“I want a job.”

“What?” Victor and Stephen said in unison, staring at her.

“I want a job,” Loki repeated. “I want a place in your brave new world. I want a rank and a shiny shiny badge and something interesting to do. I want to have official license to cross borders at will and I want to be able to walk into Doomgard’s mead hall without the Thors being like ‘uh, you really can’t be here.’” Her smirk faltered for a moment, her brows drawing together as she bit her lip for a fraction of a second. “And- and I want to know which one of them is mine.”

My thoughts on Loki IV’s (it’s about time we just start numbering them like the Doctors, isn’t it?) place in Battleworld.
Agent of Doomgard

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Seven Weeks post Doom’s Day

“All-Father Doom, Sheriff, we have arrested a boarder-crosser,” a Thor announced as he and another Thor marched into the room with their prisoner.

Stephen gritted his teeth and tried not to grimace as he laid eyes on the young woman and felt a surge of recognition. She was definitely a Loki. She was dressed in a mishmash of styles (green, of course) that he supposed would overall be considered “gothic” and smiling cheerfully. Rather than being restrained or dragged, she was happily holding a hand of each of the Thors escorting her. She brightened even more as she made eye-contact with Stephen. “Doctor, you look fantastic!” she exclaimed. “The old cape was getting tired. You were due for an extreme make-over and this look is you, it really is!”

A chill ran down Stephen’s spine and he swallowed back shock and dread. No, she didn’t remember, not really, she couldn’t, no one did. She was just being Loki, playing with words and trying to glean information from him. “Name of the accused?” Stephen demanded, turning his eyes to the ranking Thor.

“Are you being coy, Doctor?” Loki wondered.

“She doth call herself ‘Loki’ and ‘Storyteller’,” the Thor answered. “We... are unsure what barony she hails from.”

Stephen let a small frown slip through. “Then how do you know she has illegally crossed boarders?” he asked.

“Because she hath arrived on Doomgard’s doorstep,” the younger Thor answered and then they both flashed embarrassed, guilty looks. “... Thrice.”

“Well they kept giving me free drinks,” Loki replied with a shrug and an innocent hum. “And you know what they say about feeding strays.”

“... She did not seem to understand the boarders,” the older Thor said awkwardly, not meeting Stephen’s eyes. “We scolded her and explained why she must not cross them and sent her back from whence she came.”

“You scolded her,” Stephen sighed. He really shouldn’t be surprised; a Loki who couldn’t talk a Thor in circles would hardly be a Loki at all. “After a few rounds, of course.”

“She lives up to her name,” Victor said from his throne, a note of amusement coloring his voice.

“I take full responsibility for this lapse,” the older Thor announced, dropping down to a knee and lowering his head, awaiting a sentence.

“No no, his scolding was quite firm, I’m just not very good at being scolded,” Loki said, bouncing once on the balls of her feet. “But I am very happy to see you gentlemen. I wanted to give my
compliments on what you’ve achieved here. I suppose it’s terribly sad that the old world and trillions upon bazillions of people died, but I really like what you’ve done with the place.”

Stephen drew a sharp breath, staring at her for a moment before glancing at Victor, whose eyes were narrowed suspiciously. He looked back at Loki, who was continuing on in a chatty tone, seemingly oblivious to the tension in her audience. “And you Victor, well you were quite the pinch-hitter, weren’t you? I’m sure nobody saw that one coming. I mean, you always did want to be God, but I sort of assumed you’d go for the great-and-terrible kind of God, not the savior type. Well I was surprised anyway. Would you say it’s Miss Richards’ good influence that’s turned you around or was it getting punched by a man named after an insect?”

“Clear the room,” Victor commanded suddenly, rising to his feet. “Doom has spoken.”

“You two as well,” Stephen ordered, when the Thors looked unsure. “Leave her.”

The room was a flurry of motion for a minute as the court hastily exited. Loki stood on the spot, curiously watching everyone funnel out and the doors slam shut behind them, before turning to look back at Stephen and Victor, her head tilted to the side. “I’ve said something wrong,” she noted.

“How much do you remember?” Stephen asked sharply, walking toward the Loki and examining her more closely as Victor glared down from his perch.

“Everything. My predecessor gave me all of his memories, no editing or abridging,” Loki replied, taking note of Stephen’s scrutinizing gaze and turning a circle in place to display herself. She was a full adult, godly stature evident as she stood a few inches taller than Stephen, but still quite young; perhaps the equivalent of twenty. Older than the Loki of their world had been before his disappearance. Yet she spoke with seeming knowledge of the Earth Stephen and Victor had come from. But maybe the key to that was in her last statement.

“Your predecessor?” Stephen asked.

“The third Loki, Loki the Third, Loki the Very Confused,” she shrugged and waved a hand parallel to the ground a little shy of six feet up. “Teenager-ish, social-media savvy, had a very sassy mouth on him. Victor turned him into a decorative statue for a while.”

“That Loki disappeared after the Red Skull incident,” Victor said, his tone suspicious, not quite accusing but close to it. “There was evidence to suggest he had been killed.”

“Well, that might not be quite the right verb,” Loki said, clicking her tongue and seeming to consider. “It would be a bit more accurate to say he killed himself, I think. But it wasn’t just suicide,” she amended quickly, waving her hands. “There was a purpose to it! He wanted to build something new, he wanted to be something new, and he realized he couldn’t build on a crumbling foundation, so he decided the only real solution was to burn the whole thing down and start over.”

“... You’re saying that that Loki sacrificed himself in order to create you,” Stephen said slowly, trying to decide if that sounded even remotely feasible. Well, yes, it sounded feasible since the original Loki must have done something similar to create the boy, but feasible didn’t mean probable, what seemed far more probable was that the God of Lies was lying.

“Well, he was very tired of the whole ‘God of Lies’ thing,” Loki said with a shrug. “It was limiting as much as it was alienating. Victor was the one who started this whole thing,” she said gesturing loosely to Victor.

“How do you reach that conclusion?” Victor rumbled, narrowing his eyes.
“You taunted the first Loki. You called him predictable and that irritated him,” Loki explained, clasping her hands behind her back and rocking on her feet. “He’d actually developed some respect for you, for your intellect and opinions, and so he took your comment into serious consideration and decided that you were right and that it was unacceptable.” She gave a shrug and dipped her head a bit. “But he had too much ego to give it the whole nine yards, he didn’t want to end, so he half-assed it and instead of giving his progeny a fresh start, he just gave him a restart of the same old game. Thus, instead of making something truly new, he just made a new God of Lies with severe bipolar disorder and crippling self-doubt. Fortunately that same self-doubt meant that my predecessor didn’t have so much ego holding him back and he gave himself over fully and gladly to the end of his own story.”

Stephen looked at Victor, who seemed to be interested and seriously considering Loki’s explanation. But there was a hole in it, and Stephen replayed Loki’s words in his mind to identify where it lay. “You called your predecessor ‘Loki the Third’,” Stephen said, looking back to the young goddess and frowning. “What happened to Loki the Second?”

“Well that was a great and terrible secret,” Loki replied with a smirk on her lips and sadness in her eyes. “Loki the First saw one of the great turning points in his life, one of the moments that defined him as a god and a person, as the moment he became a murderer. When he killed an innocent out of jealousy and spite. And, as he believed this to be a very important, self-defining detail, when he decided to recreate himself, he felt it important to recreate said detail. Loki the Second was murdered, and Loki the Third was born with blood on his hands and a stain on his conscience which hobbled him and sickened his soul through every moment of his life. Which he kept as his most closely guarded secret and lie out of debilitating shame.”

Victor nodded slowly. “And in time the guilt would have driven him mad,” he mused.

“You told him that you saw how he would turn out, once he cracked under the pressure,” Loki noted, tilting her head and looking Victor over carefully. “He caught a glimpse of it too. And when he fully realized the extent of it, when he believed in the inevitability, that was when he decided to go all in and gamble on me.” Loki glanced down at the floor and pursed her lips. “... But you know, the timing was also significant,” she said quietly.

“... After the inversion period,” Victor said. Stephen glanced at him and then back at Loki.

“Yes, the inversion,” Loki nodded, gaze still downcast. “He was one of the ones who didn’t revert properly. And he wasn’t standing behind Tony Stark like the others. He got broken because in some ways gods are far more fragile than humans. He was not able to rebound. He got stuck halfway between. A god of lies who could not lie and was unable to face the truth.” She looked up finally, and there was a mild, accusing glare in her eyes. “He was broken by what you and Lady Maximoff did. He killed himself because of it. Your comments were the inspiration that caused Loki the First to create him; you had a hand in his birth and in his death.”

Victor’s eyes narrowed and he glared back down at the goddess. “... Tell me you are not stupid enough to have come here seeking revenge. If your story is factual, then you would not now exist if your predecessor had not destroyed himself.”

Loki shrugged her shoulders and put on a mild grin. “Revenge? Of course not, Victor. What use is blaming God? No no, I’m here to inquire as to whether Victor von Doom is the sort of god or man who settles his debts.”

“Loki, you are treading on very thin ice,” Stephen said quietly, watching Victor’s eyes narrow again behind his mask.
“I always am,” Loki replied.

“And what debt do you imagine you are owed?” Victor demanded.

“Loki the Third helped save Latveria from tearing itself apart under the Red Skull’s influence,” Loki replied, lifting her chin and looking confident and blithe. “You had attacked and imprisoned him. He had no reason to do anything for you. But he still put himself in great personal discomfort helping Miss Richards break the Red Skull’s influence over your people in the belief that it was ‘the right thing to do’. Because he so desperately wanted to remake himself as the sort of god and person whom Thor might be proud of.” Loki crossed her arms and tilted her head to the side. “He potentially saved the lives of hundreds of your subjects. You owed him for that. He is no longer able to collect on that debt, but here I am.” She smirked, eyes half veiled and smug. “So Victor, what kind of god are you? One with honor, or a capricious bully?”

Victor rose from his throne and descended the dais slowly until he was standing right in front of Loki, glaring back into her smirk. “And what favor would you ask of Doom?” he hissed.

“I want a job.”

“What?” Victor and Stephen said in unison, staring at her.

“I want a job,” Loki repeated. “I want a place in your brave new world. I want a rank and a shiny shiny badge and something interesting to do. I want to have official license to cross borders at will and I want to be able to walk into Doomgard’s mead hall without the Thors being like ‘uh, you really can’t be here.’” Her smirk faltered for a moment, her brows drawing together as she bit her lip for a fraction of a second. “And- and I want to know which one of them is mine. I’ve talked to a dozen or more and... none of them have been quite right. It’s hard to tell when so many of them look so much the same...”

Victor exchanged a glance with him and Stephen could see consideration and calculation in his eyes. “... And why would I trust the God of Lies with any task?” Victor challenged.

“Well to start with, I’m not the God of Lies, that was the whole point of my predecessor sacrificing himself,” Loki replied, wrinkling her nose. “And secondly, why should you even need to trust me? You’re God! If I get too sassy, you can smite me!”

Victor and Stephen exchanged another glance. “... Thus countering the reasons Doom should not grant your request,” Victor said slowly. “Now explain why I should.”

Loki’s smirk renewed and she bounced a little on the balls of her feet. “So now I compliment your reorganizing of the heavens, because really, Thors make fantastic beat-cops. They’re courageous and selfless and uncorruptable and tough as all get-out and they inspire the children,” she said, eyes bright. “But as excellent as they are at being noble pillars of justice, there are certain arenas where they’re bound to fall short. The thing about Thor and Loki, the thing that bonded them together and made them so much closer to each other than either of them were to any of their other siblings, is that they were opposites. Where Thor falls short, Loki excels and vice versa,” Loki explained, folding her hands together and appearing to try very hard to stand still. “And I can do things a Thor just can’t. I can go places a Thor can’t. I can talk to people a Thor can’t. On those rare occasions when a Thor just isn’t going to cut it, when there’s something weird and sinister and tricky afoot, you need a Loki. And I am the Loki for the job.”

There was a long moment of quiet as they digested Loki’s pitch, then Victor turned to Stephen, the skin above one eye stretched to show that his eyebrow was raised beneath his mask. “Your thoughts, Stephen?” he prompted.
Stephen nodded slowly, arms crossed and tapping a finger against his elbow. “... You said that you aren’t the god of lies,” he said carefully. “What are you the god of, Loki?”

“Stories,” Loki replied, turning her eyes to him. “And the derivatives. Poetry, art, mythology... magic.”

“... Interesting,” Victor said, looking Loki over carefully as though only just noticing her.

“... And does that have something to do with how you’ve managed to retain your memories of the old world?” Stephen asked.

“I am the God of Stories. I could never forget one. Stories end, and maybe they’re buried by time and forgotten by the world. But not by me,” Loki said, her voice a bit softer, a slightly wistful hue coloring it. “I am stories. They are me. Forgetting would be death, and I’ve only just been born.”

Stephen nodded again, ruminating for a moment before turning to Victor. “There is the matter of that particular... discordance. Loki may be the ideal party to investigate the matter.”

Victor looked back at him and gave one quick, sharp nod. “Agreed.”

“I can investigate!” Loki declared excitedly, seeming much younger than her appearance indicated, but then, she was brand new, wasn’t she? “I’d be a great detective! I’ll detect so well!”

“Then we will test the earnestness of your proposition,” Victor said in a stern, commanding voice. “And hereby Doom’s ledger is cleared.”

“Agreed,” Loki gave a little bow of her head. “Glory to Doom, long may he reign.”

“Do not mock me,” Victor growled, eyes narrowing.

“I’m not. I’m adjusting myself to the new paradigm,” Loki said. “What you were is not what you are, anymore than I am any of the Lokis who came before me. I’ll need to behave appropriately toward my Lord God. Probably dropping the first-name-basis assumption is a good place to start.”

“Mm. Indeed,” Victor considered her another moment, trying to decide if he detected any sarcasm, before turning to Stephen. “Give her her assignment. Have her begin immediately.”

“Of course. I’d like to see this matter resolved as quickly as possible,” Stephen agreed.

Sheriff. This is unexpected,” a very old Thor (who looked more than a little like Odin) said, pushing himself to his feet and standing at attention. “How may I serve you?”

“Lawspeaker, this is Special Agent Loki,” Stephen said brusquely, gesturing to Loki as they stopped in the middle of the office, which was a little more ‘Asgardian audience hall’ than ‘police chief office’. “She is going to be taking over investigation of the Loki murders. I will be walking her through the files now to get her started. Please give her access to the Thors who have worked these cases and assign her a temporary assistant to take her over the crime scenes.”

“I get my very own assistant-Thor?” Loki tried not to squeal. “Also- ‘Loki murders’: wat?”

“You asked for ‘tricky’, if I recall,” Stephen cast her a raised eyebrow.

The very old Thor gave Loki a scrutinizing stare and managed to look both unimpressed and suspicious. “As you order, Sheriff,” he agreed in an exceptionally grudging tone. “She’ll have the
resources. I’ll find her an ‘assistant.’” Clearly Loki’s assistant would be either someone old-Thor didn’t like or didn’t think much of.

“I have a request on that,” Loki said, looking at Stephen and biting her lip momentarily. “Regarding the second thing I asked for.”

“Not here, Loki,” Stephen replied, refusing to look at her. “Come along. I need to brief you and get back to my duties in Doomstadt.” He turned around and started back out of the office.

Loki chose after him, feeling both a flush of frustration and a chill of dread. “Do you think that I don’t know avoidance when I see it, Stephen?” she hissed, grabbing his arm and pacing him as they continued down the hall. The Thors dotting the way stared at her, looking shocked. They hadn’t done that on the way in, so Loki had to conclude that it wasn’t because they were recognizing her as a Loki, but rather because one does not grab the Holy Eye and make demands of him.

“... Loki, I have not had the time to catalogue all the Thors,” Stephen said in a low voice. “I don’t know which one might be your brother.”

“‘Might’?” Loki dug her claws into that word.

“... Your brother was not on Earth when the end came,” Stephen’s voice went even quieter, so that Loki had to strain to hear it. “He was not part of any universe. He was lost in the void... I don’t know if he made it.”

Loki was silent for a few minutes, staring at the doctor and letting him lead the way as her feet kept moving, though she couldn’t focus on where she was walking. “... That is unacceptable,” Loki whispered at last.

Stephen sighed. “Loki, I don’t know for certain--”

“No. It’s unacceptable. I don’t accept it. You’re wrong,” Loki snapped, tightening her grip on Stephen’s arm and seeing him wince. “I’m going to find him and I’m going to shove your face in it. This is my story and I say my brother is alive and I’m going to find him and he’s going to love me and be proud of me!” She was rambling. She knew she was rambling and that she sounded a little hysterical.

Stephen stopped walking and turned to face her. “I hope that you do,” he said, looking her in the eye and putting a hand on her shoulder. Loki stared back at him for a moment and then let him go, dropping her arms to her sides. “... And if you’re working out of Doomgard, that will give you the best opportunity to search. Some of the Thors work primarily out of Doomgard, some of them have assignments in the baronies and only come in every few months, but if you’re here long enough, I’m sure you’ll meet all of them eventually.”

Loki nodded, pursing her lips and clasping her hands behind her back. She felt shaky and weak suddenly. Which was stupid, because her Thor was not dead and she was going to find him. “... So. ‘Loki murders’. That sounds interesting,” she murmured. “Is a Loki murdering people or are Lokis being murdered?”

“Both,” Stephen said, catching her elbow and starting to walk again. “Because many of them have the ability to teleport or otherwise travel unlimited distances, some of the Lokis have become aware of the fact that there are multiple iterations of themselves across Latverian. And a few of them have taken offence to the idea.”

“... They’re going Highlander on each other, aren’t they?” Loki asked, wrinkling her nose.
“Yes,” Stephen agreed, nodding. “And although some of them may be entering these duels willingly, at least two of the four victims so far identified were ambushed and may have been unaware or uninterested in the other iterations.”

They came to a room with a slightly glowing, translucent ‘screen’ in the middle and Stephen started pulling up images on it. Loki watched and listened to the display for a moment, finally deciding that it was a perfect marriage of magic and science. Oh Victor, the beauty of your mad fever-dreams. Once she’d taken in the wonderful techno-magy, she was finally able to appreciate that there was something on the display that she ought to be paying attention to.

Photos of four violently deceased Loki’s were spread out in front of her. Well, three and a corpse that was charred beyond recognition which she could only assume was also a Loki. Stephen was pointing toward the collection of photos in the upper left, which featured an adult, male Loki who appeared to have been pummeled by a blunt object until his chest was thoroughly caved in and most of his body was bruised and mangled. “This Loki appears to have been one of our aggressive factors. Multiple witness accounts of the incident agree that he attacked another Loki in public and broad daylight. Obviously he made a miscalculation of the odds,” Stephen was saying. He then gestured to a group of images on the right. “However, being as the Doom Valley incident occurred after Arcadia, he was clearly not the only predatory Loki.”

“And I’m guessing we don’t know exactly how many might be hunting at this point?” Loki asked, trying not to feel queasy as she looked over the photos of a cowboy-dressed Loki with a basketball-sized hole through his lungs and a somewhat crushed skull.

“We do not,” Stephen agreed. “In addition to investigating the incidents which have already occurred, and putting a stop to further duels and/or slayings, I want you to locate and document all of the Lokis living on Latverian.” He turned away from the screen to give Loki a very serious look. “While this situation,” he gestured at the display, “is the most acute, I believe that you would be inclined to agree with me that Lokis in general are a major x-factor and capable of representing a significant threat to the safety of this world.”

“Because Lokis are dangerous and very frequently mentally unstable, you mean,” Loki said. She glanced back up at the screen. “Of course, if there have been more incidents like this,” she pointed at the smashed Loki, “where an ‘aggressive’ Loki was rebuffed, perhaps even repelled without a death occurring to draw Doomgard’s attention, then when I walk into another Loki’s territory, looking very much like a Loki, I am going to also look very much like a threat. Or, if I happen upon an aggressive element, then I look like a potential conquest.”

Stephen nodded. “It will be dangerous. And I’m not going to tell you that I don’t see value in your potential as bait to lure the aggressive elements out, but you told us that you are the god of magic and mythology.” He looked her up and down slowly. “If I don’t miss my guess, I think that might very well make you the most formidable Loki ever born. And if you don’t feel confident in your ability to defend yourself against an aggressive element, then you are certainly welcome to keep a Thor with you as you investigate and conduct your census.” He glanced at the screen again. “Aside from obviously having a stake in this, I believe you would be the most able to assess the level of threat another Loki may represent to Doom’s law or the people of Latverian.

Loki drew a deep breath and held it for a moment before letting it out and nodding. “All right. Sounds like something of a plan... So tell me about this Robo-Loki. That one’s really got me curious,” she said, pointing to the images in the lower right.

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“I got a job!” Loki declared, arms raised in the air excitedly.
Verity stared at her, baffled and skeptical. “You got a job?” she repeated.

“Yes!” Loki agreed, trying for excitement one more time before giving up and dropping her arms. “I am officially a servant of God. I have a shiny shiny badge and everything.”

“... You are a god,” Verity pointed out, wandering over to flop herself on the couch.

“Yes, but Victor’s a God with a capitol G. I’m just pantheonic riffraff,” Loki explained, perching on the armrest.

Verity raised an eyebrow and gave an exaggerated shrug.

“... I’m a detective? I’m detecting things and solving crimes?” Loki tried.

“What kind of crimes?” Verity asked, scooting herself into a more upright position.

“The Loki Murders!” Loki said dramatically, wiggling her fingers.

Verity frowned. “... Is a Loki murdering people or are Lokis being murdered?” she asked.

“Both!” Loki said excitedly.

Chapter End Notes

I just want to say that I started planning this and had the first scene mostly written before Thors came out and then I was like 'ARGH! Now I'm going to look like such a jerk because it's way too close! Fuck it! I'm staying the course!' (although I have every confidence that a Loki is not the culprit in the current Thors story line because that would just be too cheap.) Also I am thinking of the (crazy) mindset with the 'aggressive' Lokis as being 'there can only be one' rather than just going out to slaughter; to the crazy ones, this has turned into the best of horrible games. So... yeah, 'Highlander' Lokis. That was my starting point.

I think this will end up less as chapters-with-an-eventual-destination and more of a series of connected shorts. I'll be using a combination of canonical Lokis and theoretical Lokis inspired by different Battleworld locations. Obviously Arcadia's been mentioned already as a 'this was a bad plan, asshole-Loki!' location and I plan to play with the Goddess of Secrets once or twice, and also play with the idea she brought into canon the instant she was introduced as the 'Goddess of Secrets': the 'God of Lies' descriptor is not a universal! I plan to keep any theoretical Lokis in the same ballpark though, with deceptive/subversive themes to their titles.

This fic is probably going to take place entirely in the null space of the Secret Wars' eight-year gap period, so I can just ignore the canon story developing in future times. That's eight years away- screw it! I also don't plan on spoiling any of the ongoing Battleworld series here because of that, most of the stories happening in the comics right now are still years away, with the possible exception of the anthology comics (Battleworld and Secret Wars Journal) which seem to be focused on filling in the in-between times *shrug*. Either way, the super dramatic shit happening in the main Secret Wars publication right now does not apply to this fic because it's still in the future.
The Importance of Homework

Chapter Summary

“We can discuss terms after Cowboyville,” Loki chuckled. “Come along, Have Hammer Will Travel, the wild frontier awaits.” He grabbed the Littlest Thor’s wrist.

“Hey--” Masterson started before Loki teleported them, then flinched sharply and yanked his arm away as they touched down on a dry, dusty road, looking around, slightly wide-eyed. “So... I guess you’ve got a few tricks then, huh?” he murmured.

Chapter Notes

This Chapter Guest Staring:

Doomgard: The Following Day

“And what shall I call you, new friend?” Loki asked, eyeing her new pet Thor. He was so young that he was still gangly despite being powered up by a knock-off Mjolnir. As predicted, the Lawspeaker had assigned the rookiest of rookies to be Loki’s assistant. But he did have the fabulous hair going, and for a Thor, looking like a walking Loral ad was half the battle.

“Masterson,” the junior Thor scout answered, looking Loki up and down, his eyes lingering a while on her chest.

“A pleasure, Master Masterson,” Loki said with a grin. “And I’ll be your Loki today.”

Masterson wrinkled his nose at the prefix. “I’m not a kid,” he protested.

Loki laughed. “It would seem that that is quite debatable. I didn’t realize they even let children your age try out for Thor.”

“Whatever,” Masterson snorted, glancing away.
“So, as I understand it, you’re going to take me on a tour of the Loki-related crime scenes today,” Loki said, clasping her hands behind her back and rocking on her feet.

“Yup. Grabbed the files on the way here,” Masterson replied, pout forgotten, and held up the four manila folders he was carrying. He fanned them out in front of him and cast Loki a lopsided grin. “Pick a card, any card.”

Loki smiled. The boy was entirely un-Thor-like, but that certainly didn’t have to be a bad thing. Loki lifted a hand and let it waver back and forth over the edges of the folders for a moment, feigning indecision. “Hmmm, the cosmos is telling me... yoink,” she pinched her fingers around one of the folders and random and pulled it out of Masterson’s hands.

“What’s a ‘cosmos’?” Masterson asked, pushing the other three folders back together and tucking them under his arm.

“Just a word whose meaning is long forgotten,” Loki shrugged, flicking the folder open and glancing at the pages inside. “Timely, Doom Valley. That’s nineteenth century, if I’m not mistaken. A gold rush, cowboy, wild west, good old boy, testosterone-fest.”

“Pretty much,” Masterson agreed.

“Mm, this is probably going to be like an auto-shop then. A girl will have a hard time finding anyone to take her seriously. The fairer sex is far too delicate for such repugnant topics as murder after all,” Loki noted, flipping the folder closed again and tapping the corner against her chin. “Rule one: know your audience. It’s a man’s world down in the valley and I’ve got a man’s work cut out for me. Derp derp.” Masterson made a startled sound in the back of his throat and took a step backward as Loki shifted to a male seeming. Loki tilted his head a little, smirking at the disgruntled look on Masterson’s face. “... What?” he asked.

“Damn,” Masterson scratched the back of his neck and grimaced, looking away. “I was gonna spend this stupid assignment staring at your ass. Now the whole day’s a bust.”

“You can still stare at my ass if you want,” Loki offered.

“Nope. Nope. You’ve ruined it,” Masterson said, screwing up his face into something he probably thought didn’t look like a pout.

Loki laughed. “I think I like you,” he decided.

“That would be a lot cooler if you still had tits,” Masterson sighed.

“Well, we can discuss terms after Cowboyville,” Loki chuckled. “Come along, Have Hammer Will Travel, the wild frontier awaits.” He took the other three folders from Masterson and tossed them on the desk, then grabbed The Littlest Thor’s wrist.

“Hey--” Masterson started before Loki teleported them, then flinched sharply and yanked his arm away as they touched down on a dry, dusty road, looking around, slightly wide-eyed. “So... I guess you’ve got a few tricks then, huh?” he murmured.

“I have all the tricks,” Loki replied with a smirk, looking around at the charming little Americana classic that was Timley. He flipped the folder in his hands open again, glancing at the first few lines. “Location was... Main and Third. All right, let’s go have a looksie.” He snapped the folder shut again and started walking as Masterson trailed after him.

And just like a cliché Hollywood classic, the people of Timely were clearing out of the streets,
abandoning porches, darting inside saloons and shops and otherwise hiding themselves away from the strangers invading their space. The presence of a Thor (even a wee little one) could be very intimidating in backwater districts too small or sparsely populated to merit a regular presence, and it belatedly occurred to Loki that a heinous murder had very recently been committed here by somebody who, in all likelihood, looked very much like him. Probably should have considered that earlier. But changing forms now (or adopting an illusion) out in public view, after he’d already been seen, was probably not going to win him too many hearts.

“I suppose the first try is always bound to be a bit sloppy,” Loki sighed softly.

“What do you mean?” Masterson asked next to him.

“Mm, just that I didn’t think this through very well. I think perhaps we should go for a little lower profile on the next one,” Loki replied as they arrived on one of the tributary streets where there were a few partially destroyed and charred buildings and obvious signs of powered battle. He handed the file folder to Masterson. “Would you please read to me while I look around? I’d like to sort of... process.”

“Kay,” Masterson agreed and stood in the middle of the depopulated dirt road, reading aloud from the collection of reports and witness testimonies in the folder as Loki slowly picked over the damaged buildings and craters. He was crouching to examine a dark place in the street, where a significant amount of blood had soaked into the dirt, when he heard two rather distinctive clicks, followed by Masterson’s outraged protest. “Hey! What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

Loki looked up and froze, staring at a winsome, corseted and hoop-skirted blonde with a revolver leveled at his head, standing beside a brunette youth who was glaring down the barrel of a rifle at him. Second-hand copies of memories supplied names to the faces that made Loki’s stomach clench and his blood run cold. Sigyn with the pearl-handled Colt. Vali with the Winchester.

“Hey! Drop ‘em! You see this hammer? I am a legit Thor and I am gonna arrest your asses!” Masterson squalled at them, brandishing his mace menacingly.

“Masterson, shut up!” Loki snapped.

“Hey! Wh--”

“Stand down!” Loki ordered.

“You don’t give me orders!”

“I just did, now shut up!” Loki snarled and then lifted his hands and rose slowly to his feet. “... This is a misunderstanding,” he said quietly, hands held above his head as he took a few slow, careful steps toward the grim-faced duo.

“Man who killed my husband,” Sigyn said in a delicate drawl with the sound of an expensive education behind it, “they say that he looked just like him, but shaved clean as an enlisted boy and wearing the strangest clothes ever seen.”

“So is there some place where everybody dresses like that and goes around killing each other?” Vali asked sardonically. “Or are you just crazy?”

So the victim had had a family. That was probably mentioned somewhere in the case-file that Loki should have reviewed before coming. Copied, re-recorded, grainy reruns of memories told Loki that Sigyn was one of the sweetest, most forgiving souls ever born and would probably stand up for her husband no matter what kind of monster he may be, but the fact that Vali was apparently upset by his
father’s death? Well, that tended to imply that the Loki of Timely wasn’t a total dick, and that suddenly made this murder mystery less fun and more sad. Crap.

“Okay... so I know this looks bad,” Loki said carefully. He could hear hoof beats approaching out in the main road and wondered if the rabble had found their pitchforks and torches and was on their way. He started inching closer to Masterson, getting ready to teleport both of them back to Doogard. “This is very truly the first time I have ever set foot in Timely. I am here at the behest of the Holy Eye to investigate the crime that took place here and bring your husband’s murderer to justice.”

“Oh, I reckon I could do that right now,” Vali sneered, keeping his rifle aimed at Loki’s head as he moved.

At that moment, a majestic, noble, white stallion came charging courageously around the corner. Also, there was a horse. Steve Rogers, in a white hat and gleaming, star-shaped badge, arrived on the scene and was leaping from the saddle before his steed had even drawn to a full halt, throwing himself into the crosshairs. O Captain, my Captain. “Now Sybil, ah know what y’all’re thinkin’,” the bravest of men said calmly, raising his left hand toward the victim’s family in a placating gesture. The other arm, Loki noticed, was trapped in a cast and sling against his chest. “But ah saw the man who done kill’t your husband, and ah’m fair certain he was older than this one,” he glanced over his shoulder at Loki.

Loki bit his tongue very hard to keep himself from bursting into giggles. Steve Rogers, you are adorable. “The man you saw, was he the one who broke your arm as well?” Loki asked calmly, digging his fingernails into his palms and reminding himself that this was all very serious and very sad. “You fought him?”

“That’s right,” Sheriff Rogers said, looking back at Loki again, though keeping his body turned toward ‘Sybil’ and her son as they reluctantly lowered their firearms, still looking highly suspicious. His eyes glanced toward Masterson, who hadn’t moved but was gripping his mace menacingly and glaring a warning at the family. “Y’all are from Doomgard?” the sheriff asked.

Loki nodded. “I’m Special Agent Storyteller. This is Officer Thunderstrike,” he said calmly, gesturing to Masterson. “The Holy Eye, Sheriff of Doomstadt, believes this murder to be tied to a series of slayings occurring across multiple districts. The Eye has assigned me to find the killer and put a stop to his rampage.”

Sheriff Rogers turned a little more and looked Loki up and down. “You’re a Thor?” he asked, clearly skeptical.

“No, sir. I’m a special agent,” Loki corrected. “I work in concert with the Thors on uniquely puzzling cases.”

The sheriff nodded again, still looking skeptical. “Ah see.”

“I’ve been given the reports filed by the Thors who originally responded on this matter,” Loki said carefully, “but I wonder, as local law enforcement, whether you may have conducted your own investigation, Sheriff Rogers?”

“Ah have,” the sheriff agreed.

“Would you perhaps allow me to review your reports and interview the eye-witnesses?” Loki asked. “I believe having the benefit of multiple perspectives will provide me with a better developed sense of what happened here. At this stage, it seems certain that the killer is still actively seeking victims
and traveling between domains by means that we are as of yet unable to track. Any assistance you can provide to bring this monster to justice would be greatly appreciated.”

Sheriff Rogers nodded sharply. “Come on down to the station. Ah’ll have my deputy round up the witnesses,” he said.

“Thank you, sir.” Loki watched as Sheriff Rogers mounted his horse and took a few cautious steps closer to the dead Loki’s family. “Missus... Sybil? Is there anything you and your son need?” he asked quietly, finding it very difficult to look her in the eye. “Money? Resources? A hired hand to help out around the homestead?”

“I need to put a bullet in the man who killed my husband,” Sybil replied coldly.

Loki nodded. “I will find this man. Wherever in the world he may be hiding, I will find him,” he assured her.

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When Verity opened the door, Loki (currently male) was leaning a hand against the jamb, looking tired. “So it turns out not all Lokis are terrible at families,” he noted.

“Aaand I’m guessing the one that’s not is one of the dead guys?” Verity asked.

“Yeeeaah,” Loki sighed. “His widow’s a classy lady and his son doesn’t hate him.”

Verity nodded and caught Loki’s arm just below the elbow. “Sounds like it’s cocktail hour,” she said, pulling him into the apartment.

“Also my pet Thor is, like, twelve,” Loki said as he let Verity guide him to the couch.

“Oh he is not,” Verity snapped, casting him a mild glare.

“Well, I’m exaggerating, but he is a kid. Maybe sixteen or seventeen at most,” Loki amended.

“They let teenagers be cops?” Verity asked, wrinkling her nose.

“’pparently he’s worthy,” Loki shrugged, dropping into the couch as Verity went to pull a bottle of cabernet out of the fridge.

“Do you like him?”

“Yeah. Short temper, but that’s Thors for ya,” Loki shrugged.

“Right,” Verity agreed, making her way back to the couch with the wine and a couple of glasses. “So which one was this family-man Loki?” she asked, sitting down and popping out the cork.

“This was Cowboy-Loki,” Loki answered, watching Verity pour. “Tomorrow we’re going to go over to Technopolis to check out Robo-Loki.”

“That was the girl one?” Verity handed him a glass.

“Yeah,” Loki nodded and took a sip of his wine.

“Do you have an idea of the girl-to-boy ratio on Lokis in general?” Verity wondered, pulling her feet up onto the couch and leaning against the armrest, facing Loki.
“Not sure yet,” Loki shook his head. “And of course, it’s probably not real firm, in the physical sense at least.” He shrugged again, a momentary grin at the corner of his mouth before he went back to just looking tired. “Would depend mostly on who raised them and what they decided to raise them as, I imagine.”

“Like, Odin could have just decided to raise the first Loki as a girl and boom, he’d have been a girl?” Verity asked.

Loki nodded. “Frost Giants are mostly androgynous. Odin chose to make Loki a son, rather than a daughter, maybe because he’d only had brothers and grown up in basically a constant war-zone, so he saw having a lot of sons as a strategic advantage... With hindsight though, I think raising him as a girl would have eliminated a lot of the biggest issues that turned into world-shattering problems with Loki.”

“Like what?”

“Like the sibling rivalry thing for starters,” Loki mused, eyes distant. “If he’d been Odin’s only (known) daughter, rather than a youngest son, that would have given him a well defined and unique role to play. As the youngest son, his role was understudy, which isn’t a real role so it’s confusing and frustrating and encourages him to put the leading man out of commission so that he’ll have something to do.”

“Hmm,” Verity leaned her head against the back of the couch and considered that.

“Maybe as I’m doing the Loki-census, I’ll conduct a gender-comparison,” Loki said, glancing back at Verity and putting on a weary, little smirk. “Hypothesis: Fem!Lokis are better adjusted.”

Verity wrinkled her nose. “Being a girl is hard. I think the girl-Lokis are just going to have different problems.”

“We’ll call that hypothesis B.”

“There’s no control group. This isn’t a valid scientific study.”

“But I have a peer. You can review it,” Loki protested, grinning a little more earnestly.

“Still invalid.”

“Damn.”

Chapter End Notes

I hadn't originally planned on using Li'l Thunderstrike (like most people, I forgot he existed.) But then I wrote that Loki gets a Thor-liaison and decided that Lawspeaker probably doesn't like having Loki all up in his shit (it's like when the FBI takes over a case in Law and Order and everybody gets mad) so he'd probably assign whatever Thor he views as most useless to doing it. So then I was like 'Let's see, which up-and-comer to make a rookie-Thor... Striker, maybe? No, wait, don't we already have a canonical mini-Thor somewhere?' and I remembered some obnoxious kid from one of the Fear Itself tie-ins and started poking around to remember who that was. Spent some time reading the Thunderstrike miniseries from a few years back (kind of reminded me of the
Marvel Boy miniseries that first introduced Noh-Varr, but I guess it didn't test as well with audiences since Li'l Thunderstrike just kind of disappeared again afterwards) and decided he'd make a good rookie-Thor sidekick for a couple chapters.

To people who are confused and saying 'Wait, isn't Vali blond?': the only place Vali has been portrayed as blond was the Prince of Power miniseries. His original character design (in mid-90s Hulk comics) was brunette and his most recent appearance (X-Factor Investigations) was back to his original character design. Also, the way teenage-Loki is drawn in Agent of Asgard and Young Avengers bares a very strong resemblance to the original Vali design, so I'm inclined to defer to that as the canon. I decided that Timely-Vali would be named Vale (English, derivative of Valentine) but then it never came up. *shrug*

I don't really have a plan/inspiration for the Technopolis Loki-murder and haven't even decided where burned-to-a-crisp-Loki should be from; I just needed a handful of casualties to establish that there was a pattern going. So, I'm not really sure what I'm going to do with the next part. I feel like I shouldn't just skip past it, but maybe I'll kind of montage it. Any opinions on which district burned-to-a-crisp-Loki should be from? Unavailables are Valley of Doom, Arcadia and Technopolis (obviously), Manhattan, Killville, Higher Avalon and... probably forgetting somewhere... *shrug* I don't know, big map, lots to work with. And Korvac Saga seems to indicate that there are more 'worlds' than just the official districts- stuff being annexed and such. Also, opinions on where the asshole-Lokis should be from and how many I ought to have? I plan for at least three (including the one that got curb-stomped in Arcadia) to be genuinely hunting and not just dueling/challenging counterparts when they stumble across them. I'm inclined to say that the hunters are all in the bat-shit-crazy camp, either paranoid enough to find the concept of alternate-selves very threatening or with more of a 'THIS IS THE BEST GAME LET'S PLAY!' mindset.
CSI: Battleworld

Chapter Summary

“You’re not... a woman?”

“Not always. She’s like half-and-half,” Masterson said. “Like, a time-share gender-bender or something.”

“That’s why some of the iterations are male and some are female,” Loki explained. “Just because there are both male and female Lokis doesn’t mean there’s a female iteration of you somewhere in Battleworld.”

Chapter Notes

Contains references (but no significant spoilers) to, and characters from, Secret Wars: Armor Wars, 1602: Witch Hunter Angela and A-Force.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Technopolis: Second Day of Crime Scene Review

“Robot-suits are not half as awesome as they sound,” Loki complained. “I have an itch on my leg. Robot-suits have caused this to be a great tragedy.” She was rooting around the roped-off crime scene, which had only been preserved as long as it had on Doomgard’s authority. If Technopolis’ natural order had been allowed to proceed unhindered, this would probably already be new retail or office space.

“At least you get to go back home to the real world at the end of the day,” Rhodes, Technopolis’ designated Thor, retorted. “We can’t fit the whole city in a decontamination chamber, so everybody else stays in the quarantine zone and stays in their suits.”

“That bites,” Masterson noted. “Do they sleep in these things?”

“Yes,” Rhodes agreed. “And they eat in their suits and they use the toilet in their suits. The suits don’t come off.”

“... How do they... y’know, sleep in them? Like, with a friend?”

“Masterson, are you twelve?” Loki demanded, laughing. “For pity’s sake, just say ‘fuck’! It’s not that hard!”

Masterson turned his robot-suited head to look at Loki for a moment. “... ‘Hard’? Seriously?”

“You are twelve!” Loki exclaimed.
“However you say it, the suit makes doing it a lot less fun,” Rhodes sighed.

“And yet not impossible...” Loki noted, tilting her head.

“You really think they could keep the quarantine if this place was a convent?” Rhodes snorted.

“Was the assailant in a suit?” Loki asked, poking at some exposed rebar on a mostly destroyed building.

“No. He seemed to have some kind of force field surrounding him,” Rhodes answered. “Which has now got all the major industry players trying to come up with a personal force field generator that can keep the plague out but allow for personal interaction.”

“Mm, doubt they’ll have much luck with that,” Loki said, looking at the spider-web pattern of cracks in the asphalt around a small impact crater. “It was definitely magic, not tech.”

Rhodes shrugged. “Most of them don’t believe in magic any more than they believe that Santa Strange puts presents under the Doom Tree,” he said.

“Ah yes. Dogmatic skeptics. They can be positively irrational sometimes,” Loki sighed.

“So some sorcerer dudes have a big old magic-fight uptown and they just pretend it didn’t happen?” Masterson asked.

“They try to explain it with tech,” Loki corrected. “They believe everything in the world can be explained with tech.”

“It’s the majority belief system around here,” Rhodes noted.

“That’s crazy,” Masterson said.


Rhodes turned to look at her, his robot face made it so she could only guess at the dirty look he was giving her. “What’s your problem with Stark?”

“You mean aside from being an incredibly egotistical, unrepentantly self-concerned, unparalleled hypocrite with ridiculously massive control-issues?” Loki asked, straightening up and tilting her head at him in order to offer some small form of expression. “Or am I completely wrong about that?”

Rhodes looked back at her silently for a moment. “He has redeeming qualities,” he said.

“He annoys me,” Loki offered.

“Yeah, I caught that. Thanks for clarifying,” Rhodes snapped. “When have you even met him?”

“Manhattan’s iteration of Stark annoys me,” Loki conceded.

Rhodes crossed his arms, and Loki could just imagine the glare he was giving her. “If we’re judging people by their parallel iterations, why am I not arresting you for being an insane murderer right now?” he demanded.

“Because I’m not a parallel of these psychos,” Loki replied with a shrug. “I’m the son of the son of the deceased parallel iteration of these psychos.”
Rhodes stared at her silently for a few seconds. “... ‘Son’?” he asked, confusion evident in his voice. “You’re not... a woman?” The walls of the robot suits were only about an inch thick; thin enough to follow the natural curves of the body inside of them.

“Not always. She’s like half-and-half,” Masterson said. “Like, a time-share gender-bender or something.”

“That’s why some of the iterations are male and some are female,” Loki explained. “Just because there are both male and female Lokis doesn’t mean there’s a female iteration of you somewhere in Battleworld.”

“... Actually, I hadn’t even considered that, but I’m glad to hear it’s not a thing,” Rhodes said slowly. “I don’t think I’d be comfortable with seeing what a woman-Rhodey looks like... Thanks for clearing that up.”

“No problem. Thanks for conceding that Tony Stark is at least kind-of an asshole,” Loki said.

“I did not concede that.”

“You totally did.”

**England: Third Day of Crime Scene Review**

“Such a wonderfully circular burn pattern,” Loki noted, standing at the center of a scorched clearing, deep in a dense English forest where every tree, shrub and blade of grass had been burned right to the ground. “What would you say, a twenty-foot radius? I bet if you looked from above, it would be geometrically perfect.”

“Do you want me to look?” Masterson asked.

“Sure. Why not. Go have a peek,” Loki agreed, crunching over the charcoal.

Masterson leapt into the air and up through the troposphere as Loki crouched down and dug around in the char at the epicenter of the burn. It was damp and starting to grow things; it had been a month since a nice little piece of lush, green forest had become a barren, blackened crime scene. He was examining the soot-mud between his fingers when he heard something that sounded suspiciously like the echo of a giggle. Horror movie stuff. Loki froze where he was, keeping his eyes trained on his mucky fingers, and listened. Snapping branches, distant footsteps, whispers, wordless echoes of child-like voices. Movement flickered in the corner of his vision.

Loki shook the majority of the mud from his hand and rose slowly to his feet, pausing for a moment before turning his head in the direction he’d detected movement. Of course nothing was there. Not even a moth flapping away. A few seconds later, there was a squishy thump as Masterson landed two yards away. “Yeah, it’s a perfect circle, it’s not even lumpy. I think some of the trees must have been burned right in half to make it that perfect,” he announced.

Loki nodded distractedly. “Thank you,” he said, studying the tree line intently. After a minute of staring, he saw a tiny light flicker and bob around for half a second before disappearing.

“What are you looking at?” Masterson asked.
“... If I were to hazard a guess, I’d say fairies,” Loki replied softly. “... Wait here. I’ll yell if they’re hostile. Or maybe scream.”

“Dude.”

“Just wait. Trust me,” Loki said, waving at him and crunching across the clearing toward where he’d seen the light. Masterson reluctantly but obediently stayed put as he reached the edge of the burn. Loki noticed a tree that had indeed been burned in half by the magical blaze. Then he plunged into the forest beyond, which, he noted as he got a few yards in, was much too dark for this time of day, regardless of the number of branches shading it.

Up ahead, he saw another flicker and adjusted his course accordingly. The forest became thicker and darker every step he took, and soon he was wading through waist deep underbrush and climbing over nurse-logs and stumbling on roots. The whispers and giggles grew louder, until he could almost make out words in them, as the white ladies kept guiding him forward. The sound of falling water caught Loki’s ears and he took a deep breath, reminding himself that this was a playful-forest-spirits thing, not a summer-horror-movie thing (why did those two very different things have the same sound library?) and knew that he was getting close.

The forest had gotten so thick that it was almost impossible to move through, but teleporting would likely offend his hosts, so he kept stumbling and scurrying and scrambling through the flora and ignoring the fauna crawling over his feet and sometimes momentarily exploring his pant-leg. Just as the trees and bushes became so close together they were nearly forming impenetrable fortifications, Loki broke through the wall and out the other side into a glen. He came to a stop in front of a small brook, where water was tumbling over a nice little basalt outcropping into a tiny, crystalline pool before continuing on its way. He gazed down into the pool for a few minutes, waiting, listening to the whispers.

The little, indistinct voices didn’t seem to be either crescendoing or dying, so Loki took the initiative and spoke, his eyes still trained on the pool. “You called?” he asked in a clear, calm voice.

The whispers abruptly died and there was a rustling to his right. He looked up just in time to see a nymph of rare loveliness melting out of the trees. Loki was so distracted by the fairy glitter and wooden branch/antlers and crawling ivy that it took him a moment to recognize a face that should have been all too familiar. “... Amora,” Loki whispered, watching her advance slowly toward him, the tiny plants in her path reaching out and clinging at her skirts as she passed them.

She tilted her head curiously at him. Her eyes were alien and strange; dark sclera with the luster of hematite and luminescent irises the color of the pool by Loki’s feet. “And thus wouldst thy name be ‘Loki’?” Fairy-Amora asked softly.

“Yes,” Loki nodded faintly. The fairy look really suited Amora. This outfit was so much hotter than the spandex and leather deal.

“Pray tell, how is this? From whence hast thou come and wherefor?” Amora asked, coming to a stop in front of him, so close they were breathing the same air and her breasts were brushing against his chest on the inhales.

“I am of Manhattan and also Doomgard,” Loki answered softly, standing still as he felt Amora’s hands wander slowly up his torso. “I was sent on the order of Holy Eye of Doomstadt to investigate the burn.”

“And what dost thou know of the burn?” Amora asked, sliding her hands behind Loki’s shoulders and leaning closer.
“I know in the loosest terms what caused it, or rather who,” Loki answered, trying not to shiver or get too turned on.

Amora nodded slowly, and Loki tried to look at her creepy eyes rather than her slightly parted lips. “This is wherefor the Lord didst send you?” she breathed.

“Yes,” Loki replied softly. “Did you see it? Can you tell me what happened?”

She nodded again, a hand traveling slowly down Loki’s side and finding its way to his rear as she pressed herself fully against him. “A pretender didst come into the wood. He bore the same name and the same face as that of my beloved. My lord could not abide such insult, and they fought. For a day and two nights they fought, and as the twilight of dawn began on the second night, my beloved was slain in the burn,” Amora explained in a sultry whisper and then ran her tongue along Loki’s bottom lip. “I didst offer the victor my lord’s crown and place at my side. He refused and insulted me.”

“Well... he’s very rude,” Loki mumbled, wondering exactly when he’d put an arm around Amora’s waist, and slid his fingers through her silky hair.

“Thou wilt stay, wilt thou not?” Amora murmured before nibbling at Loki’s earlobe. “Thou wilt join me in my bed?”

Correct answer: yes yes yes yes yes yes yes yes yes yes yes yes yes yes yes yes yes yes.

“I- I’m sorry. Doom has given me a task. I cannot refuse the God of all lands,” Loki tried very very hard not to stammer as Amora groped him shamelessly. “And... the villain who deprived you of a consort and offended you must be brought to justice for his loutishness.”


Loki’s brain stalled out for several seconds. There was some reason he shouldn’t stop for epic fairy sex right now. He was pretty sure there was. What was he forgetting? Something he’d left somewhere? Oh yes. “... I left a boy Thor at the burn site. He’ll be getting antsy. I... shouldn’t leave him alone there too much longer...” Loki mumbled sliding his hand along Amora’s firm yet soft thigh.

“Let him wait,” Amora hissed into Loki’s ear.

“I... I’m afraid he’ll get upset and call down lightning... He might cause more of your forest to be burned,” Loki argued reluctantly. “Perhaps... I could come back later?”

Amora planted two deep, slow kisses on Loki’s mouth before easing herself away and stepping back. “I shalt count the hours until thou art within me,” she said. She fondled her own breasts and gave a lusty sigh before vanishing.

Loki stared dumbly at the last spot she’d been standing. He couldn’t shake the feeling that he had just made a huge, idiotic mistake. He could have been in bed with a fairy sex-goddess right now! Loki balled his hands into fists and made a frustrated sound as he shook them out at his sides and then dropped down and plunged his head into the very cold pool of water next to him.

After a long period of regaining his composure, Loki finally teleported himself back to the burn site. When he arrived, Masterson was kicking charcoal-mud around, looking irritated. He started and looked up as Loki arrived, relief in his expression followed by suspicion and worry. “Why are you
all wet?” Masterson demanded, eyeing Loki’s dripping hair.

“I put my head in a stream,” Loki replied in an expressionless monotone.

Masterson wrinkled his nose in a confused grimace. “Why?”

“Because I just turned down a fairy-queen sex-goddess who was all kinds of coming on to me,” Loki said. “This is me not ditching you to have sex with an unbelievably hot forest nymph. This is the face of true friendship.”

Masterson stared at him blankly for a few seconds. “Dude, I totally would have ditched you.”

“I can respect that.”

Arcadia: Fourth Day of Crime Scene Review

“The crime scenes in the other districts were preserved,” Loki said, frowning. It wasn’t entirely true; only the Technopolis crime scene had been deliberately preserved, Timely just hadn’t gotten around to rebuilding and the England site was too far from any human settlements to have been disturbed.

“We kept it roped off for two weeks, and we haven’t repaved, but it rains pretty regularly here and the blood had mostly all washed away days before we took down the tape,” Carol Danvers replied with a shrug. “It’s the middle of the street market, we couldn’t keep it off-limits forever.”

Loki sighed. “My fault for coming into this late, I suppose. I’ll just have to work from the reports we have on file. And any your people might have recorded, of course.” She walked into the middle of the street, where the pavement was fractured and there was a slight depression. It wasn’t the kind of crater left from a single, devastating impact- more like one made from pressure, or repeated, smaller strikes in the same place. Like maybe a She-Hulk punching somebody over and over right here.

“This was where it ended?” Loki asked, looking up at Danvers.

“No. This was where one of the children had him pinned down for a while. That was before A-Force arrived on the scene,” Danvers answered.

Loki frowned and tilted her head. “One of the children?”

“Loki’s girls,” Danvers said with a nod. “The attacker just showed up out of the blue, possibly teleported in because I don’t see how anybody could not notice someone dressed like that. He went straight after Loki with a sword (she was at that booth over there, I think) and caught her by surprise,” she explained, pointing and gesturing around the market area. “She was hit pretty badly, it wasn’t fatal but there was a lot of blood. Her older girl went ballistic and managed to disarm the attacker and pin him down. She was wailing on him pretty hard when we got here.”

Loki nodded slowly, looking at the vendor booths, the layout of the street, a few places here and there where she could spot damage to the architecture which might have been caused by a super-powered fist-fight. Or it just as easily could be from the normal wear-and-tear of everyday life over time. This fight had to have been very well contained. A-Force was certainly a force to be reckoned with. And apparently Loki of Arcadia had offspring of unusual strength, even by godly standards, if a little girl managed to pin down a full-grown Loki. Well, Loki the First’s children had been bigger and stronger than him, so that wasn’t really surprising. Maybe it was more surprising that Loki of
Arcadia’s children apparently weren’t wolves or dragons or living-dead-girls.

“How did you end up killing him?” Loki asked. She knew the cause of death (internal bleeding and crushed organs caused by repeated blunt-force trauma) but wanted an eye-witness walk-through.

“Well, Jen got the last two hits on him, but he was basically dead and just not admitting it before A-Force even got there,” Danvers said. “We weren’t trying to kill him, he just would not go down so we had to keep hitting him to keep him contained. It was like he couldn’t feel the pain. I thought he was probably on drugs, but Doomgard took the body before our M.E. could do toxicology.”

“Nope, he wasn’t on drugs,” Loki sighed, meshing her fingers and stretching her arms above her head. “Just craaazy as cat-piss.”

“Ah,” Danvers said, looking a little more disturbed by that idea of somebody being just that crazy and violent naturally rather than amphetamined out of their skull.

“So, that booth?” Loki asked pointing. “And which direction did he come from?”

“Yes. Witnesses said he started coming at her (and screaming like a maniac) just from the middle of the street, so over there.” Danvers pointed.

“Masterson, would you stand there for a minute?” Loki asked, glancing back at her official (but not very official-looking because he’s a couple hundred pounds too small) escort.

“Sure,” Masterson nodded and walked over to the middle of the street as Loki headed for the booth Danvers had pointed out.

She turned to consider her position relative to Masterson and estimate how many steps apart they were, turning that information over in her head and hooking her thumbs in her pockets as she played the blocking of the scene out in her head.

“Morning, Loki. Just the usual today? Maybe I can tempt you with some nectarines? The best part of the season is upon us,” a cheerful voice called from the booth at Loki’s back. She turned around sharply and stared at the smiling, middle-aged woman who was standing in the middle of a little cove built of folding-tables covered in produce.

“I’m... sorry? What?” Loki asked.

The woman’s smile faltered, replaced with a confused look. “Oh. Excuse me, miss. I mistook you for someone else,” the woman said, looking at Loki carefully. “Do you... have an older sister, maybe?”

“... Yes. I do,” Loki said, taking a step backwards, feeling extremely uncomfortable for some reason she couldn’t really define. “Sorry, I have to... I need to go,” she stammered and then spun around and fled back across the street to where she’d left Danvers.

Masterson was wandering back at the same time and gave Loki an odd look. Did she seem flustered? “... That woman just called me Loki. And smiled at me. At the same time,” Loki explained lamely.

“... Yes. I do,” Loki said, taking a step backwards, feeling extremely uncomfortable for some reason she couldn’t really define. “Sorry, I have to... I need to go,” she stammered and then spun around and fled back across the street to where she’d left Danvers.

Masterson was wandering back at the same time and gave Loki an odd look. Did she seem flustered? “... That woman just called me Loki. And smiled at me. At the same time,” Loki explained lamely.

“Well you look a lot like the attacker’s target...” Danvers said, giving an awkward little shrug. “It’s... pretty uncanny, actually.”

“... Right,” Loki agreed, nodding. “I... I guess I should probably interview her...” she mumbled, feeling a little queasy at the prospect. She wasn’t looking forward to this. Maybe she was even dreading it. Maybe that’s why she’d put Arcadia off until last. Maybe it was easier to process and reconcile dead Lokis than to face a not-dead one. But this was what Stephen had really hired her to
do, wasn’t it? Get a read on all of the not-dead Lokis and assess their threat-potential. Loki wondered how many not-dead Lokis she was going to have to talk to. How many times would she need to go take stock of just how bad a Loki can be? How low can you go?

“I told her there was going to be another inquiry from Doomgard today. She should be at home,” Danvers was saying. “We can go now if you want.”

Want? That definitely wasn’t what she wanted. “Sure. That’d be great,” Loki said, and she could hear the falter in her own voice.

As Danvers started leading the way, Masterson moved to Loki’s side and gave her a concerned look. “Are you okay?” he whispered.


“All the ones are that much harder?” Masterson asked, raising an eyebrow.

Loki shrugged slightly. “I’m sort of used to dead Lokis, I suppose.”

“That’s kinda messed up.”

“Probably,” she agreed.

Chapter End Notes

Technopolis' Rhodey is apparently both their district's Thor and also the city's police chief or something. He's working some serious overtime. He's basically wearing an armor version of Thor's classic outfit and runs around being angstly and noir. Technopolis has some kind of very poorly defined/explained plague that I would hazard to guess is nanotech and apparently wearing armor keeps it at bay despite the fact that they frequently have their faces exposed so apparently the armor's not filtering the air and so I have no idea what kind of stupid logic they're using there besides 'SCIENCE!' or some bullshit.
'White ladies' is a name for the fairy-lights that either lure travelers off their path or guide lost travelers back to their path (depending on whether you're dealing with asshole fairies or nice fairies). Also called 'will of the wisp'. Fairy-Amora's character design for Witch Hunter Angela is ridiculously hot. Seriously. So much hotter than corset and novelty-tights Amora.
Arcadia's Captain Marvel looks to be part of She-Hulk's staff in A-Force. I'd probably call her the chief of police if I were to guess. Also, I promise next chapter is picking up right where this one left off, and yes, this is eight-years-ish before the start of the A-Force comics.
Ode to Funhouse Mirrors

Chapter Summary

“... You’re the goddess of secrets?” Loki asked softly.

“Yes. Aren’t you?” Arcadia-Loki nodded.

“No... Kind of the opposite. Stories are my domain,” Loki said.

“... Stories?” Arcadia-Loki asked softly, and a slight tension came into her voice and posture.

“I'm not a gossip though. I can keep a secret,” Loki assured her and could see Arcadia-Loki relax again.

“But you are Loki?” she asked, her voice switching from nervous to curious.

Chapter Notes

Minor references to Avengers Arena and A-Force.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

It was an elegant Queen Anne manor house with a colorful and meticulous paint job. The lawn was green and weedless, there was a swing hanging from the tree and a small rose garden. A rose garden. With roses. Loki stared at the roses, not quite able to parse the data. Erda had been very fond of roses. Loki didn’t suppose Erda had survived the end, since the Earth itself didn’t.

She followed Danvers up the front walk, which was cobbled with two different colors of stone, artfully arranged to look random. The doorbell was the old-timey pull-cord kind and Loki could hear it jingling inside as Danvers tugged on the rope. Little feet running over hardwood floors followed, and a moment later the door opened to reveal a small Japanese girl, whose eyes were quickly drawn to Loki and she frowned, staring. Loki stared back, baffled, as Danvers crouched to the little girl’s level, smiling gently.

“Hey, Nico. Could you tell Loki that the people from Doomgard are here to talk to her?” she said.

Loki turned over the name in her mind as the little girl nodded, smiling a bit shyly at Danvers. Nico... Minoru? Loki tried to picture the tiny child as a seventeen year old, covered in her own blood, beating other teenagers to death. It became a little easier when the child turned toward the interior of the house and shrieked at a truly unholy volume, “LOOOKIII! THE THORS ARE HEEERE!”

The adults (and Masterson) winced, ears ringing in the wake of the little girl’s scream. Loki kept trying to process the idea that the children Danvers had referenced as ‘Loki’s girls’ included a tiny human. Loki of Arcadia was adopting orphans. There was a pleasing symmetry to it, but it was also disturbing. Like the roses and the pretty little house and the vendor in the market smiling at her. Loki
of Arcadia was running a very deep con.

After a minute or so, more footsteps could be heard from inside; two pairs, Loki thought, one with a shorter, quicker gate that stopped a ways off while the other continued. “Sweetie, remember when we talked about indoor-voice/outdoor-voice?” called a female voice that made Loki clench her teeth, because it was completely familiar but not coming from somebody else. A few seconds later, the face to match it appeared around the door.

Arcadia-Loki’s eyes went to Loki like a magnet and her eyebrows went up very slightly, but she was obviously reigning in her reaction. “Oh, well aren’t you pretty,” she said with an amused smirk. “You don’t look like a Thor.”

She was dressed almost exactly like he had when he was wearing Sif’s stolen body. That thought made Loki feel a bit ill and she looked the woman over very closely to reassure herself that she wasn’t looking at a stolen Sif now. “I’m not. Special Agent Storyteller, under the authority of the Doomstadt Ministry of Sorcery, in association with Doomgard. This is Officer Thunderstrike. We’re here to interview you about the attack,” Loki said in an even, professional tone.

The sound of small feet running across the floor was accompanied by a vicious (if a bit squeaky) shout. “We already told you babosas what happened! Go away!” A little Latina came into view around the door and latched onto Arcadia-Loki’s waist, glaring up at the intruders and then freezing when she spotted Loki, eyes going wide for a second before narrowing suspiciously.

Loki was tentatively putting a name to the face when Arcadia-Loki confirmed her theory. “America, that’s enough,” she admonished gently, patting a hand on the little girl’s head. “Of course, we’re happy to cooperate. Please come in. Can I get you anything?” Arcadia-Loki turned into the house, gesturing for them to follow.

“We’re fine,” Loki said, watching tiny-America, who glared over her shoulder as she hopped along, still stuck to Arcadia-Loki’s waist.

Arcadia-Loki led them into a parlor that was all oak chairrail and vintage elegance. They were seated on fancy Victorian chairs and Loki thought that the whole thing was rather dollhouse-like; staged perfection and loveliness. It was cute. Arcadia-Loki had a cute house and a cute garden and cute little girls and a cute life. It made Loki’s skin crawl. Whatever plot this was, America and Nico weren’t dolls, and when this trap snapped shut, Loki didn’t want them ending up either bait or prey.

“So, you had some additional questions about the attack, Agent Storyteller?” Arcadia-Loki asked sweetly, settling on a settee with America perched rigidly at her side, continuing to glare, while Nico sat herself cross-legged atop an ottoman.

“Did you know your attacker?” Loki asked, folding her hands in her lap and watching Arcadia-Loki carefully.

“I believe I mentioned in the initial reports that I’d never seen him before,” Arcadia-Loki replied, smiling benignly.

“Yeah! We told you already!” America snarled.

“America, shhh,” she cosseted the girl’s shoulder.

“Do you believe the attack was random?” Loki asked.

“I’m not really sure,” Arcadia-Loki said. She bit her lip for a moment and shook her head. “I think he might have said my name, but, well, it all happened so fast, and he was raving like a madman...”
She was lying through her teeth, and she wasn’t as good at it as she really should have been, Loki thought. “I’m told you were injured during the attack.” Loki said.

“Oh. Yes, magic put me to rights, but it was very unsettling,” Arcadia-Loki agreed, looking away and shifting awkwardly.

“Can you describe the injury, please?” Loki asked.

Arcadia-Loki faltered, biting her lip again, feigning discomfort. “Well, I... Agent Storyteller, as a woman, I’m sure you can appreciate the delicate nature of subjects pertaining to the body...” she demurred. “I’m- I’m a little uncomfortable discussing it in mixed company...” Her eyes glanced up at Masterson and a delicate blush displayed on her cheeks.

Masterson looked slightly alarmed, probably not entirely sure why he should be concerned beyond an adolescent boy’s visceral terror of female topics. “Should I... wait outside?” he asked awkwardly, looking at Loki.

Loki shook her head. Arcadia-Loki was being deliberately cryptic and suggestive. They could waste ten minutes dancing around, waiting for Arcadia-Loki to coyly propose what she was angling for, or Loki could beat her to the next argument and save everybody a lot of time. “The children don’t need to relive this. Perhaps I could speak to you privately, Ms. Loki?” she suggested.

“Thank you for understanding,” Arcadia-Loki said, nodding and rising to her feet as America grabbed at her and protested. “I’ll be fine, America. Agent Storyteller is a noble officer of Doom’s Law. Why don’t you ask Officer Thunderstrike to arm-wrestle you?” she suggested.

Masterson seemed to be similarly concerned by the proposed course. “Hey, are you sure you should-”

Loki caught him by the shoulder and leaned in to whisper. “She wants to tell me something, but not in front of Danvers or the girls,” she explained. “Keep them busy for me. I’ll find out what she knows.”

Masterson chewed his lip and gave Loki a look that wasn’t exactly worried. “You’ll scream if you need help?”

“I will scream so loud,” Loki assured him.

“Kay.”

Loki got up and followed Arcadia-Loki out of the room, down the hall, and into a pretty little kitchen with the same dollhouse perfection and cuteness as the parlor. As the door swung shut behind her, Loki asked again, “Did you know your attacker?”

“Your phrasing is problematic,” Arcadia-Loki replied, turning around and looking at Loki, her Stepford Wife blithe charm falling away and being replaced by a keen, calculating look, not unlike a cat considering a birdfeeder. “Did I know him? Certainly not. Did I know who he was? Do I know who you are, ‘Agent Storyteller’?” She raised an eyebrow and crossed her arms. “I am a little bit clever, you know.”

Loki nodded slowly. “Fair enough.”

“And to answer your other questions: firstly no, I don’t believe for a moment that it was ‘random’. Secondly, he caught me by surprise and hacked into me with a massive sword before I could mount a decent defense. Cut halfway through my gut. It was excruciating,” Arcadia-Loki listed brusquely,
turning away and drifting a few steps, tension in her shoulders. “And now I have a question for you, ‘Agent Storyteller’. What happened when the sky broke open?” she asked.

Loki stared at her back, wondering if all the Lokis had resisted the amnesia that the rest of Battleworld had succumbed to. “I’m sorry?”

Arcadia-Loki turned around, took three long, fast steps across the floor and grabbed Loki by the arms, just above the elbow, staring into her eyes up close, her brow knit. “The sky broke open and everything ended. Everyone died. I saw it end. I felt it,” she said, her voice changed, betraying stress, desperation. “And then I was in the street, here, in Arcadia, staring up at blackness... Why is the sky black? There were lights in it before. I know there were, but I... I can’t remember what they were called...” she trailed off into a whisper, her eyes pleading.

“... Stars... the little ones were called stars,” Loki whispered back, staring into mirrors of her own eyes and feeling suddenly as shaken and lost as Arcadia-Loki looked.

“And ‘moon’,” Arcadia-Loki said eagerly. “There was ‘moon’ too... What was ‘moon’?”

“It- It was a natural satellite, orbiting the Earth,” Loki explained, not entirely sure why she was doing so. “Earth was the world you used to live on, or maybe near. In association with. You might have been in Asgard, which might not have been on Earth, but was intrinsically tied to it. The moon circled the planet every twenty-eight days and reflected light from the sun. The sun was the source of light and heat that the Earth orbited.”

Arcadia-Loki sighed, looking relieved. “... Thank you,” she whispered, letting go of Loki’s arms and easing back a step.

“... How did you remember ‘moon’?” Loki asked.

She let out a soft chuckle and shook her head. “Because I am the goddess of secrets and ‘moonless nights’,” she explained. “... So if there is now no moon, are there no moonless nights? Or are all nights moonless?” She let out another bitter little laugh and bit her lip.

Loki frowned, watching the body language. Something was wrong; was it just the moon she was upset about? The loss of a secondary title? “What else do you remember?” Loki asked.

Arcadia-Loki was quiet for a while, eyes closed and hands rested on her hips. “... When I awoke, I could feel it all slipping away. I could feel the things I knew being stolen from me... I wrote down what was most important. The things I couldn’t lose even if everything else was taken...” she whispered.

“... What did you write?” Loki asked.

Arcadia-Loki took her hands off her hips and wrapped them slowly around her abdomen, hugging herself. “Before the sky opened... there was... a tiny life inside of me,” she said, her voice small and fragile. “... When I woke... I was empty.”

Loki’s blood ran cold. She’d known that some people- most people- were lost, of course they were, when the multiverse fell apart at the seams. People fell through the cracks. Some lived, some didn’t. Sometimes people who had been in the same city, the same building, standing right next to each other before the calamity, had fallen on opposite sides of the gap between life and oblivion. But for an expectant mother to come through without her expectancy? A fetus was weak, fragile- even gods had miscarriages. The end of the world must have been too much for the developing godling. There were an infinite number of factors that could have damaged the baby, and Doom hadn’t brought
As the gravity of such a disappearance struck her, Loki considered maybe starting to believe that the amnesia really was more merciful than manipulative. “... I’m so sorry,” she whispered.

Arcadia-Loki made a sound of trying to suppress a sob and tilted her head back, looking up at the ceiling. “... There was a little boy... He’d only just started to walk and he wanted to walk everywhere,” she continued in a shaking, wavering voice. “But when the sky cracked, he wanted to be picked up. I had him in my arms... Then he was gone.” She failed to hold in the sob this time, and Loki could see tears starting to escape her eyes. “... I can’t remember his name... By the time I started writing, it was too late...”

“... I’m so sorry,” Loki said again. She watched her mirror image cry for several elongated seconds before glancing back toward the door, where down the hall America Chavez and Nico Minoru were diligently distracting Masterson and Danvers for their foster-mother. “... The girls.”

“... Nobody claimed them... In the first few days, everything was in chaos, and some still remembered that things were not as they should be...” Arcadia-Loki explained quietly. “Jennifer helped me go through Arcadia’s records and we could find nobody with names to match the girls’. So... I built my house and I brought them home... And by the end of the week, nobody could remember that they and I hadn’t always been right here.”

“... You adopted them to replace--”

“I will not replace my children!” Arcadia-Loki snapped, glaring. “I will not forget what was stolen from me!” She looked away, swallowing and trembling. “... But I don’t want to be alone... Without my son... without my little daughter who never saw the world... Without my husband...” She sniffled and pulled out a lace handkerchief to dab at her eyes. “... I was a mother without children and they were children without a mother...” she whispered.

“I’m sorry.”

“What happened when the sky broke open?” Arcadia-Loki asked again.

“... The world ended,” Loki said, wondering exactly how deceased she would be if Doom found out she was divulging the divine secrets of the new cosmos. “All worlds ended. Universes filled with stars were torn apart by creatures crueler and more powerful than gods,” she explained, and then, so as not to blaspheme, so as not to give Arcadia-Loki anything to hang a vendetta on: “Doom killed them all. He was a human before, but he was the cleverest human of all. He challenged the universe-killers and destroyed them and took their power into himself. He used it to save what was left, what he could... That’s Battleworld. It’s everything that he could scrape up, everything that hadn’t been completely shattered, from dozens of broken universes, glued together and forced into something planet-shaped.”

Arcadia-Loki was silent for a while, staring at the tile floor. “... Whom am I to hate?” she whispered.

“The universe-killers,” Loki supplied promptly. “They stole from us all. They’ve been punished but... I only wish they had suffered a million lifetimes of torture for what they did.”

Arcadia-Loki turned slightly and looked up at her. “... What did you lose?” she asked.

“... A family as well,” Loki said softly. “I- I didn’t have children, but I’ve been orphaned,” she explained carefully, stumbling over the thoughts, trying to form them into a cohesive story. “I was
made-- My progenitor made me out of sorcery and dreams, rather than the old fashioned way... I was born an hour before the world ended. I didn’t have time to familiarize myself with that existence before it was pulled out from under me, but my maker bequeathed all his memories to me. He didn’t do it to be cruel, but now instead of being able to blithely embrace Battleworld as all that is right and real, I’m left missing everything that he loved... His parents, his siblings, his new baby sister... She was an infant fire-god, just like me... We would have had so much fun together... But I’m not sure if she made it. If she was strong enough to make it.”

Loki had let herself get distracted by her own narrative; she’d gotten so caught up, she didn’t notice Arcadia-Loki move until she was right there. And then Loki was being hugged, and she didn’t quite know what to do about that. This was getting too weird. Loki started to wonder if the pretty house and the roses and the swing maybe weren’t a con after all. She remembered something Arcadia-Loki had mentioned earlier, something that had gotten lost in all the discussion of apocalypses and murdered children. “… You’re the goddess of secrets?” Loki asked softly.

“Yes. Aren’t you?” Arcadia-Loki nodded, still holding her, and it was nice, actually.

If a Loki of a new generation could be something other than the God of Lies, it stood to reason that a Loki of an entirely different universe could be too. That hadn’t occurred to Loki before, but the logic was solid enough, and it wasn’t as though Arcadia-Loki’s title was entirely removed from that of Loki’s predecessors, it still held deceptive connotations, she was still a trickster, but secrets were defensive rather than offensive like lies. Loki shook her head, trying to refocus on the conversation, on answering Arcadia-Loki’s question. Because the exchange of secrets required reciprocity, imbalance would breed discord. “No... Kind of the opposite. Stories are my domain,” Loki said.

“... Stories?” Arcadia-Loki asked softly, and a slight tension came into her voice and posture.

“I’m not a gossip though. I can keep a secret,” Loki assured her and could feel Arcadia-Loki relax again.

“But you are Loki?” she asked, her voice switching from nervous to curious as she let Loki go and stood back a little, looking at her carefully.

Loki nodded. “I am-- I was the ‘new’ Loki... Three Lokis that lived and died before me were called the ‘God of Lies’. My predecessor was tired of it, tired of being type-cast. He never wanted to be a villain. He wanted to be better. He... made me to be better than he thought he could be,” she found her voice faltering a little as she finished.

“... A parent dreams of seeing their child rise higher than themselves,” Arcadia-Loki said gently.

Loki dipped her head a little, her throat feeling tight. “… I never got to meet him. He sacrificed his life to create mine, so I never got to speak to him... I couldn’t ask if he was happy with how I came out... If he was proud of me.”

She was being hugged again. “Any father would be proud of you, Storyteller,” Arcadia-Loki murmured, petting her back gently.

Loki momentarily debated whether to correct the word ‘father’, but had to concede that there was nothing inherently inaccurate about Arcadia-Loki’s choice of nouns. And maybe it was even insightful. Maybe the biggest difference between Loki and the Lokis who had come before her, was that she was the first one to be wanted, intentional, loved by the god who gave her life.

“... You’re not like the ‘real’ Loki, the first one, from my world,” Loki said softly, wondering, as the new embrace ended, whether Arcadia-Loki had been wanted by whomever she had called ‘Father’.
“Was the one of your world like the one who attacked me?” Arcadia-Loki asked.

“Probably not quite as far gone. I doubt he would have gone after you in public,” Loki shrugged and shook her head. Although, maybe the one who attacked Arcadia-Loki hadn’t been a ‘God of Lies’ either; maybe he was something less subtle, more overtly aggressive. God of Jealousy? God of Rapacity? God of Irrational Bitch-Fits? “But yeah, he’d probably be out Highlandering it up too. He’d just be doing it more quietly,” Loki conceded.

Arcadia-Loki gave her a slightly puzzled look. “Highlander?”

“Oh, that’s, yeah, I mean, harboring some kind of twisted belief that he needs to be the only Loki. That the others are a threat to his identity or something stupid like that…” Loki grinned to herself.

“Ah.”

“… God Doom has tasked me with taking stock of, and keeping track of, all the Lokis in Battleworld,” Loki said slowly, changing gears, again considering the value that reciprocity would hold to a Goddess of Secrets. Arcadia-Loki had given her a lot of useable intelligence in the last few minutes, both intentionally and simply by defying Loki’s expectations so completely; she had earned some return on that. “Assessing what threat they might pose to society and such. That starts with figuring out which ones are going around duking it out for Loki-supremacy. So, in part I’m to put a stop to the killings, and in part I’m to make sure all the Lokis who are still breathing know their place.”

“And now you will go before God Doom and tell him all you have learned of me,” Arcadia-Loki said calmly, a hint of flinty coldness coming into her eyes.

“I’m going to go and tell him whether I believe you represent a clear and present danger,” Loki corrected, feeling awkward again. “Which is no, because you’re not out of your mind like some Lokis, and because secrets like to keep to themselves. I think that while the things you know might be dangerous to Doom’s Law, you’re probably not going to tell anybody, because if everyone knew, you’d lose some very powerful secrets,” she said, to which Arcadia-Loki smirked, the coolness in her eyes fading. “So I’ll give my assessment of your not-immediately-threatening nature, and I expect I’ll be coming around to check in now and again, make sure you’re not plotting to destroy or take over the world. That sort of thing.”

Arcadia-Loki looked bemused. “Why would I want to do something like that?” she asked.

Loki gave an exaggerated shrug. “You’d be surprised,” she said, and then gave a little puff of a sigh. “Is there anything else you need to know or tell me before I go collect My Little Thor and start writing a report?”

“… Will others come?” Arcadia-Loki asked. “You implied that there were more of… us who are like that one.”

Loki nodded. “I’m not sure how many yet,” she admitted. “I recommend a spell to shield yourself from being located by blood. And just... be careful. I’ll- I’ll try to keep you updated, when I have a better idea of the numbers we might be dealing with.”

“I would appreciate that,” Arcadia-Loki said softly.

There were a few seconds of silence and then Loki moved forward and this time she initiated the hug herself. “… Thank you for being my first,” she whispered. “I can’t tell you how much it means to me that you’re not horrible.”
Arcadia-Loki laughed, hugging her back. “I think you must have somewhat low standards if that is your primary criteria for being pleased, my dear.”

“Yeah. The bar was so low back home, it was like a world champions of limbo tournament,” Loki agreed.

Arcadia-Loki patted her shoulder as they broke apart again, and then put an arm around her, starting to lead her back to the door. “Now, I’m a little worried about how long we’ve left our charges alone. I think your Thor may need rescuing,” she said.

Her prediction was accurate. When they returned to the parlor, it was to find Masterson sprawled on the floor with little America straddling his back and pulling his arm up between his shoulder-blades, demanding, “SAY UNCLE!”

“UNCLE! Doom almighty, UNCLE!” Masterson shouted, slapping the floor with his free hand.

“Say it again!”

“America, that’s enough. Let him up,” Danvers said sternly, catching the little girl around the waist and plucking her off of her pray.

“Oh America, that’s an outside game,” Arcadia-Loki sighed.

“America’s stronger than a Thor!” Nico crowed, standing on top of the ottoman and bouncing.

“Well, he’s only a little Thor,” Loki pointed out, grinning so hard it hurt.

“Oh thank Doom your back,” Masterson gasped, sitting up and rubbing his arm as Loki crouched down next to him.

“Aw, you’re so good with kids,” Loki cooed.

“Let’s never come here again.”

“And also never speak of Masterson getting totally pwned by a tiny little girl?” Loki asked.

“It never happened.”

Loki snickered and patted Masterson on the shoulder. He winced. “It’s all right. I think we’re done here for now. The Eye will be wanting to hear my findings, and I suppose I need to come up with a strategy for moving forward with the case,” she sighed.

“There’s still a case?” Danvers asked, frowning in concern. “I thought this visit would put a close to the issue.”

“Unfortunately, things are a bit more complicated than that,” Loki said, shaking her head and offering Masterson a hand to his feet. “The incident here was part of a string of related attacks happening all across Latverian, and we have reason to believe there are multiple aggressive elements involved.”

“That’s terrible,” Danvers glanced at Arcadia-Loki and then back at her. “Is there something we can do?”

“I’ll let you know as soon as I figure that out,” Loki said with a shrug. “I’ve only been on the case four days and we don’t have very much information yet.”
Danvers nodded slowly, looking less than happy with the answer. “I’ll let Jen know.”

“We appreciate your cooperation. Our Lord Doom wishes to see this matter resolved before anyone else is hurt,” Loki said, dipping her head to Danvers and then Arcadia-Loki. “We’ll do our best to keep Arcadian law enforcement in the loop.”

Stephen was in his study within the Doomstadt palace, reviewing the list of arbitrations scheduled for the next day and the written statements submitted by the involved parties, when he heard the brass knocker rapping against his door. He sighed, letting yet another complaint filed by Baroness Cochran against the Hydra Empire drop to his desk and giving a small flick of his wrist. The doors opened to find Loki dressed in a mini-skirted business suit and plastic-framed glasses with her hair pulled into a tight updo and a file folder tucked under one arm. Stephen nearly groaned, trying to decide whether Loki’s apparent affinity for playing dress-up meant that she wasn’t taking her assignment seriously or that she was taking it too seriously.

“Why are you wearing that?” Stephen asked, holding back a heavy sigh.

Loki looked down at herself, feigning confusion. “I’m making a report to the boss,” she said, looking back up. “It’s important to dress appropriately.”

“... Putting aside for a moment that you don’t work in a corporate office setting, mini-skirts are not considered appropriate business attire outside of network television,” Stephen said. “You’re a special agent, not Ally McBeal.”

“Who?” Loki asked, giving him a blank look.

Stephen suppressed a grimace. It wasn’t that old. “You said you have a report. What did you find out?” he asked.

“About the attacks, nothing yet. I’ve only just finished reviewing the reports and previous crime scenes,” Loki said, walking over to Stephen’s desk and holding out the folder. “But in regard to the other thing, I’ve interviewed my first Loki today and written up my assessment.”

Stephen took the folder and flipped it open, glancing at the photo paper-clipped to the inside of the front cover. “This was the target in Arcadia?”

“Yes. And it was a particularly useful first encounter because in addition to familiarizing myself with this particular Loki, it has also given me a very important piece of information about Lokis in general,” Loki said, clasping her hands behind her and bouncing on her toes.

“Oh?”

“Some of them have different titles,” Loki said.

“Titles?” Stephen raised an eyebrow.

“They’re not all the God or Goddess of Lies,” she clarified. “Arcadia-Loki is the Goddess of Secrets.”

Stephen nodded slowly, leafing through the report Loki had written. Five pages, by hand, perfect penmanship. “And exactly what significance would you attribute to that?” he asked. He knew that the nomenclature of a mythoform could have a great impact, but he was curious to hear Loki’s take.
“The title of a god isn’t just empty words (although, that phrase itself is nonsense, words are never empty.) A god’s title reflects their primary attributes (and secondary titles will reflect secondary attributes) and a god’s attributes define function and function defines personality,” Loki explained. “As example, to be the God of Lies, one must go around lying to people. Lies create chaos and discord, thus the God of Lies becomes a God of Chaos and Discord. Chaos and discord are destructive, thus the God of Chaos and Discord becomes a God of Destruction. Ergo, Loki lies: Asgard burns. Furthermore, lying, chaos, discord and destruction are not simply functions that follow Loki, he embodies them in his temperament and behavior. Lying and destruction are compulsive, chaos and discord are systemic.”

“And a Goddess of Secrets?” Stephen prompted.

“Secrets are quiet. Secrets are shy. A keeper of secrets keeps her own council and avoids confrontation. She plays everything close to her vest and only shares anything with those she trusts,” Loki answered, looking down. “A secret-keeper doesn’t go looking for trouble, she hides from it.”

“So you believe she’s not dangerous?” Stephen asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Well...”

“Well?”

“As I am the God of Stories, I absorb and retain information. Thus failing to forget all the big and small things that everyone else forgot,” Loki said, glancing away and rocking on her feet. “A Goddess of Secrets similarly locks in information. But she doesn’t feel any urge to share it like I do.”

“... You’re saying she also remembers the calamity?” Stephen asked, wondering if that might be a trait of all Lokis and if so, that could become a very serious problem at any moment.

“Not clearly, not as well as I do,” Loki said. “But bits and pieces. And there’s one particular detail that, if we do see any trouble out of her, it will definitely be from that.”

“Stop being cryptic,” Stephen frowned at her.

“Before the calamity, she had a family. Husband and children. They didn’t make it through,” Loki said and then looked away again, chewing her lip. “Upon learning this I... breached protocol a little tiny bit in order to enact some quick damage-control...”

Stephen swallowed back quiet dread and gave her a hard stare. “What did you do?”

“... I gave her a secret,” Loki said softly, her eyes glancing up while her head remained tilted downwards, giving Stephen a guilty look, and he couldn’t tell if it was genuine or feigned. “I told her a story. She asked me who to hate, so I told her that her world was destroyed by cruel and terrible gods, and that the cruel and terrible gods were killed by the cleverest of humans, thus did he become an almighty god.”

“... Loki...”

“But it was important!” Loki protested. “I can extrapolate how she thinks. Eventually, when she had stewed long enough to be really, really angry, she was going to look around and ask herself who had benefitted from the apocalypse. And when she looked, she would see one man who had won everything, and she would be very suspicious,” Loki explained, her voice quick and nervous. “I told her a story that explained how this man could have benefitted so greatly without being the orchestrator. Further, I told her that Doom was the one who meted out punishment to the bastards that murdered her family. Thus, not only have I assured her that God Doom is not her enemy, I’ve
made him her hero.”

Stephen rubbed his hands over his face, feeling a headache setting in.

“I couldn’t take the time to run it by you!” Loki said desperately. “If I hadn’t told her in the moment and immediately, she would have suspected fabrication! This is why I’m useful! I can make instinctive decisions like this, and they are right! Yes, I didn’t ask permission and that’s very irksome from your perspective, but there was a valid reason I couldn’t take time out to ask permission, and permission or not, this was the right call,” she finished in a rush, voice slightly shrilled with stress. Was she really scared, or was it an act? No, she must be; she had an idea of the power Victor was wielding now and she knew that he had never been a man to hesitate in striking down a conspirator.

And if there was some element of conspiracy at play, why would Loki have revealed her breach of conduct? Though, even if it was a breach, she made a credible point; if one was to assume that what Loki had just told Stephen was an accurate recounting of her conversation with the Loki of Arcadia, then she had indeed steered a potential dissenter toward loyalty. And if indeed a potentially formidable sorceress’s fealty had successfully been courted, she had now become a valuable asset where she might have otherwise been a devastating threat. Loki’s decision was exactly the conclusion Stephen likely would have come to after an hour or two of debate on the matter, and she had made it as a snap judgment. She was right; this was what made her useful.

“... Why?” Stephen asked softly.

“Because it was the right call!”

“No.” He shook his head and looked at her carefully. “Why are you acting so loyal to Victor? Why are you going out of your way to inspire loyalty for him in others?”

Loki looked slightly confused. “... He’s God.”

Stephen stared at her silently for a minute. “And Loki is well known for challenging God. Or at least Odin.”

Hurt and offence displayed themselves quite clearly in Loki’s frown. “I am not that Loki, Stephen, we’ve been over this,” she said tightly. “But putting me aside for a moment, Doom isn’t just God, he’s the God that Battleworld needs.” She let out a small, harsh sigh and shook her head. “This world is new and chaotic and fragile. It could be broken so easily right now, it’s not at all funny. It needs a firm hand. Maybe someday it will be time for a gentle and loving God, but this is the beginning, and the world needs an old-testament God.”

“So...”

“I want Battleworld to survive,” Loki said firmly, crossing her arms. “And I truly believe that Victor is the one who can make that happen. Maybe the only one who can. He turned out to be the only one who could save us from annihilation, after all. Which makes him officially smarter and cooler than Mister Fantastic. You can tell him I said that.”

Stephen gave a small, bitter chuckle, letting his head dip in elevation a little as he shook it. “And it doesn’t offend you that ‘God’ used to be a mere mortal?”

“Loki the First was disdainful of mortals because he hadn’t evolved enough to break the fourth wall of his own mythology. I’m not exactly sure of all the little things he added to the recipe when he made his replacements, but one of the tweaks he made opened that up,” she explained, looking at the ground, her expression soft and thoughtful. “Loki the Second and Loki the Third could both see out
of the box. They saw things that the other gods couldn’t see. They saw that humans were far, far stronger than gods as a collective. And sometimes, even an individual could manage that feat, when they have the power to wield the collective as a weapon.”

Stephen studied her for a quiet moment, considering that. “... You’re of the school of thought that humanity created the pantheonic gods, rather than vise versa?” he asked quietly. He had heard rumors that this philosophy was picking up speed among some of the pantheons, but remained a minority view. However, as a trickster-god, it was natural that Loki would be attracted to minority, progressive theories.

Loki gave an exaggerated shrug. “Chicken. Egg.”

Stephen let a small smile curl his lips for a moment, appreciating the irony of an agnostic god. “So your support of Victor is genuine, not simply inspired by intimidation,” he asked carefully, to which Loki nodded. “Is it conditional?”

“All things are conditional. The world turns upon conditions.” Loki grinned her oncoming-whimsy grin. “Conditions like gravity and centripetal force and I digress... In any event, I don’t believe in stagnation. I don’t believe in it as in I don’t believe it exists. Nothing is forever. Things will change. Either Doom will evolve or he’ll be left behind as Battleworld evolves without him.” She gave a small shrug and shook her head. “Maybe a few centuries down the line, I’ll be inclined to support Franklin instead. He seems like he might have the potential to make an excellent gentle-loving-type God. But I like existence, so I’ll support the God who is best capable of making existence exist.”

“And you don’t foresee yourself ever becoming that god?” Stephen asked.

Loki physically recoiled, grimacing in horror. “Ergh! No! Why in Doom’s name would I ever apply for management? That sounds like an absolute nightmare!”

Stephen raised an eyebrow. “You don’t want the power?”

“There’s some guy who’s always saying this thing about power and responsibility,” Loki said, still looking thoroughly repulsed by the suggestion. “I don’t want the responsibility. I want to run around and kick hornet nests, not babysit all of reality.”

Stephen nodded. “... I’m very glad to hear that.” He let another wan smile slip through. “And I agree completely.”

Chapter End Notes

To those confused: the comment about Nico covered in blood and beating the hell out of other teenagers is a reference to Avengers Arena/Murder World, which Loki, being an internet-addict, would have probably seen and is what he/she would be most familiar with Nico from.

Don't think I've used this since Chasing Starlight, but "Mythoform" is the science-word I made up for gods and non-god mythological-persons for Marvel purposes, because I feel like the super-logical scieny (religiously atheist) people like Tony Stark or Reed Richards would want a more 'logical' word than 'god' or 'fairy' or 'troll', because science damn it! For my fanon, it is the 'politically correct' or 'scientific' word for persons spawned by mythology. Some gods find it offensive/demeaning.
I think Arcadia-Loki will be popping up now and again throughout this fic; Storyteller likes her and is thoroughly amused by tiny-America, she plans to keep visiting.

I referenced both Kid-Loki and Agent-Loki as having the meta-vision thing going; I feel like while Agent-Loki definitely had a preoccupation with stories, the God of Stories' powers are more inherited from Kid-Loki. Agent-Loki is aware of the story around him, and King Loki is able to fuck with it, but Kid-Loki was the one we saw creating characters, talking back to JiM's exposition boxes, and actively discovering and pursuing the magic involved in storytelling. He may not have been the one to create the God of Stories, but I tend to think he was Agent-Loki's inspiration. Those two have such a sad, fucked-up relationship.
We're All Mad Here.

Chapter Summary

“Hello, Loki,” he hissed.

Loki found herself smirking a bit wider. “Hello, Loki,” she echoed. “You seem to be hiding quite well. Should I take it from that that you are aware of what’s been happening?”

“Such a vague question,” he sneered. “Of all the many many things happening, how am I to narrow it down?”

Chapter Notes

This chapter guest-starring:

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Doomgard: Eight Weeks post Doom’s Day

“Leiiiif.” Green-sheathed arms wrapped around Leif’s shoulders from behind as a weight leaned against him. “I love your shirt, you know. It looks like you’re all ready to go hit the clubs. We should go clubbing. Do you like clubbing, Leif?”

“An airless basement reeking of sweat, excessive cologne and overpriced mixed-drinks? Countless strangers drunk on vodka and adrenalin, pressing against each other in a vulgar parody of affection while deafening themselves with synthesized music that shakes the very floor?” Leif asked, a small smirk curling his lips. “What’s not to like?”

A giggle was pressed into the side of his neck. “You’re so cute, Leif. One doesn’t see blond goths nearly enough– they all think they’ve got to dye their hair black or something, but it’s all about the contrast. The black becomes blacker and the gold gleams in the darkness,” Storyteller chattered, draped against him.
“I’m ‘goth’ am I?”

“Oh you absolutely are,” Storyteller agreed.

“Is there something you need, Agent Storyteller, or should this perhaps wait until a more appropriate hour for social calls?” Leif asked, giving the report he was writing a slight shake to emphasize that he was working.

“Oh aye,” Storyteller sighed. “I seek your professional council for the moment, though I would never turn down your social callings, should you find yourself free for mead and games later. Once you’ve exhausted both your hammer-swinging hand and your paperwork-writing hand and all that’s left to do is drink.”

Leif chuckled, setting down his pen and glancing across their facing desks at Ray, whose muzzle never changed shape all that much, but there was a particular way his eyes narrowed and a small shake of his head when he was amused. “And what council do you require this day, Agent?”

“You know North Manhattan better than anyone in Doomgard,” Storyteller said, letting go of Leif and standing herself up straight so that Leif could turn in his chair to look at her. “I have been scouring that half of the district, and widened my search to include the entire district in case of movement, and I have been unable to locate the Loki presence native to North Manhattan.”

“Perhaps there is none?” Leif suggested. “Or perhaps they have taken flight? Many of them are capable of crossing borders undetected, are they not?

“No, I’m sure there’s one there,” Storyteller shook her head, frowning. “I can feel it. A narrative just out of my reach, brushing at the edge of my consciousness every now and then. But I can’t seem to lock it down however I try. There’s definitely magic at work. He or she (or not) is very good at hiding.” She let out a frustrated little breath through her nose. “Which on the one hand seems like a good sign: they’re on the defensive, not the offensive. But on the other hand, the Eye has assigned me to census them whether hostile or not. Being able to tick the benign ones off the list helps me narrow down who and where the malignant ones are. And I’d rather secure my own back yard before going globe-trotting for the rest.”

Leif offered her an apologetic shrug and a sigh. “I’m afraid I know very little of Lokis,” he said, to which he received a wrinkled nose and an expression he couldn’t quite decipher.

“If I may, Agent Storyteller,” Ray spoke up and the agent’s eyes turned to him. “I have seen a man in the north who bears some resemblance to you. I cannot say for certain whether he is the one you are looking for though, and he is a derelict and quite certainly mad.”

“Beta-Ray you stunning stallion, that is exactly the sort of thing I was hoping to hear,” Storyteller said with a grin, resting a hand on Leif’s desk and leaning eagerly toward Ray. “Where do I find this madman?”

“Last I saw, he was in an alley off of Northern Lexington,” Ray said and hesitated. “It would perhaps be better if he did not know that I gave you his location...”

“Oh no, of course not,” Storyteller agreed, nodding. “Much better for him to think I’m just that good, wouldn’t you say?” She strolled around the desk and planted a quick peck to Ray’s cheek. “But I’ll do my best to give him no reason to be angry, even if he does suspect,” she promised.

She probably shouldn’t flirt with the Thors. That was probably not a healthy thing to do. It seemed
like the kind of thing that would be considered unhealthy. Although, she wasn’t entirely sure why it
should be; she didn’t have blood in common with any Thor, and she hadn’t even grown up with any
of the Thors she was flirting with. Well, technically speaking she hadn’t grown up with her Thor
either, but as she did have some memories of doing so, it was muddy.

Loki reached the end of the alley and turned around, retracing her steps and looking carefully at
every trash can and box and bit of debris. She supposed memory really was what it all came down to
in the end. If the Thor Corps ever remembered who they used to be, her Thor might find her
flirtations with alternate-universe analogues of himself somewhat disturbing, or if one of said
analogues had had a Loki of their own, they might be disturbed upon waking. And maybe all of that
was just wishful thinking. Holding onto some hope that her brother might one day look at her with
recognition in his eyes. That she would find her brother. That he was alive. He was. He would be.
His story couldn’t end without being told.

She arrived at the other end of the alley and turned around again, doubling back to walk its length a
third time. But if her brother was alive (which he was) and if she did find him (which she would) the
memories of gods were still slippery, ephemeral things. They lived indefinitely, centuries upon
centuries, and a mind could only hold so much. And a god’s mind was plastic, moldable, bendable,
because their memories were not held within themselves but written on a page. They were stories,
stories which did not belong to themselves but to everyone else. If an event failed to be recorded, if it
failed to be told, if the world was allowed to forget it, it would be lost to everyone, even he to which
it had happened. Why did they brag so loudly of their triumphs in the mead hall? To remember them.
The story didn’t even have to be true, tell it enough times, and the story would become history, and
history would become memory.

She reached the edge of the alley again. Time to focus on the task at hand. She pushed her debate to
the back-burner and turned back into the ally once more. She walked down and stopped in the
middle this time, crossing her arms. “I know you’re here. I can feel you,” she said out loud. “I’m not
here for a fight. I want to parley. I live in South Manhattan and I’ve been catching whiffs of you. I’m
not sure if you’re aware of what’s been going on, but it’s got me nervous.” Loki pressed her lips
together and looked at bit of graffiti on the wall as she shifted on her feet uncomfortably. “... I’m not
going to hurt you.”

“Do you imagine you could?” A male voice. Loki turned to find him perched on top of a dumpster
lid, staring down at her through narrowed, scrutinizing eyes. “You’re rather a skinny little thing,
aren’t you?” He was younger than the First had been when he pulled his suicide-by-cape stunt, but
older than Loki’s apparent physical age. He was also in shambles, rumpled, stained clothes, a dirty
jacket, a knit hat, every inch of him looked a dirty, schizophrenic, homeless drunk. Which was a
remarkably efficient way to make oneself effectively invisible.

Loki offered a smirk. “Looks can be deceiving.”

“You look like my mother,” the man (whom Loki decided to think of as ‘Hobo-Loki’) sneered. Well
that was an interesting bit of information.

“No. I look like you,” Loki corrected. “... And why do you suppose that is?”

Hoboki glared at her another moment before the tight line of his lips eased into a slow, rather
unhinged grin. “Hello, Loki,” he hissed.

Loki found herself smirking a bit wider. “Hello, Loki,” she echoed. “You seem to be hiding quite
well. Should I take it from that that you are aware of what’s been happening?”

“Such a vague question,” Hobo sneered. “Of all the many many things happening, how am I to
narrow it down?”

“Some sort of informal tournament for supremacy,” Loki elaborated, crossing her arms and watching his reaction carefully. “Lokis are hunting and killing each other.”

“Oh yes, that,” Hoboki gave a disinterested shrug. “Frankly, that game just sounds tedious and exhausting. I’ve decided not to play.”

“Did you come to this decision right away, or did you give it a try before deciding to beg off?” Loki asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Well I did defend myself when a rather unpleasant doppelganger attacked me some weeks ago,” Hoboki replied. “Then I slipped away when his head was turned. He spent a few hours looking for me before moving on.” He drummed his fingers on the dumpster lid and gazed up at the sky. “He’s come back around twice since, and I’ve avoided his notice both times. I assume he’s hoping to catch me off-guard one of these days.”

“I see,” Loki said, nodding to herself and ruminating on that.

“What is your interest, Little-Girl-Loki?” he asked, looking back down at her.

Loki laughed at the epithet. “Aside from my potential to be targeted for such an attack? I’ve been tasked by Our Lord Doom to put a stop to them,” she replied. “A Loki doesn’t go down easy, and these duels incur rather a lot of property damage. At least four Lokis have been killed so far, as well as about a dozen casualties during an incident that occurred in a densely populated zone.”

“Tasked by Doom?” Hoboki asked quietly, his eyes wandering slowly over her, carefully analyzing. They were bright and keen, but Loki could see the flame and madness flickering just below the surface. He was at least half-insane, she guessed. “And what, pray tell, has led the all-powerful Doom to issue tasks to you?”

“I asked for a job and He judged me fit to serve Him,” Loki replied.

The left side of Hoboki’s lip twisted up into something between a sneer and a grimace. “Please tell me there wasn’t a hammer involved in this transaction. I think I should have to die of shame for sharing a name with you.”

“Don’t be silly. I’m not a Thor. Do I look righteous, honest and true to you?” Loki laughed, putting her hands in her pockets and rocking on her feet. “But Our Lord Doom, in His great wisdom, recognizes that there are some tasks to which a Thor is not well suited and at times a slyer hand is required.” She smirked and gave a little curtsy. “I am that sinister left hand.”

“Oooh,” Hoboki grinned excitedly and finally hopped down off the dumpster to circle around her and take a closer look. “Well that is a lark. Are you official and everything? With papers and such?”

“And the shiniest badge!” Loki agreed.

Hoboki laughed and clapped. “Well you’re perfectly poised to pull off the crime of the millennia then, aren’t you!” he exclaimed delightedly.

“Er, well,” Loki grimaced, crossing her arms, “that’s really not the goal here. Which is probably why I got the job, because fiery destruction isn’t on my short-list. Or my long-list.”

Hoboki gave her a faintly puzzled look. “Why not?”
“Just not my thing, I guess,” Loki shrugged. “Quick question: are you a god, and if so, what are you the god of?”

“God?” Hoboki paused, looking vague and lost for a moment, his eyes distant. “Oh no no, that was a long time ago, wasn’t it? There are no gods left, no Golden City. It was all burned away. Not by me. Metal angels... They brought it all down. Blood and bodies raining from the sky, the day the Children of Tomorrow murdered those of yesterday...”

Loki frowned softly, rather wishing she could get a more concrete narrative on what had happened, but doubting Hoboki could give her one. Was he referencing a Mapmaker incursion or something earlier? Some event that had occurred in his own world before its destruction? Either way, it definitely wasn’t anything that had happened on Battleworld, and so whatever memories Hoboki had of it had most likely been clouded and confused by Battleworld’s amnesia. Loki sighed and tapped her toe against the pavement. “What was Loki? Before the metal angels came?”

“Hmm,” Hoboki closed his eyes and seemed to think hard. “... Murderer. Mad... Baldur said he always knew it couldn’t be avoided... Always knew Loki was destined for terrible things...” He opened his eyes again and glared into space. “Despised by all. Most especially Mother, who hated her spawn from the moment she discharged him of her body, if not sooner. Disdained by Father, held in contempt by his brothers. What was Loki? A shadow. A mistake. A regret.” He turned slightly and aimed his glare at Loki, cold, accusing. “You look like her.”

“I’m not her,” Loki pointed out quietly, wondering who exactly his mother was. Clearly a biological one, so Loki’s origins must have been different in the mythology this one was coming from. Was he even Jotun then, or was he a true Aesir? How curious that would be.

“You look like her.” Hoboki turned away, shoving his hands in his pockets and shuffling sulkily down the alley.

“Because I look like you,” Loki said again. “And it’s more than just appearance and nomenclature, you know.”

“You’re sane,” Hoboki spat back at her, as if it was a grave insult.

“I’m young,” Loki offered a shrug. She clasped her hands behind her back and followed along behind him as Hoboki wandered away. “My mother tried to sell my soul, you know. For power, really. I’m sure she’d tell you something far more noble-sounding, about the safety and/or security of Asgard, but that’s just be a lot of excuses,” Loki said softly, grimacing and glancing away as Hoboki paused and turned slightly to look at her again. It was a small lie, because it hadn’t precisely been her the All Mother had tried to sell out, but she knew the story better than any and it offered a common complaint to bond over. “I mean, it’s one thing to sell your own soul to the devil, but to sell your child’s? Unconscionable... And then after that went tits-up, she decided to cover her ass by banishing me before I could mention the episode to anybody.”

“Well she sounds just charming,” Hoboki snorted.

“Mm. Once upon a time, I think I loved her,” Loki mused.

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“Well she sounds just charming,” Hoboki snorted.

“Mm. Once upon a time, I think I loved her,” Loki mused.

“One does try to please. Unfortunately, one so often finds themselves trying to please those who are unpleaseable,” Hoboki said wistfully. “... I don’t think she even wanted the Norn Stones. I think she just wanted to get me executed.”

Loki studied him carefully. “How much do you remember from before?” she asked.
“Before?” Hoboki raised an eyebrow at her.

“Before everything changed. Before it became like this.”

“Everything changes constantly. There have been so many changes, so many times,” Hoboki shook his head.

“But there was a time, not so long ago, when there was only one Loki. And only one Thor. And only one of everybody else,” Loki pointed out. “Only a few months ago, the land and sea were a different shape. Do you remember that?”

Hoboki frowned, gazing into space. “… The world changes... It’s changed many times, I think. I don’t remember when,” he closed his eyes and shook his head. “Everything changes... Evolution does not always have a forward momentum, sometimes it is simply a plummet into the abyss.”

Loki watched him silently for a few minutes before asking, “What do you remember before today? Is there a continuous narrative?”

“Continuous narrative?” Hoboki cast her a small, bitter grin. “Oh to be young and believe in such things again. There is no continuity. Just scraps, rags, frayed round the edges. And before today? I’m not sure I could tell today from yesterday or tomorrow.” He shook his head and gave a humorless laugh. “You’re a child, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” Loki agreed with a nod. “I look older than I am.” She bit her lip for a moment and thought. “Before those metal angels you mentioned killed the gods, what was Loki the god of? Did he have a title?”

Hoboki was quiet for a moment, watching a rat scuttle across the alley a few yards away. “… If a god must be the god of something, I suppose Loki was the God of Destruction,” he mused softly. “Elaborate, mad schemes for annihilation, an infernal clockmaker. But it hardly matters now. The gods are dead.”

“All the gods?” Loki asked, tilting her head. She was fairly sure Leif was a 1610 native, and he was definitely an analogue to her Thor.

“Well, there is Doom,” Hoboki conceded. “But I’m not so sure about him.”

“You should be careful how you talk,” Loki said, giving him a serious look. “That sounded very much like blasphemy. And if you’re so dottering as to forget that you’re in the presence of an agent of Doom, I think there will be little hope for your survival in the long-term.”

“Oh, but isn’t that useful in and of itself?” Hoboki cast her a grin, melancholy seeming to slide away, forgotten. “Isn’t it a good thing for madmen to blaspheme? Because then blasphemy is the occupation of madmen.”

Loki smirked back at him. “And when you say clever things like that, I think you are perhaps not as mad as you pretend to be,” she noted.

“I can be mad and clever. In fact, I am,” Hoboki reasoned.

“So you are,” Loki agreed, rocking on her feet and feeling the corners of her mouth tug wider. “So I wonder if you might provide me the perspective of a madman, to help me in my investigation?”

Hoboki tilted his head slightly, interest gleaming in his eyes. “I suppose I could.”
“If you did wish to play the Loki-Battle-Royal game, what sort of stratagem might you employ?” she asked.

“Oh that is an entertaining hypothetical,” Hoboki hummed. He nibbled on his lip and looked up at the sliver of sky above, mulling it over. “The weakest will be picked off first,” he noted, nodding to himself. “You’re quite young, implying that there is a wide age-range at play. If a Loki were to use his own blood as a means of locating others to whom it is a match, then he would be led to those Lokis who are either unaware and unprepared for battle, or who have not the ken to hide themselves.”

Loki nodded slowly. “Or those from worlds without magic;” she murmured.

Hoboki gave her a horrified look. “Surely such a nightmare couldn’t exist?”

“They do,” Loki said with a smirk and a shrug. “Or rather, ‘did’.”

Hoboki shivered. “Well. Then. I suppose if one were to try a divining spell or two with one’s blood, one would discover the location of the infants and invalids quite quickly. And as those are the ones a madman might be inclined to target first, before moving on to the more dangerous prey, I imagine those ones are going to start dropping like flies very quickly now that the game is underway.”

“That makes sense,” Loki agreed. “Thank you for your madman’s perspective. May I call on you again?”

Hoboki eyed her, wearing an amused smirk as he looked her over. “For more pearls of wisdom from a bedlamite?”

“And to make sure that nobody’s succeeded in making you a casualty of the game,” Loki said. “Or that you changed your mind and decided to play after all.”

Hoboki laughed. “Do you think I might be a contender?”

“I have yet to meet the competition,” Loki shrugged. “Or to see what you can really do.”

“I think not. I rather think I’m used up, and I simply lack the interest,” Hoboki said, slightly wistful again. “It would be an awful lot of work, after all. And for what? The assurance that I should never have another conversation like this?” He shook his head. “That seems a poor prize.”

“It does, doesn’t it?” Loki agreed. “They must be very insecure, the ones who are playing. They just don’t see how fun this could be. A world full of tricksters.”

“That does sound like a riot,” Hoboki grinned broadly.

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The sound of the knocker broke Stephen out of a meditative trance and he shook himself, blinking away the confusion of returning to ordinary consciousness. He climbed to his feet and waved a hand, extinguishing the candles and incense, before turning and gesturing at the doors to bid them open. Loki was waiting on the other side in another stylish business suit, because apparently she could not be dissuaded from her dress-up game. Stephen ignored it. “You have a report?” he asked.

“I’ve made contact with sixteen-ten’s Loki, I think,” Loki said, nodding. “I believe I would put him at a threat-level of orange.”

“Oh?”
“Well, he may have been the ‘God of Destruction’, he’s a bit vague on the details,” Loki explained. “But he’s also washed-up and depressed. His mummy didn’t love him, and he’s a sad, crazy man because of it.”

Stephen raised an eyebrow. “Are you being cute or are you serious?” he asked.

“I’m serious,” Loki frowned, looking offended. “Nobody loved him so he decided to be the God of Destruction. Maybe.”

“Maybe.”

“Well, it’s hard to tell, because he’s kind of insane,” Loki said with a shrug. “Which I don’t think is going to be an altogether uncommon thing here. Anyway, he might have already been pretty scrambled before Doom’s Day, and the amnesia probably hasn’t done him any favors on that count. I get the impression his memories are choppy and out of order and he might have some attention-span issues.”

“All right,” Stephen nodded, frowning. “But you don’t classify him as a clear and present danger?”

“Because he seems to consider himself a has-been and he’s being a hobo for no real reason. He obviously has enough magic on him to live a more comfortable life than that,” Loki explained.

“Shouldn’t that be worrisome in itself?” Stephen asked, deciding he wouldn’t correct Loki on the improper use of the word ‘hobo’. “If he seems to be deliberately enduring unnecessary hardships for no apparent reason, are you certain that it isn’t part of an act?”

“No, I’m definitely not certain, and I plan to keep an eye on him. Thus threat-level orange,” Loki shook her head. “But I think it’s more like he identifies with crazy hobos? Like hobos are his spirit-animal or something?” She gave a little shrug.

“Loki, that’s not what ‘hobo’ means,” Stephen spat in a rush and then gritted his teeth and shook his head. He’d tried.

“Yeah but ‘hobo’s fun to say. Hobo hobo hobo,” Loki replied with a grin. “Anyway, linguistic evolution, so there. I’m calling this one ‘Hoboki’.”

“His designation will be ‘Sixteen-Ten-Loki’,,” Stephen corrected, recomposing himself. “Getting back on track, please?” he prompted.

Loki held out a file-folder, amused little smirk indelibly staining her lips. “My formal report,” she said. “Also, do you have a nice big map of Battleworld I could use? Like a physical, paper one?” she asked, tilting her head to the side.

Stephen accepted the file and nodded. “Of course.” He set the folder down on the corner of his desk and walked around to the bank of pigeonholes amid his bookshelves and pulled out a large chart. “You’re going to try charting movements to look for patterns?” he asked, handing the roll to Loki.

“That might not be a bad idea, but I’ve got something a little quicker and more immediately pressing to try first,” Loki said, unrolling the chart and pressing it down against Stephen’s desk. Stephen helped her, settling weights on the corners. “I figured that the vast majority of the problem-Lokis are going to be crazy, like Hoboki, so I asked his opinion on how (if he was going to play ‘the game’) how he would go about it. He pointed out that the weakest targets, the ones that we’re most likely to see showing up dead within the next few weeks, would be very easy to find with some basic blood-divination.”
She pulled a small dagger out of nowhere in particular and sliced across her own palm, then held it out over the map and murmured a spell. Loki spoke a different mystic language than Stephen, the syllables sounded foreign but his mind sifted out the meaning of the words and he nodded, watching tiny droplets of blood lift from Loki’s upturned palm and dart through the air, slapping down against several points on the map, marking locations. Stephen studied the deep red target points as Loki withdrew her hand and wiped it with a handkerchief that appeared from the same nowhere as the dagger had come and gone to. “Seven who haven’t hidden their presence from magical detection,” Stephen noted quietly.

“So either they don’t know that they should,” Loki said, crumpling the handkerchief and flicking it out of existence. “Or they can’t... Technopolis and Doom Valley both seemed to be magic-free zones, some of these might be as well,” she leaned over the map, looking at the marked locations. “And then some of them might be too young to perform complex magic...”

“This one will be a child,” Stephen agreed, tapping next to the drop that had landed in Marville. “Although, not necessarily powerless.”

“We know this, how?” Loki asked, glancing up at him with a raised eyebrow.

“Educated guess,” Stephen replied, looking over the other dots. “I believe there’s another magical dead-zone here,” he pointed to a dot pinched between the Apocalypse territories and Technopolis. “This one is unusually magic-rich and nearly impenetrable. A native of this location would be surrounded with quite good natural fortifications. You may have difficulty getting through,” he pointed to Weirdworld. “But most of these were worlds with a similar climate to ours.”

Loki nodded slowly, studying the map. “Well, maybe I’m just a soft-touch, but I imagine I’ll go check in on the child one first. I can put some wards on him to take him off the map anyway, and see what else I can do to make sure he’ll be protected if and when a bad-Loki finds him through other means,” she decided.

“Be careful,” Stephen said, sitting down in his chair and watching Loki roll up the chart. “You’ll likely be inclined to underestimate the locals. They’re extremely dangerous and unpredictable.”

“Noted,” Loki said, grinning at him. “Well, it looks like I have a starting point then. I will endeavor to have my next report on your desk tomorrow, Stephen.” She gave a little bow.

“I’m glad to hear that the case is progressing,” Stephen gave her a nod, and then repeated, “Be careful.”

“Aw! I knew you cared!” Loki simpered.

Chapter End Notes

The anthropologically correct term is ‘urban nomad’.

The search begins! I’m going with what seems to be the prevailing viewpoint that Hobo-Loki from the Thors comics is a Battleworlded Ultimate-Loki. To those unfamiliar with Ultimate-verse, their Loki suffers varying levels of insanity (based somewhat on whether it’s before or after 50+ years of sensory-deprivation) and may be either sociopathic or simply have child-level cognitive abilities in the social department (exhibits attention-seeking behavior like a very five-year-old if the five-year-old has
horrific magical powers). Magically, he's at least on a par with 616's Loki-Prime, and provided some of the framework Cinematic-verse Loki was built on. In Ultimate-verse, Loki is Odin's biological offspring with a Jotenheim princess whom he apparently briefly took as a mistress, knocked up, and then sent home (what the *hell* Odin?!). After Loki was born, his mother shipped him back to Asgard like 'This is your problem, jerk!'

So I decided seven was a reasonable number of unprotected Lokis to have scattered around Battleworld (and presumably three of the first four casualties were unguarded... wait, crap, that puts me at an even ten... screw it, that's fine.) Definite locations I'll be using for those are Marville, Weirdworld, Old Town and Avalon. Suggestions for the other three would be welcomed (Killville, K'un Lun, Arachnia, Deadlands and Inferno are reserved for later, so they're off the table). Keep in mind that some of the domains apparently contain districts from multiple worlds within them (Utopolis has annexed a few other world-remnants and it looks like that's not an uncommon thing, because Old Town, Breakland, Yinsen and some others aren't part of the world-map either) so I'm also open to suggestions of Marvel alternate-universes that haven't been referenced in Battleworld canon (I feel like Marvel vs. Capcom should be in there somewhere -maybe close to X-Men '92- but I don't actually know the Capcom characters well enough to write that...) Also, I flat out refuse to write any Howard the Duck 'verse. Not happening. No ducks.
Loki could think of two possible explanations. The first was that a Saturday morning time-slot from the Mojoverse had slipped its leash and gone feral. The second was that Franklin Richards had simply gotten bored. He couldn’t decide which was the more likely scenario, but the results were adorable.

There were shrieks and laughter and bouncing balls and other sounds of children at play, and they were all in costume! Loki bit his lip hard to keep from collapsing into uncontrollable giggles as he walked along a paved footpath through the neighborhood park, watching the teeny tiny little heroes battling with squirt-guns and jumping rope and climbing on big-toys. A series of small explosions caught his attention, and caused Loki a moment of concern before he identified the sound as the herald of a very small mutant teleporter.

Despite his rapid ‘ports, Little-Nightcrawler’s pursuers were moments from catching up. He changed tactics and directions, doubling back as the other two overshot. Loki put his hands over his mouth, trying to hold in hysteria as he wondered whether he might feint from sheer delight. A moment later,
there was a bloom of purple smoke and Little-Nightcrawler, with a bandana tied rakishly around his head, appeared just in front of him. Little-Nightcrawler grinned up at Loki, glanced around his legs for a moment to check on the distance of those giving chase, and then back up at him with a brilliant, slightly fanged, smile. “Guten Tag, Freund! I’m assembling a stalwart crew to voyage across the North Sea and seek the fabled Gama-Emerald of Greenland! Do you know how to sail?” he asked.

“Kurt! Don’t talk to strangers! I’m telling Mom!” Little-Rogue shouted, finally catching up with Little-Nightcrawler and tackling him into the grass as Little-Northstar zoomed around and gathered up a small assortment of brightly colored vinyl ponies sent flying by the impact.

“So cuuute!” Loki whispered, his lungs burning from the effort of not falling down and laughing his fool ass off right then and there. “That- That is normally a very good policy,” he managed to push out, desperately trying to keep himself calm as he pulled the shiny, gold badge that proved his officiality out of his jacket. “Strangers can be very dangerous, but as you can see, I am an agent of Doom.”

Little-Rogue frowned suspiciously, eyeing the badge as she held Little-Nightcrawler’s head against the turf with one hand and firmly gripped his tail with the other. “You don’t look like a Thor...” she said skeptically.

Loki took a breath, about to respond, when he was cut off by another child-voice calling from a few yards away. “What?”

“What?” Little-Rogue snapped in return, glaring, as Loki turned to seek the source of the interruption.

“Did you call me?” the tiniest little Thor dressed in tiny little armor asked from where he seemed to be sword-fighting with badminton rackets against a very small Ms./Captain Marvel.

“I said ‘a’ Thor, stupid-face! Why would I be calling you?” Little-Rogue snapped.

Little-Thor scowled at her. “I’m gonna be a Thor when I grow up! And then I’m gonna arrest you and throw you over the Wall!” he declared.

“Hey now, what’s with all the hostility? There’s no need for that,” Loki admonished. “And no, I’m not a Thor, I’m a special agent with--”

“Oh!” Little-Thor exclaimed, brightening and pointing at him. “You’re the Storyteller! You work with my dad!” Well that made sense after a fashion, Loki opened his mouth to ask a follow-up, but Little-Thor cut him off again. “He says you’re a nosey no-good meddler who has no business interfering where you’re not wanted!” he declared, looking pleased with himself, apparently very proud of his extensive knowledge of grown-up affairs.

Loki burst out laughing, unable to hold it in any longer. Yes, that would be an Odin. A bizarre, Saturday-morning-cartoon caricature of an Odin most likely, but definitely an Odin. “S-So, he doesn’t like me then?” Loki gasped.

Little-Thor looked puzzled. “He doesn’t?”

Several more travel-sized super-heroes had started gathering around, attracted by one word in particular from the exchange. “You’re a storyteller?” a little Spider-Woman asked, looking up at him.

“I am,” Loki agreed. “And that’s also my name.”

“Tell us a story!” a little Iceman demanded excitedly.
Loki grinned and took a few steps off the foot path, then settled himself down cross-legged on the grass. About a dozen super-kids gathered eagerly around him. “What do you want to hear a story about?” Loki asked.


Loki threw back his head and laughed. “You are all adorable!” he declared and began to weave a story about unicorn-riding princesses (who were discriminated against for being robots) heroically interceding in a train robbery committed by villainous insectoid cowboys, and being commended by the governor for their noble and selfless deeds. It was a hit. No sooner had he finished the eclectic tale than the children (whose numbers had grown to upwards of twenty) were clamoring with suggestions for the topic of the next story.

“Wait! Wait! I have to ask you something first!” Loki laughed as a not-so-colossal Colossus clung to his shoulder and a tiny Wasp tugged at his jacket. “Do any of you know a- a child named Loki?” he asked.

“Oh!” Little-Thor jumped up excitedly. “Just a minute!” he said and leapt into the air, zooming away.

“That’s his brother,” a miniature Black Widow explained, wrinkling her nose. “He’s annoying.”

“Well that’s not very nice,” Loki said.

“He’s not very nice,” a little Scarlet Witch protested. “He pulled my hair.”

“Aw, I’m sorry, sweetie. That really hurts, doesn’t it?” Loki giggled through a simper.

“Uh-huh,” Little-Scarlet agreed, sticking her lip out.

Little-Thor reappeared very quickly, flying back and dragging an extra-small Loki through the air with him. The tiniest Loki was dressed in a version of the outfit Loki the Second had worn (although with short-pants and no cowl) and he seemed to have been bound up and gagged with duct-tape. “Here he is!” Little-Thor announced proudly as he landed and presented his much smaller brother.

“Why did you tie him up?” Loki demanded, horror doing furious battle with hilarity in his mind.

“Huh?” Little-Thor glanced at Tiny-Loki. “Oh, that wasn’t me. Angie did that.”

Loki blinked in surprise. “Angie?” he asked, just as the sound of engines caught his ears and he looked up to see two mini-bikes cresting the hill. They managing to get airborne for the briefest moment before slamming back down to earth and hurtling along the footpath.

“Teenagers!” the little bitty Captain America gasped in dismay.

The mini-bikes came screeching to a halt next to the gathering, and a number of the children shied away while a few of the bolder ones moved forward, sticking out their chests defiantly. Two older girls, just beginning adolescence, dismounted the mini-bikes and pulled off their helmets, a green-skinned one and a rather familiar red-head. “Thor!” the red-head snarled, tossing her helmet to her friend and stomping over to Little-Thor, who was standing his ground admirably in the face of Angie’s furious wrath. “I’m going to kick your ass!”

“She’s so cool...” Little-Darkchild murmured to Loki’s right.
“What’s the big deal, Angie?” Little-Thor demanded, refusing to be intimidated.

“I am trying.” Angie growled, pulling out a sword, “-to BABY-SIT!” She leapt forward, taking a swing at Thor, which he only just managed to block. Holy shit.

Loki grabbed Tiny-Loki and scrambled to the side as Little-Thor and Angie commenced wailing on each other and the collected children scattered with shrieks of terror and/or outrage. “What’s your problem? You get paid either way!” Little-Thor shouted.

“I have to EARN IT!” Angie screamed back, slashing at him.

Loki adjusted Tiny-Loki in his arms and pealed the tape off of his mouth as he danced back a few more steps to avoid the growing frenzy of blades, bludgeoners and repeated lightning strikes. He looked down at Tiny-Loki, who seemed entirely resigned and was making no attempt to struggle against his duct-tape bindings. “... Why does baby-sitting involve duct-tape?” Loki asked.

Tiny-Loki glanced up at him, looking faintly surprised. “Thið iðn’t normal?” he asked.

Loki tilted his head and considered that. “Maybe it is. I’ve never baby-sat or been baby-sat-upon,” he admitted with a shrug. “Is this normal?” he asked, nodding toward Little-Thor and Angie’s heated battle.

“Mm, no, they’re holding back,” Tiny-Loki noted, glancing at the skirmish. “Laðt time they got in trouble for breaking the curly-ðlide.”

“Ah...” Loki nodded. He retreated several yards, to where the rest of the children were either perched atop the big-toy for a better view or hiding behind it to avoid shrapnel. He set Tiny-Loki on his feet in the woodchips and cast a quick gestural spell to negate the adhesive on the duct-tape. “Let’s get you out of that tape,” he murmured.

Tiny-Loki frowned. “Angie’ð juðt going to redo it when we get home,” he protested. “De might do it tighter nexðt time.”

“Have you tried promising to behave yourself?” Loki asked.

“De doeðn’t believe me.”

“Have you tried actually behaving yourself?”

Tiny-Loki tilted his head to the side, considering that. “I ðuppoðe that might work...” he conceded.

Loki finished pulling the tape off of him and then reached into his pocket, retrieving a small jar. He dipped his thumb into the dark paste inside and carefully drew a few runes on Tiny-Loki’s cheeks and forehead. Tiny-Loki scrunched up his nose and frowned.

“What’ð that?” he asked.

“Magic goo,” Loki answered, because that would probably garner less argument than telling him it was ash, blood and a few other less-than-savory ingredients. He whispered a few particularly powerful words as he put the jar away and pulled out a small vial, shaking the powder from it out into his hand before instructing, “Close your eyes,” and blowing it into Tiny-Loki’s face.

“Ooh, are you doing a warding spell?” Little-Darkchild asked, hanging upside down with her knees hooked over a rung of one of the big-toy’s many ladders.
“That’s right,” Loki agreed, pulling out a carton of wet-wipes and cleaning off Tiny-Loki’s face while he sneezed. “Have you ever seen any scary strangers come around here looking for Loki before?” he asked, glancing up at the small handful of children who had turned their attention from the fight to what Loki was doing.

“No,” several children chorused together. “Thor would probably beat them up though,” a little Arch Angel pointed out. “He stuffed Tony in a basketball hoop one time for calling his brother a doofus.”

“I stand by my words!” Little-Iron Man announced.

“And one day, you’ll eat your words,” Loki snorted at him.

“Why would a stranger be looking for me?” Tiny-Loki asked.

“Hopefully one won’t,” Loki replied. “But there have been some very scary strangers making some trouble around Battleworld and they seem to dislike people named Loki.”

“But that’s my name!” Tiny-Loki protested.

“Yes, I know, which is why I finger-painted on you,” Loki agreed. “That should help keep scary strangers from finding you.”

Tiny-Loki frowned, looking concerned for a moment before seeming to accept the solution. “Okay,” he said.

“Are you going to tell another story?” Little-Storm asked, leaning over the rail of the log-bridge.

“Well, I think that depends on how long it takes them to stop fighting,” Loki sighed, glancing back at the ever-growing crater of destruction Little-Thor and Angie were creating in the field area.

“You could tell a story while we wait!” Little-Spider-Man suggested.

“I suppose I could do that,” Loki agreed.

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“Verity! Veeerryyyy!” Loki whined, catching her by the shoulders as soon as Verity opened the door. “I have just been to the cutest and most disturbing place ever!”

Verity looked back up at him, giving an unimpressed expression. “Uh-huh.”

“It was adorable!” Loki whispered. “And terrifying!”

“Uh-huh.”

“I have pictures!”

Verity crossed her arms and raised an eyebrow at him.

“... I also have Chinese take-out?” Loki tried.

“Okay,” Verity nodded, stepping back and letting him into the apartment. There were rules to these things after all. No horrible tales of suspense on an empty stomach, no matter how adorable.

Chapter End Notes
So after I was a few paragraphs into writing Tiny-Loki, I was like 'Hm, I meant to make him seem significantly younger than the other children,' because A-Babies vs. X-Babies (the one-shot comic that Little Marvel is spun off of) came out while Journey into Mystery was running, so the Loki associated with this universe should be a mini-version of Kid-Loki. I'm picturing him 4-ish (the other Little Marvel children seem to be somewhere in the 6 to 10-ish range) but I didn't want to make his speech grammatically wrong or missing words or tenses, because he's still Loki so he should be a smart little cookie. So I decided to give him a lisp. I was about half a page along, replacing all of Tiny-Loki's S's with TH's, when it suddenly occurred to me: I'm writing a Norse god with a lisp. I SHOULD TOTALLY USE 'ETH'. I find this hilarious; I hope everybody else doesn’t find it too annoying (I’m fine with ambivalent).

And I mentioned the Mojoverse in the opening there, it is worth noting that there have been two or three in-continuity stories with X-Babies as a thing created for the Mojoverse. I think all of that was 80s or very early 90s, before the next generation of writers came along and thought ridiculous characters like Mojo and Impossible Man and such are kind of lame and should be used sparingly if at all.
Smoke and Mirrors

Chapter Summary

“Interesting...” Loki murmured, fascinated by how utterly boring it all was. “Tell me, Mister Watson, what is your familiarity with magic?”

“Smoke and mirrors made to dazzle the gullible idiots of this world into emptying their purses in exchange for precisely nothing,” Watson sneered.

Chapter Notes

This chapter guest-starring:

[Image of Baron Fisk]

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Old Town

‘Baron Fisk’. Loki tried to decide what he thought about that. It did, after all, call to mind memories of the president of the United States handing the world’s most powerful military to Norman Osborn on a silver platter. But then, Loki had to concede that Wilson Fisk, at least the Wilson Fisk that he remembered, was not in the same weight-class of crazy as Norman Osborn. Norman Osborn took the crazy-cake. Norman Osborn mashed the crazy-cake all over his face like a baby at their first birthday party. Norman Osborn was legit insane in the membrane, whereas Wilson Fisk was just a megalomaniacal sociopath. The lesser of two crazies. Wilson Fisk might actually do a decent job of running a barony; sure, there would probably be a lot of mysterious disappearances and unexplained deaths, but at least the trains would run on time.

The questionable management aside, Loki found the little domain charming beyond compare. Zoot suits and swing music and oh the hats. Loki was strolling, casually putting out feelers rather than trying a more exact blood divination, because he was so enjoying the quaint, ‘war era’ aesthetic. He probably should have been putting a bit more urgency into his search, procrastinating certainly increased the chances that he’d soon find another crime scene rather than another living Loki to census, but it was all just so charming.

“My friend, you must need a shoe-shine,” a deep, reedy voice with a tantalizing accent called. “Such a handsome young man should look his best, yes?”
Loki turned to meet the wide grin of an old man with ebony skin and teeth so white they were practically luminescent. Loki tilted his head and smirked back. “Oh dear, am I looking a bit shabby?” he asked; he’d dressed himself as a local today, deciding that, as it was an unusually ‘mundane’ little country, blending in would benefit him in the Old Town domain.

“Oh, a man can always use a shoe-shine,” the old man replied, waving a brush at him. “Come, come, sit.”

