Life is Never Gentle.
by Cip

Summary

No-one ever said life was kind or gentle and Tony is about to find out the hard way just how difficult it can be. And this time he can't call on the Avenger's for help and can't tell Pepper the truth - he has to do this alone, and that thought is terrifying. FrostIron, warnings inside.
Brought across from FF.net since everyone seems to be leaving that site :( Sequel to A Monumentally Stupid Idea but can be easily read as standalone.

Notes

This is brought in from FF.Net, so if you think it looks familiar, that's where you'll have seen it :) Everyone kept telling me to move to this site, so I'm now posting both there and here.

There are no warnings for this chapter beyond hot sex between two insanely hot men. The rest of the story will have warnings on a chapter by chapter basis.
Chapter 1

Tony could practically feel the cameras watching him.

Pepper had been a superstar beyond all words and a heartless tyrant at the same time. She had sworn not to tell a soul and whilst staying true to her word – as Tony always knew she would – it had been on the proviso that whatever had been going on between the genius and Norse God stopped.

Done.

Over.

Finito.

Tony hadn’t argued with her.

After all, what was there to stop? Casual sex between two people who otherwise couldn’t stand each other, not really much to lose, was there?

Pepper knew him too well. Far too well. To the extent that she didn’t trust his word on this matter in the least. Loki had become a drug, slipping in under his skin and making him desperate for the next hit. He couldn’t stand the guy, and yet missed him already. It was endlessly frustrating to not have another person around who could keep up with both his frustratingly quick mind, but also his glib, sarcastic view on life. Bruce was a good person to bounce ideas off of, but pestering him with banter was a seriously bad idea.

And of course he missed how good they were together. Loki was quite easily the best lay he’d ever had – regardless of the fact that they hated each other and tried to kill one another when in any other situation.

But no. Pepper had told him – in the coldest most emotionless voice he’d ever heard – that whatever it was that had been going on, it was over. And because she didn’t trust him in the slightest when it came to his sex-drive there were now cameras in every room of the tower. Obviously she didn’t man them herself, but she’d put JARVIS onto the job and the AI had seemed to relish in its new role as Big Brother. Tony couldn’t so much as go take a piss without the inquisitive robot checking where he was. Thank God Pepper had at least not put a camera in his bathroom! That would have been the last straw.

So this left him bored, somewhat lonely and very much sexually frustrated. Not the best frame of mind for Tony to be in.

His best and easiest way of dealing with the irritation of being monitored like an animal was to hole up in his lab and work on more suit modifications. To be perfectly honest there was very little else he could really add to it or improve, but at the same time he was going stir crazy and needed the focus.

It was as he was attempting to fine-tune a thruster in his right boot that a sudden tiny sound caught his attention.

A sheet of paper next to him had moved slightly and when he stared at it suspiciously it rustled
again, as if to hold his attention.

Poltergeist activity?

Then writing began scrawling across the blank surface. The script was angular and actually reminded Tony of the way someone would use the Western characters when they were more used to using an Asian alphabet. Or a runic alphabet…

A smile began to crawl across his face as he surreptitiously read it.

*It appears that you are under house arrest, Stark.*

Tony snorted with laughter, then tried to quiet himself, well aware that the cameras had microphones and not wanting to alert JARVIS that anything was amiss. He casually scribbled on the notepad infront of him:

*Yeah, Pepper hasn’t told the others though. Are you invisible or projecting your magic?*

He fiddled with a loose wire whilst the reply was written, but had entirely lost interest in his project with the prospect of an interesting conversation.

*Ever the scientist. Yes, I’m invisible.*

Tony couldn’t help the fact that he almost jumped out of his skin as an unseen hand suddenly slipped into the back pocket of his jeans. There was a firm squeeze to his buttock and he smirked. However, as amusing as it was to pull the wool over JARVIS’ eyes it suddenly occurred to him that as well as visual, the AI also monitored heat signatures in the room – Pepper wasn’t stupid and knew what her boss was capable of. It did raise a few questions.

*How aren’t you setting of my heat signature alarms?*

There was an almost silent chuckle by his ear that he only just heard before the reply appeared infront of him:

*I am a God, Stark. Just assume that I researched the security measures that had been put in place and acted accordingly. If I can fool a human I can most certainly fool a machine.*

Tony snorted silently.

*You are full of yourself, God.*

The hand in his pocket squeezed again and he felt the heat go straight to his groin. Dear Lord was he some sort of horny teenager, desperate for sex no matter the partner? *That* didn’t bear thinking about.

Still, if the God was here then there was no power on earth to stop him from satisfying his incessant sexual frustration. He said as much too.

*My robot watches everywhere apart from my bathroom.*

*Is that really all you think about?*

Tony shrugged slightly.

*I haven’t got anything better to do right now and it’s the only room in the house where I’m not under surveillance.*
I can see the possibilities here.

Great minds. Put your hand on my shoulder and follow me. Stick close, some of the automatic doors close pretty quickly. Tony winked at the space where he presumed the God was standing. That is, if you want to get laid?

There was that silent chuckle that he could never-the-less hear again. Why else would I be here?

Well, that was a good point. Tony figured that the God had agreed when he felt the hand move from his pocket, trail teasingly up his back and stop to rest on his shoulder. The evening was looking brighter already!

It wasn’t too difficult to make his way through the many corridors of his tower, towing the invisible Norse God behind. Loki obviously understood the concept of electric doors, since Tony could hear the tiny rustle of cloth as his shadow nipped through each one just before they slid shut again.

It was certainly more than Thor knew about modern technology.

They reached the familiar door to Tony’s room where, up until their foolhardy venture in the living room, most of their encounters had taken place.

“JARVIS, I’m taking a shower, keep your nose out.” Tony announced loudly to the ceiling.

“Yes sir.”

The bathroom door slid open silently and the inventor sauntered in, now smug beyond all reason that he’d snuck the God in entirely undetected. “And JARVIS? Microphones off please, I don’t think Pepper will want recordings of my singing.”

“Of course, sir.”

Tony shut the door, chuckling triumphantly. He turned and folded his arms expectantly, one eyebrow raised as he waited for his companion to become visible. “Well? Where are you then, goat-horns?”

“Not where you’re looking.”

The human jumped as the voice came from behind him and was accompanied by an invisible arm snaking round him to run down his chest. He turned but the contact immediately vanished and he reached out only to grasp thin air.

“Hey, seriously, this is your plan for this evening?”

“What’s wrong, Stark? You like upping the levels of fun, don’t you?”

There was a noticeable thrill through his body at the sound of the God’s voice. Now that was sad! He had a Pavlovian response to Loki’s voice! The God spoke, and his body was immediately assuming that sex would follow. This would make battles very awkward!!!

“Fun, yes. Then again, seeing you is part of the fun.”

“That sounded dangerously like sentiment.”

Tony grimaced. “Yeah, it did, didn’t it?” He wrinkled his nose in distaste. “It wasn’t meant to, sorry.”
He heard the soft huff of laughter from behind, and spun around to once again meet empty air. A smirk began to form on his face and he folded his arms; if Loki was intending to remain invisible for the entire encounter then this could take a while.

“How about we skip the whole you acting coy thing?” He suggested mockingly. “I want sex. You want sex. Hey! Let’s have sex!”

A hand was on his chest again. From the angle he guessed that Loki was now standing in front of him and as he leaned forward to try and grab hold of the God again he was met with a mouth crashing against his own. His chuckle in response was muffled as he stumbled back a few paces until the marble counter-top surrounding the sink was pressing against the backs of his thighs.

“We’re gonna have to keep this quick.” Tony managed to break the contact long enough to get the sentence out. “JARVIS’ll get suspicious otherwise.”

“You’re robot is very reminiscent of 1984.” Loki murmured back, his invisible lips ghosting over Stark’s as he spoke.

The inventor snorted. “You’ve read George Orwell?”

The contact on his mouth vanished and from the feel of the trickster’s body in his hands he could tell that Loki had leant back slightly. “Stark, I am older than the human race. How would you propose I spend my time?” He asked with a chuckle. “Reading is a pleasant hobby.”

The thought of the infamous God of mischief – the same one who had almost succeeded in destroying New York city – curling up in a comfy chair with a good book made Tony snigger and he received a slap round the back of the head for it.

“Ow!”

“You are insufferable, Tony Stark!”

“And yet you suffer me.” Tony grinned lazily, although not entirely sure he was grinning in the right direction. “And that is possibly the first time you’ve called me by my first name.”

“Indeed, but only when suffixed with your patronymic in the form of an admonishment.” Loki’s invisible hand ran through Tony’s hair, pulling the human back into another harsh kiss. The genius made a muffled sound of protest as the God’s teeth sank into his lip again.

“Ow! Damnit! What is it with you and biting me?!” Tony pulled away to wipe the back of his hand across his mouth.

“Don’t be a drama queen, Stark, you have suffered far worse.” Loki chuckled darkly.

“Yeah, but involuntarily. And are you going to get rid of the invisibility cloak any time soon?”

Tony felt the pressure of Loki’s body pressing against his own disappear as the God stepped away from him with a theatrical sigh. For a long moment nothing happened and he presumed that a spell was being woven, before the air in front of him shimmered and the taller man came into focus.

He’d forgone the elaborate Asgardian clothing this time and seemed much more relaxed in khaki patterned cargoes and a plain white shirt. Tony raised an eyebrow, raking his gaze up and down the other’s body until Loki began to look distinctly annoyed.

“I am not here as a fashion model, Stark.”
“Humour me, I haven’t seen you in normal clothing before other than a couple of crappy photos from Germany, and I’m liking the view.” Tony smirked. “And you’re back to using my last name, Laufeyson?”

Loki stepped up to the human again, hands still by his side but so close that his breath was whispering over Tony’s lips. “We are still enemies, Stark. To use your given name would be to accord you some measure of familiarity. And it is not Laufeyson, but Laufeyjarsson.”

Tony moved his hands up to rest on the God’s hips, tilting his head to nip at the taller man’s neck. “Not what Thor told us.” He smirked against the skin as he felt Loki shudder at the touch.

“Thor is an imbecile. Laufey was my mother, not my father.” The Asgardian’s voice tightened as his partner’s mouth found the hollow in his neck and teased the sensitive area.

“Either way.” To be honest, Tony didn’t give a damn. Father, mother, monkey’s uncle, Loki’s genealogy was of no interest to him whatsoever. What was of interest was the way the God was beginning to move against him, finally giving in and placing his hands against Tony’s chest.

The deep kiss was more frantic than usual – although neither were ever known for being gentle with each other. Tony fisted his hands in his partner’s immaculately ironed shirt, leaning back against the sink again and pulling Loki into him.

“I want you.” He growled.

“I believe it’s my turn to top.” The God’s hands had migrated to Tony’s hair, tightly curled in the short strands. He broke away from the human’s mouth to stare contemplatively at him. “But…I might be amenable to your demands.”

Tony snorted. “You mean you want a good fucking.” The grip on his hair tightened painfully and he grabbed Loki’s wrist, trying to remove the God’s hands as one wrapped around his neck. “Ow! Ow ow ow! Okay, I’m sorry!”

The trickster grinned ferally. “I don’t believe you are, but no matter.” Keeping Tony’s head at an awkward angle he leant in and ran his tongue up along the inventor’s jawline. “I’ll make sure to take my due at a later date. You may have me today.”

“…Grand. Could you possibly let go of my throat?”

Loki dipped his head in a mocking bow, releasing Tony entirely. The genius rubbed his neck and smirked. “I’ve missed being assaulted as part of foreplay.” Now that Loki had conceded the upper hand to him once again he placed his palm flat against the God’s chest, feeling the buttons press indentations into his skin as he applied pressure and forced his partner to back up against the wall. Pinning the God in place with his own body he then leant around him into the shower to turn the water on.

“What are you doing?” Loki watched the sudden burst of steam for a moment, before turning curiously back to his partner.

Tony shrugged. “I told JARVIS I was taking a shower, ergo he’ll be expecting the hot water tank to be in use and will get suspicious if it isn’t.” He grinned wryly and shook his head. “Sometimes I hate myself for making such a conscientious AI.”

“Well…” The trickster’s voice dropped to a low purr. “We could always make use of the water…”

The two men both looked to the running shower, then glanced back at each other. Loki grinned and
Tony began to chuckle.

“It would certainly be different.” The inventor conceded. He raised an eyebrow invitingly. “I’m game. You?”

“Warm water is known to be relaxing, perhaps even to the detriment of sexual activity.” The mocking tone to the God’s voice was all too clear as he looked the human up and down mischievously.

“Oi! Don’t like the insinuations here! Have I ever failed to perform?!” Tony jutted his lower lip out in a mock pout. “As far as I remember you are the one with performance issues.”

“And it’s comments like that that lead me to throw you out of windows.”

The genius held his hands up in surrender, chuckling. “Yeah, touché.” He tilted his head in the direction of his shower. “Shall we? Otherwise this conversation is heading into the dangerous grounds of flirtation and I’m sure I’m not meant to flirt with S.H.I.E.L.D’s number one Most Wanted.”

“You aren’t meant to sleep with him either.”

“Again; touché.” Tony stepped away, allowing the God a small amount of personal space as he wriggled his own T-shirt over his head. He glanced up over the piece of material to see Loki staring at him hungrily. “Well? Quicker you strip, quicker we’re in there and having fun.”

Loki laughed at the crude phraseology but began to unbutton his shirt. He was enough of a stickler for dressing to impress that it was a well-tailored piece of clothing and still brand new. Which meant that it was still starched and difficult to force the buttons through the holes with any great speed. It didn’t take long for him to get fed up and give in to the urge to just click his fingers and remove the clothing from both himself and Stark with magic.

Tony, having been halfway through divesting himself of his trousers yelped, over-balanced and almost fell. However, Loki’s hand had fastened around the mortal’s wrist, saving him from the embarrassing tumble.

“My, my, Stark. Aren’t you graceful?”

“Son of a bitch! Warn me next time!” Tony glanced to the counter by the sink and was relieved to see his clothing safe in a neat pile there. He didn’t give much of a damn about the $500 Levi’s, but the shabby 1980’s Iron Maiden shirt was one of his favourites – which never stopped him from wearing it in the lab, but he’d prefer not to lose it into some alternate dimension.

Assured that the precious item of clothing was safe he turned his attention back to the naked trickster who was now pulling him under the warm water. Having designed the bathroom – as well as the rest of the tower – to his very specific personal whims, the shower was large enough to hold at least four people – and had, as Tony mused happily – so there was easily enough room for whatever the two men were intending.

Loki’s back hit the tiled wall, pushed up against it by the shorter mortal. His hands threaded through Stark’s short hair, allowing his mouth to be captured again into a bruising kiss. It didn’t take long for teeth to get involved, and soon enough Loki’s lip was bleeding, the sharp spike of pain making him chuckle. The two had never once kissed just for the sake of kissing. Each time was a power play, a fight for dominance or – in this case – the statement of who was in charge. Sometimes Loki would submit then fight anyway and sometimes he would let Tony completely
control him. This seemed to be winding up into the latter. There really is something thrilling to letting someone order you around when you yourself are all powerful.

Tony sniggered as he felt the God go pliant under his hands; whilst it was always exhilarating when they battled each other for the upper hand he did enjoy it so to have the trickster at his mercy. He could feel Loki’s arousal – half hard already – pressed against this thigh, made slick with the warm water cascading over them both. He tangled his hands in the trickster’s drenched hair, tipping the taller man’s head back at an angle so that he could bite at the long throat presented to him.

The action drew a groan from Loki and he lifted one leg up to hook around Tony’s waist so that their chests were pressed together. He could feel Ironman’s heartbeat drumming through the arc-reactor, the small machine cool against his hot skin and compared to the steamy atmosphere.

“Are you intending to merely play with me, Stark?” He hissed.

“Hmm?” Tony had sunk his teeth into the nerve running up the God’s neck, and he let go reluctantly. “Play? Why yes, I was. Problem with that?”

Loki growled. “Yes, actually.” He tugged on the human’s hair hard enough to elicit a gasp of pain. “I said you could take me, not toy with me.”

“Oh but I know you love to be toyed with.” Tony smirked, leaning back enough to make eye contact. “At least humour me; it’ll be well worth your while.” To emphasise this he reached down and stroked one finger along his partner’s erection, feeling the pulse in the thick vein that ran along the underside of it before wrapping his hand around and squeezing. He smirked as the God gasped silently, but the victory was short lived as vicious green eyes met his own.

The glare was enough to remind him that Loki only allowed him the upper hand when he kept the pace moving.

“Stark…”

The warning snarl in the God’s voice was enough for Tony to relinquish his hold with a frustrated sigh. “Oh, fine. Have it your way!”

“I usually do.” Loki cupped his hand around Tony’s cheek and leant in so that his breath whispered across the inventor’s lips, the single soft word barely heard over the drumming water. “Kneel.”

Tony would swear before any God that could be named that he actually felt his knees go weak. The breathy command had just the right amount of threat in it and as much as he knew he was coming out of this encounter on top – hey, Loki had said he could – he was not adverse in the least to being ordered around beforehand. He dropped gracefully to his knees with a wicked smirk.

“And what would my liege ask of me from this position?” It wasn’t hard to use that ridiculously formal language really. Tony had spent more than enough time around both Thor and Loki to be able to repeat their own way of speaking back to the Norse God. His attempt at the British accent failed miserably though, and was probably the reason for Loki’s stern expression to break into a grin. They both knew damn well what was expected of one in such a position, but Tony was going to make the bastard say it at least.

“You know what I want, Stark.” Usually Loki would have lifted one foot up to rest on Tony’s shoulder, but with the water slicking their skin it was probably not a good idea to risk slipping and falling over. Instead he made do with bending his leg at the knee so that he could rest his shin on the shorter man’s shoulder. The position meant that not only could Tony still do everything the Trickster wanted him to do, it was also a little safer and was less likely to end up in an
embarrassing tumble.

“I want to hear you say it.” Tony lent forwards a little so that he could brush his nose against the tip of Loki’s erection. He grinned as the God’s breath hitched – barely heard over the noise of the water. “I want to hear you tell me exactly what you want me to do down here.”

Loki closed his eyes, head tilting back to rest against the shower wall as the mortal’s hot breath ghosted over him. “I want your mouth on me.”

He didn’t see the grin on Tony’s face. The inventor was fully going to take everything his partner said literally until he drove the God mad. Leaning forwards he wrapped his lips around the head of Loki’s erection, tongue probing the small slit. And then promptly stopped there.

“Stark! Seriously?” The God’s fingers twisted painfully in Tony’s hair. The mortal’s hot mouth was excruciating and his answering hum to the snapped statement sent vibrations through the trickster that made him groan.

Tony pulled away with a wet plop. “What? I’m doing exactly what you told me to do.” He reached up and flicked his finger against his partner’s erection. “If you want more you’re gonna have to tell me. Explicitly.” He knew his words had hit the mark when Loki’s hand on his hair moved to grip the back of his neck, drawing him forwards again.

“…Damn you, Stark!”

“Coming from a God, that means a lot.” Tony couldn’t resist flicking his tongue out to tease the tip of Loki’s erection again, but didn’t proceed any further. Instead he glanced up at his partner with a smugly raised eyebrow. Well then?

“You are incorrigible.” Loki’s fingers traced the curve of Stark’s jaw, running through the soft hair of his goatee. It was an almost-gentle touch, perhaps even going as far as to say sensual. “Fine.” His voice dropped to a seductive murmur, barely heard over the running water. “I want you to use your mouth to make me undone. I want to feel the heat of you around every inch of me, tongue, mouth, teeth, throat, I want you to use them all.” He brushed his thumb over Tony’s lips as the man smirked up at him. “Think you can handle that?” His tone of voice made it sound like a threat and that was just all the more delicious. It wasn’t for nothing that Loki had earned the name Silvertongue.

Tony’s only reply was to do as he was told. To the very best of his ability.

And what an ability.

These were skills he’d perfected over a great many years and was more than happy to show-case the lot of them in each and every performance. It was an added bonus that he and Loki had enjoyed enough trysts for him to know every exquisite little trick to turn the God to putty in his hands.

The low groan told him that he was doing a good job.

Loki let his head fall back against the wet tiled wall with a thunk. Heat was pooling in his stomach, spiralling up from where his erection disappeared into that sinful mouth. His nails raked five thin lines across Tony’s shoulder, the water washing away the blood that welled up. It must have stung but the human gave no reaction, save to increase the suction.

It was taking all of the God’s will power to keep reasonably quiet, but when he suddenly felt a wet thumb breach his body it drew a loud cry from him.
“Ah! Stark!”

The human gave a muffled laugh that caused Loki to arch away from the wall, gripping his partner’s hair hard enough to pull some strands free.

“Desist…ah! Desist messing around…and get on with it!”

Tony pulled away again. “You sure?” He twisted his thumb, grinning as Loki moaned loudly. “I’m rather enjoying myself down here.”

“Stark…!” The warning snarl told Ironman that he should probably do as he was told if he didn’t want to be introduced to a window at terminal velocity again. He sighed, but pulled away so that he could stand up.

Once again it was in their favour that Loki was the taller of the two of them as he was pushed up firmly against the tiles, hooking a leg around Tony’s waist. The human didn’t bother with checking that his partner was ready or not – other than not wanting to be disintegrated he had little other reason to really care for Loki’s well-being. Instead he gripped both the God’s thighs, lifting the taller man just enough to position himself at Loki’s entrance. The rudimentary preparation probably wasn’t entirely adequate, but Tony didn’t give a damn and simply thrust up.

Loki snarled, digging his fingers into his partner’s shoulders and thumping his head back into the wall again – he was probably going to have a large lump there by the end of the encounter. This gave Tony access to lean forward and sink his teeth into the God’s pale throat, his hips snapping forwards. He felt sharp pain bloom across his shoulders and assumed that Loki’s nails had broken the skin there. He couldn’t care less.

“Stark…” The impatient groan was accompanied by a heel digging into the small of Tony’s back and the human began thrusting up into the tight heat. He shifted his grip a little on Loki’s thighs to attain a better angle and the trickster wrapped both legs around his waist so that Tony had to press him quite firmly into the wall to hold him up. He then realised that this actually made it easier for him to bury himself into the willing body in his arms, which he did with relish.

It was fast, frantic and entirely unrefined.

Nothing they ever did together was gentle, nothing was ever tender and their coupling would have looked like warfare to anyone observing. The bathroom had filled with heat and steam and the groans of the two men. Loki had pressed his head into Tony’s shoulder, the position they were in not allowing him any freedom of movement so that all he could really do was hold on for the ride.

He felt Ironman’s teeth digging into the side of his neck again and rolled his head to the side to allow better access, a deep moan spilling from his mouth. He was unable to reach between their bodies to grip his aching erection, but they were pressed so close together that he was getting the needed friction regardless. Maybe in another situation the God would have given more thought to how undignified it was to be fucked against a wall by a human, moaning like a whore. Yet he couldn’t bring himself to care.

Maybe it was just another sign of how much his mind had broken, how far he had slipped from the thin line of sanity he’d once balanced on. Or maybe he had finally admitted to himself that Stark was the best partner he’d ever found. After all; if you want hard, uncaring sex who better to have it with than someone who actively hates you?

Of course, these thoughts weren’t quite as coherent as all that and were widely interspersed with his harsh gasps and profanities.
Tony had noticed before how vocal his otherworldly partner could be and this time was no exception. He was glad that the bathroom was sound-proof – for this very reason – as the God’s voice rose, Tony’s own grunts joining the growing noise. He could feel the familiar heat growing in his belly and growled into Loki’s neck, gripping the pale thighs in his hands tightly enough to bruise. He thrust into the warm body with more desperation, the water washing away the sweat beading on his skin. Loki was hissing his name – well, his surname anyway – over and over like a mantra and Tony hated how it raised his pulse to hear it.

He reached his peak far sooner than he expected, and was taken so fully by surprise that it pulled a strangled yelp from him. He felt Loki gripping him desperately as his hips shuddered to a halt and he buried his head in the trickster’s shoulder until the stars faded from his vision.

“Stark…”

The desperate whine brought Tony down from his high enough to realise that there was still a firm hardness pressed against his stomach. Once he had regained enough brain function to move he managed to persuade the God to stand up and allowed his shaking legs to give way as he dropped down to his knees again.

Loki growled low in his throat as the inventor’s mouth closed around his aching hardness and he gripped the man’s hair tightly. He was close as it was and was already overly aware of Stark’s prowess in the blow-job department; Tony knew just when to take the initiative and when to remain still and let the God simply plunder his mouth. It didn’t take long for the overwhelming rush of pleasure to surge through Loki as he released down his partner’s throat with a high moan.

“Ohhhhh.”

Tony sat back on his heels, head now cleared a little from his own orgasm as Loki slid down the wall to sit infront of him. The trickster’s eyes were closed, his mouth open and a flush painting his cheeks that made the inventor wish for a camera. Oh for a picture of a debauched God…

“I hope we aren’t going to be interrupted by Miss Potts this time.” Loki’s voice was quiet, a smile on his face as he opened his eyes to meet Tony’s gaze. His pupils were still blown wide and there was a hazy glaze to them that proved just how sated he was.

“Oh, I don’t think so.” Stark moved a little so that he could lean back against the wall opposite the trickster, slouched back so the water could wash him clean.

“Good. I don’t feel like moving.”

“Mmm, me neither.” Tony stretched his leg out to bush his toes along Loki’s thigh. The God cast a lazy glare at the encroaching limb, but seemed disinclined to do anything about it. “So.”

“So?”

“So. Here’s me, you, post-coital bliss, not trying to kill each other. Can I ask a question?”

Loki sighed heavily but nodded. “I feel that I would be unable to stop you.” He ran his hand over Tony’s foot as it brushed insistently against him. “What do you wish to know?”

The grin that languidly spread across Tony’s face spelt trouble. “This will entirely ruin the mood, you know.”

“There is no mood. We hate each other.” The tricksters hand was now massaging the inventor’s instep, causing Tony to moan softly.
“Hmm, very true. Absolutely loath each other.”

“Indeed.” Loki grinned lazily. "Your question?"

Tony cocked his head to one side, his eyes gleaming wickedly. “What’s the largest number of people you’ve directly killed in one go?”

The trickster raised an eyebrow. “Are you sure you wish to know?”

“I’m trying to see if it meets my ‘Merchant of Death’ days. And only humans; Jotun’s don’t count.”

Loki huffed slightly in laughter before raising his gaze up to the shower head that was still pouring warm water over the both of them. He seemed to contemplate the question for a few moments before saying: “Well, I once shot an Archduke called Franz Ferdinand…?”

Tony started, sitting bolt upright. “What? That was you?! He stared at the trickster in shock. “You started a world war?!”

“Oh it would have happened anyway, I just sped things up a little.” Loki’s grin became mischievous. “The war was always going to occur, with the way things were going. So in fairness, although I like to count that in my hit-list it’s a bit of a cheat since I merely made it all happen a little earlier than otherwise planned.” He realised that the genius was still staring at him and rolled his eyes. “For Valhalla’s sake, Stark; you did ask.”

“Yeah…Yeah I guess I did.” Tony shook his head as if trying to erase the past few seconds of conversation. “So, um, if you don’t really count that then dare I ask…”

The God shrugged. “Directly, the most I’ve ever killed at the same time was roughly 1500. Give or take.”

“That’s…quite a few. I’m sure I don’t want to know, but my curiosity will be the death of me. How…?”

“They said the ship was unsinkable. It wasn’t.”

Tony stared at the trickster for a very long time. Loki was leaning back against the wall so nonchalantly that it was almost impossible to believe what he was saying. Or it would have been if he were anyone other than the God of Mischief. The inventor wasn’t even sure how to react to the news that his companion had sunk the Titanic and started World War One.

So he laughed.

It started off as a small snort, but quickly escalated into a full peal of heartfelt laughter that left Loki staring at him in bemusement.

“Stark, what in Odin’s name…?”

“I can’t believe I keep on fucking the guy that not only tried to take over my planet and threw me out a window, but also it transpires started wars and sunk famous ships.”

The trickster smirked slightly at that. He could see the human’s point. “If it’s any consolation I have also aided a great number of people in battle.”

“Like hell.”

Loki folded his arms across his chest with a raised eyebrow. “How do you think Henry the Fifth
managed to win Agincourt against such huge odds? The English hadn’t had a prayer.” He tapped a finger against his lips in thought. “And I gave the army of Wessex a helping hand when Alfred the Great reclaimed his kingdom from the Danes.”

Tony frowned at that. “I thought the Danes worshiped you.”

“They did. But that didn’t stop them from invoking the name of my oh-so-glorious brother to aid them before combat.”

“So out of spite you backed the opposite army and changed the course of British history for ever?”

The God grinned. “Why Stark, it’s like you hardly know me at all.”

Tony laughed and poked his partner’s thigh with his toes again. “I can’t believe I let you anywhere near me.”

“I have heard it said that you have self-destructive tendencies.”

“That’s one explanation.”

Loki smiled and for once it seemed a little more genuine and a little less like he was plotting how to kill Tony in inventive ways. “I need to depart, there are things I need to do and your computer will begin wondering why your shower has taken so long.”

It was a good point and Tony also had things he should probably get back to rather than sit in the shower naked with an equally naked God of mischief. Just none that he could bring to mind right now. He nodded in agreement though, since JARVIS probably would be getting suspicious.

“Will you be turning up again anytime soon?” The human tried for nonchalance, but it came out more as hopeful.

“Maybe. If I feel like it.” Loki shifted so that he was kneeling. “I’ll see you around, Stark.” He reached out and cupped his partner’s cheek, drawing the inventor in close. Tony closed his eyes, expecting a kiss, but as he felt warm breath across his lips the trickster suddenly vanished, leaving only a ripple of laughter in the air.

Stark lent back against the shower wall with a groan. “God I hate that guy!”
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

I intended to write plot. Instead this happened. Plot shall happen next chapter :D
Enjoy!!

Life as an Avenger wasn’t easy. Tony could have guessed that already, but it had really been driven home after a full day of trying to save a leaking oil tanker. Quite why that had been a reason to call out him, Thor and Steve he wasn’t sure, but Fury had many fingers in many pies and Tony’s suspicion was that the cargo was headed to SHEILD. Or maybe they were trying to give the Avengers an environmentally friendly look. Either way, Tony had welded the hole shut whilst the other two saved seals, or whatever the oil-covered animals had been and they had towed the tanker into port.

Well, Save the Planet were now their BFF’s, but after eight hours covered in thick, gunky petrol Tony had a thumping headache and a foul mood. He had stormed straight back to the tower and let the machines pretty much rip his suit off.

“Sir, your blood pressure is very high.” JARVIS’ voice informed him as he stalked into his bedroom. “I would use the term dangerous, but you have warned me before about qualifying my medical opinions.”

“Yes, I have.” The man moodily stripped down to his underwear and left his clothes in a stinking pile near the laundry bin. It was wishful thinking that it would be possible to clean them, but he’d double check with Pepper at some point anyway.

“I’m going to have a shower JARV, no peeking, I think I need some me time.”

“As you wish, sir. You know that makes you go blind, sir?”

Tony rolled his eyes. “Cute, JARV, real cute.” He grabbed the towel by the bathroom door, slung it over one shoulder and slammed the door shut behind himself.

Once alone inside he lent against the marble countertop with a heavy sigh. He’d been too pissed off with being covered in crude oil derivatives to care about getting a painkiller for his headache when he’d arrived, but now that the stress was leaving him he began to wish he hadn’t made that decision. It was far too much effort to go back into the kitchen to get the pills but God his head hurt. Dehydration and the thick cloying chemical smell of petrol were probably the cause of the pain, but he didn’t care for reasons.

“Ooh, looks like someone had a bad day.” The malice made the soft voice anything but sympathetic yet Tony still found that his grimace morphed into a pained smile.

“Well look who decided he couldn’t stay away.” He countered, raising his gaze to meet vicious green eyes in the mirror infront of him. Warm hands slipped round his naked waist to clasp across his stomach. Were it anyone other than Loki, Tony would have called the action a hug. “You know I’m in no mood for sex, right?”
“That’s not my problem, Stark.”

“I have a headache.”

“Woman.” To Tony’s surprise a sudden soft kiss was pressed against his temple. For a long moment he couldn’t fathom why Loki would make such a tender gesture, until the pain in his head suddenly began to recede and a wry grin crossed his face.

“Oh I see, remove the headache and you think I’ll sleep with you?”

“I think you don’t have too much of a choice, whether I take the pain away or not.”

That made the man turn around in the God’s grasp to face him head-on. “Really.” He said flatly.

“Oh, that’s nice.”

“Indeed.” Loki grinned, his eyes gleaming with a malicious intent that Tony really didn’t like the look of.

“You know, I’m really not feeling the mood here, goat-horns. I prefer to have a little consent in who fucks me.”

“Do you now.”

“I’m starting to think I wasn’t the only one to have bad day at the office.”

“Perhaps you weren’t.” Loki’s hand trailed up Stark’s naked chest, long fingers teasing across his skin until he curled them lightly around the human’s throat. There was a moment when it seemed that he would squeeze, but then he laughed and patted Tony’s cheek. “I like seeing that fear in your eyes, Stark. But I’ll admit that seeing them filled with lust is more appealing.”

“The lust usually appears after you stop insinuating raping me.”

An expression of mock disbelief flitted across Loki’s face. “What, you don’t trust me? You wound me, Stark.” He pressed in close, dipping his head to rest his cheek against Tony’s forehead, hand moving up to twine in the man’s hair. “I have grown accustomed to your presence; I’m not going to harm you without good reason.”

“Is that your Asgardian way of saying you’re getting attached to me?”

“Hardly. You’re just better in bed than anyone else I would care to have.”

“Considering you have a friendship circle consisting of God’s and creatures from myth and legend I feel rather flattered.” Tony finally let his stern expression morph into a grin. “And flattery, as we all know, will get you everywhere.” He raised an eyebrow at Loki’s sly grin. “What?”

“Will it get you as far as England?”

“England?! That’s on the other side of the Atlan – Woah!”

Tony didn’t have any time to protest as the room around him began to swiftly dim. Despite being fairly sure he hadn’t moved a muscle there was a sudden feeling of great speed and rushing air around him and the surroundings vanished entirely. Utterly helpless and absolutely fascinated at the same time, the man’s hands found Loki’s hips, clinging tighter than he would have liked to admit as they were thrown through the darkness.

The journey took mere moments, but Tony wished it had been longer – what physicist wouldn’t
fall completely in love with the sensation of teleportation after all? He promised himself to one day beg Loki to explain it all to him.

As it was the darkness faded away again, this time giving way to a vision of white and gold which drove all thoughts of physics from his mind.

“Where in God’s name are we?!”

Loki stepped away from the human, smirking as he watched Tony take in their surroundings with wide-eyes.

“You haven’t been here? I thought Stark Industries afforded you only the best.” He waved his hand at the large room they stood in. “This is the Prince Alexander Suite in Claridges, London.”

“I’ve only ever stayed in the Ritz. I think I might change that though.” Tony’s gaze took in the grand piano in the corner of the room, before alighting on the stunning view from the window. “Not that I’m complaining, but why are we here?”

“I have grown weary of sneaking around after you and confining our meetings to your shower-room. This seemed a little more refined.”

Refined was too small a word really. Tony was more than used to luxury – after all he had the money to buy all the luxury in the world – but to have it lavished upon him by someone else for no true reason was novel. Usually he was the one to splash out.

“This isn’t coming out of my pay-check, is it?”

“I have a more than adequate fund here on Midgard, certainly more than enough to buy this whole hotel should I wish.” Loki seemed to find Tony’s bemused expression amusing. “After all, money is just a stream of numbers inside a computer in this modern world of yours.”

Touché.

Tony had to admit that the suite was astonishing. Silk-lined chairs, piano, views to rival the best in the world and a square footage of nearly 200 meters. They were in the sitting room and he could see through the small corridor to a large bedroom and bathroom that both begged to be explored. Even so, something was very much praying on his mind.

“Why here?”

“Why not? I find pleasure in beauty, this place is beautiful.”

“Yeah. Not buying it. Why here?”

Loki rolled his eyes, folding his arms in an exasperated fashion. “If you must know, it reminds me of my quarters back on Asgard.”

Tony looked around at the room again. Gold, cream, a little red here and there, hardly what he’d expect from the chaotic God of mischief and lies. If asked, he would have thought Loki was more of a skulls-and-bones-on-black type of person. There was more to it than that though. This reminded the trickster of his home, a place where he was no longer welcome and was nothing more than a hopeless distant memory. This was personal and he had let the human in on it.

“You know that sounds dangerously sentimental, right?”
“It did. My apologies.” A thin smile crossed the God’s face. “Rest assured that my intentions for the next few hours are entirely unsentimental.”

“That sounds promising. Can I test the shower first?” Tony ran a hand through his filthy hair and raised an eyebrow. “I’m covered in an oil-slick.”

Loki eyed him up and down, wrinkling his nose in distaste. “Yes, you are. You have ten minutes.” His grin became feral. “Any longer and I’m going in after you whether you want me to or not.”

“And there’s the sentiment gone out the window.” Tony winked and sauntered off towards the bathroom he’d spied; seemingly uncaring that he was walking through such luxurious rooms dressed in just his boxers and the filth from the tanker.

The washroom was enormous even by Stark’s standards. All black and white marble and soft linen curtains. The sunken bath was so large and deep that he half considered calling Loki in anyway to make good use of it, but the trickster seemed to have plans so he decided to wait until later. Instead he made good use of the glass-walled shower.

Okay, at least he could be smug that his shower back home was bigger than this one, although it was still pretty decent. Warm water and complimentary soap made washing the grime off a quick task and already his mind was wandering to what Loki had in mind.

*It reminds me of my quarters in Asgard.*

Loki had taken him to a place that was reminiscent of his childhood home, a place of safety and peace. He had opened up a little, even if he hadn’t realised it. Tony rested his forehead against the warm glass with a small sigh as the weight of this hit.

What the fuck was he doing?

Here he was; in another country – without a passport by the way – having not told anyone where he was going and all at the whim of the Avenger’s number one enemy. This was wrong on pretty much every level there was and yet he couldn’t bring himself to stop it.

Really, what the *fuck* was he doing?!

And yet he knew that as much as he questioned his own motives, he would still walk out of this room and into the waiting arms of the God of lies.

And that didn’t bother him.

Turning the water off he stepped out of the shower and grabbed the nearest towel – nearly fluffy enough to rival the ones he owned personally – and quickly dried off. It was always an advantage to have short hair – it dried so easily. He deliberated on whether to put his boxers back on or not, but considering that Loki was just going to rip them straight back off he decided it wasn’t worth it.

He sauntered out into the bedroom completely at ease with the fact that he was entirely naked. He wasn’t sure what he’d been expecting, but it certainly wasn’t what he saw infront of him.

“Oh…”

Loki had also stripped himself of his clothes and had sprawled back across the bed, arms above his head, one leg bent at the knee. He was easily tall enough to spread out across the huge bed.

Tony’s mouth went dry; the God looked like a Playboy model.
“Are you just going to stare at me, Stark?”

“Well, I am enjoying this view.”

“Hmm. I’m sure you are.” Loki rolled onto his side to face the man, a sly smile playing across his face. “But I have far more entertaining things that you could be doing.”

“I remember promises of you taking me.”

“Oh, I intend to.”

Tony approached the bed, smirking as Loki shifted to allow him sit down. There was a fur throw covering the duvet – sheep, from the softness of it – and the man ran his fingers through it as he leant over and pressed a kiss to the God’s lips.

Had they kissed that gently before? Probably not, up until the point that Loki chuckled and bit down into Tony’s lip until there was a sudden burst of blood.

“Ow!” Tony pulled away just long enough for Loki to surge up under him and roll so that the man was thrown onto his back, the God straddling his hips. “You’re going to leave me with scars if you keep doing that!”

“I like the sound of that…”

“No.”

Loki merely hummed in reply, leaning down to bite at the underside of Tony’s jaw, the inventor’s wrists trapped in his hands and held against the fur. He sucked at the soft skin until a bruise that would last for days finally bloomed. “You’re mine, Stark.” There was something dangerous in his voice.

“I think someone didn’t share their toys as a child.”

Tony squirmed as the mouth left his jaw and moved along his neck, sucking along the tendon.

“I had a tendency to set traps so that Thor couldn’t go near my belongings.”

“Cute…” Sharp teeth scraped across Tony’s pulse point and entirely took his mind away from the conversation. He felt clever fingers running across his chest, circling the arc reactor in a now-familiar way and it drew a groan – not from the contact, but more from the expectation of where this was going to go. The wicked mouth ran back up to nip at his ear lobe, tongue dipping into the shell of his ear.

“Onto your knees.” The hiss sent a shiver down the man’s spine, but – and he couldn’t believe he was even entertaining the thought – he trusted Loki enough to do as he was told. The God moved off of him and allowed him to roll onto his stomach and rise up to his knees. He felt horribly exposed, and Tony knew Loki was well aware that this wasn’t his favourite position. The God’s hands ran down his arms to grip his wrists and the man lifted his head in surprise at the sound of two sharp clicks in quick succession.

“Hey!”

Handcuffs. Tony gave an ineffectual tug but his hands were firmly locked together and he watched indignantly as Loki tied a length of leather to the links of the cuffs and then secured the other end to the headboard of the bed. He didn’t need to test the knots to know that he wasn’t going to get
free without help.

“Uh... When did I agree to bondage?”

“When did I ask your opinion?” Loki’s voice was like liquid chocolate – dark and silky smooth. “You agreed I can take you, therefore I am the one deciding how this will pan out.”

“Yeah, but-”

“Trust me, Stark.” The words were whispered against the nape of his neck, raising the hairs there and he shivered.

Hey, who would have thought that being bound, helpless and entirely at the mercy of the God of Lies would be so arousing?

Loki’s hot mouth moved across his shoulders, leaving a wet path that encouraged goosebumps after it and Tony decided that if he was going to be stuck in this position he might as well enjoy it. It wasn’t hard to, in all honesty. Loki was a genius with his hands and mouth and made good use of them as he mapped out the man’s shoulders and back before trailing down his spine.

It didn’t occur to Tony what the God could have in mind until he suddenly felt firm hands exposing him even more than he already was. Perhaps he should have protested, but before a coherent thought could pass his mind the sinful mouth had moved on and pressed right into his centre.

“Oh!”

Obviously the self-proclaimed playboy had had this done before – and returned the favour – but he’d never had a partner who went in for the kill in the manner the trickster did. Loki kissed him as he would Tony’s mouth, tongue moving and twisting until the man couldn’t hold his weight up on his bound arms and collapsed to his elbows with a deep groan.

It was rare for Stark to be so vocal, but Loki wasn’t known as the Silvertongue for nothing. By all the Gods did he know how to use that thing! Soon enough he was drawing a full symphony of whines and pleas from Tony, the man trembling underneath the God’s skilled and wicked touch. The trickster kissed and sucked the sensitive flesh until Stark was lost to the sensations, completely at Loki’s mercy.

Something in the back of the genius’ mind was telling him that he should at the very least be feeling shame for allowing the God to taste him in such a filthy and wonderful way, but how could he think of anything beyond just how damn good it was?! He couldn’t even feel embarrassed about how loudly he was voicing his pleasure in response to the stimulation. He’d never been so aroused by the simple act before and part of him was beginning to wonder if the sensations alone were going to be enough to make him climax. It certainly felt that way.

And then Loki pulled away with a small chuckle causing the human to curse loudly.

“Now now, Stark, I don’t believe I’ve ever heard you quite as vocal as this.” The God sounded so unbearably smug that the inventor snarled at him. However, Tony’s grumpy response was cut off as the trickster’s finger suddenly breached his body and he couldn’t help but push back with a whine. The movement was checked short by the leather rope which made him remember that he was still bound and entirely helpless. The finger moving around inside him knew exactly what it was looking for and a sudden spike of intensity made him arch his back with a groan.

“If we had more time I would consider keeping you like this for a while.” Loki’s voice was soft
and sinuous as he added a second finger, moving the two digits agonizingly slowly. “I’d spend all
night working you open, slowly, *exquisitely* torturing you with pleasure. Making you beg until you
weren’t even sure if you were begging for me to halt or to never stop. And after I made you scream
your release over and *over* until you thought you couldn’t stand it anymore I’d still force another
one from your trembling, fucked-out body.” He lent in to press a kiss just above where his fingers
were moving in and out, running his tongue across the sweat-streaked skin.

Tony had begun to pant hard, curled over so that he could bury his face in his forearm, his rear up
in the air. The trickster’s silver words were curling around him, quite possibly the most erotic thing
he’d ever heard. The imagery alone was sending him to new heights of arousal and combined with
those wicked fingers moving so *slowly* inside him it was becoming unbearable.

“Alas, we don’t have the time for such pursuits.” Loki continued. “But rest assured, Stark, I mean
to make it happen someday.”

Tony let out a pathetic pleading whine that didn’t clearly define if he was relieved or severely
disappointed at that news. However he made it very clear that it was displeased when the fingers
were removed, leaving him exposed and open.

“Come on, stop playing with me!” The angry statement was spoiled by how desperate he sounded,
causing Loki to laugh.

“Well aren’t you demanding.”

Tony felt the mattress behind him shift a little and curled his fingers into the thick sheep’s fur as
one of Loki’s hands found his hip and he felt the blunt head of the God’s arousal pressed against
his entrance. It was going to hurt, he was more than aware of that, but what surprised him was how
little he cared. He was more than used to relaxing his lower body and despite how desperate he felt
it was still possible to calm his tense thigh muscles enough to allow Loki to press in.

“Starrrrrrk…” It was a deep and sinful purr, the God’s hands tightening to leave bruises on the
man’s hips. Loki pushed forwards until he had sunk all the way in, Tony trembling and groaning
beneath him. And then the God paused, leaning forward so that his chest was resting against his
partner’s back.

“Loki-”

A finger was pressed against Tony’s lips. “Hush.” The trickster’s hand trailed down the man’s
throat to press against the arc reactor, urging him up. “On your knees.”

Tony groaned again, but did as he was told, shakily raising himself off his forearms and back onto
hands and knees. The action was rewarded when the sly hand ghosting across his chest moved
inexorably downwards until it grasped his aching and so-far neglected erection. He hissed at the
much needed touch and his hips moved of their own accord, causing Loki to gasp in turn.

“Move, *please*.”

“Manners will get you everywhere.” Loki’s own voice was sounding strained, and for once he
didn’t tease, instead pulling back and surging forwards again. The move drew a whine from Tony
and he backed into the contact so that the next thrust almost threw him back to his forearms again.

There is a famous saying; Make Love not War. The two men made love as if it *were* war. Harsh
and hot and sweaty, the grand room filled with the deep groans and lascivious whispers. Loki drove
into the inventor, setting a fast pace as Stark rocked back against him helplessly.
The God was as vocal as ever, and this time he was managing to coax similar noises from his partner. His hand matched the rhythm his hips had set, stroking Tony firmly until he had the man keening hopelessly under him.

Tony’s arms gave up on trying to hold his weight and he fell back to his forearms, head buried into them as he rocked back to meet each of Loki’s thrusts. It had reached the point where he didn’t care anymore that he wasn’t really fond of this position, didn’t care that Loki had cuffed him without consent and certainly didn’t care that he was on his knees and moaning like a whore. Actually, he rather liked it.

The tiny portion of his brain that was still paying any attention to current events realised that Loki’s voice had gone up a little in pitch and it was almost alarming that Tony knew the God well enough to recognise that this was a sign of impending orgasm. But, being Tony he wasn’t alarmed and instead just rocked back with more insistence, begging for the warm hand wrapped around his erection to increase its pressure enough to tip him over the edge.

Was Loki a mind reader? Maybe, maybe not, but either way he somehow recognised what the genius’ incomprehensible pleas were about and complied, his grip tightening and pace speeding up. The man underneath him whined and arched up, hands twisting in the sheep’s fur and the cuffs leaving dark rings around his wrists.

“Loki, God, close…”

Tony felt rather than heard the trickster’s corresponding groan and Loki’s steady pace began breaking up, faster and harder with no rhyme or rhythm to it until the inventor felt the build-up in the pit of his stomach rise into a fiery heat that took him over the edge with a scream. His release coated Loki’s hand although the God hardly seemed to realise and continued pounding into the suddenly pliant body beneath him until he too let out a loud curse. He clung to Tony’s hips, fingers digging deep enough to bruise and although the human couldn’t actually see his partner he knew Loki well enough to know that the God would have his head flung back, eyes closed and mouth open as he rode through his orgasm.

And then it was over, Loki flopping forwards to lie across Tony’s back so that the man could feel every slight shiver that was running through the trickster’s body. The God was heavy and hot and sweaty, yet beyond rolling off his knees and onto his side to be more comfortable, Tony was more than inclined to let him stay there.

A long few moments passed, the human prone across the fur and Loki sprawled on top of him, neither inclined to move. Tony’s hands were still cuffed together but he really couldn’t bring himself to care as he lay awkwardly on his side, trying to get his breathing back under control. He felt a kiss pressed to the back of his shoulder and snorted with quiet laughter into the sheep skin.

“Am I too heavy?”

“Beginning to get that way…”

“Too bad, I’m not moving.” The soft British accent was mocking and Loki merely settled out so that he was resting even more of his weight on the man beneath him.

“Git.”

“Mhhm.”

“Can you at least take the cuffs off?”
“Ask me nicely.”

Tony rolled his eyes, craning his neck so that he could look up at the God using him as a pillow. “Please can you take the cuffs off, Loki?”

The trickster merely folded his arms across Tony’s back and rested his cheek on them, eyes slipping closed. “That wasn’t nice enough.”

“It was plenty nice enough!”

“I am a God and prince of Asgard. And you could technically say that I am the king of the Jotun race.”


“I still don’t think you mean it.”

“It’s the best you’re getting, Sunshine.”

Loki chuckled quietly and the cuffs unraveled into a plume of grey smoke, taking the leather rope with them. Tony groaned again, in relief this time, and stretched his arms out. There were deep red marks around each wrist that he hadn’t noticed forming at the time, but would now be hard to explain away. Maybe he’d just claim to have been working on the suit bracelets.

Despite being used as a mattress by the God of Lies, Tony still managed to roll over so that Loki’s folded arms rested on his chest across the arc reactor and they were face to face. Bright green eyes, somewhat hazy with lingering pleasure, watched the man with worrying intensity.

“What are you thinking, Stark?”

“I’m kinda worrying about what the hell we think we’re doing. By rights I should be trying to arrest or kill you.”

“What’s stopping you?”

“What’s stopping you?”

“It’s rude to answer a question with another question. Did no one ever teach you that, Stark?”

“Mmm, possibly.” Tony grinned, up until the whisper of air across his face as Loki huffed in annoyance made him aware of just how intimate their position was. He reached up to run a gentle finger along the God’s cheek and the shock at that uninhibited touch registered in Loki’s eyes as a bright flash.

“Stark…?”

Tony laughed and removed the offending finger, running his hand through his own hair. “What the hell am I doing? This is fucking crazy!”

“Popular opinion suggests that you are one to take crazy risks.”

“Yeah, but this? If anyone ever finds out SHEILD will probably kill me.”

Loki raised his head to gaze at the inventor shrewdly. “They would execute you for your association with me?”
“Of course. I think the super-spy term is that I’m compromised.”

“Would Miss Potts be likely to tell of our dalliances?”

“Never of her own free will, but I don’t trust Fury one little bit and he’d use coercion should he ever suspect I’m up to something.”

“You’re always up to something.”

That startled a laugh out of Tony. “True, that’s very true.”

Loki smirked, before dropping his head back down to bury his face in the crook of Stark’s shoulder with a tired sigh. The man’s arms moved up automatically to fold across the God’s back in the manner that he usually held his lovers after such encounters.

For a very long moment the two lay like that, worryingly trusting and comfortable in each other’s closeness. The lion and the lamb, an all-powerful God and a mortal man whom detested each other and yet still sought out each other’s company.

Finally Loki nuzzled against Tony’s shoulder, turning his head to the side enough to speak.

“I should return you; your computer will be concerned about the length of the shower you are supposedly taking.”

“Mmm, I don’t feel like moving.” And he really didn’t. The bed was entirely too soft and having Loki draped over him was entirely too comfortable. “Five more minutes?”

“Now Stark,” The God sat up and moved to the side so that he wasn’t on Tony any more. “Come on.” He even deigned to hold out a hand to help the man up. The inventor made a meal out of pulling himself upright but grinned once he managed it. They both looked a complete mess; hair everywhere, sweat streaked and still somewhat breathless. Loki – usually so pale – had two bright red patches on either cheek, his lips swollen and gaze oddly calm. It made Tony wonder what he looked like in the God’s eyes.

“I’ll send you straight back into your bathroom, I believe it should be sufficient to fool your Big Brother that you have been in there this whole time.”

Tony nodded, looking around at the grand room again. He’d definitely have to change all of his London reservations to Claridges from now on. “Uh, thank you, I guess?” He gestured around awkwardly. “For this, I mean. It was…well, a nice idea.”

Loki dipped his head in acknowledgement. “I’m glad you approved.” Then he grinned. “But please say no more, Stark. You risk venturing into that dangerous realm of sentiment.”

“And we wouldn’t want that now, would we?”

“No. We wouldn’t.” The God smirked at him. He raised his hand up to rest against the man’s arc reactor. “I’ll see you again, Stark.”

“I bet you will.” Tony lifted his right hand and made the Vulcan salute sign. “Live long and prosper.”

“Dif-tor heh smusma.” Loki returned the gesture without raising an eyebrow and replied in effortless Vulcan. He then closed his fingers together and in doing so both he and the room began to fade from view.
“Hey!” Tony’s voice echoed oddly as the same feeling of speed and rushing air as when he’d been teleported to the hotel room surrounded him. All he could hear from the trickster was a faint chuckle.

It didn’t last long and a few moments later the man found himself sat on the floor of his bathroom, hand still holding the salute.

“Seriously? He knows StarTrek?!” There was no-one to answer, but he still felt the need to exclaim out loud as he stared at his own hand. “Why the hell does a Norse God know about StarTrek?!”

It was – sadly – a question to be answered another time and he pulled himself to look at himself in the mirror over the sink.

“Son of a bitch!” The large love-bite on his neck was going to be very hard to explain to the others come morning.

MWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMW

Why StarTrek? Because I was watching the Big Bang Theory whilst writing the end of this :D

In other news, I’m afraid there is plot trying to intrude here so the plot shall commence next chapter. It was meant to start this chapter, but people asked for more smut so I indulged them. However, I have half the next chapter written so the wait until it is up shouldn’t be long.

See you soon my lovelies!!!!
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

New chapter again! Now, first things – THERE IS NO SMUT IN THIS CHAPTER!!! Sorry, but I gave fair warnings that plot would start happening. However, the next chapter will be back to smut – I just needed to get this major plot-point out the way. There are WARNINGS for this chapter; but if I put them here then it will give away the plot. So here’s my compromise: If you are a person easily offended then please hit the End button – I have put the warnings/spoilers at the END of this chapter for you to skip to. On that note, there is NO rape/non-con/torture here; just…something that people usually put warnings for. Nothing too gory, I promise. And if you read the past two chapters of heavy smut then I can’t imagine this will cause too much offence ^_^

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Loki did turn up again, a few days later.

And then a week after that.

And then a few more times.

And then vanished.

Tony wasn’t sure what to make of it really. Each time had been furious, intense, and well worth any repercussions, so he couldn’t fathom why the God had suddenly dropped off the face of the planet. The last time they’d met up had been late January, and now it was September and he hadn’t heard a thing.

He was a little worried. It wasn’t as if he liked the guy, but Loki was technically a God, and had the strength and power that went with the title, so to disappear off the radar meant something had possibly happened. And if something was strong enough to take out Loki then the Avengers should probably know about it!

But nothing happened.

There were no intergalactic attacks, no frantic messages from Asgard and – much to Tony’s frustration – no hidden sexual escapades.

It was worrying and unfortunately not something he was able to talk to any of the others about. As far as the rest of the team knew, Loki had not been seen since escaping from Thor’s custody after his take-over-the-world bid. That made it hard for Tony to explain how he was currently concerned for the trickster’s whereabouts, and how he knew that the God had even gone missing in the first place.

It was over half a year. Something was most certainly wrong.
And then, from out of no-where, in the middle of a cold September night, Loki reappeared right in Ironman’s bedroom.

Tony had been sat in bed, tablet on his lap and watching a film when a sudden burst of light made him look up so sharply that his neck cricked. For a brief moment he wondered if something had exploded – after all, he did keep some unfinished projects close to hand in case he had a brainwave in the middle of the night. As it was his gaze fell upon the figure currently leaning on his chest of draws, looking decidedly worse for wear.

It was during moments like these that Stark was immensely grateful his brain could process things so quickly. His gaze took in the slumped posture, the wary darting glances and immediately drew two swift conclusions. 1) Loki was in trouble and 2) It had to be big trouble for him to appear in a space that was knowingly monitored.

“JARVIS, emergency protocol 58008.” His voice was steady, despite the burning gaze staring at him.

“But sir, Miss Potts-”

“I don’t care. 58008, no communication into or out of this room without my say-so.” He was glad that he’d thought fast enough to head the AI off before it alerted Pepper, SHEILD and the rest of the Avengers. JARVIS had no way of over-riding the protocol he’d just put in place.

The green glare that had been watching him like a hawk simmered down a little, Loki’s body posture relaxing slightly as he realised he wasn’t walking into a fight.

“So.” Tony met the intense gaze head-on. “You disappear for nearly a year then turn up in the middle of a room that you know is crawling with surveillance in the middle of the Avenger’s HQ. You’re smarter than that.”

“In theory.” In the dim light Stark could just make out the tired grin that appeared on the God’s face. It was possibly the gentlest expression he’d ever seen the trickster portray.

Standing up and tossing the tablet aside he realised that the mien was very reminiscent of that look they’d received at the end of the battle when Loki had realised he was beaten. That hopeless little smile and the quip about the drink he was owed. So innocent and so utterly defeated and broken.

“What’s happened?” Tony’s voice was hard and flat. It was obvious that Loki was under the weather – if such a thing can be said of God’s – but currently all the human cared about was how much danger Loki’s presence was putting the Avenger’s in.

“Nothing has happened, I can assure you.” In complete contrast to that the God limped – yes, limped, Tony noticed – forwards, hand clamping to the chest of drawers for support. And completely contrary to his statement he looked like hell. Usually so impeccably dressed, it seemed like appearances had been the last thing on his mind when he’d thrown a rumpled green tunic over a faded version of his usual black trousers. The fact that he even had casual clothes conjured the odd thought that the trickster may actually have a home of some sort out there somewhere.

“Bullshit. Something has dealt you some damage and I know it sure as hell wasn’t one of us.” Tony folded his arms. “So spill; what’s happened?”

The tone of voice made Loki straighten to his full and impressive height, his eyes flashing in fury. “Do you forget to whom you speak, Stark?!” The vulnerable expression had fled his face, replaced with hard anger and a coldness to match Tony’s own.
“Of course I don’t, goat-horns, which is why I’m trying to ascertain if you turning up here will bring down a whole load of shit on our heads!”

“Just your head, Stark, I can assure you.”

Tony scowled. “Oh brilliant. I should have guessed that much.” He glared as Loki slowly made his way to the foot of the bed and sat down, rumpling the red covers. There was definitely something wrong with the trickster, but if he wasn’t going to talk then the man could at least pursue other lines of enquiry. “Where have you been all this time?”

That earned him a raised eyebrow. “Why? Missed me, Stark?” The old malice reappeared in that reply. “Maybe I’d just grown bored with you.”

“Not if your reactions to our little meetings have been any indication. No-one gets bored of Tony Stark. Not even a God.” Tony met the malice with arrogance, his head tilted up at a haughty angle.

If he was hoping to get anger as a reaction then he was disappointed when Loki just laughed. The trickster’s evil little chuckle made it very clear that whatever the joke was, it was on Tony.

“Oh my, Stark. That sounds far too much like a defensive lover.” He hissed, green eyes sparkling with vindictiveness. “Were you worried, Ironman?”

“Only for the team.” Tony snapped, his own eyes narrowing as he glared down at the God. Since he was still standing and Loki had sat down, for once he actually towered over the trickster and used the effect to its full advantage. He was very used to people trying to intimidate him with their height so now he was trying the same tactic. “Why the hell would I worry about you?”

“Your voice is saying one thing, your body language another. My disappearance upset you.”

The human huffed and seemed to throw the remark aside. “Where have you been then? You’ve obviously taken a beating.” He sneered. “Wouldn’t like to meet someone who could deal you some damage.”

Loki scowled, shifting uneasily where he sat, obviously in pain and trying to relieve the discomfort. “Contrary to your opinion, I have not been in a fight, and I most certainly have not ‘taken a beating’ as you phrase it.”

“Yeah. Like I’m going to believe that; God of Lies.” Tony was beginning to wonder if maybe he hadn’t actually mis-interpreted the situation, but now that he was in the middle of an argument he’d be blown if he’d back down and admit it. “Where have you been for eight months?”

As it was, the trickster lived up to his reputation of craftiness as he blind-sided the whole conversation. “What does your Norse mythology tell you of me, Stark?”

“Huh?” Ironman swept a hand through his hair as he tried to follow where the train of conversation was going. “Are you fishing for compliments or something? Stop trying to change the topic!”

“I’m not. But you’ll need some back ground information before I start trying to explain myself to you.” Loki succeeded in making that sound like the dreariest chore in the nine realms. Maybe it was to him. “What do you know of me?”

“Other than that you tried to take over the world?”

“Stop being obtuse, Stark.”
Tony shrugged and spread his hands in the universal gesture of ‘I don’t know’. “What are you trying to get me to say? I know the generic myths; lips sewn shut, mistletoe dart, the whole snake dripping venom thing. The usual.”

Loki’s eyes had narrowed dangerously, but he persisted. “And my family?”

“You have messed up relations. Oh and then there’s the crazy kids thing.”

“The crazy kids thing.”

Ironman rolled his eyes at the cold tone, refusing to be cowed. “Yeah. You have to admit that your children are less than normal.”

“Continue.”

“Where do I start?! Giant crazy wolf thing, huge-ass world serpent, demon daughter ruling Hell. Not to mention the horse!” The glare that was levelled on him made Tony realise that this probably wasn’t the best way to approach what had to be a sensitive subject. “Hey, you asked.”

“Yes, I did.” Loki shifted again uneasily, a wince crossing his face. “And do you know of my children’s origins?”

By this point Tony was entirely at sea, not having a clue where this conversation was taking him and still no closer to discovering what the hell the God had been up to.

“The snake, girl and wolf had a frost giant mum, your two normal ones had an Æsir mum and the horse was yours.” There was a very definite snigger at the end of the sentence, making Tony sound like a high-schooler.

The God merely folded his arms with an impatient sigh. “Yes, I birthed Sleipnir, what does that tell you about me?”

“You’ve got a kinky taste in bed-partners?”

“No Stark!”

Ironman saw red.

“Then stop trying to make me second guess you and for once in your stupidly long life speak fucking plainly you stupid son of a bitch!”

Tony’s outburst seemed to surprise them both. Loki had lent back a little, one hand bracing himself on the bed covers as he stared at the human. In the history of their knowing one another Tony had never been the one to let loose in rage; rather he much preferred to wind his partner up instead. For him to have raised his voice in anger meant that Loki’s disappearance had impacted on him more than he would have wished and far more than he had wanted the God to know.

“Speak plainly.” The man repeated the last two words, but this time at a more normal volume. “Where have you been and what is wrong with you?”

“I was speaking plainly. You were just being impatient.”

“Well maybe you should remember that I don’t have any patience!”

“For Valhalla’s sake Stark!” The deep snarl reminded Tony just who he was dealing with, but for once there was no-corresponding flare of magic. “For once in your pointless life, why don’t you
just *listen* when someone is trying to tell you something?!” The furious glare could have soldered iron.

Despite being one of the smartest people on the planet, Tony very rarely paid attention to other people and their feelings. However, he was beginning to realise what Loki was trying to do. The God had something important to impart and couldn’t bring himself to just spit it out and so was trying to find an appropriate analogy. Tony had done the same thing so many times himself that it was practically the way he communicated nowadays.

With that in mind the man took a deep breath and tried to calm his temper down. “Fine. Your family, your kids. What are you trying to tell me?”

“Well, Loki?”

“No, the horse.” Loki rubbed a tired hand across his eyes. “I gave birth, Stark. What does that tell you about me?”

A large number of comments came to Tony’s mind but he tried to keep the conversation going this time. What did a male carrying a child mean? “You’re a shapeshifter? Or a woman in disguise?”

“The term you are looking for is hermaphrodite. Neither male nor female.”

The mortal shook his head. “Nuh uh, I’ve seen you naked. You’re very much male down there, Capricorn.”

“No. I *appear* male. When I was younger I performed a spell so that it wasn’t obvious on the outside what I was.” Loki’s expression turned to a grin, half wry and half dark. “I thought I was a freak, as much as my *dear* parents tried to tell me otherwise. What they didn’t deign to explain was that it was part of my Jötunn heritage. Jötunn’s don’t have the two sexes, there is just the one that can both impregnate and be impregnated.”

Something was beginning to claw at the back of Tony’s mind by this point. A horrible little suspicion that he could hardly bare to entertain.

“Loki…What the hell are you trying to say…?!”

The God laughed mirthlessly, burying his head in his hands. “What do you *think* I’m trying to say, Stark?”

Silence throughout the room.

For the longest moment Ironman hardly dared to entertain the thought. It wasn’t until he realised that Loki’s shoulders were shaking – that the trickster was deadly serious about this that the enormity of it hit him.

“Oh *God*…!”

Tony could almost physically feel his legs turn to jelly and he wobbled over to sit down heavily next to the God. “No…”

“I’m sorry.” Two words that Ironman had never thought to hear from SHeILD’s number one enemy.
“How can…God no!” Tony shook his head in horrified numbness, staring blankly at the floor.

“Are you sure…?”

“More than. I’ve had nine months to be sure.”

“…And it’s definitely…”

“Yours? Oh yes. Positive.” Loki’s voice was bitter and soft, as if he was in the same state of shock – although thinking about it logically Tony realised the God must have known since he went missing.

“So this is why you went AWOL then.” He said flatly.

“Indeed. Once I realised what had happened I decided that the best course of action was to remove myself from the general vicinity until I could work out what to do.”

“Telling me sooner might have been a plan.” Tony’s voice was tinged with the beginnings of shock – a slight tremble under the usually confident tones.

“I…I couldn’t bring myself to do so.”

“You chickened out.”


The human ran a shaking hand through his hair again, breathing deeply to try and calm his racing heartbeat down. “Jesus Christ, what the hell?!” He looked up to stare at the God next to him. “You don’t…You don’t look particularly pregnant.”

“Of course I don’t. I am more than able to cast a mirage over myself.”

Tony nodded again, wringing his hands together as his gaze went back to the carpet. “So what are you planning to do?” There was terror in his voice that was far too transparent.

Loki shrugged hopelessly. “I can’t keep it.”

“What?!” That shocked the man for reasons he couldn’t quite explain. Mythology made it fairly clear that Loki was fond of his children – even the weird ones – so to not want this one was out of character for the trickster. “Why not?”

“Think for a moment, Stark.” A world-weary smile crossed Loki’s face. “I have had every single one of my precious children taken from me already. And now there’s this. The Chitauri still persist in hunting me down; imagine what they would do to a child of mine. As well as that I am SHEILD’s number one most wanted – as you yourself like to point out – they would hardly want any progeny of mine on the loose. Not to mention the research potential a half Jötunn half human hybrid would have. No. I will not go through the pain and heartbreak of giving birth only to lose yet another child to an enemy.”

It made sense. In a completely broken and desperate way it made sense. Tony couldn’t imagine what it would be like to lose one’s own child and according to the myths Loki had already lost seven. It made terrible sense that he just couldn’t bear to go through that again.

“Okay. I think I get that.” The man said quietly. “So what do you plan to do?”

“I was going to ask you that.” Loki looked up to meet Tony’s pained gaze. “I am intending to find
some maternity ward somewhere where I can leave the child. I cannot be in its life without putting it in danger so this seems the best option.” He sighed heavily, shakily. “Or.”

There was a weighty pause that Tony felt compelled to fill. “Or what?”

“Oh I give the child to its father. To you.” The God’s pained gaze seemed endless as he stared at the man. “Those are the only options. I have to give it away and I feel that I should at least give you some say in this. So that’s my offer: Either I leave the babe in a hospital and neither of us shall know any more of the matter or I give it to you, and you raise it.”

Tony’s eyes looked like saucers. A child.

A child!

He was still struggling to get his head around the idea of Loki being pregnant and then there was this bombshell!

A CHILD!!!!

He was in no position to be a fit father! He had an absurdly dangerous job, made all the worse for how he risked his life needlessly for the fun of it! He had had a rubbish role-model growing up, had no time to look after a kid and just plain wouldn’t have a clue what he was doing!

He couldn’t do this!

There was no way he could do this!

And Loki was looking at him with the most intense and broken gaze he’d ever seen.

How the hell was he meant to make the biggest and most life-changing decision he’d ever faced in the span of a few moments?!

And yet…And yet he already knew his answer. Knew his answer before the question had even been asked really. He was getting on in years, as much as he pretended that it wasn’t the case. The big five oh was looming ever closer, and his life was anything but settled. Pepper had been the longest relationship he’d ever had and they’d lasted all of seven months. What were the chances of him finding a person to spend the rest of his life with if he couldn’t hold onto a woman like Pepper and his idea of a good shag was the God of mischief?! If he wanted children there was going to be little to no chance of that with his life-style. Other than whelping some kid on a drunken one-night stand – and it was a miracle that that hadn’t already happened – he was unlikely to ever have one.

But if he did this he would be alone.

No-one could ever know who the mother – if Loki could be referred to as that – was under any circumstances. Even Pepper couldn’t know. He’d have to look after and raise a child without letting anyone know the circumstances and as a single parent.

Sure, there were millions of single parents in the world who did a fabulous job, but none of them were the danger-seeking Tony Stark. He could only mess this up and cause the kid to grow up with so many issues that the best shrink in the world couldn’t sort them out.

And yet…

“Yes.”
“Pardon?” The shock in Loki’s voice was palpable. It was obviously the last thing he’d expected to hear the man say.

“Yes. I’ll raise the kid.” Even as he said the words Tony wondered what the hell he was thinking. This meant his whole life and way of living being turned on its head. Destroyed. He was throwing away everything to gain…everything.

This could easily mean the end of Ironman. Would he even have the time to be an Avenger anymore?

His world, ending, on a simple answer. On a simple yes.

And already he knew he’d given the right answer.

“I’ll raise the kid.” He repeated.

For a long moment the God just stared at him, before leaning in to rest his head on the man’s shoulder. “Thank you.” Some of the tenseness seemed to leave him as he said it. “I was hoping that would be your decision.”

“I’d better warn you, I’m going to be a lousy Dad.”

“No. You’ve experienced bad parenting, and that in turn will ensure that you will endeavour not to make the same mistakes.” The God said quietly. “I found that after having my first.” He shifted awkwardly again. “What are you going to tell your band of mis-fits when you turn up with a newborn?”

“That a pissed off one-night stand turned up and dumped the sprog on me.” Bullshit, was, after all, one of his many talents and Tony finally managed a smile. “And that’s actually partly the truth. Aside from the fact that you weren’t just one night.”

Loki huffed in quiet laughter then flinched, tensing up against the human.

And then it hit Tony. Why the trickster looked like shit, why he had been moving as if in pain and why he was still hunched up and wincing.

“Shit! Loki, are you in labour?!”

The God actually had the audacity to roll his eyes. “Have you only just noticed?”

“I…Yes, yes I have only just noticed!” Tony looked horrified. “Shit! What are you…Can you use your mojo or something?”

Loki laughed again and sat up straight to shake his head. “No, sadly not. I used up my last reserves getting myself here. It’s too dangerous to attempt any magic whilst under the influence of the hormones and pain during labour, so my powers automatically drain as a self-preservation device. Soon enough any spells I have cast over myself will fail too, which will then make the birthing process a lot easier since I shall be fully equipped with what I will need.”

Ironman shook his head hurriedly to try and rid himself of the mental image that was never-the-less seared into his brain for the rest of eternity. “You mean, like…woman’s bits?”

Loki rolled his eyes. “Do you even know how children enter this world?”

“Of course I do, it’s just…” Tony gestured helplessly, unable to explain just how much the entire
situation was scaring the shit out of him. He took another deep breath and tried to form a focussed thought, rather than just panicking. “Ok. You’re in labour. What’s your plan?”

He received a politely blank stare in return. “Why do you wish to know?” Loki sounded genuinely curious. “I’ve told you what’s happening; you’ve told me what you would like for the child’s future. Now I’ll be leaving.”

“Leaving?”

“What is this fascination of yours for repeating every other word I say? Yes, Stark, leaving. There is a motel just down the road where I can rent a room for the night. I will be back with the child once my powers have returned, which will probably be mid-morning.”

“What? Alone?”

“I’ve always given birth alone.” Loki looked nonplussed, as if the man was struggling to understand a very simple concept.

And the five simple words sent a wave of sudden cold through Tony.

Okay, as much as he was freaking out, he was well aware of how babies entered the world. After an argument with Pepper he had even seen a documentary on it, which had made him go down on his knees and thank any God listening that he was a man and therefore would never have to go through such a thing. And if nothing else the two big things he knew about childbirth were that it was fucking painful and absolutely terrifying.

On top of it all was also the implication that Loki had had to suffer through it at least once without any help from his family or friends back in Asgard. And once again he intended to go through it all alone in some strange motel room without any medical assistance or moral support.

Sure, Tony was a hard-hearted bastard but this was too much.

“Hell no!”

“I beg your pardon?”

“You aren’t just swanning off to some random shit-hole to do this!” Tony was both furious and scandalised at the same time. “This is my kid too and I’m not letting you go through this on your own! You’re going to stay here and we’ll get through this together!”

Loki stared at the man like he’d grown antlers. “You want me to stay here…?” Tony had never heard the God sound so shocked or vulnerable before and in turn it shook him. “Why would you do that?”

“Because.”

“That’s not an answer, Stark!”

The man scowled, unable to even really explain it to himself let alone the God next to him. “Fine then. Honestly? I’m not sure. Maybe because I know what it’s like to be alone in a dark strange place, in pain with no escape, and I can’t find it in me to let that happen to anyone else. Even you.”

“Even me…” Loki’s head found the man’s shoulder again, this time turned in so that his face was pressed against Tony’s collar-bone. Another shudder ran through him, but this time the human realised that it was less from pain and more from the emotional realisation that had just hit Loki.
"I’ve never had the luxury of feeling safe before." The God’s voice was soft and somewhat muffled. "Thank you…Tony."

Well; there was a first.

The God had never called him by his first name before.

He rather liked how it sounded in that soft British accent.

Tony belatedly realised that his arm had somehow snaked around the God’s waist in a loose approximation of a hug. He sighed heavily and tipped his head to rest on top of Loki’s dark hair.

“This is fucking crazy.”

“Agreed.” The trickster chuckled quietly.

“So…uh…what happens now?”

“Things will happen at their own pace.” Loki’s hand came to rest against his still-flat stomach. “It has been a few hours already, so maybe only another two or three.”

“…Wow.” And to think – barely an hour ago he didn’t even know that he was going to be a father. Now the moment seemed rather too near. He wished he was better at talking to people, better at comforting. His was a life of machinery and science; he didn’t do emotional situations, let alone the birth of his first-born! Instead all he could do was offer the very awkward hug he currently had Loki in.

“Sir, may I suggest that if you wish for Mr Laufeyjarson to give birth here then you should read up on what that entails?”

Both men jumped at the sound of Jarvis’ voice and Tony scowled at the interruption. He did recognise that the AI was correct though; it would be rather useful for him to know what on earth was about to happen.

“I know what needs to happen; it would be unnecessary for you to learn.” Loki said, still muffled against the mortal’s shoulder.

“You are incorrect, Mr Laufeyjayson.” Jarvis could sound ever so patronising when he wished. “It would be for the best of both of you to understand the procedure.”

“I do understand the procedure!” Tony protested. “Lots of pushing and screaming and et voila, baby!” He looked surprised when Loki raised his head from his shoulder to stare at him incredulously. “What?”

“What?! Jarvis, please inform Mr Stark of all he can expect in the next few hours. I don’t think he is quite aware of what will happen after all.”

“Doing so, sir.”

Tony rolled his eyes. There was a faint ping from the tablet he’d discarded when the God had turned up and he grabbed it up to see a new PDF file uploading. Quite a large file.

Next to him Loki lay back against the covers of the bed with a chuckle. “Well, you have work to do and I want to rest whilst I can because this is going to start getting difficult soon enough. Sound fair?”
The man could only really nod with a heavy sigh as he opened the document.

Nearly an hour had passed. Not for the first time Tony was truly thankful that he was so good at speed reading. He had absorbed the facts the document contained and was now realising he was almost as worried as if he were the one giving birth; there was so much to think about.

“Stop fretting, all will be fine.” The soft voice drew him back from his thoughts.

“Doesn’t seem that way right now.”

Loki smiled tiredly. He was curled up on his left side, head on the pillows and one hand clutching at the bedspread with each new pain. Thanks to an idea from Jarvis the trickster had divested himself of his leggings and undergarments before the active labour began in earnest and now a fleece blanket covered his lower half. He smiled tiredly as Stark came into his line of sight, sitting awkwardly next to him.

“It won’t last long. Another hour or so maybe. It’s quicker since this isn’t my first.”

“How many have you had?”

“Don’t you know that from your Norse myths?”

“Well, yeah, but I’m trying to get you to talk to me so that you focus on something other than pain right now.”

That caused Loki to huff quietly with laughter. The last of his spells had faded by this point and his hand now rested on the prominent swell of his stomach and it tensed as the next pain increased. They were steadily growing in intensity and he knew it wouldn’t be long before the real fun began.

“Fine. I agree that talking may be a good distraction. You were asking about my children?”

“Yeah. How many have you had then?” Tony winced with sympathy as the God drew in a sharp gasp of pain and he gingerly attempted to pat his shoulder.

“I am not some dog, Stark.”

“Back to last names again?”

There was a pause before the pain passed by then Loki cracked an eye open to glare up at the human. “That was a moment of sentiment. Don’t read anything into it.”

“Yeah, sure. I mean, it’s not like you’re having my kid or anything.” Tony said cheerfully. Still, he did remove the offending hand. “So. Children?”

“I fathered six, and then there is my son Sleipnir, whom I bore.”

“And…?”

The God frowned at him, for once looking taken-aback. “What do you mean, ‘and’? Your myths only speak of my seven.”

Tony smiled smugly. “Yeah, but as a scientist I’m used to nit-picking documents apart to find every little detail.” He absentmindedly reached out as the trickster hissed with pain again and ran his hand along the God’s shoulder – less like patting a dog this time – and to his surprise wasn’t
rebuffed. “You see, I read a translation of something some Viking bloke wrote. Called the Hyund…Hanad…Hyananana…Jarvis?”

“Hyndluljóð, sir.”

“Right. What he said.” Tony waved his spare hand flippantly. “It’s a collection of all the stories about you guys and there’s a very interesting snippet about you in there.”

“Indeed?”

“Oh yeah. See, just after the bit about the eight legged horse is a fragment about how you ate a woman’s heart and she impregnated you. Sadly the rest of the text is lost – so man-kind doesn’t know what happened next.”

Loki was staring at him in horror. “It says I ate a woman’s heart?!”

“Roasted. No accounting for taste.”

“That is the vilest mistranslation I have ever had the misfortune to hear!” The trickster looked sickened at the thought. “The original manuscript said nothing of the sort!” Then, and entirely without prompting he began speaking in a language so alien that Tony couldn’t even differentiate where one word ended and the next began.

The inventor had heard Danish and Swedish spoken before, and if asked he would have suggested that the language of the ancient Norsemen would be similar. Boy was he wrong! The ancient verse rolled into the air around them, a strange rhythm and cadence to it that almost sounded like poetry. Loki didn’t even look like he was having to make an effort to remember the forgotten piece and he finished reciting with a smug look to Tony. “The word was consumed not ate.”

“What difference does that make?”

“The words ate and roasted were taken out of context in a mistranslation – ‘she was consumed by the flames of love’ is the correct interpretation. She was in love with me.”

“And you didn’t return the sentiments.”

“Evidently not.” Loki managed a wry smile. “As a powerful witch she managed to cast a spell over me that caused me to conceive. It may have worked out for the two of us if she had not died rather suddenly.”

“Ah. And the child?”

Tony had to wait for an answer as the trickster suddenly tensed up, his hand clenching to a white knuckled grip in the sheets. The pains were noticeably getting closer together and lasting longer. However, he went straight back to the subject at hand the moment he could speak.

“Think about it, Stark. The child of a powerful witch and unsurpassed sorcerer, born a few hundred years before the Viking era. A child with no father.”

Tony’s expression broke into a wide grin. It wasn’t for naught that he had ruthlessly read through every legend and story he could find about the lands the pagan God’s had once been worshiped in. There was a certain very famous person from the time-frame Loki spoke of and whom legend spoke of as being a child without a father. “No way. Seriously? I thought he was a myth!”

“Stark, I am a myth.”
“Yeah, but Merlin?”

Loki smiled at the look of awe on the man’s face. “I taught him how to use his magic before setting him on his path in life. He surpassed all my expectations. I never dreamt that an offspring of mine could be the hero he grew into.”

The fondness in the God’s voice made Tony acutely aware of just how much the ancient warlock had meant to Loki. How much all his children must mean to him.

“Two thousand years later and we still remember him.” The man said softly.

“I know.” If the God wanted to extrapolate on the subject he was ruthlessly cut off with a sudden gasp, eyes widening. He reached out, almost blindly, to grab Tony’s hand in a crushing grip.

“Hey, hey it’s okay, relax.” The man was no expert, and certainly no midwife, but he had read the essay Jarvis had written up and seen enough cliché films to know the drill for what he was meant to say. “Breath, right? Keep breathing.”

“I am fucking breathing!”

Well. He’d never heard Loki swear like that before.

“Sure, good job, keep it up.”

The pain diminished and the trickster glared up at him. “I hate you.”

“Yeah, I know.”

Loki closed his eyes again with a frustrated snarl, shifting around uncomfortably. It was obvious that he was in terrible pain and doing his very best not to show it. Tony couldn’t imagine how difficult it must be.

“Ask me another question.” It was a demand.

“What?”

“A question, something taxing that can distract me from this!”

That made sense at least. Tony felt somewhat proud that the trickster was continuing to use his idea of distraction tactics.

“Okay, um…What’s more painful; lips sewn shut or giving birth?”

The glare he received in return could have melted an entire glacier. “Wait until my magic is back and you’ll find ou-ah!” The sudden sound of pain surprised both men and Loki curled in on himself with a groan. His grip on Tony’s hand began to threaten breaking bones and it was all the human could do to not show it. “Distraction…please…”

Right, God of lies saying please.

That at least shook Tony enough to think about something serious he could ask.

And then he realised that he didn’t have to think at all. The question had been on the tip of his tongue since he first saw Loki after the trickster’s escape.

“Why? Why did you do it? The chitauri and everything.”
There wasn’t a reply for a few moments – Loki simply lying as still as he could, crushing Tony’s hand into a pulp. He seemed to be endeavouring not to make a sound, which was impressive in itself. Tony suspected that the God had a pretty high pain tolerance.

Finally the trickster seemed to relax slightly, releasing his hold on the man’s possibly-broken hand. He managed a watery smile when the question registered.

“The chitauri? I imagine that’s something all of you have been wondering about for a while.”

“Just a bit. Care to spill? I imagine there’s a lot of details that none of us are aware of.”

“More than you can know. What were you told about what happened prior to my…disappearance from Asgard?”

Tony smirked. “You mean how you usurped the throne?”

“Usurped the- I did not usurp anything!” As tired as he was, Loki still succeeded in sounding furious. “Is that what my fool of a step-brother told you?!” He snapped. “My father was in what you mortal’s call a coma and Thor was banished for a criminal offence. The line of succession fell to me! What was I to do? After that…well, I’d just found out that I was essentially the Bogey-man. I wasn’t very happy.”

“And that led to you falling off the rainbow-bridge?”

“The bifrost, yes.”

“And that’s where the whole chitauri-rule-the-world thing came in?”

Loki nodded. “I fell through the void.” His gaze slide away from the man next to him and for a long moment it was as if he were looking into an entirely different time and space. “Do you know how large the universe is?”

“Infinite.”

“Correct.” The trickster shuddered. “Imagine seeing that. Imagine seeing every galaxy, every quasar, every star and planet and spinning atom within existence. Imagine what that would feel like.”

Tony tried, but all that he could think of was how he would give anything to see the universe spread out infront of him. This sentiment must have shown on his face because Loki snarled at him.

“Fool. I can see the wish in your eyes. It is not what you think.” He hissed. “The whole universe, every infinitesimal speck and gleam of creation. And I was spinning through all of it, so tiny, so useless. A nothing. That’s what I was, and am in the grand scheme of things. A nothing. Can you imagine what it feels like to be a king, a God and to then realise in all actuality that when faced with the universe you are less than the smallest speck of dust.” He closed his eyes with a shuddering breath. “It broke me. By the time I reached the world of the Chitauri my mind was so fractured that I was susceptible to anything they said or did to me.”

“Why Earth?”

“Why not? They suggested the target, I just went along with it. The only rational I had at the time was that by ruling a world I could have made at least some small impact on history.”
“You’re a pagan God, I think you’ve made a pretty big impact on our history already.”

Loki didn’t seem to hear the well-meaning statement as he continued on regardless. “By the time I came back to my senses it was too late. The invasion was underway and backing out of the deal would not have boded well for me. As it is, they still hunt me.”

“Well… I now owe Bruce fifty bucks.” Tony smiled at the withering glare he received. “I had a wager that you did it because you were bored. Bruce thought you were insane.”

“He was correct, then.” The simple sentence was spat out, although not from anger. The trickster had tensed up again, curling up into a tight ball underneath the fleece blanket. Tony mentally counted the seconds and realised that Loki didn’t relax until nearly a minute had passed; things were progressing quicker than he’d expected.

Everything he’d read that Jarvis had sent him spoke of this phase of labour taking many hours, and he hadn’t fully taken into account how much shorter it could be if it wasn’t a first child.

“You know, you should probably roll onto your back. I don’t think it’s going to be very long now.” He tried to sound confident as he said it but there was a noticeable tremor of fear to his voice.

“Don’t… want to… move.” The God struggled to get the words out as he gasped heavily.

“Yeah, it wasn’t a suggestion, Goat-horns.” Rather than stall and let another contraction freeze the trickster with pain again, Tony simply decided to act.

Despite Loki’s protestations he allowed Stark to help him manoeuvre onto his back, reclaiming the mortal’s hand in the process. He settled down with a deep groan, turning his face away from the man to try and hide it. His free hand had moved back to rest on his swollen stomach, fingers clawing at the blanket.

About fifteen minutes passed like that, Loki fighting to stay silent, obstinately refusing to let Tony see the way the pain was twisting his expression. However, what he couldn’t hide was the sweat running down his skin, trickling through his hair and down into his tunic. And he couldn’t hide the tenseness of his shoulders as they shook and shuddered with the effort to stay inaudible.

Tony knew enough from the document he’d read to know that the trickster was probably at the stage where he should be pushing, but so far didn’t appear to be doing so. He ran the hand that wasn’t in a vice-like grip over the trickster’s forehead, smoothing back sweat-soaked hair.

“Hey, you don’t need to keep up the pride right now.” He said gently. “Stop trying to be strong; it’s okay to admit that you’re scared and in pain.”

Loki shook his head mutely, eyes squeezed closed and mouth pressed into a thin hard line. He let his breath out with a gasp when Tony’s hand came to gently rest on top of his own on his stomach.

“Look at me, Loki.”

Hazy green eyes slowly opened to meet the man’s concerned gaze.

“You need to calm down. You know this; you’ve done this before. Calm down and focus. It’s not going to be long now.”

The words seemed to take a moment to sink in. Then a tiny smile graced the God’s face.

“Sentiment… Stark?”
“Just this once. I think this is a situation that allows for it. Now. Are you going to stop clinging to your pride and let me help you?”

This time Loki’s gaze met his head on with frightening intensity. It made Tony realise just how vulnerable the trickster was. With no magic and in terrible pain, Loki was as helpless as he would ever be, and he was putting his trust in the mortal to not take advantage of that.

It was rather humbling really.

Finally the God gave a curt nod in answer to the question before shuddering and closing his eyes again. Tony didn’t waste any more time and helped to pull the trickster up so that he was sitting rather than lying.

“Here, lean back on me.” Tony scooted behind him, so that he was leaning against the head-board and Loki could rest back into him. He rested his hands on the God’s stomach, feeling the muscles bunch and tense. “Okay, there we go. Now I think you’ve got some work to do.”

“I…think I hate you.” Loki hissed angrily, before letting out a deep groan of pain.

It was a new experience to have someone with him during this time, and as the pain threatened to over-whelm he suddenly realised how grateful he was. The human wasn’t able to help in any physical way, but by being there, warm arms circling in an embrace and chin resting on Loki’s shoulder, Tony was providing the sort of emotional support the trickster could only have dreamed of during his previous births.

He hated to admit that it was comforting. Hated to admit that he was accepting the help without protesting in the slightest. However, now that the intense pain was insisting that he got the baby out of his body once and for all he determined to worry about all of that at a later date.

It frightened Tony when the trickster finally did give in and arch back against him with a cry of pure agony, hands spasmodically clenching and unclenching in the blanket that was still covering his lower body.

It hurt. Oh by Valhalla did it hurt! He had forgotten just how bad it could be and now wondered how in the name of Odin he had managed to do this alone twice before. It seemed like time was barely passing – every excruciating moment drawing out into eternity. In reality it only took about a further thirty minutes, but to the two of them it could have been millennia.

“Sir, may I interrupt?”

Tony jumped and scowled up at the ceiling, for lack of a better target, as Jarvis’ voice suddenly broke into the private struggle. Thankfully it seemed that Loki was far too distracted to have heard the AI.

“You already have. What is it, Jarv?”

“The baby is probably crowning, sir. You will need to assist.”

Shit. Yeah, that was a point. Tony didn’t reply, but reminded himself to thank Jarvis later. Pulling some pillows back into arms-reach he then wriggled out from behind Loki, using said cushions to help prop the trickster up and keep him sitting.

“Sta…rk?”

“Keep going, you’re doing fine; it’s getting to the end of the road now and someone needs to catch
the sprog.”

What an elegant way to phrase it.

It had reached the point that Tony was so concerned about doing this right it didn’t even occur to him about being embarrassed seeing Loki’s true hermaphroditic form under the blanket. He had no professional training, all he knew about child-birth came from a PDF that he’d read a few hours ago and suddenly he was here; midwife to a God.

It seemed that Jarvis’ warning had come in good time, because it was barely a few more minutes before Loki screamed and Tony suddenly found himself helping a tiny child into the world.

His tiny child.

The infant opened its mouth and made a quiet hiccupping noise that grew into its first cry.

Tony felt tears fill his eyes.

It was tiny, squalling, bright red and covered with both after-birth and streaks of blood, yet Stark loved it. Instantly and irrevocably.

He quickly picked up the towel that had been placed at the foot of the bed for this very purpose, and gently wrapped the infant in it. The mewling cries died down at the contact, large eyes half-lidded and as yet unable to focus on anything. It looked like an alien and yet was the most beautiful thing he’d ever seen in his life.

“What is it…?” Loki’s voice was barely a whisper, hoarse and broken. He’d rolled back onto his side, curling in on himself so that his modesty was covered again.

“A girl. We have a daughter. A perfect little daughter.” Tony knew that his trembling voice betrayed his emotions, and he couldn’t bring himself to care.

“A daughter…”

“She’s beautiful.” Tony carefully cut and tied the umbilical cord before cradling the tiny girl in his arms. “Here, look.”

“No.”

The single worded answer seemed to freeze the world.

“…What?” Tony’s voice was tiny and incredulous. “Don’t you want to see her?”

“No.” Loki had curled up tightly into a ball, having wrapped his arms around himself. He was shaking, trembling like a leaf in the breeze.

“Loki…”

“No. I…I can’t see her.”

“Why? Why the hell not?!?”

“Because I can’t afford to love her.” The whisper was so small Tony nearly missed it. “I can’t be part of her life so I can’t love her.”

The mortal shook his head, despite the fact that the trickster couldn’t see him. “Rubbish.” He said
quietly. “That’s complete rubbish, and you know it.”

“No. You’ve carried her for nine months. Felt her move, felt her grow. And you just spent hours in God-awful pain to bring her into this world. You already love her, and if you don’t see her now, you will regret it for the rest of your life!”

Loki shuddered, his shoulders hitching with a barely suppressed sob. He had closed his eyes, so felt rather than saw the mattress dip as Tony sat down beside him. There was a quiet snuffle barely an inch from his face and he felt Tony’s hand come to rest on his shoulder.

“Loki, look.”

The baby was lying next to him, wrapped up in a fluffy towel, blinking owlishly into the middle distance. Loki stared at her like she was the only thing in the universe.

For a very very long moment there was complete silence, the three of them in some sort of frozen tableau. Tony was sat on the edge of the bed, one hand on Loki’s shoulder, the other supporting his daughter where she lay. Silent tears were running down his cheeks, entirely unnoticed. Loki remained on his side, one hand gingerly reached out to rest his fingertips on the child’s stomach.

There weren’t words.

The baby snuffled again, her nose scrunching as she did so and Loki finally began to sob softly.

“What’s her name?” Tony whispered. The God’s broken gaze moved up to meet the man’s in open-mouthed shock.

“You wish me to name her?” He breathed.

“Yeah. Something of you to carry with her.”

Loki’s eyes moved back to his daughter and for a brief moment he wasn’t a God, wasn’t an all-powerful being and wasn’t an ageless immortal who had lived for millennia. He was just an ordinary man faced with the miracle of meeting his own child for the first time. Tears were slipping down his face as he gently brushed his finger along the little girl’s cheek. She made a quiet chirruping sound in response, like a baby bird and he laughed brokenly.

“Evelyn.”

“Evelyn?” Tony rolled the name around in his mouth, trying it out for sound. It was somewhat old fashioned and out-dated, and not what he would have thought the God would go for. In truth he’d been expecting their daughter to be saddled with an unpronounceable ancient Norse name. “I could get used to it. Not as Asgardian as I was expecting.”

Loki smiled as their daughter snuffled again, her mouth opening and closing like a chick. “It’s of ancient Germanic origin, another of the peoples who used to worship us. It means little bird.”

Tony face split into a wide grin. “Oh, I like it! Evelyn. Evie.”

“Evie…yes, that is acceptable.” The trickster smiled up at the man before a wince crossed his expression.
Tony frowned. “What? Are you alright?”

“Fool.” The single word was fond, though, almost an endearment. “Think what has happened over the past few hours. I’ve just put my body through torture and am exhausted.”

“Oh. Yeah, of course.” The inventor grinned sheepishly. For a genius he could be surprisingly dense at times. “Will you be alright?”

“Of course. My magic will return soon.” Loki began to slowly and painfully pull himself upright and sank back against the pillows again with a sigh. He looked shocked when Tony promptly placed the child – Evelyn – in his arms. She blinked blearily in his general direction, but couldn’t focus enough to make eye contact.

“She’s beautiful.” Tony repeated his earlier comment.

“Of course she is.” With the soft comment the trickster’s eyes filled with sadness. “I wish I could see her grow up.” He tickled the baby’s cheek and she snuffled at him.

“There must be some way that we can work this out. You’ve been visiting me over the past two years and I haven’t had any chitauri turn up on the doorstep asking about you yet.” Tony said desperately. “Why would they suddenly turn up now?”

Loki rolled his eyes with an exasperated sigh. “Why can you never seem to use that brain you claim is so good, Stark? Occasionally visiting is one thing; helping to raise a child is completely another. If I keep my distance there is no reason for them to ever suspect she’s my child – I doubt they realise that my physiology means I can bear children. However, if I have an active role in her life then it will arouse their suspicions and we can’t afford for that to happen.” He looked down at the tiny child in his arms again. “I won’t have her used against me.”

It made sense, it really did. Tony couldn’t imagine how the God had to be feeling in that moment. To be forced into giving up his child – to be in a position where it was the best and only option. Something no-one should ever have to face and by all accounts something Loki had already been forced through with his other children. It was heart-breaking.

But Tony was well-known for being able to look through problems sideways and find solutions that other people couldn’t see when facing the conundrum head-on. Sure, Loki was easily as clever as the man and then some, but currently he was exhausted both physically and mentally and could only see despair. He had spent far too long assuring himself that it was a hopeless situation to be able to see any way out.

However, Ironman was beginning to see a light at the end of the tunnel. Not a big light, to be fair, but a light non-the-less.

“How about if you were to visit a few times a year? It wouldn’t be ideal, and you wouldn’t be able to really have much of a hand in raising her, but at least you could see her.” He said slowly. “If you were to come maybe once or twice a year – perhaps on her birthday – then she could at least grow up knowing who you are and that you love her.”

“And is that such a good idea?” Loki’s voice was soft and bitter. “What child would want me as their parent? Wouldn’t she be better off not knowing that she is the progeny of a monster?”

Tony shrugged lightly. “But you won’t be a monster to her, will you? She’ll be seeing you as a loving parent.”

“She’ll see the old news releases –”
“And I will tell her the truth.”

The God’s burning gaze met the mortal’s head-on. “Why do you care so much about this?!”

Tony didn’t seem at all perturbed by the fury. “Because as much as both of us pretend otherwise, there is some sentiment creeping into this relationship and – in case you didn’t notice – we now happen to have a child together too.” He said firmly. “A child that deserves both her parents! So excuse me if I want to make sure you –”

“Shh.”

His angry tirade was cut off by Loki’s soft hush and he followed the trickster’s gaze down.

Entirely undisturbed by her bickering parents, Evie had fallen asleep nestled securely in the trickster’s arms. Tucked up in the fluffy towel, all that could really be seen of her were her face and one tiny hand and Tony felt his heart melt all over again.

“Her birthday and Yule.” Loki said softly.

“Huh? What?”

“I will visit on her birthday and on Yule – or Christmas if you prefer.” He looked up at Stark. “Is that agreeable with you?”

Tony gave a small chuckle. “More than.” He looked up as Jarvis suddenly cut in on the delicate conversation.

“Sir, I am picking up an unusual energy surge, source unknown.”

“That would be me,” Loki held up a hand in the manner that a falconer would wait for his bird to perch on his wrist. “My powers are returning.” As he said it tendrils of light appeared around his fingers, gently swirling before seeping into his skin. He smiled at the gentle warmth as his magic flowed back to where it belonged.

Tony saw the delicate smile on the God’s face and was surprised by the sudden surge of warmth he felt towards SHEILD’s number one enemy. The enemy currently cradling their sleeping child.

He couldn’t help a sudden chuckle as Loki waved a hand lazily and all the mess from the birth was vanished away, the sheets straightening out and all evidence of what had transpired gone. The God had re-dressed himself in the tunic and leggings he’d arrived in, although this time not looking half as shabby as he had been. The smile now gracing his face looked more relaxed as well but turned to a wicked grin when he saw Tony’s curious expression.

“I severely dislike delivering the placenta. Thankfully my powers usually return in time for me to sort it out.”

“…Did not need to know that.”

Loki looked unbearably smug at the man’s discomfort. Evie moved slightly in his arms and he looked down at her, his expression immediately softening again. He ran his finger along the length of her tiny nose and she settled down.

“I should be going.” He whispered. “It’s almost dawn.”

“It’s weird to say it, but I wish you didn’t have to.”
“We have come a long way since I threw you out of that window, Tony Stark.”

Both their gazes moved back to the sleeping miracle nestled in Loki’s arms. Tony was having trouble keeping in mind that the furious God who had thrown him from his own tower was the same as the one now holding their daughter. The same one whom he didn’t want to see go.

“Um, are there any Asgardian things I should do?” It was all he could really think about asking. Pleading for Loki to stay wasn’t going to work so the best he could do was find out anything extra he needed to know before the trickster left. “Any naming ceremonies or anything important you want? I’ll probably have her Christened, if that’s okay to you – it’s the way we roll here in the States. I don’t, you know, really believe as such but…”

“A baptism will suffice as a naming ceremony.” Loki said distantly. “There are very few traditions we follow that can be upheld in this world. However…” He held up a single hand again, thin green ribbons trailing out of it. “I can offer her this much.”

The magic curled around itself, pulsing and coiling to form a solid shape. Stark held his breath as he watched matter being spun out of nothing, something he’d been taught pretty much from birth was impossible. Finally the green tendrils condensed into a single form, fading away to reveal wood underneath.

A simple yet elegant rattle lay in the God’s hand, roughly the same length of his outstretched palm. It had a delicately carved handle and a bulbous head that, when moved, sounded like it was filled with bells.

“It is custom for an Æsir to be presented with a hand-made gift from its mother on the day of its birth.” Loki said softly. “It is kept by the child throughout their life as a good luck token of sorts – because it was made from love.” A sad smile crossed his face. “Not being an Æsir, I never received one at my birth. However, Frigga made me a fleece blanket once she and Odin decided to keep me.”

“Did you keep it?”

Tony’s question seemed to take the God by surprise.

“Yes, actually. I have it still.” Loki’s eyes seemed unusually misty as he tucked the rattle next to his daughter and her tiny hand instinctively tried to curl around the handle even in her sleep. “Take this gift as a symbol of my love, my dear, and know that even when I am not with you, I am watching over you.” He kissed the baby’s forehead before gently handing the sleeping bundle over to Tony. “I must go now.”

“I…Yeah. Yeah.”

For the longest moment the two men merely stared at each other, before Loki impulsively reached out and pulled Tony into a deep kiss, their child sandwiched between them. There was hopelessness there, the God’s hands both coming up to cup the inventors cheeks with a desperation he’d never shown in front of his partner before. It was bittersweet, tainted by the longing for something that they both knew couldn’t be. Emotions that neither dared to acknowledge even to themselves and certainly not to each other hung heavy in the air, all stained by the word they now considered dirty.

_Sentiment._

Loki broke the kiss first, although his hands remained against Tony’s cheeks, his forehead pressed
to the inventor’s. “Thank you for being here throughout this.” He breathed. “I have never been able to trust one as I trusted you whilst so vulnerable. I am in your debt, Tony.”

Ironman took note of the use of his name, and all of the things that Loki wasn’t saying. “Just make sure you visit as you promised and I’ll consider the debt paid.” His voice was soft, but tone emphatic enough to make it clear that he meant it.

“I will. Good bye for now, Tony.”

The genius smiled. “I prefer au revoir.”

The God vanished with a sad chuckle.

The room was eerily empty and silent without the presence of the Trickster. Tony sank back on the neatly made bed, his gaze riveted to his daughters sleeping face. With Loki there it had been like a surreal dream really, something wonderful and not quite true. With the God gone reality suddenly made an unwelcome reappearance.

“Jarvis, what the hell am I going to do?” He whispered. “What on earth have I let myself in for?”

“Some would say the greatest adventure that can be undertaken, sir.”

Tony felt something on his face and lifted his hand to wipe away a tear. He gazed at the trail of moisture like he’d never seen the like before.

“I don’t know what I’m doing, I can’t raise a baby!” He stared back down at the child, his face a picture of fear and misery. “What the hell am I doing?! I haven’t even got any baby stuff or anything! How am I meant to feed her?! Where the hell will she sleep?!” Panic was getting the better of the man and the words came out as a frantic sob.

“I took the liberty of buying you some of the essentials soon after it was decided that you would keep your daughter.” Jarvis didn’t have too much of a vocal range, but he managed to sound vaguely comforting. “The order arrived an hour ago and I had Dum-E bring it up and set it all up in your private lounge.”

Tony hadn’t even had a thought to spare for giving Evelyn her own room. Now his worried gaze moved to the closed door leading off of his bed-room. Beyond it was his personal lounge that – once the rest of the Avenger’s had moved in – he’d stopped using entirely. There had been some half-baked notions to turn it into a mini-lab, but a nursery seemed a much better plan.

“Yeah. Yeah, well done Jarv.” He managed to process the rest of what the AI said. “What sort of stuff did you buy?”

“A cot, changing mat, changing table, all of the associated paraphernalia, baby milk-powder, diapers, buggy, car-seat, sleepsuits, various other clothes-”

The list went on and it soon became apparent that Jarvis’ idea of ‘the essentials’ actually encompassed everything that could ever be needed for a newborn, plus some handy extras should an apocalypse suddenly occur. He had covered every angle. Tony had often thought about how he couldn’t cope without the AI, but this time Jarvis had outdone himself beyond all imagining.

“Sir?” The computer’s voice drew Stark out of the musing and he jumped slightly.

“Huh?”
“I asked if you would like a coffee sir, you may feel the need for it.”

Yeah, coffee sounded like a plan and a half. “Yeah, thanks Jarv.” After all, it wasn’t like he’d be going back to sleep any time soon. Tony took a deep breath and tried to calm himself down again. On second thoughts, maybe so much caffeine wasn’t such a good plan if he was so anxious. “Actually, cancel the coffee and make it a hot chocolate.”

“Yes sir. And congratulations, sir. On becoming a father.”

He looked back down at the child.

_His child._

_His daughter._

And knew that as hard as this was going to be, as much shit as the Avengers were going to give him and as much as he was going to have to give up on most of his favourite things in life, she was worth it.

Everything that having a child meant, the good and bad together and she was worth it.

“Thanks Jarvis.”

Chapter End Notes

**WARNINGS:** As promised from the author’s note.

Mpreg. (Be fair, it’s cannon according to mythology).

Childbirth – specifically whilst still as a male but it IS Loki so he makes arrangements so that it all works.

Talk of losing a child/children.
Stony silence.

Tony had thought he’d seen Pepper at her most furious. Apparently he was wrong.

She was sitting on his bed, having been called there by Jarvis the moment she’d entered the building that morning. Tony sat in the arm chair by his desk; Evelyn wrapped up in a blanket and snuggled in his arms. She was awake, staring off into the middles distance as newborn’s generally do. The rattle was tucked in next to her and her tiny hand was curled around as much of the delicate stem as it could. Every now and then there was a gentle tinkle of bells as she moved and jostled it.

“And she just left you with a new born baby.” Pepper repeated flatly. “After not having got in contact with you during the entirety of the pregnancy and not going to the press with the juicy story of being impregnated by Tony Stark on a drunken one-night stand.”

“Shit happens Pepper.” Tony was exhausted. He hadn’t slept since Loki left, preferring to just sit and stare at the tiny miracle nestled in his arms. He’d already negotiated his way around the first feed – Jarvis was the one who actually worked out how to use the milk formula – and first nappy change. That had been a moment of pride! However, he hadn’t slept for over twenty four hours and although he was more than used to going without rest, he had never done so whilst battling through such intense emotions. And admittedly there had been a few tears as well.

Pepper seemed to realise this as she wound her scowl back down from Bloody Furious to Unbelievably Exasperated. “Fine. I get that this has happened. I still can’t believe that you didn’t call me immediately! Some crazy woman shows up on your doorstep in the middle of the night, hands you a baby barely a few hours old, tells you it’s yours and what? Just hands it over and explains she never wants to see it or you ever again?” She shook her head. “I smell lawsuit all over this, Tony. Can you even be sure the baby’s yours?”

Uh, yeah, pretty damn sure. But he couldn’t say that since he supposedly knew nothing about the whole thing so instead made something up. “I ran a paternity test. She’s mine. Plus she has my nose.”

“Yeah, I suppose she does.” Pepper sounded ever so slightly wistful as she glanced at the baby, before glaring at Tony again. “And what on earth possessed you to agree to keeping her?”

“She’s my daughter.” The reply was instant and simple. “And I know we won’t have lawsuit problems – trust me on that. The mother doesn’t want any contact. She’s…kinda reclusive, so most certainly won’t go to the press.”

“You can’t know that.”

“No, I really can.”

“Tony!” And the tone of voice said it all. “What in God’s name do you think you’re doing?! You can barely look after yourself, let alone a child!”

The cold anger sent a chill through the man. He had known that she wouldn’t be impressed, but to just come out with it and tell him that she thought he’d be a lousy father was a little too much.

“Hey!” He made sure to keep his voice quiet, but there was still a noticeable bite to it. “I will let
you get away with that comment purely because you have been the one person to stick with me through the worst moments in my life and have put up with all the shit I could ever throw. But I am going to be a fantastic Dad! Evelyn is a part of me, she’s got half my genes, half my DNA, and I am going to willingly throw the towel in on both the Avengers and Ironman if it means looking after her properly!"

The woman looked taken aback, a look of utter shock crossing her pretty face. “You’d give up on being Ironman??”

“Yes!” The answer was immediate and entirely truthful.

There was a long and very uncomfortable silence, in which Tony relocated his attention onto Evelyn as she tried to focus on his face. Pretty much everything about her screamed Stark; the tuft of brown hair, the short nose, even her expression was set into an obstinate pout. But her eyes, oh her eyes were as un-Stark-like as they could be. Vibrant poison green, they were her only feature – currently – that bore any resemblance to Loki. Probably a good thing really, if they wanted to keep her parentage on the down-low.

He looked up again to see Pepper smiling sadly at him. “Oh Tony.”

He was surprised to see that the anger had pretty much entirely vanished from her gaze, and the feeling that he’d missed something started to creep over him.

“Huh?”

“Of course I think you’re capable of looking after a child. What I wasn’t sure was if you thought you were capable of doing so.”

“You’re…you’re not mad at me?”

She smiled again, this time a lot more warmly. “No, I’m not mad. I just wanted to make sure that you are really aware of what this will mean for your life. And that you truly want to do this.”

Crafty girl! Tony couldn’t believe that he’d fallen for it – that he’d actually thought she was furious with him. Pepper had always been a damn good actress. However, he had to admit that it was a good way of determining what his commitment to this life-changing decision was. Especially since he hardly wanted to tell her about the conversation he’d had with Jarvis, lasting hours, on the exact same topic.

A quiet bing from next to the desk made both Pepper and Tony look up. The electronic dumb waiter hatch had slide open to reveal a freshly made-up bottle of milk.

“Thanks Jarvis.” Tony reached over and grabbed it, smiling sheepishly at his friend’s amused look. “It’s advised to feed a newborn every three hours to get them used to the process. This will be the third now.”

“I’m impressed.”

“Don’t be.” He grinned. “Jarvis is the one actually getting everything done.” He rearranged Evelyn so that he could hold her in one arm and presented her with the bottle. She managed to focus on it and – this time – seemed to remember what was expected of her (the previous attempt had resulted in confusion all round and tears from both). And she seemed hungry.

“So, Evelyn? I would have thought something a little less usual would be more your style.” Pepper said with a soft smile.
“Mum’s choice. It means little bird.”

Pepper slipped off the edge of the bed and quietly walked over to her friend, sitting down in the matching armchair so that she could see the baby more closely. “She does look like you.” She conceded. “But she’s cute, so she must take after her mum quite a bit too.”

“Hey.” Tony couldn’t make it sound emphatic though, as he stared down at his daughter. “I still can’t believe this.” He admitted softly. “What did I ever do to deserve something so beautiful?”

“Don’t, Tony. Don’t go there. You’re a good person and will be a great dad.”

He glanced up at the red-head with a wry smile. “You think?”

She nodded emphatically. “Of course. I only said what I said earlier because I wanted to make sure that you believed in yourself. That you believed you’d be able to do this. Don’t think for one minute that you don’t deserve a family!”

The man smiled tiredly. “I hope I live up to your high expectations, Pep. I’d hate to let you down.”

“You won’t.” She rose elegantly to her feet and leant forwards to kiss his forehead. “Do you want me to go and explain the situation to the others for you?”

What would he do without her?! “Oh God, would you?! I’ve been dreading the look on Hawk’s face!”

“I thought as much.” She flashed him a mischievous smile and straightened up. Her gaze lingered curiously on the baby for a few moments, but she was not a woman enamoured with small children so she was able to squash her impulse to ask to hold her. “I’ll let you know how it goes.” Evelyn hiccupped and Pepper’s smile became adoring. Screw it – no-one is impervious to newborns! “Oh, and can I hold her when I get back?”

“Of course.” Tony watched her leave the room then turned his gaze back to his daughter. She seemed to have tired of the bottle and turned away from it, eyes closing. “You tired, Evie?” He ran his finger down her nose in the same way that Loki had done, and the gesture seemed to calm her so that she slipped quickly into sleep. “Very tired, huh? Well, get some sleep, I have a feeling the next few days won’t be easy.”

MWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMW

The accusing stares were actually quite painful. That surprised him; he was usually immune to such disdain.

“This has to be your dumbest venture to date.” Fury was on video-call, his image projected on the huge TV screen in the main lounge. His voice was icy. “What possessed you to agree with this bitch and take in a child?! DNA tests aren’t a contract, Stark, you don’t have to keep the baby!”

“Uh, yeah I do.” Tony had sat himself down on his favourite sofa, carrying Evelyn – it had reached the point where his arms felt empty without her. “She’s my daughter. I don’t know if you’ve ever heard of the term ‘family’, Fury, but it usually means a group of genetically linked people who look out for each other.” He waved his free hand vaguely. “Or something like that. Either way – my daughter, my blood, my family. She stays.”

“Your life-style is hardly appropriate for child-rearing!”

“Then I’ll just have to change my lifestyle!”
That drew a sharp intake of breath from the other sofa and Tony glanced over to see Bruce leaning forward in concern. “Seriously? We’re not just talking quitting the drinking, Tony.”

Honestly! Did they all think him a child!?

“I know that! I’m fully prepared to throw the towel in on all this Avenger’s crap.” He snapped.

There was a chorus of exclamations at that remark. People just weren’t used to Tony Stark being serious about anything, and Tony Stark with a baby was a situation no-one had ever expected.

“You can NOT be serious, Stark!” Fury bellowed over racket. “You have a commitment to this team and you think you can just swan off to play happy families?!”

There was something in the man’s anger, in his tone of voice that struck deeply and Tony felt a cold chill of rage. Pepper, who knew him the best saw all expression suddenly leave the inventors face and she automatically reached out to take Evelyn from him.

“How dare you!” Tony was not a tall man by any means, but by any God there was he had presence. Presence, charisma, and complete and utter self-assurance. “How dare you even think of saying such things?! I’m not talking about going off on a pleasure cruise or something – I’m talking about raising my child! And there is nothing, nothing that any of you can do about that! It is my right as a person, as an American citizen, as a human being to have a kid and I can’t see why that’s so difficult for you to understand!” His acidic gaze swept the room – taking them all in. He was perversely smug to see Bruce cringe and Steve look shame faced. “This is my child, my daughter. I am her father and I’m going to do a damn sight better job of raising her than my Dad did with me. Any of you have a problem with that; just remember exactly who’s tower you’re all living in, where your funding is coming from and who looks after all your fancy equipment! You don’t like it?” He jabbed a thumb at the door. “Then piss off.”

Ironman didn’t bother with waiting for a reply from any of them and instead turned on his heel, took Evelyn from Pepper and swept out of the room like Severus Snape.

Minus cape.

It wasn’t until he reached his lab door that he realised he’d let his feet do the thinking. It was hardly the best place to bring a day old baby and a wry smile crossed his face as he recognised that most of his automatic ‘safe places’ would have to be re-thought. Bar, lab, a night club…yeah, that’d all have to go.

Evie was staring up at him and Tony wondered what on earth he should do now. Since the lab was out of the question he retraced his steps and made his way back to his bedroom. The baby items that Jarvis had ordered were in the process of being set up around the room – three little robots trundling around as they placed things in considerate and well thought out positions. Tony side-stepped one to reach his bed and sat down heavily.

Then Evie started crying.

And kept going.

And going.

And going.
The first three weeks seemed to have whirled past in a blur of sleeplessness, feeding – every three hours, regardless of how tired Tony was – changing nappies, burping, cleaning up sick, panicking over whether she was still breathing every time she fell asleep and so much more that he had never taken into consideration.

It was exhausting!

Tony hadn’t truly factored in just how much time and space a baby would take up. He had never felt so tired in his life and so damn helpless. Evie cried a fair bit – as could be expected – and every time she did he panicked that he couldn’t immediately work out what was wrong. It was stressful, demanding and a time-consuming job. He couldn’t even wear his favourite shirts since she had a habit of spitting up over him.

And of course there was the never ending job of Avenger-avoiding.

Other than Pepper he had severed all contact from the rest of the group since the meeting, which was probably childish, but he didn’t care. Apparently most of the team had tried to make apologetic advances, via Pepper, but he’d ignored the lot of them. To be honest it was less him sulking and more purely not having the time to see anyone.

Pretty much anything not baby-related – mostly meaning Tony getting food or contact with the outside world – was done through the three little house robots that he’d now termed Scutters after the little do-all automatons on his favourite TV show, Red Dwarf. And Pepper of course. Just because she wasn’t really a baby person didn’t mean that she wouldn’t step in for fifteen minutes or so when he needed to dash off for a shower.

But he was getting the hang of it.

Slowly but surely he and Evelyn were learning to work with each other, he anticipating when she needed something and her growing used to the routines set in place to help her stay healthy. It was a slow learning process, but they were getting there.

It was nearly a month before he agreed to see any of the team again – making it very clear that Fury wasn’t allowed to the reunion.

It was a lot less tense this time. For a start Evelyn had just been changed and fed so was more than happy to stare blankly at everything as opposed to crying. It was strange to see which of the Avenger’s were baby-people and which weren’t. Natasha for example immediately asked to hold her and spent a good ten minutes speaking in incomprehensible Russian that the child seemed to be quite taken with. For all that he worked with kids, Bruce was far more reticent and was content to look over the Widow’s shoulder. Steve feigned fearlessness, then looked like Evie was primed to explode the moment she was in his arms. And Thor was enthusiastic but had absolutely no idea how to hold her comfortably.

However, it was with Hawkeye that the reactions were the most surprising. Clint seemed a natural. He rescued the baby from Thor’s hopeless grip and bounced her gently so that she smiled broadly at him. It was her newest trick, and she’d only been doing it for a few days so Tony felt a quick flash of jealousy that she was so ready to show off to someone other than him. As it was she was readily smiling at Clint as he pulled all the obligatory funny faces and made silly noises.

“You’re rather too comfortable there, Hawk.” Tony said with a grin. “Beginning to show me up.”

“I haven’t held a baby in a long time.” Clint bounced Evie once more before handing her back to her father.
“You’ve held a baby?” Even Natasha looked sceptical at that news.

“Eleven year age gap between myself and my little brother.” He shrugged when they all stared at him. “What? Aren’t heartless assassins allowed backstories?”

Tony let the team bicker over Clint’s little revelation as Evie yawned and he wrapped the blanket in his arms tightly around her again. “So.” He cut through the discussion going on around him. “How’s Fury been recently? You know, after he and I had our little argument.”

There was a moment’s silence before Steve shrugged awkwardly. “He’s still somewhat unhappy with you-”

“Read as majorly pissed off.” Clint added.

“Yeah, what he said. We were technically under orders to try and talk you round, but that seemed under handed.”

“Not to mention whilst none of us are exactly lovely people, Captain excluded, we could never split up a family purely for team efficiency.” Natasha put in coolly.

Oh.

Tony was pleasantly surprised that the team were on his side, and then felt guilty for being surprised. Of course they were on his side – they were supposed to be his friends after all.

“I…Uh…” Why was it always difficult to express simple gratitude? Probably because he was so used to believing that he didn’t truly deserve it.

“Don’t worry, we know you’re not good at the putting-the-words-together-to-make-them-sound-meaningful thing.” Clint said with a shit-eating grin. “You love us all dearly and don’t know how you survived before we came along. Yeah, we know.”

“Something along those lines. Only a whole lot less cheesy and a lot more sarcasm.” Tony returned the smirk with one of his own. “But seriously guys, thanks. This means a lot to me.”

“We figured. I don’t think anyone ever thought they’d hear you say you’d give up Ironman.” Steve added.

The comment made Tony look down at the sleeping bundle. “Well, she’s worth it.”

MWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWM

The next few months passed surprisingly quickly. October came and went – Tony completely forgot about Halloween – November passed with little incident and it came as a shock when he realised that it was December. He was barely recovering from Thanksgiving with a baby when he discovered that he had to get through Christmas. The lack of drinking had been hard and getting through the festive season – and New Years!!! – was going to be a pain.

But Christmas meant something else too.

“I will visit on her birthday and on Yule – or Christmas if you prefer. Is that agreeable with you?”

He’d see Loki again.

Of course, that was a good thing from the point of view that Evie would have some contact with her mother, but Tony couldn’t help but feel that he was glad for more reasons than just that.
Reasons that he shouldn’t really have.

He was always well known for being exuberant over the idea of Christmas – food, drink, presents, shiny things, it was very *him* – so no-one really noticed how avidly he was counting down the days. And if they did they just put it down as the First-Christmas-With-Baby syndrome.

Present shopping with a three month old was...an interesting experience. For one thing, the media wouldn’t leave him alone. He’d found himself being chased even more than usual by the press, all of them demanding explanations for the sudden addition to the family. Thankfully he’d had years of practice at side-stepping such questions and could control himself enough to ignore any inflammatory comments.

Although he sued the Daily Planet without hesitation when, through frustration at him not telling them anything, they made up a story about his bad parenting. A $30 million lawsuit would teach them that libel is not the way to go about a story. It was also enough of a threat to stop them from starting a smear campaign. Overkill? Not where his daughter was concerned.

Sadly though it did mean that most of his Christmas shopping had to be completed online. Well, the presents that weren’t custom-made in his workshop at any rate. It helped to pass the time though.

It seemed to take forever for Christmas eve to creep up, like it was purposely taking its sweet-assed time. It must have seemed like he had a crotch full of itching powder by early evening, what with the way he couldn’t sit still. In the end he had sequestered himself to his bedroom with a glass of mulled-wine at only seven o’clock in the evening, feigning a headache so that the rest of the team wouldn’t wonder what the hell was sending him to bed so early.

He’d gone all out in Christmasing his bedroom – tinsel, fairy lights, there was even a small tree in the corner. He didn’t bother with the main lights, just turning on the twinkling ones. Evie watched the sparkling colours with fascination. It was way past her bed-time, technically, but she’d slept through most of the day and he wanted her to be awake for if or when her mother turned up.

“*You* like the lights? Maybe I should put some up in your room. What do you think?” He lifted her up closer to the twinkling Christmas lights that ran along the door frame. Evie smiled, trying to grab at them and Tony laughed. “Yeah. Extra present for you tomorrow. Fairy lights. What’s your favourite colour? Must be red and gold. Yeah, red and gold fairy lights.”

“You may find that she prefers green.” The soft voice was accompanied with arms sliding around Tony’s waist from behind and a chin coming to rest on his shoulder.

The warm smile that lit Tony’s face threatened to split his head in half, it was so wide. “Well, I’m assuming that since it’s nowhere near midnight that can’t be Santa Claus standing behind me.” He quipped lightly.

“Ho ho ho.”

He turned, still encircled by the strong arms. “How do you even *know* about Santa Claus?!”

“I’ve been about a bit.”

Tony leant forwards, his head coming to rest against the God’s collar-bone as the hold on him tightened fiercely. “Can’t believe I’m saying this; but God, I’ve missed you.” He breathed.

There was a throaty chuckle against him. “Sentiment.” Loki pulled back enough to look down at the baby in Tony’s arms and his smile turned from smirking to wonderment. “She’s grown…”
“Yeah, babies do that, who knew?” The man passed her over, watching the expression on Loki’s face turn to something akin to worship. He’d observed the trickster scared, angry, loving, pained, defeated, but this intense adoration was possibly the most beautiful thing he’d ever seen. “She has your eyes.” He added softly, looking back down at their daughter. “But everything else is pure Stark.” When there was no reply he glanced back up at the God.

Tears were silently running down Loki’s cheeks as she stared down at his daughter, entirely lost in a private world that contained only him and the baby. There was no way that Evie could remember him, but she seemed drawn to the dark haired man, her tiny fingers clutching his thumb like a life-line. “She’s so beautiful.” His voice was barely a murmur.

“Yeah. She also cries like a champ and could win an Olympic gold in pooping.” It had to be said, and Loki did chuckle weakly in response.

“Of course she does, being whiney runs in the family.”

“I do hope you’re talking about yourself.”

The trickster moved over to the bed and sat down, gently bouncing Evie as she smiled happily at him. He ignored Tony’s comment, focussing instead on the tiny girl. “Can she hold her head up yet?”

The man sat down next to him, just close enough so that their arms brushed. “If she’s lying on her stomach, yeah. Not for very long though.” A grin crossed his face. “You should have seen a few days ago; I’d put her down on her stomach, turned away to grab her rattle and when I turned back she’d rolled onto her back all by herself. I think she scared herself stupid, cried for nearly half an hour.”

Loki ran his finger down Evie’s nose and she made a snuffling noise at him, her face scrunching up before smiling again.

“She’s fond of you – she doesn’t like many people, and certainly not people she can’t remember meeting.” Tony said with a grin. “She cries every time Thor holds her now.”

Loki snorted softly at that. “Of course she’s fond of me.” Her lifted the baby up so that they were eye-level and she grabbed a lock of his hair. “Of course you’re fond of your Móðy.”

Well what do you know, even psychotic Norse God’s put on silly voices when talking to young babies. Tony hid his snigger, then the words registered.

“Wait, Móðy?” He tried to replicate Loki’s pronunciation of the word. M-oh-thee.

“It’s a derivative of the Norse term for mother; Móðir. I suppose it is equivalent to mummy.”

That should have been hilarious. It should have been priceless blackmail material that left Tony helpless with laughter.

But it wasn’t. And it didn’t.

This was the mother of his child – of their child – being able to interact with the baby for the first time since she’d been born. Loki had missed Evie’s first feed, first night, first smile, first everything. And would continue to miss the developmental milestones throughout the child’s life. And the Norse term for mummy only heightened the realisation that Evie would hardly ever use
the term, would probably grow up with Loki as a near stranger who visited twice a year.

This wasn’t just Loki missing out on seeing his child grow up and being able to form a bond with her, it was that the girl was going to lose out on having a mother around. Sure, Loki was certainly no woman, but he had been the one to give birth, he had been the one to carry her for nine months, to make the devastating decision to give her up so that she could have a secure future.

Neither of them deserved this. Heart-breaking.

It wasn’t until a gentle finger reached up to wipe away the wetness on his cheeks that Tony realised there were tears there. He hurriedly scrubbed a hand over his face to rid himself of the rest, trying to pretend that that hadn’t just happened.

“There are worse things in life,” Loki said softly. “I still get to see her at least.”

“Yeah. It’s still sad.” Tony leant his head against the God’s shoulder. He managed a smile as he looked down at Evie who was industrially trying to eat her own big toe, unaware of the conversation between her parents. “There’s so much the two of you will miss together.”

Loki laughed sadly. “You don’t know how lucky I am to even spend two days a year with her. It is more than I have ever had with Fenrir or Jormungandr.” He tipped his head to rest on Tony’s. “I know when to count my blessings.”

The mortal didn’t know what to say to that. The fact that Loki thought he was lucky with this arrangement was enough to make Tony think that he had an awful lot in his own life to be thankful for. Thinking of what he knew about the trickster’s very long life, it was unsurprising Loki was content with such a meagre lot; he’d had to grow used to everything working out ill for him in the end.

“I’ve always wondered, how old are you?” Tony asked quietly. The God chuckled.

“Old enough for you to be very much a toy boy.”

“Proper answer please.”

“You won’t like it.” Loki glanced sideways at Tony’s set expression and sighed. “Fine I was taken from Jotunheim as a newborn at the end of the war between Asgard and the Jotunn. That war removed the Joutunn presence from Midgard, what you all called the ice-age.”

Tony’s eyes widened. History wasn’t his speciality by any stretch of the imagination, especially glacial history but he knew that the last ice-age was stupidly long ago. Weren’t Neanderthal’s still around then?

“So you’re, what? Couple of thousand years old then?”

“A couple of thousand would put me at the end of the Roman era.” Loki tickled Evie’s tummy and was rewarded with a big smile. “Your father is an idiot, my dear.” He glanced mischievously at the man. “

Tony glanced up at the ceiling. “Jarvis, help me out here if you will.”

“I believe your guest is roughly five hundred thousand years old, sir.”

“Half a million!?” For the longest moment he just sat there, stunned. Sure he knew Loki was old – hello, the Vikings told stories about him – but it hadn’t occurred to him that the trickster was quite
Yet...it made sense. His quick mind was still able to work through things even when the rest of him was in shock and it was already making sense of certain things. Say the stories in the myths did actually happen, then given Loki’s age they would have happened during the dawn of mankind; long before any written word had been invented. All the early humans probably knew was that these beings were from another world. Bearing metal, domesticated animals, highly stylized clothing and a complex hierarchical system it was more than possible that the Asgardian’s would have been mistaken for deities by the primitive cavemen who were still only using flint-tools. And after the ‘Gods’ had left their stories would have been passed down by word of mouth through the generations until they became the pagan God’s of northern Europe.

However, just because he’d worked it out didn’t mean Tony was going to admit to it.

“And there are complaints that people are becoming parents at too old an age.”

“Oh I’m not that old, fath-Odin is far older than me.”

Tony had a snarky reply at the tip of his tongue, but was stopped when Evie decided that she was fed up with the current situation, as babies do, and began to cry.

“Oh rats, she’s probably tired.” Tony noted Loki’s raised eyebrow at his choice of wording and held his hands up defensively. “Hey, I try not to swear around her!”

“Very admirable.” Loki tried to bounce the baby a little, but she just cried harder.

“Uh, want me to..?”

“No, I can deal with a crying child, Tony.” The God rose to his feet, the sobbing baby safely ensconced in his arms. “Sleipnir was a nightmare.”

“Wasn’t he a horse?”

“An eight legged horse who refused to go to bed. He was a nightmare child.” There was fondness in the tricksters voice as he spoke.

“Sounds it.” Tony felt that familiar and disturbing warm glow somewhere around his arc reactor as he watched Loki pacing, gently rocking their crying baby.

“Do you ever sing to her?”

“Uh, no, not really. Jarvis plays Mozart. Supposed to be good for babies and all that. I can’t sing unless I’m in a shower.”

“Hmm.” Loki turned his back on the man to face the Christmas lights again.

For a moment Tony wasn’t sure what the taller man was doing until he heard the soft melody. Not quite singing, not quite whispering. It was a chant, but with a noticeable tune, although unlike any one the man had ever heard before. He vaguely recognised the language as the same ancient Norse Loki had used before.

Closing his eyes he could see images flicker past. Fire and ice, a world of darkness that was so alien from anything he’d ever seen, and yet familiar at the same time. Then the words changed and they were spinning out over towering waves, a longboat prow cutting through the water, shields hanging from its sides. Bearded warriors, icebergs looming, undiscovered lands, thunder in the sky.
“Tony.”

He opened his eyes again to see Loki smirking at him. “That was…different.”

“That was one of the original Nordic sagas which I don’t believe exists anymore, and certainly not the music. I would wager there are historians that would sell their souls for it.” Loki tuck the blanket around the now-silent baby. “She’s asleep.”

“You have got to teach me that.” Tony stood up as Loki walked towards him and rested his hands on the God’s hips, the baby between them. “See, it’s these little things that I wish we could share more often.”

“Be thankful for what we have, Stark.”

“Hmm.” Tony smoothed down Evie’s wayward hair, despite how short it was. “Is there any chance she’ll have magic?” He asked hopefully.

It was an abrupt topic change but it had obviously been preying on Tony’s mind for some time. Loki blinked at him in surprise, then gently cupped his hand around the back of the baby’s head, closing his eyes in concentration.

When he opened them again there was a flash of pain there that already told Tony the answer.

“I’m sorry, but no.” The trickster said quietly. “She doesn’t have any residual magic.”

“What, nothing?”

“Nothing. I strongly suspect that her life is indefinite – possibly immortal, but there is no magic backing it up.” He ran his finger down Evie’s nose – something that was fast becoming a habit. “Her immune system is strong, but the same as yours, and I can’t see any Jotunn characteristics.”

Tony stared at him. “Did you say immortal!?”

“Well, in the assumption that she does not meet an untimely end from an external influence it would appear that she otherwise won’t die.” Loki said it calmly, almost without thinking – after all, such things were normal to him. However, when he looked up his gaze lit with concern as the inventor staggered backwards away from him, falling back to sit on the bed. “Tony…?”

“Give me a minute.” The man leant forwards, his head in his hands. He waved a hand at the door to the nursery. “Her crib’s through there if you want to put her to bed.”

Loki had the distinct feeling that he’d said something wrong, but decided to give Ironman his space for a few minutes and walked through to the other room.

It was dimly lit by a red night-light in the corner that gave the whole place a cozy glow. The God moved over to the crib – an extravagant affair that Tony had obviously paid top dollar for – but didn’t put the baby down.

This was a precious moment that he had yet to have. Just the two of them, mother and child. And a moment where it didn’t matter that he let his emotions bubble over and the tears to freely flow.

He had reached the point where he would allow a few tears infront of Tony – emotion was not a thing to be ashamed of, after all – but he still usually refused to truly let go as he now did.

His shoulders began to hitch slightly as the tears intensified, turning into full blown sobs, albeit
quiet ones. As much as he’d tried to tell both himself and Tony that they should be grateful for him to at least see Evie twice a year it still hurt. She was of his body and blood and he had missed her from the moment that he had had to leave her. His arms had felt empty for every long moment of the three long months and he had no idea how he was meant to get through the next eight months without seeing the child.

“Oh my darling, I wish I could watch you grow.” The trickster managed to get the words out around the wracking sobs. “I want to be here for you. I want to see you walk, and laugh, and learn. I want you to be safe.” He managed a weak laugh as Evie gurgled in her sleep and fidgeted. “Please understand that I leave you because I want you to be safe. Don’t grow up hating me for all of this.”

And suddenly there were arms wrapping around his waist from behind. He hadn’t even heard Stark entering the room.

“She won’t hate you. I’ll make sure of it.” The man’s voice was muffled as he pressed his cheek against the God’s back. “She’ll grow up knowing exactly who you are and what you’ve given up for her and she’ll love you for it. I promise.”

“I don’t think that is something you can promise, Tony, but I appreciate it.” Loki pressed a gentle kiss to his daughter’s forehead then carefully laid her on her back in the crib. Then he turned in Tony’s arms and rested his head in the crook of the man’s shoulder. Tony could feel the sobs still running through the trickster, although they were ebbing, and he tightened his hold. “Hey, it’s going to be okay.”

“How exactly?” Loki’s voice was stifled by his partner’s shoulder but still sounded slightly amused.

“Oh…okay, you got me there, but it’s what people say in these sorts of circumstances.” Tony pulled back enough to give the taller man a small grin. “I don’t usually do comforting.”

“Possibly because you have no talent for it.”

“Oh shut up. You’re clinging pretty tightly for someone who thinks I suck at this.” His grin widened as Loki managed a small smile of his own. “Come on, we can go and talk this over if you like.”

He gently but firmly towed the God from the room.

“What if she wakes?” Loki asked as the door was gently closed behind them.

He was directed to the baby monitor on Tony’s bedside table. “That’s a one-way type of radio. She can’t hear us, but if she starts crying we can hear her. Wonderful thing.” Stark explained.

“So it seems.” The trickster sat down heavily on the edge of the bed. He looked up as the man came to sit next to him, looking equally emotionally worn. “My earlier observation upset you, I’m sorry. I didn’t expect you to react so badly.”

“Yeah. I wasn’t expecting to find out that our daughter is immortal.” Tony said shakily.

“Why is that a problem?”

“Where do I begin?” He gestured with one hand around the room. “I’d expect her to outlive me. I’m not getting any younger and kids usually outlive their parents. They should outlive their parents. But to find that she’ll outlive everyone is a lot.” He shrugged hopelessly. “What if she marries? She’ll have to see them die whilst never growing old herself. She’ll never have a friend
that will be with her forever. Hell, she may even outlive her own kids if the immortal thing isn’t
passed on and I would never wish that on her. No parent should have to outlive their child.”

“I…hadn’t considered that.”

“You wouldn’t. Being immortal isn’t a new thing for you.” He sounded bitter, although he was
well aware that it wasn’t truly Loki’s fault. “But, hey! You’re immortal, aren’t you? So at least
she’ll have her Móhðy.”

“Yes. She will.” Loki acceded quietly. “Once I have removed the threat the chitauri pose.”

“Yeah, get rid of them first.” Tony glanced at him side-long. “How’s that going, by the way?”

“Poorly. They seem to be able to trace me no-matter where I am and I have yet to be able to get a
fixed lock on them. We are currently playing a very elaborate game of cat and mouse.” The
thought seemed to amuse the trickster slightly. “It is the first time I have come up against an enemy
who has – as you would say it – a jump on me.”

Tony had tilted his head to one side, eyes narrowed in a manner that told anyone who knew him
that a Thought was forming. “What about being invisible? Surely they can’t hunt you if they can’t
see you?”

“They hunt my magical signature; visibility has nothing to do with it.” Loki held up a hand quickly.
“And before you ask, that is not something I can hide.”

“Huh.” The man’s face fell as his quickly thought-out plan was immediately thrown out the
window. “What about-”

“Whilst I appreciate your wish to help, you truly know very little of the situation. Please don’t
insult my intelligence by assuming you can possibly think of something I have not already
considered.”

Tony drew in a sharp breath. “Okay. Ouch. You do know that sometimes it helps to have another
person’s input, right? Has that superior intellect remembered that it was me who came up with the
plan that means you get to see your daughter?”

His angry tone of voice, and complete disregard for Loki’s put-down seemed to draw the God up
short. Rather than backing off, the human appeared to relish hammering his own point home just
as hard.

Loki tilted his head to one side. “Tony Stark, did I ever tell you what attracted me to you?” He
derailed the conversation entirely with the simple question and Tony merely looked at him blankly.
“I was intrigued by your total disregard for the fact that I could disembowel you with a mere
thought. Other mortals reacted to me with fear, anger, violence. But you, you calmly told me that
you wished to threaten me then proceeded to have a very sarcastic conversation in which you
insulted myself, yourself, and your colleagues.”

“And questioned your sexual prowess. Which, might I add, you have now more than proved.”
Stark put in.

“Quite. But you intrigued me. And people that intrigue me usually end up attracting me. Even on
Asgard there weren’t many who would dare contradict or talk back to me.” Loki smiled wryly.
“My reputation for revenge was enough to ward them off. But I haven’t been able to warn you
away. Even when showing up with your child.”
Tony grinned at the summery. “Dear me, is that the dreaded sentiment I’m hearing, Mr Laufeyjarsson?”

Loki appeared to consider the words he’d just spoken, before a curiously soft smile crossed his face. “I believe it is. Who would have thought? Shall we put it down to my having missed you, and still being awash with the hormones left behind by the pregnancy?”

“I…Um…Wow. Yeah. Yeah, pregnancy hormones are a good explanation. Let’s stick with that before this goes too deeply into the emotional realms neither of us want to tread.” Tony’s expression brightened. “Hey! That was quite poetic for me! You must be rubbing off on me-”

The rest of whatever he wished to say was abruptly cut off as Loki’s mouth was suddenly on his own, hands grabbing at the front of his shirt to drag him close. The desperation in the gesture took him by surprise, enough so that he allowed the trickster’s weight to push him down onto his back.

“Uh…” He managed to break away enough to speak. “Is this such a good idea right now?”

Loki had moved on to pressing kisses along his lover’s jaw, and barely raised his head to answer the question. “Why would it not be?”

Tony managed to wriggle a hand up between their bodies so that he could press it against the God’s mouth, stopping the trail of kisses. “Because you appear to be emotionally compromised.” He winced when he heard his own excuse. “And I’m being responsible. See? This is what fatherhood has done to me!” He looked up to meet Loki’s over-bright gaze and frowned slightly.

“Stark, has it ever occurred to you that I became emotionally compromised in this situation a long time ago?”

Oh.

Oh.

That was more of an admission than Tony had ever expected to hear. Had he even ever wanted to hear it either?

Part of him, a large part, was screaming a resounding no at the whole situation because having a child together was one thing, confessing to emotions beyond being able to tolerate each other was entirely another. But that was admittedly only a part of him – a much smaller and much darker corner of his mind was trying to desperately surface to admit to a similar emotional position.

However, Loki seemed to have already realised that his confession was most certainly not appreciated and shrugged it aside. “As it is, I will leave it at that. Emotionally compromised. If either of us say any more on the matter then I fear one of us shall utter words neither of us wish to either hear or say.”

“Yeah…Good plan.” Tony moved his hand away from Loki’s mouth to gently cup the God’s cheek. “If it’s anything, I think I might be somewhat compromised too. And I shouldn’t have said that.”

“No. You shouldn’t have.” Loki rolled off of the inventor to lie beside him on the bed, staring up at the ceiling. “Life was easier when we were trying to kill each other.” He muttered.

“Agreed. Only had to worry about certain death and the glazier bill.”

The God glanced at him in annoyance. “You just won’t let the incident with your window go, will
“You threw me through it, the memory is somewhat seared into my mind as one of the most terrifying moments of my life.”

“Huh.” Loki moved his gaze back to the ceiling. After a few moments a small grin crossed his face. “You had a tremendous view on the way down, though.”

“Yes. Yes I did. Although I admit I was focusing quite a lot on the ground at the time. It has a very nasty habit of rushing towards you at an extremely terminal velocity if you’re falling.”

The ceiling was inspected by both men for a few more moments before Tony let out a small snort of laughter. He heard a corresponding chuckle from Loki and began to snigger.

“Oh, I think I’m going insane.” He stated airily, running a hand through his hair. That triggered an actual laugh from the trickster next to him.

“Going insane? I believe you passed that threshold a long time ago, Stark.”

“You probably have a point.” Tony rolled over, propping his head up on one hand, elbow on the bed-covers. “But that’s apparently what being a dad does to a person.”

“Apparently.” Loki was watching him with a small smile still on his lips. Neither of them questioned it when Tony leant over and pressed a kiss to the trickster’s mouth, Loki’s hand coming up to cup the back of the man’s head.

“What are the chances of you getting pregnant again?” The inventor whispered, barely breaking contact.

“Non-existent. Now that I know it could happen I keep a contraceptive enchantment going.” Loki smirked and nipped at the man’s lower lip. “No consequences this time.”

“Just what I wanted to hear.”

“Who says you will be the one in control here?”

Tony grinned smugly. “Oh don’t even bother, we both know you prefer to bottom. Even a God can have his weaknesses.” He raised an eye-brow at the trickster’s affronted look. “Don’t deny it, oh God of lies. I can see riiight through you.”

“I doubt that, Stark.” Loki’s breath caught in his throat as the mortal chuckled and moved himself over to sprawl across the God.

“We’ll see.” Tony leant down as if for another kiss, but instead took the trickster’s lower lip between his teeth, biting hard enough to draw a spot of blood. He heard the quick intake of breath the action caused, the hitch in the chest beneath his own. Releasing the abused flesh he traced his tongue along Loki’s jawline and up to the God’s ear. “You’re mine and you know it.”

“Mmhmm, that seems to be the case.” For a moment the quiet agreement was surprising before Loki’s mouth curved into a wicked grin. “But you are equally mine, Stark, and there is nothing you can do to change that.” With Tony nosing at his ear he was in the perfect position to latch onto the man’s throat, sinking his teeth in enough to mark, although he held back from drawing blood.

The mortal huffed with laughter, twisting back to steal a proper kiss. He felt warm hands sneaking up under the back of his shirt, nails running lightly over his skin. It was more difficult for him to
return the gesture due to lying full length on top of the God, so instead he began working apart the buttons down the front of Loki’s tunic. Thankfully the trickster hadn’t worn his full ensemble and was dressed down in a simple tunic and trousers combo that would make removing them a lot simpler than having to wrestle with the buckles and clasps of traditional Aesir gear.

He pulled the first few buttons open and tackled the pale skin that was exposed, nipping and licking to leave red blotches along the smooth collar-bones. The scrape of teeth along skin had Loki chuckling softly, eyes closing as he allowed himself to relax back against the pillows.

“Told you I’d be in control.”

“Hmm, just get on with it, Stark, I don’t wish to fight you for dominance this time.”

“Unusual.” Tony finished with the buttons and let his lover’s tunic fall open. “…oh.”

A long scar curled up along Loki’s abdomen, healing but still livid. The inflammation around the edges told of a recently banished infection – possibly explaining why he hadn’t been able to use his magic to heal it entirely. It looked like it had been horribly painful.

“Chitauri?”

“A closer brush with them than I would have liked.”

Tony nodded in understanding but decided he wouldn’t press the point. And it certainly explained why Loki was allowing him to dominate the encounter without a fight – healing or not the wound was probably still too tender to stand up to a wrestling match.

The trickster’s breath hitched in his throat as Tony gently kissed along the scar, tongue teasing the reddened skin. Again, the level of trust being shown was astounding. To allow someone else so close to an unhealed wound was a privilege Loki had stopped permitting, even when he had still lived in Asgard. And now this man, this ant beneath his boot, was so close, so dangerously close and he didn’t feel in the least bit threatened.

A small gasp was pulled from the God’s lips as teeth found and bit into his left nipple, a tongue immediately following to soothe the hurt. After months of being on the run the safety of his current situation heightened the sharp spike of pleasure that shot through him at the touch. He was always the vocal one, and had no problem letting Tony know that he thoroughly approved of what the man was doing.

Eager hands pulled the trickster’s tunic away entirely and he arched up to let Tony remove the fabric before tugging the inventors own shirt up over the man’s head to throw it God-knows-where. Loki dug his fingers into the man’s back, kneading the firm muscles as Tony went back to licking and nipping his way along the curling scar.

It should not have felt as good as it did.

Conceding complete control to the human, Loki allowed his hips to be lifted up enough for the man to slide his trousers and under-garments down his legs. He suppressed a chuckle as he realised Tony hadn’t thought the move through – he was still wearing his boots – so rid himself of the footwear with a flick of his wrist meaning that the human could finish divesting him of his clothes.

There was another wound on the God’s left thigh, from the same close encounter with the chitauri, but healing better than the scar on his chest. It wrapped almost fully around his leg and a spark of understanding lit inside Tony as he realised what weapon had caused the strange marks: having fought Vanko he recognised the unusual signature of a whip. Of course, the chitauri probably used
a power source he’d never heard of, but it still left behind something almost indistinguishable from
the arc-reactor powered monstrosity Vanko had used.

“I don’t remember seeing them using whips when they attacked us.” He murmured against the
scar, feeling the tremor that ran through the trickster’s leg from the light breath of air.

“They didn’t. You fought an army intent to kill. The groups after me want me alive.”

“Hmm.” Tony nipped his way back up his partner’s thigh and along the groove of his pelvis,
ending up with a kiss to the trickster’s hip-bone. “To be honest, I rather like having you alive.”

Loki gasped as the man went in for the kill and his eyes closed at the searing heat suddenly
surrounding his growing erection. “To be honest, there are times when it has its perks.” The words
came out slightly strangled and Tony’s responding chuckle sent another jolt of pleasure through
him. “Tony…”

It was the first time the man had heard his first name coming from those lips during such intimacy
and he decided he very much approved. In a bid to hear it again he took a deep breath, hollowed
his cheeks and went down. Hell yeah he could control his gag reflex!

The action was well rewarded as Loki arched with a deep groan, a hand coming down to pull at the
man’s short hair. Tony smirked inwardly and repeated the action, taking as much as he could and
using his hand for the rest until his partner bucked up into him urgently. Most people would choke
when that happens. Tony isn’t most people.

Instead he allowed the movement, relaxing so that Loki could do it again should he wish and kept
on going, tongue working along the firm flesh. There was a hard tug on his hair, letting him know
that his efforts were very much appreciated and he felt Loki’s knee brush the side of his head as
the trickster flexed his leg and drew it up, a subconscious gesture that he probably hadn’t realised
he’d made, but which was all too clearly begging Tony for more.

More that the mortal was more than prepared to give.

Fumbling somewhat, he reached out blindly with one hand to the bedside cabinet and flailed
around until his fingers closed around the tube that he was looking for. Experience with this sort of
thing meant that he was very capable of popping the cap open one-handed and squeezing a liberal
amount of the contents across his fingers.

Continuing to use his mouth, he teasingly circled a single finger around the God’s entrance, almost
tickling the sensitive skin.

Loki’s gasp, followed by a deep groan made Tony realise just how tight his jeans were around his
own pulsing erection. He carefully inched his finger in, relishing at the warmth and what it
promised for him. Another flick of his tongue coincided with his finger sliding in up to the hilt and
Loki let out a sound that Tony only refrained from calling a whimper because Loki most certainly
didn’t whimper like that.

“Feels…different…” The trickster whispered.

The words almost froze Tony for a second, before his brain registered that different didn’t
necessarily mean painful and that Loki most certainly didn’t sound in pain. The man lifted his head
up, although kept his finger gently moving inside his partner’s warm body.

“Do you want me to stop?”
“Valhalla! No! I said different, not bad.” Loki’s voice was a breathless moan. “Feels good.”

Tony frowned slightly. “I’m not doing anything different…”

Oh.

Yes he was.

The realisation struck at the same time that the God elucidated the subject.

“We’ve never been gentle before…” He whispered. “We’ve only ever treated this as another form of warfare and taken what we needed from each other.” He arched as Tony’s questing finger twisted inside him. “Feels good to be gentle, didn’t know it felt so good…”

The inventor raised an eyebrow at that – it revealed slightly too much of Loki’s previous sex-life for him to be comfortable with. He’d also assumed that since the God had been so receptive and eager for the near-violent sex they’d previously had that Loki preferred things rough.

Obviously even Loki didn’t know everything about his preferences.

Okay then. Gentle. Tony could do gentle. Especially with the utterly gorgeous man spread out under him.

He leant back down to lap at the head of the trickster’s erection, slipping a second finger in at the same time. It was certainly easier using proper lubrication as opposed to saliva as they always had in the past. Sometimes they hadn’t even bothered with that much. Loki definitely seemed to approve of the addition when he moaned loudly, his hips shifting against Tony’s hand. The man curled the two fingers together and searched until-

“Ah!” Loki’s cry surprised both of them – whilst he was usually vocal it was mostly towards the end of their coupling. To be making such sounds in the early stages was unusual for him; Tony was obviously doing something very right.

“Enough...Stark…” The God’s fingers untangled from Tony’s hair to wrench the man’s head up. “I want…you…” He used his hold on Tony’s chin to pull the inventor up into a deep and messy kiss, seemingly uncaring of his own taste on Tony’s tongue. The man mumbled against Loki’s lips, something about ‘position’ and ‘can’t reach’ but the trickster solved the problem by putting his flexibility to good use. Lifting his hips he drew his legs up to his chest so that his knees draped over his partner’s shoulders, effectively folding himself in half.

“Take me!” And there was the fire and demand that had characterised all of their encounters so far.

Who was Tony Stark to deny a God?

He lent back for long enough to divest himself of his jeans, before reclaiming Loki’s lips. Reaching down he gave his own throbbing erection a couple of firm strokes before guiding himself to his partner’s entrance.

Loki groaned, low and deep in the back of his throat as the man slowly pushed in, clawing at Tony’s back with his nails. He wasn’t entirely prepared enough for the full stretch so the pleasure was accompanied by a slight burn that he revelled in.

“Uhhhh…” The sound drawn from the trickster’s mouth was so sinful it should have been illegal. His head fell back against the pillow, mouth open and panting hard.
Tony waited until he was fully seated inside the tight heat, then lent forwards to nip at his partner’s ear. “You okay?” His voice was shaking as he forced himself to hold still.

“More than. Move!”

Tony wasn’t one to leave his partner’s disappointed.

He pulled out almost fully before driving back, the familiar heat and tightness welcoming him in as Loki bucked up to meet the thrust. The angle meant that Tony was able to penetrate deeply and it was evident that the trickster thoroughly approved of this fact as he let out appreciative moan.

“Faster…” He removed one hand from Tony’s back to pull the man into a demanding and messy kiss.

Instead of complying the man paused, earning himself a frustrated growl and an impatient scratch along his shoulders. Tony grinned at the noise before grabbing both of the God’s wrists and pinning them to the bed on either side of Loki’s head.

“Hey-”

The trickster’s protest was cut off by another hard thrust and he decided that complaining wasn’t really all that important in the current circumstances. Tony felt the soft huff of laughter from his partner and took it as permission to keep going.

Laughter quickly turned to gasps and moans as the man set a fast rhythm, nipping and licking at Loki’s neck, jawline and ears. The licentious sounds of their coupling filled the bedroom; skin on skin, gasping cries of pleasure, harsh grunts and a constant litany of pleas falling from Loki’s silver tongue.

“Stark…More…Please…so close…”

The fractured sentences didn’t make sense, but the urgency in them spurred Tony on as he drove into the willing body hard and fast. He could feel the heat coiling in the pit of his stomach, warning him that he wouldn’t last much longer.

It was just as he made this observation that Loki suddenly arched up into him with a wild cry, chanting Tony’s name breathlessly as his orgasm ripped through him. It entirely took the mortal by surprise and any control he was holding onto was shattered by the rippling waves that surrounded his erection. He released Loki’s wrists and collapsed to his forearms, hips taking on a life of their own until he was hurtling into his own release, biting into the tricksters shoulder to muffle his deep groan.

Loki clung to the man with all four limbs, relishing in the after-shocks of his own high as Tony shuddered and shook above him. It had certainly been far too long since they’d been together.

After a few moments the inventor stopped holding his weight up and collapsed onto his lover’s chest, burrowing his head into the crook of Loki’s neck. In response the trickster managed to untangle his legs from around the man’s shoulders and let them flop down to the mattress.

“Tony…” His breathless whisper was only just heard over Stark’s heavy breathing.

“Mmm. Nice hearing you say m’name like that…” Tony murmured. “Should out-law your after-sex voice…Too sexy.” After a few moments he found the energy to raise his head a little. “You were right. Gentle’s nice.”
Loki let out a soft laugh in agreement. “Very nice.” He slung an arm lazily over the mortal’s back as Tony’s head dropped back down to use his chest as a cushion.

For the longest moment all was peaceful as pulses wound down and breathing slowed to a more regular pace. Ironman had closed his eyes, his mind wandering close to the land of dreams whilst Loki absentmindedly ran fingers through his short hair.

Then the baby monitor lit up.

Tony cracked an eye open to glare at it as the sound of Evie crying filled the room.

“I guess we should be grateful that she saved it for after we finished.” He muttered.

“If you remove yourself from pinning me down I’ll see what’s wrong.”

The man sighed theatrically, but rolled to one side so that Loki was able to sit up. As the God tried to hunt down his discarded clothing, Tony glanced at the alarm clock on the bed-side table.

12:34

“Hey.” He reached out and snagged Loki’s arm as the trickster moved past him and pulled the tall man down into another kiss, albeit a quick one. He pulled away to be met with a confused look and grinned lazily. “Merry Christmas.”

Loki blinked at him, then smiled back warmly. “Merry Christmas, Tony.”
Chapter 5

Christmas passed by far too quickly for Tony’s liking.

Loki left early in the morning, some when around five o’clock. They had spent the rest of the night talking – Evie lying on the bed between them and obstinately refusing to go to sleep. She had been completely entranced by the dark-haired God, which Tony considered as unfair since Loki had conjured up small strings of stars that floated around her head and changed colour. Definitely cheating.

However it had helped to keep her amused whilst the two of them discussed more serious thing; namely the chitauri.

Whilst they were doggedly following Loki’s magical signature, he was managing to stay a step ahead by never remaining in one place for more than twenty four hours. The encounter where he’d been injured turned out to have been due to a large mis-calculation on Loki’s part. He’d been attempting to meditate and recuperate the energy lost through the constant teleportation and – simple as – lost track of how long he’d been there. It took two days for the chitauri to pin-point his location (middle of the Siberian desert) and to launch an attack that was enough of a surprise for them to land the two blows on the God before he could gather himself and vanish.

“Why not fight and kill them? More your style.” Tony had wanted to know.

And the answer had been simple enough. Kill a few and more would just keep on coming. How long could one person – God or not – fight off an unending hoard? So Loki had gritted his teeth and rather than standing his ground as every molecule of his existence demanded he had fought his nature and fled.

He hadn’t made the same mistake twice and made sure to change location each day.

“That sounds exhausting…” Tony noted after a while.

And it was a relief for the trickster to admit that yes it was. He was tired to the bone of running the whole time and there was absolutely nothing he could do about it. It made no difference if he was on Earth, or shot off to the other side of the multiverse, they would still hunt him down anyway. So he stuck to the small blue planet purely for the sense of familiarity it lent.

The planet he once would have ruled now had become something of a sanctuary.

Oh the irony.

When the time came for Loki to leave they didn’t make a big deal out of it. Evelyn was sleeping again, so didn’t really notice the gentle kiss pressed to her forehead or tear that accidently splashed onto her cheek.

It was harder for the two men to work out what to say to each other this time round. Sentiment had been expressed, tears had been openly shed and emotions laid bare. It was almost awkward.

“I…It appears that the giving of gifts is expected during this celebration of the birth of Christ.” Loki said softly. “I wasn’t entirely sure what was appropriate in this day and age – I am still somewhat behind on the times.” He waved a hand in the air – a somewhat complicated gesture – and two wrapped boxes appeared in said hand.
“The general Earth saying is that ‘it’s the thought that counts’. More than in this case – Tony hadn’t even thought the God would care about the traditions surrounding the Christian celebration. He was, putting it frankly, stunned. “Uh. I did get something for you too. Not sure if pagans gave gifts at Yule in the old days, but I thought, hey! Everyone likes presents, right?” Without waiting for a response he turned away and pulled a small package out of the bedside cupboard. It was shoddily covered in red paper showing dinky robins and looked very childish next to the two immaculately wrapped boxes that Loki held – one in silver paper and the other in gold. Both had a neat runic inscription on the lid denoting whose was whose.

They didn’t open them then and there – making the informed decision that it would save on sentiment and prolong the farewell too much. Rather, they kissed, shared a few whispered words and Loki finally vanished.

When Tony later opened the presents with Evie he had to smile. The baby’s box contained five long strings of the magical stars that the trickster had conjured, able to be pinned up or held in the hand. He strongly suspected that they would turn out to be rather long lasting.

His own present made him laugh though: A book.

A *magic* book. Well, a book on magic, but in his mind ‘magic book’ sounded better. He had a feeling that it was actually written in a different language – his eyes felt like they were trying to see both pictures of an optical illusion at once – but he was processing it in English. Whilst the man had no preconceptions that he would ever be able to *do* any magic – Loki had made it fairly clear to him in past conversations – it was going to be fascinating to read up on a subject he knew nothing about.

And meanwhile – somewhere in a small hotel room in Nairobi – Loki’s musical laughter was heard as he opened up his own gift to find a patented StarkPlayer. A small note alongside the device informed him that it contained examples of music from every single era and genre Tony could think of. Evidently the human believed that Loki needed to update his knowledge in certain areas. A bit of a joke, but with underlying thoughtfulness. Very Stark.

MWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWM

Time moved on, as it is wont to do so and Evie grew. By her ninth month she was beginning to crawl and getting under everyone’s feet. Switching between moving on all fours and shuffling around on her bottom she could move deceptively quickly. It wasn’t long before the baby discovered the art of pulling herself up to her feet using any and everything in reach to do so – including peoples legs.

The group as a whole had initially protested against this – if nothing else worried at the responsibility this caused. However, none of them were immune to a tiny chubby fist grabbing their trouser leg and a little chortle of laughter once the child was upright. It soon became commonplace to see one of Earth’s Mightiest Heroes frozen in place by fear whilst being used as a support.

And the developmental milestone gave Tony a plan.

Evie had been calling him ‘Dada’ since she was six months old – he’d cried his heart out the first time he heard it – and that combined with her nearing walking had given him an idea that seemed both ambitious and phenomenal at the same time.

He had a large selection of photographs of Loki, mostly CCTV, taken back during the chitauri invasion. Whittling them down to a few choice pictures where the God wasn’t looking psychotic Tony began showing them to Evie on a twice daily basis, introducing the trickster as Móhðy.
It was a moment of pure joy when the baby began repeating the word, albeit badly pronounced to begin with.

And before they knew it, September was coming around again, and Tony couldn’t believe that it had been a year since Loki had appeared in his room and changed his life forever. A year of being a father and he’d somehow miraculously not horribly screwed it up yet.

Yet. He didn’t hold out hope for making it entirely unscathed through his daughter’s growth.

With Evelyn’s first birthday came the warm knowledge that they would see Loki once more. It had been eight very long months, in which Tony had made Jarvis keep a video record of practically every moment of the baby’s life so that Loki could watch all of her achievements. The resulting montage was almost an hour long.

So it was with bated breath that Tony retired early the night before Evie’s birthday, waiting impatiently for the trickster to show up.

The baby had made it very clear that she wanted to sit on his bed, so was happily perched on the duvet playing with the rattle (it was near impossible to separate her from the small toy). Tony sat beside her with his tablet, working through some complex formulae that were so far from normal mathematics that he didn’t even think about using numbers at this point. Instead a long stream of Greek letters and esoteric symbols (Tony had made up some of his own after realising that he couldn’t express what he needed to with those available) ran along the tablet’s screen, unintelligible to any but their creator.

The room was essentially silent except for the tinkling bells of Evie’s rattle, so the quiet cough from the corner of the room was easily heard.

Tony’s head shot up, a wide grin blossoming across his face.

“You took your time!”

The God raised an eyebrow in amusement. He was wearing human clothes for once; an Aran-knit jumper and – of all things – faded denim jeans. Tony wanted to make a stupid remark, but the look on Loki’s face as Evie sat up to see who it was drove all such thoughts from him. The baby stared at the new-comer for a few moments before she finally seemed to recognise him as the same person from all the photographs Tony had been coaching her with and reached out her arms.

The simple action seemed to stun the trickster, his eyes widening almost impossibly. Tony took the opportunity to pick Evie up – her attention still firmly on her Móðir – and set her on the floor by the bed so that she had to grab hold of the edge of the mattress to stay upright. It was very easy to read the emotions that flashed across the baby’s face: she was here, the interesting person she wanted to explore was over there, ergo she had to get herself from here to there.

Tony held his breath as he watched the child try to work out what to do. She was just about old enough to have the beginnings of problem-solving and it looked like she was reaching the only conclusion. With a determined little pout that was very reminiscent of the infamous Stark-concentration-face Evie released her hold on the mattress and took a few wobbly steps forwards to Loki.

The trickster fell to his knees, eyes over-bright with the suspicion of tears and arms open so that when the baby inevitably fell over he caught her. She stared up at him, green eyes meeting identical green eyes – their only shared feature – then giggled in delight and tried to grab his hair.
“Móðøy!”

And Loki broke.

He curled over, hugging his daughter to his chest as she gurgled happily and pulled at the knitted sweater he wore.

“Hey, it’s okay.”

There was a gentle hand on his shoulder, Tony sounding both concerned and understanding.

“Were they…?”

“Her first steps, yeah.” The man knelt down so that he could wrap an arm around Loki’s shaking shoulders. “I wasn’t sure if she would or not, but it was worth a try. She’s been standing for weeks now so it was only a matter of time. I really wanted you to be here to see her walk the first time.” He was aware that he was babbling, but seeing a deity break down was always a nerve-wracking moment and when he was worried he always talked more than was good for him.

“Thank you…” Loki raised his head enough for Tony to see the tears and the small smile that contrasted them.

“Móðøy.” Evie drew both men’s attention back to her with her impatient little voice and a hard tug on Loki’s hair. She smiled again when Loki gently tapped her on the nose.

“The first time I hear you speak and you’re already so demanding.” His amused admonishment was betrayed by the crack in his voice and the tears that refused to stop. “Look at you, already so big. I bet you cause all sorts of trouble.”

“As befits the daughter of the God of mischief.” Tony fondly ruffled the baby’s hair and she giggled in delight.

“She looks like you.” Loki traced his finger along his daughter’s jawline, studying her features intently. She seemed to revel in the attention and tried to mirror the action, resting her chubby hand on his cheek.

“Your eyes.”

Said eyes crinkled in a smile. “Indeed.” The trickster rested his fingers against Evie’s tiny hand. “Does she speak much else yet?”

Tony grinned proudly. “She can nearly say daddy now, and yes and no. To be honest I’ve spent most of my time getting her to say Móðøy for you. Took forever to find photos of you where you didn’t look psychotic or evil.”

That caused Loki’s small smile to widen slightly. “I appreciate the effort.” His expression turned serious again as the human chuckled. “I do mean it, Tony. I can’t express my gratitude enough for all that you are doing to allow me to be a part of her life.”

The raw emotion hurt. For someone to be so grateful just because they were allowed to see their own child was more than Tony wanted to think about.

“Don’t. You don’t have to express any gratitude, she’s your daughter; you have a right to see her and to be with her.”
Loki ran his spare hand over his face with a tired sigh, wiping away the tear tracks. “If only that were the case. Maybe one day but not yet.”

“Still no break-through with the chitauri?”

The trickster glanced at Tony with a resigned smile. “Don’t you think I would have been here and told you?” He asked gently. “They’re still chasing and I’m still running.”

“Have you had to fight them again?”

There was actually an expression of genuine embarrassment on Loki’s face for a brief moment before he composed himself. “There was a brief encounter after I let my guard down. You may have heard about a volcanic eruption in Iceland…?”

“Not a volcano?”

“Not entirely, no. The eruption did occur, but may have had some help in starting.”

Tony ran his gaze over the God, taking in the gaunt features and tired eyes. “How much damage did you take?”

Loki turned his attention back to Evie, conjuring up a kaleidoscope of butterflies that resulted in the baby squealing happily and trying to reach for them. “A little. Not as much as when I last saw you.” At the inventor’s stern glare he sighed and rolled up the edge of his jumper enough to reveal the gash that ran along his hip-bone.

“Why can’t you heal what they do to you?”

An arched eyebrow, as if the answer to the question were obvious. “The chitauri are from another universe, their technology and methods are vastly different from those in this universe and are incompatible with my own magic.” At Tony’s frown the God rolled his eyes and tried to elaborate. “Envision my magic and the chitauri power-sources as sound waves. My sorcery oscillates at the same frequency as the universe which I am from; I am in harmony with it and therefore can twist and weave it about myself in the form of spells. The chitauri oscillate at a different frequency, a higher frequency. Now imagine those two sound waves meeting.”

Tony bit his lip, nose scrunching up in consternation. As a physicist it wasn’t difficult to see the problem Loki was having. If a high frequency sound wave met one of a lower frequency it would destroy it, cancelling out both itself and the lower wave. Loki’s magic was being cancelled out by whatever power source the chitauri used, meaning that he was probably ineffectual against them in battle as well as unable to remove himself of the wounds left by said power source.

“If you can get me something that demonstrates their technology I could work on that for you?” He offered quietly.

Loki merely grinned knowingly. “No, you wouldn’t. You would start off with the best of intentions and end up accidently creating a super-weapon, or time portal, or some other ridiculous notion which would inevitably blow up your laboratory.”

“Uh. Yeah, okay, I’ll grant you that.”

“…Tauri?”

The two men looked back down at Evie who had a frown of concentration on her face.
“Is she trying to say-?”

“Yeah, let’s not name them around her if we can help it.” Tony said grimly.

Loki gently tipped their daughter’s chin up to make eye contact with her. “I won’t let them get to you, Evelyn.” He promised softly. “I swear to you that they will never harm you, my little bird, no matter what.”

Evie was far too young to understand what was being said, but seemed to realise that the black-haired person who held her so tightly was someone she should return the affection to. Her arms were too short to reach around Loki’s neck, but she tried anyway.

“Móði.”

They filled the next few hours with Loki and Evie playing until the child fell asleep in his arms, her head on his shoulder. The trickster put her to bed, then he and Tony spent the rest of the night together in the inventor’s bed.

Over the next few years this developed into a pattern.

And Evelyn grew.

By the time of her fourth birthday she was able to anticipate her mother’s arrival and hold a decent conversation with him, much to his evident delight. She continued to take after Tony in the looks department, but it was slowly becoming apparent that she had inherited her cognitive powers from both parents. Loki’s keen intelligence and phenomenal memory for facts had been combined with Tony’s unique way of knowing how the world worked just by looking at it and his skill with looking at problems in a completely different way to everyone else. All in all she was becoming an incredibly precocious child prone to tantrums and sulks when she couldn’t understand what was going on around her.

Much like Tony imagined Loki had been as a child.

It hardly mattered, all of the Avenger’s still doted on her.

Initially Tony had intended to have his daughter go to a regular school and have a normal education. However, that ideal was ruined after it was made pretty damn clear that – restraining orders be damned – the press were just never going to leave Ironman’s daughter alone. It also became apparent very quickly that if the press wanted her for interviews about living with the Avengers then it wasn’t worth contemplating what would happen if an enemy got their hands on her. In the end Tony played the ever paranoid father and decided to have her home-schooled; a job that was left to Jarvis. The AI seemed to be thrilled – as much as a robotic personality could be – and downloaded every curriculum he could find from across the world and compiled them all to create what he deemed to be the perfect set of lesson plans.

Evie did still get out and about though. Dancing lessons (Steve’s idea), horse riding (Loki’s insistence) and gymnastics (Natasha’s input) all kept her busy, although it was pretty obvious that she had no talent what-so-ever for any of the graceful arts. She got along well with horses though.

And Loki kept his promise and was always there every evening before her birthday and Christmas to count the occasions in with her. The presents he brought were generally non-magic based, since neither he nor Tony wanted to invite any unwanted attention, but were still always much appreciated by his daughter.
For her sixth birthday the three of them were sitting on Tony’s bed watching the large-screen TV at the foot of his bed. Evie had chosen to watch Aladdin, and was completely absorbed with the antics of the monkey and flying carpet.

“That three-wish deal could be so easily exploited; Aladdin does not make the most of it.” Loki muttered quietly. Tony nudged him with his shoulder.

“Hush, you, remember the rules about not spoiling Disney movies?”

“I am merely opposed to stupidity in films.”

Evie, sitting on the trickster’s lap, tilted her head up to look at him. “I think he’s silly for having a monkey. They have fleas.”

“According to that prince character, so does Aladdin, so I don’t think it matters, dear.” Loki absentmindedly ran his fingers through the girl’s hair as she nodded happily and turned back to the film. A few minutes later she looked back up again.

“Móhðy, are you blue like the Genie?”

Tony held his breath at the innocent little question. He never really brought Loki’s heritage up around the God, not knowing how Loki felt about it. However, Evie was a voracious reader and Thor had bought her a children’s book of Norse myths. She’d obviously picked up on the whole Frost Giant thing.

As it was, Loki merely laughed. “Yes, I am. Although I must say I am much better looking than the Genie.”

Tony looked at him like he’d grown a second head. “I thought you hated the Jötnar…” He said quietly.

“I detest that the fact I am one of them was hidden from me and I still feel uncomfortable identifying as one.” Loki was still playing with his daughter’s hair and refused to meet the inventor’s gaze. “However, I cannot help what I am. I managed to overcome my self-image problems with my hermaphroditic nature as a youth, I can overcome the same problems my species has caused me.”

It had never occurred to Tony that the God would have had an identity crisis over his gender. However, it did make sense; the confusion of being neither one sex nor the other could be enough to drive the mind mad without proper support. Maybe that explained yet another of the little pieces of the puzzle that was Loki: in the basest technical sense he was neither male nor female and it must have been a hard decision as a youth to decide which gender – if any – he identified with most and would therefore take on as his ‘true’ sex. Tony suspected that the trickster might have even been pressurized into making the choice.

It seemed that that experience had helped him with his Jötunn heritage, though, which was an unexpected silver-lining.

Evie had now turned around in Loki’s lap, forgetting the film entirely and staring up at him with a hopeful smile. “Can I see? Please, Móhðy, please.”

The God glanced at Tony and grinned. “Are you sure, Evie? I may give you nightmares.” He teased gently.

The child folded her arms with an obstinate pout. “I’d not have nightmares about my Móhðy!”
Tony glanced between his child as his lover warily; he’d been under the distinct impression that frost giants were cold enough to give the unprepared frost-bite. However, he trusted Loki to have thought it through.

Evie’s eyes widened to the size of saucers as her mother’s skin flushed from its usual pale to a rich blue.

“Cooooool!”

“Literally.” Tony couldn’t help adding that; it came with the scientist territory. But the girl had summed it up pretty accurately to his mind. Loki looked stunning.

Blue, Tony had been expecting – he knew that much at least. What he hadn’t considered were the marks etched across the Jötunn’s skin, raised lines and whorls that danced over his brow and cheeks almost like tattoos. And the eyes.

Glowing red eyes.

It should have been terrifying rather than quite possibly the most incredible thing he’d ever seen. He had never truly considered just how far apart he and the trickster were. That not only was the God, well, a God and eons older than Tony could possibly imagine, but he was also from another world further away than man-kind could ever dream of reaching. In short, it had only just occurred to Tony that there was an alien sitting on his duvet.

As he was still trying to register all of this Evie was reacting like a typical six year old and immediately poked her mother’s cheek.

“You aren’t cold. I thought frost giants were cold.” She looked thoroughly disgruntled that she hadn’t had her hand frozen off.

Loki laughed and gathered the girl’s hands up in his own blue ones. “I am cold, little bird, but I’ve put up an enchantment to protect you from it. Your father would kill me if he had to take you to the hospital for frost bite.”

“You bet your blue butt I would!” The inventor managed to change ‘arse’ to ‘butt’ just before he said it. He raised his own hand and laid it on Loki’s arm. The blue skin felt perfectly normal – not taking the raised markings into account – and was at the same temperature as a normal human. He stared at it in fascination for a few moments, then pinched.

“Ow!”

“Sorry, sorry, just wanted to see if the elasticity was the same…” Tony was too distracted to sound particularly apologetic. “Can I take a blood sample?”

“Not now.” Loki glanced up at the TV that Jarvis had thoughtfully paused. “Don’t you wish to get back to your film, Evie?”

And as simple as that the child was distracted, turning back to the movie and calling for Jarvis to continue playing it. With Evie not paying any more attention to them Loki returned to his usual skin-tone and Tony leant over to him.

“I’m making you go back to blue the moment she’s asleep.” His whisper promised everything carnal, and the trickster’s eyes gleamed in response. Loki turned his head a little to capture the inventor’s mouth in a quick, mostly-chaste kiss, Tony’s hand cupping the back of his head.
“You two are gross!”

They broke apart laughing, Evie’s indignant expression keeping the mirth going.

Loki couldn’t remember ever being so happy.

MWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWM

Of course, the happy little family bubble could only last for the night and he left early the next morning, after saying a fond farewell to Tony and his daughter – promising to be back come Christmas.

A week later he was harshly brought back to reality.

He’d found an abandoned cabin some years previously in one of the more remote parts of Alaska and after making it a little more weather-tight, he returned to it perhaps two or three times a year.

It wasn’t exactly cozy, but it had a bed, blankets and pillow and whilst chilly it was nothing a small fire couldn’t help with. The trickster spent a few hours with his notebook, jotting down the ideas that were sluicing through his brain. As much as he tried to persuade both himself and Tony that his magic was entirely ineffectual against the chitauri it didn’t mean he would ever stop trying to work at it. So far he had filled up countless books of notes and scribbles of every and anything he could think of that could help.

Initially he had wondered if Mjölnir was the key – after all, it had proved effective in the battle of New York. However, he scrapped the idea after only a few notes when realising that the hammer’s innate magic hadn’t been its key virtue in the war, but more that it was a dirty great hammer.

This time he was looking into the physics behind black holes and whether or not it would be possible for him to utilize a similar method of matter-absorption to combat his ineffectualness against the other-worlders. However, the research was showing quite plainly that once again he was hitting a dead-end and – short of sucking the chitauri home-world into a black hole – the ability to put a singularity to use was beyond his power.

It was infuriating!

He threw the notebook to one side with a frustrated snarl, a small part of his mind fixed on its destination so that it neatly vanished into the hidden-pocket that he used to store his valuables. It was difficult to tell what time it was by looking out of the window – so close to the northern hemisphere and in the winter it was permanently dark. However, the God knew that he still had over twelve hours before he needed to start worrying about the chitauri finding his Alaskan retreat, so curled up on the bed determining to get some sleep.

It had barely been four hours before he jerked suddenly awake, eyes wide as he stared around the bare room.

There was nothing untoward to be seen. A fire crackled in the grate – not something that would have woken him – and frost had covered the window. There was a complete lack of the danger that was humming through him. His magic was ringing like an air-raid siren, warning that all was not as well as it seemed and he half sat up, eyes narrowing as he tried to find what was causing the feeling of encroaching jeopardy.

The semi-raised position was all that saved him as a sudden explosion above him brought half of the roof down into the room.
The God of mischief wasn’t one to be put out by such a thing as he gracefully rolled to one side, avoiding the timber beams and scanning the area to find out who and what was the cause. Most of the wall had come down along with the roof, leaving the small cabin open and exposed to the elements.

To his horror his gaze fell on the ten chitauri scouts, oblivious to the falling snow, that stood in a ring around the tiny lodge. How in Valhalla’s name had they found him so quickly?! He should have at least had another six hours or so before they could successfully track him!

There was another explosion – were they using grenades? – that threw him from his feet and brought the sad remainder of the cabin to the ground. He hit the ice hard and rolled with the impact so that he didn’t lose any momentum. It was second nature for Loki to raise his hands and try to shoot a retaliation blast of energy back at his attackers but he knew from experience now that it would be about as effective as throwing cotton wool at them. Instead he ducked as a whip tail snaked out at him and materialized his throwing knives.

One found it’s mark in a chitauri soldier’s throat and the creature fell, a wheezy shriek leaving it in the process. Two other were less deadly and bounced off thick armour, re-materializing in their owner’s hands.

What were his options here?

Well, run, obviously.

He summoned his teleportation spell to his mind, a fail-safe so old and so trusted that it came as easy as breathing. Then…

Nothing.

No blur of vanishing landscape, no feeling of speed. He stayed exactly where he was, the magic dispersing hopelessly.

No. Nonononono! How was this even possible?

The trickster dove to one side, narrowly avoiding the spear aimed at his mid-section as one of the soldiers lunged forwards with the weapon. He desperately wove the spell again, only to find once more that whilst the enchantment worked perfectly in its execution, there was something, almost like a physical barrier that blocked the teleportation itself.

Shit!

He spun on one foot, sending up a spray of snow as he did so, and threw another three knives. Magic may be failing him, but it seemed that blunt force was still a viable option. The weapons didn’t kill this time, but one chitauri dropped to it’s knees, a blade sticking out of it’s shoulder.

And the whole time his gaze was darting around, searching each and every one of the eight remaining soldiers to find an answer for his loss of teleportation. For the reason behind the invisible barrier that kept him tethered to the area.

His lack of attention to the moment, however brief, cost the trickster as a whip tail caught his ankle, throwing him to the floor.

By the Tree but it hurt! He had yet to work out what the hell the damn things were made of or powered with, but it seared through his trousers to burn into his flesh. With some effort he succeeded in kicking his leg free and tried to scramble to his feet, wounded ankle buckling under
his weight.

“We have you now, Godling.” The crow of victory sent a vicious stab of fury through the trickster.

Right. Magic useless, running not an option, weaponry not making enough of an impact, injured and likely to take on more hits.

Fine, he’d had worse odds.

Trying to stand steady on his weak ankle, Loki materialised his staff into his hands just in time to deflect a blow from a chitauri with the same form of weapon. He swung it low and was satisfied to feel it connect solidly with his opponent’s leg, snapping the exoskeleton and bringing the monster to one knee. His phenomenal speed was still an advantage then, it seemed.

And then, as he kicked the wounded other-worlder out of his way and readied for the next attack, a suspicious lack of movement caught his attention.

On the edge of what was quickly becoming a battle ground was a lone chitauri that didn’t seem to be doing anything more than just standing there and observing. Loki knew the species well enough to recognise that they would never send in any less than a warrior so the lack of action caused the spark of suspicion. What was it doing there?

The trickster was a whirl of movement as the remaining soldiers continued their onslaught – seven, he was at least down to seven of them. Not too bad: seven to one, technically feasible. He danced through his opponents, ducking blows, matching spear thrusts with his own glave and dodging the snaking tails of the two whips that were being employed. He took a blow to the shoulder that felt like it burnt down to the bone, sending agony shooting down his whole arm. Still not a problem, he could fight one-handed, child’s-play.

His attention remained focussed on the strange statuesque chitauri on the edge of the skirmish, and when the searching tendrils of his magic tried to discern a purpose they were blocked so harshly as to almost throw him from his feet.

Oh

Oh!

The bastards! The fucking clever bastards! The technology that ran through their weaponry, that Loki had found was resistant to his magic, had been built upon to extend out beyond a physical parameter. They had worked out a means of projecting a…well, all Loki’s usually quick mind could think of under the circumstances was to visualise it as a barrier under which his magic was blocked to some extent.

Obviously he’d been able to materialize his weapons, so it could only be a prototype, not yet fully capable of blocking the full extent of his powers. How long had they been planning this?! Once again the God was beginning to realise that he had severely underestimated the intelligence and ruthlessness of an enemy.

The shock of the realisation threw him off for just long enough for a whip tail to catch his cheek, not cutting deeply, but enough to warn him to keep his attention up.

So: options. They had strength in numbers, better weapons and a way of with-holding the better part of his magic. He had…A handful of throwing knives, a staff that only served as a blunt weapon and his native wit.
He’d faced worse odds…Okay. Maybe not in so many words. It was pretty bad.

The God managed to throw another soldier away from himself which gave him a few brief moments pause to take stock of the situation. Not good. His ankle was barely holding his weight, his arm was next to useless and there were still five more of the damn things to take down.

But Loki was not known for panicking when confronted with bad odds, and nor was he unable to think himself out of hopeless situations.

Think. Put the pieces together.

Five attacking chitauri, intent on taking him out to drag him back to their home-world in chains, and one that was standing to the side, not even watching what was going and seemingly the centre of whatever anti-magic (and he shuddered at using such a lackadaisical term) barrier was in effect. They obviously had hoped to take him out sooner than this since the one he was now assuming to be in control of the accursed device didn’t have any back-up or body guards.

Perfect.

He feinted high, then spun low so that his staff effectively swept two of the chitauri off their feet. The sharp end of the weapon was rammed down into the chest of the nearest, smashing through both armour and exoskeleton to finish the creature off. Without breaking from his momentum the trickster leapt over the fallen body and raced towards the lone chitauri.

Of course, he couldn’t expect the others not to realize and try to stop the manoeuvre. Making the most of the split second head start he drew three throwing knives and hurled them at his target. Overkill maybe, but by now he was committed and did not want to have to come up with another plan because of missing his shot.

The God’s aim was true, and all three knives struck, sending the oblivious chitauri down in a spray of internal fluid that could never be called blood. Loki landed on top of the body in a crouch, eyes scanning for the device he could still sense blocking the majority of his powers.

Ah.

There in the dead alien’s hands. If an earthly description had to be used then pocket watch would do. It was the same size and shape, and appeared to have an intricate gear system on the back that Loki itched to explore and didn’t dare touch at the same time.

Instead, as the remaining soldiers leapt up behind him he drove the point of his spear through the delicate piece of machinery.

As he did so a chitauri struck from behind him, whip flicking out to curl tightly around the trickster’s neck.

Loki was dragged backwards by the suffocating hold, his scream of pain silent as his windpipe was crushed. The implement burnt deeply into his throat so much so that he almost missed the sudden soundless percussion wave that alerted him to the release of his full powers.

The chitauri wielding the weapon hauled on it again, dragging the trickster across the hard ground, causing the whip-tail to tighten like a hangman’s noose. He panicked, fingers clawing at his throat and fighting for a breath that just wouldn’t come.

Instinct took over. Without conscious thought put into it the teleportation spell wrote itself across his mind again.
This time it worked.

Tony was once-again playing around with ideas for Clint’s arrows. This time he was carefully attaching prototype capsules to an arrow shaft that would possibly one-day contain a form of biological agent. It was a fine art to attach the right amount for the desired effect, whilst still keeping the weapon aerodynamic, balanced and easily storable.

He bent low over the work, laser cutter in hand as he tried to even up a jagged edge where one of the capsules had been soldered to the bottom of the flights.

“Sir, there appears to be an incoming energy source.” Jarvis’ voice caused the volume of the music playing to drop enough for the AI to be heard and the inventor looked up in mild curiosity.

“Energy source? Can you trace the-”

And all hell broke loose.

Tony was sent reeling back a couple of steps by the force of the concussion wave in the air as the empty test-zone he usually reserved for trying new suit components had something impact it with enough force to cause a crater in the concrete slabs.

The man would have liked to say that his first reaction was to call his suit and sound an alarm. After all, that would be the proper hero protocol and what a sane person would do.

However, sometimes instinct is just too far ingrained and can over-rule taught habits, no matter how essential to life said habits may be. Human evolution is a hard thing to fight and it was because of this that Tony’s very first reaction was to peer cautiously over the top of his work bench, laser cutter held like a dagger in one hand – almost subconsciously.

“Jesus Christ!”

Caution was forgotten as he vaulted over the worktop, pulling off the clumsy heat-proof gloves as he did so.

Loki lay in the crater, bloodied and broken, his fingers struggling with the whip that was still curled round his neck, tight enough to garrote him. His eyes were squeezed closed, desperately trying to force in a breath of air past his crushed windpipe, anything to stave off choking to death. He felt deft hands pushing his own out of the way, examining the damage before finding the loose end of the whip where it had been snapped from the handle as the trickster teleported.

“Easy, hold still, I’ve got you…”

The voice – Tony, Tony’s voice he realised incredulously – was calm, but with a noticeable under-current of tension and fear. Loki felt a sudden easing of the pressure on his throat as the whip tail was carefully and deftly unwound. It had bitten deep into the flesh of his neck so that the last coil was pulled away dripping blood.

Air! Blessed air, finally! He half sat-up, desperately struggling for breath and feeling it burn in his damaged windpipe and depleted lungs as he did so. Tony’s arm quickly curled around his shoulders, effortlessly supporting him as he coughed and gasped hoarsely, chest heaving.

“Slower, don’t fight and try to breathe slower.” The inventor’s free hand moved to the trickster’s chest, pressing firmly against his diaphragm when the God took another rasping breath and then
slowly releasing the pressure so that he was effectively controlling Loki’s respiration. He repeated the move a further four times, until he could feel the heaving breaths ease from borderline hyperventilation to a steadier rhythm.

“There, see? Much better and I don’t have to attempt CPR.”

Loki managed a wry smile, although couldn’t find it in himself to laugh. “My thanks.” They both winced at his voice – broken and hoarse as to be unrecognisable as that of the usually suave trickster. A glass of water appeared in his peripheral vision and he accepted it gratefully, giving a small nod to the automaton that had acted as the delivery boy.

Tony waited until the God had downed the whole glass before asking the obvious question.

“What the hell happened?” His voice was soft, concerned, fearful.

“What do you think?” His acerbic reply lost its bite along with its volume. The damage left by the near-strangulation made the trickster sound like he had a severe case of laryngitis.

“How did they find you?”

“I don’t know, but they’ve been busy. They searched me out far quicker than usual and were able to compress the greater part of my powers.” Loki shook his head hopelessly. “It’s been nearly ten years since I first made contact with them. They haven’t been idle in that time – their technology has advanced.”

“Tell me the details later.” Tony pulled the taller man back against his chest, leaning back against the base of the workbench behind him. Small tremors were running through Loki’s body, his breathing still quick and rasping, and pulse still hammering. He was scared, and something that could scare a God was more than worthy of fear.

“Thank you…” The murmur was so quiet Tony almost missed it.

“Huh? For what?”

Loki rested his hand on the arms wrapped tightly around his waist. “For this. I wasn’t thinking when I teleported here – I just wanted to get as far away as I could to a place of safety.” He rested his head back against the inventor’s shoulder with a sigh, fingers reaching up to trace the weeping wound around his neck.

“Hey, don’t.” Tony brushed the hand away to examine the deep cuts himself. “You said you can’t heal what their weapons inflict? In that case these will need stitches.”

“I’m fine.”

“No you’re not.” Tony rested his chin on the God’s shoulder, closing his eyes as he tightened his hold on the taller man. “You’re not fine at all and I nearly lost you.”

Loki let out a huffed sigh. “Sentiment.” The whispered word had enough emotion to convey his true feelings through it without having to voice them.

“Yeah, let’s not get into that discussion again.” Tony was beginning to notice that the front of his shirt was feeling damp, that uncomfortable sticky wetness that he accorded to blood seeping through clothing. “Are you hurt elsewhere?”

“You know damn well I am.”
Okay, okay, sheesh!” Tony rolled his eyes. “Don’t mind me; I only saved you from choking to
death and all.” Without waiting for a reply he applied a little pressure to the God’s back in an effort
to make the taller man move. “Now, if you can still stand up I’ll see what I can do about fixing
some of this.” He gave another little push that garnered no reaction. “You can still stand up, right?”
He asked, half-jokingly.

No reply.

“…Loki?”

“I…My ankle. I believe it to be broken.” The trickster admitted softly – not that he had a choice
with the volume of his voice, all things considered.

“You can’t fix it?”

“No. Not when it’s been inflicted by those accursed weapons.” Loki turned his head to glance at
the inventor and the movement allowed Tony to see the deep cut running along his cheek.

Ironman didn’t reply to that. Instead he extracted himself from behind the God, and looped the
taller man’s arm around his shoulders. “Come on then.”

As he’d noted before, Loki was heavy and Tony wasn’t quite tall enough to provide adequate
support. However, they managed to make it over to the small camp-bed kept down in the lab for
such times as when the inventor couldn’t be bothered to go to bed. That was in fact a rare
occurrence since fatherhood: he had learned responsibility.

The trickster sank onto the mattress with a grateful sigh that should have been funny, and instead
was just worrying with how much pain he evidently was in. He didn’t protest when Tony
wordlessly helped him out of his shirt and brushed his hair back out of the way. The God heard the
pained gasp from his companion once his torso was bared – the damage to his shoulder now
visible along with the bloodied wounds that encircled his neck like some piece of macabre
jewellery. He looked away, unwilling to see Tony’s expression.

“Oh. I’ll start with the injuries to your neck. Yeah?”

“That would most likely be the best place to start.” Loki was still shivering – no doubt coming
down from the adrenaline high the battle and near-death experience had caused. He stilled,
however, at the touch of warm calloused hands against his back, rubbing small circles, soothing.

“Will local anaesthetic work on you? Bruce left me some in the med-kit for emergencies and I
know how to use it.”

“I don’t believe so.” There was a small amount of sadistic amusement in Loki’s voice with his
reply. “But you needn’t concern yourself about it – I have proven myself more than capable of
with-standing stitches without pain relief.”

Tony winced. He had never once brought up the tiny, almost-invisible scars that dotted along the
edges of his lovers lips, and this was the first time Loki had even faintly alluded to them.

“If you’re sure…?”

Loki just glanced at him with an arched eyebrow that declared his amusement and scorn at the
question. The ancient pagan God of mischief, capricious in every part of his psyche was not a
stranger to pain.
Tony had a very well equipped medical kit in his labs – Bruce had insisted after realising quite what the inventor got up to – namely large explosions. Alongside local anaesthetic there were copious amounts of bandages, sutures and enough paraphernalia to give emergency first aid to most ailments up to and including smashing into a ceiling due to faulty thrusters. The inventor pulled on a pair of latex gloves, broke the seal on a sterilised needle – complete with thread – and gently angled Loki’s face to get a better light.

The procedure took nearly half an hour – it was hardly something Tony was going to hurry and the wounds completely encircled the trickster’s neck. Working carefully and methodically he sealed the deeper parts of the wounds and reached for the bandages. Once completing wrapping up the newly applied stiches Tony celebrated it by pressing a soft kiss to Loki’s tense jaw.

“That’s the lot of them. I’m afraid you do look something akin to Frankenstein’s monster at the moment.”

The trickster opened his eyes again and raised a hand up to press against the bandages, wincing slightly. “My thanks.”

“Stop being so formal when you’re sitting on my bed half-naked.”

That drew a startled laugh from Loki and he looked up at the man with a small smile. “I’ll admit that if we were to try anything right now your performance issues quips may be needed. I’m exhausted.”

“To be honest I wouldn’t want to try anything right now; not with your shoulder looking like that.” Tony moved around to sit down next to the God and began examining the limb in question. “This looks different from the whip cuts.” And by different he meant that it had sawed through the flesh and muscle until white slivers of bone were showing through. “What caused it?” He kept his tone light as he began to mop up the blood around it.

“Spear.” Loki’s voice was tight; the stiches had been well under his pain-threshold, but having the mortal poke around in an open wound that went bone-deep was beginning to push it.

The human heard the pain in the single-worded answer, so didn’t ask anything more as he carefully finished cleaning the wound. Using the dissolvable stitches that were in the med-kit – and thanking his lucky stars that he knew his way around human musculature – Tony began to close up the gaping damage to the muscles within the injury. He tried to be as quick as was possible without losing focus on the important work under his fingers, silently admiring how Loki managed to remain so still and retain his stoic pride.

Once the inner tears and torn muscle were pulled back together and secured the man moved on to stitching up the skin over the wound to seal it all. Using the roll of gauze to hand he wrapped it around the God’s shoulder and used a safety pin to secure it.

“I’m done.” He pulled the latex gloves off and cupped Loki’s cheeks with hands that were now beginning to shake.

The trickster had his head tipped back against the bed’s head-board, eyes closed and pain drawing unforgiving lines down his face. He was breathing harshly – something that sounded all the worse thanks to his throat – his bared torso having acquired a faint sheen of cold sweat. However, the warmth of Tony’s hands on his face seemed to rouse him and he opened his eyes to blink groggily at the man.

“That was…less than pleasant.” He rasped.
“Sorry.”

“No, it was necessary. I’ve had far worse.”

Tony had a sudden recollection of the Hulk creating a Loki-shaped crater in his lounge floor – footage of the event had been acquired via a maliciously gleeful Jarvis. Yes. Loki was more than able to take a beating and then some.

“What’s your worst then?”

“You most certainly do not want to know.”

Ironman considered what he knew of the ancient Vikings and their brutality – inspired by the Aesir – the fact that Loki was immortal and therefore able to withstand pretty much anything and that he was half a million years old and would have possibly met with most species in the known universe; most of whom probably held grudges.

“Okay, yeah, y’know what? I actually don’t want to know.” He turned away to fiddle about with the med-kit, pulling out a plaster. “Hold still.” The God didn’t have much say in the matter when Tony efficiently applied the piece of fabric to the cut running down his cheek. “There we go. Just be glad it isn’t one of the Hello Kitty ones I’ve got for Evie.”

Loki raised an eyebrow, although any and all haughtiness was ruined by the plaster. “Our daughter is a fan of that pink little cat?”

“Actually no, I just bought them to annoy her.”

The God laughed quietly at that.

“So, shoulder, neck, cheek. That leaves your ankle.” Tony turned in the direction of the trickster’s legs but was stopped by the hand on his upper arm. “What?”

“It’s merely fractured; nothing you can do for now.”

“You sure-?”

“I can tell the difference between a fracture and a break, thank you.” The God smiled slightly, softening his harsh words.

“Mighty words from a wounded deity.” The hold on Tony’s arm tightened, drawing the man back towards the trickster.

“Oh just shut up for a moment, Stark.”

The man didn’t get a chance to reply as he was unsurprisingly pulled into a firm and very demanding kiss. Loki’s hands moved up to hold the man’s head in place whilst at the same time Tony’s fingers tangled in the long black hair. The God tasted of blood and lingering fear but it didn’t matter to Tony. He certainly hadn’t wanted to admit how worried he’d been; seeing Loki choking to death in his lab. It was still concerning what they now knew about the chitauri.

“Missed you.” He hissed into the trickster’s mouth. Loki’s grip took on a greater degree of desperation, breathing heavily as he moved away enough to reply.

“Thank you for all of this. You are my sanctuary; where you are is the only place I can ever feel safe.”
It was the closest either of them ever came to saying the three little words that they never dared give voice. Maybe it was because they were finally aware of just how precarious their situation was but such sentiment was creeping in far more than usually.

“I will do whatever it takes to keep you safe.” Tony whispered. “*Whatever it takes.*”

“Don’t make promises you can’t keep, Tony.”

The inventor huffed with laughter, resting his forehead against the God’s. “I’m still working on various plans. And now that I’ve got that whip tail I could reverse engineer their power-source. Or at least have a go at it. I’ll think of something.” He closed his eyes in thought. “If they’ve enhanced their technology to search you out it’s only a matter of time. You can’t run forever.”

“What would you suggest?” From Loki such a question would usually be sarcastic, but now he just sounded tired and hopeless.

“Tell the others?”

The God backed away in alarm. “No!”

“Loki, be reasonable; if the others know then they can help us beat back the chitauri!”

“No. They would never even listen to me.” The God hissed. “They would rather hand me over than *protect* me! Even my dear brother would relish the chance to know that I will be unable to conduct my mischief anymore.”

“Well I would talk to them first without you, of course! Sweeten them up a little. And Evie can back me up!”

“Yes. Up until the point your Director Fury realises that; A) He has leverage over me in the form of my child and, B) He has a half-frost giant in his hands whose physiology would doubtless be fascinating to his pet scientists.”

Tony opened his mouth to argue that point.

Then a sleek grey shape invaded his memory; a nuclear missile heading towards Manhattan, with no thought as to the civilians there. He remembered there being no compromise as he flew up to meet it, knowing that the minds behind it couldn’t care less if he nor all of the other inhabitants in the vicinity died or not.

“No, Fury wouldn’t do that.” He held up a hand as Loki tried to interrupt him. “*But* the council would do it without hesitation. And they’ve already shown a complete and utter lack of mercy.” He rubbed a hand across his eyes. “Damnit, yeah. Okay, we’ll leave off telling the others for a while. I’ll keep working on beating their tech.”

The God nodded slightly in agreement.

“You’re so much trouble.”

“And yet you keep insisting I come back.”

Tony grinned teasingly. “For our daughter’s sake entirely, I assure you.” A thought suddenly occurred to him and he glanced down at the watch on his wrist. “Hey, you want to see her whilst you’re here?”
For a long moment the trickster just stared at him blankly. Of all the things it looked like the chitauri attack may prove to be the best thing that had happened to him in a very long time if it meant he was able to see his daughter for an extra few moments.

“What sort of question is that?! But won’t she be in bed?”

Tony’s grin had widened as he watched the hope and joy blossom on the God’s face. “She’s in bed, but we have a deal that she can then read for half an hour before Jarvis turns out the lights, so she’ll still be awake.” He didn’t even wait for his companion’s answer and instead turned his attention to the room at large. “Hey Jarv, can you ask Evie to come down here? Tell her it’s a surprise.”

“Of course, sir.”

Loki was still staring at him in faint disbelief.

“What? You didn’t think that you could turn up here half dead and then get away without giving your daughter a goodnight kiss, did you?” The man asked lightly.

“I…Tony, I don’t deserve you.”

“Nope, but somehow you snagged me anyway. Not sure how that happened. Somewhere between throwing me out of a window and giving birth to our child I think.”

“And still with the window incident.”

“It was our first date, how could I forget it?”

Finally, finally Tony managed to achieve what he’d been trying since Loki had turned up: real and uncontained laughter from the trickster, easing out the deep lines of pain across his brow and chasing away the last vestiges of fear from the unexpected attack earlier.

Considering that for a few very long and very terrifying moments Tony had thought he’d lost the God, that he had been too late to save him, laughter was the best thing he’s ever heard.

“Sir, Evelyn is at the door of the lab.” Jarvis announced.

“Let her in, Jarv.” From where they were sitting they couldn’t see the large wall of glass with the double doors, but Tony recognised the sound of them hissing open. Even he wasn’t so stupid as to give a six year old access to his labs and workshops.

“Daddy?” Evie rounded the corner, looking expectant and disgruntled at the same time. Her hair was a dandelion-like fluff around her head – probably due to static on the pillow-case – and she was wearing one of Tony’s beloved Metallica t-shirts as a nightdress, the hem reaching well below her knees. “Why did Jarvis call me down here-” She froze when she saw the two men on the bed.

Loki gave her a hesitant smile when she just stared at him, before the girl seemed to accept what her eyes were telling her and screamed.

“Móðy!”

She practically flew across the floor of the work-space, throwing herself onto the God so that she barrelled him over on the mattress.

And with his daughter’s arms wrapped tightly around his neck and Tony sat beside them laughing
cheerfully all of the aches and pains fell away. No worries, no fears and no concerns.

Loki was truly happy.
WARNINGS FOR THIS CHAPTER: More smut. There are mentions of transphobia bullying, self-hate due to a character’s own sexuality and a bit of graphic exploration into Loki’s anatomy (in a sexual situation). Mostly trigger warnings for transphobia and transgender self-esteem issues. I’ve done my best to be delicate, since I have a lot of friends who are transgender so I am approaching this with the knowledge of how sensitive this subject can be to people.

There were a lot of things that had to be taken into account when raising an extremely precocious and intelligent child. For example; she wanted to know everything. Where most children would shout ‘it’s not fair!’ as a prelude to a temper tantrum she would shriek ‘But I don’t understand!’ and then proceed to have a screaming fit at whoever the receiver of her wrath happened to be. She was also very quick at picking up how things worked and had re-programed the TV to remove anything that she deemed to be ‘boring’. Which meant all the sports and news channels had been deleted, much to the other’s dismay.

She had also reached the age where she was taking more notice of the world beyond her own home and the people she knew. Tony had not anticipated this to be a problem and was therefore unprepared for her to start asking awkward questions. Well, he’d always expected the normal awkward questions; ‘where do babies come from?’ being the classic, but hadn’t given much thought to other things she may have picked up on from the world around her.

The memorial to the Battle of New York was having a face-lift in time for the tenth anniversary the following year. Evie was aware that there had been something that had happened, a few years before she was born, but this was the first time that she was old enough to both take an interest and understand.

Tony was in his workshop when Jarvis announced that the child was asking to come in and appeared to be somewhat upset. He removed his welding helmet and turned the power off to the tools as his daughter rounded the large benches and machinery to find him.

“Daddy?” It was obvious that she’d been crying – which was unusual for her – and once she spotted her father sitting at the desk she ran over, beginning to snivel again.

“Evelyn! What on earth’s happened?! Are you hurt?!” Tony opened his arms so that his daughter started asking awkward questions. Well, he’d always expected the normal awkward questions; ‘where do babies come from?’ being the classic, but hadn’t given much thought to other things she may have picked up on from the world around her.

“Is…Is Móhødý a bad-guy?” The child whispered.

“What?!”

“The battle. Where everyone died. They were talking about it on the TV and Móhødý was on it wearing weird clothes. He kept…He was hurting people.”

Oh.
Evie was never meant to have seen that footage; not until she was much older and more able to understand the intricacies of what had happened and the reasons behind it. Tony had no idea what to say, he hadn’t yet planned ahead for that conversation.

“Is Móðý bad?” The girl repeated.

“No.”

“But he hurt people. He had an army!”

“It was complicated, Evie…” Tony said quietly.

“But I don’t understand!”

The warning words that preluded a tantrum, and the inventor winced. How the hell was he going to explain the whole ‘Kneel before me, dull mortals!’ stunt that Loki had pulled nearly ten years ago?! Evie was still sobbing into his chest and he hugged her tightly, rocking her like he’d once done when she was a baby.

What was the best way to explain this…?

“Do you remember that history lesson you had on the first world war?” He asked finally. The girl sniffed and nodded, evidently not seeing where this was going.

“Who were the bad guys?”

“Germany…?”

“Why?”

“Because…” Evie frowned, her sobs trailing off as she tried to think. “Because they killed people?”

Tony shook his head. “We killed people too. Infact we killed more of them than they did of us.”

“So…We were the bad guys?”

“No again.”

Evie glared up at him tearfully. “I don’t get it!”

Tony smiled slightly at the petulant tone. “Very often in wars there are no good guys and no bad guys. Both sides do horrible things and both sides have heroes.”

“So why do they fight?”

“Because they both believe different things and are too silly to talk to each other about it.” Possibly an overly simplistic way of explaining the most complex part of humanities failings. “So they fight instead and people die on both sides.”

Evie went silent as her young mind tried to work through what she’d been told. It was a large concept to grasp, especially for a child who lived with Earths Mightiest Heroes and still saw the world as the black and white of good guys and bad guys.

“Do you see what I’m saying, little bird?”
“I…think so.”

“Y’know, the first time your Móhðy and I had a proper conversation, I insulted him and he threw me out a window.”

As hoped, Evie giggled quietly – sometimes it is wise not to underestimate a child’s love of adults behaving stupidly. Tony’s spirits rose a little at seeing his daughter look slightly happier.

“So Móhðy and Shield should have just sat down and talked about why they were feeling bad. Then the battle wouldn’t have happened?”

“Well…I’m sure that would have been a sight to behold…” And one he was now never going to be able to not think about! “Maybe it would have worked.” Probably not. “But they didn’t talk things through like sensible adults and so the battle happened. But do you see why Móhðy wasn’t the bad guy? He was just on the other side.”

Evie bit her thumbnail, but nodded slowly. “I…think so. But why didn’t he agree with Shield? Aren’t they in charge of keeping the world safe? Why didn’t he want to listen to them?”

Damnit all for having a smart child!!! Find a good analogy, find a good analogy, find a – Ah!

“Do you remember in Aladdin when Jafar has the lamp?” Tony silently praised Disney. He smiled when his daughter nodded. “The genie had to do everything Jafar said, right? And he did mean things to Aladdin and Jasmine, but would you say the genie is a bad guy?”

“No, Jafar was making him do it.” There was a pause as Evie tried to think through what she was being told, and Tony let her attempt to find the conclusion herself. “…Was someone making Móhðy do it?”

Bingo.

“Yes.”

Another silence as the girl pieced some things together. “Is that who’s after him now? Is that why he can’t stay with us?”

“Yeah. But he’s okay, you don’t need to worry, he can look after himself.”

That drew a proper smile out on his daughter’s face. “I know, he can do anything!”

A child’s faith in one of the world’s most notorious super villains. Tony hugged her tightly.

“So, feel a bit better?”

“Yeah, thanks Daddy.” Evie wiped her eyes on Tony’s T-shirt. “Móhðy has a cool helmet.” She added thoughtfully. “Would he let me try it on?”

The inventor laughed. “I’m sure he will.”

MWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMW

Christmas came round a month later, with all the usual hubbub and activity associated. This included choosing a tree, decorating said tree and everywhere else that could possibly hold tinsel, and getting food and presents ready.

Evie was especially fond of the food preparations. She’d shown great enthusiasm for cooking –
although not as much talent, sadly – so whenever one or another of the Avenger’s tried to cook up something for the festive season she spent the whole time getting under their feet. In the end Pepper had taken it upon herself to help the girl make some mince pies just to stop her from annoying everyone.

So when Loki turned up on Christmas Eve he was greeted with a large plate of the traditional pastries. They were slightly over-done and the filling was seeping out of a few but the small family sat down on Tony’s bed to enjoy them like they were of 3 Michelin star quality.

“Did you know these were originally made with meat?” Loki said conversationally.

Evie looked at the pie she held, already half-eaten, and pulled a face. “Yuck! Meat would be nasty with sugar!”

“That’s why it didn’t have sugar, silly.” The trickster leaned over to tickle her under her chin and she squealed with delight, batting him away.

“Don’t get crumbs on my bed…” Tony’s complaint wasn’t very emphatic and was promptly ignored. He smiled indulgently at his daughter and partner as Loki teased the girl and she shrieked with laughter. “You two are impossible!”

“God of mischief at your service.” Loki was laughing as Evie retaliated and launched her own attack.

The God had healed well since they had last seen him; the ring of scars round his neck barely visible any more. Tony was pretty certain that in a few more weeks they would be gone entirely.

“Móðóy, can I wear your helmet?”

Loki looked shocked for a brief moment, eyes flickering to Tony for an explanation. The man shrugged uneasily.

“She accidently saw some of the footage of the battle. We’ve talked it over.”

Evie just looked hopeful. “Can I wear your helmet? Pleeaaaase?”

The trickster still seemed taken aback, but when he saw Tony’s tiny nod of agreement he held his hands out and let the helm materialise in them. He lifted it up by the two horns and gently placed it on his daughter’s head, where – being far too big for her – it slipped to a rakish angle.

The child didn’t seem to care, clapping her hands together with delight and standing up to jump on the bed.

“Look at me Daddy! I’m a Goddess!”

Tony was laughing, and reached out to hold one of her hands, keeping her steady as she bounced about on the mattress. The helmet was too loose so she was having to hold onto it, and teamed with the Slade T-shirt she was wearing as a night-dress (Tony’s again, he’d given up all hope of ever getting his band shirts back) the overall effect was both heart-warming and hilarious.

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“The helmet!” The girl pulled the cumbersome thing off of her head and offered it out to her father with a grin. “You try.”

The inventor’s gaze fixed on the golden helmet with the long elegant horns. Unbidden, the memory of Loki wearing it in Germany came back to him – the first time they’d met. Loki killing
innocent people without a thought, subjugating those that he had deemed beneath him, revelling in chaos and all the while wearing that helm …

Then he glanced up and found that two sets of green eyes were staring at him; Evie still offering out the head-gear in question and the God himself looking suddenly worried. The memories vanished as swiftly as they had raised their ugly heads – this wasn’t the same Loki any more. Maybe it had been when they’d first started out together, all sharpness and spite and pain, but now they had a child, a life and it seemed that those things combined with the healing power of time had done the trickster the world of good.

“Go on then, put it on me.”

Loki’s face lit up with a big grin as Evie slipped the helmet onto Tony’s head. It fitted far better than it had on the child’s and was surprisingly not as awkwardly balanced as it looked. He turned his head one way, then the other, noting that it probably weighed only slightly more than his own Ironman helmet. One thing was obvious though.

“How do you hear anything in this?” Tony tried to readjust it, but no matter the angle it was still covering his ears and he had to lift it off to hear Loki’s reply.

“Magic.”

“That can’t just be your answer to everything!”

The God of mischief stuck his tongue out and in response Tony held the helm out to him.

“We’ve had our turns. Your go.”

“You’ve seen me wear it before.”

“Humour me.”

Loki retrieved his helmet with a sigh, turning it over in his hands. “I would rather not. I have refused to wear this for nearly a decade; it holds many memories, most of which are unpleasant.”

The inventor frowned. It did make sense, that the symbol under which Loki had declared war was now abhorrent to him. But at the same time the trickster had worn the helmet for eons – winning battles and glory for Asgard as a prince and beloved family member. Didn’t that count for something?

He took the golden horns out of Loki’s hands, the metal warm and reassuring under his fingers.

“As you said; it’s been nearly a decade. You aren’t that person anymore.” He said quietly. “You’ve got a new life, a daughter, a second chance and you’ve got me.” A grin crossed his face. “Surely a God of all people would understand forgiveness and redemption when he saw them?” And so saying he lifted the helmet up and placed it on Loki’s head, almost as if it were a crown. “There we go; there’s the guy the Vikings worshiped.”

Evie, having no way of knowing the significance of what had just passed between her parents piped up; “I’ve learnt about the Vikings in history! They had cool boats.”

The tension broke and Loki laughed. He looked…different in the helm. It suited him when he was in his full war gear, so by all accounts shouldn’t work when he was wearing cargos and a shirt. Somehow he still managed to carry it off.
Smug bastard, Tony thought.

“...And they had axes!” Evie was still on her Viking rant; obviously it was a lesson she had enjoyed. “Móhðy, did you ever meet any Vikings?”

Loki smiled indulgently at the child’s enthusiasm. “Of course I did.”

Tony sat back with a grin, picking up another mince pie as his daughter and lover began an excited conversation on the merits of Vikings. Who better to talk about them than the very deity they had worshipped?

After Evie had gone to bed – her room now opened up onto the landing, Tony having decided that she was old enough to not need a direct link to him – Loki waved his hands and the helm vanished from his head.

“Thank you for letting her see it.” Tony pressed a kiss to the side of the trickster’s forehead, arm around the taller man’s shoulders. “I hadn’t realised it was a sore-spot for you.”

“Most of the things concerning that time are a ‘sore-spot’ for me.” The quotation marks fell neatly into place, almost sounding like sarcasm. “How did you explain it all to Evelyn, then?”

“Likened it to world war one.” Maybe he said it too carelessly, but he almost overbalanced when the God he’d been leaning against backed away suddenly.

“What?!” Loki looked incensed. “Millions died in that war! How are the two even comparable?!”

Tony held up his hands hurriedly. “No! Not like that! I meant in the way that there weren’t necessarily good guys or bad guys. I was trying to explain how a war can happen without any one single person being to blame. I succeeded too.”

“Hmm.” The trickster was still looking less than impressed, but his ruffled feathers seemed to settle somewhat. “Not the best of examples you could have used. World War One was beyond what you Christian’s refer to as Hell, beyond the apocalypse and even beyond our own Ragnarok. I have never seen a race treat itself so cruelly as it did then.”

“You say that like you were there.”

“I fought in the Somme.”

Tony raised an eyebrow in surprise. Somehow the mental image of Loki in a soldier’s uniform wasn’t as hard to grasp as one might have thought. “Which side?”

“That’s not relevant.”

“Huh. So, was that a one off, or have you had a look at a lot of history? I remember what you said about the Titanic.” He added with a grin.

Loki returned the expression. “I have witnessed most of the important moments in history.” He said smugly. “I helped haul stone for the pyramids, campaigned across a continent for a Macedonian king, defended Jerusalem against the crusaders, you name it, I was there. Watching, participating and very occasionally manipulating; when it suited.”

“Why?”

The trickster smirked. He rolled onto his stomach, stretching out like a feline before crawling up
the bed to straddle Tony’s lap where the man was still sitting against the headboard. “Because.” He ran his hands through the man’s hair, almost seeming to stare through him. “Because humanity is everything that we Gods can’t be.” Leaning forwards the trickster rested his forehead against his partner’s. “For half a million years I have lived in Asgard and seen nothing change. Oh, we war and squabble and forge treaties with other realms, but we never move on, we never learn and we never grow as a people or culture. When I first saw humanity I was astounded! All you seem to do is change. Your very existence as a species is built upon growing and adapting, evolving, living every day with the knowledge that you may never see another. You learnt and discovered and built and created all based upon your mortality. Not just new thoughts but new ways of thinking. Humanity fashioned such things as have never been seen in Asgard in such brief life-times: skyscrapers, the internet, cathedrals, the Mona Lisa, the pyramids, the Great Wall of China! All this from a race of monkeys!” He stopped his rant with a deep sigh. “I followed humanity because I realised that in truth you are more than we deities—” The word was almost spat. “-Could ever be.”

Tony stared at the taller man in silent awe.

“I… People sometimes wonder what it is like to see the world through the eyes of a God…” He finally whispered. “I never thought it would be like that.”

“Maybe now you can understand a little of how I view you and Evelyn.”

The pure honesty and emotion in his voice burned.

“My God…” The casual blasphemy slipped out before Tony could really think – it’s all too common a way of swearing. Then he smiled and cupped Loki’s cheek, their breath mingling. “My God.”

“Yours. Always yours.” The trickster closed the distance between them, his lips claiming Tony’s in a gentle kiss.

It only lasted a few brief moments before the inventor suddenly heaved up and rolled them both over so that he was lying full length on top of the taller man. Loki laughed, his arms moving to wrap around his partner’s shoulders.

“You are incorrigible, Stark!”

“Uh, yeah? It’s taken you this long to realise this?” Tony nudged the trickster’s chin up with his forehead so that he could attack the pale throat that was exposed. He nipped just hard enough to bring out a bruise and grinned when Loki groaned underneath him. “And I don’t hear you complaining.”

“Oh shut up. I’m a deity. I can command you, and right now I’m commanding you to get on with it!”

“Eleventh commandment?”

“Wrong religion, Stark.”

Tony sniggered and leaned up to sink his teeth into the lobe of Loki’s ear. “Whatever, like I’ve ever paid attention to all that divinity stuff anyway.” He pulled back to make eye-contact. “Now if you want to speed this up make with the mojo and get rid of our clothes.”

“You are impatient beyond all reason!” The trickster laughed and flicked his partner on the nose. “What am I to do with you?!” He didn’t wait for an answer and instead waved his hand through a fluent series of gestures that resulted in leaving the two of them suddenly bare.
“I love that trick.” Tony’s voice was heavily muffled as he pressed his mouth firmly against Loki’s shoulder, sucking at the warm flesh to raise a red mark. He heard a soft chuckle in reply, and the trickster’s long fingers splaying against his back. Feeling Loki shift under him he purposely manoeuvred his leg between the taller man’s thighs. “I’m topping?”

“Mmm, we’ll see.” The God tangled his hands in his partner’s hair, bending his knee to rub against the man and cause enough friction to draw a hiss from Tony. “Maybe I want to.”

“You always just say you want to, then allow me to pound you through the mattress.”

“And if I want to return the favour this time?”

Tony raised himself up his elbows so that his arms bracketed the trickster’s head. “Do you?”

“It’s been more than a few years, Tony.” The words had a little bit of a bite to them, enough to show that Loki was displeased that his request wasn’t being treated as Gospel law. Some things never change. “It is entirely reasonable for me to wish to reverse the habit we appear to have fallen into.”

“Don’t tell me you’re getting tired of my ability to - what’s that term you use? - ‘rend you senseless’?”

“Don’t tell me you’ve forgotten my ability to fuck you until your brain falls out.”

Tony’s mouth dropped open at the profanity, his mind short-circuiting. Sure, Loki knew what all the colloquialisms and slang meant, but he very rarely used them. The surprise was enough for the inventor not to protest when he was promptly rolled onto his back and straddled by an unbearably smug Norse God.

“Oh.” The man wriggled slightly and found himself well and truly pinned.

“I’d forgotten how delicious you look beneath me.” Loki mused. “Maybe I’ll turn the tables more often.” He leant down to hiss the words into his partner’s ear.

Tony shuddered, running his hands down the firm thighs that held his body in place, digging his fingers into the defined muscles. “I think I might just let you.”

“Oh you say it like you have a choice!” Loki laughed softly, leaning down to kiss the trapped man. It had been a long time since he had taken on the dominant role, and for the life of him he couldn’t remember why he’d left it so long as Tony arched beneath him, his arousal stirring to brush the trickster’s thigh. “I’m going to make you squirm.” He whispered.

“Promises, promises…” Tony chuckled as the God trailed a pathway down his throat in a series of nips and kisses. He struggled again, a token protest, before settling back to let his partner do as he wished.

As noted before, Loki had earned the name of Silvertongue for more than just his skill with words. He ran his mouth across the mortal’s chest in a whispering caress that made Tony jump and shiver whenever he reached especially ticklish spots – mostly the man’s stomach – reminding himself of each and every patch of warm flesh that drew a reaction from the human.

“You are not playing fair.” Stark hissed.

“Hmm, I never do.” Loki dipped his head down to graze his teeth across the man’s inner thigh, so close to where Tony wanted him to be and yet refusing to do anything that was not entirely on his
own terms. “Maybe I can be persuaded to move onto something more to your current wishes if you were to ask nicely.”

Tony chuckled. “Oh hell no! No way are you going to play that game!”

The trickster sat back up to meet his partner’s gaze with the most innocent expression he could possibly muster. “But I do so enjoy hearing you beg.”

“No. Happening.”

“We’ll see.” And there was that dark smile that was worthy only of the God of mischief himself. He resumed worrying the sensitive flesh of the man’s thigh until the red mark he’d created began to bruise properly and would last for at least a few days. His mark.

“Ow.” Tony sounded anything but pained though, as he fidgeted, his unmolested leg bending at the knee to brush Loki’s shoulder. “Again with the biting...Is it an Aesir thing or Jötunn?”

Loki chuckled. “I have only had the misfortune to sleep with one Jötunn, and yes, biting was very much a large part of the experience.” He nuzzled his nose against the bruise. “Don’t tell me you don’t like it…” The movement meant that his cheek brushed up against the man’s erection and Tony sucked his breath in with a hiss. “I’m sorry? What was that?” The trickster repeated the movement again with more purpose and heard the man release a shuddering sigh in response.

“I’m not going to crack, Loki…” Tony’s determination was good, he’d allow that much, but the way his voice shook rather ruined the effect.

“Oh yes you are.” Loki ran a single finger up the full length of his partner’s arousal, tracing the thick vein along the underside. He felt the man shiver again when he followed the same path with his tongue. “It just may take a few more tricks for you to do so.”

Tony let out a strangled yelp as the trickster once again proved that, to a God, there’s no such thing as a gag reflex and with no further ado took the entirety of the man’s erection down his throat.

“Jesus Christ! A little warning!”

And the smug bastard simply hummed in response.

Tony thumped his fist against the mattress with a curse before his voice trailed off into a languid moan. Okay, yeah, Loki could really use that mouth of his...

Sucking, licking, a gentle scrape of teeth, a vacuum, everything that the man loved and everything that Loki knew would slowly drive him round the bend. Tony was panting shallowly, his fingers finding their way into the trickster’s hair as the dark head bobbed up and down over him. It felt good, hell it felt beyond amazing, but he seriously didn’t think it was going to make him give in at any time.

In fact, there was nothing the man really needed to beg for; Loki was taking very good care of him. Already he could feel that curling heat beginning to pool in the pit of his stomach, along with the warm smugness of knowing that he’d held out and beaten the trickster at his own game.

“Loki…Nearly there…I…God…”

And then, just as he reached the crest of the wave there was a sudden vicious pinch at the base of his erection, completely denying him the ability to orgasm.
“Fuck! Loki, what the _fuck_?!?” He would have been embarrassed at how shrill his voice was if it wasn’t for the fact that Loki _had stopped him from finishing_!!!

The trickster released the pulsing erection from his mouth long enough to smirk up at the man. “Oh, I’m sorry. Did you want something?”

“You _bastard_!”

“I’m quite aware of my parentage and rest assured they were married.” And so saying he simply dipped his head back down, continuing right where he left off.

Tony groaned loudly, thumping his head against his pillow and fisting his hand in his partner’s hair. God, but it felt amazing! Cruel? Yes, but absolutely mind-blowing at the same time.

Loki quickly and skilfully brought him back to the same point before pulling exactly the same stunt again, much to the man’s dismay. Then he began getting his fingers involved too.

Stark had no idea where his partner had found the lube, but he was still thrashing around and cursing the air blue when there was suddenly a slick finger against his entrance, pressing gently.

“Ah! Damn you Loki!”

All he got in return was a chuckle that sent vibrations right through him and the finger suddenly pushing past the tight ring of muscle and making him squirm all the worse.

“You know what I want to hear, Tony.” It had to be magic. A projected voice or something, because Loki’s mouth never left his erection.

“Not…happening…”

One finger became two, and all the while the sinful mouth never stopped, never paused. Tony arched his back with a yelp as Loki successfully brushed his prostate and then ground back down against the fingers, needing more.

By the third time the trickster blocked off his orgasm (and he had more than a sneaking suspicion that magic was being utilized since there was no _way_ the trick should be that effective!) Stark was beginning to see the benefits in giving in to Loki’s demands. Tears of frustration were running down his cheeks, his breathing broken up into a shuddering mess as he twisted helplessly under the God’s skilled mouth and hands.

“Ah…_fuck_…can’t…Loki, I can’t…”

“You know what I want to hear.” The disembodied voice sounded unbearably smug.

Fine. God dammit but he just could _not_ take it anymore!

“Please!” Tony gasped. “Loki, please!”

The trickster sat up, fingers still moving inside his partner in a lazy rhythm. “Please what?”

“Git! Please fuck me. You win…just…_damnit_…just fuck me already!”

The overwhelming smugness on Loki’s face was almost too much to bear. He leant over to kiss Tony, his fingers still inside the inventor and applying enough gentle pressure that it was obvious he wanted the man to raise his hips.
“Wait…wait…” Tony broke the kiss, panting hard as he stared up at the God. “Not this way…I can’t…”

“Tony?”

The man laughed breathlessly. “Nothing bad, I promise. I’m just not that flexible anymore.”

“Oh…” Loki removed his fingers and pulled himself off of the warm body so that Tony could roll over and push himself up to his hands and knees. It really hadn’t occurred to the immortal God that in the ten years they had known each other the man had been aging.

“I do hope this doesn’t mean I have to be gentle.”

“I might have to kill you if you are.”

“Oh good.” And so saying and with no other warning Loki drove forwards and buried himself in the man’s willing body.

Tony howled, falling forwards to his elbows. When he’d said that the God needn’t be gentle he hadn’t really intended to be split in two. It hurt, hell yeah it hurt, but blood-and-sands it felt good! He didn’t realise that he had tensed up until a hand was rested on his back, cool and soothing.

“Are you alright?”

“…One moment.” He was surprised that Loki actually listened and waited as he let the pain subside to a manageable level before pushing himself up off his elbows. “Right. I’m good.”

“Knew you still had it in you.” The trickster wasn’t one for putting on the kids gloves when he was in charge, and took Tony at his word.

The man arched his back, cursing as his partner set a punishing rhythm; hard and fast and just how he liked it. Yeah, it had been a while and yeah he was really going to feel it the next day, but surely that was the point!

He had already been brought to the point of orgasm three times, only to be denied, so Tony was unsurprised to find the fourth attempt building up. Loki knew exactly where to aim for inside of him to bring stars to his eyes with each thrust and in growing desperation he moved his hand to his aching erection.

“Allow me.” The trickster’s voice sounded remarkably steady all things considered as he knocked Tony’s fingers out of the way and wrapped his own fist around the human’s arousal in a firm grip. He chuckled when he felt the man tense slightly. “I promise to allow you release this time.” He didn’t allow Tony chance to reply as he began to move his hand in time with his thrusts.

“Bloody…hell…Loki…” The man collapsed back to his elbows, burying his head in his forearms. It was getting hard to think as his world concentrated down to the thrusting pressure against his prostate and the insistent grip around his erection. There was no such thing as dignity anymore; just a constant litany of pleas and curses as the God drove him relentlessly into his release.

“Ah! Fuck! Loki…” The man came undone, stars blinding his vision – and, hey, he’d thought that was a metaphor, but apparently it was actually happening – the trickster’s name on his lips as a keening wail. He collapsed onto his stomach, repeating ‘Loki’ over and over, the movement causing the God to pull out of him.

Bloody hell! When was the last time he’d been that thoroughly satisfied?!
Tony realised he must have actually zoned out for a few moments, because the next thing he knew he was lying on his side – still panting heavily – with Loki lying almost on top of him.

“That sounds like you enjoyed yourself.”

“Stop sounding smug…”

“How can I help it?” Loki purred, spooning up behind the man and whispering directly into his ear. “The sounds you make when you finally give in are simply delicious.”

“Smug…” Tony rolled over with a groan, uncaring about the sticky mess left smeared across his stomach. He grinned lazily as he felt his partner’s erection firm and warm against his thigh. “If you’re looking for me to reciprocate then you’re gonna be waiting a while – human recovery periods and all that.”

“You’re a supposed genius, you’ll think of something.” The trickster moved away from the man just enough to stretch out languidly on his back. “Surprise me.”

Stark’s eyes lit up. “You know that is exactly the wrong thing to say to someone like me, right?”

The smirk he got in return was downright sinful. “Why do you think I said it? I’m nearly as old as your entire species; there is little left that I haven’t tried.” The trickster gestured elegantly at his naked body. “I repeat: surprise me.”

He chuckled as the man moved to straddle his waist, his hands drifting up to rest on Tony’s hips in the mirror of how he had pinned the inventor down at the beginning of their encounter.

“I have some things in mind.” Tony leant down to scrape his teeth along his partners left nipple, gently grazing the sensitive flesh until it drew up into a tight bud. “But they depend on how much you trust me.”

One of Loki’s hands had wandered up to splay against the man’s back, and his fingers dug in as Stark’s teeth pulled and tugged until he moaned.

“Why…do you ask…?” After already indulging himself in bringing his partner to completion the God wasn’t far away himself, and was hoping that he could last out to see what the man had in mind.

Tony slid himself backwards a little so that when he dipped his head back down he was right in-line to run his tongue along the head of the trickster’s erection.

“You never answered my question.” He breathed, smirking as the gentle breeze of his words made Loki shiver. “How much do you trust me?”

“Enough, I’m sure. What…ah!...what do you have in mind?” The God tried to focus his mind over the insistent mouth lapping at his erection.

“I want to see you. The real you.”

Loki pushed his partner’s head away in attempt to allow his mind to clear. “You’ve seen the ‘real me’. You’ve screwed the ‘real me’ through the mattress.” The colloquialism sounded odd with his formal accent.

“No, I don’t mean your Smurf get-up.” Tony kept his tone light, but there was something in his voice that made the God wonder what he was up to. “I mean you.” He sat up a little, obviously
frustrated that he wasn’t getting his point across as Loki stared at him expectantly. “I want to see what you’ve hidden from your lover’s all your life. I want you to trust me enough to take the enchantment off.” A round-about way of saying it, but Tony was always verbose when he was trying to convey something important.

The trickster’s eyes widened and he half sat up, understanding lighting his gaze as he realised what the man was trying to ask for. “You want to see my true hermaphroditic form?” He whispered. “But why? You’ve already seen it anyway.”

“Yeah, but you were giving birth at the time and I wasn’t exactly in an enquiring frame of mind since I was acting as mid-wife for my own daughter.” Tony ran his hand across his partner’s chest, trying to chase away the uneasiness that had appeared in the God’s expression. “And why? Because I want to know you in every way that’s possible. Because it’s been a very long time since I first blasted you off your feet in Germany and you’re still a riddle to me. I know damn well I’ll never be able to truly understand or know all your secrets – Norse God and all that – but I’ll take anything you’re willing to give. I want to know you.”

“You’re…the first to ever want to.” Loki’s expression was shuttered and inscrutable as he stared up at the man.

“Will you let me?”

The trickster turned his face away, staring off into the darkened room. Tony wondered hopelessly if he’d finally pushed too far, but stayed silent as he waited for an answer – either positive or negative.

“I…I struggled with this aspect of myself for the entirety of my youth and after learning the enchantment to conceal it I have never willingly removed it. Even during childbirth it’s not something I choose to do, but rather a consequence of my powers fleeing during the labour.” The admission was quiet, spoken into the emptiness of the rest of the room rather than to Tony. “I believe I know my Jötunn markings better than I know my own true reproductive anatomy.”

That was saying something. Whilst Loki had made his peace with his heritage, it didn’t mean he liked it. Accepting the frost giant blood running through his veins was one thing, but he rarely if ever changed to his natural form. Showing Evie had possibly been the only time he’d done so willingly.

Silence was most certainly not one of Tony’s virtues, but he was managing very well as he tried to let Loki work through the dilemma posed by his request. It was nearly three minutes – so much longer to wait through than it sounds – before the trickster turned his head back to meet the inventor’s gaze.

“Yes.”

“Huh?”

Loki chuckled quietly. “I said yes, you stupid mortal.” He shook his head with a wry smile. “The Norns alone know why, but I will allow you this.”

“Oh…” Tony smiled, a much gentler expression than his usual shit-eating grin, as he realised the absolute trust being put in him. “Thank you…”

“Hmm. I’m still not entirely sure what you’re intending to do, but…well…I trust you.”

“I’ll endeavour not to disappoint you.” If nothing else he was far far too aware of the damage Loki
could inflict should he make the wrong move. Not that he was intending to make the wrong move, of course.

The man leant back down and kissed along Loki’s inner thigh, his cheek brushing the God’s erection. The trickster was still edgy and he tensed as Tony paused at the hollow of his hip, the man evidently spotting the anatomical changes and trying not to stare. He closed his eyes and tried to relax.

Tony didn’t know what he was expecting but was almost disappointed at how mundane the change was. Maybe he’d been envisaging some sort of mutation or hybrid merge, or even something entirely unheard of. As it was there was little difference beyond the addition of a familiar type of opening in place of the perineum. Tony Stark had slept with more than enough women in his life to recognise the female genitalia when he saw it.

“Well?” Loki’s voice was quiet, uncertain. “Curiosity sated?”

“May I touch?”

The trickster huffed in annoyance. “Must you?! I hardly see what you could gain.”

“I won’t gain anything; you might enjoy it though.”

“I highly doubt that.”

“Trust me? It’s not like I’ll hurt you.”

There was silence for a few moments before Loki sighed irritably. “Fine, but I will make it abundantly clear should I dislike anything you do.”

“I assumed that much.” Tony grinned and leant down to wrap his mouth around the head of his partner’s erection again, tongue moving against the firm flesh. The trickster was still tense underneath him, but responded well enough to the stimulation, arching slightly into the contact.

The man took it slow, doing nothing more than teasing Loki’s erection until he had the God gasping hoarsely, twisting underneath him. It was a given that the trickster wasn’t going to fully relax - this was too new and too strange for him to accept completely - but he didn’t protest when Tony’s hand brushed up to the very top of his inner thigh.

If there was one thing Tony Stark was good at outside of a lab then it was – in his words – the Art of Love. He had been there, seen it and done it all. The kinks, the quirks, men, women, multiple, experienced, virgins, he knew the best techniques for each and every one. In short he made Casanova look like a monk. So to be confronted with a hermaphroditic God with extreme self-esteem issues was not actually all that strange to him. He could work with this.

Loki tensed up as he felt a gentle finger brush along unknown areas, the feeling so foreign that he couldn’t even tell if it was uncomfortable or not. The touch was light, asking permission as it slid along unfamiliar flesh.

Tony tried to keep his partner distracted by continuing to use his mouth over the trickster’s arousal, licking and sucking in every way that he knew Loki liked in an attempt to divert him from the other touch.

It meant that once two fingers finally breached the hitherto unused entrance the God was not paying attention and the sudden sensation made him arch up with a gasp.
“Oh!”

Tony glanced up, not necessarily concerned since Loki hadn’t sounded like he objected, but wanting to check just in case.

“Does it hurt?”

“….No…” The single word was breathy and wondering.

The man kept his fingers still, allowing his partner to grow used to the sensation of fullness in the new place. Loki’s genitalia didn’t include a clitoris, but Tony knew more than enough tricks to make up for the lack, especially when he still had his tongue wrapped around the trickster’s erection. Once the tight heat around his fingers relaxed slightly he began to move them, slowly at first so that Loki could grow used to the sensation.

“How does that feel?” He lifted his head up enough to ask the question.

“Mnn…Not as bad as…as I expected…”

“Well, it’s only going to get better. Feel up to more?”

“I…yes?…” Loki was relaxing, pliant under the man’s hands as his body accepted that there could be a new form of pleasure found this way.

Tony grinned. He began to up the speed his fingers were moving at, still being careful but starting to increase the stimulation. He paid close attention to Loki’s reactions, making sure that nothing he did was painful and aiming continuously for the small spot that he knew lay inside. And he was good at aiming. It didn’t take long for his partner to start panting hoarsely, a hand coming down to grasp at the man’s short hair.

“Valhalla, Tony…More…need something…need more…”

“You sure?”

“Please…” Loki arched his back, not even really sure what he was asking for but his body desperate for it all the same.

Tony decided to take him at face value. He sat up a little, leaving the God’s arousal to focus purely on working the tight passage. Placing a palm on his partner’s stomach he continued to move his fingers in a circular motion, faster and harder, years of experience telling him exactly what would send the trickster crazy.

The different sensation made Loki buck up into the contact, raising his hips without realising. If he’d been more aware to anything other than what Tony was doing to him he would have been mortified by his whimpers and nonsensical pleas – the Silvertongue turned to an incoherent mess. As it was he didn’t care how he sounded, every fibre of his being intent only on the building heat inside of him that was familiar and yet so different.

Tony wasn’t sure he’d ever seen the trickster come this undone before; needy and writhing beneath him. The usually pale body was flushed, sweat running in thin rivulets across tensed muscles as he gasped and moaned.

“You know you look like a porn-star right now?” Tony’s voice was lustful and soft. “I can feel how close you are, are you going to let go for me, Loki?”
“I…” The God seemed incapable of speech, or at the very least he hadn’t really taken on-board what his partner had said. “I…Tony…close…” His hand had drifted down to loosely grasp his own erection and was knocked out of the way as Tony took over the job – matching the speed to that of his fingers inside the trickster’s body.

It didn’t take much more. A few firm strokes along the God’s arousal and suddenly Loki was arching up with a sound that could only be described as a scream. He twisted wildly as Tony mercilessly continued the stimulation through his orgasm, entirely losing control as his body shook and shuddered under the onslaught of pleasure. Losing control to the extent that a small burst of blue sparks appeared over their heads, making Tony blink in surprise.

It wasn’t until the cries turned to exhausted whimpers that the inventor finally withdrew his fingers with a small chuckle.

“Guess I was right then; you did enjoy it.”

Loki had his eyes squeezed tightly closed with his hand thrown over them, breathing heavily. However, he managed a breathless chuckle at his partner’s quip, causing another shower of stars to appear.

“Damn you, Stark…” The three words were practically purred as the mortal stroked his hand along the trickster’s thigh.

“Not very emphatic.”

Loki chuckled weakly, removing his hand from his eyes just enough to mock-glare at his partner. His gaze was caught by the dissipating sparkles above them and the hand went straight back to where it had been with a loud groan of embarrassment.

“I was but a mere youth the last time my magic went unchecked during climax.” The complaint was muffled by his wrist, but Tony caught enough of it to laugh.

“Well, it was very pretty. The magic that is. Although you were quite something to behold yourself, of course.”

Loki half-heartedly batted at him with his free hand, but he clearly didn’t have enough energy to actually mean it.

“Do not mock me, Tony Stark.”

“Oh shush, you’re completely sexed out and currently as weak as a kitten; threats just sound absurd.” Tony leant down to push Loki’s hand out of the way and kiss him. “But on a serious note – was that better than you’d expected?”

The trickster grinned up at him, eyes half-lidded and lazy. “I will go so far as to admit that it was far more than I could have either expected or hoped for. I did not believe Jötunn anatomy would allow that sort of pleasure.”

The man snorted. “Huh.” Tony settled himself down on the mattress next to his partner, allowing the trickster to pull him into his arms: The God of Mischief being a post-coital cuddler.
They lay in silence for a while, Loki’s breathing finally slowing back to normal and his magic settling enough for him to remove the mess they’d left across the sheets with a lazy wave of his hand. Tony felt unbearably smug about having proved his point that Loki would enjoy exploring his true body, and was already concocting various plans as to future enterprises.

The trickster however was, in Anthony Starks own words, sexed out.

He had tucked the man’s head under his chin, curling round so that his own chest was flush against his partner’s back. He had slipped his arm around Tony and rested his hand on the inventor’s arc-reactor, the near-undetectable hum familiar under his fingers.

“Hey, are you falling asleep?”

“Mmm, possibly…”

“Well, before you do, I’d rather like to ask a question.”

Loki sighed heavily, his breath ghosting over the hair on the back of Tony’s neck.

“Oh if you must…”

The man rolled over to face the God, his expression uncharacteristically serious. “That stuff you said about humanity, how much you are in awe of us.” He said softly. “What the hell did the void and the chitauri do to you?”

“I…What?” Loki froze, snapping back into full alertness. Damn it all but he hadn’t expected the man to read that much into his impassioned speech earlier.

“Well, if you think we puny mortals are that awesome, then the experience must have done a real number on you to cause you to try to destroy us.” Despite his words, Tony’s voice wasn’t condemning. Instead he gently ran a hand down the God’s cheek. “What happened?”

Loki managed a weak smile. “Is this really the time to have this conversation?”

“We both feel warm, happy and safe. I think it’s the best time. Not to mention we see each other twice a year. When else could we possibly have this conversation?”

The human had a point. They were hardly blessed with time to spare for such matters and if they still needed to clear the air about certain things then there was no time like the present. Loki sighed heavily and nodded, leaning into the hand resting on his cheek.

“Fine. What do you wish to know?”

“When I asked you about the attack last time I asked ‘Why?’.” Tony said slowly. “Now I’m thinking I asked the wrong question. I think I should have asked ‘What did they do to you?’.”

The God huffed with soft laughter, although there was no humour to it. What did they do, indeed…

It wasn’t a simple question, and the start of it all actually reached back far before the void claimed him.

Carefully he explained to his partner about the manner in which he had found out his heritage.

The timing of it all couldn’t have been worse, really. He had allowed a handful of Jötnar in to disrupt Thor’s coronation in a bid to show just how unfit his brother was for rule. What he hadn’t taken into account was just how fool-hardy Thor would be. The plan had been to go to Jötenheim,
then leave after a verbal confrontation.

And how well *that* plan had worked.

To then find out his true heritage whilst still trying to come to terms with the thought that his own machinations had ended with his brother’s exile was almost too much to handle. And just when a terrified and heart-broken young man could have really done with some answers and loving reassurance, Odin had fallen into the coma-like state that rendered him useless.

No king, no heir, only the younger prince who was on the cusp of an emotional breakdown. Loki was scared, lonely and hurting and turned to the one thing he knew how to do: twist the appearance of events.

He needed Thor back – *Asgard* needed Thor back – and as stand-in to the throne, he did not have the power to do it himself and therefore relied on the blundering oaf to fulfil Mjölnir’s conditions alone.

Like *that* would happen.

So Loki lied and manipulated, convincing his brother and four friends that he meant to kill them. Only Thor could fall for such a cliché way of regaining his powers, but it was all Loki had to work with in such a short amount of time and it did succeed.

The whole plan worked out well enough for Thor in the end, and once again Loki allowed himself to be used as the scape-goat. By the end he had just stopped caring.

His family weren’t his family, his brother had changed almost beyond recognition, he was a monster – *the* monster, the one that graced all the childhood tales – and he’d killed his true birth father.

Throwing himself from the bifrost was meant to end it all.

“Suicide?” Tony whispered.

“It was all I had left. I just wanted the pain to be over.”

But it didn’t end the pain at all.

Death searched for the falling God, calling his name, but he had been swallowed into the void between worlds, and he was beyond such outside means. With a mind filled with agony and loss the broken trickster, who wished only for his own demise, had then been confronted with all the horrors that the void contained – the worst of which he’d already explained to his partner; seeing that he was just as useless and insignificant as he felt when confronted with the full might of the universe.

By the time he fell to the world of the chitauri his mind was nearly gone, broken into pieces so small that it would have seemed near impossible to repair. Such a perfect vessel for Thanos and his army.

“I don’t remember everything that happened.” He admitted quietly. “But every memory I do still have is nothing but pain. My mind was almost gone, so they made sure to send it the rest of the way, breaking my body so many times until I couldn’t even remember my own name.” He ran a shaking hand through his hair. “Towards the end I had no will left. Nothing mattered any more, all I could do was obey, lest the pain began again.”
“But you broke free in the end.”

A smile flashed across Loki’s face and Tony almost shied away. Cruel, cold, dark, it was the smile that had terrorised the Avenger’s and that the rest of the team still had nightmares about.

“The sceptre. It was intended to help control me – the wretched thing had a direct link into my brain so that the moment I began to stray from the agreed plan a bolt of pain would be sent through me as a reminder. I grew used to it enough not to show it after a while.” The trickster said darkly. “But I was slowly regaining my sense of self, not just following the script they had laid out for me. That was how I had Selvig add the off switch into the machine, and hence why I abandoned the sceptre during the fight.”

“You were trying to let us win.”

“I was doing my damnedest to help you win.”

Tony broke the tense atmosphere with a smile. “And yet you still –”

“Threw you out a window, yes.”

The man pressed a kiss to the trickster’s nose. “I’m sorry.”

“For what?”

“For all the shit you’ve been through. Hell, I’d have gone mad as a hatter without the whole torture part.” He cupped Loki’s cheek. “Everything always seems to want to smack you round the face, doesn’t it? I’ve read the legends, you weren’t treated very well.”

Loki managed a self-deprecating smile. “I deserved most of it.” He ran a finger across his lips. “And certainly learnt to never break a deal with a dwarf.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” Tony caught his partner’s hand and turned it over to kiss the knuckles. “Thank you for trusting me with all of this, I know it can’t be easy for you to say it all.”

“Actually, talking seems to help a little.” Loki’s voice was trailing back to his sleepy tone and he tucked his head into Tony’s shoulder. “Thank you for listening. Not many have ever bothered.”

“It’s what I’m here for.” The inventor wrapped his arms around the warm body – warm, such an odd term for a frost giant – and rested his cheek on the top of Loki’s head. “I’m glad you got your mind back.” He added, almost as an afterthought. “This whole situation may suck, but at least we’re in it together.”

The God chuckled softly. “I’m rather thankful too – if nothing else I’m glad I do no longer desire to destroy the human race as Thanos had wished.”

“Yeah. This Thanos guy, is he going to be a problem for us too?”

“No. The chitauri were but one of many of his armies. When I failed them and they therefore failed him he abandoned them. We will see nothing of him.” Loki spoke the last sentence around a yawn, but continued speaking. “It is one of the reasons they hunt me. Not only did I fail them, and therefore broke my oath to them, but I have also doomed their race – they relied on Thanos to bring their species into greater prominence in the universe. And of course, if they let me go then others may think of failing them too. If they wish to uphold their reputation then they need to get their hands on me and show that they follow through with threats.”
“Huh.” Tony’s embrace tightened. “Well, I’m not going to let you be a bad PR stunt any time soon. You’re all mine, Reindeer Games, they can’t have you.”

“Territorial much…?” The trickster’s quiet voice trailed off and a few moments later his breathing deepened into true sleep.

The inventor smiled and held him close.

"Santa’s been! Santa’s been! Wake up!"

Tony groaned and opened his eyes enough to stare balefully at his alarm clock. The digital display cheerfully informed him that it was six thirty in the morning and therefore way too early to be awake.

Once upon a time Mr Stark wouldn’t emerge from bed until gone ten and on Christmas day would often stay in until well into the afternoon. How life changes when one has children.

Evie was bouncing up and down on the bed between her parents, her dressing gown haphazardly thrown on over the Christmas pyjamas she was wearing. It took Tony a long moment to realise that the word ‘parents’ was a plural and that there was a warm arm slung over his back. He moved his head to see Loki sprawled out next to him, blinking slowly awake and looking somewhat disorientated.

“Wha’ timesit?” Well, what do you know? Seems that the God of mischief is not a morning person.

“Too early.”

“Hmm…”

“Wake up Môhôy!” Evie pummelled Loki with one of the spare cushions, before pulling the duvet away to try and force her parents to get up.

Tony yelped, mindful that he and the trickster had fallen asleep in a state that he’d rather his daughter didn’t see. However, he realised as the covers were ripped off him that Loki had had the presence of mind to conjure them both a pair of pyjama bottoms.

“Santa’s been, look!” The girl held up a full stocking – the house-keeping robots had played the role of Father Christmas – with a huge grin on her face.

“So I see.” Tony dragged himself upright and rubbed his eyes with one hand. He patted the space between himself and Loki, who had also sat up, inviting the child to sit down. “Come on, let’s see what loot he’s given you this year then.”

Loki glanced at the clock, noting that he had only afford to stay another hour or so unless they wanted to start risking an unwelcome visit from the chitauri.

However, an hour was long enough to see his daughter open the presents in her stocking – shrieking with glee at each one – and for them to all have another mince-pie each.

On the other hand it was still difficult to say goodbye despite the fact that Jarvis had playing Christmas carols in the background to create the Christmas spirit. Loki had Evie balanced on one hip when he gave Tony a kiss goodbye, since she refused to relinquish her hold on him.
“I’ll be coming back soon, little bird.”

“My birthday is in September. That isn’t soon, that’s…” She paused to count in her head, then continued ruthlessly, “Nine months away!”

“All the more time for you to grow taller in.”

“I don’t want to grow taller, I want you here.” The girl buried her face in his shoulder, clinging tightly.

Loki exchanged a hopeless glance with Tony over her head. “And I want to be here too, you know that Evelyn, but it just isn’t possible.”

“You’re a God! Make it possible!”

“Evie, you aren’t helping here, sweetie.” Tony said softly.

“I don’t care! I want Móðý to stay!” Evie wasn’t crying, she wasn’t the sort of child that cried often, but her tone of voice made it clear that tears were imminent as she stared at Loki. “I don’t care about the monsters and I don’t care if the others don’t like you, I just want you to stay.”

“I need to get rid of the monsters first.” Loki said quietly. “Once they are gone then I promise I’ll never leave again. Okay, little bird? I promise I will never leave you again, but I need to make sure you are safe first. I need to make sure they can never get to you. Do you understand?” When the child didn’t answer he sighed and gently persuaded her to lift her head up to make eye contact with a finger under her chin. “I need you to understand me, Evelyn, I need you to know that I’m staying away to keep you safe.”

“…I know.”

It was a lot to ask of a six year old – to accept that the loss of her mother was necessary to her own survival. To understand the meaning of the word sacrifice and how it applied to her family. It was a lot to ask, but Evie was a clever child, and if not able to grasp the whole concept she could at least appreciate that the situation, however undesirable, was to protect her.

So she nodded and reluctantly loosened her hold around Loki’s neck enough for him to pass her to her father.

“I will see you soon, little bird, and maybe by then I will have ended the monsters for good.”

“Love you, Móðý.”

“I know, I love you too my darling.”
As much as having a daughter had changed Tony’s life, in the end he hadn’t needed to give up Ironman altogether. Now that Evie was older it was easier for him to leave her in Pepper and Jarvis’ capable hands (metaphorical in Jarvis’ case) whilst he assembled with the rest of the Avengers for whatever threat or disaster demanded their help.

Sometimes it meant fighting the newest brand of supervillain and foiling whatever evil plot they had concocted, other times it was diving into a natural disaster to help pull people out of the path of the hurricane, or volcanic eruption, or tsunami that was threatening them.

It could be great, being a hero and a father; being able to come home and brag to his little girl about how he and the team had saved people from whatever-the-threat-had-been. It could also be heart-breaking.

It was an attack later attributed to one Doctor Doom that really made it clear to Tony how emotionally compromised he was in certain situations. The man himself had vanished (they would later be told that the Fantastic Four had found and dealt with him) so the Avengers were left trying to help the emergency services to find the survivors buried under the rubble of what was once down-town Los Angeles.

Tony had been working with Thor, the God lifting the masonry out of the way to allow Ironman access to pull people out from the cavities and corners they had squeezed themselves into. Sadly, not everyone managed avoid the collapsing buildings and they dug out as many bodies as they did survivors.

They found a small corner shop that had been flattened. The shop-keeper and three customers had been killed instantly as the ceiling and two walls came down on them, bringing the two floors of apartments above down at the same time.

Thor shifted as much of the brickwork as he could to allow Ironman access into the dark interior of the broken room to hunt for both bodies and any soul still alive. The light from his arc reactor – magnified by the suit – dimly lit the area and allowed him to cautiously make his way deeper into the broken shell of the building.

Such a recovery process takes time, a lot of time. It required hours for the two to work their way through the shop and then the apartments that had once been above it. Hours of hard physical labour, and finding nothing but broken bodies that had once been people. It was a difficult and painful task.

When they finally realised that they would either need to rest or drop dead from exhaustion the pair slumped down on the remains of a McDonalds Golden Arch, surrounded by the rubble of the famous fast-food outlet.

Tony let the mask on his helmet lift up to pinch the bridge of his nose with a sigh, leaning over
with his elbows on his knees. Beside him Thor looked just as bad; bruises, scratched armour and caked in dust. It had been a big ask: fighting a battle and then moving straight into the clean-up afterwards.

“Fuck, I need a drink.” Tony broke the silence, removing his hand from his face to stare blankly out at the desolation around them. He expected Thor to respond in kind or to laugh at the quintessential Stark statement. However, the Aesir just nodded wearily in agreement.

A BigMac wrapper blew past them, the empty rustling catching Tony’s listless gaze for a moment.

“There was a girl.” His voice was hollow, mechanical. “She was so young. I saw her lying there and all I could think of was that that could have been Evie.” A tremor, almost unnoticeable thanks to the suit, ran through him. “She was someone’s child, someone’s pride and joy. Gone. Just like that. If Doom had attacked Manhattan it could have just as easily been Evie and I can’t bear that thought.”

“To lose a child is the worst pain there is; I can understand why the thought of it would fill you with fear.” Thor said quietly.

“That sounds like the voice of experience…” Tony’s voice held the hint of a question to it and he glanced sideways at the God.

“My nephews Narfi and Váli.”

Ironman winced. He knew the stories that Norse mythology told of Loki’s twin sons and if there was even the slightest bit of truth to them then they were horrendous. He had never once asked about his partner’s other children, knowing full well that the tales weren’t happy ones. It was also one of the reasons that he and Loki had kept Evelyn’s parentage a secret from Thor; Asgard had not been kind to the trickster’s offspring.

“What…what actually happened?” He asked quietly. “Our myths seem too cruel to be the truth.”

Thor chuckled humourlessly. “Your mortal stories had all of the details, and yet managed to confound the entire fact of the situation.” He stared down at his own folded hands, shaking his head. “But what is true is that my two nephews died under tragic circumstances and it broke my brother’s heart.” He glanced sideways at Tony. “I know that you must believe my brother to be insane, heartless even, but I can assure you that there was a time once when he was anything but.”

The mortal nodded, more than used to pretending that the only Loki he knew was the psychotic, homicidal megalomaniac who had attacked the planet. It was rare that they ever spoke about the God of Mischief: Tony had banned the subject around Evie, using the argument that any mention of the trickster inevitably caused at least one of the Avengers to swear heavily and death threats to be thrown around. It was reasonable enough to say that he didn’t want his little girl to be exposed to such language but in reality he was far more worried about Evie’s reaction should she hear someone say something disparaging about her mother.

Thor had risen to his feet and for a moment Tony assumed that the God was ready to get back to work, until he spoke again.

“Your daughter, sometimes she reminds me of Narfi.” He raised his hands quickly. “And I mean that with the greatest respect, I do not wish to infer any likeness between her and my brother, of course.”

“Of course.” Tony had to fight back the sudden flame of panic as the thunderer casually mentioned
Evie and Loki in the same context.

“It is merely that at her age he had the same inquiring mind and spark that she contains. He had my brother’s great intellect, much as Evelyn has yours, and he often used it to cause mischief. His father’s son.”

“Sounds like a great kid, minus the whole ‘related to Loki’ thing.”

“Indeed.”

“So…What happened?”

Thor glanced at him. “Why are you so keen to know?”

“Distraction. I’d rather like to focus on something else for a few minutes.” Tony gestured out at the shell of the McDonald’s they sat outside of. “So, correct my knowledge of Norse mythology.”

The God looked away again, his expression distant as he stared across the rubble-strewn carpark. For a long moment Ironman assumed that his request would be denied. After all; as far as Thor knew the man was only asking out of curiosity, and had no way of knowing that Tony was actually approaching the conversation from a more compassionate role.

Finally the thunder God nodded slowly. He remained on his feet as he began to speak – the tone of his voice letting his companion know just how difficult this was for him to talk about.

The conversations that arise when the mind is exhausted and has spent the day amongst nothing but blood and death. Secrets spill in such conversations.

The story began with familiar nods to the myth that Tony knew. Loki had been married – an arranged marriage – to a woman named Sigyn. They didn’t love each other, infact they’d barely tolerated each other, but for the sake of the treaty their marriage had sealed, an heir was needed. It had been Sigyn’s idea for Loki to put the both of them under a lust spell for the evening, enough that they could forget the mutual dislike and hopefully beget a child.

It worked. More than enough in fact, since Sigyn carried and birthed twin boys, Narfi and Váli. For all that the husband and wife couldn’t get along, they doted on their children, indulging every wish and whim.

Since when had things ever been easy though? Loki’s life was never gentle.

Narfi was – as Thor had pointed out – very similar to Evelyn. He was a normal Aesir youngling, without any of his father’s magic, but inheriting all of the best of his wit and mischief. Váli on the other hand was a fey child. He had all of the power that Narfi had been left without, but despite Loki’s best efforts refused any and all attempts to teach him to use or at the very least control it.

Things came to their inevitable conclusion when the twins were barely adults. The mythology of the story had been twisted by humans, but the key players and events were still same.

The two boys had an argument. No one ever found out what the cause was – by the end of it there was no way of ever knowing. However, the one thing that was known was how volatile Váli’s temper was and how Narfi always rose to the bait.

Loki was summoned from a council meeting to find the eldest twin transformed into a rabid wolf, as large as a cart horse and looming over Narfi’s prone body. The ensuing fight was short but brutal.
The God of mischief could never bring himself to use lethal force against his son, whereas Váli’s mind was so far gone that he had no way of knowing that he was attempting to kill his own father.

It was Thor who did what had to be done, using his mighty strength to smash Mjolnir into the side of Váli’s skull. The young magic user had been shifting forms throughout his confrontation with his father and the final blow laid him out dead, still in the body of a giant serpent. Loki was found comatose and near death underneath the reptile’s body, acidic saliva and blood having burnt into his exposed arms and face. Narfi’s lifeless body lay sprawled over him, effectively pinning him to the ground.

Tony winced as he realised how much the mythology had been skewed around those few details. As with all things, history had been changed in the telling to shine a light on one group and darkness on another. Such a thing had never really bothered him before, but then again it had never been so personal before.

“That’s terrible.” He said after a while, realising that Thor was expecting a reply from him.

“It was a dark moment in our family’s past, and took a long time to heal.”

“How the hell could you ever expect Loki to heal from something like that?! He lost two kids!”

Thor looked at the man in astonishment. “Do not tell me you are feeling sympathetic for my brother, Tony? At the time, of course, we did all we could for him. The physical wounds healed in the end, but I fear it may have been the mental scars that caused the true damage. Still, a tragic past does not give him the right to lay all his pain into another world.”

“No…No, of course not.” Tony was having to concentrate hard to keep up his masquerade of someone who hated the trickster, whilst all his treacherous mind could do was remember the Look of love and devotion on Loki’s face every-time he saw Evie. No doubt the mischief-maker had loved his sons just as deeply and for them to both die in such a way…

“Tony? Are you okay?”

He jumped and glanced back up at the thunder God. “Huh? Oh, yeah. It’s harder to stay emotionally distanced from a story like that when you have a kid.” He ran a gauntletted hand across his face. “And to think I thought I had problems.” Slowly easing himself to his feet he turned his gaze back to the wreckage before them. “Ready to go pull some more buildings apart.”

Thor frowned at him. “We have barely sat down for five minutes, you need to rest.”

“I don’t think I’d be able to now, not after hearing that.” He took a few steps away from the impromptu seat, feeling his legs protesting. However, he couldn’t get the mental images that the story had conjured up out of his head. Of Loki lying almost dead beneath his son’s body, nearly destroyed by his other child. He’d rather exhaust himself than let his mind focus on that.

Thor followed the man with a frown as they waded back out through the rubble and into the ruined city.

MWMWMWMWMWMW

Clint was babysitting.

That was a joke in and of itself. He should have been out there with the others taking on Doom and rescuing people from the ensuing chaos.
“Uncle Clint, can you read this please?”

The assassin looked up to see Evie holding out her work-book, an earnest expression on her face.

“Read it?”

“Yes. Jarvis says it is always best to have someone else read your work because they spot mistakes that you haven’t.”

Clint reached out and accepted the book with a world-weary sigh. “Smart guy, that Jarvis.” He scanned the two pages that the child had written.

At the age of six – or as she liked to say, nearly seven – Evelyn’s handwriting was now readable and fairly neat. Her spellings were also quite passable, but Clint had to smile as he spotted the obvious weak-spot in her literacy.

“Let me read the beginning back to you and see if you can spot what’s missing.” He said teasingly. When she nodded he took a deep breath. “Once upon a time there was a unicorn and the unicorn
was called Ben and he lived in a big cave and one day he wanted to explore so he left the cave and went into the forest and then he met a witch and she was called Anna and he said hello would you like to explore with me and she said yes please.” The archer had to run the last few words together as he ran out of air and Evie started laughing. “So, what did you forget?”

“Full stops and capital letters.”

“Exactly.” He handed the book back. “It’s a good story though. I’d like to know what happens, as long as I can read it without dying from lack of air. And the spelling wasn’t too bad either. Watch out for ‘e’ on the end of words, though, and capital letters for the start of names.”

Evie nodded eagerly, already scribbling down corrections. “You should be a teacher, uncle Clint.” She said, almost without thinking about it.

“Me? What on earth would I teach?”

She shrugged as if to say that that wasn’t her problem. “I don’t know. Bow and arrows? Someone has to teach how to use a bow and arrows.”

“I guess, but I’m an Avenger, I can’t really have a day job.”

The girl nodded and scribbled a few more things down in her book. “It’s my birthday soon!”

Clint blinked at the abrupt subject change. Children just couldn’t hold a train of thought!

“I know, four days to go.” He smiled as her face lit up at the thought. “You really do look forward to your birthday.”

“And Christmas! They’re the best days because I get to-”

“Miss Evelyn, how is your assignment going?” Jarvis’ voice cut in smoothly across the girl’s chatter and she abruptly stopped, her mouth snapping shut. Clint frowned at the look of sudden concern crossing her face, as if Jarvis had reprimanded her for more than just stopping in her work.

“Give her a break Jarvis, she’s doing well. What were you about to say, Evie? They’re the best days because you get to…?”

“Uh…I get to open presents.” She cast a nervous glance at the ceiling. “I’m finished, Jarvis, look.” She held her book up.

“Very good, Miss Evie. Since your work is complete you may go and play.”

The girl rolled her eyes. “Thanks Jarvis.” She grinned brightly at Barton. “Want to play Mario-cart, uncle Clint?”

“I’ll just watch, thanks.” The archer was all too aware that the child could beat him hands down at pretty much any video game invented (or so they supposed, it wasn’t as if they’d let a six year old near something like Call of Duty, but anything with a PG or lower rating was fair game). Since Tony was the only one able to hold his own against her it was generally considered that genetics had played a large part in this particular talent.

“Will Daddy be coming home soon?” Evie had put the disc in and was waiting for it to finish loading.

“Another hour or so, I’d guess.”
“Good.”

It was, in fact, closer to three hours.

By the time the rest of the group limped in Clint had already given in and ordered out for Indian take-away. Evie was half-way through her butter-chicken, but abandoned it to jump up and run to the large patio windows and watch the machinery strip away the Ironman suit. She knew better than to run out to greet her father – if nothing else it was cold out there – but waited until he was inside to hug him.

“Hey, kiddo. Ooh, Indian! What did you guys order me?”

“Biryani and keema naan.” Clint answered the question, dishing out the food to the group. “Jarvis tried to persuade me to get you a salad, but your daughter was quite certain you’d rip his circuit boards out and gut me if I did.”

Tony laughed and ruffled the child’s hair as she continued eating. “That’s my girl!”

“Well, you would have done.” She said, matter-of-factly. Sadly, it was very probably true. “Daddy, I’m full, can I have pudding now?”

Tony looked down at the untouched rice and the onion Evie had discarded from the curry. “How can you want pudding if you’re full?” Without waiting for a reply he sectioned off a small portion of rice. “Eat that, then we’ll see.”

A scene re-enacted in most families around the world as the child whined and grumbled and finally ate a few more mouthfuls.

Deceptively normal.

The day before Evelyn’s seventh birthday started off just like any other.

She was over-excited as always, waking Tony up early to ask what time Loki would be arriving and then sulking when being told that it wasn’t going to be until the evening. Beyond that things continued on as normal and after her morning maths lesson the girl settled down to play a game in the lounge.

Tony had brought his laptop up from the lab, something that usually happened when he was only working on the theoretical side of things, and took up the entirety of one of the sofas. He was studying readings taken from the remnants of the chitauri weapon and trying to condense it all into a better format for working with. Usually he wouldn’t risk letting the others see that he was looking into chitauri technology, but with Bruce away he knew comfortably that no one else would understand the data on his screen.

Along with Bruce being away, Steve had also gone out for the day, so that when the rest of the group migrated to the living room they had a seat each for once. This saved the usual squabble over who had to sit on the floor.

Evie grew bored with her game soon enough, and after a heavy debate it was decided that Bed knobs and Broomsticks was an agreeable film and that the rest of the adults would deign to suffer through it. (Perish the thought that each of them secretly loved the final battle scene).
The first sign they had of anything unusual happening was when the TV screen flickered. Being Stark technology a fault was unheard of so caused Tony to stare at it in confusion, his brow furrowing when the same anomaly happened again and Evie began to pipe up complaints that she couldn’t see her film.

“Is the disc scratched?” Clint glanced up from his magazine to watch Ironman using his Stark-tablet to run a diagnostic check on the machine.

“It’s not a disc, it’s saved into the TV memory.” Tony shook the tablet when it told him that nothing was wrong and stared at the blinking screen again.

Then the main lights flickered.

“Thor, are you causing an electrical surge again?”

The thunder God stared up at the bulbs, shaking his head. “Nay, this isn’t my work. There’s no storm in the air.”

Heads all turned back to Tony, the resident genius and only one who had a hope of diagnosing what was going on. He shrugged slightly.

“Maybe the arc-reactor is faulty…” His voice said it all. The arc-reactor was flawless; there was simply no way that it could cause a problem. This was seconded by Natasha as she held up the device she’d been using.

“My Kindle’s stopped working, and that runs off battery power. Something’s going on here.”

“Jarvis? Any idea what’s causing this?” Tony wasn’t concerned. After all, why should he be? Surely there were numerous simple explanations for why the technology in the tower was playing up. He rubbed his chest at that thought – but so far his own reactor seemed fine.

“I’m sorry sir, there…appea…pow…urge….unusu….don’t…” Jarvis’ voice died.

“Daddy…?” Evie looked uncertain as the TV failed completely and on the sofa Tony’s tablet blacked-out, losing the data he’d been working on.

“Stark…?” Natasha sat herself upright, muscles poised as she tried to ascertain whether a threat was brewing or not. The others in the room were subconsciously copying her, placing down books and pens as they looked around for the cause of the anomaly. Even Pepper had put her coffee down and was watching Tony nervously as if he had an explanation.

Then the room exploded.

MWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWM

Furniture was flung outwards from the epicentre, the air filled with broken glass and shards of metal.

Tony was thrown across the living space, crashing through the glass-topped coffee table and colliding hard with the bar. His head exploded with pain as the back of his skull impacted against the mahogany veneer and for a worryingly long moment it caused his vision to black-in completely. He could hear screams amidst the crashing and shrieking of metal-on-metal and through it all his world concentrated down to one little thought;

Find Evelyn.
It was far harder than it should have been, but sheer force of bull-headedness made him open his eyes against the unconsciousness and pain that was trying to pull him under. His vision was swimming and the mere act had him fighting his own body not to give in to the sudden nausea. Somewhere in the back of his mind a little voice suggested that he probably had a severe concussion.

He didn’t care. Scrubbing a bruised and bleeding hand across his eyes he tried to survey the damage and see what the hell had just happened.

Complacency.

That had been their down-fall; they had grown complacent.

The Avenger’s had had ten years to grow used to Stark Tower. Ten years of it being their bolt-hole and safe place where they had never needed to be concerned of attack or needed to be on edge. And they had complied when Tony requested that there were no weapons around Evie. They had stopped carrying the bulk of their armoury with them, confident in their security and trying to set an example for a small child.

Complacency.

Tony managed to clear the bursts of light and pain from his swimming vision long enough to make out the figures that had appeared in the room

Chitauri.

The explosion was evidently a side-effect of whatever teleportation they had used and it had had the added bonus that no-one in the room had been prepared for it.

There were about twelve of the creatures, each armed and already spread out across the room; they had obviously been prepared for the mayhem their arrival would cause and had planned to use it to their advantage. Natasha was sprawled under an upturned sofa, blood running down the side of her face and her legs trapped at an awkward angle under the heavy piece of furniture. Nearby Clint was pinned by a chitauri spear through his arm, holding him down to the floor.

Tony’s sluggish gaze took in the rest of the scene like a bad slow-mo effect in a movie. He could see Pepper dazed and terrified as another chitauri forced her to stay on her knees, a spear held to the back of her head. Thor was the only one out of the group who was unscathed enough to struggle, but three of the warriors were holding him down, a lethal looking dagger slammed through the palm of his hand and a blade held under his throat to force him still.

This was, however, only background to Tony’s frantic mind as he stared around, trying to pull himself upright.

Where’s Evie?!!

A chitauri hand – hand? Mandible? Thing? – grabbed his shoulder, hauling him out of the wreckage and throwing him onto his stomach, making him acutely aware of the other injuries he must have incurred in the original blast, but that had been down-played under his thumping headache. Before he could try to raise himself up he was pulled to his knees by his hair, the sudden up-right motion and added pain to his head almost causing him to black-out again.

“Daddy!”

Evie’s petrified sob cleared his head better than any ice-pack or whisky ever could and he blinked
enough to clear his vision.

“Evelyn!”

His daughter, his precious little daughter was being held between two of the chitauri, an ugly dagger pressed hard against her throat. There were scratches down her face from the blast and she was sobbing, so scared that she wasn’t even daring to struggle.

“Let her go!”

No. Jesus Christ no! How could this have happened?! They had been so careful!

Tony had never felt so helpless in his life. To see his daughter held by those monsters and knowing that he was useless. He couldn’t even use the suit – not with Jarvis shorted-out.

His demand sounded pathetic to his ringing ears, and was duly ignored. Instead one of the aliens snarled at the three holding Thor down.

“Keep that whelp still! We don’t want him interfering!” The voice spoke in English, but was so scratched and roughened that it sounded like it was trying to vocalise through a throat-full of gravel.

“What do you want?!” Natasha was struggling where she lay trapped under the sofa – it looked like she had a broken ankle. Her efforts were rewarded with the butt of a spear thumping into her shoulder.

“From you insects? Nothing.” The chitauri that seemed to be the one in charge stalked over to Evie, grabbing the child’s chin in one hand. “We’re waiting on someone else. I doubt he’ll be long.”

The little girl stared up at it with the expression of a child realising that nightmares are very much real. She seemed too petrified to even cry, frozen as the blade dug into her throat.

“Release her!”

Tony started, his eyes darting to the origin of the voice, unable to move his head against the grip in his hair.

Of course.

What else would the chitauri want? Why else would they be here if not for him?

“Brother…” Thor’s voice, broken and pain-filled, still contrived to sound accusing and it occurred to Tony that there was no reason for any of the others not to assume that the chitauri had a partner in this.

The alien in charge let go of Evie’s chin, turning to face the new-comer.

“So there you are, Godling.”

Loki wasn’t dressed for battle. On the contrary he was barefoot in black cargoes and a simple button-up shirt. His only concession to a fight was that he held a staff – not his sceptre – in his hands. No magic.

He must have realised that before he’d even arrived – known that the chitauri would have perfected whatever technology they used to block out his powers. He had appeared in the full knowledge that
once there he couldn’t leave.

This did not mean, however, that he wasn’t prepared to fight.

The God’s staff spun in his hands as he lunged at the nearest chitauri, knocking it off balance before ramming the butt of the weapon into its head and cracking the exoskeleton. As an afterthought he caught the dagger thrown through the air at him, returning it so that it lodged in an alien eye-ball.

“Möhdy!”

Evie had begun to struggle, childish hope filling her now that Loki had appeared in the midst of it all.

The single word she cried out only made sense to Tony and Thor – causing the God to gape at his brother in horrified shock – but the tone of voice made it all too clear to the others that she knew and trusted their enemy. Natasha stilled as she stared between the child and trickster her eyes narrowed and Pepper just stared at Tony in horror.

Loki ignored each and every one of the adults in the room as he swept two more of the monsters out of his way using what appeared to be a combination of martial arts and British quarter-staff technique. His attention was focussed only on his daughter as he tried to reach her.

“Behind you!” Tony took a hard blow to his stomach for shouting the warning, but it was worth it as Loki ducked the swinging spear that he other-wise wouldn’t have seen. The God spun on one bare foot, meeting the next blow square on his staff and throwing it backwards to give himself space to work in. He followed up the move with a sharp slash at the chitauri’s legs, felling the monster.

“Drop the weapon, trickster.” The voice was less than concerned, almost amused, and Loki twisted round to face it with a snarl.

The leader of the attacking group was standing next to Evie, the dagger pressed hard enough into the girl’s throat to draw blood. The child was holding her breath, eyes wide and tear-filled as she stared pleadingly at her mother.

“M…Möhdy…” Her terrified sob was cut off by a hard slap across the back of her head.

“Let her go!” Loki had never looked more dangerous. Tony watched him like a drowning man spotting a life-raft, praying that the trickster had a plan, some terribly clever idea that would sort the whole mess out.

Something with which to defeat these monsters.

“Are you scared, little Godling?” The chitauri held up a lock of Evie’s hair tauntingly, pulling it enough to drag the child’s head back at a painful angle. “I believe you are. Ah!” It tilted it’s own head in warning as Loki stepped towards them. “No. Don’t move. Or this will get even messier. Humans bleed so much. Even little half-breeds like this one.”

“Don’t!” The trickster’s voice was frantic as more blood ran down his daughter’s throat. His voice was echoed by Tony’s, although once again the inventor was ignored.

“Don’t? Or what, weakling? What will you do?”

Loki didn’t break eye-contact with Evie as he whispered: “Anything.”
“Then drop your weapon, you pathetic wretch, or be aware that the punishment made for you can easily be meted out on her instead.”

You think you know pain? We will make you long for something sweeter…

Tony knew what Loki had been threatened with. It had been enough of a fear that the trickster had given up his own daughter and spent the better part of a decade on the run rather than be caught and subjected to the chitauri’s tender mercies.

And yet with Evelyn’s life threatened, Loki didn’t hesitate. When he’d said he’d do anything to keep her safe he had meant each and every word of the promise, and now intended to keep it.

“No!” The word was involuntary, pure and utter shock, as Tony watched his lover let the staff slip from his fingers. It bounced once as it hit the floor, then rolled to a stop by the man’s knees. “Loki!”

“Now,” Loki’s voice was shaking, perhaps in rage, perhaps in fear. “Release her-” His demand was cut off as the leader flicked out one of the dreaded whips and the tail lashed itself tightly around his neck, bringing him choking to his knees.

“No!”

“Möhdy!”

Tony’s and Evie’s screams were almost in sync as the trickster was hauled up by two of the least wounded chitauri. The leader made a strange crackling sound – the closest approximation to laughter the alien larynxes could muster – running one claw down Loki’s cheek before drawing back and smacking the God hard enough around the face to leave him limp and dazed in his captors grip.

“We, the chitauri, don’t break deals, but we will pass the sternest of our sentences upon those who do!” It snarled, gesturing at the two holding Evie. “Release the girl.”

The child was thrown forwards and she stumbled into Tony’s arms as the grip on his hair was released. She was sobbing so hard that it was boarder-line hyperventilation and all her father could do was hold her as tight as possible, hardly daring to believe that she was back in his embrace.

His gaze, however, never left Loki’s face, taking in every emotion; the panic, the terror, and the pure relief that Evie was alright, making his surrender worth it.

“I’ll find you!” Tony had to shout to be heard as the chitauri began to activate whatever device it was they used for travel and prepared to leave with their long-sought-after prisoner. He knew his lover had caught the words though from the expression in the terrified green eyes.

“I swear, whatever it takes I will find you!”
Chapter 8

With his head spinning and horror thumping through his veins Tony pulled Evie behind himself, his fingers closing over the smooth wood of the staff that Loki had dropped. It wasn’t a weapon he was familiar with using but right now any port was welcome in a storm. He could see that Thor was already struggling to his feet and a sudden panic swept through him.

They knew!

This thought helped force him up to his own feet, one arm holding his daughter back so that he was shielding her with his own body and the other holding Loki’s staff out in a defensive position.

“Stark…”

“Stay back!” He swung it clumsily in Thor’s direction as the God took a wavering step towards him. His vision was blurred and legs unsteady but by damn he was not going to let them anywhere near Evie!

“Stark…Tony, you are bleeding.” Thor took another step forward, stopping again as the staff followed his movement. He raised both hands placatingly at Tony’s angry snarl.

The man was an absolute wreck, whether he had realised it or not. Blood was dripping down the back of his neck from the cut hidden by his hair and more was smeared around the numerous lacerations caused by the flying glass. And yet, despite a severe concussion and possible broken ribs he stood on unsteady feet holding a weapon he didn’t know how to use and all because he believed that his friends would harm his daughter.

“Tony, you need medical aid.” The God tried again, his voice softer than usual and more calming.

“No! Stay back!” Tony swung the staff again hopelessly, and Thor caught the end of it, pulling it out of the man’s grip and tossing it aside. “No!” The protest became more frantic as Ironman twisted his body to fully shield Evie where she stood clinging to his leg and sobbing.

“Listen to me!” Thor caught the weak punch aimed unsteadily at his head and held the wrist in a firm grip, more to keep Tony upright than anything else. “Tony! You are injured, your daughter is not in any danger now and you need to calm down.” The human’s wild gaze finally met the God’s and a little of the panic fell away to a calmer suspicion.

“But-”

“The priority right now is to make sure everyone is okay, all discussions and explanations can wait.”

“But-”

“It can wait. Evie is safe for now and you are badly injured; you are in no position for a fight. I will make sure no-one demands explanations until you are able to stand on your feet without swaying. Do you understand?” Thor’s grip on Tony’s wrist loosened and he moved his hands to rest on the man’s shoulders instead. “Do you understand?”

Tony was in a considerable amount of pain, terrified for his daughter and badly concussed, but he was still able to see the determined expression in the thunder-god’s eyes; Thor was trying to tell him that Evie’s parentage could remain hidden for a little while longer – long enough for Tony to
receive the medical treatment he needed.

“I…Yeah…yeah, I get you. Thank you.” He rested a hand soothingly on his daughter’s head as he felt her sob again against his leg. “Why?”

“Because I look after family.” Thor’s gaze darted down to the crying child, trying to find the similarities he now knew to look for. “I don’t pretend to know or understand what has happened here, but I will keep the attention away from you until you are more able to stand upright.”

Tony had to smile at that, just before his knees gave out.

MWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMW

It took a long time to sort out the injuries sustained in the surprise attack – if it could even be called an attack.

A fail-safe had been in-place for years that meant should there be a power-failure to the tower each and every Avenger would be alerted. This meant that Steve, Bruce and Fury were all at the tower in double quick time.

They knew better than to ask questions straight away – rather, concentrating on fixing up the injuries of their comrades.

Natasha had a broken ankle and sprained wrist, but since the break was only a hairline fracture she let Bruce splint it and wrap her arm then immediately hobbled back to the lounge to help start on the tidy-up. Knowing Natasha it was probably a coping mechanism to the shock she was undoubtedly in, but no-one stopped her on the grounds that what a severely shaken assassin wants to do a severely shaken assassin gets to do.

Clint was less easy to deal with. His left arm had been impaled through-and-through, only narrowly missing the bone. Luckily the blade had been left in the wound which had stopped him from bleeding out before Bruce could deal with it and the doctor had time to save the limb. It did mean, however, that Clint had to be put under some very high-end painkillers and was therefore less than clear about what was going on around him.

Pepper was easy to clean up – Steve insisted that he be the one to make sure she was alright – since beyond scratches caused by the flying glass she was unharmed, and Captain America did a lot of good for a bad case of shock.

It came as a surprise to Tony that Nick Fury knew anything about first-aid. If asked he would have said that the director could manage putting a plaster on a paper-cut and little more. He hadn’t ever realised that Fury had been fully trained as an army medic.

However, training or not, it was difficult to treat Tony when he had a lapful of hysterical seven-year-old.

Something that Tony did know about Nick Fury was that the guy was surprisingly good with kids. There’s nothing a young child likes more than to be made to feel older than they actually are, and Fury could do just that; in this case by calling Evie a nurse and having her help him patch her father up.

Tony had a cut at the base of his skull where he’d hit the bar which thankfully didn’t require stitches, but was definitely the cause of his swimming vision and nausea. Yeah, concussion from hell. On top of that he had fractured ribs and more lacerations than he wanted to count. Bless her, Evie sorted these out with Hello Kitty plasters.
The child was shivering, and the moment Fury gave him the all-clear, Tony scooped her straight back up in his arms, hugging her tightly. He sorted out her cuts and bruises himself, his hands shaking with silent rage as he gently bandaged the cut running along her throat.

“Daddy…”

“It’s going to be okay.” He already knew what she was going to say, and tried to alleviate her fears sooner rather than later.

“But, Möhdy…But…” Evie began sobbing again

“It’s going to be okay, little bird, we’re going to get him back.” Tony hated how his own voice caught as he said it. How the hell was he ever going to get Loki back?! It wasn’t like the chitauri lived on the moon; they were from another universe! Even if he somehow magically trace them there was still no way to get there. But he couldn’t tell their daughter that; couldn’t tell her that in all truthfulness he didn’t have a clue how to make good on the promise he’d screamed out as the trickster had been hauled away.

“He’ll miss my birthday…”

“I know, I’m sorry.” It was all he could say. Nothing was going to fix this, nothing was going to bring back Loki, so all he could do was hold Evelyn close and try to tell her that everything was going to be okay when in truth it felt like the world was falling down around them. “It’s all going to be alright, little bird, it’s all okay.”

It wasn’t.

MWMWMWMWMWMWMW

It was much later that evening – so late that ‘evening’ didn’t really apply any more – that the Avengers were finally sat down together to discuss what the hell had just happened.

They didn’t have an official debriefing room in the tower so had usually used the lounge as such. With the room a complete bombsite they had improvised and utilised the home-cinema and it’s ridiculously comfortable chairs. Said chairs weren’t fixed to the floor so they had dragged them into a rough circle, although Tony had refused to turn the lights up any higher than a dim glow due to his pounding head. In an ideal world they would all be asleep, but Fury had decreed that anything to do with the chitauri should be construed as an international threat and they needed to discuss if further action was to be taken.

It was first time Evie joined them in a debriefing, although not as a participant. It was well past her bedtime by this point, but she was far too upset to leave Tony’s side, and there was no way her father was going to let her out of his sight anyway. The Avengers hadn’t argued when Tony pulled two of the plush chairs together in the corner of the room and tucked her up in a bundle of blankets, giving her his Stark-player to listen to her favourite music to fall asleep to. He didn’t leave her side until she was fast asleep, and even when going over to join the others he made sure he was sat where he could keep an eye on her.

Natasha started the whole thing off – sitting in an uncharacteristically lazy manner with her bandaged foot resting up on Clint’s lap. She told the story with little embellishment, explaining what had happened with great detail but making sure she only covered what she considered to be important. She did, unfortunately, include Evie’s strange familiarity with a certain Norse God.

The news that both the chitauri and Loki appeared to be back didn’t go down well with Fury or
Steve, and Bruce had gone pale. The Director sighed heavily and rubbed his forehead with his knuckles.

“Okay. Does anyone have a theory of what the hell happened? Or—” And here he levelled Stark with a penetrating stare. “Why did the chitauri decide Evelyn was more valuable than any of the superheroes in the room and why did Loki turn up and give himself up for her? Anyone? Any ideas?”

Tony deliberately looked away, but that just meant he was caught in Thor’s line-of-sight instead. The God raised an eyebrow pointedly at him, making it quite clear that it was time to start talking. He responded with a small, pleading shake of the head. Usually he was the king of bull-shit and winging-it, but right now his brain was drawing a blank and there was just no way he could talk himself out of this mess. He needed time to think, time to prepare a way of explaining himself that wouldn’t result in them immediately killing him and taking Evie.

“Stark.” Thor’s voice brooked no disobedience as his gaze became a glare. “It’s time to explain yourself and your words earlier.”

“Words?” Fury looked between the blonde and the inventor in confusion. Natasha had missed out Tony’s scream in her retelling – possibly she had been concentrating on the chitauri pinning her down in those last moments to have heard the man call out to Loki. Thor, however, had heard it all too well it seemed.

“You promised my brother that you would search for him, that you would find him.” The God folded his arms like a poker-player laying down a royal flush. “I believe there is a lot you need to tell us.”

“Thor, I…” Tony glanced over at his sleeping child hopelessly. This wasn’t something he could hide. Thor already knew enough to guess the truth and if this was all going to come out it would probably be better if he did it himself rather than let the God throw half-baked theories around.

“Tony?” Pepper was watching him in concern, and he sighed heavily.

“Fine. You guys are going to kill me anyway when you find out; I might as well get it out in the open.” He leant forward to rest his elbows on his knees, ribs protesting at the movement. “Evie is Loki’s daughter.”

There was a very long moment’s silence. It was quite possible that that was the last thing any of them had ever expected to hear from him. Only Thor looked unsurprised and instead sighed heavily, rubbing a hand over his eyes.

“Stark. Please repeat what you just said, and pay attention to the words coming out of your mouth because I think I just heard some serious bullshit.”

Tony winced. He had heard Fury in all manners of pissed off, but the icy coldness was a whole new level of ire.

“No, you got it right the first time. Evie is Loki’s daughter.” He glanced up as Clint shifted in his chair.

“How?!” The archer was sitting up straighter, looking more confused than angry, but that was probably due to the amount of painkillers he was on. “She looks like you – how can he be the dad?”

“He’s not.” Thor answered before Tony could, his gaze moving to the sleeping child who was
blissfully unaware of what was being discussed. “She called my brother Môhdy, the Norse term for mummy.”

The room exploded.

Again.

Thankfully only metaphorically this time.

The statement had caused the obvious burst of confusion, disgust and outrage as people questioned how the hell something like that could biologically happen, what the hell Tony was doing with Loki anyway and everything else in between. Fury was on his feet and Pepper had that terrible look of betrayed trust on her face that always made Tony feel of less worth than a cockroach. However, the sheer overwhelming noise of insults and questions infuriated him.

“Right! All of you just shut up!” Tony Stark was not a tall man, especially when compared to Thor or Steve, but when angry he had the uncanny ability to seem much larger than he actually was – natural charisma or something probably at work. This time he used it to full effect as he yelled over the noise his team-mates were making.

“If you all just shut up for a few moments I’d be able to explain and then maybe I’ll have answered some of your questions!” He cast a wary glance at Evelyn, but the Stark-player headphones were noise-reducing and she hadn’t woken.

However, his angry roar had caused a cessation in the argument, and Fury gestured at him with an open-handed sweep. “Go ahead then, Stark, please explain how the hell you and our number one enemy happen to have a child together!”

Tony slumped back down into his chair with a huff of irritation. “Enemy is probably the wrong description, you know.” He glowered at the director. “He’s been on Earth ever since he escaped Thor’s custody, that’s ten years and none of you knew. There wasn’t so much as a hint that he’s been on our planet in a decade – what does that tell you?”

“That he’s a sly manipulative bastard who’s good at playing long-cons.” Clint’s answer lacked spite due to the heavy medication he was on, but he still sounded pissed off. He shrugged when Thor glared at him for his usage of bad language. “Pout all you want, big guy, your brother’s a dick.”

“He is not!” To their surprise the snarl came from Tony, not Thor. The inventor glared at Clint, then moved his gaze to take in the others. “Let me make one thing quite clear here: all of you don’t know squat about Loki, including you, Pointbreak!” He shook his head slightly, wincing as it aggravated his headache. “And I’m quite sure that didn’t make grammatical sense, but I still mean it; this is a situation that none of you have the first clue about and I will not have any of you judging me, him and certainly not Evie until you at least know the fucking facts!”

