High Rise

Summary

Darcy is thrown into the deep end when she becomes the liaison between high powered business tycoons. Loki Odinson and Tony Stark proceed to make her life a pandora's box of problems in their dealings. Working with the chaotic master might prove more than her sanity can endure, not to mention dangerous, but she won't go down easily. Creative business would be putting Loki's and Tony's antics lightly, and their associates don't make her life any easier either. Battling to win will either kill her or make her the best, but if she falls, she will take them down with her!

Notes

This is an AU with there never having been an Asgard of myth, no magical world of any sort, just the modern day usual world. Loki is human, though still BA and powerful, just in the human way. I did hint at Avengers and TDW but in non-magicy ways. But Loki is technically "ruling" so I guess this would be after TDW but it's kind of Thor 1 as well.
Slender fingers tucked a long, dark wave of effortless-no, carefully fixed, sprayed, gelled, and made to seem effortless-curl off a soft, curved cheekbone that had taken far too much makeup treatment for one day but you could never tell by looking. Darcy Lewis, the young, feminine, beautifully spunky attorney was on the rise, figuratively as well as literally, at the present.

The "on the rise" part was making her very nervous at the moment which was why she spent hours previously making every strand of hair, every eyelash, every button or pleat, and every brush of powder perfect to give her the tiniest bit more confidence ... in hopes tiny would be enough to cover her terror. On the rise had a big way of falling flat, meaning a bloody, greasy spot at the bottom of a cliff. Never a good look on anyone!

Of all the men, places, times, and assignments she could have been handed this would never have been on her list of hopes. She was quite sure her boss, genius, cutthroat, Tony Stark, had it out for her when he told her this was her new case. Her law firm, S.H.I.E.L.D - the meaning of which the acronym long ago escaped her - worked largely for Stark industries; meaning he could ask for favors and get what he wanted because he had more money than the ocean had fish. She tended to think of him as her boss as much as she did director Fury.

Darcy took in an unintentionally shaky breath as her high heels clicked along the chilly marble floor, glass walls on each side of her not only increasing the echoing but adding to her nervousness every time she dared let herself look down to the street below. Walking through the glass hallway made her feel like a fish swimming in dangerous waters or maybe like those people that walked in the under water tunnel with those sharks just outside and if the glass ever broke... Yeah.

Who built this stuff anyway? Why did they build hallways to connect two buildings with GLASS when it was several stories up? Sure, she knew there was metal too, but why build something like this at all? Problem waiting to happen.

Being up high was honestly the smallest issue she had to worry about though and that was just sad. Her main issue was her would be business appointment and soon to be "buddy" besides Stark until this was over, which could never come too soon for her after looking in depth into the man she had to work with for the next month. Loki Odinson, a cutthroat above even Stark or the rest.

Tha man took down businesses and people like it was child's play. He single handedly "dethroned" the big man of Asgard Incorporate, not to mention his own father. The self made lord of conflict and deception pulled the proverbial rug out from under his well feared father and the intended successor of the company, his older brother, in a single brilliant takeover that broadsided the entire industry. She did not know all the details but she heard plenty about his unforseen magic act.

He was a shark with a mouth full of teeth if ever there was one and she had to take the plunge and swim with him. Stark told her to negotiate as well as watch his every move in this business deal. She was the spy of sorts, the negotiator, the hopeful peacekeeper. She was told to give Odinson anything
he asked for, acquiesce to his whims, within reason or capability on Stark's side. Today was going to be horrible. She questioned Stark in his sanity for such an order but she would obey. They had a weird history so she knew things might be hectic.

It had not been that long ago that the young man tried to take over Stark Industry. It had taken Tony a lot of calling in favors, playing nice-ish with other big fish, and calling in some of the best guns in the entire business world, and maybe a little darker, to keep his company. Loki nearly brought it down to the ground and that was saying something when it involved the Teflon King himself. No one got the better of Stark but Loki almost had.

And little, wide eyed, still-learning-the-ropes Darcy had to try to match him and outsmart him. Perfect and so typical of life to hand her that just after things were going so well and she was getting in good with the business world.

Her lashes fluttered nervously as she closed her eyes, reaching for the door handle she wished she did not have to turn. The typical confidence and "sass" people said she had was taking a hard hit today and she had never felt more like a crab in a boiling pot in her life ... and she hadn't even walked into the man's office yet.

She did not want to be here but that never actually mattered in life, she learned that a long time ago. What you had to do and wanted to do were very rarely the same thing. She wanted to bolt and say forget it before her entire career was ruined and she ended up on the street; too bad she had never been smart enough to run and not be stubborn.

Better get it over with, she guessed.

Her carefully pressed pencil skirt brushed at her knees as she pushed through the door and confidently strolled to the desk with the pretty little blond, the type Stark would have sampled in his previous days before he grew up and opened his eyes to Pepper. "I'm here representing Stark-" Darcy began her crisp speech only to be cut off rudely by a typical receptionist tone informing her curtly that she was expected.

The brunette waltzed back to the large office she was pointed to before hesitating. Should she knock or would that make her seem timid? Better to seem too brazen than look as terrified as she was so she quickly decided to march in like she thought she owned that office. Heaven help her!

With more force than needed, she tossed the door open, shoulders squared and chin up. Vibrant, soft but tigeresque green eyes snapped up from his screen to greet her and her steps hitched in spite of herself. The Armani suit and expensive looking desk; and everything else expensive in the world; she expected but innocent features, high cheekbones, dark hair cut slightly on the long side; long enough to curl at the ends, just long enough to hover over the perfect shell of his ears ... not so much.

Even seated he looked formidable behind that huge and ornate monster of a desk. She thought he would be older for all he'd done already but he was her age - god she hoped he wasn't younger, that would put her life into perspective fast.

He looked strangely innocent if you didn't notice his eyes, beautiful in color but sparking with poorly hidden malice and peril. "Ms. Lewis, I presume." A liquid silk, melted chocolate voice snarled carefully at her like he was trying to growl it out without seeming like he was growling; a picture in her mind of a wolf with a sheep skin surfaced just from his voice alone.

She had the instant feeling of being on the edge of a precipice or maybe stepping out on her bare feet on a very thin stretch of ice. "Mr. Odinson." Darcy returned the tone as well as she could but it never sounded as intimidating when she growled as when a man with a deeper voice did. She crossed the
"Quite punctual..." His sharp eyes shot to the clock on the muted gray wall, "a little early even. Always a good sign on the first day."

She blinked at him, unsure what he wanted her to say. This was not a job interview, she already had the job so why was he acting like her performance could make or break this; then again, maybe he was right and she should watch her every step. No use letting him get her guard down just because his voice could melt ice with that subtle accent she could not quite place; she was very bad with accents, they all sounded nice and some sounded darn well the same to her so she knew better than to guess.

He leaned forward on his elbows, long fingers tenting under his chin as he starred at her from his seated position behind the dark wood desk; she did not miss the intentional slight of him not even extending the common courtesy of standing in greeting or even offering his hand to her. "How is Stark these days?"

Darcy kept her words crisp and short-why play sweet girl when he didn't give her reason, "Mr. Stark is quite well." If he had been nice she might have lied and said Tony sent his regards.

For the first time, those thin, sharp, curved lips smiled and she was shocked by how sweet he looked wearing such a face; he looked like a totally different person. "I am pleased to hear it."

Smiles would not get her that easy and she was very careful to keep her expression blank, "Mr. Odinson, what say you to ending any surface pleasant chatter for the moment and skipping to the reason I was sent?" The more on edge she was the more formally and abruptly to the point she became in her speech, it was a trait she learned to adopt rather than her old habit of running her mouth when nervous.

A slight touch of surprise flickered behind the shine of his eyes but he smiled again and nodded, "Very well, it's not as if we're fooling each other, now is it?" The smile grew a fraction darker with the lowering dip of his voice, his green eyes dancing with slightly terrifying interest. "You are here to convince me to agree to Stark's demands in our deal and I'm here to see how far I can push him...how much does he need me is the general question, how low he is willing to bow for this deal of the century between our companies, isn't it?"

Maybe, she had to think now, her decision to be blunt might have been ill advised considering the manner of man she was facing. "I'm not sure that would have been my choice of words, but in basic nature, you are correct."

His intonation dipped lower still as his volume sank to an intimidatingly quiet, secretive threat level, "My description might not have been your wording preference but it was no less accurate. We both know the motives behind cooperation, we both simply want to exploit the situation for our own gain, so I am relieved to see we can end the dance."

This man was frightening when you looked into his eyes, little wonder people were uncomfortable with him.

"Then please," Darcy plunged ahead for lack of any other way to precede now that she expertly just ensured her first day was going to be horrible, "allow me to say that Stark Industry seeks a pleasant negotiation...however, we are prepared for anything considering past history." There, she got that bombshell out of the way! "We have our interests as you have yours so it would be nice if both parties came away happy but that does not always happen."
She smiled sweetly to soften her words but they were no less true, and if he thought she would back down, he was crazy, "Do understand though, Mr. Odinson, we will not come away with less than we deserve. Mr. Stark does not make it a habit to get less than what he asks."

She just shot herself in the face in less than five whole minutes in his office and she had no idea why she had done it! He looked quizzical but combative and this was going to be the worst first day she had ever had in any job ... and she did it to herself in her desperation to seem tough. If he made her cry in the following five minutes she would neither be shocked or undeserving with the killer ground work she just set down.

"I will keep that in mind but please understand that I am also not accustomed to getting less than my way. Deals have a tendency to go according to my wishes." He simply purred at her.

"Not when it comes to Stark Industries, I have heard." Even her eyes widened at her own obvious declaration of war, someone save this traitorous tongue of hers, please! What was she doing? Good heavens! Why did she not shut up?

Loki's expression was wholly blank for a moment before he leaned back in his chair and chuckled, a dark sound that sent a chill up her spine, "Well then, we will see which of us has a stronger will, Ms. Lewis." He waved at the leather couch in the corner, "I just decided that I would like the first counter offer before you leave today. You may work over there."

Oh, ouch... it was going to be worse than she thought.

"Don't bother me too much with questions, some of us have other deals to attend while you are here. I am a busy man. You will have your time well occupied as you go through the paperwork I have prepared for you."

Deciding she let her mouth go wild enough for one day she simply nodded, reached into her briefcase to set her own stack of papers on his desk and meekly moved to the couch. A very thick stack of papers was perched on the stand next to it and she set to work on them in utter silence. He did not so much as glance her way again as he worked across the room, lithe fingers tapping away at the computer.

His office was huge, a far cry from her own little cubicle. She would have preferred he stashed her in an out of the way closet rather than sticking her on his couch. It was unnerving to be trapped in the same room with him without a desk to hide behind. She felt like the awkward little freshman allowed to observe real business for a day as an assignment for extra credit. Knowing he was a strategist, that could easily be it, him letting her know that she was on his territory and she was in the way. It would not have shocked her if he were trying to intimidate her and put her in her place by not even offering her any space of her own even though she knew this building had it.

The cold atmosphere of gray, black and white decor was enough to signal everyone that he did not invite them to stay. The display weapons carefully placed on shelves and a couple mounted on the walls sent a rather clear message too.

He was a blade guy, an expensive hobby judging by the amount of metal in the sword above her head.

She shifted on the couch, cringing at the noise it caused. She hated leather for that. The papers were already starting to blanket her lap and the reaching surface of the couch. There wasn't even a table to set a drink on. Her lap would have to be enough even though it made this so much harder. She shot Stark and Fury a quick summary of Odinson's request to let them know what to expect, to which Tony repeated his earlier statement of; "keep him happy."
This was loathsome but there was no way she would complain. Darcy just stuck her pen between her teeth as she flipped through the pages, scribbling when needed or circling parts she wanted to bring up in conversation later. She wanted to read through everything at least twice before she dared speak to Odinson or Stark so she knew the material.

It did not even register that time was moving by until Loki picked up the phone and ordered himself a late lunch. She noticed that he pointedly did not offer her anything nor did he suggest she take a break. His lunch came and she made sure not to look up even once. She made no obvious sign she knew he was alive even as he consumed his Chinese - which smelled amazing - and simply kept on scribbling away. She had her legal pad out by now and she was furiously writing all her little notes and suggestions and issues with the conditions. Her ipad perched on one knee while the papers continued to spread out around her, even pooling at her feet for lack of another place for them.

Loki was good at creating very appealing sounding terms but if you listened to the content it was blatantly obvious how many back door options he left for himself. For every offer and concession there were at least three ways she could think of that he could twist it to ensure he came out miles above Stark. That was not going to pass under her nose so easily! She intended to head him off at every pass!

Darcy was engrossed enough in finding all Loki's personal Easter eggs that she did not even notice when he began turning on the overhead lights nor did she notice it getting darker outside. One of her strengths and weaknesses was being a work addict, especially when the other party happened to piss her off.

Her eyes were killing her and she had to close them and remove her glasses several times but she tried to hide it. She was desperate for a drink since her coffee fix had been just before she got here but she dared not look at the clock. It had finally dawned on her two hours after he turned on the lights that it was darker outside but she ignored it, determined not to even consider leaving until he did and she did not care how late that was. She did not want to know what time it was, dreaded knowing even though her numb legs and even more numb hind end told her well enough. Her lower half was so far past tingling, it was just dead. Standing would be a challenge once he finally made a move.

Darcy nearly jumped out of her skin when that velvet voice hit her ears suddenly, "Ms. Lewis, perhaps you should take a break."

Her blue eyes darted up to look at him, annoyed that he did not look even slightly tired, "Thank you for your concern but I'm fine." She was back to a pleasant tongue, thankfully, despite her mood.

His green eyes showed a dull irritation for a moment, "You did not take a lunch, you should at least go get dinner."

Her full lips turned up in a smile, curious to know if he needed her to leave for some reason, an expected call perhaps, "I believe I will be fine. I skip lunch often. You know how easy it is to get wrapped up in things."

His thin but soft curving jaw set in hidden enmity and he said nothing for a minute, "Very well. I'm going out to the café on the second floor."

She noticed he did not invite her to join him but she nodded at him as he strolled past her. His legs were long, she observed, long and lanky. He was thinner than she originally thought, that suit hugging his straight waist and narrow hips.

Darcy twitched, eyes falling instantly to her ipad when it occurred to her that she was assessing his
body. Not the best idea but she stopped herself before he would have had time to notice.

She did so much looking into his business life and none at all into his personal. It was lack of foresight on her part. Had she been smart she would have desensitized herself to his good looks but she had never been one to be easily taken in by a handsome face or sleek figure anyway. Thankfully she did not blush easy like a few of her friends did. When she was young she used to blush easily but she managed to school that.

The very second he closed the door behind him was the moment she shoved the papers of her lap to stand. Her legs were not ready for the act and she nearly fell back down. Numb did not even begin to cover the fact that she would not have even known she had legs if she did not know she had them. They moved when she focused but she could not feel them moving. Nothing below her waist felt real, it was more like she was floating on some thick clouds. She stretched her arms up over her head and tried to do a few yoga stretches but they were clumsy at best. It did feel better, though painful, to move again.

Her back and shoulders were knotted up. A couch was so not ideal for paperwork even though it seemed like it should be. It might have been all in the mind because she could sit on her own couch through several movies in a row and feel fine but put work in her hand and the body protested.

She could at least relax now that he was gone. When he was around she felt like she had to sit up straight and keep her posture perfect, which got old. There was no way to really tell if he was going to be gone a while or not. He seemed very much the type to tell one thing from those smooth lips and do something very different in order to throw off his opponent. He might be gone long enough to eat and make a call or he might walk back in after three second, no way to tell.

Still, good things did not come to the faint of heart so she took a stroll over to his desk to see what she might be able to uncover.

First thing he must have done before walking out was put his computer in hibernation and she was quite sure it would be password protected, there was no way a careful creature like him would do otherwise so the compute was out. The papers were a different story!

Just a glance at a few of the letterheads told her that this man was in bed with a lot of companies which was unsettling to say the least. He had his fingers in a lot of deals if a speed read of those letters was a judge. Stark needed to watch his back or he might be in for round two of another takeover try.

Then again, if any of this was secret there was no way that man would leave it out, not when a quick try of his desk drawers told her he locked everything before he left. If anything, he might have wanted her to see these.

Darcy was quick to move away from the desk just in case he returned so she opted for a further walk around the room to get a feel, however poor, for the man. He was a heavy reader of law judging by the different volumes of his shelves; everyone in her world had these, sometimes just for show, but she could tell that these had been used. When she slipped one out bravely she noticed some of the pages were dogeared or traced with various colors of liner. He used these alright.

She slipped it back into the hole and let her eyes travel over other titles. The other books, and he had many, were all of high reading stature. He had King Lear, Othello, The Canturbery Tales, Don Quixote, Hamlet, The Raven ... and all were some very expensive editions. These had not been marked but she could tell they had indeed been opened, so unless he got them at a garage sale, which she could not picture, nor could she see the father he betrayed giving them to him, the only answer was that he purchased them for pleasure. There was a scrap of paper peeking out of one, she noticed,
like he had been in the middle of reading it and was interrupted.

He was intelligent to be able to read some of these in their very un-revised old English. Shakespeare was clearly a favorite on his shelf but so was Poe and several poets. Her fingers traveled over the shelves, not daring to touch these books because books of this kind were always private in her mind, but allowing herself a moment to admire. If not for the fact that he was cruel and heartless, she might have liked him for his taste.

Back in the day, the horrible years of high school, people made fun of the book worms. The girls with glasses got picked on by the cheerleaders and Jocks. It was funny how the world flipped when adulthood came around and suddenly reading was not pathetic but necessary and an attractive trait. Running with the big boys suddenly meant hanging with the guy with a brain rather than the boy with big muscles and little else. Youth taught you one thing while growing up taught you to know how stupid what you used to believe was.

People like she and this Loki were the ones that probably got picked on in youth...but look at them now! Here they were, running the lives of the people that used to bully them while the sport people were in manual labor, fast food, or the military if they got lucky. Life was interesting! Darcy found herself smiling, amused by her own thoughts and the strange fact that a book collection had her almost emphasizing with the jerk that owned the office.

"I gather you are a reader like myself, Ms. Lewis?"

Darcy jumped, only just swallowing a gasp as she whirled on the toes of her shoes to face the door. Her heart was doing some impressive acrobatics in her chest; she could thank her rare bouts of luck he caught her here and not at his desk; his arrival terrifying her even though she was doing something perfectly lawful. She honestly had not heard him open that door!

"How was dinner?" She blurted out, trying to hide her speeding pulse behind an indifferent face, ignoring his question.

He looked at her blankly but suddenly seemed to remember what he said to her before and nodded - she was so right, he did not step out for food - going along with her, "I changed my mind, the menu did not fit my mood."

She nodded, looking down at the dark carpet, her hair falling like a curtain to hide her face for a calming few second before she looked up again.

Time to go back to the torture couch, she thought with displeasure. They wordlessl returned to the places they had been at all day. The chatter already over.

Darcy spent half an hour finishing formatting her suggestions and findings to Stark in a more condensed version, giving him a full update including a list of those companies in correspondence with Loki. After working ideas up in her head all day she was sure her counter offer was near bullet proof, or she hoped so, but Stark could make any changes he desired. It was a long message and longer file that he was sure to call a book later but from that he would be able to confirm or deny her ideas. Once he altered the counter offer she could finally call it a night and leave ... ready to come back tomorrow for the torture, she would see Stark, but he had the bulk of the issues in hand now to make his choices, the first of many. People like this never went down easy, they haggled back and forth endlessly in any deal.

Darcy arched her back, discreetly trying to stretch without being obvious while she waited on her employer to send her his proposal. The message sign lit up not moments later, much too soon for even that man to finish a counter offer even with all her work, unless he changed nothing at all, so she frowned at her screen before opening it.
Her expression darkened considerably but she collected herself quickly in case her office-mate looked over. Stark really did have it out for her!

He responded in nearly a one word answer and an order to bring the documents to his office. She hated it when he hardly made an effort to seem interested or listen to anything she said. He had no intention of giving Loki an answer by or before seven, it looked like, yet he told her to comply with the enemy anyway. He could have told her that to start with! It would have been nice to know Stark planned to play rough before she spent all day trying to finish this in the cave of the devil!

What was he playing at? He must have been enjoying forcing her to stay here when he knew he never planned to give Loki an answer when he wanted it. Give him anything he wants, comply ... right!

"I will need to confer with Stark personally this evening to give you a more conducive response, but," She stood up, papers gathered once again into a neat stack, and walked to his desk. "for now, my hand written notes will have to suffice. They will give you a fair idea what we propose."

His green eyes narrowed as he took the carefully torn out legal pad pages from her outstretched hand, "Just your notes?"

"As I said, I will be going to Stark industry from here to speak with the others before I can give you a final word tomorrow morning."

"Unprofessional, giving me hand written scribbles. I take it you are woefully unprepared for this task or you're too inexperienced. I already asked you for the counter offer before the end of the day, to which you agreed. If you could not do it and were not up to it you should have said so." He met her eyes with a challenge.

Darcy wanted to give him a slap—or maybe a slap for him and a slap for Stark—but she smiled instead, "I wrote as clearly as possible. I will have the official counter to you this evening if you feel waiting until tomorrow is detrimental."

"We agreed on today, before you left my office, in fact. Stark could send it to my secretary before you leave." He arched a delicate brow at her, "Why did Stark suddenly change his mind? Did you not inform him of my condition?"

These two were playing company tug-of-war and they had made her the rope, "I wrote as clearly as possible. I will have the official counter to you this evening if you feel waiting until tomorrow is detrimental."

"I'm asking you, why did you agree to my terms when you did not plan to comply? Are you brazen or incompetent?"

Everything in her wanted to jump over that desk and lash out but she ignored the desire, "I will forward the documents to you after they are finalized. Have a good evening, Mr. Odinson."

Her reputation was taking hits already and it was only the first day! She did the singular thing she could do other than cry and simply walked out with her briefcase in hand and chin up.

Her heels clicked down the hall as she tried not to break into a dead run, tried to look composed and professional as she left.

Stark was her client so she could not pin this on him, thus could not defend herself for ignoring the terms set before her. It did not matter to either Stark or Loki what became of her after this deal. What worried her was that Loki would have no compunction about ruining her reputation and it was only
going to get worse from here.

They were going to be the death of her!
I love writing Darcy's pov! It's so much fun! Loki's pov always is more eloquent and dark in my mind, brooding and morbid where hers is lighter and full of random tangents. I feel her mind would take her on even though she is a professional. Anyway, yes, this is tasertricks. Just to be clear, I think Loki and Thor (when he drops in) would have hair no longer than in the first movie because it is the business world. TDW would be too long for wall street. Oh, and Tony is not Iron Man in this, just a normal crazy rich guy that invents stuff.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The taxi ride to Stark Tower left her with nothing to do but think and inevitably seethe like a boiling tea pot. It really had not helped that it began raining almost the minute she left Odinson. She had to stand on the corner waving frantically to be noticed; she had always been a little short and heels weren't always enough on the street where crowds passed you by, especially when rain hit. Her bad mood had turned into a near panic attack before turning to rage.

The drenched clothing made her cold and she could not help shivering like she used to when she was a little girl and had stayed out too long in the snow playing. Making snow angels seemed a lot more worthwhile than her entire day today. Her teeth chattered just a little bit, which she really hated - she hated that feeling when her jaw just refused to keep still and nothing she did would change it. It made her feel even less in control. Being a kid was so much easier. Why did people have to grow up and become jerks? At least the rotten kid in the sand box that stole everyone's toys had to give them back when his mother caught him, and at least that did not ruin lives forever, it just made the little kids cry.

She suddenly really felt like crying but this was a taxi, not her room, and she never cried unless it was behind the safety of her thick door. Loki probably could make her cry though. He was that type that she was sure took pleasure in things like that and might make a conscious effort in if he thought it would work on someone.

Man, she needed to perk up!

Futilely she tried to make her wet hair look less than hideous but there was little she could do about
her clothing or how it clung to her uncomfortably. Her hair looked as black as Loki's when it was wet. Her bra was showing a little through the soaked fabric. She really hoped her driver was not a mass murdered that picked up girls with large boobs as victims. He did not seemed to notice her, so that was good, even if it made her feel strangely insulted.

If Tony made a comment about her bra though, honestly, she would pick up his paperweight and bash in his skull. In this mood, that sounded like a good idea.

She wanted to murder Tony twice as much as Loki. She worked for Stark, they were supposed to be on the same side, he was supposed to work with her! Her reputation was already crumbling like sand through her fingers. Lawyers relied on their reputation more than anyone knew. If you were good and professional and always kept your word, people knew. If you habitually missed deadlines, did not examine documents carefully, or were careless in other ways, people knew that too. She had been very careful to build her reputation since the beginning but she had a terrible feeling that it was taking damage.

Stark and Odinson were two of a kind; both ego maniacs, both stubborn like two year old's, both too smart for their own good, both full till divas! These were her bosses and they would be fighting like high school cheerleaders over the position of prom queen! That left her in the unfortunate middle exactly where she knew she would end up when this started. Those two would inevitably get what they wanted and they would walk all over her to do it. They had nothing to loose as powerful as they each were, but she, the new rising girl in this business, had an entire career to watch crumble. She still had student loans! She still had to make a name for herself! She still had to be credible after this was over! She should have expected to be tossed around between them.

By the time to cab stopped, she paid, and rushed through to glass doors, she was no less calm. Most of the workers here had left for the day. It was a skeleton group left with only the real workaholics. Looking at them in their offices was depressing. She could not even let herself think of what the coming days would lead to, it was also depressing.

Tony Stark was in his dimly lit office, dressed in an expensive but slightly rumpled suit; wrinkled from him crawling around with his gadgets all day, no doubt; fiddling with something mechanical when Darcy walked in. He hardly spared her a glance before holding out his hand for the papers-what was she, a paper boy?-which she slapped into his hand with force. It made a loud sound but she doubted it hurt but she wished it had. They were not drowned like she was, her bag kept them water free but she considered rubbing her hair on them before handing them over. She should have!

Darcy was seething inwardly but doing her level best not to show it. She learned ages ago that you had to wear a mask with these people or you didn't survive. "You recorded my findings. What was it you needed to speak with me about?" Her words were clipped and dripped with her irritation but he did not seem to notice, nor even look at her.

"Yeah, your notes were spot on. He was leaving back doors the size of planets and hoping we wouldn't notice." His dark eyes traveled over the pages she had originally taken from Odinson, running a hand through his thick, short brown hair. "I made a few changes to yours but I was pleasantly surprised, you did pretty well covering it. Not too much slipped by you."

Darcy never cared much for back-handed complements. She had about all the comments she could take for one day. "If it is ready then I will take it to him now."

"No, wait till tomorrow afternoon." His dry, no nonsense, bored voice contradicted her instantly.

"I thought you said you had finished revising it." Darcy mumbled, too tired to deal with this. "We agreed to finish the first offer today and give it back to him with enough time to look at it before
tomorrow."

"I know. He still gets it tomorrow afternoon. Why should we rush on his account? He's just playing games." Stark huffed, still not bothering to so much as glance at her, "The only games I like to play are my own."

Darcy let out a slow breath as her fingers curled into fists. "We agreed to have it finished, we can't simply not give it to him. It is finished so the logical thing would be to proceed with expediency. A swift moving time frame is beneficial to all involved."

Finally his sharp brown eyes turned on her, "I think I know the in's and out's, this is my deal after all." He eyed her like a pompous teacher would the new kid in class.

"I realize that, Mr. Stark, but what do you hope to gain by postponing? Isn't it better to proceed quickly before he finds someone else?"

"There are no other deals, he has no other options, I'm it and I want to make him sweat."

Egos were abounding!

"That might be true but I still see no purpose in delay for either side. This is a large deal for both sides."

He cocked his head to one side and lifted a glass off the table, content likely to be brandy, "You work for me, remember? This is a merger between a small company I own and a smaller company he owns. Together, they make more money than rain in the rain forest. I know what it is, sweet heart."

Patronizing, now he was patronizing her and it took all her will not to raise her voice or glare, "May I ask why you agreed to have our first draft finished today then?"

Stark's expression softened, "Oh, right, I guess I did put you in an awkward position today. I should have given you more of a heads up on what I wanted." He took a drink, the ice in his cup clicking to the side, "I'll try to remember to clue you in next time. I'm not letting this guy set the pace though, he has to learn that I set it, and he'll have to work around me, not the other way around." A piece of ice snapped under the pressure of his teeth as he chewed it absently while speaking, "I don't need him getting ideas again, thinking he can run my show."

Darcy nodded as if she agreed even though she found two men trying to figuratively arm wrestle by proxy to be senseless, there was little she could say.

Stark chuckled dryly, "You're not tracking with me, I can tell. You don't understand my world."

Her blue eyes flashed in anger and she opened her mouth to refute the allegation against her intelligence but he cut across her.

"Right now we are using dual distribution, whereas, exclusive distribution would be more cost effective and efficient; no more waist of time and money for either of us." Tony took a quick drink, "But, then we would have to decide who gets the baby, mom or dad? And what if neither of us want to give up the kid?" He motioned at her with the glass, "So, to avoid fighting brands, and the forced competition costing us money and wasted material, the logical step is what?"

"Horizontal Merger. A new line with joint ownership of the original, partnering two trusted brands into one to hit both target groups. New and updated, bigger building to expand to cut the cost of maintaining both original locations." Darcy was mumbling, annoyed that he was acting as if he was teaching her something totally new.
"Bingo, babe. But we're a couple of stubborn guys that want to keep all the perks for ourselves."

"I've noticed." Her eyes fell to the floor as she tried not to spit out any other more insulting comments.

He ignored her jab and plowed ahead, "So how do I stay on top?" Both hands flew at her, his drink almost spilling in his enthusiasm, "I prove to him that I say what he gets, when he gets it, and how much. The punk has to learn that what he wants doesn't count, what I want does. I'll make him wait a year if I want to! He's my bitch, not the other way around."

All she did was nod, not trusting herself to say anything.

"Now you understand so we should do fine in the future." He took a drink and said, "Thanks for understanding, babe."

Every fiber of her body wanted to snap at him and tell him she was not his "babe" but she knew he did it to everyone to get a rise. "Do you have a hard copy of the papers or do you want to send it to me to print?"

He reached back behind him and then tossed her a flash drive, and she was impressed with herself for catching it. She muttered a thanks and offered him a crisp "have a good evening" before starting for the door.

"Hey," Tony waved a hand at her to come back, "By the way, what's with the grunge, drowned look? It's a nice bra, very sexy, but I think you're taking it a little far. Not super professional." He was smirking at his own humor, "I told you to accommodate him but you don't have to go that far, I promise."

"It was raining! I didn't have an umbrella!" Her voice had risen several decibels and she was fairly sure the people downstairs heard her reply but she did not care.

He nodded in mock surprise and understanding, "Oh, so he didn't see that then?"

At that very moment she was quite sure she could have committed murder but she knew she would look horrible in those orange jumpers. In the logical part of her mind she knew perfectly well that he did that because he thrived off getting reactions; she had steadfastly stayed calm so far, which he could not stand. How did Pepper stand this? Instead of reaching for the nearest object to shove down his throat, she stormed out of his office without a word. Those two men really were one of a kind! They loved to say things to make others angry and push any button they could find. They were equally good at finding weaknesses and pinpointing which buttons would work best. A terrible ability, not for them, but for everyone else! At least, she had to give Loki one point for never having made comments like that to her, yet at least.

The rain had not let up in the slightest, it might have become an even more fervent storm in the passing time. It had stopped mattering to her once she was headed away from those men. Anything had been fine as long as it meant she was going to her nice, plush, comfy, cozy, warm haven for all things soft. Her biggest weakness in life was fleece, silk, velvet, velutinous items and on days like this she was glad she indulged.

Once Darcy was home she headed right for a bath. It warmed her but did not manage to calm her down even though she used the lavender scented bubbles. What it did do was give her more time to think and time to decide exactly how she intended to handle the two spoiled brats. Her decision was to ignore most of everything they said. If it was not logical, she would do it her way without telling...
them. They were behaving like children so she would be the adult in the group; moreover, she would poke right back at their swollen egos. Maybe her motives were a little out of anger and spite too, but she planned to play them each as much as they had been playing her. Two, or three in this case, could play that game. They had weak spots too, everyone did!

Tony had no right to jeopardize her reputation like that. He had no right to keep her in the dark when she was the one taking all the risks. As her boss he was supposed to take care of her as much as she took care of him. It was a team, them against the world sort of thing. They were supposed to keep each other's back but he wasn't going to do that so she would do it for herself. Stark could not honestly believe stalling would make Loki bow to his wishes and there was no way that man would be anyone's "bitch" whether Tony had that in mind or not. The idea of trying to out-jerk the other guy seemed more than stupid to her but maybe that was because she just wasn't the bitter and wrinkled old lawyers she ignored in her office yet.

As for Loki, he had no right to talk down to her. He had no right to look down his nose and demand stupid, impractical things of her while chaining her to his couch. She might not have had his money and might not have owned a company she stole from her father, but that did not mean she was lesser than he was. She might have been afraid of him but she was her own woman! This deal was helping him too so there was no reason for him to treat her like she had a huge "A" sown to the front of her dress.

Her fuzzy towel worked over her hair as she fluffed and preened at it. She felt better now that she was not in damp clothing. Drenched cold was the worst kind. She analyzed herself in the large wall mounted mirror, practicing her faces for Odinson and Stark with a few funny faces mixed in. She was no Narcissus but she did enjoy mirrors. With some mental prep work she could face them both tomorrow and never break character.

She could and would play their game and match them at it! The next day would be different because she was not going to walk in there blind, she was not going to trust Stark to work with her, and she was going to find ways to exploit those two and shut them up. Her side was neither side even if she did work at S.H.I.E.L.D. Darcy Lewis now worked for the good of that new company, not them; at least, that would be how she attacked it tomorrow. Now she worked for the common good of all those consumers that purchased those products. This was for her country-alright, she was going a little over the top with that, but it really helped her mindset.

With her super downy robe in place around her, she padded into her room and dropped into her chair. She flipped her computer open and inserted the drive with Stark's revisions. After a quick scan of it she smiled, more pleased than she should have been at how few changes there had been to her original, she almost expected more because of who he was. At least she had done that right on her first day at the inquisition.

Next, she opened a window of communication to Odinson. He was very likely home by now so he would not see it until morning but she could say in technicality that she got it to him at the end of the day and she could tell Stark she gave it to him tomorrow because him seeing it tomorrow was almost the same as handing it over then. It worked in her mind. She was not playing their games by their rules anymore. These were her rules now and she was going to be the middle ground to the king's of drama. That in mind she attached the file and sent it to his personal mail. The second she pushed send her shoulders sagged with relief. That was one thing off her shoulders at long last. Now she could go to bed feeling a little less horrible.

Her fingers rubbed at her temples slowly. This day had given her a headache that could cross her eyes. Her bed was looking beautiful after maybe a couple aspirin. Yeah, that sounded really good. Her nice pillow top bed and warm covers would do wonders.
The office was getting chilled with the cool of the rain settling over the building with a quiet creep like death descending. The soft sound of the rain against the glass and sill was a lull to his tense muscles. Lights were being turned off in procession all over the building, leaving him in progressing darkness as the people filtered out. He brushed a few feathered strands of hair back into place as he stared, transfixed, out at the street below. He hugged his arms to his midsection as his gaze turned up to the mournful, dark sky.

Loki never had cared much for rain storms but they did have a particular allotment for beauty in the sound and way the water fell. Things that were dark or cruel often had a strange tendency to hold equal beauty to their nature. His lashes twined together as he closed his eyes and leaned his forehead against the freezing cold window.

Stark's liaison had been caught in the rain. Her makeup must have been waterproof too because it did not leave black streaks down her face or give her the raccoon look. It had been amusing to watch her pace in the crowd, flitting about like a wounded bird, trying to get the attention of any cab she could.

That girl was something, unique and interesting where he was used to predictability. She managed to surprise him more than once with her ample spirit and direct word choices. Her big blue eyes betrayed a sharp mind behind her shy stance and evasive answers to questions. It felt like he had miscalculated moves on more than one occasion in regards to her actions, which was a rarity for him. There were few people he could say that about.

Her sporadic ways confused him at some turns the way she managed to adjust and shift so quickly to her situations. He supposed he would say she was innocent with sprinklings of cunning, witty with foolish tendencies, determinedly focused with leanings to impetuosity. For the most part, beyond her blunt beginning, he could have mistaken her for meek, but he could tell she had fire in her. She controlled the fire but not so well he could not see it. There was something about her that reminded him of someone but he could not quite decide who.

Maybe in some distant, disconnected, strange way the Lewis girl shared similar traits in personality with his mother. He heard how she was when she was young; strong, tenacious, brilliant, keen, sly, but kind and nearly magical like a queen. His father once said she was perfervid, vivacious, and valiant; for that man to shower praise so adoringly it was obvious he fell in love with her because she was unmatched and as near perfect as could be. When she was young though, he could see her having come into his father's office and trouncing him with the same spirit Darcy had told him to stop playacting. She had been a powerful woman all her own, which was why she could hold three dauntless men still and quiet at the dinner table, and make two mischievous boys behave a expensive parties. He imagined she might have been like this girl in some ways, though far superior, but he hated that reminder.

What he wouldn't give to have his mother back! He would pay every cent he had or ever would have if he could see her. The one and only person in the world that loved him, his saving grace, his comforter and encourager had been taken away to the heavens some time ago. He had been alone ever since. There was hardly a day he did not feel her absence and the raw hole it left within him. The loss of her made living with his father and brother impossible.

The Golden haired "Prince" of Asgard Incorporate and the "King" were always so far away even if they were in the same room. He could not stand the numbing indifference directed at him while they stood shoulder to shoulder; he always ended up standing in the corner behind them somewhere; never a part of their activities. Loki always noticed it but it never felt so cold when his mother came to stand beside him and chase away the frost with her smiles. His father rarely spared him a look most of the time before he forced him to see him for once when he took the only thing other than
Thor that he cared about.

What enraged him was that it still felt like he was in that corner even though he was on top now! They were in *his* shadow now! The company was his and he dictated who stayed and who left and when they did.

He possessed everything he used to covet; the power, the fear, the business, the standing this position brokered, yet it left him feeling almost as hollow as he used to, if not about equally. He struggled, schemed, worked his fingers raw, back-stabbed, and clawed his way to this point but it did not fulfill him the way he always expected it would. Maybe that was because he still did not have the respect he craved. Even after he pulled the company out from under his father and not only kept it running, but made it grow more powerful, his father still looked down his nose at him. To his father it only seemed to prove he was the lesser son rather than swaying the scale in his favor. After forcing his father and brother out, he expected the hate, but he somehow thought it would garner veneration.

The condemnation, disdain, and disapproval in those aging eyes hurt a great deal more than he could bring himself to admit.

His name was whispered in trepidation by most now and they did recognize his skill but nothing more. People called him depreciating things like a cheat and a trickster behind his back. Everyone in *Asgard* thought he was suspicious and had deals in the dark side of business because they secretly abhorred him and had a revulsion to what they decided he was, so obviously he must be doing shady things because he was evil.

Loki had to stretch his fingers when he heard his knuckles crack from how tightly he balled his fingers into fists. His hands protectively moved to his chest as he rubbed his fingers into his palm. A few deep breaths calmed him a little. It should not still bother him because he was used to this and the disappointment. It did not even matter what they thought because he *owned* them all now! He was on top and they would learn that eventually and they would respect his ability. Unlike his golden brother that was good at everything *but* business, this was the place he excelled, his element, the place he was most secure.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw the blip of an icon signaling a message received. He turned around slowly and walked to the desk to sit in his chair; his chair, his desk, and *his* office; before opening it. It was from that girl. A smile tugged at his lips as he read it. He had honestly not been expecting her to comply after she left for the day, and on personal time too.

Loki reclined in his chair, the razor edge to his grin unseen by anyone, "Thank you, Ms. Darcy Lewis. I think you and I may work together well after all."

He could use her against Stark if he stepped just right. Maybe he just never would be happy until he ruled more than one kingdom. One was not enough. That hidden part of him that was desperate for approval was a hungry beast, and if his father and everyone else couldn't see his value after one takeover, maybe they would with the next. He owed Stark one anyway! This girl could help him get what he wanted, he could tell!

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**Chapter End Notes**

Yes, I did play off the cold aspect on purpose (Jotunn) just like I brought out Loki's
dislike of storms for Thor. No regrets and I'd do it again! I regret none of my shameful nods the the movies or quotes, none! Expect more!

In case you didn't get the business lingo: "dual distribution – The practice of simultaneously distributing products or services through two or more marketing channels that may or may not compete for similar buyers. exclusive distribution – A distribution strategy whereby a producer sells its products or services in only one retail outlet in a specific geographical area." If you were at all unsure that should explain. Tony and Loki are both being jerks to her right now.
Face Time

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

~=High Rise=~

Face Time

*Marvel

*Loki Odinson, Darcy Lewis, Thor, etc.

When Darcy arrived in Odinson's office the following day she had been more than a little shocked by the smiling figure that greeted her. Loki shook her hand and even came out from behind his desk to talk to her. With his arms crossed loosely over his chest, thin hips leaned against his huge desk, and ankles crossed casually, he looked so normal even in a suit. It struck her instantly that the real Loki, rather than the one keeping civil, relaxed business talk with her, had been kidnapped by aliens and duplicated with this pleasanter version. In the back of her mind something was screaming fowl play but she managed not to bolt out the door screaming for aluminum foil hats.

Optimistic Darcy wanted to think that this friendly version of the man was the real one and he was behaving this way because they had built a rapport. She wanted to think that this was his way of apologizing to her for his rude, exasperating behavior yesterday. Her show of good will in sending him the papers and being the calm adult had won his respect as much as anyone could manage. Now he was trying to be professional and work with her. This was the start of better things! Heck, he might even be fun to work with now that he wasn't an ice-king, he did have a good wit. Maybe this would end up making her career rather than damaging it considering everyone considered working with him and coming out alive to be worth as much as a year of other casework.

Cynical Darcy was sure that this was a ruse to put her off balance and make her unprepared for the kill. Tantrum throwing was in his nature and there was no way he would feel guilty for it. There was a reason people feared him and it wasn't because of his smooth voice and winning smile. He wanted something and he was switching tactics today in a wholly new approach at getting it. What she really needed to do was wait for the other shoe to drop where the monster came back. He was a tornado and this was the eye of the whirlwind, but she was in more danger here than anywhere else. This was the man that stole his father's business, not a kitten she found in a box. This was like pandas; they looked huggable but if you tried you had a good chance of getting killed.

Nice Loki was strangely more handsome than angry Loki. His smile put her at ease even though she knew that was exactly why he was doing it. Talking to him when he smiled seemed easy and the mellow atmosphere he created was extremely pleasant. His verdant eyes changed from frightening to beautiful. She could admire how handsome he was without the desire to slam her fist into that gentle sloping jaw. She had never been a sucker for a pretty face but it did not hurt things any to have something nice to look at.

She wondered if he might not use his looks to gain favor in deals. A little flirting would take him a
long way with some female clients, probably the occasional male clients too. Flirtation in business was a skill; too much or used on the wrong target and it sank the ship, but just enough on the right ones and you could gain a loyal meal ticket. The neglected housewives must flip for this guy. The lonely high powered women that most men were too intimidated by must have melted at his confident power. He would be any secretaries dream too, use his favor to work up ... not that he would give anyone a boost but she could imagine him pretending he would. It made her question how many women this one man could be dangling.

Good thing she was smart and gave up finding a decent man ages ago. If she hadn't seen more than enough guys that could act in love and cheat on their poor wives, he might be tempting even her. Darcy was no fool though, she knew a deadly poison when she saw it. Swallowing this man's lies would have about the same end as drinking potassium cyanide.

Loki held out a paper and slid over beside her to point out a section, his chest brushed against her shoulder very lightly, and she struggled not to tense. Her head nodded slowly as he spoke, following his long finger as it traced the line. Now she knew he was trying something! He might as well have been running his fingers in little circles on the curve of her back, and she intended to move away before he could try. It was obvious what this was and she was not a dumb little freshman in law school he could trick.

"What do you think, Ms. Lewis?" His eyes lifted to look into her face.

She had to crane her neck just to catch his eyes from this angle and the comment just slipped out before she could stop it, "You're taller than yesterday."

Loki blinked at her like he was deciding if he heard her correctly before he snorted and said, "Not since last I checked."

Darcy laughed self depreciatingly and took her chance to step away from him, "Sorry, I did not mean to say it aloud ... but you were at your desk most of the time yesterday so it just surprises me when you're closer." She grinned at him to make sure he did not notice her moving away, "People must get soar necks around you from looking up so much."

The smile he was wearing looked conspiratorial but more real than most she had been shown, "It never occurred to me to ask even though a lot more people than would like to do have to look up to me in more than just height."

Joking around was as much his element as hers, which gave her a little hope for him. "I'm sure."

"But," he prompted, "what do you think of my idea on location?"

She tipped her head slowly forward and let her eyes fall to his feet, "On the surface, it looks to have potential. I never like to decide until I have checked into it personally and researched the entire area first. You never know what hidden problem could arise unless you examine every angle. People looking to sell can hide any manner of things from a buyer." Her words had been so careful, not tipping her hand but sounding as intelligent as possible, while avoiding telling him that Tony might hate it because he had not found it.

"That can be true of a great many things." He chuckled dryly and left her wondering just how many meanings he had hidden behind that one phrase.

Both heads swiveled in the direction of the door when the tiny blonde walked in holding a tray with what looked to be lattes. Loki reached for the one nearest him without a word. Darcy snatched hers, or what she could only guess had to be hers, with all the desire of a true caffeine addict. It was warm
to the touch, even through the cute little cafe holder. The smell wafting from both cups was pure heaven and she just had to smile, bringing the cup to her chest like a mother with a lost child. Beautiful and comforting. She was surprised Loki let her have one, unless it wasn't his idea.

"Thanks, chica, you rock my world! You read my mind!" Darcy's smile faltered when she saw the incredulous look the two of them gave her.

Oops, that was a blunder. Professional, she had to be a big bad lawyer in here. She let the lure of his smiles and coffee relax her too much. A little warmth hit the tops of her ears but it did not hit her face, fortunately. She was with big, bad S.H.I.E.L.D. and they did not talk like a common person. She was only supposed to be business and lofty words to prove she knew what she was talking about. No one respected the cussing or slang here, it showed your education was poor. The high tempers did bring out cussing or slang, sure but she would always hear people mutter about it later. People judged harshly.

"Sure, not a problem." The girl finally muttered.

Darcy nodded and turned on her heels to put her back to both of them even as the girl left. She sipped her coffee and decided to pretend it never happened. That girl would start the talking about it, things like how she just found out the new girl was really just some poor scholarship student that got lucky, because she obviously talked like the every day teens on the street. Loki was bound to ruin her one way or the other. Or maybe she worried too much but worry and paranoia kept you alive in this world.

Which brought her full circle, back to her resolve last night to get a thing or two to use against Odinson if he decided to go for the kill. Weaknesses had to be hiding under that thick dragon hide of his, she just had to poke him to find them.

"Back to what we were discussing though, now that the proper fuel has been added to the mix." He said as he crossed to sit behind his desk. His quick, graceful fingers easily managed to find whatever they were looking for. His posture was almost languid as he sat in the kingly place, looking all too at home.

Darcy slowly moved in closer, but not so close as to crowd, and no where near as close as he had come to her. She watched him flick through pages and pictures of locations. Whatever he wanted to convince her of, he was working hard at it. That alone was enough to worry her. For having such an innocent interest in locations he was pitching hard if the pretty landscape flashing by was an indicator. There was no question he had a reason for suggesting that place.

"For the extension of Vanaheimr Production, I personally picked out this area." The screen showed a very lovely building that looked like the perfect place for Disney magic to happen, then clicked to show her what it became, which really was impressive - He had modernized an old structure to perfection appealing to old and new generations. He was a little too good and that worried her too.

"Vana Productions..." She mused aloud, "I have heard about them quite a lot in the recent years. They used to partner with your father."

His body instantly went from a relaxed pose to a stiff, tight posture, "That is correct."