Loki did as directed, his curiosity peaked by the old man. There was something familiar about him, some feeling Loki couldn’t quite define. “Your accent is quite interesting,” Loki said as he sat and the old man knelt down and started setting to work. “Not the cadence of Caribbean... you sound almost as if you stepped right off a boat from the Gold Coast.”

“Ah, you have a good ear, my young friend,” the old man said, his grin never narrowing as he spoke. “And what do I hear in your voice? A hint of Danish perhaps?”

“Something like that,” Loki agreed. “A shoeshine must meet all sorts of people and hear all sorts of things.”

“Indeed, indeed,” the old man agreed, nodding as he scrubbed shoe polish onto Loki’s already reasonably shiny shoes. “Surely a shoeshine knows all the stories of his city.”

“Well that is most impressi—”

“And all men with shoes on their feet,” the old man laughed, glancing up at Loki with that slightly-wider-than-really-seemed-possible grin. “And he begins to know these men’s stories, before they even tell them.”

“Oh?” Loki asked, charmed and amused. “And what is my story, sir?”

“You are looking for someone,” the old man replied. “But even you are not sure who it is.”

Loki raised an eyebrow; the first statement would be easy enough for a seasoned mentalist to guess, the second seemed just a little bit too sure, too specific for a first act. “Indeed, sir? You must be a psychic. You should take your act to vaudeville,” Loki said.

The old man laughed. “No, my friend, vaudeville is for the young and pretty. I think a clever shoeshine will not sell so many tickets,” he said, shaking his head. “But Vaudeville is not the only place to find psychics and magicians. Why, I know a man, a bookkeeper of no small renown, who is called a sorcerer in his own right. They say there is no finer accountant in New York. They say he can make numbers vanish from sight, that he can twist them to his will and make them tell any lie he chooses. They say there is no illusion he cannot craft with his magical numbers. I wager that if he had been Capone’s bookkeeper, old Scarface would own the world today.”

Loki nibbled on his lip as he listened to the odd digression. The old man finished his shoes and stood back up, still grinning. “There you are, my friend. People will think you a prince for how dapper you look,” he said.

“Thank you indeed, Mister...?” Loki asked, pushing himself to his feet.

“Nancy,” the old man replied.

“Thank you, Mister Nancy, it’s been a pleasure to meet you. I’m Skald,” Loki said, paying the old man with a two-hundred percent tip. “I wonder, that accountant you mentioned, what was his name?”
“Perhaps you are in need of a good bookkeeper, Mister Skald?” the old man suggested, grinning.
“He goes by Luke Watson. You will find his office if you go two blocks down this street and turn
left. The door says ‘Watson CPA’.”

And perhaps Luke Watson CPA could tell him exactly what the statistical probability (or
improbability) was of any of this conversation being a coincidence. “Thank you very much, Mister
Nancy,” Loki said, shaking the old man’s hand.

“Not at all, my friend,” he chuckled. “Come see me again when you need another shoe shine.”

“I certainly will. Good day, Mister Nancy,” Loki said, giving him a final nod and turning in the
direction of the accountant’s office.

“Until next time, Trickster,” Mister Nancy replied in a low voice, lustrous with amusement.

Loki smirked and turned back around. He was not really all that surprised to find that Mister Nancy
and all his shoe-shining kit were nowhere in sight. Curious. Loki had been under the impression that
this province was without magic or any metahuman or mythic population.

He shook his head and started back down the street. Radio music poured out of open shop doors,
mixing with the bustle of nineteen-forties New York. No doubt the charm would wear thinner the
more racial and sexual slurs and rampant misogyny Loki heard flung about casually, but it was a
rather nice place to visit for a little while. Two blocks on and around the corner, Loki found the
offices which his mysterious tipster had directed him to. The door hit a little bell mounted above it
and jingled as Loki pushed it in, and a woman sitting behind the desk facing it looked up from her
typewriter.

Loki tried to hide recognition as his mind instantly tied a name to the secretary. Her hair was pulled
up into a tidy updo that showed off her pearl earrings and she was clothed in a dress that was no
doubt very fashionable this year, because Lorelei was nothing if not stylish. Lorelei paused, her
eyebrows going up and then pulling back down and together as her mouth opened slightly and
confusion played across her eyes, she started to glance back toward the ajar door left of her desk
before catching herself and bringing her focus back to Loki.

“May I help you?” she asked.

“I was hoping to speak to Mister Watson,” Loki said, smiling at her.

“... I’m afraid I don’t have you on his schedule,” Lorelei said without bothering to consult a
schedule. “Perhaps I can book an appointment for tomorrow afternoon?”

“I can wait here, if he’s busy,” Loki replied pleasantly.

“I’m afraid he only meets clients, or prospective clients, by appointment,” Lorelei said.

“I can appreciate the logic of that, but the matter I must discuss with him is rather time-sensitive,” Loki
said carefully, watching Lorelei frown, looking somewhere between annoyed and nervous.

“And you will appreciate that accounting is a very time-sensitive business,” a new but infinitely
familiar voice snapped as the door to the left of Lorelei’s desk pulled open to reveal Loki’s query in a
pin-striped vest and crisp, starched collar. “So either make an appointment or get out. And I
shouldn’t bother with the former, if I were you--” Loki bit his tongue to keep himself from giggling.
“--as we are not taking new clients at this time.”

Watson was very curt, irritable and businesslike. Interesting. “I am not here for your accounting
services, Mister Watson,” Loki tried to match his humorless tone and reached into his pocket pulling out shiny shiny badge. “I am here as an agent of the throne of Doomstadt, in association with the law enforcement body of Doomgard, and it is quite important that I speak to you today.”

Watson glared at the badge suspiciously. “... And what interest could Doomstadt possibly have in me?” he asked quietly.

“Relax, Mister Watson. It’s not an audit,” Loki said with a smirk, putting his badge away. “I just need to ask you a few questions.”

“Such as?” Watson challenged, distrust plainly written all over his face and posture.

Loki tilted his head slightly. “Did they change your name at Elis Island or did you choose to make it sound more American for business purposes? I would guess that you were called Wotanson in the old country, yes?” He could see Watson clench his jaw, clearly not happy about being caught out. “Your English is exceptional and your accent is nearly convincing. You must have worked very hard at it.”

Watson swallowed and turned his head toward Lorelei. “Melody, bring us some coffee, please,” he said, and then took a step back and held his office door open wide enough to be considered an invitation, as he glared daggers at Loki. Loki walked through and settled himself in the chair facing Watson’s desk, making a truly valiant effort not to grin at all. “I don’t believe I caught your name, Agent,” Watson noted, every syllable conveying hostility.

“Skald,” Loki replied in the most pleasant and friendly tone he could muster. “Now the first and most important thing I must ask you, Mister Watson, is whether you have recently been attacked or felt that you were being stalked or pursued.”

“You mean apart from this,” Watson sneered, seating himself and folding his hands on the desk. Loki smirked. “Yes, apart from me.”

“No. Not recently,” Watson said coolly. “Certain clientele of mine hold sufficient intimidation factor to discourage the criminal elements from inconveniencing me.”

“Wilson Fisk, you mean?” It was a guess, but Loki could see from the twitch of Watson’s eyebrow that he’d hit the mark.

“I shall be needing a subpoena if you require a list of my clients, Agent Skald,” Watson said.

“That won’t be necessary. This inquiry isn’t in regards to your business, it’s about you.” Loki watched Watson’s eyes narrow, suspicion and loathing coming off of him in waves. “Where were you born, Mister Watson?”

“Ertz, Norway,” Watson spat.

“Tell me about yourself.”

Watson’s glare turned up a few degrees. “What would you like to know?” he asked with a slow, overly precise enunciation.

There was a soft knock a second before the door opened and Lorelei came mincing in with a tray of coffee and accoutrements. “You’re a very irritable man, Mister Watson,” Loki noted as Lorelei set the tray on the desk and poured coffee into the cups. Loki saw the corner of her lips hitch up slightly at his observation.
“And you an insufferably smug one,” Watson retorted.

Loki laughed so hard he leaned forward in his chair and felt tears sting his eyes. Lorelei set a cup of coffee in front of him before scampering back out of the office. “I suppose you’re not the first to accuse me of that,” Loki noted, grinning at Watson, who was giving him a sour look. “Hmm, what do I want to know... Let’s start with why you chose to come to New York?”

“... I am the bastard son of a wealthy land holder and a household maid,” Watson said tightly. “Such occurrences are an acceptable embarrassment, not uncommon. The lord’s reputation will remain relatively spotless while the product of his indiscretions takes the blame for them. If I had remained in the town where I was born, I would be only ever a bastard. I chose instead to petition my father for the funds to send me to a college in the United States.”

“Sensible,” Loki nodded, turning that over in his mind. “And you are, I’m told, remarkably intelligent.”

“I am,” Watson agreed, apparently having little use or patience for modesty.

“And did open your own office right away after school?”

“I worked for a larger accounting firm for two years but found the inefficiency and clumsy mishandling of accounts intolerable,” Watson answered.

“And what was your big break?” Loki asked, fascinated by how utterly boring it all was.

“Norman Osborn. He was pleased with how I managed his accounts and recommended me to his associates,” Watson replied.

“Interesting...” Loki murmured and took a sip of his coffee. And oh it was terrible, but it was also entirely likely that nobody around here knew any better. “Tell me, Mister Watson, what is your familiarity with magic?”

“Smoke and mirrors made to dazzle the gullible idiots of this world into emptying their purses in exchange for precisely nothing,” Watson sneered.

Loki laughed delightedly. “Oh you’re so vitriolic,” he said appreciatively. “But anyway, I suppose I have enough information for my report.”


“Nothing, Mister Watson, that’s rather the point. I just needed to cross you off the list,” Loki said, pushing himself to his feet and reaching into his pocket. “Now, if you’ll hold still, there’s one more formality to address and then I’ll get out of your hair.” He navigated his way around the desk as Watson stood up to meet him, looking anxious and defiant. “Just hold still,” Loki instructed, reaching toward Watson’s face, fingers smeared with blackish paste.

“What is that?” Watson demanded, jerking away.

“Just a bit of smoke and mirrors, nothing to worry about,” Loki said calmly. “And I should inform you that I do have the power to arrest you, Mister Watson. So humor me and this will only take a minute, then I will be on my way and you can get back to your entirely legitimate and ethical business practices.”

Watson gritted his teeth and glared an inferno at him while Loki drew the runes on the furious man’s face and preformed the warding spell. “There now, that wasn’t so bad, was it?” Loki murmured,
taking a step back and offering Watson a steamed towel.

Watson took it, frowning, no doubt wondering where Loki had produced it from, and wiped at his face as Loki turned and made his way back toward the door. “And what exactly is your function in Doomstadt?” Watson called after him, balling the towel up in his hand.

“Special Agent Storyteller, inquiries and investigations department for the Doomstadt Ministry of Sorcery,” Loki replied over his shoulder, opening the door with one hand as he snapped his fingers with the other (just for show). The towel in Watson’s hand vanished. “Thank you for your cooperation, Mister Wotanson. I may be checking in from time to time,” he said and pulled the door shut behind him.

Chapter End Notes

Name notes: 'Wotan' is a regional variant of 'Odin'. 'Melody' was a name Lorelei used one time when she was screwing around on Earth pretending to be human. As far as Google has been able to inform me, Ertz isn't a real place but it's the city name that was referenced in Iron Man Noir.

World notes: Old Town is the Battleworld name for Marvel Noir 'Verse (Earth-90214). Everybody in Marvel Noir is non-magical, non-powered, normal human beings with the one exception of Spider-Man, whose powers derive from the spider-god Anansi, indicating that there is at least one god who is 'real' and active in Noir 'Verse. Thor was vaguely referenced as existing in that verse but confirmed human and very mortal. Old Town does not have a canon location more specific than 'bordering the Domain of Apocalypse', but if you've looked at the map, the Domain of Apocalypse is pretty damn big.

Mister A. Nancy is from the Spider-Island tie-in for the Hercules series of that era. There was also an Anansi in one of the Spider-Verse one-shots which was a pretty fun one and I might use him some time (there's multiple Lokis in Battleworld, so there's logically multiple Anansis).

A note on Mister Nancy's appearance: I described him as 'ebony' but you might have noticed in the picture up top that he's a bit more mocha. Marvel has a tendency to draw/color their African characters a lot lighter than they logically should be. Storm is the primo example. She spent part of her childhood in Egypt, and her complexion would make perfect sense for an Egyptian character, but then it was also regularly tossed around that she was originally from Kenya, where her complexion would make a lot less sense. Recently (like, a year ago, I think?) they finally nailed down an exact region for her homeland, stating that she's from Lake Turkana. Now, the Turkana people live right up on top of the equator and they most certainly do not have a mocha complexion. There are two very logical and legit reasons for the artistic choice of giving Storm (and other African characters) a lot lighter complexion than they realistically should have. First, they're trying to appeal to African-American readers, and thus they make the characters look more like African-Americans than Africans, because pastoral nomads in the rift valley really don't care what an American comic book heroin looks like and there are not a whole lot of comic shops out there. The second reason is that in comic book style art, where a lot of the motion and expression is dependent on the outlines, facial expressions will get lost if the face is nearly as dark as the outlines. If you're going to do
some really fancy shading work, you can pull it off, but if you're going to shade it like a normal comic book, it doesn't work very well. As far as Mister Nancy goes, I feel like Anansi should look Sub-Saharan West African, so my mental picture makes him a lot darker than he was inked in the Herc comics.

There's probably something else I wanted to address here that I'm forgetting, but now it's getting late and I'm getting sleepy, so I'll stop worrying about it. Thanks for the comments, guys! I love hearing what you think!
Relationships are Complicated.

Chapter Summary

Last year, she had rarely ever seen Loki wear more than two outfits, his Asgardian-style armor or a sweatshirt and jeans. The sudden switch to being an outright fashionista was another indicator Verity had added to her mental list of reasons this Loki was not her Loki. The clothes thing was a benign and often amusing symptom, but it was one more thing.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Those were the ones I was most concerned about,” Loki said, studying his map spread across the floor as he sat cross legged in front of it, nibbling on a slice of pizza. “A non-magic, archaic-tech population is at pretty significant risk when flung up against worlds like ours. And I was worried when Stephen pointed out this one as a child, but now I’m pretty sure anyone coming into Marville with ill intent is going to get thoroughly curb-stomped by the natives.”

“So the others are more like us then? Our world?” Verity asked, sitting on the couch and picking off olive slices, eating them one by one, as she looked over his shoulder.

“Avalon and Weirdworld are less tech and much more magical than we’re used to. Avalon’s like Harry Potter, simple, basic machines, but most everything complex or important is accomplished with magic. Weirdworld, from what I understand, is a Lewis Carroll-esque acid trip,” Loki explained, pointing at their western neighbor and a larger country southwest of that. “I think it’s safe to put those off for last, because any Loki from a region that magic-soaked is going to be pretty formidable. Not too at-risk.”

“I don’t read fiction,” Verity reminded him. “So you’re not worried about those ones being more dangerous?” she asked, scrutinizing the bigger country. “Are you going to bring your teen-sidekick for backup? If they’re more magic than you?”

“They’re not ‘more magic’ than me, they’re just not going to be un-magic like Mister Watson or poor Cowboy-Loki,” Loki corrected. “Anyway, I’ll worry about that after I’ve dealt with these three ‘normal’ ones.”

Verity frowned, she didn’t like him taking for granted that he could just handle whatever was out there. He hadn’t been wrong yet, but it was a stupid assumption to make. She put off arguing about it for now and pointed to one of the blood splotches that was in the blue area of the map. “Why is that one in the ocean? Is that Atlantian-Loki?” she asked.

“No, Atlantis is over here,” Loki corrected, tapping the map. “Or New Atlantis down there and Tranquility is over there and such and so forth and anyway, that’s right in the flight-path of State-51. One of the floating islands. This one I believe is a tech-based phenomena rather than magic.”

“... Floating islands,” Verity repeated, grimacing.

“Oh where’s your sense of whimsy?” Loki admonished, grinning at her.
Verity rolled her eyes and finished her slice. ‘Whimsy’ seemed to be a theme Loki was going for this evening. Last year, she had rarely ever seen Loki wear more than two outfits, his Asgardian-style armor or a sweatshirt and jeans. The sudden switch to being an outright fashionista was another indicator Verity had added to her mental list of reasons this Loki was not her Loki. The clothes thing was a benign and often amusing symptom, but it was one more thing. Today’s outfit had almost certainly been marketed for women (or maybe teenaged girls, would a self-respecting adult wear a gothy, ripped lace and eyeleted fake-corset blouse?) but all clothing tended to refit itself flawlessly whenever Loki swapped out genders, so that right now it was the laiciest, slinkiest men’s shirt ever seen not on a mariachi or figure skater.

“What are you going to do if you meet one of these bad-Lokis while you’re out doing your census thing? You said that these guys are attracting the bad-Lokis because they’re not warded, right?” Verity asked, pulling another slice of pizza out of the box.

Loki shrugged and Verity felt a strong urge to kick him for the flippancy. “I figure I’ll get a much better idea of what I’m up against, and if it’s not something I can easily deal with, I’ll run like hell.”

“That doesn’t sound like a plan. That sounds like the lack of a plan,” Verity said, glaring as he turned his head to glance up at her and offered a toothy grin in reply. Verity was still trying to work out a proper argument and express how thoroughly she disagreed with his not having a plan when there was a firm knock at the door. She sighed and shoved herself to her feet, feeling slightly relieved for the little vacation from Loki’s infuriating Lokiness that walking across the apartment would provide.

“Expecting someone?” Loki asked curiously behind her.

“Amazon. New battery for my computer,” Verity tossed back as she caught the door and pulled it open.

“Aunty Pam is getting married!” Verity’s brain stalled out as her mother’s excited grin faltered slightly and her eyes darted away. “Again!”

“Oh... okay,” Verity mumbled, mentally flailing for balance. “Good for her.”

“Pammy says she’s sure this time. Definitely Mister Right,” she said brightly, and the first part was half-true (Aunt Pam had said that) the second part Mom didn’t actually believe.

“Uhuh,” Verity fought a grimace and managed to at least tone it down a little.

Mom gave a slightly helpless shrug and Verity noticed she was holding a box of frosted pumpkin muffins. “Anyway, they haven’t set a date yet, I just wanted to tell you the good news,” she said, walking into the apartment as Verity automatically stepped out of the way, still off balance and dazed, sure she was forgetting something important. “And I thought we could order a movie and maybe--” She froze suddenly, like a deer that had just sensed movement, and Verity’s mind finally switched back on.

Verity slapped her hand over her mouth to stop herself from swearing out loud. The map had disappeared and Loki was gathering up his file folders and tucking them under his arm as he climbed to his feet. “Ah, hello. You must be Eloise,” he said, flashing a smile with a hint of nervousness that was half-fake. “It’s a pleasure to meet you. My name is Loki. I live just up the hall.”

“The pleasure’s all mine!” Mom said, her face lighting up like a Christmas tree. “Oh goodness, I’ve interrupted your evening. I am so sorry.”
“You didn’t interrupt anything!” Verity protested.

“It’s quite all right, I really should leave my work at the office,” Loki said with a sheepish little shrug, holding his folders momentarily with both hands before pulling a messenger bag off the couch from an angle where Mom couldn’t see that it had just now appeared out of thin air. “I’m just being run a bit ragged this week on a new project. Hard to get my mind off of it.”

“Oh? What do you do?” Mom asked eagerly.

“Mom.”

“Government work. With the census bureau. Very boring, mostly number-crunching,” Loki lied, giving a casual shrug.

“But a government job must have excellent stability, good benefits--”

“Mom!”

“Oh I’m certainly not complaining. I get a lot of satisfaction out of my work, but it isn’t the most riveting conversation material,” Loki replied with a charming smile. “You must want to catch up with your daughter. I can just--” he gestured vaguely toward the door as he pulled the strap of the messenger bag over his shoulder.

“Nonononono!” Mom said quickly, catching his arm. “I don’t want to interrupt if you two had plans.”

“Not really plans, just pizza,” Loki shrugged. “I’m sure there’s plenty if you--”

“Mom can I talk to you, please?” Verity demanded through her teeth.

“Of course, honey. We’ll just be a sec,” Mom promised, patting Loki’s arm, before chasing Verity around the corner to the kitchen area. “Oh sweetheart, I’m sorry, I’m embarrassing you,” she said, dropping the muffins on the counter and catching Verity’s hands excitedly in hers.

“Mom.”

“He’s so handsome, Verity!”

“Mom.”

“And polite!”

“Mom.”

“And he has a real job!”

“Mom!” Verity caught her shoulders. “Did you notice his clothes?” she asked, giving her a serious look as Mom’s excited grin faltered. “The way he talks with his hands? How he’s wearing more makeup than I had on at Aunt Pam’s last wedding?”

Mom’s face fell and Verity felt her stomach twist. “Oh,” Mom said, the syllable managing to convey a surprising level of desolation for a single phoneme. Verity had just lied to her mother without lying. Loki was officially a terrible influence on her. “Well it’s- it’s nice that you’re socializing, sweetheart,” Mom said, half lying, half meaning it as she gave Verity a forced smile.

Verity sighed, feeling slightly terrible. “Okay, hey, do you want some pizza?” she asked.
“That would be nice,” Mom said with another half-hearted smile.

As they sat in the living room eating pizza and then pumpkin muffins, Mom continued politely asking Loki about his work and life (which he lied shamelessly about through a pleasant smile) though she was far less excited about the answers now. Loki cast Verity curious looks now and again, and then tilted his head to the side, eyebrows going up in an ‘ah’ expression and looked very much as though he was trying not to laugh when Mom asked him whether he had a boyfriend.

“Mom,” Verity snapped, feeling her face heat up in embarrassment.

“Not at the moment,” Loki said carefully, folding the muffin-wrapper in his hands into a little square. “I’ve had a bit of family difficulty the last couple years that’s been occupying most of my attention. But, new job, new apartment, excellent neighbors, I’m feeling very optimistic these days.”

“Well I’m glad things are looking up,” Mom said, smiling warmly at him and not asking what ‘family difficulty’ meant- thank God for polite omission. “I don’t suppose you have any straight friends Verity’s age?”

“Mom!” Verity snapped, nearly ready to drag her mother to the door and kick her out.

Rather than laughing, like Verity more or less expected, Loki seemed to seriously consider the question, which was so much worse. He tapped a knuckle against his bottom lip and gazed into space. “Let’s see, early twenties... Hm, no... no, he’s a bit too young... he’d get on your last nerve...” He raised an eyebrow, looking thoughtful, and glanced at Verity. “What are your feelings on girls?”

“Stop it,” Verity hissed, glaring at him.

“Oh!” Loki snapped his fingers. “Ramsey!” he said brightly, looking entirely too pleased with himself. “Douglas Ramsey. He doesn’t do that incidental lying thing. Y’know, like the ‘how are you?’ ‘oh I’m fine’ when you’re not thing? He doesn’t do that. He says what he means. He’s very precise with his language. Or any language.”

“That’s wonderful!” Mom exclaimed, excited anew.

“He’s a nice boy. A bit shy, more than a bit socially awkward, and he’s cute. Do you like blonds?” Loki asked, giving Verity an innocent look.

“Knock it off,” Verity growled through her teeth.

“He sounds perfect, sweetheart!” Mom said eagerly.

Loki’s expression shifted to a thoughtful little frown. “I don’t think he’s one of those ‘I only date other mutants’ types...”

Mom froze, her grin going unnatural, stiff, like when Aunt Pam’s latest one-true-love had been the subject of conversation, and the muscle under her left eye twitched a bit. “O-Oh, he’s... a mutant?” she mumbled awkwardly, trying so very hard to be liberal and open-minded.

Verity bit down on the tip of her tongue to keep herself from laughing as Loki continued on blithely. “Hm? Oh yes, quite impressive. I would say his potential is limited only by the imagination.”

“That’s- That’s nice,” Mom said awkwardly. “He sounds nice.” The enthusiasm had entirely drained out of her voice. The conversation continued at a slightly more subdued tone, and the subject of blind-dates for Verity did not come up again. As time crept closer to the ten o’clock hour, Loki announced that he had work in the morning and said his goodbyes. He offered Mom a handshake and received a hug instead, before making his polite exit, after which Mom turned back to Verity
with a warm smile. “Well, I suppose it is getting pretty late.”

“Yeah,” Verity agreed with a nod.

“I’m glad that you found a friend, Verity,” she said. “And it would be wonderful if you found somebody special, but I suppose there’s no reason to rush.”

“Especially if ‘somebody special’ was a mutant whose powers are ‘limited only by the imagination’?” Verity asked, raising an eyebrow.

Mom bit her lip, glancing away awkwardly. “Now, I don’t have-- It’s not that I’m- I’d just be very worried about you getting involved with somebody dangerous,” she explained.

“It’s okay Mom, I get it,” Verity reassured her. “I know you’re not racist.”

She looked relieved. “Anyway, I’m glad you have somebody your age to talk to now,” she said, giving Verity a hug. “I’m sorry about just dropping in unexpectedly. I’ll call ahead next time.”

“Thanks,” Verity whispered, hugging her back. “I love you, Mom.”

“I love you too. Good night, sweetheart.”

Once the door had closed and Mom was safely away, Verity sighed heavily and ran a hand through her hair, shaking her head.

“So...”

Verity jumped and spun around sharply. “God damn it, Loki!” she yelped, glaring at the god who was once again perched on her couch as though he’d never left.

“I have a question,” Loki said, unfazed by the exclamation. “I take it you told your mother I don’t date women--”

“I implied it.”

Loki grinned at her. “Nicely done.”

“Oh shut up.”

“But anyway, it did bring up a point I’ve been a little unsure of and was hoping to get some clarification on,” Loki said, grin fading into a genuinely awkward, nervous look.

Verity frowned, walking over to the couch. She dropped onto the far end and pulled her feet up on the cushions, looking curiously at Loki as she leaned her shoulder against the back. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong, really. It’s just-- I am very young, you know, and while I have several centuries of knowledge catalogued in my head, there are certain areas and subject matters where the material is a bit sparse,” he rambled, turning himself sideways on the couch to mirror Verity and look back at her. “Personal relationships have not really been the strong suit of any of the previous Lokis whose knowledge has been passed down to me.”

“You’re book-smart but socially dumb,” Verity paraphrased.

“Yes,” Loki agreed, nodding. “They could do charisma. They understood social interaction as sort of a point of study, but successful relationships was more of a shortcoming. So I’m more or less starting
from scratch in that arena,” he explained. “And I’m not sure if most people don’t need to ask these sorts of questions, or if they simply don’t do it because one isn’t supposed to, but I think I’d like to eliminate any ambiguity on the matter.”

“You’re babbling,” Verity noted.

“I’m being verbose,” Loki corrected. “I do that sometimes.”

“I know,” Verity rolled her eyes. “What do you want to ask?”

“Is our relationship entirely platonic or is it prelude to a romantic one?” Loki asked, and then continued without giving Verity time to respond. “If the latter, I take no issue with the pace, I simply wish to understand what course we are on. If the former, I’m perfectly content with that, your friendship is the most important thing I have and no less valid or valuable than any other potential bond.” He’d held eye-contact through the long-winded question, now his gaze fluttered down toward the cushions. “As noted, I am quite young, and I think I’ve not really mapped out my emotions all the way yet. I think my feelings about you are still flexible enough to choose which way to bend them if you were to give me a preferred direction. I love you, but I think I could still choose how to love you.”

If the question itself hadn’t stunned Verity, the earnest confidence with which he used the word ‘love’, as if it were a simple and obvious fact, would have. It was the truth. Loki hadn’t doubted it even the tiniest bit as he’d said it. And the rest... damn. Damn, she was too tired to deal with this. But the fact that he was just coming right out and asking, it was completely reasonable. Why didn’t people just ask these kinds of things? How much heartache would be avoided if people just asked?

Verity sighed and rubbed her hands over her face and then hugged her knees, staring down at her feet for a few seconds as she gathered together scattered thoughts, a lot of things that she usually tried to avoid thinking about but tended to bother her when she couldn’t sleep at night. “... Loki... sixty years from now, how old are you going to be?” she asked softly, looking back up at him.

Loki shrugged and smirked. “I imagine I will be sixty.”

“I mean seriously,” Verity said and bit her lip.

His smirk faded but he shrugged again. “I suppose I won’t have aged noticeably... from your... perspective...” Loki’s voice faded out at the end and a troubled expression started to overtake his face.

“... Loki, if I were going to be romantically involved with anyone... I’d need it to be someone who could grow old with me...” Verity said quietly.

“... You’re going to die...” Loki whispered, sounding very much as though the idea had never before occurred to him. “... And I’m not...” He blinked rapidly, but a tear still broke away from his eyelashes and started crawling its way down his cheek.

“I’m human...” Verity said, and she felt like she was apologizing.

Loki nodded, staring at nothing, looking desolate and somehow almost small as he crouched in the far corner of the couch. “I just... I hadn’t...” he mumbled, a tremor in his voice. “... The first Loki used to criticize Thor for falling in love with mortals...” His gaze, still unfocused and very damp, drifted downwards toward the carpet. “... for this very reason...”

“... Which is probably a good reason for you not to be in love with me,” Verity said softly.
Loki closed his eyes and Verity could see more tears making their way down his face. “I still won’t want you to leave me,” he whimpered.

“It won’t be for a long time still,” Verity said.

“... From your perspective,” Loki whispered. “... From the perspective of someone who isn’t staring eternity in the face... From the perspective of someone who gets to have an ending. Happy or otherwise, you’re guaranteed an ending... I’m guaranteed... that I’ll be left behind... again and again and again, forever.”

Verity closed her eyes and drew a shuddering breath. People thought mortality was scary. But immortality must be utter horror. Verity groped for something, some inadequate comfort, and she knew that she was grasping at straws. “You can keep my story,” she whispered, looking up at him again.

“I will,” Loki said, his eyes snapping open, and the sudden vehemence in his voice startled Verity. “Verity Willis, you will never be forgotten. In five thousand years, I will remember your name. I will remember your story,” he promised, staring her in the eye. “I will remember that you were my best friend and I loved you.”

“... Okay,” Verity whispered weakly. She took a shaky breath and wiped at her face with her sleeve. “S- So, I guess to answer your question, I think we should just be friends.”

“There’s no ‘just’ about it,” Loki said, his face still tear-streaked but the despondence seemed to be fading. “There’s nothing lesser. You’re my friend and that’s more important than anything.”

Verity found herself smiling. “Yeah.”

Loki smiled back and several minutes passed in a fairly comfortable silence. Loki was the one to finally break it, seeming to pick the conversation back up where it had sat, a slight glibness attesting to the recovery from his despair. “But I think I might give dating a try sometime,” he said.

“Not Amora,” Verity said firmly.

“Oh come on, Verity! She’s really hot!” Loki protested.

“She is crazy and evil and she will probably try to kill you or something else horrible,” Verity shot back.

“But she’s really hot!” Loki whined.

Chapter End Notes

It's been a while! At first I was out of town, then my computer got diseases and held all my fics hostage while it was in the shop, then I got diseases and slept for, like, a week. Now I'm trying to get back into the writing groove and get back to posting.

Let's see, names mentioned with varying degrees of obscurity- State-51 was from Nextwave, which I haven't actually read yet, it sounds ridiculously cracky. I picked it up from a Machine Man mini series thing (which was also cracky) and mainly decided to use it because I'm trying to shove a few domains in here that aren't New York. Tranquility is entirely made up. I was trying to think of a name to evoke an Atlantian
lunar colony (obscure reference to New Exiles) and that was the best I could come up with. Douglas Ramsey is the original Cypher (there seems to be another 'Cypher' running with the X-Men now and I'm not actually sure who she is) one of the New Mutants. Originally (back in the 80s) Cypher's powers of being able to read/understand/respond in any language, human, computer or alien, were characterized as the weakest link on the team because they didn't have offensive capabilities. When he was brought back during the X-Men's Utopian era, he came with a really huge existential power-up in the form of the question 'what is language? everything is language.' I think of Loki as being especially impressed with the shy, unassuming universal-translator because the God of Stories would be very word/language oriented, and also, during the Exiled crossover between New Mutants and Journey into Mystery (the thing with the Dísir), Doug actually started reading/picking up on Kid-Loki's meta, making the list of characters in 616 continuity who can do that something like three (Loki, Deadpool and Doug Ramsey). I <3 Doug Ramsey, but probably will not have much use for him in this fic besides this little reference.

So the official Battleworld map is for 8 Years Later, I've been working out a 'current' political map for the purposes of this fic with the same physical geography but some differences to the borders, such as mapping out the canonical subdomains (The City apparently has at least four smaller domains inside of it, and Utopolis has something like six) and also extrapolating a few former domains based on textual references. The biggest one being that in Age of Apocalypse they reference Doom having to go down and tell Apocalypse that he wasn't aloud to expand his boarders anymore, indicating that he'd been doing a lot of it previously, so I'm inclined to speculate that the Domain of Apocalypse used to be a lot smaller.
Chapter Summary

“I thought-” Loki felt her face heat up with a flush of embarrassment, which felt odd- it was the first time she could remember being embarrassed since she’d been herself. “I thought if I was the God of Stories, how could any other mythoform even hurt me? If myth itself is beholden to me, then I’ve reached the top of the mythic totem-pole, haven’t I?” She let out an abashed giggle and looked up at Paradise-Loki. “I didn’t consider the possibility that I might run into another God of Stories.”

Chapter Notes

**This chapter guest-starring:**

Paradise Domain

Paradise City was not aptly named. It was another New York, except this one seemed to have been built in the shape of a huge, ugly statue. Or rather, it had likely been magically absorbed and reformed in the shape of a huge, ugly statue, Loki realized, as closer examination told her that she recognized the face. Crusher Kreel, powered to the gills yet utterly incompetent because he was dumber than his damned wrecking ball. And he was apparently now a city. An especially grubby and broken city.

While a significant number of buildings were now absorbed and hanging off of the monstrosity, the majority of the city was still on the ground, and Loki’s query seemed to be as well, although she was beginning to lose confidence in her tracker. She glared down at the compass she’d made out of a mirror compact, a drop of blood and a whisper, as it again seemed to lose its bearings. The blood collected itself back into a small bead in the middle of the glass, jiggled uncertainly, and then sent out a little spike of red in a new direction. “I just came from there,” Loki admonished it irritably.

She turned around and headed back the way she’d come, bored and annoyed. She’d been wandering around this (exceptionally ugly) city for almost four hours as her compass kept getting confused and changing directions. Either she’d made it wrong or something was disrupting it. She paused at a food truck to acquire a gyro and then perched herself on a bit of traffic barrier as she ate and glared at her
compass, which had now started *spinning*. “Well now you’re just doing it on purpose, aren’t you?” she accused, licking a glob of tzatziki off the knuckle of her thumb.

“Well now you’re just doing it on purpose, aren’t you?”

Loki glanced up as somebody leaned against the other side of her traffic barrier and looked down at her calculatingly, their sharp, green eyes carefully dissecting her as they crossed their arms over their chest and offered only a neutral expression. “Oh, I imagine it’s outside interference that’s the problem,” Loki said quietly, snapping the compact shut and pocketing it as she studied the intriguing new arrival.

If ‘Anon’ had a face (and if it wasn’t a caricature of Guy Fawkes) this would be that face. Every feature was utterly forgettable and nondescript. The only things that were distinct enough to even merit notice were that their eyes were an unusually vibrant green and that they were rather tall by human standards. There was nothing in the individual’s shape or appearance to indicate a gender and any hair they might have had was covered by a cowl that was almost wimple-like. Actually, the overall outfit was rather evocative of a habit. The individual was so entirely unremarkable and ambiguous that their very anonymity stood out.

It was the eyes and a tug of familiarity, a feeling down in the pit of her chest, that made Loki certain she had found her query. Or rather, her query had found her. “And now I find myself very curious indeed,” Loki said, letting her eyes travel over the peculiar outfit for a moment and then back up to the remarkably unremarkable face. “This whole place is so much odder than I was expecting. The people are so varied there is no ‘normal’ at all. And then one gets to considering the architecture,” she glanced in the direction of the huge, inert Absorbing Man made of city blocks in the distance.

“Oh yes, it’s been an exciting few decades,” the Loki of Paradise City agreed, voice as ambiguous as their face. “So I take it that you plan to have a friendly chat and put me at ease before trying to kill me?”

They must have been attacked already; that was why they’d been leading Loki around in an annoying little fugue for the last four hours before sneaking up on her. But that begged the question, if they had the ken to mess around with Loki’s tracking spell, and if they already knew about the ‘game’, why hadn’t they guarded themself against tracking entirely? For someone as utterly anonymous-looking as Paradise-Loki, they didn’t seem to be especially interested in hiding. “I’m not going to kill you,” Loki assured them.

“I think you missed the operative word,” Paradise-Loki said, no hint of a sassy smirk or other form of ‘attitude’, just an expression so neutral they might as well have been asleep. “I said that you would try.”

Loki grinned. “Ah, there’s the vanity. Now I recognize you,” she said.

“Are assuredness and vanity one in the same?” Paradise-Loki asked, raising an eyebrow. “Is knowing and accurately estimating ones abilities hubris?”

“It is if you assume without evidence that anyone else’s abilities are inferior,” Loki pointed out.

“Your abilities are irrelevant,” Paradise-Loki replied in a disinterested voice. “Because ‘You are already dead.’”

Loki’s heart stopped. She dropped her lunch and grabbed at her chest, eyes going wide. She stumbled from her perch, staggering and almost falling when her feet hit the pavement. It hurt so much. She tried to breath but it was meaningless, her blood had stopped flowing, stopped moving...
oxygen from her lungs to her body, to her brain. Her vision was beginning to darken. She grabbed at Paradise-Loki, caught a handful of their robes and clung as her knees buckled and gave out, they just stared down at her without feeling or interest. Loki’s vision started to go black at the edges and shrink inwards.

“’No,’” Loki drew another useless breath and hissed through her bared teeth up at Paradise-Loki. “’I’m not!’”

Her heart started back up like a jackhammer, frantic and pounding in her ears. Loki gasped again and made a little sound somewhere between a whimper and a sob. If it had hurt so much when her heart stopped, why did it hurt even more when it started doing its job again? The next second, arms were around her, pulling her back up before her knees quite hit the ground, supporting her, holding her close.

“Well done, child,” Paradise-Loki’s voice murmured next to her ear. An arm held her firmly around the waist and a hand stroked at her hair. “Very well done.”

“Y-You’re a dick,” Loki gasped, clinging desperately to them and shaking all over.

“And you are exceptional, my dear,” Paradise-Loki whispered, the cold indifference that had previously colored their voice replaced with affection and Loki felt a soft kiss at her temple. “Well done.”

“You— I’ll h-have you know y-you just as-assaulted an instru-trument of G-God Doom,” Loki whispered into Paradise-Loki’s shoulder and then bit them for good measure.

Paradise-Loki started slightly at the bite but didn’t comment on it, slipping an arm under Loki’s knees and picking her up to cradle against their chest. “I suppose that must have hurt,” they noted, an apologetic note in their voice.

“Ya think?!” Loki snapped. Her pulse was still so loud and shaking her entire body with every beat, she almost missed a warping, pulling sensation, and it took her brain far too long to process that Paradise-Loki had just teleported them both somewhere new.

“But what do you mean you’re an instrument of Doom?” Paradise-Loki demanded, sounding somewhere between concerned and offended, as they leaned down and gently settled Loki onto something soft. “You’re far too intelligent for servitude, especially to a charlatan like that.”

“C-Could arrest you f-for blaspheme right now,” Loki threatened. She couldn’t seem to get her hands to let them go, still clinging like a terrified child, but she prodded herself to focus on taking in the new locale as much as she could with her forehead still pressed against Paradise-Loki’s shoulder. She was on a bed, very plain, in a small, plain room.

“That would be very disappointing,” Paradise-Loki replied, stroking her hair soothingly. “How are you feeling?”

“... You almost narrated me to death,” Loki said slowly, finally beginning to properly process the events surrounding her unexpected arrhythmia. “I would be impressed if I weren’t busy being angry.”

“And you ‘narrated’ yourself back to life,” Paradise-Loki said, smiling affectionately at her. “You’re the first to manage it yet.”

Loki stared at them, pressing her lips together as she finally talked her hands into unlocking, letting go of Paradise-Loki’s robes. “... How many have you killed?” she asked softly.
“Three so far,” Paradise-Loki said, settling themself on the edge of the bed, and caught her hand, loosely clasping it in both of theirs. “Disappointing creatures. Nothing but two-dimensional caricatures.”

“You can’t just kill them,” Loki protested.

“Obviously I can, perhaps you meant to say ‘mayn’t’?” Paradise-Loki retorted, raising an eyebrow and smirking. “Anyway, they came here looking for trouble and they found it. I was defending myself.”

“Oh nobody’s said ‘mayn’t’ for a century. And you knew they were hunting and you didn’t even try to hide. You’re practically luring them in,” Loki said, frowning and pulling her hand away to cross her arms irritably over her chest.

“I see no reason I should be obliged to hide,” Paradise-Loki sniffed, folding their hands in their lap. “They’re the ones on murderous rampage. I’m not doing anything wrong.”

Loki started to form a rebuttal and then paused, thinking the words over and frowning. “... You’re not doing anything wrong?” she asked.

“No,” Paradise-Loki agreed.

“... Nothing at all?”

“No.”

Loki stared at them for a moment, turning that over in her mind. “... Well that is very peculiar.”

Paradise-Loki smirked again. “Defying expectation is my avocation,” they said.

Loki studied them silently for a long while, thinking over what they’d said so far, and what had happened on the street. “... You wrote yourself a new character,” Loki decided at length.

Paradise-Loki nodded, reaching out again and stroking their fingers over a lock of Loki’s hair spread across the comforter. “The old one was trite and irritating. I was tired of it,” they said. “... You’re very lovely.”

Loki wrinkled her nose. “You’re judging me, aren’t you?” she demanded. “I like being pretty and I don’t care if you think I’m shallow.”

“Good,” Paradise-Loki smiled at her. “I’m glad you don’t care. And I suppose I can’t complain that you’re pleasant to look at, as I find myself looking at you.” The smile faded and was replaced by a dark look. “But you said that you serve Doom. Why would you prostrate yourself for a fraud? You’re better than that.”

“You’re very affectionate all of a sudden,” Loki noted, feeling petulant.

“... You’re the first one I’ve found that’s like me,” Paradise-Loki said softly.

“... An author?”

Paradise-Loki’s lips quirked upwards. “If you like. ‘Author’. The others I tried to free, I had to take by the hand and drag. Even if they didn’t want to be what they were, they still can’t really think for themselves. They may be my ‘kind’ but they’re not like me... I was beginning to think no one was.” Their smile widened and warmed as they touched a hand gently to Loki’s cheek. “You’re from
another universe... The end of everything, the deaths of untold trillions, nothing can balance that, but still... that you have been brought to me is...” They leaned down, placing a very soft, barely touching, kiss to Loki’s lips and then leaned their forehead against hers. “... I’m glad you came,” they whispered.

Loneliness. Paradise-Loki didn’t have a Verity. When they sat back, Loki pushed herself up too and scooted over to lean against them, letting herself be held as Paradise-Loki gladly wrapped their arms around her. “How did you free yourself?” Loki asked softly, cheek leaned against their shoulder.

“... The heroes of the world this used to be had need of my power and the late Doctor Richards won my aid by giving me a very large dose of self-awareness,” they explained. “The world, and my nature, the manner of creature that I am or was, tried to steal that knowledge away from me again. I could feel it unraveling in my mind, but I held fast. I couldn’t allow it to be stolen from me. I held on to the fraying edges of what I was given until I learned to weave for myself what I was and would be.”

“Taking control of your own story,” Loki mused. It was no easy feat, a nearly impossible one, in fact. A mythoform was slave to their story and the story was the property of the masses and the casualty of the ages. For a mere character to catch the reigns to their own narrative and wrest the pen from the hands of the gestalt, well, it was practically unheard of. “That’s quite impressive.”

“Is it any less than you did?” Paradise-Loki asked.

“Hm, I suppose we used evolution,” Loki shrugged one shoulder. “And evolution requires death and generations. Three Lokis died to make me. I am Loki the Fourth.”

“Interesting,” Paradise-Loki whispered. “... Why do you serve Doom?”

“You’re really stuck on that, aren’t you?” Loki grinned to herself.

“It’s contradictory,” Paradise-Loki said. “You freed yourself from Asgard’s shackles only to become servant to a human wielding stolen powers? Why?”

“The Victor von Doom that became God Doom was of my world (Universe Six-Sixteen by the Britain Corps system) and he owed me a favor,” Loki said, letting her eyes wander over the plain little dresser/vanity next to the door. “Or rather, he owed Loki the Third a favor, but since he was unable to collect on it before his end, I called it in.”

Paradise-Loki frowned. “Doom is doing you a favor?”

“I am at the center of things. I have a great deal of privilege and legitimacy within the new world order, and am well on my way to a great deal of influence,” Loki explained. “Knowledge is power, and I am in the best position to learn and observe all the inner-workings and intrigue that rule our new existence.”

“And what power are you seeking then?” Paradise-Loki asked softly, a slight edge coming into their voice. “Do you plan to poise yourself for a take-over?”

Loki shook her head. “Sheriff Strange asked me the same thing. No. That sounds awful,” she said. “What I want is the power to choose my path. The power to act upon my conscience. I suppose that’s called ‘freedom’, but freedom comes from and depends on a great deal of power. The weak cannot be free, because one needs strength to stand firm against a greatly oppressive world.”

Paradise-Loki nodded, cheek brushing Loki’s forehead. “... Your life feels very young, but you obviously carry a great deal of wisdom... It reminds me of a messianic toddler I met some years ago.”
“I was born with the knowledge of the Lokis who came before me,” Loki explained.

“So that you are bright-eyed innocence married to the wisdom of ages,” Paradise-Loki mused.

“I suppose so,” Loki agreed, closing her eyes and letting her body relax into Paradise-Loki’s warmth.

“So it sounds rather as though you remember everything? The way your world was and the end of it?”

“You mean I have not been affected by Doom’s damnable towers, delivering his gospel right into the hearts and minds of his stolen subjects?”

“Towers?” Loki frowned softly.

“The transmitters Doom uses to make everyone believe things are as they should be,” Paradise-Loki said. “You don’t know about them?”

“I’m just beginning to learn my way around the mechanics of Battleworld,” Loki said, opening her eyes and gazing at the blank wall ahead of her. “How have you found out about these transmitters?”

“You fancy yourself an ‘author’, and it seems you have the talent, but you’re trying to run before you walk, aren’t you?” Paradise-Loki chided gently.

“What is that supposed to mean?” Loki demanded.

“How well can you possibly write when you haven’t yet learned to read?” Paradise-Loki challenged.

“Read?” Loki considered that. “Read what? Everything?”

“Or anything.” Paradise-Loki nodded. “Anything that has meaning, you should be able to look into and read what’s written there.” They gave a lopsided shrug and Loki felt their lips quirk upward. “Or even meaningless things can be readable, if one considers Lewis Carol as example.”

“I know a boy with that power,” Loki mused. “Or, well, no, I suppose he can read anything written and tangible, but you’re more talking about reading the Matrix aren’t you?”

“What matrix?”

“Oh, no, never mind. It was a movie back on my world but it probably didn’t happen on yours,” Loki shrugged. “What I think you’re saying, if I understand correctly, is that I ought to be able to look at someone or something and read everything they are?”

“Well, perhaps one day,” they tilted their head a little, considering. “But omniscience would take a great deal of work and dedication and time, I imagine. Still, go about and watch the world, watch the people, observe it all and learn to understand it, and you’ll begin to see past the cover of things and learn to read the text within.”

Loki nodded slowly, mulling that over and staring blankly into space, her eyes unfocused, body languid, letting Paradise-Loki support her. “... I have the sum knowledge of three and a half Lokis in me...” she murmured after a few minutes.

“A half?” Paradise-Loki asked.

“Time-travel shenanigans. They always muss up the numbers a bit,” Loki shrugged one shoulder. “But it’s really an awful lot of data between them all... From the first Loki, I am an expert of seething
and every kind of magic he could appropriate from the Norns and various other little bits of horrible
he scraped up here and there. From the second, I learned to create and build instead of destroying.”
She shut her eyes and bit her tongue for a moment, swallowing hard, trying to push his round, young
face quickly from her thoughts again as a surge of longing twisted her stomach. It wasn’t guilt now,
just an emptiness, a gap that she tried to keep shoved to the periphery of her consciousness for the
time being.

“From three-point-one I know how to curl time and space around my finger and skate across the
surface of reality and tie causality in knots. And from three-point-two I learned that the difference
between truth and falsehood is a semantic argument,” she continued, as Paradise-Loki allowed her
brief falter to pass by without comment. “I- I thought I knew enough now. I thought I was finally
fully-baked and I could stop learning and start living,” she mumbled, feeling very foolish suddenly as
she said it.

“If you are not learning, you’re not alive,” Paradise-Loki replied easily. “We are students until the
day we die.”

Loki sighed heavily. “Verity was right. I got overconfident,” she said.

“Verity?”

“My friend. A human girl who can see only truth,” Loki explained. “She thought I was being
reckless, not having a plan of how to deal with a hostile Loki when I meet one... I thought--” Loki
felt her face heat up with a flush of embarrassment, which felt odd, it was the first time she could
remember being embarrassed since she’d been herself. “I thought if I was the God of Stories, how
could any other mythoform even hurt me? If myth itself is beholden to me, then I’ve reached the top
of the mythic totem-pole, haven’t I?” She let out an abashed giggle and looked up at Paradise-Loki.
“I didn’t consider the possibility that I might run into another God of Stories.”

Paradise-Loki wrinkled their nose. “I’m rather tired of the word ‘god’. We’re not the creators, we’re
clearly the created,” they said.

“I would argue Voltaire’s point on that,” Loki hummed. “While indeed humans, or at least genus
Homo, might be much older than gods, and have created our early forms some two million years ago
(or whatever the anthropologists are arguing now) they’ve also given us the power to back up the
name,” Loki pointed out. “Maybe they made us, maybe we are subject to their whims, but we are
here because they need us.”


“... You are very unhappy about being a god, aren’t you?” Loki noted softly, reaching up and tracing
a hand slowly around Paradise-Loki’s jaw, studying their expression as they looked back at her. “My
immediate predecessor had secret dreams of being a real boy too... I try not to get hung up on it.
Wishing. Wishing on stars, wishing on pretty young men with reality-bending abilities, it’s not
productive. I know what I am. I am a story. And I shall be the best story.”

Paradise-Loki smiled softly at her. “I think perhaps that youthful optimism is your strongest asset,”
young men with reality-bending abilities, it’s not

“I think I might like to call on you very often,” Loki mused. “Are you going to make me spend half a
day looking for you every time?”

They chuckled. “I think I can see fit to be a little more hospitable next time.”
Verity opened the door to find Loki holding a shopping bag of takeout boxes in one hand and a small cake in the other. “We can’t have cake every day,” Verity said, putting her hands on her hips.

“Says you,” Loki rebutted.

“You might have a godly metabolism, but I will get fat,” Verity pointed out.

Loki frowned and tilted her head, considering that. “... More of you to love?” she tried.

“No.”

She gave an exaggerated shrug. “Special occasion. This is a ‘you were right and I’m sorry’ cake,” Loki explained.

“What was I right about?” Verity asked curiously, stepping out of the way to let Loki into her apartment.

“That we’re not in a small pond anymore and I’m not that big a fish,” Loki said, putting her food down on the coffee table and starting to pull the takeout boxes out of their bag. “I met another God of Stories (or something along those lines) today, and I got my sorry ass handed to me.”

“Are you okay?” Verity asked, looking Loki over critically.

“Yeah. I kinda almost died but I managed to bounce back at the last minute and then they warmed up to me real fast and we’re friends now,” Loki said, her explanation so mystifying it created more questions without really answering any.

“‘They’? How many were there?”

“Just one. But androgynous, so, y’know, ‘they’,” Loki explained.

“Okay, and how did they almost kill you?” Verity demanded.

“They narrated me dead,” Loki answered, straightening up and walking over to the kitchenette.

“... What?” Verity stared after her, too irritated by the esoteric explanation to be worried, because after all, Loki seemed to be fine now.

“It’s... Remember when I used my narrator-voice to bottle up Asgard?” Loki gathered up plates and silverware and carried them back to the coffee table. “They used narrator-voice and tried to re-write me so that I was dead.”

“... But you’re not,” Verity pointed out.

“Yeah, because I crossed out their revision,” Loki replied, heading back toward the kitchenette.

“... Neither of the things you just said made any sense,” Verity grumbled, collapsing on the couch and grinding the heel of her hand against her temple.

“Of course they do, you just need to stop thinking of me as a person and think of me as a story,” Loki said, pulling a bottle of wine and two glasses out of the cabinet. “Picture me as a book. Paradise-Loki took a pen and wrote me a death scene. Thus I died. Except that I can do that too, so I reversed it before it took all the way.”
“... ‘Paradise’ Loki?” Verity raised an eyebrow.

“The domain they live in is called ‘Paradise’. For some reason. It’s not really very nice,” Loki replied.

“So... ‘Paradise-Loki’ tried to kill you, but now you’re friends,” Verity said.

“Yes.”

“Okay, that was kind of a prompt there,” Verity glared as Loki handed her a glass of wine.

“Paradise-Loki’s never met another meta-god (I think they’re lonely) and they were very excited that I broke the fourth wall,” Loki explained, sitting down next to Verity and popping open takeout boxes, which were filled with Italian today. “They got very affectionate after that. Lots of praise and cuddles.”

“... Cuddles?” Verity set her wine on the end table and looked at her.

“Some people are very tactile,” Loki shrugged. “Arcadia-Loki was huggy too... Not quite as much, but still.”

“Okay, so, they tried to kill you, and then you cuddled. Am I understanding that right?” Verity demanded.

“Well... you’re hearing it right, I’m not sure if you’re understanding...” Loki said, tapping her fork against her bottom lip.

“You’re right. I am definitely not understanding this,” Verity agreed.

“Well, it’s kinda... when I showed up, they thought I was one of the bad-Lokis looking for a fight, and they greeted me with a metaphorical middle-finger, but then when I proved that I was a cool guy, everything was cool,” Loki explained.

“They tried to kill you! How can that possibly be cool?” Verity exclaimed.

“I was mad for a little while, but I got over it,” Loki said.

“They tried to kill you!”

“They weren’t trying to kill me personally, because they didn’t even know me,” Loki protested. “They were trying to kill what they thought was a bad-Loki, in their territory, hunting them. If you think about it in those terms, it’s fairly reasonable.”

“Oh my God...” Verity moaned, dropping her face into her hands.

“The experience and our conversation after the fact has also helped me to recognize a few shortcomings in myself,” Loki noted, settling back into the couch and starting to eat. “The first of course is a point you brought up last night, that I need to have backup. Or at least be able to call for backup,” Loki reasoned, twirling her fork through some fettuccine noodles. “I think with the non-hostile Lokis, having a Thor shadowing me (even a little one) would be a problem, put them on edge. But when I run into a hostile one, I need to be able to call backup in fast.”

“Makes sense,” Verity agreed, picking her wine back up and trying to relax, because at least now Loki was talking not-crazy.

“I’m thinking something like a medical-alert-bracelet, except it’d be a Thor-alert-bracelet.”
“Sounds like a start,” Verity nodded. “How fast does a Thor move though? If you’re in trouble, you’d need help fast, right?”

“Thors move pretty fast,” Loki said with a mouth full of chicken and pasta, then swallowed. “The important thing is going to be rigging the spell up to give accurate directions so they can find me.”

“Right,” Verity set her wine on the coffee table while she bent over to load her plate. With Loki sounding mostly rational again, she was starting to get her appetite back.

Chapter End Notes

So you might have noticed in the picture that Paradise-X's Loki doesn't have a nose; I never really saw a purpose to that, it was always just weird-to-be-weird, except that that doesn't really fit their personality, so I'm going with the theory that they dropped it at some point between Paradise-X and now. The scene in my mind is that Donald tells Loki they look like Voldemort, and Loki's all 'I'm okay with looking weird, or ugly, but I will not be derivative!' Lalalalala- Anyway.
The Earth-X series (Earth-X, Universe-X, Paradise-X) is... odd. It's all non-linear, extremely confusing, and mostly narration without much on-screen action. It's marvelous world-building, but the story is a little... It reminds me of Tolkien, the writer's built an elaborate, complex, huge world that's actually really interesting, but the prose feels like you're reading a text-book. And honestly, a comic book shouldn't really even have prose in the first place, so... yeah, the story-telling in Earth-X etc. is not great. I mostly kept with it because what they'd done with Loki was pretty interesting. If anybody decides to read it, you should know that Marvel's digital archives have the order screwed up, they show two 'Issue 0's in all the series, and you have to look at the actual covers. One of them really is Issue 0 (which is the start of the series) and one of them is 'Issue X' (which is not ten, it's the finale). IT IS EVEN MORE CONFUSING IF YOU DON'T KNOW THAT! But anyway, it's not necessary background reading for this fic, don't worry. Although the narrating somebody to death thing does come from Paradise-X, and it was an topic I wanted to bring up with the God of Stories.

Loki mentioned Voltaire, the oh so famous quote she was referencing was “If God did not exist, it would be necessary to invent him.”

Next chapter will have Masterson back, I know a few of you have been asking for him. I love to hear from you! Feedback is always appreciated and sometimes comments lead to me changing/adding stuff to what I have planned. That's the thing that really enchants me about writing to a live audience, the dialogue.
Filing Papers and Fetching Coffees

Chapter Summary

“Um, hi?” Loki called to the young woman behind the counter. “This is the police station, right?”

The officer looked up and nodded. “Yes, is something wrong?” she asked.

Loki tilted her head to the side, puzzled. “Well, I suppose I was sort of expecting some police officers and handcuffed criminals to be wandering about,” she said.

The woman raised an eyebrow. “You’re not from around here, are you.”

“Er, no,” Loki admitted.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Doomgard

Loki was tapping her toe against the baseboard behind her desk while working on the second page of her report, listening to the dull murmur of the open office space around her, when one of the many sets of walking feet tramping about the area veered close enough to catch her attention. She lifted her head as the owner of the approaching feet addressed her. “Teller, you’ve got a new crime scene,” Masterson’s voice called.

Loki turned to look at him, the flicker of a sick feeling clenching her gut. Guilt? Because she should have been fixing this instead of dawdling and playing games, and now another (potentially cool) Loki was dead? No. She hadn’t been screwing around. She’d been doing what she was supposed to, taking the time to eliminate suspects and protect the ones that were in the most danger. She was being prudent and methodical, not dawdling. This is what she was supposed to be doing.

“Where?” she asked.

“Killville,” Masterson answered, coming to a stop next to her desk. “The Thor assigned to that domain just sent word up.”

Loki blew a sigh past her teeth and ran her fingers through her hair then pursed her lips for a few seconds before pushing away from her desk and climbing to her feet. “Well then, I suppose we’d better go have a look while it’s fresh,” she said.

“You want me to come?” Masterson asked, looking hopeful.

“It’s rather easier to get past the red-tape when I’m accompanied by a man with a hammer,” Loki said with a smirk. “Unless, of course, you’re too busy.”

“Oh gee, I’ve got so many papers to file and coffees to fetch and super important stuff like that,”
Masterson replied, rolling his eyes.

“Well I’d hate for you to get behind in your very important filing of papers that nobody’s ever going to read or care about,” Loki draped an arm around his shoulders. “And where shall we go to meet the Thor who called it in?”

“He’s got an office in the Killville police department.”

“Righty-o, off we go then,” she pulled Masterson into a teleport and landed on the sidewalk just outside the stationhouse. “Oooh, neony,” Loki cooed, looking up and down the street at a scene that could have just as easily been part of the Las Vegas strip, but for the absence of familiar landmarks.

“... I think I can see the word ‘girls’ written in lights at least twenty times from right here,” Masterson noted, sounding somewhere between sarcastic and intrigued.

“They know what the people want,” Loki grinned and turned back toward the stationhouse. “What’s the local Thor’s name?” she asked, climbing the concrete steps.

“Cage. I don’t really know him. I guess Killville keeps him pretty busy,” Masterson said, following in her wake.

Inside the stationhouse, all was still and quiet. A smartly dressed officer, tapping away at a computer behind the counter, seemed to be the sole occupant of the room. There were no rowdy drunks or tweakers in handcuffs waiting to be processed. There were no harassed-looking officers bustling around trying to process them. There were no furious relatives shouting at anybody. It was entirely unlike Law and Order, and Loki frowned softly, surveying the scene that looked rather like the lobby of an office building.

“Um, hi?” Loki called to the young woman behind the counter. “This is the police station, right?”

The woman looked up and nodded. “Yes, is something wrong?” she asked.

Loki tilted her head to the side, puzzled. “Well, I suppose I was sort of expecting some police officers and handcuffed criminals to be wandering about,” she said.

The woman raised an eyebrow. “You’re not from around here, are you.”

“Er, no,” Loki admitted.

“We don’t do that sort of thing. The guilds keep order,” the woman said. “Did you need something?”

“... I’m looking for Thor Cage?” Loki said.

“Ah,” the woman nodded, picking up the receiver of a phone and Loki could hear the clicks of touch-tone keys as she dialed into it. “He said somebody would be coming around.” She paused for a moment, phone to her ear and then said, “The officers from Doomgard are here... Yes, sir.” She hung up the phone and looked back to Loki. “He’ll be right here.”

Loki nodded and glanced at Masterson, who shrugged. Two minutes later, Power Man, wearing a bit more metal on his person than Loki’s recollection and sporting wingidies on his tiara, walked into the room. He glanced at Loki, then at Masterson, then back at Loki, and looked thoroughly underwhelmed. “You this ‘Agent Storyteller’ I been hearing about?” he asked.

“That’s right,” Loki agreed.
“Okay. Got him in the morgue,” he said, turning back toward the door he’d come through and giving them a beckoning wave.

“All right, and will we be able to see the crime scene as well?” Loki asked, following after him. “If you’ve got a full plate, you can just tell us where it was and we’ll pop on over and have a look.”

“Ain’t got no crime scene for ya,” Power Thor replied, glancing over his shoulder at her. “Somebody stuffed the stiff in a dumpster down on twelfth. No idea where he bit it.”

“Ah...” Loki nodded slowly. “And I don’t suppose that’s something that would be... pursued... canvassing for witnesses or some such?”

Power Thor snorted. “This is Killville. Nobody saw nothing.”

“Of course,” Loki nodded again and then sighed. “I suppose it wouldn’t make much of a difference. Our killer is probably hunting in another domain by now anyway... Would have been nice to get a physical description though.” Power Thor made another dismissive sound. “I wonder if you might tell me, Thor, the officer in the... reception area said that crime in Killville is administered to by the guilds. Can you elaborate on that?”

Power Thor glanced back at her again and gave a shallow nod. “Killville runs on the guild system, and the guilds protect their own interests. You operate without a guild license, the guild you screwed deals with it.”

Loki tilted her head to the side a little. “What sort of guilds?” she asked.

“The biggest ones are gonna be the Escorts Guild, the Assassins Guild and the Mercs Union. After that, you got the Hospitality Association, the Mercantile Guild, the Science League and a buncha also-rans,” Power Thor said. “So enforcement works like this: say somebody runs a commissioned hit and they ain’t with the Assassins Guild, word gets round to the guild and next thing you know, the stupid bastard who did it and the idiot dumb enough to pay him both wake up dead.” He gave a dismissive shrug. “Or if someone sells it without an Escorts license, that guild makes a call over to the Assassins and orders up a hit. Main reason the Assassins Guild is as powerful as they are is because they do most of the enforcing for all the other guilds.”

“Interesting...” Loki said, mulling that over. “I suppose the sentence for crossing a guild is universally death? There are no prisons in Killville?”

“Hell no. Ain’t nobody gonna pay to put a roof over the chumps who can’t get with the program,” Power Thor sneered.

“Brutal but effective, I suppose,” Loki mused.

“Baron deals with static when the guilds start in at each other. Hospitality and the Escorts are always getting into it and now Assassins have been going back and forth with AIM for a few years over whether a sentient weapon violates their dominion over rent-a-killers,” Power Thor said as they stopped short of the door marked ‘MORGUE’ and he pushed through the one marked ‘EXAMINATION ROOM’. “Somebody calls in a body in a dumpster, it’s just a normal Tuesday, the cops go out to tag it and pick it up. I just happened to see this guy’s face as they were rolling him in this morning. I know the powers in Doomgard’ve been watching for these ones.”

The M.E. glanced up as they entered, leaned over the body, wrist-deep in the exposed abdomen. His I.D. badge read ‘Essex’, but Loki recognized him easily enough without it. What was that stupid little diamond on his head for anyway? “Ah, these would be your colleagues from Doomgard, Thor
Cage?” Essex asked, cheekbones shifting slightly under his flimsy medical mask to indicate a pleasant (creepy) smile.

“Storyteller and--” Power Thor faltered and glanced at Masterson.

“Thunderstrike,” Masterson said with the barest hint of a sulk and a great deal of resignation.

“Hm, no hammer,” Essex noted quietly, eyeing Loki. “You’ll be here to identify the body then?” he asked, back at normal volume.

“I serve a different function,” Loki replied coolly. “And we’re actually here to collect the body. This is an ongoing investigation and Doomgard’s medical examiner will need to perform the autopsy-- finish performing it-- in order to compare this death with the previous incidents.”

Masterson glanced at Loki with a slightly raised eyebrow as Essex’s face fell into a look somewhere between disappointed and accusing. “I see. Of course. If I could just take a few samples for our--”

“We needed the body intact,” Loki interrupted. “Failing that--” she glanced down at the flayed chest and disassociated rib-bits and then back up at Essex with a faint sneer. “-we will just have to take it as-is.”

“I see,” Essex repeated tightly. “I suppose you’ll be needing to arrange transport then--”

“If you would be so kind as to take a step back,” Loki said, walking over to the table. The medical mask covered half of Essex’s face, but he was definitely giving Loki a dirty look as he backed up. Loki spread out her hands and swept them through the air over the half-dissected corpse, whispering an incantation and warping the space to fold it up into a conveniently pocket-sized sphere then picking it up. “And where might I find the clothing and personal effects?” she asked, looking back to the glaring M.E.

Essex pointed silently to a few plastic bags on the counter, which Loki packed up in a similar manner. “Thank you for your cooperation, Mister Essex,” Loki said, giving a flick of her wrist as she passed him and making the blood vanish from his gloves and scalpel, leaving him immaculate and earning a small, restrained sound of disgruntled fury. “If you would like a copy of the autopsy report for your records, I can have one sent to you.”

“... Thank. You.”

Leaving Essex to his chagrin, Loki made her way back into the hall with the two Thors following in her wake. After they were a few yards on, Power Thor called up to her, “So you got a problem with our M.E.?”

Loki half-turned back to look at him. “Aside from the fact that he’s a Sinister and there’s no way in Hel I’m letting him have samples of one of my alternates?” she raised an eyebrow. “No problem at all.”

Power Thor cracked a grin and nodded. “I feel ya,” he agreed.

Loki shuddered. “My skin is crawling. I’ve half a mind to go back and sweep the room for stray hairs. He no doubt is,” she complained.

“No offense, because major props for having the stomach for it, but is everyone in Killville some kind of psychopath?” Masterson asked looking up at Power Thor.

“Nah, just everyone important,” Power Thor snorted, rolling his eyes.
“Latvarian is a world of wonderful variety,” Loki sighed, reaching the stairs and climbing her way back toward street-level and the land of glittering neon. “And not-so-wonderful variety too. Are you a Killville native, Thor Cage, or were you brought in from another domain?”

“Born and raised,” Power Thor replied, pushing back his shoulders and raising his chin proudly. “Like I said, not everybody here is a psychopath, they’re just running the place. You can find decent people on these streets, but just keeping their heads down mostly, because being decent is a good way to get a target on your back.”

“Mm, I can see as that could become very discouraging,” Loki agreed, nodding. “I admire you then, Thor Cage, for managing to stay sterling amid such corruption.”

“Ain’t nobody ever accused me a being ‘sterling’,” Power Thor chuckled. “I’m worthy of these streets, and these streets need me.”

Loki looked back at him and smiled. “Then perhaps that is much better than being sterling.”

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After dropping off Killville-Loki with Doctor Frog (who was very annoyed the autopsy had been started and complained loudly about Essex’s techniques) Loki caught Masterson by the arm before he could wander off to go be a lowly cog in Doomgard’s administration again. “There was something I meant to talk to you about, before the whole new-body-slash-crime-scene thing came up,” she said, tugging him back over to her little corner of the office.

“What’s up?” Masterson perked up at the possibility of further putting off paper-filing and coffee-fetching.

“As I am conducting this census that Sheriff Strange has tasked me with, I feel that in most cases, when I am seeking out a non-combative Loki, having a Thor present would be counter-productive. My queries would feel intimidated or harassed and be inclined to be uncooperative,” she explained carefully and Masterson nodded. “However, as I am yet unsure where or when I might encounter an aggressive element, I find myself in a very risky position, and it has occurred to me that I need to be able to call for rapid assistance should I find myself in a situation for which I am ill prepared.”

“That makes sense,” Masterson agreed, nodding again. “So, like, you want some kind of undercover guys following you? Lawspeaker probably won’t like giving you the resources, but the Sheriff did tell him to.”

“I don’t think a constant presence is really necessary,” Loki shook her head and held out a black, plastic-looking bracelet. “What I need is someone I can trust to come running when I call.”

Masterson stared at her, then at the band, looking startled. “Me?” he asked.

“No one I’d trust more,” Loki replied.

And it was true not just because she had built a sufficient rapport with Masterson to believe in his willingness to help her, but also because he had something to prove. The fact that Lawspeaker had assigned him to Loki in the first place tended to indicate that he was at the very bottom of this pecking order. And despite other dissimilarities in their personalities, Masterson had the same pride and temper as Thor, he wasn’t about to sit around and accept being a menial, he’d fight his way to the status and respect he wanted. Any chance he had to prove himself was a chance he’d grab with both hands.

He reached out and took the bracelet from Loki, frowning at it. “How does it work?” he asked.
“If I find myself in an overwhelming situation, I can activate a distress call,” she explained, folding her hands behind her back. “The bracelet will receive the call, alert you, and give you my location. It will also activate automatically if I become incapacitated.”

“Okay,” Masterson pulled off his glove and slid the bracelet onto his arm, where it resized itself to fit snuggly but comfortably around his wrist. “I can handle that,” he said, looking more pleased with his new responsibility by the second. He glanced back up at Loki with a grin. “I won’t let you down.”

“I know you won’t,” Loki replied, rocking on her heels. Then she sighed and ran her hands through her hair, feeling suddenly tired as she remembered, “I still have a report to finish. And I don’t think the Sheriff is going to be especially pleased by it.”

Masterson nodded, looking subdued as he realized he was being dismissed to go back to his real job. “So you don’t need anything else for now?”

“Hm, if you’re taking coffee orders...”

“Sure,” Masterson sighed resignedly, rolling his eyes.

Stephen glanced up from a request for mediation from Forest Hills to a knock on his door. “Enter,” he called, and was pleased and then slightly worried because Loki had not dressed up in a parody of office-wear this time as she stepped into the room. “You have a report on Paradise?” he asked.

“I do, and I’m not entirely sure how you’re going to take it,” Loki said, frowning just a little as she made her way across the room to stand in front of his desk.

Stephen raised an eyebrow. “I don’t think I like the sound of that,” he noted.

“Well, hear me out to the end, all right? Because it’s going to sound bad to start, but I don’t think it really is bad,” she said, fidgeting with the folder in her hands. “See, the Loki native to Paradise claims to have dispatched three other Lokis in the last few months—but it’s because those ones were killer ones who were on the prowl. It was self defense, more or less. Maybe less, because I kind of doubt any of them really stood a chance.”

He nodded slowly, considering that. “So the Loki in Paradise is above the norm for power then?” he asked.

“Ohhh yes, I should say so,” Loki agreed, nodding. “They nearly ended me, due to mistakenly assuming I was one of the bad ones.”

“They?” he asked sharply. “How many?”

“Just one. Androgynous,” Loki said quickly.

“I see.” Stephen pursed his lips for a moment, frowning. “And they attacked you?”

“Sort of a... pre-emptive self-defense thing...” Loki bit her lip, looking away. “The more notable part is how they attacked me. They used narrative. They’re a God of Stories too. Although, apparently they take issue with the word ‘god’, but I’m fairly certain if one were to title them, that would be the correct one.”

Stephen sighed, mulling that over. “... Making them exceptionally powerful and they apparently have a hair-trigger. Not a good combination.”
“I don’t think it’s so much that,” Loki said, shifting on her feet and looking as awkward and uncomfortable as Stephen had seen her. “It’s... I think they were just very very disappointed... Because the bad-Lokis were being the trope, and Paradise-Loki kind of took it as a personal insult, and also, maybe, evidence that they were unique and... alone. I think they were sad and angry.”

Stephen studied her for a moment. “... And after meeting you?” he asked.

Loki’s lips shifted into a small, distant smile. “After I unwrote the death they narrated for me, they became completely friendly.” She tilted her head to the side a little, seeming to consider. “Maybe a little too friendly. The fawning got a little bit incesty-feeling,” she admitted. “But they like me lots, and I honestly think they may not kill off anymore Lokis, even if they come a prowling, just because I asked them not to.”

“Oh.” Stephen tapped a fingernail against the desk, considering that slowly. “That’s... disturbing.”

“The incest part?”

Stephen fought a grimace. “That amount of power being held by an emotionally volatile being.”

“They were lonely.” Loki said quietly, an unfamiliar somberness in her voice and expression. “They thought they were the only one. Now they know they’re not.”

Stephen sighed, closing his eyes. “And what level of threat would you say they represent to Doom’s Law?” he asked.

Loki hummed and tilted her head to the side again, thinking. “Their memory of their previous world and the cataclysm seems to be completely intact. Which isn’t surprising if they have similar powers to me,” Loki said slowly. “I’m fairly sure they would refuse to recognize Doom as ‘God’ if asked, but they recognize the importance of his function and don’t seem particularly inclined to challenge him or speak against him. I think in general they just want nothing to do with the religion aspect of it.”

“And you don’t believe that they would be inclined to seed doubt for the sake of mischief?” Stephen asked.

“Actually, it was rather implied that they’ve retired the mischief bit,” Loki said. “They’re not exactly like me, obviously, they’re just also a story-god.”

Stephen raised an eyebrow. “No mischief?”

“They said they don’t do ‘wrong’ things,” Loki shrugged. “They seem to be living an ascetic life of contemplation and stuff. Like a monk. After they realized that they’d been trapped inside the myth, they were so disgusted by the whole thing they just did a total one-eighty to be like ‘so there!’”

“Interesting...” Stephen murmured, mulling the idea over.

“An inverted Loki,” Loki mused softly and Stephen glanced back up at her; her gaze was distant and expression slightly wistful. “But intentionally and willingly inverted. Not just a fluke.”

“So in that light,” he said carefully, tapping his finger on the desk as he considered it, “would you say that they are trustworthy?”

Loki seemed to think about it for a moment. “... Yes. I think they almost have to be.”

“But since they feel no loyalty to Doom...”
“I think they feel loyalty to me now,” Loki said softly, her eyes studying the carpet. “I think they won’t risk alienating me.”

“... Do you think they’re in love with you?” Stephen asked curiously.

“In a way,” Loki said, eyes still downcast. “Not really as a romantic thing. I think it’s possible they won’t even feel the need to be near me excessively often, sometimes but not always. It’s more that... they need very badly to know that I exist. They need it more than anything, maybe.”

“After one meeting?” he studied her uncharacteristically demure body language.

“After one sentence,” Loki said in a voice not far above a whisper.

Chapter End Notes

So I was trying to decide on a good Thor to be Killville's resident Thor on duty, and I think Luke was about the third name I thought of and decided on as the best. This was before I found out that this was an actual thing. There was a What-If comic back in the 80s where Luke Cage finds Thor's hammer instead of Donald Blake. I haven't read it (and doubt I really want to) but I'm pretty sure it's just pure silliness.

Sinister as Killville's M.E. is kind of indirectly referencing/being inspired by the story with Loki and Sinister from A+X issue 5. I was trying to think of who would be a good coroner for a domain that's 90% villains, and at first I went through a couple of more obscure science-creep characters before I was like 'Oh, duh, Sinister!'

I breifly mentioned 'Doctor Frog' in passing; that's a thing from the 'Thors' Secret Wars mini series. Doomgard's M.E. is Throg. Because why not.
The past week I've been thinking more about the personalities and attributes of bad-Lokis I eventually want to have make appearances. I think I want to feature four nasty ones who are actively playing the game, and I've planned out a Goddess of Poisons and a God of Rage/Madness (because a Berserker-Loki would be the shit), but I'm still drawing a blank for three and four. Any suggestions for titles or attributes?
Under the Mistletoe

Chapter Summary

The compass directed him to 409 and he paused in front of the door to consider the little sprig of mistletoe thumb-tacked above the lintel for a moment.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Nutopia

Loki didn’t recognize the city. It wasn’t New York; it was something smaller, or at least shorter, which faded into a sprawling suburbia that went on for miles. This time Loki’s little mirror tracker seemed quite happy to lead him toward his query without hiccup or confusion. He followed it through the reasonably pleasant (though nothing to write home about) streets of Nutopia into the nebulous region that fell somewhere between ‘urban’ and ‘suburban’, eventually coming to a small, attractive apartment building with planters by the main door.

He glanced briefly at the directory but none of the names were obvious, so Loki whispered a spell to unlock the door and headed for the stairs, keeping an eye on his compass. It directed him out onto the fourth floor and he paused in front of 409, to consider the little sprig of mistletoe thumb-tacked above the lintel for a moment.

Loki slipped the compass into his pocket and knocked. When the door opened, Loki’s first impression was that she was a child. She was a foot shorter than him and maybe an inch or two more, but a second glance told Loki she wasn’t really juvenile, just small, even by human standards. The next second, the diminutive woman’s eyes had gone wide and she jumped back with a shriek.

“No! No! Leave me alone!” she cried, darting around the corner and coming back into view brandishing an aluminum baseball bat. “Don’t come near me!”

That reaction was quite telling. She hadn’t been afraid to open her door (it was a nice neighborhood after all) but the moment she’d caught sight of Loki, she was terrified. She’d been attacked already. She’d been attacked and she must be another normal human variant like Watson, judging by the stature and the fact that she defended herself with a bat. “It’s okay. It’s okay. I’m not going to hurt you,” Loki said gently, holding up his hands in a surrendering gesture. “I’m not here to hurt you. I’m Special Agent Storyteller and I’m with Doomgard. I’m not going to hurt you. I just want to ask you some questions.”

“You’re lying!” Nu-Loki accused, backing herself right up against the wall, the bat in her hands wavering as she trembled visibly. Besides being short, she was also birdishly delicate; she didn’t look like she could do much damage to anyone, even with the bat. She had a doll-like cuteness with her porcelain skin and ruby lips. Her hair formed into loose ringlets that ended an inch above her thin shoulders and she was dressed in a very human way- comfortable, soft cottons with no hint of Asgardian influence anywhere to be seen.

“I’m really not,” Loki said calmly, glancing nervously down the hall, concerned that Nu-Loki’s
shriek might bring curious neighbors out to investigate. “I have a badge and everything.”

“You don’t have a hammer,” Nu-Loki snapped and then bit her glossy, red lip, glaring venomously.

“I’m not a Thor, I’m a special agent. I work with the Thors, but I do a different job,” Loki explained, stepping into the apartment. Maybe that wasn’t going to do much to calm her down, but waiting for the neighbors to involve themselves would make this a lot more complicated. “I do have a badge if you’d like to see it.”

“It’s probably fake. You’re a damned liar! Don’t come near me!” Nu-Loki shouted.

“All right. I’ll stay over here and you can keep your bat,” Loki said softly, stepping just far enough to get out of the door’s path and keeping his hands up while nudging it shut with his toe. “I just want to talk. I need to ask you a few questions. About the attack.”

Nu-Loki’s eyes narrowed suspiciously. “I never reported an attack,” she hissed.

“But you were attacked, weren’t you?” Loki asked, turning back toward her. “If your attacker is still out there, I need you to tell me everything you can remember so that I can prevent him coming after you again. I want to protect you. I’m not going to hurt y--”

Loki cut off with a startled gasp as something small and sharp slammed against his back, biting into the flesh just below his shoulder blade, followed by another blossom of pain a few inches lower and then a third. The pain lasted only a second or two before being replaced by a numbness that spread quickly outward. Moments later, Loki’s head was reeling and he didn’t even feel his knees hit the ground, he just saw the carpet swooping up towards him.

He heard a giggle as his view of beige carpet and small feet blurred and darkened. “Oh I know you won’t, pretty,” Nu-Loki purred.
Lawspeaker glared anyway. “What are you babbling about, boy?” Lawspeaker demanded.

“Special Agent Storyteller! She gave me a beacon that tells me if she needs backup or gets knocked out or something!” Masterson explained, holding up his wrist. “It just went off! She’s in Nutopia!”

“And what precisely is the matter?” Lawspeaker asked, scowling deeply.

“I- I don’t know exactly...” Masterson faltered. “It doesn’t say what happened, just- just where she is...”

“And you expect all of Doomgard to drop everything and run off to chase down your playmate because some trinket is squawking at you?” Lawspeaker growled, looking about as unimpressed as Masterson had ever seen him.

“No, probably not- not everyone, but, I mean, I--” Masterson stammered and then squared himself. “I’ll go find her,” he said in a surer voice. “So, that’s where I’m going, if, y’know, you’re wondering or if anything comes up. Or if we disappear forever. Nutopia. See you later!” He turned and took off out of the office again.

“Thunderstrike!” Lawspeaker’s voice yelled after him.

“I’ll go with him,” someone less shouty said.

Masterson heard boots chasing after him and glanced momentarily over his shoulder without stopping, to see Ororo following behind him. “Do you know where in Nutopia?” she called as Masterson was pulling his mace off his belt and racing through the main arch.

“Yeah, it’s got directions, I think!” he called back as he raised his mace and flung himself into the sky.

“And it tells you nothing of the nature of the emergency?” Ororo asked, following him into the air.

“This is the first time it’s happened!” Masterson protested. “I don’t know how the stupid thing works!”

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Sensation, an ache in his arms and irritation at his wrists, crept slowly up on Loki as he became vaguely aware of himself. He sighed and tried to shift, but something caught, a tightness around his wrists, holding them in place and baffling Loki as he tried to lift his heavy eyelids. The world remained blurry for a while as he blinked and frowned in confusion.

“Ah good, you’re a resilient one. I thought I’d have to use hartshorn to wake you,” a girlish voice said and a thin, cool hand touched Loki’s cheek as a face swam into view and more slowly into focus. “You’re quite young, aren’t you, my pretty new friend?”

Loki stared at her for a moment, memories coming back, stuttering like a reluctant engine. Nutoipa. A diminutive Loki, dressed in a fashionable, human convention, frightened. Had she hit him? No, not with the bat, she’d been more than two yards away. It was something he hadn’t seen, something that came from behind just after Loki had entered the apartment, just after he’d... walked into a trap.

He turned his head and twisted his body as much as he could while his wrists remained firmly fixed in place, extended above his head and his ankles seemed to be similarly trapped. Down pillows and duvet, a nightstand, abstract-landscape pictures neatly hung on the walls. “... Am I chained to a bed?” Loki asked, settling back again and looking up at Nu-Loki as she leaned over him.
“There’s a clever boy,” she giggled and then crawled on top of him.

“Whoa! Okay, this is getting weird now,” Loki protested, finally making the jump from perplexed to alarmed. “Do you know who I am? I mean, forget the cliché, I’m not blustering, I mean seriously, do you know who I am? Because I think that is pertinent information here.”

“Shhh...” Nu-Loki pressed a finger to his lips as she settled herself over him, straddling Loki’s waist and leaning down to lick the edge of his jaw. “Don’t fret, pretty, I know exactly what you are...” she murmured darkly and smiled against his cheek. “You’re my new toy.”

“Wow. Wow. This got creepy pretty quickly,” Loki said, tugging at his wrist hard and the bed frame it was shackled to didn’t so much as creek. “But don’t you think we should be on a first name basis, maybe? What with me being chained to your bed and all?”

Nu-Loki giggled again, it was actually a pretty creepy giggle now that Loki cared to notice. “I’ve always liked pet-names,” she said, stroking a delicate hand down one side of his face while she kissed his cheek on the other. “But if you prefer, Loki, I can oblige,” she whispered before doing obscene things to his ear with her tongue.

Loki’s initial impression that Nu-Loki was human definitely had some cracks in the theory. He’d gone down in the entryway and now he was in the bedroom. Nu-Loki had moved all quarter-ton of him through the apartment and up onto the bed apparently by herself. Even if she’d been dragging him rather than carrying, that was not something a small human was likely to accomplish. And apart from that was the fact that Loki realized he couldn’t seem to cast any magic to free himself. He reached for words of power or gestural spells and the knowledge seemed to bob just out of reach. Enchanted shackles for holding sorcerers, not a new idea but a difficult thing to make, or at least to make well enough to hold a spell caster on Loki’s level.

“... And I’m not the first other Loki you’ve met, am I?” Loki guessed, squirming.

“Mm, I think I like you best though,” Nu-Loki murmured, nipping at his jaw and then sitting up and pulling off her sweater, leaving her in a lace-trimmed, white camisole. “Such a nice boy. Why would a sweet, timid thing like you be hunting me, hmm?” She draped herself against Loki’s chest and ticked her fingers through his hair.

“I was trying to protect you,” Loki grumbled. “Some of them may be using a blood-trace to locate unprotected ones and you were too easy to find and... that’s completely intentional, isn’t it?”

She giggled.

“... Let me guess. Goddess of Traps?” Loki sighed, feeling very stupid.

“And poisons,” Nu-Loki added cheerily, as Loki recalled the obviously drugged darts that had hit him in the back and the mistletoe hanging over the front door. To the modern eye it was cutely flirtatious, but Loki really should have known better. “Such a clever boy. I like you,” Nu-Loki hummed, pushing herself up on an elbow and catching his jaw with one hand as she pressed a kiss against his lips. Loki kept his mouth firmly shut. “Don’t be coy, pretty,” Nu-Loki cooed, licking his bottom lip.

“This isn’t fun. I’m not having fun,” Loki said sulkily, turning his head to the side.

“Ooh, don’t pout,” Nu-Loki murmured against his throat and then gave a gentle bite. “We’ll have lots of fun, you and I.”

“Untie me then. I don’t like being tied up,” Loki tried. “I’m Loki too, so chances are our interests
align, right? If you untie me, we can find out. But I’m not playing with you if you don’t untie me.”

Nu-Loki chuckled darkly, stroking her hand down his neck. “I am the finest apothecary in this broken little world, pretty. You’ll play. I can see to that,” she assured him.

Loki made a ragged, horrified sound in the back of his throat. “How can you be so tiny and so creepy all at once?!” he demanded.

Nu-Loki pushed herself up on her elbow again and smiled down at him. “All you have to realize is that you are mine now. Find peace with that, and we shall have a wonderful time,” she whispered and tried to kiss him again.

He waited until she drew back before daring to open his mouth. “And what happens when you get bored with me?” Loki hissed. “You’ve had another Loki trapped here before, haven’t you? What happened to them?”

“Don’t fret, pretty,” Nu-Loki breathed, kissing his temple then nibbling his earlobe. “You’re special. You’ll be mine forever.”

That was not reassuring. But the crash was. A loud slam and splintering wood, then the smaller thump of a knob smacking into the wall as the door swung in too hard, caused Nu-Loki to sit up straight and turn toward the bedroom door she’d left ajar. She was wide-eyed and tense, stilling for a moment to stare at the sliver of hallway visible through the crack.

“TELLER!” Masterson’s voice shouted somewhere beyond.

“HERE!” Loki screamed back as Nu-Loki leapt off of him and dropped to the floor without another word, rolling herself under the bed.

Masterson came barreling through the door, brandishing his mace. “Teller, what—” He faltered, a baffled grimace replacing righteous fury on his face. “What the fuck?” he demanded, mace lowering a bit even as Storm-Thor charged in after him and thunder rolled outside.

“Get me out of here!” Loki snapped, pulling at his restraints.

“Who has done—” Storm started.

“She hid under the bed!” Loki answered, squirming. “Get them off!”

“Chill out, I’m doing it!” Masterson protested, hurrying over and fussing with the strap around Loki’s left wrist. “You seriously couldn’t get out of these yourself? They’re, like, rabbit-skin or something. This stuff’d be too soft to make a decent belt.”

“They’re enchanted!”

“There’s no one under the bed,” Storm announced, crouched down on the carpet.

“She probably tele— Get down!” Loki shouted as he spotted a small hand and a glint of metal from behind the door.

Masterson had barely started to turn, but Storm was quicker, sweeping her cape up and catching a tiny dagger like a fish in a net before swinging her hammer around and lighting up the corner with a blast of electricity. “How dare you!” she bellowed. When the lighting died, there was nothing behind the door but scorched wallpaper. “... She’s fast,” Storm growled.
“Is she ‘porting?” Masterson asked, finally getting Loki’s left wrist free and moving to unbuckle the straps on his ankles.

“No... it’s something else...” Loki murmured, pulling at the buckle on his right wrist when he caught a flicker out of the corner of his eye. A little hand, reaching through the shadow under the curtains—not through the window, through the shadow—to set a candle down on the floor before slipping away back into the darkness. “There! Ororo, the smoke!” Loki shouted, pointing.

Storm threw a gale that blew out not just the window but the whole damn wall. “Where is she?” she demanded as bits of drywall pattered down to the carpet, glaring out the massive hole she’d made in the building.

“In the shadows,” Loki answered, freeing his other wrist and sitting up to get his other ankle out as Masterson had become distracted by looking about in round-eyed paranoia. “She’s moving through the shadows. And hiding. She’s not going to risk a frontal assault. I think it’s a safe bet she’s going to try to incapacitate us with poison instead.”

“Coward!” Storm shouted to the room at large.

“So, like, any shadow or do they have to be connected...?” Masterson asked nervously, gripping his mace like a lifeline and repeatedly glancing over his shoulder.

“Don’t know what her range is...” Loki muttered, casting off the last shackle and flicking his fingers to produce a simple shower of sparks. Magic was working again, good, it really had been the shackles and not the poison. “But somehow I don’t think she’s going to abandon her turf,” he pushed himself off the bed and studied the layout of the room carefully.

The closet was too obvious. The table by the window? No. Too close to her last appearance. Loki focused on the dresser, it had a nice, deep shadow underneath, but it was from the gap behind and the sliver of dark on the leeward side that a little hand again appeared with a slingshot trained on Storm. Loki reached out with a snare spell, catching the delicate wrist and dragging. Nu-Loki gave a startled yelp and was halfway out of her hiding place before she managed to break free and dive back toward the darkness.

Loki bellowed an ancient hex of scalding agony and Nu-Loki screamed, pitching backwards as her body seized up in pain. She hit the ground, writhing and wailing and clawing at the carpet. Loki froze, his breath catching and blood running cold. A second or two stretched on into a small eternity before his lips managed to form the shape of the counter-curse and Nu-Loki went limp, panting and sobbing into the carpet.

“Teller?”

Loki stared down at the small goddess curled in on herself, face hidden in her arms, and felt numb and horrified. Why, out of every trick and jinx in his toolkit, had he reached for a torture spell? Revenge? She’d tricked him, poisoned him, tied him up, legitimately frightened him. Was he getting back at her?

“Teller?”

“What?” Loki asked sharply, looking up at Masterson, who was giving him a concerned look.

“What do we do with her?” Masterson asked. “I mean, arrest her, obviously, but do we need a really bright light or something to keep her from running off?”

“Uh, no,” Loki shook his head slowly and tried to push away a slight feeling of nausea. “Shadows
are cast by lights. Um,” he glanced back at the bed and the fuzzy shackles hanging from the headboard. “Those might work though,” he noted.

“Look out!” Storm shouted behind him as Loki was fussing with the bolts attaching the cuffs. He turned in time to see Nu-Loki’s legs and feet disappearing as she apparently dove into her own shadow on the floor and vanished just before lighting scorched the spot.

There was a thump and then running feet just beyond the door a moment later (apparently Nu-Loki’s range was a few yards at best) followed by panicked shouting. “Help! Oh help! I’m being attacked! Somebody call the Star--” she was cut off by the thump of Storm’s boot kicking the door aside immediately followed by the crack of a bolt of lightning shot straight down the hallway.

“Grab her and hold her up off the floor!” Loki shouted, turning his attention back to the shackles and was gratified to find that magic did work on them from the outside as he ripped them from the wood and joined them into a makeshift pair of handcuffs.

He hurried out into the greatroom to find the Thors restraining Nu-Loki, who had a tiny dagger in each hand and was thrashing and kicking and biting for all she was worth, while Storm shouted at a small collection of neighbors who had spilled in through the front door. “Return to your homes! This is official Doomgard business! Return to your homes at once!”

“Better do as the Thor says if you don’t want to spend the rest of your days guarding the Shield!” Loki called as he pried one of the daggers out of Nu-Loki’s hand and strapped a shackle around her wrist.

“Don’t believe them! They’re frauds in costumes! They’re not real Thors! It’s a trick!” Nu-Loki shrieked, her voice filled with terror and crocodile tears painting her cheeks with mascara. “Call the Starbrands! Please! Somebody help me!”

“Go home, people! You don’t want to see our credentials!” Masterson yelled at the crowd as Loki managed to get Nu-Loki’s other wrist bound into the cuffs and started patting her down for any more hidden surprises.

“I think that should hold her,” Loki sighed, catching hold of Nu-Loki as Storm went over to confront the neighbors and prove her Thorness. Nu-Loki’s struggling mostly subsided as she apparently admitted defeat, although she kept kicking at Masterson until he let go of her feet.

“You’re not really going to throw me over the wall, are you, pretty?” Nu-Loki whimpered, snuggling against Loki’s chest as best she could and staring up at him with forlorn puppy-dog eyes.

“Oh of course not, you tiny, evil shrew,” Loki sneered, looking away. “You get to explain yourself to God Doom and face his beneficent mercy.”

Nu-Loki was silent for a few seconds, her lips pursed and brow drawn in tight, before she hissed coldly, “You wanted to know what was in the freezer.”

“What’s in the freezer?” Masterson asked.

“A trap, of course,” Loki snorted, rolling his eyes.

“You wanted to know,” Nu-Loki sniffed.

“I’m gonna--”

“Masterson, don’t open the damned freezer,” Loki snapped.
“Hey, I’m not gonna use the handle or stand in front of it or anything! I’m not stupid!” Masterson protested as he walked to the side of the refrigerator and slammed it with his mace, sending the entire door flying off.

“And what if it was full of poison gas?” Loki demanded, glaring at him. “Rule number one! Don’t do the exact thing the bad-guy just told you to do!”

Masterson continued to disregard him, leaning out to the side to peer into the freezer. Loki watched the color drain out of his face as his mouth dropped open slightly and his eyes got round.

“Masterson?” Loki called, worried both by the reaction and by the little giggle that Nu-Loki made.

“Th-There’s a head...” Masterson stammered.

“... A head?”

“... He looks like you...”

Loki bit the tip of his tongue for a moment and looked down at Nu-Loki, who was gazing back up at him with a disturbing combination of a glare and a sultry smirk. “... What did you do with the body?” he asked, his voice coming out hoarse and quiet.

“I burned it. He wouldn’t all fit,” Nu-Loki replied.

“... She’s really creepy,” Masterson whispered, looking a bit green.

“... Yes she is,” Loki agreed, cringing for a moment before casting a muting spell on her. “Get the head,” he ordered quietly.

“What? No! Don’t we need, like, the forensic CSI guys to, I don’t know, take in situ pictures and catalog this thing or something before it gets moved?” Masterson flustered.


“Yes. And I can explain the situation to the local authorities,” Storm replied, half-turning back toward him.

“Okay,” Loki nodded. “Masterson, call this in and get our people down here to process it. I’m not sure if she’s caught any more Lokis specifically, but I’m betting that head isn’t the only person she’s killed. It seemed kind of like she maybe had a routine going. Ororo, you might ask the Starbrands if they’ve possibly had a rash of missing persons in this area.”

“You’ll take her to booking?” Storm asked, glancing back at him again.

“Ehm,” Loki frowned. “That... wasn’t entirely clear, actually, but I think maybe I’m supposed to take her straight to Doom...”

“Are you sure?” Masterson frowned.

“I’m pretty sure I just said I wasn’t sure,” Loki snapped.

“Hey, quit being bitchy! It’s not my fault you got tied to a crazy lady’s bed!” Masterson protested.

“Yes. Yes. Sorry. Thank you for the save,” Loki sighed, feeling a migraine bearing down on him. “I’m just going to take her to Doomstadt and apologize if I’ve misinterpreted the appropriate Loki-
procedure."

“Good luck, Agent,” Storm nodded to him.

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It was near the end of the day’s mediations when a page entered the throne room, skirted round the edge, and hurried over to Stephen, whispering, “Special Agent Storyteller seeks an immediate audience with God Doom. He has a prisoner.”

Stephen nodded, pursing his lips and watching as the representatives from Egyptia and Doom Valley were both made equally unhappy by the results of their mediation. “Inform the delegates from New Mars and Arachnia that their audience has been pushed back due to an unforeseen emergency, and see Agent Storyteller in,” he instructed.

“Yes Sheriff,” the page said, scurrying away.

As Victor dismissed the parties from Egyptia and Doom Valley, Stephen stepped closer to the throne and Victor looked up at him. “What is it?” he asked, sounding tired and annoyed.

“It sounds as though Loki’s made an arrest,” Stephen answered.

“Finally some pleasant news,” Victor said as Valeria made use of the short reprieve between audiences to adjust her seat near her ‘father’s’ feet.

The doors opened again a moment later, and Loki (male today, wearing jeans and a short leather jacket) strode into the throne room carrying a smaller, female Loki, who looked thoroughly harmless and was making no attempt to struggle. There were mascara tear-tracks marking her cheeks, but she appeared calm to the point of serenity now, gazing placidly around the room. A translucent, chartreuse, oblong was curved around her mouth, glowing faintly; a magical gag no doubt, though whether it was to stop her from chanting spells or simply from speaking was less clear.

“Glorious Doom, I have been restlessly pursuing the task you set to me to and was today met with success,” Loki announced, taking a knee at the foot of Victor’s throne and setting the smaller Loki down in front of him like an offering.

“I tasked you with apprehending vicious murderers and heretics,” Victor noted, giving him an unimpressed look. “You seem to have brought me a small woman.”

“I have brought you Loki: Goddess of Traps and Poisons,” Loki corrected, looking up to meet Victor’s eyes, an uncharacteristically grim expression on his face. “Her appearance is deliberate and calculated. She looks harmless in order to fool her prey and serve as bait for her own traps,” he explained.

“Interesting,” Victor’s eyes studied the woman closely even as she returned the scrutinizing stare, sharp, green eyes flicking up and down, carefully analyzing.

“By falling for it,” Loki said flatly, then pressed his lips thin for a moment before elaborating. “She briefly incapacitated me today after luring me into her apartment, a practice which she has apparently been using to capture the aggressive elements. She’s killed at least one, as his head was discovered stored in her refrigerator by one of the Thors who liberated me.”

“Fascinating,” Victor’s eyes studied the woman closely even as she returned the scrutinizing stare, sharp, green eyes flicking up and down, carefully analyzing.
“In addition to being a murderer, she also shows a distinct disregard for your divine authority, my Lord,” Loki said calmly. “As she saw fit to poison and bind me, as well as making obscene threats, even after I had identified myself as an agent in the service of Doom. She obviously shows no respect for Doom’s Law and represents a clear and present danger to society.”

“Your council is heard, Agent,” Victor said with a sharp nod. “I would hear what the accused has to say in her defense.”

Loki gave a flick of his wrist and the magical gag covering the smaller Loki’s mouth disappeared. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, then looked back up at Victor and smiled sweetly. “You know those postcards with pictures of kittens wearing little hats and sunglasses? Animals dressed up in people-clothes?” she asked in a sweet soprano and then followed it with a girlish giggle. “That’s what you remind me of. You are no god. Just an ugly little kitten wearing sunglasses.”

There were several gasps from the assembled court as Victor narrowed his eyes and Loki grimaced. “Did I mention she’s also insane?” he murmured.

“... Put the heretic on her feet,” Victor ordered.

Loki stood up and caught his analogue under the arms, hoisting her up off the floor and setting her upright as she smirked blithely up at Victor. Some look passed between Victor and their Loki and he took a quick step backwards as Victor lifted his hand. There was a flash, and the room was left apparently unchanged, although as Stephen watched the Goddess of Traps carefully, he realized that she no longer seemed to be breathing.

“Doom’s judgment is rendered. Take this would-be ‘goddess’ and display her in the trophy room,” Victor ordered, looking pointedly at the guards by the main doors, then glanced back at Loki. “You have done well, Agent. Doom is pleased with your service.”

Loki dipped his head and Stephen could see him swallowing hard. “... Glad to be of service,” he said softly.

Two of the guards moved to pick up the Goddess of Traps, who may as well have been carved out of marble now, and followed Loki out of the throne room before the delegations from the Holy Wood and Arachnia made their way in to present their complaints against each other.

An hour and a half later, the assembly was dismissed, and as he stepped through the grand double doors Stephen spotted Loki, leaned against the wall a few yards on, making eye contact with him the moment he passed into the hall. Stephen raised a curious eyebrow and moved to the side of the exiting throng, making his way over to Loki.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, disquieted by the sober air Loki was exhibiting. He briefly considered and then dismissed the possibility that Loki was shaken by his doppelganger’s fate. No, he’d been subdued since arriving.

“There is a minor point of detail I wished to discuss before writing my formal report,” Loki replied.

Stephen nodded, frowning. “Let’s speak in my office,” he suggested, turning and making his way brusquely through the halls as Loki followed behind him in a silence that seemed unnatural for the normally boisterous god. Stephen could feel his ulcers acting up as he ushered Loki into his office and pushed the door shut behind them, becoming increasingly nervous over Loki’s atypically sedate behavior. “What happened?” he asked, walking around his desk as Loki stood uneasily in front of it, lips pursed.
“... I tortured her,” Loki said softly.

Stephen stared at him, baffled and disturbed. “What do you mean?” he asked.

Loki looked blankly down at Stephen’s desktop. “She put up a fight. She was very slippery, and I needed to get her off balance, knock the moxie out of her for a few seconds... I... used a torture spell... induces gut-wrenching agony without inflicting physical damage.” Loki swallowed, shifting on his feet. “It worked. Stunned her. We were able to get her contained after that...”

Stephen sank into his chair and rested his elbows on the desk. “... I’m not sure what you want me to say, Loki.”

“... I only needed to restrain her. Why is my first instinct to hurt somebody?” Loki whispered.

Stephen sighed, closing his eyes and resting his chin on his folded hands. “Because it’s what you were taught,” he said softly.

“... It’s what I learned,” Loki said, frowning and glancing to the side. “Or, rather, it’s what my predecessors learned. But they were never taught, not really. Once the first Loki could read, he started reading everything. Teaching himself. We’ve always taught ourselves... Books taught us everything we needed to know... They taught us how-to everything,” Loki’s voice and eyes were distant, his brow drawn in and hands fidgeting with his sleeves. “They teach the hows but not the shoulds,” he said, finally looking back up at Stephen.

“... You never had a teacher?” Stephen asked, sifting through his knowledge of mythology and coming up with nothing.

“When I was-- When the first Loki was small, he had a governess. She taught him spelling, maths, the histories, those sorts of things,” Loki gave a little shrug. “But magic wasn’t an appropriate art for a boy to study. So, no. We never had any sort of master... except for Amora showing us tricks that she’d learned from hers.”

Stephen frowned again, tilting his head. “But Odin practiced magic,” he said.

“Odin was busy. He didn’t have time to teach children, he had a whole realm to run,” Loki shrugged.

“But he wouldn’t have provided you-- your predecessor a magic teacher if you’d asked?”

Loki let out a humorless chuckle. “Asking would mean admitting that he needed help,” he pointed out then sighed and gave another shrug. “Which I suppose he didn’t. He learned everything he felt was useful and became just the sort of sorcerer he wanted to be.”

“... But not the kind you want to be.”

Loki glanced away again. “I don’t know exactly what I want to be yet.”

Stephen studied him for a moment, considering carefully. “... You know that you don’t like hurting people,” he said slowly, watching Loki’s reaction.

He bit his lip and looked down, brow furrowed. “It makes me feel sick,” he whispered, then paused again, thinking. “The Third too, he-- When he’d realize that he’d hurt someone nice, he’d get sick to his stomach... But Nutopia-Loki wasn’t nice at all. She was awful. Why would hurting her make me sick?” he asked, looking back up at Stephen imploringly, earnest confusion written in his features. “Is something wrong with me? Do I have some wires crossed in my brain?”
Stephen shook his head. “It means that you have a very strong sense of empathy,” he said. “Which can be quite useful to a sorcerer, and imperative to a storyteller.”

Loki looked relieved. His eyes flickered down to the desktop again and he pursed his lips, looking contemplative for a few seconds. “I suppose you’re very busy. Being Doom’s right hand and all,” he said softly.

“I am,” Stephen puzzled at the non sequitur, wondering if Loki was trying to politely dismiss himself.

“Yes, of course,” Loki gave the kind of grin made for hiding disappointment behind. “I’ll have formal reports on Nutopia-Loki and the encounter written up by the end of the week. Doomgard’s CSI team is probably processing her apartment now,” he said, giving Stephen a nod and turning toward the door.

“Wait, Loki,” Stephen called, curiosity piqued by the odd air of disappointment. “What am I too busy for?” he asked.

Loki blinked and frowned, looking as though he was surprised Stephen had to ask. “A student,” he said, as though it was obvious.

Stephen stared at him, trying to decide if he’d misheard. “... You want me to teach you?” he asked quietly, trying to discern any hint of humor in Loki’s voice, the very notion so utterly absurd.

“Well, not magic,” Loki tilted his head and wrinkled his nose slightly. “I already know more magics than one could possibly teach or learn in a single human lifetime and I doubt my intrinsic chaos would mesh well with your order-based paradigm anyway... But the shoulds and shouldn’ts would be mostly the same, wouldn’t they?” he asked, faltering slightly as though he was no longer sure.

“... You want me to teach you ethics,” Stephen realized, half of him still waiting for a punch-line.

“It’s sort of your thing, isn’t it? Or was?” Loki asked, looking uncomfortable and self-conscious suddenly. “The Sorcerer Supreme is the top authority on the dos and do-nots of magicing and whatnot, right?”

Stephen stared at him a few more seconds, half of his mind numb with the magnitude of what was being asked of him and the opportunity he was being offered (this was Loki for Vishantis’ sake! asking him for ethical direction!) and the other half was frenzied at the infinite ways this could go right or very very wrong. “... I will make time, Loki,” he said finally.

Loki brightened. “It’s not too much trouble?” he asked.

“It might be,” Stephen conceded with a small smirk. “But it’s important. And also very flattering.” He sighed and ran a hand through his hair, thinking carefully. “I’ll work out some scheduling and we can discuss it when you turn in your report.”

“Yes! Excellent!” Loki chirped. “I’ll get to work on it as soon as I’ve checked in with the crime-scene Thors,” he promised.

“And get some rest as well,” Stephen advised.

“Yes--” Loki paused for half a second, seeming to consider, “Sir? Doctor? Master?”

Stephen’s lip twitched a little in distaste for the latter. “Let’s stick with ‘Stephen’,” he suggested.
“Okey dokey,” Loki gave him a thumbs-up and hopped happily out the door.

Chapter End Notes

So Loki's officially-sanctioned adult height is 6'4", and since Verity made comment that Loki had grown six inches since his disappearance, it seems to be implied that he's back to full-size now. I'm putting Nu-Loki at 5'2" or 5'3" ish, someone you would look at and say 'That is a short woman' but would not assume that there was anything medically off about her; she's mainly just tiny in comparison to a god.

The mythological thing with Loki and mistletoe doesn't actually involve poison, but mistletoe is poisonous, so I like it as a symbol for this insidious little Loki. I was trying to get this posted in December because mistletoe, but then things got very busy around here and I didn't have much time for writing, so the last scene didn't get finished until this week. Anyway, next adventure I'll be throwing in some more obscure characters to fill bit parts, that's always fun, right? Madam Menace turns out to be surprisingly engaging for being such a sexy-evil-henchwoman-from-a-70s-James-Bond-movie trope.
Ethics is Hard

Chapter Summary

“Part of knowing what you are is knowing what you are not. And to know where you are going you need to know where you’ve come from. What you’ve come from,” Paradise-Loki said.

“So the proverbial tabula rasa is not a viable notion?” Loki wondered.

“If you wish to be coddled and infantilized, then it’s as viable as a spin of the roulette wheel,” they scoffed.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

“Reflexes develop over time, instincts are written into the blood. ‘Muscle memory’ comes more readily than deliberation or intent,” Paradise-Loki mused, lazily watching two crows that were arguing over an empty potato chip bag. “When one is in distress, one falls back upon their baser impulses. Violence, generally.”

Loki nodded, leaning against them and cradling a paper coffee cup in her hands. “I wonder whether I should be endeavoring to be more mindful, to not let instinct override reason, or whether I should be attempting to cultivate a different set of instincts,” she said as one crow hopped a few inches closer to the other, flapped its wings menacingly, and then jumped back and cawed a ‘come at me bro’.

“Either would be a slow process,” Paradise-Loki noted, stroking a thumb absently against her shoulder. “Although the former is a bit more trainable, something you can consciously work toward. It’s far more complicated to reform the tacit.”

“I’ve learned to ride a bicycle wrong. Now I can’t forget,” Loki sighed.

“Never forget,” Paradise-Loki said, arm tightening around her slightly. “You can change, remake, rebuild, but never forget.”

“Or I’m doomed to repeat history?” Loki asked, watching one of the crows pick up a corner of the mylar bag and start waving it around, finally chasing off the other contender with overwhelming shiny-crinkles.

“Exactly,” Paradise-Loki agreed, touching their face to her forehead, not quite a kiss. The champion crow hopped around with its trophy, spilling a few potato crumbs around the pavement. “Part of knowing what you are is knowing what you are not. And to know where you are going, you need to know where you’ve come from. What you’ve come from.”

“So the proverbial tabula rasa is not a viable notion?” Loki wondered.

“If you wish to be coddled and infantilized, then it’s as viable as a spin of the roulette wheel,” Paradise-Loki scoffed. “If you want to take ownership of your destiny, then you must take responsibility for it.”
“Mm, point,” Loki nodded. “... Do you think it’s worse than death?” she asked after a moment, watching the crow stick its head in the bag and then decide it was a bad hat and shake it off. “The living-death-freezey-statue treatment? Do you... think it would have been kinder to kill her?”

Paradise-Loki was quiet for a while, eyes distant. “... It might have been,” they said at length. “But I think that you’re not meant to be a killer... That’s been revised.” They turned and met her eyes as Loki looked up. “Because killing was always the turning point. There was before Baldur and there was after Baldur. That was the inciting event that transformed a trickster into a demon... Once there was blood on our hands, there was no reason to even try to keep them clean anymore.”

Loki stared back into their eyes for what felt like a long time. “... Yes,” she whispered at last.

“... You’re a new soul and your hands are clean,” Paradise-Loki said, laying their own hand over Loki’s fingers, still clasped around the paper cup. “Keep them that way.”

Loki nodded. “I’m going to learn proper, modern ethics. I’ve asked Doctor Strange to teach me.”

Paradise Loki seemed to consider that for a moment before answering. “If he’s much like the Stephen Strange of my world, then that’s an excellent choice,” they said and Loki felt pleased by the approval.

She took a sip of her latte and leaned her head against Paradise-Loki’s shoulder again, sighing. Silence passed between them for so long that the crow had gotten bored with the potato chip bag and finally abandoned it before Loki spoke again. “I could have held her with narration. Even without narrating, there’s a dozen ways I could have just held her without... I have these fabulous new powers and ideas but when I’m against the wall I fall back on the old things,” she sulked.

“You got scared.”

“... I got scared,” Loki agreed, turning a little bit and half burying her face in Paradise-Loki’s shoulder.

“It happens,” Paradise-Loki assured her. “The fact that you built in a safeguard to fall back on was wise, and that you were willing and ready to ask for help sets you apart from your history.”

“That’s because of you,” Loki noted. “I wouldn’t have had the beacon if you hadn’t set me straight. So you saved me from Miss Mistletoe by nearly killing me yourself.”

“Then I’m very glad you found me first,” Paradise-Loki said.

“Me too.”

“I’m very glad,” Paradise-Loki repeated in a more serious voice, catching her chin and bringing her face up to look into her eyes again.

“... Me too.”

Loki settled back against their side and sipped at her latte. It was getting cold. A new crow had decided to investigate the potato chip bag. Or maybe it was the loser from earlier. After a while, Loki heard footsteps approaching and glanced up at the sound of an oddly familiar voice. “You have a friend today?” an unremarkable blond doctor asked, walking around the bench and planters that sectioned off the tiny bit of ‘park space’ in a courtyard at the center of the huddle of medical buildings. His eyebrow raised, looking curious and slightly startled. “Is this a date?”

“Why would I have a date in front of your office?” Paradise-Loki grimaced up at him. “That would
“And of course you are the exact opposite of ‘odd’,” the doctor smirked, rolling his eyes.

“... Donald Blake...?” Loki murmured curiously. Had they become separated in this universe? Like after the Serpent War in her own? Or had they never been linked? The latter seemed unlikely, given his apparent association with this universe’ Loki.

Donald turned a smile on her. “You seem to have me at a disadvantage,” he said and then stopped, frowning very slightly and looking at her more carefully, a puzzled expression overtaking his face.

“She’s the Loki of universe six-sixteen,” Paradise-Loki said in a bored tone, as though explaining anything at all to the doctor was tiresome.

“... Universe...” Donald whispered, his expression changing but no less confused, eyes clouding over as he seemed to be trying to remember something just out of reach.

“We have been over this, Donald!” Paradise-Loki snarled, now looking a bit past annoyed and into angry territory as they snapped their fingers at Donald like they were scolding a dog. “Yes ‘universe’. ‘Earth’ more specifically. The planet. Which this mockery is not.”

“It’s not his fault,” Loki said softly, laying a hand on their arm.

“That doesn’t make it any less aggravating,” Paradise-Loki grumbled.

“But why isn’t he in Doomgard?” she asked curiously, glancing back at the doctor.

Donald snorted softly and put his hands in his pockets. “Because I find healing to be slightly more important and rewarding than bashing heads,” he said, rolling his eyes.

Loki stared at him for a moment and then looked back to Paradise-Loki, tilting her head and raising her eyebrows. “Mm?”

“Meet my brother, retired Thor and the last ‘normal human’ of Earth ninety-nine ninety-seven,” Paradise-Loki introduced, gesturing loosely at Donald.

“Huh,” Loki looked him up and down carefully. He was nearly as unextraordinary as Paradise-Loki, or maybe a little more so, because he was an ordinary human size and wore very ordinary clothes and had very ordinary hair. He would blend into a crowd much more readily than his brother (although, maybe not in this domain, since all the other people in Paradise were freakish and strange). “But you were with Doomgard at one time?” Loki asked.

“For a while. Before I decided that saving lives was more important than glory and prestige and ‘worthiness’,;” Donald replied.

Loki grinned. “Well that seems like a very ‘worthy’ thing to say,” she noted. “But if you were with Doomgard, then you know of the doppelganger effect, so that makes it easy.” She climbed to her feet, setting her nearly-empty cup down on the bench, and held out her hand. “I’m the Loki of South Manhattan.”

“Ah... You’re a woman,” Donald noted as he shook her hand.

“Very astute,” Loki agreed.

Donald gave a nervous chuckle and a slightly embarrassed grin that warmed as he kept hold of her
hand a bit longer than necessary and said, “My brother seems to like you.”

“I get that impression,” Loki smirked back.

“I’m glad you’re cheering him up. He’s been depressed lately.”

“Could you be a little more embarrassing, Donald?” Paradise-Loki snorted.

“Oh I’m sure I could if I tried,” the doctor replied, casting him a grin. “So did you want a rain-check on lunch today?”

“Oh no no,” Loki interjected quickly. “I didn’t mean to disrupt any plans. I have lots I need to get done today anyway. I just stopped by for a chat,” she explained, picking up her mostly empty coffee cup off the bench. “I should probably be getting back to it now though.”

“Please don’t let me chase you off,” Donald said.

“Not at all. It was lovely to meet you, but I really do have some rather pressing responsibilities to see to,” Loki said, giving him a brief, warm smile before turning back to Paradise-Loki as they picked themself up off the bench.

They caught Loki’s hands in theirs, gazing unwaveringly into her eyes. “You are unwritten and your potential is without limit. Don’t be discouraged by a stumble,” they said in a low, gentle voice.

Loki pursed her lips for a moment, feeling an uncomfortable tightness in her throat, then reached out and grabbed Paradise-Loki into a hug, hiding her face against their neck. “Thank you,” she whispered.

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“Jeremiah!”

“Still not my name, Agent,” Doctor Frog sighed as Loki walked into his morgue. “I’ve finished the report for your Killville victim but I haven’t completed the full toxicology on the freezer-head,” he waddled around on his stool to face her and then hopped down and made his way over to the cold chambers against the wall.

Loki pulled the slab containing Killville-Loki out of the bank of refrigerated drawers and Doctor Frog hopped up on her shoulder. “Cause of death was being shot through the heart, although any one of a dozen other holes he’s riddled with would have killed him too, just not quite as quickly,” he said as Loki looked down at the pale corpse with the Y-shaped autopsy incisions across his chest.

“He was shot?” Loki asked, raising an eyebrow as she took in the small, round wounds with charred edges. “Like, with a gun?”

“A gun firing plasma rounds that could probably cut through a three foot slab of concrete,” Doctor Frog replied. “I think we’re either looking at anti-tank or anti-meta-human ordinance here. It’d be real cutting-edge stuff for Killville, but might fit right in in Technopolis or Nueva York.”

“Now that’s getting more interesting,” Loki murmured, trying to think why that sounded familiar. “Technopolis’ Loki has been accounted for but Nueva York’s isn’t yet.” She gnawed on her lip for a moment then asked, “What race was this one?”

“Lesser-god. Similar physiology to you or a Thor,” Doctor Frog answered. “His flesh is dense enough that any conventional projectiles would have at least gotten stopped halfway in, but every
hole in this guy has an exit wound on the other side, I didn’t manage to pull a single slug out of him,”
he noted, glancing up at Loki. “Whoever made ‘em wasn’t cutting corners. This was seriously grade-A
stuff.”

Loki nodded slowly. “So we’ve got one of our baddies using tech-based power. That’s interesting. I
didn’t really think any of the non-mystical types would be able to compete,” she said.

“It takes some pretty high-end tech to keep up with sorcery, but it is possible,” Doctor Frog agreed.

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“Thinking about bringing backup on the next one?” Verity sipped her wine as she watched Loki sort
through notes on the livingroom floor.

“I think the distress-call system worked perfectly,” Loki said, shaking her head. “No reason to
change it.”

“You’re not feeling more vulnerable or anything?” Verity asked, studying her friend. Yesterday
she’d seemed genuinely rattled, tonight merely subdued.

“She made me feel stupid, but Masterson’s quick response was quite gratifying. If anything, I feel
more confident now,” Loki said, and the words itched but it wasn’t an outright lie.

Verity leaned her head against the back of the couch for a minute, thinking it over. “… Mistletoe was
prepared to handle another Loki, but not your reinforcements,” she said slowly. “What saved you
was that she didn’t expect you to have backup so she took her time to play with you. What happens
if you come up against a Loki you’re not ready for and they don’t draw it out? What if they just go to
up and cut off your head or something?”

“Or shoot me,” Loki sighed, drawing her legs up and hugging them. “My biggest advantage over
most of them is going to be narration,” she noted. “That’s what I need to develop.”

“You did it before,” Verity said, watching Loki drum her fingers against her calf. “That thing with
Asgardia, that was some serious muscle there. It seems like you could beat pretty much anybody
with something like that.”

Loki nodded. “I could,” she agreed. “But it was... I wasn’t even entirely sure what I was doing then,
or, I knew what was happening but it didn’t feel like I was planning more than a second ahead... It
was just coming to me... I was still sort of molten and everything was so exciting... I felt like I was
cought up in a hurricane... And I suppose we were.”

“Have you forgotten how you did it?” Verity asked.

Loki looked up at her. “You can tie your shoes every day, no problem, until you start thinking about
how to tie your shoes. If you think about it, you can’t do it.” She let her legs go and tipped
backwards, leaning awkwardly against the couch. “Or maybe I’d thought about it a whole lot ahead
of time? I can’t really remember incubating or whatever I was doing all those months... I think
maybe I came out prepared for the end of the world. Ready to deal with it.”

“So you could put Asgardia in a bottle because you’d been getting ready for eight months?”

“I’m not sure,” Loki closed her eyes. “Maybe I’m just over-complicating it. Like the shoe laces.”

“Then stop complicating,” Verity said, finishing her wine and setting the glass aside. “Tell me a
story.”
Loki opened her eyes and tilted her head to look up at Verity without changing her position. “What would you like to hear?” she asked.

“Tell me a story about something we can observe from right here, but change the ending,” Verity said, scooting herself a little more upright as Loki climbed off the floor and settled on the other side of the couch.

Loki sat for a few minutes, eyes distant, seeming to think about it. “... Your kitchen faucet has been leaking for months, just a slow drip, every two minutes or so, barely even noticeable,” she said, voice a bit soft, a bit hesitant at first, then something shifted and Verity could hear a rich resonance creep into it that seemed to vibrate the room around them like loud music. She remembered that unsettling, enthralling feeling, the same as when she’d watched Loki ball Asgardia up in his hands and pocket it. “It wasn’t caused by a loose fitting or a missing gasket, but by a flaw in the metal. And as you ignored it all this time, the issue too minor to warrant attention, the water picked and fretted at the flaw until finally the stress became too much and the faucet bro--”

They both turned their heads at the sound of a loud pop and watched a small geyser start spewing water toward the ceiling over the kitchen sink. “... You’re cleaning that up,” Verity said.

“It was your idea,” Loki pointed out.

“Breaking the sink wasn’t my idea,” Verity retorted.

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“I broke the sink yesterday,” Loki said, walking along a rampart overlooking the main courtyard. “I fixed it, and cleaned up the mess. But that’s the sort of thing that’s very easy to tell I’ve done something wrong and to know how it must be fixed,” she frowned, clasping her hands behind her back and looking at Stephen. “It’s easy to clean up a mess when it’s physical and obvious... But what if I make a mess of something metaphysical? What if I’ve made someone upset? How can I know how to clean that up?”

“It varies situation to situation,” Stephen replied calmly, walking beside her. “Sometimes the best thing to do, especially if the problem is that you’ve upset someone, is to just ask how they would like you to resolve it.”

Loki nodded, looking unhappy. “What if they get angry that I don’t know why they’re upset?”

Stephen let out a heavy sigh that turned into a chuckle. “That can be a problem in some relationships,” he agreed. “In such a circumstance, I would suggest calmly explaining that you have difficulty with social cues and grew up in a different culture than them. That may not satisfy everybody, but Loki, if a person is refusing to tell you what’s upset them, there is some possibility that they might be unreasonable. Just because somebody’s upset with you does not mean that it’s your fault they’re upset.”

Loki tilted her head to the side, seeming to mull that over. “Avoiding messes is preferable to cleaning them up though, is it not?” she asked, a small note of uncertainty coming into her voice at the end and another small frown settled on her face. “Or is it better to share the experience of mistake-making and learning? My Little Pony might seem to indicate that collectively learning lessons strengthens friendships...?”

“That’s... a cartoon?” Stephen asked.

“Yes. It’s about friendship and proper social decorum,” Loki nodded.
“Ah. I suppose the target audience is meant to be children?” he asked and Loki gave an uncertain look and wiggled her hand in a 'so-so' motion. “Well, I would expect that the characters make mistakes in order that the viewer should learn by example that those are mistakes. And while a shared experience may indeed strengthen a relationship, knowingly making mistakes will not.”

“Yes, they had an episode about that!”

“Ah. Well, good,” Stephen considered the tangent for a moment. “Children’s cartoons could provide a reasonable baseline for understanding and building the foundation of a modern ethical platform, but they’re dealing with ethical dilemmas that a child is likely to encounter. As an adult, you will face far more complicated and nuanced quandaries. And people are going to be less understanding if you commit a faux pas than when a child does.”

“I know,” Loki agreed, nodding again. “I don’t have cute-power to fall back on.”

Stephen rolled his eyes and let out a small huff of a laugh. “I’m sure there’s room for debate on that count.”

Loki gave an amused hum. “Oh? I thought teacher-student flirting was considered unethical this century, Stephen?” she teased.

“I wasn’t flirting,” Stephen said firmly. “And that is a very recent change or addition to Western ethics.”

“Yes, of course, running counter to long-standing traditions of scholastic romance going all the way back to Greek pederasty,” Loki said in a breezy voice, wearing a big grin.

“... Which is entirely beside the point because I wasn’t flirting,” Stephen said with firm finality.

“Am I not pretty enough, Stephen?” Loki simpered, her tone mockingly whiny.

“Loki,” Stephen snapped, casting her a warning glare, to which Loki burst into giggles and he pinched the bridge of his nose, feeling a headache coming on. She was well over six foot tall and anyone looking at her would have called Loki an adult, but the more he interacted with her, the more he saw that the assumption wasn’t entirely accurate.

“Stephen,” Loki’s voice had darkened again and her brow drew in very slightly. “I practiced narrating yesterday, I think that’s the advantage I need over the bad-Lokis, and I think I’ve figured out how it works now,” she said, frowning. “But toying with sinks and inanimate objects is only going to get me so far... Is it unethical to practice on people?”

Stephen closed his eyes and groaned. “Oh... you do know how to go straight to the most difficult problems,” he sighed. “That... That is an area of constant debate, Loki. Most notably in the medical field, for modern doctors and scientists...” He put his hands into his coat pockets and gazed down into the courtyard. “... Would narrating animals be a logical next step?” he asked.

“Very much so,” Loki nodded. “If I were to find some little pigs or an ugly duckling, that could take me a long ways.”

“I think you should try that then,” he said, nodding. “And from an ethical standpoint, I’d say you should narrate them in ways that do not cause the animals any harm.”

“Of course,” Loki agreed. “The first two pigs don’t really need to get eaten. One can always go with a Disney Classics take on things, where innocents don’t die and bad-guys just fall into oblivion and are never seen again.”
Stephen chuckled. “You watch a lot of cartoons, don’t you,” he said, shaking his head and smiling.

“But human-trials does seem like an eventuality,” Loki said, frowning and fidgeting. “And, even if it’s all non-harmful things... it gets into an issue of free will...” Her voice grew a bit quieter and her frown a bit deeper as she continued. “And even if I keep it to little tweaks, like whether one does or does not have a cup of tea, how can I account for the butterfly-hurricane problem?”

Stephen leaned against the parapet and mulled that over for a few minutes, before deciding that he would need both more time and a better understanding of Loki’s ‘narrative magic’ before he could even begin to form any opinions on the matter. “I think that perhaps we should revisit this when you feel that you’ve learned as much as you can from non-sentient animals,” he said slowly. “Your powers are quite new to me as well, and so I may be a little bit ill equipped to advise you on them.”

“Paradise-Loki says that I need to spend more time observing,” Loki noted, sounding frustrated as she leaned next to Stephen and gazed down into the garden. “But there’s so much to do, Stephen! I have to find the bad-Lokis and stop them or it’s only going to get worse while I’m playing student!”

“Being a student doesn’t mean being idle,” he said calmly, patting her elbow. “You’re learning as you go, and you’ve made more progress on the problem in the past week than the Thors managed in two months. I know that you’re working very hard.”

Loki glanced up at him with a grateful smile and then sobered. “But another Loki died just the other day. It’s still happening, and the longer it takes me to find the bad-ones, the more okay-ones might die,” she whined.

“Loki, your best is all you can do,” Stephen said gently.

“I don’t think this is my best though... I think I could be better,” Loki said, chewing at her lip and looking down.

“More powerful isn’t the same as better, Loki. If I can teach you only one thing, let it be that,” Stephen said, putting a hand on her shoulder and giving her a serious look as she glanced back up.

Loki pursed her lips for a moment, brow knitting, and then asked, “Is kindness the same as goodness?”

Stephen gave her a small, sad smile and shook his head. “Not necessarily. Not always,” he said.

Loki’s gaze fell again. “Ethics is hard.”

“Yes it is.”

Chapter End Notes

Oh, oops, I lied in the chapter-end notes last time, I promised another adventure-chapter and now I’m posting an in-betweeny chapter instead. Sorry, next chapter will be back on the trail and have cameos and stuff; needed to get some paperwork done first though, laying down some important foreshadowing and whatnot.

So in the lab, Throg referred to Loki and Thors as being 'lesser-gods'. I'd been debating for a while whether Loki and other characters who had been previously called 'gods' in their own worlds would still be called 'gods' in Battleworld, or if that would be
considered heresy (because DOOM is the alpha and the omega). I ended up deciding that Doom would be pleased enough to let it still be the accepted belief/standard that some kind of divinity was the reason for their super-humanity, so long as they are known as 'small-gods' or 'lesser-gods'. (He's actually rather chuffed hearing it.)

For those who didn't read Paradise-X: Ragnarok (I don't expect you to, it's all long and confusing and convoluted) and are curious what was going on there, at the end Thor decided 'Fuck this! The world needs doctors more than heroes!' and went back to being Donald Blake full time. Loki accused him of being uncreative and he was like 'Well I like being a doctor.'

Oh, hey, here's a question to put to the crowd: I need to fill up Doomgard a bit, what Marvel characters should I turn into Thors? Keep in mind, this isn't ironic; I'm looking for characters that actually fit the profile of strong, terrible-to-enemies, very noble, etc. No Wolverines need apply! He does not need to be on every team ever!
Chapter Summary

The Baroness glanced over at Loki for a moment and it looked like she was biting the inside of her cheek. “... You say you’ve never met your cousin?” she asked quietly.

“Never,” Loki agreed.

“She has friends throughout the upper crust of Metropolis Fifty-One’s social ladder,” the Baroness said, turning back toward the elevator doors as they opened. “But she is largely unknown by anybody below the top one-percent. Her parties are very private and never mentioned in the society pages.”