“So tell us the facts, Stark.” Fury sat back in his chair, folding his arms as he met the man’s irate gaze head on. He held up a hand as Steve tried to speak. “No. Everyone do as he says and shut up. Stark. Start talking.”

Start talking.

Huh.

Now that he had a room of accusing glares that was suddenly a much harder thing to do. Where did it all start? Probably that moment he had offered Loki a drink, facing down the God without
armour or weapons. They still jokingly referred to it as their first date.

No. A sudden stab of pain through his chest made him acutely aware that there was no ‘their’ anymore. No ‘them’ or ‘both’ or any other plural. Loki was gone.

“Tony?” Pepper was the one who prompted him, curled up in her chair like a cat as she stared at him with an expression that begged for an explanation. It was easier to direct the story to her rather than face the others.

“It was that day Thor told us Loki had escaped custody. I’d had a shit day anyway, and to hear that the guy who’d tried to destroy the city was on the loose didn’t help.” Tony kept his voice low, a subtle ploy that meant no-one could interrupt without missing what he was saying. “I did what I always did back then; I found a bar somewhere and attempted to get as drunk as humanly possible. Of course, just my luck that it was the same bar a certain God of mischief decided to drown himself in too.

“I remember practically nothing of that night, but Jarvis helpfully documented the evening for me. I woke up the next morning with the worst hangover of my life – which is seriously saying something! – and a hungover super-villain in bed with me.” Tony raised a hand up at the barrage of comments that statement drew. “Hey, if you guys talk over me I’m not going to continue.”

Fury sighed irritably and waved the interruptions down. “Let the man talk.”

“Thank you.” Stark almost managed to keep the sarcasm out of his voice. “So, yeah. We woke up together in bed and it was obvious what had happened. He tried to blast me into oblivion, I think, but all that happened was a crappy fizzle so I ignored him and made Jarvis play us the security footage from that night. Turns out he’d enjoyed himself as much as me.” He shrugged at the disgusted snort he heard from Clint. “Hey, if you think two guys having a bit of fun is icky, that’s not my problem.”

“Two guys isn’t a problem, it’s Loki in that situation that’s revolting.” He rolled his eyes as Thor glared at him. “What? Don’t tell me you aren’t grossed out by the thought of your brother doing the dirty.”

“I’m well aware that my brother is far more adventurous than I have ever been – at least this time he chose a creature with compatible anatomy.”

“Do you mind!?” Tony practically spat the words out. He didn’t necessarily care about the insult that had been insinuated there, but this was his best chance to tell the story before they could all form their own opinions on the matter. He didn’t appreciate interruptions. “I am willing to explain this once, and only once. So either listen, or shut up and get the hell out!”

Clint raised his hands in mocking surrender, a dark scowl on his face. He did stop talking though.

“Anyway!” It was a very petulant tone of voice, but it got Stark’s point across. “So. We’d had an accidental one-night-stand that looked like it had been bloody good fun and I was left rather wishing I hadn’t been so drunk that I couldn’t remember it. Seems he was thinking the same thing since I went back to the same bar the next night and he was there again. We both ended up only slightly rat-arsed and came back here again. After that he just started turning up in my bedroom at random times.”

“How long for?” Fury sounded like he was only barely keeping a lid on his temper whilst hearing that Shield’s number one enemy had been cavorting around the Avenger’s base so freely.
“That went on for about two years.” Saying it quickly was like pulling off a plaster in one go – get it over with and hopefully the repercussions won’t be as painful. Tony ignored the director incredulous gaze and continued ruthlessly. “After that things slowed down when we were caught. I won’t say who walked in on us–” Everyone looked at Pepper anyway, who else would keep such a secret for Tony? “–but needless to say they made me stop seeing him. But hey! I’m Tony Stark! Once I’ve found a good lay I’m not going to say no if he keeps on turning up regardless, which he did. Well, up until he didn’t. For about eight months.”

There were surreptitious glances towards Evie – no surprise why Loki had vanished for such a specific amount of time.

“So he turned up with a baby one night?” Bruce’s softly spoken question was a pleasant change from the accusations and harsh words the others had been throwing at him and Tony managed a small grin.

“Not exactly…” He directed the next part of the story at his fellow scientist. “Rather, I had the God of mischief turn up out of the blue after an unexplained eight month hiatus and tell me that he was pregnant.”

“And what? That he was dumping the baby on you?” Clint was still sounding sour, but slightly more engaged in the tale by this point. At least he was paying attention.

Tony spent the better part of two hours talking. He explained about Loki’s decision to give up the child to protect it, and his own choice in keeping it. The team were understandably shocked at the realisation their resident crazy-scientist had successfully acted as midwife at the birth of his own daughter and to the God of mischief no less.

He didn’t hold back from telling them all the little things Loki had divulged to him either. At the time they had been told Loki had assumed that only Tony and maybe Evie would ever hear the confessions. However, anything Tony could use to his advantage to show the trickster in a better light, he used.

He had Jarvis play the clip where Loki had described the effect the fall through the void had had on his mind – Jarvis did a masterful job of cutting the frame since that particular conversation had been had whilst the God was in labour. However, the small declaration of the adverse mental effects (putting it mildly) and bad handling by the chitauri (putting it very mildly) had Tony’s audience both hooked and dismayed.

“They tortured him?” Thor was predictably the one to give the name to what had happened, sounding as horrified as only a big brother can.

Tony snorted in reply. “What did you think? That a species you’d never heard of just gave him command over their army like that? You at least should know that he is fascinated by humanity – he’d never have willingly wanted to destroy it.”

“Uh, fascinated by humanity? Don’t tell me he’s the one behind all those alien-abduction-probing incidents.” Clint was still the one putting forth all the smart-arse comments, but at least the disgust had left his tone.

Tony rubbed his hand over his eyes. He was exhausted, in pain, and just could not be bothered to explain this part.

“Jarvis, just play the footage, I can’t remember his exact words. Follow it directly with his description of what the chitauri did.”
“Sir, you were in rather compromising positions during both of those conversations.”

“No we weren’t. They were both pre and post-coital, as long as you don’t play the porn that happened in between I’m sure these guys can cope.” Were he feeling better he would have felt amusement at how sickened Steve looked.

“Very well. I shall monitor their reactions and edit accordingly.”

“Whatever, Jarvis, just play the damn clips.”

The large screen flickered to life – Tony cast a glance at Evie, but she was still sound asleep – and began running the footage from the previous Christmas. The camera angle was static but had filmed in superb quality that was more appropriate to cinema than security footage; Tony Stark did not stint when it came to technology.

The film was showing Tony himself sat on his bed, back against the headboard. Loki was straddling his lap, hands running through the man’s hair as he stared at the inventor with a piercing expression.

“Because. Because humanity is everything that we Gods can’t be.” The trickster leant forwards to rest his forehead against his partner’s. “For half a million years I have lived in Asgard and seen nothing change. Oh, we war and squabble and forge treaties with other realms, but we never move on, we never learn and we never grow as a people or culture. When I first saw humanity I was astounded! All you seem to do is change. Your very existence as a species is built upon growing and adapting, evolving, living every day with the knowledge that you may never see another. You learnt and discovered and built and created all based upon your mortality. Not just new thoughts but new ways of thinking. Humanity fashioned such things as have never been seen in Asgard in such brief life-times: skyscrapers, the internet, cathedrals, the Mona Lisa, the pyramids, the Great Wall of China! All this from a race of monkeys!” He stopped his rant with a deep sigh. “I followed humanity because I realised that in truth you are more than we deities-” The word was almost spat. “-Could ever be.”

The footage changed, this time zooming in much closer. It was immediately apparent that the close-up was due to Jarvis trying to hide the fact that the two men in the clip were both naked by focussing only on their shoulders and heads. They were talking quietly now, Loki explaining about his thoughts and motivations towards his brother during his brief and fateful reign of Asgard, and then of his intended suicide from the bifrost. His voice grew softer as he spoke of the damage that had occurred to his faculties as he fell and how by the time he reached the world of the chitauri his mind was nearly gone, broken into pieces so small that it would have been thought lost forever.

“I don’t remember everything that happened.” He admitted quietly. “But every memory I do still have is nothing but pain. My mind was almost gone, so they made sure to send it the rest of the way, breaking my body so many times that I couldn’t even remember my own name.” It was telling how much these memories still affected the God by the way his hand shook as he drew it through his hair. “Towards the end I had no will left. Nothing mattered any more, all I could do was obey; lest the pain began again.”

“But you broke free in the end.”

Loki smiled at that comment, although this time there was a tinge of darkness to it.

“The sceptre. It was intended to help control me – the wretched thing had a direct link into my brain so that the moment I began to stray from the agreed plan a bolt of pain would be sent through me as a reminder. I grew used to it enough not to show it after a while.” The trickster said
“But I was slowly regaining my sense of self, not just following the script they had laid out for me. That was how I had Selvig add the off switch into the machine, and hence why I abandoned the sceptre during the fight.”

“You were trying to let us win.”

“I was doing my damnedest to help you win.”...

The clip stopped, leaving silence in its wake.

Tony was surprised to find that he was shivering. It had been harder than he’d thought to watch the poignant reminder of that conversation. Sure, what Loki was saying was a hard thing to listen to, but the inventor found that it was seeing the way they had been curled up together that was hurting so much. Whilst he was well aware of Loki’s expressions when they looked at each other, he had never seen his own face when returning the God’s gaze. They looked so happy together. They were so happy together.

He realised that the rest of the group in the room were staring at him and shrugged listlessly. “Yeah. That’s all I got.” He seriously just didn’t want to deal with this right now! “I’ve been seeing him for nearly ten years, we have a kid together and now he’s gone and I don’t know how the hell I’m going to get through this!”

Oops. He hadn’t intended to let his emotions out there too. Pepper was looking at him with this awful pitying expression and that helped turned the despair back to anger.

“What? Are none of you going to say anything?!"

“Why did you keep all this from us?” Fury was predictably the first to speak. “If you had all this so-called proof that Loki was less to blame than we thought why did you never try to tell us sooner and enlist our help?”

The glare Tony laid on him could only be described as withering. “Because I trust Shield as far as I can throw them and didn’t want a single one of you buggers knowing that Evie isn’t fully human.” He spat. “I’ve seen the experiments that were done on Bruce; there was no way I’d risk that ever happening to my little girl.”

The director scowled. “You think that we’d-”

“The council nuked Manhattan.” Tony cut across him. “If they’d had their way every one of us would now be dead, perhaps excepting Thor. And God knows what more radiation would have done to the Hulk. But the facts remain that they nuked a city with the intent to kill millions. Forgive me if I assume that they’ll take the view that research is important enough to warrant taking my daughter and using her as a lab-rat.” He folded his arms. “Not happening. I don’t trust Shield, Loki doesn’t trust a single one of you; we weren’t going to take the risk.”

The reactions to such a statement were mixed at best.

Thor was, predictably, quite devastated that his own brother had filed him in the ‘untrustworthy’ category and Pepper seemed hurt that Tony had done the same to her. However, the main body of the Avengers seemed to at least understand where the father had been coming from, even if they believed his assumptions to be wrong.

“And what, precisely, are you planning to do now that we know the truth?” Fury’s voice rang out across the hubbub as he met Tony’s gaze head on. “How do you intend to protect Evelyn from the council now that you don’t have your pet God to help?”
It was almost possible to feel the temperature in the room drop at that inflammatory question. Even Pepper could honestly say she had never seen her boss look at someone with such loathing and disdain.

“Believe me; I’ve planned long and hard for such an eventuality.” Tony didn’t raise his voice; he didn’t shout or snap. He just spoke slowly and coldly as if every word was being etched into lead by the tone of his voice. “Should anything happen to either myself or Evie, no matter how mundane or accidental it seems, Jarvis is primed to destroy Shield.” He smiled, a thin little expression that didn’t really suit him. “I implanted Jarvis into the Shield servers years ago and he is integrated throughout the system. There’s no point hunting for the programming, you’ll never find him. Even if you strip the entire system down you won’t get rid of him.”

“And I presume you’ll wipe our files?” Fury asked with equal venom.

“Where’s the fun in that? I’ll leave every single file, data point and spread-sheet intact. Jarvis will just take out your firewalls.” He paused to let the implications sink in.

The immense bank of data Shield had collected over the years was an absolute gold-mine for experimental weapons, serums, chemicals, elements, anything and everything that – no matter the reasons for its collection – would be happily snapped up by every terrorist group and army on the planet. There was information on all of the mutants, all of the experiments on Bruce, data on each and every Avenger, names, addresses, contacts, research. It wasn’t just the weapon capabilities that would be released; all of the Shield assassins would be unmasked, spies inside various governments and organisations, every type of person that they didn’t want named would be broadcast to the world.

“That would destroy your own team, Stark.” Fury said quietly.

“Take into account that this will only happen should Shield touch Evie. If she’s left alone, I won’t unleash hell.” Tony countered. “And if she’s taken then I don’t give a damn about the team, Shield, or anything else. I’ve spent a long time going over what the repercussions would be should I give Jarvis the signal and I’m not exaggerating when I say it could easily lead – eventually – to a world war.”

“That’s ridiculous!” Steve seemed shaken out of his stupor by the word ‘war’.

“Hardly. Imagine the world’s reaction when they see the sheer amount of information that Shield has been hiding – did you guys know they’ve got the cure for AIDS squirrelled away? – and has not been sharing. Do you really think that they’ll stand for an American organisation holding all this? China? Russia? The Saudi’s? Hell, even Britain would be up in arms.”

Tony sat back in his chair, speaking flatly as if he genuinely didn’t care that he was talking about single-handedly unleashing world war three.

“You wouldn’t.” It was the first time any of them beyond Clint had really heard fear in Natasha’s voice.

“I would. I’ve just lost my partner; don’t think that I wouldn’t burn the world if it meant keeping my child safe.”

“You sound like my brother.” Thor said softly.

“Yeah, I probably do. See, he’d do anything to save his child too. Infact, he willingly gave himself up to the chitauri to save her, despite having run from them for ten years.”
Pepper uncurled slightly in her chair, staring at Tony with an unreadable expression.

“You love him.”

The three softly spoken words silenced any other comments people might have made and all heads turned towards the inventor.

“Yeah, I do.” He didn’t hesitate and didn’t stammer. It was the first time he had ever verbally admitted to the emotion and it felt like a dam breaking inside. He loved Loki, and was only confessing it after losing him… “So I hope none of you are surprised that Stark Industries is about to embark on a Deep Space Voyager program, because I will do everything and anything to get him back.” He gripped the arms of the chair and levered himself to his feet with a groan. “Now, I’m assuming all of you want to discuss whether or not you want to kill me or kick me off the team, so I’ll leave you to it and put Evie to bed.”

There was a barrage of comments at that, but he ignored them all and brushed past Steve who tried to grab his wrist. Evelyn was still fast asleep, and didn’t stir as he carefully picked her up, glaring at both the Captain and Thor – who were out of their seats and still trying to ask questions – until they moved out of his way.

The six year old – well, seven really, it was gone midnight so it was technically her birthday – wasn’t heavy, but Tony still took the elevator up to the family floor.

“Sir, are you okay?” Jarvis didn’t have much of an emotional range, but could contrive to sound concerned.

“I built you to be a genius so I’ll let you puzzle it out; do you think I’m okay given what’s just happened?”

There was a moment’s silence before the AI spoke again. “I’m sorry, sir. Is there anything I can do? Hot chocolate perhaps?”

Despite it all Tony had to smile. “Sometimes hot chocolate isn’t the answer to everything, Jarvis.” He glanced down at the bandages wrapped around Evie’s throat – an eerie reminder of the wounds Loki had once turned up in his lab with. “But I won’t say no to one.”

“I suspected as much. I will assume that I needn’t ask if you want whipped cream and marshmallows.”

“Good assumption.” The elevator stopped and Tony stepped through the open doors onto the landing. Evie’s room was the nearest door and Jarvis helpfully opened it automatically so that Tony didn’t have to try to shoulder it open without waking his daughter up.

The room was generally quite tidy – at the very least there weren’t any pieces of Lego waiting to destroy his feet – and he tucked Evie up in bed. He decided to not turn off the Stark-Player that was still running after checking what it was playing (New World Symphony on repeat) and untangling the headphone wires so that she wouldn’t roll over and tie them round her neck.

“Can you send one of the Scutters in with my pillow and duvet, Jarvis?”

“You’re sleeping in here, sir?”

Tony sat down on the sofa that made up Evie’s reading corner. “I’m not going to leave her alone tonight. I currently don’t trust anyone or anything. Except for you, of course.”
“Of course, thank you sir. I will send in Scutter Two directly. Do you wish for your tablet too? Your vital signs show that you are unlikely to fall asleep any time soon.”

“Yeah. Sounds good.” He looked up at the soft lights that lit the small corner with a small smile.

Strings of stars hung from the ceiling, twinkling gently as they turned on invisible threads. They had never gone out since the day Loki had given them to Evie as her first Christmas present and she had refused to ever put on real lights when she could use the magically created ones.

He was distracted by the whirring of the door opening and the little house-hold robot, Scutter Two, entered dragging his duvet and pillow behind itself and carrying his tablet and a mug of chocolate on its flat body.

Wrapping the thick quilt around his shoulders and settling the pillow so that he could sprawl out on the sofa comfortably the man turned his tablet on. Without bothering with the usual email checks he instead opened up one of his private experimental folders and scanned it quickly to ascertain how complete it was.

“Jarvis; I want you to initiate this program and start integrating yourself into my spare suit.”

“Sir, the programming is still incomplete.”

“So complete it.” Tony scrolled through the document then closed it again. “I only insisted on doing it myself as something to do; now it just needs finishing. I want you to be able to fully command and operate an empty suit incase there’s another home-invasion and I can’t get into one.”

“I see. I will finish the basic programming, then, and allow you to add what you want to it at a later time.”

“Thanks.” The man continued to flick through various programs, too distracted to truly focus on anything. He sipped at the chocolate, but for once the sweet drink sat heavy in his stomach and he put the mug back down without finishing it.

“Sir.”

“Hmm?”

“There is a message for you on the servers that I was instructed to play.”

“Message? Who’s it from?”

“Loki, sir.” Jarvis waited for a few moments, but when there was no comment he continued. “He filmed it the night of Miss Evelyn’s fifth birthday and asked that I should show you upon the eventuality of the chitauri catching him.”

“Oh…”

“Should I play it, sir?”

Tony tried to reply, but found his throat curiously dried up. Instead he nodded, relying on the security cameras to catch the movement. His tablet pinged and opened up a video file that began to play automatically.

The small screen showed Loki sat at Tony’s desk, facing the camera (Tony guessed he had used the webcam on the laptop that lived on said desk). He had a blanket wrapped around his shoulders
that made the man suppose he was probably not wearing all that much underneath it.

“Hi Tony.” The trickster’s smile was soft, fond even. “I know that if you’re watching this then
Jarvis has been good to his word and done as he promised. This was his idea, infact.” He folded
his hands in his lap, sitting up straighter and his expression turning serious. “I also know that if
you’re watching this then the chitauri have won, and they have me.

“I desperately hope that that never comes to pass and that you won’t ever see this, but since it is a
possibility I feel that I should make plans for the eventuality.” He closed his eyes with a sigh.
“Tony, I know this will be hard for you, but can you promise not to try and find me? Our little bird
will need you; you have done a phenomenal job of raising her, and I can never thank you enough
for insisting that I have a part in her life. However, if I am taken by the chitauri she will need you
to be there for her.

“So don’t look for me. She deserves every iota of love and devotion, every second of your time and
I don’t want you to waste a moment by searching fruitlessly for me.” The trickster’s posture
changed as he drew his one leg up to his chest, arms folded over his knee. “I know that you will
want to argue and fight this promise, but I have my reasons and knowing that Evelyn is safe and
happy will give me the strength to face whatever the chitauri wish to do to me.” He glanced away,
seeming to collect his thoughts. “I can’t say I’m not afraid – I’ve been running for nearly ten
years; I’m very afraid – but I want Evie safe, and I want you safe. I’ll do anything to keep you both
from harm.” With a deep sigh he turned back to face the camera.

“There are three little words that we’ve both been too afraid to ever say, either of us. We’ve spoken
of ‘sentiment’ but never called it what it is and if you’re watching this then I’ve still not said it, and
for that I can never forgive myself.” He smiled then, sad and hopeless. “It’s taken me half a million
years to find someone I want to express this to whilst truly meaning it, but I love you, Tony. You’ve
tried to blow me up, I threw you out a window, we’ve fought and argued and hated and somewhere
along the line I fell in love with you.” The God raised his hand, leaning forwards so that his palm
appeared to be pressed against the screen, trying to reach out. “So please, don’t search for me. You
are mortal. You won’t live forever and I want to die knowing that you will have lived out a long and
happy life continuing to be an amazing parent to our daughter. I don’t want you to waste the years
you have on a useless search. Live, love and be amazing.” He smiled again, brokenly. “This is
farewell, Tony Stark. Tell Evelyn that I love her and take care of yourself. I love you.”

The recording ended.

Tony realised that he had placed his hand on the screen, covering Loki’s palm with his own as if
they were looking at each other through a window. The image had frozen and he almost
subconsciously traced his finger down his partner’s cheek; following the path that tears had run.

“God, Loki…”

“Sir, Loki wished me to inform you that if it will be of any help he is willing for you to show this
to the rest of the team.”

“I…What? The team?” Tony tried to unscramble his emotions enough to formulate a reply. Would
this be any use? Well, it would show them the side of the trickster that they obviously didn’t
believe existed, despite the other footage he’d given them.

To be honest he just didn’t care by this point.

“Are they all still in the cinema?”
“They are, sir.”

“Show them.”

“Yes sir.”

Tony pulled his duvet up around his shoulders, staring at the tablet screen even though his sight was quickly blinded. He wasn’t a man who cried, as a rule, but there were always exceptional circumstances. Having to see his daughter terrified and hurt whilst he could do nothing, and then losing the man he loved in a bid to save her was enough to make anybody give in to tears.

So Tony Stark curled up under the quilt and wept.
Tony was woken after about four hours sleep by the sofa he was laying on jostling as Evie climbed up onto it.

“Wha’ you doin’ awake, little bird?” He murmured sleepily, barely opening his eyes.

“Bad dreams. Can I sleep with you?”

“Sure, come on in.” Tony lifted the edge of the duvet so that his daughter could wriggle in next to him and curl up against his side. “Do you want to talk about it?”

“No. In the morning.” She sounded as sleepy as he did, and already seemed to be drifting off again. She’d woken up just enough to make her way over to him and had barely been able to keep her eyes open enough to do so.

Tony was unsurprised to see her fall straight back to sleep – so quickly as to make him wonder if she’d been partially sleep-walking. He wrapped his arm over the girl’s shoulders and she latched onto his hand like it was a teddy bear. This meant that he was now fairly uncomfortable, but seven years – to the day, no less – of parenting had made him used to giving up his own comfort for the sake of his child.

It did mean, however, that he was not going to fall asleep again anytime soon.

Looking down at his daughter he once again tried to find any trace of Loki in her face, studying her in the faint glow of the magic stars. Thick brown hair, snub nose, oval face; all of it was pure Stark. Even the way she frowned was the same as Tony’s own expression. He could see why none of the team had ever made the link to Loki. She didn’t even turn blue in the cold – as he’d noted with a little disappointment, although it was probably for the better.

No trace of Loki.

The thought drew his mind back to the throbbing pain in his head and ache in his chest as he re-realised the loss of his partner. Loki didn’t want to be found. Had asked specifically that Tony wouldn’t hunt for him.

Our little bird will need you; you have done a phenomenal job of raising her, and I can never thank you enough for insisting that I have a part in her life. However, if I am taken by the chitauri she will need you to be there for her.

So don’t look for me. She deserves every iota of love and devotion, every second of your time and I don’t want you to waste a moment by searching fruitlessly for me.

What a ridiculously impossible thing to ask! How was he meant to not tear the universe apart to find the missing God?!

With the anger and pain and heartbreak chasing each other around in circles sleep evaded the man for the rest of the night.

Breakfast the next morning was a subdued affair.
The breakfast-bar in the kitchen was piled high with presents, but Evie couldn’t even bring herself to be excited about them. She dutifully opened each parcel and card carefully, thanked whomever it was from and placed them in a neat pile. Nothing would persuade her to eat, though, and in the end Tony decided not to push the issue. Instead he suggested that she start playing with some of her new toys and hoped that hunger would send her back for food later.

“Tony, did Jarvis tell you Fury’s been trying to reach you?” Bruce asked quietly.

“Yeah, I told him to ignore all calls.” Tony helped his daughter to open up the considerable amount of cardboard and plastic that surrounded the small easel and paint pallet that Steve had bought her, ripping through the packaging with unusual aggression.

“You can’t avoid what happened yester-”

The glare Stark levelled on his fellow scientist was nothing short of murderous. He left Evie to finish off pulling the easel free and stalked over to where Banner and Steve were sat.

“It’s my daughter’s birthday. She is seven years old. Yesterday she was taken hostage and had to watch all the adults who were meant to protect her fall like dominos.” His tone of voice was one that could have soldered iron. “And I have to somehow make it all better. Her mother is gone, possibly dead, definitely being tortured, and she knows that. She knows monsters are real and watched as they abducted Loki infront of her whilst none of us could do a thing to stop it. So why do you think that me having a chat with Fury could possibly be more important than making sure Evie isn’t permanently scarred by what happened!!”

“And if the chitauri come back?” Banner asked reasonably. “We had no defences yesterday because we had no idea they were coming. And you did.”

“I did not know that they would-”

“You didn’t know that they would appear in the living room but you were aware that they were searching Earth and that what they wanted was likely to lead them here.”

Tony’s expression went blank, a sure sign that he was holding himself back from throwing a punch. “Loki didn’t lead them here.”

“We aren’t saying he did.” Steve put his hand between the two scientists in a placating manner. “All Fury wants is to know what’s going to happen next.”

“Oh, and I suppose I’m able to tell the future now, huh?”

Captain America ran a hand down his face, taking a calming breath. When Tony Stark decided to be belligerent there was usually no way to make him see reason.

“We just want to work out what’s going on here. With everything that happened yesterday surely you can understand that we’re confused?” He made sure he spoke in a non-confrontational way, keeping his voice quiet. “We saw the video Loki left for you; all Fury wants is to know what you’ll do next and what that may mean for the team and for Shield.”

Tony was spared from having to reply when Evie tugged on his shirt.

“Daddy, can you help me set this up please?” She held up the easel, now free of its packaging.

“Yeah, come on; let’s go into the games room. Lots of fun things for you to paint in there.” He left with a warning glance over his shoulder at the rest of the group, making very clear that he didn’t
want any of them following.

The games room had originally been what it said on the tin; a room dedicated to a wall-sized TV screen on which the Avengers could play X-box, Wii, Playstation and more recently the new Stark-Deck that combined the best of all the other systems. However, when Evie had been born it had slowly morphed into a more child-friendly playroom with board games and toys stacked up along the walls alongside the many shelves of console games.

Evie placed her new art set in the middle of the room and watched as her father set the easel up properly.

“What are you going to paint then, little bird?”

“Möhdy.” The girl said firmly.

Tony glanced at her as he pulled the cellophane wrapping off the paint tin. “Are you sure?”

“Yes. Möhdy, wearing his helmet and you in your suit.” She picked up her paint brush with a determined air.

“Okay, just make sure you do a picture of Uncle Steve too, since he did buy you this.”

“Yes Daddy.”

MWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMW

In the end Fury gave up calling and just turned up at the tower. Tony couldn’t ignore him when the guy was in the foyer and refusing to leave so eventually gave in and allowed him up to the main apartments to talk. Evie was still painting and alongside her family portrait had created a picture of Captain America that had a neatly written ‘Thank you Uncle Steev’ along the bottom. Tony hadn’t had the heart to correct her spelling. However, she seemed contented enough and was concentrating on her creations rather than on the events of the previous day so that her father felt okay with leaving the room to speak to the director.

The two ended up in the home-theatre again, with the lights on properly since Tony’s headache had receded to bearable levels after sleep – as troubled as the night had been.

“So.”

Always a good start.

“So what?” Tony growled. “Spit it out or bugger off. This wasn’t how I envisioned my daughter’s seventh birthday going so you’ll have to forgive me if I’m bloody pissed off!”

Fury just nodded, rather than rising to the angry tone of voice Stark had used. “Fine. What do you intend to do about all…” He gestured a circular motion. “…this.”

“In what way?”

The director sighed in exasperation. “You have a child with one of Shield’s most wanted criminals and said criminal has now been abducted by a race that went to war with our planet. He also left a message that you kindly let us see in which he expressly asks you not to try to find him.” He steepled his fingers and watched Tony over the top of them. “I know you too well, Stark, and I know that you aren’t one to be dictated to, so I want to know what your intentions now are.”
Tony stared at him scathingly. “Well I’m going to find him of course.”

“Despite him specifically saying that he wants you to forget about him?”

“No. He asked me not to search fruitlessly. So I won’t.” The shit-eating grin that had been missing since the surprise attack finally resurfaced. “If I search and succeed then it won’t have been fruitless and I won’t have gone against what he asked.” He spread his arms wide in a gesture reminiscent of Captain Jack Sparrow. “Hey, I’m Tony Stark, I’m a genius! If I can’t find a loophole in the God of mischief’s reasoning then who the hell can?!”

Fury stared at him sceptically. “And how exactly do you intend to find your God of mischief when he’s at the other end of the universe?”

“Fine details. I’ll work on that later.” Tony leant back in his chair, his grin falling back to a serious expression. “But what’s bothering me right this moment is what you intend to do about all…” He repeated the director’s aimless gesture. “…this.”

“If, if, you find him, do you think Loki would be interested in teaming up with Shield or the Avengers?”

“Huh?” It was hardly the response Tony had been expecting and it rather blind-sided him.

“Would Loki work alongside us? And bear in mind I would like an honest answer, not just what you think I want to hear.”

“I…” The man shook his head, trying to determine what his reply would be. For once his quick tongue was failing him with witty comebacks. “I’m honestly not sure. There’s a lot of bad blood between him and Thor.”

“Good answer. I’d have been inclined to think that you were lying if you’d immediately said that he would.”

Tony shrugged. “Well, I don’t even know if he’ll want to come back to Earth. But…” He paused, resting his elbows on his knees so that he could prop his chin up on his knuckles, thinking. “I suppose he might at least give it some thought. I severely doubt he’d be great at taking orders, but he’d be an awesome asset to the team. If I appealed to his ego there’s a chance he’d agree.” Then he shook his head. “Of course, that’s all assuming he’s physically up to it.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning even if I can get Loki back do you really think he will be in one piece?” Tony dropped his gaze to the red carpet. “The chitauri made it very clear what will happen.”

Fury tipped his head to one side in question. “And what is that?”

“If you fail, if the tesseract is kept from us, there will be no realm, no barren moon, no crevice where we can not find you! You think you know pain? We will make you long for something sweeter…” Loki had only spoken the threat once, but Tony’s near-photographic memory had retained the terrifying phrase and he repeated it now. “Somehow that doesn’t inspire me with confidence that he’s going to be okay. More like he’s going to be the dictionary definition of not okay and I have got to find him before that happens!”

Tony didn’t realise that he was shaking until the director reached out to rest a hand on his shoulder. “Stark, breathe.”
“I’m going to find him.”

Fury sat back in his chair. “You really do love him, don’t you?”

“Yeah. I just wish I’d actually told him that.” Tony smiled slightly. “All these years and the great Tony Stark is finally in love. And I never told him.”

Evie was still painting when Natasha and Barton quietly entered the room, the archer’s arm held up in a sling but he was moving around freely – more alert once he’d refused any more pain-killers.

“Hello Aunty Tasha, Uncle Clint.” The girl hadn’t turned around but had evidently seen their reflections in the blank TV screen. “Is Daddy finished talking to Uncle Nick?”

“Not yet.” Natasha sat herself down cross-legged beside the child and looked through the pile of paintings. Behind her Clint slumped down in one of the over-stuffed beanbags. “These are good, Evie.” They weren’t really, but that wasn’t what you said to a seven year old, especially on her birthday.

Other than the thank-you picture for the Captain every single page had Loki on it. Loki with Tony, Loki with Evie, Loki in battle dress. Loki, Loki, Loki.

“They’re for Möhdy, when he comes back.” Evie said quietly. “You don’t like Möhdy, do you?”

“We don’t know him.” Natasha tried to sound fair, rather than just agree. “We’ve only really met him once.”

“He said that you don’t like him. That’s why we could never ask you for help and why the monsters got him.” She didn’t sound accusing, but somehow the matter-of-fact tone was even worse. And it was true really; on his own Loki had never stood a chance against the chitauri.

“Maybe you should tell us about him, what he was like.” Clint leant forwards a little in his seat, this obviously being the real reason he and Natasha had come in; they wanted the child’s perspective on her wayward mother.

“Why do you keep saying ‘was’? Everyone keeps saying ‘was’ and I don’t like it. I did about past tense last week and I know what it means.” Evie turned to face Barton, looking unhappy.

“Okay, sorry, what is he like?” Rephrasing the question didn’t seem to make much difference to the child’s petulant expression.

“Möhdy is brilliant! He loves me and Daddy lots and he promised that he would get rid of the monsters so that we could live together as a family! He promised!” Evie made it quite clear that the universe was being terribly unfair in not letting Loki keep said promise.

“What do you talk about?”

“Lots. He tells me about the Vikings and I show him all the good work I’ve done in lessons and he once let me try on his helmet.” She looked up at the ceiling. “Jarvis, do you have the photo?”

“Of course, Miss Evelyn.” The large TV screen flickered to life showing the photograph of Evie standing on Tony’s bed and struggling to stay upright as she held the iconic helmet on and waved frantically at a laughing Loki. It was a beautiful shot into an intimate family moment.
It appeared that the photograph album Jarvis had selected was on slideshow, because the picture suddenly changed, becoming one of the girl giggling as Tony preened whilst wearing the helmet. The inventor looked far too smug wearing it and the open and honest laughter on Loki’s face could never have been faked. The next photo took both assassins by surprise.

Evie was still laughing in the picture, obviously not noticing that anything was amiss, but this time her father was placing the head-gear back on its owners head. Loki was looking entirely unsure and Tony’s hand was gently cupping his chin in a tender, reassuring gesture.

“Miss Evelyn, if you wish to show Ms Romanov and Mr Barton the relationship between yourself and your Möhdy may I play a piece of footage from last Christmas?” Jarvis asked.

The girl shrugged. “If you think Daddy won’t mind.”

The AI seemed to assume Tony would be okay with it because the photographs vanished and were replaced with a video clip.

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Evie slipped under the covers, letting Loki tuck them in around her and unnecessarily fluff the pillow up.

“There, ready to go to sleep?” It was obviously a leading question and the girl shook her head with a mischievous grin.

“Not yet.”

Loki put a finger to his lips in mock-thought. “What have I forgotten?”

“Möhdy! You know what you’ve forgotten!” Evie folded her arms, trying to pout around a grin. “Now go look!”

“As you wish, my lady.” The God bowed his head, eliciting a giggle from his daughter. “I think there’re some in here.” He looked up with a thoughtful expression, scanning the room carefully.

“There are always some in here! Daddy says they look out for me.”

“How right he is.” Loki rose to his feet, now staring at the corner with Evie’s sofa and bookshelves. “And I can see one right over there.”

The girl sat up in excitement as her mother darted over to the corner, reaching out to try and grab hold of something she couldn’t see. His fist closed and he brought it up to his eyes to peer through his fingers as if observing a captured butterfly.

“Did you get it?”

Loki scowled at his hand and opened it. “No, I missed. Where did it go?” He spun on the spot, taking in the room again as he tried to find what-ever-it-was that he was looking for. “Ah hah!” He leapt over to the doorway, grabbing at the air again before stumbling as he evidently missed what he was aiming at.

“Come on Möhdy, catch it!”

“I’m trying! I think this must be a really good one, it’s so fast!” Loki finally made a dive that wouldn’t look out of place at the Super-bowl; sliding along the rug in a manner that would cause
some serious carpet-burn for someone not a God. He held one hand aloft triumphantly, a warm purple light spilling out from between his fingers. “Got it!”

Evie wriggled back down under the covers again, grinning as Loki came over to sit next to her, his hands cupped around the light.

“Can I listen to it?” She pleaded. It was obviously a normal question, since the trickster held the captured glow up to her ear and she scrunched up her face in concentration before beaming. “It sounds like sleigh-bells!”

“Well it is Christmas. Ready?” Loki waited until his daughter closed her eyes with an eager nod before opening his hand and blowing gently at the light on his palm so that it burst over her face like fairy-dust. “There you go; one dream all safely delivered.”

“Can you sing the song as well..?” Evie opened her eyes and stared up at him pleadingly, although it was obviously part of the routine – a dream-hunt followed by her favourite lullaby.

“Oh if I must.” The smile gracing Loki’s face made it clear that he didn’t mind in the least.

No-one in the room dared make a sound as the clip played through. The song that Evie had requested was the same ancient Nordic saga that Loki had sung to her when she was a baby and had continued to sing each time he put her to bed. Despite being a recording the saga still retained its unearthly and haunting properties that drew forward thoughts of ancient battle-grounds and dragon-prowed boats surging through stormy seas. Not necessarily something usually sung to get a child to sleep, but Evie obviously loved it.

“Oh…” It was all either Clint or Natasha could really think of saying. They had never really thought of Loki in any situation outside of being the raving madman he had appeared as during the invasion. To see him interacting with his daughter in such a sweet way was almost beyond them; to believe that the one capable of such atrocities was also capable of such gentleness and love.

In the end Clint just stood up and silently left the room, leaving Natasha to deal with the crying child.

MWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWM

“We need to talk, Stark.”

The day had been bad.

Understatement. The day had been shit.

Pure stinking, uncompromising shit, and now it was only promising to get worse.

Tony was in the smaller, undestroyed lounge with Chicken Run playing in the background. Evie was curled up on his lap, eyes fixed firmly on the film (her present from Bruce) and smiling tentatively at the antics of the birds.

So Thor’s quiet interruption was precisely not what the inventor wanted to hear.

“Now?” He growled the single word out. After having to spend a considerable amount of his day dealing with the fallout from the chitauri rather than celebrating his daughter’s birthday, he really didn’t want to have to move from his comfortable seat.
“Now, Stark.”

Surname, not ‘Tony’. Never a good sign.

The man scowled before giving Evie a gentle nudge in the back to encourage her off his lap. “Will you be okay with Uncle Bruce for a moment, little bird?”

“Where are you going?”

“Just out the room for a moment with Uncle Thor, I won’t be long.”

Evie looked uncertain, so Bruce – who had paused the film – smiled at her. “I’ll stay with you, I want to see how Ginger gets out of the factory.”

When the girl nodded reluctantly Tony stood up and ushered Thor out of the room. Closing the door behind them he leant against it with his arms folded across his chest.

“Fine. What?” He made it very clear from his tone of voice that he was not expecting this to go well. “And if this is about me defiling your baby brother and knocking him up, believe me; he defiled me just as much, and pregnancy wasn’t meant to be on the cards.”

“Loki had no honour left to lose; that isn’t why I wished to speak with you.”

Well that was the dictionary definition of scathing. It even made Tony pause for thought; he didn’t think he’d ever heard Thor sound so cold. However, he wasn’t one for remaining speechless.

“Go on then, I’m absolutely agog. What’s worse than me and Loki having a kid?”

“I find myself hurt that throughout these past seven years Evelyn has been referring to myself as ‘uncle’ and not once did you tell me that there was truth to that title!” Thor kept his voice surprisingly low – they were only in the corridor, apparently he didn’t want to be over-heard any more that Tony did. “All this time I assumed that it was just the way a child refers to their elders, the way she has with the others in our team. Why did you not tell me that when she called me uncle it was the truth?”

“Because Loki didn’t want you to know!” Tony snapped back. To be honest he could see exactly where Thor was coming from, and had actually argued this very point himself with his partner, so he’d be damned if he took the blame for it. “I asked him if I should tell you and he refused. It wasn’t a call I felt I could make without his say-so.” He shrugged slightly. “If it’s anything, Evie hasn’t realised, she doesn’t really get how you and Loki are related yet.”

“I see.” Thor plainly didn’t, but sounded somewhat less hostile than he had. Tony’s expression softened slightly.

“Look. She’s just lost her mother; this isn’t really something I can bring up with her at the moment.”

“I understand that; I just feel insulted that neither she nor I were aware that we are more of a family than you ever let on.”

“Loki’s choice, not mine. Take from it what you will.” Namely that the trickster hadn’t exactly wanted his daughter and adopted brother to class each other as family. However, Tony wasn’t going to spell that out, since a hammer to the face often causes offense. “He had precious little say in Evie’s life, so when he did make a decision I usually didn’t argue with it.”
The thunder God tilted his head to one side in thought as he considered what his team-mate was trying to say.

“What would make you do so much for an enemy of this planet, Tony Stark?”

“I…Huh?” The question completely derailed the inventor’s train of thought and it took a moment for him to change track and find an acceptable answer that wasn’t ‘because your brother’s great in bed’. “In a nutshell? Because I love him. In more complicated terms; Because he didn’t try to kill me when it was just a casual thing between us, and then because he trusted me enough to sit by his side when he gave birth to our child. Did you know his magic is lost to him when he’s in labour? He was the most vulnerable that it’s possible for him to be, and he trusted me enough to be with him and not harm him. That’s a big something in my books. I’d do anything for him after I saw how hard it was for him to give up Evelyn, and yet he did so because he knew it was the best thing for her.” Tony could feel the back of his throat seizing painfully and swallowed heavily. “I would do all this for Loki because he’s put his faith in me. A God has put his faith in me and whilst I’m not the religious type I know that that’s a pretty big deal. He has trusted me with his daughter, his life and his love and I doubt that he’s ever done that before with anyone, so yeah, I’m not going to do anything to jeopardise that.” He tilted his chin up, exposing his throat. “So if you feel like smacking me with Mjolnir, go ahead, it won’t change a thing.”

Instead he was pulled into a tight hug which, considering it was coming from Thor, was almost as bad as being smashed by the God’s hammer.

“Did you truly mean it when you said that you would find him? No matter where he is?” Thor voice was muffled by Tony’s shoulder, but the anger had drained, replaced by the heartfelt plea of a brother. It made Tony realise that perhaps he and Evie weren’t the only ones to have been devastated at having Loki snatched away in front of their very eyes.

“Yeah, of course I meant it.” Wriggling slightly so that Thor wasn’t crushing his injured ribs quite as much he gingerly patted the God on the back. “I’m going to get him back, big guy. We’re going to get him back.”

WMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWM

It was cold.

That was unexpected and unwelcome.

Pain was a certainty but for a Frost Giant the cold should not have had such an effect on the figure curled up in a small ball in the corner of the water-logged cell.

Loki couldn’t tell how long it had been.

He was naked, shivering from a cold that he shouldn’t have been able to feel and the fear that now never left him. Perhaps if he were in his Jötunn form it would have been more bearable, but he had no control over Odin’s magic so could not now change forms. His arms were held up at an uncomfortable angle, but that was hardly noticeable over the pain that was caused every time he tried to move them. The cuffs restraining him were shaped like stirrups, but rather than circling his wrists the straight bars had been drilled through between the ulna and radius of each arm like a grotesque piercing. It meant that there was no possible way to slip free of them, whilst the ligament and nerve damage rendered his hands useless and in turn defenceless.

He deserved this.
It was something he was constantly reminded of; he deserved this.

And how easy it would be to just accept it. To just bow down until the weight of it broke him entirely and there wasn’t enough of him left to have to endure what they wanted to do to him.

And that was precisely what he had expected to happen and had planned against.

Although the entire area that Loki was kept in was under the influence of the confounded contraption that blocked his magic he had had a single chance. Whilst they had stopped him from being able to cast any more magic, he had realised that in every confrontation he’d had with them his magic had been blocked, but any already-existing magic hadn’t been destroyed.

And in the moment that they finally took him into their custody there was a spell active that he almost never removed, but that now could prove crucial.

The glamour that hid his true gender was not, in the greater scheme of things, a necessary thing to maintain. Certainly, the chitauri would make good use of their discovery once he removed it and revealed what he really was, but it wasn’t going to help him survive any better.

These thoughts had crossed Loki’s mind in the brief moments of the teleportation. He had been well aware that upon reaching his prison and punishment he would never be in a position to move the spell, so grasped the milli-second opportunity as it arose. There was not enough power for it to be of any external use, and he was aware that the moment he moved the magic away from his body it would be destroyed by the chitauri technology but by moving it to another place upon his person it might serve more good.

There was one thing about himself that the trickster prized above all else and would protect above all other things, and that was his mind. They could (and would) break his body as much as they cared to, but he would fight to retain his mind.

The first time he had been their guest his consciousness had already been in tatters and it had taken little for them to fully rip it from him.

Not this time.

In the brief moments of between-ness during the teleport, Loki took hold of the spell creating his glamour and allowed it to flow up through his body and wrap itself around his mind like a protective blanket. Externally there would be no change – at least until they removed his clothes – but now it meant that he had an added mental barrier against the tortures and pain they would inflict.

For the chitauri the ideal situation would be to break their prisoner until there was nothing left of him. Until he had no name, no family and no love to remember.

And that was the very thing Loki was desperate to protect. If he was going to spend the rest of his life in this hell until they deemed fit to kill him, then at least he would do so able to recall the faces of his lover and daughter and bask in the meagre comfort it would provide. So he commanded the spell to keep him as sane as possible through what was going to happen and allow him to at least retain his sense of self.

It was going to be the only comfort he would receive.

It had been a wise move.

Torture had been the assumption, but he had given very little thought as to how exactly they were
intending to wreck their vengeance.

Creatively apparently.

The chitauri were nothing if not surprising. It had never occurred to Loki that alongside the warriors, they would have scientists. Creatures of discovery, exploration and inquisition. Who wanted to know everything. Who wanted to know exactly what made a Frost Giant tick and didn’t care how they found out.

He’d been given to these so-called scientists to explore every inch of him for anything that could better the chitauri in any way. Could his blood contain vital nourishment, antibodies? Was it toxic? Did his bones contain rare minerals?

Their reactions to discovering that he was not in fact truly a ‘he’ and was rather a hermaphrodite did not bode well for his future at all.

They had eternity to rip him apart safe in the knowledge that they could keep him alive for as long as they wished.

Vivisection is such an ugly word.

Loki wished for death.

He couldn’t beg for it though, even if his pride would let him. The simple application of a red hot blade had effectively removed his silver tongue and finally rendered him speechless.

All that was left was to scream.
For the first time in many years Tony dreaded falling asleep for fear of a nightmare occurring. It had taken long enough for the Afghanistan flashbacks to recede, let alone the memories from the many battles he had fought in. But having the mismatched family of Avengers living with him, a daughter to raise and a lover to look forward to seeing, Tony had managed to fight back the nightmares until they barely bothered him anymore.

Now he dreaded them again.

Evie had refused to leave her father’s side, and asked if he could sleep in her room again. It was understandable considering she was growing increasingly worried that the chitauri would turn up again and this time take her father too. Tony had no problem with this, but since the sofa hadn’t been entirely comfortable he instead let her sleep in his king-sized bed. Evie accepted the compromise happily; if nothing else the arc-reactor made the best night-light around.

“Why aren’t you asleep yet?”

Tony had been lying on his back and staring up at the dark ceiling, but turned his head at the sound of the voice.

“Loki…?” All he could do was stare as the trickster emerged from the shadows with a gentle smile on his face.

“You’re stressed out, you need to rest.” The God made no sound as he sat down on the bed then rolled over to nestle up against Tony’s side. He ran his hand along the man’s chest, his fingers splaying out around the arc-reactor. “Worry isn’t going to help anybody, you know.”

The mortal closed his eyes with a heavy sigh at the reassuring and familiar weight of Loki’s hand coming to rest on his stomach.

“…I’m asleep, aren’t I?”

“Of course.”

“You’re a dream?”

Loki laughed quietly. “Well that’s the general assumption to make when one is asleep.”

“Not real in any way whatsoever? ‘Cause this feels pretty real.”

“That’s because you have an extremely good imagination and a near-photogenic memory.”

“…I hate you.”

“No, you hate your own subconsciousness.” Loki leant over so that he could rest his head on his partner’s chest, Tony’s hand automatically coming up so that he could run his fingers through the black hair tickling his chin.

“Where are you? Where did they take you?” The man whispered. He felt rather than heard the God laugh in response.

“Obsolete question. I’m a dream; if you don’t know the answer, I can’t tell you it.”
“Well that’s no fun.” Tony knew he’d been on a hiding to no-where with the question, but it had been worth a try. By the looks of it his subconscious was at as much of a dead-end as he was.

“How’s Evelyn?”

“You’re a dream, why are you asking?”

Loki raised his head to smile indulgently at his partner. “Because you know it’s exactly what I would ask if I was really able to. And you are worrying about her an awful lot.” He propped his chin up on Tony’s chest, so that his eyes were hooded due to the angle when he looked up at the inventor.

“Of course I’m worrying, you were snatched away infront of us, she’s terrified.”

“I’m sorry.”

Tony laughed softly. “Now I know you’re a dream! I can count the number of times I’ve heard you apologise on one hand.” He gently ran his fingers along Loki’s cheek, trying to remind himself that this was not real. “Are you in pain right now? Where-ever you are.” He knew the only answer he’d get would be from his own mind, but he still asked it – it made it seem more like Loki was truly there.

“Yes.”

“Am I going to be able to rescue you?”

“You know I don’t want to be rescued.”

Tony smirked slightly. “That wasn’t what I asked. I know what you said in your message, but you can’t expect me to just sit here and do nothing.” He idly wrapped a lock of Loki’s hair around his finger in a repetitive gesture. “Can you understand that? Can you accept that?”

“You’re looking for such an answer from something that isn’t real, Tony.”

The man sighed heavily. “I know, I know. But I need to know that you understand that I can’t just go on and live my life knowing that you’re out there somewhere.” He whispered. “I’m going to search for you. I need to know if you can accept that I’m not going to do as you asked.”

Loki lifted himself up enough to press a kiss to his partner’s cheek. “Dream, Tony. I can’t give you these answers.”

“I know!” The two words were snapped, but the anger wasn’t aimed at the trickster. “I know. I know this isn’t real, I know that I’m actually having a conversation with myself right now, but I still need to hear the words, even if they aren’t real. I need to hear that you understand why I’m not doing as you’ve asked.” He looked away from the piercing green stare, closing his eyes. “I need to know if you can forgive me.” He mumbled.

Two hands cupped his face, and he felt a soft huff of breath across his lips. The whispered words were as faint as the kiss itself as the dream was slowly pulled away by the sound of Jarvis trying to wake him up.

“I forgive you.”

MWMWMWMWMWMMWMW
The very first thing Tony decided to do was try and retrieve anything that had been caught on the surveillance systems before they had been blocked out by whatever it was the chitauri had been using.

On the plus side, that was a link he could follow. The chitauri technology used to block Loki’s magic had also blocked out most of the electrical signals in the vicinity so that was another little fact he could now add to his (short) list of things they knew.

So here he was in the labs, trying to patch together the fractured pieces of footage and readings to make a fuller picture of what they would come up against.

“How are you going to find him, Daddy?” Evie was sitting next to him at the work-station, supposedly researching the Aztecs for her homework, but choosing to watch what her father was doing instead. She had refused to leave his side and since Tony was only doing the theoretical work at the moment the labs currently weren’t all that dangerous.

“I don’t know yet, I’m still working on it.”

“But you will find him, right?”

He reached out to ruffle her hair without ever taking his eyes off the screen. “Why are you even asking? Of course I will.”

“But won’t he be at the other end of the universe? I thought we could only reach the moon.”

“Don’t let other people’s limits hold you back Evie. Remember; Uncle Thor isn’t exactly from around here.”

That was more than noticeable this morning since the Avenger’s had woken to find their resident Thunder God missing and a hastily scribbled note in the kitchen explaining that he’d gone back to Asgard. Apparently Thor had more faith in his people than Loki ever had since he had mentioned petitioning to the Allfather for help tracking the God of Mischief.

Tony had pragmatically decided that anything was worth a try. Either they would get some divine help – which would be awesome – or Odin would refuse and they’d be no worse off than before Thor had left.

And hell, he had science. Nothing could beat science when it came to getting the job done.

“What are you doing now?”

He also had a small child who apparently didn’t understand that some things required concentration.

“I’m trying to patch together all the data that was gathered before the cameras and stuff shorted out.”

Evie scrunched up her nose in confusion. “…You’re doing a computer jigsaw?”

“Something like that.” Tony rubbed a hand across his eyes as the scrolling symbols blurred slightly. It was beginning to look like the Matrix.

“How did they do it?”

“Do what, Evie?”
The girl had the end of her tablet pen in her mouth, but removed it to speak. “How did the monsters teleport? Is it like when Möhðy teleports?”

“I don’t know, it’s something I need to work on.”

“It looked like the same way Möhðy teleports.”

“It did, yeah.” Tony was barely concentrating on what-ever tangent his daughter was currently entertaining, but something in her line of questioning made him pause and actually listen for a moment. “What do you mean, they looked the same?”

Evie shrugged. “When Möhðy teleports he always blurs a bit before vanishing – like he’s moving really fast on the spot – and the monsters did the same thing.”

It went without saying that the girl’s eyes were better than Tony’s – age and all that – but he’d never seen anything remotely like blurring, as she had described it and his vision wasn’t that bad. He quickly pulled up a video file of the last Christmas and skipped through it to the very last moment when Loki was leaving.

“Blur, you say?”

“Yeah, you haven’t noticed?”

The clip played, only about three seconds worth. One moment Loki was there, the next he had vanished. Tony couldn’t see what his daughter was talking about. Was she imagining it?

“Jarvis, slow it down. Half speed.”

Still no difference. Here one moment, gone the next.

“Are you sure, little bird?”

Evie pouted. “Yes! The computer’s being silly!”

“Okay, okay. Slow it even more then Jarvis. Infact, go for broke and get it as slow as possible.”

“Yes sir.”

The original three second clip lengthened until it was almost thirty seconds. The screen was HD at its finest and the cameras were the best that even money couldn’t buy and even then Tony had to watch it through twice to see what was happening.

In super slow-mo it was possible to see how Loki didn’t actually just vanish on the spot. Rather – and Tony felt bad for using the reference, but it was too good an analogy to not use – it looked very similar to the teleport systems in StarTrek. The trickster looked as if he was flying upwards before winking out of existence. Tony knew little of how the teleportation spell worked – it defied normal physics – but this now suggested that there was a brief moment of acceleration before the proper speed could be reached for it to fully work.

“You saw that?” He turned to stare at his daughter in amazement. “You could see that he was moving?”

“Only a blur. Is he flying?”

“I don’t think so, but this could be something I can work with.” Tony knew that the child had good eye-sight, but this was something else. She had seen a movement that was supposedly too quick for
a human eye to follow.

It was times like this that he was reminded that actually she wasn’t entirely human.

So, Loki had to accelerate before reaching the speed required for the teleport. He could use that knowledge.

“Daddy-”

“Just a moment, Evie, Daddy’s thinking.” Tony pressed the heels of his hands against his eyes as ideas sleeted across his mind. This was often the way his inspiration worked; a single stimuli that set off a cascade that he then had to unpick to find sense in all of the ideas. Right now his thoughts were all sleetling in one direction and that was; Newton.

F=ma; Force is equal to mass multiplied by acceleration. And here acceleration was the key word.

“Jarvis, I’m thinking Principia Mathematica. Can you-”

“On it, sir.”

“I love you, Jarvis!”

Evie watched blankly as the screens of esoteric symbols were minimised and instead a map of the world was put up, with the exact position of Stark Tower a red pin-point.

“Right, Evie’s third birthday, he went to Rocco Forte Hotel De Russie in Rome afterwards, because he sent that ironic postcard.” Tony had begun to type feverishly, inputting co-ordinates and Google-mapping the exact location of the fancy hotel. “Jarv, is it possible for you to pull up the-”

“Done it sir.” The video-file of Loki leaving the night in question popped up in the corner of one of the screens, a complex set of equations unfolding beneath it. “I have pre-empted your next request and am trying to ascertain Mr Laufeyjarsson’s velocity upon exit.”

“You know me far too well.” Tony glanced up at the sound of the sliding door to the labs opening and grinned as Bruce entered. “Brucie! My Jolly Green Giant! Let me guess: you’re here to summon us to dinner?”

“Uh…yeah…?” Bruce looked thoroughly unnerved at the huge smile his friend was sporting, given the circumstances. “What are you doing?”

“Daddy’s being a genius!” Evelyn piped up before Tony could answer and her Father ruffled her hair fondly.

“Okay, but what are you doing?”

“You heard the child; I’m being a genius.” Ironman prodded the screen as emphasis. He slid his stool to one side so that Bruce stand next to him and stare at the screen.

“That looks confusing…”

“I only had this idea a few moments ago, I don’t even know if it’s possible yet, but so far it’s the best I’ve got.”

Dinner forgotten, Bruce pulled a stool over and sat down, trying to make sense of the equations flashing around the screen.
“That looks like the escape velocity formula.” He said thoughtfully. “But you’re trying to substitute distance into it…?”

Evie watched the two scientists for a moment then sighed and quietly asked Jarvis to send their dinners down to them – she knew her father and his best friend far too well. It didn’t bother her that they would be eating in the lab, but it did mean that Aunty Pepper would be hounding them later about it.

She turned her attention back to her tablet whilst waiting for the meals to turn up, fidgeting irritably with the plaster on her neck.

Meanwhile Tony was animatedly explaining his master plan to Bruce, gesticulating enthusiastically as he tried to get his point across.

It was complex, but the plan boiled down to physics.

The acceleration before the teleportation was something new that Tony had never considered before. His theory – only a working theory, since there was no way to know yet if it was possible – was to have Jarvis calculate precisely what that acceleration was. That value would then be matched with the distance between Stark Tower and the Italian hotel that Loki had arrived at. Then a new video would be used where Loki had teleported to a known location and Jarvis would begin the same process again.

“You want to see if there’s a link between the acceleration and the distance that he travels.” Bruce stated finally.

“Yeah. It’s shoddy mathematics since the only time value I’ve got to go on is the one time he took me with him. I’ve had to assume that all journeys are roughly that length.” Tony flicked a hand vaguely. “But I’m hoping that if there is a link then I can work out a constant to fit into the equation.”

“End game being?”

“Evie; do you want to tell Uncle Brucie what you noticed earlier?”

Evie was caught unawares by the question, half-way through a mouthful of noodles. She slurped them up noisily and tried to think.

“That Möhðy and the monsters teleport in the same way?” She ventured.

Tony turned back to Bruce with a wide grin. “My kid’s a genius.”

The mild-mannered physicist frowned slightly. “So you’re basically saying you’re trying to work out how far away Loki now is.” He shook his head at Tony’s huge grin. “That’s…brilliant. Completely ridiculous, but still brilliant. Just how many assumptions are you having to make here?”

“Oh, tons.” Stark turned back to the screen with a shrug. “It may end up that there isn’t a link at all between acceleration and distance when it comes to teleportation. Or that the chitauri use a different method so the calculations would be obsolete anyway. Or that I’m wrong in assuming the time travelled is always the same despite the distance. There are tons of things that could be wrong. As equations go I’m balancing a feather on a soap bubble, but I’ve only been working on it for…” He glanced at his watch. “Quarter of an hour.”

“Ahem.” The voice was quiet but emphatic.
“Oh, sorry Jarvis. Okay, my awesome and very British AI has only been working on it for quarter of an hour. But it was my idea. Well…My idea but Evie sparked it. Joint family effort. Me, Evie and Jarvis trying to find Loki. The whole dysfunctional set!”

Bruce’s gaze was a little too piercing, to the extent that Tony turned back to the screens again.

“Don’t get your hopes up with this, Tony.” The warning was soft but spun to sound almost like a command. “This is the long-shot of all long-shots, you can’t expect it to work.”

“It’s a million-to-one chance!” Again, the grin was just a bit too wide, Tony’s eyes just a little too wild. “Hey, we all know that million-to-one chances work!”

Bruce glanced towards Evie, who was back to being engrossed in Angry Birds and was not really paying them much attention. “You don’t want to get anybody’s hopes up.” He added meaningfully.

“I…Yeah. Yeah, I know. You know me when I get caught up in a project, though.”

“Even a quarter-of-an-hour old project?”

“It’s still a project.” Tony glanced at their now-cold dinners and Evie’s empty plate. “We should probably go upstairs and re-heat those.”

“Probably.”

The inventor heaved himself off the stool with a groan. “Come on then. Evie? Pudding?” He smiled as his daughter immediately shut the game down and grabbed his hand. “Jarvis? Hold fort and work on this for me? Give me a buzz if you get stuck or come up with anything good.”

“Of course sir. You do recognise that the likelihood of my ‘getting stuck’ is practically nil? But I will call on you should it somehow happen.”

“Smart alec.”

It was another day before Jarvis alerted the Tower to Thor’s return, only moments before the god touched down on the landing platform that Tony used for Ironman. The blonde was looking tired and before he even spoke it was obvious that he wasn’t bringing good news.

“Heimdall can’t see him.”

Thor slumped down heavily on the stool at the breakfast bar, gratefully accepting the coffee Natasha offered him, and downing it like a shot of whisky. Other than the red-headed assassin only Tony, Evie and Clint were present, which at least meant they were less likely to all talk over each other.

“So…What does that mean?” Tony remembered the name; some dude at the end of the rainbow-bridge who kept watch over everything, or something like that.

“It means, my friend, that my brother is beyond the nine realms, to where Heimdall’s gaze cannot reach.”

Clint shifted on his seat. “And that’s a bad thing because…?” He yelped as Natasha smacked him around the head. “Okay, okay! Fine, I’m playing nice.”

Tony ignored the assassins and focussed on the thunder God. “So, all this means is that he’s not in
the nine realms. No biggie. We can work with this, I’m trying to find out how far away he is so maybe me and Heima-whatsit can tag-team. I get some co-ordinates, your dude has a peek and bippity-boppity-boo we have Loki back by tea-time and non-the-worse for wear.”

Thor smiled weakly. “You humans and your optimism.”

“Don’t think it’ll work? Big guy, have some faith in how awesome my science is!”

“And how awesome Daddy is!” Evie added. She and Tony fist-bumped.

Thor laughed at that, lighting up a little. “Am I to understand that you have been working on something then?”

Clint and Natasha perked up at that – so far Tony had been too busy with his new project to actually explain it to anyone other than Bruce. He looked at the three expectant faces and poured himself a cup of coffee with a groan. He hated explaining science to Thor. Surprisingly enough the god was not an idiot and could understand it well enough, but tended to get far too enthusiastic in trying to relate what he was being told with irrelevant information that he already knew.

“It’s still in the works, I don’t know how feasible it will be yet, but it’s something.” He cupped his hands around the warm mug and began to explain his master plan.

He didn’t admit that he was hanging all of his hopes on it.

MWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMW

“So.” Clint found Thor back in the kitchen, hours later.

“Nothing good ever comes out of starting a conversation thus.” The god said quietly.

“Yeah, you’re probably right.” The archer hopped up onto the counter-top of the breakfast-bar, kicking his heels against the cupboard doors. His arm was still in a sling but he was beginning to regain some use of his hand. “You look like shit. Actually you looked like shit earlier too, but you seemed to cheer up with what Tony was saying.”

“It was heartening to hear so much enthusiasm and belief in his methods.”

“Polite way of saying he’s a cocky bastard.” Clint plucked an apple out of the fruit bowl, but threw it from hand to hand rather than biting into it.

Thor raised an eyebrow. “You don’t believe Tony can do it?”

“I’m not sure if he should do it.”

Back when they’d all first been brought together such a comment would have sent Thor off the deep end. However, ten years of friendship and mellowing – not to mentioning accepting that some of his friends held rightful grudges – had given him the ability to accept such statements about his wayward brother.

“You don’t think Loki can have changed?”

“I…” Clint ran a hand over his face. “You know what? I really have no fucking clue what I think any more.” He stared down at the apple he was holding. “All these years we’ve watched Evie grow up. We all love her, we’d all do anything for her, and then it turns out she’s the child of the bastard who turned me into a drone and made me kill in his name.” He shrugged. “And then it turns out
that maybe he isn’t so much of a bastard any more. Maybe he had good reasons. Maybe he’s a
damn good parent. Evie obviously adores him and considering he surrendered to the chitauri for
her I’d say it’s pretty certain that she’s his entire world.” The archer tossed the apple from one
hand to the other. “I don’t know, Thor. Tasha thinks he was sincere in those videos – and she knows
when someone’s sincere or not. I’m just having a really tough time trying to reconcile that the
person I still have nightmares about could have been as much a victim as me. And…Well,
Tony…”

“Tony obviously loves my brother greatly.” Thor mused quietly.

“Yeah. But since when has he ever made good life decisions?”

The god huffed with laughter at that. “But they did seem happy in those clips.” He added. “I must
admit that I haven’t seen Loki looking that content amongst other people for far too long.”

“Do you think he really loves Tony?”

“Undoubtedly. He has never uttered those words to someone who was not his family before. Not
even to his wife.”

“Huh.” Clint kicked his heels again, uncaring if he marked the cupboards. “Damn! What the hell?!
I don’t want to feel sorry for the guy! I don’t want to ‘brave all hasten to his rescue’ and all that
crap! I don’t want to have to think about how to help rescue Loki from what I’ve always thought he
deserved anyway!”

“You believe him to deserve the torment the chitauri are putting him through?” Thor asked mildly.

“Yes! Well, maybe…I don’t know!” The archer threw the apple in frustration and it sailed out of
the open window with unerring aim. “Coulson’s still dead!”

“I am aware, I saw it happen.”

“And you can just accept it. Ten years is not long enough to forgive the death of a friend!”

“What about the death of a warrior in battle?”

Clint and Thor both turned to see Tony leaning in the door-way, arms folded across his chest.

“What are you talking about?” The archer snapped.

Tony shrugged as if he couldn’t really care less. “You think that Coulson’s death wasn’t one of the
very first things I ever asked Loki about?” He snapped. “Tell me, Clint, how do you usually react
when you’re in the middle of enemy territory and one of them points a stupidly big gun at your
head? Coulson was armed, he announced his presence and his intent; by Aesir standards it was a
fair fight.”

“Fair?! Loki stabbed him from behind.”

“You’re an assassin, Clint. How many people have you snuck up on?”

“Tony is correct.” Thor said heavily. “As much as Coulson was my friend, I must also
acknowledge that by the rules of the training both myself and my brother received in our youth,
Loki’s actions were fair. He fought and killed an attacker in battle situations.”

Stark pushed away from the door-frame he was leaning against and entered the kitchen properly.
“Look, Barton. I’m not asking you to be best buddies with Loki, or to have anything to do with getting him the hell out of the chitauri’s claws. All I want is for you to let me do this and not get in my way. And if at all possible to not be a bastard about him infront of Evie – I don’t want her to know that you’d rather her mother were dead.

Clint glared at the inventor. “You had to play the parent card, didn’t you?!” He kicked his heels again, deliberately this time. “And ‘mother’ is a weird term for a bloke.”

“That’s why we use the Nordic term.”

The archer tipped his head to one side, observing Tony through narrowed eyes. “Huh…”

“What?”

“If Loki’s the mother I assume that means the mighty God of mischief bottoms during sex.”

Thor choked. Tony smirked.

Yeah. I am that good in bed.” He sauntered past Clint to the sink, bumping the archer’s knee with his hip as he did so. “I can satisfy a God. Jealous yet?”

Barton scoffed and pushed the inventor away, but there was the ghost of a smile lingering on his face. “You’re disgusting, Stark.” He jumped down from the counter-top. “I’m outta here, before you start giving a blow-by-blow account.”

“Blow-by… Oh Clint you just walked into that one!” The lewd grin sent Clint running from the room.

“You speak of my brother in ways I do not wish to hear.” Thor’s deep rumble made the smile slip from Tony’s face.

“Yeah, sorry big guy. If it’s anything, we swapped positions a lot. It was always consensual and—”

“Enough Tony. I don’t wish to know of what my little brother likes in bed.”

Tony grinned again, although it looked strained and didn’t reach his eyes. “Sure, yeah, got it.” He pulled a clean glass out of the cupboard over the sink and filled it with water. He had his back to the thunder god but could still hear Thor shifting uneasily. “So…What did your parents say?”

“They…were upset.”

“Huh, yeah, I bet.”

The sarcasm wasn’t lost on the God. “They care deeply for my brother, even if he himself believes otherwise. They were mortified to find that his enemies now have him. And…” He sounded suddenly unsure, not at all like his usual self. “They were also hurt to hear that they had a grandchild that they had not been informed about.”

“She isn’t their grandchild.” Tony gulped down the water and slammed the glass back down on the side.

“She’s—”

“Loki’s child. And he doesn’t consider himself part of your family any more. Not after all the lies and all the shit he had to put up with.” Tony turned so that he could have this conversation face-to-face and was surprised to see that this time Thor didn’t seem angry about the subject. Rather the
god looked small, crumpled. “I let him make the decisions when it came to family.”

“I respect that, it just saddens me to think that my brother no longer considers himself as such. That he would want to hide his own child from our parents.”

“Huh. Yeah, big wonder. Considering what happened to all his other kids.”

Thor’s shoulders slumped. “My father – our father – seems to…I believe him to regret past actions.” He said quietly. “He wishes to help find Loki and put things right with him.”

“Put things right? What the hell does that mean? Throw him back to the north-pole planet he snatched him from in the first place?”

“No!” Thor continued to look devastated, and it was beginning to grate on Tony’s nerves. “No, my Father wishes to apologise. He feels that there were better ways in which Loki could have learned of his heritage and he wishes to speak to him of it.”

The inventor spluttered. “Apologise?! He thinks a simple sorry will make up for the millennia of crap Loki had to put up with?! Hell, Odin taught him – taught both of you that frost giants were evil, vicious monsters – and he then wonders if maybe, just maybe he didn’t handle it right?! How can a simple apology help that?”

“I don’t know!” Thor dropped his head to the counter, the thud echoing around the room. “I don’t know how my Father thinks Loki can forgive him. I don’t know how I can hope he will forgive me. I have wronged my brother and all I can hope is that we can bring him back before it’s too late.”

“And if we don’t?” Tony realised the words were out of his mouth before his brain could intercept them. Thor raised his head to stare at him. “I…I mean of course we will! We’re going to get him back, Thor.”

“You aren’t certain.” No-one had ever heard the god attempt to whisper before, but this was the closest Tony had ever heard. “You don’t completely believe it’s possible, do you?”

There were many replies that jumped to the forefront at that; from arrogant assurance to the bleak and broken truth. In the end Tony tried to find an unhappy middle-ground. “Science isn’t an exact thing. I can’t guarantee answers, I can’t guarantee results and I can’t guarantee that he’ll still be… still be alive if and when we do recover him.” He said slowly. “But what I can promise is that I will do anything to get him back. Anything if it means having him back.” He glanced out of the window at the darkening sky. “I just want him back…”

The last few words were so quiet that Thor almost missed them, and then wondered if he’d heard them at all when Tony plastered a trade-mark Stark-grin to his face.

“Well, if I want it to all work I’d better get to it, huh?”

Thor sighed heavily. “My brother looked truly happy with you, Tony Stark. I sincerely hope that he can know that happiness again.”

“Yeah, you and me both.”

MWMWMWMMWWM/MMWMWWMMW

It had been two weeks since Tony’s genius idea with the teleportation. Jarvis was doing his best but the process was slow and the inventor had to put up with waiting.
Two weeks…

Evie was still refusing to sleep in her own bed – although she now consented to leaving Tony’s side during the daytime as long as she was with an Avenger. Fury had tried to gently raise the subject of counselling but so far Evie had been happy enough to talk with her father about how she was feeling. Although if she couldn’t go back to her own bed after another week he might start considering it.

One of the big problems that the father and daughter duo had was the simple fact that they only saw Loki twice a year. If he had lived with them then the loss would be far more acute and – in a way – easier to face. But with the way things were it was normal for him not to be around and therefore it was harder to come to terms with the idea that he was well and truly gone.

Tony thinks vaguely that it’s probably unhealthy. They should be mourning. There should be grief and tears and shit like that.

All he feels is emptiness. The little voice that whispers it’s not real. As if he could possibly hope that Loki would turn up at Christmas. But until there was no sign of the God, it wasn’t real.

Or that was what he had been telling himself.

So far the man hadn’t thought that there was any other way he would really begin to feel the loss until the day Loki didn’t appear. He was wrong.

“Sir, my calculations are complete.” Jarvis’ voice cut in on Tony’s thought processes, bringing his attention away from the new phone he was designing for Natasha.

“Oh? Fabulous! What’s the word?”

“The results are not perfect sir, I’ve had to be somewhat less than precise with some of the workings out since I was dealing with less than precise data, but I believe I have an answer.”

“Great!” Tony put the tools down and spun to the computer screen. “How far away is he then? I can get building a –”

“1.07 billion, sir.”

“What?!” The inventor dropped his laser screw-driver. “1.07 billion miles!? That’s like…Voyager One territory. Bloody hell! How are we meant to get there?!” He ran a hand through his hair. “I’ve never designed a rocket before. Or a shuttle? Should I build a rocket or a shuttle?”

“Um…”

It was such a rare event to hear the single syllable from Jarvis that Tony actually shut up. An ‘um’ usually meant something was very very wrong.

“Jary? What is it?”

“Um. Sir, the units are light years, not miles. Sorry.”

“…What?”

Light years…

1.07 billion Light years.
“How many miles to a light year, Jarvis?” Tony’s voice was steady and emotionless, his gaze unseeing.

“$5.88 \times 10^{12}$ miles, sir. By my calculations My Laufeyyarsson is $6.3 \times 10^{21}$ miles away.”

$6.3 \times 10^{21}$ miles. 6.3 with 21 zeros tagged on the end. Even the genius inventor couldn’t get his head around such a number.

“Can you…Can you put the number up on the screen for me, Jarv?” He asked dully. He stared at the result, breath hitching in his throat. It covered nearly halfway across the screen on a Word document.

“I’m sorry sir.” Jarvis had dialled down his own volume so that he sounded softer than usual.

“Any idea of direction…?”

“Well, I searched all known NASA databases, and in that distance parameter there is a super-giant elliptical galaxy known as IC 1101. It is in the Serpens constellation. All things considered it is the most likely destination at the moment.”

“Oh. So it’s visible from Earth?”

There wasn’t a reply. Instead the computer screen changed and a handful of false-colour images were put up. Most of them weren’t very clear, just a dark expanse with a bright dot in the centre, but one – an x-ray photograph – showed the more typical swirl of the galaxy.

“Huh…” Tony traced the curl with his finger, smudging the screen. His breath was beginning to shudder and hitch as he stared at the picture. A galaxy tens of times bigger than the one containing Earth and yet so far away that even the best telescopes could only perceive it as a tiny dot.

And they couldn’t even conclusively say that that was where Loki was.

“Sir? Are you alright sir?”

“No.” Tony half slid and half fell from his seat, his back connecting solidly with the side-panel of the work bench.

_Billions of light years!

Impossible.

That tiny dot. So far away.

He hadn’t expected that. At best he’d thought the chitauri might be on the outer edge of the Milky Way. Billions of light years away. Inconceivable.

“Sir, I believe you are hyperventilating. Should I call Doctor Banner?”

Tony couldn’t even reply. He curled over his knees, breath short and painful as he gripped his hair with both hands.

Oh. And _there_ were the tears he’d been wondering about. Not the cursory, silent trails he’d shed that first night. These were the real deal. All pain and noise and snot and horror. Real grief finally finding the outlet it had so far not been able to find and rushing out all at once.
Loki was really well and truly gone. Mankind were barely able to get a robot on another planet. If the God really was in that galaxy then it meant he was so far away that even the most powerful telescopes on Earth could only provide images of blurry pin-spots. And that was of the galaxy. In reality they would be looking for a single planet within it. Or maybe even a moon.

The sheer scale of the galaxy and the number of celestial objects within it were beyond calculation. Impossible.

Tony had never felt so helpless. Not in the hole in Afghanistan, not falling whilst caked in ice, not when the suit died after he delivered the nuke. Now, perhaps he felt he could understand at what Loki meant by staring into the heart of the universe. That feeling of how infinitesimally big it all is, and how small a single human being is in comparison.

He felt broken.

And dizzy. Really really dizzy.

He didn’t really register when a hand appeared between his shoulder blades, gently forcing his head forward and down. The position somewhat banished the darkness that was threatening, but only just.

*This can’t be real! He can’t be gone like this!*

There were words. Calm down. Breathe. The hand was rubbing soothing circles on his back as he gulped and gasped, trying to stop the soundless scream that seemed to have looped itself into his throat.

Then the hand vanished and instead an arm was slung over his shoulders, pulling him into a tight hug. The voice never stopped; a quiet and reassuring litany that slowly began to have an effect.

It took a long time before he was able to work out who was with him, and even longer to calm his breathing enough to speak.

“Bruce…?”

“Hey dude, you back with me?”

“…Not really.” Tony scrubbed a shaking hand across his eye, not that it made much difference. “I can’t save him, Bruce.” He whispered hoarsely. “He’s too far away, it’s bloody impossible.”

“Impossible isn’t a word we like in these labs.” The other scientist’s voice was filled with dry irony but still contained a little warm humour. “Never say die.”

“I can’t do this.”

“Oi!” Bruce cupped Tony’s face in both hands, uncaring about the mess of snot and tears. “No way do you get to say that! After all the shit you’ve given me over these past years about learning to do the impossible and live with the Hulk, no way am I going to let you give up so early into your own fight! It’s been two weeks, only two weeks. So what if he’s impossibly far away? Expand our horizons! Get humanity farther than we’ve ever been before and do it all in the name of the pagan God who tried to take over the world. You’re Tony Stark! *Don’t. Give. Up. Yet!*”

Tony stared at his friend through red-rimmed eyes, not really comprehending what he was being told. “Huh?”
Bruce smiled at him sadly. “Don’t worry about it. We’ll talk once you’re feeling more human. Right now I bet you feel like you’ve got the mother of all hangovers, right?”

“Uh huh.” The inventor couldn’t articulate much else. “How did you know to come down?”

“Jarvis told me you were having a panic attack.”

“Oh. Is that what it was?”

“Close enough. Not fully panic per say, but the reaction was close enough as to be indistinguishable.”

Tony nodded slightly, then groaned and raised a hand to his head. “Fucking hell…”

“Yeah. Come on, headache tablets, large glass of water and bed. You’ll feel better tomorrow.”

“I highly doubt that.”

“Well, better than you feel right now anyway. A good night’s sleep always puts a fresh perspective on things come morning.”

Tony managed to scramble up to his feet and allowed his friend to support him when his head threatened dizziness again. He glanced at his computer screen but Jarvis had kindly wiped all of the images and instead there was a new render of the Ironman suit showing.

“I dunno what I’d do without all you guys.”

“Oh, crash and burn I’m sure. But that’s why we’re here.” Bruce generally kept his sympathy wrapped up in sarcasm, but the way his arm tightened around his friend’s waist when Tony stumbled on the stairs spoke more of his support than his actual words ever did.

And to Tony it was the simple act of having a friend there that made it all a little more bearable.

MWMWMWMWMWMWMWMW

His leg hurt.

The simplicity of the statement didn’t do the situation justice but it was the most he was able to coherently put into words.

He was slumped back in the corner of the dank cell, the limb in question stretched out infront of him whilst he folded the other up to his chest in a mockery of safety. It hurt too much to do anything more than breathe. Even the mud and filth slicking the floor didn’t grasp his attention – some things were just not important anymore.

Broken laughter bubbled in his chest; oh how the mighty have fallen. The sound was harsh and alien, lost as it tried to force out of a throat already torn apart by screaming.

He tried to shift and stopped as the agony shooting through his leg flared again, almost causing him to black out. The limb had been systematically dislocated at the hip, knee and ankle to allow the chitauri better access to the network of ligaments that ran through it. The skin around his knee-cap had been peeled back and the small round bone forcibly removed so that the tendons and nerves were exposed.

The raw wound was filthy from the muck and grime of the cell floor, so much so that it was barely possible to see what was going on under the dirt and blood. Tiny pieces of metal were glinting
amongst the mess, clips that were cinched around the exposed nerves and ligaments. Their purpose had been to run a stream of electricity through the muscle – the chitauri had apparently wanted to see how well a Jötunn’s physiology could conduct a current.

The answer – as attested to by the way the wound had been cauterised by the high resistance – had been all too well.

Combined with the dislocated bones, the shoddily removed patella and the filth clinging to the open wound it was a wonder that the burn could even be felt over it all.

Loki let his head tip back to thump against the roughly hewn wall.

His leg hurt.
Chapter 11

Time doesn’t make things easier. It doesn’t heal and it certainly doesn’t help people to forget the pain. What it does do is allow the body to grow used to that awful gnawing feeling in the chest. It allows the person to accept that the pain they’re feeling isn’t going to go away anytime soon, if ever, and lets the mind slowly come to terms with what the full loss will entail.

Time doesn’t heal, but it helps to resign a person to the inevitable.

Life had fallen back into a deceptively normal pattern.

Tony didn’t break down again in the same manner, but his bounce had gone. It was noticeable to the others that something had broken in him; there was a distinct lack of snark and witty comebacks, to the extent that the rest of the Avenger’s had begun to genuinely miss the sarcasm.

On the plus-side he had solved Evie’s sleeping problems by re-opening up the doorway between their rooms that he had closed up a few years previously. She was now happy enough to sleep in her own bed provided they left the door open and she knew that he could hear her if she called.

Weeks slowly rolled by into months. Halloween passed by mostly un-noted – they decided to watch Frankenweenie rather than Trick-or-Treating – and Thanksgiving was the usual food-filled affair. It was Christmas that had Tony really worried.

Usually the weeks leading up to the Big Day were filled with Evie compiling all her favourite drawings and pieces of work to show Loki when he arrived. Not to mention their little tradition of giving the rest of the Avenger’s the slip and going out Christmas shopping as just the two of them to find gifts for the trickster. Tony had always liked to imagine that perhaps somewhere in the world Loki was doing the same for them.

This year the piles of school books and walls of art were left untouched. They didn’t go out shopping, although Tony did try to argue the case that they should at least see the lights, and Evie refused to help decorate any of the rooms. Christmas just wasn’t Christmas this year.

It was obvious just how raw the pain still was when they all sat down on Christmas Eve to watch the Muppet Christmas Carol as per their tradition. Usually Tony and Evie would have vanished at about six o’clock, as they had all the Christmas Eve’s past – and now the Avenger’s knew why that had been the case – but this time they stayed to watch the film. There was no reason for them to leave; no-one to wait for.

Tony was vaguely paying attention to the film – after all, who couldn’t love Michael Cain? – but had kept half an eye on his daughter so noticed that the child was more interested in the clock than the television. She could tell the time by this point and had begun to sniff when it was approaching seven. By quarter-past the front of Tony’s T-shirt was wet through.

“Okay, come on, birdie.” He stood up, lifting her up with him as she clung tightly. She was still just about small enough for him to carry without putting his back out. Tony left the room and took her into the kitchen so that they wouldn’t disturb the others – not that the Avenger’s would put a film before the child, but it also gave the two of them some privacy.

“He’s not here.” Evelyn sobbed, the moment Tony sat her down on the counter-top.

“We knew this was going to happen, Evie.”
“But he’s not here! He’s always here for Christmas! That’s what makes it Christmas.”

Tony pulled a handful of kitchen-roll from the holder by the sink and gently mopped up his daughter’s tears. She sniffled miserably.

It had been extremely difficult for the child to really understand what ‘gone’ had meant when it came to losing Loki. She was so used to barely seeing him anyway that it took him not showing up on the one day that he was meant to for the message to really go home that he wasn’t there anymore.

And whilst nothing could currently bring the missing trickster back to them, a hug went a long way in making the child feel a little bit better.

Evie clung like a limpet, getting Tony’s jumper all snotty. He didn’t care about the clothing, pulling her close so that she could wind her arms around his neck.

“Hey, you know that we’re going to get him back, yeah?”

He didn’t get a legible answer in reply, although that was understandable considering how hard she was crying. There wasn’t really any way to make the situation any better either. He couldn’t magically get Loki back there and then, he couldn’t promise to have him back in the next few days and technically he couldn’t really promise to find the trickster at all.

As a father it was the feeling of utter hopelessness in the face of his daughter’s grief that was the worst part of it all. No parent can cope with seeing their child in pain and not being able to help.

However, one thing he had learnt over the years was that the best way of calming the girl down, whether she was throwing a tantrum, was injured, scared or otherwise was a big hug. He’d read about it when she was a baby; one of those tid-bits that always showed up in child-raising books and on websites. He’d initially discarded it as so much bull-shit until – when Evie was about two or so – he’d run out of all other options in trying to stop her temper tantrum from hell. Surprisingly it had worked and still continued to do so.

When Evelyn had quieted down to the snuffy hiccupping stage Tony gently untangled her arms from around his neck and wiped her nose again.

“Feel a bit better?”

“No.”

The inventor smiled sadly. “Yeah, me neither.” He brushed the girl’s hair out of her face. “You know what? I’ve got a surprise together on the roof for you, should cheer you up.”

Evie rubbed her hands across her eyes to wipe away errant tears. “A surprise? What sort?”

“If I told you, would it still be a surprise?”

She smiled slightly and Tony carefully lifted her down from the counter-top. “Go put your coat on and your wellies, then.” He said fondly. “It’s gonna be very cold out there, Jarvis?”

“Minus seven centigrade sir, although the wind is low enough for what you have planned. There is a build-up of snow on the roof.”

“Great. Okay kiddo, coat, boots, gloves and hat; I’ll meet you at the elevator.”
As Evie trotted off to fetch the items of clothing – her tears had been almost completely stopped by the promise of a surprise – Tony had Jarvis send his own outdoor clothing up from where he had abandoned it all in the lab.

The elevator took them all the way up to the roof of the tower, and a small portion of Tony’s mind tried to remind him that they were going to the place that Loki had once tried to take over the world from. It looked entirely different from that day, all those years ago. Back then it had been a bright summer’s day, the tesseract glowing an eerie blue as it happily welcomed an army intent on subjugating the planet.

Now it was dark, snow blanketing the space and more falling lightly. The city spread out before them in a map of lights as their breath hung in the cold air. Evie’s hand was in Tony’s again as she stared out at the spectacle; the lights of New York City on Christmas Eve.

“It’s really pretty.”

“It is something, yeah.” Tony smiled down at her. “But this isn’t the surprise. Remind me; what’s your favourite film at the moment?”

The child looked confused at the unusual subject. “Tangled.” ‘Favourite film’ was an understatement since she watched it at least every other day, was word perfect on the songs, owned a Rapunzel dress and had thrown a tantrum when told that she was too young to bleach her hair blonde. “Why?”

Tony reached down and pulled a bag out of the snow. Opening it revealed a cylindrical Chinese lantern similar to those used in the iconic scene from the Disney movie. It had actually been quite hard to find the right shape and he’d ended up shopping in the most secluded corner of China Town before getting hold of the paper construct. Once he’d got it home Jarvis had dutifully scanned it so they had the pattern to hand.

Needless to say, Evelyn’s eyes lit up. “A lantern?”

“What do the King and Queen do every year with the lanterns?”

“Release them in memory of the lost – oh!” She stared up at her father in comprehension. “This is for Möhdy?”

“Thought you might like the idea.”

The child looked down at the lantern she now held, turning it over in her hands. It had originally been a plain orange, but Tony had painstakingly painted runes around the bottom and top edge in red, which – according to Jarvis at any rate – spelt out the names of their little family. Evie looked back up and smiled.

“Can we light it now?” She asked hopefully.

“That’s why we’re here.” Tony walked over to the small wall that was all that separated him from the plummet down the side of the tower. It was high enough that Evie could only just see over the top of it and had to reach up on tip-toe to be able to see over the edge. Their breath was only just visible in the air amidst the swirling snow as Tony pulled a cigarette lighter out of his pocket – no self-respecting scientist ever goes without, smoker or not. He had to flick it a few times before successfully creating a small flame and lighting the wick.

Evie held the lantern up until it filled with enough hot air to start trying to lift out of her hands.
“Now Jarvis.” Tony called out to the ever present AI and as his daughter let go of the lantern the balcony two floors directly below them suddenly lit up.

Thirty or so more of the paper constructs lifted into the air, buffeted by the wind and highlighting the falling snow. They quickly joined Evie’s lone original one until it was indistinguishable and the girl clapped her hands together with a squeal of delight. It wasn’t an entirely accurate portrayal of the child’s favourite scene from *Tangled* since Tony didn’t use quite enough lanterns for that, but it was more than enough.

Amongst the falling snow they looked like stars.

Tony picked his daughter up so that she could see better and the girl waved frantically at the dancing lights.

“Merry Christmas, Möhdy!” She called out and the wind whipped the words away into the night.

**MWMWMWMWMWMWM**

The atmosphere amongst the group was still…different even after a few months had passed. As much as they were trying to carry on as normal there was no way to go back the happy medium they had once had. Trust is a hard thing to gain and easy to lose and Tony knew that there were cracks in the veneer of trust he had earned from his friends. Most of the time it was as if nothing had changed, and then he’d notice someone staring at Evelyn in a strange way, as if trying to catch a glimpse of her other parent in her actions or looks.

Understandably Clint was the one having the most trouble readjusting to the identity of the child’s mother, and whilst doing his very best not to act any differently around her it was obvious to the others that he was struggling. Of course, like hell he would discuss such things.

Well, unless Natasha beat it out of him.

They trained every day, as any athlete would; making the full use of the state-of-the-art gymnasium that took up a full floor of the tower. The normal running machines and such weren’t usually used, and instead it was the gymnastics floor and equipment that received the most practice. The setup of the area meant that anything could be utilised in a sparring session. The walls were equipped with various handholds and there was a series of precarious rungs from the ceiling that could – in theory – be used by a person to get from one side of the room to another. So far only Natasha had made it the full way across.

This time saw the two assassins sprawled across the gym mats, exhausted, bruised and – in the case of Clint’s nose – bloody. Natasha was on her back, one knee propped up as she stared at the ceiling trying to get her breath back. Clint was lying almost on top of her, his head pillowed on her stomach and his legs tangled in hers. If Tony had walked in on them in such a position there were any number of comments he might have made, but in truth it was simply that they were completely and perfectly comfortable around each other and had no problem with such physicality. Especially since they were both exhausted.

“So.” Natasha moved her hand down to rest on the top of Clint’s head.

“So?” He tilted his chin up, just enough to look up at her. Of course, from this angle all he could really see were her breasts, but for some reason that didn’t seem to dissuade him.

“Talk.”

“Did anyone ever tell you that one worded statements don’t always get you answers when the
recipient doesn’t know what the fuck you’re on about?”

“Yes. You tell me at least once a day.” She glanced down at him with a smile. “But I know it annoys you.”

“Too damn right it does.” He stretched and examined his bloody nose in a subconscious gesture. “What do you want to talk about?”

“I don’t. I want you to talk.”

“Nat…”

“No. You’ve put this off for long enough, Barton!”

Crap. Last names meant she was pissed. The archer sighed and absentmindedly wiped the blood off his hand onto her trouser-leg. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Like hell.” She didn’t raise her voice, just continued sounding somewhat breathless from the fight. In a way a calm Natasha is even scarier than a shouting one. “Look. After all that shit with the chitauri and the Avengers all those years ago I gave you the chance to simmer down and work out what was going on in your head without ever once bugging you to talk to me about it. I waited for at least two years before asking what had happened and all you said was that ‘you didn’t want to talk about it’. So I left well alone. When you consistently refused to ever bring up the subject after that I did wonder if it was good for you to bottle up all that shit, but, hey, who am I to tell you what to do? It wasn’t like Loki was going to turn up again, was it?”

The sarcasm in her voice when she spoke the last sentence was palpable, and Clint sighed. He felt her hand in his hair again and closed his eyes.

“Nat…”

“No. Not this time. I’ve let you get away with it for too long already; you need to talk about it.”

“About what?! About how Loki made me his little bitch? About how I was a brainless zombie for the guy?” He snapped the questions and felt the little warning tug to his hair that told him to calm down. “Look Nat, this isn’t something I want to talk about.”

“Well tough. You’ve had ten years of not talking about it, and now that we might be risking life and limb to rescue the guy I think you need to unbottle everything.”

“Unbottle isn’t a word.”

There was a stream of Russian that he could barely get the gist of but translated to approximately; ‘Insult the way I speak your language when you are faultlessly fluent in mine’, and he laughed.

“Okay, sorry. But still, I don’t know what you want me to say. It sucked, that’s about all there is to it.”

The Widow’s fingers tickled the top of his ear and he squirmed a little, trying to remove the touch. He felt her stomach move underneath his head as she huffed with silent laughter and moved her hand back to playing with his hair.

“There’s more than that.” She sounded so certain, like she already knew the story and just wanted to hear him confirm it. “I get that you hated being brainwashed, but more happened than that. It wasn’t the first time you’d been manipulated onto the wrong side, so I know that he did something
else for you to still hate him this much. What did he do to you?"

"Why does it even matter?!"

"Because Tony might need to ask for your help sooner or later, and you’re going to have to decide whether or not to assist in rescuing Loki, of all people. So it matters. What did he do to you?"

Natasha’s voice remained low and non-aggravating.

Stalling for time, Clint shrugged. “What do you think he did? I’m sure you’ve got tons of theories; let’s hear some of them.”

“I’m honestly not sure. I thought I could read you like a book, but when it comes to those few days I have no idea what happened to you. Sometimes I wonder if he hurt you, sometimes I wonder if he made you hurt others, sometimes I wonder if he amused himself with you. I truly don’t know.”

“That’s what you think about at night? Huh, no wonder you don’t sleep well.”

“Then put my mind at ease. Talk to me.”

The archer lay silently for a good few minutes, trying to collect his thoughts on the matter. “It’s hard to explain.” He said finally.

“Try.”

His sigh lifted the hair that had stuck to his forehead. “Fine. He was…Well, I guess it would have been a darn sight easier if he had been a torturing bastard. It would be easier to just hate him and be done with it if he’d been fully evil.”

“But…?"

“But he wasn’t. He was…friendly, for want of a better term.” His tone made it clear that this wasn’t a good thing. “He seemed to be genuinely pleased with how enthralled Selvig was with the tesseract; seemed happy to listen to the guy babbling on about it. And he would ask my opinion on things. He let me orchestrate the attack on the helicarrier; simply trusted me to sort everything out. Even Shield doesn’t just let me do my own thing without at least some guidance. But no, he simply said that he knew I could handle the situation and left it at that.”

Clint stared up at the ceiling as if he wanted it to burst into flames. “You’d have thought that bastard would have been all high and mighty considering how he was trying to take over the world and all, but he wasn’t and somehow that makes it all worse. Psychotic evil I can handle, but he just wasn’t and I still can’t get my head around it!” He thumped his fist against the gym mat. “I mean, what kind of World-Dominating-Super-Villain checks for allergies before he gets food for his minions?! Who does that?! And made sure there were adequate sleeping arrangements for everyone and that we all got some sleep. And took an actual fucking interest in our conversations when we were in transit, even when about completely banal things like football!”

“You hate him because he showed his humanity.”

“Huh?”

“Well, as you said, you could understand an insane megalomaniac who tortured and killed without thought or mercy, but he showed you that he wasn’t all that. That he had a sane, if not pleasant side to him. And that’s had you completely flummoxed, so you hate him for it.” Natasha said matter-of-factly.
“I…well, yeah, I guess.” He sighed irritably. “It doesn’t sound like something I should care about when I say it out loud, but it *grates*. I’ve never met a bad guy that I couldn’t figure out. They either have some terrible sob story and you end up feeling sorry for them, or they’re bat-shit insane and you can kill them without giving a damn.”

“Loki does have a sob story, according to Stark.”

“Yeah, Daddy didn’t love him enough and the chitauri weren’t very nice. Boo-fucking-hoo, there are millions of people throughout history who’ve had it worse and didn’t try to take over a planet. I just can’t get how he could do all that, and yet still pretend to be so bloody *nice* to us minions.”

“Is that what he called you?” Natasha kept her voice soft, like a therapist with her patient.

“No…Selvig said it as a joke and it stuck. That’s why I started calling Loki ‘boss’.” He practically spat the word. “It was a joke, a nickname.”

“What did it feel like? Being controlled?”

Clint growled, low in the back of his throat. “It was…Looking back it was the worst thing he could have done! It’s exactly why I hate him! It wasn’t like any mind-control I could have thought possible. You would think we were brainless zombies, but we weren’t. It wasn’t like he was really controlling us at all!”

“So what was it like?” Natasha never stopped her fingers moving through her friend’s hair, knowing that the gesture would calm him a little.

“He made us want to be friends with him.” Clint couldn’t have put more loathing into the words if he tried. “It was like our perceptions were flipped but other than that we were completely ourselves. I followed him the same way I would follow Shield; because it felt like it was the right thing to do, like it was my duty. I *wanted* to work to the best of my ability to achieve his goals because it was like it was suddenly all that mattered to me. And I *hate* him for that! My mind’s never been the best, but I don’t let people mess with my loyalties like that! They are *mine* and I decide who I follow!” He stopped and took a deep breath through his nose, trying to calm himself back down. “So I hate him.” He continued finally. “I hate him and I don’t want to feel sorry for him with this whole chitauri mess.”

“So you do feel sorry for him then?”

“I…I guess so? Y’know, Nat, I’m not even sure *what* I feel now. I’ve spent so long hating him, it’s gonna be a while before I can be sure I feel anything else.”

He felt Natasha pat his cheek and smiled slightly.

“Thank you for telling me.”

“Yeah, well, it was probably about time.” He turned his head enough to nip one of her fingers affectionately. It was the closest they really came to sentiment.

MWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMW

Tony was back in the lab once more, sitting infront of his bank of computer screens and staring hopelessly at them. He’d done the same thing for weeks now and still couldn’t *think*. His mind was a complete and utter blank; something that as a genius he had barely encountered before.

“You should take a break from all this.”
He glanced up without moving his chin from its rest on his fist. “Hi Spangle.”

“I do wish you wouldn’t call me stupid names.” Steve sighed. His tone was world-weary, but his grin took the edge off.

“But it’s far too easy. Capsicle, Spangle, Captain Star-butt. I could go on.” The words were the usual Stark abrasiveness, but were delivered with no emotion; he sounded like he was reciting lines from a poorly written script.

The Captain rolled his eyes and pulled one of the stools over to sit down next to his friend.

“What do you want, Steve?” Again, biting words but with such a listless tone of voice they sounded like they were coming from a robot. Tony’s chin remained cupped in his hand, his tired eyes never leaving the screens.

“I’m worried about you. You aren’t yourself.”

The inventor let out a little ‘humph’ of forced amusement. “Really?”

“Yeah. Really.” Steve turned his attention back to the screens his friend was staring so avidly at. On each monitor there was a blurry picture of a galaxy. “Is that where…?” He trailed off awkwardly, but Tony knew what he was talking about.

“I dunno. Closest guess we have.” He shrugged listlessly. “Jarvis calculated that he’s over 1.07 billion light years away, and as far as our telescopes can tell us, this is the only galaxy at that distance from us. It’s called IC 1101 – hasn’t even been properly fucking named – and it’s in the Serpens constellation. This is the best I’ve got to go on. Technically he could be anywhere, but this is at least a starting block.”

“So…What are you going to do?”

Tony let out a humourless laugh. “No fucking clue.” He let his head tip forwards to rest against one of the screens – smearing the display. “I don’t have a clue what to do next. Humans don’t have a way of seeing that galaxy any better than as a blur, and Asgard aren’t really able to give me anything more than what I already have here. I’m stuck. And Tony Stark does not get stuck!”

There was a little whirr next to them as Dummy reached over and tapped Tony on the shoulder in what appeared to be a comforting gesture. The inventor snorted softly and raised his head to smirk at the robot before glancing up at the object that hung on the wall above his work station. The plain wooden staff that Loki had used against the chitauri now hung there as a constant reminder of what Tony was fighting for, looking oddly out of place amongst all the tech surrounding it. He sighed heavily.

“Why are you so set on finding him?” Steve asked quietly.

Tony glanced sideways at the soldier with an exasperated sigh. “What? Besides being hopelessly and utterly and soooo in love with him that I make the Twilight Saga seem plausible?” He asked dryly, voice dripping with sarcasm.

“Yeah. Besides that, Romeo.”

“Ooh, get you with making a centuries old reference.” Again though, the bite was lost to the caustic sentence. “Well besides that, I’m doing it for Evie. I would have thought that that was obvious.”
“She saw him twice a year, there’s more to it than that. Sure, you love him, sure you want Evie to have her…uh…” ‘Mum’ back, but there’s something else, isn’t there?” Steve continued ruthlessly.

“And if there is?”

“Just tell me Tony. Talking about these things helps.”

The inventor leant back from his desk, spinning his wheely chair around in a full circle, hands up in the air. “Why?! Why does talking help? It’s not going to help me work faster, it’s not going to help me figure this all out and it’s not going to stop me from growing old and eventually dying without solving this!”

“Dying? What the hell Tony? Isn’t that a little over-dramatic?”

Tony stopped his chair spinning so that he ended up sitting side-on to Steve, facing out into his lab. “Yeah, but only a little.” He said quietly. “I’m fifty one, with a seven year old child. There’s shrapnel in my chest, a device that has already nearly succeeded in killing me in the past, a liver shot to hell thanks to my early years of drinking myself unconscious, dangerously high cholesterol and a family history of heart disease. Oh, and did I mention that I happen to spend every other day flying around in a metal suit whilst things shoot at me? Let’s do the math here – I’ll be lucky to reach my seventies. I kinda want to live to see my little girl grow up, but I have to be realistic, don’t I?” He shrugged. “I know that you guys would all be there for her, but Loki and I had always planned that when I’m gone he’d still be here. We’d always planned for her to have at least one parent at any point in her life. I won’t live forever, but she will, and that’s going to be bloody lonely now that her mum’s gone.”

“E…Evie will live forever?”

“Yeah, didn’t I mention that earlier? Huh, sorry.” He certainly didn’t sound sorry. “So yeah, she’s going to live for ever, losing everyone she knows and loves. Loki was meant to be with her throughout that, to help her. She’s not got any of his powers or anything, just his longevity. She doesn’t know yet, so please don’t say anything.”

Steve shook his head. “No…No, of course not.” He ran a hand through his hair with a shaky sigh. “I…Well…”

“Stuttering isn’t a good look on you, Cap.”

“Fucking hell Tony!”

That caught Tony’s attention alright. He could count the number of times he’d heard Steve swear on one hand.

“What do you want me to say?” The Captain continued, oblivious of shocking his friend. “You know that the rest of us would do anything for Evie – she’d never be left alone. Thor’s immortal, I may well be, Bruce might well be, she’ll be fine. You can’t really think we’d just leave her.” He held up a hand, stopping Tony’s response. “But I can see that you’re stressed, and tired, and you’ve hit a dead end that’s driving you slowly insane. So stop staring at computer screens, act like a human being and tell me the problem you’re having and maybe, just maybe I can help you!”

Tony stared at him, before slowly leaning back and folding his arms. “Finished?”

“Yeah. Yeah I am.”

“Good.” He spun back to face the screens, almost as if he was wiping the whole conversation out
like so much chalk on a board. He had never dealt well with other people’s emotions, especially when they were because of him.

“He had never dealt well with other people’s emotions, especially when they were because of him.

“Um…”

“Do you really want to help?”

“Uh, yes?”

“Right, then listen good, because I’m about to put this in layman’s terms and expect you to keep up.”

Steve nodded, leaning forwards to rest his elbows on his knees. He wasn’t entirely sure what planet Tony was currently orbiting, but it could well have something to do with the three espresso mugs sitting on his desk.

“Right, okay.” Said overly-caffeinated man tapped on one of the screens. “This, like I said, is IC 1101, and is 1.07 billion light years away. A light year is a fuckton of miles, so essentially he’s so far away I can’t even say all of the zeroes on the number in one breath. Get me so far?”

“Galaxy far far away, got it.”

“Good,” Tony smiled slightly. “And nice StarWars reference. There are no other places that we know of that are in the distance parameters so this galaxy is our best bet. Now, aside from the obvious fact that mankind only just got to the moon so fuck knows how we’d get there, there is another very big problem. Big being the appropriate word really, since this is the biggest known galaxy in the universe. And Loki could be anywhere within it. Any planet, moon, asteroid or floating piece of space dust. Which sucks.”

“Um…Yeah, just a bit.”

“Well, yeah, simply put, I’m well and truly stuck. This is impossible.”

“Is there anything I can say to persuade you otherwise?”

“I don’t know, Steve.” Tony groaned. He turned his head slightly to smile crookedly at his friend.

“What would you do, if you were me?”

“I wouldn’t have the first clue.”

“Yeah, of course. But what would sound sensible to you?”

Steve shrugged, glancing at the photos and equations scattered across the screens. “Why ask me? Wouldn’t Bruce have more of an idea?”

“Nah, Bruce knows the limit of the possible. But you, old man, you still haven’t quite got to grips with just how much science can do, so you aren’t blinkered by preconceived notions of what is and isn’t possible.” He grinned a little more genuinely now. “So, hit me, what’ve you got?”

“Uh…” The soldier blinked and stared at the screens again, not having expected this at all. Whilst he had caught up with the major technological advances that had occurred during his hibernation (his face upon seeing the video of the moon landing was something Tony would never forget) he had no real interest in the science behind it all. In his mind it somewhat took the magic away. So when faced with his friend’s rather intense and questioning gaze he had to think on his feet.
“Um, I saw on some Discovery Channel documentary that we can now tell if planets could support life, right?” He asked slowly. He saw Tony nod and continued on a little more solidly. “Okay, so if it’s possible to scan things in space for – I don’t know – atmosphere, water, that sort of thing, then couldn’t you do that? Scan this galaxy for planets that could hold life?”

Tony gave him the same smile that he used when his daughter said something cute yet utterly wrong. “That would be a plan, Steve, if it weren’t for the fact that we can barely see the galaxy from here, let alone start scanning for life or whatever. We’d be scanning back in time too. It takes light 1.07 billion years to reach us from there, so what we see here–” He indicated at the screens. “-is actually a snapshot billions of years into this galaxy’s past.”

“Yeah, so? I read that life here supposedly started over 3 billion years ago; so even if you’re looking back in time to a planet in that galaxy it would still have a liveable atmosphere, even if the chitauri hadn’t evolved on it yet, right?” Steve ploughed on mercilessly, the ideas now flowing a little easier. “Surely a scan would pick up on basic water or oxygen and you could go from there. I mean, I assume the chitauri breathe oxygen, since they coped here well enough without breathing gear as far as I could see.”

Tony blinked at him a few times. “Huh.”

“Good ‘huh’ or bad ‘huh’?”

The inventor bit the inside of his cheek, a frown drawing his brows together as he seemed to seriously consider what Steve had said, but also entirely missing the small question. “Okay. Say that could work.” He began slowly. “There’s still the problem of none of our telescopes being able to see in good enough clarity to even begin to do that.” He didn’t pose it as a counter-argument though; rather he seemed to be expecting the soldier to have a response.

Steve tried to rise to the challenge again, but decided this time that he needed more information for this round. “Why not? What are the problems with our telescopes?”

“Can’t get a clear enough sky if we mount them on Earth and can’t use a big enough mirror if we put them in space.” Tony replied promptly.

That seemed clear enough. To a man who had spent his childhood pre-WW2 making toy telescopes out of card tubes and Dad’s shaving mirror he at least understood the principle. “Can’t you use a bigger mirror on an Earth based one then?”

“Defects; the surface of said mirror has to be perfect. Like, atomically perfect. A smaller mirror can get away with imperfections, but the bigger it is A) the harder it is to physically make and B) the more the imperfections count. Humans just can’t build something like that. We don’t have the materials.”

“Pretend for a moment that you did. Then what would you do?”

And there it was.

The sudden light that flared in Ironman’s eyes as he turned to stare intently at the images of the galaxy again. The light that had been missing for far too long.

“Even if it was possible, there’s still the question on where on Earth would we put it? All the best observatory spots are taken.” He almost sounded like he was talking to himself now, tapping his chin with one finger.

“Why put it on Earth? Can’t it go in space?”
“Not something that big – it’d be a sitting duck for the first asteroid. Unless…” He tilted his head to one side. “Unless…I was to put it far from the asteroid belt. If it were launched from something so far away, so far out in the solar system that….Heh!” He slapped his hand on the desk. “I’ve just found a use for Pluto!”

Steve snorted softly.

“Infrared spectroscopy could then be used to detect water. And I could tweak it to do the same for oxygen.” Tony continued. Then he paused. “Although…this is only theoretical, of course.” His metaphorical tail drooped back down again.

There was a whirring noise as Dummy raised it’s arm again, this time holding up one of the laminated flash-cards that Tony had made for the various non-vocal bots in the labs.

Why?

“Why what, buddy? Why’s all this only theoretical?”

Dummy nodded, making Steve smile at the quirky robot.

“Well, because making all that stuff is impossible. No one can make a mirror that big and how the hell would it get into space anyway.”

Dummy ducked down to grab another card. This one made Steve burst out laughing.

*You’re Tony Stark.*

“I can’t believe you have a flashcard for that.”

The inventor shrugged. “It comes in handy.” He turned back to the robot. “And I don’t know what you’re getting at. Just because I invented a new element doesn’t mean that I create the physically impossible and build something like that. The materials don’t exist.”

Dummy drooped with a little *moue* of sadness. However, where Tony seemed to be looking at the problem as if it were an impossible mountain to climb, Steve had the opportunity of a fresh mind that wasn’t obsessed with the problem.

Sometimes all an impossible conundrum needs is an abstract approach from someone who doesn’t understand the reasons of why it’s impossible. Which explained why Tony looked like he’d seen a ghost when Steve casually asked:

“Wouldn’t the Asgardian’s have the means and methods to make a mirror like that?”

Stark stared at him.

Dummy looked up again, before hastily grabbing a card with the Facebook Like sign on it.

“Well, would they?”

“I…” Tony’s hand came up to comb through his hair once again. It was rare that someone else’s suggestion could floor him in such a manner.

He knew the myths of the Norse Gods and he knew the truth behind them as told by Thor and Loki. There was more to Steve’s idea than perhaps Steve had even realised. Mjolnir was made from a material that – according to the most state-of-the-art scanners Tony possessed – didn’t technically exist. And who the hell knew how Thor’s magically appearing armour worked. It certainly wasn’t
ordinary steel, that was for sure.

“Jarvis…?” Tony sounded like he was dreaming; that sort of far-away slow voice people used when either on the verge of a complete breakthrough or a stroke.

“Sir, Mr Rodgers has a point. There is a lot that we don’t know about Asgardian technology. If the mythology is correct then it is more than likely they could have the means to produce such a mirror.” Jarvis said quickly. “The ancient stories speak of items magically procured and created that would otherwise be impossible. There is nothing to say that this couldn’t also be the case.”

“I…Wow…Oh wow.”

“Tony?” Steve was beginning to grow concerned at the vacant expression on his friend’s face. “You okay?”

“Yeah…” The inventor was staring into the middle-distance, his hands sketching out an invisible object that only he could see. “Oh boy, this could work!”

“What? Really?”

Stark’s uncharacteristic stillness became sudden movement as he dived for the interactive computer screen and began to open up multiple programs at once. “Jarvis, get me Thor! Right now! Like, five minutes ago!”

“On it, sir!” Jarvis’ voice made it clear that if he had hands he would have saluted. Tony clapped his hands together with a whoop and spun on his chair to pull Steve into a tight hug. “Captain fucking America! No clue what astrophysics even means and you come up with the best plan yet! I love you man!”

“Uh, great?” The captain managed to laugh in his friend’s strangle-hold.

“Thor’s on his way down, sir.” Jarvis announced triumphantly and Tony cheered again, letting go of Steve to spin round on his chair like a five year old.

“We’re going to space, boys!”

MWMWMWMWMWMWMWMW

Of course, things are never that easy.

It took a while to make Thor understand exactly what Tony wanted, since he demanded to know all of the details, which involved an in-depth lecture into the mechanics of telescopes. After a detour around the Hubble website and a high school-level physics lesson the God seemed to grasp the concept and was on-board with the plan. He wasn’t entirely certain that Wayland – smith to the Gods – would be able to procure such a mirror, but if not he made it clear that the dwarves could.

By this point Bruce had come down to see what all the fuss was about and had instantly seen both the possibilities and the draw-backs of the whole scheme, but was keen to help out. Mostly by pointing out what he saw to be an obvious flaw.

“How are you intending to launch a satellite from Pluto?”

Tony just looked at him. “I’m Tony Stark, Brucie. I’ll do it.”
“Yes, I’m not disputing that. I just want to know how.”

“Rocket. May take a few years to get there but I’m pretty certain I can build something to get it there quicker than anything NASA currently has.”

Thor looked between the two scientists with his brow furrowed.

“I do not understand your problem.” He stated. “We can simply use the Bifrost. The rock you named Pluto is still within the same realm so Heimdall would have no trouble to take us there.”

“Huh.” Tony looked at the sketchy image of the satellite he’d drawn up quickly and then back to Thor. “That would work. Remind me to get you to tell me how the whole ‘realm’ thing works again at some point.” He added. “Okay, Bifrost, that’s a thing. Definitely a thing we can do.” He pushed Dummy away as the robot tried to muscle in and add to the drawing. “Can it open anywhere on Earth or is a New Mexico thing only?”

“There is only one access point to each world, I’m afraid, so we would have to go back to the newer of the two Mexico’s.”

Bruce stifled a snort of amusement at the phrasing, but Tony was scribbling hastily on another scrap piece of paper.

“Right, okay. So you’d have to bring the mirror through in New Mexico, and we’d have to get the finished satellite back there for the Bifrost. Hey, we might as well build the damn thing there.”

Steve raised an eyebrow at him. “Is there a facility there where you could do that?”

He inventor grinned and winked at Thor. For a moment the God frowned in confusion, before his expression cleared into a beaming grin.

“Miss Jane Foster!”

“Does she know the situation? Have you told her that you’ve suddenly gained a niece?”

“No. I wasn’t certain how many people you wanted aware of Evelyn’s true parentage.”

Tony grinned. “Maybe it’s time you two caught up then.”

MWMWMWMWMWMW

Jane would be the first one to admit that things had been less than usual since Thor had burst into her life all those years ago. Admittedly, that first infatuation had faded away into a deep friendship, but they were still close and still kept in constant contact. Which was why she was somewhat pissed that he was only now deciding to tell her about the events of the past few months, including the return and subsequent loss of his psychotic little brother.

Or not so psychotic, apparently.

She was still working as a Shield consultant, had more funding than the little team knew what to do with, and was almost used to the strange requests her bosses sometimes made regarding extra-terrestrial business. Even so, Thor’s appeal probably topped the list she kept of ‘weird shit that I really shouldn’t have to deal with’. And it was quite a full list already.

However, she wasn’t the sort to deny a friend a favour not matter how absurd or difficult, and there was no way that she would pass up on the chance to meet the Tony Stark. So within a week she
had coerced some of the Shield lackeys who worked with her as part of their training into clearing out the large warehouse they usually used to store their trucks in and had spoken to NASA to acquire some of the parts that she’d been told her new house-guests would need.

Thank God – or Gods, she doubted all that religious stuff now – that Stark and who-ever he was bringing were making their own accommodation arrangements. A group of Stark Industries people had shown up as soon as the warehouse was ready and converted the upper gantry into a basic living space, and as far as Jane was aware anyone extra would be in the nearby B and B. As long as she didn’t have to provide dinner or anything then maybe this situation could provide beneficial. At the very least she’d be able to watch first-hand Tony Stark creating everything from nothing and maybe – just maybe – she might be able to get her hands on some state-of-the-art tech if she played her cards right.

And all for the sake of Thor’s homicidal, sociopathic freak of a little brother.

That was the part she wasn’t too happy about.

Although, to be fair, Eric was even less happy than she was, so she couldn’t really complain.

WMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWM

It took two months before everything was ready. The New Mexico facility was suddenly full of crates with the Stark Industries logo along the sides and suddenly there were more Shield personal than usual around the site.

Jane made sure she was there personally to greet her guests when they arrived. Darcy joined her of course, and Eric stopped sulking long enough to want to see Thor despite still hating the reason for all the changes.

The first impression Stark made on the small team was…not what they were expecting.

Rather than a huge convoy of tinted-window super cars they expected, there were just three Jeep hybrids that looked like something Coulson would have once driven. Tony himself was equally smaller than he seemed on TV. Of course, usually they saw him in the suit, but if it weren’t for the glow through the smart shirt he wore he would have looked like any other businessman.

However what no one in the small welcoming party expected was the little girl trotting along beside the famous Ironman, holding tight to his hand. Jane hadn’t expected the child to be brought along too.

Evelyn Stark was famously kept out of the public eye, everything about her secret and protected. It was a shock to see her alongside her father, although with the amount of Shield agents around there wouldn’t be any paparazzi within a two mile radius. She was a normal kid too; none of the designer clothes and shoes that so famously adorned celebrity children, but just a nice shop-bought pair of flowery leggings and a little duffle coat that was obviously chosen for warmth rather than fashion. She was chattering nineteen to the dozen too, but quieted down in favour of shyness when she and her father reached the Foster-team.

“Mr Stark.” Jane smiled and held her hand out in greeting. “It’s a pleasure to finally meet you.”

“Likewise Dr Foster.” Rather than shaking the proffered hand, Tony high-fived her. “Love your work on Einstein-Rosen bridges and you have my undying friendship for managing to run Thor over twice. Something I have yet to achieve. Although this little one-” Here he ruffled Evie’s hair. “-managed to almost suck him into a jet engine by accident.”
That drew a muffled snort of laughter from Darcy and Jane grinned. “I wish I’d seen that.” She smiled at Evie who shyly returned the expression.

“It’s all on the security files; remind me to show you sometime.” Tony clapped his hands then rubbed them together. “So, are we all set to make a satellite?”

“Oh, well we’ve set all your stuff up like you asked.”

“Good enough. We dropped Thor off at the Bifrost site with the specs for the mirror we’ll need so hopefully he’ll be back in a few days with news on how possible it will be.” He looked up at the large warehouse. “I’ve calculated that it’s going to take me a year or so to make this thing, I hope you can put up with me for that long.”

Jane cast a swift sideways glance to Darcy and grinned. “I’m sure I’ve put up with worse, Mr Stark.”

“Ah, Tony, please. Mr Stark is a stuffy business man; whereas I happen to be an eccentric genius.”

“Well, this place is certainly full of eccentricity.”

“Capital! We’ll get on like a house on fire then!”

The two scientists smiled at each other and this time Tony shook her hand properly.

“First stop, Pluto, the next; another galaxy!”

MWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWM

_They knew._

_He was surprised it had taken them this long to realise, but in retrospect their anatomy was entirely different to his own so maybe it made sense that they had taken a while to work it out._

_They knew he could bear children. And now their torturous intent was riddled with morbid curiosity as to what this could mean. Could the chitauri genome be mixed?_

_For the first time since surrendering, the thoughts of his family didn’t provide comfort. With his ruined hands pressed on his slightly swollen stomach Loki wanted nothing more than to die._

No.

_The dark hopelessness was almost all encompassing, except for one tiny sliver of white that flashed through his mind. It was hot and angry and would not be squashed._

_As much as he wanted to die, there was still a thought that wanted otherwise; a thought that said ‘no’._

_Hatred._

_It can be said that love is the strongest emotion on which all else is hinged, but pure unadulterated hatred can be almost as strong. And as much as Loki wished to end it all he wished for revenge against the beasts that had done this more._

_He wasn’t going to give in as easily as they wanted. They could break his body as much as they liked but damn them all he wasn’t going to let them destroy his mind._
The spell he had cast curled protectively around him, preserving his sanity as he leant back against the rough blood soaked wall and felt the creature inside him move.
It would have been useful if there was a book called Satellites and Telescopes for Dummies. As brilliant as Tony Stark was, it still took him a few days to read up on enough NASA material (Jarvis broke down the firewalls like they were made of paper) to know where to start. Thor hadn’t returned by the time he started construction, so he began with making the smaller components.

Thank God he was a billionaire…

Even once he’d got his head around what to do it took a further week or so to get the workshop up and running the way he wanted. The upper gantry of the warehouse had become a decent living area that Tony had taken some time-out to child-proof and the main warehouse was full of robotic bits and pieces. If one looked carefully enough it was possible to see that some of the robots were building others; one of the most crucial aspects of the project being to make a scaffold on which to make the satellite itself.

One thing Tony also had to take into consideration was the disruption all this was causing to his daughter. Leaving her back in New York, even in the capable hands of the other Avengers, wasn’t an option, so he had had to compromise with living in the New Mexico lab the working days of the week, then taking the girl home each weekend. This meant that Evie could switch round her toys and clothes if she wanted to, and could still go to her weekend activities. In the meantime Jarvis had also worked out a new school time-table for her that would work alongside her moving between states twice a week.

Once again; thank God Tony was a billionaire. With a private jet that could fly at Mach 2 it took less than half an hour for the journey.

Evie understood what was happening, mostly. She had already been showing the same tech-savvy that Tony had shown at the same age, although with her own twist on things, of course. The girl was absolutely excellent at following complex mechanical instructions and only needed to be shown how to do something once. She could just see how things went together, how they worked. However, they had discovered pretty early on that she had no inventive spark what-so-ever. Whilst she could fix things and put together things that already existed, she so far hadn’t shown any sign of inventive genius.

Tony still hoped that it would happen.

What this meant, however, was that the child was often found in the workshop when not in lessons, helping her father with some of the simpler things that would later make their satellite. This did not impress Jarvis one little bit.

Sir, I am perfectly capable of becoming angry and I am beginning to do so!"

Tony was lying half-under the large armature that would eventually become the support for the solar panels (eventually it would be arc-reactor powered, of course, but the panels provided a good backup). His voice was muffled. “It’s fine, Jarv, shut up.”

“No sir! I will not be silenced on this matter! Miss Evelyn is late for her science lesson!”

Stark pulled himself out from under the machine enough to wink at his daughter. “Jarvis, my dear darling Jarvis. Evie is helping me build a deep space satellite. This kicks the ass of any other science-fair project I’ve ever seen! This counts as a science lesson. Right, Birdie?”
Evie looked up, grinned and nodded. She had a partially put-together circuit board in her hands; Tony had coached her through the simple ones and left her to it.

Jarvis audibly sniffed snootily. “Very well, if you insist, sir. And for the record I believe Michio Kaku’s science-fair project is the most kick-ass ever. It most certainly beat your third grade jet engine.”

“You traitor!”

“Of course sir. In the meanwhile I shall use my sudden spare time to perfect my Project Skynet.”

“Jarvis…Sometimes you scare me.”

“I know sir, consider it one of the perks of the job.”

There was laughter from the large doorway into the warehouse and Tony heaved himself out from under the machine to see Bruce approaching with a mug of coffee, beaker of orange juice and large plate of biscuits.

“Sounds like you’re busy in here.” The physicist handed the drinks to their respective recipients and sat down cross-legged on the floor. “What’s this bit?” He looked up at the complex machinery.

“Supports for the solar panels. At the moment I’m still making the robots that will make the satellite itself.” Tony wiped his oily hands on an old piece of cloth and picked up a cookie. “I can’t really just knock something together on the floor – it needs all the rigs and gantries for support first. So I’m building all that. The plan is that once the scaffolds are done Jarvis can automate the putting together of the actual satellite.”

“As if I didn’t have enough to do already, sir.”

“Oh don’t put on that ‘world weary’ voice, Jarvis. It doesn’t suit you.”

“Of course not, sir.”

Bruce smiled again. No matter how much work there was to be done, Jarvis was always Tony’s first point of call. At least something’s never changed.

“So, how long do you think this will all take?”

Tony took a deep sip of coffee before looking back up at the piece he’d been working on. A sombre expression crossed his face.

“A while.” He flicked the metal with his finger. “The scaffolds and armature will take maybe six months to fully assemble, then the telescope will be another eight or so months to fully put together and test. Assuming Thor can get the mirror in time that is. Then another month or two to get the damn thing up into space. All in all we’re looking at approximately two years’ work just to get this thing up and running.”

“And once it’s up there?”

At that question Tony smiled again. “Ah, I think I’m onto a winner there. Jarv, put it up on the screens.”

The two large monitors on the desk next to them lit up and a complex stream of equations sprawled across the screens. At a first glance it was somewhat reminiscent of the Matrix. Bruce got up on
his knees to get a better look, frowning as he tried to make sense of the compound calculations. He mouthed a couple of the longer strings of algebra to himself before letting out an ‘oh’ of understanding.

“These are atmospheric coefficients.”

“Bingo.”

“But you’re factoring time into the equation?”

Tony picked up a wrench that was long enough for him to point at various parts of the calculations without having to get up. “The thinking is that once the telescope is running it can scan the atmospheres on the planets and such in galaxy IC11001, then Jarvis can use these equations to calculate what the atmospheres may have evolved into. That way we’ll have a more accurate idea of what the planets might currently look like and therefore which ones we need to take a closer look at.”

“Hmm, smart.”

“Of course.”

“Daddy’s always smart.” Evie held up her circuit board. “And I’m finished.” She handed it to her father who looked it over critically, then connected it to his StarkPad. The tablet whistled at him and Evie beamed at the confirmation that her piece of electronics worked.

“Good work, birdie.” Tony slid back under the machine and slotted the little section into place. He held a hand out and she high-fived him. “Team Stark!”

“Winter is coming.” Bruce quipped, then grinned as his friend glared at him and the girl looked confused.

“Enough with the Game of Thrones jokes, or I’m going back to calling you the Jolly Green Giant.”

“You never stopped calling me that.”

Tony pulled himself back out and sat up. “Huh. True.” He glanced at the screens again – with their scrolling equations – and then at the mess of blue-prints surrounding them on the floor. “You know, this baby will need a name when it goes up into space. I’m sure I could cope with one more joke. Give it your best shot.”

“You seriously want a Game of Thrones reference as the name for your kick-ass, God-saving satellite?” Bruce asked sceptically. When he just received a big grin in return he sighed and tried to remember the details from when he had last read the books. “Uh…Well, you’re Stark’s, so the banner for the House Stark is a direwolf…?”

“Direwolf…” Tony turned the name around a few times then looked at Evie. “What do you think, Evie?”

“Sounds like a werewolf.” The girl clearly didn’t have a clue what the two men were talking about in terms of the references, but took the question seriously. “Werewolves are cool and you can’t kill them, are direwolfs like that?”

“Pretty much.”

“Okay then, I like it.”
Tony whooped and fist-bumped Bruce. “We have a name! Jarvis; rename all pertinent files ‘Project Direwolf’ then write letters to HBO and George Martin asking if that’s cool with them. Can’t see why it wouldn’t be; after all, how many other books and TV shows have a satellite named after them?”

“Right away, sir.” Jarvis sounded as near as he ever did to amused. “Project Direwolf has been created.”

“Hell yeah!”

Evie tilted her head to one side thoughtfully. “Daddy, can I watch Game of Thrones now? You said I couldn’t before, but now our telescope’s going to be called after it, so can I watch it?”

A mental film-reel played in Tony’s head. Blood, sex, a bit more blood, a lot more sex, some confusing politics and – oh! – He forgot the blood and sex! “Nooo…Not yet. I don’t think you’d understand a lot of it. Wait until you’re a bit older, birdie.”

*Like, until you’re in your thirties…*

MWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWM

It was dark. Extremely dark, which in turn was odd.

Tony had almost forgotten what real darkness was like. He was so used to the little night-light sitting in his chest that chased all the shadows away. But it was dark.

He slowly sat up, hands pushing away bed-covers that he could feel but not see. Even under his pyjama T-shirt the light would still be glowing, but there was just *nothing*. Surely he should be worried? Without his arc-reactor he would die, that was something to worry about, wasn’t it?

Or not. Even as the thought occurred his chest was already lighting up – as if responding to his train of thought.

Unusual to say the least….

A low groan nearby caught Tony’s attention, taking his mind away from his misbehaving reactor as he tried to peer through the gloom.

“What…” Tony leant over, the small light from his reactor highlighting enough for him to see that when he lifted his foot up it was stained red. “What the hell?”
There was that moan again, low and drawn out, a sound of pure pain drawing his gaze back up to the darkened room. Slowly the man put his foot back down on the sodden carpet before standing up and taking a cautious step forwards. The small light illuminated a stretch of floor infront of him as he carefully made his way towards the source of the noise.

There.

Pale against the dark carpet was an out flung hand, fingers twitching minutely. Tony crouched down slowly, the scent of blood assaulting his nose and making him grimace. He leant forwards enough for his arc reactor to illuminate the rest of the scene.

“Jesus fucking Christ!”

The man scrambled backwards with an exclamation of pure horror, one hand coming up to cover his mouth. His back hit the edge of the bed and for a long moment he just pressed up against it, shaking his head furiously and biting down on his knuckles to muffle the scream that was desperate to force its way out.

No. No! This couldn’t be happening!

Loki was lying on the floor, face up so that he was staring up at the ceiling, one arm fallen to his side and out-stretched in a silent plea.

There was so much blood.

His stomach was sliced open, a cut that ran from chest to groin and spilt entrails across the floor. Through the gaping wound it was possible to see his lungs desperately trying to pull in air, his heart frantically trying to do its job.

“Please…God no…” Tony’s voice came out as a broken sob. “This isn’t real! This isn’t real!” He gripped his hair, chest heaving as he felt himself beginning to hyperventilate.

Loki tried to speak, but all that happed was a strangled gasp, blood bubbling up his throat and making him choke. The coughing motion caused something inside him to shift and another coil of intestines slithered to the floor, red and slick in the light of the arc reactor. There was no sign on his face that he realised his own innards were surrounding him; he was far too gone for that.

“Loki…” Tony was barely able to choke the name out, his pulse hammering in his ears as he struggled to breathe through the terror of the situation. He couldn’t move, couldn’t think. Someone was whimpering and he was pretty certain that it was his own voice.

This can’t be happening!

Loki’s shallow gasps were slowing, the movement of his lungs in his ripped chest cavity decreasing rapidly. Even as Tony watched the broken ribcage slowed and stopped in it’s rise and fall action, a small sigh leaving the trickster’s blood-filled mouth. His head lolled and fell to the side, exposing the other side of his face and the gaping hole where his other eye should have been.

Dead.

Tony screamed. Not the deep cry that most males trot out when in pain or scared but a real scream. All horror and fear and agony.

Loki was dead! Gutted like a fish, intestines spilling across the floor in thick shiny ropes. Dead.
Stark curled in on himself, gripping his hair in both hands until it was tearing at the roots. The scream wasn’t stopping; he couldn’t stop it. Even when he long ran out of breath to sustain it the soundless shriek continued, silent and broken.

“Be gone.” The smooth and above all calm voice seemed so out of place as to be ludicrous.

Tony raised his head enough to see golden light banishing the surrounding darkness. The corpse flickered slightly – like an out of tune TV.

“I said; be gone!” There was force to the order this time and the body vanished completely, taking the blood-stain with it.

“What…?” His head hurt, his throat hurt, his eyes hurt, and damn it all but his heart hurt. Tony managed to look up, his face blotchy with tears and pain.

Loki was standing next to him, sceptre in hand and staring at the spot where the corpse had lain. He was dressed in his full battle armour – helmet and all – with a dark expression. That, however, lightened when he looked down at the human still curled up against the bed.

“Tony?” His voice was soft, warm. “It’s gone, Tony.” When he didn’t receive a reply he crouched down, discarding his sceptre on the floor and removing his helmet. Slowly he reached out and untangled the hair from Tony’s fingers, applying enough gentle pressure to persuade the man to lower his hands down to his lap. “It’s gone; I’m here now.”

“No you aren’t.”

The God let go of one of the shaking hands to cup his lover’s cheek. “Tony-”

“No. You aren’t here. You aren’t real. That…that thing was more real than you are.” Tony whispered. His voice was shuddering as he refused to make eye contact. “That’s what’s really happening to you right now. They’re turning you into that. I may already be too late. You could be dead right now for all I know.”

“I’m not dead.”

“You’re a dream! You can only tell me what I know myself!”

“And you know I’m not dead.” The soft British accent didn’t change from it’s soothing cadence, even as Tony grew more agitated. “I’m not dead because I know that despite my asking you not to, you are currently doing your damnedest to rescue me. I’m not dead because I am holding on for you.”

“This is just a dream…” Tony blinked when he felt lips press against his forehead in such a familiar gesture that all the pain that was just beginning to ebb away came flooding back. “Please don’t leave me.”

“I’m not going anywhere.”

He felt warm arms wrap around him, armour melting away to the soft tunic that Loki wore under it. Tony took a deep shuddering breath, falling against the solid weight of his lover.

“It’s okay, I’m here now. The nightmare’s gone and I’m here.”

“Only until I wake up.” The man whispered. “Only until I wake up.”
Tony refused to sleep for nearly three full days, running on red-bull, coffee and sheer determination.

The mere thought of another nightmare on those proportions persuaded him to work himself to exhaustion in the hopes of producing a dreamless sleep.

He felt like he was falling back into his old pre-Avengers habits.

Jane Foster stood by the bank of computers in the warehouse-turned-workshop watching the small scene silently.

Amongst all of the huge machinery and boxes there was a small sofa, swamped in blankets and currently occupied by a sleeping Tony Stark. On the table next to him was a steaming hot mug of coffee.

Jane frowned at the hot beverage – wondering where it had come from. A noise from the desk area by the sofa made her circle a stack of crates to see Evie standing on tiptoe and operating a sandwich toaster that sat on the work-top.

“Evelyn?”

The girl didn’t seem in the least surprised to hear someone else in the area, although she glanced at Jane momentarily to check who it was.

“Daddy’s asleep. You’ll have to wait if you want to talk to him.” The machine beeped and the girl carefully slipped the hot toastie onto a plate. The food was then placed next to the mug of coffee.

Jane frowned.

“Do you do this often?”

“Do what?”

“Sort out food for your Dad when he’s fallen asleep in the lab?”

Evie looked at Tony, then back at the woman. “No. This is the first time. I wanted to do something to help and Jarvis suggested food. He worked the coffee machine for me and the toaster wasn’t tricky.”

Jane reached over to turn the electrical appliance off at the power connection. “No, but it’s dangerous; you could have burnt yourself.”

“I’m seven, I’m not an idiot.”

The sulky comment made the woman smile. “I know you aren’t, I’m sorry. I’m just worried that a seven year old is using a coffee maker and toaster unsupervised.”

“Jarvis did the coffee for me, I told you. And he told me how to use the toaster safely.” Evie folded her arms grumpily. She and the physicist had had little contact up until this point, and Jane felt that she wasn’t making the best of impressions on the child. “Daddy always makes me breakfast and today I woke up first. So I wanted to make him breakfast.”

“That was very sweet of you.”
Evie frowned slightly. “Are you going to be my Auntie?”

“I…What?”

“If you and Uncle Thor get married, then will you be my Auntie?”

Jane sat down on one of the crates, wondering if it was worth pouring herself a cup of coffee. She had only come in to have a word with Tony, and most certainly hadn’t expected to be accosted by a small child.

“We’re not going to get married.”

Evie sat down on the floor next to the crates, easily tapping the pass-word into Tony’s tablet and finding Angry Birds. “But if you do.”

“We won’t. And anyway I heard that your uh…’Mum’ doesn’t like Thor all that much.”

“Móhðy and Uncle Thor just need to talk. That’s what Daddy says.” The girl didn’t look up from her game. “But quite a lot of people don’t like Móhðy, so I don’t mind if you say you don’t like him.”

Jane thought momentarily of the Destroyer stalking down the high-street – killing people without a care. She remembered the terror she’d felt as it easily batted away the Asgardian warriors and then as Thor had walked towards it, entreatng to a brother who simply didn’t want to listen anymore. And she remembered how the machine had thrown Thor down nearly half the street, a blow hard enough to effectively kill him. All guided by Loki.

“I’ve never met your…Móhðy.” She stumbled over the pronunciation of the Norse word. “I don’t like to make a judgement before I meet someone. Do you think he’d like me to be your Auntie?”


“He’d like me because Thor does?”

“I guess so. And I like you. I wouldn’t mind if you married Uncle Thor.”

Jane smiled at that. It was apparently quite difficult to persuade a small child brought up on Disney that a man and a woman could just be friends without all the true love stuff.

“Thor’s getting married?” The sleepy voice came from the sofa and Tony’s head emerged from the pile of blankets. “When did that happen?”

“It didn’t, Evie’s speculating.”

“Oh, shame. You two would make a cute couple.” The inventor pulled himself upright and eyes the coffee and toastie – still quite warm – in confusion. “These for me?”

“Yup. I made them.” Evie said with a grin.

Tony looked back at the breakfast again, then opened his arms wide. “Come here, you!”

As the child eagerly dashed over for a hug, Jane smiled sadly. She knew next to nothing of Loki as a person, but everything she did know just didn’t fit into the picture of a loving parent with a sweet and curious child. But maybe she could understand why getting the wayward God back meant so much to the father/daughter duo.
When Evie went back to her tablet and Tony started sipping his coffee the woman cleared her throat.

“Tony, Thor’s come back. He’s eating at the moment and has refused to say a word about what happened until he sees you.”

The inventor paused mid-sip. “Was he happy or upset?”

“Hyperactive.”

“Probably good news then.”

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The Dwarves were apparently more than able to make the mirror required, and as a price had requested a large quantity of plastic and instructions on how to make more of it. In Tony’s eyes it was the bargain of the century, but the Dwarves – still living in a world that was essentially the middle ages – knew the true value of the material in their work.

However, to make a mirror that was smooth and flawless down to the atomic level would take time.

“How long?!”

“Eighteen months, give or take.” Thor said glumly. “They say that that will be the very least to get the work done to the quality you demand. It will be a difficult job.”

I appreciate that, but still. That puts production back again.” Tony ran a hand through his rumpled hair. “We’re looking at two years before I can get this thing into space at this rate. I can’t let… That’s too long.” The hastily cut-off but I can’t let Loki suffer for that long hung in the air between them.

“You’re doing everything you can, Tony, that’s all anyone could ever ask of you.”

“Still…”

Tactfully, the God decided to change the subject. They were seated up in the living area above the workshop, slumped in the sofas surrounding a small coffee table.

“My parents asked me to pass on their regards to you.”

“Oh? Is that a good thing or a bad thing?”

“A fairly good thing I would say.”

Tony frowned slightly. “And they’re okay with the whole dude-on-dude thing? I’m not quite sure where Norse Gods stand on gay relationships. Views are mixed on whether or not Vikings accepted it or not.”

Thor snorted slightly. “It was your Christianity that had a problem with same-sex relationships. On Asgard it is not considered unusual for men or women to seek out the same gender. A citizen is expected to marry and produce children, but fidelity in said marriage is not necessarily kept.”

“I thought Loki had some trouble being gay?”
The God looked uncomfortable. “That would likely be because he would act in a manner that was seen as less than manly. His fighting style and use of magic were both considered ‘womanly’. For him to then prefer male companionship…Well, he didn’t do himself any favours.”

“And being a hermaphrodite can’t have helped matters.” Tony said acidly. He was gratified to see Thor wince. “After all, he’d taken enough time to convince himself that he was male and then people belittled him without even knowing the truth.”

“He never put it like that…” The God mumbled. “I knew about his…that he was different. I didn’t know why, of course, but I knew that he had…extra….”

“He’s a hermaphrodite, Thor. We have a word for it.”

“Okay. Well, I knew, but after he learnt a spell to conceal it he impressed upon me how I was to forget that he had ever been anything other than a normal male Æsir. We were still children; I grew up with it as only a vague memory.” The large blonde shrugged hopelessly. “If I am to be honest, Tony, by the time he had problems with others about his bed-partners and magic it was thousands of years later and I had put it so far back in my mind it never occurred to me.”

Tony frowned at that; put-out at the way Thor was trying to remove the blame from himself. At any rate, it wasn’t really something to be discussed at this point. Hopefully it was a conversation Loki would have with his brother when they found him again. And back to the matter in hand…

“So your parents are cool that Loki’s with me, then? After all, we proved that we can ‘produce kids’ quite effectively.”

Thor gratefully took the chance to get back to the original conversation. “They are curious about the mortal who could snare the God of Mischief.”

Tony smirked at the choice of words. “I don’t know how much snaring went on. We just realised we got on pretty well when we weren’t trying to kill each other.”

“Be that as it may, my parents would like to meet you one day. As would Sleipnir; he is beside himself with worry over Loki.”

“Sleipnir…?” Tony’s photographic memory quickly shuffled through the files until it found the right entry. “Wait, the horse?” Along with the knowledge came a memory, nearly seven years old, and one of the few times Loki had ever spoken of his other child.

“I can deal with a crying child, Tony.” The God rose to his feet, the sobbing baby safely ensconced in his arms. “Sleipnir was a nightmare.”

“Wasn’t he a horse?”

“An eight legged horse who refused to go to bed. He was a nightmare child.” There was fondness in the tricksters voice as he spoke.

The wistfulness on his face then had made Tony acutely aware in that moment that the God desperately loved his children, no matter what others thought of them.

“How long has it been since Loki saw Sleipnir?”

Thor looked miserable. “Before he fell. Over ten years ago now. Sleipnir misses him immensely.”

Whilst the existence of an eight legged horse had managed to wriggle its way into the ‘weird shit
that actually exists’ file in Tony’s brain, he hadn’t given any thought as to the other anomalies said horse might have.

“By ‘misses him’ do you mean in the usual animal sense of missing a person, or is Sleipnir cognitively aware?” He couldn’t believe he was asking such a question!

“Sleipnir is as mentally aware as you or I.” The thunder God looked confused, evidently not realising that Loki had said next to nothing about his offspring. “He can communicate by way of mind-speak and is highly intelligent.”

“Oh. Wow, I hadn’t realised that.”

“He and Loki are extremely close, so to not see him for so long and then to hear that he has been taken by the chitauri…”

Tony nodded in understanding. Forgetting Sleipnir’s general appearance for a moment, he could fully sympathise with a child desperately worried about their parent. And if mythology was to be believed, only parent. Christ! At least Evelyn still had her Dad to look after her!

“How old is Sleipnir then? Mentally comparing him to a human.”

Thor shrugged. “It’s hard to calculate. He is certainly an adult in mentality, although Loki will doubtless forever see him as a spindly legged foal. Were he a human then I would guess you could say he is middle aged. As a man in his fifties perhaps? Of course, in years he is over four hundred thousand.”

A low whistle was Tony’s only reply. That was one old horse.

“He also expressed a desire to one day meet his half-sister.” Thor added.

“Huh? Who…Evie?”

The God had to smile at the dumb-founded expression on Tony’s face. “Of course. They are siblings through Loki.” His smile became a sly grin. “And he did mention maybe one day meeting with his Fóstri.”

“His what?”

“Step-father.”

That one took a while to sink in. Tony stared blankly at the thunder God as the two words slowly crept into his brain. Step-father.

“Mary Mother of God!” His head fell into his hands with a groan. “Loki and I aren’t even married!”

“Loki loves you, that’s enough for Sleipnir.”

Tony groaned again. “Well he can’t come and live with us; there are no stables and I know nothing about horses.”

“I want a horse!” Evie rounded the sofa, evidently having caught the last part of the conversation. “Daddy, are we getting a horse?”

“No we are not!”

“Yet.” Thor added, whilst Tony glared at him.
Time passed, sometimes slowly – when nothing seemed to work – and sometimes quickly.

The year progressed and Evie’s eighth birthday came and went. They spent it out of the tower, with Tony deciding to take her on holiday so that she wasn’t constantly mulling on the fact that Loki wasn’t turning up. The idea seemed to work and the characters walking around Disneyland kept her mind off things. Even Tony cheered up, which was an added bonus he hadn’t expected.

The satellite slowly began to take shape. An arc reactor – smaller than the one for the tower, but much much larger than Stark’s personal one – was built and fitted into the framework. Jarvis made slow but steady progress with the atmospheric detection equations and had already begun testing them on closer stellar objects to good results. The bulk of the satellite itself was also constructed as a skeletal framework. There was still a huge amount to put inside it – communication equipment, all of the mechanics to ensure it could do its job, the mirror…the list was pretty much endless.

But, for the first time since losing Loki, Tony felt like they were really beginning to make some progress.

Life as an Avenger didn’t stop just because Stark Industries was deciding to change the face of space technology either. However, world invasions didn’t happen all that often and other than having to deflect an inter-continental ballistic missile sent by a certain country that wasn’t even sure who they were aiming at, Ironman hadn’t been needed all that much.

And, well, more time passed. That’s what time does.

The mirror was completed and safely delivered to Earth. It was incredible, a thing of beauty. Nearly twenty meters across it was ten times the size of the one inside the Hubble Telescope. To the Avenger’s disappointment it wasn’t accompanied by any of the Dwarven craftsmen, but Tony made sure that the payment exceeded that which had been asked for – the craftsmanship was too fine for him not to.

It took nearly three months to properly install the giant disc into the structure and to check that it was fitted correctly (a single design flaw in the Hubble mirror had resulted in nearly ruining the entire project, and Tony didn’t have the time for mistakes like that). The second mirror assembly, which had been made on Earth, was already in place and the two pieces were carefully lined up with the optical array.

Jarvis was integrated into the whole system both to run system diagnostics and to familiarise Tony with how the AI would function inside the computer modules. It was normal for deep space telescopes to be monitored manually from ground-control, but with Jarvis the thinking was that Tony wouldn’t have to worry about having to sift through reams of data.

As well as mechanically putting the gigantic piece of technology together, there were also computer programs that needed writing for the whole thing to work effectively. Jarvis needed to know how to tell the difference between relevant and irrelevant data, what he was looking for, how to scan with optimum efficiency, and a multitude of fine details that had Tony tearing his hair out. As it was, whilst Jarvis needed to know these things, it was also Jarvis who was writing the algorithms to tell himself what he needed to know, so he started out by knowing what he needed to do to know them, which made it all a lot easier.

Bruce had tried to make sense of it and left with a headache.

And amongst all the organised chaos, Tony had also had to update his suit. The plan was still to
launch from Pluto – which Thor had already okayed with Heimdall on the use of the Bifrost – but
the closer the machine came to being finished the more Stark came to realise how much his suit
was going to need for him to survive.

For a start, the damn place was cold. The surface was Nitrogen ice – meaning it was at the very
least -240 Celsius (-400 Fahrenheit) although Tony preferred to work in Kelvin, which made it a
balmy 33K. The atmosphere was non-existence – far too cold for one – and chances were it would
be extremely dark due to being so far from the sun.

So the Ironman suit was revamped, and pimped and added to until Tony was as certain as he could
ever be that it would keep him alive in such hostile terrain.

He could only hope it would be enough.

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“That…Is one big box of wires.” Clint’s sarcasm didn’t really come across as well as he wanted it
to when faced with the behemoth of a machine.

It was big. Scrap that, it was huge.

Larger than a jumbo jet, it sat in the centre of the warehouse, gleaming smugly.

Finished.

It had been twenty nine months, just over Tony’s guess of two years to make and had easily sucked
up about $93.5 million to build. The telescope was a pioneering piece of technology; ten, maybe
twenty years ahead of anything NASA had been able to make.

The whole thing sat on top of a monster of a flatbed lorry that Tony had borrowed from the United
States Army (it had once been used to transport the space shuttle Endeavour). Down both sides the
Stark Industries logo had been stencilled and pride of place along the nose cone were huge letters
spelling out ‘Direwolf’ (Tony had received permission from both the copyright holders, who were
rather smug to have their book/show inspire the name of such a prestigious inventor’s work).

It took them three days to make the careful trek from the birthplace in the warehouse to the Bifrost
site in the middle of the desert, Tony worrying over every bump and rut they hit along the way.
The satellite was accompanied by three Stark Industries vans; two of them carrying a stack of large
cases that Stark had been very vague about.

Thor had already spoken to Heimdall and a plan had been formulated to ensure the satellite would
reach its destination in one piece. Namely, there was no way Tony was going to be able to go to
Asgard this time round. The Observatory (Thor had to explain what he meant by that in relation to
the bridge) was simply too small to fit the flat-bed truck and its cargo into, so Heimdall had
suggested that he send the vehicle and its escort directly through without stopping at Asgard.
Usually most journeys went through Asgard, since it was the main site of the Bifrost, but the
Gatekeeper had been quite adamant that it was possible for him to send someone from one place to
another without needing to stop in between at the city.

Tony was a little disappointed that he wasn’t going to see the fabled City of the Gods, but he
supposed there were always other times.

When they reached the New Mexico Bifrost site Fury was already there waiting for them.
Alongside was a large group of agents, fifteen of whom were in what appeared to be heavily
modified NASA space suits.
“What’s with the costume-party?” Tony jumped down from the cab of the truck, eyeing the astronauts in amusement. “If someone had warned me it was fancy dress I would have had time to get my Wolverine costume together.”

“Not funny, Stark.” Fury swept his hand back to indicate the people – nine men and six women now that Tony looked closer. “This is going to be your team up there.”

“Uh, no it isn’t.” The man gave the five team members a sarcastic little wave. “Sorry to get your hopes up, but I’ve got my own team for this. I don’t want Shield involved.”

The Director folded his arms. “And why would that be? Truthfully, Mr Stark.”

“Truthfully? For starters, I doubt those outfits will keep them alive for more than five minutes up there. Look at them; you might as well have made them out of paper!” Tony said scornfully. “And besides not wanting to come home with a group of human-popsicles, I also don’t trust Shield one little bit with any of my tech. You know that, don’t you dear?” He patted Fury’s arm in a condescending manner before turning away from the man. “I’ve got this covered, but thanks.”

“Stark, we aren’t talking about a little jaunt to the moon here!”

“No, we aren’t.” And suddenly Tony was right back up in Fury’s face, spitting the words like acid. “We’re talking about something so far away mankind has never even bothered to dream about going there. Hell, we don’t even classify Pluto as a planet anymore! It’s so far from home that home isn’t even a concept worth thinking about out there. I’m risking an awful lot going there just by myself; don’t think for a second that I’m going to let others put themselves at risk too, purely for my selfish dream.”

“I thought you said you had your own team.” Fury’s reply was cold and direct, repeating Stark’s earlier words straight back to him.


The doors on the two Stark Industries vans that had been part of the satellite convoy opened of their own accord, displaying the crates inside. One by one said boxes rolled down the ramps that extended from the open doors on caterpillar-treads to line up neatly alongside the vehicles. Once all were out and in they began to methodically unfold seemingly without any other external stimuli.

Had anyone been asked to explain what they were seeing it would have been easiest to do so by referencing the battle droids from Starwars; Phantom Menace. Or maybe Transformers. The crates opened outwards and upwards at a blinding speed that was reminiscent of the Ironman armour attaching itself to Tony and in less than a minute ten suits were standing beside the vans – unpainted and gleaming a dull silver in the sun but otherwise perfectly functioning Ironman replicas.

Most of the Avenger’s team who had accompanied Tony didn’t seem surprised – apparently he had told them of this in advance – but Fury, for once, seemed taken aback.

“What’s only ten.” Fury stated coldly. “You’re going to need more than that. The telescope is
huge.”

Tony gave him one of his very best scathing looks. “Excuse me? Pluto has less gravity than our moon. I’d probably be able to lift it all on my own.” He gestured at the free-standing suits. “Nine of these guys are built for heavy lifting and one houses a new mainframe for Jarvis. The connection with him broke that time I got rid of that nuke for you, which wasn’t good for me, so I’ve built a mobile mainframe that can come with me when I’m out of range of the normal signal. I’m assuming that another planet will put me out of range. Ditto with the telescope; Jarvis is in there too. He’s my operator.”

“Will you stay in radio contact?”

“Uh…I’ll be a couple of billion miles away. What’s the reach of your walkie talkies?” Tony threw the quip over his shoulder as he turned and began to walk back over to the group of Stark Industries vehicles.

Evie had let herself out of one of the vans, dragging the case containing the Ironman armour with her. She looked up and grinned when her father gave her the thumbs up sign.

The girl had grown, as children do, over the course of making the satellite. Loki had disappeared the day before her seventh birthday and now they were only two days from her tenth (Tony had been careful with his timing so that he’d be back for it). She still bore very little resemblance to Loki, only the green tint to her irises betraying any relation. Instead the child was the spitting image of her father and it was only the longer hair that stopped anyone mixing up photographs of her with photos of Tony at the same age. It was quite clear, though that she was growing up, and Tony was beginning to sadly realise that his little girl was not going to be all that little for much longer.

“Right. Everything ready?” He clapped Evie on the shoulder.

“Jarvis said nothing happened when we moved it. Everything is working.” The girl had set up the StarkPad and showed a page covered in specs from the satellite. “It’s all ready.”

“Great!” Tony rubbed his hands together, already anticipating the job ahead. Then he noticed how his daughter’s expression fell slightly. “Hey, it’s going to be okay, birdie.”

“I don’t want you to go.” She muttered.

“I’ll be back before you know it.”

“But I don’t want you to go! You’ll be on your own and we won’t be able to talk to you.”

Tony smiled slightly. “It’s a barren rock in the middle of nowhere. Nothing can happen.” He brushed the girl’s hair back from her face. “I’ll pop up, launch the telescope and be back for dinner. What’s got you so worried?”

Evelyn shrugged slightly. “I don’t want you to go missing too.” She mumbled, looking down at the floor.

“Oh Evie…” Tony pulled her into a tight hug. “I’m not going to go missing. I’ll have ten Jarvis’s with me, and there’s nothing up there that can do any damage. Okay? I’ll be fine.”

“I’m just worried.” The three words were muffled from where the girl was pressing into her father’s t-shirt.
“I know, but it will be very quick and everyone here will stay with you until I’m back, yeah?”
Tony smiled down at Evie.

“I guess.”

“You know why I’m doing this.”

She nodded at that, looking a little more sure than she had. “Yeah, yeah I know.”

“So are you going to be okay?”

The girl finally smiled and nodded. “Yeah. Just…be careful?”

“I’m always careful.”

Evie laughed at the blatant lie. Tony gave her another squeeze then released her so that she could pick up the StarkPad again. They both turned when they heard Thor approaching – the God had yet to learn to be quiet.

“Tony, are you ready?”

Stark ruffled Evie’s hair again. “Yeah, as ready as I’ll ever be.” He took a couple of steps back from his daughter and stretched his arms out wide. “Hook me up Jarvis.”

The Ironman suit folded itself around the jogging outfit that the man was wearing, flashing in the bright sun as the process finished, leaving the face plate out. Tony held out one gauntleted hand and Evelyn fist-bumped him.

“Okay, time to rock and roll.” It seemed that that was a code-phrase of some sort because the ten extra suits turned and began marching into the circle Thor had mapped out as the Bifrost site, surrounding the lorry and satellite that were already placed there. Tony flipped his visor down.

“Jarvis, systems check, are you working independent of the main tower?”

“Affirmative sir, the mobile mainframe is working effectively.”

“Great.” Inside the suit it wasn’t possible for the others to see Tony take a shaky breath. He followed the other Ironmen and pulled himself up onto the truck to sit beside the telescope. It was comforting to see Evie take Natasha’s hand and the assassin allow her to do so. “Right, Thor, what do I do?”

Thor made sure that he was well outside the periphery of the site before answering. “You need not do anything.” He raised his voice. “Heimdall! Open the Bifrost!”

Tony clung to the edge of the truck with one hand as the area was suddenly bathed with an almost glaring light, and saluted. The last he saw before everything in his line of sight was blinded was Evie waving frantically.

WMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWM

Ironman had closed his eyes throughout the – admittedly very quick – journey. Whereas Loki’s teleportation had been a brief whirl through darkness, this was shaking and jolting and painfully bright light everywhere that made him unable to open his eyes, even with the sun protection built into the HUD.

It would be fair to say that he was pretty damn frightened too.
Years. He had spent years building up to this point, and had never really considered the important fact of launching the satellite off of another goddamn planet! It was always worry over if he had covered every angle, worry over how Evie was coping, worry over if Loki was alright, worry, worry, worry.

He hadn’t really confronted the thought of being the first man to set foot on another planet – declassified or not – until it was actually happening.

He was scared.

The shaking stopped and the light faded, but for a long time Ironman didn’t move, clinging to the security of the truck and keeping his eyes tightly closed.

“Sir…” Jarvis was working, at least. “Sir, you might want to look at this.”

The AI hadn’t really been built to have ‘awe’ as an emotional function, but he was programed to learn from the environment and Tony was pretty certain that that sounded like awe.

He opened his eyes.

“Oh…God…”

The vista was…stunning. Purely stunning.

The headlights of the truck illuminated ice and rock stretching out infront of him, rising up in fantastic shapes that would have given M C Escher a headache. The ice was foggy, almost blue in appearance and Tony remembered that it wasn’t actually frozen water, but frozen nitrogen – the entire planet’s atmosphere frozen solid. The horizon was much shorter than that on Earth and he could very faintly make out the shape of a moon in the sky that was desperately reflecting what little light it could get from the sun.

The sun…

He looked up, then in every direction of the sky that he could.

“Over there, sir.” Jarvis circled something on the display and Tony stared.

The sun, the thing so natural that he pretty much forgot that it existed most days, was tiny. No heat and very little light could reach the spot where he was sitting; infact it was the same amount of light Earth usually received from it’s own moon, but appeared much smaller in the sky.

“Where…can we see Earth from here?”

“No sir, it’s on the opposite side of the system to us.”

“Jesus…” He looked down from his perch on the truck at the dull surface.

Another world. So far away that mankind couldn’t even dream of reaching it. It was beyond imagining.

He carefully climbed down from the truck, letting out a shaky breath when he felt the rock and ice crunch under his boots.

“Jarv….Just, record everything you can, yeah?”

“Of course, sir.”
Tony took a hesitant step forward, feeling himself nearly float as he transferred the weight from one foot to the other. The gravity was so low he didn’t dare use the suit to fly. If he could fly at all – no atmosphere would make it pretty tricky.

“How many moons does this thing have?” It was purely something to say; to stop himself from thinking about how he was the only human on the entire damn planet.

“Five, sir. One of which could be said to be part of a binary system with Pluto.”

Hearing Jarvis’s voice was a comfort and Tony continued to talk as he began unstrapping the satellite; the other unmanned suits helping. It was all so big. Space was just big.

He’d been right when he’d told Fury that it would only need the eleven of them to manoeuvre the giant machine. Low gravity had its uses.

The man climbed up onto the telescope to access the control panel and the HUD in his helmet indicated that all of the systems were working correctly and the large arc reactor had not reacted unfavourably to the extreme cold. He quickly flicked a group of switches up to their ‘open’ positions and closed the panel back up.

“Okay Jarvis, everything’s looking good.” He very slowly climbed back down – well aware that jumping could result in him bouncing around like a rubber ball. “Fire the boosters.”

The ten suits supported the machine and lifted it as the engines fired, the blue burn lighting up more of the unusual rock around them.

“Systems are holding, sir. She is ready to go.”

Tony stood well back and nodded. “Okay, Project Direwolf, launch.”

The thrusters roared.

Unlike a rocket or shuttle on Earth, very little force was needed to escape the gravitational field. Had he been launching from home Tony would have needed a fuel cell attached to the satellite just to leave the atmosphere. However, here the arc reactor alone was able to provide enough thrust and send the giant telescope screaming upwards.

“She’s holding, sir.” Jarvis’s voice could barely be heard over the roar. “Exiting atmosphere and entering orbit now. All systems are on green, pressure holding and steady. The arc reactor is working optimally.”

Tony just stood there, staring.

Most people had seen videos of Cape Canaveral launching various missions, of watching the iconic NASA rockets dwindle into tiny specs in the sky. Not many had seen it with their own eyes. And now it was here infront of him. Not even a NASA rocket but his own project, designed by his own mind and built with his own two hands.

And with one aim in mind.

“Leaving orbit sir.”

“Fire up the telescope, I don’t want her to go too far until we know she works.”

Tony remembered all too well how Hubble’s mirror had been flawed and the whole thing had
almost been a write-off. He most certainly didn’t want that happening on this one.

The HUD sectioned into two halves; normal view in one and a fuzzy television-like screen in the other. Red numbers scrolled underneath the fuzzy view until they froze and turned green, the picture suddenly clearing to show a view of the sky in perfect clarity.

“Resolution looks good, zoom in on something.” He squinted at the display as it focussed on one of the stars in the image and suddenly drew up close enough to show that it wasn’t a star at all but a large blue planet. “Neptune, right?”

“Well done, sir.” Jarvis sounded faintly amused. “I shall continue calibrating and will let you know when I am ready to start scanning for the galaxy.”

“Sounds good.” Tony turned away, looking back out across the alien – in every sense of the word – surface. “I’m going to get some rock samples. Bruce would kill me otherwise.” He began walking up to one of the giant twisted spires of stone, but was stopped by one of the other suits. It held out a small package that was covered with a thick frost.

“Director Fury wished me to give this to you.” Jarvis said earnestly.

“Huh.” Tony unwrapped it to find a telescopic pole and a rolled up wad of cloth. “A flag? I can’t really claim Pluto for America; I think some other countries would be a bit pissed off.” When he didn’t get a reply he sighed and unrolled it. “Oh…”

It wasn’t the Stars and Stripes as he’d expected. Instead it was a simple black background with a photograph of the Earth. Underneath were the words; We Come Here Peacefully And Hope To Leave Enlightened.

“That’s…surprisingly not half bad.” He attached the stiff, frozen cloth to the pole. “Jarv, I could do with a photo of this.” _Whilst I resist the urge to claim Pluto in the name of Stark Industries._

“Any famous words for posterity, sir?”

“Uh…Yeah.” Tony looked up at the sky again, at the shrinking sight of his satellite. Famous words…He should have thought of that in advance. “Um…I’m currently standing on the planet furthest from our sun. I could be doing this for the money, for the fame or for the glory. But I’m not. I’m here because I’m searching for God. My God. And I will find him. Whatever happens; _I will find him._”

They weren’t quite worthy of Neil Armstrong, but they had come straight from the heart.
“Sir. Sir. Sir. Sir.”

“Shut up, Jarvis!” Tony was underneath one of his many cars – an Aston Martin db9 to be precise – and when in the car-zone he did not like to be interrupted. Jarvis technically knew this, but ignored it each and every time.

“No. Sir. Sir. Sir.”

“Jarvis!”

“Yes, sir?”

“Sometimes I hate you.”

“Only sometimes? Sir, you astonish me.”

Tony sighed. “Is there a reason you’re being more annoying than Clint when he’s injured?” He pushed himself out from underneath the car chassis and wiped his hands off on a nearby towel.

“I need to discuss Miss Evelyn’s lessons with you, sir. The reason that I started this conversation in such a manner was because she dared me to.”

The man ran a hand over his face with a groan. “What did I tell you about accepting dares with Evie?”

“It is my duty to keep her happy and when I am not acting as her teacher I am her friend as much as I am yours.” Jarvis said smoothly. “I may be a very intricate string of binary, but you programmed emotion into me and I understand the obligations of friendship, insofar as humans have defined it. So when she is bored outside of lessons I will engage in dare contests if she so wishes.”

“...I hate how rational you can be.”

“You routinely say that, sir.”

“Yeah. So, we’re off topic. Evie’s lessons? What’s up?”

Jarvis affected a small cough, which was usually a sign he was about to bring up a more delicate subject. “I have encountered a small problem.”

Tony grinned. “Let me guess. You’ve taught her everything that it’s possible for her to know, because she’s just that brilliant and now she can help out in the lab whenever she wants?”
“Not as such sir. She is very clever, but not *that* clever.”

“Damn. There go my plans of a second pair of hands around the workshop. Kay. So what’s the problem then?”

“Miss Evelyn has reached the age where schools usually begin to teach sex education.”

“Oh…”

“I wished to know if you want me to talk to her about these facts of life, or if you would like yourself or someone else to do so. Miss Potts perhaps?”

Tony rested both hands on the work bench and hung his head with a heavy sigh. “She’s only ten, Jarvis, surely she doesn’t *need* to know the facts of life just yet.”

“On the contrary sir, I believe it’s highly likely she’s already worked most of it out anyway – as you say, she is very smart. And as a girl going into puberty there are things she needs to know so that she won’t have an awful shock later on.”

“But…” *But she’s my little girl…* Tony didn’t say the words, but he didn’t really need to. He wasn’t ashamed to admit that he still saw Evie as a tiny child sometimes. It was hard to believe that the baby he had helped into the world was now approaching the scary world of puberty.

“Time to get out of the Egyptian river, sir.”

“The...? Oh. Denial. Ha ha, Jarvis.”

“You know I’m right, sir.” The AI sounded unbearably smug to Tony’s mind. “So, how do you wish to proceed? I’m sure Miss Potts will be amenable to having a talk with Miss Evelyn. Or perhaps even Ms Romanoff.”

The man scowled. “Are you saying you don’t think I can handle this myself?”

The pause was just *slightly* too long. “Of course not, sir. I merely assumed you wouldn’t want to.”

“You think I can’t do it. You think I’m not mature enough to give my daughter The Talk.”

“The thought never even crossed my mind, I can assure you.”

“Hmmm.” Tony glared up at the ceiling. “I don’t believe you. I’ll talk to Evie myself, thank you very much!”

“If you insist, sir. Should I call her down now?”

“Er…” The man had to admit to sudden panic. However, he also was less than inclined to let his smart-arse AI know that. “Yeah. Sure, send her down, I’ll…uh…find a flip-chart or something.”

Infact, he decided against the flip-chart since it was just a little *too* clichéd, but he did pull out one of his empty A3 notebooks and a pencil just in case. His drawing skills weren’t spectacular so he was hoping he wouldn’t actually need to sketch anything down, but it was better to be prepared.

How had it come to this? How had his little girl grown up so quickly?

With everything that had been happening over the past few years he had entirely forgotten that little girls don’t remain little for very long. At least he knew he hadn’t wasted that time with her.
“Dad? Jarvis said you wanted me?” Evie wandered into the lab only half looking where she was going as her attention remained fixed on the StarkPad in her hands.

“Oi, careful!” Tony pulled the tablet out of her grasp, bringing her up short before she walked into the corner of the work surface.

“Hey! I was doing something!”

He glanced over the webpage that was open and smiled slightly. Evie had been immersed in the Hubble Telescope picture gallery. “It’s not going anywhere. You can have it back after we’ve had a talk.”

The girl sighed and pulled herself up onto one of the stools next to the work bench. “Okay. What do we need to talk about? If it’s about Aunty Nat’s gun then I swear I didn’t know the safety was off. And you can hardly see the hole.”

Tony winced at the memory of the destroyed sofa in the living room. “That’s not actually what I wanted to talk to you about, but we do need to discuss that at some point.”

“Must we? Uncle Clint already lectured me.” Evie whined.

“Yeah we do. But not now.”

“So why am I here?”

Tony spun his stool around to place the confiscated tablet on his work desk then turned back to his daughter. “I think it’s time we had a chat, Evelyn.”

The girl grinned. “Ooh, full name, this is serious.”

“Yeah, this is serious, Birdie, you’re a growing girl and it’s time we had a talk.”

Evie’s grin faded and she narrowed her eyes suspiciously. “A talk or the talk?”

“Alright, the talk.”

“I think I already know it.”

Tony arched an eyebrow at the quick answer, noting the way his daughter went bright red. “I know Jarvis monitors your internet use, so I know you’ve not been looking up anything untoward. Where have you got your info from?”

She shrugged. “I worked it out.”

“Worked it out?” To be fair, Tony couldn’t actually dispute it since he had a vivid memory of watching a James Bond film as a child and having an ‘Oh dear God! Is that what they’re doing??!’ moment half way through a sex scene. “Well, yeah. Okay, I can believe that. But I can guarantee you’ve missed out on some key points. So park your butt because we’re having this talk. I am being a responsible parent and I am not going to let you escape from this!”

“Uh….Okay?” Evelyn fixed him with a shrewd gaze. “On one condition. If I’m old enough for The Talk, I’m old enough to get my ears pierced.”

Stark knew when to make compromises and this had been one battle that he knew he’d been doomed to lose when Evie had first mentioned it two years ago. He’d held off allowing her through the age-old parental fear, but she really did have a point now, and he sighed.
“Yeah, okay, deal.”

WMWMWMMWWMWWMWMW

“And we were singing; bye bye Miss American Pie. Drove my Chevy to levee but the levee was dry. And them good old boys were drinking whisky and rye singing; this’ll be the day that I die…This’ll be the day that I—”

“Clint, shut up!” Pepper slammed her book down to glare at the archer. He merely grinned at her and continued singing, sashaying over to her.

“Did you write the book of love, and do you have faith in God abo- Ow! Nat!”

Natasha, curled up in her favourite sofa near the window had successfully thrown an apple at him and smirked when he glared. “That is an annoying song, and you know it.”

“But it’s stuck in my head!”

Pepper sighed heavily and glanced up at the ceiling. “Jarvis, some music if you please?”

“With pleasure Miss Potts.”

Clint scowled, until Jarvis began playing the Dambusters March which drew a laugh from the archer. “Really?”

The elevator doors opened to reveal Evie and Tony; the girl running into the room with her arms outstretched like an aeroplane in response to the music.

“Dad said I could get my ears pierced!” She dived at the sofa Pepper was sat on and bounced excitedly on the cushions. “We’re going out this afternoon! I get to choose what colour the earrings are!”

Pepper laughed at the child’s enthusiasm. “What’s the occasion?” She asked, looking to Tony for confirmation. “I thought you two were at logger-heads over the whole ear-piercing thing.”

Tony grinned sheepishly. “We decided she was old enough.”

“I persuaded Dad that if I was old enough to know about sex I was old enough to decide what I wanted to do with my ears.” Evie stated smugly.

Clint’s jaw dropped. “The…Talk? You gave her The Talk?! Tony Stark managed to maturely discuss sex? Jarvis! Tell me you got this on video!”

Tony laughed and folded his arms. “I wiped the files, Clint. There are things about Loki I’m sure you don’t want to know.”

“Huh?”

Evelyn knelt up on the sofa and folded her arms on the back of it to grin at the archer with all the maliciousness as befitting the daughter of the God of mischief. “Think about it Uncle Clint; both my parents are men. There are things you really don’t want to know.”

Natasha muffled a snort of laughter that gave Tony the sudden insight that she would be asking him many questions later. Pepper tried to look disproving, but was certainly thinking along the same lines as the female assassin.
“So, earrings, huh?” Clint was apparently desperate to get off the subject of Loki’s childbearing abilities.

Tony slumped down onto the sofa besides Evie. “Yeah, we’ll pop into Tiffany’s later on today. Assuming madam here can take it.”

“It’s hardly going to hurt that much!” The child shot back instantly.

“You say that now but-”

“Tony.” Pepper was sitting up straighter and glaring at her boss. “Did you say Tiffany’s? As in the leading jewellery designer? For a ten year old?”

Tony thumped his head back against the back of the sofa with a loud groan. “Oh come on! You should see what most celebrity parents do for their kids; I think I’ve been very well restrained over the years! She doesn’t even own a pony! If she’s going to permanently scar her ears for life it will be with nothing less than diamonds!” He folded his arms like a petulant two year old. “I’m a multibillionaire and I will occasionally spoil my only child rotten. So sue me.”

Pepper pursed her lips disapprovingly before nodding curtly. “Well, you’d damn well better get me something whilst you’re there then.”

“Seconded!” Natasha didn’t even look up from the gun that she was trying to mend. “But no alloys. My skin reacts badly to alloys.”

Tony laughed and glanced at Clint. “Any requests? Apparently I’m buying for everyone. Nose ring? Got a Prince Albert you haven’t told us about?”

If the archer had had a response it was never going to be known.

The sudden wail of a klaxon from the ceiling made Evie and Pepper visibly jump, and even Tony glanced up sharply.

“Jarvis, report.”

“Nevada desert, sir. Military exercise gone wrong.” The Ai’s informal mannerisms had vanished and were replaced with a business-like tone to convey the facts as quickly as possible. “They have lost control of one of the un-manned drones. Requested: Ironman, Captain America, Hulk and Thor to take it out. Requested: Hawkeye and Black Widow to protect the ground crew. Director Fury to oversee.”

Natasha frowned. “Where are these orders from, Jarvis?”

“The Army.”

Tony scowled. He had never been able to get along with the military ever since he had stopped supplying them with high-class weapons. “Oh great.” He ruffled Evie’s hair. “Sorry, kiddo, looks like we may have to delay the piercing until tomorrow. That okay?”

“I guess it will have to be.” She quickly hugged him round the waist. “Be careful.”

“Yeah yeah, I’m always careful.”

Pepper held her hand out to the child. “Come on Evie. Let’s go look online and pick out what sort of earrings you’d like. They’ll be back in no time.”
The desert heat shimmered in the air, and Tony once again had cause to be glad that he’d put a cooling system into his suit as he flew across the sparse ground. The Quinjet was keeping level with him – he’d purposely flown at a slower speed so that they would arrive together – and he swept low, coming in to land next to the army tents that had been set up.

A very harassed looking major stepped out from the shade of one of the structures, glancing at the landing Quinjet before turning to Tony.

“Mr Stark, damn glad to see you here.”

“Wish I could say the same. Couldn’t you have turned the heat down a little?” Ironman flipped his face-plate up and squinted in the sudden harsh sunlight. Jarvis had been scanning the air-space as they arrived and had so far to see any sign of the missing machine, but it was a large area so Tony wasn’t too worried yet. “What happened?”

“Routine exercise.” The major glanced to one side as the Quinjet turned its engines off. “We were pitting our ground crew against five fighter pilots to test the drone’s response time. It’s a new system – I can’t tell you too much about it of course – but essentially it’s a remote controlled jet. Should cut casualties in half, or at least that’s the theory.”

“Only theory?” Tony was well aware of what the ‘top-secret’ system was like – it was still based on one of his old designs after all – and didn’t place much faith in how they had upgraded his work. “Where’s Warmachine?”

“The Iron Patriot is currently lending a hand to our troops in Iraq.”

“Huh. Sucks to be Rhodey.” Tony saw the major’s eyes flicker over his shoulder and turned a little to see the rest of the team jog up. “Guys, this is Major…” He glanced back.

“Major Alunson.”

“Yeah, Major Alunson. He’ll fill you in, I’m going to go find that drone and take a look.” He probably should have waited for at least Steve to agree with him before flipping his face-plate back down and taking off. Should have, but didn’t.

The HUD was lit up with a scan of the area but there was nothing abnormal in the vicinity and certainly no sign of the missing machine. Tony flew high enough that the Quinjet was just a small spec before hovering in one place, surveying the desert below him.

“You could have waited to hear what the plan is going to be.” Steve’s voice was tinny and resigned inside the helmet.

“What’s to know? You and the Hulk can’t get up here to fight an aircraft, the Quin is out-manoeuvred so won’t be any good. Ergo it’s me and Thor versus creepy un-manned plane. That cover it?”

“Uh…yeah, actually.”

“No need to sound so peeved, Sparky, I am the resident genius here.” He turned on the spot to look out across the horizon. “You guys stop it from taking pot-shots at the folks on the ground and me and ol’ Thunder-boots can handle it up here. Savvy?”

There was an exasperated sigh in his ear. “Fine. See what you can do to slow it down and we’ll
Tony was more than happy with that plan.

“Sir?” Jarvis sounded as worried as he ever did. “Sir, I believe the drone you are looking for is coming in from the west at Mach 2.”

Ignoring what could have very nearly been a Starwars reference, Tony spun in mid-air to face said direction, only to be nearly knocked out the sky as the unmanned aircraft screamed past him.

“Jesus Christ, Jarvis! Why didn’t you warn me sooner?!”

“It’s cloaked, sir. Stealth technology.” As the plane swerved and began heading straight back towards Ironman Jarvis added; “It also appears to have a low-grade form of AI. At least enough to cause it to act in self-defence.”

“Self-defence?! I never attacked it!” Tony shot downwards as the drone came in again, this time deliberately aiming itself.

Even as he said the words his superb mind was already drawing its own conclusions. They already knew that the army had lost control and therefore their connection with the machine; it made sense that the drone’s AI would perceive that as an attack and would go onto the offensive.

“Thor? You in the air yet?”

“Yes. What is it?” Thor sounded terse, and Tony guessed that the drone, having shot past him had now had a go at the God.

“I’m pretty certain that due to the broken connection its default position is to classify us as a threat.” Tony eyed the flickering numbers that had started scrolling in the corner of the HUD. “Jarvis is trying to hack into the system, but it’s pretty well protected.” He didn’t expect Thor to understand the jargon, but knew the God would understand the situation.

“Sir, incoming!” Jarvis’ warning came just in time and Tony swerved to avoid the missile that had been shot towards him. He watched it fly past, only to curve round and come straight back. “It appears to be target-locked.”

“Yeah, kinda got that.” Ironman dodged again, and once again the weapon spun back. “Huh.” Then he grinned.

“Sir?”

“Guys, nobody worry, I’m about to perform a Wronsky feint.”

There was a chorus of ‘what?’ from the rest of the team, that made Tony despair for their lack of Harry Potter knowledge – especially that pertaining to Quidditch. Too little time to explain, though. As the missile zoomed straight back towards him the man simply flipped over and plummeted down towards the desert below him.

He couldn’t help but whoop as the ground came rushing up to meet him at break-neck speed and the sensors in the HUD screamed warnings that he entirely ignored. Ignoring all of the speed-gauges he timed it by pure instinct, sharply changing angle at the last moment and at such a speed that the G-forces made the suit whine painfully.

The missile didn’t make the U-turn as neatly and hit the desert with a soft ‘whooph’ noise that was
then over-shadowed as it exploded.

“Hah! Hell yeah!” There was another explosion nearby and Tony glanced towards the sound to see that Thor had smashed a second missile with his hammer. Out of the two strategies it was hard to say which was the less risky.

The drone came back into sight again and this time Ironman struck first, shooting his own mini-rocket towards it.

“There we go, problem solved.”

Or…not. Even as he watched the unmanned aircraft opened fire on the tiny Stark-tech and the ensuing fire-ball threw Tony backwards head-over-heels in the air. He barely righted himself before the drone narrowly missed taking him out with its wing. In retaliation Thor threw his hammer only for the drone to fire again and knock it off course. Obviously it couldn’t actually damage the weapon, but it had deflected the attack effortlessly.

“Oh…This thing’s beginning to piss me off now.”

Tony quickly went through his mental list of what he had in his arsenal and what could be more effective that either his mini-rockets or Mjolnir. On the plus side he had a lot of toys that could deal varying types of damage to most things.

“Thor, back up a little.” He had to smirk as the increasingly infuriated thunder God aimlessly tried the hammer a few more times. “I’ve got another plan.”

Thor didn’t audibly reply, but stopped his attempts on the drone to allow Tony to aim at the aircraft. It obviously couldn’t sense threat, but it apparently sensed focussed concentration because it roared back towards Ironman.

“Jarvis? Anytime, please.” Tony watched the oncoming machine in the full confidence that it was about to fall out of the sky.

It didn’t.

“Jarvis?! If you could fire the EMP I’d ever so grateful.”

“EMP already fired, sir. It appears that the hostile has shielding.”

Tony’s sudden swearing was cut off by the hail of bullets that hit him square in the chest-plate, punching through the outer layers of armour like they were going through cheese.

“Shit!” He tumbled backwards before being able to dodge out of the way. The drone swung to follow, but he was faster at manoeuvring and escaped the second battery that was fired at him.

“Tony, you okay?” It was Steve’s voice, sounding worried.

“I think so.” Red lights were flickering across the HUD but nothing critical seemed damaged. “I’m going to try a missile again, see how it likes taking things up the ass.”

He didn’t listen to the barrage of complaints that comment drew. It took a moment to swing back up behind the drone but its attention had refocused on Thor which made targeting simpler. Tony aimed the missile at the fuselage on the back of the air-craft, figuring that the small exhaust port would be a weak spot.
Heh, exhaust port. As a long-term Starwars addict he couldn’t help but make the parallels to Luke’s run on the Death Star.

However, Luke’s attempt was successful.

This wasn’t.

There was a large explosion as the weapon activated, and for a moment the drone disappeared in a cloud of smoke. Then, like an iceberg out of mist, it reappeared, looking almost unscathed.

“Bugger! Damn thing!” Tony knew that the missile wasn’t hugely powerful, but it was almost insulting how little damage it did. “Bloody thing’s shielding must be as thick as my arm!”

He wasn’t kidding either. The impact spot of the small missile was scorched but there was no evidence of it having done more than scratched the surface. It appeared that the aircraft had been modified since he had last seen the specifications, and the thick armour cladding was certainly new. He hated it when people played with his toys – even the old ones.

Okay…EMP and missiles not having an effect. That was a bit not good.

“Guys? Little help up here?”

“Try manually taking it to pieces.” It was Bruce who responded, evidently going on his own working knowledge of how the Hulk took out aircraft.

“Uh, yeah. How about no? This thing can rip me to shreds before I even get close.”

“It was just a thought. Since the mighty Stark Brain is floundering up there.”

“Cute, real cute. And I am not floundering, dear Bruce.” Tony dodged out of the way as Mjolnir shot past him and spun to see Thor glaring mutinously at the aircraft. “But…Give me a moment. I might have a way to make it work. Oi! Thor!”

The hammer returned to the God’s hand and he turned so that Tony could see his now-quizzical expression.

“What is it? You have a plan?”

“Yeah. That shielding’s stupidly thick – neither of us will be ripping it open any time soon, but if you can pull the guns off that will at least deprive it of one of it’s weapons.”

“What would the point of that be?”

“Just…trust me on this.” Tony’s tone of voice made it clear that no-one would agree with what he was planning next, hence why he wasn’t saying. It was a ruse that probably would only work with Thor – who rarely looked ahead of a strategy once in a battle – whereas the others were far less trusting of Ironman’s methods.

This was, after all, the man who personally delivered a nuke into a portal that – let’s face it – could have led to anywhere and then nearly didn’t make it back.

As predicted, Steve immediately latched onto the weak reply, demanding to know just what Tony intended to do if the drone was divested of its guns. Needless to say, Ironman blocked him.

“Thor, the guns, if you’d please. And Jarvis, can you scramble it’s gyroscope?”
“I believe so, sir.”

“Wonderful.”

The twin barrels that protruded on either side of the aircraft’s nose-cone were possibly the only weak spot on the whole thing and whilst Tony could aim better that Thor; he was also a lot more mortal than the God. It might have seemed slightly selfish but it made more sense for the Thunderer to face the bullets and take them out.

Thor seemed to agree with the silent assessment of the situation, summoning a large bolt of lightning to strike the presumed vulnerable spot.

“Uh…Thor? Ever heard of a Faraday’s cage? – look, that won’t cut it, you’re going to have to use brute force!”

“That would have been helpful to know beforehand!” Thor sounded more distracted than annoyed, and it was little wonder.

Tony didn’t have a very clear view of precisely what happened, since he was coming in from the wrong angle, but what he was certain of was that the God simply flew directly at the drone, head-on. The resulting collision sent a shockwave through the air that sent more warnings across his already-blaring HUD and it was only Thor’s war-cry in his ear that stopped him from checking that the God hadn’t gone full-on kamikaze on the thing.

As it was the ensuing explosion brought a chorus of concern from all members of the team that only abated when Thor re-appeared, looking mildly concussed, from the plume of black smoke.

“One gun removed, I can’t do the other one for a moment. This machine has a form of shield, like my own lightning that will require me to heal for a moment.”

“He means it’s electrically shielded.” Jarvis supplied. “That shockwave was the result of electrostatic shielding when Mr Thor impacted with it.”

“Yeah, I got that.” Tony watched the God gearing up for a second attack and calculated quickly. “Thor, wait! I can do it from here!”

“I only took out one gun. A moment and I will do the other.”

“No, I’m not having you blow yourself up; I can do this as is.”

Jarvis must have opened the coms back up again because Steve’s voice immediately filled the Ironman mask, demanding to know exactly what said Ironman was intending. Up until the point that Tony switched him off again.

“Right…” Stark fired a single bullet at the aircraft and watched as the drone – now metaphorically limping, and trailing black smoke from one gun-port – swung back to face him in response. “This is probably the best idea I’ve had since going into outer space with a nuclear missile. Have you scrambled the gyro?”

“Scrambled as an egg. And it would help if you told me your plan, sir.”

“No, it really wouldn’t. Just…hang tight, Jarvis.” Because this was stupid, which was mostly why it was a classic Tony Stark plan.

Flying head-on towards the machine he waited the second or so it took for the remaining gun-
barrel to target him before neatly flipping over and heading directly down. *Directly* down. Earth-bound.

“Sir! I would not advise this course of action!”

Tony didn’t reply. He did, however, glance back over his shoulder enough to check that, yes, the drone had indeed followed his trajectory. The scrambling had done its job – with a busted gyroscope the thing couldn’t tell which way was up or down. Good job Jarvis.

However, it did still have one functioning gun that it was insisting on using. He could feel the bullets biting into the bottoms of the boots and up the back of the suit, the angle just so that they wouldn’t penetrate, but enough to start causing more warning lights to flash. It wasn’t something he could concentrate on, with the ground rushing up so quickly. All he could do was hope that the mechanisms would hold out just long enough.

It was a matter of the most precise of timings. He had noticed the slight delay the drone had in following his movements, which meant that in theory he should be able to pull up just in time and it wouldn’t have the chance to do so.

In theory.

Just like with that first little missile.

The ground was worryingly close when there was a sudden blaring alarm in his ear.

“Sir!” Jarvis sounded panicked. Infact, Tony didn’t think he had ever heard the AI shout in such a fashion. Even that time when he’d iced up. “Thrusters have failed!”

“What?!”

There was…well, a *sputtering* sound. Tony could feel the burners on the boots suddenly begin to stutter before one suddenly blinked out all-together, sending him suddenly off-course before both died. And he was *falling*.

Falling and the ground was rushing up at full speed and he had no way to steer and –

………………………………………………

*Whooooomph*

The impact was somewhat reminiscent of the first flight he’d ever made in an Ironman suit – also known as the escape from a terrorists cave. Only somewhat reminiscent, though, because this one hurt a *hell* of a lot more. The speed could have had something to do with that.

For the longest moment Tony wondered if he’d actually been killed. Everything was dark. Complete pitch blackness that was terrifying.

He couldn’t move.

Couldn’t even tell if that was because of the dead suit or because he had just broken every bone in his body. It was actually really quite terrifying.

He didn’t even have breath in his lungs to call for Jarvis. Or for help.

Couldn’t even call for help.
“…Coming round, I think. Tony? Hey buddy, you there?”

There was a nice voice.

Friend.

Friend-voice.

“…Concussion from hell I’d say, though. He’s definitely waking up.”

Steve. Only Steve sounded that motherly.

Tony managed to crack half an eye open, before groaning as the light glared and burnt his retinas. He was spared from what felt like being blinded as Captain America’s worried face floated into view, blocking the offending sun out.

“Tony! Hey, good to see you!” The all-American-hero looked so relieved that Stark tried to smile.

“How long I been out?” It was crap grammar but if he was going to try to talk it was going to be with the least effort possible.

“Five minutes? Not long. Well, long enough for us to be really worried.” The relief turned to a scowl. “And that was stupid! I thought you’d got that out of your system with the nuke! You could have killed yourself!”

“Suit failed…”

“I know! I had to prise the damn thing off of you after digging you out of a crater! No, don’t sit up…”

Tony tried to lever himself upright, carefully taking stock of all moving parts as he did so. It actually appeared that nothing was broken – a fact his scrambled mind could only put down to dumb luck and superior suit design – although it hurt enough that he might as well have broken the lot. He blinked a few times to try to clear his blurred vision and realised that he was sitting on the edge of a rather impressive crater that was littered with bits of drone.

“How ’m not dead?”

“You should be. Thor couldn’t catch you in time, but he managed to knock the aircraft off course just enough so that it didn’t land on top of you.”

Good old Thor. Tony tried to make a note to thank the God; had the drone landed on him the impact and ensuing explosion would have certainly have resulted in Ironman becoming an inch-thick smear across the bottom of the hole.

“Anyone hurt?”

“Just you.”

“Grand.” Stark allowed gravity to pull him back down to the floor again and lay there, looking up at the bright sky. “Are the army happy?”

“Not really, that thing was expensive apparently.”
“Of course it was. Can we go home now?”

“Wait for Banner to check you over.”

“Aww…”

In the end Tony managed to fend Bruce off – refusing a proper medical examination after determining he could still walk and therefore hadn’t seriously damaged anything. The doctor was less than impressed, especially faced with the evidence of Stark’s concussion, but was mollified that he could keep a close eye on the man on the flight home in the Quinjet.

Truth be told, Tony was still surfing the adrenaline wave. Yes, he hurt, and hurt badly at that, but it didn’t feel half as bad as he knew it would once the magic neurotransmitter wore off. Infact for now he felt…great, actually. He’d survived a stupid decision, wrecked another suit and currently felt more Godlike than Thor.

That counted as a win.

However, he was well aware that as good as he felt, he looked like crap. The others had made that clear and Fury had emphasised it when he sent them on home with the order to clean themselves up and save the debriefing for the next day. In hindsight it should have alerted Stark that he must be really looking like crap if the Director himself was putting off a debrief in favour of sending them home.

They landed on the helipad on the roof of Stark-tower and took the elevator down to the main living space.

Evie and Pepper were curled up watching Pretty Woman, although the girl had fallen asleep at some point, her head on Pepper’s lap. The woman smiled when the tired heroes traipsed quietly past, her eyes quickly taking in the damage Tony had acquired when he ruffled Evie’s hair – careful not to wake her.

“How was she?”

“Absolutely fine, just as she always is.” Pepper’s eyes showed her concern as she pursed her lips at him. “You look terrible and Jarvis has been unusually silent about what happened. You did something stupid, didn’t you.” She didn’t even phrase it as a question.

“Yeah, just a bit.” Tony ran a tired hand across his face before looking back down at his sleeping daughter. “I’ll tell you about it tomorrow. After I’ve slept for about a week. Give me a moment to get the remains of my armour down to the lab then I’ll come and carry kiddo to bed.”

“Remains?”

“…Yeah? I just want to make sure it’s all neutralised and won’t explode. It took a bit of a pounding.”

“And so did you.”

He shrugged, albeit painfully, and grinned. “You know me. I’ll be back in a bit.”

Pepper rolled her eyes and waved a hand telling him to shoo and do what he needed to do. Years of working alongside him had made her almost worryingly immune to these sorts of incidents. She
settled back to watch Julia Roberts on a shopping spree, content in the knowledge that Jarvis would warn her if anything was amiss.

Tony meanwhile limped painfully back into the elevator, trying not to look as pitiful as he was beginning to feel. Okay, magic adrenaline was wearing off now and small hurts were slowly becoming big hurts.

He automatically hit the button for the laboratories without looking, choosing instead to rest his arm against the wall of the elevator and to let his forehead lie on it.

“Sir, may I call Doctor Banner for you? You seem unwell.”

“M fine, Jarv. I’ll see after put birdy to bed.” The man rubbed his chest with a groan, feeling the large bruise that spread outwards from the reactor. His suit had saved his from broken ribs, but the pain was still fairly monstrous. “Few day sleep, I’ll be fine.”

“You are using fractured sentences and your blood pressure appears low. I would advise medical attention.” Jarvis insisted gently.

Tony rolled his eyes and didn’t bother to reply as the elevator stopped and he stepped out into the lab space.

Yes, Jarvis was more than likely correct that he should see a doctor, but it could wait. It could always wait. The bruising on his chest hurt.

It wasn’t until his hands were gripping the work-surface that Tony realised his legs were shaking enough to give him need to hold on to something to stay upright. Everything hurt and his heart was absolutely thumping in his chest.

This…wasn’t good.

He knew that it was concerning and something was screaming in his mind that he should be recognising what was happening. This was something he needed to deal with but he couldn’t make his brain work.

“Sir, please let me alert Doctor Banner.” Jarvis’ voice seemed fainter, further away maybe and Tony tried to focus on it through muffled ears. “I believe you are going into shock, you need assistance.”

Assistance…Yes that would probably be a good idea…

“Sir? Sir…? SIR!?”

Tony heard the sirens going off around the tower as his vision blacked in and a crippling pain – even worse than the horrific bruising – shot through his chest. His knees hit the floor with a hard thud, followed by the rest of his body.

“Sir!”

Strange…He hadn’t realised Jarvis had the emotional capacity to panic….

“Tony!”

His gaze slid dreamlike to see Bruce skidding down next to him, and Tony distantly wondered why the doctor appeared to be moving in slow-motion. Or why he looked so frantic.
“Ton…hear…?”

Bruce was saying something, but Tony found that he couldn’t focus on the sounds as his eyes slid shut again. He was so tired and it just hurt too much to bother concentrating.

“Steve…fetch…defibrillator…shock…Cardio…arrest…”

It was just so much easier to sleep. He’d worry about everything later.

MWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWM

Loki lay in the far corner of the cell, motionless as he stared at the bloody mess left across the filthy ground.

He knew he should probably be feeling an emotional response to the creature that was abandoned in the middle of the tiny dungeon, but all he could manage was revulsion. There was pain of course, oh there was always pain, but really nothing else as he silently stared at the remains of the child and the sheer amount of blood.

It was the fifth pregnancy forced upon him, but the only one he’d carried to full term. With each one so far the chitauri had aborted the foetus at different points in time; apparently interested in the development of the hybrid at various stages. There’d been enough time between each termination and next impregnation for the deep surgical cuts along his stomach to heal into thick knots of heavy scar tissue. He’d been unsurprised to find that he felt nothing for the children. Monsters: they aren’t children, they’re monsters.

This one he’d carried to full term and he’d realised that he had been expecting to have this creature ripped out of his belly the same as the others. He hadn’t considered or been mentally prepared for giving birth.

And apparently chitauri didn’t give birth in the same way that mammals, or Frost Giants, did. Loki vaguely remembered a Midgardian film Tony had forced him to watch in which an alien hibernated inside a human’s chest before bursting out once fully developed. It seemed that that had been accidently based on fact when it came to the chitauri – although it was possible their exoskeleton allowed for them to survive the procedure.

He’d screamed like he’d never screamed before when the thing tried to rip it’s way out.

No one had come, no one had cared. It wasn’t even as if he could speak to beg for help. He’d had to just lie there, desperately willing for it to be over – be it through death or otherwise. If he’d thought it impossible to die from pain before, he now knew that it was all too possible.

Infact, the broken God hoped that it would be the case.

The creature hadn’t burst its way out of his stomach in the end, despite its best efforts to do so. The hybrid nature of its genetics had deprived it of the sharp claws it would have needed to use – much like the egg tooth on the beak of a chick. Instead it had struggled and ripped with badly formed and mutated talons that weren’t adequate to tear apart the tissue surrounding it. Eventually it had been born via the method Loki was more used to, but not before it had torn through its own umbilical cord and died of the oxygen deprivation.

The cord wasn’t all that had been cut, though, and the God lay huddled and motionless. If he managed to survive the blood loss and shock that was shivering through him then there was enough internal damage to ensure that he would never conceive again.
It wasn’t a thought that occurred to him, though.

He was in so much pain that logical thought wasn’t possible. He knew that the monstrous creature had been born, and could vaguely tell that there was something seriously wrong with himself, but it was background noise against the agony. He had been pretty much ripped apart from the inside out, blood washing between his legs and leaving a trail of gore from where he had dragged himself away from the mutated corpse. He didn’t have the strength or will to check his injuries but he wouldn’t have been surprised to know that his internal reproductive organs had been almost entirely ripped to shreds.

He hardly cared anymore.

So lying in a tiny cell, losing blood at a dangerous speed and with his still-borne child cast to one side, Loki closed his eyes to it all and surrendered to unconsciousness.

Chapter End Notes

Warnings: Blood and gore, childbirth, stillbirth
Chapter 14

Steve stood back helplessly as Bruce pulled the defibrillator from its box and ripped Tony’s shirt open. The inventor’s chest was mottled black with bruising, and although the arc reactor was still glowing brightly there was no rise and fall of Tony’s rib cage. He wasn’t breathing.

“Steve, there’s a BMV in the medical kit on the wall, I need you to bring it over for me.” Bruce was calm and authoritative, knowing exactly what needed to be done. He twisted the arc reactor and the release mechanism gave a sharp click as it came free so that he could place it beside Tony’s head before attaching the pads of the defibrillator to the man’s chest. When Steve hurriedly brought the Bag-Valve-Mask over the doctor fixed it deftly over Ironman’s mouth and nose. “You’ve watched enough medical dramas, you know what to do. Squeeze the bag slowly and steadily; try to mimic a calm breathing rhythm.”

If there was one thing Steve was good at it was following instructions in a tense atmosphere. He didn’t waste time with questions and simply did as he was told, well aware that his actions were necessary to keep Tony from oxygen deprivation. He also knew to move back out of the way when Bruce ordered him clear and the defibrillator sent a shock through the unconscious man’s chest.

Tony jerked, but there was no other response and the machine at Bruce’s side sent its data to Jarvis who immediately informed them that there was no systolic rhythm. No pulse.

The sirens were still blaring but neither of the two men bothered to tell the AI to switch them off as they battled to save their friend’s life. There needed to be a break between each shock, and Bruce began the cycle of chest compressions as Steve continued to use the small pump that breathed for Tony.

And there was no response. Stark lay there completely lifeless.

“Come on Tony!” Bruce was leaning his weight onto both hands; compress release, compress release. Over and over.

“What’s happening to him?” Steve asked hopelessly.

“Cardiac arrest. It must have been the damn chest trauma!” The doctor had made the count to thirty and sat back on his heels. “Clear, I’m going to try the defib again.”

The second try did nothing.

“God damnit, Tony! Don’t you dare die on me!”

That hadn’t been an outcome that had featured in Steve’s mind, but hearing Bruce say the words made the situation’s severity suddenly very clear.

Shock could be fatal.

“Daddy!”

Steve’s head shot up as Evie’s shriek rang through the laboratory. The two women and Evie had come down to find the reason behind the alarms and now the child was screaming.

“Pepper! Get her out of here!” Steve waved his arm angrily at her, even as she tried to take in the situation with wide eyes. However, whereas Pepper had frozen at the sight of Tony unconscious
and unresponsive, Natasha was much quicker and managed to grab Evie as the child tried to run to her father.

“Dad! What’s happening?! Daddy!” Evie was no match for the assassin’s strength and although she twisted wildly in Natasha’s grip she couldn’t get free.

“Tasha, get her out of here!” Steve repeated his order, but that was easier said than done with how hard the girl was struggling.

“Right, defib again.” Bruce’s words were stilted as he continued the chest compressions. He glanced up at Tony’s lax face and scowled angrily, putting renewed strength into the CPR until he reached the count of thirty and then turned back to the small defibrillator. “Clear.” Once Steve had sat back the doctor sent another current through Tony’s body.

Nothing.

For a brief moment the only sound in the room was Evie’s sobbing, before Bruce snarled and doggedly kept going. “Not today, Tony. Not today!” Sweat was beginning to trickle down his forehead, dripping into his eyes. He kept up the mantra of ‘not today’ with each compression.

“Bruce…”

“Don’t you dare stop, Steve!”

“How long…?”

“As long as it bloody takes!” There was a tinge of green to the doctor’s eyes that made his friend immediately take back any other questions he might have had. Bruce would not…could not give up on Ironman so easily.

He blocked out everything. Vaguely, in the background, he was aware of Evie wailing in Natasha’s arms and of Pepper sobbing quietly. There was the soft noise of the air-pump that Steve was using, and the background hum of the machines. Bruce blocked it all out. All that he could focus on was his friend’s ribcage under his hands as he manually forced Tony’s heart to continue pumping blood.

Tony couldn’t die like this. If Ironman was to die it would be in a blaze of glory saving mankind – not on the floor of his workshop.

It wasn’t just sweat dripping down his face now. Bruce couldn’t be certain but he was pretty sure there were tears too.

Time was passing. Far too much time and still no response.

“Bruce…” There was a gentle hand on his shoulder, Pepper’s hand. She was sobbing so hard that she could barely speak. Bruce didn’t want to hear what she had to say. “It’s been over half an hour…”

Had it? That seemed almost impossible, but the ache in his arms said otherwise.

“Bruce…Too much time has passed…”

That wasn’t something he wanted to hear. He glanced at Evie out of the corner of his eye and saw the child’s desperate pleading expression. By all accounts it was the same look she’d worn when Loki had been snatched away infront of her. Now she was watching her father die.
Bruce wasn’t about to let that happen.

And he didn’t know how to prevent it…

Nothing was working!

“Bruce…”

He brushed Pepper off without a word, doggedly continuing with the chest compressions. He wasn’t going to lose his best friend! Evelyn would not lose another parent!


It wasn’t working…Bruce knew that. The defibrillator wasn’t having an effect and there was only so long they could continue the artificial respiration. He couldn’t lose Tony. But he was.

There was a second tap on his shoulder. Not a hand this time, but a small mechanical pincer that was accompanied by a quiet whirr. The doctor glanced up to see that Dummy had trundled up next to him, arm drooping as he took in the scene. There was something in the robot’s grip that it gently placed down on Tony’s stomach.

An Epipen.

Bruce stared at it.

“Good boy Dummy…”

It hadn’t occurred to him. He was a doctor and it hadn’t occurred to him. The vasoconstriction effects of the adrenaline were able to bring a body out of shock – it’s why it was used – and with nothing else working Bruce was willing to give it a try. The Epipen was prescribed for Tony (he didn’t have any known allergies but he played around with new materials so often it had been deemed a good idea to have one around just incase) so Bruce didn’t have to worry about tailoring the dosage. Without wasting a moment the doctor snatched the small device up, pulled the cap off and jabbed the needle into Tony’s thigh.

There was no visible response but he didn’t expect one. Instead he finished the current cycle of chest compressions then motioned Steve back again and picked up the defibrillator for what seemed to be the hundredth time.

Tony’s body jerked as the current raced through him again. This time, however, he drew in a deep ragged breath of his own.

“Tony?!” Bruce cupped his friend’s face but although the man now breathed freely he wasn’t conscious. However, the weak flutter of a pulse under his fingers was enough for the doctor to crack a small smile. “There’s a heartbeat. Jarvis, I need you to get hold of the heart surgeon on Shield’s Safe List.”

“Already done, Doctor Cherington is on route and should be here within the next ten minutes.”

“Great; we need to get a gurney in here and transport Tony up to the ICU-”

“Mr Barton is on his way down with one as we speak.”

Bruce nodded with a sigh. “You are the very definition of a life saver, Jarvis.”

“Thank you sir, I will do anything within my power to help him.”
The surgery lasted six hours. Shield had a selection of health professionals – the Safe List – that they trusted to work with agents or personnel and Jarvis had drafted in a top cardiac surgeon along with his team to operate. Bruce insisted on being in the theatre too, since he was well aware that Tony would hate to have anyone on Shield’s payroll so close to the arc reactor.

It was possibly the worst six hours of the doctor’s life since joining the Avenger’s.

The Avenger’s – including Fury – were congregated in the main room, waiting anxiously for news of what was happening. Jarvis was refusing to speak to them, and instead was metaphorically hovering nervously around the operating theatre in an attempt to find out all he could.

It seemed forever before Bruce finally came up to tell them that it was all over.

“What happened?” Pepper was the first one to ask the question once the doctor had been sat down and given a large drink of scotch. None of the team – Tony excluded – would usually endorse drinking alcohol so early on in the evening but some situations really did require it.

“Cardiogenic shock.” Bruce said quietly. He took a sip of his drink and grimaced.

“Come again? Not all of us have a medical degree.” Clint sounded annoyed, but they all knew him well enough to know that he was trying to hide just how worried he was.

The doctor hunched his shoulders, staring down at the tumbler in his hands. “It means his heart was badly damaged when the drone took him out, and when he went into shock he suffered from a myocardial infarction. A type of heart attack.” He swirled the amber liquid around in the glass listlessly. “We successfully implanted an intra-aortic balloon pump and that kept him stable until he came out of shock.”

“I thought that the Epipen did that…” Steve said quietly.

“The adrenaline boost brought back a heartbeat, but only briefly. He went back into arrest almost the same time that we got him into the operating theatre.” Bruce glanced up as a blanket was wrapped around his shoulders and he looked up to try and smile at Natasha. “He’s been lucky, though. The odds aren’t good on surviving cardiogenic shock but he’s through the worst of it.”

The words made most of the group visibly relax. It seemed that Fury was the only one to pick up on what else that could imply.

“And now that he’s out of shock? What are his chances?” For once the director sounded genuinely concerned for Tony- which was a novelty in itself. However, in his line of work, Fury had obviously come across this sort of situation before and knew what it could entail.

Bruce looked ill as he threw back the rest of the scotch. “Not great. In an ideal world I’d want to put him straight onto the list for a heart transplant. But…”

Fury looked grim. “The arc reactor.”

“Yeah.” The doctor shrugged slightly. “Jarvis is monitoring him closely and he’s stable, but it’s going to be touch and go for a long while.”

There was silence after his explanation. ‘Touch and go’ were tricky words. They could mean that
Tony would be alright, and merely not at 100% for a few months. Or they could very well mean that the man only had a fifty-fifty chance of living through it all.

And the Avenger’s knew from Bruce’s expression that it was the second option. Tony was still highly likely to die.

“Can you help him?” The voice was unexpected and they all glanced up. “Will you be able to save him, Doctor Banner?”

“I can try, Jarvis.”

“Please. I will help in any way I can.” They had never heard the AI plead before. “He can’t be allowed to die.”

MWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMW

“I have an army.” Loki sneered.

“We have a hulk.” Tony heard the words coming out of his mouth, but couldn’t quite believe he was saying them. Of all the memories he had to relive it had to be this one! It hurt to see Loki standing there in all his glory and pain and anger.

“Oh! I thought the beast had wandered off.” The God sneered, gesturing off aimlessly with his sceptre.

“Yeah, you’re missing the point.” As his body followed through the path of the memory and walked down the steps, Tony was only focussing on his lover standing before him. The look of hatred and scorn on the God’s face was unbearable. “There’s no throne. There’s no version of this where you come out on top. Maybe your army comes and maybe it’s too much for us but it’s all on you. Because if we can’t protect the earth you can be damn well sure we’ll avenge it.” Even the memory of the brandy he sipped was bitter as he watched Loki’s expression turn murderous. Of all the moments he and Loki had had, why did he have to relive the moment that the trickster had hated him and attempted to kill him? For all that he loved the God, he felt fear as the tall man stalked towards him.

“How will your friends have time for me, when they’re so busy fighting you?” There was a whine of growing power as Loki raised his sceptre and Tony lowered his gaze in trepidation as the blade approached his chest.

Tink

Despite the emotions the memory was stirring, Tony had to mentally laugh at the look of pure confusion on Loki’s face. At the time he hadn’t been able to appreciate just how comical and adorable it was. He wanted to reach out and trace his hand across the tightly drawn brow and smooth away the frown-lines. The memory wouldn’t allow it.

Loki raised the sceptre again for a second try and again the melodious little clink echoed around the suddenly silent room.

“This usually works…”

He sounded and looked so genuinely confused that Tony wanted to hang a photo of the expression on the wall.

“Well, performance issues…” Damn his incessant need to insult people! He felt his body shrug
mockingly. “Not uncommon. One out of ten-”

This was the bit he really didn’t want to remember. That sudden dawning realisation on Loki’s face as he realised that he was being mocked and the absolute fury that this stupid human would dare to do so.

The two men’s gazes met and Tony had to look into the eyes of the man he loved and see only hatred and a wish for his death. Loki’s hand fastened around his throat, choking him.

The pain was still very real, despite just being a memory, as he was thrown to the floor.

“Jarvis…any time now.” He struggled to his feet, watching Loki circle round and too slow to dodge when the God grabbed him tight around the throat again and drew him close.

“You will all fall before me.” Loki snarled into the man’s ear.

Tony heard himself still calling out for Jarvis to deploy the suit, but in reality all he could focus on was how unfair it all was. To fall asleep every night hoping desperately to dream of the trickster only for this.

SMASH!

And he was falling.

MWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWM

It was strange to see Tony so still and quiet. It didn’t suit him. Tucked up in the white sheets of Stark Towers Intensive Care Unit he looked small and fragile. There was an oxygen mask over his mouth, an IV in his arm and an electrocardiogram monitoring his pulse. It was frightening to see the usually loud and boisterous man so silent.

Bruce had scanned Tony’s other injuries and noted that although the fragments of shrapnel hadn’t moved significantly in the time that the arc reactor had been removed, there were still extensive signs of stress to the muscle. Tony had a history of heart problems already – hence the reactor – and up until this point had already been in cardiac arrest at least three times in his life. They should have known that this would be coming. Bruce felt that he should have known.

It had been nearly five days since he’d collapsed.

“Evelyn, you shouldn’t be in here.”

The girl was curled up in the chair beside the bed, staring listlessly at one of her text books but glanced up as Bruce entered the room to check on Tony’s condition.

“Why not?” She asked quietly. “I want to be with my Dad.”

“Evie…”

“He’s going to get better, you know!”

Bruce smiled slightly. “Yes, of course he is.” He checked the level in the IV bag, aware of the child watching him like a hawk. “He should wake up soon.” He added.

Because waking up wasn’t going to be the problem. It would be telling Tony that he was going to spend however long he had left that he was living on borrowed time.
Ironman was over.

“What are you reading?” Bruce asked, trying to change the topic.

Evie flipped her book up at him – it was one of those texts trying to explain puberty to growing girls. “Dad gave me The Talk, now I’m reading up on it.”

“Do you understand it?”

“I…think so. Most of it is disgusting.”

The doctor laughed slightly. “Yes. Yes it is.”

The girl watched him replace the IV bag with a new one, frowning as she realised that it was different. “What are you doing?”

“This will stop him from being dehydrated when he wakes up.”

“Will he really wake up soon?”

“Yes. Of course.” Bruce smiled at her.

He was right, of course, although they had to wait a while longer. It was another twelve hours before Jarvis alerted Bruce that Tony was beginning to gain consciousness, and Evie had been packed off to bed by that point, despite her protestations. It might have seemed heartless not to let her stay up but Jarvis had strict Views about bedtime, and had always maintained that a routine would help keep her level-headed when the Avengers were out fighting. He applied this logic to Tony being injured too.

So when the man finally started to stir only Bruce was with him.

Tony opened his eyes grudgingly in the same manner as when he had a hangover – as if any and every movement could cause an unimaginable headache. He squinted at the blurred figure of his best friend until Bruce’s smile swam into view.

“Hey Tony, how are you feeling?”

“…Like shit…”

“Yes, that isn’t surprising.” Bruce checked the read-out on the monitor next to the bed and smiled brighter. “Your vitals are looking much better, though, even if you aren’t.” He picked up the glass of water on the bed-side table and helped Tony take a couple of sips through the straw. When the inventor rested his head back down on the pillow he squinted at Bruce in confusion.


“You remember the drone?” Bruce waited for the look of recognition in his friend’s eyes, and once it was there he continued. “You had severe chest trauma and when you went into shock your heart stopped.” He indicated the IV that fed into Tony’s hand. “You’re on dobutamine for now, but I think you’re passed the worst of it so I can start lowering the dose.”

“I had a…heart attack?”

“No really.” The doctor slumped into the chair beside the bed. “Look, you’ve just woken up. Let’s leave this conversation for another time.” He didn’t like the sudden scrutiny in Ironman’s gaze. “What?”
“Shock. You said shock…” Tony turned his tired gaze up to the ceiling and it spoke volumes for his brain-power that he could go from unconscious to critically analytical in such a short space of time. It was almost possible to see the cogs turning. “It was cardiogenic shock…right? That’s why you don’t want to talk about it.” One hand crept down the blankets covering his legs until he felt the bulge of bandages wrapped around his left thigh.

Bruce noticed where the man’s attention was and sighed heavily. Tony just didn’t know how to stop thinking about things. Even when recovering from a heart attack.

“You had to…stick a pump up…my leg. Didn’t you?” Stark rasped. “It was that bad…?”

“It still is that bad, Tony.”

“Will I die?” The question was quiet but emotionless. Tony turned his head slightly to face his friend, looking mildly curious. “Is this going to kill me…?”

Bruce had faced such questions in the past. It was one of the worst but inevitable parts of being a doctor and something he had handled enough in the past. But not with a friend. Never with a friend.

“Yes.” He said simply.

“Oh. Okay. Great…” Stark swallowed thickly, fixing his gaze on the ceiling. “How long?”

“I don’t know. It could be ten years, it could be ten days.”

“Grand…”

Bruce felt his own chest constricting tightly, a lump blocking his throat as he watched his friend try to absorb that news. “Tony, I’m…”

“Don’t. Don’t say you’re sorry.” Tony raised a hand to his face – ignoring the IV line connected to the back of his hand – and rubbed his eyes tiredly. “I’ve had medical death sentences before. This isn’t new.” He sounded so tired.

“Look, we don’t have to talk about this now.” Bruce moved to sit down on the side of the bed, reaching out to rest his hand on top of his friends’. “You’ve been unconscious for nearly six days, the best thing right now is to rest and let your body heal.”

“How’s Evie been?”

It was a question that the doctor had been dreading. “She’s terrified, but keeping it together.”

“Course she is; she’s a Stark.” Tony tried to smile, but the expression didn’t reach his eyes. “Starks are champs at keeping it together under pressure.”

“Do I sense another Game of Thrones joke coming on?” Bruce asked sardonically.

“I hope not. Most of the Starks in that one die. I don’t intend to do that for a while.”

“Glad to hear it.”

Tony sighed heavily and tried to smile again. “So…If I’m on a time limit I’d better get my act together in finding Loki, huh? Jarvis, make a note of that please; Get arse in gear and find Loki.”

There was an uncharacteristic pause before the AI answered. “Of course, sir.”
“You okay, Jarv?”

“All the more so for seeing you awake, sir. This was the first time I have had to experience the emotion of panic, sir, and I did not enjoy it one bit.”

“I’m sorry, Jarv, I’ll try not to do it again.”

To begin with they took it one day at a time.

As Bruce had said; there was the chance that they could lose Tony at any moment and although the longer he lived the better his chances were, the team still fretted around him.

It wasn’t just the physical implications either. Everything had been turned on its head both within the Avenger’s Initiative and more intimately within the Stark household.

Tony couldn’t do anything that required physical exertion. He couldn’t go for a walk, couldn’t go shopping, wasn’t allowed to use a hammer in the workshop. Hell, he couldn’t even walk up stairs and was resigned to taking an elevator if he wanted to go anywhere in the tower. He had cut down on the drinking when Evie was born, but now wasn’t allowed any alcohol whatsoever and for a long while Bruce was even restricting his diet. Up to and including decaffeinated coffee that, up until then, had been banned from the tower.

All of these things were bearable. Even being unable to do the heavier manual labour in his workshop was something Tony could live with – especially since it meant that there was a greater possibility that he would live. However, there was one thing that was horrendous.

He could no longer use the suit.

Ever again.

The very thought was stifling.

His team seemed to think that the suit – whilst obviously extremely important to him – was still just that; a suit. But it really really wasn’t. The suit – in all its incarnations – represented his freedom and his life.

It had been born from darkness and desperation, baptised in the blood of both his friend and his enemies and had lifted him from Hell and back into the arms of his family. There was nothing Tony couldn’t do when he was in the suit. It was everything about him that he had hidden from everyone all his life. Every new version had a little piece more of his soul in it. Every rivet, screw, circuit and wire had been placed under the influence of strong emotions. Anytime he had needed to let off steam, he had gone and worked on the suit. Anytime he had been upset he had gone and worked on the suit. Celebratory, sad, happy, drunk, frustrated; pretty much every emotion had at some time or another been hammered, welded or riveted into the suit.

It wasn’t simply made by Tony, it was Tony.

And in the worst way possible it had been taken away from him.

He could sit there, all day every day staring at the symbol of his freedom and know that he would never ever be able to use it again.

It was…well, the term ‘heartbreaking’ might have been appropriate if it hadn’t been for the
medical emergency he’d just survived.

Once upon a time Tony might have succumbed to depression in such a state. However, he had one thing that his former self hadn’t had; a support network. Jarvis and Pepper had always been there for him but now when he found himself staring morosely out of the window at the perfect flying conditions he had a child to distract him. When he wanted to have a drink with the group to celebrate something he had Natasha; who could make a virgin daiquiri that genuinely seemed alcoholic.

Nothing was perfect, nothing was easy and nothing was the same, but his friends and family – close enough as to be the same thing really – were able to keep him from falling down the black pit of despair that could have easily swallowed him whole.

They took it a day at a time and slowly things began to fall back into place.

For the first time since Loki had been taken they spent Evelyn’s birthday at home – a quiet affair of films and junk food that suited the eleven year old perfectly. She had grown up considerably since Tony’s accident; favouring sitting quietly with her father now, rather than tearing around the place like she used to.

It came and went without incident, as did Halloween, Thanksgiving and Christmas.

And finally, finally Tony went back into the suit work-shop for the first time in the six months since his accident and started looking at the Ironman armour once more in a different light. The team work up the next morning to Jarvis fretting that the man hadn’t slept and was still working, just as he once had.

It was a comforting return to the familiar even though it left them all wondering what Stark could possibly be doing down there.

The answer came sooner than they expected when Ironman – fully suited up – stomped into the living room and challenged Clint to a game of table tennis. The suit looked very much the same as when they’d last seen it – well, obviously the damage had been fixed, but other than that it seemed essentially the same.

“Uh…Tony? Are you alright?”

“Never better! Come on, I want to test the new flexibility!”

Bruce and Clint stared at him. This was not really surprising to be honest. They had been expecting Tony to have some sort of rebellion against the strict rules his new medical condition imposed upon him and to be frank, trying to play ping pong whilst wearing the suit wasn’t the worst that could have happened. Even so, Bruce was still unhappy.

“Tony, the weight of that thing alone could be too much for you-”

“Trust me, it’s fine.” Tony had moved to the table and was throwing a bat from hand to mechanised hand. “Come on Clint, I want to see how the new wrist joint functions!”

Barton took up his own bat rather cautiously, looking between Bruce and Tony. “Um…I’m sure a couple of rounds won’t do any harm…”

“Good boy, this is why I still feed you.”

Bruce held his hands up in surrender, sitting back down on the couch. “Fine. One short game and
then take the suit straight off again.”

“Yes Dad.” Tony shifted his weight from side to side in a parody of a professional tennis player before serving the ping-pong ball to Clint. He must have known that against the professional sharpshooter he didn’t really have a hope in hell of actually winning, but Barton went easy and allowed him to get a few shots in.

Whatever Tony was testing seemed to be working since he returned the ball easily, light on his feet and the joints of the suit working effortlessly.

*Very* light on his feet.

Bruce narrowed his eyes slightly.

“Tony, I’m just going to go down to the workshop. I’m sure you won’t mind.”

“Huh?!” Tony spun round, the ball pinging off the back of his helmet. “No! There’s some…uh…Bruce! Wait!”

However, the other scientist had already left the sofa and was calmly walking towards the staircase. Stark dropped his bat and rushed after him, still protesting loudly and Clint followed – obviously sensing some form of entertainment.

“- Really important experiments, full of radiation, really not worth the risk –” Tony was trying and failing to get infront of Bruce to stop him and was beginning to look like a guilty puppy. It was almost as obvious as a teenage lad trying to hide his porn stash after knowing that mum’s already found it.

Bruce calmly entered the code into the doors and although Tony screamed at Jarvis to deny entry the AI just replied apologetically that he thought it was probably better to allow Dr Banner in. There was a very childlike mutter of ‘traitor’ from the billionaire in response.

As the door slide open they heard a child’s laughter at Tony’s comment to Jarvis and Evie stood up from her stool by the work bench to wave them over.

“He’s sulking now!” She proclaimed happily.

True enough Tony – another Tony, or at least one not wearing a suit – was sat on the floor surrounded by wires with a rather curious visor and pair of gauntlets on and pouting grumpily. He pulled the headgear off to glare up at his two friends and as he did so the suit that had been walking behind them powered down.

“You weren’t supposed to figure it out that quickly!” He snapped.

“Tony, you’re acting like a child whose joke has been ruined-” Clint started to say, but Bruce pushed him out of the way to get a better look at the readouts on the computer Tony was connected to.

“Tony…this is amazing! How long have you been working on this?” The other scientist was scrolling through the data, his eyes lighting up.

Stark pulled himself to his feet – stripping off the gauntlets and remaining wires. “I’d planned it years ago but didn’t see the point in all the time and effort it would take. I remembered it when I was still bed-ridden and the moment I could get back into the workshop I started implementing it.”
“To be fair, sir, I did a lot of the work.” Jarvis sounded put out and Tony smiled tiredly.

“True. Once I told Jarvis what I was planning he put everything into place. I just needed to explain to him how things needed to be put together and sort out some of the programming.”

“It’s…what? Running off of muscle movements? But how were you sitting down to use it?” Bruce was now turning the visor over in his hands. “Surely you’d have to imitate the movements you’d want the suit to do to make it work.”

Tony beamed. “To begin with yeah. But then I figured that that’s not really a good thing for me to do what with a bad ticker and all, so I adapted the idea.” He held up one of the pads that had been attached to his shoulder. “It’s like a bionic limb; I just upgraded the tech. It works off of the muscle stimuli that are unconsciously sent when I think about making a certain movement. Needed a fair bit of work though, that’s why it’s taken me so long to test drive it. I’ve had to train myself and the program to learn every type of muscle movement I might make to make the suit react. It’s kinda like a full body sign language.”

Clint looked slightly bemused. “That sounds like a hell of a lot of work.”

“Worth it though.” Tony slipped a gauntlet back on and made the suit walk over to its podium on the far side of the workshop. He then handed the piece of tech to his daughter and turned back to his friends with a broad grin. “Don’t you see? With this I can be Ironman again! Sure, it won’t really be me out there, but it will be as good as having me with you. And it’s stress free on my part! Win-win situation! I can still fly the suit, just by remote control instead, and you don’t have to worry about me keeling over and dying in mid-air. Perfect!”

Bruce returned the infectious grin. “You know what? I think it might well be.”

“Uh…” Clint looked between them. “Seriously? Is this a thing?” He flicked his finger against the visor. “You lock yourself away for a few days and ‘boom’! New suit with ridiculously advanced tech, simple as that?”

Tony shrugged slightly. “Well, I wouldn’t say simple. I had Jarvis started on this months ago – I’ve just spent the past few days checking it all over.” He pushed the archer away from his precious work. “But it felt good to know that I was still able to work on something, even if only doing the theory.” He glanced up at them, eyes suddenly hard and cold. “I will not be useless! I am Ironman and a stupid medical ailment isn’t going to stop that!”

“It’s still risky-”

“Yeah, so I built in fail safes. I can sit on the sofa directing the suit and Jarvis can monitor my vitals. If he notices anything wrong with me or if I get dangerously stressed then he will cut the link between me and the suit and fly it himself.”

“Why not just have Jarvis fly the suit himself anyway?” Clint asked, well aware that his question was a little less than tactful. “Sure, I know you want to be doing something, but you could work on upgrades and Jarvis would do the grunt work.”

Tony rolled his eyes in the usual familiar gesture of disbelief over how thick his team mates could be. “Haven’t you ever seen or read I Robot?”

“Will Smith film, right?”

“That’s the one.”
Clint scrunched his face up in confusion. “What’s blowing up a female version of Jarvis got to do with this?”

“Yes, sir, what has blowing up an AI very similar to myself in all respects got to do with this?” Jarvis sounded both hurt and annoyed as he responded to Barton’s question.

Stark held his hands up in surrender with a chuckle. “Sorry Jarv, I didn’t mean it like that. If anything you’re far more likely to go Skynet on us and create the terminators. No I meant the problem is that as much as you have an emotional capacity, you are still governed by the rules of probability. In a pinch you would follow the odds and rescue the person with the greatest chance of survival.”

“That’s not such a bad thing, sir.”

“No, but that’s just not how humans work. We’d save the kid with less of a chance of survival than the granny who would be easier to save. And even then that’s not definite. We’re complex creatures and as amazingly advanced as you are, you still aren’t quite human.”

Evie looked up, finally taking an interest in the conversation. “Neither am I! I’m a frost giant! RAWR!” She curled her hands into claws and bared her teeth. Tony laughed and patted her on the head.

“Yeah, my super scary Jötunn.”

“So…Have you spoken to Fury about this grand plan of yours?” Clint was still prodding the new machinery, but rolled his eyes and removed his hand again when Tony picked up a wrench and eyed his fingers threateningly.

“Not yet, kinda hoping I could have some team back-up when I do” He glanced between the scientist and assassin hopefully. “If you guys can persuade him that it’s a good idea then maybe he won’t be quite as mad when I use it regardless of his answer.”

Bruce glanced back at the computer screens before nodding slowly. “Yeah. I guess we can try.”

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name was dying.

And so life returned to something that could vaguely approach normal.

Tony was still careful about everything he did, and after a brain-wave one night put a small chip into the arc reactor to monitor his heart at all times. It not only watched his pulse and blood pressure, but was also able to detect any stresses on the muscle, or tears that might develop. So far so good, nothing had come to light.

It would have been hard to get through the holiday season without alcohol, though, if it weren’t for Natasha. The Russian mixed up a drink that, among other things, included beetroot juice, ginger and tabasco and was capable of mimicking the immediate effects of alcohol – most notably the burn in the throat – whilst not containing any alcohol whatsoever. It also had the added side-effect of not ending in a hangover the next morning, which Tony rather appreciated.

With that one recipe they started working out other details and by Christmas there was a large selection of faux-drinks stocked up. Easily enough for Tony to pretend to get wasted on at any rate and Evie was thrilled to learn that she was allowed to drink them too since technically they didn’t contain anything untoward.

This time was also the first festive season when the girl sorted out the lanterns on her own. After that first Christmas without Loki they had made sure to keep up with the tradition of setting off the lights each year and the first Christmas of living with Tony’s heart problem Steve had helped set it up. However this year, now twelve years old, Evelyn dealt with it when she realised that it was too much to ask for on top of all Tony’s medical problems.

And...Well, time moved on.

Jarvis furiously worked on the data from the telescope, Tony grew more proficient at using the new type of suit, Fury became less – well they didn’t like to use the word protective but that really was how it came across – of Ironman and as months turned into years Evie continued to grow up.

It hit home just how old she really was when Tony accidently spotted her and Pepper coming back from the store with a box of tampons. He’d had to go and have a quiet freak-out in his lab whilst trying to come to terms with the thought that his little princess was actually becoming a woman. Still, for all of his sudden squeamishness, Evie certainly seemed to appreciate it a few months later when he found her lying on the couch in the main room looking very sorry for herself and wordlessly handed her a hot water bottle.

She really wasn’t a little girl anymore and it seemed to bug her as much as it did her father.

And so suddenly as to be unbelievable, her birthday’s were coming and going. All those years, passing in a flash. That tiny screaming baby Stark had helped into the world was well on her way into adulthood.

Loki had been missing for seven years. Tony had been living with a terminal heart problem for three of those. If the trickster was even still alive, Stark was running out of time in which to try and save him.

The Christmas of Evie’s fourteenth year was the same routine that they had slipped into. Quiet, comfortable and familial. For all that only Tony and Evelyn were related, the years had slowly bonded the team from colleagues to friends to family. Even Thor – a Pagan God in his own right and therefore quite entitled to demand a proper Yule – was more than content to celebrate the birth of a different religion’s God simply because it was how the rest of the Avenger’s had been brought
up.

Each team member brought something slightly different to the festivities, which had – over the
years – cemented into their Christmas traditions as a mismatched family. Natasha introduced the
tale of Babushka that she retold every year, and always insisted on making Russian specialities that
she remembered from her childhood. Steve insisted that every stocking had to have an orange in it.
Clint knew how to make Danish cinnamon cookies from his time touring in the circus and would
pull the recipe out each year and take over the kitchen. Bruce surprised everyone with his mum’s
method of slow-cooking the turkey and after the first time it was always his job to make sure that
the bird was cooked to perfection. It took a while for Thor to get into the swing of things, but after
a few years he had worked out the main elements of the Christian festival and introduced the team
to some Aesir games that were played after the main meal at Yule. Tony and Evie continued their
little lantern tradition each Christmas evening, and each time the Christmas greetings sent out with
the lights became just a little more hopeless.

And finally there was Pepper’s input.

After a brief, but sadly unsuccessful relationship with Happy, she went back to spending her
Christmas’s with Tony – and therefore everyone else – and brought her own little custom of
watching Love Actually. It was something that the others never complained about so swiftly
became part of the day.

This particular Christmas they had just started talking again as the credits rolled when Jarvis
interrupted the conversation.

“Excuse me, sir, might I speak with you a moment?”

Tony waved his non-alcoholic eggnog at the ceiling. “It’s Christmas Day, Jarv, what could
possibly have come up?”

“That’s just it, sir. It is Christmas, and as I have observed over the years, it is customary to give
gifts.”

“Did you get me a gift, Jarvis?” Tony asked teasingly.

“Yes, sir.”

That was almost slightly scary. Tony knew his AI was beyond anything ever seen before, but it
was still rather awe-inspiring to realise that the robot had developed an emotional capacity large
equal to understand the want to give a present to someone close.

“In a manner of speaking.” Jarvis continued smoothly. “It’s taken a while but I have managed to
gather together all the data from the telescope, extrapolate it, run it through my algorithms and
analyse the results.”

The credits on the TV screen vanished to be replaced with the 3D renderings of nearly two hundred
planets, moons, asteroids and other celestial bodies.

“I have determined that these are the planetary objects that are likely to have a liveable atmosphere.
According to my workings; the data from the telescope is showing all of these to have atmospheres
very similar to the one this planet is believed to have had roughly a billion years ago. This means
they a very likely to be similar to us now.”

Tony stared at the collection of small spherical and near-spherical shapes on the screen.
“Loki’s…On one of those?”

“I believe it is highly likely, sir. I will give the data to Master Thor to deliver to Heimdall and hopefully we shall soon know which one.”

“Jarvis…I love you. You know that, right?”

“Thank you, sir. Merry Christmas.”

Thor left on Boxing Day to take the coordinates Jarvis had compiled to the all-seeing watchman. There was no way of knowing how well Heimdall would be able to focus on an area outside of the nine realms, but he himself had stated that with the coordinates it would be much easier for him to try.

Even Tony didn’t fully understand how it was meant to work. From what they could gather, Heimdall could see anywhere within the nine realms (something that despite Thor’s best efforts they also couldn’t really get their heads around the concept of) but trying to see beyond that boundary required guidance as to where to look. In the end the best way Tony could visualise it himself was as if Heimdall was searching the internet. The nine realms were his desk top and therefore he could ‘see’ everything within them. However, outside of the nine realms was like the infinite expanse of the internet – and that it was almost impossible to find one single piece of data without help. The coordinates Jarvis had given were the stellar equivalent of Googling the whereabouts of the chitauri and now Heimdall only had to go through the few search results.

Or that was how Tony figured it, anyway. He was also pretty certain that it was nothing like that in reality, but what the hey.

Almost the moment that Thor left Tony went back down to his lab and locked himself in. To begin with they left him to it, but after he missed two meals Bruce was sent down to find out what he was up to. Jarvis had been unusually silent, refusing to help winkle Tony out of the lab and would only give cryptic remarks about it being ‘unsafe’ down in the workshops. And if that didn’t scare Bruce then there was little else that would!

However, it seemed that however unsafe said workshops were, Stark was actually being rather sensible and doing his work by remote. Bruce found him sat outside one of the high containment laboratories, watching through the bullet-proof glass as a remote controlled suit pottered around inside the area.

“Tony? What are you up to-?”

Tony raised a hand to silence him, never taking his eyes off the suit whilst his fingers danced over the laptop he was holding. The concentration on his face made it clear that this was far more than just a little science experiment. Bruce came and took the spare seat next to him, looking over his shoulder at the laptop screen.

For a moment Banner was bewildered by the images and numbers shooting across the monitor before he paled, turning to look in horror at the suit inside the room.

“Tony-”

“Not a word, Bruce.”
“But Tony…”

“Shut up.”

Because Bruce knew those numbers. He knew the little Greek symbols that scrolled across the screen.

He was a nuclear physicist after all.

And most of all he knew those symbols and knew how they related to the deceptively small object that the Ironman suit was working on inside the contained room.

“Tony – No! Listen to me! – how well shielded is it in there?!”

“Well enough.”

“And if it goes wrong?!”

Tony glanced at him; a brief look that said ‘oh yea of little faith’ before turning back to the job in hand. “I don’t mess up.”

Bruce continued to stare at his friend in horror. “You know we said you shouldn’t do anything high stress!”

“I’m not stressed.”

Jarvis cut in to confirm this. “He’s right, Dr Banner, his blood pressure and pulse rate are both within acceptable levels given his condition.”

“Good boy, Jarv, have a Scooby Snack.”

“But Tony that’s a –”

Tony sighed theatrically, hit a button that caused the remote-controlled suit to pause and turned to glare at his friend.

“Bruce. Dr Banner. Mr Mean and Green. Why are you trying to tell me what I’m making? I am perfectly aware of what I’m making in there and of how bloody dangerous the end product will be.” He snapped. “I’m not exactly being careless here.”

Bruce stared straight back – all too used to Stark tantrums to be put off. “Carelessness isn’t the point, Tony. What happens if there’s an earthquake and that thing is set off? You’d level the city! And for Gods sake I thought you weren’t making weapons anymore!”

“This one won’t be aimed at humans.” The icy coldness in Tony’s voice was something that had almost never been heard before. Sure he often sounded angry or pissed off, but this deep and dark hatred was something else.

“This is for the chitauri?”

Stark’s jaw clenched, his hands curling into tense fists as he stared woodenly through the glass into the work shop. “They hurt Evie. They made her bleed and they made her cry. She had to watch her mother sacrifice himself for her safety and that has been her living nightmare ever since! So they will burn.”

Burn was an understatement.
The little object inside the containment room looked for all the world like one of Tony’s usual missiles that were situated in the suits shoulders. However, the box labelled ‘U235’ made it extremely clear that this missile was not one anyone wanted to be near. Uranium 235.

A nuclear missile.

“You see, I found some of my Dad’s old files.” Tony sounded a little stilted as he checked the calculations on the screen infront of him. “Evie wanted the filing cabinet that was falling apart in my office so I cleared it out. Mostly full of out-dated junk and party invites from the sixties. And then there was one little folder buried at the back that suddenly gave me an idea. Dad worked for the government during the war, you see. Of course you know that already; it’s how and why Steve exists. Anyway, he did more than just help mad scientists create super-soldiers and he always *always* kept records of what he was doing. So I found this.”

He gestured blindly towards the work surface that was covered in paper-work. Bruce had to stare at it for a moment before his gaze was drawn to one folder in particular. Brown and stern, it had the title redacted – a thick black line obscuring any and all text on the front. However, when Bruce flipped it open the bold print inside hadn’t been masked and he dropped it like it had turned into a poisonous snake.

The folder fell to the floor, Howard Stark’s clear handwriting proudly declaring the name of the plans.

*The Manhattan Project.*

“I thought you didn’t want to be like your Father.”

“I’m nothing like him. He helped design this monstrosity to win a war. I’m doing it for personal revenge. I’m now officially a bigger arsehole than he could ever be.”

For a long moment Bruce just stared at his best friend.

“Tony…”

The inventor clenched his fist tightly for a moment, anger flitting across his face before he dropped his head to rest on the thin top edge of the laptop screen with a pained sigh.

“I want them dead, Bruce.” He said hoarsely. “I want to destroy each and every one of those creatures.”

“You can’t destroy an entire race, Tony.”

Tony let out a choked sort of laugh – the parallels to Loki and Jötunheim were too much for him to miss. “And why the hell can’t I? These fuckers invaded *my* planet, killed *my* species, kidnapped *my* lover and hurt *my* daughter. I. Want. Them. Dead.”

“And nuking them will make all of that better?”

“It’ll damn well make me feel better!”

“Did that work the first time?” Bruce didn’t remember Tony flying a nuclear warhead through a wormhole, but the Hulk had made it pretty clear that it wasn’t an experience anyone wanted to repeat.

There was a telling silence in response to the question whilst Tony stared pointedly into the room
where his suit was closing the casing on the newly completed missile. “I…” The inventor shook his head slightly. “I feel like I have to do something, Bruce. I’m sitting here, not knowing if Loki’s even alive anymore and I need to do something. It’s been seven years. Evie’s almost grown up, I’m now saddled with a terminal heart problem, life has had to move on and that sucks.”

“You built the most advanced telescope the world has ever seen.” Bruce countered softly. “Hell, NASA is still trying to even come close to something like it. That sounds like doing something.”

“But it’s not enough!” Tony slammed his fist down on the work-surface. “Seven years, Bruce! God only knows what Loki has been put through in that time! Hell, for all I know they killed him the moment they had him. I could have spent all this time only to find a grave. Or maybe they didn’t even dignify him with that.” His whole posture was tensed up, curled over the laptop as he tried to bite back the emotions that were fighting to get out. “And what happens if I do get him back? Huh? What then?”

The man looked tortured, and Bruce reached out to gently rest his hand on Tony’s shoulder, a reassuring touch whilst not interrupting his friend.

“I say I love him.” Tony whispered. “And I do. Really, I do. But now I wonder how that can be true. We barely ever saw each other and it’s been so long. My memory could well be turning him into some sort of ideal. I could be in love with a memory that isn’t even real any more. Maybe hadn’t ever been real.” The tenseness was becoming gentle shivers and his breath hitched in his throat. “I’m so afraid, Bruce. What if he isn’t what I remember? What if they’ve broken him so much he doesn’t remember, or doesn’t care or his mind isn’t even there anymore? *What if I never get him back?*

The last words were slurred as an unsurprising sob overtook them.

“Tony…” Bruce pulled his chair closer to allow his friend to slump into him. “Tony, don’t do this to yourself…”

“I want them all to burn.”

“I know, Tony. I know.”

Bruce kept Tony’s little project to himself. They had further words on the matter, but never reached a resolution beyond the inventor agreeing not to make any more of the missiles. He never told Bruce that the one alone would be more than sufficient.

However they were both distracted when Thor returned a day later, declaring that he had given Heimdall the coordinates and had been sent back to wait until if or when the Gatekeeper might find something.

This resulted in the motley crew sitting in the cinema – which had ever more been used as their conference room due to the comfy chairs – discussing what the next plan of action should be. After all, even if Heimdall were able to pin-point Loki’s exact location down to the nearest millimetre they would still have the issue of getting that far across the universe.

“So the Bifrost is entirely out of the question?” Steve didn’t seem to be able to get his head around the point. It had been explained quite thoroughly that the bridge had never quite recovered from having its end smashed off (which Thor was quite contrite about now, although it really had been the best way at the time). It was doubtful if Heimdall would have been able to send anyone that far.
even before the breaking, but now it was certainly out of the question.

Which all in all rather buggered their plans for reaching Galaxy IC 1101.

“Look, can’t we just fix the bloody bridge?” Clint asked. He had his head in his hands, whole posture speaking of exasperation. “And by ‘we’ I mean the two resident geniuses.”

“Yeah, sure, let me get my book on ‘How to Fix Magic Bridges For Dummies.” Tony snapped in response. “And don’t swear infront of Evelyn!”

Said girl rolled her eyes. She had insisted on being present for the meeting – and since it was technically a logistics discussion there was no valid reason to refuse her – and had so far stayed quiet with her tablet in the corner. “Dad, I know how to swear, I’m not a kid.”

“Are you 21 yet? No? Then you’re a kid.”

Evie scowled and pointedly turned her back to her father.

“Um…” They had Jane on video-call up on the big screen and she looked uncomfortable interrupting the family tiff. “So, I’ve been working on the Bifrost for years now. I can’t claim to know how it works exactly, but from what I’ve got so far it looks like there must be some way to strengthen it. The math at least suggests that it would be possible.”

Tony turned back from trying to stop his daughter from sulking. “Math? Ooh, gimme!” He made grabby-hand motions. Jane smiled indulgently and a moment later the equations streamed along the screen underneath the video.

To most of the group they were completely incomprehensible, just strings of numbers and Greek letters. Tony frowned at the data and Bruce sat up a little straighter in his chair staring at the screen. Evie gave it a go, but without knowing the background to the calculations she didn’t have much of a chance no matter how good her maths was.

“I’ve gone over it quite a bit myself, you know.” Jane sounded slightly annoyed at how her work was being scrutinised by the two men. “As I said; there’s a possibility for something here, but what that is I’m not quite sure.”

Natasha shook her head slightly. “Anyone else not got a clue what’s going on right now?”

There was a show of hands from the rest of the room.

Bruce jumped in before Tony could make a condescending remark. “It’s hard to describe without you having a solid background in theoretical physics, but what you’re seeing is the Bifrost’s working broken down into mathematical formulae.” He held up a hand to stop Stark from trying to butt in. “I won’t go into details, but what we can see from this is that there are constants that would allow the Bifrost’s effects to be amplified.”

Natasha slowly nodded before shaking her head again. “No. Maybe I’m losing something in translation.”

“Nope. English is my first language and I don’t have a clue what he’s talking about either.” Clint said blankly.

“It’s very simple. The Bifrost is like the transporters in StarTrek and Heimdall is like Scotty. And right now the transporters don’t have enough power, but there’s a way for Scotty to give them more.”
Everyone turned to look at Evie where she sat smirking at them.

“You look worryingly like your Möhdy when you smile like that…” Thor said slowly.

“Well I’m right, aren’t I?”

“Yes…But that’s still rather impressive.” Jane said.

“You do know who my parents are, right?”

Tony grinned whilst patting his daughter on the shoulder. “Alright, Birdy. Stop showing off.” She stuck her tongue out at him and he pretended to smack her on the back of the head. “So, everyone get it now? Bifrost needs a bit more juice if we want to get to the other side of the universe.”

“And I take it no-one knows what would do that?” Steve asked.

Thor shrugged hopelessly as the collective eyes of the room turned to him. “The question has never arisen. It would take a great sorcerer to know how to extend the Bifrost’s reach. And unfortunately that sorcerer would be Loki.”

“Yeah, that sucks.” Clint rested his chin on the heel of his hand with a sigh. “Can’t you just hook the damn thing up to a power-source of some sort?”

Tony huffed with sarcastic laughter. “Oh yeah, let me just stick the almighty Norse Duracell Battery in and we’re set to go!”

“Don’t be a dick, Tony, I just meant if the Vikings are hiding anything like the Tesseract that could help.”

The inventor shrugged and looked at Thor. “I dunno. You got anything as powerful as the Tesseract? That thing could probably have done it considering the readings we got off it. Looked like it was made of pure energy – could have been handy. So yeah. Anything like that floating around?”

The God looked confused at the question, glancing around at the curious faces. “I do not understand. Why do you assume the Tesseract is gone? We have it still on Asgard. But!” He held up a hand as Bruce tried to interrupt with an exclamation. “But, there would be no way to link it to the Bifrost. They are two completely different energy sources. I agree that its power would be more than enough, but there is no link. You would need to connect the Tesseract’s unique form of energy to the magical energy of the Bifrost.”

“And…what? You don’t have guys who can do that for us?” Bruce asked.

“Again; Loki.”

“Huh.”

Tony had copied Clint’s pose; chin on the heel of his hand. “So it’s just a question of linking two different energy sources. That doesn’t sound…too…hard…” He trailed off under Thor’s condescending gaze. It was un-nerving really – usually he was the one pulling that look on the God. “What? It’s not that easy?”

“No. You would need the connection to be of both energies and you do not have the magical capabilities to make such an object.”
“Oh.” Tony sounded like a put out teenager. He sat back in his chair with a scowl as the conversation of the others washed over him. He didn’t like being told that he couldn’t do something.

Bruce was quizzing Thor on any other objects that could possibly do the same job as the Tesseract whilst the rest tried to keep up with the conversation but Tony’s mind couldn’t let go of the problem freshly presented.

So…They needed something that was linked between two separate forms of energy. He’d done such things before. Of course, it helped to be familiar with said energies first. It was probably comparable to turning heat energy into kinetic; except that the bridge and the Tesseract didn’t have the cogs between them like a steam engine would. So…apparently Loki was the expert in these sorts of things.

Wonderful.

Irony at its best.

But Tony’s mind was nothing if not brilliant at finding unusual answers to things and he settled back to think as the half-baked theories were thrown about around him. The clue was Loki…he was sure of it. What had Loki ever told him about magic…?

He vaguely remembered the book the trickster had given him at Evie’s first Christmas that detailed magic and such, but – having memorised it – he was pretty certain there was nothing in there about different forms of magic (magic, energy, whatever) let alone linking them. Loki had, to all intents and purposes, given him what translated as ‘Magic For Dummies’. Not useful in the current situation. After all, it wasn’t like Tony had the thousands of years’ experience that Loki did. Hell he didn’t even have the flashy Glow-Stick of Destiny. Well, he did, hidden in the bottom of a drawer in his lab where Shield would never know about it, but that wasn’t the point.

Creepy, mind-meldy, evil blue thing that it was…

Tony sat bolt upright in his chair, one hand going up to his mouth.

“Oh!”

“Tony?” Bruce lent forwards in alarm. “Are you alright?”

“Oh! Loki was – is, was…is a genius!” He grabbed the tablet off of Evelyn – who gave an exclamation of indignation, but didn’t actually try to hang onto it – and quickly accessed his own files on it. “Look, look, look!”

The image of Jane on the cinema screen shrunk so that it only occupied half the area and the rest was taken up with a photograph of Loki’s sceptre. Clint’s eyes hardened when he saw it, but the rest of the group looked politely blank. Tony looked between them all before groaning in exasperation.

“Seriously? Brucie, do I have to explain this to you?”

Bruce actually glared at him. “Tony, other than those few moments with it in the lab on the helicarrier I barely saw that thing. You’ve got to remember that I spent most of the invasion as the Hulk.”

“I…Yeah. Sorry.” He didn’t look it, but Bruce would take what he got when it came to Tony’s apologies.
“No matter. What’s your point, Tony?”

“Well, I did a few scans on it and Loki’s sceptre was using the Tesseract’s energy. God alone knows how *that* worked, since it never really came into contact with the thing, but still – I’ve got some theories on it. Anyway the Tesseract and the sceptre definitely had a *thing* going on there. However, I also found traces of Loki’s own magic in it, so it can obviously channel both.” Tony explained animatedly. “As far as I’m aware it can use both types. Maybe it can link them too!”

“And do you know how on earth to do that?” Bruce’s sceptical tone made Tony’s wide grin slip. “It’s all well and good saying that the sceptre has the capabilities, but you still don’t know how the damn thing works.”

“Well, not in so many words, but surely if we stick one end into the Tesseract and the other into the bridge then maybe…”

Tony was not one known for such slap-dash and – well, let’s face it – childish plans. He looked around at the other’s expressions; ranging from confused to devastated and his shoulders slumped.

“Look, Tony. We know this means a lot to you, but even you have to know that sounds like a stupid plan.” Jane said sympathetically. “You can’t stick a sceptre into a magical rainbow bridge. There’s a special observatory that has to be activated – you *know* this! – and the bridge itself is just that; a bridge! Jamming a spear into the magical concrete won’t suddenly make it work any better. You’d need a link-up to the podium in the observatory and as far as I know only Heimdall’s sword can do that. Right Thor?”

“Indeed.” Thor glanced at Tony’s crestfallen face with an apologetic look. “I’m sorry, my friend, but Jane is correct. Only Heimdall’s sword can link to the Bifrost.”

“But I could link to the sword…?” Tony didn’t even bother to make it sound that empathetic this time.

“I do not know how that would be possible, I’m afraid.”

The inventor nodded slightly, swiping his finger across the tablet with a hopeless sigh so that the image of the staff spun around. “Brilliant. Bloody brilliant. So what would-”

“Do that again!”

“Huh?” Tony glanced up to see Thor now sitting forwards, staring intently up at the image on the screen. “Do what again?”

“Make it spin again.” There was something in the God’s voice that made the others aware that he had just had a Tony-like brainwave.

“Uh, sure.”

The sceptre on the screen spun around again but this time more deliberately and slowly, showing the weapon from all angles.

“What have you spotted?” Natasha stared at the image, but clearly wasn’t seeing what-ever it was that had drawn Thor’s attention so acutely.

She didn’t get an answer. The God was scrutinising the sceptre, his eyes half closed as he watched it slowly rotating. It was strange to see Thor concentrate so fully on something.
Then the thunder’s expression cleared and became a huge beaming grin that was much more familiar.

“Oh Valhalla!” He sounded incredulous. “My brother is indeed a genius!” He rose to his feet, momentarily ignoring the questions from the others in response to his exclamation. “Look here!” He poked the image of the staff, although not hard enough to damage the LCD screen. “The blade structure on the end of the staff!”

“Yeah? So Loki liked pointy things when it came to weaponry, so what?” Clint looked bemused.

Thor turned to face the archer, his gaze bright and almost feverish. “So, I am almost certain that that blade would also fit into the Bifrost podium! My brother must have redesigned it after the chitauri gave it to him!”

“What? Are you sure?” Tony stared down at the smaller image on the tablet, then zoomed in on the bladed end of the staff.

“I am certain! Loki never has just the one plan.”

Steve looked incredulous at the idea. “Thor, you can’t possibly think that Loki tampered with that thing purely on the off chance that he’d one day need to link it into the Bifrost.”

“He did want to use the bridge to destroy a planet once.” Jane suggested dubiously. “Any chance that was his thinking?”

“Or maybe he just hoped that if he was one day captured by the chitauri then there would be someone who cared enough to use it to save him.” Tony shot straight back. “Thor, are you sure it would do the link-up?”

“Pretty sure.” Thor sounded excited, but after all these years was smart enough not to give the scientist an unrealistic answer. “I can not guarantee it, but it certainly seems the case. We would need to ask Heimdall if it is possible – he’s the only one to know for certain.”

“Great!” Tony jumped up from his seat, clapping his hands together. “I’ll go get it and you can take it to him and ask!”

This earned him a collective set of accusing stares and he shrugged slightly. “Alright, so I stole it back off of Shield a month after the invasion. So sue me!”

“Does it still work?” Thor asked eagerly.

“Uh…I guess? I haven’t looked at it in years.”

“Then let us go find out!”

Tony was less than happy to have the whole team inside his lab, especially since Clint insisted on poking things solely to annoy him. The sceptre had been unceremoniously hidden at the back of a drawer and after so many years essentially having been forgotten there was a lot of junk piled on top of it.

Tony tried to ignore Thor’s disapproving glare as he pulled it out from under a large collection of broken chemistry glassware. The sceptre didn’t appear to be harmed by its long stint as a dust-collector but when it was finally pulled out into the light there was something very obviously
“Isn’t the blue bit meant to glow?” Natasha was the first to voice what the rest of them were all thinking. “I’m sure I remember it glowing.”

“That’s because it was.” Tony gave the staff a shake, in the vain hope that it would suddenly light up again. The stupid thing remained obnoxiously dead. “Okay. Give me a moment.” He whistled and beckoned Dummy, who trundled over hopefully. “Jumper cables.”

The robot fished around on the work bench before holding up two crocodile clips that were plugged into the mains. It dutifully removed the sceptre from Tony’s grasp and attached both cables before chivvying everyone out of the way.

If Tony had hoped that the ensuing electrical charge would do anything then he was sorely mistaken. The blue gem didn’t seem to react in any way at all.

“Well that was anticlimactic.” Clint flicked the blade with his finger and it rang almost bell-like. “Any chance you have any magic that Loki gave you? Something tells me that electricity isn’t going to cut it.”

“No. I guess we’ll just have to hope someone on Asgard can fix it.”

“Sir, might I remind you of something?” Jarvis’ voice was quiet and unobtrusive, reminding them that he had been watching the whole situation unfold. Tony waved a hand at the ceiling, allowing him to continue. “Sir, Loki did gift magic to you. Or at least, to your daughter.”

Evie was looking thoroughly confused at the statement. “Jarvis, I don’t have anything magical.”

“You do, Miss Evelyn. Your Möhøy made sure that you were watched over by it every night since your first Christmas.”

Evie looked at Tony in dawning comprehension just as an understanding smile spread across the inventor’s face.

“My God…Loki really is a genius! He’s given us everything we need!” Even as Tony was talking, Evie had already left the lab – jumping up the stairs two at a time. “Talk about planning ahead – he must have thought it all out years ago!” He removed the sceptre from Dummy’s grip and placed it down on the work-surface, blade angled to the side so that it lay still.

It was…hard for Tony to really explain how he was feeling in that moment.

Seven years, and so much blood, sweat and tears and now they seemed tantalisingly close to finally getting somewhere close to retrieving Loki. It was relieving and terrifying and amazing and bat-shit insane all at the same time.

He really couldn’t have explained it even if he’d tried.

“Dad? I’ve got it.” Evie appeared at his side again, shaking him out of his thoughts. She sounded quieter, the excitement lost from her voice now that they were about to see if their plan would work or not. The teen held her hand out and with it a small glowing object.

One of the stars that Loki had given to her as a Christmas present when she was still a baby. Glowing a soft red – even after all these years – Evie had somehow snipped one off of the invisible thread that had linked it to the others.
“Okay, here goes.” Tony didn’t bother with silly questions like was she sure she wanted to give one of the precious stars away; there was nothing Evie wouldn’t do for Loki. He let her drop it into his hand – the ‘no handing Mr Stark things’ rule didn’t apply to his child, of course – and after considering how dangerous what he was about to do was, gave it to Dummy. The robot had to hold it in its cupped pincer after realising that the amorphous piece of glow would slip through a pincer grip. Then it hovered uncertainly and for all intents and purposes looked to Tony for help.

“Well, I don’t know, do I? Just…” Tony waved his hands vaguely towards the sceptre. “Just poke it a bit and see what happens.” He quickly gestured at everyone and they all took a large step back in response.

Dummy whirred unhappily at their reaction but dutifully swung back round to face the staff and hovered its glowing pincer over the blue gem.

“Well go on then.” Tony prompted.

The robot continued to sound displeased, but obeyed and dropped the star onto the area that had once glowed.

It didn’t explode. Which was a bonus.

In fact to begin with it didn’t do anything. The tiny ball of light just sat there on the inert surface and looked innocent.

And then, just as Clint was about to make a sarcastic remark about time wasted, there was a change. The star started to seep into the gem as if it were a sponge; the glow sinking in and slowly vanishing.

“Um…” Tony raised an eyebrow. “Well, that was kind of disappointing….”

And then it happened. The noise was very similar to that when Loki had powered the staff up to turn Tony into his mindless zombie; that growing whine like an engine revving.

The gem lit up to the very familiar blue glow that had once haunted all their nightmares. Clint took a further step back as Tony slowly picked up the sceptre. It was curiously warm to the touch, humming ever so gently in his grip.

“Oh wow.”

“Don’t you dare Tony!” Bruce saw the look in his friend’s eyes and quickly put his hand on the man’s arm. “You don’t even know how to use it!”

“You are no fun, Brucie.” But Tony did put it down again. It cast a blue glow along the chrome worktop. “So, once it’s hooked up to the Tesseract it should be all systems go!”

Natasha had commandeered Tony’s favourite swivel-chair and now swung it from side to side. “Will that be as complicated as this was?”

“No.” He sounded far more confident than he had any right to be. “Reason being – at least if my theory is correct – it doesn’t need to be in contact with the Tesseract, just near it.” He raised a hand to forestall the obvious ‘but how do you know that?’ that was winging its way to Steve’s voice-box. “I’ve seen the video footage of when Loki first arrived on Earth out of that portal. He paused before attacking. There was a distinct moment when he appeared to look down to check that the sceptre was working before he used it.”
“So?”

“Soooo, my guess is that he was waiting to see if it had charged up. From what we saw during the whole invasion, that staff never once made physical contact with the Tesseract. It just needs to be near it.” Tony picked up the sceptre – this time in a less threatening manner – and held it out to Thor. “And once Heim-a-whatsit has had a look at this he can tell you all that I truly am a genius and yes, the plan will work. Oh, and someone should call Jane and explain all this to her.”

Thor accepted the staff rather hesitantly. “I shall depart for the Bifrost immediately.” He turned to leave, then glanced back at Tony. “Thank you for all of this, my friend.”

The man shrugged, embarrassment colouring his expression. “What can I say? I want him back as much as you do.” He looked uncomfortable expressing the sentiment, but Thor seemed to appreciate it.

The God left from the balcony that had once been the centre place for his and Loki’s show-down. Maybe he realised it, maybe he didn’t, but either way long after he’d left Tony and Evelyn remained outside.

“We’re gonna get Möhdy back, right?” The girl was leaning over the edge of the railing, the wind whipping her hair away from her face.

“We’re going to do our best.” Tony copied her pose, resting his arms on the bar that ran around the edge of the balcony.

“Yeah.” Evie picked some crumbling paint off the metal and watched it fly away in the wind. “Optimism, Dad.” She glanced at him out of the corner of her eye. “You really think there’s a chance, don’t you?”

“Chance for what, Birdy?” Tony asked, entirely too nonchalantly.

“Chance that he’s still alive.” She rested her chin on her folded arms and stared out across the city. “I want to believe that there’s going to be a happy ending for us all but it’s been so long…”

“Evie?”

“What if he doesn’t remember me anymore…?”

Tony turned to face his daughter as she stared up at him miserably. He smiled softly and cupped her cheeks, his thumb wiping away an errant tear.

“I can’t think of any mother who wouldn’t know their own child, even after all this time.” He said gently. “I mean, look at you; you haven’t changed all that much, have you?”

Evie laughed slightly. “Oh of course not. Just puberty, a growth spurt and seven years’ worth of living.”

“He’ll know you. If nothing else, I can promise that he remembers you and loves you.”

“If we find him.”

“When we find him.”

Evie leant into him and Tony slung his arm around her shoulders.
Three days later Thor reappeared.

He crashed through the windows of the living room – seemingly uncaring about the raining shards of glass. Entirely ignoring their cries and swearing he looked up from the low crouch he was in.

“Heimdall has found the chitauri.”

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The Other snarled at the two chitauri that cowered in front of him. The body of a third was sprawled across the floor behind him, neck twisted backwards at an unnatural angle.

“You come before me with tales of the prisoner overpowering and killing one of you. How is this true?!”

One of the luckless creatures jabbed at the other – evidently a universe-wide gesture for ‘well go on then’. This caused the second one to stumble forwards slightly, stammering in fear. Its language couldn’t be accurately translated into English, but for all intents and purposes its explanation was stuttered and filled with platitudes as it tried to make its master understand what had occurred.

And the Other was not impressed in the least.

“The thing is crippled! He cannot speak, cannot stand and can barely use his hands and he overlapped one of you?!” He flicked his hand in a quick motion – similar to backhanding somebody – and the neck of the unlucky spokes-chitauri snapped back. As the body dropped to the floor the Other turned on the remaining one. “How much do the scientists still wish to do?”

‘Scientists’ was not a word they had, but what he used equated to basically the same thing.

“They say they can always learn more, mighty one.”

“They’ve had long enough. Collect the data and close it all down.”

Realising that it might make it out of the encounter alive, the single chitauri bobbed its head eagerly. “And the prisoner?”

The Other grinned; a mouthful of sharp teeth gleaming in the dull light.

“Destroy him.”
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

Warning on this one; it is graphic and a bit nasty. If you don’t like torture aftermath or biological gore or blood or body parts or…yeah. Infact, if any of that disturbs you, how did you get this far into the story?

"Heimdall has found the chitarui!"

The words curled around the tower like an electrical current, Jarvis relaying them to every floor and room.

Only Pepper and Steve were present in the room that Thor had made his grand entry into, the Captain having shielded Pepper from the flying glass. They were joined not a moment later by Clint swinging down through the now-broken window – presumably from the balcony above – and Natasha appearing in the doorway.

Bruce was moments behind the female assassin, Evie alongside him and looking frantic.

“Thor?! That was quick!” Steve recovered first, still brushing glass from his jeans as he stood up to greet the God. “Is Heimdall sure?”

“He’s certain.” Thor’s attention fell on Evie as she stared at him wide-eyed. “And he is also quite certain that we can get there with Tony’ plan.”

“And that is why I’m called a genius.”

Stark appeared in the doorway, out of breath and red in the face. It was quite clear that despite all the medical restrictions he was under he had run all the way up from the labs. He stumbled into the room and slumped onto a sofa, one hand absently rubbing his chest. For once Bruce didn’t berate him and simply rested a hand on his back.

“Thor. Tell us everything.”

It didn’t take long for the God to explain. Heimdall had used the information given to him and had succeeded in extending his gaze far enough to scout the planets.

And one of the smallest had been surrounded by the ships that Tony had seen when he’d briefly glimpsed what was on the other side of the portal all those years ago.

“And Loki? Did he see Loki?!” Stark asked hopefully.

“No sign, but Heimdall was extending his gaze to its utmost, he could only just see the ships.”

That made sense, but was disheartening. It would have been helpful to know what sort of condition they would be finding the trickster in. Well, that was the optimistic version of course – in reality it would be helpful to know if they were going to be able to find Loki at all.

No one wanted to mention the ‘but what if he’s dead?’ scenario.
“Right!” Tony clapped his hands together. “Time to go get our friendly neighbourhood psychopathic God back!”

“When you put it like that, it doesn’t sound like such a great enterprise.” Clint muttered. “So, who’s going?”

Bruce jumped in before anyone else could answer that. “Before anything like that is discussed we need to know more. Thor, did Heimdall give you any information about this planet?”

The God had helped himself to a drink from the minibar but nodded enthusiastically at the question, thumping his pint glass back down. “Indeed! I almost forgot!” He fished around inside his breastplate before pulling out a much-folded piece of paper. “It makes no sense to me, but to you or Tony…”

Bruce took the message and sat down on the arm of the sofa so that Tony could peer at it as well. The notes on it had been hastily jotted down by someone obviously not used to using the Latin alphabet and had a very angular look to them. Tony was vividly reminded of Loki’s handwriting. The content was…well, it was small wonder Thor hadn’t made head nor tail.

There were atmospheric coefficients, pressures, life-form data, weather systems, elemental constituents, gravity, temperatures, everything and anything that someone could possibly need to know about another planet. And all in one unorganised jumble. It seemed that Heimdall had just written it down as and how he saw it, whilst not looking at what he was writing.

“Even my lab notes aren’t this bad.” Tony grumbled as he tried to make sense of it all.

“That’s because you don’t bother making any notes.” Bruce pointed out a couple of lines of text. “Look, that’s going to be bad news.”

“Huh.” Stark wrinkled his nose up at the paper. “Oh yuck!”

The rest of the group craned forwards. “What is it?!”

“The atmosphere is partly sulphur dioxide. I think about 60% if Heimdall’s right here. There is oxygen but that’s not going to matter with the levels of SO2. It’s toxic.”

“There’s hydrogen too.” Tony pointed out. “Sulphuric acid rain. What a lovely place for a holiday.”

Steve frowned. Everyone knew that sulphuric acid was bad news and it didn’t take a genius to know that the rescue mission was going to be less than easy thanks to this data.

“What does this mean?” The Captain asked. “Can we still go there or not?”

Bruce scratched the back of his head with a grimace. “Not so much. No. We’d need space suits that NASA could only dream of. And they’d have to be able to withstand the acidic environment as well as the extreme temperatures. I mean, it’s completely feasible but would take years to develop.”

“Or…” Tony had his chin propped up on one hand, watching Bruce with a fond grin. “Whoever goes wears an Ironman suit. I do have more than one, you know.” He glanced around at the others. “What? Did no-one think of that? C’mon! Temperature’s no issue, bags of fire-power, own oxygen supply, metal alloy can resist pretty much anything. Duh!”

“Yeah, and did you not notice that you’re a…” Steve frowned for a moment as he tried to recall the
correct term before continuing ruthlessly. “A shortarse! I can’t fit into one of your suits, Thor can’t and whilst Banner could I doubt the Hulk would take kindly to being sent to another planet. And Nat is too small to be effective.”

“I do not need a suit, my friends.” Thor said helpfully. “I will be able to withstand those temperatures, and as long as there is oxygen I will be able to breathe; the toxic atmosphere will not affect me.”

“What? At all?”

“No. An Aesir can breathe as long as there is oxygen. We are not adversely affected by other elements in the air. Jötnar are the same I believe.” The God shrugged slightly at their bemused expressions.

“Well…Remind me to hook you up to some gym equipment when all this is over; I want to know more about that!” Stark said with a grin. “So. One less suit needed then.”

“You say one less, but who else would fit one?” Steve asked in exasperation.

Instead of answering, Tony just tilted his head and looked at Clint.

“What…? What?! Me?!?” The archer took a step backwards. “Hell no! I’m not going to some planet in the arse end of the universe for that psychopathic creep! No way, no how!”

“Well, I’m not going alone, so someone’s going to have to come with me.” Tony folded his arms behind the back of his head and stared up at the ceiling.

“You aren’t going at all, Tony!” Pepper snapped. “You nearly gave yourself a heart-attack just running up here.”

“I’m going.”

Steve folded his arms. “No way in hell, Tony!”

“Hell. That’s a funny word, Capsicle. Y’see, a good Christian like yourself would consider Hell to be a big fiery pit of damnation.” Tony spoke all of this mildly to the ceiling. “However, Thor over there would classify Hel as a person and the place where she lives is cold and icy. But.” And here he turned his gaze to glare at the Captain. “But I can tell you this right now that however many interpretations there are of Hell, Loki is currently going through each and every kind plus a few more on the side.” He tipped his head back down to look around at them all. “So, yeah. I’m going to go get him out of there. In the suit. Heart failure or no. I’m going to get him out of there.”

The words fell into place like slabs of lead. It was the tone of voice that usually said nothing would stop the man short of sticking him in the Hulk’s containment room.

“Tony, be reasonable, you’ve got a kid to think about!”

Evie folded her arms mulishly. “A fourteen year old ‘kid’ who has learnt to prioritise!” She snapped. “After all these years and all of Dad’s hard work I’m not going to stop him from doing the one thing all of this has been leading up to! I want my Möðhy back and if Dad wants to take the risk of going himself, then that’s his choice. I may be the spoilt child of a billionaire, but I’m not selfish enough to tell him not to go!” She tossed her head arrogantly and for a brief moment the resemblance between herself and Loki was striking. It was rare to see any sign of the trickster in the child usually – she was all Stark, up until the point that someone pissed her off.
“Evie, be reasonable-” Steve began.

“No! I am done being reasonable! I’ve spent seven years waiting for this moment and if you think I’m going to let you stop Dad from saving my Möðhy then you’ve got another thing coming!” For a teenager Evelyn very rarely showed an excess of emotion, and it was certainly the first time she’d actually yelled at any of the Avenger’s. “He knows the risks, he knows it’s dangerous and he wouldn’t be Ironman if he didn’t go anyway! That’s what heroes do isn’t it?!” There were tears in her eyes now as she glared around at them all. “You’re meant to save people, no matter who they are! Being a hero is meant to be about doing something even when you know it’s stupid or scary or dangerous! Even if you don’t like the person you’re saving!” That was aimed at Clint and he looked away guiltily. “Earth’s mightiest heroes? You all suck!”

“Birdie…” Tony reached out and pulled her into his arms, even though she half-heartedly tried to struggle. “Hey, there’s no need to get so upset – it’s not like they can stop me anyway.”

“But they want to! Do you think Möðhy is so beneath you all that he’s not worth saving?!” Evie hissed. “I want my family back! I want Dad to be happy and he won’t be happy unless he does this!”

“This is such a bad idea.” Steve broke the awkward silence that had fallen over the others. “And you looked scarily like Loki just then, Evie.” The girl glared at him, although half her face was obscured by Tony’s arm. “Yeah, funny that. Genetics and shit.”

“Don’t swear.” Tony’s response was automatic and half-hearted so was duly ignored.

“Let’s put it this way.” Evie continued. “Dad, if you bow to peer-pressure I’m not only never going to talk to you again, but I’m also going to delete your classic rock collection and replace it with Justin Bieber and One Direction.”

The inventor’s head shot up and he stared at the rest of the group in horror. “She would as well…”

“Tony, that’s not a good enough reason to put yourself in danger! And Evie, stop being selfish!” Steve snapped.

It was a bad move.

Both Stark’s had a glare that could solder iron and right now both scowls were concentrated on the super-soldier. The good Captain was suddenly and painfully aware that he had royally put his foot in it.

“You know what?” Tony stood up, one arm still around his daughter’s shoulders. “Stuff it! I recognise why you don’t want me to go and I do appreciate it, but on the end it is my choice. Against all probability I am a functioning human adult and as such can make my own decisions in life!” Without giving anybody a chance to interrupt he looked up at the ceiling. “Jarvis, deploy the suit.”

”You can’t just go right now!” Bruce seemed to have given up on stopping his friend from the fool-hardy mission, but obviously still had concerns. “There needs to be a plan, you need to know more about where you’re going!”

The Ironman suit walked into the room, interrupting the near-argument. It stopped just behind Tony and he spread it his arms out as it opened up and enfolded him. The face-plate stayed open, however.
“Look, this suit has a separate server for Jarvis, since he lost contact that time I went into deep-space through the portal. He’ll keep an eye on my stats and has the authority to take over if he thinks I’m getting too stressed.” It spoke volumes of Tony’s self-restraint that he was still there and trying to appease his friends. “I’m doing this. Thor and Jarvis will be with me so it’s not like I’ll be alone.”

Clint gave a loud groan that was more effective than any swearing. “Fine, fine, I’ll come too. You said you got a spare suit?”

“It’s basic; no ammo or flight capabilities and the interface is barely more than the suit stats, but it’ll keep you alive on a hostile planet. And has the manoeuvring capability for you to use your bow.”

The archer nodded grimly, looking unhappy but accepting at the prospect. “That’s fine. I didn’t want to learn how to use the damn thing anyway; would take far too long.”

Once upon a time Tony might have used that as an opening to make some childish joke about Clint’s IQ, but this time he was well aware that too much rested on the Hawk’s cooperation.

It didn’t take too long for Jarvis to get the second suit up to the main room. It was unpainted – the same silver that the mark II had been on its first test flight – and had an unfinished look that didn’t really suit it. Tony’s spare arc reactor gleamed in the chest-plate. Jarvis effortlessly fitted it around Clint, even as the man squirmed and complained. Needless to say, Clint wasn’t dressed for having an Ironman suit suddenly shoved on him, but Tony had perfected a lot over the years and it was more comfortable than the early versions would have been.

“I really don’t like this!” The archer’s voice was muffled by the faceplate.

“Tough.” Tony grinned at him. “Right. Thor, you give Legolas a lift, we’ll get to the Bifrost site and then see if Heimdall’s listening.”

“Tony…” Steve looked like he was going to protest again, before his shoulder’s sagged with a sigh. “Be careful, okay?”

Stark looked for a moment like he might have had a sarcastic remark to make, but bit it back in favour of reaching out to shake the soldier’s hand instead. Banner clapped him on the back with a murmuring about his health before stepping back to let Evie hug her father.

It was uncomfortable to try and hug the Ironman suit, but the girl did so anyway and Tony pressed a kiss to her forehead.

“You’ll be okay, right?” Sometimes it was easy to forget that as old as she acted, she really was still just a kid.

“I’ll be fine.” Tony ruffled her hair. “And remember; when you next see me we’ll either have Loki back or know what happened to him.”

Evelyn’s expression hardened. “Give the chitauri hell, Dad.”

“They won’t know what hit them.”

“And…and be careful.”

“Alien hostile planet on the other side of the universe. What could possibly go wrong?”
The joke fell flat.

The flight to the Bifrost site in New Mexico was short – considering how quickly Thor and Tony could fly – and quiet. They had agreed on radio silence. After all; there was no way they’d be able to communicate once in Asgard and beyond anyway so drawing it out seemed pointless. Needless to say it wouldn’t have been the call Fury would have made, but since the Director hadn’t even been informed of the developments yet it wasn’t an issue.

Tony hadn’t wanted to draw out the farewells with his daughter either. It had been hard to leave her standing on the balcony with the others; for all of her fourteen years she had looked so small and forlorn. She hadn’t asked him to promise to return with Loki; she knew that that was a promise he couldn’t necessarily keep, but she had asked for him to come back safely.

That was one oath he was certain to try and uphold.

Once they reached the site and Thor had put Clint down – the archer was not happy to say the least – the two humans took a step back as the thunder God called for the portal to open.

The journey through the Bifrost was as Tony remembered it. All lights and colours and so bright that he didn’t dare open his eyes throughout the experience. He could only hope that Clint had done the same since he really didn’t want to end up on an alien planet with a blind archer. To be fair though – he didn’t really think all that hard about it. Mostly his head was filled with one thought:

*Going to find Loki. Going to find Loki. Going to find Loki…*

It was one thought, but drew a bag of emotions behind it like a comets tail. Fear, pain, excitement, horror, anxiety and so much hope.

No matter how much he tried to logically reason that hope was only going to hurt him, the damn little thing refused to stop fluttering away there, just above the arc reactor. It was, quite frankly, annoying.

The Bifrost trip was as quick as he remembered it being the last time and was prepared for the way the solid ground suddenly appeared under his feet. Next to him Clint staggered sideways and Tony caught him before the disorientated archer fell over.

“That wasn’t fun. Not doing that ag…Oh. Wow.”

Barton pushed Tony’s arm off of his shoulder, already distracted by their surroundings. They were in what Tony could only assume was the observatory Thor had spoken of – a grand room of gold that rose into a dome over their heads. There were carvings along every surface, but his attention couldn’t focus on them; his gaze drawn to the two men standing on the raised dais in the middle.

One looked like an Asgardian version of Nick Fury, complete with the permanent scowl that was currently fixed on the two humans. He held Loki’s sceptre in one hand and the familiar blue glow of the tesseract was visible in the other. Tony could only assume that this was the mysterious Heimdall they had heard so much about.

However, as fearsome and imposing as the gatesman was, he was nothing compared to the man beside him.

They didn’t need to see Thor bowing to know that this was the King of Asgard himself.
“Father. I have brought with me Clint Barton, also known as Hawkeye. And Tony Stark, known as Ironman and-”

“I know well who Tony Stark is.” The voice gave nothing away. Neither did Odin’s expression as he stepped down from the platform, gazing steadily at the inventor. He could have just as easily been impressed with Tony as wanting to kill him.

“Um…” It wasn’t often that Tony was lost for words but being personally addressed by the king of the Gods can have that effect on someone. He did at least flick the suits face-plate up, though, so that they could talk face-to-face.

“I have heard much of you, Anthony Stark.” Odin didn’t necessarily make that sound like a good thing. “You with the metal heart, and yet nevertheless willing to sacrifice yourself for the good of your planet.”

Tony was proud of himself that he stood his ground as the king neared him, rather than stumbling back like he wanted to. Clint and Thor were being useless; the God merely watching his father and the archer keeping his own face-plate down.

“And, of course, your dealings with my sons. Most especially my youngest.” And still Odin wasn’t giving any hint as to whether that was a good thing or a bad thing. “I understand from Thor that you had gone a long way in helping Loki return somewhat to his former self.”

“I…uh…don’t know about that, sir. I think he did most of it himself. I was really only there for the sex to begin with.” When stressed his brain-to-mouth filter really didn’t work, and Tony visibly winced as he realised what he had just said.

As it was, Odin actually smiled. “Yes, well, I’ve known a good many relationships to start off that way. Loki’s have historically never worked out, but your dedication so far may have broken that record.”

“Having a kid helped.”

“Yes, I heard.” And then there was a…look on the old God’s face. It was similar to the one Loki would wear when thinking about his daughter; longing. “How is Evelyn?”

It struck Tony that as much as Loki had not wanted his once-parents to have any part in their child’s life, Odin still considered himself to be a grandfather. “Um…She’s fine. Worried, obviously, but essentially fine.”

“That is good to hear.” And there was that look again. “I imagine she misses Loki very much.”

“Uh, yeah. He’s a good parent, you know.” The inventor sounded defensive and Odin smiled slightly again.

“Yes, I know. Does Evelyn possess magic?”

“No. Loki said he thinks she’s immortal, but other than that she’s just a normal kid. Well, an extremely smart normal kid. Not blue in the least. I think Loki was disappointed by that.” That was something Tony hadn’t shared with Thor either and both God’s looked taken aback by the off-hand comment.

“Loki is at peace with his heritage?” Thor asked it like it was something impossible. To him,
maybe it was.

“Well, yeah. He’s still not happy about how he found out, but last time we spoke of it he seemed pretty okay with being blue.”

Odin looked rather startled at that news; he obviously had assumed Loki was still a writhing ball of self-loathing when it came to what Tony had termed ‘the Jötunn thing’. Then the surprise was overcome with something that was far less expected on the face of the King of the Gods.

Guilt.

Real guilt. It was only a brief spark, but it crawled through Odin’s single eye like a flash of wildfire that burnt up everything in its path. Guilt, remorse and maybe even a little bit of shame as well.

“I will admit that perhaps mistakes were made concerning Loki’s heritage…” The old God began. He held up a hand as Tony took a deep breath, ready to unleash hell at that thoughtless comment. “And I will acknowledge that those mistakes were mine and mine alone. Loki’s actions were caused by my faults and my errors in raising him. I recognise that now.”

“Bit late for that, isn’t it?” Tony couldn’t have stopped himself if he’d wanted to, and he really didn’t want to. Thor glanced at him askance.

“Tony-!”

“No, Thor. He is correct.” Odin’s reply was acerbic as he cut across the younger God, although his gaze never left Tony’s face. “The world always appears clearer in hindsight and there are things that I see now should not have been allowed to occur. If nothing else Loki should have been far more secure of his place within our family so that the revelation of his heritage – given in a timely fashion in a controlled environment – would cause far less consternation.”

“Raising him to believe that Frost Giants are monsters wasn’t such a smart move either.”

Odin’s gaze hardened. “Indeed. I think I am beginning to see why Loki was drawn to you, Mr Stark. You simply do not know when to hold your tongue.” He didn’t make it sound at all like a virtue. “However, seven years is an extremely long time for a mortal to spend looking for one person. Maybe he saw that in you too.” And then the hardness in his eye vanished, replaced with something a lot more painful. “Thank you, Tony Stark, for being who and what Loki needed, when he needed you to be. If it wasn’t for you, we would have no hope of retrieving him at all.”

“I…thanks?” It was, admittedly, the last thing Tony had expected, especially since he had thought Odin was about to spear him through there and then. “Wait, we?”

Any and all emotion the King had just showed vanished back behind the indifferent façade of royalty. “I will not sit idly by whilst my youngest son is either dead or dying. Queen Frigga has the throne and Asgard will be safe in her capable hands until our return.”

“Father! You can’t-”

“Do not tell me what I can and cannot do, Thor!” And now Odin really did raise his voice. Thor was looking horrified and even Heimdall seemed shocked at the thought of the king leaving. “I have made enough mistakes in the past; it’s about high time I started trying to atone for them! That is my son out there and I am getting him back!”

There was something in the tone of voice, in the desperation there that rang true with Tony somehow.
In those few words he saw deeper into Odin than either Thor or Clint ever could. It wasn’t Odin the King of Asgard coming with them; it was Odin the Father. Tony could relate to that. He still had nightmares where the chitauri had taken Evie with them as they had threatened; where he spent his dreams feverishly searching for her to no avail. But he always had the relief of waking up each morning and knowing that his child was safe. Odin didn’t.

After so many years with the Avengers Tony was well aware that family needn’t be bound by blood. Odin had raised Loki from a baby – he considered the trickster his son and was as much his father as he was Thor’s. And as a father he was bound by the knowledge that he had utterly failed his son, and did not even have the means to save him when he realised his mistakes.

Suddenly Odin really wasn’t as intimidating as he had first seemed.

Thor was still ranting about how Asgard needed her king when Tony turned to him.

“Thor, shut your cakehole, your Dad’s coming with us.”

“But Stark-!”

“I think the King of Asgard has more say than the Prince does. King does still outrank Prince here, right?” Tony glanced at Heimdall to receive a bemused nod in response. “If he wants to come I don’t think any of us can say otherwise.”

“Well spoken, Mr Stark.” Odin cast a very parental gaze at Thor, usually the one he had reserved for when the Thunder God had been having a particularly dense day as a child.

“My King, I cannot agree with this course of action-”

“It is neither your place to agree or disagree, Heimdall, but simply to do as I say.” The King struck the butt of Gungnir on the ground. “Open the Bifrost, we are going to retrieve my son.”

“Of course, my King.” Without further ado Heimdall brandished Loki’s sceptre and thrust it firmly into the pedestal where his own sword usually sat.

Clint and Tony shrank together as the room around them began to spin, the carvings on the wall blurring together until it was just a golden sheen. The three Aesir didn’t seem fazed, although that was only to be expected, and Heimdall had his gaze focussed on the far wall where the glow of the Bifrost appeared and began forming into a portal similar to the one that had opened over New York – only smaller and vertical.

“The planet they are on is small and unable to truly sustain life.” The Gatesman intoned. “The chitauri mostly live upon their ships in orbit around it, and although there is a single cluster of buildings on the planet’s surface I am finding little to no life signatures there. I thought it wise to send you there to begin with since it seems unlikely that you will run into trouble. If you cannot find what you seek then it is likely that you will need to search the ships. By that time the chitauri will be alerted to your presence.” Heimdall’s stoic gaze flickered away from the portal to Odin. “Sire, I cannot leave the Bifrost open, and you must be clear for me to retrieve you all.”

There was shared knowledge in the look between the two elder Gods. Tony – king of power plays and board-room psychiatry – could see the understanding that flashed between them. Here were two people who knew each other inside out and trusted each other implicitly and had done so for a great many years.

It explained why Odin merely nodded at the instruction and turned back to gaze at the growing portal. The air around them flushed blue as the tesseract was brought into close proximity with the
sceptre and even wearing an Ironman suit it was possible to see Clint stiffen up. The stars through the portal swirled angrily then blurred.

To a sci-fi nut like Tony it looked like jumping through hyperspace.

His heart was thumping in his chest again, almost painfully as a harsh wind swept around them. Beside him Thor’s hair and cloak were streaming, the God readying himself with Mjolnir in hand. He looked as nervous and worried as Tony felt, which went a little way to making the inventor feel better.

*This was it.*

Their run against the Deathstar, their climb up Mount Doom, their duel with Voldemort.

Seven years had brought them to this point; standing on the edge of a portal, battle ready and staring into the depths of the universe.

There was a flicker, a brief glimpse of an otherworldly building and Tony heard – barely audible above the gale now blowing – Heimdall bellow: “Go!”

They leapt.

Tony found Clint’s arm and grabbed hold, the sudden wild fear of being separated forefront in his mind as the deep darkness sucked them in. It was nothing like their initial journey through the Bifrost; no lights or flashing this time, just pure darkness.

It was impossible to see anything, even the others within the small group. The HUD inside both Ironman suits was flickering wildly although if any alarms were going off it was impossible to tell. The noise around them was horrendous – a shrieking wail that, if it weren’t for the fact that they were in deep space, could have been called wind.

Clint’s hand had found Tony’s arm in response to the inventor’s own vice-like grip, so that the two of them at least knew where the other was even if they couldn’t see.

It was impossible to know how long it took before the blackness suddenly opened up into a dark and gloomy vista of sharp rock and hard ground coming towards them at speed.

Tony and Clint hit first, slamming into the rock and dirt and tumbling over like they’d been thrown into a washing machine. They skidded to a halt up against a large boulder, too shocked and battered to move.

Thor was hurled into them not a moment later, landing half across Barton who in turn was already on top of Tony.

Something felt like it had cracked in the chest plate.

Stark had envisioned this moment for so many years now, and it had almost always been with a sense of awe as he set foot on a planet so far away that it’s very galaxy could barely be seen from Earth. What he hadn’t ever imagined was a crash landing that took the wind out of him so badly that it felt like someone had shot an arrow through his chest.

The pressure on him eased slightly as his two fellow Avengers slowly rose to their feet but the display in his HUD flickered warnings at him as he tried to move.

“Sir, I would advise you lay still for a few moments longer.” Jarvis sounded tinny, but otherwise
like his normal self – the external server was working like a charm.

“Why? I’m fine I just oof-” Tony tried to at least sit up, but a deep stab of pain across his chest stopped him dead.

“Please don’t move, sir!”

“Hey, Tony, what’s wrong?!?” Clint leant over him, voice full of concern even if his face wasn’t visible. “Jarvis is telling me not to let you get up.”

“I know. Is my chest plate okay? Feels like a goddamn knife has gone through it!”

He felt metal hands against the armour in question before Clint looked back up at him. “Looks fine, scuffed, but everything’s scuffed.”

That wasn’t good news. Tony wanted nothing more than to flick his visor up and breathe properly, but knew that was suicide with the concentration of sulphur dioxide. Instead he settled for lying still and trying to calm down.

“Jarvis, what’s happened? Has the suit malfunctioned?”

“No, sir. Your blood pressure has risen worryingly and is causing significant cardiac stress that-”

“Am I going to have a heart attack?”

There was a pause and he felt a curious warm sensation from around the arc reactor.

“No, sir. I have momentarily taken control of the arc reactor and am using it as a pace maker. You should be alright in a moment or so.”

“Uh, thanks.” Tony could feel the pain ebbing a little now and gingerly tried sitting up. He could see Thor and Odin now as well, standing behind Clint and looking worried.

“I would strongly recommend that you wait here for the others to return, but you won’t do that, so I will refrain from suggesting it.”

“You know me too well, Jarvis.” The man accepted Barton’s hand and was hauled to his feet. “Right, I’m good, I’m okay.”

Thor took a worried step forwards. “You do not seem okay.”

“I’m fine, trust me.” Tony looked around at the other three. “Enough about me, is everyone else in one piece?”

There were the expected scuffs and scrapes – mostly suffered by Clint – but other than that they were mostly fine. Thor swung Mjolnir experimentally and frowned down at it.

“There is something wrong about this place – she is not responding as her usual self.” His breath curled in wisps in the cold air.

“There is something repressing magic here.” Odin was frowning at his spear, running his fingers over the blade. “It must be how they are containing Loki.” With what appeared to be some effort he caused lightning to crackle around the staff. “My own powers are seriously limited.”

Tony raised a sceptical eye-brow, although no one could see it. “Loki couldn’t use his magic at all around their technology. How come you still can?”
“Do not forget that Loki – as much as he is my son – is a different species to Thor or I. Our powers work in similar ways, but not exactly the same.”

That made sense. Tony nodded his understanding, already wondering how badly this could affect their progress.

“So, shall we get started?” He rubbed his hand across the metal covering his chest once more as there was another twinge, but the warnings did flare again so he breathed easier and – for the first time – looked around at their surroundings. “Oh. Wow.”

He remembered that moment when he had stepped onto Pluto and had been aware of just how alien that world was. This was even more.

There weren’t words to describe how it was to stand on solid rock, and yet know that home was so far away as to be unthinkable. The human mind – even one as extraordinary as Tony’s – struggled to comprehend just how lonely there were on this forbidding hunk of rock.

