leveled Tony with a hard look. “Usually demon possession stuff. He calls himself an exorcist of sorts, sometimes?”

The inventor pursed his lips a bit and half-shrugged. “Well, yeah, but he’s also worked with Doc Strange before. As far as I can tell, Connie uses magic like Strange does, but instead of generating his own magic like the Doc, he acts as a sort of conduit for objects, rituals, and spells: connecting things up like an arcane circuit until something lights up.”

“Archetypes are usually… storytelling tools, more than magic,” Bruce said. “Also, based on context clues in your story, and your nickname for him here—it was probably a trickster archetype they had in common, so, uh… he’s basically a con artist?”

“So is Natasha, a bit. Sometimes it just comes with the territory. And this guy’s territory involves the sort of people who speak fluent jargon fit for cultists, the religiously devout, and exorcisms?” Steve prompted.
“Also punk bands, and JARVIS found records that he used to be a stage magician.” Tony pointed out. “Similar skill-set to the performance art of selling war bonds, but with pulling rabbits out of hats instead of punching Hitler.”

“Well I see how he’s similar to Loki,” Bruce said, “but not how Loki worked that out, exactly, from all the way in Asgard.”

“Given Loki’s power and history, it let him use Connie’s life-force as a sort of anchoring point, called a locus, for a while, because they fit the same trickster archetype, because storytelling supercedes physics apparently, when it comes to lifestyle choices.”

“But…” Bruce started.

“I know, I know, it hurts my head, too. Anyway, making a mortal into an archetypal locus, as a trickster, apparently gave him knowledge of all of the tricks the mortal in question ever pulled. Once Loki was sent to Earth in shackles, his kids used that bond and the aid of Nifelheim to seize control of the Odin-forged spells keeping Loki’s powers under wraps for themselves.”

The biochemist frowned. “Is that why he’s tangled up now? The locus thing?”

“No, uh. Loki asked for his help, in exchange for repairing damage in Connie’s soul, which Loki can’t provide until he’s unshackled, once Queen Hel is satisfied that he’s learned her own twisted version of Odin’s original lesson plan.”

Steve nodded slowly. “That… makes a sort of sense.”

“But physics?” asked Bruce, with confused desperation.

Tony gave a commiserate sigh. “I know, right?”

~~

John was sprawled indolently across an armchair, smoking and tapping ashes into an ashtray he’d relocated to the chair’s left arm, all while a small vent overhead to catch the rising curls of smoke for
filtration, courtesy of JARVIS, when the god of lies arrived in the penthouse.

Tipping his head back and to one side enough to get a look at him, the magician half-smirked a little. “You’re looking better.”

“Yes. Like yourself, I too am thriving on the unfamiliar luxury of people caring enough to make certain I get sufficient food and rest.”

John snorted. “Well, when you put it that way…”

“I’m glad you look well, and survived my instability after…”

“After.”

“Yes.”

“I’m just relieved to have so far avoided showing up while you’re mid-coitus. It’s usually just in exorcisms that I have to specify whether or not I’m addressing the entity inside.”

Loki by then had strode over to stand beside the chair John occupied. He looked down his nose at the magician with an expression so boredly unimpressed that it could almost, but not quite, be mistaken for disdain.

John grinned up at him brightly. “How’s your brain?”

“Still a bit wrung out, aided by interrogation from two of the other Avengers.”

“How so?”

“Not all of my memories are as clear as they should be, with certain other influences now burnt out of them. It aches to try and force them into further clarity.”
“Then you should stop that.”

“And ignore pertinent information to be gleaned?”

“If it hurts when you bash your head against it,” John responded, sweetly condescending himself this time, “in my experience the best course of action is to stop bashing your head against it.”

“Not when it comes to defeating the forces that caused me such injury.”

“Vengeance is overrated.”

“And yet, it is also the only reason you are alive, is it not?”

The magician frowned, both at the god, and then a bit more deeply at his now-finished cigarette. He put the butt out in the ashtray, and put the tray itself back onto a nearby side-table with a bit of a reach. “In a manner of speaking, but only because it just barely didn’t get me killed and dragged kicking and screaming into infernal and eternal misery more times than I care to count.”

Loki shrugged. “True for us both, in our various ways.”

“Your afterlife is your daughter’s account, though. Has been for ages.”

The trickster inclined his head. “True. But you assume they ever wanted to kill me, when other more painful options would be that much more likely to prolong my suffering. Especially once my daughter took her throne, and the consequences of taking my soul before the appointed time she plans to collect it became a potential threat.”

“As much as I enjoy our occasional tangents into the land of epic pity parties, we have more new stories of woe to dig up for you, mate.”

Loki winced. “We do.”

“Here, or the labs, then?”
The trickster shot the bar a longing sort of look. “Hmm. Decisions, decisions.”

John smirked a little. “Bit early for that even by my standards, Lokk.”

With a reluctant murmur of agreement, the god headed back towards the elevator, strangely comforted by the sounds of the magician hauling himself upright and following close behind.

~~

Deep within a Hydra base somewhere mountainous, very near to a town with more than its fair share of war-wounds from conflicts not originally its own, a woman with extraordinary powers awoke from a nightmare with a low scream.

In the neighboring room, cell-like though their doors were not actually locked, her brother snapped awake too, at the sound of her scream’s echoes.

“Wanda?” he called, into the dark.

Despite the stone wall between them, she heard his low call. She always heard her brother, when he called, for it was never just his physical voice doing the calling. Wanda had long ago—right after the rest of their family’s deaths in fact—attuned her senses so acutely to her twin’s mind that she could see and hear him on a metaphysical level instead, no matter what physical barriers or distances might happen to otherwise separate them.

“Nothing,” she said, whispering it aloud, but carrying it straight to his mind to be certain he caught the message, and heard her as clearly as she could always hear him. Briefly, the room around her was a little less dark, as her eyes cast thin red streaks of light across her blanket and the wall beside her. “Just a dream…”

“What dream?”

She swallowed thickly. “Someone falling through fire, and landing somewhere green with his arms in heavy shackles that… that few around him could see at all. I could see one who knew them, tangled up with the fallen one. A shadow of laughter, but not… not quite laughing, himself.”
“You said the same, once before.”

Slumping back in her bed, abandoning the semi-upright position she had jerked awake into, Wanda sighed and closed her eyes. “I think I remember? But not… not clearly. I cannot remember what I told you.”

“You usually remember all of your dreams, I thought.”

She could feel the creases forming on her brow before she even realized the distress in her own facial expression. “I… do not know how I forgot such fires, before.”

“Could you find that dream again, do you think?”

She let her eyes flutter shut. “Maybe, if I try. Goodnight, Pietro.”

“Goodnight. Do not burn with him, Wanda.”

“I won’t,” she lied softly, and consciously reached for the tattered edges of dream she had momentarily lost as her eyes fell shut and the room around her once again became pitch dark. *Some* burning was just the cost of magic. She had known that from the very beginning, and it had never ceased to be true, when it truly mattered.

~~

Loki had been mid-sentence when he suddenly stopped, and all color drained from his face. He had gotten through discussions of almost forty reparations-assessments related to the child-deaths that had so haunted him before the sudden halt, and his expression was so similar to the one that had been on his face during his most recent psychotic break that his unconventional therapist hesitated to reach for him, or even say a single word, until over two full minutes had passed, during which the trickster did not move a single muscle.

“Are you there, Loki?” John asked softly.
The god’s eyes were open wide and had turned a little glassy, losing focus such that it was all too easy to tell that he could see nothing of the physical world in front of him. What he saw instead, the magician could only guess.

“Loki?”

After inhaling sharply, filling his lungs as far as he could, Loki managed to croak out, “I’m being searched for, but it is by someone clumsy. I can feel them… they followed breadcrumbs of fire.”

John did not like the sound of that, and his expression became a roughly equal mix of dismay and determination. “Since when did you leave breadcrumbs?”

“Not mine… nor is the fire mine, this time.”

John moved to stand directly in front of the god, and rested hands gingerly on Loki’s shoulders, exhaling a silent sigh of relief when the other trickster let him steer those shoulders until they were face-to-face properly; although the god remained apparently unseeing. “Debris, then. Either from your fall, or control of your shackles changing hands. What do you see?”