Chapter Notes

This Chapter Guest Staring:

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Metropolis 51

Metropolis 51 seemed to be a tech-empire, a Seattle or a San Jose. Loki had very mixed feelings about that. On the one hand, there were coffee houses everywhere, on the other hand, it was yet another city with the name ‘Stark’ plastered all over the damn place. From where Loki was standing at that moment, she could see eleven instances of ‘Stark’ and only eight of ‘Starbucks’. This seemed grossly unfair. The man could go around acting like a pompous, controlling, self-centered dick-head day in and day out and people would thank him for it. Tony Stark, by all rights, should be a villain. And people fucking loved him.
Loki had a quite vivid memory of that man pointing a weapon at a child’s head, on his birthday, while poor little Loki II cowered in terror of a flying metal man. And so damn selfish; Loki III had sacrificed his gains from the inversion wave because somebody managed to convince him it was for the greater good, but nope, nope, not Tony Stark. Tony Stark did and got whatever Tony Stark wanted. She glared at a particularly large instance of the ‘Stark’ logo up on the side of a shiny, glass building and decided that she would need a mocha frappuccino and a pecan tart to mitigate her disgust. “In my story,” she murmured quietly, pointing a finger at the brand, “you are a bad-guy.”

Fortunately, this world’s Tony Stark was mostly concerned with his business concerns and apparently didn’t play politics. Baroness Bain ran the city like a well oiled machine, and aside from that, she was a very smart and very pretty lady. Mollified with sugar and caffeine, Loki decided to seek out Mayor Menace. It seemed like the kind of world where crime always wore a white collar, and perhaps the lady with the whitest of collars would know where to find all the persons predisposed to high-society criminality. Besides, it was time for Loki to start getting better mileage out of her wonderful shiny shiny badge.

The Baroness’ secretary seemed somewhat dubious about the authenticity of said shiny shiny badge and gave Loki a suspicious look as she picked up the phone and pressed her boss’ extension. “I’m sorry to disturb you, Madam Baroness, but there is an ‘Agent of Doomgard’ here to see you?” she said, a slightly doubtful tone to her voice. After a pause in which Loki could hear the quiet, muffled sound of somebody on the other end of the line, the secretary responded, “Well, she doesn’t look like a Thor...”

“I didn’t say I was a Thor,” Loki crossed her arms and gave the woman a reproachful look.

“She’s not a Thor,” the secretary corrected herself.

A moment later, the large, impressive door of the office opened to reveal a gleaming, art deco masterpiece behind it. A Thor-styled Jocasta looked at Loki for half a second and then nodded. “Hello, Agent Storyteller,” she greeted. “Please come in.”

“Thank you, Thor,” Loki said, casting the secretary a smug look and then strolling past as Jocasta-Thor held the door for her.

Inside the office, Baroness Bain was on her feet but leaned against the front of her desk, wearing a suit that was slightly too sexy for business-wear. She did a double-take when she caught sight of Loki and then a startled expression turned quickly to annoyed. “Loki, this is completely inappropriate!” she hissed, and it took Loki a moment to place that she seemed to be embarrassed. “I am at work!”

Jocasta-Thor seemed to be as puzzled by the reaction as Loki was. “I was not aware that you knew Agent Storyteller, Baroness,” she said.

Baroness Bain glanced at her and then back at Loki, looking confused for a moment and then there was a renewed embarrassment as she no doubt realized she’d mistaken Loki for someone else who was also named Loki. “… Agent Storyteller...?” she murmured.

“Actually, I wasn’t aware that we’d met either, Thor,” Loki noted, turning to Jocasta-Thor. “I should think I would remember if I had seen such a striking presence around the halls of Doomgard.”

“I apologize,” Jocasta-Thor said. “We have not met. I am Jocasta, and I have not left Metropolis 51 recently, as I am its designated guardian. My brother related to me your appointment,” she explained.
“Ah, of course,” Loki nodded, because although she hadn’t seen a Jocasta around Doomgard in the past two weeks, she had definitely seen a Vision. Apparently they were bluetoothed. She turned back to the Baroness and gave a respectful dip of her head. “I am Special Agent Storyteller. I work in concert with Doomgard, under the authority of Sheriff Strange, to investigate matters of special importance to Doomstadt’s Ministry of Sorcery.”

“I see,” Baroness Bain said quietly, nodding. “And what brings you to Metropolis Fifty-One, Agent Storyteller?”

Loki tilted her head to the side slightly. “When you saw me a moment ago, you mistook me for someone else, didn’t you?” she asked. “‘Loki’? I believe that would be the person I am here to find.”

A worried look crossed the Baroness’ face for half a second before smoothing out. “For what purpose, if I may ask?”

“I have reason to believe she might be in danger,” Loki explained and then lowered her head slightly, demurring. “And while this is part of an official investigation, I do have some... personal interest.”

“... Is she your sister?” the Baroness asked, her eyes carefully scrutinizing Loki.

“Cousin,” Loki said with a slight shake of her head. “Though I’ve never met her. I’m from the Kingdom of Manhattan and have only recently been issued border-crossing papers,” she explained. “I wasn’t sure how to find my cousin and was hoping you might be able to aid me with your knowledge of the province.”

“Of course. I--” the Baroness hesitated for a moment. Loki was very curious about this odd, shy reluctance an otherwise notoriously strong and confident woman seemed to have on the topic. “I can take you to her.”

“That would be wonderful,” Loki said, smiling at her. “Though I hate to disrupt your day. I’d be happy to make my own way if you gave me the address.” She observed another tiny flash of anxiety on the Baroness’ face, protectiveness, and the pieces clicked together in Loki’s mind. An affair. “Or perhaps I could come back a bit later, after you’ve finished here for the day,” she suggested.

The Baroness nodded a little too eagerly. “I have one more appointment this afternoon, but I believe I can be ready to take you by four,” she said.

“Sounds perfect.”

The Baroness ordered up a limo for Loki and herself and it took them to a tall building just north of the heart of downtown. It had elements of classical elegance mixed into contemporary practicality and functional form; built at some point later than the utilitarian ugliness of the Modern period, when architects started again to think that perhaps people simply like pretty, useless decorations. The youngness of the building and the primo location suggested to Loki that she may very well be looking at some of the most expensive real estate in the city.

The doorman dipped his head as he greeted Baroness Bain and ushered them into the building. The Baroness demonstrated increasing twitchiness as they boarded the elevator and headed for the penthouse. “You seem nervous, Baroness,” Loki noted softly. “You are in charge here. As long as they don’t contradict Doom-Law, you make the rules in this city. And given that enforcing Doom-Law is Jocasta’s job, I see no reason at all for you to fear my judgment.”
The Baroness glanced over at Loki for a moment and it looked like she was biting the inside of her cheek. “... You say you’ve never met your cousin?” she asked quietly.

“Never,” Loki agreed.

“She has friends throughout the upper crust of Metropolis Fifty-One’s social ladder,” the Baroness said, turning back toward the elevator doors as they opened. “But she is largely unknown by anybody below the top one-percent. Her parties are very private and never mentioned in the society pages.”

“I see,” Loki said, following along after the Baroness as her curiosity became like an itch on the part of one’s back that’s just out of reach.

“I doubt it,” the Baroness said, casting Loki a slight smirk as she stopped in front of a beautiful mahogany door and knocked.

Loki’s patience with the mystery was beginning to wear thin when the door finally opened. The Loki on the other side of it was a show-stopper, and Loki found herself drawing a small, startled breath and holding it a bit longer than she normally might. Metro-Loki was wearing something that was halfway between a skimpy cocktail dress and a negligee, the very frugal distribution of black satin and lace serving to highlight a figure that would give Barbie body-image issues.

“Sunset,” Metro-Loki greeted in a voice like warm syrup, stepping into the Baroness’ personal space and wrapping one arm behind her shoulders as the other hand caught the Baroness’ and twined their fingers together. “Who have you brought me?” she asked, eyes sweeping slowly up Loki, gleaming with intense interest.

“This is Agent Storyteller of Doomgard,” the Baroness murmured, leaning into Metro-Loki as every trace of tension in her posture melted away. “She said she’s your cousin.”

“Oh of course,” Metro-Loki said with a smile and stepped back toward her apartment, pulling the Baroness with her. “Come in, come in. This is wonderful.” The inside of the apartment smelled of sweet smoke and spices, delicious, alluring, teasing Loki to breath deeper. “Sunset, darling, won’t you give me a moment with my cousin?” she asked, pressing her forehead affectionately to the Baroness’.

“Of course, Loki,” the Baroness whispered back and received a medium-heat kiss.

“Tilda’s brought the most delightful champagne. You must try it,” Metro-Loki said next to her ear as she caressed a hand against the Baroness’ back and sent her along down the hallway, deeper into the apartment, where the sounds of low music and murmuring voices seemed to indicate some kind of gathering. She then turned her attention to Loki.

Loki was just opening her mouth to speak, trying to remember how she was meant to introduce herself and go about these meetings, when Metro-Loki pounced on her. She wrapped an arm around Loki’s waist, drawing her close. She was shorter than Loki, close to six foot, so that she had to look up as she stroked Loki’s cheek and stared into her eyes with blatant fascination. “Cousin? I like that. Tell me, cousin, what brought you to me? You’re an agent of some kind?”

“I...” Loki faltered, words falling away, her mind hazy and vague. She had to focus. This was important. Metro-Loki was in danger and Loki needed to protect her. “They- They’re killing us,” she whispered. “Us. We’re killing us. Other Lokis... Some of them are violent and- and they’re killing us to, I don’t know, to prove something...”
“I did wonder what that was about,” Metro-Loki said, frowning. “I could tell that he was like me, like us.”

“One found you?” Loki asked, a chill running down her spine, and her arms wrapping protectively around Metro-Loki.

“A few weeks ago.” Metro-Loki nuzzled Loki’s ear and kissed along her jaw. “I confused him and he left. I invited him to join my party, but he was upset. He didn’t want to be my friend.”

“... You’re so soft...” Loki whispered, her mind lagging and stalling as it tried to process what Metro-Loki was saying.

“He came back a few days later. He behaved very badly and Simon had to escort him out,” she murmured and then kissed Loki fully. Loki whimpered. “Will he come again, cousin?” Metro-Loki asked when she drew back half an inch.

“If... If he doesn’t get himself killed in the meantime,” Loki said, listening to the pounding of her own heart and breathing the scent of Metro-Loki’s skin. “He knows where you are... and- and I found you with a blood-trace... You need to-- You need to be warded against that, so others don’t find you so easily.” Loki chased her lips and found another kiss. There was something familiar about this warm, vague feeling, the sensation of being pulled into Metro-Loki’s wake and dragged down into the undertow. “Are you a sorceress? If not, I can do it... protect you...” she whispered.

“You’re such a dear,” Metro-Loki said and kissed her again.

Amora. That’s why it was familiar. It was like Amora when she really got going. “... You’re...” Loki mumbled and broke off as she was kissed again. “... Goddess of Seduction?”

“And what are you, my darling?” Metro-Loki asked, nibbling Loki’s neck. “You taste of the playful innocence of youth... So sweet and eager.” She caught Loki’s earlobe between her lips and drew a little mewl from her.

“Stories...” Loki whispered.

“How wonderful,” Metro-Loki said warmly, nuzzling her neck.

“Are you... doing that on purpose?” Loki mumbled.

“Am I upsetting you, my darling?” Metro-Loki asked, a note of contrition in her voice.

“No. No, of course not,” Loki said quickly. “I just-- I think I’m acting oddly...”

“Relax, sweet cousin, it’s a party,” Metro-Loki said and kissed her again and then stepped back, catching her hand. “Come in, join my party.” She tugged Loki toward the hall, toward the music and murmuring voices.

They emerged into a greatroom that had been furnished in a manner reminiscent of those eighteenth century paintings depicting the harem fantasies of sexually-repressed Englishmen. It was also populated in a way appropriate to such dreamscapes (although a bit more co-ed than the typical harem scene) with many of the denizens only half-dressed and a few not at all. The baroness seemed to have misplaced her suit-jacket, blouse and shoes and she was comfortably situated in the lap of a muscular man with a well-groomed beard.

“You have a sister, Loki?” a sultry voice asked, drawing Loki’s attention to the left, where a corseted and garter-belted Emma Frost slunk toward her. She trailed a hand down Loki’s arm. “She has a
mind just like yours... So chaotic and tangled and hot, I can’t even catch hold.”

“This is my sweet little cousin,” Metro-Loki said, smiling warmly.

“Lola,” Loki said.

“Hello, Lola. I’m Emma Frost,” the White Queen greeted warmly, stroking Loki’s neck and then wondered aloud, “Are all of your relatives such beauties, Loki?”

“One can only hope,” chuckled another voice that made Loki clench her teeth. “Lola, a pleasure. I’m--”

“Tony Stark. Of course,” Loki turned his attempt to kiss her hand into a shake. “I’m surprised you would have to bother introducing yourself. Does anyone ever really not recognize you?”

Stark laughed, accepting the handshake and returning it heartily. “Well, I’m told that vanity’s a sin and I’m not sure how many more I can manage before the ground opens up and swallows me down.”

“If only,” Loki smirked. She noted that her head felt much clearer now that her attention had been drawn away from Metro-Loki. She had a gravity to her, drift too close and you got sucked into her orbit. If Loki was going to learn anything here, perhaps it would be better to work from the periphery.

“Not a fan, I take it?” Stark asked, tilting his head, he tried to make it sound jovial but there was a hint of disappointment in his eyes.

“I’m not convinced you’re worth the hype,” Loki replied with a dismissive shrug, her eyes scanning the room, putting names to the other faces, and oh it was a bright crowd indeed, geniuses aplenty to choose from. Loki’s eyes caught on one of particular promise.

“Maybe you’d give me a chance to change your mind?” Stark suggested; was he still talking?

“Maybe,” Loki cast Stark a teasing smirk and stepped right past him, making her way into the room. “But not tonight.” She could hear Emma Frost laughing as she went, apparently delighted by the snub.

There was a large glass hookah near the expansive penthouse windows, which a few of the partygoers were indulging in. A blond was reclined among a collection of cushions, gazing out at the cityscape with distant, dreamy eyes. He didn’t really startle when Loki dropped down on him, straddling his thighs, but he did look a bit puzzled. Magic lightened Loki to a weight he might find appropriate for a human of her size as she settled herself into her new friend’s lap and plucked the mouthpiece from his hand, taking a slow, deep inhale before handing it back to him. It wasn’t hashish or opium; the blend of savory herbs and mild spices seemed largely for flavor, with belladonna and amanita providing the kick.

“Doctor Pym?” Loki watched the smoke escaping from her as she spoke, curling into the air around her face.

He reached up and stroked her cheek softly. “Are you... related to Loki?” he asked, eyes sliding over her face, not quite focusing.

Loki nodded. “Her cousin, although this is the first time we’ve met,” Loki explained, lightly tracing his collarbone with her thumb. “It’s my first time coming to the city... my first time being at a party like this...” She dipped her head a little, eyes glancing to the side, and flashed an embarrassed
expression. “Am I doing it right? I think I may be over-dressed.”

Doctor Pym chuckled and caught the opening of her jacket, pealing it back as Loki shifted her arms to let him. “Oh... I think I was wearing a tie and lab coat when I first got here,” he noted with a slight shrug. “I’m not sure where they went now.” His eyes shifted back up to Loki’s face once he’d managed to clumsily extract her from her jacket. “… You know me?” he asked, looking amused and curious.

“I know of you,” Loki replied, helping Doctor Pym find the zipper on the side of her top. “I admire your work in recent years. You dance a line between science and sorcery that intrigues me.”

Doctor Pym grinned, amused, as he dropped Loki’s shirt to the floor and smoothed his hands up her sides. “That’s an interesting way to put it,” he said. “I feel like... so many of my colleagues lose their sense of wonder... They try not to see the magic.”

Loki leaned forward and kissed him slowly, draping her arms around his shoulders. “You’re a dreamer, Doctor Pym.”

“I’ve been called worse,” Doctor Pym murmured. “… And it would be wonderful if you called me Henry.”

“Hmm.” Loki smiled and kissed him again before asking, “Do you know how often Loki has these parties, Henry?”

“Every night. Every day...” Doctor Pym said, kissing Loki’s jaw and working his way down her neck. “I come... several nights a week. Sometimes I stay for a few hours, sometimes I fall asleep and leave in the morning.”

“Is that just sort of the way of it?” Loki asked. “The hostess’ friends just wander in and out at all hours with no formal structure?”

“Right,” Doctor Pym agreed, nuzzling the dip of Loki’s collarbone as his fingers did battle with the closure on her bra.

“When did you start coming, Henry?”

His hands stilled for a moment and his shoulders slumped minutely. “After... the papers were finalized...” he said softly. “We signed them in the afternoon. Janet said... Then I went back to the lab. I wanted to... work. But I... I don’t really remember why I... Tony pulled me in off the ledge and slapped me. Then he brought me here...”

“I’m sorry,” Loki said softly. “I didn’t mean to pry... about your marriage.”

Doctor Pym shrugged, apparently trying to pull himself free of the melancholia. “It’s all been in the tabloids anyway.” He cupped Loki’s cheek in his hand and pulled her down to him for another kiss. She felt him frown slightly just before the kiss ended. “… What’s your name?” he asked.

“Lola,” Loki said, holding out her arms helpfully as Doctor Pym finally got her bra unhooked. “You can pick which song you’d like that to refer to. I’m thinking ‘whatever Lola wants, Lola gets’ might be applicable just now,” she murmured with a smirk, kissing him as Doctor Pym chuckled.

“I certainly can’t see how the other song would be,” he said, hands exploring Loki’s skin.

“Well I am very tall,” Loki pointed out.
Doctor Pym laughed again. “That runs in the family?”

“Oh, the rest of the family is bigger,” Loki giggled and kissed him again. “It seems like there are an awful lot of technical geniuses in this room... Are all of Loki’s friends clever like you?”

“Not all. Some have other assets,” Doctor Pym said.

“And the hostess is always here?” Loki asked. “How does she pay for all this?”

“Worthington owns the building.”

“And food?” Loki asked, intrigued. “I believe she mentioned that one of her guests had brought the champagne...”

“I think Tony pays for most of it,” Doctor Pym said with a small shrug. “Somebody always pulls out a card when a delivery-person shows up.”

“So, gifts. It’s all gifts,” Loki said softly. “From those who adore her.”

“There’s nothing wrong with that,” Doctor Pym said, frowning very slightly.

“I wasn’t criticizing. I’m just trying to understand how it all works,” Loki assured him, combing her fingers through his hair.

Doctor Pym nodded, seeming placated, and slid his hands slowly up Loki’s skin to gently cup her breasts. “It’s not just her... It’s this place. This atmosphere. This warmth. I... I don’t know what I’d do without it.”

“... Hm, drink alone? Silently mourning the lost innocence of youth?” Loki sighed, nuzzling his ear.

He chuckled and the sensation of his body shaking against and under Loki made her shiver. “Frank and insightful,” he murmured, tilting his head up and fishing for another kiss. Loki gave it to him, contemplating the insights Doctor Pym had provided himself.

There definitely was an atmosphere here, and Metro-Loki was no doubt the source, maybe not a deliberate spell, maybe it was just her presence, her gravity. In this little corner of the world, everything was fine, there were no sins or regrets, only uninhibited affection and a warm feeling that nothing in the world was wrong, or that if it was it didn’t matter. Metro-Loki’s very proximity must be more addictive than nicotine and heroine combined. She had worshipers. Devout ones. Friendly ones, Loki noted, giggling ticklishly as Doctor Pym nibbled on her neck.

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“Hey, what’s up?” Verity’s voice answered as the call connected.

“Just wanted to let you know you may need to find alternate entertainment for dinner tonight,” Loki said, holding the phone to her ear and sitting cross-legged and comfortably nude as she gazed out the large picture windows and french doors that looked out onto the balcony.

“Are you okay?” Verity asked.

“Oh yes, I’m fine,” Loki assured her. “It just turns out that today’s query can’t effectively be tackled directly, and taking the indirect rout is a bit time-consuming,” she explained.

“So this Loki’s not scary then?”
“Oh no, she’s lovely!” Loki said happily, grinning.

“... Lovely?” Verity sounded skeptical.

“She’s sweet and pretty and friendly and she doesn’t have an ounce of meanness in her!” Loki elaborated. “It’s just taking a while getting to know her because trying to talk to her is a little like looking at the sun.”

“... That sounds kind of disturbing,” Verity said.

“No no, it’s perfectly fine. She’s nice. I like her,” Loki said quickly. “Don’t worry, she’s fine, I’m fine, we’re all fine!”

“... Are you drunk?”

“Yes. Somewhat,” Loki agreed, giggling.

Verity sighed. “... Alright. I can manage to feed myself. Have fun getting drunk on the job.”

“Oh absolutely yes! So much fun!” Loki grinned happily. “Good night, Verity! I love you! Have a good dinner!”

There was a very small laugh on the other end. “Good night, Loki.”

“Looola. My name is Lola today,” Loki corrected.

“Good night, Lola,” Verity snorted and Loki burst into giggles as the call ended.

Loki flopped backwards on the plush carpet and giggled again up at the beautiful young man grinning down at her. “Your name isn’t ‘Lola’ every day?” he asked curiously, tracing patterns on Loki’s shoulder.

“Well I was getting a bit old for ‘Lolita’, and did you know that’s the name of a fetish now? A fetish that evokes borderline pedophilia? Or maybe its ephebophilia?” Loki stared up at him, wide-eyed and scandalized. “It’s because of some book. But it’s the sort of connotation one would rather like to distance themself from, don’t you think?”

The beautiful young man wrinkled his nose but was still grinning. “So today you’re ‘Lola’,” he said.

“And you’re ‘Max’! But are you always ‘Max’ or do your checks say ‘Maxwell’ or ‘Maximilien’ or ‘Maxfield’?” Loki wondered.

He laughed. “Nah, those guys are jerks,” he said, tickling Loki’s ear and then combing his fingers through her hair. “For you, I’m just ‘Max’.”

“No, for me you’re just gorgeous!” Loki corrected, pushing herself up against her elbows and kissing him.

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“Mmm, you work out,” Deidre murmured appreciatively, squeezing Loki’s bicep. “I like that. Isn’t it just disgusting the way those misogynists running the media portray waifishness as the ideal of feminine beauty? Just another attempt by the patriarchy to weaken their betters.” She draped herself over Loki, petting her lightly but apparently at least somewhat interested in chatting for the time being.
“Although, one might argue that, as physical or ‘brute’ strength is a traditionally masculine merit, the valuation of ‘muscle’ as a primary representation of power is a somewhat misogynistic assumption,” Loki pointed out, tucking one arm behind her head to prop it up a bit and wrapping the other around Deidre’s waist. “And not only chauvinistic, but outdated as well. In the wake of the Industrial Revolution, the greatest might is all mechanized, and therefore any discrepancy there may be in the physical strength of males and females has become utterly obsolete. ‘Muscle’ itself no longer has value.”

Deidre grinned down at her, a hint of teeth showing. “So you would argue that ‘muscle’ is masculine?”

“In an iconographic sense, yes. That is the common association,” Loki agreed. “Not that muscles aren’t perfectly lovely on a woman,” she noted, eyes sliding lower over Deidre’s lithe but very toned physique. “Or soft and curvy or willowy... variety is the spice of life after all. I think the greater problem with the media representation of beauty is its narrow focus.”

Deidre smirked and leaned down, kissing her. “I like you,” she said. “You have Loki’s pretty face but you’re built for power. I don’t doubt you could crush a man’s skull with your thighs.”

Loki wrinkled her nose, a little disturbed by the morbid suggestion. “There isn’t really much sexual dimorphism in skulls. A man’s skull and a woman’s skull are pretty much the same. It might be more accurate to suggest that I could crush a ‘human’ skull with my thighs... not that I can really understand why I should want to, unless that is simply meant to be a hypothetical measure of strength.”

Deidre chuckled and started kissing her way down Loki’s neck and chest. Was conversation time over? Damn, Loki was supposed to be asking questions, wasn’t she? “How long have you been coming to Loki’s parties?” she asked, hoping she sounded calm and curious and not like a clipboarded census-taker.

“Two years,” Deidre replied, caressing Loki’s skin. “I like the way she makes men serve her.”

“It seems like everybody serves her,” Loki noted musingly. “I hadn’t noticed a distinct gender delineation in the serving.”

“I don’t serve,” Deidre sniffed. “I appreciate.”

“I didn’t mean to imply that you did,” Loki assured her, sliding a hand down Deidre’s side and over her hip. “Simply that I’ve noticed no significant gender-bias since I arrived. Gender, and everything else, seems very relaxed here.”

“There is always gender-bias,” Deidre retorted, distractedly playing with Loki’s breast. “And here, beautiful matriarchy.”

“It’s a bit of a beehive, isn’t it,” Loki hummed. “A beehive with drugs and booze.”

Deidre laughed and kissed her shoulder.

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There was a dim glow from candles left to burn down atop a few level surfaces here and there, enough light to see dim outlines and the shine of damp upon open eyes but no color or detail. Loki stared into the faint gleam in the semi-darkness that told her Metro-Loki was looking back. She’d let herself get caught up in her counterparts rapture again and now she knew she was trapped. A minor sleep-spell had afforded them privacy within the rather crowded bedroom, but Loki couldn’t seem to
muster up any useful questions, just babbling and promises.

“You’ll protect me, won’t you, sweetness?” Metro-Loki simpered quietly. “You’ll stay with me?”

Loki’s heart twisted. “I- I have to find the bad ones,” she whined. “I have to find them and stop them from hurting us.”

“But who will protect me?”

Loki considered pointing out that the walking shampoo-ad currently spooning Metro-Loki was a gama-powered tank. Or there was the bulletproof telekinetic with devastating curves, whose arm had found itself draped across the pillow, fingers barely brushing Loki’s neck. Or the solar-powered dynamo who could probably level this building with a punch, now cuddled up to Loki’s side. Or half a dozen other partygoers who had settled on or around the very large bed and were all gifted enough for Metro-Loki to have deemed collectable.

“You’re well protected here, Loki,” Loki said, squeezing her hand. “And I’ll give you a way to summon me if there’s trouble. But you’re not the only one in danger. There’s powerless ones and child ones out there. I have to keep them safe too.”

“Will you visit me?” Metro-Loki asked, weaving her fingers into Loki’s.

“I- I’ll try,” Loki stammered. “But I’m-I’m going to be very busy for the foreseeable future. I won’t have much time for visits.”

“But I want you to come to my party,” Metro-Loki pouted. “Didn’t you have fun?”

“It was very fun, but I need to concentrate on this problem right now,” Loki assured her.

“I hope it’s resolved quickly...” Metro-Loki sighed.

“I hope so too and I’ll do my best,” Loki promised.

“And then you’ll come back to my party?”

“If I can manage it,” Loki said.

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“Tears of Thok! I should never ever go back there ever!” Loki exclaimed.

Verity raised an eyebrow, partially because she wasn’t quite sure if Loki was swearing or just making up words, and partially because the statement had been without prelude or explanation. “Where?” she asked.

“Metropolis Fifty-One. Or more specifically, Metro-Loki’s penthouse,” Loki sighed, running her hands through her hair and wandering over to deposit herself Verity’s couch. “I think I missed the secondary titles. Should have guessed from all the drugs and alcohol, but your head gets all fuzzy when you’re near her.”

“Stop being cryptic and tell it properly,” Verity demanded, crossing her arms.

Loki sighed and groaned and looked slightly pained as she tilted her head back over the arm of the couch and looked up at Verity. “So yesterday I met the Goddess of Seduction,” she said, looking unhappy and agitated. “And I think she might also go by Goddess of Intoxication and Goddess of Addiction.”
“Oh,” Verity said, frowning and looking Loki over carefully. She looked uncomfortable and far more ruffled than Verity was used to seeing her. “Are you okay?”

“I really really want to go back,” Loki whined.

“But you probably shouldn’t,” Verity noted, sitting down next to her.

“I know,” Loki sighed, nodding. “But she’s nice Verity! That makes it worse! She’s not being evil-schemey-manipulative with it like Amora, she just happens to be made of pure heroine!”

“How sure are you that she’s not being evil-manipulative?” Verity asked curiously.

“As far as I can tell, she doesn’t want anything. She already has everything she wants. And everything she wants is a penthouse full of groupies to faun endlessly over her.” Loki closed her eyes and scrubbed her hands over her face. “I mean, she got a little manipulative trying to make me promise to come back and play some more, but there was zero subtlety. Nothing about her is subtle. I’d show you a picture, but I was too distracted to take one. Seriously, one look at her and it’s like ‘yup, nothing subtle there!’”

“I’m not even sure what that means,” Verity said, grimacing.

“She is shaped like this,” Loki traced her hands through the air in an hourglass shape, “and wears a negligee to answer the door.”

“Ah.”

“I didn’t even know I was being invited to an orgy until suddenly: orgy,” Loki dropped her head back against the arm of the couch again. “And then Tony Stark hit on me and it was like ‘eeargh!’”

“... You were at an orgy?” Verity asked, frowning.

“Aside from the Tony Stark part, it was great,” Loki said with a flippant little wave of her hand. “Very relaxed atmosphere, everyone was pleasant, soft jazz and incense and champagne...”

Verity stared at her for a moment, pursing her lips. “Loki, you’re two and a half months old... Did you just have your first time with a stranger at an orgy?”

Loki looked blank for a few seconds. “I- I have the memories of all my predecessors...” she mumbled. “So it didn’t seem like... anything I hadn’t done before...”

Verity sighed. “... Do you think maybe that has something to do with why you’re upset now?”

“No,” Loki said, and there was an undercurrent of mild uncertainty that itched at Verity. “Metro-Loki’s the one I’m all obsessed over right now and I didn’t have sex with her (that would be weird.) It’s just her- her presence, it’s overwhelming.”

“And you don’t think that that ‘overwhelming’ maybe influenced you into making a not-great
“Well obviously,” Loki shrugged, looking away. “But I wonder if you’re making a rather big deal out of something that shouldn’t be. The idea of virginity as some big, sacred thing is a very Christian sort of value, and in case you hadn’t noticed, I am very not Christian.”

“Okay, no, back that up right now. Regardless of whether ‘chastity’ has value, losing your virginity is still a milestone,” Verity said sternly.

“Not when I already feel like I’ve done it before,” Loki said, frowning uncomfortably and Verity could feel mild uncertainty under the words. “It was a long, long time ago for the first Loki, but just last year for the third... It’s... I forgot because this doesn’t feel new.”

Verity sighed, pushing her hands back through her hair. “So the orgy part wasn’t at all uncomfortable or weird for you?” she asked.

“No, it was super relaxed. I was mildly stoned and a little drunk, and everything was just sort of warm and nice,” Loki sighed. “And now I want to go back, because she’s addictive, and honestly I’m kind of scared of her because of that. Like, not because it’s threatening but because she can get that much power over me without even trying.”

“So are you going to tell Doctor Strange that?”

“No!” Loki yelped, looking alarmed. “If I did that, Doom would statue her!”

“... And you want to protect her,” Verity sighed.

“... Yes,” Loki whispered and then bit her lip, looking worried.

“So I guess she really is pretty powerful,” Verity said, crossing her arms and watching Loki fidget.

“But she’s not hurting anybody!” Loki whined.

“I’m not telling you to turn her in, Loki. But I think you’re right. I think you should stay away from her,” Verity said.

Loki nodded, looking slightly miserable. “Yeah... I know...”

Chapter End Notes

So many cameos! Starting with Jocasta, who is the 'Bride of Ultron' android; she started out a copy of Janet van Dyne (Wasp)'s personality (in theory) but ended up being a lot more serious-business robotish as time went on.

Sunset Bain, (Madam Menace) started out as an Iron Man sexy-villain and later became the resident sexy-arch-villain/fem-fatal-maybe-love-interest for Machine Man. I wanted a 1%er kind of maybe-villain to be a baron and Sunset had the chops and the sex appeal.

The idea of using 'State 51' (I thought 'Metropolis' sounded better for a domain in Battletworld because the concept of 50 states doesn't have any relevance here, and also because evoking the tech feeling of Fritz Lang) as a domain for her came from a Machine Man mini-series in the 2008 Marvel Comics Presents anthology. State 51 is an unusually massive helicarrier turned into a floating city, in case you were wondering.

Other cameos in order of appearance/mention:
Tilda Johnson (Deadly Nightshade) brought the champagne. She's a super genius and martial arts master.

Metro-Loki mentioned Simon Williams (Wonder Man) having to escort a bad-Loki out of the party a few weeks ago. He's a super-genius made of ionic energy with god+ level strength and punchitude. Also an actor.

Emma Frost, most recently of the X-Men, is the former White Queen of the 'Hellfire Club', which served as partial inspiration for Metro-Loki's parties (Hellfire's dress code involves a lot of lingerie). She's an omega-level telepath and can turn her body into diamond at which point she gains super-strength and invulnerability. She's not a super genius but she's pretty bright.

Tony Stark we shall assume needs no introduction.

Hank Pym (Ant Man, Giant Man, Goliath, Yellow Jacket, Wasp, Can't-Make-Up-His-Mind Man) is a super genius who cannot seem to decide on a field of expertise anymore than he can decide on a name. His primary skill-sets these days seem to revolve around writing/creating artificial intelligence (Ultron and Dimitrios) and poking the intersection of science and magic with a stick. Also, he has the super power to change size and become huge or tiny.

Warren Worthington (Angel/Arch Angel) who Hank mentioned owned the building Metro-Loki's penthouse is in, is an original X-Man with the powers of flight and ludicrous wealth.

Max Brashear became one of my favorite characters right about the time he started talking. He's an ironic super villain, ladies and gentlemen. That's right, he's a super villain *ironically*. He built himself a evil villain lair on an active volcano and put on a silly helmet and hired some henchmen and dubbed himself "Doctor Positron" to *piss off his dad*. I love him. He's a super-genius, no powers but possible extreme longevity (not yet established for him but it runs in the family).

Deidre Wentworth (Superia) hates men. Wants to subjugate and/or castrate all of them. Possibly Thundra's greatgreatgreat grandmother. Super genius, super strength, semi-invulnerable, flight and energy-blasts.

Mentioned by description but not name were:

Leonard Samson is a genius with fabulous hair and semi-hulk powers.

Monet St. Croix of the X-Men is a low-grade telepath, high-grade telekinetic with flight and near-invulnerability, also a ludicrously rich genius.

Roberto da Costa (Sunspot) of the New Mutants has loosely defined solar powers including super-strength, durability but not really *invulnerability*, flight, energy blasts and huge huge piles of money.

Moving on... I mentioned that the hookah had belladonna and amanita in it, that's deadly nightshade and shrooms. They would have been the drugs in use (often in combination) for religious ceremonies and recreation in Viking Age northern Europe, whereas opium and hashish were popular down around the Mediterranean and southern Asia.

Before anybody gets ruffled about me referring to virginity as a Christian value, I want to clarify: while other religions predating and following Christianity did and do also value virginity in *brides*, Christianity is pretty much the first religion that made the idea of life-long virginity virtuous/holy (and applicable to both sexes), so in that, it gives virginity a much higher value than the other Abrahamic faiths. Hinduism and Buddhism both sometimes feature the idea that abstaining from pleasurable experiences may bring you to a more contemplative or open state of mind, but that's something that can be adopted at any point in life, it's not dependent upon having one's virginity intact.

Oh, I forgot to mention, look at this cool thing Malitia made! It's a TV-Tropes wiki for
my fic!
The Terrible Ennui of Herbert the Fish

Chapter Summary

“How old is Franklin?” Loki asked, looking back up at Doom.

Doom glared down at her, eyes narrowing slightly. “What?”

“What year was Franklin Richards born?” she asked, staring right back. “Do you remember? What’s the age-difference between him and Valeria? How long has he been?”

She could see Doom’s eyes widen slightly and then narrow again. “… What is this?” he hissed.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Stephen frowned slightly, glancing down at the report and back to Loki. It was shy of one page, lacking the careful detail of her previous reports. The inconsistency made Stephen nervous. “How would you rate her magical aptitude?” he asked, because the report was missing that detail.

“Rudimentary,” Loki replied with a small shrug. “She’s magical, no doubt, but only seems to practice very simple spellcraft. Basics like birth-control magic and the like. I’d hazard a guess that she didn’t go further with her education because she wants to be dependant. The original Loki of our world pushed himself to excel because of a desire to be independent and say ‘I can do it myself!’ whereas Metro-Loki seems to have more of a ‘If you love me you’ll do it for me’ attitude.”

Stephen nodded slowly and flipped Loki’s report over, making a note on the back. “So you would say that on a magical level, she’s not very powerful?” he asked.

“… On a sorcery level, no,” Loki said, a slight hesitance in her voice. “I put the warding spell on her myself because it was a bit beyond her ken. But she has a stronger presence than the Enchantress or Venus from our world. She’s literally intoxicating.”

“I see,” Stephen nodded, making another note. “And would you say that that makes her dangerous?”

Loki was silent, staring at nothing, and by the shape of her mouth Stephen guessed that she was biting her tongue. “… Loki? Is she dangerous?” he asked again.

Loki bit her lip, brow furrowing. “She’s-- Anyone trying to attack her would be in trouble. Her entourage is made up of the smartest and strongest her world has to offer, and I don’t doubt every one of them would go all-out to protect her,” Loki said slowly, eyes trained on the edge of Stephen’s desk.

“… Are you protecting her, Loki?” he asked quietly.

“I don’t want her to be a statue!” Loki whined, finally making eye contact. “She’s not hurting anyone, Stephen! She doesn’t want anything! She’s not a threat!”

“Loki, calm down,” Stephen said gently. He sighed and rubbed his hands over his face, processing
the outburst and Loki’s unusual behavior. Goddess of Addiction indeed; her apparent ability to inspire intense and lasting loyalty on contact stood out as a red flag. “... So your belief is that she would have the power but not the will to represent a threat.”

Loki looked away again and fidgeted. “Metro-Loki has enough power, by proxy, to make a considerable mess if she wanted to, but she already has everything she wants,” she said carefully. “She wouldn’t want to challenge Doom’s power or anything, because she doesn’t fancy management.” Loki frowned slightly and tilted her head to the side. “She wouldn’t want Doom’s power but she’d probably want Doom himself if she could get him. Or you. I’ve no doubt she’d be very pleased to have you come to her party,” she glanced up again with a hint of an impish smirk.

“Loki,” Stephen gave her a disapproving look.

“You’d like her parties, Stephen,” Loki chirped, anxiety already forgotten.

“Stop,” Stephen ordered. He looked back down at the notes he’d made as Loki went quiet. He considered for a while, worrying his bottom lip, before putting the sheet back into its folder and holding it out to Loki. “Rewrite the report. Do it properly this time. And when making your recommendation, be sure to note that, while left to her own devises Metropolis Fifty-One’s Loki is unlikely to cause any significant problem, but removing her would likely incite a riot.”

Loki twisted the folder a little in her hands, watching Stephen with an unsure expression. “... Will Doom leave her?” she asked quietly.

“Victor trusts me to manage these matters, and your assessment of her disposition seems valid. I see little reason to doubt your judgment,” Stephen said carefully. It wasn’t entirely true; he saw plenty of reasons to doubt Loki’s judgment regarding this particular incident, mainly revolving around the obvious effect it had had on her, but there was also logic to her conclusions, not just emotion, and it was logic that Stephen could easily follow.

Loki relaxed visibly and nodded. “I’ll have it on your desk first thing tomorrow,” she promised.

“Don’t rush. Be careful with the language,” Stephen said, folding his hands atop the desk.

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Arcadia-Loki was laughing so hard she’d had to put her tea down to avoid spilling it. “Oh dear. Oh dear, you poor thing,” she kept laughing.

“No no, I’m sure your night of torrid, dizzying sexual cavalcade was very upsetting,” Arcadia-Loki said, snickering into her hand as she covered half her face.

“Well, no, that part was fine enough, it’s the after effects that are concerning me,” Loki explained. “That I’m still worrying about it now and obsessing over her... It’s disturbing, you know? Like, how long before this obsessive thing goes away?”

“Well I imagine until you stop making excuses, dear,” Arcadia-Loki replied, picking her tea back up and taking a sip.

“I beg your pardon?” Loki demanded sharply.

“An important thing to remember about addiction is it comes in two varieties, chemical addiction and psychological addiction. Nicotine is chemically addictive, the user’s body builds a dependence upon
the drug itself. Cannabis is psychologically addictive, the user wants the high or to slow down or whatever the reason, they want a feeling, but their body is not dependent upon the drug on a chemical level,” Arcadia-Loki explained, looking evenly back at her, a faint smirk upon her lips.

“And another important thing to remember about addiction is what a marvelous excuse it makes. One doesn’t need to look for deeper reasons behind their feelings and actions or even take responsibility for them if addiction is to blame.”

Loki stared at her, feeling dumbfounded and slightly numb. After a minute, she looked down at her teacup, and her hands nested around it, and bit her lip, mind racing, considering, trying to acknowledge and deny all at once. “... You think I’m making it up?” she asked quietly.

“I think that all those nice little rich geniuses at Metro’s party are staying rich geniuses, because what use would they be to her if they became bootless junkies?” Arcadia-Loki said calmly. “So that would tend to indicate that she is not hindering them doing their jobs, perhaps she’s even making them better at their jobs by sending them off to their laboratories and workshops stress-free and refreshed. So then, why ever should you be such an outlier unless there is another element at play?”

Loki stared into her teacup, stomach clenching and churning. She heard the grandfather clock chime three o’clock inside the house. She bit her lip and glanced out at the rose garden. “Why was I fine until I came back from Metropolis Fifty-One then?” she challenged quietly.

“Were you?” Arcadia-Loki asked. “Or were you hiding behind blithe smiles until you found something a little sturdier to shelter you?” She finished her tea and set it in the saucer, then leaned her elbows on the table and folded her arms. “You’re keeping secrets from yourself, my dear.”

Loki pursed her lips, looking down at her cup again before closing her eyes. “I’ll confront those things when it’s relevant,” she whispered. “Thinking about it now isn’t productive or useful or anything. It’s just going to stress me out and make me less effective.”

“Because you are so effective when you’re blaming your fragility on a convenient scapegoat?” Arcadia-Loki challenged.

Loki looked up and her stomach clenched. “I... I didn’t--”

“You are making mistakes,” Arcadia-Loki said firmly. “And someone is going to end up paying for those mistakes eventually.”

“I’m sorry...” Loki whispered.

“Don’t apologize to me,” Arcadia-Loki said sternly and then her voice went gentle. “What are you hiding from? What is so terrible?”

Loki blinked quickly, her eyes burning and her chest tight. “...That it’s too late. That they’re gone forever and I’ll never be able to fix things with them...” she whimpered. “That I worked so hard for nothing...” A sob caught in her throat. “Every day that goes by, the more time that passes without any sign or hint of them, the more I start to think that maybe they’re not here... maybe they didn’t make it... There weren’t so many people I really needed to be part of this mod podge little world, just a few... just a handful.”

Arcadia-Loki reached across the small patio-table and put her hands around Loki’s. “I’m sorry,” she said softly. “... That’s why you commissioned yourself to Doom? To more easily search Battleground?”

“Yes,” Loki nodded. “They were lost to me before the end of everything... Gone somewhere I
Arcadia-Loki was quiet for a while, eyes downcast and a pained, wistful expression on her face. “... I can’t remember my husband’s face... I see it when I dream, but when I wake it slips away like mist... Having my family taken from me is a knife in my heart. Having their names and faces stolen... is a weeping wound that will not close.”

Loki turned her hands to weave them with Arcadia-Loki’s as a school bus pulled up to the curb at the end of the front walk. “I’m going to try to get that much back for you,” she said, looking Arcadia-Loki in the eye. “I’m going to learn how the memory-dampening thing works and see if I can pop you loose from it.”

“I would be grateful to the end of my life,” Aradia-Loki whispered as America ran up on the porch with Nico racing behind her.

“Why don’t you use a computer?” Verity asked, watching Loki hunched over at the foot of the couch, using the coffee table for a writing surface.

“Hm?” Loki hummed distractedly.

“How do you keep writing your reports out by hand? You know how to use a computer, it would be less work to type them,” Verity pointed out.

Loki paused, staring blankly down at the paper in front of her for a while and then looking up at Verity. “Hand-written is much better for magic. It’s difficult to work spells over a computer, not impossible, but sort of unnatural.”

Verity raised an eyebrow. “Is your report magical?” she asked.

“Not as such,” Loki shrugged.

“So then back to my first question,” Verity prompted.

Loki shrugged again, looking back down at the page. “Feels more natural, I suppose,” she said. “I like... feeling the words. I think it’s maybe important for me, feeling the shape of them.”

“As in important to your powers?” Verity asked.

“Maybe. It just feels like something I should do,” Loki said, bringing her pen back to the page.

“Herbert the fish was the cleverest fish in the garden pond. Which isn’t saying much because fish are not very clever as a general rule. But unlike his less clever associates, who were content to stare at nothing and suck on algae day in and day out, Herbert was clever enough to become bored with the tedium and develop a terrible case of ennui,” Loki said, sitting cross-legged in the grass next to a small pond in the main courtyard of the Great Palace of Doomstadt. She watched an orange and white carp wend its way through lily pad stems and around rocks. “One day, without warning, Herbert snapped. He screamed a silent fishy scream and raced about in a tizzy, darting this way and that, startling the other fishes so badly that they hid themselves from his frenzy.”

The orange and white carp proceeded to zip back and forth and zigzag around the pond in a sudden mania. “In a great burst of desperate frustration, Herbert gave a mighty jump, freeing himself from
his watery asylum and landed upon the earth,’” Loki continued as the fish leapt out of the pond and smacked down in the grass. “For a moment his heart cried out in delight, for he was somewhere new and different. Then he gave a gasp, only to find that he could not breath the air, and flapped his tail, only to find that he could not swim upon the ground, and Herbert became very frightened. As Herbert lay upon the green grass, shocked and appalled at this terrible new world in which he found himself, a robin landed beside him.”

A bird that had been picking at the grass a few yards off moments earlier flapped its way over to the pond to land next to the carp, twisting its head around and giving the fish a sideways look. “Oh silly fish,” the robin said, “was your home really so terrible?” The bird started tweeting and hopping back and forth. “And Herbert sagged with regret. ‘I have made a foolish error and I am afraid that I shall surely die!’ he cried. ‘Cheer up, fish,’ said the robin. ‘I will help you return to your pond.’ And with that, the robin gave a hop and a flap and a great big push and he rolled Herbert over the bank with a great big splash.” The bird head-butted the fish in a manner that birds generally would not, and the fish flopped over and tumbled back into the pond.

“‘Oh happy day!’ Herbert exclaimed. ‘I am home and I can swim about and play and eat algae!’ And he thanked his friend the robin and swore that he would never again jump without looking where he was leaping. Herbert decided to find a more constructive way to occupy himself and began collecting interestingly colored pebbles. He was very happy with his new hobby and lived a contented little fishy life for the rest of his days.” Loki watched the fish calm down and swim off to the shelter of the lily pads, rattled by its out-of-water experience.

“That was cool!” a voice exclaimed from above. Definitely not a robin. Probably. Loki looked up into the branches of a peach tree to see a preadolescent boy partially hidden among the foliage. “How did you do that?” the prince of the Battleworld asked.

“Magic,” Loki replied with a grin.

“I thought magic was all funny-weird words like ‘abracadabra’?” Franklin (not Richards) von Doom said, branches shaking as he crawled his way lower before hopping to the ground.

“Magic can use any sort of words, so long as you have the imagination and determination to make them work,” Loki explained, watching the boy land on the grass and walk over to crouch next to her. “I’ve heard you’re very imaginative, Prince Franklin.”


“No, most of the magic I know is funny-words spells. I’m still learning story-magic, that’s why I practiced with Herbert,” Loki said, nodding to the pond.

“Oh,” Franklin nodded and frowned. “You’re a grown-up though. How come you still gotta learn stuff?”

“Because learning stuff is fun and it makes us better,” Loki smiled up at him. “We can always afford to be better, no matter how old we get.”

Franklin sighed, looking slightly perturbed by the notion of unending education, but nodded. “So then, if you’re just learning story-telling now, what were you called bef--”

“Loki,” Doom called, suddenly there and glaring down at her from a few feet away. “You will explain yourself.”
“Will I?” Loki asked, looking back up at him, puzzled.

“Dad--” Franklin started.

“Go play elsewhere, Franklin. I must speak with Loki,” Doom commanded.

Silence stretched as Doom waited for Franklin to walk across the lawn and leave the courtyard and earshot. He continued to glare down at Loki unwaveringly the entire time. Once Franklin was out of sight, Loki hazarded to ask, “Have I done something?”

“What is your interest in Franklin?” Doom demanded.

Loki considered that for a moment. “… It is my understanding that he is also a storyteller in his own way. Or some manner of ‘dreamer’, as I’ve heard it,” she said carefully. “I do find that interesting, and I’m curious how his powers compare to mine, or to other mutants of the same powers-category.” She glanced down at the pond and chewed her lip for a moment, debating carefully. “… How old is Franklin?” she asked, looking back up at Doom.

Doom glared down at her, eyes narrowing slightly. “What?”

“What year was Franklin Richards born?” Loki asked, staring right back. “Do you remember? What’s the age-difference between him and Valeria? How long has he been?”

She could see Doom’s eyes widen slightly and then narrow again. “… What is this?” he hissed.

“… Franklin is not part of our time,” Loki said quietly. “We can see him, we can touch him, we can interact with him, but he does not exist within time as we know it. He never has, and that’s why it’s nearly impossible to notice that anything is… off. That’s why you’ve never asked yourself how old he is, that’s why no one ever asks.”

“… And how do you know this?” Doom asked, some of the venom in his voice had been displaced with curiosity.

Loki gave a shrug. “I- I didn’t until recently. I just… saw it. I can only assume it’s to do with my nature as a story-god,” she said. “Franklin has… He’s been older than he is now. But I suppose he didn’t like it so he went backward. Nobody noticed because- because that’s just part of how he works, no one sees that he’s moving through time all wrong. He’s made himself a great deal younger since his sister was born, perhaps to be closer to a peer for her, a playmate. The last few years she’s been aging forwards and he’s been aging backwards.”

Doom was quiet for a moment, looking in the direction Franklin had disappeared a few minutes earlier. “… And this interests you?” he asked, a dangerous undercurrent in his voice.

“Well it’s very cool,” Loki pointed out. “But also… it makes him effectively immortal.”

Doom looked back down at her.

Loki glanced away, pursing her lips. “… In a few decades, when the humans I know now, the ones I’ve come to care about, when they’re all dead and dying of old age… around that time, I think it might start to seem like the very best criteria on which to base a friendship… may be longevity,” she said quietly. “How many friends will I need to watch die before I start avoiding friendships with mortals?”

“I see.”
“In a hundred years, Franklin will still be here. In a thousand years, Franklin will still be here,” Loki said, voice fading out.

“I see,” Doom repeated.

“He seems very likeable though. I think there might be other good reasons to be friends with him too,” Loki said, putting on a fragile smile.

Doom’s eyes narrowed again. “… If I hear of you introducing my son to heretical or unsavory ideas, Doom will be displeased,” he warned.


Doom made a sound somewhere between a snort and a growl, and a moment later, vanished. Loki sat still where she was for a while before climbing to her feet and dusting herself off.

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“So tomorrow’s another quest day?” Verity asked, tearing back the aluminum foil around one end of her burrito.

“Weird World. I hear it’s very weird,” Loki said, nodding and poking sour cream at her burrito.

“Are you going to go like that?” Verity asked, carefully training her eyes on her burrito and not looking up as her peripheral vision caught Loki turning toward her.

“Like what?” Loki asked in a puzzled voice.

“You’ve been a girl for four days solid,” Verity said, looking back at her.

Loki frowned and glanced away. “So?”

“That kind of consistency is a little unusual for you, isn’t it?”

“Maybe I’ve just been in a girl mood,” Loki shrugged, taking a bite out of her dinner.

“… You went girl and haven’t changed back since Nutopia,” Verity said quietly, watching Loki who was diligently not looking back at her. “Did she make you feel uncomfortable in your skin?”

Loki snorted and a moment later shifted to male. Now he was a man wearing a sweetheart-style corset-shirt and a little shorty leather jacket that stopped several inches above his waist. Why did this seem so much more ridiculous than a woman wearing it? Questions without answers. “Happy?”

Loki demanded.

Verity sighed. “I’m not criticizing you, I’m worried,” she said.

Loki looked down. “I’m fine, Verity,” he said; it was a half-lie. “I’m not scarred for life, I’m just a bit off.”

“She scared you,” Verity said.

“Yes.”

“Have you been trying to distance yourself from the whole thing physically or something?” Verity asked.
“I don’t know,” Loki said, squirming uncomfortably. “Why do I need a reason all of a sudden?”

“I don’t know,” Verity shook her head and looked down at her burrito again. “... I guess because you’re just acting... off.”

“... I’m okay. I’m in control and it’s going to be fine,” Loki said quietly, and it sounded almost mantra-like. “I’m full of hope and positive feelings and confidence and stuff.”

“It itches when you say stuff you’re trying to convince yourself of,” Verity complained and bit into her burrito.

Chapter End Notes

For those unfamiliar with Franklin-Time, here's the article: The Franklin Richards Paradox

My head feels stuffy right now because somebody wanted to redo the cabinets in the kitchen, so there's all this sawdust in the air and I can't stop sneezing. I'll use this as my excuse for not being able to come up with anything relevant to say for closing comments.
Loki is damp and very upset.

Chapter Summary

The air was so full of magic, it was almost filthy with it. It prickled Loki’s skin and itched through his bones like static in the desert. It was chaotic even by Loki’s standards, seething and in constant conflict with itself. It was too close, too strong, too overwhelming; trying to cast a spell in the middle of this would be like lighting a cigarette while standing waist-deep in gasoline.

Chapter Notes

Appearing this chapter:

Weirdworld

Loki landed hard in thick moss and damp earth. He lay there for a few seconds, startled and puzzled, before picking himself up and brushing at the stains clinging to him. Why had the touchdown been so rough? He’d been teleporting for centuries and rarely had any issue; had he unwittingly wandered into an anti-teleport field?

Wrinkling his nose at the wet feeling the mud had imparted to his clothes, he gave a small gesture to dry himself, and then yelped as the magic exploded in his hands. A moment later he was patting out small fires on his jacket and cussing vehemently. Steadying himself, Loki closed his eyes and took a deep breath, carefully reaching out and feeling the world around him. Then he wondered how he hadn’t noticed it immediately.

There was a pulse, a breath, an ebb and flow surrounding him. Weirdworld was alive. And not just alive, too alive. The air was so full of magic, it was almost filthy with it. It prickled Loki’s skin and itched through his bones like static in the desert. It was chaotic even by Loki’s standards, seething and in constant conflict with itself. It was too close, too strong, too overwhelming; trying to cast a spell in the middle of this would be like lighting a cigarette while standing waist-deep in gasoline.

“... Well shit,” Loki muttered, opening his eyes and looking around the wholly alien landscape.

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Masterson started as he was sorting memos and mailings into their appropriate pigeonholes. He pulled his glove off with his teeth and stared at his wrist for a few minutes, frowning. He could have sworn he heard the bracelet chirp, but now it was silent and smooth, unblemished black. Masterson waited another minute and then pulled his glove back on, sighing.

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“Okay, look... where does the baroness live? How about that? Is there a capitol city, or a big fancy castle or something? Do you know where the lady in charge is?” Loki asked, watching the surly bartender glare suspiciously up at him while drying glasses behind the counter.

“Ain’t no business o’ mine whats royalty does,” the bartender spat irritably. “I ain’t get involved, y’see!”

“I’m not asking you to get involved in anything,” Loki protested. “I’m just looking for directions. Morgan le Fay, do you know who that is? Ever heard of her? Great sorceress who rules Weirdworld under the authority of God Doom?”

“Ain’t get involved in no politics,” the bartender insisted. “No religion neither. Just a simple dwarf.”


“Ain’t get involved in no politics,” the bartender finished drying all the glasses and went about sweeping the floor.

“I’m not here to make trouble for the baroness or anyone else. I just want to find the capitol.”

“Ain’t know from no baronesses or sorcerers or gods. Just a simple dwarf,” the bartender replied gruffly.

“What about a capitol city? Do you know where I’ll find the capitol city?” Loki tried.

“Never been. Ain’t no use for that.”

“Do you know where it is?”

“Never been.”

“Do you know what direction it’s in? Do you know if the road leads to it?” Loki pressed, trying for all he was worth to stay polite.

“Never been.”

Loki bit his lip hard and sucked in a breath through his teeth. “Do you know where any large cities are? Or any city at all?”

“Never been.”

“All right, you’ve never been to a city. That’s fine,” Loki said calmly. “But you probably have customers that pass through on their way to other places, right? Like maybe cities? Do you know if that road out there leads to or goes past a city?”

“Never been.”

“I understand that you have not been there, sir, but do you have some vague notion of where the road goes?”
“Never been.”

Verity checked her phone for texts for the fourth time that evening. Not a peep. Odd. Usually if Loki didn’t plan on showing up with takeout and spending the evening regaling her with tales of madness, he called. She chewed on her lip for a moment and then pulled up her short little contact list and picked Loki’s name. She held the phone to her ear and then frowned and hit ‘end’ as it went straight to voicemail.

She gazed down at the screen for a while and then pulled up the text window and thumb-typed a quick message.

Are you okay?

“Fucking bats!”

Loki made his way quickly through the dense, dark forest he’d been chased off the path into by giant fucking bats several hours ago. He hadn’t run very far from the road, but damned if he could find it again. And while the bats hadn’t followed him into the thick, moist woodland (the closely packed trees unable to accommodate their thirty-foot wingspan) now he’d been found by a pack of giant hyena-pig-monsters that were charging after Loki with much ado as he fumbled and tripped over roots and underbrush and so very much mud.

“... Sign says to wash your own damn cups...” Masterson grumbled as he scrubbed coffee rings out of a collection of mugs left in a break-room sink, the pileup having become too great to ignore. “... Should put names on them... everybody just gets one cu-- What the hell?” He jerked his arm up and glared at the black band around his wrist. He could swear it just flickered.

Either Masterson was being paranoid and imagining things, or the bracelet had been teasing him with momentary flickers and half-chirps all day. Were the batteries wearing out? Did it have batteries? Should he not be getting it wet?

“Hey,” Masterson demanded, tapping the bracelet with a damp finger. “Where’s Teller?” The bracelet was silent and black. Masterson glared at it for a minute and then tried, “Is Teller okay?”

A little glowy, holographic-looking display appeared above the bracelet, like it had during the Nutopia incident, but this time there was no map, just the words NO ALERTS.

Masterson chewed on his lip and sighed unhappily.

“You don’t impress me!” Loki shouted, slashing at a mini sea-serpent with his distaff as it lunged at him, snapping and hissing. “My Jörmungand takes shits bigger than you!”

Two days in a row with no word from Loki was no longer a ‘maybe Loki is being callus and self-involved’ situation, and it was enough to make Verity put on her coat and leave the apartment building. There was a Thor bar in Manhattan for some reason, Loki had told her about it, and Verity
had a vague idea of where it was. It took a little over an hour of combing the general area to find the hole-in-the-wall.

Verity pressed her lips together and shifted uncomfortably, looking up at the sign for a few minutes before squaring herself, pulling the door open and poking her head inside. A few burly, armored god-people looked up and a tall woman got to her feet and moved toward Verity. “I’m sorry Miss, this establishment isn’t open to the public,” she said in a gentle but firm voice.

“Yeah, I know,” Verity shifted back and forth in place but stood her ground as the muscley woman loomed over her. “I- I was just wondering, do any of you know Storyteller? He’s-- I think he’s missing.”

The woman paused, frowning slightly and then turned to look over her shoulder at a few other ‘Thors’ whose attention was still on Verity’s intrusion. They exchanged glances and shrugs and then the woman turned a little more and called into the dimly lit room, “Masterson.” Verity didn’t hear the response, but the woman made a beckoning gesture. “She’s asking about Storyteller,” the woman said quietly as a blond teenager walked up and his eyes turned to Verity.

“... ‘Kay. Thanks, McQuillan,” the boy said as the woman nodded to him and went back to the bar. Verity stepped back onto the sidewalk, letting Masterson follow her out as he looked her over curiously. “So, uh, how do you know Storyteller?” he asked a little awkwardly.

“He lives down the hall from me,” Verity said, carefully checking all her statements over for ‘heresy’ before she made them. “We usually eat dinner together. He’s my best friend.”

“Oh,” Masterson nodded, looking even more curious.

“He went on a mission yesterday morning and he hasn’t come back or called me since then,” Verity explained, then bit her lip and crossed her arms. “Which is unusual. Can Doomgard contact him? I mean, do you know if he’s all right?”

“Well, uh,” Masterson scratched the back of his head and bit his lip. “Not- Not contact per say... I mean, Teller kinda does his missions solo most of the time and, uh... I mean, I’ll totally look into it, but I’m- I’m sure he’s fine.” The last statement stank of a lie.

Verity frowned and pursed her lips, giving Masterson a stern glare, to which he looked guilty and slightly panicked. “... I can tell when people are lying, you know. It’s my power. I can tell whenever anything is fake or untrue,” Verity said quietly. “You don’t think he’s fine,” she accused.

“I-- No, it’s just I- I mean--” Masterson floundered, looking a little more distressed under Verity’s continued glare. “See, there’s this thing--”

“The beacon?” Verity asked.

“Oh, okay, you know about that,” Masterson nodded, pulling off his right glove and holding up his arm to show her a plain, black, plastic-looking band around his wrist. “It’s just- It’s been acting weird, like flickering and chirping, like when the batteries start to go in a smoke-detector or something,” he explained.

Verity bit her lip, looking at the bracelet and considering the explanation for a few seconds, her stomach feeling sour. “... Or when a cell phone has really bad reception?” she asked, looking back at Masterson’s face.

His eyebrows went up and his mouth formed a small round. “Oh... Oh shit, yeah, that...” he whispered. “Oh shit.”
“Okay, so what do we do now then?” Verity asked, trying to stay calm.

“I- I don’t know, I mean, the bracelet won’t tell me where he is, I tried!” Masterson said, genuine panic starting to creep into his voice.

“You have a lost officer or whatever, don’t you have protocols for this?” Verity demanded.

“I-- Sort of? But- But Teller doesn’t carry the standard equipment and--” Masterson flustered.

“Hey,” a new voice called as the bar door pushed open and a latina teenager in white and green armor leaned out. “You’re not ditching me here, are you? I’ve had about as much of old-people big-fish stories from our esteemed colleagues as I can take,” she demanded, frowning at Masterson.

“Teller’s missing and his emergency-caller-thingy isn’t working,” Masterson blurted, looking at the other mini-Thor.

“‘Thingy’,” the latina snorted, rolling her eyes. “So what are you going to do? Lawspeaker won’t care.”

“I know, I know,” Masterson whined, pulling at his hair and biting his lip.

“What about Sheriff Strange?” Verity asked and both teenagers turned to stare at her. “Can’t you go to him?”

“Um... I’m not... uh,” Masterson hesitated.

“Sure, go over Lawspeaker’s head. Your funeral,” the latina laughed, grinning at Masterson.

“Look, I get that he’s your boss’s boss and internal politics and all, but he’s also Loki’s teacher,” Verity pointed out, putting her hands on her hips and giving Masterson a hard stare. “So maybe you’d want to inform him that his student is missing.”

“Hm,” the latina tilted her head and considered Verity. “This’s Teller’s girlfriend?” she asked.

“We’re just friends,” Verity said firmly. “And if you want me to tell Sheriff Strange that he’s missing, because you’re too scared to rock the boat, then at least give me a lift to Doomstadt.”

The teenagers exchanged a glance and then the latina snorted again. “Right, because illegally transporting you across borders wouldn’t rock the boat at all,” she said.

“Okay. Okay. I’m gonna go tell the Eye. Ava, can you take Verity home and stay with her?”

“What, like I’m a babysitter now?”

“Like I need babysitting?” Verity demanded.

Masterson made a frustrated sound. “Fine, give me your phone number then,” he snapped, turning back to Verity. “I’ll call you when I know anything. Or after I talk to the Eye, whatever comes first.”

Verity sighed unhappily. “... Fine. I guess I’ll just go wait at home,” she agreed.

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“No! Capybaras are the largest member of the rodent family and they’re herbivores, god damn it!” Loki shouted as he slogged through knee-deep muck and lashed out at the swarm of giant rats trying to overrun him.
Masterson pinched the side of his tongue between his teeth and tried not to squirm as he hesitated in front of the massive, ornately carved oak doors. He briefly considered whether Storyteller’s wellbeing was worth throwing *everything* out for if Lawspeaker heard about this. Then he considered what he’d do to Storyteller if he turned out to be fine and just not picking up his phone. Masterson took a deep breath, squared himself and knocked.

A moment later the doors swung open of their own accord, revealing a huge study with vaulted ceilings and decorated by a large number of things Masterson couldn’t even guess names or purposes for. Sheriff Strange was seated behind a large desk, looking over some paperwork, he spared a glance up, frowned and beckoned Masterson in as his eyes returned to the paperwork. Masterson walked stiffly toward the desk as the doors swung shut behind him and waited silently as Sheriff Strange scribbled down a few notes before setting the papers aside and looking up at him.

“Yes?” he asked.

“Uh, I- I apologize for, uh-- That is-- I know you’re very--” Masterson stammered.

“No need for apologies, Thor, but please get to the point,” Sheriff Strange cut in.

“I-- Yes, sir. It’s- It’s Agent Storyteller, sir. Sh-He’s been out of communication with Doomgard for two days and just a bit-- less than an hour ago-- his girlfriend came to Valhalla’s asking if anybody had seen him because, uh, she hasn’t heard anything from him either. And, um, it’s just that Storyteller gave me this thing--” Masterson pulled off his glove to display the bracelet again. “And it’s supposed to tell me when he’s in trouble, but, uh, it’s- it’s kind of been *flickering*. Like- Like there’s something wrong with it...” he finished lamely, his face hot as he stared at the front of Sheriff Strange’s desk.

The Sheriff got abruptly to his feet and Masterson jumped a little, looking up as the man walked around the desk and caught his wrist. “Flickering how?” he demanded.

“W- Well, when Storyteller got into trouble in Nutopia, it- it kind of blinked red, like a warning light, and it made a beeping sound to get my attention. Then after I asked where Storyteller was, it made a map,” Masterson explained awkwardly as Sheriff Strange examined the bracelet. “But yesterday and today, it’s like, I’ll just catch it starting to blink out of the corner of my eye, but then it goes black again like nothing happened, or I’ll hear it start to half-beep and then cut out,” he said, feeling his confidence bolstered by the Sheriff’s apparent concern. “And when I tried asking it where Storyteller was or if he was in trouble or anything, it just said ‘no new messages’ or something.”

“Can you take it off, please?” Sheriff Strange said, turning away and walking part way around his desk again, pulling out a drawer and digging a small candle out of it.

“Um, yeah, sure,” Masterson nodded, pulling at the band, which loosened up under his touch to let him pull it off.

Sheriff Strange took the bracelet from him as he walked past Masterson and rolled the carpet back from a patch of floor, revealing some kind of complex magic circle underneath. “Loki said that his next mission was going to take him to Weridworld. It’s possible that that domain’s unique atmosphere may be causing interference,” he explained, setting the candle and the bracelet down on the floor and lighting the candle before stepping outside of the circle. “And if that’s the case, it’s also possible that it may be interfering with his ability to cast spells.”

Masterson stayed where he was and watched silently as the Sheriff lifted his arms and started
chanting in a deep, resonant voice, speaking incomprehensible words that seemed to almost have physical substance. The candle flared up, swirling into an inferno that filled the magic circle and rose ten feet into the air. A few seconds later, the room rang with a distraught wail and as the fire died, it left what appeared to be a garden slug the size of a cow, and beneath it a pair of frantically kicking legs, covered to mid-calf by the abomination’s slimy girth.

“AAAAAAAAH! NOT LIKE THIS! FATHER! HELP! FATHER! PLEASE FOR THE LOVE OF ALL THAT’S HOLY! HELP! AAAAAAAAAH!” Storyteller’s voice was screaming from somewhere on the other side of the monstrosity.

“Teller!” Masterson exclaimed, running over, hammer ready, even as Sheriff Strange made a few gestures and said some not-words and the monster-slug disappeared.

“AAAAAAAAAAAAH!” Storyteller kept screaming for a few seconds after it was gone and then curled his sticky, slimy legs up and hugged them, hyperventilating.

“Teller, it’s okay! You’re back in Doomstadt!” Masterson assured him, crouching down at his side. Storyteller shuddered and let out a pathetic whimper. “Is- Is he... okay?” Masterson asked, looking up at Sheriff Strange, who had knelt on Storyteller’s other side.

“... He’ll be fine. He’s just in shock,” the Sheriff said calmly, his hands glowing faintly as they hovered over Storyteller, apparently checking him for injury. “Thank you for bringing this matter to my attention, Thor. What’s your name? I’d like to give you a commendation,” he said.

“Um... Thunderstrike...” Masterson bit his lip and glanced away. “S- Sir? If it’s all the same, could we skip the part where Lawspeaker finds out that I ignored all the proper channels and protocols and went straight to you instead of him...?” he asked.

“Ah...” Sheriff Strange nodded slowly. “I understand. Then I suppose my personal thanks will have to do,” he said giving Masterson a small smile as he held out a hand, the black bracelet (now caked in an unfortunate amount of slime) laying in his palm.

“Steeeeephen. The sluuuugs,” Storyteller whimpered from the floor, biting his lip and hugging his knees.

“The slug is gone now, Loki,” the Sheriff assured him.

“There were dozens!” Storyteller protested. “So sliiiiiimy!”

“It’s okay now, Loki,” Sheriff Strange said soothingly, patting Storyteller’s shoulder.

“So, um, Your friend Verity’s worried about you,” Masterson called and saw Storyteller’s eye flick toward him momentarily. “I’ll just-- I’ll just call her and let her know you’re okay and you should maybe go see her after you take a shower,” he suggested.

“Thank you, Officer Thunderstrike,” Sheriff Strange said, nodding to him. “I can take it from here.”

“Er, yes, sir,” Masterson said, nodding and climbing to his feet. “And he’s... really gonna be okay, right?”

“He will,” the Sheriff agreed. “As soon as he calms down.”

“Okay,” Masterson nodded again and took a deep breath. “I’ll just be going then,” he said and headed for the door, then paused and turned back. “It’s okay to get this thing wet, right?” he asked, holding up the slimy bracelet which he had not yet returned to his wrist.
“Yes, although I’ve heard it’s better to let the slime to dry and then rub it off,” the Sheriff said.

“Okay. Thanks,” Masterson said, nodding and slipping out of the office. Once outside, he leaned against the closed doors and sighed heavily, his legs feeling weak. This was one for the win-column, he reminded himself. Storyteller was okay (theoretically) and Sheriff Strange wasn’t going to tell Lawspeaker that Masterson had gone over his head. It had been a high-stress day, but it was a definitive win.

He pushed himself away from the door and started down the hall as he pulled his phone out of his pocket and found the number Verity had given him earlier. It picked up halfway through the first ring. “Hello?” the woman’s voice asked sharply.

“Hey, it’s Masterson, from the bar. I, uh, I just wanted to let you know that Storyteller’s basically okay. He’s just covered in slug-mucus right now and kinda upset about it,” he said.

“O...kay,” Verity’s voice sounded skeptical and concerned.

“I told him he should take a shower before he goes to see you. Because slug-mucus and also he smells like ass. Or possibly swamp,” Masterson said.

“... Thanks,” Verity replied.

“Yeah. And... thanks for kicking my ass. I probably should have done something, like, yesterday, or this morning at least. I just- I wasn’t sure, y’know?” Masterson said awkwardly.

There was a sigh on the other end of the line. “Loki’s too overconfident,” Verity said, sounding irritated. “I suppose there are worse things to have for a primary character flaw.”

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“Did your spells not work inside of Weirdworld’s magical field?” Stephen asked crouched next to Loki after helping him to sit up.

“Define ‘work’,?” Loki groaned, scrubbing his hands over his face. “Every tiny, insignificant spell I tried blew up in my face!” he complained, casting Stephen a sulky expression. “I set myself on fire six times.”

Stephen nodded slowly. “So you were forced to navigate and defend yourself physically,” he guessed.

“There’s no sense of direction in there!” Loki exclaimed. “And there’s mire and swamp and mud everywhere! I could barely move even if I had known which way I was going!”

“I think it would be best if you put off further quests into Weirdworld until that domain’s Thor comes in to Doomgard to give a report,” Stephen said. “He’ll hopefully be able to serve as a guide.”

“Oh if you think I’m going back in that wretched nightmare world...” Loki shook his head vehemently. “Mephisto’s Hell was nicer than that place!”

Stephen sighed. “You’ve obviously been through an ordeal, Loki. We don’t need to talk about this now,” he said, putting a hand on Loki’s shoulder and giving it a small squeeze. “I don’t think there’s any rush here. It would seem that Weirdworld’s natural energies make it virtually impenetrable even for you, so I’d say that puts the native Loki in one of the best fortified locations in Latverian.”

Loki nodded, pulling his knees up to his chest and leaning tiredly against them. “I’m just going to
forget that Doom forsaken place even exists, if it’s all the same to you,” he muttered.

“For now,” Stephen agreed. “You still had another location to look into anyway, didn’t you?”

Loki nodded vaguely, closing his eyes. “Avalon was still on the list.”

“Ah, yes. That one was rather concerning,” Stephen said, climbing to his feet and moving toward his desk.

“How so?” Loki asked, lifting his head a little and opening his eyes.

“Because there shouldn’t be a Loki there,” Stephen replied, digging through his files for a map. “Avalon is the remains of Otherworld. There wouldn’t be a ‘native’ Loki for that region. I expect they wandered in from another domain and it’s possible they just happened to be passing through when you did your tracer spell the first time. I think it would be worth performing it again to see if they’ve moved,” he suggested and then glanced up to find Loki staring at him, eyes wide and face blank. “Loki?”

“... You’re right... Loki doesn’t belong in Otherworld...” he whispered, looking almost more shaken than when he’d first arrived. “... It’s an anomaly.”

“Yes, but not difficult to explain, given how easily the aggressive-Lokis or you yourself are moving between domains,” Stephen replied, frowning slightly as he studied Loki’s peculiar reaction.

“I have to go see!” Loki announced, clamoring to his feet, slipping and sliding in the residual slime as he rose.

“No,” Stephen said gently but firmly. “You need to go home and rest. Avalon isn’t going anywhere, it will keep for a few days.”

“But what if something happens?” Loki exclaimed, turning back to Stephen with panic coming back into his features. “What if one of the bad-Lokis gets there first and kills him? I have to go now!”

“No, Loki. You are hysterical and obviously exhausted. You’re barely functional right now and you are going to get yourself killed if you rush off half-cocked like this,” Stephen said, walking back toward him and catching Loki’s shoulders. “Right now you need to go home, take a long hot bath and go to bed.”

“B-But-- No! I have to--”

“Loki, you are no good to anyone like this!” Stephen said, gripping him firmly but not shaking. “What has gotten into you?”

“I- I need to see. I need to know,” Loki whispered, barely contained hysteria shining in his eyes.

“Loki, have you slept at all the last two days?” Stephen asked.

“... No,” Loki admitted.

“Go home. Rest,” Stephen insisted.

“But--”

“Loki, you can’t help anybody if you don’t take care of yourself,” Stephen said sternly.

Loki’s lip shook slightly and then he bit it and nodded. “... Okay,” he whispered.
“Go home. Get some sleep,” Stephen said again.

“Okay,” Loki nodded.

Verity let out a sigh as she read the text and then leaned her head back against the couch for a few minutes, staring at the ceiling, before pushing herself to her feet and tucking the phone into her pocket. She pulled her key ring out of her jacket as she passed it and walked out of the apartment and up the hall to Loki’s door. She’d had a copy of his key since they arrived in ‘Battleworld’, but hadn’t found any need to use it before, and was glad to find that it worked and took her into Loki’s apartment and not the electrical closet that should have been behind that door.

“Loki?” she called as she walked in. She heard a muffled response from the bathroom and gave a little knock before pushing it open. The upper two thirds of Loki’s head were poking out of the steaming water and his eyes were closed. “Are you okay?” she asked.

Loki shook his head and then tilted it back so that his mouth breached the surface. “Eight-hundred pound slugs,” he said and then let his head fall forward again.

“Eugh.” Verity shuddered, settling herself on the lid of the toilet.

Loki shifted, leaning back against one side of the bathtub and squirming until the water was just lapping at his chin as one set of toes immerged on the far end. “I need to go to Avalon,” he said quietly, eyes opening just a crack. “But Stephen said I have to sleep first or I’ll be useless.”

“Well he’s right,” Verity said with a slow nod. “But why is this now an urgent thing?”

“I missed a key plot-point,” Loki said softly. “Maybe I wasn’t reading carefully enough... Or maybe I was scared and I ignored it...”

“Oh kay,” Verity said, frowning. “What plot-point did you miss?”

“Loki shouldn’t be in Avalon,” Loki said, voice a whisper as he stared at the wall ahead of him. “He doesn’t belong there... He’s not welcome there,” he said and then suddenly disappeared, head dropping under the water.

Verity waited as a minute crawled by and had just started to wonder if maybe Loki hadn’t passed out and was now drowning when he finally surfaced again and pushed his hands back over his face, brushing the water away from his eyes and slicking his hair back. “Why isn’t Loki welcome in Avalon?” she asked.

“Because of something he did last time he was there,” Loki said softly as he went back to looking blankly at the wall, seeming only half-aware of Verity’s presence.

“Something bad?”

“Something right but unpopular,” Loki said, eyes fluttering shut again.

“So what does it mean if one showed up there on your map?” Verity asked.

“... I don’t know,” Loki whispered, and he was half-lying.

“... You have an idea,” Verity said, trying not to scowl.
“... I can’t tell you,” Loki said, eyes opening and finally turning to look at her, his brows drawn in. The statement registered as fully true, that he somehow wasn’t *capable* of telling her. “Not yet. I have to see. I have to *know*.”

Verity looked back at him, chewing on her lip and considering that for a while. “... Okay,” she said at last. “And when you know, you’ll tell me?” she asked.

“... I don’t know...” he whispered, and it was true now. His eyes flicked downwards, looking at the rim of the tub, his wet face and eyelashes adding to the uncharacteristically distraught look on his face. “... If I’m wrong, if I got it wrong... I want to forget.” True.

Verity bit her lip a little harder and was quiet for a little while before sighing. “Maybe when you’re a little less tired and a little more *you,*” she said. Loki nodded and it was another half-lie. Verity sighed again and pushed herself to her feet. “Sleep well, Loki. You can tell me about the eight-hundred pound slugs tomorrow.”

“I think I want to forget about *those* too,” Loki said, sinking down in the water again.

Chapter End Notes

The Thors mentioned at the bar were Linda McQuillan, Captain UK of the Captain Britain Corps and Ava Ayala, White Tiger and avatar-turned-god (is about the same age as lil’ Thunderstrike.)

I have molluscophobia. Thus to explain my decision for incomparably horrible nightmare creature to make Loki fight.

Double-post today. Move along now --->
Teaching children the finer points of Marxism

Chapter Summary

“Do you really think I don’t know a lie when I hear one?” the berserker asked merrily. “But I do appreciate the effort. Tell me where he is and I might even let you live, little tinker.”

“I also know a lie when I hear one,” Wilson said. “And I know your kind.”

“Excellent,” the berserker chirped and putting a boot over Wilson’s chest, forcing him down into the floor. “For it is my kind that I seek.”

“You’ll find none like you here,” Wilson growled.

Chapter Notes

There was a double-update today! Did you read chapter 15 yet? Important stuff happened!

This chapter guest starring:

![Wilson](image)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

**Lower Avalon**

“But if the aristocracy are the oppressors, I don’t understand why the bourgeoisie are the problem,” Loki said, swinging his legs as he sat atop a workbench, watching Wilson shape a horseshoe against his anvil.

“The bourgeoisie are complacent. They are too comfortable with the oppression, or rather they are insufficiently uncomfortable,” Wilson explained patiently between blows of the hammer. “You’re a bright lad, Loki. I think you can understand that a person who lives a so-so existence, in which his dearest desires may not come to pass but his belly is filled and his bed is warm, would be unwilling to gamble these comfort on the dream.”

“So... they’re lazy,” Loki paraphrased.

An amused smile curled Wilson’s lips. “They’re under-motivated,” he corrected. “They already have
what we believe all people should. It is the median, the destruction of classes and egalitarian
distribution of resources that we strive toward. The aristocracy would be lowered and the proletariat
would be raised,” he explained, finishing the shoe and plunging it into water. “But the bourgeoisie
are neither above nor below, and so if the dream were realized, their lives would be unchanged.
Therefore, they see little reason to bother.”

“Why don’t they just want to help the prols?” Loki asked, frowning.

“Why don’t the aristocrats?” Wilson countered.

“Because they are bad,” Loki replied, then felt a bit foolish as Wilson smiled indulgently at him.

“The child of an aristocrat and the child of a proletarian come into this world in the same manner and
are very much the same when they are born,” Wilson pointed out. “The aristocrats are not bad, just
ignorant and self-centered. The number of evil people in this world is very few, but those who would
stand idle or complacent in the face of evil acts are many.”

Loki chewed his lip, thinking about that. He was startled out of contemplation by the sound of an
explosion. He looked toward the factory doors. “Has one of the forges--” he started.

“That wasn’t a forge,” Wilson hissed, dropping his tongs and grabbing for his largest hammer. “That
was magic. Run, Loki.” There were shouts and screams outside and another explosion. And then
Loki heard a laugh, maniacal and blood-chilling, and he knew that he was the reason those people
outside were screaming. “Go!” Wilson snapped, grabbing Loki’s arm and dragging him off the
workbench, then giving him a shove between the shoulders to send him running.

So Loki ran, because he was scared and because Wilson was the smartest person he knew and never
wrong. But he couldn’t run far. He couldn’t abandon Wilson to the monster that was about to crash
through the doors, because Loki knew that the monster was here for him, just as the others before
had been. He threw himself behind a stack of crates as one wall of the factory was torn apart in a
great hail of splintering wood and the monster arrived. Loki peered through a gap between two
crates, his view limited to a tiny slice of the scene.

“I am looking for a Loki. Have you seen one?” the monster asked, his voice sing-song with madness,
strolling into the factory. He was nearly luminescent, with more magic bleeding off of him than even
an aristocrat, and bare-chested, with swirls of woad painting his skin. He held a sparth axe rested
against his shoulder.

“Never,” Wilson replied, standing up straight and tall and gripping his hammer firmly as he glared at
the monster. “It seems you have destroyed my workplace for nothing.”

The monster threw his head back and laughed, before suddenly dashing forward, quicker than Loki
could even gasp in surprise, and slammed the handle of his sparth across Wilson’s chest, knocking
him to the floor hard and sending the hammer spinning out of Wilson’s grasp. “Do you really think I
don’t know a lie when I hear one?” the monster asked merrily. “But I do appreciate the effort. Tell
me where he is and I might even let you live, little tinker.”

“I also know a lie when I hear one,” Wilson panted, trying to push himself up. “And I know your
kind.”

“Excellent,” the monster chirped and putting a boot over Wilson’s chest, forcing him back down into
the floor. “For it is my kind that I seek.”

“You’ll find none like you here,” Wilson growled.
“Oh well now you’ve got me intrigued,” the monster said. “You seem to believe that, and yet I am quite positive there is a Loki here. I will find him whether you tell me where to look or not. But if you should continue to entertain me with such curious little quips, then I shall perhaps continue to be entertained by seeing what other sounds I can draw from you.” The monster lifted his foot and suddenly slammed it down on Wilson’s arm. Wilson screamed.

Loki put his hands over his mouth to hold in a sob. This monster was worse than the other two that had come looking for him before. He was going to kill Wilson. But he hadn’t even come for Wilson. He’d come for Loki. And Loki was nothing. He was just an urchin and wouldn’t be missed by anybody. Wilson was a great man. Without him to lead the revolution, the dream would crumble.

Loki squeezed his eyes shut and swallowed against the lump in his throat. His whole body was trembling. He was terrified. But the choice was no choice at all. Wilson needed to live, deserved to. Loki didn’t. He took a steadying breath and started to crawl out of his hiding place.

“I wonder,” a new voice suddenly rung out across the factory floor, “could it be me you’re looking for?”

Loki peaked around the edge of the crates and caught sight of a tall, dark-haired woman standing in the place where the factory’s wall used to be, hands on her hips and head tilted slightly to the side, a cocky smirk on her lips. The monster’s eyes locked on her, and he stepped away from Wilson, mouth spreading into a feral grin. “There you are...” he hissed, stalking slowly toward the woman, eyes narrowing into something between a glare and a leer as he took the sparth off his shoulder. “Hello Loki.”

“Hello Loki,” the woman replied, continuing to smirk confidently. Then she opened her mouth again and the words that came out held a different quality, something indefinable, something more than words. For a moment, Loki thought she was singing, but that wasn’t it. Her voice, her words, were simply more. “He was distracted from his rampage by the arrival of what he took to be his prey. The tinker was forgotten as Loki turned his full attention to his other-self, madness and thirst for power feeding into a bloodlust that would be satisfied by nothing less than the destruction of all he laid eyes on."

The monster stilled, grin fading as a suspicious look took its place. “Though, as the encounter wore on, Loki began to suspect that he had miscalculated. His other appeared young, as green as her extremely fashionable outfit, but there was something more to her than met the eye. Before—” the woman broke off suddenly, laughing. “I’m sorry, I just started hearing ‘robots in disguise!’ in my head!” she exclaimed, then sobered and continued. “Before blows were ever exchanged, before even cursory flyting had commenced, Loki’s gluttony for carnage was lost to the curiosity rising like a tide within him.

‘What are you?’

he asked.”

The words were spoken in perfect unison from both their lips and then the monster drew a sharp breath and took half a step backwards, his posture going tense, staring at the woman, agitation and fury painting his features. Loki found himself holding his breath and feeling almost more excited than scared as he watched from behind the crates, and realized what was happening, the same thing that the monster must have just realized. He was caught in a spell that the woman was casting with every word she spoke.

“She smiled knowingly and dipped a shallow bow,” the woman said, doing just that. “And she said ‘I am the Storyteller.’"
"Loki felt doubt seep into him, like a chill running up his spine, as he looked upon her and realized that the lamb he had thought he was chasing was, in fact, a lion. Loki made to slip away, to forfeit this match that he might bide his time and search out a weakness in the Storyteller to benefit him another day. ‘Wait,’ her voice changed again, going back to being words that were just words, and the slight smile that she had worn while in recitation dropped off her face in favor of a serious look. ‘Please take a moment to appreciate that I am letting you go,’ she said quietly, and Loki could see the monster bristle with quiet rage. ‘And to appreciate how well I win without raising so much as a hand. And to consider what would happen if I decided to actually fight you.’"

The monster glared venomously at her for another moment before demanding again, ‘What are you?’

“I told you. I’m the Storyteller,” the woman replied, smirk returning.

The monster snarled, and a moment later disappeared, leaving a faint trace of greenish vapor hanging in the air for just a moment before that too dissipated.

The woman let out a sigh and walked across the floor to Wilson, who was staring up at her quietly, clutching his injured arm against him. “That looks like a nasty break,” she said, crouching down and holding out her hands. “Healing isn’t my usual forte, but I think I can be of some assistance.”

“Miss, you have already been of greatest assistance,” Wilson replied, his voice strained as he allowed her to touch his arm. “I cannot express the depths of my gratitude.”

“Oh Wilson, you’re adorable,” the woman chuckled. “And finding you under that nogoodnik’s boot makes me quite hopeful I’m finally in the right place.”

“... I apologize, have we met?” Wilson asked slowly.

The woman shook her head. “Not in this lifetime,” she said. “In another place, another time, with the eyes of children, did we walk together but briefly,” her voice was airy and almost like when she had been weaving words into reality, but there wasn’t the indefinable hum of power this time, just poetry.

Wilson stared at her, frowning softly. “I’m sorry... I don’t remember,” he said.

“I know. It’s all right,” she smiled warmly back at him. “I remember you. I remember that you are a good man. I remember feeling some amount of awe for you, for the scope of your ambition and optimism.” She looked down at his arm again. “How’s that?”

Wilson followed her gaze and flexed his fingers then bent his arm back and forth a few times. “Fantastic. How can I possibly repay you?”

“With information,” the woman said, and Loki could see Wilson tense up again at her response. “The Loki that creep just now was looking for... is he a child? Just shy of adolescence? Too curious for his own good? A bit devious but with his heart in the right place?”

Loki’s breath caught and he dug his nails into the wood of the crate, clinging to the sensation, as much as the box itself, like an anchor. “I’m not sure what you’re talking about,” Wilson said quietly. “That man was clearly mad.”

The woman’s sad, hopeful smile fell away into a look of desperation. “Please. Please, I just want to talk to him,” she begged. “I just-- I just have to know...”

“I’m sorry. I can’t help you,” Wilson replied, his tone flat.
Loki pressed his lips together and swallowed against a lump in his throat. Wilson was the smartest man he knew... but there was something about this woman. He climbed clumsily to his feet and one of the crates shifted as he pulled on it for support; it didn’t fall, but it made a scraping, creaking sound and the woman and Wilson both looked over and spotted Loki.

“I told you to run!” Wilson shouted.

Loki jumped slightly and gasped, startled, scared by the harshness, the fear in Wilson’s voice. But the woman stayed where she was, didn’t attack; she wasn’t one of the monsters. She put her hands over her mouth and her eyebrows drew together as she stared at Loki. After a few seconds, there were tears falling off her eyelashes when she blinked. Wilson was watching her now too, taking in her reaction, still looking nervous.

After a minute, the woman lowered her hands and whispered. “Oh my darling, I’ve missed you.” Her voice wavered and the peculiar statement was followed with a sob. “I’ve missed you every day.”

Loki slowly stepped away from the crates and walked across the floor, his legs feeling stiff and awkward and his lungs not quite seeming to work right. His eyes were burning, and by the time he was halfway to where Wilson and the woman were climbing to their feet, he felt dampness hitting his cheeks. “Loki, wait,” Wilson said in a quiet, firm voice, putting a hand in front of Loki to stop him and staring suspiciously at the woman. “... You’re too young to be his mother,” he said quietly.

She shook her head, swallowing and blinking quickly. “Sister,” she whispered.

Wilson looked doubtful for another moment, but he lowered his arm and stepped to the side slightly. Loki inched forward, staring up at the woman and finding that he was trembling as he came to stand in front of her. Then the woman descended on him, and the movement was so sudden that for a second Loki was terrified anew that she was going to crush him or eat him or some other terrible thing that monsters do to children. But the next moment he was being held so tightly he could feel her every breath as the woman sobbed shamelessly against him. That was even more alarming than the fear of being eaten by a monster.

She kept sobbing and kissing Loki’s cheek and temple and combing her fingers through his hair and whispering how much she’d missed him, and Loki clung to her and found himself crying just as hard because no one had ever held him like that or said anything so wonderful to him. And why not? If she’d existed all this time, why hadn’t she come for him before? “Where have you been?” Loki whimpered against the woman’s shoulder. All he could remember ever being was an orphan, an urchin, an unwanted creature more vermin than person.

“Looking for you,” she whispered back. “You were very hard to find.”

Loki hid his face against her neck and dug his hands into the fabric of her jacket and let a flood of too many different feelings pour out of him as he felt the woman gently picking him up off the floor and shifting her arms to hold him against her. “... What’s your name?” Wilson asked softly.

“That’s a name?”

“It’s mine.”

“And where are you from?” Wilson asked.

“Manhattan,” she whispered. “I’ve been searching so many domains... to think he was this close...” She kissed Loki’s cheek and ear and hugged him so hard it was almost painful, but Loki hugged
“I suppose you’ll be taking him back with you then,” Wilson said slowly.

Loki could feel the woman nod. “That maniac is still at large. And I was bluffing. I didn’t have anything to take him down really. But now I know what I’m dealing with, I think I’ve got some ideas... But I need to keep my little one close until that matter has been resolved... I need to protect him.”

“This was the third to have come after him in recent weeks,” Wilson said. “Each has been different and yet the same.”

“... That’s informative... I’ve been trying to get some idea of how many there are... I’ve captured one and I have confirmation that at least two have gotten themselves killed, and I’ve been told that three more fell overestimating themselves, but I’m not sure how many are still out there.”

“What’s your involvement?” Wilson asked.

“Stopping them,” she said. Stroking a hand over Loki’s shoulder as she leaned her cheek against his forehead. “... I’m going to call in some help to secure this area and maybe we can get your factory fixed up. I’ll be back tomorrow to ask you for a description of the other two attackers.”

“Call in help from where?” Wilson asked.

“Doomgard.”

“... You’re a Thor?” Wilson sounded like he didn’t believe it.

“No,” she shook her head, chin brushing against Loki’s hair. “I’m something else.”

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“My Lord, good news!” Loki announced, strolling into the throne room unannounced just as the last audience of the day was making their exit. Stephen frowned as he took in the sight; she had a child, maybe eleven or so, wrapped up in her arms and a look on her face that told Stephen she was preparing to dig in her heels and be as stubborn as a Thor. “A great break in the case and whatnot. Would you like to hear of it?”

“What is that?” Victor glared at the child.

“Adorable, isn’t he?” Loki said, with so much casual cheer she was clearly nervous, and disentangled the child’s arms from around her neck before setting him on his feet in front of her. “That’s God, honey, say ‘hello’!”

The child’s eyes went round and a tear-stained flush washed away as he blanched in awed terror. The moment the boy’s face had come into view, even distorted by emotions as it was, there could be no doubt that he was quite definitely a very young Loki. The boy backed up against his older iteration, lip shaking, clearly overwhelmed. Stephen sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. “What have you done, Loki?” he groaned.

“W-What?” the child squeaked.

“Don’t worry my Lamb, he’s talking to me,” Loki assured, petting the child’s hair and kneeling down to wrap an arm around his small shoulders. “I’ve made contact with one of the aggressive elements. I was unable to apprehend him, as I felt there would have been heavy collateral damage...”
and casualties, but I think I’ve put together a good estimation of his abilities and I’m quite sure I’ve got his attention.”

“And the boy?” Victor asked.

“The would-be culprit’s would-be victim. Also my new ward,” Loki chirped, smiling.

“I think not,” Victor said, crossing his arms.

Loki’s smile faltered. “He’s still too little to work magic of any consequence or wield a proper weapon and he has no family. He’s quite defenseless,” Loki explained carefully. “He’s already been stalked three times and it’s not likely he’ll be lucky enough to slip away a fourth. He needs protection. I can provide it.”

“Out of the question,” Victor replied icily. “Perhaps the threat to the boy’s life will give you greater motivation to resolve this matter quickly. And if he is made a casualty before you succeed in your task, then I would see him as one less problem to deal with in the future.”

Loki’s face twitched slightly and Stephen could almost hear the snap before she pulled the boy protectively against her and started shouting. “He is mine and I love him and I am keeping him and if you want to stop me then you’re going to have to kill me!” she screamed.

“You dare presume to give Doom an ultimatum?” Victor demanded as the lights in the hall dimmed ominously.

Stephen was at Victor’s shoulder whispering urgently to him the very next second. “Loki’s emotions have always been volatile, it’s part of their nature as a fire elemental. That is being exacerbated by the fact that Loki has been under heavy stress since the last time she was in this court,” he said quickly. “I have no reason to believe that her current outburst represents any loss of loyalty, but rather reflects the great effort she has been exerting toward the assignment we gave her.”

“My Lord...” Susan called softly, leaning over Victor’s other shoulder. “Loki serves you very dutifully and asks so little in return,” she said gently. “Is it so unthinkable she be allowed to raise the child? They’ve clearly bonded.”

“It is unthinkable,” Victor growled. “They are analogues. They cannot be allowed to--”

“But that’s not so!” Loki blurted suddenly, and more than one member of the court gasped at her audacity for interrupting. “I- I’m not the original Loki. I’m a second generation Xerox. There is a strong possibility that there are no other iterations of me on Latverian... So- So then there’s no paradox here.”

“Victor,” Stephen found himself frantically grasping at straws as he wished desperately that Loki had run this by him first and let him present it. “Due to his young age and the severe handicap it would put on his ability to use magic, any threat this boy might represent is insignificant. Compare that to the resource that your Agent represents and I believe the truly minimal risk would seem to be worthwhile.”

Victor narrowed his eyes, looking Loki over, wrapped around the child, enveloping him in her arms. “Be that as it may--”

“Please,” Loki sobbed, and the broken sound made Stephen’s breath catch for a moment. “Please, God. Please let me keep him, beneficent Almighty. Please have pity, Lord. I can’t lose him.” She curled tighter around the boy as she prayed, her voice breaking a little more with every word.
Victor tilted his head back, looking down the nose of his mask at Loki’s hunched form and raising an eyebrow behind the cold steel, calculation in his eyes rather than pity. “... Your love for this child has moved Doom’s heart,” he announced in a clear voice, the statement directed toward the court more than Loki. “However you cannot be allowed to keep the boy in Manhattan.”

Loki looked up sharply, tears streaking her face and wary hope in her eyes. “I agree. It’s too hot. Too much of a hub,” she said, her voice still weak as she made efforts to steady it. “We need somewhere off-grid with enough space to get lost and go unnoticed. I’m thinking rural England.”

Victor nodded and rose to his feet. “Your request for custodianship is granted, but let it not hinder the mission Doom has given you,” he announced, crossing his arms and looking down at the lesser god knelt before him. “Take yourself from this chamber and see to your composure, Agent Storyteller. Doom has spoken.”

“Thank you, God,” Loki murmured, getting to her feet and bowing deeply before picking up the child again and giving another awkward half-bow. “Praise be to Doom. Thank you.” She turned and hurried out of the throne room as fast as she could without running, while the child-Loki’s round, frightened eyes stared at Victor over her shoulder.

Loki teleported directly into the living room. It was terrible manners, but she’d used up all her good manners for the day on praying to Victor von Doom. “Verity!” she called as soon as there was carpet under her feet; her voice was still cracked and raw and Verity looked a little past worried when she came running out of the bedroom door.

“What’s wrong?” she asked and then froze in her tracks, staring at the child Loki was clutching to her chest.


“What worked?” Verity asked, watching Loki drop onto the couch and shift the much smaller Loki into her lap. He leaned against her and eyed Verity cautiously, fingers curled around the edge of Loki’s jacket.

“I wasn’t sure it would. And it was so long without a trace of either of them, I thought I’d failed,” Loki rambled, words spilling out without proper narrative or meaning, leaving the audience adrift from sloppy storytelling. “But I found him. It worked. Look, Verity, it worked! He’s alive!”

Verity stepped closer, frowning and studying the child carefully even as he made himself harder to see by pressing into Loki and hiding half his face against her neck. “... Is that Kid-Loki?” Verity asked quietly, glancing up to look at Loki, her brow knit. “... The one who died?”

“Yes,” Loki said, nodding emphatically and hugging him a little tighter.

“How?” Verity asked, gingerly lowering herself onto the cushion at the far end of the couch.

“Everything was in flux. Dozens of worlds torn to pieces, being stitched together like a patchwork quilt. Timelines were ragged and meeting up at all the wrong points, pasts and futures colliding and being slapped together with duct tape and spit,” Loki explained excitedly. “A whole new world was being born and it was such a ruckus, I thought I could give it just a little nudge while no one was looking. Cheat just a tiny bit and reality wouldn’t notice. And it worked, Verity!”

“You’re sure it’s really him?” Verity asked.
“I’m sure. I feel it. I know it,” Loki whispered and pressed a kiss to his forehead. “And I’m going to find him too, Verity,” she promised, looking back up and smiling. Her vision blurred a little and she blinked to get the tears out of the way. “Your Loki is out there somewhere too, and I’m going to find him.”

Verity’s eyes widened and she drew a shuddering breath but said nothing.

“... You’re not my sister...” the child mumbled against Loki’s collarbone. “... You lied to Wilson.”

“Wilson wanted to know that I wasn’t going to hurt you,” Loki said, combing her fingers through his hair and nuzzling her chin against his temple. “‘Sister’ was a word he could understand.”

“... Who are you?” he asked, not pulling away.

Loki considered the question for a moment, her thumb stroking slowly over the shell of his ear. “Niece? I think niece would be the most accurate word?”

“... That doesn’t... make sense... does it?” he mumbled, unsure.

“Oh Mon petite Serrure, let me tell you a story,” Loki whispered, kissing his forehead again.

Chapter End Notes

So this was actually the second or third chapter I wrote of this fic (I went through and edited it now and again as I changed my mind or better developed some stuff about the overall direction of the story). This sort of marks off ‘part one’ plot-wise; there will be three parts, to give you an idea of the overall size of this thing, but the parts might not all be the same length.

Serrure is still my all-time favorite Loki and probably always will be. I adore him to bits and continue to mourn. Wilson, if you will recall, was a character from Journey into Mystery, Speaker for the Manchester Gods, which was a sort-of-pantheon of post-enlightenment gods rising in Otherworld that Loki went to help stop and then realized that they had a little brighter ideas for the future than the incumbents. I think I was watching through the first season of Peaky Blinders when I decided that Battleworld Wilson should be a communist leader.
To be precise about names

Chapter Summary

Verity's face slid into a small frown, her brow pinching. “... You never told me you weren’t him,” she said softly.

“... Don’t pretend you didn’t figure that out yourself ages ago,” Loki whispered, looking away, a guilty sheen to her features.

“You still should have told me. You should have come out and said it. You shouldn’t have just left me to wonder,” Verity bit her lip, feeling a slightly nauseating mix of annoyance, frustration, sadness, hope.

Chapter Notes

This chapter guest-starring:

Verity sat up, muscles stiff and reluctant, and rubbed her hands over her face. She yawned and rolled her shoulders and then scrubbed a hand through her hair and sighed before shoving the covers back to swing her legs over the side of the bed and lever herself up with a wobble. She decided to put off her customary morning shower and pulled on last night’s jeans and a sweater before exiting the bedroom.

She shut the door quietly as she glanced toward the couch where Loki’s head was tilted back over one arm of it, hair spilling down the side and hanging an inch above the floor. Verity thought it looked like a guaranteed neck-ache, and wondered again whether she should have woken Loki up after she passed out last night. It was the fourth time since Battleworld was a thing that Loki had fallen asleep there, and she stayed later than was really polite most nights (so it was fortunate Verity set her own work schedule) and seemed to spend very little time in her own apartment. The odd reluctance to go home had made Verity start to wonder if this version of Loki wasn’t extra sensitive to loneliness.

The travel-sized Loki sprawled on top of her, drooling on her shoulder with the fingers of his right hand tangled in the older-looking Loki’s hair, didn’t do much to refute that hypothesis, he did however represent both solution and maybe an ultimate source. Verity had thought once or twice that Loki’s clinginess since their arrival might be driven by missing her family, but maybe she’d been a
little off-mark in assuming Loki’s ‘family’ meant Thor and Asgard. Verity had never actually thought to ask, and the way Loki had fawned over ‘Serrure’ last night wasn’t nostalgia for days gone by, it was love.

Sighing again, Verity made her way to the kitchenette. She set the coffee maker up to brew a full pot and started her largest skillet heating on the range before digging through the fridge. She thought a silent thanks to no one in particular (definitely not Doctor Doom) that the grocery delivery had been yesterday as she pulled out an unopened pound of center-cut bacon and a dozen large, brown eggs. She was transferring the first six strips of bacon from the skillet to a paper-towel covered plate when movement caught her eye and she glanced up to see grown-up-Loki shifting Kid-Loki around to deposit him on the couch as she left it.

Loki disappeared into the bathroom while Verity poured the grease out of the skillet and reappeared as she was laying more strips down, wandering over to the counter. “Waking me up with bacon and coffee smells makes you the most wonderful person in the whole world,” Loki said quietly, leaning her elbows on the counter and grinning at Verity.

“I’m sorry, did you think I was sharing?” Verity raised an eyebrow at her.

“I take it all back.”

Verity smirked, flipping over bacon strips with tongs as they crackled exuberantly away in the skillet. The smile faded slowly to a small frown, her brow pinching. “… You never told me you weren’t him,” she said softly.

“… Don’t pretend you didn’t figure that out yourself ages ago,” Loki whispered, looking away, a guilty sheen to her features.

“You still should have told me. You should have come out and said it. You shouldn’t have just left me to wonder,” Verity bit her lip, feeling a slightly nauseating mix of annoyance, frustration, sadness, hope. “I asked you if he was dead and you gave me some bullshit about Schrödinger’s cat. You kept it vague enough to not be a lie, but you steered me into assuming you were some- some next evolution or something.”

Loki drew a long, slow breath and sighed it out, then nodded, staring at the counter. “... I’m sorry... At first I was scared you wouldn’t want me...” she said in a small, fragile voice. “I probably would have scraped up the courage to tell you eventually, but there was almost no time. It was only hours from that moment to the end of the world, and... and then, when we were in the creative white space, that’s when I made my move,” she explained, eyes glancing back up toward Verity with a hesitant look. “And after that... I wasn’t sure if I’d succeeded or failed... and I didn’t want to bring it up again until I could answer your question.”

Verity frowned, moving the second panful of bacon to the paper towel and draining the skillet. She was pulling more raw strips out of the bag when she asked, “My question?”

“If he was dead,” Loki said. “I didn’t know. I didn’t know if it worked until yesterday. Now I know it did.” She looked down at the counter again, sighing. “It looks like Doom’s smash-everything-together-like-play-doh strategy of world-building just dropped the ‘extra Lokis’ wherever there was room for them, an empty niche. There wasn’t a ‘native’ Loki in Avalon, so it was a perfect spot to drop an orphan with close ties to a local subculture,” she mused, scratching at something dried to the corian with a fingernail. “So I suppose I should look for my maker in other places that shouldn’t have a Loki.”

“Your ‘maker’...” Verity whispered, watching the bacon sizzle and pop.
“... He made me for you,” Loki said softly. “For you and Thor. He built my foundation on three rules: don’t make Verity wrong. Love Thor. Be free.” She was quiet for a few seconds, pursing her lips. “He made me without the pathos... I don’t feel... compelled to lie like the Lokis before me... It was like a weight on his chest, you know. When he understood that conventional lies couldn’t get past you, at first he felt relieved, like he could trust himself with you. Then it was like a neurosis, compulsively searching for ways around your power because something deep in his quintessence told him he had to...”

Verity moved the bacon out of the pan and drained it again, frowning to herself and feeling a knot in her throat. She laid the last few strips in the pan and stared at them, pressing her lips together for a little while. “... And that’s still going to be bothering him, isn’t it?” she asked quietly. “... Because he didn’t free himself, he freed you.” She glanced up to catch Loki nodding.

“I may be able to help him. I’m the God of Stories, I should theoretically be able to edit another mythoform,” Loki said.

Verity frowned. “Theoretically? Is that ridiculously dangerous and likely to give him brain-damage or something?” she asked.

“Well I’m not just going to up and do it,” Loki wrinkled her nose. “It’ll probably be a while before I even start sorting through his skein. I’ll take the proper time to figure it out and get it right. I’ll be careful. I’ll get advice from experts and learn my art before I get all experimental and avant garde.”

Verity nodded and glanced across the room to where Kid-Loki was still dozing on the couch, curled up on his side, back to the room. “... He’s a God of Lies too, isn’t he?” she asked. She was disturbed by Loki’s description of the compulsive nature of the lying thing, because she had seen her Loki seeming to struggle with it in a way that baffled her, not understanding, on the occasions when she did manage to catch him out, why he couldn’t stop being shitty. And if it had been that difficult-to-impossible for him, how the hell was a child supposed to deal with this magically-inflicted-mental-illness thing?

“At this age he’ll still be governed by the God of Mischief title,” Loki said, shaking her head. “Lying will be an important part of his tool-kit, but child trickster-gods are playful. Same archetype-family as fairies and foxes,” she explained. “Loki got recategorized into a different archetype midway through the first millennia, in large part by Christian influence. Thus being rewritten from sidekick to antagonist over a few hundred years as mythologies and dogmas drifted back and forth between Rome and the barbarian tribes of Germania and beyond. The last nail in that coffin was the fact that Christians were much bigger on writing stuff down than Vikings ever were, so the stories that stood the test of time were the ones told from a third-party perspective.”

Verity moved the last strips of bacon to the plate and put them in the oven to stay warm, then started cracking eggs. “So he won’t have that ‘weight on his chest’ yet?” she asked.

Loki tilted her head to the side and considered. “... He’ll be predisposed to fooling people,” she said carefully. “But his ‘bad behavior’ will be more on the level of trying to steal sweets or stay up past his bedtime or embarrass grown-ups. Child-gods are supposed to be good. They’re not allowed to be evil if they’re really children (and not just demons that look like children).” She seemed to think for a few moments. “He’s also allowed to use tricks and mischief on a bigger level to protect himself and his family, or if it’s for an otherwise good cause. He scraped together a few pretty grand schemes when he went up against Uncle Cul and Surtur.”

“So he’s a little liar but he uses his powers for good,” Verity said, pouring the bowlful of eggs into the skillet and pushing them around with a spatula.
“Yes,” Loki agreed. “And he’ll tell you that he hasn’t had any cookies when he’s really had three.”

Verity smirked. “Okay then.” She glanced over at the miniature god on her couch, hoping that having a benign nature meant the stress and existential crises could wait. “Here, put the toaster on the table and wake him up for breakfast,” Verity said, unplugging the toaster and handing it across the counter.

“Kay,” Loki accepted the appliance, carrying it over to the table, and plugged it in, then went to crouch down next to the couch. She murmured to the godling, rousing him gently and ushering him toward the bathroom, trying to explain modern plumbing before being pushed back out and having the door firmly shut in her face. Verity wondered what century Avalon was in; Kid-Loki’s high-waters and long-socks look made her think nineteenth. Loki came back over to the counter. “He does not need help with the bathroom,” she noted.

“He’d be a little old for that,” Verity agreed with a chuckle.

“Well there’s not a whole lot of fancy indoor plumbing in Lower Avalon. Think Tenement Museum, for closest approximate point of reference,” Loki said with a shrug.

“Never went,” Verity said.

“Well you should have. It was a fascinating window into the lower-class urban condition during the industrial revolution,” Loki declared, crossing her arms. “And now it’s gone. Because history is heretical.”

“I think getting annoyed about that fact is heretical too,” Verity noted, tipping the eggs over a casserole dish and pushing them out of the pan with the spatula. “But, also... why doesn’t he remember anything?” she asked, looking up. “I thought that Lokis were immune to the amnesia?”

“Varying levels of immunity,” Loki said with a slight shake of her head. “Seems to depend on how relevant memory is to their title. And how much magic they personally wield (which leads me to assume that the amnesia is at least primarily magical in nature).” She glanced up as Kid-Loki exited the bathroom. “And he’s still small. He physically can’t handle big magic yet, so that makes him rather vulnerable to it. Did you wash your hands?” she asked as Kid-Loki approached the counter.

“I know how to use a wash-stand!” Kid-Loki said irritably.

“It’s called a sink here, Lamb,” Loki said. Kid-Loki screwed up his face in annoyance and looked adorably pouty. “Did you wash your hands?” Loki asked again.

“Yes!” Kid-Loki snapped.

“Get back in there and wash your hands right now,” Verity commanded, giving him a stern glare. “With soap, or I’ll make you do it again.”

Kid-Loki managed to look even more annoyed, pouty and embarrassed as he turned around and went back to the bathroom. “... The industrial revolution was an exceptionally filthy time,” Loki noted with a smirk.

“And children are exceptionally filthy little people,” Verity said, rolling her eyes and passing Loki the casserole dish and a bag of bread, then pulling the bacon and a stack of plates out of the oven.

Kid-Loki arrived looking fairly morose as Verity and Loki were putting breakfast on the table and going back and forth for silverware and other forgotten things. “Did you--” Verity started.
“Yes! With soap!” Kid-Loki exclaimed and this time it was true.

They settled into breakfast and Verity watched Kid-Loki curiously, studying the way he moved. She found herself categorizing every detail she observed into whether it more resembled the other Loki at the table, or whether it was more like ‘her’ Loki. Kid-Loki would occasionally look up and give her an uncomfortable, wary look, knowing he was being watched and anxious because of it. “... So what happens next?” Verity asked.

“Doom says we need to leave Manhattan. There’s already an extra Loki in this domain, and it’s not a very big place,” Loki said, pulling two slices of toast out of the toaster and handing one to Kid-Loki. “I’m heading for one of the domains that’s currently short.”

“Short?” Verity frowned, glancing at her.

“I picked England. They’re down by one Fairy-King and that makes an open niche for a Loki or two,” Loki explained. “And it’s heavily forested. I like that. You know the parts of Battleworld that aren’t covered in cities are mostly all desert for some reason.”

“I see,” Verity said, looking down at her eggs and feeling an uncomfortable tightness in her stomach. “... So then you won’t be here anymore.”

“Down the hall, no,” Loki said and Verity didn’t look up to see what expression she had on. “But I can set up a magic door if you like. If you don’t mind.”

Verity frowned and glanced back up. “A magic door?”

“Like a portal. From here to the new house.”

“Oh,” Verity said, suddenly feeling rather foolish.

“Unless that would make you uncomfortable,” Loki said.

“No. No, that’s fine,” Verity shook her head.

“Good,” Loki smiled. “It will of course be illegal and illogical, so don’t go spreading it around.”

“Sure,” Verity nodded.

“So ‘build a house’ is on today’s to-do list, along with interviewing witnesses concerning yesterday’s and previous related assaults in Avalon,” Loki said, leaning on an elbow and poking distractedly at her eggs. “But of course first order of business will be getting a baby-sitter.”

Kid-Loki looked up sharply and frowned. “I’m not a baby,” he protested.

“No, but you are being hunted by a very scary man,” Loki pointed out and Kid-Loki bit his lip. “So while I go figure out some logistical stuff, I need to make sure to leave you with someone who is capable of either fighting him off or picking you up and running like hell.”

Kid-Loki looked down at his plate and frowned. “... Why can’t I stay with you?” he asked quietly, a slight whine in his voice.

“Because I want to make sure it’s safe before I bring you there,” Loki said gently. Kid-Loki didn’t look happy but he didn’t protest further. Loki reached over and petted his hair. “... And I suppose I should think about changing my name,” she mused.

“Can you even do that?” Verity asked, tilting her head to the side.
“Not really, I’ll always be Loki of course, but that’s almost more like a last-name now, isn’t it?” Loki glanced up at her. “Like signifying an affiliation or clan... In Battleworld it’s become my type, but not me personally.”

“But Loki can be different things,” Verity pointed out. “You said so yourself.”

“And I am, we are, but it’s just going to get confusing from here on out,” Loki said, nodding toward Kid-Loki. “Like if you call ‘hey Loki!’ and we both look up. So I think it’s time to really be Storyteller. To internalize it, you know? Start thinking of it as my name, my identity.”

“Shouldn’t you have a more namey kind of name too?” Verity tapped the tip of her fork idly against half a strip of bacon. “I mean, most places you introduce yourself as ‘Storyteller’, people are going to be like ‘but what’s your name?’”

“Eh,” Loki shrugged lopsidedly. “Masterson’s taken to just calling me ‘Teller’ lately. That’s a legit name. In Vegas.”

“I don’t think that guy talks. And I’m pretty sure that’s not his real name,” Verity wrinkled her nose and gave an amused huff. “And you are so not a straight-man.”

“Your double-entendres do not move me,” Loki grinned. “I usually just make something up when I find myself in a place where I need a namey-name. Made-up stuff isn’t me though-- No, wait, that’s not right, made-up stuff is totally me...” she frowned, seeming to debate that one internally for a minute before shrugging.

“It just seems weird. Storyteller’s your title, isn’t it? Shouldn’t you get a name too?” Verity asked. “I mean, you gave ‘Serrure’ a name,” she noted, nodding to Kid-Loki.

“He gave it to himself, he just doesn’t remember,” Loki corrected. “Also, it’s a French word. It’s the English thing that’s throwing you, isn’t it? English-speakers have this weird idea that names aren’t supposed to be words. That’s a very odd notion you know (and also generally incorrect) and a very English/American way to think. It’s just because English is a borrower language, so all your names are words from other languages or dead-languages.” She tilted her head to the side and raised her eyebrows, gazing into space. “So then, un-English it? I could be ‘Skáld’ or ‘Skáldmær’? Oh, or ‘Schelden’, that’s a name, I’ve heard that used as a name.”

“Schelden? Where is that coming from?” Verity frowned.

“From Skáld. Although it sort of means ‘heckler’ now, linguistic evolution and all... Odd thing to name a child all things considered...”

“I think Storyteller’s a nice name,” Kid-Loki interjected, grabbing two more strips of bacon off the plate in the middle of the table.

“Why thank you, Lamb,” Loki said, patting him affectionately.

“So now I’m the bad-guy,” Verity rolled her eyes.

“Verityyyyy, I appreciate your concern,” Loki grinned at her. “Although it is a little hypocritical coming from you. Admittedly, people only really use ‘verity’ as a word when they’re studying for SATs, but still.”

“Whatever!” Verity exclaimed, putting up her hands. “I’m just saying ‘Storyteller, God of Stories’ sounds dumb!”
Serrure. Serrure. Serrure. He kept turning the name over in his head, toying with the sound, the sway and roll of it. Storyteller said that he’d picked it himself, a long time ago, and he didn’t remember (he didn’t remember doing any of the things from the story she’d told him last night) but it felt right, just like she felt right. He liked the sound of her voice. He liked the smell of her hair. He liked the way she kissed his brow and told him he was good and wanted. He liked how perfectly his hand fit into hers as he hurried along next to her up a cobbled walk lined with lush grass and little blue flowers, the smell of roses coloring the air.

They climbed up onto the porch of an elegant manor house that looked like a picture from a book or a painting of some aristocrat’s country home. Storyteller pulled on an expensive-looking rope with two colors of silk twisted around each other and a tassel on the end, and Serrure heard a bell somewhere inside, followed a few moments later by running feet. The door opened up to a girl smaller than him with black hair and brown eyes who looked keenly at him, then up at Storyteller, then back at him.

“Good morning, Nico. Would you mind fetching Loki for me?” Storyteller asked.

The little girl nodded and turned away from the door. Serrure was starting to contemplate asking how many Lokis there were in the world, when he felt Storyteller’s hands press over his ears and tilted his head back to look up at her in confusion. The next second, the little girl was screaming at the top of her lungs and Serrure was very happy for Storyteller’s hands.

“LOOOKIII! STORYTELLER IS HERE!”


Storyteller let go of Serrure’s head and chuckled as a woman came into view. She looked just like Storyteller except a little older and dressed in armor and fur. She started to smile at Storyteller and then caught sight of Serrure and looked started. “Oh my. Who’s this?” she asked, crouching to his eye-level and smiling warmly. Serrure found Storyteller’s hand again, studying the other woman, comparing all the curves of her face and form to Storyteller.

“This is Serrure,” Storyteller said, brushing back some of his hair with her fingers. “I found him in Avalon yesterday where he’s been alone all this time. I lobbied for custody and received it with the stipulation that I can’t keep him in Manhattan,” she explained calmly as the other woman stood up straight again, looking back at her. “I need a few hours to set up a house and make some arrangements. I need somewhere safe to leave him. I’ve found Arcadia to be one of the most well-guarded and harmonious places in the world, and I need someone I can trust to look after him while I’m gone.”

The other woman smiled and stepped forward, hugging Storyteller and whispering in her ear. Storyteller whispered back, and though Serrure strained his ears he couldn’t make out the exchange. The other woman stepped back and leaned down to address Serrure again. “It’s wonderful to meet you, Serrure. I’m Loki of Arcadia and this is Nico.” She frowned slightly and glanced around. “Nico, where’s America?” she asked.

“She’s diggin’ a hole!” Nico said brightly.

Loki of Arcadia’s frown deepened. “Why is she digging a hole?”
“A’cause we’re gonna build a swimming pool and then we’ll have our own swimming pool!” Nico explained excitedly.

“No,” Loki of Arcadia said firmly, standing back up. “No. We go to the neighborhood pool because it’s social and our friends are there. We don’t need our own pool.”

“But if we had our own pool, our friends could come play here!” Nico reasoned.

“Our friends can come over to play here now, because we have a yard,” Loki of Arcadia said. “If the yard was gone, where would we run and play badminton?” she challenged.

Nico frowned, looking contemplative.

“It sounds like you have to go stop a little girl from digging up the garden,” Storyteller noted, sounding like she was trying very hard not to laugh.

“It does sound that way,” Loki of Arcadia agreed with a sigh and then smiled again, a little forced this time, at Serrure. “Well, I’m sure we’ll have lots of fun today, Serrure. Let’s let Storyteller go get her important work done.” She held out her hand to him.

He glanced reluctantly up at Storyteller, chewing on his lip. “Don’t worry, Lamb. I’ll be back this afternoon,” she assured him and then bent down and pressed a kiss to his forehead. Serrure nodded, letting go of her and accepting Loki of Arcadia’s hand.

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“Good morning, trusty sidekick! How’s tricks?” Storyteller greeted, throwing an arm around Masterson as she appeared.

Masterson let out a puff, rolling his eyes and turning his head to look at her. “Did you know your witness is craaaaazy?” he asked in a low voice.

“Oh he is not,” Storyteller snorted. “He’s just got big, ahead-of-his-time ideas.”

“He keeps trying to argue with the king,” Masterson countered, nodding toward the warehouse where a new wall had appeared without any noticeable signs of recent construction.

“Braddock is here?” Storyteller asked, surprised.

“Apparently he takes magical attacks from foreign terrorists pretty seriously,” Masterson gave a sarcastic shrug.

“Fair enough,” Storyteller nodded, letting Masterson go and starting toward the warehouse’s large, barn-style door, which was sitting half-open. Masterson took up in her wake as she went, and a few of the other Thors who were processing the scene glanced over and nodded as they caught Storyteller’s eye.

As she entered the warehouse, Storyteller felt a slight strangeness in the air that she couldn’t put her finger on, but was distracted from contemplating it by the sound of very controlled voices speaking with that we’re-all-adults-here sort of calm-arguing tone. “--already off-schedule from yesterday’s interruption and this continued interference is--”

“I understand, Mister Wilson, but national security is somewhat more important--”

“Well of course if His Majesty sees fit to involve himself, it must be far more important than the lives
and livelihoods of the common people by whose labor and upon whose backs this nation is carried,”
Wilson didn’t so much ‘snap’ as strongly interject.

“*You insolent* little--” Prince Brian started furiously.

“Brian, I have this,” King James said calmly, putting a hand on his brother’s shoulder. “Your concerns are of course quite valid, Mister Wilson, and the workers of this facility will be compensated for the loss of productivity this investigation has caused. I shall also have a solicitor from my court speak to your clients about the necessity of this delay and negotiate a new schedule for the completion of their goods. Will that be acceptable?”

Wilson sighed irritably through his nose and gave a sharp nod. “I suppose it will have to be,” he agreed.

Storyteller laughed out loud, catching their attention as she walked toward the kings of upper and lower Avalon. “Wilson, you are so cute I think I might kiss you,” she declared. “Are you sassing your king?”

“I didn’t vote for him,” Wilson deadpanned and Storyteller laughed again.

“Special Agent Storyteller from the Doomstadt Ministry of Sorcery,” Lionheart-Thor announced loudly as Prince Brian glared daggers at Wilson and King James turned his attention to Storyteller.

“My Lady,” he nodded to her.

“King Braddock,” Storyteller gave a little bow. “I’d ask ‘what brings you here’, but that’s a bit obvious, I’m just somewhat surprised that a disturbance in the factory district would merit a personal appearance.”

“Three of my citizens died in an attack which I have been told was perpetrated by a sorcerer who entered my realm illegally,” King James replied calmly, a grim frown shaping his lips. “This interests me greatly. I have submitted a formal request to Sherriff Strange asking that select members of my guard be allowed to participate in the manhunt for this criminal.”

Storyteller nodded. “Your concern is understandable, your Majesty, however I find it unlikely that the Holy Eye will agree to your assistance. This attack is connected to a larger investigation which the Ministry of Sorcery and Doomgard have been pursuing for some months,” she said, carefully putting aside her amusement with Wilson’s wonderful audacity for the moment and making sure she was wearing her serious face. “The case was put under my care two weeks ago and we’re yet unsure of the number of terrorist elements at work, but the first arrest was made earlier this week. The cooperation of your citizens who witnessed these attacks on the boy will be invaluable in bringing this matter to its conclusion.” She noticed Wilson twitch and King James frown at the last part.

“*What boy?*” King James asked.

Now she really did want to kiss Wilson, brave lovely creature that he was, protecting all the weak and small, somebody really ought to give that man a hammer. “The attack seemed to be focused on a young boy, and urchin, who I’m told has been attacked on previous occasions by similar assailants,” Storyteller explained evenly. “The child has been removed from the realm for Avalon’s safety and his own.”

“Why was this boy targeted?” King James’ frown deepened slightly.

“We believe it is connected to his bloodline,” Storyteller replied.
“You said he was an urchin,” King James pointed out and made a peculiar gesture with his hand, as though catching hold of something and tugging.

Suddenly, the vague strangeness Storyteller had felt when entering the warehouse came into sharp focus as a thread in the tapestry of the room tightened, twisted, pulled. She gasped sharply and her distaff was in her hand the next moment as she pulled back. The tool’s sudden appearance had Prince Brian and all of the royal guards present stepping forward and drawing their swords, to which three of the four Thors in the room grabbed and lifted their hammers while Lionheart-Thor looked torn and anxious.

“... I apologize, Special Agent Storyteller,” King James said quietly as his guards glanced at him in confusion. The king stared at Storyteller with wide eyes, both startled and curious as he motioned his entourage to stand down.

“... There is no need to compel me with magic, Sire,” Storyteller said, watching him carefully, equally curious to exactly what kind of magic that had been, because oh my but it had felt like story-magic. “Even orphans have bloodlines, although they may not be known. This boy happens to have a somewhat august one, which has become known to certain undesirables.”

“And what line is that?” King James asked.

“One descended from foreign royalty of times long past,” Storyteller replied.

“You are not at liberty to give me a name?” King James raised an eyebrow.

“I am not,” Storyteller agreed. “The investigation is ongoing.”

King James frowned again. “Citizens of my realm have lost their lives.”

“And compromising this investigation could result in many more lives lost,” Storyteller countered.

King James looked unhappy but nodded. “What do you require of the witnesses?” he asked.

“Descriptions of the attackers. Most particularly of their clothing and abilities,” Storyteller said as the various heavily muscled and armed parties in the room reluctantly, and warily, relaxed and put their weapons away.

Chapter End Notes

Loki mentions the 'creative white space' that followed the end of the universe. This is a common element of Eastern and particularly Zen art, where large portions of the picture are left unpainted, with the white paper showing through. The blankness represents 'void' which sounds scary from a Western perspective but in Eastern philosophy represents possibility and creativity. The void is unfathomable and bottomless potential. Marvel, particularly X-Men, makes reference to 'the white-hot room' now and again (Fantomex used it in reference to a physical place/lab, but I think that facility was supposed to be named after the metaphysical concept) particularly as somewhere the Phoenix exists/comes from/returns to, or possibly something that is (metaphorically/metaphysically) inside of the Phoenix. It is definitely something divine, and might either reference Heaven or what existed before (and after) existence.
Almost everything that's survived from the myths of Norse paganism was written down by Christian monks in Iceland in the 12th century, when the Viking Age is in its death throes, and not as religious texts but as historical materials, compiling the traditional beliefs of their ancestors. This causes two problems: These myths are already a thousand+ years old before they're recorded for posterity, so they've changed over that time. Also, they're being told through a Christian lens, and the characters in the stories are being categorized into Christian archetypes; this is a problem for Loki because in Christian paradigms, tricksters are associated with Satan. And also, medieval monks were really big into consolidating stories and characters. This is the same reason that Mary Magdalene became a whore, even though the Bible doesn't say she's a whore. The Bible talks about a whore, and it also talks about a woman named Mary Magdalene. First millennium religious scholars said 'Hey, wait, where did this other Mary come from? Who is she?' so they decided to combine her character with another female character that wasn't named. Loki got consolidated similarly, because there were actually three to five Lokis in the old stories. At the times the Eddas were written, they were still differentiating two of them, Thor's sassy sidekick Loki and the frost giant king Utgard-Loki. Marvel comics kind of further combined those two into a single antagonist. In the mythologies, even under Christian influence, younger-Loki was never really Thor's antagonist though; Baldur's, yes, but not Thor liked him.

The time-period in Avalon is malleable and non-specific. Most of Otherworld looks basic 'high-fantasy' setting, but then there are bits and pieces of modernity (like fairies wearing bitchin' 90s shades) around. I referenced Industrial Revolution era, because that's what the Manchester Gods aesthetic evoked, so I'm saying that the factory-district of Avalon has that vibe.

King James Braddock of Avalon is not to be confused with King James Stuart over in Battleworld's "King James' England". Yes, both the Englands in Battleworld have King Jameses. Now, there are two important James Braddock Jr.'s in Marvel (and they're both the same person). Jamie-616 is an omega-level mutant reality-warper whose power is described as 'pulling on quantum threads'. He went very crazy and he's died a couple times, most recently in Uncanny X-Force vol 1. Jamie-1610 became the new Captain Britain after Brian-1610 got terminal cancer. I think the Jamie in Secret Wars was supposed to be Jamie-1610, despite the Brian and Betsy who are with him definitely being 616's (this is because Jamie-616 is dead, as are Brian and Betsy-1610, family-mashup!). In Ultimate comics there was never any indication that Jamie was a mutant, butuut they never said he wasn't, and I'm playing the card that multiverse mashup and exposure to Avalon has triggered a latent in him. Because I want to, because Ultimate-Jamie got dropped into a bottomless plot-hole and he deserved better.

This is the second time I've referred to the spear/staff that Loki took from Frigga/Freya as her 'distaff', so it's probably time I addressed that. In canon ancient Norse mythology, there are not a whole lot of women besides the valkyries who go into battle or carry weapons; Marvel has made a few very strong female warrior characters in Asgard, and Frigga became one of them when they assimilated her with the mythical character of Freya (as per the German variant). Now, Frigga is the goddess of clouds and weaving (because clouds look woolly, see) and as such, her most notable possession was a magical jeweled distaff (a tool involved in spinning thread) which became the constellation Friggarokkr, or "Frigga's Distaff". As Loki's new weapon was swiped from Mom, and as Loki is the new god of 'spinning yarns' so to speak, I've decided that that spear is Frigga's Distaff.
In a land far away

Chapter Summary

“Thou came seeking the pleasures of Faerie?” Amora whispered.

“I came with a request,” Storyteller said.

“What boon wouldst thou ask of me?” Amora asked.

“I want to put a cottage in the burn,” Storyteller explained. “I have come into custody of a young ward and I must create a home for him.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Storyteller arrived at the epicenter of the burn and surveyed it. Grass and small plants had begun to poke their way up through the bed of damp char as nature slowly but surely reasserted itself. He studied the wall of trees surrounding the perfectly circular clearing, searching for fairy-lights a minute or two before crunching across the char and entering the forest about where he had the last time he was here.