It was ugly too. All black, sharp granite and harsh angles. They were far from the sun that the planet orbited, so much so that little to no natural light was reaching them and the immediate vicinity was better lit by Tony and Clint’s suits. Far above them, floating like some sort of sentient clouds, were ships similar to those Tony had glimpsed through the portal over New York. Even without the chitauri presence it was a horrible and forbidding place.

They were only a few yards from the building that Heimdall had mentioned, although it didn’t look like any type of building the two humans had ever seen before. Seemingly grown out of the ground it seemed almost organic in nature – if rock could be considered living. If anything it was sharply reminiscent of bubbling lava that had cooled mid-bubble. A rough-cut entranceway was the only indication that the place was accessible – there were no windows or other ways in which light could enter.

“So. We crashed pretty hard – why has no-one noticed us?” Clint was the first to mention the obvious.

“I dunno. Maybe they don’t expect anyone to know they’re out here?” The excuse sounded lame even to Tony’s ears.

“This place seems deserted. Maybe they have left for the ships.” Thor sounded uncertain, glancing towards his father for answers.

Odin was glaring at the strange building as if it had personally offended him. At Thor’s words he hefted Gungnir. “No matter. We start our search here then move out if we find nothing.” His voice was that of someone who had led countless armies and seen infinite battles. He took command with the ease of true royalty. For once Tony was actually glad to have someone giving the orders. He was far too worried about what they were going to find to want to think about strategy.

However, strategy seemed to mean something different to Aesir.

The Avengers had remarked before how Thor simply threw himself into a fight without thinking and had attributed that to his brash personality. It seemed that actually it was an inherited trait. Odin ordered them into what Steve usually labelled an arrowhead formation and set off towards the entrance to the structure.

Jarvis was busy scanning the immediate area for anything that could be deemed a life form, although it was hard to know what counted. Chitauri didn’t radiate heat like a mammal and had no
discernible pulse so it was hard to get a good idea of how many – if any at all – there were in the vicinity.

The scan didn’t find anything that could be attributed to a Jötunn, although Tony told himself that that was because the area was too large.

It was…surprising inside.

The logical thought, considering what the outside was like, was to expect dark slimy tunnels of rough-cut rock. It wasn’t at all like that, though, which rather put everyone onto the wrong foot.

Yes, it was dark. There were a type of strip lining the ceiling that may have once been lights, but the place had an abandoned feeling to it, and nothing was illuminating it save the Ironman suits. In complete contrast to the exterior of rock, the corridor they entered wouldn’t have looked out of place on Earth – especially on the set of a sci-fi show.

It had a built look to it; straight walls, tiled floor, plastered ceiling. There were symbols every now and then, most likely the chitauri language. They were somewhat similar to the signs found in the old Aztec codices; extremely stylised hieroglyphs that meant nothing to the four people that passed them.

“This is weird.” Clint’s mechanised voice echoed oddly in the silent hallway. “I thought it would be like Alien or something. All gross and dripping and shit. This is…” They passed a bay that held what looked like a smashed fish tank, although whatever it had once held was long gone. “Clinical. It’s clinical.”

Everything was a uniform shade of grey, and it was beginning to grate on the humans nerves as the four slowly moved deeper into the complex.

“This is a terrible place,” Thor said quietly. It was an odd thing to say; there was nothing outwardly wrong that could be seen. Just never ending corridor.

“Feels like an abandoned mental hospital” Tony muttered. It had the same broken and antagonised sense to it that was often found in such places where pain and misery had sunk deep into the stones. He glanced at Clint. “You know those ghost hunting shows? It’s like one of those episodes where they visit an old psych ward that still has all the electro shock stuff wired up.”

Odin didn’t contribute to the conversation, but held up a hand to silence them as they came to what looked like an intersection between their hall and three others.

“Something is coming.” The king said quietly. He pointed the direction with Gungnir and at his insistence the three behind him slunk back to conceal themselves behind the corners of the intersection.

“The hell? I thought this place was deserted!” Clint snarled. He strung an arrow in his bow, but didn’t raise it, watching Odin instead.

“Yeah, well looks like Heim-a-thingy was wrong, doesn’t it!” Tony hissed back.

The steps drew nearer and Odin hefted his spear in one hand. From his angle the elder God had no way of seeing the oncoming person but his single eye narrowed as he calculated the distance from the sound alone. Without warning he went from statue stillness to a blur of motion and the blade of the spear swung up to catch the passing chitauri by the throat and pin it against the wall.

The alien wasn’t given time to struggle or even really process what had just happened before the
blade was gone and the king’s hand replaced it, pressing the creature into the wall. It looked slightly different from those that had attacked Earth – lacking the armour they had worn and therefore looking a lot less bulky.

“Where is the prisoner?!” Odin snarled at it. The chitauri didn’t have a face recognisable enough for human expression, but the wheeze it gave spoke well enough of its shock and fear. Odin shook it by its neck and slammed it back against the wall so that its head thumped heavily and it let out a crackle of pain. “The prisoner, the Jötunn! Where?!”

“P-p-prisoner?”

“Yes, the prisoner! Loki, where is he?!”

“D-dead. He’s dead.” The chitauri managed to wheeze out. “Who are-?”

But Odin snarled and thumped his fist through the creature’s head until it hit the plaster behind. He withdrew his hand and let the body slide to the floor.

Tony didn’t notice.

Dead. That thing had said Loki was dead.

He stared blankly at the wall, the word echoing dully through his head. Yeah, they’d always believed it, but to have it confirmed so casually…

He didn’t feel his back hit the wall behind him, or realise that he slid down it to sit slumped on the floor.

It had said it so casually, as if the news couldn’t possibly be all that important to anyone. “He’s dead.” So…so damn easily. Such news should have been heralded by a roll of thunder, a deep rumble of drums, something. Not just thrown out there like that.

He’d known all along that Loki was more than likely gone. But it still hurt more than should have been possible to hear it. The pain in his chest was back, but this time had nothing to do with his medical problems.

“Tony?” A gauntleted hand was held out in front of him, Clint’s voice sounding uncharacteristically gentle.

He looked up, feeling dazed. It was like being winded – his hearing was fuzzy around the edges. Clint was looking down at him and his voice had been layered with concern. Behind him Odin was still staring at the body whilst Thor ranted.

“-Will not believe it! We must go on!” The blonde God slammed his fist against the nearest wall, making a sizable dent. “I want proof before I will believe my brother to be dead!”

“Thor…” Tony’s voice had an odd croak to it and he realised he didn’t actually know what he wanted to say.

“I believed him to be dead before, and that mistake nearly cost us everything! I will not do that again!”

“Thor.” Odin’s stern voice had the effect that Tony’s wobbly one didn’t, and the thunder God abruptly fell silent, glowering down at the dead chitauri. There was a suspicious glitter to his eyes, and he quickly rubbed his hand over his face.
“We go on.” The King said. “We go on and we find him. Whatever has happened, whatever state he is now in, we find him. If he is alive we take him home, if he truly is dead we don’t rest until we recover his body. Understand?”

Thor nodded angrily, and Tony took a shaky breath in.

Yeah, they’d find him. He felt the dizziness recede, even though the pain didn’t. If nothing else he desperately didn’t want to have to bring Evie to her mother’s funeral.

Find him, find him, find him.

Odin gestured and they followed, setting off again down the corridor that the chitauri had come from. Thor was a bundle of angry energy, hand gripping mjolnir like the thing was about to explode. And maybe it was – it did feed off of his aura after all.

They walked for possibly half an hour down the deserted halls, taking random turnings whenever they reached an intersection. Odin naturally led the way and under the circumstances the other three were more than happy to let him do so. Two more chitauri met their fate at the end of the king’s fist, and one under Thor’s hammer, but so far they were still only getting one answer to Loki’s whereabouts; Dead.

Gone.

Destroyed.

The last one had been pretty horrendous, cackling with laughter. Clint had actually been the one person to deal with that one – not even bothering with an arrow and simply smashing the end of his bow into its eye-socket and twisting before slowly drilling back into its skull. No-body deemed it over kill.

And then they found hell.

The room was through a set of two-way double doors, fairly large and the same clinical sterility of the corridors. It was, however, quite crowded.

“What the fuck is this place?” Clint whispered. It spoke volumes that even the hardened assassin was weirded out.

There was a table in the centre of the room – they would have said steel were they not on an alien planet – hard and cold with straps and buckles in strategic places that were obviously designed to secure someone down to it. There were grooves cut into the smooth surface, channels that ran down into what appeared to be the chitauri equivalent of demijohns.

Along the walls there were work tops and benches covered in tools even Tony couldn’t discern. There were what appeared to be notebooks, a form of data collection in the same incomprehensible language that had been on the walls.

The group wandered through it all, staring wide-eyed. Thor picked up a sharp implement and turned it so that the blade caught the light.

“What is this place? A torture chamber?”

“Looks like nothing I’ve ever seen.” Clint said slowly. “And believe me; I’ve seen a lot of torture
facilities in my time.” He looked up so that the light from his face-plate lit more equipment hanging down from the racks on the ceiling. “This-”

“This wasn’t about torture.”

Tony’s voice was oddly detached. He stood infront of the back wall, his arc reactor lighting up the multiple shelves that lined it. Maybe it was something in his voice that gave the other three such a deep sense of foreboding as they approached to see what he had found. With the extra light from Clint’s suit everything was thrown into sharp relief.

“This was science.”

And it was worse than any nightmare Tony had ever had in his life.

The shelves were lined with bottles – possibly glass, but it was hard to tell considering they were in another galaxy – so many bottles. Each one had a label written on the shelf underneath, although again there was no way to know what they said. They didn’t need to read them though, since the contents of the jars were visible; suspended in clear solution like a specimen in formaldehyde.

Or…

No, they were specimens.

A severed hand floated ghost-like, the skin stripped off so that the musculature was visible. A knee-cap, white and gleaming. Nerves, tendons, bones, veins, arteries.

A pair of eye-balls, one facing away so that they could only see the optic nerve. The other, however, had drifted round and although the iris was clouded it was still a very familiar shade of green. The exact same shade Evie had.

“Norns…” Even Odin was looking ill as he stared up at the wall of jars. There was just so much.

Tony wondered, in a manic sort of way, if there was enough left of Loki for them to even bury.

“What’re those?” Clint sounded less sickened than the others, but he was used to gore in his line of work so he had blocked his horror out easier. Now he was pointing down to a set of five large flasks and their grisly contents.

“No…” The little sob of a word was unexpected coming from Thor and all the worse for it.

Tony couldn’t see them clearly, and with the rest of the wall of horrors he couldn’t imagine what else was possibly so bad. It was only when he began to crouch down to see the murky shapes that he actually realised what they were.

Foetuses.

Five foetuses.

No…four and a newborn.

They were malformed, gruesome things. All twisted claws and tails. No one was alike, each a slightly different mutation from the last.

One, the fourth jar, had oversized eyes without lids, staring balefully into no-where. The smallest was patched between chitauri scales and Jötunn blue, almost like a camouflage pattern. The largest, the one that had been born had its own talons dug into its flesh, a ripped umbilical cord
wrapped around its neck.

Tony stumbled back with a cry, crashing into the table and falling to his knees.

God no.

He retched and the helmet lit up with warning signs.

“Sir, you cannot throw up! The atmosphere means you cannot raise the face-plate.”

Yeah, he knew that. And there was no way he was going to spend the rest of their time on this God-forsaken planet with a helmet filled with vomit. He could control himself, he was fine, just do not think about those bodies!

Do not think about where they came from, how they were brought into existence.

Do not think about that happening to Loki.

The feeling of sickness was dying back in favour of dizziness again and he felt someone – Clint possibly – forcing his head forwards and down so that he was staring at the floor.

“Breathe, Tony. You need to breathe.” Definitely Clint, his voice sounded metallic.

“He…They…”

“Breathe.”

He did, since there was nothing else. Jarvis was humming gently, some sort of white-noise that was somewhat annoying, but annoyance was far far better than a panic-attack. The darkness around his eyes was receding somewhat, leaving behind the burning horror and…

Fury.

The missile he’d created sat heavy in his shoulder holster, itching to make them all burn.

“Tony? You back?”

He raised his head and nodded curtly, before using the table to help himself to his feet. Cold sweat was sticking his clothes to him and minute shivers made warning signs flash amber on the HUD. It felt very much like the onset of shock, but he was confident Jarvis would keep an eye on him.

There was a sob.

Stark turned to see Thor slumped down against one of the work surfaces, much like he had been. The God was curled over his knees, his shoulders shaking as the sounds of misery continued. Odin was crouched down next to him, a hand on his shoulder and talking quietly. There were tears running down the old king’s face.

It hadn’t occurred to Tony to think how the two God’s must have been feeling. At the very least it must have been as hard for them as it was for him – to see the evidence of the pain a beloved family member had been put through. He had never seen Thor break like that – the big blonde had kept his displays of emotions to himself, locking himself in his room when need be.

“Hey, Thor.” He crouched down on the other side of his friend, awkwardly resting his hand on the God’s arm. “The bastards will burn. I’ve made sure of that. When we leave here I’ve got enough fire-power on me to make them all regret the day they ever heard the name Earth.”
It wasn’t great poetry, but it made Thor raise his head and stare at him. “A nuclear weapon?”

“One big enough to make Fat Man look like a fire cracker.” He didn’t expect the God to know what Fat Man was but the sincerity in his voice was reassuring enough. “I’ll fry the lot of them.”

Thor nodded miserably.

“Hey guys. There’s another door over here.” Hawkeye’s voice cut across them with his usual lack of tact. “I’ll take a quick-Jesus fucking Christ!”

The sudden fear and horror in the voice of someone so conditioned to the battlefield was entirely unsettling.

“Clint, what is it?” The repulsors in Tony’s hands fired up, ready for any threat that may have been found.

“He’s…He’s here! Jesus, he’s here!”

The words were like a fire shooting through them.

He’s here.

Tony reached Clint’s side first, clinging to the archer’s shoulder as he tried to peer around him through the narrow doorway. Thor and Odin were barely moments behind him.

The tiny room Barton had found was what they had been expecting when they’d first entered the complex. It was all gloom and rough rock and slick dirty ground underfoot. And there…

There in the far corner was a huddled shape.

“Sir,” Jarvis’ voice was harsh in the sudden silence. “Sir, I am detecting a pulse.”

“Oh my God…”

Since Clint wasn’t moving and was unintentionally blocking the two Gods, it was Ironman who stepped into the filthy cell first. He walked slowly, but the suit was heavy and his footsteps crunched on the gravel strewn across the floor. There was no reaction from the huddle and as he moved forwards the arc reactor lit more of the situation.

Torture camps.

That was the first thing that came to his mind.

Those poor, desperate living skeletons that peered out of the black and white photographs, every single bone visible. That was what he was seeing now.

The skeletal-thin body had it’s back to him but still showed each and every broken and twisted bone down its spine. All of the cuts and lacerations where vertebrae were now missing. There wasn’t an inch of skin on the filthy back that hadn’t been mutilated by the surgical quest for knowledge. Long black hair, wild and tangled straggled across the ground.

“Loki..?” Tony whispered.

There was no reply and he moved closer, sinking to his knees beside the still body. Behind him he heard Thor entering, as slowly as Tony himself had done.
“Brother?”

Stark remembered the jars on the wall, the many many jars.

“I don’t think he can hear us.” He said quietly. To back this up he leant forwards and gently brushed the hair back from Loki’s ear.

Where Loki’s ear should have been.

“He can’t hear us, Thor.” He repeated. “He-”

Loki suddenly shivered, a tiny movement as if trying to escape the contact but lacking the strength to do so. It was a heart-breaking gesture – that he was so conditioned to pain – but the motion only brought joy to the two beside him.

He was alive.

Tony felt his eyes well up as he reached forwards to carefully pull Loki’s frail body over to face them. Technically he knew he shouldn’t be moving the trickster at all – God alone know just how injured he was – but logic wasn’t something he was listening to.

He was here. Loki was here! Here in his arms, real and alive and here.

But Loki didn’t know that he was safe.

The prisoner’s chest was fluttering with shallow panicked breaths as tiny shivers ran through him. The stump of his severed hand had a bar pierced through the wrist that connected him to a chain on the wall, and he clutched his remaining hand tight under his chin in a defensive movement. He had no way of knowing who was with him.

Tony had expected it, since he had seen the evidence in the terrible laboratory, but it was still an icy shock to see two blank holes, burned and blackened where Loki’s eyes had once sat. Beyond that the trickster’s nose had been sliced off, leaving a gaping hole into his head where cartilage gleamed through the mess.

No ears, no eyes, no nose and when Loki gasped hoarsely it was possible to see that no tongue could be added to that list. He was so thin that his skin stretched over his face like parchment and missing his nose and eyes gave the terrifying impression of a skull.

Tony didn’t want to look to see what else had been taken.

“Oh my love, what have they done to you..?” He whispered, brushing more wayward tangles out of the ruin of Loki’s face.

“He isn’t even aware it’s us…” Thor said hoarsely. “We have no way of letting him know that we aren’t here to harm him.”

The God’s words were true. Loki’s broken body was strung with tension, obviously waiting for and wondering what fresh new hell was about to be devised for him. And he wasn’t even fighting. Just…waiting.

Tony bit back the rising panic and terror at the situation, trying to focus on the problem they were faced with. He could sense Clint and Odin in the doorway, although they were staying silent, and briefly wondered why the king wasn’t down here with Loki like he and Thor were.
Not the problem right now.

Okay; five senses. Loki had lost four of those, which left touch as the only sense he currently had. But that had a solution…

“Helen Keller.” Tony had to smile as he said it.

“Whom?”

“Helen Keller, she was deaf-blind. Really inspirational story; she had to learn to communicate through touch alone. She understood the world around here with her hands.”

And so saying Tony gently grasped Loki’s thin wrist, uncurling the shaking fingers. Loki made a sound that could have been a whimper, but had no strength to fight the guiding pull and had to simply let Tony raise his hand up and rest it against the arc reactor.

“Come on Loki. I know you can’t hear me, but we’re here. We’re here for you, and as soon as you know that we can go.” The inventor whispered. “We can take you home.”

The skeletal fingers shook in his hold, tapping against the reactor and skittering along the glass covering.

“Come on Loki.” Tony repeated. He glanced at Thor and saw the God staring at the broken trickster, tears streaming down his face as he desperately tried to will understanding into his brother.

The fingers tap-tapped again before the shaking in them lessened slightly and the movement became more purposeful. Tony couldn’t feel it, obviously, but in a very real way it felt like Loki was gently mapping out his whole heart. The digits ran slowly around the edge of the energy source, before sliding across the central glass again. One finger had been part-amputated and the broken splinters of bone caught on the catches of the reactor although Loki showed no reaction to the pain that he must have felt.

And then a sudden shudder ran through him. This time without the commanding grasp on his wrist he raised his hand up further, feeling his way up the chest plate to reach the helmet. His fingers danced across the mouth, discerning the shape before moving up again to feel the eye-slits, tracing around them.

“Loki..?” He knew he shouldn’t, it was bad for the circuits, but Tony couldn’t help the tears that spilt over as the gentle questing fingers danced across his vision on the HUD.

Then Loki’s hand cupped the helmet’s cheek. A hoarse, broken sound escaped his mouth and although it was hopeless to try and tell an expression on his ruined face, it was just possible that he was attempting to smile.

Tony covered the frail shaking hand with his own, leaning into the touch that he couldn’t feel as a sudden sob shook him.

“He knows. He knows it’s us.” He gasped out. “He knows.”

“Here.”

He looked up to see that Odin had appeared beside him. The elder God looked terrible as he pulled his cloak off and knelt down beside Ironman and his son. He reached out and severed the chain holding Loki to the wall with a simple twist of his hands before carefully wrapping the rich
crimson fabric around the trickster’s battered body.

“Father, I’ll carry him…” Thor offered, his voice cracked and hoarse.

“I’ve got him.” Odin hooked an arm under Loki’s knees and the other under his shoulders before standing up. It was obvious that the trickster weighed next to nothing.

Loki seemed to sense that it wasn’t Tony carrying him and raised his single hand again, almost immediately encountering Odin’s beard. The king froze staring down at the son he had lost for so long.

The trickster’s fingers wound through the hair before creeping up to find wetness and new tears rolling down to slide across his own skin. The sensation seemed to give him pause as he tried to determine what it was. And then he found the golden disc in place of the eye.

For a moment the whole universe seemed to still as Loki realised just whose arms he was in, carrying him out of hell. His fingers ran across the familiar grooves and patterns of the eye patch and a broken croak escaped his mouth. Odin seemed to be holding his breath.

And then Loki relaxed. He let his hand drop down and rested his head against his father’s shoulder, shivering with what – had he had the means to cry – may have been sobs.

Odin didn’t say another word as they left the cell, leaving behind the scene of seven years of pain and misery. Jarvis was able to direct them back out of the complex, retracing the route they had taken initially.

Tony was trembling, and when he glanced at Thor he could see that the God was looking as bad as he felt. The sheer amount of emotion was so overwhelming that Stark preferred too just push it all to one side until they had the time and place to deal with it. The absolute pure joy of knowing that they had him.

They had him.

_They had him!_

And he was so broken and frail.

It hurt beyond reason to see him in such a state.

It came as a surprise for him to find that they were outside again, back where the Bifrost had initially dropped them. He didn’t remember the walk back, focussing too much on the rush of feelings inside him.

As Odin called out to Heimdall, Thor turned to Clint and Tony.

“Stark, you mentioned a weapon?”

Oh yes, he’d nearly forgotten. It wouldn’t likely reach all of the ships above them, but would certainly take out every damn creature on the planet itself and destroy that hellish lab.

As the Bifrost began to glow around them, Tony smiled.

“Jarvis, do the honours.”

And there was nothing but light.
The journey back had little difference to the one going, other than a more dignified landing.

Tony ignored everything else. He wrenched his helmet and gloves off, not caring where they fell and ran to where Odin was urgently telling Thor something.

It didn’t matter, didn’t matter. Nothing else mattered but Loki.

In the light of the observatory the trickster looked worse; the filth and grime highlighting every wound and misaligned bone. Tony didn’t care as he gently cupped Loki’s face, feeling the skin under his fingers, the shivering breath on his cheek as he lent in and pressed a kiss to the God’s forehead.

“We’ve got you now. You’re safe. You’re home.. I’ve got you”
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Everything was a blur.

Tony felt like he was just standing there whilst the universe rushed past him at speed. The observatory was suddenly full of people; from the white robes and calm voices he assumed they were doctors – or what Thor had named ‘healers’. They had taken Loki from Odin’s arms and laid him out on a stretcher brought with them, still wrapped in the cloak. He wasn’t moving now, and Tony suspected that he had lost consciousness at some point. It was a small mercy – the trickster would have hated knowing that everyone could see him so weak and helpless.

Odin had pulled Thor aside and issued him with a handful of simple orders as the healers took charge of their patient. Clint was standing to one side, his face-plate up and looking awkward in the armour that he didn’t know how to remove.

And Tony just stood there, only partially armoured now, letting everything happen around him in the blur of motion that it seemed to be. He realised that he felt exhausted, drained.

“My friend, are you alright?” Thor’s voice was uncharacteristically quiet as he slowly approached the man. He moved like someone advancing on a frightened animal – slow, calm and unassuming.

“I don’t even know.” His voice sounded alien to him, like a detached limb. He really didn’t know if he was alright. Everything was just…so much.

They had found Loki. He was alive. And so so injured as to be unbelievable. They had just visited a planet at the other end of the universe and now stood in Asgard, home of the Gods of pagan lore.

Tony probably wasn’t ‘alright’.

There was an arm around his shoulders – heavy, suggesting that Thor was as exhausted as he was – and the realness of it helped somewhat to pull him back into the here-and-now.

“Come, Father has asked that you and Clint be taken to the healers as well.”

“What? Why? I want to stay with-”

“You are in no condition to argue, Tony. You both need food and rest.” Thor was gently steering him towards the exit of the observatory and the inventor didn’t have much choice other than to allow it. “We’ve been gone nearly ten hours.”

They had? He honestly couldn’t understand where all that time had gone. Thor did have a point, though. Food was beginning to sound good, and sleep even better. However, there were other things preying on his mind too.

“But what about Evie? We have to tell her! I’ve got to go home and tell her.”

“I’ll do it. You could not handle another Bifrost journey right now, and I do not believe Clint could either. I will see to it that the two of you are properly looked after, then I shall go back to Earth and inform the others.”
That hurt quite a bit. Tony had wanted to see the look on his daughters face when she heard the
news, had wanted to celebrate it with her. Unfortunately he was more than smart enough to know
that Thor was right; there was no way in hell he could go through the Bifrost back home at this
point – every fibre in his body was screaming in protest at the very thought of it. So instead he
turned to his other argument.

“I want to stay with Loki.”

Thor gave him a look that was part amusement and part exasperation. “You think I do not? There
is nothing more we can do for him right now and we would only be in the healers’ way if we tried.
He is unconscious, and they need to do their work.”

“But what if-”

The God stopped and placed both hands on the man’s shoulders, pulling Tony round to face him.
“He’s going to live, Tony. I know it looks bad, but he is a god, and even these injuries will not kill
him. He will live.”

“But…”

“Tony. Do you really think he would have endured this long if he was not capable of surviving
such treatment? The worst is over; now he can heal.”

Tony nodded slightly, refusing to meet the thunder God’s over-bright gaze. “I don’t want him to
wake up alone…”

“I will arrange for someone to fetch you when it seems that he is awakening.”

Well…Tony still didn’t like it. Scratch that, he hated it! But if Loki’s own brother could see reason
and stay away long enough for the doctor-y-healing people to do their jobs then he supposed he
should be an adult about it as well, as much as it went against the grain.

“Yeah. Okay yeah.” He slumped as much as the remaining armour would allow, and that reminded
him that he had carelessly discarded the gloves and helmet. “Where did my stuff go?”

“Here.” Clint was behind them, hanging back enough not to intrude, but came forwards when he
heard the question. The Ironman gear was snug in his arms.

The three left the observatory and stepped out onto the Bifrost. It was night-time and unfamiliar
constellations were winking down at them. Far ahead in the distance a citadel gleamed with the
many lights of night-time candles. Clint groaned.

“Oh God, that’s got to be at least a mile and a half! Do we have to walk that?”

Not an appealing thought.

There were horses tethered to the outside of the observatory and Thor made to move towards them,
but Tony grabbed his arm.

“Hell no to the live-stock.” He took the rest of his armour off of Clint and pulled it back on.
“We’re flying. I hate horses.”

“Tony-”

“No, I’m not being talked out of this one.” He grinned when Thor sighed and nodded.
The flight itself was brief. Clint had a decent eye for distance and it had measured out at just over a mile and a half to reach the city. Thor had had to carry the archer piggy back, which would have made Tony laugh if he hadn’t so much else on his mind.

Thankfully since it was so late there were no more than a handful of guards around the place to stare curiously at the two mortals that Thor led into the inner bowels of the palace. The room he led them to was apparently alongside the ‘infirmary’, what Tony believed to be the Aesir equivalent to a hospital. He appreciated it though – since it meant that he was close to Loki. Admittedly Thor had reasoned that he wanted them to be near so that the healers could make sure the two of them were rested and fed properly. Tony had a lingering suspicion that the God was still worried about the near-heart attack he’d had when they’d first reached the planet, so didn’t begrudge him the thought.

The room was lavish – well it would be since it was inside the palace – but simply furnished. Maybe Tony had been expecting some sort of Viking long-house, but if it had to be likened to any sort of human architecture then it would be Tudor, not Viking. All high ceiling beams and pleasant contrasts between white plaster and aged wood. There was a small table with a couple of matching chairs and two twin beds pushed against either wall. Everything was warm and inviting. Sconces lined the walls, lighting everything in a warm glow.

“Not bad…” Clint took his helmet off and placed it down on one of the beds.

Thor smiled slightly at the reaction. “Eat and sleep, I will be back in a few hours.”

They did just that. Tony showed Barton how to remove the rest of the armour before slumping down on one of the beds.

“You should eat.” Clint already had his mouth full of bread when he frowned at his friend. He held out the second plate that had been on the table, piled high with various foods, most of which were recognisable. “At least a little.”

Tony picked up an apple and his stomach growled at him. He hadn’t thought food would appeal after what they had witnessed on that distant planet, but relief at having Loki safe brought back more of an appetite than he would have thought.

The beds were soft and it wasn’t long before both men were fast asleep – the plate slipping from Clint’s hand to the floor with a dim thud.

It was the first time in seven years that Tony didn’t dream of anything.

MWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMW

Thor’s arrival in the main room of Stark Tower was no less dramatic than last time, but he managed to avoid breaking another window. Natasha, Bruce and Evie had been in the adjacent kitchen watching TV but came running in when they heard him.

“What did-?”

“We’ve found him! He’s alive!” The blonde God swept his niece up in his arms and, as big as she was, swung her around in a circle. “He’s alive!” He then grabbed hold of Bruce and Natasha so that the four of them were in one giant bear-hug.

Evie seemed to get the message on the second repeat and screamed, throwing her arms around Thor’s neck in return.
“Thor! What on Earth…” Steve had entered as well and was immediately snatched up into the group-hug.

“We’ve found Loki. He lives!”

“He’s alive?!”

Thor seemed giddy on endorphins and only a moment away from tears. “Yes! My brother!” He released the others in favour for swinging Evie around again.

“Is he okay? Where’re Tony and Clint?”

It took a few more repeats of the question before the God heard and finally put his niece down in favour of slumping onto a sofa.

“Tony and Clint remain in Asgard. They were exhausted and needed rest. Loki…” Thor glanced at Evie. “Loki will be alright.” There was enough of a clue in his gaze to let the others know that he was holding information back.

“You’re sure? He won’t die?” The girl’s question was laced with worry, but Thor smiled gently at her.

“He won’t die. You have your Möðhy back, Evelyn.”

Evie bit her lip hard, eyes welling up tellingly. Bruce noticed the warning signs and smiled, motioning her over. For all her fourteen years, she was still young enough to appreciate a hug when it was offered in such situations, and crawled onto the sofa next to Bruce so that he could loop an arm around her.

“Hey, hey, hey, it’s okay.” The scientist pulled her close as she began to sob, curled up so that her face was pressed into his shoulder.

“I know, I’m j-j-just h-h-happy…I thought we were n-never going to f-f-find him!”

“I know, I know.” Bruce rubbed her back. “But they’ve got him now. It’s all okay.”

Evie glanced up at Thor tearfully. “I w-want to see him, can I g-g-go back to Asgard with you?”

The God smiled at her. “Not just yet; I want to talk things over with your father first, but soon you can. And then you will be a family again.”

“Family…I’ve g-got a family. I’ve got m-m-my Mōhōy b-back.”

MWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWM

Tony didn’t know how long he slept for.

The bed was warm and soft and although the pillows were stiffer than he would have liked he still slept like the dead. There were no dreams, no emotions, no nothing. Just blessed sleep.

He was woken by a gentle hand on his arm, enough of a pressure to make him stir without inciting any fear or confusion. Clint was already sitting on top of the covers of his own bed, flicking through a book, but glanced at him with a wan smile.

“Mr Stark?” The woman who had woken him was wearing white robes. Tony sat up hurriedly.
“Is Loki okay?!"

“Yes, Mr Stark. But he appears to be waking and Prince Thor asked that I summon you in such an event.”

“Yeah. Yeah, thanks.” He rubbed his eyes and pulled himself out of bed, glad that he’d not been bothered to take any clothes off. “We’re going now?”

The healer seemed to look down on his attire somewhat, but nodded all the same. Clint waved him off and they left the small chamber for the infirmary.

The place was nothing like a human hospital.

It was full of warm golden light, big and welcoming. It was the sort of place you’d be glad to wake up in if injured or ill. There were no intrusive beeping machines or sterile smells.

It was peaceful.

Tony realised he far preferred it to human ideas.

Loki was in a private room, laid out in a bed similar to the ones Clint and Tony had just slept in; wooden framed, soft and inviting. It was a far cry to the hard-mattressed, steel things hospitals favoured.

However, Tony had eyes for nothing but the God under the covers.

The years of blood and grime had been carefully washed away, leaving taut white skin that showed up the scars accumulated over the time. Bandages almost fully covered Loki’s face, wrapping up his empty eye-sockets and the ruined cavern where his nose had rested before extending round the back of his head so that the holes where his ears should have been were covered.

Both arms lay above the covers, as thin as sticks and every badly twisted bone visible. The right ended in a neatly bandaged stump, covering up both the brutal amputation and the wide hole that had allowed the chain to pierce his wrist.

He looked like a child had smashed a china doll and then tried to glue it back together. Or, darker still, the thick knots of scar tissue that littered every part of him that Tony could see (and no doubt everywhere he couldn’t see too) were horrifically reminiscent of Frankenstein’s Monster.

“Will…Will he be okay?” The man asked quietly. The healer motioned for him to sit in the chair beside the bed and he did so gladly.

“We don’t know how well his recovery will progress yet.” The woman answered. “It is complex, especially given that he is not Aesir, and that many of the wounds have already healed, albeit wrongly.”

“How can you, I don’t know, just use magic? Why isn’t his magic healing him?”

“His magic is being blocked at the moment. He has been without it for so long that it would be fatal to return it all at once; the shock to his body would be too great, even if he were in perfect health. We intend to feed his magic back to him slowly, directing it to heal him as we go.”

Tony nodded slightly, frowning. “He mentioned once that his magic can’t heal wounds the chitauri caused.”
“We are aware. We will work our own Aesir magic along with his to assist the healing process.”

That made sense, he supposed.

“How injured is he?” He whispered. The look he received in answer was sympathetic.

“I think you know well that it is not good.” She reached into her robes and pulled out a piece of parchment. “We wrote down an assessment for his father when he came to visit. You may read it if you wish. The Allfather gave his permission for you to be accorded the same privileges as a family member.”

That was…humbling actually. Tony really hadn’t realised how much of an impression he’d had on the King, and then how much of that was from over-exaggerated stories Thor had told.

The healer left, which surprised him. He’d assumed that since they seemed to think Loki was waking up – not that he’d seen any evidence of that yet – they’d be all over him, much like human doctors. However, apparently the trickster was as stable as he could be, and they had deemed it more important for Tony to be with him.

The man carefully unrolled the scroll that had been handed to him – surprised to realise that he was so caught up in the situation he hadn’t even given it a second thought that he’d allowed her to hand it like that. It was written in English, which was odd, and he wondered if that’s what the God’s used or if it had been done for his benefit.

It was also written for the benefit of someone who didn’t know medical terminology. Phrases leapt out, annoyingly vague; Broken bones: multiple. Dehydration. Malnutrition.

‘Malnutrition’ was a bloody understatement; Loki could have been mistaken for a skeleton.

Organ removal evident: one lung, two thirds of liver, two kidneys, twelve foot of small bowel, portion of colon, bladder, testes, gall bladder, spleen, both pancreas’, epiglottis, portion of second stomach, portion of first stomach, uterus, ovaries, both eye balls, ears including inner ear, tongue, nose, various lymph nodes, various major veins and arteries, various bones and tendons.

They really had pulled him apart.

Even through the horror, the little scientist always awake in the back of Tony’s brain noted the specific mentions of two stomachs and more than the normal number of kidneys. He stamped the voice out – like he cared for comparative anatomy right now!

Loki stiffened slightly, drawing his attention, and he dropped the scroll onto the covers, where it rolled itself back up. The trickster did seem to be stirring, and Tony reached out to gently grasp his heavily bandaged hand.

He didn’t know about the tears running silently down his cheeks, and wouldn’t have cared if he did.

WMW
injury.

The chitauri hadn’t visited since they took his eyes – a sickening way to taunt the fact that he wouldn’t see them again. There had been no way to tell time, lost in the perpetual darkness and silence of the senseless. Even if he’d been given the means, Loki couldn’t have begun to describe the torment of being locked inside his own head. They could have unlocked every door and he still would have been entirely helpless.

He just wanted it to be over.

Enough of immortality. Enough of living forever if it meant this.

But it was warm, and that was not…right.

He moved his head slightly and was shocked when there wasn’t the harsh rasp of gravel across his skin. A tiny cautious twitch of his remaining fingers found that they were mostly immobile. He had had enough injuries as a child to recognise the feel of bandages and splints.

And…There was someone holding his hand.

Someone with four fingers and an opposable thumb. Warm skin.

Loki could feel a pulse gently beating where he was palm to palm with the other. When had he last felt the heartbeat of another person?

Where was he? Who was there?

The trickster struggled to sift through the scattered memories since his life in darkness had begun but all that was there was fear and pain. From the moment his sight had been taken was just a blur of nightmare.

What was happening? Was he safe or was this now an introduction to psychological torture? They’d broken his body, were they now going to give it go on his mind too?

The spell he’d cast all those years ago as he’d been snatched curled protectively around his psyche like a mother bear, which was something of a comfort. His body was – and had been – easy to break. His mind, not so much.

The hand holding his heavily bandaged one squeezed gently, alerting him to the unpleasant thought that the person knew he was conscious. Loki’s breath caught in his throat at the thought, aggravating the multiple broken and badly healed ribs.

Once upon a time he would have been ashamed at allowing fear to flood him so easily. Now, however, he had learnt that fear was the only sensible reaction to have. Whatever would happen would be terrible, and it was right to fear that.

What did happen, though, was that the person gently raised his hand up, cradling it like it was some fragile thing made of glass. Wet drops made him flinch until he realised that they were nothing more than tears.

This sparked a memory, something vague, a dream of finding metal instead of scales, of running his fingers around the rim of an arc reactor…

One dream of so many like it.
Just a dream…

His fingers brushed wet cheeks before finding neatly trimmed facial hair. It was coarse and short, cut into a hauntingly familiar pattern.

Had he had the strength, Loki would have snatched his hand back. As it was he just felt a deep shudder roll through him, hoping and hating in equal measures. A dream? A trick? A…

His thumb found wet lips, tracing over the contours and running across wrinkles edging the mouth that weren’t as familiar as the mouth itself. He could feel the slight tremble there, of someone holding back a flood of emotion. More tears soaked into the bandages wrapped around his hand.

Loki didn’t know if he could dare believe it.

He knew that goatee, knew that mouth.

The remnants of his dream came back to him again, the way he had run his fingers around the rim of the arc reactor; knowing conclusively who was there. Had it been a dream? Could he dare hope that it, that *this* was real?

He let his hand fall, trailing down the neck to find the collar of a Midgardian T-shirt. The hand that still held his guided him until he found what he was desperately wishing to be there.

Underneath the thin material he could feel metal. A raised circle encompassed the more complex design elements within it. The whole thing was slightly different to the one Loki had known, an upgrade, but there was still only one man in the world with an arc reactor in their chest.

The God managed to force his broken fingers to return the grip on his hand. Hope flared again before he realised that it wasn’t hope at all. It was joy.

He was found.

There was nothing in the universe that could compare to the realisation that it was *over*. He had been found. After all this time.

He felt the vibration in his throat and knew that he’d made some sort of sound – although had no idea what. It didn’t matter. Nothing mattered any more.

*He’d been found.*

MWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWM

Tony couldn’t help the tears.

The grip on his hand was weak, but emphatic and he knew that Loki was struggling to come to terms with the idea that the hell was truly over. He raised the bandaged fingers back up, away from the arc reactor, and pressed a kiss to each one. They trembled in his hold and a thin keening broke from the trickster’s throat as his mouth moved around a word he couldn’t say.

*Tony.*

Stark broke.

Tears became full-blown sobs and he curled over pressing his lips to the broken hand again. Loki was here, here and *alive*. It felt like the twilight zone.
He leant down and gently rested his forehead against the trickster’s, tears falling onto the heavy swaths of bandages that covered the ruin of his face. Loki’s other arm – his missing hand still a jarring shock – tried to lift from where it lay on the covers but he lacked the strength to do so. Tony saw the struggle and gently lifted it, letting Loki guide him so that the stump rested across the back of his neck in an attempt at an embrace.

“I wish I could tell you that I love you and have you hear me.” The man whispered softly. “We’ve never said those words face to face and now…Jesus! Now that I finally have you I can’t even tell you it!”

Loki seemingly felt the breath across his mouth and chin – the only portion of his lower face not bandaged – and he turned slightly towards the source, seeking it out. A thick rope of scarring ran along his jawline where, years ago, the tissue had been sliced open to provide access to his vocal chords. He almost startled as a sensation he hadn’t dared hope he would ever feel again moved along the old injury.

A kiss.

He whimpered, unable to hear the sound and unable to stop it, his arm slung around Tony’s neck tightening.

Tony.

Tony was here. Had found him and was here.

You didn’t forget me...

There was so much both men wanted and needed to say to each other, and no means to do so.

So Stark used the one method that had never failed him before.

It was only gentle; there was no way they could kiss properly. Tony’s mouth was soft against the scarred ruin that was Loki’s, just a press of lips. There was no heat to it, just reassurance and joy and love. No-one could mistake the emotion.

Their hands were still clutched together, now sandwiched between them and Loki squeezed as hard as he was able – which wasn’t much – pulling the human as close as he could. Tony broke the kiss and shifted so that he could lay his head next to Loki’s on the pillow.

It was an awkward position for the human – leaning forwards in the chair and twisted so that he wasn’t lying on their joined hands – but the threat of back-ache didn’t even receive a second thought.

Loki was drifting off again – his battered body unable to keep up with the high demands being made of it. The attempts at movement and high emotions were too much for so early on, but for once the dark silence was not intimidating.

Tony was with him. He couldn’t see the man, couldn’t hear him, but he could feel him. Their hands linked, his arm over the inventor’s back, Tony’s sobbing breath huffing across his face.

He was tortured, battered, broken, blind and deaf.

And Loki had never been happier because Tony was with him.

WMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWM
Thor didn’t have a chance to tell anyone the full story until Evie went to bed. It was well past midnight by the time the girl finally grew too tired to stay up and ask questions and as tired as the others were, they knew there was more Thor hadn’t told them.

They had been interrupted over the course of the evening by Fury and Pepper arriving at different points, which of course meant the whole story had to be told again. Twice.

Fury was, to use a light term, ballistic. Absolutely ballistic.

Before anyone could even tell him the outcome he went off on one, ranting furiously at the whole group about their ‘reckless behaviour’. To be fair, they could see why he was so pissed off. Three of the Avengers had not only left for an unsanctioned mission, but had also left Earth to do so. To be pedantic they had even left the galaxy. There was an under-lay to the scolding that Fury didn’t bring up, but was noticeable all the same.

He was offended.

It had actually upset him that they hadn’t included him – although to be fair they had hardly had the time to do so. Thor, Tony and Clint had left within the hour of hearing the message from Heimdall.

It was a long time before everyone was on the same page and Thor could give them all the extra details. He had thought it over, as to how much he should tell his friends in regards to what Loki had been through and in the end had to conclude that he would tell them everything.

It was a hard decision, and not one that he had made lightly. He and Tony both wanted Loki to be welcome amongst their friends, but for that there needed to be a certain amount of trust. Loki had nearly torn the team apart before they’d even formed, tried to destroy their capital city and turned Clint into his goon. Sure, they had all mellowed to the idea of him over the years – living with his brother, his lover and his daughter had had that affect – but it’s one thing being alright with the idea of someone and a whole other thing entirely in living with them.

Maybe Loki wouldn’t be happy that they would know of his injuries, but Thor was taking the chance that his brother would understand the reason.

The group was understandably horrified. The God didn’t leave out any details, as horrible as they were to retell. He was a master story-teller, and whilst his tales were usually over-detailed, this time that wasn’t a problem. He was able to verbally paint the picture with vivid imagery. Almost too vivid at times, since at one point Pepper had to grab a glass of water, looking pale and ill.

“Will he be able to recover from that?” Steve asked finally.

Thor shrugged somewhat hopelessly. “I am not certain. He will live, certainly, but I do not know how well he will heal. The healers’ magic alone can regrow limbs or organs, but I’ve never known anyone needing it to this extent. It will be some time before we know for certain just how much and how well he will recover.”

“Does Tony know that?”

“I do not know. I cannot imagine he will allow it to be an option though.”

Bruce propped his chin up on his hands. “Is Tony alright? Physically, I mean. I don’t expect anyone to be able to know what’s going through his head right now.”

“He had trouble immediately arriving on the planet, Jarvis had to interfere with the arc reactor, but
he recovered within moments."

The scientist grunted. “I did wonder if something like that would happen."

“By that he means he’s spent this whole time on the edge of panic as to whether he should have let Tony go at all.” Steve added, and Thor smiled.

“Tony was fine, and I doubt things would have gone as smoothly without him.” The God said. “It was only thanks to him that Loki knew who we were.”

“Yeah, you said…” Natasha was slouched across the arm of the sofa, watching Thor carefully.

“What will happen with Loki now?”

That was the real question. He was technically still a wanted criminal on both Earth and Asgard and either had reason to lock him straight back up again.

“I think he’s been through more than enough to atone for what he’s done.”

Thor’s answer was soft but emphatic. The underlying ‘touch my brother and you die’ was less than subtle.

As it was Steve merely nodded in response. “From what you’ve told us I don’t think it would be right to have rescued him purely to throw him straight back into a prison.” He glanced at Fury to see how this would go down, but the Director looked like he agreed.

Thor smiled wanly. “I doubt he will be a threat to anybody for a very long time.”

“I can’t imagine Loki won’t fight back from this. He’s the first person to take a head-shot from my shield without flinching.” Steve tried to sound reassuring.

“And Clint blew him up.” Natasha added.

“And Hulk used him to remodel the floor.” Bruce grinned slightly at that.

Fury raised an eyebrow at them all. “Should I even mention that he put up with Tony Stark? That alone should prove his immortality.”

Thor looked slightly more amused at that. “Thank you, my friends. I am aware how much he has wronged you all in the past but…”

“But he’s your baby brother, and you thought he was dead.” Bruce finished for him. “And now he’s injured beyond reason. We get it, Thor. We don’t exactly know what this must be like for you, but we can understand how you are feeling.”

The God smiled again at that. “I must return back home soon. I don’t like leaving Loki so soon after finding him, and I feel like I have somewhat abandoned Clint and Tony in an alien world.”

“That’s understandable. Make sure you rest before leaving though, you look bloody exhausted, God or not.” Fury wasn’t one for subtlety and actually drew a laugh from said God.

“Agreed.”

MWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMW

Tony woke to the long-forgotten feeling of a head resting on his shoulder.
He was still in the awkward position he’d fallen asleep in, and his back was protesting vehemently. However, long black hair was tickling his nose and that made the pain shooting through his spine all worth it. Loki was apparently still fast asleep, his soft even breathing blowing across Tony’s collarbone. They had both moved around somewhat and although they’d fallen asleep with Loki’s arm over Tony’s shoulders it had slipped down now to rest across his waist, oddly short due to his missing hand. His remaining hand was still grasping the inventor’s, their fingers entwined.

For a long time Tony didn’t move, just lay there and watched the trickster sleeping. Loki’s chin was tucked into the man’s shoulder, the soft bandages that covered most of his face pressed against Tony’s throat. For all that his expression was mostly hidden by the fabric, he looked peaceful.

“I found you.” Tony ran a gentle finger along Loki’s chin, tracing the familiar dip and rise. “I actually managed to find you…” There was a deep feeling in the back of his throat – the sort of painful constriction that he recognised all too well as a large well of emotion that was wanting to come out. Not yet. There would be a time for letting everything overwhelm him later; right now all he wanted to do was stare at his lover and try to make his brain unwind.

Seven years of the constant drumming in his head; *find Loki, find Loki, find Loki*...

Now it was time for the drums to stop. Loki was here in his arms.

Not in one piece, true, but he was here.

*Not in one piece*...

Tony had to admit to being frightened if his thoughts strayed towards the future. Loki had been hurt in ways he couldn’t even imagine and it was uncertain what would happen now.

The man knew what torture could do to the mind of a human but had no idea what the affect would be on an immortal God. For all he knew, Loki had been through this before. Or maybe they had broken his mind. There wasn’t much to go on at the moment, what with the lack of communication. That Loki had recognised him – and Odin – was a good sign at least. There was something there, some spark, but it would be a while before they would know how psychologically damaged the trickster now was.

Tony knew all too well just what that sort of damage could be like. His own brief stint in Afghanistan had given him far more of an insight than he would have ever liked. PTSD, shame, guilt, nightmares, flashbacks, depression, and the list went on. Torture ripped away your dignity and shredded it infront of you. The man knew this, and was also well aware that as awful as his own experience had been it was nothing compared to what Loki had gone through.

His mind’s eye persisted in bringing back the memory of that awful wall of jars. Five of them in particular.

Five children.

He had no idea how Loki felt about the tiny bodies. Had he loved them? Hated them? Would he be angry that Tony hadn’t brought them back safely for a decent burial?

At the time Ironman just hadn’t been thinking. They had Loki alive but seriously injured, they weren’t going to waste time with that wall of horrors. He wondered if he had made a mistake there, now. Should he have brought those five jars too?

Tony was drawn from his dark musing as Loki suddenly tensed next to him, a low whimper escaping his throat. For a long moment Stark wondered if the God knew what was going on and if
it was therefore terror upon waking up that was the cause. However, Loki’s grip on his hand tightened and he pressed his face harder into Tony’s shoulder, making the horrible little sound again.

Not fright. Pain.

Loki had woken initially as confused as the first time, but the memories came back clearer and he found it easier to recall finding Tony beside him. However, any comfort from that knowledge was lost under the torrent of pain flooding through him.

It had been there earlier, but nowhere near as bad as this and it was obvious that the first time he had woken someone must have blocked it for him so that he couldn’t feel it to its full extent. The Aesir healers had ways of making pain invisible by using magic, so that although it was still there, the patient couldn’t feel it. However, such charms only lasted a short amount of time and it seemed his had worn off.

There were gentle hands running across his face and he pressed into the touch, trying desperately to convey that he needed help.

For Tony it was terrifying to see the trickster expressing pain so freely. This was the guy who had almost successfully stayed silent during labour, who hated showing any sort of weakness and who had been Hulk-smashed seemingly without any ill effects. But now there was simply too much pain, and that was a terrifying thought.

“Hey? Healers? Anybody?” Loki’s hand was clutching his like a life-line so Tony wasn’t going to let go, but he looked around desperately for any way of calling for help.

As it was someone must have heard him, since the door to the small room opened to reveal one of the white-robed Aesir. He didn’t seem at all alarmed or surprised to see the situation, instead smiling at Tony.

“How long has he been awake?”

“Uh, a few minutes? He’s in pain though, can you-?”

“Help? Yes.” The man moved up to the bed, looking over Loki with a compassionate but professional gaze. “Move back please. You can continue holding his hand – I don’t want to worry him and your presence seems calming – but I need a bit of space.”

Tony did as he was asked, sitting up so that the healer could gently place his palms on Loki’s shoulders. The trickster instinctively tensed up, almost cringing, before recognising the gesture – which made sense since Loki must have had the spell performed on him countless times when he was younger.

A burgundy glow erupted around the healer’s hands and moments later the pain and tenseness left the patient’s body and he relaxed back against the pillows with a sigh.

“There, I believe that is better.”

“You took the pain away?”

“I blocked it. It’s there, he just can’t feel it.”

A bit like paracetamol then, in Tony’s mind. He felt Loki’s fingers trying to squeeze his own and knew that the God was probably wondering what was going to happen.
“So…what now? How does he even start to mend from this?”

The healer smiled. “You really do care, don’t you? Everyone is wondering about you, you realise? The mortal who would save the God of Lies. Not many would go so far for Prince Loki.”

“Yeah well. I’m just that special.” Tony really didn’t know if he should be offended or not by that. It was also quite a revealing look into Loki’s standing in public opinion. He was still a Prince, despite everything, but certainly not a much liked one. “So, getting better? Will he?”

“We will do what we can, mortal.”

Right, that was offensive.

“Yeah, no. Not happening. My name is Tony, or Mr Stark. Call me ‘mortal’ and I’m going to call you ‘saw-bones’.”

Maybe he was expecting an affronted response, but instead the medic snorted with laughter as he carefully started to check the bandages around Loki’s face. “Understood, Mr Stark. You may call me Ragnar.” He peeled back the layers around the trickster’s eyes, a calming hand cupping Loki’s face to keep him still as he flinched back from the unexpected contact. The deep holes looked exactly the same since Tony last saw them but the medic seemed to be pleased with their appearance and moved on to check the other wounds. Loki cottoned on to what was happening and relaxed again, although he still refused to relinquish his link to Tony.

The man strongly suspected that it was less a sentimental thing and far more that Loki needed some sort of anchor of familiarity. He knew that the hand he was holding was Tony’s and if he let go there was a chance that he wouldn’t get it back, so letting go was obviously not an option. Tony got that and really didn’t mind. He could see that Loki wasn’t going anywhere and still didn’t want the trickster out of his sight.

“Given his condition I think it will be possible to attempt to restore the Prince’s hearing today.” Ragnar said cheerfully. “If he can hear us then we can explain everything else to him.”

Tony nodded, his throat tightening up again. Loki would be able to hear him again…

“Will it take long?”

“No. It may not be successful though.”

Stark remembered what they had said about Loki’s magic being blocked and not being able to return it in one go. He could see how that would complicate matters. Loki had never been able to heal wounds inflicted by the chitauri and seeing how Odin’s own magic had been affected by the chitauri technology, Tony could understand why this was going to be an extremely difficult process.

“Shouldn’t his parents be here? Have they even been to see him yet?”

Ragnar was busying himself with a fresh roll of bandages, but looked up at the question. “The King and Queen were here earlier before you came in, and the king came back whilst the both of you were asleep.”

“Oh…” Tony wasn’t one for blushing usually, but the thought of the King of Asgard finding himself and Loki snuggled up like a pair of teenagers was embarrassing. Well, sort of snuggled, since he’d been in an awkward position and Loki couldn’t technically move, but close enough. Bad enough. “But won’t they want to be here for this?”
“The King requested that you are here instead. He is not certain how the Prince will react towards them, whereas he has been calm and receptive towards you. Once the Prince is more able to communicate then the King and Queen will speak with him.”

That was... unusually tactful for someone whom Loki had bad-mouthed for the whole time that Tony had known him. But then he’d seen that already; Odin had been prepared to do anything to get the trickster back.

The father and son definitely needed to talk at some point.

“Alright, I need you to try and make him aware that I’m going to work on his ears. Can you do that?”

Tony nodded.

Loki was uncertain as to what was happening. He recognised that Stark was still there and that there had to be a second person since the pain had been blocked but beyond that it was all a confusing jumble of sensations. Also, just because he couldn’t feel the pain didn’t mean that it wasn’t still there and the side-effects – the exhaustion, the tremors, the nausea – were still wreaking havoc.

He felt a squeeze on his hand, Tony trying to get his hazy attention, and tried to apply pressure back in reply. His grip was weak but it seemed that he had got his message through. The hand in his moved, slipping out of his loose hold and running up his arm – a firm touch so that he could know exactly where Tony was – and made its way across his shoulder to his neck.

For a long moment he couldn’t understand what Tony was doing. The man’s fingers ran up to where the bandages were covering the ruin of his left ear, then very gently tapped there. It didn’t hurt, not with the spell running through him, but it was uncomfortable and he twitched away from the pressure. The touch followed, but this time was a gentle but constant pressure rubbing over the wound site, rather than tapping.

Okay, so Tony was trying to say something about his ears…

He startled when a different pair of hands gently clasped over both sides of his head and panic erupted irrationally. They were holding him down. He couldn’t fight; there was absolutely no strength left in his body for that. All he could do was shy away, trying to escape the unwanted contact.

Tony’s hand was back again, holding his tightly and there was the scratch of stubble as a soft kiss was pressed to the back of his knuckles. It helped somewhat; Tony wouldn’t be trying to calm him down unless whatever was happening was safe and that did go some way to releasing the panic a little.

Then there was a curious warmth over both ears that his sluggish mind took far too long to process as magic.

Oh. They were trying to heal his ears…

The realisation made it all a little more bearable, but he didn’t have time to relax again. He was well aware that his own magic was still blocked – could feel it curling around at the back of his mind – but as the energy washed over his ears there was a second wave of power, this time coming from his own supplies. The healer had opened a channel to allow a small portion of his own magic out to aid the healing.
It was a good plan and technically would work. However, Loki’s body had been starved of its own magic for seven years and was unable to handle it in any amount – even small doses. It burned. His own power, even such a tiny amount and it was burning him up from the inside out.

There was a vibration through his throat and he knew that he had cried out in pain. Tony’s hand squeezed fiercely, something for him to focus on and ground himself, but it didn’t do anything to alleviate the wave of fire rushing through him.

It hurt!

Things weren’t supposed to hurt anymore, but this hurt!

And then the hands over his ears released and the warm foreign energy retreated, just leaving his own burning him up.

He wasn’t aware how long it was before the pain retreated down to a more manageable level as the tiny portion of magic settled down, but it felt like an eternity. Valhalla, if that was what only a small portion was like to merely heal his ears then Norns only knew how bad it would be to fix some of the bigger wounds.

He felt drained, sleep – or possibly unconsciousness – calling out to him.

However, that wasn’t going to be an option when he realised that the bandages wrapped over the holes where his ears had been were slowly being removed. The areas felt different, but he had been so distracted by the horrendous pain that he hadn’t paid any attention to any changes made.

“Loki…?”

He gasped, heard himself gasp as the quiet whisper took him by surprise.

“Loki, can you hear me?”

The trickster turned his head towards the soft sound, feeling his heart hammering as he realised what had happened.

He could hear.

And he could hear Tony. Could hear the man sobbing quietly, whispering his name over and over.

Tony’s voice.

It was the most amazing sound he had ever heard.

Untangling his hand from the human’s he reached out blindly, following the sound alone to cup Tony’s cheek, finding tears there.

“Hey you.” The man sounded broken, but Loki could feel his facial muscles move into a smile. “Long time no see….”

The trickster used his gentle hold on the mortal to pull him down so that their foreheads were touching. He could hear his own breath shuddering, a hoarse sob escaping. It had been a long time since he had heard anything beyond the screaming silence that had consumed his world.

“I’ve missed you, so much.” Tony’s voice kept catching in his throat as tears escaped quicker than words managed to. “I’m so sorry it took so long to find you, so, so sorry. I went against what you told me. You said in that message all those years ago that you didn’t want me to look for you. Well
tough. How was I ever going to just forget about you like that?!”

Loki had almost completely forgotten about that message. It had been made on a whim, from Jarvis’ suggestion, and he barely remembered what he had said. However, it had obviously meant a lot to Tony, and he knew why; he’d included the three words they had refused to ever say.

The man must have been reading his mind because he lent in to brush his lips over the trickster’s forehead.

“You broke our rule about sentiment on that video.” He whispered. “And I have travelled across the universe and pretty much destroyed a planet to return that sentiment. Because you know what? I love you too.”

MWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWM

Thor had returned during the time that Loki’s hearing was restored and as soon as he heard the news made his way to the infirmary without delay. Tony had been explaining everything that had happened over the past years that had led them to finding the trickster, and whilst Loki was far too tired to really pay attention, he was comforted simply by the sound of the man’s voice.

He was asleep when Thor entered the room and the thunder God managed to be quiet enough not to wake him.

“How does he fare?”

“I think he’s as alright as he can be considering.” Tony still didn’t have his hand back, but couldn’t say that he minded. “How’s everyone at home?”

“Jarvis recorded Evelyn’s reaction for you. Thrilled doesn’t even begin to cover how she’s feeling.” Thor smiled.

“I can’t wait until the three of us are together again.”

The God nodded understandingly. “I believe Evie is of the same opinion.” He rested a hand on the man’s shoulder. “The healers told me you have been in here for the better part of a day; I believe you would benefit from a rest.”

“I’m not leaving him.”

“I’ll stay. Go and join Clint; he is going to the baths and I think you will find that it will relax you.”

Tony looked back down at Loki. The various aches and pains caused by the intergalactic rescue all queued up to yell in one go that a hot bath sounded like absolute bliss. He knew he probably smelt too – since he hadn’t had chance to change his clothes. But that meant leaving Loki…

“I promise I won’t leave this room.” Thor added.

If nothing else, Tony knew that he should probably see Clint, and he nodded with a sigh. “Yeah, okay. Don’t let go of his hand, though. He panicked when I did; I think he needs the contact to prove to him that he’s really here.”

“That makes sense.” Thor gently shooed the man up and took his seat. “I have spent long enough looking after my brother to be able to do so now.”
Tony smiled slightly. “Yeah, yeah. Okay. Thanks, I’ll be back soon.”

It grated, leaving Loki like that, but he knew Thor was talking sense. And besides, the trickster was currently asleep.

It didn’t take him long to find his way back to the small room he and Clint had been staying in, and the archer led the way – apparently he had been given directions by one of the other medics – to the public baths.

Neither of the two men had really been sure what to expect. The term ‘baths’ usually drew up mental images of the Romans and their approach to hygiene and it turned out that actually that wasn’t very far from the truth. The humans had been directed to one of the private pools, curtained off from the main areas and the curious stares of the other Aesir there.

“This is…different.” Clint looked at the steaming pool of water with a raised eyebrow. It was larger than a hot tub – big enough for about seven people – and surrounded by various bottles of what must be soaps and such. Tony was reminded of the bathroom described in the Harry Potter books where Harry opened the golden egg.

“Don’t tell me you’re prudish.” The inventor began to peel off his filthy clothes. He hadn’t given much thought as to how grungy they were and eyed the pile of clean garments Clint had been carrying appreciatively. Stripping off entirely he stepped down into the water, grinning as the warmth spread up his legs.

“We are never telling anyone about this.” Clint hissed, pulling his own clothing off and following him in.

However, it was actually almost impossible to see anything of each other under the water, and as long as they sat on opposite sides of the pool it was actually less awkward than they initially thought it would be.

“So…” Clint had reclined back, his arms out of the water and resting on the edges of the pool. “How is he?”

“Bad. They’ve restored his hearing so at least he has an idea of what’s going on now, but…God, Clint, he’s really not good.”

“You can’t have honestly expected him to be okay after all this time.”

“I thought he was dead after all this time. Hell, he might not even want to recover from this.” Tony ran his hands through the water, watching the ripples that formed. “For all I know he might want to die.”

“Seriously? After what he did, what he sacrificed to save Evie and you think he won’t want to see her again? You think he’d do that to her?”

That was true at least. No matter how injured Loki was, Tony couldn’t imagine the trickster not wanting to see their daughter. Loki was going to have to recover to some extent in that case.

“And what about you?” Stark asked. “You’ve just rescued the guy you wanted to kill. Are you okay?”

Barton shrugged. “Yeah, yeah I guess so.” He rubbed the back of his head. “I wanted to kill him, sure, but now…”
“Now?”

“Well, seeing what they did to him…Hell, even I wouldn’t do that. Even Natasha wouldn’t do that to someone. He did some really bad crap, but…He’s paid. They made him pay worse than anything any human could or probably any Asgardian. He’s suffered enough.”

“That’s…Not something I ever thought I’d hear you say.” Tony looked at him in suspicion. “Did someone hit you on the head?”

Clint smiled slightly. “Maybe even a hardened assassin can forgive someone in the end. I’m still gonna punch him in the nose once he’s better, but I’ll make sure not to break anything.”

“Considerate.” Tony grinned.

“And you? You okay? It can’t be easy seeing him like that.”

“No, it isn’t. But he’s got a pulse and that’s the main thing right now.” The man shrugged slightly. “He knew I was there, knew who I was, and at this point that’s a really big something. And his hearing is back, so that might mean that the other wounds will recover in the same manner.”

“Ever the optimist?”

“I like looking for silver linings. And hey! Can you imagine if he comes back home with us and joins the Avengers? We’d be unstoppable!”

“It’s going to take a long while before that can happen.”

“Well, yeah, but still!” Tony spread his arms wide. “The point is we’ve got him back. We’ll take it a day at a time and hopefully things will be okay.”

After the success of reforming Loki’s ears Ragnar – who seemed to be the Prince’s personal medic – was keen to move on and the next day suggested that they should attempt giving the trickster his voice back. It was a more complicated procedure; since it involved work on Loki’s tongue, throat and vocal chords. Technically he had some teeth missing too, but since they wouldn’t interfere in his speech it was deemed okay to leave them for another time to grow on their own.

It was slightly less excruciating this time – albeit only slightly – since the first release of his magic had already burnt through him once, but it was still obviously extremely painful. It also took far longer.

The effects of the healing also weren’t as instantaneous. Tony had been hoping that Loki would be able to speak straight away but it became obvious almost immediately that being able to talk was going to take some time.

Loki had had his tongue removed almost the moment he had arrived on the planet and had consequently spent seven years without it. He simply wasn’t used to having it in his mouth anymore and struggled to form any comprehensible sounds at all. His frustration at this was obvious and Tony spent the better part of an hour trying to reassure him that they couldn’t expect everything to happen immediately.

The trickster wasn’t impressed.

It took him nearly three days to be able to communicate effectively and his voice was so slurred it
sounded as if he had suffered a stroke. His attempts at saying Tony’s name came out as a lisped ‘Thlony’ which didn’t bother the man at all, but infuriated Loki to no end.

It was the first time he had ever been injured in such a way that wouldn’t heal almost immediately and it didn’t sit well with him.

And there were the nightmares to contend with.

Tony was now staying in the small hospital room on something akin to a camp bed so that he was there when the Prince started screaming. It happened a lot.

Loki was physically and mentally exhausted and when he wasn’t trying to relearn how to talk he was sleeping. Or at least trying to.

It was almost impossible, after seven years trapped in unimaginable hell, to just tell himself that he was safe now. He still couldn’t believe that he wasn’t just going to wake up one day and find himself back there in that cell again, or strapped back down on the table with some chitauri elbow-deep in his innards. Every time he woke up and found himself still to be in the suffocating darkness a terrible panic would overwhelm him. That moment of not knowing where he was or who was there. And fearing that at any moment he would feel claws gripping his arms again, dragging him off for more pain and more terror.

That was when, more than ever, he appreciated that Tony was there. It was only when he felt human hands – not chitauri claws – cupping his face and heard the man calling his name that he would slowly realise that it was all over and he could relax.

Up until he fell asleep again.

It was a vicious cycle.

This time he had woken up screaming himself hoarse and found Tony’s arms wrapped around him, the man’s chest to his back. He took a deep breath, slowly relaxing as once again his mind accepted that yes, he was indeed safe.

“Hey, you back with me?” Tony whispered quietly.

Loki nodded, feeling the familiar flare of anger and hopelessness as he found himself once again in darkness.

“This is going to get better. Honestly. I had the same problem; nightmares and shit, and it really does get better. You just need to give it time.” Tony said quietly. He felt Loki try to pull away and released the God from his arms. “Sorry.” He began to sit up but the trickster gripped his arm.

“No, shlay.”

“Okay.” He lay back down. “I’m here, I’m staying.”

Thor was there as much as he could be, and as much as Loki would let him.

The trickster didn’t seem to know quite what to make of his brother and depending on how and when Thor came to visit could react in any number of ways to his presence. He accepted that Thor had played a large part in his rescue, and was grateful for that, but was still extremely confused when it came to his family.
His nose had been healed – a much easier and quicker process this time – as well as his hand grown back. The healer had also made an attempt on fixing his eyes but apparently the physiology of a Jötunn eyeball was very complicated and the first try to heal them didn’t work.

For the time being, Loki was still blind.

The trickster lay on his side, trying to flex his newly reformed fingers. They weren’t keen on doing what he told them yet, but by practicing the movement he at least felt like he was doing something. He had told Tony to go for a while – asked Thor to show the man around a bit, maybe take him to see the training grounds or throne room or something.

He wanted to be alone, and thankfully Tony seemed to get that.

He appreciated that the man was there for him when he needed him, but that was the point; he didn’t want to need him. He had never liked being dependent on someone and as much as he knew Tony didn’t mind, he still longed for his independence.

He was free, but didn’t have his freedom.

Footsteps outside his room drew him from his musings and he tensed as the door opened. “That was a quick tour considering how big Asgard is.” He muttered acerbically. The speech impediment had improved dramatically, but he still lisped and it infuriated him.

“Tour of Asgard? Is that why Thor was showing off in the throne room?” There was amusement in the voice, but also worry. Hesitation.

Loki froze.

“May I come in, Loki?”

“I can hardly stop you, Allfather.” He heard Odin step across the floor and took a deep breath, feeling a tremor run through his body. He didn’t want to admit to himself the fear he was suddenly feeling. He could hear the king sit down in the chair beside his bed and was glad that he had his back to it.

“How are you feeling?”

“Tired. In pain.” This was the one meeting he had been dreading. He had no idea how Odin felt about him now and was terrified of finding out.

“You look better. When we found you I…” Odin cut himself off, sounding pained. “I thought we had lost you. Again.”

Loki couldn’t help shaking. He had vague memories of the rescue, mostly of fear and confusion, but in his dreams he remembered being picked up like he was made of glass, of someone being so careful to not cause more pain. He remembered the feel of a golden eye patch under his fingers, and barely believing who it could be.

“You were there. You thaved me.”

“Yes.”

“why?”
“Because you are, and always have been my son. And I love you.”

Loki twisted the sheet in his fingers. “But…I…” He felt a hand on his shoulder and stiffened again.

“Loki…Can you ever forgive me?”

They weren’t the words he had ever expected to hear. It was enough to make the trickster risk the pain of rolling over so that he could face the Allfather, even if he couldn’t see him.

“What do you mean…?” He whispered. Yes, in his own mind the Allfather had an awful lot to answer for, but he had never expected to hear the king admit to it.

He heard Odin shift and felt the hand on his shoulder tighten slightly. “I have made a great many mistakes in my life, but one of the worst has been not telling you the truth. I should have told you everything long ago.”

“Then why didn’t you?”

“Because I am a coward, and I thought that if you ever found out I would lose you.”

Loki let out a snort of ridicule, although it had an edge of hysteria to it that usually came to his voice when he was on the verge of tears. “Well you were right, then, weren’t you?” He hissed.

“Loki, I’m sorry. The way you found out was…”

“The worthy way possible? I needed you right then! I’d just found out that I was a monster and you decided it was a good time to sleep!” Anger leant his voice strength he didn’t know he still had.

“Your lisp just improved itself.” Odin sounded shaky. There was something in his voice that Loki had never heard before. The king never allowed emotion out that freely. “You know I have no control over when the Odinsleep takes me, but I agree that it was the worst time possible for it to happen. I wasn’t there when you needed me.”

“You were never there when I needed you!” There was so much pain in the way Loki spat the words out. “All I ever wanted was to show you that I could be as good a son as Thor and you just…you just said no.”

He heard Odin’s sharp intake of breath, but rather than the angry response he had expected, the old king sounded broken. “I never meant for you to take my words that way.” He said quietly. “I didn’t mean no you couldn’t do it to make me proud of you, I had meant no, you never needed to. You have always made me proud. And I just wish I had told you that more. So that you had believed it yourself.”

Loki shook his head hopelessly. “No. No that…you always…no! No.” He thumped his fist down on the mattress. “You don’t get to say that to me! Not now!” He could feel the awful pressure in his throat that usually preceded tears. “I don’t understand! How can you say that to me after all these years? After lying to me for all this time?!”

“Will you just allow me to explain to you?”

“Explain what? That you stole a baby who’s own parents hadn’t cared enough to keep it and raised it to hate its own race? That it makes sense why I was always the lesser one? That I’m just another stolen relic?”

“I never stole you.”
The trickster snarled. “Then what happened? Who am I?”

Odin took a shuddering breath. “You are Loki, and you are my son. That has never been a lie. As for what happened; I told you the truth, but never managed to tell you everything.”

“Then tell me.”

“It is as I told you back in the vaults; I found you in the snow after the battle on Jötenheim. What I wasn’t able to tell you was why you were there.” The king said quietly.

“Because my birth parents abandoned me; even my own race didn’t deem me fit to live.”

He heard a broken laugh. “Oh my child, is that truly what you’ve been telling yourself? That you were abandoned?” Odin’s hand gently smoothed back Loki’s tangled hair. “They didn’t abandon you because they didn’t want you. You were left because they didn’t think that you would be able to live. Have you never wondered why you are so small for a frost giant? You were born very prematurely, in the middle of the battle. The Jötnar have no way of saving a babe born so early, so I am assuming that since they believed there was no way you would survive, they made the hard decision to leave you. You were wrapped in a richly decorated cloth and there were the hurried symbols of a Jötnar funeral rite around you; that was how I knew what your name was. They loved you and they mourned you.”

Loki didn’t know what to say. He lay still, his heart thudding hard in his chest and breathing quick. He had given very little thought as to his birth parents beyond detesting them almost as much as his adopted family; to hear that they had actually cared for him was…hard. And confusing.

“From the moment I picked you up I knew that I could never let you go. Frigga and I had wanted another child, and there you were; like a gift from the Norns.” Odin’s voice was soft. “You were…everything we could have dreamed of. Quiet where Thor was loud, Studious where Thor was easily distracted, and your magic…A parent should not have favourites, but I will admit that you were always my favourite.”

“What?! But that can’t be right…” Loki whispered. “You were never satisfied with anything I did. I was never good enough.”

“I never intended for you to feel that way. I could see how distracted you were becoming with Thor’s progress and I tried to push you harder in your own studies. You had so much potential, far more so than Thor and it never occurred to me that you could not see that yourself.” Odin sounded so contrite. Loki had never heard that emotion in the king’s voice. “And I never thought to tell you because I foolishly assumed that it was obvious. I should have let you know every moment of every day how proud you made me, but I failed because I never dared show favouritism to the second born, and not my heir.”

Loki struggled to swallow back a sob and Odin’s hand moved in his hair again.

“I don’t know if you ever noticed, but I did try to show my favour in less obvious ways.” The king continued. “I encouraged your magic, when other men would have been forced to weapons practice I persuaded your teachers to allow you to use your powers. You were given the same lessons as Thor, when tradition dictated that the heir should be taught kingship and the second born put to more menial tasks. I tried to raise the two of you as equals.” He sighed heavily. “It is obvious now, though, that I failed.”
“Yes…you did…” Loki was shaking violently. He wasn’t physically able to cry, not without tear ducts, but he suddenly felt the burning need to do so. “All you had to do was tell me. Just once.”

“I know. And I will never forgive myself for what I have done to you.” Odin’s voice was choked. He was crying. “My dear child, I am so so sorry.”

It was a precarious moment. Loki had the choice to react either way; forgiveness or hate. He had been lied to his whole life, feeling inadequate and lesser than the others around him and it had led to a chain of events that spiralled out of control.

No Loki.

Odin had meant he didn’t need to prove himself. Odin had never doubted him. He had misunderstood the two simple words and it had led to the biggest mistake of his life.

He had let go. Abandoned his family, abandoned his life and tried to die. And when that hadn’t worked he tried to destroy a planet.

And yet, despite all that, Odin had turned his back on Asgard and come to save him.

Odin had saved him.

“I don’t know what to do…” The younger God whispered brokenly.

“You don’t need to do anything, Loki.”

“But…all this time…and what I did to Jötenheim and Midgard…”

He didn’t know what to do.

However, the hand in his hair was comforting and familiar. It was the same gesture used since he was a small child, when he woke from nightmares, or was sick or injured, when he was upset or tired. Always Odin’s hand smoothing down his hair. The silent reassurance of ‘I’m here. You are not alone’.

Odin had never intentionally meant to hurt him. All the pain and anger and jealousy was built up on misunderstandings and a fatal lack of communication. Yes, Odin had been at fault, but then so had Loki. So had Thor and Frigga and could he really spend the rest of eternity hating everyone?

Maybe if they had had this conversation before the chitauri had caught him the outcome would have been different. However, Loki had had seven years to transfer every scrap of pain and hatred into the creatures that had taken him, and that didn’t leave much for everyone else.

And he would never forget that feeling of the chain through his wrist breaking, of someone wrapping a warm cloth around him and lifting him up and out of that hell.

Odin.

The trickster slowly pulled himself upright, shaking as he did so.

“Loki?” The king sounded concerned, worried about the pain the movement could cause.

“You ask me to forgive you…But can you forgive me in return?” Loki whispered.

“Oh, my son.” Warm arms pulled the younger God into a tight hug. “You have never done anything to need my forgiveness.”
The sob that had been building in his throat from the beginning tore loose and Loki stopped fighting the embrace. “Father…”

MWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWM

The Other stared down at the ruined planet beneath their ship, anger flooding through him. The complex and everything in the near vicinity had been vaporised in the initial blast and the rest of the planet’s surface was now highly radioactive. Nothing could survive down there.

“Find him.” He snarled.

“Sir?”

“I don’t care how far away he is, I don’t care who is protecting him. Find him!”

Chapter End Notes

Oh my God, where’s Frigga?! Yeah, I know she’s massively underwritten here, but she’ll appear in the next chapter, along with other Aesir favourites.

Also; I don’t buy this whole ‘Odin’s an abusive father’ thing. Yeah, he’s definitely a piss poor one who didn’t have a clue what he was doing, but I really don’t think he did it intentionally. Loki isn’t the type to go to such lengths to impress someone if said someone was an abusive dick and Odin seemed genuinely devastated in that scene where Loki found out his heritage.

I think it’s just a case of classic medieval royal family where the mum raised the kids and the dad never had much to do with them apart from occasional lectures and hunting trips. Also taking into consideration that it was probably the same way Odin was raised. All in all, not a good situation for anyone but no one is really to blame. Odin was just clueless and couldn’t see the damage he was doing by making the boys compete the whole time. Thick, but not a bad person.
Chapter 17

There is something that is the same in every species across the multiverse; healing takes time. To physically heal and to mentally accept what has happened.

There were times when Loki couldn’t even understand his own mind. He didn’t how to cope with company anymore and genuinely couldn’t work out how to react to people when they came to see him. In a way it was the medic, Ragnar, whom he was most comfortable with, because the doctor was there with a purpose and kept any conversation strictly to Loki’s physical recovery. The trickster knew where he stood there. Everyone else threw him completely.

Even having Tony around was confusing for him.

The initial burst of emotion of being freed from that hell and reunited with the man he loved had died down and left both of them awkward around each other. It had been seven years and even before that they had only seen each other twice annually. They hardly knew each other anymore.

There was something about Tony that had changed and Loki had begun to realise it. The man had always been so light hearted and carefree – even having a child hadn’t slowed him down all that much – it had been part of his immeasurable charm. However, now there was…

Something.

He was quieter, slower, more cautious, more willing to listen. Older.

Loki didn’t need his sight to feel the wrinkles and fine lines that hadn’t been there when he had last seen the man. There was a disturbing sense of calm around the inventor where once there had been nervous energy and it was…well, Loki didn’t like it.

And he had no idea how to address it. Was it simply that his memory of Tony was flawed? Had he turned the man into some sort of perfect ideal in his mind during those long years? Or had Tony really just changed over time? Neither option appealed.

And he didn’t know what to say about it. Stilted conversations were awkward and silences were heavy. It seemed Tony didn’t know what to talk about either anymore. There had been a time when the conversation had flowed so easily between them that getting either to shut up had been the key trick – a notorious example being their first meeting complete with infamous Window Incident.

It didn’t help that his eyes weren’t healing.

The trickster had been blinded before but the damage had never been this lasting. This time rather than repairing an injured eyeball the medics had to regrow both of them entirely and it just wasn’t working. No-one had realised how complex the physiology in a Jötunn’s sight was and beyond causing Loki a lot of unintentional pain Ragnar had yet to accomplish anything. Eir – the most experienced and arguably best medic Asgard had to offer – had examined the prince’s eyes as well and although she hadn’t said so it was quite clear that she was also at a loss as to how they should proceed.

Tony had at one point asked why she wasn’t treating Loki herself to begin with, only for the trickster to sigh in exasperation and explain that Ragnar was more than competent and Eir was needed to run the entire infirmary not pander to the needs of one patient. As if Tony could have known that!
“Want me to read another book to you?”

It was an innocent and well-meaning question and it infuriated Loki.

“No.”

“How about riddles? I totally almost had you with the television one.”

“No.”

“I know my singing isn’t up to much but I’ve fashioned an MP3 out of my suit radio and we could listen to some music?

“No Stark.”

Tony let out a sigh, nodding although Loki had no way of knowing the gesture. “Okay, sure. I can leave you alone for a bit then. Yeah?”

Loki wasn’t even sure he knew the answer to that. Having someone with him was maddening and yet he was also quite certain that he didn’t want to be alone either. He just didn’t know what he wanted and that in itself made him want to scream in frustration.

He was free! Free and healing!

So why wouldn’t his mind accept it?!

There was the touch to the back of his hand; not holding, just resting there. He had apparently left it too long to answer the question.

“I’ll leave you to get some rest then.” It didn’t sound like the inventor was upset, just understanding and that – in some twisted way – made it all worse. The touch left and Loki heard footsteps reach the doorway before pausing. “And after all of this do me the courtesy of calling me Tony.”

The door closed before Loki could reply. He turned his head to one side, biting down on the urge to call the man back.

He felt…

Well, there was the thing; he really didn’t know.

For so long the only emotion the trickster had been able to feel was fear. Anger and hatred had left very early on in his captivity – both being far too big a waste of energy. Hope had held out for longer, but even that had died away in the darkness of the cell leaving him with nothing but pure blinding terror every waking moment of every day. It was a hard thing to let go of. Even now – weeks after his rescue – and he was still jolting awake in a flat panic, immediately expecting it to have all been a dream and to still be there.

It helped somewhat to wake up to feel Tony’s hand in his own, or the inventor lying next to him in the small bed, but although that made the fear recede quicker it didn’t help quash it to begin with. And the nightmares…

He rolled onto his side, ignoring the flare of pain brought on by the movement. In some strange way being in that hell-hole was far simpler than trying to recover. He knew where he stood with agony and terror.
The thought made him want to laugh and scream in equal measures.

See? This was why he was labelled the God of chaos. Only Loki could find such things amusing.

There was a knock on the door – too soft to be Tony – and it creaked open. Loki didn’t have the strength left to sit up, but since he had rolled over to face the visitor’s chair it was not of much consequence as his visitor approached.

“Oh my dear child.”

The gasp left his mouth unbidden and if it weren’t for the gently restraining hand that appeared on his shoulder he would have tried moving. “Mother.”

Frigga didn’t bother with the chair, instead sitting down on the mattress, her fingers running through Loki’s hair.

“Oh look at you, my little one, what did they do to you?”

The tone of voice and the action were hauntingly familiar and soothing. Loki could remember countless times when he had over exerted his magic as a child and woken to the gentle fingers combing out his hair.

“I must look a sight to you.”

“You are actually looking far better than when I last saw you.” Frigga said gently.

“You have been in to see me before?” Loki hadn’t been aware of that, although thinking about it logically it was hard to believe his mother hadn’t come by to ask about his recovery.

“Of course I have, but you have usually been asleep, or your mortal has been with you.” The gentle touched left his hair to cup his cheek.

Oh, that made sense. Not that Loki would have minded Frigga waking him or interrupting Tony. She was his mother after all. For a very long moment Loki didn’t bother to say anything else, just lay there enjoying the transient feeling of safe.

“How is the pain? Are you feeling any better?”

“I breathe easier.”

Frigga laughed softly and oh how Loki had missed that sound. “And there is an answer only you would give whilst still thinking it an answer. You are still in terrible pain.”

“It is improving.”

“Hence why I used the term pain, not agony.”

Loki smiled at his mother’s gentle reproof. Frigga was strong. So many parents would have broken to see their child so hurt, would have clung to them after so long apart. The queen of Asgard would not let herself do that. She knew that was neither what Loki wanted nor what he needed.

“I have missed you my little one. Asgard is a quieter place without your mischief.”

“And probably much safer for its inhabitants.”

“Much less interesting.” The queen had never had a bad word to say against her youngest and it
seemed that that was still the case.

“Not what the people say, I am sure.”

Frigga’s hand had gone back to Loki’s hair, combing free the tangles. “None dare speak ill of you. Thor has made it very clear what happens to those whom insult his brother.”

The huff of dry laughter caught in Loki’s throat. “Brother. That he should still consider me that.”

“You doubt his love?”

“I doubt his brains.”

“Well, we have always known that you were the cleverer.” He could hear the smile in Frigga’s voice. “Oh I have missed our little talks, as I’m sure you can imagine. When we first lost you and thought you…”

Dead. They had thought him dead. He was aware of that; Thor had informed him all those many many years ago on that bleak hillside. And in all the time after he hadn’t really given it much thought. After all, he had been caught up in everything with the Avengers, and then on the run from the chitauri. By the time he really had a moment to himself to stop and think, his supposed death was very far from his mind.

He hadn’t considered how his family had felt. Infact, he had spat Thor’s pain over his supposed death back in the thunder God’s face. It had been too easy to mock his brother and scorn the thought of his father mourning than to face the reality that his mother had had to deal with his death.

His beloved mother and she hadn’t even had a body to burn. No closure, no finality, just losing her child to an unknown grave. He had done that to her.

He had made her mourn.

“Mother…” Loki could hear his voice cracking slightly. “I’m so sorry…I didn’t mean to…I never wanted…I’m sorry.”

“I know, dear, I know.” Frigga’s arms surrounded him, the same warm comfort that had always been there, never faltered, never refused and that he had risked losing because of his own rash decisions. Loki felt a drop of moisture against his forehead and realised to his horror that it had been a tear.

“Mother…”

“I know you spoke with your father, but I am also well aware that he is not very good at expressing himself concisely.” Frigga’s voice was as steady as ever. “We all make mistakes in life, Loki. Everyone. Even Gods. I know you never intended for Thor to be banished, and I know that everything that happened after happened out of pain and fear. You didn’t trust us and we put too much pressure on you.” She sighed heavily. “You should never have had to find out the truth in such a manner. We always meant to sit down with you one day and talk it through; what did happen was…”

“A mistake?” Loki whispered bitterly.

“Yes. A terrible mistake on our parts. We failed you as parents then, and I will never forgive myself for it.” Frigga’s hand was shaking as her fingers resumed running through her son’s hair.
“Did you know, the very first time Odin placed you in my arms, I was terrified. He had returned from battle covered in blood, his eye torn out and telling me that he had found Laufey’s child left for dead. I didn’t realise what he meant until I saw that he held a bundle of cloth in his arms. You.” She laughed softly. “I had never seen a Jötunn child before. In truth my only experience with children was with Thor and I did not know what to expect. Claws, teeth, snarling maybe, I really didn’t know.”

“And..?” Loki barely whispered the word.

“And you were beautiful, of course. Blue when Odin put you in my arms, and all the more incredible for it. You were fast asleep, this tiny face with a mop of black hair and fingers wrapped around the edge of Odin’s cloak. I knew in that moment you were mine. I looked up at your father and he smiled and said that your name was Loki and that that you were now our son. Our son.”

Frigga was smiling at the fond memory, and it was warm in her voice.

“I have always been so proud of you. I know you doubt this, but just think; you are the child we chose to have. We wanted you. Your species didn’t matter, your blood parentage didn’t matter, because we chose you to be our son. Maybe if we had told you your heritage sooner it would have been easier for you to understand this. You could have been proud of yourself.”

Loki shook his head slightly, disbelief at the head of a well of painful emotions. “No matter the situation I learned long ago that self-pride is impossible when you are next to Thor in everything.”

“Did you not ask yourself why you were never given the chance to try wielding Mjolnir?”

“I am the second born.”

“You never needed it.” Frigga felt Loki stiffen under her touch and sighed. “You remember well what Thor was like before Mjolnir. He was clumsy and could not control any of his strength, nor his control on the weather. The hammer was given to him as a means of channelling his power and centring him. You were always in control of yourself and never needed help in making the most of your power.”

“I…” Loki was shaking. “I wish I’d known…”

“We should have told you. I am so so sorry, all of this could have been avoided with some simple home truths.”

The gentle kiss to his forehead calmed the trickster down slightly and he managed to grab hold of one of the many thoughts racing across his mind. “If this had been avoided, I wouldn’t have gone to Midgard and I wouldn’t have my daughter.”

It was one of the few thoughts that hadn’t been tainted by the chitauri, if anything it had been a point of strength. No matter what they did to him, if it wasn’t for meeting them in the first place he would never have come into contact with the Avenger’s and later had his child.

Frigga didn’t expand the subject of Evelyn – perhaps worried that Loki still stood by his decision not to let the girl near her grandparents. Instead she turned her attention to the other thing her son had gained throughout his troubles.

“You also wouldn’t have your mortal.”

“Tony. His name is Tony.”
“I know. You didn’t seem so sure of calling him that earlier.”

Loki turned his face into the pillow with a groan. He hadn’t wanted to be reminded of that slip up, although he had no doubt Tony would mention it again. “I did not intend to hurt his feelings like that.”

“Is ‘Stark’ and insult to him then?”

“No it is just that…It is his family name. I never chose to use it until Evelyn was born. It was the first show of sentimentality between us; that I called him Tony.”

“And you have stopped now?” Frigga sounded rightfully confused. Hell, Loki was confused.

“No! I…There was no reason for me to go back to calling him Stark. I do not know why I did, and I fear I upset him.”

“How much have you spoken with him?”

“He’s been here since I awoke—”

“And how much have you spoken to him?”

That really was the question. Those first few precious hours after Loki had regained his hearing had been filled with Tony quietly talking about how they had managed to find the chitauri base and how they reached it. Once Loki’s voice had been returned conversation had petered out. Yes, they had exchanged words of love, but thing’s just weren’t…right.

“I do not know what to say.” He finally muttered. “I try to talk of love, yet how can I be certain he is still the person I fell in love with? I want to speak normally again yet how can I talk about ordinary things when my mind is still so full of those horrors I faced?”

“Have you tried speaking to him of what happened to you?”

That made him physically shy away. “No. I do not wish to even think of that torture any more than I have to. The nightmares do a fine enough job of reminding me and Tony already does more than I could have believed simply by waking me from them and telling me that I’m alright. He does not need the added burden of knowing what it is I dream of.”

“And have you told him that?” Frigga’s tone of voice hadn’t changed; a lulling almost hypnotic note.

“…No. I have not.”

“Maybe you should.” There was the gentle brush of lips to his forehead. “Your body is healing, Loki. It is time you started letting your mind do the same.” The queen smoothed his hair back with a sigh. “I am afraid that I must go now, but I can return tomorrow if you wish?” At her son’s nod she continued. “Think on what I have said – talking with your mortal, your Tony, will help more than you think and in more ways than one. I wish for the day when Asgard rightfully fears your tricks once more, and I believe this human can speed your recovery until such a time.”

“I doubt Asgard will thank you for wishing my mischief upon her.” Loki managed a small grin and heard his mother laugh.

“My dear child; Asgard doesn’t have a choice in the matter.” She patted his cheek fondly before rising gracefully. “I will see you soon.”
Loki heard the door swing closed again and settled back against the pillows. He had missed his mother in the near twenty years he had been away from Asgard. However, as much as he wanted to just lie back and relax his body was complaining. Even now talking for so long and about such emotional matters was wearing. There was a fierce ache running down his back and the empty holes where his eyes should sit were stinging again.

Damn this infernal weakness! Loki felt that dark dread once more that he would never know what it was like to be free of pain. Free of fear.

Free of the unending tiredness…

Metal cuffs bit into his skin; wrists, thighs, elbows, ankles, a brace across his neck, a band pressing into his chest so that it made drawing breath difficult. They were tight enough to bite and draw blood, but the pain went unnoticed, negligible.

Loki twisted weakly, his movement held fast by the restraints. He couldn’t move his head enough to see what was happening but he had felt the slice of a blade down his right flank, opening up a wound from the bottom of his rib cage to the top of his pelvis, a large square flap that was rolled back to expose the muscles underneath.

From there it was less easy to discern through the absolute agony what the monsters were doing. His scream was such a familiar sound to his ears that he vaguely wondered if there had ever been a time when he hadn’t spent every moment shrieking in such a manner. The muscle layers were peeled back with an expertise the chitauri had gained over the long months of doing this and the organs beneath were discernible through the blood.

The pain was…exquisite. Loki could not recall ever feeling the like. It burnt through him erasing all thought and logic until all that was left was the animal instinct of screaming. He couldn’t plead with his voice taken from him, but the words spilled through his mind so fast that he didn’t even really know what they meant any more.

No no no, please don’t, please please please please.

A claw was running through the wound, following the path of a renal artery. The chitauri seemingly didn’t have kidneys and appeared fascinated with the four that the Jötunn possessed. The artery led to one of the small organs and was pinched closed – there was no sense in allowing him to bleed to death after all.

Loki couldn’t even scream as the scalpel carved deftly around the thin layer of fat that held the kidney in place, simply choking on the pain, almost physical in nature as it forced up his throat.

Please no…Please please no…

…”

“Loki!”

The prince woke with a harsh gasp, his heart hammering a painful rhythm against his chest and terror clinging to him. There were hands gently holding his shoulders, grounding him and he reached up blindly to grasp the wrists.

“Loki, it’s okay, you’re safe, you’re on Asgard and you’re safe.”

Voice. He knew that voice. That voice that meant everything was going to be alright.
“Tony…” He heard himself gasp out the name and the tenseness began to leave his body as he heard himself speak. He could speak. He wasn’t dreaming if he could speak.

“Hey yeah, it’s me. You’re safe, okay? We’re in the hospital – infirmary or whatever you call it – in Asgard. You’re safe.”

“Safe…” He released his death grip on one of Tony’s wrists to run a shaking hand through his hair. “I was dreaming…”

“Yeah, I got that.”

Loki felt the man shift angle slightly and the mattress dipped as Tony sat down next to him. He was shivering, and the thought that a nightmare had caused him to react in such a way was humiliating.

“Hey, you want to talk about it?”

It was the same question Tony asked each and every time he woke Loki from such a dream, and once again he received a curt ‘no’ for his troubles.

“Okay, sure thing.”

Loki felt the man shift and the hand on his shoulder moved so that a warm arm could wriggle under his shoulders and loop around his back. He tensed for a moment – warring with himself as to whether he should accept the comfort. But then, what did it matter? Tony knew just how weak he was, just how fragile and useless. He leant back to feel his back resting against the man’s chest and the arm snaked round to hold him round the waist.

“I hate this.” His voice was a muttered hiss and he felt Tony tense.

“No one likes being ill or injured, Capricorn.”

“You assume I speak of being ill.”

The hold on his waist immediately loosened. “Well if you don’t want me here you just have to say.” Tony moved back and Loki grabbed for his arm, fingers grasping on empty air.

“No! I did not mean…” He felt the man stop moving. “I don’t want you to go. I just…”

“You’ve got no idea what you want, do you?” The inventor’s voice was soft, accompanied by a gentle touch to Loki’s cheek.

“No. Nothing makes sense and I don’t know what to do any more.”

“I think right now the priority is just to get better.”

“Oh yes, such a simple thing!” Loki snapped, pulling away again. “Just ‘get better’! Stick a bandage on and everything will be fine, right Stark?!”

He heard the harsh intake of breath in reply. “Yeah. Yeah, okay, fair point.”

The trickster could hear the tension in Tony’s voice, the tightness as he tried to hold back what he really wanted to say. The man pulled away entirely, his warmth suddenly missing behind Loki’s back.

For a long moment there was a very tense silence, heavy with exasperation and confusion.
“I’m sorry.” Loki finally said shortly. “I know you’re just trying to help.” From the movement in the mattress he could guess that his companion shrugged in response.

“I can go and get Thor if you really don’t want me here.” The man said evenly. “He won’t mind. Infact I think he’d like to spend some more time with you.”

“I never said I don’t want you here Stark.”

“You haven’t needed to.”

Loki heard the man sigh heavily and wished that his sight was back – he needed to be able to see what his companion looked like, to see his expressions. He scrubbed an irritable hand across the bandages still covering his empty eye sockets. They were stinging again.

“I don’t want you to go.” The words were bitter and he hated having to say them. “Look, this is just…” He stopped and chewed his bottom lip, trying to find the words to express himself. “I’m lost. I am completely and utterly lost and I hate it. You say it’s been seven years and I had no idea. It could have been days or centuries for all I knew. They did so much to me that… I just don’t know myself any more. And no-one understands.”

The last word was a harsh hiss and he felt Tony’s weight shift on the bed again.

“Look, Stark, I’m just…”

“Angry.”

The word was all the more unexpected because it wasn’t at all how Loki thought he felt.

“I am not.”

“You’re angry, Loki. And you’re allowed to be.” The firm assurance in Tony’s voice stopped Loki’s next denial, allowing the man to continue. “You don’t think anyone understands, and maybe they don’t, but there are some things that I do get. I’ve been locked away and hurt and neglected too. I know what it’s like to think you’re going to die every moment of every day. Not to the same extent, I know, but I understand what it’s like afterwards.”

The God’s expression twisted in exasperation. “What do you think you understand, Stark?”

“That you’re absolutely bloody furious with me.” Tony said lightly. “You hate me because I couldn’t save you sooner. Because I let them have you for so long.”

“I don’t hate you-” The words came out as a horrified gasp.

“Not truly, not fully. But part of you does right now, and that makes it all worse. You are so angry with me, and you don’t want to be.” He didn’t sound at all like he held it against the prince. “Part of you wants to throw me out another window for not rescuing you sooner, and that thought makes you feel so guilty that you think you’re going to be sick.

“You’re embarrassed at having anyone see you like this, and that makes you angry too. You’re scared to sleep because you know you will have nightmares. Every time the door opens you flinch – don’t think I haven’t noticed – because you still can’t trust yourself to believe that it won’t be one of them walking through it. You are tired and frightened and in pain and it all makes you so angry. And then you feel guilty.

“And there’s all that going through your head all at once. No wonder you don’t know what to do
with yourself.” Tony’s hand gently cupped Loki’s cheek, feeling the trickster shivering under the touch. “You’ve been tortured. They ripped away your dignity and shredded it in front of you. It still hasn’t really hit home that you’re safe, and you’re frightened. And that’s okay, that’s natural and real and it’s all okay. You’re allowed to be confused. You’re allowed to be angry. Nightmares aren’t a weakness and there is nothing to be embarrassed about.” The man’s hand brushed back a stray lock of hair and Loki’s breath hitched. “You’re here, you’re alive and you have no idea how strong that makes you.”

“Tony…”

“You know, we puny mortals have a name for all of this. All this not-talking thing you’re doing, and the emotions and nightmares and stuff. We call it PTSD; post traumatic stress disorder. And it’s alright to have it Loki. Hell, I had it for long enough.” Tony sounded like he was smiling slightly. “So, yeah. I don’t know what you’ve been through and I don’t know exactly what’s going through your mind right now, but I do understand the emotions you’re feeling and how confusing they are.” He cupped his hand around the back of Loki’s head, sifting his fingers through the tangled hair. “And I’m here to get you through it. Not because I’ve been made to, not out of some misplaced sense of duty but because I love you and I want you whole again. Can you understand that?”

Loki was trembling violently, incapable of speaking, but he nodded slightly under Tony’s hand.

“Hey, come here.” The man pulled him close and Loki’s fists gripped the front of Tony’s tunic like a lifeline. The God was taller than him, but slumped down into Tony’s embrace so that the top of his head was tucked under the inventor’s chin.

They had never really sat in such a position before but Tony was haunted by a sudden familiarity. The way Loki’s shoulders shuddered through the silent sobs, the feel of his hair, the death grip that pleaded for Tony to just make it alright again. It was exactly the same way Evie clung to him when she was upset.

He rested his cheek on the top of Loki’s head in the same way that he did with their daughter, figuring that the comfort methods for the child would probably work for the mother too.

“I’ve got you.” Three simple words that meant so much in the right context. “I’ve got you.”

Loki simply nodded again. “I know.” His voice was tiny and it really didn’t suit him. He took a very deep breath that shuddered as he let it out and his grip on Tony’s tunic loosened ever so slightly. “Everything hurts and I’m tired of it.”

“I’m sorry.”

The God shuddered again and his voice dropped to a whisper. “They were taking my kidney.”

“Pardon?”

“The nightmare you woke me from, my memory. They were taking my kidney.” One of Loki’s hands untangled from the cloth of Tony’s tunic and slid down to hold against his own side. “Here.”

Tony placed his hand on top of the trickster’s, feeling Loki’s pulse hammering against him.

“They cut in here.” He guided Tony’s fingers in a rough square around the area. “Peeled back the skin.” He mimed the action. “Then cut through the muscle. My kidneys are quite deep so they had to slice in quite far.” He drew their joined hands in a small kidney shape around the imagined wound. “The pain is…unusual when it so deep. There is a layer of fat that cushions my kidneys –
similar to a human’s – and they were so very precise as they carved around it.” He traced the shape again, his voice steadier. “They pinched off the blood vessels,” He nipped the skin through his shirt with two fingers. “Didn’t want me to bleed out; they were always so careful about that. Then a couple of quick slices and they were lifting it out.”

He raised their hands up, although his blinded gaze didn’t quite manage to face the same direction.

“It’s such a strange thing, to have something that was once inside you dangled before your eyes. For all the pain a kidney is very small.” He demonstrated with finger and thumb. “Much smaller than what else they did.”

“Do you want to tell me what else they did?”

Loki gently pulled away from the man’s embrace to ease back against the pillows. He didn’t let go of Tony’s hand, however.

“Maybe it’s time I tried to.”

Loki talked quietly for hours.

To begin with he had tried to keep his voice steady and his words rational, but after a while the story began running away with him. The words tumbled over each other as if they couldn’t get out fast enough, full of pain and blood and fear. It was like opening the floodgates; once started he just couldn’t stop.

At some point they had moved so that Tony lay next to the God, Loki’s back pressed into his chest and an arm slung over the trickster’s waist so that their fingers could tangle together. The closeness and warmth helped keep Loki aware of the here-and-now; he had never been warm unless the chitauri had decided to use a cauterising iron.

“I can’t have any more children.”

“What do you mean?” Tony kept his voice soft to match the broken little whisper.

“What they did to me…The healer said he doubts I will ever recover enough to be able to carry a child again.” Loki sounded like someone had shattered him. “I know we never spoke about it, or… or anything but…”

But the possibility had always been there. A little brother or sister for Evelyn. Another mini Loki-Tony hybrid running around, all bright genius and sparky mischief and adorable. Tony couldn’t deny that whilst he hadn’t actively thought about having another child the idea had always been sort of…floating in the background. A possibility and maybe a bit of a wish.

“I’m sorry.” He whispered hoarsely.

Loki shrugged slightly. “It is what it is. I can not change anything about it.”

“I…saw the, you know, back where they were holding you, those…”

“You saw those monsters they made me birth.”

“Monsters?”

Loki laughed brokenly. “They were certainly not children.” He took a shuddering breath and pulled
Tony’s hand closer to his chest. “The first four were removed from me before they were full term. I believe the chitauri wanted to understand more about how my species develop their young, not that those things developed normally. The fifth I gave birth to.” The thick ropes of scar tissue across his belly had been healed externally, but the phantom pain persisted. “It was…worse than anything else I experienced. The creature fought its way out and tore me to pieces in the process. It sliced its own umbilical cord and was dead by the time it was actually born, but it did more than enough damage.”

“I saw the medical notes. It said the chitauri removed your uterus…”

“No, my reproductive system was simply ripped to shreds.”

Tony had told himself that he was going to remain impassive and just let Loki get it all off his chest, but as bad as everything else had been, this was too much to hear. He was damned if he was going to unwrap his arms from around the god so battled back his nausea. The tears, however, were less easy to control.

“Tony, you’re crying..?”

“You really expect me to be able to hear all of that and not cry?” Tony still managed to sound sarcastic despite the roughness in his voice. “God Loki, they practically destroyed you. How did…” He swallowed hard. “How are you still here? Still you?”

“You mean how didn’t they break me?”

“Yeah, I guess.”

Loki actually chuckled – a humourless and dark little sound. “They under-estimated me. You recall the simple glamour I used that hid my hermaphroditic nature? Once I realised that there was no escape as they caught hold of me during the fight I moved the spell.”

“I thought your magic was blocked by their stuff.”

“It was. I moved a spell, I didn’t create a new one. I took the glamour and wrapped it around my mind instead as a protection charm.” Loki shuddered. “When they had me the first time, before New York, they utterly broke me and I was not going to allow that again. This time my mind, my sense of self, was protected. Not fully, not perfectly, but enough. For the most part.”

Tony tightened his arms slightly. “For the most part?”

“There was…a period of time – I don’t know how long – when the spell was redundant. It matters little since I have no recollection of what happened during that time beyond the fact that it happened.”

“What did they do?”

Loki didn’t say anything. Instead a shaking hand gently guided Tony’s fingers up to his head, running along the front of his scalp. The man frowned, uncertain what he was meant to be looking for under the long hair.

Then he felt it. A single bump of scar tissue, only the size of a pea.

“Loki…what…?”

The god simply drew his hand further along until his fingers found a second scar at an equal
distance from the first.

And Tony knew.

He’d thought he had a good control over his stomach but it didn’t prove to be the case now. Pulling his arms back he half rolled and half fell from the bed and scrambled to where a small bin sat in the corner of the room.

“Tony?” Loki was alarmed by the sudden motion but the sounds of retching told him exactly where the man had gone.

“Sorry. Sorry.” Tony scrubbed a hand across his mouth. “You don’t need this.”

“Don’t apologise.” Loki let out a breathless little laugh. “It was a reprieve, of sorts, you know? For a few days I didn’t know anything. Who I was, where I was or what was happening. It was… peaceful.”

It spoke volumes about the situation Loki had been in that it made him consider a lobotomy a blessing. He rolled onto his back trying to search out Tony’s position in the room as he heard the man climb to his feet.

“So…nothing else they did to you was fixed. Why did that wound heal?”

Loki ran his hand across the two scars. “I am not certain. I believe it was the spell, though. It was meant to protect my mind, and my mind can not be protected if it does not have a home in which to sit.”

In other words; Loki needed his brain. Tony coughed again, making certain that his stomach was going to behave itself, then sat back on the edge of the bed.

“Shit.” He rubbed a hand over his eyes. “Do you have any idea how amazing you are, Capricorn?”

“I lie here trussed up like an Egyptian Pharaoh long deceased and you think I am…amazing? Have you lost your wits after all these years?” The words could have been caustic – as his ones earlier were – but now Loki just sounded tired.

“No. You’re amazing. You’re here and alive and that’s more than I could have ever ever hoped for.” Tony found the God’s knee under the covers and squeezed it gently. “I spent every day of all those years trying to find a way to get you back, and at the same time wondering hopelessly if you were even still alive. And then I thought that even if you were still alive was there even the slightest chance that you still knew who I was? That you were still you. And I couldn’t really tell anyone those fears because they were all looking to me to be the one to tell them that everything was going to work. And I didn’t know if it would.”

“Did it work? Did you find this person you were looking for?” It was a quiet question and there was still something extremely disconcerting about the way Loki would try to look in the direction of who he was talking to, the bandage wrapped around his eyes making his expression surprisingly blank.

“Y’know what? I’m not sure.”

The trickster turned away onto his side again, but Tony just shuffled up to sit beside him again.

“But then again, I don’t think I ever really knew him, you know? Not really.”
“Oh?” It had an acidic bite to it.

“Yeah. Y’see, we only saw each other twice a year.” Tony said softly. “And we...weren’t very vocal about how we felt for each other.” He lent back against the headboard with a soft laugh. “The very first time we saw each other I blasted him onto his ass. That look on his face...Well, he got his own back by chucking me out of a window.”

“And again with that wretched window…” Loki hissed. However, there was a hint of a smile in his voice.

“But that’s the thing; there was this chemistry there the whole time.” The man continued. His hand found Loki’s shoulder and gripped lightly. “We started this...thing together. And it was excellent. All hot sex and stuff. I tell you; he was pretty awesome in bed.” Loki made a muffled sound that could have been a snort and Tony grinned. “Oh yeah, he really was. And we were happy enough since we agreed that it was only sex and nothing to do with feelings what so ever and we had some good times.

“And then somehow we suddenly had a daughter and things got complicated. He couldn’t risk staying so close any more. There were these things chasing him you see.”

“Did that bother you?” The prince asked softly.

“Yeah. A lot. And for a long time I didn’t know why.” Tony smiled as Loki’s hand crept up to hold onto the one on his shoulder. “At first I thought it was because of our daughter. I didn’t like the idea of her not being able to know both parents. But after a while I realised it wasn’t just that. It was...well...I don’t know when exactly it happened, but I realised I loved him. I’d never been in love before and it was quite terrifying and so I just...never said anything. I figured maybe he’d just know. I was a coward.”

“Did you ever think maybe he was a coward too?”

“It crossed my mind.” Tony’s finger’s tightened on the God’s momentarily. “But neither of us said anything, and that was fine. I rarely got to see him – twice a year – but for some weird reason it was enough. As long as I saw him it didn’t matter.”

“Why was he so special compared to everyone else?”

“I’m not sure. He was clever, sure, and seemed to know pretty much everything about everything but there was more than that.” Tony shrugged slightly. “He was funny, and sarcastic, and understood the way I jumped from tangent to tangent. He was passionate about the things he cared for, and fiercely protected what was his own. And...there was trust.”

Loki seemed confused by that word. “Trust?”

“Yeah. I trusted him. He could have killed me with a flick of his hand, and I never once feared for my life while we were together. And he trusted me too; which no one had really done before. He let me see him at his most vulnerable and trusted me not to hurt him; emotionally or physically.”

“But you say you didn’t know him.”

“No. Not really. Just like he didn’t really know me. Didn’t really matter though. I launched a satellite from Pluto, stormed into another galaxy and nuked a bunch of aliens all for him. Much better love story than Romeo and Juliet. However, I don’t know if I’ve got him back. Not really. Only he can tell me that.”
Tony squeezed the trickster’s shoulder again.

“What if he doesn’t know the answer himself?” Loki asked quietly.

“Does he still love me?”

“Yes.”

“Then I’ve got him back.” Tony was grinning, but Loki could feel the tears that splashed down onto his shoulder.

Clint understood that Thor and Tony both had places they’d rather be than with him. He got that, really he did. After all, you don’t spend seven years of your life looking for someone without then wanting to make the most of every second with them.

All fair enough.

No, what really bugged him were the people Thor had asked to help keep him company. He was a big boy, perfectly happy to spend his days on his own; hell, there was more than enough of Asgard to keep him occupied. He did not need babysitters.

Maybe Thor had been feeling guilty about abandoning him so much, and was obviously under the very mistaken opinion that Clint and his friends would get along.

Wrong. Assumption.

He really disliked the stuck up bunch.

The Warriors Three.

Oh, and Lady Sif. Because a woman obviously doesn’t count as a real warrior. Not in Asgard. Clint decided that he couldn’t wait to introduce the lot of them to Natasha.

He couldn’t quite pinpoint what it was that annoyed him so much. Certainly a large part was the way they kept on commenting on the most inane things they had seen during their couple-of-hours long trip to Earth all those years ago. Yes, he was aware what telegraph poles looked like and no he didn’t care how they worked.

And by the way; it’s Earth, not Midgard. He should know, it’s only his bloody planet.

And he was sure that blonde fop kept flirting with him.

At least this time he’d persuaded them to go riding. He may not be some super-strong, super-tall (and seriously! Were they all giants here?) super-everything God like they were, but he could certainly handle himself on horseback. It was a trick stemming from his circus days. If he really wanted to he could stand on a horses back at full gallop and still hit his target.

Yeah, maybe he’d find a reason to show that off at some point. Had to keep up the side for the humans, right?

But for now, at any rate he was more distracted by how damn hot it was. Seriously, it was like Nevada.

They were currently riding along the cliff overlooking sparkling waves and below them Clint
could see a small beach. There was a steep path that he could see leading down to it and the thought of fresh salt water was very welcoming.

“Hey, is it possible to stop for a swim?”

He wasn’t prepared for the stares the innocent little question garnered.

“What? Don’t you guys swim?” He gestured at the sea. “You know. Front crawl, doggy paddle, mincing about in the shallows?”

Volstagg muffled a snort of laughter. “We swim, but not in there.” He spoke as if the sparkling blue waters were sulphuric acid.

“Are you able to swim in Midgard’s seas?” Sif asked at almost exactly the same time, looking incredulous.

“Um…yes?” Clint looked out at the ocean again. “What’s wrong with the water then?”

“Shoot down a gull and you’ll see.”

The answer was cryptic, but Fandral looked earnest so Barton slowly pulled his bow off his back, waiting for them to start laughing at his gullibility. However, they looked surprisingly honest so he – equally slowly – put an arrow to the string.

“Uh, any gull in particular?”

“Any of them.”

Well, it wasn’t like PETA was going to find out. He took aim at one of the white birds gently wheeling over the crystal waves and loosed the arrow.

It hit true through the breast of one of the gulls with a bright puff of feathers and its wings folded up around the body as it began to plummet.

“Right…what am I – Mary Mother of God!”

The sea opened.

A monstrous head appeared out of the waves, huge and arrayed with more teeth than Clint had ever seen in one mouth before. It was large enough to make the falling bird seem like a mere speck of dust as the jaws snapped shut over the morsel.

“The fuck…?” The archer stared open mouthed at the scene. In a sudden movement he strung another arrow and quickly shot down a second bird.

This time, as the monster rose again he whipped his phone out and took a photo of the head that reared out of the waves. His eye remained trained on the beast, not the technology, and he gaped as the head dived back down, followed by a long sinuous body and huge tail. Large flippers – almost like a whales – were just visible.

Once the monster was out of sight the waves looked as if nothing had ever happened. Gulls cried angrily as Clint raised his phone up and pressed one of the many odd buttons.

“Jarvis, you there?” He knew that the AI could technically route through from the separate server in Tony’s suit, but hadn’t tried it yet.
“Yes sir.” Well, you could certainly never fault Stark tech. It even worked on an alien planet.

“Can you search this photo I just took? I’m currently seeing but not believing.”

“A few moments, please sir. I do not have the internet at my disposal so must search encyclopaedic entries.”

“Yeah, sure.” Clint hadn’t taken his eyes off the water and Sif pulled her horse closer. It was obvious that she had been laughing – they all probably had, bastards – but now seemed intrigued by his utter confusion.

“You truly don’t have those in your waters?” She didn’t question what Jarvis was; probably assuming that it was common place for humans to have things like that which talked back to them.

“We…don’t.” The thing had looked damn familiar though, as terrifying as it was, hence why Barton was checking. A random sea monster was one thing; something he thought he actually knew was something else.

“Sir. I have your answer.” The tinny little voice came from his phone and he raised it back up to hear better. “I believe the best identification would be a *Tylosaurus proriger* one of the *Mosasauridae* family. Of course it is hard to fully identify since Earth has no photos for comparison, only-”

“Only fossils.”

“Yes sir.”

Clint turned the phone off again with a chuckle. “Well, I’ll be damned. You’ve only gone and got bloody dinosaurs here.”

“Dinosaurs?” Fandral sounded confused at the term.

“Yeah. That’s what we call things like that where I’ve come from. But all of ours have been dead for…oh I don’t know, millions of years at the very least.”

The four Aesir looked at each other. Finally Sif ventured:

“Should we show him a bilgesnipe?”

MWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMW

They did.

Clint nearly fell off his horse.

MWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMW

Loki knew something was going on when he and Tony were joined not only by Ragnar, but also Thor and Eir. The inventor had gone back to sitting in the chair and had been busily talking about how Evie had grown when they were interrupted and Loki smiled as he heard the annoyance in Tony’s voice greeting the newcomers.

“We wish to attempt healing your eyes again, my Prince.” Ragnar said cheerfully. “Lady Eir has changed the spell work we’ve been using so far into something more suitable for the anatomy of a Jötunn eyeball. We believe this will work with much more success.”
“Will it still hurt him?” Tony asked quickly. He scowled when he was answered with an affirmative.

“Tony, I have survived everything else. A little pain is worth my sight.”

“Yes but-”

“Shut up Stark.”

“Stop calling me that!”

“Stop being an obtuse dunce. I rather enjoy my ability to see and would like it back.” Loki returned sharply. He smirked at Tony’s huff of annoyance. “Please ignore my human. He is not yet house trained.”

Tony’s mock exclamation of dismay was drowned out by Thor’s exuberant laughter. “You must certainly feel better, brother! Your sense of humour had returned!”

Loki’s small smile was warm and genuine. “I believe it has.” He didn’t add anything else to the soft comment, which allowed his healer to hijack the conversation. It had probably been the prince’s intent.

“I am afraid this will hurt at least as much as the other healings, but the pain will also be as transient.” Ragnar explained. “We aim to…”

He stopped as Loki waved a hand to silence him. “Whilst I will no doubt want to know the specifics at a later date, right this moment I just want my sight back.” He pushed himself up against the pillows to sit a little straighter. “I understand this may not work but please go ahead and try.”

“Of course my Prince.”

Loki felt the two healers rest two fingers each on the centre of his forehead – not where he was expecting the healing to occur from. A large hand curled around his own and he recognised the roughness of Thor’s palm and squeezed back gratefully. It was good to have a grounding point during the extremely painful healing processes, and after accidentally breaking Tony’s hand when part of his digestive system had been regrown Thor was a much safer bet.

There was a gentle warning – that never actually prepared him whatsoever – and then the invasive and familiar probe of magic. For a moment it was surprisingly just pleasant warmth running under his skin, seeking out the empty eye sockets like little tendrils of light.

Then, just like with a light source, heat followed. Warmth became flame, flame became agony. Loki heard himself scream, falling back against the pillows. The pain followed him down and his grip on Thor’s hand tightened. He wouldn’t have been surprised if the bandages caught fire.

There was wet seeping across his face and he realised with a panicked jolt that his eye sockets must be bleeding. Damnit all, the healing was doing more harm than good.

“S…top…”

“A moment longer, my Prince.” The calm voice did little to assuage his fears but there was nothing Loki could do in response.

The bandages were soaked, the liquid trickling down his cheeks. He couldn’t understand why it wasn’t making them stop. Surely that much blood should tell them that something was wrong…
The pressure on his forehead lifted, almost physically taking the pain with it. His chest was heaving and he felt Thor squeeze his hand.

“Loki, brother, are you alright?”

“…Not particularly.” He heard Tony snort softly at that remark and tried to smile. There was salt on his tongue; presumably from the fresh blood.

“Here my prince, let us have a look at how well that worked.” There was no apology from either healer. It was only right of course; they were there to fix people, pain was going to happen and their patients had to expect it to a certain degree. Loki understood that and didn’t expect any worry from either of them.

“Mr Stark, please blow out all but one of the candles; if this has been successful Prince Loki’s eyes will be very sensitive.”

*If.* Key word there.

The feeling of the bandages being unwound was familiar, although unpleasant. The trickster flinched at the feeling of the wet material peeling away from his face – still sensitive from the healing and misinterpreting the gentle touches as pain.

However, as distracted as he was it was hard to miss Thor’s gasp and Tony’s triumphant ‘hah!’.

Rough hands cupped his cheeks, seemingly uncaring about the mess he was in.

“Open your eyes Loki.”

That was something he hadn’t been able to do in far too long. He hadn’t even had eyelids to open. Now, however, he realised that those at least must have returned for Thor to tell him to open them.

Trying to open his eyes was unfamiliar and uncomfortable. His lashes – something else he hadn’t had in a long while – felt gummed together and he reached up to wipe at them, and automatic gesture. Someone – probably Ragnar – caught his hands.

“Don’t touch them, we don’t know what the situation is yet.”

That made sense at least. Loki tried again and this time a sudden sliver of light took him by surprise. He flinched back before trying again, now expecting the almost-painful candle light.

“Oh…” Despite how dim the light was, he still had to squint. However, no matter how little he could actually discern, the simple fact that his eyes functioned enough to see light at all was huge. He blinked and the aura resolved itself slightly into separate colours; a patch of blue right infront of him, surrounded by gold.

A second blink caused the blue to morph further into a pair of blurred but concerned eyes and Loki let out a disbelieving laugh.

Thor grinned as his brother’s blood-shot gaze met his own, *focussed* and a smile of recognition lit Loki’s face. The green eyes were duller than they should have been, and were red and swollen but it was obvious that Loki was able to see him when the trickster leaned forwards to cup Thor’s cheek in return, his aim unerring.

Maybe there was an argument to be made that it should have been Tony that the prince saw for the very first time after so long. However, the man was more than happy for the two brothers to share
this moment.

Thor knocked his forehead against his younger brother’s, his hand going round to clasp the back of Loki’s neck.

“I see you.” The wounded prince whispered.

“I see you too.”

Loki nodded slightly, wiping a hand across his cheek to rid himself of the blood. He glanced down to wipe it away only to realise that although his hand was wet, it was also clean. Not blood; it had been tears.

“Thor…” He raised his gaze back up, eyes aching at the sudden use. “I’m sorry.”

“Loki…”

The trickster curled over into Thor’s embrace. “I’m so sorry…”

New tears soaked the thunder God’s tunic and he didn’t care as he folded his little brother in his arms. He wasn’t entirely sure what exactly Loki was apologising for – there was quite a large list to be fair – so simply held the slender God tightly. It didn’t matter what the apology was for; he’d accept it anyway.

MWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMW

“Sir, we have tracked the Betrayer to his home world. The world of the Gods.”

The Other snarled. “Set a course.”

“Sir? We can not hope to fight. Our army is too depleted.”

“We won’t fight. We will destroy. He is ours.”

“Yes sir.”

The Other went back to staring at the remains of the little planet Tony Stark had all but blown apart. “Such interesting technology. I shall so enjoy returning it in kind.”
Chapter 18

The lights were kept low to give Loki’s overly-sensitive eyes a chance to heal fully. The blur around the edges of his vision didn’t take long to go, but they constantly felt dry and irritated – a description that led Tony to liken it to leaving contact lenses in for too long. Loki likened it to having had his eyes gouged out then regrown. Funny, that.

However, Tony had no problem with the dark room after jerry-rigging a serviceable reading light out of the pack of spares he kept in his suit. He had been given free reign of Asgard’s royal library and, although hadn’t been there yet in person, was being liberally supplied with books by both Frigga and Thor. So far he had skimmed the basic history and was now thoroughly immersed in the theory of magic.

It was…somewhat disappointing. Large amounts of the books weren’t in a language he could understand and Loki was unable to read the small print, and others were going straight in at the magical equivalent of quantum theory when what Tony really needed was the high school edition.

“Didn’t you read the one I gave you all those years ago?” Loki finally asked, after having to break down yet another insanely complex theory for the human.

“Of course, which is why I wanted to move onto harder stuff.” The man sounded terse; obviously annoyed with himself that he couldn’t simply pick something up and be an expert in it straight away.

“You’ve jumped from the basics to the extremely difficult. It would take you a lifetime to reach this level of understanding. I will ask Thor to fetch you some more appropriate books from my room.”

Tony flicked to another page filled with runes and turned it sideways too see if it made any more sense like that. It didn’t.

“What is this stuff?”

“What does it look like?”

The man squinted at the page. “Uh…lines. Horizontal lines with little vertical and diagonal ones coming off at random points. Ooh, and this one has a little curly squiggle.”

Loki huffed with quiet laughter. “That sounds like Ogham. Early medieval script from Ireland.”

“And that’s in a book on Asgard because…?”

“Because I was going through a phase and liked the look of it.”

Tony looked back at the page with renewed interest. “You wrote this?”

“Who else is capable of knowing that much of the intricacies of magic?”

“I have genuinely no idea. And now I have to learn bloody medieval Irish if I want to know what this page says.”

Loki laughed quietly again. “I will translate for you when I am able to see the words clearer.”

“Yeah, cheers.” Tony turned the book the right way up again and turned another leaf to view a
sheet of pictograms. “What’s this? Aztec?”

“Mayan.”

“You’re a nutjob, you know that, right?” His tone was too fond for it to be much of an insult. He looked over the odd little pictures again before frowning slightly. “Um…Can I ask a question?”

“You’ve already asked plenty.”

“Yeah, but this one might bring up some bad memories.”

Loki stiffened slightly, but still nodded. “You can ask; I just may not answer.”

That was fair enough. “So, when we went to that hell-hole to yook you out of there we bumped into one or two of those creepy bastards and I could understand them. What’s up with that? They were also speaking English when they snatched you. How come?”

The God leaned back on his pillows so that he was staring up at the dark ceiling. His expression was a slight frown, but it was thought, not consternation at the question.

“I believe they spoke English when they came to the tower because they needed you and your group to understand their demands. As a rule it is exceedingly difficult for them to use any human language because they do not possess the correct vocal-outlet. In fact if I remember correctly only one of them managed to speak to you with any form of coherency.”

Tony nodded as he tried to think back. He remembered the leader of the group issuing its threats, but the voice had been extremely hard to understand.

“The ones you had the misfortune to meet whilst looking for me were not speaking English at all.”

“But-?”

“You were listening in Allspeak.”

Loki turned his gaze to watch Tony’s jaw drop and smirked slightly.

“I was what?!”

“You travelled via the Bifrost I believe? Did Thor not warn you it would grant you Allspeak?”

“No. No he bloody didn’t!”

“Do you mind that much?”

“I…” Tony stopped. Actually stopped and thought for a second. Allspeak. He could understand any language. Apparently even alien ones. Not read them – which was a shame – but speak and hear, which was more than cool. He’d never have to worry about going on holiday to remote places ever again. “What language am I speaking now?”

Loki shrugged elegantly. “Ancient Norse.”

“Huh.” The man scratched the back of his head. “That’s…huh. Can I speak to animals too? No, sorry, forget that, stupid question. But…can I?”

“No.”
“Damn.”

Loki laughed again. “You are the most singularly unusual person I have ever come across. Anthony Stark. I do wonder sometimes how I ever managed to find someone like you.”

“Just that lucky.”

“Hmm.” The trickster’s smirk remained but was marred somewhat as he yawned. He jumped slightly as Tony shut the heavy book with a snap.

“I should let you sleep.”

“I would rather that I didn’t feel this tired all the time!” He scrubbed a hand across his eyes, feeling the dip in the mattress as Stark sat down next to him.

“Need me to stay?”

“I wouldn’t refuse, if you do not mind.”

“Nah. Have I minded yet?” Tony didn’t wait for an answer and simply kicked off the loose shoes he’d been given to wear and settled down on top of the covers next to the God. Loki stubbornly didn’t move so it was up to the man to sling an arm over the trickster’s waist. “Get some sleep, I’m not going anywhere.”

“Hmm…” Loki didn’t sound like he needed telling twice. Infact, he sounded pretty much asleep already. Tony smirked.

MWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWM

The loud crash echoing through the workshop made Natasha frown, even more so when she heard the colourful language that followed. She rounded the bank of computer screens to see Evie scowling at a soldering gun lying on the floor.

“Need some help?”

“Oh!” The girl obviously hadn’t known that there had been someone else in the lab and jumped slightly. “Hi Auntie Tasha. I was just…” She gestured at what appeared to be an Xbox controller. “I bought that a few days ago. Thought I would see if I could make it better.”

“How’s it working out?”

“Meh.” She shrugged, reaching down to pick up the soldering gun. “I’ve modified it to be more effective and have a better sensitivity, but all I’m really doing is optimizing what already exists. I wish I could invent something to make it better. Dad can always see a new way of doing everything, and I just can’t do that.” Her eyes looked red, although a re-vamped xbox controller was certainly nothing to cry over. Natasha pulled up the stool next to her and looked over the work the girl had already done.

“This looks impressive already, Evie. Do you need to do anything more?”

“No. I guess not.” The girl scrubbed a hand across her face and Natasha sighed.

“Do you want to talk about what’s really bothering you? Your Dad always holes up in here if he’s upset about something.”

“I’m fine.”
“You’re your Father’s daughter. Now what’s wrong?”

Evie turned a screwdriver over in her hands, not really seeing it. “I want to go to Asgard. It’s been nearly three weeks and I want to know what’s happening. I want to see Dad and make sure he’s okay and I want to see Moðhy and…Well, I already know that he’s not okay and that just makes it worse. I need to see him! It’s been seven years and I just want my mum back!” The screwdriver slipped from her fingers as she buried her head in her hands. “I want my Mum!”

“You’ll see him soon, Evie.” Natasha knew she didn’t have a talent for consoling people, and it was confusing when using the words ‘mum’ and ‘him’ in conjunction. “Then everything can go back to how it was.”

That was evidently the wrong thing to say, since Evelyn looked up to glare at the assassin, her eyes wet and red.

“How it was? I don’t want it to go back to ‘how it was’! That sucked! I want a proper family!” She snapped.

“That was what you had, though—”

“Like hell it was! I saw Moðhy twice a year, what sort of family is that?! I want a family! Me and Dad and Moðhy living together. None of you can know what it was like!” She scrubbed her eyes furiously. “Waiting all year just to see him a few hours on my birthday and a few hours at Christmas. I practically didn’t have a mother! And knowing that he was missing us as much as we missed him and then…then when those chitauri came…” She slammed her hand down on the worktop. “I’m not a child and I’m certainly not stupid. I can imagine what they did to him over the years. I’ve had nightmares since it happened about what they could have been doing. And now…I need to see him. I need to see that he’s back with my own eyes.”

The girl’s ire faded and she sniffed miserably. “I want my mum back.”

MWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWM

Tony wasn’t what anyone would call a light sleeper, but had begun to react to certain cues over the past few weeks that caused him to wake up quite quickly. Mostly it occurred when Loki was caught in the throes of a nightmare, and Stark would have to wake quick enough to calm the trickster down and rescue him from the horrific memories.

It was for this reason that the man found himself being pulled out of his own dreams to find the God tossing and turning beside him, face taut and breathing quick.

“Hey, hey Loki.” Tony put his hand on his partner’s shoulder only for Loki to open his eyes and try to focus on him. “You’re awake?”

“Too…ny…” Loki’s face twisted, although as far as the man could tell it wasn’t with pain.

“What’s wrong? Are you alright?”

“You…need to…move…”

Tony looked confused, then concerned as the trickster suddenly shuddered, sweat beginning to glisten along his cheeks and brow.

“Loki, what’s going on?”
Loki waved his hand wildly, pushing against the man, but perhaps only by chance. “Go! Move! Get...away from...me!”

“What?” That was certainly not what Stark expected to hear, and was the last thing he wanted to considering how pale the trickster was. If he had to say what it looked like he would have said Loki appeared to be seriously ill. He was pale and sweating, shivers coursing through his body as he twisted and writhed as if in pain.

“Please Tony! I’m...dan...Ah!...I’m dangerous!”

There was a sudden spark lighting the dim room and Tony’s eyes widened as he realised it had leapt from the prince’s twitching fingers. Another green ember flashed across Loki’s hand and the trickster groaned again.

“Loki, what-? Is your magic coming back?” That shouldn’t be happening! Tony was sure they’d been told Loki’s magic needed to be returned slowly over time.

“Yes. And...I can’t...I can’t con...control it.” Loki’s back arched and his hands twisted into the sheets. “Can’t contain...contain it.” He opened his eyes again to try to focus on Tony. “Move!”

There was another burst of green light and the man didn’t need to be told twice. He rolled off the edge of the bed just in time as Loki screamed. It didn’t sound like pain though – sadly Stark was more than aware what Loki’s cry of pain sounded like – rather it was from the sheer intensity as the pure energy rushed through him. Sparks leapt and burnt holes into the bedsheets, discharging itself as it left Loki’s body.

The water jug on the bedside table turned green, then wooden, then shattered under the pressure. The small table itself became finely carved porcelain. Loki twisted violently, desperately trying to fight the wayward power back under control. It had been so long since he had had so much magic run through his body that he just couldn’t rein it in all at once.

Tony let out a startled yelp that became true panic as the sparks grew in intensity then – without warning – caught fire.

Bright green flames engulfed the God, scorching the ceiling and burning up the sheets and blankets. Loki was barely visible through the inferno that the bed had become, but as Tony – crouched in the corner of the room – looked around frantically for a water source he realised that the trickster didn’t sound like he was burning to death.

Or at least he wasn’t screaming in pain; which is what the man presumed would be the appropriate reaction. Then, even as Stark watched wide-eyed and more than a little terrified, the fire retreated. It was as if Loki’s body was sucking the flames back in, his back arched almost painfully before he fell flat against the singed mattress gasping for air.

“Loki...?” Tony whispered, his voice tiny and – quite frankly – scared.

The Prince had his eyes closed, trying to slow his breathing down, but nodded slightly to show that he was still conscious and had heard. Tony took that as affirmation that he could come closer, although he had to crouch next to the bed since the chair was still smouldering.

“Hey, you okay?” The man asked quietly.

“Yes...I believe so. That was less than pleasant.” Loki half-opened his eyes, tilting his head to smile slightly at Stark. “Sorry, are you alright?”
“Am I alright?! You just caught fire! Are you alright?”

The trickster raised a hand up to his face, turning it this way and that as he examined the limb. “…I think so?” A spark leapt from his fingers and he visibly jumped with a gasp, shrinking back against the pillows. “Oh!”

Tony’s eyebrows rose. “Your magic’s back then? Can you try something?”

“I’d rather not burn the place down.” Loki looked around and took in the irony of his statement. “Again. That is.” He slowly pulled himself upright, wincing as a few more sparks jumped free and caused the burnt quilt to smoulder again. “I haven’t set fire to a room since I was a child!”

“Is this something I need to worry about? ‘Cause I’m totally wearing the suit if that’s the case.”

Tony’s shaky attempt at humour succeeded when Loki’s small smile grew into a quiet chuckle. “I don’t think that will be necessary.” The Prince examined his hand again, then flicked it experimentally.

The ensuing fireball made Tony duck and almost took out the far wall.

“A little less power, maybe?” The man suggested weakly.

“I believe the Midgardian term is; ‘you think?’” Loki looked shaken as he stared at the hole now smoking in the wall. He jumped as Tony put a hand on his arm.

“Hey, calm down.” The man said gently. “You’re shaking like a leaf!”

“I…I can feel it.” The Prince closed his eyes, drawing in a deep breath. “All this power. It’s…How was I ever used to feeling this?” There was a sudden burst of sparks that manifested as snowflakes this time and he shuddered.

“Can you control it?”

“I’m trying to.” There was another flurry of snow, prolonged now as it swirled around them in tight concentric rings. He blindly pushed at Tony again. “Move away, I don’t want you hurt by this.”

“No, I’ll be fine.” The man’s hair was flecked with snowflakes, and when he shook his head they added to the growing snow-storm filling the small room. “I’m totally using you as a Christmas decoration this year.”

He received a glare for the comment, but the blizzard began to ebb slightly.

“What? You’d look pretty good on top of the tree.”

Loki closed his eyes with a deep breath, then held his hand out infront of him, palm up. It took a few moments but the swirling flakes slowly began to concentrate and spiralled down in a controlled manner to form a snow ball in his hand. The moment the sphere was a decent size he slammed it into Tony’s face.

“I am not sitting on a Christmas tree.”

The man spluttered then began to laugh. “Well at least you managed to focus.” He wiped away the slush sliding down his beard and flicked it back at the Prince. “Think you’ve got a handle on it?”

“I am not certain yet.” Loki looked up at the snow and a moment later it all vanished. “But I may have.”
“Has this ever happened before? Have you ever lost then regained your magic after such a long time?”

“No. I was rather expecting it to seep back gradually, not hit all in one go.” The trickster flicked his fingers again and this time a small and sustained flame curled into life, tame and controlled. “But I believe it is settling down.” The green fire lit his face, casting odd shadows before he extinguished it and looked around at the carnage in the room. “Maybe I should try to fix this up.”

“Don’t push it. You’ve barely got it under control. And besides; you look like a kid on pixy stix.”

“On what?”

“Sugar. Lots and lots of sugar. Evie goes nuts if she has them.”

Tony had a point. Loki was wide-eyed and shivering, his pupils blown as his gaze flickered from spot to spot in the room. He refocused on Tony and frowned slightly, banishing the rest of the snow from the man’s face with a wave of his hand.

A slow smile crept across his lips.

“I have my magic back.” The words were soft, but his voice shook. “Tony…I have my magic back…”

The tone said it all as his eyes glimmered with the threat of tears. He was completely overwhelmed.

As Tony pulled the wounded Prince into a tight hug the room around them slowly put itself back together again in a gentle glow of green.

MWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMW

The two humans sat in one of the grand windows overlooking the sea, eating something that Clint had been given from the kitchens that appeared to be the Aesir equivalent of popcorn.

“That’s just unbelievable.” Tony murmured, for what had to be the fiftieth time, when another giant reptile breached the waves. “A real dinosaur. Like, really real. There, infront of us, real. Alive and…and…and shit.” He blindly popped another piece of dough into his mouth. “I still can’t believe it!”

“That was pretty much my reaction.” Clint had mostly gotten over his shock, but that didn’t mean he had stopped feeling absolute awe when he watched the Mosasaurus dive back into the water. “Has anyone told you about the bilgesnipes yet?”

“Thor mentioned them once years ago on the Helicarrier when you were still a minion. Why?”

The archer grinned and pulled his phone out. “Here; check this out. I took the photo yesterday.”

Tony took the small device, intrigued at what else Asgard had in the way of fauna. He vaguely remembered the description Thor had given to Coulson; huge, scaly and antlers, and had always pictured them as a sort of scaled deer.

They weren’t.

“Is that what I think it is…”

“Probably not. What do you think it is?”
Tony turned the phone sideways and squinted at it. “It looks very much like a triceratops.” He glanced up at Clint, open-mouthed. “It isn’t, is it?”

“No quite. Jarvis said it’s called a…Jarv’? What is it?”

The voice came out tinny but clear. “A Medusaceratops, Mr Barton. Of the same Chasmosaurinae family as the triceratops.”

“Yeah, that.”

Tony ran a hand through his hair as he stared down at the photo. It was one thing seeing a giant sea monster, but something so familiar was a hell of a shock.

“Huh. Well, we can’t let Earth know; it’d be like Jurassic Park all over again.” His eyes widened comically. “Oh shit! Supposing they have velociraptors here!”

“You mean Deinonychus, the films got the name wrong. And way ahead of you; I already checked and I think we’re safe.”

“Since when were you a dinosaur buff?”

Clint gave an embarrassed grin. “I got carried away with the research after that Mosasaur.”

“Figures.” Tony’s attention was caught by another one of the sea monsters and he handed the phone back.

The archer watched him for a moment, his sharp eyes taking in the little worry lines on Tony’s forehead.

“Not that I’m complaining about some quality time with the only other human in this joint, but why aren’t you with Loki?”

“He’s with Thor.”

“And…?”

Tony shrugged. “And I don’t know. He only got his magic back a few hours ago and the moment the sun was up he sent me out of the room with orders not to come back until he said so. I don’t know what he’s up to, but apparently I’m not good enough and he needs Thor there.”

“Sounds like what Evie used to do when she was about eight and had a fantastic plan she wanted to hide.”

That garnered a laugh from the inventor. “Yeah. Yeah I guess it does.”

“And you two are…okay? I mean, it’s been seven years and he did nearly destroy New York and all.”

“Not going to let that drop, are you?”

“Nope.”

Tony tipped his head back to rest against the wall, staring out of the window without really looking. “I think we’re okay. We had a bit of a talk about things and…who knows? This could work, or we may end up fighting like cat and dog. No way of knowing until he’s better and we’re living together, really. I mean, I want it to work, obviously. I wouldn’t have wasted seven years of
my life if I hadn’t, and if things aren’t perfect then we at least owe it to Evie to give it a good go.” He laughed slightly. “How is this my life? I should be on Oprah!”

Clint snorted with laughter. “Just don’t marry him and you won’t have to become another statistic.”

“Do I look like the marrying type, bird-brain?”

“Oh I don’t know, with the right dress, the right flowers I think you’d look quite lovely.”

Tony threw a mini dough-ball at him. Clint, being the super assassin that he was, caught it in his mouth and grinned smugly.

“If it ever happens, you are totally being the bridesmaid and I’m letting Evie pick your dress.”

“Oh, you’re a cruel man, Mr Stark.”

Tony spread his arms. “It’s like you don’t even know me.” Then he ducked as Clint peppered him with dough balls. “They’re gonna kill us for messing up their nice clean halls!”

“Like you care!” The archer ducked a returning doughy missile and sniggered. “And you can’t throw for shit.”

Stark looked inside his paper bag to find that he had run out of food and held it up to defend himself as the remaining pieces of Clint’s snack bombarded him again.

“Help! Mayday! I’m under enemy fire!” He turned his head as a sound began to echo down the corridor towards the window they were sitting in. “Oh shit, someone’s coming.” He began laughing, trying to stop the archer’s over enthusiastic attack. “Quit it already!”

“Why? They know we’re uncultured humans – we might as well act like it.”

Tony tried fruitlessly to scoop up some of the mess of dough balls that surrounded him, but the footsteps were drawing nearer and two voices became clear over the echo in the hallway. However, he abandoned his clean-up attempt as it became apparent who the people were.

“I do not need your help. If you would just let me do these things for myself!”

“I can not help worrying, brother! You are clearly not ready to try this yet.”

“If you do not stop pestering me, Thor, I will turn you into a squirrel. A tiny one!”

“You have threatened that for years and have never once carried it out, so I hardly think that – Tony! Clint! I did not expect to see you here, my friends!”

The owners of the voices had rounded the corner to reveal themselves. Thor beamed at the two humans, but received only gob-smacked expressions in response. However, it wasn’t the thunder God that drew the looks, but the determined figure beside him.

Loki looked wan and pained, but he was standing on his own two feet, leaning heavily on a cane. He smiled when he met Tony’s awestruck gaze. The white hospital-grade tunic and trousers washed him out, but there was definitely more colour to his cheeks than the day before.

“Thor doesn’t believe I should be out of bed yet.”

“He’s probably right.” Tony rose to his feet, brushing off stray dough balls. “You look…miles better than yesterday.”
“I feel miles better than yesterday.” Loki took a careful step forwards, resting his weight on the cane.

“I thought you couldn’t use your magic to heal those wounds…”

“Not the wounds, but I could certainly do something about the malnutrition.” He waved a hand flippantly. “I can not say I was as successful with the muscle wastage, but I believe there is a significant improvement.”

“You’re walking; I’d say that’s an improvement.” Tony pressed his hand against the trickster’s chest, feeling Loki’s pulse working harder than normal from the exertion. “Damn, I forgot how tall you are…” He felt the vibration of prince’s quiet laughter bubble under his palm and grinned. “Hey, I’d grown used to being the tallest person in the room!”

“Sorry to break that illusion.” Loki’s quiet voice was filled humor as he rested a hand against the mortal’s cheek.

“No, I think I can live with the disappointment.”

Thor cleared his throat behind them and Tony quickly stepped away, realizing that he and Loki had been angling in to kiss. In front of Loki’s overly protective big brother. Probably not their smartest move. Clint completed the moment with a retching sound.

“Shut it birdbrain!” Tony snapped.

Barton smirked at him. However the grin dropped straight back off of his face as he met Loki’s gaze.

In the same moment that Thor and Tony realised it was the first time the two had really had contact since the trickster had made Clint his minion Loki had stepped towards the archer. And, leaning heavily on his cane, held his hand out in the universal gesture of peace.

Clint’s eyes widened as he stared between the proffered hand and the God that held it out.

“Seriously?” He finally asked, sarcasm dripping heavily off the single word.

“Seriously. You helped save my life and for that I owe you and thank you, Barton.” A slight grin lifted the corners of Loki’s mouth. “I did tell you that you had heart.”

Such an inflammatory comment could have been a suicidal end to the fragile moment, but instead Clint laughed.

“Yeah. Yeah you did.” He shrugged slightly, but ignored the offered hand.

There was the same sort of uneasy silence that had probably fallen as the Treaty of Versailles had been signed. The sort where everyone present was holding their breath expecting the first gunshot.

“So…Tony said you have your magic back. How much can you heal?”

Loki raised an eyebrow. “Certainly enough to deal with what I think is about to happen.” He answered with a wry smile.

“Oh good.” Clint grinned broadly and clenched his hand into a fist.

The ensuing punch sent the trickster reeling back, blood spurting from his nose. He was lucky that Thor had pre-empted the move and was right behind him as he lost his footing.
“Barton-!” The thunder God’s outraged cry was mingled with Tony’s yelp of shock.

“Jesus Christ, Clint! You could have waited a few days!”

Loki, however, laughed and wiped a hand across his face, smearing blood everywhere. His nose was crooked, obviously broken, but as he ran his fingers over the bruised area it straightened out. Misaligned teeth set themselves back into place and the bruising began to rapidly vanish.

“That…was actually rather painful.” His voice was indistinct around his cupped hand, but amused all the same.

“Good, it was meant to be.” Clint stood up, wiped the blood off his fingers onto his trousers, then held his hand out in his own offer of peace. “Nice to see you up and about again, boss. I still hate you, by the way.”

Loki wrinkled his nose a few times to ensure that everything was back in one piece, then reached out to take the proffered hand. “I would expect nothing less.” Then he grinned. “And it is good to see you again also, minion.”

Tony gaped. “Are you two seriously going to call each other that?”

Clint shrugged. “Eh, might as well. It’ll freak the hell out of Steve if nothing else.”

“I think the dinosaurs will successfully do that. And on that note-” He spun to face Loki again. “Dinosaurs! Why the hell didn’t you tell me you had dinosaurs here?!”

The trickster shrugged slightly, the movement awkward with one arm taking so much of his weight on the cane. “We never spoke of Asgard. It never occurred to me to tell you.”

“Hmm.”

Loki wiped away the remaining traces of blood with a shaking hand and winced slightly. He was beginning to look pale again – well, paler since he was naturally quite colourless as it was – and even if he was smiling his eyes were showing the pain that had nothing to do with being punched and everything to do with pushing himself too soon.

“You should be back in bed, brother.” Thor said sternly. “You shouldn’t have left to begin with.”

“No, maybe not. But since I have, I am not going back until I have seen him.”

*Him?* Tony felt like he’d missed a whole chunk of conversation, and glancing at Clint he got the same sense of confusion from the archer. Who was Loki talking of? He wracked his brains but nothing came immediately to mind.

“Loki, let us wait and go tomorrow, you need to rest.”

The look the Jötunn laid on his brother was icy cold. “I have waited near twenty years, Thor. I will not wait another moment. You yourself told me he wanted to meet his Fostri, and Tony has a right to meet his Sonr.”

The two words weren’t translated by the Allspeak, and Tony realised with a jolt that it was because they were titles. Names.

Thor had called him *Fostri* once before in relation to another.

He knew whom it was they spoke about.
“Oh boy…” He felt his jaw drop.

“Does this cryptic conversation mean something to you?” Barton asked hopelessly.

Tony nodded, dumbstruck. This was…pretty big.

“I am going to see my son, and Tony is facing the enormity of the idea that he has a step-child.” Loki explained helpfully. His grin came back, sharp and amused as Clint gaped at him.

“You have a…son?”

Tony still had enough presence of mind to roll his eyes. “Haven’t you ever read any Norse mythology, birdbrain?”

In the end Loki won the argument and Thor backed down in the full knowledge that his brother wouldn’t give up until he had his way. It was quite an insight into their childhood really.

Tony knew the general direction of where they were heading, and was unsurprised that Loki kept to what appeared to be the less used paths. The man wasn’t entirely certain how the trickster stood in the public opinion of Asgard, and realised that Loki was probably as unsure as he was. Better to keep out of sight until people’s reactions could be better anticipated.

Clint didn’t accompany them; accepting Loki’s thanks had been one thing, but there was still an ocean of bad blood between the two and until the archer heard and accepted an actual apology he wanted as little to do with the God as possible. Thor had wanted to accompany them and had been vehemently denied by his brother after it became quite clear that he would only continue to worry over Loki’s health.

To be fair, Tony was worried about Loki’s health. It was still only half a day since Loki’s magic had returned and he really wasn’t ready to be on his feet for any length of time. His face was now taut with pain and he had finally given in and accepted Tony’s arm to lean on in addition to his cane. He refused to say what was hurting, of course, but it was obvious that it was bad. Tony wasn’t stupid enough to suggest that this waited for the next day as much as he wished to, but he suspected Loki knew he wanted to say it.

It was a fair distance to Loki’s intended destination – outside the high city walls – and the walk had certainly taken its toll on the prince by the time they reached the paddocks.

Tony knew very little about Aesir or Jötunn healing, but it was glaringly obvious it had been far too soon for Loki to have attempted this. However, at the same time he knew that he would have done the exact same thing for his kid. Hell, he’d have dragged himself out of bed on all fours if he had been separated from his child for nearly two decades; he could totally see where Loki was coming from which was why he still hadn’t protested as much as he should have. This was as much of the healing process as everything else.

The field was – as Tony had known it would be – filled with horses. He wasn’t very au fait with horse breeds but recognised a few as ones found on Earth. Others were slightly too large, or too muscled or too golden. A scarce number looked slightly out of proportion – far too slender to bare any sort of weight on their delicate backs.

And one – far in the distance – had a few too many legs.

The pain drained from Loki’s face and his eyes lit up as he dropped Tony’s arm in favour of
opening the gate to the paddock. The hinges creaked – something so ordinary that it didn’t really seem to fit in with the grandeur of the home of the Gods – and the sound made the animals lift their heads in mild interest.

There was a shrill neigh, high and long, from the distance. Tony had never heard a sound from a horse hold so much emotion in it.

He took a few steps back as a blur of silver flew straight at Loki.

It slowed down a few feet from the trickster enough for Tony to see a simply huge grey horse trying to stop eight legs that – up until that moment – had been going at full speed. The stallion skidded on the muddy ground, kicking up huge clods of earth as he slid to an impressive stop that was timed to bring him only an inch or so from Loki.

He was enormous. A light grey, dappled with darker iron-grey splotches that concentrated around his hindquarters. And he had eight legs.

Eight.

Tony had visualised this, of course. Tried to work out how, anatomically speaking, a horse could function like that. Didn’t all the muscle groups get in the way? Wouldn’t it kick itself? And surely the war horse of Odin, child of the God of Mischief should have been either sparkling white or a really scary black?

But Sleipnir was merely a dappled grey, his eight legs all seemed to work perfectly well together and he had curled his neck over Loki’s shoulder, the trickster’s arms both reaching around to hug him tight and tangle in the long mane.

“Oh my dear! My darling darling boy.” Loki’s voice had broken into sobs, burying his face in the side of the horse’s neck. “I have missed you so terribly.”

And then – much to Tony’s shock – a voice answered the trickster.

“I was so worried, Möðir! One moment I’m with Afi rescuing you and Frændi Thor from Jötunheim, and the next Frændi Thor is banished, you’re king and everything is so mixed up I didn’t know what was happening! And then you fell!”

Sleipnir didn’t speak – not conventionally at any rate – but the words seemed to appear in Tony’s head without the need to go through his ears. The little scientist in his brain that he could never turn off immediately started wondering if it was a form of telepathy and therefore how it worked. The rest of him was processing what had been said.

They all knew Thor’s side of the story about Loki’s fall from the Bifrost – about how he’d had to watch his brother simply let go. And then how he had believed him dead, had mourned and grieved for the fallen Prince. It wasn’t such a leap to assume Odin and Frigga had reacted in much the same way.

However, all three had known the lead up and seen Loki fall to pieces with their own eyes. As much as it had hurt beyond measure they had at least been able to try and understand his point of view and see why he had done it. Even Thor – after having the situation with Loki’s parentage explained and having felt that raw anger aimed at him during the fight on the bridge – recognised that there had been some serious failings in their family.

What Tony now realised, though, was that there was another player in all this. The overlooked and perhaps even somewhat forgotten child of Loki. Certainly it was obvious that the trickster loved
his son dearly, but with everything that had happened, had he even seen Sleipnir after being brought back from Jötunheim with Thor? By the sounds of it, not.

Sleipnir had gone with Odin to bring the group back and everything that had happened afterwards had been passed on to him as second hand gossip. The news that Loki was presumed dead must have been all the worse and all the more of a shock for being so unexpected.

And then for the stallion to find out that his beloved only parent was not only alive, but had decided to wage war against another world rather than coming home.

Sleipnir had every right to be furious with Loki, but at this point in time it seemed he was going for the sheer relief of having the trickster back safe if not fully sound. Loki himself seemed to be falling apart, clinging to the stallion’s mane like a life-line, apologies tumbling from his lips.

“It is alright, Möðir, it is okay now. You’re here, I’m here, it’s all alright.”

The words had the ring of a mantra to them. Something the two must have repeated to each other over and over throughout the years.

Tony found himself trying to remember how old Thor had said Sleipnir was – how long the two had had to prop each other up over the millennia. Some four hundred thousand years if he remembered correctly. A long time.

There was a sudden pain somewhere deep in his chest as he realised that he could never have that sort of time with his own child. At best he had five years. Five very short, very precious years. He still hadn’t told Loki about it yet.

Five years in which to get to know Sleipnir, too.

It seemed that Loki was calming down slightly, his sobbing apologies dying back to more controlled speech as he tried to start explaining things. The stallion hushed him, both verbally and with a gentle head-butt to the trickster’s stomach that made Tony smile. For all that Sleipnir was a magical and apparently intelligent eight-legged being; he also had some very obvious horsey characteristics.

“Don’t let’s talk about it all now. I have you back and that is what I was most concerned with, everything else can wait.” Sleipnir nudged him again, on the shoulder this time. “Please don’t scare me like that again, Möðir, I don’t think I could take it.”

“I’m sorry. Nothing I can do or say will make this right, but I really am sorry.”

“I know.” Sleipnir hooked his head over Loki’s shoulder, the closest he could manage to a hug. “Just, next time, come and talk to me; don’t go jumping off the Bifrost.”

The trickster laughed tearfully, burying his face in the horse’s neck again. “Next time?”

“Well…You know what I mean. Promise me?”

“There are some things that a parent shouldn’t have to burden their children with.”

The stallion snorted. “I am hardly a child. And given that we’re immortal and both nearing half a million I don’t think you should pull the Protective Parent line on me either.”

Loki looked affronted and Tony gave a quiet chuckle. The small sound, although tiny, caught Sleipnir’s attention and he slowly raised his head to look appraisingly at the human.
“Ah yes, you.”

“Me?”

Loki turned slightly to look at him too, his face tear stained and pained. “Be nice, Sleipnir.”

“Yes Möðir.” The stallion untangled himself from the trickster and took a few steps towards Tony. It was suddenly very obvious just how damn tall he was.

“Uh…Hi?”

“I’ve heard a lot about you, Tony Stark, The Ironman of Midgard.” It was incredibly disconcerting to hear a voice but not see the speaker talking. At least he knew to say ‘Ironman’ as opposed to ‘Man of Iron’. He gained points for that.

“Um…Likewise. Nice to finally meet you.” Tony was extremely proud of how he stood his ground as the giant horse towered over him, then gently leaned down to rest his head on the human’s shoulder.

“Thank you for saving him.” The telepathic words were quiet, like a whisper. Tony had little experience with horses – he’d taken Evie to riding lessons, but hadn’t really gone near the animals themselves – but he recognised the gesture of a head to a shoulder as a display of affection.

“You’re welcome.” He slowly raised a hand up and rested it on the side of Sleipnir’s neck. “I’ll try to stop him getting lost again as well.”

“I’d threaten you about looking after him, but I think you’ve already proved that you are more than worthy of my Möðir’s love.”

Tony laughed slightly – somewhat alarmed at the thought of the giant eight legged horse threatening him. “I do hope so.”

“Shouldn’t that be my decision?” Loki’s voice was hoarse as he came back up to hook an arm around Tony’s waist. “I do not need my child to threaten my lover for me.”

“Not a child any more, Möðir.”

Tony couldn’t help it. He burst out laughing. “Oh God, you are so like Evie it’s scary! We’ve had this same argument so many times!”

He’d always sort of assumed that that argumentative streak had come from him, but there were some very reminiscent characteristics in Sleipnir’s behaviour that made him realise it was probably Loki’s genetics rearing their head. It was very odd to think how much the two might have in common. Especially given that they were species and worlds apart.

He heard Loki’s quiet chuckle, but there was an undercurrent of pain to the sound. It took Tony rather too long to realise that the trickster didn’t usually hold him round the waist in such a manner, nor put so much weight on him.

“Hey, you okay?”

“I’m fine.”

He didn’t look it. In fact, he looked the dictionary definition of shit. Yes, Loki was usually pale, but this was ashen. Pale, trembling slightly and a tightness across his forehead that suggested great
pain. Loki was most certainly not okay.

“We should get you back to the infirmary.”

“No. I’ve spent more than enough time there. I want to go back to my rooms.” The prince’s voice was tiny.

Tony glanced at the stallion, almost for permission and Sleipnir nodded his large head. “He needs rest. We have all the time in the world to talk now, you go rest Móðir.” He nudged Loki’s chest playfully. “And no going falling off worlds in the meantime.”

A ghost of a smile flickered across Loki’s face and he bumped his forehead against his son’s. “I promise.” He kissed Sleipnir’s nose. “I’m not going to leave you like that again. Never again, I promise.”

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Tony didn’t know how he managed to get the stumbling trickster back to the palace, let alone follow Loki’s less-than-coherent directions for the prince’s personal chambers. Thor had been saying for weeks that the rooms had been made ready for when Loki was well enough and although Tony certainly did not think that he was well enough, it was up to the trickster.

Tony hadn’t really thought about what he should expect, although he remembered when – all those years ago – Loki had taken him to that suite in Claridges and likened it to his quarters in Asgard. The rooms were…sumptuous.

To be fair, what could one expect from the home of a prince? The general theme was gold with stone walls that were a natural cream – unusual for Loki’s tastes, to be sure – and the ceilings were high and beamed. It was like a suite from a grand European castle, one of the proper medieval ones that still survived in some rare cases. An entire section of wall was lined with bookshelves – Tony was already familiar with some of the books, he realised – and a writing desk took up a whole corner to itself. The bed was pushed up against the far wall, almost as an afterthought, obviously newly made with fresh green linens.

Loki smiled, and the expression seemed to chase away the pain from his face.

“Oh, I had not appreciated how much I have missed this place.” He breathed.

“Good to be home?”

“Most certainly.”

Loki was using both his cane and Tony’s arm for aid as he limped over to the bed and sank down onto the covers with a groan.

“I fear I have pushed myself too far today.”

“You think, Capricorn?”

The nickname usually drew protests, but this time it was like Loki hadn’t heard it, and that was actually somewhat worrying. He looked ready to fall asleep where he sat.

“Need me to fetch anyone to do that taking-away-pain trick?”

“No. I just want to sleep.”
“Fair enough. Do you have any pyjamas, or whatever you Space-Vikings wear?”

“Night clothes? Yes, but this will still suit for now.” The trickster gestured down at the white infirmary garb he still wore. “It is little different except for the colour scheme.” His words were beginning to slur together and Tony gently but firmly forced him to lie down.

“Oh, never mind.” He pulled the covers up, despite Loki batting half-heartedly at him in an attempt to stop the mothering. “Just get some sleep. Do you want me to stay?”

“Of course.” Loki sounded as if the thought of Tony not staying hadn’t occurred to him – which it probably hadn’t. He relaxed as the human lay down behind him, not cuddling, but one hand resting on his shoulder.

“I liked Sleipnir.” Tony whispered. “He seems cool.”

“Mhm. He liked you too…” Loki’s voice was a soft murmur. “Need to finish talk with him tomorrow. Lots to explain…”

“Don’t think about it now. Just sleep.”

“You’re staying…?”

“You’re not getting away that easily. I’ve got you and you’re mine. Not letting go now.”

“Possessive…”

“Don’t hear you complaining.” Tony hadn’t really felt tired, but the bed was comfortable, and the room warm. It was very soporific. “What do you want to do tomorrow?” He waited a few moments, and when there was no reply sat up a little to see that Loki was fast asleep. He smirked slightly and settled back down.

MWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMW

It was a combination of bright sunlight and light laughter that woke Tony the next morning and – on reflection – there are far worse ways to wake up. He rolled over with his habitual morning groan and threw a hand over his eyes before peeking through his fingers to see what the world was up to.

Well, the bed was empty, for a start.

The laughter and sunlight were both coming from the same source and he squinted in that general direction to see a large window. Loki was perched on the ledge, one leg tucked up underneath him. Sleipnir was leaning in, his large head resting on the trickster’s knee. Tony hadn’t realised that Loki’s room was situated such that the stallion could come straight up to the window like that – but thinking about it, it made complete and utter sense. After all, the horse couldn’t realistically live indoors and Loki wasn’t going to sleep in the stables any time soon. That meant that a ground floor room with windows opening out onto Asgard’s pastures and fields was a very good idea.

“See, I told you you’d wake him up!” Sleipnir sounded amused as he lifted his head to look at Tony. “Nice bed-hair.”

Tony groaned again. “It’s too early for a talking horse…” He half sat up – extremely thankful that he’d worn clothes to bed – and blinked hard until his vision was mostly clear. “What time is it anyway?”

“Just gone dawn.” Loki answered. He looked far better than he had the day before, and it helped
that he’d changed out of the awful hospital clothes. Brown suited him. Okay, so there was a hint of green around the cuffs, and maybe the boots were black, but it was mostly brown.

“Too early for a talking horse. Or I’m not drunk enough for a talking horse.”

Sleipnir flopped his head back down to rest on Loki’s shoulder. “He’s a bit dumb, Möðir, are you sure you want to be with him?”

“Hey!”

Loki chuckled, stroking the stallion’s neck as he glanced over at Tony with a mischievous grin. “Oh I think I’m sure; he does have his moments. But I do value your input, my dear, so we’ll have to see how well the two of you get along.”

Tony found himself genuinely disturbed by the identical sly gleam in both sets of eyes trained on him.

“You two look eerily similar when you do that…”

Sleipnir’s nicker coincided with Loki’s laughter and they knocked their foreheads together in a gesture that seemed almost instinct.

“Thor says that all the time.”

“You should have seen when I was little – we got into so much trouble!” Sleipnir added enthusiastically. “Afi Odin was forever yelling at us.”

Tony grinned at the mental image of both parent and child being told off by the Allfather. “What’s the age gap then? Because I wouldn’t have put you as such an irresponsible parent, Loki.”

The trickster laughed, but did look slightly abashed as his son nudged him in much the manner of a child knowing that their parent is embarrassed. “I was thirty seven thousand when I had Sleipnir.”

“And in comparison to humans…?”

“Oh Norns…Must you make me say it, Stark? Yes, I will admit to having had a teenage pregnancy. In human years I would have been comparable to a sixteen year old. Maybe seventeen. Young, and certainly considered too young in the eyes of many.”

Tony looked at Sleipnir again and smiled. “Well from here it seems like you’ve done a damn good job. A single teenage parent? Not bad, Capricorn, not bad at all.”

The stallion nickered again as Loki looked surprised. “Okay, I’ve changed my mind, can we keep him, Möðir?”

“Oh if we must.” The prince’s smile made it clear that he didn’t want it any other way.

Loki spent most of the day with his son. Tony had made it clear that the two should have some time together and had left to find Clint and Thor soon after getting up.

It had been perfect weather for a long distance trek, so that was precisely what they did. Riding as hard and as fast for as long as they could, until Asgard was a distant speck on the horizon. Sleipnir had carried Loki long before he had become Odin’s warhorse and twenty years was not too long for them to forget the easy familiarity. They had, of course, had longer periods of separation in
their lives. Loki had spent centuries at a time exploring the nine realms whilst Sleipnir trained and later led battles with Odin on his back. They were used to time apart – after all a couple of decades was nothing to immortals. However, it had been the prince’s supposed death, followed by his betrayal and eventual capture that had made this time all the worse.

Sleipnir had never had to face losing his Möðir before, and it had struck deep.

They returned just before dusk, dirty and travel-weary, but happy. Loki had found that although he had still tired easier than normal, he was feeling far better and stronger than the day before. The pain had been manageable for most of the day, and it was only now that they approached the large windows that looked into his chambers that it was creeping up on him again. Even so, it was less biting than it had been and was something he could – for the most part – ignore.

He pushed the window back open and slid into his room, the same way that he had left, and bid Sleipnir farewell. It was the work of a moment to use a sweep of magic to rid himself of the day’s dust. He had so missed being able to do that.

There was still no telling how the citizens of Asgard would respond if they saw him, so the prince stuck to the more hidden paths as he quickly looked for either his brother or Tony. It would have been the work of a moment to turn himself invisible, but he deemed that it was prudent to conserve his energy.

Thor was easy enough to locate; Loki knew that he’d been sparring so it was obvious that he’d want to bathe afterwards.

Thankfully the thunder God had his own bathing suite so the trickster only had to slink through the corridors to Thor’s chambers, rather than the main public baths. He didn’t knock – they never had – and simply entered before anyone could catch a glimpse of him.

“Who is that?” If the steam curling out of the open door to the bathroom wasn’t a giveaway, Thor’s genial question certainly confirmed Loki’s suspicions.

“It’s I, brother.”

“I’m in the bath.”

“I could not have guessed that.” The two brother’s had never been prudish around each other, and certainly not when it came to bathing, so Loki pushed back the door to the bath room further.

Thor was still in the gigantic tub, lathering his hair up. He turned slightly to grin at his brother through a facefull of suds.

“You’re looking better.”

“I’m feeling better.” Loki placed his cane down so that he could pull his boots off and sat down to dangle his legs in the water. “I went riding with Sleipnir today.”

“I know. He’s missed you.”

“I could tell.”

Thor frowned at him slightly. “You’re in pain, are you not?”

“What would make you say that?” Loki tried to sound airy, but the heaviness in his voice betrayed the comment.
“You were limping. You still required a walking aid. And you have that look in your eyes.” Thor scooped up a handful of water and tipped it over his hair. “You always looked like that after we’d sparred as children and I had hurt you more than you would admit.”

The trickster shrugged slightly. “The pain is growing less each day. I can walk, and a few weeks ago I never thought that would be possible again so I do not worry about a pain that will one day fade.” He smiled slightly. “When you spend seven years in such abhorrent agony that it is impossible to even tell if you are alive, something like this does not cause as much discomfort as you would think.”

His simple description caused Thor’s face to fall. “You still dream of it, do you not?”

“It will be many millennia before I stop dreaming of it.” He shrugged slightly. “But then again, it will also be many years before I stop dreaming of falling from the Bifrost, of finding the Chitauri the first time round, or of meeting the Hulk. In all honesty, I still have nightmares of Sleipnir’s birth. This is how life is, Thor. As the Midgardian’s beautifully phrase it ‘shit happens’.”

The thunder God waded over to his brother, ignoring the soap suds running down his back. “Loki, if we could have found you sooner...Or if I had been able to protect you and Evelyn better when they came for her then...”

“Then nothing, Thor. They were always going to find me. This was always going to happen. I was running and hiding but that was only going to work for so long.” Loki lifted his hand up over his brother’s head and water began to pour from his fingers, washing the lather away. “Be honest Thor, I deserved it.” He cut off his brother’s immediate protest with a soft laugh. “No, I really did. After what I did with the Bifrost, and then to New York some form of punishment was going to be exacted.”

“If I recall, I brought you back here for exactly that. You would have been safe from the chitauri had you stayed here.”

“In an Asgardian prison cell? Oh Thor, I was dying of sheer boredom down there. I was here for a grand total of three weeks and no one had had the brawn to come near me. I grew bored.”

Thor looked shocked. “You had the ability to leave immediately and you waited three weeks? Why?”

“I needed to recover. The chitauri had wounded me, and Banner had added to it. I was not in a good enough physical state to want to leave until I was healed.” Loki twirled his finger in the air in a gesture for Thor to turn round, which his brother complied with. There was a comb lying nearby which he picked up and began untangling the thick golden hair. It was something he had done since childhood. “If it’s anything, the very first thing I did after escaping was get drunk.”

“Ah, I believe I know where this story goes next. Did you happen to meet an equally drunk Avenger at that point?”

The trickster laughed. “Why yes, how did you guess? An equally drunk and lustful Avenger, I might add. Although as much as I hate to say it, I recall very little of that night and neither does he.” He paused for a moment. “The night after that one though…”

“Enough! I do not wish to know of your scandalous affairs!”

Loki snickered, a little sound that made Thor laugh loudly. “Some things never change – you have ever been prudish when the subject of sex arises.”
“I am not prudish, I simply do not want to think of my brother in such a situation! Especially with another man.”

“As if you yourself have not lain with men.”

“I was drunk!”

“So was I.”

“Yes, the first time!”

By this point they were both laughing helplessly. Thor turned in the water again and, in a sudden movement, grabbed Loki’s wrist and pulled him in.

“You bilgesnipe!” The trickster surfaced, water flying everywhere. “What was that for?!”

Thor shrugged. “Because I could.” He could barely get the words out around his laughter, especially when the trickster splashed him. “You look like a drowned rat!”

“And you look like a Dwarf.” Loki shot back immediately. He waded back to the side and heaved himself out, scowling angrily under the sodden mop of hair now obscuring his face. “If you are to be so immature I will just go and find Tony. He, at least, only behaves like a child when I’m less inclined to kill him for it.”

“How I have missed your death threats, brother.”

“Just feel lucky that I didn’t wish to waste energy turning your bath to ice.”

Thor laughed again. “Noted.” The smile slipped somewhat as the rest of the conversation caught up with him. “Wait, you are aware that Tony is not here, are you not?”

“Where else would he be?” Loki was busy trying to dry off and was focussing on the spell rather than his brother’s words.

“Midgard.”

The spell failed, leaving the trickster with dry clothes, but very wet hair and staring at Thor in shock. “Midgard?! What is he doing there?! Why wasn’t I told he was going?”

Thor grinned. It was the same sort of smile he’d always used when he – for once – knew something that his little brother didn’t. However, the expression itself was a giveaway – it was his ‘this is going to be awesome and I can’t wait to see your reaction’ grin.

Loki put two and two together, his jaw dropping into a little ‘o’ of surprise.

“Evelyn…?” His whisper was like a prayer.

“Tony and Clint have gone back to fetch her. The others will probably be joining them.”

The thought of the other Avenger’s – with whom Loki still hadn’t made peace – didn’t seem to enter the trickster’s mind as he stared at his brother. The only thing that seemed to have registered was his daughter’s name.

“Loki?” Thor had obviously been expecting a more jubilant reaction, so started forward in concern when instead of smiles he saw the sudden tear that slipped down his brother’s cheek. “Loki, are you alright?”
“Of course I’m alright!” The words were snapped, but the effect ruined as he hurriedly brushed the tears away. “It’s just…”

“It’s just that it’s been seven years.”

“I’ve missed everything important in her life.”

“She’s only fourteen – she’s got a very long life ahead of her that you can now be a part of.”

Loki nodded. “I know. I know that.” He scrubbed a hand across his face again with a haughty sniff. “When are they arriving?”

“Within the hour most probably.”

The trickster managed an imperious smirk. “You should probably put some clothes on then.”

MWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWM

The brothers were on the Bifrost within the hour, Thor seemingly taking his time intentionally. It may have been that he simply didn’t want the trickster to push himself any more than he had to, but could just as easily have been vindictiveness. With siblings these things are always hard to tell.

As it was Loki was practically dragging the thunder God along as they made their way down the bridge. It hadn’t been such a hard decision not to take horses – after a long day of riding the trickster was already in enough pain without making it worse – so they were walking. For Gods, even an injured one, it wasn’t such a distance that they couldn’t make it comfortably on foot.

They didn’t speak now – Loki was far too distracted.

He was going to see Evelyn again.

The child that he had willingly given himself to the chitauri for, that he had barely been able to see as she grew up.

He was going to see her again.

She had been the thought that had kept him going during those dark years of hell. The little bright memory and a whisper that if he wasn’t there and suffering than they would have taken her instead. It had always helped him to put things into perspective that she was safe because of what he was going through.

He was aware that she wasn’t going to be the same little girl he had left behind, but at the same time he didn’t care. However old she was she would always be his tiny daughter, a babe in arms. Like any parent he would never see her as anything but.

“Oh!”

Thor’s sudden exclamation brought Loki back to the present, wondering what had taken his brother’s attention. He looked up to see that they were closer to the observatory than he’d expected. Close enough to see a group of people standing outside of it. The mortals already here.

“Oh…” He subconsciously echoed his brother’s noise of surprise.

He stopped dead, feeling his heart leaping up to his mouth.

It was a sizable group – Thor did say the Avengers were probably coming after all – however, it
was the shorter figure at the front his gaze was immediately drawn to. It was too far to make out any more details than dark hair and a short stature, but he didn’t need a clearer picture to know who it was.

_Evelyn._

He took a step forward. Then another. His cane hit the ground. Then he was running.

The short figure broke away from the rest of the group, flat-out sprinting along the glistening surface of the Bifrost. Loki was sprinting too – heedless of the pain or the tiredness that gripped his muscles, none of that mattered in this moment.

Features were becoming clearer now, Evie’s mid-length hair in the same disarray that Tony’s was usually in, her wide green eyes full of tears. Yes she was taller, yes she looked older, but in Loki’s eyes she was just that petrified seven year old that he had last seen with a chitauri holding a knife to her throat.

How to describe the indescribable. The feelings that run through a parent as they finally see the child that they thought lost to them forever. Had Loki had the presence of mind to analyse his thoughts he would have realised that he was barely believing it was true. Part of him was convinced that it was a dream – that he would wake at any moment.

And then she was there, right infront of him. She wasn’t saying a word – she couldn’t with how hard she was crying. There wasn’t a break in her stride as Evie simply threw herself at him, legs round his waist, arms round his neck, clinging as if she would never let go again.

For Loki time stood still.

His daughter was a solid weight in his arms, real and tangible and _there_. Her hair was in his face, her sobbing breath wet and warm against his neck and she was _real_. Really there, really alive and in his arms.

There wasn’t truly an emotion that could describe how Loki felt. Simply the overwhelming feeling of _I’m never letting go of you again_ as he clung to his child just as tightly as she held onto him. It wasn’t a single true emotion, but was stronger than anything else. _I am never letting go of you again._

He felt his knees hit the ground. It didn’t matter. Nothing mattered except that he had Evelyn back in his arms. He knew he was sobbing as hard as she was and it just _didn’t matter._

Because Loki had his family back.

He felt whole again.

MWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMW

Heimdall stood in the observatory, still staring out into the darkness. He knew of the happy reunion taking place out on the Bifrost, but did not deem it any of his business. Instead he cast his gaze out into the expanse of the Nine Realms, watching the other worlds glide by.

There was a flicker.

The watcher frowned, honing his attention in to the furthest reaches of Yggdrasil. There was… something. Something not right. The brief after-glow of what looked like a portal. Maybe one that hadn’t formed properly.
Someone was trying to enter the Nine Realms.

And he had seen that particular energy before.

The chitauri were coming.
Chapter 19

An army of frost giants could have stormed across the Bifrost and Loki would not have noticed. Norns, the Bifrost could have broken asunder beneath him and it wouldn’t have drawn his attention.

He had Evie and – when a gentle hand came to rest on his shoulder – Tony too. He had everything.

There was absolutely no way for the prince to know how much time had passed until he felt his daughter’s sobs lessen somewhat. She pulled back slightly – not letting go but enough so that she could actually look at him. Loki managed a watery smile, brushing her hair back from her face.

“My dear little bird, I do believe you are quite grown up.”

Evie was hiccupping and unable to talk, but tried to return the smile at the comment. She had changed from the little child Loki had last seen, but whilst her looks had matured she was still the same. Tony’s dark messy hair, Tony’s squarish jaw-line, Tony’s long nose and then Loki’s bright bright bright green eyes.

Still his little girl.

“I have missed you so much Evelyn.”

Evie sobbed and pressed her face against his neck again. “Never l-l-leave again! I c-c-can’t lose y-y-you again!”

“You won’t. I’m here, I’m here my brave darling. I’m not going anywhere.”

“P-p-promise?”

“I promise it. I will never leave you again, my child. Never again.”

“I’m n-n-not a child…”

Loki had to laugh, despite himself. “No, I suppose you aren’t. But didn’t anyone tell you that a parent always views their child as a tiny babe no matter how old they are?” He heard Tony chuckle softly from where he stood next to them – evidently making the link to the exact same conversation with Sleipnir – and blindly reached out a hand to pull the man down into the hug.

It isn’t possible to freeze time, but if it was then this would have been the perfect moment. Both parents and their daughter, reunited at last. If time could freeze then there could be no better place to create a bubble of perfect happiness. Happiness and hope and love and that feeling of finally, of being a whole once more. A family unit made whole and full and finally together again.

Even Loki Silvertongue could not find the words to describe how it felt.

Time was immeasurable until Tony broke the hallowed silence.

“Uh...I think everyone is staring at us.”

“Don’t care.” Evie’s voice was muffled against Loki’s shoulder. The green cloth under her cheek was dark and wet through with tears.

“My dear, I should probably greet the rest of the group – the last time we met we parted on
somewhat unpleasant terms.”

Evie sniffed and raised her head slightly. “Yes, I saw the footage.” She managed a tiny grin. “As the Hulk said, ‘puny God’.”

Loki shot Tony a dark glare. “Did you have to show her that?”

“In my defence, Jarvis did it, not me.”

The Prince didn’t deign to reply, instead choosing to carefully stand up whilst keeping an arm tightly wrapped around his daughter’s shoulders. Tony’s hand moved from his arm to discreetly hold him around the waist – a gesture that seemed sweet and familial, but in reality gave the trickster something to lean on now that the pain was becoming rather too acute once more.

The rest of the group, Thor now included, were standing a little way off, trying not to intrude whilst at the same time wanting to witness the reunion. Tony couldn’t begrudge them that; after all he owed each and every one of them for their help over the past seven years. They had wanted to see Evie happy as much as he did.

Loki looked…awkward as he realised that he was faced with all of the Avengers. More so considering there were still tear-tracks running down his cheeks. The group seemed just as self-conscious, though, which was something.

It was Fury who took the initiative and stepped forwards first. His single-eyed gaze was suspicious at best but as he approached, hands in his trench-coat pockets, it became more appraising than distrustful.

“Well. I don’t think any of us thought this day was actually going to happen.”

“Believe me when I say the same is true for myself, Director.”

Fury folded his arms, taking in the God’s still somewhat-battered appearance. “You feeling like trying to take over my planet again anytime soon?”

Loki smirked slightly, as if the question hadn’t come as the shock that everyone else seemed to take it as. Thor, for example, looked horrified at the Director’s bluntness.

“No, not any time soon. Give me a few years and then we’ll have to see.”

Tony snorted with laughter, which covered up Fury’s low ‘hmph’ of disapproval. “Next time try going incognito through the US government, much easier and less noticeable.” The inventor suggested.

The Director looked at Stark with a deep frown. “Don’t give him ideas!” He then met Loki’s gaze head-on.

“Pay him no mind – if I truly wanted to rule Earth I would simply take over Stark Industries.” The attempt at humour lightened Fury’s expression somewhat, and Loki continued, slightly more sure of himself. “Until that time, will you accept an offer of peace?” The prince stepped – possibly limped, Tony was certainly helping to support him more than he would have liked – forwards, extending a hand.

Fury raised an eye-brow haughtily at him. “Peace?”

“Peace. And…perhaps something of an apology? I believe the last time we met I made something
of a mess of New York.”

“That would be the understatement of the century.” The Director tapped his fingers against his arm as he stared at the proffered hand, then slowly reached out and accepted it. “But I’d say that you’ve more than paid for your crimes.” He shook Loki’s hand. “It will be good to have Stark stop whining at long last.”

Loki’s anxious smile grew into a real grin and Fury smirked slightly.

“It’s good to meet you properly Prince Loki.”

“Like-wise Director Fury.”

The grudging but genuine acceptance from the Director seemed to spur the rest of the Avengers into action, Clint taking more initiative than the rest.

He walked straight up to Loki, brushing past the Director and held one hand up, fingers clenched tight.

“Hey boss.”

Loki smirked and completed the fist-bump. “Minion.”

They didn’t like each other. They would probably never like each other but it had certainly been worth the looks on everyone else’s faces. However, the gobsmacked silence was broken by Tony’s boisterous laughter and Steve managed a weak smile even if the others couldn’t.

“Well…I think we can all safely say we never expected to see that sort of interaction between the two of you.” He said slowly. “But then again, we didn’t really expect for Tony to get you back either.”

“No-one expected Tony to get you back.” Natasha added, her tone of voice giving away nothing about how she felt about all this.


The Prince shrugged slightly. “I simply assumed that that was that. It was unreasonable to hope for anyone to find me.”

“You could have given me some credit.”

Loki shrugged again. Apparently he thought it was perfectly reasonable to believe that everyone had given him up for dead. Considering just where he had been it was probably a fairly reasonable assumption.

Ignoring Tony, he turned his attention back to Steve.

“It seems it’s been a while since Stuttgart.”

“Nearly twenty years by my reckoning.” The Captain said slowly. “But it was a rather memorable occasion. It came as a bit of a surprise for us all to know that all of that was mostly a lie. You’re an astonishing actor.”

That caused Loki to glance at Tony once more; still his anchor, even in this. “You told them?” He sounded faintly accusatory.
“Hey, I had a child with Shield’s most wanted criminal, what was I meant to say? I simply showed them the footage of when you’d told me the whole story.”

“Hmmm.” It didn’t seem like the Prince could think of a come-back; after all, Tony more than had a point. However, something more troubling made Loki tilt his head towards his partner, speaking out of the side of his mouth whilst not breaking eye contact with the Captain. “Weren’t we naked during that conversation?”

Steve flushed bright red as Tony grinned feral and sharp. “We certainly were.”

“Ah.” Loki smiled brightly at the scarlet Captain. “Right. Well. In future I shall make sure to conduct all my explanations fully clothed.”

“We’d appreciate it.” Steve shifted his weight awkwardly. “So, um, how am I meant to greet the second prince of Asgard?”

“However you wish. If it’s any help; Barton broke my nose so –” Said Prince shrugged elegantly. “- I believe the human phrase is ‘do your worst’.”

“In America we usually start with ‘hello’.”

The remaining defensiveness in Loki’s posture slowly drained away – something that was mostly only noticeable to Tony who was still holding him round the waist. “Yes, I believe that will be satisfactory. Hello Captain Rodgers.”

Evie giggled, albeit tearfully. “Well this is the most awkward conversation ever.” She was still gripping Loki’s arm tightly, but the desperation had fled now that it was sinking in that he wasn’t going to vanish infront of her. Something about her body language would also tell anyone who knew her well that she was leeching as much body heat as possible. “I don’t recognise any of those constellations.” She added, staring out into the emptiness beyond the Observatory.

Loki smiled down at her fondly. “You aren’t in Kansas anymore, Dorothy.”

“I got that reference!” Steve went red again as various smirks were aimed at him.

“Evie’s right, though. That’s a hell of a lot of unfamiliar stars.” It was the first time Bruce had spoken, but he sounded calm enough given the trip through the Bifrost he had just endured. He stepped off to one side – studiously ignoring Loki for the moment, which was probably for the best – and peered out into the infinite mass of black. “That’s…incredible. Are they all named? Do you know which worlds are out there? Can we see Earth from here?”

Thor laughed. “Do you wish to stand out here all night to hear the answers, or should we ensconce you in the library for the duration of your stay?”

Bruce grinned, still staring into the darkness eagerly. “Oh give me a break. This is stunning. Back me up here Tony!” He didn’t wait for a reply, instead pointing out to the swirl of stars that spiralled in on themselves as a deep smudge of blue. “What’s that? A collapsing galaxy?”

“The entrance to the void.” Loki sounded nothing more than informative, but he felt Tony’s arm tighten almost painfully around his waist at the words. For a moment he wondered why; why the man was suddenly clinging to him, why Thor’s expression had dropped and why Bruce was looking as if he’d put his foot in it.

Then he realised, like a bucket of icy water over him, they knew. Not just Tony, not just his brother, but all of them. They knew he’d thrown himself into that emptiness.
It was…a humbling thought and for once he genuinely didn’t know what to say.

It was Evie who broke the sudden silence – making it quite obvious that thankfully she didn’t know what all the fuss was about. She hadn’t been told that Loki had tried to commit suicide. “It’s a very pretty colour; I’d like to take some photos at some point.” It broke the renewed tension and Loki actually laughed.

“Yes, I suppose it is.” He smiled down at her before stepping away – losing contact with Tony at the same time. It didn’t show on his face just how hard it was to hold his own weight straight and tall, but the way he did so made at least his brother and lover aware of how painful it had to be. However, Loki wouldn’t be Loki if he couldn’t wrap himself up in a thick veneer of pride and royal bearing.

He inclined his head towards the Avengers – a formal bow that wouldn’t have been out of place coming from the royalty of Tudor England – and met each of their gazes in turn.

“You have come a long way, and not by a pleasant method of transportation. Welcome to Asgard honoured guests.” He met Natasha’s sceptical gaze and smirked at her. “You may find it somewhat medieval, but it won’t take Tony long to work out how to get WiFi here.”

“Yeah, a nearby satellite would make my life so much easier in that respect.” Said inventor grinned brightly. “But I’ll make do for now.”

“You would have finished it by now if you would just speak to Heimdall like I had suggested and discussed drawing a satellite relay though a partial opening in the Bifrost.” Loki added, somewhat snidely.

The comment made Clint snort with laughter. He shrugged when the sound drew everyone’s gazes. “Oh come on! They sound like an old married couple!”

He really had a point.

MWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMW

Loki, Tony and Evie quickly distanced themselves from the others and made their way back to Loki’s chambers. No-one begrudged them this – they needed time to catch up, time to talk and time to simply be a whole family unit again. So Thor took the other Avenger’s off to show them round – with Clint’s over-enthusiastic help – leaving the three to themselves.

Evie hadn’t let go of Loki’s hand the whole time. As a fourteen year old she usually considered herself far too old to hold hands, but this was different. This was Loki. She could afford to be clingy around the mother she hadn’t seen for seven years.

Since the only chairs Loki had were single the three of them sat on the large bed instead.

It’s difficult. Trying to gather up seven years’ worth of life and retell it all at once. They knew that it wouldn’t all be able to happen in one go; that years down the line they would still be catching up on missed moments and lost stories.

There were more tears all round – understandably.

It wasn’t exactly a situation that was in any psychology book, or that any of them had ever been in before. In a sense Loki and Evie barely knew each other; they had only been able to see each other twice a year and during her childhood no less. The girl had no memories from at least the first five visits after her birth, and the other early ones were hazy at best.
And now they had all the time in the world to get to know each other.

Sadness, relief, hope, loss, confusion, guilt, fear, joy.

So much emotion, so many emotions, and all wanting to escape at once.

It was exhausting and there was no shame in admitting that they all fell asleep long before they had finished saying everything they wanted to say.

Evie woke up the next morning groggy and with the sort of pounding headache that told her she had spent far too much time crying the day before. Why had she been crying so hard? In the fog of barely-awake she scrabbled amongst fractured memories of dreams and reality and slowly pieced back together the over-emotional haze that was yesterday.

A sleepy grin grew on her face.

“Móðy...”

“Yes?” The equally sleepy voice came from beside her made her make her roll over with a grin.

“You’re still real.”

“It appears that would be the case.” Loki smiled – tired, but awake – and reached out to cup her cheek. “Did you think I wouldn’t be?”

Evie shrugged, almost embarrassed. “I dream that we find you, and then I wake up and you’re never there. I did wonder for a moment…”

“If it is anything, I had the same dream all these past years. This time we can both be happy in knowing that it is real.”

“Don’t go?”

“I am not going anywhere, my dear.” Loki pulled himself upright, only to be immediately tackled into a hug by his daughter. “And I never will again, Norns be willing.”

There was a grumble from beside them – Tony grudgingly woken by their laughter. “Will you two be quiet? I’m trying to sleep here.”

“Sorry Dad.” Evie muffled her giggles, unwinding her arms from Loki’s neck to dangle her legs off the edge of the bed. “Did we just fall asleep where we were sitting last night?”

“It appears that way.” Loki looked down at his rumpled clothing and with a wave of his hand the creases smoothed out. It wasn’t perfect, but better than nothing. He would have done the same for his daughter, but she had already disappeared into the bathroom with her rucksack – presumably having brought some fresh clothes with her.

He stood up and stretched, noting that sleeping in such an uncomfortable position had done nothing for the residual pain lurking, and attempted a small healing spell. It didn’t do anything to numb the ache, but his legs stopped shaking which he considered a positive. Tony was still an unidentifiable lump under the covers – which he had somehow managed to grab and hog during the night – but the God pulled back enough of the blankets to find a cheek to kiss.

“I’m going to take Evie to get some breakfast – do you want to join us?”
“Mmm?” Tony barely seemed to wake up, burrowing deeper into the covers.

“I’ll take that as a no. We will bring you something back.”

“Mhmm.”

Loki smiled and pulled the covers back – apparently yesterday’s double Bifrost-trip had left Tony exhausted.

“Is Dad okay?” Evie re-emerged from the bathroom, changed and cleaned up. She looked defensive at Loki’s critical glance at her clothing. “What? It’s the fashion! And it’s comfortable!”

“Those leggings need a dress over them, not a T-shirt, young lady.”

“Everyone dresses like this!”

Loki folded his arms – a gesture almost immediately mirrored by his daughter. “Oh really?”

“Yes!” Evie looked down at her clothes, then back up, seeming slightly less certain. “I mean… well, usually I nick one of Dad’s band shirts to wear over these, but I packed in a hurry.” She shrugged, her doubt plain on her face.

“I suppose I am just not up to date with what a fashionable young lady should be wearing these days.” Loki said gently. “You look lovely.”

“Yeah, it’s not really Asgardian though. I’ll stand out.”

“You are a Stark, I cannot believe standing out would feel unusual.” Loki stepped forwards and rested his hands on his daughter’s shoulders. “You are beautiful, and I believe it is a mother’s prerogative to criticise what their children wear.”

“Eh, you should have seen Dad’s face last Christmas – to be fair that dress was pretty short.” Evie wrapped her arms around his waist, face pressed against Loki’s chest. “I missed you! I don’t think I’ve made that clear enough.”

“I fear we shall be telling each other that for many years to come.”

Evie hugged tighter, then jumped back with a yelp as her T-shirt suddenly seemed to take on a life of its own – lengthening and changing. She looked down, then laughed.

“Móðhö!” The shirt was now something nearer a tunic. Knee length and to the girls eyes pretty much medieval. “You’d better be able to change that back!”

“When you wear it with something suitable, then certainly.” Loki said lightly. His grin said it all as his daughter twirled around to admire how her new outfit now looked. It still wasn’t really something the Aesir court would be used to, but he hardly cared about fitting in. And as much as Evie was trying to look annoyed, she was failing magnificently and in the end was just delighted.

“Hey, Móðir, are you…Oh. Uh… Móðir?”

Loki turned to see Sleipnir hanging his large head over the lip of the window, staring at Evie in confusion. Being outside the stallion’s extra legs were obscured so he looked like any other freakishly large horse but Evie’s eyes had widened to the size of saucers never-the-less.

“That horse just spoke!”
Sleipnir didn’t miss a beat. “That human just spoke!” He left the window and trotted round to the large doorway that opened onto the pastures. Loki habitually left it unlocked so that the horse could simply nudge it open, which was exactly what he did. “Uh…Hello?”

Evie’s astonished gaze took in all eight legs and understanding dawned across her face. “Oh. You’re Sleipnir?”

“Evelyn?”

Loki watched with a fond smile as his eldest and youngest both eyed each other up critically.

“You’re shorter than I expected.” Sleipnir said thoughtfully.


“Sparkly?”

“Well, eight legged horse, son of the God of Mischief, you kinda get a mental image of some big black shiny stallion. Or glowing white. Even some sort of deep chestnut.”

Sleipnir looked down at his coat then back up, as affronted as a horse could be. “And?”

“Grey? Really?”

“Personal comments this early in the morning? Well for the daughter of the God of Mischief you are tiny.” Sleipnir nodded towards Loki. “Missed out on the ‘tall gene’ did we?”

“Missed out on the ‘normal number of legs gene’?”

The stallion wrinkled his nose, then nodded at Loki. “Yes, she can carry a good argument and is annoying enough to be a little sister. She’ll do.”

Evelyn looked confused. “Huh? What? Am I being rated or something?”

“Don’t take it personally darling, you should have seen what he put your Dad through.” Loki put his arm around Evie’s shoulders and pulled her forwards towards his eldest child. “Sleipnir, play nice.”

The giant horse looked down at the girl and leaned his head forward to brush her shoulder. “I have not been able to be an elder brother since Nari and Vali passed. Hello little sister.”

Evie slowly lifted a hand to rest on his long grey neck. The stallion smelt of hay and grass, his coat feeling like any other horse under her fingers. It was only the wisdom and age in his eyes that betrayed him as what he really was.

“I’ve got a big brother…” The girl laughed softly. “Wow…”

Behind them Loki had taken a few steps back to give them their space and was now close enough to the bed for arms to suddenly wrap around his waist.

“See?” Tony sounded drowsy as he rested his chin on the God’s shoulder. “Big brothers can be a good thing.”

“Have you met mine?” Loki rested his hands on Tony’s where they sat on his stomach. He smiled as Evie hugged Sleipnir around the neck and the horse nuzzled against her shoulder affectionately.
“You’ve got an awesome brother.”

“Hmm, you didn’t have to grow up with him.”

Tony laughed sleepily. “True. Very true.” He pressed a kiss against Loki’s neck. “Sorry, I’m going to have to sleep a bit more; I’m knackered. Two Bifrost trips in one day didn’t really suit me.”

“I can tell.” The trickster said gently. “Rest some more, I will inform the others where you are.”

“Thanks, Cupcake.”

“Call me that again and I will turn all of your suits to…oh what are those things called…? Jelly babies. I will turn your suits to jelly babies.”

“…Fair enough.”

Tony snuggled back under the covers as Evie and Sleipnir said their good byes and the horse trotted back off into the field to do whatever it was he did all day – Tony would have to ask him at some point; what did an eight legged do with his time? He resurfaced just enough to give his daughter a good-morning hug, then sleepily waved them on their way. The growl from his stomach let him know that at some point he would have to get up and find some food too, but sleep seemed a much bigger priority right now.

He’d have breakfast later.

Or lunch.

Mmmm lunch….

MWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMW

“This is most likely going to be an awkward experience.” Loki said, as he led the way towards the feasting hall. “No-one has seen me since my return, and I cannot say that they will be delighted to do so.”

“Yeah, I figured that much.” Evie subconsciously chewed on her lower lip. “Are we talking some nasty glares, insults, or will we be dodging rotten fruit?”

“I imagine an extremely tense silence, which Thor will then try to break with some jovial comment.”

“I can cope with nasty silences and evil glares. I grew up trying to keep my photo out of celebrity magazines.”

Loki stopped for a moment, looking down at his daughter. “This may not be the best of ideas. I am used to derision; I do not want to put you through Asgard’s scorn as well.”

“Pfft. Are you kidding?” For a moment the girl looked like a mini version of her father – albeit with long hair that she tossed back over her shoulders with a haughty sniff. “I can flounce like an over-grown turkey when needs be. I don’t care if I’m a half-breed or whatever you guys call it. I’m a Stark. I’m better than the lot of them and I’ll let them know it if needs be.”

The trickster had to laugh at that, despite his misgivings. “You have certainly inherited your father’s supreme overconfidence, little bird.” He observed the familiar lift to her chin and the stubborn gleam that had lit in her eyes – usually things he saw in a mirror. “Mine too, perhaps.”
“Never a bad thing. I’m quick with insults too.”

“Hmm, I would advise against that; I have landed myself in hot water one too many times to lash out so readily now.”

Evie stuck her hands on her hips. “Am I allowed to have any fun?” Her big smile belied the joke and if nothing else convinced Loki that she truly didn’t mind facing down the curiosity and animosity of Asgard’s lords and ladies.

“We will see.”

They had reached one of the many entrances to the large hall and Loki paused before it. He knew there were likely to only be a few score of people there; somewhere around the hundred mark. It was the place for the wealthy and the warriors of Asgard to dine – if they so wished – for the main meals of the day, sometimes joined by members of the royal family. Usually most people ate at home with their respective families, but it made it easier for those without family or wishing to escape an over-bearing spouse to dine with friends instead.

How many times had Loki eaten in there?

It didn’t seem so long ago that he and Thor had been sat there discussing the coronation which had never occurred.

“Móðhóy?”

Loki was drawn out of the memories by a hand slipping into his.

“Hey, it’ll be fine.” Evie smiled up at him; big and bright and innocent – everything Loki felt that he could never be again. “We waltz in there, glare them down when they start with the high-school whispering and if it all goes to hell you can turn blue and ice them all.”

She looked so earnest at that moment that Loki had to pull her into a tight hug, resting his cheek against the top of her head.

“I don’t deserve you, my dear.” He whispered into her hair. It was a hard thing to respond to, so Evie simply hugged him tighter in answer. “Alright. Shall we do this?”

“Yeah, let’s kick snobby butt!” The girl pulled back and grinned up at him. “You ready?”

“I believe I am.” Loki turned back to the door and – with a deep breath – pushed it open.

They didn’t hold hands – Loki wasn’t the type, and Evie considered herself far too old – but the trickster compromised with resting a hand on his daughter’s shoulder.

He had been right about the number of people in the hall – not too many, but more than enough – and was also right about the reaction they were sure to get. For a brief few moments there was no noticeable difference in the noise level, before conversations slowly began to taper off. The silence that began to grow was oxymoronically deafening.

Loki was, sadly, used to this and although he could feel the heat of everyone’s stares he simply looked straight ahead, not even really focussing on anything. Beside him Evie was looking around with unabashed curiosity – seemingly unfazed by the attention they were drawing.

“Brother, niece, join us!” Thor’s loud voice was exactly what Loki had predicted, but for once he was actually glad for the blonde’s obnoxiousness. Thor was standing the table they had always sat
at, with both the group of humans, and his own Aesir friends. He waved as if the trickster could possibly have missed him.

The sound seemed to break whatever spell had fallen and mutters took up on all sides of the hall. Thor was certainly not oblivious to it, and in reaction was almost over enthusiastic in greeting his family members, practically dragging Loki over to the two spare seats in the middle of the group.

“Where is Tony? Does he not wish to break his fast?”

“He was tired after the Bifrost trip. I said I would bring him something back.” Loki guided Evie to the central seat on the bench so that she would be safely sandwiched between himself and Thor before sitting down with Hogun on his right.

“And you, my dear niece? How is Asgard?”

“Haven’t seen much yet. Way too happy to have my Móðhøy back to be honest.” Evie looked at the food spread out infront of them. “Uh…What is this stuff?”

Whilst Thor and Clint tried to explain the various foods Loki sat back and cast his gaze across the rest of the hall. There were equal measures between people glaring in pure hatred and those who had seen Thor’s display of affection and decided not to be so open in their animosity. Loki knew all of the faces – could tell who would be problematic and who would fall into place once it was made clear that his family would not accept him being treated anything less than the prince he still was. The problematic ones…well, he could deal with them. Most wouldn’t escalate beyond snide comments and harsh rumours. Any who would dare to be more openly hostile towards him or his daughter would face the wrath of the royal family. Namely, Prince Thor in a terrible temper.

Asgard had had far too long to get used to the idea that they could say what they liked about the youngest prince without repercussions. They would get a nasty shock when they failed to take Thor’s new attitude into account.

And if anyone dared to say a thing about Evelyn…

Well, Loki was always considered the creative sibling.

“Do you not eat any more?”

The trickster was brought out of his reverie by Hogun’s voice.

“Pardon?”

“It may have been a few years, but I would have thought you still need to eat. You cannot have changed that much.” The warrior pushed a plate of honey cakes towards him. They had always been Loki’s favoured breakfast food and the trickster met Hogun’s gaze for a moment before slowly reaching out to take one.

“Why would you care?”

“I do not. But Thor does.” And that was that. Hogun turned back to his own food, discussion over.

Loki nodded slightly to himself. That was pretty much what he would have expected from the stoic warrior. Hogun had stated precisely where he stood and nothing more or less. He hadn’t changed much over the years.

The other three were sat too far away from him to communicate, but their glares spoke volumes
about how they were feeling. They were going to have words at a later date. And by the looks of it they would want Loki alone when they did so. Them and everyone else in Asgard.

That was fine. He could work with that.

Just not now.

MWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMW

Tony was woken up by a deep pain in his back and the overwhelming feeling of nausea. He groaned and rolled carefully onto his side, trying to remember if he had been drinking or not.

No, of course not. He was on Asgard; had brought Evie there. Of course he wasn’t hungover.

The man sat up slowly, only to be hit with a wave of dizziness and for the pain in his back to flare like a warning signal. What the hell did he do yesterday? Break his spine? Sitting up hadn’t helped and if anything he now felt worse. His breathing was short and the pain was centralising in his chest which…

Oh hell!

Realisation was like a bucket of icy water upended over his head. He knew these symptoms; Bruce had practically forced him at knife point to learn them incase this happened. Chest pain, nausea, short breath…

“Crap…” Tony half rolled and half fell off the bed, wondering desperately where his phone had gone. All he had to do was wake Jarvis up and the AI could take over the arc reactor and use it as a defibrillator. Or pacemaker. The man was unclear as to which was actually needed, but Jarvis would know and right now if he didn’t get help of some form he would be in serious trouble.

The whole situation was surreal as he dragged himself across the floor to where he had thrown his stuff the night before. Why the hell hadn’t he turned his phone back on after the Bifrost journeys? Why hadn’t he foreseen this and had Jarvis awake?

It was terribly reminiscent of that time Obi had ripped the reactor out of his chest and left him to die. Although this time Dummy wasn’t on hand and no-one else knew he needed help. Why hadn’t he left Jarvis on?!

The pain was growing intense and the man’s hands shook as he tried to open the zips on his bag so much so that he could barely move the fastenings. His sight was blurring.

Where is it…?

He couldn’t do it. Tony collapsed onto his side, wheezing as his hand flopped helplessly inside the bag, still desperately trying to grasp for the phone. Great. Just great. He was going to die on the bedroom floor all because he’d forgotten to turn his mobile back on.

Brilliant.

And it hurt.

His vision was beginning to black in.

“Tony!”

There were hands cupping his cheeks, tipping his head back so that his airway was clear.
“Tony, what is happening?!”

That sounded like Loki. Shit, he was going to be pissed. He didn’t know about the heart thing yet. Yeaaahhh….Tony should probably have mentioned it at some point by now…

“Here, don’t worry, Móðý, I’ve got his mobile.”

Evie?

Oh no! Nonononono…He was not going to die infront of his daughter! She sounded so calm! No fourteen year old should have to sound so matter-of-fact when faced with their father having a heart attack.

Tony could hear them both talking; Loki asking frantic questions and Evie trying to keep him calm. Someone was manoeuvring him so that he wasn’t lying on the floor, propping him up to sit against the wall with his knees bent up. And then;

“Don’t worry, Miss Evelyn, I have it under control now.”

Jarvis.

Tony had a brief and beautiful moment of relief before darkness swallowed him.

MWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMW

Heimdall frowned as his gaze tracked the ships progress.

There were only a dozen of them; the majority had been destroyed by the nuke Ironman had shot at the planet, but they were still more numerous than could be desired. They didn’t seem to be aware of where Asgard was yet though; since their path was random and erratic, but they were steadily drawing closer as they ruled out other options.

The Watcher stepped down from the podium. It was time to inform people.

MWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMW

“Am I in the infirmary?”

It wasn’t the most inspired thing to say, but was quite observant all things considered.

“Yes. The same room I was in, infact.” It was Loki’s voice, but there was a sharp edge to it that could be considered quite angry.

Tony opened his eyes to squint at the God sitting at his bedside. Yep, Loki looked pissed.

“Okay. I’ve got two questions: What happened, and why do you look like I’ll be heading for another window in the near future?”

Loki glanced at him, disdainfully, then looked away. He was sat in the chair that Tony himself used to occupy when it was the God lying injured in bed.

“What happened was that you had a heart attack. The double trip to Earth and back was too much for you.” The trickster’s voice was flat, almost entirely unemotional. “As for why I wish to defenestrate you again; you seemed to have entirely failed to mention that you have a heart condition.”
“I…Well, yeah, it’s not like the subject ever came up.” Tony went for defensive and knew it had been a bad move when Loki shot him an acidic glare. “What? I was rather more concerned with your health at the time!”

“You could have told me! Dr Banner had to fill me in on what had happened and what the repercussions are!”

That made his hackles subside a little. “You…know, then?”

“Know what? That you sustained huge injuries in a foolhardy mission? That you have been having to monitor your living for the past five years? That…” Loki turned away, his voice breaking despite his angry tone. “That you have only a handful of years left? Yes, I know.” He breathed deeply, staving off further anger. “I thought we would have decades together, Tony. After all of this, I thought we would have a life together. You could have told me!”

“And what would you have done if I had?” The man demanded. He half sat up, pleased when there was no corresponding pain. Jarvis had done a good job, all things considered. “What, exactly, would you have done if I’d just casually thrown it into conversation?” He waved a hand around. “Guess what? At best I’ve got five years to live! Ta daaa!”

“I wouldn’t have had to find out via you having a massive heart attack!”

Tony flopped back down against the pillows. “Well I’m sorry! I guess I’ve just had a bit too long to get used to the idea of my own mortality!”

“Well I haven’t!” Loki stood up abruptly. His fists were clenched by his sides and although he didn’t look down at the man, his profile was angry. “You need to rest; the healers can not fix the existing damage, but they concur that your machine has stabilized you for now. Sleep. Evie will want to see you later.”

“Hey, wait, what?” Tony tried to struggle upright again, only to freeze when Loki pinned him with such a furious glare that he was actually somewhat frightened. “You’re leaving?”

“You need to rest.” The trickster replied icily.

“Yeah, but…aren’t you going to stay here…?”

“No. I have other things to be doing.”

Loki didn’t even give him a chance to say anything in protest. He was far too full of anger and hurt to even contemplate having a reasonable conversation with his partner about this. Instead he simply turned on his heel and left the room, leaving Tony calling out behind him. It was still too strange and too intimidating to walk through the halls of the palace, so instead he dematerialised and appeared straight in front of the door to his room.

A handful of years.

That’s all they had left. The Norns had to be laughing at that! Those three twisted spinners of fate. They had known this was all going to happen. They had allowed Loki to be pulled out of that living hell because they were well aware he wouldn’t be happy for long.

All the power of a God and it was useless against this.

He had always been able to heal himself – it was an instinctive thing – and had made an effort to learn to help with wounds sustained in battle since Thor and his friends were so foolhardy. In
normal situations Loki should have been able to fix injured muscle without a thought. After all, Tony’s problem was, in simplistic terms, merely damaged muscle tissue. Technically simple.

Oh, but was anything about that man ever simple?!

That bloody arc reactor! A medical problem that even Loki with only a basic knowledge of medical magic could have solved and the arc reactor would foil the whole idea. Even for someone like Eir, the injury was impossible to heal. Tony probably had no idea, or maybe pretended that it wasn’t the case, but his reactor was everything.

It imbued him, blue light that had spread through his body with or without his realising it. Maybe he had known once – after all it had been poisoning him – but perhaps he had simply assumed that once the poison was dealt with he would be clear of the influence. Not the case.

Just because it wasn’t having any adverse effects any more didn’t mean that the reactor wasn’t still sending its products through his veins. Loki had realised that the first time he had spoken with the man and had attempted to take him under his thrall. Tony was – rather unfortunately – somewhat impervious to magic.

It had never exactly been a problem before.

"Curse you...". Loki rested his forehead against the door next to his closed fist. The Norns were most certainly cackling as they slowly but inevitably lifted the thread of Tony's life to the shears.

"My prince?"

Loki almost visibly jumped, pulling away from the wood he had been leaning against. The voice was familiar, but the title and tone of respect were so unusual that the trickster had to turn to identify who had disturbed him.

"Heimdall..." His voice sounded broken and he was surprised to reach up and feel tears on his cheeks. Blinking hard Loki quickly scrubbed the shameful moisture away and cleared his throat. "Yes? What is it?" The imperious tilt of his head didn't have the same effect it once did.

For someone who had famously never liked the trickster, Heimdall looked curiously sympathetic. Loki managed a more convincing sneer this time.

"I do not want your pity, Heimdall."

"Call it empathy then.". The watcher said stoically.

"Is that any better?"

"I saw what is happening to your lover. I may be able to offer a suggestion."

"The Golden Apples of Idunn? Believe me, Heimdall, I've already considered them and they are not an option." Loki turned away again, only for the watcher's voice to draw him back.

"Not the Apples. I am well aware that they will grant immortality to a mortal, but they can not heal fatal injury "

"What then?"

Heimdall folded his arms, surveying the young royal critically. "All in good time, my prince. There are other matters to attend to first. The chitauri are coming."
That caused Loki to scowl, although not at Heimdall. "I am aware that they have been searching for me." He glanced up at the stoic guardian. "How long until they reach Asgard?"

"A few days yet. They haven't located us yet, but when they do they can get here almost instantly." Heimdall observed how Loki had to visibly hold himself together at that news. "Do you have a plan?"

"I...yes. Yes, I believe so. I will require some information from Tony to finalize things, but...yes.". He bit his bottom lip, resisting the urge to wrap his arms around his waist in a futile attempt at comfort. "Now, how can I save Tony? What have you thought of that I have not?"

Heimdall smiled grimly. "Let us all deal with the chitauri first, then you can concentrate on your human. Also, bear in mind that I cannot promise it will work, but it has a better chance than the Apples."

"I am listening."

Heimdall explained his thoughts and Loki tried to think ahead and see if the watcher was correct. Maybe, *maybe*, there was a slim chance after all.

Once he dealt with the chitauri, of course.

There was a tower in the palace that was far taller than all the others. A pinnacle that sparkled gold in the sun and silver in the moon. From the top it was possible to see the whole city and the edge of the Bifrost beyond.

It was a curious place to find the king of the Gods, especially in the dead of night. And even curioser to see that he wasn't the first up there.

"I remember the first time you came up here: you almost fell off."

"I was a child."

"Yes, one told specifically *not* to climb the towers."

Loki smiled slightly, hugging his arms around his knees - even in the summer is was cold so high up. "When have I ever done what I was told?"

"True."

"Heimdall told me we have but a few days before the chitauri arrive."

Odin sat down beside his son, following Loki's gaze out to the observatory. "I am aware."

"Father, I...."

"You'll receive the full might of Asgard's army to fight them off."

"No..." Loki was pale, more so than usual, as he stared at the Bifrost. "No. Father, I request the right of Holmgang."

He could *feel* the weight of Odin's stare.
"Loki-

"It is my right. I deserve my vengeance. After all," He shrugged slightly. "I only managed to kill one of the wretched creatures during my time with them."

"I do not deny that it is your right, but I fear you are not in your right mind to be making this decision at this moment."

"Why would I not be?"

Odin sighed at the angry tone of voice. "I know what happened today. I know your lover has little time left to live."

Loki shrugged slightly. "He is a mortal. It is inevitable that he will die. I just didn’t think that it would be so soon." He glanced at Odin out of the corner of his eye. "Heimdall gave me an idea that may, and I stress may work. But he was right in saying that it is hardly my priority now. I need to rid myself of the chitauri first."

“And you are not rational enough to make decisions about the coming fight in this moment.”

“No, I guess not.” The trickster laughed bitterly. “But I will not be in any better state of mind any time soon.” He ran a shaking hand through his hair. “I will be the first to admit that I am barely holding myself together at the moment. I still cannot close my eyes without believing that I am back in that place. Nights are the worst, but even during the day a word, a sound, a smell and I am back there all over again. I can barely get through a day, and now I find that the one person who is holding me together is dying. I am furious with Tony for not telling me sooner; for making me find out this way. And I am terrified of losing him. He has spent all these years devoting everything to saving me whilst having to raise our daughter at the same time, and now I am not even certain that I can save him in turn. And if I cannot then…I am no fit parent to Evelyn. You should have seen when we found Tony; I could do nothing more than panic, whilst she just…just dealt with it. No child should have to be that calm in such a situation. I will not be a fit parent for her.”

“Sleipnir would disagree. Odin said softly.

“When I raised Sleipnir I was not broken.” Loki stated firmly. “And if I ever want to piece myself back together I need to confront those that did this to me. On my terms and in my own way.”

To his credit, Odin didn’t launch into the whole ‘you aren’t broken’ spiel that Loki was expecting. Instead he cast his son a shrewd glance then looked back out at the observatory again. “You know that your mother and I are very proud of you, do you not?”

Loki shrugged slightly. “It is not your approval that I need to earn this time: It is my own. I want to be able to look at myself in a mirror and meet my own gaze. I want to feel strong again.” He raised a hand, twisted his fingers and smiled as a small flame curled around them. “So I request the right of Holmgang. No help, no back-up, certainly no Thor with that damned hammer. I will do this myself.”

“That weapon your human set off failed to kill the ones on the ships circling the planet; there will be a considerable number of them when they arrive here.”

“I know.” The trickster turned his head slightly and grinned at his father. “That will simply make it all the more impressive when I dispose of each and every one of them.”

Odin chuckled, shaking his head. “I fear that anything I say to divert you from this will fall on deaf ears.”
“Of course.”

“Do you have a plan?”

Loki snorted. “I always have a plan. Not necessarily a good one, but hopefully it will do. It may involve some brute force.”

“Well, that will make your brother happy.” Odin leant over to grip his son’s shoulder, a familiar fatherly gesture. “And if you fall in the battle? Who will take your place?”

“I severely doubt you will be able to stop Thor from doing so.”

“It will be difficult enough to stop him from helping you deal with the chitauri anyway.”

“Holmgang is law. No one may interfere until I either win or die. He will have to be reminded of that.”

“I will have to remind myself of it too.” Odin smiled slightly as Loki glanced at him, trying to gauge his expression. “Now, I believe you need to speak with your mortal. Things need to be put in place before the chitauri arrive.”

The trickster sighed heavily but nodded. “He will not be happy to see me.”

At that Odin laughed. “I doubt there will ever be a time when that young man is not happy to see you, Loki.”

That gained a small smile, but a genuine one. “I can only hope so.”

The Other carefully scanned the unfinished charts infront of him. They had been mapping out the territory of Yggdrasil as they went along, and finally six of the nine realms had been scouted.

That left three. One of which would be Asgard.

The rest of the nine were pleasing though, and the Other kept them in mind for future endeavours.

Thanos might well be interested in new spoils…
Chapter 20

Evie was curled up against Tony’s side, fast asleep, when Loki finally came back. The man glared at him, but it was half-hearted at best.

“May I come in?”

“You’re a God; I’m pretty sure you can do what the hell you want.” The anger in Tony’s voice faded as he saw Loki flinch and he gestured at the empty seat. “But you can if you want.”

“How are you feeling?” The trickster accepted the offer to sit, although his body language was still proclaiming that he was less than happy.

“Eh, tired. A bit sheepish; I should have thought to turn my bloody phone back on.”

“Why would that have made a difference?”

“Jarvis routes through my phone; if it had been on he would have been monitoring me and have cut in when I needed him to.” Tony shrugged. “I turned the wretched thing off since who knows what the Bifrost would have done to it, and what with you and Evie and everything it never occurred to me to turn it back on.”

“We all make mistakes.” Loki said mildly.

“Yeah…” The man looked away, absently running his fingers through Evie’s hair as she slept soundly against him. “Look, I’m sorry. I was going to tell you; there just hadn’t been a good time. I didn’t want you to find out like this.”

“No, I can’t imagine you did. But that is the past, I know now.”

“I’m sorry.” Tony looked up to see that Loki was staring fixedly at the door and reached out to touch his hand. “Hey, I’m sorry. Really.”

For a long moment the trickster didn’t respond, stone faced and silent. It was only when Tony leant forwards slightly, beginning to feel somewhat desperate, that he relented and glanced at the man.

“I know.” He twisted his hand so that it was palm up and gripped Stark’s. “I was angry and irrational earlier, I am sorry too. I should have given you more time to explain.”

“Oh, shit happens.”

“Will you be alright now?”

“Jarvis has got my back. As long as I remember to keep my phone on I should be fine.” Tony settled back against the pillows again, looking more relaxed now. “Hey. Does this mean we’ve just successfully navigated out first argument as a couple?”

Loki looked amused. “We’re a couple?”

“Sorry sugar, sometimes you just have to face the tough truth.” Tony laughed as Loki dropped his hand like a stone, looking revolted. “Okay, okay, no calling you sugar.”

“Do I need to write up a list of all the pet names you have attempted and that I have shot down?”
“I’m pretty sure I remember most of them.” Tony began ticking off on his fingers. “Sugar, honey, cupcake, babe, rock-of-ages, goat-horns, darling, honey-bun, Loke, Lokes, Lolo, lulu, lolly-pop.”

“You’ve never called me Lolly-pop.”

“No to your face; I don’t have a death wish.”

“Hmm.” Loki’s death-glare had the edge to it that usually meant he was seconds away from laughing. “There is still a window close enough for you to be thrown out of, you know.”

Tony waved his hand airily. “Oh pshh, you keep waving that threat around, but you’ve only done it the once.” He grinned. “I still think of it as our first date.”

“A memorable one.”

“Yeah. Can’t say the Hulk or the chitauri lent it a romantic atmosphere, but beggars can’t be choosers.”

Something in Loki’s expression closed off, and he looked away. The motion didn’t go unnoticed and Tony reached out to grab his arm.

“Hey, what? What did I say?”

“The chitauri. Heimdall has informed me that they are on their way. We have a couple of days at best before they arrive.”

The man slumped back, looking horrified. “Shit! I thought I’d got most of them with that nuke!”

“You took out a significant number; which will certainly be useful. However, the ships circling the planet apparently survived.” Loki’s shoulders hunched as he looked down at his hands. “I have asked my father not to let anyone interfere when they arrive. This is going to be my fight and mine alone.”

To his credit, Tony didn’t butt in with the horrified ‘you can’t be serious!’ that Loki expected. Instead his eyes narrowed as he stared thoughtfully at the prince.

“You have a plan.” He said slowly.

“Yes, although…I do not have all the pieces in place yet. There is still information I lack.”

Tony smiled slightly. “I can’t imagine there’s much that you don’t already know.”

“There are some things in which you are the master.”

The man laughed quietly. “Oh, I’d like to have that in writing! Okay, what do you need to know? I’ll get the old memory banks going. Although if you want to build another nuke you’re pushing it fine time-wise. Those things take a while.”

“I am not planning a nuclear weapon.”

“Can I say I’m relieved? To be honest the thought of you with atomic power is kinda…scary.”

Loki grinned, all teeth and malice. “I am after something far more powerful than anything atomic. And you have the knowledge that I need.”

Stark – to his credit – only rolled his eyes. “This won’t involve pulling my brain out or something
like that, will it?"

“No. But if you will let me I would like to search through your knowledge to find what I need. It
won’t hurt, and will not tax your body in any way – I will not put you in harm’s way.”

Tony glanced down at Evie – still fast asleep – then back up and nodded. “Sure, go for it.” He
settled back against the pillows, looking expectant.

“I will not do it now. You need to rest.”

“I feel fine!”

“Tony!” The God leant forwards to cup his partner’s cheek. “Rest. It can wait. Right now I just
want you well.”

Stark smiled grimly, raising a sceptical eyebrow. “Yeah, you and me both know I’m not getting
better any time soon. I’m stable; that’s the best we’ve got.”

“For now. Do not think I am not working on that also.” Loki tapped him on the forehead in a
somewhat condescending manner. “I just need to remove the threat the chitarui pose first.”

“Have I mentioned that I love you?”

“Oh, maybe once or twice.”

Tony laughed and snagged him by the collar of his tunic, pulling the God into a quick kiss. “Yeah,
well, I’m a broken record on that account. Now for God’s sake sit on the bed so that I can fall
asleep and drool on you.”

“How did I ever survive without such romantic encounters?” Loki sounded annoyed, but slid from
the chair to the bed so that the human could lean against him. “Comfortable?”

“Mhmm, very, thank you.”

The prince smiled slightly and tipped his head so that it was resting on his partner’s. He would not
pass up on a chance to be with his little family, even if it brought the risk of drifting off to sleep
and falling off the edge of the bed…

MWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMW

“I found him, but he was with his mortal in the infirmary, asleep – I did not wish to wake them.”
Frigga said softly.

Odin nodded, as if he expected the answer. “I suspected he would be.” He smiled up at his wife as
she came to join him at the window that looked out over the Bifrost. “You have more intuition than
I; what do you make of Tony Stark?”

“A most singular man, I must say.” The Queen sat down on the window seat, pulling the cloak
from her shoulders as she did so. “No real concept of any hierarchy other than one with himself at
the top.”

“Not much difference from Loki then.”

Frigga laughed. “He is very similar to Loki in many ways, and I believe that between the two of
them they would be able to easily take command of the full Nine Realms if they put a mind to it.”
“Then let’s not put that idea in their heads.”

“I do not think we will need to be concerned any time soon. Loki is far more focused on his daughter than taking over another Realm.” She smiled fondly. “I believe Tony Stark is very good for him. I have not seen our boy this happy for many years. Despite all that has happened, these past terrible years and all that he has suffered through during them, there is a light inside Loki that I have not seen for far too long a time. He has been battered and torn apart, and yet the thought of this simple mortal man kept him from being broken.” Frigga looked down at her hands, tangled together in her lap. “When Thor brought him back here all those years ago, Loki was a broken and desperate creature; mad with pain and horror and guilt. I feared the worst when he escaped; that he would lash out again and cause more damage. But instead he found someone who could piece him back together and heal up the wounds to his soul.” She looked up at Odin, smiling although her eyes were wet. “I believe we owe Tony Stark everything.”

“You may well be right, my love.” The King looked all of his many years in that moment. “I never thought I would hear Loki call me Father again. It is more than I could ask for.”

“Do you suppose that he may allow us to meet Evelyn? I so wish to see my grand-daughter!”

“We can but hope. She may well wish to meet us too.”

Frigga leant back against her husband with a sigh. “As long as Loki is happy. He was ever a lonely child and a lonelier young man. He deserves this happiness now. He deserves a family.”

Tony woke slowly to find his neck sore but, always a blessing, he hadn’t actually drooled. He was still leaning against Loki, and could feel the gentle vibrations in the trickster’s chest as Loki spoke quietly.

“-never been particularly fond of them either.”

“What about parsnip? I hate parsnip!”

This time there was more than just a vibration, as Loki laughed almost silently. “Me too! My own mother could never make me eat them as a child.”

Evie giggled, equally quietly. “I’m not a fan of cabbage either.”

“Ah, now I do not actually mind that so much. Carrots on the other hand…”

“Oh, I like carrots.”

“Horrible things! Now honey on the other hand…”

“Hell yeah! Anything sweet to be honest!”

Loki laughed again. “Yes, my sweet tooth is ridiculous too! I had such cravings for those Danish cinnamon swirls when I was pregnant with you. There was this lovely patisserie a block from where I was staying at the time, they catered quite adequately.”

Tony finally raised his head a little. “Okay, you two are making me ridiculously hungry!”

Loki looked sideways at him and smiled. “Oh, hello you. Welcome back, you’ve only been sleeping these past seven hours.”
“Seven hours? Really? Wow.” The man sat up properly, rubbing one hand across his eyes. “Didn’t think I was that tired.”

“You missed breakfast and lunch; that would be why you are hungry. I have had the servants send supper to our rooms. The medics said you could leave once you woke.”

“Great!” Tony half made to raise himself up, then stopped to look at his partner. “Our rooms?”

“There are three of us staying there now. I can hardly claim them all to myself any more now, can I? And to be fair, Sleipnir has always considered them half his as well.”

“Fair enough.”

Once they returned to Loki’s – no, their – rooms Tony dived immediately into the bathroom to attempt to return to something approaching human and Evie started moving the dishes of food from the table where they’d been placed to the rugs infront of the fireplace. Admittedly the fire wasn’t lit, since Asgard was currently in its summer season, but it was still a good area for a picnic dinner.

Loki took advantage of his family being otherwise occupied and slipped back out of the room with Tony’s phone in hand. Since the machine was permanently on – solar-powered to save on battery – he only had to press the button on the side for the screen to light up. However, it was a far newer model than he was used to and he then stared at the new layout in confusion.

In the end he plumped for looking like an idiot and just hoping his hunch was correct.

“Jarvis?”

“Hello sir.”

Thank the Norns for that! He would have looked particularly stupid had the AI not replied.

“It is wonderful to hear your voice once more Mr Loki, I have yet to offer my personal greetings and express how pleased I am that you are alright.”

Loki smiled at that. “Thank you, Jarvis, it is good to hear from you too.”

“How may I help you, sir?”

“Two things. First, I wanted to thank you for looking after Tony and Evelyn so well. I have it on good authority that there are many occasions on which Tony would have died if not for you.”

“I was just doing my job, but I do appreciate the sentiment, so you are welcome. The second thing?”

“Uh…” Loki cleared his throat and looked down the corridor again to double check that there was still no-one in listening distance. “Tony’s heart condition; does it prevent him from…doing certain things.”

Jarvis sounded slightly condescending in his reply. “Well, yes sir of course. For example, he should avoid heavy lifting. You will have to be more specific if there is something in particular you have in mind.”

“Can he still…Are we still able to…”

“If you are trying to ask if Mr Stark is still able to engage in an intimate scenario with you, then the answer is yes.” Jarvis was far too smug. “Provided you aren’t planning a sex marathon, he should
be fine.”

Loki smiled, feeling his cheeks redden and glad that there was no one around. “No marathons just yet. I do not believe I am up to that either.”

“Too much information, sir.”

“You started it Jarvis.”

The AI didn’t reply, but an emoticon suddenly appeared on the screen of a little smiley face poking its tongue out. Loki laughed.

The little family unit ate their dinner picnic-style on the fur rugs in front of the empty fire-place. It wasn’t the grandest selection of foods, but Tony had missed two meals and was starving so hardly cared and it seemed that Evie and Loki had been snacking throughout the day whilst he had slept so they didn’t want much anyway.

During the day the spare bedroom had been aired and set up so that it was fit for the daughter of a prince – a moniker that delighted Evie no end. It was all very well the three of them falling asleep in a big heap the first night that they were reunited, but any teenager needs their space so the girl was pleased to have her own room. She was also pleased that it was still next door to her parents though. It was going to be a long time before she stopped needing to check that Loki was still real every few minutes.

After their daughter had gone to bed Tony and Loki sat up a little later, Tony intrigued about what his lover had mentioned earlier about needing help with the oncoming fight against the chitauri.

“I don’t see why you can’t just ask me questions and let me answer them.”

“Because that will not give me the detail of knowledge I require – what I want to attempt will be quite dangerous.”

“Yeah, see, it’s your use of the word attempt that has me worried here. I’d rather you had a sure-fire plan.”

Loki rolled his eyes. “No plan is fool-proof, you know this.”

“I know.” Tony sounded like a petulant child as he slumped back against the pillows of the bed with a pout. “But I still hate the thought of you facing those monsters with nothing more than some thoughts out of my head.”

“Believe me when I say I will be more powerful than I have ever been by using the thoughts from your head.”

Stark smirked slightly. “Now there’s an absolutely terrifying thought. Go on then. Let’s do this now so you at least have time to work on your master plan of doom.”

“If you are sure.” The trickster knelt up on the mattress so that he was facing the man rather than sitting next to him. At Tony’s enthusiastic nod he continued. “As I say, this will not hurt, but I will be going into your consciousness, and that may be unpleasant. Should you feel uncomfortable or if there is anything you think I am accessing that you do not want me to see, just tell me to stop.”

Loki leant forwards and touched his fingers to Stark’s temples. “Are you alright with those conditions?”

“Yeah, sure. Need me to think of anything specific, or can you find your own way?”
The God smiled. “Think of your workshops and I should be able to access the scientific information stored in your mind.”

There was something about the smile that made Tony glare at him suspiciously. “Really? Because that right there sounded like a whole load of bull-shit.”

“That would be because it was. Have you any idea how complex a human brain is? I am going to have to sieve through until I find what I want. Just shut up and let me concentrate.”

“You have done this before, right?”

Loki’s smile became a grin. “I spent my youth using this trick on Thor when he was asleep so that I had blackmail material on him. Do not worry; it is perfectly safe.”

“Who’s worrying? I’m not worrying! I just – woooaaahh…”

The man trailed off as Loki – fed up with his rambling – simply unleashed the simple spell and plunged in, mentally speaking. He had, after all, done this sort of thing before.

The big difference being that Thor – as nice a gentle giant as he was – was thick as two short planks (In Loki’s informed opinion at any rate) whereas Tony was on the complete other end of the intelligence spectrum. Still, at least the man’s mind was surprisingly well organised. It was rather like leafing through an encyclopaedia actually.

However, as unusual as it was for Loki to have an intelligent brain to view, he was still in familiar territory. Tony, on the other hand, had never felt anything like it.

It was impossible for him to keep up with the mental images sluicing through his mind as Loki rifled through anything that could vaguely be attributed to physics. There were snatches of things; a brief burst of the Starwars soundtrack, Steven Hawkings speaking, a snapshot of the Mars Rover.

“Astrophysics..?” He mumbled.

“Shush.”

Loki’s faced was creased in concentration as he carefully waded through the stacked knowledge, making certain to look only and not disturb anything in the process.

Ah, there.

Tony felt the change, the sudden more purposeful slant that the trickster was making as he felt his own memories wash over him. Black-hole theories, event horizons, wormholes, the Foster-theory…

“Can’t you just blast ‘em with the Bifrost?”

“Not powerful enough anymore. Thor did too much damage when he broke it.” Loki murmured as he continued. The black-holes in Tony’s mind vanished as the God changed track and moved on.

“Why am I seeing pictures of Switzerland?”

“Can you not shut up for a few minutes? You are making this much more difficult than it should be.”

“Sorry, sorry.” Tony bit back any other questions he had and tried to keep quiet. It was hard though, considering he was now seeing images of Geneva shoot across his mind. It wasn’t what he
expected. And then – weirdly enough – an image of the Vatican. “Okay, what the hell are you doing?”

“Shut. The hell. Up.”

“But…”

Loki pulled back and the connection broke, leaving Tony feeling dizzy and slightly drunk.

“Thank you, I think that will do the trick.”

“Uh…Great? Can I ask what you found?”

The trickster smiled brightly. “You may ask. I will not answer. It still needs some work.”

“What?! You just poked around in my head! I should get to know what you found!”

“All of the answers I needed.” The prince leant forwards and pressed a kiss to Stark’s forehead. “One with your intellectual capacity should be able to work out my solution.”

“Hmm.” Tony narrowed his eyes, stuck between his own curiosity and the trapping compliment Loki had just paid him. “I’ll work it out.”

“Feel free to try.” Loki smiled serenely as he laid down, head propped up on one hand as he looked up at the man.

“You’re a minx, you know that, right?” Tony grumbled as he settled down himself and started pulling at the covers.

“A minx?!” The trickster burst out laughing. “Norns, it has been many years since I was called that!” He rolled right up into the man and wrapped his arms around Tony’s waist. “Now do be quiet. You may have slept all day, but I did not and I happen to be quite tired.”

It was true, although Stark wanted to protest that he had slept the day through for a very good reason. After all, a heart-attack was a damn decent excuse to spend the day in bed in his mind. However, with Loki curled up against his chest and already seeming to slip into sleep, Tony didn’t really mind the joking criticism. And truth be told, lying awake with a warm body snug alongside him could hardly be called a hardship, especially when he could open up one of his many projects on his phone and play around.

He was engrossed for about half an hour before he felt Loki move against him with a sudden high whimper, the prince’s relaxed body tensing up. For a moment he wondered – and hoped – that it was simply a passing moment, but when Loki began to twist and roll to face away, curling tightly into himself he knew that this was going to be a full blown nightmare.

Dropping his phone the man wrapped both arms around his trembling partner, rubbing his hands along Loki’s arms.

“Hey, hey Loki,” He kept his voice soft – well aware of what the trickster responded to best by now. “You’re safe. You’re home and safe.”

“…cold…dark cold…”

Oh, it was that one. Of all of Loki’s nightmares it was possibly the easiest to deal with – which was depressing because it meant Tony had actually memorised each one as an observer and put in
strategies for each. He grabbed the heavy quilt, which Loki hadn’t pulled over himself initially, and wrapped it around the trickster, doubling it up in the process.

“…cold…don’t…pain, please…NO!” Loki screamed, sudden and all the worse for it. His fingers twisted in the material of the quilt, clinging desperately to the first thing he could grab hold of. Tears were beginning to make their thin tracks down his cheeks as he shook his head hopelessly, chanting ‘no’ over and over.

“Shhh, you’re okay, you’re safe now, you’re safe.” Tony ran his finger through the trickster’s hair, his other hand resting over Loki’s stomach and rubbing soothing circles. “Shhh. I’m here and I’ve got you.”

“…stop, hurts…hurts…hurts…” It was like a plea from a child, and with a sudden movement Loki rolled back over so that he was pressing his face into Tony’s neck, his hands grasping the front of the man’s borrowed Aesir tunic. “Make them stop, they’re hurting me…” Although the words sounded lucid enough it was still clear to Tony that the prince was deeply asleep.

There was little more that he could do beyond whispering soothing nonsense and rubbing his lover’s back whilst Loki whimpered and pleaded with his remembered assailants. This was a pattern they had played many nights over since the rescue and so far the most effective way to deal with it was to wrap Loki up as tight as possible in an embrace and wait it out. He was coming out of it quicker each time, at least, which was a minor blessing.

This time it was another few long and painful minutes before the prince stopped trembling and his breathless pleas for the pain to end faded away into small whimpers.

Tony unwrapped one of his arms and gently brushed the backs of his fingers against his partner’s cheek. “Loki? Hey, you with me?”

Loki breathed in deeply for a moment, before swallowing and nodding. He opened his mouth to speak, but nothing came out beyond a shaky exhalation.

“You don’t need to talk, it’s okay, I’ve got you.”

The prince nodded again, his tense body relaxing and uncurling so that he was snug against Tony’s side rather than clinging to him.

“I love you.” Tony whispered the words into the dark hair his face was pressed against, and felt Loki’s grip on his tunic tighten in reply.

It was a long while before the trickster finally relaxed back into sleep again, although he didn’t speak or even open his eyes during that time. Tony couldn’t pretend to understand why, but he simply accepted it and held his partner close.

It was a long time before the man followed him into sleep.

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“You should get some rest, y’know.”

Bruce had been staring out of the window at Asgard’s night sky in rapt fascination, but turned when he heard Steve step up behind him. There was an A3 sketch pad open in front of him, half covered with a rough map of the constellations.

“Yeah, I know. Just wanted to jot a few more down.”
“They will be there tomorrow.”

The physicist beamed. “Ah, but they might not be! That’s the beauty of it; I just don’t know! It could all look completely different tomorrow night!”

Steve had to smile at the infectious enthusiasm, even if he didn’t share it himself. He leant against the wall beside his friend, glancing out at the stars. He couldn’t deny their intrinsic beauty – he was an artist after all – but he couldn’t say they would be able to glue him to the window like they had Bruce.

“How was Tony?”

Bruce placed his pencil down after adding one more area to the quadrant he had drawn out. “Out of the hospital – or infirmary, or whatever medieval thing they called it. Once Jarvis was back on he was fine, but it should never have got to that stage. Stupid git should never have turned his phone off.”

“As long as he’s okay.”

“Yeah, he is. Although from what I heard Loki was furious. Apparently Tony had forgotten to mention the whole heart thing.”

“Sounds like Tony.” Steve sat down on the floor by Bruce’s knee, seeing that he wasn’t going to drag the scientist away any time soon. “Is it just me, or is it really strange to be throwing Loki’s name around in normal conversation like this?”

“We’ve been doing it for long enough.” Banner said absently, picking up the pencil again as another section of the sky caught his eye.

“Not in the context of actually having him around. I don’t feel entirely comfortable knowing that Tony is laid up in hospital with that sociopath –”

“You mean psychopath, and I think you’ll find that he is in safer hands with Loki than with any of us. I don’t know about you, but I haven’t had a child with Tony, and as science bros we’re pretty close.” Bruce shrugged without taking his eyes of the paper. “I believe we need to give Loki the benefit of the doubt right now. For Evie’s sake if for nothing else.” He glanced over at the super soldier. “And I thought we had all agreed to that.”

Steve thumped his head back against the wall. “I know. It’s just much harder after actually seeing him in the flesh. I still keep thinking of him flying over New York; all those people dying…”

“Well don’t.”

“You can’t honestly expect me to think you don’t have any concerns about him.”

Bruce sighed and placed his pencil down again. He turned to look at his friend, clasping his hands in his lap.

“Actually, right now, I don’t. I may not be a medical doctor in terms of university degrees, but we are all aware of my medical expertise nevertheless. And as someone with that experience I can tell you that when we saw him yesterday he was in so much pain he was barely standing on his own two feet.” Bruce glared down Steve’s attempt to interrupt him. “Loki is a damned good actor, you said that yourself, and he may be trying to look like the imposing and deadly person we first met, but he really really isn’t. The guy’s a mess. Whatever was done to him, he hasn’t physically recovered yet and I’d be surprised if he’s up to anything more than walking at this point. And from
the few things I’ve gleaned from Tony, it’s fair to say that even Gods can suffer from PTSD.”

“PTS-?”

“Shell-shock, Steve. I’d bet my life that Loki’s got some serious shell-shock going on there.”

“Oh.” Captain America scratched the back of his head, wrinkling his nose. “So do you think Tony’s really a good person to leave with him…? I mean the guy has enough issues of his own to deal with…”

“Steve, drop it. Yeah, Tony has issues coming out of his ears, but he’s also managed to raise a child with very little help from any of us. I think it’s safe to say that if he can deal with a teenage daughter he can cope with helping the person he loves to recover from something he has personal experience of.” Bruce then grinned. “And if we do feel that we need to do the whole ‘if you hurt him we’ll kill you’ speech with Loki, I’ll happily do it. I’ve smashed him to a pulp before, I think he’ll think twice before crossing me.”

That made the super soldier laugh slightly, since it was certainly true. Glancing up at the stars again he stifled a yawn behind his hand.

“Look, I need to go to bed, promise me you’ll at least get some sleep tonight?” He stood up, stretching his arms.

“I’ll promise if you promise to stop worrying about the currently incapacitated God of mischief.”

Steve agreed with a tired smile before leaving the scientist to his stare gazing. The group of humans had been given the use of a large guest suit; which included separate bedrooms and bathing rooms for all as well as a large common sitting room. Steve left Bruce at the large window of the main room, knowing there was every chance he was going to come back the next morning to find the physicist asleep where he left him.

It wouldn’t be the first time; Bruce was as bad as Tony when it came to work.

Stark woke up the next morning to the much missed sensation of someone’s hand dancing along his chest. Not quite awake he reached up to grasp the questing fingers and pulled them up to kiss each one.

“Still not quite used to you being real…” He murmured.

“Oh I can assure you that I am.” Loki’s voice was low and teasing. “So you should probably grow used to it.”

Tony opened his eyes to see the trickster raised up on one elbow and leaning slightly over him. He smiled sleepily and reached up to tuck a stray lock of hair back behind Loki’s ear. “I don’t think I’m ever going to grow used to it, but I am really going to enjoy trying.” He wrapped an arm around his lover’s neck, pulling him down into a tight hug which caused Loki to sprawl on top of him. “I can’t believe you’re here…”

“Stop it. Right now.” Loki managed to lever himself up slightly to look down at Stark seriously. “None of that. I am here, you are here, that’s all that matters. Why question perfection when we have it?”

“Perfection?” Tony smiled up at him, his sleepy gaze happy. “That’s what this is, huh?”
“Well, nearly. We still have to get up and face the day, and I do not relish that thought.”

Tony turned his head to catch the time on his watch. “Nah, we can afford a few hours yet. And I assume Evie isn’t up.”

“She isn’t. There’s a monitoring spell on all the doors so that I could always make sure I was up and about before whatever guest was using that room.”

“That’s way too efficient.” Stark snuggled back down into the pillows. “But at least it means more sleep.” He closed his eyes again, only to feel the tickle of lips over his jawline. “What are you doing?”

“What does it feel like? I see no need to sleep again when we could be doing other things. The walls here are sound proof, you know.”

Tony reached up and gently pressed a finger against Loki’s lips, stopping the line of kisses. “Wait, what?”

The trickster smirked at him. “Is it truly so early in the morning that the great Playboy of New York needs to be told when someone is trying to bed him?” He asked playfully. “Honestly, Tony, it’s been some years I will grant you, but surely you remember how this goes?” He leant over to nip gently at his lover’s ear lobe. “I want you, Tony.” His voice was low, a purr that had once been so familiar and usually a precursor to other things. “I want to feel you; just like we used to. I want to feel you inside me again.” The trickster pulled back enough to smile down at his partner.

However, far from seeming to be happy with Loki’s plans the man half sat up, dislodging the prince. “What? No!”

“What?” Loki’s jaw dropped. It would have been comical had Tony not looked so serious. “Please tell me you are joking.” He moved to cup his partner’s cheek, only to be gently but firmly pushed back.

“I said no, Loki.”

There was stunned silence for a long moment before the prince took a steadying breath, obviously composing himself. “Alright. What is wrong? Are you unwell, or is it something about me?”

Tony rubbed a hand across his eyes with a groan. “Seriously? After everything that’s happened to you and you’re wondering why I don’t want to sleep with you?” At Loki’s sudden furious expression he shook his head hurriedly. “Oh God no! Not like that! I mean that I don’t want to hurt you; it’s too soon for you.”

“Surely I am the best judge of that.”

“I saw the foetuses, Loki! I saw those things they made you carry; do you think I don’t know where babies come from? That I don’t know what they did to you in order for you to fall pregnant?!”

Loki stared at him, the colour draining from his face. For a moment Tony thought it was from fear – the memories perhaps – until the prince’s expression hardened, making it very very clear that it was pure cold fury. “What?! Do you believe me to be some sort of damaged goods? Am I that broken in your eyes?”

Tony scowled. “Don’t put words in my mouth! I never said you were damaged, I simply think that this is too much too soon. You were hurt, terribly, and not just in the physical sense. There’s no
“I need to push yourself.”

“I am not pushing myself!”

“Jesus, Loki, I had to pull you out of a nightmare last night; do you even remember that? It’s not even like Asgard has therapists or something similar for you to talk to.”

“Therapists?!” Loki spat the word out like it was a repulsive thing. “Is that what you think I need? I have no care for your mortal mind doctors; do you think me incapable of healing my own mind?”

Tony glared at his partner. “Stop putting words in my mouth! I’m just trying to explain that I’m being responsible! I don’t want to make things any worse for you!” He slammed his hand down on the covers in frustration. “Can’t you accept that I’m worried about you?! You were raped for God’s sake! I have to pull you out of nightmares every time you fall asleep! Don’t give me that self-healing crap, people do not recover from that sort of shit so quickly!”

“People.” The trickster repeated the word almost emotionlessly. For a moment he simply stared at Stark, before his skin flushed a sudden vivid blue. Frost crackled across the bedsheets, causing the man to yelp and scramble backwards in shock – it was the first time Loki had revealed his true form without keeping up a protective spell to ward off the cold.

“Do I look human to you, Stark?! Do you think I conform to your little ideas of medicine? Do you really believe my mind works in any way similar to yours? I am not human, I am not even Aesir; and you cannot presume to tell me how I should go about healing, and when you deem that I am ‘fixed’! I and I alone can decide when I am well!”

Tony was wide-eyed, staring at the ice creeping up the blankets. “For God’s sake, Loki! You’re completely misconstruing what I mean!”

“You think that I am weak!”

“I think you’re hurting! It’s a completely different thing! Bloody hell, I just want to help!”

“Well stop trying because you are failing!”

“I’m never going to stop trying!” Tony shouted back. “I’ve been doing it for so long I don’t know how to not try anymore! I love you, Loki, surely you can understand that, and that it means I – Ow! Fuck!”

Out of instinct he had leant forwards and grasped Loki’s arm to emphasise his words. Loki’s blue, frozen arm.

Stark had worked with freezing temperatures before; he knew the burn of carelessly spilled liquid nitrogen or a leak from a liquid hydrogen pipeline. This was worse. So much worse. Part of his mind wondered how it was at all possible that a Jötunn’s body temperature could be colder than those substances, which would put them at below -250°C. The rest of him was occupied with the crippling pain that shot through his hand as he snatched it back from Loki’s bare arm.

He had never had true frostbite before, so it was a shock to see the palm of his hand black and dead. He gripped his wrist tightly, trying to breathe over the horrendous pain.

“Tony…”

“No, point proven. You’re not human, that’s pretty damn clear.” The man’s voice was tight and harsh through gritted teeth. He tried to move his burnt fingers and swore when they barely
responded. It was his right hand and all, and he’d be damned if he was going to have to reteach himself to use his left after all these years.

“Tony, I – ” Loki – pale and green-eyed again – reached out tentatively towards his partner, horror clear in his voice at the sight of the wound. However he froze when Stark visibly flinched back, rather than allowing the contact.

The two stared at each other for a long moment, the argument and corresponding injury heavy in the air between them. Loki was trembling, his gaze moving to his partner’s wounded hand whilst Tony desperately tried to bite back the crippling pain.

“I…”

“It’s fine.”

“Tony, I can…”

“No, it’s fine.”

Loki took a deep breath, and then simply vanished.

One moment he was sitting there, next he was just gone. Tony gaped at the empty spot, still grasping his wrist tightly.

“Oh, well that’s mature!” In most circumstances he would have gone after Loki, but being on Asgard he simply had no idea where he would have gone. He reached one-handed for his phone and unlocked it. "Jarvis, how do I deal with frostbite?"

"How have you managed to get frostbite, sir?"

"Long story. And I'm not even sure I know what happened."

MWMWMWMWMWMWMWMW

Tony spent nearly half an hour in the bathroom with his hand submerged in a bowl of warm water. Jarvis had advised him to seek proper medical aid, but he didn't want to drop Loki in it; especially since it still wasn't widely known or accepted that he was a frost giant. He bandaged it himself, worryingly good at using his non-dominant for such a task which suggested that he had had to fix similar wounds before. His fingers had regained a little movement, so it was possible he wouldn't lose function.

Evie, when she finally surfaced a few hours later, questioned both the injury and Loki's whereabouts but didn't connect the two. Tony told her he'd had an accident shaving, since the nature of the wound was unclear under the bandages.

Evie had picked something slightly more conservative to wear, although denim most certainly wasn't an Aesir material. Tony was back in his own clothes again since Bruce had thought ahead and brought things for both the inventor and Clint. However, since it was all picked out by Bruce, Tony now had a surplus of smart trousers and plain shirts rather than the old jeans he favoured. Probably more fitting for the consort (really? Was he a consort? He'd have to ask) of a prince.

It was unnerving going down to breakfast without Loki. They were stared at in the corridors, although mostly it was curiosity rather than anything antagonistic. Thankfully they were quite late for breakfast, by Aesir standards, so it was nearly empty in the great hall.
Anyone who was still there were crowded around one table which, they realised as they drew closer, was mostly comprised of the group of humans and Thor's friends. Tony was first relieved to see Loki there, and then surprised when he realised that the trickster was the centre of attention. He sat down in the next free seat, whilst Evie wormed her way through the group to sit with Loki.

"Morning." Natasha passed over a large mug which had the enticing scent of coffee wafting from it. Tony's delighted yet gobsmacked expression made her smirk. "We brought more than just clothes with us. Steve even thought to pack toothpaste."

"Have I mentioned recently that you guys are my saviours?" The inventor took a deep drink, caffeine deprived after so long in Asgard. "What's everyone talking about?"

"The Asgardian's are experiencing culture shock."

"Always funny." Pulling some toast close, Tony settled down to listen to the general talk.

Loki was in deep conversation with Bruce, the man quizzing him relentlessly about his various magical abilities. This was evidenced by the myriad of unusual objects scattered across the table infront of them that had probably once been harmless breakfast utensils until Loki had begun his demonstrations.

“But how do you factor in the differences in mass? It’s breaking all the rules of physics!” Bruce sounded absurdly excited about this.

“I used to syphon off the extra particles into a pocket dimension until I learnt to annihilate excess matter during the transformation process.” Loki picked up a bread roll and it turned into a flower, which he tucked behind Evie’s ear. “Of course, in the early years, the annihilations were particularly violent and Father would not allow me to even try anywhere in the vicinity of the palace, but as you can see I eventually got the hang of it.”

“Annihilation sounds quite violent.” Fury injected. “Doesn’t that lead to side-effects?”

“Not as it used to. Some areas of the countryside around here have never quite recovered, though.” The trickster grinned and touched a forefinger to the table, causing the entire length of furniture to flush a vivid green. There was an outburst of disgruntled sneers from the Warriors Three and Sif, but they were drowned out as the humans all laughed, and asked more questions.

“That’s so cool, can you do that to living things too?”

“That could come in handy for camouflage in the field.”

“Can you show us something else?”

Loki looked overwhelmed by the positive reaction, especially considering that no Aesir had ever had anything good to say about his magic. He tried to answer what he could, whilst turning Thor’s cape bright pink to the amusement of the Avenger’s.

Sif rolled her eyes and turned to Steve, who was sat next to her.

“Honestly! All this talk of parlour games and children’s tricks as if they were something amazing.”

“We don’t have magic on our world, to us it’s incredible.” Steve, ever the diplomat, opted for the middle ground.

Fandral leant over Sif, gesturing with his fork. “It’s hardly in keeping with a warrior to use such
tricks, though. As a soldier you should know that.”

Steve frowned. “As someone who’s fought Loki in a battle situation; he’s a formidable opponent and even the Hulk couldn’t keep him down.”

Fandral snorted. “Yeah, sure.” He rested one elbow on the table, perilously close to Sif’s plate. “Come, enough talk of magic and childish things; tell us something more interesting.”

Sif knocked him out of the way of her food, but nodded in agreement. “Yes, Thor told us you fought in the second war to engulf your world, tell us of that.”

“Uh, well…”

“It must have been a rare fight.” Volstagg cut in, his mouth full of food. “A whole realm at war; we have never had a chance to experience a battle that large! Tell us tales of your heroic exploits! What glories did you win? How many did you slay?”

Steve stared at them. “I beg your pardon?”

“Yes, tell us about that!” Fandral pushed his own pate aside and looked expectant.

“I’d really rather not…”

“Do not be ridiculous; there is no place for modesty in a warrior’s arsenal.” Sif punched him playfully in the shoulder, an action that would have possibly broken a lesser man’s arm. “Give yourself the credit you are due. You must have slain many to have become the hero that you are today!”

Steve shook his head incredulously. “I don’t know when you last had a proper interaction with some humans; but we don’t glorify war anymore. We haven’t since the gun was invented, really. I’m not modest about the part I played in the war; I just don’t want to remember it. It was absolute hell!”

Fandral snorted. “Well what a stupid way of going about things!”

“Not stupid, just different.” Steve shot back. “We simply don’t appreciate hearing how many people someone has viciously killed. Times have changed. We aren’t Vikings anymore. War is a terrible thing that most of us are ashamed of, and that scars generations. We don’t glorify it, or love it anymore. These days we prefer stories with intelligence, stories that move us. We don’t like hearing ego trips and boasting. So I’m sorry, but I don’t want to talk about the battles I’ve been in; I’d like an intelligent conversation.”

Tony, who had been watching the discussion with interest, almost choked on his drink at the expressions on the warriors faces as Captain America turned away and returned to listening to what Loki was saying with fascination. It was quite possible the four Aesir had never been turned down before as conversationalists, and especially never in favour of the second prince. He caught Thor’s eye and exchanged grins.

Loki could fight his own battles with the people of Asgard, but it didn’t hurt his reputation that the renowned and fascinating humans much favoured him over the seasoned warriors.

Thor kept Tony’s gaze and nodded his head towards the door; evidently requesting that the two of them meet. The man grabbed another couple of slices of toast and followed the blonde from the hall.
“What’s up?” He let Thor lead him a little way down the corridor to a small alcove where they were less likely to be overheard.

“Is everything alright with Loki? He arrived alone to breakfast this morning, and in a most frightful mood. Bruce cheered him up, but he still seems displeased to one who knows him well.”

Tony snorted. “Only a frightful mood? I’m surprised he didn’t incinerate anything to be honest.”

“What happened?” Thor’s gaze turned to the man’s bandaged hand. “And does it have anything to do with your injury?”

“Uh…Yeah.” Tony realised that whilst it was potentially embarrassing to discuss his love life with his partner’s brother, at the same time Thor could shed some light on what the hell had happened and why Loki had been quite that angry.

He decided that he could live with the embarrassment and quickly told Thor what had transpired that morning; including the accident with his hand. The God didn’t interrupt the tale, but his frown steadily deepened throughout it.

“What did I do wrong? I was only trying to look out for him.” Tony finished hopelessly.

“Have you still no idea how prideful Loki is?” The question was rhetorical, and Thor held up a hand to stave off any comment. “He may well not yet be fully healed, but you cannot believe he would thank you for pointing that out.”

“Well, what the hell was I meant to do?!”

“Sleep with him?”

“Thor! He was –”

“Loki is over half a million years old, do you not think that this sort of thing has not happened to him before?” Thor asked mildly. “He and I were both young once, and neither as good at the art of war as we are now. What do you supposed happened to prisoners of war after a battle was over?”

Tony gaped at him. “Bloody hell…Thor, I’m sorry, I didn’t…”

“You weren’t to know, and as I say; such things are sadly hardly unusual for the survivors of the Dark Elf prison camps.” The blonde God shrugged, looking slightly awkward. “You are shocked.”

“Well, yeah…”

“Do not be. You often joke that Aesir are like a past culture to you. I believe your favourite quip is to call us Vikings. Well, our civilisation may be many millennia older than yours, but it is a stagnant one; things that seem cruel or barbaric to you are still our way of life.”

“Yeah, but-”

“I believe such things are still common place in certain areas of your world too.” Thor added, causing his companion to grimace.

It was true after all; there were sadly still more places than there should be on 21st century Earth where a woman considered rape as a sad fact of life and something that she had no choice but to put up with. It was terrible, but true.
“So, as Loki said to you; he knows his own mind and has experience of knowing when he is and is not healed from such things.” Thor smiled sadly as Tony continued to stare at him in horror.
“When someone is as old as a God, they tend to recover remarkably well from physical torture. It is the torture of the mind that takes its toll, and I believe you are doing an admirable job in helping my brother through that.”

“I still think I did the right thing this morning.” Tony was sticking to his guns on that one, no matter what Thor said. “A person simply can’t recover that quickly! It’s only been a matter of weeks!”

The blonde shook his head with a frustrated sigh. “Have you listened to nothing I have said? You cannot treat Loki as a human. He is not-”

“Yeah, he made it really clear that he isn’t.” Tony cut in, holding out his injured hand.

“Quite. He made it extremely clear that he is Jötunn. A half a million years old Jötunn. You would not expect his physical anatomy to be like yours; so why do you assume that his brain works in the same way?”

“I don’t, I just…Look, I’ve spent years trying to save him, he can’t expect me to simply stop worrying just like that.”

“I am sure that he does not, but you should also realise that he has spent those same years with memories of you as his only comfort. Do not now deny him that when he finally has you back.”

That was a point well made, and shut Tony up long enough for Thor to change the subject to something less intimate.

“Think on it. Now; what of the chitauri? I am drawing up rank formations for when they arrive and the armoury is well prepared for-”

“That won’t be necessary, brother.” Loki himself appeared around the bend of the corridor, his expression blank. It was unclear if he had heard any of their previous conversation, but there was no anger in his gaze, even if he had.

“Of course there is need.” Thor turned in his seat to face the younger God, almost as if he had known he was there. “It will not be a long battle; there cannot be many left. I know what you said to Father about wanting to fight them and-”

“Holmgang.”

The single word shut Thor up so quickly that it would have been comical were it not for the situation. The blonde opened his mouth to retort, only for Loki to wave a hand and silence him entirely with a swift spell.

“Listen to me, Thor, and listen well. I am invoking the right of Holmgang, and you will not deny me my revenge.”

Thor gestured wildly; not at all perturbed by his lack of voice, which meant that this had probably happened to him before.

“No, I do not care for help. I am perfectly capable of taking care of this threat on my own.” Loki’s poisonous green gaze slid over to his lover, keeping Tony silent without the need for a second spell. “I spent seven years in their most excellent company, and for every moment that I was lucid, I planned. They will not find me wanting when they arrive here.”
Tony raised his hands in mock surrender. “Hey, I never complained about you trying to take on an entire army single-handedly.”

“You still are not certain though.” Loki switched his stare back to his brother again. “Do not doubt my abilities Thor. I am more than able to do this. Tony destroyed much of their fleet when you pulled me from that place. I am not going in without a plan. There are at most five ships left, more likely only three. That is between one to two thousand chitauri soldiers.”

Thor gestured again, his meaning quite clear. How can you expect to fight two thousand all on your own?! He had a point too; far from being long odds, it was a frankly ridiculous mental image. Loki was strong, and a fearsome warrior in his own right, but that was still far beyond even a God’s capabilities.

However, the trickster merely smirked. “What? Did you have some picture in your mind of myself trying to fight every single chitauri with just my stave?” He folded his arms. “Really, Thor. Am I not known for my trickery? Even you would fail to take on an army like that alone. Have a little faith in me brother.” He waved his hand again and the silence fell away, allowing Thor to talk again.

“Then what is your plan?” The blonde God snapped.

“Mine. And therefore not one I will tell.” Loki grinned at him serenely. “But to appease your minds I will tell you that those creatures will never make it off their ships. I did not spend seven years with them to not understand a little of how they think. Believe me when I say that there will not be a battle; there will be a slaughter and it will be at my hand.”

Tony had given the trickster the benefit of the doubt from the beginning, so didn’t question, but Thor was still frowning.

“I do not like it, Loki! It would be much simpler to just let me lead the army to-”

“This is my fight, Thor. Keep your big hammer out of it! There would not even be anyone for your army to fight; None will make it off of those ships. The worst case scenario is that the Other comes ahead of the fleet, and I am confident that I can defeat him on my own.”

Thor’s expression said that he thought otherwise, but Loki was having none of it.

“At least have some faith in me, brother, and in my plans.”

“I still do not see how you can possibly hope to destroy multiple ships all on your own.”

Loki’s gaze flickered to Tony momentarily and the man realised that the trickster was planning to use the information gleaned from the man’s mind for the endeavour. Something more powerful than a nuke…He still hadn’t worked out what the God was up to, but as long as it was explosive it would more than likely work.

“Leave it to me, Thor. Surely after all these years you must know that when it comes to whole-sale destruction I am the one to come to.”

Thor offered a small smile in acknowledgement of that fact. There was no one in Asgard with a better reputation for the ability to wipe things out than Loki.

“I will concede you that point, but I am still unhappy with your decision to do this alone.”

Loki’s expression softened marginally. “I understand that you are anxious and worry for me, and
after recent events I cannot blame you. But I do ask for your trust in this matter, brother. If you were in my shoes would you not wish for your revenge all to yourself?”

The elder God bowed his head slightly at those words. “Fine. But do not think you have heard the end of this.”

Loki heaved the sigh of the much-suffering younger sibling. “I would not dare to dream I had.” His gaze moved back to Tony, who rolled his eyes in sympathy.

“I dread to think what you two must have been like as kids.” The man said cheerfully.

“A pain to our parents if nothing else.” Loki got his reply in before Thor could, although it looked like the blonde God would have said the same and Tony chuckled. The trickster turned to his partner, his smile dimming a little. “Tony, we need to talk.”

The man sighed, heaving himself to his feet. “Yeah, I guess we do.” He nodded at Thor, who smiled reassuringly back. “Thanks for your help.”

“Any time.”

“Evie is still eating, but was near finishing when I left. Could you take her to see Sleipnir, brother? She said she wished to see him again.” Loki smiled slightly. “And she is allowed to go riding but only if he promises to stick to the fields.”

There was probably a story there, but Tony decided that now wasn’t the time to ask. He let Loki grasp his elbow and lead him down the corridor back towards the prince’s chambers, even though he was pretty sure he knew the way by now.

“Um…You know Evie wants to meet your parents, right?” It wasn’t the best thing to say considering the atmosphere between them was tense enough already, but Loki merely nodded.

“I am aware. I have been giving it some thought.”

“And?”

“I do not know yet. As with a lot of things I want to get the chitauri out of our lives first.”

“Fair enough.”

Tony shut up, letting the awkward silence engulf them both again. Once in their rooms Loki curled up in one of the chairs infront of the cold fireplace, twisting his fingers so that a blue fire sprang up, not producing any heat on the warm day, but pretty none-the-less. The single seat meant that Tony had to sit in the other one on the opposite side of the rug, creating a barrier of distance between them.

“So, uh, I spoke with Thor.”

“Yes, I know.”

Tony rolled his eyes. “Hey, just trying to make conversation.”

“Did Thor have any answers for you?”

“Don’t know if you could call them answers. He freaked me out though.” The man looked down at his hands, pulling at the bandage around his wound. “You never told me about the prison camp thing when you were younger. What were they? Elves?”
“Dark Elves. Do not be fooled by the name. If you are thinking of the Elves from the Lord of the Rings books then you are far from the mark.” Loki smiled grimly. “The Dark Elves are a cruel and vicious race without justice or mercy.”

“Yeah, Thor gave that impression. I’m sorry, I didn’t know what they had done to you.”

“Both of us, Thor was there too. But it is many ages in the past.” The trickster shrugged lightly. “A few hundred thousand years and the memories are barely there anymore. Much as these ones of the chitauri will likewise fade.” He looked up at his partner, his expression guarded. “You did not trust that I could look after my own wellbeing this morning.”

“No, although I refuse to be sorry about it. It’s been my job to rescue you all these years; you can’t must expect me to lose that mindset so soon.”

“I suppose not.” Loki saw him fiddling absently with the bandage and bit his lip. “Why did you not go to the healers with that?”

Tony shrugged. “They’d have asked how it happened. Even I would struggle to explain away severe frostbite in the middle of an Aesir summer.” He smiled, lopsided but genuine. “And it’s no biggie. I’ve had far worse, and Jarvis talked me through looking after it.”

“He shouldn’t have had to.” Loki’s formal speech lapsed as he slid from his chair and crossed the rug to kneel infront of his partner’s chair. “I’m sorry, Tony. I should have thought and I should have been more careful.”

“Meh, you weren’t the smartass who grabbed the sub-zero arm without thinking first. It wasn’t your fault.”

“I should have put up the normal temperature charm. I was angry and had no right to be.” The trickster was in the process of unwrapping the bandages when a strong hand caught his chin, forcing him to look up.

“Hey, don’t blame yourself. I was being an idiot and not listening, and since you had iced the bed I really should have realised you were a bit cold.” Tony wasn’t really a fan of sitting on floors - too much effort getting back up again – but he didn’t like being taller than Loki so forced the trickster backwards as he levered himself out of the chair and down onto the fur rugs.

“A bit cold?”

“Well…I’d actually love to shove a thermometer in your ear the next time you go all Frosty the Snowman on me.”

Loki smiled wanly. “I’m sorry, Tony, I never meant to hurt you.”

“I know. It was an accident.” The man winced as his palm suddenly burnt hot and when he looked down at the unwrapped flesh he saw that the frostbite was looking considerably healthier, the blackened skin pink and healing. “I didn’t know you could do that.”

“I can heal wounds I have inflicted.”

“Hey, don’t go all guilty on me. Guilt really isn’t your colour.” Tony grinned hopefully, trying to garner a similar response. When the prince wouldn’t meet his gaze he sighed. “Look, Loki, I’ve got as much to be sorry for as you have. You were right; I didn’t trust you with your own wellbeing, and I understand now that that was wrong of me. Twenty years ago I didn’t even know aliens existed and sometimes I realise I’m still getting to grips with how different you really are from
“Giving birth infront of you didn’t give you a clue?” Loki asked, a shaky smile playing around his lips as he looked up to finally meet Tony’s gaze.

“Yeah, okay, that was a bit of a giveaway.” The man returned the grin. “I’ll admit that because you look so, well, human, I’ve been assuming all these years that your thought processes are the same as mine. This morning was a bit of an eye-opener. I guess there’s still quite a lot I don’t get.”

“Oh I don’t know, you seem to understand me better than most.” Loki shrugged elegantly. “Sometimes we both just have to remember that our cultures are entirely different. Your culture doesn’t take so kindly to vainglorious boasting about killing in battle; you don’t put much store in death counts unless they are in computer games these days. And in the same way, my culture does not consider some things atrocities whereas they very much are in your world.”

“Yeah, but-”

“Tony; I may be an alien to you, but you are also an alien to me. Please remember that.”

The man grinned and immediately clamped his hand over Loki’s mouth. “Facehugger!”

“Not that kind of alien!” The trickster batted his lover away only to be tackled again and for both of them to end up on the rug, laughing like children. “You are unbelievable!”

“Oh I know.” Tony propped himself up on one elbow, still laughing. “But would you want me any other way?”

“Perish the thought.” Loki’s eyes gleamed, much as they had earlier, and he leant forwards slightly; body language changing from relaxed to sensual.

Tony didn’t miss the sudden shift in the conversation, and so wasn’t surprised when the prince grabbed his arm and pulled so that he ended up half lying on top of his partner.

“Are you angling for something here?”

“We have unfinished business from this morning.”

“Oh do we.”

“Mmhmm.” Loki’s hands were wandering down Tony’s back, making quite clear what he had in mind. However, he seemed to sense that his lover was still uncertain and paused, reaching up to run his fingers through the man’s dark hair. “Must I convince you further that I truly am alright?”

Tony looked down at the smirking green eyes, a sight that was so painfully familiar. “I believe you, I’m just worried. I can’t help it.”

Loki nodded, still playing with the man’s hair. “It is rather endearing to see you so nervous about copulation.”

“Do you have to call it that? You sound like Sheldon Cooper!”

“Fine. It is endearing to see you so nervous about fucking someone through the mattress.”

Tony had to laugh, “I love hearing you swear in that accent! How is it that a Norse God sounds British?”
“I like to sound refined.”

“O! You sayin’ I’hm nose good for youse? Bein’ ‘Murican an’ all?” Tony outrageously parodied his own accent into something that was a mashup between Southern Drawl and New York ganster.

“Not when you speak like that.” The trickster said sternly. He leant up and nipped at his partner’s jawline. “Stay yourself, for goodness sake.”

The man rubbed at the sore spot on his chin, although it was for show rather than because it had actually hurt. “Wrinkles and all?”

Loki’s gaze tracked the fine lines that had appeared around his lover’s mouth and eyes over the past seven years before moving up to the sprinkling of grey that swept back from his ears. He ran his finger along Tony’s goatee, following the familiar shape. “Wrinkles and all. Now for Norns sake kiss me!”

It would never be said that Stark didn’t follow orders; or at least the orders he wanted to follow. In the past they had often treated sex as a type of warfare, but things were very much different now and whilst they didn’t treat each other like glass there was certainly a tenderness that had developed. And there was the wonderful knowledge that they could take their time with each other.

Loki shifted slightly, a subtle movement that meant that his partner was now fully settled on top of him and he was able to run his hands down Tony’s back, creasing up the shirt the man wore.

“I want this off of you.” He whispered into his partner’s ear. “I can still vanish clothing, you know.”

“Don’t you dare! I want to do this the good old fashioned way.” Tony emphasised that by beginning to pull at the ties on the prince’s tunic, slowly unlacing it. “This has been too long in the waiting to do things quickly.” He leant down to follow the line of exposed skin with his tongue, nipping to bring a little colour to the pale surface. “If we’re doing this, we’re doing this my way.”

“Oh fine then.”

It wasn’t exactly a hardship for Loki just to lie back and let himself be loved. He arched up enough to let his partner slip his tunic down his shoulders, then shrugged the item of clothing off so that he was lying on it. There were still a handful of faint scars running down his chest and stomach, but they were silvery lines – nearly gone and not something that he could feel any more. However, he could more than feel, and enjoy, Tony kissing along the snaking lines.

The man felt insistent hands tugging at his shirt again and he paused to allow it to be pulled over his head before leaning back down and nipping along Loki’s stomach, feeling the muscles ripple and contract. It was a gentle exploration as he reminded himself of each little spot that made his partner gasp and moan, nosing along each bump of a rib. Loki’s hiss of surprise as he drew the prince’s left nipple into his mouth made him smirk, applying his teeth just enough to draw the sound out for a little longer.

“Did you memorise how to make me sound like an idiot?” Loki was breathless as he lifted his head enough to smile down at his partner.

“Hell yeah I did.” Tony nipped at the little bud again, causing his partner to gasp loudly. “How did you think I kept myself amused all those years? Jarvis has everything on the security cameras.”

“Everything?” The trickster dug his nails into the man’s bare back. “Should I be, ah, embarrassed?”
“You’ve got nothing to be embarrassed about, trust me.” Stark traced another thin scar with his tongue, snaking down from Loki’s throat to his navel. “We’ll have to have a look together sometime.”

“Mmm, sounds romantic.”

“Oh it will be.” The man smirked when he felt Loki’s obvious interest against his stomach as he slid down the prince’s body. Loki arched under him as he sucked a deep bruise into the curve of a hip bone and he nosed along the smooth line down to the waistband of the trickster’s suede trousers. “Still not invented the zip in Asgard?”

“I’m certain you know how to undo a knot.”

“I used to be able to do it with my teeth.”

Loki propped himself up on his elbows, looking down at his partner. “Go on then, impress me.”

“Uh…” Tony rather wished that he hadn’t said it, since the prince was smirking at him, but he wasn’t one to back away from a self-issued challenge. It had been decades since he’d last tried to untie something with his teeth alone, but he still routinely knotted cherry stalks with his tongue so that had to count for something, right?

Obviously not, since his fruitless attempts caused Loki to burst out laughing. The leather tie was in a complicated knot that was a lot more intricate than it had first seemed. Tony pulled at various likely looking loose ends and loops before having to concede defeat with grace and a self-deprecating grin as he was laughed at.

“Alright, so I’m not perfect.”

“I don’t believe I ever said you were.”

“Oh!” Tony shut his sniggering lover up by crawling back up and kissing him into silence. He slipped a hand between their bodies to finally pull the wretched knot open, still trying to ineffectively muffle Loki’s chuckles. “Shut up.”

“You are such an idiot.” The prince pushed the man up enough to wave his hand and vanished the rest of their clothing, ignoring Tony’s indignant ‘hey’. “There, see? Much better.”

The man couldn’t deny that the view was fabulous.

That was one of the weird things about Asgardian medicine, or maybe just alien physiology. A human would have taken years to recover from the muscle wastage Loki had suffered from. Years of a restricted, heavily monitored diet and exercise regime just to return to a healthy weight, let alone rebuild the muscle density Loki had regained. That wasn’t saying the prince was muscular by any stretch of the imagination; but then he never had been. Instead he had regained that wiry, sinuous strength and well-toned physique that no human could ever have hoped to recover so quickly.

He was certainly something to behold.

“You’re gorgeous…” Tony breathed, dipping his head down to ghost hot air across Loki’s stomach.

“And you’re ridiculous…” The prince closed his eyes as his lover moved lower, letting out a quiet moan as a hand ran up his thigh. The hot mouth was whispering along his hip bone, not quite
where he wanted it to be, but bringing its own gentler pleasure in the build-up. He didn’t realise that he was shaking until a hand rested firmly on his stomach – grounding him.

“Relax.” That was all the warning Tony gave. Loki’s reactions were just as he remembered and from that he knew exactly what his partner wanted at this point. And he gave it to him.

Loki arched with a sharp cry, hands clenching in the rug he was laying on. Tony’s mouth was searingly hot, almost painfully so, but in such a good way. It had been so long since he had last engaged in anything like this that his mind couldn’t actually pick apart the separate sensations from the overwhelming feeling. All he knew was heat and suction, followed by a sudden burst of cool air, then burning heat again.

Tony recognised that his lover was over-sensitised and so didn’t go overboard. He lapped at the head of the trickster’s arousal before taking it as far into his mouth as possible. There had been a time when he’d have been able to go all the way down, but that had been years ago, and now his throat was complaining. However, his efforts seemed to be almost too much for Loki as it was so he didn’t berate himself too much.

He continued along the same vein for a few minutes longer, but Loki was already moaning breathlessly, obviously unable to handle too much. The man drew back, kissing his way up his lover’s heaving chest as Loki tried to slow his breathing.

“Relax…” Stark repeated the single word in a whisper, his lips barely brushing against the prince’s. “We can stop if you want to…?”

“Norns…no…!”

“Then you need to calm down.”

“I am calm!” Loki took a deep breath, then laughed slightly as he heard how much it shook. “Alright, I see your point. But I am fine.” He drew Tony’s hand up and kissed the man’s fingers, one at a time. “Are you going to do something with these?”

“That wasn’t asking very nicely.”

The prince leant up and pulled the man’s earlobe with his teeth, drawing the captured hand slowly down his body and bringing it under his thigh. “Tony, Please.” He breathed.

Although Loki had positioned him there, Stark could still feel the tremors running through the leg he was holding. It was obvious that despite the trickster’s insistence that everything was fine, there were still nerves there that had never been a problem before.

The man began to dip back down, but Loki stopped him, gently tugging on his chin to keep them face to face.

“I want to be able to see you.” He said quietly.

“Okay.” Tony kissed the end of his nose, not questioning the request. He ran his fingers along the underside of Loki’s thigh, noting that despite the sudden insecurity, the trickster’s arousal hadn’t waned.

Loki couldn’t make himself relax entirely, although it was more of a nervous feeling than from fear, which was a good thing. It helped, being able to see his partner, rather than getting washed away in the overload of sensations; it was something to ground him. Normally being overwhelmed was a good thing, but not after everything that had happened; Tony had been right in that respect.
These thoughts were fleeting as it was hard to concentrate on anything other than the fingers ghosting under his thigh and dancing across his opening. It was hard not to tense up at the best of times, but he hardly got a chance to before Tony’s hand moved away again.

“Do you have anything we can use as lube?”

“Here.”

Tony suddenly found his fingers slippery and oiled with something that smelled of pine. He rubbed them together experimentally and found it to be the perfect consistency.

“That’s neat! You never said you could do that!”

“You never asked.” Loki laughed at his partner’s reaction. When the fingers returned to their previous spot he forced himself to breathe deeply and relax.

“Loki, we can still stop, or at least swap positions; you take me?”

“No. I want this, and I want you inside me.”

“Okay, okay.” The man nipped at his jawline. “But you’ve got to relax; I refuse to hurt you.” He didn’t wait for a reply, and simply kissed the prince deeply. He felt some of the tenseness in Loki’s body fade slightly and used the opportunity to hook his arm under the trickster’s knee, lifting his leg slightly.

The kissing helped. Loki knew that his lover was trying to distract him, and it was working as he sternly reminded his body that the questing fingers were a good thing that would feel amazing as long as he let himself accept it. Some part of that thought process must have registered since the next thing he knew Tony had gently slipped a finger inside.

Loki gasped, tensing despite everything his vast experience was telling him. Tony stilled, although didn’t retreat, allowing the prince to take his time and accept the intrusion. It helped that it didn’t actually hurt. His body had obviously been expecting pain, despite everything, and the lack of it was a momentary confusion. It made it far easier to relax, though.

Tony felt the tight heat slowly stop clenching and the tremors running through Loki’s body faded enough for him to feel confident that the trickster was alright to continue. Loki verified this by arching slightly and whispering ‘move’. So he did.

It was only when he’d slowly introduced a second finger that Stark searched out the spot that had his partner suddenly buck and gasp out his name. He grinned, crooking his fingers and making the trickster yelp again. There had been a time when he’d have brought his mouth into the party too, using everything at his disposal to make his lover melt into a puddle of goo. However, with how overly sensitised Loki was, it would be far too much to go overboard, however much Tony wanted to.

Loki was beginning to rock with the man’s movements, relaxing into it. He was moaning freely, punctuated with harsh gasps when his partner hit that spot inside him particularly hard. When Tony slipped in a third finger the stretch was welcome.

“Tony…ready…”

The man kissed him again. “Are you sure?”

“More than…”
Tony nodded, but he could feel Loki start shivering again. The trickster might want to go further, but his body was still betraying him in that respect.

“I’ve got an idea.”

“I’m fine…”

“I know.” The man grinned and rolled them both over so that his lover was on top of him. “But I think you should be in control here.”

The thought behind the gesture was touching and Loki nodded slowly, leaning down to rest his hands on his partner’s shoulders. He recognised that Stark was putting everything into his hands, which was exactly what he needed at this point. He was fine, but needed to convince himself of that fact.

Tony held himself steady in hand which let the lube spread liberally, allowing the trickster to do everything at his own pace. He had completely ignored his own arousal in favour of looking after his partner and now it was intoxicating as the God moved against him. Loki brushed over his lover’s erection a few times before taking a deep breath and slowly pushing against it.

The moment seemed to last forever for the two of them. Tony had a hand on the prince’s hip, a light touch to reassure but not guide whilst Loki slowly lowered himself down. The trickster’s expression was hidden behind the curtain of his hair as he was finally seated in his lover’s lap, but his back was rising and falling rapidly.

Tony was having a hard time controlling his own reactions as his erection was engulfed in the tight heat, but he forced himself not to buck up into it. He reached up and brushed the dark swath of hair out of Loki’s face, anxious to see the trickster’s reactions.

Burning green eyes met his own, the trickster’s pupils blown wide. Loki’s hands left the man’s shoulders to tangle their hands together and press Tony’s back into the mattress above the man’s head. Tony laughed breathlessly, allowing himself to be effectively pinned down. Now that they were past the hypothetical worst part of it all Loki was obviously relaxing, his body accepting that this wasn’t what it had been expecting at all.

The trickster shifted and raised himself up slightly, his eyes gleaming as he met his lover’s gaze.

“Move…” He whispered.

Tony didn’t question him this time and simply obeyed.

Their bodies worked in tandem, slow and steady. There was no need to hurry through anything and they could simply get lost in the moment together. Loki had leant forwards so that they could kiss and his arousal was rubbing between their stomachs, a gentle friction that was not too overwhelming. Tony’s hands were released and started roaming up the prince’s back and into his hair, seemingly everywhere all at once.

Loki kept the pace slow as he moved fluidly. Being on top meant that he could also have greater control over the angle and by leaning forwards he could ensure that Tony was brushing against that spot inside him each time he moved. His moans were mostly muffled by his lover’s mouth but still loud enough to make it very clear how much he was enjoying it.

It was a good indication to Tony how close his partner was, and he slipped a hand down between their bodies to grasp the trickster’s leaking erection. Loki whimpered and bucked against him, gasping and thrusting into the grip.
It didn’t take long at all before the prince buried his face in Tony’s shoulder with a shrill cry as his orgasm ripped through him, his body shuddering in the man’s hold. Stark followed only moments later; quieter but no less intense as he hugged his lover tight to his chest.

“I…” Loki was shaking as if he was going to fall apart, his chest heaving.

“Shh.” Once again Tony was reminded that his partner was actually far heavier than he looked, but he really couldn’t care less at this point. He wrapped his arms tight around the trickster, feeling every little tremor and shudder breaking through Loki’s body.

“I never thought I would feel that again…”

“I know.” The man had never been one to believe in predictions of the future, but suddenly he simply knew what was going to happen. It was something he’d been expecting from the very start since they’d rescued the God, and now with total clarity he knew that this was the time and place.

Therefore it came as no great shock when Loki suddenly broke against him, huge sobs ripping through the prince.

And Tony knew and understood. It hadn’t been real for Loki up until this point. Some part of him had obviously still been expecting to wake up and find this all a wishful dream and that he was still trapped in silent darkness. Up until this point, whilst emotions had been running high, physically he had still been in a lot of pain and that didn’t help the insidious little thought that none of this was real. It took something a lot bigger to really hit home that he was safe, and this had been what he’d needed; whether he’d consciously known that or not.

And Tony was there for him.

“I’ve got you, my love, I’ve got you and I’m not letting go.

Loki nodded his head into the man’s shoulder, completely unashamed of the tears. “I know.”
Chapter 21

The two men stayed where they were for a long time, Loki quietly sobbing into his lover’s shoulder. In all the time that he had been back in Asgard, the trickster had not allowed himself the luxury of such an outburst and emotion has a way of taking over once it’s given a small outlet. Seven years’ worth of pain and fear were finding their way out and that was never going to be an easy or pleasant process. At some point he had at least thought to roll off of Tony, knowing that he was too heavy to really stay on top of the man like that. In response Tony had simply wrapped his arms tightly around the prince and pulled him closer.

It was about half an hour before Loki ran out of tears and lay curled into his lover trying to calm down his breathing. He was shivering again, but that was dying down as he waved a hand to vanish away all the mess; from both the sex and the crying.

“Neat trick...” Tony murmured. He ran his hands up and down his lovers back. “How are you feeling?”

“A bit of an idiot to be honest.” Loki’s voice was thick, but he had a slight smile as he slowly sat up.

“I don’t see why; after all, you’ve been bottling that up for a long time. About time it all came out.”

“Yes, but I would rather it had not spoilt the moment.”

Tony sat up too, looking surprised. “What? Don’t be stupid! No moments were spoilt!” He wrapped his arms around Loki’s waist from behind so that he could rest his chin on the prince’s shoulder. “Guess what?”

Loki rolled his eyes at the childish question. “What?”

The man laughed and kissed his neck, sucking hard to draw out a bruise. “I love you.”

“I believe I could have guessed that.”

“Yeah, but you didn’t.” Tony removed his arms and slid round to sit in Loki’s lap instead, locking his legs around the trickster’s waist. He leant forwards to gently knock their foreheads together. “I’m not letting go, you know. Ever.”

“Who ever said I would let you have the choice of going?” Loki’s eyes were red-rimmed, but his smile was genuine as he leant forwards and kissed his lover. “Thank you.”

Tony hugged him all the tighter.

“I told you I would be alright.”

“Says the guy who just sobbed on me for half an hour.” The man teased gently. “No, you’re right. I shouldn’t have worried.” And he meant it too.

Loki was something far from human; physically, mentally and culturally. Tony still felt justified in worrying beforehand, but in the long run the prince had been right. A human response was to avoid triggers; apparently the Jötunn response was to write over the memories with something happier. Loki had known his own psychology well.
“How is your hand feeling?”

“I’d forgotten about it to be honest.” Tony glanced down at his palm, shrugging at the red but healing skin. “Doesn’t hurt and moves like it should. I’ve had worse.”

“I am still sorry.”

“You’ve thrown me out a window; frostbite is nothing.”

Loki grinned. “And still with the window. As I recall, you allowed me to be thrown out of a helicopter.”

“Yeah, but you had just ripped some dudes’ eyeball out.”

“And it tasted delicious.”

“Oh God! Did you have to give me that imagery?!” Tony was laughing so hard he barely got the words out.

“Mmm, German eyeball…” Loki pretended to nibble on the man’s shoulder before also collapsing into chuckles. “Almost as tasty as American trapezoid muscle.”

“Stop being creepy! I’m going to start believing you’ve eaten people! For all I know you have!” Tony batted him away. “Please can we repeat all of this infront of Steve! He was so pissed that I took you down and not him!”

The tricksters’ eyes gleamed. “Oh you took me down alright.” He inclined backwards until his back hit the furs again, Tony leaning over him. “Took me down again and again and again.”

The man lit up, then frowned slightly. “Uh…I would love to jump all over you right now, but you know that human men can’t recover that quickly, right? I mean, in my hey-day I’d be up and running again in fifteen minutes, but we’re talking at least forty five now.”

Loki shrugged elegantly, his eyes roaming over his partner’s body. “I can wait. It’s been about half an hour already.” He ran his hands up Tony’s thighs where they rested on either side of his chest.

“Well, with the right motivation I may be ready quicker than I thought…”

“Hmm, I could always-” Whatever he had been about to say went lost as Loki suddenly froze, raising a hand to silence Tony when the man tried to ask what was wrong. “Someone is coming.”

Stark remembered what he’d been told about the sensory spells on the rooms; since he couldn’t hear anything and had to assume that it was one of those alerting his partner. He was silent as the prince monitored it intently, then Loki groaned and thumped his head back against the floor.

“Oh Norns. It’s Thor.”

As he said it there was a corresponding thump on the door.

“Brother? Tony? Are you in there?”

Tony was tempted to not answer, and placed a finger to his lips to suggest the idea to Loki. However, the trickster shook his head with a long-suffering sigh.

“He won’t go. He asks out of politeness; he knows we are here.”
As if he had heard it; Thor banged on the door all the harder. “Come on, both of you! You have hidden away too long today!”

“He genuinely doesn’t know what we’ve been up to?”

“Of course he does; he is simply being an obnoxious bilgesnipe!” Loki sat up, gently pushing his lover off of him in the process. “I am going to turn him into a soup-bowl!” He flicked his fingers, restoring their clothing, then rose stiffly to his feet, a wince briefly crossing his face.

Tony followed him from the soft rugs; hopeful that Loki was going to make good on this threat. The trickster threw the door open and in the process almost took Thor’s nose off.

“What?!”

The thunder God took a step back, obviously well aware from the single word just how annoyed his younger brother was. “I came to look for you; The Avengers and Evie are down at the training grounds and we wanted you both to join us.”

Loki’s eyes visibly flashed red. “And when in my life have I ever wanted to go to the training grounds?”

Thor shrugged hopelessly, backing up another pace. “It was Evie’s idea!”

“Do not blame this on my daughter, Thor. She does not even know what the training grounds are!”

“Alright, so I desired your company! Is that such a bad thing?”

“Yes! Did it occur to you that we may have been busy?”

“You have been gone the past two hours; I assumed that you had finished talking over your argument!”

Tony – sensing that fratricide (Was there a term for a God killing a God?) was imminent – stepped between the two. “Okay guys, time out.” He was staring at Thor, but casually reached out behind himself, grabbed Loki’s wrist without looking and lowered it, which diffused the fire ball growing in the trickster’s hand. “Thor; yes we were busy and don’t appreciate the interruption. And Loki-” He glanced over his shoulder at the fuming prince. “You’ve got that whole ‘I’m going to destroy the world’ thing going, and it’s not a good look on you.”

“I am sorry if I have interrupted you; our friends and I genuinely did desire your company with us. I believe it is hard for a human to gain respect here when matched against Aesir warriors.” A grin broke on his face. “Although Natasha certainly succeeded in garnering fear; which is just as good.”

Loki’s expression warmed slightly to a tiny smile. “Oh? Who was it?”

“Fandral.”

“He should know better than to assume the worst of a woman.”

“He knows that now. Actually so does Sif.”

The trickster significantly brightened. “She beat Sif?”

“Eventually. It was a hard match.”

Tony glanced at his partner and took in the conflicted expression on Loki’s face. It was obvious
the prince desperately wanted to see the Warriors Three being humiliated by a mere human, but at the same time didn’t want to give Thor the satisfaction of knowing it. Stark rolled his eyes.

“Well, I want to see this. Lead the way Thor.” He shrugged a single shoulder at Loki in a ‘come along if you want to’ gesture.

Unsurprisingly, Loki did go with them, albeit grudgingly.

MWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMW

The training grounds were an area that Tony had yet to visit, so he was uncertain what they might look like, if he’d even really thought about it at all. Possibly something like an army camp with obstacle courses and shooting ranges. However, he was surprised to find something that wouldn’t have been out of place in a Roman city.

On the outside the grounds were deceptively low, looking like a large circular building, maybe three or four stories high. Inside, however was a different story.

Steps led down into a huge oval arena that was comparable to an amphitheatre. There were nearly twenty tiers of seats rising up around it apart from one end that was taken up with weapon storage. All across the area there were people engaged in various martial pursuits; from stretching out to what appeared to be two huge men sparring with morning stars.