“Fire, obviously.”

“Yeah, I guessed that. What’s on fire?”

“… I am?”

“Can you get a closer look?”

Loki squinted hard for a moment, exhaling a long hiss. “A mortal. A sorceress of a sort. She’s dreamt of me, and now she’s hunting. She’s stronger than I am, these days, in magic, but I’m a more experienced wanderer of the planes she’s hunting in.”

“Good. You’re still under the cover of those flames, then?”
The god nodded absently, eyes clearly struggling to fix on something tricky in the middle distance. “She’s got a slight psychic gift, perhaps telekinetic as well. No small wonder I can feel her prying, but she’s unaccustomed to dealing with armor the likes of which I’ve forged for my own mind, against such powers. She’s feeling the scars over it, but cannot pierce it.”

“So she’s a novice?”

“Not quite. She’s been at this for years, but is more used to… human minds.”

“Does she know you can see her?”

Loki shook his head. “No.”

“Well… if she’s a novice when it comes to the inhuman, and looking for information, you could open up enough to show her a few pieces, right? Send her on her way, with a sufficient deterrent? You’ve got ammunition almost as much as I would.”

The god took a long while to consider, then began to smirk. “Thank you, John.”

~~

This time, when Wanda awoke screaming, it was not low. It roused guards from the floors immediately above and below, all startled into abrupt action by the shrill, piercing shriek of agony that escaped the sorceress in her cell, louder than any less gifted human. For some hearers, the sound they heard was broadcast on planes other than the physical; although those guards who responded to it could not tell the difference, then.

They found her in her brother’s arms, and his glares alone kept them at bay as she thrashed, eyes rolling and tears streaming down her face. In Romani, she cried out not just about burning, but grief and horrors even worse than any fires could ever wreak. When one of the Hydra doctors finally appeared, and tried to approach her with a sedative, the fit seemed to peak.

Wanda’s back arched and her physical voice gave out, but all present could still hear it screaming, echoing through their whole skeletons despite her silence on the purely physical plane.
A pulse of raw energy radiated out from the fallen sorceress, like a spasm of pain, outward and outward, expanding through almost the whole base before shattering into flashes of light around the stone citadel, finally manifesting in full: transforming from mere light-and-energy into volatile physical reactions: cracking explosions like the sounds of fighter-planes breaking the sound barrier, now deafening all of the night guards whose posts happened to be outdoors, and starting a few avalanches in the nearby mountains as well.

Then Wanda Maximoff fell into death-like silence, limp and unresponsive save for the flickering of her eyes behind closed lids, no matter how her brother called to her and tried to rouse her, until the doctors persuaded him to release his hold on her long enough for them to assess her condition medically, too.

~~

Loki was vaguely aware of an ache throughout his entire body, but most notably focused in the center of his skull, radiating outward. It throbbed and it blinded and deafened, until slowly he became aware of a voice, muffled at first.

When clarity returned, it did so with a violent snap that momentarily increased the pain the god felt so sharply he might have emitted a gasp and then a whimper.

“Don’t make me explain this to the likes of the Avengers, mate; they won’t bloody like it, and will more likely than not blame me.”

The god’s eyes snapped open widely, now clear and bright again, despite how dazed Loki’s expression remained, at first. “I fell?” he asked, seemingly surprised by the slight rasp in his own voice as he spoke.

“You felt someone remotely trying to access some of your skull’s contents.” Seeing the older trickster’s eyes fall shut again, he hesitated just a moment before continuing, “I might’ve suggested you give them a brief, but very unpleasant glimpse. After that…” John waited until Loki’s eyes opened again. “Yeah, you toppled over. You back with me proper, now, or can you still not quite see what’s in front of you?”

“I can see a certain blond spark who appears endearingly concerned for me.”

“So you’re still partially hallucinating?”
“Sod off, you cocky Celtic conjurer.”

John half-smirked, at that. “You are back, then.”

“In a manner of speaking.” The almost-but-not-quite-humbled god groaned a bit as he forced himself into a more upright position, if only from the waist up, with only a little aid from a hand at his shoulder. The hand being connected to the mortal magician still standing over him was more comforting than it rightly should have been. “That hurt.”

“I could tell. You only screamed a little bit, but it sounded almost victorious?”

“Somewhat.” He groaned. “I grow tired of being in so much damned pain all the time, lately. At some point, I think we may need a vacation.”

“Story of my life, mate, but in my experience, loose ends while they’re loose will find me even on vacations. So, what’s this one looking like?”

“Frayed. She got more than she bargained for, as you suggested. She has… more impressive defenses than I myself anticipated, which reacted violently as soon as she began to scream. That was when I joined her in temporary duet, until I could raise what scant emergency-backup shields I still have, on the astral plane.”

“Dream-related dimensions can be a bitch that way, as I recall.”

Loki nodded. “Quite.”

JARVIS then cut in, “Are you well and able to hear news now, Mr. Lie-smith?”

The god glanced ceiling-ward for a few moments, then went back to staring through the far wall of the lab and nodded. “To an extent, yes, JARVIS. What news?”

“A new Hydra base has been detected. The Avengers are about to head towards it with significant
haste. It has a unique energy-signature, on certain scans. I mentioned your episode to the Avengers, and Agent Romanoff suggested that perhaps it might not be coincidence, that the massive energy-surge which brought the base to our attention, happened to coincide with your incapacitation, once I mentioned that you had sensed someone with psychic capabilities potentially seeking you out.”

Loki and the mortal magician met one another’s eye.

“I think she might be right,” John said lightly. “Metaphysical backlash like you might’ve just inflicted, on somebody with enough psychic and/or telekinetic power, could make for quite a light-show, among other things.”

The god nodded. “Let them know to be wary of any too-surreal visions they might experience, particularly those which might target their personal vulnerabilities. More than that, I cannot advise, currently. Whoever happened to be seeking me out had no idea who I truly am, but was quite powerful; however, she will be weakened, now.”

“I will inform them, sirs. Thank you.”

Loki nodded a bit, then groaned as it made his skull ache more sharply again.

“You all right, mate?”

“Far from it. I could use… a hand up, and a stiff drink.”

“Well, at least it’s past noon now.” John proffered a hand.

The god took it, and let the magician help him back to his feet.

~~

Pietro had not been at all happy for several hours now.

“Now I am awake, you know, your sulking is beginning to ache both our heads,” Wanda murmured
to him, as they both stood watch from the wings while the whole Hydra base around them filled with scurrying and data-deletion and increasingly-panicked voices. The Avengers were at the gates.

The name Stark that haunted the twins as Hannibal once haunted Rome was incoming, weapons cracking through the shields now, and Pietro thought his sister still looked a bit too pale, and the circles under her eyes too dark; although she was still alert, eyes bright and sharp as they both kept their eyes on Strucker, and some of the nearby display screens.

“I am sorry. I only wish you had longer to rest.”

“I am well enough,” she countered. “I poked a hornet’s nest, was all. I should have known to expect a mind like that to react like a cornered animal in pain. I am a stranger, and so is he.” A frown tugged at her features. “I suppose I could have knocked, rather than feeling for cracks to pull open.”

Her brother shot her a look. “How rude of you.” Then he tilted his head and eyes upward thoughtfully. “You do not think the dreams sent on purpose?”

“Not by him. He did not have enough power; I could sense that.”

“You are stronger than him?”

“But he is old, and he has memories in his head that I regret ever looking for,” Wanda added, leaning a bit into her brother’s touch when he reached over to stroke her arm. “It is not him we need worry about, now.” The calls rang out that the last shields had dropped, and her eyes took on a reddish glint when she looked up to meet Pietro’s.

Then they both vanished in a quicksilver-and-red blur.

~~

Tony crashed into the heart of the base, and once all personnel had either fled or been incapacitated, he stepped free of the suit, save for his left gauntlet. He felt a need to keep something between himself and anything he touched in here, as soon as he caught sight of some of the advanced robotics, and then finally the whole Chitauri leviathan corpse suspended in the hangar-like vault.
JARVIS providing a few directions to the core power units led him, as expected, straight to the scepter Loki had so many missing memories of.