"I heard that was a deal made ages ago by your father." Her eyes fixed on his profile as she said the next line, "I heard they tried to break off the deal with Asgard, gave you mountains of problems, because they refused to do business with anyone other than him, trust established and things like that. Everyone said that he operated on his genius mind and the alliances he formed over the years."
"The key to that story being how they tried to break it. The second key being how I now own over half of their establishment and it runs even better than it did while their outdated loyalty and systems held them in bondage." His green eyes flashed with controlled rage as he rounded on her suddenly, still seated but still managing to make her feel like she was looking up to him, "My father, Ms. Lewis, was an inexcusable coxcomb. He was obsolete and would have dragged this company to the ground. I saved it!"

There he was, the Loki she knew, full fledged. She finally got the familiar one back to the front. This guy had too many personalities swirling around. Darcy had to fight not to let the corners of her mouth twitch up. Weak spot number one found! Daddy issues! It sounded like he had some kind of complex going on there too, a spiny spot with regards to not taking his dad's greatness being compared to his very well. Not shocking with that ego. Score! She was gaining ground. This looked like a deep well of potential.

She absolutely had to explore this a little more, it could be her only chance, "Your brother did not seem to think so. From what I heard, he thought your father was indispensable to the company."

"Oh, you don't know the half of it!" If it was even possible, his eyes clouded even further with what she had to call pure ferocity. "My brother developed that ideology only after our father carved him down to the ground for an asinine, unauthorized deal he made that nearly destroyed the company." His voice sounded positively husky, "Before he was ground under that heavy heal he used to rave about taking over and changing 'the old fool's cowardly dealings'- his words- so don't think he always sang those praises! He only realized how much he needed our father's help when his imbecilic ways got him in so much trouble, kicked into the real world to see how far he had to go."

Weak spot number two already! She was on a roll! "Really? I had no idea. What deal did he make that caused such issues?"

A calm came over those chiseled-rock features so fast it was easy to question he had been angry at all, "It is history now, and as you pointed out to me early on, we do need to proceed with our current matters rather than past deals."

That had not been exactly what she said yesterday but she could roll with it; he was obviously good at twisting words to fit his individual needs ... like those kids that changed to rules in games any time they started to lag in points. "Oh, of course. Please continue. The building is lovely."

He smiled up at her and crossed his arms, but the smile was tight, "I think we could improve that location just as easily. The bones of it are good so we could simply alter it to fit our needs. It is better than building a totally new, cookie cutter building with no personality, do you not agree?"

Darcy smiled and nodded, "Indeed, I do."

Loki was cordial from then on, and he slowly eased himself back into the coy flirting, which she ignored for the most part. He was a charmer and that was a fact, but she was wise to flirting. Her ample chest made sure she knew a lot about men and their flirting styles. She could spot flirting from a miles distance. He was one of the best at making it seem unintentional she had ever met, even making her question herself more than once, but he was a player.

All his fines and striking intelligence made him so difficult to deal with. He exploited weakness for his own gain and played people like a stringed instrument and obviously knew his way around a woman. She would have trouble with him and she knew it, but as long as she did not let him predict her, she would be fine. He was a Casanova sort of man that could find his way into any bed he wanted, but not hers. It made her feel powerful to know she could avoid his lures and walk away with her pride and dignity at the end. She was not a notch in a bedpost, thank you very much, and
she was also not stupid!

Admittedly, she played with him in return, brushing against him innocently or even leaning over to look at papers to give him a peek at her bra. It gave her a few moments of thrill when she was sure he noticed. Playing games was not foreign to her either but she knew exactly where to draw the line, and snaps of tantalizing was where the line stopped.

Even though she was no expert she could tell he was a mess of bottled emotion and anger, bad things to get tangled with. If she said yes, she knew what it would look like; a lot of wine, empty flattery, and even more insider business pillow talk at the end, and Darcy ending up in a huge mess. Men were not as smart as they thought and they were never as charming as they believed. He might have had a very well made and cared for body with more than enough to keep a girl happy, but she had pride and self worth. Giving him that just handed over her power, which she was not planning on doing. He could try all he wanted but she was not that easy to fool.

She had other ways to stay in control too.

After going home for the night and realizing he had forgotten the Infinity project paperwork, he was forced to turn around and go back. All the way up in the lift he had been muttering to himself. The day had put him into a foul mood and this was just one more thing to add to the list. If the Lewis girl and Stark's impertinence was not bad enough, the other liaison for this project multiplied in exponentially. Too bad he really needed that deal, that patent and design. The last time he dealt with the other liaison had been an experience that he did not care to revisit but dealing directly with the client was worse.

The things he endured for a little power! Sometimes he was not sure it was worth it. But what else could he do? There were only two options in life; going up, or going down. He intended to go up and stay there, gazing down at his father, by whatever means needed. One day he would show that old man that he was a hundred times better than all of them. Some day, he would own all of their lives and they would bow to his whims.

The building was as deserted as it ever could be. He could hear a vacuum running somewhere, the low drone mundanely familiar. He had heard it many a night when he spent the late hours working in his office. The cleaning people were all that was in the building though, and they never really seemed to sleep, like ghosts inhabiting the place.

The smell of un-emptied trash from lunch made him crinkle his nose in disgust as he walked by the gathered cans of it.

Taking out his keys, he slipped them in and slid the bolt from home, twisting the knob and walking in. His heart jumped from his chest when his eyes landed on a figure silhouetted against his windows. For a minute he stood frozen, mind racing with questions of how that man got in and why. It was locked, he never forgot to lock his door and it had been locked when he walked through. Papers rustled as the older man looked up and smiled, flipping the pages like a fan. It took all his willpower, but Loki schooled his expression of shock to a bored, though annoyed one and walked the rest of the way in.

"I did not remember we had a meeting tonight." Loki's voice was calm but he kept a particular threatening edge to it.

"Your secretary must have forgotten to write it down." The old sandpaper, raspy voice crooned.

There was little point in turning on the light, so he left it off as he walked, shutting the door quietly.
Loki huffed through his nose and dropped his briefcase into a chair, "It would seem so." He said as he prowled forward, eyeing the papers in the other man's hand, "But I had come back for those papers. It is kind of you to have anticipated my need for them."

Loki held out his hand pointedly. The other man hesitated before smacking them into his waiting palm. He checked quickly over the pages to be sure none were missing. What more had been rifled through was an unknown subject. It was only a hope that he had arrived back in time to stop a lot of the exploration. Locks did not ever seem to hinder this ghost of a man.

"So, Loki, how does it go with Stark?" The dark, annoying voice prompted.

"It goes well. I have been making a lot of progress with the girl he sent. His cowardice in not dealing with me directly will be the first of many mistakes."

The old man laughed in such a way that it made Loki's chest tighten, "We are not interested in your conquests, boy, we only care about Stark's designs. Use the girl for your personal heater all you want so long as you get us what we want!"

His green eyes narrowed in anger, lips a thin line as he glared, "I will get everything you asked for and I will crush Stark while I'm at it. By the time I finish, he will beg to get a job in my office mail department."

Quiet steps moved the other man around the desk like a vulture circling a half dead animal, "You said something similar the last time you tried. My associate has been gracious to offer you a second chance."

"That was because your systems failed. I had to work against all his people alone." A calculating, devious smile played at the corners of his lips, forcing back the twinge of worry as he spoke, "Had you proved to be useful, it would have been done. As it was, I nearly had Stark and his merry band of fools. For failing to help, I think your employer owes me."

Rather than the expected reaction of anger, only dry laughter came as the other man strolled past him. Loki struggled to hold his ground and not flinch away as a badly wrinkled hand came to rest on his shoulder. He pointedly did not look into that face, feigning indifference but hiding the way his skin crawled with revulsion at the closeness.

He should never have gotten involved with them. The people that suspected he was dealing with darker business men were right, but to be fair, he had not really known what he was getting into until it was too late. It had been something of a self fulfilling prophecy, the people expected it of him so he expected to encounter it, seeking it out in some cases. They entered his life the moment he set his eyes on Stark and offered help for a small pittance of designs. The thought had been that if he was accused of it he might as well benefit from it. He thought with his wits it would be easy to manipulate the turn of things but he had soon found differently. Now they frightened him and made him question how long he could keep them under control before it was he that was being controlled. Now that he was going after Stark again, they had been contacting him, urging him on.
The call had come right after the Lewis girl sent him the file and now they were breaking into his office. Being bothered by them was not enough to make him stop his plans but it did make him wary. That power to make the world his would need to come soon so he could be the one making them nervous. Things like this just further instilled his need to gain an even higher place.

"Just get it done, Odinson."

Loki did not bother to watch him leave, he just glared at the windows until he heard the door click shut. A good chunk of time after was spent looking for listening devices or cameras. Paranoia might have played a part in his desperate searching but he was of the mind that it was true what they said; just because a person was paranoid did not mean people were not out to get them. In his case there were more than a few people out for his head so it seemed doubly true.

This one was not his only deal, he had many going all at once and not all of them were friendly. The call he was forced to step out for when the girl refused to leave was from one of his more nefarious associates and long time spy he used while his father had been the head of Asgard. That woman could not be trusted any farther than he could but she was good at what she did. Her seductive ways worked wonders on getting information from his dear brother.

After finding no strange devices he did feel a little silly but his heart was not quieted. He did not like the idea of anyone entering his space uninvited, it made him feel vulnerable and violated. It was unpleasant. He dropped into his chair, finally noticing his shaking hands. At least thing occurred during a time no one was around to see him behaving like a frightened child. He closed his eyes and willed himself to relax. Stress was something he could handle, he created it well enough for others so he could handle it himself. Panic was the first step to failure and he was no failure.

The phone on his desk made him jump to his feet, anticipating another intrusion or maybe that he missed a camera and this was the call to tell him they were watching.

He snatched the phone from the cradle and barked a hello.

"Um, Loki, it's me." A deep male voice answered slowly, "I tried your other number but you did not answer."

A growl was on his lips instantly, "For good reason! Had I not answered so quickly and looked at the caller identification, you would have had the same luck here."

"I guess my luck is still good then."

Loki sighed, deflating fast and dropped into his chair again, sighing out his answer, "What do you want?"

"We need to talk."

"Am I mistaken or are we not currently speaking?" Loki chuckled derisively.

"In person."

"No. I have nothing to say to you I have not already said."

"Please, Loki?"

Why he was sitting at this little late-night coffee shop was beyond him, somewhat. When he said yes to the pleading voice he seriously intended not to come, just leaving the idiot to sit here waiting all
night. Now he was the one sitting on a leather stool, hot mug in hand as he faced the wall. His foot tapped the metal bar of a foot rest impatiently as he childishly swiveled the stool back and forth - not really becoming of Asgard's top man but he doubted anyone knew he was in here.

Staying was a good strategy, he reminded himself. Considering the person he was meeting, one of the very consultants Tony used to thwart his plans, would be best watched carefully. Furthermore, meeting him would be a sign of goodwill to lull him into security, make him believe nothing was going on. Being nice was a good way to relax people. Besides, he might get a feel for what Stark was up to, or if he was pulling the old people together through this talk. Gathering information was the goal even if it was an unpleasant means to that end.

His face was blank of any expression besides total boredom but inwardly his mind was a chastising blaze. Strategy was only half, if that, of why he was here even if he would deny it to his last breath. He caved to that familiar puppy voice and he knew deep down why he had. His stomach was feeling the stress, all this at once was going to give him ulcers. No one would ever bring him to admit it but he knew deep down what his reasons were, guilt being one of the main ones. Being here and waiting was unpleasant and made the previous tension in his body worse.

Loki blinked a few times, tensing as he heard heavy steps and familiar gate heading his way. He did not bother to turn his head or move his gaze as a tall figure easily slid onto the stool beside him. Now that the caller was so close he questioned whether or not he even had to ability to look at him. It had been a long time since they had been in the same room, not since a confrontation in Stark's office. It was a conscious effort to keep his breathing steady and to look perfectly relaxed. He did not even flinch or jerk away when a large hand gently rested on his shoulder.

Finally, he turned his head to look at the blonde, "You're late."

A smile spread over the unshaven, virile face, "I'm not late, you are early per usual." His blue eyes fell to the floor for a minute before returning with the smile only a ghost, "Thank you for coming."

The hand was still resting on his shoulder but he was making no move to flee from it yet, "What did you want to see me about, Thor?"

The hand fell away to tuck a bit of choppy, jaw-length golden hair behind his ear, "How have you been? We have not seen each other in nearly a year, or perhaps more."

Loki shifted the stool toward his brother to drill him with a stare, "You are avoiding the question and that is never a good sign."

Chapter End Notes

If you thought that was the Other, you guessed right. I am still waiting for them to come after Loki like they promised. Don't think Thanos is going to let stuff slide so easily, you know? Not sure Marvel is going to take that anywhere or just let it go but in my mind, stuff would have happened. Thanos would be kind of an underworld type in modern day life so that is what he is. More Darcy and Loki ahead with some fun later, don't worry.
Loki opened the door slowly, brows crinkled together as he stepped through. It had been locked last night, he had been more than careful to lock it fully but it was open now. Not again, he did not want to find that man here again, once was more than enough. He felt tension rise inside him as he looked around the room, still quite unsettled from the intrusion during the night. It was morning now and he was in no mood at all for another visit so soon.

It was an instant temptation to pick up one of his swords from the display. Before he reached for one he finally saw her, scanning over his books like she had done a few days ago, the first day. He relaxed instantly upon seeing her, thankful for the better outcome.

She was wearing the exact same outfit as the first day, like she had forgotten to cycle through her others. She was as stunning as she had been the first day, perfectly sculpted and manicured. He would never concede thinking it aloud but it was no less a fact. Darcy was an alluring creature that was extremely easy to admire. It amplified the truth when she was staring at his treasured books in some odd, and maybe kinky way; like the way some men fancied teachers or librarians. He shoved the thought aside easily before but it was harder to do now.

He watched her for a minute in silence before he spoke, "I gather you are a reader like myself, Ms. Lewis?"

Darcy flinched, startled, and turned to look at him, "How was dinner?"

Loki frowned, "It would be breakfast." He paused, worrying his lower lip between his teeth as his eyes traveled over her, "But we have had this same conversation before."

Her eyes sparkled and she nodded, "Yes, we have, so you should change it. Try to be more friendly."

He watched her for a minute in silence before he spoke, "I gather you are a reader like myself, Ms. Lewis?"

Darcy flinched, startled, and turned to look at him, "How was dinner?"

Loki frowned, "It would be breakfast." He paused, worrying his lower lip between his teeth as his eyes traveled over her, "But we have had this same conversation before."

Her eyes sparkled and she nodded, "Yes, we have, so you should change it. Try to be more friendly."

His brows arched at her and he crossed his arms, "Should I? What should I say instead, Ms. Lewis?"

She shifted her weight so that her back rested smoothly against the shelves. "You could tell me how
good I look standing in front of all these expensive books of yours." The playful smile made him want to smile back, which he found himself doing.

A long sigh hissed past his teeth as he looked her over from the top of her head to the tips of her shoes, lingering longer in some places than others, "You do. The way you ran your fingers over the books so tentatively the last time caused me to wish I could be one of them. It is rare for me to be caught off guard like that. The passion in your eyes made me want to spin you around, pin you against my shelves and take you right there." He was never usually so honest, something was wrong with him.

A red tint swept her cheeks as she looked at him from under hooded lids, "Did it make you hot to imagine it?"

His breathing was already uneven as he watched her unbutton the top two buttons of her blouse with one hand to show the deep dipping v of her cleavage, caressing the books up and down with the other, "Yes." A shiver went up his spine as he moved in closer. "It took a great deal of self control not to act on my wishes."

"What would happen if you let loose?"

He took a few steps forward, eyes glued to her seductive stare, knowing she was pulling him in, "How did you get into my office?" The tone of his voice deepened with their shortening proximity. "And what sort of a game are you playing with me?"

"Game?" She asked coyly.

"Yes, you have been trying to distract me from the very first." He narrowed his eyes at her to indicate a challenge, daring her to refute his point.

Tipping her head, she smiled, "Maybe, but you have been trying to seduce me so I would tell you what you wanted to know. You wanted to wind me around your hand and convince me to do what you wanted."

"How would you know that?" He sneered as he again stepped closer.

"I just know. You have never been as clandestine as you thought." She countered.

"I overthrew my father." He squared his shoulders proudly, chin level.

"Because he underestimated you."

Loki's hands were coiled into her soft hair in the next breath, staring down dangerously into her eyes, "He always has, but I really don't want to talk about that right now."

"You never want to talk about it at all. You always avoid conversations that hurt you, but it doesn't change how it feels." She was unaffected by his closeness while he was very much so. She needed to stop talking.

To silence her, he cupped the back of her head and locked his mouth over hers. It was not a slow kiss, it was open mouthed and insistent. He was already breathing harder through his nose, pinning her to the shelves with his body. His hips rolled into her and he groaned, not even aware how aroused he was until this point. She did not push him away so he continued, swaying against her and clinging to her. He wanted to do this the minute he saw her that first night, wanted to have her against the shelves. It was dirty and he knew it but he wanted it all the same.
She moaned as if knowing his thoughts and he buried his face in the crook of her neck and into her thick hair. He was past knowing what he was doing, just grinding against her in a wanton haze of need. With his face pressed so hard into her hair he could hardly even breathe but he did not care in the slightest. He did not even notice the world around him and he was vaguely aware that something was wrong with the situation considering he knew for a fact he would never really do this. This was out of character for him. This was all too careless of him; he was better than this. He never publicly lost control of his senses but he was in no frame of mind to care.

His vision was blurry and splotchy as his eyes flew open, a cry on his lips as his back arched in reflex to the sensations slamming in his brain. Shivers of strange delight and electricity slithered over him as he tried to grasp why. Loki was panting hard as he lifted his face away from the suffocating valley of his goose down pillow, lids blinking rapidly as he tried in desperation to orient himself. His fingers were locked tightly into the fabric, clutching the pillows for dear life. His elbows raised him up enough that he could comfortably not die of air loss as he shook his head to clear the dust he felt there from that-

Flipping onto his back he groaned in frustration. He had dreamed about that stupid girl and he ... how could he have been dreaming about her like that? She was Stark's spy! She was beneath him! What was wrong with him? Little wonder it was so strange! Even in the dream he knew there was something wrong. That would never happen in a normal setting. He would never behave that way and he doubted she would either.

He would never, ever ... His hands shot to cover his face like it might save him from his own whirlpool of humiliation.

His long legs shifted, knees bending and he froze, noticing the sleep pants felt suspiciously wrong, warm and uncomfortable. Hesitantly, he glanced down. Had he really ... yes, yes he had! A snarl bit into the quiet of his room and he slammed his fist into the dresser beside him, utterly furious. Was he fourteen, really? Was he a teenager again for mercy sake, spilling over a dream? This was the absolute limit!

That rotten woman! He was not at all sure how he was going to face her after this. At least she did not know about it, that was all the saving grace he had to cling to in the matter. But now he needed to change and obviously launder his sleepwear.

It was a pity, a tragedy they were marooned inside on such a sunny day. Darcy was not so much an outdoors kind of girl but on days where the sun was beaming and birds were singing, it just seemed wrong not to go outside. It was perfect to go and spread a blanket in the grass and bring a book. Then again, she generally had good intentions about going outside until she walked out the door and remembered sunny days meant a lot of heat, at which point she would inevitably head for shade or go back inside.

Not to mention she usually got a sunburn on occasions she did sit in the sun and read. She was more of an inside, computer person.

At least Loki had big windows so it was as good as being outside, if not better, because there was cool air inside.

She tugged at the edges of her cute little blazer, making sure it was hanging the way it was supposed to. There were small, pink little bows at the end of the hem on each side in the front that made it just a touch girly without being in anyone's face. It was unbuttoned because she liked the look of this one best that way. Some jackets looked best open. It made her seem less formal that way too, like she was relaxed about everything even though she was not.
As Darcy strolled into the familiar office at her usual time she had to wonder exactly what version of him she would find today. He must have an entire closet dedicated to the masks he wore for people and occasions. The ink haired master loomed where he always was, behind that desk. If the tight smile he shot her was to be believed, she predicted nice Loki. Good, she needed that today.

He watched her come toward him with an unusual wariness. She felt he was even less happy to see her today than most days but he was hiding it. Her chest tightened like it normally did when she took a good look into those eyes though; she decided the forecast might have mild showers of angry Loki too. There was a darkness behind that soft smile that never failed to remind her that she was with the enemy.

"How is the day treating you so far, Mr. Odinson?" She let a wide smile perk up her features to try to quell her apprehension.

"It is going well," He said the last part so quietly she almost did not hear the, "all things considered."

There was a tightness to his entire body that, upon a closer look, she could not help seeing, "I relayed your suggestions to Mr. Stark last night and he sent me with these for you." The papers dangled from her fingers as she held them out like an olive branch. "He liked your suggestions on location but he also wanted to show you a few that he discovered to compare the advantages of all of them."

"You mean he hated it and wanted to see if he could sway me onto something he liked." Loki chuckled derisively and slid the papers from her hand.

"No." She shook her head, curls swaying over her cheeks, "He liked it. He said you have quite an eye for property potentials. He said you would be able to see if these locations had any merit to them, if anyone could." Those had not been his words but she could twist meanings as well as either of them could.

His green eyes lifted to hers and he grinned secretively, "Well, if he really wants me to look them over, it could not hurt."

"If not for this project, you might show him things for ones in the future. You never know."

His lips twitched in a near smile as he read and glanced over pictures and blueprints.

Oh yeah, she was smooth! That went over just fine! No anger needed to be stirred into the mixture at all. She was a peace goddess ... hopefully. The fact that she defused his irritation, or hoped she had, made her stand a little taller. Business owners or not, she could still stroke their egos the right way and make this work. She studied for this kind of thing and she would use it. Wording was power and spin to that was key, everything was about spin.

"By the way, have you had a chance to look over the fourth section of my revised counter offer? You work more closely with Stark than I ever will so I did wonder if you thought he would be willing to offer some of his ... gadgets to the new building?" Loki seemed so disdainful, nose crinkling and upper lip curling just a little when he brought up Tony's inventions, which raised the question of why he would want to have them in the production if he thought them inferior.

Darcy shuffled through her other pages quietly, "What items did you have in mind for the production?" Like a stray feather, one of her papers floated lazily from the stack to land by her foot.

"I have heard he has been working on several new items lately," He slipped off his chair in a smooth, surprisingly graceful motion and snatched up the page before looking up, "So..."

She watched him as he seemed to freeze in place before her, eyes fixed on the hem of her skirt before
they nervously darted over her and back up to her eyes several times. Her first reflexive thought was that she spilled coffee somewhere and had not noticed it but a fast glance down told her otherwise. The strange expression on his face took her mind several turns to place, it was only when she looked more deeply into his eyes that it dawned on her what was happening. Her eyes widened a fraction. 

_No way! _There was no way! He could not have been thinking what she thought he was. Not this man!

A hint of color dusted his cheeks as he rose quickly, head turning away to stare sidelong at the windows, handing her the fallen item like it was burning his fingers. Oh, he thought it alright, he so thought it! Not good! Her stomach flipped with discomfort and unease as she realized she was correct and everything they had just been talking about was long out of her head. Awkward did not even begin to describe realizing what passed through those few seconds of his pause on his knees.

She did not need this! Maybe she brought in on with the flirting stuff but, in fairness, he started that little game. It might have gone too far though.

Panic swirled in her as she waited in desperation for him to continue speaking so she would have an idea what to say. She needed to know what he was going to say or there was no way she could pull this out and save what little composer she had left. It had always been her skill to play off these kinds of things, act dumb, play innocent, redirect and shift topics harmlessly into safe waters but without any idea what they had said before she was rudderless. Midstream changes were too obvious.

"What—what were your thoughts?" His voice was almost faltering, but he hid it so well she could easily pretend not to notice.

_Perfect._ The way he said it and his choice of words made her very sure he no longer remembered what they had been speaking of either. He passed it to her in an act of desperation. So he got desperate too, she could remember that and tuck it away for later.

She glanced at her papers but she could not think what she had been in search of only a minute before so that was no help. Her mind was spinning like an overhead fan, trying desperately to conjure a topic to shift into. Her head cocked to the side in a thoughtful manner, as if thinking over his question, but she was just plotting her next move to escape.

Things like this happened to her more often than she ever thought they should but it generally could be saved. She was good at this, she could give them both an out and ensure they could plod on normally. A little playing at obliviousness went a long way because everyone could back out if the other party thought she was too dense to understand what they had done or said. No one had nailed her down yet and she was not breaking her streak. She could not let this sink her considering they still had to work together.

"Well, I suppose we should consider all side of the matter. What is good for you as well as Stark Industry ... you two should both be satisfied with the outcome of it." She paused, holding one finger up as if an idea occurred to her from the great beyond as she hurried away from him, "Speaking of, I wanted to ask you if you thought we should revise the current systems administration or not. Your company uses one format while Stark's uses another. It is a small matter but when we consider the employees it can add up to more. I am sure that Tony would like to continue with his, but I did think, if you had objections, we could find middle ground."

Loki looked measurably relieved for the change and he nodded amiably, back to the calmness she was getting used to. "I am more than happy to take his ideas into consideration. I have heard his employees feel that particular method is efficient. I have never considered it myself but I see no reason not to now."
That was a nice save! Darcy nodded and abandoned her pages for new ones in her bag. She was switching directions and she was just thankful she was distanced from him and that she had a path to follow. Master-subject-redirection-Darcy struck again and saved the day! Good thing she had a subject to switch to. Stark was good for something! She was never good at floundering and she always tried to move past those moments with a quickness.

The way he watched her pull out the folder spoke volumes. He was deciding if she was acting or if she had really not seen the way he looked at her. Stage acting had never been her hobby but maybe it should have been. The way his stance relaxed told her he had decided he was safe. Playing the innocent little new girl paid off on some occasions.

After talking further and going over yet more paperwork as if nothing out of ordinary transpired, they settled into a normal lull. Darcy was thankful for normal when it came to this man. Normal meant he was not raging or trying to flirt with her, though he was never not trying to trick her, she would take what she could come by and run with it. The normal moments kept her mind from breaking.

An interruption in the form of a ringing phone brought them each to a stop as he picked up his private line and shoved his papers haphazardly at her.

Worry began to stir in her anew once he answered. The way his shoulders tensed and jaw set told her he was not keen on the caller. His tone became hushed and thick with menacing even as he stepped out of the room to speak in private, shutting the door and leaving her alone. It unnerved her to feel that rage spike in him because she was never sure it would not come her way. He was so moody and changeable. People were afraid of him for a reason.

Darcy sighed as she dropped into his chair, sorting through her papers to organize them. Being with that guy felt like being on a carnival ride without a seat belt. He drained her by just being in the room, but when he left her alone she was left to worry about what manner of mood she would face when he came back. She could relax, slouch, and swing her feet when he was gone but it just did not make her feel at easy. She could remember dreading the return of few people the way she did his, but the ranking ones would have been her crazy high school math teacher that still lived in his glory days in the army.

She needed to lighten that guy up somehow.

Parts of being here were fun, she would admit. He had a sharp humor that she did enjoy if it was not directed at her. There was a fun sort of charm to him that she could have basked in if he were just a little more relaxed and a lot less Jurassic Park raptor peeking in the kitchen door. She had a feeling he would be the fun guy in a party as long as he was happy. He must have been the class prankster as a kid too, she just knew it. If he could pull out that fun side more he would be easier to endure. The phone call face of his did not testify to fun though.

And she still had to go see Stark after this. There were times she was not sure it was worth it.

The wall thumped with the force of his back connecting with it as he sagged, phone dangling in his fingers. Listening to that voice was grating on him even more than it normally did. He did not want to hear from this man after last night, he did not even want to be a part of their little club meetings any more. They were not even helpful, just demanding. He was not their employee!

To say that he felt anything better than exhaustion last night would be an atrocious lie. He hardly remembered getting home or how he got there, he simply knew he ended up there after his long hours working on both his pressing cases after the ghost left. His sleep had been fitful too, and then there was that dream he awakened to.
Loki had seen fit to test a new strategy with her the day before, which could have been the catalyst for his problem. It was the best he had come up with as a reason. Intimidation had not worked so a flexible man like himself could adjust. He knew he had to lull her into a relaxed state, a place where she would let him be her master and let him morph and move her how he desired, so he was willing to try a little flirting. It had worked on more seasoned women than her so an innocent little girl should have been easy to sway with a bit of charisma. Women were weak to light brushes of contact, well-timed soft spoken words, or fleeting, innocently seductive glances across the room.

She surprised him again though, which was becoming an irritating trend. She did not melt, throw herself at him humiliatingly in a moment of lust he could blackmail her with, she did not even blush. After his careful effort it really had perturbed him. Furthermore, she had the unmitigated gall to talk down to him about his father, of all things! Apparently his mind did not take defeat well ... so it manufactured a receptive audience. Curse it all!

He mistakenly thought his mind would be merciful after that but he was wrong to think so. He thought he could push the dream about her away as he did with most other things but seeing her dressed in a button up shirt that was just a little tight in the chest, her sweet little smile, and the perky little spring in her step was all his mind needed to send him down the path to ruin.

An unsuspecting employee entered the hallway, not even noticing him in the shadows. A primal sounding snarl from his lips alerted them quickly enough, wide eyes finding him and feet carrying them swiftly out of his territory. Unfortunate soul. He might have to fire them later, if he could find out who it was. His workers should know not to enter his area for any reason. Some people compared him to a tiger or beast of prey and he could not really argue against it. Being feared was best in most situations and very helpful when he needed to be alone.

It had not been on his mind when he bent down; for a change he was being a kind, picking up her paper. The thought had come completely unbidden, but flood his mind it had. He had no idea why but it flustered him instantly the second he looked up from that position. Everything he had been saying was lost on his tongue. A lot of mental pictures rose up in his mind when he locked eyes with her from his place on his knees. He was just glad he had not actually reached for her. He was not sure how long he had stayed like that but it could not have been long.

To be sure he did not try to act on anything he had been quick to stand but he could not even begin to think what he had been saying and he knew how desperately he needed to cover. She did not act as if she knew what he had been thinking but there was something in her eyes and he was afraid she had connected the dots.

Nothing really embarrassed him but even he could feel the heat in his cheeks for a minute. That did not help at all. She did not say a word to indicate she knew, mercifully changing the subject for both of their sake, but he had been tense the entire rest of the time. Now he did not want to go back into his own office. Maybe he could send her home early?

"Loki, are you listening to me?" The voice rasped impatiently, made even worse by the mild static on the line.

"Yes." He snapped back, "And I have told you that I'm making progress! She has the plans with her today and she has been showing me. I was in the process of getting more out of her when you called. If you would stop bothering me I might get things done more swiftly!"

"She has the plans with her?" Now he sounded interested.

"I don't know, we have been going through various ones for the new location. There are several different ones we have yet to touch on. Some of them might be the ones, so please stop bothering me
and let me work!" Loki ended the call with an angry push at the screen, tempted to throw it.

He was livid! The girl was bothering him, his unsightly "associate" was bothering him, and his brother had bothered him as well. People needed to leave him be! He could easily have thrown something out the window and not even felt bad about it until later. Later was the problem though and he was not about to let anyone know he was ready to explode. Everything was happening at one time and he knew that played a large part in his problem as well but there was little he could do about it.

It was going to be a while before he could go back into his office.

The heels of Darcy's shoes clipped over the cement stairs, hand sliding lightly over the railing. The elevator was too slow today so she saw no better way to calm her nerves than a little walking in the silent stairwell. No one ever came in here so it seemed the perfect place to be. Lifts were always crowded and she was done with people for a while. Loki was enough people for a lifetime.

If business shark Loki and nice Loki had been a shock to her, shy and quiet Loki was even more. Her first day had been one for being pointedly ignored but this was of a different nature entirely. He never looked her in the eye after the incident, avoiding looking at her like they were in high school. He would look anywhere in the room but at her even when she was talking directly to him.

He reminded her of a twelve year old boy that lived down the hall from her a few years ago. The kid never looked at her but spoke to her frequently and nearly shadowed her whenever she was outside her apartment. At first she thought there was something wrong with that kid but his mother eventually informed her of what was really going on. After that she finally noticed that he did look at her, just at her chest, and when she caught him at it he would turn the deepest shade of red.

Loki had blushed today too. It was the most awkward thing she had ever been in the middle of, or in the top five, but as she walked down the steps all she could do was smirk. The expression on his face was about as close to priceless as she had ever seen. He looked so ashamed and humiliated at having thought it, then horrified that she might have noticed, and then desperate when the heat lit up his cheeks. Too bad she did not have a camera out.

To think such a thought would even occur to a man like that was strange. Kneeling for her was just not something she would have expected his mind to bring up. It was more humorous than it should have been and she was almost pleased with herself.

At the time, she did not want to deal with the ramifications of noticing and did not want to create even more problems in the work environment than already existed so she gave them both an out. Besides, he looked so helplessly trapped it was a bit cute and he looked so young in that instant that she did not have the heart to make him feel worse.

Her steps hitched when she saw a teenager leaned up against one of the stairwell doors, hoodie up over his face, arms crossed, and head down. A small voice in her head told her she should make a run back up and slip out the nearest door but her feet kept moving her down. It was probably just some kid waiting for a parent to get off of work. It was not as if she owned the stairs.

Her grip on the bag strap hanging on her shoulder tightened and she held the railing with more force as she kept walking. Her eyes watched him carefully but he did not even move. There were headphones hanging out of his ears and she guessed he did not even notice her. There was no reason to be afraid of a teenager, she carried a taser anyway.

Inconspicuously she unzipped the front pocket of her bag just in case she needed to reach for it. It
would be simply enough to shock him if he tried to grab her. In fact, she could use some target practice after a day with Loki! Bring it on, little boy! Punk!

Chin up, shoulders back, standing even taller, she marched past the still motionless teen and kept right on going.

The world suddenly blurred and she felt nothing but a pain in her head. Darcy shifted her body on the cement landing and there was a lot more in a lot more places. Her back was killing her and her shoulder was on fire, and her knee, and her ankle, and her leg. Wait, her mind hitched with questions. Why was she on the ground, head awkwardly held up by a step? Why was that kid walking down the steps toward her? Was she really on the ground?

She tried to sit up as he came closer but she really only shifted again. It was cold. Had she slipped? Did her heal break on the steps? Why didn't she know? Had she screamed? Did anyone know she fell? Was he coming to help her?

He stepped over her like she was trash on the ground and she groaned in protest, swiping weakly at his leg in hopes of tripping him. To her foggy dismay, she did not even come close to hitting him as he passed her without so much as a glance, scooping up her bag on his way down the stairs. Her minds eye focused on a few random points, like the Nike mark on the sleeve. She watched through blurry eyes as he vanished from her sight and a door banged open and hissed closed.

Darcy frowned as something moist and warm slid down her face and dripped onto the stony ground. That guy, her sluggish brainpower realized, just stole her bag. Could he just do that? This was a business building! People were not supposed to go around taking bags from girls on stairs! Oh, she was on the stairs, right.

This feeling reminded her a little of the time her roommate in college got her totally drunk out of her skull as a prank. Darcy had not taken more than a glass of anything ever again after that, the memory of the feeling and the hangover so bad she never cared to repeat it.

Her hand reached up to cradle her head and she felt how wet it was there. Maybe he dumped coffee on her too since it felt so hot. Except it was red when she pulled her hand away again. That was not coffee.

It was not coffee at all.

It did not frighten her like it should have. She did not really feel anything besides the aches and she did not like those. She needed to stay still for a while and she would be alright. Just a little rest would fix it. The floor was really cold so that should help.

Darcy sagged back, eyes drifting lazily to the ceiling and the light behind the cage. It must be going out because the room was getting darker. Oh, no, that was her, she was getting darker. Then the light went out.

Chapter End Notes

Cliffy! There you go! Tried not to put any business lingo in it, just skipping over or brushing over it. Hope you enjoy the awkward moments!
The dream thing was supposed to be strange, it was a dream and I was trying to make it out of character because no one is normal in dreams. She was also his subconscious in there, not real Darcy. The title "Slip" is as much for Loki, if not more, than for Darcy.
It was darker in here than it had been a few minutes ago. Wait, no, her eyes were closed. Struggling, directing her focus on her eye lids, they finally fluttered. It felt like they were sewn together, at least one side did. Her left eye opened but the right eye stayed as it was. The lashes hurt like they were being pulled when she struggled with it.

Her fingers slowly found her eye and rubbed gently at it. Her lashes were stuck together. She might have to see a doctor about this. There was having a little sleep in your eyes in the morning, and then there was having the crusty stuff caked all over your eyes. Maybe it was infected. The skin felt strange, too thick and unpleasant. She licked her fingers to get the moisture and persisted.

A bit more rubbing finally got her eye open even though flashes of color and traveling dots were all she saw at first. Her heart dropped to touch her spine when she looked at her fingers, dry flecks of red covering them. Her eye was bleeding! She was in a horror movie where eyes started to bleed! Forget the doctor, she needed a specialist!

A low cry of pain erupted from her as she sat up far too quickly, her spine screaming at her. That really hurt! She really hurt! And a look around the room told her that she was not in her bed but some part of her mind had known that before now. The numbness in her skin made it so she could hardly tell what she was on but moving made sure she knew she did not like it.

This was a landing. This was not even her apartment building, those steps were wooden. She could feel how cold her limbs were and she shivered, only making her groan again from the new pain it stirred.

Where was her bag? She needed her bag.

Wait, she remembered, her bag was gone. That punk took it after she fell. A rotten little brat that did not even help her! She would hunt him down and beat him up for that later or she was not a Lewis! Punks did not go around taking a Lewis girl’s bag and leaving them on the stairs! The Lewis girls were raised tougher than that.

Not that she felt too terribly tough at present, she felt more like a new born cat that had been thrown under a bus. She was shaking from the cold and from the pain all over her. Even sitting still made her hurt. It was so much worse than how she felt during a really bad cold, the ones where the whole body just ached, and you wished you would die so you could feel better.

When she clenched her fingers that hurt too. The joints ached and the knuckles of one were scuffed and bloody. Her really, really hated it when her hands got hurt, that was one of the worst things in life because you could not even write when your hands hurt.
Not eager for more pain, she did not even bother to touch her head. There was blood on her jacket, she observed with irritation; this was one of her favorites. Her stomach twisted when she noticed there was even more on the step and floor. How much had she lost?

Darcy slowly turned her head, neck creaking in her ears like an old door, to look around her. No one was around even though she called out a few times to test it. There were no sounds other than hers, she was on her own. Fine, she could take that! She was no weak little thing! She would walk out of this with her chin up! It could not be that hard.

A sharp gasp left her lips when she slid her legs around to get them in a position to stand. They hurt, they burned like molten lava was in her blood coming from her ankle and knee. Tears stung her eyes but she blinked them down. Forget standing, forget walking out, chin up or down. No standing for her.

It might be easier to slide herself down the steps but a glance that way made her wary of falling again. Gravity might make going down easier but it might make it too easy. If she got dizzy on the trip down it might end badly. Crawling up the steps to the other door might be safer because she could be like a worm and stretch rather than like a slinky and fall. Yeah, no slinky stair travel for her again, once was too many. She hurt enough and did not want more.

A deep breath of cool air hit her lungs but did not make her feel any better. The floor was so cold it hurt even more to stay on it so she shifted to her other side before scooting up the steps. She hissed in irritation as her knees loudly protested being used. Her bones sounded like she was seventy!

She could do this! Her feet struggled and legs shook but after a good few minutes they were under her. She used the steps to crawl her way into a straighter position, clinging to the rail like a toddler learning to walk. Her breathing was coming in gasps after only that much and she was not even standing, just half kneeling, half leaning over the stairs.

She rested her hands on the steps, waiting for her heart to settle so she could begin the crawl. Her head was pounding and she could feel her pulse in her temples. Black clouded her vision a bit too quickly for her liking. The annoying feeling similar to snot running down her nose was on her forehead now and she knew she was bleeding again. Her arms were shaking like flowers in the wind and she felt the horrible sensation of bile rising in her throat. She was going to be sick. For how drained and lightheaded she felt she should have just climbed Everest!

Maybe she couldn't do this. Either way she went, the doors were about the same distance apart: too damn far! No, she needed a new plan unless she magically healed herself so she sank back down and let herself drape over the steps. It hurt, the edges pressing into her tender ribs, and she moaned. It had never really been in her to whine and cry when she was hurt. Normally she just held her breath, but right now she could not hinder the whimpers coming from her chest. She hurt and she was stuck helplessly in an empty stairwell with no way out. She growled through the whimper in defeated frustration and rested her head gently on a part of the step that caused the least pain.

Stupid stairs! She was never taking them again!

All she wanted was to get out of them! Other places would be easy to move around in. After she was out she could get a cab and crawl into an elevator, which would lead her to her apartment and her tub. She needed a bath and in nice hot water and then she would be fine. A good long soak would be enough.

Her eyes widened as she spotted a beautifully familiar item in the very corner to the landing, pushed up and on its side like a stranded lifeline.
"Please, please, please be alive, baby! Mommy needs you! Don't be broken!"

Gingerly she eased herself down all the way and scooted very slowly over to it. Her bag had landed there and it must have fallen out. She remembered unzipping the pocket. Her taser was kept in that pocket but she almost always slipped her phone in that one too. Now she was desperately, sickeningly glad she did.

Her fingers wrapped around her phone like she had just found a treasure she had been searching for her entire life. It had a few dings in it but it was alive! There was a God! He did still hand out miracles! She would have to remember to say a prayer of thanks after this was over, seriously!

When she pushed to button the screen came to a bright life. It told her the date and the time, just like it always did!

She nearly cried again when she saw her old friend and shocker down on the next landing; plus a pen, but she did not care about the pen. That friend would have to wait for her though, the phone was what she needed now.

The question was who to call. Who could come in here? It was 6:45 now and she left Odinson's office at 5:30.

She felt dizzy all over again. She had been in here that long? It did not seem that bad but her phone never lied to her.

Loki might have gone home right after her, and a lot of people would have left too, left for dinner if they planned to come back at all. There might not be anyone in the whole building. She only had Loki's office number, not his cell number. If he was not in the office she was not sure what she would do. That secretary of his always left for dinner at six so there might not be anyone to answer that phone.

All she could do was try. If he was there maybe he could help her out of here. Getting her coffee would not hurt either, that would be enough to give her the energy boost she needed to get home. She really needed to get home. He could help her. If he refused she would just call her baby sister and she would yell at him in her scary way, then he would help her. That girl was great but she was a freaky little thing when she wanted to be, pulled off crazy like she owned all the stock on it.

The phone ring buzzed in her ear and made her cringe. She hated that sound!

"Loki Odinson." A bland, irritated sounding voice answered after a terminally long bunch of rings.

"Hey! You're still there!" She smiled, relaxing against the wall, "I was afraid you might not be."

"Ms. Lewis? Did you forget something?"

"Nope, but I could really use a favor." Darcy noticed her speech was slow and a little slurred so she focused harder on forming the words on her lips, squeezing her eyes shut in concentration, "See, I'm in your stairs right now. I think I'm not going to be able to get out." She trailed off for a minute, humming a whine as her head span, "I was going home but then there was this kid on the stairs and I think he pushed me, maybe... I... it's fuzzy. I dunno but I fell, see, and-"

"You fell?" Loki interrupted, sounding much less lethargic than before.

"Yeah." Her anger spurred her on, "Yeah, and that little punk stole my bag! He straight up took it! There were...are laws, you know!" She whined again and let herself slide back down to the floor as the pain in her head increased, "I don't feel so good. My head... I think it's going to fall off."
The floor dropped out from under him quite suddenly as he listened. She sounded drunk and he could hardly understand her, he had to listen carefully to each word. He was out of his office the minute he heard the terrible word "fell" and he was swishing through doors as quickly as he could without running. If he heard her right, someone attacked her on the stairwell.

If she had been leaving when she was attacked that meant she had been down there quite a while. That was a lot of time for an attacker to do a lot of things. For all he knew she was bleeding to death in his building. He would never live that down, a young girl killed right under his nose! Not a good thing to have on any resume.

And ... he could not say he really wanted her to die anyway. He did not really want to ask how badly she was hurt for fear of the answer. She sounded like she was crying now so he needed to get her talking. Her head hurt so that meant head trauma, possibly a concussion, so he needed her to keep talking.

"What floor are you on? Which level?"

"I... dunno. I just want to go home." She mumbled into the phone, but she was sounding farther away.

"Above the doors, there are numbers. Tell me what number you are close to." He was trying to sound commanding so she would do ask he asked.

"I don't know. Everything is too far away. I don't remember."

If this was a prank he would strangle her when he found her. He really did hope it was a stupid prank though. It was not funny at all, but he would rather it be a lie. A few rare, brave souls tried to pull of tricks against him every once in a while, which was a poor choice. Thor was usually the one that cajoled people into trying to match wits with him.

"Listen, Darcy, I'm coming to find you, so just sit still, understand?"

"Yeah, I am. I already tried to leave earlier and it didn't work too great." The phone clacked loudly in his ear like she dropped it but she was back a minute later, "When you come, could you help me get a cab? Is there still coffee, do you think?"

Loki was in the stairs, his feet a blur as he descended. He was being quick but he was also being careful not to end up joining her in her predicament. "Alright, we can look for coffee in a little while."

Several flights down and he spotted her over the railing. His stomach dropped to his toes when he saw her curled up on the ground. He moved even faster now as he stared down at his target, assessing it as he came closer. There was something on the steps that he had a very bad feeling was blood. He gasped when his foot connected with something and sent it flying. It flew down the steps and rolled to a full stop before he realized it was one of her shoes.

That was at least a full flight worth of a fall if her shoe was an indicator. People died from falls like that. Loki slowed, suddenly afraid to know what he was about to find below. He could see her just fine from this distance and he was not keen on more. She heard him though and slowly turned her head toward him. The right side of her face was streaked with blood, her jacket was ripped from the seam at the sleeve, her hair was a mess and bunched in her face.

"Hey..." She smiled up at him, a bloody gash on her lower lip making it look painful.
Before he even realized he moved, he was kneeling beside her, not sure where to touch her or if he should try, "Darcy."

There were big, ugly bruises already marring her legs. Her skin was so pale in comparison. Her skirt was bunched up higher than would have been comfortable and he was instantly worried about what more than a fall and stolen bag could have happened since she left his office. He was afraid to ask. Very carefully he let his hand rest on her arm. She was trying to look at him but her eyes rolled, obviously unfocused. "Where do you hurt?" His timid sounding voice surprised him but she did not seem to notice.

"All over." She muttered softly, "My head hurts. I want to go home." Her blue eyes pinned him with a pitiful stare, "Please, could you help me get home?"

"Soon. First we need to see how badly you are hurt. I can take you to a hospital, and then home." He knew he should have phrased that differently the minute it left him because there was a sheen of fear in her eyes.

She started trying to sit up and he began to panic, "No, no, no." He crooned, moving closer, "Just stay still."

Darcy however, did not stay still, she was determined to sit up. She was starting to realize she was hurt more seriously than she thought, he could see it in her eyes. He was not helping the situation, he was sure she had seen the apprehension in his face. Comforting people had never been his strength; terrifying, but not so much calming.

He slid in quickly, shifting fully onto the floor and tugging her against his chest so he could hold her still. She tried to wriggle away from him but he held her in with both arms gently circling her. There was no way to know how badly she was injured but anyone could tell she should not be thrashing.

His mother knew how to comfort her sons when they were hurt. If she were here with Darcy she would know exactly what to do, she would be calming her down like an expert, not saying the wrong things. Thor said Loki was more like their mother but Loki had never agreed. They were similar in some ways but she had people skills he never would. True, he could talk Scrooge into buying five mansions to house the homeless, but when it came to tenderness he found he was lacking. People trusted his mother because she was kind.

Loki licked his lower lip, a bad habit he had when he was thinking out of his element, "Darcy, relax. It's alright." He needed to think of what his mother would do. "You're cold, aren't you? Why don't you just sit with me for a minute and let me warm you up a little? I will take my jacket off and you can use it."

Darcy stilled and tipped her head back, laying it on his arm as he held her up, "No way."

Loki frowned, "Why not?"

"You'll stick me with your dry cleaning bill."

He could not help laughing, just glad to hear she had not lost her senses completely, "Do you think I would do that?"

"I know you would!" She crinkled her brows and stared up into his face, "You smell good though, like oranges and wood chips. Better than Pledge though, not like that, more expensive."

He huffed an airy chuckle, grinning at her, insanely relieved because jokes he could deal with, "Do I? I'll make sure I wear this every day you are here then, as long as you promise to wear that stuff
"Hairspray?"