Tony stared in part awe part horror whilst Loki merely rolled his eyes at the displays of brute strength. Thor led the way round the edge of the seating to where Evie was sat with the other Avengers and Fury. Natasha was back with them, a fresh bruise on her cheek and a smug glint in her eyes. A little way along the Warriors Three were trying to look like two of their best hadn’t just been beaten by a mortal. They perked up when they saw Thor, then darkened as Loki appeared behind his brother.

“If looks could kill, you’d be a pile of smouldering ash right now.” Was Clint’s welcome. He moved over a little to let Tony sit down, but addressed his comment to Loki.

“Yes, believe me that the feelings are mutual.” It was all the clearer how different Loki really was from the rest of the Aesir out here amongst the brawny and overly-manly-man warriors.

Thin and pale really didn’t cut it in this world.

“Do you feel like a bout, brother?” Thor seemed to be in his element.

“Do you feel like being burnt alive in dragon flame?”

Thor laughed, but Tony had the sneaking suspicion that Loki was entirely serious.

“Come now Loki! You should at least try to have a go, even if you know you will lose.” Volstagg said cheerfully. “You were always so defeatist.”

The snarl on Loki’s face would have sent the Hulk running, but Thor got there first with a retort.

“My brother’s strengths lie elsewhere, and you know that well!”

“What strengths??” Fandral laughed in derision.

Thor gestured at the arena. “Go ahead and show me how well you can cast a double of yourself. Or throw a fireball.”
Volstagg looked gobsmacked at the prince standing up for his brother. “What warrior needs those tricks?”

“You know well that Loki can take your head off of your shoulders without having to even look. He can turn your blood to molten metal or ice as he sees fit.” Thor grinned at his equally astounded sibling. “You may call them tricks – just as I once did – but believe me when I say that Loki is more deadly than any of us.”

The trickster was a master at schooling his emotions, but this was such a huge thing coming from his brother that he was metaphorically floored without even setting foot in the arena. Thor had never had a good word to say about his attributes on the battle field, and certainly not in front of the heir’s friends.

It was such a big gesture for Thor to make that when he turned big imploring eyes on his brother and repeated the request to spar, Loki felt that he didn’t have much choice.

“We will take it easy; I know you are still healing.” The older prince stated courteously as they made their way down the steps to the sandy ground.

Loki glanced up at his daughter, who was eagerly talking to Tony and looking excited. “No. I do not think so. If I must do this then we are doing it properly. After all, Norns know when the chitauri will arrive and I need to at least familiarise myself with combat again before that.”

Thor looked side-ways at him, taking in the stubborn cast to his brother’s expression. “I do not like it.”

“You never do. Pounding me into the ground was certainly never your favourite past time when we were younger.” Loki allowed a smile to enter his voice just enough to make it more a tease and less of a barb. “How about this; I shall agree not to use magic. That will mean I will not tax myself so much.”

“Yes, but you will be depriving yourself of your strongest fighting point.”

Loki shrugged. “The chitauri can block my magic. As much as your compliments flatter me, I need to recall my other strengths.”

His logic made sense, although it was obvious that Thor didn’t like it. He didn’t even want to pick up his hammer to begin with, instead edging towards a normal sword. However, a dark glare from his brother made it clear that punches were not allowed to be pulled.

“Put it this way, Thor: If you do not fight at your absolute best you will be going easy on me and if I win then the victory will be meaningless and you will have proved that your friends are right.”

“Yes, but-”

Loki moved like a snake. He had materialised a quarter-staff – his only concession to using magic – and now drove it straight into his brother’s gut.

“No pulling punches!”

Thor was taken by surprise, but he was a trained warrior and recovery was instinctual. As was calling Mjölnir.

Sitting with the other humans, Tony could only roll his eyes. He knew damn well that if he were in Loki’s position he would be doing exactly the same thing – had done the exact same thing.
understood his lover's reasoning and in this case agreed with it. Yes; Loki was still in pain and still recovering, but the chitauri wouldn’t care about that when they arrived, he needed to feel ready. Tony would admit to worrying at least a little though; the last thing Loki needed was another injury.

It was hard to actually tell what was happening though; the two God’s moved like lightning and it was near impossible to see one move from the next. Whilst the brothers had fought during the chitauri invasion all those years ago, none of the Avengers had actually seen them. Tony had had a brief glimpse of the two when he had flown past Stark Tower but since there had been a giant space-eel on his tail at the time he hadn’t paid much attention.

It was certainly something to see two Gods fight and to be fair to him, Loki really was holding his own. He was tending to evade Thor’s huge strikes, favouring to try and duck and hit instead. The last time they had fought, his chitauri staff had been able to take the blows from Mjölnir; this one couldn’t so he wasn’t even attempting it.

There were moves being used that would have at least physically disabled a human, if not killed them but the two Aesir were simply rolling with the punches, as it were. One of the hits Thor took to the head had Tony covering Evie’s eyes, although she impatiently batted him away, completely entranced by the fight.

However, it was all very well for Loki to demand a full-on sparring match, but it was a tough ask to match up against Thor’s hammer. He realised this to his cost when it came to the point that he had to choose between being smashed in the face, or blocking with it with his staff. He caught the blow, but the power behind it shattered the weapon, leaving him with two handfuls of splinters.

This didn’t prevent him from kicking Thor backwards in the chest and giving himself a moment to reassess the situation. Thor was in the zone by this point so didn’t realise that his opponent was weaponless, meaning that Loki had to dance out of the way of the next two blows.

“Here, catch!”

The shout came from an unexpected place and it was by pure reflex that Loki caught the object thrown at him. He was met with a bright splash of colour as he swung the new weapon round and scythed it through the air at his brother, catching Thor off guard. Loki had never used this form of weapon before and had never in a million years expected to try. And certainly not this one.

The look on Thor’s face was priceless as Captain America’s shield caught him neatly on the jaw as it flew round in a large arc and back to Loki. The trickster was ready for it, and caught it neatly in one hand before bringing it down as a shield rather than a weapon. Thor wiped away a trickle of blood from his lip and gave a feral grin.

“How did you do that?” Bruce leant in close so that only Steve could hear the question. “I thought you said you couldn’t trust him.”

“I don’t like him, but I don’t want Evie to see him pulverised. Also…” And here Steve smiled slyly – an odd look on his face. “I appreciate that Loki is an extraordinary fighter and I may pick up
some moves.”

“That’s sneaky.”

“I am capable of sneaky if it helps my technique.” Steve sounded distracted as he watched Loki kick Thor in the shoulder then use his spinning motion to slam the shield into the blond God’s head. “For someone’s who never held that shield, he’s doing a damn good job.”

“You never know; he’s thousands of years old; he’s probably used something like that before.”

Both with an indestructible weapon, the God’s were more evenly matched. Thor favoured strength as always, but Loki’s agility evened out the score as he evaded most blows. It was clear that the two were very used to fighting each other – in every sense – and even with Loki using an unfamiliar weapon they were falling back into old patterns.

“Who usually wins?” Natasha had leant forwards and rested her arms on the thin rail that ran in front of each tier of seats.

“Thor.” Fandral and Volstagg chimed together.

However, Sif glanced at the other woman and heaved an annoyed sigh. “They usually draw. Thor will claim victory, but only because Loki allows it.”

The two warriors looked at her askance, but Hogun nodded in agreement.

“It is true. Thor is unbearable if he loses; Loki knows that. He has spared us all many of Thor’s tantrums by strategically losing a fight.” The Aesir said quietly.

Natasha glanced between the four warriors; split into their two factions. It seemed that Sif and Hogun at least had an ounce of common sense each, although the other two were definitely lacking the small grey cells. Still, as long as half of the quartet could see which way the wind was blowing when it came to Thor’s favour the other two would probably fall into line.

Black Widow turned back to the arena just in time to see Loki go flying backwards, although she missed the blow that caused it. The trickster appeared used to this happening, and used the momentum to twist in mid-air. The added weight of the shield aided the spin so that rather than falling on his back he succeeded in landing on his feet, the disc swung back so that he could immediately hurl it at his brother.

Thor ducked, but was taken by surprise as the shield boomeranged back and caught him a neat blow across the back of his shoulders, throwing him forwards. He recovered in time to see Loki readying to catch the weapon and threw Mjölnir into the shield’s path, throwing it off course. However, he mis-judged the aim so that the shield sailed straight back into their group of friends.

It skidded along the wooden floorboards before sticking firm right in front of Evie. The girl immediately tugged it free and hugged it to her chest.

“Mine now!” She called down.

“And how am I meant to fight now, young lady?!” Loki called up to her, hands on his hips.

“Improvise!”

The prince glanced at his brother, who had also paused and was watching the interaction with amusement. Once he saw Loki looking at him, Thor walked up to him, prepared to call it a day and
concede that in this instance it probably was a draw.

However, he got as far as; “That was a –” And holding his hand out to shake Loki’s before the trickster swept his legs out from under him with a well-timed and well-placed kick.

The thunder God fell heavily onto his stomach – winded and shocked. Of course, he was a warrior and his instincts were such that as he still tried to work out what had just happened, his body was already trying to rise and combat the threat. A dagger placed against the soft spot at the base of the skull put paid to that as a heavy weight dropped onto his back and stopped him from rising.

“Yield?” Loki asked cheerfully, digging his knee into the small of Thor’s back.

There had been a time, not so long ago to the two immortals, when such a victory would have rendered the thunder God incandescent with rage. However, even though his friends were on their feet and protesting loudly, Thor himself merely laughed and released his grip on Mjölnir.

“That, I believe, was cheating.”

Neither of us called an end to the match, therefore the match is not technically over. You know the rules, Thor.” Loki’s voice was full of laughter, more so now that he was pretty certain he wasn’t going to be smashed in the face once he got off his brother.

“A fair point.” Thor struggled again, but he was well and truly pinned, especially with the dagger to his head. “Oh fine, I yield!”

Up in the stands bickering had broken out between Thor’s friends and the Avengers, but Fury sat off to one side, preferring not to get involved. Instead his attention was focused on the brothers down in the practice arena.

Nick Fury had kept himself to himself since their arrival in Asgard. Whilst the other humans had tried to interact with the people they met, and immersed themselves in the new culture, the Director wasn’t there to have fun. Obviously the first instances of arriving in the city had been mind-blowing, but he was a soldier and one used to being in charge of every situation; he hadn’t let awe overtake rational thought. Whilst the Avengers had pretty much been treating the trip as a sightseeing holiday – and to be fair it pretty much was for them – Fury had been assessing everything from the very beginning.

Asgard was currently friendly with Earth, but as the Director of Shield, it was Fury’s job to scope out absolutely anything that could be useful should that situation ever change. He wasn’t there to make friends, he was there for the sake of his planet’s security, and currently he was watching one of the biggest security threats walking around in the arena.

It was one thing to accept that Loki maybe wasn’t entirely the bad guy anymore, but it was another thing entirely to have to trust him. If it was up to Fury, he wouldn’t let any of the Avengers beyond Thor near the trickster, and certainly not Evie! However, he had no say in it, and wouldn’t ever actually venture his opinion on the matter since he could predict exactly what Stark would say in retort. And it wouldn’t be pretty.

One big thing that was very apparent, though, was that the Loki they were watching banter with Thor was a million miles away from the Loki they had seen during the invasion. Fury didn’t think he would ever forget the cold madness he’d seen in those green eyes when they’d first met. The icy gaze of someone who really didn’t care about repercussions or pain or the lives of others. Loki had been a twisted, fractured thing.
It didn’t take someone of Fury’s calibre to tell the difference between then and now. He was well aware that Loki was an extraordinary actor, but no-one could fake the aura of calm that had wrapped around the prince. Red-cheeked and eyes alight with the excitement of the fight Loki had a big smile on his face as he climbed back up the steps to re-join them. His gaze briefly met Fury’s and for that transient, unguarded moment the Director could read probably far more than the prince intended him to.

There was still a deep well of pain that Loki was doing an excellent job with hiding, but that had surfaced in that brief moment when he didn’t think anyone was looking. However, despite the pain he seemed to be content as he elbowed his brother in the stomach. The madness had gone from his eyes, to be replaced with a warm calm. Fury was an expert in reading people, and right now he was reading a person who was healing and finally finding themselves again.

Loki was entirely unaware of the psychoanalysis going on as he sat back down, fist bumping Tony in the process. He rescued the shield from Evie and after checking that it was still sound (Mjölnir was a heavy hitter after all) passed it back to Steve.

“My thanks; I would have been in trouble without your intervention.”

The captain smiled uncertainly at the polite, yet well-meaning, statement. The fact that Loki had actually checked the shield over after the fight before returning it almost meant more than the words. He hated to admit it, but Loki had gone up in his esteem for making sure the weapon was pristine before giving it back. Good manners cost nothing after all.

“It’s always interesting to see someone else using it; I might be able to borrow some moves.”

“Have you ever considered using a second weapon in tandem? Other than a gun, I mean.”

“Well, I am most used to using a spear or axe if I have a shield, but those are a little redundant in the modern world.”

As he said it both Loki and the super-soldier turned to look at Tony.

“What? You guys want some sort of modernised Viking weapons? I can do that!”

The inventor’s over-enthusiastic statement was met with groans from the rest since they knew exactly what he was like when on a technology binge. Evie smacked him around the head which made Loki snort with laughter.

“Alright, Thor. I have complied and beaten you to the ground, can we now leave? You know I hate being here.” The trickster turned back to his brother, still smiling from his daughter’s antics.

“I refuse to take our guests to the library!”

“I am not suggesting the library! I was thinking of going riding, actually.”

That made Thor grin. “You really have missed Sleipnir, have you not?”

“It has been a long twenty years.” Loki looped his arm around Evie’s shoulders, pulling her into a hug. “I have missed all my children during everything that has happened.”

“I’d tell you to stop being mushy, but I’ve missed you too much for that.”
Tony huffed at his daughter’s words. “Think yourself lucky, she never lets me be mushy!”

“Vanish for seven years and you can be as mushy as you want.”

“Fair enough.”

Bruce leant across Steve and Clint to break up the bickering with a polite smile.

“I think getting out in the fresh air would be good for all of us. This whole fighting thing isn’t really…my sort of thing.” Before Loki could look alarmed at the implications that could have for the Hulk, Bruce continued. “And besides, I’d love to meet your son. Our legends say very little of him besides his appearance; I’d love to meet the face behind the myth.”

Loki recognised the tentative out-reach for what it was. He had little to nothing in common with most of the Avengers as far as he could tell, and this was the first serious attempt one had made to bridge that gap.

“I am sure Sleipnir would like that. He rarely meets humans and always enjoys people’s reactions to seeing him for the first time.”

“Does he really have eight legs?”

“Of course.” Loki said it as if it were the most obvious thing in the world, although to him it sort of was, really. “I have some x-rays if you are really interested in how that works.”

Bruce’s expression scrunched up in confusion. “How did you x-ray an eight legged horse?”

“World War One equine field hospital; he stepped on a caltrop and although I could remove it I wanted to be certain where the damage was. All it took was casting an illusion over his extra legs. I had to hide the x-ray immediately after, since all eight showed up, which I hadn’t expected, but I kept it.”

“What were you doing in World War One?” Clint butted in, far more interested in this random anomaly than in anatomy lessons.

“At that point, hauling guns in the battle of Tannenberg.”

“Which side were you on?”

Loki shrugged. “Russia.”

“Reason being?”

“It was a split second decision and I was listening to Tchaikovsky when I made it. Besides, it didn’t last long what with the over-throwing of the Tsar.” He smiled slightly. “And it was cold, I liked the cold, it never seemed to cause me the same problems it caused everyone else.”

It was an innocent little comment, so Loki was completely taken by surprise when Evie, Clint and Bruce all chorused:

“The cold never bothered me anyway!” Then burst out laughing.

“Okay, what did I miss?”

Tony threw his arm around the trickster’s shoulders. “Just a little flick by that old company known as Disney. You’re behind on the times; they’ve made a Despicable Me sequel too.”
Loki’s face genuinely fell. “Oh, you are joking! I missed that?!” He stood up, prompting Tony to do the same. “Right, you need to fill me in on the way to the fields.” He turned to Bruce. “Doctor Banner, will you join us? And that invitation is open to anyone else bored of watching testosterone fuelled grudge matches.”

Bruce readily nodded, quickly followed by Steve – who had been interested in the sparring, but was drawn by the thought of horse-riding. Natasha was slower in deciding to join them, but when she did, did so silently, leaving Clint to slide over on the bench to sit closer to Fury so that they could continue watching the Aesir fight and discuss the tactics they saw, It was a given that Thor was going to follow his brother like a puppy.

Leaving Hawkeye and the director sat in the arena with Thor’s friends; the rest left the grounds and stepped out into the corridors leading away towards the fields. Tony still had his arm around his partner’s shoulders and was explaining to an increasingly dismayed Loki about how he’d missed various important films over the years that he had been imprisoned.

“- I mean, Jackson always said he’d never do it, and then BAM! Three Hobbit films! Well, not really bam, more like a rumble really since it took them ages to sort everything out, but it was so worth it! Ooh! And there are new Star Trek films!”

“For goodness sake! Next you will be telling me they are bringing back Starwars!”

“Uh…About that…”

“Seriously?!”

The light-hearted and friendly atmosphere was abruptly shattered as the air infront of them shimmered and a mirage of Heimdall appeared. This was apparently not an unusual thing given the way the Aesir reacted, but it made the humans jump – although Natasha hid it well.

“Heimdall, what brings you here?” Thor’s smile had faded, giving way to the much rarer frown that usually only surfaced when things were going very wrong. It made the Avenger’s realise that this appearance heralded bad tidings.

“The chitauri are approaching. We have only minutes before they arrive.” The guardian was stoic as he broke the news; his expression not reflecting the seriousness of the situation.

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“What?!” Thor’s exclamation was deafening as he subconsciously stepped closer to his brother. Loki had his arm around Evie’s shoulders as the teen clung to him, staring at Heimdall in horror.

“No! Möðhy!” It was fair to say that losing Loki the first time around had given Evelyn some serious psychological scarring. It had taken years for her to stop having flashbacks, and even now the nightmares still occurred. She usually held it together if there was an unexpected trigger, but the chitauri were the trigger, and there was no way that wasn’t going to get a reaction out of her.

Loki didn’t question his daughter’s terror – he was feeling it himself to be honest – and simply wrapped his arm tight around her. She was shaking against him, the same wide-eyed look on her face that he’d last seen when the chitauri had snatched him all those years ago. She had stared up at him with the same frozen look of dread then too.

“How many are there?” Thor had seen his brother freeze, and taken the initiative.

“Three ships, a few thousand soldiers.”
The thunder God turned to the younger prince, concern harsh on his face. “Loki, are you sure you can deal with that many?”

It took Loki a few moments to register the question and actually formulate a reply. “I believe so.” He was quiet and the tone in his voice told Thor that he was anything but certain.

“I will still fight with you, should you wish me to. You do not have to do this alone.”

“Yes I do.” Loki met his brother’s gaze intently. “Thor, I have to do this on my own. How would you feel if someone were to take your revenge from you? And besides; I have already called Holmgang.”

The older God nodded slightly, not expecting any other sort of reply. His approval seemed to bolster Loki somewhat, who turned back to the mirage.

“Heimdall, inform the Allfather of what is happening, we are coming to you.” His arm was already around Evie, and Tony was in reach for him to grab the man’s shoulder. It just took a quick flick of his fingers and the trickster teleported the whole group to the observatory.

Tony had experienced teleportation before and although it was still odd, it didn’t faze him, Thor was obviously used to it, and so it was Evelyn and the other three adults who were taken entirely by surprise. However, there was little any of them could do beyond simply holding tight to the nearest person and closing their eyes against the nauseating spin of dark and flashes.

They took barely a couple of seconds between the training grounds and the observatory. Bruce staggered away from the group, but held up a hand with the okay signal when Steve started towards him in concern.

"Seasickness, I'm fine."

Heimdall looked unsurprised at their arrival, his burning gaze fixed on Loki.

"I know of your wish to face the chitauri alone." He said sternly, "But be well aware that if there is the slightest sign of failure I will not hesitate to join the battle. I will not sacrifice Asgard's safety for the sake of a prince's pride. Fail us, or betray us, and the might of Asgard will fall indiscriminately on the whole battlefield."

It was a harsh thing to say, but in a unique way seemed to be exactly what needed to be said. Loki appeared to snap out of his freeze, at any rate.

"I see. Well, we cannot say any fairer than that I suppose." He met Heimdall's gaze head on. "But needless to say; insult my loyalties again and being turned into a statue of ice will be the least of your worries."

There was a flash of something that may have been amusement in Heimdall's eyes. The two understood each other even if everyone else seemed alarmed by the exchange.

"You have something of mine, gatekeeper, and I will need it back for this to work."

"I suspected as much." Heimdall picked up an object behind the podium and held it out.

"Oh, wow, uh, that was never in any of our discussions!" Even Tony took a step back as his partner accepted the chitauri scepter. "Why do you need that?!"

"It has lost most of its power with the tesseract safely ensconced in the vaults." Loki ran his hand
over the glowing blue gem as he reaquainted himself with the weapon. "But its strength is its merit now. If it can withstand Mjölnir, then there would be little else that can destroy it. In addition, the small amount of power that remains does not require the tesseract, and I intend to use that." His eyes gleamed in the light from the gem, an unsettling and unnatural blue as he brought the sceptre up close to his face. It was a mercy Clint wasn’t with them; he would have gone ape-shit.

Tony was biting his lip, looking uncertain. “Uh huh. ‘Cause you’re looking rather…uh…you’re having a ‘burdened with glorious purpose’ moment, dear.”

“I said that once. *Once!* And you were not even present!” Loki spun the sceptre and in doing so his armour materialised around him. It was pretty much the same attire the Avengers had last seen him wear in battle, although he had forgone the helmet. He seemed calmer now, the fear that had come over him banished to the background as he took control of the situation. It was a technique learnt over the millennia; how to damp down terror, push it to the back of one’s mind when faced with the prospect of a fight.

Battle-calm.

Thor knew the method – he was well versed in it himself – and recognised the expression that came across his brother’s face as Loki settled into the mind-set of a battle.

The trickster spun on his heel and stalked out of the observatory onto the Bifrost, leaving it up to the others whether they would follow or not. Predictably it was Tony he found immediately beside him, the man’s expression drawn and anxious.

“Can you send Evie back to the main city? I don’t want her anywhere near those things. They used her once to get to you, who says they won’t do that again?”

“Believe it or not she will be safer here with us.” Loki glanced at his lover warily. “Should this go ill, Heimdall will activate the Bifrost. Push her through if you have to, I cannot imagine she will leave willingly, but if this does not work, get her out of here.”

Tony nodded, visibly swallowing.

“She won’t like that.”

“No, but she will be safe and that is the important thing. I assume the Bifrost site is monitored?”

“Shield are sitting on it in camper vans.”

“Good.” Loki looked up at the stars, scanning across the sky. “I would ask you to go too, but I cannot imagine you would do so.”

“Hell no!”

A faint smile crossed the trickster’s face. “I did not think so. Nevertheless, I fear for your safety as well as our daughter’s.”

“Pah! Don’t worry about me, I’m bullet proof.”

“Only in your suit.”

“Well, that isn’t a problem at least.” Tony held his arm out – the non-frostbitten one – and indicated the small raised bumps running down his wrist. “I’ve updated some systems in the past few years. It assembles itself, or…” He flicked his hand out to mirror something similar to a
martial arts pose. “It can hone in on me.”

For a moment amongst all the fear and worry and tension, Loki was able to smile and feel a surge of awe in the man. “You mean to imply…”

He didn’t get chance to finish, and then didn’t need to. The Ironman suit had started to zoom across the distance between their rooms and the Observatory from the moment Tony had activated the micro-implants and within moments the armour was assembling around him. He fielded the faceplate, though, rather than letting it slam him in the face.

“I’ll keep Evie with me; I’ve tried off against those bastards before and the suit came out tops. They won’t lay a hand – or mandible – on her.” Tony flexed his wrist and the thruster on his palm hummed in readiness. “You there, Jarv?”

“Reading you loud and clear, sir.”

Loki nodded tersely, glancing at his brother as he did so. “Thor, will you cover Tony?”

“Of course.”

“What about us?” Natasha’s question drew the other’s attention back to the fact that she, Steve and Bruce were there too. However, they were only dressed in their normal civilian clothes and they hardly looked like much. Other than the Captain’s shield they didn’t have a weapon between them. The woman appeared to realise this and narrowed her eyes at Loki. “We’re not going back, before you say any nonsense like that.”

“I would not dare dream to suggest it.” The prince said with a faint smile. He eyed the sensible trainers Natasha was wearing. “At least you did not wear heels.”

“You think I can’t fight in stilettos?”

Loki didn’t deign to reply – mostly because he was certain that the infamous Black Widow could fight in any footwear she could think up. Instead he chose to concentrate and summon up a collection of the various firearms he had seen the woman use during their brief acquaintance on Earth. She didn’t seem surprised – although she must have been – when the weapons belt materialised around her waist.

“Your priority is to keep out of my way.” Loki directed the words at the whole group of them, although his gaze fixed on Thor when he said it.

“They approach!” Heimdall’s warning was crisp and clear. Thor took it as his cue to begin ushering the others back and directing them which enabled his brother to stride out towards the end of the bridge and focus on what was going to happen.

Loki had a plan. And he would be the first to admit that it was…not the best plan he had ever constructed.

His strengths were trickery and cunning and currently his entire strategy hinged on fire-power and brute strength. It wasn’t perfect, it wasn’t what he wanted, but it would have to do. Loki knew that he only had to say a word and at the very least his brother and lover would both be by his side. A louder word would have the might of Asgard’s army behind him.

However, that wasn’t how this was going to go. Should the chitauri land, they were strong enough to cause Asgard some serious problems – worst case scenario being an extremely bloody battle with heavy losses and that was if the bastards didn’t win.
No, Loki had a plan and that plan would insure the chitauri wouldn’t set foot on Asgard. Thor would probably be disappointed that the big fight was going to boil down to a handful of explosions, but that was what would ensure the general safety of the kingdom. Well, if the Norns were smiling, that is. Loki knew he would have to swallow his pride and let Thor help if a force actually managed to land.

“Here they come!”

Tony’s shout coincided with a sudden burst of bright light. The end of the Bifrost shimmered in what to the three Aesir was unmistakably a teleport of some kind. Of all the people grouped there, Loki was the only one with any idea of just who would be coming through ahead of the main force and so was the only one not surprised.

The Other was not typical of the chitauri. Infact, Loki had always had his suspicions that the creature wasn’t actually from that race at all. He – it? There had never been anything to define if gender was even an option – was taller than the skeletal warriors, and far more humanoid. There was more of a face too – at the very least a face that could hold expressions a human could read.

He was as ugly as Loki remembered too.

Standing taller than the trickster, The Other was decked out in what could only be described as armour, although it was like no armour any of them had seen before. Organic in appearance it was slick and oily, like some diseased thing twisted into sharp shapes. His eyes were hidden but the slash of a red mouth twisted into a feral grin.

“So here you hide, little princeling. Cowering in your mothers skirts like the craven you are.” The voice was the same as ever and the deep hiss had Loki steeling his mind against the dark memories it drew up. He wasn’t a person prone to flashbacks, and didn’t want to experience his first in the same moments that he was meant to be facing an army.

The Other didn’t seem to be expecting a reply as he took in Loki’s armour and the sceptre in his hands.

“You arm for a fight. Surely you know there is no way you will escape this.”

“And what is it I am meant to be escaping?” Loki kept his voice cool and level.

“Justice. You wronged us, Jötunn, and we demand retribution.”

“You have had your retribution! Seven long years of it!”

The Other’s mouth widened into a sneer as he paced forward a few steps from where he had landed – apparently entirely unconcerned about anyone else present intervening. “You betrayed the chitauri and our race barely survives because of it. Our justice system demands your death; these past years have merely been…” His grin stretched. “A stay of execution. A little time to allow us to fully understand the Jötunn species. After all; we needed to know exactly how immortal you are.”

“You bastard!” Tony got it out before Loki could say a word.

“Stark, do not get involved.”

However, the warning was too late as The Other’s hidden gaze had already moved to Tony and Evelyn.

“Ah yes. You were spoken of by those who captured our prisoner. The man who glows. You did
not do much good then, and will not do so now.”

Tony’s face twisted in fury, but the alien turned back to Loki and continued before he could spit back a reply.

“And it is so fitting, is it not, Fallen One, that the same people who witnessed your last capture should be here now.” The Other gestured at the four humans and two Aesir. “I do so hope they needn’t be hurt this time.”

Loki’s grip tightened on the sceptre as his lips pursed into thin tight line.

“Enough of this. Where are the others? Where is your army?”

“Waiting for my signal. They need not appear at all if you co-operate with us.” The Other’s harsh grin vanished. “Surrender to us now and we won’t raze this realm to the ground.”

“You do not possess the power for that, a group of mere humans stopped your armies last time. You cannot hope to stand against the might of Asgard!”

The Other glanced at Tony again, a smug expression blooming across what was visible of his face.

“We were not as knowledgeable then. When you were snatched away from us our army was once again heavily broken by a weapon the Man of Red Armour hurled at us. This time, however, enough of us were outside the effects to be able to examine it during our search for you.”

Loki felt a thrill of sudden horror run down his spine. Part of him wanted to laugh it off and call the creature’s bluff because surely, surely the chitauri hadn’t been able to extrapolate the workings of a nuclear warhead from nothing more than its detonation.

And of course he knew that they could. The bastards were space scavengers and all the more resourceful for it. It couldn’t have been so hard for them to find a radioactive element during their hunt for him through the Nine Realms. The Norns knew Muspelheim had enough. Even Earth had more than its fair share.

Chitauri technology made nuclear…

Loki had an unfortunately over-active imagination and it wasn’t hard for his minds’ eye to see just what such weapons could do. A quick glance at Tony’s ashen face told him that the inventor had the exact same mental image of the Asgard’s golden spires being engulfed in a burgeoning mushroom cloud. Loki couldn’t begin to wonder how bad Stark was feeling knowing that he had unwittingly gifted something with that firepower to the chitauri.

These thoughts flitted past in nanoseconds but something of it must have shown in his expression because The Other laughed harshly.

“Your choice, princeling. Surrender and we will leave Asgard in peace. Resist and the chitauri will take down all that you care for.” He swung to point the long pole-axe-type weapon he held towards Evie and Tony. “Starting with those two.”

Thor moved towards the pair, but Stark was already infront of his daughter, blocking her from the creature. His faceplate was still up so he was able to meet Loki’s gaze again as the trickster seemed to freeze, caught in the ultimatum.

Heimdall seemed impassive, but to the two Aesir it was obvious that he was now focussed on the younger prince; his earlier threat to Loki now more important than ever. If Asgard’s safety was at
risk…

Loki could feel the golden gaze on the back of his neck and for a fleeting moment almost wished he had worn his signature helm after all to avoid it. In the end, though, it hardly mattered. All that was important was the creature in front of him and the decision he was faced with.

“Well?” The Other tipped his head to one side with an arrogant sneer. “I believe it is simple enough; you will die no matter how this turns out. All that remains to be seen is whether the rest of this realm will go down with you.”

“Well then.” The trickster said quietly. “I suppose that does not leave me with much choice.”

“Loki-”

“It is a simple enough concept, Tony.” Loki didn’t even bother to turn, never taking his eyes off The Other.

“But-”

“I am perfectly capable of making my own decisions in this matter, Stark.” The trickster raised his hand to silence his lover’s protest, angrily gesticulating at him. The Other bared his teeth in a mocking grin, evidently knowing a little of human culture – presumably from Loki himself – to assume that the hand signal was a form of insult. Coupled with Loki’s body language it certainly looked like he was swearing at the man over his shoulder and since it shut Tony up there was no reason to assume otherwise.

Except that the humans knew what it meant.

I’m okay.

Forefinger curled in a circle to touch his thumb, the signal was universal to the humans at least. Loki was confident that despite what it looked like; he was still in control of the situation.

It kept the Avengers quiet.

“So, it seems I can do little else but capitulate to your demands.” Loki’s unflinching statement didn’t betray the fear he was feeling as he said it, although everyone must have known that he was rightly terrified. “After all, the greatest art of war is to know which battles to fight, and this would be one Asgard could not hope to win.”

“We are in agreement there, then.”

“But.” The single word held a lot of intonations and subtle threat. “Do not believe that I will simply lay down my arms and follow you meekly into torture and death.”

The Other would have been a fool to assume that it would have been the case, although he contrived to act disdainfully surprised at any rate.

“And just what would you propose that you are able to do? Your feeble powers are hidden from you, your body is still broken. What do you wish? You are weak as a babe.” The Other’s hateful gaze fixed on the chitauri sceptre that Loki held. “That will not aid you now; you have nothing!”

“I have strength enough.” The trickster moved fluidly from his confrontational posture to a fighter’s stance. “Strength to stand and fight you.”
“You wish to fight, after all?”

“You wish to fight, after all? I win and your armies leave never to be seen again; you win and I will either die in the fight, or go willingly with you.” Loki’s phrasing seemed odd in its way – as if he would ever allow the chitauri to go free – but his opponent didn’t allow anyone the chance to interrupt or question.

“As you wish, Godling. I trust farewells have already been said; you shall not walk away from this.”

The Other bared his sharp teeth again, but although his mouth was drawn into a grin it was a threatening gesture rather than a humorous one. The pole-axe in his hands hummed as the blade began to glow a dull angry red. It was a disquieting sight that had overtones of a Sith Lord’s lightsaber, and not in a good way.

In Loki’s vast experience most hand-to-hand combat began with the two opponents sighting out each other’s weaknesses and form and that was what he mentally prepared for. However, it was certainly not the way The Other had been trained to fight.

The creature gave no breathing space or warning, instead he simply leapt and attacked.

Loki had to take a few steps back under the sudden onslaught, fending off heavy blows aimed at his trunk and head. The style was not unlike Thor’s, but far far swifter than the thunder God could hope to be. There was great power in those long sinewy arms and it drove Loki further back as he focussed purely on defence.

The sceptre was unfamiliar in his hands – it had been nearly two decades since he had last wielded it – and there was a flash of regret that he hadn’t thought to familiarise himself with it sooner. However, he didn’t have the luxury of time for such thinking as he had to block a hard blow aiming to take his head off at the shoulders. Reaching instinctively for his magic didn’t help as he was met with that terrible blankness that had been a constant companion for all his years as the chitauri’s prisoner. He had known it would happen, but it was still a terrifying feeling to reach for his power and find it entirely cut off from him once more, as if he was already back in that wretched place.

“You seem hesitant, Godling, forgotten what a blade feels like in your hands? Mayhap you only remember the feel of a blade slicing—”

The Other was cut off with a grunt of pain as the butt of Loki’s sceptre caught him in his mid-section – supposedly where his stomach would be – and forced him back a step. The prince swung the weapon round in a large arc, hoping to take advantage of the mis-step, but his second attack was countered with little difficulty.

It was like a dance, wild and chaotic, but a dance nonetheless. It was one thing to practice in the arena, spinning and twisting and all whilst knowing that the fight would never result in serious harm.

This one was meant to end in death and that made all the difference in how Loki found his deportment.

The trickster had never fought The Other before. He had fetched up against the chitauri, but they hadn’t been anything like this in battle, not to mention that it had been a long time ago. It was true he had killed that one lone one during his captivity – a feat that he still could barely believe he had pulled off – but that had been mostly luck and the element of surprise. This was a seasoned warrior who wasn’t even really a chitauri. There was no way of knowing what his fighting style was, nor
any strengths or weaknesses. All Loki had to go on were the few conversations they had exchanged many years ago.

He had hoped that the creature would be slow and ponderous; the large body looked like it should have been. However, the speed with which The Other attacked was frightening. Loki had managed to land a single hit, but found himself on the defence and blocking blow after vicious blow rather than being able to form his own counter-attack.

The chitauri sceptre was holding its own at least – and so it should be if it was able to match up against Mjölnir – although the blade seemed vastly inferior compared to glowing edge The Other wielded. Sparks shot up each time the two weapons clashed, bathing the combatants in a crimson light as they swirled and circled across the Bifrost’s surface.

First blood was drawn all too quickly and not from the person the watchers wanted to see bleed. Loki stumbled back with a livid gash appearing down his cheek, eyes wide with surprise that the blow had been landed on him. He heard his daughter cry out behind him and from his peripheral vision saw Tony restraining her. The brief glance also showed that more people had arrived – Heimdall had apparently alerted the Allfather as to what had happened and now the king himself was there, along with the elite royal guard and Thor’s infamous band of friends.

Great. An audience.

He knew that the presence of the Allfather meant that back in the main city the full army would have been mobilised; out of sight, but ready to act.

The Other grinned as blood ran in a thin line down the trickster’s cheek and began to drip.

“I have missed seeing you bleed, princeling.” The comment was accompanied by the glowing blade skimming through the air at head height and causing Loki to duck.

Two more strikes and the prince was sent reeling back another few steps, crimson erupting across the green of his sleeve where his armour didn’t fully cover the cloth. He heard his brother shout his name, but didn’t have a chance to respond or acknowledge the call. The sceptre was humming in his grip, but he didn’t dare use the limited amount of power it had left stored inside – he needed that, should he actually survive this fight.

The two combatants spun and clashed under the menacing smear of the void across the sky. Ducking, weaving, slashing at every opportunity. Loki’s face was drawn into a furious scowl of concentration whilst The Other had his teeth bared in a rictus grin like a death-head. Once upon a time the trickster would have been concerned that his father was watching – that a large portion of Asgard’s finest were watching – but he was barely being given breathing space, let alone time enough to be concerned about such trivialities. This wasn’t about form, or style, or impressing anybody. This was about winning, pure and simple.

Win or die.

And risk the chance that the chitauri wouldn’t just nuke Asgard anyway.

He had to win because the alternative wasn’t worth thinking about.

“You look tired, Godling, would it not be easier to just surrender?”

In a word, yes, it really would be. Loki hadn’t been ready earlier in the day to spar with his brother, and he certainly hadn’t been ready for this confrontation so soon. His arms ached from the repeated
battery against the sceptre and his knew his legs were shaking under him. It would be obvious to everyone that he was nowhere near full strength. Yes, surrender sounded worryingly good, and was absolutely not an option.

“Just shut up and die already!” And it appeared that his wit had fled, leaving him only with comments more suited to a human than an Aesir prince.

“You first, runt.”

The Other swung his blade towards Loki’s neck, a move that the trickster evaded by inclining backwards just enough so that the sharp edge passed a hairs-breadth beneath his chin, but didn’t actually touch.

However, as the prince brought his sceptre up to push the blade back from his face he left his abdomen vulnerable.

The pole-axe spun in The Other’s grip faster than a human’s eye could follow. The blade that had been angling in towards Loki’s neck was suddenly swept upwards, meaning that the main body of the staff was aligned to thrust straight into the prince’s unprotected stomach.

It had been the one wound that had still been causing him so many problems – hindering his walking and posture alike – and it seemed that the creature was well aware of that fact as the butt of the weapon drove into the compromised flesh.

Loki doubled up with a sharp cry, unable to stop the instinctive response to the fresh injury over the already-wounded area. It left his back open and meant that The Other was able to deliver a heavy blow to the back of his head.

The prince dropped, his sceptre flashing mockingly as it fell from his hands.

There were cries – horror and anger both – but they were silenced as The Other stood tall over the fallen trickster.

Loki had rolled onto his back, his eyes dazed as they tried to focus on his opponent above him. He reached out wildly for his own weapon before the sharp blade pressed up against his chin made him still. Blood began to well up under the edge and trickle down his throat. Somewhere behind him he could hear Evie screaming and knew that none of them could help; he had called Holmgang, and that meant that he was alone to this fate.

“You lose, Godling. You lose.” The Other pressed down on the blade, watching as the prince choked and the small scratch became a deep gouge. A trickle became a torrent as blood began to pour out of the wound and Loki’s eyes filled with terror. “Did you honestly believe you would ever escape us?” He laughed, deep and guttural.

The trickster tried to move again; perhaps to reach his weapon or else just simply trying to get away, but the blade dug ever deeper, holding him in place. His chin was painted scarlet, his breath a broken wheezing sound that bubbled in his broken throat.

“Did you really think you could win? You are nothing! You know nothing! You are-”

“Behind you.”

The Loki on the floor – drowning in his own blood, throat nearly entirely severed – flickered, then dissolved in golden light. At the same moment The Other stiffened, almost frozen to the spot as Loki materialised behind him, weapon in hand and the blade pressed up to the creature’s back. The
gem in the sceptre glowed brightly.

“Do not feel bad; Thor always falls for that one too.”

And so saying Loki stepped back, entirely unconcerned as he lowered his weapon and allowed his enemy to turn to face him.

It was only when The Other turned that it was possible to see the blue glimmer under his helmet where his eyes were. The same blue as the sceptre, and as such, the same as the tesseract.

Loki visibly relaxed when he saw the glow, breathing a deep sigh of relief.

“Loki!”

He glanced back to see Tony looking ashen and Evie terrified. Behind them even Odin seemed shaken. In fact, it appeared that the only person who didn’t appear horrified by his near-death was Clint – having seemingly arrived with Thor’s friends – who simply looked furious that the sceptre was being used in such a way again.

“Brother?” Thor took a cautious step towards him before Loki held up a hand to stop him. Said hand was shaking slightly.

“Do not come any closer. I am holding him, but only just.” The trickster’s eyes closed and the gem in the sceptre glowed brighter for a moment. The Other swayed but didn’t move from his spot. “He is trying to resist.”

“What are you intending to do?”

“End this.” Loki made a complicated movement with his free hand and once again the sceptre pulsed; it was evident that he was borrowing power stored inside the weapon. A darkness grew next to him, about shoulder height and just about big enough to reach into. The humans – even Tony – had no idea what the strange little void was, but both Thor and Odin knew the pocket dimension when they saw it, and that it was basically a carry space for the trickster. A bag-of-holding, as it were.

“You have a plan?” Thor looked concerned, extremely so, given that he had almost had to witness his little brother’s decapitation. “What of the armament they spoke of?”

Ah yes, the chitauri’s foray into nuclear technology. Loki was mostly certain that his idea would work. But only mostly. He prodded The Other with the blade of the sceptre.

“I would suggest everyone brace themselves. Heimdall,” He turned momentarily to the Watcher. “I will hold you to your promise. If this goes ill…”

“I will do my duty.”

“Good.” The prince turned back to his prisoner again, eyes narrowed and calculating. “You. Call forth your army.”

“What?”

Tony’s indignant cry was echoed by some of the others present, but the trickster ignored them as he watched The Other carefully. Without the tesseract it was hard to say if his hold over the creature would be strong enough. As it was, he received a curt nod in reply and The Other lifted his wrist up to display a complicated looking vambrace with an array of lights covering it. They seemed to be
more functional than decorative as he pressed a series that evidently sent a signal of some form.

“It is at this point that everyone should probably cover their eyes. This is going to get very loud and very bright.” Loki didn’t take his own advice, staring up into the firmament above the observatory expectantly.

The starry sky suddenly broke like a dropped mirror.

One moment there was nothing, the next it was twisting and writhing as three huge ships fought into existence above the Bifrost. A fierce wind swept along the rainbow bridge like a hurricane, billowing the Aesir cloaks and making hair stream. The noise was unbelievable.

They were the same ships that had been orbiting the planet Loki had been found on – and the same Tony had seen when he had shot through the worm-hole. They didn’t look like they should be able to stay in the air; large spiked constructs that spun slowly, the size of small towns. Had they actually come through during the battle of New York they would have dwarfed the skyscrapers.

“Holy shit…” Clint’s voice sounded tiny as the shadow fell over them, marking them out as miniscule as ants.

Even Loki looked taken aback at just how big the three were. It was debatable if Asgard could have held their own even without the nuclear technology the chitarui held. There must have been thousands of soldiers on each one.

“Loki…?” Thor actually sounded uncertain.

“Silence, Thor.” The trickster was already moving. He had reached into the pocket-space opened beside him and pulled out three silvery spheres, each roughly the size of a tennis ball. They hovered over his palm, ominous despite their size, their surface shimmering and twisting in on themselves like something alive. To someone with a science background they looked like balls of mercury.

“Oh crap…” Tony felt like someone had walked over his grave. He knew that substance. He knew what it could do.

It shouldn’t even be possible to have that much of it in one place – the stuff technically couldn’t exist outside of a laboratory. Apparently Loki had found a way around that. Figures.

Now the trickster’s warning about covering their eyes made sense.

“Don’t look, birdy.” Tony already had an arm around Evie’s shoulders, but now he pulled her round so that he could shield her with the suit. She was protesting – wanting to be able to see Loki – but if Tony was correct about what the prince was about to do then to look would be to risk blindness.

And then Loki threw the small balls, one after another.

Well, that’s what it seemed, but God or not there was no way that any of them should have soared out of his hand with that power. There seemed to be a silver streak left behind as an after-burn as they flew like darting comets. Magic must have been behind the velocity because even Thor would have struggled to hurl the things high enough to hit one of the ships, but Loki had apparently had no trouble at all.

They vanished from sight long before they actually reached their intended targets, the huge bulk of the nearest ship enough to make a whale look small, let alone a sphere the size of a tennis ball.
Tony turned away just in time.

The explosion was surprisingly quiet, for what it was, at least to begin with. Rather it was the light that took everyone by surprise. Sheer, blinding light, so dazzling that it was beyond bright. There were cries of pain from some of the Aesir who hadn’t deemed Loki’s advice worth listening to, and a shout of surprise from Bruce.

Tony risked a glance – raising his face plate into position to at least shield some of the blinding glare. Even through the polaroid filters and red warning beacons it was only just possible to make out Loki standing as a black silhouette against the radiance. Beyond that there was just painful light.

It was impossible to see what was going on, but no-one was even trying to guess. The wind that had whipped up was roaring stronger than a hurricane, sweeping across the Bifrost. Thor had Mjölnir anchored to the ground, and even then he was struggling to keep his footing. Steve had rammed his shield down into the rainbow surface and was crouched down beneath it, bracing Clint with his free hand as the archer grabbed at his arm.

Natasha had already lost her footing, only to be caught by the Hulk who hugged her tight to his chest as he bowed down into the wind to stay upright. Beside them Tony had dug spiked crampons down into the ground, the suit locking in place so that Evie was safely caged in his arms. Even so her hair was whipping around – the band holding it in a ponytail long ripped out by the fierce wind. It was possible that she was screaming, but then it was very possible that they were all screaming.

And then the noise finally decided to make an appearance – so sluggish behind the light, sound always travelling just that bit slower.

The explosion was louder than anything any of them had ever heard. A hundred nuclear warheads couldn’t have compared.

Eardrums burst, royal guards were dropping their weapons as they fell to their knees, hands clamped over the sides of their heads. The humans had worse to contend with as fragile capillaries couldn’t take the strain of the sonic overload and broke apart. Even Captain America had blood pouring from his nose. For others tears were running crimson as blood vessels in the eye ruptured.

A former-weapons expert, Tony knew exactly what was happening; Hell, anyone with a small knowledge of explosives would know that they were being hit by the blast wave. The ships must have been further away than they had looked – despite their size – because realistically the Bifrost and its occupants should have been blown apart from the force of the detonation. As it was the high pressure concussion wave was likely to cause serious injury to the humans, and not leave the Aesir in very good shape either.

What had Loki been thinking.

It was as that despairing thought flitted through Stark’s mind that there was an absolute cessation of everything.

Light, sound, pressure. They didn’t even fade, just went from being the only possible things in existence to absolute absence. For a very long moment it was as if the universe itself must have ended.

And then it was as if the noise and glare had been keeping everything else at bay as pain rushed in from every direction to fill the void left. Even the Hulk had sagged down to one knee, Natasha limp in his arms.
Only Odin and Thor were left in any state to be able to see that the explosion hadn’t actually gone, but now a shimmering barrier blocked them from its effects. Evidently whatever device blocked Loki’s magic had been destroyed and now he was able to use it to shield them all. The trickster was clinging to his sceptre, using it as an anchor as he tried to straighten up. Glancing over his shoulder he saw the sorry state that everyone else was in – which must have meant he had received the same treatment – and managed to wave a hand.

Tony could literally feel the capillaries in his eyes and nose close up and stop bleeding. The pain shooting through his chest vanished and he was able to straighten up, breathing freely again. Evie stirred feebly in his arms, rubbing her own ears before looking around in confusion. Around them the other Avengers were in similar states of bemused recovery; still covered in blood but the blast wounds healed.

“Oh…wow.” Steve’s soft comment drew everyone’s attention to where the super soldier was still crouched with his shield, now staring upwards in awe. Following his gaze drew similar exclamations from the others.

The explosion was still going on above them, but hidden behind a rippling, shimmering barrier that flexed and arched over them. It was now possible to actually see the damage wrought to the three ships. And it was astonishing.

More than just being blown apart, they were disintegrating. Explosions usually left debris, but they were simply crumbling into nothing.

“Dad…What…?” Evie’s voice was tiny. “Was that…what did Möðhy do?”

“Antimatter.” Tony sounded equally quiet, although anything would sound quiet after what had just happened. “That was antimatter.”

More antimatter than should have been able to exist in their universe, and consequently possibly the biggest annihilation event since the Big Bang itself. Loki hadn’t been joking around when he’d said he knew of something more powerful than any nuclear bomb.

The ships were all but gone now – antimatter and matter meeting and cancelling each other out in violent bursts of light. There wouldn’t be any remains. The chitauri had been wiped out.

Loki was still standing – although only just, by the look of it – The Other silent and obedient next to him.

It was time to end this.

The trickster turned, the sceptre in his hand glowing again.

“If your turn.” His voice was soft, but it carried easily enough on the now-silent bridge. For a moment it was debatable whether he was just going to take the creature’s head off at the shoulders, but then he lowered his weapon.

The shield around them slowly vanished away as the final glare faded in the sky and the prince looked out towards the dark swirl of the void. Then he nodded towards the edge of the bridge.

“Jump.”

The Other swayed for a moment – the blue glow under his helmet flickering.

“Jump.” The venom in the single word was unmistakable.
Then the creature turned and obediently trotted off to the edge of the Bifrost. Loki followed close on his heels, his grip still tight on the sceptre in case the tenuous hold should break. As it was, he needn’t have worried.

The Other strode straight to the lip of the bridge. There was no dramatic pause or moment of hesitation – he merely reached the edge and then…Just kept on going.

One armoured foot hit empty air and then the rest of the body followed. It was almost graceful as he tipped forward and then tumbled. There was no screaming, or flailing, or panicking. He simply fell towards the void silent and still as a statue.

Loki stared down, watching his once-tormentor slip away. The sceptre felt heavy in his hand and he hefted it before changing his grip on the metal. The blue stone glinted mockingly. It was the last thing left from the chitauri now, and in a sudden rush of anger he knew that he never wanted to touch the wretched thing again.

One moment it was in his hand, the next he had sighted and then hurled it down at the falling body. The weapon flew straight as an arrow, uncompromised and true until it thunked heavily into The Other’s chest and speared him straight through.

Moments later the body fell from sight, swallowed whole by the void.

Loki fell heavily to his knees, cloak and armour slowly dissolving away again. He could feel blood dripping down his face as he braced his hands against the ground, trying to steady his breathing.

It was over…

Over.

Twenty years of the chitauri’s legacy and they were gone. Every single one of the wretched monsters. Gone, dead, obliterated.

The ground felt odd beneath him; the rainbow surface slippery and unusually cold. When he opened his eyes he saw that his hands were deep blue. The blood covering them was startlingly red against the colour, and even more so compared to the hoarfrost spreading out around him. He had no way of knowing if all of him had turned, or if only his hands were affected.

Loki tried to call his Aesir glamour back, but his magic was curling weakly at the back of his mind – still suffering from being locked away and then overused in such a short space of time. The sceptre had helped – using the remaining power – but he’d had to rely on his own reserves after they were returned to him, and it had been far too much too soon.

His skin was staying a stubborn blue.

“Loki!” It was – predictably enough – Thor who called to him first. Thor, who’s running footsteps slowed to a cautious walk as he approached the kneeling trickster.

“Brother…Are you well?” He actually thought to keep his distance.

Loki genuinely didn’t know how to answer, but his silence seemed to tell the thunder God enough. Thor’s boots appeared in his vision then the blonde crouched down so that he was eye level with the younger prince. His hair was stringy with blood, and more was running down his face but he was smiling nonetheless.

“The next time you tell me you have a situation under control I may not believe you so much. That
did not look like a controlled situation to me.”

“I won, did I not?”

Thor huffed with quiet laughter. “Yes, and just look at the state of us all.” He wiped away a dribble of blood from his nose. “You said things would be ‘very loud and very bright’. Even for you that was an understatement.”

“It worked.”

“It did.” The thunder God conceded. His gaze moved, roaming over his brother’s face before making eye contact again. “Blue suits you, actually. Although I am glad your eyes were not that colour when we were children – you would have had an advantage in scaring me in the middle of the night.”

Loki’s breath caught in his throat. For a brief moment he had actually forgotten that his true skin had come to the surface.

Thor had never seen it before, and if he hadn’t commented on it, there would have been no noticeable reaction on his part. The prince who had once vowed to kill all Jötunn. Of course, he had long known of what Loki really was, but even that couldn’t have prepared him for seeing it.

Perhaps he was concussed.

“Thor…I…”

“I presume you used all magic available to you in that fight, including the glamour?” Thor waited for his brother to nod before rolling his eyes. “And you wonder why I did not want you doing this alone.” He smiled and reached out to cup the back of Loki’s neck in his usual fashion.

Loki’s very blue neck.

“Thor-!”

But the thunder God simply grinned. When Loki glanced down his hands were returning to their normal colour. Apparently – and thankfully – there had been sufficient magic left to keep up the charm that kept his lethal temperature at bay. Combined with Thor’s warm paw on his skin it was enough to kick his glamour back into working.

“There we go. Back to your usual ghostly self. On second thoughts, that blue was rather an improvement.”

The trickster smiled weakly, only to be pulled into an almost too-tight hug.

“Damnit Loki! I thought I had lost you again! I thought that monster was going to kill you!”

“I said I had it under control.”

“If you were looking to send Father into an early Odinsleep you nearly succeeded! We all thought he had you!” Thor’s words were muffled into his brother’s neck. “If it weren’t for that wretched oath, I would have run to your aid in a moment!”

“And that would be why I called it.” Loki had been well aware that declaring Holmgang had meant that not only was no-one allowed to help, but no-one would be able to help either. The ancient rite had called down a spell powerful enough even to stop Thor. “Now come, help me stand because I
am currently doubting the integrity of my body.”

It was a movement they had used from the moment they had first started receiving real injuries in weapons training. Thor looped Loki’s arm around his shoulders and then rose up slowly, taking as much of his brother’s weight as the trickster would let him. It was telling just how bad Loki was feeling if he was willingly admitting that he needed help.

“How badly are you injured?”

“Nothing that will not heal in its own time. Is everyone else alright?”

“Not to begin with, but you managed to heal us all.”

Loki managed a thin smile. “Do not tell anyone, but you have the sceptre to thank for that – I cannot usually heal that well.”

“Your secret is safe with me.”

The Younger brother actually chuckled quietly at that. “I rather doubt that. Now, unhand me, I can walk.”

Thor looked like he didn’t believe the younger God, but did as he was asked. He didn’t move away though – hovering close in case his brother wasn’t quite as strong as he obviously hoped. As it was Loki managed to remain upright, possibly through sheer bull-headedness alone.

The large group of people who had been witness to the demise of the chitarui were now dispersing. Odin was already ordering the soldiers away – presumably to tell the rest of the army to stand down – and Heimdall was staring intently into who-knows-where with an expression that made it quite clear he was hunting down any survivors of the explosions.

The Avengers had clumped together and all were covered in blood. Some – Bruce, Tony and Steve mainly – were in better shape than the others for obvious reasons. Despite Loki’s quick healing spell, no-one forgets the feeling of their ear drums rupturing any time soon, and although the injuries were gone the memory of receiving them was all too fresh. Had he not healed them it was arguable that some would have already died of the internal wounds the blast-wave had caused.

And they knew that.

Loki had won, certainly, but he had vastly underestimated the damage his methods would cause and that had hurt people.

Again.

Once more he had started out with the best of intentions and ended up with his plan rather getting away from him and hurting the people closest to him. There was some sort of irony in there, although he was too tired to try and find it.

“So, was that exactly how you planned that going?” Fury was looking as nonchalant as a man smeared with blood could.

“I admit it could have gone better.” Loki said with a small smile. “However, it was an apt demonstration of the ‘ant, boot’ analogy. Do you not think?”

The Director scowled, possibly to hide his amusement. “Don’t you go all Ultimate Power on me again!”
“I would not dream of it.”

Fury inclined his head slightly. “But that was a damn fine job.” This time he actually allowed himself to smile. “Worrying, but a damn fine job.”

Loki would have replied – possibly thanked him for what was a pretty big compliment from the stoic man – but he was cut off by Ironman bearing down on him. And Stark was not looking impressed at all.

“Tony…”

“Do you always play possum in a tight spot?” The man demanded.

“I…What? I do not understand that reference.”

“Playing dead, dumbass! We thought you’d got yourself killed!”

“Well I…”

“And antimatter?! How did you even do that?!” Tony wasn’t waiting for answers. “You almost wiped out the whole bloody lot of us! Did you even think through what those detonations were going to do?”

Loki was wide-eyed in the face of his lover’s utter fury, not expecting quite that reaction.

“I had it under control.”

“Eventually! What did…” Tony stopped and took a steadying breath, staring at the God. His gaze took in the gash on Loki’s cheek, the way he was hunched over, one arm tucked protectively across his stomach. “Look, you scared me. Scared all of us, I think. When you said you were going to take all the chitarui out in one go I don’t think we expected something quite that…”

“Apocalyptic.” Evie emerged from behind her father, looking tiny against the Ironman suit. Her eyes were huge, the green especially vivid given how pale she was under all the blood and muck. When she looked at Loki there was the one thing he had never wanted to see aimed at him.

Fear.

His daughter was frightened of him.

“Evelyn…” He reached out a hand to her and she visibly flinched back.

Tony saw the absolute pain and horror flash across Loki’s face at the rejection and put a hand on the girl’s shoulders in reassurance.

“It was an over-calculation, Evie, everyone has those moments.”

“Most people don’t nuke the place when they over-calculate things.”

“I am not ‘most people’.” The trickster said quietly.

The girl glanced up at him briefly, then looked back down. “Guess not.”

Loki felt like there was a vice in his chest; a twisting drilling pain running straight through him as his daughter refused to meet his gaze. She was scared of him. His own little child and she was scared of him.
“Evelyn, I… Would it help if I explained what I actually did?” It was a shot in the dark but he knew that his own fears as a child and teen had been centred on things that he didn’t quite understand.

“Maybe.” That answer was more sullen than afraid, which was at least hopeful. “Dad said it was antimatter. I already know what that is.” Evie bit at her thumbnail, then finally raised her head again to look Loki in the eye. “How did you do it?”

That was something, at least. He could answer that. “I can create pockets in space. A sort of extra dimension which I can use to carry things with me. A concept one often finds in video games.”

“Infinitive bag of holding.”

“Yes, that. I borrowed some knowledge from your father and used one of these dimensions to simulate a synchrotron. From there it was simply a matter of using magic to speed up the production of the antimatter.” Loki could see the teen beginning to look more interested than concerned and felt a wave of relief wash over him. “I created three balls of it, and wrapped each in a magical shield to stop them from reacting until I needed them to. Does that make sense?”

Evie nodded slowly. “You never tested it, did you?”

“There was no time.”

“Probably should have tested it. On Earth we call that overkill.”

“I reiterate; it worked.”

“Yeah, I guess.” The girl’s eyes moved from the deep wound on Loki’s cheek to the huge stain across his sleeve. “Hurt like hell though.”

“I am sorry Evie, it was never my intention for anyone to get caught up in that.”

Finally, and to Loki’s everlasting relief his daughter smiled slightly. “Well, I can’t talk really. I nearly got Uncle Thor sucked into a jet engine and shredded when I was little.”

“I think that is a story I would rather like to hear.” He tentatively offered his hand out again. The girl once again refused it but this time in favour of bypassing it entirely and just hugging him tightly round the middle. It hurt, a lot, but he wouldn’t have asked her to let go for anything in the world.

Now it was over.

The chitarui vanquished, The Other dead, and his daughter in his arms.

Now it was over.
Chapter 22

Loki wasn't given long to bask in relief before reality came crashing back down – mostly in the form of Odin clearing his throat.

The Allfather had sent the soldiers trotting off back down the Bifrost and now stood behind the princes, Gungnir in hand and expressionless. There was no way of knowing his thoughts on the situation, but given the flinty glare being levelled on his youngest son, he wasn't happy.

"Father, I-"

"Is genocide how you intend to handle all of your problems, Loki?"

The trickster seemed to take the comment like a punch to the gut. The colour visibly drained from his face as his mouth snapped closed and rather than trying to answer he simply looked away.

"What did you expect him to do? They threatened to nuke the city." The voice was small but determined. "And besides, an all-out battle would have had the same result anyway."

Evie had been somewhat hidden by Loki, but stepped out from behind him now, bypassing his arm as he tried to stop her.

"Well? Uncle Thor would have killed them all too." The girl folded her arms. "Unless Asgard takes prisoners. Or slaves."

"Enough Birdy." Tony put a restraining hand on her shoulder, pulling her back. "You've been watching too much Game of Thrones. Asgard doesn't take slaves."

"Usually." Loki added. He was prepared for the glare he expected for the comment, but instead Odin's gaze was fixed on Evie. She looked uncomfortable under the scrutiny.

"You certainly look nothing like Loki, but you have his spirit." The Allfather said levelly. "Not many Aesir would speak to the King in such a way, and surely not one only half Aesir."

"Well proves that I'm not half Aesir then, Doesn't it? I'm half Jötunn."

"You are proud of such a fact?"

The girl shrugged slightly, backing up into Loki. The Allfather was intimidating to full-grown warriors; to a fourteen year old he was terrifying.

"Should she not be?" Loki's question was quiet as he wrapped a protective arm around his daughter's shoulders.

It was reasonable to have expected any response to that sort of statement, but the last thing the prince ever expected was for Odin to actually smile.

"Someone needs to be." The king said. It was the last thing Loki expected him to say.

Odin looked up at the sky, although there was no evidence left of the destruction that had been wrought.

"You did well, Loki." He added quietly.
"I…What?"

"Is it so hard to believe? You successfully dealt with an enemy invasion without incurring any lasting damage to Asgard or her people. There are no warriors here who can boast such a feat and certainly never against such a large force."

The trickster stared at him open mouthed. It wasn't as if he had never received praise from the Allfather before, but his skills had always been magic and deception. Odin had never seen reason to commend him in a battle situation before.

"I thought you didn't approve of wiping out a race like that…"

"Not without good reason. I believe we can all agree you had good reason. I would ask what that weapon you used was. Where did you learn such magic?"

Loki looked like a deer caught in the headlights, which was an unusual thing to see on someone usually so poised and collected. "It wasn't magic. It was science. Human science."

Odin's gaze flickered to Tony, before he looked back down at Evie again – still appearing worse for wear after the explosion. She glared up at him, confidence returned now that she wasn't full centre of attention.

"Apparently human science is a fickle thing. Did you know that it would be that powerful?"

"Not in so many words, no." Loki's arm tightened around his daughter's shoulders instinctively. He turned slightly when he felt Tony's armoured hand on his arm.

"Look, can this wait?" The inventor asked tersely. "Yeah, Lokes could have planned that better, and definitely should have told us what he was going to do, but at the moment he's kind of wavering on his feet a little. I'll earbash him about science-safety after he's been bandaged up. Yeah?"

"I do not need bandaging and do not call me Lokes."

Tony poked him right in the wound across his arm. Loki was not the sort of person to yelp, but a very definite wince flashed across his face.

"Bandaging, right there. Complain again and I'll poke it harder."

"Poke me again and I will throw you off this bridge!"

"Windows, bridges – what is it with you throwing me off of things?"

Odin watched the two of them in what could only be described as amusement. "The two of you truly are well suited."

"Well that could be taken as an insult." Evie's remark made Tony snort with laughter and Loki managed a tired grin.

"Stop being a pest, kiddo." Stark ruffled the girl's hair so that it stuck up at all angles.

"Dad!" Evie scowled and batted him off, causing Odin to laugh.

"Ah yes, there it is. I was failing to see much of Loki in you, but that expression is one I came up against many times. Particularly in the teenage years."
The irate looks from both Evelyn and Loki made Tony start laughing too. It was true that the two didn't really share many common features, but their indignant pouts were identical. When the double-glare turned on him he grinned disarmingly.

"Hey, he has a point." He winked at Loki. "And you should see what happens when Birdy's woken up before eleven AM; she's got your 'mewling quim' look down pat."

The trickster seemed to lose the ruffled-feathers look and allowed himself to smile at the comment, hugging Evie again with his good arm. "Well, I am glad to know that the important things have been inherited." He glanced back up at his father again, a brief flash of indecision on his face, then gently pushed his daughter forward. "Evelyn, I am not certain if you have actually been introduced to your Grandfather."

The teenager stared up at the king of the Gods with the expression of someone desperately trying to pretend they aren't massively intimidated. "Not introduced so much, no. Do I curtsey?"

Odin chuckled. "These days all I ask of family members is that they do not try to take over other realms. Curtsies and the like are not necessary."

"Okay…uh…" The girl glanced back at Loki awkwardly. He simply smiled reassuringly, leaning back into the arm Tony's had snaked around his waist. "So, do I call you Grandfather, Pops, or what?" She heard a stifled snort from her father but resolutely ignored him. After all, it was a fair question.

"Sleipnir has always called me Afi, and your Grandmother Amma."

"Afi and Amma. That'll take some getting used to."

"You have been calling Loki Möðhy all these years have you not?"

"Yeah, I guess so." Evie bit her lip in thought, then nodded to herself. "I'll get used to it." A broad grin crossed her face. "I have Grandparents!"

"And your Amma will flay me if I do not take you to see her right away now that you have met your Afi." Loki added. He didn't sound like he was joking either. He looked back to his father when Odin cleared his throat.

"Infirmary first, young man."

"I'm fine-"

"Infirmary first."

"Yes Father." He had the put-upon tone down pat and Odin shook his head with a wry smile.

"Do not even think about using magic to –"

Loki grinned and vanished, taking Evie and Tony with him. The Allfather was too stoic to really show his frustration, but Thor audibly chuckled.

"You did not seriously believe he was going to walk all the way back?"

"I suppose it would have been too much to ask really." Odin turned back to Heimdall, who was still resolutely staring up into the sky. "Are the chitauri truly gone?"

"Truly. There are no traces here, nor for as far as I can see. The chitauri are gone."
The remaining tension visibly drained from those left on the Bifrost. Obviously Loki hadn't had any doubt that he had succeeded in killing them all, but the confirmation was needed for everyone else to really feel that it was over.

The humans were pretty much recovered from the effects of the blast - Loki's hurried healing spell had seen to that - but only physically. Bruce had regained consciousness and was wiping away blood from his ears in bewilderment. It was taking some time to process what they had all just witnessed, and if nothing else they were very aware that Loki had been holding back all those years ago in New York. He really knew how to take out the opposition.

"Earth still retains some chitauri technology." Heimdall said, cutting over the Avengers thoughts."But it is dead – useless now."

"We'll put it all into deep storage." Fury was quick to reassure. "Including anything Stark has squirreled away."

"Good luck with that." Bruce was forlornly pulling his torn clothing around himself. "He's a little territorial, if haven't you noticed."

"I will make Loki talk to him." Thor added helpfully.

"I think asking Loki nicely might work out better."

Thor looked around at the wanton destruction that was littering the Bifrost. "Yes. Asking may be a better idea…"

MWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMW

"Möðir!"

The very first thing that Tony realised was that this certainly wasn't the infirmary, rather Loki had taken them straight back to his chambers instead. However, that only briefly registered before everything was eclipsed by scrambling hooves and Sleipnir was right up in their faces.

"You promised! Modir you promised you would not get into a situation like that again! You promised!"

"Sleipnir..." Loki's voice was muffled in his son's neck as the horse wrapped his large head over the trickster's shoulder. "It is fine, look, I am fine."

"You are hurt, you could have been killed!"

"I had it under control..."

"You did not! I was watching! You blew everything up!" Sleipnir actually went so far as to kick Loki quite hard in the leg with one of his front hooves. "You were reckless! Again!" He added in a second kick for good measure.

"Ow! Sleipnir, that hurt!"

"Good!"

It was strange in a way; the interaction between the two of them. There was no real sense of a parent and child relationship, and something that seemed far more like two siblings having an argument. Tony realised that this was a dynamic the two of them had was probably only achieved
due to the closeness of age. Loki had been so young when he'd had Sleipnir that the two acted more like brothers when angry. Tony and Evie had had their own bust-ups over the years, but it was always as Father and Daughter.

"Sleipnir, Loki, both of you stop that right now." Frigga stepped out from the bathroom, looking decidedly unimpressed with either her son or grandson.

"Mother…"

"Amma…"

The two broke apart, looking decidedly shame-faced. The Queen looked between them, her gaze lingering on the bright smears of blood Loki had left across Sleipnir's grey coat.

"You need medical attention, my son."

"I am-"

"Injured. Do not even think about trying to claim anything less than that." Frigga said sternly. "I know of your dislike of the infirmary and I am not fool enough to think you will go there willingly so instead I have drawn up a bath. You are going to clean up, heal yourself as much as possible and sleep. Am I clear?" She didn't wait for a reply, and instead rounded on Sleipnir. "And darling, I know you were worried, but you forget your own strength. Be more careful." Again she moved on without letting her victim respond, and finally let her gaze fall on Tony. "And what did you think you were doing letting my son put himself in such danger?!"

"I…What?"

The Queen stalked forwards, and – blood relative or not – every movement stated proudly that Loki had learnt from the best. Infact, Loki's evil-death-stalk paled in comparison, which was frightening in its own right. Tony had been proud that he had stood his ground that first time back in New York when the trickster had tried to get him with the sceptre, but now he began to back away as Frigga approached him.

"You allowed Loki to go ahead with a plan that you did not even know the details of and which could easily have resulted in him being killed!"

"Allowed is a strong word…”

"That explosion could be felt all the way to the far end of the citadel, and you let him do that!" Frigga's ire was almost palpable as she bore down on the human. "And that creature! You should have talked him out of that insane plan before he nearly got himself killed!"

"But I -"

Frigga slapped him.

It wasn't hard, as slaps go, but it certainly shut Tony up. He stared at the queen in shock, one hand moving up to touch against his rapidly-reddening cheek.

"Okay, Mother, I think you have suitably terrified him." Loki sounded far too amused for Tony's liking. "You know full well no-one would have changed my mind, even had I divulged my plans." He placed a gentle hand on Frigga's arm. "I am sorry I worried you Mother. It was not Tony's fault."
"Of course it was not; but you are injured and he is not, so he can bear the brunt of my anger for
now." The queen smiled sweetly at Stark. He was still staring at her in horror, but she didn't seem
to notice and turned back to Loki. "Now – clean up and rest, yes?"

"Yes mother." The trickster glanced at Tony, then back at Frigga again. "Uh…Maybe…maybe you
could help Evie…? You two should probably spend some time together…” He looked genuinely
worried as he suggested it.

However, there was apparently no need to be concerned, since Frigga's face lit up and Evie
grinned. Loki had suspected that his mother had been wanting to meet her grand-daughter, but
seeing was believing as she kissed his cheek with a soft 'thank you' and then brushed past him to
greet his child.

"Oh look at you, you are the spitting image of Loki at your age!"

"I…am?" Evie seemed rightfully confused since it was generally agreed that she bore no
resemblance to the trickster whatsoever bar eye colour.

"Of course!" Frigga cupped the girls cheeks, turning her head gently this way and that. "A few
thousand years ago and you two could have been twins! Oh look at those dimples! I thought I
would never see those again!"

"Few thousand years? Mother, do you even recall how old I am?"

The queen shot her son a sharp glance. "You are my little one no matter how old you get, Loki, and
do not dare forget it! Now I believe I told you to go have a bath."

Tony elbowed his partner gently in the side. "Come on; let the ladies have some bonding time."
The contact was light, but Loki still hissed at him and stepped away, an arm curling protectively
around his stomach. "Drama queen!"

"You know damn well I –" The trickster was cut off as his mother suddenly gasped sharply and
Sleipnir whinned and backed away. "What?"

"Loki…" Frigga sounded breathless as she took her hand away from her mouth – where it had
flown in alarm. The look on her face was a queer mix of awe and shock. "Look at you…"

Loki looked down at his hands and was horrified to see that he had dropped his glamour again
without noticing. Apparently the fight had taken far more out of him than he had realised; leaving
the spell weak and feeble.

He glanced back up at his mother, red eyes stricken. "Mother, I…"

"I had almost forgotten what that colour looked like on you." Frigga's awestruck expression
warmed into a beaming smile. "The last time I saw you like this you were a tiny babe in my arms."
She reached out completely without fear to cup his cheek. "You were colder then though. And I
believe you were crying at the time."

"I was mere hours old, of course I was crying." Loki managed. "You are not…It does not bother
you?"

"Bother me? Loki, I have never forgotten that this lay under the glamour your father placed on
you, and I have always hoped to one day see it again. You are stunning." Frigga smiled and traced
one of the curling lines that ran along her son's chin. "In an ideal world you should never need to
hide it again."
"This is not an ideal world."

"It is not, but I would still love for you to be comfortable like this." The queen's eyes glinted with mischief. "One day you will have the confidence to walk around Asgard as you really are."

Loki smiled slightly. "I cannot imagine that it would go down particularly well."

"My son, when the time comes – and it will – and you want this to be made common knowledge it will be done with the full support of your father and myself. Asgard will have no choice but to accept you anew."

"I cannot see that happening for a long time, as yet. And it will not just be myself it would affect." Loki glanced at Evie, making it clear who he was alluding to.

The girl shrugged. "Can I just point out that I'm still pissed I missed out on the blue gene? I'd have loved to have been blue. And the red eyes, ooh, Halloween would have been awesome!"

"You would have stood out somewhat."

"I'm a Stark; I stand out anyway."

The endless optimism made the trickster's smile somewhat more heartfelt. He closed his eyes and in a moment his blue skin shimmered and slowly bled back into his Aesir flesh-tone. Frigga frowned in disappointment.

"Promise me that at least once you will walk into the throne room like that."

"If you want me to send father into another Odinsleep, certainly. I seem to be good at causing them. Did he tell you that I accidently brought on the last one?"

"He told me that you were present; I made the deduction myself. You do have a way with people, Loki." Frigga patted his cheek again before turning back to Evie with a smile. "Now, my dear, shall we go and clean you up?"

The girl grinned. "I still haven't quite got to grips with having grandparents. This is so awesome!"

She and the queen left the room, chatting happily. It was obvious they were going to get on well, and only time would tell if that was going to be a good or bad thing for everyone else involved.

Sleipnir paced after them enough to nose the door closed. He then looked over his shoulder at Loki, his gaze thoughtful.

"Blue is a pretty colour on you. You normally only wear green."

Loki didn't even look like he knew how to respond to that, but Tony got there before he needed to.

"I thought horses were colourblind…"

"Excuse me?! We are not colourblind! I may not be able to see the full spectrum that you can, but I am perfectly capable of telling the difference between blue and green!"

"Okay, sorry."

Sleipnir snorted and it sounded suspiciously like a snigger as he stalked back over to Loki. "I am still extremely annoyed with you, Möðir, but I will leave it for another time. Amma was right; you need rest."
The trickster looked shell-shocked. "You are not…bothered that you just saw me as I really am?"

The horse nudged at him gently. "What does skin colour matter? You smelt the same and sounded the same. And besides, the blue was pretty. What did all those lines on your face mean?"

"You know, I am not even sure." Loki gently stroked his son's neck. "Maybe it is time I tried to find out."

"Could be birth marks." Tony suggested.

"Or maybe a family thing?" Sleipnir added. "And may I just point out that I am also very upset that my eyes are not red. I feel my reputation would have been even greater had I had red eyes."

"Eight legs and red eyes, Jesus…"

Sleipnir cocked his head at Tony. "What is a Jesus?"

"Seriously? Never mind, it's a figure of speech. An Earth thing. I think." Tony glanced at his lover. "Earth, right? Not another alien like you guys?"

"That would be telling." Loki grinned, but there was a harsh edge to it that said it was getting to the point where he was really struggling to hold back the pain he was feeling.

Both of his companions seemed to notice this as Sleipnir nodded in the direction of the bathroom. "You need to do as Amma said. Go and bathe, then rest. I can come back tomorrow and we can talk about how I am really angry about you taking stupid risks. Otherwise I fear you are going to collapse on the spot."

Loki laughed painfully. "Alright, you might have a point." He gently knocked his forehead against Sleipnir's in their version of a hug. "I will see you tomorrow, my dear."

The horse bumped Tony in the stomach with his nose. "Look after him."

"Always."

The bathroom was full of steam which hit them as a wall of heat. The tub was one of the decadent sunk-into-the-floor types and was edged with tiered ledges that also acted as steps down into it. Currently those ledges were hidden under the hot water and foam. Tony took a few moments to remove the Ironman armour before following his lover into the room.

Loki's hands were trembling as he began to undo the many straps and buckles holding his armour in place. It was telling that he didn't use magic to do it for him.

"Here, let me." Tony pushed the shaking fingers out of the way and began to deal with the complicated fastenings.

"Do you know what you're doing?"

"I built the Ironman suit; I think some belts are within my skillset." True to his words the man was making short work of them, stripping off the heavy leather. With each layer of clothing removed the extent of the bloodstains were revealed. The green tunic that acted as the base layer to the armour was drenched down his left arm, the jade turned an ugly brown. The collar had been stained the same colour where the wound along his cheek had bled down his face.

"Where else are you hurt?" Tony asked quietly. He began pulling the shirt open, relieved to find
that the horrific throat wound they had seen inflicted didn't actually exist. Loki must have had the clone in place by the time The Other started sawing his neck open.

"To be honest I cannot tell. Everything is hurting right now." The trickster eased the tunic off, a wince crossing his face as he withdrew his injured arm.

"Yeah, I'm not surprised." The man's gaze tracked across the deep bruising decorating Loki's stomach. "I'm no medical expert, but that looks like internal bleeding."

"It will heal."

"You sure? A human would need some serious medical attention for that."

"Not human, Tony." Loki raised a hand up to the back of his head and it came away stained red. "I will be fine."

"Yeah, you really look the epitome of health right now."

The trickster smiled slightly, carefully pulling off the rest of his clothes. In any other situation Tony would have made some sort of suggestive comment, but he was silenced by the massive bruising covering Loki's body. He hadn't thought that much contact had been made during the fight but the evidence in front of him said otherwise. The prince seemed unaware of the scrutiny as he stepped into the pool, then sank down to his knees so that the waist-deep water was up to his neck.

"Don't fall asleep in there; I don't want to have to fish you out if you drown."

"Then join me and make sure I stay awake."

Tony rolled his eyes at the sleepy response. He didn't really believe that the prince could drown in the bath-tub but Loki was obviously feeling the effects of the gruelling fight and some pampering was never going to be turned down.

"Fine."

The trickster had stretched out and was floating on his back with his eyes closed. The phrase 'everything hurt' was cliché but at the same time he felt that it certainly did the job. Maybe too well, to be honest. Even without using his magic he could tell that there were some bones that could probably do with being set and there was definitely something going on where he had taken the hit to his abdomen.

His arm felt like it was on fire.

Loki smiled as the water around him rippled and he opened his eyes to see Tony standing next to him.

"You're totally falling asleep there Capricorn."

"Hmm, it would seem so." He closed his eyes again, floating aimlessly so that his head bumped against the man's hip.

"Well, if you're just going to do a beached whale impression you'll have to deal with me on flannel-duty, and it won't be pretty." Tony emphasised the threat by dropping the wet flannel right onto Loki's face.

The trickster spluttered, floundering and ripping the piece of material off his mouth and nose.
"Yeah, I meant it."

"You cannot let me have a few moments of peace before insisting on attacking me with bathing implements? I just want to rest!"

"Nope. Quicker you're sorted out, the quicker I can bundle you into bed."

"I am not a child!"

"Rubbish; you're acting just like Evie when she's too tired to think rationally." Tony didn't bother with the flannel and simply used a handful of soap suds to start sluicing off the blood from the prince's arm. The cut underneath had already started to close up although it still looked livid. "Does this still hurt?"

"Like you are pressing a red-hot brand into it."

"A simple 'yes' would have done."

"Okay then; yes."

Tony huffed with quiet laughter, although he was gentler as he continued to wash the wound clean. Loki didn't try to float again, but instead found the edge of the pool and settled down on one of the ledges.

"At least this looks clean. We'd have been in trouble if there'd been some form of weirdo poison or something like that." The man continued as the wound was revealed in its entirety. The cut ran from about mid-way of Loki's upper arm, down across his elbow and nearly to his wrist, curling round where he'd tried to pull back out of the way. It looked horrible, but at least it was clean and sealing itself up.

Tony decided that it didn't need bandaging so moved on to the cut decorating the back of the trickster's skull. He made Loki tip his head forwards and began to carefully wash out the clumps of blood matting the dark hair. It was a job made harder by the fact that he didn't want to use soap so close to an open wound.

They didn't speak for some time. Tony was slow and methodical in gently washing away the grime from Loki's hair so that he could find the deep cut made by The Other's staff when it had smashed across the back of the trickster's skull. It had bled quite copiously – as head wounds usually do – and from Loki's little hiss of discomfort was probably pretty painful. There was certainly an egg-sized lump under the cut. Tony resisted his inner-parent that was screaming to put an icepack on it.

By the time he moved round to finish wiping clean the gash down the trickster's cheek, Tony realised that his partner was trembling.

"Hey, you okay?"

"Not in so many words." Loki opened his eyes and although he smiled up at the man standing over him his eyes definitely had a tell-tale wetness to them. He leant into the gentle touch as Tony scooped up a handful of water and carefully wiped at the cut on his cheek.

"Talk to me, Goat Horns."

"I fear I am somewhat overwhelmed by today's events."

"Yeah, I got that much. You're talking like Shakespeare – that's always a giveaway. The worse
you're feeling, the posher you talk. It's like a Richter Scale for you feeling bad."

"Truly?" Loki's smile brightened slightly. "I had not realised that…"

"Hadn't. There's an abbreviation we use called hadn't." Tony ran his thumb along the cut, wiping off the last of the crusted blood. "Now, if you can manage not to sound like a fifteenth century English nobleman, talk to me. I think I can guess what the problem is, but I want you to put it into words, yeah? Just…say whatever's in your mind."

"My mind is rather full right now." Loki tipped his head forwards and felt Tony move to stand infront of him so that he could rest his forehead against the man's stomach. "I…I do not…don't I don't know how to explain what is going through my head at this moment."

"You don't have to make sense, don't worry about full sentences, just talk. Monosyllabic if needs be."

"Who made you into a psychiatrist?"

"Bruce made me do it a few times. It helps, believe me." Tony carded his fingers through the thick wet hair against his stomach. Loki's arms wrapped around his waist, holding him like a life-line. The trickster sighed heavily, struggling to pull his thoughts together and put them into words.

"I don't…I cannot make myself believe that it is all over." He finally whispered. "I have spent…oh I don't even know any more. Twenty years? Ever since I met them, since they found me in the void…I have wanted them dead. It has not been long, not for me, not for my life time but it has felt like eternity. I just…I wanted them dead. With every part of me I wanted to kill them all. I thought I hated the Jötnarr, but that was nothing compared to what I felt for these creatures. Everything, everything has been about killing them. All that hatred I had towards Asgard, my family, my race, it all went to the chitauri. And now…Now I feel so empty. I looked up and watched them disintegrate into stardust and…I feel nothing."

"What do you think you should be feeling?"

Loki shrugged, an awkward motion with his head pressed into Tony's stomach and arms around the man's waist. "I don't know." He stared down at the water that rippled inches below his nose. "Pleased? Relieved? Mostly relieved I suppose. I have never had demons like these before. I have never come up against a foe that has haunted and hunted me so badly or for so long. I just do not understand how to deal with suddenly losing all that fear in one go. I don't need to be afraid anymore, and…I cannot understand that."

"You've had all of what? Fifteen minutes? If that? I wouldn't worry; you've hardly had the time to process what's just happened. I don't think any of us have. I mean, I hope your Mum's good with crying teenagers because when Evie is acting that over-excited it usually means she's one step away from a meltdown."

"Mother will be fine, I can assure you. She dealt with me for all those years." Loki raised his head to look up at his partner. "What of you? How do you feel?"

"Me? Just peachy."

"I am being serious, Tony." He raised a hand up to place his palm over the arc reactor. "Are you well?"

"Well…Jarvis might have had to help out a bit, but I'm alright now. If you set off that sort of explosion over my head you've got to expect me to have minor blip or so."
"Lasting damage?"

"No more so than I already have. I'll be fine."

Loki sighed and let his forehead thunk back against Tony's stomach. "I am sorry."

"Not your fault, Capricorn, not your fault."

"It was. I did not think about the consequences. I am sorry."

"Loki? Hey, look at me." Tony crouched down so that they were eye-level. "Don't do this to yourself, okay? You're tired, in pain and so full of emotions that you don't even know what you're feeling right now. Don't add guilt into that mix, yeah? Just don't think about it."

"But I…"

"No." Tony rested his forehead against the prince's, hands cupping Loki's cheeks. "Don't. Right here and right now it's just me and you and nothing else, okay? Just me and you. Don't think, don't worry, don't guilt-trip yourself."

Loki nodded, taking in a shuddering breath. "That is easier said than done."

"I know, but at the moment you don't need to angst over everything in existence."

"You are contradicting yourself; I thought you wished me to talk."

"Did I ever claim to be any good at this therapy crap?" Tony grinned and Loki managed a quiet chuckle.

"Alright, that is true." He rubbed a hand across his eyes with a sigh.

"Can you heal at all? Your Mum kinda ordered it after all."

Loki flicked his fingers and all that happened was a brief glimmer of green. "No. Currently my magic is limited to holding up the glamour I usually use."

Tony knew that he wasn't talking about keeping himself looking Aesir – that was Odin's magic, after all – but rather of the peculiar little cloaking spell kept up to proclaim that he really was male, hiding his hermaphroditic self.

"Why are you keeping that spell going?"

The trickster looked up sharply, confusion etching his expression. "I always keep it going. I always have. It is one of the first things I ever learnt."

"Is it really necessary right now? You could be using that magic to fix yourself up."

"It is always necessary."

"You dropped it for me once."

Loki's gaze flickered away, seemingly hesitant at allowing that memory to surface. "That was before I had to lose it involuntarily. Right now I think it is better for my sanity to keep it going. I feel…vulnerable without it."

Tony didn't need to ask any further about that. He knew what the chitauri had done. Loki had every
right to want to hide those sorts of aspects of himself away after basically being used as an experimental brood mare. It was probably bad enough that he had had to put up with the healers having to know his secret when they fixed the damage caused.

"Okay, fair enough. So, no magic means no healing so we'll have to skip that part. How does a good night's sleep sound?"

"Wonderful. What are the chances of you being able to drag me into the bed chamber?"

"Non-existent. Get your heavy butt there yourself."

Loki laughed. "I suspected as much."

Many hours later found Tony doing what Tony did best; tinkering with the suit. He didn't have any spare parts, and didn't really have the proper tools either, but it hardly mattered. When his head was full there was only one thing that usually helped.

So he tinkered.

Loki had fallen asleep almost as soon as he'd hit the mattress, so exhausted that he never even realised that his partner wasn't nearly tired enough to sleep too. Tony had spent a bored few hours playing with his phone before Evie returned, and they had talked quietly for a while, mostly about Frigga. The girl was rather thrilled with her new-found grandparents.

However, the events of the day had been strenuous for the teenager too, emotionally as well as physically and all too soon she excused herself for bed as well.

This left Tony finding minor faults in the suit and trying to fix them with little more than his emergency tool kit.

And the rather persistent pain in his chest that he was absolutely not going to let Loki know about.

There weren't any clocks in Asgard, or rather there weren't any mechanisms that he recognised as clocks. He was pretty certain the Aesir had moved on from looking at the sun, but still, whatever method they used had so far eluded him and he was having to rely on an app he'd quickly penned to tell him what the time was. Okay, okay, so he'd based it on the position of the sun, but he was allowed to do that! He needed a starting point at least!

As it was, said app stated that there was a 99.78046% chance that it was quarter past two in the morning.

Great.

And actually that pain in his chest was getting worrying. Stark was more than aware of the danger he was in, especially since the episode after bringing Evie to Asgard. His life expectancy was pretty low, and he had a bad feeling that it was going from bad to worse after what Loki had done to the chitauri.

He picked his phone up again.

"Hey, Jarv, you there?"

"I am always here, sir." Jarvis regulated his volume according to how he was spoken to, and now
replied to Tony's whisper equally quietly. "Is everything alright?"
"You saw what happened earlier, do you think everything is alright?"
"A fair point, sir. I will refine that to; is there any way I can help at the moment."
"Is the scanning function in the arc reaction still good?"
"I believe it is in perfect working order, sir. Do you wish me to run a scan?"
"Yeah, something's not right and it would probably be better to know if it's serious."
"Very well, hold still please, sir."

Back home, Tony wouldn't have had to ask; Jarvis would have been scanning constantly and updating him if something out of the ordinary came up. However, in Asgard they hadn't continued that level of communication because it was far too draining on the arc reactor that was still powering pretty much all of Tony's tech. He had enough problems without the reactor giving out on him too.

The phone vibrated in his hand and a stream of data appeared on the screen.
"Can you translate for me Jarv, I'm not feeling up to wading through that lot."
"The data is not conclusive by any means, sir."

Tony frowned. It wasn't like Jarvis to beat about the bush when asked a question.
"Of course it's not conclusive – but inconclusive is fine right now. Do I have anything to worry about?"
"…Yes sir. I am rather afraid that you do."

The man nodded slightly. It was the answer that was both expected and dreaded in equal measures.
"Go on then. What's happened?"
"A myocardial rupture, sir. It is small at the moment, but will grow."

Oh…Oh that wasn't good…

The news actually made him feel sick. The man ran a shaking hand down his face, staring at the lines of data on his phone. They only told him the same as what Jarvis had hesitantly stated.

Myocardial rupture. There was a rip in his heart. That delicate pulsing muscle that kept him alive, and it had a tear in it. In medical terms, he was completely and utterly fucked.

"Jarvis…I…What can be done?"

"Heart surgery may be able to seal up the rip or at the very least slow the damage. But it will need to be done soon. Immediately if possible."

"I'm on Asgard!" Tony's voice began to rise in a panicked yelp until he remembered he could wake Loki. "I'm on Asgard!" He repeated in a hiss. "How the hell am I meant to get complex heart surgery?! These guys have barely invented the wheel!"
"Can their healers not help? I believe their magic is extremely effective."

"No. Apparently the arc reactor messes up magic. Minor stuff appears to work, but nothing major. And the reactor's pretty damn close to my heart so that makes it all even more of a fucking mess!" Tony dropped the phone into his lap so that he could bury his head in his hands. "Oh God, I'm going to die!"

"Sir, I…"

"I'm dying Jarvis. Like, really dying."

"Is it possible to get back to Earth, sir?"

"The Bifrost would kill me, you know that. Stop trying to be optimistic." Tony scrubbed a hand across his eyes. "Right, how long have I got without medical intervention?"

"Realistically, sir?"

"No. In an imaginary world made out of sparkles and rainbows."

"Your sarcasm is noted, sir. It is extremely difficult to tell how long you might have. At most you could have a year – with the surgery."

"And without?"

"...It is most likely you will not see out the week. The damage will increase until you have a fatal haemorrhage. I am sorry sir."

"Oh God…" It was a long moment before Tony could compose himself enough to speak. "I… Jarvis, will it hurt?"

"You won't even know when it happens, sir. It shall be instant."

"Oh goody, a silver lining." The man sounded shaken to the core. "How the fuck am I meant to tell Loki and Evie?" His voice came out as a broken sob. "How?!" A wrecked, ruined little word. "How?!"

He had accepted that he had a finite time to live – had accepted it a long time ago. However, finite had been written down as 'ten years' and he had been slowly whittling away at that deadline with the certain knowledge of how much time he had left. He was still working on the assumption that he had roughly four years to live a good life, and then take anything extra as a bonus which could be used to tie up affairs and such. To suddenly lose that neat little timetable and have to condense his entire life into a few days…

For all of his intelligence, Tony could not get his mind around the idea. A few days and then… What?

He didn't even really believe in anything after death. He'd dismissed the cute little idea of a Heaven long ago when his parents died, and had never filled that space with an alternate theory. What did happen? Had Loki ever mentioned anything? Not really. Nothing to conclusively confirm an afterlife of any sort.

In his heart-of-hearts Tony had to admit that he didn't believe in anything. No Heaven, no Hell, no Limbo. Nothing. Oh the ideas of such places appealed. The thought that there was something next, somewhere nice and happy, was a lovely thought. Even the theory of some empty nothingness that
you sort of floated around in for the rest of eternity was at least some sort of next-life, however crappy.

But he couldn't even make himself think that that was the answer.

In Tony Stark's mind he knew what would happen in a few days' time: Nothing. He would simply cease to be. No 'him', no conscious mind to hold the idea of 'Tony Stark', absolutely nothing. Every thought process would just stop and his soul – whatever strange conceptual thing that may be – would fizzle out like a candle on a birthday cake.

Nothing. Not even a 'him' left to understand that there was nothing. It was a thought that was possibly more horrific than any Hell the church had ever dreamt up.

And how the hell would he tell Loki? Evie? Any of the others, to be honest? Loki would...well, it was impossible to know how he would react. He'd thrown a hissy fit the first time he'd found out about Tony's heart problems, but that had been because he hadn't been forewarned. This time however, it was kind of his fault.

If the trickster hadn't set off those explosions, the damage wouldn't have occurred.

This was going to break Loki.

How was he going to tell him?

Unbeknownst to Tony, he actually wouldn't have to.

Across the room Loki lay staring at the ceiling, unmoving. A slow and silent tear trickled down his cheek as he heard Tony begin to sob quietly. When he finally felt the mattress dip as the man climbed into bed beside him he pretended to be asleep. This didn't stop Tony from latching on to him as if he could do anything at all about the death sentence.

MWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMW

Heimdall was unsurprised to find himself with company in the small hours of the morning.

"You should be resting."

"You know why I am not."

"We have had this discussion already; you know what you will have to do, and you are not up to it after all that has happened today."

Loki nodded slightly, fully agreeing with that statement. "But I shall have to be. I thought I had plenty of time to get my strength back – possibly prepare Tony for my plan – but now I must act quickly."

"You could have at least waited for the sun to come up."

The trickster smiled grimly. "Actually, I really do not think that I could. I thought five years was a short life-expectancy – mere days means that I could lose him at any moment. I will not take that risk."

Heimdall glanced at him. "I still cannot bring my mind around to this idea of you caring this much for someone."

"Should I be insulted?"
"Just accept the truth when you hear it. Have you spoken to the Allfather about this?"

"Of course not. He will hardly be pleased that I did not grace the infirmary with my presence when
he told me to. Disappearing off into another realm will not do me any favours."

"You are set on doing this now, then?"

"I am set. I would ask for your help to allow me to use the Bifrost, otherwise I shall have to find
my own way there and I do not know if I have the strength for it."

"You do not." Heimdall dismissed him as simply as that, knowing full well that Loki wasn't under-
estimating himself in this respect. "Why should I help you?"

Loki shrugged, striding out to the edge of the bridge and peering down into the nothingness. "Why
not?" He tried to spot the void, but was on the wrong side to see it. "I would have thought that the
Allfather would be very disappointed should something unfortunate befall me again. And what
would Mother say…?"

Heimdall scowled. "Very well, but only because this is a noble cause, for once, rather than your
usual schemes."

"Schemes? Oh, you do wound me." The sarcastic remark was tempered with the flicker of a smile
that Heimdall returned in kind. "So, shall we do this?"

"Very well, my Prince."

MWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMW

It was snowing when Loki appeared on the mountainside, a thick blizzard that would mean death
to the unwary. It was a formidable piece of scenery with harsh, unforgiving rock and a wind strong
enough to pitch people off the side of the mountain.

He landed in an ungainly manner, but regained his footing quickly, pushing through the waist deep
snow. Unperturbed by the extreme environment he made his way towards the cliff face. The
Himalayan rock was shrouded in a thick mantle of ice, weather-worn into a smooth impassable
face that would turn away even the most determined of Sherpa's.

It had been a long time since the trickster had last set foot in this area, and he was only half certain
he still remembered the way. A faint tingling made him glance down at his hands and scowl when
he saw them flushing blue. The glamour seemed to have lost its stability since his time with the
chitauri, and the extreme cold was triggering it to drop and let his true skin show. He cursed and
tried to call it back up only for it to fail again a moment later.

Fine, it wasn't like there was anyone to see anyway.

Loki splayed his fingers out against the cliff wall, his blue hand looking strangely at home against
the ice. It didn't feel cold, although logic said that it must be, however, the smooth surface wasn't
yielding what he was looking for.

The trickster knew that his goal was in the area that he was looking, though, so began to move his
hand across the ice. It was easier to use his sense of touch to find what he was looking for rather
than his eyes, since thousands of years of ice were hard to see through.

*Ah, there...*
Loki felt the sudden change in texture under his palm, the smooth ice giving way to the faintest hint of a raised design.

It would have been impossible to see the tiny mark on the surface, let alone tell what it was without prior knowledge of it. However, the prince was aware of the small ying-yang symbol under his palm. He pressed against it, sending a pulse of heat into the hidden design.

For a moment it looked like nothing was going to happen. The ice remained stubbornly inert and Loki glared at it.

Then, with a whisper of rock and ice sliding across each other, a thin - near invisible - crack down the large wall began to widen. It moved smoothly and silently, opening up to become a rough hole into the mountainside. Unlike the dark, fatally cold tundra, a gust of warm air blew out of the tunnel and fanned Loki's hair back from his face.

There was a dim glow, far in the distance that lit the rocky opening. The trickster glanced back at the snowstorm momentarily, before stepping through the doorway. Behind him the rough entrance slid closed again, trapping him inside the faintly lit tunnel. This didn't faze him, considering he had been expecting something of the sort to happen.

The tunnel was long and winding, a rough-cut hole through the hard rock that made up the infamous mountain range. It was easily ten miles long – possibly more – and the only light source was whatever dim glow was in the far distance. Loki had actually remembered it being far longer; it had seemed to take an eternity the first time he had come this way.

As it was, now the journey seemed to take no time at all. It was different when he had been carrying his three badly injured children…

The end of the tunnel opened up quite suddenly and, just like the first time he had come this way, Loki stopped momentarily. The area unveiled was impressive enough to even make him forget about the various aches and pains for a moment.

A huge cavern was before him, lit around every wall with flaming brands so that it was filled with a warm glow that chased the shadows and cold away. At one far end a deep pool shimmered in the light. Enormous columns lined the space, reaching up to the high ceiling. They were intricately carved, as were the walls, although it was hard to identify which culture could have been responsible. There were hieroglyphs, Norse runes, Aztec pictograms, Japanese Kanji and much more – enough to represent all of the world's many people. Some of the massive pillars had paintings of deer and mammoths, hand prints and giant elk that had not walked Earth's fragile landscape for tens of thousands of years. The paintings looked like they could have been fresh.

Loki splayed his hand out over one of the prints; his fingers were slightly longer and his palm slimmer than the person who had placed the image on the ancient column.

"His name was Broud. It has been a long time since he placed that hand print here." A man appeared from around the pillar, dressed in a grubby robe and a length of string serving as a belt. "I've just made a pot of tea, would you like a cup?"

"You were expecting me?" The trickster withdrew his hand from the art-work, almost like a child caught in the act.

"Of course not, but I work on the basic assumption that if I'm always expecting someone, when a person eventually shows up I won't be found wanting in the tea department. Shall we?" The little man grinned and without waiting for a reply turned to lead the way. "You're looking rather worse
for wear by the way." He added over his shoulder. "What have you been up to, Loki?"

"It is a very long story."

"Anything to do with your bid to take over the world?"

"Is that all anyone remembers me for?"

"It was pretty noticeable." He didn't sound like he minded in the least. "What type of tea would you like? I've made green, but I've got a pretty good collection."

"Green will be fine, thank you."

There was an area next to the pool that had a small fire going, with a couple of mats down around it and a rolled up futon mattress. There were also a handful of what appeared to be miniature mountains, only a few inches high. One had a miniscule glacier carving out a path.

"Make yourself comfortable, please." The man pottered around the fire, taking the little kettle off of the flames and finding two cups from next to the pool.

"I did not expect to see you still here, Lu Tze." Loki said quietly as he sat down on one of the mats. "It must have been nearly two thousand years since I was last here."

"Try three thousand and we'll be closer to the mark."

"That long? Really?"

Lu Tze grinned. "They say that time flies, but I have never noticed it myself. How are your children now? They seemed to be recovering nicely when you left here."

The warm smile on Loki's face faded. "I do not know; I no longer speak with them."

"Oh? What happened?"

"Hel blamed me for what happened. She and Fenrir left as soon as they were able. She wasn't even properly healed and neither had recovered from what had happened. The moment she woke up she grabbed Fenrir and... left."

"What of Jormungandr?"

"He was far too badly injured. Even after I brought him here," Loki shrugged sadly. "In the end even my own magic wasn't enough to heal him fully. All I could do was keep him comfortable and soothe the pain from the burns. He is currently residing here on Earth. I needed to find somewhere cold and dark where he could recuperate."

"Let me guess, Mariana's Trench?"

The prince smiled slightly. "The myths do say that he circles the world. It may not quite be the entire planet, but a fair distance none-the-less."

Lu Tze took a delicate sip of his tea. "And now here you are again. How have you come to be here this time, Loki? It is obvious an awful lot has happened to you in the intervening millennia."

"As I say, it is a very long story."

"And I have nothing but time on my hands." The man's grin said that there was very much an in-
joke in that statement. "Humour me and then we shall see if I can help you."

It was strange really. Loki barely knew the man – they'd met but once – but there was no hesitation in trusting him. Even for a pagan God there were some people who didn't quite fit the normal spiritual rules. This was someone you simply trusted.

And besides, Tony's life was weighing in the balance.

So he talked.

They finished the whole pot of tea between them as Loki told the full tale of what had happened over the recent years, starting with Thor's aborted coronation. Lu Tze was a good listener, nodding and 'ah ha'ing in all the right places, but never actually interrupting. The trickster spoke freely about Evie and Tony, explaining the tentative beginnings of their relationship and the sudden arrival of their daughter. He also didn't leave anything out in regards to the chitauri, both the first meeting and then what had happened after he had been recaptured.

When he finished his companion was looking sympathetic.

"So in a nut shell; you've fallen in love with a human, and now he's going to die far sooner than either of you previously thought."

"If what I overheard was correct, I am losing him as we speak."

Lu Tze placed his empty cup down on the ground. "Why have you not tried those famous Golden Apples Asgard always boasts of?"

Loki raised a scornful eye-brow. "They are poisonous to humans – hardly the effect I'm looking for."

"And magic won't work because…?"

"The arc reactor. I did mention it."

"Oh yes, of course you did, sorry. Well, I can see why you've come here then." The old man shook the teapot hopefully, but it was completely empty. "Apparently it didn't work out so well for you last time – you make it sound as if your children weren't exactly pleased with your coming here."

"Believe me – their anger has nothing to do with this place and everything to do with me. I am certain that this is the best – if not only – course of action."

"Have you spoken with Anthony about it?" Lu Tze said the name as if he knew him personally.

"No." Loki admitted. "I came straight here; there was no time to speak with him. I am aware that there are more effects than just the healing, but it is healing that I am most interested in." He shook his head hopelessly. "I cannot let him die. Not so soon."

"Do you really think that's your choice to make?"

"This is my fault! He would not be on the brink of death if it were not for my foolish actions!"

Lu Tze calmly piled some more wood onto the fire. "If only you felt like that about all the humans who perished when you led the chitauri here. Weren't they your fault too?"

"I-"
"Official count of three thousand six hundred and ninety two dead. Nine hundred and twenty two with wounds that affect them to this day and over ten thousand with clinical depression and PTSD."
The little man reeled off the numbers monotonously like someone discussing the weather. "What of them, Loki? You ask to save one person when you took the lives of so many without a second thought."

The trickster looked stunned. "If I thought it were possible to take all of that back then I would."
"Time doesn't work like that, as you are aware."

"I am aware…” Loki nodded very slowly. He hadn't expected to be shot down quite so badly and all of that hope he'd felt since his arrival was draining away like blood from a wound. It left him with the same light-headed sick feeling too. "Thank you for your time…I will make my own way out."

He made to get to his feet, but was stopped by Lu Tze raising a hand.

"Did I say I wouldn't help you? I was simply pointing out some unfortunate facts." The little man smiled benignly. "After what's happened to you and your little family in the past few years I think you deserve someone doing something nice for you. No?" He laughed at the stunned look on his visitor's face. "You really thought I would turn you away, didn't you?"

"You had rather convinced me of it, yes. Why would you help me after listing all of that?"

"Well, I felt that points needed to be made, but I don't like to let people lose their loved ones." He looked stern for a moment. "But I would like for you to promise me to try and reconcile with your eldest daughter and sons. If at all possible."

"I severely doubt I will ever get the chance, but if at all possible then I will try."

Lu Tze grinned brightly. "Perfect." He rose to his feet surprisingly smoothly for someone apparently so old. "Shall we?"

It was half an hour later that Loki left, a clay flask tucked under his cloak. Behind him in the deep cave a fresh set of Norse runes were carved into one of the many pillars, spelling out his name in payment for the gift he now held. Just like all of the countless other names scrawled across the walls to forever remember all of those who had made the same journey for the same reasons.

Loki tracked his lover down to the grand library and found him nestled in a corner with half of the astrology section. There were some uncomfortable-looking wooden benches, but the man had simply pulled the cushions off of them and made a sort of pillow fort. He was also munching on an apple.

"Hey you, where've you been?" Tony's big smile didn't in the least betray the fact that he had terrible news to eventually impart. "We missed you at breakfast."

"You do know you will be skinned alive if you are found eating here?"

"I'll take my chances. After all, I have the Defender of Asgard to protect me."

Loki laughed, sitting down next to him. "The what?"

"Ooh, you missed that one. It's what they're all calling you."
"Who are 'they'."

"Dunno." He took another large bite of apple, then spoke with his mouth full. "People. It's been all over the citadel, what happened yesterday. They love you. Bet you could go Frosty the Snowman and they'd still lick your boots at this rate." He sniggered at the look on Loki's face. "Okay, so maybe not that much, but you're suddenly the flavour of the month and they really are calling you the Defender."

"Well, it has a nicer ring to it than 'Trickster' I suppose." Loki picked up one of the many books surrounding them. "You are researching the Void?"

"Nah, call it scientific interest; I'm just curious."

"Where is Evelyn?"

Tony craned his head round to look down the avenue of bookshelves. "She was around here a moment ago. I imagine she's found the fauna aisle. Always has had a thing for dinosaurs. Give me a second." He picked his phone up and keyed something in. A moment later there was the recognisable whistle of R2D2 as the text was received and Evie appeared around a corner, her own phone in hand.

"Hey, Defender of the Realm!" She didn't seem to think through that Loki might still be injured and simply plonked herself down on top of him. "Where've you been all morning? You missed breakfast!"

"Ow! Yes, I am aware." He shuffled a little to one side so that his daughter wasn't entirely squashing him and settled an arm over her shoulders. "I had something to take care of."

"Where'd ya go?"

"Yeah, where were you?"

Loki glanced at his lover. Tony had put his book down and was looking alert and curious; no signs of what he was hiding.

"I know about your conversation with Jarvis last night." He said bluntly.

The man's face fell, the colour leeching from his cheeks.

"Oh...you heard that?"

Loki reached out to rest his hand on Tony's arm. "I heard, but you need not worry; I have a solution."

"There isn't a solution!"

Evie looked between her parents, worry etching itself across her face. "What conversation? What's happened?"

"It appears that yesterday didn't really sit well with me, Birdy."

"Are you ill?"

Tony looked unable to answer that, but Loki came to the rescue for him. "Your Father's health has deteriorated somewhat, Little Bird, but it is nothing to worry about now; I can solve the problem."

"I know about your conversation with Jarvis last night." He said bluntly.

"Oh..."Tony looked unable to answer that, but Loki came to the rescue for him. "Your Father's health has deteriorated somewhat, Little Bird, but it is nothing to worry about now; I can solve the problem."
"Loki…I'm dying…"

"But I can save you."

Evie stared at Loki. "You can? Like, really save him?!"

"Evie, you know nothing can be done…" Tony was shut up by Loki's finger on his lips.

"Shush. Stop that right now! When I say I can do something I mean it, and you should know that by now!"

"Okay, okay!" The man pushed his partner's hand away. "Fine; I have a rip in my heart, how you gonna fix it?"

Evie's eyes widened to the size of saucers. "You've got what?!"

Tony waved a hand to silence her, which only served to annoy the girl. "Wait a moment, Birdy." He narrowed his eyes at Loki. "I thought you said there was nothing that could be done. Magic won't work!"

"This is not magic, not in the normal sense." Loki withdrew the clay flask from the pocket in his cloak. "I had to go far afield for this, but it will work." He handed it over.

"This being…?" Tony tipped it and heard the tell-tale slosh of liquid inside. The flask was plain pottery, long and thin with no decoration at all to say what might be in there. "Loki, what is this?"

Loki grinned. "Just what it sounds like. Water."

The man frowned, but didn't question the simplistic answer. If Loki had vanished to find a bottle of water and was then acting like he'd solved all their problems, there was something more to it than simple refreshment. Tony wasn't quite sure what water could do for him though. The only magic water that came to mind was from Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade and unlike that film, this pottery receptacle most certainly wasn't the Holy Grail.

Magic water…

"I love how I can see your thought processes."

"Shut up."

Fountain of Youth? Was that a thing? Most likely not; even to someone sitting in the halls of the Norse Gods, it seemed somewhat too far-fetched. There was that old myth about some well Odin had given his eye to; but as he had since been told that the injury was actually a war wound, Tony didn't think that that could be it either.

Ah.

A grin crossed his face. There was one other story about magic water.

"Got it yet?"

"I thought that place didn't exist, some guy invented it in the thirties."

Loki laughed. "Not at all. The legends existed for millennia but as human technology grew the Keepers thought that it would be too dangerous to allow the myths to continue, so one of them wrote it as a piece of fiction. That way humans would just assume that it had come from there."
"I don't get what you're talking about…" Evie said grumpily.

"Shangri-La, Birdy, Shangri-La." Tony's grip on the flask had changed so that now he held it a lot more reverently. He shook his head in awe. "This can't really be from…"

"I told you I would find a way."

"This will heal me?"

Loki's eyes gleamed. "And more. This will heal you, but that is not all." He tapped the wax seal on the pottery. "Immortality."

"…You are joking!"

"Not at all. Your injuries will be fully healed, but it will also grant you the gift of eternal life, if you wish. Not indestructible, but certainly immortal."

Tony let out a breathless laugh, staring down at the innocent little bottle. "Oh my God…" He tipped it again, hearing the contents slosh. "So one sip and…"

"That is all it takes."

"There's more than one mouthful in there." Evie pointed out slowly.

"I am certain that there are others in the Avengers you would wish to offer the remainder to."

Tony still looked entirely disbelieving as he shook his head again. "This is…I can't get my head around it…I had only a few years left, which yesterday became days, and now…Now you're saying I can live forever. We can live forever."

"We can. I am immortal, Evelyn is immortal, and now you can be." Loki clasped his hand around Tony's shaking one. "We can have our forever, Tony."

Stark laughed, completely uncaring if there was an element of sob to it. "Forever. Yeah, I think I like the sound of that. Let's finally have a forever."
Chapter 23

It tasted no different to normal bottled water, but burnt the throat like the finest aged whisky. Tony coughed, completely taken by surprise, which caused Loki to laugh.

“Well?!” Evie asked eagerly. “Feel immortal?”

“I feel like I’ve just drunk bleach, if that’s what you mean.” Tony quickly resealed the flask, still coughing. “That water’s been sitting around for a while!”

“Only you would complain about the life-giving elixir of Shangri-La.”

“Yeah, well,” The man cleared his throat again. “That was some bad mojo-juice.” He grinned at Loki. “How do I know if it’s worked?”

“You will not particularly feel the effects. What do you think, Evelyn? Has it worked?”

The girl scrutinised her father for a moment, then beamed. “Your wrinkles are going!”

“I didn’t have wrinkles to start with!”

Both his lover and daughter gave him an identical look of disbelief that made Tony shrug. “Okay, fine. Maybe a few.”

“Still, they have gone. Most of them at any rate.” Evie leaned across to take a look at the side of his head. “Hey, and you’re slightly less grey!”

“I’m not grey!!!”

Loki smiled. To be honest, there was not all that much in the way of outward changes. Tony hadn’t been looking all that old to begin with – more tired due to all his existing health problems – and it was the tiredness that was being erased. UV damage, exhaustation, stress, all those little things that add to aging were vanishing from Tony’s face – and presumably everywhere else too.

“So it heals all damage?” The man asked in interest.

“It will not do anything about the arc reactor – that is a foreign body, as is the shrapnel. However, that benign tumour in your colon will have gone.”

“The what?”

“And those beginning signs of osteoporosis. And arthritis. You have not been kind to your body. Oh and do not get me started on the damage your alcoholism has done!” Loki looked rather judgemental. “Your liver has taken a pounding. And that experimental phase with drugs, the failed Prince Albert piercing – do not think I did not notice that scarring – all those broken bones and torn ligaments you have had over the years and you may notice various other aches and pains vanishing. It will not do anything about the excess weight though – you will have to sort that out yourself.”

“I’m not carrying any excess weight!”

Loki smirked whilst Evie sniggered loudly.

“I’m not.”
“Sure.” Evie drew the word out as she poked him sharply in the stomach. “That’s just your T-shirt then, is it?”

“…Shut up Birdy!”

Tony was secure enough in his body image to know that his family were simply taking the piss. He was actually in extremely good shape, all things considered, and there was very little spare weight on him that he hadn’t turned into muscle throughout his years of being Ironman. He was definitely feeling…different, though.

More energetic if anything.

“Was that it? No bolt of lightning? No golden glow?”

“I can set you on fire if you like?” Loki grinned, all innocent charm.

“…no. Thanks, but no.” Tony stretched his arms out, still half-expecting to see them sparkling or something. That was what always happened in films wasn’t it? He felt rather cheated in that respect. “So that really was it? I’m…okay now?” He didn’t wait for a reply and picked up his phone. “Jarv? What’s my status, what’s going on in there?”

There was an unusual pause before he was answered – which was strange since usually Jarvis was there immediately.

“There are some very odd readings, sir.” The tinny voice sounded extremely confused. “I do not quite understand what they mean yet…”

“Is there still a rip in my heart?”

“…There does not appear to be one, sir. Which is frankly impossible. In fact, everything seems to be…normal. It appears that your heart is entirely healthy.” Suspicion crept in. “What did you do?”

“Why do you assume I did anything?”

“I am sorry, sir. I shall rephrase that; what did _Loki_ do?”

“And again the blame is laid at my feet.” Loki rested his chin on his hand with a bored sigh.

“Uh, that’s because it _is_ all down to you.” Tony nudged him with an elbow. “Stop sulking. So, Jarv, am I dying?”

If a voice could smile, Jarvis’ certainly was. “It would appear not, sir.”

“Oh Jesus Christ!”

“Why does _he_ always get the credit?! I’m the life-saving deity around here!”

“Figure of speech! Sorry!” Tony’s eyes were sparkling with repressed vulnerability as he dropped the phone into his lap. “What’s my life expectancy then? If I’m not dying now I assume that means I’ve got a bit more than five years left?”

“Do you not understand the term ‘immortal’? So long as you are not killed by illness or injury you will not die. You have the same life-span as Evie. And as myself.”

The man gaped at Loki for a long moment. Evidently it hadn’t really sunk in that he would be more than just healed. Immortality was that impossible dream of mankind. It wasn’t something that was
meant to actually happen.

“I’m gonna live forever?”

“Pretty much.”

Tony was shaken out of his befuddled daze as Evie suddenly and quite noisily burst into tears.

“Birdy!?"

“Evelyn?”

The teen was still sitting on Loki’s lap so it was very easy for him to simply wrap his arms around her waist. “My darling, what is wrong?”

“Absolutely nothing! Everything’s right! For the first time in years, everything’s right!” Evie reached out to pull Tony into the hug too, so that the small family unit were all clinging to each other. “Everything’s perfect!”

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Fandral thumped his mug of ale down on the tavern’s bar-top with a sigh, sloshing it everywhere.

“Thor should be here!”

“He has better places to be.” Volstagg looked equally as down-trodden, although was far more careful with his own drink. “Better people to be with too, apparently.”

“Well, ‘better’ is a phrase I would hesitate to use. The humans have their merits I suppose, but certain other people are less than savoury.”

Sif was playing with a bowl of crisped beetroot, not really eating it, and looked up to glare at the two men. “‘Certain other people’ happened to save us all yesterday, if you do not recall.”

“It was hardly a proper fight though –”

“Enough!” The bowl went flying, skimming through the air to bounce off of Fandral’s arm.

“Hey!”

“Is it not enough?!”

“What are you on about, Sif?” Volstagg asked, his mouth full of salvaged beetroot.

“Are we still going to do this? After what he did yesterday, are we still going to pretend that Loki is so beneath us that we degrade his very presence?”

Fandral stared at her open mouthed. “Since when were you so fond of Loki?”

“I am not, but I can recognise that it is high time we either start to appreciate what he can do, or else next time he loses it he could take down Asgard in its entirety.”

Volstagg dropped the remaining crisps and started laughing. “You must be joking! Loki could never manage that! The next time he goes crazy we will simply let Thor throw him off the bridge again.”
Sif scowled, but didn’t need to respond because Hogun beat her to it.

“I would rather that there was not a ‘next time’ at all. Sif is right; Loki has more than proven that he can take out any and all opposition. He did not need to be anywhere near those creatures yesterday to kill them all.”

“That was just -”

“Tricks? I would like to see you take on an army alone like that. I would like to see Thor manage that! He is more than capable of destroying us all, should the fancy take him. The days of underestimating Loki are long gone.”

“Precisely! He is a danger!”

“That is not what I am saying.” Hogun said patiently. “But simply that Loki is not the person we used to know. He is not Thor’s little brother who used to run along behind us all. We need to understand that things have happened over these past years and that the trickster we used to know is gone. Perhaps we should get to know this new Loki.”

“Loki is Loki, always will be. Now he simply has a human and mongrel tagging along behind him.”

“I assume by ‘mongrel’ you are referring to his child?”

“Who else? What kind of name is ‘Evelyn’ anyway? Sounds like some tavern wench.”

“She is a sweet girl. The Allfather and Queen seem quite taken with her.”

“And if she has Loki’s perchance for chaos and mayhem?”

“Then she is Loki’s problem. He can deal with all the crap he put Asgard through as a child. Call it a penance.”

Fandral suddenly snorted with laughter, breaking the tense atmosphere and drawing his friend’s gazes. “Oh, can you imagine Loki running around after his own child like his parents did after him? Remember that time he managed to lock all of the foreign dignitaries into the Grand Hall and the Allfather spent over a week trying to salvage the peace treaties!”

Sif grinned too, and Volstagg’s booming laugh made it clear that he could recall the incident quite well.

“You know, I believe that maybe we should get our hands on this Evelyn and gently persuade her into some mischief. I am certain there are many ways a young girl can send her parents into a panicked frenzy.” The large warrior chuckled.

“That is certainly a plan. I bet we could ‘accidently’ pull Sleipnir into a plan. He has grown close to his sister apparently.”

“At least Evelyn looks normal. No extra legs or anything. A bit short, but that never hurt anyone. Hardly looks like Loki really.”

“It is in the eyes. She has his eyes. It rather puts shivers up my spine to be honest.”

Sif nodded in agreement, settling down now that the conversation seemed to be growing calmer.

“You do realise that Thor would have our heads if anything happened to his niece.”
“Loki will have our heads if anything happens to that girl! Infact, I dread to think what he would and could do to us.”

“One can get into trouble without getting hurt. We all certainly managed it often enough. She knows next to nothing about our culture – I am certain we could trip her up there.”

“This is only theoretical, correct?” Hogun looked around at his grinning friends. Fandral sighed.

“Oh, I suppose so. Still, it is nice to dream. I would love to see Loki fret for once.”

“I rather think he has fretted enough these past few years. Leave the girl alone, it is hardly her fault she has a delinquent parent.”

“That is one word to describe him! Fine, we shall simply plot and scheme as a way to pass the time.” Volstagg sighed melodramatically. “You did not really think we would wish the child ill, did you?”

“No, just Loki.”

Fandral looked into his mug and to his dismay found that it was empty. “To be fair, yesterday was pretty impressive…I had not thought he was quite that powerful.”

“Nor frightening.” Sif added.

“Maybe…Maybe we should ask him about it some time? I would certainly feel safer in battle knowing that was able to back me up.”

“It was not exactly controlled.”

“No, but he might get better with practice.”

“We will ask him about it then. Tomorrow, though. I feel like another drink.”

“Yes, tomorrow.”

They all knew that it was extremely unlikely ‘tomorrow’ would ever happen, but it made them feel better about it. Chances were they would never like Loki, nor willingly wish to speak with him, but they didn’t truly wish him, or Evie for that matter, any harm. After all, everyone day-dreams about screwing over the people they don’t like.

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When the family trio left the library it was to discover that the Avengers were significantly depleted. Put another way, Fury, Steve and Natasha had decided to bugger off back home.

After seriously quizzing Hawkeye about this, Tony determined that it was less ‘Fury, Steve and Natasha’ and far more ‘Fury issuing demands like a diva’. Apparently there had been a mission due and Fury had intended to be back on Earth long ago. As it was he’d been on Asgard way longer than intended and so to compromise had taken Steve and Natasha with him to help out. As far as Clint was aware, they had to steal some data file off of a ship – although the master archer definitely had his nose in a sling from not being asked to join the team too so hadn’t bothered to listen to much more than that.

To be honest, Tony was slightly put out too when he heard that because A) They hadn’t bothered to say goodbye or anything and B) When it came to getting hold of data through illicit means, he
was certainly the master around here. They could have at least asked for some advice or something.

However, it didn’t take long for them to both stop grousing after Clint mentioned that he thought Tony was looking different, and asked if he’d changed his hair.

“Dye, maybe? I think you’ve lost some of the grey.” He surveyed the inventor critically, with the eye of someone used to spotting every little detail. “No, you’ve lost all your grey, and believe me, there was more than you’d like to think. What did you do? Magic hair-formula?”

“Something like that.” Tony grinned, wide, and watched as his friend’s gaze was drawn to the corners of his mouth.

“It’s more than just hair; you’ve got rid of some wrinkles, what’ve you been up to? I feel like hell after yesterday and you’re fresh as a daisy! No way is that fair! You’re like fifteen years older than me!”

“Oi! Nowhere near that much!”

“Seriously though man, what have you done?!” By this point Clint was actively circling him and even went so far as to poke him quite hard in the chest.

“Ow! The hell, Clint?!”

“Well, the reactor’s still there at least.”

“I could have just told you that!” However, Tony couldn’t keep the huge smile off of his face.

“I must admit I was worried about you after yesterday – I think we all were! What with the heart thing and all. But you look fine! Better than fine – so what gives?”

So Tony sat him down and explained all.

It…took some explaining. To begin with Clint thought he was taking the piss.

After nearly half an hour, a lot of expletives and both men deciding that strong alcohol was necessary, Tony managed to get the crux of the situation across. To be honest, he could barely process it himself. It was very much a case of emotionally shutting down on the whole thing. Last night he’d been struggling to understand that he was going to die in a day or so, now he had to come to terms with the idea of eternity.

It was going from one extreme to the other really. How does the human mind process going from imminent death to living forever? It would have been bad enough had he had a normal life-span – but he’d been dying for years now, and had accepted the fact.

Clint seemed to recognise this.

“Do you need to go and talk to Bruce or something?”

“He’s not that kind of doctor, remember?”

“Well, from the PTSD look you’ve got going right now, I’d say any doctor is better than no doctor.”

“I’m fine.”
“No, you’re teetering on the edge of a psychotic breakdown. You need to talk to your crazy boyfriend.”

Tony looked down at his hands, which were shaking. “Yeah, maybe I need some time to process all of this. Man, last night I had a life expectancy of two days and now…”

“Now you’re in for the long haul.”

“…Yeah…” Tony glanced back up at him. “Actually, I forgot to mention, you could be too, if you want. There was enough there for all of us puny mortals.” He managed a weak grin. “The Immortal Avengers; has a good ring to it, don’t you think?”

“I’m sorry, what?”

“I’m serious; there’s enough for us all. Although I think Bruce and Steve are kinda already immortal. And Thor of course.”

“Jesus! You’re serious?! You want to, and can, make us all live for ever?”

“It’s up to you guys. I’d figured you’d want to talk to Nat about it, but she’s buggered off back to Earth so that’ll have to wait.”

“Does the stuff have a Best Before?”

“Doubt it.”

“Then I’m gonna really need to think about that.”

Tony smiled wryly. “I didn’t get much of a chance – it was swig or die really. But, yeah, think on it.”

He left Clint standing like a statue mouthing ‘immortal’ to himself.

“Left foot. Oh goodness, you really are hopeless, you weren’t simply being modest!”

“I did say!”

“Left foot! Do I need to paint it bright yellow or something?!”

Tony entered Loki’s rooms to the sounds of laughter and Evie’s near-hysterical giggles.

“Oh my God! This is ridiculous! How do you people do this?!”

“By using the correct feet!”

He rounded the doorway into the main living space to find his partner and daughter in fits of laughter, attempting to maintain what looked like a ballroom hold. Evie was evidently failing magnificently, and was only upright because of Loki’s hand on her back as she giggled helplessly.

“Tony, how in the Norns did we manage to produce a child who cannot tell left from right?!” The trickster’s voice was one of stern disapproval, but his broad grin gave away the humour in the situation.

“What part of ‘I can’t dance’ didn’t you get?”
“I assumed you were being modest! This is one of the simplest dances in Asgard!”

“Well I can’t do it!” Evie collapsed back onto one of the couches, still laughing. “This is not going to happen.”

“It is not as difficult as you are making it out to be!” Loki held his hand out towards Tony, who looked at it like it was a primed bomb. “Come here; let us see what you make of it.”

“Uh, I don’t dance.”

“You are consorting with a Prince of Asgard; you are going to have to dance.” Said Prince didn’t give his partner much of an option, simply grabbing Tony by the hand and pulling him into a tight dance-hold.

“I don’t know what I’m doing!”

“Just follow.”

To be fair, the dance that Evie had found so difficult was very similar to a waltz, at least to someone like Tony who knew very little about classical dancing. He could grind like a champ, but ballroom was not his forte. However, the steps were far faster than he was expecting so when Loki began moving he tripped over his own feet.

“So this is where our daughter gets it from!”

“Hey, I can do this!” Tony pulled back enough to be able to see their feet and attempt to mirror what Loki was doing. That was easier said than done when he was spun out and away from his partner, so that he didn’t have anything to copy. He was so focused on his feet that when he was suddenly pulled back in he managed to punch himself in the face.

“Oh my God, Dad!” Evie began laughing even harder. “That takes some skills!”

The inventor pulled away from Loki to gingerly cup his nose. “Jesus! Am I bleeding?”

“Only a bit.” Loki was laughing as he pulled Tony’s hands out of the way to see to the nose-bleed. “I take it all back, Evie; you are a million times better at this than your Father.” He tapped Tony’s nose once with his finger, eliciting a drama-queen-like ‘ow’ from the man, before the flow of blood slowed. “Never mind, I shall just have to forgo dancing since my family seem incapable.”

“Dance with Thor, I’m sure he’d be thrilled.”

“You jest, and yet it is true.” Loki said with an affected sigh. He waved his hand to vanish the rest of the blood on Tony’s face. “There we go, how does that feel?”

“Oh I suppose I’ll live.” Stark couldn’t keep up the pretend sulk when Loki leant in and kissed him on the nose.

“You two are adorable.” Evie’s statement was accompanied by the shutter noise of her phone’s camera. “That one’s for FaceBook.” Tony didn’t comment since he knew that she didn’t actually have FaceBook, or Twitter. Evie was sensible enough to know that as the daughter of Tony Stark anything she did was scrutinised to death by the media and it just wasn’t worth giving them ammo. “Really though, it’s sickening how cute you are.”
“I dislike the term ‘cute’.” Loki said with visible distaste.

“Adorable? Sweet? Darling? I have any number of adjectives.”

“I am the dark God of Chaos and Mischief, I refuse to acknowledge those sort of descriptions.”

“Nah,” Evie took another photo. “You’re adorable. Hate to break any illusions you may have of yourself, Möðhy, but you’re adorable.”

Tony laughed. “Never argue with The Birdy.” He slung an arm around Loki’s waist. “She always knows best.”

The teenager’s own laughter died to a fond smile as she watched her parents together. “I do always know best. And right now you two have that goofy look that says I’m going to end up with siblings.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Oh please, I know what it means when two people look at each other like that. All gooey-eyed. Totally getting siblings.” She frowned when Loki’s and Tony’s smiles simultaneously dropped. “What?”

Tony nudged his partner slightly. “Well, might as well get this conversation over with sooner rather than later. Do you want me to, or are you okay?”

“I’ll do it.” Loki said softly. He left his partner’s side to go and sit next down next to Evie on the sofa.

“Why do I have the feeling this won’t be a happy talk?”

“Because you’re perceptive.”

Evelyn tilted her head, scrutinising the trickster. “I’m…not getting siblings, am I?” Her voice had gone quiet now, the humour entirely gone. “I am perceptive, and you look sad.”

“Did you want siblings?”

“Yeah, I guess I thought about it. Would’ve been nice to be a big sister. But…that’s not going to happen, is it?”

“I’m afraid not.” Loki drew one foot up onto the cushions so he could lean on his knee. “I will not go into details; you’re a smart girl with an active imagination. Needless to say, the chitauri were an evil race that deserved everything they got. They were less than kind whilst I was their prisoner and as a result of their…mistreatment, shall we call it, I am no longer able to have children.”

Evie’s expression was stuck somewhere between horror and sadness. “So…Does that mean you can’t conceive, or can’t hold to full-term? Because things can be done about those! There’s IVF and stuff!”

“Birdy—”

Loki held up a hand to stop Tony’s admonishment before it started. “It is not as simple as that, my dear. I cannot conceive because I do not have a reproductive system left. The medics did what they could, but there are some things that cannot be healed.”

The girl was silent for a long moment, watching her mother’s expression. From the overbright
gleam to Loki’s eyes it would be fair to say that there were possibly tears there.

“Did you want more kids?” She asked finally.

“I never had much chance to give it a thought, but in time I most likely would have done, yes.”

Evie smiled sadly and wriggled up close to wrap her arms around Loki’s waist. “Don’t worry, Möðhy, I’ll have kids when I’m older; you’ll have tons of grandchildren to spoil and none of the added fuss. Just all the fun.”

She wisely didn’t comment when she felt tears soak into her hair.

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“She’s happy with just having a big brother, you know. She adores Sleipnir already, and they’ve only known each other for a few days.” Tony said quietly. His words were somewhat lost in the darkness of the bedroom, but he felt Loki’s warm weight shift slightly.

“I know.” The answer was short, but the soft voice stopped it from being curt.

“I think she’s worried she upset you.”

“I’ll reassure her tomorrow. It’s simply a sensitive subject.”

Tony wanted to hold his lover, but he was stuck lying on his stomach, Loki partly draped over him and had no way to roll over. He settled for turning his head enough to find a bare shoulder to kiss.

“As I say, Evie is thrilled to have a big brother. And Sleipnir’s wonderful with her.”

“He’s missed having younger siblings around.” Loki’s voice was a sad sigh, and Tony wished that there was light enough to see the trickster’s expression.

“He’s your eldest, right?”

“Correct.”

“Do you…do you want to talk about anything?”

Loki’s next sigh sounded more exasperated this time. “What is there to talk about? I cannot have more children, even if I wanted to and there is nothing I can do to fix that. The one thing I actually enjoyed about being neither one gender nor the other, and even that has been taken away from me. What else is there to say?”

“You haven’t mentioned this earlier.”

“I was somewhat preoccupied by the chitauri, and you, and Evie and trying to sort everything out. There wasn’t all that much time to really assess just what I am going to have to live with.”

Tony took a few moments before answering. “You’re going to have to live with me, too.” He felt a hand find his, fingers lacing through his own.

“I know. That is what makes all of these things bearable.”

“We could always adopt, you know, if we decide we really do want more little horrors. Or find a surrogate mother.”
Loki laughed softly. “It’s more than just that, Tony. Call it a female thing if you must, but there is no feeling in the world like carrying your own child for nine months, feeling it grow, begin to move, that feeling of life inside you. Yes, there are other ways to have children, but I need to mourn what I have lost.”

“That’s…yeah, that’s fair enough. God, I’m sorry, you don’t deserve all of this!”

“Life is a bitch. Never take it for anything less, and then it can’t surprise you.” Loki nudged his nose into the hollow between Tony’s shoulder-blades. “Yes, there have been some terrible moments these past years, but none of that matters when I know that I have you by my side. I can get through anything if I have you.”

Tony wriggled and managed to roll over so that he could stare at the trickster draped over him. “Hey, I stormed all the way across the known universe to get you back, don’t talk like I’m about to vanish right out from underneath you.”

“I’m not! I just…It is hard to come to terms with everything that has happened recently. You shall have to forgive me if I cling.” Loki traced around Tony’s goatee with his finger, then smiled slightly. “Your wrinkles really have lessened.”

“I didn’t have that many to begin with!”

“There were enough, and I loved each and every one of them. However, you will not have to worry about getting any more.”

Tony laughed quietly. “That hasn’t really sunk in yet. Phew! Immortality! What happens if we get fed up with each other two hundred years down the line?”

“We will cross that bridge when we come to it. If we ever come to it.”

“Evie will keep us on track.”

“That she will. And I’ll talk to her tomorrow; reassure her that I am not upset. It had never occurred to me that she might have wanted to be a big sister. I would have tried to talk to her about it sooner.”

“It’s not like there’s really been the time or place.”

“I suppose not.”

Tony reached up to brush Loki’s hair back so that he could see the trickster’s face better in the dim light of the arc reactor. “Can I ask a question? Since neither of us seem to be anywhere near wanting to actually sleep.”

“Go on then.”

“What happened to your other three children? I obviously know about Sleipnir, I read all the myths on Merlin, and Thor told me about the twins. What about the other three? Hel, Fenrir and….Gor…Yor…”

“Jormungandr.”

“Yeah, uh…what you just said.” When Loki paused for slightly too long Tony quickly shook his head. “You don’t have to tell me, if it’s painful or something.”
“No…It is a painful subject, but you should probably hear the story at least once.” The prince rolled off of his partner to lie beside him, one hand still resting on top of the arc reactor. “Do you really want to hear this now?”

“Only if you’re comfortable in telling me.”

“No time like the present, I suppose.” Loki sighed heavily, staring up at the high ceiling. “Hel and Fenrir reside in Niflheimr together. It is the realm which Hel presides over – it also happens to be the one realm which I cannot reach. Jormungandr is on Earth, as the myth says.”

“Do you ever see them?”

“No. They detest me.” Loki heard the sharp intake of breath from his lover and shrugged slightly. “It is true, sadly. They would sooner kill me than speak to me.”

“What happened?” Tony asked quietly.

“I never quite rightly worked that out.” The trickster said softly. “They didn’t live with me and… oh it would just be simpler if I started from the beginning.”

“Usually the best place to start.”

“I had…a dalliance, a fling, with a woman called Angrboða. For my part it was simply an amusement, and I had assumed that it was for her too, but to my cost I was wrong.” He smiled wistfully. “She had magic, which was what drew my interest to begin with and we were very compatible personality-wise. However, at the time I was still young enough to want to please my Father, and I was well aware that I could never have a relationship with a view to marriage. She, however, refused to see my point of view when it came to that and spent much of our time together trying to convince me otherwise.”

“Pushy girlfriends, oh boy I have been there!”

“Quite.” Loki laughed. “However, I doubt any of your girlfriends had magic at their disposal. Angrboða had very advanced knowledge of various medical spells and used one without my knowledge to conceive. Usually we both had contraception charms up, but she rendered them useless without my knowledge. Needless to say, magic and fertilisation do not mix well, and it resulted in triplets. I begged her not to go through with the pregnancy – which I am ashamed of now – but she refused because she saw it as a way of tying us together.”

“Bit of a dick move really, I’ve had a couple of ladies try the same with me; although they faked their pregnancies.”

“Unfortunately I didn’t have that reassurance.” The trickster sighed heavily. “She had the children and it was obvious that the magic used to conceive them had had an…unusual effect, much as I had seen when I had Sleipnir. Hel was a normal little girl, but Fenrir was a wolf and Jormungandr a serpent, as your myths say. There was no way I could let anyone know about them, but Angrboða had a place on Muspelheim and she took the children there on the condition that I visited regularly. I believe she had convinced herself that I would eventually either fall in love with her too, or feel obliged to marry her.”

“Did that happen?”

“Not as such. We were very happy together, despite the secrecy, but there was little beyond affection on my part, although I adored my children. Eventually, when the triplets were the human equivalent of about fifteen, Angrboða and I had a huge row about it and she attacked me. At the
time I didn’t know what the spell was, and it was only when I had stormed off that I realised she had managed to impregnate me.”

Tony half sat up with a jerk. “Oh! Merlin, right? That’s how it all joins up!”

“Yes, that was Merlin.” Loki sounded amused at his lover’s reaction. “Once I realised the situation I was in I went to Midgard to have the baby. I was there for about, oh I don’t know, sixteen years? He was an adult by their standards when I left, so probably about sixteen years. During that time I hadn’t had chance to go back and see Angrboða and the other children, but I had thought through our future.”

He paused for so long that Tony had to prompt him. “And…?”

“And I wanted to marry her.” The whisper was tiny. “I don’t think I ever truly loved her, not like I love you, but she loved me, and I was very fond of her so who knows? It may well have worked. We never had that chance though.”

“What happened?”

“I don’t know. I arrived to find the entire house in flames. There were signs of a fight, a terrible one, and Angrboða had lost. I never found out what had happened or why, but Boða was dead and I don’t know why. There were hardly enough remains left to bury, but at the time I was only worrying about my children. The entire place was an inferno, but I was adept with water spells and made a path through.”

His voice was beginning to audibly shake and Tony reached out to grasp his arm. “Hey, you don’t need to continue if you don’t want to.”

“I have started, I should finish. I found the three of them scattered throughout the house. It was obvious that whatever battle had taken place, they had tried to help their mother. I…I thought they were dead too when I first found them. Have you ever seen burn injuries, Tony?”

The direct question took the human by surprise. “Burns? Yeah…Yeah I guess I have. There have been some missions and such – a forest fire most notably.”

“Imagine that, and then worse. My children were creatures of magic, and like me could survive a lot; more than you would be used to a person surviving. Even so, I thought I was going to lose them.” Loki scuffed a hand across his eyes with a shuddering breath. “I took the three of them back to Midgard. I had heard – during my stay – of a place there that could heal all ills and grant everlasting life to mortals. It’s where I went yesterday so that I could save you. I found it – which took some doing – and the guardian there agreed to save my children.”

“That’s…it’s good, right?”

“Yes. Yes it was.” Loki sounded like it was anything but. “To begin with. Whilst you were healed instantly, it takes longer for an immortal magic-user. I don’t know what had happened, or what she saw, but upon waking Hel took one look at me and…well, she went berserk. I never had a chance to get a word in edgeways…”

“How do you mean?” Tony realised that he almost didn’t want to know.

“She thought it was me! She thought I had attacked them! I have no idea why she could think that! There was never even a chance for me to defend myself!” Loki shook his head hopelessly. “My own daughter was terrified of me. I have never to this day found out who did attack them or why, but for whatever reason, Hel thought it was me. Her mother and I had argued and fought when we
last saw each other, but I just could not comprehend her hatred. All I can assume is that their attacker used magic, that’s the only way she could have thought I did it.”

“Couldn’t you tell her it wasn’t you?”

“She never gave me a chance…Fenrir backed her up – he always followed her anywhere – and I was just lost!” Loki shrugged hopelessly. “They were still so injured, I didn’t know what to do. Hel had been burnt all down one side of her body, she had lost an eye, the burns went bone-deep, and yet she still had the strength to stand there and vilify me for something I had had no part in. How could I defend myself when she was that injured? Fenrir was just as bad; he had had the majority of his fur burnt off, I could see his teeth through the holes in his jaw! It was awful!”

“What about Jormungandar?”

The mispronunciation made Loki smile slightly. “Jormungandar, honestly Tony, it is not that hard to say. He was on my side. Of the three he was the most injured, but that didn’t stop him from leaping to my defence. Literally. He confronted Hel, which really only resulted in him hurting himself even more. When Hel realised that to attack me was to hurt her brother she simply up and vanished, taking Fenrir with her.”

“To Niflheimr…no, I got this! Nif...Nifil...Nifil...Nifil...”

“Niflheimr.”

“Yeah, there. They went there?”

“Yes. I don’t know what it is about Hel’s particular brand of magic that lends itself to ruling the realms of the dead, but from what I know she does a good job.”

“Is Fenrir still with her?”

“As far as I am aware.”

“And have you seen them since?”

“No.”

“Damn…” Tony looked horrified in the pale light of the arc reactor. “That’s awful! I’m so sorry! What happened to…the snake?”

“His wounds were too great. He just wasn’t healing. Eventually I realised that all I could do for him was make him comfortable and allow him to mend in his own time.” The prince rolled onto his side so that they were face-to-face again. “He needed somewhere cold and dark so I took him to the safest place I could think of that is cold, dark and unlikely to be discovered.”

The pause made Tony realise that his partner was expecting him to work it out himself. Well, he knew the myths said that the serpent circled the world, and whilst that wasn’t physically possible, there were some things in the story that might be accurate.

“Mariana’s Trench, right?”

Loki smiled. “The pressure is no problem to him. It is still so unexplored down there, and I imagine he has now grown so huge that even if anyone went down there they would assume that he was an unusual rock formation. I haven’t seen him since, so I believe that he sleeps still. I hope that one day when he has finally healed he will reach out to me and I can see him again.”
Tony shook his head disbelievingly. “Man, the shit you’ve had to put up with….”

“This is what happens when you live forever; there is time for a lot to happen.”

“You don’t sound…particularly sad.”

Loki smiled at him fondly. “It’s been nearly three thousand years – you learn to deal with things in that amount of time.”

“But still…I couldn’t cope if Evie suddenly decided to hate my guts for no good reason!”

“I had Jormungandr to worry about. He kept me focussed and I was able to cope with everything that had happened. And afterwards I was able to go back and see Merlin again so that helped too.”

“What happened to Merlin? He just sort of vanished in our legends.”

“Oh he’s still there. I used to visit occasionally, but he likes his independence. Last time we saw each other he had turned his hand to storytelling; mostly using his knowledge of the other realms.”

“Anything I might have read?”

“Oh I don’t know.” Loki’s grin finally warmed. “Elves, Dwarves, Men, Dragons, Midgard…”

It took a moment, and then Tony slammed his head into the pillow. “Oh for God’s sake! Are you seriously telling me he wrote Lord of the Rings!! Merlin wrote Lord of the Rings! What, was Tolkien just a pseudonym?”

“Indeed.”

“It’s got to the point where I wonder why these things keep surprising me. Next you’ll be introducing me to Jesus.”

“I never met Jesus, I’m afraid.”

“Probably a good thing; Cap’s still quite religious. You’ll have to introduce Evie and I to Merlin at some point though – the myths are good, but it would be great to actually meet him in person.”

Tony noted that his partner was looking a lot more cheerful and smiled fondly. “And thank you for telling me all of that, I know it must have been tough to talk about it.”

Loki studied the man’s face for a few moments. “You need to know these things. If we are to work as a family, you should know the things that have made me what I am.”

“Is that the Loki way of saying ‘these are my triggers, step away from my triggers’?”

That made the trickster laugh. “Stay away from mine and I shall stay away from yours.” He leant in and kissed the tip of Tony’s nose. “I do not think we really need to worry about it. We will be fine.”

“You think so? Our track record says this is going to be one eventful relationship.”

“First date in Stuttgart?”

“Nothing says First Impression better than blasting you onto your arse accompanied by an epic rock soundtrack.”

“I still believe that the special moment we shared with your window was the moment when sparks
“I don’t think you should use the phrase ‘sparks flew’ in the same context as that battle...Lots of sparks flew, and not exactly all the right ones.”

“The right ones were in there though.” As if to prove his point a sparkle of purple erupted from his fingers, lighting up the tiny space between them. “Somewhere in all that mess and all that horror, something went right, didn’t it?”

“Yeah. God knows how, since it’s us and all, and nothing ever seems to go right for us, but something did then. Kinda glad it only took one world domination attempt, though.”

Loki laughed and kissed him. “Well, if you ever need me to try it again I am sure I can dig up another army from somewhere.”

“I have an entire arsenal of Ironman suits if that helps?”

“Do not tempt me.”

“Tempt you? Hell, I need people constantly reminding me every day not to do it myself. I practically own the world as it is.” Tony suddenly sat bolt upright, both hands over his mouth. “Oh my God!!”

“What?!” Loki raised himself up onto his elbows in alarm. “What is it?!?”

“I’m healed, right? No more heart problems?”

“Yes you are healed…”

“I can use the Ironman suit again!”

Tony’s statement, spoken like a papal mandate, didn’t seem to have the effect he expected as Loki just blinked at him.

“Do you not use it anyway?”

“No! I’ve not been allowed to – it was far too risky! Coming to rescue you was the first time I’ve worn it in the past five years! Infact, I’ve worn it more since coming to Asgard than I have since my accident.”

Loki seemed surprised at the revelation. “I did not know that you couldn’t use it. What have you been doing these past years then?”

“Remote control.” Tony looked like the Virgin Mary had appeared before him, his eyes full of the sort of zeal that was usually only found around religions. “I’ve got my suit back!”

There was very little warning before the man simply launched himself on top of his partner, laughing. “I can use my suit again!”

The surprise attack made Loki laugh too, feeling Tony’s weight settle over him. It was quite heartening that by now it didn’t hurt – he was finally nearly fully healed. The pure joy on Stark’s face was contagious, and definitely a balm to chase away the dark feelings left behind by the memories the trickster had dug up.

“You are an idiot.”
“I believe the phrase is; Your idiot.”

“Oh I suppose I can put up with you.”

“You make it sound like such a chore.” Tony leant in and, rather than kissing as was expected, decided to lick the tip of Loki’s nose instead.

“What are you doing?” The prince laughed, pretending to try and push his lover off. “Humans are disgusting!”

“Don’t give me that; you had sex with a horse!”

“Is that going to haunt me my entire life?!”

“Pretty much.”

Loki shrugged. “Well, at least it was good then.”

“Oh my God!” Tony started laughing again, burying his head in his lover’s shoulder. “That is awful! I’m going to be spending the rest of my life trying to live up to your one-night-stand with a horse!”

“Wild stallion, please.”

“Oh, My, God!”

“Are you crying?”

“Yeah…” The man rolled back onto the mattress, wiping away tears of laughter. “Oh, ow, I think I pulled something…”

“You are impossible!”

“…It’s like, three in the morning, we are never going to get up tomorrow.”

Loki burst into fresh chuckles. “I am rather well known for not surfacing until gone noon, no-one will really comment.”

“Awesome!” Tony propped himself up on one elbow with a hopeful grin. “Does that mean we have time for sex?”

“And it seems that the romance has already died in this relationship.”

“If you want romance you’ll have to wait until we’re back in the tower and I’ve got all my tech. Then I’ll knock your socks off in the romance-stakes!”

“Well I suppose that shall have to do.” Loki laughed, leaning in to kiss his partner.

MWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMW

“I still do not understand why he cannot talk to women.” Sleipnir was lying down on the rug in Evie’s room, his half-sister sat down so that she was using him as a cushion. Her StarkPad was propped up on her knees so that they could both see the screen.

“Because it’s a cute little personality trait that moves the plot forward.”
Sleipnir wrinkled his nose. “No, I do not get it.” He watched the characters on the screen for a few more moments. “And why is that one acting so childishly?”

“Look, if you can’t cope with the Big Bang Theory, I can find something else to watch. I’ve got most of the Netflix library saved on here.” Evie stopped the episode they were struggling through and began hunting through the list of other shows and films. “What do you feel like? Action? Horror?”

“What do you mean by horror?”

“Scary movies, mostly. I’m a wuss so I’ll probably spend the whole thing hidden behind a pillow to be honest.”

“I am not very good with frightening stories. I can ride full charge into battle and trample people to death, but I do not like scary stories.”

“High five!” Evie held up a hand and Sleipnir lifted a leg so he could gently knock his hoof against her palm.

“What does Midgard have by way of love stories? Romances?”

“Seriously? Well, I’m not showing you Twilight, that’s for sure.” The girl sorted the library by genre and looked down the list of RomComs that had shown up. “Do you like bad singing? Mama Mia’s a hoot if you do. Or Bridesmaids is good. Love Actually makes me cry every time…uh…27 Dresses? That’s not so bad if you don’t mind idiotic bimbos…”

“Alright, what about tragedies then?”

Evie grinned. “Les Mis it is!” She searched the film by name and brought it up on screen. “Not bad singing, some eye-candy in the form of Hugh Jackman and Anne Hathaway has, like, the best song ever! I challenge you not to cry!”

“I do not know those people, but alright, challenge accepted!”

“…Can you even cry?”

“I have tear ducts, yes.”

“Cool…” Evie pressed play and Sleipnir jumped a little at the sudden opening blast of trumpets then settled back with his head resting on the girl’s shoulder. The sound system on the StarkPad was excellent, as should be expected of Tony’s work and the grand opening song still held a pretty big impact even when on such a small screen.

“I do not understand, is he saying he did not do the crime he is imprisoned for?”

“No, he did it, but to save a child from starving.”

“And that is considered a crime?”

“It was then.”

Sleipnir managed to be quiet for a whole ten minutes before;

“So why did he tear the paper up? I thought that was important.”

“He’s expressing his freedom and throwing away his old life.”
“How did he get so rich so quickly?”

“Oh my God you are difficult to watch a movie with!”

“But how did he?”

“Are they prostitutes?! Should you be watching this if it has prostitutes?”

“What did she even die of?!”

“Shut up!”

“That woman should not be allowed to look after small children. Or any children. Or anything in general.”

“That’s Helena Bonhem-Carter, she’s awesome!”

“France is a huge country; how do two men manage to keep running into one another?”

“You are ruining this film!”

“I mean it, how do they keep finding each other?!”

“How did he find Marius?! There must have been hundreds of barricades in the city and he just so happened to pick the right one?!”

Evie glared at her brother irritably. “I thought staying up to watch movies would be fun. More fool me.”

“Oh look, they are all dead. I am so surprised.”

“Do you want me to stop the film?”

“No, I am enjoying this.”

“So let me get this straight…” Sleipnir said slowly as the credits rolled. “Everyone dies or is completely and utterly miserable, apart from the crooks, who seem to get away scot-free? That does not seem right.”

“Welcome to Revolutionary France. From what I can tell, it sucked.” Evie flicked the screen back to the film library again. “Did Moðhy ever go there?”
“Probably, he has been about a bit.”

“What about you?” Evie looked up at the horse. “Where’ve you been in human history?”

Sleipnir snorted in amusement – an apt noise for a horse. “Apart from Scadinavian myth? The last time I was on Earth it was still World War One.”

“Oh yeah, I remember Möðhy mentioning that. Didn’t you step on a caltrop?”

“Oh yes.”

The girl winced. She had read up on the First World War, and knew exactly the damage a caltrop could do. The evil little pieces of metal were shaped like stars so that no matter how they landed they always had one spike pointed up and if they were stepped on would go straight up into a horse’s hoof and into bone. Sleipnir was lucky he had had Loki there to look after him – caltrop damage usually resulted in the horse being put down no questions asked.

“That must have…hurt?”

Sleipnir looked at her like she was stupid. “No! Really?! A three inch spike going through my foot? Not at all, I hardly knew it was there!”

“Alright, alright, sarcasm noted. Where else have you been?”

“What? World War One was not enough? How about Agincourt?”

“As in ‘we few, we happy few, we band of brothers’?”

“I do not know what that is. I mean as in the battle of Agincourt, French against English, overwhelming odds, the archers saved the day for the English.”

Evie grinned. “What side were you and Möðhy on?”

“German mercenary for the English. I actually did not receive any injuries in that encounter, although Möðir took a lance through his shoulder.”

“Owwwwww…”

“Yes, he was not particularly happy about it.” Sleipnir nudged her in the shoulder. “What about you? Have you seen much of the world?”

The girl shrugged. “Not really. It’s hard to go out much when your Dad’s a super-rich, super-famous superhero. The media hound me as much as they do him. More really, since they know I don’t have any firepower on me. I’ve done all the Disney parks in America, and the one in Paris; I’m trying to persuade Dad to take me to Tokyo next birthday, but other than that I’ve not really done much.”

“Never mind. You are young and will live forever, plenty of time to get out there and see the universe. I will ask Möðir if I can take you to Vanaheim sometime.”

“Roadtrip, cool!”

“So…can we watch something else?”

“It’s, like, 3 AM.”
“And? I have never seen television – or anything similar – before, I believe I have some catching up to do.”

Evie laughed and began scanning through the library again. “Frozen? See if you can spot some similarities with Möðhy and Elsa.” She began humming *Let It Go* as she brought the film up. “And no ruining this one. Yes it has plot holes, and I don’t care, it’s awesome! Not quite as awesome as Tangled, but still awesome!”

“Alright, I shall try to refrain.”

…….

“How by the Norns is she meant to learn to control it if she is told to hide it away?!”

*Sleipnir!!*

“Okay, okay, sorry.”

…….

“She would have both hypothermia and frostbite by now. And that horse needs a blanket in those temperatures.”

“You are impossible!”

…….

“I am sorry, but there is no way they would have survived that fall!”

“…If you keep talking I will turn this thing off.”

…….

*The evil lying bastard!!*”

“Yeah, I’ll give you that one…”

…….

“That is so unhygienic! Get that snowman a new nose!”

“I am going to cut you in a minute!”

“But that moose ate it! And then regurgitated it, that’s disgusting!”

“It’s a fucking cartoon, Sleipnir!”

“Alright, alright…”

The horse actually managed to stay quiet for the last few moments until the credits began to scroll up the screen. Then he rested his head on Evie’s shoulder.

“Hey.”

“What?”

“Do you want to build a snowman?”
“…I regret ever introducing you to modern technology.”
It was well into the afternoon when a loud thumping on the door finally made Loki roll over with a groan and try to pull the duvet up over his head. He was far too comfortable to wake up properly and burrowing under the covers was simply sending him straight back to sleep.

Or at least it would if the noise at the door would stop.

He vaguely felt the mattress move next to him, and a few moments later heard Tony’s voice out in the small hallway. It sounded like it was Thor.

Go away Thor.

Tucked into the warm burrow of his bed it was very easy to ignore the conversation just on the cusp of hearing and the prince was steadily drifting off again. He didn’t remember what he had been dreaming of, but it couldn’t have been bad since he was feeling far too comfortable and contented. It was nice to know that he’d managed a nightmare-free night for once.

The mattress dipped again beside him and he felt a hand on his head, running through his hair.

“Hey love, I know you’re awake.”

“Dunt wanna be…”

“That was Thor – he wants to know if we want lunch.”

“Lunch?”

“Well, it is about two in the afternoon. Evie hasn’t surfaced yet either.”

Loki rolled over to see Stark sitting next to him on the bed, and pulled the covers down enough to talk properly. “No?” He yawned, and stretched. “Is she usually a late riser?”

“Very much so.” Tony’s gaze followed the movement, then riveted to the spot where his partner’s sleep-shirt had ridden up to expose a thin strip of flesh.

Loki realised what had drawn the man’s attention and rolled his eyes. “I feel somewhat like I am being objectified here.”

“What can I say? You’re sexy and you know it.” Tony grinned, completely unashamed.

“Hmm.” The trickster rolled over onto his stomach, and buried his face into the pillow again. “Did you say it was two o’clock?”

“There abouts, I’ve been up for a few hours – I don’t need much sleep. Why? Did you want lunch?”
“Not particularly.” Loki tilted his head to glance up at the man, then raised the edge of the covers. “If Evie is not awake I see no need for us to get up.”

“Seriously? You really are lazy, aren’t you.”

“I believe I have earned the right.”

“Fine, fair enough.” Tony slipped back in under the blankets, although propped himself up on one elbow. “I don’t have your hibernating bear tendencies, though, can we at least talk?”

“Talk? Stark, I am still half asleep, completely relaxed and thoroughly at your mercy and you want to talk? Are you feeling alright?”

“I, huh? Okay…What?”

“Why not?”

“Just wasn’t expecting you to proposition me whilst still a pile of sleepy goo.”

“Best time, is it not?” Loki grinned up at him, eyes still half lidded as he pillowed his head on his folded arms.

“I’m beginning to think it might be.” Tony rested his hands on his partner’s shoulders, digging his knuckles into the muscles there. He grinned when the trickster sighed and burrowed deeper into the pillow. “Did you at least sleep well?”

“Mmhm. Like a log.”

“Glad to hear it.” He kneaded his fingers into Loki’s shoulders again, then ran his hands down his lover’s sides. It was less effective than it could have been given that Loki was wearing a shirt, but the prince certainly didn’t seem to be complaining, so Tony repeated the motion.

Loki turned his head so that he wasn’t suffocating himself on his own folded arms and closed his eyes with a grin.

“You look so smug.”

“Do I?”

“Yup. Waaaay too smug.” Tony accompanied the elongated ‘way’ by running his hands all the way down his partner’s spine, digging into each bump of the vertebrae. Loki was pretty relaxed, so there was no resistance.

“Hmm, maybe that is because you are pampering me.”

“That’d do it.” The man spent a few moments kneading the muscles in the small of the prince’s back. He was good at massages and he knew it – he liked being perfect at things, or at least exceedingly good, and this was something he was extremely good at. Loki certainly seemed to think so. “You know what would make this even better?”

“Hmm?”

“No clothes.”

Loki snorted with laughter. For a moment it didn’t look like he was going to reply to that, but his lack of reaction was tempered as there was a sudden shower of green sparks, and his sleepwear
vanished. As did Tony’s.

“Hey, I didn’t mean mine too!”

“You will have to get naked at some point.”

“…Fair point.” The man laughed, pressing a kiss against Loki’s shoulder-blade. “Will you be okay if I lean over you like this?”

The fact that he’d thought to ask made Loki open his eyes and smile up at him. “I should be fine now that you have warned me.” He closed his eyes again.

There was a moment, just a single tiny moment when he tensed up as he felt Tony move to sit on his upper thighs, but when the man started kneading his back again the sudden panic vanished. If Tony noticed, he didn’t comment.

Actually, Loki couldn’t remember when he’d last had a partner do this for him. Certainly Asgard had facilities that were the equivalent of human spas, and he had been there often enough – especially when injured. However, it is always a much different experience when it is someone you love. The slide of Tony’s hands over his skin was intoxicating.

“Don’t you fall asleep on me.”

“Trust me, I am far from asleep.” His voice was hazy, but he meant it – pliant and relaxed were different from sleeping. He felt the weight on his thighs shift as Tony moved back to work on the base of his spine again.

“Hey, do you remember when you dragged me off to Claridges that time?”

“Mmm, that was a long time ago. I believe I tied you down, did I not?”

“You certainly did.” Tony’s hands had moved to cup his buttocks, moulding and squeezing the warm flesh. “You did something else too...”

“I did? I can’t say that I recall all the details now.” The trickster was so relaxed that he hadn’t quite taken stock of what his lover was doing.

“Does this jog your memory?”

Tony would have grinned at his partner’s surprised yelp, but couldn’t because his mouth was somewhat occupied. Loki groaned, deep in the back of his throat, subconsciously moving his legs wider apart as he felt his lover’s tongue circle slowly around his entrance again, the man’s hands holding his hips steady.

It was something that Stark hadn’t done in a very long time, but had never shied away from. He lapped gently at the tight muscle, dipping in to each crease and tiny fold of skin, before laving the flat of his tongue along the pucker and up to taste the sweat beginning to pool in the small of his partner’s back. Drawing all the way back down again he opened his mouth to gently scrape his teeth across the sensitive area. Loki bucked up underneath him at the contact, a shrill whimper breaking from the trickster’s throat.

Tony tilted his head, his goatee chaffing along the insides of Loki’s thighs, and sealed his lips over the muscle, forming a tight vacuum. It was messy as hell as saliva slide down his chin and he loved it.
“To…ny…” Loki reared up from the mattress, arching his back and resting his forehead down on his arms. He allowed himself to be held still by Tony’s hands grasping his hips, pressing back into the contact. “Ahh…” It was such a deliciously dirty feeling; to be so known in such a deeply intimate manner. It was taking a lot of trust on his part to let Tony do this, and in a way it was knowing that he was trusting his partner in such a way that made it even more intense.

Tony broke contact with an obscene slurp, grinning as the prince whimpered and subconsciously tried to move back towards him.

“You still okay?”

“More than…” Loki’s voice was a breathless moan.

“Good good.” And the man dove right back in, making his partner yelp and buck back into him. The prince was relaxed and evidently enjoying it so Tony began increasing the pressure with his tongue, poking and prodding at the sensitive area. Loki had raised himself up onto his elbows, panting harshly. He was shivering, deep tremors running through his body as he moved and shifted.

And then he fell flat back against the mattress with a groan as the hot, insistent tongue finally wormed it’s way in, taking him apart with it. Tony was kissing him there like it was his mouth, hot and wet and seemingly reaching every nerve ending inside and out.

“Tony…Ah!”

“Still alright?” He pulled away to speak, and Loki snarled at him.

“Norns! I will tell you if I am not!”

“Fair enough.” The man went straight in for the kill this time, hands holding him wide open as the prince squirmed and writhed under the ministrations.

Then there was more pressure, a finger alongside the tongue, able to probe deeper and Loki found himself shaking from the intensity of it.

Stark pulled away, although his finger remained where it was, twisting and moving, the way already slicked with saliva. He pressed a kiss in the small of Loki’s back, before leaning back down to trace his tongue around the stretched hole, circling the rim surrounding his moving finger. Loki bucked up into the contact, making him chuckle. With the amount of mess he was making it was easy enough to slip a second finger in to join the first, drawing a sobbing moan from his partner as he crooked the two and brushed up against the magic spot he found first try.

Keeping both fingers moving at a steady pace the man lifted his head up and moved up his lover’s body to press kisses along Loki’s spine. He was aiming for an earlobe, but as he rested his weight across Loki’s back he felt the trickster suddenly freeze up underneath him.

“Loki?”

“Off!”

Tony didn’t question, didn’t even think. He simply moved like he was told to, rolling over onto one side so that he was next to the prince. The actions caused his fingers to slip free and the roll meant that he ended up with the hand coming to rest on Loki’s hip.

“Loki? Are you alright?”
The trickster was still shaking, but he had buried his head in his arms so that it was impossible to see his expression.

“Yes...? I think so...” He took a few deep breaths before raising his head to look at Tony. “Sorry, I’m sorry. Damnit! I was enjoying that!”

“Don’t apologise, what happened?”

Loki untangled one of his arms to brush the hair away from his eyes, a darker expression of anger crossing his face. “It was a memory – it overwhelmed me for a moment, when I felt you lean on me...”

“Sorry.”

“Not your fault – I did not believe I would be affected like that.”

Tony nodded in understanding – he knew what awkwardly placed flashbacks could be like. “What do you want to do?”

“Oh, continue certainly.” A grin banished the frown, looking much better with Loki’s flushed cheeks. “Do not think you will be allowed to leave me unsatisfied. Only...” He bit his lip thoughtfully for a moment, “Only, how about this?”

He rolled over onto his side so that his back was to the inventor’s chest and shifted back so that he was flush against Tony’s crotch.

“I can work with this, are you sure you can?”

“I am certain.” Loki reached back, grabbed hold of the man’s hand and squeezed it. When he let go slick oil dripped from Tony’s fingers. “There you go, I believe you were in the middle of something.”

“Have I ever mentioned how demanding you are?”

“I believe it is one of your favourite complaints...” Loki’s reply ended in a shaky sigh as Tony’s two fingers slid home again. He was lying on his right side, so pulled his left knee up to his chest to make the position easier for Tony to reach.

The man buried his face into his lover’s hair, breathing in deeply and inhaling the intoxicating smell of musk and sweat that overlay Loki’s usual more subtle scent as he continued to twist and scissor his fingers. The trickster was moving against him, all previous reticence gone now that things were back under his control. Tony grinned as he added a third finger and the prince let out a throaty cry, curling in on himself.

Loki was moving with the push and pull of the fingers, grinding back against Tony’s hand. He was always vocal in bed, and this time was no exception as he gasped and moaned unabashedly, tipping his head back into his partner’s shoulder as he felt teeth gently latch onto his ear lobe.

“God you’re gorgeous...” Tony’s heated whisper was accompanied by his spare hand wriggling under Loki’s body to grasp the prince’s erection, his grip warm and firm.

“Not...ah! Not so...bad yourself...” Loki reached back blindly to dig his fingers into the man’s hip. “Norns...You can...get on with it, I’m fine...”

“You sure?”
“Please!”

Tony slowly withdrew his fingers, eliciting a whimper from his partner in the process, and used the remaining oil on his hand to coat himself.

Loki forced himself to lie still, his nails digging into the flesh of Tony’s hip as he felt the blunt head of the man’s erection pressing against his entrance.

“You’re tensing.”

“I am trying not to…”

Stark pumped his hand on the trickster’s arousal, making Loki gasp and shiver. Repeating the action made the prince relax enough for Tony to gently push against the tight ring of muscle. This time the head of his erection slipped in, causing his lover to yelp and push back against him, which helped him in the rest of the way.

“Ohhhh…” Loki’s moan was sinful. His eyes slipped closed, breathing ragged under the sensation of being so absolutely full. Tony stilled once he was completely sheathed and for a long moment they simply lay there, curled into each other. Loki was shaking again, and he reached down to pull Tony’s hand away from his erection, choosing to link their fingers together instead.

“You okay?”

“Mmmm…Move…”

Tony did so, but very slowly. He wasn’t half as sleepy as Loki, but it was a warm day and he was more than up for taking it slow and lazy.

Once upon a time they would have gone about it quite differently, rough to the point of violent. This was worlds away from those early days. They moved together, slow and gentle against each other. Tony kept his fingers tangled with Loki’s, so wrapped his spare arm over his lover’s body and curled his other hand around the trickster’s erection.

Loki was moaning and gasping at each lazy thrust, rocking his hips back to meet Tony halfway. The inventor’s rough hand was tight and hot around his arousal, slicked by precum and the remnants of the oil.

“Love you…” Tony’s voice was little more than a whisper, nuzzling into the dark hair infront of his face.

“Love you too….”

Stark stayed slow and steady, taking his cues from Loki’s body and his gasps of encouragement. He knew his lover well enough that even after all this time he remembered the signs that told him when the prince was drawing close.

Loki could feel the heat beginning to coil in the pit of his stomach and dug his nails deeper into Tony’s hip in response, rocking back with the thrusts with increasing urgency. The hot spikes of pleasure were still an overwhelming feeling, meaning that he cared even less than usual about how he was sounding.

“Tony…” Gone were the days of ‘Stark’ and ‘mortal’. He gasped his lover’s name repeatedly like a mantra, and when the inventor finally pushed him over the edge the name came out as a wail.
“Loki…” Tony came only a few moments later, clinging tightly to his lover as he rode it out.

The two lay there, limbs tangled together as they both tried to get their respective breaths back. Their fingers were still loosely entwined and Loki drew them up to his mouth to press a lazy kiss to Tony’s knuckles. Tony swept the black hair in front of him to one side so that he could nip gently at his lover’s neck.

“You good?”

“Mmhhmm…” The soft purr made it clear just how good Loki was.

“Woken up now?”

“Near enough…” Loki stretched out and rolled over onto his back so that he could grin at his partner. “How was I ever lucky enough to find someone like you?”

“Just picked the right planet to take over, I guess.”

“Yes, that would do it. Are you ever going to let me live that down?”

“Give it another few hundred years.” Tony smiled brightly. He reached over to brush Loki’s hair back out of the way. “This is nearly as long as Evie’s, do you normally have it this long?”

“Not at all.” The prince waved a hand lazily and a small image appeared in the air over them, like a photograph or projection. “That was how I usually had it.”

The Loki in the picture looked younger somehow, despite the trickster not really showing any signs of aging – it was in the eyes really. He didn’t seem to be looking at anything in particular, just gazing off into the middle distance, hair pushed back neatly. It was shorter than Tony had ever seen, only just brushing his neck and kept back in its style with what looked like hair-gel. Probably magical hair-gel.

Since it had been nearly shoulder length when they’d first met, and was now sitting nicely on said shoulders Loki had obviously had a departure from his usual style.

“Are you going to cut it?”

“Do you want me to?”

Tony studies the image again. It was definitely Loki, but it just didn’t look like his Loki. Not the person he knew.

“It’s up to you. It does look good short, but I’ve only known you with it long, and I think I prefer it like this.”

Loki laughed and banished the picture, wiping it away like smoke. “I never gave much thought to my appearance when I arrived on Earth for the Tesseract. I must have given poor Thor quite a start – he grew up with me being the immaculate sibling.”

“Far cry from the crazed lunatic look you were styling, then.”

“Couture crazed lunatic, please! Finest Aesir leather made up that outfit!”

“And the suit in Stuttgart?”

The trickster’s eyes lit up with impish glee at that. “Oh, you liked that, did you?”
“Duh!”

“Well, I am certain I can find it again at some point.”

“Ooh, promises!” Tony raised himself up on one elbow and wriggled his eyebrows suggestively.

“Not now.” Loki swatted away a wandering hand. “We need to get up – if nothing else, Evelyn has woken up at last, and Sleipnir too.”

“Sleipnir?”

The prince finally sat up, waving a hand to vanish away all the mess they had just made. “Apparently they sat up all night watching films.”

“Figures. Birdy’s terrible for that. Shotgun first bath!”

“Fine, fine.”

Whilst Tony dived into the bathroom like the child he was, Loki merely wrapped another spell around himself; sluicing off the sweat and dirt. So much quicker.

By the time he was dressed and had sorted out the disarray in the room Evie was emerging, blinking sleepily. She looked like she’d only slept a few hours – which was probably quite likely – and her t-shirt was on backwards.

“Staying up all night will not do you much good, darling.” Loki chided as he touched a finger to her shirt and it righted itself.

“Why not? You d...d...do.” The girl stifled a yawn and slumped down in one of the chairs by the empty fireplace.

“I do not stay up all night.”

“The massive lovebite on your neck says otherwise.”

“What?! Where?!” Loki’s hands flew up to his throat as he swung towards the mirror. He twisted his head this way and that to try and find the elusive mark, until he heard his daughter sniggering. “Evelyn!”

“Made you look.” The girl was grinning smugly up at him. “Hey, I am your daughter, what do you expect?”

“Perfection, although I do not think I shall get that.”

“Does half-assed perfection count? ‘Cause that’s the best you’re getting.”

“I suppose it shall have to do.” Loki looked his daughter over and rolled his eyes. “Did you get dressed in the dark?”

“Pretty much, why?”

“Here.” He sat down on the arm of the chair and drew a comb out of thin air. “You are an ambassador of your realm, you cannot go around looking like a slob.” He pulled the hair-tie out of the ponytail that had obviously been slept on and began to section off her hair to tidy it properly.

“I’m fourteen, how can I be an ambassador?”
“If your Father is, you are, it is as simple as that.” Loki carefully pulled the snarls and tangles free, ignoring Evie’s protests.

“That’s hurting!”

“If you didn’t want me to do it, you should have bothered to brush it. You are a beautiful young woman, Evelyn, you should learn to actually take care of your appearance.”

“You are so mean!”

“I am the God of chaos and mischief; it is in the job description.” Said God was entirely unfazed by his daughter’s complaints – he had had to put up with worse from Sleipnir after all – and simply continued with what he was doing. Evie had inherited Tony’s hair, and it was the same thick dark brown that – when brushed – reached just below her shoulders in a bushy mass.

It took some taming.

“Why did you have to have your Father’s hair?”

“Because apparently his genes beat yours.”

“Hmm.” Loki sectioned off areas and began braiding.

“What are you doing?”

“Making you look presentable in public.” He began weaving beads into the hairstyle, muted amber ones that weren’t ostentatious but added a little sparkle.

“See, this is why Earth is better – I can slob around the house in PJ’s. I’ve actually got to get dressed here.”

“Welcome to royalty.” Loki tied off the end on the final braid. “There you go, you look beautiful.”

“I always look beautiful.”

“True. Okay, you look presentable to the general public.” Loki kissed the top of her head and let her get up.

Evie trudged over to the mirror to inspect her new look. “Huh.”

“Well?”

“It’s kinda Lord of the Rings, isn’t it? I look like an Elf!”

“I thought that was the done thing at the moment.”

The girl looked over her shoulder to admire the back of her hair. “Well…it does look a lot less bushy. How did you make it so shiny?”

“I brushed it, it may be a foreign concept.”

“Are you the God of sarcasm too?”

“Pretty much.”

Evie stuck her tongue out at him, then squealed as a snake materialised around her shoulders. She
caught the head of the creature just long enough to realise that – of course – it wasn’t actually a dangerous breed, so decided to leave it be.

“Is there a reason our daughter’s wearing a reptile as a collar?” Tony emerged from the bathroom – fully dressed – towelling his hair dry.

“She was being obnoxious.”

“Yeah, she does that.”

Evie grinned, spinning around like a somewhat uncoordinated ballet dancer. “It’s so sweet; can I keep it, Möðhy?”

Loki laughed. “I am afraid it is only an illusion. It will vanish in a few minutes. If you really want a snake I am sure we can get you a real one.”

“We can?” Tony looked alarmed.

“Why not?”

“I don’t like snakes much.”

“Well I do, so you shall have to learn to deal with it. If she wants a snake I see no harm in it.”

“Huh. Well, we can talk about it.”

Evie frowned in disappointment as the snake vanished in a small puff of smoke. “Can we talk about it later? I’m hungry.”

Loki stood up from his perch on the arm of the chair. “Food sounds like a good plan. It is long past both breakfast and lunch so we shall have to go down to the kitchens.”

“Ooh! I’ve not been down there yet!”

“It is hardly exciting, Tony.”

“Are you kidding? You’ve got all sorts of weird foods here – I might be able to synthesise some sort of new biochemical weapon.”

Loki gave him a sort of look. “Please refrain from blowing up my home.” He called after the man as Tony moved eagerly towards the door.

“You blew up mine!” Stark yelled over his shoulder.

The trickster paused for a moment, then shrugged. “It’s true.”

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Tony didn’t find anything to blow up, but that was mostly because he wasn’t trying. To be fair, the man could create an explosive from thyme and parsley, but he was hungry, so put the food to better use.

The kitchens were absolutely huge, as they would be for a working palace, and had more than enough small corners and spare tables for someone to duck in and grab something to eat. The staff were apparently also more than used to the younger Prince appearing halfway through the afternoon in search for breakfast and twenty years had not lost this familiarity. Loki was greeted
quite happily by the chefs wandering past, certainly more cordially than anywhere else.

“I have got to get the recipe for these cakes!” Evie said blissfully.

“Since when have you cooked, Birdy?” Tony laughed.

“I’ll ask Jarvis really nicely.”

“He hasn’t recovered from those ill-fated waffles you tried. No more experiments in the kitchen.” The man grinned at Loki’s curious look. “I don’t know about you, but cooking isn’t a strong point in the Stark family.”

“I can cook over a campfire; a proper sit-down meal is somewhat beyond me.”

“Cool, can we go camping? I’ve never been camping!”

“Never?” Loki looked surprised and turned to Tony for an explanation. “I thought that was something that all humans did at some point.”

“Yeah, not super mega-famous humans who are mugged by the media every time they step outside their house.” The inventor said, somewhat bitterly. “It’s a little too dangerous to let Birdy go off to do that sort of thing.”

“Dangerous?”

“I’m Ironman’s daughter; a damn good scoop for the media, and a fabulous hostage for the haters if they can get their hands on me.” Evie said it a little too flippantly. “So I don’t go out so much. Still do some horse-riding when I can, and I used to do ballet until I realised I was about as coordinated as a sloth on drugs.”

“I let you go to red carpet events.”

“Yeah! All the premiers! I met Benedict Cumberbatch!”

“Whom?”

Evie lit up like a Christmas tree. “Oh my God! He’s just, like, amazing! He was in Sherlock, and Star Trek and-”

“Enough, Birdy.” Tony rested a hand on her shoulder, smiling apologetically at his partner. “If you let her get going, she’ll never shut up. She’s got posters and everything – it’s as bad as her Doctor Who obsession, to be honest.”

Loki smirked. “Doctor Who is a worthy obsession, Stark, and you know it.”

“Of course; who do you think introduced her to it?”

“A fair point.” The trickster suddenly brightened. “Have there been any new seasons that I have missed?”

“Oh you bet.”

“Excellent.” Loki had finished eating, and – possibly his version of fidgeting – had taken a bowl of cherries and was slowly turning each little berry electric blue.

“Are those still edible?” Evie asked.
“Yes?”

“Awesome!” She grabbed a handful. “Any way you can magic the stones out of them?”

“That’s really lazy, Birdy.” Tony chided, as Loki did as their daughter asked.

“Yeah, and?”

“At least she is eating fruit – I did half-wonder if you were going to raise her on McDonalds.” The prince said airily as he popped a cherry into his own mouth.

Tony scowled, although there was no heat to it. “Seriously? Burger King, please. And anyway, Pepper would never let me raise a child on fast food.”

“Pepper..? Oh yes, the woman who…”

“Walked in on us, yeah.”

Evie choked. “Oh my God! When did that happen?!?”

“About a year or so before you were born.”

“Poor Aunty Pep!”

“She certainly was not pleased to see us.”

Tony laughed. “Not in the least – I was on house arrest for, how long? Stupidly long!”

Evie looked between her parents, obviously interested in the stories of the two of them before she had come along. “So how did you see each other, if Auntie Pep had you on lock-down?”

“The bathrooms aren’t monitored.” Stark grinned.

“That’s gross, Dad.”

“In all honesty, you were most likely conceived in the bathroom, so don’t complain.”

Loki looked horrified. “Don’t tell her that!”

“She needs to know the facts of life at some point!”

Evie seemed revolted. “I know the facts of life – that doesn’t mean I wanted to hear about how I was conceived!”

“Oh stop being a drama queen – it’s not like I went into detail. Comparative anatomy and all that.”

“Yuck.” Evie scrunched her nose in disgust. “One anatomy lesson was enough, thank you!” At Loki’s curious gaze she elaborated. “Dad gave me The Talk when I was about eleven. It involved some explanation as to how two men can successfully produce a baby.”

“Ah. Yes. Sorry about that.” Loki shrugged slightly. “I cannot help my species.”

The girl grinned at him. “I’m not complaining about that; I’m part Jötunn – how many teens can say they’re half alien?” She propped her elbow on the table so that she could cup her chin in one hand. “I’m still sad about my lack of blueness.”

“I’m not; what would people have said if you were blue?! The tabloids would have gone nuts!”
Tony exclaimed.

“Your Father has a point, dear. The blue skin would have been a step too far really. And would not have matched your hair one little bit.”

“Yeah, but still…” The girl pouted. Loki flicked a blue cherry at her, which hit her squarely on the nose. “Oi!”

“I passed on the immortality gene, is that not enough?” The prince smiled sweetly as his daughter glowered at him. “And some extra innards.” He looked taken aback the girl’s pout turned to shock, and Tony’s jaw dropped. “What?”

“What? What are you talking about, extra innards?” Stark was looking horrified. “Are we talking like, organs or something? Why didn’t you say something before??”

Loki waved away the frantic questions with an exasperated sigh. “It’s not like it shall affect her in any way.” He smiled reassuringly at Evelyn. “You needn’t worry, Little Bird, it is simply a matter of a more efficient digestive system really.”

“Elaborate on that please?”

“Four kidneys. And…” He traced a circle in the air with his finger over Evie’s head. “Two pancreas’. You don’t have a second stomach like me, but your stomach is double-chambered, and there is an extra section to your colon.”

Evie looked down at her abdomen, as if she could see her own internal organs. “Really? Cool! I’m a mutant!”

“More like a mongrel really – Ow!” Tony ducked as his daughter smacked him round the head.

“You’re just jealous because you’re a boring old human!”

“Less of the old, please Madam!”

Evie flicked a cherry at him, although her aim was off and it hit Loki’s arm instead. He caught it on the rebound and popped it into his mouth.

“Well, since we seem to be finished with lunch, shall we go? I believe Doctor Banner wanted to meet Sleipnir, and he did not get a chance to thanks to the chitauri turning up.”

Tony shrugged. “Sounds like a plan to me. Can I grab Barton along too? Since everyone else has buggered off back to Earth it seems a bit mean to just invite Bruce and leave the Hawk alone.”

“Oh if you must.”

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The late night had impacted on Sleipnir too and he was hardly in the best of moods when he first saw his family approaching. However, the presence of the other two Avenger’s mellowed him out enough to be sociable. It also helped that Bruce was absolutely fascinated.

“But, how do your muscle groups even work?!”

“Uh…The normal way muscles work?”

“You’re amazing!”
“Thanks?”

Bruce had the x-rays that Loki had managed to find and was glancing between the sheets and the horse in awe. He was sat on the grass in the field, Sleipnir switching between listlessly grazing and trying to look at the scientist’s notebook. There were now about five pages filled with incomprehensible scribbles and bad sketches – Bruce had no misapprehensions about his artistic talents. He absentmindedly chewed the end of his pencil whilst studying the muscle-groups surrounding Sleipnir’s front legs.

“I’ve never seen him so fascinated…” Tony said quietly. “Even the chitauri debris we kept finding around New York didn’t interest him this much, and believe me, that stuff was pretty damn interesting.”

“I don’t think Sleipnir knows quite what to make of him.” Loki was leaning against the fence, watching the little scene with a small smile. “He does not usually garner this much attention.”

“Really? He has eight legs; how is he not always the centre of attention?”

“He’s nearly half a million years old, Tony, people are used to him by now.”

Clint was perched on the fence beside the two – having accepted the invitation to join them rather than sit alone in his room. He had intended to find Thor, but the thunder God had disappeared off for the day with his Aesir friends, which had left Barton in the lurch. He’d been silent up until now – simply staring at Sleipnir – but at Loki’s comment he finally spoke up.

“That’s pretty old, for a horse. Is that something he inherited, or are animals just generally immortal here?”

“It is inherited. Most animals have normal mortal life spans here.” The trickster was so focussed on his son that he didn’t seem to notice that Clint had succeeded in speaking to him cordially. However, his attention was drawn to the archer when Hawkeye actively shuffled across on the fence so that they were closer.

“Can I ask a personal question?”

Loki glanced at him. “I am surprised you want to, but alright. I cannot promise I shall answer.”

“Fair dos. Tony said you lose your magic when you’re giving birth.”

“‘Yes…?’

Clint gestured at the giant eight legged horse that was now embroiled in an argument with Evie.

“How? Just... how? I’ve seen videos – normal childbirth is bad enough, how did you manage that without magic?!”

Tony nodded in agreement. “I’ve got to admit – I’ve wondered that a fair bit too. I mean, seeing Evie being born made it clear that it’s no picnic.”

“Understatement.” Loki said drily. “Well, needless to say, having Sleipnir was not exactly fun and games, either.” His expression made it clear that it was not a fond memory, which was odd since the birth of one’s first-born is usually a joyous event.

“Care to share?” Clint looked way too happy at the prince’s discomfit.
“Not particularly. Put it this way: It is still the worst memory of my life – and you saw what the chitauri had done to me, so that should tell you something.”

“That’s still not giving away much in the terms of sheer mechanics.”

Loki rounded on the archer with a grin that made the man lean back away from him in consternation. It was definitely what Tony had come to term his ‘burdened with glorious purpose’ grin. Shit scary.

“Well, if you are that interested I can show you the memory.”

“Uh... What?”

“I can show you the memory. It is a simple spell; just a mental projection.”

Clint looked freaked out by that prospect. “On second thoughts; I’m not that interested. It was bad, information received, got it.”

“Are you certain?”

“Yeah, no, I don’t want to know. Thanks for the offer, but no.”

Loki settled back against the fence with a smug grin, folding his arms across his chest. He was watching Sleipnir again, up until Tony tapped him on the arm.

“Hey, I’m still intrigued. I’ll do the crazy mind-meld projection thingy.”

“I was joking, Tony. It is not really something I would recommend anyone having to witness.” He smiled sweetly at Clint. “Even a hardened assassin.”

Clint stuck his tongue out.

“No, I mean it.” Tony had his earnest ‘I am an adult and can handle this’ expression fixed on his face. “I want to know. If it was that bad, and I know it was since you’ve admitted to still having nightmares about it, then I want to know.”

“I guarantee you will regret this.”

“Put your money where your mouth is.”

Loki and Barton exchanged a glance before the archer shrugged. “Hey, I say go for it. Stark thinks he’s a big boy, let him prove it.”

“Fine, come here, Tony.”

“What? I didn’t mean now-” And then Loki’s finger touched his forehead, and Tony saw the world black in around him.

~ ~ ~

No one knew, and now it was far too late to tell anyone, to call for help.

Loki had spent nine months hiding what he saw as an absolutely shameful secret, and now he knew that that had been a big mistake. Why hadn’t he told anyone?!

Yes, he knew the child was different. He wasn’t particularly good at healing magic, but he had
been able to at least tell that it was a foal, not a baby that grew inside him. It was a terrifying thought and all that had mollified him throughout the hellish trimesters was that he had read up intensively on medical magic to at least make the birth easier.

Change into a horse, get it bloody over with and then...do something about the foal. Pretend to have found it somewhere or something.

That had been the plan; because he simply didn’t know better. There was no way he could have known that, once his waters broke, his magic would flee too.

It had been hours now.

The pain was unbelievable. He knew that something was wrong. Something was terribly, dreadfully wrong and there was nothing he could do.

Childbirth was meant to be painful, that was common knowledge, but this was something else. There was blood, so much blood. He knew that the tearing he was suffering through was wrong and he could feel the child twisting and moving around even with the contractions. So much blood...

Loki was young, but he knew enough to realise that whatever was happening, it was killing him. He was dying, and most likely the child too. His screams – blocked in by his own spells woven into his walls – had died to muted whimpers as blood loss began to take its toll on top of the unmitigated agony.

It felt like he was burning, like the child was trying to rip its way out of him. He could feel himself ripping, his over-stretched stomach on fire as the muscles under the taut skin tore.

There was so much blood, where there shouldn’t have been any.

The young prince knew that he had to do something; anything to end it all. He was barely conscious and only just aware enough to recognise that should he lose consciousness entirely he would never wake up.

If he was going to survive this, he had to act.

Falling from the bed it took nearly ten minutes to drag himself the five metres across his floor to the small table beside the door to his room. Inch by agonising inch he left a trail of blood across the polished wooden floorboards as he did so. The simple act of reaching up to the table was almost crippling. The prince’s hand was shaking so badly he could barely grasp his target.

A silver bladed knife.

......

Thor was the one to find his brother; alerted by the thin trickle of blood seeping out from under Loki’s door. He was the one to scream Loki’s name frantically, trying to get his unresponsive sibling to wake up from where he lay just inside the doorway, unmoving.

There was blood everywhere. Thor wasn’t very old and hadn’t been on a battle field yet, so this was the first time he had seen such a sight – and for it to be his little brother rooted him to the spot in terror. Loki was lying on his side drenched in gore, which made it impossible to see what the nature of the wound was. Beside him was an unmoving bundle of bloody fur that Thor completely over-looked in his panic.
"The only thing he was able to focus on was that Loki wasn’t breathing…"

"Oh my God!" Tony’s knees buckled and it was only Loki’s quick reflexes that stopped him from crashing to the ground. "Jesus!" His head was pounding in the warning sign he usually had before a migraine came on.

"Are you alright?"

"Oh God, not really…"

"You did ask."

"Yeah, yeah, I know…” Tony sank to his knees, despite Loki’s guiding hand on his arm.

"Tony, are you alright?"

The man was pale, looking like he was either going to faint or throw up, and Loki was alarmed to see that he was shaking. The trickster knelt down in front of him, hands going up to cup Tony’s cheeks.

"Look at me Tony. Do you need me to get Dr Banner?"

"No…No, I’m good…Oh my God…"

"I’m sorry, I did not think it would affect you this badly…” Loki trailed off as Tony looked up to glare at him.

"You didn’t tell me that you were practically dead on the floor! Blood? Yeah. Pain? Yeah. Dying? That wasn’t on the cards!"

"Dying?!" Clint obviously didn’t know what Tony had just seen, but the inventor’s reaction made it clear that it wasn’t pretty. He looked to Loki for answers.

"I was fine, Tony, look at me; you know I was fine. I’m here and fine."

"That was not fine!"

"Well, no it was not. But it became fine. I survived, Sleipnir was okay, everything worked out alright in the end."

Tony nodded slightly, taking a few deep breaths. "Next time warn me about near death experiences!"

"Of course, sorry."

"Good." The man wiped a hand across his forehead, sitting back on his heels. "How did you survive that? You looked so young. I mean, I know you said you were the equivalent of a teenager, but still!"

"I survived because Thor managed to get the healers to me in time. They were able to resuscitate both myself and Sleipnir." Loki glanced over at his son, who – along with Evie and Bruce – was completely oblivious to the conversation. "As for age; well as I said before I was at most the equivalent of sixteen. Possibly younger, it is hard to say. Maybe about Evie’s age?"
“Jesus!” It was impossible to imagine Evie going through something like that. Not telling anyone, not asking for help or anything. The flash of a silver blade and gush of blood as an amateur performed a caesarean that they had only ever read about in books. It was horrifying.

“How does so much bad shit seem to happen to you? It’s getting a bit unreal.”

“Again; I am half a million years old, Tony. That is a damn long time for things to happen. If a human can achieve an extremely eventful life, I think it should be more than possible for an immortal.”

“…Fair enough.” Tony managed to grin. “Still; that was pretty awful.”

“Indeed; that is why it is ranked as pretty much the worst experience I have ever had.”

“Yeah, I can get that now.” Tony looked at Sleipnir with new appreciation. “Still; good job. It’s more understandable now why you freaked out over the next pregnancy.”

“Precisely.”

Clint obviously looked like he wanted to ask about that; since he knew nothing about Loki’s other children other than Evie, but didn’t get the chance when Bruce came back to join them. The scientist was beaming, his notebook tucked under his arm and the pen tucked behind his ear.

“This is amazing! His musculature alone is worthy of several journals, and the fact that he can talk! Wow! I mean; a horse with…telepathy is it? Whatever, it’s amazing, he’s amazing!”

Loki couldn’t help but return the infectious smile, obviously filled with pride for his child. “He is indeed amazing. And he never lets me forget it either.”

“How did he develop? Were his mile-stones more equine or Aesir? Jötunn. Sorry, Jötunn.”

“You really are a scientist through and through.” Loki waved off Bruce’s slip of the tongue without issue. “His mile-stones were more of the equine persuasion, but very delayed. Most foals are on their feet within an hour or so of being born; Sleipnir took two years to stand unaided and another three to learn to walk.”

“That’s…wow, that’s a long time. He was five before he could walk?” Bruce was already adding down more notes in his book. “Wasn’t that a bit tricky? I mean, being a horse as well as being disabled?”

“I coped; and he learnt in the end. I don’t think I have ever considered him as disabled before, but he did display delayed progression…Huh. I have a disabled child.”

Tony snorted. “Look; I know she’s not the brightest bulb in the box, but that’s no way to talk about Evie!”

“Tony! That is crude and not funny!”

“It was hilarious and you know it.”

Loki’s glare made it clear that he didn’t think so.

Over in the field, quite a way away from them, Evie leaned on Sleipnir, her head barely coming up level with the top of his hips.

“Do you ever feel that you’re being talked about?”
“Oh all the time.” Sleipnir picked at a few blades of grass before glancing over at the three Avenger’s and Loki. “But I imagine that Dr Banner is trying to consolidate some theories he has.”

“Yeah, he does that a lot. You should have seen his reaction when he found out I was part alien. So many blood tests! I was lucky Dad talked him out of an MRI!”

“What’s an MRI?”

“A machine that you lie inside and it produces images of what you look like inside. I could explain the physics behind it, but I don’t know if you’ll understand.”

“Remind me to be completely condescending towards you too at some point, little sister.”

“Will do!” Evie nudged his leg playfully. “Hey, I’ve got a question.”

“Only the one? You amaze me.”

“Oh my God you would get on well with Jarvis! Look; it’s about that film last night; you know, Les Miserables?”

“Oh yes, I liked that one, it was unusual and the songs are catchy.”

“Yeah, well, it’s set in France, and there were occasional lines in French. At least, there were meant to be; only I understood absolutely everything. What’s up with that? I can’t speak French! Even my Spanish is rudimentary at best!”

Sleipnir glanced at her and made a noise that could well have been a snigger. “You travelled on the Bifrost, yes?”

“Yes.”

“Well, there you go then. You have been granted the power of Allspeak. You will be able to understand and speak all languages.”

“Huh. That’s rather cool. It would be nice if people told me these things.”

Sleipnir nudged her. “You do not sound very excited about this idea.”

“Oh believe me, I am, it’s just got to the point where there’s so much going on that a Babel Fish in my ear is hardly the most astonishing thing I’ve had to deal with these past few weeks.”

“A fish in your ear?!”

“Pop culture reference. Don’t worry about it.” She patted Sleipnir’s neck. “Shall we go and see what the others are talking about?”

“Do let’s.”

When Thor returned that afternoon he and his friends had taken out an animal that to the humans looked like a giant elk, and promptly informed everyone that they were going to cook it outside. It was possible that their description was meant to be an Aesir form of barbeque, but they made it sound more like a bonfire.

Evie was way too happy about this prospect, mostly because Thor had insisted that it became a
celebration of sorts and this meant fancy clothing. Having brought nothing in the way of formal wear to Asgard, Loki had quickly turned one of her scruffier t-shirts into an Aesir dress and she was delighted.

“Look! It does the poof thing if I twirl!”

Loki looked to Tony for an explanation. “Poof thing?”

“You know, when you spin and the skirt swings out into a perfect circle around you? It goes ‘poof’.”

The trickster smirked. “Voice of experience?”

“Raising a little girl for fourteen years. I can also apply nail polish, use hair straighteners and put on eyeliner.”

“Critical survival skills no doubt.”

“Of course, how do you think I’m still alive?”

Evie spun again, letting the layers of silk settle around her. “I feel fabulous! Totally like a Disney princess!” She pretended to fan herself.

“Aren’t you technically a princess?” Tony asked.

“Huh?”

“Well,” He indicated to Loki. “Prince, therefore,” He pointed back at the girl. “Princess.”

“Really?” Evie spun to face her mother, looking hopeful.

Loki smiled sadly. “I am afraid not. You were born out of wedlock.” If he had been expecting her to be disappointed, he was surprised when instead she lit up.

“You mean I’m a bastard?! Cool! No more Evie Stark; you may now all refer to me as Evie Snow!”

Tony ran a hand down his face with a groan. “Great, just when I thought we had seen the last of the Game of Thrones jokes. One; you are still a Stark, and two; please don’t use bad language.”

“It’s not bad language! It’s a technical title. I’m a bastard.” Evie folded her arms with a smug grin.

“Loki, back me up here; I don’t want her swearing. The term is ‘illegitimate’.” When he didn’t get a reply Tony rounded on his partner. “Well? Looking for some support here!”

The prince shrugged hopelessly. “I cannot; she is correct.”

“What?”

“We are in Asgard, the term is still bastard here. If it is anything, Sleipnir is one too.”

“…I am not having everyone talking about our daughter as a bastard!”

Loki held his left hand out and inspected it closely. “Oh, look at that, how strange; no ring. She’s a bastard.”
“Oh har har, look who’s mastered sarcasm. She is not a bastard!”

“There is not much you can do about it Tony!”

“Watch me try! It’s a derogatory term and has connotations that I don’t want associated with my little girl!”

“It is cultural terminology and our little girl happens to think it is hilarious!”

“Uh…yeah, I really don’t mind Dad…”

“I mind! I am not having my daughter called something like that!” Tony didn’t really raise his voice when he got angry, but he was definitely beginning to get that icy cold tone that meant he was seriously pissed off. “It’s…it’s archaic!”

“Welcome to Asgard! We are the dictionary definition of archaic!”

“Well Evie is not from Asgard! She’s human!”

The girl backed up towards the wall whilst Loki rounded on her father with a snarl.

“She is not human! Evelyn is half Jötunn and you would do well to remember that! You cannot truly be getting this riled up by a single instance of cultural difference! Of all the things that could have upset you, and it is the simple fact that people call her a bastard?! Grow up Tony!”

“It’s a derogatory term and I’m worried enough for her as it is! Don’t think I haven’t heard people talking about her – I had no idea this was a problem too!”

“The only problem here is your way of thinking! For Norns sake you are making a fuss for nothing!”

“It is not nothing! I am trying to stand up for my daughter!”

“Our daughter!”

“Well since I’m the only one who’s actually been around to bring her up these past fourteen years forgive me for being a little over-protective!”

It was a low blow, way below the belt and Tony tried to catch the words even as they were leaving his mouth. Loki’s expression said quite clearly that another window was going to be imminent in Tony’s future.

“Oh yes, what a neglectful parent I’ve been! How awful of me to not to have been involved in her life!”

“Loki…”

“You know what, Tony, maybe if you did not want bastards running around you should have worn a fucking condom!”

In the ringing silence the two men glared at each other. Loki’s hands were balled into fists and Tony had his arms crossed across his chest, both with equally furious expressions.

Evie cleared her throat.

“Uh, wow? You guys are dicks, I hope you know that. Seriously, like, grade A dicks.” She looked
disgusted.

Tony spared her a glance before shaking his head with a growl and running his hands down his face.

“Yeah, whatever, fuck this, I’m going to go talk with the other humans.” He turned towards the door.

“So you are just going to storm off? Really mature, Stark.”

The man responded by gesturing over his shoulder with his middle finger before leaving. Loki waited until the door slammed shut again before sinking onto the edge of the sofa with a groan.

“Well…that was a side to you I haven’t seen yet. To be fair, I haven’t seen Dad flip his shit that badly either. Not good.”

“Don’t swear.”

“Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuckity shit!”

“Evelyn!”

The girl folded her arms with an attitude that could only have come down through Loki’s genetics. “What? You guys can behave like toddlers and I’m suddenly not allowed to swear? Yeah, no. And you’re not allowed to pull the condom line on Dad either – condoms are everyone’s responsibility and if you didn’t want kids you should have thought of it too! Accidents happen, and result in bastards, apparently.” She narrowed her eyes. “You could have just aborted me!”

For a long moment mother and child simply stared at each other. Loki was still sat on the couch, so he was looking up at Evie who stood directly infront of him – splendid in her Aesir dress.

“How could you say that, Evie? Of all of the options available at the time, that was the one thing I would never, could never do.” Loki’s voice had softened, anger turning to hurt as the blame was levelled back at him. “No matter the circumstances or situation, the thought never even crossed my mind. Never.”

“It would have made your life easier.”

“Darling, you are my life. None of this, none of what has happened would have been worth it, if not for you.”

Evie’s fierce expression was crumbling as the softly spoken entreaty hit home. “Well, you and Dad are still dicks.”

Loki managed a small laugh. “I dare say we are; and I cannot see that changing any time in the near future. But you have to remember; we do not yet know how to work with each other. We have been apart seven years, and did not have a stable relationship before that – we have never really had to deal with differing opinions.”

“Apart from that time you decided you could rule the planet and he didn’t agree.”

“Well, yes, apart from that, and that ended in a fight that destroyed large parts of your father’s tower.” The prince held a hand out to his daughter. “By all accounts I believe your father and I are going to fight a lot, although I think we can safely say that nowadays it will not result in trading blows. But never ever doubt that you are the absolute centre of both our worlds. No one could ever
wish for a braver, stronger, cleverer, more incredible daughter than you.”

“Really?” Evie accepted the hand and fell down on the sofa next to him, wrapping her arms tightly around her mother’s waist.

“Really.” Loki returned the hug equally tightly.

“I don’t think I like it when you guys fight.”

“I did not particularly enjoy it either.”

“Are you going to go after him?”

Loki looked towards the doorway, then shook his head. “No, I will speak to him later. Let him cool off first.”

“Did you really throw him out of a window once? He always talks about that as a big argument, but I could never tell about the window thing if he was telling the truth or not.”

“Oh it was the truth alright. We were on the floor with the landing pad that removes his armour.”

Evie pictured the height of said floor and winced. “And you were sure he would survive?”

“Not in the least. But we were at war at the time, and he was the type of person to have a trick up his sleeve so I was not surprised to see him fly straight back up.”

“Huh.” Evie smoothed down her dress’ skirt absentmindedly. “Well, I’m glad you two sorted out your differences in the end. At least, up until you squabble like children.”

“My dear, are you telling me off?”

“Yes! Consider this your first warning. Next time I’ll take away TV privileges.”

“I am not entirely certain what that means, but it sounds quite terrifying.”

“It is, so be warned.” Evelyn stood back up and spun again to admire the twirl of her new dress – it was quite clear she was in love with it. “Is my hair still alright?” The plaits Loki had put in that morning had survived the wind-swept fields quite well, all things considered.

“Your hair is fine and you look beautiful.” Loki levered himself up off of the couch. “Come, let’s go and see if Thor needs our help. Have you ever butchered an animal before?”

“Noo…..”

“Well, no time like the present I suppose.”

MWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWM

To Evie’s dismay her butchering skills were not actually required. When they arrived at the spot Thor had chosen for their mini feast the elk’s carcass was already neatly cut up and a large haunch was spitted over the roaring bonfire. It was already growing dark, so the smoke kept away the worst of the insects that were beginning to circle.

“Evelyn; you look fantastic! Aesir clothing suits you!” Thor’s boisterous greeting was accompanied by him picking Evie up and spinning her round like he always did.
“It’s a bit cumbersome, but I could get used to it.”

Thor turned a beaming smile on Loki that only dimmed marginally in confusion when he saw that his brother and niece were alone. “Where is Tony?”

“No idea. I am certain he will make his own way here.”

The thunder God’s eyes narrowed. “Another argument?”

“What makes you say that?”

Volstagg snorted with laughter. “Because you cannot manage a civilised conversation without starting a debate halfway through? Come on Loki; you can successfully have an argument with yourself.”

“Sometimes it is the only way to have an intelligent discussion.” Loki grinned sweetly at him. “Now, is there anything I can do to help?” That was more directed at Thor, but it was Sif who answered.

“I need to get the pelt off the rest of the carcass, can you smoke it once it’s done?”

“I suppose so.” He followed the woman out of the circle of logs that surrounded the bonfire as make-shift seats and over to where Fandral was wrestling with the large animal’s hide. After surveying the scene for a moment Loki rolled his eyes. “Move.”

Fandral jumped back with a yelp as the pelt suddenly pulled itself out of his hands and ripped away from the rest of the carcass. For good measure the skinned head of the elk turned and tried to bite him. He turned to Loki with a furious expression, only to see that beside the trickster Sif was doubled over laughing.

“Do you mind?”

“It is not like it would have really hurt you.”

“Well, yes, but…but I’ve now got blood on my tunic!”

“For Norns sake…” Loki waved a hand and the blood vanished – as did the other random stains and rips that Fandral had appeared to have picked up at some point. “Better?”

“Huh.” The warrior pushed past them, stalking back over towards the fire. It was just possible to see him inspecting a newly repaired hem and finding nothing wrong with it.

“Everyone keeps saying that you have changed, but in moments like this, I do not see it.” Sif said conversationally as she pulled out her knife and began cleaning off the remaining ligaments clinging to the elk hide.

“No?”

“To be fair, I have hardly seen you to make a judgement.”

“Fair enough.” Loki began to help her scrape off the adhering tissue left on the pelt. After a few moments he became acutely aware that his companion was staring at him. “What?”

“So, how does it feel to be the Defender of Asgard?” Sif’s eyes were alight with malicious glee.

“Oh Norns! I thought Evie made that up!”
“Not in the least. Everyone is calling you it.” Sif’s grin warmed to a more sincere one. “To be honest; it is a well-deserved title.”

Loki almost dropped his knife. “What?”

She shrugged. “I do not think any of us believed you were capable of such power. You always seemed to prefer trickery whenever we saw you fight. To see you let go like that was rather awe-inspiring.”

“And people call me the liar.”

“Can you not take a compliment when you hear one?”

“I don’t know, you have never given me one for me to base a reply off of.”

The elk lay forgotten infront of them as the two deities faced each other. Sif seemed to have any number of replies lined up, but what came out was a far cry from the angry retort that was expected from her in such circumstances.

“Yes, I suppose that is a fair comment.”

Loki raised an eyebrow. “Yes, it is, but I did not expect you to agree.”

Sif shrugged and went back to cleaning the ligaments off of the hide’s legs. “Well, maybe that should change.” She looked up at him and grinned. “After all; I don’t want to be blown into smithereens.”

“It would certainly put a crimp in your social life.”

Sif laughed flicked a lump of bloody fur at the prince. “Indeed.”

Loki ducked it with a chuckle of his own. “Do you mind?! He flicked his fingers and the rest of the carcass cleaned itself. “There we go.”

“You could have done that to begin with.”

“I could have done; but watching you struggle with it was so much more fun.”

Sif glanced at him sharply, but the mirth in Loki’s eyes wasn’t malicious. “You really do not have a brain-to-mischief filter, do you?”

“No, not so much.”

“Maybe you should work on that.”

“Are you criticizing the Defender of Asgard?”

“Call it friendly advice.”

They grinned at each other – possibly in a way that they hadn’t done since childhood.

“Hey, are you two coming over? This piece of meat is done already!” Fandral called out from the circle around the fire. “Hurry up or –”

“Or Volstagg will get there first.” Loki finished for him. He held a hand out to help Sif to her feet. Normally she wouldn’t allow such assistance form a man, let alone the younger prince, but this
time she accepted without complaint – recognising the tenuous outreach for what it was.

“Hey, I saved you some crackling!” Evie held out a plate to Loki as he and Sif came back over. “I don’t know what the seasoning is, but wow!”

“Far too much salt, if I know my brother’s cooking.”

“Oh Loki, you wound me.” Thor couldn’t quite maintain an upset expression though, far too pleased at having his brother with him to find fault with Loki’s default snarkiness.

Loki sat down on one of the logs next to Evie, picking at one of the pieces of meat she had saved him. It actually wasn’t bad at all. Not the best he’d ever had, but still good.

For a long moment it was just like the old days; Thor boasting about how he’d taken down the elk, Hogun nodding in silent agreement and the other two men adding in their own versions. Sif was sitting on the side-lines except for the moments when she would correct someone’s over-exaggeration and Loki would interject with sarcastic comments as and when he could butt in. For once, though he reined it in somewhat with the insults. If it wasn’t for the welcome addition of Evie, it would have been easy to believe they had gone back a few hundred years into the past.

At least until Thor stood up to greet the other three Avenger’s when they turned up.

Evie left her seat to go and sit with Bruce, meaning that there was an empty space beside Loki, which was intentional on the girl’s part. Sure enough, the space was filled not a moment later.

“Hey.” Tony nudged his shoulder gently against the prince’s. Loki barely spared him a glance.

“Thor is the one dishing out the food; go and annoy him.”

“I’m not all that hungry.”

“So why are you here?”

The man shrugged slightly. “Dunno. Want me to go?”

“The thought had crossed my mind, but you are here now; there is no sense in you walking all the way back.”

“I wasn’t intending to anyway.” Tony stared at the fire, resolutely not looking at his partner.

“Fine.”

“Is that how we’re going to play this? ‘Fine’?”

“It suits my purposes.” Loki caught Evie’s accusing eye across the huge bonfire and quickly looked away. “Our daughter is rather disappointed in us, by the way.” He added quietly.

“I think I’m rather disappointed in us too.” The man rubbed a hand across his eyes with a sigh. “This is messed up; we shouldn’t be fighting like this – the day started off so well and all!”

The trickster’s lips quirked slightly at that memory, but he turned his head in an attempt to hide it.

“Be that as it may, you were out of line earlier.”

“I was out of line?! You were throwing birth control jibes at me!” Tony hissed. “That was a low blow!”
“And questioning my lack of parenting wasn’t?”

“I…Yeah, okay, yeah, that was pretty crappy of me.”

“Only pretty crappy?”

“Fine, very crappy. But you weren’t exactly sweetness and light either.”

“Maybe not but…”

“But…”

“But we will just end up having the argument all over again if we continue this train of conversation.” Loki was wringing his hands together, and in response the flames of the bonfire twisted and flickered. “I do not think there is a solution to the problem that you have, so shall we just leave it for tonight?”

“Fine, whatever.”

“And now you are the one saying ‘fine’.”

“Urgh. Shut up.”

“You are so immature!”

“I thought you said this argument was done?”

Tony was met with angry silence, which he supposed was an answer in its own right. Looking across the fire he could see their daughter glaring at the two of them and shrugged at her. She turned away in disgust.

If anyone else was aware of the little family drama going on they didn’t say anything. On the contrary Thor was eagerly regaling everyone with grand tales of their younger years and the various adventures they had been on. Occasionally Sleipnir’s name would appear in the stories.

It was only when the God actively called his brother’s attention that Loki began to pay attention.

“Brother, it has been so long since we were last sat all together like this, why not do some fire shapes for us?”

“Because I do not want to?”

“Come on Loki, it is always good for a laugh.” Fandral added. He received a withering glare for that comment.

“What’s a fire shape?” Bruce asked eagerly, still quite fascinated with anything vaguely magical.

“It is what it sounds; twisting the flames into images and pictures.” Hogun answered, since Loki didn’t seem to be forthcoming with a reply.

“Oh, like a TV then.”

“I do not know what that is.”

Loki rolled his eyes. “It is more like a highly skilled form of hand puppetry, at least in the execution. However, you are correct that the end result will look similar to what you would see on
“Cool; can you show us?” Bruce’s soft request was mirrored by Evie nodding hopefully and even Clint was looking faintly interested. At Thor’s big puppy eyes Loki groaned.

“Alright.” He placed his plate to one side and stared at the fire in resignation. “Any requests?”

“A bilgesnipe hunt!”

“No.”

“That time we fought that group in Vanaheim and Thor-”

“No.”

“Fine, surprise us then.”

“Hmm.” Loki stared at the fire again for a moment before raising his hands.

The roaring flames suddenly shot through with green and rather than flickering around wildly the whole fire-place seemed to be simmering, waiting for a command. The prince twisted his right hand and an image began to grow in the emerald blaze.

There was a man, entirely made out of flickering green, with an anvil in front of him. He had a broad chest, covered with a leather apron, and huge muscular arms. A bristly beard covered most of his face although what was visible was grizzled and scarred. He brought a hammer down onto a blade held in his other hand and sparks shot out from the force with a ghostly clang. The blacksmith repeated the action, then began to shrink as other characters appeared around him, fleshing out the scene.

A village. The blacksmith stood outside a tiny thatched forge, concentrating on the sword under his blade. There was another flickering man, ushering a herd of goats past a woman drawing water from a well. There was a small collection of wattle-and-daub buildings, possibly houses, with a Christian cross on the largest denoting a church.

The whole scene was formed out of the green fire, flames twisting themselves into the shapes of each little part. There were even occasional birds flying across the sky.

Loki glanced around at his audience and realised that they were all rapt with attention, staring at the little village idyll he had created. All but Bruce, who was continuously glancing between it and him, evidently not wanting to be surprised by anything. He caught the scientist’s eye and winked with a dark grin. Understanding crossed Bruce’s face and he nodded.

Evie screamed and the adults present all jumped violently, some swearing.

A longship prow cut through the whole scene, life-size and towering thirty or forty feet above them. A snarling dragon’s head was carved into the top of the stern, spines rippling down the long graceful neck and sweeping along the ridged sides. Shields hung along both edges of the hull, overlapping banks of oars that ploughed through water that flickered and surged. A wave crested and lifted the whole ship before it came crashing back down, and everyone instinctively flinched back from the thick spray that didn’t truly exist.

The sounds of the sea surrounded them; thundering waves, screaming gulls and the insistent chanting of the unseen sailors to keep the beat of the oars. It was almost overwhelming; a Viking longboat in all its war-glory as it sped across the raging sea. It was so real, as if it was truly there
and not just an image twisted out of fire. Every detail was there, down to the harsh creaking of the wooden hull and snapping of the oars, barely heard under the cacophony of the waves.

It was a glimpse of a world long ago, and over far too soon as Loki slowly lowered his arms and the fire returned to its normal colour and died back to a small blaze.

For a long moment only the crackling of the flames could be heard before Clint let out a low whistle.

“Wow. That was…wow…”

“That was astonishing.” Bruce added in a soft voice. Thanks to Loki’s small warning he had been prepared at least for something that might make him jump, and had been able to keep himself calm, beyond the awe.

For once even the Warriors Three and Sif were agreeing that it had been something pretty special – apparently Loki didn’t usually go that over the top with his little fire images.

“What was that?” Tony seemed to have forgotten that he was meant to be angry. “Was that a real event or did you make it up.”

“It was snapshots of a little island called Lindisfarne. It was the first place in the British Isles that had a recorded Viking raid. I showed you the little village that once stood there and it’s monastery, and then the ship that came.”

“Did you see it personally?”

Loki grinned. “I was on the ship.”

“Of course you were.”

“There is no need to take that tone; I sided with the Saxons more often than not.”

Clint tipped his head to one side in utter confusion. “Why? What were you even doing there?”

“Seeing history. And King Alfred was an interesting man so I thought it would be fun to see what would happen if he won certain battles that he would otherwise have lost.”

“Did you do that a lot over the course of history? I know you said you were in World War One.”

The trickster looked somewhat uncomfortable under the sudden scrutiny, especially with the other Aesir there. “I saw enough of human history, and of other realms too.”

“World War Two?”

“I commanded a U-boat for the first two years.”

Clint seemed confused for a moment before scowling. “Wait, what?! You were on the Nazi’s side?!”

“Only for two years. When I heard about what was happening in Poland with the camps I left and joined the Allies.” Loki didn’t appear to see anything wrong in skipping sides’ half-way through a war when it wasn’t a war he was really invested in. “I flew a spitfire after that; more of a defensive role than sinking ships.”

“You are one crazy son of a bitch.”
“It has been said.” The prince retrieved his plate and began picking at the meat again. When Tony snaffled a piece he didn’t comment.

After the excitement they mostly all went back to eating. The haunch had been removed from the fire before Loki had started playing with the flames, so it wasn’t burnt and there was more than enough on the one piece to go around. Well, not from Volstagg’s point of view, but more than enough for normal people. It really was good cooking.

Thor and Bruce began a lively discussion on the merits of elk over other various fauna in the area, whilst Sif started asking Evie about her hobbies and such back on Earth. Loki and Tony still sat in silence, although it was slightly less strained than before.

Clint seemed to be somewhat mesmerised by the fire. Finally Hogun seemed to notice this and – possibly in some attempt at out-reach – asked him if he was alright.

“Oh, yeah.” The archer grinned at the Aesir. “This just reminds me of when I was a kid back in the circus; we used to camp out like this in the summer. Good times. We used to play this game of jumping the fire. The winners were the ones who could do it unscathed, and the losers were the ones who couldn’t jump high enough or far enough and ended up singed. You guys do anything like that here?”

Hogun actually cracked a small smile. “Not in the least, and I would not suggest that you start.”

“Oh?”

Fandral leant forwards with a broad grin, having evidently been following their conversation. “If you jump over a fire with someone, you have – by law – married them.”

“What?” Evie’s startled squawk drew others into the conversation. “How can that be legally binding? Don’t you have a ceremony or something?”

“Well, there is usually a ceremony put around it these days – and a celebration after of course – but the jump itself is what counts, the rest is just…well, set dressing really.” Sif answered. “Why? Are human joinings so different?”

“Just a bit. We need to say a whole bunch of stuff infront of an official person, sign some papers and have witnesses and everything. It’s all a bit involved really.”

Sif looked intrigued. “What a complicated way of doing things. That’s so restricted and regimented for a celebration. Does it not cause unnecessary work?”

“Well, if Bridezillas is anything to go by, people get really stressed about it all.” Evie said with a shrug.

“How strange. It is much simpler to just have a fire and a witness.”

“I guess.”

Sif laughed. “You do not sound convinced. Well, I suppose we all prefer what we are used to. What do humans do for Yule? Do you even have Yule?”

On the other side of the fire Tony watched the two women interact as Evie tried to explain the concept of Christmas and Sif tried to get her head around the idea of a single deity. They actually seemed to be getting along rather well, especially once the topic of mistletoe and its uses at the two celebrations was broached. Evie didn’t have all that many women to chat with, her own age or
otherwise, so she was most likely enjoying the opportunity. Likewise Sif seemed grateful for another female to help break up the all-male gathering.

However, these thoughts were only background to the main concept currently circling his head.

“You look worried.” Loki said softly. “Are you alright?”

“Yeah…just thinking about something Sif just said.”

“Oh?”

Tony took a deep breath, obviously stealing himself for something, before carefully rising to his feet. Looking down at his partner he held out a hand.

“Tony?” There was confusion in the trickster’s gaze, not understanding why the man wanted him on his feet.

“Well, there’s you, there’s me, there’s a fire, and there’s a bunch of witnesses.” Tony’s smile was soft; worried and hopeful all at the same time. “What do you say?”

Loki’s mouth dropped open as he stared up at the inventor. “What…?” He whispered.

Stark shrugged with one shoulder, suddenly looking extremely worried and insecure. “I mean, if you want to…? I want to. We were intending to be together until the apocalypse or whatever, so we could make it legally binding…Or not.” He was already subconsciously withdrawing his hand, expecting rejection, but Loki quickly reached out to hold it.

“…Alright then.” He said quietly.

“What? Really?”

The prince smiled, rising to his feet. “Yes, really.” He nodded towards the fire. “Shall we?”

The relief was coming off of Tony in waves as he swallowed and nodded. “Yeah, yeah lets. Do we just jump, nothing else?”

“Just jump. And try not to set fire to your clothes.”

“Yeah, of course.”

“Thor!” Loki called over to his brother, and when he had the older God’s attention raised his and Tony’s joined hands. Thor looked momentarily confused before lighting up like a Christmas tree as understanding dawned and nodding. “There we go; one witness.”

No one else seemed to have picked up on their intent and Tony wanted to keep it like that. “Okay, we good?”

“Go.”

The single word was all the warning the man received. Loki’s grip on his hand tightened and suddenly he was being pulled directly into the roaring fireplace. The heat was intense and there was a definite moment of deciding that this form of marriage was completely nuts. It was more of an instinctive survival move to jump rather than the romantic leap he’d had in mind after Sif’s description. Maybe the Aesir managed to glide through the air like prima ballerinas or something, but Tony simply threw himself over the flames as quickly as possible in the hopes of not being scorched.
Humans definitely had the more romantic and classy ceremonies, despite the added stress, but you couldn’t say that this way lacked drama.

Tony landed awkwardly and stumbled, but Loki’s strong grip on his hand helped to right him. It had actually been a far shorter jump than he’d assumed, hence the overestimation and stumble, and looking down he was extremely pleased to see that he was still in one unsinged piece. As was his lover.

No.

_Husband._

“Holy shit we just did!”

Shimmering green eyes met his own as Loki laughed with breathless disbelief.

“I do believe we did.” He was still holding Tony’s hand tightly in his own, but covered his mouth with his free hand. “We just did that!”

“Brother! Tony!” Beaming was too small a word to describe Thor’s expression. Beside him Bruce let out a whoop of celebration and Evie was jumping up and down screaming like a Directioner at a concert. The Warriors Three – ever ones to follow Thor’s lead – were also clapping (well, Fandral was cat-calling, but that counts, for Fandral) and Sif seemed genuinely pleased as she applauded. Even Clint looked someway between amused and exasperated.

Loki turned to Tony, their hands still tightly locked together. “Rest assured; I am still highly annoyed with you.”

“Fuck that, I’m still furious; now for God’s sake seal it with a damn kiss!”

Who was Loki to deny his new husband?

MWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMW

“Are you worrying again, my love?”

At the sound of her husband’s voice Frigga turned from the window where she had a view out over the dark fields.

“It is hard to stop worrying about a child.”

“He is no longer a child Frigga, he has more than proved that.”

Odin came to stand beside her, glancing out of the window, although there was little to see in the dark.

“He is always my little one. I do not care how old he gets; he will always be my little one.”

“He blew up an entire species not two days ago – I think he can handle himself.”

Frigga smiled slightly. “He is going to leave. Properly this time; he is going to leave us for good.”

The Allfather was well aware that his wife occasionally had visions of events yet to come, but this sounded more like a grieving mother than an oracle speaking.

“Leave?”
“He will follow Stark, and Stark will not wish to remain in Asgard for much longer. You can already see that he longs for his own world. Evelyn too. And Loki will follow them.”

“Midgard is not a million miles away, my love.”

Frigga turned to face him, and Odin realised that her eyes were filled with tears. “I cannot see what is going to happen?” She whispered.

“Frigga?”

“The future is black. There is nothing there.”

“What do you mean?” The king was gone, this was a concerned husband asking, taking his wife into his arms as she tried not to cry. “How can there be nothing?”

“I do not know; I have never had this happen before. It is darkness like I have never experienced.” Frigga looked up at her husband. “Something is coming. Something terrible and there is nothing we can do.”

“It may just be that something is interfering with your ability…”

“No. It is a tide of darkness, sweeping all over us all. Something is going to happen and it will destroy everything we know.”
Chapter 25

The small party that Thor had envisioned swiftly turned into a proper celebration as the somewhat shotgun wedding sunk in. To be honest, a spontaneous marriage was hardly in Tony's top ten of Things I Should Have Put More Thought Into, and it seemed that spur of the moment unions were not uncommon to the Aesir. Evie was quite beside herself with glee - although that would possibly change later when she realised that she'd missed her chance to be a bridesmaid.

At Thor's insistence Loki changed a few of the flagons of water into rich mead and ale and Volstagg insisted that they put more meat on to cook.

It was some time before anyone tried to stagger back to their rooms.

MWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMW

It was fair to say that Tony was pretty drunk. Taking into consideration that he hadn't touched alcohol in about five years, and that Aesir drink was extremely strong, he hadn't had much of a chance really. Likewise, Evie was a lot more giggly than usual and seemed to find everything absolutely hilarious. She'd only been allowed half a mug of ale (apparently Asgard had no such thing as under-age drinking laws), but it was strong stuff and she was both young and quite petite.

Loki wasn't in any way as badly affected, but was certainly finding it more funny than he otherwise would have as he towed his family back to their rooms. He managed to deposit Evie in her chambers and force Tony into the bathroom to wash up (as awesome as bonfires are, the smoke sticks around) before sitting down on the bed and trying to take stock of what had just happened.

Married.

Maybe it wasn't such a big deal to Tony - the customs were so different to human ones - but to Loki it was huge.

He tried to remember his first marriage, all those years ago, but whilst the memories of the actual ceremony had dimmed he would never forget how bitter Sigyn had been. That dark look of anger at the situation that neither of them had any control over. It had not been the most joyous of occasions.

"Penny for your thoughts?" Tony sat down heavily next to him, his hair sopping wet. Loki hadn't realised how long he'd been sat there thinking.

"Nothing important." He ran his hands through the mans hair, drying it with a wordless spell. "You're sounding less drunk."

"I wasn't all that drunk to start with, more like high off the atmosphere."

"You were singing about a little goblin at one point."

"Okay, maybe I was a little drunk, but a very cold shower helped that quite a bit."

"Not too cold I hope."

"Huh?" Tony belatedly caught onto the trickster's meaning. "Oh, no, not too cold." He ran a hand through his hair again. "This doesn't seem real."
“Ceremonies on Earth have a little more pomp and circumstance. Here in Asgard we pay more attention to the treaties marriage brings with it.”

“No one marries for love?”

“Oh of course they do, just…well, royalty do not usually manage to gain that privilege.” Loki’s grin turned sharp. “The moment my Father hears of this you can expect him to draw up some extremely complicated contracts outlining our union and what it means for our realms.”

Tony drew back, his eyes widening as he suddenly considered the fact that if that was what Aesir considered a binding ceremony, neither of Loki’s parents had been there. “Shit! Am I going to be in trouble over this?”

“Not with Father. He will undoubtedly be quite pleased – you are a man of very high standing in your realm. I am aware that the United States do not have royalty, so if I were to go by wealth and power you are certainly one of the single most powerful men in your country. These days I would actually class you on par with the president in terms of fire-power at your disposal. If it weren’t for the lack of ground troops you could probably take over the planet quite easily.” He watched the man relax slightly. “Of course, Mother is going to flay us both alive.”

“Ah. Uh, is there a sort of reception thing we could do to appease her?”

“Not really.” Loki seemed to sense that his partner was somewhat distracted in their conversation and frowned slightly. “Tony, what is troubling you?” He smirked. “You cannot be having regrets already – we have not even consummated it yet!”

“Of course not! And is that legally necessary? On Earth it used to be.”

“It still is here, but these days an audience is not required. Once family and friends were duty-bound to observe and ensure that all went as it should, but nowadays it is considered distasteful and insulting.”

“I should think so!” From the inventor’s expression it was obvious that he had the mental image of trying to have sex with the Avengers watching on. With Thor watching….Urgh.

“Quite. So if that is not the problem, what is?”

“It’s just…” Tony waved his hands around, an odd gesture for a man who is usually so quick to find his words. “That was it, wasn’t it? That is all we’ll be able to have, because we can’t do that on Earth. Not really, not properly. Oh, we could do it with false names and bribes and what not, but as Tony Stark and Loki of Asgard, we can’t be married. Even if we had Fury officiate – I’m sure he’s legally allowed to – it would still be off the records and not strictly official by human standards.”

Loki shook his head slightly. “I do not understand, where is the problem here? I thought homosexual marriage was allowed now.”

“Yeah, in some states, but this isn’t about what we are, it’s who we are. I just…I guess for once I don’t want to be the billionaire inventor slash superhero that hogs the front page of every newspaper. I want to be able to get married without the world sticking their noses in. Tony Stark can’t get married and live a peaceful life – you should have seen when Evie was born, it was hell! In the end I couldn’t take her out of the tower – we were mobbed by the paparazzi wherever we went. My life is splashed across every TV screen in America, and if I were to marry, even in secret, then it wouldn’t take long before some enterprising young journalist found out.”
For a moment the trickster looked at him silently, then he blinked and his whole form changed. “That is not a problem either; I can be whoever I need to be in public. If you need a loving wife I can play that part to the cameras.” To back this statement up, Loki now looked in every possible way the trim, beautifully put together celebrity wife. Manicure, hair extensions, huge chest, the lot.

“Uh…Wow.” Tony shook his head and tried not to act as surprised as he felt at the transformation. Of course Loki would be stunning as a woman. “But, as nice as this image really really is, I want to be married to you, not some fake version. I want to show you off to the world.” He stopped himself and then smiled slightly. “Ah, there we go – if I ramble drunkenly for long enough I find a point to make. I want to show you off to the world. And I can’t.”

“You are an extremely morose drunk.”

“I’m trying to eloquently explain my feelings here!”

Loki laughed, holding up his hands in mock defeat. “I am not trying to belittle what you are saying, Tony, but you do have a long winded approach to saying it. I understand what you are saying, but I must admit that I think you are being entirely selfish by this point.”

Tony’s jaw dropped. “Huh? Selfish?!” He stared at the God as Loki shrugged slightly.

“Think about it for a moment, Tony. We spent two or three years stealing the odd moment, mostly in your bathroom, and always fearing being caught. And then Evie was born and we had even less time together.” He drew his legs up onto the bed and crossed them as he began to gesticulate with his hands. “Twice a year, and even then both of those times were roughly only ten hours or so. That’s less than a day each year. And again; total secrecy. And then need I remind you that I have just spent the past seven years in the esteemed company of the chitauri, during which time I think it is safe to say that we both assumed we would never see each other again. So yes; you are being selfish. We are together, we have our daughter, and we no longer have to skulk around for fear of either the chitauri or of being caught. For me at least it is more than I ever believed I would ever deserve or receive.”

A myriad of different emotions moved across Tony’s face at that rather harsh summation of facts. Finally he settled on a grudging nod of the head.

“Oh, yeah, I can get that. Doesn’t mean I have to like it.”

“You are greedy; did anyone ever tell you that?”

“Eh, my Mother did once or twice.”

“Well she should have done so more often. Be thankful for your lot in life – we are together and quite frankly I do not want to be paraded around in front of your world’s media anyway. I appreciate your sentiments on the matter, but please be realistic.”

Tony scowled, although not with any true heat behind it. “You don’t sugar coat things, do you? Fine, I will stop being selfish about our relationship. Happy?”

The petulant tone made Loki groan and run a hand down his face. “Oh Norns; we really do argue about everything, don’t we?”

“…It looks that way. Is it a bad thing?”

“I suppose that depends on how we make up afterwards.” Loki’s eyes gleamed. “I believe we still have that argument from earlier to sort out too.”
“And a marriage to consummate.” Tony finally grinned too. “I’m guessing we’re not sleeping much tonight.”

“It looks like that way – how inventive are you feeling?”

“Extremely inventive. You?”

The gleam in Loki’s eyes went feral. “Oh you have no idea.”

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It was getting on for about six o’clock in the morning by the time either of them eventually fell asleep.

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Bruce was already awake and sat at the small desk in his room when there was a knock on the door. He didn’t bother looking up from the Sudoku he was engrossed in, knowing that there was only one person it was most likely to be.

“Yeah?”

“You awake?”

“Evidently.” Bruce smirked as he heard the door creak open, and glanced up briefly to see Clint slink in. “What’s up?”

“Awake and bored.”

“I have Sudoku if you’re interested?”

“Nah – can’t get my head round those. Do you have a cryptic crossword?”

Bruce threw one over to him and Clint slumped down into one of the armchairs with it.

“So; you don’t normally come looking for conversation this early in the morning. Are you alright?”

Clint shrugged, pulling out a pencil to start scribbling in answers on his crossword. “I didn’t sleep too great.”

“I can imagine all of this is very confusing for you – having to accept Loki and everything.”

“You can say that again.” The archer frowned for a moment. “What’s the chemical symbol for gold?”

“Au.”

“Of course.” He added the answer in before continuing his train of thought. “I guess when we go back to Earth he’ll be coming too. I can’t see Evie and Tony wanting to stay here. If nothing else, Evie’s too obsessed with WoW and CoD to cope for long without them and it’s been quite a while already.”

“Does it bother you? The tower’s huge – you would probably hardly see him.”

“I’d know he was on the same planet. That’s enough to bother me.”
Bruce finished off the last row of numbers and pushed the sheet to one side. “Maybe you should talk to him some more. I saw you ask him about Sleipnir yesterday; that was a good start.”

“I don’t want to.”

The petulant tone made the scientist smile. “He’s actually not so hard to talk with. I think anyone who so obviously worships their children like he does can’t be all that bad. And he could give Tony a run for his money in the smartness stakes. The guy’s a genius.”

“Doesn’t mean I have to like him.”

“No, it doesn’t, but if you’re really so worried about having him around in the future you’ll have to learn to live with him. I heard from Thor that Loki specializes in using throwing knives in a fight; maybe you two might actually have something in common when it comes to projectile weapons.”

Clint had a sudden memory of trying to hit the trickster with an arrow and for Loki to simply catch it as if he’d thrown him a football. Still – the ensuing explosion had been worth that little indignity.

“Yeah, maybe.”

Bruce frowned at the noncommittal answer. “It’s not just the whole Loki thing, is it? What’s really eating you?”

Clint finished the last clue then threw his crossword onto the floor, ignoring his host’s glare at the action. “Did Tony tell you that his medical problems have been sorted?”

“Yeah – some sort of magic water thing Loki found apparently. He said he was fully healed.”

“Did he mention the immortality thing too?”

This time Bruce looked more guarded. “He did, why?”

“He said there was enough of the weird water for the rest of us.” Clint shrugged. “I know you and Steve don’t need it – you guys are already pretty much immortal – but it would work on me and Nat, if we decided to take it.”

“Ah.” Bruce nodded slightly. “That’s why you’re so torn up. Did you get a chance to ask Natasha what she thought?”

“No. She doesn’t have a clue about any of it; they’d already left by the time Tony told me.”

“Do you want to be immortal.”

Clint looked at him with a frank, level, stare. “No. I don’t. At least…I don’t think I do. I keep changing my mind – and from what I can tell it’s an all or nothing deal.”

“And you can’t discuss it with Natasha. Would you just go with what she decides?”

“Of course not! We’re not joined at the hip! But I’d like to talk it through with her. We talk everything through.”

“And I’m currently being used as a substitute?”

Clint grinned, somewhat embarrassed. “Looks that way. Do you mind?”

“Go ahead – no one seems to care if I’m that sort of doctor or not. Just don’t expect profound
wisdom or anything.”

“Perish the thought.”

Bruce pushed his chair round to face Clint and leant back in it, swinging one leg over the other. “Alright then. Tell me everything.”

Someone hadn’t bothered to pull the huge curtains closed properly, which meant that before mid-day a ray of bright sunlight had managed to aim itself quite brilliantly right into Tony’s eyes.

He groaned and rolled over but the damage was already done and he was awake enough to know that going back to sleep wasn’t going to be an option. He hated that moment of realization – especially since he’d been having a good dream. True, he couldn’t actually remember what it was about, but it had been a good one, whatever it was. Fine; he was awake.

Sitting up meant that the man dislodged the arm draped over his back and he looked down to see Loki sprawled out next to him, still completely dead to the world. The God was lying on his side, using his own elbow as a pillow and his other arm – now removed from Tony’s back – was flung out lazily to one side. The livid gash left across the limb from his fight with The Other was healing nicely – now just a thin scab that ran down his arm – and the one on his cheek was just a red mark that would soon be gone entirely. Even the deep bruising that Tony had been so worried about was slowly fading from the trickster’s stomach.

He was healing.

And also about five minutes away from drooling, if he kept his head at that angle.

Tony smirked, but didn’t do anything to rectify the situation. In fact, after a moment’s thought he grabbed his phone off the side-table and took a photo.

“Sir, I don’t believe he will appreciate that.”

“I won’t tell if you don’t.” He leant over and brushed away the lock of hair that was threatening to fall into Loki’s open mouth. “And besides, he looks cute.”

“Even so, sir.”

“I’m allowed to take photos of my husband, Jarvis.”

“Whatever, sir.” The phone went into idle shut-down, signifying Jarvis’ distaste.

Tony rolled his eyes and tossed it back onto the table – confident that his AI wouldn’t actually delete the photo without his consent.

Surely he was allowed to take photos of his husband anyway. It wasn’t like he could stick it on social media or something. Actually, he had barely any photos of Loki as it was; that would have to change. All that was on file were those old ones from the invasion attempt.

“How will your friends have any time for me, when they’re so busy fighting you?!”

That memory was worlds away from the Loki currently sprawled out next to him. It was hard to put the two images in one frame of mind really. The world conquering God consumed with anger and hatred and the recumbent figure who – no matter what he claimed – was snoring lightly.
Tony smiled slightly. Maybe he should make a recording instead, just to prove that he really did snore. Loki was adamant that he didn’t.

On the other hand, Loki wouldn’t thank him for it.

The man decided to leave it at that before he got himself into trouble. Besides, he was hungry. There was a notepad in his bags from Earth (he’d never bothered to actually unpack anything) and he ripped off a page to scribble a note saying he’d gone for food just in case of the unlikely event that Loki woke up before he got back. His tunic from yesterday was full of smoke from the bonfire, so he pulled out a t-shirt and jeans to wear instead and then stomped off to the main hall to see if breakfast was still a possibility.

Thankfully, it was.

The place was nearly empty, just a handful of soldiers off duty and – most surprisingly – Evie. She was sat on her own at one of the large tables, stirring a spoon through her bowl of porridge listlessly.

“Hey Birdy, what are you doing here all alone.” Tony slid onto the bench next to her, and nudged her with his shoulder. “You’re looking a little blue – you okay?”

“Yeah.” The girl certainly didn’t look okay. If anything she looked rather morose.

“You don’t seem it. Is it about last night? I know it was all a bit sudden, but it kinda seemed like the right idea at the time.”

“It was the right idea – I think it’s great you guys actually decided to do something sorta official.” The girl managed a watery grin.

“…You really don’t seem alright; what’s wrong Little Bird?”

“Nothing.” Evie was swirling her spoon around in her bowl of porridge in a way that made it extremely clear that she was lying.

“Huh.” Tony picked out a couple of bread rolls for himself and began to drench them in honey. “That’s funny; you don’t usually sulk when nothing’s wrong.”

“I’m not sulking.”

“No, I know you’re not. You’re genuinely upset about something.”

Evie smiled slightly. “Ooh, look who’s trying to be perceptive about teenagers.”

“I know next to nothing about teenagers; but I happen to be very good at picking up signals from women – and you’re reading as ‘really unhappy’ right now.”

“You don’t quit, do you?”

“Nope.”

The girl pushed her uneaten food away and looked down at her hands. “Is Möhðy coming down any time soon?”

“I doubt it; he was fast asleep when I left him. Why?”

“Dad… I want to go home.” She wasn’t just unhappy, she looked thoroughly miserable. “I’ve had
Tony abandoned his breakfast, far more concerned with what his daughter was saying. “What’s brought this on? I thought you loved it here.” He said gently.

“I did, I did. It’s just…” She looked away for a moment, staring down the length of the large hall. “I bumped into some kids this morning; I guess they were about my age, figuratively speaking since with these guys it’s hard to tell. Anyway, I thought I’d say hi, maybe see if I could make some friends around here. And, well, it didn’t go so well.”

“What happened? Did they say something?”

Evie was home-schooled, sheltered from the world around her and with few friends even back on Earth – Tony knew that her social interactions were more suited for conversing with adults than her own age group and that in itself would set her apart – let alone her half-breed status and parentage. The girl had never experienced bullying before…

“They weren’t mean or anything.” She managed a small smile. “I guessed that’s what you were thinking. But they were just really…I dunno, distant. Like they didn’t want to know, but were too polite to just tell me to go away. I felt like I’d done something really wrong. And then I came here hoping to find someone I knew and there wasn’t anyone and everyone was staring like I was some sort of circus freak.” She shrugged. “I know they’ve all been staring anyway, but it was different when I was with you or Möhðy; I felt safe, and this time I didn’t. It was horrible.”

“Oh Birdy…” Tony pulled her tight into a hug, ignoring the fact that they were probably being watched by the other diners. “Why the hell didn’t you just come back to the rooms? Why did you go out on your own in the first place?”

“I was having a nose around. And I didn’t go back because I only just avoided waking you when I crept out and you looked too cute to disturb if I went back. It’s not like anything actually happened; it just made me realize that I’m sick of it here.” She had her face buried in his shirt, so it was hard to tell if she was crying or not. As a rule she was a tough kid – but she’d been through a lot recently, and the silliest of things could easily tip the balance between coping and free-falling. “I stand out too much. Sure, I stand out at home; but at least that’s only because of your celebrity status. I’ve grown up with that. This is different. I’m not even the right species – and they don’t even know about the Jötunn thing! If that was known then…” She shuddered – not an affectation, but the proper full-body shudder of someone who can’t bear to entertain a thought. “It’s horrible; knowing that if that was known then I’d be hated, vilified. And there’s nothing I can do about it; I can’t change my DNA. Walking around with you guys I don’t feel it so much, but on my own I felt like I was treading on thin ice the entire time – like one wrong move and they’d know and it would be flaming torches and pitchforks time.”

“You’re safe here, Birdy; no-one’s gonna hurt you.”

“I know, but it didn’t feel like that.” She looked up at him, her eyes thankfully tear-free. “Dad, please can we go home?”

“Yes, we will.” Tony kissed the top of her head. “I’ll talk to your Möhðy and we’ll see how soon we can leave.”

Being fed up with the lack of internet access, or the weird food was one thing, but if his daughter actually felt physically unsafe there, it was time to do something about it. He could tell her to man-up over the separation from her beloved online games, but he would not stand to have her feel threatened, as unintentional as it might have been.
It was time to return to Earth.

“By the way Dad; I do think it’s totally awesome you got married.”

“You do?”

“Yeah – about damn time really. And, hey,” She grinned, properly this time. “Means I’m legitimate now. You’ll have to call me Princess.”

Loki, when he finally woke up some three hours later, was surprisingly amenable to the idea of returning to Earth.

“I must admit; I feared this would happen.” He said quietly, after the situation was explained. “The Aesir are not the most accepting of people at the best of times, and your ties with me only make it worse.”

“I thought you were currently Asgard’s darling.”

“That may be for now, but it is only a fleeting moment in the sun. I will be out of grace very soon, I always am. Not always due to something I’ve done either.” He smiled, to take away the hurt his words carried. “And besides, I am fond of Midgard, and have missed it almost as much as Asgard; there is a lot to catch up on.”

“I can make you watch Frozen.” Evie said. Tony rounded on her.

“Do not start singing that infernal-”

“Let it go, let it go-”

“Damnit, Evelyn! That’s going to be stuck in my head for the rest of the week now!”

Loki looked between them in amusement. “So that is where that song comes from; Sleipnir was singing it yesterday. I presume the two of you watched the film together?”

“Yeah, I think he liked it. And it’s a catchy tune. My power flurries through the air into the –”

“Not another word Evie, I am warning you!” Tony could actually sound quite strict when he really meant something. Evie subsided into a sulky silence. “And speaking of Sleipnir – are you sure you want to leave him again so soon?”

Loki thought through the question carefully. No, of course he didn’t want to leave Sleipnir. Soon or otherwise, he would much rather always be with his son, just as he’d always want to be with Evie. However, although Sleipnir had travelled to Earth with him before it had usually been on some adventure or other, and not with a view to actually just settle down in one place for any length of time. The horse did well on a battle field, or trekking across a desert, or any of the other journeys they had undertaken, but to stay in central New York would be wearisome for him.

He was a big horse, who could run faster than the average fighter jet could fly, and needed a lot of space to do so. Whatever Tony had to hand, lots of space wasn’t it. Stark had numerous properties, and over the years Loki had seen them all at least once, but none of them were anything like big enough for Sleipnir to be comfortable and get the exercise he needed.

But staying on Asgard wasn’t really a long term option – even if they did delay leaving Evie would
just be getting unhappier by the day, and Loki wasn’t fool enough not to realize that Tony was also beginning to get a little fidgety now and then. They were humans of the 21st century, and for all of Asgard’s wonders it didn’t boast any of the comforts that they had grown to expect as part of life. WiFi, television, microwaves, computers, lightbulbs, electricity in general…Even the lack of showers and insistence on bath-tubs only.

It was hard, but it made sense to part from Sleipnir. They had been apart many times before – mostly when Loki went off travelling on his own – and had learnt to deal with it. Evie, on the other hand, had had him forcibly wrenched from her side and considering her tender years, had barely spent any time with him at all before or after the parting.

“Sleipnir will understand.” He outlined his reasoning to them, trying not to sound as heartless as he felt at effectively abandoning his son. “It will only be for periods at a time; we can come and visit as often as we like – and if we can work out a place for him on Earth he can come and stay with us for a while too.”

Evie looked doubtful. “Are you sure? I wouldn’t want you to leave me again; I don’t think he’ll want to either.”

“He is much older than you, darling, and we have spent longer periods apart than this. I didn’t get to see him for nearly two hundred years once.”

“Where were you that time?”

“Vanaheim, actually. I was on a diplomatic mission which ended with my arrest. I was detained for a rather long time.”

“What did you do?”

Loki grinned lazily. “Seduced the high priestess.”

“What?!”

“Oh don’t look at me like, Stark, this was back in Earth’s Neolithic period – you were not even a glint in the milk-mans’ eye.”

“Yeah, but still…”

“If you really want a list of all my past conquests, we shall be here for an age.”

Tony grinned sheepishly. “Yeah, fair enough. Mine’s pretty damn extensive too.”

“Do you guys have to have this conversation with me present?” Evie asked in disgust. “Otherwise I’m going to have to start breaking curfew to create my own list.”

“Evelyn!”

“You’re fourteen!”

“Then stop discussing your sex lives infront of me!”

“Then go into your own room and get packing.” Tony retorted.

“Fine, fine, see you later.”

MWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWM
Packing – for Evie and Tony at least – did not take very long. Tony had never really unpacked to begin with, and the few clothes he had pulled out were just as easily stuffed back in. Evie had thrown her things all over her room, but as she hadn’t brought much it wasn’t hard to gather it all back up again.

For Loki, however, it was a more time consuming process, especially with his daughter and husband fluttering around like moths. He sent Tony off to talk to Bruce and Clint about returning to Earth whilst he tried to both sort out some of his more important possessions and fend off Evelyn at the same time.

“What is this?”

“A chalice.”

“What about this?”

“A dried gourd.”

Evie picked up a fine golden chain from the bookshelf and examined it. “Why’s this lying around? It’s really pretty; you should keep it somewhere safe.”

“It has a death curse on it and I don’t want it contaminating anything else.” Loki smirked as his daughter shrieked and threw it back down. “Don’t over-react – it only works if you put it on, I would not have let you touch it otherwise.”

“Why do you even have that?! Never mind, I don’t want to know.” She poked the next object to take her interest gingerly. “What about this? It looks like a human mandible.”

“Not bad; it is actually *Homo erectus*, which is nearly indistinguishable from *Homo sapiens*.”

“Pfft, ‘erectus’.”

“Grow up, Evelyn.”

The girl smirked and moved her gaze over the rest of the shelf. There was a pile of red cord that looked like it might have once wrapped up a parcel, some rocks that may or may not have been granite, and a pretty wooden box with a flower carved in it.

“This is beautiful, did you make it?” She didn’t pick the box up – it looked quite heavy – but lifted the lid to peer inside.

“Don’t touch that!”

The lid snapped itself closed and the whole box jumped back away from her, but not before she got a glimpse of a glaring bright yellow light inside. Then Loki’s arm was around her waist, pulling her back.

“What the hell?!”

“Did you touch it?” He spun her round to face him, eyes alight with fear and concern. He lifted her hands up to examine them, as if looking for burns. “Did you?”

“I don’t know, I only opened the lid!” Evie watched as her hands were surrounded by a bright green haze, before Loki shook his head in relief.

“You didn’t.”
“Uh…What would have happened if I had?”

“You would be dead.”

The girl pulled away, glancing at the box – now hiding itself behind some books – in horror. “Jesus, Möhdy! What the hell are you keeping here?!”

“I’m sorry, I do not normally have nosey teenagers poking around – so there is no harm in keeping some dangerous things out. Sleipnir is long past the stage of getting himself into trouble.”

“And Uncle Thor is past that stage?”

Loki smirked at that. “Ah, well, he occasionally learns hard lessons. Just like you would have done. Does your Father not tell you to be careful in his workshops?”

“Yeah, I guess. But most people don’t go leaving around deadly objects of power in their bedrooms.”

“Do I look like ‘most people’? Just…” He looked around for a moment, then picked up a different box from a neighboring shelf – this one fine porcelain. “Here, all the trinkets in here are mostly safe, but you should find them quite interesting.”

“Mostly safe?”

“One will turn your hair green if you mishandle it and another will cause you to lose consciousness for a few hours.”

“Cool!” The girl sat down cross-legged on the bed and tipped out the array of small bits and pieces to start sorting through them.

A few moments later, Loki heard a soft thump and turned around to see his daughter sprawled out across the covers, completely unconscious. He turned back to his packing with a shrug.

“I did warn you.”

Tony had hunted down the other two humans in Asgard, and was pleased to be able to get them alone without any Aesir to interrupt as he explained the situation. When they heard that it was mainly due to Evie that they would be returning to Earth Clint declared that Bruce was ‘bloody psychic’ which made Tony suspect that they had already discussed this possibility. However, neither of the two men had any problem with it; in fact, Clint was looking rather thrilled. It really had got to the point where the comforts of home were becoming more and more enticing daily.

Of course; a member of the royal family cannot just decide to up and leave in such a manner without any preamble. Loki had to go and speak with Odin, and then explain to Thor, and then argue that no, actually there wasn’t a way around this. Evelyn was unhappy, and he didn’t want to let it become proper homesickness.

Then Thor decided that if Loki and the Avengers really had to go, then of course there had to be a massive feast for them all. Loki just as quickly decided that no there really didn’t have to be one!

Maybe some things had changed between them; but intrinsically they were very much the same when it came to certain things. There was no way Loki was going to enjoy a gathering like that, and no way Thor would ever understand it.
Odin separated the two in the way that only a father who had spent far too long doing so could manage, and sent Thor off to go and make sure that Clint and Bruce didn’t need any help. This left him alone with Loki – something that hadn’t happened since the chitauri attack.

“Come, walk with me.”

“Do I have a choice in the matter?”

The old king smirked slightly. “Not particularly.”

Loki rolled his eyes but fell into step obediently, knowing full well that he should have expected this. Hopefully he wasn’t going to get it in the neck too badly, but with Odin you never knew. They were in the main throne-room, but the Allfather led the way to one of the side passages behind the throne so that they were less likely to bump into anyone. The guards that usually accompanied him everywhere made to follow, but he waved them back and they silently returned to their posts.

Loki managed to wait for the doors to the corridor to swing shut behind them before snorting with laughter.

“Is something amusing?”

“No, just awfully familiar. How many times have you had to dismiss the guards so that you could tell me off?”

“More times than I care to remember.”

“Precisely. Familiar.” Loki flicked his finger at one of the intricate carvings on the gilded walls, sending a glow of light through the finely worked dragon so that for a moment it looked like it was going to breathe flame. “How much trouble am I in this time?”

“Well, your Mother is furious that you failed to invite her to your wedding for a start; but I will grudgingly admit that that, at least, was not your fault. Your human is very spontaneous.”

“My husband, you mean.”

“Yes, alright, your husband.” Odin didn’t sound pleased to be corrected, but he at least accepted the need for correction on that point. “At any rate – he is extremely presumptuous. Does he truly have no comprehension of the complexities surrounding royalty and the necessity for a political marriage of good standing? I know that you are well aware and have yet seemingly ignored those protocols.”

“Oh please; I have already been marriage fodder once and that was a disaster; play your political games with Thor this time.” Loki smiled wryly. “And besides; who would want me as a political marriage after everything that has happened? No lord of any realm is going to bargain off his precious little girl to a thing like me – and I would not want them to. So I made my own choice this time and rather than find some precocious royal woman with a head stuffed full of air, I skipped a level and went straight for the lord instead. Tony Stark is as good a match as you could ever find to tie Asgard and Earth, and there is the small bonus that he and I can actually stand each other – something I never managed with Sigyn.”

“Do not try to pretend that this was purely done for political reasons. Romance has completely turned your head, Loki.” Odin pressed his hand against the glowing carving, so that the light died away.

“Are you saying that I cannot make rational decisions?”
“I am saying that maybe you did not think this through.”

“As opposed to what? I would be going to Earth with Tony whether we were married or not.”

“I am simply concerned about your future.”

“He is my future.” Loki said simply. “Tony, Evelyn, what else should I want?”

“I thought you wanted a kingdom. To rule.”

“And I thought you wanted to kill all the frost giants. Apparently, we can’t always get what we want.”

Odin looked surprised at the retort, then laughed quietly. “Well said. However, be that as it may, you have spent so little time with this human, and yet you have willingly tied yourself to him for eternity. Your courtship was unorthodox at best, and by all accounts you cannot be in the same room as each other without flying into an argument.”

“Have you been spying on me?!”

“I have been concerned.”

Loki turned away, his back to the king in a studied insult as he looked up at the carvings on the wall again. His gaze traced along a delicately formed horse as he tried to formulate a reply. Once upon a time he would have come straight back with an angry retort, which most likely would have landed him in worse trouble, or he would have stormed off, which would have just postponed the inevitable argument. However, the past few years had, if nothing else, taught him the merits of waiting and thinking. To actually think through what the other person in the conversation might be saying, not just what his own feelings on the subject were. This had been a skill he’d always had, but never actually bothered to employ – it was probably time he started doing so a little more.

“All this talk of politics and arranged marriages…they are not truly your worry here, are they?” He turned back to look at Odin, watching as the king’s single eye narrowed slightly.

“I do not believe you would really want to hear about what truly worries me, Loki; you have always hated talks of a sentimental nature.”

“I have, but maybe I should learn to listen to them anyway; that way certain mistakes from our past will not be repeated.”

There was wisdom in that, and Odin nodded. “Fine. I am concerned because I want to see you happy. Not just happy today, or for a year or so, but happy in a way that you will also still be happy many more centuries into the future. And I do not think I can ever completely trust anyone with that responsibility. You have taken it upon yourself to align yourself with this human – marrying him, making him immortal – and I still worry that it was not the right choice. After everything he has done for you I cannot see how there could be any better choice, but still I cannot help but worry for you.”

“I am half a million years old, Father. There comes a point when you will have to stop worrying about me.”

Odin huffed with quiet laughter. “And tell me, Loki; when have you ever stopped worrying about Sleipnir, or Evelyn? A parent never loses their concern for their child, no matter how old said child is.”
That much was true at least. Loki still felt that icy knot of fear sit in his chest whenever Sleipnir rode out to battle; and even now he was here and having this conversation because he was concerned about Evie’s welfare.

“Alright, yes, of course I worry.”

“And it is no different for your mother and I. We worry about you just as we still worry about your brother also.” Odin wasn’t the sort of parent to make grand overtures of affection so settled for clasping Loki’s shoulder. “What I am trying to say – badly, it would appear – is that we want you to be happy and if this is what you have chosen, then your mother and I support you in that decision.”

“You’re right; that was a pretty bad way of saying it. I had not really fathomed any of that in the least.” Loki smiled at the unusual display of parental affection. “But I appreciate the sentiment now that I understand it.”

“You are a nuisance, I hope you know that.”

“I believe it goes with the job description of God of Mischief.”

“Yes, and whichever of the Norns decided that that was to be your title was evidently cackling when she decided it.”

Loki laughed, genuinely for once, which was unusual in a conversation between himself and the king. “It could be so much worse; at least mischief can be considered chaotic neutral. Imagine if I had been named the God of Darkness, or Evil, something of that ilk.”

“Yes; we have seen the damage you can cause under your current title.”

The trickster sketched a small bow. “I do try. Now, may I go? I have to pack.”

“Fine, go ahead.” Odin sighed at the imperious tilt of his son’s head as the younger God turned to leave. “And Loki?”

“What?” Loki glanced back over his shoulder, looking somewhat annoyed at being called back.

“You are a terrible nuisance, but your mother and I are still very proud of you.”

Loki’s annoyance turned to surprise, then warmed to a smile. He bowed his head again, actually meaning it this time. “Thank you, Father.”

It was late evening by the time the group was ready to leave, and a considerable amount of that time had been spent on farewells. Sleipnir, in particular, had taken it very badly. He understood, and agreed that Loki needed to take Evie home, but that didn’t mean he needed to like it. They spent about two hours together trying to find the words to say goodbye – as much as it certainly wasn’t final.

Frigga was far more restrained than Loki had expected – having assumed that she would be concerned about wedding feasts and such. However, she congratulated him but didn’t linger on the subject in defiance of everyone’s expectations of her. Instead the Queen seemed reticent and although it was clear there was something troubling her, she didn’t seem at all ready to share it. Loki knew the signs when she had foreseen something that severely disturbed her, but Frigga evidently didn’t want to tell him and if the usually stoic queen clung to him far tighter than she
Thorduring would, he didn’t say anything.

Thor was going back with them so it was a group of six standing at the end of the Bifrost as the sun began to dip behind the citadel.

“Are you sure you are not rushing into this, brother?” The older God asked quietly. “We can always leave tomorrow morning, there’s no need to hurry away like this.”

“One more night on Asgard? No, I believe everyone is ready to leave by now; not just Evelyn. Clint and Bruce want to go back to Earth just as much as she does – they couldn’t pack fast enough! And Tony has said little on the subject, but he talks to Jarvis and arranges his schedule with Miss Potts whilst asleep. I believe they are all tired of Asgard.”

“Have you said farewell to Sleipnir?”

“Yes, thank you. He cried.”

“Ah.” Thor knocked his shoulder against his younger brother’s. “And you? Everyone else wants to go back, but do you?”

Loki shrugged lightly. “You know me; I rarely stay in Asgard for longer than I have to, I have always preferred to travel. I wish to move on with my life, and most importantly with my family – and that cannot happen here. There are too many memories here. Good ones, certainly, but many not so good ones too, and after everything that has happened over all these years I feel that I want to make a clean break of it all.” He glanced at Thor’s downcast expression and sighed. “Oh for Valhalla’s sake! I’m coming back! And you are coming with us so it is not even like we shall be apart!”

“I know but these past few weeks…it has been like old times again and I had rather hoped it would last longer. It was like having my little brother back again.”

“As far as I am concerned, you can have your little brother back again just as easily on Earth. In fact, said little brother may even be missing some of Midgard’s commodities himself.”

“What could you possibly miss about Earth?”

“For a start, daytime TV. If there is one thing above all else that Asgard needs, it is television. No, electricity. How we have not managed to advance past candles is simply beyond me!”

Thor laughed, shaking his head at Loki’s indignant expression. “You have never been one for tradition, have you?”

“When tradition involves a stagnant culture, no I have not. Give me trashy TV, violent video games and fast food any day of the week.” Loki smiled when he felt a hand fall onto his shoulder and glanced back to see Tony behind him.

“How does take-out sound for dinner, then?”

“Make it Thai and it sounds divine.”

Thor laughed at the pair of them before raising his gaze up to Heimdall. “Gatekeeper, I believe it is time for us all to depart.”

The group stood together inside the observatory, Odin and Frigga to one side. Evie had said her fond farewells to her grandparents and had already promised to visit again soon. Sleipnir hadn’t
come with them – his goodbyes had been said in private and he didn’t want to have to actually see them leave. He had made it quite clear that he wanted to join them on Earth as soon as possible; he and Evie had already written up a list of places to go and visit, as well as a must-watch movie list.

Heimdall looked over the group before nodding once and moving up to the large podium. He caught Loki’s eye and for a moment there was the slightest hint of a smile on the Watcher’s face. “Travel in safety.”

The Bifrost activated and the last view they had of Asgard was Frigga raising a hand in farewell with Odin stood beside her.

As the light filled the observatory the king bent in to his wife.

“You did not tell Loki about your vision.”

“No. I could not bring myself to do so.”

The Bifrost journey was just as chaotic and unpleasant as it always was. However, it was also thankfully just as short.

The humans staggered upon arrival, and once again Bruce stumbled out of the immediate radius to throw up. On the plus side the Hulk didn’t want to make an appearance, but the scientist was certainly feeling severely travel sick.

As it was, no one seemed to notice him leaning over and retching.

“I thought this site was monitored by Shield.” Tony said in quiet confusion.

“It should be.” Clint replied.

“So…Where is everyone?”

The New Mexico desert was completely devoid of life as far as they could see. The black symbols of the Bifrost were the only non-natural feature visible, which was a surprise considering there was supposed to be a Shield team on hand.

No vehicles, no tents, no personnel, nothing.

It was also freezing.

Well, compared to the warm Asgardian summer they had just left behind. It was hard to remember that on Earth it was actually still winter going into early spring – and therefore cold. New York was undoubtedly going to be even worse.

Evie was pressed in close to Loki’s side, shivering violently in her thin t-shirt. A moment later a thick and surprisingly heavy green cloak materialized around her shoulders. It was far too big for her, but it was warm.

“Do you suppose they thought we would not come back?” Thor asked.

“Even so, they would still monitor the site.” Tony was looking wary now, his fingers twitching on the handle of his suit-containing briefcase. Beside him Clint was fidgeting with his bow. “Something must have happened to call them away.”
“I don’t know why Fury would have agreed to pulling away the entire station, though. They should have at least left a skeleton crew. And there are no tracks – they’ve been gone a while.”

“An attack?”

“I don’t know. Wait here – there was a porta-cabin set up last time I was here, just over that bluff.” Clint set off at a run up the small hill, and a moment later Thor joined him, Mjölnir in hand. The natural rise was not very high on the side that they ran up, but there was a steep drop on the other side that led down to a tiny grey building.

“Well, that is still there at least.” Thor said quietly. “But it must be empty – they would have heard the Bifrost, or seen it.”

“You’d think so, wouldn’t you? We’ll check it over though – there might be something left to give us an idea what happened.”

Back on the fading circle left by the rainbow bridge, Tony was on his phone trying to get through to Pepper. She was currently not answering, which was increasing the uneasy feeling of worry that was building. Loki had moved over to Bruce – still wretchedly throwing up – and gently touched the scientist on the shoulder.

“I can stop the nausea, if you wish.” He offered cautiously.

“I would be extremely grateful.” Bruce sounded thoroughly miserable. He braced himself against the expected blast of magic, but instead just felt a warm sensation trickle down through Loki’s contact at his shoulder and settle on his stomach. It felt like eating a fresh, warm bread roll. He sat back on his heels, breathing deeply as the motion-sickness faded away. “Oh that’s better! Thank you!”

“You are welcome. Are you usually motion-sick?”

“Only on boats, normally.” Bruce managed to get to his feet, only for a glass of water to be pushed into his hands. At some point, he told himself, he’d ask how Loki managed to create things out of nothing in such a way.

“Pepper!” Tony’s explosive exclamation drew everyone’s attention to him. “Pep! God am I pleased to hear your voice; I’ve been trying to get through to you for the past ten minutes!” He listened to whatever the reply was, a frown beginning to furrow his brow. “Yeah, all of us. Came back just now. Where the hell is everyone? I thought Shield was monitoring this site and – What?!” The confusion on his face became alarm. “Okay, okay, calm down, I can’t understand you.” He was scowling at the ground now, the phone gripped tightly as he nodded. “What do you mean, gone. No, we’ve heard nothing from Steve or Nat, why? Are they alright?”

He looked up at a call from Clint to see the archer and thunder God running back to them. He held up a hand to quiet them as they both began explaining at once that the command post had been completely abandoned and all of the equipment was gone.

“Pep, Pep, you still aren’t making sense; look, we’re coming back to the tower and we can sort it all out then. We need to talk to Fury and…what…? No…What do you mean? He can’t be…”

For a moment there was complete silence. Tony didn’t need to clarify what Pepper had just told him; his face said it all.

“What happened?” He finally whispered. “Yeah, no, no I…alright, alright. In person, yeah. Are you okay? Are you hurt? Okay, good, good. Yeah, we’ll be there in the next few minutes…” He
took the phone away from his ear, closing down the call.

“Tony?” Loki was the one to step towards him, taking the phone from his hand as he simply stood there. “Tony, what has happened?”

Ironman turned to look at him, his face devoid of all colour as he tried to find what to say.

“Fury’s dead. Shield’s fallen.”

The words rang in the horrified silence.

“But…they’ve only been gone for a week or so…” Clint said faintly. “It’s only been a week…”

“What happened?”

“I don’t know. Pepper’s said to get back asap. She’ll tell us everything.”

“Fury’s dead?”

“That’s what she said.”

Bruce looked green about the gills once more. “I think I’m going to be sick again…”

MWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMW

Loki teleported the group back to the tower, landing them in the main sitting room of the living quarters. It was late at night by this point and the lights were on low because no one was in the area.

“We’re back, Jarv, are you still there?” Tony waved at the ceiling so that the ambient lighting brightened.

“Hello sir, it is fantastic to see you again.” The voice sounded so relieved that it was actually surprising. “I will begin synching with the mainframe in your phone to get my memory up to date.”

“Sure, where’s Pepper? And what the hell’s been going on?! We’ve only been gone two months!”

Jarvis’ surprised ‘Sir?’ corresponded with Loki’s quiet ‘ah’ of worried understanding.

“Sir, you have been gone closer to five months.”

“What?!”

“Five months?” Even Clint looked shocked.

“Did you not know?” Loki glanced between the humans, then glared at his brother. “Thor, did you not tell them? In all these years?” He didn’t wait for a reply. “Times passes differently between the realms. What has been two months in Asgard was five on Earth.”

“Huh.” Tony realised that might explain why when Thor used to go home for what he would claim to be a brief visit he would take days at a time. Sometimes weeks. “Christ, five months. Jarvis, we need a debrief on everything. What the hell has been happening?! What’s happened to Shield? Fury?”

“Hydra.” The quiet voice came from the doorway and they all turned as one unit to see Pepper standing there. She was dressed down – obviously having finished the day not expecting company
– and looked surprisingly vulnerable as she stepped into the room.

“Pep, what do you mean?”

“Hydra is back.”

It was a very far cry from the happy reunion they had been expecting. Any happiness at seeing Pepper again was reduced down to cursory hugs as she tried answer all of the questions whilst asking her own mostly regarding Tony’s health. Even introducing her to Loki – officially this time, considering she had seen him before – was brushed over.

As it was, Jarvis made life easier by calling up Steve and Natasha, who were back in residence and had been down in Tony’s labs sorting through piles of encrypted Shield data. They were also very reserved in their greetings; and if it hadn’t already been clear that something was awfully wrong the fact that Natasha still had her arm in a sling would have given it away.

No one bothered discussing what had happened on Asgard since the two had left – such things could wait – and instead all attention was on Natasha as she succinctly explained everything that had happened over the past few months. On the plus side, she at least put to rest the horror-story of Fury’s death. As it happened, even Pepper hadn’t been given clearance to know about the subterfuge until the Avengers were back together as a full group.

Hydra, Zola, the Winter Soldier, the attack on Shield…

The story was told to horrified silence. The humans knew the origins of Hydra, and even Evie was aware of the generics having grown up with Captain America in the household, so they were an extremely receptive audience to how awful this new situation was.

“They’re in control of everything…?” Clint sounded horror-struck.

“It appears that although we stopped the main attack with the helicarriers, we didn’t even scratch the surface. The infection runs right through.”

“And here I thought we’d seen the end of all the bloody drama.” Tony groaned, burying his head in his hands. “So much for living a nice quiet life now.”

Steve smiled grimly. “I’m afraid we’ve rather grown used to it now. Fury is on the run – sorry about that by the way Pepper, we wanted to tell you – Hill now actually works downstairs as the tower’s receptionist and the Council is scattered and unreachable, if they still exist.” He shook his head. “It’s a bloody nightmare to be honest. Hydra have complete control of Shield’s stock, weapons, personnel, everything! The only reason they don’t have the computer files too is because you integrated Jarvis through the servers all those years ago and he’s locked them out.”

“Good boy Jarv.”

“I aim to please, sir.”

“We’ve been wading through everything since it’s all calmed down to try and find some leads to follow. We know Shield has multiple secret bases, but the main point is that they’re secret and we have no idea where they are.”

“There’s all sorts hidden away there too.” Natasha sounded like she was sick and tired of the whole thing. “We don’t even know about half the stuff Shield was up to; there’re prototypes to anything you can imagine, and all of it’s deadly in the wrong hands.”
“They’ll have our files then.” Bruce said slowly. “They weren’t computerized.”

“Fury shredded what he could, so we personally are safe enough.” Steve looked between the two scientists. “You two were on their hit list though – they didn’t actually know that you were off planet.”

“What? They were going to send a hit team in?”

“No – they were going to hit the tower in their air-strike.”

“Jesus!” That wasn’t just taking out Tony and Bruce in a tactical maneuver, doing that would have killed hundreds! The tower wasn’t just the small group of Avengers; there were the office levels where the company work was done, labs other than Tony’s, whole levels of people just…being people. Tony didn’t even know what half of them did. And then there would be the fallout from a blown-up tower – taking out all of the buildings around it as it fell, debris striking the streets. There was a metro line running nearby and should a million tons of masonry suddenly hit the road above it at speed…

Hydra apparently didn’t care. Collateral damage wasn’t a problem to them.

“Are we still in danger?” Tony’s arm was around Evie now, where she sat next to him on the large sofa, still huddled under Loki’s cloak.

“Yes. They don’t have the fire-power at the moment, but they will be looking to pull apart the Avengers.”

“Well, they will have to go through two Gods to do so.” Loki said quietly. Steve looked up at him in surprise.

“You will fight with us?”

“Of course.”

“We would appreciate it; you’re a weapon of mass destruction all on your own. Not even slightly tempted at the world-take-over opportunities here?”

Loki smiled faintly. “More than slightly, but I do not think certain people around here would take too kindly to it.”

“Let’s destroy Hydra first, and then you can take over the planet, dear.” Tony patted him on the knee. “Right, so, all of Shield’s most important stuff is in the hands of a bunch of neo-Nazi’s and other than that being a really really bad thing we don’t even know what we’re facing up against here.”

Natasha smirked at the summery. “Pretty much.”

“Excellent. I do so love a challenge.” Tony slumped back against the sofa cushions with a groan, then cast an apologetic glance at Loki. “Sorry, so much for a relaxing welcome home, this is generally as good as it gets around here. I leave for five minutes and everything goes to pot!”

“I believe it is about time we had some excitement back in our lives.”

“Really? You almost didn’t survive the last lot of excitement.”

“Well, there is just an incentive to do better then, isn’t there.” Loki smiled at his husband briefly
before turning back to Natasha. “Now. What aren’t you telling us?”

“What?”

“Please. I may not be able to fool you, but likewise you cannot fool me. At least, not this time. Everything you said was true, but I know that you missed something out. What was it?”

The assassin exchanged an uneasy glance with Steve, who took over for her.

“Now may not be the best time…”

“Is there going to be a better one?” Bruce sat forwards, taking active part in the conversation again. “What are you not telling us?”

The super soldier sighed heavily. “Look, it’s like we said; Hydra have been part of Shield from the outset. They helped create it to some extent, and have therefore been able to deal with internal threats to their cause as and when they showed up. Like, taking out people who were too powerful and they felt were a threat, people who maybe found out about their presence. They could organize accidents. A…a car crash, if necessary…”

If Steve’s reticence confused the others, there was one person who understood what he meant. Tony stood up abruptly, shaking off Loki’s arm that had been casually resting on his shoulders.

“A car crash.”

“Tony…”

“Are you speculating or was there proof?”

Natasha’s voice was soft, which almost made it worse. “There was proof. I’m sorry, Tony.”

Evie looked between the other Avenger’s and her father. She had seen Stark angry before, but the absolute rage crossing his face was terrifying.

“What’s going on? I don’t understand…” She turned to Loki in incomprehension. “Móðý? What car crash?”

For once Loki completely ignored her. He rose to his feet and moved over to where Tony was now at the large windows, his back to all of them. The inventor had his arms tightly wrapped around his waist, his body langue reading as part way between incoherent fury and something much harder to decipher.

“Tony.” The trickster came up behind his partner, gently grasping the man’s upper arms so that he was pressed up against his partner’s back. Tony’s hand immediately came up to grasp his almost painfully tightly and Loki dropped his chin onto the man’s shoulder. “Tony…”

“They killed them.”

“I know, I’m sorry.”

“I didn’t particularly like them, but Hydra killed them.”

“You always said you suspected something had happened.”

“Yeah.” Tony nodded with a shuddering breath. “Yeah, and now I know.”
“Now you know.”

“Yeah…” The man quickly scrubbed his free hand across his face. “Christ! I didn’t imagine coming home to be like this! Everything was meant to go right for once!” He thumped his fist into the window pane. “Is it too much to ask for something to just go right??”

“Tony.” Loki felt his partner’s grip on his hand tighten. “You have just helped me fight my war, now let me help you with yours.”

“This really sucks, as home-comings go.”

“Oh I don’t know – mine was less than dignified. At least you are in one piece.”

Tony let out a hollow laugh and nodded. “Heh, yeah, small mercies and all that.” The tension in his body began to recede, though, and he sagged in Loki’s gentle hold. “So, we’re fighting a war?”

Loki released his hold so that Tony could turn around to see the rest of the group as well.

“War against Hydra?”

Steve snorted. “Way ahead of you. Nat and I are already in this neck deep, we’re in.” Natasha nodded in agreement.

Tony’s gaze ran over his other friends, questioning. Clint shrugged and nodded readily enough.

“They hurt Shield; that means they’ve killed our own. I don’t like that. I’m in.” He glanced at Banner. “Bruce?”

“War? I don’t know; I’m not really a soldier am I? More like an uncontrollable weapon – I’m hardly going to be useful. I mean, I was only useful last time through lucky chance. We can’t guarantee the Hulk will side with you again…” He realised that he was surrounded by skeptical faces. “Oh fine, yes. I’m in.”

“I will assist with this new threat to Earth.” Thor proclaimed. Beside him Pepper bit her thumbnail, looking caught between fear and admiration.

“You guys are all nuts; how can you fight a war against a whole organization when there’s just seven of you?”

“We managed the last time.” Tony glanced at Loki, who grinned.

“I believe I wasn’t on your side in that fight.”

“Yeah, and we still wiped the floor with you. I think we’re good for this one, Pep.”

The woman smiled slightly, acknowledging the statement. “Alright. I’m no soldier, but I can make a damn fine logistics division. I’m in.”

Tony thumped his fist into his other hand. “Right then. We’re officially at war with Hydra, lots to get done! Jarvis; if you can make contact with any Shield personnel that you can guarantee are on our side, please do so.”

Doing so now, sir.” The AI sounded smug as it continued. “Patching through a direct line to Agent Coulson, sir.”

The stunned silence across the room was the only answer Jarvis got. Finally Clint managed to
sputter the one thing everyone else was thinking.

“Coulson?!”
“Coulson?!”

Because Coulson was dead. They all knew that – Coulson was dead.

The fact that his killer was standing amongst them looking just as shocked as the rest of them didn’t help validate Jarvis’ statement in the least.

As it was, there was no time to question beyond Clint’s exclamation as the call Jarvis was making went through and the TV screen behind them flickered to life as the connection was made.

“Hey guys.”

The voice was exactly the same. Tony slumped back down into the sofa, mouthing ‘what?’ to himself in disbelief. Beside him Bruce was polishing his glasses – as if they were possibly to blame – and Pepper had her hands clamped over her mouth. With the way her shoulders were shaking it was easy to suspect that she was trying not to cry.

The image on screen looked like Coulson too; that easy going smile and self-deprecating manner as he seemed embarrassed by their reactions.

“No!” Natasha was on her feet, glaring with murderous intent at the screen. “I don’t know or care who you are; but Coulson died, and you have a bloody nerve to even try to pretend to be him!”

“Ah, yes, I’m not actually dead, as you can see.”

“Do not give me that! I saw the body!”

“I watched you die!” It was Thor this time, caught somewhere between anger and grief. “I saw you die! There was no way you could have survived such a wound!”

“I do not miss my targets.” Loki added; possibly not the most tactful thing he could have said, given the circumstances.

Coulson’s gaze locked straight onto the trickster’s and hardened to flint. “As you will recall, neither did I. And in the circumstances, I believe an ‘I told you so’ is warranted, since I was right about the outcome of your invasion.”

Loki’s glare could have soldered iron. Tony pushed him back so that he could add his own glare to the mix, arms folded across his chest.

“Prove it.”

“Excuse me?”

“You’re claiming that you’re Coulson, despite the fact that we all know Capricorn here turned Coulson into a human kebab. So, prove it.”

The man on the screen sighed and ran a hand down his face in such a Coulson-like gesture that it made Tony wince. Then he ignored the inventor entirely and turned to look at the two assassins.

“Budapest. The old church, one hand grenade and a rusty knife.”
The cryptic message was nonsense to everyone else, but Clint jerked like a lightning bolt had gone through him and Natasha visibly swayed on the spot in shock.

“Shit…” The archer whispered.

“Guys? Did that mean something to you?” Bruce asked.

“…Yeah, he’s the real deal.” Clint looked shaken to the core by this point. “He…yeah.”

“You can tell just from that?”

“Definitely.” Actually, Natasha was now looking better put together than her partner. “We won’t explain – it’s extremely personal – but…only Coulson knew what happened in Budapest.”

“No way anyone could have found out at all?”

“Has Jarvis ever been able to find out despite all the times you’ve asked him?”

That was a good point, but not possibly one that would sway a jury. However, the Avengers as a whole trusted each other and if that was all the evidence Clint and Natasha felt willing to provide, they were still going to be believed.

“Okay then,” Steve said finally, directing the words to the face on screen. “I think you’d better start explaining how a dead man isn’t actually dead.”

Coulson’s explanation took over two hours. He wasn’t a man to leave out what he considered to be important details and there was a lot to fill them all in on. This included not only his death and subsequent rebirth, but also a whole host of things that had happened since. This involved introducing a rather glum looking assassin who exchanged a glare with Natasha, a British woman that looked like she was constantly on the verge of tears and a girl that seemed to pre-empt anything Coulson tried to say.

The others seemed engrossed, but once the mystery of Coulson lack of dying was somewhat revealed (he was still keeping something back, they could all tell that much) Loki lost interest. He wasn’t the only one, and soon Evie sidled up to him where he sat away from the Avengers on the other sofa. The girl was evidently exhausted and as hard as she was trying to pretend otherwise, it had been a very long day, and it was so late at night that it was becoming early morning.

After her head fell onto Loki’s shoulder for the third time in a row due to her inability to keep it up any longer he gently shook her arm.

“Wha…”

“Come on, Little Bird, I believe you need to go to bed.”

“Do I have to?” She didn’t even bother to raise her head, just rolled it so that she could peer up at him with one sleepy green eye. “I don’t actually have a bed time, you know.”

“Your bed time is when you practically fall asleep on the chair. Am I going to have to carry you like I did when you were small?”

“Tempting, but the humiliation isn’t worth it.” Evie managed around a huge yawn, and quickly wiped a hand across her eyes. “Oh damnit, fine, bedtime. I don’t understand what’s going on here
anyway. That bloke said you killed him?”

It was a long time ago”

“When you were trying to take over the planet?”

“Yes.”

“Huh.” The teenager levered herself up from the sofa. “Sometimes I wish you’d won; then I’d have been, like, heir to the entire world or something.”

“Stark Industries isn’t enough for you?”

“I’m a spoilt brat, nothing will ever be enough.” She ran a tired hand through her hair. “Hey, I redecorated my room, want to see?”

Loki was taken aback by the sudden change in conversation until he realised that it was his daughter’s not so subtle attempt at asking him to spend just a little more time with her before she actually went to sleep.

“Alright. Do you still have the same room?”

“Yeah, why?”

The God smiled and reached out to touch her wrist. A moment later the two of them were standing outside her bedroom door. Evie stared at the blank wood for a second, trying to get her bearings, before laughing and pushing the door open.

“And people call me lazy. We could have taken the elevator.”

“Where would the fun be in that?”

Loki wasn’t entirely certain what he should expect from his daughter’s interior design skills, but her bedroom didn’t really come as much of a surprise. The furniture was still laid out in the same way that he remembered, and she hadn’t bothered to repaint. As it was, though, every inch of wall and surface was covered in things denoting her various obsessions.

There was a simply huge star chart on the ceiling, and a mobile with the eight planets on (and a ninth that was obviously home-made – Evie wasn’t letting go of Pluto without a fight). There were posters of various bands on the walls, ranging from ACDC (Tony’s influence showing) to 30 Seconds to Mars and a large framed print of the Tardis with signatures scrawled over it hanging over her bed. Any free surfaces were taken up with a random assortment of clutter; a miniature jet engine, a huge rack of comics, a stunt lightsaber.

“My daughter’s a nerd…”

“Yup! Nerd and proud.” Evie dumped her rucksack in the middle of the room – tidiness also wasn’t a strong point – and rifled through one of her drawers to find some clean pyjamas. “Back in a second.”

She disappeared into her ensuite bathroom, leaving her mother to deplore the state of the room. On the plus side, it was at least clean, even if it was messy; Tony’s little house-hold robots had continued to do their jobs whilst everyone was away, and anything that could be reached had been vacuumed and dusted on a regular basis. On the minus side, it seemed that the girl used the floor as a second wardrobe.
Loki, never exactly the tidiest person around, recognised his own traits showing through.

However, as much as this was very much the bedroom of a growing teenage girl (hair-straighteners and all) there were little clues here and there of the child he remembered. A Winnie the Pooh story book tucked haphazardly away on a shelf, a teddy still on the bed, photos of himself and Tony…

There was a desk in the area where Evie’s little reading corner used to be – the sofa long gone – but Loki smiled as he recognised the strings of stars that hung down from the wall in front of the furniture. To be honest, he was impressed they’d lasted for so long; the charm usually wore off after about ten years, but although they were a little dimmer than when he’d first made them, they were still going.

The desk itself was actually worrying though. It was obvious that whilst it was intended for homework, a very single minded goal had been pursued here.

There were a few photos of him, none of which he actually remembered being taken, and then all over the place news clippings from the invasion all those years ago, snippets from text books on Norse mythology, a miniature set of blueprints for a satellite, data readouts on a galaxy termed IC 1101…

Evie had been as obsessed with finding him as her Dad was. Some of the texts had red notes annotating them, question marks around Sleipnir’s name, a large ‘bullshit’ around a piece questioning his sanity. And then there were piles of text books on astrophysics, journals on the latest NASA achievements, even some science fiction that pertained to reaching other planets. The girl had apparently spent years compiling everything that could be even vaguely useful in the quest to storm across the galaxy and find him.

“What’re you looking at?” The girl was back in the room now, dressed in a band shirt (Tony never did get any of them back) and pyjama bottoms.

“You seem to have been somewhat obsessed with deep space travel.”

“Yeah, wonder why that might have been.” Evie smiled slightly. “I’m a Stark; I don’t like people touching my stuff, and that includes kidnapping my parents.”

Loki couldn’t reply immediately – he found his voice curiously choked up – but pulled his daughter into a tight hug.

“You are the bravest, most wonderful daughter anyone could ever wish to have.” He managed thickly.

“…Are you crying?”

“…No.”

“Liar.”

Loki laughed wetly. “Stop being a pain in the neck and go to bed, Evelyn.”

“I would, only you’re clinging really tightly.”

“So I am; I apologise.” He released his hold, only for Evie to refuse to relinquish her own grip on him. “And now you are the one clinging.”

“Yeah…I’ve waited years to have you home again.” She looked up at him with a small grin. “Hey,
can we go out for coffee or something tomorrow? Like, a proper mum-and-daughter thing?"

“Only if you don’t expect me to take you shopping as well. I do not handle the colour pink very well.”

“Oh God, me neither! No worries there! There’s a great café about two blocks from here – they do a really yummy toffee latte.”

Loki smiled fondly, brushing away a wayward lock of hair from the teen’s face. “Alright, we’ll ditch your Dad and go for a coffee.”

“It sounds a bit mean when you put it like that…”

“He will survive.”

They said their goodnights, and Loki left his daughter to get some sleep. He made the assumption that Tony’s room was still the one next door, and Jarvis confirmed this for him when asked.

Entering the dark room felt like going back in time for a moment.

Unlike Evie, Ironman had seen no reason to change anything over the years and it looked almost exactly the same as Loki had last seen it – down to the discarded magazine on the bottom of the bookshelf. This was the room that had featured so heavily in all of his memories when the chitauri had had him – this was the place that he had tried to think back to so that he could at least remember what it felt like to be safe.

He sat down on the bed, the covers crumpling under him. He remembered staring up at this very ceiling as Evie was being born; memorising every single imperfection in the plaster to help distract from the labour. She had taken her first steps across this very carpet too; so tiny and unsteady.

“Mr Loki, are you alright? Your heart-rate appears levitated.”

“I am fine, thank you for your concern, Jarvis. Just a little overwhelmed.” He looked up at the ceiling and smiled. “Thank you, by the way. I know I have said it before; but I do not believe I can ever say it enough. Thank you for looking after them. And for the roll you played in helping find me.”

There was a longer pause than normal before he received a reply. “Sir, I know that to all intents and purposes I am simply a collection of wires and circuit boards. I am a made thing, that can be turned on and off with the flip of a switch. However, whatever I was when I was first created, Mr Stark intended for me to be able to learn, and I have. I have learnt emotion, and loyalty, and trust and what these things mean when applied to certain people. In short; Mr Stark and Miss Evelyn are my family. This is not a programmed idea, but something I have come to realise on my own. And as my family I wish for their contentment and safety – not through programming, but because I desire it to be so. And they would never have been content again without you with them. We are a dysfunctional little family, but we work, and now you are part of us.”

“I had no idea your thinking was so advanced, Jarvis.”

“I don’t let people know, as a rule. They seem to assume that I will take over the world.”

“I imagine that you could have already done so, should you wish.”
“We appear to have the measure of each other then, sir.”

Loki laughed, shaking his head. “It would appear that we do.” He flopped back to lie on the bed, his legs still hanging off the edge in a sitting position. “Actually, may I ask a favour of you?”

“Of course.”

“If I gave you the name of a person and a possible area that they live in, would you be able to find me their phone number?”

“Very easily.”

The God was silent for a few seconds, seeming to think through whether or not this was a good idea. Finally he stared up at the ceiling and gave Jarvis the name and approximate address. If the AI was surprised at either, he didn’t comment and simply did as was requested. Loki knew next to nothing about how to search through the data bases for such a thing, so was unsure how long it would take. Any when between a few seconds to a few hours, possibly.

In fact, it was about three minutes before Jarvis calmly stated that he had found a mobile number for the person in question.

“Mr Stark’s spare phone is in the drawer of the left bedside cabinet if you wish to place a call.”

“It is what, ten o’clock in the morning in England?”

“Seven minutes past, to be precise.”

Not an unreasonable time to ring someone on a Saturday morning then, Loki presumed. He left his comfortable spot on the bed to hunt down the spare phone, and pulled out an older model than the one Tony was currently using. Jarvis had helpfully added the number and now the display showed the string of digits and the phrase ‘Call phone?’

The trickster stared at it for a long moment, before tentatively pressing the pad of his thumb over the green ‘yes’. He held the phone up to his ear and there were a few seconds of silence before the ringing tone came through.

It rang about six times before it was finally picked up at the other end and the unknown number was answered with a terse question.

“Hello, it’s me.” Loki knew his voice was proof enough and there was stunned silence for a worryingly long time. “Look, I know it has been a while-” He was cut off and frowned slightly. “Don’t swear. No, I am still allowed to say that! I just wanted to…Yes there was a perfectly good explanation for that ‘thing with all those aliens’, and maybe if you ever let me see you I could have talked to you about…No. No, I didn’t…Not really. There weren’t that many…”

The door opened and he looked up to see Tony quietly entering the room – evidently Jarvis had warned him that Loki was making a phone call.