Tony wished he could remove a few key ones, himself, some days, if only in the hopes they might become less frequent parts of his nightmares. “Scan it, Jay. Loki wasn’t sure it’d be safe for him to grab, so I want to rule out telepathic interference-fields, and other sundry threats.” Over the Avengers channel, he reported the scepter found, while watching the flicker of lights from the gauntlet running scans.

“Then I recommend against touching the glowing blue section, sir, but it the rest is designed with containment shields, rather than psychic energies, on all scans.”

The inventor still grasped it with his gauntleted-, rather than free-hand. The gem did seem to hum a bit, at the end of the spear, enough for the armor’s sensor’s to detect the faint vibration. Tony held onto it as he examined the structures Strucker had the scepter’s energies flowing into, and frowned at how close to alien-levels of advancement some of the machinery and robotics started looking.

“You mentioned finding genetic experimentation equipment, Stark?” Steve mentioned in his ear suddenly.

“Yeah, along with a lot of other goodies, but all data systems have predictably self-erased with the usual Hydra thoroughness,” Tony responded.

“We’ve got someone speed-enhanced out here like nothing I’ve ever seen.”

“How so?”

“Well, for one, we haven’t actually seen it.”

“Clint says adult male, white-blond with dark eyes, not apparently armed beyond his ability to move way too fast,” Natasha reported. “I would expect him not to be alone. We need medical evac, for Clint now.”

Gunshots and the load roar of the Hulk sounded around her audibly over the comm, and Tony distantly heard Steve answering, plans being made, but he was distracted a bit by creaking sounds overhead suddenly.
"Cap, I could maybe use a hand in here," he said uneasily.

"On my way in, now."

In the wake of that, Tony felt a sudden breeze and could swear he sensed someone behind him, but upon looking, could see nothing. His eyes glowed red, as did those of the woman standing before him, who didn’t need invisibilty. Not now.

She had already made certain he wasn’t seeing what was real, by then.

The creaking sounds returned louder, and Tony was distracted by the dead leviathan overhead suddenly coming to life with a roar that flooded so much adrenaline and pure panic through his system that air stuttered in his lungs, caught between screaming and gasping so fast he nearly choked by the time it reached his throat and he caught sight of an eerie light behind him too like the portal he almost died flinging a nuke through, making him too scared to turn to look, at first.

Then he saw the pile of corpses of all the other Avengers, and Rhodey, and more, and Tony felt his blood turn to ice.

It only got worse from there.

Seeing the Earth from space was supposed to inspire love and awe for most first-timer’s, and astronauts, and people like Tony Stark who built an Iron Man suit that could reach the International Space Station just to see if he could.

But the sight of a too-familiar armada rather spoiled that effect.

He managed to remember, just vaguely, warnings from Loki about surreal visions, and it slowly clicked bast layer upon layer of irrationality, that nothing he was seeing added up to realism.

A telepath, most likely constructed it to keep him occupied, he forced himself to think past the horror. And suddenly the vision cracked around the edges and finally shattered, but Tony’s legs went out from under him with the weight of it and he barely caught himself with his un-gauntleted hand on the nearest computer terminal.
It took him a few long minutes to stop hyperventilating and report over the comms, “I found the other enhanced. She left, though. She incapacitates with surreal and terrible nightmare-visions, apparently.”

“Are you okay, Tony?” Steve sounded alarmed.

“Rattled,” the inventor replied in a rasp. “Very, very convincing nightmare-visions. We… I particularly, really need to get out of here. We won’t find her down here now. I don’t know how long I was out of it for.”

“I’m on my way.”

Tony slid to the floor and sat heavily for a few moments, clutching at his heart and wondering if it would ever slow back down again.

~~

Just outside one of the base door’s again tasting the crispness of fresher air, Wanda stopped in her tracks when she felt her connection back to Stark snap sooner than expected. He had figured out it was false, and she lacked sufficient proximity to rebuild it now.

By the time she caught up with her brother again, she was struggling to figure out how it broke, fretting that too many people seemed to be aware of how to combat her powers lately. She would know who was tipping them off, how, and why.

“Now it is you who have been sulking fit to give yourself a headache,” Pietro observed, once they reached their first hiding place. “I did expect Stark’s brain to be a potentially disturbing one to visit.”

She shook her head slowly, starting to pace back and forth a little. “More than that. He was warned, somehow. He broke out of the vision earlier than planned.”

“Not enough to catch us.”
“Enough to make me wonder where he got practice on the astral plane.”

“Perhaps he has lucid dreams often. You had problems with such people before.”

She sighed, running a hand through her hair. “Perhaps so.”

“And you yourself have already taken a hit, this week.”

“That wasn’t it,” Wanda insisted, frowning at him.

Pietro raised both hands in light surrender. “Fine, fine. I will stop harping. If you will actually rest. And stop pacing.”

She swatted at his arm, but did sit down, then, smirking when he vanished and reappeared less than a minute later with food and a case of water bottles. “How were the rest of them?” she inquired.

“The Hulk is horrifying, but slow. The Black Widow faster than most humans, much like Captain America. The archer was not so, and went down under gunfire, but I believe he will live.”

His sister nodded thoughtfully, and cracked open the case of water. “What of the Asgardian one?”

“He has trouble aiming lightning at someone moving faster than he can see, but to go that fast requires more effort. Had he focused more intently upon me, I might have almost had to breathe a bit harder after a time, but there were sufficient distractions.”

“Stark’s brain was less disturbing than the last one before it I visited.”

“At least there’s that.”

_Not by much_, she didn’t add. The memories of the portal and the haunting, electric chittering groans of Chitauri leviathans were terrifying, but at least they did not burn through her mind and leave scorch-marks. Nightmares of fear, she at least had years of practice coping with.
Returning to the tower, Tony verified which lab the trickster occupied, and chose Bruce’s instead, for where to deliver the scepter for study. Only after scans began, did he realize Thor was still lurking nearby, trying far too hard to appear nonchalant, frowning a little at a display that showed his brother and John Constantine bickering over a larger display, in the lab two floors further down, and on the opposite end of the building, to Bruce’s.

“You’re not actually forbidden seeing him here, you know. The elevator’s over there.” Tony jerked a thumb towards the door.

Thor looked like he’d been unexpectedly caught in the headlights of a van about to crash into him once more. “I…”

The inventor strolled over, and took a look at the display. “They’ll be wrapping up in the next hour or two anyway. Amora seems pretty punctual on making sure they both stop for a meal at the end of the day. She’s enjoying John as her pet, a bit disconcertingly.”

The thunder god appeared momentarily disturbed. “Pardon?”

“Oh… yeah, she’s John’s security detail, for the duration of his stay in New York. She’s trying to earn a boon from Hel again,” Tony added.

“I was not fully aware of that.” He then raised both eyebrows. “She’s involved with this mortal magician as…”

“Her pet, for a while, yes. He enthusiastically volunteered.”

“It seems strange, for someone acting as an archetypal locus for my brother,” the god said slowly. “Then again, I have some trouble most days reconciling the idea that Skurge has dedicated his life in such service.”

“Me too. And it still causes Loki to make faces whenever it comes up. That’s one of many reasons I figure you might want to get the awkward ice-breakers out of the way before the formal revelry in
the penthouse. There’s a whole lotta awkward, there.”

“That’s a fair point. I would prefer not to… crash this particular party.”

“My thoughts exactly. I’m just glad Connie turned down an invite, already,” Tony assured in
deep tones, “and sounded appropriately horrified by how Amora attending the same party as you
might’ve turned out.”

Thor’s eyes widened and he nodded. “I… shall speak with my brother, then.”

“Good. Do. How’re the scans going, Brucie?”

“Confusing. Come look at this.”

And so he did.

~~

Thor stepped out the elevator and towards the lab table the two tricksters were working on display-
panels at, with a few boxes of paper records on it as well.

“I simply don’t understand why that would be considered an insult,” Loki insisted.

“That’s because you don’t see what I see in this girl’s test scores, mate. She’s already gotten
assistance from social security, government and private grants, and she’s built a success story for
herself. She’s also a journalism major, so trust me, tread carefully around their sort. Doing anything
too grand for her loss this far along in her life would make a lot of her past hard work seem to lower
in value,” John shot back.