"No, no, the perfume." He needed to keep her talking till he knew what to do with her. "What were you wearing?"

She might have been joking and still her sarcastic self, but she was not well and good. Her eyes were glassy and unfocused. Judging by the hideous gash on her head he was very sure she had a concussion. There could be any number of broken bones but the bleeding wound on her head was the most obvious issue.

It would be faster if he just drove her to the hospital. If he was careful, he could get her to his car and take her there himself.

"That was my ginger stuff. I can't remember it's name." She shifted slightly in his arms and winced, sounding strained when she spoke again, "But my friend’s cat hates it. She always bites me when I go there and have it on."

"Well, wear it tomorrow so you can tell me the name."

She reached a battered hand up and clutched at his lapel, "I'm tired... I need some coffee to perk me up. Can we get some?" Her eyes widened and she groaned forlornly, "Shit, that guy took my bag. Loki, he took it, now I can't buy coffee!"

"Don't worry," He cooed quickly, noticing she looked ready to cry, "I promise, I will buy you coffee. It's alright." Her distress was misplaced, if you asked him. Coffee was not the problem here.

Darcy whined and pressed her face into his chest, "I'm not a freeloader!" She sounded very much like a whining child.

"You can buy the coffee tomorrow. We will be even then, right? I know a place a few blocks down the street, I'll drive you there." He needed to keep her happy for the moment, he needed to get her to a hospital whether she wanted to go or not so a coffee run was as good a lie as any.

He glanced down, finally realizing as his fingers clenched that he still had his phone in his hand. He never even hung up with her, they were still connected, he could hear the strange delayed murmurs of their conversation. The noise had not even struck him until now. He pressed the button and his heart sank when he noticed the time. This would be rush hour traffic, everyone going home, going out, or returning to the office with business partners after a bite to eat. There was no way he could get her there quickly at this time of the day.

An ambulance needed to be called but he could not call them while she was with him, it would only upset her. He just calmed her down. For now, he needed to get her closer to the door. Once he called the paramedics they would need to be able to find her. He needed to get away from her so he could call but leaving her on the steps was a bad idea. They were one flight shy of the parking level underground. She had been so close to home that is was sickly ironic. A little more and she might not have met that kid at all.

She felt like she was swimming under deep, dark waters. Talking to Loki was difficult, which worried her considering talking was never normally so difficult. Now it took energy, everything took energy. She drew in a shaky breath and stared up into his worried green eyes. This would have to be surprise number two of the day. In her wildest dreams she would not have ever expected him to hold her for any reason. He was a far cry more gentle than she would have guessed, holding her like...
people would hold a baby.

She could feel the warmth coming from his arms and his chest and she unconsciously snuggled into it. It felt extremely good after being forced to sit on cement for so long. Being here, no matter how strange, felt safe. Loki was the last man she would have expected to feel safe with, and maybe it was her cold skin talking, but it was true in the moment. She did want out though, the scenery was not the best by a long shot. She needed coffee to wake herself up. She must have been working too hard lately because she felt drained. Yeah, she fell, but not all that far when she looked at how fast he came down here.

When she was younger she fell off her bike a lot and it was never anything that bad. She always got up and brushed herself off, no harm she could not shake off.

"I guess." She mumbled against his neck, "As long as it's a good coffee house and not one of those ones that have the drunk coffee and never clean."

"I think you will like it." He carefully tugged her skirt down into a wrinkly-free form like it normally sat on her but she barely noticed.

Her eyes drifted shut and she whimpered when he shifted his weight, "My head really hurts." It felt like her head might explode and snap off her shoulders at any time.

"I know." He reached up and tenderly stroked the back of her head, his fingers moving in little circles through her hair. He was very gentle with her, tucking her head lightly under his chin as he cradled her. "Just relax and it won't be so bad." She could fall asleep to that voice.

Loki shifted but she took no particular notice of it until he began lifting her. Darcy squeaked, eyes wild as she felt the ground drop away to leave only his arms. Normally she was not easily frightened but the sensation was too similar to falling. The way he lifted her, moving to his feet with the kind of elegant dexterity a lion brought down prey with would have impressed her normally. She clutched at him while he whispered soothing words into her hair.

He was much stronger than he looked, lifting her and standing up like it was nothing. His slender, lanky looking build belied the power hiding under the expensive attire and perfectly crafted tie. Agile though he might have been, it did not stop her heart from racing. The pain in her knees and legs amplified considerably. She was being a wimp but she clung to him all the more to ground herself and stuff down the tears. He easily descended the steps like carrying a girl around was second nature.

"Wait! My phone and my taser are still on the stairs." Darcy protested, sounding weaker than she expected, "I can't lose those, I'd die."

"I will go back and get them in just a moment, after I take care of you." He assured her, not seeming phased by it.

The crash bar made a sickening crack as he slammed it with his hip and whisked her out into the hallway. Her stomach rolled in protest to the motion and she tried to ignore it, hoping she did not end up getting sick on him after he was being kind. The overhead lights traveled past her and forced her to squint as they passed in quick procession. Watching the tiles and lights go by had a hypnotic affect on her and she withered in his strong arms. He headed for the floor's employee lounge next the the lobby. It was nicer than the lobby with overstuffed couches and chairs and a large fridge.

She was limp in his arms now as he walked in, the energy it had taken to freak out was more than she had to spare. Not a sound left her as he delicately placed her on a long couch, barely even jostling her as he slid his arms out from under her and straightened. Just as quickly, with a look over
her body, he turned away.

Dread filled her when she realized he was about to walk away, "Wait..." She immediately tried to sit up, grabbing at the air space he had vacated, "wait, don't leave me, please?"

Loki turned back, "I will only be a moment, I promise." The soft backs of his fingers slid up and down the good side of her face, lulling her into closing her eyes, and then he vanished.

Fast little bugger, she thought, grinning to herself. Any other time she would not have had faith in his promises but her muddled mind trusted him implicitly. He would be back and he left her in a safe, warm place. If he had tried to leave her in the stairs that would have been different, but here she felt like she was on a cloud. This was exactly what she needed. A few minutes here and she would be back to her old self.

Hands were running over her body, hands that did not belong to her. Darcy frowned, but the tug in her skin it caused made her whine. Were those Loki's hands? Her mind was having a lot of trouble bringing her past the thick fog. Her eyelids were heavy, so heavy and they hurt. Everything was so heavy, even her ribs were so heavy it was hard to breathe. It was that feeling again, like being so far past drunk she might as well have been dead. She hated it, hated this.

Her lips felt disconnected when she tried to speak, "L-Loki?"

The hands did not stop. They were moving her, pushing on her, poking at her. What was happening? The poking hurt, she did not like it. Her arm lifted slowly to bat away the offender but another hand caught hers very gently, fingers pressing on her wrist. Her eyes opened enough to see light past her lashes and a blurry shape beside her.

"Ma'ma, just relax. We are going to take good care of you, don't worry." A strong, smooth, but slightly edged male voice told her, "Can you remember where you are?" He sounded exactly like her Ken doll always did in her head, gentle but rugged at the same time.

She willed her eyes open and blinked to clear the blur, trying to sit up, "What?" Her eyes fell first on a wide, muscled set of shoulders in a short sleeved, button up shirt that looked too starched to be comfortable.

"Ma'ma, do you know where we are?" Large hands cautiously took her shoulders and guided her back down.

She looked up to search for eyes and she found shocking blue pools staring back, baby blues a lighter, more vibrant blue than hers, "Odin's Ink... Guard... Adgard." He was statuesque, his face structure like sculptor's would be proud of, sandy blonde hair topping it off and looking very Angel Gabriel-like.

"Can you tell me your name?" He persisted, handsome features half smiling but half grave.

"I'm Darcy, Darcy Lewis." She stuck her hand his way for introduction, and he took it lightly between his fingers, "How about you?"

"I'm Steve, Ma'ma. I'm here to help you, okay?"

"Help me what? I just want coffee." A light went on in her head and she tried to sit up again, "Oh! You're a barista! Loki said we could go to a posh coffee place but I didn't expect it to be this good." She smiled, more than pleased to see the customer service had to be the best in town. No matter how much this place cost, she was coming again to admire the servers!
A chuckle huffed past his lips, "Not quite, Ma'ma, but I'll see what I can do for you anyway." He kept her down with one hand splayed over her collar bone. "Now, do you think you can tell me where you are feeling the most pain right now?"

Darcy paused, staring at him while she thought about it, there were a lot of pain spots but he wanted to know what hurt most. "My head."

"Which side it is? Can you describe how it feels?" He spoke so tenderly she forgot to think about why he was asking these questions.

She touched her face, "This side, and down my neck, and my back. It feels like it's going to explode and fall off."

He peeled something like tape and reached up, carefully running something wet over her face, making careful trails to the gash in her scalp. "So, Darcy Lewis, how did this happen to you?"

"My bag was stolen." Darcy shied away from the touch, shifting into the couch back and pitifully pushing at his hand, "That's cold, stop." She muttered at him.

He captured her hands in one of his and continued cleaning, unfazed by her order, "How did you get hurt? Do you remember anything about it?"

"I was going home and I took the stairs." Her anger flared again and she proceeded to tell him in detail what she had seen, even about the hooddie. By the time she was finished he had put something else cold on her and taped a bulky bandage onto her head. He worked patiently even though she squirmed as much as possible.

"Are you the police? Are you going to find my bag? I need it!" She whined.

"No Ma'ma, I'm not a police officer, but I am in the army reserve, if that helps."

Darcy frowned again, making the clear tape crinkle and feel even more strange, "The army? Why is the army here?"

"They aren't, just me and my buddy that is talking to Mr. Odinson in the hall. I'm just here to get you feeling better."

"Oh." She was feeling sleepy again suddenly, but with his poking a prodding at her there was no way to sleep, "I want to go home."

"After I make sure you are up to your very best." He flashed a small light into her eyes and she yelped, squeezing them shut in protest. His fingers pried them open again, "I just need to see your pretty eyes better, just for a second."

"Your eyes are prettier than mine, look at those." She began to thrash and he was suddenly leaning almost totally over her, though not touching her, cooing soothing words to her the way Loki had. It worked and she stilled; what girl could refuse faces like those two when they were asking nicely would be quite the question.

"What year were you born?" He shot the question at her randomly, still staring deeply into her eyes.

She smiled up at him, "If you want a date and are trying to see if I'm legal, there are better ways to put it. Never ask a girls age right out."

A sweet, boyish smile returned hers, "Will you indulge me this once?"
"19...17... 22." Her expression feel as she worked to find the right numbers. "23-7-10... no, that was my building code." Those were wrong, she knew they were, and panic balled in her stomach. "No, I know this."

"It's alright, you had a point, a gentlemen never asks a lady her age."

Loki watched out of the corner of his eye as the Paramedic effortlessly slid Darcy onto a stretcher. She looked like a doll being moved around so easily. She had nearly been dead weight in his own arms, limp as could be. He did not like the expression on the blonde's face. He was smiling for Darcy as he spoke to her but there was worry on his face. Her injuries could have been worse than they looked.

The dark haired one with him now had already chided him for moving her without them. He understood the point but he could not have left her in the dirty, cold stairwell. Maybe he should not have moved her but it seemed right at the time.

Being drilled had always annoyed him but he found himself strangely meek to the questions now where he would normally fight the young know-it-all kids like these. He had not even been snarky, which was so rare for him. Instead of showing the kid who owned this place, he watched the girl and responded very little. There was not much he could say, he had not noticed much past the blood but he had been able to offer her likely fall distance and her state when he found her.

The dark haired, square jawed boy left him then, helping get her into place and the two began wheeling her out. Loki stood in silence, arms folded and expression blank as he watched. They were good at their job, he could say that much. She looked less near death with the blood cleaned away but her little body was far more helpless strapped to that metal contraption.

Her eyes captured him as she moved by, her tiny voice hooking him and reeling him in by an invisible string the minute she said, "Loki... what is happening?" He was walking beside her even though he did not realize it.

"They are taking you to the hospital, just to make sure you are feeling alright." He forced a smile when he saw the dread in her eyes, "I really can't have you missing any work, you know, so we have to make sure you are at your peek."

"But we were going to get coffee..."

"We still will." He assured quickly, following as they pushed the cart outside.

"I want to go home." She looked at him, pleading more with her eyes and tone that her word choice, "Can't you take me, I'll pay for gas, I swear."

"You will be fine, Darcy, just let them help you." His heels dug in when the doors to the ambulance opened and he backed away.

Her hand shot out of the blanket, reaching for him, "Don't leave!"

The blonde caught her hand even as they lifted her, pushing it back down to keep her from bashing it on the door.

"I will be right behind you." Even as he said it his chest tightened at her whine of "no" and he had no idea why he felt so guilty. He had done what he could for her, even if they let him ride along he would only be in the way. They would probably give her something to calm her down anyway so she would be fine in a few minutes. She was just disoriented and clinging to the only familiar figure
available.

He squared his shoulders. This was out of his hands and no longer his problem. Everyone would say he did everything he could do for her. This was not his problem. He had only known her a few days and she did not even technically work for him. There was no reason to feel guilty.

"Hey," The blonde poked his head through the double doors, "you can ride with her if you want to. It might keep her calm."

Loki hesitated, shuffling his feet as he stared at the EMT. He should not go along, should not even bother going to the hospital at all, he had people for those trivial matters. It would ruin his reputation if he kept up the meek behavior for much longer. No, he would not go with her. His mind told him no but his feet had already started moving him forward.

"No," He dug his heels in again, "I would only be in the way."

The blonde nodded and slammed the door shut. The ambulance pulled away abruptly and left him to watch it retreat over his parking lot. His brow furrowed more and more as it vanished. It was a good idea to stay. There was just no way he could let people hear that he was getting soft and holding her hand. Sentiment caused problems that he simply did not need.

Loki turned to his car and walked toward it briskly.

He should have gone with her.

Chapter End Notes

Hope you like what I did here, how I altered another Marvel character into a new modern day/ non chemical, non magical day.

So no, Darcy was not thinking totally rationally. The obvious thing is to call 911 but when you’re out of it sometimes you really think that all you need is to get home. You fixate on that, the safety of home and it turns into the cure all. Not everyone thinks to call a doctor thinking it could not be that bad. She wasn’t supposed to be quite rational, she had head trauma. I also see Darcy as being a hospital hater, not wanting to be a patient. So that was my thinking in her not directly calling for EMT's. It was not just so Loki could save her, though I dooo love the whole idea of him playing rescuer for her.
May I suggest you guys listen to "Wicked Game" by Stone Sour? I kind of think it fits dear Loki in this chapter but others in the future too.

---High Rise---

Impact

*Marvel

*Loki Odi nson, Darcy Lewis, Tony Stark, etc.

The drive over was made long by traffic light after traffic light, but more so by his mind's constant belligerent contradicting banter. His lungs were heavy like lead as he pressured the gas petal, turning the wheel several different ways while he struggled with his angels and demons. Turns and twists that were quite unnecessary could have mapped out the tracks of his mind and utter indecision. He had turned off the street to the hospital and back onto it fifty times at least, he was relatively sure, even if he had not dared count them.

Loki inhaled deeply and let it go again in a heavy sigh of self induced exasperation and a Titanic sized ice block of self-loathing; self loathing was not exactly foreign, at least, but the nagging worry was. He made up his mind several time not to come, yet here he sat, sprawled in a waiting room chair just a little distance from the desk on the floor he was told to go to. The little old woman on the first floor had almost refused to give him information, but a few notches more of his charm finally convinced her to tell him where the pitiful girl working as a spy would be treated.

He shifted again in the stiff, plastic covered chair, crossing one leg over the other before he tossed it back onto the floor. He could not hold still, fidgeting like a child waiting for a punishment. Being here was the last thing he should be doing, it was a poor choice and even as he sat here he berated himself for coming. If anyone found out the rumors would be intolerable but the image of her fearful eyes pleading with him not to leave her pulled him back despite his efforts to flee. He left her once and should have remained gone but he simply had to know if her condition improved.

Worry or concern were not words he could or would place on this feeling nagging and teasing the back of his consciousness, tying his stomach into a few irritating knots. His mind conjured many wonderfully logical reasons for his ending up here, all of which he was happy to adopt. It was a good skill for times like these when he knew he caved to chinks in his impenetrable armor but he had no desire to admit it. He could lie even to himself when he needed to do so. It was less degrading to remember he was dodging bullets from S.H.I.E.L.D. by staying on top of the situation, watching his back against wrongful blame and his best interest.

"The waiting room is right around the corner, Ms. Potts." A single name the blonde with irritatingly bright pink highlights in her hair spoke conversationally had him sitting in a relaxed posture instantly, making sure to look as at home here as he would behind his own desk, a mild scowl on his face to be sure that was the greeting his adversary's little pet would arrived to.
A snarl nearly bubbled up in his throat when that nagging voice reminded him he should have sent his assistant instead. All the little voices telling him to turn around on the drive were sneering at him as he stared at the corner, just waiting for the petite, arbitrarily graceful, strawberry-blonde to march herself in.

Some childish part of him wanted to crawl under the seat or bolt from the room before she could see him and report back to Stark but he was here and no one was going to force him to run. Loki did not run like a coward, he was always in control regardless of the situation.

Her perfected smooth tail of hair swayed as she walked in on high, clicking heels, eyes grazing over him for only a few seconds before landing instead on a set of open seats. No measure of surprise flashed in her eyes, no remnant of shock lingered in her delicate features hidden in her first sight. If she had not known who he was it would have been believable as simply glancing at a random stranger in any given room. Pepper Potts, however, knew everyone that had ever been a threat to Tony Stark, knew their face, address, favorite drink, and the last song played on the radio station they listened to. She was not one to be trifled with, the true reason Tony Stark could never be touched even if she received little credit.

Loki swallowed back a shocked gasp when a pinstripe dark vest and slacks, and heavily polished shoes followed a few steps behind her. Poker had always been his game. Emotional reactions when in games of gambling and business were his forte. The liar's liar was never easily undone so he never so much as twitched, bored and hostile expression solid as a stone.

Stark strolled into the bleach white and hideous mint room, hand absently running over his good boy with a bad edge haircut. "You look uncharacteristically worried, Odinson." He too did not bat an eye at the presence of an enemy.

Loki watched the other man amble toward him, a darker glare threatened to surface, but he pushed it aside for a stoic mask. It unsettled him to have been caught here. It felt like the times his mother had been called to the disgustingly ridged school for wealthy brats to find him sitting in detention. Having anyone see him waiting in a hospital to see how that girl was felt like being caught at something unscrupulous. "I am worried." Loki remarked blandly as he leaned back in the uncomfortable chair, "If I neglect to tread carefully, I know you and Fury will have her sue me, which I would find annoying."

Stark grinned at him, trimmed and sculpted beard crinkling, one side of his mouth tilting more than the other, "Good, I was worried she was growing on you and that just would not fit my idea of you. Loki going soft is foretold to be the sign of alien invasions."

Loki chuckled derisively, letting his fingers fall relaxed over to stiff edge of the armrest, "Sorry, but no one grows on me. I keep the ground even and simply hate everyone. I'm here only to head off any repercussions." He shot a pointed glance at Pepper, "I am not so easily tamed by the feminine cunning as other men."

"So, speaking of repercussions, how did she fall?" He dropped into a seat opposite Loki-next to the personification of women in business that watched over him like a lioness-and arched a brow, tenting his fingers. "Slick floors? Because I could really work with that."

Ignoring the jab, he pursed his lips into a line, "Some desperate vagrant stole her bag and pushed her down a few stairs. He probably expected a lawyer to carry a fair amount of money, which proves his stupidity since we all know no lawyer would make it so easy."

Tony laughed again and shook hid head in affirmation. "Can't deny that point." Even Pepper smirked lightly.
Loki turned an accusatory eye on Stark, "And why are you here? If anything I thought you would send Ms. Potts ... but a personal appearance by both? How will your company survive the separation?"

Tony shrugged dismissively, "Similar reason. If she died on me I'd have to find someone else to send you. Getting anyone willing to visit the devil is no easy task. The kid has spirit, and I hate losing that."

Loki nodded shortly and cast his eyes toward the desk to show clearly that he no longer cared if they were there or not. Stark did not listen well to social cues.

"So, speaking of our little gal, how bad was her tumble? Step count included in your 'few steps' incident report?" Brown eyes were fixed below Loki's chin.

Loki rolled his eyes up to watch a flickering long bulb in desperate need of changing. "Why ask me? I did not see her descent, I only saw the result."

"How severely was she injured, Mr. Odinson?" The even and steady as an artist's hand voice chipped at him as she finally broke her silence.

"A few scratches and a likely unpleasant bump on her head." He shrugged as if uninterested and fully bored, still refusing to look at them, "I am many things, but a doctor is not one of my skills. Ask her physician if you wish to know."

A low huff left Stark as he dramatically crossed his arms, "Just a bump? Then you must be a bleeder when you shave, huh?"

His eyes turned to drill into brown orbs, "Excuse me?"

"Your shirt." Pepper interjected before Stark could answer with what looked to be a derisive comment if his expression was indication. "We were told you were the one to find her and remove her from the stairs."

Exactly how did she know information like that swiftly? A little network of schlemiels hacking his surveillance cameras no doubt, his mind snarled as he glowered her direction before glancing down at himself. A jolt hit his gut when the red stains gleamed bright against the crisp white of his shirt. He never even noticed them, never looked down at his collar and his chest where her face brushed against him, never saw the streaks of blood where she grasped at his lapel. A wave of nausea threatened to ball in his throat and he twitched in his seat. "Well, thank you for pointing that out." He glanced up again, eyes cold and carefully unfeeling, "I will send you my dry cleaning bill."

"How did you jump to the conclusion I would pay for that?" Stark leaned back languidly, "It's not my blood."

"Might as well be considering she is your little puppet." Loki snapped, nearly baring his teeth, anxiety surfacing the way it generally did, taking the form of easy anger.

"That can come out of her next check." Tony sneered dryly. "I'm not the Odinson charity fund. You want hand out's try the government."

"Oh, and they call me cold?" Narrowed eyes leered at the smug expression of the other man.

"Save her a buck and pay for it yourself, Frosty."

"Boys!" Pepper barked, drawing their attention as she pointed to the nurse patiently standing on the
sidelines.

The fight in the air filtered out through the air vents in the floor as the two men deflated and stared expectantly at the dark haired, heavyset nurse in butterfly scrubs. A clipboard dangled in her fingers as she eyed them blandly. The look on her face, void of capacity to smile, said she had witnessed a great many fights in this hospital and could not even care less who the men in suits were as long as they shut their lips long enough for her to speak. She was the cold, war hardened, desensitized sort with the feel of death clinging to her very skin, having clearly seen all manner of things and ceased long ago on caring.

"Ms. Lewis is stable but the doctor intends to keep her here overnight for observation due to the head trauma and moderate blood loss. Only two visitors are allowed in the room at one time. She is medicated though, so she may or may not be terribly responsive." That said, she turned and began walking away, "If you want to see her you may follow me."

Pepper and Tony turned to look at him as one, like a business chic hydra.

He splayed his hands to the side amiably, "Don't worry about me, I never intended to visit her, I just wanted the report."

They stood up as one, Pepper stepping ahead to follow, Tony pausing to glance at Loki, "I knew she was tough and hard headed. Guess I was right to send her ... someone else might not have survived you."

Unable to stop himself, Loki glared and spoke, needing the last word, "I doubt if she has had the worst from either of us. We have only begun so you should not count her a survivor just yet."

A wry smile cocked the corners of Stark's mouth, "Point ... but she is still alive, so I guess round one goes to her." He cast his eyes toward the vanishing Ms. Potts, "But I think we might be lucky to have her. I have a distinct feeling that I would end up blasting you with one of my inventions and you would end up tossing me out a window if we were forced to negotiate in the same room."

Loki's expression filled with a morbid amusement, "I could picture that last one quite well." His fingers locked together, "Let's see how long she can keep us from killing each other then."

"Agreed, we should wager on it later." Once again he began to leave, but paused without looking back, "By the way, you did not see her fall, is that your story?"

Hackles raised along his spine instantly, ire edging his voice, "Exactly what are you implying, Stark?"

Glancing back, he shrugged, "Nothing. See you around, Frosty." Stark turned and walked casually after his woman. "Try not to let her fall down an elevator shaft next time."

Loki's hands twitched hard and he wound them around the armrest for control. If Stark kept it up he would be slapping liable charges on his desk by the end of the week! Never push a man that had been pushed too many times unless a fight was the desired effect, that would turn a battle into a blood soaked bath.

The head trauma the nurse spoke about was tilting the scales more toward a near cracked skull than running into a door. Loki had fled the waiting room the minute the two were out of sight but he had not left. The little nurse was not the type of person he would trust to tell him the full story so he went in search of his own little bird, such as the young little girl with wide brown eyes and cheeks that blushed too easily when he smiled at her.
A few white lies and careful flirting got him exactly what he wanted. Information was all about finding the correct source, the weak link in the system chain of silence. Darcy would not be wearing heels to work for a while either, nor walking without a limp from multiple injuries to her lower limbs. Her hand writing might suffer if she was left handed thanks to two broken fingers, not to mention the shoulder dislocation likely caused in an attempt to hold the railing to catch herself.

In general, he discovered Tony’s bel-esprit little spy would not be comfortable for quite a while, but she was lucky none the less. She could have died if she had fallen a little differently, hit her head a little harder, or been left alone all night. The thief had not violated her in any way beyond stealing her bag, which was quite a relief because he had been a little worried about that.

Loki ran his fingers through his hair and raked it into order as he stared at his reflection in a hallway mirror. He needed to burn his old shirt and tie. He also needed to make a few calls to increase the security in his building. Too many things were slipping by what existed at present and he did not like that one tiny bit. His building needed to be more fortified than Rome had been in its time. A king was only as strong as his defenses, his traps and checks.

He felt strangely shaken by the entire event, like what happened to her traveled in part to him in some residual way. A few too many Trojan Horses had slipped inside his walls and it left him feeling vulnerably gutted. Breathing slowly and more deeply did not help calm to nagging feeling in his chest. The strange sensations were not unfamiliar but mangled together enough that he could not pinpoint exactly what was askew. The entire catastrophe left a bitter taste in his mouth he could not rinse out.

It was dark outside after all this time, the little window in the hall only depicted blackness without a light near by to illuminate the street. He should leave and yet he still found himself prowling the halls like a ghost of some dead, unfulfilled visitor. Staying here was already crossing too many lines and going to see her would break even more. His eyes fluttered closed as he glanced at the two cups he purchased sitting tauntingly on the table. The first floor had a coffee shop and before he knew what he was doing he had been walking away with a cup for himself and a cup for her.

He had also purchased a new shirt in a shabby little shop to replace his blood stained one. The jacket should be salvageable since there was only a little smear or two on it but the shirt was a hopeless casualty of the day. He thought his tie had escaped the affair untouched only to fix it back into place and see the undeniable blemish in the green patter. Why he had not left after that frustrating discovery was a mystery. It was not as if he had a particular love of hospitals.

Part of him kept reasoning that it would be obtuse to go see her. He owed her nothing more than what he had already done. An influential man such as himself was obligated to no one and doing any more would do nothing to further his standing, thus it was useless. Then there was another voice that sounded suspiciously like hers lingering in the depths of darkness in his mind that reminded him of a promise he made to her. He could not shake her face from behind his eyes or her pleas from his ears. Stark and company had left thirty minutes prior so he should go.

Darcy’s phone and taser were still in his jacket pocket too, taunting him even further. He should drop them off for her at the nurse’s station but there was a nagging piece of him that wanted to see her personally to put his mind at rest. Of course, he would not go to see her, enough time had been wasted skulking in the ammonia scented halls. Stark only went because Pepper probably forced him. No one visited lowly employees personally, they sent their second, third, or even fourth in command to do that.

This should be enough to quell his stupid nagging guilt, he did quite a bit to help her. Her attack was not his fault. It could have happened anywhere. Had she walked down any street in the city, it could
as easily have happened there. Just because it was his building did not make it his problem. She was a grown woman and she worked for him, another ant in the massive colony he stared down at every day. A few days spent with her was not enough to bring her out of that lowly status of drones he could not bother to worry about, the walking numbers and statistics of people he could use.

A rumbling snarl drifted through his throat, his fingers moving to nimbly remove the knot in his tie and toss it forcefully in a trash bin. These same little conversations had been going through his head endlessly for some time, the dueling sides of him battling in circles. It was exasperating how his mind never let him simply rest, the devil played advocate to both sides of his mind.

The familiar tone of his phone bounced off the hard walls of the hall to make the sound that much louder. Loki snatched it from his jacket pocket and glanced at the name and number scrolling over the screen. Pure, undiluted rage bubbled in his chest and he snarled, nearly crushing the device between his fingers before vengefully hitting the ignore option.

A few seconds later and the scene replayed, Loki's rage amplifying as it happened a third time. He would not answer, he refused to bother with that stupid excuse for a man. He would not acquiesce to any of his miserable pleas, oh no! This too was not his problem! Things like these stopped being his problem the moment he cut himself off from boyish emotion and crossed the line into dominant authoritarian with the world at his feet. Call as much as he wished, but Thor would be ignored every time. The only reason he had yet to block that number was so that he would at least know when the oaf was trying to contact him and promptly ignore it.

He needed to bury the voices of his conscience in the depths on the dark corners of his mind. He needed to control those around him before they dominated him. Staying on top was a battle of wits and sleeping with one eye open every night. He had no time for family and no time for friends or loyalty. He had no desire to care because sentiment brought weakness.

He did not want to care ... so why did he feel so hollow when he ignored that ring or the weight of her items in his pocket? Weakness, that was the reason. Always weakness!

This was simply not his week, that was obvious! She should never have walked through his door.

Her waking thoughts were annoyingly following the same trend; focusing on one pain after another until it rounded to how her head freakishly hurt. Her entire body ached horribly but her head was the worst. Darcy felt like she had been run through one of those old, Little House on the Prairie style ringers for clothing. If she moved even a little pain would bounce from place to place, traveling through her entire muscle and nerve system. She was just not alright with this whole thing!

She was in the hospital and she really, really hated that! It was insult to injury that she was here and still felt this bad. They could have the decency to make sure she did not know how much pain she was in if she had to be in this cold room with stiff scratchy blankets and a pillow that crackled every time she moved her head. There was absolutely nothing appealing about being here. A scream was just itching to come out of her throat but she knew it would only make her head hurt worse.

Screaming would be a poor choice anyway considering her chest ached and it was hard to gather the strength needed to expand her lungs for deep breaths. Darcy was fairly sure someone drained all her energy, every cup of coffee she had ever drunk, every soda or caffeinated thing she ever had in her entire life out of the cuts and holes in her body.

A new level of pathetic was feeling dizzy when nothing was even moving. The spinning room did not help her aching head either. She was glad, of all days, she had been in contacts rather than her glasses. It was hit or miss whether or not she put them on to go to work but she could not have been
happier to have made the right choice today. The spinning was not doing great things for her stomach though, blurry vision or not.

Darcy fingered the blanket and tugged at the strings, mouth puckered in concentration. She got the feeling someone shook her and shook her until things had fallen out of her head. She remembered Gabriel, the sandy haired walking piece of art. She remembered little snatches of being with Loki during the day, remembered being in his arms, but only pieces like a mismatched puzzle. Things she knew she knew before were like pencil written words on cheap paper someone took an eraser to. It made her feel even more shaky.

This felt worse than when she had the flu and ear infection together for two entire weeks. It was depressing to be stuck in a white and tan room with a television that was too static filled to be worth watching. She could have been out dancing, not that she had gone dancing since college, but she would have had that option if not for her tumble. Things always sounded irresistible when they were out of reach.

Maybe she should not complain. From what they had told her, she was lucky she lived. The huge and ugly glued shut gash in her head said that much, bruises did too. Guardian angels were looking out for this little girl, she guessed. She still owed God that prayer but she would give it when she was in less pain. She did not feel like talking to anyone at this point. The visit from Tony Stark and Pepper Potts had been a kind gesture but unnerving and overwhelming to say the least, leaving her feeling vulnerable and trapped in the tiny bed.

Stark's comments on her looks did nothing to help her feel better either, it made her feel worse. She did not want to be told how bad she looked or how bad the doctor said she was. What she wanted was to be told she could go home. What she wanted was not relevant. She was trapped in this bed until they decided she could leave.

She had not been raised to let others take care of her. Her parents did not coddle her or her sister, they were raised to be independent and self reliant. When she was contagious she stuck herself in a room with crackers and water to waiting it out. Her mother brought her soup, liquid, and movies but that was usually the extent of care. Both her parents wanted tough children because they said the world was already full of weak people that looked to be taken care of. She was fairly sure they secretly never wanted children to begin with and they would be damned if they raised whiny kids.

Tough children they had been too. Lewis girls never took any crap from anyone. Boys that pulled their hair got punched in the face. When Darcy got older, boys that tried to feel her up got a "shock" to the system. It worked better than any cold shower or harsh words ever could. It worked on the guy that tried to steal her car freshman year too.

Being tough was a good thing. Being tough was all she knew, but now she felt weak. Hospital beds with the beeping monitors and needles felt like walking, noisy helplessness. Worse still was one nagging memory of being loaded onto the ambulance, feeling so afraid and lost, calling out to Loki, of all people. She hoped it was only her mind playing tricks on her but she had a wicked feeling it was true. She remembered visceral terror at being left alone, which was not like her. Having been beaten once, she supposed her confidence had been shaken, her proverbial footing had been lost to leave her floundering. Humiliating! She was pathetic!

Her blue eyes lifted when she heard the door slowly open and softly close. The curtain around her bed was drawn to give her a tiny sliver of peace, however slight. That peace melted the second the curtain shifted to reveal familiar ink tresses, static green eyes, and a tall, lanky form. They stared in stunned silence at each other for what could have been an hour, each assessing the other silently. He entered the room like a sneaking purebred cat, so silent and careful like he did not want to be found
slumming with the common house cat the neighbor owned.

His eyes dropped to the floor and she unconsciously reached a hand up and smoothed her hair in a
pitiful attempt to look reasonable. Her hands began to shake in the stretching silence, unnerved by his
towering figure compared to her prone little body. At least Stark was shorter than Odinson so it did
not feel quite so servile. He still frightened her even without his desk and swords on the walls. Power
radiated from his lithe form and posture like heat. She wanted to burrow into the bed so deeply he
could never find her.

When he raised his eyes to her again, he swallowed, looking strangely young and timid. Two little
lines creased between his brows as he stared as if expecting her to turn to ash any moment. Her
shoulders relaxed as her fear of him melted, replaced by a need to placate. His lips were just slightly
parted and something in her wanted to grab the soft, cute square of his jaw and shake his head back
and forth till that look went away. When did this guy become so cute anyway?

Darcy smiled playfully at him to put him at ease, "So, I finally figured out my make-up for
halloween." She pointed at her face, "What do you think? I kind of think I nailed it."

The corners of his lips twitched and the creases lessened, "Oh, definitely. It's remarkably
convincing!" He arched one perfect eyebrow, "Does the bed work as a prop?"

She patted the hard mattress, "Well, yeah, I think it adds that certain je ne sais quoi of authenticity."

He smiled an honest, though hesitant smile and held out a coffee cup to her as he stepped closer, "I
brought you this."

"Coffee?" She reached for it, careful of the wires connected to her hand and lifted it to her nose to
breathe in the scented steam, "How did you sneak it past the jailers?"

A twinkle gleamed in his eye, "I made like a James Bond and sneaked right past them. Visiting hours
are over too."

Darcy cocked her head, a rush of dizziness and nausea a quick result, so she clutched the cup closer,
trying hard to smile at the blurry form, "You did not have to sneak me coffee."

"No," He reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out two items, "but I did need to return your
belongings."

Her lashes fluttered as she tried to force her eyes to focus on the proffered offerings. She was doing
her best to hide it but he must have noticed because he moved closer. He snatched the cup from her
with his free hand and set it on her table; she did not know her shaking was so obvious but it must
have been. There was a few drops of coffee on the white blanket to evince it. She mumbled a fast
apology but he ignored it, placing the items in her open hand.

Her twisted brows turned up as she recognized the feel coupled with the sight, "My phone and my
taser!" She glanced up and smiled, "Where were they?"

"On the stairs. You left them there when I carried you out, I was simply returning them to you."

Darcy swallowed thickly, trying to remember what he was referring to, "Thank you." Her smile was
forced even as her vision clouded even further with tears welling in her eyes, tears of frustration,
confusion and a little fear.

"It was nothing." He paused, studying her silently for a moment before he said, "You will be back to
your old self, irritation myself and Stark after a little rest, don't worry."
She gripped the phone tighter with both hands but let go when the muscles in her two broken fingers screamed at her, forcing a hiss of pain out of her.

His hand drifted to cover her good hand, "Relax, Darcy. You were injured."

She ran her tongue over the scab on her lip, "I can't relax."

"You must. If you push yourself it will only cause you more problems." He sounded so sure, like a doctor.

"It hurts too much for me to just relax." She snapped, but it came out more of a repressed sob, "I can't even close my eyes or I get even more dizzy than I already am." She jerked her hand away to swipe at a tear she could not believe she was shedding, "I'll be fine, I'm more angry with myself than anything. I can't believe I let this happen. I'm not normally so pathetic, I promise!"

"You were assaulted and injured, Darcy, it is normal to feel this way." Loki sat carefully beside her on the bed, not touching her.

"I don't remember very much about it." She confessed, hands resting uselessly in her lap with her possessions, not sure why she was talking to him or why he was patiently listening, "All I remember is his hoodie, just his stupid hoodie. I only turned my back for a second ... I should have tased him the second I saw him and been done with it."

His posture stiffened like he wanted to leave her, "What kind of hoodie? What else do you remember about him?"

"Nothing much. It was dark colored, navy probably, with the Nike emblem on the sleeve." Her head eased back to rest on the pillow, "Nothing useful. I'll never see my bag in this lifetime with that description. I'm absolutely useless, I know. I've lost the paperwork... my wallet..." She cringed as her mental checklist clicked by in her head.

"You're not useless." Loki said nothing for a moment, "It will be alright."

They fell into uncomfortable silence again until she reached for her coffee, using her good hand, ignoring other pains in her muscles, "Thank you for the coffee. I think I need it."

"You're welcome. It was all you could talk about on the stairs so I thought you deserved to get some." He said as he watched her take a drink.

It hit her tongue like a warm, smooth honey, running down her throat like medicine to her aching body, a fix to an addiction, "I already feel better now." She grinned at him, mainly able to see the finer points of his face, "You could make even more money going from room to room selling miracle lattes."

His eyes were shadowed with tinges of sadness even though he smiled, "It is the least I could do, really."

She hummed in disapproval as she took another drink, "Hey, no, this was better than Tony's visit! He did not bring me my best friends or life's blood. You already win best sneaky visitor prize."

"Well, at least I've bested him once today!" He grinned craftily, "I can sleep well tonight."

Darcy felt more calm, phone, taser, and coffee in her possession. It made her feel human again, still in pain, but more like normal. It was better than nothing. At least he gave her a little hope and grounding. "Thank you. I needed these. I feel more like myself now rather than a bleached out doll
Loki reached a tentative hand up and brushed her hair to the side of her face with his fingers, making her nearly shiver at his warmth on her cold cheek, "Just hurry up and get back to work. I want you back on the project the second they let you out, and not a second after, understand?"

Darcy sniffed and chuckled, "Got it, boss. I'll report back for duty the second I break out, promise!"

He pulled back and stood to leave, "Rest well, Ms. Lewis, I will see you shortly."

Darcy did not say anything more as she watched his back. Part of her lingering fear wanted to call him back but she had suffered enough indignity for one day. She could never live down begging him to stay twice in one day. The curtain and door barely made a sound as he slipped out of her room. It occurred to her that he would make an marvelous spy if he wanted to be one.

She took another sip of her coffee, trying to grasp what had just transpired. Maybe it was her dizzy mind, medication, and blurry vision, but he seemed almost human while he sat on the bed with her. He tired to help her and that was more than she would have expected from him earlier in the week, or even earlier in the day. Then again, that might have been a hallucination. She would find out in the morning if her phone was gone.

Hugging her old friends to her chest, she nestled into the covers and closed her eyes, hopeful that tomorrow would have made this nothing more than a nightmare. A numbness had finally begun to fall over her and she relaxed, eyes heavier than ever. She did not want to think anymore.

Loki walked into the hallway again, moving away from any prying eyes and her room. His heart was hammering as he walked. She looked positively horrible, battered and bruised like a car accident victim. Her words repeated and circled in his brain until he already thought he might go utterly mad. A hoodie, she said. A stolen bag. The phone conversation he had during the day. Things could only add up one way.

Realization crashed down onto his shoulders like fifty pound weights. Loki backed against the wall for support, clasping his hands over his chest as all the air left the room. That girl could have died alone in the stairwell because of him and what he said in anger on the phone. She did not deserve that, no matter how she might irk him occasionally. They had struck yet again. Her bag had been stolen to see if the content held what they were looking for. It had been his fault after all.

Had he left her there with the intent to let her die? What would have happened if she had not gotten a hold of his phone? Would she have died because of this?

An icy chill ran up his spine. A worse question was what would happen if they *had* found it. What if she did have it with her, then what? Would he be considered no longer useful? He did not want to know what they might do if he failed to be useful a second time. He did not want to consider how this would end if they possessed the plans for the Infinity project, Stark's invention, his program, the little pet project Fury and Tony had worked on in tandem. Stark inherited things from his father, and one of those things was an undefined program, he knew that much about it on his own.

They told him the rest of it. The Mad Titus Thanos and his associate told him about the Tesseract computer program and machinery. Part of it was a program that could control any other computer in the world, like an entire squad of hackers and computer geniuses in one, it could take control of even a highly protected government system in a few seconds. It's other purpose was power, the physical machinery of it could create power enough for at least twenty building without trouble. It was the end of all programs, the end of all power plants, and they wanted it. It had other functions, but used
by them, it would be a weapon.

In the beginning, it sounded perfect. He knew that if he could gain such power, take over Stark's company before he could hide the program, the world would be his. He could take that power from Stark, that frightening power and never give it to Thanos at all. With a system like that one the road would open to him like never before. He had no plans to share it with anyone, least of all them, all he wanted was to use their help.

Darcy and this deal as well, were just a means to that same end. No one knew about that program, and he had no idea how Thanos discovered its existence, but it was something the big headed philanthropist would not hesitate to use to maximize his products, perhaps with a small version of the machine. Stark already used his invention, the Arc Reactor to power many of his buildings. The Tessaract was an advance version of that so it was reasonable to assume the now finished product would begin finding its way into Stark's enterprises. Through a deal he hoped to begin the processes of drawing the Tessaract from him while also sneaking his way into another hostile takeover. He would keep everything! That was still his plan but if they bypassed him and stole the plans from her, he was dead in the water.

This would be the end of everything he worked for! He had to know if they had it! He needed to find Thanos, needed to know.

Sliding his phone from his pocket, he swiftly dialed the number her memorized at least a year ago, waiting for the answer from the other end, "It's Loki. We might have a problem. I'm going to need you to snoop around a little for me tonight."
Loki glanced up from the bright screen, listening only on the surface to the dull buzz of the voice on the phone spewing boring statistics and company propaganda. His hazy green eyes traveled over the muted shade room, unwillingly envisioning the Lewis girl in different areas she normally occupied. Normally ... it felt normal to have her in this room despite the fact that she had been here such a short period of time. It was sickly bitter to realize the state of his mind after a pittance exposure. She was the sort of woman that burrowed under a man's skin before he had any idea she was close, a parasite that drew away his life force with subtlety so great that realizing her presence was only half the battle.

Extracting such creatures from the system was the real problem. One got used to having them and then it was hard to shake free the effects of their loss. Addictive, these comforts were, just like drugs. It was good for him to get this time away from her to regain his perspective. She had been gone several days and the fact that he missed her intrusion into his sanctuary alerted him to how easily she had gotten into his head.

He had a feeling it was a woman exactly like her, Helen, that started the Trojan war. It could easily have been Darcy of Troy. Or perhaps she was a long lost descendant of Cleopatra, a sly creature that could sway men to her whim and will with the ease a snake could strike. Those were the sorts of women that caused wars to be waged while they sat by peacefully, plucking strings of a harp as they did the strings of fate. Getting involved with them was courting trouble.

"We can serve you the best, Mr. Odinson, I can assure you! We take absolute pride in our work."
The annoying twit gushed, making Loki roll his eyes at the over used friendly tone.

His adam's apple swayed as he swallowed thickly. He could not continue to allow her the space in his mind or in his dreams. She was evicted here and now regardless of when she was well enough to return, which she wasn't at this point. The hospital held her longer than a night, they were entering the second day so far because her condition worsened. Head injuries were difficult to predict.

As he had become used to, he shoved the guilt away swiftly, pounding it down and back into its cage. Her fall had been brought about by his slip of the tongue but he had not been the one to push her. Stark might not have believed that, but he was not at fault for her accident, he would never allow that to cling to him as a home.

"Thank you, I believe we should install that as soon as possible. I like to act quickly."

The boring little man on the other end agreed rapidly, skittish of dealing with the darkest Odinson of the family, disgustingly eager to please. Loki hated people weak like a spineless amoeba, sickeningly sugary to his face while they would shift just as quickly in the face of any one of his enemies. As
long as he obeyed it did not matter. He would be sure to keep him frightened enough not to dare step out of line. Sometimes being on top meant being the biggest, sneakiest, mysterious monster on the block.

Loki ended the call before the worm was finished spewing flattery of parting and returned to his papers, flipping through them swiftly. He felt unable to hold still. His skin was nearly crawling, his inner workings squirming to be free of the thick prison of skin. His focus had been drastically slipping since the catastrophe. Waiting drove him utterly insane. Peace was not a word he held in his personal dictionary unless he knew everything happening in every situation around him, was manipulating it, and it was twisting according to his direction; even then, peace was questionable.

He scratched at his brow irritably with his thumb. His "associate" had not been in contact with him since Darcy "fell." That in and of itself was unnerving and bordering frightening. Had the conditions been different he would have enjoyed the respite from them but not as things stood. If they had the plans he had a great bit more to worry about than security, in fact, any security would be useless to him and everyone else. He cared little for feeling powerless, loathed it with a seething passion! In control or not, he liked to seem impervious and convince others of it. Being dangled left him at a distinct disadvantage which was intolerable. He was the puppet master, not the marionette.

With a few quick swipes of his hands, the papers were neatly stacked and he shoved them into the correct file slots in the desk. In his current state, sitting here was of absolutely no value, no work would be accomplished. Mind scattered in so many directions meant low productivity. He would be able to focus again once he knew for certain what lie in his future with the Infinity project.

With a wide gate and fast pace, Loki exited his office, locking every door behind him as he went. The tension and frustration was visible in the way he stalked angrily down the hallways like a tiger deprived of its prey for the day. The dark brewing intensity of his eyes was like a witch's brewing pot, dangerous chemicals brimming and anxious to escape. There was one person he could visit that might put his mind to rest. His contact last spoke to him the night before with a meaningless update.

He needed solid information, not guesses nor second hand gossip. Facts were the singular thing that would matter in this game. The promised assurances were supposed to be given to him at the arrival of evening but he had no time to wait for that. When information did not come to the door that simply meant that one went out in search of it personally. No use blundering on any other deals while his mind was wound tightly around this one, none at all.

The metal door clanked as he shoved it open with one hand, pulling out his phone with the other. It was picked up after only three rings.

"I am coming to see you. I need the information you promised me now, I cannot wait." He glared venomously at the reply to the negative, "My patience is running thin! I absolutely must see you. If you will not see me on my terms, I will hunt you down myself, I will come to you and you will not appreciate it! I will ask for you by name in every single place I know you frequent!" He spit the words out in a snarl.

The lights flickered over his head as he prowled through the long garage of cold concrete and thick metal beams. The keys were already in his hand, dangling and swinging from his fingers, his fingers rubbing absently at the sharp lines of one of the keys. He was finished playing waiting games. He could understand that time was needed for information to be gathered but he could only wait so long in the darkness before he slithered from his den to find the light for himself.

"Fine, I will meet with you, but not here, meet me at the park near Stark's tower." The silky, low words hissed from the phone.
A razor edged grin cut over his face, "Very well. I am pleased you see it my way."