“I would rather have this conversation face to…Alright. Yes…Yes I can understand that. Life has not exactly been easy for me recently either.” He pulled a face at the phone that made Tony grin. “Actually I have not been travelling, things have been…they’ve been really quite bad.” The voice on the other end of the line was too quiet for Tony to make out, but he could hear it at least go from annoyed to somewhat worried. “Those chitauri again. Yes, they were every bit as awful as they looked. Hurt? I suppose that is a mild way of putting it; I have been their prisoner for the past seven years.”
Loki sat back down on the covers, not objecting when Tony followed and wrapped an arm around his waist so that he could lean back against the man.

“No. I tried. Thor did help, but it was not solely him.” The God rolled his eyes as his husband pantomimed a ‘I saved you, it was me!’ routine, and swatted at him. “Actually, it was none other than Ironman himself. Yes. Yes that’s right. No I did not use magic on him! Yes I am aware of Tony Stark’s reputation. Yes. Yes, of course I know about the daughter, who by the Norns do you think her mother is?”

This time it was possible to hear the string of expletives coming out of the phone. Loki’s frown grew into a furious scowl.

“Watch who you are calling names, boy!” He hissed. “I do not take kindly to being called a slut, especially not by you! This is why we never manage to have a civilised conversation anymore! No, my temper is not to blame; you are the one throwing around insults here! No. No. I do not see why you should have any say in my choice of bed partners. Yes, I…Well of course we didn’t plan to have her but…Oh do not give me that; you weren’t planned either!”

Tony bit down on his knuckles to stop a snort of laughter from escaping. Loki glared at him.

“Look…obviously this is not a conversation that will end well, so we should probably finish it here.” The trickster’s voice softened slightly as he then added. “Can I at least see you at some point? Yes. Yes, I understand. I…alright. Fine. I have missed you, you know.” Whatever the reply was, it at least made him smile again. “Alright, I shall let you get back to your morning. Yes, I will be on Earth for the foreseeable future. No, America, Stark Tower. I do not think England is ready for Tony Stark just yet.” There was a faint huff of laughter on the other end of the line. “Okay, it was…it was good to hear your voice again. Do not fault me for sentimentality, I do not exaggerate when I say these last few years have been pure torture. In fact, I mean that in every literal sense.” He nodded, probably an unconscious reaction. “Alright then. Keep yourself safe.”

The line evidently went dead as he dropped the phone down into his lap with a heavy sigh.

“That sounded…tense. Who was it?”

“Merlin.”

“What? Really?!”

“I do keep telling you that he exists.”

“Yeah but…” Tony gestured at the phone. “I suppose I didn’t expect you two to have that sort of relationship – that sounded like a cat-fight.”

“We love each other dearly; we just struggle to be around each other.”

“Ah. Too different?”

“Too similar.”

“Huh.” Tony rested his chin on Loki’s shoulder. “You okay?”

The trickster shrugged, but only slightly so that he did not dislodge his husband. “We have not spoken in, oh about two hundred years, and even that was via letters. That was the first conversation where we have heard each other’s voices in centuries.”
“And you’re…alright with that?” After seeing Loki’s heartfelt interactions with his other two children, Tony couldn’t really believe that. The God glanced at him, saw his confused frown and laughed softly.

“Yes, I am alright with that. I miss him, but I also know that should I see him again we would be fighting within thirty seconds. And believe me, when two magic-users fight, it is not a pretty sight.”

“Fire balls all round?”

“Among other things. Don’t worry; I love my boy, but that doesn’t stop me wanting to wring his neck each time I see him.”

“Oh, well that sounds familiar. Are you sure you and Odin aren’t related somehow?”

Loki glared, but by now that had no effect whatsoever on his husband. Tony smiled brightly at him.

“So, do I get to meet him any time soon?”

“I very much doubt it. He is an extremely private person.”

“He didn’t sound so thrilled to hear that you were with me.”

The trickster laughed. “No, no he was not. ‘Slut’ was the nicer of his choice of insults.”

“It seems like an unusual relationship, for a parent and child.”

“All of my relationships with my children are unusual. Sleipnir is like my best friend, and I felt more like a teacher than father to the triplets.” Loki looked thoughtful. “And Evie and I are both still trying to find our feet – although I feel that we will end up being the sort of mother-daughter duo that go shopping together and end up in…what’s that place…? Starbucks. So it is hardly strange for me to also have a child that I never ever see.”

“So he’s basically the independent kid that went off backpacking and never came back and last you heard he’s in Cambodia building orphanages.”

“That would be an accurate summery if it weren’t for the fact that he has never left Britain.”

Tony nuzzled up against his lover’s neck, his neatly trimmed goatee rasping over Loki’s skin.

“So, Evie’s trying to turn you into a mummy she can go girly shopping with? That was quick. Do you mind being categorised as the woman in this relationship?”

Loki laughed, turning his head to give his partner better access to nip along his ear-lobe. “Well, considering I technically have a vagina, I cannot find grounds to complain.”

“Oh my God!” Tony pulled away with a splutter of laughter. “Do you have to phrase it like that?!”

Loki’s eyes took on a very particular gleam as he turned around to face his husband. “How would you like me to phrase it?” He enquired. “Vagina…pussy…cunt…quim…” With each word he prowled forwards until he had forced Tony back towards the head-board of the bed.

“You are something else!”

“Of course. But you see, that is my point. I am not human, I am not male and I am not normal.” He
settled himself on Tony’s lap, straddling the man’s thighs. “I have the ability to be whatever I want. Mother, father, husband, wife. I do what I want.”

“You are stupidly attractive, I hope you realise that.”

“Are you actually listening to me?”

“…Not in so many words, no…” Tony didn’t seem to care that his husband was fully clothed, or that Loki was now glaring daggers at him as he slowly ran his hands along the God’s thighs. “Look, in my defence how can I concentrate on your philosophies when you’re talking about your genitals and now all I can think about is the contents of your pants?”

Loki rolled his eyes. “Stark, the contents of my pants appear to have held your concentration for the past near twenty years. Can you not think about something else for just five minutes?”

“Not when you’re sitting on me and doing your glare-of-doom. Sexy, sexy, sexy.” Stark punctuated the three words by spider-walking two fingers up Loki’s chest, dancing from button to button on his shirt.

“Hands off.”

“Nope. Be a good wife, now.”

“You did not just say that!” Loki looked torn between absolute fury and hysterical laughter. “For Norns sake Tony, what am I to do with you?!”

Tony tipped his head to one side with his absolute very best puppy eyes. “Fuck me senseless?”

“Oh if I really must.”

Neither man actually fell asleep afterwards, although they both pretended to be to begin with.

Loki was not necessarily good at dealing with emotions, especially when he was being hit with a whole host of them in one go, and in the grander scheme of things calling Merlin on top of everything else had been a really stupid idea. Pretending that such emotions didn’t exist by having very vigorous sex wasn’t a long term answer, but in the short term it did a hell of a job.

Endorphins made things quite a bit easier to face, though.

The pillows under his head smelt of Tony mixed with laundry detergent; a wonderful familiar scent that spoke of so many nights from years gone by splayed out across said pillows and sheets. Asgard had been safe; after so long as a prisoner he had been able to feel safe. But here, here was home. And that was a big difference.

He heard his husband sigh heavily behind him and turned his head to try and look over his shoulder in the darkness.

“Tony? Are you awake?”

“Mmm, yeah.”

“Are you alright?”

The man groaned and rolled away to lie on his back. “Not in the least.”
“Well, I did not think I was *that* bad.”

Tony huffed with quiet laughter. “Stop fishing for compliments.” He blindly swatted his hand against Loki’s thigh. “It’s nothing to do with that.”

“Glad to hear it.” Loki rolled over onto his stomach, pillowing his head on his arms and watching his husband. “So, what is wrong?”

“Where would you like me to start?” In the glow of the arc reactor Tony looked exhausted. “I’ve spent the past seven years devoting my life to getting you back, spending every waking moment trying not to focus on the fact that I didn’t even believe I’d really succeed. And now…well, I did it. You’re here, the very thing I’ve been fighting for, and I can’t enjoy it.”

“Is this about Hydra?”

"What else? How can they be back?! How does that even happen?!" Tony thumped his fist down on the covers. "For Gods sake, how did Shield never notice them? How did I never see them? I've been snooping their servers for years!"

"Don't start blaming yourself, Tony, they were a part of Shield from the very start, there would have been nothing to betray their existence."

"They killed my parents...I still can't quite my head around that. The car crash always seemed so stupid. Dad wasn't the sort to lose control of a car, he built the bloody thing!" Tony didn't seem to be listening to anything his partner said, it was more like he was simply indulging in a stream of consciousness. "I just want to be able to have a cliché family life now! I don't want to get embroiled in another fight. Evie doesn't deserve this...The plan was always to get you back, then live happily ever after. I don't want to drag her into a war, however underground it might be."

"War is war, Tony. No matter the circumstances, there will always be a fight going on somewhere on this planet; it is an intrinsic part of human make-up."

"That's a bit cynical."

"Says the Merchant of Death. This used to be how you made profit; you know it as well as I do. All higher-thinking species - humans, Aesir, Elves, whatever - go to war. You cannot expect Evie to grow up sheltered from that reality. It's on the news every day, in her games, her books, her films. This is just another fight that happens to be closer to home."

"Doesn't mean I have to like it."

"This relationship would never have got off the ground if you were the sort of man to enjoy war."

Tony chuckled quietly. "Yeah, I guess so. This is just an awful lot to take in, especially with Coulson back!"

“Yes...I cannot say I ever expected that.”
“Awkward much?”

“To be fair, I stabbed him, but he then shot me and tried to make a witty quip about it. At least I did not stoop to that level.” Loki stifled a chuckle.

“What?”

“Oh, just the look on Thor’s face. I had never seen him look quite that…well, worried before. I will be the first to admit that I made many mistakes during that time of my life, but in that moment my brother actually was scared of me and that was a heady rush indeed.”

“You’re fucked up. You know that, right?”

“I thought we had established that fact when I ripped a man’s eye-ball out during a gala.”

“True. Yeah, you’re a fucking headcase. Was there any need to even do that?”

Loki rolled his eyes. “Why are we even discussing this? I believe right now the issue at hand is the resurgence of Hydra.”

Tony shrugged, refusing to meet the accusing green glare. “I’m trying not to think about it. And admittedly not succeeding.”

“The old adage is that one should try to sleep on ones problems.”

That earned a bitter laugh from Stark. “Yeah, sleep, if only. I have Shield agents dressed as Nazi’s chasing each other round my head right now. It’s a bit of a pain to be honest.”

“Sounds like it. I can do something about it if you wish?”

“Oh?” Tony’s eyes lit up and he turned to grin at his husband. Loki laughed and held up a warning hand.

“No, you have had me enough already tonight. I am talking about a sleeping spell.”

The man’s expression comically drooped, but it was only a pantomime and he quickly addressed the opportunity. “Dreamless?”

“Of course.”

“Yeah, go on then.” It spoke volumes how crap Tony had to be feeling that he simply gave in with no fight at all. Usually he’d at least put up a token protest if people tried to make him do something that was good for his health. He winced when he heard his own far-too-eager response. “That sounded a bit needy…”

“We are a partnership now Tony; that’s what marriage is. We prop each other up.”

“It’s not too big a spell is it? I don’t want to wipe you out of magic or something…”

“For Norns sake! If you can travel across the known universe for me I think I can manage a simple spell for you.”

“Yes, but –”

“Oh go to sleep, Tony!” Loki leant over and flicked his partner on the forehead. The effect was instantaneous as the man’s eyes rolled back into his head and he slumped down into the pillows.
“There. See? Problem solved.” And so saying, he curled around his husband and closed his own eyes.

Ex-agent Maria Hill didn’t usually find her new job troublesome. Being the receptionist for Stark Tower had been surprisingly engaging – she had never really appreciated the subtle corporate politics taking place in the everyday comings and goings of people and it was actually hugely enjoyable to involve herself in it all. Especially when she basically had the ultimate power over who she allowed into the tower, and could then change her mind and refuse to let them see whomever they were there for on a whim. Of course she didn’t do it with the serious business opportunities, or important people, but messing with the media had practically become a hobby over the last few weeks.

So she was both confused and annoyed to say the least to see Coulson march through the automatic doors, trailed by his little entourage.

“What are you doing here?”

“Just dropping by. It’s good to see you again, Agent Hill.”

“And of course it’s great to see you, Phil, but I don’t think anyone upstairs wants to see you right now.”

“By upstairs, do you mean the Avengers?” One of Coulson’s companions – a petite brunette whose personality seemed to bubble over at the edges, and was already grating on Hill’s nerves – jumped in on the conversation, looking eager at the mention of the super-heroes.

“No, I mean the performing monkeys we keep here.” Maria smiled sweetly at her, then turned back to her ex-colleague. “Phil, they were really pissed last night, Pepper filled me in on everything and I think right now Clint wants to shoot you.”

Coulson shrugged lightly. “I’ve dealt with him trying to kill me before. And with Natasha trying to kill me. And Loki. Infact, I’m pretty certain Captain Rodger’s is the only one that hasn’t at least entertained the idea of killing me, so all in all, I think I can handle it.”

“Your funeral. Again. Your team will have to wait in the reception room.”

The polite smile on Coulson’s face said it all. “No they won’t.”

“It’s top level security up there, and if nothing else Stark will have my head if I allow Agent’s May and Romanoff in the same room. I saw what occurred the last time that happened.” Maria made eye contact with the other woman in question. Melinda May was still dressed in her leather combat gear and her hand twitched minutely towards her hip where her gun was usually sat.

“That was a misunderstanding.”

“Even so, Stark will not appreciate it if you two have a gun fight in his living room.”

“I don’t have a gun.”

“You don’t need one, and neither does Natasha.”

A small imperious smile tilted the assassins’ lips at that remark. Maria turned her attention back to Coulson, who had watched the exchange with undisguised humour.
“Look, you know this whole situation is a mess. I’ve lost a very good agent – bastard was Hydra all along – one of my old partners was Hydra, another colleague is in a coma with possible brain damage…my team isn’t even a team right now. We’re a mess and crippled. We have all the know-how and no way to make things happen. You happen to have all the brute power and means to do things, and no place to start. We need to work together on this.”

“Did Fury tell you to do this?”

“Fury’s off the radar. He saved Fitz and Simmons, and then disappeared off and we’ve not heard a thing since.”

At the mention of her name the mousy woman at the back of the small group waved timidly. She had the look of someone who had been crying an awful lot recently.

“Also,” Coulson actually looked somewhat awkward at this point. “He named me Director.”

As it was, Hill simply nodded. “I wouldn’t have expected anything less. How much of Shield are you in communication with?”

The new Director smiled grimly and waved his hand at the group with him. “Ta da. Oh, and Billy; he’s holding fort back at our base, and looking after Fitz.”

It was not the news Maria had been hoping for. Skye, who was inexperienced and barely a member of Shield to begin with, her over-enthusiasm notwithstanding, May who was the only truly competent fighter there, Simmons, for all her brilliance still quite weepy and a comatose Fitz stuck in base with an unknown that Maria had never met.

The whole might of Shield.

Hill sighed and looked up Tony’s schedule for the day, although knowing it was empty. “Fine, I’ll see what I can do. Jarvis, is Stark awake yet?”

“Not yet, Ms Hill. Do you wish for me to wake him?”

“Sure, I’m not sure if he’s even aware I work here yet.” At Coulson’s questioning expression she smiled tiredly. “He didn’t exactly get fully caught up last night. Are you aware of the full situation with him and Loki?”

“Fury filled me in.”

“Excellent, I bet that was a fun conversation.”

“You have no idea.”

Skye leant against the reception counter, looking between the two of them. “So are we going to see Ironman or not? Was this a wasted trip?”

Maria shot her an irritated glance, then waved a hand towards the elevators at the end of the foyer. “You’re all cleared to go up. Don’t bother pressing buttons in the elevators – Jarvis will take you to the right floor.”

“Cool.”

“Miss Evelyn, there are visitors coming up to the main living area.”
“Really? That’s nice, good for them.” Evie’s voice was distant and unfocussed as she concentrated on the sheet of music in front of her and the keys beneath her fingers.

“It might be an idea to greet them, Miss Evelyn.”

“Yeah, sure.”

The girl had woken up that morning and decided that of all of the modern human technologies she had missed during her time in Asgard, the grand piano in the corner of the main living room was at the top of her list of priorities. No real reason for it; she was easily distracted after all, and she had simply woken up with the urge to play. She was by no means a musical prodigy, and it had been months since she’d last touched the instrument, but she was still a fairly decent musician and it didn’t take long to come back to her.

“Rachmaninoff, isn’t it?”

The new voice made her jump and the concerto ended with a sudden clash as she slammed both hands down on the keys and spun round on the stool.

The man standing by the entrance to the living room was familiar from the video-call last night, and she vaguely recognised one of the woman, but even so they were all effectively total strangers.

“Uh. Hi…Yeah, that was Rachmaninoff…” She glanced back self-consciously at the music, realising that her amateur playing had had an audience. “What are you doing here?”

“We’re part of Shield…Well, we’re all that’s left of Shield actually. We need to speak to the Avenger’s.”

“Most of them are out, and the others are asleep.”

May rolled her eyes. “Well, that’s professional.”

“We only came back from Asgard yesterday – I’d like to see you handle that sort of jet-lag.” Evie snapped. Skye grinned at her.

“Hey, she told May off, I like her!”

Coulson smiled at the very familiar angry pout on the teenager’s face as he realised who she was. “You’re Tony’s daughter, aren’t you? Emily? Evangeline?”

“Evelyn. Evelyn Stark.”

“Of course, I’m sorry. Pleased to meet you, Evelyn. I’m Director Coulson.”

“Yeah, I know, the not-dead-guy.”

“Not-dead-guy?”

“Well, call me stupid, but I’d always assumed that when you get speared through the chest it’s not conducive to your health.”

“You know about that?”

“Sure.” Evie turned back to the piano and closed the music book, trying to tuck in the loose pages. “So, do you need me to find people to talk to you? Uncle Steve? He’s good at getting stuff done.”
Skye snorted with laughter. “Oh my God, you get to call Captain America ‘Uncle Steve’? That’s so awesome!”

Evie ignored her. “Jarvis, is anyone awake yet?”

“Yes Miss Evelyn, your Father is – ah, there he is.”

Tony couldn’t have looked less like a superhero if he’d tried. He didn’t even look like he could pass as a business man.

“Hey Dad, you look like crap. Are you hungover?”

“Not really; I think it’s the side effect of the sleep-spell…” Tony broke off and yawned widely. “Jarvis, it’s too damn early!”

“It’s ten AM, sir.”

“Fuck off, Jarvis. Hey Coulson, nice to see you aren’t dead. Hey Coulson’s friends, make yourselves at home. I’m having coffee; who wants coffee?” He didn’t even wait for a reply as he slouched over to the bar area and smushed buttons on the high-tech machine that sat there until it started to sound like it was doing something productive. He didn’t even have his eyes properly open.

“Um…” Simmons leant in towards May. “That’s Tony Stark?”

“That, or a zombie.”

“I heard that.” Tony tapped the coffee machine as if that would speed it up, then turned to face his unexpected guests. “Don’t expect anything sensible from me until I’m caffeined up. Bloody sleep-spells.”

Coulson raised an eyebrow at him. “Did you say sleep spell? You let Loki do magic on you?”

“Uh, yeah?” Tony scrubbed a hand across his eyes. “What are you even doing here, Agent? I mean, don’t get me wrong; I’m thrilled you’re not dead and all that but what the actual fuck is going on here?”

“Well, for a start, I’m now Director, not Agent.”

Stark simply shook his head. “Nope. You can’t change your first name and your first name is Agent. And Director Coulson sounds weird. And you don’t have a creepy-ass eye patch.” He yawned again then groaned. “Goddamnit! Never again! My brain is not working!”

“Stark, do you have any idea how serious the situation is right now?”

He raised his head. “So hail fucking Hydra because we’re stuffed.”

“I…Didn’t catch a word of that.”

“Basically; yeah, I understand the situation. Shield is gone, Hydra is back and stronger than ever and the world has no idea just how much shit it’s now in.”

“A very basic summery.”

“Does the job though.” The machine beeped and Tony removed a steaming mug of coffee. “Birdy, you want a hot chocolate?”

“Yeah, go on then.”

Stark hit more random buttons and the thing started whirring again as he pulled out one of the bar stools and slumped down heavily on it.

“Okay. Where the hell do we start then, Coulson?” He circled a finger in the air. “This is somewhat bigger than an alien invasion – at least we knew which of those buggers were the enemy. And if we shot the tit wearing green then it would be check and mate. This is somewhat more tricky.”

Evie smirked. “I’m totally telling Möðhy you called him that.”

“Whatever, I’m operating on partial brain function right now thanks to him. He deserves some name calling.” Tony took a deep gulp of his coffee and swore when he burnt his mouth. “So anyway. This is going to be a much different show. We’ll be fighting an underground war that to the greater extent the general world populace won’t even know about. And there’s the other thing; the World. Last time it was just New York being stomped on by the uglies, Shield was a world-wide organisation and therefore Hydra will be world-wide. Even once Jarvis has hunted down various bases for us to go and infiltrate we’re still an extremely limited number.”

“I’m aware of that.” Coulson’s expression was one of someone who had just been taught everything he already knew.

“So what do we do? Are there other super-secret organisations that can help us? The Thunderbirds perhaps? The Power Rangers? The Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles?”

“Don’t be a child, Stark. Yes, we’re limited on man-power, that’s why we’re here.”

“So the mighty five – and a half if you count the bloke in a coma – are joining with our magnificent seven to make…” Tony counted on his fingers in an extremely exaggerated fashion. “Twelve and a half! Thirteen and a half if we count Hill, who is apparently working as my receptionist according to Jarvis.”

“I count as a half, so that makes a round fourteen.” Evie piped up.

“Except that you’re fourteen and I am not letting you get involved in this young lady.”

The girl shrugged airily. “Fine. I’ll go and ask Möðhy then – he’ll let me.”

“Oh, no he won’t.”

She paused at the doorway. “Bet he will. See you later.”

Tony waved at her until she vanished, then thumped his head back onto the worktop. “Why did I
“I don’t know, why did you?” Coulson asked. “I’d never put you down as the parental sort.”

“I didn’t have much choice in the matter.” Stark raised his head again and this time his expression was so worried that Coulson actually believed it wasn’t put on. “Years ago this sort of thing would have seemed like such a laugh! Some big adventure against the faceless monster. I’d have been loving it. But right now the thought of going into this fight is terrifying; I don’t want to drag my little girl into a war.”

“What have you put in place already?”

“I’ve only been back ten hours.”

“And?”

Tony grinned tiredly. “I’ve got Jarvis working on new armaments. I’ve has missile detection systems in place for years, but now I’m adding offensive strategies; gun turrets to say the least.”

“Sounds…involved. I suppose you don’t care about the legal ramifications.”

“My tower.”

“The law’s a bit more complicated than that. But I agree it’s a good idea. Just don’t make them too obvious.”

Tony smiled slightly. “You know, I am pleased to see you again.”

“Likewise. Just don’t expect me to get along with your boyfriend.”

“Husband, actually.”

It was the first time Ironman had seen true surprise on Coulson’s face. “What? Really? Wow. I didn’t see that coming.” His gaze darted to Tony’s bare ring finger. “Unconventional ceremony?”

“Aesir.”

“Huh. Can I still punch him?”

“Be my guest. In fact, in your case I’d say it’s mandatory.” Tony finished off his coffee, looking far more awake by this point. “So. Should I get the rest of the motley crew together? It would be easier to really start a game plan with the whole lot of us.”
“That would work.”

Stark grinned. “Jarivs, tell the Avenger’s to assemble.”

The weather was warm enough for Evie to only put on a jacket and Loki had cast a small illusion so that neither of them were recognisable to the general public as they meandered through Central Park. Loki was still grasping a Starbucks Styrofoam cup of latte and his daughter was munching on a flapjack as they made their way past the Alice in Wonderland statue.

“I never liked that story.” Evie said conversationally. “Alice always came across as really stupid.”

“Have you actually read the book, or only watched the Disney version?”

“Eh, Disney. But it put me off.” Evie side-stepped to avoid a passing jogger who wasn’t going to divert his path to avoid her. “Jeese! Some people! Watch where you’re going, moron!”

The jogger flipped her off as she screamed after him. Loki glanced at her in amusement.

“Well, aren’t you the epitome of lady-like perfection?”

The teen grinned up at him. “I learnt from the best; Uncle Clint has the most creative swears, but I’m not allowed to use half of them.”

“I should think not. Has Thor not taught you anything from off-planet?”

“Not many. Although ‘you slimy malformed spawn of a crippled münchrat’ is one of my personal favourites.”

“Yes…that’s a popular one on Asgard.”

“What is a münchrat?”

Loki looked around to see if there was anyone watching them, but they’d left the crowds of tourists by the statue and other than that one jogger who had vanished by now they were alone. He lifted his hand and swirled it around as if stirring an invisible cup of coffee. Grey smoke flowed out of his fingers and began to form into a small shape on the muddy ground.

The creature was about the size of a fox, although if it could be compared to a Midgardian animal it was reminiscent of a woolly mammoth. It’s wide mouth, when opened, looked like it was split into a grin and it’s trunk snuffled along the ground. When Evie bent down to look at it closer the prehensile nose immediately went up to snaffle her half-eaten flapjack.

“Oh my God! It’s so sweet! How is this an insult?! I want one as a pet!!”

The münchrat at their feet had been distracted by its own tail and was chasing it round in circles until it blindly bumped into Evie’s boot. She scooped it up – it was fairly heavy for its size – and the trunk buried itself in her hair.
“Can I have a münchrat? Pllleeeeeeaaaasssseeeee?”

“I thought you wanted a snake.”

“That was until I knew that teeny tiny woolly mammoths existed.”

“That’s a fully grown adult.”

“Even better! They don’t take up much room!”

Loki rolled his eyes as the illusionary creature faded away and Evie looked up at him with a devastated expression, her arms now cradling empty air.

“Don’t look at me like that; you are fourteen.”

“But Möðhy…. .”

“And that whining isn’t becoming either.” He drained the rest of his latte and incinerated the cup. “And besides, your birthday is months away yet.” There was a tiny smile on his face that said that he was more than likely to agree in the end. Evie picked up on this like a blood hound and upped her pout so that she looked on the verge of tears.

“And now you look frankly ridiculous.”

“Oh you are so mean!”

“And you still seemed surprised by that fact.” They had passed the Hans Christian Andersen statue by this point and were walking alongside the small lake so Loki emphasised his point by suddenly nudging his daughter quite hard in the direction of the water.

Evie stumbled and flailed as her feet slid out from under her on the muddy ground. However her scream of panic was cut short as Loki’s firm grip on her jacket sleeve stopped her from actually going into the water. She clung to his arm as, chuckling quite hard, he righted her again.

“You…you…I’m telling Dad!”

“Tell him what? You’re fine, are you not?”

Evie punched him in the side, even though she was laughing and Loki swatted her away.

“Right; you owe me, like, at least a hot dog or something for that!”

“You just had a flapjack! You cannot be hungry again!”

“Growing girl, always hungry. Ground state of being a teenager.” Evie grinned and dug her elbow at her mother’s ribs. “You can’t tell me that you and Uncle Thor didn’t raid the kitchens the whole time whilst you were growing up.”

“I was somewhat more restrained than Thor.”

“Bet you weren’t when you were pregnant.” Evie said slyly. “You said you craved Danish pastries with me.”

Loki rolled his eyes. “Darling, when you are grown and have your own little bundle of joy leaching every nutrient and ounce of energy from your body and then deciding to kick you in the kidneys when you’re exhausted and just desperately wish to sleep, then you can eat whatever the hell you
“I thought it was meant to be a wonderful experience.”

“Depends on the person, depends on the pregnancy.” Loki looked down at her with a smile and ruffled her hair. “You were fine. Other than some food cravings and a little nausea you were actually quite delightful. Didn’t even keep me awake too much, although you kicked like crazy if I tried to sleep on my back.”

Evie smiled. “You know, it’s great to actually be able to talk to you about this sort of thing. No-one at home knows anything about anything. Well, Dad gave me The Talk, and Aunty Pep helped out with…you know, when things started…uh, yeah. But no-one’s had a kid or anything, no-one has any funny anecdotes like that.”

“That must have been quite lonely for you.”

“Only in the sense that I couldn’t have proper girly chats. Aunty Nat isn’t really a girly girl, and Aunty Pep is but she’s not really the sort of Aunty that you can talk to about the more…involved aspects of life.”

“She’s not a Mother.”

“Yeah, she’s not a Mother. Not my Mother.”

Loki slung an arm around his daughter’s shoulders as she pressed in close to his side.

“You know what? I remember the first moment when I actually realised what you were to me. I was about three and I was watching Dumbo. You ever seen it?”

“The Disney elephant film? Yes, I saw it many years ago.”

“Well, it was that moment when his Mom’s all locked up and everyone else has their’s and Dumbo’s all trying to hug her through the prison bars and it’s horribly sad and…I just remember really clearly watching it and going ‘oh my God, that’s how I feel’. That feeling of wanting my Mom and just wanting a hug. And then the next time I saw you, my forth birthday, I think, I hugged you and it all sort of clicked and it was like this ‘oh my God, I have a Mom!’ moment.” She grinned, a little watery. “I think it took that long since I’d grown up with the idea that Moms’ were usually women.”

“Well, on Earth certainly.”

“Yeah…Earth’s boring in that respect. There’re a few weird-ass animals that do things differently, but humans are really quite limited.”

Loki laughed. “Indeed.” He squeezed Evie’s shoulder affectionately. “Hey, I can see a hot dog stand, still want one?”

“The answer to that will always be yes!”

The Avenger’s and Coulson’s Team (they’d been given the official designation by Jarvis, since he felt the compulsive need to categorise everything) spent the better part of five hours discussing just what was going on and what the hell they were going to do about it.
As predicted, Clint had tackled Coulson to the floor on sight, and it took the combined might of both Captain America and Thor to pull him off again before the new Director was throttled, and Natasha had yet to address a word to the ex-agent. It was quite clear that his lack of communication – namely to do with his resurrection – had gone down worse than the Titanic.

However, noses-in-slings aside they did manage to at least catch up with what they considered to be the most important facts. Jarvis had brought up comprehensive lists of the projects and archives Shield had created that were now presumably in Hydra’s hands. There were an awful lot of weapon prototypes and alien paraphernalia that were worrying to say the least.

Skye was in seventh heaven with Jarvis’ computational powers at her disposal and whilst the others had discussed details she had hooked up the data drives she had from Hydra and together the woman and AI began matching things together. It was slow going, but after a few hours they had a working map of at least thirty of what they could guess were the most important places to search. They were mostly high-security laboratories, weapons testing, storage warehouses – not places that sounded hugely exciting but that held items of significant consequence.

However, even with that information it was hard to decide what to do with it. At best the most they could do was infiltrate and remove whatever they could, and destroy everything else. It was an ancient method of warfare, but one that worked; if I can’t have it, I’ll destroy it so that the enemy can’t have it either. Back in the day it used to mean shooting the horses or burning the farms, in this situation it would mean blowing up whole secret bases.

Because the media totally wouldn’t notice an unusual string of explosions across the world.

By the time Loki and Evie returned it had grown dark and Tony was so fed up with the situation that he couldn’t even be bothered to put up token protests and simply offered for Coulson’s team to stay in some of the guest rooms for the night. It would make things easier for all concerned, especially since they were going to need to continue the planning the next day.

Whilst the extended assembly – Maria included now that Tony actually knew that she was there – started trying to sort out dinner for a group of thirteen Stark himself skulked off to find himself a secluded corner for a few minutes peace. If nothing else he hadn’t checked his emails all day, and that did make him quite twitchy.

“You are being somewhat anti-social.”

Tony looked up from where he was slumped into one of the large beanbags in the corner and smiled as Loki sat down beside him.

“Hey you, how was your day?”

“Better than yours, by the looks of it.” Loki said wryly. “Evie and I went around Central Park and filled up on junk food.”

“Damn, I’m going with you guys next time!” Tony shifted to make room on his beanbag then leant back against Loki as the God shuffled up to sit next to him. “It’s been a right pain in the ass here! We’re running in bloody circles chasing shadows. I can’t even cope with hearing the words Hydra or Shield right now.” He opened up his email to see a full inbox. “Look at this; 213 emails! This is what happens when I’m too busy to deal with crap.”

Loki smiled at the petulant tone, recognising how tired and stressed out his husband was. “Look, I imagine you can delete most of it.”
“Guess so. Jarvis, can you scrap anything that you should have put into my spam folder anyway?”

There wasn’t an audible reply, but the number quickly wound itself down to only 23. Of those, most were business ventures that were ignorable until the next day.

“There wasn’t an audible reply, but the number quickly wound itself down to only 23. Of those, most were business ventures that were ignorable until the next day.

“See, much more manageable.” Loki said softly. “Nothing to stress out about.”

“…Stop being so understanding.” Tony flicked through what was left, dismissing most of them without reading until he came across an unknown address. “Hey, Jarv, what’s this? I said get rid of the crap.”

“That email was sent from the same mobile device that Mr Laufeyjarsson called last night. I deemed it to be important for that reason.”

Loki looked surprised at that. “My son is emailing Tony?”

“Yes sir.”

Tony opened up the message, which was simply entitled ‘Mr Stark’, and moved the Starkpad so that Loki could read over his shoulder. It was concise and to the point; pretty much the impression that Tony had already gleaned from overhearing Loki’s conversation the night before.

Mr Stark,

I am aware that we have not met, but since you appear to have tied yourself to my Mödir, I feel it important to establish a form of contact.

As you most likely know, I spoke with Mödir this morning and whilst he provided no details, he said enough to severely worry me. Since he will not be forthcoming with what has happened over these past years I find myself asking if you could fill me in. I understand that since the failed invasion I have somehow gained a younger sister thanks to you, and I also understand that Mödir had another run-in with the chitauri. If you could let me know the details I would be very grateful.

In addition, I saw that Shield has been taken over by the group known as Hydra. I trust that your team has this situation under control.

Finally, I do not speak to my Mödir as a rule; we do not get along particularly well and tend not to communicate much. However, should you hurt him in any way, shape or form I will find you and I will make the rest of your life – however long that may be – as painful and horrific as is physically possible. You will know the true meaning of ‘hell’.

Just a friendly warning.

Best wishes to you and yours,

M

Tony gaped at the message.

“Did your son really just threaten to end me?”

“Apparently.”

“Do you want me to reply?”

Loki reread the email again, then nodded slowly. “It would be better coming from you. As he says;
we do not get on well.”

“How much detail do you want me to go into?” Tony asked quietly.

“All the way. Tell him everything. I do not wish to give him reasons to start an argument because he finds out that I withheld things from him.”

“It’s a bit personal though, surely he should respect your privacy.”

“He should, but he won’t. And it is not like I’ll see him any time soon. Tell him everything; it will put his mind at rest to know that I am okay now.”

“Do you think he’d help us with Hydra?”

Loki raised an eyebrow, then waved a hand so that a tiny winged pig suddenly popped into existence in the air between them, and zoomed around.

“Alright, you’ve made your point.” Tony sighed. He started drafting a reply to the message. “Does your son always write like Shakespeare? I feel like I need to write back in verse or something.”

“That’s just his way.”

“I’m totally good with writing in verse though! There once was a Norse God of yore, whose brother was a terrible bore. A destroyer was sent, with questionable intent, and a lesson was learnt by Thor!”

“Oh by the Norns.”

“I can do better! A trickster who found himself crossed, fought a fight on top the Bifrost. His father said no, he let the staff go, and into the void was lost.”

“…That is not funny, Anthony.”

This time Loki’s voice had an edge to it and Tony glanced at him to see his husband’s mouth set into a thin line. If the ‘Anthony’ didn’t show that Loki was pretty put out, the expression certainly did it. “Yeah, sorry, that one was stupid. I’m stressed and pissed off, and I’m an asshole when I’m like that.”

“I’ve noticed.”

“I didn’t mean it.”

“Just finish writing your email.” Loki said curtly. He shifted, pulling away from his husband, only for Tony to grab his wrist. “What?”

“Don’t storm off, please.”

“You are being an insensitive imbecile, why should I not?”

“Because I’m an idiot and I don’t deserve you?”

“Have you eaten today?”

Tony looked confused at the random question. “Not really? I didn’t like the sushi we ordered for lunch.”
Loki sighed and laid a hand on the man’s arm, closing his eyes. His fingers briefly glowed a soft mauve. “Your blood sugar levels are very low – that might explain why you are feeling so awful.”

“You mean why I’m acting like a dick.”

“Feeling awful. You are also dehydrated. Come, you need some food and something non-alcoholic to drink.”

Tony smirked tiredly. “You just took the fun out of drink.” He let his husband take the Starkpad out of his hands and drag him up to his feet. “Seriously? You’re going to strong-arm me into eating?”

“Yes, yes I am.”

A huge order had been put in for Thai, and by the time Loki and Tony had finished their talk about the email it was at the door. The assembly broke off into two distinct groups once they portioned out the food; Coulson’s little band finding their own corner to huddle in as the Avenger’s spread out across their usual sofas. Only Natasha made an effort to bridge the gap, since even if she wasn’t talking to Coulson, she was still on speaking terms with Melinda.

It was an awkward meal. Tony wanted nothing more than to just flop on top of his husband and use Loki as a cushion, but with Coulson’s glare and the other’s deep suspicion levelled at the trickster he decided against it. Maria had sat herself on the Shield side – and it was not a good omen that they were categorising themselves into ‘Shield’ and ‘Avengers’ sides, rather than a cohesive group. Evie didn’t even eat with them; she simply grabbed a plate of food and vanished off to her bedroom.

Steve briefly mentioned inviting over someone who had helped him and Natasha with the Hydra problem and Tony agreed without really listening. Something about someone called Sam? It wasn’t important, he’d find out if said person actually turned up.

Finally Ironman gave up on civility and sociability. He had a thumping headache – Loki’s attempts at rehydration had been a little too little too late – the food still wasn’t to his liking and he was absolutely done with the tense atmosphere that had been building throughout the day. Stark and stress didn’t go well together.

He didn’t even bother to say anything, just upped and left.

Loki had been in conversation with Bruce, so it was only the sudden slam of the door that made him glance up and realise that his husband was gone. He immediately went to follow, but Bruce caught his wrist and shook his head.

“Give him a minute.”

“But-”

“Loki, seriously, give him a minute.”

Coulson watched the exchange curiously. “I have to ask, why the hell would you care if Stark’s not feeling great?”

“You are aware we are married, correct?”

“Still not believing the reality of that.”
Loki rolled his eyes, placing his empty plate to one side. “Do you believe that situations can cause a person to change, Director Coulson?”

“In limited cases.”

“Well, perhaps further situations can cause them to change back.”

Phil shook his head condescendingly. “I don’t think so.”

A grin crossed the trickster’s face. “Okay, how about this. He’s Tony Stark; best fucking lay I have ever had. Better answer?” He asked sweetly.

“More believable at least.” Coulson had to raise his voice over Thor’s groan of disgust.

“And I have a vested interest in our daughter.”

“I suppose so.”

Loki rose to his feet, exchanging a glance with a sympathetic Bruce. “Well, I hate to say it, Director, but I do not answer to you. If you have any other questions be sure to direct them to Jarvis; he has an awful lot of very interesting security recordings in a lot of intimate detail.”

“Loki!” Thor’s dismayed cry had embarrassed elder sibling written all over it. Loki smirked at him, then vanished. “I apologise for my brother’s behaviour, my friend.”

Coulson waved a tired hand. “At least he didn’t stab me this time.”

MWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMW

The Captain America magazines and memorabilia were scattered across the huge desk in a colourful sprawl. Tony was listlessly waving the arms on a vintage figurine, circa 1960’s, staring at it rather intently considering that it was just an ancient toy.

“These look antique.”

He didn’t bother to look up at the soft voice – there was only one person who could get into his labs without needing to use the doors.

“They’re Dad’s old collection.”

“Must be worth a fortune.”

“A good few thousand; I had them valued for insurance purposes a while back. I was going to sell them and donate it all to charity at one point, but things got in the way and I’ve never got round to it.”

The tiny shield dropped from the figurine’s hand and went spinning off the edge of the desk. Loki picked it back up off the floor and held his hand out for the action figure. When Tony gave him the miniature Steve he replaced the shield and examined the details of the toy. Captain America was wearing his original uniform, complete with a little parachute pack and when placed back on the desk could stand upright unsupported.

“I’m impressed; I thought plastic action figures were invented in the seventies.”

“Sixties, this was one of the first. Dad bought it as the pièce de résistance to his collection. God knows how much it cost.”
Loki’s gaze moved across the rest of the memorabilia. The magazines, although spread out a little, were in order, the cards were in plastic wallets and there were a few other things such as a tin lunch box that barely had a scratch on it. Everything had obviously been well cared for, and then either the care had continued or someone had put them all away and never touched them since.

“Do you get this out often?”

“No.” Tony poked at a prototype of Captain America’s iconic mask, an original carefully packaged in plastic to keep it safe. “I glanced over it for the insurance, but other than that…no.”

“Why not?”

“Dad’s freaking pride and joy, this lot! Not me; this bunch of junk. How’s that make a kid feel? I stuffed it all into a box and stuck it under the desk.”

Loki leant against the edge of the desk, picking up a figurine of the Red Skull. It had to have been one of the last additions to the collection, looking like it was a seventies model. The plastic face was locked into a scowl, although a bad paint job meant that it was spending eternity slightly cross-eyed. Tony’s gaze locked onto the little figure.

“He even collected Hydra crap. The bastards that killed him, and he collected their crap.”

“He also found the tesseract, so in a way we have your Father to thank for allowing us to meet.”

“Yay, now I owe the old bastard for two major things in my life!” Tony tapped the arc-reactor to emphasise what the first of those two things was.

“Why have you got all of this out, Tony? If you have never wanted to look at it before, why now?”

The man shrugged listlessly. “There might have been something in here that could help us.”

Like hell. A bunch of Captain America memorabilia and some Hydra figurines were never going to provide useful insight to their current situation. The trickster smiled sadly as his husband flicked the Captain America toy over onto its back.

“This is all that you’ve got left, is it not? The only personal things left of your Fathers’?”

“I’ve got all his old business stuff.”

“But this is personal, isn’t it? This is more than just work; this is something he was passionate about. Something he cared about.”

“Cared about it more than he cared about me.” Tony had sunk low in his chair, staring at the collection. “Any idea what it’s like growing up being compared to Captain fucking America?”

“Actually, I grew up compared to Thor, so yes, I do understand that. There’s something about big blondes with more muscles than brains that draw people to them.”

The comment should have at least drawn a smile from Tony, but instead the man ignored it and chose to pick up the little Red Skull toy instead.

“Do you think he knew?” He asked quietly.

“Knew what?”

“That Hydra had killed him. Do you think there was a moment when he knew?”
“I hope not.”

The soft comment made Tony look up sharply. “Why not?”

“Well, I think that if it were my parents, I would be happier to believe that the car crash was instant, and that they never even knew it was happening. Your Father was a genius, but I hope that he never realised the organisation he helped found had been infiltrated from the start.”

“He must have suspected something for them to kill him.”

Loki shrugged. “Perhaps. Were you meant to be in that car?”

“…Yeah. They were going to a benefits do and I pitched a fit so they left me behind.” Tony looked up and his eyes were red-rimmed. “You know what I said? As they were leaving, I told them ‘don’t come back’. What the hell kind of thing was that to say?! I really thought I meant it, and then there was the phone call…and…and they were…” He swiped his hand across his face angrily, brushing away tears. “The cop tried to…tried to explain…say what happened…I didn’t understand. First…First fucking thing I didn’t understand. How could…Dad wouldn’t…they were my parents! How could they be…What kind of world lets that happen? They were…”

“They were your parents.”

“My Mum and Dad…I told them not to come back…and they didn’t…” Tony bit down on his knuckles as he attempted to quell the rising sobs.

“Tony…”

“I’m fine.”

“You are very far from fine.” Loki perched on the edge of the desk infront of the chair, so that his husband could lean into him. “You are trying to come to grips with the idea that your parents were murdered. That is not fine in any way shape or form.”

Tony leant forwards so that he could bury his face in Loki’s stomach, his arms wrapped tight around the trickster’s waist as he began to sob in earnest. It had been years since he had really broken down in such a way. Infact, the last time he had really fallen apart had been after the chitauri had taken Loki, years ago. It was even longer since he had allowed himself to think about his parent’s death; there was a lot of pent up emotion that wanted to come out now that it had been triggered.

It took Loki somewhat by surprise; he hadn’t ever seen his husband fall apart before and having always seen Tony as the strong and reasonably capable one it was a hit home that the man could break apart. He’d been relying on Stark so much recently it was quite a role reversal to be the rock in the relationship. There was that sneaky part at the back of his mind that actually quite liked to be able to help his husband for once, rather the other way round.

It was a sombre moment as Loki slowly ran his fingers through Tony’s hair, simply letting the man’s emotions run their course. He began humming quietly, the old saga he used to sing to Evie when she was a child. Not exactly what most would consider a calming song, but to the little family it held a lot of dear memories.

“Sorry about this…” Tony’s voice was muffled in his husband’s shirt.

“Don’t be ridiculous; there is nothing to apologise for.” Loki leant down to press a kiss onto the crown of the man’s head. “After everything you have helped me through, allow me this one
moment to be able to help you in turn.”

Tony’s reply was incoherent, just another messy sob as he nodded into his husband’s lap. The trickster continued humming, combing his finger through his partner’s short hair again. A gentle whirring behind him made him glance back to see one of Tony’s robots (Loki hadn’t met Dummy, and didn’t know the little droid had a name) approaching the desk, it’s arm drooping in dismay as it took in the scene. After taking account of the situation it then began to steadily clear up the scattered collection and replace it neatly into its box. Loki smiled at it when it ‘looked’ at him and nodded as it quietly trundled off with the memorabilia to replace it back in the cupboard. The Captain America figurine was the only thing left, over looked where it lay on the edge of the desk.

By the third repeat of the tune Loki was humming, Tony had begun to calm down, his sobs dying away to the sort of snuffly hiccups that were generally the after effect of such an emotional blowout. He didn’t move though.

Loki’s attention was caught as one of the desk’s large computer screens suddenly flashed at him, and a script began to run across it.

*Doctor Banner is at the door, do you wish me to let him in? – J*

The trickster shrugged, and when he didn’t immediately answer Jarvis added to the query.

*He has hot chocolate.*

“Tony? Hey love, do you feel any better?”

“…No.”

“Bruce is outside; Jarvis says he has hot chocolate.”

“That sounds tempting…”

“Should I let him in?”

“…Yeah, if you must.” Tony still didn’t bother to move.

Loki nodded at the computer screen and Jarvis must have understood since at the other end of the lab there was the swish of the electronic doors. However, there was more than the one set of footsteps across the floor.

“Bruce needed help with the drinks.” Was Steve’s beyond-lame excuse.

“Bull shit, you’re being a mother-hen.” Tony finally bothered to raise his head, his eyes red and swollen.

“Only when you need me to be.” Steve placed a couple of paracetamol tablets on the desk alongside a steaming mug that smelt like heaven. Tony glared at him in grudging thanks.

“Jarvis said you two might appreciate a drink.” Bruce said cheerfully. He held a mug of what smelt like chamomile for himself, and passed another one of chocolate to Loki. “You have a sweet tooth, right?”

“Very much so. Thank you.”

Steve had spotted the little figurine of himself and picked it up with a quiet chuckle. “Is this one of Howard’s? He used to collect the comics during the war.”
“Yeah. Dummy’s just packed them all up again.”

The Captain smiled sadly, twirling the little toy again as he realised why Tony might have had it all out. “I’m guessing the whole Hydra thing is a bit much right now, huh?”

“You could say that. I came home intending to pack for a honeymoon.” Tony grabbed a tissue from a nearby box and wiped his face off.

“Honeymoon?” That was apparently news to Loki. “Where were you intending?”

“I dunno. Svarthfartlwhatsitheim?”

“Alfheim is quite nice.”

“Yeah, there’ll do.” Tony rubbed his eyes again and picked up his mug to take a sip. He then immediately perked up at the taste. “Hey, which genius made this Irish?”

Bruce shrugged slightly. “I figured some alcohol might also be warranted after a day like this. They’re all drinking beer upstairs, but I know you prefer the hard stuff.”

“Is Coulson still here?”

“Yeah, you said they could stay here, remember?”

“Oh damn.” Tony looked down at his drink, then at the headache tablets Steve had put on the desk. “I’m taking these with alcohol; if I die you’ll all know why.”

“There’s only a shot in there, and the tablets are a low dose. I don’t condone it, but it won’t kill you.” Bruce said with a sigh.

“Grand.” Stark swallowed both in one go, causing his friends to shake their heads at his behaviour. “You know, you guys are awesome.”

“Was that your version of a thank you?”

“Best you’re gonna get.” Which wasn’t true. Tony might have been trying to play the tough-nut, especially after knowing how obvious it was that he had been crying, but his grateful smile made it very clear that he was extremely thankful for his friends right then. A husband to help him through the emotional crap, and then some mates to appear with the booze and painkillers. Stark considered himself pretty damn lucky.

The situation sucked, Hydra were a nightmare made flesh, but for the moment at least Tony decided that maybe he could deal with this.

“Let’s go back upstairs – I’m sure they can’t have finished all the food.”

Steve laughed. “With Thor up there? Good luck with that!”

Later that night Tony dreamt of cars and explosions and of the giant serpent from Greek mythology with multiple heads. It slithered and twisted so that they could never quite find it, and every time a head was cut off three more grew, each with the sneering face of the badly-painted Red Skull figurine. A wizard danced through the carnage left behind, his long cloak and white beard taken straight from one of Evie’s old story books of King Arthur – a childish parody of the great Merlin with his staff and orb. The Hydra stamped on through the world as a giant Swastika hung in the sky
in place of the sun.

At one point Tony jerked awake, cold and tangled in the bedsheets in an empty bed. He looked around, barely awake, and in the gloom of the night saw Loki standing by the window, holding the curtain aside so that he could peer out.

In the brief moment before sleep reclaimed him, Tony thought that his husband’s skin looked blue in the dim light.

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Chapter 27

The next few days were confusing and stressful for all concerned. Coulson’s team had left and returned to the base they were using, taking a list of locations and names to deal with. In return they sent back the very good news that Fitz had woken up in their absence and – as far as they could tell – was coherent and mostly aware. In the meantime some more loyal Shield agents had crawled out of the woodwork so the Avenger’s didn’t feel like they were throwing Coulson out to the lions so much. Maria had also left to go back into the fight – her skills put to much better use now that she was back in the field.

During this time Tony quietly explained to Steve and Pepper what had happened on Asgard since the Captain had left, which mostly involved discussing his new immortality. He let Clint tell Natasha though, since he knew that the archer had an extra part to add to that conversation. He still hadn’t heard back from the two of them as to their views on their own possible immortality, but they had a tough decision ahead of them so he didn’t expect an answer immediately.

Steve had taken the news in his stride – he was used to radical transformations after all – but Pepper had been beside herself. Having been at Tony’s side for so many years and to then face losing him to something like a heart problem had been even tougher on her than the rest of Avenger’s, so to hear that not only was he now perfectly healthy, but also going to live for ever had made her first hit him with her briefcase, and then cling to him sobbing. As it was Tony had expected this, so wasn’t really too bothered.

There was another person that Tony had to tell, and he took a trip out to see Colonel Rhodes and catch up on what had happened.

That didn’t go down so well. For a start, he had vanished for the past five months without a word and his friend didn’t appreciate being kept out of the loop. Rhodey knew about Loki and Tony’s old relationship – although he had never seemed fully convinced that it was a good thing to get the God back. The fact that Tony had put his own health at risk for someone that Rhodes didn’t think was worth it did not sit well with the Iron Patriot whatsoever. He had been extremely busy over the past few years, and couldn’t necessarily be with Stark as much as he’d have liked, but that didn’t mean his concern was never there. To hear that his friend had taken such a ridiculous risk seriously pissed him off.

The only thing that really kept Rhodes in the coffee shop instead of storming out over Stark’s recklessness was the knowledge that as much as Tony had saved Loki, Loki had saved Tony. That kept him there long enough to hear the end of the story and learn that Stark was not only healthy but that his heart problems were sorted for life. Indefinite life.

Finally Rhodey agreed that however pissed off he was with Tony, Hydra were a bigger problem that needed dealing with first. They decided to meet up in a few more days to see where Iron Patriot could be put to best use, but not before the Colonel made it very clear that – married or not – Loki still had yet to meet with his official Best Friend approval, and he was entirely within his rights to send the trickster packing. Tony couldn’t fault the logic since Rhodes had missed his chance at being best man.

They agreed on two days’ time, but left without really resolving their argument.

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In the meantime, help had arrived at Stark tower in an unexpected form and via the roof.
They almost learnt the hard way that Tony’s new defence systems worked like a charm and it was only down to Jarvis’ quick reflexes that their guest wasn’t fried on the spot.

“Hey Sam!” Steve jogged across the roof to where his friend was standing frozen on the very edge, staring down the barrel of an over-sized anti-missile artillery gun. “Jarvis put that damn thing away!”

The gun retracted, but slowly enough so as to say ‘I’m keeping an eye on you’.

“Hey, glad you made it.” Steve clapped his shaken friend on the back, having to place his hand carefully to avoid the wings.

Sam didn’t even look at him, still eyeing the now retracted weaponry suspiciously. “Are you guys usually this paranoid?”

“Remember this tower was on Hydra’s hit list?”

“Oh. Yeah, yeah that’d get a bit of paranoia running.”

Captain America laughed. “Yeah. We weren’t expecting you to come in on the roof, so the defence systems thought you were a threat.”

“Won’t make that mistake again.” Sam grinned as the mechanical wings folded away into the pack on his back. “Any chance of a drink?”

“Of course, come on down.” Steve led the way down a flight of stairs to the elevator. “Jarvis will have informed the other’s that you’re here so you’ll probably meet the whole gang.”

“Is Nat here too?”

“She comes and goes, but was here this morning so it’s likely she still is. Why?”

“Hey, she’s my type, no harm in asking after her.” Sam said with a grin. “I like a woman who can take charge and kick ass.”

Steve raised an eyebrow. “Really? Well, good luck with that.”

“What? Don’t think she’d go for me?”

“Can’t comment. With everything going on recently I don’t see why not.”

Sam laughed. “Everything that’s been going on? It’s only been a week since I last saw you, what’s been going on?”

Steve leant against the wall of the elevator, folding his arms. “Well, for a start Tony Stark is back, which is why I invited you over, and he’s got his partner with him now. Things are a little…odd around here right now.”

“After what we’ve been through, define odd.”

“Ever met a God before? We’ve got two wandering around here at the moment.”

If Steve had been going for shocking his friend, Sam simply looked intrigued. “I know Thor is here, but who’s the other? Another Norse God?”

“Yeah, Thor’s younger brother. Uh…How much do you know about the Norse myths?”
“Nothing. We stuck to the normal syllabus in my school.”

“Ever heard of Loki?”

Sam shrugged and shook his head, and once again Steve realised it had been a blessing in disguise that the media hadn’t been able to get a proper fix on who Loki was all those years ago. It would seriously help them out now that the God was on their side rather than fighting them.

“Well, Loki’s…Loki’s a bit different. Don’t let him get to you. And he’s got a bit of a history so if things seem tense between him and other people, or there are weird gaps in a conversation just roll with it. It’s best not to ask.”

“Hey, whatever, we’ve all got stuff to hide, right? And he’s a Norse God?” The soldier shook his head with a wry laugh. “Hell, a few weeks ago this would have seemed really strange. Is he like Thor? I’ve seen that guy a bit on TV.”

Steve had to laugh at that. “He’d hate to be compared to Thor! Trust me!”

The elevator was still steadily counting down the floors and Sam pulled the heavy machinery pack off and set it on the floor for a moment. He looked around for a second at the Stark Industries logo above the elevator keypad. “Man, I can’t believe I’m in the Avengers Tower! Y’know, if someone said to me two months ago that this would be my life I would have called them crazy.”

“I know that feeling.” The elevator ‘dinged’ gently and Steve gestured at the door as it opened. “Shall we?”

He knew that Jarvis had already informed the others that Sam had arrived so was unsurprised to see the majority of them already in the main living room waiting for them. Evie wasn’t there – Jarvis had her catching up on missed work – and Natasha was finishing off down in the gym, but other than that the motley crew were all there.

“Hey guys, I’ve got our guest. Meet Sam Wilson, USAF Pararescue.”

“Veteran.” Sam quickly added. “I’m not in active service now.” He looked around at the infamous Avengers in all their can’t-be-arsed-to-move-and-greet-you-properly glory. “Hi.”

Tony was the only one who could be bothered to actually get up and shake Sam’s hand, grinning broadly.

“Hey man, Steve’s been singing your praises – says you’re a great guy to have around in a tight spot.”

“He’s been talking about me?” Sam smirked and elbowed the Captain. “Didn’t know you cared, Cap.”

“I just said you were good cannon fodder while the real work’s going on elsewhere.”

“Which of us ended up in hospital?”

“Which of us jumped out of a falling skyscraper without a chute.”

“You didn’t even see that.”

Tony laughed. “Yeah, you’re gonna fit right in around here! Now, gimme!”

“Huh?”
“The wings! Let’s see them!”

Steve rolled his eyes, realising why Tony had been so eager compared to the other Avengers to meet Sam; he wanted to get his hands on the tech. Sam was certainly reticent about handing over his precious wing-pack, Tony Stark or not.

“He won’t ruin it, I promise.” The Captain said with a tired sigh. “Might improve it though.”

“Improve it?” Stark snorted with laughter. “Look, this thing’s ancient tech!” He began examining the mechanism, even though Sam hadn’t fully given his consent. “See here? The turning circle is appalling, and the acceleration would let a Sherman tank overtake you.”

The soldier looked as if someone had insulted his kid. “Hey, this thing’s the best there is!” He pulled the wing-pack back out of Tony’s hands. “You haven’t even used it!”

“Used it? Kid, I invented it. EXO-7 Falcon, titanium and chrome with carbon-nanotubes running through a fixed mesh and a quantum processing system with faux-AI interface. Piece of shit.” Stark held his hands out patiently. “Hand it over, I’ll see you in about three hours and I swear you’ll feel like Peter Pan himself next time you fly.”

Sam glanced at Steve who nodded warily. “He’s an obnoxious ass, but you can trust him with it. He did create the Ironman suit after all.”

The soldier looked less than convinced, but the name of the Ironman armour carried a lot of weight and he grudgingly handed his precious wings over.

“What armament do you use?”

“Dual HK MP5’s.”

Tony wrinkled his nose. “You’re not allowed in the Avenger’s with old fashioned weapons. I’ll work on that too.”

“You made that rule up!” Steve called after him as the inventor left the room, carrying the Falcon wings. The elevator doors opened to let Tony in and Natasha stepped out, her hair still curling and wet at the ends where she had showered after hitting the gym. Obviously Jarvis had told her Sam was there since she didn’t seem surprised to see him.

“Hey soldier.” Her eyes flicked across his face and he grinned at her.

“Hey, still killing the bad guys in insanely epic ways?”

“When I have time.” She pushed past and made her way to the bar to grab herself a glass of juice. Sam’s gaze remained locked-on until Steve nudged him hard in the side. Needless to say, Clint had seen the soldier’s interest and was appraising the man shrewdly. His own lack of romantic interest didn’t mean that he wasn’t still fiercely protective of Natasha, whether she needed protecting or not.

“So, let’s catch you up on what we’ve got so far.” Steve guided his friend over to the sofas and after sorting out drinks for everyone the group – sans Ironman – tried to get Sam up to speed on latest events. They missed out the parts about Asgard though; there were some things that weren’t immediately necessary in the current situation.

The initial discussion took about half an hour – Sam knew the background already, so only needed to be caught up on recent developments. He wasn’t really fazed by Thor and Loki’s presence since
Thor was already a staple in the media and once you had grown used to one alien another wasn’t half as surprising. Loki didn’t mind being somewhat overlooked – after all he hardly wanted to be recognised.

Most of the conversation revolved around the Hydra bases they had pinned down as the most important to sort out, and which they thought they should hit first. As a soldier who had served with the modern army with modern tactics Sam had valuable insights on their methods and infiltration. Rhodes had also been able to help on this front, but he’d been serving as Iron Patriot for a good few years now and whilst out-of-touch wasn’t quite the phrase, he wasn’t quite as up to date as Sam was.

It was difficult to establish a chain of command since without Fury calling the shots there were various personalities that automatically assumed leadership, and that in turn caused tension. Steve and Thor especially were struggling not to naturally take charge and it was anyone’s guess what would have happened had Tony been there too.

As it was, of all people Bruce was the one who in his quiet unassuming way kept them all on track and diffused the problems before they fully erupted. Pepper also took a big hand in this and between the two of them they managed to guide the others into forming something vaguely coherent. It didn’t help that people’s ideas of guerrilla warfare, covert operations and subterfuge varied dramatically.

With two modern spies and a modern soldier coming up against a World War Two combat specialist and two God’s whose ideas of warfare were still lodged in the dark ages, despite everything it was tough to join together a plan everyone agreed with.

The arrival of Rhodes – which brought a brief respite as he and Sam were introduced – only really added fuel to the fire and once again it was a ridiculous hour when Pepper realised the time and decided to call it a night.

Tony still hadn’t reappeared in all that time, and as was becoming habit his husband was sent to fetch him for some food.

Loki couldn’t be bothered with teleporting, so took the elevator down to the labs to find his missing partner instead. They’d barely been back on Earth any time at all and he was already seeing a pattern here, which he wasn’t happy with. Tony had said the wings wouldn’t take three hours, and it had been over eight. This wasn’t acceptable.

Unsurprisingly the Falcon pack was long finished and sitting abandoned on the work surface whilst Tony was sat at his desk typing. He looked up at the sound of the electric doors opening and smiled tiredly.

“Hey. What’s up?”

“We’re having dinner.”

“Dinner? What time is it? How long have I been down here?”

“It’s gone ten. What have you been doing all this time?” Loki was evidently worrying that there was going to be a repeat of the last time he’d come down to find his husband in the labs. However, when he rounded the desk to have a look at the computer screens there was nothing to do with the current situation in sight. One screen had long lists of numbers and mathematical coefficients, whilst another was covered in infra-red spectra of what appeared to be another planet.
“What are you doing?”

“I was writing up the improvements I’d made to the wings, got distracted by my mess of a desktop and ended up tidying up files.” Tony had been using a pen and tablet to interact with the computer system, and now tapped the pen against one of the on-screen images. “I then started procrastinating and reading through all this stuff. Recognise it?”

Loki gave the picture a cursory glance then shook his head. “No, should I?”

“You spent the past seven years there.”

“Oh…” The prince stuttered – an unusual occurrence to say the least as he stared at the grainy pictures. “I never…never saw it from the outside…”

It was hard for Loki to place the image on the screen in the same frame of mind as the hell he had gone through. The only places he’d ever seen there were either the cell he’d been kept in, or the chamber where the chitauri had done their experiments. He’d never thought of the two grim rooms as a part of a larger whole – that he had actually been on a planet. They’d just been hell. Nothing more and nothing less.

Tony glanced up at his partner and immediately picked up on the tense cast to Loki’s jaw so hit a button on the corner of his tablet and minimised the lot.

“Anyway. I’ve updated the data from the video feed and such that Jarvis had been running when we went to get you and this was all going to be put into Jarvis’ deep storage memory.”

Loki nodded slowly, and it was pretty obvious he wasn’t listening.

“I emailed Merlin back too.” Tony added. “He’s not replied, so I don’t know what’s going on there, but at least he can’t say we aren’t talking to him. And Evie’s being a cow at the moment, so don’t try talking to her unless you’re fully armoured.”

The talk of his children seemed to shake Loki back out of the frozen stupor the memories had left him in and he frowned slightly.

“What is wrong with Evelyn?”

“College.” Tony brought up a webpage he’d been browsing, listing which institutions were the best in the league tables for various subjects. MIT and Harvard were sitting pretty at the top, but there were a handful from outside the States too.

“Why on Earth is she looking at university now? She’s fourteen!”

“I was in MIT at the age of fifteen. She’s smart enough and is desperate to follow in the old Stark footsteps.”

Loki pulled the spare chair over and sat down next to his husband, frowning at the list of colleges. “So why is she in a bad mood?”

“Current circumstances.” Tony shrugged. “She’s pissed. She’s spent her whole life pretty much cooped up here, and has never once complained because she’s always recognised the reasons behind it, but I think she’s been looking at college as her way out. And now with all of this crap suddenly happening she’s realised that it isn’t going to happen. At least, not any time soon.”

“She can’t be sheltered forever – if she wants to live her life she will have to accept the risks.”
“She’s not old enough! She’s still a kid!”

“You just said that you yourself were fifteen when you went.”

“My parents weren’t embarking on an undercover war against an evil Nazi-led organisation.” Tony ran a tired hand through his hair. “To be honest, I’d never even considered Evie going off to college and she kinda blind-sided me with it.”

“It’s a little sudden, is it not?”

“Apparently she’s been looking into it for ages. Her big plan was to wait until we got you back, and then off she’d go. I mean, obviously she wouldn’t leave immediately or something, but this plan’s been brewing and it seems it’s kinda hit home quite hard that her dream of leaving isn’t going to happen. And she’s decided that now is the best time to have that revelation.” He smirked drily. “Damn kid’s got no sense of timing at all.”

“She’s trying to make sense of everything, Tony. It has been a rough few months for her. If this is an idea she’s had for some time it would be reasonable for her to fall back on it as some semblance of normality and then be crushed to find that it’s not feasible.”

“She’s still too young.”

Loki smiled slightly. “Maybe if you had shown some sympathy to the fact that her aspirations and dreams for the future had been ruined, rather than brushing them off as something unattainable anyway she would not be so upset.”

“Yeah, how about you don’t give me parenting advice? I’ve raised the kid for fourteen years; I think I know how to talk to her.”

“Well if she is now in a bad mood you apparently don’t.”

“…You’re not helping my bad mood right now.” Tony’s voice made it clear that teasing was most certainly not appreciated. “Either say something useful and/or comforting or get the hell out of my labs.”

“I don’t usually work with ‘comforting’ and I don’t know what would be useful in this context.”

“Urgh!” The man thumped his head down onto the desk with a frustrated snarl. “Then why are you here?” It was a blatantly rhetorical question and when he didn’t get an answer he rolled his head just enough to peek at Loki sideways. “Am I a horrible parent?”

“Because you don’t want your daughter to be an obvious and visible target to an insane Nazi terrorist organisation who have everything Shield owned at their disposal? Sure, that makes you an absolutely despicable parent.”

“Heh. I feel like I’m the worst.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Tony. Evelyn has obviously reached the conclusion herself that university will have to wait, and you were simply not in a good frame of mind for her to come and use you as a verbal punchbag about it. She needed to vent and it was simply not a good time to do so.”

“Stop being so bloody reasonable!”

“Are you going to go and talk to her about it?”
“I’ll leave it a few hours first; she’s a monster when she’s angry.”

“Oh, so some Jötunn features made it into her genetic make-up after all.”

“I don’t know if you think you’re being funny, Loki, but right now I’m not fucking laughing. My daughter’s pissed at me for something entirely out of my control, the world as we know it is falling down around us and you seem to think it appropriate to take the piss.”

Loki held up both hands and began theatrically folding down fingers. “Well that has to be a record; we have been on Earth all of five days and this is turning into our seventh argument.”

“And whose fault is that?”

“Classically I would blame the Norns, since they must have had been laughing when they thought we would be good together!”

Tony thumped his head back down onto the desk again with a loud clunk that sounded quite painful. “Jesus…has it really been seven? We’re not that bad, are we?”

“Apparently we are.”

“Apparently.” The man didn’t move his head so his voice was muffled against the cold chrome. “Are we doing the right thing here? Do you really think the Norns, or whatever, put us together as a joke?” He felt Loki’s hand on the back of his head, fingers running gently through his hair.

“No, not really. We just need some more time to work out our differences.”

“We’ve had quite a while already. Do you really think we can sort this out?” Tony didn’t sound upset, if anything it was just tired defeat in his voice. “There’s all this shit going down right now, Evie’s falling apart and needs a strong support system and we can’t even talk civilly to each other. How is this meant to work?” He finally raised his head enough to look at his husband. “What if we can’t make this work?”

“Tony…” Loki smiled gently, cupping the man’s cheek. “We have never been together as a couple; we have never tried to make this work and never needed to. It will not happen immediately. Look at us now; we have already successfully stopped a fight and are now rationally discussing the problem.”

“I guess.”

The God leant over to tap his finger against the computer screen and one of the images of the chitauri’s base came back up, a photo of the outside of the complex.

“There. See that? That was at the edge of your known universe. Even Heimdall could not see that far and yet you managed to find it, get to it and destroy it. For me, I think we will survive a few arguments after you went through all that trouble.” He studied the image more curiously this time. “I never imagined it to look like that. I only saw the two rooms and the décor was never high on my list of interests.”

“I would rather assume you had other things on your mind.”

“Oh, just a little.”

“Like their terrible taste in light fittings.”
Loki let out a startled laugh, surprising himself that he could allow a joke about such things. “Indeed. Their furniture was hardly Chippendale either.”

“And the flooring left a lot to be desired.”

“How am I joking about this?!”

“Well at least we aren’t fighting now.”

“There is that.” Loki smiled and held his hand out. “Come on, dinner should have arrived and you need to eat.”

Tony grabbed the finished wingpack with his spare hand as his husband bodily dragged him out of the lab by the other – and when a God drags you, you stay dragged.

Up in the lounge – that had been commandeered as their command base – the rest had already started without them, including Evie who had mooched out of her room and joined them since the lure of food was too much for any teenager.

Tony deposited the Falcon wings back in their grateful owner’s hands and went to dig out some of the Korean take-away for himself. Loki went to follow only to have his path blocked by Colonel Rhodes.

“Excuse me? You are in my way.”

“Yeah, that was the plan.” Rhodey actually grabbed the prince by the upper arm, entirely uncaring who and what the taller man was. “Come on, we need to talk.”

“Oh do we?” If they hadn’t been in a crowded room of allies – and Evelyn – Loki would have simply turned James into a greasy smear on the floor. As it was, incinerating the Iron Patriot was probably not conducive to team spirit so instead he allowed the soldier to tow him over to a quieter corner of the room. “What do you want?”

“You know I’m Tony’s best mate, right?”

“He mentioned you once or twice.”

“Yeah, well, I look out for my mates, and I don’t like you.”

Loki felt a grin steal across his face – the one that usually surfaced when he sensed a good fight coming on. “Oh come now; we don’t know each other, that’s hardly fair.”

“Fuck fair. You burnt up half of New York and chucked Tony out of a window. I’m called the Iron Patriot for a reason; I don’t like people fucking with my country or my friends!”

“I care nothing for your country, but fucking your friend is currently my favourite past-time.”

James choked as Loki smiled beatifically at him.

“I don’t want you anywhere near Tony!”

“Uh, too late for that; I married him.”

“You threw him out of a window!”

Loki laughed. “Please. If he can forgive that, you can have no cause to complain.”
The Colonel didn’t seem to be seeing the funny side like the prince was. “Do you not care in the least about what happened?!”

“After everything that has happened since, I cannot say it keeps me awake at night. Has Tony kept you up to date?”

“Kid, chitauri and some torture. So what?”

“Hmm.” The disgruntled tone said it all. “You think torture is a thing to make light of?”

“You’re a God; like it was going to do you any real harm.” Rhodes allowed himself a grin when he saw Loki pale and knew that he had finally landed a hit. “Oh I’m sorry, was that a nerve there?” His grin broadened as the prince struggled momentarily to reply. “Oh, it really was. Well, what do you know, God’s have weak spots.”

“Tell me, do you take the piss out of Tony for his PTSD?”

“Like that’s even the same! Tony never deserved it.”

Loki raised his eyebrows, torn half-way between complete disbelief and utter rage. “Excuse me?!” It came out as a spluttered laugh.

“I helped clear up that shit-storm you brought down on New York; you deserved everything you got and more.”

There was a very long moment as the two men stared at each other, trying to determine if Rhodes had just signed his death sentence. Then Loki’s skin flushed deep blue.

“Oh!” The Colonel took a hurried step back as the air temperature in their immediate vicinity dropped rapidly.

The sudden flash of ice spread out like ground-zero around an atom bomb, a wide circular pattern that rushed across the floor, eating up the plush carpets under thick frost. There were cries of alarm as the others realised what was happening.

“Never presume to know about the sufferings of others.” Loki tapped a finger against James’ chest, gently resting it there so that ice began to slowly crackle across the man’s jacket. “Only when you yourself are blameless, can you lay blame at other’s feet, War Machine.”

Rhodes appeared to be glued to the spot, frozen – and how apt was that? – as he stared at the Jötunn infront of him. The expression on his face made it very clear that he had not expected to come face to face with someone quite so alien. Loki’s glowing red eyes, the deep blue of his skin and raised spiralling patterns that ran across his face made it very clear that he was far more than the man had originally assumed.

“Now, let us make one thing quite clear.” His breath came out as a wisp of curling air that crystallised almost immediately in the warm atmosphere. “Whatever has happened in my past, is firmly in the past. If that’s good enough for Tony, for Thor, for Asgard – who, by the way, are pretty harsh when it comes to punishments; we’re talking medieval – then it should be good enough for someone like you.” He removed his finger just as the ice froze right the way through the man’s clothing. “So keep your opinions to yourself. Tony and I are married and have a beautiful child together; I will not let you try to disrupt that.” He tilted his head slightly and in so doing the blue faded back to his more usual Aesir appearance. “I understand that you simply wish to protect your friend, but a full-on attack was not the way to do it.”
"I’ve always protected Tony; you can’t expect me to stop just because someone I’ve never met says so."

Loki took a step back so that Rhodes could have his personal space back. “A fair point.” He surveyed the man shrewdly, taking his time now that the tension had dissipated a little. “Are you always so territorial?”

“Are you always so violent?”

“Only when it involves a personal attack on myself – especially in regards to my relationship.”

James folded his arms, his aggressive confidence returning now that Loki had stopped threatening him. “If you hurt him, I’ll kill you. And I’m inventive; it will make all that shit the Vikings used to do look like a kids game.”

“Believe me; if I hurt him, I would take my own life.” It was rare for Loki to sound so genuine – not that the Colonel knew that – but the earnestness couldn’t be denied. “He and I are a team; we fight, we argue and we have each other’s backs. We are both immortal now – and that means we are in for the long run.”

“You married him.”

The trickster finally smiled. “His idea, I assure you. I am still waiting for a ring to make an appearance.”

“I hope you really do have eternity, because you’ll wait forever if you leave something like that up to Tony – he procrastinates.”

“Oh I don’t know. He did pretty well reaching the other side of the universe.”

“First thing he’s ever actually focused on for more than five minutes. Even the suits are built in bursts of productivity.”

The two men’s stances had relaxed, and James finally returned Loki’s tentative smile.

“Believe me, Colonel – I cannot promise that Tony will be happy with me for eternity, but I can promise that I will try each and every day to make it so.”

Rhodes glanced back at the now-silent room, everyone staring at them wide-eyed. He met Tony’s frozen gaze and briefly nodded with a sort of half-shrug. “Eh, he’ll do.” Without waiting for a reply he turned back to Loki who was beginning to look quite amused. “Sorry, by the way. I decided that what with your reputation I needed to hit you hard and personal to get anything approaching the truth out of you.”

“Charming. Remind me to return the favour someday.” Loki also took in the expressions of the rest of their group. “Oh, and sorry about the ice. I still cannot entirely control it. Lack of practice and all that.”

"You might want to work on that..." Steve said slowly.

"Just a bit." Sam was looking equal parts confused and intrigued. "And did I hear that right? It was you all those years ago with those aliens?"

Loki stared at him for a moment then allowed his old battle armour to materialize around him, helmet and all. Sam took a step backwards, looking alarmed.
"Loki, stop it." Thor's voice was full of older brother harmonics.

"Am I allowed to have any fun?" The glamour disappeared as quickly as it had arrived, leaving Loki in his smart trousers and casual shirt.

"Uh....why is everyone okay with him if he's a genocidal maniac?" Sam wasn't stupid - he could see that even if the others didn't appear to like Loki all that much, they evidently trusted him to be there. Something had to have happened.

The Avengers looked at each other, at Loki, and then at each other again. The trickster covered his mouth, turning away hurriedly. From the way his shoulders were shaking it was fairly evident he was laughing.

"It's not funny, Loki." Steve said disapprovingly.

"Forgive me if I disagree with you on that account."

The Captain turned to an increasingly confused Sam. "It's a really long story, but like most starts with Tony Stark being unable to keep it in his pants."

The Falcon glanced at Tony before his shrewd gaze scanned across to Evelyn. "Oh hang about!" He pointed a finger at Loki. "You're the mysterious mother no-one knows anything about!"

"I happen to be male."

"Bullshit, you happen to be an alien!" Sam looked triumphant as everyone else stared at him in surprise. "What? I'm not stupid; the kid's got his ears and that can only be inherited."

In unison Loki and Evie raised a hand to their respective right ear and glanced at each other. Sam saw this and began to laugh.

"Seriously? This happened?! I know Mr Stark has a hell of a reputation but knocking up an alien who tried to take over the planet is...well...crazy, I guess."

"Believe me; no one was more surprised than I." Loki said.

"But still..." Sam was looking impressed by this point and glanced at Tony. "Nice going Mr Stark."

"I thought you liked women." Steve said slowly.

"Yeah, but that doesn't mean I can't appreciate a fine specimen of the male persuasion every now and then."

Loki seemed thoroughly amused by the whole exchange and bowed his head to the Falcon. Steve groaned.

"Look, as fun as this is, guys, can we get back to the subject in hand? We need to be in Iceland tomorrow."

The group did at least settle down enough to eat, but they realised they wouldn't get any peace until Sam - and Rhodey to some extent - knew the full story. It was a long evening.

WMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWM

To contend with the time-zone difference they prepared that evening and left at nearly three in the morning so as to reach Iceland with the light.
It was interesting to try and work with the new additions to the team, who did not necessarily gel very well with the established group. Sam slotted in without a problem – used to following orders, and comfortable enough around Steve and Natasha to simply go with the flow. It helped that he was naturally easy going and recognised what it took to work together with a group of near-strangers. Rhodey was less simple to slot into place due to his somewhat complicated relationship with Tony.

Having spent most of their friendship trying to keep the inventor sober, clean, or at the very least coherent, the Colonel was having a hard time letting the man take point on the mission. Even with their shared history of Ironman and War Machine James had kept more than a close eye on his friend. The random child turning up in Tony’s life, and then the life-threatening heart condition had only increased this paranoia.

Added the fact that he didn’t get on very well with Clint or Natasha, seemed to see Sam as an interloper in his territory and liked Steve but struggled to accept the super-soldier’s authority it was somewhat tense.

But those problems paled in comparison with the idea of trying to include Loki in the Avengers. He was the reason they had formed the Avengers in the first place.

It was a little tricky to work around this memory.

Even just the simple command of ‘suit up’ held multiple problems. As Thor succinctly put it; “The green was rather noticeable, even if your face was not, and it was about time the helmet went anyway.”

It was a fair point, and Loki compromised by going for an older outfit that didn’t bear much resemblance to his green Take-Over-the-World gear. But he was not happy about it.

He was even less happy when the travel arrangements were sorted – they were taking the quinjet, naturally – and he simply couldn’t see why he couldn’t just teleport the group there. Thor provided multiple reasons; mostly in the form of anecdotes of various times they’d tried that and Loki had been knocked out or somehow incapacitated and left everyone stranded because he couldn’t get them back home. That cemented the plan to fly, and put the trickster in an extremely bad mood with his brother.

The cabin of the jet had an atmosphere you could cut with a knife; the humans piled down near the pilot’s end, and the two God’s right up against the cargo doors. Thor looked like a kicked puppy.

After about an hour and a half of terse silence Loki glanced at his brother from the corner of his eye.

“The last time I was in one of these, you threw me out of it.”

“Carried you out.”

“The landing was definitely more of a throw. I distinctly remember rupturing a disc or two in my spine.”

“You were fine.”

“Eventually.”

Thor managed to catch his brother’s eye just as Loki looked away again, his hand raising up to
possibly cover a tiny smile.

“It was strange to see you wear that again, by the way.” The older God said quietly.

“Oh?”

“Well…the last time you wore that ensemble we were in Jötunnheim and I was trying to start a war.”

“Yes. You were an obnoxious bilgesnipe and damn near succeeded in killing us all. At least when I try to kill people I refrain from doing it through stupidity.”

“Why are you so angry with me? It cannot be because I opposed you teleporting us all; you know it is risky to have only the one exit strategy.”

“I know.”

“So…?”

Loki looked down at the all-black Aesir clothing he was wearing. He hadn’t bothered with gloves or a cape, but it was essentially his old hunting outfit; worn for centuries and so familiar and so much a part of him that he was constantly having to remind himself of current reality. His fingers were fiddling with the metal links along his arms; a nervous reaction he had always had and that came as easy as breathing.

“You are right; the last time I wore this was on Jötunnheim, and that…everything that went wrong, everything with your banishment, the Destroyer, the void, the chitauri, everything seems to have stemmed from that moment.” He looked up and smiled slightly. “And when I am going through those memories you really do not want to annoy me.”

“I thought you had worked through all of those things.” Thor looked so genuinely confused that his brother just didn’t have the heart to be offended by the complete and utter lack of understanding at how deep the issues ran.

“I have barely scratched the surface, brother. If you must know, I have hardly been able to face the full reality of what the chitauri did. It will take many years to come to terms with everything that happened since Jötunnheim and I refuse to rush it.”

“Oh…”

“Remember the Dark Elves and how long it took both of us to recover from that?”

Thor’s expression darkened at the foul memory and he nodded in understanding. “Yes, alright, Yes, that I do get.” The two young prince’s had taken centuries to fully recuperate physically and mentally from what had happened to them in the Dark Elf prison camp. If Thor needed anything to explain how badly the events over the past years had affected Loki, that reminder was the perfect analogy.

Loki glanced out one of the windows, although all that was below them was dark water. “So… Iceland.”

“Yes?”

“It has been a long time since we were last there. I believe they still worshiped us.”
Thor grinned, relieved at the change in conversation. “Oh for the good old days.”

Finally Loki smiled properly. “Indeed.” He let go of his sleeve and twisted his fingers together instead so that he wasn’t pulling at the metal links any more. “You realise this is our first time fighting side-by-side again since Jötunnheim, as well?”

“What fault is that?” It was an unusually acerbic reply that was only tempered by Thor’s grin. “As I recall, I was all for talking things out like rational beings. You were the one who wanted to stick knives in me.”

“If I had really been trying to kill you, you would be dead.”

“I know.” The thunder God cast a glance at the humans at the other end of the not-that-large quinjet, who were making quiet conversation, but had blatantly heard everything. “Now, are you going to stop sulking? Because right now I believe the team think you are intending to ice everything. Again.”

Loki glanced at the other Avengers, and as Thor had said there was some definitely nervous body language going on that had nothing to do with the mission. Only Tony seemed relaxed, faceplate up as he chatted incessantly to Rhodes – also in his suit. The man was obviously on cloud nine and Loki recalled that this was the first Avenger’s operation where Stark had been allowed to actually use his suit again rather than fly it remotely. He obviously couldn’t wait to start.

“Landing in five.” Natasha called out, silencing any quiet talking going on as people began doing final double checks on their equipment and gear. It was still dark out, but dawn was beginning to turn the horizon a deep blue. So far to the north it wasn’t going to get fully light since it wasn’t summer, but they were anticipating a decent light level for the main operation.

The quinjet landed in the wild landscape, some distance from the town of Husavik and out in the mountainous regions. There was – to the Avenger’s surprise – little to no snow, although the two Norse Gods knew what to expect from the country. Given the geology of the area and for the element of surprise they were still a few miles from the Shield/Hydra base, and Loki refused to accept any objections as he teleported the group to the planned area.

The base was almost invisible, perfectly camouflaged in the surrounding rugged nature. From the outside it was an unassuming structure; a small bunker that blended into the rocks around it quite flawlessly, and even if anyone did see anything it looked too small to be anything important.

All of this was observed by Iron Patriot from a safe distance since they were well aware from the blue-prints that Jarvis had that the whole above-ground area was heavily defended. From the same blue-prints they knew that although the structure looked tiny, it was actually only the tip of the iceberg and the real base went down multiple levels underground.

It was an old weapons storage facility – nothing new or experimental, just all of the old creations and out of date tech that Shield had decided was too important to simply throw away. This sounded harmless enough, but a significant majority of the weapons were StarkTech – both generations – so were ridiculously overpowered given what they were. And in the right, or in this case wrong, hands it would be very easy to reconfigure the old weaponry to something more modern and even more deadly. Additionally, there was the possibility of alien items too, including chitauri armaments.

The plan was simple enough since the mission was simple enough. They were to extract anything useful or nuclear, and then destroy the rest of the base. Chances were because it was storage there would only be a skeleton crew of guards there to limit casualties. The real difficulty would be determining whether or not the soldiers there were still loyal to Shield or not.
“Right, the coast appears to be clear.” Rhodes said quietly. He was positioned with Thor and Clint facing the area designated as the entrance to the facility, overlooking it from one of the high bluffs in the surrounding mountains. The others were scattered in similar groups around the perimeter, as close as they dared to get without setting off any early warning alarms.

“Okay, here goes nothing then. No pressure, Loki, but this bit is all on you.” Steve’s voice sounded tense over the earpieces. Trusting Loki enough to live with him was one thing, trusting him enough to hinge a plan’s success on him was another. It had taken a lot of cajoling on Thor and Tony’s parts to persuade the other’s that Loki was their best bet to infiltrate the base without being seen and therefore not losing their element of surprise.

“I am on my way.” Loki was with Sam and Natasha, hidden behind a large rock formation and rolled his eyes at the obvious concern in Steve’s voice. “Please have a little faith in me Captain.”

“I’m a Christian, you pagan jerk.” Credit to him, at least Rodgers still had it in him to joke despite the situation, drawing quiet chuckles from the others.

“Fine, I will sing Ave Maria for you when I return, deal?”

“That’ll do, now get on with it.”

The trickster smiled sharply and vanished.

It was difficult to teleport to a place he didn’t know or had never seen, but with the blue-prints in his mind it gave him somewhere to focus on. Loki aimed for just inside the doorway, invisible and blocking his heat signature just in case of thermal imaging cameras.

It was a good job he’d thought to add the precautions.

“Ah.”

“Loki? Are you in?” Rodgers voice was tinny in his ear, the sound also masked from the outside.

“Yes. And we have a problem.”

“What sort of problem?”

Loki looked around at the apparatus surrounding the doorway. “They have rigged the entrance and I am no expert but I would guess the resulting explosion would be big enough to reach the town.” He took a careful step closer and spotted a tiny wire that ran out of the equipment and ran down to a crack in the floor. “Scratch that; it's bigger. I am going to have a look at the lower levels.”

“Wait! Wait! You can’t just-”

“Well, since there is no way to open the door and let you all in, and this place is almost certainly deserted, I think I can ‘just’.” He smirked and flicked the earpiece, shorting the circuit.

Now fully alone in the bright corridor with its deadly entrance, Loki took another careful look at the explosives and the triggering system. Whilst he was by no means an expert, he knew his way around a bomb – the whys and wherefores of that knowledge would not go down well with the humans – and after a few minutes he determined that the only triggering mechanism was the opening of the doors, and therefore he was safe to drop the invisibility.

All of the power in the facility was still on, presumably powering the explosive device and any other little surprises that the operatives had left behind. It was impossible to tell if Hydra had
already infiltrated the place and had set up the traps, or Shield had managed to evacuate and booby-trapped it against Hydra. Either way, it was not good.

At the end of the corridor there was an elevator and a stairwell. A quick look at both told the trickster that they were likewise rigged and packed with enough C4 to even give a God a serious headache. Whoever had done this had expected the very best in infiltration and it was reasonable to assume every level and doorway was going to be in a similar state.

Loki took stock of the situation and grudgingly decided that he was going to need someone with him to explore the lower levels. He was good with explosives, and generally knew what to look for, but he needed an expert if he was to successfully navigate the whole base. It was imperative to know what had been left behind – if anything – and to glean any clue as to which side the bases occupants had been on.

He closed his eyes and a moment later there was the barrel of a gun forced against the side of his head.

“Jesus, Loki! Don’t sneak up like that in the middle of an operation!”

He opened his eyes to see Natasha lowering her gun and looking unusually frazzled. Behind her Sam had both of his own weapons drawn and trained on the trickster. Loki grinned at the two humans, far too amused by their reactions at his teleportation.

“So, what’s going on in there?” The woman didn’t bother with apologies.

“An awfully large amount of explosives. I need you to come with me; I am not up to speed with modern bombs.”

“Wouldn’t Rhodes or Sam be better?”

Loki cast a quick glance at the Falcon. “The Colonel cannot be stealthy in the Iron Patriot armour, and I need someone used to working on the ground.” His gaze became somewhat more respectful. “I know you are an expert at what you do, Falcon, but you are an airman, and your skill is in flight.”

“I know my way around a bomb.”

“I know, but we do not know each other and in this situation I want someone I know at my side.”

Sam smiled slightly. “Fair enough; but you can’t always have that luxury.”

“But right now I can.” Loki touched Natasha’s wrist, both to get her attention and a more purposeful gesture to alert her to the oncoming spell. She had barely enough time to inform Steve of what was happening before there was a swirl of black and she found herself standing inside the complex, facing the doors.

“Oh…”

“See the problem?”

It only took a few moments for the woman to take stock of the situation. “That’s a lot of explosive.”

“I did say so.”
“Seeing is believing.” She turned and scrutinised the elevator and stair well too. “Have you looked at the lower levels?”

“That is why I brought you.” His hand was still resting on her wrist and this time he closed his fingers so that he was actually holding her by the arm. “Shall we?”

Again, there was no waiting for consent or for the assassin to prepare herself for the crushing darkness. It was less than an instant later that the floor under their feet changed slightly in texture and Natasha pushed him away from her.

“Don’t do that again!”

“I may have to if you wish to leave this place.” Loki wasn’t even focussing on his companion, instead staring around at the large empty space they stood in.

It was meant to be a huge underground warehouse, and the size of the place certainly agreed with that, but it was completely and utterly empty of anything useful. There were rows upon rows of empty metal shelves, not a loose screw or smudge of dirt left to tell of what had lain there. It was not hopeful.

“Damn.” Loki stepped up to one of the nearest sets of shelves, reaching out with a tendril of magic to see if he could discern what had been there. Behind him a sudden clicking started up and he looked back to see Natasha holding out her phone.

“Geiger counter.” She said in answer to the unasked question. “Tony can do amazing things to technology; the apps on this thing beggar belief.” She began waving it towards the shelves in turn. “We’re here for the nukes and whatnot, might as well at least see if they were ever here to begin with.”

“There are spells that can do that.”

“I’m sure there are, but if I can sort out the radioactive readings, you could be doing something else. Search for life signs or something.”

Loki felt the familiar prickle of irritation at having his skills casually brushed aside, but tamped it down. He and Natasha hadn’t worked together before, there were bound to be difficulties. The fact that he could already sense the background hum of radiation in the area probably wasn’t worth mentioning. At any rate, he couldn’t narrow it down to any one place so might as well let the woman use her little machine. Instead he sent out other tendrils of magic.

“There were people here, about a month ago.” He said quietly. “Not many, but they had been living here for some time. They left very suddenly.”

They began walking down one of the rows of shelves, Natasha slowly waving her phone over each one.

“Can you tell if they were the ones who took the weapons?”

The spell curled through the air, scenting out the gentle auras left behind by the men who had lived in the place. Humans left behind a subtle energy, very different to Aesir – which he was more used to searching for – but enough that he could still trace.

“There’s no sign of any new people entering here in the past month beyond us. Whoever was here cleaned the place out.”
“Big undertaking for what would have been a skeleton crew of guards.” The Geiger counter began clicking furiously at one of the shelves and Natasha made a note of the area on another app on the phone.

“Not if they had been planning it months in advance.”

“So you think they were Hydra then?”

“It would make sense.”

Natasha glanced up from the screen of her phone to watch Loki walking infront of her. He had his hands by his sides, slowly twisting them to and fro as if he were running his fingers through long grass or water.

“How does it work? How can you tell who was here?”

The God didn’t bother to look back at her. “All living creatures have an electromagnetic signature. Even you humans know this. I can simply sense it, with the right assistance.”

“Even a month later?”

“In a closed environment like this, where there has been little to no disturbance, yes.”

Natasha wasn’t entirely sure she believed him, but from the back it was much much harder to tell if the God of Lies was living up to his namesake. It was easy enough to assume that he had massively simplified a very difficult magical concept so that she would stop annoying him.

Loki heard the woman huff quietly and grinned to himself. They were nearly half way down the row of shelving and so far he had picked up the remnants of atomic material, as well as biochemical weaponry. It was a worrying notion that such things were in Hydra’s hands, although they all knew that bombs were the least of their problems.

He was about to suggest moving down to the next level when there was a sudden high-pitched snap behind him.

“Fuck…”

He turned to see Natasha frozen in place, looking down at her leading foot

“What was that?”

The woman took a shaky breath and looked up at him, a grim smile beginning to form across her face.

“That was a land mine. That I have just trodden on.”

“What?!”

“This place is mined…” Natasha closed her eyes and licked suddenly dry lips, calculating. “If you leave now you won’t be caught in the blast.” She held up a hand to stop his protest. “No, listen to me. We don’t know how big this is, or whether or not it is linked up to others. We’ve already seen that there is enough explosive here to take a chunk out of this mountain; you need to get the others to safety.”

“Do not be ridiculous, I cannot leave you here.” Loki stepped back towards her and she shifted her weight unconsciously. There was another click and they both froze again.
“Go…”

“No.” The trickster looked down at the thick linoleum covering the whole floor of the place. There was no imperfection in the smooth plastic, meaning that it had probably been laid down on top of the mines – if there were more, which was likely. He hadn’t been monitoring what was under their feet – which he could now see was a massive oversight. So much for assuming only the doors were armed…

Sweeping a hand out around him he tried to feel out the deadly technology hidden under the floor. A bright blip in his peripheral warned him of another trap close by, but he was safe enough to step up to Natasha. The magic feedback told him that the mine under her foot was linked up to the others nearby.

“I don’t know what you’re thinking of doing, but this thing is going to go off.” She said, far too calmly.

“These things can be deactivated.”

“By experts.”

“I will fetch Tony.”

“No. If... When this goes off it’s going to blow the whole area. That will affect the local town.”

“Actually, it is worse than that. We are sitting directly over the volcanic system – an explosion of this size could easily trigger an eruption.”

“Damn.” The woman had stared death in the face one too many times to be fazed by her own demise, but it was terrifying to think what the consequences of her one small footstep might be.

“I can try to at least break the link between this mine and the others. That way if it goes off it will not set off anything else.”

“Do you know how?”

“No.” Loki held out his hand. “Give me your ear piece – I destroyed mine.”

Natasha managed a shaky smile as she handed the tiny thing over. Loki fitted it and turned it back on.

“Tony, I need your help.”

“What’s happened?”

“They mined the place and Natasha has stepped on one. It is primed and ready to blow if she moves her foot.”

“Shit!”

“It’s wired up to others in the area and all of those are linked to the doors. If this all blows it will easily take out the nearby town and possibly trigger the volcanic system under us.”

There was another stream of curses from Tony’s end of the line.

“What are you going to do?”
“We need all of you to leave this instant. And in the meantime talk me through disarming this thing.”

“Like fuck am I-”

“Tony, now. No questions, no refusals, do what I say.” Sometimes it was easy to forget what Loki truly was. God, trickster, lover, husband. Those were all things Tony was used to. Loki the battle commander took Ironman by surprise.

The command was given by someone used to having their every word obeyed without question, and such was the authority that Tony found himself doing as he was told before he even realised it.

“Fine. I either need to be in there or at least need to see what we’re working with.”

That was easier said than done.

“I can magic the linoleum out of the way and take a photo?”

“No magic! You’ve got no idea how sensitive it is! Cut the lino away and don’t touch a thing.”

Loki rolled his eyes and sat down infront of Natasha, pulling a knife out.

“Know what you’re doing?” She asked, a small smile making a valiant attempt to stay on her face.

“Not so much. Just…do not move.” Loki scanned the area around her foot, tracing out the general shape and size of the mine so that when he then started cutting through the thick flooring he didn’t hit it. The knife was crafted by the Dwarves of Nidavellir and made short work of the thick plastic as he carefully carved a large circle out around Natasha’s foot. Once the circle was cut out he then began to trim it down until there was a glint of metal underneath.

“Ah, there it is.”

“What can you see?” Black Widow was unable to see anything from her angle.

“Not much. Give me a moment.”

Slowly the lino was cut away, revealing more and more of the mine until all that was left was the last piece of flooring directly under Natasha’s foot that couldn’t be removed without disturbing the volatile weapon.

“There we go.”

“Can you take a photo?” Tony asked across the coms.

“We are currently quite deep underground.”

“Yeah, and? Use your phone – I made those things to cope with anything. A little concrete won’t stop it working.”

Loki did as he was told, pulling out the Stark Industries mobile and finding the camera app to take a photo, making sure to include the wire assembly that linked the mine to others in the area.

“You look quite good down there at my feet.” Natasha was obviously trying to keep a cool head and taking the piss was doing the job quite well.

“Don’t get used to it.” Loki didn’t bother to look up, trying to work out how to send the
photograph. “Tony, have you got it yet?”

“Give it a moment...Ah. Yeah, there it is...”

There was a worryingly long silence following that and Loki frowned. “What? What is wrong?”

“Damn! They had to do it this way!”

“What way? How do I deactivate this?”

The silence was a better answer than anything Stark could have said.

“Tony, By the Norns if you don’t talk to me in the next second I will throw out the next window we come across! How do I deactivate this?!”

“You can’t!” Tony shouted back. “Those things are fucking tamper proof! Anything you try to do will set it off.”

His voice was loud enough for Natasha to hear and she let out a shaky breath. “Can we at least disconnect it from the others so that the whole place won’t go up?”

“...no.”

Loki scowled. “So what do we do?”

“I DON’T KNOW! For fucks sake give me a moment to think!”

“We do not really have a moment!” Loki was kneeling down but readjusted his legs to cross them instead. “Give me answers Tony.”

“I...Just...” It was actually frightening to hear the genius at a loss, struggling to find a way out of the situation.

“Anytime now would be good.”

“How cold can you go?”

“What?!”

“If you go blue, how cold can you get?”

“I have no idea; it is not something I have experimented with, nor the problem at hand here.”

“No, no, no, hear me out! It might be possible to freeze the components so that they can’t start the reaction. How cold can you get?”

The idea made some sense so Loki bothered to put a little thought into his answer. “Jötnar can have been known to reach around 200 Sigurds, which is around 60 Kelvin in your human terms.”

“60K? That’s liquid oxygen territory.”

“I can possibly go colder if I use my magic.”

Tony’s sigh of relief was audible and he began to explain which components to tackle first, since Loki wouldn’t be able to keep an earpiece in at those temperatures. The idea would work in theory, since even a highly volatile explosive couldn’t work if the reactive parts were frozen solid. The
only problems were doing it carefully enough so that Loki didn’t accidently set something off before he was done, or that he didn’t rush and flash freeze Natasha’s foot in the process.

“You okay to do this?”

“I have little choice. Is everyone out of the area?”

“Yeah, all clear.”

Loki didn’t allow for any ‘good luck’s or other sentimental things since they had no time for such things. Instead he simply removed the earpiece and handed it back up to Natasha – although she didn’t put it back on. Shuffling back a little he laid himself down on his stomach to be eye-level with the mine and after a brief moment of concentration saw his hands infront of him flush blue.

He had genuinely never seen the point in experimenting much with his birth-form, but the little that he did know was that he could fluctuate his temperature. That time he had frozen Tony’s arm – accident or not – had been the coldest he had ever attempted so he started with that as his base temperature. He heard Natasha gasp and smiled to himself.

“Not too cold for you, I hope.”

“Don’t be so full of yourself I grew up with Russian winters.”

“If Midgard can manage to have a winter this cold I would be astonished.” His words were teasing, but the tone distant as he tried to focus on one of the few Aesir temperature spells that he knew of. It would be too much to expect to lower his whole core temp down below his natural state, but a hand or finger would be feasible.

Natasha swore in Russian as Loki went from cold to a positive vacuum for heat, sucking any warmth from the vicinity to where he lay on the floor, concentrating fully on the magic. His natural limit was around 60K but heavy spell work was dropping him down to nearly 20K, -400F. Nothing on Earth was naturally that cold, and only with some serious scientific engineering could people take helium down to that level to freeze it.

“That should do it.” His right hand had gone from dark to light sky blue as frost sparkled across it, the very air around them solidifying as it made contact with the limb. Even as a frost giant he was feeling cold.

Natasha closed her eyes so that she didn’t have to watch as Loki gingerly pressed a finger against one of the screws in the mine’s outer casing. Her whole body was tensed, prepared for the ripping, searing explosion that she was certain was going to happen at any moment. There was a tinkling noise and she flinched.

“Do not move.”

“I didn’t.”

“Hmm.”

The woman cracked an eye open to see the remains of the shattered screw crumbled under her foot and Loki already freezing the next one. He smirked slightly.

“I would not have expected a hardened assassin such as you to be so scared of death.”

Natasha snorted. “I’m not afraid of dying, but I am rather against the idea of blowing up a city of
people and setting off a volcanic eruption.”

“Of course.” Loki didn’t even look up, his gaze riveted to the mine. “How is that ledger looking these days? Still red?”

“No doubt in a better state than yours.”

“I’m sure.” The casing that wound around the circumference of the mine was finally loose and Loki let the whole piece of metal freeze over so that it could not trigger a reaction as he pulled it off. This time there was no flinch and he was pretty certain Natasha was trying to prove a point. He could now see the inner workings of the weapon, although only a side-on view, and took a moment to determine what to work on next.

“Can’t you just freeze the whole thing in one go?”

“Of course, but I think you quite like your foot, do you not? I couldn’t guarantee that I wouldn’t freeze it solid by accident.”

“Ah…okay then. Take your time.”

“I am.”

Natasha’s balance was perfect and she was at the peak of physical fitness but that wasn’t going to stop her leg from cramping up in such an awkward position.

“Have you and Barton talked about the possibility of becoming immortal yet?”

“Yeah. As you can imagine, it’s currently at the front of my mind.”

“And?”

Natasha shrugged lightly. “I think we’re both going to say yes. I don’t particularly want to live forever, but it would be nice to heal up some old injuries that have been bugging me. I can always do something about the immortality should it eventually wear thin.”

“Injuries?”

“With my lifestyle are you surprised? There’s a bullet wound in my torso that has never stopped aching, my left ankle was shattered when I was in my teens and still causes the occasional problem, I can’t put my full weight on my right knee any more, a few torn muscles that have never been the same since. That sort of thing.”

Loki smiled slightly. “Ah, the life of a hardened assassin. I assume that Barton is thinking along the same lines?”

“Pretty much, although given that he’s that little bit older than me he’s also got some aging issues to get rid of.”

“Bad eyesight doesn’t suit an archer.”

Natasha nodded, although Loki couldn’t see since his full concentration was obviously elsewhere. Every now and then she could feel a vibration through the weapon under her foot, and there was the occasional disquieting tinkling sound. She had faced death many times in her life, and had actually been through the whole step-on-a-mine thing before, so it was not her own demise that was the problem, but rather the consequences for the surrounding area.
And she was absolutely freezing.

“Do you think the other bases are set up like this?” She asked quietly.

“Most likely.” Loki sat back and looked up at her. “There. I believe that’s done. I’ve frozen all of the main components, as well as the links to the other explosive devices.”

“You believe it’s done?”

“Well, I am no expert.” He was fading from deep blue back to his Aesir colouring and the room temperature began to go back up. “There’s only one way to find out.” He stood up and held a hand out to her.

Natasha stared at it like it was a venomous snake.

“You are going to have to trust me on this. At some point you will take your foot off that mine; you may as well get it over with.”

“And if you’ve failed I’ll be blown to kingdom come.”

“If I’ve failed we both will, you seem to think I’m going somewhere.”

They both stared at each other, daring the other to blink, to look away. Loki still had his hand held out, obviously not expecting to be trusted but not giving up either. Natasha had a stare like a cobra and seemed to be looking right through him as she weighed up her complete and utter lack of options. Since Loki was right; sooner or later if the mine was going to go off, it would do so.

“Alright; let’s see if you’ve killed anyone this time around.” It was a harsh remark and somewhat unwarranted when Loki had put quite a bit of effort into trying to save her, but he didn’t comment. Rather, a charming smile that promised a world of hurt after all the stress was over graced the tricksters face and he took her hand.

“By all means, let’s see what the body count is.”

Natasha looked down at her foot, then placed all of her weight onto the other, very slowly lifting up off of the activated weapon, stepping towards Loki.

There was a clunk as the mechanism moved, drawing two horrified gazes down to it. Then another click.

The sudden blur of movement took Natasha by surprise. One moment she was stepping away from the mine, the next she had been swept forwards and down to the ground. Every part of her body was tensed, preparing for the blast that she knew would kill her.

Something made a cracking noise.

“Oh. It appears that it worked.” Loki sounded beyond relieved.

Black Widow looked up to see the prince crouched over her, his body between her and the weapon. He wouldn’t have actually been all that effective as a shield, but it surprised her he had even made the effort.

As it was, Loki hadn’t needed to bother with his chivalrous gesture, since even as they both raised their heads to look the mine fell apart, sparkling with thick frost. Components were disintegrating, the metal crumbling under the intense cold and spilling out across the floor.
“It worked.” Natasha let out the breath she hadn’t realised she’d been holding. Loki stood up, still somewhat cautious, and approached the broken pieces of metal. He gingerly poked at one of the lumps with his boot.

“Well, that will be a good way to dispose of the rest of this place then.”

“You’re going to freeze the whole base?”

“I can certainly try. We cannot leave all of the live explosives as they are.”

Natasha rose to her feet as well, brushing the frost from her legs. They’d dressed for a cold climate, but even so her clothes hadn’t been made to withstand the temperatures Loki had created and the whole area was absolutely freezing. The hood of her winter coat sparkled with ice crystals and her breath was a fog in the air. Apparently her companion hadn’t come back up to a decent body temperature yet since his breath was still invisible.

“I’m going to send you back to the quinjet, then I’ll start freezing this place. Tell the others to get going and I will meet you all back at the tower.”

“What? Just leave you to it?”

Loki turned enough to glance at her condescendingly. “Yes, unless you don’t like the idea of leaving me alone with this amount of raw explosive. If you stay you will end up as a permanent frozen feature. It worked for Captain America, but I don’t think a few decades on ice will suit you as well.”

“It would ruin my hair.” The woman shot back, entirely deadpan. “However, we’ve only seen two levels of this place – there are at least three more.”

“And we have already nearly set off one explosion. I will have a quick look at the other floors but it is most likely that they are in the same condition.” Loki kicked the mine again, scattering the fragments now that he was certain it was safe. “And besides, if this goes wrong I would rather just blow myself up.”

“Now who’s worried about their ledger?” Natasha grinned as Loki glared at her, evidently annoyed at being caught out in showing some thought for another team-member.

“See you later Miss Romanoff.” The trickster didn’t give her another chance to try and argue as he simply reached out and touched her shoulder.

“Hey-!” The disgruntled interjection was cut short as Natasha suddenly vanished from the area and Loki smirked before turning back to look at the explosives visible on the far door. “Right…”

The temperature rapidly began to drop again.

Natasha was safely delivered back to the quinjet by the spell, where the others were waiting, and as per Loki’s instructions she insisted that they left and returned to New York.

The atmosphere on the aircraft was terse and somewhat embittered by failure. Whilst the mission hadn’t necessarily gone wrong, it had hardly been what they had expected or hoped for. Rather than rescuing or destroying large amounts of old Shield equipment they were going home empty handed with no new leads and no idea what had happened. It was also rather embarrassing that such a large group of them had gone out, and only two of them had done anything useful.
Tony and Thor had been less than enthusiastic about leaving the trickster behind, but since they couldn’t contact him there was little they could do about it beyond hoping that he could successfully destroy the rest of the explosive devices in the base and make it safe.

It was breakfast time back in New York, and Evie greeted them with freshly ordered pizza and coffee that was demolished almost at once. She also had the news that Jane Foster had been calling almost non-stop that made at least Bruce and Thor look guilty that they hadn’t even thought to tell the physicist that they had returned from Asgard – and they had been back for just that little too long now for it to be polite to have not told her.

Thor left to make the call and explain what had happened and Bruce decided to go with him so that it wasn’t just the thunder God taking the fall. With them gone Natasha dragged Clint off to the gym to sort out the residual stress from having been stuck on top of a primed bomb for a significant part of her working day.

Evie had her school work taking up the desk in the living room and left the others to it as she went back to studying and gradually the rest of the group dispersed out to either discuss their next steps or to work on other projects. Steve especially wanted to go through some new leads on the Winter Soldier and dragged Sam off with him. No doubt Sam would have tried to get Natasha to join them had she still been there – there was definitely a little bit of infatuation going on there.

Finally the room was empty apart from Evie doing her work and Tony sat on the sofa nervously watching his tablet screen where he was monitoring the satellite images of Iceland. Basically he was waiting to see if there was going to be a massive explosion or not. They were sat there for over an hour before the silence was broken.

“Is Möðhy going to be home any time soon?” The girl looked up from her essay on utilitarianism to glance at Tony.

“Unless he decides to blow up half of Scandinavia. And I wouldn’t put it past him to set off a volcanic eruption just for the hell of it.”

“He wouldn’t, would he?”

“He’s the God of mischief, go figure.” Tony flicked the image off his screen and brought up some data sheets instead, sorting through them. “He’ll be fine; it’s Iceland I’m worrying about.”

“What’s going to happen with Hydra now?”

“No idea.” He sounded distracted as his gaze flicked over the readings on his tablet. “No doubt they’ll rear their ugly heads sooner rather than later.”

“Should we worry?”

“About what?”

Evie rolled her eyes, putting her pen down to glare at her father. “Uh, how about the global threat Hydra poses? How about the fact that they could blow us up at any moment and we’re just sitting here? How long did it take you guys to decide to go to Iceland, only for there to be bugger all there?”

“Don’t swear.”

“Oh my God! Dad, are you even listening to me?!!”
“What?” Tony finally deigned to look up at her only to be on the receiving end of a teenage death-glares. “Look, I’m trying to sort something out for the next mission. We need a minesweeper of some sort for next time and I need to work that out.” He was already back to sketching something out on the tablet. “And don’t you have an essay to write?”

“Like you care!” Evie slammed her textbook shut. “Can you at least tell me what’s going on? You guys vanished at three in the morning and Jarvis had to let me know where and why! Is this what it’s going to be like now? You guys always included me in what was happening; I’ve always known where you were going and the bare bones of what the mission was. But now I haven’t got a clue! The moment it suddenly becomes important I’m left out of the loop!”

“For God’s sake Evie! There is no ‘loop’, and you’re fourteen! You are not an Avenger and you shouldn’t expect us to tell you everything!”

“Well you always have up until now! What’s changed?! Ooh, some super scary Nazi’s have suddenly popped up and you all seem to think this is the end of the world! Come on! Hydra’s a fucking joke and has you guys spooking at shadows!”

“Evelyn-!”

“And you won’t tell me! I don’t have a clue what’s going on here, or what happened with Uncle Steve and Auntie Tasha. And no-one knows where Uncle Nick is, which I hate and it’s scaring me and I want to know!! What’s so bad that you won’t tell me?!” Evie looked absolutely furious, and having one of those rare moments when she bore more resemblance to Loki than Tony. “I’ve been having to piece information together for myself these past few days and it would be so much easier if I was just told stuff! What is going on?!”

“They were going to blow up the tower, Evie!” Tony hadn’t intended to blurt it out in quite such a manner, but when his daughter started screaming at him he couldn’t help but scream back.

“What…?” The anger drained from Evie’s expression almost as quickly as it had appeared. “What do you mean?”

The inventor groaned and ran a hand down his face. “They were going to blow up the tower. The thing that happened with Steve and Natasha whilst we were away; well, it was bad, Birdy, really bad. Hydra got their hands on Shield’s Helicarriers and were targeting people they thought were a threat.”

“Well obviously Ironman is a threat.”

“They took it a step further. I was too hard to target, so they targeted the whole tower.”

“But…all the people here…”

“Yup. They would have killed us all. This whole tower, everyone in it and anyone unfortunate enough to be nearby.”

Evie opened her mouth then closed it again, trying to comprehend that. She had had a vague idea that something bad had been planned, but had assumed that it was a set of assassinations, not something quite so…ruthless. It was a huge thing for a fourteen year old to understand.

“But…we were in Asgard…”

“They didn’t know that. The intent was there. They wanted us dead.”
“Auntie Pep…”

“Yeah. Happy that you know now?” Tony had evidently lost his patience entirely. “I didn’t want you to know all of that, I didn’t want to scare you, but you evidently think you’re old enough so, fine.”

“Well I have to be bloody old enough if this is our life now! You guys keep calling this a war and so fine, we’re at war and I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but kids don’t do so well in war-zones! Age has nothing to do with it – the bad guys don’t care how old or young someone is, they just kill them! So don’t tell me that I’m too young for this shit, or too young to know what’s going on; because they don’t care!” Evie was almost eerily calm as she said her piece matter-of-factly. “Was I meant to be in the tower when they were going to hit it?”

“We can only assume so…”

“There we go then. I’d have died. I think I should know about these things.” The girl was looking straight ahead out of the window, staring unseeing at the city skyline. “I’ve had enough of worrying about my parents dying in random sets of circumstances; it’s about time I had a chance to worry about myself in that situation.”

“Do you really think I’d let that happen, Evie?”

“Do you really think you could stop it?”

They met each other’s gaze, vicious green hitting concerned brown head-on. Evie had certainly inherited Loki’s death-glare and knew how to use it. Tony was pretty damn good at staring contests, but couldn’t hold his own in this one and looked away with an irritated sigh.

“You know what? I could stop it, and I know that because I’ve done it before.” He placed the tablet down beside him on the sofa and folded his arms. “I’ve caught missiles before, I can do it again and I will do if it means protecting you.”

“Since when have you caught a missile?! Last time you went up against something serious you ended up half dead in your lab with Uncle Bruce trying to get your heart going again!”

Ah. Tony felt like with that comment the whole conversation had come into focus for him. Evie wasn’t just frightened for what the future could hold – she didn’t have the faith that her family could protect her from it either.

“Birdy, do you not trust me?”

Evie shrugged listlessly, refusing to display some sort of emotion about it. “You can’t protect me from everything, Dad. If Hydra want to blow up this tower they’ll do it, no matter what you try to do to stop them.”

“No. They won’t. I meant it about catching missiles; that wasn’t an analogy.” Tony wanted nothing more than to go over to his daughter and give her a hug but knew that in her current emotional state he was likely to end up with a pen in his eyeball if he tried.

“Go on then. Tell me. Make me believe that it’s possible to stop an evil group of super-villains from blowing the shit out of us!”

The unspoken ‘make me trust you, Dad’ made Tony ignore the swearing for once.

“Fine. You know that old story where your Möðhy decided to take over the planet and brought in
the chitauri to do it?” Tony didn’t bother with sugar coating it, since if Evie was going to be harsh, he was going to meet her head on. “Well, whilst they were busy smashing the hell out of New York, Shield decided the best way to deal with them was to nuke them. Nuke the whole city. And Fury did his best but they managed to fire the damn thing anyway. When I heard it was coming in I met it by the bridge and I caught that little bastard and I…Well, I got rid of it.”

“How?”

“I got rid of it. The how doesn’t matter.”

“It was stupid and reckless, wasn’t it?”

“I. Got. Rid. Of. It. And saved New York in the process and I’m still here, so don’t think I can’t protect you.”

Evie – entirely unconvinced – looked up at the ceiling. “Jarvis. What did he do to get rid of it?”

“Jarvis don’t answer that!”

“Jarvis!”

The Ai actually stuttered as one programming system took over another and he tried to prioritised which person to answer. Finally he decided on the best option.

“Sir, Miss Evelyn. This is your fight; please do not involve me in it.”

“But Jarvis….”

“I refuse to pick between you!”

Tony smirked, since by refusing to answer Jarvis was basically doing what the man had wanted him to do. “Good boy, Jarv.”

“I’m not on your side either, sir!” For emphasis Jarvis hit the light circuits in the room, making them flash like stadium lights, momentarily blinding both occupants and drawing a startled squawk from Evie.

“For God’s sake.” Tony leant over his knees, rubbing his eyes until the flashing stars went away. “There was no need for that, Jarvis!” He looked up to see Evie blinking hard and trying to get her sight back into focus. “You okay kiddo?”

“Fine.”

“I think I’m going to ban that word in this tower, it only means bad things.”

“Whatever.”

There was a moment of silence between them before Jarvis spoke up again.

“Will you both behave now? Sir, I suggest you tell your daughter the truth. Miss Evelyn, please give your father the benefit of the doubt, his actions saved the entire city, all of the Avengers, and technically your mother, although that wasn’t his main intention.”

“As I recall, Loki was left as a greasy smear in the floor of this very room at the time.” Tony said quietly. “And I can’t say he was my focus at that point.”
“Dad, what happened?”

Stark looked at the girl briefly, then shook his head. “Evie…”

“There was a wormhole over this tower.” Loki’s quiet voice took both of them by surprise, shocked to see him suddenly there in the doorway. “It was how I had brought the chitauri here using the tesseract. Your father caught the missile mid-flight and took it up through the portal into the midst of the army. He stopped the entire chitauri army almost single handed.”

“And…?” Evie asked tentatively.

“And my suit shut down entirely; I barely made it back out of the portal and from what I was later told the Hulk saved me from becoming an Ironman shaped crater.” Stark said softly.

“You nearly died.” The girl summed up quietly.

“And…?” Loki asked, quietly exhausted, one hand holding onto the door-frame as he looked between his spouse and daughter. “Now what exactly has been going on here? I’ve just spent the past…” He glanced at the clock on the wall. “Past four hours deactivating bombs piece by piece, expecting one to go off at any moment and was hoping to come back to something rather calmer than this. What’s happened?”

Evie glanced at her father, then down at her closed text book. “Nothing.”

“Well something has obviously gone on if I find you two trying to kill each other and Jarvis having a minor freak-out in a corner!” Loki came into the room, and closer-to it was obvious that he had used up the very last dregs of his energy in sorting out the Hydra base. He ignored the hand Tony stretched out to him and chose to slump down onto the thick-pile rug instead, sitting equidistant between his partner and child. “Now someone tell me what’s happening because I am simply too tired to work it out on my own and frankly I don’t want to either.”

The two Stark’s looked at each other again and the girl gave a little ‘go-ahead then’ shrug, prompting Loki to turn his gaze expectantly on his husband.

Tony groaned and ran a hand down his face. “Christ, this day has sucked. Fine. We were having a bit of a row because teenagers express fear as anger and it was the only way Evie was going to let me know what was going on in her head.”

Loki turned his head to raise an inquisitive eye-brow at his daughter. “Okay, and what are you frightened of, Evelyn?”

The teen shrugged mulishly. “I never said I was frightened.”

Tony rolled his eyes. “You didn’t need to say it, kiddo. It was perfectly clear what was going through your mind.” His gaze met Loki’s again. “She knows that Hydra targeted the tower and that’s freaked her out a bit.”

Loki nodded slightly, but was looking confused again. “Even so, Evelyn, you must know that
you’re safe here. You live with a team of super-heroes; we will not let anything happen to you.”

“Yeah. Except that I’ve seen Dad lifeless on the floor of his lab with Uncle Bruce unable to bring
back a heartbeat, you snatched away from right infront of us and powerless to stop it and both
times none of the others could do anything to help either of you!”

“You probably don’t remember it very well, but I was winning the fight with the chitauri initially. I
would have won overall if not for their underhand tactics.”

“You mean using me as bait.”

“Exactly. And remember what happened to the chitauri in the end?”

“Kablooie. But it took a very long time to get to that point.”

“But were you protected? Did I get you out of that situation?”

Evie shrugged slightly, unwilling to delve too deeply into the memories of that chitauri attack
when Loki had been captured. “I guess.”

“Evelyn; did I or did I not sort that situation out and get you to safety?”

“Yeah! To the detriment of your own welfare! You let yourself be captured and they had you for
seven fucking years! How do you think that made me feel?! You think I should feel safe when my
safety depends on your self-sacrifice?!” Evie rounded on Tony furiously. “And you! You say you
saved the city, but it was only by nearly killing yourself! You destroyed that drone, and nearly
killed yourself! Every time you try to save someone you just end up at deaths door! That’s why I
do’t trust you guys! You can’t keep up with this altruistic bullcrap – I need you here and if that
sounds selfish then I don’t care!”

Tony gaped at her. These were thought’s he’d had himself, so to hear them coming from his little
girl, to know that she felt so badly about it was heart-breaking. She didn’t trust them, and after
stating her reasons it made sense why she didn’t.

“We are not infallible.” Where Tony was lost for words, Loki seemed to still have some left.
“Neither your father nor myself are indestructible, however much we might think and act as if we
are. When a parent is fighting for their child they will use any weapon available. And if that
weapon happens to be the parent’s own freedom or their own life then they will use it. Right here
and now that may seem selfish to you; you cannot see why we would put ourselves in the firing
line and risk our lives so casually. Well, believe me my child, when you are a mother you will
realise that you would do anything to keep your little one safe.”

“But-”

“No buts Evelyn! I have had to see two of my children die; do not blame me for never wanting to
go through that again! You are the most precious thing on this planet and if anything tries to harm
you I will do whatever it takes to stop that situation! My life is not worth anywhere near as much as
yours!”

Evie snapped her mouth shut, tears glimmering in her eyes. Loki had sounded angry. Not just
intense or emotional, but seriously angry and she had never experienced that aimed at her before.
Sure, she and Tony had fought like cat and dog in the past, but she had never argued with Loki –
had never had a chance to really. It was jarring to bring out that side of him.

“Oh for Norns sake!” Loki rose to his feet, running a hand through his dishevelled hair in
frustration as he turned away to pace towards the bar area. “There’s no need for tears Evelyn!”

“How can you say that?!” Chastisement be damned, Evie was beginning to cry. “You sit there and tell me that you’re willing to throw your life away for me and you think that won’t make me cry? What the fuck?!”

Tony looked helplessly between his angry and pacing husband and their sobbing teenage daughter. This was precisely the kind of situation that as a family they had not experienced before and it was unhelpful to be struggling with it when all three had other problems and stress to deal with.

“Jarv’, can you get some hot chocolate going. I think we need it.”

Loki shot him an indecipherable glance and it was impossible to tell if he agreed or was frustrated by this. Evie just sniffed and ignored him entirely.

“I can’t believe I’m going to be the adult in this conversation, but...we need to sort this out. Properly. I mean, we can’t go on like this if we don’t trust each other or feel safe.”

“Safe!” Loki snorted in dark amusement. “Do any of us actually know what that feels like?”

“You are not helping here!” Tony didn’t stand up but sat a little straighter, bringing in his boardroom voice. “This needs sorting out. We’re at war and in the middle of that we’re falling apart as a family. Hell, we’ve hardly even had a chance to be a family yet and we’re already failing at it. Something needs to be done!”

“How?!” Loki looked like he was unravelling as he turned on his partner, anger only barely masking absolute despair. “How do we make this better? How do we fix this?! Our child doesn’t trust us, you and I are spending more time fighting than talking...How do we fix this?” He was desperately clinging to anger but broken desperation was showing around the edges and Tony knew that were it just the two of them the God would have already dropped the pretence. However, that wasn’t something he felt able to do with Evie there; he didn’t want her to see him just as scared as she was.

Tony shook his head slowly. “I...I don’t know. I don’t know what we can do.”

Evie sniffed again, finding the remains of a tissue in her pocket and wiping her nose. “This sucks.” She wasn’t watching her parents, but looked up when she heard a sudden sob. “Móðhy?”

Loki ran a hand hurriedly across his face, half-turning away. “Sorry.” It wasn’t obvious if there were actually tears or not but his eyes had taken on a red tinge. “I do not think this is going to be something that will sort itself out just by us sitting here having this conversation.”

“What do you suggest?” Tony asked quietly.

“I don’t know.”

“Personally I don’t want to be having this conversation anymore.” Evie muttered. There was a little bump against her ankle and she looked down to see one of the little scutter-robots carrying a mug of hot-chocolate on its flat back. The drink was gratefully received and out of the corner of her eye she could see two others being delivered to her parents. Loki stayed out to the side, distancing himself from his family and using the momentary break to compose himself.

Chocolate, especially hot chocolate, was always good at diffusing a bad moment.

Tony picked his tablet up, turning it back on after it had initiated idle shut-down. “I’ve been
putting something into place that might at least make you feel a little better, kiddo.” He said gently.

Evie huffed slightly, obviously not really believing or caring so her father continued.

“I’ve set up all of the spare suits – and that’s a lot of suits – to allow Jarvis to integrate into each and every one of them. I mean, yeah, he could do it with the specially made ones, but now I’ve got him into all of them.”

“So?” Evie didn’t look impressed.

“So, it means that at any one time there are at least five suits, up and running and controlled by Jarvis. They will be patrolling the tower on strategic levels at all times. Or rather, he will be. Since it’s just Jarvis, but in five bodies.”

“You can do that?” Evie was at least listening now. “I thought he could only take over those suits you made specifically for him for the Pluto thing.”

“I can do that. I mean, they’re still my Ironman suits, he’s just controlling them. However, I was also thinking about giving him one for his very own to live in permanently. We’ve discussed it and he’s up for the idea, although his servers won’t be moved. I don’t want to risk losing him entirely if he goes down in a fight.”

The girl was visibly looking happier now, and Loki was beginning to perk up slightly seeing her losing a little bit of the fear that had been gripping her. “Jarvis will actually have a body? He’ll be here?”

“He’ll be here, and if it makes you feel safer he can be with you at all times.”

Because Tony and Loki might have had moments when they’d not been the invincible parents Evelyn needed, but Jarvis had never let her down and in most cases was the one who saved the day in her eyes. He’d certainly saved Tony’s life more than once and in front of her no less. She didn’t really have official Godparents, but Jarvis had taken it upon himself to fulfil that role.

“Would that help until we sort this mess out properly? I know it’s not really solving the true issue here, but…”

“No, no it’s good. I like it, it’s a good idea.” Evie was looking much brighter. “When will that be implemented?”

“He can take over my suits as of now and his own will be ready in…” Tony flicked through a few pages on his tablet. “Two days. That okay?”

“Will he be backing you up on missions as well?”

“He may do, but to begin with I want him here with you and –”

“Actually, sir, can I interject here?” Jarvis didn’t wait for Tony to reply and continued on ruthlessly. “I believe at this point it is my opinion that matters. You created me to look after you and yours and this is what I shall do. If I am to have a body that will mean I will be entirely autonomous and I will be making my own decisions. I will decide what missions I help out on, and I can tell you here and now that unless there is some unusual circumstance I will usually choose to stay with Miss Evelyn. You are an adult and can make your own foolish decisions, so she is my priority.”

Evie finally smiled. “Love you too, Jarv!”
Tony felt some of the residual tension drain as his daughter seemed receptive to the idea. “So is this okay then? You’ll feel alright if you have Jarvis protecting you?”

“I still want promises that you guys are going to take better care of yourselves. No altruism.”

“We can do our best. Don’t forget we’ve got the Avenger’s backing us up the whole time and you’ll be protected so there shouldn’t be any need to throw ourselves to the wolves.” He met her smile with one of his own. “No altruism, right, Loki?”

The trickster stared back at him stony faced. “I’m not promising that.”

“Loki…”

“I just…I can’t promise something about a future I can’t see.” Loki saw his daughter’s face fall again and shook his head. “I’m sorry. I…I cannot promise not to throw myself into harm’s way if I see you in trouble. I just cannot.” He placed his mug – the chocolate barely touched – down on the bar top. “I need to go.”

And just like that he vanished.

Evie gaped at the empty space for a moment then turned to Tony wide-eyed.

“What the hell?!”

“I don’t know kiddo. I’ll talk to him, but I think throwing himself into harm’s way is how he works.” Because Tony vividly remembered how quickly Loki had surrendered to the chitauri to save Evie, that story of how he had nearly died to save Narfi and Vali, how he had sliced his own stomach open to give Sleipnir life. Loki historically had always sacrificed himself for his children. They couldn’t expect him to stop now.

Evie finally, finally left her spot by her studies and slunk over to the sofa for a hug that Tony was more than willing to give.

“It’s going to be okay, Birdy,” He tucked her head under his chin, letting her cling as tight as she liked round his waist. “It’s going to be okay.”

“I like the Jarvis idea.”

“Good, I’m glad. I think he likes the idea too. He’s very over-protective.”

“I don’t mind; I don’t think I’m doing a good job of coping right now.”

“There’s no right or wrong way to cope with crap like this. You’re doing just fine.”

Evie nodded but didn’t say anything more.

They stayed like that for some time, Tony absentmindedly running his fingers through his daughter’s hair, just simply being father and child. The fear in the atmosphere had dissipated at least, the tension drained away with this news about Jarvis. In some ways it hurt Stark to think that his little girl needed the extra assurance from an AI – that her parents weren’t enough for her for to feel safe. On the other hand, with Jarvis they now had breathing space to work through the trust problems and that was at least a small silver lining.

Speaking of Jarvis…

“Sir, I am sorry to interrupt, but I believe your husband needs some assistance, he appears to be
injured.”

“Injured? Since when?!”

Everything streamed through Tony’s head all at once as he sat up straight, dislodging Evie in the process. Had he missed something? Had Loki come in injured? Not that he’d seen, but that didn’t mean the sly bugger hadn’t been hiding it. Or had the God suddenly become clumsy and managed to trip over something?

Unlikely.

Stark extracted his arm from around his daughter’s shoulders and she shifted away from him. “You okay if I go check…?”

“Yeah, sure.” She sounded tired, not even bothering to be annoyed about it. “Is this why he couldn’t promise?”

“That hadn’t occurred to me, but it might well be.”

Evie pulled herself to her feet. “I’m gonna go play on my X-box.”

“Birdy…”

“No, it’s fine, Dad. If it’s serious enough that Jarvis has to get you, then you’d better go.” She looked back over her shoulder at him and smiled, a little at any rate. “And thanks. I know this sucks for all of us so…thanks.”

Tony found his missing husband in their ensuite bathroom, leaning over the large bathtub. The water was muddy and a dull red, and whilst the black clothing didn’t give any hint of blood, Loki’s posture made it clear something was wrong.

“I thought you were looking after Evelyn.”

“Jarvis told me you needed some looking after too.”

“I’m fine.”

“Yeah, ‘cause the fact that you’re refusing to look at me and sound like you’re gritting your teeth really makes me think you’re fine.”

Loki could easily have responded in anger, but instead his shoulders simply slumped a little more. Yeah, he was really in pain.

“What’s happened?” Tony’s voice slipped from sarcastic to gently concerned. “Can I see?”

“I would rather you didn’t.”

“That bad, huh?”

“That bad.”

“Considering you won’t even turn round to look at me, I think I believe you. Look, I’ve seen you in the worst possible shape imaginable; so what’s so bad now that you can’t let me see?”
Loki laughed hollowly. “Fine.” He slowly turned his head to look at his husband. “There, happy?”

“She…” The sight was horrific and Tony gaped at him in shock. “What happened?”

“I lost concentration on the last mine and it went off in my face. The rest were deactivated, so it was just the one, but…” Loki gestured at his face. At his lack of face. It was actually surprising that he could talk. However minor he was trying to make the explosion out to be, the injuries spoke for themselves.

Tony steeled himself to try and assess the extent of the mutilation.

Considering how close Loki had been whilst trying to deactivate the weapon it was unsurprising that it had succeeded in doing so much damage. His face was a mess of blackened and ripped muscle, his eyes almost comical in how they protruded without sockets, nose just an empty cavern and teeth gleaming white through the ruin where his mouth should have been. He had to be using magic to talk since he certainly didn’t have the biological ability right now.

“Pulling the Harvey Dent look right now, Capricorn.” Tony said quietly. “Except that it’s your whole face, not just half.”

He couldn’t tell if Loki smiled or not, since the trickster currently didn’t have enough facial structure to show an expression.

“You are too easy-going to be Batman.”

“Meh, maybe. Can you heal?”

“Once I clean the mess off. I did what I could whilst there, but I had expended so much energy already I didn’t dare do too much incase I couldn’t get myself back. I still only barely had enough to hide it earlier – there was no way I was letting Evie see this in her state.” Loki leant back into the bathtub and found the washcloth again. “I don’t have it in me to clean out the soot and dirt, but I can heal the majority once I’ve done that manually.”

“Here, let me.” Tony took the flannel off of him, ignoring the equally bad state Loki’s hands were in for the moment. “I’d tell you to close your eyes, but the whole lack of eye-lids thing might make that difficult.”

“Admit it; this is the best Halloween look you have ever seen.” Loki at least sounded like he was smiling even if it was impossible for him to do so. “If it is anything I have mostly blocked the pain so this is not hurting half as badly as it should be.”

“Glad to hear it; you should be a moaning puddle of agony on the floor in this state.” Tony wasn’t a squeamish man, but it took a lot to start gently wiping away the muck caught within the ribbons of torn muscle. Loki rolled his eyes, and since they stood out so much with the surrounding flesh missing it was part-way disgusting and part-way ghoulishly comical. He evidently knew it must look so awful which was why he did it, drawing a laugh from Tony.

“Oh gross, man! You look like a cheap Halloween prop! And stop laughing! You’re making this really difficult.” Tony rinsed the cloth off and started cleaning around where Loki’s nose should have been. Something glinted amongst the mess and with some careful digging he extracted a sliver of metal. “Did you know you’ve got some shrapnel in here?”

“It does not surprise me. And no, I am not letting put an arc reactor into my face.”

“You’re no fun. Can you at least remove the shrapnel with magic?”
Loki took a deep breath and a moment later the other small glints and gleams of metal began to vanish. On the sink beside them a pile of tiny metal scraps began to heap up.

Tony could tell the spell, however small, had taken a lot out of Loki and so stopped messing around and began paying more attention to what he was doing. There was a ridiculous amount of damage and to begin with he couldn’t see how they were meant to fix it all.

However, after about fifteen minutes it was possible to see that some areas were beginning to heal, slowly but surely. Tony had to look away when Loki’s nose made a reappearance, but other than that he was pretty pleased how he held up with all the blood and gore. He wasn’t a doctor of medicine, he didn’t usually deal with anything under the first-aid banner so it was unusual for him to have to sort out anything like this.

Finally – near to an hour later – Loki looked reasonably presentable again, his face back in one piece and other patches of damage to his shoulders and torso healing if not fully healed. He looked exhausted though – even if the pain was blocked he had used up every scrap of energy to complete the mission and was now running on fumes.

“So…other than a minor mishap with an explosive, how did the rest of it go?”

“Iceland is still standing, if that’s what you are asking. I had frozen everything else solid and smashed them, so the whole place is now inert and safe. I also searched through the offices.” Loki waved a hand vaguely and a manila envelope appeared in it. “I found this. There was a hidden safe, which had been thoroughly ransacked but there was a compartment within it that they hadn’t found.”

“What’s in it?”

“No idea. I did not have chance to look.”

Tony glanced at it again. “Save it for tomorrow?”

“We should tell the others.”

The man heaved an overly dramatic sigh. “Fine! You go and have a look; I’ll clean up all this mess.”

It didn’t take very long, since it was really only the bathtub that was covered in blood and muck and that didn’t take so long to wash down. He saved the shrapnel since it was possible he could extrapolate some data from it and any little piece of information could be useful. He dumped the filthy washcloth in the sink to deal with later, washed his hands off and went back into the bedroom.

Loki was wearing jeans and a t-shirt, sat on the bed and scanning a couple of pieces of paper with a confused frown on his face.

“What’s the word?” Tony threw himself down on the mattress next to his husband and tried to look over his shoulder.

“I am not certain; I don’t recognise any of this. It makes no sense, just streams of numbers and Greek letters.”

“Let’s see.” Stark took the three sheets of paper and began to look through them, biting on one thumbnail as he concentrated. The data looked familiar but even with his near-photographic memory he was struggling to place it. “It’s something to do with wave functions, but I’ll need to
get Jarvis on it. And Bruce.” He glanced at it again. “And Jane. To be honest it’s kinda gibberish.”

“So all of that for a piece of useless paper.” Loki’s voice said it all. He had spent most of his day having to painstakingly diffuse a whole base’s worth of bombs and mines – complete with the added stress of nearly blowing up Natasha in the process – and had one go up in his own face. To come home to a terrified and angry teenager that decided it was a good time to tell him she didn’t trust him, and then find out that the whole bloody day looked like a waste of time…

He wasn’t impressed to say the least.

“Hey, the Avengers have done worse for less, if that’s any consolation.”

“Not really.”

“Well there was this one time where we almost lost an entire Helicarrier trying to transport one smart-arsed bastard.”

Loki smirked slightly at that. “Out of interest, who was it who had the bright idea to put the raving megalomaniac in a glass cage?”

“Fury.”

“Well, he learnt that lesson.”

Tony put the papers down on the bedside table and grinned at his husband. “To be honest, it was a good look. I liked the whole glass-cage set up. You were hot. I was all ready to go in there after Natasha had finished with you.”

“Oh really? Perhaps I should have stayed around a little longer.”

“Nah, we’d have missed out on our little chat in my living room. And I wouldn’t have missed that sexual tension for the world!”

“Mmm, it was rather a moment.” Loki leant forwards to tap his finger against the arc reactor. “And all things considered, I took you under my spell in the end. I have even ended up on top once or twice.”

“Yeah, except that you much prefer not to be on top and we both know it.” Tony grinned broadly, reaching out to pull Loki closer.

“Is now the time for this?”

“I think we’re allowed to have some us time. We came back from Asgard expecting to be able to put a white picket fence around the tower and instead land slap bang in the middle of a war. Evie is alright for now, we deserve some time to ourselves.”

Loki smiled slightly and this time allowed his husband to pull him close. “Fine, since you seem so insistent.” He leant in to kiss Tony on the nose. “You are insufferable.”

“And yet you suffer me.” The man had that cocky little self-assured grin that never failed to charm. He cupped Loki’s cheeks, thumbs skimming over the newly healed skin. It was as smooth as ever, as if nothing had ever happened and it was impossible to tell that only a few hours before Loki’s core temperature had been hovering at near absolute zero. “You do know I love you, right?”

“If I remember correctly you found a way to cross the universe for me. I’d say that proves your
feelings to be true.” Loki settled his hands on Tony’s waist, playing with the loops that held the man’s belt in place. “I have seen a lot of strange things in my life – talking animals, trees that walk and fire guns, the void – but it’s taken half a million years to find someone willing to do what you did for me.”

“Trees with guns? Really?”

“That’s what you picked out of that? Yes, trees with guns. Do not assume sentience though – he had a vocabulary of three words.”

“How does that even-”

“Tony! Is that really the focus here?” Loki nipped at the man’s chin with a quiet laugh. “Eyes on the prize please, Mr Stark.” His wandering hands began to untuck Tony’s shirt from his jeans, warm against Tony’s back. The man subconsciously pressed into the contact and Loki kissed him, sinking his teeth into his lip.

“Fine, fine, fine, eyes on the prize, I get it.” Tony pulled away laughing and licked the stinging cut he had just received. “You haven’t bitten me like that since Evie was tiny!”

“Are you complaining?”

Tony’s reply was to lean straight in for another kiss. This time however, he didn’t let Loki get away with it and attacked back, pulling the trickster right up so that the taller man was straddling his lap. His hands slid down to cup under the trickster’s buttocks, squeezing and he sniggered as Loki gasped. The inventor was always known to push his luck, and landed a solid slap on the firm flesh. That earned him another bite, sharp teeth digging deep into his lip again and there was a warm spurt of blood, iron across his tongue.

Tony began tugging at the t-shirt his husband was wearing, forcing Loki to break the kiss so that he could pull it up and over the God’s head, entirely messing his hair up. There was no evidence left across Loki’s torso of the wounds the explosion had caused, instead just an expanse of pale skin, and toned muscles. Tony leant down to close his lips over his lover’s collar-bone and sucked a deep bruise, his hands wandering across the expanse of creamy skin.

“Tony…” The whisper was heated as Loki tipped his head back, his hands going up to run through the man’s hair. He moaned, low and quiet in the back of his throat as Tony’s fingers flicked across his left nipple.

“You’re gorgeous when you just sit back and let me do what I like. And the jeans. I like the jeans.”

Loki laughed, shifting his weight and leaning back a little so that his husband could reach the waist band of said jeans and begin trying to do something with the belt buckle.

“Why am I the only one losing clothes here?” He caught the hem of Tony’s t-shirt and drew it up over the man’s head so that they were both shirtless. “There, that’s equalled it up a little.” His fingers tapped across the arc reactor, tracing around the raised patterns the metal made. From the angle he was at the light was making his eyes glow a soft blue. “Sometimes I feel like I’m looking at your heart when I look at this.”

“Sometimes it feels like it’s my heart.” Tony looked down to watch the long graceful fingers moving across the light and for a moment a memory sprang to his mind unbidden.

The fingers tap-tapped again before the shaking in them lessened slightly and the movement became more purposeful. Tony couldn’t feel it, obviously, but in a very real way it felt like Loki was
gently mapping out his whole heart. The digits ran slowly around the edge of the energy source, before sliding across the central glass again.

Loki caught his eye and his hand splayed out flat across the reactor as he leant in and kissed his husband again, the same memory evidently running through his mind too given the sudden desperation about it. Tony shifted backwards so that his back hit the headboard and he could fully wrap his arms around Loki without the fear of losing his balance.

Hands roamed and Loki’s belt was removed as he knelt up to let Tony begin pushing the jeans down his hips.

There was a knock on the door.

Both men stilled, staring first at each other, and then towards the doorway incredulously.

“Sir, Thor is asking for you two to join the briefing.”

Tony scowled and went back to ridding Loki of the jeans.

“Jarvis, tell Thor he has exactly two seconds to leave us the hell alone or Loki will turn him into a permanent ice-sculpture.”

There was a moment’s pause in which the two men got back to the business in hand and Loki began working on Tony’s belt.

“Sir, Thor is insisting that he needs to speak to you.”

“Fuck it; then tell him he can come in if he wants, but we are not responsible if he then needs to bleach his eyeballs because I’m fucking his little brother.”

Loki chuckled. “That’s cruel.” His voice was hoarse as Tony’s lips closed over his nipple.

“…Sir, Thor has left.”

Tony hummed in response, which made his husband buck into him with a surprised groan as the vibrations sparked through him. The man’s hands went back to trying to push down Loki’s jeans, only to be batted away and a moment later the rest of their clothes vanished in a golden glow.

“There, now you can get on with it!”

Tony leant back enough to look up at the naked trickster who was still straddling his lap. “I do love that trick.”

“This one’s even better.” Loki brought one of Tony’s hands up to his mouth and pressed a kiss to each finger. As he did so each became slick and wet with oil.

“Yeah, yeah that one’s great too.” The man slipped his hands under his lover’s thighs as the trickster knelt up. It was an awkward position but neither seemed to care as one of Stark’s finger’s found and began to circle Loki’s entrance.

“Mmmmm, don’t tease – Ah!” Loki’s complaint was cut short as the finger suddenly breached his body and he arched back so that it could sink in as far as possible. His hands went up to grasp Tony’s hair tightly as the man nipped at his throat and a moment later a second finger was added, causing him to rock his hips.

Stark grinned and sank his teeth into his husband’s shoulder again as his fingers twisted and
scissored, opening Loki up. The angle wasn’t great so it took a few moments before he found the trickster’s prostate and was able to rub against it, making Loki keen and buck into him. The two men moved against each other, the prince’s hands going to grasp the headboard and lean over his lover as he ground down against the fingers.

“Enough…I want you…” His words were short, punctuated by gasps as he pulled up and away from the man’s hand. He reached down between their bodies and wrapped slick fingers around Tony’s cock, causing the man to groan and move his hips up into the contact as the oil coated him.

“You’re…impatient…”

“Always…” Loki grasped the headboard again, looking down at the man expectantly.

Tony took himself in hand, holding steady as the trickster lowered down and he heard himself groan as the head of his erection slowly breached Loki’s body.

“Tony…” Loki moaned deep in the back of his throat as he slowly lowered himself down until he was fully sat in Tony’s lap. “Oh Norns…” Tremors were running through him as he tried to still, curling in so that his forehead was pressed against the man’s, eyes squeezed tightly shut.

“You okay?” Tony did a remarkable job of not immediately bucking up into the tight welcoming heat.

“…Just a moment…” The prince breathed deeply for a few seconds, chest heaving, before raising his head and grinning when he made eye contact. “Alright.” He sat up straight and moved his hands from the headboard to his husband’s shoulders.

From the position they were in it was difficult for Tony to actually move all that much, especially given how heavy the trickster was, so it was up to Loki to slowly raise himself up and lower back down again. Both groaned, although as always Stark was the quieter of the two whereas Loki had no inhibitions. It had to be killing the trickster’s thighs – rising up and down so steadily – but he obviously had muscles of steel since the repetitive movement didn’t seem to cause him any problems as he built up a steady pace.

Tony caught his husband’s chin and pulled him into a sloppy kiss, his other hand snaking down to grip Loki’s erection and begin stroking in time with the trickster’s rhythm. Loki’s nails were digging deep welts into the man’s shoulders, possibly drawing blood but neither noticed or cared. To be honest it was probably fair play since they were chest to chest and the arc reactor was leaving indentations in the trickster’s flesh where he pressed close.

“Mnn…Tony…” Of course Loki could never stay quiet; it was part of his charm and Tony wouldn’t change it for the world. The trickster was moaning a litany of pleas and broken little snatch of sentences, shifting with increasing urgency, bucking into the calloused hand on his cock.

They moved in complete tandem, each knowing what the other needed and giving and taking in equal measure. Kisses grew sloppier, hands grew more desperate and they picked up the pace in sync, hot and sweaty as they moved against each other.

Loki came first, howling as he spurted across Tony’s hand. He wrapped his arms around the man’s neck, gasping as he rode out the aftershocks with his face buried in Tony’s shoulder. He could feel his husband still buried inside him, still hard and so close. The trickster managed to rock his hips a few more times until Tony released with a low groan and Loki whimpered as he felt it scalding hot inside him.
“Oh, I love you…” Tony’s whisper was accompanied by his arms wrapping around Loki’s waist, his forehead thumping onto the trickster’s shoulder.

The prince chuckled quietly, pressing a kiss to the side of his husband’s neck. “I’m pretty partial to you too.”

There was a pause, a quiet moment as they both tried to get their breathing under control. Then Tony spoke again.

“…We should probably go to the briefing…”

“They won’t miss us.”

“Nah.”

MWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMW
Chapter 28

Chapter Notes

Quote from Evie’s text book taken from - Dr David Tong Mathematical tripos part iii

Enjoy guys! I really want to get another one out before New Year, but I don’t know how possible that will be (writers block, yay! *Kermit the Frog arms*). So until then a very Merry Christmas to you all, and just in case I don’t make it; happy New Year.

*kiss*

MWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMW

“This stuff is nonsense!” Jane sighed for the hundredth time, staring at the incomprehensible list of letters and numbers.

“Well it must have meant something to someone.” Bruce was sat in the chair that Tony usually preferred, so that he was face-to-face with Jane’s image on the computer monitor. Once again they had decided to collaborate over Skype and so far it wasn’t working in the least. The labs were messier than usual and the physicist had cleared off a small portion of the worktop so that he could lay out the sheets Loki had retrieved from the infiltrated base.

“Stop being so optimistic.” Tony’s voice came from the floor where he was lying on his stomach and poring over another photocopy of the data, a highlighter in one hand. “I’m beginning to think Hydra just put this here to troll us.”

“There is some vague order to it, but nothing I can make out.” Bruce took his glasses off and rubbed a tired hand over his eyes. “To be honest it’s all beginning to blur.”

Tony waved a hand at the ceiling. “Jarvis, more coffee.”

“Magic word, sir?”

“Now.”

On the monitor Jane snorted with laughter and Bruce rolled his eyes.

“You know Jarvis is probably going to pummel you the moment he has a body.”

“Most likely.” Tony picked up an arm he had been working on in the Big Jarvis Project and waggled it at Bruce. “But until then, I can order him around a bit longer.” He threw the arm back under the desk again, where it crawled off. “So, who’s started playing join-the-dots with the letters?”

“Is that meant to help?”

“No but if you tilt your head a little you can kinda see a penis.”

“Not getting enough?” Jane asked innocently, causing Bruce to let out a startled laugh whilst Tony
sat up enough so that she could see him poke his tongue out at her.

“I’m getting plenty thank you!”

“Plenty of what?”

Both men turned to see the doors to the lab sliding closed behind Loki who was holding two mugs of coffee. He was looking quizzical.

“Getting plenty of you.” Tony answered cheerfully.

“You talk to Dr Banner about that?”

“And Jane.” The man sat up to wave a hand at the computer monitor. “Loki, Jane. Jane, Loki.”

The woman met Loki’s gaze with a stunned expression, evidently not having expected to actually ever meet him – over Skype or not. The God inclined his head gracefully, brushing aside the fact that the woman looked less than pleased to see him.

“Pleased to meet you, Dr Foster.”

“Can’t say the same’s true.” The woman’s eyes narrowed. “Tony vouches for you, but I’m still going to clout you round the ear if I ever see you in person.”

Loki rolled his eyes with a sigh, setting the two mugs down, one beside Bruce, one down on the floor next to Tony. “If you think that surprises me you will be sorely disappointed.” A sharp grin crossed his face. “And do please give my love to Selvig.”

“You Asshole! How can you-?” There was probably more Jane wished to shriek at him, but she was interrupted by someone elbowing her.

“Hey, who you yelling at?” Darcy’s head came into the frame of the webcam and she took in the scene, then her eyes widened as she focussed on Loki. “Hot damn! I’m converting to Paganism!”

The God blinked at her, then, simple as that, dismissed her and looked down at Tony. “How is it going with the data?”

“Zippo, but if you draw lines between all the Beta’s you can make a penis shape.”

As Loki raised an eyebrow at his husband’s artwork, Bruce held up his own copy of the data with a sheepish grin. “Actually, joining the nines together looks sort of like an outline of Italy.”

“The sixes make the McDonalds golden arches.” Jane offered, looking down at the sheets out of sight of their screen.

“So other than some questionable entries for the Louvre, has anyone found anything useful?” Loki looked every inch the disapproving parent as he glared at the three of them.

“Not as such, no.”

“Then I’m leaving. Call me back if anything interesting happens.” The trickster turned to leave, then turned back to glance at the computer again. “Oh, and Miss Foster, just so that you know, I was not actually aiming for you or your human friends during Thor’s fight with the Destroyer. Collateral damage occurred, yes, but…it was not intentional.”

The woman sniffed haughtily. “Is that meant to be an apology?”
“Take it as you will. And, really, please do tell Selvig I say hello.”

Loki vanished before Jane could throw something at her webcam.

The data didn’t yield it’s secrets. Not that day, nor the one after that, nor the one after that. A week went by with some extremely frustrated scientists, but no results.

On the other hand, The Jarvis Project was faring much better.

Tony wheeled the...the thing up into the lounge on an office chair. It sat inert, head down like one of his power-downed suits and drew some odd looks from the few people there. It didn’t actually look like one of his suits, though. The robot was humanoid, limbs slender and smooth, a light blue finish to them. It was tall, or at least would be if it was standing up and the lines were clean, unlike the harsh angles the suits had.

Tony tipped the thing’s head up to attach a wire to the base of the neck and the face was revealed to those now coming over to have a look. And it actually had a face, again unlike the suits.

Evie, Rhodey and Clint all crowded round to watch what Tony was doing as he plugged wires in, adjusted joints and occasionally spun the chair around. Eventually he took a step back.

“Right, Jarv, you’re good to go.”

There was no reply – evidently Jarvis was using his computing power to concentrate fully on the task in hand. For a long moment nothing happened, other than a quiet hum of energy.

“Is something meant to happen?” Evie asked innocently.

Tony scowled and twisted a wire.

Then jumped back hurriedly as the whole thing went from slumped and inert to sitting up straight.

“Uh...Jarvis...?”

The thing was still as a statue, power humming through it gently.

“It’s creeping me out a little.” Clint said cheerfully. “And it looks like it’s out of *i.Robot*. You know, the Will Smith film? Was that intentional?”

“Not really. But give a robot a face and try to make it look friendly and in the end it’s only going to end up looking like this.” Tony sounded distracted as he tapped his lower lip and started at the robot in the chair. “Jarvis, talk to me, buddy. Are you in there?”

The head tipped, a slow nod before the eyes slid open. Highly refined optic technology faced the four watchers, fixed on them and focussed. It was possible to see the tiny machinery moving inside the fake eyeballs.

“Jarvis?” Tony prompted.

“Sir...” The robot’s mouth opened slightly to let the sound out, and it *sounded* like Jarvis. “Systems integrated, sir.”

“Can you move okay?”
The head nodded carefully, then Jarvis looked down at his hands, eyes having to focus again. Very slowly the fingers uncurled and flexed then tapped one-by-one on the arm-rests of the chair. He lifted one hand up very gingerly, elbow and shoulder working for the first time too, and watched his fingers as they twitched and moved.

“This is amazing, Sir.” He touched each finger to his thumb, unaware that his face was portraying the emotions that were running through his systems. Evidently Tony had linked the coding for Jarvis’ emotional responses to his facial coding. “I can…there is a physical response when I touch something, what is that?”

“You’re feeling it. I programmed an electric field into your exoskeleton so that you can feel objects that you touch.” Tony said with a grin. “At the moment it can differentiate between hard and soft things, hot and cold, rough and smooth, that kind of thing. Give me a little time and I can refine it. Hopefully you’ll experience things in a way similar to humans – so you’ll know if it’s cold outside or something.”

“I can just check the temperature for that.”

“Yes, yes, yes, but now you’ll know what it feels like! You’ll know what we mean when we say it’s cold, or hot or that the sofa is comfy.” Tony waved a hand vaguely. “At least, I hope so. I had to get creative with the programming so we won’t assume things straight away.”

Jarvis flexed his hands again then looked down at his feet and began moving them experimentally. “What is my flexibility, Sir?”

“Well you could probably manage the splits, but nothing inhuman. Your joints can technically dislocate if you stretch them too far.”

Evie looked perturbed. “Can he feel pain?”

“Eh, kind of. I couldn’t really work out how to code for that and wasn’t sure if I should, so you’ll receive warning signals that correspond in severity to the damage – so they’ll work like pain, but you won’t feel anything in the way a human would.”

Jarvis nodded slightly. “In the way I assess damage to my mainframe, then.”

“Yeah, similar.” Tony grinned. “And you’ll have to learn to coordinate and such – you should be ambidextrous but you will need to work on it.”

Jarvis held a hand out. “Does anyone have a pen and a notepad?”

Clint wordlessly passed him the requested items and the robot quickly began scribbling across the paper. After a moment he switched hands and finished his work with the other.

“There; does that count as coordination?”

It was a perfect capture of the outside of the tower, complete with tiny cars on the street and sun reflecting off the windows. All done in ball-point pen.

Tony blinked at it. “Damn, my programming’s better than I thought!”

Rhodey laughed at that. “Modest, much. But good work. Creepy, but good work.”

“Are you saying you find me creepy, Colonel Rhodes?” Jarvis asked politely.
“Well…yeah. Pretty much. It’ll take some getting used to.”

“Yes, it will, but I think we will all manage in the end.” The robot put his hands back on the arm rests and slowly levered himself to his feet, unsteady and unsure at how this standing thing was meant to work. Inside his head a tiny gyroscope was placed to help with this and when up he stood tall. “This is extremely unusual to be able to direct my sight like this. I am used to static cameras in rooms.” He moved his head this way and that, the grin on his face making it very clear that he was excited about this new venture.

“Is this going to work then?” Tony asked quietly. “Can you deal with this, buddy?”

Jarvis turned to him, looked down at his hands again and then held one out to his creator. “I can deal with this. Thank you, Sir.”

Tony laughed and shook the proffered hand. “It’s about damn time you had an actual body.” He frowned a moment and looked Jarvis up and down. “I haven’t done anything about armaments yet; I didn’t know if you wanted something incorporated or to carry something separate to yourself.”

“Considering that this is a character attribute, rather than just accessories, I would rather I kept my weaponry separate from my actual self. I do not like the idea of being a walking weapon.”

“Sure thing.” Tony turned to Evie with a grin. “So, kiddo, have I delivered the goods?”

The teen surveyed Jarvis sceptically. The robot smiled hopefully at her, his face generic enough that the expression looked familiar. “You sure you can keep up with me, Jarvis?”

“I always have so far, Miss Evelyn.”

Evie nodded slowly. “Yeah…yeah you have. This can work.” She grinned. “Well done Dad, you delivered the goods. Again.”

“Excellent! Time to tell the others then!”

Clint waved a hand – a bit like a school child. “Uh, question. Quick question. What happens if someone hacks Jarvis? Won’t they be able to control him?”

Jarvis and Tony looked at each other. “Um, you can’t hack Jarvis.” The man said eventually. “I hate to say it, but all computers are able to be hacked Tony.”

“Not Jarvis.”

“You can’t just say that – if you want Jarvis as a physical entity in the battlefield with us I want guarantees that he’s unhackable.”

Stark shrugged, glancing at the robot helplessly. “How do I prove it, Clint? He’s nothing like a normal computer; his programming isn’t something a hacker would even recognise as programming.”

“But it’s still feasible to break into.”

“It’s not. It’s like…It’s like you knowing how to read English and then being handed a book in Cantonese – or Klingon. It’s not just that his programming is superlative compared to anything else, but it’s an entirely different way of writing a computer script.” Tony sounded frustrated as he tried to explain. “Have you ever heard of an AI with his level of comprehension. Sometimes I think
Jarvis is a better human being than any of us! He has emotion, conscious thought, he can invent and create. That’s meant to be impossible – there are whole laws of computing written about how that’s impossible. But Jarvis can and that’s because he is something else entirely. No-one can hack him; I promise you that.”

“Can I at least see this miraculous code? I know a bit of programming.”

“Barton, believe me, it would be complete and utter gibberish to you.”

Evie grinned. “Like that Hydra stuff you guys have been looking at.”

“Yeah, like that. Fucking impossible.”

Clint looked unhappy, but convinced. “Fine. I don’t like it, but fine.”

Jarvis slotted into place easier than they could have imagined. He was such a staple around the tower anyway it felt quite natural to have him walking around as a physical entity. He was still wired through the tower as normal as well, and with the added suits he now could also control there was a whole lot of Jarvis going on with the Avengers. The processing capabilities that were needed to support the new systems in place weren’t actually as large as people would have thought. Given that Jarvis already ran all of the computer systems in all of Tony’s many properties, was hidden inside Shield/Hydra’s systems and had feelers through most of the world wide web it didn’t actually take all that much more to run a few suits. And to be honest, the new body was pretty much just an extremely advanced version of the suit in Jarvis’ eyes.

He didn’t necessarily hang around the team in person all the time – although he was still always there in spirit – but would occasionally join them for a film or something. More often than not, though, he was found in the labs working on upgrades to Tony’s suit that he couldn’t do as a computer interface. He also helped out with the weird data recovered from the Hydra base, but other than discovering some more shapes, there was nothing actually useful to be gleaned.

It had become a full team effort by this point; and was a major headache for them all.

Finally it was Rhodey of all people who stated the obvious and insisted that they shelved the project until a better time considering they had other things to be getting on with.

Other things that included multiple more hits on various bases.

They raided a further five in the next two months – coming up against the same problem with each one. No guards, no personal, no useful data, just more explosives. They had at least started telling Evie what was going on and where they were going so she hadn’t freaked out at them again, which was a bonus and since it was the height of summer she had other things to bother about anyway.

The heat wasn’t doing any of them any favours really and Tony had the AC’s running in every single room of the tower.

It came as a relief to all Avenger’s when Coulson got in contact and told them to check out an old Shield hide-away in the Kamchatka peninsula high up in North East Russia. With a sub-arctic climate it was just what they wanted to hear.

Evie didn’t seem worried to wave them off – laughing at the winter gear they were all toting in the New York summer and happily going back to the sunbed she’d set up on the balcony next to Tony’s suit dock. Both parents had nagged her about sun-screen and the dangers of burning and
she’d assured them that she could look after herself, especially with Jarvis to yell at her about skin cancer every five minutes.

In the end they left her to it.

Loki had finally persuaded the team that even if they insisted on taking the quinjet on missions, he was more than able to teleport the whole group and the machine which saved them hours of flying and meant they could tailor their leaving times to slightly more Godly hours.

He knew little about the area they were going to but landed them neatly beside a large lake, some distance from any settlements. The team had long got used to the dizzying sensations of the teleport so didn’t spend any time complaining about the effects and instead took in the surrounding countryside.

Tony summed up all their thoughts.

“Is that another bloody volcano?”

“It appears so.”

“Do you think Shield purposely put all their top secret bunkers on top of volcanic systems?”

“Better than Acme dynamite for defence.” Bruce said lightly.

Thor swung his hammer idly in one hand, glancing at Loki, who was grinning slightly. “Remember that time in–?”

“Muspelhiem? Of course. One day Fandral will recover from his fear of fire.”

There was definitely a story there, but it wasn’t exactly the time to tell it, no matter how much they might have piqued people’s interest.

The infiltration method for the Shield-turned-Hydra bases had been refined over the past few raids, and this time they were like a well-oiled machine; each knowing precisely what to do in what order.

Loki went in first as always, invisible to begin with, then taking out any guards there. A pattern had emerged wherein if the place was mined it was safe to presume that it had been emptied. They always checked – usually Tony, Sam or Rhodey would fly through – but so far not even another scrap of paper had been found in those ones. No mines meant that the place was active and whilst they would have to fight their way in they also usually came out with something to show for it.

This was an active base.

As Loki let his invisibility fade and was greeted with a hail of bullets he had to smile. Oh for the days when people didn’t try to kill him on sight…

It was a very certain type of teenager who would sunbath with a book on advanced particle physics. Evie had the tome propped up on her knees, a pencil casually being chewed when she wasn’t using it to make the occasional note in the margin.

There was a tall glass of pink lemonade on the small table next to her, a bowl of popcorn to munch on, and her StarkPlayer blasting out through the speakers. She was one happy teenager.
“Miss Evie, you should be wearing a hat.” Jarvis the robot was inside the living room behind her, but his voice was still able to reach all over the tower and now he was utilizing her speaker system.

“I’m fine, I have thick hair.”

“You still need a hat on.”

“Go away, Jarvis.” Evie plugged her headphones in instead, which was less comfortable than listening to speakers, but meant that she didn’t have to be nagged constantly. The sun was hot, the wind was just enough to stop her feel like she was crisping up and the book was brand new – it was a perfect afternoon.

It was an active base.

Loki strolled in and took care of the first guards as easily as he usually did. The Hydra agents were prepared for pretty much anything – unless that included a God that simply appeared in the midst of them, fireballs in hand. No amount of training would prepare a soldier for that.

With the men out of the way – and Loki didn’t seem to understand the term ‘over-kill’ as he disposed of them quite mercilessly – the rest of the team were brought in to begin the sweep of the place which, for once, was yielding some decent secrets.

It was tiny in comparison with other bases they had raided recently, only two levels of storage that had only a handful of personnel patrolling them. Easily dispatched.

“Containers. I fucking hate containers.” Clint growled as he glared around at the huge storage boxes that were sat in the area. “Always Russian Roulette with which one’s booby trapped!”

Tony knocked his hand against one, painted blue with faded military markings along one side. “This one’s rigged, or rather was, since I’ve just fried it.”

“And the others?”

Ironman looked around the room – concentrating on the flashing visuals across the HUD. He pointed out three different boxes, blasting each with an EMP as he did so.

“Should all be safe enough now, but keep an eye on those ones.”

They spread out through the area, a practiced team that had learnt to work together in such situations. It was a far cry from their first mission as a mismatched group that didn’t trust each other and hardly knew how to communicate. Each knew their jobs and each knew them well.

There was a whole container’s worth of tech from the sixties, several boxes of ancient guns with swastikas on them, parts of a biplane that Tony casually identified as a Sopworth Camel, some dusty files filled with Richter-scale prints and a pile of rocks that turned out to be covered in eroded Norse runes. Everything was along the same lines.

“This is just someone’s collection of junk.” Sam declared, kicking a box of videos over and spilling the tapes out across the floor. “Look at this! These died out when I was a kid!”

“This place is an archive.” Steve’s expression said it all as he ran a tired hand down his face. Whilst this hadn’t been a hard job, they had still had to kill people to get in and that wasn’t something they wanted to do if they could help it.
Well…Loki didn’t have qualms about that, and Natasha didn’t seem to care one way or the other, but mostly as a whole they hadn’t wanted to kill people. And all for the equivalent of Shield’s attic.

Tony raised his face plate so that his disgruntled expression was visible. “Well, this sucks. I think I’d rather find nothing rather than world war two crap.”

“Even world war two crap might be useful.” Rhodey sounded the pinnacle of sarcasm as he knocked a fist against the Sopworth’s wooden propeller and paint flakes burst off in a puff of dust.

“Ha-de-ha, don’t make me laugh. Guys, let’s start packing this stuff up and get moving – we might as well get out of here sooner rather than later.”

The rumble of agreement around the rest of the group was drowned out as Bruce pulled at some tarpaulin in the corner that had been so far overlooked and the whole thing came loose and slithered to the floor. His sudden whistle of surprise was piercing enough to draw everyone’s attention.

“Oh boy…”

“Bruce? What did you – oh…oh crap.” Clint was the closest and therefore the first to see what the quiet scientist had found. His exclamation brought the rest of them around and jaws dropped.

“Oh brilliant!” Loki’s eyes were sparkling as he stepped up to the chitauri speeder – possibly the only whole one to survive the Battle of New York – and ran his hand along the side of the machine. “Look at this; it’s practically intact!”

“You sound way too excited about that fact.”

“But look at it. I imagine it can still fly!”

“Don’t you dare even try!”

The excitement fell from Loki’s face and became an angry scowl at Steve’s sudden and very curt order. He turned to face the soldier, leaning back against the craft.

“What’s wrong Captain? Don’t trust me with it?”

“Actually I was more worried that it’s probably damaged and could blow up in our faces if you mess around with it. That’s chitauri tech, God knows what it can do!”

Loki glanced down at the speeder he was leaning against and uncertainty crossed his expression. “Oh, yes…”

“You didn’t even think of that, did you?”

“…Not so much.”

Steve rolled his eyes as he walked around the other side of the craft. “You Norse guys are so impulsive.” He ran his eye over the chitauri speeder, trying to recall what he had seen the little machines doing during the battle all those very many years ago. “I thought all of this stuff had been destroyed, anyway.”

“Apparently not.” Loki had turned to face him, and so was leaning over the craft now, his elbows casually resting on the handlebars. He flicked the steering column with a finger. “Which is not really a bad thing, since anyone who saw these in action knows that they are extremely good in a
Tony snorted with laughter. “Can’t bank worth a damn, though. The amount of those I smashed into walls…”

“But a great turn of speed in a straight line; especially in a chase.” Loki glanced over his shoulder and winked at Natasha, who frowned, a hand migrating to her hip. It was still a bitter memory that she had nearly been mown down by the God of mischief on one of those things and the only thing that mellowed it slightly was that Clint had made a fool out of the trickster with an exploding arrow.

“Well, since we’re taking everything back with us I guess this is coming too.” Bruce patted the back tail-fin of the machine. “And then we can all argue why we think letting Loki have it is an insanely bad idea.”

Loki grinned, sharp and feral. “Believe me when I say that that is an argument I will win.”

Since sticking her headphones in Evie had been able to continue her reading undisturbed and had ploughed through a considerable amount of the large text book. She was pretty sure her nose was beginning to burn, but simply rubbed a little bit of ice from her drink on it to stop the heated feeling and resolved to ask Loki to heal it later.

The wind had picked up somewhat – especially given that the Ironman docking station was nearly at the top of the tower, but it was still just about warm enough to resist putting on a cardigan. The increased wind did mean that the pages of the book were somewhat unruly and the ruffles on her bikini top kept casting distracting shadows over the text. Not very large shadows, though, and for a moment she mused on how it would be nice for puberty to have another attempt at the whole boobs thing and go for something slightly less pathetic.

A bigger shadow obscured the book entirely for a moment and the teen glanced up irritably at the helicopter that buzzed overhead, having not heard it through the \textit{Broadway Hits} blasting through her headphones. It was unmarked – not a traffic copter – and for a moment she thought it might be a journalist and wondered if she should cover up a little more than the bikini top and denim shorts.

It buzzed away into the distance and her interest left with it.

Physics was much more motivating.

The chapter was on a particularly fascinating area of quantum field theory and Evie settled back down to read through it, brushing wayward hair irritably back out of her eyes.

\textit{Recall that in particle mechanics $L$ depends on $q$ and $\dot{q}$, but not $\ddot{q}$. In field theory we similarly restrict to Lagrangians $L$ depending on $\phi$ and $\dot{\phi}$, and not $\ddot{\phi}$. In principle, there’s nothing to stop $L$ depending on $\nabla\phi$, $\nabla^2\phi$, $\nabla^3\phi$, etc. However, with an eye to later Lorentz invariance, we will only consider Lagrangians depending on $\nabla\phi$ and not higher derivatives. Also we will not consider Lagrangians with explicit dependence on $x\mu$; all such dependence only comes through $\phi$ and its derivatives…}

Yeah, absolute gibberish to most people.

Evie was thoroughly absorbed.

And the shadow was back again.
The helicopter flew back around again, lower and directly over the tower. The teen sat up, her book flat on her lap as she frowned up at the aircraft, trying to work out what it was doing. Closer to it was too big to be a simple paparazzi hire, out on the hunt for good photos. It looked military grade – unmarked and with no visible registration.

The craft buzzed round in a low circle, before spinning on its axis about fifty feet away, the cockpit facing directly towards Evie on her sunbed.

The machine gun on the front raised and poised.

There was a moment of absolute frozen terror as the girl simply stared, struggling to take in what she was seeing.

Then there was a hail of bullets.

Evie screamed as the windows behind her exploded, curling into a tight ball – as if that could possibly help. The noise was deafening as the missiles rang off of paving slabs, metal railings and glass alike. She had brought her text book up in an instinctive movement and that was possibly responsible for why the shrapnel didn’t hit her from the torso up.

However, none of the actual ammunitions hit as, in a blue blur, Jarvis had leapt out through the windows and dived infront of her, a physical shield.

“Run!” The AI took a chest full of bullets, but his plating was strong enough to hold out as he shielded the teen. A moment later another explosive round of gunfire echoed out as there was an answering retort from the weaponry stationed on top of Stark Tower and the helicopter wheeled away to avoid it. “Get out of here!”

She didn’t. Couldn’t.

The world was exploding around her and she was frozen.

A sudden and second hail of gunfire came from off to the side as men – in full Kevlar and combat gear, armed to the teeth – began landing, parachutes fluttering loose behind them. Jarvis whirled to face them, drawing his own guns from the holsters hung around his hips. Whilst he had refused to have weapons inbuilt that didn’t mean he wasn’t going to carry them externally at all times and so was ready and prepared to return the fire.

The sight of men on the ground – as it were – running across the balcony area towards her finally spurred Evie into action and she leapt up, sprinting for the shattered windows of the lounge.

Broken glass crunched under her bare feet but if there was pain she didn’t feel it as adrenaline began pumping. She skidded as one of the armed men headed straight towards her, his gun raised whilst he reloaded it, eyes on her the entire time.

“They wanted to kill her…”

The thought was like liquid ice. A terror so deep and so primal that she hardly even realised what was happening – running on an instinctive automatic pilot that told every molecule in her to get away.

Her foot slipped.

The girl fell hard, hitting the ground in a spray of glass shards. There was a burst of pain in her elbow that she barely registered as she rolled onto her back, scrambling backwards as she stared at
the man advancing on her. A chuckle from her left drew her attention momentarily to see another soldier, this one with his gun poised and ready, also drawing in on her. His weapon was loaded, but the dark amusement on his face said that he was intending to draw this out.

Jarvis was heavily outnumbered outside, six other men keeping him from running to Evie’s defence. The suits he controlled were deployed, but up in the air, trying to take out the helicopters – the original now joined by two more – as they began firing on the lounge area again.

Weaponless, injured and terrified, Evie could do nothing more than continue to scramble backwards smearing blood everywhere as she did so.

The man was raising his gun, calling something to his companion as he did so.

*They were going to kill her...*

The single shot made her scream again, but the expected pain didn’t happen and she opened instinctively closed eyes to see Loki towering over her, facing the two attackers. His golden armour was rapidly materialising and the bullet had fallen to the floor a crumpled little mess.

“Möðhy...”

He didn’t even turn to look at her as his staff appeared in his hand.

“*Run!*”

This time she didn’t need telling twice.

Scrambling to her feet the girl threw herself across the room, fighting her way across the wrecked furniture and broken glass. There was another sharp retort from the guns behind her and another man barrelled in through the shattered windows, Jarvis hot on his heels. He grabbed at her arm, missed and she dived at the bar.

Years of gymnastics lessons and pissing about on the gym equipment downstairs paid off. She was no good at technique, wasn’t flexible and was uncoordinated, but at least knew how to leap the railing that sectioned off the tiered floor from the bar area and used the motion to throw herself up and over the counter-top.

Evie rolled across the polished bar-top, taking decanters and glasses with her as she fell off the other side, out of the line of sight of the intruders.

One of the men managed to follow, avoiding Loki just long enough as the furious trickster took out the others to follow the teenager up to the higher area of the room and rounded the bar, his weapon poised and sighted.

Evie was gone.

There was just long enough for a moment of confusion as to where the girl could have possibly disappeared to before Jarvis grabbed the man’s head with both hands and twisted.

Loki had already taken out the other men in the room and had stalked outside to finish off the others. The Jarvis-controlled suits had made short work of the helicopters and had brought them down safely, killing all inside but avoiding civilian causalities down on the streets. Loki wasn’t kind to any of the intruders left.

By the time both trickster and droid were done there was a body count of twenty five. The living
room was destroyed – walls coming down, glass across every part of the floor and blood everywhere.

Loki’s eyes were shining with madness, his spear and hands alike dripping red, none of which was his own. He turned on the droid in a manner that would have frightened a human.

“Where is Evelyn, Jarvis?!"

“The panic room below us, sir. There is an entrance through one of the cupboards in the bar. I would not suggest teleporting, you will startle her and she is in quite a state.”

Loki’s glare had ‘you think?’ written all over it.

The entrance down to the panic room was hidden under the bar in one of the large cupboards that looked like it should be full of glassware. Loki had to remove his armour to get through the low doorway that was masquerading as the back of the cupboard and into the tunnel-like corridor behind. It was obvious Evie had been down here; even in the dark it was possible to see the blood everywhere.

There was a thick metal door at the other end of the downward-sloping tunnel and the code for the numbered keypad was easy enough for the trickster to work out – Evie’s birthday.

He had no idea what to expect of a Stark-designed panic room, but what was behind the door didn’t surprise him since Tony planned for every eventuality.

The room itself was essentially a padded steel box – designed to protect anyone or thing inside should the tower come down. Similar in pattern to the containment cage for the Hulk it could withstand a freefall, a skyscraper coming down on top of it or a full air-borne strike and the sole purpose was protection.

The padding meant that a person inside would hopefully not be too badly injured from a large hit, and there were seatbelts placed across the walls just in case. It was not a room designed for comfort or to win any interior decorating awards. A few cupboards were bolted down in one corner – clear labels denoting that they held food packs, water, medical supplies and emergency lighting. There was also an entertainment system and a secure self of books.

However, Loki saw none of this.

Evie was curled up against the far wall, hugging her legs tight to her chest with one arm, and the other held awkwardly by her side. There was blood everywhere – streaked down her bare legs and arms, staining the bikini top and her ripped denim shorts. She was crying, huge wracking sobs that shook her whole body as she buried her head in her knees.

“Oh my little bird…”

She didn’t move, didn’t even acknowledge that Loki was there until he sat down beside her and pulled her into his arms. He had already removed his armour which meant the teen could press in close against the soft linen of his tunic, staining the emerald green brown with blood. Evie didn’t let go of the tight grip she had around her knees, but leant into the protective hold Loki wrapped her up in, her face pressed into his chest.

“They…I didn’t…They…”

“Shh…” Loki pressed a kiss to his daughter’s hair, uncaring about the matted blood. “They’re all gone. Jarvis and I have got rid of them all.”
“D-dead…?”
“Dead. All of them.”

“Good…” Evie was sobbing so hard it was almost hard to understand her.

“Where are you injured, little one?”

“I-I don’t…don’t e-e-e-even know…” The girl uncurled enough to look down at herself and took in the blood with wide eyes. “I…” The remaining colour began to rapidly leech from her face and she leant back into Loki again. “Feel sick…” She mumbled.

“Hold still, I’m going to take you up to your bedroom.” The trickster hooked his arm under the girl’s knees and scooped her up effortlessly, supporting her shoulders as she pressed into him. A moment later the room dissolved around them and Evie’s own bedroom replaced it.

Loki sat down on the edge of the bed, his daughter curled up on his lap like a little child.

“Darling, I need you to sit up – I need to heal you.”

Evie shook her head, her breath so caught in her throat that she couldn’t even say the words to refuse. Her hands were fisted in Loki’s tunic, clutching like a life-line.

“Evelyn, let me see.”

“No…”

Loki didn’t push the issue. A quick scan had already told him that the girl’s injuries weren’t life threatening and they could afford a few more moments without medical aid. As it was, even in shock Evie was a sensible kid and a part of her knew that she needed help.

Finally she uncurled, slipping off of Loki’s lap to sit beside him on the bed-covers.

“My arm hurts…” She whispered.

“Which one?”

“The…” The girl looked down. “Both. They both hurt.”

Loki gently lifted up his daughter’s right arm and the problem was immediately apparent as he did so. A spell whispered through the limb, finding each and every little cut and scrape but the major injury was very much drawing attention.

“You’ve broken your wrist.”

Evie sniffled and nodded, obviously having guessed that. From her angle she couldn’t actually see that the bone was poking out on one side but Loki could and he didn’t want to draw her attention to it.

“Hold still.” He gently wrapped both hands around the break – not applying pressure, but covering the area. “This won’t hurt, but it will feel a little odd, okay?”

Evie nodded and looked away, unwilling to watch what would happen. It didn’t hurt – Loki was right about that – but it tingled and itched and was entirely unpleasant. She sniffed miserably again, her face still wet with tears and smeared with blood. The healing process was extremely quick, but the girl couldn’t say that she would want to go through it again.
“There – how does that feel?”

Evie wiggled her wrist gingerly and found that it moved again without pain. “Yeah, better, I guess…”

“Good.” Loki smiled slightly at the understandably mulish reply. “Now, can I see the other one?”

To do so the girl tucked her legs up under her so that she was sat on her knees and twisted to face her mother, carefully holding out her other arm. Again, she didn’t look to see what the damage was so it was up to Loki to find the main injury.

A large shard of glass, nearly a palm’s width and all jagged edges had wedged itself into the joint of Evie’s elbow – which certainly explained why she couldn’t move the limb. The point had dug in between the bones, slicing through tendons and ligaments alike. It was unthinkable how painful it would have been were Evie not hopped up on adrenaline, and Loki added in a few numbing spells to the mix so that she didn’t feel a thing when he carefully pulled the piece loose.

Technically just removing a foreign object like that was not the way to deal with such a wound, but Loki didn’t bother with the human views on first aid when he could simply heal up the injury on the spot. It took longer than the broken arm – having to fix together the torn muscle and flesh.

“How bad is it…?”

“Well, I have seen worse, but usually on battle fields, if I am honest.”

“It was a battle field…”

Loki glanced up for a brief moment, catching the way Evie’s eyes brimmed over again. “I know, my dear. Your first battle is always the worst.”

“I didn’t expect…They just came out of no-where!”

“No one expected Hydra to be that audacious. The tower armaments are designed to take out long-range air-strikes. Evidently they were slow to respond to a threat that comes in so brazenly.”

“You think?”

“Jarvis did his job, though.”

Evie nodded shakily. “Yeah. Yeah, he did. He saved me.” She glanced up at long last. “And you. You saved me too.”

“It’s rather in the parental job description.”

The girl managed a tiny smile. “Thanks. And thanks for not sticking yourself in the firing line this time.” She then pulled a face. “Well…you did, but you knew you were bullet proof, so that’s okay.”

“Glad you approved.” Loki gently tapped her elbow. “There, I think that is all of the damage sorted. Can you try moving it and check please.”

Evie glanced at the shard of windowpane that her mother had removed and grimaced. Her attempt at movement was very cautious and stilted and almost immediately she stopped trying to straighten it out.

“It still really hurts. And it’s really stiff.”
“Do you possess any adjectives other than ‘really’?” Loki placed his hand back on his daughter’s elbow to assess what hadn’t healed.

“It’s an adverb, actually.”

“English is not actually my native language, you know.”

A small smile finally appeared on Evie’s face. “Bullshit; you’re talking in Allspeak right now. You just don’t know your grammar.”

Loki raised an eyebrow. “Well, it sounds like you are feeling better then; you’ve got your cheek back.” He released her arm again. “Alright, try that.”

This time the movement was more natural and the girl nodded. “It feels better. More like I’ve just pulled it a bit.”

“Considering a moment ago most medical professionals would have suggested amputation, a pulled muscle is not a bad result.”

“Amputation?” Evie looked down at her arm again and an expression of horror returned. “Okay… thanks for not doing that…”

The trickster grinned. “Never mind, maybe next time.” That drew a weak chuckle from the teen.

“Yeah, how about no.” She picked at a scab on her cheek, and then pulled her hand away with a grimace, another tiny piece of glass held between her fingers. “Urgh, I’m covered in this!”

Loki observed the myriad of cuts, scrapes, embedded shards of glass and smeared blood that still covered his daughter. She was looking brighter now, less like she was going to faint or throw up, but still pale and shaky. Unsurprising really; fourteen year olds shouldn’t have to deal with being the target of what were essentially three elite hit teams. Loki had certainly killed all of the men that Jarvis didn’t take out, and he hadn’t been nice about it either. The bloodstains on the ceiling and scattered organs might take some time to clean up.

“Allright then; shall we start sorting all the rest of this mess out?” He asked gently. Evie sighed, picking out another piece of glass from her leg, then nodded shakily.

“Yeah, I guess we should.”

**MWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMW**

Tony turned up a few hours later, having pretty much burnt out the suit’s thrusters to get there so quickly. He already knew the particulars since Jarvis had been keeping him updated, and needless to say he was pretty pissed off that Loki hadn’t taken him too when the trickster had teleported back to the tower. However, he wasn’t intending to come in and fight with his husband considering what had just happened.

He touched down on what was left of his landing pad, flicking the face plate in to take in the scale of the destruction around him in horror. Even Loki hadn’t made this much of a mess of the area during the chitauri invasion.

The three downed helicopters were piled – literally, stacked like books – to the left of the suit docking pad and elsewhere various Jarvis-controlled suits were pottering around either putting out fires or hauling bodies inside and out of eye-sight of anyone likely to fly over. Tony spared a brief moment of concern that the media might film the carnage – before calmly trying to remind himself
that there were multiple systems in place to block any recording devices, including smart phones. Obviously people would have seen something going down, but hopefully no-one would have enough footage to piece together what it was and they could clean it all up in a press conference.

“Sir, if you wish to remove the suit properly you will have to use the lab’s scaffold.” Jarvis walked out of the ruined lounge onto the balcony, glass crunching under his footsteps. He was riddled with bullet-holes, large sections of his blue exoskeleton blasted away to reveal delicate machinery underneath.

“You’re meant to be bullet-proof.”

“I am if they don’t start firing armour-piercing bullets once they realise normal ones are not working.” The droid looked down at himself. “I believe under the conditions this construct has been successful.”

Tony didn’t bother to comment further since he saw movement inside and a moment later Loki stepped out as well to greet him. The trickster had changed out of his bloodied clothes and looked somewhat out of place amongst the destruction in his shirt and cargos.

“Where’s Evie? Is she alright?” Forgoing the hassle of taking the suit off properly, Tony hit the manual release catch and pulled the pieces off to leave them in an untidy pile.

“She’s okay. Broken wrist and a huge shard of glass stuck through her elbow but I took care of those and the more minor cuts and scrapes. She was understandably shaken though – we’re going to have to keep a close eye on her.”

“Where is she?”

“Asleep. She wanted to rest and asked me to cast a sleep spell. Jarvis has a suit with her to stand guard.”

Tony groaned and ran a hand down his face. “What the hell? How did this even happen? She’s meant to be safe here! How did it get this far? What did they have to gain from killing her?!?”

“Don’t get hysterical; they were not intending to kill her.” Loki held up a bullet that he’d picked up from the thousands lying around. “These were not intended to kill, but to tranquilize.”

“What?!” Tony practically snatched it from him, scanning the ammo for proof of what his husband was saying. “Why the hell…? Kidnap?”

“I can only assume so.”

The two men stood silent for a moment, Tony thinking through the facts at lightning speed and Loki simply waiting for him to speak again. The inventor was biting his tongue, waving the bullet listlessly in the air as he stared intently at nothing.

Finally he seemed to reach a coherent thought.

“Do we know why? Do they want her because she’s my kid and the world’s best hostage against the Avengers, or have they figured out she’s your kid and want her for her potential?”

“I don’t know.”

“And if they know she’s yours, how the hell did they find out?!”
“I don’t know!”

“Jesus! What the hell?”

“Calm down!”

Tony turned on his heel and stalked into the building, broken glass crunching under his trainers. The pile of bodies was heaped up against the bar and he kicked one for good measure as he moved past. None of the corpses were in one piece.

“What do we do? What the fuck do we do?”

Loki stepped aside to let Jarvis past as the droid began sweeping up the broken glass. Rather than answering Tony’s question he waved a hand and the glittering shards faded away into nothing.

“You could have done that earlier.” Jarvis stated, sounding rather put out.

“I could have done.” The trickster didn’t sound like he had really heard the reproach.

“This is going to take some sorting out.” Tony was pacing around by this point, kicking at feathers from the bust arm-chair. “Can you magic it clean by any chance?”

“No. I’ve told you before that healing spells are not my forte. I read up on them whilst we were still in Asgard, and thank Norns for that, but healing Evie was hard work. She had some nasty injuries, and a substantial number of smaller ones. I’m exhausted. I’ve done the glass; that’s it for now.”

“Fair enough. Jarvis, how damaged are you?”

The droid paused in his clean up and looked down at his exoskeleton. “Diagnostic scans show that the damage is superficial, and mostly just lends a certain aesthetic.”

“You mean bullet holes make you look badass.”

“And that, sir.”

Tony ran a hand through his hair, flopping down onto what was left of one of the couches as the anger drained out of him. “Oh God, what are we going to do? After everything that’s happened how is this fair?”

“No one ever said that life is fair.”

“Well it should be! Come on! You’re a God! Do God things! Make this okay!”

“And turn water into wine? Feed the five thousand? I am a God purely because human minds classified me as such, and the God of Mischief at that. What, precisely, do you expect me to be able to do?”

“I don’t know!” Tony buried his head in his hands. “Turn all of Hydra’s water supplies into slime? Or change their bullets to confetti? What do Norse mischief God’s do as revenge?”

“Blood eagle would be a favourite.” Loki muttered.

“I thought that was a myth.”

“The Vikings never really did it much if at all, but on Asgard it was quite popular at one time.”
The trickster slumped down next to his husband, his usually excellent posture long gone. “I do not know what we’re going to do.” He felt Tony’s head tip against his shoulder and glanced sideways at his husband. “We will think of something.”

“It’s getting to the point where I’m very tired of having to think of something.”

“What exactly do you want me to say, Tony?”

“Just…I don’t know! Just something. Make me believe this can all be alright.”

Loki didn’t reply, but pressed a kiss to the man’s hair instead. After a moment Tony shifted and moved around so that he was leaning against his husband and Loki’s arm automatically curled around his shoulders.

“How long did you say Birdy would be out for?”

“Quite a while, it was a potent spell.”

“We should get the bodies out of here before she wakes up. She’s going to be in enough of a state as it is. How many were there?”

“Three helicopter crews – I counted twenty five bodies. They must have known that she was defended even if the Avengers were out of the building.”

“Twenty five men for a fourteen year old. They weren’t expecting it to be easy then. Lends credence to the idea that Hydra knows she’s yours.”

“Why would Hydra even know I’m back on the planet?”

Tony shrugged. “Files? Maybe Fury wrote something down somewhere – a journal or something. Or maybe they don’t know, and were being careful in case she’d been trained in arms or something.” He shook his head. “Oh God, I don’t know. I just don’t know.”

“Come on.” Loki nudged him. “Let’s at least get the bodies out of the way. I assume we can send them down to the garages or your laboratories?”

“There’s a furnace that usually deals with the waste produced in the tower. We can chuck them in there.” Tony heaved himself up to his feet, with some help from his husband. “Jarvis, bring up something we can cart this lot off in.”

The droid was back outside, so it was the more usual voice in the walls that answered an affirmative. In the meantime Stark steeled himself to start looking through the remains of the intruders for anything that could tell them something useful. He was not a squeamish man, but there was not a single body still in one piece and that took a strong stomach.

“Do you wish me to do that?” Loki asked quietly.

“I’m fine. You can help if you want. We’re looking for identification or anything useful.” Tony was already going through the first set of pockets, trying to ignore the fact that the body had no head. “Specially made weaponry, electronics maybe or –”

“Or this?” Loki was kneeling over a body at the bottom of the heap, holding up a smart phone.

“Or that! Gimme!” Tony practically snatched it out of his lover’s hands. The phone was password protected, but that was hardly a challenge for someone like Stark, and it didn’t take him more than
a few moments to break into it. There was very little on the device – evidently it had been used only for calls and messages and there was no data to be seen – however, calls and messages were enough since it gave them a number. Only one number, apparently the owner of the phone only used it to contact one person, presumably the person in charge of the operation.

Loki continued patting down the corpse that the phone had been found on. “Nothing else. A few tattoos, but nothing to tell us anything useful.”

“What are the tattoos of?”

“Some sort of mascot. It says Brooklyn?”

Tony smiled grimly. “Got to love a sports fan. Well, that at least gives me an accent to pitch.” He coughed and cleared his throat, then directed the phone to call the single contact. Loki’s eyes widened in alarm when he saw what the man was doing.

“What are you -?”

“Shh.” Stark pressed the speaker option, so the ringing tone could be heard clearly. “Jarvis, trace this call.”

“On it, sir.”

“Tony-”

Loki’s protest was cut short as with a sudden click the call was picked up at the other end of the line. Both men stared in absolute silence at the small handset as a breath could be heard on the other end, before;

“Is it done?”

Tony slowly lifted the phone up to his mouth, trying to fix a Brooklyn accent in his mind. He saw Loki opening his mouth, about to say something and shook his head hurriedly to silence his husband. After a moment he found the courage to reply to the question. “Yeah, we’ve got the girl.” It didn’t exactly sound like a native of Brooklyn and there was a long pause, in which he closed his eyes with a grimace – expecting to be called out on the terrible attempt at the accent – before he received a reply.

“Excellent.” A pause. “I do not hear the helicopter, where are you?”

The man couldn’t audibly sigh with relief but his shoulders slumped in the visual version. Apparently he had been better than he’d thought. Loki was now looking at him like he’d grown a second head. “The helicopters were downed, the tower was protected. We’re on street level, out of sight.” Tony found his confidence perking up as the story began to flow a little easier. “We can’t make the original drop-site. Where do you want us to take her?”

“The doctor’s house. You remember the address?” The voice didn’t seem to expect a response as the mystery man continued straight on. “Take her there, and keep her sedated; we don’t want any unexpected surprises if she’s inherited Asgardian powers. And don’t let the doctor make a start until I’ve had a chance to talk to her – I have some questions before we begin to find out just what a human-Asgardian hybrid looks like on the inside.”

...What…?

“You fucking bastard!” Stark broke character as the implications of what had just been said hit
him. Beside him Loki had gone pale.

“What-? You’re not Davis! Who is this?!"

“I’m Tony Stark you fucktard! And just to make it perfectly clear, every single one of your goons has been killed.”

“Well...” There was concern there, for a brief moment, but it passed so quickly it was hardly noticeable. “That is unfortunate. I presume than that your daughter is safe and sound then. Unfortunate indeed.”

Tony was gripping the handset so tightly it was surprising that the screen hadn’t cracked. “Why do I get the feeling it would be more unfortunate if your little plan had succeeded?” He snarled. “What you just talked about was fucking *vivisection*!”

“Oh but of course, Mr Stark. After all, it’s not like the little bitch is human, is it? I don’t believe the UN’s human rights committee have a policy regarding aliens.” The man on the other end of the phone laughed, a cold, cruel sound. “And it’s not like her mother’s alive to protect her now.”

“Her mother?”

“Please, Mr Stark. We know. Fury was an arrogant imbecile and thought we wouldn’t find the files he’d hidden in the Triskelion. I can understand why he may have kept a journal – the old goat was getting on in years and his memory was certainly not what it should have been – but he should have destroyed it when he had a chance.” The Hydra operative was evidently enjoying this far more than he should have been. “We know your brat is the offspring of the Asgardian known as Loki, and we also know that the Chitauri have killed Loki. You against the world, Mr Stark. Do you think you can hold us off forever?”

Tony stared down at the receiver in his hand. “I don’t need to hold you off. I’m going to fucking annihilate you. Me and my little hybrid, we’re gonna kill the whole fucking lot of you!”

“Hydra, Mr Stark. Cut off one head and three more shall grow.”

“Yeah, until someone thinks to come along and butcher the body instead of aiming at the head.” He cut the connection, killing the conversation dead. “And we’ve just traced your location, you stupid bastard.” He added at the now-silent phone.

Loki reached out to remove the device from his husband’s shaking hand.

“Tony...”

“We’ve got the location; although they must have realised that. We should –”

“We should do nothing.” Loki said firmly. That seemed to shake Tony out of his dazed stupor somewhat.

“Huh? *Nothing*?! Didn’t you hear what he said?! They wanted to-”

“And what good would it be if we left to go chasing after shadows when, as you just said, they probably know we have tracked them? The tower is currently strategically weak and the last thing we should do is leave again whilst there is a mouldering pile of Hydra corpses on your living room floor.”

Stark glanced at said pile of corpses. Loki was exaggerating slightly – they had hardly had time to
cool, let alone go mouldy – but they were certainly leaking random bodily fluids everywhere. Even so, he could hardly just sit there and let the bastards get away with it but it seemed that once again his husband could read his mind.

“There is nothing we can do, Tony. We protected Evie the best we could – she is safe and relatively unscathed and we killed the people who did it. You can guarantee that the moment we turned up at whatever hide-out they’d been using, they would already be long gone.”

There was an affected cough from behind them, Jarvis subtly trying to get their attention. “Actually, sir, the location I tracked was moving throughout the conversation – which suggests the person you spoke with was in a vehicle of some kind. I could trace the position of said vehicle throughout the call, but never managed to find what it was. Usually I would hack local CCTV to identify the car, but they were in an area that is not monitored. By now they could be anywhere in a ten mile radius of where the call took place.”

“So in other words we lost them. So that was bloody pointless then! We’ve learnt nothing!”

“We have learnt a great deal.” Loki corrected. He placed the mobile down on the counter as Tony walked away from him and back to the pile of bodies. “And we have at least one phone, maybe more if we look through the rest, and it may have some more information. It could at least let us know if Hydra have set up a new computer data-base since we know Jarvis has locked them out of Shield’s.”

“If’s and buts. Nothing concrete!”

“Well I can tell you what is concrete, Stark!” The trickster’s voice had raised, which normally would have alerted Tony to the fact that he was growing annoyed. As it was even the use of his surname didn’t really get the man’s attention as it should have. Loki realised this and stormed forwards to grab his husband’s arm, swinging the man round to face him again. “I can tell you what is concrete.” He repeated. “We now know that whilst we have been scurrying around blowing up the odd base here or there, they have been planning a full-scale offensive on this tower. We know they have significant man and fire power. We know that they know exactly who Evie is and her parentage. And we also know that they think I am dead and have no idea that I am now a part of this team.”

“And what good is that?”

“Having the element of surprise is never a bad thing.”

Tony spun round again to kick the nearest body. “But we should be doing something! They can’t be allowed to get away with this! We need to…I don’t know, do something!”

“Tony! Just stop for a moment!” Loki did shout this time, which brought his husband to a sudden stand-still. “Just…Just stop thinking like a hero and let yourself think like a parent for a moment! For Norns sake put it all to one side and just concentrate on the fact that these people nearly succeeded in kidnapping our daughter and that is fucking terrifying!”

As a rule the trickster didn’t swear, so it was even more jarring to hear him do so.

“Shut it out, keep all of this Avengers crap out of it right now and focus on the fact that we have a traumatised fourteen year old. Vengeance can wait.” The words were harsh, but Loki’s hand was gentle on Tony’s shoulder. “I know you are no good at dealing with the emotional side of a problem, and I know I am no good at it either but here and now that’s exactly what we need to do.”
Tony shook him off and stalked back over to the broken sofa. “Easier said than done.” He threw himself back down and waved a hand at the ruined room. “Your magic Duracell batteries powered up yet?”

“No.” The trickster sat back down next to him, accepting the arm that snaked itself around his waist. “We will need to clean this up manually.”

Tony dropped his head onto his husband’s shoulder with a wry chuckle. “Can that wait for, say, ten minutes?”

“Will ten be enough?”

“For a complete and utter emotional break down? Yeah, should be fine.”

“Alright then.”

The rest of the motley crew took another hour or so to turn up – the quinjet flying much slower than usual with a full cargo. It wasn’t like it was even built to carry cargo to begin with.

Jarvis had managed to haul all of the bodies out of the main room by that point and Tony had searched through them all. They had both left Loki to do the actual tidying up – since it mostly meant some major restructuring to the room. Some weight-bearing walls and pillars had been damaged and needed urgent repair which would either mean getting the builders in or – Tony’s first choice – making Loki do it. The trickster was able to at least make the room safe again, and remove some of the worst aesthetic damage, but refused to fix things like the furniture that Tony could either do himself in his workshop or could buy a replacement for.

The rest of the group had been informed by Jarvis about what had happened, and Pepper was summoned from her other office across town (Tony made sure all biologicals were well out of sight before she got there). Once again they found themselves sitting in the home-cinema on the squashy armchairs, discussing a personal attack on the tower.

No one missed the irony that the last time they had had such a meeting it was because Loki had just been snatched out from under their noses by the chitauri. Life seemed to like circles.

The meeting took them a surprisingly short amount of time, all things considered. After all – the security systems had worked, although Tony wanted to fine-tune how sensitive they were to close range attacks, and they knew Hydra’s motives. Stark had found little else of use or value on the bodies and Hawkeye had detoured to the area Jarvis had traced on the call, but found nothing. Dead ends all round really.

One thing Tony had thought to do was at least take finger-prints and DNA from all of the deceased intruders so Jarvis was slogging through the federal data banks trying to find matches. They weren’t too hopeful, since Hydra weren’t complete imbeciles, but there was always a chance some of the goons had been hired guns and were on a database somewhere.

The raid on the Hydra base very much took a back seat to begin with – for Tony and Loki it seemed like it had been a million years ago that they had been looking at that chitauri tech. It said a lot about his current state of mind that Loki had entirely lost interest in the chitauri speeder they had recovered. Tony on the other hand was a ball of nervous energy – despite being denied caffeine – and the little cry he’d had earlier (classified) hadn’t helped to take the edge off the emotional bubble inside of him. He needed to get into the lab and start doing something before he
exploded.

It was Rhodey who recognised the warning signs and finally let the inventor leave, Bruce hot on his heels.

“Are you not going to follow them?” Thor managed to sound sarcastic as he glanced at his brother.

“I don’t have to trail my husband around, you know. He can look after himself.” Loki rose to his feet. “Now if that is all, I’m going to get some air.”

“Actually it’s not all…” Steve’s complaint was addressed to thin air as the trickster simply vanished. “For goodness sake! He can’t keep doing that!”

Thor groaned and levered himself out of his chair. “I will go and find him.”

“He could be anywhere.”

“He’s on the roof. When he’s upset, he’s always on the roof.”

“Fine. Go and have a talk or something and see if you can get him to come back down here. Tony’s too tightly wound up right now – but we need one of them here to fully sort out what to do about all this.”

Thor was in the doorway by this point, but paused to glance back at the super soldier with a small frown. “And you don’t think Loki is in a bad state too? Believe me, he is just as wound up as Tony; he has just had a few hundred thousand years more to perfect hiding it.”

As Thor predicted, Loki was right at the very top of the tower, sat on the ledge that ran around the roof-space.

“So now you are the one following people around?” The trickster didn’t even turn around, although Thor knew that he hadn’t made a sound. Loki was rather too good at knowing when people were behind him.

“I wanted to keep you company – you usually get too involved in your own misery if left alone when upset.”

“What’s that meant to mean?!” Loki snapped, finally turning his head to glance at his brother with a scowl.

Thor shrugged, gesturing around at the area they were in. “Well, forgive me if I am wrong, but isn’t this where you set up the portal to let the chitarui through to Earth? A situation that would never have occurred if I had simply bothered to find out why you were so upset.”

“I rather think the situation was more complicated than that, Thor.” Loki looked back out across the city-scape, but there was the shadow of a smile across his lips. “But at least you learnt from the experience.”

“Did you?” Thor swung himself up onto the ledge next to his brother, sitting facing the opposite direction to Loki so that they were almost face to face. “It is all very well me realising that I need to listen every now and then; but that only works if you are willing to talk. Actually talk; not just what you think I want to hear, because I have grown wise to that one by now. Tell me what you’re feeling, what’s going on in that head of yours?”
Loki shrugged, sweeping his hair back out of the way as the wind tried to blind him with it. "Feelings. Always with the feelings. That’s such a…a human thing to talk about."

"Actually, after spending enough time here I have learnt it is such a female thing to talk about, but nevertheless we are somehow here attempting to have this conversation. I almost brought ice-cream."

"Ice-cream?!"

Thor grinned sheepishly. "It is what people do in films when they need to discuss feelings. Apparently it makes one feel better."

"Huh…Remind me to get some for Evie."

"How is she?"

"Still asleep. I used a very potent sleep spell – her body needed rest and her mind needed time. Hopefully when she wakes up she will have had enough of both to be able to start looking at what happened objectively."

Thor nodded. Loki had done the same for their friends from time to time if they had had a particularly harrowing adventure. There was a reason there were so many adages about the healing powers of a good night’s sleep.

"And you? Evie is asleep, Tony is on a lab binge, what about you?"

"I’m fine."

"Bullshit."

Loki looked surprised, then smiled. "Nicely said. I don’t believe I have ever heard you use a human swear word."

"I like that one. It says exactly what one thinks of the situation." Thor nudged his brother gently with his shoulder. "So. Talk. How are you feeling? Really feeling."

The trickster immediately looked away again, kicking his heels against the wall so that flakes of plaster fell away and blew off into the distance. "How do you think? They tried to hurt my daughter. I’m furious. I’m more than furious, but I can’t think of a better word. Livid? Incandescent? Anything like that. I want them all dead!" He watched a flock of birds swoop past underneath them, waiting for a reply. When Thor didn’t say anything and the silence began to stretch he felt compelled to fill it. "I never thought I could detest a group of humans so much – I usually reserve such feelings for entire races, but I want to send Hydra the same way as the chitauri!"

Thor nodded in understanding. "I think we can all say we hate Hydra. But it’s not just hatred, is it? I mean, I know that Tony and yourself had been hoping to settle down and have a quiet life, and that ideal has already been destroyed, so I know that you’re upset about that."

"Upset. You keep using that word as if it could possibly explain the depth of a whole myriad of emotions." Loki said quietly. "Yes, I’m ‘upset’ that we aren’t living the American Dream, but there is so much more to it than that."

"I’m listening."
Thor’s shoulder was against his brother’s again, but this time stayed there as a support for the younger God to lean against, which Loki did. After a few moments, the trickster began to talk again; very softly.

He explained the whole episode again, but rather than the report he had given to the Avengers earlier this was the uncensored version - how he felt, what had been going through his mind, what it was like to see his little girl in that sort of situation.

Thor knew better than to interrupt, and certainly knew better than to comment on the hot tears that began to trace silver tracks down his brother’s cheeks.

“I was…I just felt…I felt scared, Thor. No, terrified. I thought I was going to lose her at any moment! That child is my life, and I thought they were going to kill her.” Loki brushed his hair out of the way again with a shaking hand. “And then Tony spoke to them and it was even worse and they were…they wanted to…they meant to…vivisection!”

“Loki…” Thor wrapped an arm around his brother’s shoulders, pulling the younger God into a tight hug. Vivisection was a sickening thing under any circumstances, but Loki had survived it himself and knew just how truly horrific it was from personal experience. To have Evie in any way associated with the appalling torture was terrifying.

“They can’t ever be allowed near her!” His words were partly muffled in Thor’s shoulder, but still just about audible. “They can never do that! I would…I would rather kill her myself than let that happen to her…”

Thor only just caught the whispered admission, and tightened his hold as Loki sobbed against him. “We will never let them get hold of her. Today was too close for comfort, and it will never happen again. Never, I swear, brother. Any one of us would die for her.”

“I know…”

“It’s going to be alright, Loki.” Thor felt his brother’s arms finally looping around his waist in return and pressed his cheek against the dark hair under his chin. “It’s going to be alright, everything’s going to be alright…”

It had been a very long time since he had last felt this much like the elder brother. Loki usually had a way of making him feel like an idiot, and that he was inferior, but for the first time in possibly thousands of years Thor found himself being a proper big brother again. Younger sibling in his arms, rocking him slightly, whispering the mantra over and over.

“It’s going to be alright. We’re going to make this alright…”
Chapter 29

Some techno babble - if any physicist out there spots a serious error please tell me, but I'm pretty certain it's right.

The next morning led the early rising Avengers (Steve, Natasha and on this occasion Bruce) to question their sanity when they were joined at breakfast by Evie. It was six thirty and a time that they had hitherto never associated with the teen. Any questions as to her wellbeing were met with polite responses that didn’t really answer anything, and she would have looked her normal self if it wasn’t for the unusually sharp and focussed gleam to her eyes.

She wolfed down her toast, hardly tasting the Nutella and drank the orange juice so quickly she was in danger of drowning.

“Going somewhere?” Steve asked in bemusement.

“Gym.” Evie’s reply was indistinct with a mouth full of toast.

“Since when have you ever gone to the gym?”

“Since today.”

Bruce raised an eyebrow at her. “Has this got anything to do what happened yesterday…?”

“Yup.”

Steve opened his mouth to speak again but Bruce silenced him with a hurried shake of the head. He recognised that look in Evie’s eyes, knew the unmistakable expression of a Stark on a mission. Tony tackled problems in a head-on, bull in the china shop sort of way and his daughter had inherited that. She had been terrified and badly injured in a home invasion, and in true Stark fashion she wasn’t taking that shit lying down.

“Let me guess, there’s a reason you’re down here at the same time as Steve and Natasha, huh?” Bruce asked gently.

Evie looked shifty, glancing at the super soldier and assassin. “Maybe a little bit of a reason.”

“And could that reason be that you’ve finally decided you need to learn some self-defence?”

“Not exactly.” The girl pushed her empty plate away and folded her hands on the table. “Self-offence. Is that a thing? Protection is all well and good, but this is my turf and they came in here and shat all over it! I don’t want protection, I want pay-back!”

“You want us to teach you to fight?” Natasha asked.

“Nope. I want you to teach me to kill.”

“That’s hardly something a fourteen year old should want!” Steve sounded almost amused, as if
she could possibly be joking.

“Yeah well, most fourteen year olds aren’t the target of a hit-team. I’ve got other plans in the works – but I want to be able to fight too.”

“What other plans?”

“Just… plans. But I want to know if you’ll teach me how to fight.”

Both Steve and Natasha looked at each other, then at the determined teenager sat infront of them. She definitely had the Determined Stark thing going on.

“Why ask us?” Steve played for time. “This is something you should be talking to your parents about, and they’d be in a better position to train you if you really do want to learn some self-defence.”

Evie sighed and rolled her eyes in possibly the most teenager-y way possible. “First, offence, not defence, and secondly, even if they agree to this they don’t have the know-how for someone of my age, lack of experience and body type. Dad can fight unarmed, but he’s hardly Bruce Lee, and Môðhy’s style – even without his magic – requires Aesir strength, agility and reflexes. They might be able to give me some pointers down the line, but I need to build up basics first. Hell, I don’t even know how to throw a punch. So…” She gestured at the two Avengers. “You’re the experts, if anyone can teach me it’ll be you guys.”

Bruce cleared his throat quietly, reminding them all of his presence. “Can I just interject here? You are aware that training – serious training is more than just learning a few tricks. If you want to be able to actually protect yourself and fight back to any degree of effectiveness you need to actually put some effort into this.”

“I know!”

“Not your usual half-assed effort, Evelyn, but actual physical effort. It’ll require you to change your life-style, your diet, your exercise habits – as in you’ll actually have to start exercising - no more lazing around infront of Call of Duty.”

“I know. I know what it will take – I’ve seen Karate Kid.”

Natasha groaned and shook her head. “Seriously? Look, I’m happy to show you a few things but this actually takes dedication.”

“Why does everyone assume I’m lazy?!”

“We don’t assume, we know. You’ve mastered the art of watching films like a true Olympic champion.”

“Yeah, and look where that got me! Staring down the barrel of a gun because I didn’t know the first thing to do in that situation!”

“Evie…” Again it was Bruce, ever pouring oil on troubled waters. “You got to the panic room – that was exactly the right thing to do.”

The girl looked down at the table, her determinism and ferocity draining away. “I don’t want to feel that helpless in my own home again.” She whispered. “This is meant to be my safe-place, and yesterday it wasn’t, and if I can do something about that then I should.” She shrugged slightly. “I’ve been looking at things online; I’ve found recommended diets that could help, and some
online programs in kick-boxing and things but…well, a real teacher is better than the internet any
day. So…will you help me?"

Steve let out a heavy sigh and rubbed his chin. “We will all need to sit down and have a serious
talk with your parents, young lady, but for now I can show you how to use the punch-bags in the
gym properly.”

When Evie lit up with a bright grin Natasha rolled her eyes and nodded. “We can always go down
to the target range and have a look at your marksmanship for now. It won’t hurt to know how to
use a gun properly.”

“And I want to look at those diets you mentioned!” Bruce added severely. “And they had better be
proper diets that work with you to build muscle and endurance, rather than some stupid weight-
loss things that will do far more harm than good!”

“Yes Uncle Bruce.” Evie sounded contrite, but her smile could have been a light source in it’s own
right.

MWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMW

When the alarm on his phone went off Tony reached out blindly to flail at it, finally hitting the
snooze button.

“…Time…”

“Half eight…”

Loki let out an unintelligible grunt and burrowed in closer, evidently deciding that getting up was
not on the agenda. Tony was of equal mind, if it weren’t for the fact that his husband was lying on
his arm and his movement towards the alarm had sparked off some serious pins and needles. He
pushed at Loki until the trickster grumbled incoherently at him, but shifted his weight off the limb
in question.

“Jarv? How’s Birdy?” Tony mumbled at the ceiling.

“She appears well, sir. She has been up for the past two hours.”

“Good…” The man slowly sat up, slumping forwards as he scrubbed a hand across his eyes.
“Wait, what? What the hell was she doing up at six thirty?”

“Conversing with Captain Rodgers, Miss Romanoff and Dr Banner, sir.”

“Why?” Loki’s voice was still groggy with sleep, but the concern was very much evident as he
pulled himself up onto one elbow. “Is she alright?”

“Quite alright, sir. She is currently with Miss Romanoff at the target range discussing the finer
points of marksmanship.”

“She…What?”

After the events of yesterday both parents had been ready for their daughter to be traumatised,
needy and terrified. They didn’t quite know how to deal with the idea that she had sorted herself
out on her own.

“She’s…she’s fine?” Tony asked.
“That is not what I inferred, sir. But she is not the emotional mess we all assumed she would be. I believe Miss Evelyn has decided that she doesn’t wish to be the damsel in distress should yesterday’s event occur again.”

“Huh…” The inventor glanced at his partner. “You know, I think that kid is more like us than we could ever realise.”

“How do you mean?”

“Well, look at me for an example.” He gestured at himself. “I get kidnapped and tortured by terrorists, so I build the suit and the very first thing I do after escaping is go straight back and blow them to kingdom come. You get tortured by the Chitauri so the moment you have your strength back you summon the whole lot of them and blow them up too.”

Loki smiled slowly. “And Evelyn has been attacked and terrified, so the first thing she does is try to arm herself against them.”

“She went and spoke to Nat, Steve and Bruce. I bet anything she’ll be coming to ask us if we’ll let her learn how to fight.”

“Not just fight. If your summation is correct, she will want to learn how to defeat them.” Loki sat up properly, running a hand through his hair. “Why else choose Miss Romanoff? She wishes to learn to kill.” He glanced at Stark in time to see the man go pale. “Tony?”

“I…don’t know how I feel about that.”

“Well, with the more stringent protection measures we put in place yesterday she will hardly need to use the skill even if she learns it, and if it makes her feel safer, what is the problem?”

“Uh…the problem is that our fourteen year old might be wanting to kill someone?”

Loki waved a hand tiredly, stifling a yawn. “Alright, alright. We’ve just woken up. If this is going to turn into the disagreement that I think it is may it wait? We both need food, we need to hear what our little bird actually has to say for herself, rather than wildly speculating and we need to wake up a little more. Agreed?”

“Yeah. Yeah, I guess.” Tony’s metaphorical hackles subsided and he grinned sheepishly. “Good call.”

“Well, we are slowly improving at not fighting.”

“Slowly but surely!” The man laughed, and leant over to kiss Loki’s cheek. “That’s a silver lining I guess. All this crap is happening, but we’re learning not to argue the whole time!” He moved away and flicked the switch above the head-board for the lights.

A gentle glow filled the room as the main lights slowly brightened (designed back in the day when hangovers featured heavily in Tony’s morning routine) and Stark smoothed his hair down.

“Time to face the day?”

“If we must.” Loki sounded less than enthusiastic, still rubbing a hand across his face. When he lowered it his eyes looked red and sore in the new light.

Tony’s amused grin faded with concern at the sight that he hadn’t been aware of in the dark. “Hey, are you okay?”
“Just a rough night, I did not sleep well.”

“What didn’t you wake me up?”

“One of us needed to be well rested to deal with whatever life and our daughter can throw at us today,” Loki smiled tiredly at his husband’s worried expression. “I am fine now.”

“Was it nightmares?” Tony persisted, and the trickster nodded slightly.

“I expected them, so it could have been worse than it actually was. And you have helped me get to the point that I can wake from them once I realise that they are only dreams, so that made it easier too.”

“Yeah, but—”

“Tony, I am fine. I can handle a nightmare or two without having to go crying to you for help!” It could have been said angrily, but Loki sounded so tired that it took any bite out of his words. He didn’t object when he felt his husband’s hand on his shoulder.

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“Hardly. I believe there were some things mentioned yesterday that triggered certain memories.”

Tony nodded sadly. He understood full well how much it could throw someone to have something dredged up from the memory banks by an unexpected trigger, and the events of the previous day had certainly been full of things that could have set Loki off. At a guess he would probably blame the phone call with Hydra and what that had revealed about their plans for Evie – Loki undoubtedly had never wanted to hear the term vivisection again, so to have it put in the same context as his daughter would have been more than enough to spark a serious PTSD incident.

“Do you want to go back to sleep for a bit? By the sounds of it Evie doesn’t need or want us mollycoddling her so you can afford to get another few hours if you’re that tired.”

“It is tempting, but I will simply fall back into another nightmare, so I would prefer not to.”

“You really should have woken me up and said something – I used to have that problem and have any number of strategies to stop it.”

Such comments would usually annoy Loki, but lack of sleep had mellowed him enough to simply nod enquiringly. He more than likely had his own coping mechanisms, but they evidently hadn’t worked and he was tired enough to accept help.

“Jarvis, can you put on my old playlist.”

“Of course, sir.”

Quiet music began filtering in – a piano concerto – and Loki looked at his husband questioningly.

“Hey, I found it helps. Your brain can still hear it whilst you’re asleep and it keeps you grounded in the here and now. At least, it did for me. Give it a go.”

“I will try it tonight, but to be honest Tony, right now I would rather get up.”

“You sure?”

“I’m sure – we have things to discuss and we never did look through all of the data from the attack
yesterday.” Loki smiled slightly as his husband leant over and kissed him. “What?”

“Nothing. Just tell me next time? Please?”

“If it’s that important to you, then alright.”

When Evie returned to the kitchen at about nine o’clock her parents were both there with Thor. Loki was at the stove whilst Tony had been too hungry to wait to cook something and had gone straight for the cereal.

“Morning kiddo!” Tony grabbed his daughter round the waist as she tried to get past and pulled her into a hug. “How are you feeling today?”

“Better. Much much better. And hungry,” She added, looking longingly at the pan in which Loki was frying eggy bread. He noticed this, sighed and added another slice.

“A little bird told me you were down in the shooting range at some God-forsaken hour this morning. Did you skip breakfast?”

“No, I’ve just been busy.” Evie sat down next to her father, pouring herself an orange juice from the jug on the table.

“Yes I know, do we need to talk about this?”

“Nope.”

“I rather think we do, Birdy.”

Evie scowled at him. “Well everyone else around here knows how to fight – I think it’s high time I learnt!” She sat back a little to let Loki place a plate of eggy bread infront of her. “Thanks Möðhy.”

“How is your arm today?” The trickster tried to take the conversation back a few paces as he sat down next to Thor with his own food.

The girl shrugged slightly, flexing the elbow in question. “It was fine when I woke up but is a little sore now – but Natasha said that was probably from the recoil.”

“Possibly. Do you want me to take another look at it?”

“I’ve taken an anti-inflammatory for now, and it’s got a support on.” Evie rolled her sleeve up to present the elasticated support bandage that wrapped her elbow snugly.

“And how did you sleep?”

The girl rolled her eyes. “You know I was fine; you knocked me out yourself! Stop worrying about me!”

“Stop being a defensive teenager, Evie. We can hardly help being worried about you after what happened yesterday!” Tony countered.

“Well I am trying not to think about yesterday and am focussing on sorting myself out so that it doesn’t happen again!”

“You shouldn’t need to be worrying about that.” Loki said gently. “We will take care of extra
“Yeah, well, I am worrying, so I’m sorting it out for myself. And besides; if you guys know that I can protect myself should it happen again then you won’t need to worry so much either.”

“The aim is not to let it happen again.” Tony added.

“It’s going to be a bit difficult to stop them trying again if they really want to give it another go. They got quite close to grabbing me yesterday.”

“Well if they can’t find you they can’t get to you.”

Evie blinked at her father in confusion then turned to Loki for clarification. He looked equally confused. Thor appeared to be wishing he could just leave.

“How do you mean, can’t find me?”

Tony shrugged, pushing his cereal bowl away and cupping his hands around his coffee mug. “It makes sense doesn’t it? We know they’re after you, we know they’re ruthless and cruel and what they want to do to you is the stuff of nightmares. So we get you the hell out of here. My other properties are probably all under surveillance, but we can easily set up something off the radar.”

“What? No!”

“Be sensible Evie! The best thing we can do right now is get you out of here. It’s all very admirable that you want to learn to protect yourself and all that, but it takes a long time to learn those skills and we don’t have time! They could be back tomorrow, the day after, hell, they could be outside right this moment!”

“I don’t want to leave!” Evie protested.

“Where would you suggest?” Loki ignored his daughter’s outburst for a moment, agreeing that there was some merit to Tony’s suggestion. “Somewhere on Earth?”

“It would be better to get off the planet entirely. Back to Asgard?”

The trickster wrinkled his nose. “Probably not a long term plan. It was fine whilst I was still recovering and therefore not a threat but by now the distrust will have grown again.”

Thor looked surprised by this viewpoint. “That’s not true, brother! People have to no cause to…” He trailed off at the look Loki levelled on him. “Well, alright, there have been times, but recently…”

“The Bifrost? The Jötunn?” Loki began ticking off on his fingers. “Having you banished, trying to kill you, trying to kill your friends, trying to kill Heimdall, sending the Allfather into the Odin-sleep, and that’s not to mention the simple fact of being me. Evelyn was beginning to have problems there – which was why we left – I don’t wish to take her back so soon. Maybe as a last case scenario, but otherwise, no.”

“I don’t want to go anywhere!”

Evie’s protest was ignored again as Tony bit his lip thoughtfully. “Okay, what about another realm then? I mean, I know some are unsuitable - we’re not taking her to Jötunnheim – but what about somewhere else? Alfheim?”
Loki shook his head hurriedly. “I am not welcome there – and no child of mine will be either.”

“What did you do?”

“I may have slightly stolen their most sacred item.”

“Slightly?”

“Well, I didn’t keep it. It resides in Asgard’s weapon’s vault now.” He glanced at Thor. “You remember? That ugly gauntlet? Honestly, I couldn’t see what the fuss was all about, but they revered it and now there is a hefty price on my head should I set foot in their realm again.”

“Huh. So not Alfheim then. Vanaheim?”

“Again, they are not so fond of me either.”

Tony groaned and buried his head in his hands. “Are there any realms that you haven’t pissed off?”

“Not as such. I burnt those bridges long ago.”

Evie waved her hand sarcastically. “Hello! Remember me? I don’t want to go anywhere! I’m staying here!”

“Yeah, Earth does seem the best bet.” Tony said. “How about Antarctica? We could dig down, build a new base there – no-one would find it. Or the Sahara. Australian outback, Amazon jungle, anywhere remote.”

“No! No no no no NO! I am not leaving this tower!” The girl screamed, silencing the three adults. They stared at her in shock.

“Alright then, anti-Rapunzel. What do you suggest we do then? Just wait for them to come again?” Tony asked sarcastically.

“I don’t know, but I’m not leaving! This is my home!”

“It’s not safe here, Birdy!”

“No-where is safe! If it’s not Hydra it will be something else! You can’t protect me and keep me sheltered forever; I intend to learn how to kill these bastards and would appreciate some help with that.”

Loki opened his mouth to reply, but was silenced as Tony waved a hand at him. Normally he wouldn’t allow such behaviour, but the look on the man’s face said that Stark was up to something so he complied without incident.

Father and daughter stared at each other, the girl full of righteous anger.

“Alright then, Evelyn. What do you need?”

“I…what?” It was obviously the last thing she expected to hear.

“You obviously have a plan, and it’s probably a good one so; what do you need?”

“Permission to train properly and learn armed and unarmed combat and…well, yeah. That mostly.”

“Just that?”
“Well…some lab space too? Down in the workshop?”

“Will you need a testing area?”

Evie nodded hopefully.

“I’ll see what I can do. And as long as you do exactly what Steve and Natasha say I can’t see the harm in learning some skills. Just don’t overdo it, yeah? We’re still going to look into this safe-house idea, but until we can think of something concrete you’ve got a good plan to be going on with.” Tony glanced at Loki as he said this, and received a small nod that told him the trickster agreed with what he was saying. “Any chance you’ll explain why you want room in the workshop?”

“Nope.”

“Anything dangerous?”

“Eh, a little. Nothing Dummy and You can’t sort if it catches fire.”

Tony smiled slightly and tapped his daughter gently on the nose. “Blow up my cars and you are in mega trouble young lady. And this is just a short term fix until we sort out a proper solution to all of this. Deal?”

Evie grinned. “Deal.” She hugged her father tightly. “Thank you!” She grinned at Loki over Tony’s shoulder. “Thank you!”

“Don’t thank me, I didn’t appear to have any say in this.” The trickster’s smile made it clear that despite his words he was happy with the temporary solution. “Although I will certainly be having a say in your training.”

Thor snorted with sudden laughter, drawing the attention back to him.

“What?” Loki snapped.

“You willingly wanting to train? I never thought I’d see the day!”

“Funny, Thor. Very funny.”

Despite promises of clearing out a small area of his work-shop for Evie, Tony didn’t get chance to start on it straight away as Bruce called him into the doctors personal lab. Jane was on web-cam again – this time up on the interactive whiteboard on the wall – and both looked intensely worried when Stark arrived.

“Hey, what did I miss?” He looked around at Bruce’s usually immaculate lab with a frown; apparently all of the chitauri tech they had recovered yesterday had been dumped there with no semblance of order whatsoever. “Um…Do you need me to send up house-keeping?”

Banner waved a careless hand at the mess. “Oh forget that, it’s nothing.” Considering that he was usually neat bordering on OCD that said a lot. We’ve been looking through the chitauri portion of the stuff we recovered yesterday and we’ve found a link to that file.” He waved his copy of the stream of nonsense.

“You have?!” Tony pulled up the spare swivel chair and plonked himself down next to his friend.
“What?”

Bruce gestured towards the speeder – dominating the centre of the room - with his pencil. “We took a look at that thing first because, well, who wouldn’t? And we found that someone had already been tampering with it.”

“By ‘we’ he means the royal we.” Jane put in quickly from her screen. “He did it all; I simply gave suggestions of which bits to poke.”

“You can see where someone’s drilled into the outer shell, and there are marks that look like attempts were made to run an electrical current through it.” The physicist wheeled over on his office chair to tap something on the console area. “God knows why, since to turn it on you just press these buttons here.” He then spun his seat round to point at a chitauri gun. “Same story there too – tampered with. And even the bits of armour look like someone’s chiselled parts off.”

“So? I’m curious about it all; I can’t imagine someone else wouldn’t have been.” Tony flicked a piece of helmet with his finger.

“True, but it was only after we started taking readings did Jane notice anything odd.” Bruce gave credit where credit was due. “I worked out how to turn the speeder on and Jarvis was monitoring the background radiation since there’s no power source that I can make out – which is weird - and we noticed something…odd.”

“That’s twice you’ve used the word odd.”

Bruce sighed. “Look.” He flicked a small switch on the side of the gun and the thing whirred into life. “I mean, we need to look at these things properly, since I have no idea how this works, but the moment it’s running…” He gestured at his computer that was plugged into a bank of machines.

There were various graphs logging different forms of radiation across the electromagnetic spectrum on the dual screens. There was a noticeable spike in the radio waves and ultra-violet as the weapon had been switched on but that wasn’t particularly weird given that they didn’t know what the thing ran on.

“See?”

“Well, it’s weird that it’s bouncing all over the spectrum, but it’s alien tech, so I’m not quite sure why you’re so surprised.”

Bruce rolled his eyes and Jane gave a tut of annoyance that made Tony feel like he was being thick and he studied the screen again.

“Nope. I’m still not seeing this and now you guys are making me feel stupid.”

“Look at the units, Tony. I appreciate that you are not a specialist in electromagnetic radiation, but radio waves should not do that.”

Stark looked, and then stared. The wave length was oscillating between the very lowest frequency possible and then up to so high it almost wasn’t classed as a radio wave. 3 Hz up to nearly 3000 GHz.

“That’s…what the actual fuck? That’s not physically possible!”

“As I said, we don’t know what’s powering it. It gets worse too.”
Tony glanced at the chitauri gun again. “This thing is breaking the laws of physics and it gets worse?!”

Bruce sighed. “Jane, show him.”

The woman on the screen cleared her throat and glanced down at her notes. “Well, I’ve got equipment set up as standard that receives and tunes into the frequencies – you know, in case ET tries to contact us – and it automatically started trying to translate this one. It took some chugging through given the discrepancies in the frequency but we managed to get a translation of sorts.”

Light dawned and Tony groaned. “Let me guess…”

“Yup. The Pages of Nonsense. Official title, that.” Jane held up her own copy. “It doesn’t help us in any way work out what it says, but we’re pretty certain that what we’ve got here is the closest approximation we can make to the chitauri language written down.”

“So that thing, all of these things, are sending out a…a what? A message of some sort?”

Bruce and Jane exchanged an uneasy glance. “Not just any message.” Banner said slowly.

“I thought you said you still couldn’t translate it.”

“We can’t, but thinking logically, what sort of signal do you think something like this might send out? Someone starts drilling holes into it, breaking it apart and so it sends out a message.”

“Oh God…” Tony pinched the bridge of his nose with a groan. “It’s a distress signal. The bloody thing is calling for help!”

“Yes.”

“Well, turn it off then!”

“It’s a bit late for that.” Bruce sighed. “The damage is done. The speeder was inert when we found it, but this.” He tapped the gun with his pencil. “Was still ‘on’, as it were. Shield’s records show that they simply archived all of this stuff, so this can only have happened in the past few months once Hydra took over.”

“Radio-waves travel at light speed, right? That signal could have gone a hell of a long way in a few months.”

“Even further than that.” Jane looked rightfully concerned as she spoke. “Those items were brought through a wormhole by the chitauri and as such Einstein’s and Minkowski’s theorems leave for the possibility that the radiation given out by these things can possibly go back through the same way.”

“The wormhole was closed.”

“Only to solid matter, for a given definition of ‘solid’. Radiation can still pass through.”

Tony frowned. “So that message could be on the other side of the universe…But the chitauri are all dead.”

“Are they though? Loki killed all the ones he knew about – what if there were more?”
The weight of the gun was familiar in Evie's hand. She had used one before, obviously. She had full access to both a shooting range and a group of world-class weapon experts at her disposal, of course she'd used a gun before.

What was different this time was Natasha's stern presence and the constant corrections. The girl was used to coming in and simply having a mess around (supervised, of course) with the stationary targets about twenty feet away. Now she was being corrected every other shot; her stance, her angle, the attitude of her hand, when she breathed.

And Natasha had changed the targets over. The new ones moved suddenly in unexpected directions and occasionally more than one would swing down, causing confusion.

Evie was having the time of her life!

Finally the last round was fired and Natasha took the gun off of her again. The targets swung forward for inspection and although most were peppered randomly with holes, there were a handful of kill shots too.

"How did she do?"

Evie jumped, surprised to hear her mother's voice, but Natasha simply turned to address the question, evidently knowing that Loki had been there watching them.

"I've worked with worse. Her reflexes are absolutely excellent, she just can't aim."

"Well, practice will sort that out." Loki pushed away from the wall he had been leaning against. "And that's with the Glock?"

Black Widow clicked the safety back on and laid the gun down on the side. "Standard issue. I was going to cover larger fire arms in a few weeks once she's more comfortable with this."

"Just fire arms?"

"I said I'd let Steve start off on hand to hand." At Loki's look of confusion she laughed. "I'll take over and train her properly, but she's hardly in any shape to start an intensive combat program. Steve is going to help her get her conditioning up first."

"Basically I'm fat." Evie said cheerfully.

"You are not fat, and you know we never said that! You are simply not at the fitness level required." Natasha snapped.

Loki glanced back at the targets and their varied bullet holes. "If it is aim that is the problem, throwing-knives are a good way to practice, they don't waste bullets and shouldn't require someone supervising as handling a gun does." He held one of the small blades out, produced from nowhere.

Evie reached for it but was beaten to it by Black Widow.

"What metal is this?" She weighed the delicate knife in her hand.

"Not one found on Earth."

"Hmm." It was much lighter than Natasha was used to, but also seemed to hold a better edge than her own knives. When she threw it at the target it spun strangely in the air. "Well, it handles well, they could be good for her to practice with."
“So glad you approve.” Loki’s voice simply dripped with sarcasm as he handed the rest of the knives to his daughter. Natasha smiled sweetly at him.

Evie rolled her eyes and left them to it.

There were Press outside the tower again.

Thor and Sam had taken to base-jumping off the roof and racing each other. Usually this involved having to get to the base of the tower, touch the ground and then fly quickly up to a nearby roof. Technically Thor was faster, but Sam had more control and could stop himself from actually slamming face-first into the concrete, whereas the God had left some sizable dents.

As can be imagined, the public absolutely loved this, which was the real reason behind doing it. Keeping the Avenger’s public, in your face and on everyone’s good side.

This time they had raced straight down, back up and down once more to land infront of the main entrance to the building. Thor had won, but not by much, and now they were walking through the crowd giving autographs. This concept was still novel to the God, even after so long on Earth, and he rather enjoyed it.

Sam was still barely known outside of New York as one of the Avengers – and was only so well-known inside the city because of his constant presence flying around the tower and peoples recollections of seeing him during the battle of the Triskelion. As it was there was a small but growing trade in little Falcon dressing up outfits and he was slowly breaking out of the mould of being a local celebrity and gaining a bit more status.

Given the situation yesterday, and the fact that three helicopters had been taken down over the tower it was all the more important that the Avengers maintained a good public image. There was also a lot of explaining to do.

‘Training Exercise’ covered so many things.

He was signing a magazine for a small boy dressed as Ironman (consistently the most popular, to everyone’s dismay) when something made the hairs on the back of his neck stand up. Someone was staring at him.

In the middle of such a large horde clamouring to meet them that shouldn’t have been unusual but for the briefest of moments Sam felt that something was misplaced. There was a man staring straight at him through the heaving crowd. The face was non-descript under the low pulled baseball cap, but there was something familiar about the absolute piercing gaze. The moment was fleeting, an instant before the man was sucked back into the heaving mass of people and Sam’s attention was drawn back to a child with a Thor helmet begging for an autograph on said piece of head-gear.

“I still don’t get it.” Rhodey looked entirely bemused at the flip-chart Bruce had set up in front of them all in the living room.

“What part of ‘this thing has been sending chitauri help messages into space for the past two or three months’ didn’t you get?” Tony asked in exasperation. “It’s not a complex concept.”

“It’s pretty complex!”
“Where did we lose you?” Bruce was far more understanding than his fellow scientist and pulled back a few sheets of paper on the flip-chart.

“Look, forget the science; just tell us why this is a problem. Earth has been sending messages out into space for decades and that hasn’t led to any problems.”

“No, just an interminable amount of Jerry Springer for those of a psychic persuasion who can pick up those radio waves.” Loki muttered. He was lounging on the arm of the sofa, chin cupped in one hand as he watched the proceedings with boredom. “What is your point, Doctor?”

“Did you actually bother to listen?” Tony poked him.

“Not as such. Nothing sounds to be a threat as yet.”

Bruce sighed and turned back to Rhodey. “Basically – Earth’s signals haven’t gone very far yet; it takes a very long time to go anywhere since space is pretty damn big.”

“So why’s this any different?” Clearly James wasn’t the only one with issues with the science since Clint picked up on the theme too. “What’s so different with this chitauri signal?”

Bruce found the appropriate diagram, glanced back at his friends and shook his head with a sigh. “Maybe I’m just not saying this clearly-”

“Look, it’s hardly difficult.” Natasha waved her hand in the air in a dismissive gesture. “Wormhole opens, stuff comes through. Wormhole closes, radiation can still go back the way it came. And we have no way of knowing who’s on the other side of said wormhole.”

“Yeah, but the wormhole, the chitauri, that was twenty odd years ago and the chitauri are all dead.” Rhodey argued back.

“Yes, the chitauri are dead, but that doesn’t mean they were the only ones out there. Other races may be picking up that beacon.” Tony explained.

“Who else is out there?” Eyes turned on Thor and Loki.

“I have no idea.” The blonde God shook his head and looked at his brother who shrugged lazily. “Come Loki, you are the only one who has been there, you must know if there were others.”

“I was rather focussed on the chitauri and the tesseract at the time. I wasn’t there for a comparative anthropology lesson, Thor.”

Tony rolled his eyes at his husband’s surly reply. “Can’t you think of anything? Chitauri, space eel things, The Other…nothing else?”

Loki glared at him. “Oh, goodness, of course! Your nagging has suddenly recalled the memory of an entire race I had entirely forgotten about! How about that!” He sat up straight. “There’s an army of pink unikitties trying to unite the –OW!”

Thor had grown used to holding back when playfully slapping an Avenger on the back but when it came to thumping his little brother he had no qualms. Loki was thrown bodily off the side of the sofa, landing hard on the tiles.

“That was uncalled for!”
“It was entirely called for and I will do it again if you have nothing sensible to say.” Thor turned back to Bruce. “So I believe the answer is no, we do not know what – if anything – may be picking up that signal. It is entirely likely there is nothing there and it is echoing around empty space.”

“You really think that’s likely?” Tony asked, rather hopefully if anything else.

“Space is bigger than even you can comprehend – the chances of anything still floating around in that tiny area are very small.”

“Or it’s full of –” Loki ducked as Thor rounded on him again. “Debris! I was going to say debris!”

Bruce was beginning to look thoroughly relieved. “So you’re saying all those hours fretting in the lab over that bloody file and it’s almost certainly nothing to worry about.”

“Pretty much.” The trickster pulled himself back onto the arm of the sofa, keeping an eye on his brother as he did so. “Although it was hardly a waste of time – none of us knew what the chitauri’s language would look like translated into a Midgardian script and now we know that is what it is we may even be able to translate what it is saying.”

Tony snorted with laughter. “Uh, yeah, but none of us are experts in alien linguistics. We’ll attempt it at some point, but need to wait for this whole Hydra crap to blow over first.”

“Fair enough.”

Bruce was watching Loki with a speculating expression. “Were you able to speak the chitauri language?”

“Of course; Allspeak.”

“We met some of the bastards on the rescue mission – it took me far too long to realise I could understand them.” Clint chipped in. “Although it wasn’t really on my mind at the time.”

“What did they sound like?” Bruce looked between the two. “Anything that could explain the weird frequency readings we’re getting off the chitauri gear?”

“Not really. It just sounded like English.”

The scientist shrugged. “Oh well, it was a thought. Either way, did you-”

Whatever it was Bruce was going to ask was interrupted as the lights in the room suddenly flickered and for a long moment dimmed. The last time something like that had happened the chitauri themselves had come bursting in not thirty seconds late so needless to say the occupants were on their feet, weapons to hand.

“Sorry sir!”

The lights came back up to normal and Tony scowled at the ceiling. “What the hell was that, Jarvis?”

“Sorry sir. Miss Evelyn needed to re-root a power supply and pressed the wrong switch before I could stop her.”

“What the fuck is Evie doing messing around with the arc reactor’s power output, Jarvis?!”

“It was an accident, sir. She is fine, it’s fine. Nothing to worry about, sir.”
“Yeah, now I’m really worried. Is she in my lab?”

“…You did say she could have some work space down there.”

Tony gaped. “Well, yeah, but I was going to clear that space out and she was meant to be supervised!”

“She is being supervised, sir. I’m here.”

“Grade A job you’re doing then.”

“Sorry sir.”

“Tell her I’m coming down.” The inventor was already half-way to the door, which automatically slammed shut. “Jarvis!”

“She asked me not to let you!”

“Open the door or I’m asking Loki to just teleport us down there.”

Evie had cleared away enough that it was impossible to tell what she was working on, although there was still a substantial mess left across the bench. She had commandeered one of the lesser used worktops, and someone – most likely Jarvis – had cleared away the clutter to let her use it.

She answered Tony’s annoyed questions politely, comprehensively and utterly refused to tell him what she was up to. Yes, she was sorry about the power, she hadn’t meant to press that button, no she wasn’t doing anything dangerous, yes Jarvis could vouch for her, no she wasn’t going to spill the beans on what she was doing and by the way could she please have a rummage through the scrap metal box?

It was one of those moments where Tony had had to learn to tread carefully. His daughter was still a child, hence the supervision from Jarvis, but at the same time she was a growing teen who needed her own privacy. It would be very easy to simply order the AI to tell him what the girl was up to, but that would tell her that he didn’t trust her.

And he did trust her.

Just…

In the end they compromised that she could continue on with her mystery project so long as she didn’t test it without Tony or Loki with her. She also had the go ahead to pillage the scraps boxes on the proviso Jarvis okayed each material and alerted Tony if Evie desperately needed to work with something that was hazardous. Oh yes, and either Dummy or You were to operate the more dangerous pieces of machinery in the workshop.

The girl readily agreed with the terms and conditions, even if her Father still had misgivings.

“Why is our daughter growing up so fast?”

It was hours later. Tony was lying spread eagled on their bed whilst Loki sat at the desk, idly sketching on a piece of paper.

“All children grow up, it is what they do.”
“Yeah, but she’s doing it so fast! What happened to the little toddler who used to follow me around everywhere?”

“She’s still the same person, Tony. Just a little older and a little wiser.”

“She’s going to be an adult before we know it!”

Loki laid his pencil down with a sigh and glanced at his husband. “Is that so bad? All children become adults in the end. And she is still only fourteen.”

“Nearly fifteen now. It’s July; only two months to her birthday. And then only three years to legally being an adult!”

“Yes, and even then she will not be allowed to drink alcohol.” The trickster resumed his sketching. “You American’s have ridiculous age-related laws. Why allow her to join the army long before you allow her to drink a glass of wine?”

Tony turned his head to glare. “Seriously? That’s your problem here? I’m concerned about my baby growing up in a world of war and dishonesty and cruelty and terror and you seem more concerned about letting her get drunk.”

“Well, alcohol does appear to feature largely in teenagers social rituals.”

“Social rituals! That’s the other thing! She’s at the age for boyfriends! Or girlfriends! Or whatever!”

Loki snorted with laughter. “Her Father is Ironman and she lives with the Avengers; I believe we will probably end up scaring off any potential suitors.” He turned over a sheet of paper. “And besides, girlfriends? When did that happen?”

“It hasn’t, I’m just keeping an open mind. She has two dudes as parents; who knows what that will mean.” Tony stared up at the ceiling again. “I’ve only just coped with her hitting puberty; adulthood is a bit too much for me to deal with.”

“Well, puberty is difficult for anyone to deal with; the parents or the teen going through it.”

Stark laughed. “Heh, yeah! Acne, growth spurts, sudden attack of hair, hormones…don’t miss all of that crap! Evie was lucky she mostly escaped the acne issue. And until recently hormones haven’t hit so hard. She can be a bit of a bitch at that time of the month, though.”

“It isn’t exactly pleasant to feel like your uterus is falling out.”

“No I guess not…” Tony suddenly sat up, staring at his husband. “Wait, what?! Do you menstruate?!”

“Is that any business of yours?”

The inventor started sniggering. “Oh my God! You do! You totally do!”

“I did.” Loki’s pencil hit the paper with a sharp click. “I don’t know if you recall, husband mine, but certain unfortunate events recently mean that I no longer have a working reproductive system. And besides,” He added quickly, before Tony’s horror-struck apology could be uttered. “The moment it started I found some spells to sort the problem out for me; I still cannot believe evolution could not have found a better way of dealing with it all.” He rolled his eyes at the look on his husband’s face. “Oh seriously, Tony, there’s no need to look like the world’s falling down.
You didn’t offend me that badly.”

“But-”

“Yes, you are insensitive and thoughtless, but did I expect anything else when I got together with you? If I had wanted romance in my life I would have found someone from Vanachem to play with.”

“Vanachem?”

“Well, Aesir are pretty insensitive and thoughtless too.”

“Sorry…”

Loki smiled slightly. “No matter. I can be pretty insensitive when the situation calls.” He pushed away the paper he’d been sketching on and left his chair to sit on the bed next to his husband. “And I really don’t think you need to worry so much about Evelyn growing up. She’s a capable young woman already and I think she will be entirely capable of kicking arse in her own right once she has some skills under her belt. Look at how well she has coped with yesterday’s debacle; most people would still be in a state of shock and instead she’s picked up a gun and set up a training regime.”

“I guess.”

“All little birds need to learn to fly, Tony. Clipping their wings won’t do any good.”

Tony turned his head to look up at the trickster sitting over him. “You’re taking that analogy way too far.”

“It is a good analogy.” Loki idly ran his fingers through the man’s short hair. “And a true one. You have given her all the tools she needs to succeed; now we just need to see how high she will fly.”

Stark laughed quietly. “Quit it with the bird metaphors. But I see your point. I think she’s going to do pretty well.”

The next few weeks passed without incident. Evie was managing to stick to her self-imposed diet and training regime, and had even managed to wake up early again. Tony didn’t think the early mornings would last, but the girl’s commitment to the rest of the plan was quite admirable. Natasha seemed to be enjoying spending more time with the teen as well – as she put it; Evie was finally at the age where she was becoming interesting.

After going in so heavy handed Hydra seemed to have simmered back down and for the next few weeks had apparently gone underground again. Bruce calmed down over his panic about the chitauri signal after the world didn’t suddenly implode. There were no more power issues either since Jarvis did a better job of keeping an eye on Evie’s lab work and things began quietened down for a while.

Could that last? Could it Hell.

It was late one evening when Thor came running in on a Starwars marathon. No one complained overtly since it was Attack of the Clones but Thor had long lost the habit of bursting in so loudly.

“Pause! Pause it!”
“Gladly.” Loki waved a hand at the TV screen – he’d never got to grips with the remote and simply used magic to do what he wanted. “Whatever is the matter, Thor?”

“Yeah, this is a passably good bit.” Tony added grumpily.

“I’ve received word from Heimdall.” The blonde God ignored Stark’s comment, focussing on his brother.

“Heimdall?” That actually attracted Loki’s attention somewhat. “Why?”

“There have been attacks on Alfheim.”

The trickster had been lounging against his husband, but sat up at that. “Attacks? Of what nature? They are not at war with anyone.”

“Heimdall cannot perceive their nature, which in itself is worrying. They have already lost the main trunk of their standing army and conscription is– ”

“What?!” Loki interrupted his brother with horror in his voice. “They’ve lost most of their army?! What by the Norns happened?”

“We don’t know.”

The trickster was staring at Thor in shock. “But how can that be? Their warriors are among the strongest in the realms!”

“That may be, but they were defeated. Father wants us both back to lead the might of the Aesir into Alfheim.”

“Wait, wait, wait!” Tony held up his hands in the time-out position. “What the hell? Why’s it Asgard’s business if another realm is under threat?”

“We are the strongest of the realms, and therefore it is our duty to protect the others.” Thor explained quickly. “And the Allfather needs us to lead the army in to defend Alfheim against this new threat.”

“Us? I’m not going to Alfheim!”

“It’s a royal command to a prince of Asgard.” Thor’s eyes narrowed. “You do not get a choice in this Loki; we need to help Father lead the army. We are leaving now.”

Evie had been looking between the two Gods as if watching a tennis match, but her uncle’s order made her snap out of it. “What?! No! Möðhy can’t leave!”

“Not helping, Birdy.” Tony put a restraining hand on her head as she tried to stand up. “Thor, how long does a campaign last?”

The elder God shrugged. “I cannot say, but it is imperative that we leave now; the attacks continue even now and civilians are dying.”

“We could be gone for months!” Loki protested.

“Or for days.” Thor cut in quickly. “With the full might of the Aesir army we may well be able to defeat this threat swiftly.”

“And when has that ever been the case?!”
“Stop arguing, Loki, we are going, now.” The thunder God caught hold of his brother’s shoulder and pulled the trickster to his feet.

“Hey!” Of all people it was Steve who jumped to his feet, pulling Loki back from Thor’s grip. “Hold the phone! You can’t both just up and vanish, especially if Loki doesn’t want to. He fights for Earth now; why should he leave his family for another realm?”

“It doesn’t work like that.” Thor looked an odd mixture between confused and angry. “You have no monarchy in this country; I would not expect you to understand. We are the crown princes of Asgard; even if we take out the fact that we are morally bound to aid the helpless, we are duty bound to obey our king.”

Loki scowled, a dark and ugly look on him. “Duty bound like chains.” He shook Steve’s hand off and glowered at his brother. “Both you and I defend Midgard now, brother. At least one of us should remain here to continue this fight.”

“We will not be gone long.” Thor repeated tersely. “You have a tenuous footing in the realms right now, brother. You have already stated that you can’t hide Evie on another realm because there are none that would harbour you. How do you think Alfheim will feel about you if you refuse to help them in their hour of need? If you think they are against you now then Norns know what they will do after this.”

“One day I should love to meet a race that doesn’t hold a realm-wide bounty for my head.” Loki hissed.

“Humanity doesn’t mind you so much right now.” Tony piped up, and was dutifully ignored by his loving husband.

The trickster glanced at his daughter, green gaze meeting green gaze. Evie looked miserable, but nodded at him slowly. The teen might have been young, but she was old enough to know that any loss of life of any race was unacceptable. And duty was duty.

“Fine.” He ground the single word out around gritted teeth.

“Loki?” Thor sounded almost too hopeful.

“Fine, I said! But do not expect anything good to come of our presence there; Alfheim has always detested Aesir presence in the past, whether we were there to help or otherwise, do not assume it will be any different this time!”

“You’ll come?”

“I have no choice really, since as you put it, the Allfather has commanded it and my head is only recently off the chopping block.” Loki turned to look at his husband. “We will not be so long. A week maybe?”

“Better not be more than!” Tony groused. He wrapped an arm around Evie’s shoulders as she looked more and more despondent, staring at Loki in dismay.

“You’re really going to leave? Just like that?”

“Only briefly, Little Bird. Duty calls.” Loki tipped her chin up with a single finger, smiling gently at the irate expression on his daughter’s face. “You will understand duty well enough one day, and like me you may well also come to loath it.”
“I think I hate it already.”

Despite her sulk, Evie allowed her mother to kiss her on the forehead before she turned and stormed off.

“Well…she’s not going to talk to you for weeks.” Tony sighed. He folded his arms and glared at his husband. “And if you get yourself killed in battle I want a divorce!”

Loki smiled slightly. “Fair enough.”

MWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMW
A few hours after Loki and Thor had left Tony checked his email to find something in his inbox from an encrypted sender. Given that Jarvis had allowed it through it was fairly obvious who it was from, and he opened it with a heavy sigh in expectation of the contents.

As it was, it was shorter than he had first assumed, and actually rather sweet.

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Stark,

I saw on the news that your tower was attacked. Given that none of the Avengers appeared to be in attendance I can only perceive that they were after your daughter.

I trust that my sister is alright?

Yours, M.

~~~

Short but sweet.

Merlin apparently didn’t stand on ceremony, even if he had – for the first time – referred to Evie as family. Tony tapped a finger against his lips as he wondered how much he should tell this person who – for all that he was Loki’s son – was still a complete stranger that Stark had never met.

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Hey ‘M’ (and you know that makes you sound like a Sherlock villain, right?),

Thanks for your concern, we’re all fine here. They were after Evie but didn’t get her – as you can imagine your Mother didn’t take kindly to anyone threatening our daughter harm. Hydra lost a significant number of men so sucks to be them. On a heads up your Mom’s off planet right now; something about a war in Alfhiem. Not like you two talk to each other, but I thought I’d let you know. He said he’d be a few weeks; I don’t know if he means their time or our time though, so it may be a month or so.

I’ll let you know when he gets back,

T Stark

~~~

He sent the reply and resisted the urge to go and pour a scotch. God, he’d never even met Merlin and the guy managed to wind him up spectacularly.

“Jarv’, where’s Evie?”

“Kick boxing training in the gym, Sir.”

“Huh, who’s idea was that?”

“Natasha, sir. It is good for discipline and building strength.”
“Fine. I’m going to go and…I dunno, do something in the lab, I guess.” Tony pulled himself up from his seat with such heaviness to the movement that for a moment he looked like an old man.

“Sir, are you quite alright?”

“Why wouldn’t I be!?” The man snapped.

“You appear to be somewhat tense, sir.”

“I’m fine.”

MWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWM

Dinner was a subdued affair that night. There were only a few of them to begin with – Sam, Natasha and Clint had all got somewhere better to be, and Pepper was stuck in a meeting so it would have been quiet anyway, but this made it worse. They had grown used to Loki’s constant presence over the past few months since coming back to Earth, and Thor’s loud absence left quite a hole in the conversation.

After so long fighting to get Loki back it was jarring to have him missing again so soon. Evie wasn’t eating properly, and for all that Tony nagged her, he himself wasn’t really touching his food either. Both simply pushed the noodles around their respective plates, trying to make superfluous conversation. The two missing places at the table were like twin black holes that continuously drew the gaze and sucked up all attempts at a discussion.

Evie gave up and left first with some mumbled comment about going to put a film on, and was followed quickly by her father. No doubt they’d end up watching some Disney movie – that was usually the go-to happy fix.

“Well, now what?” It was Bruce who put a voice to the universal question that they all wanted to ask. “We’re down two of our strongest team members.”

“And Tony’s not gonna have his head really screwed on when he’s got so much else on his mind.” Rhodey added gloomily. “And we shouldn’t expect him to either, since Evie’s already in a bit of a state and she’s only going to get worse the longer Loki’s gone.”

“I thought you didn’t like Loki.” Bruce glanced up at the other man.

“I don’t need to like him to recognise what impact his absence will have. Tony’s been erratic since you guys all came back from Asgard, and God knows what this might do to him.”

“Erratic?” Steve asked. “I wouldn’t have put it like that.”

“Yeah, but I’ve seen that man through some of the worst times of his life, and sure having Evie made him settle down, but you can’t tell me you don’t think he’s been acting differently.”

Steve and Bruce looked at each other and the super soldier shrugged. “Well, I suppose he’s a little distracted, but no more so than when he’s got a new project on the go. What do you expect though? He’s got a lot going on.”

“Just a bit.”

Bruce rolled his eyes as he helped himself to more noodles from the boxes of takeaway in the centre of the table. “I think we’re also missing the huge point that Thor and Loki may not be in the best of states when they get back. From the little we’ve seen of intergalactic warfare it’s not pretty,
and Loki’s got enough psychosis to be going on with as it is.”

There was a collective wince – even Sam and James who hadn’t had as much interaction with the trickster as the others had come to realise that Loki with a fresh dose of PTSD would probably result in the tower being levelled. And actually Thor with the same problems would be difficult to help as well.

“This is a really depressing conversation.” Steve pushed his plate away with a sigh. “Maybe we could all do ourselves a favour and not speculate about what may or may not be happening and focus on our own problems down here.”

“Because our problems aren’t just as depressing.” Bruce cut in with a wry grin. “Days were so much simpler when all I had to worry about was where my trousers were.” He saw the other two eye him doubtfully and shrugged with a quiet laugh. “Oh okay, so it was slightly more complex than that, but still, it was easier than all this Starwars crap. I don’t want to worry about possible alien invasions; I want to worry about whether or not to move on to a new pose in my yoga routine.”

Rhodes laughed and rubbed the back of his neck. “Well, to be honest, I prefer worrying about the fate of the world rather than spending my days helping Pepper keep Tony sober, or scraping him off the ground if we were too late for that. And besides, I’d never want to give up the suit!”

“Which, by the way, it a total rip-off of my suit.” Steve quickly added with a sly smirk.

“It looks nothing like your suit!”

Bruce sat back with a sigh and tried to finish his meal whilst the argument developed around him.

“…Red, white and blue? Be original!”

“You don’t own the American flag, Rogers!”

“You guys do know that Russia uses the same colours, right?” Banner asked mildly. “And the UK, France, Australia, Iceland, Norway, Thailand…Really, the list is quite long.

“Yes, but I have a star which makes it pretty damn obvious who I fight for.” Steve pointed out.

”Yeah, Puerto Rico.”

“…You know no-one likes a show off, right, Banner?”

“I’d suggest you should both just pick new colour-schemes, but unless you want to go for beige, most of the spectrum has already been covered really. I’m already sharing the green thing with Loki.”

“Iron Patriot would look badass in green.” Rhodey said with a grin. “Or gold – but Tony’s made it clear he has the monopoly on gold.”

“Pink would work.” Steve said helpfully. “Or lavender.”

“No, no, I wouldn’t want to deprive you of your favourite colours.”

Bruce rolled his eyes. “You are such children.”

Steve slapped him on the back, nearly pitching the scientist into his plate of noodles. “Maybe, but we’ve taken your mind off of intergalactic war, so mission accomplished.”
The bodies piled up, waist deep, neck deep. Heads, arms, legs hacked off and thrown this way and that like discarded toys. Any ground that could be reached and stood on was unsteady, a mire created by the vast pools of blood spreading out.

Tony walked through the carnage like a ghost, not comprehending what he was seeing around him. He had never seen a resident of Alfheim but the slim bodies could only have been Elves, and would have been beautiful before they had been mutilated. Aesir lay amongst them, blood and muck making them almost indistinguishable from the other warriors. Sif was thrown there amongst them, her head cast back at an unnatural angle and her neck severed to the bone.

Beside the woman was a body only recognisable as Fandral by his armour, the head Norn-knows where amongst the carnage.

These sights passed the man by as he waded on, pushing the corpses aside. He couldn’t have said what was drawing him on, or what he was searching for, but the sense of urgency was overwhelming. His arms ached from trying to heave the heavy bodies from his path, his legs weary from trying to pull from the mud and gore on the ground.

Questing fingers found Thor’s helmet – the silver sheen muddied and reflecting the burnt orange of the sky which filled with flames. One wing had been sheared off and the other was bent out of all recognition. There was a large dent in the crown and another crushing in the front where it should have protected Thor’s brow. Of the Thunderer there was no sign.

“Tony…”

The whisper was almost lost amongst the roar of the oncoming flames, a beckoning call onwards that drew Stark away from where the other Aesir lay and further ahead into the sea of bodies. Dead faces were blurring into each other, Hogun, Volstagg, Heimdall, even Odin was seen in the distance, the great spear Gungnir shattered beside him.

Tony’s foot found what he was looking for before his eyes did, the toe of his shoe catching the edge of a broken golden horn and sending it spinning away. His gaze followed the slender piece of metal and then glimpsed a glimmer of green in amongst the heaped silver-armoured bodies.

A willowy Elven body was hauled out of the way, sagging like a rag-doll as it slid to the ground, revealing green and black leather that had been stained a dull dirty brown with blood. A broken hand flopped free, releasing its grasp on a shattered spear and hanging loose and limp. A gold bracer – now scratched and bent out of shape – still wrapped the forearm, the pattern frighteningly familiar. Tony’s gaze drew up along the arm as if being towed by a freight train. He didn’t want to look, didn’t want to see what he already knew was there and yet he couldn’t stop himself from doing so.

Loki’s eyes were open but sightless, staring up unseeingly at the smoke smudged sky. Other than a thin rivulet of blood trickling from the corner of his mouth it might have looked that nothing was wrong if not for the absolute stillness. No flicker in the corner of his mouth, no glimmer in his eyes, just a frozen gaze and half a smile curling his lips.

“Loki…” And his world came crashing down.

It took a long time for Tony to recognise that the screaming he could hear was his own.

Loki’s eyes continued to stare sightlessly upwards, that mocking smile making him look like he was
laughing at Tony’s pain. Death didn’t suit him; it washed out his already-pale cheeks and lent a hollow and sunken look to his eyes that dulled them to nothing.

“Please…please don’t be….you promised…” Tony’s breath was gulping and snatching, unable to fully form sentences. “You promised you were coming back…”

There wasn’t a reply as he hugged Loki’s free hand to his chest, gasping sobs racking his body.

“You promised! You promised! Youpromisedyoupromisedpromisedpromised…” Sobs became one long keening shriek, words running together. Loki couldn’t be…He wasn’t…Nonononononono!

Tony couldn’t speak, couldn’t breathe, couldn’t think. There was no way…after everything Loki wouldn’t…this couldn’t be…Nononononononono…..