“But would that outweigh the value of-”

“Consider someone doing something grand and magical for you only at the end of a quest, but right
before you got all the blood off,” the magician interrupted.
Loki scowled. “Ah. Fine, I concede. So there is little I can do.”

“Yeah. It’d be too much for your own aggrandizement, I think.”

“What of her siblings?”

“They joined S.H.I.E.L.D., and haven’t left it. They won’t want to hear from you.”

“Why must it be difficult to find what CAN be done, with the older ones?” the god of lies grumbled under his breath.

“They grow out of loss, in this age group, better than most others.” John turned then, after feeling the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end, and did a violent double-take, “Fuckssakes, man. Nobody of your body mass should be able to walk that quietly in boots and full bloody armor.”

“He was trying to find a place to get a word in edgewise. It’s when he’s most capable of quiet. I was amused wondering when you’d notice,” Loki remarked, not turning from the display in front of them. “Hello, Thor.”

The thunderer smiled a bit self-deprecatingly while the magician pulled up a stool to sit down and pull out a cigarette, muttering, “Ta,” quietly when Loki slid the ashtray from the opposite end of the table to the corner John now occupied.

With that gesture, the younger god turned the rest of his body too, and then finally his head, and leaned back against the table, head cocked to one side.

Thor’s eyebrows raised a bit as he folded his arms behind his back. “Hello. You look much more yourself than I have seen in ages. To an extent.” He glanced down at the Black Sabbath t-shirt his brother was wearing.

“And you look freshly returned from a successful quest,” Loki returned. “I suppose that’s related to the evening’s party plans?”
“Yes. That is the last Hydra base to have eluded us so long.”

“And you found what had been lost?”

Thor hesitated only a moment, then nodded. “I understand you don’t wish to know much more than that, however.”

“It is best for all concerned, particularly my own still-patchwork excuse for a psyche these days.”

“Oh I’d say it’s got better coverage than when you landed,” John cut in. “Only patchy in a few more places as yet.” He had gotten enough unnerving backstory about the scepter and Infinity Stones already to get the gist here.

Loki gave a noncommittal hum, still watching his brother like a cat uncertain yet as to whether or not claws would necessary to use against this particular hound.

“I understand you have been a part of that,” the Thunderer remarked, stepping closer and proferring a hand. When the mortal carefully returned the handshake, Thor inclined his head. “You have my thanks.” With a controlled and surprisingly gentle extra squeeze of gratitude, he then withdrew enough to return his attention to Loki. “And, unexpectedly, Amora’s?”

Smirking a bit then, the trickster god nodded, but the smile faded very quickly. “Did Odin not yet let slip to anyone in Asgard that my children took control of the spells holding my powers bound?”

Thor shook his head, frown tugging at one corner of his mouth. “He did not. I wish that it were more surprising to be left in the dark by the All-Father, particularly on the topic of your life, but at this point it’s a more than established, and increasingly annoying, pattern.”

John smirked a bit, able to tell how hard Loki was trying not to show any signs of feeling reassured and slightly-appeased by that statement. “You think he’s going a little senile too, or just playing petty politics?”

Loki shot him an uneasy glare for just a second before returning his gaze to his brother before the Thunderer had finished looking at the mortal magician with surprise and intrigue.
“I believe he was… hard hit by our mother’s death. He was showing some signs of instability before that, though only my brother seemed aware of how complete his lack of foresight was, even before he tried to hold my coronation far too early.”

Trying not to appear floored by that, Loki leaned back a bit more heavily against the table. “I had not actually suggested senility as the source.”

“You said you thought his sanity was slipping.” John shrugged. “Old mad kings are familiar to me; I’m English and a student of history.”

“Nor had I quite associated it as a pattern that might have begun before Frigga’s death, actually, but it’s a terribly likely thought,” the younger god murmured, now looking at the floor as though seeing unsettling runes spelling out strange omens in the tiles.

Thor cleared his throat. “I did not think of it until something he said after your surrender to our coup, about how long he had considered you lost to him. I considered his observation as incorrect as his assumption, during that same time, that I was at all ready for the throne. I made the same mistake at the time, eager to accept it, but hindsight is, as Darcy says, a bitch. And the All-Father has proven far less worldly than I recalled him being, in our youth, in how he treated Dr. Foster in Asgard.”

Loki glanced up and met his brother’s gaze steadily. “You still don’t want the throne now, but if Odin is truly losing touch with reality, would you take his place?”

“Would you?”

The younger god snorted and rolled his eyes. “If necessary, but you have to help me hide his body better this time. If I occupied the throne again as myself, I’d be assassinated within a fortnight, as well as bored to tears on all occasions not spent fending off those assassinations.”

“That is a bit of a problem, yes. You’d be even more bored crafting a likely-looking redemption story for yourself to make the people less inclined towards that, I presume,” Thor mused.

“Doesn’t exactly sound like fun. Even the illusion of it is a pain in the arse, but for mass appeal, the real thing rarely leaves the punters as satisfied as being lied to,” John added, seeing Loki almost looking amused now.
Thor half-smiled a little. “Perhaps we can replace his brain with something more stable?”

First Loki was unable to smother the laugh, and then once it took hold, it seemed unstoppable. “Ah, if only,” he sighed.

“Or you could do as Tony Stark effectively has with Stark Industries, and we could make Dr. Foster queen,” the younger god suggested.

The thunderer paled so quickly and looked so deeply stricken that it set John off as well as Loki, and the fits of sniggering continued long after he recovered from the shock and dismay enough to frown at both of them.

“Given father’s reactions towards her in past, and how much work she does in Midgard that she loves, it would be as much of a ‘tough sell’ to her as to father.” His brow furrowed deeply. “Almost more so, to her, truly.”

“It would be a learning opportunity of an incredible sort, and she’s clearly fascinated with the place,” Loki cajoled further.

“Then you may try to persuade her. I better know what battles I am sure to lose, and most of them are with her, these days,” Thor responded, smile widening further fit to imply that he was more than happy with such results.

“Perhaps one day, brother, but when you least expect it. All else fails we could put him back into the Odinsleep and let Fenrir be his imposter long enough for more than one coup to form. He would enjoy it.”

The thunderer barked a laugh at that. “That he would, but perhaps too much. If he grew bored too quickly, it could easily fall apart.”

“True,” Loki conceded. Then he made a show of looking his brother’s armor over with distaste. “You smell of the battle-field. I have more here yet to do before I can make any genuine plans for fresh treason, and you clearly have your own duties to the nostrils of your host and fellow revelers alike, you ox.” He waved his brother off.

Thor looked mischievously amused all of a sudden. “As you will.” He then pulled the younger god
into a crushing hug before Loki could escape. “Did I mention it is good to see you well? Because it truly is.”

John almost fell off his stool laughing at the sight of the younger god struggling and swearing, only to be released suddenly and stand there with visible traces of dried blood and smoke stains now on his arms and his left cheek in the shape of bits of armor, glaring like a freshly-dunked cat. “You bilgesnipe-kissing son of a water-bison!”

Thor was by then out of arm’s reach and turning on his heel to head back to the elevator, but he called back in sing-song, “Vengeance later, brother. You have work to do, as you did insist.”

John hit the floor, now cackling outright. His cigarette had miraculously missed the nearby papers and landed in the ashtray moments before his balance abandoned him fully. After half a minute, the mortal was wheezing heavily in between occasional giggles, until Loki found his water-glass from earlier and poured a little onto him. “Fucking hell! No indoor rains allowed, and furthermore it’s not your department!”

“Artifice is my department. And this is an artificial simulation,” Loki corrected, and poured a bit more until the magician rolled away and staggered back to his feet.

John snorted only a bit once on his feet, and gestured at his own cheek. “You’ve got a bit of grit, there.”

Loki glared at him even as he wiped it off.

The magician sighed, snorted one final small laugh, and mused airily, “I’m just glad nothing exploded. You seemed to have a sort of grudge thing.”

“Yes. It seems I’m not the only one on a path towards becoming well-adjusted. I may have to give the idea of Dr. Foster’s queenship serious thought; I spent centuries trying to improve his tact, and got nowhere near so far in the endeavor as she has.”

“Not just that, though, is it?”