He reached for the handle, cold metal of the door seeping into his fingers just before his spine stiffened with the sensation of someone coming up behind him, thick soled boots quietly thumping the hard ground. Ending the call instantly, he slipped the phone into his pocket before glancing back but it did little to tell him the identity of the intruder of his space. A shudder of apprehension traveled up the curve of his spine, making the rounds back down to his toes.

The door swung open quickly, a gleam of shimmering silver paint as he dropped into his leather seat, slamming it the second his legs were folded in. There was no reason to wait for anyone to reveal themselves. He did not want to know who was following on his heels. If they entered his path, he would plow over the top of them gladly. He knew a few excellent body and pain shops for Jaguars, and he would be highly unlikely to lose sleep over it.

Breathing made her want to vomit, as did moving, thinking, opening her eyes to the dizzy and spinning world. Darcy would have been hard pressed to remember a time she felt worse than she did now. The first time they made her sit up had been a huge mistake. She could not leave until she could not only sit up but stand up without the world going black and having her body end up on the floor. Her weakness was maddening beyond toleration. Her body had created a rebellion against her and she had no way to pacify it.

They thought she had a grade four or five concussion, and they suspected PCS, whatever that was supposed to mean. They had given her a CT scan after her initial issues and possible seizure but apparently the results had gotten messed up and were inconclusive. Inconclusive, Darcy learned, meant they did it again. With as much money as these people rung from the public, a logical person would think they could get it right the first time, but no. She had to go for round two in a few hours.

She hated this, loathed it! Being brought food and water and having to ask permission and help to get out was more than a girl could stand! She had to be half dead before she asked for help normally, and by the time she did ask, she was already too far gone to be helped. The whole hovering people thing drove her up a wall. She did not want to have a flock of hens mothering her, it was just not in her nature to sit through that.

The day nurses were nice enough but she hated the night shift. They woke her up every few minutes, grousing at her to answer questions that anyone would know, like her name. There were times she nearly reached out and wrapped her fingers around their throat. It might have landed her in jail but she thought pleading temporary insanity would get her off. Anyone that had ever stayed the night in a hospital should understand how it was.

The only sliver of light was the girl the nurses put as her roommate. While she only looked at the willowy, honey haired angel in the corner once, it was her voice that brought the relief. That little thing had a sweet voice, like listening to a kindergarten teacher before nap time, so calming and soothing. After Darcy asked her to talk to her for a while things in the room had taken on a more peaceful feeling, warmer versus the indifferent silence she had been permeated with.

The little lady, and she was a lady, had been injured in a lab somewhere. Some lab partner spilled something toxic and everyone in the place had to be hospitalized until they were cleared. At least, Darcy was glad people at her work could not accidentally almost kill her that easily, it took more than spilling something to do that in a law office. Spilling coffee was as close to almost killing her as that had come around her office.

For all she talked about science though, Foster could have been a teacher. Darcy had always enjoyed watching others create experiments in class, it was interesting. People assumed she hated science
because her grades had always been a bit on the poor side, but that wasn't true. Her problem had always been that science did not like her. She could follow a formula to the very letter, do exactly what she was told but still have it blow up. Her high school and college friends never could understand how she managed C's in the classes; she knew why, she knew the teachers were desperate to get her out of their class to save their precious lab equipment.

Other people must not have let this little lady talk about her passion in life because she was content to talk about it all day whether Darcy was paying attention or not. Granted, she zoned out often, but she still liked to hear someone's voice to keep her from falling farther into the abysmal of her aches and pains.

Darcy flexed her fingers out of habit, not thinking about her hands, which was a mistake she regretted, yowling a curse before she could stop herself.

"Are you alright? Should we call the nurse? Do you need more pain medication?" Jane stopped mid story, a worried frown wrinkling her perfectly smooth skin, doe eyes wide.

Darcy shook her head, regret number two when pain shot up her neck and vibrated under her skull, "I'm good, just stupid for moving without thinking." She chuckled dryly, "I have that problem a lot, like your intern, Ian that spilled that toxic junk. Just be glad I don't work for you or you would be in here more often."

A musical laugh was her reward for the self deprecating jokes, "I am sure you would do much better working with me than that. I have a feeling you would be the type of person I would end up depending on to remember my appointments and turn off the burners when I rushed off ... or remind me to go home."

"Maybe, but I have a feeling you would end up paying me not to touch anything too. You would start paying me not to touch after the first few times I ruined one of your inventions."

Jane laughed again, "At least I would enjoy having someone to talk to. Erik is brilliant, but not very good with conversation unless her is arguing a point with me."

"Yeah, those Swedish guy types are all about making points but not so good at girl talk." Her memory was getting better, she remembered more details than she had been.

"That's for sure!" Jane's smooth lips pulled into a grin, "Unless I would go out for beers with him, then he would talk to me more, I bet. But, of course, I can't hold my own alcohol, so I'd never remember what we talked about later anyway."

A nurse walked in, smiling too wide, a tall, strong looking man in scrubs behind her. Darcy would have rolled her eyes if she could have done it without pain. They were here early. It was better than having them be late and waiting endlessly. Maybe she did need more pain medication. She could use some more of those relaxers too about now. Being dragged through the halls on the rolling bed, staring at the too bright lights and tiles go by too fast was just a bit more than she was ready for without a little help in pill form.

Why could these people not be at Star Trek level yet? Where was her doctor McCoy with super advanced gadgets? The science world was really lacking in advances. In Star Trek, they just put a few computers on you or stuck you in a pod and you were good again. Even injections were easier with their technology. That was what she wanted, was that too much to ask for? She was not asking for time travel, just little things! It was not like people did not pay them enough to work on things like that, right?
His fingers twisted the gleaming face of the Rolex back into the right place on his wrist. It had an ill habit of traveling to the side. Even expensive watches liked to behave badly, nothing was ever perfect. Especially not associates! He sighed, watching the water sway in rhythm to the slight breeze skating over its surface like a dance. She was late but he should have expected the sadistic little creature to make him wait. She took great pleasure in inconveniencing him at every turn even if she worked for him!

The wooden bench was not totally uncomfortable, but it was no lazy-boy either. At the core of his nature he had always been one for solitude, but solitude of books, not really of nature. Being at a park was not his idea of alone when so many mindless children ran their even more mindless parents in unending circles around the lake. The women jogging round and round on the sidewalk wearing precious little in attempts to attract the attention of the musclebound males doing the exact same thing was grating on his nerves. More grating still was when they pranced closer and closer to him each round, almost bumping his legs in a vain attempt to get him to look up.

People were terribly annoying so he pretended to be hopelessly engrossed in his phone, the focus growing deeper as one of them passed again. Having anyone work to gain his attention should have been faltering but it wasn't, it was just irritating. Being bombarded with it in the office, the giggling females huddled in corners whispering and glancing at him should have been a boost to his ego, and it was on a few occasions, but he mainly loathed it.

He, like any warm blooded male loved attention as much as the next, but swooning airheads just could not hold appeal for him. Those girls would just as easily whisper if his brother passed them as if he did. Fickle and mindlessly visceral. He could sympathize with the ladies endowed too well in their figures such as Darcy, having men's eyes never lift past their chest, never having the opposite sex think past aesthetic appeal to what potential they might have outside a bed.

His shoulders slumped as he realized his mind had drudged the girl up once again. Once again! Darcy! That girl was a virus to his computer mind.

A light, fluttering beside him drew his eyes as the feminine embodiment of a fox settled in beside him, not looking at him yet, but staring in fake interest at a magazine. It was obvious by her stiletto heels and skin tight, green, ankle length dress with a slit half way up her thigh that she had not changed from her work clothing before meeting him. It might have been her break.

Her flaxen hair gleamed in the sunlight, making it shine even more like spun gold. Exaggerated false lashes fluttered flirtatiously over green eyes as she cast him a sideways look. That sleek, extraordinarily feminine body was folded just perfectly, primly into the bench. Long, pianist like fingers shook out her fashion catalog to put order back to the pages. He could not help smirking at the hateful, vengefully jealous glare the runner that had nearly been tripping over him gave his new bench partner. Sitting down must have been her very next move but his little spy effectively ruined that for the time being.

"There you are." He muttered lowly, looking back to the lake casually.

She gave him her catty smile, canting her head to one side, "I do hope you didn't grow impatient waiting for me."

"Not at all, we both know you always arrive exactly when you mean to."

His partner wore her femininity like well used battle armor, the smooth curves or her face and ample frame of her body as good as any sword. Against the minds of lesser men easily swayed by what their eyes could take in, she was a master weapon indeed. She had always reminded him of the long past iconic blonde so famous for her power over men, Marilyn Monroe, and he occasionally
wondered if there was shared blood anywhere in that line. This woman had the cold and piercing edged wit to paralyze the very same men that discounted her power.

"That's true, it's a skill of mine. I did just save you from miss-triathlon." Amora reached up to twine a cornsilk strand of hair around her finger. "How are things at the office?"

"You tell me. I am most interested in how things are turning in other offices at the current moment. I need that information you promised."

Her red lips parted in a sigh, big round eyes turned up to look at the clouds, "Thanos is not happy. He has been in a very foul mood."

"Not happy? Say it isn't so?" He mocked smartly, feigning horrified shock and earned a hateful glare from her pretty features, "Surely that is not a problem for someone as enchanting and manipulative as you?"

"I might be near perfect in every way but even I can't always stay out of the backlash of his temperament. Oliver didn't get the plans he was looking for when he pushed Stark's girl. He got others, but not that one, but it took them a while to be sure since Stark makes everything hard to figure out on purpose." She leaned back casually, the bust of the thin dress straining to accommodate her chest, crossing one long and tones leg over the other. "You need to hurry though, Loki. The current rate of progress is too slow and if his moods at the Casino are any kind of judge, you are running thin on time. He is not patient, you know."

Leaning forward, elbows resting on his knees, the tight knot that had settled into his gut loosened just a bit at the news that he still had time. "I know, I am working on that. Lewis is not able to come back yet and Stark has yet to send anyone else. There is only so much I can do."

"The girl is a problem too. She is either going to be a liability or a help, you better make sure she is a help. Thanos will get her talking if you don't, one nasty way or other, I promise you." She switched from the magazine to sudden interest in her nail polish, "But I have more problems to tell you about, more reasons you need to speed up your deal."

His chin lowered slowly as he glared at the grass, "What might those be?"

"Two new hires. One works the tables, dealing and whatever else, and the other usually works the bar."

"Worried about your place already? Is she that beautiful?" He mocked wryly.

Amora ignored him and said with all contrariety, "Thanos doesn't seem to know who they are, but I do, through you. Stark is onto at least some of Thanos' game because they are his plants as sure as we are sitting here. It's trouble if they get anything we don't, Loki. Everyone is closing in on us and we have to step it up or we are both dead from one side or the other."

Loki's shoulders sagged further, tight cords of muscle relaxing and he let his head hang, "We never catch a break, do we?"

"Not really, it's depressing. All our work and everyone starts closing in just when it's about to pay off." She hissed in irritation, full lips pulled back in disgust, "And it's no bed of roses working for those creeps, seeing them every day. I want out of there the minute this is over, I mean it! We've worked together on a lot of schemes but this has been the worst."

"It will be the most lucrative, the last we will ever need, Amora." He turned green to green as they stared at one another. "Soon they will be under those pointed heels of yours and you can drive it
right through their temple if you so desire."

Amora grinned at that, eyes turning darker at the thought, "Better be, I'm risking my head sticking so close to them. He runs that place like it's a country unto itself and ..." She paused, a rare hint of fear flickering behind the shine of her eyes, "I've seen things go wrong in his office before, with a few dealers he caught cheating."

"If we stay on our guard, we will be fine. It is only a matter of time." He spoke over her, trying to chase that look from her face and she nodded in resignation before handing him the trashy catalog.

He watched her walk away, noticing with keen interest the tightness of her body as she left. She was not relaxed as she usually was; still graceful and commanding, but not relaxed. There was a natural and alluring grace she always kept about her that seemed dim today. Her cutting, sly, deceptive and playful side hardly even showed in this meeting. They had known each other many years, schemed together as long as that. They were not friends nor had they ever been lovers, they were too alike in nature to manage anything more than cursory alliances for personal gain, but he knew her quite well. He knew her well enough to see past her lush and easy fake smiles. What really worried him was the fact that she had not pretended to flirt with him even once, had not seductively run a finger down his chin or rubbed her breasts against his shoulder in parting. She barely joked with him at all and that was not like her. Amora was stressed.

Loki glanced at the glossy pages in his hand, wanting to open it but afraid to risk anyone seeing whatever she hid inside it. Whatever information was in here it would be important. Magazines were like her personal note pad. No one questioned a pretty blonde reading them and so they never bothered to look at the notes she made to herself on the inside pages. It was easy to hide things in and easy to give away. She was crafty and knew exactly how to play perceptions of her to her advantage.

He flexed his self-control to its maximum when he remained in the park a good ten or fifteen minutes after Amora got into the car with a hardened, musclebound creature with an arm length tattoo of a double edged ax, among others, littering his arms. She could have done much better than what he guessed was the bouncer of the Casino she was shadowing for him. It was a descent strategy though, were she to be caught, muscled men in love were quite easy to manipulate into helping set her free. Someone like that might be able to get her away from that place in reasonably one piece. Always thinking ahead, that woman!

It was with eager stride that he made his way back to his car, rolled up magazine held tightly in his hand. Once he had left the park he would be looking for her messages. A small glance at poorly printed pictures from security cameras leafed into the pages had been all he allowed himself before heading away. He reached the familiar, curvy metal animal with no small glee. Behind that wheel was among a short list of the only places he felt safely alone and in perfect control of his surroundings. Open parks were never on that list and never would be.

The steps were silent like a phantom, the feeling of eyes drilling into him the only alarm his brain was afforded. Dread hit him quite quickly, his steps hitching despite all effort not to show it. Not his day, again! They were like flies buzzing incessantly around his head! He was in no frame of mind to endure any more of them but it seemed he rarely had a choice in the matter. His singular choice was how he endured it, what face he showed to them in the glaring of a razors edge of pending doom.

Turning around, smug cock in his brow, he locked eyes with the shorter, svelte, black cat of a woman. She looked perfectly at ease, perfectly at home in the natural shade of the tree, making his mind draw up the comparison with her to a wraith or ghost from games he played as a child. She was a ghost, a phantom if he had ever seem one. Where Amora's very aura screamed for attention, this woman slithered in the shadows and the depths of any background. She was there but never quite
seen, never to be captured by any living or dead.

Her long, tight curls of crimson flowed around her smooth featured face and slender shoulders. The sway in her denim clad hips as she walked, one foot crossing over the other with every step, was so like the stalking sway of a cat. He could not understand how she walked silently in such high heels let alone through the park. Like Amora, she must not have had the time to change fully from the Casino attire he had seen her wearing in the picture carelessly, or perhaps just quickly printed on cheap paper. Like with Stark, it had been a long while since he last saw the little cat; not since she tricked her way into his office, into his ex-secretary's graces, into his security office with his ex-guards, and cajoled him into a few heated admissions he cared not to think about.

Her full lips held not hint of a smile, eyes cold like blades of ice as she stared at him, betraying nothing in her expression like a hollowed out creature. She was nothing like Darcy and her sweetness and light eyes that danced and easily gifted grins. Hers were not lips that smiled easily or without reason, the kind men could die without ever gaining a genuine curve of cupid's bow from. Her smiles were given with purpose to trick or intimidate.

She was a woman that knew, as a cat, exactly where to step and be silent; she walked with a carefulness, never stepping on the common path. On wooden floors she would walk on the line of the wall, or walk the edge of steps to avoid the creaking of places every other person walking carelessly down the center would cause. She knew the value of walking light on her toes and never lingering long in any one spot, swiftness her weapon of stealth.

"Always check the back seat or shadowy passenger side before getting into a car, Mr. Odinson. You never can tell what might be hiding in those dark places just beside your seat." Her deep, honey voice oozed over his ears like thick cream with jagged frozen shards hidden within.

Loki fought the urge to look back to his car, refusing to take the bait, "Quite true, it pays to be careful in either of our occupations." He smiled a toothy grin, fiercely hiding his discomfort.

Her lashes fluttered slowly over dark blue eyes, bored tone not easy to miss, "What occupations are those?"

A dry laugh hissed in his throat, "A free agent, an informer, shadow, sleuth for Fury and Stark. Faithful little pet that you are."

Her voice stayed impossibly even, "I am nothing but a simple observer, drifting from place to place."

"You are anything but simple. We both know you dabble in a great many lucrative venues." Loki finally allowed himself to glare. "Though you must have a tight leash in regards to Fury since you did not offer me information like any creative woman seeking more money would ... I might have paid you better but you never even tried, you just stole information from me like an infestation of ants in a pantry."

"You never asked for any, nor offered better." She countered as if he held no intelligence whatsoever in his skull.

This was a useless conversation and he knew it as well as she. Her ties were clear, they had been since he saw her standing beside Fury's other pets. Nothing he could say would make a difference beyond angering him as she played with his words. Just looking at her made him want to do some very violent things, made him want to snap her neck once and for all.

The lazy branches above them swayed, creating a similar effect a disco light in a darkened room would as the sun filtered through thick clusters of leaves and he leaned back against the hood of his
car. "How is life in the Casino, Natalia?" He should have resisted the urge to rub his new found information in her face, should have, but he found she had a too-well honed skill at making him speak without thinking.

"Fine." Her habitually impervious expression never shifted, her eyes fixed on his brow line rather than his eyes, "Lots of men willing to talk freely as they wager their lives away at the tables."

"Oh, I'm sure." He spat, gritting his teeth, "But what deity deigned to send you my way today, Lady Luck? You should stay in the Casino."

"Your father." A tiny hint of a wicked smirk played the edges of her mouth as she took in the widening of his eyes and color draining from his face at the mere mention, "Or Stark might have wanted me to drop by to remind you he left a gift in your office. Thor might have been having trouble catching you on the phone, maybe? Any of them could have."

Loki swallowed, desperately clawing to regain his footing at the mention of her potential knowledge of any of those subjects. He had thrown her a curve, but as he was learning was her habit, she threw back one harder. It left him reeling at the potential that she knew and had been in contact with them. She left several options out though, so it was very likely Fury that sent her. Omission was the greatest tell of any liar, drawing attention away from the truth. She was very good at redirecting attention.

"What do you want?" Loki was sober now and direct, not having the tolerance to spare her.

"I might have a warning to offer you..." She paused, prowling in an ark around him as she eyed him like her prey, "I might also bring you a proposition you would do well to consider carefully."

"I have neither the time to waist on you nor the patience to wait for you to end this dance. Please be quick."

"You have no time for me but you venture here... for no reason?" She was hinting and he knew it but he would not tip his hand needlessly.

"What is this message you bring me, Ms. Romanova? My expectations are high since you bothered to come find me, so do not bore me with something trivial like idle threats." He shot her a condescending, reproachful glare.

"I work for profit, as you do, Mr. Odinson. People in such a business always have expectations, but those are not always met by others." She completed one full circle around he and his car, back again to her original place. "You are walking a thin line with enemies on both sides, and enemies at either end of the line. You do not seem to realize how limited your options are."

Never once did Loki take his eyes from her, turning ever so subtly with her as she moved, "Your concern is touching but very unnecessary. I know better than you do what I'm doing. I'm resourceful." This was a game of wits and words, the way it had been the last time they met.

"You believe you are still in control, but you're not. He will fillet you alive."

"He? Which of all the potentials are you referring to?" Loki splayed his hands to the side, "I have many enemies, but none have deposed me yet. Your lack of faith in me is wounding." A nearly real smile, dark razors edge of hardened practice of menacing slid over his curved lips.

"Take your pick as you will, it applies to any of them. I do not underestimate you, but you make the fatal error of underestimating others. If you wish to live then you really should adjust your sights."
He loathed every second of this, he wanted it to be over. Ever nerve in his body was frayed to a shattering edge after the past few days, he was so very tired of these games. It was not as if he were oblivious to the truth of her warnings, he knew them all too keenly and it was steadily wearing him down. "I will keep all these warnings in mind, but I believe I already said I have little use for threats."

"Those were not threats, just advice from me to you. People around you will get hurt with more frequency if you are not careful." If she noticed the way his shoulders tightened into thicker coils she did not show it, "But I will be succinct."

Loki barely even saw something flying his direction, barely managed to catch the small item, trapping it between his palms by reflex alone to prevent it hitting his face. His eyes shot to the information drive, black little thing sharp against his pale skin. He never even saw her throw the little thing which unsettled him in ways he would never admit or allow to show on his face. "Is this your version of succinct?"

The foxy little woman nodded and turned on her heels to leave the way she had come, pausing suddenly, her back to him.

"Oh," She canted her head back, glancing over her shoulder at him in a nearly seductive manner, "and I was serious about that gift in your office."

Loki licked his lips as he watched the well kept secret of a woman walk away as he had watched his first appointment. His breaths were shaky but he had done everything in his power to hide it while her eyes were focused on him. He did not bother to watch where she went because it simply did not matter. Instead, he clutched the item tightly in his palm and threw himself into the stanch safety of his car.

Life was getting just a bit too complex when someone else's plant was giving him information, if that was indeed what this was. Free information it would not be, no more than Amora's was free, but this information might cost him more than he was inclined to pay. Unless it was not information at all, in which case he did not even want to think of what it could be. Setting the magazine at disc on the empty seat, he slammed the lock and wrapped his fingers around the steering wheel like it was his very last tie to sanity, knuckles white with the force.

He could not think of all of this right now. It was far too much information to process adequately. His real mistake today was leaving his office, he should never have left, he just should never have left. Now was the time to step back and plot his next move, or multiple moves. There were a great many chess pieces on the board and he had to find ways to capture all of them with the precious few pieces he possessed.

The engine revved to a burning, powerful life the traveled through his bones like an overpowering roar of a lion. His shoulders stiffened when he thought of what she had said about the car. While there could not be a person hiding within, surely, he dared not think what she might have placed back any number of spaces inside.

Chapter End Notes

This was almost totally a Loki chapter. Sorry, Darcy fans, she will be back! They will be back together again! And yes, I used the Jaguar thing, I did! Deal with those hot mental images!
Anyway, more characters for you, brief appearances though they were. I saw no reason to change Natasha very much. Just think of Iron Man 2 with her in it. There is espionage in business more than most people would think. Add the dark side of business and you have a lot more going on. I think she would be a shadow for Fury in the business world too, she's good at it.
Chapter Notes

I listen to songs while writing to get me into the right moods so I decided to occasionally tell what they are. Castle of Glass by Linkin Park. Also, Bullet in my hand by Redlight King. It makes me think of how Loki would be feeling during the chapter. He works so hard not to fall apart all the time while everything goes wrong around him. I brought back your Darcy time, be ready!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

~High Rise~

*Marvel

*Loki Odi nson, Darcy Lewis, Thor, etc.

Loki growled low in his throat, furiously hitting a button to minimize the screen he had been examining nearly endlessly since opening it. His normally well behaved hair was falling into his eyes from too much of his fingers raking through it in anger. The rage had his blood pumping a little faster with the lack of any way to vent and quell his frustration. His shoulders were tight cords of muscle, held up too high as his elbows rested on the armrests, fists supporting his chin. The shining black dress shoe tapped rapidly against the leg of his desk for lack of any other way to alleviate his pent up aggression.

Everything, all of this, he knew he brought on himself but he would never admit it. This were catching up to him now. All his greedy striving of callous destruction and havoc was coming full circle to chase him down into the ground. He would outrun it though, he swore that much on his future grave. Surrender was not in his nature, not any form of it. He would never allow this to come to pass, he would not concede.

It had been a sleepless night, one spent in the little room off his office no one knew about, save family. There was a bed and some of his more personal items and a few changes of clothes, but it got precious little use. His little safe escape, one his father built into the structure when he was young, that now served him. They used to call it the weapons vault. He and Thor once use it as children to hide from the front secretary, a bossy old woman that chased them away every chance she got. They always pretending she was a dragon or evil witch, sniggering every time she lost them unexpectedly in the office. Now, in his adult life, he used it to hide from more sinister people, shutting out the world when he needed to pretend nothing else existed. He brought the information in with him during the night though, which he should not have done.

Fury was a piece of work! Though he did have quite interesting information, the kind normally unattainable by legal means, and perhaps not even by unethical ones. How this information was gathered was a curious question but one he knew would remain unanswered for the present. None the less, he had it now so he was in no position to complain.
Thanos was in an uncomfortably far cry higher crime bracket than he would ever have guessed: deep down in the foreign black markets, dealing in everything from drugs to very dangerous and expensive weapons - some of the ones designed by Stark before he developed a thick conscience- of all genres. Every dark corner of crime was linked back to that man, even human trafficking and organ harvesting, which really did not speak well for where he might end up if he failed again.

He pinched the bridge of his nose between his fingers, staving off the building pressure in his skull that was sure to turn into a tension headache. All of it made Loki a little lightheaded and claustrophobic just reading the files, wherever they came from. His hands trembled imperceptibly to the eye but he could feel the telltale shaking. If he were a lesser man he might be panicking but he was better than that, stronger than curling up in a corner. Loki rolled over and played dead for no one and for no reason, not even when it made him feel sick to think of what he would do next.

If he was not destined for ulcers before he surely would be now. This was a world he never planned to step into, people died because of this sort of thing, as proven in sections of the file so graphically reconstructed for his reading and visual enjoyment.

A good man, he was not, nor would he ever be, but he was no Thanos either. There was no sliver of him that desired to be a part of any of that! Even more than ever before, he did not want that man to get hold of Stark's little program. That would be a catastrophe of incredible proportions. No one would be safe from him, he would practically rule the world ... and that was Loki's job, in no universe would he surrender that much power to a bigger monster than himself. Little wonder Amora was so tense!

He thought he had finally made it closer than he had ever been before to gaining all that he needed, to being on top of it all. Just a little farther, a little more information and he would have all that he needed. He was finding out how wrong he truly was. Never assume, never relax, not even once; he learned that a very long time ago but he had allowed himself to think too highly of his own plan anyway. The more he scanned the information Romanova handed him, the more he regretted stepping into this dark place.

Amora had been right, they were on all sides of them, and that meant trouble. It was a chess game where he had few pieces and the battling side had a full board. Fantasy was in thinking they were free from that strategic death game. But they did not know as much about him as they believed. If they did they would have used it.

Fortunately, it seemed the other sides were mainly ignorant of his connections. Unless Fury was hiding it, which was possible, but doubtful given the copious amounts of implied threats linking to what they clearly did know, they had no idea Loki was working with Thanos for the Infinity project. They believed Thanos intended to gain dirty prophet from the new business and launder his money through it. They thought it was intended in part to smuggle items for that filthy man ... which could likely have been the plan later down the road for all he knew. Men like this did not stop at one venture, they sunk their hooks into prey like a crocodile and never let go.

Admittedly, Loki himself was of a similar mindset and tactic, this went beyond the realms of anything he ever dreamed of. Threatening to rain destruction upon every facet of a person's life was one thing, doing so was another. Killing family members or loping off limbs was a place he never planned to take things for any deal. Destroying companies, reputations and peeling a person down to the bone figuratively he could handle, sure, but not like this. He destroyed people regularly but he was not ... this.

If Fury planned to frighten him, it worked rather well, just not with the end result the man might have intended. The offer at the end of the information was clear, immensely clear. Be a spy, hand over
every bit of information he had on Thanos, and of course sign away his first born, a pound of flesh, and agree to enslavement ... after that he would be offered help and protection. It sounded quite like deals the FBI might make informants and that just set off every bell in his head, screaming of how foolish it all was.

As if he would ever concede to such a thing! Trading one master for another was no way to live, nor would it ever be his way. He would never play to them. Thor might be satisfied with a life on a leash, rolling over and doing tricks for the occasional bone tossed to him ... but that was not him.

It was quite sure that his foolish brother thought he had the little ragtag group as friends, that they would help him if he ever needed it in return, maybe thought they would manage to help him secure Asgard back in the future, but Thor was so very wrong. Those promises would prove to be hollow. They would just use him until they had what they wanted. Loki could almost pity that gullible brother of his, but not quite, considering what side he was on.

The moment his eyes turned to the red and gold wrapped gift sitting on his desk, his lips curled into a snarl. After spending all night studying Amora's hand written notes, trying to decipher her poor hand writing, and the late waking hours reading Fury's information and "offer" there had been no point at which he could open that. He could not muster the courage so soon after two hard hits in procession. It it was a bomb he would soon wish he looked at it first.

He did wonder if any of them communicated at all. Fury and Stark giving him information back to back, or giving him anything so close together sent the message in between the lines that they were not following the same script. Their lack of communication would be his first weak spot to exploit, the first crack in the Titanic.

He was far more determined than ever before to turn the tables, shift the power back in his favor. They would never rule him, he would have them all bow at his feet! Life handed him misery to strengthen him, to ready him for power he was destine to one day possess. If enough things went so wrong, if one endured long enough, fortune would eventually reward your resilience. Plots were slowly forming in his mind because that was his element, the answer to his every problem. This was a delicate balance as well as a dangerous one, but it was unquestionably his chance to ruin them all when they believed he was helpless. He would die before he gave them control.

"Stark's liaison, Ms. Lewis, is here." The little voice informed him.

"Send her in." Loki snapped back and cut the connection. He nearly forgot she was coming back today. Some little airhead at Stark's office called him early in the morning to inform him when to expect her, much to his chagrin. Anger flared hot in his blood at the thought of another of those chess pieces invading his space. He had enough of that, enough of being push and prodded! She had been a spy, a thorn in his side from the very beginning. Her sole purpose in being here and staying close was to sabotage him. She was smart and managed with careful moves to put him off her scent, the minx, but the more he had thought about it the more he connected the start of his problems to her.

The moment she walked through his door, trouble flowed. She was a jinx if he had ever seen one, the harbinger of this pandemonium. For all he knew, that fall was orchestrated and she was working for Thanos and Fury both! It would not have been hard for Thanos to turn her. Loki had been looking into her records the past few days since she had been away. Her schooling had been expensive since she received no help from her family. The best she had was a few scholarships, but those were not enough to haul her out of debt. Enough money thrown at her and who could say what she might do, she was as human as any.

The girl's nightly appearances in his dreams did not improve his mood toward her, it only enraged him further. While they had been nothing like the first, her face was in every dream regardless of
content, she was always lurking within the tales of his mind. It made him want to ring her neck, ruin her. He hated the way she had invaded his mind and it made him irrationally want to make her suffer as much as he was. She was a huge problem to him and he knew it even if he was not sure exactly what to do about it besides turn his conflict into hate.

The light click of the door opening had him even more tense but he refused to show it, purposely letting his body uncoil.

"Late already, Ms. Lewis?" He shot the words at her like bullets, deliberately not looking up, not wanting her to sway his resolve, "Don't think you can garner lenience from me just because you fell in my building. You have cost us quiet a bit of needlessly wasted time. You will be making that up today and you are off to a poor start."

"I know, I'm very sorry about that. I had not really factored in my hobble time when I was getting ready to come." She laughed lightly, quietly self conscious, "It takes a lot longer than you would think to teeter down that hallway, I'll tell you."

Loki's jaw went slack as he finally looked up to take in the sight of her, eyes widening to stare at her in several long moments of dumb silence. She was an absolute wreck! Her normally sun deprived skin was so drastically white against the ugly blue and black marks and dark red scabs littering what he could see of her. It had not been a lie, she was hobbling like a toddler learning to walk, so stiff in her posture. He could see that she was in pain by the lines of her face shifting in minute grimaces when she took each step.

There was a single crutch tucked under one arm, making little clicks as she proceeded farther in. There was a thick black brace with velcro straps holding it on her tiny leg. His eyes were drawn to her hand as she struggled to hold the handle without hurting her two metal brace clad, broken fingers. Her hair was a free flowing mass of messy curls that normally were uniform and well behaved. Loki blinked several times, realizing he was on his feet and heading her direction, his main instinct screaming at him to help her, to pick her up and put her on his couch so at least she did not have to walk so far.

He realized his heart was beating faster at the sight of her even as he dug his heels in, slowing himself but not actually managing to stop walking toward her. His eyes were wide as he stepped up beside her, horrified that he had such a thin line of defense, unable to stop himself by will alone, so little ability in the face of her helpless arrival to do more than be irresistibly drawn to her like a puppy too eager to help. This was sick! This could not be him, he was not like this! Everything, all the careful indifference, all the loathing, all the carefully crafted walls he built against her were shattering at the sight of her.

"You look positively horrible." His tongue managed to hold his edge, speaking words in venom that had not even crossed his mind in a blind attempt to hide the truth. His sharp tongue was ever careful and watchful of hiding his feelings even when he could think of no defense. His brows turned down, eyes chilling as his inner shield worked furiously to stop his irrationality.

Her smile faltered a little, "Yeah, I'm sure I do ... but I must look marginally better than when you found me covered in blood." She offered with forced humor.

"Only marginally." The words kept tumbling free even before he had time to think about what his lips were doing, "If this look is a ploy for sympathy, I suggest you butter up Stark with it rather than me. I have no time at all for weak people."

A wounded look passed behind her eyes, one so open he saw it easily now, one she would have been able to hide were she not at such a blatant disadvantage. He could see her vulnerability like he
would the stars through a telescope, her injury leaving her far more helpless than he had ever seen her, confidence shaking in the face of his sharp dominance. "I don't need anyone's sympathy, I'm here to work." The conviction behind her words rang true in her blazing eyes. She was down but he could not count her out just yet. "I never asked anyone for sympathy and I never will."

Darcy stepped around him, shoulders as square as they could be, clearly angry and indignant at his implications. She dropped her bag forcefully into one of the chairs, plump lips pulled into a tight line. Without a further word, she dropped into a chair and set about tugging files from the confines. Hurt and anger radiated in the air around her. His words cut her even though he could not say exactly why, he had said much worse to her before.

His body tensed, the shaking from earlier returning for unknown reasons as he stared at the curls brushing her shoulder blades. Her presence stirred the same reaction as fear and stress did. He wanted to apologize, he really did; a near irrational urge to cup her face between his palms and chase the vulnerability from her eyes ran inexplicably through him. For lack of anything else to do, he walked slowly to her side, unsure what to do now that he soured the atmosphere. His skin itched as he stared at her, his eyes cold, betraying nothing.

"What exactly do you have for me? I certainly hope you have something considering all the time you cost me with your dance with an imbecile in the stairs ... and you are never to take the stairs again, by the way." He sighed dramatically, "I can't afford another round of this. You might have time to sit peacefully sipping juice but I do not."

The muscles in her jaw tightened in a way that said she was forcing herself to stay silent, "For starters, Mr. Stark sent me with quite a few things." She finally said, "I spoke on the phone earlier with the realtor of the property you showed me. I dislike the location, it is not high enough traffic flow there, it is too far from the main highway."

Loki's posture grew more ridged, muscles in his neck taught, "Is that so? You are an expert on it, I am sure."

"I brought quite a few alternatives that would work much better." She was shut down now, blank in the face of his scrutiny.

A thin envelope was shoved at his arm without her even looking up, "What else have you found fault with in your time away from me, Ms. Lewis?"

Her eyes flashed up at him as his fingers traced hers as he took the offered object, "You will soon see." A saccharine smile greeted him next and he was surprised to realize that he progressed enough in his time with her to know the fake ones from the real smiles. She was good at acting, good at covering the truth, much as he was, but the desire to strangle him read clearly in her eyes.

Her head cocked to one side as her gaze landed on the "gift" so clearly wrapped in Tony's colors. Those big blue eyes turned a very questioning look onto him, though he was unsure if it was over that fact that he never opened it or whether she had no idea what it was in the first place. The egotist was a poor communicator even with his own so she could easily be in the dark over what had been sent. She made no comment as he glanced over the file, skimming the content of the newest offer drawn up.

"I believe that your brain must have been rattled harder than I thought if you believe I will accept these new terms with open arms." He deadpanned his every word, calmly staring down his nose at her in his patented superior way, "If this is the best you brought, you might as well leave until you bring me something more appealing. Stark will never get all the perks from our deal simply because you took a convenient fall for him because I promise you, that has no power over me." The flair of
rage flashed bright in her eyes as he continued, waving the file under her nose, "While it might work on lesser minded men, coming in with the obviously overdone injuries is not a strategy effective enough to blind me."

She sat in absolute silence, eyes locked on his for several minutes as she obviously did not trust her self control enough to speak right away, and even after that time she allowed herself, her voice was edge with spite, "Your implications are insulting, but do not think I am fooled by the attempt to sway me from my task. You cannot anger me enough that I will let you slip things past me in a blinded attempt to prove myself."

Loki laughed deep in his chest, "That would imply you were ever a match for me even when you weren't this crippled mess before me now, which is beyond presumptuous and misguided." All his well crafted hate was bubbling out of him in his words despite the fact that his gut was being tied into knots with each and every word.

Darcy forced herself to her feet slowly, eyes still locked onto his before she tore them away to walk around him to the couch. She snatched her bag strap, a new one, and spared him not a drop of attention. "I appreciate this little reminder, Mr. Odinson."

"Reminder? Of what?" He swallowed down the urge to guess at her meaning, knowing even before she shot him a smile that she would not answer.

She sat in the every same place she spent her first day, perched uncomfortably there like a wounded bird. She set about fanning out paper methodically, never even letting it show that she noticed him inching closer. The fact that she would ignore him so totally mad him even more angry, angry because he could not manage to look away from her. This girl did not have the power, this was his world!

"Do you wish for me to call for coffee?" It was the sole thing he could think of to say that might gain him her attention.

It worked, because she looked up, "How much will that cost me? A second trip down five floors?"

Loki's fingers curled as he glared down at her once again, stepping closer to increase the effect, "Don't you dare imply I had anything to do with that, girl! I will not be slandered in my own building!"

The bitterness in her smile made him falter just slightly, "I thought it was only fair to return just a little of it to you. You have done nothing but slander me since I walked in the door." She shrugged, though he could tell it cost her pain to do it in the crinkles of her brow, "I suppose you are right though, I should not continue to speak so harshly or I might have a new accident."

"Alright," He brought a placating hand up, "enough of this. There is business to attend so let's stop this foolishness! I sometimes forget how sensitive women are."

"Sensitive!" Darcy shot up in her burst of anger, a move so fast her compromised body was unprepared, and she gasped in obvious pain.

His hands were on her shoulders in the next instant, body nearly pressing against her in an involuntary move to give her something to lean on. "Careful, Darcy..." He could see the tears pricking the corners of her eyes from the pain as she nodded and pulled away to sit back down.

Loki followed, gliding in beside her on the couch, eyes fixed on her closed ones. He nearly reached out to stroke her hair for comfort but stopped himself short, dropping it on the back of the sofa
instead, unsure what to do. She had an ill habit of making him unsure of a lot of things. His words were weapons of the mind, his only defense against what she did to him. Seeing her stirred up the same protective instinct he had while holding her on the stairs; he wanted to shelter her but instead he kept lashing out, doing exactly the opposite of his real desire. He both loathed it and was relived for it.

"You know, I think I'll have that coffee now." Darcy stared at the floor, smiling, though not at him.

"Of course." He nodded quickly, "Excellent idea, we both could use it."

Darcy really wanted to run away and hide herself away like she did as a child. There was a time she could just hide in her closet with her stuffed purple rabbit when her world became too painful; now that she thought about it, that might be why she loved soft things so much now, they were her only source of comfort when she was young. Her eyes fluttered as she tried to stay alert and away from those craven thoughts slithering in the back of her head. She had not been quite fully awake since the fall, she felt like.

Getting out of the hospital had been like an early Christmas gift but being back in this cold and dark office was like being taken to court without counsel. The air felt too thin, like being too high up on a mountain, or most likely the edge of a cliff. Once again, she had the feeling of being one step away from a deadly fall, just like the first time she walked in. This time, she felt like the disadvantage was greater, like rock climbing without ropes.

A glance up told her he was pacing again, thin face screwed into a thoughtful frown as he scoured the pages in his hand. The beautiful lines of his cut-glass face and body reminded her so much of a tiger, but a magical one, the kind from Narnia with a sharp mind hidden behind the sharp eyes. Loki had always been a puzzle, a hat-trick of shifting personalities and masks, but he seemed even more complex the longer she spent with him. The man now and the one that saved her life might have shared a body, but they were not the same.

They were back to the beginning, back to the first Loki she met, the battle ensuing the moment she walked through the door. It was a mistake to ever think she gained some sort of ground with him, he very pointedly reminded her of that fact with his cutting words. It was of no use to think he was really the same man that brought her coffee in the hospital. That man was brought on by her drugged-up, weakened mind, interpreting his acts as kindness rather than a crafty CEO covering his tracks.

Loki was not kind, he was a deadly creature of the sea. She was an injured swimmer bleeding into the water and he very clearly smelled it. He had been swimming round and round, bumping her and testing her to ready for the killing strike. This was only the beginning of a slow and painful death for her.

Her fingers rubbed at the smooth pen in her hand as she stared at the multiple fibers of gray shades in the carpet. He was a confusing man. Just when she made up her mind about him, his mood would shift to throw her off again. Not having a perfectly clear mind surely could not have helped her confusion.

There was nothing but fangs and venom when she walked in, but strange and tiny things screamed opposite to his lips. She might have been reading too much into everything, but that was the issue. He was cruel in one breath and tender in the next, or moderately tender. He did not seem the type for pity but she guessed it must be in him somewhere. The little shifts happened after he saw her pain so it was a logical assumption, though not one she liked. Pity was worse than cruelty, and she seemed to be getting both at once.
She had been watching him carefully all day, the strange way he behaved; haughty and flippantly put-upon attitude thick in the air even as he ever so casually moved things closer to her at every turn. With nose in the air like some kind of prince touring a slum, he walked around her without interest, but his attitude did not coincide with all the tiny acts of seeming unintentional kindness as he diligently catered to her needs. The moment she tried to get out of her chair she always found him in the way, examining the files she intended to retrieve before he tossed them at her as if he lost interest. It was smooth the way he did it even though quite predictable after she realized the pattern.

If she were less observant she might never have noticed the way he unendingly predicted her needs and jumped, however arrogantly innocent the moves were, to prevent her from the embarrassment and trial of action. His skills of the mind were frightening when turned so fully and singularly on her.

Loki, she decided, was a mysterious creature. Darcy found herself softening towards his strange brand of tenderness even as his sharp tongue demeaned her while his actions nurtured her. She was starting to realize that understanding such a man would be far harder than this business venture ever could. To do a proper job though, she would need to try.

She would swallow her hurt and pride to make sure things ran smoothly ... and she was hurt. He called her weak and that burned her from the top of her head down to her toes.

It was true that she was not at the top of her game, but she was not weak! That was one things she refused to be! If she dropped into that slot in the people chain, she would just give up.

Darcy glanced at her empty cup in absolute irritation. She was in no shape to be out of coffee, that was all that was keeping her even slightly sane with all the twists of the rollercoaster of a ride being locked in with that man. There was no way to deny that she was more vulnerable than normal because he very nearly made her cry a few times, and she never cried. The previous days had been emotionally draining as much as physically and she knew perfectly well she was coasting on a thin line of control.

"Am I correct in thinking Stark intends to place all his own people in the technical department?" The paper was shoved under her nose as Loki pointed at a section with his pen.

Her eyes nearly crossed when she tried to see the words and she sat back to gain some distance, "He only works with the very best computer, design, and programmers in existence. It would be sensible to allow them to continue running the systems they created or are at least familiar with rather than trying to familiarize a new team."

His dark brows turned down sharply in obvious disapproval, "I cannot agree to that! I need at least a few of my own to be part of it to ensure I am not being taken advantage of. Letting one party control an entire unit is simply not going to happen. I have not demanded to leave any of my teams solely in charge of any department so I do not see why that is to be a fair stipulation."

Sighing, Darcy shook her head and locked eyes with him, "I do not see why you find it so drastic."

His green eyes narrowed viciously, shooting venomous death at her by will alone, "No, I am sure you don't. Not someone like you."

She was just tired enough to take the bait, tired enough that she asked what she should never have bothered, "Someone like me? What exactly do you think I have yet to understand about your ever so complex plans?"

"Yes." His voice was cutting with superiority, "One such as you that has never run a business, has no idea what could be important down the road, and has no practical understanding beside that
provided in textbooks. I would be surprised if you could even follow my logic."

That did it! She did not have to sit meekly and let him insult her intelligence! No one paid well enough for her to take a constant stream of belittling. "Fine, Mr. Odinson, please, enlighten me! Tell me of your glorious intellect so that head of yours can swell a little more, I don't think you need but a few more puffs before it explodes from all that hot air!" It surprised her how little pain she felt when moving in wild motions now that rage derived adrenaline was plumping. "Like everyone else in the world, I am waiting on bated breath to know how grand and mighty you are, your highness!"

Their eyes were glued together, Darcy craning her neck up at him as she waited defiantly for the rage. His impassive expression shifted slightly in the arch of one perfect brow. Were she less observant she might not have seen the tiny shift in his eyes, the strange and sudden thaw of ice. His anger did not increase, no, the corners of his mouth wrinkled in the effort not to smile. Inexplicably, he changed on her once again like some kind of lizard. The anger he seemed intent to uphold was fading and it did not reach his eyes, he was amused by her.

"I would regale you, Ms. Lewis, but I'm afraid a detailed description would have us here for days."

Loki's voice had lost the brutality as well and turned playful.

Darcy's own scowl faded quickly to a befuddled one, her head left to simply spin with the speed of his shifting moods. "Well... I'm sure it would if you were the one telling it. You are that type, the storyteller kind."

A deep chuckle resonated in the air as he finally graced her with a rare, knife edge, contagious, roguish grin, "You think so? I have been told I am skilled at spinning tales."

She let her eyes fall to the floor and nodded. The constant weather changes in the room made her feel tired. Being with him made her desperate for a nap. Being tired around him was quite a bad idea too because her wits were much less sharp. Her worst habit was talking and being too honest when she felt the haze of sleepiness and she found herself at one of those points now even though she knew it could be fatal. She just wanted this fighting to be done. She wanted to go back to the way it had been when they were more comfortable with each other, or maybe she wanted to go back to that strange young man sneaking into a hospital room.

Walking on glass and dancing around these strange moods was enough to make her want to give up on this entire job. At this point she just wanted a semblance of peace. If clearing the water was the way to gain some of that, she could give it a try. Doing so risked beginning his angry circle again but that was a risk regardless of what she did or did not do.

"I'm not your enemy, you know." Her voice was soft in hopes of showing him a lack of threat, "We are working for the same things."

"No, we're not. So long as you work for Fury and Stark, you are my enemy." His voice held none of his previous spite, just a factual resignation that made her stomach drop.

"I don't see why." Darcy persisted, eyes to the floor and the toes of his shoes, "We could simply work sensibly and get both of you what you want out of the deal. There is no reason for battling over it."

"Forgive me if I do not share your idealism but this is business. Everyone is an enemy ... you either accept that and fight or you should not be in this line of work."

Her eyes drifted shut in defeat, "That's a depressing outlook."
"But it is a true one. If you cannot fight in this world of backstabbing and eye-gouging, you would be better off finding some bleeding-heart group to work for. Neither I nor Fury have the time for amiable relations."

His words hurt her far more deeply than she could explain, maybe just because she came here originally thinking they would work well together after the hospital. None of this would normally bother her but it was too much today. Very foolishly, she thought they established a comradery or even something closer to friendship.

It never even occurred to her before spending time with Jane that she missed having people to talk to that did not want to manipulate her. Darcy missed having easy conversations that were simply for conversation sake rather than verbal battle. When he sat on her bed and talked to her it felt like a friendship sort of thing.

That entire experience made her confused. His visit had been different from Stark's. Loki had been speaking to her rather than at her. She missed having real people. Even Jane had a few visitors not related to her work, but not Darcy, not a soul came to see her besides Tony, Pepper, and Loki. The thought never crossed her mind before that she had no one in her life. It was probably largely the drugs talking and making her feel so strange and clingy but knowing that did not help.

Loki comforted her once and now he was insinuating she was pathetic and easily expendable if she dared show too much weakness to he or Fury. What was a bit worse about hearing the things he told her was the knowledge that it was truth. Inadequacy was never to be tolerated, it never had been. That was part of the reason she entered this world, because she hated pusillanimous things and this was a world for tough people. She was on the other side now though, the vulnerable side, and she loathed it.

"I need to go confer with Mr. Stark before it gets too late." Darcy announced, "I should go."