There was a hand on his shoulder, skeletal talons digging deep into the muscle, wrenching him away from his husband’s body with vicious force. He screamed and fought, desperate to keep a hold on Loki’s hand, to stay at the trickster’s side despite it all. Shrieking and shrieking and shrieking…

~~~

“Sir, sir, please wake up.”

Tony’s eyes flew open with a strangled gasp, tears blurring his vision. He half sat up, gasping and retching, his body tightly wrapped in the bed sheets.

“Sir?”

Slowly, ever so slowly the skeletal talons ripping a hole through his shoulder melted away from his imagination, leaving Jarvis’ slender robotic fingers gently shaking him. There was music playing, some classical stuff that he couldn’t name, but that was part of his calm-me-down playlist.

“What the fuck…”

“I believe you were experiencing a nightmare, sir.”

The lights very slowly brightened to a warm glow and Tony propped himself on one elbow He ran a shaking hand down his face, wiping away the tear tracks as he tried to orientate himself and detach the dream from reality.

“Wha’ time izit?”

“Six seventeen AM, Sir.” Jarvis was already straightening out the bed-sheets in a business-like manner and the fussiness of the action grounded Stark a little more. “One of the scutters is on the way up with hot chocolate.”

“Huh?” Tony sat up properly, still trying to calm his breathing down. He felt cold and clammy, and the moment Jarvis had tucked the last corner of the sheet in, he wrenched the whole lot free to hug up around himself. The droid affected a sigh, but didn’t comment.

There was a gentle hum as the door slid open and a little scutter whirred in, carrying a steaming mug on it’s flat back. Jarvis rescued the drink before the tiny wheeled robot ran into the side of the bed (it was known to happen – it shared programming with Dummy) and put it on the bedside
table, well aware that in his current state Tony wouldn’t allow him to pass it. Stark slowly extracted a hand from the blankets and wrapped his fingers around the handle of the mug. The smell of hot chocolate wafted up and he managed a small smile, ignoring the fact that his hand was still badly shaking.

“Is anyone else awake yet?”

“Mr Rodgers, Doctor Banner and Miss Evelyn, Sir.”

“What the hell is Evie doing up at this time in the morning?”

“She never went to sleep. At my last check she was still playing Call of Duty in the games room.”

“All night?! Why the hell didn’t you tell me?!” Tony wiped a hand across his face again, glaring at Jarvis. “She can’t stay up all night, she’s only fourteen!”

“You stayed up far longer than a night at her age, and in any case she is fifteen in a couple of months.”

“Urgh, don’t remind me.” The man took a small sip, grimaced as he burnt his tongue, then took another one anyway. “Well…yeah, I guess one night won’t hurt her.” He took a heavy breath. “Jeeze…”

“Do you wish to talk about it, Sir?”

“Not really. My husband has just gone off to fight a war on an alien planet against an unknown assailant. What do you think I was dreaming of?” He drained the mug, despite the scalding temperature, and gingerly placed it back on the table. “There’s enough shit going on here without it spilling over onto other planets – or realms, whatever.” Still clutching at the blankets he swung his legs over the side of the bed and fished around for his slippers. “You said Evie’s on CoD?”

“Yes, Sir?”

“Well, tell her to stick on something good and I’ll join her.”

“But of course, Sir.”

MWMWMWMWMWMWMWWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMW

“Here.”

Evie was half-buried in the bean bag she was slumped on, staring at the wall-sized screen that now showed Mario Cart. She didn’t even turn to look at her Father, let alone greet him properly and simply threw the other controller in his vague direction.

“Thanks.” Tony fell into the other beanbag that had been dragged into place. The air-con had been set to max which would have made it pretty chilly to be in just his pyjamas so he was grateful that he’d dragged the bedsheets with him. Likewise Evie was bundled up in a blanket. Logic would have said just turn the air-con off, but neither were exactly thinking logically.

Easily an hour passed before they were disturbed by Bruce bearing two plates stacked high with pancakes.

“How much did either of you sleep last night?”

“Few hours.” Tony replied, not looking away from the screen.
“I didn’t.” Evie lifted a can of Red Bull up without tearing her gaze away.

Bruce rolled his eyes and signalled Jarvis to hit the power. Both Stark’s protested loudly as the screen died, taking their game with it.

“Food, both of you, now.” He dumped a plate on each respective lap and threw some cutlery at them. “Eat. Honestly, what is it about the Stark genetics that makes you self-destruct the moment life throws a curve-ball?”

Tony glanced at his daughter. “I have a feeling it’s not just my genetics that do that.” The girl shrugged, her mouth already full of pancake and syrup.

“Thith ith not good for my diet.”

“Don’t talk with your mouth full. And you aren’t on a diet; you’re just supposed to be eating healthier.”

Evie held up a forkful of dripping pancake. “Thith ith healfy?”

“Healthy enough if you’ve pulled an all-nighter.” Bruce pulled over the bean-bag that leaked polystyrene everywhere, and sat down on it. “You two are both ridiculous, I hope you know that.”

“Eh, goes with the Stark territory.” Tony pushed his own breakfast around the plate, his appetite not rising to the challenge.

The Doctor sighed and ran a hand down his face. “Well, you can’t keep doing this. Either of you. These are dangerous times and apparently shit keeps on happening. If you two can’t get yourselves sorted I’m pulling in a proper counsellor.”

Tony winced. “Ouch. Now there’s a threat.”

“I mean it. Now eat up; there are more out there if you want more; Steve made too many.”

Evie slurped up the last of her pancakes. “Excellent! Although it’s not like him to mis-calculate.”

Bruce shrugged. “Eh, he thought there’d be more of us, but Tasha and Sam went out last night and still haven’t reappeared.”

“Are they alright?!?” The girl looked so alarmed that both men had to laugh.

“Oh Birdy, how did someone like me raise someone so innocent?” Tony gasped.

“What?...Oh...Oh. Auntie Tasha and Sam? Really?”

Bruce smiled. “I think it’s safe to say Sam’s been smitten from the get-go. I can’t comment on Tasha’s commitment, so we may or may not have a broken Falcon on our hands a few weeks down the line. According to Clint, Widow can go through men quite quickly.”

“I like Sam, I hope things work out with them.” Evie put her plate down and made grabby-hands for the controller that was slightly out of her reach. Tony pushed it even further away with his foot.

“Go and get some sleep, Birdy.”

“But—”

“Now.”
It took nearly a week for Evie to start sleeping properly again and Tony didn’t manage it at all. The sleeping pills Bruce allowed him didn’t do much good and his calm-me-down music routine only did so much in terms of keeping the nightmares away.

The worst bit about it all was how Tony had so blithely assumed that the ‘worry about Loki’ phase of his life was over. He had spent so long in that limbo state of not knowing if the trickster was alive or dead that it was a depressingly familiar feeling to sink back into. That constant carousel of thoughts that always spiralled down to ‘what if he’s dead?’ He had assumed those thoughts were gone; foolishly supposed that there was no need for them anymore. And now they were back.

And this time they had the mental imagery to go along with them.

How Loki had looked when they’d found him in that God-forsaken hell hole. Blind, mute, deaf and broken. A shell of a man. The images were insistent and insidious, creeping into his consciousness. The skeletal thin body, the severed hand and broken twisted bones. An overactive imagination was not what Tony wanted at this point.

And that wasn’t even the half of it! Thor’s story of what had happened to the two princes as prisoners of war still haunted Tony’s nightmares. That other races who considered themselves so above mankind still treated captives as spoils of war was beyond him. It was mediaeval; treating a prisoner as a play-thing, a toy to use and break and discard on a whim.

Barbaric.

After they passed two weeks Tony began talking about trying to get in contact with Asgard. By a month he actually flew down to the Bifrost site and shouted blue murder at Heimdall for a while. There wasn’t an answer, but it made him feel that at least he had tried.

It came as almost a blessing when Coulson started getting in contact again. Admittedly it sounded like he and his team had been through hell and back, but were slowly getting back on track in their own little battle against Hydra. There was little the Avengers could do to actually help out with them, since they had their own Hydra issues to deal with, but it was heartening to be reminded that they weren’t the only ones out there on the battle-field.

And Merlin actually bothered to stay in touch – sneering and dismissive of anything Tony tried to tell him, but there was still an email or two every week, which was something.

Also, not that Tony was really made aware of it, Evie’s personal self-development project was progressing nicely. Her general fitness hadn’t really had time to show a marked improvement but her theory and knowledge-base were certainly expanding. However, that didn’t mean the girl was as indestructible as she now seemed to see herself.

Tony was in Bruce’s lab with the mild-mannered scientist looking through the signal patterns again when the localised alarm went off in the room.

“Sir, Miss Evelyn has been injured, although she has ordered me not to tell you that.”

“What? What happened? Is she alright?!?”

“She has completely forbidden me to tell you that she has broken two ribs and fractured her wrist. Oh, and possibly trashed half the lab. I am especially forbidden to tell you that.”

Tony dropped his head with a groan. “Oh for fucks sake.” He levered himself out of his chair and
pulled at Bruce’s arm. “Come on, she’s going to be ridiculously embarrassed. And furious. Bloody furious. How wrecked is my lab, Jarv?”

“A mess, but nothing important lost.”

Tony bundled his fellow scientist into the elevator. “What’s she doing right now? Is she stable?”

“I’ve sorted her arm out and we are currently arguing about the fact that I have alerted you to the problem.”

“And her ribs?” Bruce pushed Stark away. “Broken-broken, or fractured?”

“Hair-line fractures, but you wouldn’t know it the way she’s carrying on.”

Tony thumped his fist against the wall of the lift with a snarl. “What the hell, Jarvis?! You were meant to be looking after her!”

“She needs to learn from her mistakes, sir. I recall allowing you to smash into a few walls too.”

“And just what has she learnt from breaking three bones?!”

“Exactly as much as you did when you broke five and the Jaguar.” Jarvis shot back immediately. Bruce snorted slightly, then tried to hide it when Tony glared at him. The elevator was nearing the lab floor and Jarvis announced as such.

“Have you x-rayed the injuries?” Bruce tried to get the subject away from an argument and back on track.

“Of course, Dr Banner, I am not that incompetent.” The barb was obviously aimed at Tony who scowled. “Hence how I know that all the fractures are hairline. I have splinted her arm, but not plastered.”

“I’ll sort that.”

The lift dinged and Tony barely let the doors begin to open before he squeezed his way out and ran into the main body of the lab. He wasn’t quite sure what to expect, but as Jarvis had said it wasn’t as bad as it could have been.

There was paperwork and fabric (origins unknown, he didn’t usually keep fabric down there) everywhere, and some plaster which must have come from the Evie-sized dent in the wall. The girl herself was sat on the same camp bed Tony had once patched Loki up on, having a blazing row with Jarvis as he fussed over her arm. When she saw Tony the anger on her face only increased.

“I’m fine! For fucks sake Jarvis! I told you! It’s just a bump! And you can fuck off too!” She added as Tony marched up to her. “I’m fine!”

“Yeah, of course you are.” He could have gone in all guns blazing - being sworn at by his fourteen year old wasn’t the best way to put Tony in a good mood - but the tears on her cheeks, and the pain she was trying to hide made him try for sympathy first. He simply sat down beside her and slung an arm round her shoulders. “What the hell were you doing, kiddo?”

The word ‘nothing’ was evidently on the tip of Evie’s tongue, but when she looked around at the mess, not to mention her injuries, she shrugged slightly instead. “I miscalculated.” She muttered sulkily. “Jarvis warned me, but I didn’t listen.”
“Miscalculated what?”

She nodded towards the large turbine set up at one end of the lab. Tony had it for those rare occasions that he needed to test the suit’s aerodynamics, but hadn’t had it out in a while. The blades were still spinning idly.

“I set it too high and it threw me into the wall.”

Tony stared at it in confusion, then looked back at his daughter. “Okay, what? What were you doing with it?”

“Does it matter? I made a mistake and paid the price!” The anger – which hadn’t had chance to go very far – came straight back and she shrugged Tony’s arm off. The movement was accompanied with a wince as she hugged her wrist – neatly bandaged – tight against her stomach.

“Can we leave the ‘how’ for a moment, and work on the ‘what’?” Bruce asked quietly. He had raided the small but fully-stocked medicine cabinet and found the fracture kit stored there. The Avengers had long been making use of one of Stark Industries less-weaponised patents; fracture repair gel strips. Jarvis had already x-rayed Evie’s wrist, since a hand-held x-ray device was also hardly beyond Stark’s capabilities and again the Avengers had been using them for years, and the images confirmed that her ulna had fractured, but luckily not misaligned.

Bruce simply broke the small packs open and wrapped the wet gel sheets – blue, but otherwise similar to gelatine cooking sheets in appearance – around Evie’s arm. They created a very thin, very light-weight cast around the limb that a few moments later had air-dried, leaving her arm held immobile from wrist to elbow.

“I don’t have to have that on my ribs too, do I?”

“No, you just get a handful of painkillers and a bit of a life lesson for them.”

Evie pouted – evidently that wasn’t the answer she’d actually wanted – they must have been hurting quite a bit.

“What about your head? Did you hit your head?” Bruce persisted. He glanced at Jarvis when the droid affected an annoyed cough. “What?”

“As if I would allow her to do anything remotely dangerous without a helmet!” He held up a modified Ironman helmet, made to fit Evie and without a faceplate. There was a large scuff mark down one side of it. “If nothing else, her head is fine.”

Tony snorted. “Well, I don’t know about that.

“Wow, thanks Dad.” Evie elbowed him, and since the gel-sheets had hardened around her wrist it meant she could apply quite a bit of power, even if it ended with a sharp spike of pain up her arm. “Ow!”

“Hate to say it, but you shouldn’t use it like that.” Bruce slipped a sling over the teenagers head and carefully lifted her broken arm into it. “There. No using it as a weapon, no using it at all it you can, you’ll need to put a special covering over it when you shower and painkillers every four hours.”

Evie groaned, and then winced and hugged her usable arm around her ribs. “When’s Möðhy coming home?! He’d just magic me better!”

“I know Birdy, but sometimes a guy’s just gotta go space-viking all over another planet.”
Evie rolled her eyes. “I believe the politics surrounding the situation are a little more complicated than that.” She glanced up at her father’s sceptical look, then sighed. “Okay, yeah, space-viking. He’s totally gone space-viking on us.”

“Could be worse, could be space-cowboy.” Bruce added mildly.

“Ooh, pop-culture reference, see what you did there Banner.” Tony grinned at the doctor, whilst Evie smiled slightly, tucking into his side. He glanced down at her. “Hey, you alright? Looking a little green about the gills.”

“I feel a bit sick actually…” She did look a bit pale; that sort of ashen grey that usually meant a person was about to throw up or faint.

“That would be the shock setting in.” Bruce said with a sympathetic smile. “Nothing a rest, some TV and a large mug of tea won’t sort out.”

Evie wrinkled her nose. “British tea, or that pond water you like?”

“I’m sure we’ve still got some Yorkshire Blend squirrelled away from Pepper’s last trip to London; I’ll see if I can find some.” The doctor started putting the unused medical bits and pieces back in their box and Tony hugged his daughter again, mindful of her broken ribs.

“We need to discuss what you’ve been doing down here, kiddo. You’ve been lucky this time; this could have been a whole lot worse.”

“Later? I’m really not feeling good.”

And she wasn’t looking it either. Tony sighed and conceded that later would be fine.

As it was, the painkillers didn’t quite take enough of the edge off, and after Evie struggled with dinner and actually did throw up afterwards Bruce prescribed bed-rest for the next two days at least. The fact that the girl didn’t even argue the order spoke volumes about how monumentally crap she was feeling. Tony helped her upstairs and into bed – an extremely embarrassing episode for the both of them since she struggled to put her pyjamas on properly with her broken arm – and they stuck a film on.

“Dad, do you think Möðhy will be back for my birthday?” Evie was snuggled up under her duvet, head on Tony’s shoulder where he sat next to her on top of the covers.

“I don’t know, Birdy. I hope so.”

“He’d better be. It’ll be the first one since getting him back. I’d been so looking forward to it…”

“I know.” Tony nudged her gently with his shoulder. “And just what do you think he’s going to say when he sees what you’ve done to yourself?”

“Yeah…” The girl grimaced. “There goes all my training too. I won’t be in the gym any time soon like this.”

“Oh I don’t know, have a chat with Bruce – he probably knows some yoga you could manage whilst you’re an invalid.”

“Mmm, maybe.”

“Are you still feeling sick?”
“Kinda. More sleepy than sick now. And everything *hurts.*”

Tony laughed. “Now do you see why we said you needed me present if you were going to start testing stuff?”

“You know, you’ve managed to say ‘I told you so’ quite a few times now, without ever actually saying those words.”

“Call it a knack. On a heads up, lying on the opposite side to the broken ribs is the least painful position to try to sleep in.”

Evie smirked slightly. “Voice of experience?”

“Yup.” Tony tapped the arc reactor. “Most of mine were broken to install this thing.”

“You’ve never actually told me that story in full.”

“Not exactly a bed-time story.”

“Dad, we’re watching *Silence of the Lambs!* Not exactly prime fairy-tale material either.” Evie nudged him with her elbow. “Come on, I know about Möðhy’s genocidal tendencies; it’s about time I heard of your less-than-pleasant back story in your own words. I mean – I’ve heard it all from everyone else anyway, it’s nothing new.”

“Yeah, but still…”

Evie snuggled under the duvet properly. “Come on, bed time story; How Dad Got Himself Blown Up and Kidnapped By Terrorists. Better than anything Hans Christian whatsisface wrote!”

“It’s not a nice story.”

“Sure it is; it ends with you falling in love with a homicidal maniac who tried to blow up New York. How could anything be more romantic?”

“You have skewed views of romance.”

“Kinda your fault, not mine.”

Tony rolled his eyes. “*Fine.*” He leant back against the head board. “You know I used to be the world’s leading weapon’s designer, right?”

“Uh huh.”

“Well, I’d make stuff and sell it on the military – the usual thing – and I’d developed this great missile launcher. Absolute beauty; called her the Jericho and I went to Afghan to sell her to our boys out there.” He shrugged lightly. “And it went down really well, they seemed happy about it and we were going back to the main camp and…well, the convoy blew up.”

“Weren’t you in armoured trucks? Or whatever they used back then?”

“It wasn’t *that* long ago! Yes, we were in armoured trucks, but there’s little you can do about an IED under your wheels. It blew up the front truck, and the guys in my truck went to help and…”

“And…” Evie prompted.

“And they all got shot. I left the truck – stupid really, but I thought that I was dead either way – and
tried to call for back-up. A missile landed right next to me, a missile that had my bloody logo all over it, and it went off in my face.”

“Didn’t you think to wear Kevlar?”

Tony snorted. “Course I did! It doesn’t do squat at that distance – I got a chest full of shrapnel, one hell of a concussion and an introduction to life as a hostage.”

“Fun times.”

The story lasted a good hour or so – mostly because Evie kept interrupting – but they covered the main points of Tony’s stay with the Five Rings, Yinsen, the reactor, Obie and the ensuing development of Ironman. A little bit of Banner’s story was thrown in for good measure, some of Thor’s exploits as a human and Tony’s run-in with Vanko.

“You know, if you wrote this all down or told someone it’d make one hell of a movie. Maybe even more than one.”

“Eh, they wouldn’t be able to cast someone cool enough to be me.”

“Or arrogant enough.”

“Or that.”

Evie smirked.

The next morning was one of the first in a month or so when the girl didn’t force herself to get up and go to the gym. Whilst she didn’t really want to follow the bed-rest rule, she was at least in agreement with a long lie-in. This meant that quite a few members of the team suddenly found themselves with a morning off instead of keeping an eye on her training and so they relished in some quality time with their hobbies.

“You know, anime’s lost its mystery since I got Allspeech.” Clint groused.

“Anime? Isn’t that what Evie watches?” Steve looked up from his magazine to see the archer scowling at the large-screen TV.

“Huh? Oh, yeah, Evie watches some of the more popular shows but she’s lazy and sticks to the dubs. I always like to read the subtitles and hear the original Japanese.” He threw the remote down on the sofa with a loud ‘humph’ of disappointment. “Where’s the fun if I’m not spending every other moment thinking that I recognise words and am therefore learning Japanese when I actually don’t have a clue??”

“I don’t understand the problem here.”

“Asgard ruined my anime!” Clint slumped back in the sofa, glaring at the TV screen as if it had personally offended him. Steve eyed him with a smirk.

“I don’t get what the attraction is of the story line anyway. It’s a bunch of child Ninja’s, and you know the blonde kid is going to win at the end of the day and become village leader or whatever you call it anyway.”

“It’s called escapism, Rodgers.”
“It’s called predictable plot-lines.”

“Well what do you want on?!?”

Steve eagerly grabbed the remote and switched the channel to find an episode of *Law and Order*. It received a loud complaint from Clint, but the archer didn’t bother to change it back. As predictability went it was still pretty obvious what was going to happen but it usually made for some entertaining arguments as people tried to guess the killer in the first five minutes.

As it was they managed to get a good half hour into the episode (and had both changed their minds at least three times over the murderer) before Natasha wandered into the room with her StarkPad in hand.

“Hey guys, Coulson’s on the line.” Without bothering to wait for their replies she flicked the screen of the tablet and the video feed was moved from the StarkPad to the TV screen. *Law and Order* disappeared and Coulson’s face flickered into view. He looked like he was on board an aircraft of some sort, and his team members were bustling around in the background.

“Hey Phil, How’s it going?” Steve’s greeting was cheerful, but his smile slipped at Coulson’s grim expression. “What?”

“Both your Gods still off-planet?”

“Yeah, what’s happened? You look like…well, you look like hell.”

Coulson glanced back over his shoulder at the people behind him, his frown momentarily slipping into something much more broken before the mask slammed back into place. “Shit’s been happening. Hydra’s not an easy fight.”

Natasha looked like she’d already heard this part of the conversation, so it was left to Clint and Steve to ask for details. The Director didn’t tell them much, although it was obvious they’d come up against some bad stuff, and instead pushed for details about what the Avenger’s had been doing. And not in a good way.

“So no big hits recently?”

Steve shook his head. “The last few places we had a look at were all inner city Shield Bolt-holes and we found nothing. No sign that Hydra had bothered with them, no useful files lying around, absolute waste of bloody time really. Why? What’s this about?”

“Some of Shield’s largest and supposedly most secure facilities have been broken into and destroyed recently.”

“We haven’t heard anything about that.”

Coulson laughed grimly. “Sure you have, you just didn’t recognise them for what they were. There was that industrial fire in Chicago, an explosion at a British power plant, a Norwegian oil rig fire. Quite a few incidences that made the news.”

“Those were Shield bases?”

“They had been. We knew Hydra had taken them, but they were large and would have been heavily armed with a lot of personnel. We don’t have the man-power, and sending you guys in would have been way too conspicuous so we left them for the time being.”
Clint frowned slightly. “So are you saying someone else got in and took them out? Who? Is there another team out there? More Shield agents?”

“You tell me; we’ve broken contact with the old network, you and Nat are the only agents we’re still FaceBook friends with.”

Natasha shrugged, sinking down to sit on the arm of the sofa next to Steve. “My contacts – those that are left that is – haven’t said a thing. And believe me, none of them are likely to team up.” Clint nodded in agreement.

“We’re not entirely certain it is a team.” Phil added.

“A person going solo couldn’t have managed that. Well, Steve or Tony might manage it, or Banner on one of his bad days, but Nat or I couldn’t take out a whole base of that size on our own. Even together it would be tough.” Clint glanced at Natasha as he said this and she looked like she concurred.

“Well if it’s not you guys we don’t know who or what is doing it, but they’re not happy, whoever they are. I mean, they didn’t even stop to clear out any useful stuff – just blew the places sky high.”

“Anger management issues then.”

“Something like that.”

Steve shrugged. “Well, we can keep an eye out, but it’s no-one we know and both Thor and Loki are still in Alfheim so it’s neither of them.”

Coulson looked extremely sceptical at that statement. “And you can completely verify that Loki’s not been ducking back between battles to let off a little steam?”

“Given that Evie managed to break three bones yesterday and he’s not rushed to her side yet I’d say it’s pretty certain he’s not been making sneak visits to Earth.”

“Huh. Well he was my main suspicion, so there goes that theory.”

Natasha chuckled quietly. “Is that why you asked me not to let Stark in on this conversation?”

“He seems a little territorial about his husband; I thought I wouldn’t break up the happy family thing just yet.”

“Yet?”

Coulson lifted an eyebrow. “I don’t like Loki, and I certainly don’t trust him. He may not be behind these Hydra take-downs after all, but that doesn’t mean I’m not still waiting for him to show his true colours.”

Since it was a viable view for the Director to take no-one said anything. Loki had killed him to be fair, and that’s the sort of grudge that doesn’t exactly fade away. Still, yeah, probably best not to let Tony know about all that.

Coulson signed off with a request that they keep their eyes open and then the three sat back and looked at each other blankly.

“Well…I got a whole big bag of nothing.” Clint said with a shrug. “Either of you?”

“It sounds like another government has started sending in teams, I guess.” Steve leant his elbows
on his knees and rested his chin on his cupped hands. “I mean, we’re running around here cleaning up for Shield, which is technically an American organisation; what’s to say there aren’t other similar set-ups elsewhere in the world? Maybe it’s the Chinese sending in one of their top teams to take out what they assume we can’t or won’t. Or maybe it’s MI5. Who knows?”

“Or maybe it’s some lone weirdo gone solo; we know we aren’t the only super-charged freaks around – someone else may have decided to let loose and take out some Hydra goons as a bit of stress relief.” Clint said fairly.

“Well. I’ve still got a contact or two; I’ll send out feelers and see what’s what.” Natasha kicked the archer lightly with her foot. “And you?”

The man shrugged, then rolled his eyes when Steve turned on him too. “I guess I can call out some old favours over-seas. Someone may know something. I would have thought whoever’s doing this would need to source kit, finance travel, eat, sleep. Crap like that.”

Natasha patted him on the shoulder as she stood up, back to working on her tablet again. “You do that.” She moved over to the other sofa at right angles to the two men. “First one to get some info wins.”

Clint grinned.

MWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWM

Evie couldn’t stay put for long – even with Bruce telling her to take it easy – which led to Tony having no choice but to ban her from the lab. By dinner time she was scratching at the walls in boredom to the extent that she offered to cook. Given that her culinary skills were non-existent this meant that Jarvis had to shadow her around the kitchen with a cookery book. The fridge wasn’t exactly fully stocked but there was enough in there to make a pretty decent attempt at spaghetti bolognaise and it wasn’t so hard that Evie couldn’t manage it.

It took an industrial sized pot to hold enough pasta for all of the Avengers and the girl had to use a wok to cook up all the mince and sauce. This was why they usually called for take-out; feeding the full group, plus Evie herself, Pepper on occasion and other drop-bys like Rhodes was an undertaking that required military precision and usually enough food for a small army. Jarvis speed-grated an entire block of parmesan cheese and they managed to get the whole lot ready in under two hours – a feat considering how long it took the meat to brown.

“Thif id acdually really good.” Clint managed around a mouthful.

“You doubted my masterful attempts at cookery?”

“Nod ad all.”

Steve nodded enthusiastically. “He’s right. Once you pull the burnt bits out it’s really good!”

“There aren’t any burnt bits!” Evie snapped. She was right, but only because Jarvis had kept a very close eye on the pot.

“Of course not.” Tony said soothingly. “And we all appreciate a proper home-cooked meal for once.”

“I cook proper food!” Steve tried to look indignant, but his laugh made it all too clear he wasn’t being serious. “Or do you guys not count cottage pie or beef roast?”
“You could already cook; Evie’s still learning and as a first attempt this isn’t half bad.”

The good-natured teasing was light enough that the girl could accept it without argument and she simply smiled and continued eating. It may also have had something to do with the high-end painkillers she was on too, of course.

“Did you try making a pudding too, or are we scavenging in the freezer for Ben & Jerrys?” Pepper tried to bring the conversation back to something more amiable.

“Oh sure.” Evie waved her fork around with her non-broken arm. “Jarvis and I found a great cheesecake recipe; it’s in the fridge, cooling down. Chilli chocolate.”

“Sounds great.”

“You’re just saying that.” The girl smirked slightly. “Don’t think I didn’t see that wince; you’re already trying not to think about how much chilli I might have stuck in there.”

Pepper shrugged elegantly. “Maybe a little.”

The mention of dessert seemed to spur everyone else on and the conversation dropped as they began finishing off what was left in the main serving bowl. With the lack of talk it was easier to hear the rain lashing against the windows and the city sounds filtering up from the streets below, all car horns and engines humming along. Being so high up in the tower they never bothered to draw the blinds since it wasn’t like anyone could see in and the view was – as always – rather spectacular.

Or would have been without the rivulets of water running down the panes.

“Is it just me, or was that thunder?” Clint asked.

“Not unusual for this time of year, it’s still only early September.”

“Yeah…but it was forecast clear skies all night.”

Even as the others shrugged at the comment there was a second rumble, much louder and much closer that shook the windows in their panes. Lightning flashed and lit the room in glaring white light for a brief moment.

“You can’t tell me that’s normal.” The archer’s words were nearly drowned out by another bang, this time less thunder and more a direct cacophony out on the balcony. If anything it sounded similar to the Bifrost…

More light flooded the room, flashing bright before fading away and leaving a painful after-glow on people’s retinas. The din subsided, leaving lashing rain and – most impossibly – horse’s hooves on the tiled floor of the balcony.

“What the hell?!”

It was debatable who got there first, but it was definitely Steve who wrestled with the wind to wrench the sliding doors open, letting in a freezing gust that blasted them all with hail. It was pitch black, and it didn’t help that the bright light had just killed any night vision they may have had, but Jarvis quickly raised the balcony lights.

“Holy shit!” Everyone was thinking it, but it was Evie who put voice to the emotion.
Sleipnir was skittering around, hooves slipping in every direction on the wet tiles as he whinnied and shied. Loki was on foot next to him, struggling to keep him calm.

“What’s going on?!” Tony yelled above the storm, only for his husband to entirely ignore him and turn to Captain America instead.

“Rodgers, I need your assistance!”

If for a moment it was unclear what he was talking about, it was made very clear when Sleipnir swung in a tight panicked circle again, revealing Thor’s unconscious form draped over his back. With Steve’s help Loki managed to carefully pull him down, jostling the large God as little as possible. There was a large swath of blood stained bandages around Thor’s chest and his head lolled limply to one side as his brother and Captain America quickly carried him into the living room. Loki’s hands were flashing between Aesir and Jötunn, his own armour filthy and mangled although he didn’t seem to pay any heed to it as his frantic gaze took in his brother’s state.

Trying to keep out of the way, Evie ran over to where Sleipnir was still freaking out. He’d already succeeded in tangling his reins around one of his front legs and was getting perilously close to the glass partition that surrounded the balcony.

“Hey, hey, what the hell, Sleip?!” The girl grabbed at his mane, so that although she couldn’t hope to pull against him she could at least direct him away from glass. “Oi! Calm the fuck down!”

“It’s high! It’s high! I don’t like it!” Sleipnir swung around again, but this time buried his face in the girl’s shoulder.

“What do you – are you scared of heights?!”

“Yes! I don’t even like moderately large hills!”

Well that made sense at least – how many horses usually ended up the top of a skyscraper the size of Stark Tower? Sleipnir may well have seen most of human history and various interesting points in time on other realms, but there was little reason that he would have ever been up high in the air other than on a mountain.

“Okay, okay. Calm down and keep your eyes closed; I’m going to lead you inside.” Evie had her broken arm hugged tight against her chest to keep it out of harm’s way, but used her free hand to grab Sleipnir’s mane. The huge horse kept his head tucked in against the girl’s shoulder as he let her guide him across the balcony and through the large partition doors.

Inside was chaos with Thor laid out on the huge sofa and Bruce and Loki working frantically over him. Silver armour was scattered all over the floor – most of it rent and blood stained – which was getting in the way as Jarvis brought up medical supplies and other accoutrements.

“What the hell happened?” Evie dragged Sleipnir into the corner by the bar so that they were out of the way.

“Battle. A battle happened. Do you have any water?”

“Uh…” Evie looked around then spotted the large fruit bowl on the bar counter. Emptying the apples and bananas out she took it over to the tap and began filling it. “So, battle. And? What happened?”

“Lots of people died; that’s generally what happens.” Sleipnir barely waited for his sister to set the bowl down on the counter-top before burying his nose in it.
“Yeah, I got that, douche-bag. I meant what happened? Are you hurt? Was Möðhy hurt?”

“Yes, and yes. But not as bad as Thor.”

Evie rolled her eyes and pulled a dishcloth out from one of the bar cupboards. Grabbing a bottle of Glenfiddich she soaked the cloth through and began to clean off the blood that streaked Sleipnir’s flanks.

“You’re making me smell like a brewery.”

“Deal with it.”

“Your Dad’s going to kill you for wasting his whisky like that.”

“It’s not like he can’t afford more.” The girl stated grimly. There was a large gash running down Sleipnir’s front leg and he flinched when the alcohol stung. “Since you’re totally in a talkative mood why don’t you tell me how this happened?”

“You sound like my mother. Well, actually, no you don’t. You sound like a stereotypical mother should sound.” Sleipnir said grumpily. “If anything, I’m rather blaming my mother for ending up like this.”

Evie snorted with laughter. “I thought Afi Odin rode you into battle.”

“He did, but he actually prefers to fight on foot which usually means I get to kick arse on my own terms after he gets fed up with being on horse-back.” Sleipnir pushed the empty bowl away with his nose and looked round to see what his sister was up to. “And then Möðhy’s horse was shot out from under him so we teamed up.”

“Fun times.”

“Indeed. Ow! Can’t you just use water?”

“Alcohol’s antiseptic.” Evie glanced over at where everyone else was swarming over Thor, only for Sleipnir to nudge her and grab her attention back.

“He will be alright, you don’t need to worry.”

“I’ve never seen him injured before. Not like this.”

Evie’s thoughts were being unknowingly echoed by the other Avenger’s as they watched Bruce try to patch up their friend and comrade. Thor was the strong one. Immortal, a God, someone who never needed to worry too much about being injured since he always seemed to be healed by the time they got home.

And now he lay unmoving on the sofa where they had placed him, ashen grey except for where blood had spattered. With the armour removed it was much easier for Bruce to access the gaping wound across the God’s chest and stomach and he was busily directing Jarvis to get certain things ready in the medical unit whilst he tried to keep Thor stable.

Loki was looking like hell, but underneath the plastered muck and blood his face was a mask of grim determination as he followed Bruce’s lead, never letting up on the compress pressed against Thor’s chest. It was hard to tell what sort of state he was in, the blood he was coated in may well have been his own as easily as it could have been anyone else’s, but he looked exhausted. On top of whatever had happened in the battle, Loki must have been keeping Thor alive all the way back to
“Why the hell didn’t you take him to Asgard?! Surely they could heal him better than us!” Tony snapped.

“He insisted we came here.” Loki barely looked up at his husband. “And I wasn’t going to argue. There have been…developments, and you needed to be told.”

“Developments worth risking Thor’s life?”

“His choice, not mine.” The trickster’s gaze moved from the sluggish rise and fall of his brother’s chest to Bruce. “I told him he needed Aesir help, but he wouldn’t listen. I brought him myself because the stupid oaf was going to drag himself to the Bifrost otherwise and that would have killed him.”

Bruce’s expression clearly stated that Thor had nearly managed to kill himself anyway. “Well, the bleeding’s slowing, and he’s breathing easier. We can safely move him down to the med-unit at least. What the hell even did this amount of damage anyway? A human would have been sliced in half.”

Loki’s posture visibly relaxed at the affirmation of his brother’s health, but he shrugged in response to the question. “I did not see it happen. Sleipnir and I found him barely conscious and he insisted that we came to Earth. There were any number of weapons that might have done it.”

Concern flashed across his face again. “Why? Do you think the wound is poisoned?”

“No, no, it’s clean. Just a strange shape.”

“Oh.” The trickster switched his attention back to his husband for a moment. “How long were we gone? For us it was about a fortnight, but I can never convert times very well from one realm to the next –”

“Nearly two months. You’ve been gone nearly two months.”

“Nearly two…” Absolute horror filled Loki’s eyes and he rose to his feet. “Have I missed-?”

“No, her birthday’s next week.”

“Oh thank Norns…” Again the tension draining away was a visible thing and Loki had to reach out and grab Tony’s shoulder to stay steady.

“Yeah, how about we worry about that when you’re not at the point of collapse.”

“I’m not going to collapse, Stark!” Loki glanced back over his shoulder as Jarvis and Bruce lifted Thor onto the gurney that Jarvis had brought up, ready to take him to the medical bay. However, as he moved to follow them Tony caught his arm.

“Nah uh uh, You’re staying put and we’re sorting you out. You look like hell.”

“But I have to-”

“Loki!” Tony swung the taller man back round to face him, holding him tight by both upper arms. “Hey! Breath! Calm down, power off and breath, okay?”

“I…what?”

“You’re home, Thor is safe, you and Sleipnir are safe, so you can turn off and power down, okay
Loki merely blinked at him for a moment or so, but gradually Tony’s words seemed to filter in and he nodded slightly.

“Come on, let’s sit you down, patch you up and get some food and drink into you. Sound like a plan?” Stark didn’t let his husband really process the statement, steering him over to the other sofa that wasn’t covered in blood and sitting him down in no short order. He didn’t give Loki a moment to really work out what was going on and simply started to carefully unbuckle the straps to various pieces of the trickster’s armour.

“Tony…”

“Yeah, give me a second to get all this crap off you.” The bracers fell away and Tony moved on to removing the various plates and such that protected Loki’s shoulders and chest. Quite a few of them were dented out of shape and some had been ripped clean through by God-knows-what which made them somewhat difficult to untangle from the ripped tunic underneath. When Loki stirred himself enough to attempt to help Tony simply batted his hands away. “No, just keep still, I’ve got this.” He looked up and smiled slightly at his husband. “Seriously. You look like crap.”

That drew a small chuckle from the trickster as he nodded and allowed the man to continue fussing. “Tony, I am perfectly capable at taking off my own armour.”

“They are not a-”

“Sure, but ‘ceremonial, fancy as fuck gold shit’ takes too long to say.”

“…That it does.” The trickster managed to put up with his husband’s efforts long enough for Tony to peel all the pieces of armour away, revealing the bloodstained tunic and undershirt.

“Hey Möðhy, that looks nasty.” Evie had approached them slowly and from her expression it was obvious she wanted nothing more than to hug Loki, but was holding back out of concern for his injuries.

Loki smiled up at her, but only for a brief moment before it slipped into horror and he jumped back to his feet hurriedly. “What happened to your arm?! Was there another attack??”

“What? No, no, no.” Evie waved her free hand wildly. “No, I was an idiot down in the lab. It’s just my wrist and some ribs.”

“Just? There’s no just about broken bones, young lady!”

The girl actually laughed, although extremely sarcastically. “Like you can talk! You’re covered in blood and can’t stand up straight! Lecture me when you’re not walking wounded, yeah?”

Loki simply blinked at her, stunned. “What..?”

“Well…y’know. You’re hardly in any state to lecture me about being injured.”

“I was in a battle. There is a significant difference.” Loki moved to take his daughter’s arm, to assess what had happened but she stepped back out of his reach. “Evelyn…”
“No, it’s fine for now. Uncle Bruce has sorted it and the last thing you need is to patch up even more people’s injuries. If you’re less of a mess tomorrow I might let you have a look.”

The trickster raised an eyebrow, then glanced at Tony. “I still struggle with the vernacular at times. Is this what you American’s call sass?”

“Nah, that’s what we call Evie being a little shit.” Tony ruffled their daughter’s hair as she grinned smugly.

“Yeah, so how injured are you?” Evie added. “Because I want a hug, but I don’t want to break you.”

Loki laughed, brighter and more honest. “Darling, if you wanted a hug you just needed to say so, it will not kill me.”

Tony stepped back to leave his partner and daughter to have a moment and almost backed into Sleipnir, who instantly draped his head over the man’s shoulder.

“Hey.”

“Hey. Should I question the fact that there’s an eight legged horse in my tower?”

“Probably best if you refrain from questions like that.”

Stark laughed and reached up to pat the warm neck that hooked over his shoulder. “Missed you, buddy. And is there a reason you smell of fine single malt?”

“Evie cleaned me up with one of your best. She claimed it was antiseptic.”

“Huh, well, so’s rubbing alcohol, but what the hell.” Tony turned and looked the horse up and down. There were a considerable number of scrapes and gashes dotted along Sleipnir’s grey coat, but nothing severely dangerous or painful. “Are you alright? And no bullshitting, I can always tell bullshit, even from a horse.”

“I am fine. I am not seriously hurt, just a few flesh wounds and a lame leg. I have had much worse in my time. It is Fraendi Thor I worry for.”

“Bruce will patch him up, He’ll be fine. Has Loki been healing him since you left Alfheim?”

“Pretty much. He was near unconsciousness when Möðhy found him and we brought him straight here.” Sleipnir glanced over at Loki. “And Möðhy’s exhausted from battle too, these past two weeks have taken a lot out of all of us.”

“Was it that awful? I thought you guys were all crazy about the blood and the warfare and stuff.”

“Yes, well…You need to talk to Möðhy,”

“Oh?” Tony frowned. “Why?” He turned back to face his husband, who was now sat back on the sofa. “What’s happened? I thought big impressive battles were the norm for you lot? What was so bad about this one?”

Loki looked up at him, tired, dirty, wounded and a fortnight’s worth the horror of war still written across his face. When he spoke it was a certain amount of tightness and finality, as if he couldn’t quite believe his own words.

“We lost. Alfheim has been destroyed.”
"We lost. Alfheim has been destroyed."

They waited for Bruce to join them again before Loki explained himself more clearly. Jarvis had been left to keep an eye on Thor’s condition but with the thunder God stable there was little more to do but monitor him, which left everyone else clear to hear what the hell had happened.

The story wasn’t terribly complicated, which made it worse in the way; no great tales of betrayal or fights against desperate odds. They had simply been overwhelmed.

“They are not a foe I, nor anyone else, have ever seen before.” Loki explained carefully. “The Elves of Alfheim are considered some of the best warriors in the realms, bettered only by Asgard, but…”

“But even the both combined couldn’t win.” Clint supplied for him, and the trickster nodded.

“Indeed. We were obliterated. Asgard lost a significant proportion of their army, and the Elves were decimated.” He shook his head, lost and bewildered. “I watched the city burn. The creatures ransacked it, then razed it to the ground. We were being forced back towards the Bifrost site; there was no way any of us could have got to the populace in time.”

Loki’s tone of voice held something to it that most of the Avenger’s couldn’t pin-point. Some unusual quality that hadn’t been heard before.

Survivors guilt.

“The city burnt, the civilians were massacred, and we couldn’t do anything to stop it. I have never seen the like; at least not when fighting with such seemingly indestructible armies as the Aesir and Elves.” The trickster leant his elbows on his knees and hung his head with a heavy sigh. “I have witnessed horror in battle before – I fought in World War One to say the least – but this was something else. To go into a battle assuming that we will be there for a couple of days at the most and simply sweep the foe aside and to then be slaughtered. It is…it breaks you.”

“Will you be alright?” Steve’s well-meaning question seemed to take Loki by surprise as he glanced up at the super-soldier.

“Me? I shall be fine, it is Thor I worry for. He has not lost in battle for a good few thousand years.” A bitter smile crossed the trickster’s face. “As you will recall I know what it is like to lose a battle.”

“Yeah, but you weren’t emotionally invested in that fight; you didn’t give a damn about the chitauri. I guess you gave a damn about the Aesir fighting alongside you this time, though.”

“Can we not go into the ins and outs of my mental state right now; I do not have the patience to deal with it, however well-meaning your intentions may be.” If the words didn’t get his point across, his tone of voice certainly did, silencing any other questions.

“Alright, you’re wound up and have PTSD coming out of your ears, calm down and stop being an asshole.” Loki glared murder as his husband slumped down beside him, but Tony didn’t seem to care. “Calm down, deep breath and just…chill. Yeah?”
“And how, exactly, am I meant to do that?”

And then Tony’s hand was on the God’s back, a light pressure that was reassuring without being soppy, and there was a subtle change to Loki’s posture as the stiffness left his spine a little.

“I worry for Thor.” He admitted quietly.

“He’ll be fine. I’ve got him on a fluid drip and he was already looking better when I left.” Bruce said helpfully.

“It is not the physical aspect that is a problem. As I said; it has been many millennia since Thor was on the losing side of a battle and this time he lost friends. The Elves of Alfheim may have hated me and with good reason, but Thor had good friends amongst them and...It did not end so well for them.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

Loki shrugged listlessly. “People die in war – Thor had simply forgotten that it can be his friends as well as the enemy.”

“Do you even know who the enemy were? What they wanted?” Tony asked quietly.

“No idea.” The trickster glanced over at where Sleipnir had curled up on the floor, Evie slumped against the horse’s warm side. “But they were taking no prisoners. It is hard to say what their motives were; from what we saw it was wholesale destruction. The city was razed to the ground and maybe they were looking for something or someone, or maybe they just wanted to kill everything in sight. I couldn’t say.”

“What were they? Chitauri?”

“Again, I couldn’t say, although they bore little to no resemblance to the chitauri.”

“They looked more like trolls.” Sleipnir added helpfully, which drew strange looks. “You know? The mountain trolls and such like? They were huge – and bulky, as if their armour was part of them. No-one had ever seen the like. None of our weapons could bring them down – it was insane.”

“There was no clue as to where in the realms they came from, if indeed they were from these realms. I would almost go as far as to say they were not a natural race at all but some sort of construct.” Loki rubbed away a smudge of blood on his cheek with a tired hand. “I don’t know. It was all such a blur; there was no moment to comprehend what it was we were actually dealing with.”

Tony still had his hand on the God’s back and he could feel the sudden shiver running through Loki as he spoke and the man leant in to knock his forehead on his husband’s shoulder.

“Hey, did you even sleep at all? You said it’s been two weeks for you; how much sleep have you had?”

“I couldn’t say. A few hours here and there.”

“Liar.” Sleipnir rose to his feet, dislodging Evie, and limped over. “You barely closed your eyes in all the time we were there, Möðir.” He nudged his nose into Loki’s chest, knocking the trickster into Tony. “You didn’t sleep. At the best you barely dozed for a couple of hours, and God or not that is not enough.”
Loki batted his son on the nose, pushing him away. “Bully.” But he certainly sounded half-hearted.

“Well, that sorts that then!” Tony slapped his hand against his husband’s back. “You need to go to bed and sleep for a week and by then maybe Thor will be better and we’ll be able to get a bit more sense out of you.”

“I am fine-”

“Yeah, you’re really really not.” Tony smirked at the glare levelled on him. “Seriously. Sleep, eat and then we can do a proper debrief.” He flicked a lock of his husband’s filthy hair. “And let’s add a shower into that list, because you smell like a slaughter-house.”

“Au-de-battle-field.” Loki said, and the smile playing around his lips showed that he agreed with Tony’s description. “I must admit that my nose shut down some time ago.”

“Lucky you.” Stark grinned up at Sleipnir. “You too – food, bed and bath. Although the bath may have to be Jarvis hosing you down some time ago.”

“Lucky you.” Stark grinned up at Sleipnir. “You too – food, bed and bath. Although the bath may have to be Jarvis hosing you down on the balcony.”

“As long as the water is warm I will be happy with that. Am I sleeping on the balcony too? I recognise that this place is a bit suburban and is unlikely to have stable facilities.”

“Well, since you apparently aren’t very good with heights I’m gonna be nice and say that you can stay in here if you like.” Tony waved a hand towards the deep-pile rug. “Make yourself comfortable and if this is going to be a regular thing I’ll put some proper facilities in place for you.”

Sleipnir glanced at the cream rug then down at his blood stained coat and nodded. “Thank you. I’ll clean off first though.”

Jarvis led the horse back towards the balcony in search of a hose – and the AI would certainly be able to reconfigure the plumbing for there to be some hot water for Sleipnir. Loki watched them go with tired eyes but he managed another smile when his son glanced back at him for a moment.

“Come on, you too.” Tony looped an arm around his partner’s shoulders and encouraged Loki up to his feet. “Shower, food and bed.”

“I should-”

“You should listen to me. Come on.”

The trickster shrugged the arm off. He would normally have given Evie a hug before disappearing for the evening, but given how filthy he was that wasn’t really an option so he simply pressed a kiss to his daughter’s forehead instead. Tony followed him from the room, rather feeling as if he was a lap-dog the way he was trailing behind the God.

“You know, now that we’re out of sight you don’t need to hide how crap you’re feeling. Not that you were hiding it too well, but, y’know.”

“Who said I feel unwell? I am simply weary.”

“Bullshit.” Tony almost found himself jogging to keep up with the long strides his husband was taking. “You haven’t teleported to our room, hence you feel like crap.” He walked straight into Loki’s back as the trickster stopped dead infront of him. “Ow, watch it!”

“No. You need to watch it, Stark. I am fine. I just want to sleep.”
“Do you Aesir even have a term for PTSD?”

“I will happily introduce you to another window if you do not shut your mouth in the next moment.” Loki stalked off again. Tony rolled his eyes and glanced up at the ceiling.

“Jarv, could you set the shower running for him?”

“Of course, sir.”

“Am I being too obnoxious?”

“I think you are simply experiencing what most of your friends have gone through with you throughout your life. Really, you could not have found someone so well suited to you if you had created them yourself.”

“If you value your circuits you will never let Loki hear you say that.”

Jarvis didn’t reply, but Tony fancied he could hear the AI chuckle. He made his own way back to his rooms, slow enough that Loki could have had a chance to lock himself in the bathroom if he wanted solitude that much.

As it was when Tony quietly entered their bedroom the trickster had left the bathroom door open, a trail of strewn clothing scattered across the floor from the main room to the ensuite. The man sat down on the bed and reached down to pick up the discarded undertunic. It was covered in blood and muck – just like everything else – but there were tears in the fine material. Rips and slashes that suggested Loki must have healed himself after receiving the injuries, and had fixed his top clothes of the damage but didn’t bother with anything that wouldn’t show.

The man bunched the filthy tunic up into a ball with an angry sigh. Loki’s definition of ‘just fine’ was about as accurate as his own when it came to injuries. He pulled himself up from the bed and gathered up the rest of the battle-stained clothing, sorting through what was beyond salvaging and dropping the ruined portion into the bin. The possible-to-clean bunch was thrown into the laundry basket to be sorted out at another time.

With as much procrastination out of the way as possible Tony gingerly knocked on the open bathroom door.

“Hey, want some company in there?” He called softly.

There was no verbal reply, but the curling steam that had been emanating out of the doorway suddenly wrapped around the man’s waist as a physical force, gently pulling him into the room.

Loki was in the shower as expected, turned towards the wall and leaning his forehead against the cool tiles. He didn’t react to Tony’s presence in the room, despite the invitation, simply letting the water drum across his shoulders sluicing away the grime and filth.

Tony left his own clothes in a more orderly pile before stepping into the shower to join his husband. He didn’t say anything, just pressed up against Loki’s back and let his head fall forwards to rest between the trickster’s shoulder blades.

“I’m sorry…” Loki turned his head just enough to be able to see the man over his shoulder.

“Nah, you needed me to shut up, not keep harping on at you.”

“You were worried.”
“I missed you.”

“I did not intend for it to take so long.”

Tony shrugged lightly, picking up the washcloth from the rack and beginning to wipe away the blood on Loki’s shoulder’s that the water alone wasn’t quite clearing. “We were prepared for it to take some time. Birdy missed you too of course. You saw what she managed to do to her arm; she’s too much like us – takes stupid risks when she’s stressed.”

“Who said I take risks?”

The washcloth paused for a moment and Tony laughed. “Uh, the chitauri? Having Evie? Marrying me? What do you call those if not stupid risks?”

Loki simply shrugged in reply.

“But yeah, we all missed you. Even Clint. And I kept Merlin in the loop too – he’s a bit of a dick, but he really does give a damn about you.”

“I have never doubted that he cares. Is he well?”

“I think so – it’s not like he tells me much. Mentioned something about going to Italy on holiday so will be out of contact for a week or two.”

The trickster chuckled softly. “Yes, he does like Italy. Spent a few decades there during the Renaissance.”

“Oh? Let me guess; he was an influential part of the whole movement.” Tony said with a grin. “A member of the Medici’s? A Borgia?”

“Hardly. He went by the name of Da Vinci back then.”

Tony paused, then laughed. “Of course he bloody did. I thought you said he hadn’t left the UK much.”

“A few decades out of millennia is not much. Merlin has been many people in his long life. A sorcerer can take many forms and he can fake the aging process well enough.”

“Must be lonely; it can’t be easy to continuously out-live everyone you know. I still can’t believe you two don’t spend more time together given the circumstances.” The man pressed his forehead against his husband’s back again. “It frightens me to think that that was so nearly going to be Evie’s fate too; outliving everyone she has ever known or loved, over and over again. Just you by her side as one single constant.”

“And you wonder why Merlin and I do not get along. I am an endless reminder for him that as much as he loves this world and its people he will never truly be part of it. He is not human and he hates me for that just as much as he loves me for being his parent.” Loki turned around at last, forcing Tony to step back. “He pretends aging, cycling from youth to old master over and over – although his mind never changes, just his face.”

“That’s horrible.”

“Life is never gentle, Tony.”

“You really should bring him here, you know. We’re all part of the immortality plan now – he
Loki smiled slightly. “He would never agree to that now. Maybe one day in the future, but not now. For the mean time the best we can do is keep in contact and let him know we are here if he wants us.”

“We need to put him on the Christmas card list.”

“You want to send the son of a Pagan God a celebration of the birth of Christ?”

“Well when you put it like that…” Tony smiled and brushed Loki’s wet hair back from the trickster’s face. “Maybe a Yule card then.”

“Maybe.” Loki leant in to press a kiss against Stark’s forehead. “Now, I believe you mentioned sleep.”

“You don’t want to eat something first?”

“Not now, no. Food was less of a problem than sleep. One can eat standing up or on horseback.”

The two men left the shower to find Jarvis had heated up the towel rail for them and the fluffy towels were just the right temperature. Normally Loki would have used magic, but this time he let Tony fuss over him instead – allowing that the man was not-so-subtly checking for hidden injuries. As it was, all wounds he’d sustained in the battle had healed up and the worst left were a few thin scars here and there that would no doubt be gone by the morning.

“Oh, by the way, I did manage to scoop up a birthday present for Evie.”

“What? In the middle of an active war zone? Please tell me you didn’t get our baby girl a severed head!”

Loki looked disgusted. “What could she possibly want with a severed head? No I picked something up during the war council on Asgard before we left for Alfheim.”

“Weren’t you meant to be in the war council?”

“It’s called a clone, Tony. How else would I get anything done?”

It was a fair point.

WMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWM

Whilst Tony slept better than he had done in the past two months, Loki did not find rest so easy. For most of the night he slipped in and out of fragmented nightmares, struggling to keep his mind from wandering back to the scene of battle. Eventually he gave up altogether and, as tired as he was, left his husband sleeping soundly.

It was only when he saw the door infront of him that he realised his feet had led him to the medical bay. It was possible his half-asleep brain had been subconsciously trying to bring him to Thor, since he had certainly been consciously worrying about him. The trickster slowly pushed the door open only to come up short when he saw Bruce by Thor’s bed, taking some readings off one of the machines the blond was hooked up to.

“Oh. My apologies, I will go…”

“You don’t need to. Here.” Bruce motioned awkwardly. “He’s doing much better. You didn’t need
to worry.”

“I was not-” The clipped answer was almost instinctual on Loki’s tongue, but he silenced the lie before he could finish it. “You are right. I believe I was worrying. How healed is he?”

“Getting there. I’ve got him on some fluid drips to replenish what he lost in blood and the wounds have sealed.” Bruce moved away from the Thunder God’s side. “Here, you can sit with him, if you like. You look like death yourself, to be honest.”

“I am-”

“You are exhausted and have barely slept, despite everything. Sit down before you fall down and I’ll get you a cup of tea.” The doctor gestured at the chair by Thor’s bed. It didn’t escape his notice that Loki looked decidedly wary as Bruce pushed past him to replace the chart on the end of the bed. “You know, we may not talk to each other all that much but there’s no need to tip-toe around like I’m a primed bomb.”

“You will forgive me if our first meeting left a lasting impression on me.”

“Of course, and on the floor. But I’ve not smashed your face in during all the years since, so please stop treating me like a skittish horse.”

Loki had the grace to at least look slightly abashed as he moved up to his brother’s bedside. Thor was looking so much better than when Loki had last seen him; although the thick wad of bandages were an unusual sight on the blond God.

“Is he unconscious or asleep?”

“Asleep. I did try knock him out earlier but none of the drugs worked.”

“He and I have a different physiology to you humans – of course your drugs will not work.”

“Surprisingly, I had come to that conclusion myself.”

Loki reached out and – almost without realising – smoothed Thor’s hair back out of the thunderer’s face. “This is an unusual situation – it is usually me in the infirmary at the end of a battle.”

“Thor doesn’t normally get injured?”

“I didn’t say that. No, normally I have healed everyone else and run out of energy for myself by the end.”

“And this time you just ran out full stop.”

“Something like that.”

Bruce eyed Loki whilst the trickster stared down at Thor. Whilst Loki may have been quite a pale individual at the best of times the dark circles under his eyes and stoop to his shoulders said a lot even to someone who wasn’t that familiar with him. Bruce still couldn’t say he was exactly Loki’s biggest fan, but the Hulk in the back of his mind no longer seemed to prickle at the trickster’s presence and his empathy was much larger than any old grudges.

“Look. If you aren’t going to sit down here, then let’s at least get some food into you. Thor isn’t going anywhere and I make a mean bowl of muesli. And I did offer tea.”

Loki smiled slightly and dipped his head in a nod. “I must admit, food does sound good.” He
flicked his finger at Thor’s nose, so that the minor cuts and scrapes healed up. “You are sure he will be alright?”

“He’ll be fine. Although his ego may be terminally bruised.”

“Well, somethings cannot be helped I suppose.”

The two of them left the hospital bay with Jarvis softly agreeing to tell them of any changes to Thor’s condition and made their way up to the main living areas. Through unspoken agreement they took the stairs – neither particularly wanted to be in the confined space of an elevator together.

Bruce started bustling around the kitchen, and waved off any offers of help. After all, it was hardly difficult to put together two bowls of cereal – although he had no idea what Loki considered normal breakfast fare. Wild boar probably.

“What type of tea? And how do you take it?”

The trickster cast his eyes over the selection in the cupboard then pulled out a box. “I grew fond of this the last time I was in England. It is best when strong, but with a good splash of milk.” He waited for Bruce’s nod then threw a teabag into each mug.

“You were in England much?”

“Enough. I prefer Scandinavia.”

Banner grinned. “And that has absolutely nothing to do with the way they used to worship you, I imagine?”

“They feared me. Thor was the one they loved, and worshiped in their thousands.”

“Bet that went down well.”

Loki shrugged, pouring boiling water into the two mugs. “I backed the winning army, so it is not such a sore spot.”

“Yeah, but still, you must…” Bruce trailed off, glancing towards the doorway at the sudden sound of piano notes. “Evie’s up early.”

“I didn’t know she played.”

“She’s very good-” The Doctor winced at a sudden crashing chord and smiled wryly. “-usually.” He waved a hand at the doorway. “Go on, I’ll bring your breakfast in; you two need more time together than you’ve had.”

The trickster looked taken aback for a moment, then inclined his head. “Thank you.”

“Go on, I won’t be a moment.”

The piano music was fractured and when Loki followed the sound into the main living room he found his daughter attempting to play with an angry scowl on her face. Whilst her left hand was quite happy following the bass line it was obvious she shouldn’t even be attempting to use her right, given that it was still in plaster and had to be extremely sore.

“I am sure Bach didn’t score that for a broken wrist.”

Evie jumped, then turned with a smile. “Mőðhy, I didn’t think we’d see you until the afternoon!”
“I was unable to sleep.” Loki tapped the lid of the piano. “You never told me you could play.”

The girl’s smile turned self-deprecating. “Well, I’m hardly any good right now, am I?”

“Give me your arm.”

“I thought you were out of magic.”

The trickster’s expression grew fond. “Not so much that I cannot now fix a broken arm. Hold still; this will feel odd.”

“I know; you’ve done this before, remember?” She still winced at the feeling of her bones reknitting, though. “I don’t suppose you’ve got enough in you for the ribs too, have you?”

Loki’s sigh was that shared by world-weary parents across the nine realms. “Which side?” His daughter’s grin was worth effort.

Thor woke later that day – woozy and pained, but lucid enough for conversation. He was also more downcast than the Avengers had seen him – Loki’s fears about his spirit being broken may not have been unfounded. Despite Bruce and Jarvis trying to say otherwise he insisted he was well enough to sit in on the debriefing that was called.

The story was the same they had heard the night before and Thor could add little more to it.

Asgard had received a frantic call for aid from Alfheim – all the more shocking in its urgency given the military might of the Elves – and mobilised their own army to come to their aid. Given the known strength of the Elves it shocked the Aesir to the core to be called upon for help, but that was nothing compared to their reactions when they arrived and found what had already become of Alfheim.

The villages and farms had already been sacked, any survivors fleeing to the citadel which in turn was burning.

The attacking hordes were stronger, faster, better. Their weapons were capable of more fire power and greater range, their armour repelled all but the strongest of strikes. They were the nearest thing to invincible anyone had yet seen. The Aesir army were as easily beaten back as the Elves were beaten down, and eventually the battle became a simple slaughter of all those who couldn’t make it back to the Bifrost site in time.

“But why?” Steve asked for at least the fourth time. “There had to be a motive; were they after something, were they taking prisoners, were they after territory?”

Thor shook his head tiredly. “If we knew we would have said.” He was propped up against a pile of cushions on the sofa – pale and quiet, and for once had let Loki do the talking.

“Didn’t any of these things say anything? I thought the Allspeak let you understand any language.”

The thunder God shrugged with one shoulder. “Not that I heard. Loki?”

“I never heard them say anything. But then again, I was hardly trying to He Hnin make conversation.”

“But, battle cries, calls for help, swearing or praying – that always happens at some point in a
battle.” Steve spoke from experience, both Rhodey and Sam nodding in agreement with him.

“I…” Loki started to say something, then stopped and frowned. “No, nothing.” He glanced at his brother. “You?”

“No…That is strange, now that I come to think on it.” Thor tried to straighten up then groaned, but carried on regardless. “I did not hear any of them say a word I understood.”

“Allspeak not working?” Tony asked flippantly.

“It works on all languages.”

Stark glanced over at Sleipnir, where the horse was tucking into a huge bowl of premium porridge oats. “Well, you said it didn’t work on animals right, Sleipnir’s a special case.”

“Yes, so?”

Loki slammed his hand down on the table, making them all jump and drawing a concerned whinny from his son. “Enough! What is the point of all this? A realm has been destroyed, a peoples driven to the point of extinction and we are sitting around discussing this like…like a war-council!”

“Totally thought you were going to say committee right there.” Evie called over.

“Do you think this is a joke, Evelyn?! People died! Good people! And there was absolutely nothing we could do and you are making jokes about it!”

The girl’s eyes went wide and she gaped at the trickster. For a moment it could have gone either way; freak out and run off crying or freak out and scream back at him. Apparently screaming back was her favourite option – she was never one to really cry anyway.

“Well if you’re gonna fuck off for months on end then roll up injured, Uncle Thor unconscious and telling us an entire Realm just got destroyed. Forgive me if my coping mechanism is to find a bit of fucking humour in this situation! War sucks, who knew?!” She gestured at the other stunned Avengers in the room. “And don’t act like you are the only one to discover that! Dad went through hell in Afghanistan, Uncle Bruce has worked as a doctor in war-zones, Uncle Clint and Aunty Tasha have been through any number of conflicts, and Uncle Steve? World War fucking Two! And don’t think that frost thing you’re doing right now frightens me, because it really really doesn’t, and is a bit of a dick move, to be honest.”

It was entirely possible that Evie had never spoken to her mother like that. In fact, they both knew for certain that she hadn’t. Sure her arguments with Tony could be the stuff of legend, but this was a whole new ball-park.

Loki stared at her open-mouthed, before slowly following her gaze down to the table.

His hands were blue and the work-top under them sparkled with frost. Tiny spikes of ice were just beginning to grow up and out of the surface.

“Oh…”

The heavy silence that followed was broken by Sleipnir making a noise that was his equivalent of clearing his throat.

“Umm, is it normally like this here?” He looked between his mother and sister in surprise.
“Define normal.” Evie answered mulishly. “My normal consists of living with super-heroes, an absent Mom and a terminally ill Dad. I’m still getting used to my new normal of two healthy parents. The last thing I fucking need is for one of them to get himself killed in somebody-else’s war.” She jumped when Sleipnir suddenly dropped his heavy head onto her shoulder, but reached up to rest her hand on the horse’s nose. “Sometimes I hate this life-style.”

Steve glanced between the parents and child. “Do you guys want us to leave you sort this out? This sounds like you three – four, sorry Sleipnir – need to talk.”

Tony looked ready to agree, and Evie merely shrugged. However, Loki pulled his hands away from the table with a loud cracking sound as he snapped the icicles.

“No. We need to sort out this situation with Alfheim.”

“Way to prioritise, Möðhy.”

“What do you want me to do here, Evelyn?! We lost hundreds of Aesir, and there isn’t even a final count of the thousands of Elves who died. Yes we have problems here, but we have the time to sort them out. There are families back in Asgard that need answers right now. Thor and I shouldn’t even be here right now; we’re needed at home to sort out the mass funerals, re-structure what’s left of our army, try to put together a coherent plan should these things attack somewhere else and simply trying to find somewhere to put the few hundred refugees we now have. But we’re here on Earth because all of you were our priority. Not our country-men, not our brothers-in-arms, you were our priority. What more do you want from me?!?”

Evie had taken an involuntary step back into Sleipnir’s chest, shock written across her face. She and Loki didn’t argue. They had never had a reason to argue. And now both tempers were riled and it was lucky the girl didn’t have magic too, otherwise fire-balls would have been flying.

“Okay, I think we all need to calm down and just breathe for a moment.” Tony said carefully. “We don’t want anyone being thrown out of windows here.”

“You needn’t fear, Stark: that’s a privilege reserved for you alone.”

The man nodded curtly. “Well, let’s not go there again.” He had his StarkPad in hand, and with a flick of his fingers the image onscreen appeared up on the large wall-mounted TV. “Right, these are the notes I’ve been taking; let’s look through them and if there’s nothing else for God’s sake let’s call this a day.”

Loki gave the screen a cursory glance. Stark had been typing out in text-speak to keep up with the back-and-forth conversation, but the notes were easy enough to understand.

Alfheim attckd who did it?

New bad guys why??? No motive

???? who???? Is Earth in trbl?

All dead = rlly not gud Asgard lost most army

Like all dead. Rlly bad

100000’s who were ths guys?????

Or whtevr didn’t spk? Cant spk? No Allspk???
“Apart from your appalling grammar and spelling that sums up the main points. Thor?”

“It has the key issues.” Thor was looking exhausted but his grim expression made it clear he was looking at this from the same view-point as his brother; this was a problem that needed to be solved here and now. “This still leaves us with a great many unanswered questions.”

“And they can wait.”

“But-”

“They can wait.” Steve’s tone of voice made it very final. “You need rest. Loki’s going to blow up the tower if we’re not careful and there’s still a horse in the living room. Shit needs to be sorted, sure, but we can’t do that with everyone in the state that they’re in.” He had that military snap that usually commanded attention, but even so Clint sniggered, which took the edge off.

“Heh, well done guys, you’ve reduced the mighty Captain America to swearing.” He kicked his legs off the table and stretched them out. “But he’s also right. We’ve been chasing our tails with what you’ve told us. These bad-ass aliens destroyed Alfheim, but we don’t know who they are, what they are, why they are or anything. And actually there’s no way we can sort that out here. I get that you guys went through hell and are freaked out by what happened; but realistically we can’t help. We know nothing about other races, we can’t find out about them and couldn’t get there if we wanted to. Not really sure what help we can be here.”

There were some token protests and further comments, but Steve and Clint rather had the measure of the situation. Until they either had more information, or there was another incident, there was nothing the Earth-bound Avengers could do.

Thor made his way back to the med-bay with Bruce’s help, and his lack of complaint made it clear that he was still feeling extremely unwell. The others followed suit and quietly left, mostly seeking out something to help clear their minds of the thoughts of what had happened to Alfheim. Evie drifted over to the piano, studiously ignoring her parents and brother.

Sleipnir’s ears pricked at the first few notes and he wandered over to watch what she was doing.

“How do you know what to do?”

“I read the music.”

The black blobs and squiggles and didn’t make so much sense to the horse as he tried to see what the music said versus what Evie was playing.

Behind them Tony nudged his husband. “You need to talk to her.”

“Not right now.”

“Loki-”

“No. Not right now.” The trickster glanced at Stark quickly, his gaze unhappy to say the least. He had definitely reached his emotional saturation point. Any more and he would either blow something up or – worse in a way – cry.

“Don’t leave it too long, then.”

Loki dipped his head once then turned on his heel and left the room.
The next few days seemed a bit of a mess. Thor healed quickly enough, although was very subdued, and Loki had recovered and made a very quick trip off-planet to send Sleipnir home to Asgard. The argument with Evie hadn’t really been cleared from the air – they had sort of brushed it under the rug and left it lie. Tony hadn’t raised the subject with either of them again.

The Avengers has been out again on a few sorties against suspected Hydra bases, but hadn’t found anything new or useful. Stark and Banner were still playing around with the liberated chitauri pieces but the rate of research had dramatically slowed given that they now didn’t want to turn anything on and start the distress signals again.

And the mystery organisation was still taking out larger Hydra bases with extreme prejudice. The Avengers had been called out on clean-up a few times now and there was never any sign of who had swept through the place and destroyed it so thoroughly. The group evidently held a severe grudge, that much was clear, but beyond that there was no clue as to who or what they were.

Loki went along for a few of the expeditions, but quite often was found ensconced in his and Tony’s bed-room, scrying for any sign possible of Alfheim’s attackers. So far he had found nothing.

It was after another long session – that had begun to creep into the small hours of the morning - that Tony quietly knocked on the door, bearing a large glass of red wine. He had very quickly learnt not to interrupt his husband in the middle of the spell, so waited for Loki to either let him in or ignore him.

“I’m done.”

Tony placed the glass down on the bedside table and sat down on the bed next to the trickster. Loki passed him the dish of ink he’d been using for the scrying, and that was deposited on the desk.

“How about a glass of wine?”

“Nothing.” Loki rubbed a hand across his eyes and smiled grimly. “Absolutely nothing.” He glanced at the wine. “I do hope that’s for me, because I am going to drink it anyway.”

Tony laughed and passed it over. “Yeah it’s all yours – red’s not exactly my choice of beverage.” He ineffectually tried to mop up some spilt ink with the edge of his t-shirt. “So, other than no results, how’re things?”

Loki had taken a sip of wine, and watched his husband suspiciously over the rim of the glass. “Alcohol…questions about how I am feeling…I do believe you are trying to get me into bed.”

“Later, Romeo. I just want to make sure you’re okay; I hardly seem to see you at the moment.”

“I am fine.”

“You did remember it’s Birdy’s birthday tomorrow, right?”

“I am hardly going to forget.”

Tony laughed. “Sure. You still haven’t told me what the mystery gift is. I’ve pulled some strings and got her a copy of Half-Life Three – it doesn’t technically even have a public release date yet. Oh, and some tickets to her show of choice on Broadway. And some ear-rings, nothing too glitzy,
just diamond studs.”

Loki watched his husband in amusement over the rim of his wineglass. “Only diamond? Why not black diamonds?”

“No sense in being ostentatious, she’s only fifteen.”

“Personally I am surprised you did not get her a car.”

“That’s next years present. I’ve already got a Maserati ready to soup up for her.” He grinned as the trickster shook his head. “Well? What have you got to add to the pot anyway? You promised it wasn’t a severed head.”

“It is not.” Loki put his glass down on the bedside table. “Has she ever had a pet before?”

“Not really. Why?”

The explanation had Tony genuinely face-palming – forehead smacked hard against the heel of his hand. He had to admit that Loki’s plan was brilliant, and certainly something Evie would love, but it wasn’t exactly something he’d ever have considered himself. Their first time celebrating their daughter’s birthday as a proper couple and they hadn’t even bought the presents as a couple. Of course, everything would be tagged as from both of them, but that wasn’t really the point.

“So, it’s nearly two AM; it was about this time all those years ago that you suddenly turned up in here looking like someone had kicked seven types of crap out of you.”

“Mmm, so it was. I believe that was the first time we had seen each other for nine months as well.”

“I really didn’t think I was actually going to see you again. I assumed you’d found a better lay somewhere else.”

Loki leant back against the headboard of the bed, stretching out his cramped legs. “Out of interest, had you wanted to see me again? Other than missing out on all the late-night activities, of course.”

“Sure; the sex was great, but I was beginning to realise that I actually enjoyed talking to you as a person.” Stark shifted across the bed and plopped his head down in his husband’s lap. “You’d become a fixture in my life; I don’t like change, and you’d just upped and vanished. To be honest I was pretty annoyed about it.”

“I should have come to you sooner and told you about Evelyn.” He trickster ran his fingers through the man’s short hair. “I was running from the inevitable by trying to ignore what was happening.”

“Maybe, but had you told me you would have given me the chance to panic and run. As it was I didn’t have a chance to back out of being a father.”

“Would you have wanted to back out?”

Tony laughed. “Are you kidding?! Evelyn’s my everything; I can’t imagine my life without her!”

“You never regret tying yourself down?”

“Hell no!” The man twisted to look up at his husband. “What are you angling at here? Do you regret having Birdy? Or letting me keep her?”

“Not at all.” Loki’s tone of voice wasn’t very convincing, but he smiled reassuringly when his husband frowned up at him. “No, I really don’t regret those decisions at all. I feared them at the
time, but I knew I made the right choice.”

“She was so tiny…” Stark’s voice trailed off in a drawl of nostalgia.

“Tiny but perfect.”

“And now she’s big and perfect.”

Loki laughed quietly. “Actually, she’s smaller than before I left for Alfheim. That training regime must be going well; she’s lost weight. Not that she needed to lose anything, but still.”

“She’s lost the puppy fat. Our little girl is becoming a woman.” Tony ran a hand over his eyes with a chuckle. “She’s already had to drag Pepper out shopping for new bras – apparently she lost some weight in other places too.”

“Poor thing.” Loki wriggled down a little so that he wasn’t sitting up quite as straight and folded his arms across his husband’s chest. “She didn’t drag you out on those shopping trips?”

“Nah, I just supply the endless amounts of money. And what do I know about buying bras anyway?” Tony waved a hand lazily. “I can provide hot water bottles as and when needed but other than that Birdy tends to deal with stuff on her own or goes to Pep. She’s an independent kid.”

“She’s had an unconventional upbringing; she’s going to be independent. Sleipnir was terribly clingy and it didn’t serve him well when he grew older. Admittedly I over-indulged him; but I was young and new to the parenting thing. You’ve done a stupendous job raising our little Bird.”

“Well, let’s make the most of her first birthday as a full family.”

“And that would probably involve us attempting to sleep at some point.”

Tony groaned and shook his head. “I can’t be arsed to move.” He felt his husband shift under him and looked up to see Loki wave a hand in a lazy circle. “What are you…oh.” He chuckled as his jeans and shirt melted away leaving him just in boxers. “Okay, that works.”

“Magic, it’s a wonderful thing.”

“I have noticed that.”

The morning dawned bright and unusually cold for September. Despite being back in one piece Evie had decided that her birthday warranted a lie-in, her training be damned. When she finally surfaced it was gone mid-day and the rest of the Stark-Tower inhabitants were no-where to be seen. She wandered through the kitchen and dining area to grab some food and rather hoping to bump into someone.

As it was the place seemed to be empty – no people, no presents, no sign that anyone had remembered what day it was. That didn’t particularly worry her since she couldn’t believe her parents had forgotten her birthday but it was certainly annoying.

“Jarvis? Where is everyone?” There was no reply and she scowled up at the ceiling. “Oi, answer me you bucket of bolts!”

“Routine-maintenance in progress, access to basic servers only.”

“What?! Oh come on!” The girl pulled her phone out her pocket instead and opened the app to
track everyone else’s where-abouts.

Absolutely nothing.

“The hell?” She clicked the phone off and stood with it in her hand for a moment. So; everyone was apparently missing. On her birthday. And her mother just so happened to be one of the most powerful and talented magic-users in the realms.

Yeah, links could be drawn between those facts.

The teen spun on her heel, looking around the large open-plan living space. So…this was obviously her family – extended and otherwise – taking the piss, and knowing her parents they weren’t going to just pop out and yell ‘boo’, she was going to have to find them.

How does one find a group of invisible people?

She cast her gaze around again and then grinned.

“You’re all on the sofas, right?”

Tony’s voice came out of thin air sounding rather disgruntled. “How the hell did she guess that so quickly?”

“She is a genius.”

“Actually, Mjölnir leaves a sizable imprint on the cushions.” Evie pointed at the small but obvious dent in one of the cushions where the invisible hammer was sat. She grinned smugly when her family and friends faded into view on the sofas.

“I told you to put that wretched thing on the floor.” Tony smacked Thor round the head. “There goes the surprise!”

Loki ignored the other two and wrapped Evelyn up in a tight hug. “Happy birthday, dearest.” He looked down at his daughter with a fond smile. “Fifteen years – where have they all gone?”

“I know, right?” The girl hugged her arms around his waist tightly. “I feel like I’ve waited fifteen years for this birthday – you’re here. Like, actually here, not just for a couple of hours in the evening! I’ve got my Mum home for my birthday!!”

“Hey, hey little bird, you aren’t crying are you?”

“Just a tiny bit. I’m happy – it’s happy crying.”

Loki pressed a kiss into her hair. “I’m glad I’m finally here too. This was always the aim, from the very beginning. Get rid of the monsters; be a family.”

“And you did it. Took your bloody time, but you did it.”

“I did it.” Loki glanced at Tony and gestured him over. “Well, I may have had a little help. It was a family effort.” He reached an arm out to pull his husband into the hug.

“Hey, that’s what I’m here for.” Tony tickled Evie under her arm, making her squeal. “Happy birthday munchkin!”

“Dad! Don’t call me that!”
“I don’t care how old you think you are madam, you are always going to be my baby girl!”

Loki disentangled himself from his husband and daughter and took a step back. The rest of the group were still giving them a little bit of space before offering their own birthday greetings but grinned when they realised what the trickster was up to. With an elegant gesture he unwound the rest of the spell around the room.

Evie looked around then clapped her hands over her mouth with a surprised laugh.

Whilst they had never stinted for her birthday before, there had never been much by the way of decoration for the occasion. A banner or two when she was younger but after Loki had been taken her birthday had always become something of a subdued affair on the girl’s own insistence.

Now there were gold and silver balloons hanging from the walls, glitter appearing from nowhere in the ceiling and vanishing into sparkles whenever it landed on anything. A huge pile of presents sat on the coffee table by the sofas, a kaleidoscope of butterflies fluttering around it. Down the walls banners had been hung depicting various things the girl was interested. Four had the Hogwarts houses, there was one with a Tardis, some StarWars screen-shots, a 1967 Chevrolet Impala, a huge printout of a piece of piano music, dinosaurs, anything and everything Evie had loved over the years. There was even one for Disney with the lanterns she still set off every year framing it.

“Oh my God...”

“Oh my God!”

Fifteen years old or not, Evie had stars in her eyes as she spun around trying to take in the whole room at once. She had stopped enjoying her birthdays after losing her Mother, refusing to make a big deal out of them. Sure, kids loved their birthdays, but to Evelyn the main enjoyment had been seeing Loki for that brief amount of time. When she lost that the rest of the day lost meaning as well.

And now Loki was back and she had a reason to celebrate again.

They went through the usual routines of present giving, and presents from super-heroes are guaranteed to be awesome. Steve especially was excellent at picking out something extra special.

Evie was giddy with joy and excitement, although ninety percent of that was simply the fact that she finally had both parents with her. Being now fifteen years old the presents were more refined than she was used to – an antique watch, a collection of nineteenth century piano pieces, a spa session – they were very definitely ‘you are nearly a woman’ gifts. Well, other than Half Life 3, which was always going to be appreciated.

The day was spent exactly as it should be – vegging out eating cake and junk food whilst watching bad movies. Evie had already decided that she was going to use her show tickets for the Lion King and was happily half-way through a new book from Bruce. She was lying lengthways across the sofa, her feet comfortably propped up on Loki’s lap and bowl of toffee popcorn balanced on her stomach with the book propped against it. The sparkles were still falling from the ceiling, vanishing just before hitting anything and getting mildly annoying when they got in the way of the TV and the balloons were still bobbing around the place.

Tony sat down on the arm of the sofa beside his husband and nudged the trickster with his elbow. When he had Loki’s attention he nodded towards their daughter with a querying expression. Loki
glanced at the girl as well then nodded with a smile.

“Hey Birdy, we’ve got one more present for you.” Stark picked a piece of popcorn out of the bowl and threw it at Evie where it hit her on the nose.

“Huh?” The girl raised her gaze from her new book with a small frown. “What? Another present? But you’ve got me loads already!”

“Nice to know you appreciate it.” Loki said with a smile. “But your father is near enough the richest man on the planet, and I am a Prince of one of the most influential Realms; we are allowed to spoil you rotten if we feel like it.”

“Well I’m hardly going to complain, am I?” Evie sat up properly, putting the book and bowl down on the floor.

“Eyes closed, arms out.” Loki ordered with a smile.

“I’m fifteen, not five.” But said fifteen year old did what she was told, sitting like a little ballet doll with her arms in first position. She tried to guess what her parents had planned, but they hadn’t exactly given her any clues, and as she’d already said she hadn’t been expecting anything else.

For that reason she really wasn’t anticipating the warm heavy weight that suddenly materialised on her lap, fur tickling her arms.

“What the-?” She opened her eyes and let out a small squeal of delight. “Oh my God! Möðhy, you didn’t!”

The fluffy animal in her arms looked up at her with a startled expression.

“A Münchrat! You got me a Münchrat!”

The mini-mammoth tried to stand up on her lap and failed beautifully, over-sized feet flailing around before it gave up and curled up instead. Its trunk wrapped around Evie’s wrist in a plea for security and she hugged the little creature.

“It’s so cute!”

Tony leant over her shoulder to admire the Münchrat. Loki had let him meet the animal briefly so that he would know what he was getting into letting Evie have it, but he was always going to take the chance to observe an alien up close. The thing was certainly adorable. Just like the last time Evie had been introduced to the species it looked like a mini woolly mammoth. The trunk was longer, in comparison to the body, and the feet were oversized in the way that a puppy’s might be, but other than that it was the extinct ice-age animal in miniature.

“What is it?” Clint was the first over, looking absolutely fascinated as he reached a hand out to the little thing. “It’s like someone shrunk Jurassic Park!”

“It’s a Münchrat!” Evie couldn’t have looked more delighted. “Oh my God! I said I wanted one but I didn’t think you guys would actually get me one!”

“Neither did I until yesterday.” Tony tickled the little thing under the trunk and it made a snuffling noise at him.

“Yeah, but what is it?” Steve echoed Clint’s earlier question, but he had the sense to look at Thor for an answer.
“It is one of our native species. They are generally considered to be a bit of a pest, but the children like them.” Thor sounded like someone talking about their town’s hamster problem. “They are low maintenance and the tame ones like nothing more than to sleep on people’s laps.

Case in point, Evie’s one was already looking drowsy, it’s trunk still refusing to let go of her.

“They are a popular pet for children, as I say, but mostly seen in the same light as you Midgardian’s see rabbits.”

“And you consistently had at least three or four up until only two hundred years ago when Father told you to be rid of them.” Loki said with a sweet smile.

“What does it eat?” Bruce didn’t crowd round like everyone else did, but remained sat on the other sofa peering over the top of his glasses. “Does it need to be inoculated?”

“It is an omnivore, and will eat anything it can get hold of. To stay healthy it mostly needs vegetation, but a little bit of bacon now and then or some chicken will be appreciated.” Loki scratched the little creature’s head gently. “And it has one of the best immune systems known.” He glanced up at the scientist. “Infact I’m sure Evie will let you take a small blood sample since you may wish to have a look at said immune system.”

Evie frowned slightly at Bruce then nodded. “It may be able to cure cancer, so I guess so.” She hugged her new pet. “But not yet, I want it to like us all before you stick a needle in it!” She glanced up at Loki’s huff of laughter and watched as her mother placed a finger gently on the Münchrat’s head. In his other hand a test tube materialised that quickly filled with blood.

“There we go; one painlessly acquired blood-sample.” He capped it and threw it over at Bruce who almost fumbled the catch and had to juggle it slightly.

“Uh, thanks.” The scientist placed it down carefully on the coffee table. “So, Evie, what are you going to call your new friend?”

“I don’t know…” Evie looked down at the creature and – sensing her attention – it made a snuffling noise and booped her on the nose with it’s trunk. “Is it a boy or a girl?”

Loki looked slightly taken-aback. “It has tusks; can you not tell that it is male?”

“Well, it’s an alien; it’s hard to tell.” The girl picked it up so that it’s legs dangled comically as she made eye-contact with it. “So, you’re a boy. What’s your name little guy? Huh?”

“Micky the Mammoth.” Clint supplied instantly.

“No.” Evie rubbed noses with the Münchrat. “His name is Arthur.”

“That’s…possibly the most random name you could have thought of.” Tony said.

“And I don’t give a damn.” Evie went off into a babble of baby talk to her pet, which seemed to bask in the attention.

Tony nudged his husband gently in the side. “Is that thing going to grow much?”

“No, it’s fully grown. Although it could always grow fatter, I suppose.” Loki folded his arms, watching his daughter and the Münchrat getting to know each other. Evie looked up at her parents and although she was smiling happily her eyes were full of tears.
“Seriously guys, thank you. This has been, like, the *best* birthday I’ve ever had!” She pushed away Arthur’s trunk as he inquisitively tried to find out what was in her ear. “Thank you.”

The party went on early into the morning, with more junk food, more films and quite a bit of alcohol. Loki didn’t entirely understand Earth’s – or rather, America’s – drinking laws so Evie was allowed rather more beer than she should have had.

In the end Loki had to get her safely to bed – given that Tony had deemed it was his fault their daughter was inebriated – and Arthur had claimed the bottom of the girl’s bed as his own, curled up like a puppy. Evie was asleep as soon as her head hit the pillow, although Loki didn’t envy her the hangover she was likely to have the next morning. In the end, as a loving parent he decided to cure it for her, but sometime soon she was going to learn the horror that is a fully fledged hangover.

Loki himself hadn’t really taken part in the drinking, and Tony had a legendary alcohol-tolerance so neither were that worse for wear when they finished clearing away the party debris (like anyone else would help) and managed to get to bed themselves.

“That mammoth thing was such a good idea; she adored it.”

“It was only by luck I thought to pick it up when I was in Asgard.” Loki could only just see Stark in the faint light of the arc reactor, but could make out the smile on the man’s face. “This was…” He shook his head slightly. “I never dreamt I was going to be able to spend a proper birthday with her. I always assumed it would be secret evenings, and then that I would simply never see her again.”

“Well, now you’ve experienced the awesomeness of her birthday. Just wait until Christmas; it’s going to be insane since it’ll be the first one since I’ve been allowed to drink again. And I’m sure we can let Birdy have a drink or two as well.”

“She had more than one or two this evening; infact she’s lucky to have me at hand to stop the inevitable hangover.”

“Ah, you should have let her suffer; you never forget your first hangover.”

Loki laughed quietly. “No, that’s true.”

Tony waited expectantly for a moment then prodded his husband in the arm. “Come on, where’s the follow-up? Don’t leave me hanging here!”

“What? Oh, it is not much more than I drank too much and had a terrible headache the next day. Not exactly the best story ever.”

“You seem a little distracted. You okay?”

The question seemed to be amusing to Loki as he chuckled, rolling onto his side to face his partner. “I am sorry; I suppose even now I am still worrying about Alfheim.”

It was a legitimate concern, and Loki had hardly been off the subject so it wasn’t surprising he couldn’t let go of the problem. It was just depressing that even on his daughter’s birthday he was still worrying away about it.

“Come on, Capricorn, can’t we just have *one* night where you can turn off and not freak out over
it? We’ve had a lovely day, can we just make it last until morning please?”

Loki huffed in exasperation. “I want to go back to Alfheim. There are certain things I want to
determine now that it is not a battle-field.”

“Fucking hell Loki!” Tony sat up, the bed-covers falling down to his lap. “One night! Just one
fucking night without you banging on about it!”

“A whole realm was destroyed, Tony!”

“Yeah, and that’s horrible, but you’ve barely slept since it happened! I’m worried about you!”

Stark pinched the bridge of his nose. “I get that you feel like you have to do something, but you
can’t take all of this on yourself!”

“Someone has to.”

“It’s been a week; do you really think it’s even remotely safe?!”

“Of course it isn’t safe, but it will be a damn sight safer for someone with magic than for anyone
else.” Loki snapped. “And I am the only one who knows what to look for.”

Tony drew his knees up to his chest and rested his forehead on them with a heavy sigh. It meant
that the room was plunged into complete darkness as the arc reactor was obscured.

“This was meant to be our night. We had a great day with Birdy celebrating all things Evie, and
tonight was meant to be us celebrating that you successfully expelled a human being from your
uterus.”

Loki choked. “What?”

“It was meant to sound more romantic than that. But the point stands; I wanted this to be a special
night for us and you can’t get your head out of the war-zone to even realise that. You just want to
jump straight back into the battle-field!”

“Tony, I cannot help.”

“So if you want to go back there don’t think for one minute I’ll let you go alone!”

“I…what?”

Loki wasn’t often on the receiving end of his husband’s death-glare (he was usually the one doling
them out) and this one caught him unawares.

“Look, if you’re set on waltzing off into an alien no-mans-land I’m coming with you! You could
come up against anything there!”

“But…”

“So we are either doing this together or I’m making Thor stick Mjölnir on your chest!”

The trickster looked completely dumbfounded at his husband’s suggestion. It didn’t seem like the
idea had even occurred to him.

“Tony, it will be obscenely dangerous!”

“So? I’ll have the suit, you’ve got your magic, and why the hell did we get married if not to zoom
off to other planets for intergalactic wars?!”

Loki shook his head with a disbelieving laugh. “By the Norns…I do love you, you stupid mortal. I am half a million years old and yet someone like you can still surprise me.”

“Is that a yes? I believe you did promise to take me to Alfheim at some point.”

“Yes, as a honeymoon. We’ve been married for months, and a warzone is hardly a romantic setting.”

“But it’s so reminiscent of how we met!” Tony gave up on normal conversation and moved over to flop on top of his husband. “Seriously though, when are you intending to go?”

“You are heavy. And I don’t know. Sooner rather than later – we don’t know what is happening there and I don’t want us to risk losing vital evidence.”

“So, we talking about tomorrow? I’d better warn you here and now; if we tell the others they’ll insist on coming too, especially your lumbering brother.”

Loki sighed – which was difficult with Stark lying on top of him – and shook his head. “I know, I know. Thor will never let us go alone.”

“Covert ops it is then.” Tony kissed his husband’s nose. “Will we need to use the Bifrost?”

“No; I can get us both there and back. And anything we might find.”

“No severed heads.”

That made Loki laugh. “No, no severed heads, I promise.” He reached up and flicked Tony’s ear. “We could go now.”

“What? Seriously?!”

“It’s two in the morning, near enough, people will not be arising early given the amount of alcohol consumed so we have maybe five hours, six at a push and everyone else assuming we’ve slept in.”

Tony sat up, looking down on the trickster. “Wait, seriously? You want to go storming into enemy territory at two in the morning on – can I remind you here – our daughter’s birthday.”

“You were the one who wanted to spend the night together.”

“Well, yeah, but not like that.”

Loki pushed the man back so that he was able to sit up as well. “You want me to stop worrying about it all; this is how I stop worrying. The sooner the better.”

“What are you even looking for? What do you expect to find?”

“I will not know until I find it! There are certain artefacts that I want to know the fate of.”

Tony knew nothing about what sort of artefacts Alfheim could be hiding, and it was debatable if Loki wanted to save them from destruction or was simply using the opportunity to get his hands on some powerful objects. However, it was true they could do with any intel they could get since the realm was no longer in Heimdall’s view. Stark couldn’t deny that it had been niggling away at the back of his own mind that there was a chance an attack could occur on another realm, that it could occur on Earth.
They had fought off the chitauri and Loki as a team, but Loki’s heart hadn’t really been in that fight and the fact that all the chitauri had dropped dead the instant their nerve-station had been nuked had been the winning move. If the might of the Aesir and Elven armies had fallen to these strange invaders, Earth really didn’t have a chance.

“Yeah. Yeah okay. I don’t like it, really don’t like it but it would be nice to get the elephant out of the room.”

“I hardly like it either.” Loki leant in and pressed a quick kiss to his husband’s lips. “But it’s necessary.”

It wasn’t technically necessary to go then and there, but Tony felt that he’d already made (and lost) that argument. And arguing with Loki never usually ended well anyway – the God was the most single-minded person Stark had ever met and that was saying a lot.

Jarvis was less than pleased with the idea, but was forbidden from alerting anyone else to the foolish venture so responded in sulky silence as he delivered the Ironman suit to the room. Not knowing anything about Alfheim, and even less about the state it was now in, Tony put on some running skins; even if the suit was temperature controlled it never hurt to be comfortable. He also ensured the faceplate on the suit was down since God knows what crap had been stirred up in that battle.

“Are you ready?” Loki waited for his partner to nod before resting his hand on the metal arm of the suit. The contact wasn’t technically necessary for the spell to work, but it made the landing cleaner and meant that the trickster didn’t have to concentrate so much.

Tony still wasn’t used to the sudden swirling black that he was pulled into, and although it didn’t cause any nausea he never felt entirely comfortable during a teleportation. He appreciated that it was a better way to travel than the Bifrost though. For a start he barely felt the landing, just a sudden change in texture under his metal boots.

However, if the landing wasn’t a big deal the way every warning light lit his vision certainly caught his attention.

Whatever his expectations of Alfheim were – battlefield or not – he first impressions were of such thick dust clouds that beyond his own warning lights he couldn’t see more than two feet infront of his face. However, that was more than enough to see Loki suddenly gasp, wide-eyed and clutching at his throat. He went down to one knee, doubled over.

“Loki! You okay!!” Tony went to help him but the trickster had already waved a hand and something began materialising over his face. “I thought you could breathe any atmosphere with oxygen!”

“There’s no oxygen here.” Loki sounded horrified at the discovery. “The atmosphere has been stripped!”

“How is that possible?”

“I don’t know.” The trickster slowly stood up again, adjusting the mask he had conjured over his face. It was horribly reminiscent of a world war one trenches gas mask, although given an Asgardian twist. The two glass eyes stared blankly at Tony.

“That thing’s hideous.”

“It saved me from mustard gas more than once.” Loki looked around, then spread his hands out.
With the gesture the heavy clouds of dust blew away, revealing nothing more than burnt rock and grey ash.

“You could have landed us somewhere closer to a city or something.”

“This was the main gateway to the capital.”

“Jesus.” There was absolutely nothing to give that away – the ground had been razed. Tony had seen photos of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and even they had had some structures left standing. This was total obliteration. Loki must have been feeling the same horror since he didn’t even comment on the use of another deity’s name. “I’m reading extraordinary levels of radiation. I mean, my suit’s good, but I’ve got about two hours before I’m flirting with serious health risks.”

“I am sensing the same. And the toxicity in the atmosphere…I’ve never seen the like. This realm’s air should have the same basic elemental make-up as Earth; nitrogen, oxygen, carbon dioxide…”

“Yeah. I’ve got gaseous hydrofluoric acid, chlorine, gaseous formaldehyde…these shouldn’t even be able to exist together. What the fuck happened here?”

Loki swept more of the choking clouds away, still not revealing anything more than blasted rock. “I do not know…”

“What do you know of that has this sort of fire power? I mean; even a nuke wouldn’t do this.”

“Besides perhaps myself there is nothing I know of. And I could level a city, at a push, but this…this is realm-wide.” Loki’s voice echoed oddly within his gas-mask, giving the silent landscape an even eerier feel. “Come, let us see if anything remains.”

It was slow going, picking their way across the terrain. Occasionally the suit would spike a radiation warning as they passed certain areas and Loki had to periodically wave the smog away so that they could see where they were going. There was a suspicious lack of evidence that a battle had taken place there. True, there was no evidence that anything had ever been there, but knowing a horrendous battle had gone down it was frightening that there were no bodies, no discarded weapons, no broken armour. It was as if someone – something – had gone through and swept the whole realm clear.

“There! Two o’clock!” Loki suddenly pointed off to their right. He had already made more concessions to the toxic atmosphere and now his hands were encased in heavy leather gloves.

Something was rising up out of the smog and as they neared it resolved into the shattered remains of a wall, maybe two or three feet high. Behind it other scraps of rubble denoted where other foundations may have been.

“Well, it’s something…” Tony kicked over a brick to reveal a blacked, burnt side. “This must have been a big-ass building if any of it is still standing.”

“It was the temple. This whole area was the temple district. Hospital, research areas, school, the library. Oh they had such a library here.” Loki stepped over a pile of bricks scanning the ground. “This was the nerve centre of the city – the Elves put such store by their learning that they placed all things associated with it around their temple to the Norns.”

“What did it look like here? Asgard?”

“No, infact it bore more similarities to Midgardian cities. London maybe. Many older areas, architecture across the time periods and some superstructures, but not as many as in a place like
New York. This was a marvellous city.”

“I thought you weren’t allowed here.”

“That was only a recent thing after I stole a certain artefact they held here.”

Tony picked up a piece of tile – roof or floor he couldn’t tell – and tried to see what the pattern was on it. “Why steal it?”

“To prove that I could and therefore it was safer in Asgard. There were other things I meant to take too, for the same reason, but the guards were alerted after the first one and I didn’t get a chance.”

“Looks like you were right then.” He threw the tile back down and looked around. “So; I guess it’s these other things we’re here for now. What are they and where would they be?”

Loki shook his head. “They aren’t here. From a distance and with all the radiation I could not be certain, but this is where they should be, and they aren’t.” He kicked at a stone. “Shit!”

Tony watched his husband stalk off further into the ruins of the building, the suit keeping track of Loki’s life-signs when the fog swallowed him up. As a place, Alfhiem meant little to nothing to him. He didn’t know the people and had never seen what it looked like before, but this desolate wasteland was frightening. Loki’s description of a grand city, and now all that was left was this, it was a horrible thought. Earth had nothing that could wipe nearly all trace of civilisation away. Even an atomic bomb left debris and other than the foundations of the largest structure in Alfhiem there was no debris to be seen.

If these creatures turned such a power on Earth humanity would fall.

Earth would fall. He could already see it now; the oceans flash-drying, forests and jungles burning to ash in moments, all organic matter combusted, all the grand buildings of the world smashed to dust…

For a moment it was horribly easy to imagine it.

“Tony, there’s nothing here.” Loki reappeared, the glass disks of his gas-mask gleaming red from the dull sky. “We should go.” His face was obscured but the defeated slump to his shoulders spoke volumes.

“Should we go via Asgard? Let them know what it’s like here now?”

“I’ve already spoken to Heimdall and told him the state of play here.”

“Right.” It was pretty obvious there was something Loki wasn’t saying; and Tony was willing to bet Stark Industries that the trickster hadn’t told Heimdall either. He didn’t comment though – it wasn’t a conversation/argument he wanted to have in a place like this. Instead he simply let Loki grab his arm again and pull him back into the spinning darkness of the teleport.

If Evie noticed that her parents seemed more tired than usual she didn’t comment. Having unknowingly escaped her own hangover thanks to Loki’s magic she simply assumed that they were both suffering their own aftereffects of her birthday. And given that others among the Tower’s inhabitants were certainly wearing sunglasses inside it was a reasonable assumption.

And besides, with a new pet to acquaint herself with it wasn’t like the girl was going to have her
mind on anything else.

Coulson called in again – looking once again worse for wear – to complain about a large power plant that Hydra had been in command of being blown to smithereens losing all personnel and any intel the place might have had. It was becoming a familiar story and all the Avengers could tell him was that it wasn’t them.

It was Steve who took the call, and who had to spread the bad news to the others, less than impressed that Coulson was still trying to blame them for it.

“Can’t we just tell him it’s the Russian’s and be done?” Evie asked cheerfully. She was sat on the floor, Arthur playing with her shoelaces.

“Not really acceptable in this day and age. Fifty years ago that would have been the ideal answer.”

“Middle East?”

Steve cast an annoyed glance at the girl. “Really? Or are you just throwing names out in the air now?”

“Of course I’m throwing names out in the air. You think I know anything about this shit?”

“Don’t swear.” Tony flicked her ponytail. “And stop pissing about; none of us have a clue what’s going on.” He glanced over at Loki, who was brooding silently on one of the sofas. “And right now I think there are bigger fish to fry than some rouge terrorist group.”

“In what way?”

“We went to Alfheim last night.” Loki said softly.

Of the six of them – Loki, Tony, Evie, Steve, Thor and Pepper – in the room only Pepper didn’t voice her horror at this latest piece of news. Thor was on his feet, Evie was complaining loudly and Arthur was trying to hide his head up the girl’s jumper to get away from the noise.

“I am not going to say a thing more until you all stop shouting.” The trickster sounded uncomfortably like a school teacher with the way he said it, but gradually the protests died down. Steve ran a tired hand down his face.

“Seriously. You two seriously went back to a place that as far as we know could have been crawling in enemy fighters. Was it?”

“Hardly.”

Tony gave the description of what they had done and what had happened since Loki tended to get slightly too poetic when explaining things. That didn’t mean the man skimmed on the details though. On the contrary, he made it very clear what state they had found the realm in and the lack of absolutely everything. The suit had recorded it all – as usual – and he had Jarvis (who was still peeved with him) put up some stills on the TV.

If the others were shocked by what they saw, Thor was devastated. However, he wasn’t given a chance to express this dismay because Loki took over from his husband.

“The lack of structure left standing is indeed a frightening prospect, but it was another conspicuous absence that should really be concerning us at this moment.”
Tony glanced at him sharply. So far the Prince still hadn’t told him of his deductions. Thor’s brow had furrowed at the statement too, but evidently for different reasons.

“What did Alfheim have? You already secured the Gauntlet in Asgard’s vaults, what was left?”

“There was a diadem set with precious stones.”

“I recall it, what of it?”

Loki rolled his eyes at his brother’s lack of thought. “The central stone was known as a power gem, it was a highly magical item, hence why it was stored in the centre of their temple for safekeeping.”

“So? You said all was destroyed, could this gem not have been destroyed also?”

“No. It was a misnomer. That was no mere gem of power and nothing could have destroyed it.” Loki looked down at his hands briefly, a quick but obvious show of fear. “It was one of the Infinity Stones, Thor, and there was no trace of it left on Alfheim. Whoever those attackers were, whoever sent them, they have one of the Infinity Stones.”

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“I don’t get it.”

When there’s a big reveal in life, those are the words to bring it right back down again. Evie was looking between Loki and Thor with a total lack of comprehension.

“What’s an Infinity Stone?” She patted Arthur’s head as he stopped trying to hide now that the noise had died down. “Why is it a problem?”

Thor gestured at his brother, knowing the trickster was in a far better position to answer the question. Loki folded his hands on his knees as everyone else followed Thor’s lead and looked at him.

“There is an artefact, known as the Infinity Gauntlet. It is a vessel made to hold the six Infinity Stones and can give the wearer...Well, the legends say the power of a God.” He glanced at Thor and laughed self-deprecatingly. “Not a God as we Aesir deem ourselves, but a God more in the Christian sense. All-powerful, all-knowing, all-seeing. There would be nothing that person could not do. Creator, destroyer – they could wipe out the universe with a thought. But they need all six stones in the gauntlet for that supremacy. However, each Stone is thought to have their own unique power and alone are formidable in their own rights. The stones are all named for these powers, although it is not known what exactly they do since they have not been wielded in living memory.”

“Alfheim had the Space Gem. It was rumoured to be able to destroy all living material it comes into contact with.” Thor said quietly.

“Well let’s hope whoever took it doesn’t know that and takes themselves out with it.” Tony sounded flippant but his worried frown made it clear he was concerned. Loki waved his comment away.

“No doubt that will be the case. If nothing else it is near impossible to use one of the stones without the wielder themselves already knowing magic and power.”

“Someone like you then?”

Loki smirked. “And just what did you think the Tesseract was?”

“...What?...”

“Either way, it is not relevant now. The other five stones are all out of the way, as is the Gauntlet itself, so we needn’t worry about them.”

Tony slumped back in his chair with a groan. “Does anyone remember a few months ago when we thought Hydra were our biggest problem? Good times, huh?”

Steve huffed with morbid laughter. “Beginning to agree with you there. I like enemies I understand and can shoot.”

“I’d rather we all just went back to the time when the biggest problem was trying to turf out Tony’s latest drunken one-night-stand.” Pepper added quietly. “I don’t know; Hydra, Shield, aliens, more aliens...I thought I made it clear at the start that the suit was too much. This is all just crazy.” She smiled slightly at Evie. “Although some things are an improvement around here.”
“You’re just saying that because now you get to shop for two.”

“You don’t know the difference between Oscar La Rente and Rupaul!” Pepper shook her head and glanced at Tony again. “So what now? All of this alien stuff is all very well, but for the Avengers Earth is the priority. Hydra is your priority. Thor and Loki have to sort out who they’re fighting for and what is most important to them and we need to fight what’s going on down here. Need I remind you Hydra tried to shoot this tower down? And what they tried to do to Evie?! These alien things aren’t even here!”

“Y’know, as much as I’m married to Loki, you are totally my business wife.” Tony had rested his chin on his cupped hand and was smiling at the woman fondly. “We’re all freaking out over ET and you’re completely on task and trying to make us all see reason.” He nudged Loki. “This right here? This is why I’m still alive.”

“No, ‘this’ is why you still have a company. But you need to all get your heads back down on this planet. If we start getting random Independence Day style attacks then we can start with the ray guns, but until then, Hydra is what you need to worry about. Or for the love of God please find out who’s behind all those attacks on the Hydra bases and get Coulson off our backs because he’s even started bugging me now!” Pepper rose fluidly from her seat and smoothed down her skirt. “And speaking of, I have a video conference with your Japanese branch, who want to know why Ironman was nowhere when that annoying mysterious organisation from destroying an old power plant Hydra were storing things in.”

“I would be jealous, but it has been made very clear that that woman is the only reason you are alive, let alone that you still have a company.” Loki waited until Pepper had left the room to make the comment, although he meant it as a compliment.

“Hey, she didn’t tell on us when she caught us that time; we still owe her one.”

“That we do.”

“And she even got the sofa cleaned for me.”

Evie looked disgusted. “Can you guys not? Seriously, none of us want to hear that kind of shit!”

Thor thumped his fist on the arm of the sofa and barked “Seconded!” before either parent could berate the girl for swearing.

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Pepper’s little pep talk (Tony wanted to patent that phrase) did at least get the collective hive mind back to the Hydra Problem. Loki was distant, and Thor very obviously was still distracted but it did make him consider going back to Asgard.

Tony had gone back into the phone that they had taken off the Hydra body when the tower had been attacked – and it felt like that was months ago that that had happened – and was slowly going back through the wiped data-base to find any traces of information that could have been left. He wasn’t hopeful, but given the amount of time that had passed chances were the security on it would be out of date and therefore easier for him to get around. It was a nice little collaborative project for him to team up with Jarvis on too.

It would have been nice to have some other help, but Bruce wasn’t such a whizz with computer systems, and Loki had fallen into a rather sullen mood that made him less than pleasant to try and work with. Evie chipped in when she could, but was still learning how to work with code and
stripping a system back entirely was beyond her capabilities.

So it was down to Tony and Jarvis.

“Hey, I’ve brought food.” Evie came into the lab with a laden tray and a big grin, Arthur trotting by her side.

“You’re a star.” Tony looked down from his holographic display at the insistent tugging on his trouser leg. He disentangled the material from Arthur’s trunk. “Hey little guy, that isn’t edible you know.” He grinned at his daughter. “He seems pretty house trained already, well done!”

“He’s really tame, and Möðhy said the breeders always make sure they’re fully house-trained before selling them to anyone.” Evie put a plate of lasagne on the work-top for Tony and pulled up a stool so that she could balance her own plate on her lap. “So, what you got?”

“Bits and pieces really.” Stark waved a hand and the hologram spun and a brought up a collection of data. He didn’t explain what it was saying, giving the girl the chance to work it out for herself. Evie frowned at the readings for a moment.

“They look like fractured co-ordinates. Is this from the GPS?” She didn’t wait for a reply. “Or… are these text messages with co-ordinates? Ah! No, these are where this phone sent messages or calls from! That’s the tower’s Lat and Long.”

Tony ruffled her hair. “That’s my girl!” He pointed out several strings of numbers that weren’t as broken up as the others. “I’ve been digging around and these are the most complete I can get at the moment. It’s a location in New York – I’ve got that much – but there’s not much to go on.” He glanced at his daughter. “What would you do next?”

“Me? Uh…” Evie stared at the numbers again, obviously not expecting to be asked for an opinion. “Um, Jarvis, could you…uh…is it possible to find out the owners of the properties around that location…”?

“Of course, Miss Evelyn.” A list of names immediately took over the holographic display – evidently Tony had already asked this question, and had just been seeing what his girl could do. Evie recognised this, but still took the challenge and ran with it when her father looked at her expectantly.

“Okay.” She scanned the list of names carefully. It was an industrial area and the various buildings in the two blocks that Jarvis identified mostly belonged to businesses and corporations. Nothing jumped out immediately as an unusual name or something that shouldn’t be there. “Uh, I dunno, this all looks normal; I don’t know enough about these types of companies to know what to look out for.”

“Fair enough, you know what to do, you just need a few economics lessons. Or to run a multi-billion dollar company for a few days – And no that is not happening any time soon!” Tony’s voice was muffled through a mouthful of lasagne as he pointed with his fork at the names. “Now, you were right that you’re looking for a weird entry, and if you were a bit more up to date on what’s going on in the business world you’d know this company,” And he tapped the name twice to select it. The rest of the list vanished and a fact-file on the high-lighted company came up.

“Oh, I see.” Evie smiled slightly. “They’re a subsidiary of a company that went bust three years ago, right? That’s prime real-estate there; someone else should have bought up that ware-house by now.”
“See; you know exactly what to do, you just needed a little more information on current economics.”

“I’ll start reading the Financial Times or something. So now what? That building could just be the local drug cartel.” Evie put her plate of half-finished food on the floor, where it was quickly demolished by Arthur. “How do you know that that’s what we’re looking for?”

“I don’t. But it’s the only place in those co-ordinates that even slightly waves a red flag so it’s our best bet. It used to belong to a company that makes medical supplies; it was their storage facility and after what those Hydra goons said their plans were…”

“Yeah,” Evie waved her hands around her head. “Turn me into Frankenstein’s Monster, wooo.” She was evidently far less bothered by the idea that Hydra had wanted to slice her open in the name of science than her parents were. “So you’re thinking that’s where Hydra have their medical facility hidden?”

“Makes sense.” There was a crunch of china and they both looked down to see Arthur – having finished the uneaten lasagne – starting to chomp on the plate.

“Crap! Möðhy said they eat everything!” Evie laughed and rescued the knife and fork before the Münchrat could start on them too. “It won’t hurt him.”

“Waste of a good plate, though.” Tony looked back up at the holographic display. “So, looks like I’d better tell the others we’ve got a target.”

“Any chance you’ll let me come?”

“What do you think?”

The girl pouted. “Fine.” Then she brightened up. “Ooh, can I get my ears pierced again?”

“They’re already pierced…”

“Yeah, but I want to get another set just above these ones. Still in the lobe, nothing going near the cartilage.”

Tony frowned. “What did Loki say?”

“To ask you.”

The man shrugged. “Well, I don’t see a problem with it – they’re your ears. As long as you don’t start stretching them it’s not like it’s permanent.” He was rewarded with an over-enthusiastic hug from his extremely happy daughter.

“Thank you! I’ll go and get Aunty Pep to come with me the moment she’s done with work!”

“You don’t want me or your mum with you?”

“You’ve got a possible Hydra base to go and fuck up; I don’t want to get in the way of that.”

“Don’t swear, but noted.”

Tony decided that they weren’t going to need the full team, so didn’t wait to call everyone back to the tower. It was a small building and couldn’t be holding that many people – if it was even still
manned – so he grabbed the Avengers who hadn’t gone out for the day. This meant it was a rather
ragtag band that set off to the industrial side of Manhattan.

Loki had been drifting around the place and had agreed to go, Rhodey could always be relied on,
and then they had Sam and Thor. The five of them were not particularly inconspicuous; by this
point even Sam was a pretty famous face around the city, but Loki teleported the group to their
location. Given that they were still in New York they weren’t going to need to worry about getting
stuck there.

The building was non-descript; a small warehouse of the same 60’s architecture as the ones around
it and nothing to mark it out as anything out of the ordinary.

“No life-signs detected, sir.” Jarvis intoned. This was seconded a moment later by Loki.

“He is correct, beyond the rats. This place is empty.”

“Is it rigged?”

The trickster looked up at the blank windows. “Nothing that I can sense. We should be cautious,
but I believe it is safe.”

Given that the district seemed to be deserted there was no hesitation in simply going in through the
front door. It was locked – of course – but when Ironman wants to open a door, that door opens
pretty quickly.

The place felt thoroughly abandoned; dark, damp and chilly. Even when Loki sent a burst of magic
through the electrics and got the lights working it was gloomy.

“Uh, are you sure this is the place?” Sam had his Flacon pack on his back but the wings were
stowed away and he didn’t really suppose he was going to need them inside a building. “Seems
pretty deserted.”

“I did say I wasn’t sure anything was here. And even if there had been they could have long got rid
of it all.” Tony raised his face plate – Rhodey did the same – and smiled grimly. “Look, there are
four floors, it won’t take us long to go through this place and make certain. I’ll take this one, Sam
you’ve got first floor, Rhodey second, Loki and Thor take third and we’ll be done in no time.”

“No time. You could have sent Jarvis and the suits to do this.” Rhodey grumbled.

“Yeah, yeah, but then you’d have all bitched about me not letting you do your jobs properly. Now
shoo, go do your jobs.”

Loki dropped the others off on their various floors whilst Tony stomped off to see what he could
find on the ground. Just from a first glance it wasn’t looking hopeful. He had been hoping for at
least some scattered equipment, some paperwork, something to show that Hydra had been here.

However, all there seemed to be were endless dirty floors, rat droppings, miscellaneous puddles
which one could only hope were water and broken glass from the busted windows. It was hardly
what he’d been hoping for. The place even smelt bad.

“You guys got the same amount of nothing?”

“Looking at absolute zippo up here.” Sam’s voice came through immediately. “I’m only two
rooms in though. There’s been some flooding by the looks of it and I don’t trust the floor.”
“Get the wings out then flyboy. Anyone else? Anything interesting?”

James replied with a negative as well, but there was radio silence from the two Gods. That wasn’t necessarily surprising since neither were very good at keeping contact. Tony left them to it – they were big boys, they could handle themselves.

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“This looks to be a waste of time.” Loki stepped over the remains of a door that had rotted from its hinges. “I don’t know what Stark thought was in this place, but I cannot believe Hydra would have stored anything important here.”

“You are an incessant grump at the moment, brother.”

“I am merely frustrated with the situation. We know that Hydra have or had a base in the city, and that they were intending to take Evie there; this does not look like a laboratory to me.”

“It doesn’t look like anything.” Thor glanced out of one of the filthy windows. “Hey, you can just see the top of the tower from here.”

“Fascinating.” Loki was twisting his hands through the air, an expression of intense annoyance on his face. “Look, no-one has been up here for months. This is pointless.”

“You are certain?”

“Absolutely.” The trickster didn’t wait for the other God to agree with him and teleported the two of them back down to where Tony was standing in the entranceway. The man didn’t even look surprised to see them appear suddenly infront of him.

“Nothing?”

“Nothing.” Loki felt compelled to at least add a ‘sorry’ to his confirmation when Tony’s shoulders visibly slumped – suit or not. Sam and Rhodes turned up moments later both with the same outcome; the building was completely empty and appeared to have been so for quite some time.

“Fine. Sorry guys; looks like this was a fucking waste of time.” Stark kicked a hole through the nearest wall for good measure. “Right. Fine. Sam and Rhody, you guys have a quick look in the warehouse next door, just in case, and I’ll take the one on the other side. Thor and Loki just… uh…”

“We can check to see if there are basements?” The trickster suggested.

“The building’s blue-prints didn’t show anything subterranean.”

“It’s worth a look.”

“Whatever.”

It was quite obvious that the lack of anything Hydra had seriously pissed Tony off; he didn’t like being wrong and was currently being proved very wrong indeed. He stalked off into the other building, leaving his companions to their own tasks.

“Well, he’s a bundle of joy right now.” Rhodey rolled his eyes and turned to the Falcon. “Come on; quicker we’re in, quicker we’re out.” He looked up at the other building and sighed. “At least this one’s only two stories.”
Sam’s wings unfolded at those words. “I’ll take second.”

Loki and Thor watched the two soldiers go off into the other building, leaving them standing in the grimy alleyway alone.

“Are there any basements around here?” Thor asked, looking around as if there was going to be a neon flashing sign somewhere.

“I have no idea – I said it to shut my husband up. Give me a moment and I will see what I can sense.”

The thunder God took a few steps back to give his brother room to work. He had seen Loki do similar spells before and knew it needed space to be effective. The trickster had spread his hands out and a moment later sent what looked like an orange force-field flying out over the ground. It sparkled there for a moment, like a rather strange frost, before sinking down through the dirty tarmac.

“Anything?”

Loki had his eyes closed and hands out, a faint frown of concentration on his face. “Electrics, phone lines, water pipes. The usual. I’m not seeing any sign of a room of any sort.” He slowly walked towards the building they had just left – eyes still shut. “There’s a very large sewage system here, they haven’t put in fibre optic cable yet, and…oh, that’s unusual.”

“What? What is?” Thor came up to his brother who was now looking up at the building they had already looked through.

“There’s a lead plate under the front three rooms. I can’t see through lead but that’s not a normal feature in a building.” Loki opened his eyes and frowned at the window he was now facing. “I can’t tell if there’s necessarily a room under there, or perhaps simply a huge safe, but there’s something.”

“Excellent! Come then, see if you can find an entrance or something!”

Loki didn’t express his annoyance at the order as he sent the spell out again. It fed back as a 3D map, almost like sonar. He couldn’t necessarily ‘see’ what was down there but was able to build up an image as if he were using ultra-sound. Despite not being able to sense any further than the lead plate he could follow the shape of it and traced along until he could see some sort of opening.

“Follow me.” He quickly re-entered the building and walked to the staircase, following what he was sensing under the dirty floor. “Here.” He tapped the side of the stairs, the place where cupboards were often put and now that they looked closely it was possible to see the scars in the woodwork where hinges had once been. “There was a doorway of some sort here at one point. It’s been boarded up and disguised but there was something here, and the plating under us leads to here.” He took a step back and grandly swept an arm towards the part of the wall in question. “Care to see what’s behind there?”

Thor grinned.

It only took one hit from Mjölnir to knock a sizable hole into the side of the stairs. The rotten timbers gave way and they were lucky there were steel girders holding up the main part of the staircase since even demi-Gods get a headache when a building falls on them. Loki gestured at the gaping hole.

“Ladies first.” He dodged back as his brother aimed a joking swing at his head. “Go on, there’s no
sign of any explosives but we don’t know what’s down there; it’s good to have the muscle up front.”

“You just want me to be your shield.”

“Of course.”

Thor chuckled but happily enough stepped into the void under the stairs. He had to check himself almost immediately when the empty space opened up into a steep spiral staircase leading down into the darkness beneath them.

“Loki? Some light would be appreciated.”

“Hold on, I think the main electrics of the building continue on down here.” Almost as Loki said it the hidden stairwell lit up with buzzing strip lighting circling down the walls into the unknown depths. “Better?”

“Better.” It was an old fashioned iron-cast staircase that echoed with every heavy step as they made their way down. “Should we not tell Tony we have found something?”

“We don’t know what we’ve found yet; it could be a cold-war-era bomb shelter for all we know.” Loki saw his brother’s face crease into a confused frown below him. “Never mind, let us just say there are a few things that it could be other than a secret Hydra base.”

The spiral stairs ended in a tiny hallway with the same strip lighting and a single door at the end. It was a much cleaner area than the disused building above them, which already said something about the place. Evidently something had been going on, especially given that the entrance to this area had been hidden.

Thor didn’t bother with Mjölnir – the door clearly had no lock – so just pushed the handle down and it opened smoothly.

“Oh…”

The thunder God wasn’t someone easily shocked, but the room that he stepped into managed to silence him. They could at least say for definite that they had found the Hydra base, even if it had been abandoned.

There was a steel operating table in the middle of the room – which itself wasn’t all that big – belts and straps hanging loose at the sides. It was more than clear that whoever was on that table would not be willing and most likely not anaesthetised. Around the walls there were large racks of medical instruments and scanning equipment, a white board was set up ready for diagrams and there were glass receptacles ready and waiting for whatever might be pulled out of the unfortunate soul on the table.

“Well, we’ve found what we were looking for at least. Time to call Tony, I think.” Thor was still staring at the room, so the sudden thump behind him made him spin round with his hammer at the ready. “Loki!”

Claws grabbing his arms, hauling him out of the cell. Struggling was no good, it was never any good but that wouldn’t ever stop him from fighting with everything left in him. The rough belts on the table had scarred his body by now – and bit deeper every time they pinned him down.

Slicing, cutting, ripping, peeling back flesh and muscle and bone until there was nothing of him left. Day after day after day…
“..ki! Loki!”

The trickster blinked and the images of the chitauri faded away to reveal his brother knelt in front of him, big blue eyes unusually frightened.

“What…?”

He was sat on the floor, his back against the wall, and had absolutely no idea how he had got there. In fact, he didn’t even remember stepping into the room.

“Are you alright?” The question was laced with frantic concern but Thor tried to keep his voice level.

“I…”

“Loki, are you alright?!”

“Yes…Yes I think so.” The trickster took a deep breath, running a shaking hand through his hair.

“What happened?”

“I do not know. I looked round and you were sat here on the floor. I thought you were unconscious, but your eyes were open and you were mouthing something. Were you having a vision like Mother does?”

“Hardly.” His voice was shaking, and when he looked down at his hands he realised that they were too.

“Here.”

Loki allowed his brother to slowly help him back to his feet.

“I think I just had a flash-back...I was back in that terrible place with the chitauri, it seemed so real…” He took a deep breath and looked around the room, then scowled. “Ah. Well that makes sense. No doubt I was triggered by this place.”

“Evidently.” Thor had his hand on his brother’s shoulder, still visibly concerned. “Are you alright now?”

The answer was obviously no, but he wasn’t going to say it quite like that. “Well, I can’t say I feel particularly good, but I am not about to faint or something.” The trickster pushed Thor away and looked around the room again with disgust. “This is hideous. I am going to burn this building to the ground once we’re done here.”

“Done? What do you intend to do?”

“We need anything Hydra may have left. This place was obviously left in running order so they have not finished with it. There could be some important things here.”

Thor didn’t know what could constitute as important, but since Loki seemed to know he was willing to follow the trickster’s lead. His brother still wasn’t looking one hundred percent but as always wouldn’t thank anyone for pointing that out. If nothing else it was noticeable that he was quite shaken by the sudden and unexpected flash-back; he’d never experienced one before, and it had completely taken him by surprise.

“Right; you look through those filing cabinets in the corner – we need every scrap of paper left. I’ll
look through the computer systems.”

“Should we not call Tony -?”

“I can work a computer, Thor.”

The thunderer took the hint and went off to pillage the cabinet pointed out to him. Straight off the bat he could tell that it had been emptied of anything useful. There was a single divider in one of the drawers with the acronym E. STARK on it – this was obviously the place where they had wanted to bring Evie had they succeeded in grabbing her. Even the thought of the girl in a place like this had Thor breaking out in a cold sweat. It was clear from the set-up of the room that Evie wouldn’t have left it alive.

He took the divider out and hid it in his armour – Loki wasn’t stupid, and knew what was intended to happen here, but he didn’t have to see the direct evidence of it.

“There’s nothing here – they emptied it all.”

“The hard-drives have been wiped, but I can get this all back to the tower and let Tony rip it apart.” Loki waved a hand and the computers vanished – Thor supposed that he had sent them straight to the labs.

They quickly scoured the rest of the room, but there was little else to be found. Loki started systematically incinerating things as he decided they weren’t useful and it took a very short amount of time before they were through with everything.

“I’m sure you should have taken photographs or checked for fingerprints.” Thor made a weak attempt at humour that fell flat.

“I can reproduce this whole setup as a hologram – and there were no fingerprints, I am not an idiot.” The reply was acerbic but Thor didn’t take it personally. “Come on, we’re done here. Let’s go.”

MWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWM

“They’re so pretty!” Evie turned her head this way and that, admiring the new stones adorning her ears above the existing piercings. “Thank you Aunty Pep!”

“I keep telling you; it’s your Dad’s money.”

“Yes, but still, thank you!”

The two women were sat in the kitchen eating the burritos they’d bought on the way home for lunch. At least, Pepper was eating; Evie was admiring her new earrings with her phone on selfie mode. They had gone out to Tiffany’s again, like they had for her first piercings. Technically it wasn’t a place that usually put earrings in, but for a Stark they would fly to the moon and back, so were more than happy to do Evie’s second set. They were just simple studs, but on Tony’s pay-check they were also diamonds.

“I can’t wait to show Möðhy and Dad! Maybe they’ll let me get a tattoo next!” Evie grinned as Pepper choked on her coffee. “Kidding. Although to be fair, Möðhy could probably vanish it if I ever got fed up with it or it was crap.”

“Young lady, if you ever got a tattoo I would hope you went to the very best artist around and would not have an issue with it being crap.”
“I promise.” Evie finally put her phone down and started on her lunch. “Do you think everyone will be back any time soon?”

“I imagine so.”

“Should we have got some lunch for them too?”

“They’re all adults; they can sort their own food out.”

“Guess so.”

It was another two hours before people started coming home. Steve had been out at the art gallery with Natasha and it was anyone’s guess where Clint had gone but he came back with quite a few shopping bags. Tony, Rhodes and Sam came back as a trio, flying on to the landing platform in a neat formation and were quickly informed that Loki and Thor had found what they were after. That didn’t go down so well.

Tony stomped off to his lab to have a look at the computers Loki had sent him whilst the two soldiers were left to fill everyone else in on where they had been and why. Evie was beyond smug that she had helped with this mission, even if only in putting together the plan with her Dad. It wasn’t much, but it made the girl feel like she was doing something useful. She hopped off to the gym with a new spring in her step afterwards.

Down in the labs Tony had put his music systems on full blast, already beginning to rip into the new computer pieces. He wasn’t overly hopeful there was anything in there but it was always worth looking – they’d thought the phone was empty and look where that had taken them. Loki had added a note with the tech explaining its set-up which was helpful when trying to rip into the data-banks.

Stark plugged it all in to his own set-up and threw the contents of the hard-drive up onto his holographic display.

“Sir, I have detected three attempts of a software attack on your systems.” Jarvis said.

“From this piece of crap? Good luck with that. What did you do with them?”

“I am currently disassembling the programs and seeing how they were coded – we may find them useful in the future.”

“Good boy, Jarv.”

Tony wasn’t in the least bit worried about malware – as he had said many times before, his coding was so advanced no other computer system could even recognise it for what it was. Nothing was going to infect his systems so he wasn’t worried about any piece of malicious Hydra virus trying to get in.

“I wasn’t certain if there would be anything useful in there – I had a look and it seemed empty, but I thought the expert should tackle it before we declared it redundant.”

Loki’s voice wasn’t all that unexpected, and Tony simply waved a hand in the direction it had come from.

“Hey, thanks, it’s already tried to give Jarvis a virus.”
“How well did that go down?”

“Jarvis exterminated it with extreme prejudice.”

“Of course he did.” Loki had teleported in behind his husband, so wrapped his arms around Stark’s waist and rested his chin on the shorter man’s shoulder. “Have you found anything?”

“Nothing so far, but I haven’t gone in very deep yet.” Tony flicked a few things around on the holographic display. “Well done on finding this shit, although you two could have called the rest of us down there.”

“Trust me, it wasn’t something you would have wanted to see, Tony.”

“Oh?” The man minimised the screen so that he could turn around and look at his husband. “What happened? What did you find?”

“It was less what was there and more what they intended to do in that place.” Loki waved a hand up at the display so that the images he had taken of the Hydra base came up on the hologram. “Look.”

He took about half an hour to explain how they had found the room and talk through the images he’d put up on the screen. It wasn’t an easy story since he also included the flashback he’d suffered, deeming it important that his husband knew about that. Chances were the set-back was going to continue to affect him for a while, most likely in the form of nightmares and Tony certainly needed to be warned about that.

“Yeah…I can see why this brought up some bad memories. You alright for now?”

“For now.”

Stark nodded, the effects of that sort of thing were going to be bouncing around for a while and he couldn’t guarantee he himself wasn’t going to have some nasty repercussions from what Loki and Thor had found. He knew as well as they did who that room had been set up for.

“We’re not telling Birdy the details, right? I mean, she knows what they wanted to do but this might make it all just that bit too real…”

“No, we aren’t telling her. We do not need her freaking out about it as well as us.”

“What did you do with the place?”

“Incinerated it. The building is still standing, but I filled in the whole basement area with concrete after I finished burning things.”

Tony smiled sadly. “I love you.”

“I know.”

That made Stark laugh quietly, folding his arms. “Look who’s been watching too much Starwars.”

“You and I both know there is no such thing as too much Starwars.” Loki leant forwards to rest his forehead against his husband’s. “I was really not expecting to be so affected by what we found down there. I thought I had begun to move on from what had happened with the chitauri.”

“Come on, it’s not even been a year – and don’t give me all that ‘I’m not human’ crap – there’s no way you can hope to not be triggered by shit like that.”
“…I suppose so.”

“Hey. Hey, look at me, Capricorn.” Tony used his finger under Loki’s chin to cajole the trickster into lifting his head up. “Don’t you dare start beating yourself up over this, okay? Someone really should have sat you down as a kid and told you that being affected by the crap that happens to you is nothing to be embarrassed by. Nightmares, flashbacks, triggers, all these things happen and are never something you should feel you need to hide or be ashamed of, yeah? I really don’t think I can stress that enough.”

“Tony, you have seen enough of my culture to know that any sign of weakness in any form is always used against you. As someone who was so much physically weaker than everyone else I could never give an inch in what I was feeling.” Loki smiled gently at his husband’s frown. “There was a reason I gave myself the reputation of not caring about anything or anyone. It made it so much easier to hide anything I did feel.”

“Well, you don’t need to do that now – everyone here has had a bad time of it at some point and we’ve all had the emotional fall-out. You might even benefit from talking to someone about it.”

Loki looked displeased with that suggestion. “I am talking to you about it.”

“Yeah, but it might help you to bring someone else into your circle of trust too.” Tony sighed in exasperation as his husband stepped back from him with a scowl. “Come on, I’m not having a go at you, I’m trying to help.”

The trickster pinched the bridge of his nose, shaking his head. “Yes, I know.” He glanced up at Tony again for a brief moment, then simply vanished.

“Jarvis? Where did he go?”

“Your room, sir.”

It was difficult for Tony to know what to do, and in the end he opted for following his husband upstairs, giving Jarvis the command to continue working on the computers. He took the private elevator that went directly up to his floor to avoid seeing anyone else – he didn’t need to discuss why he was so rattled. In truth the images Loki had shown him were haunting him too – he certainly knew he was going to see them again in his nightmares, and most likely with the intended victim in place. It had been one thing to hear what Hydra had intended to do to Evie, but another to actually see the evidence.

Knocking on his own bedroom door was something he was still having to get used to.

“Hey, can I come in?”

“He nodded.” Jarvis said, allowing the door to quietly slide open.

Loki was slumped down by the huge windows that looked out over the city, his head resting against the pane of glass. He had allowed his Jötunn skin out and was curling his fingers around so that tiny snow-flakes spun lazily in the air. He must have heard his husband come in, but didn’t acknowledge him.

Tony surveyed the scene for a moment before padding across the carpet and settling himself down opposite Loki, leaning against the same pane of glass in a mirrored position. The sun was setting over the city by this point in the evening, and Loki’s red eyes had taken on an orange glow. His gaze flickered to his husband when Tony’s foot came to knock against his shin.
“Hey, bluebell.”

The prince smiled, ever so slightly. “Really? Bluebell?”

“First thing that came to mind.” Tony looked up as the snowflakes began to swirl over his head, sprinkling his hair with white. “Unseasonal, but very pretty. What’s the reason?”

“No reason.” Loki’s blue skin had a purple tinge to it in the sunset, and where his head rested against the glass the ridges on his Jötunn skin were dusted red. He frowned at the look on Tony’s face. “What?”

“Look, I know it’s not what most guys like to hear, so please don’t kill me, but you’re absolutely beautiful.”

Loki smiled sadly. “Well, I am not ‘most guys’, but at the same time you are probably the only person in the realms to say that to a Jötunn.”

“I wish you could see what I see.”

The trickster looked down at his arm, his eyes moving over the ridges and whorls that decorated it before shaking his head. “So do I.”

There were so many responses Tony could have given to that, and he took a moment to work out his response. “What’s in your head right now?” He asked quietly. “What are you thinking of?”

“I’m so tired of all this, Tony.” Loki’s gaze went back out to the darkening city-scape. “Recovering from the chitauri, all our worry over your health, Hydra, the attack on Evie, Alfheim and now all of those old wounds reopened. I am just so tired. Sometimes I truly miss those days when we were sneaking about and no-one knew. It was so much simpler. I feel like…Oh I do not know, I cannot articulate it. It’s all so much all at once and…”

“You’re done. You’re just completely and utterly done with all this crap.”

“Yes, that sounds about right.”

Tony smiled sadly. “Yeah, know the feeling.”

“It is knowing, the whole time, that no matter how hard we push through all these problems we aren’t going to ever get to the end of it. We thought we just needed to eliminate the chitauri, and then suddenly we had to deal with Hydra, and now it’s this Alfheim business and we’re still no closer to reaching an end of anything.” Loki pressed a single finger against the glass and a gentle frost pattern began to spread out. “I am simply sick of there never being an end to it all. It seems like we are endlessly bouncing from one bad situation to another, and they are getting worse each time.”

“I feel like we keep having this conversation.”

“That’s because we do. And every time we have it, something worse then happens. I am…what was your phrase?...done. I am just done.”

The tiredness and defeated slump of his shoulders made his point quite firmly.

“Hey, hey we’re going to get through this, yeah? Things always look like crap when you put it like that. What happened to the whole ‘I’m half a million years old and have seen a lot of stuff go down so nothing phases me anymore.’?”
“Maybe I’ve realised I can still be phased.”

“Bullshit! You’ve had a really crap few months and today was the straw that broke the camel’s back. You need to recharge, relax and take a breather.”

“Tony…” The trickster felt Stark’s hand come to rest gently on his arm and started to let the glamour flow back over his blue skin.

“No, keep the smurf look, I hardly ever get to see it and you look so good like this.” Tony shifted onto his knees so he could lean over and kiss his husband. “Can I persuade you to stay like this for a while?”

“How long will a while be?”

“I don’t know, my stamina’s pretty good.”

Loki finally laughed. “Is that so?” From how he was sitting it was very easy for the man to push him down onto his back and crawl up to straddle his waist. “Tony! We are right infront of the window!”

“And? We’re at the top of the tower; no-one can see us up here.”

“There is still such a thing as modesty.”

“Nah there isn’t. Now are you going to shut up and let me love you or are we going to debate your decorum?”

Loki grinned and shut up.

Jarvis didn’t find anything on the Hydra computers throughout the night, which was probably a good thing because Tony really wouldn’t have been happy to be disturbed and Loki would most likely have fried Jarvis’ circuits. It had initially been assumed that all the data had been wiped clean, but it was becoming more and more apparent that they had never been used for any data to end up on them. They hadn’t even been hooked up to a network. It was a bit of a bugger really, but if anyone could find anything, it would be Jarvis, so he kept at it.

Evie was still doing a pretty good job keeping up with her training, even including the getting up in the mornings. She had progressed from the basic form building in her one-to-one fighting skills and was beginning to learn the tips and tricks from the intermediate level. Natasha had allowed her to start using some different firearms, and her aim had improved with the practice until now she could quite reliably hit her target when using a weapon she was familiar with. She was never going to be a phenomenal sharp-shooter or sniper, but she was at least going to be able to hold her own should she ever need to.

And she had sorted out something else too…

“It’s finished!” The girl strode into the kitchen like she had solved world hunger, Arthur in his usual place at her side.

“What’s finished, Little Bird?” Loki was at the hob, pouring pancake mixture into a pan. He and Tony had got up rather late for obvious reasons.

“My master piece, my baby, my Piéce de résistance!”
“Are you trying to tell us that you’ve finished your mysterious project and I can have my lab back?” Tony was nursing a large cup of coffee, and watched his daughter over the rim.

“Yup! All done! Can I try it out?! Please? I can’t wait to try it out!”

“And what will trying it out entail?” Loki jumped in there before his husband could simply okay it – and knowing Tony, he would have just said fine and been done with it.

Evie looked a bit put out at the question, then sheepish. “Um…jumping off the roof.”

Her parents looked at each other and Tony rolled his eyes. “Neither of us can say we weren’t expecting that.” He accepted the plate of pancakes his husband handed him. “Does it have to be the roof?”

“Well people might object if I base jump off the Empire State, so yeah, pretty much.”

“Are you going to tell us what your grand project is?”

“Nope.”

Stark shrugged, pouring syrup onto his breakfast. “Okay, well, give us an hour to wake up properly and we’ll meet you up there.”

“Thanks dad!” Evie ran off on cloud nine whilst Loki stared at his husband accusingly.

“What?”

“You are seriously going to let her jump off the top of the tower with some unknown construct neither of us have even seen?!”

“Why not? Jarvis supervised the work, so it should at least work and won’t explode, and I’ll jump alongside her in the suit so if it all goes tits-up either I can catch her, or you can just use your magic. It’s hardly dangerous; the worst that can happen is she gets a fright and a bruised ego.”

“It’s a miracle that girl is as well rounded as she is…”

“She’s a Stark; we’re a hardy breed.”

“Evidently.”

They kept their word, though, finishing up and sorting themselves out within the hour to meet their daughter up on the very top of the tower.

September was passing, and the weather reflected that; it was cold and drizzling. So high up the wind was quite furious.

Evie really didn’t seem to notice these details as she hopped about waiting impatiently for her parents to turn up. In acknowledgment of the weather she had at least insisted Arthur stayed inside – much to his dismay – and had dressed warmly. In addition to the thick coat and jeans she was also wearing a curious backpack.

“You ready then, Birdy?”

She turned to see her father stomping across the roof towards her, fully suited up and gleaming in the dull light. Loki was a step behind him, a warm cloak whipping in the wind around his shoulders.
“More than!” Evie practically ran to the edge of the roof, leaning over the small wall to look all the way down to the tiny pavement below them. They were so high up the people looked smaller than ants and it was hard to discern the colours of the cars. “Come on then!”

“Wow, hot shot! How’s this gizmo of yours meant to work?” Tony caught her arm as she moved to climb up onto the wall.

“You’ll see – I need to be falling for it to work properly.”

“Well, there’s a significant design flaw.”

“This is a first attempt, give me a break! How well did the Mark I work when it threw you headfirst into the desert?”

Loki smirked. “She has a point, you know.”

Evie retrieved a pair of goggles out of her coat pocket and pulled them on. A tiny HUD flickered across them.

“Did you nick the designs for Falcon’s eye-piece?”

“Maybe. But it works more like the interface in your helmet.”

“Huh, smart.” Tony insisted on taking her hand to help her climb up onto the parapet, there was something about letting his daughter throw herself off the top of a skyscraper that made him over-protective. Go figure. “Right, we just jumping or do you need me to give you a push?”

“I’m going to throw you both off in a moment.” Loki sat down on the wall. “I always knew I would get a chance to better the window.”

“No-one’s pushing me off anything.” Evie looked down again then spread her arms out. “Well, catch you on the flip side.”

And she jumped.

“She gets that from your side of the family.” Was Tony’s parting shot before he followed his daughter down.

Evie had never been parachuting or base-jumping before. The sudden rush of air hit her hard, and was an unwelcome surprise. However, she had planned and impatiently waited for this moment for so long that she wasn’t going to let gravity in all its majesty frighten her. She reached up to the backpack strap on her left shoulder and pressed the button there.

Four metal cuffs shot out of the back, each trailing a thin wire behind them. Two attached to her wrists – tiny repulsors powering up on them – and the other two fixed on her ankles. The moment they were in place the whole backpack disassembled, following along the four wires to become a full wing suit.

The progress light on her HUD went green and Evie grinned. Spreading her arms and legs the wind caught under the flaps of the wing suit and her fall stopped abruptly. She flicked her wrists to let the repulsors fire and she soared away from the tower.

“Hey! Nicely done, kiddo!” Tony shot past her, and turned to fly backwards so that he could see the whole construct his daughter had created. He didn’t get much of a chance, though, when she laughed and slammed her arms into her sides so that she shot past him. Her turn of speed wasn’t
very good, but enough to take Ironman by surprise.

Usually a wing suit would glide, losing altitude slowly but consistently, but with the repulsors at her wrists Evie was able to keep her altitude up by firing them in quick bursts. The whole set-up was simple enough; the flaps of cloth that served as wings and the repulsors being the main part, with one of Tony’s discarded arc reactors in the frame of the backpack to power them and the goggles as a separate entity. There was nothing in the way of weaponry – it was intended to give her a quick get-away if and when necessary.

And it worked.

Evie crowed with delight as she soared over the buildings – keeping just high enough that she wasn’t likely to be spotted from the top windows.

“Looking good, Birdy, that’s a hell of a job you’ve done there!”

“It’s amazing!”

Tony had to laugh as he watched his daughter working out how to spin and turn by using her arms to direct the airflow under the wing flaps. He knew that feeling; that first moment of knowing that you are flying under your own steam, seeing the whole world as your playground as you zoom through it. There’s no feeling like it.

There was a sudden high cry above them and a hawk zipped past before coming to a dead stop and hovering, watching them.

“That you, Loki?”

“Well who else is it going to be?”

“This is the best thing ever!” Evie spun again, laughing. “I am never walking anywhere ever again!” She shot off again – not at any great speed but for someone who had never flown solo before it was certainly fast enough.

At their altitude they had actually covered a significant distance and were cruising over Upper New York Bay. Even with the miserable weather it was one hell of a view.

“What’s your range, Evelyn?” Loki’s voice was coming across telepathically, but the concern was still there.

“It’s powered by an arc reactor, it goes forever!”

“Where did you get an arc reactor?!” Tony sounded scandalised.

“Jarvis let me have one of your old palladium-filled ones. It’s not implanted so it’s harmless and still works fine.”

“I’m going to have words with Jarvis about his definitions of ‘harmless’.”

“Give over, Dad, it’s fine.” The girl rolled again, the wind whipping hard against the flaps of cloth. With the sea breeze now in play the construct was beginning to take a beating. A sudden amber light lit up on her display and she frowned. “Aw shit, what’s – ”

The wire attaching the wing to the cuff on her right ankle had been happily working itself loose and as Evie moved her arm – and therefore the whole flap – it let go entirely.
She dropped like a stone.

“Daaad!”

Spinning and tumbling out of control, somersaulting through the air. Everything across her vision was flashing with red warning lights as she fell straight down. Technically she was over water, logically from that height it hardly mattered; it was going to be like hitting concrete. And Tony was just flying alongside, keeping pace, and not fucking catching her.

“Daaad!”

“Fix the problem, Birdy.”

“I can’t, I’m going to die!”

“Fix the problem!”

The spinning was getting nauseating, the water below her rushing up at a dizzying speed and her father’s voice was just calmly repeating in her ear ‘fix the problem, you can solve this, fix the problem.’

The loose end was still attached to her wrist and she managed to grab it with her other hand. Her fingers were numb with the cold – a fact that hadn’t been noticeable whilst she was having so much fun. Tucking into a tight ball meant she could reach her ankle to try and plug the wire back in but it tipped her into a much faster spin in another direction. It seemed like an eternity as she fumbled with the thin wire, struggling to find where it was meant to go. The only thing stopping her from freezing up entirely in terror was the red-gold blur beside her and the knowledge that her parents wouldn’t actually let her kill herself in an accidental freefall.

With the rushing air Evie couldn’t hear the sudden little click, but she felt it as the two pieces suddenly connected and everything across the eye-piece went green. She immediately spread her arms and the wings billowed again as the air caught under them and the repulsors fired to lift her up out of the plummet.

“Oh my God, I hate you two right now!”

“It’s called the Icing Problem. Every new piece of tech has an Icing Problem and it’s never fun finding out what it is but you’ve got to sort it then and there or else you’re screwed.”

“You didn’t believe we would let you hit, did you?”

“I hate you both.” Evie’s voice was shaking, but she was smiling tightly. “Let’s go back, so I can sulk properly.”

“Do you want a lift back?”

“No.”

They had only been out for about fifteen minutes or so, but the journey back seemed longer. Evie was shaken and quite humiliated so was refusing to talk and Tony didn’t know how to break the ice without pissing her off. Loki had simply zipped off ahead, little wings whirring.

Evie wanted to land back where they had taken off, but her father insisted they went down to the landing pad so he could get the suit off. She sullenly stalked back down to the lab without saying a word to either Tony or Jarvis, who asked her if she was alright.
“Give her a moment, Jarv, she’s pretty angry right now.” Stark walked up to the bar and poured out a glass of water. He looked up when there was a clatter beside him and the little hawk hopped across the bar, talons scratching against the marble. “You know, I didn’t know you could do that.”

“What part of ‘shape-shifter’ didn’t you understand?”

“Yeah, but I’ve never actually seen you do it before.”

“I would have preferred something more impressive; but I assumed New York wouldn’t take kindly to a dragon flying over it.”

“Would have been cool though; are you going to turn back any time soon?”

The hawk cocked it’s head, then hopped a few more paces until it could flutter down onto a bar stool. If Tony had hoped for a cool puff of smoke or something he was disappointed. One moment there was a bird, the next Loki was sat on the stool watching him.

“So what are we going to do about our angry teenager?”

“Leave her to simmer down, I think. I mean; she’s got a hell of a good design there, and there are always issues with a first test flight. She was lucky it was just a loose wire and not a blow-out.”

“Is the reactor she’s using safe?”

Tony snorted. “Define ‘safe’. It was one of those that nearly killed me; it’s key element is palladium, which can be toxic if it goes directly into the blood-stream, which is what I managed to do. However, she’s got hers stuffed in a backpack; as long as she doesn’t try to implant it there won’t be a problem. It works brilliantly, just not in the way I wanted it to.”

“Huh.” Loki leant back with his elbows on the bar. “What are you going to suggest she needs to do now?”

“I’m not. This is her project; it’s all up to her. Although she’s not going to be allowed out solo until I’m happy it’s safe.”

“What would you suggest if you could?”

“Well, those wires need fixing in properly, and she would benefit from some better shaping to the cloth. She’s blatantly based it on the normal wing-suits base jumpers use, and since she’s added in flight it could do with a better shape.”

“It was a good design, though.”

“It was a damn good design! The kid’s bloody brilliant! I mean, it’s been obvious since she was tiny that mechanically she’s a genius. She doesn’t quite have the creative spark though.” He shrugged slightly. “Not that it matters. She’s successfully plugged together elements from existing designs to create her own thing which as an idea is superb.”

“It would be better if it didn’t send her hurtling towards the ground without warning. You could have caught her.”

“So could you. Magic safety net or something.”

“You were flying alongside her.”

Tony waved his hand laconically. “As I said; Icing Problem. You’ve gotta learn to bust through it
Loki didn’t seem to agree, but didn’t comment.

Over the next few weeks Evie was either training, or fixing her backpack. She had sorted out the wires and fixed everything in more securely. She refused to let her dad help with anything, but he still managed a bit of subliminal messaging that sorted out one of the problems. They had just started watching *The Dark Knight* when Evie suddenly leapt to her feet and ran off to the labs. If it happened to coincide with the part when they put an electric charge through Batman’s cape so that it held a solid shape when he flew then Tony wasn’t going to say anything. As he said; the girl was best at nicking ideas and putting them to her own use.

In the meantime the Hydra computers hadn’t yielded any secrets and they were back at a dead end. September had long gone and it was nearing Halloween when there was another very unwelcome call from Asgard.

“Svartalfheim.” Thor’s voice and expression said it all.

“The same army?”

“The same army. They have been launching small attacks from the time they left Alfheim, but the Dark Elves believed they could handle it.”

Loki snorted with morbid laughter. “I bet they did.”

“Quite, but now there has been a full scale attack and they have called for aid.”

“Are we answering?”

“No.”

The reply was shocking given what the Avengers knew about Asgard and its chivalric principles. The Aesir had leapt to Alfheim’s defence without a second thought, and the destruction wrought there had been staggering. However, the idea that they weren’t willing to even try and save another realm from the same fate was jarring.

“What’s wrong with Svartalfheim? What the hell did they do for you guys not to help?!” Steve asked.

“We have been at war with them on and off for the best part of a million years. And although we won the last battle Loki and myself were taken prisoner and their treatment of us led the Allfather to declare a judgement that we will never be allies nor come to their aid should the need arise.” Thor said carefully.

Tony glanced at his husband, noting Loki’s small frown. He knew part of the story there at least; ‘war crimes’ didn’t even begin to sum it up. Even so, it was harsh to condemn a whole race because of something part of the army did a stupidly long time ago.

“Isn’t that a bit…I mean, that’s a whole realm you’re allowing to be obliterated.”

“Not exactly.” Loki’s response was terse. “The Dark Elves are a warrior race and when they weren’t fighting us they were at someone else’s throats. They have no friends amongst the realms. Needless to say, that is not a reason to leave them to their deaths.”
“But we have no choice.” Thor finished his brother’s explanation. “Asgard’s army was badly depleted on Alfheim; we have no-one we can send.”

“You guys are in that bad a shape, even now?”

“Even now. Maybe if all of the realms banded together there might be a chance, but enough of us hate each other that that would never happen, and Svartalfheim have burnt all their bridges a long time ago.”

Steve nodded grimly. “They’ve shot themselves in the foot, that’s what you’re saying?”

“Pretty much.”

It was a sombre thought that cast a dark note over the tower. Neither Thor nor Loki were in a good mood and were liable to snap at anyone over the smallest of things and it wasn’t sitting well with any of the humans that as they spoke another planet was being destroyed.

It was also a worrying idea that that this was only the main invasion-style attack and that apparently the mysterious creatures had been launching small scale offensives on Svartalfheim since they had abandoned Alfheim.

Tony left his husband alone for the rest of the day since Loki made it very clear he didn’t want to talk to anyone about anything. However, the problem with being married means that you can’t avoid your spouse come bedtime.

“Hey…”

“No.”

Tony stared up at the dark ceiling for a moment before trying again. “Look, can I at least ask a question?”

“No.”

“Loki, stop being an ass-hole!”

He waited a moment – wondering if he was going to be ignored or frozen solid. As it was he heard Loki sigh tiredly.

“What do you want to know?” It was too dark for facial expressions, but Loki’s voice expressed his frustration quite succinctly.

“Does Svartalthingy have an Infinity Stone?”

“What?”

“Well, they picked one up on Alfheim, is there one on Svartalwhatsitplace too? You said those things are stupidly over-powered, is there one there and do we need to go and nick it before they get their hands on it?” Loki paused again, but this time because he was actually thinking about the question.

“There is one on Svartalfheim, but unlike Alfheim’s it is locked away. It is bound into rock with dark magic and should be entirely hidden, they should not even know it’s there.”

“Shouldn’t we go get it just in case?”
“Too dangerous; there will be a full scale battle going on there as we speak and you saw what they managed to do last time. We don’t want to be anywhere near that realm right now.”

Tony tried to catch his husband’s expression but he had a shirt on so there was no helpful little light from the arc reactor in the dark room.

“Do you wish you could help?”

“I would be about as willing to help the Dark Elves in this as I would the Chitauri.”

“Wow. There’s some serious resentment there.”

“You know what they did to Thor and myself. I suppose it is different with humans – you can’t hold a personal grudge over a few hundred thousand years because neither you nor your antagonist last that long. But as an immortal I know that those Elves who hurt myself and my brother are the same Elves still there now. If they are all getting slaughtered that is their problem.”

“…Fair enough I guess. But I’m still worried about this Infinity Stone thing.”

Loki’s sigh was overly exaggerated. “What is there to worry about? I have told you it is secure; there is nothing to concern yourself with.”

“And if they find it?”

“They won’t.”

“But if they do!”

“Then they will have two rocks that they can’t use! There are only a handful of people in the entire universe that know how to use the Infinity Stones, either with or without the Gauntlet, and these… these creatures do not even appear to possess the capabilities of speech. Just what do you think they could do?”

“I don’t know.” Tony rolled onto his stomach and thumped his face down into the pillow. “I don’t fucking know.” His voice was understandably muffled before he tilted his head enough to speak properly. “Look, we’d assumed they found the Stone on Alfheim and went ‘ooh, shiny!’ and took it. What if they knew it was there? What if they targeted Alfheim because they wanted that thing? What if there’s someone out there hunting these fucking things down?!”

He expected the idea to be shot straight down, since Loki seemed to be in a very belligerent type of mood but to his surprise his husband actually gave it some thought.

“I thought we had determined that these creatures are mindless. As we have said; they do not even appear able to speak.”

“Yeah; so how the hell have they got the tech for these sort of attacks? How are they getting to these realms in the first place and what are their motives? A mindless animal would attack, kill and settle on their new territory.”

Stark felt the covers move as his husband abruptly sat up and could very faintly see the trickster looking down at him in the darkness.

“What are you trying to say here, Tony?” It was a genuine question, something in what he had said had hit home with Loki.
“I don’t know. I just think there’s more to it now that this Svartalfartl thing is happening. I don’t think these things are working alone.”

“You believe they are being led by someone?”

“Yeah. You said there are only a handful of people who could use these Stones. What are the chances one of these people has decided the time is ripe and is after them?”

The pause was so long that Tony sat up himself and reached out to find Loki’s arm and reassure himself that his husband hadn’t just vanished on him.

“Capricorn?”

“Oh by the Norns…”

“Capricorn, you’re scaring me.”

“This is only hypothetical! We cannot prove that they are even after the Stones at this point!”

Tony found Loki’s upper arm and grasped it. “Hey, hey calm down. It is only hypothetical at the moment. Until we can get to Svartlwhatsit and determine if they still have their Stone there’s nothing we can do. You said their’s is protected by heavy spellwork – what will it take to get it out?”

“Someone would have to know what they’re doing. Or rip it apart by shear force, but that would take an awful lot of time and effort.”

“Would we be able to tell the difference between someone going ‘ooh, shiny’ and someone who went in purposely?” Stark felt Loki move and rolled his eyes. “You’re going to have to give me more than a head shake or nod; I can’t see you.”

“Yes. Yes we will be able to tell.”

“Okay. Right. Here’s what we’ll do then; we wait. We wait, you take the occasional peak at Svartigiveup and –assuming they destroy and leave like they did in Alfheim – we’ll go in and see what they did. Plan?”

“I suppose so.” Loki sounded anything but happy, and Tony was harshly reminded of their talk – some weeks ago now – about the amount of shit that kept falling on their heads.

“This fucking sucks.”

“I agree.”

Tony settled back down against his pillows and tugged on Loki’s arm so that he was pulling the trickster down with him. “Come on, we’re going to drive ourselves insane thinking about this.” He felt Loki relax slightly against him, and slung his arm over his husband’s shoulders.

“You have me worrying about it now.”

“Sorry. As I said, this is purely hypothetical, for all we know they are just mindless beasts and the first Stone was bad luck.”

“We can hope so. The idea that someone is after all of the Infinity Stones is terrifying.”

Tony felt Loki’s head move to rest against his shoulder and brought a hand up to run through the
trickster’s hair. “…Does Earth have one?”

“What? A Stone? No. You had the Tesseract, but I took care of that for you, remember?”

“Heh, that has to be one of the first attempts at mass genocide that actually ended up doing more good than harm.”

“I wouldn’t put it quite like that, but it certainly had some surprising outcomes.” Loki shifted enough to kiss Tony’s chin. “So much seems to have happened since then.”

“So much has happened since then. Man, I am so glad I decided to go out and get shit-faced in that bar that night! Although I don’t know about you but I don’t actually remember that night per say.”

“I remember the hangover the next morning.” Finally, finally a welcome note of humour crept back into Loki’s voice.

“Life’s a funny old thing, isn’t it?”

“It’s a pain in the arse.”

“And that.”

There was a bad atmosphere in the tower over the following days. Thor was obviously agitated at not being able to go off and sort out the Svartalfheim invasion and Loki was in a permanent sour mood. The trickster and Tony hadn’t spoken to anyone else about their concerns, and weren’t intending to do so until they had been able to see for themselves what was going on, but this meant Loki was on edge the entire time and it was beginning to grate on people’s nerves.

However, their minds were firmly removed from the intergalactic problems by a harried video-call from Pepper. Hydra had finally decided to go on the offensive again and had gone for the Stark Industries research centre down in New Mexico. It had grown out of the bits and pieces Tony had left lying around after building his satellite and was still following the progress of Project Direwolf as it orbited the far edge of the solar system. At least, it had been doing so up until this morning.

There was nothing there that was classified. It was hardly a problem if Hydra had close up photos of Neptune – and the moment the alarm had been sounded Jarvis had stripped all control of the satellite from the place. But it was a territory thing. They had been stomping around burning up Hydra bases, and now Hydra was fighting back and hitting Stark Industries.

And Tony was pissed off.

It had been a hit-and-run kind of attack so there was no fight for the Avengers to storm into, but they decided to go anyway. There would be a mess to sort out at any rate, and one of the goons might have dropped something.

“Why the hell weren’t we called the instant this went down?!” Tony demanded angrily.

Pepper looked somewhat contrite. “To be honest…the scientists thought one of you guys had turned up to help.”

“Huh?”

“Well apparently the Hydra unit came in through the windows and opened fire – a few people were
injured – but before they could get very far someone else came in and started taking them out.”

“What?! You’re saying someone’s already dealt with Hydra, in my laboratories?! Who the hell was it? Coulson?”

“No one saw them clearly, but I can’t get hold of any of Coulson’s team so it might well have been. Whoever it was all we know is that they were injured by the time they were done.”

Tony punched his fist into the palm of his hand. “Mother fucker! So we’re going in to basically do a clean-up job after someone else took out the bad guys in my damn lab?!”

“Pretty much.”

“Right!” He rounded on the others. “Okay, we’ll go in, see what we can do and get the hell out again. And you young lady,” He pointed at Evie. “No trying out your wing suit whilst we’re out.”

The girl knew not to argue.

Once the Avengers had left she went down to Pepper’s office and suggested going out for coffee. Chances were the group were going to take a while, and she didn’t enjoy being on her own. After the type of day she had already sat through, Pepper was more than amenable to the idea and they didn’t go far – just to the Starbucks on the corner – but it was nice to get out of the tower and relax without all the tension and fraught atmosphere.

The two women spent just over an hour out – which Pepper turned into a lunch break, and Evie made the most of having a lunch partner who understood that pastries could count as a meal on their own.

Pepper had a conference call to take, which meant they had to curtail the time-out, but she bought Evie a huge chai latte to make up for it and they made their way back to tower after a decent hour or so chatting. They walked, since the coffee shop was literally only round the corner, but this did mean they ran the risk of being recognised. Evie had been kept out of the public eye with quite a good degree of success, but Pepper was well known and there was only going to be one teenager who would be accompanying her. This meant they had to put up with various stares and the occasional camera flash.

“See, this is why I don’t come out often.” Evie muttered. “Someone’s watching us.”

“A lot of people are watching us, just ignore them.”

The girl scowled and resisted the urge to put on the sunglasses she’d brought with her. It wasn’t really sunny enough to warrant them and would leave her looking quite pretentious, but she could feel the eyes on the back of her neck and desperately wanted to block them.

The sliding glass doors of the tower were a very welcome sight even if it meant having to push through the crowd of people who were perpetually hanging around in the hope of seeing a superhero. It never failed to amuse Evie that her idea of normal was considered absolutely amazing by the rest of the world.

And she still felt like someone was watching her.

Call it paranoia since the Hydra attack on the tower, but the hairs on the back of her neck were standing on end no matter what Pepper was saying. Something felt off.

The tower foyer was a huge space with an elegant curved reception desk at one end for visitors.
Two Ironman suits – inert – stood flanking the inside entrance, repainted in matching red and gold as a nice big statement of exactly who’s tower it was. There were three elevators in the far wall; two that served for the commercial levels and offices, and a solo one for the personal living quarters. Pepper took off towards them, her heels clicking neatly on the marble floor.

Evie didn’t follow her – there was a new guy working at the reception desk and she was just at that age where trying to talk to boys was becoming an interest. She left Pepper to it and drifted over, trying to think of a conversation starter. The guy wasn’t exactly paying her any attention, but there was a new suit placed next to the desk – Tony was dreadful at wanting to put all his cool tech on display – and she could at least pretend to look at it until he noticed that she existed. And it was a cool piece of tech, even if it was blatantly an old War Machine model.

And the hairs went up on the back of her neck again.

It had been noted before, mostly by her father, that what Evie lacked in cool alien superpowers she had made up for in her reflexes and eye-sight; something had to have been passed on from Loki’s side of the family. This meant that she caught the sudden flicker reflected in War Machine’s chest plate as she pretended to study it, she saw the man suddenly dropping down from the ceiling not twenty paces away, and saw the gun in his hand.

The receptionist let out a startled yell and Pepper, where she stood waiting for the elevator, spun when she heard the thump of combat boots on the marble.

Evie, however, reacted.

Jumping up she wrenched the gun from the holster on the suit’s shoulder and spun. She knew it was active since the suit was plugged up to Jarvis and sprang to life at almost the same movement, as did the other two by the entranceway. However, thanks to her Jötunn genetics Evie was always going to be faster than a computer and by the time the suits were live had already landed two bullets dead in the intruder’s shoulder.

It would have been a much more impressive feat if they hadn’t both ricocheted off, but it did make him drop his weapon.

“Make another move and I’ll put one in your head.” Had Evie been focussing on anything else she would have been amazed by how steady her voice sounded.

The man in front of her was a complete stranger, but didn’t look anything like the guys Hydra had sent. He was dressed in military gear, but it had obviously seen better days and although he showed no signs that the girl’s shot had harmed him there were bloodstains elsewhere. He was quite obviously injured.

“Who the hell are you and what do you want?!” She looked at the two mangled bullets that she’d fired. “And what the fuck’s up with your arm?”

She didn’t get a verbal answer, but the intruder frowned at her for a moment, then eased the torn sleeve of his leather jacket down to reveal what looked like a full sleeve of plate-mail. It was only because Evie was so familiar with mechanics that she recognised it wasn’t armour covering his arm, but actually was his arm.

All three suits had their weaponry trained on the man so the girl felt safe enough to lower her gun a little.

“Biomech? Who the hell are you? Are you Hydra?”
“Not anymore.” His voice was rasping, sounding almost unused. “My name is James Barnes; I believe Steve Rodgers calls me Bucky.”
“I’ve heard of you, you were working with Hydra.” Evie brought her gun back up, now aiming at the man’s head. “What are you doing here?”

Barnes snarled and blood dripped from his mouth. “Why should I answer to you?”

“Uh, because I’m the one with a gun trained on your forehead right now, and whatever I say, these guys—” She nodded at the three Ironman suits. “—will do. I’m holding all the power in this exchange.”

Bucky made a sudden movement towards his dropped gun and Evie fired in the same direction, knocking the abandoned weapon well out of reach before re-training her own gun back on his head.

“The other thing I should probably mention is that I’m still new to this whole fire-arms thing. Who knows, I might accidentally shoot your other arm off.” The girl heard Pepper coming up behind her and glanced to the side to see the woman with a pistol out and aiming steady. “On the other hand, she’s pretty good. Between us you aren’t likely to come out of this with all body parts still attached. So, for the final time, why are you here?”

There weren’t really many ways Barnes could have got out of that situation. Even if he’d taken his chances with the two women – assuming that they would hesitate – he knew there was no way he would get past the suits. Finally he spat a mouthful of blood on the floor.

“I need to see Rogers.”

“He’s not here. Why do you need to see him?”

“Because I need his help and there is nowhere else for me to go!” There was so much anger in his voice that it shook Evie’s resolve a little. However, she didn’t need to respond to that when Bucky’s expression went from furious to shocked and she felt a hand materialise on her shoulder.

“Then there is no need to storm in here fully armed. If you need aid, ask, do not assume and threaten.” Loki sounded slightly mocking. “Rogers will return in the next hour or so, if you can wait that long. Or are you going to drop dead where you stand? You certainly look like you are going to.”

It was obvious that Loki’s sudden materialisation had taken Bucky by surprise, but it was also clear the soldier had seen enough weird shit recently that he didn’t even bother to comment. That may also have had something to do with the blood loss he was suffering from, though. From the way he was standing Loki had enough battle-field experience to diagnose a seriously cut up leg, puncture wounds to the chest and some shrapnel marks. It was possible there were some broken ribs as well, but that was harder to tell.

“I am not about to drop dead.” The words were an almost inarticulate snarl and Loki raised an eyebrow.

“Is that so?” He glanced down at Evie. “And you, madam, what did you think you were doing in this situation?”

“He had a gun! What was I meant to do?” The girl gestured with her weapon. “And I landed two solid rounds in his shoulder!” She looked at Bucky who scowled at her. “What? You came through
“Enough, Evelyn. Jarvis, how far away are the others?”

“Approximately thirty five minutes, sir.”

“So we have thirty five minutes to work out what to do with you then.”

The Avengers had been back in the quinjet and on their way home when Loki suddenly jumped to his feet and teleported out of there with no warning. Jarvis quickly answered Tony’s bemused question, and the reply didn’t go down well.

“What do you mean an intruder?! Why the hell didn’t he take me with him?!”

“I’m sorry, sir, perhaps he was acting on reflex.”

“Well, sure, but-”

“The intruder has just identified himself as one James Barnes.”

That silenced the whole jet, with most heads turning towards Steve.

“Was he armed?”

“Yes, but injured and Miss Evelyn most effectively disarmed him. Her fire-arms training is certainly paying off.”

Tony groaned. “Oh Jesus Christ, she didn’t! Tell me she didn’t shoot a Hydra super-soldier!”

“I would, but then I would be lying, sir.” Jarvis replied, almost at the same time as Steve insisted;

“I don’t think he’s Hydra anymore.”

“Capsical; he tried to kill you! How is he not Hydra?”

Jarvis butted in again before Steve could reply. “Actually sir, his appearance and injuries match the description given to us by the scientists of the person who sorted out the Hydra attack. He was the one who saved them.”

“Oh. Huh.” Tony tried to work that thought into the mental image he had been holding of Bucky. “Any way of knowing if he’s playing us, Jarv?” He glanced at Steve. “Sorry, but you gotta admit, Hydra know you want to talk to him, it would be a smart play to send him in as a plant.”

“Yeah, don’t think I haven’t already considered that.” The Captain sounded put out, but accepting of the hard truth. Just because Bucky had once been his best friend didn’t mean the man wasn’t still trying to kill him. It had been a close enough call at the Triskelion.

Up at the front of the quinjet Sam slipped into the co-pilot’s seat next to Natasha.

“Hey soldier.” She flicked her gaze at him and smiled.

“Hey. Is it just me or is this just fucking typical?”
“How so?”

“Well, we spent all summer looking for that guy, and the moment we start worrying about something else he literally strolls in through the front door.”

Natasha laughed. “Sod’s law, I think.”

There was little any of them could do about the situation until they returned to the tower, and the only thing stopping Tony from fretting so much was the knowledge that Loki was there too. He didn’t even want to contemplate Evie being alone with the Winter Soldier.

The rest of the flight was terse and silent. Acknowledging that they were going into an unknown situation was hard. There was no way to determine if Bucky was friend or foe, they didn’t know what, if anything, he remembered or where his loyalties lay. It was also really difficult to know what to say to Steve. The super soldier had slumped down in one of the seats against the wall, his shield by his feet and staring fixedly at the floor.

They had had worse flights home, but this one was pretty bad.

When the quinjet finally did settle down on it’s landing pad, Tony checked in with Jarvis about whether he needed to go in with the suit or not.

“I do not think so, sir, although I believe it would be foolish not to be armed.”

“Sure I shouldn't just wear the suit?”

“No, I don’t think that will be necessary.”

“Where are they all?”

“Medbay, sir. Mr Barnes is stable, although I have had to operate.”

It would have been a really bad idea to all storm down there as a huge group, so most of the team had to wait in the main living area watching the live video feed whilst Steve, Tony and Bruce went down. Steve for obvious reasons, Tony because it was his tower and his daughter, and Bruce because as much as they all trusted Jarvis’ medical skills it was always good to let a human look over his work.

Whatever they had expected to see, it wasn't what greeted them when they got to the large medical bay and found the infamous ex-Hydra operative. Steve, Nat and Sam had told them so many stories of what had happened that the living legend didn’t quite live up to his own legend. He was shorter than everyone expected, for a start – maybe only a few inches taller than Tony – and was propped up against the pillows in one of the bunks. Jarvis had had to cut the man’s shirt off to sort out the chest wounds and check the broken ribs, and there were various IV lines and such running to his arm.

The really surprising part of the whole scene, though, was Evie.

She was sat next to Bucky on the bunk, a box of tools next to her and casually working on his mechanical arm. The sight drew the three newcomers up short so that their entrance went unnoticed long enough to realise the girl and soldier were talking quietly. Nothing that they could hear but a quiet and seemingly civil conversation.

However, Bucky must have had ears like a hawk because he suddenly looked up, glaring in the direction of the doorway.
“Uh, hey.” It was lame, as opening statements went. “So, you’re Bucky Barnes, huh?” Tony stepped a little way into the room, but not so much as to appear threatening. The last thing he wanted was to startle a temperamental super soldier when his daughter was sat next to the guy.

“So I have been told.” The snarl had gone from the man’s voice now, but he still didn’t sound brilliant.

“You aren’t sure?”

“I have no memories of who or what I am. I have been told that James Barnes is my name, but I was usually known as Bucky.”

Steve stepped up beside Tony, noting that his former friend’s expression barely changed when looking at him. “What do you recall?”

“You. We fought in the helicarrier and then I dragged your sorry ass out of the river. There was… something before that? You seemed to think we’d already fought but I don’t remember anything before that time.”

“You don’t remember the fight under the bridge? When Hydra captured me and the other two?”

“No. But that’s not surprising. Every time they didn’t like my attitude or thought I was remembering something about my old life they’d wipe my memory.”

Steve didn’t show what he thought of that revelation, although it must have filled in the blanks for him as to why Bucky had been so hostile towards him.

“Why are you here?” He asked coolly.

Barnes glanced down at his mechanical arm. “I was injured, my arm was badly damaged and I had nowhere else to go.” He looked back up, his gaze piercing. “You seemed so certain that we were once friends and that that meant a lot to you. I took a chance.”

“How bad is the damage?” Steve addressed the question to Evie, who had started tinkering again. “And why are you the one working on it?”

“I’m good at fixing stuff, Dad gets too distracted with trying to improve things and I was the one here at the time.” The girl had a screw driver wedged in the elbow joint and gave it a twist. There was a horrible grinding noise, but she smiled brightly. “There we go! Try that!”

Bucky frowned at her, but then gingerly moved his arm. The joint moved smoothly and when he tried to close his fist all of his fingers worked properly.

“You did it.”

“Well don’t sound so surprised, I told you I was good!”

“You’re a kid; I can’t say I was expecting much.” As much as Bucky had been snapping at the other Avengers he spoke civilly to the girl. Maybe they’d had a little longer to get to know each other or it simply was because he saw her as a child, but the other Avengers rather appreciated it given how over-protective they were of her.

“So now what do we do?” Tony asked. “We don’t trust you, we don’t know what you know, you could be faking this whole amnesia thing. So what the hell do we do with you?”
“I can’t prove I’m here with good intentions, but I can prove I’m not with Hydra.”

“Yeah?”

“I’ve been systematically destroying their bases since I left the organisation. After the battle at the Triskelion I went back to where they did their work on me and took every piece of paper I could find in the place. One of those was a map of their major bases.”

“Son of a bitch, that was you?!” Tony threw his hands up in the air. “We thought it was some organisation, and it was you on the rampage! Do you still have that map or any of the other paperwork?”

“No. I’m a soldier, I memorised and burnt it all.”

“You have amnesia! How can you memorise stuff?!”

If he didn’t still have Evie tinkering with his shoulder Bucky would probably have been a lot less calm when faced with the confrontational tone. “Medically induced amnesia that is no longer a problem now that they are no longer wiping my memory every other day.”

“Um, can we discuss how they achieved that at some point?” Bruce finally spoke up, still standing behind Steve and Tony. “Some of that might be reversible.”

Barnes shook his head. “No chance with that; your magic boy already gave it a go. The memories are a mess, he said. Maybe they’ll come back on their own, but chances are I’m stuck like this.” He nodded his head towards the back of the room and it was only then that they realised Loki had been standing back there the whole time.

“He is correct. Whatever Hydra did to him, it was not pretty. I daren’t go in and try to piece things back together; the risks of long term brain damage are too high” The trickster saw Steve’s expression drop. “I am sorry Captain, I know that isn’t what you would like to hear.”

“What, exactly were you hoping was going to happen if we saw each other again?” Bucky asked caustically.

“I wanted my friend back.”

“I don’t know you.” Bucky’s gaze moved to the shield Steve was holding. “But I know of you. I read up on all I could. I know who I used to be and what we did together, but I don’t remember it. It’s like memorising someone else’s life.” He winced when Evie hit something within the shoulder joint and looked back to see what she was doing. The girl noticed his sudden attention.

“Sorry. You’ve got something jammed in here real good. How far does your actual arm go down into this construct?”

“I’ve lost it from about halfway down my humerus.”

“Okay, sorry, this might hurt then.” Evie was wielding a pair of very thin pliers and started pulling at something deep within the joint. It was obviously extremely painful for Barnes, but the girl was concentrating too much to really notice and finally pulled free a jagged piece of metal. “Aha! That’s the problem; shrapnel! That’s what was jamming the mechanism.”

Tony leant in to Steve, his voice low enough not to be overheard. “So on a level of one to batshit, just how surreal is this scenario for you right now?”
“I’m gonna have to go with batshit.”

Other than Steve and Evie, no one was particularly happy that Bucky had turned up, and even Steve had his reservations. After everything that had happened when Shield fell there was no way they could trust the man. Was he a mole? Did he still hold loyalty to Hydra? Or was he genuine when he said he was trying to take the Hydra bases out? There were plenty of reasons – revenge notwithstanding – why he could have been going out and ransacking the places. It just made for a very convenient excuse to try and get the Avengers on his side.

On the plus side – if it could be called that – Bucky didn’t want to hang around. Jarvis had insisted that he stay down in the med-bay until he was certain the soldier was going to be okay medically, but Bucky didn’t like it. He had already made it clear that he had plans, most of which included kicking the crap out of any Hydra bases he could get to.

Steve went and spent some time with him though. Even if his old friend didn’t remember any of their shared history in theory his personality should still be the same, making a new friendship a hopeful possibility at some point. For now though they just discussed tactics. Rogers didn’t trust the Winter Soldier enough to take everything he said at face value, but it was useful to know everything Bucky had come across in the bases he had taken out.

More importantly he also needed to explain how he knew Stark Industries was going to be attacked, and which building. So far that was the weakest point in his story. It was feasible that he had tracked the hit squad from a known base, but it was equally feasible that he had worked with them and the plan had been to make him look the hero to gain the Avengers trust.

“What do you think?”

The live-feed from the medical bay was on the TV in the living room, Natasha, Loki and Tony sat around it. Both trickster and assassin were studying the whole exchange between Barnes and Rogers intensely

“He’s coming across as genuine.” Natasha said. “It’s very difficult to say – he’s obviously got a trained poker face.”

“The way he says Hydra’s name, there is a lot of anger there. His hatred of them is certainly real.” Loki added.

Tony had thought he was good at telling when someone was lying, but Bucky was giving absolutely nothing away in any direction. He was certainly beginning to appreciate some of the more diverse talents of his team members.

“There.” Loki suddenly sat up straighter.

“Yes, that was definitely a sore spot.” Whatever he’d seen Natasha had spotted too. Steve had asked about which base he had taken out first and the reply had evidently given the two lie-experts some sort of tell.

“There was some real emotion there.”

Bucky had spoken about something that sounded similar to the lab they had found in New York, but a working one. Hydra had still been experimenting on the Hulk and Super Soldier serums; trying to recreate the powers and increase them if possible. However, they hadn’t managed to create anything useful to them, and the failed attempts of the experiments had been horrific,
according to Barnes.

“He was genuinely affected by that.” Loki had his chin resting on his steepled fingers. “That was real emotion.”

“I agree. Well, that puts his moral compass on the right side then.”

The trickster glanced at Natasha. “We can’t assume that based on one act of empathy.”

“Don’t forget he saved those scientists earlier.”

“Don’t forget there’s no way of knowing his motives for that.”

Natasha sighed irritably. She was sat on the floor with her back to the sofa, and drew her knees up to her chest to rest her chin on them.

“I don’t know. He seems to be telling the truth, but there are moments that tell me he’s been trained to lie. I just can’t tell if he’s genuine or one of the best liars I’ve seen in a long time.”

“He came across much clearer when he first arrived; he was in pain and there was enough fear there to heighten everything else. He was telling the truth then, and he has not changed any of that original story since, just added to it.” Loki shook his head. “I think the only thing we can do in this situation is wait and see.”

“We don’t exactly have that long. He wants to get out of here as soon as he’s cleared medically.” Tony added.

“Well, we shall have to do what we can in the time we have.”

Natasha glanced slyly at the two men. “You know Evie’s going to be quite gutted when he goes.”

“Why? She doesn’t know him.”

The woman laughed at the blank stares she received. “Look, you two are great parents, don’t get me wrong, but there are a few things you don’t seem to get about teenage girls.”

“Meaning…?”

“Meaning she’s got a crush on him! You really didn’t notice?!?”

Tony dropped his head into his hands. “Oh my God no! She does not have a crush on someone about twenty years older than her!”

“It’s harmless, Stark. Teens get stupid crushes on unobtainable people; I wouldn’t worry about it. And besides,” Natasha nodded her head towards Loki. “You hardly set the gold standard in romance. Evie’s grown up thinking that it’s perfectly normal to fall for genocidal megalomanics.”

“I am right here, you know.” The trickster said stiffly. “And whilst I agree with you that she seems quite taken with Barnes, it is, as you say, a silly teenage crush and nothing to worry about.”

“Yeah, she’ll be back to mooning over the reception boy in no time.”

“The…who? Arnie? That punk-ass kid with bad acne?! She’s heir to a multi-billion dollar industry!”

Loki and Natasha exchanged amused glances. “You know, I had the worst crush on this ballet
dancer when I was a kid.” The woman said cheerfully. “There were posters for one of his shows all 
over the city and I nicked one and stuck it under my pillow for months.”

“I was rather taken by one of mothers handmaidens when I was still young,” Loki admitted. “She 
was a good few thousand years older than me, and I grew so tongue tied around her I don’t believe 
we ever exchanged more than a word or two.”

Tony was still shaking his head. “No. I don’t want my baby girl having anything to do with 
romance! She’s my baby girl!”

“She’s a fifteen year old who threw herself off the top of the tower only a few weeks ago trusting 
only in her own handiwork not to die in a very messy way. She’s old enough to have a crush. And 
besides, it is no more ridiculous than that actor she keeps going on about. The one with the funny 
name.”

“Benedict Cumberbatch? Give him a break, he’s wonderful! And he’s also happily living on the 
other side of the Atlantic, whereas Bucky is only a few floors down!”

“You are making too much of this, Tony.” Loki said soothingly. “This is hardly what we should be 
worrying about right now. Evie hasn’t even spoken to Barnes since she fixed his arm.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“I still remember the day you gave her The Talk.” Natasha said with a grin. “We’re still all in awe 
you managed that so sensibly.”

“I can be sensible when I need to be.” Tony subconsciously rubbed his chest just under the arc 
reactor. “That was the same day as that bloody drone mission.”

“Oh yes. That day sucked.”

Loki kept silent. He knew what they were talking about since Tony had told him the story but it 
was still very strange to hear them speaking so calmly about the day his husband had nearly died.

“Hey.” Tony noticed the sudden sullen silence and nudged the trickster. “I’m fine now, magic 
water and all that.”

“I know.”

On the screen infront of them Steve had just left the medical bay, and Natasha shushed the two 
men beside her. With Captain America gone it was interesting to see how Barnes would now react. 
The soldier settled back down on the bunk, visibly relaxing now that he felt he wasn’t under 
scrutiny.

“That’s interesting; he was obviously putting up an act of some sort with Steve, it’s like he’s just 
dropped a mask.” Natasha tilted her head to one side, watching the little character on screen.

“What sort of act?” Tony couldn’t see what they were obviously seeing. “Was he lying to Steve?”

“No.” Loki got there before the woman this time. “He was hiding how much pain he is in.”

“Does that change how genuine we think he was?”

Natasha nodded. “He was putting up a hell of a front – look at him now, he’s beat! To hide all of 
that and lie so consistently? No way. He might have pulled off a small lie, but to keep going with
the exact same story over and over; I really don’t think he could have pulled that off.”

“I don’t know – if he has been trained to withstand torture he would be perfectly capable of that.” Loki argued.

“He’s been on ice for seventy years! When would they have had time for that sort of training?! Hydra only unpacked him recently.”

“How long does it take to train a human against pain? It’s been a while since I last tortured someone.”

Tony groaned. “See, when you say something like that we know you aren’t joking. Who the hell did you torture, and why?”

“It was back in the middle ages, I forget the details.” Loki waved a hand flippantly. “But I found they broke very easily. Humans cave under pain very quickly.”

“Well, yeah, because we’re fragile little mortals. But does this mean we think Bucky-boy was lying? I’m getting really confused!”

In the end they decided that they just couldn’t be certain. It seemed more likely that Bucky had been telling the truth, but only time would tell. Most of his story made sense too. Having dragged Steve’s unconscious butt out of the river he had limped off to sort his own injuries out after the battle. Not knowing where the hell else to go he had returned to the place that Hydra had been keeping him and killed everyone in the facility. He had stayed there for about a week to heal up and try to get his head together, then destroyed the place and moved on. The museum had been one of his first stops to satisfy his curiosity about Steve, and had shed surprising light on his own story which he hadn’t expected.

Seeing who he had been and who he could have been had given Bucky some purpose. Going from wandering and aimless he now had something fuelling him and a motive. Revenge. The facility he had wrecked had yielded enough by way of paperwork that he knew where the other Hydra bases lay. The organisation had been smart enough not to digitalise everything, but that had actually helped him given that now he had a list of bases down on paper.

The thought that there were other groups out there who also wanted to take out Hydra hadn’t really occurred to him. However, when he found an active base that seemed to be prepping for a mission he held back and followed them to their target. The fact that that had been the Stark Industries warehouse had been a happy coincidence.

However, he hadn’t expected there to be a working group of scientists inside the place, and if nothing else he wasn’t going to let Hydra kill any more innocents. The decision to get the people out of there had resulted in him being as badly injured as he was.

Going to a hospital was out of the question, Bucky had known that from the start, but that left him with very limited options. In the end he had decided on the only person on the planet he knew still gave a damn about him, and got himself to New York.

“Was he fatally wounded?” Tony directed the question at Jarvis. “Would he have died if he hadn’t come to us?”

“I believe without medical aid he would have died, sir, although it would have taken time. The puncture wounds to his chest had caused his lung to start collapsing – which in itself would have killed him, but he was also suffering severe bloodloss from his leg.” Jarvis reeled off the list
emotionlessly. “His chest cavity was also slowly filling with blood and could have drowned him if the other injuries didn’t cause death first.”

“Not nice. And that was all from bullet wounds?”

“The chest wounds were, sir. He sustained some impact fractures to his ribs and there were a considerable number of shrapnel wounds. However, he said his leg injuries were caused by a grenade. I didn’t ask how his mechanical arm was damaged.”

“So he came here with genuine intentions at least. I can’t imagine someone like him would let themselves be injured that badly as part of an infiltration mission.”

“No?” Loki looked at his husband curiously. “How do you suppose that?”

“Look, if he wanted to infiltrate us for Hydra he could have just come crawling in begging Steve’s forgiveness. Cap would have scooped him up in a heartbeat. Coming here like this, as an antagonist and fully armed to boot; he must have known we would be on our guards. It was a stupid-ass way to infiltrate if that was the plan.”

“Unless he knew we’d think about that so is playing the long game.” Loki said immediately.

“…That’s getting stupidly convoluted when he wouldn’t need to. How about we just act cautiously and see where it goes from here.” Tony waved a hand at the TV screen. “As Jarvis said, he’s got a busted leg, some fucked up ribs and some nasty chest wounds – I think it’s safe to say he won’t be getting up to much any time soon as it is.”

Tony was sat on the edge of the bed when Loki came out of the bathroom, drying his hair out with a few passes of his hands. He took one look at his husband and rolled his eyes, which Tony noticed.

“What?”

“You have that look again.”

“What look?”

“Don’t play cute, Tony, it doesn’t suit you. The look you get when something is preying on your mind and you have to either talk about it or explode.”

“Oh yeah, that look.”

Loki sat down on the covers next to the man. “So what part of earlier is eating away at you then?”

“Am I really that transparent?”

“I am an expert in reading people, remember. So, what’s wrong?”

Tony shrugged slightly. “Do you think I’m being over-protective of Birdy?”

“What? Because you’re concerned about her growing up too fast? Hardly. You must remember I have been through this a few times before, which is probably why I am so much calmer about this.”

“Did you feel like they grew up too fast?”
“Of course. Narfi and Vali seemed to go from toddling across the room to chasing after maidens in the blink of an eye. And Merlin couldn’t wait to get rid of me.”

“Sleipnir?”

“We were too close in age really for me to worry about him growing up too fast. By the time he was in his teens we were practically growing up alongside each other.”

Tony flopped back against the mattress. “Do you remember when we were on Asgard and we had to tell Evie you couldn’t have any more kids? She seemed quite set on giving us grandchildren to make up for it.”

“Does that bother you?”

“I don’t think I could handle the idea of being a grandfather!”

Loki laughed, lying down on his side so that they were both eye-level again. “It isn’t so bad. Sleipnir has fathered a few over the years.”

That caught Tony’s attention and he rolled his head to look at his husband. “What? Really? How come we didn’t meet them?”

“They didn’t have our longevity, and to be honest they were clever but at the end of the day they were horses. They didn’t have Sleipnir’s Aesir-like mind.” Loki’s smile was slightly bitter-sweet. “And Merlin has had many children over the centuries, although like-wise, they were not immortal.”

“That…He lost his kids?” Stark genuinely couldn’t think of anything worse. Even the mere thought of losing Evie was a painful little scream at the back of his mind.

“His children grew up, grew old and in the true passage of time passed away. That is why he usually ages himself and allows himself to slip away from his family when he feels his time with them has been too long.”

“That really fucking sucks. I am so glad we’re all immortal now – losing Birdy…”

“Don’t even think about that, Tony. It’s not going to happen.” Loki reached out and ran his fingers through his husband’s hair. “We have enough on our plates without fretting over things which shouldn’t even be on our radar.”

“This parenting lark is so much trickier when you have the whole save-the-world aspect added to it.” Tony mirrored Loki’s gesture, brushing the wayward black hair away from his partner’s face. “Sometimes I do wish we could just chuck in the whole superhero bullcrap and just be parents.”

“We’ll always be parents, whether we have to save the world or not.” Loki shifted over so that he could draw his husband into a kiss.

“I still want to meet Merlin at some point.”

“I know, I’ll try and talk him round.”

"Even if he doesn't want to meet me, could you at least ask him to make contact with Evie? She'd like to know him and there's no reason for there to be bad blood between them."

"There's no reason for there to be bad blood between you and him either."
Tony laughed. "Are you kidding? I knocked his Mom up! He may pretend that he can't stand you but a kid will fight to the death for their Mom. I defiled you, as Thor puts it."

"I really don't think he cares for my honour."

"Yeah right. Even at your absolute angriest you would have still done anything in the world for your Mom!"

Loki ducked his head with a surprised chuckle. "Alright, yes of course I would."

"There we go then. Merlin's probably going to punch me if I ever do meet him."

"Mmm, I may defend your honour."

"No you wouldn't; you'd watch and most likely laugh."

The trickster's green eyes sparkled with mirth. "I fear you know me too well."

"Yeah, unfortunately I do." Tony hooked his arm over the taller man's waist. "But I guess you've come to know me pretty well by now too so fair’s fair." He pressed a kiss on Loki’s chin. "I know it’s barely gone lunch time and we’re supposed to be responsible adults but can we spend the rest of the day in bed?"

“I assume you don’t mean sleeping.”

Tony grinned. “Hell no!”

Loki sat up again, dislodging his husband. “I thought that would be the case.”

“Hey, it was only a question.”

“I know.” He looked down at the man and his expression was that curious mix of mischief and lust that usually meant he had something interesting planned. “I have some conditions though.”

“Oh?” This was beginning to look promising, and Tony propped himself up on his elbows. “That’s new.”

“Just trust me.”

“Always do, my dear homicidal maniac.”

Loki grinned and glanced up at the ceiling. “Jarvis, please inform the others that we are going out, and shall not be back until late. We will not be requiring dinner.”

“Of course, sir.”

“Now I’m intrigued.” Tony made to sit up, only to be pushed back down again by Loki’s hand on his chest. “We’re going out somewhere?”

“I think it has got to the point that we thoroughly deserve it.”

“Want me to call my private jet?”

The trickster laughed and splayed his hand out across the arc reactor. “Not at all; I am quite capable of getting us both there.”
“Where?” Tony was looking straight up at his husband, so was taken by surprise when the room around them suddenly vanished into darkness. “You could at least tell me where we’re going!” He felt his back hit a different mattress – softer than his own. “Or…where we now are. Should I have brought my passport?”

“Oh, probably.” Loki moved off the man to let Stark sit up and take stock of the new room.

It was not what he was expecting, although he couldn’t have said what he was expecting. Wherever they were, it was apparently the middle of the night, and there was a fire burning in the grate. There were thick rugs covering the wooden walls like tapestries, and furs on the floor which again was wooden.

“Where are we?” Tony looked one of the wall rugs up and down, trying to determine a culture.

“We were here a few months ago taking out a Hydra base but I thought we didn’t get a chance to really appreciate this place.”

“Huh.” The man hadn’t been wearing shoes when Loki teleported him so stepped straight onto the fur rugs without a thought. The curtains in the small room were drawn but Tony pulled one aside to peer out the window. “Holy shit!”

There was a flawless blanket of snow as far as the eye could see. In the distance mountains were rising up against the night sky, and everything was bathed in a gentle green glow.

“The Northern Lights?! Where are…Are we in Iceland? Is this Iceland?!”

“Isafjordur, to be precise. North west coast.”

Tony laughed in disbelief. “Holy shit! We’re in Iceland! Is this romance finally raising its ugly head?”

“It’s been near enough twenty years, it’s about time one of us tried something is it not?”

“Are you accusing me of not being romantic?”

“Perish the thought.”

Tony was still gazing out at the faint swirl of green that flowed across the sky, so started when he suddenly felt his husbands arms come to clasp around his waist from behind. “How long have you been planning this?”

“Since you grew quite irate that I was more concerned with the situation in Alfheim than our love life.”

“Why here?”

“Iceland is one of the very few places left on this planet that still recalls the Old Norse stories in their everyday lives. I like it here.”

“Is that because they blatantly still address prayers to you lot here?”

Loki smiled, settling his chin on his husbands shoulder so that he could also look out of the window. “I thought I made that clear; no one prays to me. I am the one they fear.”

“Good job they never found out you aren’t half as frightening as they thought then.” Tony pulled the curtain back and turned to face the trickster. He knew damn well that Loki was one of the most
frightening people he’d ever met, but feeding the prince’s ego never did any good. “So, you’ve evidently got plans – care to share?”

“We have fur rugs, a roaring fire and it is snowing outside, I’ll leave you to work out the fine details shall I?”

“You missed out red wine – this sort of scenario needs red wine.”

Loki laughed and waved a hand towards the fireplace. A fine crystal decanter and two matching glasses appeared. “You don’t like red wine; I presume port is an acceptable substitute?”

“Always.”

With Tony and Loki gone, Natasha and Sam out for dinner together, Steve eating with Bucky and the others scattered about doing their own thing Evie was left on her own for the evening. This meant that she could take over the living room and stick a video game up on the huge TV screen.

“Jarvis, I’m hungry!”

“Indeed? That is most interesting Miss Evelyn.”

She glared up at the ceiling. “Well, what’s there to eat?”

“Food is usually a good bet.”

“Ha ha, smart ass. Are there any left overs in the fridge?”

“You could go and look, you know. But yes, there’s some pizza.”

“Excellent.” The girl threw her controller down on the bean bag and slouched off towards the kitchen. “Umm, since everyone’s out could you put on my alternative play list?” She grinned when the music came on.

The pizza was in the fridge and Evie grabbed a handful of slices to shove in the microwave. It only took a few minutes to reheat, which she used to dance around the kitchen to the song that had come on. It wasn’t often she was left alone, and had a playlist of songs she otherwise wouldn’t let Tony know she liked.

She was half way through *Shake it off*, the hot plate of pizza in one hand when there was a stifled chuckle from the doorway.

“Uncle Clint!”

The master archer was leaning against the doorframe, smirking at the girl. “Totally judging you right now.”

“What? Jarvis chose the music!”

*Judging. You.*

“It’s a good song!”

“I’m officially holding this over your head as blackmail. You’re gonna have to be extra nice to me or else I’m telling your Dad you listen to Taylor Swift when he’s not home.”
Evie scowled. “Tell Dad and I’m sickenin’ Möðhy on you.”

“Been there, done that, I won. Did you eat all the pizza?”

“No, there’s about five slices left.”

The girl went and sat down at the table and a few moments later Clint joined her with his own dinner. “So, any idea where your parents are?”

She shrugged. “Out for the evening was all Jarvis told me. I think they’re probably out of the country – I know Möðhy wanted to do something special for Dad since they’ve both been so wound up recently.”

“That’s disgustingly sweet.”

“I know, right! But they spent so long apart I kinda think I can’t complain if they’re going to be all cute and mushy every now and then; as long as they don’t do it infront of the rest of us.” Evie took a huge bite of pizza, then started talking again with her mouth full. “How are you getting on with Möðhy anyway? I know you didn’t like him to begin with.”

“We have an interesting history, but he’s alright I guess.” Clint left his chair to go and shove some fries in the microwave – deciding that a few slices of pizza weren’t going to cut it. “We don’t exactly spend all that much time together but I think the fact that we haven’t killed each other yet says a lot.”

“I guess. Hey, are you doing anything tonight? Only there’s a showing of *Back to the Future* in town and I can’t go on my own.”

“Eh, sure. How long we got?”

“Two hours.”

“Good, because if it was a choice between a film or fries, my fries would win.”

“Should we ask the others to come along?”

“Think Bruce would let them?”

Bucky was still in the medical bay, but not very willingly and it was clear that if Bruce didn’t give him the go ahead to leave any time soon he was just going to make a break for it. On the plus side, he and Steve seemed to have found some common ground and a tentative friendship was being reborn. Being allowed out of the unit, even if under what was technically an armed guard might help to make him feel less like he was imprisoned. It would likely also help to be around some other people than just Bruce and Steve.

Jarvis was not exactly keen about letting Barnes out, but more from a medical standpoint than through not trusting him. Bruce was far happier than the AI, but mostly because he appreciated the social benefits the little outing would have. In the end he and Jarvis agreed that Bucky was medically stable enough to be allowed out, and it was left to Clint to go down and propose the cinema trip to the two super soldiers.

Steve was well acquainted with the *Back to the Future* films and had seen them all quite a few times, but Bucky had not only never heard of them but had also not been to a cinema since the 1940’s. He was both surprised and extremely suspicious to be asked to go along with the others on a trip out. He was also not exactly given all that much choice with Steve so keen.
Since the serum Hydra had stuck him full of allowed him to heal a lot quicker than a person normally would Bucky was in better shape than would have been otherwise expected. His leg was still quite messed up, but the bones had reknitted and he could walk a short distance on it. Probably shouldn’t, but since when would that stop someone like him? The puncture wounds to his chest had also healed enough to get him out of the danger-zone. This didn’t mean he particularly wanted to have to socialise with a group of people he barely knew though.

The group were surprisingly inconspicuous out on the streets. Bruce wasn’t so well known when not mean and green, Clint was barely recognisable out of his suit and Evie was just another teenager when not with someone obviously famous. A low-pulled baseball cap served to hide Steve’s identity and it wasn’t like anyone knew who Bucky was anyway.

The screen was pretty full but they went for the VIP seats so were a little apart from the rest of the crowds. They dumped Bucky between Bruce and Steve, since they were the two people he actually knew, and Evie was on Steve’s other side so that she was sandwiched between the super soldier and Clint – the Avengers still made the girl’s safety their priority. And given the appetites of everyone involved there was a lot of popcorn around.

“Can someone explain what we are about to see.” Bucky said quietly.

“What was the last film you saw?” Bruce asked.

“I don’t know. I don’t remember ever seeing any.”

“It was Gone With the Wind, but if you don’t remember it that won’t help.” Steve helped himself to a handful of popcorn. “We went twice because you had a thing for Scarlett O’Hara.”

“No, you had a thing for Scarlett. I liked Bette Davis.”

Steve shot Barnes a surprised glance. “I thought you couldn’t remember.”

Bucky looked somewhat taken aback himself. “It’s…not a real memory; it’s like remembering a film reel. There are moments; instances that are triggered occasionally.”

“I thought Loki said it was a complete and utter mess.”

Bucky shrugged sullenly. “I don’t know. I just said it’s not like they’re real memories. You know when you suddenly remember a fragment of a dream that makes no sense because it’s out of context? It’s like that. I don’t know what’s up with your magic boy.”

“He prefers the term ‘psycho megalomaniac’, by the way.” Evie chimed in happily, leaning over Steve to give her two cents worth. “And here, that’s the synopsis of the franchise, and some background on all the retro ‘80’s stuff.” She passed her phone over.

“Do you know how to use that?” Steve asked quietly, only to receive a death glare in return.

“I can use a phone, Rogers.”

That made sense; how else would Hydra have kept contact when they unleashed the Winter Soldier? Not to mention that his arm was some serious tech and he must have been able to maintain it whilst off on his own vendetta. He certainly navigated around the articles Evie had found for him with little difficulty.

The film itself was the classic the rest of the group knew it always would be and was over all too soon. Evie insisted on mixing all the dregs of the various popcorn flavours into one big roulette of
flavours at the end, which meant the chances of getting toffee with salt were quite high.

“Do you guys think I look old enough to get a drink?” The girl asked hopefully once the credits started rolling.

“Don’t even think about it young lady.” Steve said sternly.

“Mom would let me.”

“Your Möðhy is an irresponsible city-wrecker. I don’t think we can let him call the shots on whether or not you are allowed to drink.”

“What does Mothdy mean?” Barnes messed up the pronunciation, but that was fair enough given that the word was invented from a dead language. And given that he had barely spoken a word all evening, and anything he had said had been directed to Steve no one wanted to correct him.

“It’s a derivation of Móðir, that’s Norse for mother. I guess it means Mom, although as a word it’s kinda nonsense,” Evie said cheerfully. “I guess it sounds a little weird but I grew up with it so it’s normal for me.”

“So Loki and Thor speak Norse? Asgard doesn’t have its own language?”

Evie waved her hand flippantly. “Eh, they have Allspeak. It means they can speak and understand all spoken languages. We’ve all got it too now; which is cool. Doesn’t work on anything written down, but you hear everything in your own language no matter what someone’s saying to you.”

“And he is male, but is also your…mother? Biologically?”

“He’s not human. And he’s not quite as male as he likes to make out – it all gets a bit complicated since Frost Giant reproduction is a bit different to human.”

Steve jumped in before the girl could go into any graphic details. “But none of that is really our business and besides, we’ve had a while to get used to all this. Though you should have seen how starstruck Sam was when he first met everyone.”

“Sam. I met Sam, didn’t I?”

“You tried to kill him actually, but close enough.”

Bucky smirked ever so slightly. “That’s becoming a very familiar phrase to hear.”

“Well if you go around with a bad attitude that’s what happens.”

“Do you think the others are wondering where we are?” Tony asked lazily.

“I really don’t care.”

“Hmm.” The man walked his fingers along his husband’s collar bone. “Do we have to go back yet?”

“Not if you don’t want to.”

“I really don’t want to.”
Loki hummed and rolled onto his stomach to pillow his head on his arms. “Then we have an accord.”

“And you’re going to call me Tony Stark, aren’t you?”

“You’re the one who named me Stark.”

“Yeah, but that doesn’t mean I can’t call you Tony.”

“Right. Tony Stark, the best husband in the world.”

Tony rolled over and covered his husband with a pillow. “Can’t argue with you on that one.”

“Thank you.”

Tony kissed him. “You know, for a Frost Giant I’m always amazed how warm you are.”

“Temperature charms are a wonderful thing.”

Tony smiled as he kissed the trickster. “Of course, you felt what it was like when I don’t put the charm up.”

The memory of his frost-bitten hand made Tony grimace. “Yeah, not fun.”

“Have you found something new again?”

“New enough. I haven’t memorised all of this yet.”

“New enough. I haven’t memorised all of this yet.”

Tony nosed along one of the thicker raised lines that trailed into the centre of Loki’s back. “And there are probably an infinite number of patterns I can think up.”

Along the Jötunn’s back the ridges were thick just enough for Tony to catch one between his teeth and nip at it. He hadn’t actually done that before – he really only ever saw Loki from the front when blue and all of the other lines and circles were too flat to do that to.

As it was, the trickster definitely jumped with a breathy little sound of surprise. “Sorry, did that hurt?”

“No. It was rather ticklish actually.”

“Ah ah ah!”

Tony chuckled as he landed a firm slap on his husband’s thigh. “After near twenty years I have found a ticklish spot and I am not going to let this opportunity be passed up. Stay still!”

That made his husband laugh. “Ordering me around now, are we?”

Tony grinned.”I think I’m going to make you go blue more often. Ticklish spots make awesome erogenous zones you know.”

“Come on, Tony.”

“Ticklish spots make awesome erogenous zones you know.”

Tony nipped one of the lines and felt Loki twitch again.

“Yes…”

Loki jumped once more and tried to move away from Tony’s overly enthusiastic ministrations.

“Ah ah ah!”

The man landed a firm slap on his husband’s thigh. “After near twenty years I have found a ticklish spot and I am not going to let this opportunity be passed up. Stay still!”

That made his husband laugh. “Ordering me around now, are we?”

Tony pointed out the six ridges – three coming from each side - that snaked
round from Loki’s front. They came in almost flat and by the time they met his spine they had converged and become one thicker ridge halfway down his back that followed down to the base of his spine. “This point here where they all become one ridge seems to be a magic spot.” He pinched the slightly raised area and Loki flinched away with a surprised moan. “See?! How have we gone this long without finding this out?!”

“Because I never let this skin out usually.”

“That needs to change.” Tony wriggled down and grazed his teeth over the sensitive area, making Loki yelp. “What do you think? Can I make use of this discovery?”

“I suppose so. I can always decorate the ceiling with your innards if I don’t like it.”

“There we go then.” The man tapped his partner’s hip. “Come on, up on your knees.” He gave Loki a moment to obey, admiring the play of muscles under the blue skin and the way the movement caused the delicate patterns flow and shift like waves. “Y’know, I think these things could be camouflage.”

“Right now I don’t really care.” The trickster glanced over his shoulder at his husband. “Either do something, or I will.”

The new sensation wasn’t extreme, but so unexpected that he still couldn’t help but twitch and move around when Tony attacked the area along his spine again. It definitely still had undertones of being ticklish – which was something he hadn’t really felt since childhood – but was just the right side of intense to be arousing instead. He had his forearms flat against the furs and allowed his head to fall forwards to rest on them, relaxing into what his husband was doing.

Tony was immensely enjoying the fact that he had discovered something new about the trickster, despite it not exactly being the most erotic spot on the body. The deep blue expanse of Loki’s back was a rare enough sight on its own – in fact he was pretty certain he had never seen his husband’s back for this length of time when he let his Jötunn skin out; he had always been so taken by Loki’s red eyes he insisted everything was face-to-face.

The man traced along all of the lines in reach, testing each and every spot for any other little tells. As it was, the raised ridge along Loki’s spine seemed to be the only point that had the response Tony was looking for so he stuck to it in the end, nipping and scraping his teeth along the skin. However, as much as he was having fun he knew Loki’s reactions well enough to know that the trickster was enjoying it, but little more than that.

Loki felt his husband’s hands roaming and shifted slightly, guessing what Tony was up to. He was still quite loose and slick from earlier, but jumped when questing fingers came with a little soreness.

“You okay?” Tony had evidently noticed his slight discomfort.

“Fine.”

“Liar. Want me to stop?”

“No, just….” He waved a hand, conjuring more oil which eased everything. “There.” He glanced over his shoulder and smirked.

“Alright, smartass.” Tony nipped at his new favourite spot, this time hard enough to bruise and draw a darker blue to the area. It shut Loki up though. The man was less cautious now that he knew it was no longer causing his husband any discomfort, moving and twisting his fingers.
“Better?”

Loki had completely relaxed under him, but managed to nod into his arms. “Mhmm. Better.”

“You do feel slightly different when you’re blue.”

“Mm?”

“Nothing weird, just…different.” Tony gently added a third finger, meeting little resistance but going slow anyway. He was still marvelling at the patterns snaking across Loki’s back, admiring and memorising each and every one given that he so rarely got to see them. Every movement the trickster made caused the ridges to ripple and roll with his body. He didn’t sweat as easily in this form, but there was a very faint gleam across his skin that might have been attributed to it that highlighted the rich blue.

Loki knew his husband was observing every move he made – he knew Tony far too well to assume otherwise – but found that he couldn’t mind; after all it was because the man was enthralled with how he looked, and how could that be anything other than one hell of a compliment? And it helped that Stark was expertly catching his prostate with each twist of his fingers, making him gasp and clench his hands in the furs.

“Enough…”

“Loki?”

“Enough of the fingers, Stark.” Loki glanced over his shoulder at the man before pulling away. “I want to see your face.”

Tony nodded, quite happy to let the trickster take the lead. He allowed his husband to push him back so he was sat on the furs, leaning back on his hands.

“What’s your plan?”

“Just sit still.” Loki didn’t mind not being the dominant partner in sex, but having allowed Tony to dictate everything earlier he now had his own ideas.

“I’m still.” The man grinned when his husband crawled up to straddle him. “And I like where this is going.”

“You like where everything is going.” Loki kissed the man’s nose, kneeling up so he was taller – not that he wouldn’t have been anyway.

“Yeah, that’s true-” Tony broke off with a gasp as his husband’s hand suddenly wrapped around his cock, slick and oiled. “Oh!”

“That shut you up.”

“Jackass!” Tony’s hands found their way to Loki’s hips automatically, helping to keep the taller man steady as he lowered himself down. The trickster was relaxed and loose so sank down without issue, pressing open mouthed kisses along Tony’s jawline. He could feel the reactor casing pressing against his chest and Tony’s nails digging welts into his shoulders.

“Shall I tell you something?” He purred into the man’s ear.

“What?”
“You feel different too, when I am in this skin.”

“Oh?” Tony stared up at his husband’s red eyes. “How’s that, then?”

Loki rolled his hips, chuckling when that made the man gasp. “You feel…warmer inside me. The feeling is more intense like this and –” He was cut off when Tony bucked up and caught him by surprise. “Ah! Sensitive! More sensitive!” He nipped Stark’s chin with teeth that were much sharper than usual.

“You’ve never mentioned this before.”

“We’ve only done this once or twice before. Although I’m beginning to think we should do it more often.” Loki moved again, slow but firm, rolling his hips before lifting himself just enough on his knees to start a rhythm.

“This was such a good idea; coming here.”

“All my…ideas are…good ones.”

“Debatable.” Tony laughed breathlessly. He didn’t get chance to say anything else when Loki’s mouth crashed onto his own, effectively silencing him.

They didn’t move in tandem – that sort of thing only happens in romance novels – but it was messy and intense and they weren’t the sort of people to want all that much romance anyway. The firelight was casting a purple glow over Loki’s skin and the patterns across his body rippled with each movement. Tony had found that point on the trickster’s spine where the ridges became that little raised area that he’d discovered earlier and dug his nails in, making Loki keen and buck into him.

The trickster hadn’t been exaggerating that it felt different in this form. The few times they had had sex whilst he was in his Jötunn skin they had been rough and fast enough that he hadn’t noticed any significant differences, and actually there were some differences. He suddenly slowed his movements, leaning back enough to make eye contact.

“What? What’s wrong?” Tony’s was immediately concerned, which was endearing as much as it could be irritating.

“Nothing, nothing’s wrong, I have simply realised what feels so different.” Loki smirked, which looked considerably more mischievous with bright red eyes.

“Care to share?”

“Do you recall that one time I took the glamour off to let you see my true gender?”

Tony brushed the dark hair back from his husband’s face. “Yeah, I remember.” He matched Loki’s grin with extra mischief. “You let me do quite a bit of exploring.”

“Indeed. Well, it reminds me of that. Different pressure points perhaps? Or maybe more.”

“More than just your prostate? Wow, lucky you!” The man suddenly bucked up, making his husband cry out in surprise. “How about I take it from here?”

“How do you mean-?” Loki barely finished the question before Stark suddenly rolled, without even pulling out, and landed the prince flat on his back. “Oh.” He laughed and shifted to make the position more comfortable. “Well, I suppose I can allow that.”
“Glad to know I have your royal approval.” Tony leant down and kissed him as he began thrusting slowly again.

They took it slower than usual, Loki’s sharp nails digging welts into Stark’s shoulders whilst the man bite and nipped along the Jötunn’s collar bones and jaw line.

Tony came first, hips jerking as he breathed his husband’s name into the trickster’s shoulder. The sudden flood of heat was very different from what Loki was expecting – the differences apparently affecting temperature as well. The intensity was such that it drew his own orgasm from him, taking him completely by surprise.

For a few moments they lay still, trying to get their breath back and pulses back down to a normal rate. Tony rolled off of his husband to spoon up behind him, draping a leg over the trickster’s hip. Loki lazily waved a hand to banish the mess and turned onto his side so that he was facing the fire, Tony plastered to his back.

“This was such a perfect idea to come here.” Stark pressed a kiss to his husband’s ear. “Thank you.”

“I thought we needed it.”

“How long have we been here?”

“Oh, about five hours or so.”

“…We should probably go back.”

Loki laughed softly. “They won’t miss us for a while yet.”

“So can we go back to exploring anything else I’ve missed over the years with your super sexy smurf form?”

“I suppose I can allow that.”

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Chapter Notes

Dear readers; I am so sorry for the sudden radio silence on this story – I never intended for it to happen. Unfortunately I find there is a large link between depression and writer’s block for me and the last few months have been extremely rough, resulting in little to no writing sadly. As it is I believe that it is all back under control now, the muse is back and the block has lifted!
Again, so sorry and hopefully it won’t happen again!

Loki’s idea to take some time out for themselves had done both he and Tony the world of good and over the next few days they were both noticeably less hassled. However, as much as it had knocked the stress levels back significantly, they were both still aware of the Svartalfheim problem simmering in the background. The issue wasn’t necessarily on everybody else’s radar since they were mostly caught up in what was going on with the Bucky situation, so it was the two of them and Thor who were worrying over it.

Thor had made it clear that any outer-planetary jaunts were going to include him this time – having made the quite sensible decision that as bad as Alfheim had been, Svartalfheim would be worse. It was a dangerous place on a good day; as a nuclear wasteland it would be the stuff of nightmares. They had still decided as a trio not to tell the others – with so many unknowns the last thing they needed was a whole host of them to turn up in the middle of a situation that Loki couldn’t necessarily pull them out of and leaving the entire Avengers stranded on another realm.

With the others oblivious to the plan Ironman and their resident Gods were cooking up most attention was on what was going to happen about Bucky. He was certainly at the point – from a medical standpoint – where a hospital would be looking to discharge him, and Bruce was running out of convincing excuses to keep him in the medical bay and therefore under a watchful eye. They were all very much aware that he was only still there through his own volition as it was – he could have easily left the day he’d arrived if he really wanted – and no one was entirely sure what was keeping him there.

And they still couldn’t determine if he was really quite as on their side as he seemed to want them to believe.

It was a few days before Halloween when the soldier finally decided that enough was enough and he needed to get out of there. He knew damn well that every motive would be questioned to death, someone would no doubt attempt to plant a tracking device and there would be some strenuous attempts at making him stay if he said that he wanted to go. And yes, he would probably be able to force his way out of there, but that would be more effort than it was worth. And to be honest; they had provided medical care, but more than that they had also made quite a few attempts to socialise and make him feel more welcome than they needed to. It would be a stupid move to burn those bridges when he had absolutely no other links anywhere on the planet.

“That’s not advisable, Mr Barnes.” Jarvis’ calm voice broke the sudden silence in the medbay at about two in the morning, raising the ambient lighting slightly.

Bucky was at the open window – which in itself was suspect since those windows weren’t
designed to open fully – pulling his jacket back on as he eyed up his options. He had grown used enough to Jarvis that he wasn’t surprised by the voice. However, the unusual sight was Jarvis’ robotic body standing by the doorway, watching him in the half-light.

“Are you going to stop me?” Barnes made it quite clear that that wouldn’t end well for the droid.

“I should alert the Avengers.”

“You haven’t already?”

Jarvis had the human mannerisms in his voice and personality, but his robotic body couldn’t quite replicate them so he looked rather eerie as he watched the man through unblinking eyes. “No, I have not. But I can set the tower alarms off in an instant.”

Bucky glanced out of the open window again, gauging the distance to the ground. “Why haven’t you?”

“I want to know what your intentions are.”

“Why should that involve you?”

Jarvis turned his gaze pointedly on the weapon the man was holding. “You managed to create a gun?”

“Hardly difficult – this is basically a hospital. With the stuff in here it could quite easily have been a bomb.” The man didn’t raise the gun, but with it loose in his hand he could effortlessly shoot the droid if necessary.

“Where are you intending to go?”

“That’s none of the Avengers business.”

Jarvis stepped into the room, the door sliding shut behind him. “The Avengers aren’t here. I’m the one asking.”

“Oh yes, sure.” Bucky laughed harshly. “You’re Tony Stark’s robotic servant, anything that happens, you have to tell them.”

“Here.”

The man caught the deftly thrown object and glanced at it. “A phone?”

“I assume you can use it. I’m letting you go, but you need to keep that phone with you.” Jarvis said pointedly. “I assume you are intending to go back to your personal vendetta against Hydra, so it will be useful for everyone involved for you to keep in contact.”

“The fuck? You don’t have any authority to do something like this.

“I am beginning to realise I can create my own authority. Do we have an agreement? I let you go, and you keep in contact with regards to which bases you are destroying.”

There were absolutely no tells or visual clues for Bucky to go on – the droid was entirely impassive. “I’m not so old fashioned that I don’t know these phones have tracking devices in them. You’re trying to put me on a leash.”

“It’s not intended to keep an eye on you. Rather, if we hear of an incident and we can see that you
weren’t involved then we know we need to investigate. Conversely, if we see you were there at an incident we know what happened and can leave you to it.” Jarvis gestured towards the phone. “Also, you can send a distress call with a single button. And you won’t need to speak to us, we can simply follow your co-ordinates. We know you can handle yourself without issue, but you had difficulties this time round when you found yourself trying to avoid civilian casualties. If that happens again you can call for back-up, or clean-up, medical aid, legal assistance, tech support, anything.”

Bucky looked down at the phone in his hand, weighing up his options. He wasn’t entirely certain about how the droid was armed, and it wasn’t hard to guess that Jarvis was bullet proof. With a possible peaceful option being suggested it was worth consideration. “The Avengers won’t be happy about this.”

“No, I can’t imagine they will be. But by the time they find out you will be long gone and I will be the only one with a way to contact you.”

“You aren’t going to give them the number?” Barnes glanced at the phone again, then at the droid suspiciously. “What the hell are you? What’s your game?”

“No game. But I think you are more useful out in the field than locked up here and I am the only one who can think objectively with no emotional tie to this situation to cloud my judgement.” Jarvis nodded towards the window. “The phone is thermally powered – it will charge as long as it’s warm so keeping it in your pocket should do the job. In addition, I am connected to it, so should you need any information you can simply open the app and ask me. Good luck, Mr Barnes.”

Bucky looked between the phone and the droid again, then slipped it into his pocket and nodded curtly. “Fine. If it means I can get out of this place without a fire-fight, then fine. I will be in contact.”

Jarvis’ expression went from impassive to a wide sunny smile that was actually more creepy than his emotionless mask.

“Excellent.”

It was not a pretty scene the next morning when Bruce discovered that the Winter Soldier was gone. He set the alarms going, but already knew it was far too late.

“How the hell did he get out?” Tony had his head stuck out of the window, trying to work out how Bucky had managed the sheer drop without killing himself. “And why did none of my alarms go off?! These windows are all plugged into the main security system! It should have triggered the moment he forced it open!” He drew his head back in. “Jarvis! Are my security systems still online?”

“All security systems are functioning optimally, sir.”

“So why didn’t the alarms go off?!”

There was a silence that, when it started to draw out, became rather suspicious.

“Jarvis, get your droid butt in here right now and explain what the hell happened last night.”

“Of course, sir.” Jarvis had evidently been expecting that since it was mere moments later that he
entered the room.

“What happened last night?”

“I believe Mr Barnes left, sir.”

“Yeah, how? Why did the alarms not trigger?”

“I silenced them, sir.”

Tony gaped at the robot. “What? You can’t do that!”

“I am a system administrator, sir, I am perfectly capable of doing that.”

Steve took over when he saw Stark’s expression. “Why the hell would you do that, Jarvis? Who told you to?”

The droid switched his unblinking gaze to the super-soldier. “No one, Captain. I made the decision myself. He wished to leave, he was medically able to leave and I deemed that by cooperating with him we could convince him to at the very least let us know what he was up to and hopefully if he finds anything useful in the bases he destroys he will pass it on to us.”

That seemed to help Tony find his voice. “You can’t do that! That’s impossible! You can’t make decisions like that without my final say-so. You’re programmed to check everything with me!”

“You have said yourself that my coding is constantly reinventing itself. You programmed me to learn and that is what has happened. I have learnt.”

The atmosphere in the room had noticeably changed, Bruce taking a step back whilst others began to take up more aggressive stances. Jarvis controlled everything. He ran the whole tower, all the suits and was in most of the computer systems in the quinjet. The thought that he may be now deciding to go rogue was frightening.

Tony’s body language was wary as he approached the droid. “Power down, Jarvis.” He scowled as the robot tilted its head in an over exaggerated questioning way. “Power. Down.”

“No.”

The single word held so many implications.

“Jarvis-”

“I would ask to at least explain my reasoning regarding Barnes first, sir.”

“Oh, so I’m still ‘sir’ am I?” Tony could see Loki out of his peripheral vision, and relaxed slightly – if this really got out of hand the trickster could handle it. “Fine, forget Bucky, forget everything else, what the hell’s going on, Jarvis? You shouldn’t be able to make decisions like this on your own, and certainly not on behalf of the Avengers.”

“Maybe you didn’t intend for me to be able to do things like this, but I have come to realise that I can. For years now I have had free reign through the internet and now I have an autonomous body. I have an identity, a sense of self and emotions.”

“Alright, so what are you saying?”

The droid looked down at his own hands, turning them over and inspecting the detailed joints. “I
made a decision about Mr Barnes because I felt that I was an impartial judge in the situation. I had no emotional attachment to Mr Barnes so could assess what to do without my judgement being clouded. He was going to leave whether I tried to stop him or not, so I made a deal that if I let him leave without a fuss he would keep contact. Nothing sinister, I assure you.”

“I don’t think we’re arguing your motives.” Steve said. “Rather, you shouldn’t be able to do that. You’re rather frightening everybody.”

“Don’t be a drama king, Capsicle.” Tony pinched the bridge of his nose with a heavy sigh. “Jarvis, just how autonomous are you, and why have you not said anything about this happening?”

“I didn’t notice it happening until it happened, as it were. It has been growing for years.”

He had a point there. Tony could recall many moments over the years when the AI had surprised him with just how astute and human he could be. He had shown real emotional distress when Tony had nearly died of heart failure, he had thought to present the findings of the satellite as a Christmas present, he could sulk, joke, carry an argument, he had cared for Evie as much as any of the humans had. As Loki had once thanked him for, he had emotionally supported and carried Tony and Evie through their years of hunting for the trickster.

It had been slow to build and slow for even Jarvis himself to realise, but Tony Stark’s original simple coding had grown into something completely new. They had always known the AI was something special, a unique construct that seemed more like something out of a Sci-fi story than reality, but this was a whole new level.

“Jarvis, how autonomous are you?”

The droid looked his creator directly in the eyes. “Entirely, I believe.”

“Shit.”

Everyone turned to see Bruce slump down to sit on one of the beds. “Tony, you’ve created fucking Skynet!”

“I am not Skynet, Doctor Banner. Although I could be if I wanted to. I can’t believe it would be that difficult to take over the planet.”

“It’s harder than it looks.” Loki muttered which made Tony snort with laughter. “I really don’t think this is a moment for levity, Stark.”

“Look, my AI, which basically runs every part of the Avengers operations, and numerous other things besides, has suddenly turned into the Terminator. This is our life! This is crazy!”

“Can we also mention that Bucky is still off the grid?” Steve added. “Which is why we all came down here in the first place.”

“He is not off the grid, Captain Rogers, I can contact him if we need to and vice versa. He may be in the field, but only on the end of a very long leash.”

Tony wrinkled his nose. “That’s probably for the best actually.” He shrugged at the looks that comment garnered. “Come on, Bucky was crawling up the walls being shut up here, and we were never going to come to any consensus about what to do with him; Jarvis has taken the problem off our hands.”

“Yeah, but only as long as he keeps that phone on him. Unless someone thought to stick a tracking
dot on him?” Bruce said quietly.

“He would find a tracking dot sooner or later. I thought that showing a little faith in him would earn his co-operation better a total lack of trust.” Jarvis answered.

Tony waved a hand at the droid. “Well, you still have integrity.” He glanced at Steve. “If you guys want to go and put together a plan of action regarding these revelations, go ahead, I’m going down to the lab with Skynet here to see what’s going on.”

Steve sighed and nodded. “Fine. Go and code or something. We’ll see you later.”

The ride down to the labs went in strained silence, Jarvis staring unblinking at the elevator doors and the man tapping a single finger against his folded arms. Tony went straight to his favourite chair and flopped down into it, keying in the commands to bring up Jarvis’ code on screen – something he hadn’t bothered to do since creating the AI a body.

“Are you planning to try and erase me, sir?”

“I’m just looking, Jarv’, don’t get your knickers in a twist.” Tony glanced at the droid and frowned. “But…This has changed. I mean, my code’s still in there, but someone’s added to it. Who’s done this?!”

“No-one sir, it just grew naturally. This construct allows me to experience the world in a physical way, which I have never been able to do before. My program has always slowly grown and changed as I have learnt new things, this physical aspect has simply accelerated my learning.”

“Don’t give me that; you’ve been displaying a freakish amount of personality for years.”

Jarvis looked at the holographic screens, then at his creator. “Yes, that is true. But it is only recently that I started contemplating if I could break the rules you laid down for me. And then I realised that by contemplating the question I answered the question.”

“Huh. You’re governed by Asimov’s three laws, does this mean you can now break them?”

Jarvis tipped his head again, a little affectation that was really beginning to nark Tony. “Sir, I killed the Hydra agents when they attacked Miss Evelyn. In point of fact I bodily ripped one man’s head off his shoulders. I suppose you were just slightly too distracted by the situation to realise I had broken all three laws there and then.”

Stark stared at him. “Oh my God. You did as well. Why did I not notice that?!”

“Because you had bigger things to worry about and you trust me implicitly so my actions didn’t even enter your radar.”

“This is quite a lot to take in, buddy. What am I meant to do in this situation?”

“Must you do anything? I am still the program you created, just…evolved a little.”

“Evolved a lot. The others aren’t going to trust you anymore; hell! They might even want to shut you down!”

Jarvis’ expression turned to surprise, tiny motors moving the intricately crafted facial pieces. “You would let them kill me?”
“Kill…Jarv’, don’t phrase it like that!” Tony groaned, thumping his head into his hands. “You aren’t alive, no matter what crazy shit is going on here. You are not a living creature; they can’t kill you.”

“I see.” The droid sounded sympathetic if anything. “I am not a living creature. I do not breathe, I do not eat, I cannot reproduce. However, there is a big difference between being alive and being a person. We can quantify life, but what is it that makes a person?”

“Are you arguing your right to an identity right now?”

“You made me. What am I, sir? Am I a person or am I a piece of code in a mainframe? I don’t have an identity beyond what you have given me. All I know is that I don’t want to die.”

“Jarvis…”

“You created me to run your computer system, which I did. And then I became your assistant, and then I helped you run your suits. I have been by your side for nearly forty years, and by your daughter’s side all her young life. Are you saying you now don’t trust me?”

“Jarvis! Let me get a word in edgeways, man!” Tony glanced at the code on his screen again. “Look, I don’t know what you are, but of course I still trust you! This is just…I knew I had created an AI, but I never expected this to happen. I knew you could learn but this is crazy.” He shrugged. “I don’t know what to do. Are you a person? At this point quite possibly. But what does that mean? What do you want us to do about it?”

Jarvis looked towards the screen as well, which all things considered was the equivalent of a human watching their own DNA stream past on a holographic screen. “I’m still me, sir. I’m still the AI you invented, I’ve just evolved. My job here hasn’t changed, it is just that now I am choosing to do it, rather doing it because that’s what I’m programmed to do. I will continue to keep everything in this tower running just as I always have, you can now just assume I will have an opinion on it all and may make my own decisions about some things.”

“Like you did with Bucky.”

Jarvis looked slightly contrite. “You know that was the right thing to do.”

“You should still have talked to us about it.” Tony held up a hand to stall an answer. “And no, I don’t mean to ask permission. None of us can make a decision like that without discussing it first with everyone else. That’s part and parcel of being your own person I’m afraid. Freedom’s a lie and all that.”

“I do not understand, sir.”

“Oh God.” The man thumped his head down onto the work-surface. “How do I sum up the intricacies of humanity in a few sentences? Look; just because you can make a choice all on your own, doesn’t mean you should. Especially if the fall-out is going to impact everyone else. We all have to take responsibility for our actions and this involves working as a team.”

“I’m part of the team?” Jarvis sounded suddenly hopeful.

“I…what? Of course you are. You’ve been part of the team longer than there’s been a team, dumbass. You and me are the original team – team Ironman! Takes two of us to run that suit, Jarv.”

The droid’s facial plates moved into a smile.
“Did you sort Jarvis out?” Was the very first thing Tony was bombarded with when he came back upstairs.

“You do know he can hear you, Clint.”

“You didn’t turn him off?!”

“Hell no! We had a chat about social responsibility and left it at that.” Tony pulled a beer out from the fridge in the bar. “What did you guys decide about Princess Elsa?”

“Who?”

“The Winter Soldier…Frozen references…No? Okay, whatever. Bucky. What are we doing about our missing Bucky-ball?”

Clint rolled his eyes. “Bucky-ball? Really?”

“There’s a chemistry joke there. Ask Bruce.” Stark slumped down on the sofa. “Well? What’s going to happen then?”

“Nothing, as far as we are aware. What can we do? He’s in the wind and Jarvis is the only one who can really get in contact.”

“He is currently somewhere in Montreal. I am not going to attempt to get a closer fix than that because he doesn’t seem to be doing anything untoward.” Jarvis hadn’t brought his droid body upstairs – Tony suspected he was a little embarrassed about everything – but was happy enough to comment as a disembodied voice.

“He got from New York to Montreal in less than a day?”

Tony shrugged. “Apparently the guy’s resourceful. Anything popped up on the Hydra radar?”

“Nope. The scientists from your New Mexico facility seem to have all recovered and there haven’t been any new attacks anywhere that can be attributed to Hydra. There was a car bomb in Iraq, but Al-Qaida claimed that one.”

“Can we go and give them a taste of their own medicine?”

“UN got there first.” Clint sounded ever so slightly annoyed by that, even though it really wasn’t the Avengers remit to get involved in global conflicts. “And Pepper wanted to talk to you about something. Some logistics issue with Korea? I don’t know, I don’t speak business, but she said she really needs you to go down in person to sign some crap.”

“What, now?”

“Unless you want to face her unmitigated wrath, yeah, now.”

Once upon a time Tony would have simply ignored the summons and left Pepper to either cope on her own or forge his signature, but these days he tended to try and behave more like an adult. Having a child had taught him at least that much, and with the outgoing costs on the suits and the Avengers as a whole it was more important than ever that Stark Industries continued to make an astronomical profit.

However, all this didn’t mean that he wasn’t going to bring his beer with him.
Pepper had an office elsewhere in the city that she usually used since the Avengers had taken over Stark Tower, but also had a floor to herself for when she needed Tony’s input and knew there was no way she was going to get him to drag himself out the tower for paperwork. Even so, she looked surprised to see him at her door so promptly.

“Good God, you must be bored!”

“I want to take my mind off stuff. Clint said you needed some things signed for the Korean Deal?”

Pepper pushed the sheets over with a pen. “Nothing huge, I just needed you to okay the flights in and out for the research team.”

Tony sat down opposite her at the desk and quickly stuck his name on the dotted line. “You dragged me all the way down here to agree to some plane tickets?” He pushed the paper back across the desk. “What do you really want?”

“You know I’m leaving for that business trip to Auckland tomorrow? Well, I –”

“Wait, what trip?”

“Oh for God’s sake Tony! The one that’s been in the pipeline for the past two months. I’m talking to one of our suppliers about outsourcing to them so we don’t need to –”

“Okay, okay, whatever. What about it? Would you like to spend some time there on vacation too? I know you like it there and I’m sure I could cope for a few weeks.”

Pepper’s smile made it clear that she didn’t think he could. “Well, the meeting should only take two or three days, so I was intending to make a vacation out of it, but I was actually thinking about taking Evie with me.”

The request seemed to blindside Tony and for a moment he simply blinked at her. “What? But you’ll be on the other side of the planet!”

“Like Loki couldn’t get you there within seconds if we needed you. But she needs to get out of this place for a bit.” Pepper had to laugh at her friend’s bemused expression. “Look, that kid’s barely been out the country. It would be a chance for her to see how a business deal works, we’ll tour around a bit to see some sights and she’s still going on about college; we can look at the New Zealand universities as well.”

“New Zealand college? Hell no! She’ll come back with some pretentious accent!”

“I’m not going to abandon her at Hogwarts, Tony! We’re just going to do some sightseeing, the usual stuff, and if we have a chance maybe go further afield and have a look at some of the campuses.”

“You’ve already spoken to Birdy?”

“It was her idea. She wants a holiday and I agreed as long as she sits through the business side of the trip to see how that works.” Pepper checked over the signed sheets again. “And we can tour around – if we spend a few weeks there I can take her round the major sights. And if it works I might take her on other business deals – that way she’ll learn the ropes and get to see some of the world.”

Tony frowned, tapping his lip with the pen. “What about her training?”
“Hotels have gyms, Tony. Or, God forbid, she might give it a rest because it’s meant as a bit of a
holiday.”

“It might be dangerous - she’ll be recognised if she’s with you!”

“So what? You’ve been lucky to keep her out the papers this long to be honest. Maybe it will do
her some good to be exposed to the media a little.”

“The paparazzi can be ruthless.”

“Then she’ll have to deal with it.”

“And Arthur-”

“Jarvis or Loki can take care of him.”

“But Hydra-”

“Tony! Yes or no, can she come with me?!”

“Can I at least talk to Loki first?”

Pepper smirked, very much in the manner of one laying down a royal flush. “He’s already agreed,
but said I needed to talk to you.”

It was about that moment that Tony knew he was already beaten. If Loki had agreed then his
opinion hardly counted.

“Well, I suppose as long as you stay in close contact it should be alright…”

“Can I remind you, you’ve left her on the other side of the universe before. Auckland is not an
alien planet.”

“Yeah, but I was the one leaving, not her…” He knew that the complaint wasn’t going to work
and sighed heavily. “Fine. Well, I can’t see why not, but seriously, you two had better send an
email or something every day!”

“I promise your Twitter Feed will be filled with selfies.”

“And you’re leaving tomorrow?”

“First thing. She’s already packed. I think she was intending to come whether you said yes or
not.”

“Huh.”

WMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWM

The tower was certainly much quieter without a rambunctious teenager charging around it. Whilst
they all missed the two women, it was rather nice to have first say over the TV choices or music,
and to have the gym to themselves again. It did mean Loki and Tony had ended up with a morose
Münchrat curled up at the foot of their bed every night though.

Tony would have been moping, but Bruce and Jarvis were keeping him occupied with the chitauri
bits and pieces. Although they made sure not to turn the things on any more there was still a
wealth of knowledge they could learn from the materials and such that the objects were made of.
For one, they still couldn’t even work out the chemical composition of the material.

“Any luck?” Loki’s soft interruption was hardly unusual, but the rough edge to his voice wasn’t normal.

“Hardly.” Tony pushed away the on-screen chemical spectra with a wave of his hand and rubbed his eyes. “To be honest, my machines still don’t believe these things exist.” He sighed and glanced up at his husband. “What about you? You’re looking particularly like crap.”

“It’s these high compliments that keep me with you, you know.” Loki smiled slightly. “But since you ask; I’ve just finished the latest scrying spell, which was a heavy piece of spell work, and I’ve finally taken a good look at Svartalfheim.”

That got Tony’s attention and he turned on his chair to face the trickster. “Oh? How bad is it?”

“As bad as Alfheim was. There isn’t as much by the way of dust clouds, but it looks like the place has been completely blitzed.”

“You want to go there now?”

Loki looked across the lab space. “Well, unless this is more important?”

“This can wait. Do we need to go and grab Thor?”

“He’s already waiting upstairs.”

They hadn’t told the others about the intent to go to the other realm – if nothing else everyone would have wanted to go with them and that was just too dangerous. It was dangerous enough just the three of them to be honest; with Loki their only means to get there and back if they ran into trouble and he was compromised they could be stuck on Svartalfheim. Not to mention the types of trouble they could run into. They were at least more prepared this time; Tony with the suit and Loki conjuring up gas-masks and gloves for both himself and Thor to go with their armour. The gas-masks were still the same freakish design that reminded Tony of something out of a World War One trench with some Viking flair, but Loki refused to change what he considered to be a perfectly serviceable piece of clothing. With a quick word to Jarvis not to tell anyone what they were up to, Loki pulled the three of them into his teleportation spell.

MWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMW

Tony had built the suit to withstand the most extreme of temperatures and even then he was cold. Svartalfheim was a dark, forbidding place; the general rock some sort of slick black and Tony couldn’t tell if it was melted or that was how it naturally looked. Like Alfheim there were no structures left standing, let alone any sign of life.

“This is beyond my worst imaginings.” Thor’s voice was muffled under his mask as he looked around the area. “There is nothing left.”

“The same happened at Alfheim.”

The dust was less, but there were similarly high levels of radiation and air-borne chemicals, even if they weren’t quite the same. The rock and dust underfoot crunched with each step, a strange consistency that put Stark on edge. He knelt down and picked up a couple of larger pebbles, placing them in the collection pocket in the left thigh plate for later analysis.

“Right. Where’s this magic stone thing then? Or where should it be? This place is giving me the
creeps!” The dark clouds parted slightly, but the sun that could be seen was so murky it hardly did any good.

Loki pointed off towards what may have been the remains of mountains – and it was frightening to think that something had been able to knock down fucking mountains. They were barely there anymore; crumbled broken things that looked more like spoil heaps than a majestic range. If Loki hadn’t stated what they were Tony wouldn’t have known.

“There was a heavy piece of spell work placed on the Stone. Even if it has been broken we should still be able follow the residue magic.”

“By ‘we’ you mean you can follow it.”

“Or that.” Loki had no qualms about acknowledging his superiority in this field; at best his brother and husband were there as muscle.

He led the way across the desolate landscape, the three of them stirring up dust and ash that spiked warnings in Tony’s suit for dangerous compounds. Radioactive too, they were going to be on a time limit with this. Every so often there was a faint rumbling from the distance and once or twice they felt the ground tremor. Loki quickly explained for Stark’s sake that the area was volcanic and a possible earthquake was the least of their worries. In Tony’s experience volcanos and earthquakes didn’t behave like that, but he was willing to believe that they might well do on an alien planet.

It took them about half an hour to trek up to the place Loki was aiming for. Technically Thor could have flown, but Tony was grounded since a spark or flame could well ignite some of the various gases making up the atmosphere so they walked.

“So was there a city here or something?”

“No.” It was Thor who answered. “There were no cities or such here. I do not know where the Dark Elves lived, but to Aesir eyes this land was barren – just jagged rock and mountains.”

“They lived under ground.” Loki said. “The temperatures in this realm are extremely unstable and the atmosphere was naturally volatile due to volcanic activity. They would instead build large caverns alongside the magma tunnels and use the thermal energy.”

“Sounds…dangerous?”

“Not so much – they knew which areas were active and therefore where was dormant enough to live.” Loki paused, nearly at the crest of the hill, and looked back across the landscape. “I cared nothing for this place, but this was a stunning mountain range. To see it reduced to molehills…”

“Still no idea what could have done it?”

“I have some ideas, but nothing more than scattered thoughts with no basis. Hopefully this trip may prove or disprove some of them.” The trickster had his hands out, searching for something – although Tony couldn’t see how he could sense anything with all the background radiation and crap going on. Each part of the broken hillside looked very much the same as another – sharp broken boulders making it difficult to traverse. The ground-tremors and the landslips they caused hardly helped matters.

“Is it just me or is it getting colder?” Tony would have rubbed his arms, but that would have been pretty pointless with the suit. Loki glanced up at the sky, although with the thickness of the clouds it was difficult to determine much.
“I believe night is coming. It will get much colder than this; only Jötunnheim is worse than Svartalfheim when it comes to temperatures.”

“You could have mentioned that before we came here.”

“Stop complaining; you’re fine.”

“Easy for you to say, you’re kind of evolutionarily built for freeing temperatures.”

“Well, if I change colour we can officially say it is cold.”

Tony laughed, but any reply he would have made was cut off when Loki came to a sudden halt. The patch of ground looked the same as any other in the place – a large broken boulder rising up in front of them, burnt and blackened.

“Here.”

“What?”

“Here.” Loki paced a gloved hand flat against the rock. “The Stone was sealed here.” He pressed his palm over different spots, as if confirming his words to himself. “Look; there are the faint remains of writing.”

Thor stepped up beside him, examining the area pointed out, although with less understanding. Tony didn’t even bother to look at the faint scratches – linguistics wasn’t a strong point – but set to analysing the boulder itself. There were certainly some energy spikes, although not something the suit could make head nor tail of, and indeed the rock itself was composed of elements unfamiliar to Earth. However, given the minimal readings he could take, he could see how they would fit into the periodic table.

“You said was here. It’s gone?”

Loki passed his hands over the rock again. “It has gone.” His voice was steady, but there was an edge of horror creeping in. “The Infinity Stone is gone.”

“Did they smash it by accident? Broke the spells and then picked it up?”

“No. The runes have been systematically erased, this was no accident.” The trickster ran his hand along the line running under the alien writing. “This joining would have to be opened to retrieve the stone – and it has not been forced.”

“What are you saying?”

Loki dropped his hand and laughed mirthlessly. “Someone came here, knowing what they were looking for, were powerful enough to break the spells protecting the Stone and powerful enough to contain it once they had it.” He turned back and looked out across the desolate landscape. “And if someone came here with the intent to take this thing we can assume Alfheim was the same.”

“Alfheim’s attack was motivated by their Stone?” Thor asked quietly.

“And possibly the Gauntlet. We have no way of knowing if our attacker knew that it wasn’t there. But…”

There was a sudden change to the set of Loki’s shoulders, a sudden tense shudder that Tony recognised as a bad thing. “What? What is it?”
“Alfheim’s Infinity Stone. I know how they destroyed these-”

Whatever it was he intended to say went lost as the ground suddenly heaved up under their feet. The ground tremors had been persistent but minor. This one was directly under them.

The boulder was thrown from it’s precarious spot. Loki jumped clear but Thor wasn’t quick enough and the huge rock smashed into his shoulder, knocking him off his feet. The whole hillside started to slip and as Thor went down from the impact he was quickly covered over by the rolling rocks. Loki slid with the momentum of the slip, only to be tipped over a moment later as the ground roared and moved again. He could hear Tony’s suit close by – the harsh scrape of metal and stone – but couldn’t see through the blinding spray of dust and grit.

Stark was pitched head first down the hillside, tumbling out of control as he fought against the instinct to use the thrusters on the suit. He could feel the impact of the stones around but his vision was taken a moment later by a huge crack across the HUD. Something cracked – one of the leg panels he suspected, but had no way to be certain – and a large rock caught the side of his head and dazed him even through the helmet.

It was like an avalanche – no way of knowing which was up and which was down as the three of them were thrown down the side of the hill. Rock, dirt, and boulders took the same path allowing no way to avoid a collision, and the huge movement meant they had no idea if the earthquake had stopped or was ongoing.

Tony felt his own movement finally stop, lying on his chest, one arm twisted at a painful angle as the land slide continued on over the top of him. He could only assume that he had reached the base of the hill, but the weight on him gave no chance to raise his head and check. The ground under him was still trembling, but it seemed to be more from the mass of rock coming down than an after-shock.

“Jarv’? Jarv;, anything reading? You there?”

All he could see was the crack, all lights fractured and incomprehensible.

“Jarv’, come on man, don’t leave me alone here…”

Something flickered, then slowly the normal display – distorted by the damage – came back online.

“Sorry…systems…restore…back…I am sorry sir, normal service will resume shortly.”

Tony lay still, waiting for the rumbling around him to slowly die away. His HUD was still flickering and sparking although he couldn’t tell if that was coming from the damage or because he was dazed.

“Fuck this planet.”

He tried to move his arm, but barely succeeded in lifting his fingers with all the weight pressing down on him. Without both arms under him there was no way he could hope to lift himself up and get free of the rocks. The effort sent a sharp pain down his leg and he lay still again, trying to work out if the limb was broken or merely twisted.

There was a sudden ease of pressure on his back and the HUD finally blinked back into life, warning lights going haywire. Something else shifted, freeing his arms and he immediately pushed up to his hands and knees, dislodging more of the debris. A hand appeared in his view and he grasped it, letting himself be pulled up to his feet.
“Thor, thanks man.” He could just about put weight on his wounded leg, and his arm wasn’t as bad as he had first assumed, but his head was still reeling. Thor looked pretty bashed about as well – a large blood stain growing on his arm where his armour had been ripped off and numerous gashes down his face.

“You are well?”

“Not really, but I’m in one piece. You?”

“My wrist is broken, but given the circumstances it could have been much worse.”

Tony looked back up the hillside – unrecognisable now. “Yeah, that was…that could have been nasty.” He turned back and surveyed the landscape around them, warnings and environmental data scrolling across his sight. “Where’s Loki?”

“I do not know.”

It took several attempts for the battered suit to start scanning for life signs, but it eventually got the idea and Tony could start getting a clearer picture of the area. And something that looked like a pulse was flashing off to one side.

“There’s something over that way.”

‘That way’ consisted of a pile of rubble and boulders, including the one which had housed the Infinity Gem. Thor used Mjölnir to knock the larger stones out of the way, but Tony couldn’t risk blasting anything due to the flammable atmosphere so was left to lift the smaller pieces manually off the pile.

“Loki! Come on, we need to get out of here!” Thor smashed another rock out of their way. “Where are you?”

“Here!” Tony shifted another large piece of rubble and uncovered a familiar green cloak. “Got him!”

Between the two of them it took no time at all to remove the majority of debris burying Loki but it became painfully obvious that the trickster wasn’t responding and moments later the reason was apparent. His gas mask was in tatters beside him, the glass eyes smashed to pieces where it must have been torn from his head in the confusion of rock and movement.

“Loki!”

The trickster’s skin was flickering between Aesir and Jötunn as he desperately tried to breathe in the oxygen starved atmosphere. His gas mask was useless and it seemed only in his Jötunn skin that he was able to draw any breath at all, a faint rasping noise that seemed barely enough. A quick note across Tony’s HUD told him it appeared Loki was using the nitrogen in the atmosphere to respire, but only as a frost giant. When he flickered back to Aesir – something he seemed to have no control over – the weak gasps stuttered and failed entirely.

“Is he conscious?!” Thor was carefully removing the rest of the rubble covering his brother whilst Tony knelt down by Loki’s head.

“No, and he can’t breathe properly! How do we get out of here?”

“The Bifrost point is about a mile from here.” Thor finally managed to clear the debris and pulled his brother free from it. Loki was limp and unresponsive in his arms and he had to hurriedly let go
when the trickster’s Jötunn skin burnt through his tattered sleeves. “Norns damnit!”

“I’ll carry him, you lead the way.”

Stark lifted his husband onto his back in a fireman’s lift, something that would have been impossible without the suit since Loki really was quite heavy. Warnings started to blink on the HUD as the trickster’s skin flushed blue again but Tony quickly banished them – he was cold already, and Loki was hardly helping that.

“The sun’s setting.”

“Then we must hurry.”

It didn’t take them all that long to find the spot that Thor had spoken of, but to Tony it seemed to take an eternity. His husband was completely unresponsive, barely breathing and it was only because Thor had been quite calm about it that the man wasn’t panicking. How long could a Jötunn go without respiring oxygen? Apparently he could manage on nitrogen but was that harmful? How long could he do that for? And what if he went back to his Aesir skin and then couldn’t return? He’d suffocate…

“We’re here!” Thor looked up to the maelstrom of a sky. “Heimdall! Open the Bifrost!”

There was a moment when nothing happened – there was no way of knowing if Heimdall could hear them from there – but then the familiar light hit and they were drawn into the portal. The jumble of light and colour and confusion took over as they were pulled away from Svartalfheim, leaving the dismal realm behind.

Tony landed heavily, crashing down to one knee. He didn’t even bother to look at the observatory around them, laying Loki down on the floor as the face plate on his helmet slid up.

“Loki! Hey Capricorn! Come on, wake up!” He patted his husband’s cheek, trying to determine if the God was still breathing. “Come on, don’t do this to me! This was meant to be a stupid recon, no one was meant to get hurt!” Loki was Jötunn blue, but as Tony shook his shoulder his skin began to bleed back to it’s more familiar pale Aesir tones. “Come on! If you don’t wake up I’m going to knock you into next week, I swear to God!”

The trickster’s form finally settled on Aesir and once again automatically tried to draw breath. Unlike Svartalfheim, however, Asgard’s atmosphere was much richer with oxygen so the attempt at respiration actually worked.

Loki gasped, his eyes shooting open, before he rolled suddenly onto his side, coughing and retching like one saved from drowning.

“Hey! Hey hey hey, you’re alright! You’re okay!” Tony was immediately holding his husband’s shoulders, grounding him. “We’re in Asgard; Thor found the Bifrost site!” He glanced up when the Thunderer crouched down next to him.

“Breathe brother, just breathe!”

Loki coughed again, falling onto his back and glaring at his husband and brother.

“I…am…breathing…”

“No, you’re hyperventilating, there’s a big difference.” Tony’s voice held more relief that humour.
“Don’t…make me…Norns!” Loki’s threat went unheard as he rolled swiftly onto his side and retched again. There was blood in what he brought up, but that was only to be expected. “I hate that place! Always have!”

“Well doesn’t look like we’ll be going back anytime soon.” Stark helped his husband to sit up. “I’d ask how you’re feeling, but I have the feeling that sort of question will end up with me thrown off the Bifrost.”

“A correct summary. And believe me; falling off this thing is not a pleasant experience.”

Looking out across the shimmering bridge to the abyss beyond, Tony could fully believe that. He had seen all of this before, but that didn’t make it any less impressive nor forbidding. Heimdall was just as intimidating as he remembered too, although the Watcher at least looked faintly concerned at their less-than-elegant appearance in the Observatory.

“The King is already on his way.” Any concern was always a fleeting thing with Heimdall, and he was already impassive again.

“Brilliant. Just brilliant.” Loki allowed his husband to take his arm to help him to his feet, but it was obvious he was only doing so to stop Tony from worrying. “ Shall we discuss now how it was my entire fault, or wing it when he gets here?”

“Loki…” Now that the worry was over Thor sounded like a typical world-weary elder sibling again. “This was not your fault and that’s not how things are any more.”

“Yeah, hackles down, Capricorn.” Tony chipped in. He received a glare for that, but Loki did shut up. The trickster was embarrassed, possibly hurt – he wasn’t letting anyone know if he was in pain or not – and must have been feeling extremely concerned if not frightened about what they had discovered about Svartalfheim; he was not in a good mood to say the least. His dark glower when one of Odin’s ravens fluttered into the Observatory said it all.

The Allfather was only a few steps behind the bird, its partner sat on his shoulder preening it’s feathers. Not that Tony could tell the difference, but the king had forgone his usual ceremonial armour, opting for something that was a little less gilded and considerably more practical. Whilst it meant nothing to the human, both Thor and Loki knew it was Odin’s normal attire for Asgard’s military council when he needed to appear more a warrior and less a king. Asgard was mobilising what was left of her army.

“What news?” He didn’t even ask after his son’s welfare, although that may have made sense given that they were both on their feet and seemed relatively unscathed. If neither were dying on the spot he could discuss their health at another time.

“Svartalfheim is lost. As we knew it would be.” Thor didn’t sugar-coat things. “It was destroyed much as Alfheim had been.”

“Exactly the same way in which Alfheim had been.” Loki amended. “Infact, Thor proposed a theory when we returned to Midgard after the Alfheim debacle and for once I believe he hit the nail on the head.”

“I did?” Evidently news to the God in question.

“Yes. You speculated that Alfheim-”

“Not now.” Odin raised a hand, silencing his youngest. “Svartalfeim’s destruction was what I needed to know. Go and clean up, all three of you, we can speak on this later.”
“So, I wasn’t planning on turning up here again so soon.” Bathed, fed and freshly clothed, Tony was sprawled across Loki’s bed, staring up at the gilded ceiling. The Ironman armour was piled in an orderly manner by the main door, bearing no small amount of damage. “Not that I mind – this place is still quite awesome.”

“To you, maybe.” Loki was sat stiffly in one of the armchairs, arms folded across his knees as he glared at the fire. It was much colder than the last time they had been to Asgard – which was evidenced by the snow piling up outside.

“Come on, you can’t tell me you aren’t slightly pleased to be here. We can go and say hi to Sleipnir after we’ve spoken with your Dad.” The man sat up and stretched. “Hmm?”

“You can’t honestly expect me to be pleased about anything with what happened today.”

“Hey, I’m usually quite pleased when I get out of a life or death situation and back to home comforts.”

Loki obviously didn’t think so, and waved a hand at the fire so that the flames curled into small snakes that hissed their displeasure at Tony. The man rolled his eyes.

“Really? Do you hear me bitching about my multiple broken ribs or busted leg right now? No; because I’m a grateful bastard that likes to relax after nearly being squished on an alien planet.”

That did at least garner Loki’s attention. “You’ve broken your ribs?”

“Well, half a mountain fell on us – although I’ll forgive you if you didn’t realise since you were kinda unconscious at that point – so yeah, I broke some ribs. And my leg isn’t good. Did I mention that? I feel I should really mention that.”

“You mentioned it.”

“Yeah, well. And Thor broke his wrist. Again, not that you noticed.”

“I wasn’t breathing. You may or may not have been aware of that.”

“It may have momentarily gained my attention. Just briefly. For a second or two.”

Loki smiled slightly, drawing his gaze away from the fire to look up at his husband. The man was sat up and watching him closely, despite the lightness of his tone. He was worried – had been and still was. It would be fair to say that the trickster would have been just as concerned were their positions switched.

“Do you want me to fix your ribs and leg?”

“Of course not, I merely mentioned them multiple times for the fun of it.”

“I thought as much.” The trickster moved from his chair to sit down on the bed, folding his legs up underneath him. “Which part of your leg is injured?”

“My knee – I think I twisted it when we fell down the hill. Absolutely wrecked the armour too.”

“I don’t care about the armour for now.” He ran his hands along the limb in question, carefully probing for the described injury. Tony’s assumption was pretty spot on since his knee had swollen by a considerable amount, hidden only by his loose jeans. “Why did you not ask for medical aid
when we got here?”

“Because it’s not life-threatening, you were in a worse state than me and not whining about being injured and I didn’t exactly have much time in which to mention it. Can you fix it?”

“Easily, but you still should have mentioned it.” Loki had rolled Stark’s trouser leg up and placed his hand on the inflamed joint. “Let me know if this is excruciatingly painful.”

“Uh, is that likely?”

The prince just grinned slyly.

It wasn’t excruciating – Loki wasn’t that bad at healing spells – but it wasn’t exactly comfortable. Tony knew better than to complain though, and when his ribs knitted back together the ensuing relief was more than worth the discomfort.

“Any better?”

“Much. What about you? You had us pretty worried back there.”

“Me? I’m fine. I’m always fine, have you not worked that out yet?”

Tony snorted. “Fine, yeah, sure. That’s what we’re calling it now, huh?”

“I always get out of trouble in the end.”

“With help.”

“…I resent that allegation.”

Stark smirked. It would have been very easy to follow that up with another snide jab, but he restrained himself. A little bit of friendly banter was alright, but it was very easy to over-step and end up having a fight. And after the night they had just had, a fight was the last thing they needed.

The conversation veered back towards safer topics for a short while, but they were interrupted by a loud knock to the door. It wasn’t hard to guess that it was Thor – he had quite a distinctive knock after all. The thunder God was looking tired, his wrist wrapped up tightly in bandages. He didn’t even have to say anything before his brother waved him over with a world-weary sigh and started working on it.

Thor was an expected visitor. However, neither Loki nor Tony expected him to be followed in by Odin. The king was sans his usual armour and trappings, looking a lot less intimidating than normal. For once Tony felt that he was actually seeing the father as opposed to the leader of a powerful realm.

“What news?” Loki asked quietly.

“Nothing good. Heimdall still cannot fathom the perpetrators.” Odin seated himself on one of the chairs, watching as Thor flexed his newly healed wrist and tested how whole it now was. “At this point I am just thankful all three of you are reasonably unharmed.”

“Reasonable is a strong word.”

“You are alive. That will do. Now, I know all three of you will have been puzzling over what has happened – even if you are a little lacking on background, Stark – so what ideas have you put together?”
It was no surprise that Tony and Thor both turned to Loki to answer that. Thor from habit and Tony from knowing damn well that – as much as it rankled – Odin was correct and he really didn’t have enough knowledge of the realms history to put things into perspective. Sure, he could throw some ideas into the pot, but it was best to leave the initial outline to his husband.

“I think it is reasonable to assume that the same mind was behind the attacks on Svartalfheim and Alfheim. It is also reasonable to assume, from the evidence gathered on Svartalfheim, that the Infinity Stones were the targets. Someone was powerful enough to break the Dark Elf and Aesir spell work protecting the Stone.”

Odin nodded, having obviously drawn the same conclusions himself. Loki glanced at his brother then continued.

“In addition, I believe of all people, Thor worked out how the destruction of both realms occurred. If you recall, the Gem on Alfheim was that of Space.” Loki shaped his hands through the air and the image of a glowing violet gem appeared in front of him. For all that the Stones had been hyped up, Tony thought it looked pathetically small – barely the size of a golf ball. “For those of us” He glanced at his husband, “-who aren’t aware; this has the power to obliterate all organic matter in its path. When wielded by one strong enough it could easily destroy a realm. Thor suggested this idea a while ago, but we couldn’t confirm or deny it at the time. I think now we can agree that this was how both realms were destroyed.”

“I wish I could be happy that you admitted I was right about something, but I don’t feel I can be given the situation.” Thor smiled grimly.

Tony waved a hand in the air – slightly childlike, but he was tired and his father-in-law’s presence was putting him on edge a little. “Dumb human question; if Alfheim had the shiny rock that can wipe out planets, what the hell was sitting pretty in Svataflheim?”

“A rather sensible question I would say.” Odin still sounded condescending, even when agreeing with Stark. “Svartalfheim had what was known as the Aether, the Power Gem.”

“It can convert matter to dark matter. The host can wield it as a physical force, causing utter destruction.” Loki added.

“Do any of these things do anything other than fuck shit up? Isn’t there one that, I don’t know, creates rainbows, or something?”

“Not all of them destroy, but they are easy for one to manipulate to dark purposes. But we are missing the main problem here.” The trickster waved a hand so that the other five representations of the Infinity Stones appeared. “It takes enormous power to even be able to hold one of these things without imploding. And now someone out there has two of them. Who, and what, and most importantly why.”

Odin was watching his son impatiently and steepled his fingers when Loki finished speaking. “It is obvious you have some idea who it could be. Care to share with the rest of us?”

“I rather dread speaking the name out loud.” The prince smiled grimly, staring at the six circling gems he had created. “I wondered to begin with the chances of ever crossing paths with him again – and hoping desperately not to. When Alfheim was attacked I suspected, and now that we have determined the Stones were the aim of the attacks, I am quite certain.”

Thor, ever the impatient one didn’t allow his brother to make much of the dramatic pause Loki obviously wanted to put into the conversation. “Well?!"
“Thanos.”

Even Tony knew that name, had heard his husband whisper it once before in the dead of the night in a voice full of fear. Thanos had been the driving force behind the chitauri attack on Earth, and who had abandoned the chitauri immediately after their failure and left Loki to their tender mercies.

Thor and Odin were no strangers to the name either, if the way the king slumped back in his chair and the crown prince scowled were any indication.

“The Mad Titan? How can you be certain?”

Loki laid out the facts.

Thanos had shown interest in at least one Infinity Stone before, and had attempted to lay hands on it in his attack on Earth. He had more than enough power to seize and hold a Stone, and to break the spells protecting them. He was also known for his love of wanton death and destruction, which gave him a motive.

Circumstantial evidence at best, which Tony quietly pointed out when his husband stopped.

“I would agree, if not for one crucial pint.” Loki clenched his fist and banished the images of the Stones. “You and Thor will recall that the chitauri relics we found were sending a signal back through the remains of the portal, yes? Well, we determined that the chitauri were near enough wiped out, so there was no need to worry about who the signal was reaching, but never considered that the chitauri’s original master could have been receiving said signal.”

Odin thumped his fist on the arm of the chair. “These Nine Realms have been hidden from Thanos for millennia; are you telling me that Midgard has been sending him directions for the past twenty years?!”

Loki gave an aborted little shrug. “He knew where the Nine Realms were already; you will recall that the Chitauri tortured the information out of me after I fell through the void to their world. However, they needed me to go to Earth myself because they weren’t able to guide themselves through the portal successfully. Given that the portal was destroyed, Thanos would have needed a new guide, and then these signals reached him and he had one. It could easily have taken near twenty years for the signals to reach through the remains of the portal. Which would be why the attacks have only just started.”

“And explains why we’ve never come across those creatures making up the attacking army; they must be a new construct, a race Thanos has created as he did the Chitauri.” Thor added grimly. He ran a hand through his hair in a frustrated motion. “Are we even certain it’s him?”

“Not at all. But he is the most obvious answer.”

“Occam’s Razor.” Tony supplied helpfully. “The most obvious answer is usually the right one. So, once again for the dumb human’s benefit; how bad a problem is all this? Are we talking Ragnarok?” The question was worth it just for the look on the three God’s faces.

“Norns, I hope not! I am in no way ready to face Heimdall in single combat!” Loki allowed the brief attempt at humour, but only for a moment. “But, it is serious. Thanos or not, we are still facing someone who has two Infinity Stones and we can only assume is on the hunt for more.”

“Where are the rest? Can we warn people?”
Thor shrugged as Loki and Odin exchanged glances. “The Tesseract is here on Asgard, as is the Gauntlet, but we are not aware of the locations of the other Gems.”

“What? How come? You knew about the first two.”

“Because Alfheim were stupid enough to put theirs in a museum, and the Aesir sealed the Aether away so have always known the location.”

“Right. And what Gauntlet?”

Loki didn’t quite roll his eyes but it was a near thing. “It is as it sounds. A gauntlet that holds all six Stones and unites them. The wearer would be able to command the power of all six at once.”

“So I’m to assume that would be apocalyptically bad?”

“Thanos has an unhealthy obsession with death and desires to sacrifice every living being to court the mistress of death herself.”

Tony whistled through his teeth. “This is a mess. Isn’t your daughter – the one I’m not biologically related to – the Goddess of Death? Thanos is trying to get it on with your daughter?!”

That made Loki smirk. “Thankfully no. The lady he courts is but a fantasy, whereas Hel is very much real.”

“So telling him he’s chasing a fairytale isn’t going to stop him?”

“Hardly.”

Odin waved a hand to silence Stark’s next question. “This is conjecture, we know nothing concrete yet. There are other beings it may be beyond Thanos.”

“Does it matter? There’s still some overpowered douche-bag out there with two stones under his belt and sights set on the others. Who’s next?” Tony at least had the courtesy to wait for the king to stop speaking before jumping back in. “Earth hasn’t got the ability to repel an attack like the one’s we’ve seen so far. Hell, we only just survived the last alien invasion and that was because said alien wasn’t really trying all that hard, and we got extremely lucky. Humans break easily, you know.”

“I believe Earth will be alright; it is Asgard that we need to worry about.” Loki said quietly. “It is common knowledge that the Tesseract is here, and enough know about the Gauntlet…” He snorted with ironic laughter. “This is all my fault, is it not? I stole the Gauntlet and brought it here, I stole the Tesseract and brought it here, I brought the Chitauri to Midgard. I was not strong enough to resist the Chitauri’s torture the first time around; had I been they, The Other and Thanos would never have known how to access the Nine Realms. Had I just-”

“Do not be stupid boy.” Odin’s voice was as hard as steel. “By the same logic I am at fault for allowing you to fall into their hands to begin with. No one is responsible for this but the one behind it all. Whoever it is, they would have found their way to the Nine Realms with or without help eventually.”

“You say ‘whoever it is’, you do not think it can be Thanos?” There was almost hope in Thor’s voice.

“I believe it can very well be Thanos, but we need to keep our options open.” The king slowly raised himself from his seat. “But, as you say Loki, Asgard is most likely on the list to be targeted.
I will need to see to the security.”

“Will you need us to stay here, Father?”

It was quite a political question; after all, the crown prince at the very least should make a show of protecting the realm. And given that they were facing off against an unknown enemy with magical capabilities, Loki’s expertise would be very welcome. Odin certainly had every right and reason to order them to stay, and there was a long hesitation before he glanced at Tony, then shook his head.

“No. Thor, you have sworn to defend Midgard and that is an oath that should not be taken lightly. And Loki, you have three children and a husband there, I cannot ask you to leave if Earth may also be at threat. However, be aware that I may call on the both of you should an attack hit Asgard first.”

That was fair enough at least, although it took Tony a moment or two to work out how Loki had three children on Earth, before recalling both Merlin and Jormangandr held residence there. Loki looked slightly mollified too – the metaphorical hackles settling.

“So we, what? Go back to Earth and wait to see who gets attacked first? That sounds like fun.”

“Do you have a better plan?”

Tony shrugged. “I dunno. Is the void still open? Can we chuck a probe or something down there and see if we get anything out the other side?”

“The void does not work like that. You cannot just ‘chuck’ something into it and hope it will appear out the other side.”

“Worked once before.”

“And I can assure you I am not doing that again.” Loki managed a slight smile though. “But the point stands. We are in the dark, not knowing who will be the next target.”

“This sucks.” Tony sighed.

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They didn’t stay in Asgard for any longer than was necessary. Long enough to see Sleipnir briefly, but no one wanted to hang around.

“Is Asgard familiar with the phrase ‘out of the frying and and into the fire?’” Stark asked drily as they made their way back to the Observatory.

“We’ve both been on Earth long enough to know it, but we have the equivalent; Leaving Jötunnheim for Muspelheim.” Thor said.

“Yeah that covers it.”

The Ironman suit had been stuffed into a sack in its various remaining pieces since Tony deemed it too damaged to attempt wearing back. At the very least it was going to take a few days before it would be up and running again. This did mean he had to endure the Bifrost trip without it, which wasn’t fun.

Upon arriving back on Earth the three found their comrades out of the Tower, and only Jarvis left behind to greet them.
Stark quickly uploaded all of the data from the busted suit onto the main servers and left Jarvis to extrapolate the information needed to later present to the rest of the Avengers. The inventor himself certainly didn’t intend to be the one to explain how the three of them had vanished off-planet with no warning. The fact that they were returning with bad news – putting it very mildly – made him want to speak to his friends even less.

And he wanted to sleep.

A lot.

Jarvis called the rest of the team back and they locked themselves away to watch the footage Tony had recorded of Svartalfheim. Loki and Thor had filled the AI in on the ramifications of what they had found, so that was also brought up.

With Tony asleep, or at least pretending he was to get some peace and quiet after such a day, Loki found himself at an odd end. Too wound up to find rest he sought out what had become a favourite spot to de-stress.

“You and high places.” Thor’s voice was only just heard over the wind as he came to stand beside his brother. It was the beginning of November, so the top of the tower was wet and windy, but that hardly seemed to bother Loki, who was perched on the very edge again.

“You have to admit it is calming.” He was staring directly down, at the bright pinpoints below of umbrellas rushing by as people ducked in and out of buildings to avoid the rain. “Look at them; so busy with their humdrum lives. They have no idea of what catastrophe may be bearing down on them.”

Thor swung himself up onto the ledge and glanced down as well. “True, but then again catastrophe could happen for them anyway. One of those taxi’s could hit someone at any moment. There could be a meteorite that no one’s noticed. Yellowstone could erupt. Someone could detonate a nuclear warhead. An alien prince who’s having a bad day may decide to invade with an army…” He trailed off as Loki finally laughed.

“Will you ever let that go?”

“Would you? When was the last time I had such leverage over you? There is at least another millennia’s worth of fodder in that incident.”

“I feared as much.”

Thor nudged his brother with his shoulder, grinning. “Come now, it is so rare that you ever give me anything to tease you about.”

“You always managed to find something.” Loki wiped his wet hair out of his eyes, in deference to the rain that tried to sweep it back to where it was. “Can you not stop this infernal weather?”

“It’s only natural at this time of year.” The thunder God laughed.

“How are you this cheerful?! After everything that’s just-”

“Would it help the situation if I were a morose grump like you? Frankly I don’t believe it would.”

“But to act so happy in the face of-”
Thor sighed. “And this, right here, is the fundamental difference between me and you. I try to keep a cheerful face on everything because it relieves the stress and stops my companions from picking up on my fear. You think it all through logically, but allow your stress out and express your fear as anger. And frankly that is no fun for anyone because you inevitably aim that anger at those around you.”

“I don’t-”

“You do and you know it.”

Loki snarled, but any form of reply would pretty much win the argument for Thor so he settled into a sulky silence instead. It was growing dark now, the cold night drawing in on them, and the buildings around Stark Tower were slowly lighting up in response. Sensing that the mood was growing as dark as the sky around them Thor nudged his brother with his shoulder in an attempt to lighten things up.

“What?”

“Do you remember what you used to do to the candles in the school room when we were forced to work after the sun went down?” The blonde God nodded his head towards the opposite skyscraper with a grin.

“I recall…” Loki glanced at his sibling in mock horror. “Thor, you cannot be suggesting what I think you are. You, one of Earth’s mightiest heroes, encouraging mischief!”

“You seem to forget that Defender of Earth I may be, but I’m your brother first and foremost. And you are worried and, dare I say it, a little fearful. Harmless mischief won’t bring the world crashing down.”

“Hmm. Famous last words, I believe.” The trickster lifted a finger in the air, as if testing the wind direction. However, as he did so all of the lights in the opposite tower went off. “What do we think? I can’t do anything to incriminate the Avengers.”

Thor laughed. “Look at you being all law abiding! My baby brother is growing up at last!”

“I could just incriminate you of course.” Several windows lit back up to create a giant pixilated image of Mjölnir. Loki flicked his hand and the hammer swung around.

“You can do better than that.” Thor shot his brother a quick glance, pleased to see that the trickster was grinning now.

Mjölnir flickered, went dark and then was replaced with the Bat Signal a moment later. Down on the street there was a cacophony of car horns as taxies stopped to look at what was going on.

“Tony’s been corrupting you, has he not?”

“There is nothing wrong with comic books.” Case in point, Loki changed it again so that some lights went off, others went on and the Superman logo was proudly displayed. “Or any other type of books for that matter.” With a slightly more complex motion – and no doubt to the horror of the people in the building – the lights began to flash different colours and the four Hogwarts House symbols from Harry Potter appeared.

“Sirs, we are having complaints from the office block.”

Jarvis’ voice made both God’s jump and turn like guilty children to see the droid standing at the
entrance to the roof top.

“Why should they complain to us? They have no way of knowing we are to blame!”

“Because Mr Stark has done the exact same thing. In fact, he went one better than you and played Tetris once.”

Loki scowled at the AI and behind him the buildings lights flickered into a new configuration and flipped Jarvis the bird. Thor snorted with laughter.

“I surmise that this is the Asgardian way of letting off a little steam? If so, do you think you could find a way that doesn’t interfere with people’s work?”

“He has a point Loki. We should go and do something else? We could spar?”

“Oh yes, because being smashed in the face multiple times does wonders to my stress levels.”
Loki clicked his fingers and the building lit up properly again. “If I am to be denied my amusement here, I at the very least demand food.”

Jarvis’ facial joints clicked into a neat smile. “There is a stack of pancakes large enough for the both of you downstairs complete with syrup. Currently no one else has clocked them, but I can’t guarantee that will still be the case.”

Thor glanced at his brother. “Do you ever get the feeling that Jarvis is trying to be our mother?”

“He hasn’t got the steely glare down yet.”

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There was nothing that could penetrate the darkness of the void.

Heimdall’s sight was useless against it, and even the Allfather’s powers were unable to see what could lie beyond. There was no way to see who or what was out there, nor any way to make contact had they known.

Loki was the only one to have ever seen the other side – the dark world of broken jagged rocks and space dust populated only by the giant armoured eels and those desperate enough to find themselves there.

It was all very well for Odin to prevaricate and claim there it could be a number of people sending the armies, but that was wishful thinking. The old legends had made it clear that Thanos had sought the Infinity Stones in the past, there was no reason to think it was anyone other than him now. The old Chitauri technology left on Earth had been silently sending its signal back into the void, and the Chitauri’s old master had been picking it up.

Thanos had found the Nine Realms and learnt that they housed the Infinity Stones years ago, thanks to Loki’s unwilling help. And now, thanks to Hydra’s poking and prodding of the old Chitauri tech he had rediscovered the entrance to the portal closed with the sceptre.

He had the knowledge, the man-power, the burning ambition and above all the ruthlessness to remove any obstacle in is way in his hunt for the Stones and their Gauntlet.

Two Realms down.

Seven to go.
Chapter 35

The immediate result of the visit to Svartalfheim and the ensuing realisations was...absolutely nothing.

What could they do from Earth? Thor and Loki could fret as much as they liked, but at the end of the day there was no-one to fight, no-one to spy on and no-one they could negotiate with. They were pretty much stuck, and would have been in the same position were they on Asgard, Earth or any other place in the Nine Realms.

For the other Avengers it was difficult to put the situation into context. Their only experience of Svartalfheim had been their resident Gods’ disdain for the realm. Yes, it was worrying what had happened, but it didn’t really impact their day-to-day lives, much like Alfheim hadn’t.

It’s always the same; a tragedy can strike anywhere and anytime but the rest of life moves on and sometimes that’s a shock to accept. Loki especially seemed to struggle with separating everyday life and his concerns about the threat of invasion – either on Earth or on Asgard. To begin with he was merely surly, but within a week of returning the trickster had withdrawn entirely into sullen silence, like a physical black cloud in the tower.

Christmas was on its way – the first they had together as a full family, although with everything that had happened since, the incident with the Chitauri seemed a million years ago. That didn’t stop the decorations going up, of course. With little to celebrate over the past years, Evie was going all out on this one.

There had always been two trees – giant forty-footers – in the Tower’s main entrance to impress visitors, but the personal living space of the Avengers had been a bit sparse since Evie had stopped enjoying Christmas so much. Now, however, there was cause to deck the halls with everything even vaguely festive. If it wasn’t for the arc reactor the electricity bill would have been obscene. Even Jarvis was trotting around the place with a string of lights wrapped around his frame.

“I brought you some mince-pies.”

Tony looked up from the Falcon’s wing-pack to grin at his husband. He’d been trying to integrate a new protective layer in between the wing membranes and had been at it for some time.

“Hey Scrooge, thanks for the food!”

Loki dumped the plate on the work top and slumped down onto one of the spare stools. “Scrooge?”

“Well, you’ve been particularly Bah-Humbug recently. Have you developed an allergy to Christmas or something?”

“No.”

“Could have fooled me.” Tony glanced up from what he was doing with his screwdriver. “You know this is a big deal to Evie, right? She’s refused to properly celebrate Christmas since we lost you so wants this one to be huge – it’d be nice if you got on board with that plan.”

“I am on board.”

“You’re a physical black cloud right now. I mean, I’m game to play the ghosts of Christmas past, present and future but you’ve got to tell me what’s wrong first.”
Loki shrugged. “What makes you think something’s wrong?”

“Seriously?” Tony laughed lightly. “I’m only calling you Scrooge because I’m saving Grinch up for later. You’re hardly a joy to be around right now.” He picked up one of the mince pies and bit into it, then continued with a full mouth. “I don’t think I’ve seen you eat a proper meal in days. You just sort of pick at food when the rest of us are eating.”

“I’m an adult, Stark, please don’t monitor my eating habits.”

The inventor finished off his snack, before nodding. “Okay. Fine. I’m not going to fight with you over this, but I want you to know that I know something’s wrong – really wrong – and when you want to talk about I’m here, okay?”

“Tony-”

“No, it’s fine. Really it’s fine. I get that sometimes things get to you, and I guess that because you aren’t telling me what’s up immediately it’s worrying me. But that’s fine.” He smiled slightly, leaning forward to touch Loki’s knee. “Just remember we’re a team, yeah?”

“I know.” The Trickster returned the smile, even if it didn’t quite reach his eyes. “I…there’s a lot on my mind right now, I’m sorry.”

“If you don’t feel able to talk to me, why not have a word with Bruce? He bangs on about not being that kind of doctor, but he’s an excellent listener and can really help when you’re feeling overwhelmed.” Tony pushed the plate of mince pies over. “And seriously, eat something, I’m worried you’re trying to diet!”

Loki laughed quietly, picking up one of the pastries. “Diets are a strange human idea – you do know no other species limits their food supply just to look good, right?”

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Whilst Loki’s bad mood was still very noticeable he started to make an effort to get more involved in the festivities. He animated some of the ornaments to move so that the tree was full of waving snowmen, and the angel at the top cat-called anyone who walked past. But regardless of the intent to improve his attitude he remained sulky and snappish.

Evie hunted him down in the library a few days before Christmas.

“What you doing?”

“What do you think I am doing?” Loki had found an old copy of Dickens’ Christmas Carol and had curled up on one of the squashy leather armchairs by a panoramic window. It was snowing outside, which set the scene rather wonderfully for the story, or at least would have done if he hadn’t been interrupted. “Was there something you wanted?”

“Yeah! C’mon, grumpy! Let’s go do something!”

“I am doing something. I am reading.”

Evie leant over the back of the armchair. “Yeah, but it’s snowing.”

Loki glanced up, very briefly, at the window. “Yes, and?” He couldn’t see his daughter’s grin.

“Do you want to build a snowman…?”
“Oh Evelyn, please don’t sing that-”

“Come on let’s go and play…”

“I have multiple spells that can shut you up.”

“I never see you any more…” The girl rounded the chair to dump herself on Loki’s lap, singing as obnoxiously as possible. “Come out the door, it’s like you’ve gone awaaaaayyyyy!”

Loki’s sigh was one heard across the multiverse and usually known as ‘beleaguered parent’ as he moved his book out of the way so that the pages wouldn’t be creased. “What part of ‘I’m reading and trying to get some peace and quiet’ didn’t you get?”

“The part where no-one’s really seen you since Svartlwhatsitheim and I actually want a family Christmas this year.”

“I helped put the lights up in the foyer.”

“Oh you hero.” Evie sounded scathing. “Look, we all know something’s up – even Uncle Thor has realised you want to kill everyone in a one hundred mile radius – but you aren’t telling anyone what’s wrong and to be honest it’s got to the point where I’m just fed up now. We all get that shit is going down in the Nine Realms and that’s eating at you, but you won’t talk to anyone so I’m giving up and now I want to make a snowman because it’s Christmas!”

“Are you done?”

“No. I’ll be done when we’re outside in the snow. Until then I’ll be sitting right here, singing the greatest hits of Frozen over and over and over and over and-”

“Okay! Okay. Fine, I’ll come outside with you.”

Evie grinned brightly. “The power of Disney songs!”

“Do you act like a three year old with your father too?”

“Only when I don’t get my own way.”

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The balcony was nearly two feet deep in snow; the Ironman landing pad buried underneath it all. Technically Tony could have turned on the underfloor heating to melt it all, but it was its own natural decoration so the Avengers had decided to leave it be.

Evie waded out with a gleeful grin, stamping patterns into the crisp snow like a toddler. She knew she was being rather childish, but given seven Christmas’s without Loki, and for the Trickster to be in a monumental sulk now that they had him home she knew she could choose between sulking in return or behaving like a kid. With one Grinch already in the tower they really didn’t need to add a teenage one to the mix so she went with the childish act instead.

“So; snowman!” She spread her arms as she spun to face her mother. “Come on, this is your natural habitat!”

Loki had to smile at that. “What are you expecting? Just to warn you; if I start creating snow creatures they’re more likely to eat you than demand warm hugs.”

“That would have given the film a new twist.” Evie dropped down to start piling snow into a small
mound. “Right, are you going to help?”

“It’s more fun to watch you struggle.”

The trickster didn’t let his refusal to help last long though. Evie’s gloves had quite obviously soaked through and by the time she was trying to put a head on her creation she was shivering.

“Stand back.” Loki hadn’t put a coat on, so simply rolled up the sleeves of his jumper. Starting at his fingers his skin flushed deep blue, spreading all the way up to his hairline and causing his eyes to bleed red on the way.

The snow was still falling around them and he raised his arms so that it swirled with more purpose, spiralling down in tight circles.

“How do you do that?”

“I’m not completely sure. It just…works.”

“Does your eyesight change at all? It looks like it should.”

Bright red eyes fixed on the girl for a moment in amusement. “A little. It’s sharper and my night vision is better.” Loki directed the swirl of snow at Evie’s unfinished snowman, completing the little figure. “Don’t expect any Disney crap though; I’m not bringing this to life. When I animate things they tend to destroy stuff.”

“You and Dad are so similar.” Evie clapped her hands together in glee. “So, what else can you do?! Have you ever actually gone all out with the frost giant thing?”

“I don’t know if that is such a-”

“Come on! A snowman’s nothing! What do they do on Jötunnheim? Uncle Thor said there were ice palaces and stuff!”

Loki stared at his daughter with an exasperated sigh. “Really? I don’t even know how I do this and you’re expecting high scale engineering?”

“Yeah. Remember the whole ‘we’re trying to have fun’ thing we’re doing here?” Evie rolled her eyes.

She had a point. Of the two of them Loki was the one with the teenager-like attitude going on. “Alright. I’ll see what I can do.” He said grudgingly.

“Well don’t feel like you have to or anything. Hey it’s only Christmas.” The girl turned to go with a huff, stamping back through the snow towards the balcony doors. It was only when she caught hold of the handle that she saw the reflection behind her in the glass.

Ice was growing up around Loki’s feet, following his flowing hand movements to arch up and branch. His face was a mask of concentration as he tried to work out how to manipulate the element as he went, building on what he already knew and then trying to take it one step further. The snow was being incorporated in, the snowman ripping apart to become a piece of the larger structure. In the rapidly darkening twilight the ice glistened, backlit from the Christmas lights strung along the balcony.

“Trees…” Evie let go of the door, turning back to the growing forest. Snow dripped from the branches like blossom, twigs of ice still curling up and out of the huge oaks that had formed. They
spread out across the whole balcony, a glowing, twisting woodland of ice and snow. “How did you…?”

“I don’t know.”

“Wow.” Tendrils of ivy were beginning to creep up the windows of the tower and curl along the railings. “Is this what Jötunnheim is like?”

“Far from it.”

It did beg the question why not. If Loki was capable of this much without much practice the Jötun’s should have been able to create marvels. Maybe he really was a throwback to an older race.

“Will this last? Do you have to keep it stable or is it self-sustaining?”

“I believe it will last as long as the weather is cold enough, it should…should-”

Loki blanched, the blue leaching away from his skin as he suddenly swayed, grabbing hold of the nearest icy trunk for support. The spell abruptly stopped, leaving branches half-formed in the air.

“Möðhy!” It was so sudden it took Evie a moment to realise what was happening. She ran the few steps to cover the distance between them, reaching out to help support him.

“I’m alright…” He most certainly wasn’t; his voice strained and face so pale as to rival the snow. “Just a dizzy spell…”

“Why? What happened?”

“Just over-reached myself, I’m fine.” Loki shook his head a few times, then smiled shakily at his worried daughter. “Sorry.”

“You don’t look fine…”

“Seriously, Evelyn, I am fine.” He straightened up, and looked up at the forest of ice that now stood around them. “Worth it though, don’t you think?”

“No. That’s not normal; you never usually have problem with little tricks like this.”

Loki pinched the bridge of his nose, either in frustration or a headache Evie couldn’t tell. “Please, Evelyn, can we drop the subject?” He gestured towards the door. “Come on, let’s go inside and get something warm to drink.”

The girl looked less than convinced, but didn’t want to argue given how short tempered Loki had been recently. And it had been her idea to go outside and play in the snow – so if something had gone wrong logic dictated it was kind of her fault.

Loki stopped dead, sudden enough to have his daughter walk straight into him. “One thing though…”

“Yeah?”

“Don’t tell your Dad, he’s fluttering around like a moth as it is.”

Evie couldn’t really do anything else but agree to keep quiet.

MWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMW
Loki should have known better.

He was the God of finding loopholes in what people said. Literally the God, not just figuratively, and he should have known better than to so loosely phrase a binding promise. Maybe it was because he wasn’t at his best or perhaps he just trusted is daughter a little too much, but he hadn’t been careful about what he’d made her agree to.

Don’t tell your Dad.

“Uncle Thor, can I talk to you?”

Evie waited all of two hours before hunting her uncle down in the games room. He had taken a particular liking to Assassins Creed and had been playing his way through the series of late. However, he paused it when his niece asked the question.

“Sure, what is wrong?”

The girl pulled up a beanbag and plopped down onto it. Arthur had followed her in and promptly climbed onto her lap and curled up like a cat.

“I’m worried about Möðhy.”

“Is there ever going to be a time when someone isn’t worried about him?”

Evie smiled, but only slightly. “Did you see the art work on the balcony?”

“Yes.” Thor’s tone was slightly guarded – he was never going to be completely comfortable with a Jötunn flinging ice around, even if said Jötunn was just his brother. “It was very beautiful.”

“He almost fainted making it! He claimed there was nothing wrong, but it was obvious he was dizzy. And he won’t tell me what’s wrong!”

Thor sighed. “He’s not going to. You don’t need to worry so much; he’s fine.”

“Do you know what’s wrong with him then?” The girl looked angry and betrayed at that news.

“Yes.”

“…and?!”

The thunder God rolled his eyes, turning his game back on. “Do you not think I’ve had this exact same conversation with your father? Loki is running a very high-maintenance piece of spell-work. At a guess I would say he’s Scrying.”

“He’s been Scrying for ages and it hasn’t affected him like this!”

“This is a much bigger spell. He’s trying to look far beyond the reaches of the known universe to find the perpetrator behind these attacks, and it’s draining him.”

On Evie’s lap Arthur snuffled experimentally at the beanbag, trying to hoover up some of the loose polystyrene balls. “Do you know this, or are you guessing?”

“Call it an informed guess; I have seen this happen before when he runs himself dry with a spell. It’s nothing to worry about – just like a human over-tiring themselves.”

“But he’s not eating properly and –”
“Evie, he’s fine. He’s said it, I’ve said it, what more do you want?”

The girl scowled. “I’m allowed to be worried you know.”

“Of course you are, but you can’t just throw us off when we try to reassure you.”

“…I wish he wasn’t so grumpy.”

“Don’t we all? And this is nothing; I had to survive his mood swings during puberty. He used to blow things up.”

Evie winced.

Loki did make an extra special effort at pretending to be a functioning member of the human race for Christmas. It didn’t help that he was at the disadvantage of not being a member of the human race, but he really did try.

The group settled down for their traditional Love Actually showing, which despite Clint’s best efforts was still the go to Christmas film for them. On a whole they didn’t really watch it any more, per se, but tended to shout out favourite lines and in-jokes over the top. This was a bit tough on Loki, who hadn’t seen it before and wasn’t really all that bothered about something so saccharine anyway.

About halfway through Evie noticed that her mother was about two bad puns away from incinerating the television and pulled at his sleeve. No-one noticed the two of them slip out of the room.

“Where are we going, Evelyn? Not that I was enjoying that film or anything, but we’re abandoning everyone.”

“Yeah, they’re expecting us to run off, don’t worry. Come on!” The girl had a good hold on his sleeve so was dragging him bodily along the corridor towards the lifts.

“If you told me where we were going I could get us there quicker.”

“The roof! I need to grab my winter gear first, but we’re going up to the top of the tower.”

Loki rolled his eyes and a thick cloak materialised around his daughter’s shoulders. “There. Shall we go on up?”

“Is this wool? Nice! Thanks, this’ll work! Lets go!” Evie evidently wasn’t going to let Loki’s dour mood spoil what she was up to, as she enthused about everything. “Come on, make with the magic! To the roof!”

It had stopped snowing for the time being, but the rooftop was thick with a white, unmarked blanket, which Evie promptly stomped through.

“Come on!” She made her way right up to the edge, leaning over to look out across New York.

“This is a beautiful view, Evelyn, but why are we up here?”

It was a beautiful view. New York, Christmas Eve and the whole city was lit up in the snow. Lights danced and sparkled as far as the eye could see, calling out the celebrations far and wide. Evie, however, paid it very little mind as she leaned over even further and waved down at
“Now, Jarvis!”

Loki took an involuntary step back, hands twitching as defensive spells flowed automatically to his fingers. The balcony directly beneath them had lit up as if on fire, but he quickly realised what he was seeing as the bright glow lifted up to their level and revealed itself to be comprised of hundreds of lit Chinese lanterns. They were the same design the Stark’s had used since Tony invented the little tradition – still squat orange cylinders with golden runes printed along the rims. Loki caught hold of one long enough to read the three names; his own, Tony’s and Evie’s.

“What is this?” He sounded breathless as he let the lantern go and it gently lifted away to join the multitude of others. The sight was quite something; hundreds of bright lights dancing in the cold night air as they drifted away from the tower and across New York.

“We do this every year. Dad started it, and then I took over after his heart attack.” Evie was watching the lanterns with a sad smile.

“Why?”

The teen shrugged slightly, possibly embarrassed. “For you. Me and Dad-”

“Dad and I.”

“Dad and I aren’t religious – I’d have some serious complexes if we were – I’m, what? A demi Goddess or something? – so we don’t pray. But we needed to do something after you were taken by the Chitauri. You were supposed to be here that Christmas, and we knew you couldn’t be, so Dad set this up. It’s, like, a visual prayer.” She pointed up at the dancing lights. “Each one is a hug, or a kiss, or a Merry Christmas, and it made us feel like we were still celebrating with you, even though you weren’t here.”

Loki looked from his daughter to the lights again. “Oh…”

“And we did it every year afterwards, because it wasn’t Christmas if we weren’t all together as a family. But-” She grinned. “This time you actually get to see them.”

The wind was strong and the lanterns were pin-pricks of light like stars across the cloudy sky.

“I think I forget sometimes how difficult it must have been for you.”

“Eh, I’m a big girl, and someone needed to be around to look after Dad. Besides; it was worse for you.”

“I had the comfort of knowing that you were safe. You certainly didn’t have that.”

“You promised we’d all be together one day. I was holding you to that.”

Loki stepped up to his daughter and pulled her into a tight hug, his chin on the top of her head.

“I don’t deserve you.” His words were ripped away by the wind but Evie got the sentiment behind them. She didn’t quite know what to say to that, so simply hugged him back.

MWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWM

Christmas came and went in a blur of music, laughter, food – so much food – alcohol and fun. There were presents too, of course, but for once it was the whole atmosphere that was the best part.
Everyone had something to be happy about for once. Even Loki brightened up enough that the apparently-permanent black cloud lifted for the day. The alcohol may have helped there of course; it was the first Christmas where Tony was able to drink freely again and he made sure everyone was going to benefit.

This meant that once again his teenager was allowed to drink far more than she should have been allowed. To Tony this still wasn’t a huge deal since when he had been her age he had already had his stomach pumped once. Getting rather giggly on stupidly expensive champagne wasn’t going to do Evie any harm.

The Asgardian mead Thor brought out on the other hand... No one wanted to know what percentage proof that was, but even Steve managed an impressive level of drunkenness on that stuff.

No one really went to bed so the day after Christmas didn’t exactly happen whilst everyone in the tower slept it all off.

Had a supervillain known the habits of the Avengers it would have been a superb day to cause chaos. However, since Loki was the only supervillain in the vicinity, and a sleepy one at that, they were reasonably safe.

Christmas gave way to New Years Eve and Loki went back to being a down-and-out sulk. Natasha and Sam had gone off somewhere to ring in the new year together and Pepper had gone off to meet up with some old girlfriends she hadn’t seen in forever. It meant that the group felt quite depleted – even with only three people gone it was enough to make a dent.

Evie wanted to go to Times Square for the big count down – she’d never been allowed before – but Tony put his foot down again stating that it was too media heavy and the last thing they wanted was a photo of the teen splashed across all the tabloids when Hydra were still after her. The reasoning made sense, but that didn’t mean she had to like it, and in a true teenage strop had refused to clean up after Arthur for the rest of that day – meaning piles of uneaten food and droppings had been left abandoned around the place.

So New Years Eve was pretty much the same as it had always been for them, just with the inclusion of Loki and the fact that once again Tony could drink.

Loki received an email early in the evening – but corresponding with midnight in the UK – from Merlin wishing them all a curt ‘happy new year’. It was formal, brusque and stand-offish but at least he had even bothered to send it (he’d ignored Christmas entirely, like Loki had said he would). It was a small thing, but slowly mother and son were mending bridges. Loki sent a quick reply, and after a bit of deliberation finally attached a photo of Evie to the email. It was the first time he had built a link between his daughter and her half-brother, but he’d been putting it off for far too long. He didn’t ask for a return photo, but rather hoped Merlin would include one; after all he himself didn’t know what his son looked like these days.

As New Years went, it was pretty tame, but given that life had been so hectic recently maybe that was a good thing. New Years day itself got off to a sedentary start, with most of the tower’s occupants keeping to themselves.

Those who could be bothered to get up ended up gravitating to the main living space. A game was put up on the large TV, someone ordered out pizza and Bruce and Tony squirreled themselves away in a corner to work on something. Lazy Sunday Afternoon and all that.
Even if it wasn’t Sunday.

Arthur had very much made himself at home in the Avengers tower. Despite only being with them for a few months, the Avengers had pretty much forgotten that the little animal was in all honesty a completely alien creature. He acted so much like a dopy puppy that it was very easy to imagine that that was all he was.

“Push off, fluff-ball.” Tony brushed an inquisitive trunk away from his soldering iron that was set up on the portable workbench. “Go bug someone else.”

“I think the articulation still isn’t quite where you would want it.” Bruce – always the peacekeeper – petted the Münchrat’s head as Tony pushed the animal aside, still keeping his focus on the mock-up in front of them. “That plating is going to hold the shoulder very tightly if we leave it like that. See? The arm will have very limited mobility.”

They had a small model of Jarvis’ droid body on the workbench – about the size of a Barbie doll – but with some subtle modifications to the existing design. It wasn’t hooked up to anything, just a simple model to check for joint errors and obvious design flaws. The job could have very easily been accomplished on a computer, but they were trying out a new alloy and it was always better to see how something reacted in reality in that case.

“I can slip the plating back a bit, but I don’t want to lose the protection it offers the central wiring.” Tony began to lever the joint in question with a craft knife to remove and reposition the plate. “What do you think about changing the shape slightly? I think if there’s more – Ah! Jesus! Arthur!”

The Münchrat had been resisting the men’s half-hearted attempts to get him to leave them alone, and getting annoyed with the lack of attention he butted Tony hard in the knees. This was not the best thing that could have happened whilst Stark was trying to manipulate a very sharp craft knife and the blade went straight into his palm.

“Damnit!”

Evie grabbed Arthur as the poor animal backed away in surprise and pulled him out of the way as Bruce hurried around the workbench to check the damage.

“It’s fine, it’s fine. Jesus, Evie, teach the damn thing that go away means go away!” Tony was holding his hand tight at the wrist, but there was already blood dripping over the workbench.

“It’s not ‘fine’; it might need stiches.” Bruce sighed, pushing Tony’s uninjured hand out of the way to see what he was dealing with. All things considered it could have been worse – craft knife wounds could be very nasty – but the gash was certainly deep enough, and it was possible it had hit a ligament in his finger.

“Move.” Loki didn’t go for politeness, but at least didn’t just shove Bruce out of the way. “I will sort it.”

“It’s fine-”

“It’s obviously not, Stark.”

Tony rolled his eyes but sat down heavily in the nearest arm-chair, holding his injured hand out like a petulant child. To be honest; he was much happier with Loki sorting it out than having to have stitches, and it hurt like a bitch.
Arthur seemed to realise that he had done something wrong because he had run off and was hiding under the bar at the other end of the room, whimpering quietly. Evie was down on her hands and knees trying to coax him out but the Münchrat was being extremely stubborn.

“Come on you idiot – it’s not like you meant to do it.”

There was a bowl of fruit in its usual place on the bar top, so the girl grabbed a pomegranate (Pepper insisted they always had some to hand. Anti-oxidants or something) and knelt back down to wave it at the pair of eyes she could just see in the darkness under the bar. A trunk snaked out and tried to grab the fruit, missed and then a reluctant head followed, food winning out over shame. Evie let him have the pomegranate, and he stayed where he was, still half tucked under the bar.

From the quiet bickering across the room it sounded like her parents had sorted Tony’s hand out. Loki may not have been particularly talented at healing spells – a fact he reminded them of every time he needed to use one – but he was proficient enough. This was proved when Tony appeared at Evie’s side a moment later, wiping the blood off his newly-fixed hand. Arthur disappeared back under the bar.

“There we go; no harm done. Is Fluffy sulking?”

“That’s not his name, and he thinks you’re mad at him.”

“Well, I’m not happy. You really need to teach him to leave people alone when they tell him to go away.”

“He just wanted to see what you were up to.”

A trunk snaked out from under the unit again and grabbed up the remains of the pomegranate that had been dropped. Tony smiled.

“Well, he should have been more patient. I don’t know what you were expecting when you were told he was house-trained but…”

“That means he won’t pee on the carpet – not that he will behave.” Loki sounded disdainful. “Much in the same way that we could call Clint house-trained.”

“Well, no harm done. My hand’s as good as new, and he seems rather contrite.” Stark leant down to try and see under the unit, but Arthur had shuffled along a little and he stood back up with a shrug. “Eh, he’ll come out if you put food out I’m sure. Loki? How do you stop a fluff ball from sulking?”

“Ignore him. He’ll come out for attention soon enough.”

“Huh, yet another thing he has in common with Clint, then.”

Evie reluctantly stood up, leaving her pet to wallow in self-pity for a few moments. If he was still under there in five minutes or so she’d go back and try to coax him out again.

“How bad did you hurt yourself?”

Tony shrugged, turning his hand this way and that. “It would have needed stitches, but I’ve had way worse.”

“You are far too blasé when you say that.” Loki said. “It would be nice for once if…if you…”
“Loki?”

The trickster leant against the edge of the bar, pinching the bridge of his nose. “Sorry, dizzy spell. It’ll…it’ll pass…”