He made his way slowly through the thick underbrush, scanning the deep green shadows around him and straining his ears. After he’d walked for ten minutes or more, he heard the soft, distant, echoing sound of a child’s laugh and paused. He stood still for a few minutes and heard a whisper behind him and a giggle somewhere to his left. “I’ve come seeking audience with Queen Amora,” he called in a clear, calm voice and the whispers died abruptly. “Will you please tell her I’m here?”

He waited in silence as the minutes stretched on. Finally there was a rustle up ahead and a single leaf broke off a branch and wafted slowly downwards several yards ahead of him. Storyteller started walking again, lead by a flutter of wings here, a shaking of underbrush there, a curious twinkle of light or an oddly twisted branch. At length, the sound of running, splashing water caught his senses and Loki followed it through the thick forest which grew darker and more daunting even as the sound grew louder, and finally broke through into the bright little glen once more.

Amora was waiting for him this time, sitting nude upon the mossy bank of her brook, legs dangled lazily in the water as she watched him with glowing eyes. “Thou hast long made me to wait,” she murmured.

“I’m sorry. Serving Doom has kept me very busy,” Storyteller said, coming to a stop and gazing at the fairy queen with something akin to awe. Amora stood and waded across the stream, climbing up the opposite bank to stand before him. “I’ve been attacked several times recently, and I’ve brought one criminal before Doom, though I think it wasn’t the one who burned your forest,” he explained, voice soft and trailing into a dry whisper as Amora pressed her nude body against him and tilted her head up for a kiss.

Storyteller met her lips and exchanged slow, lingering kisses as Amora’s hands began carefully disassembling his clothes. “Thou came seeking the pleasures of Faerie?” Amora whispered and sucked on his earlobe.
“I came with a request,” Storyteller said, nibbling at her jaw.

“What boon wouldst thou ask of me?” Amora pushed his jacket off and started pulling up Storyteller’s shirt.

“I want to put a cottage in the burn,” he explained, squirming out of the shirt and then putting his hands back against Amora’s warm skin, sliding his fingers up over her ribs. “I have come into custody of a young ward and I must create a home for him.”

“I would welcome thee both into my fold,” Amora whispered, unbuckling Storyteller’s belt.

“I cannot lose myself to Faerie,” Storyteller murmured back, shaking his head just slightly. “I still have my duty. I still must find these villains and protect the others.”

“Thou art too diligent, my love,” Amora crooned then gasped and rubbed against him as Storyteller’s fingers explored her soft flesh. “Leave the world of drudgery to the mortals. In Faerie thou wilt find pleasure everlasting.”

“I have a duty,” Storyteller whispered in her ear and licked around the edge of it. “I must keep myself apart. This visit must end. And I must raise my ward in the world of mortal strife. Will you give me the burn?”

Amora mewedled softly, wrapping an arm behind his neck and undulating against him. “What wilt thou give me for it?” she whimpered.

“What do you want?”

“Pleasure,” she moaned and kissed him wetly.

“Of course.”

“And if thou wouldst stay within my forest,” she murmured against Storytellers lips, “thou wilt pay tariff to me.”

“In pleasure?”

“Thou wilt come to me again,” Amora panted against his neck.

“Agreed,” Storyteller nodded, kissing her. “A-And you must- must promise to make no attempt to t-take my ward from me,” he breathed against her lips.

“Thou hast my word,” Amora agreed.

“And you my thanks,” Storyteller returned with another kiss.

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“The paperwork’s not done yet but I thought I should probably check in,” Loki announced, stepping into Stephen’s office. “Did you have any specific questions or points of interest that need clarification?” he asked.

Stephen raised an eyebrow. “You’re flushed,” he noted.

“I built a house. Nice little cottage. It’s a lot bigger and more complicated than the apartment. Magicing it up was a bit strenuous,” Loki grinned.
“I see,” Stephen said, frowning slightly. “You said you intended to set up a household in England?”

“Yes, I put it in the burn-site from the attack there,” Loki nodded, coming to stand in front of Stephen’s desk and looking very pleased with himself.

“... Within a fairy-thick wood?” Stephen asked skeptically.

“And as I first secured the consent of the Fairy Queen, I believe their presence will serve as additional security. There are no roads through the clearing, the only real way in or out is flying or teleporting, and the English people out in the world around it have no idea it’s even there,” Loki explained. “I thought it would be an ideal location.”

Stephen nodded. “And you trust this Fairy Queen to leave the child alone? They do have a notorious reputation for kidnapping.”

“She gave me her word not to interfere with him, and of course for fairies their word is magically binding,” Loki said.

“How did you manage to talk her into such favors? Fairies are traders,” Stephen asked, concerned.

“From our conversation the last time I was in England, the Fairy Queen knows that I’m the one who’s going to bring her husband’s killer to justice,” Loki explained calmly.

“I see.”

“And I slept with her.”

“Oh.” Stephen decided that was adequate information about England and shifted gears. “Did you find out how the boy came to be in Avalon?” he asked.

“He believes he’s always been there, so I’d say that’s where he ended up when the dust settled on Doom’s Day,” Loki gave a shrug. “I don’t think he’s the only displacement. I think there are handfuls of people who got scattered here and there, either because they made it through the apocalypse but their world didn’t, or perhaps because they were off-world or in a pocket-dimension when it happened,” he explained. “I’m not convinced the Loki in Arcadia came from the same place as the rest of it, but it's where she woke up on Doom’s Day.”

Stephen nodded slowly, contemplating that. The theory fit, explaining other discrepancies he’d noticed since the destruction of what was. “Avalon was very ambiguous to begin with,” he mused. “It makes sense that its citizenry might be a bit scrambled now...” He tapped his fingers against the desk for a moment and then put that aside for later. “And the hostile you encountered?”

“Definitely a berserker,” Loki said, a grim cast coming over his features. “He was wearing all the trappings and he had the look in his eye. Also he was big. Like, yea,” he waved a hand a few inches above his own head. “In our continuity, Thor inherited the berserker aspect from Odin. It’s possible that there was no Thor in this Loki’s world, or that the both of them were just remixed a bit.”

“How do you think he’s going to be a problem?” Stephen asked.

“Oh definitely,” Loki nodded. “The berserker whammy will make most offensive magic deflect right off of him, and there’s no chance I can take him physically, even if pretty much all of my martial experience weren’t with blades and therefore completely ineffectual in this case.” Loki crossed his arms, looking down at the edge of the desk, brow pinched. “I don’t think I can take him down myself, and I’m pretty certain I can’t take him in. There’s not going to be any ‘or alive’ with this guy. He will be on his feet and swinging as long as he has a pulse.”
“You’re looking for permission to use lethal force?” Stephen asked, stomach feeling slightly sour at the thought.

Loki pursed his lips for a moment, frowning, and shook his head. “I... I’m not sure it’s a good idea for me to kill...” he said in a softer voice.

Stephen studied him for a moment, the feeling of uncomfortable queasiness lifting and being replaced with curiosity. “Why not?” he asked, not to refute the notion but baffled as to where Loki had developed it. Asgardians never shied away from a righteous kill; bloodshed was forbidden in sacred spaces, but on the field of battle, slaughter was a noble calling.

“It’s- It’s something the Loki of Paradise pointed out to me...” Loki said in a faltering, hesitant voice. “In our continuity, and in most that I’ve learned of here, for centuries Loki is benign, an annoyance at most, within the pantheon. Then one day, he kills someone. And after that, never stops killing.”

“... I see,” Stephen said quietly.

“And... it’s not just getting my hands dirty, the arrow that killed Baldur wasn’t shot from Loki’s hands, after all... I’m not sure I can really be involved in the decision to kill someone at all.” He stared down at the edge of the table.

“... So you believe that you need to maintain your blood-innocence,” Stephen leaned back in his chair and sighed, considering that carefully.

“I think it might be important.”

Stephen nodded slowly, gazing unfocused at his desktop. “You need a weapon to incapacitate.”

“Something that trumps a pantheonic god,” Loki agreed. “Ergo, I would conjecture, made by someone who trumps a pantheonic god.”

Stephen nodded again. “... I’ll consult with Victor on the matter.”

Loki tilted his head slightly to the side, watching Stephen. “Speak to him on my behalf,” he said quietly.

Stephen frowned and looked at him. “What?”

“... Why are you protecting me, Stephen?” Loki asked. “Jumping in and smoothing things over when I got too hot-headed and mouthed off... You may have confidence in your position, but Doom has always been temperamental... You’re not worried that speaking for me when I overstep damages you a little bit more every time?”

“... You’re my student,” Stephen said.

“And that earns me your protection?” Loki asked, studying him with a look of someone trying to solve a puzzle.

“And I would hope that you might learn something,” Stephen pointed out. “The importance of decorum and composure when addressing someone utterly out of your league, for starters.”

“... I see,” Loki nodded, pursing his lips.

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“Was it quiet?” Storyteller asked when Arcadia-Loki opened the door to her.
“No trouble at all,” she nodded, smiling serenely. “We made cookies. Do you like snickerdoodles?”

“Of course,” Storyteller grinned, following her into the house. She could hear child-voices through the hall as they made their way to the kitchen.

“Serrure is a sweet boy,” Arcadia-Loki noted, picking up a cookie-jar off the counter and walking over to the table as Storyteller settled into one of the chairs. “Do you think his parents were lost in the cataclysm?”

Storyteller shook her head, reaching into the cookie jar and pulling out a fresh snickerdoodle. “He never had parents,” she murmured, staring down at the cookie as she divulged in hushed tones. “He was a prodigiously complex simulacrum, created through extremely advanced and taboo blood-magic by a suicidal madman, who had already taken his own life before Serrure came online.” She sighed heavily and shook her head, closing her eyes. “A vein creature so dissatisfied with his real offspring to carry on his legacy that he sought to recreate a perfect little replica to bear the weight of a life he himself despised...”

Arcadia-Loki was silent for a while and when Storyteller opened her eyes she found the woman standing still, hands folded and held close to her chest, staring down at her with wide eyes and a pinched brow. “... He’s the one you were looking for,” she whispered.

Storyteller nodded. “One of. His twin is still at large.” She offered a weak smile. “So, now you’ve met my uncle. Adorable, isn’t he?”

Arcadia-Loki pulled out the chair opposite her and sat down slowly, still staring, something heavy and desperate behind her eyes. “You pulled him from the grave?” she asked.

“From a dying space-time continuum,” Storyteller said with another small nod. “Under any other circumstances, it would have created an insurmountable paradox, but causality had already shattered, the laws of physics were failing, I felt gravity go. The timeline was in shreds, past and present no longer connected... I jumped the gap, danced across the breaks and tears, and fished them up as it was all unraveling.” She pursed her lips, looking down at the cookie again, her stomach feeling tight and unwilling. “Oblivion was too close on my heels... I didn’t have time to be careful because there was no time, I just had to sort of toss them and hope... So I’ve been looking since I woke up... Looking for any proof that I’d succeeded.”

“But- But you did it,” Arcadia-Loki protested, her voice wavering with emotion. “You saved the little ones after they’d already--”

Storyteller dropped her cookies and reached across the table, grabbing Arcadia-Loki’s hands. “The world hadn’t ended yet,” she whispered, staring into her eyes. “It was ending, but it hadn’t ended. It has now. It’s over. It’s gone. If I wanted to go back and fix or fetch anything else, I couldn’t do it, because that world and that timeline isn’t there anymore.” She held Arcadia-Loki’s hands firmly as she saw tears starting to soak through her eyelashes. “The only timeline that exists now is Battleworld’s... And I don’t think your children were ever part of Battleworld,” she swallowed hard and could feel Arcadia-Loki trembling. “I’m sorry...”

“... C-Can you look? Can you tell for certain that there was no moment, even a second, that they were here?” Arcadia-Loki whimpered.

“... I haven’t been able to slip through time since I got here,” Storyteller said, glancing down at the table and biting her lip for a moment. “Time doesn’t work right in Battleworld... It’s broken, or too conflicted,” she tried to explain, feeling frustrated. “The domains here, their worlds all had their own times, they ran at different speeds from each other, some faster, some slower... I think that might be
what’s creating the conflict, everything’s out of synch.”

Arcadia-Loki frowned at her, some of her sadness being displaced by confused curiosity. “How do you mean?” she asked.

“Arcadia’s moving fast. Faster than Doomstadt. Not as fast as Technopolis or Nueva York or Nutopia, but definitely faster than the average,” Storyteller explained. “What feels like a year to you here will be maybe nine or ten months in Doomstadt. For the most part, nobody in the domains is going to notice because of the no-immigration policy, but Manhattan’s going to be a really interesting sociology study a few years down the road when somebody notices that people in North Manhattan age faster than people in South Manhattan.”

Arcadia-Loki tilted her head, looking intrigued now as the tears dried on her cheeks. “How is that possible?” she asked.

“It shouldn’t be. It’s horrendously unstable,” Storyteller shrugged, sitting back and finding her cookie again. “I expect Doom’s power is the only thing keeping it all from tearing itself apart every second. The border of every domain marks a fault line, and sometimes fault lines run right through the middle of a domain where a smaller one’s been annexed or assimilated. It’s all... incredibly fragile. And I think movement between domains, people being out of their places and phases, makes it more fragile, so embargo on inter-domain travel isn’t just to keep people from noticing that something’s wrong with Battleworld, it’s also helping to keep the place spinning.”

“... Interesting,” Arcadia-Loki said slowly, looking down at the table and mulling it over as Storyteller ate her cookie. She glanced up again after a while and asked, “Which domain is moving the fastest?”

“Dystopia, I think.”

“And the slowest?”

“England. That’s part of why I’ve set up shop there,” Storyteller said. “It’ll take anyone we interact with much longer to notice Serrure’s not aging like a mortal,” she explained. “... And it will be longer before he has to watch a mortal friend leave him behind.”

Arcadia-Loki nodded slowly, gazing in the direction of the door through which distant, high pitched voices could be heard. “Does he know that he’s immortal?” she asked softly. “You said that there were no parents, has anyone told him that he’s not the same as everyone else? Does he even know that he isn’t human?”

Storyteller sighed, leaning an elbow on the table and putting her chin in her palm. “I don’t think so... I mentioned it in loose terms last night, but I don’t think he understands. He was pretty overwhelmed by everything, and I’m not sure how much he’s absorbed yet. He may not really understand until enough time has passed that he notices other children turning into adults...”

“It can be a difficult thing to fully grasp...” Arcadia-Loki said softly, climbing to her feet as Storyteller followed suit. They wandered down the hall to a drawing room where Serrure and Nico were crouched on the floor amid a collection of small horses (the realistic kind that were painted natural colors and wearing tiny intricate saddles and tack made by near-slave-labor in a third-world country) and dinosaurs as America loomed with a pterodactyl in one hand and a model plane in the other held above her head.

“Kachow kachow kachow! Raaawrr!” America wailed, swooping down with the plane as Nico squealed and countered with a flying palomino attack. Serrure’s eyes brightened the moment he
spotted Storyteller and he scrambled to his feet, running across the room to fling his arms around her waist.

Storyteller laughed, cosseting his hair. “Hello, Lamb. Did you have fun today?” Storyteller asked and Serrure nodded, not letting go.

“Captain, you can’t abandon your post or the invaders will win!” Nico scolded, waving an appaloosa in the air.

“Too late!” America declared grabbing up three horses and running out of the room. “You’ll never find the Jurassication Device in time now!”

“No!” Nico shrieked, chasing after her.

“Girls! It’s time for Serrure to go home!” Arcadia-Loki called as running, yelling and minor crashes could be heard from the hall beyond. “Come say goodbye!”

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Verity opened the door to find Loki holding a bag of takeout in one hand as Serrure clung to the other. She was looking as upbeat and energized as Verity had seen her since the manic episode that was her ‘birthday’. “How does gyros sound?” she asked brightly.

“Tasty and nutritious?” Verity gave a shrug, stepping back out of the way and wandering down the entry hall as Loki stepped into the apartment with Serrure and pushed the door shut behind them. “So I saw that your apartment’s turned back into a closet. Does that mean you’ve moved?” Verity asked.

“IT does indeed,” Loki agreed, handing the bag of gyros to Verity and then reaching into her jacket pocket and pulling out a plain, brass-plated doorknob, which she held up with an air of smug triumph as she grinned at Verity and nodded toward the wall that separated Verity’s bedroom from the hallway. “How about this wall, do you need this wall?” she asked.

Verity raised an eyebrow. “I need it... to not be a hole?” she said hesitantly.

“Good enough!” Loki declared, slapping the doorknob into the wall. Wood-color bled out from where it connected and spread across the wall, dipping in and pushing out, until it formed a door that perfectly matched all the others in the apartment, compete with molding. Loki then turned the knob and shoved the door inwards, where it opened into a warmly lit little kitchen/dining room. “Dinner at my place?” she asked, tilting her head at Verity while Serrure leaned around her, staring in fascination at the new portal.

Verity huffed out a soft laugh and shook her head. “Sure.” It was going to take her a while to get used to a new door that registered as ‘false’ every time she looked at it.

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Serrure hesitated a moment, twisting his hands in his nightgown and biting his lip, before he reached out and pushed the door open, making his way into the dark, silent room within. He padded across the floor to the side of the bed and hesitated again, listening to the soft breathing and looking down at the hair spread across the pillow, an abyssal pool in the darkness. He bit his lip again and reached out slowly, faltering twice, and patted the upturned shoulder.

“Storyteller?” he whispered.

“Hm?” Storyteller mumbled, flinching as she woke and then rolling toward him. “... Are you okay?”
she asked, her voice dry and tired. “Did you get scared?”

Serrure bit his lip and shook his head, denying the accusation and searching desperately for a suitable distraction. “What happened to the magpie?” he whispered.

Storyteller sighed softly and shifted, scooting away from Serrure and pushing back her blankets, making room for him to crawl up next to her, which he quickly did. She pulled the blankets up over them both and circled an arm around Serrure as he cuddled into her warmth. He heard her yawn and swallow and then she started murmuring, her voice a little clearer now, but still soft as a whisper. “For a little while, he tried to be like the cruel old man, but his heart was too soft,” she said, carding her fingers gently through Serrure’s hair. “Then for a while, he tried to be like you, but his heart was too unsure.” She pressed a kiss to his temple. “In the end, he died of a broken heart. He could never forgive himself for what the cruel old man made him do.”

“Will he come back?” Serrure asked. “Like I did?”

“I hope so,” Storyteller said, stroking his hair again before letting her hand rest against the back of his head. “I won’t stop looking for him.”

“Will he remember me?”

“I don’t know,” Storyteller sighed, shaking her head just slightly.

“Will he hurt me?” Serrure asked and bit his lip again.

“No, Love,” Storyteller kissed the top of his head. “He never wanted to in the first place.”

Chapter End Notes

Storyteller stated concerns about why he wouldn’t have much luck fighting a berserker which might have sounded odd. Berserkers were both a real thing and a mythological thing. As a real thing, they were a soldier who specializes in working himself into an enraged trance-state. Trance-state is an altered state of consciousness different from 'conscious' but it is not 'unconscious' either, and it's similar to an 'out of body experience', the mind is both a little less connected to the physical body and also a little more connected to the physical body than normal. Trance-state can manifest a few different ways, the most common you see in modern societies is trancing or speaking in tongues. It is not drug-induced, it's something one does all on their own naturally, and while it's a learned skill, it's mostly learned tacitly, from exposure to the practice, rather than something anybody can deliberately teach/explain to you. Trance-state can also manifest as a rabid, uncontrollable rage, which is what berserkers were drawing on, and under which they didn't feel pain, or rather, they felt it as something disconnected and separate from themselves and therefore ignorable. Now, most of this sounds like crazy new-age hocus-pocus, but it is legit and scientifically documented stuff, the science people even know what parts of your brain shut off and what parts of your brain turn on when trance-state is happening (it's science name is unitary-state).

Now the mythological berserker has all the traits of the real-life berserker (uncontrollable rage, inhuman strength, limited lucidity, craaaaazy) plus a few mystical attributes. Legends said that berserkers couldn't be cut by blades (probably because of the way real-life berserkers didn't respond to pain) and were protected by Odin and so protected
from sorcerers and magic and whatnot (think protective aura stuff). Why were hammers a legit weapon in ancient Norse mythology? Because since berserkers couldn't be cut, the only way to kill one was to beat him to death with a blunt instrument. Storyteller also mentioned Berserker-Loki being distinctively dressed; the berserkers of ancient Norse mythology (and probably the real ones) were known for either not wearing any shirt or wearing a bear (or sometimes wolf) skin (there's some debate/confusion because of a possible homonym, bare/bear). It was also likely for them to be wearing woad (northern indigo, named after 'Woden'/Odin) as face and body paint when they went into battle (are you old enough to remember Braveheart? They got the color a bit overly-vibrant, but they were clearly going for woad with the face-paint there- it wasn't just for berserkers.)
On the Importance of Harmony

Chapter Summary

Serrure stared at her silently for several seconds and then wet his lips slowly and whispered, “... Are we monsters?’”

“... Come here, Baby,” Storyteller said, holding her arms open. Serrure ran into them the next moment and hid his face against her shoulder as Storyteller folded herself around him. “... Monsters are defined by their actions,” she said gently, rubbing a hand between his narrow shoulders. “If someone does monstrous things, they become a monster... But you’re a good boy, Serrure. I believe that that will never be you.” She kissed his forehead and felt him let out a shuddering breath.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

In a sweet little cottage surrounded by an enchanted forest of a renaissance-era world where people didn’t bathe nearly enough, Bose speakers were playing the apocryphal songs of a deceased and forgotten realm while an improbable gas range heated a cast iron griddle. Storyteller sang along with his playlist, blithe to the anachronistic facilities of his house and secure in the great unlikelihood that any unwashed Englishpersons would happen by to be scandalized and confused by it all.

Storyteller had kept it small, and he wondered, with a vague curiosity, what that said about him. When Arcadia-Loki had made herself a house she’d made a grand manor with well over a dozen large rooms that were in all likelihood rarely used for more than hide-and-seek terrain. A display of wealth, an air of aristocracy, was important to her. The original Loki of Earth-616 had similarly grown up surrounded by and been accustomed to such pomp and display, but when Storyteller thought about it, the second and third had always tended toward holing themselves up in much smaller spaces. The secret attic compartment Serrure had claimed in Asgardia, the apartment in Manhattan, perhaps they’d been drifting farther and farther from royalty with every step.

They’d still dressed like princes though. Storyteller considered that as he watched bubbles slowly start to rise to the surface of the pancakes he’d poured. The third had worn human clothes when alone in his apartment, or when it was only Verity and him, but had still found it important to be sporting armor and a crown when he was seen in public. Storyteller wondered if his own disinterest in a princely (or princessly) presentation represented a disinterest in the ‘rents. He frowned, sliding a spatula under one of the pancakes and giving it a turn, as he tried to decide if he still cared what Odin or Freya thought of him.

“Pffffffff!” Storyteller hissed as the second pancake flopped down with its edge hanging over the side of the griddle. He cast the spatula a glare. “How is this thing so difficult to aim?” he demanded.

A little sound like a hiccup caught his attention and Storyteller looked up to find Serrure lingering in the doorway. “Good morning, Lamb. Do you think chocolate-chip pancakes ought to have chocolate syrup to match? Or maybe powdered sugar?” Storyteller asked with a warm smile, which faded as he took in Serrure’s face. Pale, eyes wide, brow pinched. He was clinging to the door jamb and staring.

Storyteller’s stomach sank as he searched his recent memories and came back with a realization that
had utterly slipped his mind that morning; Serrure had never seen him in a male seeming. He’d been attacked by three bad-Lokis in Avalon, all male. Storyteller thought that Serrure had made the connection with the Loki thing, but had he ever thought to mention that he regularly shifted between two aspects? And even if he had, seeing was very different from being told, wasn’t it.

Storyteller bit back a swear as he set the spatula down on the counter and turned, walking a few steps and crouching down to Serrure’s eye-level as he shifted back to female aspect. “Serrure, I’m sorry if I scared you,” she called softly.

Serrure stared at her silently for several seconds and then wet his lips slowly and whispered, “... Are we monsters?”

“... Come here, baby,” Storyteller said, holding her arms open. Serrure ran into them the next moment and hid his face against her shoulder as Storyteller folded herself around him. “... Monsters are defined by their actions,” she said gently, rubbing a hand between his narrow shoulders. “If someone does monstrous things, they become a monster... But you’re a good boy, Serrure. I believe that that will never be you.” She kissed his forehead and felt him let out a shuddering breath.

At length, Serrure drew back a little to look at her and Storyteller smiled, brushing her thumb against his cheek and ear, then the smile faltered and she bit her lip. “... Do I scare you?” she asked softly, studying him carefully for signs of deception, any attempts to put on a brave face.

Serrure stared back at her and seemed to genuinely consider it rather than responding defensively. “Why did you do that?” he asked.

“I have to balance,” Storyteller said carefully. She hadn’t tried to explain it before. Verity had recognized both aspects as true and accepted Storyteller’s assertion that the switching was important. Most of the people she regularly interacted with simply regarded it as an eccentricity or ongoing gender-dysphoria. But that wasn’t going to be good enough for Serrure. “I have to be both sides. Embody both sides. I don’t need to be impartial, but I need to have the balance.” She sighed in frustration, knowing she wasn’t articulating well enough.

“Did I mess it up?” Serrure asked, giving her a concerned look.

“No no no, sweetheart,” Storyteller assured him, petting his shoulder. “I just-- I’ve been a woman a little too much this week, I think, and that’s not your fault. But I- I’m just starting to feel wrong... skewed...”

Serrure bit his lip and glanced away for a moment, then back again. “... But you’re still the same?” he asked.

“I’m still me, whatever face I’m wearing,” Storyteller assured him.

Serrure nodded slowly. “Then it’s okay,” he decided.

Storyteller smiled and shifted again, gratified to see curiosity in Serrure’s face now rather than fear. His thin fingers reached up and touched Storyteller’s jaw, sliding along the edge as he examined the new shape of it. “... Your pancakes are burning,” he noted at length.

“Yes, I would say the three sitting on there are destined for compost now,” Storyteller agreed, glancing toward the stove. “We might have to make more batter.”

“Or just make up the difference in chocolate chips,” Serrure suggested.

Storyteller grinned at him. “I think once they get to be more chocolate than pancake, they probably
“How can you be sure if you don’t try?” Serrure reasoned.

“And there’s Avalon over here, and next to it is Manhattan where Verity lives,” Storyteller was poking at the map spread across her desk as a miniature version of himself stood on top of his chair, nodding attentively. “And the green pins are spots I’ve surveyed, see, there’s Arcadia down here.”

“Are you seriously explaining an on-going investigation to a kid?” Masterson asked as he approached, raising an eyebrow at the mini-Loki.

“I’m showing him a map of the world, not M.E. reports,” Storyteller replied with a shrug. “Serrure, this is Masterson. He makes me look official,” he said, smiling to the kid, who tilted his head and considered Masterson.

“Yup. I have the same job as a hat. Awesome,” Masterson sighed and shrugged. “Word just came over from Doomstadt, you’ve got a one o’clock audience with God Doom,” he said in a more serious tone, holding a memo out to Storyteller.

“Oh,” Storyteller said, taking it and looking curious. “Okay... Huh.”

“It’s unexpected?” Masterson asked.

“No, I’ve just never been summoned before,” Storyteller said, eyes scanning the sheet of paper before he folded it up and tucked it in his pocket. “So that’s what that feels like.”

“Lawspeaker’s probably gonna summon you in for a chewing out when he hears you brought a kid here,” Masterson noted.

“Uh, no, ‘cause I brought in a witness to a crime scene in an ongoing investigation,” Storyteller rebutted with a smirk.

“I totally believe you,” Masterson rolled his eyes. “Shouldn’t he be in school or something?”

“He’s being hunted, Masterson,” Storyteller replied in a more sober voice. “He needs better security than a school can provide and enrolling him in one would endanger the other students as well.”

“Right. Sure,” Masterson nodded, looking back at the kid, who was eyeing him with a suspicious air. “... How are you gonna do your job though? You don’t really have time to play body-guard-nanny.”

“Still working that out,” Storyteller shrugged and held out his hand to the kid. “Come on, Lamb, let’s go see the other place I work.”

“I think the resources could have been put to better use,” Serrure complained, looking around at the intricate stonework on the unnecessarily extravagant architecture. “Why not build hospitals or schools or public services with the money that went into this?”

Storyteller laughed next to him. “Well, for starters, I don’t know as that much money actually went into this. I’m not completely certain, but I think Doom may have magicked it,” he explained as they walked across the immaculately maintained grass of the courtyard. “And second, a palace isn’t just a residence, it’s also a states building, it needs to be big enough to accommodate really big meetings,
and it needs to be impressive enough to make visiting dignitaries feel awed and/or inadequate.”

Serrure chewed on his lip, thinking about that. “Why do they need to feel inadequate?” he asked.

“Because it gives the host an advantage, it makes them seem more powerful and respectable and the guests are more inclined to acquiesce to their point of view,” Storyteller said.

“But everybody knows God Doom is the most powerful!” Serrure protested.

“Yes, but appearances are very important. If he dressed like King of the Hobos, people would start to doubt him. He has to maintain an aesthetic standard that reinforces what everybody knows,” Storyteller replied as the rose garden gave way to a small lawn and a reflection pond.

“Storyteller!” yelled a boy who was standing knee deep in the water and wearing mud-smeared royal garb.

“Hello, Master Franklin,” Storyteller responded with a smile and then nodded to a man sitting on the grass next to the pond, who looked very much like the boy in the water. “Hello Lord Storm.”

The man wrinkled his nose. “Are you one of the people who’s going to insist on calling me that, or will you call me ‘Johnny’ if I ask you to?” he asked, looking very slightly pleading.

“Depends on the formality of the situation, I suppose,” Storyteller said with a shrug, walking over next to Duke Jonathan Storm and settling himself down in the grass. “In the court, I imagine you should be ‘Lord Storm’, in the courtyard, I suppose you can be ‘Johnny’.”


“Hey, Storyteller?” Prince Franklin splashed his way to the edge of the pond and climbed out as Serrure seated himself at Storyteller’s side. “How come you’re a boy sometimes?”

Storyteller smirked slightly and crossed his arms. “I could ask the same of you,” he replied.

Prince Franklin laughed, squelching across the grass and dripping all over. “I’m always a boy!”

“Well that must be very boring. I’m sorry,” Storyteller shrugged.

Prince Franklin laughed again and crouched down in front of them, bracing his hands on his knees and grinning at Serrure. “Hi, I’m Franklin!” he said.

Serrure nodded, fidgeting with his sock. Prince Franklin’s presence was not so overwhelming (terrifying) as God Doom’s, but he was the prince of everything. “... I’m Serrure.”

“I heard that you live with Storyteller now,” Prince Franklin said cheerfully and then glanced up at Storyteller. “Val said you flipped out in the court and yelled at my dad! Nobody ever yells at him!”

“That really is pretty... impressive that you’re still here and not on the wall or in the arena or something,” Duke Jonathan noted quietly, giving Storyteller a curious look.

Storyteller sighed and bit his lip. “I have a bit of a temper problem sometimes,” he said, looking embarrassed. “The fact that He already knew of it before appointing me may have helped to assuage Doom’s ire on this occasion. But it certainly didn’t hurt that the Sheriff and your sister spoke on my behalf.”

“Guess not,” Duke Jonathan agreed, the corner of his mouth pulling up into a lop-sided grin. “But man, you have got some brass ones.”
“I’m predisposed to mouthing off, I suppose,” Storyteller shrugged.

“Hey, do you want to see my Galactus?” Prince Franklin asked eagerly, his attention back on Serrure.

Serrure frowned slightly, not recognizing the word. “Is that... a toy?” he asked doubtfully.

“Yeah!” Prince Franklin agreed. “Come on, it’s this way!” he said, straightening up and starting to run toward one of the gaps in the rose bushes then turning back to wave a beckoning gesture at Serrure.

Serrure glanced up at Storyteller, who smiled back at him. “Go on, it’s fine. You’re safe here. Nobody’s dumb enough to attack Doomstadt,” Storyteller assured him. “Or if they are, they don’t last long.”

Serrure nodded and scrambled to his feet, chasing after the prince. They ran through the gardens and up a flight of stairs along one of the walls, through a few breezeways and arches, up another flight of stairs and down a third. They passed several guards along the way but none of them made any attempt to stop or slow them; apparently Prince Franklin had free run of the palace such that he should not be questioned or scolded for reckless frolicking.

Soon they were clamoring down a narrow stairway on the outside of the palace walls and across a green towards an enormous titan crouched in front of the main gates. Prince Franklin ran right up to it but Serrure balked as the creature moved, turning slightly and lowering its hand, palm up, to the ground. Prince Franklin climbed right into the huge hand and turned around to grin back at Serrure. “Isn’t he cool?” he called.

Serrure stared up at the behemoth, a chill running down his spine. “It- It’s very big,” he mumbled.

“Come on!” Prince Franklin urged, kneeling down and holding out a hand toward Serrure.

Serrure stiffly walked the rest of the way and allowed Prince Franklin to help him up into the Galactus’ hand. Storyteller had assured him it would be safe, after all. He started to stand up and then dropped back to his hands and knees when the creature moved again, lifting them skyward as Prince Franklin laughed happily.

“Look! You can see all the way to the ocean up here!” Prince Franklin declared as their ascent slowed.

Serrure hesitantly lifted his head and peeked out through his fringe to look in the direction Prince Franklin was pointing. Sure enough, out at the edge of the horizon, was a thin line of glittering blue. “... Have you ever been to the ocean?” Serrure asked, trying to forget that he was literally within the clutches of a colossus that could crush him with the merest thought. He quickly dismissed the idea of climbing to his feet, and arranged himself with his legs folded under him and hands nervously clenching his knees.

Prince Franklin sighed, his voice suddenly as cheerless as Serrure had heard it. “No. I’m not supposed to leave the palace grounds. An’ even the times we do get to go out in a procession, we’ve never left the city.”

“Oh,” Serrure said quietly. “I used to walk around Camelot, and I got kicked out if I went into places, but nobody stopped me walking around the streets. I could go to whatever part of the city I wanted and I didn’t have to tell anybody,” he mused, studying the landscape stretching out below. “And now Storyteller keeps taking me somewhere and telling me I have to stay there so I’ll be safe...
And sometimes I don’t want to, I want to go look around and see the rest of the place, like yesterday America said we were close to the ocean and I wanted to go see it.” He frowned to himself and chewed his lip for a moment. “But it’s still better, I think. I think having to do what Storyteller says is better than being alone and doing whatever I want.”

“Yeah,” Prince Franklin agreed with a shrug, sitting down with his legs dangling over the gap between a giant thumb and index finger. “I just wish we got to go places. I think going places would be the best.”

“Shouldn’t you be in with the rest of the court for afternoon audiences?” Storyteller asked with a small smirk, looking Johnny over. “You’re not playing hooky are you?”

“I don’t think Doom really cares if I’m there or not, honestly,” Johnny said and then shrugged, giving a small grimace. “Or, well, if I do show up, then I’d better damn well be quiet and pretend I’m furniture. But I’ve never heard boo about skipping it. And as long as Franklin’s there for any important stuff, Doom doesn’t seem to mind him skipping the day to day bureaucracy.”

“But not Valeria,” Storyteller guessed.

“Pfff, no. Daddy’s little girl always has to be there,” he rolled his eyes, looking somewhat annoyed. “Five year olds should be playing, not working full time jobs...” he muttered more quietly, a slightly dark cast taking over his features momentarily.

“Well, perhaps there’s an equally valid argument that adults should be working and not out playing in the garden,” Storyteller suggested with an impish grin.

Johnny laughed, irritation melting. “Like I’d be trusted with anything important around here anyway,” he snorted, self-deprecating but no sound of bitterness for his own account as there had been for Valeria. “I’m pretty sure Doom thinks I’m an idiot.”

“I’m pretty sure Doom thinks most people are idiots,” Storyteller countered and Johnny laughed again.

“You’re kind of a weird outlier though,” Johnny noted. “I mean, Doom doesn’t usually like weird, and definitely not silly and back-talky.” He gave Storyteller another curious, appraising examination as he mused, “So why is he so interested in you?”

“Doom is interested in competence and ability,” Storyteller gave a slight shrug. “He knows me to be competent and to have very unique abilities, and so he is indulgent of my eccentricities. Though I do think I get on his nerves, which is likely why he’s made Stephen a go-between.”

“Franklin says you can control animals,” Johnny noted.

“It’s not that exactly,” Storyteller twisted his lips to the side, thinking through his explanation as he put it together. “It’s not mind-control or puppeteering. I wasn’t so much controlling the fish as I was directing the narrative around it.” He tapped his fingers against the grass and tilted his head slightly. “Think of it as a current. I’m not in the animal’s head, telling it what to think, I’m just moving the current that it finds itself in. Like the moon and the tide.”

“The what?” Johnny looked puzzled.

“Ah, no, that’s not-- I’m confusing myself, sorry,” Storyteller said quickly, shaking his head. “I suppose I’m saying that the fish makes for a good analogy because when I use narrative magic, it’s
like I’m directing the flow of water, and things are inclined to be caught up and follow, but they can potentially resist and swim against the current as well if they’re wise to it.”

“So... you’re moving the metaphysical forces of nature?” Johnny asked.

Storyteller smiled. “You’re cleverer than you give yourself credit for,” he said.


Storyteller considered that, tilting his head and chewing on his lip for a minute. “... Yes. I suppose it is,” he agreed finally.

“Gotta admit, that’s kind of scary,” Johnny said.

“Oh my yes,” Storyteller agreed. “I’ve already gone up against somebody with the same ability just last week. A classic: misunderstanding leads to a three-to-five page fight followed by a team-up for great justice, and it’s all resolved in twenty pages plus ads.”

Johnny gave him another baffled look. “What?”

“Ah, I’m just being silly again,” Storyteller shrugged. “A parallel of mine, living in the Paradise City domain. They have the same power and they don’t pull their punches even a little. Being as they mistook me for a threat when I walked in, they demonstrated just how potent this power can be when used offensively.” He sighed and drew his knees up, leaning his arms against them. “And I had to fall back on them when I found Serrure being attacked in Avalon, because the scoundrel had me so woefully outmatched on every other level.”

“Why is that a fall-back?” Johnny asked, raising an eyebrow. “It sounds like a trump-card.”

“A trump-card should generally be kept up ones sleeve until thoroughly necessary though, shouldn’t it?” Storyteller countered. “But the real problem is that I don’t understand them well enough yet. I’m working on instinct rather than knowledge and that’s dangerous.”

Johnny nodded slowly. “So... you’re playing with fish to figure out how it works?”

“Exactly,” Storyteller agreed.

“Huh,” Johnny braced his palms on the grass and leaned back against them, gazing vaguely up at the blank sky. “Well, Franklin thinks it’s really cool. He was trying to show me which one is Herbert.”

Storyteller laughed. “He’s an enthusiastic boy, very imaginative and passionate. I like him,” he mused quietly. “I think he’ll make an excellent God someday... when he’s grown up... when things have calmed down a bit.”

Johnny watched him silently for a while, his expression neutral, betraying none of the thoughts playing behind his eyes. “Huh,” he finally said again.

“Is something wrong?” Storyteller asked, glancing at him.

“Not at all,” Johnny shook his head.

“You’re quite easy to talk to,” Storyteller offered a quick subject-change, turning his eyes back toward the pond. “You have a very non-judgmental air about you.”
Johnny shrugged slightly. “There’s not a whole lot of things I feel I’m in a position to judge,” he said. “... It’s weird...”

“What is?” Storyteller glanced back at him.

“... That I never talk to anyone like this,” Johnny said, frowning slightly, a vaguely lost look tainting his features. “Isn’t it... weird that I don’t have any real friends? Like, friends my age?”

Storyteller considered that, dredging through Encyclopedia Loki for his previous lives’ knowledge and impressions of Johnny Storm. Johnny Storm was charming and friendly, well liked in the cape community and frequently surrounded by groupies whenever he went about in the ‘regular people’ community. Did he have any close friends, or just colleagues and fans? Johnny hadn’t made a significant impression on the First Loki at all, but the Third’s memories of web-memes and Daily Show clips yielded some incite. The Human Torch and Spider-Man were the goofy-buddy-duo of the spandex world. So where was Spider-Man now?

Storyteller frowned to himself and chewed on his lip. Why wasn’t there a Spider-Man either here or in the Kingdom of Manhattan? For that matter, why weren’t there at least two in Manhattan? It seemed like the majority of New York’s notable super-humans had made it through, and Storyteller had definitely seen a Spider-Woman/Girl/Lady/Ma’am or three, but no Spider-Men. Curious, but it was something to consider another time, rather than zoning out mid-conversation.

“It can be difficult, when one is raised within high walls, to acquire or maintain an ordinary sort of social life,” Storyteller said carefully. “For someone who’s lived since his teens in a royal court, it wouldn’t really be odd for you to have had difficulty forming the sort of bonds most people find in their teenaged and young adult years, simply because you weren’t surrounded by peers as ordinary people are.”

Johnny sighed, nodding and looking discontented but no longer confused. “And most of the courtiers around here are boring as hell.”


Johnny laughed. “You should hang out more,” he said, grinning at Storyteller.

Storyteller smiled back at him. “Sing with me.”

Johnny looked startled. “What?”

“You’re a great lover of music, are you not?” Storyteller said, materializing an instrument and resettling himself cross-legged as he adjusted it in his arms.

“How do you-- Is that a keytar?” Johnny demanded, a half-formed laugh in his voice.

“Keytar is the best -tar,” Storyteller said with a grin. “It’s an ironic instrument. Its very existence is like a self-referencing gag.”

Johnny laughed again as Storyteller considered an appropriate musical choice. Something that hadn’t been wiped out of existence as heretical, obviously. Johnny Storm’s fake-band had played wishy-washy pop, but such was the nature of corporation-produced fake-bands. And being as Johnny was not a twelve year old girl, Storyteller rather doubted it was the genre he would have chosen for his own listening pleasure. So what kind of music would a thirtyish party-boy who doesn’t take himself (or anything else) too seriously gravitate toward? Beck? Presidents? Storyteller smirked, starting a baseline and watching Johnny break into a grin a few moments later.
They had expounded upon the idiosyncrasies of rock ‘n’ roll lifestyles and progressed to the desirability of short skirts and long jackets when Serrure and Franklin made their reappearance. “Neat!” Franklin exclaimed, crouching in front of Storyteller and eyeing the keytar. “How come it’s not hooked up to anything? I though a keyboards has to have a speaker?” he asked, glancing at Johnny for confirmation.

“Some of them have internal speakers, although those generally don’t get this kind of sound quality...” Johnny noted, raising a curious eyebrow at Storyteller.

“Because: magic,” Storyteller replied, holding out the keytar to Franklin, who delightedly started poking at it.

“Storyteller is very magical,” Serrure said with a note of pride, hanging himself off Storyteller’s shoulder as he slid to his knees in the grass.

“Magic is cool. I should learn magic,” Franklin said, fussing with the keytar and trying to span the controls with hands a little too small for them. “A’cause Val’s the best at science so I should be the best at magic, right?”

“Only if you want to,” Johnny corrected. “All you ‘should’ be is you because you’re awesome, Franklin.”

“Science wants a tidy mind, whereas magic loves a messy one,” Storyteller hummed thoughtfully. “You could have a great natural talent for magic, Franklin. A fertile imagination is the first ingredient.”

“And me too?” Serrure asked, a tiny whine of jealousy in his tone.

“Oh yes, Lamb, I know you will for sure,” Storyteller agreed, hooking an arm around him and dragging Serrure into a hug. “But you’re both too little for big-magic yet. It’s very stressful on the body and you wouldn’t want to stunt your growth.” Serrure made a pleased sound and leaned into his shoulder as Storyteller considered the time. If one was meant to be fifteen minutes early for a doctor’s appointment, how many minutes early was one meant to be for an audience with God? He glanced back at Johnny, tilting his head. “Do you imagine you’ll be out here a while?”

Johnny gave a shrug. “Yeah, probably.”

“That’s good. He’s less likely to wander off if there’s someone to play with,” Storyteller nodded, letting Serrure go and climbing to his feet. “I have to go talk to God now, but I’ll be back soon. Stay in the garden, Lamb, you’re safe here,” he said.

“I can’t come?” Serrure’s brow pinched and he offered a commendable kicked-puppy look.

“He didn’t ask for you, and when it comes to all-powerful omni-deities, one should not presume to impose,” Storyteller replied, petting his hair. “It could be a super serious secret security thing.” Serrure gave a pouty nod and then paused as Storyteller handed him a frisbee, a ball and a pair of nerf-guns produced from nowhere. “Here’s some outside-toys. Have fun with the prince. I’ll be back soon,” he said again.

“Okay,” Serrure said, examining one of the nerf-guns as Franklin abandoned the keytar in favor of the other one.

Storyteller cast a grin at Johnny. “Sorry, but I think I may have just made it very loud around here. I do hope you didn’t come to such a tranquil spot to relax.”
“Nah, it’s all about the floor-show,” Johnny chuckled.

“Don’t feel obliged to mind him. He’s very self-sufficient. And as this palace is one of the few truly unassailable places in the world, I’m not so concerned about his safety here. So long--” Storyteller stooped and caught Serrure’s chin, making him look up. “as he behaves himself. Promise to stay in the garden and not snoop about, because we so do not want to anger our mighty and terrifying host?” he asked, raising an eyebrow.

Serrure pursed his lips and squirmed a little. “I promise to stay in the garden,” he said quietly.

“Good boy,” Storyteller said, kissing his forehead. “And remember that kept-promises get ice-cream.”

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When the Doomstadt royal court was recessed for a private audience, Valeria was somewhat less than pleased at being dismissed with the rest. “Does this protégé of Stephen’s outrank me?” she demanded, crossing her small arms and giving Victor a moody look.

“He does not,” Victor said firmly.

“Then why is he privy to information which I am not?”

“Because it is a matter of sorcery,” Victor replied. “And while Loki is of lesser rank in this court than you, among sorcerers he is of the highest rank, inferior only to myself and Stephen. This matter concerns him, it does not concern you.”

Valeria did not look particularly mollified, but she recognized the finality in Victor’s voice and so she turned and made her way to the door, stomping her feet childishly as she went. “I think this will continue to be a sore point for her,” Stephen said quietly.

“Noted.”

A few moments later, one of the doors pushed in just enough to let Loki slip quietly through and press it shut again, starting up the long chamber toward the throne. He was male today and dressed in Asgardian armor with his hair neatly combed, and Stephen felt relief that Loki had chosen suitable presentation for a royal audience rather than playing dress-up. He came to a halt at the foot of the dais and took a knee, dipping his head to each of them. “My Lord. Doctor,” he said in a subdued murmur. Stephen wondered if Loki was playing with the formality as a new entertainment or if he was trying to make up for the outburst from his last visit by keeping to his very best behavior now.

“Loki. Stephen has apprised me of your requirements for capturing the threat you are pursuing,” Victor said calmly, looking down at the god knelt before him. “Hold out your hands,” he commanded.

Loki lifted his head and held out his hands ready to receive; Stephen could see the corner of his lips twitching and silently prayed Loki wouldn’t laugh. Victor uttered a short phrase in ancient Romani to focus his power, and an anelace appeared in Loki’s hands, larger than a dagger, smaller than a sword, with a blade that looked like polished hematite. Loki lowered his hands and examined the weapon, a hint of skepticism pinching his brow.

“Ah. A sword,” he noted, glancing up at Victor with his head slightly tilted. “I don’t suppose it comes with special instructions?”

“You are to plunge it into the center of your opponent’s heart,” Victor replied coolly.
“And this... will prove non-lethal, I suppose?” Loki asked carefully.

“Your opponent will become frozen. The effect will last for exactly one hour,” Victor explained. “You will bring them to me immediately upon capture.”

Loki nodded slowly, looking thoughtful. “I see. And I imagine that, as this is a weapon crafted of your singular power, no opponent, no matter how strong, would be able to resist it.”

“Correct,” Victor agreed.

“Well then, I suppose that solves a problem,” Loki said, twirling a hand through the air as he climbed to his feet, clothing the anelace in a scabbard of green leather and gold. “I shall focus all my efforts toward finding this menace ASAP.”

“See that you do,” Victor gave a curt nod.

Loki glanced to Stephen uncertainly and then back at Victor. “Will that be all, my Lord?” he asked, fastening the scabbard to his belt.

“It will. You are dismissed.”

“Thank you, my Lord,” Loki dipped a full bow toward Victor and then a deferent nod to Stephen. “Doctor.” He turned and walked smoothly to the great doors, making his exit with subdued quiet.

“He is far more mannerly than usual,” Victor noted.

“We had a talk about appropriate decorum,” Stephen replied, holding in a relieved sigh. “Asgard may have been a royal court, but I think it was rather raucous compared to the formalized proceedings of more recent monarchies. Loki is bright though, he learns quickly.”

“Mm,” Victor nodded.

Chapter End Notes

So I imagine the first question that's likely to pop up since this is a Secret Wars fic: isn't Johnny supposed to be in the sun? Bare in mind, issue two of Secret Wars starts after an eight year time-jump; this fic is taking place during (right now at the beginning of) that eight years. In the conversation between Doom and Susan in the third issue of Secret Wars, it is implied that Johnny was sentenced to the sun after some kind of incident (and I keep hearing a Princess Molestia 'TO THE MOOOOON!' cackle). So anyway, as of now, we are still in Battleworld's first year and the sky is empty; there is light because Doom wills there to be light.

Storyteller (and I) make the assumption that Johnny loves music because he was in a fake band. People in fake bands are usually pretty into music. I usually picture him as being into metal and alternative, but being as all music that endorses rebellion or the questioning authority has been stricken from existence, pretty much all metal (and a large percentage of rock in general) are gone.

I am not so much a weapons-knowing person, but an anelace or cinquedea is what you find when you type 'bigger than a dagger smaller than a sword' into Google (also, google anticipated this phrase, apparently I am not the only one who asks it). So there's
some vocabulary lesson for us all.
“... Why are they doing that?” Serrure asked, frowning at the woods, which were sparkling with hundreds of blinks and flashes of fairy lights.

“Hm?” Storyteller looked up and followed his gaze. “... That’s peculiar...” she said softly, tilting her head. “Rather too explicit to just be teasing you... Has something got them upset?”

The question found confirmation a moment later when the shrieking started.

Serrure picked at his oatmeal, fishing out the warm apple pieces buried within and munching on them while feeling overwhelmingly blasé about the surrounding mush. He watched Storyteller roam back and forth between the kitchen and the study, collecting books and papers and depositing them on the table. After a while, she finally settled back at the table and flipped open two of the books she’d collected then glanced over at Serrure as she dropped into the chair across from him. “You don’t like the oatmeal?” she asked.

Serrure shrugged noncommittally.

“Do you want something else?” she asked.

Serrure shook his head. “No. It’s fine,” he said. Storyteller looked worried, so he shoved a big spoonful into his mouth.

“I can make something else,” she offered.

“I’ss fine,” Serrure said again, then swallowed and lifted his head a bit, looking at Storyteller’s books and things. “What are you doing?”

Storyteller sighed, leaning her elbows against the table and looking down at the books. “Thinking about how to find people who are hiding and presumably very good at it,” she said. “There’s a lot of different ways to go about that sort of thing, but I need to assume that the people I’m looking for have as much knowledge and skill as myself and ways to counter the usual sort of locator magics.”

Serrure nodded slowly. “How did you find me?” he asked, glancing out the big kitchen windows at the tree line.

“There weren’t any spells hiding you,” Storyteller replied, shaking her head slightly. “When I tried blood divination, I found that there were seven Lokis who weren’t hidden at all, so I just went down the list until I found you,” she explained. “But now I’ve seen all but one of that list, so the rest, the ones who are really dangerous, are going to be much harder to find.”

“... Why are they doing that?” Serrure asked, frowning at the woods, which were sparkling with hundreds of blinks and flashes of fairy lights.
“Hm?” Storyteller looked up and followed his gaze. “... That’s peculiar...” she said softly, tilting her head. “Rather too explicit to just be teasing you... Has something got them upset?”

The question found confirmation a moment later when the shrieking started. It was like a clamor of a thousand birds, mixed with insect hissing and baby screams. Storyteller jumped to her feet, staring tensely through the window as a great sound of crashing and snapping wood started to overtake the fairy screams and a few moments later they could see some large beast charging through the trees.

An enormous wolf, larger than a horse, erupted into the clearing as Serrure abandoned his chair and darted to Storyteller’s side. It kept charging forward, and Storyteller grabbed Serrure up into her arms, leaping back as the creature burst through the windows with a shattering of glass and splintering of wood. Serrure bit back a shriek, clinging to Storyteller and staring at the beast as it slammed into the counter and twisted, rearing up as it turned toward them and changing. Serrure’s blood ran cold as fur drew back and gave way to blue-painted skin and a wolfish grimace became the mad, feral grin of the monster who had attacked them in Avalon.

“I suppose you think you’re quite clever, girl,” he growled, eyes slowly sliding up Storyteller. “Distracting me from my prey... Claiming it for yourself...”

“Well Mister Úlfheðinn, I try not to brag, but I am a certifiable genius,” Storyteller replied, her voice even but filled with tension.

“And how do you imagine your cleverness will save you today?” the wolf-god slunk slowly closer, twirling his sparth-axe in one hand.

Storyteller’s arms tightened around Serrure and he locked his own around her shoulders and balled his hands in the fabric of her jacket. “I was thinking, seeing as you made this nice big egress in my kitchen--” she turned and took a running jump through the hole the wolf-god had torn in the wall and started charging toward the wood as the sound of vicious barking and huge paws followed close behind.

Suddenly the sky changed to blood red and shadows swirled all around, twisting toward them, grabbing at them. “THOU! THOU HAST DEPRIVED AND INSULTED THE QUEEN OF THE WOOD, AND THOU DAREST RETURN HERE?!” a booming voice demanded from everywhere at once.

Serrure watched over Storyteller’s shoulder as the woods and the cottage disappeared, leaving only a world of swirling red and black mists. Shadows snagged and grabbed at the wolf, who snapped and thrashed angrily, and moved as though he was trying to run through thick mud. A faint light appeared next to Storyteller’s other shoulder and a voice, like the one that had shouted a moment earlier but now soft and sweet whispered, “Beware, beloved friend: the Sisterhood of Doom’s Holy Order will not suffer a witch to live.”

“Amora--” Storyteller called, but a moment later the shadows had scattered and she was running across foggy moorland.

“The wolf--!” Serrure whispered; its feet could still be heard pounding across the grass behind them along with a bloodthirsty howl, but there was another sound somewhere ahead of them, voices in the fog.

“Well, let’s give it a try then,” Storyteller muttered and then raised her voice into a full throated shout. “HELP! HELP! A WITCH! HELP!”

The wolf was gaining ground, close enough now to be fully visible despite the thick fog. Serrure was
so busy staring behind them at the monster’s snapping teeth that he didn’t see the source of the throaty roar that came from ahead until a muscle-bound woman swathed in shining steel and flowing, crimson hair soared past and swung a halberd down upon the wolf. It dodged enough to save its eye and the blade glanced off its neck.

“Oh thank Odin’s hereditary temper,” Storyteller gasped, skidding to a halt.

“Ma’am! Are you all–” a smaller woman called as she came running out of the fog.

“Just ducky now!” Storyteller exclaimed, pulling Serrure’s arms from around her shoulders and shoving him toward the woman.

“Storyteller!” Serrure gasped, terror boiling over and his hands shot out, trying to grab her as she turned and ran back toward where the wolf was jumping away from the red-haired woman’s next slash. It landed on its back legs and changed again, swinging out his sparth-axe to counter the blow.

“You have no idea what you’ve stepped into, woman!” the monster snarled furiously.

“And you know not the wrath of the Holy Order!” the woman returned.

“You’re only upset because your odds just went sour,” Storyteller announced, pulling her distaff out of the air and swinging it toward the wolf-god. He twisted and parried with his sparth-axe, in the process opening himself up to a blow in the side from the red-haired woman, but the blade skittered across his skin without leaving a mark. “Maybe you shouldn’t have pissed-off the locals on your last visit, eh?” Storyteller taunted.

“Oh well I’m not convinced she’s really a damsel in distress at all. But this still doesn’t look so great,” the woman next to Serrure muttered. “Angela! He looks like a berserker! Try for some blunt-force trauma, dear!”

The red-haired woman spun her halberd around and slammed the butt-end against the wolf-god’s ribs as Storyteller clouted her distaff against his head while dodging a swing from his sparth-axe. The twin bludgeoning finally seemed to stagger the wolf-god and he faltered just long enough for the red-haired woman to surge forward and punch him in the throat. Storyteller jabbed her distaff into the back of his knee and drew the knife from her belt. She ducked under his arm, dodging the axe again, and slammed the knife into his back with so much force, Serrure could see the black tip of it appear through the wolf-god’s chest.

The next moment, the wolf-god clattered forward against the ground, not limp or unconscious, but utterly rigid, eyes wide and blank. There was a moment of stillness as Storyteller and the red-haired woman stood over the fallen wolf-god and panted. After a pause, the red-haired woman looked up at Storyteller. “What did you do to it?” she huffed.

“Sacred blade, crafted by the hand of Doom,” Storyteller explained breathlessly. “I’ll- I’ll need to deliver him for judgment quickly, the blade will only hold him for an hour.”

“Deliver it where?” the red-haired woman demanded, frowning suspiciously.

“The court of Doomstadt,” Storyteller sighed, running her hands through her hair as her distaff disappeared from them.

“Whoa, whoa,” the woman next to Serrure called, walking closer to the two, and Serrure stiffly followed her. “How and why are you taking a witchbreed to Doomstadt?” she demanded.

“He isn’t a witchbreed,” Storyteller replied, shaking her head. “He’s a demon. Sorry about the
misinformation. I was meant to be hunting *him* but he rather got the drop on me today and put me on the defensive. Your assistance has been *most* appreciated, mistresses.”

“Who are you that hunts for Doom and carries His blades?” the red-haired woman demanded, stepping around the fallen wolf to loom over Storyteller.

“I am Storyteller, apprentice to the Holy Eye,” Storyteller said, straightening up to her full height and turning toward the red-head, who stopped and stared, looking startled.

“Oh my,” the other woman tilted her head slightly and grinned. “I think this may be the first time another woman has ever looked Angela in the eye. At least while she’s standing up.”

“Angela,” Storyteller said with a small, respectful nod and then glanced at the other woman, “And...?”

“Serah,” the smaller woman introduced with a little dip of her head.

Storyteller smiled at them. “And you are both members of the Sisterhood?” she asked. “You have served Doom very well today, and I will make sure He knows it. If you need a longer explanation, I will be happy to provide it, but I first need to bring this criminal to Doomstadt for His judgment.”

Angela nodded, still looking slightly unsure as she stepped back. “This creature must be a truly heinous criminal indeed to have earned the direct attention of Doom and His highest servants.”

Storyteller nodded. “He has been roaming across many domains and leaving a trail of murder and destruction in his wake,” she said grimly and then her eyes turned to Serrure and she held out a hand. “Come, my Lamb. We need to take the awful man to the palace right away.”

Serrure nodded, moving toward her and finding that his feet wanted to run the short distance. He crashed softly into Storyteller and wrapped his arms around her waist, feeling a little shudder of relief as her hand rested against his back. “May I ask where you will be this evening, sisters?” Storyteller asked above him.

“We will take our supper at the Crying Dove Inn in Northampton,” the Serah’s voice replied.

“Then I will meet you there to answer whatever questions you require answers to,” Storyteller promised.

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“The amassing of troops on our boarder is clearly an act of aggression and cannot be tolerated!” President Osborn insisted hotly, the intimidation factor of his glare somewhat lost to the fact that he was railing at a god-level entity who was twice his size even with the armor.

“As charming as your paranoia is, it is misplaced, Baron,” Apocalypse sniffed dismissively. “I stationed a battalion in that region to quell a minor uprising by the homosapien troublemakers squatting there.”

“There was no population living in that zone!” Osborn snapped.

“How would you know that, Baron, unless you had been unlawfully surveying my territories?” Apocalypse countered.

“That is not—”
“My Lord!” one of the Thors on guard duty called sharply, coming through the main doors.

Victor turned his attention to the Thor, clearly far more interested in the interruption than the squabbling barons in front of him. “What is it?”

“Agent Storyteller has made an arrest and requests immediate audience,” the Thor answered.

“Send them in,” Victor commanded and then glanced down at Osborn and Apocalypse. “You two, stand aside.”

“But--” Osborn started to protest.

“Doom has spoken,” Victor rumbled, narrowing his eyes. “Have you heard?”

Osborn lowered his head slightly and stepped to the opposite side of the room from that which Apocalypse had chosen, obviously furious at the interruption. The main doors opened again and Loki, female today, came striding in with the child-Loki at her side, clinging to her hand, and two Thors carrying a larger, paralyzed Loki between them.

Loki came to the foot of the dais and dropped to a knee; the child copied her. “My Lord Doom, with the tools you bestowed upon me, I have made an arrest,” Loki announced in a clear, strong voice, her head bowed.

“You took the boy with you?” Stephen demanded, slightly horrified.

“Of course not!” Loki protested, looking up and giving him an offended frown. “This bastard attacked us at home!”

Stephen settled, watching the Thors set the petrified god on his feet before the assembly, somewhat mollified that Loki wasn’t that irresponsible. Victor leaned forward, actually allowing himself to show a visible interest in the captured curiosity. He was bigger than their Loki, more on the scale of Thor, with woad patterns painted over his face, arms and chest, and a pelt draped around his shoulders. He had an enormous sparth-axe in his hand and further weapons strapped to his person here and there. “And how is it,” Victor asked, eyes glancing to his agent still knelt before him, “that he was able to find you with so much ease when you seem to be having such difficulty with a similar task?”

Loki bit her lip, and Stephen had the impression she was trying to hold back a grimace or a sulky retort, and then replied, “I believe he may have tracked me by scent.” She rose to her feet and took a step to the side, turning to gesture open-handed at her frozen analogue. “He’s a full-on úlfheðinn, and it’s likely that’s given him an advantage in the hunting department.”

“Úlfheðinn?” Susan asked softly, glancing to Stephen from her place at Victor’s other side.

“A berserker-werewolf,” Stephen answered, nodding slowly. “Intensely dangerous, though perhaps lacking the subtlety we were biased to expect.”

“He’s definitely more of the brute force sort.” Loki agreed, folding her hands behind her back as the child-Loki silently resumed his position glued to her side.

“I would hear him speak,” Victor announced.

“If so, my Lord,” Loki interjected quickly, “please be prepared to quickly arrest his movements. I believe he could pose a significant threat to the assembly.”
Victor glanced at her and nodded. “Remove the blade, Agent,” he ordered, gesturing toward the frozen Loki.

Loki patted a hand on the child-Loki’s head and said softly, “Go stand over there, Lamb.”

“But--” the boy started to protest, looking distressed.

“I may need to move very quickly and I shall be better able to do that if you go stand over there,” Loki gave him a gentle push toward Susan and Valeria’s side of the throne.

“It’s all right, dear, come here,” Susan called gently, giving him a warm smile, and the child-Loki reluctantly moved out of the way.

Loki went behind the frozen berserker and while Victor made a small gesture with his hand, she pulled the enchanted blade out of him and then retreated a few paces as the other god came to life. He staggered two steps, disoriented, and looked quickly around the room with wild eyes. He glanced only briefly at Victor before his eyes locked on the child-Loki, who took a step backward. Susan put a hand on the boy’s shoulder.

“You stand accused of violating My Law and undermining My Lawmen,” Victor announced, glaring down at the god. “How would you answer to these accusations?”

The berserker threw back his head and laughed, the sound a combination of giddy madness and derision. “Your law means nothing. There is only the hunt,” he growled, and not a second later he was launching himself at the child-Loki, sparth-axe raised to strike.

Susan threw a wall up against him and Loki turned toward Victor, stress and irritation clear on her face. “Lord Doom, please end this! He is beyond reason and there is nothing to be gained from baiting this madman! He has already refused to acknowledge your authority, what else needs to be said?” she demanded.

“Enough!” Victor’s voice boomed through the hall and the berserker froze once more, his axe raised in both hands, prepared to swing again in some misguided attempt to attack Susan’s forcefield.

There were a few moments of silence and then Loki cast Victor an annoyed, pouty look. “You just wanted him in a cooler pose, didn’t you?” she accused.

“Agent Storyteller, Doom commends you upon your capture of this criminal,” Victor announced, turning to look at her. “You have done well.”

Loki bit her lip and shifted on her feet, looking awkward. “My Lord Doom, I would like to request a token,” Loki said, pushing back her shoulders and lifting her chin.

“A token?” Victor gave her a curious look.

“I was aided in the apprehension of this murderer by two battle-nuns and a high fae,” Loki explained, folding her hands behind her back again. “The nuns may covet nothing so much as the knowledge that Lord Doom smiles upon them, but fae tend to be more appreciative of bobbles. I have inferred, based upon comments she made during the tussle, that this may be the villain who slayed her consort, and so I would like to gift her with a trophy of his defeat.”

Victor considered her for a moment. “What manner of trophy did you have in mind?” he asked.

“Oh, I don’t imagine it matters so much what. Something shiny would probably be preferable, but small enough to pocket...” Loki shrugged, looking the frozen berserker up and down. “How about
the talisman on his belt? She’d probably like that.”

“Granted,” Victor nodded.

“Thank you, my Lord,” Loki stepped closer to the berserker and unwound a gold and jet talisman from one of his belts which was also supporting two scabbards.

Victor moved his gaze to the guards who had carried the berserker into the chamber. “Remove this creature. Put him in the trophy room with the other one,” he ordered.

Loki stepped aside as the Thors moved forward to pick up the petrified god. Her head was lowered slightly and it looked like she was biting her lip as she waved the child-Loki over to her, her eyes avoiding the site of the berserker being carried out.

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They arrived home to find Amora standing in front of the house with a retinue of feral children dressed in forest-chic covering the porch steps. The roof and gutters were teaming with fairies. They clung to walls, perched upon the porch railing and sat along the window sills. Amora lifted her head regally. “Didst thou meet with success, gentle friend?” she asked, giving Storyteller a warm smile.

“There is no small part to you, great lady,” Storyteller replied, dipping her head, and watching Serrure from the corner of her eye as he took the cue and mimicked her. “I have delivered the scoundrel to God Doom’s wrath and he has now breathed his last.”

“These be happy tidings,” Amora said, walking across the grass to meet them. She lightly embraced Storyteller and gave her a peck that was a bit more G-rated than her usual kisses. Perhaps she was unenthused about the female seeming; Storyteller doubted it was the audience that was putting her out. “Thou hast avenged mine house, oh King of Bards. Wilt thou still not have my hand?” she purred, gazing seductively up at Storyteller.

“Much as I may admire my gracious lady, my duty to Doom remains,” Storyteller said softly.

“I concede that Doom is greater, but He shal never hold for thee the regard which I so gladly give,” Amora sighed, looking disappointed but resigned.

“Oh goodness, I hope not!” Storyteller bit her lip and grimaced. “He is rather a lot less-pretty than you.”

That tugged Amora’s lips into a smile and she chuckled as she took a step back and bent to Serrure’s level to address him. It was miraculous that she didn’t wardrobe-malfunction right out of her dress, and she certainly gave him an eyeful as she leaned down. “Thou art the child my lord hath taken as his own? What is thy name, sweet boy?”

Serrure nodded slightly, making a valiant effort to look at her face as his cheeks turned slightly pink. “Serrure,” he whispered.

She smiled and ruffled his hair. “I hath brought mine own changeling brood that they may know thee,” she said, straightening back up and half-turning toward the handful of feral children on the porch, who, at this cue, scrambled eagerly across the lawn to cluster around, picking at Serrure and Storyteller’s clothes and asking questions.

“Didst thou come from the human-cities?” “Thou doth smell of smoke.” “How didst thou slay the great wolf?” “Oh oh! Look how shiny!” “Wherefore wilt thou not join us in the wood?” “How canst thou move about in such raiment?” “Wherefore art thou a stag one day and a doe the next?”
The gaggle ranged in size and features from a black-haired babe in arms to a familiar little bristle- 
haired girl a head and shoulders taller than Serrure, all clearly unrelated and stolen from cradles 
across every corner of England. “You have sworn not to add Serrure to your collection,” Storyteller 
reminded Amora as one of the children manipulated her arm to examine the gold bangles around her 
wrist.

“And I shan’t,” Amora agreed, dipping her head. “For much as I wouldst delight to keep thee both, I 
wouldst be a fool to oppose Doom’s will.” She looked back up, demure gaze shaded by her lashes. 
“But know that thy child and thyself may come and go in mine wood. And should Master Serrure 
become lost whilst playing, I doth vow that my servants wilt protect him and guide him back to this 
place.”

“That’s very generous,” Storyteller murmured, raising an eyebrow. “You hope that in time he will be 
seduced?”

“As I doth pray thou wilt,” Amora returned with a sultry smirk.

Storyteller considered that, tilting her head. “It would be good for him to have some exposure to the 
natural magics...” she noted softly.

“My lovely children wouldst be pleased to have a new playmate,” Amora said, petting one of her 
lost-boys tenderly.

“... Verity will probably say that I’m making a terrible choice in babysitters,” Storyteller remarked, 
mulling it over.

“No child hath ever come to harm in mine wood,” Amora said proudly. “And never hath I taken one 
which was loved.”

Storyteller nodded, hooking her thumbs on the edge of her jacket pockets and sighing through her 
teeth. “If I had your word that he would always be led back here when I call, and never wander 
farther than he can hear my calling, then I think perhaps my Lamb might take up his hobby of 
exploration again,” Storyteller mused, and smiled as Serrure looked back up at her. “You’ve been 
feeling cooped up, haven’t you?”

“A little,” Serrure mumbled, looking guilty.

“Thou hast my solemn oath, Master Serrure shalt be not detained and ever find his way back to my 
lord’s arms,” Amora said, dipping her head respectfully.

Storyteller smiled, feeling a bit of relief. It was only half a solution, but it was getting there. Fairies 
had a knack for protecting children and confounding adults. Between Amora’s court and Serrure’s 
in innate wiliness, anyone looking to catch or hurt him here would be in for a distinctly uphill battle. 
That left only the outliers to be concerned about; how many more of the game-players were on 
Berserker-Loki’s level? The ones who had survived through the qualifying rounds and made it into 
the finals were either going to be the toughest or the luckiest, and luck only gets one so far.

“I have a gift for my lady,” Storyteller said, turning her eyes back to Amora and fishing in her 
pocket. Amora leaned forward a little, eyebrows lifting in curiosity as Storyteller presented her with 
the talisman she’d lifted from Berserker-Loki. “A token stolen from the girdle of the villain who 
violated these woods and insulted my lady. So that you may better remember the victory our 
friendship has brought.”

Amora brightened, accepting the talisman and examining it more closely. “Let this triumph be the
first of many fruits born by our collusion,” she said, and then her smile turned coy. “And mayhap that I might bear fruit in time...?”

“I think... that discussion should be saved for another day,” Storyteller said carefully.

“As thou doth say,” Amora agreed, giving a glance to Storyteller’s curves, before turning toward the flock of fairies encrusting the house and lifting her voice. “Come, my darlings! We adjourn!” she called and turned, casting one last smirk toward Storyteller, before sweeping toward the tree-line with her changeling entourage taking up her wake and a great buzz of fairies swarming into the air and zipping in every direction.

A few minutes later, Storyteller and Serrure were left standing alone in the clearing, as the sound of fairies faded into the ordinary forest backdrop. “Well,” Storyteller gave a little sigh, “It seems there are not only fairies but wild children around for you to play with. This is turning out to be a pretty good neighborhood.”

“Mm,” Serrure agreed with a nod, looking around at the trees.

“Let’s get the kitchen fixed up,” Storyteller suggested, starting toward the house. “Then I think I’ll make you a panic-bracelet.”

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Chapter End Notes

Berserkers are either associated with bears (the word 'berserker' might either mean 'bear-shirt' or 'no-shirt', depending on which linguistic anthropologist you ask) or wolves (úlfheðinn meaning 'wears wolf-skin'), as Odin (patron of berserkers) is referred to as both the bear-god and the wolf-god, and y'know, because both of those critters make pretty good mascots for whacked-out battle bros. In mythology, the animals Loki tends to be associated with are snakes and wolves (in no small part because of his big, scary children), so for Berserker-Loki I wanted to play around with that wolf aspect and eventually decided to just go all-in on it and give him the same dual-aspect as Hrimhari (616-Loki's grandson).

Bureaucracy bores Doom! He just wanted to be all-powerful, what's with all these politics? I thought I'd throw in a snippet of Doomstadt business, and a lot of what Doom has to end up doing is settling arguments between domains run by super-villains. Yes that is a Dark Reign Osborn.

It is once again pole-the-audience time! Help me decide who Amora's bebes should be! The first issue of Witch Hunter Angela mentions Amora's acquisition of a tiny baby Daken, the idea of which amuses me terribly. If you thought Daken was fabolous when Romulus raised him, imagine a Daken raised by Amora. Double-plus-FABULOUS. So I'm thinking five or six human (or mutant) children in her train. The other one I've decided on is a 13-year-old Rahne Sinclair. Help me think of some more likely candidates for feral children. I think the abandoned/runaway/stolen/abused aspect (from the main-universe character) is more important than the ‘wild-thing’ aspect for my purposes here. I'm also deciding right now no more Wolverine-offspring and no capital-R Runaways (too apt).
“Just because you don’t know the name doesn’t mean that whatever you make up is true,” Verity sighed, rolling her eyes.

“It might be,” Storyteller pointed out.

“No. It isn’t,” Verity glared.

“How can you be sure?”

Verity glared harder.

Chapter Notes

This chapter guest starring:

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“I think I like these ones better,” Storyteller noted, looking over the new kitchen windows she’d created to fix the hole the wolf had torn through the kitchen. “I thought Lustron might have a little more pizzazz than Tudor, hm?”

Surrure shrugged, not having any particular opinion about the slightly different shape of the windows. “It’s nice?” he offered.

“Architecture not your cup of tea, Lamb?” Storyteller asked, casting him a gentle smirk which faded into a worried look. “You’re shaken.”

“No. I’m okay,” Serrure shook his head.

Storyteller chewed on her lip a moment and then crouched slightly and caressed Serrure’s cheek. “What would make today better?” she asked. “Cupcakes? Ice cream? Do you want to go exploring? We could see what’s to see around England, or we could go look at Manhattan or somewhere else.”

Serrure considered for a moment and then asked, “Can we go to the ocean?”
"Of course," Storyteller smiled. "The beach is a great place to eat ice cream."

The afternoon was spent wading in the shallows along England’s coast. Having dressed somewhat appropriate to the era, the skirt of Storyteller’s linen shift was alternately caught in the current or wrapped wetly around her legs while she followed Serrure, sometimes beside, sometimes behind. He would go running frantically back and forth, jumping and crashing through the waves, then walk calmly hand in hand with her for a ways as he caught his breath, and sometimes duck down to snatch things up from beneath the foam.

He caught three crabs during their meandering journey and endured many pinches as he turned them this way and that to carefully examine before setting them free again. Storyteller spent the hours weaving a few hairs she’d plucked from Serrure together with some of her own and flax and wool and magic, to form a turk’s head around her wrist. She told him of Karkinos’ defeat at Lerna, of the Heike samurai spirits and of the unconscionable crabs who met their comeuppance for dancing at the raccoon’s funeral, while Serrure poked and prodded at the crustaceans’ angrily waving legs.

The field trip seemed to have successfully banished Serrure’s lingering anxiety as he delighted in the surf and sand, presenting Storyteller with the occasional shell or colorful stone. Storyteller mused as she watched him romp that the Avalon of Battleworld had no coastline (and how very odd that was). Had that absence weighed upon Serrure? They were, after all, the gods of seafarers; the ocean was in their blood (or perhaps vice versa as the case may be). Storyteller hadn’t much thought about the seaside since she’d found herself existent, but the sensation of the wind cutting through her and the salt crusting on her skin felt soothing and natural. She could get used to it.

Serrure was finally slowing down and spending more time at her side than frolicking ahead as the featureless sky began to dim above them. When he began to shiver, Storyteller picked him up and whispered their way home, teleporting directly into the bathroom.

“I’ve spent hours and hours in the water, why do I need a bath?” Serrure protested as Storyteller started filling the tub.

“Because you’re covered in microscopic plankton and they’re going to make you smell like rotting fish soon,” Storyteller replied easily. “You wash up and I’ll go get some dinner.”

“Go?” Serrure frowned at her. “Where are you going?”

“Oh, I was thinking fish and chips would be an appropriate way to finish off the day,” Storyteller said with a cheerful smile. “There’s a little pub in Rathauz that has the very best beer-battered cod.”

“You’re leaving me alone?” Serrure asked.

Storyteller squatted down and held out her arm, showing him the bracelet she’d spent the afternoon weaving. “I made a spell,” she explained as Serrure looked down at the simple, black band. “This spell tells me immediately, no matter how far away I am, if you are in danger or if anyone who is Loki comes anywhere near you,” she said. “And it also ensures that I can always find you.”

Serrure fingered the bracelet, chewing on his lip. “So if I’m in trouble, you’ll come,” he said softly.


“You’ll be back soon?” Serrure asked, looking up at her and squirming a bit, itchy now that the seawater was drying on his skin.
“Ten minutes. Fifteen tops,” Storyteller assured him, straightening up and drying her dress even as
she modified it into a more modern shape. “And if you’re still stinky when I get back, I will be
cross.”

Serrure wrinkled his nose and grimaced, but nodded. “Okay.”

“All right. In you get.” Storyteller said, ruffling his hair before disappearing.

After a quick trip to the east coast of Doomstadt, she returned to the newly refurbished kitchen, set
the grease-spotted paper bags of fried delicious on the counter and went into the hall to knock on
Verity’s door. A minute later, it opened to Verity with her hair up in a bandana and a dustpan in

Verity tilted her head slightly and seemed to consider for a moment. “Perry or ale?”

“Well, they’re beer-battered, so I’ll say ale.”

Verity nodded. “Be right back.” She disappeared into her apartment as Storyteller went back to the
kitchen and set the table. Serrure arrived in a hoodie and flannel pajama-pants as she was fetching
ketchup and vinegar.

“Is Verity coming?” he asked, climbing onto his chair and peaking into one of the bags.

“Yes she is. What do you want to drink, Lamb?”

“Milkshake?” Serrure tried.

“You had ice cream for lunch,” Storyteller pointed out.

“I don’t see the problem,” Serrure shrugged.

Storyteller smirked at him. “The problem is I think I am spoiling you terribly,” she said. “Apple
juice?”

“Oh...” Serrure heaved a despondent sigh.

The door in the hall could be heard closing and a moment later Verity appeared with two bottles of
beer. She paused and frowned, looking around. “You changed the windows?” she asked.

“They got broken,” Storyteller said. “There might have been huffing and puffing involved.

Verity sat down slowly, looking worried as Storyteller handed her the churchkey. “And what
happened?” she asked, opening her beer.

“The fairies raised an alarm. Apparently he’s the same one who caused the burn,” Storyteller said,
accepting the churchkey back to open her own bottle. “He charged the kitchen and so I grabbed
Serrure and made for the woods. Before we got there, Amora teleported all three of us to Bedford and plopped us down right in front of my sister.”

“Your sister?” Verity looked up in surprise as she dumped fish and chips out on her plate. “Angela?”

“Mhm,” Storyteller nodded. “Seems she’s a ‘witch hunter’ in this world,” she gestured vaguely around as she popped a torn off piece of fish into her mouth and then frowned slightly, contemplating as she chewed it. “Though... it doesn’t quite add up... Her context gives the impression of humanity, but I watched her punch a god and stagger him. A big god, not just a puny, unimportant one. That... doesn’t really sound very humanish.”

Verity sipped her beer and processed that. “So, is she really a god but Doom-o-Vision is selling her as human?”

“Yeah. Probably,” Storyteller agreed with a nod. “It seems to be a little hit or miss with the beings that were gods in their old worlds. Some of them are ‘lesser-gods’ now, some of them got demoted further. Angels might be more problematic for Doom-centric theology than traditional pagan types. We’ve already been knocked down so many ranks before Doom even came around, we didn’t really have any credibility left for him to take.”

“Mm,” Verity nodded slowly. “So, she punched the werewolf guy, and then?”

“There we were, embroiled in thick, English fog, the terrible wolf at our heels!” Storyteller set out dramatically, gesturing expansively with her beer. “And as she transported us, Amora had whispered in my ear a hint of the trick she was playing: she told me to beware the witch hunters! And so, as I heard voices in the fog, I gambled upon the fairy-queen’s good will towards me and called out for help, decrying Wolf-Asshole-Loki to be a witch! And lo, the holy battle-nuns of the Abbey of Fuck-Yeah did heed my cry!”

Verity made the confused, annoyed face she liked to make when Storyteller sent the dial on her truth-sense spinning. “It’s not called that. There’s no way it’s called that,” she protested.

Storyteller shrugged. “I don’t know for certain that isn’t the name,” she said.

“No. It isn’t,” Verity glared.

“How can you be sure?”

Verity glared harder.

“Well that’s what I’d name an abbey,” Storyteller reasoned.

“So after the witch hunters showed up?” Verity prompted.

“The sisters of Fuck-Yeah Abbey burst from the fog, and mighty Sister Angela did thrust her halberd toward the terrible beast! I trusted Serrure to the care of Sister Serah whilst I rejoined the fray. Together Sister Angela and I harried the villain as I drew the enchanted knife from my belt, and with a quick thrust, I put its blade between his ribs and pierced his vile heart!” Storyteller said, thrusting a fry through the air. “And just as Lord Doom had promised, the B-B-E-G was frozen utterly! Whereupon I was able to transport him to our great Lord for permanent incarceration.”
“So, Berserker-Loki is out of the picture now,” Verity summed, finishing a piece of fish.

“Well, that one is. It would be unreasonable to assume, without evidence, that he’s the *only* berserker,” Storyteller tilted her head a little, tearing off a piece of fish. “Descriptions of the one who attacked Arcadia sound consistent with a berserker. And there’s the heredity thing.”

Verity raised an eyebrow. “Because of Odin?”

Storyteller nodded. “Thor inherited the berserker-aspect in our continuity, but it’s reasonable to assume that another son might get it in a variant mythos. Although, honestly, Tyr’s a much better candidate than Loki.”

“So, there might be more like him?” Serrure asked, a worried little frown on his face.

“Well, not exactly like,” Storyteller shook her head. “We’re all a bit different, aren’t we. And being a berserker doesn’t necessarily make someone *bad*, it just means you have to be very careful around them... be ready to run when they get that look in their eye.” She glanced at Verity who was wearing her I-am-concerned-about-your-unhealthy-relationship face.

“How will you know when you’re done?” Verity asked, picking at her fries. “When you’ve arrested or ‘documented’ all the Lokis?”

Storyteller sighed and shook her head, finishing her last piece of fish. “Not sure. I’m still working on that part... I mean, the ‘domains’ don’t even necessarily represent all the ‘verses that went into Battleworld. There’s domains that have two or three worlds smooshed up in them... I’m not even sure exactly how many worlds are *in* Battleworld. I don’t think Stephen or Doom are either.”

“So, just... until further notice then?” Verity asked.

“For now,” Storyteller shrugged and pushed herself away from the table. “And for now, I need to take a shower and go meet the good sisters of Fuck-Yeah because I promised them an explanation,” she said, then crossed her arms and tilted her head slightly. “So I suppose I’d better hurry and make one up...”

Verity frowned slightly and glanced at Serrure. “Is this you asking me to babysit?” she asked skeptically.

“Nah, Amora already offered and I’ve got a magical-alert-bracelet for him now,” Storyteller said.

“Amora?” Verity’s frown deepened. “You *moved in* with her and now she’s babysitting Serrure?” she demanded.

“And she proposed again.”

“She proposed,” Verity crossed her arms and gave Storyteller a stern look.

“Third time.”

“Loki,” Verity said in a very serious voice. “You need to stop giving her mixed signals and teasing the crazy, morally-ambiguous fairy queen!”

“I haven’t been giving her mixed signals,” Storyteller protested. “I have been very clear and consistent. I like her but I am not willing to dally a thousand years in a semi-lucid dream-state for her.”
Verity buried her face in her hands and let out an exasperated sound.

“Verity, she’s not going to try anything because she’s afraid to risk pissing-off Doom,” Storyteller explained, doing her best to sound very well-reasoned and logical. “Amora’s court fortifies our location from outside threats, and the threat of Doom’s wrath protects me from her getting too grabby. I have thought this through. This is good strategic footing.”

“And you’re letting her babysit Serrure?” Verity demanded.

“Well he’s big enough he doesn’t need constant monitoring,” Storyteller said. “Amora just happens to be powerful and tricksy enough to provide basic protection and safety measures, so, yeah, I think it’s okay if he goes over to play at her house sometimes.”

“And why is she being so helpful?”

“Partly because fairies like children and partly because she’s trying to audition for ‘Mom’,” Storyteller shrugged.

Verity raised an eyebrow. “What.”

“She’s started dropping unsubtle hints about baby-making.”

Verity’s stern look turned into a glare. “Loki.”

“I’m not going to make any babies, Verity!” Storyteller exclaimed, throwing her hands up in surrender. “I promise! No babies!”

Verity groaned and scrubbed her hands through her hair.

“How long are you going to be gone?” Serrue asked, apparently deciding that the Amora-discussion had reached its conclusion.

“Maybe an hour or two. I want to make sure the big-sisters feel that I’ve valued their help and am giving them adequate gratitude, forthrightness and respect,” Storyteller answered.

“Even though you’re going to be lying to them,” Verity noted.

“I’ll tell them as much truth as I can, and where I can’t, I’ll lie beautifully,” Storyteller reasoned. “They will feel completely respected.”

Verity rolled her eyes.

“Would you like to play with the fairies or watch some critically-acclaimed feature-length animated masterpieces while I’m gone?” Storyteller asked, turning back to Serrure.

Serrure considered. “Is there more mermaids?” he asked.

“No no baby, the sequels are rubbish. How about Aladdin or Mulan this time?”

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The Crying Dove Inn had that renaissance-era charm, complete with that renaissance-era smell. Storyteller had dressed herself in linen and ghillies and wrapped up in a wool cloak; aside from being significantly cleaner than average, she wore nothing noteworthy or anachronistic to set her apart from the scenery. Her height did that well enough on its own.
“Lady Storyteller!” a voice called from near the back of the tavern and she smiled as she spotted Serah waving her over.

“A pleasure to see you again, sisters, now that the trials of this morn have passed,” Storyteller greeted, settling herself down at their table next to Angela but leaving a respectful distance between them.

“And how have these trials passed, may we inquire?” Angela asked, eyeing Storyteller as she fiddled with a denuded chicken-bone on her plate.

“I arrived at Doomstadt requesting immediate audience, and the urgency was understood. I was brought before our Lord with all haste,” Storyteller replied, folding her hands atop the table. “The villain was released from enchantment long enough for our Lord to hear his heretical ravings and to see his mad rage, before he was rendered still once more, and ever more.”

“What wonders you must see in that court,” Serah mused, leaning her cheek in her hand.

“Is the creature dead?” Angela asked, frowning slightly.

“Such would seem to be a matter of philosophy.” Storyteller gave a slight shrug. “If he breaths no more, is it not equal to death? He is now as a taxidermied beast, displayed as a testament to the Lord’s greatness and wrath.”

“Mm, I suppose so,” Angela conceded grimly. “I would simply feel more gladly if its neck were rendered in twain.”

Serah chuckled. “Of course you would, Angela dear. You must always insist upon pushing for that R-rating,” she noted.

Storyteller paused and stared at Serah for a moment, baffled by the anachronistic and downright meta statement. The conversation continued to flow on around it, the peculiarity going unnoticed or unremarked upon.

“I simply find a proper corpse to more reliably settle a matter than a chained prisoner,” Angela gave an unconcerned shrug.

“But of course the matter might be seen as one of faith,” Serah pointed out. “If it’s good enough for the Lord, would it not be good enough for His servants?”

“I suppose that does quite settle things,” Angela agreed with a crooked, half-hearted nod.

“Don’t worry, my love, we’ll find something for you to kill tomorrow,” Serah assured her.

“My good Lady Serah, have I heard correctly that you’ve invited a sister bard to your table and there is no drink in front of her?” a new voice interrupted as a stein was set down on the table before Storyteller. “And to further your crimes, you’ve hoarded the three fairest ladies in the city to this musty corner and left all of Northampton wanting for the warmth of your charm?”

Serah laughed and Angela snorted as Storyteller glanced up at the new arrival, smirking and looking him over. “It hardly seems to be lacking for charm, good sir. But I wonder, who told you I was fair?” she asked, studying his blindfold curiously.

“Well that would be my dear Harrison,” the man said, nodding over his shoulder toward the barkeep. “Bless him, he saves me nightly from humiliation untold. Though with a voice like yours, I find no reason you could be anyways short of a Tinntoretto.” He offered a winning smile to which
“Oh be careful of this one, Agent. Silver-tongued Murdoch is a notorious thief of hearts,” Serah warned with a grin.

“Agent? What a curious title,” the man raised an eyebrow and tilted his head.

“My station as a servant of Doom,” Storyteller explained. “I am called Agent Storyteller of Doomstadt and Doomgard. And you, sir? You are an acquaintance of the Lady Serah?”

“A brother in arms,” he replied with a grin, brandishing a lute. “Matthew Murdoch, humble Irish wanderer. This title of yours then, it’s ceremonial?”

“You’re asking if there is no truth to the epithet? Why, I should be insulted, dear bard. I could sing so gaily you would think yourself beguiled in a fairy-jig,” Storyteller rejoined cheerfully.

“Oh yes?” Matthew tilted his head. “That would be something to hear.”

“Mm, but alas I find myself ill-prepared, without my nyckelharpa. I think the evening’s entertainment must be up to you,” Storyteller said, thumping her finger against the soundboard of his lute.

“A nickel-harp? You must be from very far north,” Matthew noted, arranging the lute in his arms. “So then, what story would entertain the Agent this evening?”

“No doubt you are well versed in Homer,” Storyteller noted.

Matthew gave a short laugh. “But what better hero could a blind boy have?”

“Sing me a sad song of Agamemnon’s unfortunate daughters,” Storyteller suggested.

“Ah, a fine share of tragedies for that family,” Matthew said with a nod and started playing.

His voice was satisfactory and his playing fair enough, but it was his presentation and showmanship that made the performance worthwhile. Angela and Serah seemed content to let Matthew steal their attention, apparently satisfied with knowing that a terrible werewolf was off the streets and less concerned about where it had come from. But then, these were just the times in England, weren’t they? The whole country (and presumably the world it had broken off from) so concerned about witches and ‘witchbreeds’ coming out of the woodwork every day.

When Matthew had wrapped up his saga and Storyteller’s beer was nearly drained, Storyteller and Serah applauded, along with a few other patrons nearby, and Storyteller leaned toward Angela and Serah. “What delightful circles you travel in, sisters,” she cast them a grin. “Surely this must outstrip a convent any day.”


“And I imagine now it is time we offer alms to the bard,” Storyteller smirked, putting her purse on the table and poking inside.

“My lady, I would value nothing so highly as your name,” Matthew replied.

“And perhaps your company for the night,” Serah murmured into her drink in a low, amused voice.

“You wound me, Lady Serah,” Matthew gave her a melodramatic look of hurt.

Storyteller laughed and pushed herself off the bench, standing in front of Matthew, whose head tilted
slightly and an eyebrow rose, as he seemed to sightlessly take stock of her size. “Alas, my night is
previously dedicated or I might be tempted,” Storyteller said, catching Matthew’s shoulder and
leaning down to press a kiss against his lips. Scattered cat-calls and applause were offered by fellow
patrons as Storyteller lingered a moment and pressed her purse into Matthew’s hand. “As for my
name, Mister Murdoch, call me Skáldmær,” she murmured as they parted.

Matthew nodded slowly, one eyebrow still raised quizzically. “You play your game very close to the
vest, good Skáldmær,” he noted. “Perhaps next time we meet, you will sing for me?”

“I shall look forward to it, my friend,” Storyteller said.

Once Matthew had made his departure, after exchanging a few more quips with Serah and cheerfully
excusing himself, Angela turned the conversation back to its original topic. “How long were you
hunting the creature?” she asked as Storyteller settled herself back down on the bench.

“Two weeks,” Storyteller replied. “The mission was given to me after confounding the Thors for
more than a month. The Lord and the Eye have commissioned me to look into the peculiar matters
that Thors are not suited to.”

“What others?” Serah asked, leaning forward.

“A poisoner, in a nation east of this. She was luring men into her home and slaying them,” Storyteller
said. “I can say no more, of course, and please consider that I never said this much.” She gave a
conspiratorial little smirk and put her hand over her mouth coyly.

“And now?” Angela asked. “After you have apprehended the wolf?”

“Now there are yet a few more cases I am following, but of course I can say nothing of them,”
Storyteller replied.

“Such an exciting life, but I wonder if it is not terrifying for your... son?” Serah asked.

“Brother, and I am planning to ensure that today’s incident was the exception,” Storyteller
said. She glanced out of the side of her eye to where Matthew was leaning by the table of a small party of
lushes who had enjoyed themselves a bit too much this evening to notice that while the bard’s face
and charming smile were being given to them, his ear was turned in Storyteller’s direction.

Serah smirked knowingly. “You’re quite right,” she noted, eyes flicking briefly in Matthew’s
direction before coming back to Storyteller’s. “A public house is not the most felicitous setting for a
surreptitious conversation. Doom knows there could be many a gossip about or worse. Many curious
ears may be bent in your direction, Agent, some more curious than others.”

“Indeed, Lady Serah? I’m not sure I catch your meaning,” Storyteller murmured, nodding in contrast
to her words. “But as there is little which I am permitted to say, perhaps there is little to be said. Have
I satisfied your needs for knowledge in this morning’s matter, sisters?”

“I would know whether there are more like that creature in England?” Angela asked quietly.

“If there were, I would not be letting my dear little lamb out of arm’s reach,” Storyteller said soberly.
“No. There are no more like him in England. Though he was not of England to begin with, and as he
was able to invade this land, it must thus be noted that England is not without invaders.”

Angela gave a sharp, grim nod. “Understood. We shall remain vigilant. And if you find yourself
again to have use for my blade, do not hesitate to call upon me, Agent. I have sworn myself to
destroying all hell-spawn that would threaten my England.”
“I will bear that in mind, Sister Angela. Thank you,” Storyteller said with a nod. “It is a true pleasure to have met you both, but I should take my leave. Serrure must be put to bed.”

“Fair thee well, Storyteller,” Serah said with a warm smile.

“Doom go with you,” Angela gave her a nod.

“Good night and fair travels, sisters,” Storyteller said, climbing to her feet again.

Chapter End Notes

Mythology notes:

Karkinos: the Greek name for Cancer (the constellation/sign)
Heikegani: the restless spirits of samurai killed in the Battle of Dannoura
The Raccoon and the Crabs: a Seneca legend about respecting the dead (even dead enemies)
I wanted to throw a cross-cultural mod-podge of crab-themed mythologies. Greece, Japan and North America seems like a pretty good spread. Hm, it's all Northern hemisphere, but coming up with a more 'seemingly random' group would have required dedicating a lot more time to researching a one-sentence throw-away.

"The ocean was in their blood (or perhaps vice versa as the case may be)." In Norse mythology, the oceans were formed from Ymir (the first frost-giant)'s blood.

Fairy-jig: part of Celtic, English, Scandinavian and Germanic folktales, a particular music played by fairies/elves that inspires compulsive dancing. Mortals who hear a fairy-jig are unable to resist or stop dancing so long as the music is going. Mortal musicians who try to replicate a fairy-jig they chanced to hear will be unable to stop playing until they keel over dead of exhaustion or hunger (or if somebody breaks their fiddle).

B.B.E.G. = Big Bad Evil Guy; I've been picking up role-player vocabulary recently, and as a couple of Lokis have made canonical references to tabletop a couple of times, I figure a little D&D in Storyteller's vocabulary wouldn't be misplaced.

Matt referred to himself as an 'Irish wanderer' here, I've left it ambiguous but suggestive of 'Wandering Irish', which is a culture-group. They sometimes get called Gypsies but are not related to the Roma, they just travel in a similar fashion. My mother remembers them being referred to as 'the Tinkers' in her childhood, because they’d come through town twice a year and fix everybody's stuff for their income. Matt doesn't have a whole lot of back-story in 1602 (nobody really does, it's short little mini-serieses in a mini-verse) most of what we do know is that he's Irish and he's constantly moving.

If any of you have heard of the instrument Storyteller mentions when she's bantering with Matt, I would be very surprised. Nyckelharpa is a traditional Swedish instrument and doesn't see much action outside of Sweden. It's an acoustic keytar. No shit. Acoustic keytar.
A photoshop is worth at least a few words.

Chapter Summary

Storyteller pulled a booklet out of unspace. “Would you like to have a peek at my picture-book and see if anybody looks familiar?”

“Well I imagine they would all look rather familiar,” Hoboki retorted with a grin, but took a noticeable interest.

“Well, yes, but the hair and clothing are frequently distinctive,” Storyteller pointed out.

“Are they dead? Are these the carnage-colored crime-scene photos of the case-files?” Hoboki asked.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Storyteller followed a feeling, a gut instinct, and picked an alley. He wandered slowly into the shade of it, focusing on that gentle tug at the fabric of his mind and paused after a few yards. “Hello? Bedlamite? I seek another parley,” he announced aloud, slowly turning in place, scanning the scenery.

“Didn’t you used to be a little girl?” a voice asked from above and Storyteller looked up to find Hoboki seated on a fire escape.

“That’s sort of a part-time gig,” Storyteller explained with a shrug. “And you seemed a bit preoccupied with my resemblance to your mother last time. I thought this might make you more comfortable.”

Hoboki considered that and then nodded. “And what can I do for the Special Agent today?” he asked. “Seeking more lunatic wisdom to further your investigations?”

Storyteller shook his head. “Mostly I thought I owed you a status-update. I’ve moved. I’m not living in Manhattan anymore, though I’ll still be around now and again. But I thought I ought to come tell you we’re not neighbors anymore,” he said.

“May I inquire as to the inspiration for your immigration?” Hoboki asked, tilting his head.

“I found a little tiny Loki,” Storyteller explained, waving his hand through the air at roughly Serrure’s height. “He was all alone and I wanted to keep him, but the idea of three Lokis in Manhattan? Doom just wasn’t having any of it. So I proposed moving to a much bigger domain where the native-Loki was a recent casualty of the game. Spreads us out a bit better, you know?”

Hoboki nodded slowly. “Which domain?”

“England. West of here,” Storyteller answered, gesturing vaguely toward the West. “And might I ask whether you have had any more visits from your stalker since our last conversation?”

“Mmm,” Hoboki seemed to think, perhaps trying to put dates into order.
“Has he harassed you more than thrice?” Storyteller tried.

“... No,” Hoboki decided after another pause for thought. “So then, I suppose he’s gotten either bored or dead.”

“Maybe,” Storyteller nodded and pulled a booklet out of unspace. “Would you like to have a peek at my picture-book and see if anybody looks familiar?”

“Well I imagine they would all look rather familiar,” Hoboki retorted with a grin, but took a noticeable interest.

“Well, yes, but the hair and clothing are frequently distinctive,” Storyteller pointed out.

“Are they dead? Are these the carnage-colored crime-scene photos of the case-files?” Hoboki asked, climbing to his feet and vaulting over the railing on the fire escape to drop down next to Storyteller, reaching eagerly for the book.

“More like artistic recreations of what they would have looked like alive,” Storyteller replied and Hoboki was clearly disappointed by the lack of viscera as he opened the book. “Half of these were magiced up for me by the Lokis they went after, half I put together myself based on descriptions or the clothing the bodies were found in.” Storyteller explained, moving to stand by his shoulder as Hoboki started flipping through the ‘photos’. “I arrested this ass-hole yesterday and this nasty little minx last week,” Storyteller explained while Hoboki studied the pictures carefully and nodded. “The next three were killed underestimating the Loki of the Paradise domain. I shit you not, do not go there, you will get dropped like a sick beat. The fourth one was killed by an angry twelve-year-old girl. Also not to be trifled with.” This earned a delighted laugh from Hoboki as he turned the pages. “The rest are the apparent victims I’ve accounted for.”

“Well I can disabuse you of that notion,” Hoboki said, thumping one of the pages. “Because this handsome devil was definitely playing.”

“He’s the one who came after you?” Storyteller asked, noting that Hoboki had singled out Killville-Loki. Not surprising, the notion that a place like Killville could have spawned a Loki with a low threat-level was ludicrous at best.

“Yes. You’ve got the hair a bit wrong though,” Hoboki made a quick gesture above the page and the image shifted to reflect a slight pompadour. “I suppose that’s one worry crossed off my list.”

“And mine,” Storyteller agreed, accepting the book back. “Thank you,” he said and then tilted his head slightly as he recalled something else he’d meant to ask the other Manhattan native. “I have a question. Or, more an observation of something that stood out to me as peculiar, and I wondered if you had noticed it too.”

“Oh?” Hoboki asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Do you find it odd that there doesn’t seem to be any Spider-Man or Spider-Men swinging around here?” Storyteller asked.

Hoboki shrugged and gave a ‘meh’ grimace. “Not really. He died.”

“He died?” Storyteller repeated, feeling slightly more shocked than seemed entirely reasonable.

“Some time ago, I think. I’m not sure how long. The sainted little martyr went the way of all sainted little martyrs,” Hoboki replied, rocking on his heels and looking rather as though his attention was already wandering. “Well, there was that new one for a while, with the black and red. And he tried
to do the jokes, bless his heart, but I suppose Peter Parker is just a tough act to follow.”

“Peter Parker...” Storyteller murmured, feeling a vague oddness as he heard and said the name. As in Parker Industries. As in the young genius entrepreneur who emerged from the rubble of Horizon Labs and engineered all of Spider-Man’s gizmos. It was obvious really. Too obvious. It was bizarre that he, and everyone else, hadn’t seen it. “I... know the name, but he never unmasked in my world... Did he?” Storyteller frowned, the oddness becoming more pronounced. “... Is that right?” he mumbled to himself.

“So this ‘Paradise’ person--” Hoboki started, apparently bored with the spider subject.

“Is extremely territorial and you should not go anywhere near there,” Storyteller cut him off. “I’m not kidding. Paradise-Loki might be the strongest one of us out there.”

“But you didn’t arrest him?” Hoboki asked, raising an eyebrow. “Did he chase you off?”

“They were acting in self-defense. I mean, it was definitely overkill because their attackers probably didn’t represent any realistic threat to them at all, but they were still being attacked, so it’s more or less justified,” Storyteller explained with a shrug. “And they’re not hunting, they haven’t left their own domain, they just aren’t taking any shit from outside.”

“They?” Hoboki tilted his head. “Twins or androgynous?”

“The latter,” Storyteller nodded.

“Interesting... How’s that shaking out? The gender thing? What are the percentages looking like?” Hoboki asked curiously.

Storyteller blew a sigh through his teeth and rested his hands in his pockets. “Seems like the numbers are coming out pretty close as far as male or female go. Paradise-Loki is the only not I’ve met so far, but they used to be male, and I haven’t met another switch like me,” he said, drawing a mental chart. “The ones out proactively hunting have all been male as far as I can tell, but two of the females I’ve had encounters with were honey-traps (although one doesn’t seem to be doing it deliberately, per se).”

Hoboki nodded slowly, eyes distant and distracted. “… Do you think I would have been a better daughter?” he asked, suddenly looking back at Storyteller.

Storyteller chewed on his lip for a moment. “I’m not sure. I don’t know you very well,” he said carefully. “Did the majority of your strife come from rivalry with your brothers?”

Hoboki seemed to think about it and then shook his head. “… But maybe Mother could have loved a girl?” he whispered.

“… Maybe. It’s probably not possible to know,” Storyteller said gently, resting a hand on his dirty sleeve. Hoboki nodded again, eyes still distant and tinged with a melancholy anger.

“I suppose it doesn’t matter,” he said with a shrug.

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Loki was standing next to Stephen’s door when he rounded the corner. He smiled brightly, file folder in hand and dressed in office attire. “I have multiple reports, seeing as I’ve gotten a bit behind in my paperwork,” he announced.
“Thank you for catching up,” Stephen said with a nod as he opened the door and preceded Loki into his office. “But first, what are you doing about the boy? Where is he now? Who’s watching him?”

“At this moment he’s in the garden, playing with Master Franklin and Master Leach,” Loki said, going to stand in his usual place in front of Stephen’s desk. “I haven’t worked out an exact schedule for him yet, but Arcadia-Loki says she doesn’t mind looking after him on the weekends and the fairies provide enough protection for him to spend an hour or two left to his own devices at home if I have to run errands.” He chewed on his lip and huffed a little sigh. “I like to have him with me when I’m working magic or researching so he can observe, and often explaining out loud helps me process. I’m not over-worried about his education because he is quite good at self-teaching through exploration, but I’d like to work out some kind of nanny who can provide adequate protection while I’m out chasing down leads. Or a really big, intimidating rottweiler with a heart of gold...”

Stephen was quiet for a moment, studying Loki carefully. “... You seem to speak with a great deal of certainty about the abilities and disposition of a boy you’ve known for three days, Loki,” he noted softly and saw Loki tense for half a second.

“Well I am the resident expert of Lokis, aren’t I?” he deflected, expression suddenly very blank.

“... Are you perhaps not imposing upon him because of his similarity in age to one of your predecessors?” Stephen asked, sinking into his chair.

Loki looked down and was silent for a few seconds, expression remaining a studied blank, before he looked up again and stared back evenly into Stephen’s eyes. “There has been only one Loki connected to Avalon in recent memory,” he said softly.

Stephen raised an eyebrow. “You said yourself that the second Loki died,” he pointed out.

“Everyone in Asgard died just a few years ago. And then there they were, hanging out in Oklahoma,” Loki said, then bit his lip for a moment, then continued. “The rules are different for gods, and even if they weren’t, there were many people, heroes and civilians alike, who were killed during the last incursion. But they’re fine. They’re walking around Manhattan right now.” He crossed his arms, not quite a self-hug but close, and tilted his head back, gazing into space. “The end was so catastrophic, it broke the timeline, fractures moving up and down the stream. There’s a lot of distortions close in, and then littler ones further out- the crazing spreading out from point of impact...”

Stephen closed his eyes, his stomach churned, ulcers acting up. “Loki, I think you might be reading too much into this,” he said gently.

“I’m not. The Avalon thing is the proof. And I know it’s him, Stephen. I feel it,” he said.

Stephen opened his eyes and looked back at Loki seriously. “And you knew it when you brought him before Doom and pretended that you’d never seen him before?” he asked quietly, and he could see fear flicker to life in Loki’s eyes.

“... He’d never have let me keep him,” Loki whispered, a desperate whine entering his voice at the end. “It’s not a plot, Stephen, it’s not a conspiracy. He’s just a child. He can’t do anything. He’s not a threat. I need him. It’s not a plot. I just need him. He’s all I have...”

Stephen closed his eyes again and rubbed his hands over his face. “No, of course he’s not a threat. He’s just a child who’s capable of outmaneuvering Mephisto with no difficulty,” he grumbled and then let out an exasperated sigh.

“I’m not-- I’m not trying anything, Stephen. I just need him,” Loki whimpered. “He’s my family.
He’s my only family.”

Stephen groaned and leaned his forehead against his folded hands. “Then you ought to not be pointing out your possible connection to him, Loki, because I think you can appreciate that it does sound a great deal like conspiracy,” he said at length, looking back up and pinning Loki with a serious stare. Loki was quiet, biting his lip and staring back with a gleam of silent fear still in his eyes. “… So since we are not going to talk about this any further, now or ever, let us please move on,” Stephen said firmly. “… I think I may have some ideas for caretakers. I’ll look into the matter.”

“… Thank you,” Loki whispered, gaze falling to the edge of Stephen’s desk, shoulders going slack with relief.

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Doom Valley remained hot and arid as ever, with a few scattered tumbleweeds caught against fences or rolling around the feet of dust-devils. Storyteller had opted to wear a hat this time, partly because when in Rome: dress like a cowboy! but mostly to shadow his face and avoid the same misunderstandings his last visit had provoked.

He arrived as close to the sheriff’s station as possible, without causing a commotion by teleporting in front of the mundane populace, and only earned a few second glances as he walked the rest of the way. Within the dusky interior of the station, one James Buchanan Barnes was arguing with a scruffy man in the little jail cell while Sheriff Steve Rogers was writing at his desk.

“Y’all got no proof Ah was tryin’ t’ steal no cows!” the jail bird was protesting. “That trap weren’t for cows! See, there’s this cougar been prowlin’—”

“There ain’t no cougar, Petruski,” Deputy Barnes sighed, rolling his eyes. “Nobody’s heard no cougars, nobody’s livestock’s been took by no cougars—”

“Ah heard it! There is a cougar! Ah swear! Ah weren’t stealin’ no cows!”

“Sheriff Rogers?” Storyteller called, stepping into the room.

The sheriff looked up and shock played across his face for a second or two before smoothing out into recognition. “Special Agent,” he said with a nod. “You... made progress in your investigation?” he asked, standing up and nodding politely.

“I believe so,” Storyteller agreed, biting his lip a little doubtfully. “Although, it would seem that the... matter is a bit larger than I’d originally understood,” he said, walking toward the sheriff’s desk, and pulling out his picture file, modified into a string-bound album of tintypes and lithographs. “I was wondering if you might have a look and see whether you can identify the assailant who came here to Timely.”

“Of course, yeah,” Sheriff Rogers nodded, accepting the book and setting it down on his desk as Storyteller settled into the wooden chair across from him. The sheriff slowly poured over the photographs within, frown getting deeper with each page he turned. “… They all have the same face,” he murmured and then shook his head. “Even the woman looks...”

Storyteller sighed. “Oh. Yes. I of course didn’t think she was likely to have been the intruder here in Timely, but I’ve confirmed she was part of the... problem.”

Sheriff Rogers looked up at him with a grim frown. “... What’m Ah lookin’ at here, Agent?” he asked quietly.
Storyteller pursed his lips for a moment, feigning debate, and then glanced over his shoulder to where Deputy Barnes was pretending to be otherwise occupied while his arrestee was listening with blatant curiosity. He gave ‘Petruski’ a look and then leaned across Sheriff Roger’s desk and spoke in a soft voice. “An extended family of... an august but somewhat dissolute history. An old history... The primary ancestral line has recently been extinguished and where the rightful succession may lie has... become a matter of contention,” he explained carefully. He heaved a heavy sigh and rolled his eyes. “I think America rather has it right, cutting out all this... rotting shit that follows nobility.”

Sheriff Rogers nodded slowly, his countenance no less grim. “Is Vale in danger?” he whispered.

Storyteller pretended to consider the question carefully again. “... Do you know Sybil’s ancestry?” he asked.

“Scotch-Irish,” Sheriff Rogers replied.

Storyteller nodded. “Then I don’t think Vale would be considered to have any claim,” he said.

Sheriff Rogers looked equal parts relieved and offended. “That’s good,” he said, glancing down at the book again and drumming his fingers on the top of his desk. “... And you’re part of this... family. D’you have a stake?” he asked quietly, looking back up and studying Storyteller carefully.

“My grandfather might have,” Storyteller murmured with a small shrug. “I think I’m too far removed from the main line... And I don’t much care to make a claim on it. I’ve earned my place as apprentice of the Holy Eye through hard work, what would I want with some ancestral title?”

The sheriff nodded curtly, some of the grimness in his face giving way to a look of approval. He then looked back down at the book again and gave a small huff and a little shake of his head. “They all look so much alike, Ah’m not sure Ah could tell you which one Ah’d seen, if it were any of them at all.”

Storyteller straightened up again and nodded. “You mentioned that his clothing was distinctive though,” he noted. “Are any of these dressed like he was?”

Sheriff Rogers flipped back to the first page of the book and went over the pictures again slowly, considering each one carefully, before shaking his head. “No. Not even close,” he decided at last.

Sighing, Storyteller nodded again and reached out to accept the book as Sheriff Rogers handed it back. “All right, then there’s every possibility he’s still at large. These are the ones I’ve managed to arrest or who have killed each other already,” he said, tucking the book under his arm. “I’m not sure how many more of them are playing this... sick game. Some hide it very well, like the young woman,” he noted, tapping his finger against the book.

There was a creak of hinges and Storyteller turned slightly to see the son, Vale, taking one step past the threshold and stopping, a hand keeping hold of the door with a distinct air of impatience as he locked his eyes on Storyteller. “Is the bastard dead?” he asked.

“I’m sorry,” Storyteller said, rising to his feet. “I’ve made progress, but I was just confirming with Sheriff Rogers, none of the men I’ve taken into custody are the one who came here.”

Vale pressed his lips thin and gave a sharp nod, then stepped back out onto the porch, letting the door swing shut. “Master Vale, your family--” Storyteller called, starting after him.

“We’re fine,” Vale tossed back, striding out into the street without a backward glance.

Storyteller watched the youth go, biting his lip and feeling his gut clench. “You’re not gonna get
much more out of him,” Sheriff Rogers sighed, leaning his elbows against the desk. “Vale’s always been a bit short with words. Laughlin were such a talker, might’ve been hard for the boy t’ fit a word in around him.”

Storyteller nodded slowly. “Are they doing all right?” he asked.

“Business ‘s boomin’,” the sheriff shrugged, looking a little helpless. “The boy and his mother ’ve kept the chandlery runnin’ like nothin’ happened, and they keep sellin’ down to bare shelves. Ah’d say folks in town ‘re usin’ twice ’s many candles as ever. They know Sibyl won’t take any charity.”

Storyteller nodded, that mournful tug of guilt and loss pulling at his heart for a wife that he’d never really met, who had never really been his, an estranged child who had hated a father who wasn’t really him. “Was Laughlin a good man?” Storyteller asked quietly.

“Well... Ah wouldn’t play poker with him, but he was funny,” Sheriff Rogers offered a melancholy smile. “Truth told, Sibyl’s the one ever’body loves. Many hearts was broken the day she got married. An’ plenty of fellas askin’ after the poor widow now.”

“Decent ones, I hope.”

“Ah’ve no doubt Vale’ll chase out any indecent ones ’for they get much past the door,” Sheriff Rogers’s smile got a little warmer. “Boy’s right terrifyin’ when he takes to temper.”

“Good,” Storyteller smiled.

Chapter End Notes

Crowd-source time again! Let’s play name-that-Domain!

I think it was mentioned somewhere in Secret Wars (although damned if I can find where that reference was now) that Battleworld is slightly bigger than Earth. So taking that into account, overlay the official map of Battleworld over a map of the Earth, and the domains of Battleworld are huge! Furthermore, we know from the Korvac and Captain Britain tie-ins that The City has at least 4 domains inside of it and we know from Squadron Sinister that Utopolis has 5 domains inside of it. THUS! It seems safe to assume based on this information that other regions are also divided into sub-domains, and maybe the borders marked on the map represent the 8-years-later power-structure more than the literal domains. THUS! For the purposes of this fic, I want to further devide up the map with more sub-domains and ex-worlds. I would also probably turn what the official map marks as ‘Doomgard’ into something else, because the Secret Wars comics pretty clearly indicate that Doomgard is a floating island, and not part of the continent. THUS! I am now asking for suggestions from the audience! Either suggest your favorite canonical alternate universes or conceits for invented ones, and don’t forget to give them a Battleworld country name!

And I’m feeling cartoony this week, help me think of names for cartoon-verse domains. Let’s throw the current cartoon-verse (the one with Ultimate Spider-Man and that Avengers cartoon that’s so much lamer than the other Avengers cartoon it may or may not be a sequel to) and X-Men Evolution. 90’s-verse is already in there, all the 90s cartoons were all the same official universe (Earth-92131), so assume that whatever
survived from any of those is in Westchester Domain. And... that's probably all. The Wolverine and the X-Men cartoon didn't have it's own gimmick to distinguish it (other than four X-23s, best 30 seconds of the show.) And honestly, I don't think I can handle watching the 60s and 70s cartoons sober, I just don't have it in me, so I don't think I could write to any of them. Although Spider-Man and His Amazing Friends is one of the very best get-drunk-with-your-best-friends-and-watch-bad-cartoons shows there is...

And in the way of notes relevant to this chapter:

So I originally wrote the second chapter of this fic before the 1872 mini-series started its run. I was writing pretty much just based on the teaser-blurb about it. Anyway, I wrote Steve with a pretty strong dialect, reasoning that he would be smart but very folksy, but when 1872 was released a couple weeks later, it turned out that nobody spoke in dialect at all, probably because Duggan just didn't want to deal with the hassle (and it really is a hassle). I've decided to stay the course because cowboy-Steve is cute.

Concerning names: Originally, when I made Timely-Sigyn's name 'Sybil', it was me thinking "what's a similar sounding name that you actually hear in America?" and I've only recently discovered how wonderfully serendipitous my choice was as I've been reading Reginald Scot during downtime the last few weeks (background research for 1602-verse) and have found out that 'Sybil' was one of the names used to refer to witches back in old-timey-times. My perfect name-selection in this case is coincidental but awesome. As for finally getting around to naming Timely-Loki: Though I know that there are real live people named Loki around (I work in Seattle's little-Norway neighborhood, so I even meet some of them now and again), I'm liking to give the human-variant Loki's less godly names. Luke was so obvious and easy Marvel's already used it canonically (in the Exiled mini-series), but I decided I didn't want to reuse it, so I went digging around expecting-parents websites with name-dictionaries and found this utter gem: "Pronounced LOCK-lin, Laughlin was the name the Irish gave to the invading Vikings." SCORE! That's probably his last name though; it would have been common in this time-period for adults to refer to each other by last-name only, although maybe a little less so in the 'western frontier' where life was a bit less formal.

Oh, and the guy in jail was Trapster. He was totally trying to steal cows.
Vantage Point

Chapter Summary

“The most wonderful part of everybody being unique is that nobody is a mistake. Nobody is too big or too small,” she said, cupping Serrure’s jaw and stroking her thumb against his cheek. “Everybody here is exactly what they’re supposed to be, and none of them were born ‘wrong’.”

“That’s beautiful,” a voice commented from above, sounding more amused than moved. Storyteller glanced up at a young woman seated on top of a food-truck, eating something wrapped in a tortilla. “Baby’s first time to the city?” she asked, tilting her head and smirking down at Serrure.

Chapter Notes

This Chapter Guest Staring:

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“That lady’s purple!” Serrure exclaimed in a stage-whisper, eyebrows lifted high as he looked all around the street. “That man has buggy-antenna! That man has a tail! Everybody’s different! Everybody’s all different!” He looked up at Storyteller with an excited grin, clinging to her arm.

“Yes they are, Lamb,” Storyteller agreed, crouching down to his eye level and petting a hand through his hair. “And do you know what the most wonderful part of it is?”

Serrure bit his lip, seeming to think for a moment. “It’s not boring?” he tried.

Storyteller laughed. “The most wonderful part of everybody being unique is that nobody is a mistake. Nobody is too big or too small,” she said, cupping Serrure’s jaw and stroking her thumb against his cheek. “Everybody here is exactly what they’re supposed to be, and none of them were born ‘wrong’.”

“That’s beautiful,” a voice commented from above, sounding more amused than moved. Storyteller glanced up at a young woman seated on top of a food-truck, eating something wrapped in a tortilla. “Baby’s first time to the city?” she asked, tilting her head and smirking down at Serrure.
“Yes, we live in a very rural area,” Storyteller agreed, straightening up and getting a better look at the woman. She was sitting cross-legged and looking quite relaxed on her perch, and the truck owner seemed either content or resigned with her presence on his roof. She had short, dark hair and a large, red spider motif emblazoned across her chest. “That’s a most intriguing outfit you have,” Storyteller said, noting that the body-suit didn’t really look like fabric and where it gave way to skin at her neck wasn’t hemmed so much as rippling and seething like the surface of a boiling liquid.

“Isn’t it though? The hottest in semi-intelligent-alien-life-form couture,” the woman grinned.

“Well that does sound expensive.”

“To hear some people tell it, it only costs your immortal soul,” she rolled her eyes and wrinkled her nose.

“Oh my, I certainly hope that’s an old wives’ tale,” Storyteller said.

“Or maybe some people just aren’t willing to make the necessary sacrifices to be this fabulous,” the woman preened and then grinned and shrugged. “Nah, don’t worry. Dads just never approve of how ‘the kids are dressing these days’.”

Storyteller chuckled and turned as she felt a hand land gently on her shoulder. “Hi,” she said, smiling at Paradise-Loki as they smiled back then glanced momentarily down at Serrure before looking back up at her and raising a curious eyebrow.

“Is this your secret-family, Loki? Do you have a secret-family?” the woman on top of the food-truck asked.

Paradise-Loki grimaced and let out a put-upon sigh. “What has led you to believe that that would be any of your business?” they demanded, casting a mild glare up at her.

“Come ooooon, you can tell me. I’m great at keeping secrets,” the woman grinned, swallowing the last of her meal and crawling to the edge of the roof.

“No, Miss Parker, you are not,” Paradise-Loki corrected. “And I do not have a ‘secret-family’.”

Storyteller laughed and wrapped herself around Paradise-Loki’s arm. “We could totally be your secret-family!” she said.

“Don’t encourage her,” Paradise-Loki cast her a withering look. “Come on, let’s go somewhere better to talk,” they suggested, tugging Storyteller away from the food-truck.

“Oh? What makes you think I have something to talk about?” Storyteller chuckled, holding out her hand for Serrure. “Come along, Lamb.”


Behind them, the woman climbed to her feet on top of the food truck. “Your girlfriend’s cute, Loki!” she called loudly after them.

Paradise-Loki grimaced and turned back. “Do you not have someone else to harass, Miss Parker?!” they demanded.

“Aw, buddy, I always have time for youuuu!”

Paradise-Loki made an irritated sound in their throat and continued the journey away from their
heckler. “... Spider-Woman?” Storyteller asked, glancing back over her shoulder to where the truck-owner seemed to be expressing concern that the young woman’s upright stance might dent his roof.

“No, she takes offense to being called that. Says she doesn’t believe in ‘dynastic naming’,” Paradise-Loki gave a slight shrug.

“Oh well now I’m offended,” Storyteller said.

“... The child?” Paradise-Loki murmured, glancing down at Serrure again.

“Proper introductions to be made in a less public setting,” Storyteller replied quietly.

Paradise-Loki nodded, twining their hand with hers. “Follow me,” they said, slipping between the pages as Storyteller pulled herself and Serrure into their wake, and a moment later they were stepping into a rooftop garden. No, not actually a rooftop; it was the side of a building in the part of the city that had been upturned. Most of its neighbors had crumbled, destabilized by their new orientation, but this one had apparently been built solid enough to survive, and the upward side had been covered with shallow raised-beds, planters, and scattered patio furniture.

“This is nice...” Storyteller noted, taking in the urban pea-patch and the city stretched out a few hundred yards below as Paradise-Loki looked around, apparently confirming that they were alone.

“The gardens have been difficult to keep growing in Battleworld. I assume it’s the lack of sunlight,” Paradise-Loki said softly, walking over to a decorative bench and settling there, their eyes finally lighting on Serrure for longer than a second and taking the time to study him.

Storyteller led Serrure over to stand in front of them and put her hands on his little shoulders as he leaned back against her, biting his lip with a touch of shy anxiety. “This is Serrure. My little uncle,” she said, smiling warmly down at him.

“Uncle?” Paradise-Loki asked, raising an eyebrow and glancing up at her.

“I told you about the twins,” Storyteller reminded. “The covetous magpie and the sacrificial lamb.”

Paradise-Loki nodded slowly, looking back at Serrure. “A sacrifice which has somehow been thwarted?” they asked.

“More like redacted,” Storyteller tilted her head and gave a little shrug. “I saw an opportunity and I took it.” She let go of Serrure’s shoulders and walked over to sit down next to Paradise-Loki, holding her arms out to Serrure.

“An opportunity?” Paradise-Loki asked curiously, watching as Serrure let himself be pulled into Storyteller’s lap and leaned against her, studying Paradise-Loki with as much curiosity as he was being studied.

“Moments before the final wave hit, the timeline fractured. Causality broke down,” Storyteller explained softly.

“Allowing you to steal from the past without endangering your own existence,” Paradise-Loki finished, nodding and looking Serrure over in careful detail. “... And the magpie?” they asked after a moment, eyes flicking up to Storyteller’s face.

“I haven’t found him yet,” Storyteller said, then bit her lip, brow pinching slightly. “And... I don’t quite understand why he hasn’t found me,” she whispered. “He should have come looking for Verity. His magic and whatnot are strong enough, he should have kept some sense of self despite the
Paradise-Loki was quiet for a moment, watching her. “You have some idea. A theory,” they noted.

“... I’ve been wondering... if he’s too sad,” Storyteller mumbled, hugging Serrure a little more tightly and leaning her cheek against his hair. “... If he’s too depressed... If he decided to stay away because he believes Verity’s better off without him... Just like Billy and the others...”

“If so, it’s conceivable that he’s deliberately avoiding you,” Paradise-Loki said, eyes turning toward the ground.

“If he even knows I exist,” Storyteller sighed.

“If he saw you. Perhaps with Verity...” Paradise-Loki’s voice was quieter, slightly reluctant.

“... And thought he’d been replaced,” Storyteller whispered in horror, stomach clenching and cold, emotion starting to prickle at her eyes.

“It’s only one possibility. It doesn’t even merit being called a probability. It’s just possible, not necessarily likely,” Paradise-Loki tried to logic-reassure her, putting a hand gently against the back of her neck and leaning closer to her.

“I need to find him...” Storyteller whispered, adjusting her arms around Serrure as he hugged her.

“You will. I have no doubt,” Paradise-Loki assured her, brushing their fingers back through her hair and kissing her temple. Storyteller sighed shakily and leaned into them.

Serrure started getting fidgety, fingers gripping at a handful of Storyteller’s jacket as he began to watch Paradise-Loki with a slightly suspicious and cool air. “Does he get a special name too?” he asked after the quiet had stretched out beyond his comfort.

“‘They’,” Storyteller corrected.

“Does they get a special name too?”

“A special name?” Paradise-Loki asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Well, it would get a bit confusing with two ‘Lokis’ in the house, wouldn’t it?” Storyteller explained with a little smirk. “So we have my sweet ‘Serrure’, and I’m going by ‘Storyteller’ now.”

“‘Storyteller’,” Paradise-Loki repeated, lip twitching and a hint of a grimace wrinkling their nose.

“You don’t like it,” she noted.

“I’ve had some... regrettable dealings with storytellers,” Paradise-Loki replied, looking away.

“As has my line, which is why I stole the pen,” Storyteller pointed out. “So it suits me. It is me. It is what I make of myself.”

Paradise-Loki glanced back at her, sour look melting into a soft smile. “It does,” they agreed, and then glanced down at Serrure. “And so I need a second name too?” they asked, looking slightly amused by the notion.

“Well, I’ve been meeting an awful lot of Lokis lately, so I’ve mostly been thinking of them by region-name,” Storyteller explained with a shrug. “‘Arcadia-Loki’ and ‘Marville-Loki’ and ‘Metropolis-Loki’ et cetera.”
“And that makes me ‘Paradise-Loki’?” they asked, raising an eyebrow.

“It sounds quite complimentary out of context, doesn’t it?” Storyteller noted with a grin.

“From the Greek for ‘walled garden’, Paradise-Loki replied, smirking.

“Well, you seem to have a garden stuck to a wall, now don’t you?” Storyteller laughed.

“Hm, so I do,” they chuckled and then bit their lip, tilting their head back and seeming to think. “... What about ‘Peripeteia’, from the same Greek root.”

Storyteller grinned so broadly it was almost painful. “I love it. I really love it,” she said. “And of course you know I shall call you ‘Perry’.”

“Oh... dear,” Perry sighed, shaking their head and looking somewhere between amused and resigned. “Then maybe I ought to be thinking of some diminutive, ‘cute’ short-name to get back at you... ‘Telly’? ‘Tillie’?”

Storyteller laughed. “Well if that goes and turns into ‘Tubby’ I might be obliged to slap you.”

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“‘Well-behaved’ might be overstating, given who we’re talking about, but I believe he is polite in any event,” Stephen said calmly as he sorted reports from inquiries from intervention-requests at his desk. He heard a dispassionate huff. “And he is in legitimate danger. This isn’t just a fluff assignment,” Stephen pointed out and received an unimpressed snort in reply.

There was a knock and Stephen glanced up, feeling somewhat relieved. He gestured and the doors opened themselves, revealing Loki in a 1930s-style women’s business suit and matching hat; the feeling of relief faded in favor of irritation. “Loki,” he greeted.

“Serrure is in the garden, playing frisbee with the kiddies,” Loki said cheerfully, walking toward the desk. “I’ve been checking in with a few of my friends and witnesses around and confirmed that I definitely have at least one unfriendly still unaccounted for, so the search continues. I’m debating how best to tackle that now that I’ve gotten most of the easy ones out of the way. I’m thinking it might be time to go to a grid-search strategy,” she came to a stop in front of the desk and gave a little shrug. “I was trying to decide whether I want to go with the most straightforward sweep from one coast to the other, or maybe nautilus-spiral out from England. You know, secure the home-front first and work out from there.”

“Either strategy would have its merits,” Stephen agreed. “And as far as the matter of the boy, I have made some arrangements.” With a flapping of leathery wings, a small, purple body launched itself from Stephen’s bookshelf and landed on the front of his desk, looking up at Loki.

Loki’s eyes brightened, her lips pulled apart into a toothy grin and she waved her hands giddily. With a sudden swell of horror, Stephen became utterly positive she was about to squeal ‘baby dragon’.

“Lockheed!” Loki squealed.

Stephen stared at her. Lockheed sat up straighter and tilted his head to the side, apparently equally surprised. “You... have met?” Stephen asked, slightly confused, as Loki offered her arm and Lockheed jumped to it, walking up and settling himself around her shoulders.

“No, but he’s the bestest and cutest little X-Man ever!” Loki said happily, fingers trailing lightly over
his tail as it curled in front of her.

“Loki, he’s intelligent!” Stephen snapped.

“I know! He’s smarter and prettier than a magical dragon!” Loki grinned, scratching under Lockheed’s chin as he leaned into her fingers and purred. “Aren’t you, cutie?”

Stephen glanced between Loki and Lockheed for a few moments, baffled. Lockheed seemed to be taking her words at face value and didn’t appear offended however. “All right...” Stephen said, trying to regain his train of thought. “Lockheed is one of the Foundation’s field agents. After some recent tensions, Valeria and I both thought some time working with another department might be in order.”

Loki raised an eyebrow. “What kind of tensions get you furloughed but not kicked over the wall?” she wondered.

Stephen sighed. “Valeria believes that everyone has wanted to set Bentley Whitman’s hair on fire at one time or another.”

“Awwahaha!” Loki crooned, grinning sideways at Lockheed. “You’re going to be a terrible babysitter, aren’t you?”