"Of course." He nodded and turned toward his desk, strolling away from her slowly with nothing more to spare her.

Darcy Lewis was frightened of something. Whatever he had been saying all day long had caused her to shrink back from him. The strong defenses she possessed before the fall were damaged greatly and that meant it was only a matter of time before he found the correct angle to thrust a sword into her hear through one of the holes. She would yet be his tool into the world he had not been able to break in to. He would use her for everything he could in order to gain the upper hand.

The idea had come to him easily once he thought it through. Using her delicate state would be simple, he just needed to decide how best to approach his attack. He should have been leading up to this all day long but he had been much too preoccupied to think clearly. It was far from kind or good, but it was the weapon he was most in need of. He would have to break her and make her his own little telescope into that enemy camp. This was the opening he desperately needed to turn the tables.

It was hard to pinpoint exactly when he realized how vulnerable that girl was. It might have been right when she walked through the door, maybe when he witnessed how easily pain swarmed the expanse of her eyes, or simply how quickly he defeated her at the end, but he had seen it. Weakness, she was weakened and it made him want to protect her and swim in for the kill all at once. It was blood in the water, primal as anything could be to both aspects of his nature. He wanted to probe this newly found soft spot to see exactly what was at its core and exactly what it would mean for him when he used it, because he knew perfectly well he would use it. He needed to examine it and find the roots so he could wrap both hands around it, exploit it to his every advantage.
As of yet, he was not sure where the vulnerability rested in her but he would find it, given time. It never took him long once he caught the scent of it before he understood how to twist it. Loki was very good at using those little weaknesses, very good at examining them for what they were. How much he could make it hurt depended entirely on his whim.

He could be gentle or he could rip at it with a ruthless gnashing of teeth. There was so much he could do with a weakness. Those chinks were power, they were sway and a point of direction he could own. He had always been calculating and that would not change. Using her was far from kind but this was the game of life and he could not afford kindness. If she did not want him to find her weaknesses she should never have come back before she could hide them from him again.

Her retreat meant he was already on the right track.

The distinct sound of the door opening with a violent twist rose behind him to signal what he assumed was her irritated departure. It was not until he heard that voice, that single word called to him that he realized different. His entire body froze, rooted helplessly to the floor in angry, horrified disbelief. The very word cut him to ribbons in an instant, turned his insides to ice, nerves vibrating under his skin.

"Brother!" That awful word spoke far more than any other ever could. He knew that tone, knew it so well, knew it meant so many things he had no desire or energy to face. He simply could not turn around to face what was waiting for him, not even when the door slammed behind heavy, advancing feet.

Chapter End Notes

Loki is a very conflicted character and he changes with the wind. I try to portray his chaotic nature he is so famous for. I'm not sure I get it right but I try. He has a very tender heart and he fight tooth and nail to protect that soft side of him. He's had a lot of pain and betrayal, which made him hard but in every movie we see moments of chinks in his hard shell even if he shifts right back in the next breath.
Chapter Notes

If you want to know the big contributors were: Mess of Me by Switchfoot, Comeback RedlightKing.

Brace yourselves for lots of arguing ahead! Thor and Loki fighting was written while listening to The Family Jewels by Marina and the Diamonds. That very strange brother set with all that anger and love. Oh, and just to clarify, this story has their parentage being a bit different than the Jotun thing, obviously, I'll explain later on.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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It required everything in him to screw a cold, though not utterly icy, calm expression onto his face. Then a great deal more to force his feet to turn him in the direction of that voice. His heart sank and clenched the moment he allowed his eyes to sweep the stormy face of his older brother. Fear, even terror rushed inside him; it was not fear from worry of what their father's favorite athlete might do, but for why he was in this office; why he was wearing such a face of smoldering anger directed in one single direction. The ever forgiving - at least of his baby brother - lug looked more than ready to plow forward to shake the life out of him.

If he wanted to, he could do just that. The star of his high school football team, wrestling, and hockey team, Thor had always been simply perfect, a natural at anything that required innate power. He was a brick wall if you tried to hit him straight on and an avalanche if he hit back; barrel chested, physique sculpted by Zeus, trapezoids thick and toned to optimal use.

Darcy was quite forgotten, sitting stone still on the couch, papers half way stuck in her bag. He no longer had the mental wherewithal to think of anything but the intrusion of a past he struggled so desperately to run away from looming right back in his sanctuary. Her wide eyes flitting back and forth between to two Odinson's did not register in his usually keen senses. Thor did not seem to notice her either but she might not have cared to be seen just now.

"Well, well, Thor, what a surprise!" Loki forced a amiable tone and smile laced with poison.

The professional, gray with subtle white stripes, three piece Brioni only slightly managed to tone down the rawness of him. His blonde hair was slicked back neatly, secured tightly with a little band at the nape, the barely there tail gelled like the rest making him look more streamline. The shadow of stubble was still there but it did not manage to make him look sloppy. The obvious clench to his sturdy jaw was a blaring sign of restrained agitation though. He was indeed a palpable picture of intimidation even in this world of files, papers, and desks.
He had always been commanding in the natural sort of way Loki knew he never managed but struggled to have. His eyes were the part of him that most stuck out, the lightning flashing around inside them spoke volumes. It was not that unusual to see Thor angry, he had a temper unmatched by most people, especially when he was younger, but it was rarely so hot in the air. While the oaf was short fused, he was also strangely patient with those he cared for at all.

"I will speak with you, Loki, now!" Thor punctuated his words with a narrowing glare of his usually resplendent, wide, sky blue eyes.

Loki fixed his eyes on that thick shoulder, focusing on the seam, "I believe we already discussed everything, my mind is quite made up. You cannot burst in and expect me to-"

Thor cut across waspishly, "I did not come here because of that, Loki. My business with you now is of a different nature entirely!"

A chill of dread ran through his traitorous body, the tiny bit of shaking coming back to his hands once again. "Really? And what business might that be, Thor?"

"I have spoken to Mr. Fury and he has told me of your recent dealings!"

Loki's alabaster skin paled further, eyes widening first in shock, morphing quickly into rage, "Did he? Then I suppose you stormed the gates to inform me of all my copious errors." He tossed the file in his hand onto the desk, eyes blazing with deadly outrage. "You came to correct the ways of your foolish, wayward younger brother and forcefully drag him back onto the right path, exactly where you were told to." A humorless laugh burst from him in a gust, "Do spare me your righteous indignation! I don't have the stomach for such drill right now!"

"I came to speak sense into you! You have no idea what you have begun. This is perilous and vacuously brash! You always rush into things without thinking!" With every word Thor's tone grew sharper and his volume louder.

"I rush into things? I rush in without thinking?" Loki leaned his - much leaner than Thor's- shoulders back, a cold and numb feeling setting into his body, "Well, that is an area you surelyare experienced in! You presume to lecture me on brash behavior, my dear brother? Because last I checked, you have always been the forerunner in that area, much to father'sdismay. I suppose you have spent so much time in the real world that you outgrew that aspect of your personality and are now the very definition of wise choices!"

Thor was stressed, it was dripping from his tone and his manner of speech. Both of them had been very well educated in speaking but Thor's tended to come out most when he was stressed. The more upset he became, the more formal he was- a bit like Darcy, now that he thought of it- but he would not be shocked if the blonde twit lapsed into Shakespeare if their talk lasted too long. "Loki, this is sheer madness!" Thor cut the air with a swipe of his hand, "I know everything and I see the trap you have sprung upon yourself! I will not allow you to continue in this foolish pursuit of-"

"Allow me?" The fire in Loki's eyes could have ignited the entire room in flames as he snarled, "When have I depended on your permission for anything I do?" Loki lunged forward, hands slapping on the desk as his eyes seemed to tangibly stab at his brother, "You must have forgotten that this is my world now! I rule this company, not you! Asgard rises and falls on my orders, no one but mine! I need not seek after your approval nor permission to act upon anything I see fit to do!"

"Loki!" Thor absolutely barked, "No good will come from your spiteful power-plays! Can you not see, as I do, the danger of all this? Do you not yet notice that you are drowning in your own schemes?"
His blood pumping faster with fury, Loki's voice turned huskier and quieter in his dangerous signature, "Oh, do step a little higher on your own pedestal, I don't think China can see you yet!" His hands were shaking roughly from anger rather than fear, "Not that it is a proper structure since most of it was built by father, the bodies of anyone you cared to step on, and your own ego. One day it will finally topple rather than simply sagging as it does now."

Thor stormed around the desk much faster than would have been anticipated, forcing Loki to belatedly retreat a few steps before he caught the slightly shorter man by the lapels, jerking him into a forced face-off, "Enough games! Give up this poisonous partnership and foolish deal! Thanos will destroy you, you know that! Take this offer of help! Let them help you, let me help you! I will protect you and we will all find a new path together if you will but trust-"

Loki snarled deep in his chest, gripping the other man's thick wrists in return and shoving at him, "I do not need your help nor would I ever dream of accepting it! Rolling over like Fury's bitch might be your misguided way, but it will never be mine! I solve my own problems, I always have! Just because you relied on father to bail you out every time does not mean I did, or that I am incapable of fending for myself. You presume far too much!"

The deep set flash of pain in Thor's eyes let Loki know he indeed struck a nerve so he smiled again, predatory as he moved for the kill."Oh, but I suppose he can't bail you out anymore, can he? The way it is now, why exactly do you come rushing in to speak of such lofty ambitions of offering help? You have nothing to offer anymore, brother! You are as weak as he is!"

The grip on his jacket tightened as Thor stared deep into his increasingly wide green eyes. He had to nearly stand on the tips of his toes to maintain his balance. There was no question he was winning the verbal battle but he was fairly sure he was just about to lose the physical one that would come in the form of a punch to his jaw. He would not deny that he had been pushing for it in a strange pursuit of his own justification in driving his brother over that particular edge.

It felt like a victory, another step away from that foolish child that used to follow his big brother like a puppy, a break from the bond Thor still clung to and manipulated. If that hold this mountain of a man held over him could be broken he would be much freer. The guilt would go away and he could put it from his mind forever. If Thor broke, if that bond was lifted on Thor's side, he was sure he could finally cut the ties still remaining to his family. It would be vindication all his own. It would mean he had been right all along.

"You will stop this, Loki." The false calm veiled in the rumble in those words screamed just how close that pending strike would be, "You will listen to reason and stop all this before it is too late." So many meanings seemed hidden in those words.

Loki let his own expression calm, lifting his brows with quizzical innocence, "Will I?"

The air was practically electric, the way it normally felt just before a massive rain and thunder storm where the sky lit up with flashes that kept her up all night long with the crashing. Darcy didn't bother with the crutch, it would slow her down, she just hobbled. The way she was forced to move made her already not so great hip hurt even more than before but she really did not want to be trapped in a room with fighting titans. Running from that would be much harder.

This needed to be stopped, and invalid or not, obviously she would have to be the one to do that. Were there any sane men in the world, really? Did every one of them have to be a diva? What happened to girls being to dramatic ones?

She drew as close as she dared and spoke loudly in as chipper a voice as she could manage, "Thor
Odinson? Goodness! What a shock!" She laughed nervously by accident, intending it to have sounded anything but pitiful puppy yelp. "Two Odinson's in the same room! What a thing!" There was no question she was babbling but their heads were turning her way so it was working, "I've heard a lot about you from Director Fury! Is it true you collect Viking hammers and axes?"

They stared at her and blinked as one. And blinked again, reminding her very much of two computer monitors that had glitched at the same time. She had never seen such a confused or blank expression on Loki's face before but he stared at her now as if he had never seen her before in his life. Thor stared equally in stunned wonder but he actually had never seen her before. They were so wrapped up in their bickering to notice there was a world outside.

"When did you get a new secretary?" Was oddly the first thing the blonde gym frequenter managed to say.

There, he sounded so placid, that was simpler than she expected!

The spell of anger having been broken, Loki irritably twisted out of that previously iron grip and shook out his jacket, "That is Ms. Lewis, Stark's elf of business deals."

An enlightened, pleasant expression lit Thor's face as he passively dropped his hands to his sides as if they had never been fisted, "Oh!" His big blue eyes took quick stock of her, "The one that nearly died in our building."

Darcy inwardly blanched at how pleased he sounded at the revelation, for whatever reason.

Loki's deep-set eyes narrowed, "My building." He muttered.

Eyes fixed on her leg like an owner might eye a lame horse, he smiled boyishly, "At least you are finally taking responsibility for her fall."

"That," Loki spat, "was not claiming fault, brother! I simply was correcting your slip to remind you it is my building and mine alone."

Her curved brow twitched in annoyance. It was hard not to let the fact that they were still talking as if she did not exist cause her to drop a glued on smile but she managed. It should not have surprised her that they really were as crazy together as people said. The reputation they had for being a very strange set was even more than deserved. They were a set of negatives, the exact opposite of the other, two sides of a coin. They were a black panther and golden lion, predatory in different ways and different reputation; one walked in darkness and the other in the sunlight, but both deadly. Power rippled under their skin, she could just see it vibrating while they argued.

When not fighting though, they seemed even more different, not that she had enough data to make a full chart though. She could see similarities in them though, even in the guarded way they stood. So much volatility in those packages. This little outburst was a giant flashing sign in the sky to remind her that she was the only sane one in the group.

"And to answer your question," Thor lifted a wide, winning smile to her, "I do collect them, Ms. Lewis."

He did have calming smile, even a little enchanting, forcing others to smile in return. Darcy did smile back, unable to help it; she smiled because she knew he expected her to as much as because it was infectious. For good measure, she took it a few steps further and allowed her smile edge on flirty, even in her poor condition. The assured shift in his eyes was easy to spot. Adding a shy glance at the floor seemed to seal it for him, gear him to underestimate her. She thrived on being underestimated,
she always had, and it was a role she fell into easily with someone new.

Thor was the easy smile sort, she decided, the kind that could bring a room in with just a smile, be it real or fake. He knew he was good at it, good at charming others and expected everyone to easily fall to it. She could play to that. Men were easy if boiled down, men like this anyway. They could be placated quickly if they received the awe and wonder they thought they should get, it made them pliable and complacent.

"It is a pleasure to meet you." She added another duck of her head for good measure.

"I do apologize for my brother and I. We are not always as well behaved as we should be, even in the company of a beautiful lady." Thor's grin had nearly swallowed his face, certain that he was doing well; that was clearly the crowd pleaser side this kind always had.

This was good! She wanted him relaxed because he was the biggest threat in the room right now even if Loki was not at ease yet judging by the rolling of his eyes, "It's quite alright. Seeing men throw grand tantrums has become common since I've been working for Stark and your brother." She kept her tone perfectly sweet, ignoring the choleric glare Loki shot her.

Thor's smile lessened a little to let a bit of confusion filter into his expression as he attempted to decide if that jab included him or if it was strictly aimed at the other two. "I hope Stark is well." He renewed his smile again, obviously deciding to let the potential insult slip past without analyzing it.

She could only really guess that he calmed so easily as a moderate form of chivalry, not wanting to fight in front of a woman or outsider. He was at least gentlemanly that way, where Loki would not likely have cared what she witnessed, at least he was taking up the effort to treat her company with respect.

Her eyes glided between the two, sizing them up as well as gauging their shift in mood. What charmers the Odinson's were when they wanted to be! They had similar smiles, inviting and contagious if they let them be. Loki could melt people with a smile too, she had seen him do it in the halls before. It interested her to draw that similarity between them. They could go from raging to peaceful at the drop of a dime. That might have come as a result of growing up in the corporate world.

Even with all that acting, they could not hide the charge of welling emotion in their eyes. There was vulnerability in both of them, a rawness only rubbed painfully worse the longer they were close. So much was passing between them without even a word or a look and it hurt to watch. Crushed hopes, shattered glass bonds, and cracked trust swirled around them like the rings of Jupiter. Those kicked-puppy eyes were enough to make a girl cry.

"Oh, he is quite well. A whirlwind, as always." She was making a very large effort to sound cheery; she already decided he would respond best to the sweet but shy sort, which was easy to achieve if it meant ending the stupid testosterone surges still hanging in the air. "You know how he is, busy at every second of the day."

An airy but deep chuckle was her reward for all this effort, "Yes, yes, that sounds right. He is eccentric as always."

What were these two hiding in their past? What damage had they dealt each other to bring them to this mess she saw now? They were cutting each other to pieces ... not that she could afford to focus on that. She could not afford to think about those matters, she needed to harden herself to that for now, focus on her job.
Looking up - and she did indeed have to look up to this man too - at this Adonis of a creature, Darcy found herself feeling a bit sorry for Loki's childhood self. It was little wonder, at least in part, why he was how he was. That razor sharp wit and tongue would have been his only weapon. Growing up as a book-worm in the same house with a jock ... that would be a nightmare! Being on the receiving end of that sharp tongue would have been no walk in the park either, as she had seen all day.

Focus! Job to do!

"I take it you are here because of the project then? Fury told you about his idea ahead of schedule then?" She let her question hang in the air a moment until his mouth cracked opened to ask, "He so rarely does that but since you are here, he must have informed you that he intends to bring you in." Her head tipped to the side to non-verbally indicate she was trying to remember something, "As a consultant, I believe the file said. That overseas project he has been guarding so carefully."

Thor's interest had just been captured totally, eyes wider as he stared at her, "What project?"

"Oh, you know, that new operations base he got the idea to start a while ago, bringing together some of the big names in American business, so you and Loki were on the list. No one thinks he could negotiate that sort of deal, bringing multiple brands together, but maybe he has a better footing now."

Loki's eyes snapped to her as well, two very interested men both gaping at her. Too bad she had no idea what she was saying! Too bad she was not being totally honest with them! That project had been shot down a year or two ago, ages before Loki took over Asgard. She ran across the file on it a month before but it was not an active project. The real target had been Daddy Odinson, but neither of them had to know that. This was just an off the cuff idea to get the heat of whatever was happening in the room and turning it back on Fury; he was a big boy, he could handle it.

This was something he would fall for, something to peek his interest. She was fairly sure Thor would never believe this project she was talking about wasn't current. After all, if it was old, why would she know about it? That would be his reasoning. He would demand to know everything and it would take Fury ages to sort out what brought on this sudden issue; he would hate her and she would enjoy every second of causing him a headache. No one fully trusted Fury, it was easy to pawn blame onto him.

The main goal would be achieved though. Meaning, Thor would leave and he would remain out of Stark's way for this deal, busy finding his own answers. The very last thing she needed was to deal with a lion getting out of the cage during her zoo tour. He needed to go away! Even she could see all Thor was gaining was Loki's ire and that fight would end with neither mind being changed. She needed time to find out what one the green hills of Iceland they had been fighting about! The name "Thanos" sounded moderately familiar but she could not place it. She needed time to investigate and she would let Fury be run around to ensure she had it.

Judging by the argument, Fury was already involved anyway, so unless Stark said he wanted Thor around, she would get rid of him, and that was the simple fact. If Stark did want Thor here, it would not be hard to bring him back. Either way, she did not want to deal with this today, not blind, so she would put an end to this. Thor needed to leave before she lost what nerve she had gained, or before Loki sank his teeth into her again.

Wounded or not she still had a job to do and there was no way in hell she would just let these two run her over. Loki stepped on her enough for one day! She would not stand for round two, especially not from Mr. Captain-of-the-Jocks! This was not high school, she had the power here! She felt on higher ground when faced with men like this, rather than men like Loki, because the Thor's out there could learn this world, but she was born to it. This was her area of expertise!
Loki could run circles around her because he was born to this too, so she had less footing. This new man was a different story and he stroked up her competitive side just by standing there. This she could deal with better than what Loki had been doing.

"I heard Fury was taking heat for even trying to start this. Some people don't think it's a wise move to bring these particular competitors together on a project." She rattled on, trying to be sure he was hooked.

It was little wonder they nearly came to blows before she stepped in. She already identified with Loki and his bookshelf, already assumed he would have been the kid in class just trying to avoid the mean spirited sport teams. Now she could only imagine gym class with a poor kid just trying to live up to big brother ... and failing, if she did not miss her guess. It made her just a bit less angry with him.

Thor would have been so well liked: outgoing, charismatic to a ridiculous degree, magnetic, eye-catching, and all around the most popular type. She was faced with the living, breathing, older version of every single popular boy she had ever secretly had a crush on, knowing they would never even look at her; rather, knowing the most they would do was steal her glasses off her nose to hold them over her head, not ask her out.

"Please, Ms. Lewis, what project are you talking about?" Thor pressed her, leaning just a bit closer. There was something about him that automatically made her like him but there was another side of her saying different. The blonde was sweet and kind, she was fairly sure, but some part of her almost hated him just for being so perfect even though that was utterly foolish. He honestly reminded her of a golden lab, trusting, amusing, sweet, and even smart when not being gullible.

"Oh, you really don't know?" She faked a shocked expression before shifting it to an apprehensive, guilty one, "I just assumed that you were here because he told you. If he has not said anything ... I likely should not have spoken of it. I don't know that much about it anyway, I only saw the file open on his desk. I hardly read it at all."

The flames of interest in Loki's eyes shifted suddenly to suspicion, one brow shifting down as he eyed her silently. At least he was not voicing his obvious doubt as he hovered behind Thor. Thor watched her as well, but lacked the doubtful darkening of his eyes that would have signaled his disbelief. The wheels in both minds were just spinning like mad, she could see it.

Darcy widened her eyes at the elder Odinson, letting her long lashes play it up, "Please, don't tell him I said anything! Surely you know how he is about keeping secrets!" It was almost fun to play the innocent game, "Don't tell him I told you!"

That one tipped her hand. Now Loki knew, she could see it in the way his shoulders tipped back, spine curving deeper, chin lifting as he regarded her with those shrewd eyes, but he still did not give her away.

Thor, on the other hand, did not know her and he seemed to ponder her words very carefully, absentely adding, "Of course, I would not dream of telling him, you have nothing to fear." Poor, sweet, easy prey!

That was a win in her corner, and she just smiled at him, "I appreciate it." She waited a few more minutes before prompting him, "I realize that you must be as busy as we are here. Stark will be very cross with me if I don't get these deadlines finished with your brother. Is it a problem if I continue speaking with him? Is your business urgent?" She wiggled her papers for emphasis, thankful she still had them in hand.
Thor very clearly hesitated as he stared at her, glancing carefully back at Loki, "Well, it... Perhaps now is not the best of times for me to be here." He obviously was unsure what to do with her at this point, as expected. He was too polite to toss out an injured girl.

"Yes, Thor, we were quite busy when you so rudely cut into our work. I really cannot afford to have this conversation with you." Loki ground out as he slid around to Thor's side, "And quite frankly, this is not the time or place for this."

The openness in that rugged face was quickly closed as he stared at his brother, "No, I suppose it is not the time, but do not think we are finished."

Loki smiled sardonically, "Oh, I'm sure you don't think we are."

"I will not allow this to drop, Loki." Thor sounded every bit the scolding older brother, "We will speak later."

Loki rolled his shoulders, "Very well, but let's do so when there are fewer eyes and ears to contend with. You have already said more than is... comforting. We all know the walls have ears."

That seemed to tense Thor a bit more, as if he suddenly felt the pricks of millions of eyes on his skin. It was strange to see such a massive man shrink back, but he did. His posture seemed smaller as his eyes darted around the room nervously, landing lastly on her. What, she had to wonder, was he looking for? His big blue eyes drifted to Loki with a strange sort of worry, maybe even fear, but she could not quite tell. More was being said than she could understand. That was her disadvantage showing again.

He leaned in close, conspiratorial to whisper in Loki's ear before backing toward the door like a jailer expecting prisoners to riot. She was given a parting smile so full of tension it was palpable, but he said his goodbyes and left rather easily.

His speedy exit could not have been fully her doing, she thought that even as she watched the door close, but she was not quite sure what Loki said to make him hasten away. Darcy hugged the papers to her chest as he stared absently at the door. She had opened way for him to be distracted, had pushed him that way, but Loki clearly said something he took far more seriously than what she said. Another thing to try to understand. She needed to research Thor when she arrived home.

"You." Loki finally broke the silence and she turned her head his way to find hooded eyes glued to her in an investigative probe, burning and more intense than they ever had been before, "You played him. There was no open file, was there?"

She fidgeted with the corners of one page uncomfortably under his scrutiny, "What makes you say that?"

The wrinkles between his brows slowly vanished as he stared openly at her with something very like approval in his eyes, "Why did you lie?"

The little space between her shoulders ached but she squared them anyway as she hardened her own stare, "He would complicate things. I have my job to do, I don't need you brother thrashing about. Getting rid of obstacles is my job." Yeah, eat that! Not weak after all!

She quickly looked away, seeking an escape from all that intensity he was directing at her. There was only so much she could stand of all this per day and she reached her quota; call back tomorrow, please and thank you. There was a lot of information floating in her mind and a lot of new questions but she felt confident that she acted well for what she had available.
She was good at figuring people out, even when she was younger. It saved her a lot of trouble in some cases, reading people as she usually did. It helped her avoid some things. Psychology had been her major at first when she went to University. She was no pro at it but life made for a good study, especially the girl-with-glasses life.

His tall form edged around the desk very slowly, perhaps deciding if he really wanted to push her any farther. He was prickling with nervous energy and practically bursting with questions she had no desire to answer. At least he was holding back rather than attacking her, which she appreciated. Even so, she waddled back to her crutch and tucked it under her arm. Her anger had largely evaporated but that left her with no possible defense against his cutting ways, and she needed a defense.

Her mind had turned on her while Thor visited, making her feel defensive of that snotty mouthed prick. When that brother of his was here, she pitied him because she could see as well as feel the pain hidden in that relationship and the two sided vulnerability. She did not want them hurt, desired at her core to put an end to it. The thought of those two actually hurting each other drove her to break it up more than worry for herself, if she was honest, but she wouldn’t be that honest. Loki was toying with her mind in her current state and there was no way she could afford that. Her weapon against men like him was to be sure they never got under her skin, never read her, never understood her.

This day would not change her mind, would not weaken her. She would stop mentally defending Loki because she could not afford to be anything close to his friend. Not okay! He pointed that out himself. Caring inside this world was suicide and he would shred her if she allowed herself to soften. She was angry with him anyway! He was a slimy little snake! But a snake, her mind countered instantly countered, that saved her life. But also a snake that spent an entire day bringing her close to tears. Her shoulders sank just a little. Conflicting, stupid mind!

He opened his mouth, resolve to hold questions at bay cracking, so she cut ahead of him.

"Anyway," Darcy did not bother to look at him as she slipped the strap of her bag onto her shoulder, "I'll be going now. Have a good night, Loki."

"Do you need me to walk you out? To the elevator?" His voice was bland behind her, lackluster in his offer.

She huffed and shook her head, "I promise not to trip on my way out, don't worry. Lightning never strikes twice in the same place, you know."

She was not ready to forgive him just for halfhearted offers of help, it made it worse actually. She would rather take another beating than let herself degrade further into this weakness. Darcy would hobble a mile before she accepted a helping hand extended out of pity. She was strong!

Darcy was gone. The lights had been turned off as he sat silently in his chair, teeth worrying over the tip of his thumb. His black silk tie lay coiled in his lap and his computer screen-saver was bouncing from corner to corner as he watched in a trance. It was very quiet, as it usually was when people were leaving for the day, filtering out to go home and kiss their children or wives after a long day. There were times he fantasized about what each of those little ants did when they went home for the day. Did they have a cheery family waiting, or were they like him, walking into a dark house with dead air?

Loki fantasized because it was much easier to picture the lives of others than to ponder his own. All thoughts of his life were left to collect dust on the darkest shelf in his mind, never taken out of the box. Never, unless it was a day like this where he was forced to. Loathed as he was over it, those thoughts lingered deep inside him. They haunted him like the shadow of death on a condemned man.
It was better not to dwell but sometimes he allowed his darkness to swallow him up. Days like this were of that nature, bad days where everything in the world went wrong and he had no slept enough to keep himself sane. There were days like this when the darkness seemed to take on a physical form ... forms he recognized as all the people he never cared to think about. Thanos. Fury. Even his father.

Absent fingers reached for that package on his desk, ready now to open it. How much worse could the day really become at this point? Putting it off would do him no good. Ending the curious nagging would be best, so he untied the silly bow and side the lid free. His hooded eyes widened as he scanned the glass encased picture within the silver frame. His spine stiffened as he sat up in his chair, gripping the cold metal in both hands. It was a color picture, but one obviously taken from a (quality) surveillance camera. Thor stood large as life, angry expression only dampened by the deep sadness leaking into his every orifice, fingers wrapped into Loki's jacket much the same as today. Loki's own likeness stood staring stoically into the rugged face, betraying so little in the picture even though he knew perfectly well he had been anything but calm that day.

This snapshot from Stark's office would have been taken the day he failed to usurp Stark Industries, the day they all spent jammed into one room filled with hot tempers. Fury was partly in the picture, as was the traitorous little cat woman as she tried to ease them apart. A snarl ripped from his throat as he dropped the frame back into the box. What exactly was Tony sending him things like this for? Torment?

He stared at the picture hidden in the colored tissue paper, the glare deepening the longer he looked at it. "Son of a-

Stark knew! He sent this as a warning, but the question was why! How had he known? Thor said he spoke to Fury, not Tony. What was that crazy inventor doing sending him this? How did he know Thor would come? How much did he know about all this? Loki huffed as the red haired witch's words came back to him. It looked like she was telling more truth than lies. Almost everything she said was true. Maybe she was how he knew.

This needed answers! He was well and tired of being the one in the dark about every single thing! It had become a trend that he was the last to know everything and he found himself sick to death of it already!

Stark would answer him and he would answer him now!

The great and powerful Tony Stark sat like a king in his chair, blandly watching Loki stalk toward his desk like a demon coming to drag his soul to hell. If it worried him, he did not bother to show it even as his secretary tried to stall the raven haired devil without a modicum of success. It would not have mattered if the little lady threw her arms around his waist and used herself as dead weight because it still would not have stopped him. He came for answers and he would not be leaving without a proper talk.

There was only so much a man could take! If they all expected him to be relaxed while they danced around him and prodded at him, they were mistaken! Placid was something he only managed to play at, hold as an expression, not actually feel. Stark was the one man he felt would know the answers and be even slightly willing to offer them up. There might be a price for asking, might be problems linked to it, but he was finished playing poker.

Thanos might have a problem with him coming here too, but he did not care about that either. Some part of his mind was screaming at him to reign in his control, informed him that he had snapped, but he was not listening. Loki was beyond caring and he was in just a dark enough mood to throw everything away.
He only had a few shots at pulling his life out of this and he knew perfectly well those shots involved calculated risks. Risks he could handle because they were better than rolling over to play dead!

Stark waved the girl off casually and did not seem shocked when she scampered out like a shot, "Drink, Odinson?"

"Why did you send me that package?" Loki growled, "How did you know Thor would come to see me?"

"Professional courtesy, maybe a little message of my own mixed in." Stark linked his fingers and leaned back casually in his high back chair, "I saw the big guy get pulled aside by Fury before he came to see me and he left in quite a state. There is only one person that upsets him like that, that ruffles his feathers that much, and that's you. With how he left I figured it was inevitable you'd be hearing from him."

Loki took a few moments to compose himself, steady his breathing and mull over the information. "You must know everything Fury told me." A nod was his confirmation so he continued with a quizzical glare and clearly wavering self-control, "So tell me, why are you still negotiating with me?"

"I knew you were smarter than you looked." His chocolate eyes scanned the man in front of him like they might a complex code, "Tell me first why you're working for Thanos, why a loner like you made than leap. You're a lot of things but stupid isn't one of them. Why the hell would you jump in bed with that guy?" A crooked, wicked grin curved his lips, "You have to know that there is no version of this where you come out on top, right? Not with this crowd."

Loki expected a question like that but it still worried him and the old habit came out again as Loki licked at his lower lip, "I did not start it." He paused long enough to think over his answer. There was little use in telling full lies, but full honesty was neither wise nor needed. "Until today I didn't know the full extent of Thanos' involvement in the underworld. He approached me a little after I began this deal with you, wanted to share in the prophets in exchange for some insider sort of help. He would get me into the right places and with the right people for just a tiny cut of the profits." Loki sighed low in his chest, anger shifting to something manageable, "It seemed the best way to go about it at the time, the way he put it to me, but I have quickly been seeing my errors in becoming entangled with him."

Stark nodded, rocking a little on the hinge of his chair, "Yeah, I bet you are. He's no teddy bear."

There was no reason to tell this man any more than that so he would continue on a new path, "But understand, my plans have never changed, even with his involvement. I still want this deal, his involvement has nothing to do with that! Though, if you knew all of this, why did you enter into a deal with me? Why not break it off? Why send that girl?"

"I want this deal too, Odinson, that's why! It's good for me and I want it to happen, that's all I care about. I thought I'd let Fury handle Thanos, it's not my concern, I hired him to handle that stuff for me. I deal with my end and he can worry about his." His bearded chin tilted forward, "I sent Lewis because I knew she'd do a good job. I needed someone as hard headed as you in there, one you couldn't turn on me with that famous silver tongue of yours. I like her because she's smarter than most girls her age and she's already proven herself in my company.

"If you must know, Odinson, I tried to send a few others to you but they wouldn't go, thought you'd sink them like a pirate ship. Lewis probably thought the same but she went anyway. Plus, Pepper recommended her, and if she puts a name on my desk, I listen because she's a good judge of people."

Loki let his eyes travel upward to the patterns in the wallpaper, "Then nothing has changed. I will
still fight you on this deal, and I will get my way." He turned his eyes back to those narrowed brown ones, "My way, no one but mine. Whatever I throw at you will be mine, not his. This is between us from now on and I don't care about the other parties."

Stark smiled, a real smile, smart and playful, "Good! But I'll still run you over. We both know I'm better and I always get my way. Now that we each know where the other stands, we can cut the bull and go for broke!"

The menacing edge in Loki's voice returned, "Fine by me, but I will not be 'run over' as easily as you think!" He dropped into a chair and languidly crossed on leg over the other. "But sine we have it all in the open, let's talk about Fury. We can start on even ground."

Tony's thick brows arched as he leaned up, "Fair enough ... and while we're at that, let's talk Thanos too!"

Chapter End Notes

Hope this made sense! HOPE you like it! I tried to make it... not choppy and extract business stuff. I'm not sure how well I did, honestly, but I tried. Things are hitting the fan, truth and lies are flying everywhere!
Hope how I write Loki, our dear shifting wind, god of Chaos is alright! In future chapters, don't be shocked by Loki. He is moody, he's a trickster, he's a cheater, he plays by his own rules. I try to keep Loki true to form, or true as I see him, as true to the character as I can make him. Loki is a hurting, mixed up, damaged soul that is as close to true sideless as it gets. He is on his own side, that's how he is.

By the way, I honestly have nothing against Thor! I know some of you do and some don't. Everyone is different, but I love Thor. He is hard for me to write correctly (you'd think I'd struggle more with Loki or Tony, but no) and keep him in his wonderful character. I'm trying and there will be more of him later and I hope I do a better job of him in the future.
Ride with Me

Chapter Notes

Warning, if you don't want a little steamy time, skip the first break and keep reading.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

--High Rise--

Ride With Me

*Marvel

*Loki Odi nson, Darcy Lewis, Thor Odinson, Fury, etc.

It had been pestilential and long day trapped in his ever-shrinking office. The walls closed a little more each day but at this moment he could not think of why, hardly had it in him to think clearly at all. He knew the day had been horrible up to this point. Nothing had gone wright, people annoyed him, but now he was exorbitantly more than content. In this moment, the day could have been the best he had in ages, years even.

The air outside was chilled, seeping occasionally through the tiny crack of the passenger side window in little shots from the wind. By accident, a bit preoccupied, he pressed the power button on his door, only just tapped it, but it was enough to let that sweet little bit of air in. He could feel it only slightly when the wind howled especially hard. Each one made his over heated body shiver with utter delight.

His eyelids fluttered and he let go of a breathy moan. Giving Darcy Lewis a ride home on this dark, void of a night was the best choice he could have made. Little was better in life than to have a gorgeous woman in his precious car, but having said woman perched over him, the windows steamed over from their heated breaths, that was better still.

Her lithe little body grinding partially against his, straddling his lap, hands on his shoulders as he mouthed one of her hard buds through her silk blouse, this was better than he expected. Though he tugged at her, she would not fully press against him, just fleeting movements. She was teasing him and he was masochistic enough to adore every second of the torture. He had already popped the steering wheel up to give them more room, one hand sliding under her skirt to cup her backside while the other explored her thigh and up her side.

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She was so beautiful, so stunning, he always thought so but now she was a goddess. The low light of the car only accentuated all her sharp curves, light catching in all the right places to give her an ethereal sheen. Those blue eyes nearly glowed each time the light caught them, like glittering stars in a night sky. He could not help being overwhelmed as he stared up into her face.

His breath caught in his throat when her hands moved to tug at his hair, massaging his scalp to couple with the sudden roll of her hips. Her hair was falling to frame one side of her face as she tilted her head to look at him. Looking at her stole his breath completely but he could not bring himself to care. She was so amazingly beautiful, like a dark angel with wide mysterious eyes, hand sculpted
face, skin painted by Da vinci himself, lips like the finest silk, breasts...

Loki groaned, eyes rolling as she sat in his lap, rocking her pelvis, finally putting pressure where he needed it most, and he rolled his hips up to greet hers, "Darcy! Oh, Darcy!"

He instinctively coiled his arms around her to pull her closer, wanting and needing her. Close could never be close enough when his desire was this strong. There was nothing in the world, no company or deal he wanted more than this. Holding her felt intimate but he liked it, needed it. Everything outside the care was dark and cold, but she was warm and soft against him. She was something he could cling to and hold, something he craved!

He trailed open mouthed kisses over the column of her neck, breathing her in with his eyes half shut. A bead of sweat traveled down his temple and crawled down his neck, making him shiver. The only recurring thoughts in his mind were of how perfect she was and how much he needed her closer. Being flush against her was not enough, he still wanted to be closer! His face burrowed into the crook of her neck and pressing into her hair as he whispered, "Yes, oh, yes! Darcy!"

His breaths were coming back against him in hot waves as he panted his desire, unable to quite breathe with her so close. It was a glorious suffocation! Their bodies swayed together over and over in a desperate and delicious rhythm. His hands trailed up and down her back while hers gripped into his hair and stroked the back of his neck and shoulders. He could not have formed a coherent thought if his life depended on it, could not have spoken a full sentence other than whispering broken praises and her name again and again.

Loki's eyes shot open, back bowing as he struggled with the blankets tangled around him, pillow clutched to his chest, not quite sure what was happening, too caught in the strange and confused state between dream and waking world. The final little motions were enough to drive his over stimulate mind and body over the edge.

He came with a wild growl of frustration, understanding bouncing in his mind even with the intense firing of pleasure. Understanding or not did not stop the way the climax rocked his body, bending him one way and then the next as he rode out the current of intensity. By the time it ended he was panting for every breath, covered in sweat ... and some other fluid, with the wreckage of his sheets wrapped around him like a man eating python.

He was trembling from the mix of his climax, his over heated body, and the cold air gusting in. The window was partly open, the storm bellowing outside to make strange sounds as the air hissed in. He remembered intending to close it but must never have gotten to it before falling asleep.

"That bloody woman!" He snarled, out of breath, though grudgingly relaxed. Oh, she would be the death of him, ruining his good sleeping hours! Now he would not only need a shower but his sheets were in a hopeless mess that only stripping the bed would fix.

After recovering just enough he thought his previously shaking legs might be able to hold him, he stumbled out of bed, intent on a shower. He padded over to the master bath, peeling sleepwear off as he went. He was sweaty and disgusting and he would never get back to sleep, even though it was hours before he needed to be up, unless he cleaned up. There was a distinctive perfectionist, obsessive part of him that could not stand any filth - maybe that was why he used to harbor such self-loathing in his earlier days - being a living filthy existence. But he did not need to think into that right now.

The cold air on his naked body made him shiver, stepping on the cold tile compared to carpet making it worse.
That dream had been more vivid than most. He seemed to dream in more vivid detail than most people, his mind too sharp and keen to do anything half way. While he did not always dream, when he did, they were closer to real than they should be. Even in dreams he normally realized something was wrong but he had been so deeply entrenched tonight that he noticed nothing amiss.

She was a plague to his nights! Since she arrived, he dreamed almost every night, and she was always a player in the night. A dream like that one had not shown itself since before her fall though, which had been best.

He did not need this distraction! He needed a clear mind now even more than before! This was not the time to miss things because his mind was stuck in a passionate dream world every time he looked at her! This was not the time to be wishing she could ever let him that close in the real world.

With a fast twist of his wrist, the water flared to life in the shower head and he let the cold water pelt against him in its steady stream, washing away the evidence of his wishing. Traitorous mind he had, that was a sure thing! It made him wish for things he could not have, made him fear things that were waiting on his door, but never letting him relax.

He did not like this, hated it really. Damp ink locks plastered themselves to the tan tiled wall as he leaned his head against it. These nights spent desperately avoiding her were troubling and a little frightening. If the right situation presented itself he was a bit afraid he might reach for her and kiss her on habit alone one day. These dreams would cloud his judgement, confuse his feelings for her. He might begin to feel things he shouldn't. After the first dream, he had been confused, and this dream was worse.

The real woman would never let him close, would never let him kiss or hold her. He knew perfectly well, contrary to what he attempted to manufacture in the beginning, she had no feelings for him. Tries at seducing her had been utter failures, ending with him being the affected one. This was a destructive path and he knew it but was helpless in his sleep to stop it.

He could not let himself descend into this, he couldn't! He had to shut these strange feeling down because he knew he could not afford to feel now.

Each day they were closing in on him. Each day he walked a little closer to his own demise by one side or the other. Sentiment would be the last straw if he allowed it. Allowing it would mean he would fall from that tight-rope he was walking, and that could not happen. He could use her, confuse her, ruin her, but never feel anything about her. They were neither friends nor lovers and never could be.

He had to walk out of this alive and that meant doing some dark, terrible things.

His eyelids shuttered over his tired eyes as Oliver came to mind. One of those dark things had been seeking that man out after he saw Stark. It had been late and he came home so drained and tired, which would be why he left the window open.

He informed on himself, in a way, doing it before Thanos would have a chance to hear another way. Loki told the disgusting man that Fury was suspicious. He told him about Fury's theory that the soon to be company would be used as a front, but that seemed to be as far as the rivals had gotten. Furthermore, he told him that Fury's supposed knowledge was spreading and informed on his own visit to Stark tower.

For whatever reason, he left out his brother even though every single voice of logic screamed for him to divulge it. If they found out by other means that Thor knew, they would believe Loki kept it hidden out of loyalty and then they would think they found a weakness. He knew that but he still left
Thor's name out. It was a mistake but every time it was on his tongue, he choked on it. He couldn't, no, no, wouldn't give Thor to Thanos, not yet at least.

The entire time he was reporting Oliver only nodded and paced leisurely. Those thick sunglasses left his wrinkled face a blank of any tells to help Loki read his reactions. Once he had finished telling, though admittedly leaving out many things advantageous to him like Amora or even Romanova, the tension and silence had been thick as the city pollution.

"It is fortuitous that you came here." That sickening voice purred, "Because I knew you had gone to see Stark for some reason." The smile he shot over his shoulder made Loki gulp back secret terror, "I thought you might be trying to go behind Thanos' back."

Loki shook his head only once in the negative, not daring to seem too eager or quick to assure the other man of his loyalty because that would have been transparent.

"It is good information to know, Odinson, though we already knew Fury was straying into business he shouldn't. We appreciate your candor... you saved yourself some trouble by relinquishing it willingly."

Despite the hot water sheeting over him, Loki shivered. No matter how calm he remained outwardly, they terrified him, repulsed him when he was forced to be near them. Ice cold fear was always tickling the edges of his senses whenever thoughts of them trailed in. If that was not enough to sober him from that dream, nothing would be. He would walk out of this alive somehow! Somehow. He would walk out of it better than alive.

The little shop was buzzing with people, servers rushing around like bees with their notepads in hand and drinks or pastries on dishes. Darcy always loved the Coffee House atmosphere, the busy quiet of them. She loved the smells and feeling of a strange sort of ideal home taste of it. Home had never been like this in her world but some of her friends houses seemed to have a similar air about them.

It smelled of strong coffee beans, leather, mint, vanilla, warm computer air, raspberry, espresso and atmosphere. Heaven in its best earthly format. These places were comfortable, social in their solitude. She felt less alone in the world when she came to these places to work.

This was the perfect place to come after a day and a half of almost-mortuary-silent-office with a side of Loki served ice cold. He had been positively glacial the entire time she was with him, though still his subtly helpful self since she hobbled in. If it was pity that made him helpful or just his hatred for the sound her crutch made when she moved was hard to tell.

She had been content to let him sulk though. Having her see that display with his brother must have been awkward so she could let it lie as it was. It was not as if she held out hope for friendship, not ever again. They hardly bothered speaking more than a hand full of words, just handing each others papers or files back and forth.

A flick of her finger sent her scrolling down to a picture of Thor and the great, gray old "King" of Asgard staring at her from the screen. The two of them looked really happy, like nothing in the world could bring them down. They were a marvel picture of father and son, a powerhouse from different generations. One would take over after the other stepped down. On paper it was perfection. This article had it all wrong though. The first born would not step up onto that throne in an easy transition the way it was predicted. This had been published before Loki threw everyone a curve.

There was so much more information on Thor than there had been on Loki. Multiple magazines had been his personal followers and cheering squad before the black sheep altered the future. The perfect
blonde prince had been the favorite, the one everyone buzzed about and wanted to interview. As most young men would in that position, Thor obviously ate it up.

It was no wonder Loki was bitter. Even when people wanted to ask him questions then, it had been things like 'what is it like to be his little brother,' so she did not blame him for not answering. For someone so desperate for attention she knew that would have been a hard blow. They were quick to post his mistakes, but even those were brushed over as an "again" sort of thing. Everyone knew he was the black sheep, knew he was the bratty baby brother. They paid him no real attention. A few feminine geared ones praised his style, his looks, how he kept himself, but that was about as deep as it got. They treated him like they did female stars.

To Loki's credit, he stayed away from tabloids even now that he was the new buzz. People wanted interviews with him now but he avoided them. She had a feeling it was because he had seen how fast they turned on his brother and since they had not wanted him before, he considered it their loss. The only magazines he ever let talk to him were ones that had not published Thor's stories, and that was... like two. Spite was a glaringly huge word in Loki's vocabulary.

Darcy took a long sip of her beautiful cup of coffee, relishing it with pure glee. This place was so perfect, so good and brimming with her favorite things. It was her favorite spot to research.

Stalking was really quite an ugly word, but coming here to research people made her feel safer too. It could still be tracked to her, but using a connection not her own, alone with a few signal blocking items she kept in her purse, it just seemed like the place to be. She had a corner where no one could see her screen and she loved it. There were chairs to her left but people normally did not sit in them. She had toys to use anyway.

Her father dabbled heavily in computers all her life so it had swiftly become part of her. She knew how to work her away around anything technical. She could even do a fair job with cars if they had enough computer tech under the hood.

At age twelve, she hacked into the school system and changed all the sport players grades, tweaking them down just enough points to put them on probation. It was perfect retaliation for the stupid football jerks that ruined she and her best friend's science project. It had been a lot of mad scrambling with coaches and teachers and lots of yelling. They all had to get their grades up before they could play, school rules.

That memory made her smile. No one ever caught on, none of them came after her for doing it because they didn't know what happened. It had been one of the most perfect moments in her young life.

The little hacking skill never went away after that. How could she stop when that skill held such pleasant feelings? While she could not hack the government like some people she knew, some of those friends that never left the dark corners of their Grandmother's basement, she was still fair at it. She was missing some of her usual items of the hacker trade thanks to her mugging, but those had been easy enough to replace even if she was far less than pleased about working with unfamiliar tools. A Lewis was resilient and they did not cry over a loss, they moved on. She would deal with it, get herself wrapped around the new toys as well as she had the old. A bit more customization would do the trick. She would work on that later though.

Hacking had not been needed yet anyway. She had been searching Thor Odinson in her spare moments, like this one. There were few things that bugged her more than being caught blind in a room with people she did not have data on. That would not happen again with that big brother Odinson. Thanos was next on her list. There was too much to find, too many secrets around that little family.
Her eyes traveled up toward the door as she set her cup down. When she noticed a very built set of shoulders, unshaven chin, and blonde hair swaying at jaw length, Darcy's spine went stiff. "Shit, no way!" She muttered to herself in a panic, eyes wide as she ducked her head, frantically switching all her screens to innocent things like the stalk market. Guilt hit her in waves but she could not say exactly why, it was just research, not a personal affront to the man.