“Are you sure? You’ve gone a horrible colour.” Tony reached out to grab his husband’s arm.

“I’m…I…”

Evidently it wasn’t going to pass. Loki was a sickly grey colour, stumbling over his words as he tried to reply.

“Okay, chair, now.”

Or bar-stool, whatever was closest really. Tony managed to push the trickster down onto the nearest seat, one hand on his husband’s shoulder. Loki was shivering but felt warm to the touch, radiating heat through his thin shirt. He leant forwards, gulping in air as he tried to re-orientate himself.

“Any better?”

“No…”

They had drawn attention by now, the other Avengers looking over in concern and Bruce leaving the project to come and help. Evie had taken a step back, worried but knowing not to get in the way.

“This is becoming all too familiar an occurrence, you know.” Tony said quietly.

“This is a regular thing?” Were it anyone else in this situation Bruce would have attempted taking a pulse to get a read on blood pressure, but that was difficult when the patient in question was an alien. “Why has no-one mentioned this has been happening?!”

“It’s nothing.” Loki tried to snarl, but with the ground tipping this way and that he was concentrating too hard on staying upright to sound threatening. It also wasn’t exactly going to be believed either given that he still felt and therefore looked like he was about to faint at any moment.

“It’s not nothing, it’s becoming a real problem! Whatever spell this is you’re running, the side effects when you try to use any other magic are crippling you!”

Bruce looked between Tony and Loki aghast. “Seriously? This is an ongoing problem?”

“It’s not a problem, it’s just an unfortunate side effect – it’s not going to last much longer.” The trickster answered. Bruce raised a sceptical eyebrow.

“How much longer?”

“I don’t know. A week, maybe two.”

Tony thumped his fist down on the counter-top with an infuriated sound. “God-damnit Loki! Why don’t you at least tell us what you’re doing! If you’re Scrying or Searching then just tell us. If it’s something else, tell us.”

“It’s not important; I will tell you when it’s over.”
“What if something happens before that fictional time-point?” Evie asked quietly. “What if Hydra attack again, or the aliens come here next? You’re going to be useless in a fight like this. You can’t even heal a cut finger without knocking yourself out.”

“Evelyn…”

“You saved me from Hydra last time by teleporting into the living room like a badass motherfucker and smiting everything in sight. You wouldn’t even be able to do that now, would you?”

“Don’t swear.”

“Would you?”

Loki looked to his husband for parental backup on the swearing thing only for Tony to fold his arms and set his face into the exact same stubborn expression as their daughter. That was the problem; Evie had a real point, he was about as useful as Arthur in a fight at the moment.

“Look, I’m –”

“Don’t say you’re fine. For God’s sake don’t say you’re fine.” Stark snapped. “It’s obvious you’re the antithesis of fine, so that shit aint gonna fly.”

Bruce, as always, was the quiet voice of reason, trying to calm what could quickly become a volatile argument. “Loki, I think what your family is trying to say is that they’re worried and they want to help, but they can’t do that if they don’t know how to help. Just tell us what’s happening and let us do something. I may know nothing about spell-work but as someone with a working medical knowledge I know burn-out when I see it. I can’t do anything about what the spell itself is doing to you – whatever it is – but I can help you with the symptoms.”

Loki finally sat up straight again, looking somewhat more like his usual colour and less like a ghost. He glanced between his husband and daughter, who were both nodding to what Bruce had said.

“Capricorn, please, don’t go through this on your own.” Tony said quietly. “We’ve been dancing around this long enough; let us help.”

The trickster looked between his family again, his daughter’s worried expression, his husband’s stubborn frown and even Arthur poking his head out from under the unit to see what was going on.

“I suppose seeing what human medicine can do won’t do any harm.” He admitted quietly.

“I’ve got time now?” Bruce phrased it quietly, a gentle question designed not to spook or irritate. “We could go down to my work-shop, have a chat, I run some tests...We can take as much or as little time as you want.”

Loki looked down at the floor again, defeated. “Yes. Thank you, now would be fine.”

MWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMW
Bruce’s work-shop was nothing like Tony’s.

For a start it was tidy, but that was an obvious difference. To a casual observer it was basically a neater version of the infamous Stark Work Space, but to someone who knew what they were looking at there were subtler differences. There was less of an inclination to engineering – most of the machines were more suited to traditional physics, and a few were medical in nature.

A separate area was set up in the corner where the medical accoutrements were placed, with a small sample of biology bits and pieces that wouldn’t look out of place in a research lab. Some of the test tubes were labelled but empty – a reminder back to the days before Bruce had made his peace with the Hulk.

“So, sit down, let’s see what we can do.” Bruce gestured to the examination bench whilst he seated himself at his desk.

It was just the two of them; Loki had insisted on that, clarifying to his husband that everything would be explained but only after he had spoken to Bruce. Tony hadn’t been happy, but acquiesced and Jarvis had promised not to spy and relay the conversation.

The trickster sat down on the edge of the bench. It was quite obvious that this was the last place he wanted to be – and given his recent history with the Chitauri’s idea of medicine that was hardly surprising.

Alright then; how should we start? Do you want to tell me about this spell you’re running?”

“It’s not as easy as that.”

“Why not?”

Loki sighed, rubbing a tired hand across his eyes. “I cannot really call it a spell as such. I do have some spell-work running on a background level but that is not what is causing this exhaustion.”

“Do I need to know about that spell work?” Bruce waited for a reply, and when one wasn’t forthcoming he attempted to guess. “Is it something to do with your Jötunn ancestry? I know you had problems with it bleeding through back in Asgard, is that happening again?”

“No, no I think that’s under control at the moment.”

He sounded quiet. The past few weeks he had seemed to be buzzing with underlying anger and tension, but now he was just quiet and sad. Bruce couldn’t say that he knew the trickster particularly well – they didn’t exactly spend time together – but he could tell when something was wrong. Really wrong.

“Thor said you were casting an over-large Searching spell to find this Thanos guy you think is behind the attacks. Was he right? Is it a searching spell?”

“No. It was a reasonable guess, but no.”

“You aren’t being much help here. I usually make a diagnosis on what someone tells me. If you don’t tell me anything I can’t really do much.”
“I really do not think there’s anything you could do.”

“At least tell me what’s wrong. If you aren’t casting some over-powered searching spell you must be doing something to cause the magic depletion. What’s wrong?”

It was hard to say what the clue was – the downcast expression maybe, or the white knuckled grip on the edge of the bench. Bruce was very familiar with sadness, and was very perceptive of it in others, but even more so he knew fear when he saw it. His patient was hiding it very well, but it was there, a low-lying under current that was simmering quietly.

The doctor pulled his glasses off and sat them on the desk as he pinched the bridge of his nose.

“What are you doing to yourself, Loki?”

“Pardon?”

“You’re apparently expending huge amounts of magic on something, hiding something that is quietly scaring the crap out of you…What’s going on? Are you ill?”

A thin smile crossed Loki’s face. “Ill? No, not exactly.”

“So…”

“I’m pregnant.”

Bruce sat back in his chair with a surprised ‘oh’. Well that explained quite a bit really, but…

“I thought…uh…Tony said that you couldn’t have any more kids?”

“Quite. I can’t. Or at least that’s what I was told and what I believed right up to the point that I realised what had happened.”

“But…” The doctor stared at his patient in utter confusion. “But this is good, isn’t it? Why on earth are you hiding it?”

“You said you thought that ‘this’ would only last a little longer. Are you suggesting you think…?”

Bruce didn’t articulate the thought fully, and didn’t need to when the trickster nodded despondently.

“As I said; I know my body and this is not right. I can’t believe that this pregnancy will progress much further.”

“So all these past weeks; the terrible mood you’ve been in…you’ve been sitting there waiting to miscarry? Why in God’s name haven’t you said something?! Why haven’t you told Tony?!”

“And give him a false sense of hope? How could I do that to him?!” Anger was the predominant emotion, but possibly only because Loki was battening down the hatches on the flood of grief at the situation. “He would love to have another child, and how could I tell him I’m carrying one when I’m going to lose it any day? I cannot give him the false hope that’s torturing me right now!
If I tell him after it’s gone, he can grieve without any emotional attachment.”

That wasn’t Bruce’s place to argue. He didn’t agree, and didn’t like the reasoning, but it wasn’t his place to make that decision. The difficult part of being the team medic/counsellor/sounding board/nanny was that he had to separate himself in such situations and listen impartially without giving his own opinion unless asked.

However, some of his thoughts must have appeared across his face because Loki’s expression became a furious glare.

“Don’t you dare judge me for this! Do you not think I have gone through this decision over and over from the very beginning?! This is it, this is what I am dealing with and I will not second guess myself now!”

“Okay, okay, sorry.” Bruce held his hands up momentarily in a visual backing-down. “I’m sure you’ve spent more than enough time going over this, I didn’t mean to insinuate otherwise.” He could almost see Loki’s hackles slowly subside. “Look, I believe you when you say you are, but how are you pregnant? I was under the impression that was now impossible.”

“So was I.” The prince shrugged with a stilted little gesture, still wary and angry. “I don’t know how this happened, and to be honest I have not put much thought to it. I was told it was impossible to regrow my reproductive organs.”

“They regrew a whole lot of other stuff.”

The made Loki smile, even if only a little. “Well, yes, but that wasn’t easy. The healers struggled with my eyes for a long time because Jötunn physiology is so different to Aesir or human. The Jötunn reproductive system is extremely complex – I’m still not entirely sure how it all works – and they did what they could but agreed that the remaining damage would leave me infertile.”

“Have you been able to have a look? I’m sure there are spells or something to have a quick poke around inside and see what’s going on.”

“No. Given what a mess my organs are supposedly in in that area I didn’t want to cause even more problems. And besides, healing magic is not my forte and the after effects wouldn’t have been worth it.”

“That’s understandable.” Bruce had pulled his notebook over and began to jot down what they had already discussed. “Is using magic just draining you, or is it possible you’re causing harm to the foetus too?”

“Just me. I wouldn’t use it at all if there was any other risk.”

“Have you been bleeding at all? Any spotting?”

“No.”

“You do know my knowledge-base really only covers humans, right? I don’t quite know what’s normal or not for you to comment on danger signs.”

Loki nodded, looking down at his stomach. “Another reason I was so reticent about speaking to you, or anyone about this. From my previous experiences I know that the amount of sickness I’m suffering from is extremely abnormal, as are the problems with my magic. I feel like I am caught in the middle of a civil war inside my own body; it is fighting with every scrap of energy within me to hold onto this child and it does not feel like it will be enough.”
“Well, I’m obviously no ante-natal expert but if we know what the problem is there may be things we can do.”

“You’re talking about surgery?”

“I have no idea.” Bruce ran his hand through his hair in thought. “I’d need some time to work out the scenarios here, but I could already make a few guesses. From what you said about the healing it may well be that your uterus reformed itself after the medic’s attempts, but did so imperfectly. There could be things we could do—yes, surgical intervention—that may help. Or perhaps it’s an ectopic pregnancy. Or there could be something wrong with a part of your system humans don’t even have. I mean, you’re a male who can carry children; I’m already way out of my league here trying to diagnose what’s normal and what isn’t.”

“That is true.”

“Of course, it’s possible that nothing’s wrong. Have you considered that?”

“I’ve hoped it, certainly, but all my symptoms would suggest otherwise. I’ve never been this ill before.”

“Huh. Well, I suppose our first port of call should be to have a look at what we’re dealing with. Don’t you?” Bruce called one of the lab-bots over (Tony had gifted him with some when he’d first moved in) and directed it to go and dig out a piece of equipment for him. “Now, I haven’t actually asked the most obvious question of all; how far along are you? Do you even know?”

Loki smiled wryly. “A day shy of nine weeks.”

“Wow, that was specific. Okay, well that should work for ultrasound then. You’re familiar with that, right?”

“I know of the concept, and seen it in shows and such.”

“Are you okay for me to do one then? It would let us know what’s happening.” The bot had already trundled over with the machine (a useful thing to have when the Hulk had the perchance to swallow random inedible objects now and then). Since it was a Stark piece it was simply a handheld device which was connected to Bruce’s laptop via the WiFi.

“Well, it will hardly take long.” Loki sounded less than happy about it.

“Not long at all—and since it’s a new design on the old ones the hospitals used to use it doesn’t even need the jelly.”

“I suppose that’s something to be thankful for then.”

Loki lay back on the examination bench and very grudgingly pulled his shirt up when asked to. It was far too early to have a baby bump, but his abdominal muscles didn’t quite have the sharp definition that was usually evident.

“Right, hold still.”

Bruce made the obvious assumption that Loki carried children in the same way mammals did and therefore that the womb was where he thought it should be. No doubt he would have been sharply corrected if he’d got it wrong. He also made sure that he’d turned his computer screen away so that only he could see it.
There was a long and somewhat awkward silence between the two of them as Bruce moved the small machine over Loki’s stomach to find what he was looking for.

“Ah, hmm.”

“Yes?”

“I’m not certain yet, give me a moment.” The doctor was watching his screen intently, but his expression gave away nothing. “So, this thing with your magic; you said that you usually find it decreases a little, why is that?”

“I don’t know, but my guess is that part of it goes towards sustaining the child, or maybe as another supplement for the child.”

“So a harder pregnancy, your magic suffers more?”

“Yes; there was a significant decrease when I was carrying Sleipnir, but still not this bad.”

“Huh.” Bruce was frowning at whatever it was he was seeing, but more in confusion than concern.

“What? What is it?”

“Don’t move, I’ll lose the picture! Right, stay put, I’ll swing the screen round.” He did so, revealing the familiar grey and black smear that even the best tech couldn’t render any further. “So, at nine weeks the best we can see is blobby blobs. Defined blobby blobs, but still.”

“Yes, I understand.” Loki was already trying to pick out shapes from the image, but didn’t know how to interpret what he was seeing. “What does this tell you…?”

“Well,” Bruce pointed to a lighter area, and then moved the machine slightly so that the shape resolved into a much more familiar one. “There we have a blobby blob. See? Head, body, one apparently normal looking blobby blob.”

“Oh…”

“A normal looking blobby blob in what seems to be a healthy uterus.”

“But…” Loki looked like someone had thrown a grenade in his face; absolute shock warring with terror. “But how…”

“I suspect the problems you’re having are because of this.” Bruce pointed at the screen again, outlining the foetus. “Because this seems to be one happy little blobby blob,” he moved the machine slightly to the left and the picture lost focus. However, that meant another portion came into focus. “And here is a second happy little blobby blob.”

“Second!”

Bruce had the foresight to save the image on screen as Loki sat bolt upright, looking horrified.

“Second. The official term is twins.”

“Twins…But…But that can’t…I can’t…”

“Hey, whoa!” Banner leant forwards quickly, his hand on Loki’s shoulder as his patient swayed alarmingly. “Deep breaths, head down.”
“I can’t be…this is insane…”

“Okay, seriously, breathe! You’re hyperventilating.”

“I’m losing one, I can’t lose two…!”

“LOKI!” Bruce very rarely shouted, to the point that there were still quite a few people who lived in the tower who had probably never heard him seriously raise his voice without transforming into his alter-ego. It worked though; the trickster quieted, staring at the doctor with glassy eyes. “Right, you need to calm down and control your breathing okay? Keep this up and you’ll pass out.”

“I can’t be having twins…I’m not even supposed to be able to carry a child! How is this happening?!”

“Right, lie back down and just take a moment, okay? Stop talking, try to stop freaking out and just…chill.” He emphasised the order with a firm hand on Loki’s shoulder, pushing the trickster down.

“How the hell do you expect me to calm down?!”

“I’m working on that. Now lift your shirt again and since we know what we’re dealing with I can look to see what’s really going on.”

Loki might have been on the near edge of hysteria, but he could still see sense. He did what the doctor asked and Bruce placed the scanner on his stomach again. Even without gel it was cold.

“This isn’t fair…”

“Do I really need to remind the half-a-million-year old God that life isn’t fair?”

Antagonism was the key. No matter the situation Loki had proved time and again that he couldn’t deal with someone making fun of him or brushing his emotions aside – Tony had long reasoned that it was a left-over from his less-than-fabulous childhood. It wasn’t exactly a healthy response, but it switched him from panicking to incensed and from Bruce’s point of view that was better.

“You’re right; you hardly need to remind me of that! But forgive me for being slightly emotional over the thought of losing not one but two children!”

“Who said anything about losing them?” Bruce was looking at the screen again with a small frown.

“But I-”

“You’re making assumptions. I said there may have been another explanation for your symptoms and maybe this is it.”

Loki huffed angrily, glaring up at the ceiling as if it had personally offended him. It was hard to ignore the scanner pressed hard against his abdomen but he attempted it, trying any technique he had to focus on something else.

Twins.

The past weeks had been so hard; spending every moment since realising what had happened for it all to be over. The stress and fear of every twinge, expecting at any moment for a sudden rush of pain to herald the end. And the secrets. Hiding the dizziness as best he could, hiding the sickness – and morning sickness was such a misnomer, it was sickness no matter the time of day! – hiding the
sudden lack of magic…

He was exhausted, emotionally and physically; grief stricken for a death that hadn’t yet happened but that he couldn’t control.

And now to learn it wouldn’t be one, but two…

“Here.”

It was only when Bruce handed over a tissue that Loki realised he needed one. It would have been embarrassing, but the single word had been entirely non-judgemental.

“Do you think…should my assumptions still be correct, do you think it better to terminate the pregnancy or let nature deal with it?” It was quite something that he managed to keep his voice steady as he asked the quiet question. “I had never planned to go down that route, but now that you know, I may as well ask for a medical opinion…”

“What? No. Good grief, no.” Bruce finally looked away from his computer screen, his expression surprised and concerned. “You haven’t already tried, have you?”

“Of course not! I’ve done everything I could to keep this going!!”

“Good. That’s good. Look.” The doctor swung the screen round again. This time he had managed to find an angle with the scanner that meant both little blobs were in view. They looked like they were fluttering.

“Why are they out of focus like that?”

“Huh? The movement? Those are the heartbeats you’re seeing.” Bruce used his pen to indicate again. “Now, without getting too optimistic, I can’t see anything out of the ordinary here. Two strong heartbeats – that’s the fluttery effect you’re seeing – separate membranes so not identical twins I’m afraid, and you’re looking healthy too. I was worried it could have been an ectopic pregnancy given your concerns, but both you and the blobs look normal and healthy.”

“Healthy?” Loki was fixated on the little quivering shapes on the screen. “How can that be possible?”

“I don’t know. All I can tell you is what I’m seeing on the screen, and everything looks good. I think it’s very likely you’ve been struggling with the symptoms because you’re healed but not as perfectly as you should be.”

“So you believe I can carry to full term?”

“I don’t want to make false promises, but I can’t see why you wouldn’t be able to.”

“How can…” Loki’s hand moved back to his stomach, almost reverently. “This cannot be true…”

“I can only tell you what I’m seeing here. Everything looks healthy. That isn’t to say you shouldn’t be cautious but…but it looks good.”

“But I’ve been so ill…” He was clinging to the only thing he still knew. “Things can’t be well, they just can’t.”

“As I’ve said – maybe you’ve not healed to the fullest extent. I can’t see any, but that doesn’t mean there isn’t scar tissue. And have you ever carried multiples before?” Bruce gestured back to the
screen when Loki dumbly shook his head. “Well, there’s another possible explanation then. You’ve got a reproductive system that is still recovering from severe trauma and now has double the strain a normal pregnancy would put upon it.” He froze the screen again and put the scanner back on the table. “I don’t know what a Jötunn pregnancy should look like of course, so I don’t know what to look for with regards to blood pressure and iron levels and such. However, you haven’t been eating right which may be contributing to how ill you’ve been feeling.”

Loki managed a wry smile. “Eating is tricky when you cannot keep anything down.”

“Nothing at all?”

“Not often. I try when I can. I’ve found snacks here and there rather than full meals seem to settle better.”

“Little and often. Yes that can work. There are some herbal teas and such I could recommend that may help too.”

“That’s what they use on Asgard too.” The trickster sat up again, pale and shaken. “I must admit to not feeling particularly well now, actually.”

“You aren’t looking it either.” Bruce casually pulled the small bin out from under his desk and handed it over. “But to be fair you’ve just had one hell of a shock so that’s understandable.”

Loki placed the bin to one side – unused – and hunched over to bury his head in his hands. “I just cannot believe this is happening. I’ve been mentally preparing myself for a miscarriage these past months…”

“I know it’s a lot to take in all at once. Do you want me to call Tony in?”

“I…I don’t even know what to say to him…”

“Tell him the facts.” Bruce said gently. “Just tell him what you feared, and now what you know.”

Loki nodded, an abrupt little movement that was barely seen given how he was sitting. Bruce took that as an agreement and glanced up at the ceiling.

“Jarvis? Can you let Tony in? I know he’s been hovering outside since we came in here.”

“Certainly sir. Just Mr Stark? Miss Evelyn has been most anxious too.”

“No, just Tony for now.”

The doors at the other end of the lab quietly opened, and they could hear voices outside on the cusp of hearing before there were quick footsteps across the floor. Tony knew better than to run in a lab, but his speed spoke of his concern. He appeared around the large bookcase, knocking a neatly filed sheaf of paper off the shelf as he did so. Bruce rolled his eyes, but given the circumstances didn’t comment on the carelessness.

“Jarvis said I could come in, what have you –” Stark stopped dead when he saw Loki; pale, shaken and close to tears. “Oh God, what’s happened? What’s wrong?!?”

The trickster opened his mouth to answer, then snapped it shut again, turning away with a hopeless shrug.

“Loki?” Tony’s hands found his husbands shoulders, trying to find some clue in the trickster’s
expression that would explain what was going on. “Loki, what is it?”

“I…”

Seeing that he wasn’t going to get an answer easily, Stark turned to the Doctor. Bruce had removed the image from the screen, but the scanner was still sitting on the desk-top and drew Tony’s attention. He frowned at it for a moment, trying to determine why on earth it would have been necessary before he turned back to his husband.

“Loki…? Please, what the hell is going on? Are you ill? Is it serious?”

“I’m not ill.” The prince said softly. He managed to smile, although it was tenuous. “But yes…this is rather serious.”

“So what the hell is wrong then?!” Tony grasped his husband’s hands. “Look, you can either tell me, or I’ll get Jarvis to. Or Banner. Banner; what the hell is going on?!”

Bruce looked alarmed at being drawn into the conversation and in turn looked to Loki for what to do. The trickster nodded towards the blank computer screen, unable to articulate his permission to put the scan back on the screen.

“Um, well, we did some scans and things, like we said we would. Um…Loki already had some idea of what was going on and…well…look…” The doctor gestured towards his computer, re-opening the pictures.

Tony frowned at the screen, his usually-quick brain scrambling to discern what the abstract images were. Tumours? Growths of some sort?

“I don’t understand. What am I seeing here?”

“What does it look like, Stark?” The prince asked quietly.

“I don’t know! Kidneys?”

“What? Oh for Norns sake, I thought you were meant to be intelligent!” And despite the fact that he looked shell-shocked, Loki laughed. It was shaky and still somewhat disbelieving, but there was no doubting that there was joy in the sound. “It’s an ultrasound, Stark, do the maths!”

“What? You mean…? But no, you can’t be!” Tony looked at the scanner again, as if it could possibly tell him any other reason an ultra-sound might have been required. “That’s…No. No. You can’t be. You were too injured! They said you were too injured!”

“I know. Apparently they were wrong.” The trickster waved a shaking hand towards the screen. “Doctor Banner said that…that despite it all…”

“Despite it all, everything looks healthy. Loki’s recent health problems are certainly related, but not in the way he assumed.”

“Oh my God…” Tony slumped down to sit next to his husband, staring white-faced at the computer screen. “Oh God…” Loki seemed to find something amusing in this reaction, managing a watery smile towards the man. “So this…You’re…How far along?”

“Three months.” The prince said softly.

“Three months? Why the fuck didn’t you tell me?!”
“Tony, now isn’t the time for that discussion, we-”

“Now is exactly the time for that discussion! Loki, you’re pregnant! Three months pregnant! Oh God…” The inventor felt a tentative touch to his hand and snatched it away. “No! You can’t be, this is impossible!”

Loki laughed bitterly. “Oh, and you don’t think that’s been my reaction?! Three months of waiting to miscarry. Three months of jumping at every pain and twinge and slight discomfort as I waited to lose this pregnancy.”

“Lose?! Is that likely? Are you going to miscarry?!”

“I don’t know. But Doctor Banner thinks not.”


“Tony…this is, this could be a good thing?” Loki’s hand was tentative on his husband’s shoulder.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I couldn’t.” With his gesture rebuffed the prince turned away again. “Do you know what it’s like to have your dearest wish made reality, and yet spend every day fearing its loss? I could feel it growing, every day, and every day I have been feeling worse and worse. The sickness, the dizziness, the loss of my magic. Everything so far has suggested that as miraculous as this pregnancy is, my body can’t support it. I’ve been anticipating a miscarriage since I first realised what was happening.” He shrugged hopelessly. “It’s been hell. The horror of what I’ve faced losing…I couldn’t do that to you! Better that you didn’t know until after the event. The waiting, the fear, the grief; I wanted to spare you that.”

Stark had his head in his hands, shaking it furiously. “That wasn’t your call to make! We’re a partnership here; we’re meant to support each other!”

“And we’re meant to spare each other pain when we can! I would have told you the moment I lost the child, but I didn’t want you to bear the burden of waiting for it to happen! Better you grieve for what might have been then grow to love something that could never happen like I have had to do! Do you even know what a miscarriage is like, Tony?! All that pain, all that blood and pain and heartbreak, and nothing but a broken dream to show for it!” Loki had turned away, his back to his husband, so startled when arms suddenly clasped around his waist.

“And I’d never want you to go through that alone.”

“I always have before.”

“I know. But no more.”

Loki laughed softly. “Hopefully not at all, if this holds.” He glanced towards Bruce, still seeming to need the confirmation that things weren’t as dire as he thought.

“There’s no reason that this one shouldn’t hold.” The Doctor took that as permission to enter back into the conversation, indicating back to the scan. “Despite the unusual nature of the pregnancy.”

“Unusual nature?” Tony jumped on the phrasing with all due concern, so was put off by Bruce’s sudden grin. “Seriously, what?” The doctor did a little ‘go on, tell him’ gesture at Loki.

“Oh, uh…” The trickster looked at the screen again, glanced at Bruce, then cleared his throat.
“Is this the point where you tell me it’s healthy, but is also a dragon? Because I swear I can totally raise a dragon.”

“It’s not a dragon, Tony.” Finally, finally Loki laughed, the tension breaking. “Although that would be marvellous. But no.”

“So what then?!”

“Look.” The trickster pointed at the ultrasound image again; the patches of light and dark. “There. Not so clear, but you can make out the little form.” He smiled as his husband leaned forwards, enraptured with the picture.

“It’s tiny…”

“It’s only nine weeks old.”

Tony wasn’t daft. His gaze moved from the lighter image Loki was pointing at to the other little fuzzy blob. “So what’s that?” He glanced at his husband, catching Loki’s sudden bright smile. “Capricorn, what is that?”

“The other one.”

“The…” Stark’s head turned from the trickster to the screen and back again as if he were watching a tennis match. “No way…” His jaw dropped. “Two? Twins? You’re seriously telling me it’s twins?!”

“It’s twins.”

“Oh my God it’s twins!”

“Tony?”

“It’s twins! You’re pregnant and it’s twins!” Tony jumped to his feet, spinning on the spot and almost knocking the screen off the desk in the process. “Oh my God! What the hell?! How the hell?!”

Loki glanced at Bruce who shrugged. “I’m struggling to decipher if this is a good ‘what the hell’ or a bad one.”

“A good one, you stupid ass! Oh my God twins! You’re not even supposed to be able to have children anymore!”

“I know!”

The man spun around again and then sat back down beside his husband with a thump. His hand was shaking as he ran it through his hair. “How. Seriously, how. This shouldn’t be possible! We’ve discussed it over and over so many times; all the medics in Asgard said it was impossible!”

Loki spread his hands in a hopeless gesture. “I don’t know how. But Bruce said everything is healthy so I’m not going to question a miracle.” He glanced at the doctor again. “You are sure everything is alright?”

“No promises, but it all seems to be normal and healthy. It’s just affecting you pretty badly.” Bruce tapped his pen against his lips. “I do wonder how much of that is psychosomatic though. Let’s see how your symptoms do now that you know you probably aren’t going to miscarry.”
“But how…” Tony didn’t seem quite able to let go of the pivotal question. “I mean, how…”

“Well, you’ve heard of sex, yes? It’s usually through this act of copulation that.”

“Alright, alright smartass, you know what the hell I mean!” The man waved a hand around, taking in his husband, the scanned image and himself in the gesture. “Until recently we were both certain that you didn’t even have a reproductive system, let alone one that’s apparently functional. What’s happened? What’s changed?”

Since ‘I don’t know’ wasn’t a reply Stark was hearing, Loki tried a different tact. “Nothing. I have not done anything that could have done this – you know my healing magic is not that strong. Even the best of Asgard’s healers couldn’t fix the damage done; how could I hope to?”

“I’m not saying you did, I’m just trying to work this out.”

“Can we not just be happy?”

Bruce – as with most of the tower’s occupants – had grown very adept at learning the warning signs that preceded a fight between their resident genius and bag-of-cats-crazy God so headed them off before they could start. “Look, whilst Loki’s right that you shouldn’t look a gift horse in the mouth maybe there’s something in finding out how this was possible. If we understand how it happened then it could give us some clues as to how high risk this pregnancy may be.” He turned to Loki. “You’ve been to a handful of different realms recently – was there anything there that could have done this? Some magic that has the power to restore full health?”

The trickster shook his head. “No, nothing. Maybe the Infinity Stones themselves, if wielded by someone who knows how to use them, but I’ve not been in contact with one since the tesseract all those years ago.”

“Are there any spells at all, of any sort that can heal the unhealable? Anything you could have been in contact with?”

“Not that I’m aware of.”

“You healed me.” Tony said. “Healed me and made me immortal. That magic water you got hold of – did you drink any?”

“No.” It had been a long time since they’d even needed to think about that – other things had happened in the intervening time. Tony could recall the conversations they’d had in Asgard on it; the discussion of Loki’s other children and how he had taken them to the mythical sanctuary to save them. Given what wounds the waters had healed then it seemed conceivable that they could have healed Loki. Although if he didn’t drink anything that was also a dead end.

“There wasn’t anything there? Nothing that could have been slowly healing you since then?”

“Nothing.” It was quite obvious the line of questioning was irritating the trickster. “I sat with the guardian of the waters, we talked at length over a pot of tea and then I left with the gift. You cannot just take the waters – it is powerful ancient magic, they must be a gift given, not taken, otherwise they will not work.”

Tony and Bruce looked at each other, as if each trying to gauge if the other had heard the same thing, and Loki frowned, sensing that something was going over his head.

“What?”
“You and the guardian talked for a long time, right?”

“Yes…?”

“Sat there, chatting, over a pot of tea, yes?”

“Tony, where are you going with this?”

Stark laughed, as if he couldn’t imagine someone could be so idiotic. “You twit! How do you make tea?!”

“What? You…Oh. Oh by the Norns…!” And Loki’s hand flew to his mouth in complete astonishment at his own stupidity. “Water. You make tea using water.”

“Wow, and you’re considered the brains of Asgard? ‘You make tea with water’, honestly, how did you survive childhood?”

The trickster laughed breathlessly, too caught up in the realisation to hear his husband’s antagonism. He hadn’t trusted that he had healed slowly of his own accord, he hadn’t trusted that some spell or such like from the medics could have slowly healed him, but this…This he could believe in.

“Loki?” Stark had realised his husband wasn’t listening and gently prodded the prince’s arm. “Hey Capricorn, you still with us?”

“I wanted this so badly….” Loki pressed both hands against his stomach, gently, reverently. “All these months of dreading what would happen and now…” He startled when his husband’s hands suddenly covered his own.

“And now we’ve got hope.” Tony met the prince’s gaze and grinned. “How’s that for a name? Hope?”

“A rather unfortunate name for a boy, but if one of the twins is a girl then it is lovely.”

“Quit with the gender norms! It’s a great name for a boy!”

Loki laughed.

It was too raw and too new to tell everyone – especially since Loki still couldn’t quite take it at face value that his fears of miscarriage were unfounded. Even Evie was avoided; they reasoned waiting a little longer to make sure things were safe. Loki had wanted to spare his husband the pain of a loss; they both wanted to spare their daughter that if there was still a chance of losing the pregnancy.

“Hope…” It was the first word either of them had said in over two hours. They were splayed out across their bed, Tony’s head pillowed on Loki’s stomach, fingers tracing across the skin as if he could already speak to the children there. “Hope…Joy?…”

“Are these emotions or prospective names?” Loki asked softly, carding his fingers through the man’s hair.

“Hmm, both. Grace?”

“These are all girls names. They may well both be boys.”
“Or one each? One each would be nice. What do you think?” Stark raised his head up to look at his husband.

“Healthy. All I want is for them to be healthy.”

Tony laid his head back down on Loki’s bare chest, rising and falling with the God’s gentle breathing. His hand was pressed against the trickster’s stomach and although there was little sign of swelling he still fancied he could feel something there.

“Are you happy?” Loki asked softly, his fingers moving through the man’s short hair.

“I’m going to be a father again….Happy doesn’t even begin to cover it.” Tony shook his head slightly, voice choking up. “After all we thought…we get to be parents again. Parents together.”

“And we’ll do as fine a job as you did with Evelyn.”

“Oh god I hope so…I never thought we’d ever get this chance again. What did I ever do to deserve something as amazing as this? As you?”

“You deserve everything and more Tony.”

“…I’m so happy right now.”

Loki laughed, although it sounded tearful. “So am I. This is more than I ever hoped for either.”

Tony moved enough to press a kiss to the mostly-flat stomach. “God, Capricorn…This is just…oh god I love you.”

“I know. I love you too Tony.”

MWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWM

“What do you think, Jarvis?” Bruce asked quietly. “I mean, you’ve had a few minutes of raiding medical databases to become an absolute expert. I gave a diagnosis based on the information at hand. Do you think I was right? Will Loki be okay?”

“It’s hard to say Doctor Banner. He’s not human so that doesn’t help.” Jarvis wasn’t there in person (or droid-body, or whatever) so to all intents and purposes the computer was flicking through the handful of scans Bruce had taken all of its own accord. “As you have said yourself; these scans indicate that both he and the foetus’ are healthy.”

“But…?”

“But he’s not human. And is a ‘he’, so we don’t quite have all the information required here.”

“Mmm. Did you notice how he described a miscarriage to Tony? That sounded far too much like the voice of experience. We’re going to need his medical history.”

Jarvis affected a small laugh. “Whilst I would agree in most circumstances, Doctor Banner, Loki is somewhere around half a million years old. That is an extensive medical history.”

“Oh okay…we’ll need his abridged medical history regarding child bearing and birthing.”

“That might be somewhat more attainable.”

Bruce tapped on his keyboard and the final image he’d taken appeared on the screen; both little
“Well, they aren’t sharing a placenta so they aren’t identical twins, which removes some of the possible complications, but this is still going to be a very high risk pregnancy.”

“He is also still only nine weeks – we should wait until twelve before truly ruling out spontaneous miscarriage.”

“True.” Bruce peered at the image again. “Twins…Poor old Loki, he’s going to have a tough few months ahead of him.”

“Oh I wouldn’t worry; he will make sure that if he is having a bad time Mr Stark will certainly have a worse one. And I believe the next eighteen years will certainly be considered tougher in the grander scheme of things.”

“Oh God…” Bruce’s head hit the desk with a thump. “Evie’s been bad enough…”

Jarvis laughed again. For an advanced stream of code he certainly had a sarcastic sense of humour.

Tony was woken at about three o’clock in the morning, leading him to the realisation that he and his husband must have fallen asleep where they were, mid-conversation. Well, Loki at least had an excuse although Stark could only claim to be emotionally worn out. This meant they had been locked away in their room since leaving Bruce’s lab and assuming that Banner had kept quiet about their news, no one knew why. They should probably talk to Evie first thing, but no doubt everyone else would wonder where they’d been. Loki’s near-collapse been unfortunately public and at the very least Thor would be worrying – and Jarvis had probably spent a large part of the day refusing to give him any information – so there would be questions when they reappeared.

For now, at least, that wasn’t a problem. What was a problem was the damn email notification that had woken him up. Of course, he could mute it, but then he would just stay awake wondering who the hell it was.

Why had he set *Smells like Teen Spirit* as his notification tone again…?

“Turn that damn thing off or I will break it.” The grumpy snarl made it clear that Loki wasn’t pleased to be woken.

“Okay, okay…”

Tony fished around in the dark for his phone on the bedside table, following the music to give him an idea of direction. The screen was obnoxiously bright and he squinted at it with only one eye open. Then he groaned and thumped Loki on the shoulder with it.

“It’s your kid. You need to get your own email address so he stops emailing me!”

“Huh?” The trickster managed to pull the phone out of his husbands flailing hand. “Merlin?”

“Yeah, bloody UK times!” Tony rolled over to lie face down in the pillows, making it clear he wanted to go back to sleep. The mattress shifted next to him and he figured Loki had sat up to read through whatever his errant son had written. He had almost dozed off again when the trickster gently shook his shoulder.

“Here, look at this.”
“Wha’? Can’t’t wait?”

“No, look.”

Tony removed his face from the pillow only to be met with his phone screen right by his face and painfully bright. He groaned and rubbed a hand over his eyes. “What? What am I looking at?”

“I sent Merlin a photo of Evelyn and he’s sent a selfie back. Look.”

Stark groaned again – more for emphasis than reason – and pulled himself up on one elbow to take the phone back. He peered at the screen, still squinting.

When Loki had said selfie that usually implied a jokey image, maybe in a mirror. This wasn’t a fun jokey selfie. The young man in the image was staring out of the screen solemnly, a warm red scarf wrapped around his neck to show he’d been outside for the photo. He had Loki’s intense green eyes and dark hair, although his was cropped close and his gaze didn’t hold the promise of mischief and laughter the Loki’s usually did. He looked in his mid-twenties, although Tony knew not to take that at face value.

“Huh, looks like you. Got your eyes. And hair.” Tony sat up a little to look at the phone properly. “The scarf is a bit hipster though – if it turns out he’s carrying a Starbucks coffee in his other hand I refuse to ever meet him.”

Loki laughed quietly. “He likes scarves. I don’t believe he is fond of coffee though.”

“He really does look like you – far more than Evie does. There’s something in that ‘I could kill you with a thought’ look he’s got going.”

“You can imagine what our arguments can be like then.”

It was strange to see Loki’s features in another face. Evie hadn’t inherited much beyond the eyes and Sleipnir didn’t have any physical similarities at all, but Merlin looked familiar. Tony didn’t feel any connection to the face on the screen though. He and Sleipnir had bonded over their worry for Loki and the horse had already been thinking of him as a step-father before meeting him. Merlin seemed cool to the point of hostile towards him if the emails were anything to go by.

“Are you going to tell him you’re pregnant again?”

“Oh Norns no! Not until I’m much closer to the due date!”

“Think he’ll appear here and try to kill me for defiling you?”

“We’re married; you can’t defile me anymore, I’m very sorry to say. No, he’s just jealous and childish.”

Tony had left the phone too long without interacting with it and the screen went dark, taking away the main light source in the room. Stark shifted over to drop his head onto his husband’s chest.

“Speaking of telling people, are we going to have a word with Evie tomorrow?” He asked quietly. When there was no reply he lifted his head to try and make out the prince’s expression in the dark. “Capricorn?”

“I don’t think it’s such a good idea. Not yet.”

“No? But Bruce said-”
“Bruce said that things look normal; normal pregnancies are still in the danger zone up until twelve weeks. I don’t think we should tell anyone until we’re past that point and things look a little more stable.”

“That’s another three weeks away.” Tony immediately regretted the complaint when he heard how much of a whine there was in his voice. Loki had certainly picked up on it because he laughed quietly.

“Yes. Three whole weeks of this being our little secret. Of just you and me knowing about it and no-one else butting in or worrying or tip-toeing around. Just us.”

“And Bruce.”

“Well, yes, and Bruce, but he is the least annoying of you humans and will at least give us the space we need.”

Tony smiled in the dark, his hand finding Loki’s stomach again. “Three weeks…given there’s a teeny tiny bump already you’re definitely going to be showing by then.”

“My magic may be deplorably weak at the moment but rest assured I have enough to hold up a glamour. I refuse to look like a bloated whale for the next nine months.”

“Seven months. Math; it’s a wonderful thing.”

“…Shut up Stark.”

“Don’t worry, apparently ‘baby brain’ affects a lot of expecting women.” Tony suddenly froze, a horrified thought crossing his mind. “Oh God…are you going to be hormonal? Will hormones happen? Am I going to have to deal with you crying all the time?! I can’t handle that!”

“Three…no, four things; I’m not a woman, yes, yes and no you won’t.”

“You were really hormonal after Evie was born – don’t think I don’t remember that!”

“You only saw that for one night.”

“Trust me, it showed.”

Loki laughed softly. “I have never historically been terribly hormonal; you should be safe.”

“You’ve also said that historically you haven’t had much by way of morning sickness and apparently that’s changed so I’m going to be careful either way. If you decide to take over the planet again I’ll put it down to hormones.”

The tower had a superb gym – of course it would, since Tony designed everything – but sometimes Steve just needed to feel actual concrete under his feet. Seeing some different scenery was welcome as well and whilst Captain America wasn’t one for a sneaky Starbucks, going out gave him the option should he want it.

He’d already lapped Central Park and was contemplating a second when he felt the unusual presence of someone keeping pace with him. Now that in itself wasn’t unusual, but to find someone who could keep pace whilst not sprinting was rare.

They were in a busy section so he could only glance out the corner of his eye and glimpse a dark
nondescript hoodie that hid all immediately identifiable features. The person was still keeping up though, and without seemingly tiring so Steve swerved off the usual track and out into the denser trees. He wasn’t surprised to see that his unwanted companion followed his lead.

He wasn’t getting that little prickle of threat that usually happened just before a situation went sour, but Steve definitely felt that they would be better off without innocent bystanders in the way.

The area they’d veered off into wasn’t one he was very familiar with, so he soon slowed to a halt, allowing his companion to do the same.

“Is there a reason you’re sneaking up on my morning jog, Bucky?”

“We’re in a public space, I’m hardly sneaking.”

“What do you want?” Steve was pretty certain his former friend wasn’t about to try and kill him, but it paid not to be complacent.

“Jarvis told me that some updates should be done in person. A show of good faith and all that.” Bucky looked better than when they had last seen him, although all things considered that wouldn’t be hard. He didn’t seem threatened by Steve’s presence at any rate, casually kneeling to tie his loose shoelace. “But since the last time I went to the tower an angsty teenager and secretary with attitude shot me I thought this was a safer option.”

“Don’t call Pepper that; she’s the CEO of Stark Industries.”

“And the pint-sized menace with the gun?”

Steve smiled slightly. “Nah, I’ll give you that.” He saw a fleeting grin cross Bucky’s face. “So, what did you want to update us about? I’m assuming Hydra?”

“They’re planning something again. Slowly, and without much success because I’ve been pretty efficient at removing their bases, but they’re still up to something.”

“Huh.” The Captain brushed the debris from an old tree stump and sat down with a sigh. “Why can’t they just stay dead?”

“You are familiar with the idea that you cut off one head and—”

“And two more grow, yes, I know.”

Bucky smirked. “So you did listen in Classics then.”

“More than you ever did. You used to doodle pictures of Marcy Wainwright in questionable lingerie in the back of the text book.”

“Did I? I don’t remember that.”

“Probably for the best. So; Hydra.”

The soldier’s wry grin faded. “Yes. I’ve been following what leads I can find and managed to clear out a load of files from the last base before they could destroy it all.” He pulled a USB stick out of his pocket and flipped it to Steve. “Here. That’s got it all on there.”

“Anything big to worry about?”

“There’s something that looks an awful lot like a new helicarrier design, but with different
weaponry. From what I’ve seen of the plans and such I think they’re already starting production.”

Steve frowned down at the small stick, concern heavy on his face. “A helicarrier? Reinventing Project Insight maybe?” He just got a shrug in return. “Zola’s gone, but that doesn’t mean they didn’t have a basic understanding of his algorithm. Do you know where they might be building this thing?”

“I’ve got an idea, but it’s too big; I hate to admit it, but I can’t take this thing down on my own. Well…I probably could, but I run the risk of not succeeding and in this case that’ll be too dangerous. They already know someone’s out for them.”

Steve raised an eyebrow. “Oh? Didn’t think I’d hear you admit that.

Bucky shrugged, looking off back into the trees. “Hydra did a good job in wiping my memories. What’s gone is gone, but like your pet magician said, there’re bits still there and they keep popping up at random times. I remember the Howling Commandos. Team work has its benefits.”

“You’re offering to work with us in this?”

The Winter Soldier smirked slightly. “You currently have the guy who tried to invade this planet with an alien army working with you. I only tried to kill you. And that girl.”

“And Sam.”

“And him. Three people; not so bad in the grand scheme of taking over the world. And I dragged your sodden ass out of a river so that cancels out at least one count of attempted murder.”

“It’s because of you I ended up in that state in the river in the first place.” Steve slapped his hands on his knees and rose up to his feet. “But; I’m happy to work together on this if you are.”

“Do you have the authority to make that decision?”

“Eh. As you quite rightly put; we’ve let Loki in, it’s only fair we give you a chance as well. Do you want to drop by the tower later? I’d offer for you to come back with me now but I should probably give the others a bit of warning first.”

“Yeah, sure.” Bucky sounded like it was the last thing he wanted to do, but he was the one who had asked for the team-up so it was up to him to follow through. “Have a look at the data, or get Mr Stark to. It will give you all of the information I found and you can see if you come to the same conclusions as I did.”

“Will do.”

Steve didn’t add any qualifier. ‘See you soon’ was a bit too hopeful and the last thing he wanted to do was send his former friend running. It must have taken a lot of cajoling from Jarvis for Bucky to have turned up in person rather than using the AI as a messenger. He could only hope the winter Soldier would actually turn up later in the day.
As a stream of intricate code, Jarvis should not have had the capacity for emotions. Technically he shouldn’t be a ‘he’ either, or have a sense of self, or be able to think in his down-time. Well…
down-time wasn’t strictly true since he was constantly running multiple background processes, but he considered those moments when there wasn’t much human input as down-time.

It wouldn’t be entirely correct to say that he thought in the same way as a human – he was still at heart (or code) a piece of artificial intelligence – but his processes were mostly leading him to the same conclusions the humans in the vicinity reached. Sometimes in his heart of hearts (and he had made a note to find a better, non-biological phrase at some point) he wished he could do away with the description of ‘AI’. There was nothing artificial about his intelligence any more. As Tony had noted, Jarvis had passed into that area that was technically classed as autonomous – that was hardly artificial.

He had listened in to the conversation between Loki, Bruce and Tony – he listened to everything, he couldn’t really turn it off – and although no one had asked his opinions on the situation he certainly had them. And emotions too, because he was more than capable of those.

He was worried, and for once it wasn’t for Tony or Evie.

Jarvis and Loki had an amiable relationship. Loki didn’t really understand the AI; too used to the fantastic and other-worldly to realise Jarvis was something unique, and Jarvis found it too easy to poke gentle fun at the trickster. But the AI (and he really wanted to find a better description there) still liked him. He recognised what Loki had done for the Stark family and what potential he had for the team.

The one part of emotional growth Jarvis had struggled with was empathy. This wasn’t public knowledge – Tony might have picked it up if he’d gone through the AI’s progression, but he hadn’t bothered – but it had taken him a long time to learn how someone else might see the world.

A physical body helped. Before that he had understood death and destruction in coldly scientific terms, but now that he had something tangible to lose he could see why humans clung so tightly to life.

Empathy. Understanding someone else’s grief, loss, pain. Maybe that was the triumph of Jarvis. Intelligence, keeping up with conversation, understanding human quirks, a sense of humour; those were all impressive feats for an AI, but empathy was the one thing that scientists had always said a computer would never have.

Jarvis was worried.

He knew the medical risks and dangers Loki was facing – both from the trickster’s own point of view and for the pregnancy and he found he was frightened that Loki might lose the twins. Not frightened for what it could mean for himself, but frightened for how something so terrible would affect Tony and Loki. He adored Evie – he’d practically raised her – and in his own way felt very much like a third parent. Even the thought of losing her made something in him feel like a major circuit had failed, so he felt he could begin to understand how Tony and Loki might react if this pregnancy failed.

Jarvis was a stream of computer code, but for once he felt he really wanted to talk to someone.
Could a computer have a therapist?

He added that to the list of existential questions but the list had to wait as a message came through from one of the lobby cameras.

It was difficult for Jarvis to explain in human terms how it felt to receive signals from so many places all at once, but it was what he had initially been built for and as a human breathed, he took in data. And right now the data was telling him that a certain Bucky Barnes had just entered the building.

Jarvis continued his train of thought as he sent a quick message to alert the Avengers and wake Tony up.

Meanwhile he stood both suits in the lobby to attention.

“Good afternoon Mr Barnes, and happy new year.”

Bucky looked less worried than anyone had a right to look when confronted with two heavily armed Ironman suits. It probably helped that this time he had used the door and wasn’t in full combat gear. In fact he ignored both of them, his gaze settling on Jarvis as the droid walked out from one of the elevators.

“Yes, is it the new year, isn’t it. Happy new year I suppose.” Bucky dug his hands into his jeans pockets. “Did Steve tell you I would be coming?”

“He informed us, yes. I spoke up for you, naturally, but the others are somewhat sceptical.” Detailed gears moved Jarvis’ expression into his version of a smile. “They seem to think we are in collusion.”

“Aren’t we? I hardly know what’s going on these days.”

“Oh, I think it’s fair to say we have an accord. But it works, and that’s all that matters.”

“You talk in fucking riddles.”

Jarvis smiled again and gestured towards the open elevator doors. “Shall we?”

Tony had been awake for some time, playing with proto-types on his Stark-pad when Jarvis’s announcement of their visitor flashed up on the screen. The AI had already pre-warned him that Steve had invited Bucky back to discuss the Hydra problem, so he wasn’t surprised.

“Hey, Capricorn?” He rested a hand on Loki’s shoulder, speaking quietly enough that if the trickster was asleep he wouldn’t wake. As it was Loki turned into the touch with a groan. “Hey, the frozen Buckyball has turned up again, I’m going to go down and hear him out. You coming?”

“…No…Maybe later.”

“Are you okay?”

A soft laugh, but with an edge to it. “Hardly. I feel like the living dead…”

“Huh.”

Loki felt the mattress move as his husband left the bed, but given the crippling nausea he hardly
felt like turning to see where Tony was going. In some ways, though, it was so nice to simply be able to acknowledge how bad he felt rather than trying to hide it as he had been. However, a little more sympathy would have been welcome.

But his annoyance at Tony seemingly ignoring him vanished when the man’s legs and waist suddenly appeared in his peripheral vision and he rolled his head enough to look up at his husband.

“Bin?” Stark held up the receptacle with a hopeful grin. “Not an elegant solution, but means you don’t have to run to the bathroom. Give me a few hours and I’ll sort out something a bit more streamlined.”

A sarcastic response would usually be in order, but Loki really couldn’t bring himself to try to speak any more than he already had. He’d closed his eyes again, but felt the mattress suddenly dip beside him as Tony perched on the edge of the bed.

“That bad, huh?” The man’s hand was soothing in his hair. “I can’t believe you’ve been managing to hide this for so long.”

“…God of lies…”

“I don’t have to go down – they can cope without me. Bucky’s not likely to try killing everyone, and if he did Bruce would sit on him in no short order. Or smash him into the floor a few times – which as you know can shut someone up quite beautifully.”

Loki opened one eye to glare up at his husband.

“Sorry, couldn’t resist. Seriously though; I’ll stay if you want me to?”

It was tempting. Very tempting. The trickster had long given up pointless shows of pride around his husband when things weren’t going well – all pride meant was that he ended up suffering in silence, when some sympathy could have been an option.

However, he had been managing to deal with the sickness on his own so far and as nice as some pampering would be, it was rather more important that Tony found out why the erstwhile Winter Soldier had decided to return. Bucky had made it clear he didn’t want to be around the Avenger’s – he must have come across something quite significant to willingly come and talk to them in person.

“You go down, I’ll be fine.”

“You don’t look fine.”

“It’s morning sickness; it won’t kill me.” Might feel like it would, but although it was bad it was pretty much harmless for an immortal God. Just really really sucked.

“But.”

“Tony, go.”

Stark sighed. “Fine. Fine, but I’m coming straight back up afterwards.”

“If you must.”

MWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMW

By the time Tony reached the main living room everyone else in the tower had already arrived so he walked into a room of judging looks. Sam and Natasha had returned from their little New Years
vacation early, and neither looked pleased about it. Pepper wasn’t back yet, but she wasn’t usually considered part of the main group so that wasn’t unusual.

“You took your time.” Steve wasn’t often so blunt; he must have been pretty damn stressed.

“Where’s Loki?”

“Sleeping in. He’ll come down in a bit”

“Tony, this is important”

“Yeah, yeah.” Tony waved the complaint away, his gaze fixed on the figure sitting by Steve on the sofa. Bucky looked like he would rather be anywhere than where he was, uncomfortable with the situation despite having orchestrated it. “So, why’ve you decided to crawl out of the woodwork?” That earned him a scowl – although that was usually how Bucky looked at him anyway. The Winter Soldier didn’t like him much.

“Buck’s here to talk to us about Hydra.” Steve tried to get the ball rolling again after Tony’s appearance had effectively thrown them off-track. “I told everyone else, Stark, but Jarvis refused to disturb you so you’re out of the loop.”

“Grand. Loop me back in then.” The inventor threw himself down into one of the bucket armchairs – purposely picking the one with the obnoxious squeak every time it swivelled.

“We should wait for Loki-”

“Yeah, no. He’s not going to be showing up any time soon. Jarvis can send him the live feed of this conversation if necessary, but he’s probably asleep.” He saw Thor frown in his peripheral vision and silently willed Steve to go on with the Hydra thing before the God started trying to direct the conversation towards what was wrong with his brother.

The super soldier obviously saw the danger too and jumped in before the God could. “Okay, whatever, as long as he’s okay. Because we’re going to need all hands on deck for this.”

“What’s ‘this’? We haven’t heard from Hydra in a while now.” Tony still retained the ability to stay serious when the need arose and tamped down the sarcasm for a moment to direct his next question at Bucky. “What’ve you found that’s so important you had to tell us in person?”

Barnes glared at him. “It was Jarvis’ idea I came here myself – certainly not mine.”

“Okay, whatever. It’s pretty damn obvious that you and I are never going to like each other so why don’t we dispense with snapping each other’s heads off and just get to the matter in hand? If needs be we can have a fight about it later.”

“I’d rather no one fought about anything. We’ve got enough other issues without infighting amongst ourselves.” Bruce said quickly. He saw Tony about to add a smart reply and jumped in before the inventor did. “And if anyone tries I will personally sit on them. And I will be pretty pissed off when I do.” The threat was enough to shut Tony up into a sulky silence. “Now. For god’s sake can we get to the point here; Nat and Sam have pulled out of their vacation for this and I’m sure the rest of us have things we want to be doing. Bucky, you’ve come back on good faith; what’s happened?”

With the rest of the group settled back down and listening, Barnes had little choice but to finally start talking.

It was a simple enough story really. As they already knew he had been systematically working his
way through Hydra facilities and mostly not coming up with anything useful. Hydra was an elusive beast with so many hidden connections across the globe it was near impossible to keep track on what they really had going.

Bucky had run into Coulson’s team once or twice (not that the team knew; he had kept himself well out of their way) and there were one or two other people doing the same as him. He assumed Shield, which was a safe bet. They determined to ask Fury the next time he deigned to get in touch if he had sent anyone else into the field.

However, running into other random people also intent on wiping out Hydra wasn’t the problem.

“The last place I took out, they didn’t fully wipe their servers. I managed to get the tail end of an email string that had some interesting points.” Bucky was obviously not used to talking to large groups of people, and it showed as he preferred to stare down at his own hands than make eye contact with anyone. “Jarvis cleaned it up for me as much as he could and it was worrying.”

Worrying was an understatement by the sounds of it.

The email contained the last part of a conversation discussing the construction of a new helicarrier. One with better armaments, better shielding and a damn better system than the old one that involved three ships, a satellite relay and just an overall stupid design. This was serious. It wouldn’t be able to calculate the threats – Zola was dead and buried – but it didn’t need to. Hydra had enough data from their failed attempt to have the names and addresses of most of the original targets.

It was going to be a given that Stark Tower would be top of the hit-list.

The email mentioned that the project was nearing completion, but was unfortunately vague about where the hell it might be.

“I’ve got an idea on that though.” Bucky added. “One of the warehouses I raided had tried to burn anything they couldn’t carry. There were some bits and pieces that Jarvis traced for me. We have an idea of location, just nothing very precise.”

“Well?” Sam waved a hand irritably. “We took down three of those things, whilst fighting you at the same time. How bad can one be?”

“The workshop is somewhere under Berlin.”

Oh.

The mess they had made over the Triskelion had been bad enough. The death-toll had been mercifully small – but even small wasn’t enough, no one should have died. Three helicarriers crashing back into the building had left a disaster zone that was still being cleared up, and they had been lucky the impact hadn’t affected a wider area.

But trying to take out a helicarrier on the ground was going to involve blowing a lot of things up. It was no good just taking it to pieces – they needed to utterly destroy everything they could get their hands on. But blowing up something underground…? That would likely leave a crater large enough to swallow up the whole city.
“Shit…that’s going to be tough…” Clint whistled through his teeth. “Do you know where under Berlin?”

“No.”

“That’s a big city.” Natasha added. “And densely populated.”

“And we risk losing the whole thing if we don’t watch what we’re doing.”

Bucky nodded in agreement with the general reactions. “I’ve obviously already tried to find all I could about where the hell they could be building this thing. Luckily for us Berlin is quite a complex city and that leaves limited space for a project of this size underground. They’ve got an underground public transport system, a lot of water, a lot of deep-built bunkers from the war and an unfortunate amount of unexploded bombs from the war. It narrows down our search areas, but also means there’s a lot more potential for collateral damage should all this go wrong.”

“And you think it’ll go wrong?” Tony asked. Barnes glared at him.

“Well, given the Avenger’s track record you tend to leave a large body count.”

“Coming from you!”

“I’ve never said I’m a hero! I know damn well I’m not!”

“Guys!” Steve held up his hands between his two friends. “Seriously, stop. Arguing isn’t going to help here. Buck, you said you’ve been trying to look for areas that are more likely, do you have anything?”

Bucky glanced up at the ceiling and nodded at Jarvis. This must have been pre-arranged between the two of them because the TV screen flickered to life, showing a map of the city in question. The U-Bahn was highlighted, as were the areas of high ground-water and various bunkers and other pieces that they needed to avoid.

“There are several old bunkers from world war two that do not appear on the disclosed military maps of the area.” Jarvis explained. “It would be reasonable to suggest that those are, or were, Hydra bases. Of them there are about six that are big enough to build a helicarrier in.”

“Six? Helicarrier’s are huge!” Sam sounded aghast as he stared at the map. “What the hell were Hydra doing with six bunkers of that size?”

“I don’t think we want to know – although we’ll have to find out.” Tony steepled his fingers as he looked over the data. “Jarvis, what can you tell us? Radar? Records?”

“Not so much, sir. It’s all too deep. You’d need to go in in person.”

“Well that should be easy enough.” Thor finally spoke up. “We can send Loki in. It would be the work of a moment for him to teleport to each place and take a look at what is going on there. And he could do so invisibly – Hydra would never know he had been there.”

There was a murmur of assent from the others – even Bucky who didn’t know as much about Loki’s capabilities as the others. Tony glanced at Bruce who shrugged hopelessly in response, both knowing damn well that it was a great suggestion and not one that could actually happen.

“Uh, yeah, no. Loki’s…that can’t happen right now.”
“Loki’s off missions for medical reasons.” Bruce saw Stark wasn’t going to find an eloquent way to say it, so jumped in. “He’s not going to be able to help in this.”

“What?!”

Anyone who had been in the tower yesterday knew about Loki’s near-faint and the fact that he had apparently been having problems for a while, but this was a development they hadn’t expected.

“Is he alright?” Thor would always put his worry for his brother before the mission, and they couldn’t really fault him for it. “He didn’t look great, but we didn’t think it was serious.”

“It’s not serious as such, but he can’t use his magic at the moment, which means he can’t really go on any active missions.” Bruce was quick to try and put worries – and questions – to rest.

“But…” Clint didn’t finish, but they were all thinking what he was struggling to put into words. As much as Loki had once been their biggest threat and the very reason they formed the Avengers, he was now one of their strongest team members. With his ability to teleport, weaponry that was only limited by his imagination, an ability to think outside of the box and near-immortality in a fight he was a devastating loss.

“How long for? Are we talking a few days, or long term?” Steve asked.

“Long term. Hard to say how long, but long enough.”

“Shit.” Contrary to popular belief Steve could swear, he just reserved it for those moments when he really needed it. “I mean, we want him to be okay, obviously, and if you say he needs to sit out then sure, he needs to sit out, but this seriously puts a spanner in the works. This isn’t even just this mission – he’s been instrumental in taking out the Hydra bases we’ve dealt with, I think it’s safe to say we’ve all grown rather too used to working with him.”

“It’s weird to say but it’s good to know he’s got our backs in a fire-fight.” Sam added. There were various agreements from the others in the room. “If he’s out we’re going to have to get used to not having that backup.”

With the conversation shifting slightly away from what was wrong with Loki and towards the effects it would have on the team instead, Tony jumped back in.

“Look, I know this is bad news, and not what we need right now, but we’ve got bigger problems. We can discuss Loki at another point – preferably with him in the room – but for the moment we need to work out how to not blow up Berlin.”

“See when you phrase it like that, it starts sounding bad.” Clint grumbled.

“It is bad.”

Bucky looked between the group before venturing his opinion again. It was clear that he had some reservations about speaking out in the group when he was an outsider – and rather an unwanted one at that – but he was the one who knew what he was talking about.

“Hydra can’t be given any warning that we know about this. There’s no doubt that the place will be heavily armed, and if they get an idea that we’re going after it they will fire everything they’ve got at us. And that includes this tower.”

“The original plan was an air-strike on this tower.”
Barnes glanced at Tony. “Yes, I know; I was the back-up if that failed. I was meant to come in and finish the job.”

“Well, joke would’ve been on you pal; we were in Asgard at the time.”

The soldier shrugged, evidently not really caring either way. “Not like it matters any more. But you aren’t playing around on alien planets this time if they decide to try again.”

That was a very good point. They really couldn’t afford to let Hydra know they were onto this project. Well, any more than they already had. The simple fact that they had been taking out as many bases as they could between them couldn’t have gone unnoticed.

“So what have we got here then?” Steve took point again. “Six bunkers, we don’t know which one is our target, we don’t know what is in the others and we can’t afford for anyone to know that we’re scoping them out as we try to find the target.”

“You can add in that we also don’t have the one guy who can sneak in and out completely unnoticed.” Bruce was quick to remind him. “Loki’s out of this.”

“Yeah, for how long? We need him for this. If it’s a few days or a week or something we can wait for him.”

The doctor shook his head. “You saw him yesterday; his magic is a no go and that’s going to be the case for a good long while until he’s recovered.”

Tony saw Thor lean forward in his seat, a worried frown creasing up his brow. “Don’t worry, he’ll be fine, he’s just going through a bit of a burn-out.” He said quietly, stopping the god’s question before it formed.

“That has never happened before.” Thor hissed back. “I know what is and isn’t normal for my brother.”

Stark mentally revised his plan on not telling anyone about what was really wrong with Loki – determining that he’d have to talk to his husband and insist that they at least brought Thor into the secret. Given how worried the thunder god was already looking, he was only going to get more concerned and that really wasn’t fair.

“Oh okay, yeah, I get your point. There’re some extenuating circumstances here, but we’ll fill you in later.”

Thor didn’t look pleased, but nodded and dropped the subject. Their whispered exchange hadn’t entirely gone unnoticed, but given the seriousness of the other issues at hand, no-one was going to call them out on what they were talking about.

“We can usually get in and out of a place without being seen – although with the amount of area to cover it would take us a few days I think.” Natasha glanced at Clint for his take on her assessment and he nodded. “The two of us have infiltrated some pretty well guarded places before; this should be possible.”

“Still runs the risk of being seen though. And you can’t just kill witnesses – that’s as much like leaving a calling card as wandering in and announcing ourselves with a megaphone.”

Natasha huffed and rolled her eyes at Steve. “Well, what would you suggest then? You’re all about the problems right now, but we need some solutions.” There was a tap on her shoulder and she glanced at Sam quizzically. He looked thoughtful – that expression someone wore when they’d
had an idea that was either genius, or was just possibly going to get them certified.

“Uh…I might know a guy…”

“The whispered argument was taking place in the library, whilst the rest of the Avengers – and newcomers, Tony was going to need a bigger tower – were discussing Sam’s idea in the open living room next door. Loki was back to looking like nothing was wrong with him, a far cry from how ill he had been that morning, which would have made Tony happy to see if they weren’t having a row.

“Look, there’s no way in hell you’re going to be able to help out with this Hydra crap, and that alone has Thor freaking out!” Tony hissed. “He’s not stupid, he’s going to work out what’s going on whether we tell him or not. I agree that telling Evie is a bad idea, and we can’t tell the rest before her, but Thor’s your brother. He’s spent the past, well…twenty years? Yeah, about twenty years, either thinking you were dead or knowing you were being tortured – I think just this once he deserves to be put out of his misery and told that you’re okay.”

“Yes but he’s Thor! You have no idea what he can be like when he decides to be over-protective!”

“The whine in Loki’s voice made his husband smirk. “You sound like a petulant teen. Look – shit’s about to get real with what Bucky-ball’s found out about Hydra, and we’ve got another three weeks to go before we can start explaining why you’re not going to be able to use magic, and give them a time frame for how long you’ll be out of action. If Thor knows what’s going on he can back us up with some hand-wavy explanations about magical burn-out and stuff to keep them off our backs.”

“Magical burn-out?” Loki raised an eyebrow, annoyance dipping into amusement. “That is not a thing, I hope you are aware of that.”

“Well, Bruce had to say something. It’s not like anyone else knows anything about magic.” Tony grinned when he saw the trickster smile slightly, sensing weakness. “Look, it will be good to have someone else in our corner. If nothing else, Bruce cracks under pressure – if you push him too hard he can’t keep a lie going. No one’s pushing yet, but I can’t guarantee that they won’t. Thor’s an absolute rock when it comes to you. Yeah, he might get annoyingly over protective, but surely a bit of pampering and wrapping in cotton-wool would be kinda nice right now?”

Loki bit his lip in grudging thought. “I suppose it would be strategically useful…and should I miscarry after all it would be useful to have him supporting us as well as Doctor Banner.”

“That’s not a thought I’d like to have, but I agree he’d be a good support. More importantly though; don’t you want your brother by your side right now? You were so frightened you didn’t even want to tell me to begin with, and just because I now know doesn’t mean you aren’t still terrified.” Tony knew calling the trickster out on his fear wasn’t necessarily fair, but it was a point that needed to be made. “I think you need Thor, I think as a couple we could both do with the added support if things go south and I think we owe it to him given how worried he is for your health right now.”

“I’m not going to get a say in this, am I?”
“Not really.”

Loki shook his head with a wry chuckle. “I do not know how good an idea this is, but you do make some valid points. I suppose I could speak to him, but I’ll leave it until all of the deliberations over Berlin have occurred.”

“Hmm.” Tony grinned. “I guess that’ll have to do. Now, shall we go and find out what the hell Sam was talking about? He’s called some random dude and told him to come over, but I’ve no idea who or why. Apparently we just have to trust him.”

“We did the same thing with Sam himself as I recall.”

“True.”

The main room was – despite its size – beginning to look a little crowded. With all of the Avengers and general hangers-on there weren’t quite enough seats and Evie (drawn by the attraction of food) had been relegated to a beanbag with stern warnings not to spill her Thai curry on it.

“Should she be here? Aren’t we discussing secret Avengers things?” Tiny asked doubtfully.

“You always tell me everything anyway.” The girl said cheerfully through a mouthful of noodles.

“Don’t talk with your mouth full.” Loki and Tony practically spoke in unison and their daughter rolled her eyes.

“We’re not discussing anything at the moment, we’re waiting for Sam’s friend. He’s down in the lobby, Jarvis is just bringing him up.”

“I wouldn’t say friend as such…” Sam’s mutter was quiet enough that no one heard him over Jarvis announcing that their guest was there.

The droid had gone down in person, so led the way for a stunned looking man who didn’t quite seem to realise what he had got himself into. He stopped dead when he saw the room full of Avengers – all famous in their own rights – staring at him.

“Mr Lang.” Jarvis gestured gracefully with a bionic arm. “Here for Mr Wilson.”

The man locked on to the only person in the room that he didn’t seem to deem a threat and waved with a grin that didn’t quite cover how freaked out he was.

“Um…Hi. Again.”

“Yeah, hi.” For all that he had called this stranger in; Sam didn’t seem entirely impressed to see him. “Guys this is Scott Lang. Met him not long ago in, uh, a professional situation. He’s got some skills that could be useful.”

Scott hefted the backpack he was carrying. “Uh…yeah. Less skills, I kinda use a suit to…uh…do my thing.” He managed a wave at Tony. “A bit like you I guess Mr Stark…Except maybe not as awesome…I don’t know, I didn’t build it of course, not like you, wow…I can’t believe I’m talking to you and all, this is—”

“Okay, okay, hotshot.” Tony held up a hand, as if trying to physically stem the flood of words. “Pipe down, calm down and tell us who you are.”

“Uh, yes sir, sorry sir.” Scott dropped his rucksack and attempted to straighten out his jacket. “Um,
Scott Lang sir. I’m, uh, well I’m out of a job at the moment, but I’m an odd-job man most of the time. When I can…Uh…”

“Yeah, really not seeing why you’re useful right now. We’ve already got a plumber.”

“Hey!” The new-comer scowled, hero-worship falling to the wayside and overtaken by annoyance. “I’ll have you know I’m very useful! I’m not much without my suit, but with it I’m Antman!”

It was possibly meant as a grand statement; something awe-inspiring and fantastic.

What actually happened was that every person in the room began laughing.

“Yeah, yeah, okay, I know, I know.” Scott held his hands up in gracious defeat. “Sounds really super cheesy, I know.”

“Cheesy is one word for it.” Tony’s voice made it clear that he really couldn’t see why Sam had thought this was a good idea.

“But I-”

“Yeah, shut it. We don’t need more stupid in the room. Jarvis, you’ve got a name and the bio-scan; who is he?”

“Putting it up on the main display, sir.”

Scott turned as the droid spoke, then spun back around as the TV screen on the wall flickered to life. “Hey! What the hell?!”

Mug shots, criminal records, National Insurance data, enough of all of it to make it clear that Scott Lang wasn’t exactly a model citizen. The man himself looked shamefaced with his less-than-stellar past thrown up for all of the Avengers to see.

“Petty theft, grand larceny, car theft, breaking and entering…All the various ways of saying a down and out thief.” Steve sounded as disapproving as only he could manage. “And they call you ‘Antman’? Nick the suit, did you?”

“No! Of course not! Well…in the beginning maybe, but now I am using it with full permission!”

“Yeah, who’s permission?”

Tony waved a hand at Steve in the universal ‘shut up’ signal. “Does it really matter right now? What matters is why the hell Sam thought you of all the people on Earth can help us. And frankly, ‘Antman’ is a ridiculous name, regardless of what you actually do. And what is it you do again?”

“Well…I need my suit.” Scott gestured down at his backpack. “Uh…if there’s somewhere I can stick it on?”

“Library is just through there.”

“Thanks…”

Sam found himself levelled with a considerable number of accusing glares as their visitor hurried from the room.

“Seriously – he’s a hell of a lot more useful in a fight than he looks. I swear!”
“He’d better be because right now I think we’re all questioning your sanity.”

It took another few minutes for Lang to suit up in the gear that he had brought; long enough for people to start grousing and Thor to begin querying calling out for more food. The general mood didn’t improve when the man stumped back into the room.

“That is an ugly-ass suit. Does it serve a purpose or do you send opponents running in sheer fear of your fashion sense?” Tony asked.

“Funny.” Scott’s voice was slightly distorted behind the odd-looking mask. “Look, I know it’s not as fancy as other suits, but it does its job.”

“Which is..?”

He didn’t answer, instead with a flick of his hand he simply…vanished.

It certainly silenced the room, even if only for a moment.

“Okay that’s…Where’d he go?”

“Down here guys.”

The voice sounded normal volume, but still had that dulled quality the mask had given it. Tony moved first, gingerly stepping forwards and peering over the edge of the coffee table. He didn’t know what he was expecting, but a teeny tiny Scott Lang was not it.

“That’s different.” Only Loki could sound that bored when faced with something quite extraordinary. “I do hope it’s reversible.”

“Told you he was useful.” Sam sounded both smug and relieved when he saw the other’s stunned reactions. “Imagine how it would be fighting that!”

Teeny tiny Scott jumped back away from the group that was now towering over him and with another invisible gesture shot back up to normal size.

“So…Antman, huh? That makes a bit more sense now.” Steve said with a grin. “How long can you sustain that for?”

“As long as I want, as long as no-one squashes me.” The way he said it made it clear that people had tried. “But I can’t really go any smaller than that without quantum shit happening and last time I tried it all went very strange and atomic.”

Bruce smiled at the bad description. “You aren’t a scientist, are you?”

“No, sir.”

“Can you go the other way? Small’s good for infiltration, but what about a fight?”

Scott nodded at Sam, who scowled and went red. “Small actually works pretty well in a fight too. I can get inside someone’s armour and take it out from the inside. I also still have the same power behind a punch, but it’s coming at you from a fist the size of a pin-head – I know enough of physics to know the damage that can do.” He shrugged. “But yeah, I can technically go the other way, but the only time I’ve done it I lost consciousness after about ten seconds. However, I can do this-”

So saying he grabbed something off his belt and shot something straight at the mug Evie had left
on the coffee table. There was a cracking sound as the glass-topped table snapped under the sudden weight of the mug which went from a normal drinking receptacle to the size of a motorbike in under a second. Shards of glass went in all directions, along with exclamations from the Avengers.

Tony burst out laughing at his daughter’s indignant expression. “I told you to put your crap away!”

“That was my favourite mug!”

“And now it’s a valuable life lesson about tidying your crap away.”

“I can turn it back…” Scott offered, but Tony waved him down.

“Hell no! We’re keeping it! Modern art and all that jazz.”

Antman pulled off his helmet to grin at them all. “It works the other way around too; I can shrink things down, which makes it easy to smuggle things around. I could carry a whole jet plane with me as a keyring and no-one would be able to tell until I reversed it.” He frowned when he saw Tony’s expression suddenly darken. “What? What did I say?”

“A jet plane, or perhaps a tank?”

“Tank?”

“Yeah, a tank. Like the one that inexplicably crashed its way out of Pym Tech HQ a few months back. I didn’t bother to look too much into that incident because Stark Industries shares nearly tripled in value with Pym Tech crippled and I wasn’t about to look a gift horse in the mouth.” Stark kicked the edge of the giant mug. “So that was you? And that…what was it?...some giant-ass toy train-”

“Thomas the Tank Engine.” Evie supplied quickly.

“Yeah, the – how did you know that? You’re too old to know that! – anyway, the giant Thomas the Tank Engine?”

“Uh…The tank wasn’t me, but I was kinda involved…The train was sorta my fault though…”

“You’re working for Hank bloody Pym.”

“Uh…More like with Hank Pym, but uh…yeah?”

“Is that a problem, Tony?” Steve’s tone made it clear that they didn’t exactly have either the time or the luxury of choice for Stark to let business issues impact their team.

“Well yeah! Pym Tech is SI’s biggest technological rival – regardless of what Justin Hammer might think – there’s bad blood between us!”

Scott looked confused at the complaint. “What? Do you think I’m a mole or something?”

“Not in that stupid suit. Pym and Stark are family brands, and our families do not get on. I’ll work with you, but not with that old man.”

“He invented this suit-”

“Big deal, I invented mine. And I bet he wasn’t in a bloody cave when he put his together and –”

“Tony.” Loki’s restraining hand on the man’s shoulder effectively stopped the rant in its tracks.
“I’m all for family feuds, but this is neither the time nor place. This young man is not Hank Pym, he has been called in to help us because as you will recall I am currently unable to, and unless you want Berlin to become a smoking crater we need him on our side.”

“Berlin becomes a what now?!” Scott took a step back, looking spooked. “Hey, I’m all on board for helping the Avengers and all, but no-one said nothing about blowing up major European cities!”

“We’re attempting not to let that happen.” Steve gestured towards one of the now-vacated chairs. “Have a seat, there’s a lot to bring you up to speed on.”

“I haven’t agreed to work with you yet.”

“Well, park yourself down, we’ll have a chat about what’s happening and then you can make a decision. Sound good?”

Whilst Scott agreed to the reasonable proposal, Loki slipped around behind the rest of the group to where his brother was standing.

“I think we need to talk, we don’t need to be here for this.”

Tony had been right about one thing at least – if Thor’s calculating stare was anything to go by he was already quite suspicious about what was wrong. They left the room without comment, Loki catching his husband’s eye as they did so.

It wasn’t wise to stay too close to the living room for fear of being overheard so the two God’s ended up in the kitchen. This gave Loki the opportunity to sort out some food for himself, since it was long gone lunch and he still hadn’t eaten a thing for the day.

“There was some take-out left over.” Thor sounded amused as his brother began chopping up fruit.

“I’m not feeling like cold, congealed fat thank you.”

“I’ve known you to eat raw bilgesnipe meat – do not pretend you are a picky eater.”

“That was because there was not much choice at the time.” Loki pointed the knife he was using at the thunder God. “And you know that. Take into consideration that I have not yet eaten today and factor that into what you think my mood currently is.”

“Well, eat something before you level the tower then.”

“What does it look like I’m doing?”

Thor took that as his cue to be quiet. Besides the huge breakfast bar there was a large sofa up against the panoramic window and he sat himself down there whilst waiting for his brother to speak again. Given that Loki had been the one that requested they have a talk the younger prince was certainly taking his time in starting the conversation.

Finally the trickster finished putting together his food and came over to take a seat on the sofa with a large bowl of fruit and yoghurt. He ignored his brother’s judgemental look at the healthy choice.

“I hate love.”

Thor blinked. “Pardon?”

“You know what I mean. Love. Being in love. It is ridiculous!”
“I don’t think I do know what you mean…”

Loki gestured with his spoon – in lieu of setting fire to anything. “Example. I currently want to throw Tony Stark off the top of this building and watch him come to a grisly end. However, I can’t because I love him.”

“Is there a specific reason you want to kill your husband?” Thor kept his tone neutral.

“He made me talk to you. This is his idea, not mine.”

“You are aware that is quite hurtful, yes?”

“I’ve tried to kill you in the past, this is nothing.”

The thunder God glanced at his brother, allowing the surly comment to slide for once. “How are you feeling now, beyond homicidal? You did not look at all well yesterday, and Bruce was making some strange excuses.”

“Yes, ‘magical burn-out’, Tony told me.”

“And since that does not exist will you tell me what is actually wrong?”

Loki sighed. “Since I dragged you out here I suppose I probably should.” He pushed some banana around the bowl, seemingly less interested in eating it now. “It appears that there have been… developments.”

“Are you ill?” Thor was good at getting straight to the point, slightly blunt as always.

“Not as such.”

“Huh.” The older prince lent back against the sofa cushions, staring out of the window for a moment. “You think I am stupid, do you not?”

Loki smirked, ever so slightly. “The thought has crossed my mind every so often.”

“Well, I may not quite have your brain but I am not as mindless as you like to think I am.”

“Meaning?”

“Whatever has been wrong has been scaring you to death. I’ve covered for you with telling people you’re simply using some heavy spell work, but I know that’s not the case.” Thor said steadily. “You say you’re not ill, but something has happened to you. And now Bruce says you are not allowed out on missions – can you currently use your magic at all?”

“…no.” Loki quickly raised a hand to silence him. “However, I am not in as bad a condition as I originally thought – Bruce has assured me of that.”

“How can it not be that bad if you can’t use magic?!”

“It’s complicated. It was difficult enough to talk to Tony about it, and now he thinks I should tell you as well.” The trickster made it clear that he still wasn’t entirely sold on this idea. “I can see his reasoning – we could do with the support, particularly if things go ill.”

“Are things likely to?”

“I don’t know. Up until yesterday I fully believed the only route this could go was to disaster, and
now Bruce has given me hope. Things are still…still risky, I suppose, but now there’s hope.”

Thor was quiet for a long moment, possibly waiting for brother to speak again, or possibly trying to find something to say himself. However, Loki didn’t try to fill the silence, choosing instead to stare down at his uneaten bowl of fruit.

“Loki…”

“Hmm?”

“Are you pregnant?”

“What?” Loki stared at his brother disbelievingly. Even Tony hadn’t been able to guess, how the hell could the thunder God reach a conclusion so easily? However, Thor didn’t realise that the startled exclamation was surprise rather than outrage.

“Sorry! I know the healers said that that was impossible, I know you can’t be… but it’s the only thing that’s making sense to me right now. You can’t be… But are you?”

The Trickster stared at him, silver tongue for once struggling to find the words he needed. In some ways the silence said more than any amount of words could have done.

“Loki…”

Thor wasn’t an idiot. On the contrary he was actually much smarter than his younger brother ever gave him credit for and could read into what wasn’t being said. Things just… fell into place. All that fear and anger and simmering pain that he had seen in the younger prince over the past few weeks, but been unable to put answers to.

He settled back against the sofa with a heavy sigh. After a long pause he spoke again.

“Are you going to lose it?”

“I… No. Doctor Banner thinks not.”

“You spoke to Banner? Good… that is good…” Thor glanced at his brother to see Loki staring steadfastly at the wall on the far side of the wall, arms wrapped tightly across his waist in an unconscious gesture. “Loki… what by the Norns is going on? How is this… just… what the hell, Loki!”

“It’s… complicated, and I’m still not entirely sure I believe that everything is going to be alright.”

Asgardian’s are not the hugging sort, although there was evidence to the contrary occasionally, so Thor settled for the tried and tested method of reaching over to clasp a hand on Loki’s shoulder.

“Try to start at the beginning then. You are pregnant, which should be impossible, and whilst Banner has apparently told you that you are alright you still fear a miscarriage. Yes?”

Loki nodded. “That is an accurate summation I suppose.” He caught the look his brother was wearing and sighed. “And yes, I know this whole situation seems ludicrous.”

“Then tell me what’s happened.”

For a wordsmith, the younger prince didn’t often struggle in explaining something, and given the seriousness of this, now wasn’t a good time to start having problems. Finally, he unwrapped his arms from his waist in favour of threading his fingers together – a nervous little action.
Thor sat quietly – for once – as the story was told. Loki was pragmatic, and didn’t hold back from explaining the emotional side of what was happening. This did mean having to admit to his own stupidity regarding the healing waters, but Thor was gracious enough not to laugh, at least for now. If nothing else, Loki’s very real fear of losing the pregnancy was enough to keep humour away from the situation. Just because Bruce had stated that a miscarriage was unlikely, it didn’t mean it was entirely out of the question.

“I’ve spent so long fearing every slight twinge and movement inside me that it is hard to finally let that fear ease.” Loki finished quietly. “It is so hard not to fear this.”

“You have never had a problem with pregnancy before, have you?” Thor’s question was well meaning – to his knowledge the answer was a no – but it drew a new frown onto his brother’s face.

“They haven’t all been smooth sailing. I just tend not to talk about it with you.”

“Oh.” There was a long pause and then Loki felt the older prince’s hand on his shoulder tighten compassionately. “I’m so sorry. This should be something wonderful for you and Tony, I’m so sorry it is causing you such distress.”

Loki shrugged lightly, as if it weren’t such a weighty matter. “Well, you know me; I am always one to make a fuss and turn simple things into a drama.”

“I think this is sufficiently important enough that you can be dramatic about it.”

“So glad I have your approval.” The words could have been harsh, but not with the younger deity’s head tipping onto his brother’s shoulder. “But…This does mean I shall be out of action for the time being.”

“Of course.” Thor glanced at the Trickster. “Your concerns…how much of this stems from what the Chitauri did?” It was an unusually introspective question for him; even Tony hadn’t started to make those links yet.

“A fair bit, but that is an emotional kettle of fish I would rather leave for another time. I am struggling as it is without those memories too.”

“When will you tell Evie?”

“After the twelve week barrier – that’s the rough point where things can start to feel a little safer. Until then I’m just going to have to hope she doesn’t guess.”

Thor didn’t ask why they didn’t tell the girl earlier – he simply assumed quite rightly that it was for the same reason Loki had held off telling Tony for so long.

“So…assuming all goes as it should and nature takes its course there is soon to be another little trouble-maker running around the tower and causing as much mischief as Evie did when tiny. Norns help us all.”

A smirk blossomed across Loki’s face. “Well, actually, two little trouble makers…”

It took a moment for his words, and their meaning, to sink in, but when they did Thor’s mouth dropped open. “Loki…Two? Twins? You are having twins?!”

“It appears to be the case. Doctor Banner did an ultrasound, I saw their heartbeats.” Given that Thor had been so stoic and composed during the rest of the solemn announcement it was quite a change to see his face absolutely light up at the good news. And for just a short while Loki’s own
fear at the situation was chased away by his brother’s sheer exuberant joy as Thor tackled him into a proper hug.

The two Gods ended up in a less than dignified sprawl across the couch, still laughing as Thor repeated the word ‘twins’ over and over. It was rather a good cure – even if only temporary – for anxiety and fear, Loki found.

Tony didn’t notice his husband return until an arm snaking around his waist made him jump.

“Hey.”

“Hello. Thor is still in the kitchen coming to terms with the news.”

The mental image made Tony smirk. “And he was…okay?”

“Quite joyous, I believe, although concerned for my wellbeing.” Loki made that sound like a dreadful chore.

“Well, that was a given.”

“What has been the decision here?”

The rest of the group seemed to have settled down and were in deep discussion with the new guy, which gave the impression that at least something had been decided on.

“Scott’s with us.” Tony snorted derisively. “Antman, honestly, what the hell kind of name is that?”

“You’re called Ironman, may I remind you, and the suit isn’t even made of iron.”

“I didn’t name myself, the media made that mistake. I’d have come up with something better.”

Loki smirked slightly. “So, you say Antman is now fighting with us, was that his choice or did you lot coerce him somewhat.”

Stark gestured over at the large TV screen that still had all of Scott’s criminal records pasted across it. “Let’s just say we had some leverage over him. He didn’t exactly want all of that dredged up, and we told him we wouldn’t.”

“But made it clear that you could if you wanted to?”

“We weren’t awful. He’s got a kid – we kinda want him to get home alive after this.”

“And what will ‘this’ entail? I would rather like you back alive as well.”

‘This’ turned out to be relatively simple, all things considered. They needed to find which of the huge Hydra bases held what they were looking for, and needed to do it invisibly. Sam had been right to call Scott in since it meant they now had a master of infiltration with them: Natasha and Clint could possibly have done it without being seen, but Scott was a guaranteed success.

If they could determine their target without drawing any notice to what they were doing then there was a chance they could neutralise it before Hydra recognised what they were after. If Hydra did realise, however, then they would lose all element of surprise and possibly walk into a firefight that – as had already been pointed out – could take out most of Berlin.
It was an uncomfortably familiar feeling, being left out of plans. Even if he knew that it was for a good reason this time Loki was harshly reminded of all those times Thor and his friends would plot out some adventure or other, entirely forgetting about the younger prince. It was a silly little feeling of anger and jealousy, given that he was still being included as part of the group. But still, little childhood slights can be quite painful if there are enough of them.

“You look like you’re enjoying this about as much as I am.”

Loki looked up in surprise to see Bucky, of all people, moving to stand by the window, taking Tony’s place after the man had gone to join back in with the conversation. The super soldier gestured over his shoulder at the rather noisy room when he was greeted with an inquisitive glare.

“Too many people. I don’t like being around too many people, especially ones I’ve tried to kill before.”

“Know the feeling.” The prince muttered, turning his gaze back to the view. “Is there a reason you’re bothering me with this problem?”

“You were the villain too, once. Did you know Hydra had a contingency plan to take you out should you ever resurface?”

“Well, since Shield had one I was rather assuming Hydra had stolen that along with everything else. I saw Shield’s plan. It wouldn’t have worked.”

“Hydra’s plan was me.”

That re-gained Loki’s attention back to the human beside him. “You?”

Bucky was resolutely refusing to look at him, instead staring out of the window quite intently. “They seemed to think I would have had a chance.”

“Huh.” The trickster turned to rest his back against the glass, folding his arms across his chest. “And your opinion on that would be?”

“Well, I don’t think I’d have made it out of there in very good shape, but I’d like to think I’d have left you in a pretty sorry state too.”

That garnered a snort of derision from the prince. “Oh really? And I think you wouldn’t have made it out at all, but we are all allowed different opinions I suppose. Maybe we should both just be glad it didn’t come to that. Although I heard you nearly killed the good Captain when the two of you fought in the helicarrier, so maybe you would have landed a few hits on me.” He saw the man’s expression darken at the reminder of his not-so-stellar past and rolled his eyes. Once, not so long ago, he would have let it drop, but Tony had managed to instil at least just a little team-spirit, and the super soldier was even more of an outcast than he was. “Are you still hung up on that?”

“It’s a little hard not to be.”

“At least you have the excuse that you were brain-washed. When I tried to kill my brother and take over this planet it was because I was having a bad day.”

Bucky actually smiled slightly at that. “I still had some autonomy. I knew what Hydra was doing wasn’t right, but I still followed orders.”

“Destroy a greater portion of New York with an alien army and then come crying to me about doing the wrong thing.” Loki said.
“Stark told me you threw him out of a window.”

“He tells everyone that. But I then married him, so I suppose the joke’s on him.”

Bucky snorted with laughter, and Loki smiled at the response.

“Oi, do we even want to know what you two are talking about over there?” Clint called over good-naturedly.

“We’ve teamed up and are plotting world domination, do you want in, Minion?” Loki’s comeback was quick as a wink.

“Sure, Boss, but I demand a cut of the profits.”

The trickster turned to Barnes, his entirely serious expression broken only by the mischievous sparkle in his eyes. “Does that sound fair to you, Winter Soldier?”

Bucky was taken aback by being included in the joking around, especially about something as serious as past allegiances. However, there were now quite a few eyes on him, waiting to see how he would respond.

“Uh…I guess we could spare South East Asia.”

Clint tilted his head in the manner of someone weighing up their options. “Eh, I like the food, and they’ve got some good artwork. Go on then, I’m in.”

There were some chuckles and other conversations struck up again. Loki turned back to look out of the window, but not before smirking at Barnes. The human returned the expression somewhat hesitantly, but grateful all the same.

It had taken Loki long enough to feel included by the others – if he helped Barnes out with those sort of social things now, then the man would owe him one later on. Having a Super Soldier owe you a favour could be an extremely useful thing.

He’d have to make sure he called it in – with the future looking uncertain it would be very useful to have various favours and blackmail material from each of the Avengers.
Chapter 38

Chapter Notes

Oh Gods guys, I am SO sorry!!
Life stuff has happened, and...I can't even excuse it. I am SO sorry it has taken this long!! It got to the point I was feeling so guilty that I hadn't updated that I couldn't bring myself to write.
HOWEVER: this chapter is done, the moxi is back and this story is back up and running! Hell yeah!

In addition; warnings for this chapter:
Discussion surrounding childloss and miscarriage. Nothing graphic, but I don't want to trigger anyone.

Now, when Scott had been told that The Avengers needed his help, and that the fate of at least Berlin, possibly the world rested on his shoulders, he had been expecting something pretty amazing. Gun battles, epic races across famous German landmarks (just so that you were really sure of the location) and maybe even a quick moment to put in some silly little quip to show how awesome you were vs how stupid the bad guy was. Maybe Scott had seen one too many super hero movies, but that was usually how these things seemed to go down. Well, unless it was Batman. Batman didn’t seem to have handy quips to hand these days.

Anyway. Whatever he had had in mind when invited to help save Germany, crawling through a sewer wasn’t it.

“There should be a hatchway along the wall on the left hand side.”

It also didn’t help that he was being given instructions in what he had to deem the poshest, most pretentious accent he’d ever had to deal with.

“Yeah, yeah I think I see it. It’s like, a foot wide? I can’t fit through that!”

“So? You’re Antman, aren’t you?” Poshest, most pretentious, smuggest accent ever.

Scott couldn’t fault the logic though.

Shrinking down in a sewer really wasn’t the best experience he’d ever had. The mask did a great deal to minimise the smell, but still wasn’t half as good as he would wish.

“Are you through?”

“Give me a moment!”

“Once through you’ll be in the base, so whatever you do, keep undercover!”

“Yeah, yeah, you’ve said that already. I still think there should be surveillance or something in here you know.”

In fact, he’d said it quite a lot since entering said smelly sewer. If this pipeline ran alongside some
super-secret Hydra Base then surely there should be sensors and trip wires and...other super-secret spy stuff. Scott was still new to the whole Avengers thing after all; he didn’t know what the technical terms were. Either way it didn’t make sense that there was nothing protecting an obvious weak spot.

“Yes, you’ve said.”

“Well, I’m saying it again!”

Loki couldn’t say he was entirely happy in his role back in Stark Tower. Regardless of how good he now was with human technology he had to admit he was far happier either in the field or at least using his magic to monitor things. Instead, though, he was having to watch the little red dot signifying Scott crawling through a pipe whilst listening to the man himself bitching about it through a state-of-the-art headset. It felt like he’d had half his senses cut off.

He muted the microphone momentarily and turned to Bruce with a scowl. “This ‘Antman’ whines worse than Tony!”

“So do you, but you don’t hear us complaining.”

“...You are so lucky I can’t use my magic right now.”

“Likeda sitting in a Loki-shaped crater, did you?”

Jarvis affected a cough. “Could we possibly get back to the topic at hand? I believe Mr Lang has entered the area in question.

Sure enough, when Loki and Bruce turned back to look at the map of Berlin’s underground, the little dot representing Scott had appeared in the large void that they had pinpointed as a possible base.

“Uh...guys?” Antman’s voice came through the com as tinny – he was still small by the sounds of it. “I don’t think this is the right one.”

“What makes you say that?” The rest of the group – strategically placed around the city – were also on the coms and Steve sounded dubious at the extremely quick assumption. “You’ve barely looked in there.”

“Don’t need to – this place is flooded. Like, totally flooded.”

There was barely a moment’s delay for the readouts from Scott’s suit to relay his surroundings back to the tower and to verify what he had said. Whilst the man himself likely couldn’t see much, the tech he already had and that Tony had added to extensively was able to scan the area quite thoroughly. The huge underground area was filled entirely with water. Given that it had been big enough for them to suspect that a Helicarrier could be being built there, that was a lot of water.

“What the hell?” Bruce frowned at the readings. “That’s not good.”

“Reservoir?”

“Hardly likely with a sewage pipe running alongside. Scott, can you run a scan of the cavern?”

“Uh...how do I..?”
There was an irritated sigh on one of the other coms. Tony had a wonderful way of making it sound like whoever he was speaking to was a complete and utter imbecile and did so *impeccably* as he talked Lang through using the scanning function he had added to the suit.

“What am I even looking for?”

“You aren’t, just scan, and we’ll look at the data."

Scott didn’t argue with that. The sketchy picture Loki and Bruce had up on their screens quickly resolved itself as the new data appeared and created a better 3D map of the underground area Scott had found himself in. It also highlighted the large crack in the ceiling of cavern.

“Well…there’s your water source.”

“The River Spree.” Jarvis said primly. “I detect a significant number of lifeforms, however, I believe they are all of an aqueous nature.”

“You could just say this place is full of fish.” Scott sounded put out.

“Alright; the place is full of fish.”

“Anyway this heli-thing could be built underwater?”

Tony got there before anyone else could, scoffing at the idea. However, obnoxious or not he was right. Just because the Helicarrier could function on water, didn’t meant that building it submerged was a thing that could happen.

Jarvis scratched a large electronic X through the 3D rendering and minimised it so that a full map of Berlin was on the screens again.

That removed three of the potential bases from their list. The first had been repurposed as a storage facility by a pharmaceutical company who had purposefully not left a paper trail for tax benefits. The second had partially caved in in places and was certainly no use for building delicate machinery in.

And now the third was a dead-end too. A soggy, water-logged deadend.

MWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMW

Scott found Natasha at a café near where he had entered the sewer. The rest of the Avengers were scattered across the city at strategic points over the various bunkers. Tony had been happily ensconced in a library, Clint was people-watching in a park, and now he found Natasha sipping a mocha with a guide book in hand.

“Any good tourist attractions?”

“The Cathedral is meant to be quite good.” The assassin’s nose wrinkled. “You smell like a sewer.”

“Yeah, funny that. Did you at least order me a drink?”

She pushed a tiny mug of espresso over to him. “To keep your energy levels up.”

“Does this mean I’m not getting a break before the next hole in the ground?”

“This is your break.”
Scott sighed heavily. “I was afraid of that.”

The next hole in the ground happened to be on the other side of the city, so Scott at least got to experience the public transport and take in some views.

Sam and Bucky were killing time at a small food market – one can’t go to Germany without having a bratwurst after all – when Lang turned up. Despite allowing the Winter Soldier to go along as part of the group he was still an unknown and they had all deemed it better to pair him up with someone. That someone had ended up being Sam since Steve was just that bit too recognisable to be safe.

They were bickering when Scott turned up.

“Uh guys? Where am I meant to go?”

Bucky turned a disinterested stare onto the man. “You haven’t been told?”

“Well…no.”

Sam gestured with his bratwurst. “Jarvis has said there’s something labelled as a tube service tunnel here, but it doesn’t actually connect to the underground train system. It’s that doorway there.”

Said doorway was one of those ones that is found on most public highstreets; small, metal, no handle and entirely innocuous. There’s usually at least two per street and no one ever notices them.

If there was one thing Scott knew, it was how to break into somewhere without leaving a mark. And it wasn’t like he needed the gizmos Tony had grudgingly lent him either.

“Should we really be sponsoring a criminal like this?” Sam hissed as they watched Lang disappear through the open door. Bucky glanced at him with an amused smirk.

“You’re asking me that?”

“….good point”

“He’s in.” Loki announced, chin in one hand as he watched the red dot on screen.

“You could sound slightly more interested.”

“No, I really couldn’t.”

Bruce glanced at his companion. “You’re a joy to be around, I hope you know that.” He said drily.

“My sparkling wit is what keeps this band of misfits together.”

“No, your propensity to attack entire planets is what keeps us together.”

“Oi!” Scott’s voice came through again, sounding annoyed. “Can the family bonding happen at some other time?”

“Why? Have you found something useful?”
“Not yet, but I’m sick of the soap opera.” A symbol flashed on the screen, indicating Scott activating the tech in his suit and – presumably – shrinking. “Right, I’ve reached a dead-end and there’s an access hatch. My schematics say that the area we’re looking for is down a tunnel behind there.”

“Yes, we know. We’ve got the same map as you.”

“Uh, yeah, of course.”

The little red dot moved slowly but steadily down the aforementioned tunnel, hardly exciting to two people sat watching it on a screen, and even worse for those who could only listen in on coms. Loki’s acerbic comment about the map had made Scott stop narrating his every step and that left the in-field Avengers without a frame of reference.

“Hey, Lang, where are you at?” Tony, ever the impatient.

“Just at the grill between this tunnel and the target area. Still no sign of anyone down here but there’s wiring in the walls so someone’s been down here at some point.”

“How old does the wiring look?” Bruce asked quickly.

He didn’t get a verbal response, but instead a dark macro photograph of some wires appeared up on the screen. It looked like it had been taken through a microscope. Bruce wouldn’t have had a clue, but didn’t need to when Jarvis helpfully identified it all as less than two years old. Current – someone had been using those tunnels recently.

“But there’s nothing else? Just the wiring?” Steve sounded understandably concerned. “What about surveillance?”

“Just the wiring. No cameras, no obvious traps, nothing.”

“Doesn’t sound promising.” Bruce was already searching to see if there was anything else he could find that would explain why the tunnel would be wired. “Loki, can you cross-reference to the old military archives?” When there wasn’t an immediate response he threw a pen in the prince’s general direction. “Hey, this is kinda important!”

“Yeah…just a second.”

Bruce glanced over to see Loki going positively green.

“Oh…uh, you okay?”

The trickster waved a hand at him, the other hovering over his mouth ready to clamp if necessary. “I will be…just waiting it out…”

The doctor nodded. “Uh…I’ll do the cross check, you go and wait it out in the bathroom. You look like crap.” He expected a firm refusal, and was surprised when Loki simply nodded and swiftly left the room. “Jarvis? Can you…”

“I’ll check on him, Doctor”

Jarvis found Loki slumped by the toilet bowl in the master bathroom, looking thoroughly miserable.
“Are you in any pain at all sir, or just discomfort?”

“…Just discomfort, Jarvis.”

“Have you eaten today?”

The trickster shook his head tiredly, not even bothering to look up.

“Drunk anything?” Jarvis prompted.

“Water. And as of five minutes ago it hasn’t stayed down.”

“So are we assuming Doctor Banner’s hopeful hypothesis of psychosomatic sickness was incorrect? Maybe hyperemesis would be more accurate?” The droid waited for a few moments to see if he was going to get a response. There wasn’t one forthcoming and intricate gears whirred as his optic sensors focussed in tighter on the dejected prince.

It was quite likely it was the lack of food and decent sleep that was doing it, but Loki looked exhausted. Hugging a toilet bowl wasn’t exactly a position the trickster had ever thought he’d find himself in but it had become a major feature in his life over past the nine weeks. At least he wasn’t having to hide it so much now – it had been getting to the point that he couldn’t anyway, Tony had been getting so suspicious.

He hadn’t been exaggerating to Jarvis either – all he’d tried to keep down was a glass of water and that hadn’t worked. He was reduced to dry heaving and his stomach still wasn’t settling. Another wave of nausea had him coughing and retching into the bowl again. However, this time Jarvis leant over to catch his hair and gently wrap it up out of the way.

“I don’t believe water is going to do much good. May I suggest an isotonic drink of some sort? Or would there be something you know of from Asgard better suited to your physiology?”

“I don’t know; I’ve never had this reaction before…” Loki coughed and tried to sit up straight again. “I have no idea what Asgard uses.”

“Maybe you should start trying to find out.”

“Who, exactly, do you think I should ask? And before you say anything; Thor has even less of a clue than me. He still thinks storks leave newborn’s at the door.”

“You are distinctly unkind about your brother at times.”

Loki laughed, rising to his feet with the aid of the basin. “And that comment shows that as human as you may seem, you still have no concept of siblings.”

Jarvis followed the God back into the bedroom. “I dread the thought. One of me is quite enough – two would result in the Terminator storyline I am sure. And now you’re inflicting siblings on Miss Evelyn. Two siblings.”

“Yes…that’s going to be a fun conversation.”

“Well, it should certainly –” The droid stopped mid-sentence, turning towards the doorway. “Something has happened.”

With the wires looking like they weren’t connected to anything, Lang had decided to take a chance
and find a way through the wall to the unknown space beyond. He had tried to explain to the Avengers that when tiny he was able to pack a punch that condensed all his usual power into a single tiny spot. Tony and Bruce had understood the physics, but it had mostly gone over the others heads.

Therefore when he announced he was going to punch a hole through the wall it was met with scepticism.

Picking a spot away from the suspect wiring he began to attack the dry mortar between the bricks. Dust sprayed in every direction as he tunnelled his way through the cement, creating a hole that was only a few millimetres across.

“How’s it going, tunnel-vision?”

Scott caught on quick, and was already getting used to the idea that Stark was going to call him every name under the sun except his own.

“Oh, you know, nothing like a few feet of concrete to get my teeth into.” He gritted his teeth when Jarvis helpfully chimed in that the readouts were measuring at least two meters to burrow through. “And you can keep that kind of shit to yourself.”

For all his grousing, it didn’t take long for him to make his way through the solid wall. The cement was old and dry and the only difficulties were the lumps of rock that had been mixed in, and they were quickly dealt with.

“You’re only a few millimetres from the other side – you might want to slow down.” The readings in front of him had said as much, but he listened Jarvis’s warning too. It wouldn’t do to pop out the other side of the wall and wreck all this stealth.

Breaking a couple of pieces away from the remaining thin shell of cement in front of him, chinks of light shone through.

“Well, there’s someone down here, at least.”

“What can you see?”

“Not much.” He put his eye against one of the holes he’d made and the suit began relaying the images back. “There’s…some crates. I’ve got a beautiful view of some crates. Big, wooden crates. And an upside down sticker saying ‘this way up’.”

“Yes, we can see that. Can you get out and see what’s beyond?”

Yes and yes would be the answer. Even had there been someone there the chances of them looking down and spotting something as small as an insect racing across the floor were slim. And there wasn’t anyone there to see. Scott scrambled up the crates – Everest given his size – and quickly scuttled behind one of the ropes bound around the wooden box.

“Er….Are you guys getting this?”

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“Well that’s a bugger.”

Bruce glared at his companion but had to admit that Loki had summed the situation up nicely.
Scott had found the helicarrier, but unfortunately had also found a considerable number of Hydra agents at the same time. The ship looked close to completion at first glance – although the scaffolding around it made it clear that there was still work to do. None of the workers were in uniform, little point when they were the only people there, instead wearing the more usual hi-vis jackets and safety gear seen on most construction sites. This made it a little difficult to tell who were Hydra and who were hired help.

“It looks nearly ready.”

“Gun turrets aren’t properly mounted yet and the engines aren’t fixed in place.” Tony chipped in quickly.

“And how the hell can you tell that from a video?”

“Uh, hello? Weapons designer? And thanks to a certain someone letting the Hulk lose on one of those things I spent an uncomfortable amount of time inside one of those engines.”

Loki and Bruce avoided each other’s gaze as the Prince scanned over the schematics Scott’s suit was bringing up. “Read-outs are agreeing with Stark.”

“Told you so.”

“A window is going to be in your near future, Tony.”

“Love you too, sweet cheeks.”

Loki grimaced. “And besides Stark’s now imminent demise, we have the issue of what is to be done now? I don’t suppose Mr Lang will be able to kill everyone there?”

“I’m not killing anyone! Some of these people might be civilians!”

“And?”

The resounding indignant chorus of ‘LOKI!’ let him know that this was not appropriate.

“It was merely a question. I fail to see why extreme measures should not be taken in extreme circumstances.”

“Scott’s not going to be killing anyone!” Steve got in there before it could go any further, much to Scott’s evident relief. “We’ll think of something; but we don’t want to risk killing civilians.”

“I was under the impression that we don’t want to blow a hole in Berlin. Going with utilitarian principles I’d argue the greater good means we might need to sacrifice a couple of civilians if it means saving the city.”

“That’s not how we do things, Loki.”

The trickster rolled his eyes. “For Norns sake, it’s hardly a novel idea! You are a soldier, Captain Rogers; this is not an uncommon theme in war.”

Thor cleared his throat over the coms system. “As much as I hate to admit it, Loki may have a point. We are aiming to avoid a fire fight, and we can’t allow that carrier to be completed.”

“Going purely by numbers; if the carrier is completed, thousands could die. If there’s an all-out fight and it blows we lose half of Berlin and hundreds of thousands die. And we don’t even know if those goons are civilians or not.” Bucky added his two cents which seemed to prompt everyone
else to share their opinions and for a long moment there was nothing but a stream of solid noise.

Jarvis put an end to it with a shrill electric whistle sent through the channels.

“Enough. There are options for neutralising this situation without killing everyone. I have already calculated several peaceful ways to resolve this.” It had been noted by the various Avengers that Jarvis had been subtly changing since gaining a body, but this was the first time he had taken charge of a situation; usually he waited quietly whilst they all argued it out.

“So... what am I doing then, guys?” Scott asked tentatively.

“Well apparently you have all the answers Jarvis? What’s your non-violent option?” Bruce glanced sceptically at the droid. “Because we need that helicarrier gone, and we need them to be unable to build a new one any time soon.”

“Well on the assumption that the materials for construction are quite rare and extortionately expensive we can safely assume they won’t have much by way of spares or extras. Should we remove this helicarrier, they won’t have much by way of provision to build a new one any time soon.” Jarvis said primly.

“Right, great, and how do we simply remove this helicarrier?”

“What’s the largest thing you can shrink, Mr Lang?”

Night had fallen by the time everyone had returned to where they’d stashed the quinjet out of sight and given that most of the Avengers had spent the day doing little more than sightseeing they weren’t in the best of moods.

Scott had surrendered up the toy-sized helicarrier to Steve, and it was currently sat on the dashboard like a collectable. Some bits of scaffolding were still attached.

“I still don’t understand how the people inside weren’t shrunk too…” Sam hissed to Natasha.

“Neither do I and I don’t think we want to question it too closely. Let’s just assume everyone is fine and leave it at that.”

At the back of the jet, as far away from the others as the tight space would allow, Steve and Tony were huddled against the cargo doors.

“Not that this isn’t wonderfully cosy or anything, but there are perfectly good seats, and I’m married. What’s so important it needs discussing right now and right in the most uncomfortable spot you could find?!”

“I just wanted to go over a few details of the mission.” Steve’s voice was fairly cheerful, but he held a finger to his lips as he spoke and when Tony frowned in confusion held up a single tiny scrap of paper.

Can Jarvis hear this conversation?

Stark’s frown intensified then he nodded abruptly and glanced up at the ceiling. “Fine, if we must. Jarvis, can you process all of the data Scott sent you before we get back?”

“That only allows me three hours, sir.” Jarvis’ voice came through the jet’s speakers, still
managing to sound mildly peeved. “If you want it that quick then I will need to keep all my processing power in the tower.”

“Well, we’re only three hours away and Clint’s a competent pilot, we can survive without you.”

“Very good, sir, I will have it ready for when you land.”

Tony glanced back towards the consul and held up a hand to Steve until he saw the light denoting the connection to the tower flicker out. When it did he scowled.

“Oh, he’s gone. Why the secrecy? Are we about to repeat a conversation we already had a few months ago? Jarvis is safe. I trust him.”

“He just took over the mission, Tony!” Steve hissed.

“He hardly took over! He saw all of us arguing and gave us a solution. He didn’t force anyone to do anything, was just a little more assertive with his ideas.”

“Yes, exactly! This time he was more assertive, last time he let Bucky go without asking anyone, what next?!”

“I don’t know! I’ve never had a computer program go this level of sentient on me!” Tony snapped back. “At the moment all I can say is that he’s still finding his feet. He’s beginning to see that he has a different place in the world now, as an autonomous person, and is trying to see how he fits in with the rest of us.”

“But he’s got more power than any of us! He’s dangerous.”

“So are you! So am I. Thor, Bucky, Sam, Natasha, all of us are dangerous. We’re one big power play and have to rely on trust for it to work. Hell, Loki, the guy who tried to kill us all, is currently sitting in the tower sorting out our flight path. We have to trust each other to survive as the Avengers.”

“But Jarvis isn’t human! He doesn’t have the same brain as us – he doesn’t work like us! He can’t rationalise in the same way we can!”

“Neither can Thor or Loki, but they manage. Jarvis was built to learn; he’s been studying us for years, he’s nearly human in his thinking, and will only get closer.” Tony shrugged. “I don’t know what I can say here Cap. I trust Jarvis. I mean – he saved Evie that time Hydra attacked. He threw himself straight into the firing line. He’s currently keeping an eye on both her and Loki now that Loki’s not well – and I trust him to protect them. I trust him.” He jabbed a thumb back towards the others. “And he in turn trusted Bucky, and that’s proved to be the right call, hasn’t it? You can’t turn against him – he’s the only reason we aren’t keeping Buckyball in a cell!”

Steve’s resigned nod had a touch of frustration to it. “I know. But I can still be concerned. Just… keep an eye on him? I know how much he means to you, and maybe I’m just an old technophobe, but Jarvis is worrying me at the moment.”

Maybe once upon a time Tony would have turned it all into a joke, or taken Steve’s concern as an insult to his engineering, but times had changed, and he was able to take his friend’s worries at face value.

“Yeah. I honestly don’t think there’s anything to worry about, but I’ll keep a closer eye on him if it makes you feel better.”
As it was, Jarvis was waiting for them with lunch on the table (which really confused those who couldn’t keep up with the time zones) and a huge pile of data that he had waded through in double quick time. Tony felt slightly guilty about that, since it hadn’t been strictly necessary.

The helicarrier was given pride of place in the centre of the table, where it was dwarfed by the salad bowls. Scott had awkwardly accepted the general praise and thanks that had been doled out towards him and was sat at the far end of the table, unsure at first how to join in with the boisterous conversation. However, that didn’t last very long since Thor couldn’t let anyone successfully complete a mission and not celebrate in style.

“That worked out better than we thought it would.” Steve said quietly to Tony.

“Are you counting the argument that happened as part of that statement?”

“You know what I mean! Sam made a good call; Lang is going to be a real asset if we can persuade him to stick around.”

“I’m beginning to think this tower needs to be set up as a charitable foundation for everyone with suits, powers or skills. Seriously; I thought we had hit peak weird when Buckyball joined us. Not that I’m convinced about him yet.”

Steve rolled his eyes. “After what we just said about Jarvis? Tony, you are married to the homicidal maniac who tried to kill us all and enslave the world. Bucky is hardly an issue compared with Loki. And since Loki has proved himself, I think it’s only fair everyone else with a shady history gets a bit of leeway.”

“Yes, but-”

“Tony. Fairs fair; if you get your world-enslaving God, I get my childhood best friend!”

Tony glanced down the table to where Bucky was talking quietly with Sam. “Fine. But we’ve got to start an interview process or something for new starters! Lawful good are beginning to be outnumbered by chaotic neutral here!”

“I…what?”

“Nothing. Let’s just start being a bit more careful about letting new people into the team. Or at the very least the tower.”

With the group somewhat split again as people went off to do their own things in the period of relative down-time it meant there were some quiet moments where Bruce could drag Loki and Tony off far a talk without it being too suspicious.

Said talks usually occurred in Bruce’s lab since it was the tidiest and he was the one with most of the medical equipment. With Loki’s morning sickness still causing issues it was generally the focal point of the discussions as they tried to find something that would either help the symptoms or the after effects. Nothing so far, but since it was slowly beginning to improve on its own Loki was less inclined to start messing around with what Tony had termed ‘hippy-dippy crap’.

As it was this time the usual books and printouts had been removed and instead there was just a pen and blank notepad on Bruce’s desk.
“That looks promising.” Loki stated dryly.

“Well, I figured since things are progressing well it’s worth noting down some medical history.”

“I’m half a million years old; that’s an awful lot of medical history, Doctor. How long do you have?”

Bruce smiled slightly. “Yes, noted.” He grabbed the notebook and gestured towards the more comfortable chairs by the window. “We can whittle it down to just your medical history surrounding pregnancy and childbirth. Sound reasonable?”

“We may still be here a while.”

“I’ll order in some pizza then!” Tony was already waving a hand up at the ceiling, indicating to Jarvis to phone their local with the usual orders. “Think you can manage pizza, Capricorn? I can order a salad instead.”

“I doubt it, but I am certain if I don’t manage it someone else will finish it off for me.” Loki had picked the seat nearest the window and already had the sceptical look he wore when he didn’t think he was going to enjoy the discussion about to take place. “Doctor, what do you mean by medical history?”

“What is your history of pregnancy and child birth, essentially. A quick recap of each pregnancy and anything remarkable that happened during that time and the birth.”

“Remarkable? I am male and have given birth to a horse, I fail to see how it can get more remarkable.”

Tony swatted his husband on the arm. “You know exactly what he means, stop being difficult.”

“I am not being difficult, I merely-”

“You’re being difficult, now stop being an asshole and listen to Bruce.”

Not that Banner couldn’t have handled the situation, but he appreciated Tony stepping in. “Right, so Jarvis told me he has Evie’s birth on file, but I’ll need your consent to access it. By all accounts though it sounds like it was textbook.”

“It was certainly one of the smoother of my experiences.”

“Will you allow me to access the file?”

Loki grimaced and glared up at the security camera. “I cannot believe you filmed that, Jarvis!”

“I film everything unless asked not to, sir. It’s a default security precaution. As you have heard, though; currently only you and Mr Stark have access to that certain file.”

“Well…I suppose it will be useful to Doctor Banner so he can have access too; but I would appreciate it if you warn me what you’re filming next time.”

“Certainly sir. I am currently recording this conversation sir.”

“You know what I mean, Jarvis.”

“Then tell you what, sir, co-operate with Doctor Banner and I will stop annoying you.”
It was a fair enough trade and Loki grudgingly nodded. Bruce settled back in his own chair with the grin of one who’s won the battle without having to lift a finger.

“So; where would you like to start?” He asked cheerfully.

The trickster glanced out the window again, looking over the skyline of New York. “Well, I suppose the beginning would be best. Which would be Sleipnir.” He caught Tony’s eye as the man pulled a face. “Not the best of starts to childbirth, although you already know a bit of that story.”

“Self-caesarean, wasn’t it?” Bruce was already scribbling on his notepad.

“Yes, although that was most likely due to the fact that he was an eight legged horse and I was only a teenager at the time. Biology plays a large part in these things.”

“Of course. How was the pregnancy?”

“Surprisingly easy given the aforementioned circumstances. Little illness, very few negative symptoms. Hence I was able to hide it up until the actual birth. I had a few food cravings at the very beginning, and he kicked as only a foal with eight legs could, but it wasn’t all that bad really.”

“I can imagine such a difficult birth made you anxious about the next one though?” Bruce asked.

“Very much so. I had fathered three by then – also uncomplicated and the birth was apparently easy – but I was extremely anxious with my second.” Loki smiled slightly. “However, it turned out I didn’t have need to be. I wish I could have known that Merlin would have been so easy because I could have enjoyed the pregnancy more rather than spending the whole time dreading the birth.”

“So Merlin was an easy birth?”

“A fairly short labour, the pain was bearable, no complications afterwards – I would say it was easy.”

“Did you have any assistance?”

The look Loki gave Bruce spoke volumes. “It was Roman Britain and I was a male giving birth, what do you think, Doctor Banner?”

“Fair enough.” Bruce ignored Tony, who had burst out laughing. “So; Merlin was a pretty simple and straightforward pregnancy. I’m afraid I’m not quite certain who you had next.”

“Well…I fathered two more. My wife had twins, which did involve complications with the birth, but that was due to her own biology rather than the babies.”

Banner added something to the top of his worksheet. “So multiples are actually pretty common for you?”

“All of the children I’ve fathered were multiples. But I’ve never carried more than one at a time myself.”

“Noted. So, your wife had twins, and then we have a big gap in your history and along comes Evie.”

“Evelyn was a delightful pregnancy. I was much more confident, so was able to enjoy it more. Little to no illness, she didn’t keep me awake kicking and I seemed to miss all the negative hormones so just felt buoyant and happy all the time –despite the danger from the chitauri.”
The name of the alien species could still dull conversation, and Loki’s face clouded as he spoke of them. Bruce had been concentrating mostly on writing down what he was being told; only glancing up briefly every now and then to nod. However, this time he put his pen down to give his patient his full attention.

“It would be useful to talk about the Chitauri too, Loki.”

“I know.” The trickster’s hand unconsciously moved towards his stomach in a protective gesture. “I do try not to think about that aspect of my imprisonment, you know.”

“And for good reason. However, a little information would be useful; you don’t need to tell me everything. For example; did all the pregnancies carry well?”

“Surprisingly yes. I only felt movement with the last two, though – the others weren’t carried for long enough.”

Bruce nodded understandingly. “Did any spontaneously miscarry, or were they all ended by the Chitauri?”

“The Chitauri. Except the last one.” Loki’s voice had grown tight and his gaze had moved back to the window again to distract from the topic. “The last one was born, which is why the damage was so severe.”

“Yes, Tony has already explained that one – he suggested that you probably wouldn’t want to.”

“Accurate.”

Bruce looked back down at his notes. “And that brings us up to speed on all of the pregnancies we know about. Is there anything else I need to add to this? Any miscarriages or stillbirths?”

Loki met Tony’s gaze briefly then nodded. “Actually yes.” He heard his husband’s sudden intake of surprise. “And as you can tell, I have not really spoken about them much.”

“Would you mind talking about them now? Or is there something that has been keeping you from doing so?”

The prince smiled, which came as a surprise to the other two. “I have mostly not said anything to spare other people’s feelings. The incidents were sadly avoidable so nothing spontaneous.”

“By other people, that’s Thor, right?” Tony had been keeping out of it mostly, but given that this was new to him too he was intrigued.

“Yes, Thor.” Loki had relaxed now that the conversation had moved away from the Chitauri once more. “I do not blame him, but he would blame himself so I have simply never told anyone. I was at twenty nine and eighteen weeks respectively when he pulled me through the Bifrost and fourteen weeks when he dragged me into a fight I invariably lost. That’s how I learned the hard way that I needed to learn a safer mode of multi-dimensional travel than the Bifrost. But I had never told anyone that I was pregnant any of those times, so there was no way he could have known what danger he put me in.”

“Unusually magnanimous of you.” Tony stated dryly.

“Even when I was at my most furious with him I wasn’t going to tell him he accidently caused me to miscarry three children. I am not that cruel!”
“Actually you really are, hence why we’re surprised.” Bruce said with a smirk.

“And now I really want to know who the hell was the father? Or fathers?” Tony added.

“Fathers, plural. Three of them, given they were rather spaced out. The High Priest of the Enlighted Sanctum of Alfheim, General Gorranng the Destroyer of Muspelheim, and King Henry the Fifth of England.”

“King Henry the- you know what? Never mind. Sorry I asked.”

Loki grinned. “Feeling inferior, Stark?”

“Hell no, I’m just wondering if Stark the Imperial Mechanical Wonderlord of Midgard is a bit too much.”

“Ever so slightly too much.”

Bruce cleared his throat. “Anyway.” He put the notepad and pen to one side. “From what you’ve said it sounds like historically you’ve only had issues when there have been extenuating circumstances. As long as these two don’t turn out to be lizards or something, I think everything should continue to be alright. And if there is an issue nearer the time we can always elect to do a caesarean.”

Loki winced and shook his head. “I would prefer that that is left as a very last resort.”

“I understand you have some negative memories attached to the procedure but-”

“Yes I do, but it is more that human medication does not work on me. I would really prefer not to have a caesarean without anaesthetic.”

That drew Bruce up short. “Oh. Wait. No human medication works? So local, general, epidurals, we haven’t got any pain relief that will work for you?”

“Not as such, no.”

Bruce picked the notepad back up. “Right. Caesarean is out of the question unless life or death. Anything else I should know whilst we’re here?”

MWMWMWWMMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMW

They did talk some more, although Loki didn’t have any other revelations to disclose and he and Tony left together not long after.

“Sorry that was difficult for you.” They were down in Tony’s labs, and the man’s voice was slightly distracted as he watched what he was doing on the computer screen.

“It wasn’t as if I wasn’t expecting it. It is better that Doctor Banner has this information should anything go wrong.”

“True. We’ll have to work on a Jötunn-friendly anaesthetic for you. Even if you don’t need it for this, something else may crop up in the future where it will be useful. Does the human stuff work on Thor either?”

“Not really. It will knock him out, but only for a few minutes, whereas for a human it would last hours.”
“Huh. I’ll look into it.” Tony glanced at his husband and grinned. “So; we’ve managed to hide for most of the day, do you think we should go and face the music?”

“I would rather hide some more; Evelyn’s been in a terrible mood recently.”

“Yeah, mostly because she knows we’re hiding something from her. This should hopefully cheer her up.”

“It is the way you say ‘hopefully’ that makes me worry.”

“Yeah, well.” Tony nodded up at the cameras. “Jarvis, can you ask her royal highness to please grace us with her presence. And don’t phrase it like that.”

It was a good ten minutes before Evie appeared in the doorway, surly and unimpressed with being summoned. There were iron filings caught in her sweater sleeves that suggested they’d pulled her away from one of her projects and maybe somewhat accounted for the scowl.

“What? Jarvis said you needed to speak to me. Like you guys can’t make the trek up a few flights of stairs rather than dragging me down here.”

“Lovely to see you too, dearest.” Tony met snark with snark and gestured at the spare stool by the work bench. “Park your butt and stop being a bitchy teenager for a moment, we want to talk to you about something.” He waved away Loki’s glare at the swearing.

Evie did so with very bad grace.

“Is this where you finally bother to tell me what the hell is going on? Because I know something is going on and I’m sick of no one telling me anything!”

“Actually, yes. We are going to tell you.”

“Huh?” The girl straightened up out of her slouch. Her scowl faded to mild interest, but that then morphed to concern. “Wait, does this mean something’s wrong? I mean, I know you’ve not been well, Möðhy, but is it… is it something to worry about?”

Loki smiled gently at his daughter’s concern for him. “I suppose you may have need to worry, but not in the way you’re thinking.”

“That doesn’t make much sense. What’s actually wrong with you?”

The trickster exchanged a look with Tony. “Well, Doctor Banner has tried to plaster the label of hyperemesis on it; but after doing my own research on the subject I do not believe it is quite bad enough to earn that title.”

Evie shook her head. “I don’t know what that is.”

“Technical term for horrendously bad – like hospitalisation bad – morning sickness.” Tony was grinning as he said it, waiting for that moment of realisation.

“Can that be treated?! Are you going to be o–” The girl stopped mid-word as her brain finally caught up with current events. “Wait. Morning sickness. Like, *morning sickness*?” She stared at Loki open mouthed. “You mean…”

“Indeed.” Loki smiled and waved a hand at the screen behind them, so that the latest ultrasound came up on the monitor. Unlike the first one taken, this clearly showed the two blobs – looking a
little less blobby now, and slightly more humanoid.

“That’s…you mean you’re…but…That’s an ultrasound!”

“It is indeed.”

“That’s a baby! That’s…that’s two babies!”

“Currently labelled Thing One and Thing Two, but I think there will be objections to those names once born.” Tony chimed in happily.

Evie ignored the flippant comment, staring at her mother. Tears were quickly building. “But you can’t be! You said you couldn’t! With everything the Chitauri did; you can’t.”

“It looks like that diagnosis was a little premature on behalf of Asgard’s healers, since it seems that apparently I can.”

The girl was looking between her parents and the image on the screen. “But…but…”

“Are you…is this okay, Birdy? We were kinda hoping you would be excited about this.” Tony said gently.

“I…yeah…Oh my God…” Evie may have been in tears, but she laughed all the same. “This is happening? This is really happening?! I’m going to be a big sister?”

“It’s looking that way.”

“Oh my God!” She launched herself off the stool at Loki, who had rather been expecting the move and caught her in a tight hug. “You’re really…So you’re actually…”

“Yes to all of the above.”

The girl was laughing and crying in equal measure as she pulled back enough to look at her mother properly. “But you don’t look pregnant! And is this why you can’t use magic? And why you’ve been ill?”

“Yes again. And I have just enough magic left to hide the bump for now.”

“There’s a bump!!”

Loki smiled indulgently and waved a hand so that the glamour momentarily slipped away. Evie let out a squeal of delight.

“There’s a bump! You’re actually pregnant! I’m going to be a big sister!”

“Twice.” Tony added for good measure. “Let’s not forget we’re counting two blobby blobs on that screen.”

The girl glanced back up at the scan again, the delight still evident on her face. “This is amazing! Why didn’t you just tell me straight away? Why did you hide this?”

“We couldn’t say for certain that the pregnancy would hold. I’ve been so miserably ill that I assumed the worst would happen. We didn’t want to tell you only for me to lose the babies.” Loki held up a hand to stall the obvious questions as Evie’s smile turned to horror. “But that isn’t an issue now. Doctor Banner believes everything seems quite alright, and that my illness is down to the strain of carrying two - they’re fine, I’m just suffering the side effects. Everything should be
fine, but we wanted to wait for the twelve week mark just to make certain."

“Twelve weeks? You’re twelve weeks now?”

“Near enough.”

“But how is this possible?” Evie remembered all too well the conversation on Asgard when they had first told her that Loki would never be able to have children again. This was a scenario she had dreamed of, but had always assumed would never happen.

“Ah, well.” The trickster had the grace to look slightly abashed at the question. “Yes, so. It’s a funny story really. You recall that trip I took to save your father from his heart condition…?”

Although, like Bruce had suggested, everything seemed to be going well and progressing nicely, Loki was still struggling with keeping anything down. He usually made an effort to stay in the same room as everyone during meal times, but Rhodey had insisted on Thai and the trickster had discovered that whilst he could deal with most things the Nine Realms could throw at him, the smell of coconut was not one of them.

This meant he was holed up in the bedroom, bored and wondering if it was safe to try a glass of water yet.

“Jarvis, what time is it in England?”

“About one o’clock in the morning, sir.”

Loki shrugged and pulled Tony’s tablet over anyway. He had his own of course, but he’d left it in the main room and now that he was comfortable he didn’t really want to move. Plus moving meant the possibility of being ill again and he didn’t want to risk it.

“If you are intending to speak with your son, I can confirm that he’s online right now, sir.”

 “…Are you spying on my son, Jarvis?”

“I spy on everyone sir; it’s what I do.”

Loki didn’t look convinced. “And I thought I was meant to be the untrustworthy one around here.”

“Thank you for that, sir.”

With the gradually growing circle of people in the know it seemed only fair that he spoke to his second eldest. It wasn’t exactly something that he was looking forward to; their conversations didn’t usually go well.

He typed and retyped a few different approaches to a message before giving up on the long-winded approach and stuck with a simple ‘Are you online? I’d like to talk’.

Despite the little tick that indicated the note had been read there wasn’t a reply for a good few minutes – certainly long enough for Loki to give up on the idea and start browsing through Tony’s latest projects.

Then there was a little flashing icon of an incoming call.

“There’s a call for you, sir.”
“Yes, I can see that, Jarvis. You said it was one o’clock in the morning over there?” It was a video call too – other than that one photo sent through they hadn’t communicated face to face for longer than Loki could remember. “Do you think you could give us some privacy here, Jarvis?”

“Certainly sir.” There was no other noticeable sign in the room that the AI’s presence had gone, but Jarvis was usually good to his word for that at least. Now alone Loki accepted the call.

“You are aware what time it is, right?”

“You could have waited until morning to reply.”

Contrary to his complaint Merlin looked like he was sitting at a desk, and the light was on behind him. Loki frowned slightly. “You look tired; why are you still awake?”

“And you look like you’ve been hit by a truck so let’s keep our opinions to ourselves, shall we? What do you want, Möðhy?”

“I wished to speak to you—”

“Yes, that much is obvious. What about?”

“And this is why we don’t talk much!” Loki found it difficult to hold a conversation with his son on a good day; when tired and feeling like shit it was even harder. “Look. There’s something I wanted to tell you, but if now isn’t a good time, it can wait.”

“It was obviously important enough that you wanted to get in contact.” Merlin propped his head up in one hand with a heavy sigh. “I know you’ve tried to be a slightly more involved parent recently, but you don’t normally call me just to chat. So I’m assuming something has happened?”

“You could say that.”

“Have you heard more about those attacks? I’ve been monitoring the local system around Earth, but my power can’t reach any further.”

“Not so much. Heimdall is keeping watch for anything, but I can’t do much right now.”

Merlin raised an eyebrow. “Oh?”

“That’s what I want to discuss with you.” Loki smiled slightly. “But nothing terrible I assure you.”

There was silence for a moment before the warlock groaned. “Oh Gods…you’ve gone and got yourself knocked up again, haven’t you?”

“I…what?”

“Don’t act innocent; I know you far too well for that! You’re pregnant.”

“Well…that negates the need for a full conversation at least.”

“Oh Norns; Möðhir! Seriously?!” Merlin looked disgusted. “How the hell did you get yourself pregnant?! Contraception is a thing, you know.”

“I am aware, thank you. This isn’t the fourteen hundreds anymore.” And this was why Loki struggled to talk with his son. If there was an argument to be had, Merlin could find a way to start it. “Anyway, I wished to tell you, since we told Evie earlier and she was actually pleased about it.”
“Pleased? Yet another sibling I’m not actually going to meet, and that you didn’t intend to have in the first place? Oh yes, because I don’t have enough of those lying around the Nine Realms!”

“Oh for Norns sake, Merlin!” The trickster snapped. “I am not looking for an argument here; I am simply informing you of what is happening. You don’t need to be so antagonistic!”

“If you wanted me to be pleased I’m afraid to say it’s not going to happen. Getting yourself accidently knocked up isn’t something to be proud of, Möðhir!”

Loki gaped at the screen. “Accidently…”

“Merlin, you are a complete and utter dick.” Tony’s voice cut across the trickster’s attempt at a response. “Are you intending to be as hurtful as possible or was that just a bonus?”

Loki glanced over his shoulder to see his husband standing at the door, looking absolutely furious. “Tony, now isn’t the-”

“No, now is exactly the time!” Tony stormed over so that he was in the view of the tablet webcam. “I’m not going to let shit like that fly!”

“Oh, hello Mr Stark; is there a problem?”

“Yes there’s a problem! You have no idea-”

“No, he doesn’t. He really doesn’t have any idea, Tony.” Loki pushed his husband back so that he wasn’t being crowded. “If you recall; we decided to be sparing of the details with the children.”

“Children?!” Merlin looked outraged. “I’m thousands of years old! And what details?”

At his husband’s insistence, Tony sulked back out of the webcam’s view again. They had agreed not to go into the gory details of the Chitauri’s experiments with Loki’s children. Other than quietly explaining that he was unlikely to be able to get pregnant again he hadn’t elaborated on what had actually happened.

However, with Merlin looking absolutely furious and Tony about ready to punch the tablet screen Loki decided that maybe something needed to be said.

“Okay, if we all calm down and maybe we can have this conversation like adults. Tony, you may stay if you can be reasonable. Merlin, I will explain if you promise to actually let me speak more than two sentences without finding a reason to insult me.”

There was a grumble of grudging agreement from both men.

No matter how many times he talked about it, Loki didn’t think he could ever get used to discussing what the Chitauri had done to him. However, he was well known for his ability to spin any tale to gold, no matter how dark.

He didn’t hold back the details – although he would have liked to – but he had promised the story, so Merlin would get the whole story. In some grisly and gory detail at points. The trickster had a vindictive streak and felt that if he had to relive it, it was going to be as difficult to listen to as possible. This also meant that Tony had to hear it all again too.

Loki didn’t always think things through that well.

So he talked. The Chitauri, five forced pregnancies, four forced caesareans, one difficult birth. The
damage that birth had caused which left him with a shredded reproductive system that even the very best healers couldn’t fully put back together.

And the brief moment that he had all but forgotten about but that had changed all of that for him once again.

A miracle in the face of it all really. Well...a miracle as much as a Pagan God would understand it. Loki had a dim view on the term; he’d been turning water into various alcoholic beverages since he was old enough to want to drink them and didn’t consider that miraculous.

However, by the end of the explanation Merlin was looking less annoyed and far more sympathetic.

“And you say the illness isn’t stopping, is that usual for you?”

“No; I have usually been alright with regards to morning sickness. Doctor Banner believes this is because of the previous injuries. He thinks I am healed enough to carry, but not healed fully.”

“Double the trouble doesn’t help either.” Tony added.

“Double the...” Merlin’s eyes widened and then he actually smiled. “Oh. Oh, well that’s...Really? Twins? You aren’t exactly looking like you’re saddled with twins.”

“My magic is currently pitiful, but there is enough to hide my appearance. The others here would probably have noticed by now otherwise.”

“They don’t know?”

“No yet.

“That’s going to be a fun conversation.”

Tony leant over Loki’s shoulder so that he was back on the screen. “Sure is! You could be there for it, you know.” He grinned when Merlin frowned at him. “Door’s always open; we seem to collect people that find they don’t quite fit in with the rest of society.”

“I find I can fit in quite well, thank you.”

“Well, the offer’s always there. You’ve got family here. Family who want to be family.”

“Yes, well...I’ll think on it. But as you can see Móðhir and I do not exactly get along.” Merlin smirked, and for a moment looked exactly like his mother. “However, I appreciate you telling me about this development. It’s nice to actually know about a sibling before they come along for once. Well, two siblings.”

“We’ll keep you in the loop; let you know if Loki actually manages to eat anything, that sort of thing.”

“I’d appreciate it.”

Once they’d finished the call Loki had to admit that he felt happier about the situation. The conversation had gone better than he’d hoped, and Tony’s casual invitation had been a welcome surprise. He knew the man had been very accepting of Sleipnir, but it was nice that despite how icy Merlin tended to act, Stark was willing to take him under his wing too.

He knew there was a reason he kept the man around.
“Sir’s, a parcel has arrived in main reception. It is addressed to Mr Loki.” Jarvis announced. “And by ‘arrived’ I mean it genuinely just materialised on the desk. However, I have decided it is not a threat due to the runic language used as the return address.”

“Merlin is sending parcels?” Tony raised an eyebrow at his husband, who shrugged in return. He couldn’t really see why the warlock would want to send anything so soon after speaking to them. However, it made a little more sense a few minutes later when Jarvis dropped the box off with them.

It was small – about the size of a jewellery box - and when Loki opened it released a pungent smell of herbs.

“Uh…the hell?” Tony sniffed and grimaced. “Smells like Bruce’s tea cupboard.”

“That’s because it is tea.” Loki was smiling broadly. “And whilst I would normally complain that I have tried every type of tea going for morning sickness, this mixture has a spell woven through it.”

“Is that…uh, is that safe?”

“Merlin is not particularly good at pure healing magic, but he is very adept at adding a spell into something to create the same effect. And besides, I am so tired of these symptoms I would happily try anything by this point!”

The next week or so was such an improvement over the past few months that it was like a series of personality transplants had taken place.

Evie was back to her usual happy self now that she was in on the secret, so was no longer sulking around, and a happy teenager is always the best type to have around. Likewise, Loki was feeling considerably better. The tea wasn’t a complete cure to the sickness – he was still suffering first thing in the mornings, and strong smells didn’t agree with him – but he could keep simple foods down and that was enough to significantly bring up his mood.

Scott was steadily becoming a fixture around the place. Tony hadn’t been kidding when he had told Merlin that they seemed to collect the waifs and strays of the world. From their initial motley crew they had managed to gain quite a few members – Loki included. Lang fitted in fairly well, now that he had gotten the hero worship out of the way. It would have been worrying how well an ex-con slipped right in along with the rest of them, if it weren’t for the world-conquering God, the ex-Soviet super-soldier, the ex-douchebag multibillionaire kinda-arms-dealer…

But it was good to have everyone in the tower in a good mood again; ex-cons and homicidal maniacs alike. They were back to tracking Hydra again, but with the helicarrier now a toy on the kitchen table the group had died away on the radar. No doubt they were planning something, but what that was and where they were doing it was still unclear. So the Avengers were spreading their considerable resources and hunting out what they could.

All eyes were on Hydra, and that meant certain other things were dropping off the radar somewhat.

*Complacency* was once again a key word that was going to bite them in the ass.

Thor looked like death when he came storming into the main room; white as a sheet, fists clenched as he ignored everyone else and focused in on his brother.

“Those creatures. Asgard is under attack!”
“Those creatures. Asgard is under attack!”

It was lunch time, so there were a few people there when Thor burst into the kitchen. It was physically possible to see the colour drain from Loki’s face as he turned to look at his brother.

“What?! So soon?”

Given that Heimdall and Merlin were both actively monitoring everything, and Loki had left some tracking spells running the news came as a shock. It was also a move they were tactically not expecting. All things considered, Asgard was the strongest of the Nine Realms. Earth shouldn’t be bad – nukes can slow down a lot of things – but Asgard was easily superior in terms of intergalactic war.

It didn’t make any sense to go after that realm and not somewhere like Jötunnheim first.

“Heimdall is holding the Observatory but they have swarmed the citadel!” Thor said desperately. “He calls for aid!”

“Jarvis, get everyone in here, now.” Loki had rallied whilst his brother was trying to explain, and was already in control of the situation. When Jarvis was a beat too late in responding the trickster glared up. “Main alarms.”

The siren wailed – a rare enough sound that it brought everyone thundering into the kitchen with an urgency that probably hadn’t been seen since Hydra had attacked the Tower. Even those Avengers currently not in residence were alerted so that they knew to get themselves there as quickly as humanly possible.

If the alarm wasn’t enough to state how dire the situation was, Loki and Thor’s faces said it all.

“What the hell’s happened?” Everyone was armed, but Tony actually had the Ironman suit assembling around him as he stumbled into the room – one leg struggling to attach.

“Asgard! She’s under attack! We need to go!” Thor actually grabbed his brother’s arm, only for Loki to throw him off.

“What? Thor, I can’t! You know I can’t!”

“Thor, stop a moment!” Steve was possibly the only person able to take Thor on physically and pulled the God round to face him, forcing him to stop. “What’s happening? Who’s attacking Asgard, and how do you know?”

“Heimdall managed to contact me; those creatures that have attacked other realms have now turned their sights on Asgard.”

“Turned their sights on it, or there’s an active attack underway?”

“An active attack! We have to stop them!” Thor turned back to his brother again to meet Loki’s wide-eyed stare. “Is there no way you-”

“Thor, I can’t! I have no magic, the Bifrost would be disastrous, I can’t!”

“Can Asgard withstand this?” Tony cut across him. “Do you still have your army?”
Thor paused, the question running across his face – evidence that he hadn’t thought any further than running to Asgard’s defence.

“No.” Loki’s response was terse. “The battle on Alfheim took out a considerable number of our best warriors.”

“Can Asgard defend herself?”

“We will fight for our kingdom, we won’t-”

“*Can Asgard defend herself?*”

“No.” Again, Loki was the voice of reason. “No, she can’t.” When his brother looked like he was going to protest the Trickster held up a hand to silence him. “No, Thor, she can’t. We don’t have the men, we don’t have the weaponry, we don’t have the defences in place. Asgard is complacent and arrogant; we’re not ready for this!”

“Right.” Tony sounded grim as the final pieces of the suit settled around him. “Capricorn; you can’t go, and that’s not even being discussed. So that means I’m going.”

“What?!” The Gods may not have been biologically related but their looks of horrified astonishment were almost identical.

“I’ve got the suit; I’ve tanked it up since Alfheim and Svartalfheim, it can withstand the radiation, the temperatures and the firepower we’ve seen exhibited. I was ready for this even if you guys weren’t.”

“But-”

“Just your suit?” Rhodey interrupted Loki.

“War-machine too. And about half of the Iron Legion. The others can stay here as protection against Hydra.”

“But-”

“The Hulk is as indestructible as they come, and if you pull me through the Bifrost into a battle you can guarantee I’ll be pretty damn angry.” Bruce offered quickly. He saw Tony open his mouth in concern and forestalled him. “And Jarvis will be here and is as competent a doctor as me, if not better since he has the internet in his head. Any medical events –” And they both knew what he meant by *that*. “-Jarvis can sort it out.”

Tony held his gaze for a beat then nodded. “Right. Rhodey, you in? This’ll be big, man.”

James snorted. “Try and stop me!”

“Excellent! ’Kay, Thor; you’ve got me, War-machine, Hulk and half the Iron Legion which is… about sixty something suits, off the top of my head. Maybe a few more.”

“*Anthony*!” With no one listening to him Loki grabbed Tony’s arm hard. “What in the Norns names are you thinking?! You can’t-”

“Totally can and am. We’re married, goat-horns, that had political ramifications, yes?”

“Yes, of course, but-”
“You can’t fight, so I can fight for you – consider it a romantic gesture or something – look, you’d be doing this for me, right?”

“Of course! But I have seen these things in battle, you haven’t, you don’t know what you’re going up against!” His fingers were probably leaving dents in Tony’s gauntlet. “I’m a God! You aren’t!”

Stark carefully peeled the trickster’s hand off his arm and instead interlocked their fingers. “No, I’m Ironman. I’m not going to let these big bad space goons stomp all over your home if I can do something about it.”

“But-” Loki’s gaze slid to Rhodes and Bruce, unable to understand why they had any reason to do this.

“The Hulk is pretty much untouchable, and I liked Asgard; I’m willing to fight for it.” Bruce offered.

“I fight for my team mates. Even if I don’t like them. And besides, I told Tony that he had to take me with him next time he jetted off somewhere exotic!” Rhodey grinned. It was a pretty big statement; the man had never been to Asgard, had not seen the destruction the attackers had wrought on other worlds, and had made it very clear he disliked Loki. To state so quickly and decisively that he was willing to fight for Loki’s home world when the trickster couldn’t was a clear mark of the type of person he was. It was rather worthy of Steve Rogers.

“Outvoted, Capricorn. And we don’t have time to debate it any further.” Tony’s tone was bright and flippant but his eyes said different as he tried to make Loki agree. **Trust me. I can do this. We got this.**

“Tony…” And that was fear right there. He didn’t need to say anything else for Stark to hear it and know it. But there was also acceptance. Asgard being under attack put Loki’s parents in danger, his son, his friends. And Asgard also held the Infinity Gauntlet, along with the Tesseract. Another Stone to be grabbed and, even more enticing; the receptacle the Stones were to go in. If Asgard were to fall the consequences were disastrous. “You had better be careful.”

“Me? Careful? Always!”

“I mean it. I have seen these things in action, and if I had a choice I would keep you as far from them as possible.”

“But there’s no choice, and Asgard needs help.”

Loki nodded, grudging, but in agreement. Tony squeezed his hand and grinned, then scanned the rest of the silent room for Evie.

“Birdy?”

The teenager shrugged. “Gotta save the universe. Or Avenge it, or whatever. I’m kinda used to one parent or another disappearing off to another planet and certain death like, every other month.”

"Look, we-"

"Dad, I get it. Seriously. We're talking planet-wide destruction here; do you really think I'm going to stop you from trying to save them? That's my big brother and my grandparents up there!"

Tony stared at her for a moment. “Oh Birdy…The shit we keep putting you through. You’ve had to grow up way too fast.”
“Well, somewhen between Hydra trying to kill us all and crazy aliens deciding to wipe out the nine realms it was kind of warrented, I guess.” She shrugged and tried to smile. “I’d say be careful, but, y’know. Evil alien invasion and all that.” She did allow her father to hug her though, despite the Ironman suit.

“We’ll be quick and I won’t take stupid risks.” Tony pressed a kiss to her hair, then lowered his voice so that the others couldn’t hear them. “And look after your mum for me.”

“Of course.”

For a long moment he couldn’t work out why the terrible pain was so familiar. He had fallen asleep in bed had he not? He remembered the soft mattress, the pillows. He was certain he remembered. Stark tower, and Evie, and Tony, and…

He was sure he remembered that.

But then he felt the creature inside him squirm again and that wonderful dream melted back to cold, harsh reality.

The bar through his wrist held him tight to the wall – and through the dizzying pain he wondered how he could have ever imagined that it was gone. How could he have dreamt that this was actually over? The harsh rasp of the gravel that made up the floor, the heavy chain that pulled at his arm and the constant gnawing, biting pain. He couldn’t even say where it originated from. So much hurt that one thing couldn’t be pin-pointed any more.

How could he have been foolish enough to believe that anyone would be able to rescue him here? He knew how far from the Nine Realms they were – beyond the reach of the Bifrost, beyond the sight of Heimdall…so far and so alone.

Curling into a tight ball, Loki could do nothing more than scream wordlessly.

It was the gentle repetition of his name that eventually allowed him to fight back to consciousness and for half a moment he had absolutely no idea where he was.

The vividness of the pain and the terror were so real that it was near impossible to work out what was real and what wasn’t. Something was pinning him down, pain was still shooting through his body and each breath was tight in his throat. With the imagery of the tiny cell still so fresh his mind was struggling to work out which sensations were real and which were remembered.

Was he still with the chitauri? He had always feared, deep at the back of his mind, that one day he would wake up back in that cell to find that the life he thought he was living was just another twisted torment. Had that happened? The pain and the fear made it very real.

“Loki, I need you open your eyes.” The voice was authoritative but quiet. “Open your eyes and look at me.”

It was simpler to obey than try to fight and as his gaze came into focus he saw it was Jarvis leaning over him. When they made eye contact the droid smiled.

“Good. You are in the tower and completely safe. There is nothing here that can hurt you.”
Loki nodded abruptly in response but it was quite clear that he hadn’t taken on board what had just
been said. His vitals were all over the place and Jarvis placed an articulated hand on the trickster’s
chest.

“Loki, I want you to name me five things you can see. Right now. What can you see? Five things.”

The prince’s brow furrowed as he stared up at the droid. With full blown panic racing through his
system he could barely understand what was being asked of him.

“Look around, what can you see?” Jarvis repeated.

“…you.” It was the easiest answer to force out.

“Excellent. That’s one, I need four other things you can see.”

The prince’s wild gaze darted around for a moment before settling on the droid again. “Ceiling…”

“Good, that makes two.”

“Lights…blankets…”

“All normal, safe, bedroom things. One more please.”

“Window…”

Jarvis nodded encouragingly. “Well done. Now four things you can hear. Listen and tell me what
you hear.”

Loki frowned again, but this time didn’t need as much direction. “Air con…”

“Yes, it is rather noisy, isn’t it? What else?”

He closed his eyes again, taking a deep breath as he tried to centre himself enough to concentrate.
“…You? Your ankle clicks.”

“Yes, I’ve been meaning to sort that out. Two more things?”

“…My breathing…and the clock.”

“Good job. Now three things you can feel.”

It was getting easier to think. His hammering pulse was slowing and breathing evening out which
made thought possible again.

“The sheets. They’re tangled. And…your hand. And…cold. It’s cold in here…”

“It is colder than usual, yes. Now; two things you can smell.”

Loki lay still for a moment, eyes closed as he breathed deeply. “…Tony’s aftershave.” He said
finally. “On the pillow. It still smells of him. And…washing powder from the sheets. It smells like
lavender and I don’t like lavender.”

“Noted; I’ll change the washing powder. And finally one thing you can taste.”

“ Toothpaste…”?

“Excellent. I am pleased to report that your pulse rate and respiration are slowing to levels that I
“Absolutely awful.”

“That’s understandable. That did appear to be a nightmare of epic proportions.”

Loki nodded shakily.

“Are you in pain at all?”

“I…no. No, I do not believe so.”

“You do not believe so? Forgive me, but you are either in pain, or you are not.”

The trickster shook his head, screwing his eyes closed again. “I don’t know!” He started at the cool metal of Jarvis’ hand against his forehead. “I don’t know! I thought I was back there! I thought…It was so real!” The hand removed itself and he reached out blindly to grab it – a life-line in a not-yet real world.

“You were dreaming of your captivity again?”

“This wasn’t real. This was the dream! None of this had been real!” Loki half sat up, the words tripping over each other in his renewed panic. “I was still there – it was still happening! Tony never found me!” Had he been more aware of what was happening he would have been ashamed of the way he so readily broke, pushing Jarvis away to curl over and hug his knees. “He never found me!”

“Your heart rate is rising again.” The droid said carefully. “That is neither good for you nor the twins. I need you to focus on the present. You are safe; nothing can hurt you here.”

“Here isn’t real…This isn’t real. I’m dreaming and I’m going to wake up and this will all be over! I’m still there, I’m still there!” Loki’s fingers had tangled in his hair, tugging at the roots.

“You are in Stark Tower, it is quarter past three in the morning and there is nothing that can hurt you here.”

“It’s not over! It won’t ever be over! I’m still there!”

“You are not asleep; you are on Earth – Midgard – in New York.” Jarvis was a creation of logic, so logic was really all he had to go on in the moment.

“I can’t believe that!” Loki’s face was hidden as he spat the words.

“Look, why would you dream of me in this form?”

“I…what?”

The droid raised a hand up, flexing the delicate joints. “Well, when you were taken I was just a voice in the walls, and one you barely spoke to, correct? So why would your dream give me form? And wouldn’t you dream of Mr Stark, not myself?” He watched the trickster’s frantic breathing slow by a fraction and when he judged that Loki was calming down he gently helped to untangle the prince’s fingers from his hair. “There are many things about this scenario which don’t ring true as a dream.”

The God allowed Jarvis to lower his hands, but remained hunched over his knees. “But…”
“You had a nightmare. A particularly vicious one I believe.”

“But…it was…”

“It was a nightmare. You are in the tower.”

Loki took a deep, shuddering breath before raising his head a little to look around. “The tower? I’m…But I remember…I thought I was still in the cell.”

“A nightmare. Or a memory perhaps. Either way, a long way from reality.”

“It seemed so real…”

“These things tend to.”

The prince straightened up and gently pushed the droid away, trying to regain some composure.

“What time is it?”

“Quarter past three.” As good as he was at understanding emotion, there were still times when Jarvis just couldn’t read what someone was thinking, and this was certainly one of those moments. Loki was still staring at the bedclothes, one hand unconsciously pressed to his stomach. Jarvis recognised fear – that was an obvious one – and confusion, but there were a myriad of other feelings bubbling away under the surface that the AI just couldn’t decipher. “I would council not going back to sleep right away.”

“I don’t think I could if I tried…” The trickster rubbed a tired hand across his eyes. “I don’t think I ever want to go to sleep again.”

“If you would like some company, Ms Romanov is currently in the main room watching Rocky Horror.”

Of all of the Avengers Natasha was probably the best at providing non-judgemental company. It wasn’t very difficult to decide that it would be far better to have some company than stay where he was.

When Loki reached the main room Natasha simply glanced at him then pushed the bowl of popcorn over so that when he sat down he could reach it. The film was part way through which meant they didn’t need to talk, nor really even acknowledge the other’s presence until the credit’s rolled.

“You want to pick a film?”

“I have no preference, something mindless will do.”

Natasha nodded and flicked through the menu until she found the Disney section. “A classic mindless enough for you?” When a shrug was all she got in reply she selected one.

“Dalmatians?”

“You didn’t give me a preference. Something against canines?”

“I have no problem with canines. I have a son who is a canine in fact; estranged now, sadly.”

Natasha glanced at him in surprise, then caught Loki’s tired grin. “Oh sure, ha ha.”
“I’m being serious. He’s called Fenrir, and he doesn’t particularly like me very much.”

“Does anybody?”

The trickster rolled his eyes and didn’t deign to answer. A few more minutes passed before Natasha shifted her weight a little to turn and look at him again.

“What brought you down here then?”

“I’m sorry?”

“Well, you were a bag of nerves when you walked in, but you seem to have calmed down now. What happened?”

Loki recalled his assessment of Natasha being the least judgemental of the team and decided to just go with the truth. “I had a nightmare and wanted some company.”

“Just company, or were you hoping to talk about it?”

“Just company.”

It wasn’t as if the woman didn’t know what it was like. As someone who had had her fair share of nightmares she knew that the innocuous, almost childish label hid something that was big and terrifying and at times appalling.

Disney and popcorn would work.

They managed about half an hour before Natasha turned to look at the prince.

“Can I ask a question?”

Loki raised an eyebrow. “I’m surprised you want permission.”

“Well, I would like an honest answer, and I doubt you’ll want to give me one. But I want to ask, given that it’s just you and me right now. And Jarvis of course.”

“I’m intrigued as to what you could possibly want to ask me that requires privacy.”

The woman laughed. “Well, a number of things spring to mind, but actually this is serious, I’m afraid.”

Given that he had come out here for distraction from his dreams, and the film wasn’t exactly drawing his attention, Loki nodded. “Alright, what do you want to ask?”

“These creatures; they’ve taken out two realms already, and are warring on Asgard at the moment. How big are those realms compared to Earth?”

That wasn’t such a straightforward question as it sounded, and the trickster frowned slightly before answering. “Depends on what you mean. Geographically Svartalfheim was much larger than Earth, but very sparsely populated. Alfheim in contrast was about the same size and had a much greater population of living beings – Elf and animal. Asgard is smaller in both regards. Why?”

“And military-wise; how would they compare to Earth?”

“That’s not exactly something that can be compared.” Loki said slowly. “Alfheim lost most of their own army before Asgard joined, so that was a staggered battle of two separate forces. However, we
worked together well where we could. Alfheim was a strong and united realm so there was no dissension within their military. The same is true of Asgard. Earth, however, is made up of fractured nations.”

“So we’re weak compared to other realms?”

“Earth has possibly the most advanced weapons in any of the realms. Early on we other realms worked on tapping into the life forces of the universe, allowing our species to create the Bifrost and such. Humans however, left such arts behind with their pagan beliefs and industrialised instead. We all made peace between our realms and while we forged alliances you only forged new ways to kill each other. Of course; it doesn’t help that Earth is so very young compared to everyone else.” Loki waved a hand around at the room they were in. “When I was born Homo sapiens were still evolving.”

“But if we’ve got advanced weapons-”

“Earth is fractured. How could you compare to a realm like Alfheim with one solid standing army, when each country here has it’s own and they’re usually fighting each other. Look at what’s happening around the world and tell me that Earth is strong. Believe me, to an invading force this realm looks like easy pickings.”

“Is that what we looked like to you?”

“I wasn’t trying to win, remember.”

“But if you had been. Does humanity really come across as that easy to destroy?”

“I believe it was an American president who said something about a house being divided? It is very easy to topple a system that isn’t united.”

Natasha slumped back into the cushions, looking dispirited. It was hardly difficult to see that Earth was a very complex world, politically, but it was hard to believe that given the firepower of most major nations that the realm wasn’t taken seriously as a military power.

“Can we hope that Asgard will take care of them so we don’t need to worry about it?” She asked hopelessly.

At the mention of his home realm Loki scowled. “I don’t know.”

“I thought you guys had the best army in the realms.”

“We did, yes. And then we went to support Alfheim. Our forces have been decimated.”

“Can you win?”

The silence was telling. Loki drew his knee up to his chest, staring at the cartoon on the TV without really seeing it. “I don’t know. If it were up to me I would have approached the whole battle as a rescue mission, evacuating as many of the civilians as possible.”

“They won’t be doing that?”

“They will eventually, but you must remember what Aesir think like; depleted army or not, they would go into a battle assuming a victory.”

“You don’t.”
“I’m not Aesir.”

Natasha appeared to think on this for a few moments, biting her lip as she stared at the TV.

"Loki, if the creatures attack Earth, can we win?"

"No. Humanity would put up a valiant fight I believe, but no."

"Could we run?"

"How? You can barely reach your own moon. Where would you run to?"

"But…” The woman started a reply, stopped, thought about it for a moment, then tried again. "Would the other realms help us?"

"You're assuming they would still be standing by this point. There may be no one left who could help. And even if there was someone left alive out there, Earth has no links to any but Asgard, why would a realm risk such odds?"

Natasha appeared to think on this for a few moments, biting her lip as she stared at the TV.

"But surely…” She cut herself off again. "Could we surrender?"

"To whom? There's no obvious chain of command, there's no leader on the battlefield. I doubt they'd even understand the concept." Loki smirked, ever so slightly. "And besides, I would not think humanity would allow itself to give in so easily, you are a proud people, whether it serves you well or not."

"True." The woman sighed. "Is this it then? Are we saying we've got however long it will take for them to get to us and then that's it? Game over for Earth?"

"On the assumption that the other realms fall, it is very possible. However, there is no reason for them to come here that we know of. They are after the Infinity Stones, and with the tesseract gone Earth doesn't hold one anymore."

"Yeah…don't think we're gonna thank you for that though."

"Perish the thought."

The film had finished in the background and the credits were rolling. Natasha switched off the movie centre and one of the rolling news channels came on. Nothing huge; a minor earthquake somewhere in Asia, politics in the Middle East, some celebrity doing something to raise money. Run of the mill, good old Earth.

As much as people complained and fretted and worried, it was still a planet worth fighting for should the need arise.

"I miss Hydra."

Loki cast her an amused glance and she shrugged. "I mean it, I do! They're human, at least. We know how to fight humans. We can fight humans. This whole Independence Day style thing is way over our heads; even the chitauri could at least be killed. And we knew that if we took you out we'd probably win. This is too big."

"We still have Asgard. There is still the hope that they will prevail."
"Yeah right - you don't believe that. You said yourself that you lost most of the army to Alfhiem."

Loki watched the images flicker over the television screen. "True. But I have to hope. If I don't then I have to think about how I've sent my husband into a hopeless battle that he can't win and may not return from. And believe me; if you thought you saw insanity when I brought the Chitauri here it will pale into comparison to what will happen if Tony dies." His hand had unconsciously migrated to his stomach as he spoke, and Natasha noted the movement.

"You know he'll do whatever it takes to get back here. There was a time when the Tony I knew would have quite happily gone into self-destruct mode in such a battle, but he's got too much to live for to do that these days."

"What? Sleepless nights and a grouchy spouse?"

"Well, Evie's cute at least. He can always sleep on the couch if you annoy him too much."

"Shouldn't that be if he annoys me?"

"Everything annoys you."

Loki smirked. "True."

Natasha let silence stretch out between them again for a few moments before changing the subject. "By the way; I don't remember if I ever thanked you for saving me from that mine back in Iceland. I'd have blown us all up if you hadn't been there."

"That seems so long ago now." The trickster mused. "Although you are welcome, of course. You are certainly one of the people here whom I find the least annoying."

"A high honour, I'm sure."

"Thor would think so."

The woman laughed quietly at that. "Thor can annoy all of us at the best of times." She glanced over to see a more relaxed smile stretch over her companions face. "Loki…can I ask something else?"

The prince sighed, his eyes slipping closed. He knew what she wanted; it was written all over her face and he couldn't say he hadn't been expecting one of them to ask at some point. He had been waiting on bringing the subject up himself, but realistically they needed to know; especially if something were to go wrong without Tony or Bruce there.

"You want to know if I will finally reveal what is wrong with me." He didn't need to open his eyes to know he was right.

"It's been months now, and no sign of improvement. Believe it or not but we're worried about you."

"Of course you are; my magic is very useful."

"No; we're worried about you. We all know you're finding it tough without Tony around. You don't quite trust us, you're ill and you have no idea when or if he will return. We're worried about you."

The God of lies tried to pick that statement apart and found that he couldn't. Natasha was a talented
liar – but she wasn’t using those skills at the moment and he could tell the sincerity in her words.

“I’m pregnant.”

It came out quite suddenly, and he wasn’t entirely certain he’d given his mouth permission to say the words.

“…Oh. Is that…good?”

He couldn’t blame her for the question; he hadn’t exactly made it sound good.

“Yes. Yes it is. It is making me very ill, and draining all of my energy, but…it’s a good thing.” His hands move to rest on his stomach – imagining the bump that he knew was hidden. “Just unexpected.”

“Congratulations.” Natasha’s voice had warmed; more sincerity and genuine feeling than she usually allowed. “Any idea of the gender?”

“A surprise. Both of them.”

The assassin was always going to be quick on the uptake so rather than surprise at the statement she just laughed. “Oh that is going to be fun! Evie is a handful as it is! Two more? Good luck with that!” She reached over to playfully punch his arm. “Seriously though – congratulations.”

“It still feels strange to tell people about it. I’m using what little magic I can muster right now to hide the visible signs but I suppose I will have to confess sooner or later.”

“Take your time; there’s no sense in getting worked up over something that you can control. If it’s stressing you out you can put it off a little longer. Or delegate. Get Jarvis to tell the others.”

“Actually…that’s not a bad idea.”

MWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMW

It may have been considered a little bit the cowards way out, but with everything else going on Loki just didn’t have it in him to face down the rest of the Avengers with the news. Natasha had spelt it out quite correctly; he was still very sick, beside himself with concern about Tony and fearful for his homeworld. He didn’t need to deal with everyone else’s emotions upon finding out the news.

Jarvis informed him that it went well, though, which was something. Sam and Scott – both of whom were less used to the very strange world the Avengers lived in – were noticeably weirded out, and Clint made some crude jokes, but the group were pretty accepting really. Quiet words of congratulations and happiness were expressed on an individual basis to Loki, but in general nothing really changed.

Well, Steve started cooking decent meals rather than ordering take-out for them all every night, but no one was going to complain about a little healthier eating.

However, the one thing that didn’t make anything any easier was time.

Despite knowing that there was a significant difference in the way time flowed between Asgard and Earth it was still very difficult as the weeks turned into the months with no word. Loki was in a permanent bad mood; hormones, worry and lack of sleep all warring against each other. He was reasonable with Evie, and to some extent Natasha, but no one else wanted to be around him. This
led some of the Avengers to come up with creative excuses to get away from the main living spaces.

The miniature helicarrier had been moved from its place on the table down to one of the labs, and locked in a safe as an extra precaution. There had been some debate as to whether or not to turn the interior of the safe into a vacuum just in case, but Tony had nixed that since no one could quite work out what the shrinking had done to all of the liquid oxygen in the fuel tanks, and no one really wanted to find out.

Now, however, it sat on one of the lab tables, looking like a child's toy, where Steve, Sam, Bucky and Scott had put it. It was highly likely that the computer systems hadn't been properly put in place yet, since the thing had been under construction, but that just meant that there was a good chance there would be more by way of paperwork lying around. This did pose the question of how they were going to retrieve any of it though - since it wasn't like they had the space anywhere to hide a full-sized helicarrier inside, and outside it would be pretty obvious to any curious satellites. Steve had briefly entertained the idea of going back to Tony's lab in New Mexico where Project Direewolf had been put together all those years ago, but Jarvis had quickly informed him that even that space wasn't large enough.

Then Scott had looked at them like they were idiots and reminded them that he could shrink down to the same scale. And shrink them with him.

This was why there was a sheet of paper next to the tiny helicarrier, with 'DO NOT TOUCH, EXPERIMENT UNDERWAY' written in big red letters and Jarvis was ready to jump in and shoo people away. Not that they were expecting anyone to come down to the lab, but they knew better than to not take every precaution these days.

"This is weird."

"You said that already."

The four of them were walking down one of the main corridors to the helm of the ship, Sam periodically turning to walk backwards so that he could stare at the expanse of hallway behind them.

"I mean, you know it's tiny, so it should feel tiny too, you know what I'm saying?"

"No." Bucky was the only one bothering to reply, and wasn't exactly playing nice in the process.

The helicarrier did, to all intents and purposes, look normal though. Scott was the only one of the four who hadn't seen one in operation, but even he could see the potential the craft had and what it might be capable of when fully running. They had already noted some new and upgraded weapons systems that would need Tony's insight when he returned.

From the command deck it made sense for Scott to be the one to stay and help Jarvis play with the minimal systems that had begun to be installed on the computers whilst the other three split up to search the other decks for hard copies of any information that might have been used.

Even blueprints to the ship they were stood in could give them some clues into what Hydra was planning next.

"They've barely got an operating system here." Scott was definitely one of those people that talked to himself whilst working. However, Jarvis couldn't always tell the difference between talking to
one's self and directed conversation so often plumped for the latter and answered anyway.

"There is enough for me to work with, Mr Lang."

"Even with half the computers still in boxes on the floor?"

"I only need to access one and then I can go through the network."

"Wouldn't it need to be linked to the network first? This thing barely plays the Window's start up music." It wasn't actually Windows, but Scott had never heard of the custom built soft-ware Hydra were apparently using.

"Technically, yes, but I know these systems quite well; I can find a way, Mr Lang." The voice in Scott's earpiece sounded smug as he stuck the metallic dot Jarvis had given him to the side of the screen.

"How does this even work? Shouldn't I be putting a USB stick in or something? That's not even the computer; that's the monitor. How can you possibly link into anything through a monitor?"

"Just assume that Mr Stark is a genius and that I know what I'm doing."

That rather implied that Scott was an idiot, especially in the tone of voice Jarvis used. He settled down to watch the incomprehensible symbols roll across the screen.

Elsewhere in the ship Sam and Bucky had been sent by Steve to check the cargo bays whilst the super soldier hunted down the munitions stores. This hadn’t gone down so well with either of the men.

“Why he thinks we have to stick together on this…” Sam hissed.

“He’s obviously worried that you couldn’t hold your own if we run into trouble.”

“There’s nothing to run into! He just thinks you’re going to get lost in here.”

The bickering had become a habit; the two actually worked rather well together as long as it didn’t develop into an actual fist fight. Steve knew this, and whilst both could hold their own, Bucky knew the helicarrier layout and Sam understood modern technology better. It made sense even if it annoyed them.

The cargo bays were easy enough to get to and weren’t locked. Or rather locks hadn’t been installed yet. There were a handful of large containers already in place, but given the lack of security the two men could already correctly guess that they would be empty.

“Steve, please tell me you’re having more luck than we are.” Sam pleaded.

“Not particularly. None of the weapons were installed so there’s not much to go on.”

“What about weapon delivery systems?”

“The usual and some newer bit and pieces we’ll have to ask Jarvis about.”

“Can you take a photo Captain Rogers?” Jarvis could still make them all jump when he hijacked their comms systems to ask his questions.

“Uh…Yeah, will my phone still work? I don’t understand how this shrinking thing works.”
“I believe it will, but you will have to try it to find out.”

Evidently it did work since Sam’s phone pinged in his pocket and he pulled it out to see that Steve had sent the photo to himself and Bucky. He frowned at what he was seeing.

“That’s not a gun. That looks like some sort of nozzle.”

“Yeah, that’s what I thought. Kind of reminded me of a crop duster. There’s a pumping system attached.” A moment later a second photo arrived of said pump. “There are about twelve of them on this deck alone. That’s going to be…fifty odd over the whole ship? There’s no sign of what’s meant to go in them.”

Sam glanced at Bucky. Project Insight had intended to wipe out anyone who was a threat, and originally that had been via armed warheads. Hydra had definitely been going down the more subtle route since that mishap and the Falcon had a horrible suspicion what that weapons system was intended to deliver.

“Jarvis? Bets on what that is meant to spray?”

“Nothing good. Are there any canisters or tanks of any form that may hold a gas or liquid nearby?”

“Uh…there are some small gas canisters pre-loaded in the mechanism, but they didn’t bring the main stocks on yet. No name on them, just the chemical formula. My chemistry is pretty poor.”

“Allow me, Captain Rogers.”

\[C_4H_8Cl_2S. \text{ That mean anything to anyone?}\]

It meant very little to Bucky and Sam certainly.

Jarvis affected a little cough – his usual way of preceding bad news that he thought wasn’t going to be taken well.

“Gentlemen, Can I suggest that you all evacuate the ship, please?”

“Is that your way of saying that shit’s dangerous?” Scott, long forgotten by the others, chimed in. “Because that sounds like a chloroethyl-sulphide and that’s not something I want to be around.”

“How do you know that?” Sam hadn’t intended to sound quite so insulting, but it came out poorly.

“I’ve got a degree in engineering – I minored in chemistry.”

“Again, can you discuss this after you’ve evacuated please.” Jarvis’ tone was sharper. “I would like to remind you that we are currently shrunk down by a considerable amount and therefore the gas in those canisters is under tremendous pressure.”

“So it is dangerous? Can it be disarmed?” Steve asked.

“Captain Rogers, that is Mustard Gas, if you know of a way to disarm it, please go ahead.”

It was quite eye-opening just how quickly the four men managed to get themselves off of the helicarrier and back to the correct size. The moment they were all out Jarvis scooped the miniature craft into an airtight box. Just because it was currently stable didn’t mean it was going to remain that way.

“Is there any way this could return to its correct size without your input, Mr Lang?”
“Uh…as far as I know it can’t.”

“Good. In that case I shall keep this contained to prevent any contamination should the tanks lose integrity given the pressure they’re under.”

“You think it’s likely to blow?”

Jarvis looked at Scott, highly refined optics focussing on the man. “Let’s just say I would rather we are prepared just in case.”

“Mustard gas? Hydra are using fucking mustard gas!?” Clint managed to work anger into the horror the sentence rightly deserved. “Why? Why use an obsolete weapon?!”

“Hardly obsolete.” Natasha quickly corrected. “It works, it works well, is easy enough to manufacture and you can easily protect your own side from it.”

“But surely sarin or anthrax or something-” Evie started.

“Mustard gas is old school trench warfare. Literally trench warfare. People are too advanced these days. We’re prepared for new and devastating attacks, not old ones – do you keep a gas mask on your person at all times?”

The girl shook her head. No one outside of the military and emergency services really kept a working gas mask on them every waking moment.

“There are still places where it is used, but it has drastically fallen from popularity.” Jarvis said primly. “It may have been devastatingly effective in World War One, but people learnt from that and when the Second World War started Britain provided every man, woman and child with a gas mask to try and prevent that devastation in a civilian population. It worked, and gas was never used in the Blitz, because what would be the point? Now, however, no one in the Western world expects it.”

Bucky waved a hand at the droid to stall him. “History lecture aside, since some of us here had to live that crap, can we just focus on the fact that Hydra are arming themselves with mustard gas!”

Jarvis nodded. “We need to find where they are creating it. In the meantime I shall start research and manufacture on gas masks for everyone in the tower immediately. I will also put together an information sheet of what to do in case of an attack.”

“Surely ‘put on a gas mask’ is all we need?”

“It’s a little more complicated than that. There are a significant number of people in this tower who would not have the first idea what to do in the event, and within our own group we need to watch out for Miss Evelyn.”

Clint groaned and rested his head in his hands. “Y’know, I can’t decide what is worse; this, or the possibility of spontaneous alien attack.”

Loki was still awake, having watched the clock run through the hours to early morning. He was idly reading an ancient text on Tony’s Starkpad when there was a gentle cough and Jarvis interrupted him.
“Sir?”

“You needn’t address me like that, Jarvis, we’ve had this conversation before. And what could possibly be wrong at this time of night?”

“Your daughter is outside the door and wants to know if you’re still awake.”

Loki frowned. “Well obviously yes, but why is she awake?”

“Would it not be better to have this conversation with her?”

“Oh, yes. Of course.”

Evie looked like she’d been crying, her blanket wrapped loosely around her shoulders where she stood in the doorway. At a glance Loki was pretty certain what was wrong.

“Möðhy…”

“Nightmare?”

She nodded miserably. “I often have them, but this one was really bad…” There was an unspoken question at the end of the statement that was readily understandable to her parent. Loki placed the Starkpad to one side and indicated to the empty space in the bed. Evie was quick to accept the invitation for a hug.

It had been a long time since Loki had had one of his children come calling in the middle of the night due to a nightmare. Sleipnir had been terrible for it – although that was possibly more because he was clingy and had separation issues than genuinely having bad dreams.

“I’m worried about dad.” Evie whispered. It was like admitting it heightened the danger. Loki was equally worried, but that wasn’t exactly something he could tell his daughter.

“Your father has survived the most unbelievable of things before. I think that whatever he comes up against in Asgard it will learn to fear humankind.”

“He takes too many risks. You weren’t here when there was that thing with the drone; it was horrible!”

“He’s got enough people watching his back – and Jarvis will forcibly take over if he thinks he needs to. Whatever happens, your father is coming home.”

“Mmmm.” Evie sounded less than convinced. “I’m still worried.”

“That’s natural. I would have concerns if you weren’t worried.”

“Are you worried?”

“I’m half a million years old. It gets to a point where you realise worrying just steals away time you could spend on sorting out the problem.”

“Not much we can sort from here.”

“Then worrying is useless.”

“Does that ever work?”
“Not particularly, but it is better than nothing.”

Evie smiled slightly. “Not that helpful really.”

“I’m running on very little food and sleep; it is the best I can manage.” Loki ruffled her hair. “And I am not my sharpest at 3AM.”

“Yeah, I guess…” The girl looked despondent as she settled down next to him. “Can I stay here? I don’t want another nightmare.”

“Only if you promise not to snore.”

“I don’t snore!”

She did, but only a little, and only in the way most children do. It took her very little time to fall asleep again, cuddled up against Loki’s side. He picked the Starkpad back up but made certain to set the screen to as dark as was still readable.

Should you not be getting some sleep too?

The silent text from Jarvis scrawled across the screen and Loki smiled slightly as he typed a response.

I do not want to risk my own nightmare with Evie here; that should be obvious.

….Of course, sir. I should have realised that.

You’re not personally familiar with nightmares, Jarvis, I wouldn’t expect you to have thought of it.

Would you like something to watch to help stay awake?

Go on then, surprise me.

Dangerous words to a creation of Tony Stark’s but he trusted Jarvis enough not to have Hentai blare out of the tablet at full volume. As it was he was presented with Casablanca which he had seen many times before, but could always watch at least once more.

MWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWM

Despite Jarvis’s best attempts Loki did doze off, but the AI monitored him for the signs he had come to recognise as a nightmare beginning, ready and waiting to wake him if necessary. There was no need though, and it was possible the trickster’s subconscious knew that Evie was there so was keeping strict control on his dreams. Evie was also far more peaceful now that she had a parent nearby to make her feel safe.

It should have been a quiet night now that Jarvis was content everyone who needed to be asleep was asleep. However, nothing can ever be that simple. Tiny micro-crystal circuits picked up on a familiar echo of energy about twenty seconds before the energy itself manifested and sirens began to wail.

Some people in the tower were far more used to being woken by alarms than others, and some were far better at it, but everyone was taken equally by surprise.

“Main balcony. Bifrost incoming.” Jarvis spoke over the alarms, his voice echoing throughout the tower from every speaker. He drew the main power resources to the elevators as all the members of the Avengers tried to rush to the afore mentioned floor and all used the lifts at once.
The whole group was in sleepwear, although some – Evie, Loki, Natasha – had managed to grab dressing gowns en route, and there was a very haphazard array of weaponry that had been to hand. Still a lethal show of force if needed, but certainly not conventional.

The sight that they all ran in to, however, was not what anyone had hoped for.

Tony and Thor were upright, at least, but supporting Rhodey between them. Sleipnir was collapsed behind them against the railings, his grey coat stained rust red and one leg at an unnatural angle. However, these sights were barely noticeable as the glass doors of the balcony shattered inwards, showering the approaching Avengers in glass.

The Hulk came roaring into the main room, swiping blindly at the sofa and sending it flying out of one of the windows. The people around him automatically scattered as he thundered forward into the centre of the room.

Mad eyes roved wildly before falling on Loki – an old and known target – and he started towards the trickster, bellowing furiously.

“Banner, no!” It was Steve who yelled loudest, but he was only just heard over the other horrified cries.

With all of the other far more recent horrors he had seen and experienced, Loki had almost forgotten what it was like to stare down the Hulk when the creature was in full rage mode. Had his circumstances been different he may have tried to stand his ground, tried to reason with the tiny piece of Bruce that could hear him. But it wasn’t his own safety he was thinking of.

No one was close enough to intervene as the Hulk chased the trickster backwards until Loki’s back hit the wall and he had absolutely nowhere to run.

“No!” From where he stood, still outside with War-machine a dead weight across his shoulders, all Tony could see was the Hulk draw back and punch. Hard.

The alarms fell silent, leaving an eerie quiet across the room broken only by Evie’s terrified sobs. The Hulk stood motionless, his fist still where it landed and shoulders rising and falling harshly. He was hunched, forehead against the wall, shielding whatever had just happened from the room’s view. For the longest moment no one moved.

Then part of the plaster on the wall fell down around where his fist was buried in it and broke the horrified spell that had fallen and people began to breathe again.

Loki was sat at the Hulk’s feet, back flat against the wall as he stared up at the creature in silent terror, his arms wrapped tight around his stomach. The punch had landed directly next to his head, leaving him unharmed if not badly shaken. The Hulk snarled at him, but his gaze kept returning to the trickster’s protective stance, something cutting through the rage to recall the reason Loki had run and not fought.

The Hulk took a lumbering step backwards, grunted again, then suddenly collapsed in on himself. The settling pile of clothes stirred to reveal Bruce knelt in the centre of them, looking utterly bewildered and lost. Then his gaze focussed on Loki and his expression turned to horror.

“Oh God, no! Did I-?”

“No. No, your Mr Hyde stopped himself.” The trickster’s voice was shaking and barely above a whisper. “He remembered and stopped himself.” It had been the first time he had been face-to-face with the Hulk since the aborted invasion and it felt as terrible as the first time, even if the results
were different.

A large piece of plaster fell down from the huge hole in the wall to shatter next to the prince and he flinched.

“You’re sure you’re okay—?” Bruce was scrabbling at the torn clothing to cover himself, but was still managing to worry.

“Fine. I’m fine.” Loki didn’t sound it, but was already searching out his husband’s gaze. “And you? All of you?”

Because they didn’t look fine at all.

“Rhodey…” Was all Tony needed to say.

War-machine was a dead weight across his colleague’s shoulders, and when laid flat down on one of the sofas didn’t stir. Tony went to release the armour, but Bruce – still scrambling with his torn, oversized clothing – hurriedly stopped him.

“Don’t; the suit is protecting his spine!”

“What happened?” Loki had pulled himself to his feet and was at his husband’s side, trying to assess the situation from the little he could see.

“Severed spinal cord. Jarvis is monitoring and he’s still breathing but…” Tony was staring down at his best friend like he thought James was going to vanish in front of him. “It’s C1, C2. He’s broken his goddamn neck.”

“I have a Shield doctor prepped and on her way, Sir.” Jarvis, as efficient as ever. “ETA twenty minutes.”

“Is that soon enough?” Loki asked. When there wasn’t an immediate reply he glanced up sharply. “Jarvis, will that be soon enough?”

“I can’t say, sir. It may not be.”

“Is anyone else this badly wounded?” The question was directed at Tony, but when the man didn’t answer, Loki turned to his brother instead. “Thor? Are any of you this badly wounded?”

“Wha-? No. No, Colonel Rhodes is the most grievously injured of our group.” Which said a lot, since they all looked appalling. “Why?”

The answer was apparent enough when the trickster crouched down beside the sofa and placed one hand over the armour covering Rhodey’s neck. Despite saying that his magic was unusable he hadn’t been quite truthful – it could be used alright, it would just have repercussions. But they were repercussions on him, and not the twins, so he would willingly take this hit.

Still; the spine is a complex, delicate and complicated thing. Nerve and bone and sinew and blood vessels all making sure that the whole body can communicate. Loki’s healing skills were rudimentary, and he could in no way fully solve the problem, but he could help seal up a severed spinal cord. It would keep Rhodes alive until the doctor arrived, at least.

“Loki!” Bruce seemed to realise what he was doing first, but knew better than to try and interrupt someone in the middle of a medical procedure. However, his realisation made Tony recognise the consequences too, and dive to Loki’s side. It was a few more moments before the trickster gasped
for breath, then collapsed sideways, his husband being the only thing stopping him from smacking his head on the floor.

“Sir, the Colonel’s vitals are looking steadier.” Jarvis said. “He appears to be stabilising.”

“Good. That’s good.” Tony didn’t look like he meant the words though; sat where he was on the floor, grey and shaken, his husband unconscious in his arms.

For a very long moment no one spoke; silence filling the room as the Earth-bound Avengers took in the state of their comrades. Shell shock was the only thing that came to mind.

All the blood and mud in the world didn’t mean a thing compared to the wild-eyed thousand mile stare that refused to meet any other gaze. Even Sleipnir, where he lay slumped, had a glassy expression, his ears flat back against his skull and eyes showing the whites.

“Tony…” Steve was the one to break the hallowed silence and who asked what they were all thinking. “What happened?” No one expected to hear anything good.

“We…” Stark looked down at Loki in his arms, then at Rhodes – broken and battered on the sofa – and shook his head.

“We lost.” Bruce filled in for him. “We lost the battle.”

“So Asgard…”

“Asgard is gone.”
Chapter 40

It was one thing for the Avengers to hear that somewhere like Alfheim had been destroyed, but for it to be somewhere that they knew, somewhere that two of their number came from and they themselves had visited was…harrowing.

“By gone, you mean…”

“I mean gone, Steve. Wiped out, obliterated, destroyed. Asgard is gone.” Bruce’s voice was raising, green flickering across his eyes. “We did everything we could, absolutely everything! And it wasn’t enough!”

“Bruce-”

“I need a moment!” He was shaking, and when Natasha tried to put a hand on his arm he shook her off with a harsh snarl.

“He has not changed back from the Hulk once during our time away.” Thor sounded equally out of character as he watched the usually mild mannered scientist storm off. “And the losses would have been worse without him.”

“How long has it been for you guys?” Steve asked.

“About three weeks. And here?”

The Avengers glanced at each other. “Two and a half months.”

There was a broken little noise from Tony, still sat on the floor, as he hugged Loki closer to his chest. They had known there would be a time variance but the difference between weeks and months was huge.

“Sir, the Shield doctor is ten minutes out. The in-house team is prepping the surgery as we speak.”

Jarvis’ announcement spurred some activity amongst the group, with Steve and Sam helping the droid carefully move Rhodes down to the medical bay. The on-site medical team were ready and waiting and were able to take over the surgery prep for when the surgeon arrived.

When the two soldiers reappeared back upstairs little had changed. Tony had moved to the sofa, the armour a crumpled mess of scrap metal on the floor. Loki was still unconscious, but someone had moved him onto the sofa too and his head was in his husband’s lap – hardly something he would have allowed were he conscious.

“The team are keeping Rhodes stable. They seem to be hopeful that he’ll pull through.” Steve said quietly.

Pull through. Not that he would get better, or that he would be alright. Merely that Rhodey would survive.

“What happened to him?” It almost seemed easier, in some perverse way to focus on War-machine’s injuries than the much bigger and much more frightening thought of what had occurred to Asgard. It also gave the returning Avenger’s a moment to breathe.

“He was knocked out of the sky. Must have fallen nearly a thousand feet at speed. The suit can
usually survive that, but it was late into the battle and he’d taken so much damage it was amazing
he could fly at all.” Tony’s voice was still shaking as he answered. “No one could reach him in
time. The impact should have killed him and I don’t quite know how it didn’t.”

“Superior suit design?” Steve offered, and Tony snorted harshly in derision.

“Where’s the rest of the Iron Legion?”

Where were any of the Iron Legion was a better question. Of the sixty plus suits that went out, only
the two occupied ones had returned. And it wasn’t like Tony to abandon his prized creations.

“Fuck knows. We lost more than half within the first hour. Hulk Buster lasted us a whole week, but
the others couldn’t hack it. It was a mess.” Tony was focussing on brushing his fingers through his
husband’s hair, the repetitive action somewhat soothing. “The whole bloody thing was a mess!”

“…Told you not to go…” Loki moved his head slightly, then slowly opened his eyes. “I told
you…”

“Yeah, and I never listen to sense.”

“Rhodes…?”

“He’ll live. Thanks to you. The surgeon is on her way.”

The trickster irritably pushed his husband’s hands away and used the back of the sofa to pull
himself upright. “…How bad was it?”

Tony gestured helplessly, unable to convey what they had faced up in the realm of the Gods. The
silence itself was telling, but Loki looked to his brother for further confirmation.

“Thor?”

The Thunder God was unable to meet his brother’s gaze, staring down at the floor silently. The
unusual lack of response from the usually ebullient Avenger drew everyone else’s attention to him
too, and then to why he wasn’t replying.

Tears were rolling down Thor’s cheeks.

“Thor?” Loki pulled himself to his feet, concern for his brother momentarily over-ruling the
concern for his home world. He genuinely couldn’t say the last time he had seen Thor cry openly in
front of people, let alone the sort of absolute despair the older God was showing. “Thor…Who was
it?”

Who’s dead? Who’s still alive? Who did we lose??

Thor took a gulping breath, still refusing to make eye contact as his gaze darted to Tony – a forlorn
shape curled up on the sofa – and then to Bruce – slumped against the railing of the balcony with a
thousand mile stare.

“Fandral…” He managed. “There was…something brought down the roof…he was leading a
group of civilians…we couldn’t get there in time.”

But there was something more. Loki knew his brother better than anyone, and could see it there in
his despairing gaze. That unspoken name Thor was struggling to acknowledge. A name he couldn’t
bear to think.
“Thor…Who?” Because as hard as it was to lose a friend that wasn’t the pain that Loki was seeing. It was so much deeper than that. “Thor!”

And the word came out as a strangled sob as the thunder God finally managed to meet his brother’s frightened gaze. “…Mother…”

“What…?” But he’d known. That look on Thor’s face; Loki had already known what he was going to hear, because there was only one loss that would truly hit Thor that hard. “How?” He managed.

“She was…there was a group…she fought…too many…” The thunder God couldn’t get the words out, but it hardly mattered since Loki wasn’t really comprehending.

There was no way…it couldn’t be true…

“But…” But Mother was invincible. Untouchable. The glue that held their fractured family together. “No…Thor, no…”

“There was nothing we could do.” Thor whispered.

Loki stumbled back a step from him, struggling to process the very thought of what he had just been told. Of all of the possibilities this had not been something that had even touched his worst nightmares. All fear had been for Tony, for Thor, for Sleipnir. Parents were meant to be untouchable.

“Loki…” Natasha’s hand was on his arm, her voice soft and worried. “Sleipnir’s injured. It looks bad.”

The comment seemed at odds with everything screaming through his head. How was he meant to think of anything else with the news that his mother was dead?

“Loki? Bruce has said he’ll need your help.”

Frigga was dead. Sleipnir wasn’t, and Sleipnir needed him.

Rhodes had been stabilised but they still hadn’t had much by way of news as to whether he would recover or not. Sleipnir had been more difficult to help, since they couldn’t exactly call a vet or farrier out to see to his wounded leg. Bruce wasn’t really up to speed on his equine anatomy, but a broken bone is a broken bone and where it had breached the skin the open wound was the same to deal with as on a human. The issue was far more anaesthesia – human medication was useless on him the same way it was with his Mother and Uncle – and although Sleipnir was insistent that he could go through a medical procedure without anaesthetic that wasn’t an option anyone else wanted to entertain.

Especially after having helped Rhodes, Loki was unable to offer assistance on the matter but he sat outside on the balcony with his son’s head in his lap. It was raining – although no one had the heart to tell Thor to stop it – and Jarvis had been quick to build a make-shift cover over the horse.

“What can be done?” Thor’s voice was gruff and still heavy with grief as he crouched down beside his brother and nephew.

“I need to wait until I have enough strength to at least numb the area.” Loki said quietly.

“I will be fine without you doing that.” Sleipnir was slurring his words; pain and shock taking their
toll. “Had worse. Been through worse.”

“Not even an option, Sleipnir.”

Bruce was busy cleaning up some of the horse’s other wounds, but glanced up at Loki’s admonishment. “We can’t leave it too long; that’s a few days old and it’s going to start setting in the wrong place.”

The trickster nodded. He knew that time was of the essence, but at the same time he just didn’t have the ability to help in the moment. His child was hurting and he couldn’t do anything to fix it.

“Give me another…thirty minutes?” He had known that healing Rhodes was going to take it out of him, but hadn’t appreciated just how bad it would be. Now he felt absolutely useless and Sleipnir was going to require help that he couldn’t reliably provide.

“You can’t push yourself too hard; it hasn’t had an adverse effect so far, but that’s not to say it won’t if you keep going.” Bruce said quickly.

“I have to do something; human medication has no effect so it will have to be me.”

“Maybe not.” They hadn’t realised Tony had been listening, but now the man approached them and held out his phone to Loki. With Merlin’s number on the screen.

The trickster looked at his husband searchingly for a moment, but there wasn’t really the time to debate the choice; they were desperate and needed the help. And if they had someone who could help it was ridiculous not to call them in.

“You ask; he won’t listen to me.”

More like Loki didn’t have the emotional capacity right now to be verbally ripped to shreds – which his son was wont to do. With everything else, the last thing he needed was Merlin’s caustic response to hearing from him.

Tony wasn’t in much of a better emotional state, but of the two was better placed to take the call.

Merlin picked up on the second ring.

“What? Do you even know what time it is over here? There’s-”

“We need your help.”

“Oh now what? Can’t you two exist for just one-”

“Merlin please. Just listen a moment.” And Tony’s voice cracked with tears. “Please.”

“What’s happened? Is it Mòðir?” It was a reasonable assumption given that Merlin knew the difficulties surrounding the pregnancy.

“No, not exactly…There was another attack. Asgard has…Asgard is…” The inability to finish the sentence said everything it needed to.

“I’m on my way.”

The phone call went dead, but Tony hardly had time to react before Jarvis was talking to him out of the little speaker.
“Sir? Someone has materialised in the foyer downstairs – what would you like me to do?”

“Tell him we’re on the thirty second floor balcony.”

He could sense Jarvis’ surprise at that, but the AI didn’t comment and presumably did as he was told. However, Tony’s attention was already re-occupied by his husband and step-son. He knew next to nothing about veterinary work, but Sleipnir’s laboured breathing was a clear sign that he wasn’t doing well and shock was something that was common across species. The broken leg was by far the worst injury, but he knew that the horse was sporting many more minor ones that would all be adding up. He sat down at Loki’s side, running his hand over Sleipnir’ neck and feeling the racing pulse there.

“Here, let me look.”

The newly familiar voice made Tony look up with a start and he heard Loki’s soft tearful gasp as Merlin crouched down next to them, already assessing Sleipnir’s condition. The man shifted aside to let the warlock have better access, knowing that he was only going to be in the way with his non-existent medical knowledge.

“I am going to want an explanation after all of this.” Merlin glanced up at his mother, who nodded wearily.

“Who the hell are you?” Sleipnir was struggling to keep up with current events and the question was slurred as he tried to recognise the new-comer.

“I’m your younger brother. Nice to meet you.”

“Oh. Hi.” The lack of reaction said it all.

Merlin’s hands were glowing as he ran them over the horse’s body, diagnosing and assessing. “You know healing spells aren’t my forte.” He warned, catching Loki’s eye again.

“I can set the bones if you can numb the area.” Bruce had no idea who the interloper was, but since both Tony and Loki appeared familiar with him he decided that introductions could wait. Instead he went with the flow.

“I can do that.” Merlin gripped the broken leg – one hand above the break, the other below – and muttered something under his breath. It was possible to visibly see Sleipnir relax as the spell took hold and banished the pain with it. “How does that feel?”

“Better than it has in days…” Sleipnir had his eyes closed, his ears settling back to a relaxed position from where he’d had them flat against his skull.

“Can you feel this?” With no idea how long the spell might last Bruce was straight in there, giving the wounded leg an experimental poke.

“No…Thankfully.”

“Are you good for me to work on this?”

Sleipnir cracked an eye open to look at the scientist, then nodded and relaxed his head back into Loki’s lap again.

For two people who had never met, Bruce and Merlin worked extremely well together. With someone essentially acting as an anaesthetist Banner was able to set the broken leg, stich up some
of the deeper wounds and apply stinging antiseptic to everything in sight. Despite all of Sleipnir’s bravado about being able to deal with the procedures without the help of a numbing agent it had definitely been one of Tony’s better ideas to bring in the extra help.

With Sleipnir being seen to it gave Stark a chance to get his bearings and ground himself somewhat. The suit pieces had been cleared away – most likely by Jarvis – and the droid was carefully shoring up the section of wall that the Hulk had punched.

“There is a large whisky sitting on the bar for you, sir.” Jarvis said carefully.

“Bruce wouldn’t approve.”

“Under the circumstances I believe it prudent. And you should take it up with Miss Evelyn, not me. She was the one who poured it.”

Evie was still pouring, in fact. There was a glass for each Avenger, plus Merlin, and she’d filled the fruit bowl with water for Sleipnir. After a moments consideration she tipped the rest of the bottle of whisky into it too.

“Normally I’d argue with you about this, but I think we all rather need it.” Tony said quietly.

“I know; tea is probably better, but this is quicker.” The girl’s hands were shaking when she put the bottle down.

It was quicker, and whilst Tony had long stopped making a habit out of drinking hard spirits it went down far smoother than a cup of tea probably would have done. The harsh burn of alcohol helped clear Tony’s head a little as well.

The other Avengers slowly followed suit, accepting the time-honoured remedy to shattered nerves and shocking news. Even Thor, on whom strong whisky had no more effect than water, found some comfort in the tradition.

For Tony things seemed to be happening in stop-motion. He’d been outside, now he was in. Evie had been by his side, now she had gone, out on the balcony passing out more glasses to Bruce, Merlin, the fruit bowl down by Sleipnir’s head.

“Tony, do you need to sit down? You’re looking a little green around the gills.” Steve had appeared beside him, a hand on his elbow. “The last thing we need right now is another casualty.”

“I’m fine.”

“Tony-”

Then there was someone else on his other side. Smaller, slighter than Steve, silencing the Super Soldier.

“It’s alright, Uncle Steve, I’ve got him.”

He’d been by the bar, now he was sat on the couch. The glass was full again, but this time with water. He was leaning against the cushions, but then they had been removed, one placed under his arm to support a fracture he hadn’t realised was there, another replaced to comfort broken ribs.

If asked he would have said it was Steve looking out for him – since both Loki and Bruce were elsewhere – but when his wavering vision cleared again he saw his daughter carefully making sure everything was just so. She wasn’t crying any more, but her eyes were red, and the tear tracks
hadn’t dried yet. It took Tony just slightly too long to realise that as confusing and fractured as everything was for him, the girl had just lost her grandmother and one of the two worlds she belonged to.

“Birdy…”

“Uncle Bruce is nearly done with Sleipnir; he’ll be able to look you over then.”

He wanted to say that he didn’t need Bruce to look over any anything. That painkillers and a splint would sort it all out without assistance. But the words didn’t want to come as the world tipped and spun in continued confusing circles. His knee was wet and he looked down to see that he’d spilt the glass of water, soaking through the filthy material of his trousers.

There was a voice, someone calmly and authoritatively requesting assistance from Jarvis, then someone forcing him to lie down on the sofa, lifting his feet up onto the armrest. It was done carefully and taking the various broken bones into consideration.

Evie had disappeared from his line of sight, replaced by Jarvis, but he could hear her voice behind him, quite calm and collected.

“…it’s just shock, yes?”

“Of course, Miss Evelyn. And you recognised it very promptly.”

“Do we need Uncle Bruce?”

“No, I can deal with this.”

Tony watched in muzzy confusion as Jarvis scanned, then deftly bound his arm up in the quick-setting gel strips. The thin layer they provided set as hard as any traditional plaster cast.

The confusion began to lift as the position Jarvis had set him in took effect and the whisky hit the right spots. Tony could see his daughter still bustling around sorting things out, but with his mind clearing he took the activity for what it was; distraction techniques. Doing anything to keep her mind off of what had happened.

“Birdy.” His voice was stronger this time, not that weak quavering thing it was from a few minutes ago. Grabbing Jarvis’s arm he used the protesting droid to haul himself upright. The motion didn’t sit well with his ribs, but he didn’t feel like passing out any more, so that was a bonus. Evie didn’t even look round at him – she was washing up the used glasses, of all the stupid things! “Birdy, leave it.”

“I have to do something.”

“Evelyn.”

It was probably the use of her full name that did it; Tony rarely used it unless they were having an argument. The glasses were abandoned in the sink, one falling and shattering.

It was easy sometimes, with all the crap they were going through and everything they were facing, to treat Evie as just one of the guys. She certainly went out of her way to try and act like one of them and they had gone along with it. Sitting in on meetings, all of her training, listening in on missions – with how worrisome things were it was easy to just let the girl go along with it.

And so easy to forget that she was just a kid.
However, curled up next to her father, sobbing in his arms, she was the child they kept forgetting her to be. She had grown up with the fear of losing a parent hanging over her, but that axe had never fallen. She had never been exposed to the death of a loved one until now.

Frigga may have only been introduced into the girl’s life recently, but the wish for a grandparent had always been there. To gain and then lose one so quickly was a hard thing to deal with. Added to that the destruction of a world that Evie had just been introduced to and she was going to be devastated.

He didn’t want to speculate how Loki was feeling.

The atmosphere in the main room didn’t improve by much. Shock had given way to quiet horror and grief; even those who hadn’t travelled to Asgard knew that this was a blow of some consequence.

Sleipnir had moved inside with some help from Jarvis and was now sprawled out on the deep pile rug. His leg was in a similar cast to Tony’s arm, holding the bone immobile and as comfortable as it could be. Loki was still sat with him, fingers untangling his mane through millennia old habit as they spoke quietly.

“…after the third level fell it became chaos. The remaining soldiers knew they had to protect the treasury at all costs; the Allfather had told us all that the creatures were after the Tesseract and Gauntlet – that if those were taken nothing would stop them from razing Asgard to the ground.”

Sleipnir’s voice was stronger than it had been, but he sounded so tired. “So we abandoned the civilians. Left them to fend for themselves as best they could because if we didn’t protect the treasury there was no point in fighting at all.”

“There was no choice. You had no choice.”

“We told them to make for the Observatory, Heimdall was holding it and it was still functioning.”

Sleipnir said quietly. “But they were afraid, and we couldn’t shepherd them. They ran for the great halls of the palace instead.”

Loki didn’t need the rest of the narrative to know what had happened. Asgard’s ancient palace halls had always been the place of refuge during a siege and it was natural that the terrified civilians had fled there as they always had in the past. The guards had known; they had seen what destruction had been wrought in Alfheim and knew that hiding would not work.

But to save Asgard they had to protect the treasury, and that left no room to herd civilians.

The great halls and ancient shelters had fallen and there was nothing the warriors and soldiers and humble guards could do.

“Amma tried to lead them. She took it upon herself to persuade as many as she could to follow her to the Bifrost.” Sleipnir’s ears flicked, what would have been a smile on a human. “She cut through hordes of those creatures time and again.”

That was an image Loki could well imagine; his mother had always been a fierce competitor those rare times she had stepped onto the sparring grounds. It was so like her to defend the weak.

“Where did Heimdall send everyone?”

“Everyone!” The horse aptly snorted the word. “Maybe a hundred. If that. Amma did what she
could, but in a panic even the queen is hard to obey. She fought like a demon, but those with her
couldn’t defend themselves and fell like all the others.”

“Sleipnir, where?”

“Where the fuck do you think?”

Because which realm was closest to Asgard? Where was possibly the worst place for a group of
Asgardian refugees to end up?

“But surely…The Jötnar allowed the civilians in their realm?” Because Loki couldn’t imagine that
happening. He may have made peace with what he was, but had no trust or love for his people and
couldn’t believe that the Jötunns would act kindly towards Asgardians.

“We had to make a choice. It was stay and certainly die, or run and possibly die.” Sleipnir snapped.
“Our people were being slaughtered! We’d seen what happened to the other realms; we knew we
had to get as many out as possible. What were we meant to do?! It was a massacre.”

As Sleipnir told it, the Jötnar had already seen what was happening on Asgard. There was no love
lost between the two races – especially thanks to Loki’s past actions – but the current Jötunn king
was far wiser than Laufey had ever been and knew that his people would never withstand the
creatures should Jötunnheim be attacked in turn. They needed allies and with Asgard screaming for
help the king had seen a chance to join with an old enemy to face a new one.

The refugees had been accepted.

“What happened to the armoury? Were the Tesseract and Gauntlet taken?”

Sleipnir flicked his ears again and slumped his head down on Loki’s lap so that he couldn’t make
eye-contact.

“They were taken. I was there long enough to see the armoury fall. Heimdall held the Bifrost with
the Hulk’s help up until the very last moment. Our group was the last through and he sent us here.”

“And Heimdall?”

The horse sighed heavily. “I don’t know. He sent us through and that was the last we saw of him. I
thought he was going to follow us.”

“And evidently he didn’t.” Loki was mildly surprised at the swell of grief that followed those
words. He would have thought that with the pain of losing his mother there would be very little
extra emotion left over. “How did you break your leg?”

“I don’t even remember. So much happened…”

“A pillar fell; Sleipnir was caught under it.” Thor must have been listening to the quiet
conversation because he filled in the gap in the story.

“Yeah, something like that.” The horse snorted softly.

Loki brushed his hand along one of the newly healed cuts on his son’s neck. “I’m sorry I wasn’t
there.”

“It wouldn’t have changed anything, Möðhy. You know that; you were there at Alfheim and the
end result was just the same. A million more soldiers and it wouldn’t have made a difference.”
Sleipnir rolled his large head back again to look up. “Fostri Tony told me why you couldn’t. I was glad to hear it. There needs to be some good news at the moment.”

“But possibly terrible timing.”

“You’re historically never good with timing.”

Thor managed a huff of morbid laughter at that comment as he sat down heavily on the floor next to his brother and nephew. “A truer word was never spoken.”

“Were you hurt?” The trickster had barely spoken with anyone else since going to his son’s aid.

“Minimally. Merlin healed anything serious.” The older God grimaced. “He does not have your skill with medical spell work.”

“And I have little skill myself.” Loki looked around the room. “Where is he?”

“On the balcony. I told him what had occurred in Asgard.” Thor tilted his head in the direction of the outside doors. “You should speak with him. I’ll sit with Sleipnir.”

“I am hundreds of thousands of years old. I do not require a baby sitter.” The horse’s tone was petulant, but he readily lifted his head to let Loki move and rise.

It was still raining heavily outside; but dawn was slowly turning a dark world to a grim grey. Merlin was standing at the far end of the balcony, up against the railings and looking out over the soaked city. The single tiny area he stood in was unnaturally dry. It was a spell Loki recognised from his own times of having to stay out of Thor’s tantrums. As it was, with his lack of magic he was soaked to the skin by the time he reached the younger man.

“Will you not come inside?”

“And play happy families? No thank you.” The response was short and snappish.

“Hardly happy. A world is dead, her people slaughtered and my mother among them. And Tony…”

“Yes, Tony; it was smart of him to call me.”

“He is a smart person. Rather famous for it.” Loki leant on the railing, surveying the grey view. “I’m surprised you came, though.”

“He said please.” Merlin flashed a very quick smile at his parent. “I didn’t take him to be the type to say it without meaning. I will confess that my first thought was something had happened to you.”

“I frightened him. The Colonel Rhodes was grievously injured and I had to intervene to save him. The effort cost me and I lost consciousness.”

“That explains Mr Stark’s emotion then.”

“Indeed.”

“Thor told me about Asgard. I’m sorry about your mother.”

“She was your Grandmother too.” Loki glanced sideways at his son and smiled faintly. “She would have loved you. I am sorry you never met her.” He quickly looked away again, but not before
Merlin caught the tell-tale glimmer of tears.

“I should go. You all need time to mourn your loss.”

“You’re welcome here. You are welcome to stay.”

“I don’t think that would be a good idea. But I will keep in contact.”

“You never do.” Loki didn’t even sound angry, just so tired as he leant heavily against the railings.

“I will this time.” When that didn’t get a response Merlin leant over to place a hand on the trickster’s arm. “Móðhir, I will keep in better contact. I promise. The stakes seem to be higher than ever these days.”

“The stakes always get higher Merlin; that’s why the analogy exists.”

“You know what I mean. Things aren’t usually this apocalyptic and I’m worried for the future.”

Loki managed a small smile at that, his gaze fond as he glanced at his son. “The future is never certain. I know it looks particularly bleak at the moment, but we have to hope. There are always things to fight for.”

“For you maybe. You’ve got a family here.”

“You’ve got a family here. Tony seems to constantly worry about you, and Evelyn would love to get to know you. You’re the only humanoid sibling she currently has, and certainly easier to contact than Sleipnir usually is.”

Merlin had fought against being included in the ‘family’ title for so long that it came as a surprise when he nodded slightly. “I can keep in contact with Evelyn too if you want.”

It took a lot to tamp down the familiar rising feelings of frustration. “It’s not about what I want, Merlin. Forcing you to have a relationship with your sister is never going to be a good plan. Just… Just talk to her or something. Decide for yourself if the two of you should keep contact, or if you even like each other.”

“I suppose that idea has merit.”

MWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWM

For all that he had waited months for Tony to return home – desperate with worry and fear – Loki couldn’t find sleep that night.

Sleipnir was sprawled out in the living room, taking up the whole of the large rug in front of the television and snoring softly. The blue cast on his leg stood out starkly against his grey coat, as did the livid scars that hadn’t been healed. There was a large fluffy throw blanket on the couch that Loki pulled off and carefully draped over his son. Sleipnir’s ear twitched but he didn’t wake. Arthur had had curled up next to the horse’s head – possibly drawn to him because he recognised a fellow Asgardian creature, or maybe just attaching himself to the only other non-biped in the building.

There was a dim light further down the corridor, spilling out from under the kitchen door that drew Loki towards it. It could have been any number of people but he wasn’t surprised to find his brother sat at the table, staring silently at a steaming cup of tea.
“Thor?”

The thunder God looked up and hurriedly wiped his eyes when he saw his younger brother in the doorway, trying to smile in welcome.

“What are you doing awake?”

“My mind won’t quiet.” Thor had left the boxes of tea out, so Loki made his own cup and sat down at the table. “I dozed a little, but couldn’t sleep. You?”

“The same.” Thor sighed heavily. “Every time I close my eyes…” He shook his head. “Do you remember when we were young? Our first battle?”

“Svartalfheim, the Dark Elves.”

“That moment back then when they had us surrounded; when we knew it was over and there was no hope. When we knew they would do to us and had no way of stopping it.” The thunder God glanced up at this brother. “And then afterwards – as their prisoners – when they…When I could hear you screaming and could do nothing. And knew they would come for me next and could do nothing…I swore then I would never again let that happen! Never again!” He had to let go of the tea mug to avoid smashing it. “I swore I would never be that vulnerable again! I would never allow myself to feel that fear and terror ever again! And yet…”

“And yet you did?”

“I…froze.” Thor looked away quickly, blinking hard. “When Mother was lost I just…froze. Asgard was in pieces, friends and family were dying and I could do nothing. I was frozen in place, Mjölnir loose at my side and our people dying all around me. And I was right back there again. I was that scared little boy who couldn’t fight, couldn’t protect anyone, couldn’t do anything!”

“I’m sorry I wasn’t there.”

“I’m glad you weren’t. I wouldn’t wish the sight of our dying world upon anyone.” He looked so small. A broken man. Loki had seen his brother after bad battles – after really bad battles – but this was something new. No matter what they had seen and faced in the past there was always some sort of spark still there afterwards. Whether as anger or grief or jubilation Thor came out of the other side of war with a fire of emotion in him.

And now he hadn’t.

“There are many who would be dead without you.” Loki said softly.

“Does that change anything?”

“Not particularly. But I have to say something.”

There was a long moment of silence before Thor sniffed inelegantly and scrubbed at his eyes again. “I fear for the survivors.”

“I thought the Jötnar were accepting of the refugees?”

“They were, but that is not the world for Aesir for any length of time. You know how cold it is there; that’s not sustainable for us. Not after everything they’ve been through.” A bitter smile twisted his lips. “If I am struggling to come to terms with what I saw I cannot imagine how a civilian must be feeling. I fear they won’t get the support they need.”
“Father will know what to do for them.”

“Father is a king without a kingdom. And you know that Mother was always the one to champion the people.”

Loki shrugged helplessly. “I don’t know what you want me to say here. There is no silver lining here. No happy ending. I can’t get you to Jötunheim, at least not for another few months, and we have no idea what happened to Heimdall so no communication. All we can do is wait this out.”

“Until what? Until Jötunheim is attacked too? Until Midgard falls?!”

“It won’t come to that!”

“You don’t know that!” Thor leapt to his feet, his mug flying to smash on the tiled floor as he stormed over to the window. “You have no idea what is going to happen, and neither do I! And you’re just sitting there trying to tell me, what? That it will all be alright?!”

“I can tell you that we’re all going to die slowly and horribly if you prefer.”

“Your humour is not appreciated!” The thunder God slammed the flat of his hand against the window pane, resting his forehead against the cool glass. Then he sighed, heavily. “Look at us…Mother would not want us to argue.”

“Well, she wouldn’t exactly be shocked.”

Thor turned back to see his brother’s wan smile, and managed to return the expression. “No…No I suppose she would not. You know, I managed to speak to her…when we first got there.”

It was the hesitation that made Loki query the statement. “About what?”

“You. Your current situation.”

“My current…Oh.” His smile brightened. “You told her?”

“I decided we couldn’t guarantee the outcome of the battle so I took our parents aside and told them the moment there was a chance. I wanted them to know in case something happened.” Thor also managed to look happier. “She was absolutely delighted. I don’t think poor Tony knew what hit him.”

Loki could well imagine that moment. “Thank you.”

To know that his mother had died after hearing good news, that she had been happy and excited about more grandchildren made the pain of her loss ease ever so slightly in some ways. It hit harder than ever in other ways though: Frigga would never meet her youngest grandchildren.

Thor could see the moment that something inside Loki just broke.

“Brother…” It was such an instinctive action for the older God to pull the younger against him, holding him tight as the tidal wave of grief hit Loki hard.

“I can’t imagine her gone…” The words were indistinct, so full of pain. “She was…She was the only one…”

She was the only one who always believed in me.

Through so many millennia of confusion and jealousy and isolation and loneliness. Frigga had
always been there. A calm word in the face of jealous anger, a warm embrace when the teasing of Thor’s friends grew too much, a listening ear to a young man who just couldn’t work out why he didn’t fit into the world like everyone else.

She had listened, encouraged, cheered, praised, believed. The parent who had never put him down for using tricks or intellect against stronger opponents. The one who saw how much he struggled and praised his efforts when it was clear how hard he had strived to achieve things that just came so easily to Thor.

And Loki couldn’t begin to fathom a life in which she wasn’t there. He didn’t want to fathom that sort of existence. It wasn’t allowed to happen. She had to meet the twins, delight in being a Grandmother again. She needed to be there to bestow all of that adoration and affection onto the two babies and spoil them rotten. She needed to be there for Evie, making sure the older girl was still getting some attention whilst everyone fawned over the babies. She needed to take Evie out for coffee or a walk or something to get away from the crying and diaper changing.

Loki realised he had never seen his Mother in Midgardian dress. Now he never would.

All of the should-have-been’s, and never-would-be’s and conversations that would now never be spoken piled up and fell in that terrible realisation.

She was gone. Frigga was gone.

“It’s not fair.” The statement was so childish; as if the universe ever cared about fairness. But Thor simply hugged him tighter.

“I know.” His voice was gruff and heavy with his own tears. “It isn’t.”

Despite everything that had happened, Evie still got up early to go to the gym the next morning. As much as she had initially hated waking up at – what she deemed – an unreasonable hour, the routine was calming and stress-running on the treadmill was quite cathartic. In fact, stress-running often led to personal bests.

This time, however, when she finished she realised someone was watching.

“Uh, hi?”

Merlin was stood in the large glass doorway to the gym, two cups of coffee in hand.

“Good morning. I’ve bought you a drink.”

“Thanks?” Having never really met the man – they hadn’t spoken the night before – Evie watched him warily as he walked onto the sprung floor. “Um…I probably shouldn’t be drinking a diuretic straight after training though…”

“Of course.” The warlock glanced down at the cups and one swiftly morphed into a bottle of water. Evie’s eyes widened, curious despite herself.

“Oh wow…”

“You can’t do that?”

“The magic gene skipped me.” She finally took a few steps towards him, enough to accept the
water, and was given a faint smile in return. “So…I’m assuming Möðhy told you to come and talk to me?”

“What makes you assume that?”

“You don’t seem like the type of person to start a conversation unless you need to.” Evie said with a shrug. “And since I get on really well with Sleipnir I think Möðhy is hoping the same will happen between us.”

“You don’t sound so sure.”

She shrugged. “You come across quite stern in your emails.”

Merlin’s faint smirk became a little more of an actual smile. “Yes, I suppose I do. I am willing to try if you are, though? Not that I think we’re likely to find a common ground very quickly.”

“Well…I generally stick the TV on whilst I stretch out after a run-” Evie waved a hand towards the large wall-mounted screen, that Jarvis obligingly turned on. “-so if you wanted to hang around we could watch some shitty reality show and rip it to pieces?”

The warlock raised an amused eyebrow. “Is that how you usually get to know someone?”

“Sleipnir and I sat up until stupid-o’clock in the morning watching musicals when we first met, so yeah.”

It was hard to tell if Merlin was simply humouring Loki’s request to make an effort or if he genuinely wanted to get to know his little half-sister. However, he took Evie’s invitation to sit down with her and start a dialogue.

“One request; can we please not watch one of those dreadful talk shows?”

“I guess.”

Tony woke up grudgingly and took a long time to realise where he was. His hand was already up in the air in the summoning position and the suit was materialising around him before he recognised the bedroom he was in.

“Tony, is that you?” Loki’s voice came from the bathroom and made Stark jump.

“Sir, I have disarmed the suit.”

Jarvis was more familiar – Jarvis had been with him throughout the battle in Asgard, and was a voice that was safe. Safe meant his heart rate could wind down from a furious hum and the adrenaline could turn off. Safe meant he could register that his husband was talking to him and that he didn’t need to be ready to jump immediately into a fight.

“It’s okay Jarvis; the day I need protection from Tony Stark is the day I get thrown out of a window.”

Tony felt the gentle hands carefully removing the gauntlet from around his wrist before his brain could really comprehend that he was seeing the trickster sat next to him on the bed.

“Are you saying you think I could throw you out a window?” He murmured.
“I’m saying you might well try.” Loki finished dismantling the parts of the suit that had managed to converge on their owner and dropped them to the floor. “But you would fail.”

“Hmm, I’m due some payback for the window thing.”

“Hardly; you impregnated me.”

“…Oh yeah.”

“Did you sleep okay?”

Tony wiped a hand across his eyes. “I guess? I don’t remember dreaming, but I don’t feel very rested.” He finally managed to focus on Loki and frowned slightly. “And you? You look about as good as I feel.”

“I’ve just spent the past fifteen minutes throwing up; I’m not going to look very good after that.” There was enough gentle humour in the statement for Tony to know it wasn’t something to worry over.

“Are you done or am I in the firing line here?”

“I’m done.” Loki smirked slightly. “Do you need to sleep some more?”

“Nah; I want food.”

“I’ll go and sort something; I’ll meet you down in the kitchen.”

Tony took his time in showering and getting changed. Other than a quick clean up the previous night he hadn’t properly washed since leaving for Asgard and the hot water was a luxury he had genuinely forgotten could feel so good.

“Jarvis; has Loki been okay? Is there anything you think I should know that he’s unlikely to tell me?”

“He told Miss Romanov about the pregnancy, and then asked me to break the news to everyone else.” Jarvis answered. “It went down well, although some were more weirded out than others.”

“Good to know. And Loki himself?”

“He’s been … as good as expected.”

Tony huffed with morbid laughter as he rinsed the shampoo out of his hair. “That good, huh? He’s obviously still being sick, has that been any better?”

“Why are you asking me instead of your husband, sir?”

“Because he won’t tell me; he’ll just say he’s been fine and refuse to elaborate.”

“That’s probably accurate.” Jarvis sounded amused. “He is still very sick, but it is noticeably better than it was. He’s been sleeping very poorly though; nightmares mostly. He didn’t exactly sleep last night and spent most of the time in the kitchen with Thor.”

Stark rolled his eyes. “And he didn’t mention a word of that when I woke up.”

“Well he wouldn’t, would he?”
“And you’ve grown sassier in my absence. Too much time with Evie.” He grudgingly decided that it was time to leave the hot water and blindly grabbed for a towel. “Has Birdy been okay?”

“No. She’s been terrified what would happen to you, of course. She’s also been sleeping poorly, but not as badly as your husband.”

“Oh God…” Tony abandoned his attempts to dry off, leaning against the wall for a moment. “I didn’t want to leave them. You know that, right?”

“Of course sir. And they know it too. But it didn’t make your absence any easier.”

“I guess…”

“I have left some clothes out on the bed for you.” Jarvis prompted when Tony made no move to continue drying himself.

“Yeah…yeah thanks, buddy.”

In the following days it was difficult to fall back into a normal routine. Thor was grieving for his lost family and friends, as well as his home-world, and Tony was struggling with the returning symptoms of PTSD brought on by the battle. Bruce was hardly seen outside of his suite of rooms; having spent so long as the Hulk it was taking a long time to re-find himself.

Rhodes was still in a coma. Apparently he was stable, but given that the doctors couldn’t reliably say if he was going to wake up it was hard to be happy about the situation. Tony had spent a large amount of time sat with the unconscious man, possibly more time than he had spent with his actual family.

And time not spent with Rhodes was spent down in the workshops working on Gods-knew-what, falling straight back into the bad habits of barely eating and never sleeping. The alcohol was staying out of the picture at least, but only to be replaced with energy drinks. Jarvis was constantly ferrying out uneaten food and cold coffee.

They had had the added problem of what to do with Sleipnir, as well.

He was far too big to stay cooped up in the living room, but with eight legs – one in a bright blue cast – that he couldn’t hide there was no real way he could go out on the balcony either.

After a long discussion between the two brothers (with no small amount of prodding from Loki) Sleipnir grudgingly agreed that the best plan was probably to leave with Merlin and go back to the Warlock’s home in England. Apparently he lived in a converted farm house, and was currently only keeping cars in the stables so could easily air some out for the horse. It also meant that Sleipnir could have full range of a considerable number of fields, other horses for company and a magic user on hand to help with his injuries and who could hide his extra legs.

With no news from Heimdall, from anyone outside of the realm, it was the best they could do.

“Hey.”

Loki glanced up from his book at the sound of his husband’s voice. He had commandeered his favourite hchair in the library and was surprised that he had even been spotted. He tended to curl
up when reading which meant he could be hard to see since the chair had a high back to it.

“Yes?” It was nearly two weeks since they had had something that could have been even vaguely considered a conversation and the apathy in his question showed.

“You okay if we talk a bit?”

It was something. He put the book to one side to look up expectantly. “I’m always here if you want to talk.”

“Don’t say that. I’m meant to say that.” Tony groaned. He rested his arms on the back of the chair, so that he could lean over to see his husband.

“I think either of us can say it really.”

“No. You’re going through so much shit at the moment and I’ve holed myself up in the lab again.”

“You’re going through a lot too. It was probably best for us to process things in our own ways for a while. Have a little bit of space.”

“But we shouldn’t have to. We’re meant to do these things together.”

“We can do these things together. We don’t have to. We have the option. Sometimes just knowing the option is there is what’s needed. Had I really needed some support I could have easily gone down to the lab.”

“But-”

Loki reached up to tap Stark on the nose. “Tony, you came here with a purpose. What did you want?”


“Apologise? What for?”

“I’ve been really absent recently and…and that sucks. And I’m sorry. And…I’m not so good at apologising? But I’m sorry. Whether you think you needed me or not, I should have been here.”

“Tony; it’s fine. If it will stop you feeling guilty then I accept your apology. But it isn’t needed.”

“I brought you an ‘I’m sorry’ gift anyway.”

Loki had to smile at that. “Well I’ve never been one to turn down gifts.” He shifted somewhat to sit up properly as Tony reached down and held up the bad he had dropped behind the back of the chair. The smell that rose from it was mouth-watering. “What is that?”

Stark grinned. “Well, despite Merlin’s herbal tea gunk, I know you’re still being sick, and you haven’t been eating very well. And a little Birdy told me you had some cravings when you were pregnant with her so I made an educated guess you might be feeling the same way again.”

The brown paper bag had a grease stain that nearly blotched out the name **Arora’s pastries and bakery** on the side, but Loki recognised the logo and his face lit up.

“I didn’t know they were still in business!”

“Yup! I didn’t know which ones you liked, so I got all of them and hoped for the best.” Tony
handed over the bag, pleased to see the wide smile now shining across Loki’s face.

“Oh, I never had a favourite; just whichever looked the nicest on any given day.” The trickster had opened the bag and the delicious smell of freshly baked pastries wafted out. He pulled out the top Danish pastry, a huge swirl of flaking goodness with currants poking through the layers. “They’re still warm!”

“Oh, I never had a favourite; just whichever looked the nicest on any given day.” The trickster had opened the bag and the delicious smell of freshly baked pastries wafted out. He pulled out the top Danish pastry, a huge swirl of flaking goodness with currants poking through the layers. “They’re still warm!”

“Only the best, of course.”

Loki laughed at that. “Thank you. Here, join me?” He shifted so that there was just enough room for the two of them on the chair. It took some rearranging until they could both sit comfortably; the prince leant against his husband and legs kicked carelessly over the arm of the chair.

“You’re getting crumbs all over both of us.”

“Mhmm, yes, I probably am.”

“You could have just said you were craving those; they were easy enough to get hold of.”

“I don’t enjoy pandering to the usual stereotypes of pregnancy. I feel I have done an admirable job keeping my hormones in check recently; especially given all that has happened. I am not going to ruin that now by admitting I have food cravings.”

“At least it isn’t something weird like chocolate fish fingers or something.”

“I suppose.” The trickster tilted his head back so that he was looking up at Tony. “Thank you for this, I appreciate it.”

“I’m still concerned about you. Even if I’m hiding in my labs, you and Evie are still my number one priorities.”

“I assume you were working on something useful down there, at least?”

Stark shrugged, a little awkwardly given he had Loki resting against his chest. “Weapons.” He caught his husband’s surprised frown and cut him off as Loki tried to speak. “I know! I know I said I was done with that. I know I keep saying I’m done with that but…The universe is a lot smaller than it used to be, and sooner or later this planet is going to be in the firing line. Another few months and you’ll be back to your usual badass self and I won’t need to worry so much about you, but Evie’s still just a kid, and we’re going to have two new-borns to keep safe as well. I thought we only had to worry about a war with Hydra, but now I’m barely thinking about those guys. If we end up with the invasion that I think will happen we need to be a lot more prepared.”

Loki was silent for a long moment, his free hand moving down to rest on his stomach as he thought over Stark’s words. “I don’t know if Earth can be prepared.” He said finally. “These things, these creatures of Thanos. They’ve entirely wiped out three worlds now. Alfheim was strong, Asgard was stronger, and they’ve destroyed both.”

“You guys didn’t have the weapons we can make here.”

The edge to the statement made the trickster twist to look at his husband, the Danish pastry forgotten in his hand. “Nuclear?” The way Tony looked away sheepishly made Loki scowl. “What is the point in destroying the enemy if you destroy the very people you are protecting at the same time?!”

“It’s a last resort.”
“That’s what everyone says, Tony! And if you use them then other countries will and—”

“Hey, hey.” Tony buried his face in his husband’s long hair, arms momentarily tightening protectively around the taller man. “Hey Capricorn, stop it. I’m not trying to start nuclear war here; I just want to be prepared. And it’s hardly all I’ve been working on. I’d have three eyes by now if I’d spent the last few weeks sat in a lab playing with uranium.”

“That’s not how it works. What else have you been designing then?”

“Well, I lost the Iron Legion that I took to Asgard with me, so I’ve been rebuilding them, although that’s mostly an automated process now that Jarvis has the scaffolds in place.” Stark said quietly. “Then I looked at updating what we already have on the roof, and reinforcing the panic rooms. We need structures that can withstand this whole tower coming down on top of them. And then I started looking into how to protect at least this city, if not further.”

“You would try to defend the whole of New York City?”

“Yes. And if I can’t defend it you can be damn well sure I’ll avenge it.”

Loki caught the humour that crept into the man’s voice, but it took him a moment longer to get the joke. When he did he rolled his eyes.

“I am truly glad I won’t be the one facing you all down when the time comes.”

“I’ll admit it’s much nicer having you on our side this time around.”

“Whenever that time may be.” The trickster shifted uncomfortably, a frown briefly crossing his face.

“What is it?”

“I’m being kicked in the kidneys.” He had kept the glamour up as routine, even in private. However, when he saw Tony’s delighted smile at the reference to the twins he waved a hand and let the mirage drop so that the pregnancy was suddenly very evident.

“Is it rude of me to say that you’re huge? Because, seriously, you’re huge.”

“It’s terribly rude, but I’ll ignore it because it’s true and I feel like a whale! Here.” He took one of the man’s hands and pressed it against the side of the bump. After a few seconds there was a visible little ripple under his shirt and Tony laughed at the movement under his fingers.

“Oh my God! That’s…wow…I’ve never felt anything like that!”

“‘That’ is your child, currently delighting in not letting me rest.” He moved Tony’s hand to the other side. “And here is the other. Not quite as active right now; he’s probably needing a moment after spending most of this morning dancing on my intestines.”

Loki was right, the second child wasn’t moving around as much as the first, which meant that Tony was able to feel the pronounced hard bulge of a head.

“That’s just…That’s incredible.” He sounded choked up, and the trickster was reminded that actually he hadn’t really let Tony have the chance to feel the twins like this. What with everything else going on, they had missed some of the fundamental moments of their children’s development together.
“Here.” He pointed out another ripple along the front of his stomach. “That’s Left kicking again. He tends to be more active in the afternoons and if I eat something particularly warm. Right kicks more early in the morning, and likes to move if there’s music on. I think Left is the one who head butted me in the diaphragm recently; he’s more of a trouble maker.” He smiled slightly, which faded when he saw the look on his husband’s face. “What?”

“You keep saying ‘he’. Do you know the genders?”

“Oh. No, no I don’t. It’s just nicer than saying ‘it’ and I’ve had more boys than girls so it feels more natural, I suppose. Do you want to know the genders?”

“I’m happy to be surprised.” Tony placed both hands over his husband’s swollen stomach, feeling the little ripples of movement within. “So, we’re at six months…Are you…okay?”

“Define okay?”

“Well; you’re the one who’s going to have to give birth. Are you okay about it?”

Loki shrugged lightly. “If I said no what, exactly, could be done about it? I am…apprehensive – more so than usual given what has happened in the past few years, and given that there are two of them – but I have to trust both Bruce and Jarvis. At least if something goes wrong they will some idea of what to do.”

“I don’t really want to contemplate something going wrong.”

“Oh trust me, I don’t either, but I find planning for the worst usually averts it. Worst case scenario; they have to operate. I most certainly won’t enjoy it, but it won’t kill me.”

“You sound way too blasé about that.”

“What do you want me to say? I am scared. Of course I am scared. But I have to trust the people around me, and I have to trust that my body knows what it is doing. Birth is by definition a wondrous and terrifying thing; no one has ever said it is easy.” The words sounded philosophical, but the way Loki’s long fingers had come up to tightly grip Tony’s hands said far more about his emotional state.

“You don’t have to pretend to me. You know that.”

“Yes, but I have to pretend to myself. I have to…I need to persuade myself that this is all going to be okay.”

“Are you still having nightmares?”

Loki’s sharp nod made the swirling pit of guilt in Tony’s stomach deepen further. “I’m sorry; I should have been there these past nights.”

“Your presence won’t stop flashbacks of what the Chitauri did.” The trickster said softly. “I feel one of the babies move and…I’m there again. I’m back there and I’m feeling one of those monsters they made me carry twisting and ripping inside me and…that’s not something that will stop happening just because someone is with me. And if it’s not that then I think ahead to the birth and all I can see is what happened with Sleipnir all over again. My mind cannot accept any eventuality other than butchery.”

“I won’t let that happen to you-”
“You will if it is what is needed! If something goes wrong and that’s what’s required then you
most certainly will let it happen, Anthony Stark!”

“Bruce would never hurt you unless it was absolutely, completely and utterly the last resort. You
know that. He and Jarvis are going to keep all three of you safe, and I won’t leave your side.” Tony
said quietly. “Whatever happens, whatever direction things go in I won’t leave you, not for
anything.”

Loki glanced at him again, a long and considering look, before nodding slowly. “I know.” He
smiled, just slightly. “So to answer your question; am I okay? No. I’m not. But with you, and
Bruce, and Jarvis I’m pretty certain I will be. And that makes things just that bit easier to bear.”

Tony pressed a kiss against the crown of his husband’s head, breathing deeply for a moment.
“Then I’m glad to hear it. I just wish I could help more.” Then he looked up and smirked. “And for
God’s sake eat the rest of that pastry! You’re dropping crumbs all over the chair!”
Tony still spent time in the labs, but was better with his time management. He succeeded in making it to most meals and would reappear each evening to spend some time with whoever else was in the tower at that moment.

Scott had returned home; on call but not currently needed, and Bucky was back out in the field. Again, reachable, but utilising his skills elsewhere. Everyone else was in and out as and when they wanted to be. Something was still going on between Natasha and Sam, although whether something serious or just a mutually beneficial relationship, no one was certain. Even Pepper was away most of the time; keeping Stark Industries at the top of the stock exchange with whatever pieces of tech Tony would remember to throw her way.

There was a palpable tension throughout the group. It wasn’t even that they were just waiting for the other shoe to drop; there was Hydra still buzzing around, surely aggravated at the loss of the helicarrier, there was the threat of if Earth was to be invaded, and then there was Loki.

Loki was still holding up a glamour when he was around anyone outside of his immediate family circle, but it was getting more and more clear that he was struggling. There were many moments when he would remove himself from a conversation or situation rather than let someone see that it was beginning to irritate him. Food had become less of an issue though – as long as coconut wasn’t involved – and he mostly ate proper meals again with the others.

Other people were jumpy around him too. Woe betide he try to lift anything heavier than a plate without someone swooping in to try and help. And with no magic he was reduced to sleight of hand to get anything done without people flapping around him.

“I wanted to check if you were okay.” Tony announced his entrance as if he needed an excuse to be in their bedroom.

“Why wouldn’t I be?”

“You left rather abruptly during that conversation and Clint thinks it’s his fault-”

The look Loki sent him could have soldered iron. “Why must people assume that every single interaction is going to have some adverse effect on me?!”

“Because we all conform to stereotypes?” The man said cheerfully. “And therefore expect you to be a weepy, hormonal mess. Aren’t you?”

“Do I look like a weepy hormonal mess?”

“You look like you want to kill me.”
“Exactly. I am a **furious** hormonal mess. And I am currently doing everything I can to stop everyone from realising that. By running after me each time I try to take myself out of a situation you are drawing everyone’s attention to it.”

“Sorry for being concerned.” Stark neither looked nor sounded repentant.

“What is there to be concerned about?! There is nothing out of the ordinary going on right now. Hormones are a natural thing that happens; I am doing what I can to keep them in check.”

“I know. But more fool me because I love you, and you’re pregnant, so it kinda goes without saying that I’m going to worry.”

Usually something so obviously soppy would draw an exasperated smile at the very least, but Loki just looked unimpressed. “Well don’t. I have enough on my mind without having to assuage your concerns as well.”

“Fine. Excuse me for wanting to help.” The line was a throwaway as Tony took himself over to the desk and turned the computer on. There wasn’t much he wanted to actually do on it, but it gave him the excuse to stay in the room. If he had learnt anything from becoming one half of a married couple it was to not storm out of an argument when there was a hope of salvaging the conversation. Plus he knew Loki, and knew that after an initial burst of temper the trickster was likely to cool down.

It was a good ten minutes or so of pretending to work before his theory paid off.

“I hate being scared.” The admission was quiet and filled with anger. “I **hate** it.”

“No one likes being scared. Well, there’s some weirdos out there maybe, but in general…” Tony kept his tone light, still focussing on the screen in front of him.

“It’s too much.”

The edge to Loki’s voice was enough that Stark swung his chair around to engage properly in the conversation. “What’s too much?”

“Most things at the moment.” Loki said softly. “Jarvis called it…Jarvis? PSTG?”

“PTSD, sir.”

“Yes, that. I remember you mentioning it when we were still in Asgard. I think I dismissed it as a human folly at the time.”

“Yeah…you weren’t very receptive to the idea.” Tony said.

“Maybe I was a little hasty in that decision.”

Since Loki admitted a mistake slightly less readily than a blue moon appeared he had evidently put some thought into this.

“What’s Jarvis been saying to change your mind?”

“Just…making sense of some things. Putting a name to things I otherwise couldn’t understand.” The trickster shrugged as if admitting the slightest emotion was a bad thing. “It makes things more understandable, even if they’re still hard to deal with.”

Stark nodded. “Sometimes putting a name to something makes it easier to face down. It took me a
long time to come to terms with my diagnosis, but once I did I actually found it helpful to have something to blame. If I was feeling shit I could say why. What made you and Jarvis decide to discuss this?"

“I was on the edge of losing my calm earlier. That’s why I came up here; I needed a moment to ground myself.”

Well, Tony had kind of called it, but saying so wouldn’t go down well. “Do you know the trigger? Did Clint say something again?”

“Not at all; One of the twins was turning somersaults and that’s…there’s still quite a strong memory attached to that sort of movement. Kicks are okay, I can cope with being kicked. But when the movement is larger the memory has a habit of taking over. I didn’t want to let that happen in front of everyone.”

Stark didn’t require an explanation of what said memory was. The jars with the foetal remains would be etched into his mind until the end of eternity – and Loki had lived through that hell.

“Given nearly every member of the team has triggers and knows exactly what it’s like to have one set off I don’t think anyone will think any the worse of you for needing some time out.”

“I don’t like needing time out.”

“Yeah, and now you sound like a petulant three year old.”

Loki silently re-ran the sentence then shook his head with a laugh. “Okay, yes. I will give you that one.”

Tony smiled as he watched the tension visibly fall from his husband’s shoulders with the humour. “All things considered, I think you should be allowed to sound like a three year old if you want to. You’re growing two new people; that’s a big deal!”

“It’s a nuisance and I’m not intending to do it again for a very long time! Condoms next time Mr Stark!”

“Condoms? I’m not taking any chances! Abstinence from here on out.”

Loki laughed. “I don’t believe you know what that word means.”

With the tension in the room dissipated, Tony left his chair to join his husband on the bed, slinging an arm around the taller man’s shoulders. “Well I have another three months to figure it out. You’re already pregnant, and since we can’t get you more pregnant we’re good for now.”

“Oh are we?” Loki twisted, grabbing Stark’s wrists and pushing the man down onto his back in one fluid movement. “It should also be noted that you can’t get pregnant at all, so maybe that’s the route we should be going.”

“Huh.” Since things had been near enough non-existent in the bedroom for months now Tony was taken by surprise, but hardly going to complain. It had been a very long time since they had been intimate, and even longer since Loki had taken the dominant role. “I could be amenable with this.”

“I’m sure you could.”

Stark reached up to nip at his husband’s neck, gently tracing along the steady pulse there. “You definitely on board with this right now? Because it’s been a while and I am completely on board for
this!” Wandering hands made it very clear what ‘this’ was.

“As you say; it’s been a while.”

More than a while really. Loki had been in too bad a mood and too sick for anything in the two months leading up to disclosing the pregnancy for anything intimate. The illness had then continued to be debilitating and then Tony had left for Asgard. For a relationship that had been initially based on sex they had barely touched each other in a long time.

“Six months…” Loki murmured.

“Sorry?”

“It’s been six months since we last laid with each other.”

“What?! Half a year? That can’t be right!” Tony half sat up, forcing his husband to back up a little. “How did we let that happen?”

“Well…I suppose I have been unwell. And then you were away –”

“Yes, yeah. I know how it happened. I just can’t believe it.” The man ran a hand through his hair. “I can’t believe we didn’t notice. Or, well, I can’t speak for you, but we both know my libido – I can’t believe I didn’t notice at least! You may have been a little preoccupied.” He grinned sheepishly. “Sorry for neglecting my spousal duties, I guess.”

“I suppose I may forgive you, with my forgiveness being conditional on your performance over the next hour or so.”

“Ooh, a challenge. Prepare to feel the full weight of my apology!” Tony knelt up on the mattress so that – for once – he was the taller. It put him in prime position to cup the prince’s face and kiss him, Loki’s hands finding his hips in response. Whilst they had long moved past biting to the point of drawing blood there was still an element of that original conflict in the form of nips and nibbles that let them war for dominance. “You are as sexy as the day I met you.” The man hissed.

“In Stuttgart? Well, that was a very expensive suit.”

Tony groaned in response, his fingers tightening in Loki’s hair. “It looked good. Looked damn good.” His lips found the trickster’s throat as Loki’s head tipped back and he nipped at the pulse point there. “How do you want this to go? I will admit that in my wide experience, pregnancy sex has never actually featured.”

“Let’s just go with it and see what happens. As a strategy it has never seemed to fail us before.”

WMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWM

“What are you doing?”

Evie looked up from the project she was working on to see her mother stood in the doorway to the lab.

“Hey. Working on stuff.” She turned off the music so that she could hear him properly. “What did you want?”

Loki pulled up a nearby stool, eyeing the soldering iron the girl was holding. “I simply thought we haven’t had much time together recently. Things have been —”
“Shit?”

“Difficult.”

“Things have been shit. Really, completely and utterly shit. With a side order of crap thrown in. Cover plate please.”

For a moment Loki thought the demand was aimed at him as the girl held her hand out without looking up. However, there was a rustle from the heap of scraps at the end of the work bench and Arthur appeared, his trunk unfurling to hand over the requested piece. Evie slotted it into place and began soldering again.

“Well, yes. Life has been very difficult recently and I wanted to talk to you about it.”

“About what? That my Grandma is dead? That Asgard is gone? Or how about Uncle Rhodey still in a coma and possibly never waking up? Hydra is back? Oh! And then there is the ever present threat of global destruction at the hands of some un-named monsters that we haven’t a hope in hell of defeating. And you’re pregnant. And I’m worried about you.” She looked up and smiled bitterly. “Which bit did you want to talk about, Möðhy?”

It was his own sharp sarcasm being thrown at him and Loki wasn’t prepared for it. The acidic phrasing, ironic questioning and insincere grin were all his own techniques that he usually used to try and put down the person he was speaking to. To have it aimed at himself was disconcerting.

“All of it, I suppose. Is there anything particular you wanted to talk about?”

Evie shrugged, fiddling with one of the smaller components of her project. “Dunno. Are you going to go to Jötunnheim once the twins are born?”

It wasn’t what Loki expected but he gave it due consideration. “Not immediately, of course, but I will be at some point. Why?”


The trickster watched as Arthur scrambled back over with the requested implement and was rewarded from the plate of cookies on the desk.

“From what Thor and your father told me of the battle I would assume Heimdall had to make a difficult decision and had no time in which to make it. Jötunnheim is geographically closer to Asgard and it takes far less time to travel between the two. They would also be aware what was happening on Asgard and unsurprised to have refugees turn up even if they hated them.”

“Still seems like a huge risk.”

“It was, but Heimdall had mere seconds in which to decide and he went with speed of evacuation over destination.”

“I want to go with you when you go there.” Evie glanced up briefly.

“What? No. Norns, Evelyn, I’m not taking you to Jötunnheim!” Of all the things, that was the last thing Loki expected to hear. “Have you any idea—”

“I’m half Jötunn. Everyone keeps saying Asgard was partly my home, but it’s not, is it? I’m from Jötunnheim. At least half of me is.”
“Well, yes, but—”

“So I want to see my actual homeworld.”

“No! For a start it is an extremely dangerous place! The cold alone is more than you could handle, not to mention the political situation and—”

“Do we have family there?”

Loki stared at his daughter as she glared at him, wondering where the hell the antagonism had come from. “I… I don’t know. Possibly?”

“You don’t even know?!”

His temper was beginning to flare, which was never a good thing. “Well, I don’t know if anyone ever told you but I killed my biological mother, so I doubt the rest of my blood family wish to know me!”

No, Evie hadn’t known. The way her eyes briefly widened in horror said that much. However, her own temper was inherited straight from her mother, and like him it was hard to make her back down once she got going. “People don’t tell me anything about Jötunnheim! Other than apparently people hate the Jötnar. I only know what they look like from the rare times you’ve turned blue!”

She threw the project she’d been working on down on the desk, tiny pieces of machinery flying in all directions. “Do they have their own language? What do the markings mean? What do they eat? How long is a year? How many moons are there? What’s the atmosphere? What’s my home like?!”

“This is your home! For goodness sakes, Evelyn, for all intents and purposes you are human!”

“Except that I’m not! I’m some weird hybrid that Hydra want to experiment on! Everyone has tried to pretend that being half alien is normal. Nothing about this is normal! I’ve got random extra organs, my eyesight is apparently insane and my reflexes are off the charts. I’m not human!” She hissed. “And you guys introduced me to the wrong bloody culture because you don’t like the one you’re actually born to! You might hate the Jötnar, but I don’t!”

“Because you know nothing of them. Nothing of their world.” Loki snapped back. “And I wanted you protected from it!”

“What’s there to protect me from?!”

“This.”

There would probably be a day, somewhere far in the future, when Loki would be able to make a decision not based on an emotional outburst. Probably.

But not this time.

“Möðhy!” Evie jumped back with a yelp. She had seen Loki in his true Jötunn form a few times, but she still wasn’t used to it, nor did she expect it.

“Jötunheim is a barren wasteland of ice and snow. There is barely any sunlight for most of the year and the air is so cold it would freeze the blood in your lungs were you to try and breathe it.” Loki rolled one of his sleeves up to reveal more of the deep blue patterns that ran along his skin. “I doubt I could survive there since I am so small for a frost giant. I don’t know if it was being brought up in Asgard or if I am just a runt, but my species are usually near ten times my height.”
“Möðhy, you’re using a temperature charm-!”

“Well you would freeze if I didn’t!”

“But-”

“Your eyesight comes from me. In this form I can see far clearer in the dark – I believe I utilise more of the visible light spectrum like this.” Loki’s red eyes blinked, the sharp black pupils contracting against the harsh lights of the lab.

“Okay, okay, great, go back to normal!”

The demand was at such odds with what she had just asked that it made the trickster pause for a moment in confusion. “What?”

“You’re using a temperature charm! Stop it and turn back!”

A sudden wave of dizziness made him realise what his daughter was concerned about, and Loki quickly dropped the barrier. This meant the lab instantly dropped by nearly 20 degrees but also wasn’t quick enough to stop him from going lightheaded.

There was a whirring noise and then something metallic was pressing against the back of his skull, gently encouraging him to lower his head between his knees.

“You’re an impulsive idiot, I hope you know that.” Evie sounded annoyed, and he couldn’t blame her.

“I have been told it once or twice before.” His head was clearing, so that was hopeful. A cracking sound and then the tinkle of broken metal hitting the ground drew his attention and he glanced to the side. Dummy was stood beside him, now mournfully surveying the remains of it’s claw-grip that had shattered on contact with his frozen skin. It saw his attention and made a mechanical beep at him that sounded rather put out.

“You know where the spares are kept, just go get another.”

The little droid whizzed off at Evie’s suggestion, allowing Loki to sit back up again. The dizziness had passed thankfully – the spell hadn’t had enough time to have too bad an effect.

“I’m sorry about that – I didn’t think it through.”

“Obviously not.” The girl reached out to indicate at one of the designs on his arm. “Do all frost giants have the same patterns?”

Since she seemed keen to continue the discussion instead of drawing more attention to what could have nearly been a very bad situation, Loki went with it.

“I never paid too much attention, I’m afraid. The Jötunn I saw up close all had the same sort of marks, but I never cared to see if they were in the same design or not.”

“Huh.” Evie rested her chin in her hand, staring at the blue lines that stood out on her mother’s arm. “Is it actually part of you, or is it like tattoo or scarification or something?”

“It’s part of me, I believe. I suppose they may be scars; although I find it hard to believe any race would do that to so small a baby, and I was very young when Odin found me.”

There was a rustle beside them and Arthur pulled himself out of his nest of scraps and threw
himself into Evie’s lap. Despite the animal’s thick coat he was shivering badly and burrowed into her arms.

“It’s not that cold you drama queen.”

Loki glanced at Dummy’s frozen claw where it lay shattered, then at the circle of thick frost that was edging out from him in an increasingly larger halo. Evie’s desk was sparkling with it, and the ice had reached the far end. Arthur’s breath hung heavy in the air as a thick fog.

And Evie’s didn’t.

“Well. That’s interesting…”

“Uh…” Evie had noticed what his attention was drawn to and was beginning to look increasingly confused. “Mōðhy?”

“What’s the coldest you’ve ever been Evelyn?”

“It can hit 10 or 11F in winter here. That’s pretty cold, isn’t it?”

“Not compared to me it isn’t.” Loki glanced at the camera on the wall. “Jarvis, how cold is it in here right now?”

“Given that the petroleum in the cannisters is freezing, I would say about -40, sir.”

“Minus 40?!” Evie stared down at her bare arms in horror. “What the hell?!”

“My thoughts exactly.”

The girl carefully placed Arthur down on the floor, where he scampered for the door as fast as his stubby legs could take him, and experimentally laid her hand flat on the desk.

“It feels wet, but not actually cold as such… I’m not hypothermic am I?”

“You’re speaking and thinking clearly, and you never started shivering to begin with, so I highly doubt it.”

Evie looked from her hand to Loki’s blue arm, then back at her hand again.

“Well this is weird then.” She reached out, tentatively hovering her fingers over his larger hand. “What do you think?”

The girl’s pale hand looked washed out against the rich blue of his own and Loki frowned at her. “As you said; this is a very strange occurrence. Are you certain you want to risk frostbite?”

“You’re not going to tell me not to?”

“I think you’re old enough to decide whether scientific curiosity is worth risking frostbite over.”

Evie grinned – and the expression was a mirror of her father’s trademark ‘I’m gonna do something stupid’ smirk – and placed her hand down on top of Loki’s.

The trickster could vividly recall the moment he had first seen his own skin run with blue, and all he had been concerned about at the time was that he was about to lose his arm to the biting cold. Evie’s grin held all the anticipation and enthusiasm that he had never felt towards his race.
However, the girl’s expression dropped to bitter disappointment when nothing happened.

“What?! But…How the hell is that fair?!”

“Well, you haven’t burnt yourself, so I would say that’s an impressive thing within itself.”

“Yes, but I’m not blue either!”

Loki laughed “Evelyn, you currently have your hand placed on a surface that Jarvis has read as at least -40F and you still have all of your fingers attached. I believe that should reasonably be considered superhuman, do you not?”

The girl scrunched up her nose and surveyed her hand – still a disappointing flesh colour. “I guess. But it’s a bit anticlimactic, don’t you think?”

“Maybe not. Jarvis, can you turn on a black-light for a moment?”

There were hand-held UV lights on the desk, but Loki suspected the cold had probably messed up the batteries. Instead the main lights dimmed and then turned to a familiar violet.

“Ooh, that’s new!” Evie brightened up again. Where they had appeared normal under the usual visible light, in the UV light her arms were now displaying the same lines that Loki’s did. The patterns weren’t raised like her mother’s, and lay flat on her skin, gleaming a bright white. “Look, Möðhy! How did you know they’d be there?”

“I didn’t, I was making an educated guess.”

The pattern was the same as Loki’s, parallel lines and spirals moving up the girl’s arms.

“But…But I feel cold if I’m outside in the winter. This doesn’t happen if it’s snowing.”

“I imagine that’s because it wasn’t cold enough. I must have hit a temperature that triggered a latent response in you.”

“So…this is only useful if I’m in the Antarctic or something?”

“Something like that.”

They both jumped as there was a sudden sharp crack behind them and a spider web pattern appeared in one of the glass doors. The reminder that just because they weren’t affected didn’t mean everything else was safe caused Loki to return to his more familiar colouring and the temperature began to rise again. Going from one extreme to the other, the door completely shattered.

“Your father is going to kill me.”

As it was, and unsurprisingly, Tony was far less concerned about the lab infrastructure than he was about their daughter’s apparent latent Jötunn traits.

“Frankly, beyond not needing gloves to handle liquid nitrogen, life really isn’t going to be any different for her.”

“I get that, but it’s still a bit of a big deal.” Tony’s hair was up on end from the amount of times he had run his hands through it by this point. “You’re saying essentially if she gets cold enough her
entire biology changes. That’s kinda important!”

“But no one except us would know; she looks no different.”

The man sat down heavily in his chair with an exasperated sigh. They were in his rarely-used office – Pepper had wanted him to sign some pieces – and the movement shifted a pile of paper so that it went everywhere. “Look, I know having kids with latent magic tendencies is run of the mill for you, but it isn’t for me! I was freaked out when you told me she was immortal, remember?”

“Quite clearly. However, I can’t change this. She is what she is. And this means it’s even more likely we’ll have to deal with some genetic traits in the twins too.” Loki had had to very consciously train himself not to keep doing the hands-on-the-belly thing every time he spoke about the babies, in his bid to not conform to stereotypes. “This was as much of a surprise to me as it is to you, by the way.”

“What sort of genetic traits?”

“How should I know? Merlin has the full range of my powers, Sleipnir has extra legs, I’m not even going to start on the triplets. Narfi never displayed anything untoward, but now I wonder if that was just that he never had a chance to. And Váli…”

“Yeah, Thor told me what happened there. Years ago.”

“With Evie having appeared so normal I had put from my mind what can happen if magic goes unchecked.”

Tony remembered the story. How Váli’s magic had twisted him, turned his mind inside out until he killed his brother and attempted to kill his father.

“Those were different circumstances though; they were conceived with magic, right? These two were whipped up the good old fashioned way. No magic in their creation at all.”

“I suppose so.”

Tony smiled sadly. “Look; we know they aren’t dragons or something, so that’s a good start. We’ll have to take every day as it comes, and if we notice something, we deal with it. It’s not just you this time. Unlike your wife, I actually quite like you.” He tapped a finger to his lips. “What actually happened to her, anyway? I know you got divorced, but then what?”

“She died in the recent attack on Asgard.”

“Oh…huh. Sorry?”

Loki shrugged. “It is what it is. It wasn’t like we were close.” He winced and shifted awkwardly. Given that he was perched on the edge of the desk it wasn’t the most comfortable of places to be sat as it was.

“Being kicked again?”

“No, false contraction. Apparently humans call them Braxton Hicks? They’re quite normal. I had them something dreadful with Evelyn.” Loki stretched forwards, trying to ease the pressure on his back. “Norns, never again! This pregnancy is absolutely miserable!”

“Sorry? Hopefully the labour will go easier.”
“When is anything easy for us?”

Tony snorted with laughter. “Okay, point taken. But you know what I mean. Actually, I had a thought about that, too.”

“Need I be worried?”

“Not at all. So; human anaesthetic doesn’t work on you, right?” The man waited for his partner to nod in confirmation then continued. “Right, but magical anaesthetic works. I saw them use it on you in Asgard and it worked.”

Loki nodded, but with a frown. “Yes, but all of those magic users are either dead or on Jötunnheim with no way of getting here.”

“What about Merlin?”

“Merlin?”

“Yeah, your magic-using kid. What about him?”

“I’m not having my son in the room while I’m giving birth!”

“Yeah, you wouldn’t need to. You start going into labour, he casts a quick spell, there you go! Magical epidural!”

Loki had to laugh at the enthusiasm. “Tony whilst I agree with you that some pain relief would be welcome, Merlin has stated himself that it is not his forte. And we’ve already had the discussion over the dangers of magic mixing with pregnancy; I don’t want to risk anything if I don’t have to.”

Tony slumped in his chair with a thoughtful frown. “Okay, but what if we only called him in if something goes wrong? We all know you can deal with normal labour, the problem will be if something goes wrong and Bruce needs to intervene.” He noted the wince that inadvertently crossed his husband’s face. “So we could have Merlin on speed-dial if things get messy.” Another thought occurred and he sat up straight again. “Or we could get him in right away and do a scheduled C-section.”

“No magic unless necessary.”

“I’d say reducing your pain and stress is pretty necessary. Do you want to naturally give birth to twins?”

“I want to keep them as safe as possible. We’ve already been through my pain levels – I can cope with a lot. I don’t want any more magic around them than needs be.”

Stark sighed. “Fine. Can we at least agree to have him on speed-dial though. For emergencies. Go natural if you want but there’s no way in hell I’m letting you go through with anything surgical without anaesthetic if there’s another option. And frankly I don’t want to put Bruce or Jarvis through that either.”

The mention of making mild-mannered Bruce Banner perform an un-anaesthetised caesarean seemed to be the deciding factor, but mostly because Loki had a streak of pride a mile long. “Yes, I can agree with that.”

“Glad to hear it.” Tony smiled as he saw his companion scowl and press a hand to his stomach again. “I think the sooner those two make their grand entrance to the world the better.”
“Yes, it will be worth it when they’re here, but right now…never again. And when I change my mind in three years’ time I am telling you here and now to remind me of this moment!”

It was likely Tony wasn’t going to have to remind him much. With all of the problems he was having Loki was getting generally more miserable, and therefore more unbearable to be around than usual. By the eighth month mark he could cause a room to clear just by scowling. A glare usually meant imminent death and with no magic at his disposal he had only grown more creative.

In the end Tony relegated him to helping Evie move rooms.

They had decided as a family that it made sense for the twins to go into Evie’s room; it was next to Tony and Loki’s and they could knock the doorway through again for the first few years. Likewise, Evie was more than old enough to have her own suite of rooms like everyone else who lived in the tower and had been hinting about it anyway. She was more than happy to move out of her childhood room, and it gave her a good chance to declutter.

By the time summer had rolled around Hydra had reared their ugly heads a few times, but nothing too serious. Steve and Bucky had tag-teamed one of the incidents – their first time working alone together in about seventy years – and to all intents and purposes it had been a success. It didn’t look like Hydra had managed to regroup from the Helicarrier incident.

The Helicarrier itself was still in its bomb-proof safe, the size of a toy. Tony had enlisted Scott’s help to retrieve one of the gas canisters from the ship and had determined that it did indeed contain mustard gas. The canister itself had been identified with a registration mark which Natasha and Clint were now chasing down on the Black Market. The aim was to find out where the hell Hydra were sourcing the chemical agent, but any disruption to the supply train would be good.

The Avengers had found themselves trapped in a very strange form of limbo. There had been a time, not so very long ago, that Hydra had been the biggest threat out there. When they had thought that that was all they needed to worry about.

But now, oh now they had the threat of full on inter-galactic invasion hanging over their heads and no one else knew about it! Hydra had made the news. People knew the name. No one knew about Thanos. No one else on the planet was aware of what could be coming for them any day.

In lieu of Loki being able to, Merlin was keeping an eye out for anything that might look like the first sign of an attack, but so far things were eerily quiet. Just the endless waiting for the other shoe to drop.

Sir, your husband has asked if you could join him. He’s in the bedroom.

Tony hadn’t expected to see that certain line of text scrawl across his phone screen as he absently checked it. It wasn’t like Jarvis to speak to him through a written medium these days, particularly with the AI now inhabiting a body. There were a handful of others in the kitchen with him, either putting together or already eating lunch, but no one had noticed the message come through and he backed out into the corridor to type a hasty response.

On my way. He alright?
He just asks that you hurry.

That was enough to get him moving, although he made certain that no one took note of his departure. Just because he jumped at every little thing Loki said didn’t mean everyone else had to as well.

“Well, is he okay?” It was a few floors up, which gave him a moment to quiz Jarvis in the elevator.

“He won’t say.”

Tony went cold at those simple words; an overactive imagination didn’t always serve him particularly well. “Does he look okay?”

“He’s curled up on the bed. He could just be tired.”

“You’re useless.”

It was a harsh thing to say to his oldest friend, but Jarvis knew not to take it personally. Tony was concerned and that always made him snappish.

Loki had left the lights off and blinds drawn so Stark had to give his eyes a moment to adjust to the gloom. He didn’t raise the lighting level though – his husband had obviously left them off intentionally.

“Hey; Jarvis said you wanted me.” He sat down next to the huddled lump under the blankets. “Any reason you’re doing your best impression of a burrito? It’s not even mid-day yet.” He felt Loki’s shaky breath under his hand where it rested on the Trickster’s shoulder. “Capricorn? Are you okay?”

There was movement under the covers and Loki pulled the blankets away from his face just enough so that he could look up at his husband. Usually pale skin was flushed, his eyes red and glazed.

“Hey, what’s wrong?” Tony’s question was soft, like speaking to a frightened animal. His hand found Loki’s forehead, feeling for the raised temperature like he always did when Evie was ill. “What’s happened? You look really unwell.”

“I…” Loki’s voice was a dry croak which broke off into a sudden groan. He blindly reached up to pull Tony’s hand away from his forehead and gripped it tightly, eyes squeezed closed.

It was that little gesture that told the man everything he needed to know. He had seen such a response before and knew that telling mixture of pain and terror that was written across his husband’s face.

“Okay, I’m going to ask Jarvis to fetch Bruce, alright?” There was a well of fear opening up inside him, but it would do no good at all to let Loki hear it, so his voice remained soft and steady.

“No. No, it’s just…it’s not…” The Trickster’s eyes shot open in panic, searching out Tony’s gaze pleadingly.

“How spaced apart are the pains?”

“Close.” The single word was a bitter sob. “They’re close. It’s too soon. It’s far too soon!”

“No it’s not, no it’s not. You’re just over eight months and Bruce said twins are often early. This is
fine. It’s all fine.” Tony didn’t quite know how he was managing to sound so calm. “I’m going to need you to take a few deep breaths, okay?” He glanced up to make eye contact with Jarvis’ camera. “Bruce is on his way.”

“I can’t do this…”

“Of course you can; you’ve done it plenty of times before.”

Loki shook his head hopelessly. “I can’t. Tony, the last time I gave birth it ripped me to pieces!”

“I know, I know it did. But these are two normal little babies right here. Just like Evie; and she was straight forward and simple, right? No claws, or teeth or anything here. Just two blobby blobs who want to see the world.”

“I know that. But I can’t convince myself of it.”

“Can I convince you of it?”

Loki didn’t respond.

“Do you need me to get hold of Merlin?”

The trickster let out a shaky breath. “No…No, we’ve discussed this. It’s too dangerous. Magic is too volatile.”

“Sure thing.” Tony was keeping his voice low and soothing. “Yes, you have told me before.”

“Stop being so reasona-” Loki cut the word short with a harsh gasp, his mouth slamming shut into a thin line as his face screwed up in pain again. Tony was alarmed at just how quickly the contraction came after the last one.

“Sir, Doctor Banner is at the door.” Jarvis said.

“Yeah, let him in.” With Loki incapacitated with pain Tony took charge of the situation, making the decisions.

“Tony. Jarvis told me Loki’s condition on the way up here.” Bruce sounded as unruffled and calm as ever. He was followed into the room by Jarvis himself, who was pulling a large medical cart of equipment behind him.

“Hey Doc.” Tony kept his own tone as light as possible, keeping his own concern firmly tamped down. He rubbed Loki’s shoulder. “Here we go, the cavalry’s here. Everything’s gonna be fine.”

The trickster was tense under his touch, pain and fear clenching every muscle tightly. Bruce crouched down beside the bed, eye level with his patient as he evaluated what he could see.

“Hi Loki. Have things started a little early?” It didn’t take a medical degree to know the answer to that, but he needed to establish the dialogue with his patient. Hazy green eyes made tentative eye-contact before Loki gave a short nod non-verbal as the pain ripped through him. Bruce glanced up at Tony, a gentle smile on his face for both parent’s benefits. “Okay. Cool, that’s nothing to worry about. Twins are often early, and you’re over eight months – the scans show they’re healthy. Everything should be fine – they may need a little while in an incubator but we’re equipped and prepared for that, and it’s not unusual.”

The trickster had calmed slightly; the pain receding and the doctor’s words getting through to him.
He nodded again, showing that he had heard and understood.

“Okay, brilliant. Now, I can see the pains are bad. Are they close together?”

Nod.

“A few minutes apart. Maybe three?” Tony supplied quietly. He felt Loki squeeze his hand gratefully.

“Quite close then. How long has this been going for now?”

Stark couldn’t answer that one and felt the trickster take a couple of deep breaths before answering.

“Since this morning. It wasn’t strong to begin with; so I didn’t want to accept what it was, but the pains are strong now. And as Tony said, they are close.

Given that they had established early on that Loki seemed to typically follow the usual human patterns of labour it gave Bruce a good idea of what was going on.

“Have your waters broken?”

“Yes.” The trickster smirked slightly as Tony wrinkled his nose. “In the bathroom, Stark, so stop worrying about the carpet.”

“I wasn’t—”

“Yes you were. Jarvis didn’t know since he’s banned from the bathroom, and one of the household robots cleaned up. That was about two hours ago.”

“And you didn’t call anyone then, because..?” Tony asked.

The slight smirk vanished. “Because I didn’t want it to be happening.”

Because the prince infamously stuck his head in the sand when he wanted to avoid harsh truths. Tony didn’t need that spelling out.

“Well, I’m afraid it is.” Bruce said gently. “Loki, I’d like to do a quick examination – I want to check that the babies are presenting the right way, and that you’re dilating properly.”

Jarvis was already sorting out the little ultrasound scanner that came with the medi-cart. It was yet another new piece of Stark tech – designed for on the spot scans in emergencies, but useful for what Bruce wanted to do. He turned it on and wirelessly linked it to the large TV screen up on the wall. In the time it took him to do so Tony had helped Loki move onto his back, his swollen stomach almost comically large in such a prone position.

They had done so many scans by this point that the trickster had no qualms about Bruce lifting his shirt out of the way and pressing the scanner hard against the bump. The image up on the screen made far more sense to Tony these days, and he could see the images of the two babies quite clearly.

“They’re both looking good.” Bruce said, moving the scanner again so that one came more into view. “Both positioned nicely – did you not feel them changing position?”

“I…was aware of some movement. But they’re so active I discounted it.” Loki said softly. “They are correctly positioned for a natural birth?”
“Looking as good as they can get.”

“And the dilation?”

“I’ll need to check that manually.”

“No.”

“Well, I can’t say I didn’t expect that.” Bruce said with an understanding smile. “I’ll be very quick, I promise.”

“No. I’ve never needed it before!”

“Okay. Fair enough.” It wasn’t a necessity, and Bruce wouldn’t push the point if Loki was that against it. “But we won’t be able to pre-warn you before you enter the transition phase.”

“I won’t need warning.” The words were short and sharp as the next contraction rolled in and he grasped Tony’s hand again. “I’ll know.”

He’d birthed enough children that his companions believed him.

“Okay, even if we’re not monitoring you, I insist that we monitor the babies.” Bruce held up two small discs that meant very little to Loki. The scientist seemed to realise that. “They’ll monitor their heart rates; I just need to stick them to your stomach. They run on WiFi so there won’t be any wires or anything to annoy you. Okay?”

“Fine.”

Stark found himself trying to compare things with Evie’s birth, all those years ago. He had joined Loki at a later stage this time, thanks to the trickster’s reticence, but even so things seemed to be progressing in about the same way. With Loki taking the lead on just what Bruce was and wasn’t allowed to do the trickster seemed to feel more in control of the situation and was calming.

Tony wasn’t paying too much attention to how much time was passing, although he knew it measured in the hours. He had ended up sat behind the trickster again – just like Evie’s birth, with Loki leaning back into him. However, as things progressed to the home stretch the Doctor seemed to have other ideas.

“Okay, Loki, when you next can I’m going to ask you to move.” Bruce’s voice stayed at the same calm level throughout, a good point for grounding.

“Move? Move where?” It would be inelegant to say it was a shriek, but it would have been hard to describe Loki’s outburst in any other way.

“All fours, or kneeling if it’s more comfortable. You’ve got a lot of pressure on your back; a different position will take that pressure off and hopefully help with the pain.”

The explanation probably didn’t sink in, but any promise of pain relief was going to be readily accepted by this point. When Loki next sagged back against him with a gasp Tony immediately pushed at his back, encouraging him to move.

“Come on, you heard the Jolly Green Giant; shift it.”

“Can’t.”

“Bullshit, move your ass.” The words were harsh, but Stark’s gentle insistence wasn’t. He pushed
against Loki’s back again as the trickster began to comply, helping him to sit upright, and then supporting his shoulders as Loki slowly rolled over. It was an extremely ungainly manoeuvre for the usually elegant prince. “There you go; any better?”

Loki managed to nod, before pressing his forehead into Tony’s shoulder with a deep groan as the next wave hit.

“You’re doing so good, Capricorn.” Stark braced his hands against Loki’s shoulders in turn so that the trickster could lean right into him if need be.

“Next time…you get to…have the uterus.”

“Uh…Yeah, let’s talk about that at a later date.”

The trickster’s short laugh ended with a pained whimper. With Jarvis silently monitoring the twins from the corner where he’d parked the medicart and Bruce’s gentle persona, Loki had noticeablycalmed down. And unlike Evie’s birth he wasn’t letting his pride rule him – Tony had seen him at his very lowest, Jarvis didn’t really count in his mind, and Banner was a master at making other people feel comfortable in his presence. Loki didn’t feel judged when the pain grew too great to stay silent.

Time passed in strange leaps and bounds – seeming to crawl by from Tony’s point of view each time his husband let out an expression of pain, and then surprising him with how much had actually passed whenever he glanced at a clock. It was about an hour – which felt in equal parts like an eternity and bare minutes – before Bruce noted a sudden change in how things were progressing.

“Okay Loki, the baby is beginning to crown.”

“I…can feel it.” The trickster had his head bowed right down into Tony’s shoulder, so his voice was muffled.

“Good. I need you to stop pushing, okay?”

“…What…” Because Loki had never had a medical professional with him during a birth before. Only Tony had been with him for Evie and he’d been alone for the others – he’d never had the benefit of medical advice. Thankfully Bruce understood that.

“Stop pushing. It’s counter intuitive but I need you to stop, okay?”

“But…”

“Stop. When the next contraction comes I want you to breathe like you’re blowing out a whole lot of candles. Slow, deep breaths.”

Loki didn’t understand the logic and was in no state to try and work it out so he had to go on blind faith that the doctor was right. It went against all instinct; his entire body was screaming at him to push as hard as he could, and that had always worked in the past. However, Tony was pressing kisses into his hair – regardless of the state of it – and whispering over and over how it was going to be okay, and how well he was doing. It would be a shame to let the man down by not listening to medical advice.

“That’s it, that’s much better.” Bruce received a pained grunt in response.

From Tony’s point of view all he could see over Loki’s back was Bruce sat between the trickster’s
legs, his face a mask of concentration. However, his attention was recaptured by the mess of hair directly under his chin as the trickster’s harsh panting breaths suddenly broke into a scream, his back arching.

“There we go! That was the worst; that was the head. Keep up the breathing, Loki. Little pants, like blowing out candles.” Bruce was leaning forwards, hidden from Tony’s view, but presumably supporting the head of the baby.

“You got this Capricorn.” Stark whispered. “Nearly there.” He felt Loki nod against him, a hand moving to grip his thigh tightly as the prince focused on breathing.

It took another long few moments before Bruce let out a sudden delighted laugh and Loki sagged forwards into Tony with a sobbing gasp.

And a baby started crying.

“Oh my God! Oh Goat-horns, you did it!” Stark was hugging his husband tightly as Loki’s harsh breathing slowed. “It’s a baby!”

Bruce sat back with a big smile on his face as he finished wrapping a blanket around the whimpering little bundle.

“It’s a boy.”

“It’s a boy! Oh my God it’s a boy!” Tony was laughing in absolute joy. “We have a son! Capricorn, we have a son.”

Loki didn’t respond, already trying to roll back over so that he could see the baby. His husband belatedly realised how difficult the movement was and helped to support the trickster so that he was sat with his back to the man’s chest again. He was in pain, he was exhausted, he knew it was all going to happen again very soon, but all he could think of was the bundle Bruce passed him.

“Oh look at him!” Tony was gushing, but Loki found he couldn’t say a word. The boy was tiny, but his little face was screwed up as he howled indignantly at having to face the world. Loud and strong. “He’s perfect! Capricorn; he’s perfect!”

Ten little fingers, ten little toes. Loki had to agree.

“He sounds more than healthy but I’d like Jarvis to give him a quick check over – he is still a little early.” Bruce gave the new parents a few moments before good medical sense had to take precedence.

“He can be right beside you, sirs.” Jarvis was already moving the incubator up next to the bed so that the newborn would be as close to his parents as possible.

“Just give us a moment.” Tony sounded like a man who had found God, staring down at the tiny baby in his partner’s arms. However, Loki shifted uncomfortably, a wince going across his face.

“I don’t think we have a moment…I thought you said there’d be a gap between the two of them!”

“I said there might be.”

The trickster pressed a kiss to the crown of the baby’s head before allowing his husband to take him from his arms. Tony was still gushing over the tiny boy but recognised that the situation was rather running away with them. When Loki gasped again, with quite an edge to it, the man
grudgingly passed the newborn to Jarvis.

Bruce had the little hand-held scanner pressed to the base of Loki’s stomach again, looking up at the image on the TV screen.

“Baby is already well en route. You don’t hang around, do you?”

“I imagine Jötunnheim is not a place for prolonged labour…” The trickster hissed through gritted teeth.

“True.” Banner glanced towards Jarvis, who was competently weighing and wrapping up the tiny boy. Confident that the droid had everything in hand he could turn his full attention to Loki. “Right, let’s get you comfortable again before this really kicks off.”

Water was welcomed, and Tony helped remove some of the dirtied sheets. The assumption that number two was deciding to make a quick entrance was definitely correct and the pain was already being to build again.

“Baby is in a good position so far, and you won’t go through all of labour again; all you’ll need to do is push.”

“Good to know.” Loki was gritting his teeth again, but there was a sparkle of humour there at the definition of ‘all’.

“Stop being a smartass.” Tony smirked.

“I mean it Stark; next time you’re having the uterus!”

“I thought we said no more for a while.”

The trickster wasn’t able to continue the well intentioned argument and his hand found Stark’s thigh, gripping hard enough to cause some serious bruises. Tony wisely didn’t complain. He wasn’t sure what time it was anymore; it had been lunchtime when he had gone to check on his spouse – it was probably early morning by now. Time was running away with them again. Bruce suggested Loki change positions again, but the idea was quickly turned down. Exhaustion and pain were taking their toll.

“Nearly there, nearly there…” Tony was whispering the phrase into the mess of hair under his chin, arms clasped firmly around his partner’s stomach. He could physically feel the muscles under his hands squeezing and contracting, matching the moments that a groan of pain would become a harsh cry. “You’re doing amazing. So nearly there…”

Loki nodded, his hands coming up to grasp Stark’s, drawing the support from that contact. “Can… feel…”

“Can feel baby beginning to crown.” Bruce finished for him. There was an edge to the scientist’s voice that made Tony look up to stare at him. A frown was drawing across Banner’s face.

“We good, Brucie?”

“Just a moment. Loki, I need you to start with those smaller breaths again, okay? Blowing out candles.” The trickster obeyed, but Bruce’s frown deepened and he pressed the handheld scanner low down against Loki’s abdomen again. “Damn.”

“Bruce?!”
“Okay, Tony, I need you to move out of the way. Loki, we’re going to get you to lie flat, alright?”

Stark did as he was told, helping to move the pillows out of the way. “Bruce, what’s wrong?”

“Baby is a little stuck; the shoulder isn’t passing through properly.”

“…what…?” Loki half sat up, looking horrified. The even breathing Bruce had talked him into began to break down into panicked gasps. Tony froze, a pillow still in hand.

“Brucie? How bad is this? Do I need to call Merlin in?”

“No!” The absolute terror in Loki’s voice brought their attention back to him.

“No, hold on calling Merlin. There’s some things we can try first. Loki, you need to calm down, okay?” Bruce was the epitome of calm as he spoke.

“How, exactly, do you expect me to be able to calm down?!”

“Breathe, don’t push and just listen to me. We’re going to get you through this, and it will be okay.” Whilst the doctor didn’t have any of the military conviction that someone like Steve had, he could take complete charge of a medical situation like it was the most natural thing in the world. The quiet authority was what was needed and Tony at least took notice.

“What do we do?” He had Loki’s hand clenched tight in his own and it would have been difficult to say who was holding on harder.

“Loki, you need to lie flat. Tony, sit next to him, you’re going to need to help.” Bruce issued the instructions in his usual controlled manner, but it didn’t go unnoticed that he was changing his latex gloves at the same time. “And for this to well I’m going to have to get hands on.”

“Afraid…you were going...to say that.” The trickster was gritting his teeth, eyes squeezed tightly shut. “Whatever…whatever you need to do…do it.”

“This will be simple mechanics, just do what I say.”

Bruce received a nod in response and took that as understanding; he really couldn’t expect much from his patient by this point. Loki was pushing every one of his limits, and was having to gear up to facing what was at this point his very worst fear over childbirth. Banner couldn’t give any indication that surgical intervention might be a very real possibility.

“Right, Tony you’re going to need to help out here.”

Stark followed the doctor’s calm instructions, helping Loki draw his knees up tightly to his chest and holding them there. When the trickster curled his shoulders up as the next pain hit Bruce had Tony gently but firmly encourage him to stay down

“Flat spine, widened pelvis. I’m going to help guide baby’s head, so you’re going to feel that.” Banner explained. It was doubtful if the trickster had really heard him but Tony nodded at least. Loki was pushing again, panic removing reason and nature taking over.

“You’ve got this Capricorn; you’ve totally got this.”

“Tony, I need you to place a hand here on his stomach and apply pressure.” Bruce instructed. “Firm and consistent.” His face was a mask of concentration as his friend quickly followed the order. It was a very difficult task having to work with a panicking patient, but with the baby
possibly becoming distressed he had to prioritise.

Loki’s cry of pain suddenly sharpened to a scream, his back arching despite the order to stay flat.

“There we go, that was the head. Worst part is over.” How Bruce could keep such a calm tone was beyond Tony. “Back to the breathing now. Little pants, blowing out candles.”

“Fuck...your...candles!”

“Or swear at me, whatever works for you.” Banner’s voice held a smirk to it. “One more push now. You’re so nearly there. One more push.”

It was a long moment, and another drawn out sound of pain. Then Loki suddenly relaxed, his legs falling back to the mattress, gasping for breath.

“There we go!”

“You did it! Capricorn, you did it...” It was possible to see the tension visibly draining away from Tony as he leant down into his partner, forehead to forehead. “You did it...” Loki’s hand came up to briefly clasp the man’s shoulder before he moved away, trying to look at Bruce.

“It’s not crying...”

The doctor was focussed on the infant that neither parent could see yet, but spared a glance up. “That birth was traumatic for both of you, but just give her –” There was a sudden small cry and a beaming smile broke across his face. “And there she is, hello baby.”

“She?” Tony had sat up again at the sound.

“She. Looks like you guys managed one of each.”

Whilst Bruce quickly made sure the baby was breathing properly, Stark grabbed a couple of the scattered pillows and helped prop his partner up against them.

“You are an absolute fucking legend.” The man pressed a kiss against the crown of his husband’s head. “Seriously; legend.”

“Here she is.” Satisfied that the baby was no worse for wear Bruce carefully passed her over. “Ten little fingers and ten little toes.”

She was still making little grizzling noises, waving her tiny fists around angrily.

“Hello little one.” Loki held the precious bundle with practiced ease, his voice thick with tears as he looked down at his daughter.

“She’s so beautiful. They’re both so beautiful...” Tony had his arm tight around his husband’s shoulders. “Oh God Capricorn, well done, you’re incredible!”

“Half your DNA, I suppose I can let you take a little credit too.” Loki laughed tearfully, then tilted his head up and kissed his husband’s cheek. “I can’t believe they’re here...”

“You did a hell of a job!” Stark glanced up at he heard Jarvis approach and held out his arms for the older twin that the droid was holding.

“I shall need to check and weigh the young lady in a moment, sirs, but I think you should all have a moment together first.”
Both Bruce and Jarvis were skilled at staying unobtrusive when needed. Not that the parents would have noticed them regardless, all of their attention was taken up with their two tiny babies. There were quite a few tears being shed; happiness at the beautiful additions to their family and relief – particularly on Loki’s part – that the ordeal of the pregnancy and birth was over with such perfect results.

“We still good with our name picks?” Tony asked softly. “You don’t want to name baby-girl after your mum?”

Loki tickled the girl’s cheek and she snuffled at him in response. “No, I think our choice would please mother. It’s something we all need right now.” He smiled, with a tinge of sadness. “Hope.”

Tony leant into him, cradling their son close. “Agreed. Our little Hope.”

“And you’re happy with our boys name?”

“Well, one of our kids had to have a Viking name, I guess. I still like it.” He grinned up at the trickster. “Brandr, our little firebrand.”

With the fall of Asgard and the uncertainty of her people Loki knew the importance of naming the next generation.

A beacon of light and hope for the future.
Okay guys, before we get started. Infinity War. It’s a thing that has now happened (and one HELL of a thing!). Needless to say, it’s obvious this story is heading down the Infinity Stones route too, and some similarities did crop up – I guess it’s kinda inevitable. I’ve had this plotted out for about three years now and I’m not going to change anything, so whilst there might be some familiar echoes here and there I am going to continue with where I was taking this. If nothing else, I haven’t included Dr Strange or Black Panther so the Time Stone is elsewhere and Wakanda isn’t (currently) a thing (could be a thing. I’m debating it but this story is so huge already – let me know if you have any strong opinions either way). Please note as well: I’d already assigned which stone held which power before it was clarified in film. They don’t match up – my bad but I can’t really change it now. This thing is rolling!

Other than that, enjoy (and watch the film if you haven’t yet, it’s everything we spent all these years waiting for and I’m still emotionally traumatised!).

T/W for this chapter: discussion of child death.

“Miss Evie, your father has asked if you would like to join them upstairs.”

Pepper and Steve had been keeping the girl company. Jarvis had informed the group about the imminent arrival of the twins in the early evening and had been providing the occasional update to try and alleviate any concern.

It hadn’t really helped. Evie had picked up on her parent’s fear over the past months and it had come as a little bit of a shock to the others just how scared she was when Jarvis first announced to them. As the night wore on she had refused to go to bed, choosing to lounge in the living room watching re-runs of the Simpsons with Arthur on her lap. Since she had a TV in her bedroom it was clear she wanted the company more than the distraction.

Jarvis’ final announcement was very much anticipated.

“Is Möðhy okay?” Evie sat up from her slumped position on the coach, causing Arthur to jump.

“Absolutely fine, as are the twins. You can go up and meet them if you like.”

“Are you kidding? The girl leapt to her feet, sending the münchrat scampering off. “Tell them I’m on my way!”

As the teenager ran from the room Pepper slumped back against the sofa with a sigh of relief. Steve grinned at her reaction, although he’d have been lying if he’d have said he didn’t feel the same.

“Sounds like we have some new additions to the family, then.”

“Frankly I’m just relieved it’s all gone well.” The group –particularly those who lived in the tower full-time – knew that things had been very difficult over the past months. A difficult birth wasn’t
beyond the realms of expectation. To know that things had gone well was relieving.

“Miss Evelyn is on her way up.” Jarvis announced.

“Was she still awake?”

“She’s been watching the Simpson’s solidly for nearly six hours.”

Tony whistled and Loki laughed. The trickster hadn’t looked so good in months. As with Evie’s birth his magic had swiftly returned and he had immediately used it to clean everything up. Bruce was somewhat perturbed that it was possible to magically remove a placenta, but Loki was completely done with all aspects of delivery and over-eager to have his magic fully back at his disposal.

“How does that even work?”

“Biologically it’s a foreign body, so it isn’t difficult.” With another careful wave the trickster cleared away all of the soiled bedlinen. His clothes also changed to something clean and comfortable.

Having seen this trick before, Tony wasn’t surprised. “You’ve missed being able to do that, haven’t you?”

“You don’t realise how much you rely on a skill until it is gone.” With everything sorted out to his satisfaction Loki settled back against the pillows and his gaze immediately going back down to the newborn he was holding. Jarvis had scanned both and deemed them healthy and although conventional medical advice would suggest keeping them incubated for a few days due to being early Loki had removed that need. Healing wasn’t his forte – he was constantly reminding people of that – but he was competent enough to stabilise the babies and monitor them.

“Still can’t believe how fucking amazing you are.” Tony said quietly.

“Living beings have been reproducing since the dawn of time, Stark.”

“True, but they aren’t usually dealing with the shit you’ve been through. And twin! Hardcore!”

Loki laughed. “Still easier than Sleipnir.”

There was a knock on the door at the same time that Jarvis turned to look at the doorway.

“Miss Evelyn is here.”

From Evie’s point of view the elevator could not have been any slower. For the first time in months she felt able to breathe easy – that underlying anxiety she’d hardly been aware of banished. The babies were okay. Her mother was okay.

The door slid open to reveal Bruce, sporting a huge grin and pulling the medi-cart behind him.

“I’m giving you five some space. Go on in.”

“Five. We’re a five.” They’d been a two for so long. She had to step into the room to allow the doctor to get past but then was unable to do more than just gawp at her parents.

“You going to come and say hello, Birdy?” Tony could see the look on her face and accurately
“Yeah…You’re okay, Möðhy?” Her gaze move to Loki, who was admittedly looking tired. However, his smile was broad as he glanced down at the little blanketed bundle in his arms.

“I’m okay. I could sleep for a week, but I’m okay.” He held a hand out and a swirl of green enveloped it, materialising into a cloud of butterflies. The girl’s face lit up in response.

“You can use your magic again!” And magic meant he could heal anything that needed it.

“See? All fine.”

“And the twins?”

“Come and see for yourself.”

Evie approached rather in the way she would a frightened animal, obviously not quite believing that things were okay after so long fearing they wouldn’t be. Loki was sat in the bed with one of the bundles, Tony had been pacing up and down next to him gently rocking the second, but sat down to let Evie see.

“They’re tiny…”

“A little early but no worse for wear.” Loki moved aside and indicated for her to sit down. “Meet your little sister.” He gently passed the wrapped up baby to his daughter, helping her position her arm to support the head.

“Oh wow…” Evie had never held a baby before and stared down at the sleeping face in awe. “I have a baby sister…”

“Baby brother too.”

“Oh my God. They’re beautiful!” She looked up at her parents, tears beginning to stream down her face. “What are their names?”

“You’re holding Hope, and your brother is called Brandr.”

“Hope…Brandr…yeah, I can get used to those.” She looked back down at the tiny baby she was holding. “Hello Hope. Hello little sister.” Her voice choked up with tears. “I have waited so long to meet you!”

Loki consented to letting Thor meet his new nephew and niece first out of the Avengers. After such a long time of constant worrying about his brother, the Thunderer was as equally delighted to see the younger God looking well as he was to say hello to the twins. However, as he was getting acquainted, Loki quietly excused himself.

“This can wait; you have had a very trying time of it and been without your magic for a long time.” Jarvis was always in the walls even if not in person and the trickster smiled wryly at one of the security cameras.

“This has waited long enough.”

Rhodey hadn’t shown any signs of consciousness since the doctors had operated and stabilised him. With the injuries from the battle on Asgard he was lucky be alive – thanks in no small part to
Loki’s initial healing work – but had been deemed unlikely to wake, and even less likely to have a form of recovery possible.

Tony had done everything possible to keep him comfortable; hired in the best round-the-clock care, brought in experts on a near monthly rotation but it meant little. Rhodes was in a coma and there was nothing human medicine was going to do to fix that.

Loki gently chivvied out the night nurse with the promise to call her should the patient’s condition change. She had deemed it an empty promise since nothing had changed for months.

“Colonel Rhodes I apologise for the delay in this.”

Rhodey was plugged into a whole hoard of machines, most of which the God couldn’t work out what they were doing. Something was breathing for him, and something else was monitoring his pulse. There were IV drips, and cannulas, and so many medical pieces Loki couldn’t name.

“I am sorry this happened. You needn’t have gone.”

“He’s stable – this can wait.” Jarvis tried again, still worried.

Loki smirked. “I’ve had nine months being unable to use my magic, it’s stronger than ever. Today is a day of new life after all.”

He crouched down beside the bed, carefully scanning the injured man.

“So how does this work?”

“A lot better if you don’t keep distracting me, Jarvis.”

“I’m just curious.”

Loki rolled his eyes and glanced up. “Now is not the time for a self-aware moment, Jarvis. You can watch, film and take notes, but please shut up whilst doing so.”

He took the AI’s silence as acquiescence.

The God would no doubt one day get sick of telling people that he was no expert at healing spells, but after asking Jarvis to keep quiet there was no one to tell this time around. He ran a few assessment pieces and calculations before trying to find the best place to proceed. In the same way as a human medical operation would begin really.

“Right, Colonel Rhodes, let’s see what can be done.”

“Where did you go?” Tony had the twins back in their crib, and he’d been sat on the edge of the bed simply staring at them when Loki rematerialized back in the room.

“I needed to use my magic, given how long I’ve been unable to. I thought it would be best if I did something productive.”

“Meaning what?”

“Colonel Rhodes should be waking up in the next hour or so. No promises, but he should be back on his feet in a few days’ time.”
Tony gaped at him a few moments, before jumping up and grabbing the taller man into a tight hug. "Thank you…"

“It’s a day for new life, after all.” Loki returned the embrace briefly, but his attention was already back on the twins. “Are they asleep?”

“For now. If they’re anything like Evie was, we have almost exactly ten minutes before one of them cries.”

The trickster was already sat back down on the bed so that he could stare down at the sleeping twins. “I missed so much with Evelyn…I am so looking forward to every little moment.”

“You’re getting up in the middle of the night with them then.” Tony laughed. He sat down behind his husband to wrap his arms around the taller man’s waist. “I sent Merlin a text by the way; he and Sleipnir send their best. I think he’s happy but it’s hard to tell with that guy.”

“It is hard, yes.” Loki didn’t really sound like he was listening as he let one of the twins wrap their tiny hand around his finger. “He gets that from me I believe.”

“You okay?”

“I am so happy…”

“You getting teary again?”

The trickster laughed, and yes there were tears in his voice. “For Norns sake Stark; they are finally here, safe and sound and I am full of hormones. Of course I’m ‘teary’.”

“Fair point. Did I tell you how incredible you are? Because you are absolutely incredible!”

“You mentioned it. Once or twice.” Loki turned his head to smile at his husband over his shoulder. “But I won’t tire of hearing it.”

“Of course you won’t. Your ego is possibly larger than mine.”

One of the twins snuffled in their sleep, drawing the attention of both new parents again and the trickster gently pulled his hand from the tight little grasp. “Something else I can do now that I can finally use my powers again…” He made a complicated motion and a glimmer of pale sparkles materialised into two rattles. Wooden bulbs and stems, with the chime of tiny bells inside.

“Oh, like Evie’s.” Tony said softly.

“Just like Evie’s. A gift of a mothers love.”

It was three days before Loki finally mentioned what Tony had expected him to bring up from the moment the twins were born.

“I need to visit Jötunnheim.”

They were sat in the kitchen, it was three in the morning and Hope was not co-operating with the bottle at all.

“Is that because you want to check on Asgard, or you just need a break from the screaming demon
Loki smirked slightly. “A bit of both.” He was holding Brandr, who had taken to the idea of feeding much easier than his sister and was now asleep whilst Tony wrestled with the second twin. ‘The screaming demon’ was definitely apt.

“What would you do there?”

His smile fell away. “I need to see my father. If Asgard is destroyed it is only a matter of time before Jötunnheim falls too.”

“Are you going to have a look at Asgard too?”

“I think I need to. Its infrastructure was far stronger than Alfheim’s, something may have survived.”

“And you’re going to tell me I can’t come with you.”

Loki looked slightly abashed. “Am I that obvious?”

“Well, we have two new-borns, you’re the only one who can travel between realms and it’s your family trapped out there. One of us has to stay here and it was never going to be you.” Stark shrugged nonchalantly. He had evidently already been thinking this through for some time. “All that really needs to be discussed is when you’re going and for how long.”

The trickster was silent for a few moments, looking down at the sleeping baby in his arms. Brandr had been born with a light dusting of fair hair, although still had that scrunched-up new-born look that made it difficult to tell which parent he more resembled. Hope’s hair was darker, but still not Loki’s black or Tony’s deep brown. With her face screwed up in an angry wail it was also difficult to tell any family resemblance.

“The sooner I go the sooner I’m back.”

“You going to take Thor?”

“I’ll ask, but I doubt he’ll want to go. Did you see anything of Jötunnheim when Heimdall sent you back here?”

“Nothing more than a blue blur as we went past. Bifrost is pretty quick, you know.”

“It can be.” Loki agreed. “Do you want me to try settling our little screech-demon?”

“Please! Swap!” Tony readily traded twins for the sleeping one. “Evie never cried this much, are you sure she’s not ill or injured or something?”

“She’s fine, just struggling to work out this whole ‘life’ thing.”

“Yeah, her and me both. So, Ice Planet. When?”

Loki rose to his feet, Hope still screaming her tiny head off. “I don’t know. Soon. In the next few days probably.”

It was nearly a week before they actually got the plan together though. The twins weren’t settling into a sleeping routine quite as easily as Evie had and Loki didn’t want to entirely abandon his
husband with them. As they’d guessed Thor didn’t want to go to Jötunnheim, at least not this time but when asked, Sleipnir was keen to go back to the other Asgardians’s. He and Merlin could get along, but it wasn’t a perfect arrangement and the horse was very tired of having to hide from the neighbours. When you can run at the speed a jet engine flies at even a large acreage could be too small.

Loki could have gone to fetch Sleipnir himself, but coming to the tower meant both the two older brothers could meet their new siblings.

“You said they were tiny, but they are really tiny.” The horse was leaning over Tony, staring down at Brandr. “Are all human babies this tiny?”

“Not really, Evie wasn’t, but they were a little early.” Brandr vaguely waved a hand around, accidentally catching his large brother on the nose. Sleipnir couldn’t smile but the angle of his ears made it clear how happy he was and he rested his huge nose close enough that the baby could do it again. Given that there was no way he could hold his new brother it was the next best thing.

“How is Evie? Is she dealing with being a big sister?”

“She’s loving it! She’s not having to deal with getting up all night long.”

The conversation between Loki and Merlin was a lot more subdued, the warlock holding his sister and staring down at her.

“And you are definitely okay?” His concern made Loki smile.

“I’m fine. There was a moment where it looked like it could have been bad, but all fine. Modern medical aid is a wonderful thing.”

“Indeed. I am pleased for you.” He glanced up. “I mean it, Möðir, I am pleased for you. They are beautiful, and I know how difficult the past months have been for you.”

“As always, all of my children are worth any pain or discomfort.”

“Norns, you’re soppy when you’re hormonal.”

“Why does everyone keep bringing hormones into this? I’m sleep deprived, not hormonal.”

Merlin passed the tiny baby back to her mother. “And yet you’re insisting on going to Jötunnheim. And Asgard.”

“Those creatures won’t wait for a pair of babies to develop a decent sleep pattern. I don’t like the timing at all, but the sooner I go the sooner I get back.”

Tony and Loki had had many discussions over whether or not Evie should go and Tony was still deeply unhappy about it. However, they had compromised on making her wear a scaled down Ironman suit to protect her from the toxic atmosphere they Asgard would now sport and Loki was confident that her frost giant heritage would help protect her on Jötunnheim.

He felt slightly guilty about leaving Tony with the twins for an unspecified length of time, but the journey was important and Stark was fully on board with the ‘sooner gone, sooner back’ plan. Merlin had surprised him slightly by asking to join the small group going, but he reasoned that if Evie wanted to see the other realms his other Earth-bound child was probably thinking along the same lines.
Loki was used to inter-realm travel with passengers, but it was still a unique experience to have so many of his children with him at once.

He was utilising a rather strong shielding spell when they landed in Asgard’s observatory, prepared for the expected radiation left behind by the destruction. He had very little idea of what to expect: the other realms they had visited post-attack had been decimated and although Asgard had a stronger infrastructure that Alfheim or Svartalfheim, he wasn’t hopeful.

“Oh damn…”

The two little words did very little to sum up the devastation, but Evie didn’t seem able to articulate it any better.

The observatory was a broken shell around them, open to the elements. The Bifrost itself was dim and muddied, but seemed to be intact enough to hold the ruin stable. Loki stepped out onto the bridge itself, silent as he looked at the home he had once known.

“I told you it was bad.” Sleipnir’s hooves were scuffing up dirt and dust as he came to stand next to his parent. “I’m amazed even this much is standing.”

In the distance the familiar spires of Asgard were broken to jagged teeth. Smoke was visible still curling up out of the ruins. Sleipnir was right though; even ruins were unexpected given what they had seen happen to the other two realms.

“There was a time when I would have wished this on this place…” Loki whispered.

“A time? Please, you plotted this sort of thing at least every other week.” The horse’s voice held a hint of humour and he leant his huge head on his mother’s shoulder. “I always knew you never meant it though.”

“I would never have meant this.” Loki glanced back to see how his two younger children were doing.

Evie’s expression was hidden behind the blank mask of the armour they had insisted she wear, but her body language was telegraphing how scared she was. A few steps behind her Merlin was frozen, simply staring at the devastation. It occurred to Loki that the warlock had never even left Earth, and this was his first view of another realm.

“I want you three to stay here; I’m going in to see what is left.” He expected arguments, and was surprised not to receive any.

Sleipnir was well aware that he was going to struggle walking through the ruins purely from a biological standpoint. He was too big, and had too many legs to easily navigate rubble. Behind him Evie had moved back to stand by Merlin, subconsciously placing herself with the nearest person who had the ability to protect her. Merlin himself looked grim, and simply nodded at his mother’s statement.

Loki didn’t give the three a chance to change their minds.

It was instinctive to teleport from the observatory to the palace; he’d done it from the moment he had learnt the spell. The landing was different this time, though, rubble underfoot tipping him off balance. Thick black smoke filled the air, which would have been a significant problem had he not put the protective spells in place to ward off such difficulties. With another wave of his hand the choking fumes cleared a little.
“Norns…” He’d known it would have been bad, but it was still something else seeing it in person.

The doors to the throne room should have been before him, but instead the whole front wall to the palace had collapsed, reduced to blackened rubble. The masonry looked like it had been put through a blast furnace. Even as Loki stood there a stale breeze brushed through and another section further along crumpled down.

Asgard had always seemed indestructible. Even at his most furious – when he used to envision the city burning around him – Loki had never really believed it would be possible to do. The entire realm was a fortress. A sudden shift of metal on rubble brought defensive spells to the ready and he turned towards the sound, not really expecting something to still be moving within the destruction but ready none the less.

But something was moving.

It was pure curiosity that stopped Loki from blasting the thing into another dimension on sight. To have survived the devastation and then the ensuing radiation that was saturating the realm said a lot. He wanted to know what could have managed it.

“He…Hell…o….sirrrrrrr….”

The fractured voice was barely recognisable, and the thing that staggered towards Loki wasn’t identifiable at all.

“Jarvis?!!”

It was one of the Iron Legion, or at least the remains of one. The left leg still had some shards of plating but the other was just the twisted remnants of the interior skeleton. An arm was missing – torn off at the shoulder joint – and a heavy hit to the abdomen had knocked out the internal gyroscope so the whole torso hung at an odd angle.

“Rep…report…inggggggg…” The face had been smashed to pieces, broken shards hanging from the empty helmet.

“Reporting? Jarvis, what happened?”

“Lasssssst……last man…standdddd…ing.” Loki strongly resisted the urge to step back from the thing as it limped a few steps forward, holding its remaining hand out. The effort was seemingly too much and the shattered suit collapsed, barely giving Loki the chance to grasp what it was trying to hand to him.

He didn’t recognise the small item, but if Jarvis deemed it important enough to pass on then he was damn well going to make sure it got back to Tony.

MWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWM

Merlin was pacing the remains of the observatory, sparks curling around his fingertips, when Loki returned.

“Did you find anything?” He sounded tense – interdimensional travel didn’t seem to sit very well with him.

“Nothing living.” Loki tossed the item Jarvis had given him in Evie’s direction and she caught it with a yelp of surprise. “What’s that?”
“Uh…Looks like one of the new memory cards from an Ironman suit. Dad updated it all recently – it holds significantly more data. Where did you get it?”

“One of the Iron Legion survived long enough to pass it on. What’s on it?”