Lockheed huffed out a little puff of smoke in reply.

“Lockheed is an accomplished fighter and highly adept strategist. Provided with a teleporter capable of delivering himself and the boy to Doomstadt in the event of an emergency, I believe he will be able to provide adequate protection to your ward,” Stephen said.

“Well that’s delightful!” Loki said, rubbing her thumb down his scaly neck. “Am I to drop Serrure off with him here?” she asked.

“Lockheed will be residing with you for the duration of his mission,” Stephen replied.

“Even easier then,” Loki grinned.

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“Well this shall make things much simpler!” Storyteller lied, smiling blithely as she reappeared back in her house, Lockheed’s weight balanced on her shoulders while he peered down at Serrure and Serrure looked back up at him. “Do you have any dietary restrictions I ought to know about, Lockheed?” she asked cheerfully, strolling into the kitchen. Lockheed took leave of her shoulder and flapped over to the table, setting his little travel-bag down and digging out a mini-tablet.

“Are you an omnivore?” Storyteller asked, opening the fridge and pulling out a plastic container. “Tuna-salad sandwiches okay for lunch?” Lockheed looked up at her and gave a nod, then looked down at his tablet again and started poking away at the display. Storyteller collected bread and went about assembling sandwiches as she processed the situation carefully. She hadn’t had a moment to speak to Serrure out of Lockheed’s earshot, and explain to him the-things-we-don’t-talk-about-in-public applied to the dragon’s presence as well, but Serrure had been quiet so far, clearly in his watch-and-listen defensive mode.

As she was spreading tuna-salad across bread, trying to decide on the most plausible time to get Serrure alone, a synthesized voice suddenly broke the tense quiet. “You called me an X-Man.”

Storyteller looked up and stared at Lockheed, who was looking back at her, hunched in front of his
tablet. “... So I did,” Storyteller agreed cautiously.

Lockheed looked down and started typing away, and then looked up as the tablet spoke again, “You are immune to Doom’s memory-dampening technology that keeps the Earthlings from remembering their homes?”

“... Yes,” Storyteller nodded slowly. “Do you know something about that technology?”

Lockheed shook his head and typed again. “It was not created by the Foundation. I believe it belongs to Doom and Strange and is likely magical in nature.”

“Agreed,” Storyteller said. “And my own magical nature is likely one of the primary reasons I’m resistant to it... Which makes me quite puzzled as to your own immunity, I didn’t think you were magical.”

Lockheed shook his head again. “I hypothesize that it has been designed for humans. It may also hold sway over other mammals with similar brain-structures. I do not have a similar brain structure.”

“... Fair enough,” Storyteller murmured.

Lockheed studied her for a while and then leaned over and typed again. “You are from the same universe as Doom and Strange?”

“Yes,” Storyteller nodded.

“But neither of you are the Loki whom the X-Men of that Earth were in conflict with several years ago,” he noted.

“Correct,” Storyteller agreed.

“Yet you are familiar with me.”

“I have... inherited memories. The Loki you met back then had a passing curiosity for the X-Men, but the two that followed him were quite fascinated by them,” Storyteller explained. “And both were inclined to spend a great deal of time internet-researching all things that struck their fancy.”

“What is your fascination with the X-Men?” Lockheed asked, looking from Storyteller to Serrure, who was clinging to the other side of the island-counter, staring back at the little dragon.

“... Loki was born in Jotenheim. To frost-giants. He was severely undersized and his features were... off,” Storyteller explained carefully. “He was a genetic anomaly. Unique. Considered a shameful deformity by his biological-father.” She bit her lip for a moment, trying to parse out something she’d never attempted to explain before. “The X-Men fascinate us because... they aren’t ashamed of themselves.”

“You look human.”

“We’re polymorphic,” Storyteller said. “It’s very limited, not like skrulls or some of the notorious mutant metamorphs, but we have a small library of forms that are ‘true’ to us.”

Lockheed nodded and paused for a moment, then typed something quick. “I am here to spy on you.”

Storyteller blew out an irritated snort. “Of course you are.”

“These sort of things do not always have to imply a personal mistrust or betrayal by either the
“commissioner or agent,” Lockheed typed quickly away at his tablet. “In the past, I informed upon people I loved because I knew them to be so proud and distrusting of outsiders that they would refuse to ask for help which they were in desperate need of. I believe there is a strong possibility several of them would have died, had I not gone behind their back in this way.”

Storyteller frowned slightly, tilting her head. “So you’re saying that Stephen is just trying to look out for me and I shouldn’t be angry with him?”

“Strange did not commission me. It was Valeria,” Lockheed replied. “But whether he has actually been told or simply surmised, I have no doubt that Strange is well aware of my purpose.”

Storyteller sighed and leaned her hands against the counter, studying the smooth granite and chewing on her lip. “... And I’m betting you weren’t supposed to tell me any of that,” she said quietly.

“I was not.”

“Does Stephen know that you remember Earth?”

“He does not.”

“Did you really light Bentley Whitman’s hair on fire?”

“I singed it. He made me angry.”

Storyteller finished building the sandwiches. She handed a plate to Serrure and walked over to the table with two more. She watched Lockheed rip a corner off of his sandwich as she settled herself. After a few minutes of quiet, she asked, “What’s your political-religious take on the recent happenings of life, the universe and everything?”

Lockheed paused for a moment and then set his sandwich bit down and typed at his tablet again. “That you and I and many others are alive now is due to the intervention of Doom. If anything gives a man the right to call himself God, it is his ability to save lives. However, this world is not well. It is ill. It is wrong.” He picked up his bit of sandwich again and went back to eating.

“... Is there anything to be done about that though? Is there any way to fix it?” Storyteller asked softly, watching him. Lockheed looked back at her and shrugged. Storyteller sighed, leaning her elbows on the table and glancing at Serrure. “Dragon-nanny is very chatty but not very helpful,” she noted.

Lockheed huffed out a tiny fireball. She wasn’t sure if he was annoyed or amused.

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Serrure ran down the street as fast as he could and Lockheed kept perfect pace with him. He skidded around a corner and ducked into an alley, and Lockheed banked through the air effortlessly and refused to be shaken. Serrure scrambled up a garden wall and ran along the top of it as Lockheed flew beside him, making scolding sounds and giving him a glare. He jumped down, breaking his plummet upon a rubbish heap before taking off at a break-neck run again, Lockheed chasing after him undaunted.

Serrure finally skidded to a stop and leaned against a wall for support as he panted. After a minute, he looked up at the dragon, perched on a post above him, and grinned. “You are very fast,” he noted. Lockheed scoffed.

Once he’d caught his breath, Serrure pushed himself away from the wall and waved to Lockheed.
“This way. We have to sneak in, since kids aren’t supposed go there,” he said, making his way down another alley and dragged a few empty palates into a teetering, precarious heap, which he climbed up while Lockheed scolded him vehemently. Serrure managed to catch hold of a high sill just as his makeshift ladder collapsed out from under him, and struggled and squirmed his way through the open pivot-window with Lockheed chirping and clucking anxiously at him.

As ever, there was enough stuff piled against the walls inside for Serrure to tumble his way down without hurting himself. Lockheed followed him, making a low, throaty, nervous-sound as Serrure dusted himself off and crept quietly into the factory. He skillfully avoided the workers he knew would kick him out if they caught him and made his way to where his presence would be tolerated.

“Wilson!” Serrure hissed as he came to his friend’s workstation.

Wilson paused his work and turned sharply. “Loki,” he said, a slight smile tugging at one side of his mouth. “What are you doing back here?”

“Storyteller’s talking to the King because she’s telling him that the monster’s been caught and he’s gone now,” Serrure explained, standing carefully to the side where he could talk to Wilson without getting in his way. “She said I could bring Lockheed and come visit you.”

“Lockheed?” Wilson gave the dragon a curious look as he landed on Serrure’s shoulder and curled around behind his neck, settling there and looking back at Wilson.

“He’s gonna protect me when Storyteller has to go to work,” Serrure explained. “He’s a very very smart dragon.”

“I see,” Wilson nodded, looking curious as he put the piece he was working on back into the coals and pumped his bellows. “And so the sorcerer who attacked you the other day has been arrested?”

“Yes. He turned into a wolf and broke the window and the fairies got angry and then a lady with red-red hair helped Storyteller beat him up and then she took him to God Doom and then he tried to get me again right there in the palace and so God Doom turned him into a statue because he was very disrespectful,” Serrure explained in a long breath. “And then Storyteller bought me ice cream and took me to the beach.”

Wilson nodded slowly as he started working again. “That... is good. So are you happy so far, living with your sister?”

“She’s not really my sister,” Serrure said, chewing his lip guiltily.

Wilson looked up sharply, frowning. “Who is she, Loki?”

“She said ‘sister’ is easier for most people to understand because most people’s families aren’t as messy as ours,” Serrure explained, shuffling his feet. “But you’re very smart, so I don’t think you’d get confused.”

“Who is she, Loki?” he asked again.

“She’s my niece.”

Wilson paused for a moment and then nodded slowly. “Ah. Yes. I suppose ‘sister’ would uncomplicate most introductions,” he said.

“She calls me ‘Serrure’, and sometimes ‘Lamb’,” Serrure said, he watched the sparks begin to fly from Wilson’s hammer as he started working again, trying to identify the half-formed shape. “And
we live in a cottage in the woods and I can hear lots and lots of birds outside.”

Wilson smiled faintly. “This is in Manhattan?” he asked.

“No. God Doom said I’m not allowed to live in Manhattan, so Storyteller moved to England and got the cottage. I think she lived in a flat before, like Verity,” Serrure explained.

“Verity?”

“Verity is Storyteller’s friend. She eats supper with us. She’s very serious.”

Wilson paused, frowning softly. “She lives in Manhattan and eats supper with you in England?” he asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Oh.” Serrure bit his lip and ran his hands, mentally scolding himself. “... That’s supposed to be a secret. I’m not supposed to say that,” he mumbled.

“Well, you said it in a very noisy place and you didn’t say it too loudly,” Wilson offered a small smirk.

“Yeah,” Serrure agreed. “Don’t tell, okay? She’s not hurting anything and I don’t want Storyteller to get in trouble. She only moved away from Verity to take care of me. So- So it’s my fault. But Verity’s not hurting anything. So don’t tell, okay?”

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” Wilson assured him.

Chapter End Notes

*Peripeteia/Peripety
noun
a sudden reversal of fortune or change in circumstances, especially in reference to fictional narrative.

Para/Peri is surround or around, Peripeteia is literally 'falling around' (as in a 180), so that's how the words are related even though their figurative meanings sound completely unrelated.

Having a bit more trouble coming up with a name for Arcadia-Loki. Nothing jumped out at me for her like Peripeteia did, but I've tried building something out of ancient Norse word-bits, here's two possibilities I'm toying with for her:

Véldís
combination of vél ('artifice') and dís ('lady' or 'goddess')

Myrkenna
combination of myrkr ('dark' or 'darkness') and kenna ('to know'/to perceive')

Keeping in mind that I have not taken a class in Scandinavian languages, I think I've got the grammar/word-structure right, but I'm not positive. Thoughts/suggestions would be welcome.

Lockheed is Kitty Pryde 616’s familiar/sidekick. He is an alien-critter of human-level intelligence that looks like a cat-sized dragon. He also has very cattish mannerisms about his body-language (when he's not deliberately mimicking human gestures) and does not
seem to mind being touched like a cat. In the Starlord and Kitty Pryde Secret Wars tie-in, it is noted that Kitty works as a field agent for the Foundation, but Lockheed 616 seems to have vanished without a trace at the start of Secret Wars (has not shown up since it ended either). For those mostly familiar with other-universe versions of Kitty Pryde, the original Earth-616 Kitty is very much a brainy nerd-girl, and it is not a big leap of logic to have her working on the periphery of the Foundation.

Wilson accepts the claim of Serrure being Storyteller's uncle, as well as the fact that it's being glossed over, because even by human standards, that would not be an impossible situation but it might tend to be a slightly embarrassing one, since in real-world examples, that sort of generation spread generally happens when one or two generations of males in the family are the kind of ganky old sugar-daddies that keep getting older while their new brides keep being the same age.
There is a dragon on the table.

Chapter Summary

“Loki, there is a dragon on the table!” Verity spat out.

“I know, isn’t he adorable?” Loki replied with a bright grin.

“Why is there a dragon on the table?” Verity demanded.

“He’s the new nanny!” Loki replied without a trace of irony.

Chapter Notes

Appearing this chapter:

Striker
Brandon Sharpe

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Verity stood in the kitchen doorway frowning as Loki set the table around a steaming pan of lasagna and Serrure cleared a few books and papers away, stacking them on the corner of the counter. She fidgeted with the bottle of syrah in her hands, frown deepening into a grimace as Loki pulled a stack of warm plates out of the oven and distributed them. She shifted on her feet and bit her lip as Serrure lit the little votive candle in a tinted glass.

“Loki, there is a dragon on the table!” she spat out at last.

“I know, isn’t he adorable?” Loki replied with a bright grin.

“Why is there a dragon on the table?” Verity demanded.

“He’s the new nanny!” Loki replied without a trace of irony.

The dragon looked at her and snorted out a puff of smoke.

“I think he prefers ‘body guard’, ” Serrure noted and the dragon nodded.

“But ‘nanny’ sounds cuter,” Loki pouted.

“... You hired a tiny dragon to watch Serrure...” Verity wasn’t really sure why she was surprised.
“Stephen hired him, he works for the Foundation. But after some discussion, I think it’s going to be a good fit,” Loki said cheerfully, pulling glasses out of the cabinet. “Verity, this is Lockheed. Lockheed, Verity. Do you want some wine, Lockheed?”

The dragon cocked his head to the side slightly and then held up his tiny hands, close together; indicating something small?

“A little glass?” Loki guessed.

The dragon nodded. Okay, so he clearly understood English. And communicated with charades.

“I want some,” Serrure said, hanging on the island-counter.

“No,” Verity frowned at him.

“A little bit won’t hurt him,” Loki said as she pushed the cabinet shut, hands somewhat overloaded with various shapes and sizes of glasses. “Let’s see if he likes it,” she smirked and winked as she turned to walk around the counter so that Verity could see her expression while Serrure just saw the back of her head.

Verity poured her own glass and then handed the bottle to Loki, who filled a shot-glass for the dragon and then put a tablespoon or so into the bottom of a wine glass and handed it to Serrure. Verity felt the corner of her lips twitching upwards as she watched Serrure swig the syrah and then try very hard not to look upset. “Do you like it, Lamb?” Loki asked as she filled her own glass.

“... It’s sour,” Serrure said rather poutily.

“Do you want apple juice?” Loki asked, smiling as she set the bottle down.

“... Yes,” Serrure mumbled, sucking in his lip.

Once they were all settled and the meal properly begun, Verity raised an eyebrow at Loki pointedly. “So. The dragon,” she prompted.

“Lockheed,” Loki reminded her. “He is not actually a dragon-dragon, he is an extra-terrestrial with intelligence comparable to a smart human and very competent martial abilities. Including fire-breathing,” she explained matter-o-factly. “He ran with the X-Men for several years, however he and his BFF were in the company of the Guardians of the Galaxy at the time of the cataclysm and since Doom’s Day he’s been an agent of the Foundation.”

Verity frowned. She’d thought that Loki avoided talking openly about ‘heretical’ pre-history matters when in the presence of, well, anybody else, especially one of Doom’s people. The dragon appeared similarly concerned; he had stopped eating and was making rambling chirping sounds, head cocked to the side, eyeing Loki.

“Verity’s with me,” Loki said, addressing the dragon. “Literally. I brought her to Battleworld after we both skipped out on that last incursion event. Her immunity to the amnesia is likely a byproduct of the method I used to transport her. You don’t need to worry though, she limits her contact with other people anyway and knows better than to talk about the mysteries of the non-universe.”

The dragon made a nervous little rumble in his throat and nodded reluctantly, picking up a tiny glob of lasagna and licking it off his hand. “It wouldn’t do much good trying to hide it from her anyway. She has truth-seeing powers. Nothing gets past her,” Loki said and the dragon tilted his head, seeming to consider, and shrugged.
“So he’s going to keep Serrure out of trouble while you’re hunting down the hunter-Lokus,” Verity tapped her fork against her lip, watching the strangely cute little creature.

“Well, keeping him entirely out of trouble is a bit too much to ask of anyone, isn’t it?” Loki grinned and bit her lip. “But he’ll be making sure my Lamb doesn’t get seriously injured.”

“And he remembers the real world too. Do all the Foundation members remember it?” Verity asked.

“No. The Storms certainly couldn’t or they would likely take issue with the current… structure of things,” Loki said, shaking her head. “Lockheed’s physiology is sufficiently removed from the genotype the amnesia is targeting that it’s not working on him. Although that is perhaps not a known fact in the upper ranks. Given how surprised Stephen and Doom were when I showed up unaffected, it would seem that they assumed the memory alterations had been effective across the board.”

Verity nodded slowly. “But the fact that Lockheed remembers might indicate that other non-humans remember too,” she mused.

“Well, yes and no,” Loki said, lips twisting and head tilting to the side a little. “See, human brains are not at all unique in structure. They’re made of all the same basic parts as a cat’s brain (for example) they’re just all in different proportions. It’s the size of the frontal lobe and pre-frontal cortex that are remarkable,” she explained. “So any mammal that evolved on Earth is going to be physiologically very close to a human in the larger scheme of things. And given that Doom and Stephen likely would have been concerned about the effectiveness on Inhumans, there’s every potential that it would also be keyed to affect genotypes of Halan origin as well.”

“Okay, so that’s two evolutionary-lines from two planets, out of a billion universes?” Verity pointed out. “How are people who remember what happened not coming out of the woodwork?”

“Because we’re not really dealing with all of a billion universes, we’re mostly just dealing with a lot of Earths,” Loki said. “Think about it like this: when you have a thousand-piece puzzle spread out across a table, the pieces you reach for are the ones that look like something. When Doom was grabbing bits and pieces to make Battleworld from, he grabbed the bits and pieces that were familiar, that he could identify.”

Verity processed that, looking down at her plate as she drew in the marinara sauce with her fork. “So Earth-parts are all that’s left, and the only ‘aliens’ here are the ones that were on Earth at the time?”

“That’s entirely possible,” Loki agreed. “And it’s not really all of Earth either. Battleworld is extremely Eurocentric. Europe and the United States. Doom lived most of his life back and forth between those two so they’re the places he knows best, where he’s going to find the landmarks and people that are most familiar to him. That’s why there are an awful lot of Thors and Lokis around here and not a whole lot of Quetzalcoats or Ameterasus. When Doom was scrabbling through the broken pieces, he grabbed the ones that he knew.”

“Weren’t there aliens besides Lockheed living on Earth though?” Verity asked, leaning her chin in her hand and looking at the dragon again.

“The vast majority were Kree and Kree-hybrids,” Loki replied. “And as noted, I think Stephen and Doom would have had the presence of mind to account for them because of the sheer number. Aside from that, there’s every possibility that any evolutionary chains following the Xorrian template would be subject to the same spells and whatnot that are targeting human minds. So that would take care of Skrulls and Shi’ar and anything ‘humanoid’. Lockheed’s set apart here because his body and evolutionary lineage are completely separate in every way from ‘us’.” She sighed, slumping forward a little, elbows on the table. “Lockheed was with the Guardians, which could mean some of them
made it through as well. The tanuki one is very mammalian, his planet might have been Xorrian influenced and just running the program a bit slower than Earth, but the ent one could easily be immune... assuming he survived.”

Verity pushed aside the ‘what the hell is a Xorrian’ conversation for some other time and studied the dragon quietly for a few moments. He’d finished his tiny portion of lasagna and was lapping occasionally at his wine and glancing between Loki, Verity and Serrure as the conversation went on, quiet and contemplative. “... So you’ve been here, knowing what happened, knowing everything that’s been destroyed, while everyone around you just goes blithely about their days, unaware that every single thing around them is a lie?” she asked softly and he tilted his head and side-eyed her, then nodded. “And you figured nobody else knew?” He looked unsure for a moment.

“You knew that Doom and Stephen knew,” Loki offered and the dragon nodded. “But you were concerned about what they might do if they realized that you knew.” He nodded again.

“That must have been torture,” Verity said quietly. The dragon glanced away and she could see the shoulders of his little, folded wings slump a bit.

“Lockheed used to be half of an inseparable heroic duo,” Loki noted. The dragon made a mournful little chirrup. “Miss Kathrine also ended up with the Foundation, but, perhaps the things that united you have been forgotten?” The dragon made a sad coo and set his empty glass down, pushing his plate to the side so he could curl his legs under him like a cat and lay his chin against the table. Loki reached over and petted him.

Serrure and Lockheed were building a puzzle on the coffee table while Storyteller had spread out her map and notes on the living room floor. She fussed about with a tape-measure and dividers, trying to partition the map. No sun meant latitude and longitude had no reason to exist, which necessitated her imposing a false grid upon the globe. Verity sat on the couch above her, watching her work, occasionally asking questions or offering advice.

“So, east, west or south first is the question...” Storyteller murmured, tossing aside her pencil once she’d finished the last longitudinal curve. “I’ve already got a handle on the desert (although maybe I should give it a more thorough search, given how big it is)... The Regency’s got me a bit worried because it’s mega-creepy, but apparently law and order are pretty absolute there, so the only thing I need to worry about is Baron Roman. I think I may ask for a Thor escort on that one...”

“What’s the deal with Baron Roman?” Verity asked.

“Oh, he’s some kind of super-powers science-vampire that’s ‘consumed’ all the local super population. Super creepy, super gross, super absolute-dictator,” Storyteller shrugged. “I might look tasty to him, so I think I’d like to have some big, official hammer-wielders flanking me. I’ll ask Masterson about that domain’s Thor and maybe arrange an official introduction to get the ‘don’t fuck with me’ point across to Roman.”

“Okay. And then, what, walk around that domain and see if you just happen to bump into another Loki?” Verity asked skeptically.

“Well, with that domain I wonder if Roman may have already gotten the native Loki, since he apparently got everybody else, ‘hero’ and ‘villain’ alike,” Storyteller explained with a sigh. “So I think my strategy there might be asking if he has a catalogue of the people he’s eaten.”

“Okay. Gross. But what about the other places? How, realistically, do you intend to actually find the
Lokis who are hiding from other Lokis?"

“I think-- I think if I get close to them, I can sort of feel them a little. Or feel their... ripples,” Storyteller leaned back against the foot of the couch. “I knew there was another Loki in Manhattan because it just kind of annoyed me, like something that’s just barely in your peripheral vision no matter how you turn your head.” She tilted her head back to look up at Verity. “Stories have a gravity to them. The narrative pulls one into their intended role if they’re too complacent. I think it’s that gravity that’s tugging at me. Like if I wander into another Loki’s story, that story starts trying to latch onto me.”

Verity frowned, her brow pinching with concern. “Is there a possibility their story could get into you? Affect your mind?”

“I don’t think so. If their Loki’s still available, the story’s not going to jump ship for me, it’s just sort of getting a little confused by me mucking about where I’m not supposed to be,” Storyteller said with a lopsided shrug.

Verity’s frown only deepened. “... Loki, you built a house and you’re living where another Loki is supposed to be. That means there’s a gap in the narrative for this story, right? And you stepped into that gap,” she said very seriously.

Storyteller was quiet for a while, considering that. “... You’re right, I need to account for that,” she decided after a while. “I shall have to look into the fairy king’s role in the local mythology and decide how to proceed from there... But perhaps more important than that, in this case, is to see that I stay firmly entrenched in my own story, which means staying diligent in my mission.”

“You’re sure?” Verity asked, raising an eyebrow.

“I’m sure that I need to make sure my story is more important and interesting than his story,” Storyteller replied. “And at this point I’m fairly certain that my story is bigger and more exciting. I mean, I’m hunting down evil serial-killer alternate-reality versions of myself. That is top-shelf material! There’s even sort of time-travel involved, if you consider all the weird time-zones between the different domains, and time-travel is the most consistently successful genre in Hollywood big-budget films.”

Verity sighed, rolling her eyes. “When you say stuff like that, it really sounds like you’re not taking it seriously, except that I know you seriously mean every word.”

“Well, I see the world with different mechanics and natural-laws than most people,” Storyteller smiled up at her.

“I know.”

“So the Regency is creepy and it might take a couple days to arrange a proper Thor-escort and audience with Roman. I’ll submit whatever paperwork I need to to get that into the works tomorrow, but then I don’t think pushing the button on the bureaucracy-machine is going to take all day, so maybe I should spend some hours exploring one of the other domains,” she pushed herself forward again and looked down at her map. “Wittland would be my next big concern, as far as the regions bordering England go. I mean, run by a mad-scientist and all.”

“That’s the Wizard, right? The crazy guy who tries to make the Fantastic Four take him seriously?” Verity asked.

“They sort of took him seriously?” Storyteller said, tilting her head to the side. “I mean, yes he was
kind of their pet-supervillain and yes he was a very crazy man, but he was the extremely dangerous kind of crazy and a legit super-genius, so he was a concern, even if most of the stuff he said was like ‘whaaaat?”

“Right. So you’re basically worried that a crazy god from a crazy world run by a crazy person might be double-crazy?” Verity guessed.

“Yes. Double-crazy worries me,” Storyteller agreed.

“What about the other two that are touching? What are their deals?”

“Supremia is urban bits of a twentieth or twenty-first century world with a pretty similar overall makeup to ours. Maybe a little bit less disaster-of-the-week than home, but comparable technology and magic levels,” Storyteller said, poking at a domain on the east side of England before sweeping her fingers south. “K’un L’un is the Chinese variant of Mount Meru, a mythological hub: highest peak, center of the world, origin of the first man and woman- pretty standard ‘home of the gods’ sort of fair. It will be extremely myth and magic rich. And since it is that Chinese variant, I imagine there will be a great deal of focusing and shaping the pneuma of nature and oneself through martial arts. So that’s fun.”

“You just used at least ten times the words needed to say ‘kung fu’,” Verity snorted.

“I am verbose.”

“Why would there be a Loki in the kung fu mountains?” Verity asked.

“There probably wouldn’t. But this is a grid search and it’s part of the grid,” Storyteller shrugged. She glanced up as the clock on the mantel started chiming the hour. “Serrure, go take a bath,” she called.

Serrure gave her a truly pitiful look of one whose suffering is unending and climbed reluctantly to his feet, trudging out of the room. Verity snorted and Lockheed put a few more pieces into the puzzle while Serrure’s footsteps climbed the stairs. As the sound of water starting up was heard above, he abandoned the puzzle and flapped over to examine Storyteller’s map, settling on the opposite side of it and considering the markings she’d made, poking at one of the drops of dried blood.

“I should probably head home,” Verity said, stretching her arms and climbing off the couch.

“Oh no, domestic life has made us boring! Time was we would just now be hitting the clubs!” Storyteller lamented.

“I have never been to a club in my life,” Verity grimaced, rolling her eyes.

“Mm, they’re loud, you wouldn’t like them,” Storyteller grinned, getting to her feet and following Verity to the hall as Lockheed flew to her shoulder and perched.

“Sounds about right,” Verity agreed, opening the door to her apartment and then turning back to smirk at Loki. “So now you’ve got a single-family residence, a pre-teen and a dragon. You’re getting pretty close to that white-picket-fence lifestyle.”

“I think the fairies might take exception if I put up a fence,” Storyteller grinned back at her.


“Good night,” Storyteller called as Verity stepped across a few hundred miles into her apartment.
“Good night, Loki.”

After the door shut, Storyteller tilted her head to smile at Lockheed, who was giving the door a suspicious look. “Oh it’s just a simple little forth-dimensional gateway. Nothing to get flustered about, I’m sure,” she said cheerfully. Whether or not she found herself being chewed out about the door in the next few weeks would do much to inform her of where Lockheed now stood. He had always shown more loyalty for friendship than country in the past; of course the main question was whether she would be able to earn his friendship.

She climbed the stairs with Lockheed silently crouching on her and caught the first doorknob on the left as they reached the top floor. “My room,” she said, pushing the door in and then continuing down the hall. “Bathroom,” she pointed as they passed. “Serrure’s room,” she pushed the third door in and then gestured loosely at the other side of the hall. “And guest rooms for now. Would you like to claim one?”

Lockheed glanced around the hall and then shook his head and jumped from her shoulder, swooping through the doorway and dropping himself on the foot of Serrure’s bed. He sat down and looked back at Storyteller. “That should be fine. I doubt he’ll complain,” she shrugged. “Do you want your own bed though? I could make one your size.”

Lockheed shrugged, shaking his head.

“Well, you can still change your mind if it turns out he kicks in his sleep,” Storyteller said, sitting down next to the bed and folding her arms on top of it, cradling her chin there and looking up at Lockheed. “I’m glad you’re here,” she said softly.

Lockheed tilted his head to the side curiously.

“You’re lonely,” she whispered. “You miss your family... Me too.” She closed her eyes and sighed. “I know I’m very lucky. I still have Verity and now I have Serrure, but I was made to love my Thor, it’s carved into my foundation. I feel his absence... and the absence of the youth who spent his life to buy mine.”

Lockheed chirped, settling down on his belly and watching her.

“All the Lokis before me (the ones from our world, not necessarily the analogues) none of them were loved. Not by the ones who gave them life, not by the king and queen who adopted them into that farce of a family... Just Thor... and he always had such an awful temper,” she murmured, gazing down at the bedspread. “But me, I’m the first one who was wanted. I’m the first one who was asked for.” She put her head down in her arms for a moment and drew a shaky breath. “Even if there were no amnesia... Verity and I would still be the only people who missed him.”

Lockheed crooned softly and patted her hair.

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“Mastersoon! I need your amazing paperwork powers!” Storyteller called, walking into the breakroom.

Masterson tilted his head back to cast him an upside-down glare. “Ahahaha--Go fuck yourself.”

“I don’t think you’re allowed to say that to him. I’m pretty sure he outranks us. By, like, a lot,” Striker noted with a grin.

“Masterson’s still got points for getting him out of Weirdworld in one piece,” Ava shrugged, tilting
back her chair as she sipped her coffee.

“Strictly speaking, it was Sheriff Strange who plucked me out of Weirdworld,” Storyteller pointed out, leaning one hand on the table and ruffling the other through Masterson’s hair. “But appreciate you so very very much and find no fault in you expressing yourself.”

“Yaaay,” Masterson pushed his hand away. “What do you want?”

“I want to go to the Regency, but I’m afraid Baron Roman might try to eat my vital essence or whatever it is he does to powers,” Storyteller explained, grabbing one of the empty chairs and dropping into it. “So I figure I need to book an official audience and show up with some hammer-men to look intimidating and stuff.”

“The Regent wouldn’t really be that stupid, right?” Ava frowned, looking a little unsure. “Attacking an officer of Doom?”

“Depends on if he thought he could get away with it,” Striker shrugged. “If he thought he could, yeah, he probably would try it. Special agents don’t have a big visible presence, and it’s not like their powers are really clearly defined,” he tilted his head and tapped his fingers on the table thoughtfully. “I’m not actually sure what your equivalent rank is...”

“Interesting point, neither am I,” Storyteller admitted with a shrug.

“You should probably start introducing yourself as the Sheriff’s apprentice. That’ll probably sound more impressive,” Masterson suggested.

“Less official really, but I’d be the only one, and it might send a clearer ‘don’t fuck with me’ message,” Storyteller seemed to consider it and then waved it away. “But as far as Baron Roman is concerned, I want to see if I can get a look through his people-eaten records, and I think an official audience would probably be the easiest way to get that done. So do I file a request with our office or his office? How many layers of bureaucracy am I looking at here?”

“Mm, yeah, there’s actually a form,” Ava said, finishing her coffee and getting up to wash out her cup. “I forget the number, but I know where we keep it.”

“Bless you. Do you have any idea what kind of time-frame I might be looking at?” Storyteller asked.

“Depends on how much they want to suck up,” Ava shrugged.

“Some barons want Doomgard underscoring their authority, and they’ll be like ‘Yes! Of course! Right away! Would you like a drink or maybe a bribe?!’ and then some barons don’t want to admit that they’re not the biggest bad-asses around and they’ll try to tie you up in circular bureaucracy just to be shits,” Striker explained and then tilted his head thoughtfully, considering. “The Regent seems like the type who doesn’t want outside interference, but he’ll probably try to shuffle you through as fast as possible to get you out of his hair.”

“That is a very useful insight. Thank you, Striker,” Storyteller said.

“Absolutely. Any time,” Striker grinned back, a little too big. “So, you haven’t been around the Valhalla in a while, and, I know you’ve got a pretty big assignment on your plate and it’s gotta be exhausting and all, but, I mean, the whole all-work-and-no-play thing will drive you crazy and you don’t want to burn out, so...”

“Stop awkward hitting on him,” Masterson snorted, rolling his eyes.
“I’m not awkward,” Striker snapped.

“You’re a little awkward,” Ava offered with a smirk.

“It’s cute-awkward,” Storyteller said. “But I do have Serrure to consider now, so that complicates things a bit. Once we’ve figured out a schedule and things are a bit more settled, I can start thinking about social-life sort of matters again,” he gave Striker a warm, charming smile.

Ava snickered, setting her cup in the drying rack. “Come on, I’ll show you where the form is,” she called, heading for the door.

“Much obliged,” Storyteller chirped, hopping to his feet and following her. “Thank you for all the wise council, gentlemen!”

There were a few minutes of quiet, before Striker noted in a smug voice, “I’m ‘cute’ awkward.”

“Sure, and maybe you can milk that into a pity-date,” Masterson snorted.

Chapter End Notes

References were made to the Xorrian ‘template’ or ‘program’: Somewhere around the time that lay-people started to understand the basics of evolution and speciation, scifi shows/comics started coming under fire of people being like “But why would all the alien races look human if they evolved in completely different environments?” Star Trek universe and Marvel universe ended up using the exact same plot-devise to solve this problem (With Star Trek I think this was a cross-over toward the end of Next Generation and the beginning of DS9, which would put it mid-90s, I’m not sure when Marvel did it.) The explanation is that a far more ancient species of aliens, that existed long long before any of the current species of aliens, went around the galaxy/universe/wherever and seeded primordial planets, which had just barely started developing organic life, with DNA instruction-manuals that guided the course of those planets' evolutionary chains to eventually create humanoid lifeforms. Thus once those planets reached their evolutionary end-goals and created sentient beings capable of going forth and exploring space, they would find a lot of cousin-races scattered around the cosmos. In Marvel Universe, this ancient parent-race is called the Xorrians; they are canonically the omni-parent race to humans, Kree and Skrulls, and presumably to anything else 'humanoid'.

Storyteller maybe doesn't know Rocket or Groot, but Loki III would have seen them/been sort of aware of them during the first Angela story-arc if he wasn't before. At first I started writing Storyteller referring to them as a 'tree-person' and a 'raccoon', but then I was like, "It's Storyteller, I should mythology-up those descriptions." Thus, ent and tanuki.

Potential plot-hole to arise here is why Storyteller knows so much about aliens when mythology and magical-bullshit are her wheelhouse. Fortunately, I have a perfect peg to fit this plot-hole: Loki III hacked into the Avengers database in the first issue of AoA to delete his own files. While there, I say he also downloaded some light reading material, because he is a curious boy. He may also have acquired some information on the Guardians here, because Tony did run with them briefly just before this.

I’m pretty sure there was something else I wanted to make note of here, but I have
forgotten what it was...

Striker is from Avengers Academy! He has fabulous electricity-powers, so it seemed appropriate to make him one of the bebeh-Thor-interns. He is one of those 'he's not a mutant, he’s just an inexplicable genetic anomaly' characters: because Marvel doesn't really understand what 'mutant' means.
Storyteller decided to give ‘incognito’ a try. Being that he was on the search for some very mean, terrible bad-people whom were no doubt largely disliked, perhaps it would be good diplomacy to not look exactly like those mean, terrible bad-people he was asking after. He arrived in Wittland with short strawberry blond hair slicked neatly back, a delicate pencil mustache and a smart, gray business suit. He felt that he looked very official and to-be-taken-seriously.

He noted, as he walked along the sidewalk and up the steps of the capitol building, that the cars and clothing visible from here seemed to evoke the late fifties or early sixties. However, as he stepped through the large, glass doors into the lobby, more advanced science became visible in the form of a security scanner, which was definitely a bit more than a simple metal detector.

“Sir, please wait a moment,” the staffer standing next to it said, holding up a hand in a ‘halt’ gesture and frowning at his little display screen. After a few more seconds he bit his lip. “Ah, just a moment, please,” he muttered, glancing around with a nervous air as Storyteller raised an eyebrow at him, hiding a flutter of amusement. The scanner apparently took exception to godly-physique. “Jenkins?” the guard called across the lobby.

A man by the central counter made his way quickly toward them. “What’s wrong?” he asked.

“I’m not sure, maybe a glitch?” the guard said, nodding to the screen. “Density’s all messed up.”

Jenkins moved to his side and studied the screen, frowning for a few seconds before his face smoothed out and he nodded. “He’s a Thor,” he said.

“No hammer,” the guard pointed out, looking doubtful.

“I’m a Special Agent,” Storyteller corrected. “We work under the direct authority of Doomstadt, sometimes in concert with Doomgard, sometimes independently,” he explained. “Our work generally necessitates being less visible than Thors. Would you like to see my identification?”

“That would be great,” Jenkins nodded, smiling as he apparently accepted the explanation. Because why wouldn’t all of Doom’s servants be powered-up, quarter-ton mini-tanks? “May I ask what business you’re here on?”

“An ongoing investigation which will become a man-hunt once I’m able to determine exactly whom I am meant to be hunting,” Storyteller replied. “The individual in question has been crossing borders and I’m still trying to pin down his point of origin.” He handed his badge to Jenkins who looked at it for a moment and then handed it back, apparently satisfied.

“I see. Please allow me to assist you any way I can, sir,” Jenkins said, with a serious sort of formality like he was afraid this might be a test, as he lead Storyteller away from the security check and deeper into the lion’s den. “I assume you were here looking for records? Did you need to see our criminal database?”

“That might be useful, but I wonder if the Baron is in today? If so, would a brief audience be possible?” Storyteller asked.

“Er... that might be difficult without some sort of appointment...” Jenkins said, trying to suppress a
grimace. “Who, exactly, did you say you were again?”


“Appre...” Jenkin’s eyebrows rose. “The Holy Eye?” he asked. “Er, does- does Sheriff Strange have many apprentices?”

“Only one that I know of,” Storyteller said with a smirk.

Jenkins nodded, looking suitably impressed. Masterson’s suggestion (and Storyteller’s fashionable tweed suit) seemed to pay off. “Just a moment,” he said, holding up a finger and then ducking behind the reception counter and picking up a corded phone receiver as his hand punched away at buttons behind the high countertop. “... Mary? Jenkins. There’s a, uh, the apprentice of the High Sheriff of Doomstadt is here and he wants to talk to Baron Wittman? Is that, uh, is that...? Okay.” He went silent for a while, waiting and looking somewhat anxious. “Yeah?” he yelped after a few minutes, snapping back to attention. “Okay. Thanks. Yeah. I’ll bring him right up.”

Jenkins hung up the phone and walked back over to Storyteller, smiling in a pleased-with-himself way. “Baron Wittman has an opening in his schedule right now. You can meet him right away,” he announced.

“Thank you, Mister Jenkins,” Storyteller said with a pleasant smile and a nod as Jenkins ushered him toward the elevators.

Outside the penthouse office, a secretary picked up the receiver on her desk the moment the elevator doors opened. “He’s here,” she said quietly. “Yes, sir.” She stood up and walked toward the large, fancy doors across from the elevator. “Baron Wittman will see you now,” she announced, pulling one of them open with a nod toward Storyteller.

“Thank you,” Storyteller smiled at her. “Your accommodation is most appreciated.”

The doors closed behind him after he stepped into the office, Jenkins and the secretary remaining outside, and Storyteller looked toward a high-backed, leather chair, which faced the huge windows behind the desk for a few moments before turning slowly toward Storyteller to reveal Baron Wittman sitting with his fingers steepled Mister Burnsishly and wearing that stuuupid helmet. Storyteller bit down hard on his tongue to keep from laughing out loud.

“I am Baron Wittman. I’ve been informed that you wished to speak with me, Apprentice?” he said, slowly raising an eyebrow. Soooo super-villainous intimidation tactics. Storyteller swallowed hard, clenching his teeth for a moment and repeating an internal mantra of don’t laugh don’t laugh don’t laugh! “This isn’t any sort of audit, Baron. Your domain is not in any trouble with Doomstadt,” Storyteller assured him calmly. “I am here investigating a certain dangerous malefactor you may have some knowledge of.”

Wittman sat up straighter and folded his hands on his desk, apparently relieved but trying to play it cool. “Ah, then I suppose this ‘malefactor’ has a name?” he asked.

“‘Loki’, I believe, though it’s possible they may be using an alias...” Storyteller nixed the notion of a name-variant upon Wittman’s very visible reaction to ‘Loki’.

“Oh, Him,” Wittman grimaced and then nodded. “Yes, I know him.” He pushed himself out of his chair, walking around the desk. “Computer, large display, files pertaining to terrorist: Loki,” he called and the large windows suddenly turned into a massive monitor, displaying numerous pictures
of a grown, male Loki with longish hair pulled back in a little ponytail at the nape of his neck and an intriguing, militaristic, double-breasted styling to his outfit. It was a new outfit and hairstyle, not a Loki he’d previously documented. Nearly all the images featured scenes of general mayhem and property damage, and sometimes outright carnage.

“Thank you... I can definitely use this,” Storyteller murmured, pointing at a few of the pictures and weaving them together, generating a composite mugshot between his hands as Wittman watched him with an intrigued cant to his eyebrows.

“What sort of tech is that, if I may ask?” Wittman wondered, watching Storyteller complete the mugshot and then flick it away into metaphysical ‘storage’. “It’s very solid-looking for a hologram and you make the process look quite effortless.”

“It’s magic, actually, not tech,” Storyteller corrected with a friendly smile. “I officially belong to the Ministry of Sorcery, although I’m currently on lone to Doomgard.”


“Magic actually can be broken down into rational components, it just tends to be very counter-productive to do so,” Storyteller said with a little shrug. “Like trying to tie your shoes while you think about how to tie your shoes. The over-analysis confuses one’s motor-memory. It’s much better to internalize magic and then ‘feel’ it rather than ‘think’ it.”

“Hm,” Wittman gave a small, acknowledging nod and then glanced back toward the window-displays. “As you can see, we have had some... difficulty with magic over the years. Magic-use is illegal for the citizens of my domain. Though, as you are a representative of Doomstadt, I of course won’t begrudge you.”

“I appreciate that, Baron. I’ll keep it to a minimum and try to be out of your hair as quickly as possible,” Storyteller nodded.

Wittman crossed his arms and frowned thoughtfully up at the monitors. “Now that you bring it to my attention, we actually haven’t heard a peep out of Loki in some time,” he noted.

“I have reason to believe that he’s no longer within your domain. He’s been implicated as potentially involved in a crime-spree spanning enough domains that we’re calling it ‘global’ at this point,” Storyteller said, chewing on his lip. “I’ve been trying to track down where he started from for several weeks. This is very helpful.”

“I’ll admit, I like the idea of him being somewhere else, and I also like the idea of him being dealt with by Doomgard justice,” Wittman said with a smirk. “I would certainly not miss that psychotic bastard if I never saw him again.”

“Would you like to be informed if and when he is brought into custody?” Storyteller asked, glancing back at Wittman.

“I would like to be informed when he is dead,” Wittman replied.

“Understood,” Storyteller nodded and pulled the phone out of his pocket as it buzzed at him. He poked Verity’s text window open and frowned as he read the short blurb.

Please call me ASAP

His gut clenched slightly as he pushed the phone back into his pocket and looked up at Wittman.
again. “Was there any other information you could give me that might help track him down? Known
associates or relatives?”

Wittman shook his head. “He doesn’t have any relatives that we know of and all his ‘associates’ are
disposable patsies. If you’d like to interview a few jars of ashes, I think that’s the best I can offer you
in terms of former accomplices.”

“Understood,” Storyteller nodded again. “I shall review my case-files and be in touch if this new
information brings anything to light. Is there someone in particular I should contact if I require
anything further?”

“General Garthwaite will have the most familiarity with the maniac. He’s stationed in the northern
region of Wittland, but if you want to arrange an interview with him, the main reception desk should
be able to help you.” Wittman replied with a bored air.

“Thank you, Baron, you’ve been most accommodating,” Storyteller said, dipping his head in a
respectful nod. “I’ll let you get back to your work.”

“We are, of course, always happy to make time for Doom’s emissaries,” Wittman returned the nod.

After extracting himself from the office, Storyteller found Jenkins waiting patiently out by the
secretary’s desk. He stood up straighter when he spotted Storyteller, straightening his uniform. “Is
there anything else I can help you with, sir?” he asked.

“I think not,” Storyteller shook his head, pulling the phone out of his pocket again. “I’ve just
received an urgent message and I may need to leave at once,” he said, poking Verity’s contact open
and hitting the call button.

“I can have a car brought for you?” Jenkin’s offered, holding the elevator door as Storyteller stepped
inside.

“Thank you, that won’t be necessary,” Storyteller replied, listening to the phone ring once and then
pick up. “What’s wrong?” he asked as the elevator started dropping.

“... There was an earthquake,” Verity answered, a nervous tension and a hint of doubt coloring her
voice.

“Are you okay?”

“I’m not sure...” There was a reluctant pause and then she extrapolated. “I’m not hurt. But
something’s wrong.”

“I’ll be right there,” Storyteller promised.

“Thank you,” Verity said, still sounding far too anxious as she ended the call.

Of course she was anxious. She lived in New York. Had she ever even been in an earthquake
before? Storyteller pocketed the phone again as the elevator doors opened. “Did you need anything
else, sir?” Jenkins called chasing after him as Storyteller made quickly for the doors.

“Not today, thank you. Something’s come up. I’ll be in contact. Maybe,” Storyteller replied
brusquely, sweeping through the lobby to the main doors.

The guards standing on either side started to call to him as he approached. “Sir, will you please--”
“Let him through. He’s in a hurry,” Jenkins waved them off and the guards backed down, letting Storyteller breeze past without whatever the standard outgoing security check may have been.

“Thank you!” Storyteller called over his shoulder as he hurried down the stone steps and the sidewalk, ducking into the first alley along the way and teleporting.

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Verity stood on her balcony, frowning down at the people moving around the street below her. It all looked fine. Everybody looked perfectly content and unbothered. No one was the least bit flustered. Nothing was broken (or at least not unusually so) none of the trash cans had been spilled on the sidewalk (more than usual) none of the bikes in the rack across the street had been knocked over (except where some kid had kicked a couple of them for no particular reason but to be a dipshit). Everything was fine.

She heard the front door open inside the apartment. “Verity?” Loki’s voice called.

Verity turned, looking back at him through the open sliding door and frowning. “What are you wearing?” she demanded, the weird image of an unfamiliar blondish man playing havoc on her senses.

“A disguise,” Loki shrugged as the illusion melted away. “I thought it might be helpful. Are you all right?”

Verity bit her lip for a moment and shook her head. “There was an earthquake,” she said gravely, stepping back into the living room. “The kettle got knocked off the counter. It smashed on the tile and the plastic part on the bottom came off. The wires were showing,” she explained, pointing to the perfectly-fine kettle sitting right where it belonged on the counter. “That vase fell over and spilled on the couch. It had blue flowers in it,” she said, pointing to the vase on the end table, upright and filled with orange flowers.

Loki followed her gestures, frowning. “... Anything else?” he asked.

“... The calendar,” Verity said, pointing to the kitchen cabinet which held the coffee-filters and teas and had a small wall-calendar hung on the inside.

Loki walked over and pulled the door open, looking inside. “... February,” he noted softly.

“That’s when we got here,” Verity pointed out.

“... Yes,” Loki nodded slowly. “... We’ve reset to day-one, haven’t we?”

“How?” Verity demanded.

Loki was quiet for a few moments. “... It wasn’t an earthquake. It was a time-quake,” he said far too calmly.

“What the hell is a time-quake?!” Verity snapped shrilly.

Loki bit his lip and ran his hands through his hair, wearing his putting-together-a-frustrating-puzzle face. “... About a year before the whole final-countdown thing started up, there was some incident, some catastrophic thing that ‘broke’ time in our universe. I think there was a bit of debate about what exactly did it, likely suspects include time-traveling X-Men, time-traveling robots, time-traveling Fantastic Four-- whatever. Somebody poked time with a stick and time didn’t like it,” he said, waving off the who-done-it as superfluous. “The point is, time got smacked pretty hard and there
were cracks. Fault-lines. And stuff around the fault-lines got weird, stuff fell through here and there. That’s how Angela ended up out in space while Heaven was still sealed shut.”

“Time-quakes,” Verity said softly.

“Time-quakes,” Loki agreed. “The borders between domains, where places used to be two different worlds with different time-scales, they’ve become time-fault-lines,” he explained. “But Manhattan’s bits of two worlds right on top of each other. They’re all mixed together like they got run through a food processor. Sure, most of sixteen-ten ended up in the north and most of six-sixteen ended up in the south, but there’s no distinct border and there’s little bits just scattered around randomly. Most of Battleworld’s been smooshed together like an ill-fitting puzzle, Manhattan’s been sort of super-imposed.”

“And that’s making time-quakes.”

Loki blew a slightly frustrated, slightly anxious breath through his teeth. “That’s only part of it though. You add to that six-sixteen having a fractured time-stream to start with, and the fact that sixteen-ten moves about three times faster, and you end up with just the worst time-mess you can think of.”

“... Is this going to keep happening?” Verity asked.

Loki folded his arms and chewed on his lip, gazing at nothing for a while. “... Best guess says yes.”

“... Everybody outside is acting like nothing happened,” Verity gestured toward the balcony. “They’re all going around like it’s a totally normal day. None of them noticed, did they?”

Loki looked at her, brow pinched, worried. “You noticed... I don’t know if it’s because of your powers or because of how I brought you here, but you noticed because you’re you. You’re special.”

“Do they remember anything that’s happened in the last two months?” Verity demanded, her voice getting shrill again.

“... Probably not.”

“Oh God...” Verity whispered, putting her hands over her face and noticing that she’d started trembling.

“... Verity, I- I could maybe move you to a more stable domain,” Loki offered quietly. “I mean, there’s temporal disturbance everywhere, but I could move you somewhere that isn’t this bad.”

Verity bit her lip and sniffed, dropping her hand and then hugging herself. She shook her head. “... My mom’s here. She’d freak out if I just disappeared. And even if I told her I was going somewhere now, the next time this happens, it’s like I never told her, right? She’d just show up here looking for me and I wouldn’t be here.”

“... Maybe we could move her too?” Loki suggested hesitantly.

“Loki, I can’t explain this to her!” Verity snapped. “This is insane! Everything is insane!”

“... I can’t make it stop,” Loki whispered, apologetic, worried.

“... I know,” Verity nodded, sniffing again.

“I’m sorry.”
Verity bit down hard on her lip to hold in a pathetic sound and walked around the counter, right into Loki, and pressed her face against his shoulder as he hugged her. “... I hate Battleworld,” she whispered.

“There’s nowhere else to go, Verity...” Loki whispered, petting her hair.

“I know,” Verity whimpered.

Stephen, there’s been a massive time-quake in Manhattan!” Loki announced, bursting through the door. “The whole domains been reset! Like when the power flickers and the microwave thinks it’s midnight!”

“Loki, calm down,” Stephen pushed himself to his feet and walked around the desk to meet Loki in the middle of the room. “What happened?”

“The time in the Manhattan domain is unstable. It’s reset back to ‘start’. It’s day one again and it’s upsetting Verity!” Loki whined.

“Verity?” Stephen frowned in confusion.

“Her powers. She feels when she’s being lied to, and now time itself is lying to her,” Loki explained, looking helpless and worried.

Stephen remembered where he’d heard the name ‘Verity’ before; Loki’s assistant-Thor had mentioned it, referring to her as Loki’s girlfriend. A woman with the power to see through lies? What a curiously ironic consort for the god. But that bit of intrigue paled in importance to what Loki seemed to be telling him now. “Loki, calm down,” Stephen said gently and then turned, catching Loki’s elbow and giving his arm a slight tug toward the doors. “Come with me,” he instructed.

Loki followed him obediently, out through the winding halls of the palace and into the Foundation’s wing. Stephen chased the sounds of a small commotion and excited young voices to the main symposium hall, where half of the foundation children were staring up at a holographic model of Battleworld, chattering frantically with each other, and the other half were running around between various computers, calling off readings and measurements to the room.

“Valeria,” Stephen called and the little girl turned away from the globe, spotting him and then striding over. “Loki believes there’s been a chronal disturbance in the Manhattan domain,” Stephen said.

Valeria turned to Loki sharply, looking intrigued. “You were there when it happened?” she demanded.

Loki shook his head. “My friend text-messaged me when it started. She thought they were having an earthquake. But when I got there, everything was fine except the date,” he explained. Stephen quietly took note of the way Loki carefully danced around the fact that Verity apparently remembered the event. Artfully misdirecting without lying. Loki’s ability and aptitude for such a charade wasn’t surprising, but that he’d just allowed Stephen to witness the act was rather intriguing.

Valeria nodded seriously. “We’ve known there was marked chronal instability in the Manhattan domain for some time,” she said, waving them to follow her as she moved back toward the globe.

“Today’s event threw the entire domain back several months, erasing the intervening time and returning everyone within the domain to exactly where they were on that date. Even individuals who died in the intervening time have reappeared.” She tapped at a control pad on the projector and the
model of Battleworld was supplanted with one of the Manhattan domain, translucent blue with veins of glowing red woven through the ground below the city structure.

“And nobody remembers?” Loki asked, stepping closer and peering at the hologram.

“The events of the last few months have been erased. They never happened,” Valeria replied with a nod.

“Except that our records of it haven’t disappeared, have they?” Loki turned to look at her.

Valeria smiled a little unsettlingly. “Exactly. It seems we’ll be able to gather and record data from the domain no matter how many times it resets. This presents a slew of possibilities for study,” she said.

“So you believe this will continue with some regularity?” Stephen asked.

“See the red lines?” Valeria pointed to the strange network beneath Manhattan. “Those are stress-fractures created by a cataclysmic chronal event. Manhattan is riddled with them. It’s amazing they manage any forward momentum at all (even if that momentum is basically an illusion).”

“Is it going to be the same each time?” Loki asked.

“That’s the question, isn’t it,” Valeria smirked. “Theoretically, tiny variations, even different weather-patterns coming in from the neighboring domains, will affect the course of events. That’s why Manhattan’s going to be such a valuable phenomenon to study. We’ll be able to catalogue how different stimuli effect different outcomes in the course of events. Maybe even impose some variables ourselves.”

“Will the resets happen on a regular schedule?” Loki asked, looking down at her. “Will you be able to predict them?”

“We’re still looking into that,” Valeria replied, crossing her small arms. “Manhattan has not been studied as thoroughly as I might like to start a project like this. We’ve just started compiling the data we have available and we’re going to assemble a research team to take a more exhaustive survey of the domain.” She leaned forward and tapped at her control panel; the image shifted to a miniature group of people, Queen Medusa standing in the center of them.

“This domain is somewhat unique in the duality of its power structure. There is a perfunctory ‘democratic’ structure of governance which is of course ultimately subservient to the Baroness. And aside from the Baroness’s royal guard, the domain is also policed by various tribes of meta-human ‘protectors’,” Valeria explained, then tapped at the control panel and the little holographic Inhumans were swept aside and replaced with a new group. “The primary powers within the domain in descending order are the ‘Avengers’,” she tapped again and the familiar figures were swept away by a smaller, and less familiar, group. “The ‘Future Foundation’,” Valeria said and tapped again. Four different groups appeared, some familiar, some less so. “Various splinter-factions of mutants, all calling themselves the ‘X-Men’,” Valeria said and tapped once more. “And the ‘Ultimates’.” A small group of very young-looking heroes appeared.

Loki crouched down slightly and leaned in, studying the last group carefully and frowning. Stephen turned his attention back to Valeria. “Do you believe there will be adverse effects on the residents of the domain?” he asked.

“That’s one of the things we plan to study,” Valeria replied with a little shrug and a grin.

“You’re quite enjoying this,” Loki murmured distractedly.

“It’s a fantastic opportunity to gain a better understanding of chaos theory,” Valeria said.

“Oh, I should imagine so...” Loki trailed off and then looked at her. “The people in the domain, will they age?”

“The data we have so far suggest that they’ll age to the extent of their timeline and then revert when it resets.”

Loki straightened up and rested his hands in his pockets, gazing thoughtfully into space. “Immortality in a fish-tank...” he mused.

“I would be interested to hear the results of your research if you find yourself disposed to share them,” Stephen said.

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Valeria nodded. “Although I think it will likely be years before we gather enough data for any useful analysis.”

“All the same, it sounds quite interesting.”

Chapter End Notes

Oh my gosh, guys. It is really really hard to edit/post a chapter when I've got migraine sparkly-shit in my eyes. No headache today (just nausea and wigged-out smell/taste) but the sparklies are super pissing me off right now. Can't read!

I populated the Wittland capitol-building thing with former members of the Frightful Four, but used their people-names instead of their nom-de-cape handles. Jenkins is the original Beetle, Mary is Titania, I didn't find occasion to name him, but the guy at the door was going to be Hydro-Man.

The catastrophic time-breaking event was the conclusion to the Age of Ultron crossover event, which was in 2013 real-time, but I think that's probably just a 'last year' thing in comic-time (before '8 months later' happened... twice.) The ending resolved all the Ultron-related conflict (theoretically forever. HA. yeah right.) but 'killed' time, and made a massive time-quake that moved Angela out of Heaven, moved Galactus into Ultimate-verse, and I think did a few other terrible-consequences things for Marvel NOW. As for the who-done-it, it was totally Wolverine. Wolverine broke space-time, and he damn well knew it, but he let Beast take the blame. That ass-hole.

The idea that time in Manhattan Domain gets reset comes canonically from Attilan Rising, where we see Doom personally seem to reset the domain when it gets out of hand. But aside from that very explicit scene, all of the Secret Wars tie-ins that in part or in full take place in Manhattan seem to show the domain being a brand-new and confusing thing to its inhabitants only days or hours before Secret Wars ends, which is in pretty big contrast to the main Secret Wars story saying it's been this way for years.

So a lot of you are probably only familiar with one Marvel-verse (MCU not counting, Movie-verse is easy to be familiar with because who's going to miss an awesome Marvel summer blockbuster?) I know I hadn't pursued Ultimate-verse for several years until Secret Wars came out and I was like 'crap! gotta catch up!' So here's the break down of which of the teams Valeria mentions, and which verse they're coming from:
The Avengers: 616
Huge roster, not going to list it here.
The Future Foundation: 1610 (Sand3 does not recommend Ultimate FF. It got cancelled because it was duuuuumb.)
Invisible Woman
Iron Man
Falcon
Machine Man
Phil Coulson
The Thing (who looks human now, or sometimes a purple glow-stick)
The Human Torch
The X-Men: Both
Storm's team (X-Men/Wolverine & the X-Men)
Renegade team (Uncanny X-Men, not Cyclops's anymore, because he's been life-rafted)
'All-New X-Men' team
Ultimate X-Men team ('U. C. X-Men')
The Ultimates: 1610 (published as the 'New Ultimates v2' it was cuteish, mostly an extension of U.C. Spiderman v2)
Spider-Woman/Black Widow
Cloak
Dagger
Kitty Pryde
Bombshell
not Miles Morales (because he's been life-rafted)
Chapter Summary

By in large, the people of Sixteen-Ten were five to fifteen-ish years younger than the ones Storyteller remembered (although since Sixteen-Ten moved faster, that wouldn't have lasted for long). They had slightly different costumes (but usually the same color-schemes) and were generally overall different.

Chapter Notes

This chapter guest starring: The Young Ultimates

![Black Widow](1610)
![Kitty Pryde](1610)
![Cloak & Dagger](1610)
![Bombshell](1610)
![Madam Web](1610)

and

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Storyteller chose the Empire State Building, it’s iconic value giving it a strong ‘story’ resonance, and leaned herself against the railing where Deborah Kerr once stood, letting herself relax and feeling for the rhythms of the city’s stories. The symphony surged around her as her eyes lost focus and she
tried to pick out the parts within the whole. She picked up bits of conversation from the other people milling about the platform, a few words here and there illuminating bigger, more complex swatches that danced at the edge of Storyteller’s perception.

She tried to push farther out, that was the point of coming up here in the first place. Did proximity matter? Of course it did, stories changed across distance as well as time, so proximity would have to matter very much. But she should still be able to see farther than this. Especially from such a hub point of timeless epic romance. And it was theoretically a very loud and exciting story that she was looking for now, so it should stand out, right? Only if it was being written right now; maybe today was a quiet day, no need for super heroic antics.

But as must happen when a narrative begins to fray and a story to dawdle directionless, there came a spark. A snag to the northeast pulled into a run in the fabric of the metaphysique that dragged through the storyscape with enough force and noise to pull Storyteller’s attention. She heard the colors she was searching for, saw the flavors painting themselves through the tapestry toward East Harlem, and she teleported, not bothering to move out of view from the ordinary types on the platform. It’s Manhattan, surely people were used to this sort of thing by now?

She touched down across the street from a bank which was in the process of being robbed. Who the hell robs banks anymore? Apparently rhinoceros-themed robots or mech-suited persons. Why a rhinoceros? Because everybody needs a thing. The robotic rhinoceros enthusiast in question now found themself being harassed by a handful of powered teenagers who had a harmony that Storyteller might have called ‘well practiced’. Some of them she halfway recognized, semi-familiar alternate versions of people her predecessors had been aware of.

The faces were familiar but younger than Storyteller remembered. Cloak and Dagger moving in exquisite tandem, a very young Kitty Pryde stepping through a piece of rebar-filled concrete, a spider-person who may or may not have been the another version of Araña (hard to tell with their fondness for masks). There was a pink-clad one who was entirely unfamiliar, as were all of their outfits. Except one. The one that had captured Storyteller’s interest and scrutiny in Valeria’s team holo-portrait the previous day.

Storyteller frowned as she watched them work. They had to be the Sixteen-Ten variants. By in large, the people of Sixteen-Ten were five to fifteen-ish years younger than the ones Storyteller remembered (although since Sixteen-Ten moved faster, that wouldn’t have lasted for long). They had slightly different costumes (but usually the same color-schemes) and were generally overall different. All that served to evidence an assumption that if there was a Sixteen-Ten version of Speed, he wouldn’t look exactly the same, wear exactly the same costume and be exactly the same age as Six-Sixteen’s Tommy Shepherd.

“Lady, run! Get out of here!” the spider-person shouted at Storyteller, momentarily lighting on top of a car before jumping to a lamppost and grabbing an airborne mailbox in a web to deflect it from its course toward Storyteller. “Speed, get this civilian out of here!”

Half a second later, an arm caught around Storyteller’s waist and yanked at her with enough momentum to make her stumble. Tommy seemed far more startled as he was jerked to a halt, feet nearly going out from under him, by the object he was trying to pick up being a bit heavier than anticipated. “Ow. Uh, nope. That’s not happening, Widow,” he called back to the spider-person, giving Storyteller a baffled look.

“Quit messing around, Speed,” Widow (Black Widow, maybe?) snapped down at him.

“I can’t lift her!” Tommy protested.
"I’m fine," Storyteller assured them calmly. "Go back to what you were doing."

"Look lady, you need to get--" Widow started and then whipped around as a large chunk of façade came sailing through the air toward them. Storyteller lifted a quick shield, buffeting it harmlessly away and Widow turned back to stare at her.

"Go finish up what you were doing," Storyteller said again with a friendly smile. "When you’re done, I’d like to ask you a question."

Widow stared at her for another second or two before turning sharply to Tommy. "Speed, you and Bombshell take out his feet," she ordered.

"Are we worried about breaking his legs?" Tommy asked.

"No. He has officially lost the privilege of having unbroken legs," she said firmly.

"Well then this is over," Tommy grinned and zipped away.

Widow shot a web-line at a building across the street and swung back into the fray, shouting, "Kitty! Left-flank!"

As Tommy had predicted, once grievous bodily harm had been green-lighted, the fight lasted about two minutes before the rhinoceros-mech had been quite thoroughly disabled and broken. Once downed, the pink girl climbed up on top of it to crow their victory. "Fuck yeah, shitbag! That’s what you get, mother-fucker! Don’t mess with the fuckin’ Young Ultimates, fuckin’ pansy-ass zoo-doo fucker!" she declared triumphantly, then gave a loud whoop, pumping her fist in the air, and flung herself backwards off of the mech as though she desperately craved a concussion.

Storyteller felt a momentary surge of alarm as the girl fell toward the pavement, but the next moment Tommy was there, catching her out of the air, and judging by the pink one’s delighted laughter, this was just as she had anticipated. Well-oiled machine. They were used to Tommy being there; he was obviously part of the overall team dynamic. He had to have been there for a while. Was Storyteller overthinking this?

"My but that one’s a colorful character," she noted, nodding at the pink one as Widow approached her again.

"Yeah, Bombshell’s pretty salty alright," Widow agreed. "So was that tech or teke there a minute ago?"

"Magic, actually," Storyteller replied, giving her a friendly smile. "Can you tell me, how long has Tommy been with your team?"

"Whoa! Dude," Widow snapped, looking shocked, appalled and rather angry. "Do you mind? The masks are on for a reason!" she hissed.

"I’m sorry," Storyteller lowered her head a little. "That was imprudent."

"Yeah, no kidding!" Widow agreed, apparently deeply affronted and showing a strong degree of protectiveness.

"... He’s been with you a while," Storyteller noted quietly, frowning slightly.

"There’s always been six of us," Widow said, crossing her arms. "What is with you? I mean, I know I’ve kind of dropped the ball on the publicity thing, but I thought we’d gotten enough press by now
that people kinda recognize us. There’s a nice big picture of us on the front page of the Bugle twice a month at least.”

“Special Agent Storyteller works primarily out of Doomstadt. She’s not yet familiarized herself with the local minutia of our domain,” a new voice said, and Storyteller whipped around to find a woman in a wine-colored trench coat and matching sunglasses strolling up behind her.

“Oh,” Widow said with a slight nod, though still wearing a suspicious frown.

Storyteller stared at the new arrival, who returned a small, benign smile. “Do you have a moment, Agent Storyteller?” she asked, raising a quizzical eyebrow.


“Everything okay, Julia?” Widow asked quietly, glancing at Storyteller with a worried pinch to her brow and back to the trench coated woman.

“Everything’s fine,” the woman assured her and then nodded to a small collection of officers apparently trying to cordon off the street. “I recommend you talk to the police before one of your less-eloquent teammates does.”

“Yeah...” Widow agreed with a slight cringe and turned, heading over toward where they were unfurling generous amounts of yellow tape.

Julia turned back toward Storyteller again. “Jessica has a lot on her plate right now, keeping this place from pulling itself apart at the seams,” she said calmly. “Please don’t confuse her. It’s not time for all that yet.”

Storyteller tilted her head, eyebrows lifting. “... I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to step on any toes,” she said.

“I know,” Julia nodded. “But curiosity is contagious, and Jessica is a naturally inquisitive girl to start with. Try to tread lightly.”

“I see,” Storyteller looked her up and down again slowly. “And where do you fit into all this, Miss Julia?”

“I don’t,” Julia grinned. “That’s the frustrating thing about the whole oracle gig. There’s a certain level of detachment and not-fitting-in.”

“Ah.”

“But you’re already starting to learn about that, I think,” Julia sighed and shrugged. “It’s still ‘fun’ now, I imagine, but you’ll find that the wider your web gets, the harder it is to be patient and let things play out.”

“... Where are you from?” Storyteller asked innocuously.


Storyteller stared at her for a few moments. “... Really.”

“Well, California originally. But for the past few years, yeah. Astoria’s nice enough,” Julia shrugged.

Storyteller crossed her arms and tilted her head, chewing on her lip as she processed that for a while. “And how are you connected to all this?” she asked at last.
“Everybody’s connected,” Julia replied with a shrug. “Some people are just a little better at seeing those connections than others.”

Storyteller nodded slowly. “But how are you connected specifically? Why did you pull me over?” she pressed.

“For today, I’m just playing defense for Jessica. Leave her be. Let her concentrate on her work. It’s important work. She has lives and days to save,” Julia said with another little shrug. “As for you and I? We’ll talk again later.”

“We can’t talk now?” Storyteller asked.

“I’m sure the Goddess of Stories understands the importance of proper pacing,” Julia smirked.

“... Yes,” Storyteller agreed.

“Then we’ll talk later,” Julia said, turning and starting to walk away down the deserted sidewalk.

Storyteller started following a few paces behind. “Were there always six ‘Young Ultimates’?” she asked.


“Whose place has Speed taken?”

“Spider-Man’s, of course.”

“... The one who wore red and black?” Storyteller guessed, recalling her conversation with Hoboki.

“That’s the one. A real trooper, that kid,” Julia said.

“What happened to him?”

“It’s not his time right now,” Julia replied.

“Did he die?”

Julia paused and glanced over her shoulder with a little smirk. “We’ll talk more later,” she said. “I promise.”

It was a friendly but clear dismissal, and Storyteller found herself standing still and watching the woman walk the length of the block and disappear from sight around the corner. She turned back to watch the Young Ultimates wrapping up their conversation with the police. After a few minutes, Dagger stepped into Cloak and they folded out of existence, Tommy picked up Bombshell and was gone half a second later, and Widow caught Kitty Pryde around the waist and Tarzaned their way out of there, leaving New York’s Finest to take the would-be bank-robber into custody and process the crime-scene.

Storyteller hummed softly to herself and turned, strolling slowly away as a new, highly disturbing question illuminated itself to her. The reassemblage of reality had used Tommy to fill the vacant slot on the Young Ultimate’s roster. So where the hell was Tommy’s team that he’d even been available to fill in?

000

Serrure turned over a large, flat rock and watched various swimmy-things and crawly-things flee for
cover through the clear water of the brook. Lockheed went to pounce on a miniature lobster-thing but it managed to dodge, scuttling under a new rock and out of sight. Serrure giggled as Lockheed hopped and swam through the shallow water, splashing his tail around. Most of his clothing was quite thoroughly soaked and there was a significant amount of mud around the edges when he heard footsteps crunching through the underbrush and looked up into the forest as Lockheed swam over to his side and stretched up on his hind legs, watching the tree line intently.

Serrure grinned happily when he recognized Storyteller’s shape resolving itself from the thick darkness of the forest, and splashed to the edge of the brook, scrambling over the slippery clay bank to greet her. “Did you find the thing you needed to check on?” Serrure asked, slogging up to her.

Storyteller settled herself down to sit in the grass and held out her arms, not seeming bothered by Serrure’s sodden wetness as she welcomed him into her lap. “I did find the person I originally went to look for, but when I did, it made me realize that there were five or more others I needed to look for,” she said, frowning worriedly. “And when I went to look for them, I couldn’t find the slightest trace.” She wrapped her arms around Serrure and he could hear the worry in her voice. “The Kaplans only have the two younger boys, there’s no records that they ever had another child. Or guardianship over a fourth.”

“And they should have?” Serrure guessed.

“Mhm,” Storyteller agreed, nodding. “The Alleynes have one child, Kim, very cute and quite average... and I'm not sure how they ended up in the Bronx. I found a Katherine Bishop, but she’s fourteen and calls herself ‘Katie’. The first part I could excuse, but ‘Katie’? Not a chance... And the only Kree soldier who’s made a significant mark on the world was the late Captain Mar-Vell...” Storyteller trailed off, seeming very unhappy.

Lockheed chirped, climbing Serrure’s arm and sitting on his shoulder as he looked up at Storyteller. “You’re worried your friends are gone?” Serrure asked, tilting his head to look up at her face as well.

Storyteller chewed on her lip. “... I’m not sure,” she said quietly. “It just... doesn’t make sense. It doesn’t fit, or maybe it’s too big a coincidence that they’d all disappear... ‘Coincidence’ is Billy’s bread and butter, of course, but... if they happened to be off-world or on an out-of-universe adventure when the firmament came crashing down...” She sighed and shook her head. “Billy's powers act subconsciously as much as, or more than, consciously... and if there was some kind of sub-conscious survival-reflex at play, it’s possible that they just ended up in the wrong domain when the chips fell... Or maybe even scattered... America might speak to that.”

“But, so, they’re probably okay then?” Serrure asked, wishing Storyteller might stop looking so worried.

She pursed her lips for a moment and then nodded. “... Yes. They’re probably all right. I can’t imagine the Demiurge letting anything happen to them, just because the world was ending.”

Serrure smiled as most of the tension in Storyteller’s face and body seemed to ease. “When you find them, can I meet them?” he asked.

She smiled down at him. “Well actually, I haven’t technically met them yet,” she said. “But yes, we should try to meet them when we figure out where they’ve all gone. They’re very nice. Loki never knew that some people are just nice before the Third met them... I think... I think they’re most of the reason I exist.” She tilted her head to the side a little and seemed to consider. “I don’t think he could have been Verity’s friend if they hadn’t taught him. And I would have been still-born without Verity.”
“Then I want to meet them,” Serrure decided. “I want to tell them ‘thank you’.”

Storyteller smiled the smile that Serrure liked best and kissed his forehead.

Chapter End Notes

The name 'Deborah Kerr' in the first paragraph is referencing *An Affair to Remember*, a movie from the 1950s that is considered one of the great romances of 20th century cinema, so iconic that it was referenced in other movies like *Sleepless in Seattle* for decades afterwards.

The mech-suit version of Rhino comes from 1610, and he's not Russian or super-powered there, he's just some dude with an awesome suit (which he stole, because he's not even super smart or nothin').

Widow used the term 'teke' in the first scene; I think this abbreviation might be Marvel Universe specific (at least I don't remember hearing/seeing it anywhere else) for telekinesis. Somewhere around the 80s telekinesis started getting referred to in some X-Men comics as 'T.K.' and then later on occasionally as 'teke'. It's a short-hand that seems to have become slang in the mutant community.
Musings on Efficiency versus Rectitude

Chapter Summary

Lawspeaker narrowed his eyes. “What is it now?”

“I have just received assent to an audience with Baron Roman of the Regency domain today. And while Roman has yet to openly... cause trouble, he seems an overly ambitious man-who-would-be-God, and I feel just a tad nervous about entering his territory,” Storyteller explained circuitously.

“Spit it out,” Lawspeaker demanded.

“I would like to bring another Thor with me. To cement my legitimacy in Roman’s eyes so that he doesn’t get any ideas,” Storyteller said.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Baron Roman says ‘come on down!’” Masterson announced, shoving a paper between Storyteller’s face and the one he was writing on.

“Ah, excellent,” Storyteller caught the offering and held it still to read the short formal invitation. “Then down we shall go... Do you think I should see if I can get another hammer-man for the trip? I feel like the symmetry would be nicely intimidating.”

“That might be true, but I think you’ll have trouble convincing Lawspeaker to give you another ‘hammer-man’. Not to be a jerk or anything, but he doesn’t really like you,” Masterson pointed out.

“Well I’ll ask really nicely,” Storyteller shrugged, pushing away from his desk and getting to his feet. “I’ll be so gosh darn charming he won’t be able to say no.”

“Riiight. Good luck with that,” Masterson rolled his eyes, trailing a step behind Storyteller as they made their way to Lawspeaker’s office.

Storyteller rapped his knuckles lightly against the door and then poked his head in after the sound of a gruff response that couldn’t be translated into real words. “Good morrow, Lawspeaker,” he called and then stepped into the office. Masterson followed in his wake, taking up a place a few paces behind and standing silently, his face blank. “I wondered if I might make a little, very small request?” Storyteller asked.

Lawspeaker narrowed his eyes. “What is it now?”

“I have just received assent to an audience with Baron Roman of the Regency domain today. And while Roman has yet to openly... cause trouble, he seems an overly ambitious man-who-would-be-God, and I feel just a tad nervous about entering his territory,” Storyteller explained circuitously.

“Spit it out,” Lawspeaker demanded.

“I would like to bring another Thor with me. To cement my legitimacy in Roman’s eyes so that he
doesn’t get any ideas,” Storyteller said.

“I cannot afford to be sending my men on all your frivolous little capers,” Lawspeaker replied caustically. “If the Holy Eye wants a census taken then he should give it to census-takers, not Thors. We are here to uphold Doom’s Law, not piss about playing hide-and-seek like children.”

“While I can understand that my surveying may seem a bit time-consuming, the purpose is to track down and capture some very dangerous and very murderous border-jumpers,” Storyteller pointed out. “And although I can see how it might seem like a waste of a Thor to just ask them to stand around looking pretty, it is widely accepted that a small display of force can be very effective in avoiding conflict,” he continued, undaunted as Lawspeaker’s glare grew ever darker. “Besides, for my purposes today, I wouldn’t need one of your most decorated officers or anything. Another cadet would suffice just fine.”

Lawspeaker leaned back in his chair, glare easing slightly. “A cadet,” he repeated.

“Perhaps Officer Striker, in the records department? He proof-reads case-logs,” Storyteller offered with a small shrug. “I only need to borrow him for a few hours.”

“Fine,” Lawspeaker spat gruffly and nodded. “Get on with it then.”

“Thank you, Lawspeaker. I’ll have all your valued young protégés back in a jiff,” Storyteller dipped a little bow and then turned and strode out the door as Lawspeaker made another not-words response to his retreating back.

Following him back out into the hall, Masterson waited until the door had shut and then blew scornfully through his teeth. “‘Valued young protégés’. You dick.”

“You are young, and the smart people here value you,” Storyteller shrugged, turning to give him a grin and walking backwards for a few paces. “And the old, suspicious, paranoid people fear you, for you remind them of the ephemeral nature of existence and that you will one day supplant them.”

“You’re hilarious,” Masterson snorted.

“I am. And I just got you out of paper-filing for at least half a day,” Storyteller pointed out. “Now let’s spring Striker and then we can all go play in psycho-dictator land!”

“Woo,” Masterson tried his best to sound sarcastic, but did a poor job of hiding his smirk as Storyteller turned back around and they made their way to records.

Striker was leaned over his desk, zoned out and making corrections on some dry official record or other, when Storyteller walked up, put an arm on his chair and grinned brightly. “Striker! I am buying you lunch today!”

Striker straightened up and turned to him sharply, eyes wide and cheeks pinking. “I... Yeah?”

“And we’re going to go down to the Regency and tour Baron Roman’s house of horrors and Masterson is coming too!” Storyteller elaborated cheerfully.

“... Oh.”

“You are such a dick-head!” Masterson exclaimed.

Storyteller wrinkled his nose and tsked at him. “Mister, if you can’t improve that attitude, you don’t
“You look weird,” Striker noted as they approached the concrete terrace beneath the Regent’s tower.

“Bad weird?” Storyteller asked, glancing back at him.


“Can’t hide the eyes,” Storyteller grinned and half-shrugged. “But if the local Loki does or did look like me, then it might make the conversation inconveniently long. Or worse, make me look like a good snack for the Baron. Better to look like nobody important.”

“Except that he already knows you’re ‘important’. You signed the request for an audience as ‘Apprentice to the Holy Eye’,” Masterson pointed out. “Would it be sacrilegious to say that that sounds incredibly corny and pretentious?”

Storyteller tipped his head to the side and considered. “As long as your calling me corny and pretentious and not the Sheriff, I think you’re okay.”

“Oh I was definitely talking about you.”

“Well my mighty honor-guard is here to make sure that I look extra pretentious, and you boys are doing a marvelous job of it,” Storyteller grinned back at them as the pair of heavies that were working door-security eyed their party suspiciously. The guards were recognizable as Scorcher and Kraven because they were seriously actually wearing their rogues-gallery costumes instead of any kind of legitimate uniform. Apparently the Regent wanted to advertise ‘I EMPLOY SUPER-VILLAINS!’ as loud as he could.

“Good morning, gentlemen,” Storyteller greeted them with a cheerful smile. “We’re here from Doomgard. I believe Baron Roman was expecting us.”

Kraven nodded sharply. “The Regent anticipated your coming,” he agreed, pulling his door open as Scorcher caught the other side.

“Which is no doubt why he sent his best and brightest out to greet us,” Storyteller noted, stepping into the lobby. He could see Kraven’s eyes narrow, trying to decide whether the comment had been sarcastic or not. Storyteller could feel his escort bristling slightly and exchanging cool looks with the guard-villains while they followed him across the threshold and into the lobby.

A pretty young woman met them on the other side. “You must be the delegation from Doomgard.”

“We must be,” Storyteller agreed, holding out a hand to her. “I am Special Agent Storyteller and these are Officers Thunderstrike and Striker.”

“Janice Lincoln,” the woman smiled charmingly as she shook his hand. “We’ve been expecting you. Please follow me.”

“We appreciate the welcome,” Storyteller said, following her to the elevators, where Janice swiped a security card to call the cab.

“We of course wish to cooperate fully with Doomgard in resolving any concerns you may have,” Janice replied in a very scripted manner.
“And that is, of course, appreciated.”

The back of the elevator looked out onto the city as they ascended the glass tower and yet another New York spread out around them. “I suppose the people of your domain must feel very safe with all the power in the hands of one benevolent patriarch,” Storyteller mused and heard Masterson snort under his breath.

“Considering there used to be super-powered bank-robberies around town three times a week? Yeah, I’d say people are resting a bit easier,” Janice agreed. “Some people might complain that they miss the Avengers and the ‘heroes’, but the simple fact is, we don’t need heroes anymore because the crime-rate is virtually zero now.”

“No more crime because the biggest, baddest big-bad already won,” Striker murmured, gazing out at the city.

“I’m not much of a philosopher,” Janice replied with a shrug. “I’m just looking at the numbers.”

“Totalitarian dictatorships are remarkably efficient, really,” Storyteller noted. “The political philosophies of recent centuries may contend that democracies and republics are the ‘fairest’ systems of governance, but they are also terribly inefficient and slow to respond to changing circumstances. So very many cooks in the kitchen, you know.” Striker and Masterson both turned vaguely incredulous looks on him and Storyteller shrugged. “The facts are what they are. A sovereign can move mountains. A president or prime minister is moving pebbles in a paper cup whilst everybody argues about whether or not he should. Dictatorship is very efficient and effective; the main drawback is that it relies entirely upon the dictator having a favorable disposition.”

“And it’s so common for dictators to be super nice guys,” Masterson said, rolling his eyes as the elevator doors opened.

“But for the sake of rhetoric,” Storyteller said, spilling out into a large, overly-grand lobby with a pair of large, overly-grand doors on the far side. “No one has power more absolute than our Lord Doom, and we put our faith in Him entirely.” He watched mild shock bloom on both Thors’ faces as they followed along. “Is it a stretch to believe that similar faith could not be put into one who chooses to act as his people’s protector in a more local capacity?”

They exchanged dubious glances. “… That’s different,” Striker said, a slight note of hesitance in his voice. “Doom isn’t subject to the same vices as men.”

“So then, one should not aspire to be better than they were created?” Storyteller tilted his head and smirked while they paused before the large doors. “Perhaps one should put aside such foolhardy ambitions as, oh, I don’t know, ‘worthiness’?”

Striker and Masterson stared at him for a few seconds before Striker bit his lip, fighting a grin, and made a little sound in the back of his throat. The tension broken, he and Masterson both started snickering.

“Are you a lawyer?” Janice asked curiously, grinning back at Storyteller.

“Do you think I’d be a good one?” Storyteller asked, raising an eyebrow.

“I think you’d be a shark,” Janice replied.

“Groovy.” Storyteller turned back to his escort. “Okay, serious-time now. Back into flanking formation, boys. We’ve reached the ‘look official’ portion of our program.”
Masterson and Striker quickly sobered and took up positions at five and seven o’clock, straight-backed and straight-faced, as Janice touched a button on one of the doors and they both swung inward, perfectly synchronized and at just the right speed for maximum dramatic effect, as she stepped back out of the way.

And it was a full-on throne-room. Storyteller bit down on his tongue hard as he took in the expansive and ridiculously pretentious grand hall leading to a stepped dais and a massive throne. The architecture and trimmings had an overall art deco shape but highlighted with glowing neon blue. Storyteller made every effort to hold his tongue as he walked toward the throne where the cyborg-looking more-or-less human-shaped individual who had to be the Regent was seated. His very best efforts proved to be insufficient, however, and Storyteller found himself letting out a low whistle.

“My but you do aim to impress, don’t you. I hope your architect was well paid for this masterpiece of psychological effect.”

The Regent chuckled deeply. “Display has its value,” he rumbled. “Just as you felt the need to bring an escort. Obviously there’s no reason you could have felt unsafe, visiting a domain without crime, so clearly the decision was purely theatrical,” he reasoned.

Storyteller smiled benignly up at him. “Sometimes bringing a Thor or two is less about protection and more about looking official,” he offered, folding his hands behind his back. “They do make me look very official, don’t they?”

“I suppose. There weren’t any full-sized Thors available?” the Regent asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Makes me look taller this way,” Storyteller countered.

The Regent chuckled again. “Well played then,” he said, smirking down from his perch. “So then, what brings the apprentice of Sheriff Strange to my humble domain?” he asked.

“Research,” Storyteller replied. “And while I am sure that you are a very busy man and I should hate to interrupt, it seems that information on the subject matter I am looking into is quite... privileged. Obtaining what I need through written inquiries and what-not might have taken months, while I believed that an audience with you might be able to accomplish as much in minutes.”

“I see,” the Regent nodded, eyes sweeping Storyteller up and down, sizing him up. “And what information was it that you were seeking?”

“I needed to inquire after a meta named ‘Loki’.”

The Regent frowned slightly. “The old ‘god’ that the Avengers used to brawl with?”

“That’s the one,” Storyteller agreed. “I am seeking whatever knowledge you may have of his current whereabouts or demise, whichever the case may be.”

The Regent nodded slowly, looking puzzled and suspicious. “It was my understanding, and to the best of my intelligence fact, that Loki and the rest of his ilk were killed some time before I came to power. During an incident called ‘Ragnarök’.”

Storyteller nodded. “Thank you. That fits the information I’d compiled. I had a few conflicting reports, but they are just as likely be the result of superstition,” he said.

“And was that all you wished to ask me?” the Regent asked, looking annoyed.

“I know that it may seem a bit anticlimactic from your end of things, but knowing for certain, rather than just operating off urban legends and whatnot, was vital to an investigation of high interest to the
Doomstadt Ministry of Sorcery,” Storyteller explained. “My inquiry into the matter simply couldn’t move forward until I’d crossed it off the list. I apologize for the inconvenience.”

The Regent held up a hand and shook his head. “Your apology is unnecessary. I am, of course, always happy to comply with the will of Doom.”

“Of course, Baron,” Storyteller smiled cheerfully back. “There is no higher calling than service to Doom.”

“Indeed, Agent,” the Regent agreed, his lip twitching slightly as he fought an involuntary sneer. “Then I shall not keep you any longer from your... investigation.”

“Or I from your duties as Doom’s chosen representative in this domain,” Storyteller nodded, pleased by the way the Regent’s eyes narrowed. “Good day then, Baron.” He dipped his head and twirled around, striding between Masterson and Striker as they turned to follow him back through the overly-grand audience hall.

The doors opened for them, seemingly automatic, and let them back out into the lobby. Silence continued as they walked back toward the elevator, where Janice was waiting patiently, until the large doors could be heard latching shut behind them. “Jeeeeze! That guy!” Masterson complained.

“I really didn’t like his attitude in that last part,” Striker noted, a darker tone than usual in his voice. “Did he seem a bit contemptuous to you?”

“Men like him don’t like being reminded that there is a power above them, even if it is God,” Storyteller said placatingly. “While it may seem as though he is contemptuous of Doom, that sort of thing is really more of a self-contempt.”

Janice’s lips were drawn in tight and she had a slightly alarmed look as she took in the conversation. “Still...”

“Oh, all he did was make a face. Don’t be so sensitive,” Storyteller sighed, hanging back for a moment to catch Masterson and Striker around the shoulders as their continued momentum brought them into step with him. “He hasn’t done anything to defy Doom, and if you go filing a report that he made a face, you’re just going to embarrass yourselves.”

“It’s the attitude though,” Masterson grumbled.

“That was... very quick,” Janice noted nervously, raising an eyebrow.

“I didn’t have many questions really,” Storyteller replied. “I simply needed confirmation of a few facts that fell under the category of ‘privileged information’.”

“Oh,” Janice nodded and then glanced over her shoulder as the elevator doors opened and stepped to the side, gesturing. “After you.”

“Thank you, Janice,” Storyteller gave her a friendly smile and pulled his Thors inside, arms still draped over their shoulders. Once in, Masterson pulled away to lean against the side of the cab and frown down at the city through the glass wall; Striker stayed contentedly under his arm. Storyteller supposed he really needed to address this thing soon. And soon probably meant today.

“So do I need to worry about a hundred Thors coming down from the sky to rain destruction upon the domain or anything?” Janice asked, tilting her head and smirking at Storyteller, but there was a slight anxiousness in her eyes.
“No, don’t be silly, that hardly ever happens,” Storyteller grinned, waving her off. “This isn’t some sort of witch-hunt! (although I suppose in the literal sense--) But anyway, we didn’t come down here to cause any trouble, we were really just looking for some information. That’s all.”

“Well good. Then I won’t cancel my dinner plans,” Janice shrugged, looking relieved.

“Speaking of food-related happenings, maybe you could recommend a good restaurant nearby?” Storyteller asked. “I promised my dutiful colleagues lunch.”

“There’s a great pupuseria two blocks over,” Janice said as the elevator doors opened. She walked them through the main lobby and out onto the steps, pointing and giving directions before shaking Storyteller’s hand again while Masterson and Striker watched the super-villain security-guards like they were daring them to try something. “Well, it’s been a pleasure, Agent. You’ll of course let us know if our office can be of anymore use to Doomgard.”

“You are remarkably adept at sounding sincere, Janice. Thank you, you’ve been lovely,” Storyteller gave her another smile. “We’ll stay out of your hair.”

“I would love to never see you again,” Janice smiled sweetly.

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It was mid-afternoon when they returned to Doomgard, having somewhat taken their time about getting there. As they made their way through the main entrance, Storyteller caught Masterson’s arm and held him back a few paces, leaning down to whisper next to his ear. “I’d like you to know that I appreciate your presence today and I mean this in the politest possible way: shoo.”

Masterson raised an eyebrow, looking sideways at him. “Excuse you?”

“There’s a conversation I need to have before it gets too weird,” Storyteller explained, eyes flicking momentarily toward Striker.

“Ah. Right,” Masterson nodded. “Try to let him down easy.”

“Oh for goodness-- Shoo!” Storyteller snapped, giving Masterson a shove.

“Okay! Whatever!” Masterson groused, breezing past Striker as he glanced back, giving Masterson, then Storyteller, a questioning look.

“Well... back to work, I guess,” Striker said with a slightly disappointed smile.

“Put a pin in that, I need to talk to you,” Storyteller said, catching his arm and tugging Striker along in his wake.

“O-Okay?” Striker said, a nervous tone in his voice. “Did... I do something wrong?”

“It’s not-- I’m just-- Okay, you’re obviously attracted to me.”

“Not a thing. Not at all,” Storyteller shook his head, making his way to the southern ramparts and leading Striker along until he’d found a satisfactorily secluded point. Then he turned to his query, catching Striker gently below the shoulders. “Striker, Brandon, it’s- it’s about that whole cute-awkward thing,” he said carefully and Striker glanced away, looking very cute-awkward indeed.

“Is this going to be an ‘easy let-down’ talk?” he asked.

“It’s not-- I’m just-- Okay, you’re obviously attracted to me.”

“Well you’re obviously very attractive,” Striker shot back, still looking away, his cheeks starting to
flush while his brow drew in, frustrated and annoyed.

“All right, that’s fair, I’m just trying to-- What is it you’re looking for with this?” Storyteller asked.

Striker glanced back at him, looking confused and anxious. “I- I-- What am I supposed to say here?”

“You’re pretty and you’re sweet and I like you,” Storyteller said. “But I need to know if what you’re looking for here is a hook-up or a relationship.”

Striker’s eyes widened slightly, frustration being replaced by startled alarm. “Are- Are you serious?”

“There is no ‘serious’ until I can figure out what you want from me,” Storyteller bit his lip, starting to get frustrated because he knew he wasn’t articulating well enough. “If you want to have sex with me, then sure, you’re cute, I can do that. But... But if you want something more, I’m... I don’t think I’m in a place right now where I can do a real ‘relationship’,” his voice trailed off a bit, hesitating. “... I don’t think I know what that is.”

“Well, I mean-- That’s not--” Striker mumbled, his face now fairly red.

“You need to understand that I’m younger than I look,” Storyteller said, looking him in the eye. “I- I was born fully formed. It’s a lot of magical nonsense, I won’t go into the details. I’m a lesser-god, and some lesser-gods are born ‘adult’. And- And I have memories, but they’re not mine. They’re hand-me-downs. They’re somebody else’s and I just have them now, but they don’t fit me.” He bit his lip for a moment, looking down and feeling very self-conscious. And a new feeling too, embarrassment, that was one he didn’t have much experience with. “I-- The things I have memories of thinking and feeling, that isn’t the way that I think or feel. So- So I just... I don’t know myself very well.” He forced himself to look back up at Striker.

Striker stared back at him for a few silent seconds before hesitantly responding. “I- I want to say ‘I understand’, but I really don’t understand half of what you just said,” he confessed.

Storyteller looked down and let out a frustrated little breath. “If you’re looking for friends-with-benefits, I think I could do that, but if you want a lover, I don’t think I’m there right now,” he said.

“I-- Yeah, okay, I guess I kind of got that part, but...” he frowned, shifting uncomfortably. “Okay, how old are you?”

“... A little shy of three months,” Storyteller said quietly.

Striker stared at him, eyes widening and face going a bit slack. “You’re three months old?”


“You’re a baby?”

“No. Sort of.”

“Oh my God...” Striker mumbled, rubbing his hands over his face.

“Physically and intellectually I’m in solid ‘adult’ territory. It’s just emotional development where I come up a bit short,” Storyteller explained. “But-- So... That’s why I’m not sure I’m ready... I’m trying to concentrate on friend-love and familial-love right now and get a handle on that before I start considering the whole romantic-love thing,” he tried to explain. “I- I get the impression that that kind is much more difficult to do right.”
Striker lowered his hands and stared at Storyteller for a few silent moments. “… Is this actually real?” he asked. “This isn’t like, a really weird, messed up kind of ‘it’s not you it’s me’ thing, is it? You’re actually serious with this?”

“It’s real,” Storyteller nodded. “But, um, I’m not supposed to say more than that.” He pursed his lips and crossed his arms. “Actually, I’m probably not really allowed to say as much as I just did... I’m not supposed to talk about what I am.”

Striker looked puzzled and worried. “Why?”

“... Because my birth was heretical,” Storyteller whispered, looking away. There was another uncomfortable silence. “... But Doom has deemed me to be useful to Him.”

Striker was quiet for a few seconds. “This... has something to do with why you just came out of nowhere and Sheriff Strange practically gave you run of the place, doesn’t it?”

“... I’m probably not allowed to say,” Storyteller said softly. “It hasn’t been stated in specific terms, but there’s sort of an open threat hanging in the air.”

“I don’t want to get you in trouble.”

“Likewise... This conversation sort of went a little farther than I meant it to,” Storyteller bit his lip. “What- What I meant to convey here is that the best I have to offer you at this stage in my life (or emotional development or whatever) is a playmate. If you need something more devoted than that, then you should look for someone who’s more up to your speed.”

“Okay... Um, that’s- that’s clear enough,” Striker said, nodding and looking uncomfortable and worried.

“... So, did you want to have no-strings-attached sex then?”

A flush rose in Striker’s cheeks again. “I think... I think I’m looking for something more complicated with somebody who’s a bit less complicated,” he said, a nervous, embarrassed edge to his voice.

“That’s kind of what I thought,” Storyteller nodded. “... Will you still be my friend?”

Striker looked slightly startled for half a second and then smiled warmly. “Yeah, sure, of course.”

“Thank you,” Storyteller said quietly, giving a small smile and looking down. “I’m still figuring out friendship. I get confused sometimes.”

“Well, it seems like you’re pretty good at asking questions,” Striker said with a shrug and a grin.

“Yeah. I guess I am,” Storyteller agreed, feeling pleased at that.

Chapter End Notes

I haven’t quite decided whether or not Storyteller recognizes Lawspeaker as King Loki’s Thor... It’s logical that he could, since he assimilated King Loki... Yeah, he probably does. The question remaining then is whether Lawspeaker’s dislike of Storyteller is subconscious recognition of something/someone he doesn’t quite remember.
Storyteller's comment about being unable to disguise his eyes comes straight out of Norse mythology (Loki is noted to have startlingly bright eyes), and has also been referenced in Marvel canon (during Mighty Avengers v1). Not only do Loki's shape-shifting and illusions not cover his eyes, but also, when he was possessing Sif's body she still had Loki's eyes. I'm not sure if this is going to be an important plot-point in this fic, it's just something I tend to keep in mind whenever I'm writing Loki.

For anyone who didn't recognize the name, Janice is the 'new' Beetle.

Ungh, I re-wrote the last scene three times because it kept getting out of hand. This sub-plot kind of blind-sided me. Striker was never even part of the plan for this fic, he was just filling up the break-room when I tried to think of other rookies to be Masterson's work-friends. But I think I've figured out how to make this make sense without totally throwing a monkey-wrench into the works (that was funny but you won't understand until next chapter).
“Perhaps you know the person I’m looking for,” Storyteller suggested.

“Describe them,” the woman instructed.

“A god. A trickster or a troublemaker. Probably quite powerful. Possibly disdainful of authority. Probably gets into trouble with--”

The woman held up a hand, her face wrinkled into a grimace. “I know who that is,” she said, a strong note of dislike in her voice.

**This chapter guest-starring:**

![Sun Wukong](image)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

**K’un L’un**

K’un L’un was a gem of rare beauty. With its softly rounded mountains and sweeping fields dotted by flowers, crystalline pools, and pretty little pagodas, it was every bit as magical as England, but cast in full daylight, rather than cocooned in mysterious shadows like the fairy woodlands. Storyteller found herself unexpectedly awestruck by it. Neither the Second nor Third Loki had even been to China, much less its mythological heart, so the only fractured pieces of memories she had of it were cold and lifeless, as all the inherited memories of the First Loki were. K’un L’un was anything but lifeless; it was a symphony given form.

In the context of her investigation, K’un L’un was most likely a total dead-end, and if she were to be responsible, she should probably sweep it and check it off her list as quickly as possible. But it was so warm and golden and soothing she could spend days, months, years, wandering its hills. Within minutes, she was singing to herself, as she strolled slowly along a dirt path toward a small city. She wandered through the outskirts, watching the farmers tending their crops, and as the buildings drew
closer together, watched artisans working their trades among the gentle sounds of hand-built industry and the distant gaiety of children playing.

She tried to feel for that tug she’d described to Verity, but kept getting distracted by the music of this place as she meandered. She walked through a market and bought a baked dumpling as she drifted, almost dream-like, toward the larger buildings with stone foundations, near the center of town. The sweetness of the fantasy world started to fade as she found herself among labyrinthine streets framed by high walls. To keep the riffraff out of the rich people’s gardens. Even in a halcyon fantasy land, some things remained the same as ever. Storyteller sighed, folding her arms and searching for the way out of the winding avenues, darkened by the high walls and tall buildings that caged them in.

“You’re looking for something,” a woman’s voice called suddenly and Storyteller stopped, turning slowly and scanning her surroundings. She had taken the alley for deserted, as were most of the streets she’d walked since leaving the commercial district. It wasn’t until the voice spoke again that she was able to locate its source, crouched on top of a high wall, shadowed by the eaves of the pagoda roof overhanging it. “You’re looking for someone.”

“And I suppose you shall tell me now whom I am looking for?” Storyteller suggested, raising an eyebrow at the woman poised atop the wall, staring down at her. She was beautiful, as pale as porcelain and dressed in a minimalist quantity of black, lacy fabric, accented by strands of black pearls.

The woman tilted her head to the side. “Far be it for me to tell you the Way,” she said.

Storyteller walked closer and the woman’s dark eyes followed her, almost unblinking. There was definitely something highly mystical about the woman, she might even be a goddess, and her sudden appearance and interest seemed to suggest a liminal deity. “Perhaps you know the person I’m looking for,” Storyteller suggested.

“Describe them,” the woman instructed as she crawled along the top of the wall, her movements not quite human, and took up a position where she was slightly less shadowed.


The woman held up a hand, her face wrinkled into a grimace. “I know who that is,” she said, a strong note of dislike in her voice. “Anyone knows that god, but my family has a particular history with him. The god of more tricks and troubles than surely any other.”

“That… sounds right,” Storyteller said, raising an eyebrow in surprise. “Is his na--”

“You will find him on the next peak,” the woman said, standing abruptly, seeming to have no trouble at all balancing on the slanted ledge beneath her, and pointed southeast. “At the summit, in the temple garden where he does not belong.”

“Ah. Thank you,” Storyteller frowned slightly, gazing in the direction the woman was pointing, though she couldn’t see past the tall buildings and walls. “And what would his name be?”

“He has many names. Each more pretentious than the last,” the woman sneered.

“Ah...” Storyteller looked back up at her, feeling a twinge of frustration. “You’re a riddley sort of person, aren’t you?”

The woman smirked. “The Way cannot be found on a map. Each must discover the path for themselves,” she said.
“Of course,” Storyteller sighed. “I don’t suppose I might have your name?”

Her smirk deepened. “Perhaps next time, trickster,” she said and then flipped backwards off the ledge and out of sight. Storyteller had a feeling calling out to her would be quite useless.

She frowned to herself, trying to place the twinge of déjà vu. There was something familiar about that parting shot. She sighed and ran her hands through her hair, considering the one hint the woman had left her with. The next peak over, to the southeast, where the local trickster god was apparently waiting for her in a temple garden.

She teleported herself to the outskirts of the city, where she startled a goat but wasn’t noticed by any citizens, and gazed out at the neighboring hill. It was too far for her to make out any man-made structures from here, so Storyteller teleported blind, relying on chaotic luck, and after two tries she found a path. She walked slowly upward, humming along with the calm rhythm of the country as it quickly seeped into her pores again.

She eventually wandered through the gate of a temple. A few attendants with shaved heads and loose robes were scattered around, tending the gardens but paying little mind to Storyteller as she made her way through them. The whole scene was tranquil to the point that it started to itch at Storyteller as she found immaculately maintained bushes giving way to orchard. Peaceful was one thing, but this was too quiet and quickly becoming downright boring, and she had to fight against the sudden need to make a commotion.

Storyteller started to consider fleeing the too-peaceful place. She was fairly sure that no trickster could last here more than ten minutes without breaking something. Maybe the mystery lady had been wrong, or maybe she’d deliberately misdirected Storyteller. She was biting her lip and glancing around anxiously, preparing to make good her get-away, when movement caught her eye at the temple wall.

Someone lighted on the top as gracefully as a sparrow and then made a prodigious leap into the orchard within. Storyteller raised an eyebrow, observing the man climbing and swinging his way up into one of the fruited trees with truly effortless ease. She walked closer and gazed up at him as he started harvesting and stashing fruit in the folds of his clothes. After a moment, he glanced down and noticed Storyteller.

“What?” he demanded.

“Are you stealing from a temple?” Storyteller asked, tilting her head to the side.

The man shrugged. “They’re not going to eat it. This is all pretty much decorative,” he snorted. “I guess they think they’re raising all this for the glory or approval of the gods or something? Well then congratulations to them, this god approves!” He thumbed his chest and gave a toothy grin.

Storyteller replayed her conversation with the mystery-woman in her mind and compared it to the stored knowledge she had of the Tianian pantheon. The pieces clicked together. She lifted her hands to her mouth and gave a little squeak of exaggerated surprise. “Oh my goodness!” she gasped, staring up at him. “You couldn’t-- You’re not-- Are you the Great Sage, Equal of Tian? Oh you’re even more handsome than they say!”

He looked startled for half a second before his face smoothed over into a very satisfied smirk. “Why yes. Yes I am,” he agreed, preening with delight at the flattery. The Monkey King dropped to the ground in front of her. “And you, mi-- Oh, you’re very tall,” his smile turned to a slightly shocked expression as he looked up at Storyteller.
“I am Loki, Goddess of Stories, and I would very much like to buy you a drink,” Storyteller said, smiling at him.

The Monkey King raised an eyebrow and a moment later his smirk returned. “Well then, who am I to say no to the Goddess of Stories?”

“Only the most popular protagonist of all time,” Storyteller said with an excited grin, catching both his hands. “So where’s a good place to get a drink?”

“Well they probably do have consecrated spirits here...”

“I’m thinking some place with a little more atmosphere,” she said.

“You’re not scared, are you?” the Monkey King raised an eyebrow.

“... Are you trying to be a bad influence on me?” Storyteller asked, tilting her head to the side.

“How about a fun influence?” he suggested impishly.

“You want to steal ritual alcohol from a temple?” Storyteller asked, putting her hands on her hips. “I mean, fruit nobody’s going to eat is one thing...”

The Monkey King laughed. “Nah, forget it. There’s an inn down in the valley,” he said, jerking his chin to indicate a direction. “You have to admit though, it would have been a laugh.”

Storyteller bit her lip, trying to hold a wide grin at bay. “I think you might be very bad for me,” she said.

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“You again?” the waitress demanded when she set her eyes on the Monkey King. She crossed her arms in annoyance and frowned down at him.

“This pretty lady wants to buy me a drink!” the Monkey King declared, flashing a grin at the waitress and then glancing back at Storyteller. “You’ve got cash, right?”

The waitress turned to Storyteller. “Miss, whoever this grifter told you he is, don’t believe a word of it.”

Storyteller smiled sweetly at her and held up a silver bar. “How far will this get us?” she asked, watching the waitress’s eyebrows lift in surprise at the sum.

“Bring us red wine, yellow wine, lychee wine, goji wine, peach wine, ginger wine, sorghum wine and two of everything on the menu!” the Monkey King demanded excitedly, earning a renewed dirty look from the waitress.

“Well in that case,” Storyteller chuckled and pulled out a second silver bar.

The waitress gave her a worried look. “Miss, this man really is no good. He’s a trouble-maker and little better than a common thief. You should have nothing to do with him,” she warned.

“Oh, I should think he’s a rather uncommon thief,” Storyteller noted and the Monkey King laughed appreciatively. “But I’ve been known to exhibit ill-advised and possibly self-destructive behavior now and then. Bad judgment isn’t new territory for me.”

The waitress sighed, looking defeated. “Two of everything,” she said, not bothering to write it down.
“And a bottle of everything that’s good!” the Monkey King reminded her.

The waitress didn’t acknowledge him, drifting off to reappear a few minutes later carrying a tray with a multitude of bottles, a teapot, and a small collection of cups. She settled the drinks and cups on the table and disappeared once more as the Monkey King poured a cup of red-colored fluid and pushed it across the table to Storyteller before pouring one for himself. “So,” he said in a conversational tone as he leaned back in his chair and smiled at her. “What’s an Asgardian doing in K’un L’un?”

Storyteller stared at him silently for a moment as she sipped the liquor in her cup (it turned out not to be grape, despite the color) before licking her lips and tilting her head slightly. “You remember Asgard?” she asked quietly.

“You don’t? That’s disappointing,” he wrinkled his nose, looking down at his drink. “I mean, where do you think you even came from then? How do you explain yourself in a Doomianity paradigm?”

Storyteller considered that for a moment before answering. “I do remember, but that puts me in a very tiny minority. I’m... surprised, is all. I didn’t realize you’d have any reason to remember. It seems like your little slice of Heaven came through fairly intact,” she gestured vaguely, indicating the world around them.

“On first impression, maybe. But it’s kind of a mash-up. Like everything,” the Monkey King shrugged. “There’s people and bits here and there that didn’t used to be.”

“May I ask how you remember?”

“I d’know. Maybe ‘cause I’m a Luohan,” he shrugged.


“And you’re certainly a new face. Are you here now?” the Monkey King asked, raising an eyebrow at her.

“Just visiting,” she shook her head. “I’ve been tasked by Doom to catalogue all the Lokis in Battleworld and figure out which ones are murdering people. I didn’t really think I’d find one here, but a grid-search seemed the most thorough solution.”

“You work for Doom?” the Monkey King asked, finishing his cup and refilling it.

“Gives me unfettered and unquestioned freedom of movement and an inside line on what’s happening in Doomstadt,” Storyteller answered with a shrug. “And, y’know, stuff to do. It’s entertaining.”

“Can’t ask for more than that,” he grinned.

“I suppose not,” she smiled back. “But it’s possible I might be greedy by nature.”

“Hedonism is only a bad thing if you’re not at peace with it,” the Monkey King offered with a shrug.

“That’s your philosophy?”

“That’s the best philosophy.”

Storyteller laughed and hooked her ankle around his under the table, tilting her head and casting him a coquettish look. “I’m at peace with my hedonism.”

“Well then you need another drink,” he decided, choosing a bottle at random and filling Storyteller’s
cup as his grin spread out wide enough to put most of his teeth on display.

“Do they have rooms here?” Storyteller wondered.

“We haven’t gotten our food yet!” the Monkey King protested.

“Yeah but *after* lunch?”

“Why would you want to be locked in a musty old inn room for the best part of the afternoon? Let’s find us a field of wildflowers that smells like honey and sunlight,” he suggested, leaning an elbow on the table and giving her a lazy leer.

Storyteller shivered and giggled, feeling giddy and she hadn’t drunk nearly enough yet to blame the liquor. “Yessssss,” she agreed eagerly.

“That’s what I like about you Vikings. You know how to *party.*”

“Well, when your whole cosmology is centered around the looming and inevitable end of the world, one likes to live every day like the last,” Storyteller reasoned, sliding her foot up the back of his leg.

“Today, tomorrow, next week, it’s all the same,” the Monkey King mused, pouring another cup. “If today is shit, why would tomorrow be any better? People think the future matters, but it doesn’t. Today’s the only thing that’s real.”

“So there’s no point in wasting time.”

“I am *not* leaving without the *food,***” he frowned and Storyteller laughed.

“That’s not what I meant. Brass tacks.”

“Brass tacks?” he gave her a puzzled look.

Storyteller cast a glance around the room to make sure no one was paying them undue attention and then summoned up her distaff and laid it across the table in front of her as the Monkey King gave it a curious and appraising look. “I have recently come into possession of a rather exceptional bit of hardware,” Storyteller explained, stroking a finger slowly along the burnished uru. “The problem is: I was trained with blades. Last week I came up against a formidable opponent, and I was using this marvelous instrument as little better than a *club.* I expect I would have lost my head if I hadn’t had some help with that fight.” She slashed a hand across her throat, grimacing.

The Monkey King nodded slowly, giving her a lopsided smirk. “You want a teacher,” he guessed.

“The Great Sage Sun Wukong is the best staff fighter there has ever been or ever will be,” Storyteller said with a coy smile.

“That’s true,” he agreed.

“How can I entreat you?”

“Well, appealing to my basic carnal nature and pride is a good start,” he chuckled and then tilted his head and considered. “You won’t be able to fight the same as me though, no matter how hard you train. You’re not as strong as me.”

Storyteller hummed amusedly. “I love how you don’t even need to know how strong I am to say that.”
“Nobody’s as strong as me,” the Monkey King offered a shrug and a sanguine grin. “I’m called ‘Equal of Tian’ for a reason.”

“I thought you named yourself that.”

“I named myself that for a reason.”

Storyteller laughed. “Ah, I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship.”

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“You’re too planted. You need to keep your knees bent,” the Monkey King said as he caught Storyteller’s wrist and moved her grip a few inches further up the distaff. “What doesn’t bend, breaks.”

“That’s- the motto I- live by,” Storyteller panted, adjusting her footing as instructed.

“Good. So fight by it,” the Monkey King said with a grin. “Start over.”

Less than five minutes later, Storyteller found herself once again acquainted with the sod. She groaned and flinched as she tried to roll over; her shoulder had popped out of socket just a little ways and just for an instant. “Your shoulder’s hurt?” the Monkey King asked, squatting down next to her.

“It slipped out of place- and then back in. Fixed itself- but it’s a bit tender,” Storyteller puffed, grimacing as she poked at it.

He nodded, rocking back and sitting in the grass, apparently taking the injury as a cue that the lesson was over. “That last time was better. You’re a quick study,” he noted.

“Yay,” Storyteller sighed and let herself roll onto her back. “It will take years to be proficient, of course... And I can’t come every day, or Doom will get annoyed that I’m not at work.” She closed her eyes and flexed her fingers, stiff from gripping her distaff for hours. “And there’s a few people whom I really need to keep looking for.”

“You could do a shorter lesson every day,” the Monkey King suggested and moved, half laying down next to her, propped up on his elbows. “Time to go chase your alternates and come play with me afterwards.”

“Then go home to ice my bruises,” Storyteller opened her eyes and smirked up at him.

“Bruises help with the learning,” he grinned back.

“I think I could make a case for every other day,” Storyteller said, lifting her mostly unhurt arm and stroking his cheek. “Does that work?”

“Work?” the Monkey King leaned down and nibbled at her neck.

“Will you teach me?” she asked, closing her eyes again and wrapping her arm around him.

“Until it stops being fun, sure,” he murmured, kissing the underside of her jaw and then up her cheek to her ear.

“That seems reasonable,” Storyteller said and turned her head to seek out his mouth. He shifted, climbing over her and balancing himself against one arm as he traced her body with the opposite hand. Storyteller tilted her head back as he went after her neck again, sighing softly. “… That’s all you want me to be, isn’t it? Fun?”
The Monkey King hummed, seeming to consider the question. “I might require a basic level of morality and general not-evilness too. I mean, nothing too big. Let’s say... no cannibalism, no wholesale slaughter without a very good reason, no poisoning village wells... that sort of thing. Y’know, basic not-evil.”

“I think I can manage that,” she agreed. “... Is that how everything is for you? No expectations? Completely fluid and in the moment?”

“Expectation is the mother of disappointment,” the Monkey King replied easily, picking at the frog-clasps on Storyteller’s shirt. “Life is much better when it’s a surprise.”

“Hmmm I think I like that.” Storyteller played with his long queue, wrapping it around her fingers a few times before letting it fall. “For as long as fate has been my family’s worst enemy, maybe being in a world with no future and no past is the best thing that could have happened to us,” she mused as the Monkey King opened her shirt and caressed her skin. She found the pleasant mood suddenly spiked with a wave of guilt and she frowned up at the sky. “... Is that selfish? How many incalculable zillions of people died, and I have the gall to be happy with what I got?”

“Being grateful for life is nothing to feel guilty about,” the Monkey King whispered.

“Should I not be having fun though?”

“You should always be having fun.”

Storyteller smiled, wrapping her arms around his shoulders. “I like you. You make me feel good.”

“As the god currently feeling you, I have to agree. You feel very good,” the Monkey King noted, groping her. Storyteller laughed.

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When Loki walked into his office, Stephen frowned slightly, noting that her left cheek was bruised and slightly swollen just under her eye. “You ran into trouble today?” he asked, looking her over for other signs of malady.

“No, just the opposite!” Loki said cheerfully, her smile slightly lopsided from the damaged cheek. “Well, I’m sure some or most people would call him ‘trouble’, but not what you meant at all,” she amended, making an amused grimace.

“Who?”

“Sun Wukong!” she chirped happily.

“The Monkey King?” Stephen asked, puzzled. “Why did he hit you?”

“We were sparring,” Loki replied, seeming entirely unconcerned by the injury and its cause.

“And why where you sparring?” Stephen asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Because Mummy left to me (and by that I mean I stole from her) this fabulous magical distaff and I’ve next to no idea how to fight with it,” Loki replied, materializing Friggjarrokk in her hands. “First-Loki was trained with swords and daggers. Serrure avoided confrontation and nobody had much interest in training him. Third-Loki was pretty much sword-exclusive. So I have basically no training at all with staves.”
Stephen nodded slowly, following the train of logic. “And you asked him to teach you?”

“He’s the best!” Storyteller pointed out eagerly. “He’s the only hero ever who made a name for himself fighting with a staff! (Well, him and Gabrielle.) Heroes use swords and axes and maces and hammers, not staves. Do you know how bad-ass you have to be to make a glorified walking-stick look good?”

“And he agreed to teach you?”

“He’s the kind of guy who’ll try anything once,” Loki shrugged.

“And the quid pro quo?” Stephen asked.

“That’s not really his thing. He’s doing it for fun, because we hit it off,” Loki explained, flicking Friggiyarokkr away to somewhere unseen. “If righteousness and the betterment of society are exciting and entertaining, he’s the hero for the job. If it gets boring, he fucks off.”

“And you’re not concerned this might come back to bite you.”

“Not unless I make him mad,” Loki gave another shrug. “But I know the Hsi-yu Chi. It’s one of those landmark kind of stories that stand as a load-bearing pillar within the structure of society and culture. Or, it was. Anyway, I have some familiarity with his likes and dislikes and what kinds of triggers are likely to send him into a homicidal rage.”

“You may have read his story, but you have only a passing familiarity with his culture,” Stephen pointed out, frowning.

“Yeah, except that he’s a totem, and that means Monkeyese preempts Chinese or Tianese or K’un L’unese or whatever culture. That makes his motivations, vices and resentments pretty clear-cut,” Loki pointed out.

“I’m not trying to argue with you, Loki, I’m asking you to be careful,” Stephen sighed. “Sun Wukong is extremely powerful and has a notoriously unpredictable temper.”

Loki gave him her very most unimpressed look. “My predecessors grew up navigating Thor’s temper.”

“... Point taken,” Stephen conceded.

“But I’ll be careful,” Loki promised, tilting her head and giving Stephen a little smile. “I’ll probably be meeting him for lessons a couple hours every other day or so.”

“To coincide with your female days?” Stephen asked.

Loki frowned softly, considering. “I hadn’t been thinking about that, but yes, meeting me as a man might be a little weird for him. And I’d probably only be able to access the distaff’s real potential when I’m in female form (assuming I can figure out how to do so at all).”

Stephen nodded. “And I assume the reason you’ve brought this to me was for some sort of approval?” he asked.

“I guess?” Loki looked slightly unsure. “It seemed like the sort of thing I should tell you?”

“So long as you continue to make progress on your assignment, I see no problem with you putting efforts toward self-improvement,” Stephen said.
“Good!” Loki beamed. “Now I have two teachers who are the cream of the A-list!”

Stephen chuckled. “Well, it’s good to keep your standards high.”

Chapter End Notes

You might have noticed that I sometimes capitalized 'Way', that was when it was directly referring to the 'Tao' in Taoism, which is generally translaed as 'The Way'. Taoism falls somewhere in between the Western concepts of religion and philosophy, and there have been arguements back and forth for the last hundred and fifty years over which it is. The two-cent version is that it's the concept of a path to self-realization, and therefor a very personal and individualistic one.

Referring to the Monkey King as the 'most popular protagonist of all time' could be accurate simply by virtue of him being the most popular hero character of Chinese myth, because China is FREAKIN' HUGE. China has the most people, so their most popular hero ends up eclipsing the most popular hero of less-huge cultures. Also, the Hsi-yu Chi is popular beyond China, very notably so in Japan (The original Dragon Ball is an adaptation of it. Not Dragon Ball Z though, that's just... that's just some weird.)

Yes China does do grape wine both traditionally and now, but 'red wine' is liquor made from purple-red rice. The distilled liquor of East Asia is often translated as 'wine' in English despite being a lot stronger than actual wine.

'Luohan' is the Chinese transliteration of 'Arhat' which, depending on what school of Buddhism one is referencing, can mean someone who has attained or is close to attaining enlightenment.

No, real distaffs are not weapons; this is totally a fantasy/metaphor thing I've chosen to do within the context of Marvel-Myth. A distaff is a long shaft that holds the loose wool or linen as you are spinning it into yarn or thread, and it's the distinctive attribute for Frigga (who is also 'Freya' in Marvel-Myth). I decided that the spear she carried into battle at the end of AoA was Friggjarrokk, Frigga's magical, jeweled distaff, because in Marvel-Myth, everything is now a magical weapon.

Is anybody still reading? Here's another request for suggestions. I'm looking for semi-demonic Marvel characters; either characters with one demonic parent, or who are otherwise part-demon, part-not. Hellstrom's on the list, and I've decided against using Magik for this. I've been coming up with a handful of ladies but having trouble coming up with any other male ones with an actual personalities. I know the Salem Seven has a few, but I don't think any of them ever had enough 'screen' time to have any actual established character. It occurred to me that Billy and Tommy could potentially fit this criteria (based upon William and Thomas Maximoff's backstory) but no, that is too big a can of worms to open up as a throw-away background sub-plot. So anyway, half-demon dudes! The other half does not necessarily have to be human.
Concerning the Labeling of Relationships

Chapter Summary

"He isn’t my boyfriend because that’s a label,” Loki said.

“And ‘sensei’ isn’t a label?” Verity asked, pulling a large casserole pot out of the oven and dumping stir-fry into it.

“‘Sifu’, verity, he’s Chinese, not Japanese.”

“I haven’t watched a lot of kung-fu movies. Y’know, since I don’t watch movies,” she said, picking up the stir-fry and walking it around to the table.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“No, it is all messed up! They’re not spiders and they’re not people, they’re awful science-abominations and they’re all sick,” Loki was explaining as he sat on the floor with his back leaned against the couch.

“They’re sick?” Verity asked, turning over heat-and-serve stir-fry in a teflon pan.

“Well yeah, they’re half-spider and half-awful!” Loki said.

“Well Spider-Man’s part spider or something, isn’t he?” Verity pointed out.

“Spider-Man’s a totem warrior. That’s completely different from a science-abomination. Totems are a natural and healthy part of the mystical ecosystem,” Loki protested. “Science-abominations are just sick and sad.”

“Spider-Men are natural,” Verity gave him a skeptical look.

“Totems are,” Loki shrugged. “And see, with him it’s a little hard to tell that he’s a real totem (partly just because of the timing, that he appeared in the age of ‘marvels’ i.e. ‘science-abominations’, and also because he didn’t seem to have any mystical trappings or anything) but original-Loki checked and confirmed that he’s legit.”

“He’s a legit Spider-Man?” Verity raised an eyebrow. “What does that mean exactly?”

“A legit totem warrior,” Loki corrected. “A champion who has the mystical essence of an important spirit-animal.”

“Spiders are important?” Serrure asked, cross-legged on the couch behind Loki with Lockheed draped half over his knee.

“Spiders are very important! One of the most important!” Loki said emphatically and tilted his head back to look at Serrure. “They’re definitely more important than raccoon totems, maybe even as important than bear totems.”
“I’m guessing bear totems are important,” Verity said, poking a carrot-slice with a fork and taking a bite out of it to decide if the stir-fry was ready.

“Bear totems are super important,” Loki agreed. “Bears were the first thing humans ever deified that wasn’t a celestial-body.”

“Really?”

“The first earth-bound gods were bears,” Loki nodded.

“And Father Odin is the bear-god?” Serrure asked. Since Verity couldn’t identify the cue for that connection, she had to figure it must have come from a prior bed-time story or lesson. She wasn’t sure exactly how much of ‘their’ mythology Loki had been teaching him.

“He is, but he wouldn’t be the original bear-god. Whoever that was, her name’s been lost for millions of years. The Neanderthals weren’t very big on writing these things down,” Loki semi-confirmed. “Odin is the bear-god for our paradigm. And sometimes the wolf-god, but that can also be Loki.”

“Mm,” Serrure nodded, biting his lip, brow deeply furrowed.

“Okay, so back to the spider-people that offended you so badly,” Verity back-tracked. “Why are the science-abominations not good enough to be totems? Don’t they have an animal essence?”

“No, they’ve just been screwed with. If you get full of viruses, you don’t have a virus’s essence, it’s just made you sick,” Loki explained. “Somebody shoved a whole lot of spider-DNA where it’s not supposed to go and now all those people are sick.”

“What about your cockroach friend? Was he a totem or a science-abomination?” Verity asked.

Loki frowned softly, seeming to consider that carefully. “Well, Noh is definitely science, but he’s not really abominable because the gene-splicing didn’t make him sick. It was done when he was still a wee little zygote and by scientists who had been successfully splicing genes for millions of years, rather than haphazardly CRISPRing for a couple decades.”

“So there’s some gray area here?” Verity raised an eyebrow.

“There’s always gray area with science-ethics, I think,” Loki shrugged.

“What about with the totem thing? Is he a cockroach totem?” she asked, switching to the present tense to match Loki’s subtle assertion that his friend wasn’t a thing of the past.

“No. Noh-Varr doesn’t have any cockroach personality traits or affinities or anything. He’s just a nigh indestructible tank,” Loki explained. “Totems don’t just get powers from their totem-animal, they also get, like, ‘aspects’ and stuff.”

“And stuff,” Verity smirked slightly, casting him a skeptical look. But when Loki’s explanations got vague, it usually tended to imply the subject at hand was maddeningly convoluted, so Verity wasn’t sure she wanted any more detail. “Like your boyfriend having a ‘monkey’ personality.”

“Yes. King Kong is a primo example of a totem,” Loki agreed. “He has that lackadaisical, animalish, in-the-moment-ness, and he’s ridiculously agile and inquisitive and mischievous and other traits we associate with monkeys. And he isn’t my boyfriend because that’s a label.”

“And ‘sensei’ isn’t a label?” Verity asked, pulling a large casserole pot out of the oven and dumping the second panful of stir-fry into it.
“Sifu’, Verity, he’s Chinese, not Japanese.”

“I haven’t watched a lot of kung-fu movies. Y’know, since I don’t watch movies. Plates,” she said, picking up the stir-fry and walking it around to the table.

“‘Teacher’ is a label I can live with,” Loki climbed to his feet and went to collect dishes and silverware. “He is teaching me. That’s a label and relationship that exists in the moment. ‘Boyfriend’ implies something continuous. I’m not planning the future here.”

“You’re planning on showing up to future lessons,” Verity pointed out, returning to the kitchen for noodles.

“I’ll show up to the next lesson, and if he doesn’t, then I’ll be disappointed but not hurt,” Loki corrected. “Because our relationship is informal and scholarly.”

“Uhuh,” Verity nodded, hearing a semi-lie in the part about not being hurt.

“Storyteller doesn’t want a boyfriend because he loves me the most,” Serrure announced.

“That’s a very different kind of love, Serrure,” Verity said, wrinkling her nose slightly.

“It’s the most love,” Serrure insisted and looked like he was about to continue his assertion before being distracted by the door. “Verity, somebody is knocking on your outside-door.”

“Were you expecting someone?” Loki asked curiously.

“No. Which means it’s my mom,” Verity bit her lip and put her hands over her face for a moment as a surge of panic washed over her. “Loki, my mom’s at the door and there’s a dragon on the couch!”

“Verity, deep breath,” Loki said calmly. “Trust me, the dragon on the couch won’t be a problem, go let your mom in.”

The reassurance rang truthful, so against her better judgment, Verity took a deep breath and went to the door. “Mom. Hi,” she said and then glanced back over her shoulder anxiously. “Um, hi.”

“I had an appointment in town this afternoon and after that was finished, I thought I should take you out for dinner! How does Greek sound?” her mother said with a bright smile.

“I-- Actually, I just finished making dinner. Um, I think there’s enough if you want to... um,” Verity combed a hand through her hair nervously.

“Oh nonsense, honey, that can be tomorrow’s lunch. Let me take you somewhere nice!” her mother insisted.

“I-- Actually, I just finished making dinner. Um, I think there’s enough if you want to... um,” Verity combed a hand through her hair nervously.

“Oh nonsense, honey, that can be tomorrow’s lunch. Let me take you somewhere nice!” her mother insisted.

“That’s really nice, Mom, but I’ve sort of got company,” she said, pulling the door open and turning to look back toward the living room area as Loki walked up behind her, wearing a winning smile.

“You must be Eloise,” he said holding out his hand to shake hers. “It’s wonderful to meet you. I’m Lonnie.”

Her mother looked something close to ecstatic and Verity realized with an uncomfortable clench of her gut that her mother didn’t remember meeting Loki. Because time was broken and it had never happened. “The pleasure’s all mine!” her mother said delightedly, shaking Loki’s hand. “Oh goodness, I’ve interrupted your evening. I am so sorry.”

“You didn’t interrupt anything, Mom,” Verity said, feeling ever more annoyed at it all when the
words felt like an echo. “Y’know, why don’t you come in, there’s enough to eat.”

“Oh I couldn’t possibly disturb your plans!” her mother protested.

“We really didn’t have any,” Loki said with a grin and a shrug and then half-turned, glancing back toward the couch where Serrure was crouched against the arm, staring at them “My brother and I live a few doors down. We get together for puzzles or board games pretty often. Just seems a much nicer way to wile the evening than Netflix. Serrure, this is Verity’s mother.”

“Hello, Missus Willis,” Serrure said, giving a tiny wave and staying planted.

“Well how lovely,” her mother said, and Serrure’s presence seemed to have reassured her that she wasn’t ‘interrupting their evening’, so she stepped happily into the apartment.

“I’ll grab another plate,” Loki said, ducking around the corner into the kitchen.

“Oh Verity,” her mother whispered, grabbing Verity’s arm with an excited squeeze and leaning close to her ear. “He’s so handsome!”

Verity suppressed a groan and turned to hiss back. “I’ll bet his boyfriend thinks so too.”

“Oh...” her mother looked devastated. Again.

“Serrure, are you being shy?” Loki called as he walked back around the corner with another place-setting and headed for the table.

“I didn’t know Verity had a mother...” Serrure mumbled as she and Verity moved out into the living room.

“Everybody has a mother at some point, Lamb. That’s usually an essential part of the whole process,” Loki replied, laying out the fourth place at the table. “Don’t be scared. She’s a nice lady.”

“I’m not scared,” Serrure protested with a sulk.

Her mother stooped in front of the couch to bring herself close to Serrure’s eye level. “My name is Eloise. It’s delightful to meet you, Serrure,” she said, giving him a warm smile and then looking startled. “Oh, Verity, when did you get a cat?”

Verity’s brain took a few moments to process the question and to take in the Siamese sitting next to Serrure, looking calmly back at her mother. She tried not to cringe. “He’s- He’s Serrure’s cat,” Verity said, trying not to sigh.

“His name is Lockheed. He’s a very smart cat,” Serrure said, petting cat-Lockheed’s back.

“How lovely,” her mother said, holding out a hand to Lockheed, which he sniffed in a cat-like fashion and then stood up and jumped onto the back of the couch, not letting Verity’s mother touch him (maybe because she would have felt scales instead of fur.)

“Mom, do you want some wine? I’ve got a tavel open,” Verity asked, walking into the kitchen.

“That sounds wonderful, dear.”