Of all the luck, like her stalking him summoned him somehow, here he as to invade her shop! Who did he think he was? It was not like he owned it! Her brows tipped down in a frown as she questioned the idea. She hoped he did not own it! Hoped he had not somehow seen what she was doing online and come in to put a stop to it. He couldn't possibly have though!

It was like he had some sort of radar for this! Like all those myths where saying the monster's name summoned it up from the reassesses of darkness. He came through the door at least! This day had not totally descended into some horribly written horror flick no one would watch a second time.

If it was a bad movie, wishing him away hard enough would work, and she was wishing with all her strength, not to mention keeping her head down.

"So," that familiar, low - milk chocolate where Loki's was a dark chocolate - voice began from far too close, "you frequent this place as well?"

Darcy's bones nearly melted right out of her. She was beyond disgusted that he not only invaded her shop but he had the absolute gall to speak to her and seek her out while doing it. Was ducking behind a computer not an indication of wanting to be ignored? She sat up in her chair, studiously eyeing the charts of stock, "Guess so."

"I'm not surprised. It's fitting for a cunning lady such as yourself, hold up in a corner where you can watch everything around you as it passes." He edged around the table slowly, she could feel his eyes just drilling her.

She picked her cup up again as casually as she could, "I'm not sure how I'm supposed to take that but I guess it works either way I choose to hear it."

"You would take it any way you saw fit regardless of my phrasing. Loki does that as well. He will always hear words spoken in whatever way his mood dictates at the time. My intent has no baring on it at all." Thor noisily grabbed up a seat to bring over, she could see that out of the corner of her eye.

It irked her that he was clearly inviting himself to sit at her table, no invitation needed, apparently. "Isn't that what everyone does? We filter things in our own way."

"Sometimes. Other times we hear what others intended us to, regardless of the truth." He plunked the metal legs down a little distance from her chair and she struggled not to flinch.

"I'm guessing there is a purpose behind those this, right?"

"I suppose you did not think I would easily find you out, Ms. Lewis." Thor dropped easily onto the stool beside her.

"You seemed very trusting. I suppose. You believed me pretty quickly." Darcy did not look up, she stared stubbornly at the table, taking a quick sip. "Growing up with Loki, I'm surprised you're not more used to that sort of thing."

"Who is to say I'm not?" He countered, "Perhaps you mistook my choice to trust your word as being gullible ... but I generally trust everyone until they give me reason not to. It is my choice to do so." A jovial laugh rumbled in him, "Loki calls it stupidity."
"Then why trust? People hurt you more easily if you let them lead you around."

"If you never believe, you never find the good in others. If you look through glasses of hate and mistrust your heart becomes hard eventually and you never let anyone close enough to surprise you. There are a lot of good people in the world worth giving a chance. They make believing worth the times I am lied to."

Damn, he was good. He was too good, too gentle for his own good. It made her feel guilty just hearing such a positive outlook on life when she knew perfectly well she was one of the ones that lied to him. He was implying she was one of the anomalies rather than a standard. Part of her was guilted by that and another part wanted to lash out at him.

Darcy was optimistic, at least on the surface, but she was a realist by nature. She protected herself, and yes, she had been known to manipulate others for her own reasons.

"Why did you tell me those things, Ms. Lewis? Why do you seek to confuse me?" He turned a quizzical and oddly cute look on her. "Were you, by chance, defending my brother?"

"No." She was a bit too fast at the denial, she could tell by the smug look on his chiseled face, "But I have a job to do. I can't afford to have distractions detract from the progress of the deal. I only needed to detour you for a while, though you bounced back sooner than I had hoped." She looked full on into his eyes this time, "An Odinson trait? You both tend to force me to up my game."

A broad smile cut across his face and a chuckle left his lips, "Perhaps."

Darcy looked away again, focusing on the front of the room, "You're both pains, that much I've found out. It's bad enough to be forced to waddle like a duck everywhere I go, but you two have to give me more obstacles to muddle through. You guys should be nicer to cripples."

His chuckled extended a bit more, "Please, forgive our ill treatment of a beautiful lady!"

Darcy huffed, "Yeah, you don't need to play it up to me anymore. I'm not the air-headed secretary. Complements don't get you that far with me. I'm only swayed by money and superior coffee."

"Be that as it may, I did have a reason for seeking you out, Ms. Lewis, and it was not to chastise you or flatter you."

"I figured that." She graced him with another real look and a smile, "No one goes to as much trouble as you must have to find a girl just to gloat about beating her at Clue."

He tipped his head in acknowledgment, "Then allow me to continue to me reason for tracking you down." When she gave him no indication she would fight him, he continued. "I'd like you to keep an eye on him. You work closely enough to him that you can better monitor his comings and goings. A resourceful girl like you could find out what other deals he has open, what people visit him. You are in a position to tell me anything I wish to know, and I wish to know much." He held up a placating hand when she opened her mouth, a scowl already creasing her forehead, "I do not ask this in order to help me undermine him but because I am concerned for his well being. I believe he has entered into dealings he shouldn't and I want to head off any potential dangers to him as well as Asgard."

"Asgard isn't your company anymore. Loki took it all out from under you so why are you troubling yourself with it now?" She was not sure why she asked, she had a hunch she knew those answers.

"Asgard will always be partly mine. I grew up in those offices. It is in my blood." He cast his eyes to the floor, it being his turn to stray into areas harder to speak of.
Thor was quite a guy, it seemed to her. For someone that had been betrayed by his baby brother, the
guy was pretty forgiving. There had to be a lot going into that story. That dynamic between them
went so far beyond sibling rivalry that it wasn't in the same galaxy.

There was a fine line between love and hate, everyone said that. From what she saw, these two
stepped on either side of that line every few seconds. There was a deep love there for there to be as
much hate as there was. They had to have been very close at one time. What changed, what betrayal
or dramatic event changed that, she could not even guess.

"You might not believe me but I love my brother." His eyes turned distant, as if he were watching
images of a past life floating unseen to others over the walls. "He has done many terrible and stupid
things, hurt a lot of people, but I still love him."

"I know." Darcy said evenly, a little annoyed by how surprised the look he gave her in response
was. Always underestimating her even when she did not want them to. It was fine when she was
going for it but irritating when she wanted a normal conversation. "I could see that in the way you
looked at him. If you hated him as much as maybe you should, considering what he did and how
most people would feel in your place, you would have not only punched him, but also stomped on
his battered body."

People never gave her credit for brainpower.

"Anyway," She crossed her good leg over the one in the boot, leaning back to drape an arm
 languidly over the back of her chair, "Exactly what are you purposing? What sort of deal would we
be making and what information in particular were you wanting?" Knowing the ground rules to this
was key. While she did not plan to go through with it, at least not likely, it could not hurt to hear
what was on the table.

It did occur to her that this could give her an upper hand on Loki. She had been looking for a
weakness on him all along. This might not be that particular thing but it was interesting. Loki was not
exactly forthcoming so maybe Thor would be. Them being polar opposites, this brother might not be
as tight lipped as his counterpart. He might be a well of information just waiting to be drawn from.
At least she was fairly sure he was a talker if the evidence she gathered so far was correct.

If this was nothing more than a ruse to get inside information to help him resume his place in the
company, she would be able to tell it pretty fast if she played along. There was no way she would
play that game. She was already spying for Stark, but that was different than trying to get Loki
removed from the picture. She worked too hard on this project the have it tossed out, not after all that
torture. Loki was staying where he was and she did not much care what anyone else had to say about
it.

Having that prick around kept others on their toes was good and healthy competition. Stark would be
bored out of his skull if men like Loki were not around to keep him busy.

If you asked her, Asgard was doing just fine under current management anyway. Thor could come in
too, she had no qualms with that, but she could not see Asgard doing nearly as well without the little
trickster sitting in his office to plot.

No, she would listen and decide how best to proceed, but she was highly unlikely to help him,
regardless of how grand his intentions were. Thor would be helpful no matter what he told her
though, because if he wanted to see those things, they had to be worth looking for.

Darcy shuffled slowly out the door, bag slung over her shoulder. It unbalanced her a little but at least
she'd gotten to where she did not have to use the crutch, that had been much worse. She sounded like a
zombie when she walked, more bad horror movies being linked to her life, but she guessed that
would pass too. Eventually everything would be alright and the pain would go away.

Walking without pain had become a beautiful memory, one she regretted taking for granted, though
after she was well, she knew she would eventually take it for granted again. It really was a terrible
cycle. No one appreciated the peace of anything until it was taken, till anarchy set in and hell bit
down. Till things were in ruins, no one was grateful for what great things they had.

A sigh worked up her throat as she clutched her bag a little tighter. She did not want this one to be
taken too. It was new, and she really liked it. I had a lot of convenient pockets! All her current
hardware fit so well into it! No one was taking her things again. Replacing it all was a hassle and a
half.

"Lewis!" A sharp voice barked from her left and her head shot in that direction.

Darcy tried not to let her knees go weak at the sight of that car, the black convertible, or the man
driving. Whenever he drove that car, which was most of the time, he always wore that black leather
coat over his crisp suit. That eye-patch, she was fairly sure was for intimidation alone, he could have
gotten a glass eye like a normal person. He wore it too tight anyway, it left such big indentations on
his polished balled head that it could not have been at all comfortable.

"Director!" She forced herself to smile and wave as she waddled closer to his car.

His perpetually serious or glaring face did not show an indication of getting any more pleasant, "Get
in. We need to talk."

Darcy swallowed before nodding and reaching for the handle, trying not to let her hand tremble as
her mind raced with questions. The biggest of those was wondering exactly how much he knew, not
to mention wondering how long he had been parked in this spot. Had he seen her with Thor or had
he in fact been the one that showed the big man how to find her?

There were some clear habits that she followed in her off time. Routine made it easier for people to
stalk you, she might really have to start watching that. She would need to mix some major random
into her days after today.

Her body fell into the low seat of the car rather awkwardly and his dark eyes just drilled into her with
every single move. He looked annoyed by how cumbersome her boot was, looked like he might
even warn her not to scratch the paint or interior. At least he was not giving her sympathy but disdain
was not a lot better. She could due with a happy medium somewhere.

The car revved to life and he wheeled them off the curbside. The wind began to whip into her face
and tangle in her hair a bit painfully. He did not have the issue with having his hair nearly yanked off
his head, she thought bitterly. Riding in a car like this might have been fun if she was in the mood
and had a bit better company. It surprised her that the first person her mind pulled up as a fun
replacement was Loki considering her had been such a ice cube the past two days.

Oh, maybe that was what this meeting was about! Maybe he though she was getting close to him.
Stark might have believed she was being swayed by the charmer. She was female, so obviously she
would be stupid enough to be wooed by a sly, handsome businessman. The uncomfortable questions
were probably in her future, and she would be able to deny them all with staunch honesty.

No, they were not sleeping together. Yes, she knew he would try to play her, knew it from day one
or two of being there. No, she was not falling for him. No, she had not gotten entangled in a
forbidden relationship. No, she was not that stupid!

Since he was not talking she decided silence would be her best option. If he was trying to sweat her, it would not work, even with the silence stretching as they drove the busy streets. She contented herself with watching buildings fly past, cars rolling by them like pinballs in a machine. While she had no proof, she was fairly sure no officer would ever stop Fury, they probably had his license in every registry as a do-not-touch. There was no question any daring enough to stop this man would be widdled down in rank before they even got back to the car. Fury had connections on every block of the city.

Come to think of it, maybe she did not fear him quite as much as she should. If he did know things she was not ready for him to, she should not have been surprised. He wasn't an ordinary lawyer's lawyer, not just the director of the firm, he never had been. There was a lot more to him than that, things people gossiped about but never spoke too loudly.

She glanced at him carefully, taking in his imposing and confident, ramrod posture. The sun shined off that polished head of his. In reality, with his bone structure, smooth chocolate skin, and build, he could be handsome. His downfall was that sour personality and terrifying scowl.

"So, Lewis, how are things going?" He broke the silence with that sharp tone he never seemed to let slip, like he was always ready to rip everyone's head off their shoulders.

"Fine, Sir." She responded crisply, looking back to the passing world.

"You've looked better."

"I'm sure I have, but it was only a minor setback."

He hissed, or maybe laughed, "I hope so. I have a lot riding on you, you know that? I need you at the top of your game. There is more involved with this deal than you have any idea."

Her own posture stiffened, "So I guess you're about to tell me what that is."

"No, I'm not." He shot her a quick, cursory glance.

Her head whipped his way again, mouth gaping slightly, "What do you mean 'no'? Because I don't need to know?" She glared her very hardest at him, "I disagree! I'm the one working on this! I'm the one that needs to know!"

"You need to know some things, but I'm not in the habit of telling low level people all I know."

"Low level!" She chirped in irritation, "Since when did we join the CIA? Since when do I have a rank for clearance?"

"Since I said so." Fury's words sounded like new law being written and she grudgingly said nothing more. "But, you do need to know that we are no longer the only players in this game. I need you to close this deal before Loki gets the news that Stark has some competition. Some people are starting to moving in, people that want a piece of this, and we don't want them to get a bite. You need to move Loki faster, close this deal and lock him into it on our terms. Spin it any way you want, but we have to come out on top, pronto."

Darcy frowned, sitting back a bit more in her seat, "Who? Someone named Thanos?"

Fury tensed, shoulders lifting in what must have been anger, "Where in hell did you hear about him?"
"From Thor. But I really only got the name, I don't know who he is." She admitted simply. Fury had spoken to Thor himself, it could not be much of a secret.

The director looked even more sullen now, "That Asgard brat can't keep his nose out of anything!" His grip on the wheel tightened, "I was afraid he'd jump in where I told him not to, which was why I went against my better judgment and told him about that. Should have known it wouldn't stop him!"

"So is it Thanos?" She prompted him before he could go into a full on tirade.

"He is one of the players, yes." He was back to barking. "But not the only one to worry about. I want this deal closed! I want Stark to stay away from Loki too. Don't let the two of them near each other, got me?"

"Alright. I got it!" She nodded quickly before she ended up being the next tirade, "I'll close it. Loki and Stark don't ever need to talk."

"Good." He very nearly seemed to relax, "And keep Loki's paws off the technical department. That section is not negotiable. He is to go no where near any Stark Tech!"

Darcy was starting to wonder why this issue seemed to be the crux of things. Loki threw a fit over the same topic. Everyone wanted control of the technology department. Whatever Stark had in there was big. It made her want to find out more about it for herself. Not that she would voice that to this man for anything.

"One more thing, Lewis. I want you to start keeping better tabs on Loki. I want you to start reporting to me. Stick to him like glue from now on. Whenever he is working in that office, so are you. Make any excuse you need to but when he goes in, you better be two steps behind him."

"I'll try." Her eyes fell to the floor, forlorn and extremely displeased. Was she a babysitter now?

"Wrong, you won't try! You'll do it."

Right, no room for weakness, no room for failure. This was the big kid world. You did as instructed with no complaints. This was the cutthroat world of business and law, though it might as well have been the CIA.

Regardless, she was starting to have some very bad feelings about this. Everyone wanted her to watch Loki, everyone wanted her to turn into a personal spy camera. Thor even suggested she start recording things. He went so far as to suggest she plant a few devices in the office.

Stark telling her to watch him was one thing, but having everyone and literally the brother telling her was something else. If this was a game, she did not like the level up. They all seemed to see "New Spy Achievement Unlocked" floating over her head. She wanted it deleted! She was not Darcy-the-bug-planting-spy-camera-girl!

If she was dumb enough to do that, she would get caught. If she was caught, they all had more problems on their hands. But maybe she should start planting some of her own tech in that office. If she was going to run in this crowd it might be better to be safe and a spy than clueless and drowning with the sharks.
AN: Little thing to explain a portion of my reasoning! Basic dream (not even close to all points) analysis for Loki! General idea is the first dream was his secret feelings for her growing and cropping up. He wasn't in love (maybe in lust) but he felt something. Additionally, he was unnerved by her because he had a nagging feeling deep down that she could kind of read him. In the dream she knew things, things she should not have known because he feared that. Now, second dream! Her little stunt with Thor made him see her in a new light, like when he realized Thor lied to him in TDW. Suddenly she went up a level because Loki respects cunning, witty people (even if he does not always like them for it, especially if they beat him at it). Darcy is on top this time because she showed him there is more to her, more power and control, more things that Loki generally respects. He realizes there is more to her than he thought and he's not really sure just how much more she might be hiding. She says nothing, adding to her mystery. Moreover, he has allowed her into his car, one place he feels safe, like he can outrun the world.

Be prepared for next chapter, it's more intense for Darcy.
Besieged

Chapter Notes

Human by Christina Perri for Darcy, it fits so well in this chapter and the next.
Everybody Wants to Rule the World by Lorde.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

--=High Rise=--

Besieged

*Marvel

*Loki Odi nson, Darcy Lewis, Tony Stark, Pepper Potts, Nick Fury, Thanos, etc.

Darcy clearly did not have enough to do. After all, she was only working on a major deal with Asgard's top man, so of course she had time to spy on his personal life for Fury and Thor. Obviously she lead a life of absolute leisure! It also was not as if she had to do preliminary work on other cases for other clients she was not constantly tied to.

Well, none of that mattered, obviously. Fury had spoken! Oh yes, so that made new rules out of life. Her eyes rolled as she played with the strap of her bag. Take what comes, like a Lewis, that was what she had to do. She prided herself on being able to roll with the punches and adjust accordingly. That worked for her most of the time, other than stairs, clearly.

Rolling with it or not, she was still discretely trailing behind the dark haired usurper as he went into the huge metal, stone, and glass building of Asgard. It reached up into the sky like a grand, sparkling castle, and she was the rival kings spy to infiltrate it, swim under the mote or scale the wall, as it were. That meant finding out exactly when the king in question came to the fortress.

It was glue they wanted, so glue she would be, stalker level glue. She could be that. Tapping the morning footage gave her exactly what she needed for when to trail in.

Loki came to the office a little earlier than most people, sneaking in just a few minutes before the doors were normally crowded. He was really more of an introvert, she could see it the more she knew about him. Solitude seemed to be where he thrived most even though he was frequently around people. While he was good with people he did not go out of his way to surround himself with them.

By this time she had quite a few thoughts on how the brothers younger days might have been. Studying, for example! Thor would have been that kid that listened to music quite loudly as he studied (if he studied), but right down the hall, Loki would be in his room in as quiet a place as he could manage. There was never any music playing in his office and she was sure he focused better in the quieter, darker places.

In contrast, Thor thrived off the energy of others. He seemed to crave people and had a wide circle of friends, at least he had while he was a big name. In a school setting, Loki would have been the one
to automatically veer to a table away from the main group of crowds while his brother would clearly have dived in, seating himself at the busiest table.

She did think Loki craved people and attention but not continually. It was quite obvious he needed his solitude to remain sane, or as sane as he could be. He was an extroverted introvert, that was how she saw it. He was cunning enough to blend into any setting, but drew his center from the quiet. Books, most likely.

It was a little hard to walk quietly in a hospital issue, black boot that could never make it into any fashion catalog ever in the history of even the most wild designer's mind. She was making an effort though. Stealthy, she needed stealth! She was thinking cat thoughts. Be the floor, be the wall, be the silence!

Darcy's eyes were fixed on his back. He was sliding the keys in so she would make her move any second, let him know she was right behind him. She would be cool and casual about it to make sure he did not see anything odd about her all too sudden choice to start being early. Lawyers could do casual. There were classes on keeping clients happy and focused anywhere but the places you did not want them to look.

A rather mouse-like squeak turned out to be her "hello" as her cumbersome boot caught on one of the ugly metal chairs in the hall. With full health and range of motion she would have been able to recover, too bad she had none of those, because she fervently wished for them on her way down. She landed with a loud thud and groan as her leg yelled very loudly at her, joined by her knees, abdomen, elbows, and various other already tender places.

Too much oneness with the floor, Darcy, way too much!

*Klutz,* she scolded herself, mentally reminding herself to watch her stupid feet instead of him next time.

Loki spun around like he was waiting for some massive attack, keys held out like a switchblade until he spotted her. He frowned as he stared at the mess of hair and all around mishap that once had been her. He fleetingly eyed the lip gloss at his feet that rolled over there from her bag. She quickly flipped her hair out of her face and propped herself up on her elbows, trying for any shred of dignity she could grasp at this point. The dignity would be gone, of course, once she tried to get up because she had absolutely no idea how she would get off the lovely gray checkerboard carpet - It would be anything but a dignified or ladylike thing to watch.

"Good morning." She offered.

"Darcy?" He honestly looked at a loss, so strangely bewildered and unsure, like no one had ever come to see him at this time of the day before, let alone greeted him from the floor, "You're..." the pregnant pause meant he was trying to be tactful, "...early."

Her shoulders rose in as graceful a shrug a person could manage from the floor, "I was out already so I thought I might as well come in." She paused, arching a brow at him, "Is that a problem?"

His head shook slowly, still puzzling out what happened, "No, of course not, I just was not expecting you."

Such a calm conversation they were having considering she had just fallen on her face and ached like an old woman for it. At least he did not question it or laugh at her. If he laughed, she would have crawled over there and given him a good upper-cut to the face. Darcy swallowed, no, he was about to do something much worse than laugh. He was walking over, which could only mean he intended
to help her up. While it was nice, and she did need the help, that did not mean she wanted to accept it from him.

It would really have been better if he walked into his office and let her struggle to her feet unseen. Dignity was just slipping away like sand the more she remained at his side. Soon she would have none left. She had the distinct feeling that every single time he helped her, she dug herself more deeply into debt, something he was bound to call in eventually. Being in his debt did not sit well at all but she always ended up being on the owing side.

As his hands came toward her, she considered refusing, but thought better of it. How much more in debt could she really be? He already saved her from bleeding to death in a staircase, it was not like she could make it much worse. At least she was not in a skirt this time.

Loki bent down and took her by the upper arms, guiding her first to her knees, which she could have done on her own, it was the next part that was tricky. The boot was the problem, so heavy and hard to move, keeping her from bending her ankle, which she kind of needed to do to get up. It was like having a wooden leg, so useless and impossible to work around.

"Tricky thing, getting up with these things..." She said to make herself feel better as she fumbled for a way to get her feet under her.

Surprisingly, he said nothing, no snide remarks as she struggled, patiently waiting as she gripped at his shoulders. Getting her good foot under her was easy, but figuring out how to tug the other into place was a puzzle. Stupid floor! Once she had a good hold on him, she readied to use him as a counterweight, but he moved first, using their mutual grips to simply lift her up. She stared at him in begrudging awe, not sure how he could be so strong and look so streamline. He used no effort at all and had not even hurt her arms when he dragged her up. She could not understand how he could be so cutting with words but so careful and gentle in other ways.

She did not realize she was still clinging to him until he pulled back and she instantly dropped her arms to her sides. Getting lost in questions and zoning out was never the right time if it was done at such a close range to the man. She was not even quite sure why her heartbeats sped up when she considered it. Embarrassment, she guessed it was.

He plucked up the lose items and scooped up her bag, handing it all to her with a muted, self satisfied smirk.

She tipped her head and thanked him before meekly following him into the office like a scolded child. She felt foolish for making such a scene and wished she had some potential to save a little of her own pride. It was too much to be humiliated this early in the morning. She needed to save herself somehow. Sinking into the sofa, she decided to move on and pretend none of the previous encounter even happened, so she dove into her thoughts quickly, as was her habit. Be direct and throw him off.

"Alright, we've been going in circles the past few days and I think it is time we ended this." She carefully crossed her bad leg over the good one, wishing she still had just a little grace in her, "We need to cement things. Decide what is negotiable to you and what isn't. I will do that same, decide what is viewed as nonnegotiable. It will be much easier to do that than dance around and pretend we will cave on issues we have no intention of changing."

One side of his lips twitched up, a bit like Tony's goofy smiles, "End the dance? I seem to remember you saying similar things the very first time you came into this office." He had not given her even a hint of a normal smile in days, one caused by amusement rather than his smugness, not before now, and she was surprised to find that getting it from him gave her a little thrill.
"I meant it then and I mean it now. I'm blunt. You should have learned that by this stage." Darcy gave him a bigger smile. "Besides, I can't dance too well right now." She wiggled her boot.

"You make quite a good point." He stepped around the little table and eased himself onto the other end of the couch. "We seem to fall easily into dancing around topics though. I guess it is in our nature to be clandestine to get what we desire."

"Every dance has an end. We need to find our footing and proceed from the biggest issues. Once we find impasses, we will be able to pave new roads around them, or build bridges." She said calmly, thinking her comparison a perfect word picture, and he did not argue, so she took it as a victory.

There! The round went to her for speeding things up like the good, order-taking spy she had become.

They worked well together, better when they stopped pretending to be pliable when they were set in stone, he would admit. That stalling the past two days had been partly intentional on his part now that he had set one of his plans into motion. For now, he needed her at close range where he could use her best. He stared at her, drinking her in as she shuffled to the side of his desk, so broken but still strangely beautiful with her delicate smile. She was sunshine in all her ridiculous clumsiness. If nothing else, she could make him smile.

For the tiniest moment he could picture enjoying his days with her right here in this office, unsure what he would do without her. He loathed it but he enjoy her being near, loved when they could laugh. When she smiled it was so hard not to smile with her.

It made being unkind to her feel worse, made the fact that he knew he would soon use her sting. Her persistence and tenacity was admirable, he would never deny it. It was not common to find a person like her, she was a rare treasure he wished he could keep. Darcy Lewis was very different from every other woman he knew, and he did want her, but he could not have her.

That fact was not unusual, he never could have most things he wanted the most. She tended to make it worse still by her actions. It was driving him insane the way she had suddenly changed tactics. Rather than letting him be silent, now she was everywhere. Yesterday, her comical, falling entrance had been unexpected, but she came early again today. She even invited herself to lunch with him, not that she made him pay even though he offered, but still. Being with her every second was too much when he was this conflicted.

He caught himself lost in thoughts or fantasies of her more than once, his focus totally derailed for long stretches of time. It was quite bad for his work but the thoughts were easy coming and difficult to push away. So much time had been squandered by his mind, time he needed to plot, which was the main content of what he had been doing lately. She had absolutely no idea what really was going on while he sat at his desk, no idea how much his thoughts revolved entirely around her in business as well as personal pondering. Thinking about it made him tired and he rubbed at the bridge of his nose.

"You alright?" Her voice hit him like ice water as he glanced up, taken back by the fact that she was asking with genuine interest. He had been mainly cold to her for days, she should have still been angry.

"Fine. Why?" Loki straightened, sitting back in his chair to eye her down his nose.

She shrugged noncommittally, "You just seemed very uncomfortable, like something was wrong. Headache, maybe?"
Loki blinked slowly, unsure how to even begin to answer, so he lied, "Nothing aspirin can't cure... but thank you for asking."

Darcy nodded and smiled in that relaxed, gentle way she had when they were alone, "Any time." It made him want desperately to kiss her so he simply looked away.

If she kept this up he might misplace his mind, might say or do dangerous things. He could not afford this, could not afford not to focus. It was getting harder and harder to endure not being able to get closer. Those dreams were killing him slowly, so much that he dreaded to go to sleep and was eager for it all at once.

In little and careful moves he had found himself touching her, brushing his fingers against her, anything to ease it. "Enough..." He muttered it before he realized, and she turned her eyes on him, tilting her head in a wary sort of question, "Enough chatter, we need to get busy, do we not?" Loki said in his best business tone, trying to force down the panic, irrationally afraid she would glean understanding of his thoughts somehow from his blunder.

"Very much so." Her agreement was music to his ears after such a slip up, "Do you have those terms we spoke of listed yet?

Not quite as musical, he dreaded this, "Yes, I do." He said as he snatched up a file from his desk drawer.

Loki pushed himself out of his chair and perched instead on the corner of his desk, handing her the item to look over. Her face betrayed very little, but the tiny little creases between her brow were enough to tell him she had found a few things she did not care for. When she handed him Stark's list, they both knew the real battling would begin. These were the nitty-gritty, meat matters of the deal, the immovable objects they battled to control. Now they would be working specifically to outwit the other, get a blade around the other's neck to force a surrender. It was cloak and dagger now to see which of then could gain the upper hand with absolute lines drawn.

When he scanned hers, he was not shocked to find the technology department as one stipulation. Loki was persona non grata in the entire department, and that was the issue he was most interested in. This was their mutual stronghold, the prize to be had in battle. His green eyes peeked at her over the file, amused to find her fidgeting nervously when she thought he was not looking. She knew his stance perfectly well.

"Always so obstinate, that man." Loki muttered, "But at least we can honestly end the dance." He locked eyes with her intentionally, aiming to intimidate her, "Now the war begins."

Her own blue eyes narrowed at him, unimpressed, "Because it has been nothing but a party since we started."

"Comparatively, I think that is accurate." He smiled a sharp edge smile full of teeth, "From now on, it won't be quite so amiable. We know what we want and we both intend on having it. Stubborn people do not compromise easily, it is all done through twisting blades deeply enough in the opponent to force a concession."

"Or," Darcy offered, "the opponents growing up and working out terms of mutual benefit."

Loki could not keep the smile from his lips as he leaned forward, invading her space as he stared deeply into her eyes, "Do you think we can manage that?" He grabbed her wrist, intent on leading her to a chair and away from all his little notes he had been scribbling on scraps of paper, a little worried she might notice them. Whenever she neared his desk, he had been positioning himself to
block her out of paranoia. The muscles in his fingers flexed almost involuntarily as he stared at her.

The pained gasp made him jerk his hand away like her skin burned him, green eyes wide as he watched her step back for distance. His agitation made him grab her more firmly than he realized. Maybe he meant to hurt her, to show her who held the power, or maybe his need to touch her was overwhelming him. It could have been the stress, the pressure, the guilt, any reason. He was unsure why he gripped her when he knew she was delicate, but he was surprised to realize that he felt both guilt and satisfaction at the same time.

He was taking out his emotions on her in the little things.

"Genghis Khan!" Darcy snarled, rubbing her wrist with her good hand, cradling it lightly in her palm.

Her nerves were all hyper sensitive, especially in her hand. The fingers were nearly healed but everything was tender. Her body responded more violently, keeping her sharp to avoid injuring anything again. Her body did not approve of the damage she took once and had no plans to revisit any part of it. Loki had quiet a grip though, even if she was sensitive to pressure. It might leave a mark.

Loki's brows cocked in that half inquisitive, half incredulous way of his, begging the question with his big and expressive eyes. "What?"

Darcy shifted, only just realizing she said something strange. There was one more reason this office and people set would think she was strange. Blurting random dead ruler names would qualify as odd behavior. If she had said Caesar or Pharaoh it still would not have been better.

Her fingers curled protectively around her arm and she laughed nervously, "Sorry, I guess that sounded strange."

His quizzical stare confirmed how odd he seemed to find the outburst. It was a cute expression.

Her fingers massaged her lily skin as she tried to decide how not to sound out of her mind. "Years ago, this friend of mine was a Christian - you know, she believed in God - and I was a teen with a mouth. Like most kids I thought swearing made me grown up. I used to say Jesus Christ as a cuss word all the time and so she got mad at me one day. She said there were tons of bad people in history, so why did I have to go and use the name of something she cared about rather than cussing Hitler's name or something." One shoulder lifted in a half shrug, "She had a point. Why pick on a guy that tried to do good instead of the really jerky ones in history that deserve it?"

He huffed a subdued laugh, "Interesting. I never know what will come out of your mouth next."

"I aim to be unpredictable!" She said and grinned wryly, "Usually works for me."

"It is a skill of yours." Loki paused, stilling the air to a deathly stagnation as they both looked to the floor, neither sure what to say. Finally, tilting his shoulders back and canting his head, he asked, "Would you like to run... or hobble down to the second floor to get a little coffee with me?"

Darcy grinned wide and nodded, "You said the magic words! I'll never turn a man down on offers of coffee."

Loki stuck out his arm, indicating for her to hold his elbow like a couple of cultured society friends. To her memory, he had never offered her his arm before simply to walk and it was a very odd sort of gesture, not one she was fully comfortable with. Still, she smiled again and tentatively slipped her
hand into the crook of his arm and let him lead her out of the room, walking by his side with fake confidence. It felt very odd to her, the feel of his warmth, the silken quality of his Dolce & Gabbana at her finger tips.

Though she walked as far from him as comfort allowed rather than pressing in against his side, it was a strange kind of intimacy with him. At a party, with a random man she knew nothing about, it would not seem so unnatural, but she knew this man. He held up distance like a shield to a knight, sharp words and sinister smiles assuring others dared not venture close.

This closeness had been offered to her for reasons she was unsure of. Her first hunch, and only real idea was that he was seeking to apologize in his own way. He did that, she had noticed. Slowly she had begun to realize that when he said "would you like me to send for coffee", what he really was saying fell closer under "I'm sorry, don't be angry." It was an olive branch.

Using the words to convey regret was just not his way, he always did it in deed. His actions and words were disconnected, separate entities all their own thinking and language. She usually could have used at least two interpreters for this one man.

That in mind, she relaxed, allowing him to lead and begin a topic of absolutely no relation to work, and chat her up. He chose coffee houses as a topic, of course, which was a very safe play on his part. They slid into the elevator with only a few employees giving them odd glances. Only one woman at a desk shot Darcy a hateful glare before returning to her screen.

It made Darcy giggle aloud to know that some of them clearly read more into the casual exchange than an apology. The heavy doors clicked shut with a thump and she stared at the mated finish. The rumors would begin quite fresh and new now, which normally would have upset her, but it only amused her. That little blonde must have thought she was making moves on Loki, moves she clearly would have liked to be the one pulling. The little office elves might have even harbored thoughts that Loki cared for her, that romance was percolating.

How wrong they were! To think the big business magician at her side would ever look her way for any reason other than to brainwash her was only the sort of thing trashy or overly romantic and unrealistic books would dare venture into. The fact that she hobbled like and eighty year old really could not help things. How did they look at her and see a threat?

Those books would also have the elevator, once working perfectly up until this point, unexpectedly stall to trap them together for hours.

"What do you find so amusing, Miss Lewis?" He ventured the question as he pressed the two button to make it glow blue.

"I just found it funny how cheery your workers are, like the seven dwarfs, singing as they go." Her eyes remained on the doors steadfastly, having suddenly worried herself, hopeful she had not jinxed the machine.

"Ah, mockery." Loki smirked, not pulling from her hold, "I suppose Stark keeps his workers happy with songs playing over the speakers at all times."

"No, but Fury plays Disney movies in all the lobbies. He also keeps fresh smelling flowers in every office." She deadpanned.

"I hope you're joking, because I would fear for the economy otherwise."

Darcy chuckled and squeezed his arm as the doors opened, "Maybe."
She almost didn't notice the way he covered her hand with his for a moment as he lead her out of the lift. His fingers lingered longer than they had reason to, unless he really was trying to begin rumors. She did not react, strolling beside him until his hand fell away and their linked arms was again their only contact. That too was forgotten when the smell of coffee hit her nose.

Darcy slithered gracelessly past all the little worker bees eagerly getting ready to end the work day. She was in slacks and a flowy top to hide as much of the bruises as possible but she just did not look as polished as normal. Putting on makeup and fixing her hair was so hard when her fingers still hurt and did not respond the way they should. Her curls were messy but her makeup was at least good. She should just straighten her hair and be done with it until she had better control of her motor skills.

These people got on her nerves, all the cute little Banana Republic people walking around her drove her a little crazy sometimes. There were times she just wanted to see everyone in wild and hideous Cosby sweaters. People would not die if they were wild every once in a while, screw fashion rules.

Once she got to that overly huge door (compensating), she wrenched it open quickly. Shoving crowds on an injured person were not at all fun. She hated being pushed around like a rag doll. He did not bother to say hello as she breezed past him, she was headed for the chairs to put her bag down, so many papers made her shoulder ache. Tony followed fairly close on her heels, walking beside her until she slowed.

"So, Fury caught you, huh?" Stark perched on the edge of his desk to stare at her. "What was he asking you?"

Seriously? Darcy did not bother to ask if she was invited to sit, she simply walked to the best looking one and dropped into it. If this was going to be a grill session she needed to be comfortable for a change. She was just about sick of every person on the planet trying to make her their personal Jason Bourne. How did real spies deal with this? Did they eventually just go insane?

No use lying. "Yeah, he did. Why? Can't you ask him yourself?"

The corners of his eyes crinkled with his crooked smile, the partial beard being the only thing that made him look less a child. "Have you ever known him to offer information?"

"He works for you, remember? Make him tell you what you want to know." She mumbled.

"He works for me," Tony nodded, "and about a trillion other people. But you work for me too, remember? So I choose you."

What was she, Pikachu? Exactly how many people were giving her orders? How many people wanted her to play even more games? How many people was she even reporting to now? Or maybe the question was more along the lines of how many people thought she had to report to them?

Fine, she would play the game, "He wanted to be sure I wasn't giving Loki room to hang the deal and said he wanted me to work faster."

"That's all?" Tony stood, walking toward her chair, circling behind her, "He took the time to track you down just to say 'careful' around the big bad wolf?" One hand rested on either side of her shoulders on the chair.

He was trying to intimidate her somehow, she had the feeling, and she hated it, "Basically, he wanted me to check in." She smiled sardonically, "He's not too trusting, has to check up on everyone."
"Speaking of checking, how are you recovering?" His hands moved to her shoulders and he squeezed lightly a few times, but Darcy was not comforted. "Feeling any better? I know we rushed you after you left the hospital."

It took effort not to simply jerk away, but she sat up slowly, giving a subtle indicator, "I'm doing alright. Every day is an improvement." It was a relief when he moved away, taking the hint. "Thank you for asking." She just did not trust him, did not like him being too close. Besides, she had the feeling he was testing her somehow but could not decide what he was looking for.

He walked to his desk chair and sat down languidly, "I heard Loki eventually sneaked into the hospital to see you, right?"

Darcy's stomach soured instantly with dread, "I don't remember much about that day, I've never been sure what was real and what was my imagination or tricks of my scrambled brain. If he did, it was probably to try to hypnotize me and convince me not to sue him."

Stark barked a laugh, grinning as he shook his head, "It's funny, but I could really picture him trying that!"

Darcy smiled serenely, shrugging, "I wouldn't be too shocked."

"Oh, by the way, on the topic of scrambled brains, have you remembered more about the man that pushed you?"

"Not really." Darcy frowned, eyeing his relaxed posture with suspicion, "Just that his skin looked burned ... but why is everything I say reminding you of a different question? What are you dancing around, Mr. Stark?"

Those flashy teeth peeked at her when he smiled, "Always astute." He leaned back in his chair and spun once, just like a kid, "I know you don't tell me all you know. You and Fury and Loki tell me bits and pieces, but hide others. What I really want is some honesty, the meaty bits. I don't trust Loki or even Fury, but you're a good kid, so I want you to be real."

"Yes, Ms. Lewis, we do." That strong, collected, feminine voice drifted in behind her.

Darcy nearly jumped out of her chair to look at Pepper, "You're really quiet." She muttered as the door closed behind the petite figure.

It was unkind to frighten injured people. One heart failure while falling down stairs was enough to shorten her life, she was sure, and she did not need more.

"Please, Darcy, we need you to tell us everything you can." Pepper continued, light eyes staring right into her, so calm and at home in the huge office with her perfectly crafted attire Darcy only wished she could pull off.

"Such as? What do you think I'm hiding? What is everyone so desperate to know or hide around here that you call me out of a meeting with Odinson just to ask for details?" They did not need to know they really just interrupted the tail end of coffee with the enemy, that she would keep to herself.

"There is quite a lot at stake in this deal, as you must know by now. It goes deeper than just turning over profit. Tony and I are trying to look out for our company but we cannot do that without knowing what cards others are playing." Pepper just held herself like a Queen, asked questions so seriously like it was for national security.
Darcy deflated, she could not lie to that woman! This was cheating, like bringing in Princess Leia, Maid Marian, or Sister Kate. "Alright, Fury did drop hints for me to hurry the deal along and dropped a name. I can't find much information on him, but I only just started researching him. Fury thinks someone named Thanos is trying to sabotage the deal or steal it out from under you. He runs a few Casinos, from what I've found so far, and has a reputation for being a tough opponent." Darcy leaned into the chair, "He is known for a lot more but it can't be taken to court and proven, so he stays free even though he is infamous for shady."

Pepper dipped her slender chin in a demure nod, "We do have information about Thanos. What did Fury tell you about him in this deal?"

Darcy sniffed, "Nothing really, I'm not 'high enough rank' or something. He wanted you and everyone else kept away from Loki, wanted me to watch him like a hawk to be sure nothing slips under the table. I have looked into the guy's business dealings though, and he has a record for fronting illegal affairs behind legitimate ones, so I'm betting Fury has that assumption. For his part, I haven't seen anything more unusual than normal with Loki."

Stark and Pepper nodded as one, "We're going to need you to keep watching." Tony tented his fingers under his chin, "Thanos will be around, crawling in where he can. Search Loki's notes, snoop in his files whenever you get the opening. He has to keep record of contacts somewhere, and you can put it in the bank that he's talking to Thanos, Lewis, mark my words. Find it! Find record of it."

Darcy gaped at him openly, "I can't do that! If he caught me, he would toss me out!" She held off telling him she tried that her first day, and also how she already hacked his cameras once and found very little since records were deleted at the end of each day; the computer might be different though but that took more time than she had. "I have been watching him, but he never leaves long enough for me to do any real digging, he's too smart for that."

"Try anyway. You can forget the computer, he has to be doing it by hand now. I already hacked it once and found nothing but a corrupted file on it he destroyed well enough to keep the juicy stuff out. Being at his desk, you might get in better, but I doubt it." Tony's dark eyes drilled her, ignoring the blatant shock on her face, "He's smart, he's keeping things out of my reach, which means it's not on a computer. Find his notes and we'll have a place to start."

Darcy resisted the intense urge to comment on the fact that Stark hacked Odinson, but what could she really say when she did it too? Unethical, obviously, but when did computer people play completely fair? Hackers hacked, it was a fact, and Stark was a computer brain, better than she was, he could not be expected to keep his hands off. "Alright." She said lamely, "I'll look around and see what I can find. Picking locks never was my thing, but I can try to get into his desk."

"Be careful, Darcy, we do not want you putting yourself in way of any harm." Pepper cut in quickly, "We would not even ask this of you if there were a better way. We need information from someone we trust, and you are really the only one that has hope of getting it. You are closest to him."

"So I have been told." And told, and told, and told. She was everyone's spy and now she was adding more future crimes to the stack. Perfect! And she actually agreed, and easily too! Once Pepper came in with all that gentle prodding, it was over. That woman was impossible to deny and Darcy had no clear idea why! The second she asked though, Darcy was spilling her guts! She reminded her a little of Jane, maybe that was it. What kind of lawyer was she again? She was going to be disbarred for this, she really was! This case was literally going to ruin her! "I will be careful."

The muscles in his shoulders and neck coiled tight at the sound. Loki knew those steps, that superior gate almost as well as he did Thor's. The few times he heard it before had been unpleasant enough
that the sound was imprinted on his mind with disgust. Such a visit could not mean anything at all pleasant, the big man coming himself was a terrible sign.

He was here to try to collect, most likely. It had been clear enough that a price was required and since Loki had not come running to pay it and swear his fealty, the leader himself was strolling in, not a menial tax collector. Prizes like this were a sadistic leader's greatest pleasure to collect personally, to ring the payment from bone with a more hands on approach to a hated enemy.

"Do come in." Loki murmured, not turning his chair from the window, "I suppose you came for tea."

That heavy leather coat swayed as the imposing figure sauntered to a chair, "Not quiet what I was thinking, but I could be persuaded."

Loki smiled wolflishly, turning sharply to face the great figure of a leader, ignoring the eye-patch and staring directly into that lone, dark eye. "Of course, I always love a good cup with my veiled threats and blatant blackmail. Will Earl Grey be to your taste or would you rather have another leaf variety?"

"Anything's fine as long as it's accompanied by some answers." Fury eased himself down, both hands on the armrests, "You never did contact me, your phone must be having problems, so I came to check on you."

Loki pulled out the sickliest of appreciative looks he could, "Thank you so much for your worry. Your personal attention to all of your unwilling partners is touching."

His gleaming white teeth flashed, "I do try my best, Odinson. I like to think I will look out for you better than your own father." He paused, frowning, "Which should not be too hard considering he disowned you."

Loki's smile was a razor edge, lacing all his pent up anger in a release of stoicism that would drive the other man mad, "I can't say that I ever would have considered you a father figure, but now that you mention it, I really do see similarities. I'm sure I will claim very similar results with you as I did him. I always did have a knack for getting my way even with him."

A heavy laugh hummed past Fury's lips, "I might have to ground you more often than he did then, or take you to the woodshed to remind you who's in charge."

Fury might be displeased that she left before Loki since she was supposed to be "glued to his side" but Stark told her to come to his office. Had she known what he wanted, she would have ignored it, but she hadn't, so she didn't. He was her client first so she had to do as he asked, Fury could get over it. Moreover, Loki would be going home soon, so there was no reason to go back to the office. He and his eye-patch could deal, because she was going home. She had been doing well as glue, she thought.

Once again, she was making her way to an area where a cab could see her wave. It was unfair how tall other people were. People were everywhere and they paid no attention to her. It took a lot of effort just to get to a place she could be seen. Passing all these apartment buildings was one such path. Cabs hung out around residential areas like hotels to get the traffic.

A particularly thin stick of a man bumped her, shoving her to the side. Normally, she would have been able to correct herself, but her boot slipped, throwing off her balance completely. She shrieked when her senses and eyes took stock of exactly what direction she was falling. The brain worked quite fast, assessing that she could not stop her own fall, but worse was that it knew where her landing would be, which was at the bottom of some nasty looking stairs to some basement.
Panic hit her in a dizzying wave as she felt herself falling, inertia made her head spin. Stairs had it out for her even if she wasn't on them! People had a thing for pushing her down them too. Once again, there was nothing she could do to stop it even though it felt like it was slowed to a snail's pace.

The world spun again when hands jerked her the other direction so fast she fell the next way. Her face connected with something and she was quite aware that it hurt, but still grateful the world was stabilizing and it had nothing to do with stairs.

Darcy grunted as she steadied herself, an unfamiliar hand also clamping onto her shoulder to assist. That was one very sold guy, she realized as her eyes connected with the chest (brick wall) she unwittingly broke her face on, not that it was his fault, he did her a favor to catch her. She pulled back quickly, taking him in as she moved. Those shoulders absolutely had to be several inches wider than even Thor's, which was saying something. Everything about him screamed mountain as her eyes traveled up his barrel chest, thick neck, and finally round face.

The pallor of his skin was strange, almost gray, like he never got any sun -not that she could talk about never getting out. He was smiling down at her, a big mouth full of straight white teeth, lips too thin, or maybe it was more that his eyes were too small and wide-set, or to do with how his chin was too large and square.

"I'm so sorry!" Darcy rattled off quickly, her eyes still scanning his face, landing on the real oddity of him; five long scars down his chin.

"Not to worry." His voice was deep, with a damp cellar or storm shelter kind of feel to it.

The scars started just below his upper lip, curving over his lower and down his chin, like a really bad cat scratch. She had to make a seriously conscious effort not to look at them, focus on his eyes instead, and even then she was looking at them with her peripheral. They were so very eye catching and knowing she should not stare at them just made the temptation to gawk ten times worse.

"Pretty sure you just saved my life, Mister." She smiled up at him, so thankful to a man she did not even know that she could easily have hugged him.

He extended a very large, thick, stubby fingered hand toward her, "Titus."

She gingerly placed her petite hand into his, worried he might break it if he squeezed, "Darcy, nice to meet you."

Chapter End Notes

Little cliff hanger. Sorry!

The Genghis Khan thing was a nod to an old friend of mine, btw. It's something I could see her doing.

Now, let me say, to preface the next chapter, Darcy's character is tough, she faced Dark Elves and never even really blinked. She didn't run and hide or curl up waiting for someone to save her. In Thor one, while the Destroyer was shooting up the town, she
was rescuing a puppy (in the deleted scenes) not running around screaming! Just watch her, she's never the damsel, she always stands her ground one way or the other. I hate it when she is depicted as flimsy and weak, someone that would just go along with Loki on anything. Darcy thinks for herself.