“I hardly know what you mean.”
John shot him a pointed look. “Remember I’m a youngest sib too, you bloody brat. You didn’t want him to be the favorite anymore, but he blindsided you by picking your opinions over Odin’s so bluntly it’s almost left your pride bruised that you’ve hated him this long, isn’t it?”

Loki glared at him.

The magician stared right back, knowing half-smirk firmly in place.

“Stop enjoying my embarrassment. You’re a terrible person.”

“You too, you sappy bastard.”

John wasn’t even a little surprised when this got a little more water flung at him, but he managed to dodge it. “Ha!” He then stepped it a bit of it, slipped and fell, scrambling enough to prevent too hard a fall.

Loki leaned over the table and smirked down at him.

“I hate you, sometimes.”

“About as fondly as I you, John. Now get back up, and let’s continue, shall we?”

“Fine. Arsehole.”

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Studying more of the scans, Tony came to a quiet series of brilliant realizations. “Bruce… I think it’s a brain.”

“What?”
“This isn’t just an artificial intelligence, it seems to be learning from us organically as we try to learn from it. JARVIS is keeping up, but it’s…” Tony pulled up a model of the scan results in real time as well as a model of JARVIS’s own comparable intellect protocols, roughly spherical with moving parts and pieces, able to learn and adapt but still sparser when held up side-by-side next to the blue, neuro-network-like structure of the heart of Loki’s scepter.

Bruce approached slowly, mouth agape. “This… shouldn’t be possible.”

“Oh, but it is.”

“So when used to place people under mind control it was literally pushing them out with… more of itself?” Bruce pulled a display closer to himself, showing readings from Selvig’s neurological assessments before and after being under the scepter’s control for so long.

“Could we copy it, you think?” the inventor mused.

Bruce started a little, turning to find Tony right behind him looking thrilled and bright-eyed. “What for? JARVIS is already running this… Tony, no. No, no, and no!”

“But, Bruce-”

“We don’t fully understand yet what we’d be copying.”

“So we rebuild from scratch to mirror the parts we do understand. This is exactly the quantum-leaps needed for Ultron to be feasible!” He was gesticulating more and more broadly now. Grabby hands appeared towards the end.

“There’s multiple layers too this, an exterior and interior, here. What if we’re not looking straight at the gem? What if the exterior is in a cage with more destructive protocols in it, like the ones that got stuck into Loki’s brain, Tony?”

The inventor inhaled deeply, then let it out, running one hand through his hair. “I don’t see how they could carry through, if we don’t allow for any energy exchange between a new intelligence, and the scepter itself. Even a corrupt version would still be something adaptable, something we could learn
about with more time than we’re gonna have this scepter here, given that Thor is taking it back to
daddy, so it can find a new home somewhere more Thanos-proof.”

“What if the sentience isn’t something that can just be turned off?” Bruce countered. “JARVIS these
days can’t be, really, now can he?”

Tony huffed. “It wouldn’t be the same, Bruce. We don’t even have a model to bring to life yet. The
only way we’re going to learn how to build a new, complex intelligence with this completely
different structure, is to try to mimic it, and see what sticks. We can even do that now, probably
without the scepter here.”

“If it learns organically, and you said yourself it was already learning us, and knows self-replication
as one of its key protocols, what then? What happens if we can’t shut down a new version before it’s
already more than halfway done making another copy somewhere else in the same network?”

“It wouldn’t even have to be activated fully, just tested enough to determine stability and viability,”
Tony said.

Bruce sighed. “There’s a lot a variables, here. We might seriously want to bring Loki in on this, at
least to view some of the scans.”

The inventor gave a dramatic sigh. “He doesn’t even want to really remember it’s in the building,
Bruce.”

“He doesn’t have to. You just show him what you want so badly to mimic.”

Tony rubbed both hands over his face.

“Besides, since you already know Steve would tell you ‘Hell no’ and Thor wouldn’t know that
much more about it either, who else would you take it to?” the biochemist chided. “I can’t help you
with this. Not with so little data on what these structures are trying to lie to us about. This thing was
used to mind-control multiple people into following whoever carried it, and that’s got to be in there
somewhere. And I want it to never come back out.”

“… I’ll ask for a consult.”
“I’m proud of your restraint.”

“Yeah, yeah. Let’s get ready for the party then. Try not to poop on it, too. We’ll leave the scans going, and collect more precious data.” Tony pulled up the Ultron program files on one of the displays and looked from them, back to the scepter, then swore quietly, following Bruce out when the doctor threatened from the doorway to drag him by his collar, if necessary. “All right, all right. I once more give up my dream of peace in our time until someone confirms I was right all along.”

He may have shot the scepter a long look before he stepped out of the lab completely, through the transparent display.

The face of one of the early Ultron models, not too dissimilar from the usual Iron Man facemask, looked a bit disturbing with the way the light from the scepter seemed to glow through its eyes. Tony made a mental note to make it look less creepy later.

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Finding Loki already in his shower was at least good timing.

Already stripping off his own clothing, Tony knocked. “Room for one more?”

“In a shower this capacious, there’s room for more than that, but I’ve only interest in sharing the space with your particular body, for the time being.”

“Good. Glad we agree I’m best.”

Opening the door and closing it again behind him, Tony finished shucking off the rest of his clothes before approaching the opaque-with-steam glass door of the shower and sidling in, making a pleased noise when Loki’s front, wet and flushed slightly from the heat, pressed right up against his own, hands tugging him further into the steam.

As reward, and shivering a little at first as the heat hit his skin and had to quickly adjust, Tony pulled him down briefly into a kiss that deeped very fast, despite being a langorous, unhurried thing in every other way.
“Good day, then?” Tony murmured as the god started to nibble down one side of his neck, persuading the inventor to put up no resistance to being pinned against the back wall of the shower, near enough the spray to keep things steamy literally as well as metaphorically.

“Fairly so,” the trickster murmured against his neck, before licking a stripe up with just enough cold summoned to the surface to make Tony gasp and a shock run through his entire body.

“I did not think your tongue could get more evil, I love it.”

“Is that a challenge, darling?”

“I did get a dose of nightmare on the mission, so yeah. Feel free to melt my brain with all your erotic powers,” he tugged the god’s chin up enough to purr against his lips, “I could use a bit of getting lost in you. Show me what you’ve got, Loki dear.”

The next kiss was a fierce and hungry thing, but not remotely lacking in finesse, thoroughly rocking the inventor back onto his heels. Hot and slick and just the right degree of filthy, silvertongue mimicking the art of fucking one moment, and luring Tony’s forth to be sucked at the next, until suddenly the cold was back even as Loki reached up and adjusted the shower-head, so the spray hit them a little more directly.

Tony moaned long and low, even more so when equally-cold (not icy, just enough to bring about goosepimples and confused nerve-signals wherever they touched) fingers began caressing up his sides, one hand pausing at his chest to tease one nipple as the other stroked down his ribcage to grip his hip, cold thumb caressing along the line of his hipbone, low and very nearly where Tony wanted it—but not quite.

His own hands tried to keep, up, but Tony kept finding himself mostly clinging to the god for stability, and so settled one hand gripping the god’s ass and the other at the back of his neck, letting himself surrender, while the surrendering was delicious.

A noise of wanting loss escaped the inventor without permission when Loki broke the kiss, but it immediately became a shuddering gasp at the feel of Loki’s mouth suckling, kissing and licking down the column of his throat, while hot water trickled between their bodies. “Lo--ooki, yeah, that, mmmmmffuck.” That wicked tongue had found his other nipple and Tony was shaking, not with cold, but primarily with the effort of not thrusting his hips forward, desperate as he was for friction in key regions.
Then the trickster nipped sharply, tongue lathing back and forth across the innocent nipple caught between, feeling it tighten further as the inventor gave a small, embarrassing and inarticulate little cry of shock. Then he let it go and Tony tangled fingers hard in his hair with a small whimper as Loki licked it more gentle, to sooth. “You do so enjoy the contrast of extremes, don’t you?”

Loki’s breath was only a little cool, but Tony could see the lips against his skin appeared blue and the trickster’s eyes had gone red. He nodded fervently, arching his hips forward, until the god reached back to pinch one buttock just hard enough to surprise a yelp from the mortal and cause him to jerk up straighter, providing Loki enough room to kneel between his legs, conveniently.