Verity poured the glass of wine while a fresh panic started to slowly brew within her mind. Lockheed’s costume may be convincing enough, but they were about to eat dinner, and her mother would definitely question a cat sitting at the dinner table. Should she ignore him, or put a dish on the floor for him? That had to be rude, but he must understand the predicament.
“Serrure, come to the table now,” Loki called and Verity watched him catch hold of one of the barstools and lean across the counter, pointing up toward the dish cabinet. “Hand me one of the custard cups?” he whispered.

Verity did so and then frowned slightly, watching him set the stool close to Serrure’s place and then fish three large shrimp out of the stir-fry into the little glass custard cup. Lockheed made his way to the stool as Loki set the cup of shrimp down in front of him. He climbed the rungs rather than jumping like a cat, but at least he hadn’t flown, and her mother didn’t seem to notice the odd movement, too busy being charmed by the ‘cat’ patiently waiting for the rest of them to take their seats.

“Oh how sweet! It eats with the family?” she laughed.

“Sometimes he takes an evening off, but he usually likes being close,” Loki replied with a shrug and a smile. “He’s a very social cat.”

“Well that’s just adorable!” her mother said, accepting the dish of noodles from Loki and looking to Verity as she dished some onto her plate. “So how did you meet each other?”

Verity let go of the lip she’d been biting and silently told herself to stop freaking out. “Lonnie knocked on my door a few months ago. He said he was new... to the neighborhood,” she said carefully.

“And where did you live before, Lonnie?” her mother asked.

“Oklahoma,” Loki replied with a smile. “I like Manhattan much better. There were only two restaurants (and I must use the term loosely) in our old town, and, well, not a whole lot else.”

Her mother chuckled. “Did your whole family move?” she asked.

Loki paused and chewed his lip for a second or two, just long enough to be awkward. “This... is the family now,” he murmured, reaching out and lightly squeezing Serrure’s shoulder. Serrure picked up on the cue flawlessly and stared down at his plate with a pinched brow, poking his dinner with a sudden melancholy air.

“Ah, well,” her mother faltered and Verity shot a quick glare at Loki. She recognized that it was very strategic awkwardness, and it would stop her mother from prying at their background anymore, but it still seemed mean. “H-Have you made many other friends since you’ve been living in New York?”

Loki paused and chewed his lip for a second or two, just long enough to be awkward. “This... is the family now,” he murmured, reaching out and lightly squeezing Serrure’s shoulder. Serrure picked up on the cue flawlessly and stared down at his plate with a pinched brow, poking his dinner with a sudden melancholy air.

“Ah, well,” her mother faltered and Verity shot a quick glare at Loki. She recognized that it was very strategic awkwardness, and it would stop her mother from prying at their background anymore, but it still seemed mean. “H-Have you made many other friends since you’ve been living in New York?” her mother asked, shifting topics.

“Oh, yes, I’ve made a few through work,” Loki agreed, offering a slightly strained smile. “You hear a lot of stereotypes about New Yorkers being ornery, but I haven’t found that at all. I came from a, hm, very conservative community, and it was always a bit... uncomfortable. My experiences since coming here have been overall pretty positive.”

“Well that’s good to hear,” her mother smiled. “What do you do for work?”

“Data-entry, mostly. It’s boring, but the pay and benefits are good,” Loki replied with a shrug.

“I don’t suppose you have any single friends around Verity’s age?” she asked and Verity gritted her teeth and suppressed a groan, because she’d known that was coming.

“Mom.”

“Mm... I’d have to think about that,” Loki said, tapping his fork against the edge of his plate and
looking thoughtful.

“Don’t think about it,” Verity sighed.

“Now Verity, it doesn’t hurt to meet new people,” her mother chided.

“I am meeting new people. I met Lonnie. I don’t need to get set up,” Verity said firmly.

“She’s met a few of the people I work with too. She even came to the bar once,” Loki offered.

“Oh Verity, good for you!” her mother said happily. Verity sighed, rolling her eyes, but her mother seemed to accept this as ‘progress’ and thankfully dropped the subject. Her mother then turned her attention to Serrure. “What about you, Serrure? Do you have many friends at school?”

Serrure nodded slowly. “My friends are Nico and America. They’re littler than me, but I like them.”

“Well that’s just fine, dear,” she assured him.

The next two hours passed in a swirl of déjà vu, subverted now and again by Serrure putting on his best cuteness act. Verity wondered, as dinner was cleared away to be replaced by a train-themed board game, and Lockheed moved onto Loki’s lap with his chin rested on the table to watch, just how many times she was going to find herself sitting through this very same dinner. Should she mark the days her mother was going to ‘unexpectedly’ drop by on the calendar for next time? No, the markings would disappear when everything reset, but maybe Loki could keep it in his phone. If she knew the dates, she could make sure that she, and no one else, was in her apartment when her mother came next time around.

But did she want to keep her mother from meeting Loki, just to save herself from repeating this same awkward evening over and over? Her mother was happy to find out that Verity had made a friend, even if she was disappointed that Loki was ‘just a friend’. Verity didn’t really want to take that away from her. Maybe she could take control of it, and make the meeting not so awkward. Maybe make sure Loki was a girl next time (why hadn’t she thought of that this time instead of worrying about Lockheed?) Maybe after the next time-quake, she should just call her mother right up and invite her over, so that they could plan ahead which lies to tell her. Because ultimately, that’s what it came down to, wasn’t it? Explaining Loki without terrifying her mother meant lying to her.

The evening wrapped up much earlier than last time, as Loki reminded Serrure that it was a ‘school night’ (he didn’t go to school) and they took their leave, exiting through the hall door rather than the magic one. When they were gone, Verity made decaf and sat on the couch with her mother. “This was wonderful, Verity. I wasn’t sure moving to the city was a good idea, but you were right,” she said. “I’m so glad you’re making friends. Lonnie’s such a charming young man... What a pity he’s...”

“I’m not looking for a boyfriend, Mom,” Verity sighed.

“Well I know, dear, but you don’t have to be looking. Love finds you at strange times, there’s no predicting it,” she reasoned.

“I’m just... trying to get used to things, get the hang of all this,” Verity said with a tired little shrug. “I don’t want to make my life any more complicated right now.” She found herself thinking back to Loki’s reticence to ‘label’ his new relationship and felt a pang of guilt for razzing him. She combed her fingers through her hair and leaned back into the couch. “... Lonnie’s kind of in the same place, I guess... They came from a really bad situation. Back in Oklahoma. Y’know, the kind of awful foster-care stories you hear about.”
“Oh,” her mother looked worried. “Poor things... Lonnie must have aged out of the system a few years ago though.”

“It took him a while to get custody of Serrure,” Verity mumbled against the lip of her cup. It was only sort of a lie.

“Ah, of course,” her mother nodded sadly.

“I just... It’s not a romantic thing at all, and I wouldn’t want it to be, but I... I like having him around,” Verity said, feeling as awkward as she had all night. “He gets me. And even when he doesn’t, he tries a lot harder than most people.”

Her mother smiled, one of her truly genuine smiles. “That’s wonderful, Verity. I’m glad you found each other.”

Verity smiled back a little. “Yeah. Me too.”

Chapter End Notes

'Technically true' lies are the best lies.

For those of you who didn't follow the Secret Wars tie-ins, the thing that Storyteller's all upset about in the beginning is 'Spider Island', which was spun off of a cross-over event from fall 2011 where a couple of Spider-Man villains teamed up to turn everyone in New York (and then the world!) into spider-monster-slaves. Because, y'know, villains. They don't really need a sane reason. That crossover was the kick-off point for the Venom (Flash Thompson) and Scarlet Spider (Kain) comics. Both satisfying reads, even if they slammed face-first into every cliché they could find (nothing wrong with that).

Storyteller's assertion that the first gods were bears is a maybe-fact. The earliest archaeological evidence of ritualistic/religious practices (other than burying the dead with flowers) center around the cave bear; it started in the Neanderthal period and continued with early Modern Humans. There's no way to confirm they were actually worshiping the bears, it's equally possible that the bears were the preferred sacrifice of their deity (like how sacrifices to Zeus were made with oxen). What we know is that they were crafting special boxes and putting either bear heads or denuded bear skulls inside of them, which is pretty damn ritualistic and does not serve any identifiable practical purpose.

"King Kong" because his names are alternately "Monkey King" or "Wukong" and because it amuses Storyteller very much.

I think maybe Storyteller should introduce himself by a different name every time he meets Verity's mom. Which might drive Verity a little crazy.
Things memorable for their absence

Chapter Summary

“I am called ‘unworthy’ for abandoning my duty to Doom... But I ask, when is Doom unworthy?”

Chapter Notes

Guest appearances this chapter:

There was a clamor from inside the house of tiny feet running down the stairs. Storyteller winced as she heard the distinct sound of a small body tripping down the last few and landing loudly on the wood floor. There was no wail, however, and the spill didn’t seem to delay its victim much as the sound of running feet resumed a few seconds later and the door flew open. Nico was bouncing on the balls of her feet, squealing eagerly and holding up her arms, eyes bright with delight.

Lockheed heaved a resigned sigh and abandoned Storyteller’s shoulder to swoop down into the little girl’s arms, apparently preferring to be held and cuddled like a doll over the tantrum that had erupted on his first visit. “Good morning, Nico,” Storyteller grin ed down at her. “Did you have a good week?”

“Uhuh,” Nico nodded, petting Lockheed’s scales as she cradled him against her chest. “We made papier mache at school.”

“What’s papier mache?” Serrure asked.

“It’s you take the newspaper and cut it up and mix the flour and water into paste and put the newspaper inna paste and then take it out and put it onna balloon,” Nico explained.

“It’s for making sculptures out of recycled paper,” Storyteller added when Serrure gave her a baffled look.

“Nico, did you fall down?” Arcadai-Loki’s worried voice called as she came hurrying into the front room.

“I’m okay,” Nico said, looking back at her over her shoulder. “Serrure’s here.”
“I see that, thank you sweetheart,” Arcadia-Loki smiled, pulling the little girl to the side a little to let them in and then crouching down to look her over for fresh bruises. “How have you both been?”

“We’ve had a pretty decent week. No more wolves in the kitchen and I’ve found a weapons instructor,” Storyteller said, stepping into the house with Serrure.

“A weapons instructor? Who?” Arcadia-Loki asked curiously, standing back up and walking with them toward the kitchen.

“Do you know the name Sun Wukong?” Storyteller asked, smirking with amusement as she caught sight of America standing in the doorway from the kitchen, dressed in a T-shirt that went down to her knees and nibbling at a piece of jam-covered toast, her hair in complete disarray.

Arcadia-Loki frowned in the way she did when she was sure she ought to recognize something, but she shook her head. “I can’t say that I do.”

“He’s a god of K’un L’un, the greatest master of the staff there has ever been,” Storyteller explained.

“Well, that certainly sounds impressive,” Arcadia-Loki smiled, a slightly ironic cast to her voice.

“Oh stow it. Staves are cool,” Storyteller snorted.

“Serrure! Serrure! Alani and Brian and Cassie and some other guys are gonna meet us at the park after lunch and we’re gonna play kickball!” Nico announced, bouncing along.

“I don’t know how to play kickball,” Serrure admitted with a hint of embarrassed worry.

“Me neither!” Nico exclaimed happily.

“There is a ball and you kick it,” America explained in a sardonic drawl, looking rather subdued and following the statement with a yawn.

“You should all go over the rules before you start to make sure everybody agrees,” Arcadia-Loki said. “And what’s on your schedule, Storyteller?”

“Some more poking around the desert today, I hope to get the rest of the valley crossed off my list this week,” Storyteller said, settling down at the kitchen table and watching America finish her toast and start apparently attempting to drink her glass of milk without coming up for air. “A few hours with Wukong after that. And I’ve been meaning to catch up with some of my colleagues in Doomguard, they keep asking when I’m going to be around to the tavern again...”

“Well Serrure’s welcome to stay for dinner, of course,” Arcadia-Loki said smiling. “I know it’s important for you to build those work-relationships if you’re to find any cooperation or traction with the Thors. Would you like tea?”

“Mm, not right now, no thank you,” Storyteller decided, shaking her head. “You’re right, it is. I think they mostly like me, but there’s a few who are pretty iffy about me hanging around, kind of an us-and-them, territorial thing. I’m sure I can’t win them all over, but I’m trying to make sure more of them like me than not.”

“I’m sure you can manage that,” Arcadia-Loki said, sitting down on America’s left.

“I should hope so,” Storyteller agreed with a smile and then called, “Lockheed doesn’t like grapes, Nico.”
“What does he liiike?” Nico whined from next to the counter, one arm wrapped under Lockheed, who was slumped dispassionately against her shoulder with his ears laid back against his head in irritation.

“He already ate his breakfast. I don’t think he’s hungry right now.”

“Sweetie, stop bothering Lockheed, he’s not a toy,” Arcadia-Loki admonished.

Storyteller changed out of her dirt and grass-stain covered training clothes and cast a glamour over the fresh bruise on her cheek before she made her way to the Valhalla Tavern as daylight was beginning to wane. The room was about half full and a handful of patrons greeted her as she entered, though she did take note of a couple annoyed twitches from older, staunchier Thors who weren’t pleased about a contractor violating the sanctity of institutionalized alcoholism.

“Ho! Storyteller!” Ava’Dara called, lifting her glass in greeting from where she seemed to have climbed up and sat on top of the bar. “Tell us a tale!”

“Only if you will then sing us a song, pretty bird!” Storyteller rejoined.

“Ha! There will be songs of righteous bloodshed all around!” Ava’Dara declared with a feral grin.

“And what better way to wile an evening than drinking with comrades and listening to the dulcet melodies of Doomgard’s fairest?” Hercules said with a grin, raising his glass to Storyteller and giving her a flirtatious wink. “Ladies, my ears eagerly await.”

“Oh you sweet-talker,” Storyteller grinned, sliding up to the bar and taking the stool next to him. “Ah me, but I’m much too parched yet to spin.”

“A round for the skald!” one of the many actual-Thors (this one had shortish, strawberry-blond hair) called to the elderly retired-Thor behind the counter.

“Your shadow is likely to be running a bit late this evening,” Astrovik noted from a few chairs down. “Skyshaker had him digging up all the citations for some obscure little whatever from the last ten years, and naturally it has to be on his desk first thing in the morning.”

“This sort of thing is exactly why businesses are shifting over to digital records. That would take seconds if they were digital,” Storyteller wrinkled her nose.

“You don’t have to tell me,” Astrovik said with a lopsided grin and an eye-roll as the bartender presented Storyteller with a glass of beer.

As promised, Ava’Dara started to sing a war ballad while Storyteller sipped at a pint. Her voice was comparable in range and mesmerizing elegance to Lorelei’s, and Storyteller let herself be rocked into the gestalt current of the tune. She was only vaguely aware of the sounds of some commotion outside until Ava’Dara stopped, frowning in annoyance and glancing toward the front entrance with the curl of a sneer on her lips. “The lush is back,” she drawled.

“The lush?” Storyteller asked, glancing at the door, through which an argument with raised voices and threatening tones could be heard, and then back at her companions.

“... My predecessor,” Hercules sighed, looking depressed, which Storyteller’s hand-me-down memories told her he rarely allowed to show through. “And at one time, my friend.”
Storyteller stared at him and her heart seemed to stop. Hercules was the district-Thor of Manhattan. His predecessor, through the lens of their rewritten history, would be the former district-Thor of Manhattan, which she knew wasn’t Leif, and if it wasn’t the Thor of sixteen-ten, then logically it would have to be the Thor of six-sixteen, and he was now apparently in disgrace “Because he lost his hammer.” Storyteller breathed, voice barely audible even to herself.

She jumped from the stool and tore across the room so quickly her feet barely touched the ground. She heard Hercules and a few of the others calling to her as she fled, but couldn’t be bothered to acknowledge them as she pushed out the door and froze. There, arguing with a Thor whom Storyteller had seen around the halls of Doomgard a few times, was a sight that made her breath catch and her legs tremble. Long hair the color of ripe wheat was tied back in a low ponytail, a short beard decorated his jaw, the red cape lay back over his shoulders in a way that didn’t obscure a steam-punk left arm of black uru, and he was apparently still unworthy of shirts.

“--atrocities swept out of sight and banished from memory! The deceit is a shame upon all who would allow it, nay, commit it!” he was shouting at the unimpressed-looking other Thor.

“Aye, and you would know well of shame, drunkard,” the other Thor scoffed and Storyteller’s feet were already moving again.

“Ignorant varlet,” Thor (her Thor, he had to be) started to lift his good arm, but Storyteller caught it halfway, wrapping it in her own and continuing to walk, pulling the startled captive into her stride.

“But why waste breath on one whose ears cannot hear your words, Odinson?” Storyteller asked, smiling up at her Thor as she pulled him down the sidewalk.

“Storyteller? Don’t waste time on that inebriate!” the other Thor called after her.

“It’s fine! I’m fine! Sorry to leave early!” Storyteller called back over her shoulder with a cheerful wave, before turning back to her Thor and grinning up at him. “If the company doesn’t suit you, then why bother with that tavern? There’s plenty others in this city!”

“You’re... You’re not a Thor...” her Thor mumbled, looking as though he were trying to work out some impossible puzzle.

“Ah, no, you’re right. You’ve got me,” Storyteller agreed with a giddy laugh. “I’m a special agent. I’m stationed out of Doomgard for the time being, but I report directly to Sheriff Strange.”

“But...” he glanced behind them, seeming suddenly lost. “You were in the Valhalla.”

“Most of them tolerate me well. There’s a few who find my presence inappropriate, but we do work side-by-side and I’m fairly well liked,” Storyteller explained.

He turned back to her, looking ever more baffled. “Why do you look at me like that?” he asked.

“I smile much of the time. I’m a very cheerful person,” Storyteller replied, still unable to stop grinning. “Come, let’s find somewhere to talk and we can get to know each other better.”

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Despite the haze of intoxication and the constant, unrelenting pain in his arm, Odinson was able to recognize that this was odd. The young woman (full grown but just barely) seemed to fill the room with light and warmth as naturally as a fire, her smile downright startling in its brilliance. She was a beauty without exception, and Odinson felt a strong tug of affection for her within minutes of their meeting, yet he found that his eyes did not roam her body nor did his hands feel any desire to do as
much either. Was it because of her youth? Or did it have something to do with the strange sense of familiarity that nagged at him?

She’d been prattling along nearly nonstop since pulling him away from the Valhalla, talking constantly yet saying almost nothing. She certainly acted as though she knew him; perhaps she was someone he’d met a long time ago? Maybe he couldn’t quite place the woman’s face because she’d been a child and looked different when he’d known her?

Despite her earlier suggestion, it wasn’t a bar the young woman pulled him into but a wine and liquor store, where she flitted quickly down an aisle and paused in front of a selection of meads, considering for a moment before finally releasing Odin’s arm to collect a pale gold bottle. She hummed merrily to herself and scurried over to the refrigerated section, picking up a six-pack of some obscure microbrew and then went to deposit them on the counter.

“I.D. please,” the cashier drawled, leaning against the counter and looking both bored and tired.

“Of course,” the woman chirped, pulling a small leather wallet out of her jacket pocket and letting it drop open as she held it up. Odin caught sight of a gold badge bearing the Doomstadt seal mounted on the bottom half of the wallet, below the identification card.

The cashier frowned for a moment and then his eyes widened and he stood up straighter. “Thank you, ma’am,” he said, quickly setting to work scanning her bottles and arranging them in the bag. “Did you find everything all right? Was there anything else you needed?” he asked.

Odinson watched the transaction with detached curiosity, still trying to make sense of the feeling of familiarity as the strange young woman remained blithe and congenial in the face of the cashier’s nervousness, before finally wrapping one arm around the bag and holding her other hand out to Odin with another luminous smile. “Shall we go?” she chirped.

“... All right,” Odin agreed, walking to her and letting her latch onto his arm again as they made their way out of the store.

“Where do you live?” the woman asked, pausing out on the sidewalk.

Odinson raised an eyebrow at her. “You should be careful the way you speak to older men, maiden. Your intentions may be misconstrued.”

She chuckled. “I apologize if I seem overly forward, it’s just that I very much need somewhere private to speak with you, Odin,” she explained.

Odinson frowned slightly, considering her. “You haven’t said your name,” he noted quietly. “I assume the Thors told you mine?”

“They did not,” she shook her head. “Where do you live?”

Odison’s frown deepened, but he nodded westward and the young woman started walking immediately, towing him along once more. “What is your name?” he asked again, more directly this time.

“Storyteller,” she answered.

“That is your name? I assumed it was a title.”

“It is the name I chose for myself,” she answered, glancing up at him again, her smile slightly diminished by a vague look of hesitance.
“And what name was given to you? By your parents?” Odinson asked.

“I never met them. Though I imagine it would be ‘Loki’, just like my father’s and his father’s,” she said.

“... Loki...” Odinson whispered, his steps faltering under a sudden surge of indefinable familiarity and a torrent of contradictory but intense emotions, above all, love and hate by equal measure. “... What--”

“No more questions on that topic until we are off the streets,” Storyteller whispered and Odinson found himself startled, not sure when she’d leaned that close to his ear. “You never know when someone might be listening.” Odinson turned to stare at her as Storyteller started walking again. “Do you have an apartment? Is it very far?” she asked.

“... It’s not far. Six blocks,” Odinson answered quietly, watching her intently, wishing his mind were sharper. Though sharpness of mind was accompanied by a sharpening of the pain that plagued his lost arm.

“Excellent,” Storyteller said chipperly and then returned to chattering as she had been before, speaking incessantly yet saying nothing, though now Odinson began to suspect that while the prattle was meaningless, it was perhaps far from pointless.

The babble continued up the elevator and down the hall until the door of Odinson’s apartment had closed behind them, and then Storyteller went abruptly silent, and when Odinson looked at her, she seemed to be lost in thought. She arranged the contents of her bag upon the kitchen table, pushing aside a moderate quantity of clutter, and then wandered over toward the cabinets, asking, “Glasses?”

“On the left,” Odinson answered, settling into one of the chairs and observing the way she moved, her gait fluid and light upon the linoleum. “... The name Loki... It has meaning to me and yet none.”

“You mentioned the redaction of memories. When you were shouting at that Thor outside the Valhalla,” Storyteller said, pulling two glasses from the cabinet and walking back to the table to settle herself. “You were a Thor once, and so you were of course privy to a great deal of knowledge that the majority of people are not. Did you think your mind had remained untouched when you were disavowed?”

Odinson clenched his teeth and glared down at the table, listening as Storyteller opened a beer and pushed it toward him before peeling at the wax on the bottle of mead. “... And yet I still remember much that should not be known,” he growled.

“You remember just enough to sound like a crazy person, I’d imagine,” Storyteller said softly.

Odinson looked up at her sharply, eyes narrowing. “I am not.”

“You’re drunk,” Storyteller noted, and she was right but that didn’t make it any less an affront.

“You doubt me?”

“I do not. But others will, because you’re drunk,” Storyteller said plainly.

Odinson chuckled. “You believe I should sober and yet you serve me?”

“I never said that I thought you should sober up,” Storyteller shook her head. “Why do you think Doom allows you to walk about preaching heresy?”
Odinson frowned at her, considering that. “Enlighten me.”

“I have recently met a mad man who proposed to me this: It is good for madmen to blaspheme, because then blasphemy is the occupation of madmen,” Storyteller said, staring back at him with a calm yet intense gaze. “Were you to sober up, and were your words to command respect, then you would become a threat to Doom Law,” she explained in an even, weighty tone. “But right now you are not, and Doom doesn’t need to strike you down because he has already made an example of you. The other Thors look at you and see a man wallowing in shame and despair. They would rather die than be like you. You are still useful to Doom like this.”

Her words froze in Odinson’s gut and his veins ran with ice-water for long moments before horror turned to rage. “That--”

Storyteller hopped from her seat and flung herself at him, wrapping her arms around Odinson’s shoulders in an awkward embrace. “Don’t. What point would there be? To be snuffed out by Doom? Let this go. It’s not forever. Nothing is forever, and I know patience isn’t your strong suit, but I believe you can wait this out.”

Odinson found himself calming, which was puzzling because Storyteller’s words weren’t really comforting, but something about her made his heart soft. “… You know me... And I know your face, yet have no memory of you,” he said quietly.

Storyteller shook her head, still clinging to him. “You wouldn’t, of me. We’ve never met,” she murmured. “But I know who you are. I know who you were to my father. He loved you more than anyone in the world, and he wanted me to find you.” She swallowed and leaned her cheek against Odinson’s shoulder, a tremor running through her. “That’s why I became a special agent, to look for you, because I thought you’d be in Doomgard... But you weren’t.”

“... I’m sorry,” Odinson whispered, and then puzzled over the strange contradictions of everything the woman had told him. “… Your words are confusing.”

“Because I am confusing,” Storyteller said, finally releasing him and moving back to her chair. She pursed her lips for a moment, looking down at the table and then back up at him. “… You were always frustrated by the things my father kept from you,” she said softly. “I can’t tell you everything, because if I did, it would just get flagged by Doom’s memory magics and you’d lose all of it again... So if I want you to retain anything, I think I can only tell you the parts that aren’t apocryphal.”

Odinson’s anger started to simmer again and his jaw clenched as he growled through his teeth. “… He is a tyrant.”

“Yes, but in troubled times a firm hand is needed, and none is firmer than Doom’s,” Storyteller shrugged, looking down at the table for a while before turning her eyes hesitantly back up to look at Odinson. “I am younger than I look,” she said. “I was born into this body as it is, but I am an infant.”

Odinson mulled that over dubiously. “… I don’t understand how that could be, because you are either very wise or very very clever.”

“Clever, mostly,” Storyteller shrugged. “But my father did bequeath me the sum total of his knowledge when he left the world, and so maybe some wisdom came with that, but he wasn’t really very much older than me all told.”

Odinson nodded slowly, not understanding how any of this would be possible, but if he were to accept that it was, then Storyteller’s explanation reconciled the peculiarly abridged timeline her earlier comments seemed to imply. But there was a far more important question that nagged at him.
“Who are you to me?” he asked.

“Well, that gets a little convoluted,” Storyteller bit her lip, seeming to consider her words for a moment. “Your father, Odin, adopted my grandfather. Then later, he affiliated my orphaned father. Even later, when my father was also gone, Odin took me on. So then, I am your sister, your niece and your grand-niece,” she explained.

Odinson felt a slight smirk tugging at his lips. “That is convoluted,” he agreed, and then felt his face falling again. “… Why were those memories taken from me?”

“… If I delve into heresy, you’ll lose this entire conversation,” Storyteller said, eyes sad and apologetic.

The glass in Odinson’s hand burst as he squeezed it too hard. He glared down at the table, trembling with rage as mead ran across its surface. Storyteller didn’t even flinch. “… Why do we tolerate this?” Odinson growled.

“Because it’s all we can do. Right now, Doom is the very life of Battleworld. Without him, all of it would tear apart and everyone would die,” Storyteller said.

“You believe that?”

“I know it to be true. I know it far better and more technically than most anyone. I’ve seen the numbers. It’s true. I can understand why you wouldn’t take Doom on his word, but maybe you can trust that I am clever enough to understand what I’m talking about?” Storyteller pleaded softly.

Trust Loki? Odinson found himself balking. Some forgotten part of his mind told him no, never, but his heart wanted so badly to do just that. “… You’ve seen ‘the numbers’?” he asked softly.

“It’s true. Doom’s power is keeping us all alive,” Storyteller said with a grave nod. “And the balance is very, very fragile... He’s not a kind or loving god, but He’s what we have. It’s not a good solution, but it’s the only solution we have.”

Odinson sighed angrily and shook his head. He crossed his arms on the table and leaned against them, ignoring the spilled mead and broken glass.

“You spoke of atrocities. Outside the Valhalla. What atrocities are those, Odinson?” Storyteller asked quietly. “How did you become disgraced?”

“… How long have you been an agent of Doom?” Odinson asked, looking up at her again.

“About a month.”

“Do you know what a purge is?”

“No,” she shook her head.

“If a domain falls into chaos and collectively turns its back on Doom. If the number of heretics among the population becomes too large to contend with as individuals, then they will be met as a group,” Odinson said quietly. “Such was the case with the domain of Lemuria. And so it was purged. Every man, woman and child. Perhaps only one in five of them had truly turned from Doom Law, but that was enough to justify slaying all of them.”

“… And this sentence was carried out by the Thors,” Storyteller whispered, staring at him.
“Aye,” Odinson nodded. “I am called ‘unworthy’ for abandoning my duty to Doom... But I ask, when is Doom unworthy?”

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“Perry?” Storyteller called plaintively, knocking at the door. It was well past midnight, Serrure was tucked into bed with Lockheed watching over him, and Storyteller was a few hundred miles away, waking up her friend in the middle of the night because apparently she was one of those people.

The door opened and Perry appeared, looking worried. “What’s wrong?” they demanded.

“I- I--” she glanced nervously around the hall. It was empty, of course, everybody tucked into their tiny little rooms, no bigger than a monk’s cell, because it was late and she was being a pest.

Perry caught her arm and pulled her inside their room, shutting the door and turning back to her. “What’s wrong?” they asked again, quieter.

“I found my Thor,” Storyteller whispered and bit her lip anxiously, fidgeting. “The reason I couldn’t find him in Doomgard is that he’s in ‘disgrace’. And- And I think it’s because before the world ended, somebody else was wielding Mjolnir. He wasn’t on the outs with Asgard or anything, Mjolnir just decided to be a jerk because it’s a finicky little shrew,” she explained. “But in Battleworld, in the new ‘history’ for Battleworld, he said that he was disgraced three years ago for losing faith in Doom after Doom ordered the ‘purging’ of Lemuria.”

“Lemuria? The Tamil lands?” Perry asked.

“Yes,” Storyteller nodded. “He said the domain turned to heresy and was ‘purged’ by the Thor Corps, meaning no survivors and no man-made structures left standing,” she explained.

“... Convenient to use Lemuria then... A land legendary only for its absence,” Perry mused, nodding.

“But it can’t possibly be true! He said it happened three years ago! Battleworld didn’t exist three years ago!” Storyteller protested. “And Thor said that none of the citizens of Battleworld even remember it because Doom memory-redacted the whole thing. So then what’s even the point of a fictional story that nobody remembers?” she demanded, hysteria starting to bleed into her voice.

Perry caught her in a hug to calm her down, and was quiet for a while, processing it. “... But you say the Thors remember it?”

“Yes,” Storyteller nodded, clinging to them.

“Then that’s the point of the story,” Perry said calmly. “It tells them the full implications of their duty and what is expected of them, should such an incident ever actually become necessary.”

Storyteller shivered. “You think it is in preparation? To eventually actually do something like that?”

“Doom can’t afford a revolution. The majority of his power is dedicated to holding Battleworld together, he couldn’t afford to divide his attention should a genuine threat arise,” Perry explained carefully. “Doom is merciless and pragmatic. If he saw the need for extreme measures, I have little doubt he’d enact them. But by the same token, I believe he wouldn’t pull that trigger unless he found it truly necessary. He wants to see himself as a savior-god, so he can’t just go killing off his subjects.”

She let out a shuddering sigh and nodded slowly. The explanation was oddly soothing in its practicality. “That makes sense...” she said softly.
“... You said that this supposedly happened three years ago?” Perry asked.

“Yes?”

They were quiet a moment and then nodded. “Come with me,” they said, pulling Storyteller into a teleport.

They landed in the hall of another apartment building, although this one looked much more middle-class than Perry’s tiny dorm-like tenement. Perry turned to the door they’d landed in front of and knocked on it firmly, waited a few seconds and knocked again. They kept doing so until a muffled voice could be heard complaining from the other side as the apartment’s occupant neared. The door opened to Paradise’s Donald Blake looking very rumpled and sleepy, wrapped in a terrycloth bathrobe. He glared at Perry. “Do you have any idea what time it is?” he croaked.

“Lemuria,” Perry said, looking evenly back at him.

Donald froze, his face went pale and his eyes widened. “... What did you--?”

“Lemuria.”

Donald closed his mouth and stared at Perry silently for a few more seconds, and then said softly, “I can’t talk about that.”

“Because you were ordered not to?” Perry asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Loki...” Donald looked away, clearly wishing this conversation weren’t happening.

“Perhaps the hallway isn’t the best place for this?” Storyteller suggested.

Donald bit his lip and nodded, stepping back and holding the door for them. As soon as the latch had clicked, Perry started talking again. “Storyteller was told that the purge of Lemuria occurred three years ago. Didn’t you quit the Corps three years ago, Donald?” they asked, turning back to give their brother a piercing stare as Donald leaned against the door, not looking at them. “Did you resign because of Lemuria?”

“... Yes,” Donald whispered, nodding and closing his eyes.

“You weren’t the only one,” Storyteller noted quietly.

Donald shook his head. “I think there were seven of us... Who told you about Lemuria?”

“Odinson, of the Kingdom of Manhattan,” Storyteller answered.

Donald bit his lip and nodded again. “... He’s the best of us.”

“What does that mean?” Perry demanded.

Donald opened his eyes but still didn’t look at them. “... He threw down his hammer during the slaughter. He refused to kill innocents. He even tried to defend a group of children and had to be taken down and dragged off the field by the other Thors...” he explained, just above a whisper. “I didn’t see it, but I heard about it. Me, and the rest of us who quit... we followed our orders during the purge and then quietly resigned afterwards.” He closed his eyes again. “I wish, with everything I am, that I’d done the same as him. That I’d refused.”

“The other Thors treat him as a pariah,” Storyteller said softly.
“Because they’re blind fools,” Donald snorted.

“... I’m sorry to wake you, Donald,” Perry said.

Donald chuckled and shook his head. “No point leaving now. I won’t be getting back to sleep.”

“I think Storyteller probably has to get back to her ward soon,” they said, turning back to Storyteller and laying a hand on her arm. “... You came to me with this instead of Strange?”

“I wasn’t-- I wasn’t sure if it was something that I... maybe wasn’t supposed to know...” she explained quietly, fidgeting. “But the way you explained it, I think it’s probably okay. I just, when I first heard, I got... scared.”

“... If you weren’t sure, then it was a prudent decision not to confront Strange with it,” they said and slid their hand down to catch hers and give it a gentle squeeze. “If you should ever find yourself in a similar position, and need a sounding-board for your doubts, I will never betray your confidence.”

Storyteller pursed her lips and nodded, then grabbed Perry into a hug. “Thank you,” she whispered.

Chapter End Notes

I have read the new Hercules (and liked it a lot) but this is taking place before the post-Secret Wars "eight months later" gap, so he's not dry at this point. I'm writing him based more on the Hercules and Amadeus run of comics (one of my favorites, and precedents they set up in that series were much of what made the meta in Agent of Asgard possible).

Lemuria is a theoretical lost/sunken continent proposed by by a scientist in the 1800s that would have once been in the Indian Ocean. The continental-drift theory made the scene and most of these lost-land theories dried up, but Lemuria got adopted both by Tamil religious scholars in India and by 'new-age' mystics and fiction writers in America. One particular new-age mystic composed an elaborate (and highly impractical) military history regarding its war with Atlantis. I know they mentioned Lemuria (and the aforementioned war) in Ultimate-verse, but I'm not sure if it was ever used in 616's canon for anything.

I was trying to decide between writing this chapter or Storyteller's return to Weirdworld first, and considered putting it to a vote, but then I figured that if I did that I was pretty sure everybody would probably vote for 'finding Thor' versus a big question-mark, so I decided to skip the middle-man. And that means next up is *Weirdworld II: Return to Weirdworld!* ... *Weirdworld II: Even Weirder!* ... *Weirdworld II: $%!& Gets Weird!* ... I could probably come up with half a dozen more sequel-names, but I'll stop now. I need an obscure character for a throw-away role as a random servant/flunky to Morgan le Fey, any suggestions?

So the reason I disappeared from mostly all internet activity without a word for almost three months? I bought a freakin' condo! The first month and a half was spent reading and signing a million papers. The second month and a half has been spent fixing and painting the bedroom so that I could get it into a condition to move in. I wrote this chapter mostly last weekend, and gave it its final round of editing just now (Saturday evening) after spending the day talking to my electrician friend about ripping out the
1970s track light in the hall and replacing it with two normal light sockets, and then taping visqueen down all over the living room carpet as I start prepping to fix and paint the main part of the condo. So I'm a home-owner now! That's about the most adult thing ever (y'know, aside from parenting...!)! There's lots of work to be done fixing this place up, so I'll probably not be updating as regularly as before, but I'll try to not have any more disappearing acts like the last few months.
The palace’s large main doors were flanked by lava-men guards. The palace was literally *in a volcano*. Morgan le Fay won all the super-villain style-points. Storyteller covered his mouth and giggled into his hand as the lava-men addressed Wulfbuck.

“Greetings again, Thor Wulfbuck. What business have you with the Empress?” one of them called.

“I am escorting Special Agent Storyteller, an emissary from Doomstadt, who has been sent here on an errand from Doom Himself,” Wulfbuck replied in a strong voice, chin held high and giving off a clear aura of ‘lava-men don’t intimidate me’.

Chapter Notes

Whole lot of guest-stars this chapter:
“Astrovik said you ditched the Valhalla last night to run off with that drunk, angry guy,” Masterson drawled, leaning sideways and tilting his head to look at Storyteller as he sat at his desk. It was a declarative statement, although seemed to allude to a question.

Storyteller looked up at him. “I think you’re asking me something here, but you’re being a bit vague,” he noted.

Masterson rolled his eyes. “Why? I’m asking you ‘why’.”

“Oh, he clearly had a story,” Storyteller said, flipping through his last few reports as he scrawled updates onto the map spread out over his desk. “And it was a very juicy one.”

“A story? Are you serious?” Masterson raised an eyebrow.

“Masterson, I don’t just tell stories, I collect them,” Storyteller explained.

“From drunks?”

“Drunks are frequently very chatty and, hm, unrestrained?” Storyteller shrugged. “I don’t imagine he’d have been so inclined to divulge if he were sober.”

“I don’t think that guy’s ever sober,” Masterson snorted. “He comes around the Valhalla to just yell, like, twice a week or whatever.”

“It would seem he has a lot of emotional turmoil tied up in either the establishment or its occupants,” Storyteller noted, looking back up at Masterson again. “You know he used to be a Thor, right?”

“Yeah, ’til he turned traitor.”

“He didn’t turn traitor, he simply refused orders. If he’d actually betrayed the Corps, I think the consequences would have been a little more severe than dishonorable discharge,” Storyteller corrected, shaking his head. “Treason is a whole different magnitude of crime from dereliction of duty.”

“So, what, you just sat there and listened to him drunk-rant for a few hours?” Masterson asked skeptically.

“I like listening, and I think he appreciated being listened to,” Storyteller gave another shrug. “I don’t see it as a wasted evening at all. You can learn a lot from listening to the sorts of people who are usually ignored.”

“So that’s your life-hack then? Listen to all the street-people-gurus and--”
“Are you Agent Storyteller?”

Masterson and Storyteller both turned to look at the speaker, a tall, cloaked Thor. His nose and jaw were slightly elongated into a small snout, short gray-brown fur covering his face and long, pointed ears. “I am,” Storyteller said, climbing to his feet and pushing in his chair. “And you are?” he offered a hand.

“Wulfbuck. District Thor for Weirdworld. I came to give my regular report and was informed that you require a guide,” the lycanthropic Thor gave Storyteller’s hand a quick, firm shake.

“Ah, wonderful! Yes, I do. I have never in my life been as lost as I was when I tried to navigate that place myself,” Storyteller agreed with a grin. “I believe, if I’ve read the map correctly, that my destination is within palace or capitol city.” He half-turned back toward his desk and tapped next to the tiny bloodstain over Weirdworld.

Wulfbuck leaned over to look and gave a nod. “That appears to be where the palace stands, or at least near to it,” he agreed. “It will be a simple matter to take you there.”

“Excellent,” Storyteller said brightly. “How soon would you like to go?”

“As soon as you are able,” Wulfbuck replied. “I have concluded my business here.”

“Perfect! I will just shove this junk in a drawer,” Storyteller said, gathering up his files and dropping them into a drawer of his desk.

“Need me to come protect you from giant slugs?” Masterson asked, a smirk pulling up one side of his mouth.

Storyteller paused, considering it. “... Maybe...”

“We will not be traversing the Darkswamp,” Wulfbuck interjected.

“All right then. We’re skipping the slugs, but thank you anyway,” Storyteller patted Masterson’s shoulder and turned back to Wulfbuck. “Ready to get weird, officer?”

It was two lifetime’s ago, nestled within Serrure’s hand-me-down memories, that Storyteller found the last time he could remember being picked up and carried through the air by Thor. He had the passing thought that, though Wulfbuck was strong enough to carry him, he felt that it was a great deal more awkward and unwieldy being carried as an adult-sized person. Storyteller wasn’t sure whether Weirdworld’s magical saturation and distortion also foiled Doomgard’s teleportation scrolls like it did his own attempts at travel, or if Wulfbuck (like many Thors) simply preferred flying to translocation. Either way, Storyteller found himself very pleased to have his feet back under him when they finally arrived on the steps of Morgan le Fay’s palace.

“Well, I thank you of course, Wulfbuck, but I am glad to be back on solid ground,” Storyteller sighed as Wulfbuck put him down.

“Weirdworld is far easier to navigate from above,” Wulfbuck replied with a shrug.

“I can imagine. The forests here are some of the thickest, and certainly the most magical, I’ve ever seen,” Storyteller nodded, straightening his tunic and turning toward the palace’s large main doors, which were flanked by lava-men guards. The palace was literally in a volcano. Morgan le Fay won all the super-villain style-points. Storyteller covered his mouth and giggled into his hand as the lava-
men addressed Wulfbuck.

“Greetings again, noble Wulfbuck. What business have you with the Empress?” one of them called.

“I am escorting Special Agent Storyteller, an emissary from Doomstadt, who has been sent here on an errand from Doom Himself,” Wulfbuck replied in a strong voice, chin held high and giving off a clear aura of ‘lava-men don’t intimidate me’.

The guards exchanged glances. “... The Empress would probably want to be informed about this,” the one on the right said in a slightly unsure rumble.

“Inform her that the apprentice of the Holy Eye is here on official business for the Doomstadt Ministry of Sorcery,” Storyteller called up to them.

The lava-men looked at him silently for a moment, then one on the right turned to a box next to his station and called into the mouthpiece of a voicepipe. “Inform the Empress that the apprentice of the Holy Eye of Doomstadt is at the gate.” After a long pause, a warped and mostly incomprehensible voice babbled back through the pipe and the lava-man gave a quick nod to himself. “Understood,” he said and snapped the box shut. “The Empress grants you an audience, Apprentice!” he announced, turning back to Storyteller and Wulfbuck. “And, of course, the Thor is always welcome,” he added as the huge doors swung inward.

Wulfbuck started ascending the stairs and Storyteller followed his lead. A slightly-trollish, slightly-humanish servant dressed in medieval-chic stood with two more lava-men at the threshold. He was already bent with a pronounced hunchback, and when he dipped a low bow, Storyteller found it somewhat remarkable the man didn’t tumble right over. “My Mistress welcomes you to her home, apprentice. I am Murkandor, please follow me,” he said before straightening up as much as he could and turning to lead them down the large, ostentatious gallery.

“How do they always make volcano-lairs so roomy...?” Storyteller murmured with a smirk as they followed Murkandor, flanked on either side by lava-men.

“I’m sorry?” Wulfbuck raised an eyebrow at him.

“Ah, nothing, just amused by the cliché of it all,” Storyteller replied, shaking his head. “Nothing says ‘I’m a bad-ass’ like sitting around in a magma chamber and daring it. Kaleo certainly makes it work.”

“I... see,” Wulfbuck said, but Storyteller was pretty sure he did not, in fact, see.

At the end of the overly long entry space was another set of impressively huge doors, which were dragged open by another pair of lava-men, letting Storyteller and Wulfbuck enter an even huger throne room.

“Greetings, my guests,” a strong, rich female voice with just the right amount of ominous reverb called from atop a throne so big it was just plain satirical. “I have been informed by my men that I am in most august company indeed.”

Storyteller sank to a knee before the dais, dipping his head with the utmost respect as he tried very hard not to giggle. “I fear you give me too much credit, Empress. I am but an apprentice.”

“An apprentice to the right hand of Doom. Indeed, I was unaware the Holy Eye had even taken an apprentice,” Morgan le Fay said, and Storyteller caught the tiniest undercurrent of suspicion.

“My appointment as a servant of Doom is recent, and the Holy Eye’s acceptance of me as student
even more so,” Storyteller explained. “I became the Holy Eye’s sole apprentice as of three weeks ago.”

“I see, well that is quite an honor, as is your visit, apprentice,” Morgan le Fay said with an indulgent smirk, studying Wulfbuck’s reaction to it all for any indicators of deception. “And how may I be of service to Doomstadt?” she asked.

“I am seeking an individual named ‘Loki’, whom I have reason to believe may reside somewhere within your compound or city,” Storyteller explained.

“Loki? Hm,” she tapped her chin and then glanced to the side as the woman standing at the right of her throne gestured to catch her attention. “You know the name, Caroline?”

“The tribute from Niðafjöll,” Caroline said with a nod. “In Her Highness’s menagerie.”

“Ah, yes! I seem to recall that gift caused an amusing little kerfuffle, didn’t it?” Morgan le Fay chuckled and turned back to Storyteller. “It would seem your query is within my walls, apprentice. Do you wish an introduction?”

“That would be well appreciated, Empress,” Storyteller nodded and then glanced over as Wulfbuck held something out to him.

“Call for me when you wish to be returned,” Wulfbuck said, offering a little, silver pipe-whistle.

“I don’t imagine I’ll be very long,” Storyteller said. “Interviews usually go pretty quickly. When the interviewee isn’t violently hostile, I mean.”

Wulfbuck shrugged. “Perhaps. I don’t know you well,” he replied cryptically as he turned and made his way back toward the entrance.

“... Okee-dokee then,” Storyteller said, slightly puzzled, and turned back toward the throne.

“You, servant, escort my guest to the menagerie and introduce him to the Niðafjöll tribute,” Morgan le Fay bade, pointing at Murkandor.

“Yes, your Majesty,” he said, bowing deeply. “This way, please,” he nodded to Storyteller.

“My gratitude, Empress, and that of Doomstadt and Doomgard,” Storyteller said, dipping a bow as well, before following after Murkandor.

They made their way through grand hallways and across a sky-bridge looking out over the glorious landscape of glowing lava, the view quivering and shimmering with super-heated updrafts. They finally arrived at a new pair of large, impressive doors, which were guarded by lizard-men (mixing things up a bit now!) who eyed them suspiciously. “The Empress has invited our guest from Doomstadt to view her menagerie,” Murkandor announced and the Lizardmen looked Storyteller over (who raised an eyebrow at them in return) and then pulled the doors open for them.

Inside, the bleak, gray stone of the castle was replaced by a festival of colorful tapestries and rich, beautiful furnishings. It was populated by a collection of people-creatures who were as pretty as they were exotic, mostly all displaying a less-is-more attitude toward fashion. The ones near the doors looked up curiously as Storyteller and Murkandor entered, and Storyteller looked curiously back at them. He wasn’t sure he’d ever seen quite so many different kinds of not-human humanoids in one place.

Murkandor glanced around and then walked to the nearest grouping of strangely beautiful beings,
seated on cushions around a short table, and addressed them. “Where are the demon-spawn?” he asked.

A transparent girl, who glittered like diamond and was wearing a backless shirt made mostly of smaller precious stones knitted together with gold wire, scowled and crossed her arms. “They took the northeast balcony, and it’s not fair! I had dibs! I called it! But that awful Witchfire snuck in before dawn and staked it out!” she declared. “You have to make her get out!”

“I have no interest in your little squabbles,” Murkandor replied with a dismissive eye-roll and waved to Storyteller. “This way.”

The diamond girl made a furious sound and got to her feet to shout after them. “You’re awful! I hate you! I hope the ogres eat you!”

“She seems a bit old for tantrums,” Storyteller murmured, glancing back over his shoulder to where the diamond girl was plopping herself back down to fume.

“Spoiled rotten, every one of the pretty little wretches,” Murkandor sneered. “Ignore them.”

“Is this a harem?” Storyteller asked, because while ‘menagerie’ was a fitting description for how many different mystical species seemed to be represented, ‘harem’ better suited the décor and dress-code.

“You were expecting birds and rabbits?” Murkandor asked in a slightly sardonic tone, glancing back at him, before pulling aside a curtain hanging across an archway and holding it for Storyteller.

Storyteller stepped through and paused for a second or two to take in the sight. The balcony was so close to the edge of the island they were perched upon that it seemed to be hovering right over the lake of lava at first glance (though surely the heat would have been unbearable if that were actually the case). And the occupants of the balcony seemed to compliment the ‘hellish’ scenery, rather explaining the page’s inquiry about ‘demon-spawn’. One in particular made Storyteller freeze in place, mind racing and crawling at the same time.

Of course. Of course, if he was running around the remnants of the whole damn multiverse searching for all the different Lokis, of course it had to be inevitable, didn’t it? It was ridiculous that he hadn’t even thought of it, no doubt his subconscious shying-away from the subject, but now that it was right in front of him, he felt shaken as he stared at the azure-skinned youth (youth? no, the musculature wasn’t quite male) currently leaned over the shoulder of a larger man seated at a short chess-table.

Pleated black silk hanging from waist to knee was their only actual clothing, but they had an ample number of gold bangles, rings, necklaces and belts glittering all over them, including several bands ringing the ebony horns that curved upward from their forehead. The percentage of exposed skin made it easier to note the Loki of Weirdworld’s gender (or lack there of) and take in the curving black lines etched across their body. Fortunately, Storyteller’s staring went entirely unnoticed by virtue of the fact that he and Murkandor were being completely ignored by all of the balcony’s occupants.

Murkandor cleared his throat. “Her Majesty’s guest, Special Agent Storyteller of Doomstadt, apprentice to the Holy Eye, is here to--”

“Blah blah blah some people are so rude,” a bat-winged and pink-haired girl declared from her perch on the stone balustrade. “What, like it’s hard to tell we’re busy and don’t care anyway?”

“Interrupting a game, really, I suppose his mother never taught him any manners,” the man sitting
cross-legged at the chess-table drawled. The voice struck a note of familiarity and Storyteller leaned sideways to catch sight of his face. Yes, that was Daimon Hellstrom. A bigger, more demonic Daimon Hellstrom than Storyteller remembered, but still, the ‘hair’ should have been a dead giveaway.

“It hardly matters, you’ve already lost,” Weird-Loki said with a little smirk, biting their lip.

Murkandor snapped his fingers irritably, trying to draw their attention. “This is Special Agent Storyteller. The Empress has--”

“You lost before we even started,” Hellstrom’s opponent, a woman with luminescent eyes and little red horns peeking out from under her orange hair, spoke over Murkandor. “So take your turn already.”

“You think I’m intimidated by mind-games?” Hellstrom scoffed.

“Chess is ninety percent mind-games,” a mostly human-looking man with red, faintly glowing eyes and pointed ears noted, semi-reclined a few feet away as he toyed with some kind of puzzle-ball.

“You demon-spawn, look here! The Empress has--”

“It’s not mind-games if it’s the truth. You might as well save your dignity and forfeit,” Weird-Loki said cheerfully and Storyteller recognized the look of mischief about to happen.

“I’m not in a corner yet, there are dozens of moves I could take,” Hellstrom snapped.

“So then take one,” the orange-haired woman groaned.

“Demons--”

Weird-Loki shot forward suddenly, snatching up Hellstrom’s king and darting away. “Little snake!” Hellstrom roared, diving after them and knocking the chess-table over in the process. “Get back here!” He tackled Weird-Loki who was now laughing maniacally.

“All of you--” Murkandor tried to shout over them.

“That’s a forfeit! Forfeit!” the bat-winged girl exclaimed, laughing.

“I didn’t forfeit!” Hellstrom shouted, pinning Weird-Loki and trying to pry the chess-piece out of their hand. Weird-Loki put up an impressive struggle (considering Hellstrom looked to be around half-again their body-mass) managing to keep possession of the king through the same twitch-reflexes with which they’d acquired it and prodigious squirminess. Hellstrom gave a yelp and lost his grip entirely when Weird-Loki lunged forward and viciously bit into his shoulder. “Weasel!”

Weird-Loki made their escape, scrambling around past the orange-haired woman and hopping up on the balustrade, where they crouched, grinning like a gargoyle, while Hellstrom was grabbing at his shoulder and demonstrating a well-rounded vocabulary of curses. The bite didn’t bleed a drop, the flesh visibly frozen. It was crusted with ice crystals for a few seconds and then rapidly blackened, before Hellstrom’s semi-demonic constitution started healing the frostbite.

“You will pay attention this instant!” Murkandor demanded, furious.

“Y’know what? That’s okay. Why don’t you just take a break before that vein in your head gets any bigger,” Storyteller cut in, pulling Murkandor gently around and patting his hunch. “Here I am, escorted just where I need to be, which is exactly what your Mistress asked, so you can go have a
breather now,” he suggested, because he was fairly certain Murkandor’s frustration was only serving as encouragement at this point.

Murkandor looked back at him, seeming torn between annoyed and relieved, and then relented with a nod. “Very well, Agent. As you will,” he agreed and then turned and started away, letting the curtain go as Storyteller stepped fully onto the balcony.

The denizens of the balcony continued to be entirely occupied by their games and squabbles for a few seconds, maybe just long enough for Murkandor to get out of ear-shot, before five pairs of eyes abruptly turned and locked on Storyteller. The bat-winged girl abandoned her perch and hopped right up to him with an open expression of curiosity and an impish little smile on her lips. “A ‘special agent’ from Doomstadt! What’s that? What do ‘special agents’ do?” she asked.

Storyteller grinned and chuckled. “I thought that guy might have been the problem here,” he noted, jerking his thumb toward the doorway.

“You can’t go letting them think they matter. They’ll get uppity,” the mostly-human looking one replied with a smirk.

“Jealousy is an ugly thing,” the man gave a shrug and his smirk widened.

“And what brings a ‘special agent’ to our little fire-pit today?” the orange-haired woman asked, voice both haughty and suspicious, as she started gathering the chess pieces up via magic and reassembling the board.

“I’ve come to interview an individual named ‘Loki’,“ Storyteller replied with a pleasant smile.

“Oh, well that would be him,” Weird-Loki said without missing a beat as they pointed.

Storyteller turned and was slightly startled to find a sixth member of the balcony party curled in the corner against the wall, face mostly hidden behind a book. He hadn’t even noticed the young man, who was, unlike his compatriots, utterly silent and quite still. He tilted his book just barely enough to glare over the top of it at Weird-Loki, and didn’t so much as glance at Storyteller before the book again became a protective wall. He’d appeared quite entirely human-like, though there was something vaguely familiar about the fraction of his face Storyteller had seen.

The pink-haired girl was obviously trying not to laugh as Storyteller turned back and cast an indulgent smile at Weird-Loki. “Did you know you have a tell? You do this when you’re up to hijinks,” he said, biting the center of his bottom lip, just barely, and grinning around it.

The pink-haired girl burst out into giggles now. “It’s true! You always do that!” she exclaimed delightedly, as she pranced back over to the balustrade and settled again in her previous spot, leaning forward slightly, grin still affixed to her lips.

“I do not,” Weird-Loki wrinkled their nose.

“You do,” Hellstrom, the orange-haired woman and the mostly-human looking man chorused, earning a scowl from Weird-Loki. Obviously deception wasn’t this particular Loki’s forte.

“So then,” Storyteller leaned against the wall and slid down until he was sitting on the floor, bringing himself to a level with most of the ‘demon-spawn’; he noted that the gesture received looks of interest, his audience clearly accustomed to us-and-them dynamics. “This isn’t an interrogation. You’re not in trouble. I just need to ask you a few questions to get to know you and your situation a
bit,” he said.

Weird-Loki tilted their head and studied Storyteller for a moment before hopping off of the balustrade and making their way over, silent, with eyes locked on Storyteller’s. “Do you use a surname?” Storyteller asked as they neared; the question wasn’t usually first thing on his list, but he was twisting with curiosity about Weird-Loki’s relationship to Laufey. They shrugged and made a noncommittal sound in their throat as they stopped in front of Storyteller. The next moment, they dropped down into Storyteller’s lap, putting themself nose to nose with him as they straddled his thighs. The back of Storyteller’s head lightly smacked into the stone wall behind him as he let out a startled little sound. “… Uh, hi.”

“You are apprentice to the Holy Eye?” Weird-Loki asked, continuing to stare him right in the eye. His irises were the same green as Storyteller’s, but the sclera around them were obsidian.

“Y-Yes,” Storyteller started to nod and then gasped as Weird-Loki surged forward and latched onto his neck. Their teeth and lips were beyond frigid, while the inside of their mouth was utterly molten. The intensity and contrast of temperatures was so befuddling, Storyteller wasn’t sure whether Weird-Loki was taking a chunk out of him or not. His hands clamped around Weird-Loki’s shoulders, intending to push them away and then faltering. The feeling was shocking, and his initial impression was pain, but the sensation went beyond that simple definition and he found himself too fascinated to reject it.

Weird-Loki withdrew a few inches and hummed curiously. “You’re not human,” they noted.

“W-What, because you didn’t scald my flesh off?” Storyteller panted, and he found himself trembling with adrenaline. “D-Do you really th-think that’s the best way to t-test?”

“Well you have to admit it’s effective,” the orange-haired woman said, smirking.

“What are you? You’re obviously sturdy, and there must be something rather special about you to have such significant rank in Doom’s court,” Weird-Loki asked, looking him over curiously, touching Storyteller’s face and smoothing their fingers over his jacket.

“Lesser-god,” Storyteller muttered, staring stupidly at Weird-Loki’s skin, lost in thought. He and two Lokis before him had never once shifted to their ‘native’ form, and the first Loki had abandoned it as a small child and never looked back. It seemed that his subconscious had put a blackout curtain over the entire subject, but facing that part of his nature in adult form (nearly adult, anyway) was forcing questions to the surface. His hands were still gripping Weird-Loki’s arms, unable to let go, enthralled by the feeling of their skin; it was like a thin sheet of ice stretched over an inferno. Where was that inner heat coming from? He forced himself to let go. Once freed, Weird-Loki leaned in, wrapping their arms around Storyteller’s neck, and commenced nuzzling.

“You surprised him,” the mostly-human looking man noted with an amused tone. “I think maybe he really did come to interview you.”

“I- I think I missed a memo,” Storyteller said, giving him a helpless expression. “This is a harem.”

“Right.”

“My understanding of the typical protocol for royal harems would indicate that you are the exclusive property of Empress le Fay,” Storyteller extrapolated.

“Therefore, she can use us however she wants,” the man replied with a smirk. “For things like entertaining her guests. Mind you, they have to be particularly interesting guests to merit
entertainment.”

“Soool... that’s a little creepy and weird. Does that bother you?” Storyteller asked.

He raised an eyebrow. “I’m half demon.”

“Ah. Fair enough, I suppose,” Storyteller nodded. Demonic genetic heritage would be associated
with a particularly robust libido, while demonic cultural heritage would come with loose morality (as
defined by a middle-ages take on what ‘morality’ means). “And might I ask your names?” he asked,
looking at the man as he said it and then sweeping his eyes over the other ‘demon-spawn’.

“Magus,” the man said with a nod.

“I’m Nightmare,” the pink-haired girl said, giving a cheerful wave. “This is Witchfire,” she pointed
towards the orange-haired woman, who was making a show of being entirely disinterested in
Storyteller.

“Hellstorm,” the Hellstrom-analogue said without looking up, again settled in front of the chess-table
as a new game seemed about to start.

“And Mister Personality is called ‘Terror’,” Weird-Loki said, gesturing toward the quiet one in the
corner.

“And... you’re all demonic?” Storyteller asked slowly. “... I was told that Loki was Jötun.”

“You might consider brushing up on your morphological taxonomy,” Magus suggested, cheerfully
pedantic. “Jötun don’t have horns.”

“And they’re usually a liiiiiittle bit bigger,” Nightmare added, grinning.

“We’re all mixed. Not even the Empress would keep full-demons for pets,” Hellstorm drawled, not
looking up.

Storyteller nodded slowly, staring at Weird-Loki, who was staring right back, curious eyes scanning,
trying to read him. The First Loki had speculated on the possibility of being a hybrid, but Laufey had
refused to speak about Loki’s mother before his timely death. “What was your other parent?” he
asked softly, quiet excitement simmering within him at the possibility of gaining some insight from
this analogue who was clearly more in tune with their origins.


“Ember-fiend,” Storyteller repeated in a whisper, nodding. One of the denizens of Muspelheim. It
could fit perfectly. “That’s where the inner-fire is coming from. That’s why you burn.”

“Yes,” Weird-Loki agreed.

“Did Laufey conceive you deliberately?” Storyteller asked and watched the way Weird-Loki’s
eyebrow rose and their head tilted to the side. Was that because of the inherent rudeness of the
question or the fact that they hadn’t actually mentioned Laufey’s name yet?

Hellstorm let out a short bark of laughter. “Well that’s always the story, isn’t it? Specially crafted for
the Empress’s enjoyment. It’s a damn convenient way to suck up to the Empress and get rid of
‘useless’ accidental offspring at the same time.”

“Not that we mind being got rid of,” Nightmare said with a shrug and a little lopsided smirk. “I’d
“Certainly more comfortable than the Dark Region,” Magus agreed with a nod.

“And the empress finds us amusing,” Weird-Loki noted, leaning back into Storyteller and cuddling up against his shoulder.

“You seem to have a tight-knit group here,” Storyteller noted, thinking back on the diamond-girl’s tantrum on the way in. “... Do you not get on with the other concubines?”

“They’re scared of Witchfire,” Weird-Loki said.

Nightmare giggled. “And Ter.”

“Well obviously Ter,” Weird-Loki agreed, fanning Storyteller’s curiosity about the demure young man in the corner. “But Witchfire’s the one who refuses to eat anything but live prey. It gets those prissy little things in there so upset.”

“As opposed to eating dead, rotting flesh and moldy roots and fungus,” Witchfire sneered, looking utterly disgusted.

“Loki ate a fungus! I saw it!” Nightmare tattled cheerfully.


Weird-Loki huffed in offense and then nuzzled Storyteller’s neck. “She’s awful, isn’t she? We mostly ignore her.” Witchfire shot a glare in their direction as Hellstorm chuckled and Nightmare grinned hugely.

“And why are they frightened of Terror?” Storyteller asked, nodding toward the corner.

“Ter! Do the trick!” Nightmare demanded excitedly.

“Do the trick!” Weird-Loki seconded, pushing themself back a little to look in their quiet companion’s direction.

“No,” Terror said without lowering his book.

“No!” Nightmare hopped up to her feet again, grinning toothily.

“No.”

“No!” Weird-Loki heckled.

“Do we really want to get in trouble for upsetting the apprentice?” Magus asked, frowning at them.

“Do the trick!” Weird-Loki called again as Nightmare jumped across the balcony, beating her wings twice, and landed next to Terror, grabbing at his book.

“Stop it!” Terror tried to keep hold of it but Nightmare scratched him and yanked the book away, dancing out of reach.

“This really isn’t—” Storyteller started, dismayed by the bullying, and then his voice died in his throat and his blood ran cold, staring at the person in the corner who was suddenly the perfect image of the...
Third Loki. With an axe buried in his chest and blood dribbling from his mouth.

“You’re too late,” he said in a voice that felt like worms crawling under Storyteller’s skin.

“... Oh...” Nightmare said softly, looking disturbed. “That’s- That’s not a normal one... Most people are scared of monsters or bugs or something...” she mumbled, returning the book to Terror who hid his face behind it again, clothing fading back to neutral blacks and grays instead of the emerald green of the Third’s garb. “... Sorry.”

Storyteller kept staring, well after the illusion had faded, and an awkward silence stretched across the balcony. “... I told you it was a bad idea,” Magus muttered at length.

“... He’s a bogie?” Storyteller whispered. Terror exhibited the magic but not the malice generally associated with bogiemen; his reluctance and timidity seemed to indicate his powers were involuntary. That could certainly explain the social-anxiety.

“Yeah... Sorry,” Weird-Loki said, smoothing their hands over Storyteller’s jacket and seeming quite subdued now. “We thought it would be something funny like a monster...”

“Monsters give you something to hit...” Storyteller said, biting his lip and putting his hands over his face for a moment, trying to calm down, reminding himself that the illusion wasn’t predictive, bogies only played on fears, their magic had no prophetic links, they didn’t show anything but the dread in your own heart.

“Sorry,” Nightmare said again.

“It’s... I’m not going to say it’s ‘okay’, but I’m not angry,” Storyteller sighed, dropping his hands and shaking his head. Weird-Loki started nibbling sweetly at his neck, Storyteller supposed it was either meant to be apologetically-affectionate or to distract him from the shenanigans-gone-awry. He caught their shoulders gently and pushed them back a little. “Please don’t. I- I’m glad you’re okay with the harem thing but it honestly makes me kind of uncomfortable. I mean, the idea of patronizing it makes me uncomfortable. I don’t want to be an exploitive person. I really try hard not to be.”

“... You’re very odd,” Weird-Loki murmured.

“So I’m told,” Storyteller agreed. “Okay... So... Next question. Do you practice sorcery? Beyond that nasty little frostbite maneuver you pulled on Hellstorm?”

“I can do it with my hands too,” Weird-Loki said, holding up their hands with fingers spread; the gesture struck Storyteller as very child-like, but that fit well enough with the level of maturity he’d seen displayed by Weird-Loki and their companions thus far. “But no, not really. The Empress doesn’t allow us grimoire and my father certainly didn’t have any. Jötun use the magic that comes naturally, but their philosophy is that sorcery is for weaklings.” They rolled their eyes. “You know, ignoring the fact that they pay tribute to the Empress...”

“That does seem a bit ironic,” Storyteller smirked momentarily before the soberness that Terror’s display had shocked into him reasserted itself. “In that case, I’m going to need to ward you before I go.”

“Ward me?”

“I have reason to believe you’re going to be targeted by an insane serial-killer,” Storyteller explained calmly. “Obviously, being within Empress le Fay’s palace makes you extremely well defended, but I’m just going to give you a quick ward that will make you difficult to find as well. Between those
two factors, I think you’ll be fine.”

Weird-Loki tilted their head to the side, frowning. “Why would I be targeted?”

Storyteller shook his head and shrugged. “The killer in question is insane, which makes the overall ‘why’ a bit difficult to really understand, but the pattern we’ve identified is that he’s killing people named ‘Loki’.”

“Really? This guy’s targeting by name?” Hellstorm glanced sideways at him, eyes narrowed suspiciously.

“Insane,” Storyteller pointed out. Hellstorm looked entirely unconvinced, but Storyteller turned his attention back to Weird-Loki, pulling the little jar out of his jacket pocket and scooping some of the paste with his finger. “Hold still a moment, please,” he said and started painting the runes onto Weird-Loki’s face.

Weird-Loki stayed perfectly still, staring fixedly back at him, again seeming to be focused on Storyteller’s eyes. With most other Lokis Storyteller had met, the resemblance was obvious and immediate. The fact that Weird-Loki was, and it seemed always had been, wearing their half-Jötun seeming (did they even have the ability to shift?) obscured easy recognition. Loki’s eyes had always been his giveaway though, and even as a simulacrum, they still shone bright and clear from Storyteller’s face.

Weird-Loki waited patiently as Storyteller murmured the oral component of the spell and poured a bit of bone ash into his palm. “Close your eyes,” he whispered and then blew the powder at them. “... Okay. There. Done.”

“That’s it?” Weird-Loki asked.

“That’s it,” Storyteller agreed, offering them a handkerchief. “I already had the spell prepped ahead of time.”

“Whose blood did you use?” Magus asked.

Storyteller glanced over at him, and noted that Hellstorm and Witchfire were both paying close attention now while continuing to feign disinterest. He wondered if Magus was well-versed enough in sorcery (as his name might suggest) to recognize the type of magic Storyteller was using, or if his demonic nature made him particularly sensitive to the smell of blood. “My own,” he replied casually.

“Mm,” Magus’ eyebrow lifted a little higher.

“I have one last question before we conclude,” Storyteller said, eyes returning to Weird-Loki’s. “... Are you happy here? Comfortable and content and whatnot?”

Weird-Loki tilted their head and chewed on their lip momentarily, seeming to consider the question carefully. “... It’s as good as any place and better than most,” they decided eventually. “I prefer it to Niðafjöll. And the prissy ones in there are annoying, but they’re fun to scare,” they concluded, nodding toward the curtain separating them from the rest of the menagerie.

“And Empress le Fay?”

They shrugged. “We are better treated and valued more highly than her servants and guards. I don’t really like or dislike her. She’s simply the Empress, and one is to obey and honor her, not hold any opinion of her...” They trailed off, eyes drifting to the side and wearing a small frown for a moment. “... And as her palace is preferable to the one in Niðafjöll, her dominion is also preferable to
“Laufey’s.”

“Was Laufey cruel to you?” Storyteller asked.

The little frown remained on Weird-Loki’s lips as they thought for a moment and then shook their head. “I was identified as a suitable tribute for the Empress from birth. Most everyone found me pathetic and disgusting, including Laufey, my brothers, and the servants who attended me through my childhood, but they all knew better than to damage me. Being earmarked for the Empress saved me from any cruelty.”

“That’s good, I suppose,” Storyteller nodded soberly and then let out a quick sigh and put on a smile. “I think that covers everything that I needed to get covered today. I may check back in on you now and again in the future, but I think you’re exceptionally well protected here so I don’t imagine any psycho-killers are going to bother you.”

“Aside from Witchfire.”

“Aside from her,” Storyteller agreed as Witchfire cast the back of Weird-Loki’s head a disdainful glare.

“So that’s all?” Weird-Loki asked.

“For now, yes.”

“Okay. Bye,” they said, then pushed back and abandoned Storyteller’s lap. They twisted around and crawled the three feet across to the chess table, ducking under Hellstorm’s arm and depositing themself sideways across his lap. Hellstorm pretended not no even notice, eyes fixed unwaveringly on the game. Weird-Loki stared silently at Storyteller over his arm. Whether or not Weird-Loki had actually puzzled out or recognized who/what Storyteller was, they showed a distinct fascination, though seemed to have become either disconcerted or offended over the latter half of the meeting.

“Well then,” Storyteller climbed to his feet and straightened his shirt. “I should probably go find my guide and get back to Doomgard.”

“Aww!” Nightmare whined. “You just got here!”

“Unfortunately, Weirdworld is a bit of a commute for me and your earlier, ah, ‘joke,’” he glanced at Terror, “has reminded me that I really don’t have time to dawdle.”

Nightmare sobered at that, looking away guiltily. “Sorry.”

“No hard feelings,” Storyteller assured her with a slightly forced grin and a little wave. “It has been a pleasure meeting all of you.”

“Safe journeys,” Magus nodded to him.

“Good bye! Come back and visit soon!” Nightmare called.

Weird-Loki offered a silent wave and Storyteller nodded to them and then turned and started to push the curtain aside when a quiet voice drew his attention again to the corner of the balcony.

“Sorry,” Terror called softly, red-brown eyes peaking over the top of his book.

Storyteller paused and then stepped a little closer to him and crouched down a few feet away. “You know, there’s a positive side-effect to your magic that might tend to get overshadowed most of the
time. Sometimes, probably not always but sometimes, you remind someone what’s most important, or why we try... So, thank you.”

Terror’s brow knit and the visible portion of his face looked unconvinced, but he nodded slowly.

Storyteller straightened up and moved back to the doorway again, pushing back the curtain. “Well, I’d say ’stay out of trouble,’ but that seems like a lost cause. So, I don’t know, maybe a ‘catch ya later’,” he cast them a grin and then stepped through the curtain, listening to Nightmare laugh behind him.

Chapter End Notes

Notes on the hell-babies:
Hellstrom originally came from Ghost Rider but he's crossed over with pretty much every other continuity in Marvel 616 at some point (including Journey into Mystery) so he's probably fairly recognizable. You'll note that I put his 'Hellstorm' handle on the thumbnail, because his lame-ass 1970s handle 'Son of Satan' is just too stupid, I couldn't handle it.

Witchfire was an Alpha Flight character of the late-80s/early-90s, but I have not read that Alpha Flight run yet. Maybe one day I will. My familiarity with her comes from X-Infernus, where she's an antagonist (challenger to Magik's throne). She's the daughter of Belasco, former ruler of Limbo.

Nightmare is an alternate-reality form of the X-Men's Pixie, from the Age of X crossover. I kind of wrote her here about halfway between Age of X's Nightmare and drunk-Pixie (Uncanny X-Men 509). Pixie's semi-demonic nature is related to her time spent in, and connection to, the Limbo dimension as well.

Terrance Ward is from the Initiative. He's the son of Nightmare (the god one) and was supposed to serve as an Earthly-vessel (but was not okay with that). I wrote his personality/demeanor a bit based off the beginning of the series, he got all confident and self-possessed when he learned how to control his powers. As for my spelling choice herein, I swear, there are a dozen different ways to spell boogieman/bogeyman, I decided to go with an archaic variant that wasn't Websters or Oxford.

Dormagus is from MC2 (Spider-Girl's universe) where he made guest-appearances in about a dozen issues of various things but was never popular enough to earn a backstory. However, given his appearance (very similar to the way they used to draw Hellstrom back in the day) and his name, I'm pretty confident the writer meant him to be half-Faltine (like Clea). Dormammmu and Umar (the Faltines we know best) live in the 'Dark Dimension', and the 'Dark Region' is a location in the classic WeirdWorld comics, so I played with that.

Oh, and angry girl in the main room of the menagerie was Esme Stepford (New X-Men).

So in 'real' mythology, it is completely acceptable for a 'frost-giant' to be a fire-god because 'frost-giant' is actually a mistranslation. You see, 'hrímthursar' is usually translated into English as 'frost-giant', but it's actually 'rime-giant'. Why the mistranslation? Because you probably have no idea what the word 'rime' even means. Rime is when the top of the snow melts in the daytime sunlight and then re-freezes that night into a layer of crusty ice on top of the snow. This is significant to Norse mythology because the hrimthurs were born on the border between Niflheim and Múspellsheim from the rime created by the interaction between Niflheim's snow and
Múspellsheim's fire. Thus they engender both ice and fire. This mythology lesson does not relate to the current fic, because I'm building this story to fit into Marvel-mythology, not 'real' mythology, which is why I've made up a completely unrelated 'theory' that also explains why jötun-Loki's character design (the horns) doesn't mesh with the current character-design for any other jötun (which is probably more accurately explained by the fact that a new artist changes the overall aesthetic for frost-giants every few years. Hair-yes, hair-no, translucent-yes, translucent-no, etc.)

I can't remember if I already talked about Loki's eyes in an earlier author-note; well if I did, it was a long while ago, and since I made reference to it this chapter I'll say it here, either again or for the first time. In Norse mythology, Loki's very bright eyes are a defining feature (possibly a reference to his constellation) and he is unable to hide them when he's shapeshifted. This also became part of Marvel canon during the Dark Reign segment of Mighty Avengers when Hank and Amadeus discovered that Loki's retinal scans remained consistent even when he was wearing an illusion (and even when he was in Sif's body).

And finally, yes I pulled two characters from the original Weirdworld comics; they're not very interesting so I won't bother to say much else. I tracked down the original comics (difficult because they're not in the digital archives) and read them. They get a solid review of 'eh'. I wanted to use a real Weirdworld native for the district-Thor, but the main character of the series (Tyndal) is sooo not Thor material. The thumbnail up there for Wulfbuck is crap because there are literally no decent pictures of him. He's also a bland Strider-clone, just like all the characters in Weirdworld are bland LotR or D&D clones.

Oh, and Niðafjöll is a valley in Jötunheim. The whole realm doesn't exist inside of Weirdworld, but there's enough weird, high-fantasy crap for bits of the 9 realms to be represented here and there (it's basically D&D-verse.)
“How do you know that you can trust me?” Stephen asked.

“You have shown me I can,” Loki said with a little shrug. “And you continue to.”

“Are you certain I am not simply concerned by how discovery of your misbehavior would reflect upon myself?” Stephen asked, raising an eyebrow.

Loki looked at him silently for a moment. “If the result is the same, does it even matter?”

“The fairy-children only come out at night,” Serrure complained as he sat at the table, a large book of fables and parables open in front of him. “When it’s time for supper, they’re only just waking up.”

“Mm, yes, the majority of English fairies are nocturnal,” Storyteller agreed, sitting across from him as she wrote a report. “You’ll have a few hours of overlap at each end though. You can invite them over to play after supper, but I would like you to stay in the burn during the evenings. I don’t want you wandering too much when you’re tired.”

“I won’t get lost,” Serrure said poutilly, swinging his feet back and forth under the table.

“I get lost out there,” Storyteller retorted with a smirk. Serrure let out a put-upon sigh. “I’m going to Doomstadt today, do you want to see if Franklin can play?”

“Yes, please,” Serrure nodded.

“All right. As soon as I’ve finished my report on Weirdworld, we’ll go see who’s around to play with,” Storyteller assured him. “You like the Foundation children?”

“Yes, some of them are very little,” Serrure said, tilting his head to the side. “And Alex is very old, but he’s nice. He played frisbee with us last week.”
“I suppose there’s not much cause for cliques and elitism in the social fabric of a naukograd, since everyone therein is already proven to be elite,” Storyteller noted.

“I’m not part of the Foundation, so I’m not ‘proven elite’, but they’re still nice to me,” Serrure pointed out.

“You may not be a member, but you’re as clever as most of them. Maybe you couldn’t keep up with Valeria or Bentley when they get on a tear, but I don’t think any of the others can either,” Storyteller said with a lop-sided shrug. “You’re on the same order of intelligence as is required of Foundation membership, and the children can recognize easily enough that you’re able to pick up what they’re putting down.”

Serrure paused for a moment, seeming to mull that over. “Are America and Nicco on my ‘order of intelligence’?” he asked.

“They’re probably not as good at math and pattern recognition as you,” Storyteller said carefully. “But they are fairly bright girls and it’s difficult to quantify overall intelligence. While one person may be very good at math, another may be far better than them at understanding social cues. Intelligence is an extremely complex matrix of many factors.”

“But I am very intelligent?” Serrure asked and Storyteller felt herself smirk. He knew damn well he was clever, this was fishing for praise.

“You have a great aptitude for learning,” Storyteller said, looking up at him and smiling. “However, aptitude only gets you halfway. You must actually take the time to utilize that aptitude and learn,” she pointed at his book.

Serrure grinned and adjusted himself in his chair as he finally settled in to study.

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“I have to wonder if a bored Loki isn’t a rather dangerous proposition,” Stephen said, frowning as his eyes skimmed Loki’s report.

“Oh it’s not just a bored Loki, it’s a bored cadre of semi-demons with semi-sadistic predispositions,” Loki sighed and smirked.

“If that is meant to inspire confidence...” Stephen grimaced, glancing up at her.

“There’s definitely a mischievous and contrary vibe about the whole group, but asking if they’re going to rise up and take over, or something troublesome of that sort, is like asking if your little pug-dog can survive in the woods. They’re simply too pampered and domesticated and ill-equipped,” Loki explained with a shrug. “Weirdworld’s Loki hasn’t even studied sorcery. I think they’ve the innate ability, but they’re completely untrained. And assuming the group did get it into their heads at some point to become a problem, I imagine they’d become a problem for Morgan le Fay, rather than us.”

“True,” Stephen nodded, laying the report down on his desk.

“And come to that, I would think Morgan le Fay herself has a far greater likelihood of being a credible threat to Doomstadt than her pets. She strikes me as ambitious, whereas they’re just bored.”

“Point taken,” Stephen agreed. “Do you think we need to keep an eye on this one at all?”

“I’ll check in periodically, but I’m not really concerned. I think this Loki is the most helpless I’ve
met, apart from Luke. I’d be worried about their safety if they weren’t living in a magical terror-
fortress,” Loki’s voice got a little more distant as she finished and her attention seemed to drift
slightly.

“And you’ve finished exploring the Valley now?” Stephen asked, moving on.

“Yes. The desert’s pretty deserted, all told,” Loki said, refocusing. “I think I’m inclined to let that gap
in civilization be a boundary for the time being and finish sweeping the rest of this side of the
continent before I venture further west.”

“That’s sensible,” Stephen agreed with a nod. “What’s next to be surveyed?”

“Lost Land,” Loki replied.

Stephen’s lips tightened and twitched downward. “You know what that place is, don’t you? I’m not
sure you’re adequately prepared to contend with it.”

“It’s there, Stephen. I can’t just ignore it,” Loki protested.

“Have the Thor of that domain accompany you,” Stephen said firmly.

“You’re being protective,” Loki said, looking somewhere between annoyed and intrigued.

“But not over-protective. Please appreciate that while you may possess knowledge from your
predecessors, you are not truly seasoned.”

Loki sighed and rolled her eyes petulantly. “Fine. I’ll file a Thor-requisition or whatever and put that
one off for a few days.”

“Thank you.”

Loki looked down, chewing on her lip.

“Are you going to tell me what’s wrong, or are you going to keep fussing?” Stephen asked.

“I found my Thor. My brother,” Loki said, looking up.

“Oh,” Stephen felt a surge of relief, and maybe even a touch of joy, at the sudden revelation. Though
he hadn’t admitted it to Loki or even himself, part of him had believed that the god he’d been friends
with for years really hadn’t made it. “That’s- That’s wonderful... Why are you upset?”

“Oh, no, not really upset, just... mm,” she tilted her head, biting her lip, brow pinched. “Do you
remember that whole falling out with Nick Fury? And how Mjolnir stopped answering to my
brother?”

“Yes.”

“I didn’t find him in Doomgard,” Loki said, shaking her head. “And... the spell, or it’s bigger than a
spell really, but the thing you and Doom have done to make everyone think it’s always been this
way?”

“Yes?”

“It’s remarkably complex. Truly remarkable,” she muttered, shaking her head. “It’s not just telling
everybody ‘you’re fine, don’t panic’, it’s actually making up cover stories.” She looked back up at
him. “I mean, I can’t imagine that the two of you sat down and planned out all of these stories, so it
must be the magic that’s making them up as they’re needed.”

“... And what story did Thor tell you?” Stephen asked, carefully navigating the digression.

“He said that three years ago, due to a large portion of the populace turning to blaspheme, Doom ordered the purge of the ‘Lemuria’ domain,” Loki explained. “And that during the course of this purge, whose purpose was a total extinction event, Thor threw down his hammer and not only refused his duties to Doom but also attempted to defend the innocents of Lemuria.” Loki bit her lip for a moment, frowning. “And because of this, he was dishonorably discharged and is now in disgrace.”

“... I see,” Stephen said softly.

“And obviously this can’t have happened, because Battleworld isn’t old enough for it to have happened.”

“Obviously.”

“And I didn’t understand why a story like that would be made up, but Perry said it establishes the expectations for a Thor’s duties, and how far they must be willing to go in the name of Doom,” Loki said, looking uncomfortable. “Which I suppose makes sense, because if a large enough number of people did turn against Doom, it could be the end of all things, and so it’s- it’s an amputation, sacrifice for the greater good. It would be necessary... but it does not make me any less disturbed at the prospect of a potential ‘purging’ in the future.”

Stephen frowned deeply, likewise disturbed, but another detail tugged at his attention. “Perry?” he asked.

“Peripetia, the Loki of Paradise City,” Loki replied.

Stephen pinched the bridge of his nose and suppressed a groan. “You discussed this with them?”

Loki looked down. “I was upset,” she whispered. “I- I needed them... Perry is a story-god, like me. They understand my perspective in ways other people can’t. They’re a role-model to me in ways nobody else could be.” She kept her eyes trained down and fidgeted, chewing on her lip again for a moment. “After hearing all that... I needed help sorting it and- and I needed a hug.”

Stephen sighed and shook his head, feeling faintly ill. “Loki... do you understand that you’re not allowed to discuss heretical material with civilians?” he asked.

“... Yes,” Loki said. “But Perry is like me. They remember everything. And they can’t talk about it with anyone else either...” She looked back up with a guilty cast to her eyes. “Perry knows what’s at stake. And betrayal is very much against their nature. I know I can trust them, and I need their support sometimes. You’ll recall that I am an orphan.”

“Then for goodness sake, Loki, be more discreet,” Stephen hissed.

“I am discreet. I only told you, and I know that I can trust you too,” Loki protested.

Stephen was a little taken aback by that but recovered quickly. “How do you know that you can trust me?” he asked.

“You have shown me I can,” Loki said with a little shrug. “And you continue to.”

“... Are you certain I am not simply concerned by how discovery of your misbehavior would reflect
upon myself?” Stephen asked, raising an eyebrow.

Loki looked at him silently for a moment. “If the result is the same, does it even matter?” she glanced down, seeming to consider her own question. “The why of things is so often plastic. It changes over time. Why I can trust you doesn’t matter so much as that I can.”

Stephen studied her for a little while. “I suppose that’s a valid philosophical perspective,” he murmured.

Out in the courtyard, a game was underway with no obvious teams or regulations but a fairly evident goal; the swarm of children were taking great pains to keep a beach ball airborne as they ran about below, punching it upwards. Storyteller smiled, listening to the shrieks and whoops as she descended the steps into the garden space and wandered over to a small audience of adults sitting in the grass. “Are you at all concerned that one of the nine-to-elevens is going to fall over and crush one of the five-to-sevens?” she wondered as she settled down on Johnny’s left.

“Nah, kids are pretty bouncy, I’m sure they’d be fine,” Johnny dismissed.

“Serrure’s heavier than the others,” Storyteller noted.

“Oh, right, you’re built like Thors, aren’t you...” Johnny frowned softly and seemed to consider.

“That also makes him a bit better planted though. If two of them smack into each other, he’s not going to be the one to fall,” Scott Lang pointed out, he then sucked in his lip and offered her a little shrug. “It’d probably still be fine though, even if he did. Soft grass and kids are bouncy.”

Storyteller chuckled. “Are there points in this game?”

“It’s more of an everybody wins and nobody loses proposition,” Alex Power answered, sitting cross-legged with Lockheed perched on one knee. “The important thing is just getting all of their wiggles out.”

“How often do they need to be de-wiggled?”

“We don’t really stick to a specific schedule, but they start getting antsy after an hour, hour and a half,” Scott said, and thanks to the amnesia he was completely blithe to his own punning.

A great wail erupted from the swarm as the beach ball went sideways and hit the ground. Johnny stifled a laugh. “You had good timing today, showing up just before recess,” he said, tilting his head in Storyteller’s direction. “Are you going to hang out or do you have a lot going on?”

“Mm, my primary assignment remains category: urgent,” Storyteller sighed, shaking her head. “I don’t think I’m normally inclined toward quite so much diligence, but apparently life-or-death circumstances make me take a thing seriously.”

“Yeah, I guess it would,” Johnny agreed, faint disappointment on his face. “So, are you and Serrure taking off now then?”

“I suppose I would leave that to Lockheed’s judgment,” Storyteller said, leaning forward and looking over at the dragon. “Would you rather hang around here today or go home?”

Lockheed tilted his head, considering, and then gestured vaguely around the courtyard with a little claw.
“All right, then I can pick you two up later,” Storyteller decided.

“You know,” Scott said, drumming his fingers against his knee as he watched the swarm move shriekingly around the grass, “Serrure seems very bright. He might be a good fit with the Foundation...”

“Possibly, although I think he tends to be a little too independent when he’s pursuing and idea,” Storyteller mused. “But also, he’s very strong with the gift, so I’m gearing his education toward a sorcery focus. The sciences are, of course, a good and vital supplement, but his future is really in magic.”

“Ah,” Scott said, nodding. “I’ve never really understood what I was looking at with magic, but it does look cool.”

“I wonder sometimes why the Ministry of Sorcery doesn’t have an equivalent to the Foundation,” Alex said, voice slightly vague and eyes distant, like he was trying to remember something that couldn’t be reached.

“It’s a matter or instructional style,” Storyteller replied easily. “Science flourishes in a seminar atmosphere, where sorcery does better in an intimate one-on-one environment. Magic is traditionally taught mentor to apprentice, and unlike other arts and trades, a sorcery mentor will tend to only have one apprentice at a time.”

“Like you and Strange,” Johnny said. “But you were already a pretty big deal sorcerer before,” he noted, the barest hint of a questioning tone in his voice.

“My abilities are mostly based on natural talent,” Storyteller explained. “Magic is very intuitive for me, and because of that, I skipped a lot of the usual steps.” She shook her head, smirking a little bit. “I’m very undisciplined, in magic and in general. Stephen is helping me organize myself a little better.”

“You promise you’re not going to get boring and stuffy though, right?” Johnny asked.

Storyteller smirked and leaned over to kiss his cheek. “Promise. Just for you,” she said.

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Storyteller hit the ground hard enough to displace some of the vegetation and topsoil, and she lay gasping like a fish as her entire body seemed to go numb for a few seconds before screaming at her. “That was better,” Wukong noted as he landed next to her, feet touching the ground as softly as a sparrow. “But your footwork is still a problem. You try to root yourself like a tree. It’s typical of westerners, thinking strength is in the stalwart mountain, refusing to be moved, but the river will grind a mountain to sand. You must learn to be fluid.”


“I’m stronger than everyone,” Wukong replied with a smug grin. “I was a mountain once, mightier than an army of gods. But then I faced a being of the Ganges, and I fell, crushed beneath my own metaphor.”

Storyteller started trying to sit up and then decided to put that off a while longer. “Then you be- became a Luohan. And you- became a river?” she asked.

“Hmm, no,” Wukong decided, settling himself down next to her divot as he shrank his staff down and tucked it behind his ear. “I became the sky. Just as dynamic, but freer than a river.”
“You command clouds,” Storyteller noted, grinning up at him.

“I command lots of things!”

“And some of them listen.”

Wukong laughed and then pursed his lips, studying her. “Did I hit you too hard?”

“The bruises help me learn,” Storyteller dismissed.

“But you’re done for the day, huh?” he asked.

Storyteller squirmed and finally sat up, then nodded. “I think I might be,” she agreed.

“Do you want me to go easier on you next time?” Wukong raised an eyebrow and tilted his head.

“I wouldn’t learn as fast if you did,” Storyteller sighed, shaking her head.

“Cool,” he scooted closer to her and lifted a hand, wiping his thumb at the corner of her lips where a bit of blood had started to congeal. “So how’s your quest to do that thing you’re doing going?”

Storyteller raised an eyebrow. “You forgot what my ‘quest’ is, didn’t you, and yet you’re curious about ‘that thing’ you can’t be bothered to remember?”

“Eh. I’m curious about a lot of stuff, but I’m not invested in most of it,” Wukong reasoned.

Storyteller laughed. “I have catalogued seven of my alternates, arrested two, and ‘adopted’ one,” Storyteller said. “I’ve searched from Old Town in the west to Weirdworld and Marville in the east, as well as Manhattan and Avalon which I did before I started trying to be systematic about it...” she sighed and moved over to lean against Wukong. “I suppose I’ll do Utopolis tomorrow, ‘cause it’s all big and right in the middle of everything, then there’s a handful of smaller domains wrapped around it.”

“That sounds boring,” Wukong said flatly.

“Well, yes, being methodical about it may be a little dull, but when it gets exciting it gets very exciting,” Storyteller said with a slight grin. “The last time things heated up, some fucker nearly axed me.”

“That sounds like more fun.”

“Maybe if he hadn’t broken into my house,” Storyteller grimaced. “One likes their home to be safe.”

“True,” Wukong conceded with a nod.

“I don’t know much about Utopolis...” Storyteller noted, gazing into the distance. “I tried going incognito to a couple of the domains I was searching last week, and y’know, it does cut down on the ‘trouble’ I encounter, but now I’m thinking that when I go into a domain where there is a resident Loki, if I show up looking like him, it gets a reaction. Which can also be useful, both for immediately knowing I’ve found something, and for gauging his role within the social-tapestry of that world.”

Wukong considered that for a moment, tilting his head. “… You often show up looking like ‘him’?” he asked.

“About fifty-fifty,” Storyteller shrugged. “I try to split my time evenly, more or less.”
“You’re also male?”

“Yes. Dual aspects,” Storyteller agreed.

“Like my patroness,” Wukong said, sounding curious rather than concerned. “Are you stronger as a man?” he asked.

“No, strength isn’t gender-based in my pantheon,” Storyteller shook her head and then frowned. “Well, I should qualify that: there are more ‘strong’ gods than goddesses, but the handful of ‘strong’ goddesses are on a par with the ‘strong’ gods. My big sister was on a similar level with my two ‘strong’ brothers, and my strength level doesn’t seem to change at all when I shift.”

“Ah,” Wukong sounded slightly disappointed.

“Also, because Friggjarrokkr is metaphorically a distaff, I’m bound to have a better rapport with it in female form,” Storyteller added.

Wukong shrugged the shoulder Storyteller wasn’t leaning against. “I don’t know much about your western stinky-woolly sheep-clothes or the symbols you stick to them.”

Storyteller snorted. “Linen. Linen is the symbolic textile for Norse-Germanic mythology, not wool,” she corrected. “And spinning is a feminine principal all up and down Europe and the Med, I thought it was feminine in Asia too. Isn’t the silk deity a goddess?”

“Yeah, I just don’t know what sticks have to do with cloth,” Wukong said.

“Well--”

“Oh, I also don’t care,” he added quickly.

“Fair enough,” Storyteller rolled her eyes.

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“Did you battle any slugs?” Masterson asked, pausing by Storyteller’s desk with a bankers’ box balanced on one shoulder.

“No, I did not,” Storyteller shook her head. “I am convincing myself that the slugs are not real, and if I ignore them, they will cease to exist.”

“Oh? You think that’ll work?” Masterson grinned.

“It might.”

“So there wasn’t any trouble?” he asked curiously.

“Nope, Wulfbuck took me straight to the palace and la Fey was very hospitable,” Storyteller said and then wrinkled her nose and amended, “A little too hospitable.”

Masterson raised an eyebrow. “What does that mean?”

“She offered me use of her harem-persons,” Storyteller shrugged.

Masterson gave her a mild glare. “That is three times you’ve ditched me for the really good missions,” he accused.
“It’s not deliberate!” Storyteller protested. “I never find out it’s going to be a sexcapades adventure until I get there!”

“Excuses excuses,” he snorted, rolling his eyes.

“And anyway, I don’t think you would have liked this one. The harem and its occupants were a little bit creepy...” Storyteller noted, tapping her pen against the edge of the desk. “And it was in a volcano.”

“I missed a volcano-lair?!”

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“What do you do around here, anyway?” Storyteller asked curiously, wandering up to Johnny, who was laying on the grass at the foot of a carefully manicured hornbeam tree, reading.

He flicked his book carelessly to the side and grinned up at her. “Nothing. I'm an idle, entitled aristocrat, serving no useful purpose,” he replied. “I'm a leach upon society.”

Storyteller tilted her head to the side, smirking. “You sound rather like somebody I met in Avalon, only smug rather than outraged,” she noted. “Do you ever think perhaps you ought to try doing something useful?”

“I am actively discouraged from that sort of thing,” Johnny said, sitting up. “To be fair, I'm discouraged from most things, but particularly from trying to be useful.”

Storyteller sank down and settled herself cross-legged next to him. “Why is that?” she asked.

“Doom doesn't trust me with anything important. Or anything unimportant,” Johnny shrugged.

“Why?” Storyteller could think of any number of reasons, but not ones that would fit Battleworld's backstory.

“Because I'm the dumb one,” Johnny gave an irony-tinged grin.

“I wouldn't have thought to describe you as dumb,” Storyteller noted, raising an eyebrow.

“In any other family, I wouldn't be.”

Storyteller wet her lips, considering that. “... Does that bother you? Are you resentful?” she asked.

“That my sister and her kids are amazing?” Johnny made a dismissive face and shrugged again. “Any family in the world, one person's going to be the smartest and one person's going to be the dumbest... Only thing weird about my family is that the difference is an order of magnitude.”

“You are exaggerating the numbers,” Storyteller snorted, rolling her eyes. “So you don't resent your sister or her children...”

Johnny smirked, pulling up one knee and leaning against it. “Are you pausing because the next logical question would be blasphemous for you to ask and for me to answer?”

“Well if it is the next logical question,” Storyteller hummed.

Johnny shook his head. “Doom doesn't concern himself about me, so I return the favor,” he said. “Sue’s happy, the kids are happy, that's all I care about.”
“That's a healthy attitude,” Storyteller mused. “But you're really not stupid, and I should think that if you're bored, Lord Doom could find something you could do. Some sort of civic duty you could take part in.”

“He considers me an embarrassment,” Johnny replied, his tone very very neutral. “I'm only here because of Sue.”

“... I see,” Storyteller nodded, glancing down.

“She's six years older than me, and our mother died when I was eight,” he explained, and Storyteller looked back up, intrigued by the sudden, and very personal, divulgence. “So most of my life, she's been the one 'mothering' me, and it’s just sort of... habit, I guess. She treats me like one of her kids, even now.”

“That sounds equal parts infuriating and sweet,” Storyteller noted.

Johnny grinned, it was warm and amused this time. “Yeah.”

Storyteller tilted her head back and gazed up at the sky, mulling the conversation over. “... So then, you're the step-child Doom didn't want.” As opposed to the two he would lie, cheat and steal to get, Storyteller thought and then frowned slightly, something tugging at memories that had the stale and vague feeling of the First's.

“Yep,” Johnny agreed.

“That must be frustrating...” Storyteller mumbled, only half engaged now as her mind had suddenly started racing, because she'd remembered something disturbing. Disturbing like when one notices that the person their looking at is a missing body part. The kind of absence that speaks to terrible loss, yet everyone averts their eyes and pretends not to see. Doom had a child. Where was Doom's son?

“Are you all right?” Johnny asked.

“I-- Yes. Sorry,” Storyteller shook her head slowly. “Sorry, I just... thought of something. Related to my assignment. Something that was in front of me but I hadn't noticed it before.” She closed her eyes and sighed, chewing on her lip. “Sorry. It's nothing to do with this conversation.”

“Anything I can do?”

“Mm, not about that, I think,” Storyteller said, shaking her head again. “But, hm, while Doom may not have you actively participating in politics, I'll bet you know more about the domains than me?” She tilted her head and raised an eyebrow at him.

“Maybe,” Johnny looked pleased at being asked.

“I'm going to Utopolis tomorrow. What can you tell me about it?” Storyteller asked, leaning forward and smiling at him.

Chapter End Notes

Storyteller refers to the Foundation as a naukograd, that's a Russian term translating as 'science city'. During Soviet Union times, they started building cities that were entirely scientists (and the sort of support and service staff necessary to run a small city and take
care of a lot of scientists). If you've seen the show 'Eureka', that's a naukograd. Russia still has some of these, but most of them aren't super-top-secret anymore.

Looking back at what I've written, I think I write Wukong with a touch of DBZ-A Goku's "Bored now! What's over there?" attitude. And as I just wrote that, the sassy little thought popped into my head that Marvel's canon resolution to Secret Wars was basically "muffin button". Because why bother writing your way out of the hole you dug yourself into, when you can just hit the magic button?

For those unfamiliar with the minutia of F4: Why is Ant-Man here? Ant-Man is an off-and-on member of the Fantastic Four and Future Foundation. It seems like Reed would probably be happy enough to keep him on full-time, but Scott has tremendous ADD and probably just wanders off or something. 'Doom's son' refers to Kristoff Vernard/von Doom, adopted as a little'un after his mother, a Latverian commoner, sheltered a temporarily-deposed Dr. Doom and then got killed by the worse-than-Doom temporary-deposer. It is possible (likely?) that Kristoff was originally an average-ish child, but then he got some science done to him and now he is a super-genius (with his very own Doom Jr. armor). So that's who Kristoff is, now here's the weird part: Kristoff is never even mentioned during the whole of Secret Wars. He was there during the countdown, but after the trigger got pulled? He completely disappeared and Doom didn't even seem to notice. Huge plot hole; I can't abide it.

Poll for the peanut-gallery: Should the name of the domain for the Marvel Universe cartoons (Ultimate Spider-Man, Avengers Assemble, &c.) be called "Ultimation" (the property or act of being ultimate) or "Ultima Thule" (northernmost point of human civilization).
The role of government in a perfect society

Chapter Summary

“I went to a creepy Nineteen Eighty-Four dystopia today. And then I went to the mid-eighties and that was much nicer.”

Chapter Notes

This chapter featuring:

![Nighthawk and Doctor Zero](image)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Children played unsupervised in the streets and people seemed friendly in Utopolis. Everyone obeyed the traffic lights, even the cyclists, and nobody littered. There was no gum or cigarette butts on the sidewalk, in fact Storyteller couldn’t see or smell a cigarette at all anywhere he walked. None of the drivers honked their horns or cut each other off. Nobody swore or raised their voices. Everyone said ‘excuse me’ and showed each other perfect respect. It was terribly creepy.

Storyteller couldn’t feel any story threads tugging on him as he drifted around the sidewalks and decided after a while to make his way toward the big, shiny Citadel in the central part of the city. He kept feeling increasingly nervous as he observed the excessively polite citizens moving around the streets. People were not naturally predisposed to be so polite; if they were, there would be no need for governance. While the average person would probably not be inclined to go out and murder someone, they probably would cut in line if they thought they could get away with it. It was only natural to be a little selfish and a bit of a scofflaw on ‘minor’ things.

An entire society without any scofflaws at all smacked of some sinister subtext. Like a swan, all beauty and grace on the surface, tumult below. After watching a woman meticulously clean up after her dog, Storyteller started to turn, to continue his way down the sidewalk, but stopped abruptly, almost stumbling, as he found somebody standing right where his next step would have taken him.

The man was tall for a human but still needed to look upward to give Storyteller a cool, keen stare that, on first impression, seemed awkward and intensely peculiar, until Storyteller caught the tiniest specks of light glittering just in front of his eyes. He was wearing some kind of HUD, and apparently scanning Storyteller in some way, but the substrate was so utterly transparent and unreflective, Storyteller couldn’t even make out the contours.
“H-hello?” Storyteller greeted, feeling a tiny bit intimidated by the utter stoicism of the man, and even further by the fact that suddenly nobody was anywhere near them. All the Utopolicians seemed to be crossing the street to avoid this bit of sidewalk and Storyteller could see a street-vendor in the process of trotting his cart down to the next block as people quickly evacuated the entire vicinity.

“You have ninety seconds to explain your presence in my domain before I arrest you,” the man said in a sharp monotone.

Storyteller was so startled, and the man was standing so awfully close, he found himself taking a half-step back. “I- My name is Storyteller, I’m a special agent under authority of the Doomstadt Ministry of Sorcery, operating in conjunction with Doomgard,” he explained, tamping down the flustered feeling. “I have been tasked by the Holy Eye, Sheriff Strange to conduct a particular survey of the many domains of Latverian, and- and today was... I am viewing your fair city.”

“Why was I not informed of this inspection?” the man demanded, eyes narrowing.

“It’s not an inspection. This survey is not related to the rulership of the domains,” Storyteller protested and then frowned, looking the man over. He was dressed in dark colors and had a rather extravagant (silly) cape. What little of his face Storyteller could see wasn’t at all similar to the snippets of memory he had of the space-god-person Thor had befriended. “I’m sorry, who are you? I was given the impression that this domain was under the rule of King Hyperion.”

“I am King Hyperion’s Minister of Defense and Strategy, Nighthawk,” the man answered. “And if you had gone through the appropriate channels before making this visit, it would have been me you spoke with.”

Storyteller pursed his lips for a moment, sorting his words out carefully. “You are rather standoffish, Minister Nighthawk,” he said evenly. “Most people tend to be a bit more polite to parties representing the authority of Doom.”

“Most parties representing the authority of Doom come with a hammer,” Nighthawk retorted. “And I find it somewhat difficult to respect a bureaucrat who fails to respect the jurisdiction and authority of a domain’s leadership.”

“Bureaucrat?” Storyteller repeated softly. “… Minister Nighthawk, you seem to have mistaken me for a pencil-pusher,” he shifted his posture and expression to affect a more authoritative presence than he usually opted for. “You are speaking to the sole apprentice of Sheriff Strange. My orders come either through him or directly from the lips of Doom. These are the only authorities above me. I answer to no bureaucracy.”

Nighthawk kept a straight face and gave a curt nod. “What is the nature of your survey and how may I be of assistance to you?”

Storyteller considered that for a moment. “… How did you detect my presence within the domain and track me down so quickly?” he asked.

“Your energy signature is distinctive and significant enough to trigger an alert from my sensors,” Nighthawk answered.

“You have sensors constantly scanning the entire city for energy blips?” Storyteller raised an eyebrow.


“I see,” Storyteller nodded, chewing his lip for a moment. “And you said that my energy was
distinctive. Was it unfamiliar?"

There was a second’s pause, and Storyteller just barely caught the tiniest hint of glitter as Nighthawk’s HUD display showed him something. “You show markers for lesser-godhood, both wild-magic and trained sorcery, as well as chaos elementalism,” he listed. “The particular levels and combination is unique within my database.”

“Does your database detail all the citizens of your domain?” Storyteller asked.

“Of course.”

“Are any of them named Loki, Loke, Lokkjr or Lopti?” he asked.


“Thank you,” Storyteller nodded, wetting his lips. The combination of Nighthawk’s techno-omniscience and the lack of any plot-tug feelings seemed to confirm the lack of Loki-presences in the region, and Storyteller rather thought he was tired of being here. “I think my needs have been satisfied then.”

“You’re looking for someone,” Nighthawk noted, his eyes appraising and shrewd. “And you don’t know what domain he’s in.”

“That is the business of Doomstadt and Doomgard, and none of yours. Suffice to say, I told you my ‘survey’ had nothing to do with the rulership,” Storyteller said with a small sigh and shook his head. “Your domain's compliance with Doom Law is the business of Thors.”

“So you’ll be moving on then?” Nighthawk raised an eyebrow.

“Oh but you’ve made me feel so welcome,” Storyteller rolled his eyes and then looked at Nighthawk again for a moment and tilted his head a tiny bit to the side. “What is the sentence for littering in this domain?”


“Curiosity,” Storyteller shrugged and shook his head.

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Thanks to the rude efficiency of Utopolis's Big Brother, Storyteller had crossed a sizable domain off his list before lunchtime and was left with the difficult decision of what he wanted to do versus what he should do. What he wanted to do was call it a day, go collect Serrure and seek out ice cream, because after all, he had accomplished what he set out to do today. But every hour wasted was an hour he should have been looking for his other lost boy.

And so Storyteller sought out lunch and a venti-sized cup of caffeine and sugar in the next domain over before setting out to explore it. As with Utopolis, Storyteller could feel no discernible 'tug' picking at him, and it was a much smaller domain after all. It looked as though today was going to be good for nothing more than ticking off boxes.

The domain itself might have been engaging enough on its own terms, with a lively roaring eighties energy and the high-low culture clash of New York in its economic rebound. Normally, Storyteller might have found it an amusing place to stop and smell the gentrification, but Nighthawk's attitude had put him into a poor temper and exacerbated the anxious impatience that Terror's vision had spurred in him. So instead of a meandering course, this time Storyteller headed straight toward the
domain's power center, the still very evident World Trade Towers, which had apparently become the capitol building for a new capitalist world order.

There was a security check at the door, which was quite natural, seeing as it had apparently become an important government building for the domain and this was a paranoid cold-war society (even though they had likely forgotten who they were at cold-war with) but this particular setting lead Storyteller to consider the effectiveness of security checks in general. Of course, he supposed, they had some use against the lone-gunman type of threats, but once one's threats reached a certain level of influence and determination, metal detectors and smartly-dressed security personnel might become a rather meaningless gesture. Then again, if Storyteller were to assign a moral to the end of the multiverse, it would perhaps have to be that ultimately there may not be much one can do to prepare for death-from-above.

And of course, a metal detector held very little effectiveness against someone with the ability to magically stow all their metallic possessions in a subspace pocket and then retrieve them at will. However, Storyteller decided that the little tray one was meant to deposit their coins nail-clippers into made for a good opener and dropped his shiny and very official badge into it before stepping through the metal detector. The security guard minding the check-point gave it a curious look as he distractedly hit a few buttons on his CTR console.

“Did you have a meeting scheduled?” he asked, glancing back up at Storyteller.

“Not as such. I was hoping to speak to someone involved with domain security or possibly records,” Storyteller answered.

“So... you're not sure who you're here to see?” the security guard said doubtfully, clearly uncomfortable with the ambiguity but intimidated by the very official-looking badge.

“I'm open to suggestions,” Storyteller replied with a slight shrug. “Nobody's written a manual on how I ought to be completing my assignment, so I'm rather making it up as I go.”

“I see,” the guard said uncertainly, handing Storyteller's badge back to him. “May I ask the nature of your assignment?”

Storyteller shook his head. “It is a highly sensitive matter of Doom Law. I can only tell you that I am looking for an individual who may or may not be a resident of this domain.”

“I see,” he said again, frowning. “Ask at the main desk, and they will find someone to assist you,” he gestured toward a long reception counter.

“Thank you,” Storyteller nodded.

“Of course, sir.”

Storyteller made his way to the counter and waited patiently until one of the receptionist turned to him. “Yes, sir?”

“Special Agent Storyteller of the Doomstadt Ministry of Sorcery,” Storyteller said calmly, displaying his badge and watching the receptionist give it and him a slightly flustered look. “I need to speak to someone regarding a possible presence within your domain. Someone in records, or law enforcement, or the confluence there of, possibly?”

The receptionist nodded slightly, bit his lip for a moment, and then picked up the phone receiver in front of him and dialed an extension. He paused a moment and then addressed whoever had picked up. “I have a special agent from Doomstadt here about... law enforcement records?” he said,
glancing uncertainly up at Storyteller who gave a half-shrug and nodded. “... Are you able to be more specific?” the receptionist asked, apparently directing the question at Storyteller.

“Not in mixed company,” Storyteller shook his head.

“A sensitive security matter, sir,” the receptionist addressed the phone again. “Yes, sir,” he nodded and hung up the receiver. “Someone will be here to assist you momentarily, if you would please take a seat,” he said, gesturing toward a hospital-like waiting area. “Can I get you anything to drink, sir?”

“That's all right. Thank you for your help,” Storyteller said, shaking his head and then meandering over to one of the reasonably acceptable but not entirely comfortable chairs to wait.

A little over ten minutes later, a man with a magnificent mustache walked up to Storyteller and offered his hand. “Hello, Agent. I am Gregor Gerasimov, secretary of security,” he greeted.

“Oh, that's quite impressive. I didn't mean to be an inconvenience,” Storyteller said, standing up and shaking the man's hand as he offered a slightly sheepish grin.

“It's quite all right,” Gregor replied with a dismissive shake of his head. “I understand that the information you seek is of a sensitive nature. Please come follow me. I will do my best to accommodate your needs.”

“I appreciate that, Secretary. Thank you,” Storyteller nodded, pleased by the wholly disparate attitude from the last head of national security he had dealt with.

After boarding an empty elevator that apparently required a key to access, Gregor became more talkative again. “I understand that your mission is of a sensitive nature, but I believe I will need a little more information if I am to assist you in finding what you're looking for,” he said.

Storyteller nodded. “There is a small group of rogue elements I have been assigned by Doomstadt and Doomgard to track down. The difficulty is that in addition to several other crimes, the parties concerned have been flagrantly disregarding boarders, and so I am both unsure where they are now and also which domains they originated from,” he explained carefully. “And I should amend that they are not so much a 'group' per se, that is, I doubt that I would find them together, but rather more separate individuals sharing a few common philosophies.”

“... Would these individuals be human?” Gregor asked, voice slightly quieter, a hint conspiratorial.

“They are more likely to be super-human, though I am still building the profiles,” Storyteller replied, mimicking the slightly paranoid tone, as though super-humans were a secret, strange thing.

Gregor nodded and reached for the panel next to the door, hitting the button for a different floor than their previous destination had apparently been. The halls of this new destination seemed deserted when they arrived, as though very few people had access to this level, and Gregor lead him quietly to an office suite filled with huge, clunky computers that looked like the cutting edge in mid-80s technology as well as numerous filing cabinets and a wrap-around desk where a young man was typing away at a keyboard.

“This is Donald Gaffney,” Gregor said, gesturing to the young man, who looked up, startled by the intrusion. “He monitors, analyzes and advises on super-human activity within the Shadowline domain. Gaffney, this is Special Agent Storyteller from Doomstadt. He is tracking specific super-humans and needs assistance to determine if they are either in Shadowline now or if they ever were.”

“Very succinct, Secretary, thank you,” Storyteller smiled and stepped forward as Donald came out from behind his desk to shake Storyteller's hand. “A pleasure to meet you, Mister Gaffney.”
“Of course I'm happy to be of assistance,” Donald said with a polite nod. “I maintain a database of all the known extra-normal individuals residing in Shadowline. Is there perhaps a name we might start with?”

“There are a handful of possible 'real' names, but if they're using an alias, well, then we're into the realm of infinite possibilities,” Storyteller sighed with a slight shrug. “The inherent difficulty is that the persons I am looking for may be, ehm...” he glanced down, affecting a slight demure and pretending to be suitably embarrassed about discussing a 'ridiculous' topic like super-people. “Quite a bit older than they might look. And so there is a distinct possibility that they would change aliases with some regularity.”

Donald and Gregor exchanged a pregnant glance and the tension in the room increased noticeably. “... I see,” Donald said quietly, nervously sweeping a lock of hair behind his ear. “Are there some specific attributes or notable powers that might be associated with them?”

“Affinity for chaos, fire and possibly sorcery,” Storyteller listed, as he watched Donald walk back around the desk and start searching his computer. While there was definitely a degree of variation between Lokis, there were also common themes that he'd been getting a better idea the shape of the more of them he met. “They will probably have a prominent streak of vanity, and be likely to refer to themself as a god.”

“God,” Donald nodded distractedly as his fingers flew over the keyboard. “We're looking for a male, then?”

“Not necessarily,” Storyteller shook his head. “In the ones I've nailed down so far, gender hasn't seemed to be a determining factor.”

“All right,” Donald nodded, typing away. “Is there anything else that might--”

“Sir,” Gregor's voice interrupted suddenly. “Is something wrong?”

Storyteller and Donald both followed Gregor's gaze to find a tall, very handsome man shutting the door quietly behind himself as he stepped into the room. “Not at all, Gregor,” he said calmly, gliding gracefully across the floor, eyes fixed on Storyteller.

“This is Special Agent Storyteller from Doomstadt,” Gregor introduced before his eyes flicked up to Storyteller's and he nodded toward the new arrival. “May I present Baron Doctor Zero.”

“An honor, sir,” Storyteller said, dipping his head respectfully as Doctor Zero stopped in front of him, dissecting him with intense yet calm eyes. His pristine, tailored suit fit flawlessly, but the contour suggested quite a muscular build underneath, and that, combined with the high level of perfection in his slightly otherworldly beauty, made him look more god than human, though not any god Storyteller immediately recognized.

“I felt you,” Doctor Zero said.

“Oh. I... see?” Storyteller was slightly unsettled by the unprefaced and kind of creepy statement.

Doctor Zero glanced briefly to the other two occupants of the room. “Gregor, Donald, thank you for your assistance,” he said and then turned his eyes back to Storyteller. “Please come with me. We'll speak in my office.”

“Oh,” Storyteller said, glancing back at Gregor and Donald, who were both looking equally surprised and confused, and followed along as Doctor Zero turned and lead him out into the hall and back to the keyed elevator.
It of course wasn't the first time that a baron had been intrigued by having an important visitor from Doomstadt, but Storyteller's affiliation had seemed utterly superfluous to Doctor Zero's interest. Apparently Doctor Zero had some extrasensory awareness that Storyteller's aura had made an impression upon. It didn't feel like he was being lead into a lion's den, but Doctor Zero's detached, ethereal manor was a little disconcerting in its oddness. He was quiet as they rode the elevator to the top floor and were let out into an open floor-plan that seemed to have been designed with careful attention to feng shui.

Doctor Zero drifted to a grouping of comfortable, modern furniture, presided over by a trendy water-feature, and sat in a plush, vinyl-upholstered chair, studying Storyteller, who settled in a seat facing him across a coffee table. “What are you?” Doctor Zero asked calmly. “You're not human, but you're not shadow either.”

Storyteller didn't know exactly what a 'shadow' was, other than, apparently, not-human. “The popular term these days is 'lesser god','” he answered. “In the old days, we might have simply said 'god', but the language has been updated to show proper deference to Lord Doom.” Doctor Zero nodded slowly and Storyteller watched him, tilting his head curiously. “What is it you 'feel' in me that is so unusual as to grab your attention?” he asked.

“... It's difficult to describe,” Doctor Zero said, seeming to consider the question. “You are... molten... primal.” His eyes seemed to dig beneath Storyteller's skin, seeing something far more essential than the veneer. “What are you, though? What are you made of? Your physiology is...”

“I'm mystical, not biological. That's probably why I come off as a bit odd on a quintessential level,” Storyteller explained, wondering exactly how invasive Doctor Zero's extra senses were if he could tell on sight that there was something not-science about him. “I'm reality's illogical day-dream.”

Doctor Zero was quiet for a moment, studying him. “... Interesting.”

“I take your interest to mean that there aren't beings like me native to your domain?” Storyteller asked. “I'm a little surprised though, that you find me so odd. It's usually noted that my physiology is similar to that of a Thor.”

“The superficial, overall physical qualities of your body, but not the underlying nature of it, or the forces that surrounds you,” Doctor Zero said. “Ripley is similarly dense and physically powerful, but...” he shook his head. “You are something quite different.”

“I suppose, then, that that answers my questions,” Storyteller said, trying to remember if he'd met a 'Ripley'; most likely one of the 'Thors' deputized by Doom's power, rather than the genuine article. “The people I'm looking for are the same kind of creature as me.”

“I'm sorry if your journey has been fruitless,” Doctor Zero replied.

“Well, you've helped me make that determination quickly, anyway, and even a negative result helps me narrow down my list.” Storyteller shrugged slightly. “And your staff is far more pleasant than the officials in Utopolis, I must say,” he added, rolling his eyes.

Doctor Zero smirked slightly, looking almost 'normal' for a moment. “I take it they were rude? Utopolis's administrators are... aggressive.”

“Oh I noticed,” Storyteller agreed, wrinkling his nose.

“You know their national motto?”

“No, what is it?”
“Weakness is a capital offense,” Doctor Zero gave a half-amused, half-disgusted scoff.

“Oh charming.” Storyteller snorted.

“Isn't it though,” Doctor Zero shook his head. “They use the fallacy of social Darwinism to justify their dominion and the cruelty by which they hold it. They keep their people terrified of what lies beyond the boarders in order to keep them complacent.”

Storyteller nodded, considering Doctor Zero’s apparent distaste for the Orwellian overtones of the neighboring domain, and also reflecting on the way Gregor and Donald had looked at him. It wasn't exactly fear in their eyes, or not entirely; they didn't distrust Doctor Zero, but they seemed acutely aware that he was a different order of being than themselves. “And what is your philosophy for maintaining control over your domain?” Storyteller asked curiously.

“It's most important to keep the ecosystem well balanced, both in the physical sense and social,” Doctor Zero said placidly. “If the animals begin to hurt each other excessively, or otherwise damage the balance, they need to be censured, but the majority of them are quite happy to do as they're told, if told in a way that pleases.”

Storyteller tilted his head slightly, attention catching on one word in particular. “When you say 'animals', you mean the humans?”

“Humans tend to be the most destructive these days,” Doctor Zero half-agreed. “Others get out of balance now and again, deer, geese, cane toads... although in many cases the fault for those imbalances ultimately derives from human action.” He closed his eyes and shrugged slightly. “Humans have a strong desire to modify their environment. It isn't a bad thing in and of itself, but short-sightedness leads to mistakes.”

Storyteller studied him silently for a moment, processing the coolly detached statements. “Do you care for humanity?” he asked.

“Humans are one of many species in my ecosystem,” Doctor Zero replied, and Storyteller could tell that his own reaction to the statement was being studied. “Admittedly, they are one of very few capable of the complex, abstract reasoning that might be defined as 'sentience', and as individuals, there are humans I find engaging. But as a whole, humanity is simply bio-mass, not inherently superior to any other animal.”

“What about when they misbehave themselves?” Storyteller asked, intrigued. “You noted that they’re one of the more destructive species around.”

“That's why government is important for them. The behavior of the larger whole of humanity can be controlled through a pyramid scheme of politicians and law-enforcers,” Doctor Zero explained. “Pushing the majority to embrace what's best for the ecosystem simply comes down to marketing. And when there is an occasional maverick within the herd whose behavior is unacceptably destructive, it is best to consider that individual a cancer and simply remove them.”

Storyteller raised an eyebrow. “And what kind of behavior earns such an amputation?”

Doctor Zero seemed to consider for a moment. “Now and again, there will be terrorists who seek to express themselves by demonstrating their disregard for the lives of fellow humans,” he said, voice distant and musing. “And there will be the occasional sociopath who manages to find their way to a position of power and uses it to indulge in sadism... Like the bomb-maker. He had to go.”

“But not petty criminals,” Storyteller said.
“The censure of ordinary criminals is what law enforcement is for,” Doctor Zero said, shaking his head. “They do not require my personal attention and there is no point in trying to eliminate them. A certain level of criminality in a large population is natural and to be expected. The criminals must be rebuked, of course, but existence of crime in the abstract... there are acceptable limits.”

Storyteller frowned slightly. “And if the crime is within 'acceptable limits' you ignore it?” he asked.

“No, of course not. If criminals went unpunished, the occurrence of criminality would swell beyond acceptable limits,” Doctor Zero said. “As when a predator is removed from an ecosystem and their prey's population explodes beyond sustainability.”

“Ah. So criminals, as individuals, will be punished, but there is a percentage of crime that is expected to occur within your society, and that fact should be accepted rather than fretted over,” Storyteller paraphrased.

“Yes. Exactly.”

“You're a very pragmatic man, Doctor,” Storyteller noted, leaning back and processing the very organic philosophy on social order. It was a bit dispassionate, but reasonable, realistic, and quite business-like, which Storyteller supposed fit the domain rather well. “You remind me of Doom, in the way that I think perhaps a practical ruler is sometimes much better than a sentimental one.”

“Sentimentality is at the root of bias and has been the cause of many wars,” Doctor Zero mused. “I can't truly claim to be immune to sentiment, but I do try to avoid sentimental politics.”

“That seems like a good policy,” Storyteller agreed. He tried to decide if he liked the man or simply appreciated him, but eventually concluded that it didn't matter. And in any event, the open, polite interest of Doctor Zero and his staff had done much to ease the bad taste Storyteller's morning in Utopolis had left him with.

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There was a knock at the magic-door and then Loki leaned into the apartment. “Where do you want to have dinner?” he called.

Verity looked up from the towel she was folding and considered the piles of both folded and unfolded laundry stacked around her on the couch and coffee table. “Your place,” she decided, setting the towel aside and pushing to her feet.

“Okay, cool,” Loki said, pushing the door a little wider and holding it for her as Verity walked over. “I went to a creepy 1984 dystopia today. And then I went to the mid-eighties and that was much nicer.”

“1984 as in the book?” Verity asked, following him through the magical space-warping portal into ‘England’. “That's the one where the television watches you, right?”

“Yes, that is an accurate statement, but it's more so that the government watches everybody all the time,” Loki explained. “And so everybody is creepily well behaved. Let's see, non-fictional example... Okay, you know how Singapore made chewing gum illegal?” he asked.

“I think I've heard that before,” Verity nodded.

“This domain makes Singapore look laid back and mellow,” Loki said.

“Is this going to be a good story?” Verity wondered with a little smirk as she wandered into the
kitchen where Serrure and Lockheed were setting the table around a pile of take-out boxes.

“Eh, no, not really. Maybe if you’re into stuff like the Silmarillion? There wasn’t really a well structured plot, more like a lot of world-building stuff I guess?” Loki shrugged.

“I don’t know what the thing you just referenced is,” Verity sighed.

“The piece de resistance of world-building.”

Verity gave him a flat look. “Are you going to tell me about the dystopia or are you going to try to explain pop-culture references that have no significance for me?”

“... I can do both,” Loki frowned slightly, considering.

“Please don’t,” Verity sighed, rolling her eyes.

Chapter End Notes

The important thing to understand about Squadron Supreme/Sinister is that it is a blatant caricature of DC's Justice League and that was originally intentional and overt, like Marvel was taking shots at DC and doin' it loud and sassy. But apparently somewhere along the line, somebody decided that they actually liked the caricatures and they've since been given their own personalities and stuff. Squadron Supreme is also one of those things that was always from 'some other universe', so there were two persistent and reoccurring variations, good!Squadron and evil!Squadron. The Secret Wars Squadron Sinister makes use of evil!Squadron, and Nighthawk is the Batman caricature.

So it's been noted that I've done a lot of background reading for this fic, trying to get the characters and tone right for domains based on various Marvel alternate universes. Sometimes this turns out to be a chore, like MC2 (dear God, it's bad), other times I am pleasantly surprised by one of Marvel's parallel universes, like 1602 and Noir-verse were both charming. The SW Squadron Sinister tie-in mentioned Earth-88194 (Shadowline) as one of the domains Utopolis had annexed (Shadow Province) and I figured I shouldn't ignore it. So I read through all of the information Marvel Wiki had on that 'verse and decided to read a couple Doctor Zero comics to get the tone right. I ended up reading all of the Doctor Zero comics (there's only 8 issues) and loving them. This mini-series was from 1986, and the target audience is adults. Most 'old' comics come off as pretty dated and hokey; Doctor Zero is only dated at all because it's so political and uses the Regan administration and the Soviet Union as themes in it, but apart from that, I think it's one of the best 'dark and gritty' comic I've read and Doctor Zero a fantastic protagonist because he's like if Captain Planet was rude and dismissive. 'Zero' stands for how many fucks he gives about humanity. I'd still classify him as a 'hero' rather than 'anti-hero' because he's pretty diligent about protecting the general well-being of planet Earth, which he does because he lives here and so do the porpoises. The other two series in this universe feature protagonists who hate him or are affiliated with organizations that do, muddying the good-guy/bad-guy waters, but in Doctor Zero's title, they make him the clear 'good-guy' by pitting him against horrifying sociopaths, so he looks pretty sterling by comparison. This one gets a definite thumbs-up and I'll probably try the other comics from this 'verse sometime.
That last scene got pretty meta. Sorry. I guess set-up chapters are getting to me, I want back to some action and plot-twists, so I'll follow up with a double-post of just that...
Troubles and Tangles

Chapter Summary

“I don’t think I’ve ever heard a spell like that. Tell me, what is ‘nat-twenty’?” a particularly regal-looking, male Loki asked.

“Pff, I know what a nat-twenty is,” Spider-Man said, setting his feet and squaring himself. “Does that make me a better wizard than Loki?” The question earned a particularly venomous sneer.

“Is that your favored class? I pictured you as more of a rogue,” Storyteller said.

Chapter Notes

This chapter featuring:

Ultimation

Storyteller was trying to decide if she was imagining it or if the colors really were brighter in the Ultimation domain. Everything seemed somehow cleaner and simpler, but she couldn’t define exactly why. It also seemed less crowded than most New Yorks, like there were simply less people on the streets, though architecture was still on the same scale which ought to indicate a similar population density to the one she was familiar with. Puzzling.

And there was something just odd-feeling about the place, a sort of charged sensation she couldn’t define. Like the ionization in the air just before a lightning strike. Storyteller walked down the street, trying to push past the oddness and feel out the faint tug of a Loki-story pulling uncertainly at her.

How many times has this happened to you? You’re just swinging around the city, minding your own business, when suddenly somebody turns your entire reality on its head?

Storyteller froze; what the hell was that? She turned slowly around, eyes wide, trying to spot the source of... whatever had just happened. It wasn’t a voice. It didn’t feel like telepathy. What the hell was that?
For me, it happens all too regularly. I’m Peter Parker, the Ultimate Spider-Man, and today is the day I realize that everything I thought I knew is wrong.

“Hoooly smeg, it’s a voice-over,” Storyteller whispered. “... This place has a narrator? That’s so cool!”

Suddenly, the wall twenty feet in front of her exploded outward. Storyteller made an undignified sound and took a startled step backward as four very large (and on second glance familiar) men came charging out of the hole, bits of brick and plaster raining down. “Good job, Thunderball. Now let’s get out of here before some super-schmuck in tights shows up,” Wrecker said with a thuggish grin.

“Did I just hear my cue?” a young voice called from above and Wrecker let out a startled sound just before his mouth (and the rest of his face) was covered over by webbing. Storyteller whipped around and caught sight of a red and blue web-slinger diving into the fray. Then he and everyone else in view froze in place and the world went gray-scale except for the Wrecking Crew.

Check out these gems. Thunderball. Piledriver. Bulldozer. The Wrecker. They’re the Wrecking Crew and each one of them is as strong as me. Maybe stronger. Fortunately, all put together, they’re only about as smart as my big toe.

Motion and color resumed. “What the crap?” Storyteller demanded. The aesthetics of that bizarre introduction put her in mind of a 16-bit arcade game. Spider-Man, a slightly smaller, thinner Spider-Man than Storyteller remembered, started jumping and weaving around the wrecking crew, slowly wrapping them up and tripping them as he ducked under arms and avoided their swings, often tricking them into hitting each other.

Now I know what you’re thinking: The Wrecking Crew? Those guys fight the Avengers! They are totally a big deal! But let me tell you, these super-charged bank-robbers are small potatoes, tater-tots even, compared this lady right here:

The world went gray and still again for a moment except for a huge, blinking, red and yellow arrow pointed squarely at Storyteller. She looked down at herself and confirmed that yes, she was still in full color.

If you told me who she was, I probably wouldn’t believe you. If you told me she was about to completely blow my mind like it’s never been blown before, I’d probably think you were exaggerating. But you wouldn’t be.

“Well that’s putting an awful lot of pressure on me, don’t you think?” Storyteller noted.

The color turned back on, the motion resumed, and Spider-Man’s attention suddenly locked onto Storyteller. “What the what?” he exclaimed, a moment before Wrecker’s crowbar slammed into him and sent Spider-Man flying backwards.

Storyteller gasped, horrified. She’d distracted him. Wrecker’s strength was comparable to a Thor’s and because Storyteller had distracted him, this domain’s very young Spider-Man had just taken a blow square in the chest. He’d be lucky if broken ribs were all he’d suffered from a hit like that.

“That shut ya up, didn’t it?” Wrecker said with grim delight.

“Bug’s down. We should get out of here before the Avengers or SHIELD show up,” Piledriver said.

“In a minute,” Wrecker’s grin widened, showing clenched teeth. “I’m wanna make sure bug-boy’s
gonna *stay* down."

“No.”

The Wrecking Crew turned to look at Storyteller, clearly just now noticing her presence a few yards down the sidewalk from them. “*What’d* you say, Lady?” Wrecker asked, narrowing his eyes at her.

“I said ‘no’,” Storyteller glared back. “That’s *enough*. You outnumber him four to one and you’re all about *three times* his size. Are you actually blind enough to not notice that you’re fighting a *child*?” she demanded.