As for their relationship, every story I've ever read on them has her cave first but I honestly don't think she would. Loki is very emotionally centered. He pushes people away, fears being hurt and betrayed, yes, but he feels a lot. He is a mass of balled up emotion over so many people. He might try not to feel, might deny what he feels, but he feels so strongly, he's super emotional. Whereas Darcy is peppy and energetic but she holds her real emotions down so deep they don't fully surface much. She plays dumb, like a girl that was never taken seriously, but she's as logical as Jane sometimes. In TWD, when she was on the phone and Ian was watching TV she was more irritated than frightened, just trying to get everything fixed from her end the best she could. Crazy stuff happened but she always rolled with it, never letting it sink in, just taking the challenge and moving on to a solution.

In my universe/thing she was raised to be strong, not emotional. Feelings weren't prized, being driven and strong was. Her feelings come slowly, like how she started feeling closer to him when she was hurt, but then he shut her down so she closed that feeling off again. She has a need for control. She is passive aggressive and denies and compartmentalizes her feelings so well she hardly notices them. She gets angry but even her anger is controlled to the best of her ability. She is also a lawyer and sees human nature at its worst so she doesn't believe in real friendships because she sees them end so badly, or love because she sees it destroyed and lost. She is in a world of men and she has had them try to seduce her for their own purposes before so she just shut down that entire part of her brain, set up firewalls and mental blocks to make sure she never fell. It takes a lot for her to let her emotions free. Thing is, she is human and she can only keep feelings in a box so long. She's only part super-girl.
Never Run

Chapter Notes

Human by Christina Perri again, because it's just so Darcy to me! Turning Tables by Adele for Loki and Darcy in their situations.

Be warned, this chapter is suspense. A lot happens to Darcy. Those of you that got who Titus was will see this chapter coming, but not all of it, I hope! Those that were unsure who he was, it will hopefully be a shocker!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

--High Rise--

Never Run

*Marvel

*Loki Odi nson, Darcy Lewis, Nick Fury, Thanos, etc.

While she might not have luck with stairs, she counted herself lucky that someone was there to catch her this time. An older man, maybe in his late forties, but spry enough to catch a girl jinxed with stairs. He was full of smiles and good-fellow kind of charm, probably a wild Casanova in his day. He chatted very easily. A business man, and a good one if his suit was a judge. Anyone as large and built as he was had to have a lot of money if he could obtain a suit that nice in his size. It had to have cost a mint!

He walked her to the curb and waved down a cab as quick as a wink. It did not shock her that having a man so tall beside her made it this much easier to get a cabby to notice. Two had showed up, and he pointed her toward the first.

"Well, Titus, you've been a life saver!" Darcy grinned, not exactly sure how to politely part company with her strange new friend, one that knew exactly how much bone density most people had.

He politely had asked about her condition, and she informed him of her stairwell curse, which lead him to comment on her injury with multiple random facts about fractures like hers. Personal injury lawyer, she might guess? Of course, she could further guess that a man his size and obvious strength level would know things like that out of necessity. Something about him had her fairly sure he might have been quite a trouble maker in his youth, a thug or bouncer, she would venture since there was an aura of subdued threat hanging beneath his easy sunshine smiles.

His huge smile nearly swallowed his face, making him look strangely frightening; he really should not smile that wide or chuckle that deeply, it made him sound evil, "Believe me, I'm only too happy to do it."

Titus opened the cab door and stepped aside for her, like a chauffeur. Her cheeks very nearly flushed, not used to this treatment, but she tipped her head to him politely and shuffled to get into the back. He waited patiently, cupping a hand under her elbow to help her step off the curb and ease
inside. Older guys still had that quality of being gentlemen to ladies. It made her feel a bit strange but she did like it. It wasn't pity so she could endure it. Manners were such a lost art in this society and it was a bit of a shame too.

"Thank you very much!" Darcy smiled up at him as he slammed the door shut.

If he had waited a few seconds before shutting her in she would have said a bit better of a goodbye and expressed more gratitude. The leather squeaked when she shifted in the seat and it reminded her of Loki's couch. A long breath of the closed in air had her nose crinkling. She had not noticed it while the door was open but the cab had a very strong stench of bleach, it was almost choking. Her hand involuntarily went to her throat as the tickling feeling went inside. Clean was good but this guy needed to air the thing out once in a while, seriously.

When she announced her street, her voice hitched a little and she crinkled her nose again. The driver made no move at all to proceed so she started to repeat her order when the door on the other side opened. Her eyes widened slightly in confused shock as Titus slip inside, giant hand holding his tie in place. He did not look at her, just touched the driver's shoulder.

"I thought I should see you home, just to be safe." He did not look at her but she could see a chill setting into him as she watched his face, it was a sudden lack of that warmth he exuded before. "I would not want you being injured again, Ms. Lewis."

Her brain tingled, body stiffening with the amount of warning bells sounding inside her skull. While she could have been wrong, she was still quite sure she intentionally never gave him her full name. She made a point to be careful about that when she was on the street, never sure who she might be talking to. First names were moderately safe, but last names would leave her open to being tracked. First names were a bit ambiguous because there could be a thousand Darcy's in the city, less if you counted her age or other attributes, but still safer than a full name.

He made no move to look at her as the driver finally moved, he was chilly now. But that was another thing her mind was on edge over; why did the driver only listen to him? She clearly ordered him to move, normal for a cab, but he did not so much as twitch until the second occupant was in, not so normal.

The turn she knew would be the first he should take in order to go to the address she gave sped by as she watched out the window. That did not have to mean anything. He might have a different way of getting there, or maybe he was dropping Titus off first. Not that Titus had given him an address but he could have been a regular, if cab drivers even had regulars. She would admit that she had no idea.

Not caring to watch another turn she needed go by, which she had a feeling it would, her eyes turned down to uselessly study the inside of the car. It might have smelled clean but it was pretty badly stained. The floor had quite a few dark and discolored places to the tan matting. The seat was not much better. Things had obviously been spilled on it, coffee judging by how black the discoloration was.

"Tell me, how is Tony Stark?" That deep voice washed over her, setting every single nerve in her body to flame, "You were just to see him, I believe?"

The question was the most obvious of all, but she could not stop it, "How would you know that?" She fingered the wrinkle in her slacks as she stared at the floor.

"I make it a point to keep an eye on a lot of people. He is one of those people." He shifted, stretching out a bit, crossing his ankles.
When his feet shifted, a gleam instantly caught her eye when light hit on metal. It took her a moment to focus in on what it was, her mind working to put a name to the item, which she came to eventually. Unfortunately. Her eyes widened against her will, glued to that shiny silver casing. No matter how inclined she was to tasers, she knew what a spent bullet looked like. He was watching her and she knew it so she forced her eyes away, turning them to the seat. No better choice. The brown leather was stained a very dark, red clay color in places around her. It was not brown-black as she first thought, no, it was tinted more red-black.

Darcy's heart clenched in her chest as her mind drew and connected the lines. If she did not miss her guess, there would be a round little hole in the back of the seat, maybe about the place a heart would be. Her uninjured leg twitched a few times with her minds intense desire to run, to dive out of the car and just run.

It was her imagination, she told herself, she was trying to make more out of it than there really was. Reading mysteries was an old vice and now she was paying for it. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and Agatha Christie were to blame for this. She was being paranoid. Just because he knew the driver of the cab, just because they passed her street, none of that was reason to make up a conspiracy in her mind. There was no way he could have known when she was going to leave Stark Tower. Clearly, this was just her mind going crazy.

Titus leaned over, pinching the casing between his fingers and then tucking it into his jacket pocket.

Her eyes followed the movement with wrapped interest, brain spinning its wheels to comprehend what connections all of this had. If the stain was blood, if that was a bullet shell, if the driver was ignoring her, what did Titus have to do w-

The thought stalled and tripped over itself, her brain alight with the sudden and horrific understanding. The answer was in one word, one title, a name she should have remembered, one she should have linked together. She had done research, seen the name in a few pieces. There had been no pictures but she should have remembered that small first name that tacked onto the much used latter.

How had she missed it? Because she was not expecting it, that was why. She never so much as dreamed her rescuer could have been there by anything less than chance, could have been following her out of that building, waiting to get her alone. That was elaborate and something more important people than a little graduate law student had ever needed to worry about before.

Her eyes slowly turned to his face and into those blocks of ice that held residence in his eye sockets, "Thanos."

He smiled, lips stretching over his huge teeth, "Charmed, I'm sure. It is nice to see you're sharper than I had begun to think."

"Was the guy that bumped me yours too, or did you just save me from falling by chance?" Her voice sounded cold and so calm.

"That one on the street was not mine, just coincidence. Unless you are also referring to the first time?" His hand reached out to rest over her injured fingers and she jerked it back, recoiling from the contact.

"Both." She offered up, but her frazzled mind worked unsuccessfully to puzzle out what he meant.

"I noticed you have been taking strolls over the cyber information highway that lead in my direction." His look was meaningful and withering as a desert to a tropical flower, "Need I say that is
a bad idea? I don't care for anyone looking into my business. I'm a private man, and having you peeking at my business life is unwelcome."

"Oh." She muttered lamely, "I'll remember that. It won't happen again."

"No, it won't." He left no room to question how he could be so sure of that, no reason to question it either.

"Well, now that we're clear, guess I'll be on my way." She glanced at the driver, "You can drop me off at the mall, by the way."

Where she found the courage to seem so damn relaxed and flippant was very much beyond her since panic was about ready to cause all the blood to leave her brain. Her voice was even, emotionless, and absolutely stoic like some sort of stone cold 007 kind of agent totally used to being in cars with criminals.

His chuckle was deep as the ocean and twice as frightening, "Not quite."

Darcy shrugged, expression not even changing a little, "Well, it doesn't have to be the mall. Shopping isn't always the answer, I guess. You could also let me off at a Chinese place, I could go for some Teriyaki Chicken."

The laugh was deeper and longer this time, "Are you attempting to amuse me?"

"Not really, just saying." Her eyes turned toward him again, a shocking relaxed chill in them she did not feel.

"You do not seem worried that I took the time to come find you. Are you not curious about why?"

He crossed his arms in superiority, like a teacher scolding a child.

Worried, no, not at all. Why would she be worried? It was more accurate to say petrified, especially now that she was realizing the door handle was not only hard to find, it had been removed on her side. Short of breaking through the window, she had no way out unless they let her. That left her vulnerably at their mercy.

"Oh, I thought you would probably tell me regardless... bad guy monologues always come in about this time in a story." Good god, what was she saying? Was she taunting him? Was she brain dead?

His lips stretched wide in a huge, toothy grin, "You have quiet a mouth. I can see why Loki and Tony like you."

"Yeah, it's my biggest asset." Her eyes were traveling back to the floor, unable to hold her nerve if she looked at him too much.

"Some people might think so, but not everyone." He shifted in the seat, tilting more toward her and she found herself holding her breath until he was settled again.

His eyes were glued to her the way a hawk on a telephone pole watched a rabbit hopping on the ground. It would be nice if she knew why she was in this car but she was not quiet together enough to think up any reasons.

When she was younger, forced into Girl Scouts by her mother, she had been on a camping trip with her squad, something she had not been even remotely keen on. While they were in the huge van with a broken air conditioner, the troop leader told them all about the rules of the wild, such as what to do if they met dangerous native animals to the area. She read them all the creature habits and what to do,
including a horrifying bit about how to cover your head if a bear chewed on you, at which point, most of the girls wanted to return home.

But, regardless of what animal it was, the advice always seemed to have a "do not run" listed somewhere. There were so many reasons not to run, not to let them see fear. Those old speeches had begun to play on loop in her mind as she watched the man sitting beside her. Things not to do when faced with a deadly animal. It seemed like there had to be something in there to glean now that she was faced with a real live monster.

Of course, those said nothing about tasing and she slowly began reaching for the zipper on her purse. Her minds eye already had a grand thought of rendering him motionless and calling the police, saving the day in one grand move. It would solve a lot of problems for everyone if she could do that. It was worth a try.

It would have been worth a try if he had not snatched the bag from her hand to set it by his feet. She stared after her bag, frowning at it like it personally betrayed her. That taser was so useless, failing her twice now. What she really needed was a tiger on a leash, just see people come after her with that!

"You seem like quite a brave young woman, Ms. Lewis." He paused, waiting until she looked at him, "Bravery is a quality valued by most people, but not me. I like smart people because smart people know when they are beaten and know enough to surrender. Smart people will tell me what I want to know while the brave ones try to fight me, which waists my time."

Right, this was not the time to think of what could be, she should look at him and focus, "I'm sure that's very annoying for you, having to take all that valuable time on it."

"Oh, it does!" The voice was edged, turning gravely, "So tell me now, are you smart, or are you stupid? How this meeting proceeds hinges on that answer."

It became very hard to breathe as she watched his hand travel under his jacket, reaching deep until he pulled free a shiny black handle that lead further to a black barrel. Gun, Darcy's mind helpfully provided her with an easy label. She had no idea what caliber it might be, not exactly good with that sort of thing. They had bullets that caused holes to be produced in whatever the shooter was aiming for, that was what she knew.

"I-" This time there was a clear hitch in her voice and she swallowed. No, no, no! Don't dare panic! Never panic! Don't let him see fear! She could not afford to let him smell weakness because that would mean the end. She was stronger than this! A Lewis was made of better than an easily frightened, blubbering, begging, damsel. "My teachers in school always told me I was smart."

He purred his approval as he lightly rested the gun on his knee, "Good."

Setting a blue cup on the edge of the desk, next to Fury, Loki stepped back beside his chair. Thoughtfully, he took a sip from his own coffee mug, though it was tea. Reminding him who was in charge, that was something everyone seemed very intent to do. They all wanted to lord over him and put a collar around his neck to make him heel. It nearly made him laugh out loud because they had no idea he was just about to hold the end-game move to put each one of them in a checkmate. In a few short days, they would be wearing his collar and scrambling at his heels, at least if all went as he planned.

For now, he had to keep the man in his office from complicating things. Until the very moment he had made that move, any number of counter moves could spoil his trap, leaving him to drown once
again. Fury would be most likely to poke a hole in his raft and he did not want to let that happen. It
did frighten him that there was still that chance, but it was only during a small window.

"Now, exactly what did you have in mind for this grounding?" Loki canted his head, grinning slyly
at the older man.

"What would be the fun in telling you? Punishment is always best if you can't see it coming." Fury
leaned up to slip his fingers through the handle of the cup and pull it to him, "But I was hoping you
would be logical enough not to force me to punish you. Wayward son to one father should be
enough, don't you think?" He grinned sardonically, "After all, Thor turned out so well for your old
man, it only followed the next one would be the bane of his existence. Thor has been a pain
to me recently, so it follows that you should play the good son now."

Loki's jaw muscles tightened, his teeth gritting, but he chuckled and smiled good naturedly to hide
how tired he was of those quips. "I've always been an anomaly, Fury, so you can't count on statistics
as a guide."

"Do you get that from your mother's side?" Fury sipped his drink, "Your real one, I mean?"

Loki's fingers twitched, aching to dive over his desk and sink his hands into any weak points he
could find and inflict as much pain as possible, and this time he could not hide the darkening of his
expression. That had been a low blow, even for him. No one dared touch that territory if they knew
the secrets, no one. It only burned him a little deeper that Nick knew only because his father and
brother told this smug wolf. His heart was beating a fraction faster with the added rage and it set his
body close to trembling.

His father kept it a secret almost all his life but could not resist telling this one man? The reason was
obvious, it was to provide this adversary with a palpable weakness to exploit. Even he had not really
used it before now. It was a hollow victory that Fury seemed to feel the need to use it now, that the
other man was worried enough to claw at his foe so desperately.

The jabs about his father would have been enough, but that, that was a tender wound that had yet to
heal. It was the source of so much trouble and so much shame to fuel his pain. The added wound of
Frigga's... absence only compounded everything to lift it to a new level.

The other man seemed to pick up on the fact that he had pushed a button too many and shifted
tactics. "How about we put it this way... I did you a good turn, gave you information, and now it is
your turn."

It took Loki a few beats to reply, pushing down the seething rage enough until he could manage to
move forward with the conversation, "What do you want for your information exchange? I did not
find anything you gave me that enlightening or helpful, so I can't think you expect very much in
return for useless trivia."

"I also offered you protection, and with a man with as much power as Thanos, you'll need it even if
you did not plan to help me before. We both know his partners don't last very long. Even if you have
a great deal with him, I don't think you are stupid enough to believe he will hold up his end." That
sickening confidence rolled off the man in waves.

Loki sat down in his chair before he ended up pacing, "How can a man like you offer me that
protection? You might be powerful in the law environment, might even have a few politicians
kissing your hand for favors, but what good is that to me?"

"Thought you might bring that up. I think a few friends of mine could answer that better than I
could.” He waved at the door casually, "I brought them along, just in case."

"Did you really? How considerate of you!" Loki narrowed his eyes and did not move for a good
minute, but curiosity got the better of him and he finally signaled his secretary. She informed him that
there were indeed two men waiting in the lobby. There was little choice but to bite. He always liked
to see the cards other players were holding anyway, so why resist calling the bluff? "Send them in."

Once this was over she would laugh about it. The absolute unreal factor of this entire situation was
something out of movies. No one lived lives like this, did they? Maybe they did. Maybe people like
her that unknowingly became tangled in the wrong kinds of deals faced exactly this. It was in the law
books, cases with rules about these kinds of things, which meant that they did happen. Lawyers got
dragged into the criminal world all the time, it was part of the job, so why was it shocking her?

Some lawyers never saw a single bit of criminal activity, living a very normal life. Then there were
others that worked in the big boy world full of offered bribes and money being slipped under the
table, and they dove right in with both eyes wide open. Then there were the ones that never planned
to do anything more than work back and forth with normal business people and wound up
encountering the world of blackmail and organized crime totally by chance, the honest ones that
never wanted to play these games. That last one must be her.

That was how she ended up here, a huge and thick arm draped around her middle, back resting very
stiffly against a broad chest, hardly daring to take a full breath for fear it would trigger something.
That was how she ended up with the business end of a gun gently resting against her temple, Thanos'
deep voice rumbling through her as he explained what he wanted her to do and all the things that
would happen to her if she did not follow his instructions.

Not once had she screamed or begged him for mercy, not because she had not wanted to but rather
because she could not make a sound. Fear had totally locked her voice, leaving her only with
nodding. He thought her refusal to speak was stubbornness mixed with bravery, even mentioned she
was gutsy not plead for her life the minute she felt cold metal against her skin. He thought she was
steely and told her he was appreciative of the ones that did not scream.

It was true, she hardly reacted to anything he had done. When he took her injured hand and held it
took tightly, she jerked it away. That lead him to pull her over the joined seats and force her to sit
beside him, even leaning against him. She fought that too but once it was obvious he would not let
go, she placidly sat still. Not once had she outwardly panicked, not even when she was screaming
for dear life on the inside. How she did it was a mystery even to herself. Those old instructions just
kept playing in her head, never run, never panic, stay calm regardless of how frightening it was.

Not letting him see her react was also the only control she had to cling to after he stripped away
every other defense she possessed. She could still control how much she responded, how much fear
she let him see. There had to be some part in this she could control or she would go utterly mad so
this was it. Not letting him watch her fall to pieces was the singular thing she had to hold and she
would not give it up.

There was nothing else she could do besides sit quietly, fingers linked in her lap to hide the shaking.
All she could do was wait while they drove round and round the city.

Everything he had done was to frighten her, turn her into a willing puppet with threats of pain and
promises of rewards if she was a good dog. He was working so hard to intimidate her and it was
working. Something about having something so deadly right beside he brain was very fast acting to
remind her how easily he could kill her. No one would find her body, not the way he explained it.
"Do you understand everything you are to tell Stark and Fury? Do you remember what I want you to plant in those files, Darcy, my little hacker?" He tipped her hand and slid the drive into her palm, and she closed her fingers around it quickly. He wanted her to plant a very special worm in Loki's computer and then in Stark's system. Easy stuff.

"Yeah, I got it." It surprised her that she found her voice and that it barely shook at all. She tried again to shift back to her seat and this time his arm lifted away to allow it. Darcy wasted no time at all in scooting right up against that door, pressing against it and wishing she could melt right through it. The lack of door handle prevented her from jumping out but she would find a way to rip it off if he reached for her again.

He looped the strap of her bag around her neck and tucked it properly into place. It was oddly a caring sort of gesture but she was not fooled. "Don't fail me. I do not take well to things like that." He looked out his window, back to ignoring her now that he was finished.

Darcy could barely believe it when she felt the car coming to a stop, her heart in her throat when the driver got out and opened her door. She spilled out quickly, her legs wobbling as she struggled, begging them to work and making them move by force of will. Not daring to look back once, she slipped the drive into her bag, clutching the strap like a lifeline, and hobbling as fast as her legs could carry her.

Her hand throbbed horribly from when he played with those nearly healed fingers while he talked, so she used her other hand to push the metal door open, saying prayers of thanks that it was not locked yet. Most of the windows above were black, part of her brain had registered that, that it was late. If it had been locked she just would not have known what to do because she just had to get away and out of sight of him.

She did not run until the door crashed shut behind her, but the second it did, she was bolting through the isles of nearly empty car spaces. The world was spinning as she awkwardly raced through the cold cement structure, actually dizzy with her sheer terror. It did not matter that running hurt, she did not care as long as it meant she had more distance from that man. It did not matter that she nearly fell every few steps, she stayed upright somehow and kept running.

Clack. Swish.

She whirled, stumbling a bit as her wild eyes darted around the spaces, gasping for breath as she searched for the source of the noise she knew she heard. Someone else was in this garage, someone was following her. Her throat tightened as a cry threatened to spill out. She heard it again, the hollow sound of steps in a large empty space, but then it stopped. Not spotting anyone, she turned again and raced for the door into Asgard.

Once she reached the door, she turned again, frantically scanning behind her, waiting for Thanos to spring from some crack in the blocks, but there was no one there at all. White dots clustered over her vision and she blinked furiously to clear it away. She was gasping for every breath, chest heaving for every single breath while her body shook.

There were only so many times she could just pretend nothing happened, forget it to move on. This had been that last time, this had been the last thing she could just roll with. One on top of the other had piled up until at last the stack was so high she could not see past it. Eventually things built up enough that she could not pretend anymore. She had lost it now and she knew it, hearing phantoms.

When she turned again to reach for the crash bar, she found a chest.

Her body responded before her mind had time, feet stumbling back, arms shooting up, body folding
in on itself in a defensive stance as a shriek of absolute terror ripped from her throat. All the screams she had not given Thanos molded into one ear splitting cry.

Loki was unbelievably tense after that meeting. There was quite a lot to think of now that new facts had been added. Those men had been a surprise, he never would have suspected them, never once contemplated that they worked for Fury. They seemed normal enough but he should have known better. Nothing was normal anymore.

He shook the collar of his coat to straighten it a bit more vengefully than needed. The more he learned the more he understood that everyone was his enemy, out to get him on behalf of someone. He had so few loyal players to work with in a sea of enemies. Everywhere he turned he found something ugly. There was nothing he could do about it now but at least Fury had tipped his hand. They had come to a modicum of understanding, or so the other man thought.

For his part, Loki's plans had not changed that much, he was still going to proceed. The only change was that he was moving the time up. He did not have even a few days to waist. Now was the time to act against those fools. All he had to do was keep them all happy until he could execute them.

He had all his notes hidden away for the night where no one would find them. Amora's magazine had been committed to memory and destroyed days ago so he did not need to worry about that. All his secrets should be safe for now. Not Fury, Stark, nor Thanos would be able to catch hold of him before it was over. He left them nothing to work with, no way to predict him which left him free as a bird to fly.

His eyes fluttered at the thought of pending freedom and crushing each and every one of them slowly. That was something he would saver like the finest of all wine. He would relish picking them apart and skinning them down to the very bone. Soon he would be the one controlling their puppets and he would enjoy every second of it. Thinking about it relaxed him a little.

Tugging the door open, he was forced to jerk to a halt to avoid crashing into Darcy. He only had a second to wonder over what she could be doing back at this time of the evening before her shrill scream of abject terror nearly split his skill. His growl of discomfort was lost on her as she nearly curled to the floor.

"Please, please, God!" She whined, hands covering her face like she expected him to strike her.

"I know I look like a god in this light, Darcy, but it's just me." He muttered, attempting to make light of the very odd reaction.

It was not until she looked up that he understood something was very wrong, more than being startled. He had never seen such a look of wild eyed, soul shredding terror on her face before, nothing even close. She whispered his name with a shaky, hoarse voice, and all he could do was blink and stare as she all but climbed him. Her arms wear around his neck, clawing at him like a frightened cat during a storm and he shoved her away on instinct.

"Darcy, what the-" The way she shrank back had him shifting forward again, fingers moving to cup her face, "What on earth is wrong, Darcy?"

His tender touch had her leaning into his chest, burrowing against him and he could not even begin to wrap his mind around it. Very briefly, he considered that it was another dream, but dismissed that. It sounded like she was choking but he decided it might have been a sort of dry crying gasp. She was shaking like a leaf. This level of fear had to mean something quite horrific.
He was whispering even though he had no idea why, "What happened, Darcy? What happened? Tell me?"

His arms wound around her, his impulse to comfort her over road his commonsense. With her chin tucked against his collarbone, he peppered her temple with soft kisses before he realized what he was doing. That was an intimately familiar step he hardly believed he would have blundered into but with his cheek pressed against the side of her head, he did not hate it. She was fortunately too in shock to realize what he had done, did not even seem to notice.

"Someone's in here, they're following me." She breathed out so quietly he nearly missed it.

His eyes darted around quickly but found no sign of life at all. Someone could have followed her but they were gone now, or it seemed that way. It could not hurt to be careful though.

When he nearly moved to scoop her up into his arms and carry her to his car, he realized his mind was working much too dramatically. He was no Prince or shining knight to whisk her off her feet and carry her to safety. He was no hero, he was only one of the many bad guys in the story.

Instead, with an arm wrapped firmly and protectively around her shoulders, he said, "It's alright, come with me." There was no room to argue even if she wanted to, not with those strong arms guiding her. His other hand dropped to holding one of hers and he marched her to his car, opening the passenger door for her and letting her ease herself in. She did not even ask what he was doing or where he intended to take her, she just tucked herself into his car and let him shut the door without protest. She really wasn't in good shape.

Well, she would calm down after a little while, he assured himself as he jogged around the front of his car and folded himself into the driver's seat. "Let's go somewhere we can speak freely." He clarified for her benefit even if she had not asked.

Her glassy, tear free eyes focused on his dash and did not lift as he wheeled them out into the open. She sat like a statue, clinging to her bag like it could save her life. He watched her out of the corner of his eye, inexplicably worried about her, afraid she would shatter any second if he turned a corner too fast. For quite some time he had no clear idea of where he was driving, just that he should go somewhere. After a while he settled on a mostly empty parking lot at a chain grocery story.

They sat in silence for quite a while before he finally turned to her, "Alright, now tell me what happened." He ordered.

She lifted her eyes slowly to him, "I left Tony's office and got into a cab." Her hand shot over her mouth suddenly, horror lighting her features anew, "Oh no! I gave him my address! That means he knows where I live!"

Loki frowned, not following, "Who knows where you live?"

"The driver!" She was clutching at his sleeve now, looking for support, "What am I going to do?"

"Calm down, tell me what happened first, then we will worry about other things." He prompted gently, watching her face carefully.

It took her quite a while to begin, with a lot of pauses and stops, but she finally told him that she had gotten into a cab without inside door handles. It got hazy around the edges many times but he gathered the main points of a cab ride from hell with a driver and partner or just a drive, it was sometimes hard to tell. Either way, the main point was that she had been held at gunpoint, in every sense. He got no particular details and had no idea if she escaped somehow or if he let her leave, it
was glaringly obvious she left details out, but he chose not to press her.

By the time the story was over, she was no longer holding his sleeve, but coiled around his arm, her cheek resting on his shoulder. She was anything but herself, so different he might have sworn it was a poorly done clone if he did not know her. This Darcy had been shaken and rattled down farther than he guessed she had been in a very long time. The closest she had been to this was bleeding and on the stairs, vulnerable and confused.

He carefully stroked her hair as he tried to decide exactly what to do with her. If the psychotic driver really had her address it was fairly obvious that she could not go home, at least not alone. If he went in with her and cleared the place, she would be fine as long as she locked it behind him. Those places usually had deadbolts. That would leave her with a transportation problem though. It was safe to say she might never take a taxi again, and injured people taking the subway was dangerous for different and also the same reasons. He could offer to pick her up in the morning but that would only work so long.

The additional problem would be that she was not very likely to sleep in her own home, too afraid of the mystery man. She would be more relaxed if she was in another location. He could offer to let her spend the night in his condo but that might cause more problems than it was worth. He could offer to stay with her in her apartment but the same issues might arise. This was a problem!

It took him a minute to realize that she had fallen asleep, exhausted from all the fright and stress. His arm was a pillow now, he guessed. Maybe they could just sleep in his car for the night.

He tensed the second that dream came to mind, cheeks heating. That might not be wise either or she might have him to worry about next.

His finger raked her hair again as he thought. It was so strange to see her sleeping against him, almost as strange to see as her open expression of fear. It had not taken him long to realize that she was afraid of showing weakness, an odd fear. She wanted to be viewed as strong, needed to keep walls up between herself and everyone else to feel secure. If there was a crack in that wall, a way for someone to see her vulnerabilities, she was frightened and desperate to seal that hole.

This was a girl that never let people close enough to find a vulnerability, anything that would make her readable or human. She loathed weakness but here she was beside him, letting him see her in all this vulnerability and he had no idea what to do with that trust she temporarily placed with him. He had been searching out weaknesses like this in her and now she dropped herself into his lap and he wasn't sure what to do with it.

His hand stilled, brows turning down as his mind produced quite a few answers of a dark nature and some of a lighter one. He actually knew exactly what to do with her, knew where he could take her to keep her safe but even more where it would be easiest for him to use her in his plan. It already fell into place perfectly in his mind like a map. Her being like this was as good as a gift.

God help him, he would take it and run. He knew all along that he would use her once he found a weakness, and he was right. This made it so easy, easier that his first plan to get her into position.

Without jostling her, he carefully pulled his phone from his pocket and tapped out a text. *Tomorrow. Bring something for coffee.* And sent it. It was so easy like this.

A sick feeling nestled into the pit of his stomach but he resumed petting her hair. This position meant she trusted him, sought his comfort. Darcy came to him seeking safety and that was what he would give her, to a point. It was a point where she was useful. "Sorry, love, it's really not personal. If all goes well, we should both be fine, don't worry."
She was a means to an end. He would use her and then he would let her fall. That was how placing trust in dark knights always ended for a fair, gentle maiden. Loki would do what he had to do and then toss her out, leave her to find her own way. It was not his problem if she was hurt in the crossfire. He would not so much as blink, of course.

His chest tightened to make it a bit harder to breathe and bile swelled in his throat. He swallowed thickly.

No, that was a lie. He would find a way to protect her. He could not leave her. He wanted to but there was no way he could. He desperately wanted not to care, to leave her the way he had many other people in the past, stranded and left wondering how life had gotten so dark. It would be nice to drop the blame into her lap and let it drag her down into the depths so he could walk away.

Leaning down, he pressed his lips to the crown of her head. If he were honest with himself, which he rarely was, he would do anything to protect her despite what he was about to do. Miss Darcy Lewis had wound herself around his cold heart and it was too late to throw her away. He kissed her again, tugging her into his arms carefully.

It was too late to regret that text. That was done and he would not turn away from something this perfect, but he would not leave her. He would pull her up to the surface with him even if he sent her to the depths first.

Chapter End Notes

Darcy is tough, but Thanos is just that bad, he tortures and breaks people for fun. I think she held up pretty well considering. This wasn't exactly how I planned to write it, the words just insisted on falling this way. I can't decide if I hate it, ruined it, or did alright.

This chapter was pretty fast pace.
I was kind of frustrated with it, to be honest. Sometimes I can't tell is I'm writing good suspense or just making it stupid and outlandish, crossing unwanted lines into overdone drama. I'm not sure this chapter wasn't over the top or if it was alright. I don't have a beta so I don't have anyone to keep me in line, I just don't know.
Calibrate

Chapter Notes

Demons by Imagine Dragons for Loki. I really think this would be Loki's song to Darcy. He loves her and he needs her even if he won't admit it. He's got it bad for her, but it's Loki, and he's screwed up. Everything about this song is exactly perfect.

And I'm sorry for all the feels I put in here. And it's really long, sorry! I would have cut it short but I really wanted to get to this point before ending it.

Thank you all for showering me with such sweet words! You made me feel so much better, I thank you! My muse was jump started (which accounts for the length) by all that love! So here you go! Angst, cuteness, and frustrated Loki ahead!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

~High Rise=~

Calibrate

*Marvel

*Loki Odinson, Darcy Lewis, Thor Odinson, Jane Foster, etc.

He waited silently as she slipped the key into her door and turned it, pushing it open. The top hinge stuck, he noticed. Darcy stared into the darkness like she was looking into a yawning cave she had never before set a toe into before. She had been shaken up and the prospect that it could happen again seemed to loom over her head like a dark cloud. Having his office invaded gave him a good idea how she might feel and he did not blame her for feeling afraid. Locks only went so far in making anyone feel safe, or even be safe. The right person behind a set of lock picks was a horrifying prospect.

"Could..." She started and stopped, shaking her head slightly. It looked like she was fortifying herself as she stepped in and instantly swiped the wall to turn on the light.

Loki had a feeling he knew what she wanted to ask, "Let me take a look around." He touched her shoulder as he slipped past into her apartment.

There had been no real expectation of what it would look like before now, he never even thought of it. The couch was maroon with pillows of every color lining every inch of it, and pillows in her chairs too. There were trinkets on the shelves but no pictures of people, just a large photo of a forest hanging on the wall and another of a waterfall. It was tidy and no one was perched on a chair waiting for them, which was a relief.

On the tips of her toes, leaning over the island, Darcy checked the tiny kitchen, relaxing slightly when she straightened again. He was amused by her in spite of everything. Still Darcy, a frightened version, but still her awkward self.

There was a large wrack of coffee cups on the counter near the stove and a coffee maker beside
those. An espresso machine was perched beside the coffee pot like her own little station of a coffee house. That was of no surprise to him. Darcy without those items would have been the shock.

She did not protest as he delved farther in, traveling down the hallway as she followed on his heels to flick on every light switch in the place. The bathroom was clean enough but every surface had either lotion bottles, perfume, or some other grooming item women kept. Darcy opened a closet opposite that as if the handle was a snake and she expected a python to be waiting inside, but all he saw was a few winter coats and several boxes on the shelf, nothing else. She was not a pack rat at least, closets always were telling that way.

They headed for the last room that would obviously have to be her bedroom and she slipped in behind him so close she was almost tripping over him. It was such a rare display from her that he could not believe his own eyes. Someone looking for his protection was unheard of because there had to be trust involved. He was usually the biggest threat in the room, not the protector from the boogeyman. Having it be Darcy was more strange. He gave her credit though, she had snatched an umbrella from her closet and was holding it like a sword, not waiting for him to wrestle the alleged intruder.

Trusting him, he suspected, would turn out to be her biggest mistake. The careful, guarded, bright Darcy Lewis was letting the sly, plotting, monster into her sanctuary. Old stories about vampires and monsters usually stated that the creatures could not enter your home unless you let them in. Safety was in locked doors and bolted windows. This fair princess had lowered the drawbridge for him, was letting him cross the bridge. If she was not careful, he would make his home here and devour her soul.

She reached around him, brushing against his shoulder, to switch on the light. His eyes swept the room instantly but found nothing human shaped or threatening. But, to make her feel safer, he steeped in, lingering at the threshold as she peeked around him. A plush looking white robe was crumpled by the door, just next the a bed with a thick purple striped comforter decorated with very large pillows; black nightstand, lamp and littered pieces of jewelry cluttering the top of it.

His gaze swept the room again just to be sure no shadows had moved. A comfortable chair sat in one corner, a side table and reading lamp as its company; no surprise, the chair had a few pillows in it. What did surprise him was the weathered and old looking stuffed purple rabbit leaning against the pillows. It was the only item in this entire space that looked personal, like something she held onto from a time long past.

Everything else was no different than any other person would have sitting about any house.

Darcy would always be Darcy, strange and unpredictable, but he now saw that she had more weaknesses in her armor than he once thought. Getting a look into her private world was interesting and a bit enlightening. If he would have guessed how he would find it, the kitchen came closest to meeting his expectations. He expected jackets to be scattered on the floor, shoes haphazardly kicked into random places, but it was mainly well ordered. She kept her life compartmentalized and safe. Personal items were few, and kept safely in her room, but not so close as to be touched often.

Room cleared, it was time to move forward. He turned and walked back the way he had come, Darcy still following, though she set the umbrella down.

Loki strolled out to the sofa, shoved a few pillows aside and dropped down. "Alright, I will wait here while you gather your things."

Darcy stared at him and began tugging at the hem of her blouse, a nervous tell he was not sure he had yet seen from her, "I'm not sure that is the best idea."
Unmoved by her protest, he arched a brow, "You would rather stay here? You would rather take a
cab to work tomorrow?"

She visibly shivered and shook her head in the negative. "No, but ... I don't want to put you in any
imposition."

"It's no imposition. I keep that room so I can have a quiet place to sleep when I need it. No one else
uses it, there is no reason you can't."

She shuffled closer, perching lightly on the arm of the couch, a weak and sad smile on her lips, "You
don't have to do this. You already helped me enough, I can figure something out, I'm used to figuring
things out on my own."

What she did not know was that it was too late for either of them to change this plan, "Darcy, just let
me help you. You told me you have no where else to go, but I do, so I'm offering it." He fixed his
eyes on her short coffee table, "Offering and being forced to help are different things entirely."

When he looked up again he was stupefied to see water welling in her eyes, tears not shed. He was
on his feet, moving to her before he knew it. When it involved her, he never seemed to have much
control over his own body. The backs of his fingers brushed under her eye and she blinked in
surprise at his tender touch.

"Darcy, it's alright, I promise! We will work this out. You will be safe with me and you can stay
there until you feel able to come back here." The words sounded hollow once spoken because he
could promise nothing.

Very gently, she pushed his hand away and shook her head, grinning sheepishly, "No, it's not that,
actually. It's... it's stupid but I'm just kind of.. touched, maybe? No one has ever done anything like
that for me before. I'm always the one making sure everyone else is good."

Her eyes met his and the smile turned purposeful, one just to put him at rest. It nearly sent him
staggering back, so reminding him of the way his mother smiled when she knew he was telling her
lies, knew something was wrong but would not speak it. Frigga smiled with that same stubbornness,
hiding sadness and pent up worry behind it. Loki learned the power of a smile from her, the
meanings hidden in them unspoken. Frigga smiled just like that before she died, smiled and told him
everything would work out. He lied too, told her the medical charts said she was improving, lied for
all he was worth. In return, she also lied, reassuring him with all her fading might.

He reached around her and tugged her to him, he couldn't help it, he just wanted to make it all fade
away. There was nothing he could do to fix any of it, not now, and he could not promise in the
future either. He needed to make her feel better and he didn't know how to even begin. This was
insanity and it was only going to get worse the farther they went. The least he could do was hold her
and try to make her feel safer. His mother always told him that he gave the best hugs, and he hoped it
was true, he wished it to be one kind thing he could do.

After hesitating she lifted her arms and hooked them around his waist, leaning into him. He could
almost feel a burn behind his own eyes even though it was insane. What he was doing was stupid,
trying to comfort a girl he would soon cause pain, but that was what stung.

She said she was touched, touched because she believed him. She believed he was doing it all out of
the goodness of his heart, because they were friends, because he was secretly a good man behind it
all, but he knew she was wrong. Being trusted burned deep in his soul. It had been a long time since
anyone trusted him, and here he was, proving trusting him was impossible. She would go through
hell because of him no matter what he did to protect her.
In this moment he could have told her everything, confessed it all to beg forgiveness. He was tired too, so tired. He was sick of fighting on his own, clawing at the surface to stay alive. He wanted to stop lying to her, wished for reality with just one person. If she knew though, knew it all, she would pull away.

His eyes closed to bring quiet to his rolling and wild thoughts. This was guilt and fear talking, driving him half mad. This was nothing but guilt. He did not need her, did not need her trust or her acceptance. He needed nothing from anyone! All he needed was to calm down.

"Everything will work out perfectly, you'll see, Darcy." He muttered, eyes still closed.

She nodded as he pulled back, "I believe you."

Loki smiled kindly, forcing the stab of guilt to fade into the recesses of his mind. "Good girl. Now, smile and go pack a bag."

She took a fortifying breath to steady her nerves and stood up, sailing away for her room and he watched her go before dropping onto her extremely fluffy couch. His eyes dropped to the floor, not caring to think too long over anything, so he tugged the phone out of his pocket to be sure he had not missed more than the one word confirmation he got after sending the text.

His head dropped back, a low groan on his lips. There had indeed been contact, but not by anyone he cared for. Two missed calls, though how he did not hear it ring, he had no idea. Thor had been calling every night, sometimes in the morning. He ignored every one of them, of course. A few days ago, he sent a text, informing Thor that they could talk in a week when he was more free. It was worth a try to stall the fool but it had not worked in the slightest. Thor answered with multiple messages demanding to see him sooner, suggesting times and places. Loki ignored those too.

His lids drifted closed as he stretched, seeing no reason not to get comfortable while waiting. There was no rushing ladies and their packing, he knew that, and this was sure to be a long and undoubtedly sleep sparse night. There would be little time to relax at all once things escalated tomorrow. It was already ten and there was no chance he would wind down enough to sleep any time soon.

In the quiet of the room, sleep took him by surprise, not that he was able to relish it for long.

A loud rapping spiked his heart and his eyes flew open as he sat bolt upright. It took a few blinks before he cleared the haze of sleep from his eyes enough to focus on the door. When the knocking came again he was on his feet, very alert, feeling Darcy's sudden closeness beside him.

A glance back let him see her wide eyes looking to him in question, fingers latching into his coat. He took her wrists gently, feeling the pounding pulse beneath his fingers, and pulled her grip free before he walked to the door.

This driver of hers might get a surprise out of them yet. While Loki had never been Thor, never played football, hockey, or any of those, he had been quiet a natural in tae kwan do. He practiced multiple fighting styles of Asian origin and was very skilled in them even if he did say so himself. Frigga always watched his matches, proudly cheering loudly enough he often had to remind her not to humiliate him. Surprisingly, she was quite vocal about how she thought her dear, sweet son should grind his skill-lacking opponent into the ground. Those particular ideas had not often been taken well by other parents. Looking back, they were beautiful memories, which was why he still occasionally practiced, for her.

He could actually go for a fight, it would give him a chance to vent some of these emotions clouding
his mind. Easier to get this over with now than wait, so he jerked the door open, regretting it *instantly*. He wished for all the world he had thought to look out the view hole before opening the door. He must have been still half asleep to do something that stupid!

Loki’s shoulders sagged almost to the floor, deflating and tensing all at once, "You cannot be serious! What in God's name are you doing here?" Loki barked at the tall blonde.

Confused, wide blue eyes glanced from Loki to Darcy, and back, and back again, jaw slack, "I-well... I was actually..." Thor stammered several times before he set his jaw and squared his shoulders stubbornly, "You have not been answering my calls!"

Did Thor really believe him incapable of seeing through a poor excuse at deflection? The way he kept glancing at Darcy told the younger brother quite easily that she was the reason for the visit. Had he been expecting Loki he would not be so utterly in shock now. Surprises left people speechless, surprise attacks left the target speechless while the attacker was ready with words to win. No, Thor had not come with his hair falling into his eyes and cupping his jaw, in a dress shirt, jeans, and work boots thinking to see him. Not that he dressed up to see his brother, the dress shirt was actually more effort than he usually put into dressing to see family.

It occurred to the black sheep brother instantly that he inadvertently stumbled upon a conspiracy, a nightly meeting. Darcy's expression, however, showed clearly that his visit had not been expected in the slightest, nor welcomed. She looked angry, dumbfounded, and horrified, actually. He should question her loyalty, and normally would go mad on the spot wondering, but he just didn’t feel worried. Annoyed to see the big fool, but not worried.

Loki's brow arched further, "So you thought to find me here?" He would just brush over the fact that he *was* here, that was beside the point.

"No." Thor admitted hesitantly, "But I did think Ms. Lewis could tell me how you were and possibly assist me in getting in touch with you somewhere safe."

Loki hummed and nodded, that did sound like something Thor would do, "Well, you've seen me. I'm fine, thank you for checking." He swiftly moved to shut the door but the thick toe of a boot prevented him from getting it all the way closed.

Adding to his control over the door, Thor gripped the knob and pushed it a ways farther, "Exactly what *are* you doing here, brother?"

He could not afford this, could not afford to have Thor step in now, "We were looking for a lost file."

Eyes narrowing, Thor persisted, smelling an excuse, "In her apartment?"

Loki allowed every bit of irritation into his voice, "Yes, where it was lost. Do you mind?"

"At this time of night, Loki?" That look in those eyes said everything, the same kind of look he gave every time Loki had so much as studied with a girl in school.

"Don't go there, Thor. We are not having a lurid dalliance." Loki growled, quick to head off accusations he knew were spinning in that big head.

"Why are you so eager to get rid of me?"

Loki frowned in mock confusion, "Because I don't want to see you or speak to you? That might have something to do with it!"
"Alright, enough!" Darcy barked, tossing a magazine and hitting the door noisily above their heads before it fluttered to the ground. "This has been a horrible day and I'm in no mood to stand here while you two fight at my door!"

Loki turned, watching the way she sagged, withering as she stared at them, defiant but defeated at the same time, "Darcy, just go ahead and finish what you were doing. I will take care of this." He waved her off, shoved Thor back all the way into the hall with his own body, and shut the door behind them.

Once the door was shut, he rounded on his brother with a low hiss, "Leave her alone, even a thick skull like you should be able to see that she is upset!"

"What upset her?" Thor took a step back, eyes fixed on his dark haired half brother, crossing his arms over his chest and the too-tight shirt struggling to keep its own buttons from popping off around that thick muscle. "When did it begin to matter to you when others are distressed?"

It suddenly struck Loki in the brighter light hanging over the two that the usual stubble on that sturdy face was missing, shaved away neatly and he wondered at what might have made his brother shave; it surely was not to see him, but that did not matter just now. "Just leave, Thor! We both know that talking will solve nothing between us."

"It might if you gave it a fraction of a chance. Not that you ever do." His bright blue eyes traveled past Loki to land on the door behind him, "So what were you really doing here?"

"I already told you!" Loki whispered snapishly.

"And I don't believe you." He leaned a muscular back against the wall, crossing his legs at the ankles. "You wouldn't happen to be seducing her, would you, in order to turn her to your side?"

Loki bristled, his shoulders tensing into tight coils, "No, I would not be trying to seduce her! The deal is going just fine without my needing to attempt anything so foolish."

"Is it?" Thor lowered his eyes, nodding thoughtfully, "Then I wonder how that might change if Stark or Fury heard she has been keeping your company in her apartment after hours?"

Loki's jaw dropped, eyes wide with horrified disbelief, "You wouldn't dare! You couldn't do that to her, it would ruin her!" Fury would shred her and if word circulated...

Hardened blue eyes locked with green, "I might if it means getting you to listen! I'm trying to save your life here, Loki! You never listen to me unless I forcefully get your attention... and if you're first thought is to worry about her, because I can see it was- don't try to lie to me- then I guess I found one."

Loki sputtered and shook his head emphatically, "I'm not worried about her! Replacing her would massively slow my deal while Stark found a new person!" He was flustered, startled and unable to hide it. Thor was right, the thought of her being in harms way, of Thanos hearing frightened him more than the destruction of her reputation. Fury would be the least of their worries. Though it would indeed ruin absolutely every piece of his plan. "You're misunderstanding everything! She has absolutely no feelings for me at all!"

Thor tilted back, both brows arching in perceived understanding, catching something, analyzing his younger brother's face, "She has no feelings?"