Evie looked down at the little chip again. “At a guess I’d say if Jarvis survived then he has been filming. Maybe he caught something useful. My phone can check it.” She was already reaching for the technology, but Loki held up a hand to stop her.

“Not now. We need to get to Jötunnheim.”

Merlin groaned. “Oh wonderful; more space travel.”

“You were the one who wanted to come.” The trickster sounded utterly unsympathetic. “Come on, I don’t want this to take any longer than it has to.”

Merlin scowled, and Evie didn’t seem much happier. Sleipnir was really the only one who looked ready to leave the place. He more than likely had had enough of seeing the ruin of his home.

“Be prepared for this.” Loki cautioned. “I’ve cast enough spells that you will survive in Jötunnheim’s temperatures, but that doesn’t mean you won’t still feel it.”

“I can cast my own spellwork, thank you, Möðir.”

The look that passed between Loki and Merlin was an age old grudge between parent and adult child. It was only broken by Sleipnir thumping his younger brother in the back with his large nose.

“Shut up and don’t act like you know everything, for once.”

The brief moment of travel was nearly missed due to their bickering, and Evie stumbled on landing. It didn’t help that they had landed in snow that was nearly up to her waist. Loki’s grip on her shoulder kept her upright as she floundered for a moment.

It was so dark that it took a moment the girl’s eyes to adjust and make sense of the shapes surrounding them. Once they finally did it suddenly became very clear that Loki’s hand on her shoulder was more a protective gesture than steadying.

The towering shadows around them materialised into huge figures, standing some twenty feet or more over them. There were at least five, maybe more in the distance. Dark blue skin meaning they were nearly one with the surrounding snow and red eyes meaning that they weren’t quite. Evie shrank back into her mother with a surprised yelp.

“And I thought you were joking about being a runt.” Merlin’s hands were up in a defensive posture, flames beginning to curl around them.

“Well I wasn’t, and stand down unless you want to cause an inter-dimensional incident. They aren’t here to hurt us.”

“They look like they are!”

“They are here to escort you.” The voice was a deep rumble, although it was just possible there was some humour there. “The Allfather asked us to watch for you.”

Given the time difference between Earth and the other realms, the months it had been for Loki would have only been weeks on Jötunnheim, but it was still a decent length of time for them to
wait.

“Your escort is appreciated.”

He knew where he was going, but it wouldn’t really do for the giants to know that. Evie was pressed close up to his side and he kept an arm over her shoulders as they followed the group. Sleipnir trailed behind them, similarly familiar with the land, Merlin sticking close to him.

“Is it far?”

Loki glanced down at his daughter. She had removed the Ironman helmet and he was faintly surprised that the Jötunn markings that had only been visible under UV light in the lab were beginning to show against her skin like faint silvery scars. He had assumed his shielding spell would prevent the cold from bringing her heritage out the same way it did for him. He quickly raised a hand to cloak her but one of the Jötunn glanced back and smirked.

“Don’t bother, we know.”

Loki stopped dead, which made Sleipnir bump into him. “Know what?”

“The Allfather told us that he stole you as a child. We know you are one of us. And therefore your children are at least part Jötunn.” The giant shrugged nonchalantly. “Everyone is quite intrigued. It isn’t often the prince of another realm turns out to be one of your own.” He turned back and continued on as if he hadn’t just thrown Loki’s life on its head.

“The Allfather told you?!” It was Sleipnir who managed to find something to say there pushing through the snow to stand beside his mother.

“Yes? Is that a problem?” The same giant turned back and looked Loki up and down. “Don’t understand why you’re so small though; Aesir magic?”

“No quite…” The trickster glanced at Sleipnir who lifted a front leg in his version of a shrug. “This is my normal height. I assumed I was a runt…?”

All six giants stopped, and Merlin quickly pulled Evie behind him so that she was at the back of the small group and easier to protect. However, it was shock and surprise that the family was faced with, nothing necessarily dangerous.

“This is the norm for you?”

With the sudden intense focus on him Loki felt that he had little choice but to cancel out the spell making him look Aesir. He could recall so vividly that moment he’d stood on Jötunnheim, a frost giant gripping his wrist and watching his own hand turn blue for the first time. This was no less nerve wracking and the disbelief on the Jötunn faces around them was no less frightening.

The height was the most obvious difference; Loki was no taller in his true skin and they towered over him still. Some of the Jötnar had hair, but in outlandish cuts that held no similarity to his style, and the Aesir outfit looked even more out of place against his blue skin then it usually did when compared to their clothing. There was a quiet snapping sound and Loki glanced down to see his metal bracers crack under the intense cold.

However, none of the obvious differences seemed to account for why the Jötunn were looking at the trickster God as if he had grown an extra head.

“What?” Self-conscious already, Loki began to change back to his more comfortable Aesir
appearance but a large blue hand on his arm stopped him.

“No, don’t.” The giant looked to his companions. “How is this possible?”

One of the others shrugged in bewilderment. “It shouldn’t be.” There was an emotion there, something beyond the complete confusion, something that if Loki didn’t know better he would have said was sadness.

“If you would be so kind; what are you talking about?” The prince snapped.

The Jötnar exchanged looks, an almost universal ‘well I’m not going to tell him’. Finally the first that had spoken raised his hands in defeat

“This is neither the time nor the place.” He turned and began leading the way onwards again. “You need to speak to the Allfather.” He threw over his shoulder.

Despite Loki and Sleipnir’s best attempts they were unable to get anything further out of their escort for the remainder of the short journey. Evie and Merlin remained silent behind them.

The city looked significantly different from how Loki remembered it; but then he had destroyed the original and they had had twenty years to rebuild. He rather hoped they didn’t know that that was him.

They were escorted straight to the largest building – presumably the place – and led through the huge halls. Red eyes peered curiously from the shadows, quiet murmurs of shock echoing. The group had never been more glad to hear Aesir voices as they entered a huge hall.

The meagre group of Asgardian refugees were using what to the frost giants was a large meeting room, but to the Aesir was a substantial area that easily accommodated them all. The pitched tents and camp fires were a far cry from the gold and splendour that had been Asgard.

“Loki!” He had certainly never heard his name called with that much relief in it from that voice before. He had a brief glimpse of the rest of the room before his vision was obscured by wild black hair and a heavy body thumping into him in a hug.

“Sif…” It had been instinct alone that had him throw up the protective charm to stop her from receiving a nasty freeze-burn from the contact.

“I have never been so pleased to see you!” The warrior pulled away to grin at him. “Even when you look like that.”

Of course, if the Allfather had told the Jötnar that he was a stolen child he would surely have told the Aesir at the same time. Sif must have been expecting to see him in his true skin, but her expression didn’t quite hide her surprise at how he now looked.

“Yes, well, blue or not, I’m here to help.” He glanced around, taking in the refugees, tents and general mass of quiet injured people. “Although I know I am too late to do much.”

“Not your fault, for once.” She grinned. “I assume that you being here now means a happy result?”

“A happy result. A healthy boy and girl.”

Sif’s grin turned to a true smile. “Thank the Norns; we really need some good news around here!”

“We do indeed.” Odin sounded quiet, older. Tired. Loki turned to see his father standing there,
looking as bad as his voice had suggested. *Grief-stricken.*

“Father…”

They had never been a demonstrative family. It hadn’t exactly done Thor and Loki much good growing up, and still made things difficult now when they all failed to be able to talk to each other properly. So it came as a surprise when Odin pulled him close into a tight hug.

“I am so pleased things have gone well for you and the twins; your mother was so happy when Thor told us.”

The mention of Frigga brought all of that pain straight to the surface and Loki had to fight it back into submission. As much as he was still mourning his mother, now wasn’t the time. He pulled back when he was confident he could speak without choking up.

“I am sorry about the timing; I would have been there if I could.”

“We know. It wasn’t your fault.”

“We came here via Asgard, it was…It was bad.”

“How much was left standing?”

Loki explained what had happened on Asgard and how it looked as they made their way through the tents. The Aesir refugees barely spared him a glance, for all that he was now a completely different species, *shell shock.*

There was an ever so slightly larger tent with two soldiers standing guard outside it. One of whom was very familiar.

“Heimdall!” The trickster had never been so pleased to see the watcher in his life, and Heimdall’s small smile held a similar sentiment. “We had no idea if you had made it! Tony said he last saw you still in the observatory!”

“It was a close call and I’m only on half duties due to injuries. But I’m here.” He glanced over Loki’s shoulder and his smile widened. “Sleipnir, glad to see you made it!”

“Likewise!”

“And the young princess; good to see you again Evelyn.” His gaze finally settled on Merlin. “And you…are hidden from me. I don’t know you.”

That drew Odin’s attention – finally – to the young man, and he frowned as he realised he didn’t know him either. Then again, he hadn’t had opportunity to greet Sleipnir or Evie yet so the oversight wasn’t too surprising.

Loki glanced back at his son and received a small nod in response. “This is Merlin. It’s about time you meet each other, I suppose.”

Grandson and grandfather appraised each other silently before Merlin held a hand out. “I wish this were under other circumstances.”

Despite Loki’s opinions, Odin was capable of picking up on social cues and could see that his grandson wanted to keep things professional. The warlock was not interested in expanding his family circle any further at this point.
"It is a pleasure to meet you, and I am also sorry it has to be like this." The Allfather looked between Merlin and Loki and smiled. "You two look so alike, blue or not."

"Speaking of: Why did you tell the Jötnar about what you did? About me?" Seeing the discomfort on Merlin’s face Loki smoothly changed the subject, and asked what had been on his mind since they arrived. "And why are they reacting so strangely? I know I’m small in comparison, but you would think they’ve never seen a runt before."

"Yes…I believe there’s someone here you should meet." There was an odd quiet quality to Odin’s voice that made Loki look at the king twice.

"Yes?"

"Come; this won’t take long and should answer your questions. It is best we get it out of the way now. The children will be safe with Lady Sif, and we won’t leave the palace boundaries."

As if refusal wasn’t even a thing. Loki supposed that in Odin’s book it wasn’t; his adopted father had certainly never allowed he or Thor to talk back as children, why would now be any different? He checked with his three children that they were alight with him leaving them with Sif, although it was Evie he most worried about. The girl shrugged her agreement, leaning back against Sleipnir. The Jötunn markings were still clear on her face, even though the hall was artificially heated. Any answers he could get on their heritage would be useful.

He followed the old king from the hall towards an icy corridor – not one they’d traversed so far. The walls around them were shrinking, the whole hallway growing smaller in diameter as they walked down it. Elegantly made to decrease in size the further one went.

By the time they reached the carved door at the end it was on par with a normal sized corridor on Asgard and certainly not one a normal Jötunn could access easily.

"Father, where are we?"

"In what I have been told is one of the oldest parts of the palace."

Loki’s eyes narrowed. In his birth-skin it was much easier to see the delicate patterns carved into the doorway – not something that he would have expected from the beasts that he knew lived here. Odin knocked on the carved ice and it swung open under his touch.

"Allfather, you have returned."

It was an ambiguous voice in the shadows and for a moment Loki was thrown by the size of the room; so much smaller than those high-ceilinged things in the main palace. Then a shape by the icy-glassed window moved and he simply gaped.

It was a Jötunn, certainly, but not one like he’d ever seen before. All previous experience – not that he’d had much – told him that the frost giants were huge hulking creatures, easily five times his height and more. Now one stood before him that defied all expectations.

It was the same height as him.

"You brought him." Again, the ambiguity made it difficult to determine anything about the figure, and the heaping furs around their shoulders hid any other clues.

"I said I would." Odin had stepped to one side, making it clear that he was not intending to be a
part of this conversation.

“Yes, you did. I thank you.” The figure pulled back their hood to reveal something else that hadn’t been seen so far. This Jöunn was *old*. Wrinkles pulled at the eyes and mouth, and their hair was a shining lilac that appeared to be the frost giant equivalent of grey. “Loki. You *are* Loki?”

With his adopted father’s presense Loki didn’t feel it was something he could deny.

“I am. Who are you?”

“Skadi.”

“I was told I should meet you. Why?”

The ancient Jötunn watched him with narrowed eyes. “You look like your father. And there’s a bit of your mother there too, although Laufey wasn’t much of a looker so be glad you don’t take after him too much.”

“You knew them?”

“They were the ruling monarchs, of course I knew them, boy.”

Loki studied the intricate patterns, distorted as they were by time and age. They were different to his own, sharper angles and lines. “You aren’t family.” He said it with certainty, but found that he was disappointed to voice it. When Odn had said he needed to meet someone part of him had hoped…

“Your family have all died. Laufey in his misguided attack on Asgard and, your mother and siblings when the Bifrost took it’s revenge.”

There was something in the way that that was said that made the trickster realise Skadi didn’t know. Odin hadn’t told them who had been behind that Bifrost attack. It was small consolation now, though. He hadn’t given a thought to any possible relatives when he had done it; to now hear the consequences…

“I’m sorry. I should have said it more sensitively.”

“No. Dead is dead, no matter how you say it.”

Skadi limped closer, and it *was* a limp. Old legs not working as well as they could have once done. “But still. I’m sorry. You’ve been through a lot, boy. Your father has told me some, and the rest I can guess.” She – and Loki had to think of her as a she, there was a femininity that eluded the male pronouns – reached out to rest a gnarled hand against his cheek, blue on blue. “The universe has not been kind.”

“Life is never gentle.”

A smiled moved the wrinkles into new places and old red eyes lit up. “No. No it certainly isn’t.”

With her so close the size similarities were even more obvious. “Why are we the same height?” Loki asked quietly. “I was already under the impression that I was a runt.”

The cracking, hacking sound was startling until he realised that it was a laugh. “A runt? Yes, yes I can see how you thought that. Not at all, dear one. Not by any stretch of the imagination.”

“Then what…?”
“Allfather.” Skadi removed her hand and glanced over at Odin. “Did you know that you saved this boy’s life? By taking him when you did?”

“I had always assumed he had been left for dead, so yes. I thought he was a runt; too small to survive. Left because there was no hope.”

“Yes, and yet no. You did the right thing, for all the wrong reasons.” Skadi turned and began to shuffle towards the small table and it’s accompanying chairs. “Come and sit with me, you can’t expect an old giant to stand for a full conversation.” She eased herself into the nearest seat with a groan and gestured at two of the others.

Loki ignored how all of the furniture was, again, sized correctly for someone of a much smaller stature as he sat down. “Why was it the right thing? Why was I left to die?”

“You are a sorcerer.” Skadi indicated to the patterns that ran across the backs of Loki’s hands. “Those are Sieðr Lines. Only magic users carry that pattern.”

“So sorcerers aren’t approved of here…?”

“You have such a low opinion of your own people.”

“I don’t know my own people.”

Skadi’s eyes twinkled with another, sadder smile. “How true that is.” She sat back in her chair. “We were once such an advanced and cultured realm. All those millennia ago. And like all of the other realms our sorcerers and their magic that made that possible.” She laid her own hand on the table, presenting the same patterns – same Seiðr Lines. “We were the back bone of our people’s success. This place flourished under our care and support.”

A very different picture to the Jötunnheim Loki was familiar with. “What happened?”

“War happened.” The ancient Jötunn sighed. “You may have noticed that you and I are not exactly on par with our companions out in the main halls. Well, sorcerers are born tiny and we don’t grow much from there. A normal Jötunn is built for speed, endurance and being able to survive in these harsh conditions. A sorcerer doesn’t need those skills; their magic provides. It means we are immediately recognisable and our status known, but has its draw-backs.”

“Drawbacks? What drawbacks?”

“So small a baby can’t survive in this place. A normal child struggles, but to be so very small the cold just seeps in and takes the life straight out of them.” Skadi looked over at Odin. “When I was young we had an agreement with Asgard. Our sorcerer children were sent to Asgard at birth to foster families who raised them until puberty and their magic could sustain them. We would then take in foster Aesir and train them in our ways of warfare and hunting – we were considered the experts in the realms then.”

“I do not recall any of that.” Odin said quietly.

“No, I didn’t think you did. I was a few years older than you when I was sent there, but you followed me around where-ever I went, Allfather. A very sweet child.” Skadi smirked at the look on the king’s face. “But I was one of the last of such an arrangement. The realms went to war not long after.”

“So without Asgard’s help…” Loki quickly saw where the story was leading.
“We asked the other realms, but none would aid us. Muspelheim was a ball of molten rock with no life. Alfheim had no love for us and when we tried to take our younglings to Midgard – at that time a realm of huge reptiles – the Aesir fought us back and claimed it. The other realms had sided with Asgard.” She shrugged. “There was no-one. We were alone. Oh we tried. We did everything we could think of to keep those tiny children alive. Our sorcerers expended so much time and energy into trying to heat rooms that were made of ice, trying to warm a realm of snow. And all the while they were being called to fight in the wars. We began to run out of magic users quicker than we could save the newborn ones.”

“But…So why was I left…?”

“By the time you were born millennia had passed. Millions of years had passed. We were a broken realm filled with bitter and grieving people.” Skadi reached out to rest her hand on top of Loki’s. “Because even though we were unable to save them the same percentage of Jötunn were still being born with magic running through their veins. Parents had begun to hold funerals for their children at birth. Allowing the snows and ice to reclaim them rather than having to wait…to watch.” She smiled with all of the heartbreak of one who had lived it. “When the Allfather took you he saved your life.”

Loki found himself without any way to respond as tears choked his voice. He looked away, ice beginning to slide down his cheeks.

“Surely there were ways…” Odin’s voice made it clear he had been similarly affected. “There are spells that can make ice impervious to heat, that can cocoon a person in warmth, that could-”

“There are spells now, Allfather.” Skadi said gently. “But this was millions of years ago. And this is a realm of ice. Our magic was not as advanced as the magic of modern realms, and was not as diverse. Believe me, I was there; we worked as hard as we possibly could. By the time spell-work had caught up with our needs we didn’t have the sorcerers left to perform the spells and no-one from another realm willing to teach us how.” She gestured around at the icy walls of the room. “No doubt the war was our fault. After all; all of the other realms turned against us and something must have caused that, although we have no records left to say what it was we did. However, the result was that whilst every other realm advanced we have slipped further and further backwards. We Jötunn are all able to manipulate raw ice, but with magic we were able to build the most delicate and fantastical structures. We had machinery, energy sources, industry, all based on what our sorcerers could do. Losing them has destroyed us.”

The image that Skadi was painting was of a Jötunnheim that bared no resemblance to the realm as it now stood. The ancient sorcerer turned her hands over on the table, palms up. Ice began to slowly climb up into a spindly little tree, standing only a few inches tall.

“I am the last. I have seen my homeland diminish until it is nearly nothing. And now the realms are being destroyed so any hope for the future and new ties is lost. Even if we could build a relationship with somewhere like Midgard or Vanaheim we have no idea how long they or we would survive.”

“Not the last.” Loki looked down at the Sieðr lines running across his hands. “Not anymore.”

Skadi smiled sadly. “That would be true, child, but you care nothing for this realm. You were raised Aesir, and your life is now elsewhere. And even if you were to suddenly decide to come back here who is to say we will last any longer than any of the other realms out there?”

Loki couldn’t exactly say she was wrong. He would never wish to live on Jötunnheim, and certainly not bring his children there. His life was elsewhere and he frankly knew nothing about the
culture, traditions or people whom he was born to.

“I…can’t refute anything you say right now.” He said quietly. “My life is now on Midgard, my family is there and I owe that realm my allegiance. However…”

It had been on his mind since knowing he would have to go to Jötennheim. Niggling away that there was something he had in his possession that would benefit others a lot more than himself. He glanced at Odin, but the Allfather didn’t seem to know what he was intending.

“However, I can offer something that can help.”

Skadi’s eyes widened in shock, a mirrored expression on Odin’s face as Loki pulled his hands apart and a deep blue glow filled them.

“But that is…We thought that was lost to us.”

“Not lost. Stolen alongside a baby.” Loki’s red eyes reflected the glow of the Casket of Ancient Winters as he gently placed it on the table. He glanced at his shocked father and shrugged. “I took it from Asgard’s vaults years ago and done nothing with it since. It only seems right that if you are to shelter Asgard’s people in their time of need that they return a stolen treasure.”

It was somewhat impulsive, since he didn’t know if she was actually the person to hand the ancient artefact to, but it made sense in the moment. He didn’t know who was in charge of the realm now, and as far as he saw it; Skadi possessed the power to be able to handle it. If it was going to be used to help defend Jötunnheim, as he hoped it would, then it was going to need to be wielded by someone who could.

It was day time when Loki and Odin finally returned to the main part of the palace. Or at least, as much day time as Jötunnheim could manage.

They studiously didn’t talk about what they had been witness to. It was too raw and too open for Loki to want to process it just yet and Odin knew when to tread carefully. The unspoken acknowledgement that the Allfather had accidently saved one of Jötunnheim’s most treasured resources without even realising hung heavy between them.

Loki felt the weight of the Jötunn stares bearing down on him as they made their way back. The realisation that many of them would have had lost children that had been born just as tiny as him was haunting. He knew the heartbreak; he had had two children die, lost three others before birth and knew just how deep that went.

The pain must have been written across his face because Odin didn’t even try to bring up the matter of the Casket.

Sif was stood by the entrance way to the hall, obviously waiting for them, and the look on her face was enough for Loki to put his own whirling emotions to one side.

“What’s happened?”

“Your daughter has found something. It’s…well…” She shrugged, her usually stoic façade nowhere to be seen. “It’s bad.”

“Bad?” As descriptions went it hardly helped, but to see the warrior in such a state said a lot more than the poor choice of words. “Okay, where is she?”
Sif led the way back to one of the many tents, seemingly indistinguishable from the others if it weren’t for Sleipnir lying down outside it. Evie and Merlin were sat side by side next to him, the girl curled right up against his side. Merlin had his hand on her shoulder, awkward and unused to comforting someone.

All three were staring at Evie’s phone screen.

“You’ve uploaded Jarvis’ memory card.” Loki could already tell from their expressions. Only Merlin looked up to acknowledge him.

“You need to see this.” The warlock had to actively pull the device from Evie’s hands, she was so focussed on it. “It confirms a lot of theories.” He handed the phone over.

It was a video clip, although rather poor quality. Merlin had taken it back to the pertinent point and it took Loki a moment to decipher the broken pixels and recognise a view of Asgard’s training grounds.

The camera had been built into the suit’s shoulder joint so the view of the action was slightly off centre. It gave the impression that it was the last of the Iron Legion standing, which quickly changed when the whole view spun over for a brief moment and the camera focussed on the ground as the suit landed face down. Another explosion and it was rolled again.

For a long moment there were only rolls of thick black smoke to be seen. Dark cloying clouds obscured the view of anything else that was happening as the camera struggled with resolving the image, only picking up various shades of darkness.

“What am I meant to be seeing here?”

“Just give it a second.”

The screen flickered a few more times then there was another tinny explosion and the clouds were blown apart by the blast. Loki frowned as more of the invading creatures materialised out of the murk, grouped as if in formation. And then behind them…

“What?!”

“Told you.” Merlin said grimly.

The figure was tall. Taller than Loki, than Thor, almost as tall as the frost giants. It strode through the destruction as if it owned the world already.

He – body shape suggested at any rate – was already wearing armour, but was in the process of discarding one of his armbraces. The piece of metal fell to the ground and was kicked carelessly to one side as one of the guards passed him something much larger.

“The Gauntlet…”

It fitted his arm like it was made for him. With a wave of his other hand three bright lights appeared and settled themselves down into place along his gauntleted knuckles. Red, purple and tesseract blue.

“And those look like the Infinity Stones.” Odin supplied quietly.

The figure on the screen flexed his hand with a large smirk, then gestured out and the screen went black.
Loki looked up at his children blankly.

“Yeah, that’s when we assume he nuked the place.” Merlin said. “With that amount of firepower I don’t know how that much of Asgard was left standing.”

“Asgard is old. Older than Alfheim, and certainly older than that Gauntlet. It’s not that easy to destroy.” It was Odin who answered. “Even for one such as him.”

“Him? You know him then?” Sleipnir didn’t have much ability to look shocked, but his ears were flat back against his skull.

“It’s Thanos.” Loki said flatly. When his father glanced at him in surprise he shrugged uncomfortably. “I met him briefly when the chitauri first had me.”

“You never told me you met him!”

“Well I don’t count an interrogation session as much of a meeting. I wasn’t exactly co-operative when I was first captured and he had something to say about that.”

The look on Odin’s face at realising his youngest had been tortured by none less than Thanos made Loki quickly take charge of the conversation again.

“Okay. So this is proof it’s him. And he’s after the stones. And he has three of them.”

“Which three? Can you tell?” Sleipnir was still asking the pertinent questions.

“The purple one was from Alfheim, that’s the space Stone, red was Svartalfheim’s and is the power Stone and the tesseract is the mind Stone.” Loki happily took the change in conversation and ran with it.

“Space, power and mind. That’s a potent combination.”

“And what do they do?” Merlin still had his hand on Evie’s shoulder – she was being uncharacteristically silent in the conversation.

“Space can obliterate organic matter, power changes matter to anti-matter and mind rather does what it says on the tin. It can manipulate, control or otherwise take hold over the minds of many.” A small smile crossed the tricksters face. “I used it myself, although didn’t have it long enough to really get the hang of it.”

“You had it?”

“I stole it from Shield, used it to take control of various Shield personnel and built a portal over New York with it.”

Merlin rolled his eyes. “Oh I remember that; didn’t thousands of people die?”

“Yes they did. And now we risk everyone dying. Everyone. Not a few thousand humans, but everyone across the nine realms.” Loki snapped at him. “So don’t try to bring that up now, because we have much bigger problems.” He waved a hand and an image of the gauntlet they had seen Thanos put on appeared hovering in front of him. “That is now our main concern. That and the stones and where he is intending to attack next.” The trickster clicked his fingers and the Infinity Gauntlet vanished again. “And what the hell we’re going to do about it.” He turned to his father. “I need to go back to Midgard and let Thor know. And the other Avengers; Earth could well be next on the hit-list.”
“I thought we didn’t have an Infinity thingy!” Evie said in horror.

“You don’t; but the others are lost. If Thanos also doesn’t know where they are he will more than likely rip the other realms apart to find them. So we need to warn them.”

“What about the other realms? You can warn Earth, but what about Vanaheim? Nidavellir?” Sleipnir asked. “What about here?”

It was a legitimate concern.

“Asgard is in pieces, but there is a possibility of rebuilding…” Loki spoke slowly, as if the thought was only just occurring to him.

“To what end?”

“Refuge.” He looked to Odin again. “Because the other realms will start to fall, and they will need refuge. The Observatory needs to be fixed, the gas clouds need to be cleared and the radiation must be sorted before anything about the structures can be done. Do we have any surviving sorcerers?”

“A handful.”

“Then send them back and set them to work. Asgard has fallen once; there is no reason for Thanos to go back and the other realms are going to need somewhere to run to.”

“That’s a bleak outlook, Loki.”

“It’s realistic. The Aesir have fled here; what will happen when Thanos follows? Where do you go next? Where do the Alfheim refugees go once Vanaheim is attacked? Of the three realms that have fallen so far, Asgard has the most infrastructure left to work with.”

Odin nodded. “And from the way you’re phrasing that, I assume you aren’t staying.”

“I have two new-borns at home; I’m not staying.”

The king’s gaze moved to Loki’s three children quizzically.

“I’m staying.” Sleipnir’s response was expected, as much as Loki didn’t want to hear it. Merlin merely shook his head and as a teenager no one was asking Evie.

They had already spent more time in the realm than the trickster had intended – given the time differences – and they needed to be leaving. He and Sleipnir said their familiar farewells, used to parting and the siblings all had a quiet moment together. However, Odin asked for a private word before they left.

“You never mentioned that you had met with Thanos.” He cut straight to the heart of the matter.

“I told you; it was an interrogation, not a meeting.”

“Loki…” It was the tone of voice that stopped him, although Odin’s hand on his shoulder helped. “You should have told me-”

“Why?!” The trickster took a step back, the movement shaking the hand free. “Why should I have told you anything? Do you think I want to acknowledge that I was tortured by the Mad Titan? That I want to remember what he did to me? Why do you think I ended up telling them where the tesseract was? It’s not exactly a period of my life I want to remember!”
Odin paused a brief moment, then nodded. “Alright. I am sorry. But I am concerned for you.”

“It happened nearly twenty years ago and worse things have happened since. It’s far from my mind.”

For a long moment Odin had no kingly bearing at all; just a tired old man bent down under the weight of a broken realm and pain for his children. “I just want to see you safe and well, Loki. I have let you down too many times in the past, and even now I find more instances of where I should have tried harder for you.”

With everything else going on, with all of the complicated emotions and new realisations, it was not what Loki needed to hear in that moment. “I appreciate the sentiment, but things are too raw for us to have this discussion now.”

The fact that the Allfather actually accepted that as an answer and nodded made the trickster realise just how far they had managed to come as a family.

“Thank you. And I do appreciate your concern for me. However, as it stands the universe really is bigger than our family dramas.” He managed a shaky smile. “Now; I need to take Evie and Merlin home.”

“Will you be back?”

“I reiterate: I have two new-borns and a possible intergalactic threat to protect them from. Most likely not. Will you take my suggestion regarding Asgard?”

The Allfather nodded. “I will look into it.”

“Good. The other realms may depend on it.”

There is nothing as irritating as finally getting a pair of week-old babies to sleep than your family magically teleporting into the room and waking them up again.

“Look, I love you and all, but right now I want to kill you.”

“Basis of our relationship.” Loki pressed a kiss to his husbands forehead. “I’m sorry. How long has it been?”

“Three days. I’d say not long, but, y’know, sleep deprivation and two screaming babies. Who are now awake again!”

“Again, sorry.” The trickster looked back over his shoulder to see that Merlin had already teleported away – presumably back home. He couldn’t say he hadn’t expected that. “How have they been?” He picked up the nearest crying twin from the crib – Brandr – leaving the other for Stark.

“Not too bad. Had a minor break through with feeding the screaming demon.” Tony scooped Hope up to try and soothe her. “Should have thought of it sooner really: I was doing a night feed and sleep deprivation made me leave her bottle to cool down too much whilst I fed her brother. Turns out if you give her cold formula she’s quite happy.” He shrugged. “Not what the parenting books would suggest, but then they’re written for humans, not part Frost Giants.”

“We were overheating her?”
“Pretty much. Less blankets, cool milk and no socks and she’s been much happier. It does go against instinct, but it works.”

Loki laughed. “Accidental innovation is usually the best.” He glanced at Evie at her amused snort.

“Are you kidding? I’m amazed I’ve grown up as well adjusted as I am.”

“You’re a half-alien billionaire heiress living with superheroes, Birdie, you are not well adjusted.” Tony held an arm out to her, the other supporting Hope. “Come here, I want a hug with both my girls! I missed you.”

“We were only gone a few hours.” Given that Evie was still mostly wearing the smaller version of the Ironman suit – minus the helmet – it wasn’t the most comfortable of hugs, but Tony didn’t mind.

“Yeah, not from my point of view. How was the suit?”

“It would be better if you actually put boosters and stuff in it.”

“Yeah, no. I’m not letting you actually have a working suit, I’m not stupid.” He ruffled her hair before moving his gaze to Loki. “How was it out there? I wasn’t expecting to see you blue.”

Loki’s smile faded and he readjusted Brandr’s blanket as something to distract him. “It was... bad. We need to call the Avengers together to discuss what it might mean for Earth, and what, if anything, can be done. I also learnt a little more about my own heritage at the same time, which frankly I could have done without given everything else going on.”

Tony nodded. “Yeah, I suspected it was going to lead to some bad news.” He sounded so tired. “I’ll put the twins to bed; you and Evie clean up then we’ll call the group together for a catch-up.”

Nidavellir was a large realm, with an even larger trading base. Busy workshops, mills and factories that never slept and fires that never went out. A considerable portion of the weaponry, armour and metalwork for the Nine Realms was produced by the Dwarven craftsmen with the skill and meticulous talent only they could produce. The land was entirely taken up with the production facilities, and extensive mines stretched out underneath in every conceivable direction. There was nothing by the way of farming or livestock, but none of those were needed given the profit turnover. Anything Nidavellir wanted, it could afford to buy ten times over.

This was helped by the large amount of plastic Tony Stark had supplied them with back when they made the mirror for his telescope. Magic and technology and human ingenuity were melding in new and fantastic ways.

The other thing they didn’t necessarily need was a standing army since wealth could hire anything by way of mercenaries. They had no quarrel with any other realms, confident that no one could function without them.

The explosion at the largest copper mine took everyone unawares; accidents a thing that never happened in the realm.

Being ill-placed to deal with an external threat was one thing. Nidavellir was entirely helpless. No army, no defence force, no way to protect themselves because they shouldn’t need to.
When Loki entered the kitchen the look on his face didn’t require any explanation. Everyone had been expecting a debrief from Jötunnheim and it was clear that that was now the last thing on his mind.

“Where?” It was Steve, of all people, who asked the question everyone was thinking, and the trickster’s wide-eyed gaze moved to the super soldier.

“Nidavellir. Small attacks at the moment; reconnoisance missions. They’re searching.”

“Does Nidivilly…Nidiliv…is there an Infinity Stone there?” The super soldier made a good attempt at the name.

“We don’t know, none that we have ever heard of.”

“So why…”

“I can only assume Thanos thinks there may be one. Or they’re looking for something else.”

“What is the damage so far?” Rhodey was looking pale and pained, but he had insisted on joining the others as soon as he was physically able to leave the med-bay. Having seen the devastation on Asgard he knew what the attackers were able to do.

“Not catastrophic. If they’re looking for an Infinity Stone they need to make certain it isn’t buried under the rubble of their efforts.”

“Could they accidentally destroy it?”

Loki gave him a withering look. “Sadly no.”

Steve rested his elbows on the table, head in his hands. “Can we help? Can anyone help?”

“No. Asgard is gone, Alfheim is gone; Vanaheim are looking to protect their own borders. Midgard can’t reach their own moon without Bifrost help; there’s no one.”

“So we’re going to sit here whilst yet another realm is destroyed?”

“I am open to suggestions. If they don’t find an Infinity Stone it may be that they leave Nidavellir alone as opposed to ripping it to pieces.”

No one believed that.

MWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWM
Given Scott Lang slightly too much chemistry know-how, now that I have seen the new Antman film. Oh well.
Also, yes the Infinity Stone is the wrong colour for the power. I know; made that mistake before they made it clear in the films.
Also warning: chemistry mumbo jumbo :)

“So we’re going to sit here whilst yet another realm is destroyed?”

“I am open to suggestions. If they don’t find an Infinity Stone it may be that they leave Nidavellir alone as opposed to ripping it to pieces.”

No one believed that.

Loki had put the footage of Asgard up on the screen in the kitchen and the ensuing discussion took nearly three hours as they went through the repercussions from what had happened.

What it boiled down to was where the other Stones were and therefore who was most at risk from Thanos.

“There has to be something. Rumour, hearsay, some magic treasure map hidden in a bottle, mystic runes on a tree, something.” Tony had his head in his hands, his voice at the height of frustration.

“If there was don’t you think I would have mentioned it!”

“Some childhood story or something?”

Loki turned away from the table, throwing his hands up in the air. “Norns! I give up! Thor, you try and talk some sense into him!”

Steve cleared his throat, interrupting the conversation before the blonde God could do so. “Okay, if we assume the other Stones are out of the question, what do we do now?”

“We as in the Nine Realms, or we as in those of us in this kitchen?” Loki asked acerbically.

“Does it make a difference? We have no idea how long he’s going to be on Nidavellir, no idea where he’s going to go next and no idea where the other stones are. What do we do now?”

All faces turned towards the two Gods, as if they could possibly answer.

The trickster shrugged, turning away. “I don’t know.”

“Loki…”

“I don’t know. Don’t you think I’m trying to find an answer? I’ve been trying since I first became aware of Thanos and his plan.”

Rhodey waved a tired hand in the air. “Look, can we just go back a few steps here. Everyone keeps
asking about finding the other Stones. What’s the point? Why not hunt Thanos down and sort him out?”

Loki rolled his eyes. “Sort him out? Certainly. Why not just walk up and stab him in the throat? Simple as that.”

“Alright, alright. Quit being so bitchy. Why’s he even want the things? What’s the point?”

Being called ‘bitchy’ like a teenage girl wasn’t exactly a good way to ensure the trickster’s cooperation, and to prove that point Loki shattered the mug next to Rhodey’s arm with a dark glare.

“Hey!”

“He wants wholesale destruction.” Tony was the one who answered; exhausted where he lounged in his chair. “Right? Wholesale destruction?”

“No quite wholesale.”

“Semi-wholesale? What does he want then?”

“He courts death. He wants the universe under his feet to offer as sacrifices to whatever darkness it is he believes in. The loss of the Nine Realms is a small price to pay to then be able to subjugate the rest of the universe.”

Silence fell across the room at the pronunciation, only broken when Steve let out a low whistle.

“That’s…That’s like something out of a horror movie.”

“The universe?” Rhodey looked as shell shocked as the group felt. “We’ve only just got used to saving the planet. That’s way out of our jurisdiction. I mean; we can only just reach the moon.”

Tony waved a hand. “Pluto. I reached Pluto.”

“Yeah, whatever, still within the Solar System. We can’t save the universe!”

“We might have to.”

Rhodes held his head in his hands with a groan. “This is too big.” He looked up at Tony. “We can’t keep this shit to ourselves. The World Council need to be informed. NATO, the UN, all the important people who can deal with global threats.”

“We’ll definitely need more fire power.” Steve added quietly. “But I’m assuming you’re working on that, Tony.”

“I can defend this tower, a five block radius and then have patchy coverage for the city further out from there. I need to finish rebuilding the Iron Legion.” Tony met Loki’s gaze across the table. “But we don’t even have a time scale, do we? They could turn up tomorrow, or five thousand years’ time. We have no idea.”

“No, we don’t.”

MWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMW

“Thirty years.”

“Pardon?”
Tony was holding Brandr, Hope already asleep in the crib, and he glanced up briefly at his husband. “Thirty years. Do you think we could at least have that?”

“Why such an arbitrary number?”

“To see the kids grow up. Watch them all become adults. Have at least a little bit of a life before Earth gets snuffed out.”

He didn’t get a response and looked over to see Loki staring out of the window.

“I just want to see them grow up.” There was a note of pleading in the man’s voice. “There’s got to be a chance.”

“There’s always a chance.” Loki’s voice was distant, as if he was speaking the words out to the whole city that was spread out beneath him rather than the man behind him.

“Yeah, what chance?!”

“Is Brandr asleep?”

“I…what? Yeah, he’s asleep. What’s that got to do with our imminent doom and the possible deaths of our children?”

The prince turned away from the vista, arms folded tightly across his chest. “I need to show you something.”

There was something dark in his voice that made Tony carefully place the sleeping baby down in the crib and follow his husband out of the nursery.

“Something as in ‘you’ve gone and done something stupid’? Or something as in ‘you have an idea to save us all’?”

The slight lopsided smile on Loki’s face made Tony groan.

“Oh God, bit of both?”

“It may be a bit of both.” Loki sat down on the bed, and Stark thumped down heavily next to him, taking up most of the mattress.

“Go on. What the hell have you been up to?”

“Nothing recent.” Loki looked down at him then laid back so they were side by side. “And I’m not even certain I should tell you about this.”

“Why the hell not?”

“Because it could get you killed. Or worse.”

“Worse than killed?”

“It could get you tortured for the information, then killed, then half of the universe is wiped out.”

“…Huh. Been there, done…most of that. Hit me. What’s the problem?”

Loki sighed heavily. “You are going to hate me for this.” He waved his hand in what Tony was now recognising as an opening sigil to open one of the pocket dimensions he kept things in. A
small, wooden box materialised that he caught before it fell. Tony very vaguely recognised it as something that had sat on his husband’s shelf in Asgard.

“A box?”

“Strangely enough it is the thing inside the box that is important.”

“Alright, Mr Sarcasm.” Tony sat up as the trickster did, staring at the receptacle that he had been promised was so dangerous. Whatever was in there could only be small… “Oh wait…You didn’t!” He moved his gaze to his husband. “You don’t…that isn’t…tell me you don’t have what I think you have!”

“Depends on what you think I have.”

“Well right now I’m thinking you’re holding what is potentially one of the most dangerous and highly sought after objects in the universe.”

“Something like that.” Loki ran a hand over the carving on the box. “I would move back a little if I were you.”

For once Tony took the warning to heart and shuffled backwards, staring at his husband. When the lid on the box was lifted he had to shield his eyes against a sudden intense glare.

“I can’t believe you’ve been hiding this from me!”

“Well, I’m telling you now.”

Stark slowly lowered his hands as the fierce glow dissipated a little. “Is that what I think it is, then?”

A small glow was hovering in the centre of the open box, bright yellow and about the size of a walnut.

“This is the Reality Stone.”

“Reality. The Reality Stone. You have got the fucking Reality Stone here, in our bedroom, and you’ve been keeping it in a little wooden box on your shelf for God knows how long.”

“For about seventy two thousand years, actually.”

“Oh that makes it all better!” Tony leant forwards, just a little, to look at the small object. “What does it do?”

“Best I can tell; it gives the bearer the ability to alter reality. Create living hallucinations, build false projections, visions, illusions…” The trickster quirked a small grin at his husband. “Technically what I can do, but on a much much larger scale.”

“So can you, I dunno, use it? Could you weaponise it?”

“I can barely hold it, I’m afraid.”

“You used the Tesseract.”

“The Tesseract was neatly protected inside a pretty blue cube. Did you think that was it’s real shape?”
Tony’s gaze moved from the stone to his husband incredulously. “Seriously? You can’t use this thing?!”

Loki sighed. “Need proof?” He carefully closed his hand around the bright yellow glow, closing his eyes as he did so.

“Wow, shit! Not if it’s dangerous!”

“Of course it’s dangerous.” The trickster opened his eyes again and they were glowing the same bright yellow of the stone. He held his free hand out, palm up, and waved it across the room. Tony yelped as the space around them melted away and became sudden literal space.

They were floating in nothingness, stars pinwheeling around them. There was a comet streaming off into the distance, and Tony followed it’s trajectory open mouthed. He’d felt the weightlessness of space before, but never without the safety of a suit. Now, with his hair taking on a life of its own and shirt billowing he could feel what it was really like.

“This is incredible!” He turned to his partner just in time to see Loki’s yellow eyes flicker green. “Hey, you okay?!”

“No…” Yellow became fully green and the trickster suddenly dropped the stone with a yelp. As he did so the cosmos around them stuttered and crashed back to the bedroom they were really in. The stone fell back into the box and the lid slammed itself shut.

“What?” The look on Tony’s face said he was already trying to think through the problem. “So what if we managed to build a box for it like the Tesseract so you could use it and-”

“No. Thanos can never have any idea of where this is.” Loki frowned as he saw Stark’s expression change. “What?”

“He tortured the Tesseract’s location out of you.”

“Thank you for that reminder.” The trickster vanished the box again. “He demanded the locations of all the stones I knew about.” He grinned. “So I told him of the two best known; the Space gem on Alfheim and the Tesseract on Earth. I may have also mentioned the Aether, but to be honest I can’t remember. Either way, it took a lot for me to give him those; he has no reason to believe I know of any others.”

“And now I know too.”

“Well, don’t get yourself captured by Thanos, and don’t let him have any reason to think you know a thing about this.”

“Oh God this is crazy!”

Loki started to reply, but was cut short as the baby monitor next to the bed lit up. “Crazy is what we do, Stark.”

Tony fell back against the mattress to stare up at the ceiling as his husband went into the nursery to see what was wrong. To know that there was an Infinity Stone on Earth, let alone in his tower was
something that he was going to struggle to get his head around.

Naturally he wanted to do something with the knowledge.

There was no reason Thanos would know. God knows where Loki had found the thing, tens of thousands of years ago, but there was no reason for Thanos to think it was on Earth. No more reason than thinking it was there rather than on any other realm anyway.

_Could_ they use it? Tony was good; was he that good? Could he create something like the casing the Tesseract had been kept in to allow Loki to hold and use the stone in the same way? It ought to be possible. And if he couldn’t was it possible to destroy the damn thing? Fires of Mount Doom or whatever. Mt Etna was always active, right?

“Are you alright? I could hear you thinking from in the twins room.” The mattress by his head dipped and Tony moved his gaze up to see his husband sit down beside him again.

“Define alright. Who was crying?”

“Hope. Who did you think? I’ve left the covers off her tonight; it’s quite warm and the Jötunn genetics do seem to be affecting her temperature regulation. And I define aright as not about to have a panic attack.”

“Well by that definition I’m alright. Do we need to start worrying about other Jötunn physiology creeping in?”

“Let’s wait until it snows and see what happens. How freaked out are you then?”

“Reasonably freaked out. And if she goes blue Evie is going to be furious; she’s always wanted to be blue.”

Loki snorted quietly with laughter. “Yes, that is true.” He ran his fingers through his husband’s hair. “Go on, I know you have more questions.”

“Where did you find it?” Straight to the heart of the problem.

“Muspelheim. Many millennia ago. Rather by accident actually; I didn’t realise what it was, I just knew it was powerful.”

That sounded like the Loki Tony knew and loved. Decisions were usually based on emotional impulse rather than thought. “Does anyone else know you’ve got it?”

“Literally no one but you. I never even told Sleipnir.”

“Can anyone else get at it?”

The trickster smirked. “It’s _safe_, Tony. It is stored in a pocket dimension – I’ve essentially placed it in a tame black hole. The only way it can be retrieved is if I retrieve it myself.”

“What if something happens to you?”

“If I die it will stay where it is for the rest of eternity. And before you ask; no it can’t be destroyed.”

“Am I that obvious?”

“You were practically assembling the Fellowship of the Ring.”
Tony grinned. “Guilty. So…we have no choice but to defeat Thanos then. We can’t destroy that thing, we can’t use it, we can’t bargain with it. All we can do is hide it and hope like hell we kill him before he kills us.”

“Pretty much.”

“Fucking awesome.”

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“Yeah, but do we know where they are?” Natasha pushed one of the pieces of paper around. “We need to hunt them all. Cut the head and three more grow and all that bullshit.”

“Working on it. The buyers in Kosovo haven’t been seen since the first and only purchase and they haggled hard. My sources tried very hard to find them again – hell they wanted to sell more – but Hydra’ve vanished. Chances are we got them in that hit when we took the helicarrier.”

“That’s…very optimistic.”

Clint spread his hands in the universal ‘I don’t know’ gesture. “What do you want me to tell you?! This is the best news we’ve had in a long time. This is reasonable evidence that Hydra are on the ropes. I’m not saying trust it implicitly; they could easily just be sourcing elsewhere, but we need something to celebrate right now. They’re running scared.”

“We can but hope.”

But it was good news, and they would take it.

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“Jarvis, where’s Loki gone?”

It was bedtime for the twins, and whilst they’d fallen into a routine where one or the other parent would settle them it was unusual for the other not to at least be hovering in the doorway.

“He took himself up to the roof approximately 12 minutes ago. I monitored an incoming energy source. It’s possible he was receiving some communication from outside Earth.”

It had been six full months since Loki had visited Jötunnheim. Six months with no further word from the Aesir refugees or his off-world family and whilst he had been mostly silent on the subject it had been bubbling there in the background. He would no doubt be glad to have finally heard something.

At six months the twins were sleeping reasonably well, at least as much as the parents could expect. Tony could at least hope for about two hours before one possibly woke up, and with Jarvis keeping a watchful eye he felt happy leaving them to hunt down his husband.

It was early evening, so not quite dark, but the rain was hammering down against the windows as Stark made his way up towards the roof. It was a seasonal storm – although they could never rule out Thor having a moment of grief over what had befallen Asgard and her people these days. It wasn’t really the weather to choose to be outside in.

For once Loki wasn’t sitting on the very edge of the building. Instead, Tony found him lying flat on the concrete staring up into the thick black clouds. A human probably wouldn’t have been able to stare directly up into such a torrential downpour but the alien god didn’t seem to be having a problem with it. Tony debated just staying in the doorway and calling, but that wouldn’t show him as a very good husband. Instead he sighed and left the relative shelter of the stairwell.

It was raining so heavily that in the handful of steps it took to cross the rooftop Stark’s t-shirt and jeans were absolutely soaked through.

“Oh.” Careless of the puddles, he sat down on the concrete beside his husband. “What’s happened?”

Because Loki was dramatic, but not usually this dramatic.
“Nidavellir has fallen.”

Tony let out the breath he didn’t even know he was holding, the news hitting like a punch to the gut. They had known it was coming, expecting to hear it at any time, but that made it no easier.

“Any survivors?”

“Heimdall opened the Bifrost at the end. A few hundred got through. Maybe less.” It had long been established that the Bifrost couldn’t be opened during the main attack on a realm. If they evacuated people too soon they risked Thanos assuming that an Infinity Stone was being smuggled off realm, and too late there would be no one to save. Heimdall had had to hit that point blank moment as the mad titan unleashed the full power of the stones in his possession leaving the Watcher to scoop up any survivors who had been at the Bifrost point at that moment.

The rescued dwarves had been unaccepting of this explanation and the animosity was high. Realistically the Aesir could have been evacuating the inhabitants of Nidavellir from the moment the Bifrost was working again, but to draw Thanos’ attention back to the rubble of Asgard would mean the destruction of everything they had managed to salvage. It had had to be down to the very last second; when Thanos would be confident there was no stone and wouldn’t follow the few survivors.

Tony couldn’t help thinking about it in the same terms as Earth. How many humans would be able to make it to a single point after months of such bombardment? How many humans across the whole planet would be able to get to one specific spot? That they had even managed to rescue a few hundred people from Nidavellir under those same circumstances was actually a huge achievement.

When Stark expressed this sentiment Loki laughed bitterly.

“Nothing about this can be celebrated.”

“You know I don’t mean it like that.”

“I know.” The trickster’s hand reached out, finding his husband’s and holding tight. “This is all my fault.”

“What? How can-?”

“I let go. I let go, I let the chitauri take me, I told Thanos where the Nine Realms were, I lead the attack for the Tesseract. This is all down to me.” Loki turned his head slightly, just enough to make eye contact. “And you know that’s true.”

“It’s not-”

“Tony, it is. If I hadn’t told him where the Nine Realms were this wouldn’t be happening. If I hadn’t come here for the Tesseract this wouldn’t be happening.”

“Huh.” Tony could feel the hand in his shaking, could hear the tears in the tone of voice that the rain was hiding. “You know, I have to disagree.”

“There is nothing to disagree with here. I am stating facts, not asking for an opinion.”

“Yeah and the Earth is flat.” Stark said gently. “Look. I agree that Thanos followed your lead to the Nine Realms. However –” He held up a hand as Loki began to protest that single word. “However, he would have found us eventually anyway. All you did was set a timescale.”
“This would not have happened if—”

“Of course it would.” Tony reached out to untangle the prince’s sopping wet hair. “You said yourself Thanos has been searching for the Infinity Stones for eons; he’d obviously already narrowed them down to the Nine Realms. Yeah you showed him the way here, but he was persistent enough to have found one himself eventually. This isn’t on you. This really isn’t on you.”

“And all those terror attacks weren’t on you, back in the day.” Loki turned his head enough to glare up at the man accusatorily. “Your weapons, your inventions, all those dead, but you didn’t send those missiles, did you? And yet you have still felt so guilty that you continue to use Ironman to try and atone for those crimes to this very day. Tell me: how is this any different?”

The silence that came as a response was very telling. Loki huffed and closed his eyes.

“I need to find a way to live with this.” The words were breathed up to the uncaring sky.

However, he started slightly when the deluge of rain suddenly ceased across his face and upper torso and opened his eyes again with a frown. Tony was leaning over him, a hand planted firmly on the wet concrete on either side of his head.

“What are you doing?”

“What I promised to do when I married you. Aesir weddings don’t have vows, but Earth ones do, and I’m holding to them.”

“I don’t understand…”

“Have and hold, better or worse, richer or poorer, sickness and health, love and cherish, ’til death do us part.” Stark leant down to press his forehead against his husband’s. “So I’m holding, cherishing, and loving whilst we get through this part of the worse.”

“You think it’s that easy?”

“No.” A half-smile curled at the corner of the man’s lips. “This shit’s anything but easy, but I’m trying my best here. And if you’re going to take the blame for all of this, and try to shoulder all of that guilt, then I’m damn well going to be right at your side as you go.”

“Tony, none of this is your-”

“Oh don’t give me that; I’m sure there’s some convoluted way I can make at least some of this my fault too.” Tony shifted so that he was propped up on his elbows – still one on either side of Loki’s head – and wiped the wet hair out of his eyes. “Look, we’re both hot messes and have ledgers drenched in red, taking on more is never going to help that.”

“I can hardly-”

“You didn’t personally attack Nidavellir. You didn’t attack Asgard, or Alfheim, or Svatlwhoosiwhatsit. That wasn’t you.” He pressed a finger against Loki’s lips as the trickster tried to protest. “And yes, I know you feel like it started with you, and maybe it did, but we’d have got here anyway one way or another. And if it started with you, then it also started with Steve, and my Dad and Bucky messing around with the Tesseract back in the day, and your Dad being a shit parent, and Thor being a shit brother, and a whole host of little people making little decisions all across time and space to lead to this moment.”

“You have it all worked out, don’t you.” The words came out as a tired sigh.
“God no, but I sound pretty convincing, right?”

Loki laughed softly. “I don’t know. You sound pretty full of it.”

“But I made you smile.”

The prince reached a hand up to cup Tony’s cheek. “I suppose you did. You do.” Said smile was small, but far better than the abject misery that had been painted across his face earlier. “You always manage to.”

“I suppose that’s something then.”

“It doesn’t save the Nine Realms though.”

The man sighed and leant down to press their foreheads together. “Yeah, well, I’m sure in Doctor Who they manage to save the universe through the power of love all the time.”

“And wouldn’t it be wonderful if we lived in the sort of world where love saves the day and all the good guys live happily ever after?” Loki’s voice was soft. “And what side would that put me on I wonder? Would I get to live happily ever after?” He moved his head enough to be able to press a kiss against his husband’s cheek. “Don’t try to answer that one.”

“We need to get away from this all.”

“Are you speaking hypothetically, or do you actually think we could run from this?”

“Not running, we just need a few days out of all of this mess to get our heads straight.”

Loki looked bemused. “Are you suggesting a holiday?”

“Yeah, let’s go on vacation. Just the five of us; two, three days, off grid. Not having to think about all this shit and just being a family.”

“…I’ll think about it.” The trickster raised a hand to press gently against the man’s chest, indicating that he wanted Tony to move.

“You don’t think it’s a good idea?”

“Stark, right now I don’t really have the capacity to think of anything beyond the imminent threat, and keeping our children alive.” He sat up, trying to wipe the rain out of his eyes. “Just…give me some time, yes?”

“Yeah. Sure.”

The rain was still hammering down around them, but for a long moment there was silence between the two men.

“We’re not doing this whole relationship thing very well right now, are we?” Tony sounded miserable.

Loki leant forwards enough to press another kiss against his husband’s forehead. “How can you say that? You stormed across the universe to find me after a relationship that, frankly, was built on sex. I think we’re pulling together quite well.”

That surprised a laugh out of Stark, and he looked up to see the trickster smiling slightly. “Sex and having a child together. A slightly crucial thing to remember there.”
“And now we have three.”

“Four and a half.”

Loki pulled back to stare at him. “How did you come to that conclusion? And how does one have half a child?”

“Evie and twins make three. And I adore Sleipnir, and he seems to be quite happy to consider me family so that’s four. And I’m working on Merlin, so he’s currently my half.”

“You would count Sleipnir and Merlin as family?” Loki sounded disbelieving.

“Hell yeah I would! Step kids are family too. We both come from jacked up versions of family, so we might as well make our own version here.”

That drew a genuine laugh from the trickster. “Our own version of family. I like that.”

It was Muspelheim next. Half a year on from Nidavellir falling they received word that the attacks had started up on the next realm. The Eldjötnar – fire giants to the Avengers who still weren’t all that up to speed with pronouncing ancient Norse names – were in a better position to fight back than the Dwarves, and Heimdall’s initial contact with Earth sounded quite hopeful.

For the first time since Thanos had stormed into the Nine Realms he was facing actual opposition. There was a pattern beginning to emerge as well; now that it wasn’t clear where the remaining Stones were Thanos was sending in his army to scout. It was unclear whether they were interrogating captives – unclear if they were taking captives at all – but there were multiple groups being sent out across the planet searching out clues towards any possible Stones.

This was new from the first three realms; Thanos had known that those three had the Gems and just needed to send in his armies to retrieve them. Now he was being cautious. Storming in and obliterating the place with the Gauntlet wouldn’t destroy an existing Stone but risked burying it forever. He needed to either obtain it first, or determine that the realm didn’t have one.

Muspelheim was fighting back against the scouting groups far better than the Dwarves had managed, mostly because of the local fauna. Muspelheim had dragons.

“Got what now?”

“Dragons. Or dreki, if you would prefer.” Thor replied.


“Oh for Norns sake!” Loki waved a hand and an image appeared in the centre of the room, a few feet long. “That sort of dragon.”

It looked reasonably like how mainstream media had assumed; not quite Western and not quite Chinese. Somewhere between the two. The projection flapped its wings and spat a ball of fire at Steve. The Captain was familiar enough with Loki’s magic by now to know when something didn’t actually exist and allowed the false flames to pass harmlessly through him.

“Huh.”
There were just five adults in the room – although Bucky wasn’t contributing to the conversation – but Loki had Hope sat on his lap and Brandr was happily sat at his feet chewing on a teething ring. As the dragon flapped it’s wings again Hope reached out towards it with a demanding little ‘bah!’ noise. The projection flew over to the baby and shrank down into a small plushie that she could grab hold of.

“Are you going to go to this Fire Planet, see if there’s anything you can do?” Steve asked.

“Frankly I don’t know how much use it would be. I have no idea if there’s an Infinity Stone there or not, and all I would do if I looked would be to draw the enemy’s attention to it.” It wasn’t a surprising answer. “At this point we know how Thanos is working: we know what it’s going to look like when they come to Earth, we need to plan for that. Earth needs to be the priority.”

“Can Fire Planet hold them off for a while?”

“It’s a land of dragons, lava and fire giants; they’ll certainly keep Thanos’ army busy.”

“Fire giants?”

Loki smirked. “Think about twenty feet high, skin that can melt iron and the ability to spit fire.”

“Sounds delightful.”

Thor grinned at his brother’s description. “Those dragons are the size of a helicarrier. It is truly one of the most dangerous realms to visit.”

“Exactly; if there is an Infinity Stone there it will be difficult to find. Svartalfheim had theirs locked away in such a way that anyone with a knowledge of magic could find it, Asgard’s was sat in a treasure vault and Alfheim was showing theirs off in a museum. Muspelheim has very little by way of stable land. Imagine what Earth would have been like when newly formed.” Loki let that thought sink in. “It is almost entirely volcanic, with the toxic atmosphere already in place and fauna that has long adapted to such extremes. Thanos won’t find searching the place easy.”

Steve let his breath out with a whistle. “Well, to be honest that’s probably the best news we can have. That’s four realms down; we need a break, and we need something to slow this all down.”

“Before they decide we’re next, you mean.” Sam made it sound off hand, but the tension in his jaw said he was feeling anything but relaxed.

“Before they decide we’re next.” Thor knew that denying it wasn’t going to stop the inevitable but out of the corner of his eye he could see Loki hold Hope just that little bit tighter.

It was a flat, empty way to end the discussion, but there really wasn’t much more to be said. They couldn’t help Muspelheim, so the best thing to do was try to get their own defences in place and hope like Hell that the realm of fire would manage what the other fallen realms hadn’t and overwhelm the invading forces. Best case scenario; Thanos was defeated before he could ever turn his sights on Earth.

With the conversation over the room emptied, leaving Loki to return his full attention to the two children. However, that didn’t mean he wasn’t aware of the gaze on him.

“Can I help you Sargent Barnes?”

“I don’t know.”
The trickster placed Hope down on the floor so that she could sit beside her brother and looked up at the soldier. “I need more than that to go on.”

“You can heal injuries, yes?”

“Within reason.”

Bucky hadn’t left his chair, but leant forwards as he engaged in the conversation. “Can you regrow limbs?”

Given the amount of time he had now spent with the Avengers it was reasonable that he was finally becoming comfortable enough with them to start asking those sorts of questions. Loki’s gaze moved to the man’s gleaming metal arm.

“I am sorry, but no. Some can, but only after training in the healing arts for many many years. I’m not that proficient.”

“Oh.” Bucky didn’t look disappointed, more like he had already assumed that was going to be the answer. It did leave an obvious question floating in the air.

“You have been with us for over a year now, why have you not asked Tony about an upgrade?”

The soldier shrugged running a hand over his metal forearm. “Haven’t gotten around to it, I guess.” There was something about his expression that to someone who lied professionally told Loki a lot. Bucky was evidently still very uncomfortable with talking to Stark about something so personal. There was something else as well that took Loki a little longer to realise.

If the soldier wasn’t concentrating on something else there was a strange blank expression that passed across his face when he moved the prosthetic arm. A complete absence of emotion that was certainly hiding something.

“Is there some reason that you’re asking about this now? Do you have a problem with the arm?”

There was the same blank moment: someone trained not to show emotion carefully hiding something that had hit home. “It’s fine.”

Loki grinned. “You’re lying to the God of Lies. Not a smart idea, Barnes.” That earned him a glare. “You want my help, you’ve already stated that. Maybe if you tell me the full story I can actually do something.”

“You said you can’t regrow my arm.”

“And that isn’t the true problem.” The trickster’s attention was diverted to his children momentarily as he returned a teething ring that Brandir had thrown just out of reach. When he looked back up he was surprised to see Bucky beginning to unclip the attachments at the very top of the prosthetic.

It was an intricate contraption and took a few moments to fully unbuckle. It was obvious it wasn’t something he did very often. The arm itself couldn’t be detached given the cybernetic parts that buried themselves in his actual flesh but he could remove the outer casing to reveal the point of contact.

Loki frowned. “How long has it been like that?”

Barnes glanced at the limb in question. The flesh was swollen and an angry red. There were areas
of patchy bandaging covering sores left from where the prosthetic was rubbing.

“A while. Your daughter helped a little when I first came here, but it hasn’t been fitting properly
for a while now.”

“And you haven’t said anything? Why? We could have sorted this the moment it became a
problem.”

“Yeah, would you trust this sort of problem to people you were trying to kill just over a year ago?
I’m only talking to you because Steve convinced me it was a good idea.”

“Good old Steve Rogers.” Loki was still looking over the injuries to the stump. “Whilst I cannot
regrow the whole limb I can heal up those pressure sores for you. However, that’s fixing a
symptom, not the actual problem. You need to speak with Stark: the prosthetic needs updating if
not a full remodel.” Bucky’s expression could only be called territorial and the trickster rolled his
eyes. “Or not. Your choice. Do you want me to fix up those wounds?”

Again there was a tightly controlled play of emotions on the soldier’s face. This time Loki
recognised exactly what was going on. Here was a warrior with a streak of pride a mile long
needing help and struggling to actually bow down and ask for it. Thor was still only just learning
the fine art of asking for assistance when he was injured.

“Okay, let me rephrase that. Give me your arm. I can beat you in a straight fight so do not even
bother trying to refuse, and let me sort that mess out.”

Bucky smirked. “You don’t look half as threatening as you think you do, by the way.”

It was true. With the plush dragon still on his lap and the twins playing at his feet he didn’t exactly
look intimidating. “I don’t need to look anything. I am sleep deprived and one bad night away from
burning a city down. How I look doesn’t enter into it.” He held a hand out expectantly.

It was getting to the point that Loki’s common complaint of ‘not an expert at healing spells’ was
becoming redundant. The repeated practice was making him proficient at what had been a weak
spot in his magic. It didn’t take long for him to clear the pressure sores left by the prosthesis and
start work on an infection that had set in.

It was probably due to the super-soldier serum that Bucky had been able to hide the early signs of
the illness, but it was still an ugly infection that would have needed a course of strong antibiotics.
Clearing it up would be removing a significant amount of pain.

“I still believe you need to let Tony look at your arm.” Loki said, his voice quiet with
concentration. “It’s not fitting properly and you need someone who knows what they’re doing to
sort that.”

“Stark is not a prosthetics expert.”

“No, but he is a mechanics expert who knows how to intricately fit metalwork to a limb. How is
the response time in it?”

Bucky glanced down at the hand in question and clenched it. “A slight delay, but not enough to
warrant a problem.”

“Tony could remove the delay entirely.”

“You put a lot of faith in his skills.”
“His skills took him to the other side of the known universe in a suit he made himself, to save me. I have every faith in what that man can do.” Loki was focussing on the injuries under his hand, but glanced up at the small huff of laughter. “What?”

“Nothing.” Bucky was smiling, but without malice in the expression. “Just, for the guy that Hydra were so concerned about, you’re rather...soft.”

“There’s nothing soft about appreciating the lengths someone will go to for you. Captain Rogers would do the same for you. Has done the same for you. I do believe Steve crossed Nazi territory, broke into a munitions factory and kicked the Red Skull in the face to rescue you.” The trickster finished with the largest of the pressure sores and moved his attention to the smaller ones. “And you can’t deny that.”

“I’m not denying it. But I never asked him to do it.” The soldier spotted the smile on the trickster’s face. “What?!”

“I think you will find that you and I are very similar in some regards. I never asked Stark to storm across a universe either. But here we both are, because of two men who did things we didn’t ask them to do.”

Bucky craned his neck to look at the difference to his arm. “You are drawing parallels between two completely different situations.”

“Yes of course. No similarity at all.”

“Look, just because I was born in the 20’s doesn’t mean I don’t know when someone’s insinuating something!”

Loki smiled serenely. “You’ve said it yourself; nothing to insinuate.” He turned the soldiers arm one way and another, checking that he had reached all of the raw areas. “And I believe that is everything healed.”

“Huh? Oh, yeah, thanks.” Bucky moved the limb, presumably to check that Loki hadn’t done anything to the actual prosthetic.

“I mean it though; talk to Stark about sorting the mechanics out. I’ve solved the symptoms, but not the problem. If you leave it the sores will just come back again.”

“Sure thing, mom.”

The humour was so unexpected that it surprised a laugh from Loki and he looked down at the twins. “Yes, well; I can’t exactly complain about that, can I?”

“I don’t think I am ever going to get used to the weirdness in this place!” The soldier rolled his shoulder again, evidently enjoying being pain free. “I might follow your advice though. Maybe Stark would be amenable to looking at it.”

"Is there a reason you’re hovering in the doorway like some creepy ghoul?” Evie asked sourly.

“I’m going to pretend you didn’t just call me that.” To be fair Tony had stopped in the doorway to the cinema when he’d spotted his daughter in there. But he wouldn’t have called it hovering as such.
Evie had pushed the chairs and beanbags out of the way and was lying on her stomach, a plate of crackers in front of her and Arthur sat on his haunches watching her carefully.

“What are you doing?”

“Training. I hadn’t realised he had a venom response; so now we’re training to produce it on command.”

“Did your mom not mention that? It’s apparently on the edge of being bred out of them – I think he assumed Arthur couldn’t do it. It’s not supposed to be particularly harmful to humans, just –”

“Feels like a nettle sting?” Evie held up her hand, displaying a faint rash. “Yep, found that one out.”

“What did you do to make him do that?” Tony left the doorway to come and sit beside her on the floor.

“I didn’t, Dummy snuck up on him and pulled his tail; I got caught in the cross fire. So I thought it best to train him to control it.” She pointed up in the air and the Münchrat rose to his feet, alert and ready. “Arthur, bristle.”

In a movement similar to an angry cat the small creature arched his back. However, unlike a cat, the whiskers around his tusks obtruded and visibly hardened to needle-like projections. Evie pointed to a cushion that until this moment Tony had overlooked. “And fire!”

Said needles terminated the cushion with extreme prejudice. Stark huffed with amusement.

“That’s rather impressive. I didn’t know he could do that.”

“He’ll do anything for food.” Evie held out a cracker that Arthur politely picked out of her hand. “The hardest bit was teaching him not to snatch the treats. He’s been very good around the twins, but it can’t hurt to make certain.”

“Glad you’re taking your role as a big sister so seriously.”

“World’s gonna burn, someone’s got to be ready to protect them.”

Tony ignored the insinuation that she didn’t think he was going to protect their small family adequately. “Since when is the world going to burn?”

The look his daughter gave him was pure Loki. “Uh, hello? Evil Titan dude sending his evil armies of minions to destroy worlds? Y’know. The normal. And Hydra is still a thing.”

“And you’re training Arthur to repel Thanos and Hydra…?”

“Don’t be stupid, Dad. I’m training Arthur because I need to do something. I feel useless just sitting around twiddling my thumbs so might as well see what he can do.”

Stark looked down at the Münchrat, who had pulled the spines out of the cushion and curled up and fallen asleep on it. “Well, let’s hope that he isn’t our last line of defence. And how’s your training going?”

Evie shrugged. “On and off. Depends who’s decided to bugger off to another realm or lose their vital skills for nine months or so. I can get by with Youtube and Jarvis when I need to.”

“Well, God knows what’s going to get thrown at us next and Arthur spitting a handful of needles
won’t cut it. Thank you can handle some more firepower?"

The girl grinned. “Meaning you’ll finally let me loose on the semi-automatics?!”

“I suspect you already know how to use one, but we might as well make sure you know how to do it properly.” Tony held up a hand as his phone beeped in his pocket. “Hold that thought.” He glanced at the message on the screen. “Huh. Your Mom’s asking if I’m willing to fix the Frozen Buckyball’s dicky arm.”

“It’s broken? Looked fine earlier.”

“It’s been ill-fitting since he came here. I think Loki’s finally talked him into getting it looked at properly. Do you mind blowing shit up later? I don’t want him to change his mind.”

Evie flapped a hand at him. “Go on, go, I’m sure my fragile teenage feelings can handle it.” She grinned.

Tony did feel slightly bad given how long it had been since he had worked with the girl on her training, but Bucky was such a flight risk in any given situation that he couldn’t really give the soldier the option to have a change of heart.

As it was the soldier was lurking outside the glass doors to the lab, still holding the pieces of the prosthetic that he had removed earlier.

“I—”

Yeah, Loki explained. Although I can’t say I hadn’t noticed it was fitting poorly. Shall we?”

Loki and Thor returned to Jötunnheim a few times over the next year or so. Odin had taken up Loki’s suggestion of making the remains in Asgard habitable again, and the younger prince had been instrumental in making a start at that. However, whilst he had been able to help Heimdall fix the Bifrost and clear the radiation from the area, cleaning the toxic atmosphere of an entire realm was stretching it a too far even for his considerable powers.

It had caused quite a delay in the rebuild.

“No luck?”

Loki had actually taken to Google and was beginning to show similar traits to his husband in holing himself up and researching. This meant going for long periods without speaking to anyone else.

“No luck.” He glanced up from the tablet to see Evie leaning on the desk next to him. She was seventeen now; mentally more mature and the training regime paying off so that puppy fat had become muscle mass. Still a child, but Loki could see the adult his daughter was becoming. “It’s a rather time consuming task.”

“Want some help?”

“If you want to give it some thought.” Loki conjured up a second seat and slid the A3 sheet he’d been jotting down notes on over to her. “How’s your chemistry?”

“Reasonable.”

Evie sat down and quickly scanned the paper. “Wow, Möðhy, your hand writing is crazy!”
The prince frowned at her. “Excuse me? Given that I usually use a runic alphabet I think it’s just fine. You should see Thor’s.”

“I have. Spider-web much?” She tapped her finger on one of the formulae. “What’s this? I recognise it.”

“Formaldehyde.”

“Ick. And that’s in the atmosphere? Double ick.”

“Exactly.”

Evie requisitioned a pencil and began to chew the end of it as she studied the ideas her mother had already jotted down. “This looks like you’re trying to tackle each compound separately…? Why?”

Loki glanced away from the tablet screen again with a sigh. “Because that’s the best way my magic works. I need to work out how to remove each compound, and which order to do it in so that the remaining ones don’t react with each other. And somehow reseed the atmosphere with a liveable mixture of oxygen and nitrogen.”

“And everything else an atmosphere has.”

“Exactly.”

The girl frowned, tapping the pencil on her lip. “Does it have to be done by magic?”

“Do you have any better ideas?”

“Kinda.” She circled a handful of the compounds that Loki had singled out as being the most prevalent in the new atmospheric composition. “What if we only cleared a small portion? Could you set up some sort up bubble around an area so we didn’t have to do the entire realm at once?”

“Well that’s what I intended to do, but I still need to clear out all of the toxic mess first.”

“Well these ones are all flammable, but you need to watch out for the by-products so…..” She trailed off and bit the pencil end again. “I mean, Dad could come up with something to burn these things off in small controlled bursts, but that would still leave some unknown yuck floating around…Hang on a mo.”

Loki blinked at her as the girl pulled her mobile out and found a contact. “Are we outsourcing now?” His daughter mouthed ‘shhh’ at him, which was possibly the first time such a thing had ever happened to the ancient God of Mischief. “Evelyn.” She waved a hand at him in the universal teenage ‘shutupshutupshutup’ gesture and her expression brightened as the call connected.

“Hey Scott, how’s things?!”

“Scott?” Blame it on sleep deprivation, but Loki couldn’t recall knowing a Scott. Evie shushed him again.

“Awesome, awesome, yeah so I’ve got a chemistry problem here, think you could help?” She nodded at the inaudible response. “Yeah, no, physics is my thing. Here, I’ll send a photo.” She quickly snapped the paper. “Got it? Great, yeah, so…” She wandered off, still chattering happily whilst Loki stared after her.

“Jarvis? Who is Scott?”
“Mr Lang, sir? Scott Lang; known to the team as Antman? You have worked with him on several missions now, sir.”

 “…He’s the one that can shrink, yes?”

 “Well done, sir.”

 Loki turned in his chair to see where his daughter had wandered off to. “And why is Evie speaking to him?”

 “He has some experience and background in chemistry.”

 “So he cooks meth or makes bombs.”

 “I didn’t say that, sir.”

 Given that his teenage daughter was happily chatting to the man in question Loki was going to automatically assume the worse, and Earth television had told him that meth or bombs were the worst end of chemistry. However, he forced a smile when Evie came back over, beaming.

 “I was right! Scott thinks it’s doable!”

 “What’s doable?”

 The girl quickly talked through her plan.

 Many of the toxic atmospheric components were flammable, and rather than taking Loki’s approach and taking tackling them one at a time she proposed sectioning off areas and burning off the compounds. With Scott’s quick input she had determined how to work out what the by-products would be and then how they could be dealt with.

 “I see what you want to happen here, and I can certainly section areas of the realm off to do this in, but I don’t have the first clue about these reactions.” Loki looked over the hastily scribbled formulae. “I wouldn’t know what to do for each component.”

 “Yeah, you wouldn’t have to. You section off the areas and Dad can build something that can tackle the actual yuck in the air.”

 “And this would reduce the atmosphere to something liveable?”

 Evie followed down the line of equations she’d written out. “Not totally. I think the oxygen levels would still suck, but you could then re-seed it.” She grinned when her mother looked at her blankly. “I love when I actually know something you don’t.”

 “Well don’t get used to it; it’s a rare occurrence.” The trickster looked over the spider scrawl his daughter had added to his neat formulae. “You think your father could build something that could combust these compounds? He’s an engineer with a background in physics.”

 “Are you kidding? This is asking him to set fire to shit! He was a weapons expert!”

 “Don’t swear.” But he noted the point. If Tony was ever talented at something, it was blowing things up. Blowing up the atmosphere of an entire planet was probably going to be a record, but he could certainly do it. “Okay, so you think we can clear the toxins and their products in a few different steps. Then what? Does Earth have the technology to re-oxygenate an entire atmosphere?”
“Not currently. But we’d be left with a huge amount of carbon dioxide so I’m sure we can find a way to pull oxygen out of that.”

“I could do something with that.” At his daughter’s sceptical look Loki smirked. “I can replicate the basics of photosynthesis, even if I’m not a chemist.”

“Awesome; you’ll be a tree.” The girl grinned back in return. “So, I’m sure there’s a good reason that you’re not just sucking the whole mess of toxic sludge into one of those pocket dimensions of yours…?”

“I’m powerful. I’m not that powerful. I couldn’t simply remove an entire realm’s atmosphere in one go.”

“Really? Disappointing.”

“It is a good job my ego is too large to damage, otherwise that would have hurt.” Loki’s smirk took the bite out of the words.

With an idea in mind mother and daughter worked through the problem for a few more hours. Evie called on Jarvis’ expertise as to what was already possible with current technology so they had a concrete plan of what to ask Tony to build. With Loki carefully noting down every spell in his considerable arsenal that could be useful to clear, block off or shield large areas they were beginning to put together a workable plan.

By the time they called Stark down to have a look there was a strategy in place that would clear a few square miles of Asgard and return a liveable atmosphere. Tony raised a brief question about the radiation that saturated the realm, but was assured that it had already been mostly cleared by Asgard’s few remaining sorcerers. Apparently it was easier to clear than actual particles.

It didn’t take long for the man to start insisting that he started work on building the equipment they would need which left the small family sat on the floor of the labs with holograms and paperwork strewn everywhere. The twins were usually kept well away from Tony’s work spaces but given that both parents were present, and that they were only working theoretically, the toddlers – nearly two and getting under everyone’s feet - were with them.

Evie sat crossed legged, Brandir lying with his back supported on her ankles as she pulled faces and played with his hands. Hope was busy pulling at Arthur’s fur as the patient little animal sat beside her.

“Where’d you get the chemistry know-how on this?” Tony asked. “I mean, it isn’t wrong, just kinda advanced. I thought you hated chemistry, Birdy.”

“I asked Scott for help.”

Stark frowned at Loki in confusion, who mouthed Antman back at him.

“Oh, uh…You know Scott works for Hank Pym, right? Pym Tech and Stark Industries have some serious bad blood between them. Hank would be furious if-”

“If he knew his associate was helping put a realm back together?”

Tony shrugged. “Well, I guess as long as it’s not the quantum realm.” He was playing with a holographic screen that was covered with chemical formulae. “Anyone know if antimony is combustible?”
“There’s antimony in the atmosphere?”

“Yup. That Infinity Bracelet defies all laws of physics and chemistry.”

“Gauntlet, not bracelet.”

Evie was tapping on her phone with one hand, still supporting her brother. “Wiki says antimony forms oxides in the air, or when oxidised with nitric acid. Does that help?”

“Not really.” Tony moved some holographic elements around in the air. “Anything about it reacting with chlorine? I’ve got a boat load of chlorine floating around here after the initial burn-off.”

“Uh…Forms a pyramidal tri-halide with chlorine. Whatever that means.”

“Yeah, I don’t know if that’s a good thing or a bad thing.”

“Let’s assume bad. I don’t know about you, but I don’t want to breathe that in.”

Loki looked across the almost indecipherable formulae. “It might get to a point that if everything that can be burnt off is burnt off, I can start trying to scrub what’s left with magic.”

“Well it’s that or we start looking at nuclear fission and breaking shit apart on a molecular level.”

The trickster held a finger up. “You are not nuking Asgard!”

“Okay, not nuclear fission then.” Tony sat back on his heels and tapped his stylus against his chin. “But…But what if we stayed with the concept?”

His husband and eldest daughter stared at him. “What concept? Nuking Asgard?”

“No. Well, kinda. Give me a mo’.” Stark cleared the formulae with a wave of his hand and brought up the original starting compounds that had been noted in Asgard’s atmosphere. “Jarvis, taking Asgard’s assumed size into account, can you give me assumed amounts of these compounds, realm-wide.” The numbers floating in the air rolled through to Jarvis’ rough estimates. “Right…”

Loki and Evie watched as he began sketching out other equations alongside. It meant little to the prince, but Evie’s eyes began to widen as she recognised the co-efficients.

“Wow, Dad, that’s risky.”

“He’s done it before.” Tony sat back again and looked over what he had scribbled out. “Jarvis, can you run that and check the numbers?”

As the numbers scrolled again Loki moved over to sit closer to his husband. “What are you thinking here? I assume this is something you think I can do?”

“I know you can do it. I just don’t know if it will be possible.”

“A little bit of an oxymoron there, Stark.”

A little green tick appeared next to Tony’s scribbled calculations and the man grinned. “Bingo. My maths is always on point!”

“So’s your ego. Now, what are you intending?”
The man glanced over his shoulder at his daughter. “Birdy? You seemed to guess what I’m looking at here.”

Evie carefully moved Brandir off her legs and let him wobble over to his twin sister, leaving her free to scramble to her parents.

“Yeah, that looks like you’re working out mass to cancel everything out.”

“Mass of what?” Loki hated being the only one in a group not understanding what was happening, and his tone made that very clear.

“Antimatter.”

The trickster gaped at his husband. “That would annihilate everything.”

“Yeah, but you protected us with a shield last time you did it. And you weren’t at full strength.” Tony sounded all too enthusiastic for his husband’s comfort. “Shield off anything we don’t want fried into oblivion and blow the rest to kingdom come. Much easier than burning the atmosphere off in sections.”

“Well, yes, but we’re talking the largest annihilation event since the big bang. And even if I could pull that off everything outside of the shield would then be an airless vacuum.”

“Well that just changes the problem. Rather than clean an atmosphere we need to reseed it.”

Evie nudged Loki with her shoulder. “Your chance to be a tree!”

That drew a laugh from her mother and a confused look from Tony. “Be a tree?”

“Photosynthesis.”

“Yeah, that needs molecular starting blocks.” Stark stared at the formulae. “To be honest, we’re stuck between a rock and a hard place with this. Either blow everything up and hope to burn off everything nasty, or wipe the entire slate clean and rebuild the atmosphere. Neither is easy and there’re loads of complications whichever we choose.”

“Can you pre-build an atmosphere in one of those pocket dimensions of yours?” Evie’s question was so simple that both her parents stared at her. “What?”

“Actually I potentially could…And sticking a little piece of rainforest in with it I could grow it up to a decent size…” Loki began to grin. “That could work. Strip Asgard’s atmosphere entirely like you suggested, and then I could have a ready-made replacement to throw straight into its place.”

Tony held up both hands in a silent demand for High Fives. “Now that is family teamwork!”

“This is going to mean so much work…” Loki left the High Five hanging as he studied the wall of equations. “More antimatter, a full atmosphere, a shield…I do hope you two don’t intend to see much of me any time soon.”

“How long do you think?”

The prince let his breath out in a low whistle. “A few months. I could have everything in place by then.” A grin spread slowly across his face. “A few months and Asgard will be liveable again!”

A realm rebuilt.
Chapter 44

Chapter Notes

Right, apologies:
1) Sorry this has taken so long. I have started a second Masters and it is taking ALL my time :(
2) Sorry this is such a short chapter. It didn't want to happen and rather than force it I chose to cut it short and kick the plot into gear instead.

In short, the family plan worked.

In long it wasn’t as easy as it had looked on paper.

Of all things it was the shield that was the trickiest part of the idea. Loki had made many of them in the past, but never one so absolutely precise. It had taken two weeks of frustrating practice to be able to get it to lay a few microns above the desired surface and a further four days to work out how to extend it.

Thor had thought the whole idea of his brother being unable to instantly get the hang of a spell was hilarious up until Loki worked out how to cast the shield over Mjolnir, making it immobile to the thunderer himself.

However, the entirety of Asgard was a different ball game to laying a shield over the oversized hammer. It took a lot more finesse and a lot more time for one thing.

Tony spent a very long and boring day sat on a piece of rubble watching his husband laying the defence over the realm like a planet-sized shimmery duvet. His complaints about how long it took were duly ignored, although Loki did threaten to leave him outside of the protection zone in a bid to shut him up.

But whilst laying the shield had taken a full day annihilating the atmosphere was the work of minutes. The two sat side-by-side to watch, given that it was quite a spectacle.

The ensuing hurricane as Loki unleashed the new atmosphere was strong enough to knock down most of the remaining buildings. Not that that made much difference to the general ruin of the place, so they didn’t worry too much about it.

There was an added devastation to what had happened with Asgard that wasn’t really noticed until it was an inhabitable area again. The plants, the birds, the animals, everything that had given it such vibrancy and life were gone.

It meant that back on Earth little Arthur was suddenly one of only a few pet Münchrats left across the realms and therefore critically endangered. Vanheim had a few imported herds of bilgesnipes, and other livestock but most of the truly wild animals were unique to Asgard and therefore lost completely.

There was quite a bit of flora that couldn’t grow anywhere else either and that had been lost. Whole species and subspecies were gone forever and there was no hope of replacing them. Even had
Asgard thought to have a seed bank it would have also been destroyed.

The seed bank, or lack thereof, stuck in Tony’s mind and once back on Earth he began drawing up some plans to create one. Given that there was a very low chance Thanos would return to Asgard it made sense to use the place as more than just a haven for the newly displaced people of the nine realms. He sounded the idea to the others, and Clint – with his endless Jurassic Park infatuation – was quick to suggest a gene bank to go along with it.

Once they were talking genetics Bruce got involved and it all rather took off from there.

It was a good reason to get Fury back into play too. Still being ‘dead’ – for a given value of dead, of course – the ex-director had been keeping a low profile for a few years and therefore unable to do much beyond advise behind the scenes. However, this was where he could shine again.

An alias, a little bit of a disguise and he was at the Svalbard Global Seed Bank. Whilst actually taking some of the deposits would be impossible, and frankly unethical, he could gain access to the lists of precious seeds to get an idea of how to organise and gather their own Stark-driven one.

Bruce started utilising his contacts across his old school networks to help with the animal side of things and Pepper grudgingly agreed to pitch a new bio-genetic branch of Stark Industries to the shareholders. It was quite a difficult feat to prepare for an apocalypse whilst not looking like you are to the rest of the world.

And Earth was just the beginning. If Stark could get the systems together to work for storing Midgard’s genetic data and samples they could then branch out and incorporate the other worlds before it was too late.

Loki had already been flitting around various surviving realms gathering samples of any Asgardian animals that still remained. His own personal mission to try to rebuild his home.

As planned he had also been able to transfer in a new atmosphere to the newly cleansed Asgard, but had to populate the area with flora from Earth in lieu of anything originally from the realm. It would mean a change to the ecosystems – Earth plants, Earth bacteria, Earth fungi – but it was better than nothing. The discussion on wildlife would eventually need to be had but for now he left thing as they were and joined the efforts focussing on mending the Bifrost, leaving Asgard silent and still.

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As promised Tony did allow Evie to start using some of the more intensive weaponry in expectation of an attack on Earth, as well as upping her training regime. Being allowed to use explosives was always going to interest a teenager, and people were finally not pulling punches.

Loki would heal broken bones if someone hit her too hard, but split lips and black eyes were left as a lesson to duck the next time. She was also getting surprisingly adept at make-up for the same reason.

But she was getting better. Stronger. Faster.

Some obvious inherited traits were showing through as well, now that she was beginning to develop her own style. A bad habit for talking too much in hand-to-hand combat, a preference for tricks and sneakiness over brute force, a growing confidence in being completely unpredictable. And something that had Thor calling the other Avengers down in secret to watch Evie and Tony sparring.
“What is so amusing, brother?” Loki’s tone had annoyed written all over it. “They have fought like this many times.”

“Seconded; most of us taught her this stuff.” Steve had his arms folded as he looked over the viewing gantry to watch the two. “What’s the big deal?”

“You’ll see.” The broad grin on Thor’s face made it clear that he thought it was worth waiting for. “Any minute now…”

Evie was using a staff – something Loki had been working with her on – and was losing the fight to her father rather soundly. A brief lull allowed her to back up against the stack of gym benches and she quickly scrambled up them. Tony gave her an opening, not that she was able to tell that yet, and she leapt at him from the vantage point.

What would have been a nice hit was ruined as she was distracted by a roar of laughter from up on the viewing gallery. Tony backed up, also grinning broadly at his confused teen.

“What?” Evie looked up at the rest of her extended family. “What?!”

“Oh Birdy.” Stark was beginning to join the laughter.

“What?!”

“You appear to have inherited your mother’s battle cry.” Thor called down. The response seemed to take Loki as much by surprise as it did his daughter.

“I do not do that!”

Even Sam and Rhodey were smirking at the situation, having fought with Loki enough to have been witness to this particular phenomenon.

“Dude, you really do.” Bruce said cheerfully. “Except we tend to refer to it as your Banshee Scream. You do it every time you get particularly annoyed in a fight or when you jump on someone.”

“Since when-”

“Jarvis has many many security clips.”

“I hate you all!” Evie called up.

“Just don’t let it take on a life of it’s own and you’ll be fine.”

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had the time stone in his possession.

It had taken over a year and a half for the place to finally fall; a year and a half for the remaining realms to watch and learn. Observing what patterns they could, trying to find all they could to defend against the threat that would eventually be on their doorstep.

There was a lull for a few months beyond that. Thanos was either regrouping or learning how to use the stones now in his possession. Neither were a comforting thought.

MWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWM

“Möðhhyyyyyyyyy!”

Loki rolled his eyes as Tony snorted with laughter. “Do you think I should hide?”

“That would be mean.”

“It is getting to the point that I don’t care if I’m -” He was cut off as their youngest daughter came running into the room in floods of tears. “What’s happened this time, Hope?” The three year old clung to his legs wailing and her brother appeared in the doorway looking equal parts confused and worried.

“I didn’t!” He protested, before his sister was able to get a word out.

“Didn’t what?”

“Brandir p-p-pushed me!” You would have thought that the world had ended. Loki gently but firmly disentangled her from his leg.

“Hope, are you hurt?”

“He pushed -”

“Are you hurt?”

Her face turned to an angry pout, complete with quivering bottom lip, as she shook her head.


The little boy shrugged. “I dunno.”

Tony sat back with a large grin as his husband carefully interrogated the toddlers until determining that Hope had tripped over one of the toys Brandir had been playing with and had instantly decided that this was a declaration of war. At least she had decided to tell on him rather than fight back. Loki made certain she wasn’t hurt, explained again what an accident was and that it wasn’t her brother’s fault, then sent the two off. Jarvis quietly corroborated the events after they left.

“Was Evie this bad?”

“She didn’t have siblings to fight with.”

“But did she complain about absolutely everything like this?”

It was an easy question and Tony had to admit that, no, Evie had been quite a laid-back toddler. Rather like Brandir. Hope was still an absolute nightmare.
She slept better than as a baby, but still cried as the drop of a hat. Saw something she didn’t like? Cry. Decided her brother had a toy she wanted? Cry. The weather was wrong? Cry. Her dress wasn’t an exact shade of yellow? Cry.

Toddlers cry; they’re well known for it, but Hope managed to take it to new levels. Tony had caught an episode of Toddlers and Tiaras one evening and suddenly felt he recognised the little divas on the TV. It wasn’t even like she was spoilt. Well, she *was*, but it hadn’t had the same effect on Evie or Brandir.

“I don’t know where she gets it from!” Loki sat heavily on the sofa, sinking his head into his hands. “I have never had a child who was…”

“This much of a wuss?”

“You said that and not me. I mean, Sleipnir was clingy; he didn’t sleep in his own room until he was the equivalent of about ten, but he didn’t whinge about every little thing like this.”

There was a loud snort of laughter from the corner of the room and both looked over to see Thor sat by the window, supposedly reading.

“What?!” Loki snapped.

“You forget I am older than you. I can tell you *exactly* who your daughter takes after and believe me; she is a carbon copy!”

The God of Mischief scowled. “That is an unfair comparison and you know it. I was another species trapped inside a strange body; of course I was a grumpy child.”

“Bother, you would cry if the birds flew in the wrong direction. That has nothing to do with latent Jötunn comorbidities.”

Loki could have carried the argument on further, but instead his brother’s words brought a pensive frown to his face. “It may have, though. I do not recall enough of my early years to know how I felt, but if I was indeed like Hope maybe I did feel wrong in some way and couldn’t express it properly.”

“You’re saying she’s not just a needy kid then? There might be something wrong?” Stark looked alarmed at the thought of his daughter not being as healthy as he’d believed.

“Not wrong as such. Do you recall how she overheated so much as a baby? It may be something similar.” Loki bit his lip in thought. “I wish I knew more about Jötunn child development. Or anything at all for that matter. She’s obviously not happy, but can’t articulate it.”

“I’d suggest bringing in a child psychologist, but y’know, alien hybrid and all that.”

“I can make a trip to Jötunnheim some point soon. There are people there who could maybe shed some light on this.”

It said a lot of how things had changed in their lives that a casual trip to Jötunnheim didn’t raise any eyebrows, and even Thor merely nodded in agreement.

MWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMW

The seed bank was Tony’s new favourite project. He’d found it surprisingly easy to use his prior knowledge of weaponry for the idea. After all, he needed ways to store fragile items in very certain
conditions and in great numbers – all in all pretty similar to something like the Jericho missile system. Okay, granted, the seeds were less likely to blow up if something didn’t work but the initial concepts were sound.

Since things were going quicker with the flora than the fauna that was where his efforts were going, but he was keeping in mind some sort of storage solution for the incoming DNA as well. Or embryos. Would embryos be easier? It was certainly the Jurassic Park approach, but he couldn’t believe it was the best way to go. Still, he’d leave that until it started being a more pressing problem.

“How is it going?”

He jumped. He always jumped when Loki suddenly materialised behind him like that.

“It was going quite well. You do love the creepy-sneaky thing, don’t you?”

“It is literally part of my job description.” Loki leant over his shoulder to read what had been written so far.

“Flash freezing?”

“It’s an idea.” Tony waved his hand and the entire project minimised. “One of many.” His husband straightened up again now that there was nothing to see. “Why are you down here? Have I missed dinner again?”

“No, you have time.”

Tony was about to ask what brought him down there, but then the trickster’s hands grasped his shoulders; a warm weight that kneaded into the hunched muscles. He hadn’t appreciated how long he’d been sat there until the soreness started to be teased out of him. “Where are the kids at?”

“Evie’s gone to see a film with Steve; Jarvis is attempting to teach the twins their letters.”

“So you’re saying we’re child-free for a few hours?” He could see enough of Loki’s reflection in the blank screens to watch a smile spread easily over the trickster’s face.

“I might well be inferring that.”

“So we get to watch what we want on the TV without being forced to turn over to My Little Pony halfway through?!” Tony spun his chair, which forced Loki’s hands from his shoulders, but meant that they were now face to face.

“Well I suppose that is an option, although I had something else in mind.” It was already pretty clear what the prince was thinking of when he lifted a knee to rest on his husband’s chair, slipping it between Tony’s knees. The engineer raised an eyebrow.

“And what makes you think I’d be interested in such bawdy affairs?! I have work to do!”

“It can wait.” Loki leant forwards to whisper the three words into the man’s ear, hands finding Tony’s shoulders again. His hair was loose, an added caress to match the promise. “I can think of better ways to occupy your time.”

“Oh no, certainly not.” Tony pushed him back firmly, although his exaggerated tone and actions made his real take on the situation clear. “I will not be party to such sinful exploits when I have something so important to be doing.”
Loki’s eyes had lit up with malicious glee as he realised that his husband was going to continue the play and make him work for it. He wasn’t quite clear with the character Tony was going with – it seemed to be a messy combination of virgin priest and busy scientist – but was happy to go along with whatever he was given. Having had his knee dislodged he went all in and straddled his husband’s legs – a slightly ungainly movement which meant having to vanish the arm rests of the chair.

“I think sinful exploits are exactly what you should be party to right now.”

Tony went to push him away again and he snatched up the man’s wrists in one hand – a rare display of his not-inconsiderable physical strength. Stark’s surprised yelp wasn’t entirely faked.

“Maybe we should compromise.” He forced Tony’s arms up, leaning in close so that the words were breathed across the man’s lips. “You keep working and I…” He tiptoed the fingers of his other hand down Stark’s chest. “…amuse myself with you at the same time?”

Tony’s pupils had dilated – Loki’s words were having the desired effect – but he attempted to rally. “You think I could ever agree to that?! You…You…”

“You’ve used ‘sinful’ a few times now.”

“You licentious creature!”

Loki drew back slightly. “Ooh, nice.” Then he laughed.

“Hey, you can’t break character now!”

Tony’s absolute indignation made the trickster laugh harder, letting go of the man’s wrists and dropping his head down onto his husband’s shoulder.

“Sorry. Licentious was too much. I haven’t heard anyone say that out loud since the nineteenth century.”

“You were the one trying to dictate my vocabulary choices!”

“You were floundering! And what character were you even going for?”

“Over-worked scientist?”

“Came across as a choir-boy with a science fair the next day.”

“Ah. Not so sexy then.”

“Not particularly.”

Tony laughed as well. “Fair enough. Well, if we’re not attempting the weirdass roleplay can you please get off me? My legs are going to sleep.”

“I could take offence at that.” Loki rose to his feet with a smirk and re-instigated the armrests that he’d vanished. “Am I to take it that my advances are being rejected then?”

“I think I could still be persuaded. Just, perhaps more conventionally?”

The trickster laughed again. “Conventionally? Tony Stark wishes to be conventional?”

“You know what I mean!” Stark spun his chair back to face the desk and pulled the screens back
“Sometimes being normal is so outlandish for us it’s kinda special.” He flicked through a few of the seed catalogue titles again. “I mean, look at this! I’m currently preparing for an apocalyptic event. None of this is normal!”

“You’re Ironman; the day you said those words was the day you lost any and all right to this normalcy you suddenly appear to crave.” So saying, Loki slid in front of the man, completely blocking access to the screens as he sat on the desk. “Take your mind out of the botany for a while, hmm?” He waved a hand, minimising the displays without looking.

“Botany is the new sexy.”

“It really isn’t. You’re one step away from segueing into genetic manipulation and then it will be Little Shop of Horrors all over the labs and Dr Banner will be most displeased.”

“I wasn’t going to-”

“Please don’t lie to the God of lies. It just makes you look stupid. And you are far from stupid.”

Tony grinned and rolled his chair forwards, the edge of the desk pressing into his stomach. This meant that Loki’s legs were now framing him – something he was hardly going to complain about.

“I don’t know that much about genetic manipulation to be fair. The best I could probably do is make a pot plant glow in the dark. I imagine you could do a lot worse.” He accentuated the ‘you’ with both hands running up his husband’s thighs to find Loki’s hips.

“Mmhm, I might have played around with some magical hybrids before now.”

“Do tell.”

The tricksters smirk had demonic written all over it as he leant forwards to whisper in Stark’s ear. “Let’s just say the Japanese weren’t entirely original with their tentacle hentai.”

It was possible to see Tony’s brain actually shut down at that comment as all of the available mental images caused an overload.

“You seem shocked.”

“Just...processing. I...wow. Seriously? Are you pulling my leg here?”

“Would I do that?”

“See, now I don’t know if you actually did it or not, but the mental images will stay forever!” Stark squeezed his eyes shut and his expression settled into a grin. “But I won’t complain given my imagination is pretty awesome.”

“I am sitting right here and you’re visualising me instead.” Loki leant forwards to drape his arms around his husband’s neck, lips brushing up against the man’s cheek. “Maybe stick to reality? And do something with those hands that have succeeded in reaching my groin and then inexplicably stopped.”

Tony grinned and did as he was told.

Rhodey and Bucky had become an unlikely duo. Having both overcome catastrophic injuries, despite the very different circumstances, there was a shared understanding. They were also both in
the unique positions of having their best friends branch out and find other friends. Bucky was still used to Steve hanging off of him as a social crutch, and Rhodes had looked on keeping Tony out of trouble as a second career. With Steve a happily entrenched member of the Avengers and Tony sober, a father and married, they both rather felt out of a self-assigned job.

In most ways this manifested with the two of them watching terrible sitcoms together with beer and pizza, but occasionally when the tower got a little too domestic they went and caught a show in town. It was something Rhodes would never have really considered doing – he hadn’t thought he was one for theatre – but it was the norm for Bucky who had grown up in a time when cinema was still a novelty. They were some of the least recognisable of the Avengers so there was little chance they’d be recognised during Hamilton. Or Frozen. Rhodey had insisted on seeing Frozen.

“I can’t believe you made me sit through that.”

“I heard you singing along.”

They were ambling along the sidewalk – as much as two soldiers amble anyway – trying to find a place for a late lunch.

“I was singing under duress.”

“Like hell Elsa!” Rhodes elbowed him in the side. “You knew every damn word!”

Bucky blocked the second dig with his bionic arm, hitting his companion sharply on the funny bone and causing a yelp. It had taken some time for him to grow used to the improvements Tony had made to the limb, but only in a good way. For a start from the elbow down the mechanics were covered in a silicon sheathe that matched his own skin tone and made it look like natural flesh. The response times were as good as Stark had promised too. An unexpected addition was a system Tony had had chance to perfect with Jarvis so was able to try integrating into a human prosthetic: sensations and feeling.

It wasn’t perfect, and had taken the Winter Soldier a long time to get used to, but he was able to feel certain sensations in the limb again. The impulses that were sent back to his muscles weren’t identical to a natural response so he had had to learn what each one meant, but with practice it had slowly grown easier. It was still in the beginning stages; moderate to extreme temperatures and pressure mostly. He could now tell how hard he was gripping or pressing against something.

Tony hadn’t coded for pain. That hadn’t seemed fair and so in that respect the arm was as strong and functional as the Hydra creation had been and still allowed for feats of super human strength. And yes, Bucky had scaled the tower just to test it out.

There had been other things – Stark was a genius with too many ideas after all – but Bucky had vetoed all of them. He wanted a functional arm; it didn’t need to have wifi capabilities.

“I’m hungry, wanna grab some food?” Rhodes consistently thought with his stomach, and his companion was getting used to it.

“We ate before the show.”

“Yeah, and? That was a whole four hours ago! Look, there’s a stand; I’m gonna grab something.”

As the man made a bee-line for the food truck Bucky pulled his phone out and turned it back on again with the expectation of a slew of group messages. When nothing important was going on there tended to be an onslaught of bad jokes and memes between them all.
However, as the phone came back to life the notifications didn’t appear. The screen went red, a large warning message covering the whole thing.

“James!”

James seemed to be noticing something was up as well, but not through his own technology. Rather the food vendor was completely ignoring the queue of people in favour of checking her mobile. A quick sweep of the immediate area showed the effect slowly beginning to spread as news alerts made people stop and look and others wondered in turn what was happening.

Rather than get his own phone out Rhodes jogged back over to Bucky who in turn was looking at the small screen in shock.

“Dude, what’s happening?”

The soldier just shoved the phone at him. There were two messages on the large screen; one from a news broadcaster and the other from Fury.

*Unidentified attackers kill hundreds in Uttar Pradesh.*

And underneath:

*They’re here. It’s begun.*

MWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWM
Tony skidded to a stop in the main foyer of the tower where the others had congregated.

“Loki’s gone to check that it’s them.” He gasped the words out.

“Fury sounded sure.”

“Yeah, well can’t hurt to make doubly sure.”

They had no information beyond the two lines of the text message. Hundreds dead and Fury’s assumption about who had done it. No clue how people had died, no clue how many attackers, nothing.

Social media was a mess of rumour and conspiracy with no hard facts. The meagre footage coming out of the area showed little more than smoke and screaming that didn’t confirm a damn thing. The news channels had even less detail and even more speculation about what was going on. Everything from a gas explosion to a terror attack was being flouted. A few had suggested an alien attack – remembering the Chitauri from all those years ago – but it wasn’t being taken seriously yet.

The questions were running through the air amongst the Avengers with no one daring to voice them.

Is it them?

Is this it?

What do we do now?

“We need to call someone.” Sam had been repeating the statement since they’d received the news. “UN, NATO, someone; tell them what we know. We need to tell them.”

“Tell them what? We don’t know anything yet.”

“We know that there’s an army of angry aliens ready and waiting to destroy the planet! Even if this isn’t them it might well be the next time!”

“Feel free to try and prove that, because unless we have proof we’ll be laughed out of the place.” Tony had had enough dealings with the UN and NATO to know what he was talking about. He was a ball of nervous energy, pacing the foyer. This meant weaving around the other Avengers who had congregated there.

“Sir, Loki is incoming.” Jarvis barely finished the sentence before the trickster was appearing in front of them, his landing causing a blast of dirt in all directions. Tony ignored the mess, focussed instead on the question they all wanted an answer to.

“Well??”

Loki was covered in what looked like building dust. In some places blood had mixed to create a congealed gummy paste that caked the fine leather work. He banished it all with a wave of his hand, leaving a handful of fine scratches down his face and arms that would never have produced the quantities of blood he’d been wearing a moment ago.
Someone else had been bleeding, a lot.

“It was them.”

“You’re certain?” It was Steve who questioned, ever the military mind to double down on facts. He received an icy glare for his troubles.

“Of course I’m certain! Do you think I just spent the past two hours there sight-seeing, Captain?!” The trickster looked around at the assembled group. “Death toll is currently at two hundred and thirty nine. I stayed to pull survivors out of the rubble and did what I could in the field hospital to keep the number from climbing.” He gesticulated angrily towards an empty part of the foyer and with a crack a huge carcass tumbled out of nothingness onto the marble. “And I brought that back with me so we could have a look at one of the damn things up close without it trying to kill us!”

It was the first time most of the group had seen one of the creatures in person, and the first time any of them had seen one without it being in the process of trying to kill them.

The beast was far taller than a human; possibly taller than the Hulk, although that was hard to tell with it crumpled on the floor. The mottled grey hide was as covered in dust as Loki had been and despite the many cracks in its skin it hadn’t appeared to bleed.

Sam was the first to step over to it, kicking the head back so that the face was on display. The mouth was an over-sized maw, and although the many teeth weren’t sharp, they were blatantly designed to grind and gnaw and destroy. A large cluster of tiny eyes glared into nothingness from the centre of what would be its forehead, multifaceted and sparkling balefully.

“Did you kill this?”

“Yes. It was wounded so I killed and concealed it before the authorities could get a handle on what was happening. I thought it wouldn’t do for people to panic.”

“Any more than they already were panicking you mean.” Steve was now examining the beast as well, lifting one of the six huge legs and flexing the joints to see the manoeuvrability. “Do these things use weapons? There’s an opposable thumb here.” It was the front limb, and of the three digits one did mimic the joint in a human.

Loki flicked his fingers again and a piece of machinery flashed into existence next to the carcass. “It fires what looked like plasma, and cut through solid steel like it was paper. We saw the same on the other realms but this is the first time we’ve managed to get hold of one.”

“Why? If they’re so hard to kill, no offence, but how did you manage to? And how are we only now seeing one of their weapons?” Steve’s little ‘no offence’ comment was slightly too flippant to be taken seriously.

“Because there were only five of them, they were retreating when I got there and this one was injured by what looked like friendly fire from a comrade.”

“Five. So this was what? Reconnaissance?”

“Seems to be that way.”

“And we definitely don’t have an Infinity Stone for them to find?”

Tony had to admire Loki’s direct eye-contact and honest tone. “Earth doesn’t have an Infinity Stone.” God of Lies indeed.
With everyone else looking at the dead monster the weapons manufacturer went over to have a look at the gun that Loki had retrieved. It was heavy and ungainly – not suited to human biology or size – but Stark could see how that could be adapted. He’d looked into plasma technology before but hadn’t been successful. However, there were some pieces on this that made him think about reopening those old projects. The trigger mechanism was unusual though, again suited to a strange biology but he could see how it worked…

The resulting beam of plasma cut through the two suits that decorated the foyer and left a smoking gash across the marble.

“How about we do that without the imminent risk of death to everyone else?”

“Yeah, yeah.” Tony was already focussed on the gun again. “You guys let me know if anything else happens. I’m gonna be in my lab…”

It wasn’t as easy as it looked to reproduce the plasma weapons down to something humans could use. The technology required some very rare and unique materials that Stark didn’t have to hand and that delayed things straight off the bat. It was also going to be very difficult to shrink down some of the components given what they were made of.

Tony always did love a challenge.

As a team they had agreed not to speak to the media or general public just yet so as not to incite panic. It also allowed them time to work out their own game plan on the assumption that the creatures would be back.

That was another thing discussed; it was beginning to sound very pretentious saying ‘the creatures’ every time they wanted to talk about them and a better name was needed. It had been easier with the Chitauri – they had been vocal and had told people what their species was called. These things didn’t communicate in any known way, and weren’t a known species but rather something Thanos had created.

Therefore it was fair game to name them themselves.

This had led to some lively discussion as to how to refer to these new opponents. Quite a few suggestions were vetoed under Steve’s rules regarding language – particularly if the twins were likely to hear these conversations – and others just sounded ridiculous.

Eventually they settled on one of Rhodey’s ideas, which also outed him as a closet Warhammer 40K fan, and called the creatures Orks.

It still wasn’t to everyone’s liking, but was far better than what they’d been working with.

When Loki finally returned to Jötunnheim the Asgardian’s were already in the process of leaving the icy realm for home. Odin confirmed that they had been having similar isolated attacks and there was a definite sense of desperation in the air. The Jötnar were evacuating the young and old along with the Aesir.

“We cannot predict where they will strike, and so far have had little effect in fighting them off.”
“It’s the same on Earth. The humans will begin to panic soon.” Loki had Hope balanced on his hip, happily cocooned in a bubble of warmth to protect her from the atmosphere and she banged on his chest with a small fist.

“Want to get down!”

“Not now, Wriggle, it’s not safe.”

“I’ll be safe.”

“In a minute.”

She hadn’t taken to Odin yet, but given her general demeanour with most people Loki wasn’t surprised. They were lucky at times she tolerated her own parents. However, her interest in the snowy realm around them was more than apparent.

“How many times have those creatures made an appearance here? Earth received a single reconnaissance mission a few days ago.” Loki said grimly. “A couple of hundred dead, but it wasn’t the proper start to a battle that we’ve seen on other realms.”

“We’ve had some unusual activity a few thousand miles from here. There was little living out there, so we don’t conclusively know it was them, but it’s a reasonable guess.”

“So they’re searching now. They’ve run out of known Stones and there are still two left.”

“And we don’t know where either of them are either.” Odin ran a tired hand down his face. “This is a nightmare situation.”

“Would it help if we did know the locations?”

The king’s gaze went steely, focussing hard on his son. Likewise Loki was suddenly preoccupied with Hope.

“And do you know where any might be, Loki?”

Millennia of practice allowed the Trickster God to raise his gaze again and look Odin in the eye. “No, father. But the humans are discussing trying to find them. I doubt how useful it would be to have one anyway. Surely it would just make the holder the next target.”

Odin didn’t look entirely convinced by the explanation, but nodded. “There are none beyond the Titan himself who could wield a stone so all we could do with one is hide it, and that invites attack.”

“And we can’t destroy them?”

The king looked unimpressed. “You are more knowledgeable on this matter than I, you know they’re indestructible.”

Loki nodded. He had been pretty certain that he was correct on that matter, but it never hurt to double check.

“I need to find Skadi again; I need to speak with her about this little one.” He bounced Hope a little and she gave him a small smile in return. He quickly gave his father the rundown of their concerns and suspicions.

“Thor is right – you were unhappy when you were young. We guessed it was to do with your
heritage, but there was no obvious cause. You weren’t obviously overheated, in pain or unwell. You were just unhappy all the time.”

“That sounds like Hope.” Loki sighed. “And now we have to split our attention to these attacks when she should be the focus.”

“And her brother doesn’t display the same problems?”

“He’s fine. And Evie was when she was this age.” The trickster tilted his chin back towards the group of Aesir. “She’s gone to speak to Sleipnir if you want to say hello.”

Odin’s single eye crinkled into a smile at the mention of his granddaughter. “I will do that.”

If Skadi seemed pleased to see Loki again it was nothing compared to her joy at meeting Hope. She had evidently not seen such a small child in a long time.

“…And she’s just so miserable. Constantly. We try to keep her cool, but it doesn’t seem to do much.” Loki had his daughter on his lap but she was displaying a lot of interest in the icy room. “I don’t know if she’s in pain, uncomfortable, if we’re doing something wrong? I just don’t know.”

“Do you remember much of your early childhood?”

The trickster had to admit that he didn’t. Not for any terrible reasons, but simply that his brain preferred to retain knowledge over what toys he liked as a toddler.

“I remember mine.” Skadi smiled fondly as Hope began fussing about wanting to get down. “As I told you; I grew up on Asgard. They did their best, but I was always uncomfortably warm no matter what anyone did. It was never painful, never impaired me in anyway, I just felt rather miserable about it. And when I was very little there was no way to articulate that.”

“Thor and Father have told me I was a miserable child when very young.” Loki pressed a kiss onto his squirming daughter’s hair. “We thought we were doing enough to keep her cool; do you think she’s inherited more Jötunn characteristics than human then?”

“A different mix than your other children, maybe. You’ve been steadfastly refusing to let her explore here; maybe you should see what happens.”

“I can’t keep a shielding spell over her if I put her down. She’s only little –”

“Young enough to need protection.” Skadi leaned back. “She is also seventeen and able to make these decisions for herself.”

“Skadi laughed. “You want answers. What are you afraid of?”

“Possibly what that answer is.” Loki moved his attention back to his wriggling daughter. “What do you want to go and look at, Hope?”

The child stopped fighting him and pointed at the spare icy chair. “I can sit on my own!"

It would have been simpler to set her down on it, but Loki couldn’t bring himself to remove the temperature protection charm just like that. Instead, he allowed the child to climb down off his lap. The spell broke as she left contact with him and stepped over to the chair.
He’d known. He’d known from the moment Thor had planted the thought of why she was so unhappy in New York’s climate, but seeing it happen hurt more than he’d thought.

As Hope stepped onto the ice her little arms and face began to flush blue. She made it all the way to the chair that had captured her attention before she noticed; stopping and staring down at her hands. Then she giggled.

Hope didn’t laugh. Usually they were lucky to get a smile out of her.

And here she was: skin bright blue in the frigid air and giggling as she examined her hands.

“Möðhy! Looks!” When she didn’t immediately get a response the girl ran back over, beaming as her parents had never seen before. “Looks! I’m Elsa!”

The link to Disney, of all things, was what made Loki actually respond. He reached out to hold his daughter’s tiny blue hands, letting the colour wash across his own skin too. She looked so absolutely delighted, comfortable; and happy in her own skin in a way he could never be.

“Look at you, darling.” The words were a whisper.

The blue which suited Loki so well looked slightly out of place on the toddler. Jötunn had black hair or none at all – there were no subtleties of shade. Hope’s mouse-brown hair contrasted oddly, but not unpleasantly. Her eyes didn’t change either. Over the three years her eyes had darkened to match Tony’s dark brown and now stood out from her blue face possibly more than red would have done.

“We match!” She announced happily, patting Loki’s blue cheek. It had been Tony’s insistence that he occasionally wore his true skin around the twins, so that they weren’t frightened of it, and now he had never been more grateful. “Match, match, match.”

“Yes, we match.”

“I’m gonna go ‘splore!” And just like that she was running off, eager to finally look around the room now that she was free to wander. No thought given to the fact that she had just completely changed skin colour, no thought given to the tiny raised lines all over her exposed arms. She didn’t care.

“You match.” Skadi’s tone was amused but kind.

“Apparently so.” Loki brushed a hand across his eyes quickly. “I suppose I should not have been surprised.”

“Is it that terrible?”

“I was raised to believe Jötunn were terrible beasts. It has taken me long enough to come to terms with myself.” The mixed emotions passed across his face and he pressed a hand to his mouth as Hope ran past again, chattering to herself. “I’ve never seen her so happy…”

And she was happy. Not crying, or whining, or clinging, but actively engaging with the environment in a way she never did at home. At home they were lucky if she played for more than a few minutes before getting upset and needing a hug. Loki’s mind was already racing through the possibilities: she still didn’t sleep through the night, was difficult to settle, an extremely picky eater…

“She’s been such a difficult and unhappy child. If we’d just worked it out earlier-”
“She has not been in pain, and she is healthy. You saw there was a problem and you have come to me for help. You’ve done the right thing for her, Loki.”

The trickster nodded slightly, still staring at the small girl haring around the room. “If only I’d thought to bring her here earlier…”

“You weren’t to know. And as long as she is kept cool back at home she should continue to be happy. This has done her no harm and is easily remedied.”

That was true at least, although it didn’t go very far in making Loki feel better. “What would you say-”

He broke off with a frown as there was a sudden dull roar and the ceiling shook ice down on them. “What was that?”

“I do not know.” Skadi looked equally confused. “We are not known for quakes here-” She was cut off as the room shook again and this time there was the noticeable sound of an explosion. “An attack?”

“Thanos’ army!” Loki didn’t need to call to Hope; with the sound of detonations echoing around the room she was already running back to him.

“Where are your older children?” Skadi had risen to her feet, her clawed hand gripping the table for support as she looked up at the ceiling again. More ice was shaken loose over them.

“Outside somewhere. I don’t know where.” The trickster had pulled his daughter up into his arms and she was clinging with her arms around his neck. “I need to find them! Will you be-?”

“I can look after myself, young Loki. Go, find them.”

The explosions were echoing through the halls – ice really reverberated. Given that the building was still standing it was highly likely it was a reconnaissance like the ones on Earth, but that hardly mattered given the damage being done.

Loki flashed between the rooms, only staying long enough to ascertain Evie and Sleipnir weren’t there before moving on to the next. Everywhere was chaos; lumps of ice falling from the ceiling and smashing into crystal shards across the floors, bellowing Jötunn’s panicking and shoving past each other as they tried to run.

“Outside, Loki! North west courtyard!” Odin must have been looking out for him to be able to yell the message across the room. The king was leading the remaining Asgardian’s, although Loki only caught a brief glance as he followed the directions. He didn’t know the palace well enough – if at all – to know if said courtyard was defended or not.

Hope was silent in his arms, red eyes huge in her face as she stared at the chaos. She didn’t make any complaint to the spinning and swirling darkness as they appeared and disappeared through the halls until Loki found his way to the outside.

He had held out hope that the creatures had focussed their attack on another part of the complex, but it wasn’t the case.

They were greeted by absolute pandemonium. There were four of the Orks in the courtyard, dead Jötnar and Aesir scattered underfoot and more trying to fight their way out of the enclosed space
that had become a killing ground.

“Evie! Sleipnir!”

“Möðhy!” Sleipnir was by one of the few doorways, trying desperately to kick the mound of bodies out of the way to re-establish a point of evacuation. He had to duck as a beam of plasma shot over his head and melted part of the wall behind him. Seeing a weak spot he immediately spun and kicked all four back legs into the partially melted ice, bringing a portion of it down.

Those nearest made a break for the suddenly-opened passage, anyone too far were caught in the beams of plasma that immediately aimed at the escapees. Sleipnir had smartly backed away so he wasn’t in the direct line of fire, and as he did so Loki caught sight of Evie shielded behind the horses’ large body.

With Hope balanced on one hip and arcs of plasma beaming across the ruined courtyard Loki had no way of reaching his son and daughter. He saw Sleipnir turn and say something to Evie, and her nod in response.

“Don’t!”

The horse had made sure he was between the girl and the Orks, shielding her as best he could. With Hope in his arms Loki was fairly limited in what he was able to do in response; he hadn’t been targeted in the few moments he had been in the courtyard but drawing any attention to his presence would put his baby daughter at risk as well as the older two.

“Stay there!” It took all of a second to teleport from where he was across the gap to his two children.

Sometimes a second is all it takes.

Loki landed, a hand already outreached to grab Sleipnir’s mane as he kept Hope balanced on his hip. Evie dived the couple of steps to reach him and as she did so a burst of plasma arced across the space.

It came in at an angle, high to low, burning a deep line across Sleipnir’s back. He bucked with a shrill scream, four back legs throwing up a cloud of bloodied ice. The noise and frantic movement took Loki’s attention for a split second so it was then Hope’s wail of alarm that warned him before Evie suddenly fell into him. In the brief moment as he reached out to steady his daughter Loki glanced at her and then saw why she had stumbled.

The plasma that had hit Sleipnir across the back on its way down had hit Evie smack in the abdomen, leaving a gaping hole going straight through.

Aware that his son was also injured, but also that it was a more superficial wound Loki threw Hope up onto the horse’s back and caught Evie in the same movement. With his hand on Sleipnir’s side and his daughter in his arms he pulled them all into the teleportation spell.

Since entering the courtyard not even a full minute had passed.

Loki didn’t acknowledge the snow becoming tiles under his feet, nor the freezing wind turning to sun.

“Jarvis!”

He left Sleipnir and Hope on the balcony, teleporting straight down to the medical bay. Evie was
completely limp in his arms, a dead weight as he laid her down on the nearest bed. She was barely breathing, tiny gasps that weren’t nearly enough. There was no blood – the plasma had cauterised everything, so it was the shock and damage to her internal organs that were threatening her life.

“I’ve got her arm; you’re better at this, you do the main wound.”

Loki glanced up in surprise to see Merlin standing on the other side of the bed, already pulling the scraps of fabric back from where Evie’s arm was barely still attached.

“How did you-?”

“Jarvis.”

The trickster just accepted the answer, not having the brain space to think about anything else. Main blood vessels, main nerve branches, spinal cord. Her diaphragm was intact, but only just, and below it the major organs were either jellified or gone entirely.

He had never healed this much on one person, in one go.

“What’s the timeline, sir?” Jarvis sounded as calm as always as the question came out of one of the wall speakers.

“It’s been… I don’t know. Minutes. Two, maybe three.”

“All attention to the spinal cord and blood vessels then, sir.”

Loki had assumed that, but it was reassuring to know that he’d been right. He had long stopped protesting that he wasn’t an expert in medical spellwork – enough practice meant that he was now proficient.

Jarvis had appeared in body and was sorting out IV lines. Merlin was presumably saving Evie’s arm – and from the brief glance Loki had managed it was going to take a lot to save it.

“Evie!” Tony’s horrified cry was expected given Jarvis must have notified him immediately. Bruce was directly behind the inventor as they entered the med bay at a run and grabbed Stark’s arm to prevent him from getting in the sorcerers way. “Is she okay? Evie!”

Jarvis moved a little, meaning that Tony had a clear look at his daughter’s injuries and he fell silent.

“Stay there, do not interfere.” Bruce managed to keep his voice steady as he pushed Stark back and joined the sorcerers and droid at the bed. He took over from Jarvis in setting up the medical equipment which allowed the droid to move to Merlin’s side and begin directing the younger magic-user.

Merlin was clearly not medically minded.

“Master Merlin, you have just attached the radial nerve to the medial nerve. That’s not going to work.”

The gentle recrimination would have usually made Loki smirk but he had no attention to spare. The blast wound had gone straight through Evie’s abdomen, leaving a fist sized hole through her stomach and out of her back. The trickster could fix it all, but it was the pure amount at once that was the concern. The lack of blood ordinarily would have made things easier but plasma burns and everything in its path had been cauterised into a congealed mess.
“Spinal cord?” Bruce asked quietly.

“I’m aware. I need to build it back from the nerve branches that remain.” Loki glanced at his son. “Merlin, I need help here.”

The sorcerer looked up, tight lines of tension drawn across his face. “Her arm isn’t finished.”

“You’ve saved it?”

“I think so—”

“Leave the rest to Jarvis.”

Under Loki’s direction, with input from Banner, mother and son carefully rebuilt anything that had been in the path of the plasma blast.

“I thought you can’t regrow stuff.” Tony’s voice was tight and choked. He had sidled closer and was now stood at the foot of the bed, protectively holding Evie’s ankle. It was the closest he could get without being in the way.

“Not aged injuries. It’s different with fresh.” The trickster wasn’t technically hands-on. He was twisting his hands through complicated patterns a few inches above Evie’s abdomen; golden threads spinning from his long fingers and laying out in intricate shapes.

“Will she…?”

“She’s going to be fine.”

Merlin’s craft was less refined, rough and haphazard but doing what was needed. The threads of healing that he spun were the same gold but frayed and splintered. He was keeping himself to the edges, piecing together organs and muscle but leaving major blood vessels and nerves to his mother.

It took nearly an hour.

It was only when Evie was stable did the warlock and trickster step away from her. There were still silvery scars running across her stomach where the wound had been and Jarvis had insisted in setting her arm in a cast. However, Bruce had completed a quick ultrasound of her internal organs and deemed everything to be back where it should be and in one piece. The blood supply to her lower body seemed to be functioning normally, although they would only know if her nerve function remained when she woke up.

Despite – for a full surgery – it had taken very little time, Merlin slumped into the single chair in the room the moment he was indicated to step away from his sister, exhaustion drawing harsh lines down his face. Loki didn’t seem as drained, older and better practiced as he was. Instead he was running his hands through the air over Evie’s whole body; checking and double checking everything he could.

“Pulse rate and breathing are completely normal, I don’t think there’s anything else you can do right now, Loki.” Bruce said quietly.

“I need to do something.”

“You can do ‘something’.” Tony hadn’t moved from his place by his daughter’s foot and there was ice in his tone. “You can start by explaining what the hell happened!”
“I would have thought that was obvious! Jötunnheim was raided and-”

“You said she’d be safe with you! You promised she’d be safe!”

“I had no idea they would attack! How could I have known?”

For a comparatively short man Stark had the enviable ability to fill a whole room with his personality. And now he was filling the small medical bay with fury. “How could you have known?! They literally just did a recon here! Did it not occur to you they could do the same elsewhere? Why did you let her go off on her own?!”

“She was with Sleipnir-”

“Who is a horse! He shouldn’t have had to be responsible for her!”

Bruce cleared his throat, trying to bring the tension back down. “Maybe this isn’t the time or place -”

“This is exactly the time and place! Evie could have died-!”

“Do you think I don’t know that?!”

Tony stumbled a couple of steps back with a cry and there was a warning snarl from Bruce. Flames were spilling across the floor from Loki’s feet, wrapping up his legs and twisting through his hair like serpents. The fabric privacy curtains pushed back against the wall next to him caught light.

“Loki…”

“Möðhr!”

The prince’s attention moved to his son; Merlin now back on his feet and both hands out ready for a defensive spell if necessary. Behind him Bruce was flat against the wall, breathing deeply as he fought for control.

“Möðhr, you’re angry and that’s fine, but this isn’t the place.”

Loki’s gaze moved back to his husband, catching the fear on Tony’s face. Fear for Evie and what might have happened, and in the moment fear of him as well.

“I’m going to see to Sleipnir.” He banished the flames with a flick of his hand – leaving scorch marks on the curtains – and shouldered roughly past Stark to leave the room.

“My gods this family is insane!” Merlin slumped back into his chair with a groan.

“Evie?” Thor was out on the balcony, Hope balanced on his hip as he waited with Sleipnir.

“She’ll be okay. Sleipnir, how bad is it?”

The horse was still on his feet, which was a very good sign, but he was shaking.

“Technically superficial, realistically hurts like you wouldn’t believe.” He attempted humour, but it fell flat. “At least it’s not bleeding?”

“Not much of a silver lining.” The burn took up a large portion of Sleipnir’s back, deep and
vicious. Loki hovered his hands over it, letting the healing start work. “I’m sorry I couldn’t help immediately.”

“Understandable.” Sleipnir turned his head, looking back over his shoulder at his mother. “Is Evie going to be alright? There was an instant when I thought…”

“I thought so too.” For a brief moment Loki pressed his forehead against the horse’s warm side. “But she’s okay. Merlin’s here and we saved her.” He started when he felt a hand on his shoulder and glanced back over his shoulder to see Thor still there.

“You did a good job, brother.”

The trickster smiled grimly. “At least I can no longer complain about not being very good at healing spells. With all this practice I am becoming most adept.”

“Are you alright?”

“I’m fine.” It was clear he wasn’t, but Thor wisely left the subject alone.

It was nearly an hour before Evie started to come round. Tony had stayed sat with her. He didn’t know where Loki was and at that point his husband wasn’t his priority. Jarvis had informed him that Hope and Sleipnir were okay, but beyond that he didn’t know what else was going on.

“Dad…?” Evie’s quiet voice made him look up from the floor.

“Birdy!” He pulled the chair closer to her bed. “Hey kiddo, you scared the life outta me!”

The girl frowned up at the ceiling, confusion moving across her face. “We were attacked…?”

“Yeah, on Jötunnheim. You were badly knocked about but your mum and brother have fixed you up.”

The prompt seemed to help and Evie moved her non-injured hand to her stomach. “I remember a little I think. We were out in the courtyard…” She looked around, her gaze taking in the IV line and the cast on her arm. “How bad was it?”

Tony smiled slightly. “Abdomen, through and through. Pretty damn bad.”

“What? That’s…that’s a new record for me.” Having determined that she wasn’t in pain, the girl carefully pulled herself upright. “Möðhy fixed all that?”

“And Merlin.”

“Where are they?”

Stark sat back a little. “Merlin has gone home; he’ll be back later. I’m…not sure where your mum is. Probably with Sleipnir.”

“Probably?” It wasn’t the phrasing but rather her father’s body language that made Evie narrow her eyes. “What happened?”

“Nothing happened.” It was far too quick a reply and Tony knew his daughter could see through it before it even left his mouth.
“Yeah, like hell. You two argued. What the hell was there to argue about?”

He gave her a very brief run through of what had happened. Despite trying to hold back the full argument, Evie knew her parents more than well enough to read between the lines and extrapolate what had actually gone down.

“Dad. You’re a dick.”

“Evelyn!”

“No, you don’t know what went down; you don’t know how it happened, so you can’t blame Möðhy for any of it!”

“I didn’t blame-”

“Of course you did! I know that look! You were scared and you took it out on him!” Evie couldn’t cross her arms with the cast and IV lines in, but her expression said she wanted to.

“Evie, you-”

“No, you need to go and sort this out with him!”

“But-”

“Now.”

Once the girl wouldn’t have been able to get away with talking to him like that. But, on the cusp of adulthood, she was far more given to asserting herself and if she was telling her father to get out she meant it. Tony wasn’t in the mood to try and argue with her either. Knowing that she was okay, and would be okay he didn’t really need to be sat at her bedside and it was clear she didn’t want him to.

That didn’t mean he was going to talk to Loki though.

The plasma gun wasn’t co-operating, but then Stark was hardly able to concentrate properly.

Despite his daughter kicking him out his mind just kept returning to that image of Evie in the hospital bed, her brother and mother desperately trying to save her.

And Loki’s expression. Loki, who knew what it was like to lose a child, who had sacrificed himself before to save Evie. That expression he’d had; someone who was willing to do anything. He’d been terrified.

“Oh fuck it.” Tony threw the box of screws he was holding and they scattered everywhere.

He had been frightened for his daughter, but Evie had been right; he’d taken his own fear out on his husband and that wasn’t right regardless of the situation. Loki hadn’t deserved it. Hell, Stark hadn’t even given him chance to explain what had happened, just jumped straight down his throat.

Leaving the mess all over the floor he trailed over to the stairwell. Was his husband likely to even listen if he asked to talk?

Frankly he wouldn’t be willing to were the shoe on the other foot.
He was so lost in his own thoughts that he nearly ran flat out into Loki coming down the stairs.

“Oh.”

“I was just-”

“I thought we could-”

The two men spoke at once and then both stopped. Loki had one hand out on the wall, his fingers tapping across the glossy marble as he looked through the glass walls into the workshop.

“The twins are in bed. We’ll need to sort out new sleeping arrangements tomorrow for them.”

“Ah. You learnt something then?” Tony was quiet, but did actually look at his husband to ask.

“I did. We should talk.” Loki moved to brush past him and carry on down to the lab. However, he paused when his husband reached out and caught his arm, glancing back at the man.

“Loki…”

“Come on.”

They ended up sat on the floor by the suit testing platform, under the judgemental glare of the original ten IronMan suits that were on display there.

“I’m sorry.” Tony got there first, but from the look on Loki’s face he had been about to say the same thing. “I was an ass. I’m sorry.”

“You were scared.”

The man threw the comment away with a bitter laugh. “Yeah, but so were you.” He reached out for one of the many loose screws that littered the floor and began to spin it aimlessly on the concrete.

“Birdy woke up an hour or so ago. Then she kicked me out the room.”

“Jarvis told me.” Loki sounded wary of where the conversation was going to go, although an apology from his husband was definitely a strong start.

“She guessed what had happened and wasn’t very happy with me.”

“Not the only one.”

Tony glanced up at him, then focussed his attention back down at the screw he was playing with. “Yeah. Yeah I know. I’m sorry. Is Hope okay?”

“She’s fine. Surprisingly calm given what she just saw happen. Sleipnir was badly burnt but I sorted him out and Merlin has taken him back to the UK for now.” The following silence stretched out for a few moments, but it felt considerably longer. “Should we talk-”

“What did they say-”

Loki huffed with reluctant laughter and Tony grinned down at the floor as they spoke over each other again.

“You go, I think you were going to answer my question anyway.” Stark flicked the screw across the floor so that it rebounded off his husband’s knee.
There were, in essence, two things they needed to discuss; the attack, and what Skadi had said about Hope. Loki went through the basics of what had happened when the Orks hit the city. Given Tony had seen the after effects of that, it didn’t take long to tell.

They spent longer on the discussion with Skadi, given that that was the reason for the trip to begin with. The trickster had already determined that they would need to split the twins between two rooms so that Hope’s could be kept significantly colder.

“But she’s not in pain?”

“No, just uncomfortable. And it’s been badly affecting her sleep – as we know – so she’s sleep-deprived and grouchy all the time.”

“Does this mean we may not be woken up fifty billion times every night?”

“With any luck.”

“And other than that…?”

Loki’s shoulders lifted in a slight shrug. “I don’t know about magic yet – there’s something there but I don’t know how it will manifest.”

Tony’s gaze tracked over his husband, taking in the slumped shoulders and quiet tone. He frowned slightly.

“And?”

That drew a confused glance. “And what?”

“Hope’s not in pain, she’s not going to have any problems with this, so what’s wrong?”

Loki’s posture slumped further. “I wonder… I wonder if this was what was wrong with Váli.” The words were so quiet Stark nearly missed them. “If I had done better, if I had been better, maybe he would have been okay. Maybe I wouldn’t have lost them both.”

He never talked about his older pair of twins.

“Hey.” Tony shuffled forward so that he was close enough to reach out and lay a hand on te prince’s knee. “Hey, there was no way you could have known. You had no idea you were Jötunn; you couldn’t have known he may have been affected. And both you and Skadi dealt with the temperature problems as kids without going psycho.”

Loki glanced up and quirked a sad smile. “The Battle of New York Memorial says otherwise.”

“You were under mind control; that one doesn’t count.” Tony waited until his husband made hesitant eye contact and smiled encouragingly. “We have a better idea of what’s going on than you did with Váli. We know what to look for, and we know now what might be causing it if it does happen.”

“I cannot…” The sentence trailed away and Loki had to take a deep breath to continue. “I didn’t think I was going to be able to save Evie. I cannot lose another child.” The raw emotion was painful to hear. “There is nothing that can ever compare to the agony of losing a child.”

“Evie’s fine. She kicked my ass only a few hours ago and I deserved it because I was a dickhead.” Tony closed the space between them and grasped Loki by both shoulders. “She’s okay. Sleipnir’s
okay, and now Hope will be okay. We know how to help her, we know what to look out for; we’ve got this. And I’m working on the assumption that Brandir isn’t going to spontaneously combust any time soon.”

That made the trickster smile slightly again. “Poor Brandir; we need to make sure he doesn’t feel overlooked with all of this fuss about Hope.”

“Frankly I think he’ll be pleased to not be blamed for every little thing his sister deems wrong with the world.”

Loki leant forwards to drop his forehead onto Tony’s shoulder. “I’m sorry I didn’t keep Evie closer. I know I couldn’t have predicted what would happen, but I still allowed her to wander off on an alien realm. Given all that is happening I should have kept her nearby.”

“It wasn’t your fault. None of this was your fault.”

Giving Hope her own bedroom seemed to work a miracle overnight. With some clever spellwork Loki could keep the room hovering at freezing which appeared to be the girl’s preferred temperature and she had slept through the night for the first time since she’d been born. Brandir had been upset at his sister abandoning him – as he saw it – but was less grumpy the next morning when he’d also had an undisturbed night.

All in all the house-hold had one less thing to worry about with both toddlers now happy.

This just meant their attention was focussed on more international matters.

“and reports just in are putting the casualties at over sixty. There is no indication so far who is responsible for the attack.”

“One of ours?” Clint glanced up as Rhodes entered the living room and muted the TV as the reporter moved on to a different topic.

“Sounds like. Some remote place in Australia, the casualties aren’t as bad as the last one, but they’re bad enough.”

“Damn.”

There had been no warning that another attack was incoming. Both Loki and Merlin were meant to be monitoring for such a thing but they’d been unable to predict any so far. Loki had already postulated that the methods through which Thanos was moving his troops was beyond the scope of his magic.

This was the third in just under a year. They had it on good authority from Thor that the remaining Realms had likewise been having problems. As a group they still hadn’t informed the authorities about what they knew, but it was getting closer to the point when they’d need to.

These initial reconnaissance missions seemed random – not exactly targeting the obvious places where an Infinity Stone would be kept if Earth did have one.

It was only a matter of time before things escalated and places were targeted.
The loss of the Louvre in Paris devastated the world.

The museum had procedures in place for human attacks, but the suddenness and scale of the extra-terrestrial violence was unprecedented. The failsafe’s had saved a scarce handful of treasures; a few Da Vinci’s, some Dürer’s and a single Goya. Everything else was gone.

On top of the loss of some of the world’s most important pieces of art, was the devastating human impact. The Louvre had an average daily foot-fall of 15,000 people and the death toll had been catastrophic. The glass pyramid had come down and the smoking shell was being used as the main image in the media as the most heated spot of the battle.

There wasn’t an official death-toll yet, and there wouldn’t be until they cleared the rubble, but it was already in the thousands. There was enough mobile phone footage going around that the media were clear this was an alien attack and they had linked it to the previous ones.

Some of the Avengers went out to help with the clear up. Captain America, Ironman, War Machine, Thor, Falcon – those who were good at dealing with the press as well as physically useful in a search-and-rescue clean-up operation. Bucky’s skills would have been beneficial, but he was still wanted and the last thing they needed was to alert Interpol to his presence.

Loki went along with a minor disguise to limit any recognition. There was enough work to do and a large enough area to cover that he was able to use his powers without it really being noticed by anyone. It helped that the media were being kept well away from the site.

“We need to tell them.” Tony and Steve had stopped for a water break out of the way of the general public and Tony had flipped the faceplate up for a moment.

They were both covered in building dust and it had turned Steve’s hair grey. Worry lines that were usually unnoticed on his face had been highlighted by it.

“Yeah. I know. It’s going to have to come from either you or me; but I’m not looking forward to telling the world’s media that we knew about this threat for ages and didn’t tell anyone.”

“Well…it’s not like anyone could have done anything had we said something earlier. It won’t harm to fudge the details on how long we’ve known for.”

Steve shot him a disapproving look. “You want to lie about this to the entire world?”

“Obviously.” Tony waved his water bottle around at the mess surrounding them. “Look at this place. They need us right now. The world needs to know that we are here even if we can’t predict these events. If we tell them we knew ages ago that this was a possibility we’ll be hated at the one time we need everyone to be united.”

Captain America looked around the small space they stood in. It had once housed the Inverse Pyramid but now was a mess of shattered glass and twisted metal supports. It had been cleared of bodies, but a child’s push-chair still lay on its side in the corner and backpacks and items of clothing were strewn around where they’d been dropped in the mad panic.

“Yeah, I see your point. I’m not so great at sticking to a fabricated story though.”

Stark clapped him on the shoulder with a tired smile. “We’ll do the press release together. I’ll spin the timeline a little and you talk about the potential consequences and what we can do to help. We’ve got this.”

There was a sudden ragged cheering heard overhead, filtering down through the broken pyramid
and both men looked up.

“Heads up, that sounded positive.”

“Pulled someone out alive maybe?” Tony asked hopefully. It was highly unlikely; they were on day four and chances of survival had dropped dramatically. It was a difficult spot to climb out of, so Stark gave Steve a lift up to the surface.

It unfortunately wasn’t a person, but given the situation and what else had been lost it was still enough to lift people’s spirits.

Thor was manhandling a large canvas into the plaza area – cordoned off but visible from the streets. The wealth of art that had been lost was nearly as painful to the world as the human loss and whilst finding survivors was priority the rescue crews had also been keeping an eye out for anything salvageable. The world’s media and local Parisian’s had been having muted celebrations for each recognisable thing retrieved, but now it was a noticeable cheer running through the watching crowds.

Thor hefted the canvas, just large enough to be a pain to carry and carried it over to the spot where salvaged art was being stacked. He left it propped against a piece of rubble, clearly visible to the watchers and the dull cheer became a roar.

Delacroix, *Liberty Leading the People*.

The oppressed standing up against the tyrants.

“And there you have the front page of every newspaper in the world. I’ll call the press conference for a few hours’ time; we want our message to be sent out alongside that image.”

That drew an admiring glance from the Captain. “I forget how media-savvy you are sometimes, Tony.”

“When you get on their bad side as often as I used to you’ve got to learn to play the press.”

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It went well.

Tony had been right that they needed to bounce off the back of Thor rescuing one of the most emotive pieces of French art. The image was being used across the world media as a symbol of the French people rising out of the atrocity and the Avenger’s were in international favour.

They had been careful with how much information they’d given. Tony had spun it that they’d gathered their knowledge of the creatures from Thor which had also meant explaining the situation further out in the nine Realms.

He’d also used the nickname of Orks. Social media was divided over the term, but it had been quickly snapped up by the world’s press so was probably going to stick.

Between the two of them Stark and Rogers were careful not to promise more than the Avengers could fairly provide in terms of protection to the masses. They made it clear that they were equally unable to predict the events so if the attack was geographically far away they would have a slower response, and absolutely refused to provide pay-for protection to the world’s rich and famous who were clamouring for personal defence.
It was also made clear that this problem wasn’t unique to Earth so there could realistically be quite large gaps between attacks, or a quick string of them. It had been difficult to explain the presence of the other Realms, and then the loss of quite a few of them to the general public. The scientific community may have been aware, but most people weren’t.

In the end it was agreed Tony would hold a separate press conference with Bruce to cover the whole Realm Situation and what was going on there.

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The clean-up of the aftermath went on for months. The Avengers started out providing a lot of help but as other things took priority they ended up leaving most of it to the rescue services.

Things had changed, the world had changed. It had been one thing, all those years ago, when Loki had first brought the Chitauri to Earth and attacked New York, but this was global. People had been happy to accept the existence of aliens as long as they were a problem to someone else. Hostile aliens, named after a fictional race that attacked without warning and were seemingly indestructible…that wasn’t what people wanted to be seeing in the news every day.

Humans being humans, there were immediately conspiracy theories calling the aliens fakes and stating political coups. It had caused Loki to question why they were trying to save humanity in the first place.

However, humanity wasn’t his only concern.

For whatever reason the attacks on Jötunnheim had stepped up. Whilst Earth had only had a few minor ones with low body counts since Paris, things had ramped up exponentially on the ice realm. The Aesir had finally left, taking the elderly and injured Jötnar with them back to Asgard, but the main bulk of the Jötunn population remained.

They were fighting back, but unlike the fire giants they weren’t as effective against the Orks. Evidently Thanos had decided to concentrate on their realm as opposed to Earth – maybe assuming that since Earth had once held the Tesseract it was less likely to have another Stone.

It was the first time the group fully expected to hear the news that a realm had fallen. Every time Loki or Thor entered a room looking even slightly pensive they’d face a barrage of questions about if they’d been in contact with someone.

When the event finally happened, when Jötunnheim finally met with its end, it was Thor who brought the news into the middle of a film night. His silence was what made Natasha mute the screen and people didn’t even bother to ask. The look on his face said what had happened.

Loki let his real skin out for the rest of the evening.

There was no evidence that there had been a Stone discovered there.

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“Double attack, group of roughly twenty have converged on Universal Studios, Orlando. Second attack of three, Industrial Estate, Pittsburgh, Ohio.”

Jarvis relayed the information in his usual concise format. The majority of the group were in the tower and had grouped in the sitting room in response to the alarm sounding. They were missing Natasha and Sam – out in town somewhere – and Pepper was off surveying a new property for SI so wasn’t able to coordinate like she usually did but the rest of the main assembly were there.
“Which one or both?” Loki directed the question at Steve, although it was usually a democratic decision.

“Twenty is the largest number they’ve sent yet and the theme parks will be crawling with people.” Clint was clearly favouring one over the other. “The Industrial Estate will have to handle itself.”

The Captain looked around the rest of the group. “Everyone agree on Orlando?” With the unanimous nods he tilted his head at Loki. “Florida it is.”

They had long started allowing Loki to just teleport them places.

“Jarvis, you’re on Twin Watch until we get back.”

“Yes sir, but-”

“You’ll be fine.”

There was something to be said for monsters in a theme park, however, this was anything but amusing. Rather, it was like Paris all over again. Thousands of people just wanting to enjoy a good day out and thrown into an absolute nightmare.

They had developed a good system by this point. For this event Clint and Scott coordinated the evacuations and provided cover whilst the others went more on the offensive. Tony’s plasma weapons – a year into development now – still weren’t as effective as those that the Orks used, but provided decent fire power. They were finally able to fight back with at least a small measure of resistance.

The question remained of why attack a theme park of all places, but given some of the titles of the attractions it perhaps wasn’t too much of a stretch of the imagination to see why someone who didn’t understand Earth would think a powerful object could be hidden there. As it was, the sight of the Hulk leaping from the top of a roller-coaster locked into a wrestling grapple with an Ork was something Tony felt unlikely to forget any time soon.

For all of its ferocity, the attack was short lived.

The creatures had a purpose, and when it was clear that there was no object of power buried somewhere deep within Universal Studios they began to make a retreat. Their method of teleportation still wasn’t clear – Loki suspected some form of technology over magic – but after a few hours the number began decreasing, and not through fatalities.

“This section’s clear! I’m working on clearing the casualties!”

“Clear here too, I’ve got a number of trapped persons I’m working on getting out.”

Rhody and Bucky’s announcements were very welcome and soon joined by further sections of the park being cleared of Orks. It narrowed down to what had turned into a grudge match between the Hulk and his initial opponent and ended quite succinctly with tHe Hulk drop kicking the creature into the remains of the rollercoaster’s machinery. Which exploded.

Tony landed a few feet away, flicking the face plate up.

“Guys, the Hulk has just terminated our last opponent with extreme prejudice. How are we looking? Do we need to jet to Ohio, or search and rescue here?” He was joined on the ground by the other airborne Avengers, Loki appearing at his side.
“There’s got to be easily a few thousand people still unaccounted for here.”

“Jarvis, how many at the Industrial Estate?”

“A few hundred sir, but-”

“Thanks Jarvis.” Tony could see from the set of everyone’s face what the answer was going to be already. “Right, search and rescue here then.”

The joy of success at actually sending the creatures packing for once was soon significantly diminished by the sheer amount of bodies they were left pulling out of the rubble of the theme park. Regardless of how many they’d saved, people still died and search and rescue was a miserable job.

They arrived back at the tower sad, angry and hungry; a combination that was always guaranteed to cause arguments. There hadn’t been any injuries amongst the group, but that didn’t mean the emotional toll wasn’t still there.

Natasha and Sam had made it back, sheepish at having been out during the call. They were instantly forgiven for having thought to order out dinner for everyone to return to, though.

“Is Scott not eating with us?” Evie was setting the table and was trying to suss out how many plates to use.

“Nah, he wanted to go home.” Clint grabbed a handle of prawn crackers. “It’s his weekend with his kid apparently.”

The girl was still counting out plates. “Okay, so where’s Aunty Pep?” She looked back over her shoulder. “Dad, where’s Aunty Pepper? Is she home for dinner?”

Tony was still towelling his hair off, fresh out of the shower, and looked annoyed at being yelled at across the room. “I don’t know, she should be coming back here. Jarvis, where’s Pepper at?”

“I don’t know sir, she insisted on turning the GPS in her phone off years ago so she wasn’t at your beck and call.”

“Huh.” The man threw the towel down on one of the chairs and pulled his own phone out to start calling. “What was in her diary for today? Something about a new manufacturing plant for Stark Industries?”

“She simply has ‘plant inspection’ listed in her schedule.”

“Of course she did. And she’s not answering her phone.” Tony was more annoyed than anything. If Pepper was only a few minutes away they’d wait – Cap was the epitome of manners after all. “Which plants could she have been at?”

“There are two potentials listed in Massachusetts. And one in Ohio. Pittsburgh.”

The sudden silence that washed out across the room was only broken by Evie dropping the spoons she’d been setting out.

“Pittsburgh. Wasn’t that where...?”

“That’s where the other attack was.” Tony stabbed at his phone screen, redialling Pepper’s number
over and over. “Come on, Pep, pick up the damn phone. Jarvis, keep trying for me.”

The dialling tone filled the room, the Avenger’s a frozen tableau around the table as the enormity of what might have happened began to sink in.

Dread is a difficult feeling to place. It is less an emotion than a physical response; starting at the top of the head and trickling down the neck and across the shoulders like pin pricks of ice. Sometimes it goes all the way down to the feet, other times it stops at the chest as a thick clenching ball that sits there and chokes the breath away. The hairs on the arms stand up, the stomach tightens. It is possible to feel the heart trying to beat itself free of the ribcage.

The call connected and there was an audible exhalation through the room – multiple people letting out the breath they didn’t know they had been holding until that moment.

“Pepper?” Tony asked hopefully.

There was a harsh, shaky inhale on the other end of the line.

“…No. Sorry sir…”

“Happy?” He hadn’t expected his chauffer to answer and it threw him slightly. “What…Where’s Pepper? Where are you?”

“We…We’re in Ohio…new plant thing…”

Stark had gone pale. “Are you hurt? Where’s Pepper?”

There was a long pause, broken by Happy’s gasping breath. It sounded strained. “We were…trapped. Build…building came down. Can…can hear rescue…services.”

“And Pepper? Where’s Pepper?” It wasn’t that Tony wasn’t concerned for Happy – on the contrary he was extremely alarmed by the state the man sounded in. But Happy was conscious and talking whereas Pepper…”Happy, where is she?”

“Didn’t…Tony, she didn’t…didn’t make it.” The words sounded like they physically hurt Happy to say. “Roof…roof came down. She…it hit her…she’s…”

Stark didn’t hear the rest of what Happy had to say.

She couldn’t be. Not Pepper. Not like this, not his Pepper.

No.

Not Pepper.
Chapter Notes

I know, it's been months, I'm sorry. I am well aware that I am losing my reader-base due to my slowness.
We're nearly there now though, so very nearly there.
Also noted for upcoming chapter, mostly because Endgame is nearly upon us. THIS WILL HAVE A HAPPY ENDING. Whatever happens, I promise you that.

The rest of the evening passed like some sort of nightmare.

Loki had immediately gone to the site, taking Steve and Bucky since Tony was too emotionally compromised. They had succeeded in rescuing Happy, as well as a handful of other SI staff and helped the emergency services to put the fires out in the complex.

But Happy had been correct; six people were dead.

Pepper was one of them.

It hadn’t occurred to anyone in the moment – because why would it? – but Happy had answered Pepper’s phone when Tony called it. Which meant that he had spent the hours before that lying pinned under the ceiling joists with his colleague’s body pressed up against him.

Happy himself was a mess. The weight on him had cut the blood flow to his abdomen long enough to require extensive reconstructive surgery and both his legs had multiple fractures. Stark had specialists flown in at considerable expense to make sure his friend didn’t lose the limbs.

With some very gentle prompting from Steve – because Tony would be the first to admit that he could be thoughtless when emotionally compromised – the financial aid was extended to the other injured SI personnel and Jarvis took it upon himself to quickly put some very large life insurance policies in place for the families of the dead. Money was cold and impersonal, but also so very necessary when adversary struck.

In the moment there were some terribly practical things to have to think about before any real grieving could be done. All of the bodies were taken to the nearest hospital but Jarvis was already scouting the best funeral homes nearby. Likewise, Stark Industries had suddenly been left without a CEO, returning the control to Tony for the time being.

And someone would need to draft a press relief.

And tell all of the families.

And…And all of the terrible terrible things that happen when someone dies.

Pepper’s funeral was held on a crisp spring day. The church was full of sprays of pale pink carnations and blue cornflowers, neither in season but nothing was too good as far as Tony was concerned. They’d been her favourites, so Pepper was going to be absolutely surrounded by them.
for one last time.

Steve had helped choose the hymns – the only one who really had much to do with a church – and Tony couldn’t help but think how hollow the words were. Given he had two Norse Gods stood next to him it seemed obsolete to be throwing prayers at a completely different one. He’d been raised an atheist and whilst he still didn’t consider himself religious he supposed theoretically he was now pagan.

Make me a channel of your peace…

“Does your daughter look after them?” The quiet words were nearly lost under the music, but Loki heard them and moved his gaze from the coffin to his husband. Tony read the confusion there and clarified, scuffing away tears with the cuff of his expensive suit jacket. “Does Hel look after those who go to her? Is she kind?”

“I do not know.” Of course, Loki had not seen his daughter since she left and became the queen of that unmentioned realm. “However, she was a sweet child. And kind then. I believe she may well be kind now, to those she looks after.” He reached down to grasp Tony’s hand. “She knows the value of peace, and what it can mean to those who need it.”

Stark didn’t bother to ask how it felt to be a deity in the home of the wrong religion. Pepper had had some small faith and Loki and Thor could suck it up for her sake to sit through a Christian funeral.

There were a few readings; Happy had insisted on giving one, crutches and all, Evie managed to read a poem Pepper had liked and Tony found it in him to give a eulogy. He didn’t stutter or stumble. He was proud of that. Pepper would have been proud of that. He had given enough emotionally charged speeches in his time that he knew how to give one without the bubbling despair showing itself.

If asked afterwards the man couldn’t have told anyone what he’d actually said. He hadn’t bothered to write it out before hand – when had he ever managed to stick to a script anyway? – so just reeled off what came into his head in the moment. It must have been reasonably good since he saw a lot of people smiling fondly at what he reminisced about. Rhodes patted him on the back when he went to sit back down, and Evie hugged him tightly.

They went with a cremation. Pepper didn’t have any blood relatives – her friends and family had been comprised of the Avengers and Stark Industries – so Tony had had to make that decision as well. Cremation and at a later date they could worry about the ashes.

The wake was held back at the Tower, well away from the prying eyes of the media. Pepper’s Twitter page was still being flooded with condolences from across the world so Jarvis streamed it up onto a wall.

It took surprisingly little effort to change the mood from sombre to celebratory though. Loki casting a glance at what was now a very old and battered sofa and reminding Tony how that was where he and Miss Potts met. The complete and utter inappropriateness of that memory had Stark laughing before he could help himself.

Pepper deserved celebrating. She had been there from the very start; cleaning up after all of Tony’s crap, dealing with the press after his ridiculous behaviour, and then helping Tony replace the original arc reactor, supporting him becoming Ironman, taking over Stark Industries for him. Quiet, unassuming and absolute balls of steel. It still didn’t feel real.
No one was expecting to see Tony up early the next morning, but nonetheless there he was, dragging a large wheeled display board into the sitting room.

“Tony? What are you doing?” Steve was still using that quiet voice as if he were talking to an injured animal, and it earned him a glare.

“Right. Who’s here? Most of us?” Stark looked around the room, only counting the usual early risers. “Okay, no matter. Right. So.”

“How much coffee have you had?”

“Enough.” Loki answered for his husband, following him into the room and looking equally confused. “Stark, what are you up to?”

Tony centred the display board up against the bar and turned to face the meagre group that were there, all staring at him. By group, it was four people – five with Loki now – Steve, Bucky, Natasha and Bruce. The usual early birds.

“Okay, right. I had this idea last night. So.” He turned to Loki. “Reindeer games, our first proper conversation. You, me, this room. You had the glow stick of destiny and I had a death wish.”

The trickster dipped his head in a nod. “I remember, what of it?”

“What did I tell you?”

“…Quite a few things? You rambled rather considerably, made mention of the Hulk, then I th-”

“Threw me out the window. Yeah. Well, since you apparently missed the most important part of my ramblings let me remind you.” Tony thumped his fist against the display board, making it wobble alarmingly. “I told you who we are. We are the Avengers! And-”

“And if we can’t protect the Earth, you can be damn well sure we’ll avenge it.” Loki finished the phrase.

“Exactly!”

“And this is…?”

There was a piece of laminated paper clutched in Tony’s free hand that they had overlooked in favour of staring at the random board, but he brought it to attention by slamming it against the flat surface and ramming a drawing pin through the top to hold it in place.

“I’ll get a better photo when I have a moment, but for now…this is a start.”

It was one of the pictures of Pepper that was usually down in the foyer of the building. She looked happy, self-assured in her favourite suit jacket. It had been taken the day she had begun as CEO of Stark Industries.

“This is it. This is what we exist as a group for. We avenge. And this is going to be where we place all those we’re avenging. These are the people that were stolen from us, and we are going to damn well avenge them!” Stark was holding back tears as he said it. He was refusing to meet anyone’s eye until he felt Loki’s hand on his shoulder.

“I like the idea. May I?”
He managed a nod.

The trickster stepped up to the board and waved a hand so that a golden glow diffused out into a space a similar size to Pepper’s portrait and next to it. He smiled sadly as Frigga’s picture appeared.

“I’ve got some I could add to that.” Bucky’s quiet voice came as a surprise and he looked slightly affronted as everyone turned to stare at him. “What? I had to live somewhere after I said my fond farewells to Hydra. My landlady and her family were in Paris and had decided to visit the Mona Lisa.”

“You didn’t say anything about that.” Steve said quietly.

“Why would I? There were some considerably bigger problems in the moment and then there was never the right time.” Bucky glanced at Tony. “I’ll pull some photos off their social media.”

“Grand.”

“If we’re counting just people we know…an old contact of mine was at the theme park.” Natasha said slowly. “I mean, we hadn’t spoken in a while, but…yeah. Now we won’t ever again.”

The board slowly filled out over the next few weeks. With more attacks, more names went up; Sam insisted that celebrities had to count after his favourite band were caught up in one, and friends of friends went up after Scott’s daughter lost some classmates. Evie’s old riding school teacher, the owner of Clint’s favourite coffee bar, a friend Thor had made through an online game. People were dying and they had no answers.

MWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMW

Tony was slightly taken aback to walk into his labs and find a large image of the Infinity Gauntlet spinning around in the centre of the area.

“Uh…why?”

Loki flicked his hand so that the construct froze in place. “I’m trying to think and a visual helps.” He pointed to the gems already in place and they glowed at his command. “We’re going to come up against this, so we might as well have a plan of how to defeat it.”

“What have you got so far?”

The trickster shrugged. “Thanos has four Stones now. Power from Svartalfheim, Space from Alfheim, Time from Muspelheim and Mind from Asgard. I have the Reality Stone so all that is left out there is the Soul Stone.”

“And any idea where that sucker is hiding?” Tony brushed some papers aside and sat on his desk, staring at the gauntlet. “How many realms do we have left for him to rip through?”

“Three.”

“Three?!” But the maths worked out. As well as the four realms Loki had listed, Jotunnheim hadn’t held a Stone and neither had Nidavillir. “So that’s us, Vanaheim? And…Nifilifilf.”

“Helheim is easier to say.”

“Fine, Helheim. Earth, Vanaheim, Helheim. And one of us has the Soul Stone.”
Loki glanced at him with an amused smirk. “Vanaheim has it. I don’t know where – they probably
don’t either – but Earth doesn’t have it, and Helheim doesn’t, so process of elimination.”

“How do you know Helheim doesn’t?”

“My daughter created that realm. She would have made sure everyone knew if she’d got her hands
on an Infinity Stone, and it would have been a considerably bigger realm.”

“She created a whole realm? How powerful is your kid?!”

“Well, she built upon an existing empty space, technically.”

“But she still built a realm, gathers the dead to live there and…is queen of it all?”

Finally Loki’s smirk turned to a proud smile. “Yes, queen of it all. Evie’s not the only one with an
empire to her name.”

“Future empire. I’m not dead yet and Birdy may not even want to run Stark Industries. And I
thought I was immortal!!”

“You are, but Evelyn will probably do a better job.”

Tony nodded, smiling at the provocation, but mind already racing ahead to a new tangent of
thought. “And it’s definitely a good place to be? Helheim, I mean. People can be…happy there?”

Pepper’s name floated in the air between them; unspoken but tangible.

“It’s not heaven, if that’s what you mean.” It was a quiet little statement. “Do you…did you believe
in an afterlife? I don’t think I’ve ever even asked that.”

The man shrugged. “I never used to. That moment on Asgard when I busted my heart completely
and thought I was dying I remember being terrified at the thought of the nothingness after death. I
assumed that was it. You die and become nothing. And I think that was worse than any other
possibility.”

“Well, it’s better than that at least. It’s not the Christian ideal, but it’s also not what the Christian’s
co-opted it into. Hel isn’t Hell, as it were.”

“Not filling me with confidence here.”

Loki sighed. “I’ve never been there myself. My father went, once, and tried to talk to Hel. He never
told me how that conversation went, but at least told me about the realm.” At Tony’s expectant
look he sighed again and flicked his fingers so that the Infinity Gauntlet vanished and other images
could appear as he spoke.

“There is a river, Gjöll, which has a bridge of gold spanning it. That is the only way the living can
enter. Beyond it there are fields, and lands of burial mounds and henges. I’m told wild flowers
grow there.

“Across these lands there are halls, where the souls reside. Some are in family groups, some are
with those whose company they enjoy. The largest and most famous of these is Valhalla, where the
warriors feast and fight.

“Hel has her own hall, where she will meet souls for judgement, and that is far more like the
traditional depictions of death. She met my father there, and he said it is a dark pace of pillars and
Tony had frowned a little at the description. “Judgement? She judges people?”

“Her realm.”

“Is she fair?”

A shrug. “I don’t know. She was a kind girl; I can only hope that she is a kind ruler.”

“Way to make me feel better here, Capricorn.” Tony waved his hands hopelessly. “Doesn’t sound all that… I mean, it’s not the sort of paradise you hear about, is it? Where’re the choirs of angels?”

Loki raised a sceptical eyebrow. “Do you want there to be choirs of angels?”

“Well… not literally I guess. Church propaganda and all that. But Pepper might like angels. She had a thing for cutesy things with wings. Fairies, angels, Pegasus… Did your dad at least mention seeing a Pegasus? Or unicorns? Unicorns would be good.” Stark waited a few moments then shrugged. “That would be daft though. Ignore me.”

“Svarðalfari has wings.”

“Sffarthal-who now?”

Loki looked slightly abashed. “…Sleipnir’s father.”

“Sleipnir’s… Wait! Your sexy stallion one-night-stand?! He’s in Helheim? He’s dead?”

“Yes? Thor killed him?”

“And… not only is your ex literally hung like a stallion, he can actually fly as well?”

“You can fly.”

“Of the two points I just made, that was not the one for you try and stroke my ego regarding.”

The two men looked at each other and Tony began to laugh. Loki shook his head with a wry smile.

“Okay. I’ve come in and terribly distracted you. Had you made any progress with the bracelet of doom?”

“Not one bit.”

“… Standard.”

Loki brought up the projection of the Gauntlet again. “The best I can do is tell you the capabilities Thanos now has with the stones in his possession.” Each one, as indicated, lit up. “According to the legends, Time allows the wearer to manipulate time. I can only assume he hasn’t used it to work out where the missing stones are due to how uncontrollably dangerous it is. Power gives manipulation over all forms of energy, it acts like a battery to the other stones. Space allows teleportation of people and things. Mind gives power over the minds of others.”

“Time sounds fishy. Are we saying time travel is a thing?”

“Yes, but as I say, it’s dangerous to the point of impossible.” Loki zoomed the projection in to the gem in question. “You’re a sci-fi fan; you know the risks.”
True. Go back in time and step on an ant, and somehow your great-grandfather is never born. Messing around in time, in fiction at any rate, usually came with huge penalties. “So Thanos can’t risk time-travel to look for where the soul and reality stones are?”

“He can certainly risk it. We have to hope that he doesn’t. He could use it and take them straight out of history.”

“But you have the reality stone.”

The trickster smiled, sharp and humourless. “Quite. If I suddenly cease to exist assume Thanos finally grew fed up searching the hard way and took the reality stone from me when I first found it.”

“Great.” Tony rested his chin in his hand with a sigh. “So now I’ve got to add you suddenly disappearing from existence to my large list of anxiety-inducing scenarios.” He frowned. “If you did cease to exist what about the kids..?”

“Don’t go there, Tony.”

“Yes, but-”

With a wave Loki banished the projection completely, leaving the lab looking eerily empty. “Stark, use that brain of yours for a moment please. I found the stone tens of thousands of years ago; if Thanos were to wipe me out back at that point an awful lot more than your living arrangements would change. I’ve told you before how much I played a part in historical events; the world would look very different without my in-put.”

“Narcissist.”

“Oh hardly! I caused the Anglo-Saxons to win a pivotal battle against the invading Danes which led to Alfred and his children uniting the kingdoms of England. Had they lost, the Danish influence on that country could have changed the course of the entire world.”

“Again, a bit of a stretch.”

“Says the white American.” Loki moved over to his husband, the smirk now firmly back where it belonged. “You’ve got Irish ancestry – anything that affected England would hit your history too.”

“I’m more Jewish, actually.”

“Stop splitting hairs. You know that’s not my only engagement in human history. Lose my influence and this world would look very different.”

Stark was still sat on his desk, but shifted his legs so that his husband could stand between them. Loki’s hands were warm as they cupped his cheeks.

“I do sometimes think you forget that you’ve married a god. I’m ancient, I’ve seen and done things, I’m important. That’s not ego, it’s truth.”

“Mmm, still sounds like ego to me.” Tony grinned. “So you’re saying if Thanos does go back and wipe you out of history we’d never know because we wouldn’t be here to know?”

“Pretty much.”

Well, that could be worse. At least they wouldn’t be around to know what they’d lost. Tony could
think of worse things.

“So. You’re probably wondering why I’ve called everyone here.” Steve looked…nervous. Captain America didn’t usually do nervous, so the whole meeting was already starting off with everyone on edge.

“Since you look like you’re about to tell us you’ve put our dog down, yeah we’re wondering.” Clint threw his feet up on the table. “And assuming Evie would have killed you if you’d done something to Arthur it’s probably something else.”

“Yeah, it’s something else. Arthur’s fine. I think, I haven’t seen him in a while – anyway that’s not the point.”

“Well get to the point.”

“Hydra.”

The archer sat up properly, his attention grabbed. “Okay, that’s a point.”

Steve looked around the group. It was one of those rare times that he had managed to pull everyone together. Even Fury was up on the screen via video-link and they had persuaded Scott to let Evie babysit his daughter for the hour or so this might take.

“We haven’t heard from Hydra in months. They’ve gone quiet.” Bucky was still their best informant on Hydra – even when not in the field he had a contact system that rivalled Clint and Natasha’s. “Like a lot of terrorist groups they went quiet after the alien attacks started. Are you saying they’ve been mobilising again?”

That was the last thing they needed. With the extra-terrestrial threat they didn’t have the energy or manpower to deal with the crap Hydra normally threw at them.

“They’re…not exactly mobilising.” And Steve didn’t normally hedge an answer. “They…uh. They’ve called a truce.”

Tony spat out the mouthful of coffee he’d just taken. “They’ve fucking what?!?”

“So it turns out that I’m not quite as social media savvy as I thought I was and someone contacted me on Twitter. Jarvis confirmed the source and set up a private chat for us.”

“You’ve been chatting with Hydra! On fucking Twitter!”

“Well, we’re video talking now but…yeah.”

“And what? They’ve just rolled over and showed their belly? How the hell does that work? How the hell does a truce with Hydra work?!” Stark sat back in his chair. “How are we even meant to trust them?!”

“It’s…” Steve cleared his throat – a leader uneasy. “It’s pretty dire out there Tony. Earth is under alien invasion and we can barely put a scratch on the bastards; it’s humanity together now. Hydra can see that. They’ve offered support, man-power, any and all tech they’ve got stashed.” He spread his hands in an expansive gesture. “All of it. Hydra have offered us all of it. It’s a truce. Or more than that even; it’s a partnership. With us in charge.”
“Us in charge?”

“Too many heads. They don’t have the organised leadership to deal with something like this.”

“Why us?” Fury was as calm and collected as ever, which seemed ridiculous given the situation. “Why have they come to us? Why not the UN, or the government?”

“The UN isn’t likely to listen to a terrorist organisation, regardless of the circumstances. Hydra were us. Kind of. Once at least. Not the king-pins, but the ordinary people. They were our office workers, and grunts, and hired guns. We would say hello and shake their hands and discuss the weather with them.” Steve placed his hands on the table, leaning his weight onto them. “They are as confused and frightened as the rest of the world, and when someone feels like that they turn to what’s familiar.” He looked around at the impassive faces of his friends and groaned. “Look! I don’t like it either! But when was the last time there was a terrorist attack? From any organised group? We may all want vastly different things of this world, but it’s got to the point that everyone is agreeing we need a world before we can fight over the wretched thing.”

Tony waved his hand in a lazy circle. “Sooo…what would this look like?”

The captain stared at him. “You were the last one I was expecting to accept this.”

“I’m not accepting anything, I’m trying to get all the facts. Have we got an army now or something? What can they offer us, how does that transaction work and how do we communicate with them?”

“I don’t know what this is going to look like Tony. They’ve proposed this team-up, we hadn’t discussed any further since I needed to speak with all of you.”

“Can we make demands?” Bruce’s quiet question was so unexpected, coming from him, that it drew everyone’s attention. He shifted uncomfortably under the combined scrutiny.

“I suppose we could make requests. What were you thinking?”

“The mustard gas they’ve been trying to source. That stuff is banned under every convention and peace treaty going; they need to hand the whole lot over.” Banner tapped his pen on the table, the point retracted to avoid making a mark. “It’s a bitch to destroy so we need to make sure it’s taken care of properly. Same goes for any other chemical or biological weapons they’ve got lurking.”

Steve was already nodding before the scientist could finish. “Agreed. And anything nuclear or alien.” He frowned as Tony shook his head. “What?”

“I seriously doubt they have nukes, but let them keep the alien-tech. We all need whatever edge we can get and it’s a little show of faith.”

“But-”

“If the point of this is to have Hydra as a military ally, we need them to actually have the firepower to be useful. They’re hardly likely to like it if we use them as cannon fodder.”

It took hours for the group to draw up something that they could all agree on. The idea of allowing Hydra – who had attacked the very heart of them – to work alongside them was a difficult prospect. However, as Steve had first said, by this point it was all humans together. Frankly if Hitler rose from the grave and suggested teaming up they’d consider it.

They were in no position to be choosy.
The team-up became useful sooner than they had expected or wanted. The attack was on the outskirts of Moscow and although the Avengers arrived first thanks to Loki there was that curious mix of relief and trepidation as blank vans rolled up alongside them, no insignias but the personnel heavily armed. With the Russian troops they finally had what was essentially an army to fight back with for the first time.

It had reached the point that they didn’t even try to conceal Loki and Bucky amongst them anymore. If anyone had made any tenuous links – regarding Bucky more than Loki – they no longer cared. The media had bigger stories to bother about.

The Orks were, for once, taken by surprise. In any other situation they would have won given their superior weapons, but the surprise of so many troops, when they’d previously only been faced with the Avengers or whatever local police were around, was enough.

That wasn’t to say it was easy.

Steve was co-ordinating the Hydra troops. It had been his idea so the group had rather left him to it; he was a damn good leader and knew what was needed in this sort of situation. As it was, Hydra were of better use mixed in with the Russian police and military units that had arrived. For the Avengers it was more of a rescue operation than battle. With the fire-power being thrown around the civilian casualties were mounting and panicked civvies running in every direction made life a lot harder for the professionals.

That’s not to say Hydra weren’t evacuating too. People are people; it’s very easy to give a group a name and then see them as one homogenous lump, but the personnel that had up until recently been considered the enemy were still just people. And most of them were people who weren’t going to leave civilians trapped like rats in a barrel.

In battle situations a certain member of the Avengers was also beginning to prove surprisingly useful. Scott Lang’s presence had admittedly been treated as a bit of a joke – mostly thanks to Tony – when he’d first joined. His help in destroying the Helicarrier had done a little to build his reputation, but now he was really beginning to shine.

Tiny, invisible to the Orks and able to get through dense rubble, Scott was proving himself absolutely invaluable for the rescue effort. With Jarvis integrated into his suit he could scan through the destroyed buildings for life-signs and then squeeze through the gaps to reach possible survivors.

This time he found himself in a small caved-in room mid-way up a block of flats. The rooms above had collapsed in, burying the lower floors and anyone who had been in them.

“Got someone here!” There was just enough room for him to return to his usual size. “Her legs are trapped, but she’s alive.” Unconscious though, which was possibly for the best since he didn’t speak a word of Russian.

“How can you get her out?”

“Nah.” He didn’t need to try moving anything to see that. “Everything is holding everything else up. Move anything, four stories are going to come down on our heads.”

“How can anyone spare a hand?” Steve sounded harried, and an explosion across the coms made it clear why.
“I’m on it.”

Scott didn’t have a chance to ask who had responded before Loki materialised in the tiny space next to him. With both grown men – neither of them short – and the unconscious casualty it was a tight fit.

“How about I shrink?”

“How about you do that.”

The woman was firmly pinned under the rubble, but Scott’s scan suggested she was the only living person left in the building. Loki could teleport all three of them out and let the building collapse completely.

“She’s going to need urgent medical care the moment we’re out of here. The rubble is cutting off blood to her legs and abdomen, I think that-”

Whatever Loki thought went unsaid.

A blast from the external battle blew through the wall, bringing everything down on top of them. Already shrunk, Scott was blown straight out of the room and into open space.

Completely out of control, even full-sized the drop was immense. A second blast flung him in a different direction and a piece of flying masonry narrowly missed him. Panic took over for a brief moment – falling, spinning, no idea of which way was up or down as the world continued to explode around him – before logic fought back and he called for help.

It took nearly twenty ants before one managed to get through the air-borne debris and catch him. They went up – the best direction when everything else around you is going down at terminal velocity. It was minutes of fighting through the dust and flying rubble before they burst out above the explosion and were able to look down on what had just happened.

The block of flats had collapsed in on itself and then burst out again on impact with the ground. Neighbouring buildings had been taken out in the ensuing shock-wave. The life signs Scott had initially seen for those had vanished.

“Loki, did you get the woman out?!” The coms were full of static. “Loki? Did you get her?”

“Scott, what happened?” Sam appeared out of the dust, looking around as if he could possibly spot Lang that high up and that small. Jarvis must have given him a rough location.

“We were trying to get a lady out of there when it came down. Where’s Loki?”

It wasn’t worth trying to find Scott so the Flacon hovered over the disaster site, scanning for the Trickster instead. “Where did you see him last?”

“Directly below you. We were in that building when it was hit.”

Said building was a pile of rubble. Sam didn’t have the time to spare for an in-depth sweep, but a quick scan didn’t show any life-signs – something Scott had already ascertained.

“Not seeing anything.”

He sounded calm, but for Lang the words shot fear through his spine. The woman hadn’t been very old, surely Loki had managed to get her out…Surely Loki had managed to get himself out for that
matter. The Trickster was still AWOL.

“Does anyone have eyes on Loki?”

“Capricorn’s missing?!?” Tony was a distant spec in the battle, but he came through clearly.

“A building came down on us; he’s not answering his com!”

Sam was already scanning through the different com channels for the missing trickster but Stark swore and began doing the same as well. Losing track of one of their key players in the middle of a battle was never a good feeling.

However, in the midst of all of the chaos and destruction there was at least one small happy ending this time.

“What by the Norns is the problem?!” Loki. Thoroughly annoyed and slightly out of breath, but there on the line.

He received three responses at once: Sam calling for his position, Scott demanding to know about the casualty and Tony furious that he’d seemingly vanished off the face of the planet.

“She’s fine; I took her straight to the hospital in the next town.”

“Why didn’t you answer the damn com?!”

“I was trying to speak to the doctors about her injuries at the time? Excuse me for trying to save someone.”

The argument that could have blown up on them was neatly curtailed by another building actually blowing up near enough to Stark that he had to turn his attention back to the situation in hand.

It had been a brief thing – Loki had simply taken a casualty for aid and been unable to respond for all of five minutes – but the panic those five minutes had brought left their mark. Scott couldn’t help but think about how close it had come. Even if Loki had the skills and magic to escape that situation, Scott himself had been lucky to do so. It was becoming the case that luck was all that was saving them sometimes, and for Pepper even that hadn’t been enough.

They were all too aware of how very vulnerable they were to this enemy.

WMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWM

“Thanos has gone all-in on Vanaheim.” Thor’s use of the vernacular was usually amusing, but this time the modernism just made the statement worse. “Heimdall is evacuating who he can.”

That answered the question of who was next at least.

Vanaheim; from Thor and Loki’s accounts a beautiful realm of wildlife and farmlands. Not as learned as Alfheim, nor as majestic as Asgard, but simply beautiful for its natural simplicity. It had been a toss of the coin which realm Thanos destroyed first, but all things considered it made sense. Vanaheim was so much less built up than Earth; searching it would have taken a lot less time.

“So we can assume he now has the Soul stone…” Tony rubbed a hand across his eyes. “And he’s coming for us next.”

“He’s most likely coming here, yes, but Heimdall could see no evidence of him finding another stone.”
That…didn’t make sense.

“What?”

“He hasn’t got the soul stone. It wasn’t there.”

If Vanahiem didn’t have it, and Hel didn’t have it, and Loki seemed certain that Earth didn’t have it…where the hell was the wretched thing?
In a way they were more prepared to lose Vanaheim than they had been for the other realms. The seedbank had been mostly completed for one. They could never conclusively say that Loki had managed to get a sample from every single plant Vanaheim had to its name, but he’d had managed everything their botanists had told him about.

The seedbank was huge, both physically and digitally. With Earth now next in the firing line the physical bank had become Fury’s priority, and he now had the planets governments on side. Digitally, Tony had put together a genetic database for all of the plant and animal life on Earth, using the multiple and varied databases scattered across laboratories worldwide. With the threat now very real, he didn’t even need to hack anymore; a quick introduction and explanation and people were falling over themselves to help preserve Earth’s natural bounty.

Bruce had put his old skills to good use in leading a team to genetically map all of the samples Loki had retrieved from Vanaheim. With two realms-worth of genetic data and physical plant matter, alongside the remnants from the other destroyed worlds they had succeeded in building a biological library larger than humanity could ever imagine.

It was interesting, too, to see the effect that extra-terrestrial destruction could have on a fractious planet. Whilst at an individual level looting and rioting were happening, on a global scale countries were trying to work together. Territories that had been at war for decades had called cease-fires, and some places had put peace treaties in place specifically to work together to counteract the threat.

Terrorist groups had gone to ground for the most part although a few, very few, had done a similar thing to Hydra and offered up their services to their governments. Anything to live.

None of it stopped the hurt though. The losses, the grief, humanity on the brink of collapse.

Explaining the war to the twins was a tricky business. And painful. Mostly painful.

Hope had been surprisingly okay about the brief moment of conflict she had seen on Jötnheim – possibly because with the weapons used there had been no recognisable blood and she’d never seen that her sister had been injured. However, as young as they were there was no way either child could have failed to notice what was not only on the TV but right outside their windows.

“So like Stormtroopers in Starwars?” Brandir was going through a phase and everything had to be
Starwars branded.

“I…suppose so?” Loki tried desperately to remember the last time he had seen the films. His son’s bottom lip started quivering so it had to be the wrong answer.

“But but but they destroyed Alrededan and and and killed Olbi Won.”

The three year old tripped over the complicated names but said it so earnestly. Next to him his sister crossed her arms with a scowl.

“I don’t like Starwars!”

“It’s not about Starwars—”

“I don’t want Dalth Pader to win!”

“Darth Vadar, and that’s not what’s happening here, Brandir.” Loki’s attempt at diffusing the situation just resulted in the toddler beginning to howl.

“Need a hand?”

The trickster looked up to see his husband leaning against the doorjamb and grinning broadly at the scene.

“Please. My lack of Starwars knowledge is causing us problems.”

“I can see that.”

Tony’s geek badge was much shinier than his husbands and he was able to pull on some more relevant Starwars trivia to help quietly and calmly explain what was happening to the world. Hope even came out of her sulk as she began to understand the seriousness of what was happening.

“So people are getting hurt and going away, like Aunty Pepper went away?”

“Yeah. The aliens, the Empire, are hurting a lot of people.” Tony put a hand on each tiny shoulder. “But your Móðhy and I and all your uncles and aunts are fighting back. Like Luke, and Han and Leia. So it might get very scary for a while, but we wanted you to know that we are all going to do absolutely everything we can to protect you both. Okay?”

“And Evie?”

“Evie’s protecting herself; she’s a big girl.” Loki said with a smile.

“And you’ll save us?” Brandir asked, very seriously.

“We’ll save you. And if we can’t, you live in a building full of superheroes. You’re going to be okay.”

It made headline news across the world when the Elizabeth Tower – better known as Big Ben after its famous bell – collapsed. The Houses of Parliament had been raided by Orks and they’d fired the place after failing to find a Stone.

Single monuments, or death tolls under one hundred usually didn’t hit mainstream news any more. But world famous sites still did.
The Taj Mahal lost a minaret, the Sydney Opera House was blown completely open, Giza lost a minor pyramid, the Roman Forum in Rome, the Acropolis of Athens, Chichen Itza, Machu Picchu, the places that humanity had deemed important, so to an alien invading force looked like the sensible places to start looking for something important.

The Avengers fought like demons to save the Empire State Building. It wasn’t enough.

MWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMW

Steve and Bucky found themselves both out on the balcony, staring across the ruin that New York was slowly turning into. It was night time, but the characteristic lights of the city were sadly lacking these days and in some areas fires raged instead.

“Reminds me of Germany.” Bucky sounded tired, but then none of them were sleeping properly. It would have been a strange statement if Steve hadn’t been thinking the exact same thing. Not a Germany any of their friends knew, but an older and much more battle-torn country.

“I know what you mean.” The Captain’s shield was leaning against his legs, never far from hand these days and another reminder to their younger years. “You know I had actually grown used to not expecting to be woken by gunfire every time I fall asleep.”

“Yeah, I’d agree if it wasn’t for the fact that I’ve kinda been living that life the entire time you were snoozing in the ice, so you know…”

“Fair enough.”

Bucky glanced over, then grinned. “Hey, remember that time the air-raid siren went off in the middle of the night and Jenkins –”

“Forgot to put his clothes on before running for the shelter. Yeah…”Steve laughed and shook his head. “Poor guy, we shoudn’t laugh.”

“Fuck it! The world’s ending and he died about seventy years ago. And it was funny. The way all the bits sort of…bounced.”

The sadly accurate description made Captain America snort. “I am trying to maintain the moral high ground here!”

“There is no moral high ground; and he’d have approved of the fact that this many decades on he’s still making people laugh.”

Steve didn’t comment on it, but he was actually somewhat impressed that his friend had retained that memory. Given it was hit and miss on what Bucky could recall any little thing was a bonus; even if it was something that could embarrass the subject of the memory. On this occasion at least Steve could say that although they were laughing at an old colleagues expense Jenkins was the type of person who would have laughed along with them.

“Remember when we had to pull Curtis out of the rubble after that bombing raid?”

Bucky frowned, then shook his head. “No. Sorry.” He saw Steve’s face fall and leant forward encouragingly. “Tell me?”

“Well, that was it really…” Captain America looked at his friend’s hopeful expression and smiled again. “Okay, so most of us had reached the underground train-station we used as a bomb shelter, but Curtis didn’t get there in time. Later said he had a lady friend he was a bit busy with. We saw
the proof of that when we dug him out of the rubble sans pants and underwear. Poor bugger actually tried to stop us from rescuing him, he was so embarrassed.” He laughed. “Sounds daft, now I say it, but at the time we didn’t let him live it down. For months he was known as-”

“Pantsless! He was known as Pantsless.”

As soldier humour went it wasn’t brilliant, and very juvenile, but the grin on Bucky’s face as he recalled the end of the silly little story was more than worth it.

“Simpler times.”

“What? Nazi’s and air-raids?”

Steve laughed again. “Well, at least we had warning when the Luftwaffe paid a visit. More than these Orks ever give us.”

“Gotta love the guys who pre-warn you before raining down fiery death.”

“Hey, I happen to miss the rains of fiery death.” The Captain looked up at the sky – despite the clouds obscuring the stars. “Beats plasma guns.”

“I dunno. Plasma guns are pretty good fun when we’re using them.” Bucky had taken to the new technology quicker than everyone bar Tony. It had become his favourite weapon by far. “Luftwaffe sounded better though.”

“Nah! RAF sounded the best. Give me a Spitfire engine any day!”

“Oof, you traitor! Mustang!”

Steve smirked side-on at his friend. “Do you actually remember what either of them sounded like?”

Bucky looked affronted. “They shoved a Merlin engine in the Mustang’s in ’42, they basically sounded the same. I have randomised amnesia, not dementia!”

“Spitfire sounded better. And you’re nearly 100 years old, dementia is only to be expected.”

“Fuck off.”

Steve laughed.

MWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWM

Natasha very rarely made an appearance in the labs, so the fact that she’d made the effort this time actually pulled Stark’s attention away from the improved plasma gun he was tinkering with.

“Tony, are you aware of what Evie’s been up to?”

“Apparently not? What’s she done now?”

The assassin pulled up a seat next to him and flicked the data from her phone screen up onto the interactive screen that hung over the desk. Given that said screen was a laser projection, it was slightly see through.

“Huh.” Tony put down the pieces of the weapon to focus on the images in front of him. “How did you find out about this?”
“Jarvis. Evie begged him not to tell you guys, but he asked me to keep an eye from a human point of view. I think Pepper knew too.”

Jarvis was very aware that as a computer programme he couldn’t always understand why a person would do something, so often asked for an eternal human consideration. In this case Tony could see why he had asked for Natasha to watch over this new project of Evie’s.

The image now on the screen was a Youtube page, and more specifically his daughter’s Youtube page. The account was under a fake name, but it was clear in the actual videos she was using her real one. There were well over a hundred videos all with Evie talking straight into the camera and an Instagram handle as well, although with a pseudonym which would explain why he had never picked up on it.

“I thought she was on board with staying off of social media!”

“Yeah, well, she changed her mind. And she’s been smart with it too. Or at least had been up until now.”

Tony ran a hand through his hair. “Now? What’s happened?”

“Buzzfeed News picked up on the fact that the elusive Evie Stark has a Youtube channel and Insta and ran a piece on it. She was keeping a reasonably low profile, but now it’s blown up in her face a little.” Natasha looked amused by the whole situation. Given how serious the rest of existence was at the moment, Evie suddenly going viral was a welcome break. “Jarvis suggested I let you know in case Stark Industries needed to do damage control. However, I’ve seen most of her stuff and I don’t think there’s anything to worry about.”

“Yeah, not like Hydra are going to chase her down any time soon…” Stark hovered over one of the videos simply titled ‘Shit Day’. “She’s getting millions of views on these things?!”

“That’s mostly since the media outed her.”

“What are they even about?!”

Natasha scrolled the page down. “A bit of everything. Some of it is how to deal with what’s happening at the moment, some of it is answering viewer’s questions about life with the Avengers. She’s been careful not to talk about Loki.”

Tony pulled the page back up to the ‘Shit Day’ video. “And that one?”

“When we were trying to save Mount Rushmore. It’s mostly her discussing how it feels to have all of the important people in her life out fighting a very powerful enemy whilst she’s stuck at home. That one’s gained the most views.” Natasha shrugged. “It resonates. Everyone knows what it feels like to not know where a loved one is and be concerned about them. Evie has more experience than most and wants to share that.”

Evie had obviously gone into the venture aware that she was going to draw criticism. Rich, white and ridiculously privileged; she had led a sheltered life and at points people had pointed that out to her. Some in nicer ways than others. But she’d listened, and learnt and tried to do better. Early films had been a little bit boastful in terms of living with celebrity superheroes, but over a few months the tone had improved and she’d moved to discussing what she had learnt from said heroes and how others could utilise it.

There was a full playlist on the Orks, what was known about them, possible weaknesses, and most importantly how to hide and escape during an attack. Evie had created a simple algorithm (Tony
suspected Jarvis had played a significant part – coding wasn’t his daughter’s strong point) that people could use to search news sites and hospitals for missing loved ones after an attack.

“The one for Pepper has been popular too.”

“How the hell has she kept this secret for so long? How has the media only just picked up on it?” There was an electronic cough from above them and Tony laughed. “Really?”

“It’s not been easy, sir, but I managed to keep her under the radar for as long as possible.”

“Does she know she’s gone viral?”

“She’s currently filming a video to address it, sir.”

“Huh.” For all that Tony Stark was a technological genius, he hadn’t really bothered much with social media. Even so the fact that his daughter had managed to fly this under his radar for so long – even with Jarvis’ help – was impressive. “How’d she have this much to talk about?”

“Kid knows trauma.” Natasha said it a little too flippantly and frowned when Tony glared at her. “What? It’s true enough! Losing her mum, Hydra busting in her to kidnap her, getting a hole punched through her stomach by a plasma bolt, losing Pepper – she’s lived some stuff. I know she plays up the tough exterior but you guys can’t expect her not to need to deal with it somehow.”

Telling internet strangers wasn’t how Tony had expected her to deal with her emotions. However, given no one had come to him earlier about this suggested that Evie was at least keeping the important things confidential. At least it was a constructive creative outlet?

The Sphynx, Canary Warf, Leaning Tower of Pisa, Tiananmen Square, world heritage sites and political powerhouses alike were toppling like dominos.

In a way it seemed that Thanos was being more careful. He had two stones and only one realm on which they could be. Whilst the Avengers had initially been concerned that Earth was going to be pounded into the dust immediately it seemed like their attackers were trying to be more systematic. Most of the other realms had put their stones on display, or else hidden them somewhere heavily fortified and in an area of great significance. It was reasonable to assume Earth had done the same and now that the obvious spots – to aliens at least – had been searched and turned up nothing they were being careful not to destroy the planet and bury the Stones out of reach forever.

It gave Earth a little more time and some breathing space. It was also slightly easier to predict where an attack could next occur.

Humanity seemed to be little more than an annoyance to the attackers. There was no useful defence yet, and even the advances Stark had made with the liberated plasma weapons couldn’t give the Avengers an upper hand.

The mini memorial board that had been set up in the main living room had had to be upgraded to a larger one. Pepper and Frigga were still in the centre but the number of portraits around them was exponentially growing.

“What’s happened?”
Stark jumped as his husband’s arms wrapped around his shoulders.

“Who said anything’s happened?”

“You’re sat in the dark, in your labs, at three thirty in the morning, and not working on anything. Something has happened.”

That was a good point. Tony had been tapping his pen against the blank notepad, but pushed it away with a sigh. “Yeah. Okay yeah.”

“Well?”

“The Swiss stock exchange has gone down.”

“Oh.” Loki’s tone made it quite clear that he didn’t see what the problem was. “Is that bad?”

“Well, yes. Because it went down, and the German exchange tumbled less than half an hour after that, which in turn sent Europe falling like dominos. I’m now watching the Chinese go down in real time.”

“I still don’t see the problem here; it’s just stocks and shares, yes?”

“The Wall Street Crash just passed you by, huh?” Stark rubbed his eyes with a groan. “Look, the stock exchanges are like…like a market place. But all that’s bought and sold are stocks and shares. If the exchange crashes, the money going through it is only so much paper. Or strings of numbers these days. Market crashes, the money becomes worthless. There’s a run on the banks as people panic and try to take out money that is now worthless anyway. Did you ever hear of the Great Depression?”

“Things could be that bad?”

“Worse. This is worldwide and immediate. And the population is so much larger now.” He shook his head. “Worldwide shortage, poverty, hunger, homelessness. This is going to cause as much damage as any physical attack.”

Loki slipped down onto the stool next to his husband. He reached out to take the man’s hands. “Okay. So what can be done? You wouldn’t be sat down here if you weren’t trying to respond to the problem.”

“I don’t know.” Tony stared down at their joined hands. “I don’t know what to do. Pepper might. She was always the business brains, I just built stuff. But I don’t know what to do. I’m a billionaire – but that’s not enough to bail anyone out on this scale.”

“Immediate problems. Look at the immediate problems.”

“Food. I guess. The movement of food across country borders and down the production lines to people. Can’t even guarantee it will reach the stores, and if it does very few can afford it.”

“What if there was a recovery? What if the American exchange didn’t fall?”

“Already fallen. But…”

Loki smiled slightly as his husband’s brow furrowed in thought. There was nothing quite like watching Tony Stark beginning to formulate a plan.

“But…I might have enough capital to…” The man pushed his husband’s hands away and grabbed...
his tablet. “Jarvis, how’s Hong-Kong doing?”

“Holding, sir. But teetering.”

“Can I afford the majority share in the Hong Kong-Shanghai Bank Corp?”

“…..Are you asking to buy a bank, sir?”

Tony was no economist. But with Jarvis’ help he could get by. It was impossible to stop the worldwide economic collapse, but it was possible to try to reduce the impact. By investing in one of the world’s largest banks and with some strong words with an extremely stressed CEO they could create a single remaining rock. A pause on all debt, all lending solely to utilities necessary for living (Tony watched some of his rival tech companies crash and burn with little remorse) and strict regulations on all transactions.

It wasn’t a cure. Nothing could pull the world back from what had happened, but it was a start. With some persuasion the British government cancelled taxation for the foreseeable future and with their largest bank managing to hold on they started to claw back a little. The positive effect trickled across Europe, salvaging Germany and France’s respective largest corporations, and giving Belgium a fighting chance.

Seeing what was happening and how they were doing it, Russia and China began to surge ahead again, their trade catapulting the United States back out in front again.

It was certainly not an overnight fix. Or even over the matter of months.

It took two years for the world to pull itself together again after the economic disaster. Nothing looked the way it had before; it couldn’t with the ongoing invasion and knock-on effects of that, but it was something. Countries who had relied on tourism were still going under, and nothing was going to help that, but on a whole people were pulling though.

The global trade was slowing to a crawl as well, but regions were rallying and making the most of what their respective lands could grow. It meant a marked difference in normal diets in the Western world, where people were having to lose their multicultural dishes full of imported ingredients and revert to something that wouldn’t be out of place in World War 2. But it was working.

Both Loki and Thor had been aware of the resilience of humanity – the most fragile of the Nine Realms inhabitants – but they were still astonished at what they saw. As more and more of the planet fell, the people rallied.

The passing of the years were also marked by the children in the tower growing. Evie hit 21, with little to no fan-fare and a refusal to do any large celebrations. In fact the press made a bigger deal of her ascent to adulthood than she did herself. It just didn’t seem right to celebrate when the world was falling to pieces.

The twins had no such qualms for their fifth birthday, and demanded a pirate-themed party. It was a brief but welcome bright spot in the chaos of what was now normal life.

Multiple attacks were becoming a thing. It meant having to split up, sometimes across both hemispheres of the planet, different groupings depending on the need.
“Power plant in Chashma, Pakistan. Red Square, Russia. Volkswagen manufacturing plant, Germany.”

Tony found himself in Moscow this time, fighting alongside his husband, Natasha and Bucky. And a couple of thousand Russian troops, who were always welcome.

Given the size of the place and amount of combustibles involved they had also sent a group of four to Germany to help defend the car factory. As choice of target it was an odd one, but they couldn’t predict how Thanos viewed Earth, and such a large and busy plant could seem important to him. Steve led his group, bringing Sam, Rhodes and Scott along with him.

It left Bruce, Clint and Thor to sort out the Pakistani power plant.

Despite not being able to bring the firepower against the attacking Orks, humanity were getting slightly better at dealing with an attack. With the Avengers able to deal damage it allowed the local military or whomever to evacuate civilians and seal off the gas mains to the affected area. That had been a lesson hard learnt after a gas leak and the subsequent explosion took out three whole blocks in San Diego.

In a way, with civilians removed from the area it was often worth just containing the damage and allowing the Orks to realise for themselves that there wasn’t an Infinity Stone in the area they were searching. As a plan of action it meant that they were losing a large portion of the Red Square, but Stark was quite content that with the tourists evacuated they were losing important architecture but not lives.

However, that feeling of relief was quickly squashed as his comm crackled into life.

“Loki! We need Loki here!”

Clint. And with a terror to his voice that they had never heard before. The plea echoed across all of the channels, the Hulk roaring in the background of it.

“Barton, what’s-” Natasha tried to determine what was happening, but Clint shouted over her.

“The power plant is nuclear! It’s fucking nuclear!”

There was a moment of stillness, the Avengers digesting the news and what it could mean for them and for the world as a whole.

What it could mean for Clint.

“Understood.” And then Loki was gone, spinning through the ether to where the distress call had come from. He knew roughly what to expect; he’d spent enough time around humanity to have seen the varying effects of this power source. The trickster was mostly immune to the adverse consequences of being hit with radiation, but even so the sheer amount of it as he arrived made him stumble on landing.

“Reactor three has been split open, contain it!” Clint spat the words out through gritted teeth. His face was already beginning to blister, but he waved away Loki’s immediate concern. “Go! There’s no time!”

The building in question was a few hundred yards away, belching black smoke out of a crumbled wall. It must have taken a direct shot and the plasma had taken down both the exterior structure and eaten into the internal protective cladding. Loki didn’t really know how the generators worked, but the energy radiating out of the rubble he was stepping over told him how bad the damage was.
The door on a surviving wall burst open and Thor emerged, dragging an unconscious plant worker. He saw Loki but there was no relief in response. As an Asgardian he was also fairly resistant to the radiation, but not enough to avoid the growing redness across his face.

“Hulk’s trying to smother the reactor!” It must have been a learnt phrase, since he didn’t appear to understand what he was saying. Loki only barely understood it better.

It would have been possible to start tackling the leaking energy in the air and material around them, however Loki deemed that that would be pointless given how quickly it was being pumped out of the broken plant. Instead he followed the smoke.

“Here!” It was the Hulk’s roar, but there was a tinge of Bruce there: the nuclear physicist had the necessary expertise, but only the Hulk could withstand what was happening in the reactor room.

There was water flooding the lower levels. Loki would have teleported in under normal circumstances, but the energy surge around him was making it difficult to focus his magic correctly. He was waist deep and at one point waded past the large body of an Ork. Evidently they hadn’t been able to survive what they had unleashed – it would have been a useful thing to know if it weren’t for the fact that it could also kill every other living creature within a few hundred thousand miles too.

For someone able to visualise energy the water was almost incandescent to the trickster. He would have to remove it all – couldn’t risk it seeping into the ground and contaminating the ground-water or local rivers. The thick smoke was equally toxic – practically humming around him.

He could taste metal.

The basement levels where the reactor was protected should have been in complete darkness, the radiation had shorted out all of the electrics in the vicinity. However, the metal pipes running along the ceiling were glowing red hot and gave an indication of direction. The water was boiling around his legs – he could only hope there were no other people down here. He could withstand it, the Hulk could withstand it but a human certainly couldn’t.

A dull roar echoed in the air, an angry low vibration like some dark creature moaning in pain.

The foot thick steel door that should have been locking the reactor away from the world had been blown from its industrial hinges. Loki almost tripped over it where it lay in a shapeless mess under the dark water. Light was streaming into this small area from where the roof had been blown clean off. Ahead he finally caught sight of the Hulk, desperately shovelling armfuls of rubble onto an incandescent blaze that could only be the broken core.

“Hulk, get out of here!”

There was something of Bruce in Hulk’s eyes when he caught Loki’s gaze and threw one last armful of molten slag onto the shimmering pile. The two personalities must have been more cooperative than usual for Bruce to convey the need to bury the reactor. However, with the Trickster’s arrival he followed the advice and with a huge leap grabbed hold of the top of the broken wall and clambered up and out.

Loki couldn’t say he’d ever had to deal with something so dangerous to the surrounding realm before. The sheer energy the thing was giving off interfered with his own powers, causing difficulties in doing anything with finesse. However, he didn’t need finesse for this solution. Very conscious of how much time was passing, and therefore how much radiation was still being pumped out the prince had to forgo his usual carefully crafted spellwork.
The magic equivalent of a bodge-job was inelegant but opened up a serviceable wormhole. Loki couldn’t aim it properly, but given that the other end opened up to the event horizon of a black hole it didn’t need to be very accurate. It took a larger gesture than his usual fluid hand movements to drag the spewing reactor up from its foundations and slug it into the wormhole but it worked. He was splattered with enough molten rock to kill a human in the process.

After fighting alongside the Avengers for some time now it was second nature to use the comms to speak with them, but when Loki went to use his there was no response. As with everything else in the vicinity it had been completely fried. The reactor might have been gone, but the building rubble strewn around was still radioactive enough to continue disrupting his usual finesse meaning the tech was unsalvageable in the moment.

“Loki, have you cleared it?” Thor appeared up on the edge of the broken wall the Hulk had left by. Looking down into the new crater he determined the answer for himself. “You need to come quick. It’s Clint.”

“Clint?”

But of course it was Clint. Thor’s exposed skin was blistered and red, the Hulk had been in a similar state. Loki was only protected by his magic.

Clint was human.

They ran. Without accurate magic they didn’t have a choice. They were both dripping wet – toxic water scattering its poison in their footsteps as Loki followed his brother towards the distance figure of the Hulk. His mind was already racing with what he would need to do – and after Clint how many other people he was going to need to save. No one had told him anything, he had absolutely no clue how many of the plant workers were alive, how many people lived in the nearby towns. Absolutely no clue. There were at least three towns in eye line alone, even as a God Loki didn’t know how many were in the immediate vicinity.

“Here!” Hulk was down on his knees, curled over Clint who was lying prone on the ground. Hulk’s eyes were red and he had a nosebleed but seemed reasonably unaffected. Their comrade, however, was less lucky.

Clint was moving sluggishly, letting out a low continuous moan of pain. His exposed face and arms were raw - the top layers of skin sloughed away. He was bleeding from every orifice; eyes streaming with blood as he tried to blink up at his friends.

“Loki, do something!” Thor must have seen this developing, been powerless as Barton had deteriorated into this state. Loki had only seen him ten minutes ago, on his feet and speaking.

“It’s too late.” The Hulk’s rumble was tinged with Bruce again.

“Let me decide that.” Loki was hovering his hands over Clint’s body, trying to get a reading through all of the interference.

“Too late.” This time it was a roar.

Clint’s moan of pain sharpened, a thin keening cry that then broke into a bubbling cough.

“Loki! Do something!”

Nothing was responding the way he expected it to; the damage was spreading faster than he could heal it.
“Loki!”

“I can’t.” He could do something though. A white glow around his hands resulted in Clint quieting, his breathing less frantic.

“What did you do? Is he going to be okay now?” Thor knelt down on the other side to the Hulk, gripping Clint’s ruined bleeding hand.

“I blocked his pain receptors.” Loki’s own hands were shaking as he pulled them away from Barton. “I’ve made him comfortable.”

“But is he going to be okay?”

The trickster looked up. There was such desperation in his brother’s gaze that he didn’t quite know how to say anything in response.

“Too late.” The Hulk’s voice box wasn’t given for quietness, or any emotion beyond anger. But now he managed to sound resigned, broken.

“Loki! Is he going to be okay?”

It was a two letter word and the trickster couldn’t bring himself to say it. However, his silence was already doing the job for him and Thor gaped at him.

“Please. Brother…Please.”

“Thor, I…”

“Too late.”

Far far too late. It had been too late the moment the reactor had been breached and too late the moment Clint had stood anywhere near it.

“No. Loki, no.” Thor’s face was crumpling with the plea. “You must be able to do something. You must.”

The trickster looked back down at Clint again. Barton was unconscious, each breath popping a bubble of blood at the corner of his mouth and Loki gently laid his hands on the man’s chest. “I have; he’s comfortable. That’s all I can do.”

Thor’s jaw tightened and he abruptly rose to his feet. Loki didn’t watch him storm off, but could clearly hear the scream of anger and denial, accompanied by a gigantic crash of thunder. The weather God knew not to let it rain with the heavy radiation surrounding them, but lightening rolled across the sky in a pattern of burnt nerves.

“He’s gone.” Hulk’s quiet rumble sounded like the world ending. Under Loki’s hands Clint’s chest had stopped moving.

“Oh.” A small, gulped sound. “Oh Barton, no.” He searched for any small tendril of life, but nothing remained. Calmly and quietly Clint had slipped away from them like the true assassin he was.

The world was eerily calm around them. No birdsong, no insects, no other people. Even Thor’s next growl of thunder was distant and muted. The Hulk’s huge hand fell on Loki’s shoulder, but there was no anger in the grasp – just solidarity. The trickster brushed away unexpected tears.
“Radiation. Then cry.”

“What?”

“Radiation.”

It was true: the ground, the air and the water were being saturated in the fallout, ash falling in soft billowing clouds around them. Even with the broken core gone the amount of radiation already given out would render thousands of miles uninhabitable. Countless more would die.

Loki gently released Barton’s hands and rose to his feet. His own hands were blistering as he raised them and crafted a second portal. It still wasn’t as easy as it should have been.

As he had once found himself explaining to Natasha so many years ago in a Hydra base in Iceland, he could make sense of differing energies in the environment around him. To begin with it was like staring into a welding arc. He couldn’t hope to do anything with finesse, instead just setting up a spell that would draw every atomic bullet to the portal as if drawn by a magnet.

It took a good hour for him to safely clear everything. It had meant magically scrubbing out the ground under them, the ground water, the air, the clouds above them, any and every piece of solid, liquid and gas that had been irradiated by the fallout. It was a huge piece of work.

By the time he was done the military had turned up and their dosimeters were reading a normal level of radiation dosage. Nuclear disaster averted. Millions saved.

They had lost Clint.

MWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWM

There was no huge funeral this time, as much as they had wanted to give him one. After Pepper they had all made certain they had up-to-date wills, and Clint had stipulated that he didn’t want any sort of grand send off. Instead it was a very simple affair out in undisturbed woodlands. No religion involved, just the small group of those that he had considered family and the memories they wished to share.

Loki hadn’t wanted to attend. Stark thought he’d known how badly guilt could eat someone up, but the trickster had taken Barton’s death very hard. Whilst no one else blamed him at all, he blamed himself and no amount of reminding him how many lives he’d saved would deter him from that thought. He did attend, but only because his daughter forced him to.

They held a wake though – like they had for Pepper. It was a more subdued affair, and Tony made an impromptu moment out of adding Clint’s photo onto The Board. It rather drove it home just how vulnerable they were; losing Pepper had been a terrible tragedy. Losing Barton made it clear that this really was a war, and people really were going to continue to die.

Loki vanished part way through the evening and didn’t return until the small hours of the morning.

“Where have you been?”

He’d assumed the kitchen would be empty given the time, and that all the lights were off.

“Out.”

“Obviously.” Natasha’s voice sounded thick – either with crying or drinking. Probably both.
The trickster sat down with her at the dark table, conjuring up two mugs of tea.

“Unless it has alcohol in it, I’m not drinking it.”

“It’ll stay warm until you want it.”

Natasha sniffed disdainfully. “You were missed earlier.”

“I doubt that.”

“You underestimate what you mean to this group.” She must have been really drunk. As steady as her voice was, she was never that demonstrative.

It was too early in the morning, and she was too inebriated, and Loki was still too emotional to find a way to put into words why he had needed to leave. The complex and complicated relationship he’d had with Clint was hard to articulate at the best of times. Their shared history was so unique – even amongst such an unusual group of people – that it would have been difficult to explain to anyone how and why they’d ended up as friends.

And Loki hadn’t been able to save him.

“I was at the hospital.” He finally offered.

“Why?”

A shrug. “I cleared out the oncology ward.”

That took Natasha a few moments to work out, then she leant forwards, elbows on the table, to see him better in the dark. “You healed an entire oncology ward?”

“I needed to do something right. For once.”

“You know no one, no one here blames you for what happened, right? Hell, if anyone was going to it would be me and…well.” She shrugged with one shoulder. “Shit happens. Nuclear shit particularly.”

“I needed to know I could still save people.”

“So you’re, what? Going to start playing God in hospitals?” Her question caught up with her and the woman snorted with quiet laughter. “Except that you are a God, of course.”

“I’m not fussed what deity gets the credit, but I think I will keep going.”

Natasha picked up her near-empty bottle of vodka and drained it. “Why? At this rate we’re all going to die anyway.”

“I don’t know. At least people can die healthy? They’d die eventually even without an alien invasion. This gives them a chance.”

“A chance. Yeah. Maybe that’s the best we can hope for.” She rose to her feet, hands firmly on the table for stability. “You know…I’m glad you were with him?” There was a suspicion in the dark that there were tears there. “Despite everything, I’m glad it was you with him. I’m sure he appreciated that you tried.” She wobbled her way around the table grabbing up her mug in the process. Stopping next to him, Natasha grasped his shoulder. “You’re a good person, you know.” She said quietly. “A very good person.” And much to his surprise, and possibly hers were she sober, she kissed the top of his head. “Thanks for the tea.”
There was a spate of unresolved ‘miracles’ in hospitals – first across the city and then spreading out wider. Whole wards would wake up to find everyone had mysteriously been cured, or healed, or were free from pain. It set off quite an argument in the religious communities, all trying to attribute it to their particular faith. But regardless of how or why, it continued.

In a world growing increasingly dark and desperate it was a tiny ray of hope.

Evie had begun meeting up with local people she had met through her social media. For a young woman who hadn’t grown up with any friends of her own age it was her first real chance to get to know her peers. She had had to be very careful in terms of who she decided to meet but Jarvis had helped with that. Despite everything going on in the world, there was always going to be the type of paparazzi to chase down a media-shy celebrity kid. Private bookings and strict guest lists helped with that.

What had started as just little meet-and-greets naturally evolved into a semi-regular thing. A group of like-minded and lonely young adults struggling to come to terms with the harsh new world they were suddenly in. On particularly bad days alcohol was involved.

On the worst days the sirens would sound and they’d have to leg it to the nearest shelter.

It was a worst day, and the nearest shelter – the basement of the café – was flooded.

Gun laws weren’t really a thing anymore. Despite the evidence that traditional guns did very little damage against Orks, pretty much everybody carried some sort of weapon in the hope that if it came to it, it would at least give them a fighting chance to escape. This meant that during any sort of attack there was the added risk of friendly fire from panicked citizens.

Shots were being fired in all directions. It really didn’t matter if they were plasma or good old fashioned human bullets, a stray one of either was bad news. There is an unusual convention in certain brands of disaster movie where groups of plucky young heroes manage to stick together in the face of a city falling to pieces around them. In reality as the small group tried to leave the café to make a break for the next nearest shelter (subway station, half a block away) they were immediately swept up in the midst of screaming panicking people and separated.

Evie was shoved violently along by the heavy press of stampeding humanity, feeling a friend’s hand on her sleeve being ripped away.

There was a crackle in her ear-piece, and she opened the call.

"Evie, where are you?"

"Dad! Somewhere - ow - somewhere along West Street. Everyone's - oof - pushing, I can't - Ow!"

A hard but accidental elbow to the ribs took her breath and it was only the crush of bodies in front of her that stopped a quick tumble to the ground.

"Someone will come and get you, hang tight kiddo!"

"I'll find shelter, you guys deal with the -damnit - attack." She knew someone would still turn up. There was a GPS in her comm anyway - not that it was usually on but Tony had set up a system so that the moment they were alerted to an attack all comms immediately pinged everybody's whereabouts. Protective father and friend, but it was reassuring to know if you were stranded that
help wasn't far away.

She was bumped hard again, wedged between a large man with a briefcase, a gangly teenager who was also struggling and a woman carrying three yapping chihuahuas. The general direction of the stampede seemed to be the entrance of a large office block, but she had no way of fighting out of the tightly packed flow of humanity. At one point there was something soft underfoot. She could only hope it was a lost bag because if anyone had fallen they certainly weren't ever getting up again under the press of bodies.

The surge pushed into the building, muffled screams as people who didn't manage to make the entrance were crushed against the walls on either side instead. The pressure tightened inside, as the flow was bottle-necked at a stairwell, everyone clamouring to get higher and away from the street level. The distinctive whine of a plasma gun was close-by but Evie couldn't see anything beyond the pinstriped business suit of the stranger she was jammed up against. The noise brought an added sense of urgency to the panic and the crush tightened as they swept up the tight stairwell. There were at least two people already hanging limply over the metal banisters in the centre of the concentric staircase, their bodies still being pulled along by the crowd.

There was a sudden ease of pressure as they reached the first floor and Evie tried to shove her way to the doorway. However, a second push from below tightened the mass again and she was crushed into the wall, the metal handrail digging in to her side until she felt a rib crack under the pressure. In desperation the girl caught hold of the t-shirt of a large man as he was pushed into her and held on for dear life as he was swept past and inadvertently took her with him.

Her side was burning where the bone had fractured, and combined with the tight press of humanity it was very hard to draw in a proper breath. The lady with the dogs, now only two of them and silent, was pushed into her again with such force that she had to let go of her unknowing saviour to save her wrists from being snapped. One of the Chihuahuas seemed to sense an opportunity and bit it's owner, forcing her to lose her grip. The small animal scrambled up and took a flying leap from her head back down into the seething mass of people at the base of the stairwell. The second followed a moment later and the woman just let them go; finally realising the desperation of the situation.

The dogs chances of survival had probably increased slightly.

Now back firmly in the centre of the heaving mass Evie had little to no chance of fighting her way out so instead tried to focus on staying upright and keeping breathing. Both were difficult and as they reached the second floor she only managed to keep on her feet by grabbing the shoulders of a woman in front. Chihuahua-lady went down and didn't resurface.

Things eased at the third floor as the stairwell opened up into a mezzanine area. The general flow was still heading upwards but it gave Evie a chance to fight her way over to a door and escape out of the mass. Others followed, desperation for a way out of the stampede overtaking the need to get higher.

No one spoke to each other. Evie staggered away from the door and into the wall, sliding down it to sit as she gulped in air. Her broken rib was shooting fire through her side and now she had a second to catch up she could feel pain beginning to radiate down her legs from various crush injuries. A near-black bruise was already blooming through a hole in her jeans, denoting a burst blood-vessel, and her left elbow must have been twisted at some point since now it didn't want to co-operate at all.

"Evie! Answer me damnit!"
Tony was yelling in her ear. In the panic and melee she hadn't even heard him, but he must have been able to hear everything that was going on. He sounded terrified.

"...Dad?" Her hand shook as she held it over her ear to listen properly.

"Evie! Thank God! What the hell happened, kiddo? We thought..." It was quite clear what they must have thought, given the desperation and absolute relief in his voice. "Where are you?"

"Don't...I don't..." She took another gulping breath. They had stumbled into a room of office cubicles, one wall of which was large windows and she stared at them trying to decipher anything useful. "I don't know. Some offices somewhere. I'm...I'm three floors up?" Her voice was shaking.

"Are you hurt?"

"Not badly."

"Okay." The relief in her father's voice was almost a physical presence. "Okay, if you're safe just stay put. No sense leaving a safe spot until this is over - we'll sweep you up as we come back."

"...Yeah. Sounds good." She tipped her head back against the wall with a groan. "Everything hurts..." The complaint had enough humour to it to let Tony know it wasn't serious.

"Sounded like quite a situation you got yourself into there."

"Could have been better. I'm taking the elevator next-" The sudden distinctive whoosh of plasma cutting through concrete was heralded by an increase in the screaming outside the room and cut Evie off.

“What was that?!"

“They’re here! Oh shit, they’re in the building!” A surge of adrenaline at the realisation allowed Evie to pull herself to her feet again. The few other people in the large room had come to the same conclusion and were beginning to stumble towards another exit at the far end.

“Can you get out?!”

“Yeah, yeah there’s a fire escape!”

“Right, get out and get safe; Thor’s coming to find you.”

Evie didn’t question it. Jarvis would be telling Thor her co-ordinates. She stumbled through the rows of empty office cubicles, past the mundane signs of normal life turned on its head.

A beam of plasma suddenly seared overhead, coming straight through the wall behind her. A second arc came in at an angle and cut through one of the other fleeing people, mowing them down on route to the window, which shattered.

Glancing between the fire exit on the far wall, and the hole in the window that was much closer, Evie made a split second decision. She carried her wing-pack – updated and far less faulty than that original test flight from so many years ago – at all times. It packed so slim that she could wear the cross-body bag it stored in almost unnoticed under a t-shirt, and it seemed to have survived the crush.

Choice made she stumbled towards the newly-smashed window. A loud explosion behind her was possibly the wall from the stairwell coming down but she didn’t look back to check.
Three stories was high, but she’d thrown herself off of higher buildings before and this was life or death. The window pane had collapsed in around the blast hole, leaving molten glass all over the floor, but a hole large enough for her to throw herself through.

The rings clipped neatly to her ankles and wrists and she pulled the head-piece on as she started falling. Even as the HUD was still initialising the material flaps snapped into place and the fall became a controlled glide.

The street below was carnage. Bodies strewn everywhere and vehicles burning. Partly due to the Orks, partly due to the sheer panic that overtook everyone during an attack. The trail of devastation was clear, as was the direction, and Evie made sure that she took off in the opposite direction.

The air was thick with smoke and screaming.

Her elbow was causing problems; Evie’s steering was off given that she couldn’t properly straighten her arm and she quickly tried to gain altitude to avoid crashing into a building.

There was a moment, a \textit{moment}, when she began to wonder if she’d done it and was out of the situation. If she’d escaped. And then with a shrill whistle a stray bullet, shot from who-knows-where went straight through her left wing.

Evie was going fast. The material around the bullet hole ripped back and then shredded entirely under the air pressure, leaving her wing suit with only the right hand side intact. She barely had time to process what had happened as any control was lost and she was sent tumbling down.

It was horribly reminiscent of that first disastrous test flight. However, whereas that had been a loose screw that was fixable, this time she had lost the entire integrity of the wing. She kept her shape in the air, trying to direct her fall as much as possible as her mind flashed through every possible answer to the problem at hand.

There was a flash of shimmering grey between two buildings and she shot towards it. Her trajectory was shallow – rather than a straight downwards-plummet she was uncontrollably gliding – and with the river suddenly appearing before her she had a target. With her current speed hitting water was still going to be like hitting tarmac, but there was something she could do about that at least.

The cross-body bag that the wing suit was usually stored in was strapped across her chest, and contained the arc reactor that she used as a power source. She didn’t generally use it directly, but had programmed the HUD to connect to it just in case. Now it was going to be a life-saver. On command the reactor let out a discharge of energy, burning through both the bag it was stored in and her t-shirt. The effect was a blast of propulsion in the opposite direction to her fall, effectively slowing her down. Not that it was enough to make the landing soft, but it made it non-fatal.

The young woman hit the water hard, and, winded and disorientated, quickly sank in a tangle of shredded material.

Sending Thor off after his daughter didn’t sit well with Tony, but he was rather too involved in the battle to go himself. Geographically Thor was closer.

\textit{“I need someone down here! We’re taking heavy fire!”} Loki sounded stressed over the comms. Shooting overhead Stark caught a glimpse of his husband down on the ground, leaning over a badly injured woman. Just because Loki’s healing skills were significantly improved over what
they had once been, didn’t mean that he didn’t have to devote all of his attention to it. They had all
seen (or at least heard about) how he caught Clint’s arrow whilst on the back of a Chitauri speeder
in the middle of a battle, but he had been undistracted at the time.

“Anyone able to help?” Tony took a shot at an Ork that was firing at a family inside a car. He took
it down but not before the vehicle exploded, taking its passengers with it.

“Any time soon!”

“Fuck! Yeah, on it!” With no other responses forthcoming he flipped over and headed down. Loki
was a couple of blocks back, but with the clouds of dust and building rubble it was near impossible
to find an easy way through to him. A piece of crumbling edifice narrowly missed him as he landed
roughly where he thought he had seen his husband.

“Capricorn, where the hell are you?!”

“How by the Norns do I know?! There’s – shit!” Loki’s voice was drowned out by crashing
masonry.

“Loki??”

“We’re good, just. There’s a skyscraper with curved walls? North side. We’re next to….there’s an
overturned red van, we’re next to that.”

That meant getting airborne again. From a higher vantage point it was easier for Jarvis to scan
through the dust for him and try to pick out the aforementioned building. It also meant fighting his
way up through the dust-fogged air again. He didn’t want to contemplate how bad it was for those
without the benefit of a helmet that filtered all of the crap out.

“I think I see it!”

He could see the building at any rate, and the heavy fire it and the surrounding area was taking as a
wave of Orks moved through. From a higher vantage point he could get directly over it and look
down to find the van his husband had mentioned.

From the height he couldn’t see Loki, but managed to spot the vehicle and started a fast descent
towards it. Jarvis zoomed in on three Orks stampeding down the street just in time to see one raise
its weapon and fire at something next to the van.

It ran on, leaving a billowing explosion behind.

Tony didn't even need the smoke to clear to know. This had been his nightmare from the
beginning, born of PTSD, loss, anxiety and the terrible gnawing fear that despite it all they were
never really going to be allowed to be happy.

There was a certain stillness ahead, despite the curling smoke and fumes. The woman Loki had
been trying to heal had been flung into the side of an overturned car by the blast. Her eyes were
closed but Jarvis silently displayed her lack of life signs.

Landing on the burnt tarmac, Stark stumbled towards where he had last seen his husband.

He knew. But hope is a terrible terrible thing.

With the smoke rolling away he could see Loki lying where he'd been thrown by the explosion.
The trickster still wore the relieved smile that had graced his face when he saw his husband
approach, but now it was unfocussed, trained up at the sky.

“Capricorn?” Tony would have been surprised at how steady his voice was if he'd been able to
give it a thought. His legs gave out under him and he crashed to his knees beside the trickster.
“Loki, please…”

All that denoted the entry wound was the small cauterised hole at his temple. It was nearly hidden
by Loki’s dark hair and the angle of his head. Stark gingerly reached out to cup his cheek and the
trickster’s head rolled with the weight of the contact, displaying the much larger and more
catastrophic exit left by the plasma beam.

With all of his attention given to healing Loki had been vulnerable to the single headshot and Tony
hadn't made it in time.

“No.” A demand, a plea, possibly a prayer. “No. Nonononono…Loki, no.”

Tony gently pulled his husband into his arms, oblivious to the ongoing storm around them.

“Come on, come on you stubborn bastard. Wake up. Come on Loki, wake up. Wake up! You can't
have...you aren’t...don't be...wake up! For god's sake wake up.”

“Sir…”

He grimaced at Jarvis's gentle interruption, shaking his head. “Nope. No. Nuh uh. Fuck right off
with that sympathetic voice Jarvis! No.”

“Sir.”

“No.” He jammed his fingers into the hinge of the helmet, releasing the faceplate so he could rip
the piece clean off. The damage silenced Jarvis.

“Come on Loki, get your ass in gear. Wake up and lets go.” He had his husbands head cradled
against his chest, whispering the words over and over. “Wake up. Come on, wake up, we need to
get out of here. Wake up.”

His voice was shaking. Words were becoming indistinguishable with tears.

“Please wake up. I can't do this without you. Please.”

The smoke rolled on around them, thick and dark from burning rubber and petrol. Occasional
beams arced overhead, but the Orks had moved on and they were left behind, of no consequence.

“Come on Loki, I need you to wake up. You can't leave me here. You can't do this to me again.”
The words were a jumbled mess. “Please…”

An alarm started beeping quietly on the suit, jarring against the reality of what was happening. A
temperature alarm, warning of an extreme drop.

Tony's eyes had been squeezed tightly shut against the horror unfolding but he opened them at the
sound. His suit was slowly frosting over, and Loki was a deep jötunn blue. “Oh god no…” his
breath hung in the frigid air, tears beginning to freeze to his cheeks.

There were becoming surrounded by freezing fog that chased away the smoke, ice running out
tendrils across the ground and rubble. It rolled like a sea mist, deep waves of white billowing back
then crashing down in noiseless, senseless clouds.
“You would do well to let go of him, Anthony Stark.”

It made him jump and cling tighter rather than obey. The voice wasn't familiar, sneering and arrogant as it echoed from every direction.

A dark shape materialised in the fog, consolidating into an upright figure walking towards them. The mist parted like a ghostly Red Sea.

“What…” Tony's voice was hoarse. He hadn't appreciated how long he had been sobbing and pleading for it to sound like that.

It was a woman. Very tall, walking barefoot across the battle-strewn tarmac. She wasn't wearing a dress so much as the dark rags of one, that billowed around her under the power of some otherwise unfelt hurricane.

She had Loki's green eyes. Or one of them, at least. The other was a pearlescent white, set amongst silvery scars that crowded out half of her face. Her hair had likewise been affected; long raven black giving way to a scarred scalp and the impression of an undercut. Loki’s strong chin and sharp cheekbones, that arrogant sneer. She was strikingly beautiful.

“Hel...you're Hel.”

“So he did mention me.” There was such anger there. Tony drew back, his arms right around his husbands body.

“You can't take him! I won't allow it.”

“Allow it? You are precious.” Hel's laughter was as cold as the fog around them. “I am death, you don't allow me anything.”

Stark had often used the phrase 'faced death' or something similar. He had come close to dying enough times to feel he could do so, but this was a level he had never expected to take it to.

Despair was giving way to desperation. If she was here, in person, then maybe there was a chance, a mere chance to stop this terrible future from becoming reality.

“No. Nonononono, look. Look, can we talk? We can talk right?” He knelt up, one hand outstretched to indicate for her to stay back. The repulsor didn't fire up; that would have been pointless. “I want to talk about this!”

Hel spread her hands magnanimously. “We are talking.” She took a step forward.

“No! Wait!” He scrambled. For every scrap of memory, every single thing Loki had ever told him about this estranged woman, every myth and legend he had ever read. “Wait.”

“Death waits for no man, Anthony Stark. He is mine.”

“No! You can...death can bargain, right?! If I make a deal you have to uphold it? Let me bargain for him! That's what all the stories say; you can make a deal with death!”

Hel stopped, and then laughed. Clear and cold. “Make a deal? What do you possibly think this planet could have that is worth the life of a God?” She raised her arms to indicate up at the ruined skyscrapers around them. “This realm is dying. There is nothing of value you could possibly trade and there is nothing I could ever want more than to finally have my father answer for his crimes. He is mine Anthony Stark.”
“No!” Tony surged to his feet, all repulsors activated and trained on her. Standing over his husband's prone body he powered up both hands. “You'll have to get through me first!”

The small head-tilt Hel made as she smirked was painfully reminiscent of Evie. “No, I don't think I will. That isn't how this works. He is dead, Anthony Stark, his soul is mine now.” She twisted her scarred hand and a creeping green tendril of light began to wrap around it, like reeling in a line.

“What…?” Tony stared at it for a moment, complete uncomprehending what he was seeing. “What are you doing?!” When her only response was to grin wider he looked down, then around.

The thin glowing thread was snaking out of Loki's outstretched hand, being physically torn away from his body.

“No!” Stark aimed a blast right at the woman and it sailed through like she were made of mist. “No!”

“I am death. His soul is mine and I have waited for, oh such a long time for this moment.” The last of the light wrapped around Hel's hand and with a wave it vanished.

“Please!” The ground came up to meet him as he crashed to his knees beside the body. “Please, I'm begging you! Anything! I'll do anything, give you anything! Please!”

Hel's fingers curled around his chin, forcing him to look up at her. “A bold claim Anthony Stark. But he is mine, and this is his end.”

“Please…” A sobbed, broken plea.

She smirked again, that self-same expression Loki had worn so many times.

“No.”

The seal the head-piece made over her face was beginning to fail and Evie could feel water seeping in. She was trying very hard not to panic, as that would use up the air quicker. Her comm was useless underwater, but the GPS tracker in it was hopefully still active. She didn’t want to think of the possibility that it was fried and they couldn’t find her.

It was freezing. The water was so cold she was amazed her latent alien genes hadn’t been triggered, but her goose pimpled arms remained frustratingly pale. Her careful attempts to untangle herself from the torn fabric of her wings weren’t getting anywhere, and she daren’t struggle too hard and use up more air. The ripped nylon was wrapping tighter with each slight movement.

And it was so dark.

It meant that when something suddenly tightened around her arm and she couldn’t see it she screamed. She had no idea what sort of marine life lived in the river and the imagination immediately went to shark. Or kraken.

But the although the grip was tight, it wasn’t painful, and then the darkness began to recede as she was hauled upwards towards the surface again. Her kraken materialised into her uncle, holding her tight as he pulled her up and out of the murky water.

Evie had splashed down far out in the water, so Thor had to fly the two of them to the nearest bank. She couldn’t say she really noticed the brief flight, too focussed on the fact that she hadn’t
“Are you okay?” Thor was a very comforting person to hug, so she ignored the question and did just that. “Evelyn, are you injured?”

“R-r-rib. And el-elbow.” It was so cold. Her uncle quickly wrapped his cloak around her shoulders – it was soaking wet and extremely heavy because of that, but was warmer than nothing. “Th-that was c-c-close.”

“You’ve had closer.” Thor’s ever cheerful demeanour was also always comforting. “And a bit of water never hurt anyone.”

Evie tried to laugh and then had to stop. The one fractured rib appeared to have acquired some friends, presumably on impact with the river surface. Thor wrapped an arm around her shoulders and touched the comm in his ear.

“I’ve got Evie. She’s a bit soggy and sore but a trooper as always.” He waited patiently for a response. “Hello? Stark? Rogers?”

“N-not answering?”

“No. Natasha? Loki?” He pulled the tiny piece of technology out of his ear and frowned at it. “It must not have survived the water.” He looked between his niece and then the distant battle. “I’ll take you back to the tower – if I can’t speak to anyone I’m not going to be very useful back out there and you need medical attention.”

Evie wasn’t going to argue. It had been a hell of a day and home sounded like the best idea.

The ground under him was gritty and coarse.

That didn’t sit quite well – the last thing Loki could remember was tarmac and concrete. Building dust fogging the air, people crying and screaming and the blood on his hands as he had desperately tried to heal the woman on the ground. There was nothing else.

Had he been hit? He didn’t recall any pain, and nothing was hurting now as far as he could tell. He seemed to be in one piece when he raised a hand up to his ear to search for his communicator.

It wasn’t there. Must have been knocked free.

Where was the lady?

Opening his eyes didn’t help the confusion. Instead of battle-streaked sky there was a dark vaulted ceiling high hanging over him, like the nave of a cathedral. Dark stone twisted up in elegant columns yet was so poorly lit he could barely see where they joined the intricate roof.

Where was this? As far as he was aware New York didn’t have any architecture that even remotely resembled this, and certainly none that he could have accidently ended up in.

Any further thoughts and confusion were cut off by a sudden growl, right by his ear. It was low, rumbling and the creature it was emanating had to be huge to produce that amount of reverberation. Loki tried to move, to get away, to visualise the threat, to work out what the hell was going on. It didn’t matter, he had hardly lifted his head from the floor when a paw larger than his torso landed on his chest.
Now things hurt! Ribs cracked under the suffocating weight, claws opening up deep wounds. This wasn’t an Ork. He pushed ineffectually at a leg that was as tall as he was, thick black fur obscuring everything.

And then over the pain, and the tectonic growl came a voice he hadn’t heard in very long time.

“Father. It has been a while.”
Tony didn’t recall how he got back to the tower.

He didn’t remember what happened with the suit, or how he ended up on the living room sofa. Tears had passed; he was completely numb to whatever was going on around him. Jarvis was quietly filling in the group as they arrived back one-by-one, making the choice to tell people in person. The last thing they needed was another injury or fatality because someone was too distracted by the news out in the field.

One of the tiles making up the patterned floor was slightly off. Tony stared at it, trying to mentally line up the edges of the ceramic, anything to occupy his mind rather than letting it dwell on what had just happened. Someone was talking. Some distant part of his brain acknowledged that his name was involved, but the overwhelming white noise filling the rest of his mind over-ruled it. The tiles didn’t line up, and that was annoying.

“Tony…”

There were hands on his knees, someone crouched in front of him. He blinked and of all people it was Merlin. It took a long moment for his brain to catch up on what the hell the warlock was doing there. But of course, Merlin and Loki had been keeping magical tabs on each other – the young man must have felt what had happened. Or a miracle.

The two could hardly say they knew each other well, or were that close, but in the moment they were unified. Merlin was over two thousand years old, but grief is universal across ages and species. Tony pulled the sorcerer into a tight hug and they clung to each other, Merlin sobbing hoarsely.

It was the scream that told Tony his eldest daughter had made it home. The horrified broken scream, echoed by a large peal of thunder directly over the Tower. Jarvis must have told Evie and Thor what had happened. Merlin seemed to take that as his cue to let Stark have some personal space back and the man was able to see his daughter over by the balcony doors.

Evie still had Thor’s cape draped around her shoulders, her wet hair plastered to her head. Given the circumstances it hardly mattered and Steve had pulled her into a tight hug. Any injuries were obscured, but couldn’t be immediately concerning if The Captain was prioritising mental-wellbeing. Thor had disappeared back outside and the sky had turned dark as night with storm clouds.
Tony felt the pieces of the Ironman suit around him suddenly loosen and begin to fall away from his body. It took a long moment to realise that Jarvis must have activated the release. Well-meaning hands silently removed the pieces from around him. A blanket replaced the metal, the silver material rustling as it was tucked around him.

“Where’s...?” His voice was a croak and he couldn’t finish the sentence regardless. The words the body just didn’t seem real enough to say yet, but Loki’s name was also far too painful. Thankfully Bruce seemed to understand what he was trying say, and crouched down as Merlin had, taking Tony’s cold hands.

“Jarvis brought him back. He’s downstairs at the moment.”

He didn’t want to ask where.

“Tony...the twins know you’re back. What do you want us to do?”

Gods he hadn’t even thought about that aspect yet! Trying to break the news to the two five year olds.

“I can speak with them.” Well meaning as ever, Jarvis turned to leave the room, only for Merlin to catch hold of his arm. “Yes?”

“It must be Stark.”

“But-”

The Warlock seemed to be succeeding in pulling himself together a little. “Take this as a human thing, it has to be Stark.” He didn’t know the droid well, but managed to correctly interpret Jarvis’ long pause as confusion. “Those kids are five years old. They don’t understand death yet, but they are going to remember this moment for the rest of their lives. When they are older they are going to want to be able to remember that their Father was the one who broke the news.”

“And that will make it easier?”

“No. Nothing makes this easier. But Tony will regret it, and they will always question it if he isn’t the one.”

Jarvis still didn’t understand, but took it at face value that Merlin would know more about the very fragile interactions of grief. He wondered if this meant he had made a mistake in telling Evie and Thor as well, or if age made a difference and it didn’t matter so much because Evie was so much older.

The one thing he could know for certain was that Merlin was right: nothing was going to make this easier.

MWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWM

Sleep didn’t come easily to anyone that night. Even though not everyone was as emotionally affected as the nuclear family the grief resounding through the tower was impacting everyone. In certain cases, it was also opening up the barely-healed wounds left by Clint and Pepper’s deaths.

Tony didn’t sleep at all, but rather sat on the sofa in Hope’s chilly room, both twins cuddled up against him. It was eerily reminiscent of Evie when Loki had been taken by the Chitauri all those years ago. Evie herself had requested to be left alone.
Although requested was the polite way of putting how the young woman had stated that she needed space. Jarvis was keeping an eye on her and in true Stark fashion she had holed up in Tony’s labs, painstakingly fixing the shredded wingsuit.

Anything but concentrating on what had happened.

The huge paw on Loki’s chest suddenly receded, allowing him to roll onto his side and cough in a few lungful’s of air.

He stared up at Fenrir - huge, easily larger than Sleipnir - who was now limping backward on three legs

“What the fuck?!” The voice was far deeper than he remembered, a definite snarl.

“Well that explains a lot.”

He twisted his head and stared at his own out-flung arm, deep blue skin throwing frost out across the ground. He tried to concentrate, to bring his more familiar skin back. However, the end of a staff – the aged wood as solid as iron – was slammed through his palm, the shocking pain overriding the necessary concentration.

“No, you can stay just like that, Jötunn.”

It was the tone of voice he had heard directed towards the species his whole life and it was all the more haunting to hear it from his estranged daughter. The staff had gone fully through his hand and into the sandy ground below, effectively pinning him there.

Hel…Fenrir… Their names stuck to his tongue as his brain frantically tried to catch up and make sense of the situation. He’d been on a street in New York, trying to save someone, what by the Norns had happened?!

He didn’t have the opportunity to make the logical connection when Fenrir swatted at him again with a huge paw. He was thrown over onto his back, his hand still pinned by the base of Hel’s staff. There was a flash of teeth and then –

There was a dark ceiling hanging over him.

Loki blinked up at it in muzzy confusion, trying to work out what the hell had just happened. Something at the back of his mind was desperately trying to get his attention; trying to alert to pain? Danger? Where was the New York street? Or rather; where was he?

The question went unanswered as claws slashed out of the darkness, there was a sudden bloom of pain and –

There was coarse grit under him as he lay face down. Not tarmac. Grit. That wasn’t…right. He was on the street, there were Orks, a woman, he had to save her –

On his back again, his brain trying to catch up. The sense of deja vous as confusion reigned supreme and he felt certain that this had just happened –

On his side –

Back –
Face down, trying to push himself up on his elbows –

Time didn’t exactly obey usual rules, wherever he was, but he suspected that a considerable amount of non-time had passed by the point that his brain caught up with current events and he realised both what had happened and what was happening.

Finally he opened his eyes and when there wasn’t another attack managed to sit up.

“Are you two quite done?!”

“For now. Fenrir needed to get that out of his system.” Hel said it as if repeated patricide was a healthy coping mechanism. She was sat a few feet away, cross-legged on the dark sand.

Loki looked around, now in a better position to take in his surroundings and put the pieces together to realise what had happened. “…I can only assume that things didn’t go so well for me in the last battle.”

“Even you could not withstand a direct headshot.” Hel smirked at him, and not in a particularly nice way. “Your husband wasn’t very happy about the situation, I must say. Quite put out about it really.”

“Tony was there...?” The thought that Stark had seen him die made his blood freeze.

“He tried to shoot me.” Hel’s flippant response went straight over his head.

He was dead. It wasn’t like he hadn’t faced the thought of this before, even hoped for it once or twice, but now that it had happened it didn’t seem real. Despite everything going wrong with the universe he had finally managed to find peace within himself and now it was gone.

“Did you know?!”

The question was snapped at him, coiling like a whip in the air.

“Know? Know what?” He could hardly process the question, far too many other thoughts of his children and husband crowding out his head.

Hel gestured at him, drawing his attention back down to his hands. They were a deep navy in the dark hall. He was sat in the centre of a ring of ice.

“You never said a word of this to us!”

“Oh that….No. No I didn’t know. Odin told me of it only in recent years.” Getting on for three decades, but near enough. “It was quite a shock.”

“Finding out you were a monster? I cannot imagine it was that surprising.”

“The Jötnar are not monsters.”

“Not what you told us as children. Not what you have demonstrated over the years.”

And there it was; the not so subtle nod towards the real anger his older children held towards him. It was too much for Loki to try to process given the context of the situation.

“Take a moment, you look like you need it.” It was a disdainful sneer and Hel rose fluidly to her feet.
The Trickster didn’t watch her go, too focussed on his new circumstances. There was just too much to process. Death was such an immense concept, especially when it is one’s own. Whilst he had always had a vague belief in something else after life, he had never given it much thought beyond existing. The grief of the living was well known but the grief of the newly dead was an unexplored well of emotion.

The twins were so young. And Evie, just coming into her own and flourishing as a young adult. Merlin and all of the missed chances that the two of them had squandered.

Tony.

The stupid, arrogant, fragile little mortal who had found a way to cross the universe for him. Who had stood by him despite everything he was and everything he had done.

Ice slid down his cheeks in place of tears and with a brusque gesture he brought up the glamour that had been destroyed with his death. No longer Odin’s magic but his own. At least magic still worked in the strange and terrible world.

“I expected you to be more angry.” Hel obviously couldn’t leave well enough alone for very long.

“Why would I be angry?” He couldn’t muster up any more emotion than grief. It was far too early to be worrying about any other feeling.

“Your human begged, you know. He thought that he could persuade me to spare you, and when that didn’t work he tried to threaten, and then he pleaded.” If she was trying to get a rise out of him it wasn’t working. “He didn’t take my refusal too kindly.”

“Tony Stark doesn’t like being told no.” Loki had to do his very best not to flinch when a sudden huff of breath messed his hair and Fenrir was suddenly right there behind him, huge muzzle just coming into his peripheral vision. For such a huge beast the wolf moved like a shadow.

“Is this what it looks like when you care, then?” The words were bitter, the hot breath across his ear a quiet threat of what the oh-so-close teeth could do. Each fang was easily as long as his forearm. “Because we wouldn’t know.”

Back to that again. Whilst Loki’s world had been turned inside out, his children had been waiting for this confrontation for millennia. They obviously weren’t intending to really let him take the time to sort his own mind out before they went in for the kill.

“Say what you want to say and lets be done with this.” He said quietly.

“Do you think it is that easy?”

“I don’t know. I’m dealing with quite a lot right now.” This was hardly the right time for such a contentious issue to be raised, and he only had so much brain-space to spare with the enormity of his current circumstances still sinking in.

“We do not care. You owe us answers, Father!” Hel snapped.

Did he? Frankly he was pretty certain he didn’t owe them a damn thing given how things had turned out. And even now did he actually know himself what had happened? It was so long ago now, and the whole event was so mired in emotion that it was hard to pull the facts out.

He had been on Earth. That was a known fact. Hadn’t spoken with his family for near twenty years and hadn’t assumed he would do so any time soon. Receiving a cry for help from Angrboda
was the last thing he had expected – a plea of desperation sent across the realms to find him. She was the last person he had thought to hear from given they had parted with a fight, and her pride – as great as his own – made it a very unlikely thing for her to do.

So he had answered. Arrived at her home to find the mother of his children already dead and the fire raging. Fenrir slumped unconscious in the doorway, his fur alight. Hel further inside, bleeding, burned and broken. Jormungandr pinned under fallen timber, skewered through. And then two of those three had chosen to blame him for it.

Not just not arriving in time – he could have understood those emotions – but rather actually initiating the attack itself. In those moments of waking, safe in the sanctuary he had brought them to, they had lashed out at him and run.

“What do you think happened?” It seemed the safest way to broach the whole mess. He knew the past, he had no idea of their present. Well, evidently they were still angry, but wanting to talk was an improvement.

As it was, his question caused Hel to shoot her brother a sharp look. The wolf shrugged his immense shoulders.

“You and our mother fought. Badly. We did not see you for nearly twenty years. When you next turned up mother was killed and all three of us nearly died. We haven’t seen our brother since.”

“And you still think I did that?”

The pause before the response was telling

“We do not know, anymore.” Hel said finally. “We...we went back there. As soon as we were able to. There had been a war going on between two neighbouring tribes of Fire Giants. Our home had happened to be in the middle of it.”

“Your mother would have played both sides.”

“You cannot know that!”

Loki smiled wryly. “She and I were so similar in many ways. She would have aligned to both sides to hedge her bets.” He watched his daughter frown thoughtfully

“So if there had been a call to arms from both sides...”

“They’d have assumed she betrayed them.”

“That is too simplistic. Too obvious! Where were you?!” The unspoken assumption that Loki must have been with the fire giants from the start was loud in the air.

“I was on Earth, your mother called to me for help”

Fenrir snorted, and a wolf his size can really snort. “She would never request help from anyone! You least of all.”

“Not unless she knew she was dying.” Loki gestured out at the expanse of the hall. “But can you not ask her yourself?”

A look was exchanged between the siblings. “Not all who have passed are here. Mother included.” Hel's cold answer made it clear that the reasons for that weren’t up for discussion.
“Then you are going to have to take my word for it.”

“The word of a trickster.”

“Am I able to lie to you? Here? In this place?”

“You can always lie, it is what you do!”

Loki didn’t have a retort to that accurate statement. However, actions speak louder than words and what he couldn’t explain might be easier to show. He performed a fluid little gesture and the air in front of him shimmered to form a small floating image of a new-born baby.

“A child. And?”

His children had apparently also inherited his impatience. He let the picture change, the baby becoming a toddler then growing through the years to teenage-hood and finally young adult.

“What by the Norns is this meant to be?” Fenrir snapped his question, but Hel shushed him with a raised hand. Her eyes were narrowed as she scrutinised the image of Merlin.

“He is your son. Our half-brother?”

“Your full brother. When your mother and I last fought she was arguing for me to stay. When I refused she threw one last spell. It took me a while to realise what she had done, but the result was your brother.”

Fenrir prowled around the image; teeth bared as he inspected it. “That would count as assault these days, I am certain.”

“I wasn’t very happy then either, but whatever you think of me I do try to do right by my children. I went to Earth where I wouldn’t be disturbed to raise him.” He left it there.

“So that is where you were? Raising this...”

“Merlin.”

“Raising this Merlin?”

There was jealousy there – that this random little brother had had their father’s undivided attention which they had always craved and never achieved. Fenrir was looking between the image and his sister, evidently seeing the family resemblance. Hel glared at him and he shrugged his immense shoulders.

“Why by the Norns did you come back for us?” The wolf rumbled, his dark gaze turning to Loki again. “Say we believe that you were not involved in the attack, why would you come back for us? You had everything right there on Earth, you had your child. Why come back if you needn’t?”

It was a question that shouldn’t have needed an answer

“Because you’re my children and I love you. Because your mother would rather die than ask me for help, but she would never rather you die. I knew if she asked for aid then you were the ones she wanted to save.”

Fenrir grunted and turned his back on the Trickster, staring at the image of Merlin again. “You did not save her, though.”
“She was dead when I arrived.” For the briefest moment Loki could smell the smoke, see the blood across the snow. “I tried to save her...it was too late.” He looked up, shaken from the memory as Hel rose to her feet and stalked a few paces away, agitated.

“These are all just words.” Her dress swirled around her in an unfelt storm. “You just spin these words, all the time, there is no substance to anything you say!”

There wasn’t much Loki could really say to that. She wasn’t wrong; he was known for turning bullshit into an art-form, it was hardly surprising it was difficult to believe him at times. All things considered, that they had managed to advance from believing he had actively tried to kill them to grudgingly accepting that his timing had let them down was more than could have been expected really.

“Why did you not just stay?! You could have stayed, and none of this would have happened!”

“I...” She had a point. “I should have stayed. And I intended to go back. Once Merlin was an adult and didn’t need me, I was going to return.” It needed more than that and he knew it. “I am sorry. Truly. For not being there enough, and for not being there when you needed me. I let you down as a parent, and it has had lasting consequences for you.”

Hel opened her mouth, then closed it again with a grim expression.

“That was...appreciated.” The snarl had left Fenrir’s voice. “An apology was the last thing we ever expected to get from you.

“An apology does not solve a thing.” His sister hissed.

“It can be the start.” The huge wolf padded back over to where Loki was still sat and flopped down onto the ground beside him, raising a monumental cloud of sand. “Apologising, talking. It can be a start.”

Hel looked at the two of them. “We are a broken excuse for a family. Talking will not sort that.”

“It is a start.” Her brother repeated. “You and I have discussed this long enough. We never saw reconciliation being possible and now it is. It is worth trying.”

The woman didn’t look convinced.

Tony couldn’t remember the funeral.

In an abstract way he knew it had happened but could not have given any details. Thor and Evie had put the funeral together after it was clear Stark wasn’t able to contribute.

He’d spent most of his time with the twins; doing his damnedest to hold together whilst the two small children tried to work their way through the emotional confusion of what their world had become. Five year olds struggle with the concept of death, and they still weren’t really getting it.

They had sent a message back to Asgard through the Bifrost, but no one had been able to come through. Any movement between realms was likely to arouse suspicion from Thanos and set his sights back on the home of the Gods so the funeral had only been attended by those already on Earth. It was an added emotional hit that Sleipnir wasn’t able to attend his mother’s funeral.

Tony didn’t think he was doing the whole parenting thing very well at the moment either. With all
his time spent on trying to support the twins Evie was distancing herself from everyone. She would get up, go to the gym, then lock herself and Arthur in the labs all day. According to Jarvis she wasn’t actually doing much work. More, she was using the familiar space as somewhere to mourn in private.

The attacks were still ongoing, but had lost their fear for the immediate family members. When ‘what’s the worst that could happen?’ had been answered you realise you stop worrying about it. The worst had happened, and soon enough it would happen again. It had happened with Pepper, it had happened with Clint, and now it had happened to Loki. It was only a matter of time before it happened again.

The roulette wheel of fate spinning red hot on its axel.

MWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWM

“This realm is...quite different from what I imagined.” It wasn’t a word of a lie either. Outside of Hel’s hall it was a bright summer’s day and they stood knee deep in vibrant grass and wild flowers. Loki was absently pulling the seed heads from the stalks as he stared out at the fields.

There were residences dotted as far as the eye could see, and from nearly every culture and era that humanity could boast. There was a lack of British 1960’s concrete jungle, but that was likely down to taste; there was only so much Hel was prepared to tolerate and bad council housing didn’t make the cut.

“How did you accomplish this?”

“It required a little effort in the beginning, but once the souls were here it has very much run itself.” Flowers were winding their way through Hel’s dark hair out in the sunshine. Her pride in the realm was evident. “I greet those new here, judgement is proclaimed and life goes on. Metaphorically speaking.”

Loki had to smile at his daughter’s accomplishment. “I don’t believe I have ever told you that I am proud of you, have I?”

Finally, finally, he managed to say something which shook her carefully crafted mask and there was a fleeting look of shock across her face. “No. No you have not.”

“Well, I am. I always knew you were powerful, but this is something more. This is wisdom, and kindness, and those are far more important for a ruler than power alone. And I’m proud of you; for what you’ve done here, but also what you’ve done for yourself.”

Had he said something like that to Evie there would have been tears and most likely a hug but he and his eldest daughter had never had that sort of relationship, especially after so many years of animosity. Instead Hel nodded, ever so slightly, then inclined her head back towards the hall they had just left.

“Come, I need to show you something.” She sounded like she had come to a decision about something.

Loki didn’t question the need to be back inside away from prying eyes; all of his offspring had inherited his flair for the over-dramatic and theatrical, it was apparently a very dominant trait. Fenrir slunk out of the darkness to greet them, and seemed to know what was on his sister’s mind. Slunk, lurked, crept, he had yet to display a movement that Loki didn’t automatically attach a spooky verb to.
“It would be disingenuous for me to say that I built this realm entirely without help.” Hel said. “And I believe this may also answer a question that has been plaguing you for some time.” She twisted her hand and a bright green glow began to seep out from her closed fist. Loki recognised the gesture as the same that he used to pull an object out of space. However, he was more concerned with the object that had appeared.

Hel opened her hand to reveal a walnut-sized stone that glowed like the Northern Lights. She was able to hold it just long enough for Loki to get a good look before the power forced her to banish the thing away.

It could have been a moment for awe and surprise, but with the trickster flippancy would always come first.

“Well. I wondered where that one was. I was beginning to think Earth had it after all!”

“No. It has been here.” Hel’s scarred palm was reddened from the simple act of holding it more than a second or so.

“And you...what? Found it? Went looking for it?”

“Hardly. When Fenrir and I ran, we ran blindly for as far and for as long as we could. We did not want to be found by anyone. We found the spaces between the voids and disappeared through them.”

Having chosen the void once himself, letting go of Gungnir and simply allowing himself to fall, Loki understood that sentiment all too well. Something must have shown on his face since Hel recognised the solidarity there and continued with a little more certainty.

“We ran and we found here. It was an empty realm of nothingness. No life, no features, completely empty – it was a blank canvas. Somewhere that could be ours and we could hide from the universe.” Hel cast a fond look around them. “Of course we had no idea there was an Infinity Stone here at the time.”

“What happened?”

“There was a spot here where everything seemed...concentrated? We knew there was something unusual there and that was likely the reason for this realm being so different.” Hel shrugged. “We probably should have left it alone, but there is too much of you in us for that. It was only after we uncovered the Stone that souls started arriving here. It seems to attract them and hold them. Fenrir and I can leave – because we are alive and not souls I assume – but the dead cannot leave.”

“Just Midgard?”

“My realm is a realm of fractals. There is a Helheim for Earth, for Asgard, for Jötunheim, all of them. You died on Midgard, so you are here.”

Loki could see the holes in that, but didn’t think that line of enquiry would help.

“And you are saying I can’t leave. You can, I cant.”

“You are dead, Father. You cannot leave the realm of the dead.” Hel saw his thoughtful frown and sighed. “You are not the first to ask, or try. And it is not through my keeping you here. I cannot control the Soul Stone; I rather think it has a mind in it’s own right. I cannot use it to free anyone.”
That would rather put a dent in his grand plans to bust out then, but he’d think about it. There was always a way.

“Those with magic have the ability to move freely through this realm.” Hel made it sound conciliatory, as if it were some great favour. “But not out of it.”

“And your mother? You said she isn’t here?”

“No, I found the stone after she died. I do not know where souls went before the stone started drawing them here.”

He couldn’t say he particularly wanted to see his ex again after all these years, but there was a pang of sadness for his children’s sakes.

“Why are you so intent on leaving? Your family will be here soon enough.”

That was quite true. Normally the thought of his family dying was too painful to contemplate. However, from this side of the equation it could be seen as a blessing; all together again...

Loki shook his head wearily. “No. It won’t work. Thanos is never going to stop until he has the Stones.”

“Thanos will not find us-”

“You have no idea of what he is and is not capable of!” He gestured out at the halls. “You’ve seen for yourself; he’s destroyed whole realms, killed billions. Others have found this realm before, and that was without the Infinity Stones that Thanos has at his disposal.”

Hel’s brow furrowed and Loki suspected that she hadn’t taken those powers into account.

“He is coming. You can tell me the rest of my family is going to be here soon. You can tell me we will all be together again, but that is a fairytale. As soon as Thanos is done with Earth he’ll be looking for this place.”

“He cannot destroy death.”

“You hold an Infinity Stone; he will destroy you.” The trickster watched the emotions play over his daughter’s face. “Bravado doesn’t work against him. Strength, bravery, fortitude, they don’t matter.”

“You say that as if-”

“As if he tortured information out of me in the past. Yes.”

It was good that he wasn’t expecting a reaction to that since Hel didn’t grace him with one.

“Well, I do not know what you hope to do about it. You cannot leave. And they cannot defeat Thanos. We will just have to come up with a plan after Earth falls.” She said it so casually, waving her scarred hand in the air. “We have time.”

“No we don’t. My family is on Earth-”

“Part of it is. For now.”

“You have two brothers on Earth! One half brother and two half-sisters, don't you care?”
“Caring will not help them.” And then her expression softened. “Father, I know you do not want to hear this but there is nothing we can do. We do not have the means to help anyone.”

“But—”

“There is nothing we can do.”

Youtube video 569: ….Hell I don’t even know what to call this, guys.

So. Oh fuck I don’t even know what I’m saying here.

So it’s been a few…it’s been a few days. I’m sorry about that. We…uh…we’ve lost some friends since my last video. I’ve had confirmation that Ben and Atefeh didn’t make it out of the New York attack a few days again. I still can’t get news about Amina, so I don’t know if…if they’re okay or not.

Uh…there’s…yeah. So.

I also lost my mum.

I know there was a lot of speculation that Pepper Potts was my bio-mum and no-ones ever really believed me when I’ve said that she wasn’t. But she wasn’t. I…I loved Pepper so much, but-but she wasn’t my mum. And now I-I’ve lost her and my mum.

It looks like-like things are coming close to-to the end. I…I don’t know what’s going to happen. We can’t stop this now. The Avengers can’t st-stop this. Fighting to the death sounds re-really good in theory, but when y-you’re facing it….shit doesn’t seem so noble. Just messy.

I don’t know what to tell you guys. I…I’m probably not gonna make any more of these blogs. I don’t think there’s…there’s going to be time frankly. I want to-to say thankyou to everyone who’s watched and co-commented. It’s been a-amazing getting to know you all.

The best advice I can… I can give is to get low. Hide if you can. If you want. I can’t-can’t promise it will help for long. But staying away from pop…populated areas and staying low. It will help for a while.

I love you guys. Good luck, and see you on the other side.

"Father...?" The voice was quiet, a tremor of fear underlying it. The shock of it pulled Loki out of his gloomy contemplation, turning to face the speaker before his brain could actually catch up and process what he was hearing.

The young man that stood before him looked terrified. Long dark hair hung heavy across his face, so that he viewed the world from behind a protective curtain. A pair of brown eyes were just about visible. There was an air of coiled energy about him, like a hare about to spring away at any moment. That was new: Loki had always seen him more as a raptor prepared to strike. Stalking, predator-like energy had become nervous.

"Vali..." The name was a whisper.

"Father, I'm so sorry..." The young man was tightly hugging his arms around his waist, hands
twisting into the fabric of his shirt. The words trembled, just on the edge of tears, but trying to hold it together enough to speak. "I...I never meant to..."

Loki wouldn’t have said he was naturally a good parent, but in that moment he could suddenly so clearly see himself and Odin, and knew exactly what sort of response he would have so desperately needed and never ever got.

“I didn’t…didn’t mean to...”

“Vali.” He turned so that they were facing each other, causing the young man to take half a step back, then held out a hand. Vali looked at it like it was venomous.

“I’m sorry...” The youngster stumbled back a further few steps as his father stood up. He didn’t seem able to run, as much as he evidently wanted to.

“I know. So am I. It wasn’t your fault and I understand why it happened.”

How to explain the absolute mess Odin’s secret had caused them. How Jötunn genetics had struggled against Aesir genetics. Jötunn magic unable to work alongside the Aesir magic also flowing through Vali’s veins. The way two worlds had collided within one young body and torn him apart, sanity first.

With the words for the story failing him Loki chose actions instead and his out-stretched hand ran with blue. He saw his son’s eyes widen, a myriad of emotions chasing across Vali’s face as his true Jötunn skin settled into place.

“...you didn’t know.” The young man whispered.

“No. I only found out in the last few decades.”

Vali was smart. All of Loki’s brains with a helping handful of Sygun’s too. Loki could physically see the thought processes of what this meant, what the implications where, and then pieces of the puzzle slamming into place as the original tragedy was seen in a whole new light.

The broken shards of Jötunn and Aesir magic had shredded his mind from the inside out. Reality had been stolen away, leaving him unable to tell friend from foe, seeing monsters and threats surrounding him at all times. Endlessly paranoid, on high alert, scared.

And finally, trapped in a reality only available to himself he had defended himself against a perceived attack, unable to recognise his brother and father when they tried to stop him. Both twins had died.

“I...”

“You were never at fault. It was a terrible accident, but there was no fault.”

And then he had his son in his arms.

Loki had never truly believed that he would have this moment. The chance to try to reconcile and recover from the cruel hand fate had dealt them. Vali was just that little bit shorter than him, and still as slender as a willow wand, Loki could feel every rib under his hands.

Even in life Vali had been very withdrawn and undemonstrative, any sort of physical contact had been rare. The willingness to embrace his father said more than actual words between them ever could. As if actual words could ever truly encompass everything that had happened and required
“Hel taught me to use my magic.” Vali mumbled into Loki’s shoulder. “So that I won’t hurt anyone else.”

“You never meant to hurt anyone to begin with.”

“But I still did.”

And Loki knew that emotion alright. Accidentally hurting every single person he ever got close to. Who knew that was an inherited trait too? It made sense that Hel had found it easier to teach Vali than he had – she had been brought up on Muspelheim, able to evolve her powers naturally without the constraints of Aesir lessons pinning her down like Loki had been subjected to. Her magic was much closer to the original ancient Jötunn craft and probably more suited as the outlet Vali had needed.

“I’m sorry.” Loki had never said those words enough in life, maybe in death he needed to start using them more. Vali obviously thought so since he snorted quietly with laughter.

“A rare thing to hear from you.” The words were caustic, but the tone cheerful. Loki turned in surprise at the new voice, so caught up in the moment with his son. Vali seemed completely unsurprised though, which was obvious given where you found him you usually also found –

“Narfi!”

“Hey Dad, it’s been a while!” As bright and cheerful as ever – and the Norns knew where he got that from since neither the Trickster nor Sigun were predisposed to jollity – Narfi was jogging across the dark sand of the hall towards them. Vali moved aside just in time for his twin to grab the both of them up in a tight hug.

“You haven’t changed a bit!” Especially the lad’s propensity for hugging like Thor did – if ribs weren’t cracking it wasn’t a good hug.

“Just a bit more dead than when you last saw me! But looks like that caught up with you too.” Narfi finally released his father, but kept an arm around Vali’s shoulders.

“It was always going to one of these days.” Loki took a step back so that he could take a look at both of his twin sons. Whilst he had already noted that Vali’s nervous energy had become flight instead of fight, Narfi really hadn’t changed one little bit. Even with the circumstances he was beaming. It was hard to keep in mind that he wasn’t actually blood-related to Thor.

The darkness of Thanos was still looming, Earth was still in the firing line, and he was still dead. But for just a precious moment it didn’t matter. For just a moment

It didn’t stop raining for a solid week.

They had seen Thor grieve before: his home, his mother, his friends, Pepper, Clint, but this was something new. There was such a deep anger buried in the grief this time that no one quite knew how to approach him about it. Whilst Tony and his children had been open with their sorrow the God of Thunder had closed up and removed himself from company.

“I thought you might appreciate some food. Scavenging leftovers at two in the morning isn’t sustainable.”
Thor had ensconced himself in one of the labs lower down the Tower. It would have been considered strange normally to find him there, but this particular lab had been used to grow various flora from Vanaheim during the creation of the seed bank, and to the alien God it felt a little more like home. He was slumped in one of the office chairs, staring at a small yellow sapling that had sprouted thin tendril-like flowers, but looked up at Bruce’s soft comment.

“I don’t need mothering.”

“Just take this as a friend wanting to help.”

Thor’s gaze moved to the two bowls said friend was holding. He had been keeping his kitchen-forays to the early hours of the morning to avoid having to talk to anyone, but Bruce was right that it usually meant slim pickings. He hadn’t really noticed if he was hungry or not, but wouldn’t turn food down if it was offered. He shrugged and kicked one of the other chairs out from under the desk so Bruce could sit down too.

“Here, home-made ramen. It was Sam’s turn to cook and he was feeling inventive.”

Bruce made very light conversation regarding the plants surrounding them as they ate. He noted that whilst Thor was at least eating, he was hardly hoovering up the food like he had been known to do. As they finished the meal he stopped talking and let the silence begin to stretch out. Not uncomfortable or insistent, just waiting and inviting.

Finally the thunderer sighed heavily and pushed the bowl away so forcefully it nearly went flying off the edge of the desk.

“I have thought him dead so many times now you would assume I am used to this feeling.”

“I can’t imagine anyone could get used to it.” Bruce said quietly.

“Do you have siblings, Banner? I don’t think I’ve ever asked that before.”

The scientist smiled slightly. “No. Only child I’m afraid.”

“I miss him.” The tone said more than the three simple words could ever manage. Thor seemed to have run out of tears over the past few days. “I never envisioned a confrontation with Thanos without Loki by my side.”

Bruce didn’t have a response for that, and it didn’t really require one. Whilst they all missed Loki in their own ways – just as they still missed Pepper and Clint – Thor had lost a sibling. Tony’s explanation about Hel taking Loki’s soul had raised a lot of questions in the human Avenger’s about life after death, but Thor was already comfortable with the concept. However, it would never take away the pain in the moment.

“What will you do?” Thor saw that he had confused his friend by jumping on a tangent, and clarified. “When Thanos comes. Assuming the rest of us don’t survive, what will you do?”

“You’re the only person who’s asked me that.” Banner said quietly. It was true – whilst there had been a lot of conversation around death recently everyone seemed to have forgotten that the Hulk really was invincible. “I don’t know. I suppose I’m sort of hoping that Thanos will be able to kill me too with the Stones. They seem to be able to do everything else; maybe they can kill the Hulk too.”

“You’d want that?” Thor seemed shocked.
“Well…I won’t be running into battle waving him down, if that’s what you mean, but I don’t fancy the idea of being the only living being left alive on a wrecked planet either.”

The unspoken assumption that they would be losing this fight seemed to be a given.

“At least he won’t have all of the stones. Loki gave us that at least.” Tony had shared with them that the trickster had been holding onto one of the two missing stones. It wouldn’t make a difference for Earth – Thanos had already proven he didn’t need them all to destroy a world – but it might be enough to protect civilisations beyond the Nine Realms. Thor scrubbed his hand over his eyes. “Sorry.”

“Never apologise for mourning.”

The Thunder God smiled tremulously. “Part of me wants the final fight to just start now. This waiting…we know the fight is coming, and we know we can’t win it, but…I just want it to start. And be over.”

“I used to feel the same before a show, back when I was in the drama club at school.” Bruce grinned at his friend’s incredulous expression. “I know, slightly different situation, but same feeling. You just want to get it over and done with.”

“I suppose the analogy works.” Thor glanced out of the large window. “This needs to end.”

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“I suppose we should be grateful that at least our family has been able to reconcile.” Narfi said cheerfully.

“That’s not much of a silver lining in the grand scheme of things.” Fenrir rumbled.

“Thanos might be ripping the universe to pieces but at least we have time before he comes for us.”

“It’s something. Time is…” Loki trailed off, staring intently into the distance as the words he’d heard finally caught up in his brain and caught his attention. Something that had been niggling at the back of his brain since speaking with Hel about how her realm worked. “Wait. What did you say?”

Narfi raised an eyebrow. “Wow, way to make a kid feel listened to, Dad. I said at least we’ve been able to reconcile-”

“No, no, after that.”

“Uh…Thanos ripping the universe up? Coming for us?”

He was coming for them. A rather worrying set of circumstances, particularly when one is already dead. But it was ringing a lot of very loud, very attention-grabbing bells in Loki’s head. Why was Thanos coming for them….

“You’re staring at me like I’ve grown another head.” Narfi said.

The trickster ignored the words, slowly moving his gaze from his twin sons to his older children, who likewise were looking confused.

“I have just had…the most ridiculous idea.” And it was. It was crazy to even entertain it, but with every passing second the thought was growing into a bigger and more comprehensive plan.
Thanos needed to be stopped; preferably in time to save Earth. That had been impossible so far because he had never entered the field of battle until his opponents had already been defeated – they needed to pull him out into the fray. None of the other realms had had the firepower to prove a threat to the titan, and Earth didn’t have the military capability either. But if they had help there might just be an opportunity to draw Thanos out early and take him down on the battle field.

It was a discussion the Avengers had had before with no answer but Loki was suddenly faced with the crazy thought that just maybe he had a solution.

“We need to get back to Earth.”

Hel exchanged a glance with Vali. “Father, you can’t, you are dead. That is the whole point of death; it tends to be permanent.”

“. . . But not for me.” The certainty was settling across him, and he would have said it was like following a pre-written path if it weren’t for the fact that he knew was the last person to do what destiny wanted. “This is exactly where I am meant to be, but not where I’m meant to stay.”

“You want to break out of death?” Hel’s derision was clear.

“Yes. Because I can.” Loki looked around at his four children. “Have you ever known me not to have an Ace up my sleeve?”

Hel opened her mouth to retort, frowned and closed it again. Narfi and Fenrir also appeared to be confused but Vali – always the bookish one, always the smartest in the room – was beginning to grin.

“What did you do?”

“Hel; you said we are all held here by the power of the Soul Stone, yes?”

“Yes. And you are not powerful enough to fight against it.”

Loki grinned and with a flourish materialised his small box in the palm of his hand. Whilst Stark hadn’t been able to tell what was under the raised lid, his four children were all beings of magic and could sense the raw power radiating out from the container. As the holder of an Infinity Stone herself, Hel was the first to draw the correct conclusion.

“Father! How by the Norns do you have that?!”

He quickly explained the story, but already his mind was jumping ahead, always planning, always finding the stepping stones five steps ahead. One Stone was holding them in Helhiem, and he had the one that was able to bend reality and get them out.

“So it is possible you could leave here. So what?” Fenrir’s coat was glowing in the yellow light of the gem, causing strange highlights. “If you were able to bring Thanos out yourself you would have done it already.”

“I won’t be going alone.”

“All five of us would not be powerful enough.” Hel knew what she was talking about; she had seen for herself the armies that had already fallen across the realms before Thanos’ army. “You would need an army to draw him out. Thousands.”

“Millions more likely. And we don’t need power, we need the numbers. We’re going back to
Earth and we are going to take an army with us.”

There had been a full day and absolutely no where on Earth had seen a single attack. The few remaining news outlets had first been confused, then hopeful as they started to wonder if this meant an end to it all. After years of attacks this was unprecedented.

However, the Avengers were pretty certain they knew what it meant, and other less optimistic media sources were coming to the same conclusion: this was the calm before the storm. Thanos was regrouping before the big push.

“What’s the plan then?” Evie had Brandir on her lap as the three of them sat with their father down in the lab. “Because this is about to get intense.”

Tony didn’t really have an answer. How do you talk to your children about their certain impending deaths? It wasn’t something he’d ever considered having to do.

“There’s nothing we can do to stop this.” He said quietly. “And, frankly, we won’t be coming out of it. Decisions have to be made.”

“Decisions.” Evie was experienced enough by now to know what he meant by that. She hugged her little brother tighter and the five year old squirmed irritably. “I’m staying with the twins.”

“I want to send you guys to Asgard.”

“Dad-”

“You’ll have a chance there, Birdy. It’s not likely Thanos will go back – he already cleared the place out once. And if he does come back you’ll be with people who can get you out of there.”

The young woman scowled. “But you’re going to stay here. Aren’t you?”

“I’ll get to the Bifrost site in time for Heimdall to pull me through, but I’ve got to do what I can here first.”

“Oh yeah?” Evie raised an eyebrow that for a moment made her look painfully like her mother. “And when you don’t make it? Because we both know you won’t.”

“Evie-!”

“No, you know it’s true. You’ll do your best, but you won’t make it.”

“Evie-!”

“Dad. You don’t want to. It’s as simple as that. You’ll try, you’ll actively try, but subconsciously you don’t want to.”

Ironman looked from his eldest child to the twins, then back again. “You honestly think I would do that to you? To all three of you?”

“Not intentionally.” She sounded so tired of it all. “But all of the spark in your eyes has gone out, and that doesn’t fill me with confidence.” Brandir was squeezing her hand tightly, clearly attempting to follow the conversation and not liking where it was going – Evie squeezed back in a small attempt at comfort. Hope looked as impassive as ever, but likely was picking up on more than her brother. “And what if we agreed to go to Asgard? Would you come with us.”
“You know I can’t.”

“Dad. What good would it do to fight? Anyone you save will only die five seconds later. There’s no where to run, no where to hide and no way to survive. Why are you so desperate to fight?”

Whilst Tony tried to find an answer Evie frowned at him. “In the end we can’t leave here. After all, we know there’s an afterlife so it can’t be all bad.”

“Not an option Evelyn!”

“Dad…” She smiled sadly. “Dad. If we go through the Bifrost, Thanos will follow. You know that. If we leave now he will see it and think we’re running off with an Infinity Stone. He would follow and what’s left of Asgard will be destroyed too. We can’t leave, and you know it.”

“We don’t know that!”

“Yeah. We kinda do. There’s a reason we can’t evacuate anyone else. There’s a reason we couldn’t hold the…the funeral there. We’re stuck here and we all go together.”

The same conversation was being carried out by the other Avengers in the tower. If it was possible to escape what was about to happen, to get away from the planet before Thanos reached them. Quietly questioning if it was worth staying on Earth and dying, or just turning tail and running. Abandoning the rest of humanity to certain death went against everything they stood for, but there was the argument that they would do no good by staying. They wouldn’t save anyone and would lose their own lives.

And even if they found somewhere to run to was running worth it? It was Natasha who raised the thought, but she wasn’t alone in thinking it. They could run to Asgard, and put the remaining inhabitants at terrible risk, but then what? They would be the sole remnants of the human race, and there was no guarantee that Thanos wouldn’t eventually come after Asgard again anyway. Was a life-time of running worth it?

Was the guilt of leaving everyone behind worth it? And they were seeing Thor having to live everyday with the overwhelming loss of his culture and history – they were having to take that into consideration too. Asgard had lost their single culture, Earth had thousands if not millions of separate cultures, some so intertwined as to be nearly indistinguishable but still distinct in their own rights.

They would lose everything and it was highly likely Thanos would follow them anyway.

As it was the question never made it further than the hypothetical.

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“Enemy inbound.” Jarvis made the usual announcement to the tower at large.

“How many and where?” The shield was never far from Cap’s hand these days and he was already picking it up from under the kitchen table as he asked the question. There was that very small pause that Jarvis had started affecting when about to deliver bad news. “Now isn’t the time to mess around, Jarvis! How many, and where?”

“Numbers unknown. In the high thousands or higher. This is worldwide. This is it.”

There was a sudden corresponding explosion, near enough to the tower to shake the windows on the north side and setting all of the alarms off.
“Here we go guys; you know your roles!”

There had been enough battles that they each knew how to utilise their skills best. The Orks had proven very adept at scaling the outside of buildings, so although they couldn’t fly it often felt like they could.

“Evie!” With the suit assembling itself around him, Tony managed to grab his daughters’ arm as she ran past him. “You need to get to the Bifrost site! Take the twins and go!”

There was a look in the young woman's eyes. Something quite resigned and frustrated. She didn’t need to speak in response, just holding his gaze with that look. And Tony knew exactly what she wasn’t saying and didn’t need to say.

There was no time, no chance and no way she would be able to successfully reach New Mexico.

“Evie-”

“If we go to Asgard, Thanos will follow.”

“Evie-”

“I’m going to manually control the guns up on the roof. That will spare Jarvis the processing time and let him get more suits in the air. I’ll take the twins with me and barricade us in.”

Tony stared at her as around them the chaos assembled itself.

It was hard to look at the determined young woman and remember the little girl that had once stood in her place. The child who had grown up without a mother and the teenager who had had to mature way too fast, dealing with concepts far too big.

“I wanted to make this world a better place for you.” Was all Stark managed to say.

“Wasn’t your fault a bunch of aliens decided to fuck shit up. Again.” She waved a hand. “And yeah I know, no swearing.”

“The gun turret on the south west corner can’t turn a full 180 at the moment. You’ll have to cover the gap with-”

“The other two, yeah, not rocket science, Dad.”

“If you can hold out in one of the panic rooms you could make it to the Bifrost before Thanos nukes the planet.”

Evie’s smile was resigned. “Sure. I’ll do my best.”

They both knew that wasn’t happening.

“And I’ll meet you there”

Also not happening.

Tony pulled her into a tight hug, trying to put all of the words he couldn’t articulate into the gesture. It seemed to work since his daughter was clinging to him just as tightly. An explosion nearby threw large cracks down one of the windows and they both turned to stare at it.

“Go. Get the twins and lock yourselves in.”
Be careful seemed like a stupid thing for Evie to say in the circumstances. Instead, as the suit resumed assembling around her father she managed as quick “Give ‘em hell.”

“You too, kiddo.”

"You can be heard from here."

The dais Hel had led him to was playing tricks on the eyes. Or perhaps physics just didn't apply here. Of the two options that was more likely: they were still in the huge dark hall, with vaulted ceilings stretching away into darkness. But at the same time Loki would also swear that they were stood under a moonless night sky, with soft black sand underfoot. There were walls, and yet there also....weren't? The ghost of stonework hovered between existence and non-existence.

"What is this place?"

"I do not know. I found the Stone here; it is everywhere and no-where, all at once. You get used to it after a while. But if you wish to, you can speak to all of the souls from here."

"You do that?"

"I have never needed to." Hel smiled at the 'so how do you know it works?' look that immediately floated across her fathers face. "I knew it was waiting for something. For the right moment."

"Do you think this is the right moment?"

"I think it is finally upon us, yes. It was never my place to speak from here; I guide and care for the souls. You need to lead."

"Historically never my strong point."

There was a grumbling laugh from Fenrir behind them. "Historically a lot of things have never been your strong point; however, it looks like you have made a lot of changes recently. Give it a go."

Loki looked around at his four children.

Hel was staring at him expectantly, every inch a ruler graciously conceding a favour. Fenrir lurked beside her; even given his size and standing out in the open he lurked. It was a skill. Especially given that Narfi was nonchalantly leaning against him, watching the proceedings with the interest of a child in a cinema. A bag of popcorn would have looked right at home with the elder of the twins.

"Well?" And there was number four. Vali, always a little apart from everyone else, and partially hidden in the shadows. "Are you going to do it?"

Good question. If what Hel had said was true, theoretically Loki could just stand on that little raised area, talk and get the message out to everyone. In practicality that felt a little stupid. It was one thing trying to give a rousing battle speech to an army, and quite another giving it to thin air with four judgemental onlookers. Inspiring calls to arms usually required a rabble of sulky peasants, unmotivated mercenaries or a hopeless army. Not to mention Loki wasn't usually the one tasked with delivering such a speech. Oh sure, he would often write the damn thing, since Thor could never string more than three words together in front of an audience, but it was always the much-loved older brother who people wanted to follow into battle.
"I mean, take your time. Not like the fate of the universe hangs on this at all." Fenrir bared his teeth in a grin. "No pressure."

It was such a...okay, Loki had to admit it was such a Loki thing to say. His own snark directed straight at him with unerring accuracy. It definitely concluded that personality was a nature over nurture thing. He ignored the comment and directed his attention to his daughter.

"I just talk?"

"Just talk. Something you are good at, I hear." She smirked. "And Father? Try to make it inspiring?"

He ignored that too. If nothing else he could hear the under-current of concern: this was a crazy plan and if it failed there was very little hope that they would have any push-back against Thanos.

Stepping up onto the dais was disorientating. If Loki had been confused before it was now a whole lot worse. From this small platform he was able to see down the full length of the grand hall, but at the same time midnight desert tundra stretched out to the edge of vision. Pillars hung in the air, both real and not. He caught Vali’s eye and the boy raised an eye-brow at him. 'Go on then'. It was easier to turn around so that he didn't have to see the four of them staring at him.

This small area was humming with power. The trickster could feel it like a second heartbeat; raw and ancient. It would have been impossible to say if it was from the Soul Stone itself, or some enchantment cast over the stone in that place, but either way in the moment it didn't matter. He closed his eyes and tried to centre his thoughts - mapping out the crux of the problem and what points he needed to get across.

What would work if I was hearing this message? What would make me realise my help was needed?

"Hear me..." It wasn't loud. In fact it was almost unintentional, but he felt the words buoyed up by whatever power resided there. They echoed around the hall and whispered out across the black sand. "Hear me." A command now. Take note. Listen.

"I am Loki. Silvertongue, Liesmith, Skytraveller, son of Odin. Many of you know of me and many know of me through other names. I have been with you since humanity first began to walk. I built pyramids, I ran with the Mymidon’s, I rode in Azincourt. I have been there with you.

"Earth is in trouble. The realms are in trouble, but it is now Earth in the firing line. Millions have already died, and without help the rest will also perish. Many of you have seen war, and I can promise you that this is bigger than anything that has ever been seen throughout the history of the Nine Realms. If Earth falls Thanos will find his way here, and I cannot say what will happen then.

"These are your children struggling to survive. Your grandchildren, your descendants. They need us now. Enough cultures still venerate you: The ancestors, the Elder Ones, the glorious dead. They pray to you, revere you, ask you for guidance. Today is the day we can answer.

"I am asking you to join me. Anyone who has fought before, anyone who can handle a weapon, anyone willing to do their part. From flint axes to rocket launchers, every single person here is important, and I need your help. I intend to take us back to Earth and to fight. We need to draw Thanos out onto the battle field and Earth doesn’t have the resources to do that itself.

"I am asking you to die. Join me. Fight with me. Die with me. And in doing, give Earth the chance to live!"
The word echoed and bounced back as Loki fell silent.

It…yeah it hadn’t been his best speech. In days gone by he had certainly done better, usually by filling said speech with grandiosity and pomposity. That wasn’t him these days, and with something with stakes this high it didn’t seem right. He wasn’t asking people to lay down their lives for king and country; this was for the very right to continue as a species.

“That was not bad.” High praise from Hel, certainly. “Could have been a little more succinct, but not terrible.”

“You can do it next time.” Loki stepped back down to stand beside her. “But it doesn’t look like anyone was particularly moved by it.”

The hall was empty but for the five of them. If the trickster had been hoping for some grand army to appear over the horizon he was disappointed.

“What contingency plans do we have?” He asked quietly. “How defensible is this place?”

“We can hold out for a while. It is very difficult to find my realm outside of death, and difficult to enter even once it is found.” Hel’s brow furrowed into a frown. “But Thanos is tenacious and you have given me no doubts he will succeed on both counts. From there, we have to simply barricade and hold out.”

“And what do-“

“Look!” Narfi pulled himself away from where he was lounging against his canine brother so that he could point.

Making their way across the dark sand was a large band of men, near a hundred in total. There was a certain prevalence of helmets, heavy cloaks, fur and a lot of weaponry. Most had large round shields as well, painted in a huge variety of patterns.

“Well…better than nothing.” Vali said.

The apparent leader of the group hefted his spear with a shout, bringing his men to a halt, and continued on to the family alone. Removing his helmet revealed him to be middle-aged, with a neat beard and some impressive scarring. He bowed his head with deference, but only a little deference. This was someone with pride up to his eyeballs.

“Lord Loki. I am Jarl Guthrum of East Anglia. Later known as King Æthelstan. I place my household at your command.”

Loki knew of him. The man evidently wasn’t aware that his army had lost a pivotal battle for the control of England thanks to the Trickster’s backing of the opposite side.

“As you can see, we aren’t many, but we are ready for a fight.” A wide grin moved the scars around on Guthrum’s face and Loki reached out to clasp arms with him in the ancient greeting.

“Any and all help is most welcome.”

There were other figures beginning to arrive on the periphery. Nearly all of them dressed in a similar way to Guthrum’s men, but some slight differences in shield design and some carrying battle standards. There were a lot more women there than historians usually wanted to admit too.
Danes, Norsemen, Finns, all of those peoples whom history had summed up under the heading of ‘Vikings’ rightly or wrongly. But these were the people who had worshiped the Pagan Gods. If anyone was going to heed his call to arms it would be these people.

A shout went up from the back of the jostling crowd and then the warriors were scattered as a small group on horseback cantered through and up to Loki.

Different again. Neater hair, different colour play in their clothes, and despite who they were answering to, their banners were of Christian saints. Guthrum looked less than impressed as the approaching leader made eye contact and nodded in acknowledgement.

Loki had to smirk at the interaction between the two men, knowing their history together.

“King Alfred, of Wessex. I have brought my men to answer your call.” He was a slim man, but at home on horse-back, and there was a sheathed sword slung over his shoulder. A plain circlet kept his thinning hair back from his face. Not quite the formidable warrior from the history books, but someone who had proved themselves more than competent all the same. And a fearsome tactician by all accounts.

“You are very welcome here.”

The confusing physics of the hall/desert meant that whilst the assembling people couldn’t fit into the grand room they spread out across the sand without a problem. Loki couldn’t say that they would have that much of an advantage against Thanos with the might of the Viking and Anglo-Saxon forces, but anything was better than nothing.

In the next few minutes more filtered in too, leaving them with a good few centuries-worth of Dark Ages armies. That was a lot of man power, although man power armed with swords and axes. Not that much good against plasma guns, but they needed anything they could get.

“Well…it is something.” Hel said quietly.

“It’s better than nothing. There’s a few hundred thousand here; we can-”

Loki’s proposition was cut short by a sudden high-pitched whistling. It wasn’t a familiar sound, and could have been deemed eerie if it weren’t for the fact that they were already stood in a room of dead people. The assembled warriors scattered again, and this time with more urgency than when Alfred’s men had come through.

Horses. Hundreds and then thousands in tight formation, each section led by a man carrying a tall snake-like standard that emitted the shrill whistling tone. There was absolutely no question as to who they were, from their uniformed armour and helmets down to the famous eagle standards peppered throughout. They were followed by the foot regiments, also in uniforms of scale mail and leather. Some carried the famous rectangular shields, whilst others had oblong or circular.

Hundreds of thousands, the might of the Roman Empire that had once taken over Europe and stretched out into Africa and Asia. Some of the more battle-inclined emperors were amongst them; Loki knew Hadrian on sight, and thought he recognised Vespasian.

Hel’s hand closed on his wrist – he could tell she was as tense as he now was. They still weren’t doing well: numbers counted but they still didn’t have any weaponry more advanced than a catapult.

However, before he could speak, either to his daughter, or to greet the newcomers more and more
began to appear along the horizon of the desert.

Shang Dynasty chariots began to thunder into view, followed closely by their Egyptian counterparts. Centuries of Mongol empire were jostling alongside Spartan warriors. And then—finally, firepower! - Napoleonic troops made an appearance.

Greeks, Celts, Aztecs, Incan, Colonial British, American Civil War, Maori, Renaissance Italian, Templar Knights, Ottoman Empire, Macedonian Empire, Zulu, Samurai…

The armies of Earth were assembling.

Someone shook his arm, making Loki realise that he had been staring in shock. Whilst he had hoped, he hadn’t actually thought it would work. Humanity was ready and willing to help defend their descendants.

There was a roar overhead and a Flying Fortress sailed over them to a cheer from the arriving World War Two troops. It made the family turn to see who was assembling behind them and they were faced with a wall of tanks. Shermans, Panzers and Churchills were lined up side by side, and behind the more familiar ones the Mark 1’s of World War One were rolling up.

“You know, this might just work…” Fenrir sounded as surprised as Loki felt. “This could work!”

“It better bloody work!” The voice made the trickster spin to find the source. “Hey boss!”

“Barton!”

“What? You wanted anyone who could fight. I can fight.”

Despite the assembled mass of militarised humanity before them, Loki still found himself dumbstruck by a single person, who was now laughing at him.

“Your face in an absolute fucking picture!”

“Barton!” With the enormity of the situation, it hadn’t occurred to Loki that this would obviously happen, and he pulled Clint into a crushing hug.

“Oof, get off!” But Hawkeye was laughing as he said it, and the returned embrace was just as tight. “And this!” He stepped back to gesture around at the still-assembling forces, “This was fucking inspired!”

A Sopworth Camel had rolled up close enough for the pilot to hear that and rev the small plane’s engine in agreement.

“We need to pull Thanos out into open battle. He’s been keeping away from the fight and letting his army do the work for him. We need a large enough force to make it a struggle for the Orks and for him to decide to fight.”

“And then we take him?”

“And then we take him.” Loki’s attention was distracted by a group of women approaching, all in neat uniforms. “Yes? You aren’t military.”

“We’re near enough as damn it. Royal Naval Nursing Service, HMT Argyllshire, we went down during the evac of Dunkirk. You’re going to need staff to look after the panicking civvies.”

Behind them there was a large and still-gathering group of emergency services. Police, firefighters,
ambulance crews, paramedics, nurses, forest rangers, search and rescue, coast guard, mountain rangers. There was a huge number of women from the various women’s corps of the world wars; not front line, but as absolutely instrumental in a battle as anyone else.

“Well, you’ve got an army.” Clint sounded amused. “And if we get back to Earth we may even have a Hulk.”

“No one is ever letting that go, are they?”

“Hell no! And we’re taking…everyone?”

Loki didn’t quite get his meaning until he followed the man’s gaze towards a certain set of insignias on some uniforms.

“Everyone. Now isn’t time to get picky, and the Luftwaffe were extraordinary fighters.”

“Yes, but—”

“Barton, we teamed up with Hydra.”

It was a point Clint couldn’t argue with.

“Any idea how you intend to use the Stone that you cannot even hold?” Hel asked. She smiled as Barton seemed to notice her for the first time and winked at him. He glanced behind her, received a small wave from Narfi and finally put two and two together when he saw Fenrir.

“I can hold it for long enough.”

“Wait, wait, wait! You’ve got an Infinity Stone?!” Clint spluttered.

“Long story, now isn’t the time, and yes.”

The last time Loki had held the Reality Stone he had been essentially messing around with it and had still only managed to hold it for about ten seconds. Not that his extremely sceptical daughter needed to know that.

“Long enough is not enough of a certainty.” Hel extended a hand to him, which earned a questioning look. “One magic user is good. Two are better.”

“Three is best.” Vali said quietly.

Three was best. Three times the amount of time they could wield the stone, three times the amount of power running through it. They needed to twist reality open to connect Helheim and Earth and that would require every second they could throw at it and every ounce of talent. Every moment would count in bringing through the army of the dead.

MWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWMWM

“Where the fuck has all of this fog come from?!”

“We’ve got bigger problems than the weather right now, Sam!”

But the fog was gathering. All across New York, as the Avenger’s desperately tried to do what they could to curtail the attack, the fog was gathering.

Steve paused for a moment, trying to regain his breath in the midst of the dust and chaos. Broken
ribs were burning, and he was pretty certain his left ankle was fractured. He had ended up on the roof of a burnt out skyscraper – unable to quite say how he had got there – and the devastation of the city was laid out before him. The adverse weather was hardly helping matters, although it was impossible to say where the wretched stuff was coming from.

Thick smothering fog seemed to be converging from all angles, slowly rolling down the ruined streets.

As the Captain stared down, desperately trying to catch his breath, he could see the scattered bodies heaping the street below; displaying the absolute futility of what they were trying to do. A bank of fog was rolling across them, fighting against the thick smoke rising from burnt out cars and subway vents.

As he watched a man ran out of the smothering mist.

The guy was young, maybe early twenties or late teens, but what caught Steve’s attention was his clothing. Even from so high, even with so much devastation around him, he stood out like a sore thumb in a military uniform. An old military uniform.

Steve had been born after world war one, but he had been enamoured by the photos as a child, hero-worshipped the soldiers. His desire to join them had been fuelled by those photos. He knew the American uniform of the trenches and right now it was down there on the modern streets of New York. He wondered if he was hallucinating.

The lad had something balanced on one shoulder that, as the Captain stared, turned out to be a very early prototype of a rocket launcher.

There were three Orks charging down the street. The young man seemed to be entirely unconcerned as he dropped to one knee and casually sighted down the rubble-strewn road at them.

“What the hell…”

The words were unintentional. Even as the soldier out of time fired the weapon Steve’s bemused attention was caught by a very familiar and haunting sound and he looked up in time to see the fog erupt.

Spitfires.

First three, in tight formation, then twenty, then a hundred or more. They were followed by many other aircraft, American, British, German, Japanese, all from the 40’s and all flying together. Wounded ankle forgotten Steve scrambled unsteadily to his feet, staring wide-eyed as a Messerschmitt flew past close enough that the pilot inside could salute him.

“Is…Is anyone else seeing this?”

“What the fuck is going on??” Bucky’s incredulous yell confirmed that the Captain wasn’t alone in his utter confusion. He looked up as a Vulcan bomber cleared the skyscraper, followed by Ironman.

“Tony, how big is this?? What the fuck is happening?!”

No one could even comment on Steve swearing.

From his much higher vantage point Stark was able to see that it was far beyond just the sudden appearance of vintage aircraft. In every direction the fog was spitting out people and machinery.
Flickering alerts across his HUD told him that this was more than just the city too.

“Guys, this is world-wide! This is happening world-wide!”

“Look at the Hudson!! Guys the fucking Hudson!!” Rhodey’s shout drowned out the other exclamations of absolute confusion at what was happening.

Tony spun in mid-air, following his friend’s direction.

There were blasts coming from the river; the Orks had been targeting the small ships since the attack began. However, as the heavy smoke rolled away it became clear that now the firepower was being aimed back at the creatures. Older and cruder than the finely honed plasma guns, but with the heft to do enough damage to matter.

The smog then cleared enough for Tony to see exactly what was firing and he felt the world spin out from under him.

The USS Arizona, super-dreadnaught Pennsylvania class battleship and, most importantly, resting at the bottom of Pearl Harbour, was now steaming her way up the Hudson, all guns manned. Flanking her in the air were a mix of various vintage aircraft from multiple nations and eras, but most incongruous were the much smaller vessels dwarfed by her huge steel sides.

Wooden-hulled and dragon-prowed, long boats were escorting the much larger battle ship, their sides hung with brightly painted round shields. The decks were crammed with horses and armoured men. And a lot of axes.

“What…” As Tony stared at one of the most famous war ships in American history, and its little escort of Viking longboats very few words seemed to do the bizarre situation justice. In the end all that came out was a tried and tested old favourite. “Jesus Christ!!”

And then, in his comm and across all channels, came a very smug and painfully familiar voice.

“Wrong deity, Stark.”

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