“Hey, he puts on the *tights* and he’s *asking* for a beat-down,” Bulldozer shot back.

“And now *you’re* asking for it, Mister Camp,” Storyteller retorted, calling forth her distaff and giving it a swirl. “*Storyteller rolls a nat-twenty and the Wrecking Crew all fail their will-saves and fall asleep.*” The men’s faces all suddenly went slack and the next moment, they hit the ground, out cold. Storyteller stood still for a few seconds, slightly startled, and maybe a little bit frightened, by the effectiveness and ease of it, before remembering *why* she’d interfered and hurrying across the street to check on Spider-Man.

He hadn’t gone all the way *through* the wall, but his body had smashed up the façade enough that he had bits of it on top of him. “*Spider-Man?*” Storyteller called as she started clearing the rubble off of him. “Can you breath?” she asked, crouching down over him.

He coughed weakly. “D-Did you... get the... number--” he whimpered.

“Of that tank? I did you one better, I pulled him over,” Storyteller let out a relieved sigh as she checked him over. Astoundingly, the boy didn’t seem to have any major injuries, which made no amount of sense, given how hard Wrecker had hit him. Spider-Man was strong but he wasn’t invulnerable. Or was he, in this universe?

“Whoa... How did you do that?” he asked as he levered himself to a sitting position, staring over at the Wreacking Crew scattered on the ground.

“I’m rather curious on that point as well,” a familiar voice called from above and Storyteller saw Spider-Man flinch at the sound and start scrambling to his feet as he sought out its source. “I don’t think I’ve ever heard a spell like that. Tell me, what is ‘nat-twenty’?” a particularly regal-looking, male Loki asked from a position hovering about twelve feet above street level.

“Pff, *I* know what a nat-twenty is,” Spider-Man said, setting his feet and squaring himself, clearly readying for another fight as he looked up at the god. “Does that make me a better wizard than Loki?” The question earned a particularly venomous sneer.

“Is that your favored class? I pictured you as more of a rogue,” Storyteller frowned slightly as she watched Spider-Man’s movements and continued to be amazed that he didn’t need to be hospitalized, never mind that he was ready for another fight.

“*Paladin,* actually. Level twenty-seven.”

“Nice.”

“I’m not entirely sure what the two of you are prattling about, and I don’t particularly care,” Ultima-Loki said imperiously, lifting his chin a little higher and glaring down at Storyteller. “Run along now, Spider, the lady and I have business.”
“Think again, Loki,” Spider-Man stood his ground. “If you think I’m just going to stand back and let you hurt this... uh... lady who single-handedly took out the entire Wrecking Crew without getting dust on her outfit... um...” He glanced uncertainly over his shoulder at Storyteller. “... I don’t know, do you have this one? You seem like you might have this one.”

“I’m rather hoping it doesn’t need to be had,” Storyteller said and caught his shoulder, pulling Spider-Man back a few steps. “I didn’t come here to fight,” she called up to Ultima-Loki. “I’m not playing that game. I just need to talk to you.”

“Oh well then by all means, let’s talk,” Ultima-Loki replied with a smile that could have been mistaken for pleasant if Storyteller didn’t know better. And oh she knew better.

**Spider-sense!**

“Get down!” Spider-Man’s attempted to tackle her out of the way just as Storyteller started to move. Both their efforts were foiled and they ended up tripping over each other spectacularly. Storyteller was barely able to raise a shield to deflect the chaos-blast Ultima-Loki had lobbed at her. “Sorrysorrysorry!” Spider-Man apologized, scrambling off of her and grabbing Storyteller’s arm to help pull her to her feet. “You’re a lot heavier than I thought you’d be, and I don’t mean that in a rude way!”

What is she made of?! That was like slamming into the Hulk! Okay, maybe She-Hulk.

“No of course not,” Storyteller nodded distractedly, setting her grip on her distaff and bracing her feet. “We really don’t have to do this,” she called as Ultima-Loki landed on the sidewalk and advanced on her slowly, twirling his glaive and giving off an air of ease that made Storyteller fairly sure he was a bit more comfortable with polearms than her. “It’s true. I’m not playing. I’m trying to end the game.”

“Not playing?” Ultima-Loki laughed and lunged at her. Storyteller managed to block his glaive but was pushed back several steps. “My dear girl, everybody is playing. Some are simply losing.” He shot a blast from the gem mounted in his glaive and then made a quick swipe at her with the blade, but it was dragged back by a web-tether from behind.

“Loki, if the lady doesn’t want to play with you, she doesn’t have to! I thought you were a gentleman! Okay, no, that’s a lie, I never really thought that,” Spider-Man pattered, trying to pull the weapon away from him, but Ultima-Loki gave it an expert spin and severed the line before shooting a magical blast at Spider-Man from his left hand. “Whoa!”

“Do you know, it seems to be impossible to kill anyone here,” Ultima-Loki said in a conversational drawl, turning back to Storyteller. “Oh I’ve heard of people dying, but I’ve never seen it. Nobody ever even bleeds! I think I was beginning to go a bit mad before suddenly everything... changed.”

Storyteller felt a sickening sinking feeling in her gut and her lips pulled into a grimace. “And now?” she asked, voice a bit softer than before, any good humor she’d had coming into this domain shaken. “... How many of us have you killed?”

“Of us? Just one so far,” his smirk turned particularly nasty. “But I think I took quite a few bystanders in that hideous Starktech city.” He then attacked in both directions, shooting a blast at Storyteller with his glaive and one at Spider-Man from his hand. Spider-Man flipped out of the way and the blast tore a hole through the wall behind him, while Storyteller twirled her distaff, muttering a spell, and managed to pull the blast into its wake to swing right back at Ultima-Loki.

Ultima-Loki speared the returned attack and his glaive resorbed it, then he went at Storyteller with
the blade again. She parried the first blow and tried to dodge the second; she saw it coming and her
gut clenched as she realized she wasn’t moving fast enough. The blade just missed her face and
clipped her hair instead. Which made no sense. Storyteller had seen where that blade was and she
was sure it should have torn into her cheek and possibly taken her eye. Instead, it had given her a
dramatic trim. But then, Ultima-Loki had said it himself: nobody bleeds here.

As she rolled to the side and back to her feet, Storyteller could see the grimace of frustrated rage
twisting Ultima-Loki’s features. He’d seen it too; that swing should have tagged her and they both
knew it. A web-line hit him square in the back as Spider-Man apparently tried to drag Ultima-Loki
off his feet. He barely stumbled and then gave a short roar of fury and let off a directionless chaos
discharge, bright chartreuse and about halfway between flame and plasma, that burned through the
webbing. He whipped around and fired another blast that grazed Spider-Man’s leg as he dodged.

“Yeow! Watch it, Loki! You could really hurt somebody with that thing!”

Storyteller tried to get on the offensive, dashing forward and taking a swing at Ultima-Loki. He
cought her distaff with the head of his glaive and twisted, locking their weapons and yanking it
almost out of her hands, then slammed his palm against her stomach, shooting a blast that tore
through Storyteller’s lightly armored clothing and seared at her flesh, pulling a scream out of her.

“Lady! Are you--?”

“I’m okay!” Storyteller shouted, panting and adjusting her stance, distaff held in front of her, back in
a defensive posture. “I have to be okay,” she said, glaring at Ultima-Loki. “This monster killed
twenty-nine people in Technopolis to get to one.”

“Don’t be so dramatic,” Ultima-Loki scoffed and then went back to his nasty grin, eyes narrowing.
“I killed them because it was fun.”

“You- You--” Monster. He’s a monster. I never quite realized before. I’ve never heard him say
something that horrible before. It’s usually all ‘destroy’ ‘conquer’ ‘defeat’ ‘subjugate’. And it's not
like he ever wins. All the times I’ve fought Loki before, he just seemed like some flamboyant
Napoleon tantruming for attention. I never saw a stone-cold murderer there, but the look in his eyes
now...

“She didn’t even have magic to fight back, did she?” Storyteller growled, her teeth clenching so hard
they ached. “Did she even know why you were attacking her?!!”

Ultima-Loki’s eyebrows rose and he looked slightly startled for a moment before he started laughing.
“Oh, oh that is just precious!” he exclaimed. “You actually care, don’t you?”

Storyteller banished her distaff and summoned the black anelace as she climbed to her feet. “You’re
done. No second chances and no excuses. You are done,” she said grimly, glaring at him. “Spider-
Man, stay there! I need room!” she called as she saw the young hero about to launch another attack
at Ultima-Loki’s back.

Do I listen? She’s got to have some major firepower, right? I mean, the way she wrecked the
Wrecking Crew like that. If she says she can handle this, then she probably can... Wait, she’s not
going to kill him, is she? I can’t just let somebody get killed in front of me, even if it is Loki.

“That’d be against policy!” Storyteller called.

“What are you on about now?” Ultima-Loki demanded, frowning at her in confusion.
She did it again! *How is she doing that? Is she psychic? ...* Oh no. She’s psychic. *Don’t think anything dumb don’t think anything dumb don’t think anything dumb.*

“Are you going to *do* something with your cute little toy sword, or are you just stalling for time?” Ultima-Loki narrowed his eyes, then swung his glaive around and fired another blast at Storyteller. She dodged around the attack and threw up a barrage of miniature chaos blasts and a wall of illusory fire for cover as she closed, adjusting her grip on the anelace and moving in for the strike.

Something slammed into her left foot, the glaive, then the side of an arm caught her under the chin, clocking her hard enough to knock her head and shoulders backward. A hand clamped around her wrist, twisting, jerking. Storyteller started to gasp as she felt the anelace’s blade against her chest.

“I’m *telling* you, that’s *crazy!* I saw the whole thing! Loki was-- *Whoa!***

Storyteller flopped down on hard asphalt and floundered around, panicked and baffled. The air was clear and calm, not filled with the dust of recent explosions, and Ultima-Loki was nowhere in sight. She sat up and looked down at herself to find the anelace sticking right out of her chest. “*Oh... Oh that’s disturbing...*” she whimpered. But it didn’t hurt, it was one of the few things that didn’t right now, so she took a steadying breath and caught the handle.

“*Wait! Don’t--***” Spider-Man’s voice started even as Storyteller tore the blade out of herself. There was no wound left in its wake, not even a hole in her clothing. “...*Oh... Okay,*” Spider-Man came to a stop next to her, wavering. “*Um, so- so this is going to sound crazy, but--***”

“You’re under arrest, *Loki,*” a slightly metallic voice interjected.

Storyteller turned sharply to look up at an Iron Man, standing next to a Hulk (a green one) and a Nick Fury (the ‘Junior’ one.) The ones with visible faces were frowning suspiciously down at her, eyes narrowed. “*Excuse me?*** Storyteller demanded.

“Give it up, Loki. I had plenty of time to analyze your energy signature and physical metrics while you were out. *You’re not fooling anyone,*” the Iron Man said.

“Oh. You-- *smarmy,* self-important little man!” Storyteller growled, glaring up at him. “I don’t have *time* for this shit!” she surged to her feet and turned to Spider-Man. “*How long was I out?***” She was met with looks of utter shock on the visible faces and the ones in masks seemed to have been dumbstruck as well. Storyteller tried to process the odd reaction and it occurred to her that she might have just said ‘shit’ in a G-rated world. But now wasn’t the time to backpedal and lose momentum. “*How long?***”

“Er, um, about an hour?” Spider-Man answered, clearly still a jarred.

“*Exactly* one hour,” Fury amended.

“Of *course,* damn it,” Storyteller growled to herself and moved to sheath the anelace.

“Hey, put the weapon *down!*” Fury ordered, hand going to his sidearm.

“*Drop it, Loki,*” Iron Man commanded, raising his hand and pointing a repulsor-glove squarely at Storyteller’s head. That view brought back one of Serrure’s earliest memories and her previous directionless frustration focused into a very precise anger.

“*Mister Stark,* you have *five seconds* to point that thing *somewhere else* before I have you charged with assaulting a servant of Doom and obstruction of Doom Law!” she snapped, glaring him down. “*Five.*”
‘A servant of Doom.’ Who called it? I called it. I’d gloat, but this is looking like a whole lot of not-good right now...


“Four.”

“I’m with Bug-Man. That’s not Loki,” the Hulk said, frowning. “That’s a lady.”

“Thank you, Hulk! Exactly! That’s a lady!” Spider-Man agreed emphatically. “Iron Man, that is a lady!”

“It’s an illusion. And not a very good one. He hasn’t even altered his base facial structure significantly. Chalk it up to vanity,” Iron Man said.

“Three.”

“Iron Man, seriously. I’m telling you, she’s not Loki! I was right here! I saw her fight Loki! I helped her fight Loki! ... a little bit,” Spider-Man protested, hopping over in front of Iron Man and attempting to reason with him.

“Spider-Man, you know I respect you, but let’s not forget whose primary M.O. is illusions and misdirection, hm?” Iron Man retorted confidently.

“Yeah, Mysterio! Let’s try to stay on topic here!” Spider-Man exclaimed in frustration.

“Two.”

“How sure are you, Stark?” Fury asked, frowning and giving Storyteller an unreadable look.

“I’m sure, Nick.”

“And I’m telling you, you’re making a mistake!” Spider-Man protested again.

“One,” Storyteller growled.

Oh this is bad. I can tell this is bad.

“Are you done?” Iron Man asked smarmily.

“No, but you are,” Storyteller replied and then felt her lips spreading wide as she heard a roll of thunder overhead. “Oh my, did you call backup? Why thank you, that’s very helpful.”

“Yeah, I’m real scared,” Iron Man scoffed.

“Look, look, how about we just calm down and all of you adults can act like rational adults and we can figure out what’s going on here and--” Spider-Man got between them and waved his hands placatingly.

“Oh it’s a bit late for that, isn’t it? I already counted,” Storyteller reminded him.

“Well, maybe you could count again? And start at, like, twenty this time?” Spider-Man suggested.

The wind whipped at Storyteller’s hair and she turned just as an (actual) Thor landed on the street. She couldn’t say whether or not she knew him because so many of them were so awfully similar, but she saw his eyebrows raise and recognition cross his face. Good. She pointed an accusing finger at
Iron Man and demanded in a loud, clear voice, “Officer, arrest this man at once on the charge of grand heresy!”

The Thor’s expression went from surprise to dawning horror and his jaw dropped slightly as he stared at Storyteller for a few seconds before turning sharply to Stark. “Iron Man, what have you done?”

“It’s a trick, Thor. Trust me, I’ve scanned ‘her’ thoroughly with my armor’s sensors. That’s Loki in disguise,” Iron Man replied.

“No, Iron Man... Tony. This is Agent Storyteller, apprentice to the Holy Eye,” the Thor explained, looking uncharacteristically helpless. “She is one of the highest servants of the Ministry of Sorcery, answering only the Sheriff Strange and Doom Himself.”

“That’s ridiculous. I have run half a dozen different scans and they all clearly show--”

“Retinal?” Storyteller asked sharply.

“Excuse me?”

“Did you run a retinal scan?” she spelled out, glaring at Iron Man.

“He couldn’t! Your eyes went blank white while you were frozen!” Spider-Man inserted, sounding hopeful. “If that’s all it takes to clear this up, great! Let’s get on that!”

“So?” Storyteller demanded, taking three long steps and getting right into Iron Man’s face.

There was a moment’s pause and then Iron Man said, “Hm. That... That can’t be right...”

“Uhuh. That’s what I thought,” Storyteller sneered, turning away and feeling a puff of gratification almost sufficient to offset her anger. Because she hadn’t known for sure. She’d gambled. Maybe ‘hoped’ was the right word.

“This doesn’t make sense. Every other metric--”

“The density of my flesh and bone being consistent with a lesser-god, you mean?” Storyteller cut in.

“That, and--”

“Perhaps the distorted probability aura of being a high-level chaos mage?” Storyteller demanded. “I believe your trusted friend and comrade just mentioned that my rank is within the Ministry of Sorcery.”

“That doesn’t account for--”

“Iron Man, still thy tongue!” the Thor hissed, casting him a warning glare and then turning quickly back to Storyteller. “I pray thee, Agent Storyteller, forgive Iron Man’s indiscretion. Surely thou can sympathize with his error.”

“I have sympathy for many things, Officer, arrogant and reckless blaspheming is not one of them,” Storyteller retorted, crossing her arms. “I clearly identified myself as a servant of Doom and issued more than adequate warning for him to desist in his hostilities.” She narrowed her eyes at the Thor, who obviously had friendly ties with his Iron Man. “Are you defending a blasphemer, Thor?”

“Nay, never! It is simply that I truly believe no blasphemy was intended!” the Thor protested.
“Then he shall have ample opportunity to seek redemption through service on the Shield,” Storyteller said.

“Whoa! You’re kidding, right?!” Spider-Man exclaimed in dismay.

“Hey now, there’s no reason—” Fury started.

“Nicolas, thy authority is naught in matters such as these!” the Thor snapped. “Agent, I do appreciate the severity of this affront, but I tell thee, as one who hath fought beside this warrior on many occasions, Iron Man is no blasphemer,” he said very seriously, a pleading look in his eyes. “I beseech thee, thou must surely be able to understand the cause of his confusion in this instance.”

Damn, it was hard to say ‘no’ to that face. Storyteller let out an aggravated sigh and shoved her hands in her pockets, giving a brief shake of her head. “I expect a full report to be filed on this incident. It should be noted and permanently recorded that this man has been warned,” she said.

“It shall be done anon. I thank thee, Agent,” the Thor dipped his head gratefully.

“If you vouch for him then he must be worth it, Thor,” Storyteller said, nodding to him before turning and pointing at Spider-Man. “You. Since you’re ironically the only rational and responsible adult here, walk with me. I have questions.”

Great. No pressure or anything. The psychic special-agent-of-Doom goddess who can apparently intimidate a Thor just wants to talk to me. Don’t think anything dumb don’t think anything dumb don’t think anything dumb.

“Relax,” Storyteller said, patting his shoulder. “Can you tell me what happened after I froze? Did Loki give any reason for not killing me while I was defenseless? Some arrogant nonsense about a ‘challenge’ or anything like that?”

“No, see, he tried,” Spider-Man shook his head. “He took a bunch of shots at you, but you were like stone (or something a lot harder than stone because I’m pretty sure stone would have broken.) Well, I mean, you looked the same (except your eyes were all creepy-blank) but even your hair wouldn’t move at all,” he explained. “Loki tried hitting you with his spear and magic and he kept screaming ‘why won’t you bleed’ and getting... crazier than usual... Then he blew up a couple cars and left.”


“Well, after I realized he couldn’t scratch you, I, uh, I sort of got a little distance, called for backup and kept an eye on him,” Spider-Man said, and somehow managed to look sheepish and embarrassed right through the mask. “And I guess he was pretty focused on you, I think he forgot I was even there... Seriously, I’ve never seen him that crazy. It’s not like I’m the expert or anything, but I’ve fought him enough times (and got brain-swapped that one time) and he’s not usually that crazy.”

Storyteller frowned and tilted her head slightly, processing that. This Spider-Man had fought the Loki of his world ‘enough times’, like it was a reoccurring event. That struck her as slightly odd because Spider-Man was possibly the only Avenger the First hadn’t hated. Storyteller wasn’t entirely sure whether it was because being a spider-totem designated him as a fellow trickster, or because in the brief time they’d interacted, Spider-Man was the only person in centuries, god or human, who had spoken to and treated him like a peer, without presumption or prejudice. The First had been torn between baffled and offended, before settling on intrigued and perhaps even as close as he really ever got to liking someone.
“You have an adversarial relationship with Loki?” Storyteller asked curiously, looking down at Spider-Man.

“Well, I mean, he is a villain,” Spider-Man shrugged. “Also, the first time we met, I sort of tricked him, and he didn’t like that.”


Spider-Man tilted his head, studying her. “It’s kind of weird how you seem to know Loki but you don’t know anything about him...” he noted. “But anyway, thanks for not arresting Iron Man. I mean, I know he can be a little, uh, brusque and opinionated sometimes, but he’s really not bad,” Spider-Man said, fidgeting and looking down as they strolled.

“My but you’re diplomatic,” Storyteller scoffed. “‘Brusque and opinionated’, I probably would have chosen somewhat stronger words.”

“Well, I know he was dead wrong about you and all, and it’s really annoying that he wouldn’t just listen to me, but I can kind of see where he was coming from,” Spider-Man scratched the back of his neck, radiating discomfort. “I mean, you do look like Loki. Now I’m not saying you’re mannish or anything (because you’re totally not) but you look like you could be his sister or cousin or Loki-from-an-alternate-universe-where-everybody’s-gender-and-moral-alignment-are-reversed.”


WARNING! She’s offended! I offended the psychic special-agent-of-Doom goddess who can intimidate a Thor! Back-peddle! Back-peddle!

“I’m not saying--”

“Sh!” Storyteller grabbed his arm and teleported to the rooftop of a nearby store, where she grabbed his other shoulder, pulling him face to face and staring seriously down at him. “What did you just say?!?”

“Wha-What?” Spider-Man sputtered, staggering a little, disoriented by the relocation.

“‘Universe’! Did you just ask if I was from an ‘alternate universe’?” Storyteller demanded.

“N-No! That’s ridiculous, right? I was just joking around! I mean, seriously, what are the odds of--”

“Peter, listen to me!” Storyteller cut him off and Spider-Man went abruptly silent, his entire body tensing. “You must never- never! say that word in front of a Thor! Why do you even-- I can’t-- I think he was out of ear-shot, but you just can’t say things like that!” she flustered, feeling panic rising to accompany her confusion. If he’d said that to anybody else... This sweet boy did not belong on the Shield (or worse).

“... How?” Spider-Man whispered, sounding hollow and scared. “How do you know who I am?”

Storyteller dropped her voice low; the rooftop seemed to be empty, but one could never really be sure. “You were right. You were dead on the mark. I was born in Universe Six-Sixteen,” she explained quietly. “But Peter, there are no more universes! You can’t say that word anymore, you’ll be picked up for heresy!”

“That’s not-- How can you say there’s no...” Spider-Man started in confusion and then he went still and quiet again for a beat or two. “... Oh my God...” he whispered. “Oh my God! There- There was another planet-- Another planet crashed into Earth!” He started shaking. “H-How could I forget--
“How am I alive?!“

“Doom,” Storyteller whispered. “He swept up all the bits of broken universes and rolled them together. That’s Battelworld... It wasn’t just a planet that collided with yours, it was another universe. And it happened to all of them, two by two.”

“... One planet? That’s what we have? One planet and not a single star in the sky? Out of a million billion universes?! What- What happened... to...?”

“The rest is gone now,” Storyteller said, trying to keep her voice calm. “We can’t fix that, we just have to protect what’s left.”

“... How many... people...?” Spider-Man whispered.

“... We don’t have words for those kind of numbers,” Storyteller shook her head. “... But we can’t do anything about that now. What’s happened has happened. What’s important now is keeping everyone and everything we have left safe.”

“Oh- Oh God...” Spider-Man’s voice broke, his shaking getting more violent and his posture crumpling slightly. “... Oh God...”

Storyteller swept him up and held him tight. He might have been wearing a full body-stocking, but his voice still rang with definite youth and she had a general idea of what a grownup Spider-Man’s stature should be. She guessed he was somewhere in the middle of his teens, not far from childhood. And even if he were grown, the most jaded adult couldn’t help but to be shocked by this death-toll.

“Shhshshshhh... Are the people you love accounted for?” she murmured, stroking a hand against his back.

“I- I think so,” he mumbled.

“Then focus on that. That’s what matters,” Storyteller said gently. “That’s what matters... Protecting them is what matters...”

“W-Why...?” Spider-Man whispered against her collar. “... Why did this...?”

Storyteller shook her head. “I don’t know. I’m not sure if there really was a reason, or if some ass-hole exo-alien just got bored.”

“Exo-alien?”

“They came from outside of the multiverse,” Storyteller explained, keeping her voice calm and soft, despite her own nerves being frayed because, not only did she just let a serial-killer slip past her, she’d been completely blindsided by this conversation. “From what I’ve learned of physics, known and theoretical, it seems that whenever somebody thinks they’ve determined the smallest unit, there’s always something smaller, and whenever somebody thinks they’ve figured out the boundaries of reality, there’s always something outside the snow-globe.

“I suppose to them, we might be as irrelevant and insubstantial as insects... or maybe computer-sims. I mean, I’m not the type to drown an ant-hill for no reason, but I’d asteroid computer-sims, so it could be an existential question of reality, maybe.” Spider-Man wasn’t making any move to pull away from her, so Storyteller kept hold of him as she idly speculated to fill the quiet and she felt him shaking in a way indicative of weeping while keeping silent. He was in shock, but still instinctively trying to be the brave hero. “Or, if one gives them the benefit of the doubt, maybe they had a reason. After all, I’m sure a virus doesn’t believe that it’s harmful. As far as the virus is concerned, it’s just
living and minding its own business. So how are we to know our existence wasn’t making something infinitely bigger than us sick?”

“G-Great. I’m n-never gonna take antibiotics ag-gain.”

“I’d rather think they were very bad exo-aliens. It somehow hurts less to believe they were cruel,” Storyteller murmured, shaking her head. “What I don’t understand is why you even remember this... Why the amnesia spell hasn’t wiped you clean like everybody else.”

“He has always been one of the more sensitive ones,” a voice like syrup-sweet coffee answered, making Storyteller and Spider-Man both jump in surprise and whip around to find an ebony-skinned old man sitting on the parapet. “Hello again, Trickster,” he grinned warmly.

“Mister Nancy,” Storyteller found her lips pulling upward, the stress and confusion broken by the sudden appearance of the curious old man. “Or should I say Anansi?”


“It seems that the time has come for this to finally be known,” Anansi chuckled, hopping lithely down to the rooftop and taking a few steps toward them, then turning and lifting his hand. “Come, my young friends, we have much to discuss.” A panel suddenly opened behind him, a window into some other place ripped out of the very air and it took Storyteller a moment to process the rhomboid shape and recognize it as a single segment of an orb-web.

“Is that...?” Spider-Man whispered.

“My my,” Storyteller murmured, curiosity overrunning and outcompeting all the frustration, anger and melancholy of the day. “Is it to be down the rabbit hole or up the winding stair to your parlour then, Mister Nancy?”

“Come, children. We’ve been waiting,” Anansi beckoned them and then climbed through the portal.

“Well... wouldn’t want to be tardy, I suppose,” Storyteller whispered and turned to look at Spider-Man. “Shall we?”

“... Yeah,” he nodded.

Chapter End Notes

I just added a new series to the tags.

I debated a bit about whether or not to use the voice-over for Cartoon-Ultimate-verse, because it is increadibly silly, but it is also an acutal thing, as evidenced by the fact that Deadpool managed to hijack it (and Peter noticed him doing so), Nova was able to hear it and see the camera when he was concussed, and Miles-1610 saw (and was freaked out by) a cut-away scene when he was hanging out with Peter-12041 during the Spidervese crossover (the real one, not the in-cartoon nod to it). So, if it's a thing that meta characters can interact with, then I figured Storyteller should be able to and I'll call it a legit element of this universe. There's no reason it needs to make any more sense than Marville.
The first time Loki shows up in 12041, he's got a trident (which seems to be Gungnir from the context) and then in subsequent appearances he's always got a polearm, but the design is a bit inconsistent, sometimes a longer version of the movie's scepter, sometimes more bladey. I described it as a glaive because, well, that's about the closest 'standard' weapon shape it seems to resemble... maybe a guisarme-glaive or something? But that is a long, stupid word and I was not wanting to overcomplicate!

I've been playing with my map some more. I revised the official map of Battelworld both to create one that's before the eight year time-jump (we know from various tie-ins that a number of domains get annexed during that time) and also to account for discrepancies between the narrative and the map (they drew Doomgard as part of the continent in the map, but in the comics it's clearly a floating island.) I've got 12 mini-domains yet to assign universes to (many of them are doomed to be annexed), any suggestions on favorite universes to feature/destroy? The four major cartoon-verses are already accounted for, as well as a few other official 'verses, and 'verses spun off of 'events' (because I am still and always a huge fan of Dark Reign).
“A distaff holds the fluff and keeps it tidy while it's waiting to be spun,” Storyteller explained, frowning at the implement apparently in question.

“And you've already bonded with Lokarrokkr--” Bride of Nine Spiders started.

“That is not what it's called!” Agent Storyteller yelled, throwing the distaff down on the floor and crossing her arms indignantly.

Chapter Notes

This chapter introducing:

![Bride of Nine Spiders](image1.png) ![Master-Weaver](image2.png)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Peter’s memories had been run through a blender, with conflicting chunks of unreal ‘Battleworld’ memories standing like fogged glass in front of the real ones. But even though Battleworld was telling him he’d never been anywhere else, never traversed an infinite multiverse, the sensation of being pulled through the Great Web was familiar. And when his feet touched solid ground again, he recognized the enormous, circular room.

“Loomworld...” he said, feeling that same strange sense of awe and connection as the first time he laid eyes on the Great Web.

“A small piece of it,” corrected a voice that Peter tried really hard not to shudder at, because he knew the guy was an okay guy, it wasn’t his fault he was born a creepy, soul-sucking vampire-monster. “As with the innumerable worlds of the Multiverse, nearly all of Loomworld has been lost. I managed to save the Chamber of the Great Web, but there is little beyond this hall,” Karn said, sounding depressed, although Peter was pretty sure that’s how he always sounded, as his robotic limbs picked at the Web, apparently repairing what looked like a whole lot more damage than Otto-Spider had done.

“Master Weaver! And... company!”

“My innocuously helpful stalkers!” Agent Storyteller exclaimed. “Julia San Diego! It’s ‘later’ and
now you’re going to tell me all the things like you promised!”

“I promised we’d talk, I didn’t promise to tell you all the things,” a lady with red hair and a redder coat replied with a smirk, sitting on the steps of the dais.

“And that’s the spooky lady who sent me to King Kong!” Agent Storyteller said excitedly, slinging an arm around Peter’s shoulders and pointing at a pretty, very pale, Asian lady.

“King Kong? As in the giant gorilla on the Empire State Building?” Peter asked skeptically wondering if maybe Agent Storyteller’s grip on reality was a little loose.

“As in the Monkey King Sun Wukong of the Tianese gods,” Agent Storyteller corrected cheerfully. “And in retrospect, I rather think she sent me to him deliberately.”

The woman grimaced, crossing her arms and looking thoroughly disgusted. “It was certainly not my idea. I want nothing to do with that wretch.”

“Ah, but someone must teach the child to use her weapon,” Anansi said in a warm, amused voice. “Welcome, children. Indeed, the time has come for many explanations. As you now realize, young Storyteller, we have been watching you.” He moved to stand just in front of the dais steps and gestured open-handed at the others. “You have met Julia Carpenter, medium of your own world, and also the enigmatic Bride of Nine Spiders from K’un L’un. And above, you see Karn, the Master Weaver.”

“And this is a curious thing indeed,” Agent Storyteller said, grinning and bright-eyed as she walked slowly closer to the dais and the Web hanging above it. “What interest could a spider-god, a spider-medium, a spider-immortal-weapon and a spider-demon possibly have in little ol’ me?”

Peter saw Karn pause, hands and robot-limbs stilling in their work, and his head lifted slightly to look at Agent Storyteller. Anansi and Bride of Nine Spiders exchanged raised eyebrows.

“The distaff,” Julia said, climbing to her feet. “Why did you take it from Freya?”

“'Take’ is such an ugly word,” Agent Storyteller shrugged and grinned, tilting her head. “I didn’t steal it, per say. Mummy dropped it, so I picked it up.”

“You felt drawn to it,” Bride of Nine Spiders said calmly. “You felt it call to you.”

“As the newly born spinner-god of Asgard, you knew it to be your own,” Anansi intoned.

“Wait! Wait! Back up! Hold on! I’m confused!” Peter called, raising his hands and making a time-out gesture. “Are you guys saying good-guy alternate-universe lady-Loki is a spider-totem?!”

“Please don’t call me ‘Lady Loki,’” Agent Storyteller muttered, shaking her head. “And no. Asgard by in large is botanic, not totemic.”

“Bwah?” Peter looked up at her, baffled. “You’re a flower?”

“In most pantheons, gods are associated with specific animals. Maybe they’re depicted as those animals like the Ennead, maybe the totem is simply used as an epithet like the Olympians,” Agent Storyteller explained. “But the gods of Asgard are associated with specific plants instead. Freya, patron of spinners and weavers, was the personification of flax.”

“Flax?” Peter frowned. “The stuff they put in bread and smoothies?”
“Linen.”

“Those are the same thing?”

“But fair Freya fell. And the mystical Friggjarrokkur fell to a daughter,” Julia said with a smile.

“So... she’s not a spider-totem, but she’s a spinner-slash-weaver-goddess and that makes her part of the Web?” Peter asked, looking back and forth between Agent Storyteller and the others.

“... We always called it ‘Tapestry’, and no, Freya was only a patron, the name people evoke for luck et cetera. The Norns were our connection to the Tapestry,” Agent Storyteller wasn’t grinning anymore, instead looking confused and disturbed. “Besides--” she flicked her hands and the fancy spear she’d used during the fight appeared in them, “I don’t even know how to spin.”

“You will learn,” Anansi said.

“Why?” Agent Storyteller frowned slightly at him. “You’re already a spinner-god and a story-god. We’d be redundant. What do you need me for?”

“As a ‘special agent’, appropriately enough,” Julia said, turning to walk up onto the dais. “The Web says that you’re a connection point between what we have and, well, we’re not sure yet, but you seem to be a hub.”

“Axis,” Karn said quietly.

“Axis?” Agent Storyteller’s eyebrows went up.

“Axis?” Peter asked, pulling off his mask because it seemed like there wasn’t a whole lot of point right now and it was uncomfortably damp from totally-not-crying. “I mean, besides what Webster’s says?”

“... It’s what some people ended up calling the period between the inversion waves,” she muttered, more to herself than the room, her head dipping as she seemed to contemplate.

“And... what were the inversion waves?” Peter asked.

“The incident that preceded my birth,” Agent Storyteller replied, not really clearing things up a whole lot. “But--” she looked up again, glancing back and forth between Julia and Mister Nancy. “But you don’t know what I’m at the axis of? What is this even about? What are you trying to accomplish that you need (whatever it is) for?”

“Battleworld is not well,” Bride of Nine Spiders replied. “And obvious as that may seem, it is worse than it appears.”

“The bits don’t fit. It’s all fault-lines trying to pull apart,” Agent Storyteller said. “The Manhattan Kingdom is having time-quakes, maybe others too. Doom’s power is the only thing keeping it all together.”

“Exactly,” Anansi agreed. “And while Doom’s power may be great, do you truly believe one man can hold a dying reality together indefinitely?”

“... No,” Agent Storyteller said softly. “I thought he might be able to keep it in one piece long enough for Franklin to grow up.”

“Franklin still is but one man,” Anansi shook his head.
“And you have a better idea? You’ve found a solution?” Agent Storyteller asked.

“The Web was the reflection of the Multiverse, the threads that connected all reality to all reality,” Karn said softly, looking like he was only half paying attention, with his hands and robot-limbs still working diligently away at the Web. “It has been shredded, most of it lost. Reweaving the Web will do much to stabilize what remains. That is my responsibility.”

“The Master Weaver oversees the Great Web, but all spinners and weavers have a responsibility to it,” Anansi said and pointed a finger at Agent Storyteller. “Including you.”

“I’m not agreeing here, but continue.”

“Reweaving the Web only gets us partway there,” Julia said. “There are other pieces to this puzzle and we don’t know what they are yet. The destruction of the Web has severely limited our ability to ‘see’ anything, but what we have managed to put together is that you, Special Agent Storyteller, are a key strand in a very big knot.”

Agent Storyteller narrowed her eyes. “Oh well now you’re just being cheeky,” she said, frowning.

“I missed something, how is that ‘cheeky’?” Peter asked, looking back at her.

“Middle Icelandic: ‘loki’, meaning ‘knot’ or ‘tangle’.”

“You don’t find it significant that your name is textile-themed?” Julia asked with a smirk.

“No, because the knots were named after Loki, not the other way around,” Agent Storyteller retorted, starting to sound irritated and defensive. “And you, Mister Nancy, ought to know better than trying to pull one over on a Loki. What are you trying to prove?”

“It’s not a ruse,” Bride of Nine Spiders said.

“I’m not a spinner, or a weaver, or a whatever!” Agent Storyteller protested.

“You’re holding a distaff right now,” Julia pointed out.

“I stole it!” Agent Storyteller almost shouted.

“Wait! Question! Question!” Peter broke in, because things were getting a little too high-strung. “What’s a distaff? What does a spear have to do with being a spinner-slash-weaver-god-person?”

“A distaff holds the fluff and keeps it tidy while it’s waiting to be spun,” Storyteller explained, frowning at the implement apparently in question.

“... That looks like a weapon, and I’m pretty sure I saw you fight a guy with it,” Peter said skeptically, tilting his head.

“And hammers are construction tools. I’m from Asgard. Everything is a weapon,” Agent Storyteller shot back.

“Touché.”

“You’ve already bonded with Lokarrokkr--” Bride of Nine Spiders started.

“That is not what it’s called!” Agent Storyteller yelled, throwing the distaff down on the floor and crossing her arms indignantly.
“Why do you resist this aspect of your nature so vehemently?” Anansi asked, studying her. “You easily embraced your role as a storyteller, so much so you took it for your name. Storytelling and spinning are cornerstones of the cunning arts, along with magic and healing. These things have always been intertwined, and you are certainly well enough educated to know this.”

Agent Storyteller pressed her lips so thin they got pale and didn’t say anything, stress and anger painted across her face. Peter reached out and touched her elbow hesitantly. “Excuse me, sorry, not to butt in or anything, but, uh, if this is what it feels like to be the dumb guy in the room, can’t say I’m a fan,” he babbled nervously. “Can I just-- I mean-- Why is this a huge horrible thing? What’s so--”

“Because this isn’t mine!” Agent Storyteller started shouting in earnest now, stamping one foot and throwing her hands out like she was rejecting a physical object. “You have no right to claim me! I’m not part of this! I am not connected!” Her eyes were squeezed shut with the beginning of tears showing at the corners.

“All beings are connected through the Web,” Karn spoke up again, still busily mending. “All things that draw breath, and all things that don’t. Even the stone under your feet.”

“No!” Agent Storyteller shouted, storming up the dais and getting underneath the Web to shout up at him, pointing an accusing finger. “This isn’t mine! This role-- This- This-- Loki is the outsider! I made peace with that! I accepted it and I am not going to stand around and listen to some clockwork-punk spider-demon rehash philosophies from Hong Kong punch-up movies and ‘new age’ bullshit!”

Karn stopped fiddling with the Web and stared down at her, going very still. He glanced up at Anansi, who shook his head and gave him a ‘keep going’ wave. “... You made peace with a fallacy,” Karn said and Peter slapped a hand against his forehead because, oh boy, Karn was not so good at this defusing-a-fight thing. “In your short life you have already forged many connections. You have a notable talent for it, which is likely why the Web has cited you as a go-between.”

“You shut up!” Agent Storyteller screamed. “You don’t know what you’re-- you’re not-- you’re...” she trailed off and some of the tension left her posture as the anger suddenly drained out of her face, replaced with a confused frown as she stared up at Karn. She was very still for a moment and then moved a few steps in closer to where he was hanging. Karn took a nervous step backwards, higher into the Web. “... You’re not a spider-demon...” she said, voice perplexed and curious, tilting her head a little as she studied him carefully. “What are you?”

Karn was silent, staring nervously down at her.

Agent Storyteller whipped around, looking between the rest of the room’s occupants. “What is he?” she demanded, pointing up at Karn.

Peter glanced at Anansi, because he seemed to be in charge, and Anansi looked right back at him, giving Peter a smirk and a little nod in Agent Storyteller’s direction. Well, fine then. “He’s a totem-hunter-- I mean, retired totem-hunter,” Peter corrected himself.

Agent Storyteller’s eyes got wide and she stared at him for a second or two before turning back and staring up at Karn again. “... The totem-hunters went extinct six millennia ago.”

Karn nodded, taking another step backward, hunched in on himself a bit. “... My parents were the last breeding pair. Not sufficient to repopulate the species, and the mystic ecosystem had changed too greatly to support one such as ours,” he said quietly. “My siblings and I were the last generation... And the world on which my siblings were imprisoned was destroyed in the cataclysm.”
“Oh... geeze... Does that make that our fault...? Did we... genocide...?” Peter bit his lip and cringed. Horrifying, evil vampire-monsters though they might have been, he didn’t like the idea that team Web Warriors had accidentally killed them all.

“It was probably fate,” Julia said with a dismissive wave but also wearing a little grimace-cringe.

Agent Storyteller suddenly spun around again, looking straight at Anansi, her eyes wide. “You have a primordial!” she exclaimed.

“A what?” Peter muttered and glanced at Anansi who was smirking deeply as he nodded back, apparently understanding the thing Agent Storyteller had just said perfectly.

“You can actually do it, can’t you?” she whispered. “You can actually make Battleworld real?”

Anansi shook his head. “It’s not enough. Not yet. There are more pieces needed, and the Web indicates that you are a common link to those pieces. Perhaps you are already connected to them and do not yet know it, perhaps you will stumble upon them, perhaps they will find and affiliate you as we did. You do seem to have a talent for getting yourself adopted.”

Agent Storyteller’s face darkened again, her eyebrows drawing in as she bit her lip for a second before muttering, “I don’t like fate.”

“Because you want to have control of your destiny,” Anansi said, raising an eyebrow at her. “So pick up your distaff and learn to spin.” He pointed firmly at the distaff still lying on the floor where Agent Storyteller had dropped it.

Agent Storyteller pressed her lips thin again and glared at him, anger and defiance back but at half-strength. “It’s not fair!” she snapped after a moment, crossing her arms. “The Norns are yours! I’m no relation of them at all!”

“And when Thor invoked the power of all Asgard to banish the Norns from your universe, did he not justify his actions by claiming the right of fraternal vengeance for the one they had used as pawn?” Anansi replied, looking so smug Peter felt a little sympathetic irritation on Agent Storyteller’s behalf. “Regardless, the fact of the matter is that the Norns are gone. As would all of Asgard seem to be gone. But you are here.”

Agent Storyteller glared at him another few seconds, biting her lip, and then closed her eyes and shook her head. “I need to think. I need a minute,” she said, then walked down the steps to the floor and ducked around one of the support pillars, hiding out of sight of the Web.

There was a minute or two of quiet and then Anansi walked calmly over to Peter and clapped a hand on his shoulder, leaning close to his ear to murmur, “Storyteller is the one whom needed to be woken today, but it was no accident that we brought you with her, Peter.”

Peter frowned and glanced at him. “Uh... okay?”

“You put her at ease,” Anansi said, nodding toward the pillar.

“Why?”

He shrugged. “Perhaps because you’re an innocent. Or maybe because you’re similar in age to her assistant in Doomgard, or a young god she’s been missing. Or it could be your charm,” he said with a smirk.

“I can’t tell if you’re being sarcastic with the last thing...” Peter frowned and side-eyed him.
Anansi put his hand on Peter’s back and gave him a gentle shove. “Go talk to her.”

“About what?” Peter demanded. “I kind of feel like you’re putting a lot of pressure on me with this. I mean, you’re putting a lot of pressure on her, but it seems like there’s plenty of pressure to go around here.”

“You have questions. Ask them. She is quite knowledgeable of mystic mechanisms,” Anansi said with a little wave and turned to walk back up the dais steps.

Peter took a deep breath, squared himself, and went over to the pillar Agent Storyteller had hidden herself behind, half expecting her to have teleported away. She hadn’t, she was sitting with her back against the pillar and her legs pulled up against her chest. She tilted her head a little and didn’t quite look up at him.

“Sorry. Uh, I get that you came over here for some space and all, but you are the only person in this room who seems to appreciate that it is major freak-out time,” Peter said, crouching down a few feet from her. “And you’re also the only one here who explains anything without being all cryptic and smirky. I’m... I’m just not really sure what’s going on...”

“... You come from a ‘western science’ dominated world?” Agent Storyteller asked.

“Yeah, I guess you could call it that. I mean, there are some magic people around, but I always figured it was sort of just science that wasn’t really...”

“It is.”

“It is?”

Agent Storyteller nodded. “It doesn’t all fit into what you’ve been taught ‘science’ means, but it’s all inter-related. Just like ‘chi’ and ‘eastern medicine’ do parallel things that ‘science’ can observe, even if it hasn’t yet found a way to quite calculate them.”

“Oh,” Peter considered that, tilting his head slightly. “That- That actually makes me feel kinda better about all the weird woogie magic stuff I’ve stepped in...”

“Oh you shouldn’t step in it. It’s harder to get off your shoes than bubblegum,” Agent Storyteller shot back and Peter grinned, encouraged.

“So you’re seriously really some other universe’s Loki? Because I gotta tell you, you are not anything like I would have thought, based on, y’know,” Peter scooted a little closer to her and settled down on the stone floor.

Agent Storyteller tilted her head a little, eyes distant. “Well, yes and no,” she said and then chewed her lip for a moment. “I’m Loki the Fourth.”

“Wait, you’re Loki’s great-granddaughter?” Peter asked, both more and less confused.

“If we’re using familial terms, it would just be ‘granddaughter’. The Second and Third were twins,” she corrected. “And also, not so much offspring in the traditional sense as, well, in ‘science’ dialect, one would probably say ‘clone’.”

“Who the heck would want to clone Loki?” Peter spat out before back-peddling. “I mean, sorry, no offense, I’m sure in your universe he was a great guy.”

“Oh no, he was a terrible person who did terrible things,” Agent Storyteller shook her head. “He
made the Second and Third Lokis himself, and then screwed them over worse than anybody. I very much doubt he saw them as children. A horrible, abusive, hateful god who hurt everybody he had any contact with.”

“Oh... Okay... So he was a jerk just like my world’s Loki,” Peter nodded, feeling awkward as a panicky voice in the back of his head screamed at him to change the subject. “So- So I’m trying to figure out how you... fit into this stuff. I mean, I guess I get that some ‘pantheons’ have spinner/weaver gods who are non-spiders and stuff, and I guess it would make sense that they’re part of weaverdom even if they’re ‘flax’ or whatever... I’m just...”

Agent Storyteller shook her head, she didn’t look angry this time, but plenty upset. “Mother-- Freya was flax, but Anansi’s talking about me taking the Norns’ place,” she said, and chewed on her lip. “The Norns were Asgard’s old spinner-weaver goddesses that actually had a direct line to this ‘Great Web’. They got banished from reality (or unreality, as the case may be) because they started preying on the gods and it got a little out of hand, so Odin and Thor decided they weren’t having any more of it.”

Peter’s nose scrunched up and he gave her a should-I-be-horrified face. “Your weaver-gods were eating the other gods?”

“Sort of. In a metaphysical, metaphorical way,” Agent Storyteller shrugged and then grimaced and shook her head again. “But that right there is one of the reasons I can’t replace them. One god can’t hold that kind of power, it’s the ‘corrupts absolutely’ problem. The Norns had it split up between the three of them and it still went to their heads! Now Anansi wants me to take responsibility for a level of power that was designed for a trinity?”

“So... you think being the new ‘Norn’ person would turn you evil?” Peter asked.

“We’re talking about being a god of fate, not just predicting who lives and who dies but deciding.” Agent Storyteller bit her lip and squeezed her eyes shut. “Anyone who agrees to that is either going to end up a mad tyrant or paralyzed with terror by the sword hanging overhead.”

“Why does there need to be a Norn?”

“I don’t believe there does,” Agent Storyteller sniffed sulkily, crossing her arms. “The world is better by ad lib.”

“So you’re scared and you have a philosophical objection to the thing,” Peter said slowly, drumming his fingers against his knee. “Well, Julia said they wanted you to be a ‘go-between’, right? Can’t you do that without being the boss of fate? I mean, maybe I’m misunderstanding, but it sounds like you have spinning-slash-weaving in common with us, and then there’s some other people-things that you have something else in common with, and you’re supposed to set us up on a save-the-world blind-date?”

“That’s about what go-between means,” Agent Storyteller shrugged. “I wouldn’t mind being a messenger pigeon, but Anansi’s insistence that I need to learn spinning...”

“But your mom was a spinner-god and she wasn’t Norny, right?” Peter pointed out.

“No, she was just a seer, but she lost that power when the Norns were cast out,” Agent Storyteller let out a harsh sigh.

“So... that’s a dead-end on the logic trail, huh...”

“Yeah,” Agent Storyteller agreed. “Keeps coming back to Norns.”
“... But it’s not Asgard, right? Like it’s not Earth?” Peter asked slowly. “Battleworld’s got different rules. I mean, I’m not even sure how physics works here, I mean, what the heck are we even orbiting?”

“So I should gamble on the wish that ‘this time it’ll be different?’ Agent Storyteller asked, voice and face going grim. “What’s the definition of insanity again?”

“Well--”

“Bearing in mind that I’m pretty sure I’m genetically predisposed to insanity.”

“Hm. That... hm,” Peter cringed.

“I hate fate. It’s a denial of free will,” Agent Storyteller closed her eyes and hugged her knees. “Why would anyone want to have a fate? I want to learn! I want to decide! I want my decisions to matter!”

“Well if you were the boss of fate, it kind of seems like your decisions would matter the most,” Peter noted, but then considered that maybe that was the whole problem here, pressure and stuff.

“That’s not how it works,” Agent Storyteller scrunched up her nose and shook her head. “And maybe the Third Loki would have been charmed by this ‘you get to be the hero of the story’ twist, but it’s the same thing as always! It’s somebody telling me what I have to do and what I have to be!” Agent Storyteller let out a sob and Peter bit his lip as he saw that she was actually crying now. “And- And now I find out that they’re the ones who arranged for me to meet Wukong! S-So even when I though I was making a choice for myself, I wasn’t!”

“But choices aren’t really choices,” Peter said, feeling stupid and inarticulate. “Because even when you have a choice, it’s just the right choice or the wrong choice. And if you make the wrong choice, somebody gets punished.” He bit his lip for a moment and tried to steady himself, tried to not think too hard about personal wrong-choices and stay on track. “So- So even when there isn’t ‘fate’, even then, we still- nobody really has a choice, not the way we want to pretend we do. With the important stuff, the choice is never really a choice. It’s just ‘will you do the right thing or the wrong thing’, and that’s not really a choice.”

Agent Storyteller sniffled, and wiped at her face with a sleeve. “So that’s all then, huh? The right choice or the wrong choice?” She made a sound halfway between a swallow and a hiccup. “Will I sacrifice my ideals and sell my freedom to make the world a better place, or will I be a selfish little brat and watch the world burn?” She shivered and wiped at the other eye. “If I’m a Loki, then I should watch it burn.”

“And if you’re a spinner-slash-weaver, you should do the other thing,” Peter said. “And also wallow in some irrational guilt while you’re at it.”

Agent Storyteller let out a shuddering sigh and rested her chin on her knees, looking very forlorn.

“So... I guess I get why this is a big deal to you now, but, um, I’m still foggy on why this is a big deal in general terms,” Peter said slowly. “I mean, I know the Web is important and stuff, but you were saying we could somehow make Battleworld ‘real’ with it? And- And what’d you mean about Karn being a ‘primordial’? What does that mean?”

Agent Storyteller was quiet for a while, taking a few slow, steadying breaths, before she answered. “Primordials were the original mythoforms. Before gods and demons. They’re, in ‘scientific’ terms, they’re the ‘common ancestor’. Gods and demons split off from primordials. Totem-hunters were one of the... sort of... races or species of primordials,” she explained. “In the ancient times before history.
Before prehistory.

“That’s why you thought he was a demon? Because he’s sort of halfway between?” Peter wondered, tilting his head to the side.

“And because spider-demons are one of the more common types of terrestrial-demons. It would have made sense for you to have one.”

“Terrestrial-demons?”

“As opposed to hell-spawn.”

“Oh,” Peter nodded. “I didn’t know totem-hunters were a big deal, besides to the guys they were, y’know, eating,” he said, leaning to the side a little and looking around the pillar to where Anansi, Julia and Bride of Nine Spiders were now up in the Web, apparently helping Karn with the mending.

“As noted, there were different kinds of primordials,” Agent Storyteller said. “The one, at least in concept, that you’re probably most familiar with, would be ‘Mother Earth’.”

“Oh. That... yeah, I guess she sounds like kind of a big deal,” Peter nodded.

“She was the last living primordial I knew of...” Agent Storyteller murmured, shaking her head slowly. “I didn’t know there was an enclave of totem-hunters still clinging to life.”

“They ‘cling’ reeeeeeally violently.”

“I would expect so,” Agent Storyteller said with a tired smirk. “In the oldest times (and we’re talking seventy-thousand years ago kind of old) totems dominated myth. They flourished in huge numbers. And, as nature abhors a vacuum and evolution will endeavor to fill every ecological niche, a predatory myth-species rose to cull them... In those days, all the mythoforms were primordial, neither good nor evil, just... forces of nature.”

Peter frowned, chewing on his lip, a slightly sour feeling in his stomach. “So... the totem-hunters weren’t evil?”

“Well, not back in their hay day, which would have been roughly the Mesolithic period. ‘Good’ and ‘evil’ only became a thing about eight thousand years ago, at the same time most of the primordial races were dying off,” Agent Storyteller said, seeming to sort through her words carefully. “But the little handful of primordials that survived the rise of gods and demons adapted to the new concepts.”

She slowly blew out a puff of air through her teeth. “And I expect that if they were subsisting off the consumption of sentient beings, ‘evil’ likely would have taken root in any surviving totem-hunters.”

“Except for Karn,” Peter mused, glancing vaguely toward the center of the room, but not leaning out enough to actually look.

“How old is he?” Agent Storyteller asked curiously.

“I... have no idea,” Peter realized, frowning. “I think he was the youngest one of the Inheritors...”

“‘Inheritors’...” Agent Storyteller repeated musingly.

“That’s what they called themselves.”

“It fits,” she nodded.

“So, now I know what a ‘primordial’ is, but why did you say that would somehow help ‘make
“Battleworld real?” Peter asked.

She shrugged slightly and shook her head. “Primordials are embodiments of the primal forces of creation... They’re aether. He’s... It’s like he’s that cup of ‘the beginning’ that you need to bake a creation-cake.”

“... As weird as that analogy is, it somehow makes perfect sense to me...” Peter noted. “And so, Anansi thinks that you can find the other ingredients for the creation-cake?”

“Apparently.”

“What are they?”

Agent Storyteller gave another frustrated sigh. “To figure that out, first I need to put together a list of everything that Battleworld’s missing. Everything that’s stopping it from being a proper ‘world’.”

“Aside from stars and- and a cosmos in general?” Peter raised an eyebrow.

“... Well, that’s definitely part of the problem,” Agent Storyteller agreed with a nod. “So I guess I need to figure out where to find a cup of stars.”

“Does that mean you’re in?” Peter asked, tilting his head and grinning.

“Well, it’s the ‘right choice’ or the ‘wrong choice’, isn’t it?” Agent Storyteller sighed, looking tired and unhappy again. “That’s the only choice there is, right?”

“In my experience, yeah,” Peter nodded.

Agent Storyteller closed her eyes and rubbed her hands over her face. She took a deep breath and then climbed to her feet and Peter did the same. When they came back into view of the Web, Anansi was standing at the edge of the dais, looking expectantly in their direction, hands folded behind his back. Julia was sitting in the Web like a hammock-chair, dangling her legs, and Bride of Nine Spiders was up in a corner, fussing with one of the anchor-lines. “Yes?” Anansi asked expectantly.

“Do we know anything at this point?” Agent Storyteller asked, frowning up at him. “Do we have any idea what resources we have, what we’re looking for or where to look?”

“We have a time-frame,” Julia offered.

“What’s the time-frame?”

“Eight years.”

Agent Storyteller pushed a hand through her hair and sighed, frowning vaguely, before nodding. “Okay, I’m not going to call that ‘a start’, but at least I know when this is all going to alternately come together or blow up in our faces.”

“The ‘start’ you are looking for is here,” Anansi said, pointing again at Agent Storyteller’s discarded distaff. “You must learn to spin and weave.”

She let out an exasperated/resigned sound and walked over to pick up the distaff. “Fine. Okay. So Mister Nancy is going to teach me to spin and then everything will make sense.”

“Oh no?” Agent Storyteller asked, raising an eyebrow at him.
“A student needs a master,” he smirked.

“Karn’s going to teach her?” Peter asked, sort of surprised, sort of not. “Because he’s the not-a-spider who does whatever a spider can, and she’s the not-a-spider who has to learn to do whatever a spider can?”

“I don’t think I can do that, no matter how much studying and practicing I do,” Agent Storyteller noted, pointing up at Bride of Nine Spiders, who had bent and twisted her leg at a really awkward-looking angle to brace while she was cinched up a radial thread.

“Spinning and weaving should be sufficient,” Anansi chuckled. “I’m sure the rest of your teachers give you enough to keep you busy.”

“Yeah, I’m starting to get a pretty full course-load here, aren’t I?” Agent Storyteller noted, scratching her head. “How many credits am I taking now?” She smiled a little wanly, seeming to relax a bit. “Okay. I will learn to spin and I will try to figure out world-building. I’m not joining any cults though.”

“Too late, you just did something terribly responsible with your power,” Julia said with a grin. “You’re officially in the cult.”

“Damn it!” Agent Storyteller swore.

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After dinner, while Serrure and Lockheed started a Disney movie involving princesses with problems, Loki lay on the rug, staring blankly up at the ceiling. Verity leaned against the doorway of the living room for a while, watching her and frowning. “Hey,” Verity called. “Are you okay?”

Loki turned her head to look at Verity. “… I’m upset because I was clumsy and let a bad-guy get away,” she said. “That’s all.”

Verity pursed her lips. The first sentence was true, the second was a lie, and the way Loki’s eyes flicked momentarily in Serrure and Lockheed’s direction, and then came back to lock on hers, was significant. “Were you still going to be able to help me move my dresser tonight?” Verity invented.

“Oh. Yes. I forgot,” Loki nodded, sitting up and then rolling to her feet. “Guys, I’m going over to Verity’s for a few minutes. I’ll be back soon,” she called.

“’Kay,” Serrure nodded, enthralled by princesses, and Lockheed gave an acknowledging chirp.

Loki followed Verity through the magic-door and into her apartment. Verity waited until she heard the door close before she turned around to give Loki a hard look. “What’s wrong?” she demanded.

“Today I learned that I have been fated to connect two or more dots, and those dots will somehow save the world,” she replied without hesitation. Good, she was shielding Serrure, or keeping Lockheed at arms length, but she wasn’t blocking Verity out.

Verity chewed on her lip and pushed a lock of hair back as she processed the statement. “… That fate part is what’s bothering you,” she guessed.

“Yes. On multiple levels.”

Verity closed her eyes for a moment and nodded. “Well, saving the world sounds good, because it sucks right now, but how about you try explaining what happened using a few more words this
“Okay,” Loki took a deep breath. “So I was hanging around on my tuffet today when along came a spider...”

Chapter End Notes

Oh my God, so much exposition, this chapter is way too dense and as much as I’ve wanted to drop this shoe, that was painful to write and I hope it's not painful to read. I think I deleted and re-wrote various sections of this at least half a dozen times. I hope this doesn't piss everyone off, the spiders are a slice of a bigger pie, partial-explanation below, but some background-factoids in order of concept-appearance first:

Flax holds a similar significance in Norse/Germanic mythology to olives in Greek/Hellenic mythology. It's an economic cornerstone that half of the good stuff is made from (textiles, food, oil, paint and more). It was a gift from Frigga/Holda, regional-variant goddesses or Heaven.

8,000ish years ago was the agricultural revolution. The early beginnings of the mythologies/religions we know today start right around this time. There were forms of religion before this, going back at least 70,000 years (earliest evidence of ancestor and totem worship) but just like the entire human lifestyle changed drastically at this time, so did human beliefs.

Referencing the Norns as belonging to the Web is inspired by Giuseppe Camuncoli's depiction of the Norns during Dark Wolverine's Siege tie-in, where he gave them a distinctly spidery look and feel. I this is the only place the Norns themselves have shown up since the 2007 Thor reboot and the current Asgard/Asgardia, because an important plot-point of the 2004 Ragnarok event that ended the previous Thor franchise was Thor cutting the Norns off from/out of Asgard, and during the reboot, when Loki reappears she makes reference to that plot-point, stating that she's no longer under the Norns' control.

In 'real' Norse mythology, there aren't any bug-themed gods, and there are few references to bugs at all, and that's because we're talking about a sub-arctic culture; most insects and arachnids would have only had a visible presence a few months out of the year. Bugs just weren't as big a part of people's lives here as other places, so they didn't have much presence in Norse mythology like they do in the mythologies of temperate and tropical cultures. And on the topic of 'real' mythologies, while Anansi is probably the most prominent or well-known spider-god around, he's definitely not the only one. Spiders show up in a lot of world mythologies because they capture people's imaginations more than pretty much any other bug. It's the webs. Spiders are often associated with legends about the origin of spinning and/or weaving and are frequently very sassy. Marvel comics has established an association between spider-totems like Spider-Man and mythical 'spiders', both by the way Spider Island effected Bride of Nine Spiders and when they brought Anansi 7082 into Spiderverse.

Early in the framing of this fic, I wanted to put a stronger emphasis on story-gods and trickster-gods, but I also wanted to keep the roster to characters from Marvel-canon only, not bringing in any actual-mythology gods that Marvel's never used. Anansi and
Arachnia are the only other Marvel-canon gods-of-stories (Bragi made an appearance in the 60s-70s Thor comics at some point, but like a lot of the god-cameos from that period it's been retconned away, and it probably wasn't very interesting anyway. I'm not a fan of the old franchise.) So thinking about spiders, I went and read the Spiderverse event and that, combined with Young Avengers v2 and other sources to be revealed later, inspired me to turn this into an even more Crosstime-themed fic. "Crosstime" is a Marvelism which sometimes describes the space between universes or the pathways between/connecting universes. I don't remember anybody using the word in Spiderverse, but the shenanigans depicted therein would definitely be counted as Crosstime-shenanigans. Nobody else seems to be using Crosstime as a tag on Ao3. I guess most of the titles that made regular use of the word are old and dusty at this point.

Giuseppe Camuncoli's Norns:
Rethinking Reorganizing Reprioritizing

Chapter Summary

“Loki, your entire existence is based around making your own rules. You can't allow your opponent to dictate the terms of the engagement, and thereby handicap yourself.”

“What if I don't want to make the rules?” Loki interjected suddenly. “What give me the right?”

Stephen was slightly startled by the question, and even more so by the fear in his student's eyes.

Chapter Notes

This chapter introducing:

This chapter introducing:

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“So this morning I realized that I really should have checked in last night but I was all upset and freaked out and so instead I ran home to sulk and lick my wounds and I realize that was a stupid, short-sighted thing to do and I’m sorry and I will keep this in mind in the future,” Loki explained sheepishly during his journey between the threshold and Stephen’s desk.

The level of anxiety radiating from his expression and posture was concerning. “What happened?” Stephen asked, studying him carefully.

“I got my ass kicked,” Loki said, shaking his head and looking down. “And it didn’t turn into a learning experience that washes out like with Perry. I got stomped and now there is a bad dude out there who knows I’m looking for him. A crazy bad dude.”

Stephen nodded grimly and folded his hands on his desk. “I’ll be expected in the court shortly, can you please give me a quick rundown of the most pertinent facts now, and a detailed report on the incident can wait for later.”

Loki wet his lips, seeming to think for a moment. “He’s from the Ultimation domain. I’m not sure if he was at home when I arrived, or if he had spells in place to alert him to an analogue entering his territory. Either way, he showed up twenty minutes or so after I got there,” he explained quickly.
“He went right after me, and I tried to talk him down, y’know, saying we didn’t have to fight, I’m just doing a survey, yadah yadah-- at which point he stated pretty clearly that he didn’t care and intended to kill me like he killed the girl (and bystanders) in Technopolis.”

“I see,” Stephen nodded.

“The local Spider-Man helped me fight him for a few minutes (he just happened to be there), and then I... sort of got stabbed with my own magical-Doom-knife and... that was a problem,” Loki sighed, looking embarrassed and miserable. “I was out for an hour, but Spider-Man tells me that apparently Ultimation-Loki couldn’t kill me while I was frozen and so he got annoyed and left... Obviously I’m going to make finding him a priority and double-check the wards at home to make sure he doesn’t find me in the meantime.”

“Why did you fail?” Stephen asked.

“W-What?” Loki’s eyes widened a little and he looked startled and hurt.

“I’m not chastising you, Loki, I’m asking you to analyze what went wrong. Why did he win?” Stephen paraphrased.

“Oh,” Loki nodded and pursed his lips a moment. “Better weapons training. He was more comfortable with melee then me. I’m competent with a sword, but better adapted to magic and misdirection,” he decided. “And, also, I’m not using a sword,” he noted, manifesting his staff and shrugging.

“Should you be? If that’s where your training is, we can find or make you an adequate sword,” Stephen suggested.

“No,” Loki shook his head. “That’s where my training is because my predecessors were swordy, but I’m connected to the distaff. I picked it up when I was still molten and I’m... tied to it now.” He held the weapon in both hands and looked down at it, chewing his lip and seeming somewhat perturbed by his own words.

Loki’s origins and circumstances were peculiar enough that Stephen didn’t feel equipped to question his beliefs on the matter, so he shifted tracks to consider the underlying problem. “Why did you take him on directly?” he asked.

“Well, he came at me with a glaive,” Loki replied with a slight shrug.

“Because that’s where his strength is, but you said yourself that you’re more adept at spellcraft. You allowed him to dictate the terms of the engagement, and thereby handicapped yourself,” Stephen explained.

Loki seemed to consider that for a moment. “Shit.”

“Loki, your entire existence is based around making your own rules. You can’t allow your opponent to--”

“What if I don’t want to make the rules?” Loki interjected suddenly. “What give me the right?”

Stephen was slightly startled by the question, and even more so by the fear in his student’s eyes. He studied Loki for a few moments and then shook his head. “I believe this is going to be a long discussion, and I’m expected in the audience hall. Let’s revisit that topic on Wednesday,” he said calmly. “For now though, remember that you must not let your opponent force you into fighting on his terms. You don’t have to fight on his level because you are not on his level, Loki. I have every
confidence that you outclass him, so use your strengths.”

Loki pursed his lips, swallowing, and nodded, the fear in his eyes fading and being replaced with resolve. “I’ll get him in round two,” he said.

“I don’t doubt it,” Stephen smiled wanly.

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“I know what he looks like, I know where he’s from, I know he’s cocopuffs, but do I know how to find him?” Storyteller demanded, glaring down at the map spread out atop of his desk again. “Fuck.”

“You can’t magic it?” Masterson asked, eyes meandering over the marked up map as he picked at one of the blueberry muffins that had appeared in the break room that morning.

“That’s how I found the first seven, but the rest have warded themselves,” Storyteller sighed, pressing his palms against the desk and leaning on his arms.

“You did that with the blood-finder trick though, right?” Masterson asked, tilting his head. “Now that you’ve actually met this one, isn’t there a more personal kind of magic you can do?”

“Magic doesn’t get much more personal than blood-magic,” Storyteller shook his head. “I haven’t fully explored all the avenues story-magic can take though. I know it’s powerful, but it’s also extremely ancient and the art’s been largely lost. There might be something there if I can figure out how to do it...”

“So do you keep the search thing going or do you go meditate on a mountain for a montage and figure out how to work the story-magic better?” Masterson asked curiously, tearing off another piece of muffin and popping it into his mouth.

“That is the question, isn’t it...” Storyteller said, chewing on his lip. “I hate the idea of sitting still, but taking the time to expand my tool kit might be more efficient in the long run.”

“Did you put out an APB on this guy yet?” Masterson asked.

“Yeah, but he’s been eluding notice this long, so I doubt he’s going to just slip up that badly now,” Storyteller straightened up and put his hands in his pockets, giving the map another accusing glare. “I feel stupid. I mean, for letting him get away, obviously, but also for feeling like this right now. I already knew he, and maybe a few more of him, were out there, so why is it so much worse just because now I know what he looks like (and by that I mean, what shape hat he wears, since obviously he looks like me)?”

“Because now he’s not just an abstract concept?” Masterson shrugged.

“Masterson, that’s super intellectual!” Storyteller gasped, casting him a grin.

“Oh fuck. Forget I said it,” Masteron smirked back.

“You gotta protect your meathead hammer-bro image.”

“Right?” Masterson let out amused puff, and then the momentary levity seemed to blow away and he frowned slightly, nose wrinkling. “You got another problem though,” he said, holding up his arm. “My bracelet-thingy didn’t go off when you got stabbed. Why’s that?”

Storyteller looked at the band around his wrist for a moment, considering the question. “Well,
apparently I went basically indelible when I was frozen, so I guess I technically wasn’t in danger...” he said and then hummed thoughtfully and held out his hand. “I should probably tweak it.”

“Probably,” Masterson agreed, pulling the band off and giving it to him.

Storyteller pulled the anelace out and hooked the bracelet over its hilt for a moment as he whispered a quick addendum to the magic already woven into it. “That will hopefully solve the one issue,” he said, handing the band back to Masterson as he sheathed the anelace.

“Hopefully good,” Masterson nodded, letting it hang off one finger while he finished his muffin. Quiet stretched as Storyteller went back to staring uselessly at his map; after a few minutes, Masterson called, “Hey, what are you thinking? If you don’t keep talking important murder-stuff to me, somebody’s going to come and tell me to get back to work.”

“You are totally working right now,” Storyteller replied, shaking his head. “And I am thinking... mm... I don’t know... But that’s why it is vitally important for you to be right there, eating your muffin, and not dying of paper-cuts in the file room.”

“No arguments here,” Masterson shrugged.

Storyteller went quiet again, eyes staring in the general direction of the map but losing focus as he considered the resources he had and how they could be used to tackle the problem at hand. He hadn’t invested much time into developing his narrative abilities yet because he’d been focused on powering through the ‘census’ as quickly as possible to find his lost boys. One was still out there somewhere, and if Ultima-Loki found him before Storyteller... Finding Ultima-Loki and hauling his ass in to Doom’s trophy room was the priority though, more time-crucial than finding the Third, because even if he did find the Third, both he and Serrure would still be at risk as long as Ultima-Loki was out there.

The spiders could pre-cog to varying degrees; would having access to the Great Web be the edge he needed? Could he use it to find Ultima-Loki? To find the Third? Julia had said that the current state of the Web was limiting their vision, but obviously it was still giving them some hints. Storyteller’s first lesson with the Master Weaver was tomorrow morning, he supposed asking about the Web’s Loki-finding potential would be question number one. But today should be devoted to exploring other possible avenues. He’d been brought into this whole ‘case’ in the first place because Doomgard wasn’t up to the task, but that didn’t mean it didn’t have resources to offer.

His thoughts were suddenly derailed by a voice that was simultaneously familiar and not.

“Special Agent Storyteller, I don’t mean to disrupt if you’re working on something time-sensitive, but I’ve been hearing so much about you recently.” Storyteller turned and his mind went blank for a second or two, stalling out like a reluctant engine. “I was giving my quarterly report this morning and thought I’d introduce--”

“Teddy?” Storyteller stared, surprise at seeing Teddy dressed as a Thor quickly replaced by surprise at himself for being surprised. After all, if anybody was ‘worthy’, Teddy certainly was.

He looked slightly puzzled for a second before giving that utterly disarming smile Storyteller remembered, and shaking his head. “Sorry, I think you’ve mistaken me for someone else. My name is Mar-Vell,” he corrected and Storyteller’s mind went blank for another second as that information clicked into place.

“Oh.”
“Mar-Vell’s the district Thor for Paradise Domain,” Masterson supplied, raising an eyebrow at Storyteller.

“Oh,” Storyteller said again, feeling foolish and inexplicably startled. “You’re... Sorry, you’re younger than I thought you’d be,” he said lamely.

The very young Mar-Vell smiled again, and it was exactly the smile he’d seen so many times on Teddy’s lips. “Considering I was only reborn four years ago, I think I’m growing rather quickly, all told,” he replied.

Storyteller broke into a grin. “Well, I know how that goes,” he said, studying Mar-Vell closely, searching for the tiny differences that set him apart from the man who, in another world, another life, would have been his son.

“So I’ve heard,” Mar-Vell smirked back. His hair was curlier than Teddy’s.

“You have?”

“Loki speaks of you,” Mar-Vell explained. “Quite fondly, I might add. Actually, that made me more curious about you than anything I’ve heard through Doomgard. It’s rather rare for Loki to take such an interest in anyone.” He was thinner, not as brawny as Teddy.

“You’re a friend of theirs?” Storyteller asked.

“I like to think so,” Mar-Vell agreed with another smile. “I believe I may have been the first one they spoke to after their metamorphosis, and I know I was the first to recognize them for what they’d become.” His eyes were glassy smooth without those distinctively Skrullish double-collarette rings like Teddy’s.

“I think they may have mentioned you,” Storyteller said slowly, tilting his head and thinking back. “They said something about a ‘messianic toddler’.”

Mar-Vell grinned and looked a little embarrassed. “It was an odd time,” he said, slightly sheepish.

It suddenly struck Storyteller as odd that he’d never thought to ask who the Thor of Paradise was, because obviously it wasn’t Donald. Which lead to another suddenly obvious blind-spot.

“Masterson,” Storyteller said, turning to him abruptly. “Can you get me a list of all the district-Thors and their reporting schedule?”

“Um, yeah, sure,” Masterson nodded, wading up a now-empty muffin wrapper in his hand.

“Not right this moment, we’re still brain-storming, but soonish, as a thing that would be useful for me to have,” Storyteller added.

“Sure.”

“Brainstorming?” Mar-Vell asked curiously.

Storyteller sighed. “I identified a suspect in my man-hunt yesterday and then very promptly lost him after getting K.O.ed,” he explained. “So now I’m taking stock of resources and whatnot... I don’t think it’ll help much on this particular jaunt, but having that list could be useful for the census bit. There are a handful of places besides Weirdworld that are going to be either difficult or dangerous for me to enter alone.”

“Like Greenland?” Masterson suggested.
“Yes, that’d probably be a rough one,” Storyteller agreed.

“And though it might be considered more ‘civilized’, I would say that Dystopia is no less dangerous than the rest of the northern continent,” Mar-Vell added.

“Good to know,” Storyteller nodded, tapping a finger against his lip and thinking for another minute or two. He made up his mind and pointed at Mar-Vell. “I think I might follow you home. They always know I’m there the second I set foot in Paradise. I need to find out how they’re doing that so I can set up something similar at my place. I can’t get caught off-guard again.”


Storyteller chuckled, sucking in his lip and grinning. “As entertaining as that image is, being carried feels really awkward as a grown up,” he shook his head and held out a hand. “I thought maybe we could take the short-cut.”

“That works too,” Mar-Vell agreed, taking his hand.

“Sorry, Masterson. Looks like I have to return you to your regularly scheduled program now,” Storyteller said with an apologetic look and a shrug.

“It’s fine,” Masterson shook his head and sighed. “Not like all the things are going to file themselves. Like they _would_ if we were a paperless office.”


They landed in downtown Paradise and the jaded citizenry didn’t so much as cast them a second glance as people went about their business. “That certainly is a short-cut,” Mar-Vell noted, glancing around to take in their position as he let go of Storyteller’s hand. “Though personally, I find flying relaxing.”

“I can imagine, but being a passenger is a bit less so,” Storyteller nodded, starting to drift down the sidewalk and musing that if the colors in Ultimation had seemed particularly vivid and crisp, Paradise was the opposite, the whole place seeming slightly muted and dismal. Was it like the way time flowed at different rates in different universes? Was the light spectrum slightly different as well?

“Mar-Vell?” a familiarly ambiguous voice called and Storyteller spun on a heel.

“Perry! Right on cue! Which is _exactly_ what I needed to ask you about,” Storyteller said with a bright grin.

Perry looked back at him, pausing for a second or two, and nodded slowly. “That’s a familiar face, although I don’t believe I’ve seen it on _you_ before, Storyteller,” they said.

Storyteller froze, feeling slightly startled. “Oh. I guess you haven’t...”

“I had my check in with Doomgard today, and after I finished my report, I heard that Storyteller was in the office, so I introduced myself,” Mar-Vell said. “And it seems Storyteller had something to discuss with you, so we car-pooled.”

“_Hm_,” Perry smirked and tilted their head. “What did you need to talk about?”

“The way you know whenever I’m here. Your system seems better, more accurate, than the wards I’m using now. I didn’t know the wolf was even there until he was huffing and puffing at my
“Ah, yes, you’ll certainly need to tighten that up,” Perry agreed.

“I’ll excuse myself then, and leave you two to that,” Mar-Vell said, holding out a hand to Storyteller. “Storyteller, it’s been a pleasure finally meeting you.”

“It certainly has!” Storyteller caught the proffered hand and shook it. “I’m glad to hear my frequent presence on your beat isn’t too annoying.”

“Not at all,” Mar-Vell shook his head, gracing Storyteller with one last lovely smile. “The company you keep speaks very well of your character. I’ll be seeing you. Loki,” he cast Perry a nod before lifting into the air, floating under his own power rather than using the hammer tucked into his belt.

Storyteller gazed after Mar-Vell as he left, humming a quiet note and wetting his lip. “I didn’t realize how much they looked alike,” he said quietly.

“I don’t know who you mean,” Perry replied, raising an eyebrow.

“... The Mar-Vell of my world died more than a decade ago, almost two,” Storyteller said softly, falling into step with Perry as they strolled slowly down the sidewalk with no particular destination. “But his son is just about that age. Or, well, the age he looks, anyway.”

“And looks can be quite deceiving,” Perry noted with a little smirk, fingertips gently touching the bottom of Storyteller’s chin, lifting it slightly as they examined his face. “I haven’t looked like that since Rome was a legitimate power... such a young face.”

“But much older than I’ve earned,” Storyteller grinned.

“What’s his name? The son?” Perry asked curiously. “This Mar-Vell never had a child.”

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“A human name?” Perry raised an eyebrow again.

“Oh it gets wilder,” Storyteller laughed. “He’s half skrull. But he’s lived his entire life on Earth.”

“Skrull? Really?”

“The rebellious Princess Anelle,” Storyteller explained. “Naturally, what she’d look for first in a suitor is someone her father would hate.”

Perry smiled and shook their head. “Well that makes sense then. What is he like? Theodore?”

“The nicest boy in the world,” Storyteller said and then paused, reconsidering, and shook his head. “No. He’s not ‘nice’. He’s kind.”

“A friend?”

“... I haven’t met him in this lifetime,” Storyteller said softly, shaking his head again. “My predecessor came to think very highly of him though... He’s as strong and brave and compassionate as Thor, but he has the coolest temper I’ve ever known in an organic person. He only gets angry when someone he loves is hurt or threatened, and I don’t think he’s even capable of holding a grudge.”

“Then the resemblance is more than skin-deep, it seems,” Perry mused.
“Huh. Mar-Vell was a memory before Serrure and the Third were born, and any memories we inherited from the First are washed out and faded like old photographs…” Storyteller said, trying to decide if the few images that flickered in his mind were from actual memories or photos he’d seen on the internet and television. “I have no impressions of the Mar-Vell from my world, only that it seems he was well-liked.”

“He and I were reborn on the same day,” Perry said softly. “There’s a certain kinship in that. And he never questioned my change. He looked at me, and he saw me. I didn’t have to buy his trust against the debt of what I had been before. He saw me as I was and accepted me without hesitation.” They closed their eyes and smiled. “I suppose he is my first true friend.”

Storyteller smiled, warm-fuzzies in his chest. “That’s nice. I like that,” he murmured, and gazed out at the city around them. “It’s weird, your world looks so very bleak, but there’s all these tiny, little, beautiful stories hiding in it.”

“Hope,” Perry replied, nodding. “When things are at their bleakest, the little flickers of hope shine their brightest.”

“… Battleworld is very bleak, when you think about it,” Storyteller said, not very far above a whisper.

“But you have Serrure, and you have the hope of finding your predecessor,” Perry pointed out.

“Yes, I know, but that’s not- There’s something else I wanted to talk to you about,” Storyteller said, brow pinching, anxiety gnawing at his belly. “Something you would have to keep from Mar-Vell, because however wonderful he may be, he’s been co-opted by Doomgard… And Donald too. Knowing would only put him in danger.” He closed his eyed and bit his lip a moment. “And I suppose I’m putting you in danger now. But knowing Doom, I think you’d be in danger just by being ‘me’ anyway, and, besides that, I need— I need your guidance.”

Perry sighed softly and caught Storyteller’s hand, clasping it gently as they walked. “You seem to think of me as some kind of sage, but I haven’t been myself so much longer than you’ve been yourself.”

“By proportions and percentages you have,” Storyteller pointed out. “Four years compared to two months? No contest. And you have all your ‘dark ages’ memories as a first-hand kind of thing… The longer I’m me, the more the First’s memories are fading away, I think… And King’s are like mist, I can’t even find them anymore. I think they’ve unraveled, because I unraveled him…” He pursed his lips and looked at the ground for a moment, processing that. “Right after I assimilated him, for a few hours I could skate across space-time like he did, but then… I lost it. At first I thought maybe it was Battleworld, because it didn’t have a past. But I can’t go forward, and I can’t go back to last month either, so… it’s not Battleworld. It’s just-- I’ve lost it. I’ve lost him… I unwrote him, and so I don’t get to keep the things I took from him.”

“That may be for the best. One tends not to properly appreciate power that isn’t properly earned,” Perry said.

“Yes, see, this is why you’re sagely to me,” Storyteller said, smiling at them. “Because you know important things like that. I’m getting too vague on the old mistakes. I’m forgetting why I am, and why it’s important that I am, and why I must be. That life, that other Loki, is becoming history to me, not memory.”

Perry paused for a moment and studied them. “… It gives you greater freedom though,” they said softly. “Greater self-determination. Being a child, growing without that burden dragging at you. It’s…
“You think your evolution was less organic?” Storyteller asked.

“I know it was and is,” Perry shook their head. “It’s reactionary. I’ve made myself the polar-opposite of what I was, and so I am still defined by that past.”

Storyteller hummed and nodded, staring at nothing for a moment before turning to look back at Perry. “I need to speak to you somewhere alone. The garden, maybe?”

“All right,” Perry agreed.

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Peripeteia turned the distaff slowly in their hands, studying the gem and feeling the radiant warmth and hum of the power within it as Storyteller leaned against their shoulder. He was obviously disturbed, frightened even, by the revelations the spiders had brought him. “You’re afraid of being corrupted,” Peripeteia noted softly.

“Yes,” Storyteller agreed. “I didn’t ask for this. I didn’t want it.”

“No? You wanted King’s power, didn’t you? You miss its absence. So it’s not that you revile power in a generalizes context,” Peripeteia pointed out.

“King’s power was already mine. If he belonged to me than so did it,” Storyteller protested without any particular energy.

“You don’t assume that much of it was stolen?” Peripeteia asked skeptically.

“... Point.”

“It’s the connection to ‘fate’ that repels you, yes?”

“Yes.”

“The same as your concerns about using your narrative abilities on others,” Peripeteia noted, setting the distaff to the side, and leaned against the bench. “You worry about denying them the right to choose for themselves.”

“Yes.”

“... You know the agony of being chained. There is wisdom to be found in that knowledge. Restraint,” Peripeteia mused, putting an arm around Storyteller.

“But pain too often sours into bitterness. What if that just makes me vindictive?” he whined.

“But you feel the pain of others, don’t you?” Peripeteia pointed out.

“... Yes... The Third wasn’t any good at that. When people got upset, it always caught him off-guard. It wasn’t that he didn’t care how other people felt, he just couldn’t see it,” Storyteller said quietly. “He tried to fix that in me, and he may have gone a little overboard. I feel... a lot.”

“That’s good, in this context,” Peripeteia said. “If seeing the suffering of others causes you pain, then you’d be unlikely to cause it.”

“Unless I disassociate,” Storyteller retorted. “Disassociation, dehumanization... that’s how whole
societies go bad. It is statistically improbable that the whole of Nazi-Germany was psychopathic, but they disassociated themselves, dehumanized their victims... One doesn’t have to be cold to be cruel, they just have to be existentially disconnected from what they’re doing.”

“... But if you disassociated yourself from the characters, then you would be no kind of story teller,” Peripeteia said slowly, thinking through their words. “And if you were to become such a feeble skald, I imagine you would lose the powers associated with the ability.”

“... You think?” Storyteller asked, lifting his head slightly to look at them. “So then it’s self-regulating?” His face darkened again a moment later and he put his head back down against their shoulder. “No... the Norns went cruel but still had their power.”

“You said that they were overthrown. If they truly had power over destiny, that couldn’t have happened,” Peripeteia countered.

“It took a lot of doing,” Storyteller sighed. “And they’d been cruel for a very long time before that, I think.”


“... Am I good?” Storyteller asked in a small voice.

“You are exactly what you make yourself,” Peripeteia stroked his shoulder. “You are free-born and indomitable. You are a brave, strong, beautiful child and I have faith in you.”

“... I love you,” Storyteller said in a small, fragile voice and Peripeteia couldn’t remember ever feeling so arrested by words, even though it was words that had defined their entire existence. ‘I’m glad I found you... ‘Family’ is a confusing topic for me, because of the cross-generational wrench that’s been thrown into my legacy... But I think you’re my family, in ways the other analogues aren’t.”

Peripeteia was silent for a few seconds, absorbing the claim of affiliation slowly, reverently. Then they dipped their head and pressed a kiss to Storyteller’s temple. “That is an unparalleled honor which I shall cherish,” they whispered.

Chapter End Notes

Family resemblance can be difficult to define in comics since there's not a lot of consistancy in the little details of character design from one artist to the next; the shape of a character's face has more to do with who's drawing them than anything else. As far as Teddy's base-appearance is concerned, I'm inclined to refer back to Young Avengers volume 1, where, when Teddy takes a bad hit and goes into shock for a minute or two (not long, since he heals fast) he shrinks down and ungreens. My interpretation is that while his Hulkling form seems to have become his preferred one, his neutral, unmorphed form looks almost entirely white-kree (outwardly indesrtiguishable from white-human). Which fits, since in Secret Invasion they stated/showed that Skrull shapeshifting either goes hand-in-hand with, or is the most obvious manifestation of, a hyper-adaptable physiology. Then in Avengers Academy it was noted that in some Skrull-hybrids the Skrull DNA takes cue and mimics the non-Skrull DNA completely,
basically going dormant. Besides Teddy, the other notable Skrull-hybrids kicking around are William Grant-Nelson and Torus Storm, who both look exactly like their non-Skrull parent (except Torus's hair is green). When Teddy first came to the Avengers' attention, nobody pointed out "wow, you look just like--" but at that point he was only 16, and probably a lot more baby-faced than anybody on Earth had ever seen Mar-Vell.

I mentioned Teddy having Skrullish eyes; Teddy's eyes are blue (like Mar-Vell's) whereas full-Skrulls are always colored with green eyes. They are also pretty consistently drawn with a double-ring pattern in their irises. I can't remember a detailed close-in shot on Teddy's eyes, but for my head-canon I've decided to give him that feature, and I wanted it to have a name so I looked up eyeball anatomy.

I realized, as I was staring blankly at the screen after I dropped in that last page-break, that I've never done a segment from Perry's POV. At this point I seem to have made them a main character (not originally in the plan, but we like it when our characters have minds of their own) so I guess it's about time.

Also, for those who haven't read Earth/Universe/Paradise-X (I don't expect you to, it's like getting your teeth drilled and having a sugar-free sucker as a reward) Mar-Vell is a weird, unsubtle Jesus alagy in that story/universe, and spends the middle segment split between a three-year-old form and an energy-being form on two different planes of existence. At the very end of the third run, he goes back to his normalish form and flies off into the sunset. It's... weird. Anyway. The ending was so incomprehensible, it's probably best to ignore it, and all in all, Mar-Vell was the obvious choice for this domain's Thor.

Speaking of, now that I went and brought it up, I need to figure out some district Thors! I've figured out some, there's some canonical ones already, and I have a list of good-Thor-material characters we came up with a while back, but what's getting me now is whom to make Thors for the 'evil' domains. Domains run by super-villains would need a Thor who still represents the core qualities of strength, loyalty, etc., but also fits the vibe of their domain, like how Luke Cage Thor is very gangland but still Thorable. I need Thors for two domains run by Norman Osborn, two demonic domains, the Domain of Apocolypse (this one would have to be a mutant), the Regency, Wittland, Bar Sinister, the Hydra Empire and the Sentinal Territories (this one can not be a mutant).

Suggestions?
“I have a question, in regards to the Web and all,” Storyteller said. “Can it be used to help me track down the bad-guys I need to track down? Are you aware of the fiasco that happened just before I arrived here the other day?”

“I’m aware,” Karn nodded and then paused, seeming to consider. “That would probably make a good lesson. Having a practical goal will help to guide you.”

“Sweet. I want to get that guy off the streets,” Storyteller said, pleased both by the affirmative that the Web could help and also that Karn didn’t feel the need to throw any 'you're not ready for that yet' bullshit at her.

“Do you have your sammiches?” Storyteller asked as she watched Serrure tie his shoes.

“Yeah,” Serrure nodded, stretching out his leg as he drew the laces tight. “Are you going to Doomgard today?”

“Probably not. I have my staff lesson in the afternoon and some stuff to check up on this morning,” Storyteller shook her head and leaned against the wall. “The new alarm-thingies make the forest safe-ish, but the rest of Battleworld is still at the mercy of the merciless. You have your panic-bracelet?”

“Yeah,” Serrure held up his arm and shook the sleeve down a few inches to reveal the band wrapped around his wrist.

“If anybody out there starts singing about dance-magic, give me a ping right away,” Storyteller said.

“I know,” Serrure climbed to his feet and picked up his explorer backpack.

“Today’s assignment is to find a bunny and try to talk to it. Have fun,” Storyteller put her hands in her pockets, watching Serrure pause with his hand on the doorknob and turn back to look at her, frowning.

“Bunny’s don’t talk,” Serrure said.

“It’s a fairy wood, Lamb, they just might. And besides, I didn’t say the bunny had to talk back,” Storyteller pointed out. “They’re very good listeners. That’s why their ears are like that.”

“What am I to say to the bunny?”

“That’s up to you, but remember what it was so you can tell me about it tonight,” Storyteller replied with a smile.

“’Kay,” Serrure nodded and opened the door. Lockheed departed Storyteller’s shoulder to swoop past him before the door pulled shut behind them.
Storyteller stood for a moment, watching the closed door, and then pushed herself away from the wall and wandered into the kitchen. She crossed her arms and sighed impatiently. A minute later, the air ripped open in front of her, stretching out into the romboid shape of a web-segment, and Storyteller hopped through into the marble and granite room beyond.

“It’s a wonder you don’t put a sack over my head as well,” she complained.

“I’m sorry?” Karn asked with subdued puzzlement.

“Where am I?” Storyteller demanded. “Why am I not allowed to come and go with my own teleport? You and yours are asking an awful lot of me and I’m not even trusted with the location of your secret club-house? Is there a hand-shake I’m missing out on too?”

“... No deception was intended,” Karn replied, watching her from his perch amid the Web. “This chamber is sealed. You would not be able to access it with your normal technique and trying to do so could result in a dangerous rebound,” he explained. “Our current location is at the northern pole of Battleworld, beneath Lake Gama.”

“So the Web is the only way in or out?” Storyteller asked, folding her hands behind her back and meandering along the edge of the dais.

“Yes.”

“And you’re the gatekeeper.”

“Yes.”

“Is dry and humorless a requirement of semi-omniscient gatekeepers?” Storyteller asked.

“I’m not sure,” Karn deadpanned.

Storyteller sighed. “I suppose we just need to get it over with then. What’s my lesson today?”

“... You’re being confrontational... because despite agreeing to Anansi’s request, you’re still angry?” Karn asked slowly, like he was running a careful analysis as he spoke.

“There’s that, and you’re also just very dry and humorless,” Storyteller shrugged, a little sulky at being called out.

Karn paused for a moment, seeming to consider that. “I suppose so. I never found occasion to develop a sense of humor,” he replied.

“... How old are you?” Storyteller asked, squinting critically up at him.

“Why does that matter?”

“Are you evading?” Storyteller raised an eyebrow.

“No,” Karn’s shoulders drew in very slightly, betraying a hint of awkward anxiety.

“How old are you?”

“... Six and a half centuries,” Karn answered.

“You’re a baby!” Storyteller accused with a grin.
“You’re exaggerating,” Karn replied.

“A primordial born not only after the Primordial Fall, but after the Pantheonic Fall too?” Storyteller eyed him with interest as Karn’s head turned slowly to follow her movement while he stayed otherwise still. “Why, you’re right into science-era territory there! The Renaissance was already starting to heat up by then!”

“Does that matter?” Karn asked, and Storyteller couldn’t tell if he was annoyed, because his voice remained the same flat, colorless tone.

“Well it’s very peculiar, isn’t it? You’re quite the anomaly,” Storyteller said. “And I imagine your age may have been a factor in the morality schism between you and your family, assuming your siblings were significantly older? You were born when clemency and rebirth were the philosophical order of the day.”

“That’s a possibility,” Karn agreed.

“But late enough that the war upon paganity had become much less blood-thirsty. You avoided the crusading centuries that damned many a god and puca,” Storyteller mused, continuing her stroll, and Karn finally had to move to keep watching her, clockwork legs skittering in a circle to rotate him.

“Such as Loki,” Karn said.

“Yes. The ‘good’ gods got made-over as fairy-tales, but his association with fire, obfuscation and shapeshifting did slot Loki into a very particular category as far as the Teutonics were concerned,” Storyteller agreed.

“... History is important to you,” Karn noted.

“History is important to everybody, some people just fail to realize that,” Storyteller shook her head. “But history and mythology are intimately entwined, forever shaping and guiding each other. Art follows life. Life follows art.”

“You are art given life.”

“Ooooh, how many chicks have you picked up with that one?” Storyteller grinned.

“I was being literal,” Karn said, posture tensing up with discomfort again.

“Why do you wear a mask?” Storyteller asked. His body language was probably about as expressive as his face would be, but it seemed odd. “The Spider-Mans wear them to protect their identities, thereby protecting their families, but you don’t leave this chamber, do you? Everybody who sees you already knows who you are.”

“It’s a symbol.”

“Of what?”

Karn was silent for a few beats. “You need to begin your training. You are under many time constraints and there is much for you to learn,” he said. Storyteller made a mental note of the redirect but let it pass for the time being.

“I have a question, in regards to the Web and all,” Storyteller interjected. “Can it be used to help me track down the bad-guys I need to track down? Are you aware of the fiasco that happened just before I arrived here the other day?”
I’m aware,” Karn nodded and then paused, seeming to consider. “That would probably make a good lesson. Having a practical goal will help to guide you.”

“Sweet. I want to get that guy off the streets,” Storyteller said, pleased both by the affirmative that the Web could help and also that Karn didn’t feel the need to throw any ‘you’re not ready for that yet’ bullshit at her.

Karn glanced around and seemed to listen, or perhaps feel, for a moment, then crawled to a different area of the Web and turned his head to her again. “Come closer,” he instructed.

Storyteller picked her way carefully deeper onto the dais, stepping over and ducking around low-slung threads. She came to a stop below Karn and waited, watching his head turn back and forth, seeming to search again, before one of the front clockwork legs stretched out and lightly tapped a thread. “Here,” he said, sweeping his leg to include the entire length of the thread in the gesture. “You’ll find your recent encounter somewhere here.”

“What am I doing with it?” Storyteller asked.

“Take it gently, follow the Web and find the incident,” Karn instructed. “Open yourself and let the Web guide you.”

“Y’know, my other teacher is a ‘each must find their own Way’ kind of guy, but his instructions are still kinda more instructive than yours,” Storyteller sighed and reached out, gently touching her fingertips to the thread. It was a peculiar sensation. She was plunged into a river of images, sounds, feelings, flowing around her, through her, past her. She pulled her hands away, taking a quick, sharp breath through her nose. Her foot moved to take an involuntary step backward, but caught on another thread and she stumbled. A clockwork leg hooked around her and steadied her.

“It can be overwhelming. You must learn to focus on what you’re looking for,” Karn said.

“How?”

“How did you learn to focus your eyes?”

“What?” Storyteller looked up at him, baffled and annoyed.

“How did you learn to focus your eyes?” he repeated.

“I don’t know! That just happens naturally!” Storyteller protested.

Karn nodded. “But it wouldn’t, if there were nothing to see,” he pointed out. “If you lived in total darkness, you would never learn to focus your eyes. The ability doesn’t develop until it is needed. It cannot be taught. It happens naturally as one acclimates to the light.”

“... This is going to take a long time,” Storyteller groaned.

“Yes.”

“There is a murderer out there right now!” she snapped, glaring up at him.

“Then you should try again,” Karn replied.

“You’re not going to help me on this? You don’t care about the murderer?” she demanded.

“Doing it for you would not be helping, and I don’t have the same connection to the incident as you,” Karn shook his head. “Your current motivation is good. Use it.”
Storyteller snorted irritably and reached for the thread again. Data bombarded her, blinded her, drowned her. A million fragmented flashes swirling around her. Butterflies, she thought, and tried to catch one, any one, and hold on long enough to make any sense of it. A cashier in a fast food franchise being verbally abused by an irate patron. She let go and tried for another. Children standing knee deep in slightly greenish water, attempting to catch tadpoles. Another. A high school marching band practicing on a football field.

She kept catching and releasing until the butterflies started to have colors, until she could feel some inkling of what a databyte was before she caught it. A handful of Avengers battling a MODOCK as it screamed vitriol and flailed it’s weird, little arms. Another. Spider-Man, the young one she’d met the other day, dodging and clamoring around a large laboratory as the Lizard chased after him. Another. A rather bland and nondescript robot suddenly morphing itself into a particularly fancy Ultron model and vomiting laser blasts. Another. A blond reporter doing some sassy interview piece in the park and—*Nope!* That was Loki! Storyteller focused hard on the snippet, feeling every detail of it as it squirmed in her grip, before finally releasing it and searching the cacophony for the next.

She kept catching and releasing, finally able to identify and chase relevant content, and each piece of time-reality-narrative she caught now contained Ultima-Loki. She caught dozens of little fractured pieces of scenes of him fighting or taunting various heroes, and then, finally, she saw herself, eyes wide as her own blade was slammed into her chest. She clamped down tight on the snapshot, not letting it escape. “I have it!” she announced, opening her eyes and finding her right hand fisted tightly around the thread in front of her.

“Good. And within that moment is your query,” Karn said calmly, settled nearby, watching her.

“Yes,” Storyteller agreed, staring at the web, still feeling the scene in her hand.

“Find his thread and follow it to where he is now,” Karn instructed.

Storyteller considered that for a moment. “I need a bookmark,” she said.

“A bookmark?”

“If I get lost trying to track him, I don’t want to lose my place here,” she explained. “If it takes me a few tries, I don’t want to start over from scratch. This is my save-point.”

Karn nodded. “That’s wise. You’re displaying good forethought. I will hold your place,” he said.

“Thank you,” Storyteller closed her eyes again. “What am I looking for? How do I find the thread of an individual?”

“Just as every event has a filament, so too does each being,” Karn answered.

“... A filament is a narrative,” Storyteller said softly, the statement was for her own benefit, but saying the words out loud helped her sort them. “A scene contains a segment of the narratives of each character within it... So a scene, a strand, is not a single fibril, but a napped fiber made of many filaments.”

“Yes,” Karn’s voice agreed.

“... So... I need to untangle the lattice and isolate the filament I want,” Storyteller reasoned and chewed on her lip, concentrating on the scene she’d found.

“Yes.”
She carefully removed one extraneous element at a time. People. Objects. Sounds. She kept pulling pieces away one at a time until Ultima-Loki was the only thing left. She bit down on her lip and tried to make him be a fiber, but that left a question of polarity, which way was forward? She picked a direction and started traveling, drawing her way down the line hand over hand. It was too unfamiliar, she didn’t know enough about him, his life. She recognized some of the supporting cast though. She kept moving. He was yelling at Thor about something. Bullying Hawkeye. Bitching at Thor again. Fliting with Spider-Man. Bitching at Thor again. Annoying Hulk. Bitching at Thor again. Pouting in a locked cell. Bitching at Thor again. Laughing as he lobbed a chaos blast at Iron Man. Bitching at Thor again. Faltering as Spider-Man taunted his vanity and blood-lust, tricking him—

“This is the past,” Storyteller said, opening her eyes and looking over her shoulder to where Karn had a clockwork leg pinned to her save-point.

She walked back and started again, following in the other direction this time. Or trying to. On the first try, she followed a filament back to her kitchen. She was on her own thread. That was no good. The second try she got entirely lost and wasn’t sure who she had even been following. The third try she apparently hooked Tony Stark. Returning yet again to her save point, Storyteller scowled in frustration. “Going backwards is easier than forwards, isn’t it?” she asked.

“I believe that would have to do with your own affinity,” Karn replied. “You are rooted in the past, and you’ve an aversion to observing the future.”

“It’s not the observation, it’s the definition,” Storyteller sighed, shaking her head. “But then I suppose we’re into cats-in-boxes arguments there. Observation is a form of definition or interference or something.”

“Are you afraid to go forward with this individual?” Karn asked.

“I’m not trying to look at his future, I’m trying to find where he is right now,” Storyteller said, shaking her head. “That’s very different.”

“Too much fear may hamper your ability to read the Web,” Karn noted.

“I’m not afraid of him and I’m not afraid of this. I want to locate the bad man and bring him in,” Storyteller said firmly and closed her eyes again, taking a deep breath. She had two more false starts, then managed to follow Ultima-Loki two steps before losing him again. It was a similar feeling to the tug she could feel when she wandered into another Loki’s territory. She’d yet to successfully follow one of those tugs to the exact location of an analogue though. But she held onto the thread in her fingers and pursed her lips, thinking on it as a fishing line, trying to feel her pray thrashing at the other end. She took a step, reeling him in. A cityscape, dismal, polluted, the people on the streets not so much walking as trudging with their shoulders hunched in. She kept going. Mad laughter, a glaive cutting through the air. Storyteller gritted her teeth and kept going. Somewhere brighter. A hedge-lined alley. Blood on the pavement. A distinct feeling of now now now!

“I have him!” Storyteller gasped, eyes bursting open. “I- I don’t know where he is, though. It feels so vague... Like the where isn’t important,” she bit her lip hard, glaring at the thread in her hand.

Karn abandoned the save-point and scuttled over to her. “You know many locations in this world by feel,” he said. “When you teleport to a familiar location, your telemetry is intuitive. You have a tacit geographical awareness.”

“... This isn’t anywhere I’ve been,” Storyteller shook her head.

“Triangulation needs only two points of reference to ascertain a third. You’ve been to more than two places in Battleworld,” Karn pointed out. “Intelligence is one of a Loki’s key attributes. You have a
geographic intuition of the places you have been, and I’m sure you have some basic geometric skill.”

“I don’t think triangulating a geo-coordinate is considered ‘basic geometry,’” Storyteller retorted, closing her eyes. “That’s at least high school level. Compensating for planetary curvature and all.”

“And you’re somewhat beyond high school level.”

The ‘where’ might not be important to the scene Storyteller was grasping, but there was a ‘where’, and so she pushed a pin into that ‘where’ and combed out from there until she could recognize something. South of Verity’s building and Doomstadt. East of Avalon. That was– she thought of the map on her desk-- the Holy Wood. She pulled her focus in tighter, chasing that fishing-line down into the depths. “I have him. I’ve got him. I need to go now, before he moves,” she said, opening her eyes.

“Of course,” Karn agreed.

“I’m sorry to cut the lesson short.”

“You’ve been here over four hours,” Karn said.

“Oh. Well, okay then,” Storyteller shook her head and looked back at her fingers pinched around the thread she’d sought out. “You said I can’t teleport from here?”

“I can open the portal to the right place,” Karn replied.

“Buuut you still made me telemetrize it anyway,” Storyteller snorted, annoyed.

“You need to learn,” Karn said, tip of one leg touching the thread as Storyteller released it and took a step back. The clockwork legs moved around in a funky spider hand-jive and then spread as Karn ripped open a portal from the point. “Go now, and I will summon you for your next lesson the day after tomorrow.”

“Yes, Mister Karn,” Storyteller chirped, summoning her distaff and jumping through the fissure, tensed and ready for a fight. She planted her feet, gripped her distaff firmly and paused, mind processing the scene she had just stepped into.

Ultima-Loki lifted his head and glared up at her, bloody saliva dripping down his lip as he grimaced in fury and pain. He spat and attempted to gather himself together, drawing his legs under him and bracing his glaive against the pavement to pull himself up against. He failed. His shaking legs weren’t willing to take the weight, and he sank back to his knees.

Storyteller let out a low whistle, sidling cautiously closer, eyeing the arm wrapped firmly across Ultima-Loki’s belly, trying to hold his guts in, and the blood soaking every inch of fabric below what was presumably a very deep and long cut, and smearing and tinting the gold that decorated his outfit and glaive. “Well. Somebody sure took a bite out of you, didn’t they?” Storyteller said, coming to a stop just outside of glaive-range.

“Gloat all you want...” Ultima-Loki growled wetly.

“Why would I gloat? This sure isn’t my handiwork,” Storyteller replied, crouching down closer to eye-level. “So, you got out of your small pond and found out there’s bigger fish out there.”

Ultima-Loki spat another mouthful of blood on the pavement. “He had a partner,” he snapped. “I would have made a smear of that brat in a fair fight.”
“Have you ever fought a ‘fair fight’ in your life?” Storyteller asked skeptically.

He spat again. “And now you’re here to finish me,” he noted darkly.

“I sure am,” Storyteller nodded and rose back to her feet.

Ultima-Loki let out an angry, desperate roar and threw a ball of entropy at her. Storyteller slapped it away and lunged, catching her distaff around the head of his glaive and yanking it away from him, then kicked him in the throat, throwing him to his back as she drew her anelace and slammed it down into his chest.

He went still and rigid, unbreathing, eyes frosted over. Storyteller stood still for a moment, staring down at him, before crouching lower to get a better look. The slash across his gut was deep, nasty and ragged. It didn’t look like a sword wound. A dagger or a hunting-knife. And there was a hole in his shoulder, round and punched all the way through. “Eyes bigger than your stomach,” Storyteller murmured and straightened up again. She pursed her lips and took a steady breath, then collected his glaive.

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“This violation of Contretempus soil is reprehensible and must be addressed!” Simon Trask said, jaw tight and a shadow of disgust on his face as he cast a look at Sinister.

“I agree, of course, Baron,” Sinister replied in his well-practice saccharine. “Your own peacekeepers dispatched the clone in question, and I have had the rest of his gene-lot terminated in case any more of them should prove to be defective as well. You just can’t be too careful.”

“And so you hold that the clone was acting of his own will, Baron Sinister?” Stephen asked, already knowing the answer.

“A maverick, Sheriff Strange,” Sinister nodded, smirk unfaltering. “I’m having my lab collect and review data on the rest of the lot to see if a cause can be determined.”

“Your abomination was examined by coroners and determined to lack a pre-frontal cortex. It didn’t possess the higher brain function necessary for disobedience,” Trask snapped, glaring at Sinister momentarily before turning his face forward again.

“Indeed, which makes it all the more curious that this incident occurred at all,” Sinister said silkily. “I am inclined to think that it simply got separated from its handlers and wandered off.”

The door at the end of the hall opened and one of the Thors on retinue duty slipped into the chamber. She walked the perimeter of the room, unobtrusive, as she made her way toward the dais.

“Then perhaps the practices of its handlers ought to be reviewed,” Trask growled.

“The handlers have been terminated as well.”

“... My Lord Doom, Sheriff Strange,” Trask said through gritted teeth, hot fury written in his features but volume kept to a polite level, “I would like to register a formal complaint against Bar Sinister, on what I am sure is a rapidly growing list of such.” He clenched his jaw for a moment, obviously having trouble keeping formal civility. “... For it seems that its baron is incompetent to maintain order over his subjects.” He bowed as Sinister rolled his eyes, obviously unimpressed by the attempt to insult him. “I thank you for your time and consideration.”

Stephen turned his head as the Thor reached him and whispered, “Agent Storyteller has made an
arrest and requests an immediate audience."

“Thank you,” Stephen whispered, nodding, and then turned his attention momentarily back to the two barons standing before the throne. “Baron Sinister, as Baron Trask points out, you seem to be having some difficulty controlling your domain,” he called, watching Sinister maintain an utterly unruffled calm. “Baron Trask’s complaint has been noted, and if indeed you prove incapable of preventing discord, then it may be necessary to replace you.”

“Understood, Sheriff,” Sinister said, dipping his head. “I shall make every effort to resolve any discord within my borders. And of course, thank you sincerely, Baron Trask, for bringing this matter to my attention.” He turned and nodded politely to Trask, who refused eye-contact, lips twisting in a grimace of revulsion.

“This audience is concluded,” Stephen announced and then turned toward Victor. “I have just been informed that Special Agent Storyteller has made an arrest.”

“Excellent,” Victor said, grim humor in his voice as he evidently found far more interest in Loki’s mission than the squabbling of his flock. “Bring him in.”

The Thor who had brought the message followed the two barons and their entourages from the hall, and then returned a moment later, following behind their Loki with a second Thor as they carried in another petrified Loki between them. He was soaked in red, gripping his abdomen tightly, and appeared to have been collapsed when he was frozen. “Lord Doom. Sheriff,” Loki called, taking a knee as the Thors set the frozen Loki down behind her. “I have made an arrest.”

“It would seem you did more than that,” Victor noted, choosing to take an active role in the conversation, rather than letting Stephen speak for him as he did with most audiences. Stephen took the cue and faded two steps backward to Victor’s side.

“He was like this when I found him, actually,” Loki shook her head as she rose back to her feet. “But my first encounter with him (as this was my second) indicated that he is of a reckless and confrontational disposition, and so I assume that he picked a fight with somebody bigger than him.”

“Indeed,” Victor replied, sounding amused. “And the reason you did not capture him upon your first confrontation?”

“I am ashamed to say that I was not his equal in combat,” Loki lowered her gaze and folded her hands in front of her. “I have been taking measures to rectify this. In order to serve you to the full extent of my abilities, I must ever seek to improve those abilities.”

“A wise philosophy,” Victor noted. “And you say that your first encounter with this individual revealed his disposition to you? Tell the assembly why have you brought such a wretched creature before Doom.”

“He hails from the Ultimation domain, and that is where I first encountered him. During this encounter, he claimed responsibility for an attack in Technopolis which took the lives of thirty and did millions in damage to private property and public infrastructure,” Loki said, wearing an expression of seriousness that did not appear to be feigned for formality’s sake. “The reason he gave for this assault was, I quote, ‘I killed them because it was fun’.”

“Hm,” Victor nodded, eyes shifting from their Loki to the petrified one. “Doom has heard your words, my agent. Now I will here his,” he announced. “Remove the dagger.”

Their Loki stepped to the side of the petrified one and reached for the hilt protruding from his chest.
She yanked it free and straightened up in one fluid movement. She slid the blade into its sheath and neatly folded her hands again, facing forward as the Loki of Ultimation came unfrozen, collapsing more thoroughly against the floor with a huff and a groan, then going quiet.

Their Loki looked down at him out of the side of her eye, staying exactly as she was, face toward the dais while her eyes regarded her analogue. After a few moments of stillness, the other Loki rolled to his side and got his arms under him. He took in his surroundings, and his eyes fell on Victor. His expression was blank as he gathered himself together, managing to sit up and wrapping one arm back around his abdomen, eyes remaining glued to Victor. And then the blankness pulled away like a curtain into an expression of awe and fear.

“Oh that I should be so fortunate as to look upon the face of the Great Lord Doom,” he gasped, eyes wide and bright. “Never did I believe I could be so lucky.”

Victor raised his chin slightly, looking imperiously down his nose at the god while their Loki turned her head slightly to the side and rolled her eyes. “You have been accused of crimes against Doom,” Victor stated flatly.

“N-never, my Gracious Lord! I wouldn’t dream of it!” the Loki of Ultimation recoiled slightly, looking utterly scandalized. “I beseech you, my Lord, there has been some kind of mistake! A misunderstanding! This woman has clearly mistaken me for someone else!”

“Indeed?” Victor stared down at him. “Are you the lesser-god Loki, resident of the Ultimation domain?”

“... That is correct, my Lord,” he lowered his head respectfully.

Victor turned his eyes toward their Loki. “And where did you pluck him from this day, Agent?”

“From the Holy Wood, Lord Doom,” she replied evenly.

“I-- My Lord, it was a mistake. I was attacked, badly injured and terrified for my life,” the Loki of Ultimation looked back up, eyes pleading. “I teleported blindly. I am mortified and aghast. I never meant to violate your borders. It was a terrible mistake.” He bowed his head again. “I am most sincerely chagrined, my Lord. I beg your indulgence for this sin, as it was never intended.”

Their Loki’s lips were pushed upward and drawn in as she fought a grimace, contempt shining in her eyes as she kept her gaze forward but focused on nothing.

A few moments of silence past as Victor stared impassively down at the injured god, then his eyes narrowed and hardened. “Do you take Doom for a fool?” he demanded in a low, dangerous voice.

The Loki of Ultimation kept his head respectfully bowed as he began to protest. “No, my Lord Doom, of course--”

“You have insulted Doom,” Victor accused, rising to his feet and the court all stared, wide-eyed and breathless at the unusual gesture. “You have made mockery of this assembly,” Victor continued, walking to the edge of the dais and glaring down at the god. “And you have questioned the competence of Doom’s chosen agent.”

“My Lord, I assure you--”

“ENOUGH!” Victor’s voice echoed through the chamber, reverberating off every surface, and leaving a heavy silence in its wake for a few seconds as everyone held their breath and stared. The Loki of Ultimation had stopped attempting to protest, and as Stephen watched him, he realized that
the god was no longer breathing or exhibiting any movement at all. A few seconds passed, and Victor returned to his throne, settling himself before calling out at his normal volume, “Doom has had enough of this wretch. Put him with the others.”

The Thors moved forward and picked up the again-petrified god as their own Loki stepped out of the way, head lowered and expression neutral. She stayed quiet while her analogue was swept from the hall and waited.

“... You have done well, my Agent,” Victor announced, gazing down at her.

“Thank you, my Lord Doom,” Loki replied in a subdued voice. “I am glad to do it. Today my home and my family are that much safer than they were yesterday.”

“Indeed. To serve the will of Doom is to serve all of Doom’s peoples,” Victor nodded. “Your diligence pleases Doom and the assembly. Go forth, my agent, with Doom’s gratitude.”

Loki looked up and her expression was a mix of surprise and confusion. She hesitated slightly, taking an uncertain step and wavering. “... Thank you, Lord Doom,” she said quietly, giving a shallow nod, before turning and making her exit.

Chapter End Notes

Karn’s age was not directly attested in the Spider-verse cross-over, but in the brief back-story snippet he was given, he’s clearly being treated as the baby of the family. The twins behavior shows a lot of general immaturity, but that might also just be a spoiled-brat issue, and the way their mother is coddling Karn has a very late-life ‘lets have one more baby before I hit menopause’ feeling to it.

In the comic art, the Great Web’s design is pretty inconsistent, and I’m not going to fault the artists on that at all because it is actually somewhere between really hard and impossible to find diagrams of any kind of spider web besides an orb web, which is that pretty spiral structure seen in the elementary school science books. Orb weavers are just one family of spiders, accounting for about 6%-ish of spider species. I felt like the Great Web should be three-dimensional, and orb webs are very two-dimensional, so I’m picturing something more like a 'tangle-web' structure here, that’s the expansive, three-dimensional kind of cobwebs that bring to mind haunted mansions and Halloween.

SPIDERS ARE CRAZY-COOL, YOU GUYS! <arachnophilia>

Obscure vocabulary:
’Puca’, the Irish spelling of the Celtic trickster-fairies (from which ’Puck’ is derived) associated with shapeshifting and childish behavior.
’Fliting with Spider-Man.’ This sentence came up in the first scene and that’s not a typo. ’Fliting’ is an artful insult/banter contest, that can range from witty quips to full on rap-battle. This was a kind of entertainment in ye olden dayes, generally being spontaneous but having some vaguely defined rules (’rules’ not so much meaning dos and do-nots, but rather how its scored). Mythological-Loki got into a lot of fliting matches and was generally very good at it (if I’m recalling correctly, he lost once to Sif -I think- and that was a notable event, because he usually wins). Ultimate Spider-Man vs. Loki episodes could frequently be described as fliting + fighting.

The previous two Badkis to face Doom have been defiant/disrespectful, I figured it was
about time for a sweet-talker to take a run at Doom's vanity. Ultima-Loki might be a bit unhinged, but he's not as disturbed as Nu or bat-shit like Berserker.

I need to build a good murderer for Timely-Loki. I was originally going to attribute it to Ultima-Loki, but then I decided it was too much of a throw-away after I'd gone and made Timely-Loki all poignant, so I switched it to Technopolis-Loki instead. I think I need someone extra hateable to be responsible for Timely. While my current rogues-gallery Lokis' psychoses make them scary, they're a little less hateable because of the crazy; I need someone really lucid to get to that top-shelf ass-holeishness. Suggestions for an extra ass-holeish Loki's gimmic/title?
“Alejandra. That rolls of the tongue nicely,” Storyteller noted and looked back up at Masterson. “Do you know her?”

“Not really,” Masterson shrugged. “She doesn’t hang out. I’ve heard she’s kinda... I think I heard the word ‘bitch’ mentioned...”

Storyteller smirked and snorted. “I will attempt to tread lightly then.”

This chapter introducing:

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Storyteller,” Masterson’s voice called and Storyteller looked up from the report he was drafting. “You got a response from Lost Land.”

Storyteller gave the telegram a look. It was a little too concise to guess the disposition of the Thor who had written it, nothing but a time and a set of geo-coordinates, but it did express either an underlying impatience or a distaste for Storyteller’s request. “Aaand they didn’t put a date, so I’m going to assume this is a today-thing,” Storyteller noted, clicking his tongue. “Who’s the Thor for Lost Land?”

Masterson pursed his lips and held up a finger, then dug through the stack of folders and papers that had been tucked under his arm and pulled one out, handing it to Storyteller. “Got you that list you wanted.”

“Ooh, thank you!” Storyteller scanned it quickly to find Lost Land. “Alejandra. That rolls of the tongue nicely,” he noted and looked back up at Masterson. “Do you know her?”

“Not really,” Masterson shrugged. “She doesn’t hang out. I’ve heard she’s kinda... I think I heard the word ‘bitch’ mentioned...”

Storyteller smirked and snorted. “I will attempt to tread lightly then.”
“Psh, you don’t have it in you,” Masterson rolled his eyes.

“And the sass-master strikes again,” Storyteller sang and glanced back at the telegram. “An hour. I am not going to finish this incident report, so I hope I don’t end up with another one... Stephen was pretty nervous about this jaunt.”

“Dangerous?” Masterson asked hopefully, tilting his head.

“Not so much battle-dangerous,” Storyteller shook his head and Masterson looked a little disappointed. “Moreso that people who set foot in Lost Land tend to not leave it. Thus the ‘lost’ part.” Storyteller gave a half-shrug. “The Sheriff wanted me to have a chaperon to keep me focused, not as much to defend my life. Sorry, but I think taking you along would just double the risk of lostness.”

“Uhuh,” Masterson sighed with a nod.

“I really appreciate the list, and whenever I need extra muscle, you’re always the first person I call,” Storyteller said with an apologetic smile.

“Thanks,” Masterson grinned, puffing up a little with pride. “I know you’re just stuck with me, but thanks.”

“Hey man, you’re stuck with me,” Storyteller corrected.

Masterson thumped him lightly on the back as he walked on, continuing about his day of office-droning, and Storyteller went back to his report, keeping an eye on the clock as he wrote. Ten minutes to the time appointed in the telegram, he packed up his desk, double-checked the geo-coordinates and teleported.

He found himself in the middle of a particularly bleak desert, the light illuminating it seemed to cast a slightly reddish hue over everything. A woman not much older than Masterson, dressed in black leather and 80s heavy metal looking armor, stood nonchalantly nearby, eyeing him. Storyteller gave her a smile. “Hello, you must be Alejandra Jones?” he called, walking toward her.

“Yeah,” she nodded. Storyteller didn’t see a hammer on her, but she had something in her right hand that he took on first glance as a bladeless hilt, but a closer look identified the thin protrusion over her thumb as a break-leaver, not a hand-guard. She was apparently holding a single handlebar, disattached from anything. “S’what exactly are we doing? You said you needed an escort? Where?”

“Not entirely sure yet,” Storyteller shook his head and caught a spark of impatient annoyance in the girl’s eyes. “You’re familiar with the doppelganger effect? The Sheriff has tasked me to take an inventory of my analogues, so I’m searching domains one at a time,” he explained.

“Why?” Alejandra asked, frowning. “What’s so special about you?”

“A common instance of erratic behavior, sometimes downright insane, crossed with high power levels,” Storyteller replied. “There’s been an issue with border-crossings leading to violent confrontations-slash-assassinations.”

“And you’re the token not-crazy one?” Alejandra raised an eyebrow.

“There’s a _few_ not crazy ones...” Storyteller bit his lip and shrugged. “Just not many that are cut out for disciplined public service.”

“So what are we doing?”
“Well I’m very magical--”

“Am I supposed to be impressed by that?” Alejandra asked.

“N-No?” Storyteller faltered. “It sounded like you were asking for an explanation... That is part of the explanation...”

“Right.”

“So... Long-story-short, essentially a form of dowsing. Normally I teleport around, but Sheriff Strange wanted me to have a chaperon due to the beguiling effects some parts of this domain are known for.”


“Drive?” Storyteller asked blankly.

Alejandra held out the handlebar and gave it a twist. Fire poured out of the end with a roar like a gunning engine and swirled wildly before taking shape and congealing into a wicked two-seater. Alejandra mounted it and glanced over her shoulder at Storyteller.

“Okay then. Drive it is,” Storyteller agreed and climbed on behind her.

“Where are we going?” Alejandra asked.

“Well, we’re at the edge of the domain now, so let’s drive toward the center and I’ll try to get a more exact read. Updates to follow,” Storyteller said, putting his hands around her waist and closing his eyes, trying to tune in as Alejandra gave an irritated sigh and brought the bike to life.

They roared across the dusty expanse, wind whipping at Storyteller’s hair as he tried to feel the fabric around him. Even if he wasn’t touching the physical representation of the Great Web, the metaphysical presence of it was everywhere, ergo the credits earned in the previous day’s lesson should be somewhat transferable. Storyteller had found the fishing-line analogy ultimately the most useful for ‘catching’ her prey, and so he started casting. He found a tug and leaned forward, opening his eyes momentarily and calling to Alejandra, “Turn to ten o’clock!”

She nodded and adjusted her course, continuing on. For a bit shy of half an hour, they drove, with Storyteller shouting the occasional course correction, until, as he leaned forward to give another, Alejandra interjected, “I know where we’re going!” Storyteller faded back and watched the scenery. Soon a large city wall loomed on the horizon, and a few minutes later, they were pulling to a stop in front of the gate. “Sinner’s Market,” Alejandra announced, looking back over her shoulder at Storyteller.

He took the cue and dismounted, watching in fascination as Alejandra’s bike disappeared back into her handlebar. “It’s a rather grim name,” Storyteller noted, third-hand memories danced in his mind, a place where anything, absolutely anything, was for sale for the right price.

“It’s a grim place,” Alejandra scoffed and started walking for the gate as Storyteller drifted in her wake.

“Welcome, Thunder Rider,” the gate guardian greeted Alejandra and eyed Storyteller with interest as they approached. “You are here on Doom’s business?”

“We are,” Alejandra replied with a curt nod. “Open the gate.”
“Of course. Does your companion understand the rules of--”

“Only Doom’s laws are relevant to Doom’s law-keepers!” Alejandra snapped at him, brandishing her handlebar as it manifested a hammer. Ah, there it was.

The guardian was silent for a moment and then nodded. “... Of course, Thor,” he agreed.

“Open the gate,” Alejandra demanded again and the gate guardian complied. They walked through into a bustling marketplace. The wares being displayed at the booths ranged from enchantingly beautiful to horrifically grotesque. “Don’t look at stuff,” Alejandra hissed, catching Storyteller’s arm. “If you look at stuff, it’ll get in your head. Just concentrate on the thing you’re looking for and don’t look at anything else. They got everything you can imagine here and a lot that you’d never want to.”

“Boy howdy, do they! If you can’t find what you’re looking for at the Sinner’s Market, then you’re just not looking hard enough!” a peculiar, slightly grating voice announced with an air of exuberance. Storyteller turned to find a tall and utterly odd individual behind him. By the breadth of the shoulders, he’d hazard to assume male, but while the person was human-ish, they were not-human enough to make judging their gender a guessing game. They grinned toothily at Storyteller, monochrome eyes bright. “This place, oh man, there is a whole lot of shiny stuff here! Easy to get distracted with all the shinies! Good thing you brought the baby-sitter, kiddo, ’cause you look like you’ve got a bit o’ magpie in ya!”

“Get lost. We’re not interested,” Alejandra sneered, shooing them off, and the stranger took a flustered little hop backwards, but their manic grin didn’t falter.

“Wait,” Storyteller took a step closer to the stranger, frowning curiously and studying them. “Why would you say that?” he asked. “That there’s magpie in me?”

“Was I wrong? My mistake. Forget I mentioned it!” they said, raising their hands slightly in a surrendering gesture.

“Who are you?” Storyteller asked.


“He asked you a question,” Alejandra snapped.

“He did! Yes! Very curious, this one. Always into something, aren’tcha?” the stranger agreed brightly. “Inquisitive mind! Don’t go letting people tell you that’s a bad thing now, kiddo!”

“I am inquisitive,” Storyteller agreed, stepping closer and trying to decide if the peculiar armor was at all familiar. The outfit was about halfway between art deco and retro scifi and topped by a weird broken semicircle that floated in an arch above their head, halo-like, with no visible support. “And I would very much like to know your name.”

The stranger made an amused sound and then reached out, pinching Storyteller’s cheek. “You are just gosh darn cute!” they declared. “Big-O would be proud of ya, kiddo. I’ll see you around.” They took a sudden hop backwards, and in the hubbub of the teeming market, somebody stepped in front of them.

“Wait!” Storyteller called, chasing after, but the stranger had either melted into the crowd or teleported, and as Storyteller paused in the spot he’d last seen the bizarre enigma, he felt a gut certainty that any attempt to look for the stranger would prove entirely fruitless.
“Disappearing act? Fucking hate those,” Alejandra growled, looking around with fire in her eyes and steam rising off of her. “Want me to put out a wanted on that guy?”

“No, it’s okay,” Storyteller shook his head. “They’re not the one I’m looking for.” The encounter was definitely intriguing, but it didn’t strike Storyteller as Thor-work. And the stranger had said that they’d be seeing him again, so there was no need to go looking. They were a tease, and obviously knew a thing or two about Storyteller. Every word and gesture clearly spoke to the stranger being a trickster of some kind. Maybe a spider? No, the body-language was entirely wrong.

“We gonna get back on schedule then?” Alejandra asked, crossing her arms and raising an eyebrow.

“Do we have a schedule?” Storyteller asked, feigning a look of surprise and then closed his eyes and checked his line again. “… There’s definitely one here,” he said, nodding and turning slowly, then opened his eyes.

He started walking through the densely packed marketplace. Alejandra stayed close to his side, glaring menacingly around with eyes like embers and smoldering a little, such that the crowd parted for them as they went.

Storyteller’s eyes caught on a silvery-glassy object hanging from the awning of a booth and lingered as his feet slowed and then stopped. It was beautiful. He started to take a step toward the stand.

“Hey,” Alejandra called, grabbing his elbow. “Is that what you were looking for?” she demanded.

“… What is it? It’s... It’s beautiful...” Storyteller murmured, staring.

“Hey!” Alejandra grabbed a fist-full of Storyteller’s hair and yanked his head around, breaking his gaze, and something else broke at the same time. Storyteller gasped, not from the hair-pulling, but because he suddenly felt like he’d been drowning without realizing it. He looked down at Alejandra. “Is that what you were looking for?” she demanded, glaring back up at him. “I told you not to look at shit!”

“S-Sorry!” Storyteller yelped.

“Head in the game.”

“Yes. Sorry,” Storyteller agreed, nodding. He closed his eyes and tried to find the tug again. “Okay,” he took a deep breath and pushed it out quickly, steadying himself. “This way.”

They walked through the tide of shoppers for several minutes, Storyteller studiously ignoring all the shinies that glittered in his peripheral vision and called to him like sirens in the mist. Finally, a voice with a familiar timbre caught his ear and Storyteller looked up to find a neat little junk-shop tent, where a thin, almost gaunt, Loki with slicked-back hair was leaned over a glass-topped counter and talking fast to a creature with a goatish-cattish head.

“--and the case (which I’ll throw in absolutely free of charge, my gift to you) is genuine sand-tiger skin! Completely water-proof, highly crush-resistant! You’ll never have to worry about damage!”

“... That is a nice case...” the goat-cat-person agreed.

“And at this price, it’s a steal! You’re not going to find a better deal in Battleworld, my friend!” the Loki urged.

Storyteller turned to Alejandra. “This is it,” he said.
“So let’s shake him down,” she took a step toward the tent.

“Weeell, I’d rather avoid a tense confrontation,” Storyteller caught her arm and held back. “Some people have a tendency to get a little nervous around Thors, and I’d just as soon keep this relaxed and casual. I think I’m likely to get more cooperation and useful answers, if it would be possible... for you to maybe wait here for me...?”

Alejandra gave him an annoyed look and crossed her arms. “Fine,” she spat.

“Okay. Thank you. I will just be a few minutes. Hopefully. If he takes a swing at me, then by all means, happy to have you jump in, but, y’know, conversation might go a little faster this way. Thank you,” Storyteller said, giving her a strained smile. Alejandra just kept looking at him with the same annoyed not-quite-glare. “Thank you. Sorry.” He turned and made his way toward the booth.

Lost-Loki seemed to have finished his sale and the goat-cat-person had disappeared. He looked up as Storyteller approached and went still and blank for a moment before grinning brightly. “Well aren’t you a handsome devil,” he greeted; Storyteller counted three gold teeth in that grill. “Now I just know I can make you a deal! So what’ll it be, son? What are you in the market for?”

“I was looking for you, actually,” Storyteller said with a congenial smile. Lost-Loki was neither on the defensive nor offensive at the sight of him, which tended to suggest that either he’d managed to go unnoticed by those playing the game, or that they’d simply never gotten past the distractions of the Sinner’s Market far enough to find him.