Oh, Loki did not like that look, it meant Thor was reading into him and it made Loki take a wary step back, "And I have no feelings for her either, Thor."
The low tone had turned gentle, knowing, and oddly sympathetic. "That is not what you said."

"Just stop! Stop creating things where there is nothing." Loki cut the air with both hands, "Enough with the manipulative games, that has always been my area."

"I've spent many years beside you, I've pick up a few tricks." Thor said calmly, relaxed as he watched his brother flounder.

Loki glared, voice lowered to a whisper, "This is our fight, she has nothing to do with it. I will not be toyed with over things you imagine you see." He squared his shoulders, lifting his chin in challenge, "You want to play games so badly? Why not chase down your dear Fury and just ask him how he intends to save my life, why don't you? Because you might find that your idea of keeping me alive and his differ vastly!"

Thor frowned, dropping his arms to his side as he focused in on Loki's eyes.

The younger took a step forward, bringing them closer, letting Thor examine him for truth or lies, "It no longer matters what I do, I am but bait for the schemes of one side or the other." He grinned mirthlessly, his voice so low it was a whisper, "Your efforts to save me are for nothing, brother! It is already too late for that. You think your 'friends' plan to save me, but you're wrong, they will let me drown in order to get what they want."

Thor's hands were clutching at Loki's shoulders, color leaving his face as he took in those words, "No, he has assured me that he will protect you if you tell him about—"

Loki scoffed, "You seem to believe he intends to snatch me away from all of this, but he doesn't even wish me to leave." He smiled again, speaking lower still, "He wants me as close to Thanos as possible, Thor. The closer, the better the information, don't you understand? Yes, he wants to flip me, but he will not spirit me away to a tower of safety!" He had no idea why these words were tumbling free, he never intended to say them, but here they were.

Thor was clinging onto him now, tugging him closer to rest their foreheads together the way he always had in their childhood when they spoke of deep secrets, "Then come to me, please!" It almost sounded like his voice cracked just slightly as his large hand slide to cup the back of Loki's head, "I will protect you, I swear it! Stay close to me and I will make him fix this! We can fix this together, you need not fight it alone. Just tell me what you need and it will be done!"

Loki shifted out of that tight hold, pulling back with a wry smile. He opened his mouth to deny his need for being saved, to remind Thor how little power he had to help him, but a fluttering down the hall caught his attention.

A willowy creature, the sort you might have found in a dance studio, with straight, wispy, honey hair glided toward them on the tips of her toes as if afraid to make sound. If ever humans were properly described as gliding, it would be true in her case. Her doe eyes looked them up and down as she came. Her hands tangled together nervously as she finally stared at Loki.

"Jane, you really should wait in the car. Loki must speak with me."

She quickly looked up at Thor sheepishly, "I'm sorry, I just got worried when you didn't come back." Those hazel eyes darted over the hallways, "Is it safe in this place? It seems a bit questionable... but I did not mean to interrupt."

Turning fully toward her, Loki shook his head, "Oh, believe me, you were not interrupting at all! We have already finished speaking."
A thunderous expression was on Thor's face as he turned a glare on his brother, "We are far from finished! I will not let you avoid this a moment longer!"

"Now I see why you shaved, Thor!" Loki's grin was real this time, amused as he canted his head, "Though, how did you keep from frightening her away once she saw more of that ugly mug?"

Thor forgot himself for just a moment and smiled boyishly, "Probably the same way you managed to keep yours from noticing your hideous countenance." He blinked and sobered, "But you're dodging again."

"So," Loki folded his arms behind his back and looked to Jane, "how did a beautiful lady end up meeting the Creature from the Black Lagoon?"

Jane giggled nervously, unsure how to proceed in the face of an obvious argument, "The normal way, I guess, at a conference a year or so ago. He took an interest in my project and study after my presentation. After that, he agreed to help me get funding by using his connections."

Loki was grinning like a cat, casting a knowing glance back to Thor, "Oh, I bet he did! He has always been an avid supporter for new ideas."

Jane extended her hand a bit too quickly, still letting her nerves show, "Nice to finally meet you. He talks about you all the time!"

Loki accepted her hand, "I'm sure if we spoke more than the holidays, he would have done the same about you to me." He cast a glance between the two thoughtfully, "Though, you must tell me, did a date or two come as part of his deal with you?"

Her glued on, wary smile tightened with unease but she did not falter, "Yes, actually! Only I assumed he was kidding at the time."

Loki chuckled, smirking with triumph. Jane still look torn between staying and fleeing, however. He would have to give her credit for class, no doubt. Thor seemed ready to pounce though, clearly worried over the direction of the conversation, and for good reason. Now would usually be the time for a turn of more cruel comments as it had been on some old occasions when Loki met the latest arm decoration.

Thor stepped closer to his brother, shoulders arched to make him look larger, frowning, "Stop teasing Jane and stop being cowardly about this talk! You always avoid speaking seriously!"

Loki chuckled darkly, voice turning to an easy tone of mockery, "Cowardly? All I did was ask her a question. I think I have the right to do that, or have you gotten closer with Fury than I thought?"

Jane retreated several steps, "I just remembered I left my phone in the car." She muttered as she backed away, but Thor did not hear her.

Thor snarled, running his fingers vengefully through his hair to avoid wringing his brother's neck, "You drive me insane! I sometimes wonder why I bother trying to save you when you are so intent on courting death!"

Loki’s eyes lost every bit of their previous sparkle, "Maybe it's just bad wiring? Father always said there was something wrong with me."

Thor whirled, finger jabbing into Loki's chest, "Don't start that! I will not let you start that when we both know it does not matter! This is not about our parents, this is about you insisting on swimming in a tank full of hungry sharks and expecting not to get bitten! Father cannot protect you, so I will!"
The bark of laughter peeled from him too quickly, "Father would not lift a finger even if he could! I have always walked in dangerous places, we both have! It is where we thrive!" Loki batted Thor's hand away, "But, since you began this, allow me to offer you a warning."

Little Jane had not left, she was hovering around the corner, nervously waiting to see if they were really going to fight. There would be nothing she could do to stop it if they did, but she would clearly try like the good, sweet little girlfriend she obviously was. Better than some of the woman Thor used to chase. And if Thor could read his feelings for Darcy in a matter of minutes, the same was true in reverse. Thor had never looked at a woman that way before. He had never stopped Loki from teasing them even a little, usually enjoyed watching them squirm under the tricksters thumb.

"What warning might that be?" Thor glared, unsure what to expect.

Yes, Thor had feelings for his sprite. A weakness he normally did not have. Loki lowered his voice to avoid said weakness from hearing a word of the conversation.

"I didn't tell Thanos you're involved, never even mentioned you in passing. I've kept you out of it." Loki watched Thor's frown fade and watched his adam's apple bob when he swallowed. He kept his expression neutral and his voice as calm as a spring breeze while he lowered the killing blow, "But if Thanos did hear a hint that you were involved, I can assure you, he would not be pleased. He just loves to sink his teeth into weak points; loved ones... helpless father's, sweet girlfriends, and shred them to pieces. Usually makes you watch too, relishes watching you fall apart."

It was Thor's turn to reel back, jaw slack, panic lighting his eyes, "You wouldn't!"

"I might, if it gets you to listen." Loki snapped, firing the same words back against him, "I'm giving you warning! Keep your distance or I might do something we'll both regret." He paused, glancing down the hall, "Even if I don't, even if I say nothing, he will find out if you keep this up. In which case, we'll both suffer for it."

The fear swirled and shifted many different ways as those big blue eyes stared at him, "Please, Loki, don't do something stupid!"

Loki turned, reaching for the door, "So don't even try to come around again. Keep you chin low and your nose out of it or you'll get us all killed."

Arms caught him around the shoulders, hugging him so tightly it was suddenly difficult to take a breath as Thor's quieted voiced clawed him into stillness, "It doesn't have to be like this. No one has to die for this! Not you, or Jane, or me, not if we fight together, Loki! We are strongest together, you know it is true. We have always protected each other, always!" Thor paused and Loki listened, "I would fight until my last breath to keep you all live, I think you know that. I also do not think you would ever tell Thanos. You might threaten, but I do not believe it. You always lie the hardest when you are most afraid."

A feral snarl rushed from his lips as he shoved Thor away, surprised the idiot let go easily when he spotted the venom is his green eyes, "Even if you're right and I told him nothing, it still stands that he will find out from your interference!" His laugh was husky and dark, a razor grin turning the corners of his mouth, "But don't underestimate what I will or will not do, brother! Do not be so pompous to think I would ever crawl to you for aid either! I would only betray you later even if we did as you suggest because treachery is in my nature! I need nothing from you! You are only chasing a shadow, a bond between us that died years ago!"

Loki was on a roll now, the helplessness, frustration, pain, rage, and fear gushing free in a cutting mess of words. He was only fueled by the hurt in those blue eyes.
Dark tongues of fire danced in his eyes as he plunged on, "You are mistaken if you think I stayed silent to protect you! I only kept you out of this because you are more trouble than ten enemies at once! I don’t care if he catches hold of you and wrings the life out of everything you hold dear, I might even watch myself! Stay out of my way and do not test me again or you will find out how low my regard for you is!"

With that, he left his big brother in the hall, left him to think it over while he ran to Jane. The fact that no more pounding on the door came said Thor had at least heard him. There was hope for that brain yet!

Loki let his back hit the door for support, let his eyes close, shoulders hunch, and his breath come out normally. Through the entire rant he had barely been breathing, taking short breaths as he screamed in a whisper. It made his lungs ache for a proper cycle. It surprised him when he realized his hands were shaking, his entire body trembling from the rush of whatever emotion those had just been. He let his hands move to cover his face, let himself curl to the floor, knees pulled to his chest.

Those last few moments felt so desperate and he had no idea why, no idea what brought such a strong need to flee and make sure Thor never chased him again. His skin felt too tight, crawled beneath his clothing with nervous energy he could do nothing with. His fingers clenched into his hair so hard his nails dug into his palms.

It was the stress, he decided. The copious amount of stress he was under had finally begun to cripple him from within. That was why he reacted so strongly with Darcy and his brother. Feelings played no part in this at all, only the stress.

His corded muscles began to relax once he understood the reaction and a cold type of calm sifted over him slowly, freezing him once again as he got to his feet, in control of himself. That was some sort of panic attack, painful as that was to admit, at least he could fight it once he understood. Everything was stuffed back swiftly into the corners of his mind to be dealt with another day, or perhaps never again. His place on the couch was once again his and he relaxed there. Darcy was not out yet so he would continue to wait.

A hopeless coward was what she was, and she knew it, teeth working at her thumbnail. She intentionally stayed well away while the two were in the hall, not caring to be part of that drama a second time. Once she heard the door though, she slid from her room to be sure he was not sporting a bloody nose. When she saw him, crumpled on the floor, she had not moved. She watched him in stunned silence as he seemed to carefully piece himself back together.

When he began to stand she darted back to her room like a child hiding from fighting parents. She wasn't exactly together herself but she could not bring herself to admit that. She was Darcy Lewis and a Lewis girl was stronger than a foolish attack of terror. *Nothing to fear but fear itself.* Yes, she needed to be composed. She repeated the mantra many times as a pep talk to get her feet moving out that door again and she was intent to pretend she had seen nothing once she got there. She really knew no other way of handling it besides total avoidance, that was how she handled almost everything in her life.

A smile plastered on her lips, glasses perched on her nose, she spoke, "I think I'm packed now. Some changes of clothing, cosmetics, all the girly tools of the trade."

Loki shifted to look at her, "Splendid! Then we should get moving." The smile was dark as the gleam in his eye, making her want to step back, but she held fast.

Her head dipped in a nod and he stood, coming to her side. A shiver threatened to run up her spine
when he stood with her so close she could feel his heat. Her eyes stayed stubbornly to the floor as she moved to get the two bags. He followed so close he could have been touching her all the way, their feet brushing feather light against each other a few times.

Loki snatched the handles of each before she could even speak and he grinned at her, "Don't even think of carrying anything. You're hobbling, remember?"

Darcy muttered a thanks as he brushed past her again, smiling as he glanced back at her. He was light on his feet, nearly bouncing as he moved ahead of her. None of it felt quite natural, like a dissonance from what had become normal. She laughed nervously as she moved around him to open the door, still not really looking at him. Bags dangling at his sides, he plunged ahead, chucking along with her as he motioned her to stay beside him.

"I feel like royalty having my bags carried for me." She tucked her hair behind her ear as she walked, self conscious about her every reaction.

His shoulder brushed hers when he leaned his upper body closer to whisper, "Maybe you are? A long lost princess ... it's been known to happen."

They shared another round of laughter even though she was fairly sure it was all from nervous energy on both sides.

In all her days she had never met a man like this one. He could change colors faster than a cuttlefish, near tears and huddled on the floor one moment and full of smiles steeped in mischief the next. Still, it warmed her to him somehow, that charismatic smile drawing her in all the more because she knew it was covering unshed tears. Whether he knew it or not, he was human too, prone to unwanted emotion, like everyone else.

Even she had started to forget, saw him as some sort of rock face, jagged and pointed, but solid. It made something in her twist even though she could not identify the feeling. He might be taking care of her, might be letting her lean on him while she was weak, but he had a few holes in his armor too, he was not an emotionless void. It made her want to help him in return even though she had no idea how she could.

They were alike in some ways, the two of them, independent and terrified to let true feelings show. But they could break, this proved it was possible.

"Careful," she said as they walked out the exit door, forcing herself not to flinch when it slammed behind them, "you might give me a big head, and you can't have that. One of use has to be a little grounded."

"I don't know, being grounded never appealed to me as a boy." It struck her how beautiful that playful smile was as he glanced down at her.

He made it so easy to relax and made it easy to let herself forget everything. If she wanted to she was very sure he could make her forget without ever trying. Laughing was easy, contagious between them, an easy escape for each one. Better to laugh than cry, people always said. It was true too, laughing made it easier to trick the mind into believing everything was alright.

A loud, angry yell to her right had her suddenly pressed against him, fingers clutching his lapel before she knew she moved. That was fast turning into a bad habit. She felt the rumble of his chuckle as he looped his arm around her waist, the case resting on her hip. The drunk stumbling out the bar muttering loud gibberish was the source, nothing threatening considering he could barely stay on his feet. Her cheeks flushed and she looked down, ashamed of herself all over again.
"Relax, Darcy." He whispered, "I'm right here. I can assure you, with these bags as my weapons, no one will get near you, they are deadly heavy."

A strange jolt of some kind ran through her at his words and she swallowed, "I told you that you didn't have to carry them."

Loki's hold on her did not flee and she did not pull away either even though she should have. The two of them were probably using each other, leaning on the other, making jokes so their minds could roam onto anything but what they should think of and did not want to. She could just feel the tide of push and pull between them. It was easy to fall into step with something familiar and so safe. Though she could not say she would ever have expected to hear herself consider him "safe" but that felt exactly right for the time being.

The spell would break tomorrow and they would be back to their old ways, but tonight was an anomaly and they could pretend to be friends, pretend they could help each other. They were good at pretending, good at games of the mind, and even good at tricking themselves. Surely they could be normal for a night, pretend the world was an easy place to hold onto a bit of sanity. She wasn't strong enough right now to do anything else and maybe he wasn't either.

As long as they remembered the truth tomorrow it would be alright.

She let him guide her back to his car, let him pack the bags in the back, let him open her door like a gentlemen, and let him drive her away. It was interesting but she felt no regret in leaving the little home. It meant nothing to her besides an easy place to rest at night. Maybe these thoughts were coming from a numbness caused by shock. The fact that she no longer cared about anything and was willingly letting her enemy lead her anywhere he wished must have been a sign of shock. Probably.

She considered bringing her rabbit, but she left it there. Bringing it would have been a childish thing to do.

Light flashed bright across the sky, drawing his eyes to the distance. The black sky and dark gray clouds hovered above, another flash of lightning igniting the sky. The flashes were bright and far reaching even though it was so far away, though it would be moving their way soon enough. A storm was raging in the distance. Ironically similar to the current situation.

Bags in his hands once again, he lead her through the dark hallway. She followed him so meekly, so trusting that he would not lead her into danger. That trust, he would shatter it soon enough. He could not be sure she would forgive all he was going to do. If she later hated him it would be justified. He was ruining her, just as he expected early on that he might.

Unexpectedly, it bothered him. Back at the start he could not have anticipated that he would care in the slightest, but he did. Or maybe that was imagined, created from the same stress that had him so unbalanced. Probably. These feeling nagging and tickling the back of his mind would fade. He got bored of people easily anyway. Even if he felt something he would grow tired of her.

In the beginning he could not have expected the shock that would go through him when she fit herself against his side, actually looking to him for protection in her weak points. Having someone believe in him that way was so new, awakening something he supposed was primal, that need to protect. She was a beautiful girl in need and he was a man, average type of story and not difficult to understand. Men were geared toward saving the princess, quite a normal thing. It was more than that though, he just could not decide why. Could not decide why he knew he would try to save her from everything falling down around them.
Why would he worry, care, reach out and pull her back from an edge he first pushed her to? It was so contradictory. Killing her just to bring her back. Foolish! Stupid! Nothing better than a child's storybook ideal. He was the bad guy and bad guys were not supposed to save the princess.

No, indeed, they were supposed to lock her in a tower. He was doing just that, following his part.

Loki swallowed, setting the bags down as he unlocked the door. He flicked the light on and tugged the bags inside. As soon as she was settled he would erase the last few minutes from the cameras to hide her return with him. Anyone seeing that would complicate his plans. No one could know she was here.

"Um, what are we doing in here?" She asked quietly behind him.

He cast her a quick smile, "Hiding you, of course. I'm going to show you my weapons vault."

Darcy laughed dryly and shook her head, "That sounds like the beginning of a dirty joke, you know that?"

A hum of agreement was her answer as he pushed forward, clicking the keys needed to open his little secret door. This would be the first time he had ever revealed this secret to anyone but he could not say he was afraid of letting her into his sanctuary. It should have worried him, maybe. The shadow of doubt vanished, replaced with boyish pride when he saw her gaping in astonished and obviously impressed awe. She actually gasped when the wall swung and produced a door. It was a cliche to have a hidden room behind a bookcase but his father had not been all that inventive.

"You're full of surprises!" She mused as she stepped in beside him, craning her neck to see more, "I never would have guessed this was here... or that the spare room you told me about was the Batcave!" Darcy grinned, eyes sparkling with keen interest, walking inside like a ten year old who found Narnia, "Any other super secrets?"

"Oh, I always have surprises, Darcy!" He crooned, smirking as he slowly swung the door closed, "Super villains always have to keep grand secrets and escape plans."

The room was nothing too grand, though Odin had been picky about the woodwork, the practicality of space as well as aesthetics to appeal to the eyes. There was a bed shoved into a corner; no headboard to save space. Curling iron work lanced each end of the bar intended to hold a few changes of clothing, and a few suits hung in garment bags to make that fact obvious if Darcy could not tell it. A built in desk was on the far side, built in nightstand to the bed, and more shelving for files or books. There was just room enough for Loki's modern little studio day sofa beside the bed. A bit crowded but still nice.

The floor was the obvious splurge in the small room, tiles shaped in surprisingly detailed patterns depicting two large ravens and Asgard to their side. It was totally impractical but he would not deny having stared at it for long stretches of time while he thought.

The bathroom was small as well, no extra space, but more than adequate for one person hiding from others.

Darcy giggled, more giddy than he had ever seen her, "So you're ... what? Joker? Mr. Freeze? The Riddler?" Her eyes roamed over his little space, eyes falling instantly on one of his personal items.

He watched her carefully lift the gold frame, studying the faces behind the glass in a strange reverence before she asked, "Is this you and your mother?"

His chest tingled when he nodded, "Taken when I was sixteen."
She replaced it very carefully, sympathetic eyes reaching right into his soul and stealing his breath in
two words, "I'm sorry."

"Thank you." He headed for the door, waving a hand behind him, "Go on and get settled while I check
something. I'll be back."

The conversation was over that quickly and he set about fiddling with the cameras and deleting the
frames that captured his arrival with her. There would not have been enough time for the hacking
Stark to notice the feed and once he deleted it, erasing it from the backup memory as well, he never
would catch it.

Rocking back and forth in his chair, mind working over the details of the coming day, he scribbled a
few notes to himself before sticking them into his hiding place. He lingered at his desk longer than
necessary but he wanted to give her a little time to settle and probably change. Boredom got the
better of him in short order though, and he carefully walked back to the door, calling for confirmation
to enter before he stepped back in.

Mentally prepared for the sight of her when he walked in, he was not, and it was all he could do to
keep his jaw off the floor. His eager eyes took her in only a second, cataloging in rapid fire every
tiny detail as she hung her pant suit beside one of his - Darcy was wearing a classic white cotton,
scoop neck, sleeveless nightgown that hung all the way to her ankles. It wasn't form fitting in
the least, draped around her very loosely, shirring in the front and back. She had not removed her
bra, he could see one of the straps peeking around the sleeve. There really wasn't anything showing
in the slightest besides her feet, arms, and some neck, but by the stars it was the sexiest thing he
had ever seen!

He choked on some very descriptive words that wanted to tumble out and he covered it with a laugh,
absolutely begging his body to behave. But for mercy sake, there were light little yellow daisies in
the pattern and it was the cutest thing he had seen in his entire life, her standing there with her hair
down in that. Or cute would be the innocent word. If he walked in with her in a teddy it would not
have been as sexy - well, that would be sexy too - damn his mind!

"What's so funny?" She cocked her head in question, staring so intently he nearly blanched.

Loki whirled towards the bed, slipping off his shoes as he dropped down to prop his back against the
wall, pulling his knees up to hide the very obvious signs of his true thoughts before speaking. "I had
no idea you played in the Sound of Music, Darcy." He deadpanned, clasping his hands atop his
knees.

Oh god, she was going to kill him! She actually blushed!

"Not that it's a bad thing." He laughed again, grinning in desperation, "I just pictured you as more of
an over sized Scooby doo pajama set type person."

Her eyes narrowed, hands moving to her hips, "Oh, so you're saying you though I was eight and
now you think I'm eighty?"

He held up both hands, still smiling and ignoring how uncomfortable his trousers had gotten, "Those
were never my words or thoughts, I assure you! Though you have enough attitude for either a child
or an elderly woman with a bad hip." He pointed at her foot, "You're already working toward a bad
hip, actually, it just has to work its way up."

The nightgown billowed around her so prettily it made him want to - No, he would cut that off!
Dropping onto the edge of the bed, she leaned over and punched his leg, "Don't be so smug! At least I am capable of being nice, unlike you."

He spread his hands to the side, "I let you in my Batcave, what more do you want?"

She smiled and undid the velcro straps one by one on the boot, dropping that conversation, "As long as I'm very careful, I can sleep without the torture trap."

While she was facing the other direction he worked on relaxing his overly tense body but he could not keep from watching her slid along the wall to get on the inside. The covers were pulled up almost to her neck very quickly and he was thankful for small bits of luck. She settled her head into a pillow beside him and he silently marveled at how relaxed she was with him. Trusting him again. What was wrong with her? He did not even trust himself most days!

That quiet voice stilled his mind instantly, "Thank you, for helping me."

"It's nothing, really." He muttered, drawing circles into his palm absently.

"It is to me." She retorted.

Loki shifted, sliding his legs off the bed, thankful he was more ... relaxed, "It's an ungodly hour so I'll let you get some sleep."

The fingers suddenly around his wrist nearly made him gasp, but he stilled without looking back.

"I know this makes me sound like a five year old, and I know I shouldn't ask you after everything you've done tonight ... but ... do you think you could stay?"

The thought of staying beside her made him tense, sure it was a horrible idea, but the words fell from his lips anyway, "S-sure. Just until you fall asleep though." Promise already made, good or bad, he shifted back into his place against the wall, crossing his legs on the bed.

Her fingers slid down to tuck around his palm. Loki struggled to control his breathing like some teenage boy, eyes flickering closed. Her fingers were the only part of her touching him but it felt ridiculously intimate. The soft pads of her fingers against the sensitive skin of his palm made him shiver. Darcy misread that signal and quickly tugged the blanket out from under his legs and flipped it over him, effectively making him feel a lot closer to her than he had a few seconds before. He swallowed back an involuntary moan when she held his hand again, shifting on the bed so her knee just barely brushed his thigh. If he didn't know better he would swear she did it intentionally to test his control.

Chapter End Notes

Could I take a sec to point out how awesome Frigga is? She almost had Malekith all on her own! If you haven't watched deleted scenes with her you're missing out! I love her! I can picture this normally calm and demure woman turning into a cheering tiger for Loki every time he did anything. And their smiles, have you seen those different smiles side by side of Loki and Frigga? He was HER son! Blood or not, he was her son all the way, exactly like Thor was Odin's! Hubby says she can't see her baby, too bloody bad, she did it anyway, and in a sneaky way like Loki would have. And look at them fight! You know she taught him!
Anyway, Thor and Loki's dynamic is kind of hard to write but also fun in a heart
shattering way. I love them but I just want them to be okay again, but its not that easy,
they are so damaging to each other! I wish Loki and Thor would just make up and be
good brothers! OMG, it kills me! Like, did you see the pain in Avengers when Thor
arrived! The looks in their eyes! Or TDW, after the jailbreak when they were with Jane!
Killing me! Just hug and be friends again, please, before I cry! FEELS! Okay, sorry, I'm
in the feels. I hadn't originally planned to have Thor here but he just dropped in with a
few minutes of Jane.

Love Jane, she's so cute and strong but also awkward and unsure. Like, she can figure
out science but not always people a social situations, you know? Darcy, I think, would
have been a loner all her life. Taking care of others and never herself. Not used to
anyone trying to protect her.
A moan was on his lips when his body shifted in his sleep, awakening him to the pain. His eyes blinked open, fogged mind trying to understand why he should be in pain, but it failed. At the strange but familiar juncture between being asleep and being cognitive, he was not even sure where he hurt, only that he did. Moving again to find out seemed very unwise but he could feel the sensation of discomfort building, focusing and radiating in the back of his head and neck.

Why did his head hurt? Why did his back hurt? He was fairly sure he had not exercised more than usual. But his spine! His neck might never feel normal again! The aching was increasing at it finally brought his mind to an understanding of the problem. He had stayed propped against the wall while Darcy fell asleep, which would not have been an issue if not for the fact that he had also fallen asleep. Somewhere after that point his body traveled down, but not far enough.

Groaning quietly, he wriggled his way down until his neck and shoulders were not on the verge of snapping. Head on the pillow where it should have been, the pain ebbed a little but not so much than he would be comfortable for several minutes more. Darcy did not even blink with all his jarring, a hard sleeper he supposed. She had not even moved from the last position he saw her. She clearly slept like a near literal rock.

He really needed to stretch though, and there was no room to do that in a shared space, so he slipped silently from the mattress. His stocking feet gave him added silence as he tiptoed away, opening the door slowly to avoid the noise and also to be sure he did not knock any of the books on the other side free. The shelves were all slanted to avoid that but he still was careful each and every time.

Loki was nothing but a dark shadow moving lazily before his windows, eyeing the blackness outside. The darkness was abated only by the few lights far below on the streets and other buildings scattered randomly. Sheets of water streamed down the glass like hundreds of waterfalls and a flash of lightning ignited the sky to chase away the darkness for a fleeting moment. The light made his skin glow in that instant, giving his an unearthly but sinister hue for a moment.

There was the rain. It took that storm a while but it had fallen full force upon them now. He arched his back, stretching his arms out behind him to get the kinks free. A glance back into the other room told him she was still sleeping in peace, looking like a dark haired angel stretched in his bed.
His jaw clenched in a strange mix of reflexes battling against each other. One part of him wanted to run in and kiss her awake, one wanted to run far enough away that he would forget her, one wanted climb back into bed and bask in her presence, one felt sickened by everything involved, and still another wanted to lift his head to the sky and scream out his frustration. She confused him, turned him all around until he could not even remember what he was doing.

He needed to recenter himself, needed to remember why he was doing all of this, why it began. Yes, he began it all long before he so much as knew her name, set eyes on her, and it would continue long after she was gone from his life. She would go, of course, because everyone did, so wasting his time with her was useless. This plan was what he had been working for all this time, all his life really.

Power is what he wanted, craved, needed since he watched the way everyone groveled at his father and brother's feet because they would control their lives. Being in control meant being feared and respected, having a place of worth in the world. Being one that no one had ever wanted, having been born an unwanted mistake, having that place of value was a much coveted thing. Once he ruled them all, had all the power, he would have proved to every last one of them what a mistake they had made in throwing him aside. He would watch them bow before him, knowing he decided their fate. That would be the moment he possessed everything he desired. Asgard was not enough, he needed it all, needed to ruin every one of them to finally gain the respect he deserved. Darcy could never change that.

The coils in his shoulders relaxed, a long breaths easing out his nose. There was his center, now he had it. Darcy was fleeting, this was forever. She could not ruin years of plotting and planning to get to this point. When he was this close to having everything he ever wanted in hand one girl was not going to stop him. At the end, when he had everything, she would beg to be part of it anyway. Having the deal meant having everything.

His chair received him gladly as he dropped into it, fingers steepled under his chin as he began to think again. The plan had to be perfect, no moves wasted, not time allowed to drag. While he was not the only player, he needed to be sure he had thought of every eventuality. All his players had to play their parts perfectly or it would all fail and they would all end up dead.

Little Darcy played a key roll; the prisoner locked away to be used. She could not be allowed out for her own good as well as theirs. He had toyed with ideas revolving around her before but he had never been sure how to make it happen until tonight - or maybe it was morning now -but this was the prime moment to spring. It was fortunate that Darcy had been an option in his plans all along or this might not have worked at all. Her vexatious boss forced him to move swiftly, but he was glad of it, it gave him the push he needed. There were times he needed a bit of inspiration to fall into his lap.

Loki, pulled one of his books from the corner of his desk, flipping the pages until he came onto the hidden paper with the times scribbled into it. Hiding information in view of everyone tended to be the best option, he had often found. His fingers raked his hair back into place and away from his eyes as he studied that paper one last time to be sure he would have every second timed correctly. He could not settle for less than perfect. Any plan would run into snags, that was the way of life, so he needed to plan for those prospects in the time line as well just in case.

His little blonde spy had done her job very, very well, providing him with maps of each key player's usual schedules, habits, and potential weak points. They had plotted out every piece of it, instigated situations to trigger the targets to be anywhere but where they should be. Once triggered, as his text had done, the plan would roll like a raging river to plow down everything that could ever stop them. They could only hope it worked as well as it very well should.

The clock read 3:15 so that meant Amora would be arriving in his office in less than three hours.
dressed as one of many cleaning workers. That woman had always been skilled at blending with her surroundings if she cared to, though the same was true for her younger sister. The two of them were chameleons, beautiful creatures of deception and they were exactly what he needed.

His fingers massaged his eyes to stave off the burning. With a bit of time to kill before everything began he was finding Darcy curled in his bed to be a very tempting sight. He had gone over his plan every way he knew and there would be nothing more he could do. Sleeping in what little peace he would have seemed not only a tempting option, but a wise one as well.

It took very little to convince him when the thought of curling up beside her, looking at the way her dark hair spilled over the mint pillow cover, and the curve of her body outlined in the blankets was all he really needed. She was a sight in that gown, he would never deny it to his own mind. The thought of running his hands over her curves, feeling her in that soft white fabric, so light to the touch had occurred to him more than once. Memory of the way it billowed around her when she walked left his imagination running utterly wild; thoughts of what he would like to do to her while she was in that gown were chief among his reasons for getting out of the chair.

A cotton gown that showed him so little of her should not have been as appealing as it was. She looked ravishing in it though, so delicate, sweet, free, and beautiful. Seeing so little of the body beneath while there was such a thin fabric in his way made his toes curl at the thought. He wanted to kiss her, explore her slowly, roll the fabric up to her hips and pleasure her until she screamed his name like a song ... and he had a lot of other detailed ideas he really did not need to entertain considering his body was never going to sleep if he wound it up again.

He sighed deeply through partly opened lips as he slipped back under the blankets with her, his fingers unable to avoid stroking her curls very carefully as he watched her. Loki snuggled down into the pillow, curled up on his side as he watched her sleep, his fingers finding her hand to tangle with again.

She was going to hate him so much after this was over, but he could win her back again. Power swayed everyone and it would sway her as well. Once he had the power to grant her anything it would hardly matter what he had taken from her in the beginning. There was no reason he could not win her back. Her trust might take a while but he could gain it back eventually.

A hard shiver ran through him when she gripped his hand in return, shifting to curl closer against him. He found he liked this closeness with her, relished it like water to the dry earth, feeling a warmth in his chest. He could have curled up with her and stayed the rest of his life. She was taking him off his center again with only a few moves, crippling his will to stray from her with no effort. It would not stop him though, he was still the bad guy. Loving the princess might make him want to stay in the tower with her but it could not keep him there.

No, he would enjoy these moments and then he would allow them to be dashed to tiny shards while he ruined her. He would love her as he destroyed her; that was what evil men did to the things they loved, it was part of their nature. He did not ever want to hurt her but he would sacrifice her misplaced trust. She should never have let him close. Perhaps he could protect her but the closer she was the darker her world would become. Nothing he could do would change that, not even if he called off this plan because they were all drowning no matter what he did. If he destroyed her world now, perhaps he could build her a new one after it was over.

Yes, maybe that was part of his new center. He needed power, craved it, strove for it! Power was what he had to have because power could give him everything, including Darcy, it could give him the ability to save her from what he had done.

His forehead rested against hers, "I will try to save you, I promise. I do want to protect you. I'm sorry
Darcy found that she ached when she awoke, bleary eyed, in the unfamiliar room. A touch of fear lasted only a second until she remembered the events preceding. The pain was from all the punishment and stress on her poor and abused frame. Her leg ached but not as badly as it always did by the end of the day in that vice. When she slowly rolled onto her back on Loki’s bed she found she did not care to get up.

Her fingers carded through her curls as she stretched her arms up over her head, brushing them up the cool wall before dropping them down at her sides once again. A contented sigh was on her lips as she stared at the spackled ceiling. What reason did she have for moving early in the morning anyway? The order had been to stay close to Loki but how much closer could she be than hiding in his Batcave? Well, she did have other orders as well.

Her brow wrinkled slowly as she considered her position, her fingers finding her glasses on the table to slip them onto her nose. Loki was gone to some unknown place and she was in his office, virtually undetectable until he returned. Had she the energy, she could search this room to see if she could find those hidden notes of his, search everything in his hidden room. So long as he believed she was getting dressed, she could even search while he was in the office and be perfectly safe. It was a bit ideal.

Any time he left the office, she could even plant Thanos' little bug. It would all be perfectly easy, child's play for a computer person such as herself. If she planned to follow that particular order, which, in some way or other, she would have to. The rules had been quite clear the entire time that gun was at her temple.

Her knees pulled up to her chest as she rolled onto her side again, balling herself into a protective position. This spying business was turning into something she did not care for. She did not enjoy taking advantage of situations, especially when the man brought her here as a kindness, tipping his hand in helping her. Repaying a kindness with treachery was not something she felt comfortable with.

None of this was comfortable in any sense of it. She did not want to spy for any of them. It might have been comical that all the players in this had asked her to spy for them except Loki. All of them told her never to "tell Loki" for any reason. As odd as it was, he was the only one not telling her to keep secrets from anyone. To date, he had been more honest with her, to her knowledge, than she had been with him.

Her throat closed up and the backs of her eyes stung hot. She was a wicked person! Down right evil! Loki helped her, saved her twice and never even asked her for an ounce of inside information in return. While he was usually an absolute prick, he was also very kind to her in his own private way. No one had taken care of her like this since she was a child, and even then she could barely count that. Her entire life had been spent fending for herself and now that one person was taking the time to help her without asking for favors, she was spying on him for every enemy he had in the world.

This was just not okay in the slightest. Now that it was morning she really saw things a lot differently. None of it had seemed quite as dark while she was in shock and now it pretty nearly was crushing her under an invisible elephant. There were just so few options open to her that did not involve pain in extreme amounts.

Still, she knew she would never plant that worm for that monster, knew it even when she vowed to do it. Granted, she would plant it on a computer, just not the ones he wanted her to. Stark would
even be getting the drive from her to plant on any computer he could convince Thanos was a normal one, but one that would not give anything unwanted away. That was her plan for that end, tell Stark about the entire thing and let him decide what to do about it. Loki was a more complex story.

There was no way to know how much he knew about Thanos, Fury never told her how much he knew. How could she tell him all about it if it tipped the scales the wrong way? For all she knew, Loki might willingly join sides with that psychopath, and if he did, that would make everything worse. She could not really know what he might do if he found out about that situation. He might do nothing at all, but he might do something horrible or very stupid, she just could not be exactly sure. If she landed Loki in that world with both feet she really would not forgive herself.

She wished she could trust him with the truth, wished she knew what he might do with the knowledge, but she just could not do it. While she trusted him, she also did not trust him. It might be similar to owning a tiger; you raised it, love it to pieces, but if you trusted it completely that might lead to a very bad end. She did not care to see any bad endings for any involved, save one horrible mountain of a man.

Darcy was out of her depth. She was used to cases, used to law and difficult problems, but this was dabbling in lives. If she did the wrong thing, money was not the only thing someone might lose. She did not want to be responsible for the outcome of lives she cared about. Figurative lives and figurative happy endings were different than looking into the eyes of people she felt anything for. She did not want to be in this game but there was no way out. She was a pawn in everyone's set now.

The only thing she could do was get Pepper and Tony in on it and see what they thought she should do with Loki. She did not honestly trust Fury enough to tell him about it. While he might have been her employer he also played a lot of sides and she could not be sure what he might do to Loki with this information. She trusted him to know what to do with Stark but it was no secret he was no friend of the younger Odinson. She would speak to Stark first.

Her body jolted, fingers clutching the blankets to her for what little support they might offer her, fearfully watching the door open. She only relaxed once she spotted inky hair and a wide, playful smile. It took her a few tries to take in a normal breath but she managed it and then smiled pleasantly. Two coffee cups were in his hands and she brightened instantly at the sight, grinning in earnest now. Coffee would clear her head right up!

"I thought you might like some when I woke you up." He held the large cup out to her with a sly expression, energy dancing around him like invisible fairies, "But you woke up all on your own, Sleeping Beauty."

Darcy grinned at him, propping herself on her elbow as she took her cup from him, "Sarcasm so early in the morning? You're in the wrong story anyway, I'm in the Sound of Music, remember?"

He chuckled deep and long, eyes sparkling with something she could not identify, "Any time it a good time for witty remarks, they never go out of style no matter the time of day." Taking a sip of his own latte, the playful expression only solidifying, "Though, let me just say, you should feel honored! I personally went and got you this coffee and I do not play delivery man for very many people."

Tipping her head dramatically, she grinned, "Well, Sir knight, I must offer you my deepest gratitude for replenishing my life's blood!"

"Well," Loki smirked wide, easing down to sit beside her, "Indeed, I could hardly deprive the world of a sarcastic and fair princess such as you, thus I could do nothing but ride to the rescue."
"Kind Sir, I am indeed in your debt. This liquid of the gods shall be my saving grace." Darcy giggled, enjoying how easily they could play and joke, relishing the way he could make her forget all those unpleasant thoughts with so little effort.

The glint in his eyes grew significantly as he sipped the beverage before speaking, "Oh, but how can you be so sure I am kind, fair lady?"

"Elementary, my dear Watson! You brought me coffee in bed!" She kept her tone light and whimsical, "You also showed me your weapons vault."

He barked a laugh before shaking his head, "I thought you said that sounded like a dirty joke!" He watched her take a long sip and shrugged one shoulder, dropping his eyes to his cup with his previous mirth settling lower, "Though I do not claim the rights to the title, it was actually Thor that titled it when we were children."

Darcy hummed and clicked her tongue, "Oh, so this jewel was not your idea, it was your father that put it in?"

Nodding, he took another drink and set the cup lightly on his knee, "Yes, it was put in when the place was built. It stayed a family secret, no one has ever known about it but our little clan."

"But you let me in." Her eyes dropped to the sheets as she took a drink of the smooth liquid gladly, more thirsty than she first thought she had been, "Doesn't that break all the rules?"

A sharp grin was on his lips as he leaned closer, voice lowered as if to tell a secret, "I believe I am well in the business of breaking family rules and disregarding secrets. Still, you are the first to know about it."

She returned his grin, equally conspiratory in her tone, "So, since this is your evil lair, does that make me your minion or something?"

Loki arched a brow, cocking his head to one side, "Are you offering to switch sides? Does this mean Stark is losing to his more appealing opponent?"

A nervous laugh bubbled up and she took a long drag of coffee to give herself a moment to decide how to answer, "Well, I don't know! What are you offering me for switching to the Dark Side? Stark already has cookies and lots of technology so that is very hard to beat."

He rumbled with another deep and dark laugh, nodding before he sipped at his latte, "You do have a valid point. Those are hard points to beat, I admit. I might be able to think up something if you give me a few days though."

Darcy took an even longer sip, mulling over how to dig herself out of the strange trap, "Well, you might have to take longer than a few days. I'm a pretty pricey minion, I tell you." Her fingers swirled the cup a bit to make sure it was fully stirred considering all the creamy goodness seemed to be at the top.

She took another drink, suddenly content with the silence, letting coffee be her excuse not to say more. This whole thing, her life had been getting so complicated lately. She hated how easily she got herself into trouble anymore, she did not even have to try. Trouble just rained right down on her head. Life used to be much more peaceful.

A sudden wave ran through her brain, making her vision sway like river raft. She actually felt light headed even though that was the most ludacris thing in the world to feel dizzy when she was in bed. Maybe she should have asked for a muffin to go with her coffee, if she had asked at all, that was. His
hand came up to cup the top of her head a moment before he began petting his way down her hair. He muttered a question, something about how she was feeling but he sounded far away, like he was in another room. Her ears felt like they had water in them.

Another few desperate sips of coffee did not bring her the relief and clarity she hoped it would, and she wavered a bit in place, "Not sure, I must not be quite awake yet, guess."

"Finish your coffee, maybe that will help." His hand came to rest gently on her hip, brow creased with worry, watching her carefully as she obeyed and drained the cup.

Darcy whimpered as the room began turning darker, the spinning getting even worse. Desperation and fear started to take hold and she clutched at him. Her brain might not have been in the best of shape but she knew something was very wrong with her and it frightened her. He set his cup aside and took her empty one from her hand. His much larger palms took her hands between them. Leaning down over her, he whispered soothing words to her the way he had on the stairs. His arms were around her shoulders and she pressed into the touch, muttering questions she forgot the moment they left her lips.

Loki only curled up beside her, holding her gently to him as the darkness swallowed her. Her hold on him was quickly weakened until it no longer existed, her muscles turning to putty. Some part of her mind registered him speaking into her hair, whispering about being sorry as she lost herself to the dreamless nothing of darkness.

For several minutes after she faded away all he could do was sprinkle kisses over her face and on her shoulder. He loathed doing this to her, hated watching her sink away into the drug induced sleep. The frightened expression was similar to the one she wore on the steps when she was frightened. The girl had been through a lot in recent times because of him. It was unfortunate that it had to be that way.

Plucking the glasses from her nose to set them on the bedside table, he gently fixed her into a comfortable sleeping position, tucking the blanket around her to keep her warm. She did not look pleased, her nose crinkled slightly despite being gone to the world. Loki slid away slowly, planting one gentle kiss to her lips before standing and snatching up her purse, the jacket she had hanging beside his, and her walking boot. A last glance at her was all he allowed himself before he exited the room.

"She drift off alright?" Amora's sultry voice connected with him as he slid the door closed.

"Yes, she drank it all so she won't present us with any problems." He was lightly scowling as he handed the items over to her waiting hands. It was surprising how different she look with dark hair, replicas of Darcy's glasses, and make-up to alter her appearance. Had he not known better he might have been fooled, might have been as unsuspecting as everyone in her office was soon to be.

"Good! At least she behaves that way. A good, useful girl." Amora walked in a circle, showing off her practiced limp for him and grinning, "I nailed it, didn't I?"

Loki nodded, showing little reaction, a bit numb to it all, "You could fool her own mother so long as you don't talk."

She shook her head, still smirking, clearing her throat before she spoke again, "No, Mr. Odinson, I think I have that too!" It had flaws but she was close enough to Darcy's pitch that people who might not know her as well should be fooled.
In spite of it all, he had to smile, brows arching in surprise, "My dear, you are even better than I remembered. The only thing you will have to contend with is that you are taller than she is."

Returning to her normal voice, she waved him off, "No one is going to notice that when I have all the other details right." She reached up and nimbly unfastened the top button of the blouse to reveal more, "Besides, the men won't be looking too much past this."

Loki chuckled, crossing his arms as he watched her slip on the jacket, "It's a little small on you but not too much. You should pass."

"Oh, I will pass! Fury himself won't notice the difference." Her full lips pouted at him as she began strapping the boot on.

"Try to avoid Fury, Amora. He is the last person you want to see, but he should be busy chasing our rabbit." His fingers found his temple and he sighed, "I'm still hoping you don't see Stark either."

"Relax, have a little faith in me!" She dug swiftly through Darcy's bag until she came out with her identification badge, dangling it between her fingers before clipping it to the jacket. "I will be in, files downloaded to the drive, and out before they have reason to blink."

He sighed again, thrusting the paper in her direction, "Do you have the times memorized? You have to be in the right places in the right times or this is blown, you know that!"

Her green eyes scanned the paper a last time, "Yeah, I know. I know exactly where to be and when, I know the plan. We have been working on it long enough!"

"Is Lorelei clear on her part?" He leaned against the desk, watching her put on the finishing touches to assume Darcy's place.

"She's got it. I have Skurge staying with her too so she looks more convincing filling my spot at work. I made her roll clear to her even if she doesn't know what our scam is." Amora snickered, "Since neither you nor I see fit to trust her with information, I just told her to play me until I could come back and told her how much it would pay. She didn't ask any questions once I told her the price for working with us."

His tongue lapped at his dry lips, "Good. I'm not keen on her being involved but there is no one else to cover for you that could be convincing. If you left your metal head with her, no one should question it."

Amora stood up, shaking her hair and flipping it into place. "We have it all under control, my dear!" She bussed a kiss to his lips before hobbling away on the boot. A few strokes to smooth down her costume and she was slinging the bag over her shoulder. The pouch with the computer drive was stashed safely in the bag and she moved for the door. With a few last minute keys to the cameras to erase all traces of their leaving, he soon followed at her heels. They each had places to be and there was no time to waist. They were as ready as they could ever be.

In no time at all they would have Stark's Infinity thanks to Darcy's clearance badge. Everything would belong to them, the world and every person on it would be their slave. Or rather, his slave. He never told her exactly what the project was, told her very little besides the fact that he knew how to make them both richer than they could dream with it. It might not have been fair to keep her in the dark but he told her only what he could trust her not to go wild with.

Loki tried not to let his mind drift to the real Darcy as he looked at her double walking at his side. Everything had to be done perfectly! With the sedative Amora brought for her coffee, she was safely
out of the way. Though it would be Darcy everyone would believe stole the Infinity project, it should not be a problem. He should have the program set and should have each of them under his thumb before Thanos, Fury, or Stark realized he had taken it, but if they found out he would have to keep that girl hidden for quite some time. She would be up on charges on one end and have her name on a hit list on another if he did not work fast enough, but he could work quickly.

The sooner he gained power the better. He could not afford to linger in this state of limbo for one more day. Enemies were closing in on him and he had to beat them before it was too late. He needed the Infinity and he needed to rule their lives and strip them down to nothing. Their lives would belong to him in no time, though he would be a massive nerve until it was finished, it would be worth it in the end.

He would soon have it all, all their deals, all their bank accounts, all their information. He would take it all and ruin them piece by piece until there was nothing left. Thanos would be first with Fury as a close second. The rest he would take his time one, savoring it all.

His brows twitched. They had to get it first though. The plan had to work! If not, they were all finished and they would all drown in the vast ocean of life and death. It needed to work because there would be no going back.

Chapter End Notes

I was really frustrated because I wrote this and then my computer decided to dump half of it I should have known it would happen because everything was just flowing out of me perfectly and I loved how it was falling on the page. I was super happy with it all and then it was gone so I just lost the drive to bring it back. Nothing I wrote after sounded as good even though I tried to remember it all. There was a lot of cursing and a near thrown computer when I dumped it all. I don't know how this all sounds this round. I don't like it as well but I hope it doesn't suck.

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