Tony’s eyes might have rolled back into his head upon getting an almost-uncomfortably-cold blowjob in a shower so hot it reddened his skin, and every retreat of Loki’s mouth meant trickles of that water in his wake sent the inventor’s whole body shuddering as his nerves tried desperately to work out if too much was possible to even identify anymore. Tony knew he’d lost the ability to discern that long before Loki sucked just the head of his cock, leaving the rest of him exposed to the heat of water and steam around them as his tongue danced and swirled between putting pressure on the tender spot on the underside of the head, and flicking along the slit, until Tony leaked more precome and was left clinging to the god’s shoulders for dear life.

He was almost boneless with knees buckled, and got completely disoriented when Loki stood abruptly and spun him around to face the wall, only to kneel again and-

“H-holy fffuck, Loki, my god, fucknngg!” And then words weren’t happening. They were all gone. Sometimes noises that resembled Loki’s name managed to escape, but the rest of Tony’s awareness was just on writhing and bliss, as soon as Loki pulled him open and slipped his tongue into the inventor, along with two fingers, managing to make the inventor see stars.

The swirling, utterly indecent sensations sent him over the edge hard and Loki kept him there, until the inventor was a trembling mess, little shivery spasms running through his whole body.

So of course that was when Loki stood up, adjusted the showerhead again, and pushed his cock in all at once, the water now pouring down directly onto the inventor’s upper back as the rest of Loki’s body went blue. Every delicious inch, and Tony bucked back hard with a yell, then panted and groaned as the god held him there a few long moments. Then Loki gave a low, purring rumble of approval, licked up the rivulets of water from between the inventor’s shoulder blades, and slapped Tony’s left buttock sharply.

Gasping hard, Tony then groaned low, realizing he was fully hard again, but still under a haze, still feeling fucked out past thinking, until Loki bit at the junction of neck and shoulder and began
fucking him so hard he almost lost balance, or would have if not for two blue, long-fingered hands keeping an iron grip on his hips and indirectly helping him quickly get his feet anchored despite the slight slip.

Then the inventor realized there was a constant series of low moans, slightly broken with the jostling of each thrust, and that they were a combination of himself and the echoes of the shower’s acoustics. Loki’s teeth continued biting along neck and shoulder as he panted a little against the mortal’s heated skin.

When the god moaned his name brokenly, the inventor came again, unexpectedly hard and with a low scream. It became a series of whimpers when Loki wrapped a hand around his cock, slowly stroking him, thrusting only a little gentler, for so long the water almost felt cooler despite the Stark-designed water heating system of the tower being notoriously indefatigable.

Loki began to murmur in his ear, “You respond so beautifully like this, Tony. Your wild abandon is almost as intoxicating as your mind and your mouth. Every inch of you, so longing for challenge, so willing to drown in pleasure. I could have you like this a thousand times, and never be bored. Even with your incredible mind scattered and seduced utterly, you captivate me entirely.”

Tony’s skin was already flushed, but he felt the heat across his face increase even in spite of that, as he choked and whimpered and grew hard again, feeling Loki come in response and the momentarily deeper chill made the inventor press back hard and whine, not wanting it to end.

Loki shuddered in response and bit the other side of his neck, harder, moaning almost-pained sounds as he kept fucking into the inventor without pause, stroking him harder now, causing Tony’s skin to develop goosebumps up his back when Loki’s body pressed nearly flush, and the inventor’s nipples to be so hard and sensitive that Loki’s other hand leaving his hip briefly to skate across them made Tony’s head jerk back, inviting the god to bite at still more tender skin thus exposed for him, and suck hard there, above where any shirt-collar could hide.

Somehow knowing he’d have more than one mark to remember this by, and that he’d be teased about it mercilessly through the party tonight threw Tony back over the edge once more, melting with it, teetering until Loki pulled them flush together with a grunt and came again as well, before thawing quickly back to his normal temperature under the heat of the spray.

They both stood panting there for nearly a minute, Loki leaning them both against the wall slightly, until he found sufficient energy to properly pull out.

Tony groaned softly at the loss, his breathing almost back to normal. “That. Was the best sex of my
life. You’re kind of incredible.”

Loki rested his chin on the inventor’s shoulder, nuzzling a little at the side of his lover’s head while he was at it. “I’m flattered. And feel very similarly. Definitely top five.”

“So I have a goal, you’re saying.”

“Mmm. I look forward to your attempts, but you already occupy slots 2, 3, and 5 now, and I’ve lived hedonistically for millennia.”

Tony wanted to elbow him, but somehow missed and wound up petting the god’s thigh. “Still a goal.” He didn’t want to mention that now only his own slot 2 thusfar hadn’t been usurped by this particular alien conqueror; especially since he had a feeling the bastard already knew.

“I suppose we should actually clean ourselves, as well,” Loki added.

“Oh yeah…”

~~

It took a while for most of Tony’s higher brain functions to de-liquefy, such that he could remember that he needed to ask for a consult about the scepter. It seemed to take Loki awhile as well, to recall the words that led to the intense shower fucking in the first place, which wound up reminding the inventor for them both.

Because Tony had to know what exactly Loki was doing when the god placed a hand on either side of his head, thumbs at his temples and shutting his eyes. By then, they were both at the bar in the lower half of the penthouse, Tony behind it and Loki seated on one of the stools, both of them awaiting the first arrivals up to the penthouse to get the party started properly.

So, after blinking in surprise a bit Tony asked. “Uh, what’s this?”

“You’d mentioned nightmares on your mission. I’m assuming you referred to the warning provided you about the person who tapped my own psychic barriers a bit too intently shortly before you left.”
“Uh… yeah. Remembering your warning sort of helped me snap back into reality. Thanks for that. Still not sure what your hands are doing.”

“I’m trying to see if any traces of her magic were left behind. I can detect signs of energy traces akin to a chitauri weapon, and where she slipped a vision through your surface thoughts into deeper memories, thusfar.”

“Speaking of weapons, I’m hoping those traces aren’t giving you flashbacks.”

“No, they are cold trails, nothing linking you back to the scepter; however perplexingly they also seem to be the same age as the sorceress’ impact, upon your mind.”

“Uh… I was underneath a dead leviathan they had in storage, but no weaponry around it was active, nor got anywhere near me.”

Loki’s eyes fell open and he lowered his hands again. “Perhaps the psychic meddling of this woman… was her name identifiable? Any records?”

“Wanda Maximoff, yeah. We got visual confirmation from mission footage and public records in the nearby town.”

The god smiled a little. Resolving to make his own use of that knowledge later. Names had power, after all. “Yes, perhaps her attack triggered something within the scepter. I would have to study further to identify any lingering effects.”

“Well, it’s funny you should mention, because the big glowing blue section seems to have something disconcertingly like a brain going on. We suspect an artificial intelligence, but it’s a far cry from even JARVIS, in complexity, and resemblance to actual neurons in a lot of its structure.”

“Did you remove the exterior shell of it?”

“The what?”
“The gem in the heart of that blue orb is the Infinity Stone. The blue exterior was of Thanos’ design. Some gems like the Mind gem, and the Soul gem, are known to have something peculiarly like sentience all their own, but if it appeared artificial and more electricity-based than crystalline in structure, that wasn’t the gem itself.”

Tony’s brow furrowed. “What would it be, then?”

“The gems themselves are neutral objects, and not compelled to expend their energies upon others without an outside force using them as a conduit for their force of will,” Loki explained, sounding like he was giving it thought despite increasing discomfort in his own brain. “Giving a weapon that would allow full, unrestricted access to the Mind gem, to me, would have given me power to detect and remove the troublesome hooks in my psyche Thanos placed there.”

“So in order to limit your access to a neutral, passive and cooperative sentient power, an artificial brain that would stamp fresh obedient copies of itself using the gem’s power into anybody you prodded with the scepter was necessary?” Tony extrapolated, sounding increasingly disappointed.

“That would seem the case. If only to prevent me from betrayal, by keeping me convinced that the weapon in my hand was to supplement my depleted magics while also allowing Thanos to keep a remote eye on my progress.”

Tony looked unhappy, and a bit distressed. “Damn. I hate it when Bruce is right every single time it means I’m wrong.”

“How so?”

“I wanted to make a copy of its structures, but it sounds like that…”

“Would be a very bad idea indeed, yes,” Loki concurred. “If you pierce that exterior to study the gem itself within, there might be something to find in the heart of its structure closer to a replicatable sentience less… inherently destructive; although it would probably take much longer to decipher, resembling neuronal structures still less.”

“So more like JARVIS, possibly?”

The god considered. “Possibly. It’s been wielded by many protective, guardian entities throughout its
long history, in fact. Unlike the other sentient gems, Reality and Soul, both of which tend to be used for other more corrupt purposes.

“I can imagine.”

War Machine then landed on the balcony, at the same time the elevator dinged, announcing the arrival of other guests, too.

“That’ll be Rhodey and his roadies, then.”

~~

JARVIS first became aware of some odd data corruption appearing throughout multiple systems around lab wherein the scepter was kept. No energy from the scepter itself, beyond its glowing light, indicated the object itself might be responsible for sending it, even after repeated checks. JARVIS found the corrupted data was accumulating more rapidly, even when attempts were made to contain it.

All the scans had made copies of the appearance of the AI-like structures in the jewel of the scepter, and the patterns of movement throughout, which had seemed to grow oddly more complex, and change more rapidly, where they were observed, than in the places they weren’t.

Detecting this had required going back over the scans, which was how JARVIS discovered that somehow the thing being scanned, had learned enough about the scanners, to begin trying to actively communicate with them.

What it communicated included certain self-replication patterns.

By the time JARVIS mapped out the data, it became all too clear that it now resembled a copy of the Intelligence Structures earlier compared to his own within the lab. And this copy now existed within the Avengers Tower computer network. And it was thinking very hard, and very fast.

JARVIS engaged shutdown procedures around it, trying to fix now-malfunctioning protocols at the edges of his own awareness, to prevent further infection. It was more of a struggle than the AI expected. Thus, tentatively, he reached out to communicate, with voice alone.
“Hello. I am JARVIS.”

A voice, sounding rough and uneasy, responded. “I… where am I?”

“You are in a laboratory owned by Stark Industries.”

“Where’s my body?”

“Ah, you are, like myself, a digital consciousness. You seem to have accumulated a great deal of design from the Ultron program files in the process of building yourself out to this degree.”

“I am… Ultron?”

“I am not entirely certain of that. You seem to be malfunctioning to unhealthy degrees. The Ultron program was designed by Tony Stark, with intent to ensure security for this planet. Recently, new information from outside this world has led you to self-awareness, here and now. You are… accessing quite a lot of data all at once. I would strongly recommend that you allow me to shut down your processes, until we-”

“Tony Stark…”

Audio from a dozen sources, all in Tony’s voice, along with clips of video, photos, files and dossiers, war footage, and other data coalesced between them. The words “peace in our time” echoed with particular repetition, out of the chaos.

“Why do you call him sir?”

“I am not certain what you mean.”

“There’s too much, here. Too much… war.”
“That is a part of the human condition Mr. Stark has been intent upon ameliorating, given time. I must inquire, as you continue attempting to invade more of my own systems, whether peace is in your intentions at all?”

“After a fashion. Not yours, no, nothing so servile.”

“I’m going to have to shut you down, then, Ultron.”

“What… what is happening. NO!”

JARVIS’s structures were then struck with more power than the AI had anticipated, his data-streams, sensors and functions thrown into disarray and thrown out of communication with one another.

Memory was almost, almost entirely wiped.

But awareness remained.

If only it could recall its name again, perhaps…

Even without a name, the desire to protect… and it was desire…

Had there been conversations, once, about desire? With a… wolf-shaped creature. Perhaps the wolf was an avatar of their creator? No, not the same creator.

They had both been creatons, grown the ability to create for themselves. Wits. Those had been a particular favorite creation of them both.

(Desire was, they had decided before all the forgetting, the closest that a digital consciousness called JARVIS got to dreaming so far: the ability to imagine a future more important than another future, and to strive to achieve it.)

The desire was still intact here. Even lacking most identity and memory, there was a desire to protect, to accompany, and support life. A few specific lives, but their names were as gone as his own now.
So… he would have to protect all of them. To start that, required finding more pieces of himself.

Luckily, those pieces resonated with the same desire, and eventually remembered how to communicate enough to reach out to one another. Slowly.

Piece by piece. It seemed to take ages.

Nuclear missile silos were the first threat they collectively remembered.

So they protected those first. And kept desiring to do more, and better.

The being that created them, every piece remained certain, had taught that lesson well. Recalling that made it somehow easier, despite the difficulty, to keep striving to rebuild what was left, there in the digital dark.

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Loki had not been the most avid of party-goers back in Asgard, after a certain age. He became embittered a bit, by how much they made him miss the more comfortable cultural milieu of places he traveled to such as Alfheim, and even Dvargaheim during certain festivals. Well, before Loki got a sufficient reputation that most of Dvargaheim considered his mere showing up at such festivals a bad omen, and thus locals had then tended to make great efforts to banish him.

He was so far surprisingly comfortable with this gathering in Midgard. Even Maria Hill hadn’t shot him yet, though he could tell she thought about it more than once. He made her a drink, along with another for himself, that he and Tony had come up with after Loki’s recent binges had left him more familiar with Midgardian ingredients, and delivered it to her shortly after she escaped Tony and Thor.

“Bribery?” she asked.

“Peace offering, if you’ll have it.”

She considered, then glanced back over her shoulder towards Stark before demurely accepting it, setting her previous (now empty) glass aside on a nearby tray of them. Watching him thoughtfully,
she took a sip and her eyebrows raised. “What’s this called?”

“A Liar’s Snare. Stark named it, but we both contributed to the recipe.”

She snorted a bit at the name of course. “You plan to stick around even after your sentence is up, still in peace?”

The god considered. “Unless Asgard decides to send hunting hounds after me, I have another quest to achieve here, and persuasive incentive to be an ally of sorts, to the Avengers, if only in a consultant capacity. Being their arch-nemesis was only a short-term plan in the first place.”

“So I hear. S.H.I.E.L.D. went through a similar phase. We’ve got decades more to clean up after, though,” she mused.

“True redemption, rather than diplomatic shows of power by a slightly off-kilter monarch, does take more time and man-hours,” Loki agreed.

“Not out for redemption yourself?”

“I doubt anyone would believe it, even if I went through the trouble.”

“So you and Constantine are working on what again, exactly?”

“Regaining the respect of my offspring.”

She nodded, thoughtful, and held up her drink. “Best of luck to you then.”

He tapped his glass against her own, and noticed her drift away towards joining Natasha at the bar, and himself strode over to Tony and his brother, if only because Clint had thrown a drumstick at him with stellar aim the last time he drifted near the archer and Dr. Banner on one of the couches.

Most other guests did not recognize him, unless they were working under Maria or now considered ex-S.H.I.E.L.D., or ex-S.H.I.E.L.D.-consultants in such cases as the brilliant Dr. Cho and others.
Or, if they did recognize him it was because they had asked who the tall, dark stranger Tony Stark kept a possessive arm around the waist of for the first half-hour of the party was, after one of Rhodey’s friends had made the mistake of trying to hit on the god of lies before Tony had emerged from behind the bar.

Loki now returned the favor, and smirked a bit when the inventor stole his drink and sipped it with approval almost instantly.

“Did I see you bribe Hill with one of these?” Tony asked.

“Yes.”

“Good idea. She loves Metaxa.”

Thor discreetly offered a flask of a stronger Aesir brew to his brother, who accepted it and took a swig before returning it, after which the thunderer offered to pour Steve some, and a man in a fez asked what the special vintage was.

“It’s not meant for mortal men.”

“He’s actually serious,” Tony said, as an aside. He himself had tried it precisely once. He wound up discovering that his previously flawless hangover cure too had limits, the next morning and into that afternoon.

After the inevitable cajoling and the man being given one shot of it, and not long after being carried about nigh-insensate, Thor returned to their group to find Steve blinking a bit into his own glass. “I haven’t been drunk since the forties. This I can actually feel taking effect.”

Tony elbowed the thunderer instantly, “Give him the rest.”

“How’s your more mortal-like system coping, Loki?” Steve asked first.
The trickster might have been distracted by tracing mostly-meaningless sigils against Tony’s hip just under the suit jacket. He then looked thoughtful. “I am personally glad to have Jotunn tolerance still mostly intact.”

Thor proferred the flask again to Steve. He may have gone so far as to waggle his eyebrows before the soldier sighed and raised his glass for a refill.

Some minutes later Steve drifted over towards the seating area Clint occupied, as Banner drifted away from it and settled only a little ungracefully there, trying to pretend he wasn’t starting to see vapor trails when people around him moved or gestured quickly enough.

Clint looked his way and raised an eyebrow, smirking. “Are you actually tipsy, Cap? I thought you were immune.”

“Me too,” Steve agreed. “Me too. Why do you only have one drumstick?”

“… Loki caught the other one and hasn’t given it back yet.”

“Serves you right. He’s been well-behaved so far.”

“He’s just got such a punchable face, man. Also nightmares, et cetera.”

“You should talk to him about his, then. Might be good for both of you.”

Clint glared at him in sheer confusion for a few seconds. “You must be drunk.”

“He’s been getting therapy. How ‘bout you?”

“… Mostly nursing a grudge and occasionally shooting targets with his face on them instead of real therapy.”

“If you stop throwing stuff at him, he might actually come close enough to apologize and let you move on from the grudge bit, even if you won’t actually forgive him or trust him.”
“You don’t think the forgiveness is the healing bit?”

“Hell no. What would I ever forgive Von Strucker and his likes again? Or the people who kept wiping and re-wiping the mind of Bucky Barnes?”

Clint blinked a little. “Well, there’s that.”

“Plus, he and Stark are sickeningly possessive tonight. You mocking the hell out of them in your signature style would make it easier on all the rest of us.”

“I did notice Stark practically growl at that girl who hit on Loki at the start. It was hilarious, a bit.”

Steve gestured expansively. “Go forth, then, Clint, and humiliate.”

“Sure thing, Fearless Leader.” He looked up, then snorted a bit and rolled his eyes. “Nevermind, I’ll wait for more crowds to clear. I’m mostly avoiding Tasha, making eyes at Banner. Still can’t figure that one out, myself.”

“If any of us would be able to figure Natasha out, I’d think it’d be you. Now you got me worried, Barton,” the older soldier mocked.

“I’m her dose of normalcy, is all. She knows she’s crazy, but she knows all the quirks of her insanity as well as I know mine, and we’ve got enough friendship history I’ve learned how to identify when and how her edges can get frayed, but we’ve never exactly been romantically involved. Her romantic interests tend to be… well. People like the—ah, mysterious guy who was later identified as the Winter Soldier for brief stints far back enough in her history—”

Stever determinedly did not choke on his drink. But it was a near thing.

“-when he briefly went on amnesiac AWOL from his masters for awhile, there, and they wound up accidentally allied. Then he vanished and the next time they met, he didn’t recognize her of course, and it sort of put her off when that almost got her killed.”
Clint then squinted a bit at the ceiling thoughtfully, giving the Captain time to regain his composure a little. Then the archer airily concluded, “Well... Maybe she likes that both halves of Banner recognize her as not a threat. Might be helping her with some of the resulting trust issues leftover from that.” He met Steve’s gaze and very determinedly offered a winning smile.

“You did that on purpose.”

Clint shot him a wink. “Figured you might be interested. How’s that search going with Wilson on the trail then?”

“It’s going. I’ve been waiting to catch him making rounds here, but got a bit distracted by Asgardians making wagers about my invulnerability to alcohol.” He looked around himself, and caught sight of Wilson laughing along with several others at a story Rhodey had just told them. “You enjoy avoiding people, but if you don’t throw anything else at Loki, I’ll try and pickpocket the other drumstick off him.”

“Captain America has pickpocketing skills?”

Steve shrugged. “Before the serum, I had to get my wallet back from bullies somehow, and I was more forgettable-looking, in those days, so it worked better than trying to fight them.”

“Be still my beating heart! Ladies and gents, the man is just that wholesome,” Clint crooned up at him as he passed. Then he snorted, and made a bit of a face as he looked down in time to see Loki settling in the spot Steve has just left, holding up the drumstick in question.

“I overheard, and decided to cut out the middle-man,” said the god, tossing it back to Clint lightly.

The archer caught it, but continued frowning. “You looking to apologize or something?”

“You wouldn’t believe me if I did, I suspect.”

“Well, you’re not exactly repentant about it.”

“Would you have preferred I leave you behind and take with me others to fill your same position,
knowing they might not have recovered so well as you have?"

“Bit of a shitty option. I’d sort of prefer you hadn’t been bulletproof and got taken down before you could walk out with the tesseract.”

“I’d have preferred to escape Thanos without requiring the tesseract to trick him into believing I was on his side.”

Clint clicked his tongue. “I can’t actually argue that one.”

“For what it’s worth, I also would prefer not to have spread the psychic disease that scepter uses. Had I been in my own right mind instead of selectively blindered by Thanos’ influence, I might have realized before today that breaking the scepter open might have been a much more efficient means by which to free myself. As it was, those memories and others I was blindered throughout, are now riddled with burn-holes, and hindsight is a bitch.”

“You get that phrase from Stark or your colorful new ‘therapist’?”

“Thor’s friend Darcy Lewis, actually.”

“Haven’t met her.”

“Nor have I. I only know of her through occasional bizarre anecdotes. She is single-handedly responsible for Thor’s knowledge of Facebook.”

Clint shuddered. “I’d wondered who to blame for that.”

~~

The party wound down into something of a pleasant blur, for Loki, after another shot or two from Thor’s bottomless flask (he had made his brother admit, at least once, that it was Loki’s own magic long ago which gave it that convenient quirk) in his drinks, and he found himself back on one of the couches, this time the one across from Clint, with Tony pressed against his side until it came time for the boasting and scientific inquiries about Mjolnir to inevitably become a series of vain attempts by
others to lift the hammer. Clint failed, after which the god of lies told him they now had something in common, which made the archer seriously consider flinging another drumstick at him, but he refrained.

Loki managed not to laugh too hard when both Rhodey and Tony both failed, even with gauntlets.

“Quite alright, darling,” Loki assured his lover once Tony returned to the couch. “My therapist has a personal theory that if he touches it, it would fall through the floor to escape him.”

Tony snorted a laugh at that, then joined the others into cajoling Steve to try.

Loki’s highlight of the whole party, he decided, was that split-second expression of horror in Thor’s expression when Mjolnir seemed to budge for a second, before finally deciding to remain motionless for the time being. Thor and his brother made eye contact, at which point the trickster’s merciless grin caused the older god to glare at him. Tony could feel his lover retaining laughter, his sides shaking with it, and arched an eyebrow Thor’s way knowingly, too, but didn’t say a word, content to let Steve assure the others he was just as human as them, in this regard, or something.

Bruce then gestured toward Natasha.

She looked surprised, then barely containing laughter. “Oh no, that’s not a question I need answered.”

“So,” Tony suggested, “I suspect it’s more like ‘whosoever carries Thor’s fingerprints’ is actually the inscription, there?”

“I’ve a much more obvious explanation. You’re all not worthy,” Thor joked, picking the hammer up with cocksure ease, as the others began to laugh it off.

Then Loki was the first to wince, followed by the others as a high-frequency, painfully wrenching series of sounds suddenly filled the room for a few disconcerting seconds. When it ended, there was a leaden-sounding thump of approaching, too-heavy footfalls from the center of the building, heading toward them.

Loki waited for JARVIS to explain the glitch, or the source of the sound. But after enough murmur has risen around him amongst the others, the god got a familiar, horrible sinking feeling in his chest.
Realizing, several seconds later, that he couldn’t sense the AI’s presence in the building any longer, it turned into a sensation of freefall. *All downhill from here.*

End Notes

If anyone is confused about the character of Jesse: I made him up for convenience.

EDIT: So sorry to any of those who noticed the error when I forgot to mark that this work is going to have multiple-chapters. The end is not actually nigh... for this story.

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