“Sorry, just one thing in the booth that’s not for sale, and that’s it,” Lost-Loki shook his head, still grinning. “But not to worry, I’m sure we can find something that’ll catch your fancy! So what does a fine young man like yourself need and (more importantly) what can you afford?” He caught what looked like a monocle the size of a saucer, hanging from his neck as a lavaliere, and held it up in front him, apparently examining Storyteller through the glass. His eyebrows rose in interest and he let out a low, impressed whistle. “Well look at you... clean as the morning dew,” he said softly as his eyes scanned Storyteller up and down through the lens. “How does someone your age even manage that?”


Lost-Loki let out a short bark of laughter. “There’s always a trick!” he said, grin coming back stronger than ever as he let the lens go and looked Storyteller right in the eye and leaned against the counter. “But you have got some full pockets there, son, so let’s talk about what you need.”

Storyteller shook his head, smirking a little in amusement at his skeevy salesman counterpart. “I’m not shopping. I’m here because I’ve been commissioned to catalogue all the analogues and rate their threat-levels,” he explained. “You’re right where you’re supposed to be and you didn’t attack me on sight, so you’re off to a great start.”

“The start may be important, but it’s the sprint in that final leg that wins the prize,” Lost-Loki replied cheerfully. “And don’t go saying ‘no’ just yet, kid. Everybody needs something, and not to brag, but I’ve got the finest wares in the Sinner’s Market!”

“I’m sure you do, but I’m equally sure that what I’m looking for isn’t here,” Storyteller chuckled.

“Ah, but you’re looking for something!” Lost-Loki exclaimed, all teeth on display. He gave a wave of his hand and a small, filigree box appeared in it. “You, young man, need a desire-compass.”

Storyteller paused, staring mutely at the object for a moment. A genuine desire-compass was
incredibly rare, the magic necessary to create one was on a par with the Norn Stones, and the craftsmanship needed, beyond even Eitri’s abilities. In a way, perhaps the most powerful scrying tools in existence, a real desire-compass (and fakes were quite common) could lead the holder to anything they sought, regardless of realm, plane or how well a thing might be hidden. “... Is that real?” Storyteller asked quietly.

Lost-Loki’s face fell into an offended frown. “Kid, don’t insult me.”

Storyteller raised an eyebrow. “You’re telling me you wouldn’t or couldn’t sell snake-oil?”

The frown was swept away with a chuckle. “Fair enough,” Lost-Loki shook his head and resumed his skeevy grin. “But this is the genuine article, son, guaranteed. Wouldn’t believe what I had to do to get it. But I like you, kid, and I’m gonna make you a deal,” he said with a wink, grin broadening a little. “Anybody else, I’d charge fifty human souls and not a bit less, but you? I’ll let you have it for your integrity.”

“No,” Storyteller said flatly, shaking his head.

“Your ethics.”

“No.”

“Your blood-innocence.”

“No.”

“... You’re bad at haggling, kid,” Lost-Loki said, frowning annoyedly.

“I won’t haggle with my soul,” Storyteller replied.

“Then you’re in the wrong market,” Lost-Loki said and the compass disappeared from his hand. Storyteller’s stomach clenched; if it was real, that pretty little box could have lead him straight to the Third. But the cost would have made it pointless. What was the use of a compass that could lead him to his heart’s desires if his heart was black?

“I told you I wasn’t shopping,” Storyteller said quietly, putting his hands in his pockets and trying not to look at any of the other fascinating little treasures under the counter or behind it. “I just have to ask you a few questions and cross you off my to-do list.”

“And what will you trade for the answers to your questions?” Lost-Loki asked, annoyance still clear in his voice.

“Doom’s made me responsible for deciding who stays free and who gets a living-death incarceration, so I guess I’m trading the freedom to go about your life unmolested,” Storyteller sighed and shrugged. “That sounds rather like a threat, but I think it really is the most valuable thing I have to offer. And if I hadn’t volunteered to sort it out, I think Doom likely would have just put all of us on ice to save himself the trouble.”

“... I suppose freedom is the ultimate currency at the end of the day,” Lost-Loki noted grudgingly. “What are your questions?”

“Do you know who I am?” Storyteller asked.

“Couldn’t guess which plane you’re from, but I think I know your name,” Lost-Loki replied.
“Have you heard about some of the others playing a macabre ‘game’ of self-assassination?”

“Oh, is that what that was about?” Lost-Loki gave a half-shrug and shook his head. “Some degenerate with a sword took a swing at me when I was, ah, touring.”

“Treasure-hunting?”

“There didn’t used to be much outside the city walls,” Lost-Loki said. “The desert went on for a few miles, and then just looped back on itself. All roads lead to the Sinner’s Market, no matter which way you were going.”

“A pocket dimension, and a rather small one at that,” Storyteller noted.

“Uhuh,” Lost-Loki nodded. “A nexus though, a million realms just on the other side of the door, you know. So while there’s not much real estate, all the best stuff ends up coming through this trading post,” he explained. “I love it, I do, but when I woke up one morning and all of a sudden there’s a back yard out there... I was curious. Thought I’d do a little exploring, maybe scout some merchandise.”

“And you didn’t pick any fights?” Storyteller asked.

“I’m not a fighter. I’m a business man,” Lost-Loki shrugged. “Like I said, big guy with a sword came at me, so I skedaddled.”

Storyteller summoned his book of cataloged hunters, flipping to the one who had attacked Arcadia to his own sorrow, and held it up. “Is this the big guy with the sword?”

“Bingo.”

“Well you won’t need to worry about him again, anyway. Quite dead. And so, obviously, all of this happened inside of Lost Land, because as we both know, boarder-jumping is illegal and she’d have to arrest you otherwise,” Storyteller noted, pointing a thumb back to where Alejandra was waiting. Lost-Loki followed the gesture, expression blanking again for a couple seconds and then nodded. “Obviously,” he agreed.

“And I’m never going to hear about you getting caught outside of your domain by a Thor,” Storyteller added.

“Of course not. I’ll never be caught out by a Thor.”

“Good, ’cause that would make me look really bad,” Storyteller noted. “So then, let’s see. What are your thoughts on Doom?”

“I’m sure I could find something to sell him,” Lost-Loki’s grin made a reappearance. “May be the man who has everything, but everybody needs something and I’ve got a knack.”

Storyteller chuckled and bit his lip for a moment, thinking. “Do you have a title? God of--?”

Lost-Loki blew a sigh through pursed lips. “A long time ago, maybe, but the Lost Land doesn’t have gods. I didn’t grow up here.”

“I didn’t think you looked especially local,” Storyteller nodded. While there was a fairly eclectic aesthetic to the population of the Sinner’s Market, it was overwhelmingly demonic, and there was nothing particularly demonic in Lost-Loki’s features. Not even the eyes, which were usually the first
to show signs of demonisation.

“I was born in a gods-and-monsters realm, but nobody really wanted me there, and I didn’t really want to be there. So I left. It’s been eons,” he shook his head. “There’s no gods here, just businessmen and credit brokers. I like it. Capitalism is nice and simple, not all those messy contradictions of idealism.”

Storyteller nodded and then smiled. “All right, thanks for making this easy,” he said. “I assume you have some kind of wards running to keep anyone harboring ill intent from finding you?”

Lost-Loki smirked. “I’m a businessman.”

“And you wouldn’t want any customers with buyer’s remorse to come a’knocking,” Storyteller chuckled. “All right, I won’t worry about you. I think you have a knack for survival too.”

“So that means I’ve been approved for freedom?”

“Well, this is a free market,” Storyteller said.

“Then it’s been a pleasure. You’re sure you don’t want to buy anything? You don’t really need all of your morality, right?” Lost-Loki cajoled.

“Well, I figured I could manage without chastity, and I got a pretty good return on that,” Storyteller smirked and Lost-Loki laughed. “But most of the rest is already tied up in long-term investments, so I’m gonna have to take a pass.”

Lost-Loki sighed and rolled his eyes. “Oh you’re one of those low-yield-but-stable bonds types. Fine, be off with you then, so I can trade with the real customers.”

Storyteller grinned and nodded. “I’ll get this Thor out of here for ya and stop scaring off your most promising sales,” he said and held out a hand.

Lost-Loki accepted the hand, giving it a shake. “Have a nice day, little innocent.”

“You too, snake-oil,” Storyteller nodded before turning to search out his chaperon. He got absorbed into the crowd and was starting to get disoriented, when a hand landed on his arm and he looked down to find Alejandra there.

“Is that it?” she asked.

“Yep. He’s a non-issue. Totally benign,” Storyteller agreed.

“So this was a waste of time?” Alejandra raised an eyebrow.

“Not at all. The Sheriff asked me to census all of them. If we hadn’t found one, then it would be a waste of time,” he replied.

“Fine,” she nodded. “Let’s go, I got better things to do than baby-sit all day.”

Chapter End Notes

I posted a thumbnail with no name on it! Back when I introduced Bride of Nine Spiders
but kept her as a mystery guest, I just didn't do a thumbnail at all, but then, her appearance is easily described (she's a pretty standard scantily-clad-goth-girl) but the new mystery guest is **weird** looking, so I wanted a thumbnail, but if I put a name on there, y'all could go wiki it, and I ain't having that! So unless you recognize this obscure character (and if you *are* that savvy, *don't spoil in the comments, please!* you're just going to have to wait for the drop.

Alejandra had a one-season stint as Ghost Rider in the main universe (it was really hard to find an uncropped, front-facing image of her without her head on fire, out of every single appearance, the one in that thumbnail was the best I could do). I really liked her disembikened handlebar thing, made it very easy to avoid the usual plot-holes of "But Johnny didn't park anywhere near that, how did his bike get there?" because her bike apparently just conveniently disintegrates when she's not on it. I also don't want to give the impression that I dislike Alejandra, and it's noted that she did have friends growing up, but on-pannel she's brusque and impatient in kind of a 'I'm trying to make you take me seriously by being rude and aggressive' way, and it's sort of cute.

My concept for this Loki was 'used-car salesman', and he was kind of spur of the moment as I was doing a world-building planning session and decided that Lost Land should have a Loki. I picture him middle-aged, which is may be a bit weird, because we mostly only see gods young, in their prime, or old. I guess Volstag is middle-aged. *shrug*]

The Lost Lands has only enjoyed 10 pages of story ever, as somewhere Doctor Strange visited on a search for magical power (a side-story in New Avengers vol 3, ish 14) but it's kind of an archetype. Normally when we think of an 'archetype', it's a person, but the Sinners Market is one of those place-that-is-a-character-itself kind of things. Bianchi definitely gives it a demonic look and feel, the gate guardian/guide Stephen talks to is a demonic-style satyr, and even though the visual aesthetic is different, some of the dialogue at its introduction made me think of cenobites; this is definitely the place you would by a Hellraiser puzzle-box.

I finished my map! I got to a point where I needed to sit down and plan out Storyteller's route and where/when various plot-points will hit. [MAP](#)

I've also started drawing while I cover the reception desk at work (for an hour and a half a day, I'm chained to the phone and don't have much to do between calls) and I just finished up a pic of Nu-Loki, more to come later. [PIC](#)
Concerning Heredity

Chapter Summary

“I'm proud of you.”

Loki looked up with slightly wide eyes. His mouth opened for a moment, then he pursed his lips and nodded, flushing slightly. “Okay,” he whispered.

Stephen was quiet for a moment, watching him. “You're not accustomed to praise,” Stephen noted quietly.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Enter,” Stephen called and looked up to see Loki make his way into the office. He was dressed in something closer to, if not quite, Asgardian fashion today. Lighter than war armor, less decorative than ceremonial, perhaps equivalent to Asgardian hunting attire, but what caught Stephen’s attention was the armored diadem and the lack of horns protruding from it. “You finished your report on the Ultimation Loki?” he asked.

“Yes, and Lost Land,” Loki agreed, coming to the desk and offering Stephen two manila folders.

“Lost Land? When did you go?” Stephen asked, frowning slightly as he accepted the folders.

“Late morning. The resident Thor got back to me and wanted to just do it,” Loki said. “She’s rather... brusque.”

“I see. And there were no complications?”

“I saw a thing I reeeally wanted. I had no idea what it was, still don’t, but I reeeally wanted it,” Loki wrinkled his nose.

“The Thor stopped you?” Stephen asked.

“She pulled my hair,” Loki grimaced a little more. “Like I said, brusque. She got really snappy with any of the locals who talked to us too. I couldn’t tell if she was nervous they were going to take a bite out of me, or if she’s just anti-social in general.”

“She obviously got you in and out again successfully,” Stephen noted, flipping the folder open and glancing at the picture. “This one wasn’t any trouble, I take it?”

“It seemed like trouble-avoidance may be one of his primary goals in life,” Loki nodded, folding his hands behind his back. “Snake-oil salesman. If he was ever any kind of royal, he doesn’t carry the airs of it anymore. I asked what he was the god of and he just said that Lost Land doesn’t have gods and he’s been there for an epoch or two.” He shrugged and sighed softly, eyes distant. “Seems pretty happy to peddle his curios. And he was using the local currency but didn’t show any signs of demonization. I’d classify him a low-to-non-existent threat level.”

Stephen studied him, catching the hints of distraction, maybe even wistfulness. “Something’s
bothering you,” he noted.

“No, not really, just,” Loki shook his head, wearing a little frown. “He- He tried to sell me a desire-compass... I think it might have been the real thing. Just-- I don’t know, I had a feeling that it was.”

“I see,” Stephen nodded slowly. “But the price was too high, I imagine.”

“Not really, not considering.” Loki chewed on his lip, brow furrowed. “He really was trying to make me quite a good deal on it, maybe seeing me as someone he’d like to be on favorable terms with. But it’s... It wasn’t too much in a business sense, but...”

“More than you were willing to part with.”

“I...” Loki looked down at the edge of the desk and swallowed. “I’m not sure how fragile my soul and my sanity may be,” he said softly. “Considering heredity (or whatever it should be called in my case) I feel like I should be very careful.”

“I believe that’s prudent,” Stephen agreed with a nod, and then smiled. “And I believe that your consciousness to that fact, and your restraint in this instance, shows a great deal of responsibility. I’m proud of you.”

Loki looked up with slightly wide eyes. His mouth opened for a moment, then he pursed his lips and nodded, flushing slightly. “Okay,” he whispered.

Stephen was quiet for a moment, watching him. “You’re not accustomed to praise,” he noted quietly.

“I...” Loki frowned, looking away, brow furrowing again. “I’m very new, so I imagine there’s many things I’m not accustomed to in this life,” he said uncertainly. “But, in the other lives I remember... Loki was only called out for bad behavior. Nobody noticed if he did good.”

“... You reacted strongly yesterday when Victor commended you,” Stephen said.

“Well, that seemed a bit out of character for him as well,” Loki replied, shifting uncomfortably. “I suppose he’s always taken something of an interest in my line, but, I don’t know, in the past it’s been more like, how he can maneuver to make use of us without getting burned too badly.”

“And you don’t think that’s what he’s doing now?” Stephen raised an eyebrow. Loki looked up at him, chewing on his lip. “Loki, I don’t mean this to be in any way insulting, but you are very child-like. I’m not sure how much of that is your newness and how much of it is the effect of being an uncorrupted trickster-god, but anyone who has had the opportunity to observe your behavior and general disposition for very much time is likely to notice that you are... emotionally immature.”

“I’m not insulted. You’re right,” Loki agreed.

Stephen looked down at his desk for a moment, piecing his words together carefully before looking back up to meet Loki’s eyes again. “Victor raised a very loyal child in the previous world. Your apparent level of psychological development strikes me as close to early adolescence. That is a notoriously teachable age.”

Loki tilted his head, eyes distant, and considered that. “He wants to indoctrinate me while I’m at an impressionable stage,” he murmured. “Is that a problem, though? He is the ultimate over-god of our reality. He wields power enough to snuff me out, and so with that in mind, I should think that loyalty would be good for my health.”

“Your loyalty should be based upon reason: his power is holding this world together. You should be
loyal because he is doing what is necessary and right. But *blind* loyalty is never a good thing. You must always practice critical thoughtfulness. Recognize the motives behind your own actions and the actions of others,” Stephen explained.

Loki nodded, eyes still unfocused. “But I didn’t follow him blindly. I know what he did, I know it better than anyone else but you. I know he saved everything we have... In our darkest hour, he was ultimately the hero who stepped up,” Loki said slowly, then his gaze fluttered downward. “And- And that... that was-- That he turned it around, that he stepped outside of his trope to do what had to be done and reinvented himself... that was...” A small smile curled Loki’s lips. “I can follow him because he followed us, and he’s the one who started it all in the first place, so it’s... maybe it’s fitting. Almost like it’s a journey we took together, even though we didn’t, like he’s had my hand, just a little.”

Stephen frowned, baffled by the broken patter. “I’m not sure I understand, Loki.”

Loki’s eyes turned to him, expression clouded with confusion for a moment. “You don’t--? No, of course not. There’s no reason that you should have.” He shook his head, then pursed his lips, gaze cast down and to the side for a moment as he seemed to debate. “… You were the Sorcerer Supreme. You understand mysticism and mythoforms as well as any mortal can,” he said slowly, then paused, biting his lip again and looking back up at Stephen. “Only the primordial sky-fathers of the proto-pantheons could reproduce asexually. Like Ymir or Ra. Normal small-g gods, we can’t just make a new god all on our own. Even when one is using a non-traditional method of progeny-making, it still takes a ‘mother’ and ‘father’, at least in a metaphorical way.”

Stephen stared back at him with an uncomfortable coolness creeping in his stomach, not quite dread but something in that neighborhood. “... Continue.”

“... Doom was the one who told the First that he’d become trite,” Loki said softly, staring back, almost unblinking. “He was-- He was the spark. The seed of inspiration.”

“... Doom is your father,” Stephen whispered, mind and body seeming to go numb.

Loki shook his head. “Not me. In familial nomenclature, it would be ‘grandfather’ to *me,*” he said, looking away again. “He inspired the First Loki to craft the Third, and the Second as a stepping-stone to him, but *I* was never part of the First’s plan.” His lip pulled to the side a little and he wrinkled his nose. “Well, strictly speaking, the Third wasn’t part of his plan either. He was an accident, because the First failed to notice that what had been set into motion wasn’t just his own scheme anymore. The conception, the idea incubating in the dark of his subconscious, he discounted the fact that somebody else had put that bun in the oven, and so his plan to recreate himself was overwritten by the fact that there was already something new being created.”

Stephen rested his elbows on the desk and leaned his chin against his folded hands while a minute or two of silence passed between them. The revelation was, at the least, jarring. Did Victor know? Was there any reason he should? What had been the pivotal ‘spark’ in Loki’s existence may easily have been nothing more than a snide, off-hand remark to Victor. The metaphysics surrounding the substance and apotheosis of mythoforms were vaguely defined and confoundingly twisted with both logical and illogical symbolism; simultaneously hypersensitive and ironclad. How and why a mythoform *was* was persnickety.

“... And because his creation was ‘non-traditional’ and his physique essentially a simulacrum, he could be a full-god despite having a human parent,” Stephen said slowly, taking on the least disturbing questions first.

“Not unheard of. Dionysus was similar, although with more blood and guts, because the Greeks *do*
so love their blood and guts,” Loki pointed out.

“Have you, or the Third Loki, ever spoken to Victor about this?” Stephen asked.

“No. Do-Do you think I should?”

Stephen was quiet for a moment, thinking. “... No. I don’t think he knows, and I think telling him would create a more complicated relationship than either of you could navigate,” he said at last.

“Okay,” Loki nodded.

Stephen was quiet for a while longer, staring down at the wood of his desk, processing the fallout of this bombshell. “... Is that why it doesn’t bother you? Letting Victor step into Odin’s role?” he asked quietly.

Loki tilted his head for a moment and then shrugged. “He created this world. He is the All-Father of it.”

Stephen nodded. “I see.”

Serrure and Lockheed were chasing around the yard with three fairy-adopted children, catching fireflies in the twilight as Verity and Loki watched them through the kitchen windows, sipping at pre-dinner cocktails. “The ‘changelings’ are all mutant kids?” Verity asked, watching one trip and fall forward; he would have face-planted if he hadn’t stopped and hovered a few inches above the grass at the last moment.

“Maybe. The majority of X-gene mutants first manifest powers or physiological changes somewhere between ten and sixteen, so before that, it’s generally hard to tell. But Amora is very magical, so she might use divination to pick out the best ones for herself,” Loki said, gazing vaguely out at the game. “But also, this world was a good two-hundred years away from the first theories poking at genetics. Here, anybody weird might be considered ‘witch-breed’, whether it’s stemming from an X-gene or something else.”

“And what does ‘witch-breed’ mean, exactly? What do they think it means?” Verity asked, glancing back at him.

“Mm, for the last few centuries, as witch-hunting has become a hobby of churches and local governments, the lore has evolved and congealed into a few generally agreed upon points,” Loki explained in a distant, musing tone. “One of those common beliefs is that witches like to get knocked up by either demons in general or Satan himself. Thus the production of half-witch, half-demon offspring.”

Verity wrinkled her nose. “Lovely.”

“Mmhm,” Loki nodded. “Whether a mutant’s powers look like deliberate magic, or whether they’re just very odd, would probably be the determining factor in whether they’re ruled a ‘witch’ or a ‘witch-breed’. And of course, if they’re a witch-breed then you must be sure to burn their mother as well.”

“This is a horrible time period,” Verity sighed, grimacing in disgust.

“Oh, every era has their own version of institutionalized misogyny,” Loki shrugged dismissively. “At least this one’s up-front about it.”
“Ungh.”

“... There was something I left out of my report on Lost Land,” Loki said quietly and Verity turned away from the window to look at him again. “I’m not sure if it’s related to the Spiders or something else entirely, but... I’m not sure. I had a feeling it might be troublesome to bring up. Because they said they’d ‘see me around’, and if that should happen in a domain besides Lost Land, then it would probably be considered illegal, as it would tend to indicate they were crossing borders.”

“You’re being wordy without being descriptive again,” Verity noted.

“Sorry. Um...” Loki pursed his lips a moment, gathering himself. “Someone started talking to me in the Market today. Either a ‘he’ or a ‘they’, it was hard to tell. But they... definitely knew me. They said I had ‘a bit of magpie’ in me.”

Verity raised an eyebrow. “That’s interesting. And it wasn’t another Loki? You think it might have been a spider?”

Loki shook his head. “No, definitely not a Loki, and they moved wrong for a spider. Spiders can be a bit erratic, but they’re very graceful, sure-footed... this guy was... hoppy.” He frowned, tapping a finger against his glass and chewing on his lip. “Strong air of a trickster though, spoke in riddles and teases, had this manic-but-patient grin.”

“What did they say?” Verity asked.

“Not much at all. They just kind of... poked me and left,” Loki shrugged.

“The magpie comment’s bothering you,” Verity noted, studying Loki’s face, pensivity tugging at his features. “That’s really private for you, right? Not many people knew about it?”

“Just Serrure, Leah and the Third, I think...” Loki murmured, staring out the window with unfocused eyes. “That was... that was weird, but at the end he also said that ‘Big-O’ would be proud of me.”

Verity frowned, processing that for a moment. “Odin?” she asked.

Loki’s nose wrinkled. “I think I’d get slapped in half if I ever called Odin that where he could hear me.”

“Who else would that mean?”

“No, I think you’re right, it’s just, I mean, I can’t imagine anyone who would actually call him that,” Loki shook his head.

“Do you think they’re going to be a problem?” Verity asked.

“... No... They seemed, sort of... fond,” Storyteller said, brow drawn in. He sighed and set his glass down. “We should probably eat.”

“Is weird-guy a just-you-and-me topic?” Verity asked, watching Loki climb to his feet.

“For now, yeah,” Loki agreed with a nod.

Chapter End Notes
I think I spent well more than an hour trying to come up with a word for the thing Loki wears on his head, but the problem is that, while that headgear-style armor is relatively common in high-fantasy, it was never actually used anywhere in real-Europe. From the very beginning of bronze smelting, Mediterranean and European cultures went straight to the full helmet and it has always been a staple of the armor. The only place I could find a real word for non-helmet head-armor was in Japanese, because in Japan there was a greater focus put on being faster and more maneuverable than your opponent, thus being able to avoid the blows rather than block them; there you see cloth head-coverings with light plate over the forehead (the real ones did not look like Naruto). After much research and frustration, I determined that there just isn't any word for Loki's thingy because it only exists in high-fantasy, not history, and nobody's ever bothered to name it. It could be referred to as 'headgear' because the shape and function is similar, but I went with 'armored diadem' because that sounded fancier.

Stephen's reference to Storyteller as 'an uncorrupted trickster god' is what I decided to use as mystic nomenclature for the differentiation between the two types of tricksters. In world mythologies, there are two reoccurring archetypes for trickster gods/spirits, the malevolent tricksters, who use and abuse humanity (like Satan) and the benevolent tricksters who steal shit from the gods and give it to humanity (like Maui, Raven, Robin Goodfellow, Prometheus, etc.) Important to note here is that over the course of the first millennia, most of the older European tricksters ended up being reconned as either an anonym or servant of Satan, even if they were previously seen as benevolent (Robin Goodfellow was in the process of being demonized before Shakespeare intervened and repopularized him as 'Puck'.) This is because the early Catholic Church adopted the classical Roman method of conquering cultures by incorporating them; rather than simply denying all the established beliefs of a people they were converting, they reconned the pre-existing religion and explained how the characters from it would fit into a Christian paradigm.

Storyteller's mention of Dionysus having a similar makeup is a reference to the story of his birth. Dionysus's mother was a mortal princess, but she was killed while carrying, and so Zeus (the father) sewed the fetus into his own body and carried Dionysus to term. Thus Dionysus is a full-god (part of the Olympian aristocracy) because he had a god for a father and a 'mother' (carried within Zeus's own body), as well as the mortal mother.

While the term 'witch-breed' is a Marvel invention for the purposes of the 1602 universe, the idea of witches begetting children by devils comes from real-world lore, as described in Reginald Scot's The Discoverie of Witchcraft. The book was first drafted in the 1590s, and it explains (and debunks) the witch-related myths prevalent in that time period.

This really should have been part of chapter 38 and I'm unhappy with where I split it. I was at my normal 9-10 page length with chapter 38, and the organizer part of my brain said 'this is a complete chapter!' but I should have told organizer-brain to shut up because the story-segment wasn't properly wrapped. So rather than making the problem worse by splitting another chapter in an inappropriate juncture, I'm going to leave this a shorty and start out clean for chapter 40.
“What if, for one reason or another, I need a spider who has not been brought into this to trust me? Is there a secret hand-shake or something?” Storyteller asked.

Mister Nancy raised an eyebrow, considering that, and then glanced at Karn. “What do you think? Can something be arranged?”

“Not a hand-shake. A vocal trigger, though,” Karn said, crawling through the crisscrossing threads toward the center of the Web. “I could weave a mantra stabilimentum that the totems would instinctively recognize.”

“Good morning!” Storyteller called, hopping through the portal into the Great Web’s hall.

“Good morning,” Karn responded in a far more reserved tone.

“Welcome, weaver,” Mister Nancy greeted from against one of the pillars.

“Mister Nancy,” Storyteller nodded, giving him a curious look. “Are you playing teacher’s assistant today, or is there other business?”

“The business of gods,” Mister Nancy replied with a wide smirk. “I have been a very busy one, these recent days.”

“Oh yes?” Storyteller asked, tilting her head.

“I have called for the Tricksters’ Truce,” Mister Nancy said.

“Have you? The Truce is reserved for exigent circumstances and generally dissolved as soon as the danger is passed,” Storyteller noted, watching him curiously. “The sort of time-frame you spoke of the other day would be unprecedented.”

“I would think that we find ourselves now in the most exigent of circumstances,” Mister Nancy replied. “And our current situation, quite unprecedented indeed. I have called. Do you answer, trickster?”

“I answer,” Storyteller nodded.

“Excellent,” Mister Nancy’s smirk broadened a little more. “I wonder if you might be willing to speak to the Monkey King? He has a spotted history with spiders, and it would be a shame for the conversation to break down before it has begun.”

Storyteller tilted her head and considered that. “Then it might rub him the wrong way that a spider made the call... Who has answered already? Anybody he respects?”
“Besides you, you mean? Inari has answered, he’ll appreciate that,” Mister Nancy replied, seeming to consider. “Also Khonshu, Bres and Turoq. I’ve still many others yet to commune with.”

Storyteller nodded again and mulled that over. “Are the mortal trickster totems being included?”

“The spiders are,” Mister Nancy agreed. “Others will answer for themselves on a case by case basis.”

“Okay, but when I first met Julia, it seemed implied that many of the spiders are being left in the dark for now, to just do whatever a spider does without the distraction of all this scariness. Is that so?”

Mister Nancy nodded. “For the time being, for most of them, allowing the totems to continue their day to day lives unburdened is best. The majority are unlikely to do anything that would violate the Truce as a matter of character. And for the few of more violent temperament, I am making contact,” he explained.

“But that may become a problem for me, as I go about Battleworld,” Storyteller pointed out. “For example, had I happened to be in male seeming the other day, Peter would have recognized my face and taken me for an enemy when he saw me,” she explained. “What if, for one reason or another, I need a spider who has not been brought into it to trust me? Is there a secret hand-shake or something?”

Mister Nancy raised an eyebrow, considering that, and then glanced at Karn. “What do you think? Can something be arranged?”

“Not a hand-shake. An aural trigger, though,” Karn said, crawling through the crisscrossing threads toward the center of the Web. “I could weave a mantra stabilimentum that the totems would instinctively recognize.”

“Some pig!” Storyteller exclaimed, bouncing on the balls of her feet. Karn glanced back over his shoulder at her, stilling; if his face were visible, it probably would have read bafflement. “Make it ‘some pig’!”

“… No.”

“Come ooooooon!”

“No,” Karn repeated.

Mister Nancy chuckled and shook his head. “Amusing as your suggestion may be, Storyteller, better if they cannot easily identify the source. We would not want them to mistake why the chosen phrase echoes familiar to their ears,” he said, and Storyteller deflated. He clicked his tongue thoughtfully and glanced back at Karn. “‘Welcome, weaver’.”

Karn nodded. “Simple and specific without being overtly suspicious to an outsider,” he noted and started picking and fussing at the Web.

“Excellent. Then I shall return to my business outside,” Mister Nancy decided, slinking out onto a tension thread and, with a flourishing flick of the wrist, he pulled open a portal. “Have a good lesson, Storyteller. I shall see you again soon.”

“Happy travels,” Storyteller cast him a nod as Mister Nancy hopped down through the portal and it closed itself behind him. She walked carefully deeper into the dais, coming to a stop beneath Karn to watch him work on the stabilimentum. “So what will happen when I speak this mantra?” she asked.
“The totem you address it toward will feel their connection to you through the Great Web,” he replied, attention on his work as he knit the threads together so tightly they became opaque. “The same way that their connection to the Web warns them of danger, it will, in this instance, make them feel that they can trust you.”

“Convenient plot device,” Storyteller said, studying the shapes Karn was making. Definitely text, and just as definitely not English or any other modern language. The forms were vaguely familiar to Storyteller, but of a language so ancient she wouldn’t have been able to decipher it without a pile of very rare reference books and a lot of scratch paper. Karn used both his hands and two of the mechanical legs to form the intricate knotting, and Storyteller frowned slightly as she watched. “Wouldn’t that be easier without your gloves?” she asked. The gloves in question appeared to be kid leather and fine craftsmanship, but even so, they must impede his dexterity a little.

“... Perhaps,” Karn replied dispassionately.

“Why wear them?” Storyteller asked. “It’s not cold in here, and the webs are all organic compounds, it’s not as if you’re touching anything toxic.”

“... It’s fine,” Karn said quietly, entirely failing to answer the inquiry.

“You don’t have an inch of skin showing anywhere,” Storyteller noted.

“I suppose not.”

“Why do you wear the mask?”

“... It doesn’t matter,” Karn said.

“It must,” Storyteller rebutted, frowning up at him. “If you were a human, I’d say scopophobia, but you’re not, you’re mythoform, and therefor it must mean something.”

“... None of this is relevant to your lessons,” Karn deflected again.

“But it is, because reading and writing go hand-in-hand, and I’m having difficulty reading you,” Storyteller explained. Karn stayed silent, continuing to work while Storyteller studied him for a few more minutes. Then she reached up. Karn jerked his hands quickly away before she could touch him, leaning back and drawing his arms toward his core. They stared silently at each other for a minute or two. “... You can’t get anywhere near the totems without siphoning from them, can you?”

“Please move. I’m not finished,” Karn said quietly.

“What’s the distance? How far away do you have to keep yourself to make sure they’re safe?”

“Please move.”

“I’m not a totem,” Storyteller said softly, staring back at him, staying where she was.

“... Please move.”

She sighed through her nose and let her hand drop. Karn went back to work without another word. “A teacher is supposed to answer questions, you know,” Storyteller pointed out.

“... Those questions have nothing to do with your lessons,” Karn said.

“Yes they do,” Storyteller retorted. “I’m not a totem. My connection to the web isn’t organic and intuitive like a totem’s. I may have an affinity, but it’s one that has to be deliberately cultivated. The
spiders are very nice and all, but there’s a reason Anansi couldn’t teach me himself. Because he never learned, he was born just knowing. You’re not a totem either. You had to learn to spin.”

“... And I will facilitate your learning to the best of my abilities,” Karn said, keeping his face aimed toward the glyphs he was making, pretending to ignore her even while giving verbal responses.

“I need to learn about you, because even though Anansi has the same titles as me, as weaving goes, you’re the one most like me,” Storyteller put her hands in her pockets and frowned up at him.

Karn continued working diligently away, giving every appearance that he was ignoring her, but after an uncomfortably long pause, he murmured, “It varies... Contiguous exposure for a brief period is generally passable. Prolonged proximity is better avoided.”

“And you can’t touch them?”

“It’s better avoided,” Karn repeated.

“Is that because you osmosis energy off of them involuntarily, or because being close to one of them gives you cravings?” Storyteller asked.

“Draining a totem to the point of lethality takes a conscious decision. But my physique and substance are contrived to absorb totemic essence... I am a sponge for it,” Karn explained, voice losing volume bit by bit. “While a totem does not necessarily risk serious injury by maintaining prolonged contact, they will begin to feel fatigued and weakened.”

“How have you been living since you came here? Are the stronger ones donating--”

“No,” Karn’s shoulders and arms drew in a little. “... While I’m in contact with the Great Web, its energies flow through me. My task sustains me.”

“... And chains you,” Storyteller noted quietly. “You’re left with the choice between never leaving this temple or going back to the carnivorous lifestyle.”

Karn was quiet for a minute or two as he kept working. “I spent half a millennia wandering the multiverse in exile. Alone. I think I’ve seen enough of it.”

“But it’s the same thing, just the reverse. Being told where you can’t go,” Storyteller pointed out.

“No one has given me edicts. I chose to serve the Web,” Karn shook his head.

Storyteller watched him work for a while. “Why were you in exile?” she asked.

“I... hesitated, during what was meant to be my first real hunt. My mother was a casualty of that reluctance,” Karn explained quietly. “Father banished me, telling me that I would be welcomed back when I had proved my dedication to our family.”

“But I suppose nothing was ever good enough,” Storyteller said.

“... There was... little contact. Father never spoke to me again after that day. I encountered my siblings on rare occasions. Portals were opened before me as I completed each hunt, and I entered each and every one wondering if it would take me home...” his voice faded into a murmur.

“But they never did, right? In half a millennia. Because your family didn’t want you back,” Storyteller mused.

“It was Braddock who opened the portal which returned me to this hall,” Karn said, his hands stilling
over his work for a just a moment before resuming.

“Braddock? Captain Britain?”

Karn shook his head. “A different Braddock. One of the totems.”

“I suppose there must have been more than a few across the multiverse,” Storyteller nodded slowly, gazing at the coarsely knotted glyphs.

“Yes.”

“And so you were taken under wing of your own prey,” Storyteller mused.

“... You understand the difference it can make,” Karn said softly. “After centuries of scorn, to be offered a token of compassion from the very last place you ever expected it.”

“... Yes,” Storyteller agreed, looking down. “Being nurtured and embraced by the prey... it redefines your entire world.”

Quiet stretched between them as Karn finished the stabilimentum. Finally, he seemed satisfied with the results and turned back to Storyteller. “I have found making repairs to the Web to be very instructive as a way of learning,” he said. “The Web wants to be whole, and it will guide your hands.”

“Question,” Storyteller interjected.

“Yes?”

“I used the Web to find Ultimation’s Loki the other day. Can it be used to find others?” she asked.

“Your predecessor?”

“Maybe,” Storyteller muttered.

“Julia Carpenter said you would ask,” Karn noted, scuttling through the Web. “She also said that the answer was ‘no’.”

Storyteller wrinkled her nose. “Why?”

“Because that is not how you’re meant to find him.”

“I make my own fate,” Storyteller said, narrowing her eyes.

“You will, eventually. But you still lack that level of skill,” Karn replied. “Which is why it is crucial for you to put effort into your lessons.”

“Could you find him?” Storyteller demanded, glaring up at him. “That’s not a request, that’s a question: do you have the ability to find him?”

“I am not closely connected to him.”

“That’s not an answer,” Storyteller growled.

“No. I could not,” Karn said.

Storyteller pursed her lips for a moment and then nodded. “Where are we starting today?” she asked.
Storyteller found Wukong leaning against the trunk of a xi shu, whistling a lazy tune, with a small bird perched on one shoulder, another on his raised knee, and two more pecking at the ground around him. “What a charmer you are,” she smirked, hanging back a little as the birds eyed her shrewdly.

“I’m excellent at making friends,” Wukong agreed, petting a finger down the back of the little yellow bird on his knee.

“I hear you’re not so good with spiders, though.”

Wukong wrinkled his nose. “They test me, they get what’s coming to them,” he said and gave a little shrug. “Why?”

“Apparently Anansi had some reservations about approaching you himself,” Storyteller said, moving slowly and settling herself down on the ground as the little birds watched. “He asked me to speak to you.”

“The Vodu trickster?” Wukong asked. “What did he want?”

“To call the Truce.”

“Oh.” Wukong frowned softly, thinking that over. “I take it you answered.”

“I did,” Storyteller nodded.

“Anyone else?”

“Inari, Kohnshu, Bres, Turoq. Those were the ones he mentioned, anyway. Might be more,” Storyteller replied.

“... I like Inari. Throws pretty good parties,” Wukong muttered and then sighed. “I answer,” he decided. “Is there a thing going on then? Are we organizing something?”

“I think for now it’s more just a truce-truce,” Storyteller shrugged and shook her head. “The spiders are trying to figure something out, since networking is kind of their thing and all, but I think they haven’t come up with the answers they need to put together a solid ‘plan’ yet.”

“All the spiders?” Wukong asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Yeah. Anansi’s organizing them,” Storyteller agreed.

“Even the jerk ones?”

“He mentioned he was trying to make contact with all the jerk ones and get them to fall in line. I guess he’s taken responsibility for policing his totem-siblings,” Storyteller nodded.

Wukong grimaced and snorted, “And Lady knows they need policing.”

Storyteller laughed. “Well if your primary experience has been with the demon ones, I suppose that would leave a bad impression.”

“They keep eating people!” Wukong protested, startling the birds, who took flight of him.

Storyteller tsked. “Very naughty.”
Fallen gardenia blossoms were now projectile weapons (though not especially good ones) in the back garden, as three children had become embroiled in some manner of war which involved a great deal of shrieking. “This is all amiable, right?” Storyteller asked, frowning slightly as she observed.

“Oh yes. The tone changes if they become genuinely upset,” Arcadia-Loki nodded serenely, a cup of tea clasped in her hand.

“I guess I haven’t learned to differentiate tones,” Storyteller chewed on her lip.

“You’ll develop an ear for it in time,” Arcadia-Loki assured her. “It’s something you learn naturally as you listen.”

“That kind of learning is frustrating,” Storyteller complained with a sigh. “Explicit learning I can practice and fret until I’ve got it right. Tacit learning I have to just... let happen. I’d rather swim laps than let the current take me.”

Arcadia-Loki chuckled softly. “Mm, that’s your masculine side, craving delineated control and domination over your surroundings and circumstances.”

“I thought it was youthful impatience.”

“There’s that too,” Arcadia-Loki agreed. “But patience is a feminine virtue, borne and nourished by the rhythms of nature, the promenade of seasons and the lunar waltz, swaying the winds and seas.”

“Oh you’re being very witchy now,” Storyteller noted with a grin.

“Well, there might be some grounds for such an allegation,” Arcadia-Loki smirked down at her tea.

“You are so very feminine,” Storyteller mused, studying Arcadia-Loki’s delicate grip on the bone-china cup, complete with a dignified pinkie-flip. “I suppose being a goddess tied to something like the lunar cycle would tend to do that... Even if my predecessors weren’t really dual-aspects, I think we’ve always been somewhat in the middle. They all favored a masculine seeming, but were witchy and foppish too.”

“Asgard was always quite categorical when it came to gender. Strength of arm is a man’s right, mysticism a woman’s,” Arcadia-Loki murmured, eyes distant and distracted. “Your predecessors had a feminine inclination toward mysticism, but...” She frowned slightly, seeming to think. “But they had to protect themselves? Is that it...?” Her hands shifted around her teacup, cradling it. “... It is a woman’s right to be protected... To have that right stripped and stolen, is she no longer a woman...?” she whispered.

“I think that must be a more advanced class of post-feminist philosophy than I’ve taken,” Storyteller said, tilting her head and studying Arcadia-Loki closely. The slightly dazed moue suggested that she had stumbled upon a gap and was trying to puzzle out what piece of information belonged in it. “... You’re supposed to have a partner-consort,” Storyteller said softly. “You weren’t scripted as a solo act.”

Arcadia-Loki’s lashes drooped and her lips pursed. “... Husband... What was your name...?”

“I’ve learned nothing useful about the amnesia...” Storyteller said, feeling a pang of guilt at having put that expression on Arcadia-Loki’s face. “But it seems most of the mystical maverick types have
taken notice that something is off, and the call’s been put out.”

“The call?” Arcadia-Loki asked, looking up again.

“The Truce.”

“Who called?”

“Anansi.”

Arcadia-Loki studied her silently for a moment and then frowned. “Did you answer?”

“I did,” Storyteller nodded.

“But would such a conspiracy not conflict with your other loyalty?” Arcadia-Loki asked, raising an eyebrow.

“I support that which is good and healthy for Battleworld. I lend my power to harmony. I see no conflict,” Storyteller replied.

Arcadia-Loki nodded slowly. “I answer the call, my sister,” she said.

Storyteller reached across the table and Arcadia-Loki set her teacup down to reach back, clasping her hands.

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Serrure was toying with a washcloth, pinching the corners and scooping upward to see the fabric balloon out taut while a steady trickle leaked from the base, when a gentle knock sounded and the door opened. He turned his head to see Storyteller step into the bathroom and shut them in, then she padded over and knelt next to the tub. “Hello,” he said, puzzled and curious by the unusual intrusion.

“Hello, Lamb,” Storyteller replied with a gentle smile and then tilted her head slightly. “Do you know that you’re a trickster-god?”

“Yes,” Serrure nodded.

“Do you know what that means?”

He frowned slightly and thought about it. “That I... trick people?” he tried; while he knew what he was, the concept was vaguely defined in his mind.

“That’s one part of it,” Storyteller agreed with an indulgent smirk. “There’s a lot of characteristics to the archetype, I suppose that should be a lesson soon. But all trickster-gods have a specific function within a mythos. A job,” she said, reaching out and combing back a lock of his hair with her fingers. “It’s one of the most vital roles. To break what doesn’t bend. What do you think of that?”

Serrure considered for a moment, his brow pinching as he fidgeted with the washcloth. “... It sounds bad,” he decided, an uncomfortable, tight feeling in his stomach.

“Some people think so, mostly people who are very concerned about control,” Storyteller said, letting her arm rest on the rim of the bath. “But imagine if it were the case that everybody had to walk on their hands and knees. Imagine that it was this way simply because it always had been this way. And then one day, one person stood up tall and walked upon their feet. That person would be a trickster, because they had challenged the way of things. And then if all the other people took note of what the trickster was doing, and realized that they too could walk upon their feet, well now the rule
“And so if the trickster breaks a rule, but it’s a stupid rule, then they’re not bad?” Serrure asked.

Storyteller nodded. “There are many rules in the world that exist simply because of tradition, because nobody has ever really thought to change them. A trickster’s place in the grand scheme is to look around and discover things that do not make sense, and to poke at them,” she emphasized her explanation with a poke at Serrure’s ribs and he giggled. “Every mythos has a trickster, Lamb,” she said softly, and there was a shadow of something serious in her eyes.

“... You don’t usually do lessons at bath time;” Serrure noted, the peculiarity stirring some unease in him.

“Because I need to talk to you about something that is only for trickster-gods,” Storyteller said.

Serrure considered that, nibbling on his lip. “Lockheed must not hear?” he asked.

“It is not that I don’t trust Lockheed, or that I believe he would be upset, but rather that this is simply not for him. This is special, just for tricksters,” Storyteller explained.

The notion of a very special secret was deeply intriguing and Serrure nodded and held his breath with anticipation.

“First, you know that there are many pantheons, and they have similarities and overlaps, but they each stand as a separate mythos,” Storyteller said and Serrure nodded. “And each of these pantheons holds such great and terrible power, if they were to go to war against each other, the consequences would be dire. Two pantheons in conflict could scour an entire continent. More than two, trigger a worldwide extinction event,” she explained, voice and face grave.

“Then they must not,” Serrure said.

Storyteller nodded. “And so the Council of God-Heads was formed to maintain peace between the pantheons, even if and when a pantheon is not at peace within itself,” she said. “This is the Great Council and the Great Truce. But where do you think tricksters fit into this, Lamb?”

Serrure pursed his lips and thought about it. “... Trickster-gods don’t follow the rules,” he muttered.

“No. Only our own conscience (where applicable),” Storyteller agreed.

“... So then, trickster-gods are not part of the Great Council’s truce?” he asked, looking up at her for confirmation.

“That’s right. Because trickster-gods will not let anyone, not even their all-fathers, speak on their behalf. We speak for ourselves,” Storyteller said seriously. “But sometimes something very important is happening, something which reaches across many pantheons and concerns even the tricksters. When that happens, sometimes they will call their own truce.”

“A tricksters’ truce?” Serrure asked.

“Yes. Sometimes they are small, just two or three trickster-gods joining together in cooperation. Sometimes, if something very big and important is happening, it may gather together the trickster-gods from many pantheons.” Storyteller reached out and cupped Serrure’s cheek, her brow pinching for a brief moment and then smoothing out. “There is a very wise trickster-god, from a very ancient land, who believes that the world might be sick, and he has called for a truce so that we can put our efforts towards figuring out why and healing it.”
Serrure sucked in his lip and bit it for a moment before asking, “Does the wise trickster need me to help?”

Storyteller frowned slightly and then shook her head. “I think first, for now, he’s just trying to establish peace. He wants to know who is willing to be peaceable. You remember the Big Bad Wolf?”

Serrure shuddered and nodded.

“We want to figure out who’s going to be bad-tempered like him, and who’s going to be cooperative. You see, it’s difficult to go forward or make any plans before you know who you can trust,” Storyteller explained.

“I see.”

“And so today, Anansi the Trickster asked me if I would be part of this Tricksters’ Truce. And I answered that I would,” she said and then stared into Serrure’s eyes very seriously. “But I am only allowed to answer for myself. Every trickster-god must answer for themselves.”

“... You mean that I must give my own answer too,” Serrure realized.

Storyteller nodded. “I can’t answer for you.”

“I want to help! I want to be part of the Tricksters’ Truce!” he said, splashing a little in excitement.

“And so you are, mon petite Serrure,” Storyteller said, climbing to her feet and leaning over to kiss his forehead. “But you must remember, the Truce is very very secret. Only tricksters may know about it.”

“Okay,” Serrure agreed with a nod, grinning up at her. “I can keep a secret.”

“I know,” she smiled and ruffled his hair, then walked back toward the door. “Finish your bath now. You’re going to get all pruney.”

Chapter End Notes

The Tricksters' Truce idea was inspired by the 2006 Ares series, in which Hermes and Inari conspire together to get both of their pantheons off their prideful asses to collectively put down Amatsu-Mikaboshi. In Marvel pantheons, apparently Hermes is officially a trickster-god (shrug). Amatsu-Mikaboshi is the god of primordial void-chaos (which is apparently now evil? also shrug).

Trickster gods Mister Nancy mentioned:
Inari: Shinto god of luck (both good and bad) and rice. While in old-timey Europe wealth was measured in pounds of gold, in old-timey Japan, it was measured in pounds of rice, therefore the same god oversaw rice and fortune. Foxes were his messengers/agents in the material world and tricksters because in a country with a limited amount of farmable land, for one person to gain wealth, another had to lose it.
Khonshu: Egyptian god of the moon, night travel, fertility and smiting the enemies of the Pharaoh. He has a relatively small part in the old epics, but in Marvel-mythology he's a major player and seems to be considered somewhat trickster-ish.
Bres: Mm, it looks like Marvel might have written the Formians as demons rather than gods, and I'm not completely sure Bres has a real backstory in Marvel, so I'm just going to assume actual-mythology Bres. Quick breakdown: The Formians are the old gods of Ireland, they were supplanted by the Tuatha Dé Danann who came to Ireland from the sea mist, and there's a back and forth power struggle between the two, similar to the Aesir and Vanir. The Dana tend to be portrayed as the heroes and the Formians as the antagonists, but their actions against each other are pretty comparable. Over all neither really seem significantly more good or evil than the other, so it's kind of like the Dana are the home-team and that's why we root for them, or maybe they're just a little more human-friendly than the Formians. Bres and Lugh are the two half-Dana/half-Formian characters, Bres politically/culturally favors the Formians and Lugh favors the Dana. Turoq: As far as I can tell, Marvel's completely made up the names for their Native American and First Nations gods. Some of them loosely resemble real gods, a lot of them are more just archetypes of hippie-washed 'tribalism' kind of... stuff. The 'Inua Gods' apparently include any Native gods from Canada, the Pacific Northwest and Greenland (this is Snowbird's pantheon). For most of these gods, all we have is a single picture and one-sentence description from a 'pedia on Marvel's pantheons that came out a few years back. Turoq is referred to as 'the most skilled shapeshifter' and 'shaper of life' and he's drawn in all black with a cape that looks maybe-feathered. I think he's supposed to be Raven (major deity of the Pacific Northwest), so that's what I'm going with.

**Stabilimentum**: Some species of orb-weavers put a decoration in the middle of their webs (best theory is that it keeps birds from flying through and ruining them). Argiope (super-cute spiders with stripy stockings) are called 'writer spiders' because their stabilimentum look like scribbled hand-writing.

My mother thinks it's really weird when I talk about cute spiders.

True Believers familiar with the post-Secret Wars series *Web Warriors* might notice that my statement about the Web feeding Karn may(*) contradict the canon. I'd already made a lot of my decisions about mechanics for this fic before that series ran (or when it was still in the first couple issues), and I've decided not to let retroactive canon knock me around. So there will be a couple more plot-points down the road that contradict that series as well.

(*)A little unclear, because the point at which he gets weakened and needs an energy transfusion in the series is when he's been separated from the Web.

"And Lady knows...": I decided that when Wukong swears, he swears by Kuan Yin.

I worry that Arcadia-Loki's musings may rub the wrong way, but that will tend to happen in discussions of classical symbolism versus contemporary philosophy. We have 40,000 years of symbolism, and while there were gradual variations throughout that, in the last 200 years the changes have gotten fast and furious. Arcadia-Loki's statements were based in classical symbolic motifs of gender, along the lines of Platonic Dualism or Confucianism, rather than the actual ability/strength of the sexes. Being a symbol herself, the elements that define her are symbolic, and so she is painted with those symbols (like the way gods are pictured in art carrying specific 'attributes').
“You look lost,” the man noted, raising an eyebrow. “Or rather, I suppose you look like you’re looking for something.”

“True,” Storyteller agreed, looking the man over more carefully. There was something faintly familiar about him, but Storyteller couldn’t quite place it. “Though I’m not sure I know exactly what.”

“Oh dear, that is a difficulty then,” the man chuckled slightly; he had a warm charm about him that was rather beguiling. “Perhaps it was a decent cup of coffee?” he suggested.

Storyteller tilted his head slightly. “Are you hitting on me?”

Storyteller was three domains away from having everything from Paradise to Doomstadt cataloged. Being able to cross a solid block off of his to-do map would be a satisfying illusion of accomplishment, and he decided to take the one bordering England and sweep eastward toward Manhattan Kingdom (from home to home) to plug up the gaps and pretend that this was an important achievement. He sighed, crossing his arms and looking down at his map spread out on the kitchen table, cobalt blue wafer-marbles sitting on top of the already-searched domains. He’d been at this for almost a month and searched only a quarter of his map. And that wasn’t even counting any of the scary stuff below the Shield. A quarter of the map which the Loki he really needed to find hadn’t been part of.

And searching was going to get slower, with Storyteller now having to devote half of his days to lessons with his various masters. But those were important too. Karn hadn’t said that the Web couldn’t be used to find the Third, he’d said that he couldn’t do it and that Storyteller didn’t have the skill. All-Knowing Julia said that Storyteller wasn’t supposed to find the Third that way, but if there
was one thing Storyteller knew about Lokis, it was that telling them they’re not supposed to do something is the very best way to make them do it. So now it was a race, would Explorer-Storyteller find the Third or would Weaver-Storyteller?

“And Lokis are good at games,” he murmured and set his lips into a confident smirk that was mostly bravado meant to fool himself. He pressed a finger against the unexplored domain just to the southeast. “Supremia, we gonna have words,” he announced and teleported.

Supremia, like Utopolis, was overseen by the Squadron Supreme. Unlike Utopolis, Storyteller could see litter that had missed a garbage can on the corner of the street and graffiti dotted here and there along buildings. That was comforting. He’d teleported himself to the sidewalk across the street from a small campus of government buildings, and the people wandering past on both sides looked fully at ease and only the normal amount of law-abiding.

“My goodness, you’re a tall one, aren’t you.”

Storyteller started and turned around to find a red-head smirking amicably up at him. “I suppose so,” he agreed with a shrug, wondering if stopping strangers to strike up friendly banter was a typical custom in this domain.

“You look lost,” the man noted, raising an eyebrow. “Or rather, I suppose you look like you’re looking for something.”

“Also true,” Storyteller agreed, looking the man over more carefully. There was something faintly familiar about him, but Storyteller couldn’t quite place it. “Though I’m not sure I know exactly what.”

“Oh dear, that is a difficulty then,” the man chuckled slightly; he had a warm charm about him that was rather beguiling. “Perhaps it was a decent cup of coffee?” he suggested.

Storyteller tilted his head slightly. “Are you hitting on me?”

The man’s eyebrows rose and he looked genuinely startled for a second before he let out a startled bark of laughter. “I think I might be a little too old for you, son,” he said, shaking his head and grinning in amusement. “Sometimes a cup of coffee really is just a cup of coffee.”

“I’m sorry, my mistake,” Storyteller said, biting his lip and grinning a little because the man’s smile was rather infectious.

“I apologize if I sounded forward. I didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable.”

“Actually, strangers seem to have a habit of being forward with me,” Storyteller noted, considering the man again, wondering if there was more to him than simply a friendly stranger. “Perhaps it’s me. But actually, coffee sounds nice.”

“I own a place around the block,” the man said, gesturing. “Doesn’t open until eleven, so it’ll be quiet for a while yet. I’m Raphael, by the way,” he gave Storyteller another thoroughly pleasant smile.

“Storyteller,” Storyteller replied, following along beside him as Raphael lead the way. “Do you often invite strangers in for coffee before opening?” he wondered.

“Not always,” Raphael shrugged. “But you looked like someone who doesn’t know where they ought to be,” he said, glancing up at Storyteller again.
“That’s true, I guess,” Storyteller nodded. “But as you say, I am young, isn’t it normal for the young to stumble around a bit blindly as they seek out their place in the world?”

“Oh I like you,” Raphael said, grin spreading wider as he glanced up at Storyteller out of the corner of his eye. “Simultaneously self-aware and lost. You must be quite the contrarian philosopher, Storyteller.”

“I am an explorer, literally and existentially,” Storyteller replied, standing to the side and waiting as Raphael unlocked the glass door of a tiny cafe tucked into the long embankment of brick, the unbroken facade painted over in so many warring colors as it faded from one business to the next.

“Ah? And what sort of exploration are you on?” Raphael asked, holding the door for him and then following Storyteller inside.


“Have a seat, I’ll put on some coffee,” he said, pointing to a table near the back, out of direct view from the windows so as not to contradict the ‘sorry we’re closed’ sign in the door. “So then, are you taking a year off school to backpack across the continent?” he called as he went behind the counter.

Storyteller considered the question for a moment as he slid into the booth-seat. It wasn’t a peculiar question, except that it was, because that sort of casual travel was prohibited for the majority of Latverion’s denizens, which was quite common knowledge. Raphael had some subconscious vestige that backpacking across Europe was a thing; was it simply so inconsequential that his mind didn’t analyze the strangeness, or had his memories rationalized that the travel-ban was recent? “I haven’t taken the time off, actually. I am a student and a full-time employee,” Storyteller replied.

“Goodness, you must have quite the busy schedule,” Raphael noted as he set up a large siphon brewer. “How do you have time for wandering?”

“Wandering is my job,” Storyteller explained. “I’m with the Doomstadt Ministry of Sorcery. The Holy Eye is kept quite busy with his duties in Doomstadt, but it’s important for him to have the pulse of Latverion, to understand the disposition of the domains and needs of their people. Much of my duty as his apprentice is to explore the world and talk to its peoples.” He smiled as Raphael glanced over his shoulder, pausing to look Storyteller over again as he lit the brewer off. “So I’m on the clock right now, talking to an ordinary citizen, learning about Supremia in ways its baron and the local propaganda machine can’t teach me.”

“... That sounds a bit intimidating, to be honest,” Raphael noted, leaning against the counter and watching Storyteller while he waited for the water to heat. “An intimidating task for yourself, but also one is a bit intimidated to find oneself under your scrutiny.”

“Mm, it’s not really scrutiny on an individual basis,” Storyteller said, carefully considering his words. “It’s more trying to understand the domain as a whole. Domains’ governments enforce their own laws, and enforcement of Doom Law is the duty of Thors, I have no part or interest in any of that. I simply absorb the ambiance.”

“You’ve no part in the politics of Doomstadt or laws of Doomgard?” Raphael asked.

“I’m quite new at this... I imagine if there were some instance where a matter of policy were in question, and the Lord Doom and the Holy Eye needed a perspective regarding social climate, I may be asked to give one,” Storyteller tilted his head slightly, thinking it over. “Mostly I am simply a surveyor though.”
“Well it sounds fascinating.”

“I enjoy it. I get to see interesting places and meet interesting people,” Storyteller said.

“I shall take that as a compliment,” Raphael smirked.

“It is,” Storyteller agreed with a nod. “One of the things that has pleased me most as I’ve gone about, is finding that by in large, it seems to me that people are good. Evil is an aberration.” He folded his arms on the table and leaned against them slightly as he continued to muse. “And don’t get me wrong, while basically good, it is quite natural that people are also a little bit hedonistic and a little bit selfish and a little bit mischievous. I don’t think this makes them less good, but maybe that’s why leaders and laws are a necessity, to keep it all at reasonable levels... When not properly tended, the fire will burn itself out or burn the house down.”

“Well said,” Raphael smiled warmly at him and then turned around to glance at the brewer, beginning to boil, and he moved over to the grinder. Storyteller waited quietly as the machine crunched away at coffee beans for a minute. “So then am I to be the cultural ambassador to Supremia this morning?” Raphael asked after switching the grinder off.

“Well, you’re chatty, which is perhaps the very best quality in a cultural ambassador,” Storyteller noted with a grin.

Raphael chuckled. “I am delighted to be of service then. Is there anything specific you were looking to discover?”

Storyteller hummed thoughtfully, considering his angle. “As I mentioned, I am part of the Ministry of Sorcery, and so my focus is quite esoteric compared to a scientific surveyor,” he explained. “My interests are both in understanding the disposition of your land, and also in cataloging mystical elements of it.”

“That’s fascinating, but I’m not sure how much use I can be, as I’m not a sorcerer of any kind,” Raphael said, turning off the gas and letting the coffee filter into the pot.

“No, and I may look for one if I should see the need for a deeper dive, but this is mostly a preliminary survey to get a general feel of things, and so common knowledge is all I’m looking for today,” Storyteller replied with a casual shrug. “So in that vein I should ask, does the average citizen of Supremia recognize any lesser-gods? Either as objects of worship or simply beings which exist?”

Raphael raised an eyebrow, picking up the pot and two cups as he came back around the counter and made his way to the table. “That’s a bit loaded.”

“Lord Doom allows for the worship of lesser-gods, so long as it does not preclude or contradict loyalty to Himself,” Storyteller shook his head. “And as I said, it wouldn’t be my duty to enforce that loyalty either way.”

“I see,” Raphael nodded, setting the pot down on the table and sliding into the booth across from Storyteller. He poured a cup and passed it to Storyteller as he seemed to consider. “There are some who consider Hyperion a god, although I don’t think I’m sold on that, and I’m not aware of him ever calling himself one,” he said.

“Are there any other metas who self-identify as gods? Either ‘heroes’ or ‘villains’?” Storyteller asked.

“Oh, you know, the occasional super-villain might declare it in a moment of bravado, but I don’t think most of them really believe it themselves,” Raphael waived dismissively.
This lent confirmation to the fact that Storyteller had not felt any narrative tugs since arriving. “It certainly is a good way to establish the size of one’s ego,” he noted.

“And naturally their claim to godhood is always on their ability to take lives,” Raphael sighed, expression sinking and eyes sad.

“Well that’s a curious point,” Storyteller hummed thoughtfully. “On erroneous claims of godhood, yes, but isn’t it odd that claims of goddesshood instead always seem to be based upon the ability to give pleasure?”

“Oh dear, you’re right, aren’t you.” Raphael bit his lip and wrinkled his nose. “That’s a bit disturbing, isn’t it? Well, I suppose I shall just have to take comfort in knowing that I have been a man for many years and never put on any self-aggrandizing airs about destroying people’s lives and whatnot,” he sighed over the lip of his cup before taking another sip of coffee. “Nor do I have a preternatural talent for taking them, so far as I know.”

Storyteller tilted his head slightly, something had been niggling at him that he couldn’t quite pin down, and Raphael’s casual statement cut a little deeper into it. “How many?” he asked. “Years that you’ve been a man?” he clarified.

Raphael’s eyes glanced up to meet Storyteller’s, and he was quiet for a moment. He set the cup back down on the table while continuing to hold Storyteller’s eyes. “About twenty,” he said. Which was interesting, because Raphael appeared to be in his forties. After another brief pause, Raphael’s skin rippled and shifted to a deep indigo hue and the line of his jaw softened.

Storyteller realized why Raphael looked familiar as he found himself suddenly looking at Mystique. He hadn’t changed the length or style of his hair, and the suit didn’t change at all (apparently it was real) giving him a teddy-girl style that Storyteller decided he found more attractive than the skin tight, slitted dresses of his world’s Mystique. “Well you’re quite handsome either way,” he noted. “I like to believe the same is true of myself.” He shifted to female.

Raphael’s eyebrows rose in surprise and his mouth opened very slightly for a moment before his lips pulled into a grin, and he reached out to lightly touch Storyteller’s cheek, eyes scanning over her face and taking her in. “Well look at you...”

“I’m not a true polymorph. I’m always myself,” Storyteller said.

“Storyteller, that’s a gift, not a shortcoming,” Raphael said firmly, dropping his hand to catch hers, rested on the table, and squeezing it. “That’s a gift not everybody is born with,” he noted, a flicker of melancholy in his eyes. “It was a great irony that I could be anyone, yet no matter who I was, I was never comfortable in my own body.” His gaze lowered to the table as he leaned back in his seat and sighed. “The APA calls it ‘polymorphic dysphoria syndrome’, co-morbid or leading to ‘polymorphic identity disorder’... The late love of my life told me that peace isn’t found, it’s built, and so I must build myself a home to always come back to.” He shifted back to his apparently preferred form.

“I’m sorry for your loss, and I’m glad that you built a home,” Storyteller said softly.

Raphael smiled sadly. “Home is a fickle thing... It seems that every time I think I’m there, I find myself soon set adrift again.” He shook his head and sighed. “But at least I have myself now, which I didn’t always.”

Storyteller nodded, returning to a male seeming himself. “I do know a thing or two about having to build a ‘self’,” he mused. “I find myself an end-product now, but I remember what it took to get here.”
“I think you’re something other than a mutant,” Raphael said.

“A lesser-god. Which gives me a predisposition for mysticism and looks good on a resume for positions within the Ministry of Sorcery,” Storyteller replied with a slight shrug.

“I imagine it would,” Raphael chuckled and then sobered slightly. “You were asking earlier about the ‘disposition’ of Supremia... It may perhaps be pertinent to note, at this juncture, that Supremia’s disposition towards mutants is... not entirely well disposed.”

“I understand,” Storyteller nodded. “And if I should ever one day meet a mutant in this domain, I will be sure to be discrete.”

“Excellent,” Raphael said with a fresh smile.

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Storyteller was annoyed. He was seated in a bare, wooden chair, in a local-time when basically all chairs were wooden, with his wrists bound behind it and his ankles to the legs of it. It had been a very rude welcome. The rumble of bombs in the distance could be heard every few minutes and the underground bunker was the cold sort of humid that felt inherently insanitary. He heard the heavy door open once again and turned his head toward it. The blindfold over his eyes prevented him from seeing anything, but he wished to demonstrate that he was paying attention.

“So, who sent you?” a voice that vague familiarity and context suggested would belong to Nick Fury.

“The Holy Eye,” Storyteller replied in a measured but cool voice.

Fury gave a snort. “Right. And is that what you Nazis are calling Himmler now?”

“The Holy Eye, Sheriff Stephen Strange of Doomstadt,” Storyteller clarified, voice getting a little tighter and sharper. “Head of the Ministry of Sorcery and the highest officer of Lord Doom. My Master. He sent me to Europix as part of a survey. As I have already explained to your lieutenants.”

“It’s a good story, for sure.”

“I showed them my badge. And they took it from me.”

“You Nazis do make some pretty things with all that gold you stole from the Jews,” Fury said.

Storyteller was silent for a minute before starting again in a low, dangerous growl, “I am not a hateful person. I make a point of not hating, because I don’t want to be a hateful person. I avoid using the word ‘hate’ casually. But if there is one thing in this world I well and truly hate, it is Nazis.”

Fury stared at him for a moment, obviously processing Storyteller’s words and weighing evidence. “So say for a minute I believe you,” he said slowly, watching Storyteller’s face carefully. “What are my options? If you’re being square with me, then it seems like I’ve already sinned against Doom, so I must be bound for the Shield no matter what I do.”
“If that were the case, then I imagine what you do next could determine whether your feet land on the Shield, or the other side of it,” Storyteller replied coldly as he bent and pulled the ropes from his ankles. “Although that being said, enforcement of Doom Law is not my job. If I have to call a Thor here, I will, and they get a bit testy about that kind of thing. So do I have to call a Thor?”

Fury’s eye narrowed and his jaw was tight. “... What do you want?”

“Information. Information which, quite frankly, the Nazis might be more likely to specialize in, but I didn’t want to dirty my boots by stepping into their territory if I could avoid it,” Storyteller replied. “They have a proclivity for flaunting Celto-Norse symbols and playing at pagan rituals for drawing power from the old gods,” he explained, crossing his arms and giving Fury a hard look to convey that he was dead serious. “My question is: have they summoned any? Are they claiming to have any lesser-gods with them, literally, in the flesh? Are there any metas on the battlefield claiming the names of old gods?”

“Nah, most of their costumed morons call themselves shit like ‘the Hangman’ or ‘the White Death’,” Fury snorted with an eye-roll. “Maybe there’s something lost in the translation, but that don’t sound scary to me.”

“Trying much too hard with that sort of thing often results in falling flat,” Storyteller shook his head. The verbal confirmation backed up the fact that there hadn’t been a tug. Because this world was like his, but more than fifty years behind; Asgard hadn’t been drawn back into vitality from the sleep of antiquity yet. It brought a deeply uncomfortable question, one that occasionally occurred to Storyteller on nights when sleep was evasive: How much responsibility could the Worst Reich’s entreaties to ancient powers have had for breathing life back into a dormant pantheon? He could say it was the late-Enlightenment’s revival movements all he wanted, but that never quite extinguished every grain of doubt, it never settled the question. “I’m done here,” Storyteller decided, and gave Fury a stern look. “I want my badge back now.”

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Peter was sitting on the parapet of an apartment building, eating peanut-butter-jelly and listening to the city, when he heard shoes crunching on the gritty rooftop behind him, which he’d been sure was deserted, and he twisted around just as a horribly familiar voice called out to him.

“Hello, Spider-Man. Late lunch?”

Peter stared for a few seconds, dumbstruck, before jumping to his feet, sandwich be damned, and squaring himself. “Oh heck no, Loki. If you think--”

“Welcome, weaver,” Loki said.

Peter’s train of thought derailed. He was flooded with a wave of... something warm. Like being hugged by Aunt May. Trust? Peter’s pulse slowed as the surge of panic dried up and vanished, and he belatedly noticed that Loki was wearing completely different clothes from normal. Modernish. Coolish. He stared for a few more seconds, the gears in his brain spinning around uselessly and coming back to one weird and confusing conclusion. “... Storyteller?” he asked at last.

“Uuhh,” the god nodded.

“... You’re a boy,” Peter observed, feeling stupid and embarrassed after he said it. Wait, is that rude? Am I allowed to say that? It’s probably totally rude.

“I’m a dual-aspect,” Storyteller replied, not seeming offended.
Peter mulled that over for a few seconds. “Does that mean ‘part-time boy’?” he asked.

“Essentially, yes. It’s a god thing,” Storyteller shrugged.

Peter wandered closer, curious and still trying to decide if asking about it was rude. “Are all the Lokis like that?”

Storyteller tilted his head and seemed to consider the answer for a moment. “Well, a pliable physiology is common, but most seem to have a fairly firm gender-identity.”

“Huh.”

“Hey, how did you feel when I said that thing a minute ago?” Storyteller asked, looking at him keenly. “Karn wrote a secret password into the Web yesterday, just in case, and I wanted to see what happens when I activate it.”

“We have a secret password?” Peter demanded. That is awesome. I didn’t even know that was a thing we could have.

“It’s pretty cool, right? What did it feel like?”

“... You said ‘welcome weaver’,” Peter murmured, trying to parse the peculiar sensation. “And... I think my spider-sense went off in reverse. Normally when my spider-sense triggers, it’s like ‘danger danger danger’ but this time it was like ‘you trust this person’.”

“Neat. I predict that is going to save me a headache or two down the road,” Storyteller said with a nod.

“Hey hey hey hey,” Peter segued articulately, newly excited as he remembered another important thing. “I was thinking about what you said the other day about being ‘botanic’ instead of totemic, and how your mom-grandma was linen and all that? And I figured out what you are.”

“Oh?” Storyteller tilted his head and gave Peter a curious look. “What I am?”

“You’re cotton! Wait! Wait! Here me out!” Peter cried, waving his hands a little, he wanted to make sure he explained it right. “Okay, okay, so the invention of the cotton-gin marks the beginning of the industrial revolution. The change to a cotton-based textile economy is the trigger that starts the ‘modern age’, right?”

“Oh,” Storyteller agreed with a nod.

“And before that, before the cotton-gin, cotton was way expensive because it was so much trouble to process, so other, easier to work with fibers were more common, right? Cotton was hard to deal with because it was super high-maintenance and really annoying. Like, y’know, some people (or gods) might have been a little bit too much to deal with,” he explained, starting to feel self-conscious, but Storyteller nodded encouragingly. “But then the revolution hits, and the new cotton-economy also leads to, like, this huge social upheaval and discord and it ends up being this really big thing and taking the country (no, a lot of countries) in this direction nobody saw coming. The social repercussions of which just keep going on and on.”

Storyteller bit his lip and tapped a finger against his chin. “... So you’re saying I represent modernity and revolution, and I also piss everybody off?”

“And you’re breathable and comfortable on a hot day,” Peter added, grinning under his mask.
Storyteller laughed. “Well, there you have it. I am the Scandinavian personification of a plant that couldn’t be grown in Scandinavia.”

“I’m pretty sure Battleworld has rendered all traditional geographic rules obsolete,” Peter waived a hand dismissively.

“Maybe I should start wearing all cotton all the time then,” Storyteller suggested, tilting his head and putting his hands in his pockets. “I don’t think the Norns or the Moerae were ever fiber-specific.”

“Yeah, but my logics and metaphors and stuff,” Peter pointed out.

“No no, I see it, good metaphor,” Storyteller chuckled.

“So you’ve had a couple lessons now, right?” Peter asked, looking up at Storyteller curiously.

“Yes, lesson one was dowsing, lesson two was darning,” Storyteller sighed and shrugged. “I’m clumsy at both. This is going to be intensely frustrating for a long time.”

“You’re pretty smart though, I mean, Lokis are supposed to be smart, right? So you’ll probably figure it out pretty fast.”

Storyteller smiled at him. “You are very sweet, Spider-Man,” he said. “Thank you, today got all weird and dumb. Because Nazis make everything weird and dumb. I spent hours being held under suspicion of being a Nazi spy today, and it was super annoying.”

“Wow, that’s... terrible,” Peter grimaced.

“Yeah. I’m going to hold off on hitting up the next domain on my list because I don’t have time for another captive situation like that today,” Storyteller said with a casual shrug, as though being captured and accused of Naziing was equivalent to a grueling commute. “I’ve got to have dinner on the table at six, after all.”

“Oh, well, priorities,” Peter nodded.

Chapter End Notes

It's apparently been 11 months since I posted the last chapter. I'm sorry. I got some writer's block and then life happened a bit, and then I started doing some low-pressure writing to relax and loosen up that writer's block, and then some more life happened. So, anyway, here I am, not dead.

For those of you who have no idea what is going on with the 'siphon brewer' (and I realize that not everybody spends as much time thinking about coffee as Seattlites) the TL:DR is that Raphael is making good coffee.

It was a brief few paragraphs, but you might have noticed I didn't change pronouns with Raphael when he shifted to female. I made that choice because he identifies male, which is different from Storyteller, thus the difference in pronoun usage.

Made-up APA designations for comic book scifantasy worlds are fun! We've seen a few characters in Marvel comics struggling with a polymorph-specific type of DID (Mystique, Copycat and maybe Lyja) so I head-canon that it is a consistent enough affliction to have gotten the APA's attention in a post-human world.
I was reading through the archives of a now-defunct webcomic while I ate lunch and I found my crow from chapter 12! I felt like sharing.
Concerning conscious and unconscious awareness

Chapter Summary

storyteller turned her eyes back to Karn and gave him a suspicious squint. “Are you just... spying on me all the time?”

Karn’s shoulders hunched in and his head dipped a little in the way that he tended toward when flustered. “It’s not-- I’m not a voyeur,” he protested uncomfortably.

“Aren’t you a bit though?” Storyteller challenged.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“The threads we see here are a manifestation or projection of the multiverse, or now Battleworld, itself. Thus they are present everywhere you go,” Karn said in his usual flat tone, crouching amid the Web as Storyteller rocked on her heels and looked up at him. “Most of the totems are able to feel the Web’s presence at all times, no matter where they are. Their connection to it is receptive. You may be able to develop some receptivity with time and effort, but it is unlikely that you will ever have a similar level of sensitivity.”

“It’s an instinct to them,” Storyteller said and hummed vaguely. “I understand that most of them seem to use it primarily as an early-warning system to be the very best at dodging.”

“Nearly all of them,” Karn agreed. “There are a few for whom the range varies and, like Julia Carpenter, they may catch glimpses days or years ahead. In those cases, they may or may not also possess the more immediate range.”

“The other day, it seemed like Peter was subconsciously aware of the day ahead of him, but didn’t see it on a conscious level,” Storyteller noted.

“Yes,” Karn nodded. “Much of their receptivity is normally subconscious, as you said instinctive, for the majority of them. It takes a higher level of sensitivity, intuitivity and effort to develop the connection into a broader toolkit. A few are able to use it for seeking things they need out, rather than just avoiding danger.”

“Bride of Nine Spiders knew where King Kong was going to be before he got there,” Storyteller mused, lowering her gaze and staring at nothing for a moment. “Did she pull that up herself, or did you tell her?”

“She found the information by her own abilities,” Karn said. “There is also a young woman who uses her connection to find weak points on her opponents by identifying which places represent the least danger to her.”

“Oh that’s clever,” Storyteller smirked.

“And while you lack the natural receptivity of the totems, through your distaff you possess an ability to impose upon the Web, in small ways, from anywhere. The totems and myself are only able to do so through the manifestation in this chamber,” Karn said, and Storyteller tilted her head and gave her
distaff a curious look. “You did so reflexively on your first encounter with King Braddock, to rebalance yourself after he had attempted to use his own abilities compel you.”

Storyteller turned her eyes back to Karn and gave him a suspicious squint. “Are you just... spying on me all the time?”

Karn’s shoulders hunched in and his head dipped a little in the way that he tended toward when flustered. “It’s not-- I’m not a voyeur,” he protested uncomfortably.

“Aren’t you a bit though?” Storyteller challenged.

He shook his head. “After the aggregation of Battleworld, Julia Carpenter became aware of your emergence and brought you to our attention. We’ve monitored the milestones of your awakening since then,” he explained, hints of frustration and embarrassment coloring his voice. “We weren’t watching you all the time, no, I simply noticed moments when you began to establish and build your connection to the Web.”

“And your co-conspirators just happened to bump into me at random?” Storyteller raised an eyebrow at him.

“The times you were confronted, before we brought you here, you had entered their native domains, and they found you by their own means,” Karn replied. “I didn’t tell them you were there. All three of them have a particularly great connection to the Web because they are more than a typical totem.”

“A god, an immortal weapon and an oracle,” Storyteller hummed, nodding. “But what about King Braddock? You said I accessed the Web with my distaff because of the thing he did. He did something to the Web, didn’t he? He has access to it too? And you said before that one of the totems was a Braddock.”

“James Braddock Junior is a very odd case,” Karn said with a small nod. “He’s not a totem, and he’s not a spinner god. The six-sixteen variant was a mutant, and it has frequently been the case with x-gene carriers that latent traces of mystical heritage or affinity are brought to the surface with its manifestation. James Braddock Senior had been a native of Otherworld, itself both highly mystical and a multiversal nexus, and it seems the combination of those factors must have influenced the nature of son’s mutation.”

“Why is that ‘a very odd case’?” Storyteller asked, tilting her head. “As you said, that’s quite common where the x-gene meets a bit of magic. Darkchild’s mutation tied itself directly to Limbo, and my little in-law with a tiny drop of varúlfur in her blood, likely from some ancestor several centuries back, had it brought right out in full glory.”

“It’s odd because King Braddock is not the six-sixteen variant,” Karn replied, shaking his head. “That James Braddock Junior returned to his father’s home of Otherworld and died there a few years ago. King Braddock had no powers before the aggregation of Battleworld.”

“Oh. Interesting.” Storyteller tapped a knuckle against her chin thoughtfully, staring at nothing. “A vastly overpowered reality warper, with powers directly tapping into the stuff of the multiverse itself, died in a multiversal nexus… leaving an imprint of his quintessence upon Otherworld? So that when a ‘close enough’ host happened to wander by, that imprint got offloaded onto him?”

“Possibly,” Karn agreed. “Of the few universes in which a James Braddock Junior was born, only a very small handful lived to adulthood. Of those, one survived the cataclysm.”

“And for winning that lottery, he gets phenomenal cosmic powers,” Storyteller noted and hummed.
“But it seems like your lot ought to be very concerned about him then. He’s uninitiated but he can muck about in your Web.”

“Yes. It is a concern,” Karn nodded. “But the Braddock line has been closely tied to the Otherworld nexus for centuries, with branches extending through many different universes which would all be able to trace lineage back to Otherworld. Several children of that line have been spider totems or Britain Corps, some of them both at once. If King Braddock does become problematic, we will reach out to him.”

“How many oddities like that have hooks into the Web without any understanding or proper mystical endowment to it?” Storyteller asked.

“I fit that description. And some would feel that you do as well,” Karn said. “Freya’s connection to the Web was tangential rather than direct, and she could not impose her will upon it. Your powers are a significant evolution above hers. Anansi believes your combined inheritance of rune magic from Odin and spinning divination from Freya, paired with the boldness with which you confronted the cataclysm, caused the change.”

“Anansi believes that… Are there differing opinions?” Storyteller asked.

Karn shook his head slightly. “Not differing, per say. Julia Carpenter believes there is more to it, though she is yet unable to say what those other factors may be… It is an unusual jump to make.”

“You did,” Storyteller pointed out.

“Not exactly. I… It’s complicated.”

Storyteller bit her lip for a moment, studying him. “Is it complicated because ‘you are what you eat’?” she asked.

Karn was quiet for a minute. “We’re off topic.”

“Not really.”

“It may be beneficial for you to learn how to deliberately access the Web through your distaff,” Karn said, moving right along. “Julia Carpenter is not yet sure what role you are to play in the days to come, and what exact skills you will need to fulfil it, so it would be best to train you in any art you show an affinity for.”

“Makes sense,” Storyteller agreed. “But since you’re talking about remote access and you can’t come with me outside where I’d be remote, will you mostly be talking about theory and giving me homework?”

“In part, but you can also learn to direct the threads through your distaff here as well,” Karn said.

“Ah, yes,” Storyteller nodded.

“Your last lesson focused on darning, today you will begin to learn spinning,” Karn said, and a mechanical leg pointed toward one of the piles of silk-fluff lying at the feet of the pillars surrounding the dais. “While the multiverse was certainly shattered by the cataclysm, not all that was shredded was entirely lost. By respinning and reweaving the scraps, we will better be able to stabilize Battleworld’s foundations.”

“If we’re building a foundation, I should think organzine would be a better choice than spun,” Storyteller noted skeptically. “Yay recycling and all, but is this not going to be a bit weak?”
“If you’re going to be so literal, I could point out that textile silk is generally not spider-derived,” Karn retorted.

“Touché.”

“It can be made strong,” Karn said. “Try gathering the silk to your distaff.”

“How?”

There was a brief pause. “... I’ve never used a distaff,” he admitted.

“So you don’t know,” Storyteller clarified, raising an eyebrow.

“No.”

Storyteller drew a deep breath and gave a loud sigh.

“You reached for the geothreads with it instinctively when you were in Avalon,” Karn pointed out.

“And it’s very difficult to remember how I did something *instinctive* when I didn’t even know I was *doing* it,” Storyteller quipped.

“Yes. That’s why it was felt that you needed as much time as possible to learn and explore your abilities.”

“Right.” Storyteller sighed again and then tried sticking the head of her distaff into the fluff to see if that would do anything useful. She followed that failed attempt by picking up a handful and piling it on top of the gem, which also proved fruitless. An indeterminate length of time was spent fussing over the fluff, with Karn giving occasional suggestions, before Storyteller was able to get a feel for the mystical potential within the formless material and successfully wrap a tiny bit of it over the gem. She looked up from her distaff and bit of fluff. “And now?” she asked.

“Did you ever watch Freya spin?” Karn asked.

“I certainly didn’t. Neither did Serrure or the Third… The First must have when he was small, but I don’t really remember,” Storyteller shrugged.

“You seem to know the terminology fairly well,” Karn noted. “You understand the concept?”

“I understand how hipsters on Youtube make yarn, but how much of that is transferable to mystic spinning?” Storyteller asked.

“The motions and concepts, somewhat,” Karn said. “You’ve already developed a fair understanding of the basics of subtle mystic energies, and you successfully channeled those energies through your distaff to affix the flock to it. It will be a matter of continually channeling those energies while you spin.”

“Show me. Are you able to do it with just your hands? I don’t have extra appendages,” Storyteller asked. “Will you come down here so I can see?”

“All right,” Karn nodded, descending through the strands. “Move back, please.”

“I need to see it up close to understand the subtleties,” Storyteller protested.

Karn paused, and started drawing up on himself a little again in discomfort.
“I promise not to touch you,” Storyteller said quietly.

There were a few more seconds of hesitation and then Karn climbed the rest of the way to the dais. “I don’t have any practice with a distaff, and I wouldn’t be able to connect with yours,” he said, crouching down and picking up some flock. He wrapped it around his right wrist and then produced a spindle from one of his pockets.

Storyteller sat down and rested her distaff across her lap as she watched him set the whorl end against the floor and knap a loop around the shaft before starting it spinning, back and forth, back and forth. The strand looked yarnish almost instantly, but he kept working the length for a minute, tightening the structure of it up, before coiling it and continuing the next section. Storyteller at first watched with a critical eye, then let herself be lulled into the rhythm, listening to the sound of the spindle’s end against the stone and feeling for the power buried within the flock and in the process itself.

After a couple yards had been put onto the spindle, Karn stopped and looked up at her. “Do you understand enough to try?” he asked.

“... I don’t have a spindle,” Storyteller admitted, feeling a little foolish that she’d never thought about that rather vital bit of hardware.

“Use this today,” Karn said, pulling the thread he’d started free of the fluff on his wrist and holding his spindle out to her by one end, carefully giving her enough space to take it from him without direct contact. “Before your next lesson, craft your own whorl. That will give more power to your work.”

“I knew there would be homework,” Storyteller said, accepting the spindle. Then she carefully pulled a line of flock from her distaff and knapped it to the loose end of Karn’s thread and stood up, slipping the distaff through her belt. She found it hard to keep the spindle spinning on the first few attempts, and twice the loop holding the already-spun thread in place came loose and she cursed at it as she rewound the escaped thread. She wasn’t sure how long she’d been trying, how many attempts she’d made, or if she was getting any better at all, when a voice suddenly broke through the chamber.

“Portal!”

Storyteller glanced up in confusion and looked around, but the speaker wasn’t evident. Karn climbed back up into the Web and scuttled a few yards away, then pulled open a portal. A few seconds later, somebody in a black and scarlet body-stocking hopped down through it.

“God fucking damn it!” the newcomer swore, hitting the floor at a crouch and rising gracefully half a moment later. “If that shrivelled old piece of shit thinks I’m here to do his dirty-work--” he started and then froze as he turned and spotted Storyteller. He was silent for a couple of seconds before looking up at Karn while pointing an accusing finger at Storyteller. “What the fuck is this?”

“I’m the new intern,” Storyteller replied. “I’m not being paid, but it is twenty credits toward my degree.”

He turned his head toward her, and Storyteller was sure she was getting a glare. “You’re not cute.”

“Well that is just hurtful and untrue,” Storyteller pouted.

“Who is she?” the man demanded, turning back to Karn again.

“The Asgardian goddess of spinning,” Karn answered.
“Why the \textit{fuck} would you bring her here?” the man asked angrily. “What happened to this chamber being \textit{closed} and secret and all that shit? \textit{She’s} no totem!”

“How do you know?” Storyteller asked curiously.

“You’re wearing \textit{boots},” the man spat.

Storyteller glanced down at herself and considered that. “Hey, no, Spider-Man wears boots!” she protested, looking back up.

“Spider-Man’s ‘boots’ are lycra with a sole less than an eighth of an inch thick,” he shot back.

“... You wear boots,” Karn noted in a subdued, factual tone.

“Not when I’m \textit{working}, and that’s \textit{beside} the point!” the man snapped. “\textit{That’s} not a totem! Why is she \textit{here}?!”

“Anansi and Julia Carpenter felt it was important that I teach her spinning,” Karn replied.

“Fucking \textit{Anansi}!” the man fumed, turning to glare at Storyteller again. “\textit{Who} are you?”

“Storyteller. This is my third lesson,” Storyteller replied.

“\textit{Funny}. I’ve never heard of an Asgardian spinner goddess named ‘Storyteller’.”

“Well I’ve never heard of whoever you are either,” Storyteller retorted. “... Actually, wait, aren’t you the New Warriors’ spider-person? \textit{Anyway}, I was only born recently. Like, hours before the final death of the multiverse. The ‘fully-formed’ sort of deity birth. So you \textit{wouldn’t} have heard of me.”

“And \textit{why} do we trust her?” the man demanded.

“Do you trust Julia Carpenter?” Karn asked.

“‘\textit{Trust}’ is not the right word there,” the man said and then gave an irritated sigh-growl. “\textit{Whatever}. I’m fucking sick of \textit{both} your faces.” He turned and stomped down the steps of the dais and over to the chamber’s door, disappearing through it.

“Well he has a \textit{very} different temperament from Spider-Man,” Storyteller noted.

“Yes,” Karn agreed.

“Where was he going? Does he live here?” Storyteller looked back up at Karn.

“Yes. Kaine was here recovering from the injuries my family inflicted upon him when the collapse of this universe occurred,” Karn explained. “After Battleworld settled, his presence had been written out of the history of what was left of his own world, and he claims to have no interest in attempting to reintegrate himself there.”

“And what sort of ‘dirty-work’ is Anansi having him do?” Storyteller asked, slightly dubious about what the foul-mouthed totem had been saying when he’d arrived.

“That description is over dramatic,” Karn replied, shaking his head. “He is asked to run errands, collect things, provide support or protection when and where it is needed.”

“So he was just mad because he’s the mad type,” Storyteller guessed.
“Yes,” Karn agreed.

“And there are bedrooms and amenities back there?” Storyteller asked, nodding toward the door.

“Yes.”

“You sleep here too?” she looked back up.

“I don’t sleep,” Karn shook his head.

“At all?”

“No.”

Storyteller tilted her head, looking at him curiously. “Is it that you don’t need to sleep, or that you can’t sleep?” she asked curiously.

“I can’t,” Karn said. “None of my family slept.”

“Huh. Well that sounds terrible. Sleeping feels good. Waking up on a new day feels good,” Storyteller said, looking down and chewing on her lip.

“There is a great deal of work to be done. Being sleepless allows me to accomplish more,” Karn replied.

“What happens if somebody falls asleep in the Web?” Storyteller asked, looking up at him again.

“... I don’t know,” Karn said, sounding slightly puzzled.

“I’m going to try it,” Storyteller announced, laying her distaff down.

“What?!”

“Because the unconscious mind works differently than the conscious mind. It’s aware of different things,” Storyteller explained, unlacing her boots. “I see and feel a lot of stuff when I touch the threads. And the flock doesn’t have much narrative, but it’s got a lot of crackle to it. I want to see what the Web shows me when I’m asleep.”

“... I see,” Karn said, watching her kick off her boots and start to clamor her way up through the threads until she found a good enough hammock.

She pulled up her legs and settled back, squirming until she was comfortable, and then turned her head toward Karn, who was sitting a ways away, watching her. “If I’m out more than an hour, will you wake me, please?” she asked.

“Alright,” Karn nodded.

“Thank you.” She closed her eyes and relaxed. The high frustration level of the lesson had made her tired enough that it wasn’t too difficult to let herself slip away, and soon she was somewhere else.

She couldn’t tell if the backdrop was familiar, she could hardly even see it, because all she could focus on was the Third, laying on the floor, knees curled in, right arm wrapped around his torso, hand pressing against a long, deep gash that ran from his armpit to lower back. From that wound and others, blood soaked a silk vest and collared shirt. His left leg looked broken. Pain and fear were etched across his face. His left hand had just finished drawing a sigil upon the floor in his own blood, a protection charm.
“You don’t really think that’s going to help, do you?” a male voice asked, amused and mocking.

“W-Why?” the Third wheezed, new blood painting his lips with every breath.

“Because you are a weak, miserable excuse for a Loki, and I am here to put you out of your misery.”

The scene dissolved into darkness and the sound of rapid arms fire.

“NO NO NO NO!” Storyteller screamed, flailing and falling backwards.

“Storyteller!” Mechanical legs hooked behind her back and a hand caught her arm, halting her descent, reeling her back.

Storyteller screamed again, wordlessly, and grabbed and pulled and dragged herself into Karn, sobbing. “No! No! It’s not true!” she wailed. “Is it true? Tell me it’s not!”

“I- I don’t know what you saw,” Karn faltered, posture stiff, holding his arms up awkwardly as she clung to him.

“Was that the past or the future?! Is it happening right now?!”

“I don’t know what you saw!” Karn protested.

“The Third, my maker—my parent, being murdered!” Storyteller exclaimed. “Did this already happen?! Is he already dead?! Is that why Julia wouldn’t help me find him?!” she demanded, looking up at Karn.

“She wouldn’t be that cruel,” he shook his head.

“This is a waste of time!” Storyteller wailed, pushing herself away from him and half climbing, half tumbling down to the dais. “I’m wasting time I should be looking for him!” She snatched up her distaff, yanking at the spindle to snap the thread connecting them and tossing it aside. “Send me home!”

“I—”

“Send me HOME!” Storyteller screamed up at him.

Karn said nothing, and quickly opened a portal.

She jumped through into her kitchen without another word or a backwards glance and paused for a moment, sobbing, then started running through the house, her socked feet slapping against the floorboards. She threw herself out the front door and stood gasping on the porch for a moment, feeling a fresh swell of hysteria from decision paralysis. Where the hell was she going? Where should she be going?

“Oof, you do not look so good. Bad day?” a squawky voice asked.

Storyteller whipped around and stared. The enigma who had approached her in the Sinner’s Market was perched on her porch railing, looking her over curiously. “... What the hell are you doing here?”

Storyteller demanded.

“Waiting for you to turn up, champ,” the stranger replied. “Nice place ya got here. Real nice.”

Shock gave way to a surge of fury. “This is my home! You can’t be here! How did you find me?!”
“Whoa, hey, calm down, kiddo! No need for that!” they said, holding their hands up. “I ain’t getting
up to tricks or anything. It’s cool.”

“You’re a border-crosser. I could arrest you right now!”

“Nah, I ain’t doing anything wrong,” the stranger protested.

“It’s illegal,” Storyteller snapped.

“Not for me.”

“It’s illegal for anybody without a mandate from Doomstadt,” Storyteller retorted.

“Any-body, but not any-thing,” They grinned with toothy smugness.

Storyteller glared at them. “... I’m not in the mood for your riddles,” she growled, pulling her
anelace. She’d said she wanted to unravel the stranger’s mystery on her own, but right now dragging
the sassy bastard into Doomgard and letting them sort it out seemed like the better option.

“I ain’t here to fight you, kiddo,” the stranger said, grin dropping away into a concerned frown.

“What’s got your feathers so ruffled?”

Storyteller lunged at them, swinging the anelace. And then she was caught by the wrists, a knee in
her gut, and being lifted as the stranger let themself flip backward over the railing, dragging her with
them. Moments later, she was face down in the grass, a hand pressed to the back of her head, and
another pinning down her wrist and the anelace with it.

“Now knock that off,” the stranger snapped, and held her down for another few seconds before
letting go. “What’s all this about?”

Storyteller sat up and glared at him. “How did you find me?” she demanded again.

“I got a knack,” the stranger shrugged.

“... Where’s the Third?”

“The third what?” they asked, looking nonplussed.


“That’s the whiny one, yeah?”

“Where is he?”

“Isn’t that what your whole quest-thingy is about? Figure it out yourself,” the stranger shrugged.

“Quests are good for ya. Vikings gonna vike.”

“You know where he is, don’t you?” Storyteller accused.

“Sure. I’m in the business of knowing things,” they replied.

“Tell me!”

The stranger frowned, their brow knit in concern as they studied her. After a minute, they knelt down
in front of her. “... He’s fine,” they said softly.
“Tell me where he is!” Storyteller was nearly screaming now.

“No.”

“You bastard!” She slashed at them with the anelace, a wild, uncontrolled strike, and they caught her wrist, strong enough to still her without any seeming effort.

This time they snatched the anelace, twisting it out of her grip and throwing it a few yards away. Then they grabbed her face, holding her jaw in a grip she couldn’t pull away from even when she put real strength into it. They were strong, maybe stronger than Thor. Their strange eyes stared at her as she struggled for a few seconds before giving up, glaring back at them. “... Loki was always the brightest star in the night sky,” they said once she’d quieted. “And you? You’ve got more watts than any of ‘em that came before... I ain’t doing your homework for ya.”

“... He’s going to be killed, if he hasn’t been already,” Storyteller whispered.

“He hasn’t been. Like I said, he’s fine,” the stranger said, and despite how cryptic and infuriating they were, Storyteller felt a surge of relief at that. The stranger let her go and sighed, shaking their head. “Hey, I’ll make sure he stays that way until you solve it. I’ll keep my best eye on him.”

“Just tell me where he is,” Storyteller pleaded. “Please.”

“No,” they said, shaking their head again as they rose to their feet. “You got this, you don’t need my help. And for the record, he doesn’t either, but I’ll watch him if it’ll help you relax a bit.”

“... Why should I trust you?” Storyteller asked.

The stranger smirked and chuckled. “Now there’s a good question,” they said and shook their head. “Normally, maybe ya shouldn't. But I heard a rumor there’s a Truce on.”

Storyteller pursed her lips for a few seconds, before asking, “And you’ve answered?”

They shrugged. “Nobody’s asked me.”

“I’m asking you. Right now. Do you answer?”

“Sure, why not,” they replied.

“And who are you?” Storyteller asked again.

The stranger laughed and crouched back down, leaning their arms against their knees and tilting their head as they grinned at her. “Really phoning that one in, aren’t ya? Come on kiddo, you call that a trick? Gonna have to do better.”

“Why won’t you tell me who you are?”

“Cause I’m a stinker that way,” they replied and then reached out and cosseted her hair. “Hey, don’t stress yourself out about the whiny kid. He’ll be fine ‘til ya get there. Promise.”

Storyteller looked down, blinking a few times and feeling a few more tears fall from her lashes, as she heard the stranger stand up again and start to walk away. She swallowed hard and looked up, calling, “Odin?”

But she was alone.
I got really into the thumbnails when I started this fic and for a while, but in the last few chapters, and with some of the plot-points I have planned to come, it feels like putting the thumbnails at the top of the chapters can become spoilery, but some of you have told me you really like them and I thought that if I got rid of them you'd miss them, so I've decided to move them to the bottom. So here's a Kaine. Too muscly for shirts.

'Svarúlfur' was the Norse mythology name for werewolves. Contrast against 'ulfhéðinn', that I used to describe Wolf-Loki in earlier chapters, which has more direct and specific berserker overtones. Why did I use an old-timey Norse word to describe Rahne and not an old-timey Scotts word? Werewolves *come* from Norse mythology, and werewolf mythos doesn't spread out into the rest of Europe until the late medieval period. Werewolves were a Norse thing before they were rolled up into the same package as witches and 'devil-worshipers' and whatnot during inquisitiony times. That being said, nearly every culture in the world had its own submythology concerning shapeshifters that turned to or from a local apex predator, generally canines, felines or ursines. Sometimes, like with coyote skinwalkers in North America or trickster foxes in East Asia, the animal in question wasn't really directly dangerous to humans but was especially clever at killing small livestock, and so made an impression because of how big a nuisance they could be. Why reference Rahne as an actual werewolf at all? Combination of the fact that Hrimhari identifies her as 'like me' both on first impression and closer acquaintance, and it's a head-canon fix for part of the perpetually-retconning retcon that is Romulus's bullshit.

So I know I've used the word 'quintessence' before in this fic, because back when I started writing in Loki fandom I chose it as a word to substitute for the concept of genetics when pertaining to mythical persons. 'Genetics' and 'genes' didn't seem like a valid word/concept to use while talking about creatures derived from mysticism. But since the last time I used that word in here, I watched Voltron and now it's weird. They seem to be using it conceptually as basically chi/ki, but it wasn't really a very good word for that purpose. 'Quintessence' is a different conjugation of 'quintessential', so it just means 'the basic stuff of' not life-force or organic or whatever specific. The Ancient Greek word/concept 'Pneuma' would have been better for Voltron's purposes, if they wanted something more obscure than chi/ki.

"Loki was always the brightest star in the night sky."
This is a Norse astrology thing. Loki's constellation, 'Lokabrenner' is Sirius, the brightest star. It is almost twice as bright as the second brightest star, and part of the reason for that is because it's actually a binary star, although Sirius B is really very very small.
Storyteller meets someone she didn't expect.

Chapter Summary

She was just the right age. The way she moved, the timbre of her voice, that pout when she got frustrated, it was all so familiar. But her hair was too straight, and her speech was too stilted. Storyteller bit his lip, frowning as he watched the girl standing on top of an upturned car, shouting orders at some powered-up thugs who were tussling with the local Spider-Girl. She looked so much like the Third’s female form, even the outfit had a similar shape. Her voice sounded so much like the echo in Storyteller’s memory, but the words were wrong, the affectations, the anachronisms.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

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The action below had come to a pause, with the youthful Loki of the McTwo domain seeming to have gotten into an argument with her thugs while Spider-Girl crouched on a nearby wall. Storyteller teleported closer to listen in.

“It is not yours to question my ways, mortal!” McTwo-Loki was shouting down at the thugs.

“Lady, we have been over this,” the lead thug snapped back up at her, crossing his arms. “My name is Paul. Not ‘mortal’ and not ‘minion’.”

“You do not understand what is at stake, Paul!” the girl balled up her fists and they trembled at her sides in frustration. “You are but blind animals groping in the darkness!”

Paul looked thoroughly unimpressed. He gave her a long, hard stare and then dropped his arms and tossed aside a faintly glowing morningstar. “Y’know what? That’s enough. I’m done.” He turned and started to walk away.

“Ney! Youshan’t turn your back on the likes of me! Paul! Paul!” McTwo-Loki shouted as the other two thugs dropped their miscellaneous magical weapons and started following Paul. “No! Paul! Return to me, mortal minions!”

“Honey, you’ve really got to work on your management style,” Spider-Girl laughed.

“Fool!” McTwo-Loki shouted, rounding on her. “You have no idea what has happened! What has been lost!” she accused. “You dogmatically defend that which is foul and obscene!”

“Hey, New York isn’t that bad,” Spider-Girl protested. “You don’t like it, nobody’s asking you to stay.” She hopped off the wall and started to walk toward the car McTwo-Loki was perched on. “So.
Your ‘mortal minions’ are gone. Looks like it’s just you and me now, girlfriend,” she pointed out cheekily.

McTwo-Loki made a wordless sound of furious frustration and leapt down to the street. “Ignorant fool!” she snarled, raising her arms and readying a spell. “You do not even conceive of the crime that has made victims of us all!”

“You’re talking about New York fashion week, right? Because I so agree, puce is not the new black,” Spider-Girl said, walking slowly closer while keeping an eye on McTwo-Loki’s hands.

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Storyteller decided to call it and teleported just behind McTwo-Loki. “All right, that’s enough of that now,” he called.

McTwo-Loki whipped around, furious and pouty. “I do not need he--” she cut herself off with a startled shriek and threw a chaos blast toward him.

At the same moment, Spider-Girl jumped to a ledge for some high ground, shouting down. “I call foul, Sylene! No fair calling in Da-- Wait, that’s not--”

Storyteller summoned his distaff with a twirl to deflect the chaos blast and, as he was dissipating it, caught the reflection of movement in McTwo-Loki’s diadem and dodged to the side, whirling around and bringing up his distaff in time to block a huge sword crashing down where his head had just been. He stared, frozen, for far longer than was healthy in the circumstances, as his mind seemed to simultaneously race and lag behind. At the other end of the sword that had just tried to take his head was a full-adult, male and very very angry Loki, who was now pulling the weapon back and readying for another strike. And what had Spider-Girl just called the younger one?

“GET AWAY FROM MY DAUGHTER!” he roared, lunging as Storyteller dipped and swiveled, parrying the blow and ducking around him.

“Shit! Shit! Shit!” he cursed, trying to put some distance between them without turning his back, and suddenly finding himself fighting both the furious sword-wielding Loki and his daughter’s chaos blasts.

“You will not live to regret this decision, cretin!” Dad-Loki growled, and the next strike put Storyteller on his back and pinned him long enough for one of the girl’s chaos blasts to hit him hard.

Storyteller let out a scream of startled pain before managing to kick the sword away and scramble out of reach. “What the hell is happening here?!” Spider-Girl exclaimed from above, and Storyteller looked up and spotted her clinging to the wall, looking frantically back and forth between the three of them.

That was really something Storyteller would like to know himself. He’d been positive when he saw the girl that she was this domain’s Loki. How could she possibly be his daughter? She felt just like--

“me,” Storyteller gasped, feeling like he’d just been punched in the gut. As Dad-Loki came at him again, Storyteller dodged and slammed the distaff into his ribs, ducking under another chaos blast and turning to catch sight of Spider-Girl again. “WELCOME, WEAVER!” he shouted.

Spider-Girl’s gaze snapped to him immediately, and the next second she leapt off the wall, bringing her feet down hard against Dad-Loki’s back and shooting webbing at the girl’s raised hands, delaying her next attack and earning a series of curses. She came to a landing next to Storyteller and
turned, tensed and ready, toward the father-daughter duo. “You got a plan here?” she demanded.

“Can you keep the girl busy?” Storyteller asked.

“No problem, we’re practically best-frenemies!” Spider-Girl chirped and took a run at her target.

Dad-Loki all but ignored her, his attention fully focused on Storyteller. Because however much trouble Spider-Girl could cause, a-hundred-to-one she wasn’t a killer, and Dad-Loki had identified Storyteller as a clear and present threat to the life of his ‘daughter’. “This is a misunderstanding,” Storyteller said calmly.

“Clearly,” Dad-Loki sneered and came at him again, this time charging his sword with chaos-magic as he swung it.

Storyteller held him off but was driven back several feet. “I- I didn’t come here to hurt either of you!” he protested.

“No, you came here to die!” Dad-Loki snarled, thrusting.

“He tripped on the rubble!” Storyteller cast, and Dad-Loki lost his footing and came down on his side with a very startled expression.

“How--” he started fighting to right himself.

Storyteller rushed him, sweeping with his distaff to knock Dad-Loki back again before he had the chance to get his feet under him, and slammed a palm into his head, muttering a living-death sleeping curse. Dad-Loki’s eyes glazed and then closed and he went limp.

“Father!”

Storyteller turned to see the girl trying to run toward him, a chaos-blast ready in hand as webbing hit her from behind. “Nuh-uh, Sylene! Your dance-card’s full!” Spider-Girl called, yanking her back.

“Father!” the girl screamed again, repurposing her chaos-blast to disintegrate the webbing and resuming her charge toward Storyteller. Spider-Girl shot another web-line around her as Storyteller threw an entanglement spell at her legs, bringing the girl down on the pavement as he ran towards her to close the distance. “I’ll kill you! I’ll kill you! I’ll kill you!” the girl screamed up at him, and Storyteller could see tears on her cheeks. She thought he’d just killed her father.

“Holy crap, girl, simmer!” Spider-Girl called.

Storyteller touched the girl’s forehead, murmuring the sleeping curse again and she went silent. He stayed still, crouched over her for several lingering moments, as he panted, more winded from the surprise than the exertion.

“What- What did you do to them?” Spider-Girl asked, a note of worry coming into her voice, maybe the same thought the girl had just now occurring to her.

“TL;DR, a Sleeping Beauty curse,” Storyteller answered.

“Oh. Okay,” Spider-Girl said, sounding relieved.

“What did you say her name was?” he asked, sliding an arm under the girl and repositioning her to be laying less-awkwardly on her back.

“Sylene. How do you not... know…?” Spider-Girl started to falter and waivered slightly on her feet,
suddenly confused and unsure. “... Who are you?!” she demanded in a quieter, suspicious voice, taking a backward step away from him.

“Spider-Girl!” a synthesized voice shouted from the sky as the roar of an engine tore down the street. Storyteller looked to see a somewhat Iron Man-esque armor and a very curvy Captain America bearing down on them along with a blur of blue and white that circled around and came to a stop on the other side of them, resolving itself into a teenaged girl.

“Oh hey guys, you are just in time for clean-up duty, and I super appreciate that,” Spider-Girl greeted.

“Uh-huh, you sure you don’t need a hand with this guy?” the blue-and-white speedster asked, tilting her head to the side and raising an eyebrow above her polarized wrap-arounds.

“Um, I’m-- This- This is--” Spider-Girl faltered again, voice doubtful and confused.

“Agent Storyteller!” Thena Thordóttir dropped out of the sky, coming down next to the motorcycle just as the female Captain America was pulling off her helmet. “Stand down, Avengers. Agent Storyteller is apprentice to the Holy Eye, Sheriff Strange. He is above reproach.”

“Oh, you flatterer,” Storyteller flashed her a grin. “I’m sure Lawspeaker would disagree, he reproaches me plenty.”

Thena lifted her hand to stifle a laugh as the black-and-gold Iron Man stepped cautiously closer to Storyteller, examining him with a distinct aura of distrust. “Agent... Storyteller?” he said slowly.

“Special Agent to the Doomstadt Ministry of Sorcery, under the authority of Sheriff Strange, working in concert with Doomgard on the investigation of uniquely puzzling matters which are of importance to the Sheriff and God Doom,” Storyteller rattled off, standing up straight and looking evenly back at him.

“And these two are part of a... ‘uniquely puzzling’ investigation?” the armor asked skeptically.

“I know of it,” Thena noted, crouching down next to Sylene. “Though I... did not realize my cousin was involved.”

“She’s a person of interest, but I don’t believe she’s directly involved,” Storyteller replied and Thena looked relieved. “I will, however, be needing to question them both,” Storyteller said, and Thena nodded. “And while sticking around to chat might be delightful, the matter at hand is rather pressing, and I’m not completely sure how reliably or how long this spell will hold someone with their kind of entropy levels. So I’ll have to be going now,” Storyteller said calmly, crouching down and gathering Sylene up onto his shoulder.

“Where are you taking them?” the Captain America demanded, picking up on the Iron Man’s unease.

“Ohh... That is so far above your pay-grade, I’m not even going to make up a lie to placate you,” Storyteller replied with a lopsided shrug and an apologetic grin.

“Excuse me?” the woman put her hands on her hips and glared.

“Agent Storyteller answers only to the Holy Eye himself, American Dream!” Thena cut in, stepping in front of-- ‘American Dream’?! Really?-- and getting right up in her face. “His missions are classified at the highest level!”
“That’s not going to cut it, Thena,” the Iron Man said.

“Hey, uh, guys?” the speedster called, wedging herself between Thena and American Dream and attempting to push them apart. “Are we seriously talking about just saying ‘no’ to Doomstadt and vicariously to God Doom Himself?” she demanded.

There was a pause as American Dream and the armor exchanged a glance and then American Dream took a step back. “… Of course not,” she muttered darkly.

“And I really appreciate that. Thank you, sorry about the mess, be seeing you later, bye!” Storyteller gave them a chipper wave and then grabbed Dad-Loki by the arm and teleported.

He didn’t go far however, just walking out of the domain with Dad-Loki and ‘Sylene’ (while a Thor was watching) would lead to rather a lot more attention than he wanted to draw. That, and he wasn’t really sure where he could possibly contain them for any length of time besides Doomgard, and he definitely wasn’t taking them to Doomgard. He instead returned to the rooftop he’d used as a vantage point when observing the confrontation with Spider-Girl and gently set Sylene down, staring at her for an elongated moment before he pulled out his phone and made a call.

The line picked right up. “Storyteller, how are you?” the comforting voice at the other end asked.

“I-- um, I may need a little bit of a favor...” Storyteller said a bit hesitantly.

“Are you all right?”

“At the moment, yes. I’m not hurt or anything. I just think I’m a little outgunned... And, um, I might need a sanity-check on something.”

“Where are you?”

“One-twenty-one point seven-four-two East by thirty-two point one-eight-nine South. On top of a four-story building.”

“I’ll be right there.”

“Thank you.”

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“You found them together?” a weirdly ambiguous voice asked, and Mayday bit her lip and slowed down, almost holding her breath as she peeked over the lip of the roof.

“I spotted the girl and was confronting her when he attacked me. Which, I assume, is because he thought I was attacking her, so I can’t much fault him there,” Agent Storyteller responded. He was standing with his hands in his jacket pockets as someone in a weird black and white robe crouched over Sylene and Loki’s lifeless-looking bodies. They both had their backs to Mayday.

“So they formed some kind of protective alliance?” the robed person asked, and Mayday wrinkled her nose and strained her ears, trying to decide if the voice was male or female.

“Well... he called her his ‘daughter’,” Agent Storyteller said, sounding like that was somehow weird.

“Hm, curious way to establish the relationship. But I suppose the age-difference--”

“I don’t think that’s it,” Agent Storyteller cut in, shaking his head. “The locals were familiar with both of them. I think they both belong here. I... I think she might be me. Like me-me.”
There was a pause and then the robed person straightened up a little, sitting back on their folded legs and nodding slowly. “... Curious indeed,” they murmured.

“And she’s been named for the moon. I didn’t get that tenure until I was, well, *me* me... I’m not crazy, right? Does this make sense?” Agent Storyteller asked.

“... It could,” the robed person said, climbing to their feet but not turning, still looking down at Sylene. “It’s an intriguing possibility, at the least,” they said.

“I need to interview them together, I think,” Agent Storyteller said.

“Which is why you needed me?”

“I can’t handle both of them at once. They’re really well coordinated, and they’d probably kick my ass,” Agent Storyteller shrugged. “Do you think you could just... be there? For back-up? Some stuff’s going to be said that I’m not necessarily authorized to say, so I don’t want to get the Thors involved in this.”

“It’s fine. Of course. I’m honored you’d ask,” the robed person said, finally turning toward Storyteller and laying a hand on his arm. There was something familiar about them that scratched at some forgotten memory down in the bottom of Mayday’s mind. Their eyes flicked toward her and Mayday froze, taking a sharp breath and getting ready to duck or jump or run like hell. Maybe they hadn’t actually seen her; she was holding very still, after all, and it’s not like she was wearing bright candy-apple red or anything.

“Did you need something, Miss Parker?” the robed person called.

Mayday froze, her blood running cold, her stomach turning to ice and her hands slipped away from the brick wall. She scrambled, arms flailing as her spider-sense started going wild and gravity tried to claim her. She’d barely even started to drop, however, when something wrapped around her and yanked her back. Mayday let out a tiny squeak as she was pulled right up over the edge of the building and forward a few yards to find herself face to face with Agent Storyteller, who, judging by the way he was holding out his arm with hand fisted in a grabbing-gesture, had been her rescuer just now. He turned back toward the robed person as Mayday’s feet gently found the ground again and shot his companion a reproachful look. “Don’t be smug, Perry. You scared her.”

“I- I- I don’t know what you’re talking about! Scared? Why would I be scared! What did you just call me? Because it totally wasn’t my name! I don’t know who that is, but you’re definitely confusing me with someone else!” Mayday yammered as the frozen guts gave way to a bubble of hysteria rising in her like nausea.

Agent Storyteller gave her an exaggerated wince. “Ooh, you really may need to work on that delivery there...” he said with a slightly sympathetic look. “But don’t worry about any of that now. We’re all friends here.”

“I don’t-- I don’t--” Mayday took an awkward step backwards. She was so freaked out that she was starting to tremble, and yet her spider-sense was completely silent right now. It had to be magic, right? Agent Storyteller had been using magic this whole time, not to mention that he looked *just* like a younger, hotter version of Loki. But come to that... Mayday turned, focusing on the robed person and looking up into their eyes. *Bright* bright green. A much brighter green than human eyes ever really got. Just like Loki’s; just like Sylene’s. “… I know you,” she whispered, the vague sense of familiarity suddenly crystallizing into a fragment of forgotten memory. “You’re Angel-Loki! You’re from Venom-May’s domain! You’re a good-guy!”
Agent Storyteller gave a start and turned to look at Angel-Loki, surprise giving way to amused delight in his expression. “‘Angel-Loki’?”

Angel-Loki looked a few shades past mortified. “I have never called myself that,” they muttered, glancing away.

“That’s adorable! Oh my goodness! How did that happen?!” Agent Storyteller exclaimed, giggling.

“It’s not relevant,” Angel-Loki said, crossing their arms and refusing to look at anybody. “There are far more important things to be focusing on right now.”

“And you’re Loki too, aren’t you?!” Mayday demanded, jabbing a finger in Agent Storyteller’s direction. “You’re another Loki from another- another domain!”

“‘Universe’, Miss Parker. The word you’re looking for is ‘universe’ or ‘world’ or ‘Earth’,” Angel-Loki corrected.

“... ‘Universe’...” Mayday whispered, her mouth feeling dry, and she could feel the weight of those syllables resounding throughout her whole body. They meant something. Something important. Just like the words Agent Storyteller had said during the battle meant something, but the meaning was just beyond Mayday’s grasp.

“You’re about half-right, May,” Agent Storyteller said calmly, and his contour shifted, the shape of him changing both subtly and startlingly until May was staring back at a slightly older, slightly taller, wavy-haired version of Sylene. “Because I think you could more accurately call me an alternate version of Sylene.”

“Oh...” Mayday stared, her mind sputtering out. Gender was getting pretty weird up around here. “Oh!” she brightened, realization hitting her. “She’s your daughter!” she exclaimed, looking back to Angel-Loki.

“What? No!” Angel-Loki protested, looking genuinely flustered now as Agent Storyteller burst into laughter.

“Oh- Oh no-- hahaha-- Wouldn’t that be charming, but no,” Agent Storyteller gasped, wiping at her eyes. “No, the ‘real’ Loki of my world was not at all ‘good’. He was probably much closer in character to this one,” she said, gesturing toward the unconscious god lying at her feet. “This one is a super-villain, right?”

“Yeah. Most def,” Mayday agreed, nodding.

“Okay, yeah,” Agent Storyteller nodded, calming, but her lips were still quirked in a grin. “Though the relationship with the daughter tends to suggest that he’s not as aloof and sociopathic as my own predecessor, so that’s worth poking. And I found him in his own domain, always a good sign.”

“Okay, so, yeah, lots of weird going on up here. Are either of you going to fill me in?” Mayday asked, crossing her arms. “Or are you going to tell me why the hell I dropped everything and backed you up without even thinking about it? You said something, you cast some spell on me, and it was like-- It was like I knew you, like you were someone I trusted implicitly.”

“Right, sorry, that’s a cheat-code Karn put in. I shouldn’t take it lightly (and I don’t) but I got a little panicked because Dad-Loki here really caught me off-guard,” Agent Storyteller said with an apologetic shrug. “So, the short story is that I’m chasing a serial-killer. I know it’s a Loki, but I don’t think it’s either of these two, because they don’t seem to fit the profile. However, they may know something,” she explained.
“... Karn...” Mayday whispered, again getting hit with an unsettling feeling of familiarity, like she should know that name.

“All of this information is to be held in strictest confidence, for your own safety as well as ours,” Angel-Loki cut in, once again wearing a serious face. “I do hope that you have some ability to keep secrets, Miss Parker?”

Mayday tilted her head slightly, wrinkling her nose, though she knew it wouldn’t show through her mask. “That sounded slightly blackmaily, Angel-Loki,” she noted.

Angel-Loki’s lip curled up into a slight grimace, apparently they found the epithet supremely embarrassing. Agent Storyteller giggled again and shook her head. “No no no, that’s a misunderstanding of the intended tone,” she said, walking closer, until she was right in front of Mayday and still not setting off the tiniest blip on her spider-sense. “Perry isn’t saying that we’d hurt you if things got out that shouldn’t be out, but rather that those things getting out would put you in just as much danger as they would us. There are a whole lot of big scary secrets going on, and I can’t go into it any more than that. I trust you to be able to keep this conversation under your hat, and I really need you to trust me.”

“Why would I trust you? I don’t even know you!” Mayday protested.

Agent Storyteller tilted her head to the side and pointed at Mayday’s belly. “You trust your spider-gut, don’t you?” she asked. “It’s telling you I’m a friend.”

“It’s telling me you’re not an immediate threat,” Mayday corrected, but to herself she had to admit that her spider-sense normally did warn her when her secret-identity was in danger.

“Well then, I guess all I can give you is my promise,” Agent Storyteller said. She touched the gem on her spear-thing and seemed to hook her fingers into a bit of nothing. When she pulled her hand away, the thinnest, intricately woven threads of glimmering something stretched out between her fingers and the faintly glowing stone, forming a beautiful, golden gossamer. “We’re on the same side, sister.”

Mayday’s jaw dropped. “You’re a spider?!”

“No, I’m cotton. But in mystical-taxonomy, that puts us in the same genus,” Agent Storyteller said, dropping the glowing threads, which fizzled out of sight, and leaning down. “Welcome, Weaver,” she whispered right next to her ear, giving Mayday’s hand an affectionate squeeze. “Remember, the first rule of Weavers’ Club is you don’t talk about Weavers’ Guild. Do you know what the second rule of Weavers’ Club is?” she asked with a warm note of humor in her voice.

“I’m guessing it’s also ‘You don’t talk about Weavers’ Club’,” Mayday whispered back, and now that they weren’t in the middle of a fight, the bizarre surge of trust that Agent Storyteller’s ‘cheat-code’ brought on felt like a warm, fuzzy blanket, and Mayday really hoped her spider-sense was guiding her right on this one.

“No, I’m cotton. But in mystical-taxonomy, that puts us in the same genus,” Agent Storyteller said, dropping the glowing threads, which fizzled out of sight, and leaning down. “Welcome, Weaver,” she whispered right next to her ear, giving Mayday’s hand an affectionate squeeze. “Remember, the first rule of Weavers’ Club is you don’t talk about Weavers’ Guild. Do you know what the second rule of Weavers’ Club is?” she asked with a warm note of humor in her voice.

“I’m guessing it’s also ‘You don’t talk about Weavers’ Club’,” Mayday whispered back, and now that they weren’t in the middle of a fight, the bizarre surge of trust that Agent Storyteller’s ‘cheat-code’ brought on felt like a warm, fuzzy blanket, and Mayday really hoped her spider-sense was guiding her right on this one.

“Very good,” Agent Storyteller said softly, straightening back up. “Not even to the Avengers, or your non-spider family members, or any other ‘good-guys’. They may have the best of intentions and character, but for now they can’t understand. They’re being prevented from understanding by some very techy and very very powerful forces. This is weavers-only stuff, and trying to explain it to anyone else is only going to unfairly burden them and put them, and all of us, in danger.”

“... Why?” Mayday asked, uneasy. She didn’t like hiding things from Mom and she wasn’t good at it.
“Because something much much bigger than us is going on and we have to tread carefully. I know this is frustrating, but you have to be patient, May. The lives of everyone you or I care about depend on it.” Agent Storyteller said, looking more serious by a few orders of magnitude than she had since the conversation began. “Please be patient, and somebody will contact you soon to explain more. But I have to go now, because I really don’t know how long my spell is going to hold these two.”

Mayday sighed and looked down at the ground, chewing on her lip. “... Okay,” she said quietly.

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“We need a bare lightbulb and a bunch of cigarette smoke in here,” Storyteller giggled. “Or is this more bondage than noir?” she stood back and looked Dad-Loki and Sylene over, both carefully restrained to chairs about a yard apart.

“You’re over-amused by the cliché,” Perry said, tilting their head and giving Storyteller a searching look. “You’re anxious, and you’re channeling it into humor.”

Storyteller tucked her hands into her pockets and pursed her lips, looking down at the floor for a moment. “... I suppose you’re right,” she agreed softly. “I... It honestly never occurred to me there would be another ‘Junior’. I mean... Well, you caught me off-guard too with the narration when we first met. I guess I was just biased or egotistical enough to think I was unique.”

“You are unique. You’re different from me and you’re different from her,” Perry pointed out gently.

“Yes,” Storyteller agreed, biting her lip momentarily as she studied Sylene. “I’ve been thinking about it (non-stop, really) and I’m thinking that Sylene wasn’t split in half the way the Second and Third Lokis were in my world. She was created whole and autonomous, rather than a pair of conjoined twins...”

Perry was quiet for a few moments as they strolled around Sylene’s chair, studying her. “... She was created to be a companion, not a replacement,” they said at last, and their eyes flicked back up to meet Storyteller’s. “If her ‘father’ intended to guide and teach her, then there would have been no need to burden her with his memories.”

“Hm,” Storyteller crossed her arms and considered that. “... So she’s the same as me and the twins in body, but nobody jammed an epoch of trauma and jading into her head.”

“Or forced a sordid title and blackened name upon her,” Perry added with a nod.

“... The Asgardians still wouldn’t have trusted or liked her, but they wouldn’t have reviled her to the same level they did us... She wouldn’t have had to put up with the degree of abuse we did,” Storyteller murmured.

“And it seems she had a dedicated protector,” Perry noted. “But the similarity in clothing, and that they are apparently close, suggests ‘the apple didn’t fall far from the tree’. Being raised more gently means she didn’t push back, so she hasn’t evolved beyond him as you did.”

“Well there’s a marvelous topic for philosophical rhetoric: Is it better to have a happy childhood or a productive one?”

“... I don’t know,” Perry shook their head. “But this world would be poorer if you had not existed.”

Storyteller smiled, warmed by the praise, and then chewed her lip as she considered the two unconscious gods fastened to chairs. “Do you think I should change? I usually try to maintain gender-continuity when I’m meeting the same person repeatedly, but in this instance, my analogy to
Sylene might inspire a little more congeniality from Daddy.”

Perry nodded slowly. “Either has merit,” they said, and then tilted their head slightly to the side and gave Storyteller a studying look. “What does it mean when you abandon that continuity?”

“... I didn’t even notice when I dropped it with you,” Storyteller mused, shaking her head. “I didn’t think about it. I guess I’m just so comfortable with you it didn’t occur to me.”

“Hm,” Perry smiled softly. They glanced back at Dad-Loki, who had started to twitch now as his internal chaos burned away at the sleeping curse. “Perhaps like you did with Miss Parker; begin with the form they already know, and then find an appropriate point in the conversation to make the switch.”

Storyteller nodded, shifting back to male, and walked to stand just between Dad-Loki and Sylene. He placed a hand on each of their foreheads and released the sleeping curses simultaneously. They both jerked to life with startled gasps. “Sorry about the trouble. I know this is rather undignified, but you had me a bit overwhelmed back there,” Storyteller said calmly.

“How dare you! Release me at once, cretin!” Dad-Loki snarled, straining to break his magical restraints or the chair they attached him to.

“Father! You’re-- I thought--” Sylene looked equal parts furious about her capture and relieved to see her father alive.

“You should have killed me when you were able, boorish varlet! Your paltry--”

“Be silent!” Perry snapped at Dad-Loki, voice harsh and cold.

Dad-Loki went quiet, looking baffled and angry because he didn’t understand how he was being compelled. “No, no, not silent,” Storyteller sighed, stepping back and standing a comfortable distance in front of the captured pair. “We need to have a discussion here and that means everybody gets a chance to talk. We just need to take it down a notch, so if we could all take a deep, calming breath now, that’d be great.”

“Father? What have you done to him?!” Sylene demanded, struggling.

“Perry, let him go, please?”

“You may speak when asked a question,” Perry said, crossing their arms.

“Perry.”

“What do you hope to gain?” Sylene demanded. “If you meant to kill us, you could have done so!”

“Exactly. So obviously I don’t want to kill you,” Storyteller pointed out. “Now, I am called Special Agent Storyteller and I’ve been retained by Doom because He’s been having an issue with a handful of Lokis from various domains deciding that they’re going to go out and kill all their analogues. My job is to capture the bad-eggs and catalogue the survivors,” he explained, and then glanced over to Perry. “Perry, let him go. He’s not going to calm down while you’re lording your next-level power-ups over him.”

Perry rolled their eyes and sighed, then turned back to Dad-Loki. “You may speak.” Dad-Loki started to spit out an ancient and particularly nasty poison-fire curse at Perry, but where the curse took a whole stanza to recite, Perry only needed three words. “That won’t work.” And it didn’t.
“Okay, yes, you’re very angry, I get that. Things got a little too exciting down in the city today, because I rushed in a bit misinformed. But now we’re here, and we’re going to calm down and talk.” Storyteller said very calmly and waved his hand, summoning a chair, then sat down facing the angry pair. “So I’m thinking, based on the way you reacted when you saw me, that you two have encountered one or more of these hunter-types, but the fact that I found you in your own domain, and not out on the prowl, tells me you’re not aggressors in this thing.”

“And you will release us, once you are certain as to our lack of involvement?” Sylene asked shrewdly, narrowing her eyes.

“Do not grovel, daughter!” Dad-Loki momentarily abandoned his glaring-contest with Perry to snap.

“I am ascertaining the situation, Father;” Sylene snapped right back.

“Yeah, Dad, let her work!” Storyteller grinned.

“Graceless fool, do not mock me!” Dad-Loki snarled.

“To answer your very reasonable and logical question, Sylene,” Storyteller said sweetly, turning back to the girl. “The two major bullet-points for me to check off my list are these: are you psychotic, globe-trotting serial-killers, and if not, can I convince you to not challenge Doom?”

Sylene tilted her head, looking curious and thoughtful, while Dad-Loki spat, “Doom is no god.”

“Now, that is a point for debate. No, Doom didn’t used to be a god, but now He’s wielding enough unfathomable cosmic energies to call Himself whatever He damn well pleases. And I’m fairly certain He’s more powerful now than any actual-god I’ve ever met.” Storyteller leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms. “Straight to the point: If Perry’s magic can shut you up, Doom could annihilate you with a sneeze.”

“And so you whore yourself to the charlatan like a mewling sycophant, begging for scraps from his table?” Dad-Loki sneered.

“No, I ‘whore’ myself to Him so that I can have an inside-line on what’s going on around here. Your daughter seemed pretty upset earlier about how the apocalypse came and went but nobody remembers,” Storyteller explained. “I have the scoop, and I have immediate access to further news-updates as they become available. And while my actual authority is pretty loosely defined and nobody really answers to me, I have more freedom now than I ever did in Asgard. All in all, I’d say the end of the world has worked out in my favor,” he painted the mention of Asgard with a note of disdain, which usually tended to play well with this demographic.

“And what is the ‘scoop’?” Sylene asked before her father could lob another pointless insult.

“Some kind of ludicrously overpowered aliens from exo-space decided to tear down the multiverse,” Storyteller replied. “Doom found a way to kill them and siphon off their power, then He smooshed up what was left of the realities we remember and rolled them into a ball. Thus, Battleworld.”

“That’s preposterous,” Dad-Loki scoffed.

“I know, right? It’s completely asinine,” Storyteller agreed. “I’d never make up something that stupid, which is why it has to be true.”

Perry gave an amused snort. “Despite Storyteller’s glibness, the basic gist is accurate.”

“And you would beseech us to allow this pretender his charade?” Dad-Loki demanded.
“I would beseech you to not throw your lives away pointlessly,” Storyteller corrected. “Doom’s already turned three Lokis into decorative art for His trophy room. You two might be a bit rude (I’m looking at you, Daddy) but you’re not the worst of the worst, and I don’t think I want you ending up statues.”

“And so Doom has sent you to convince us to fall in line,” Sylene pursed her lips, eyes calculating.

“No,” Storyteller shook his head. “Doom sent me to assess whether or not you represent a threat to His law and order and whatnot. The fact that you retain at least some memory of the previous world means that you most definitely do represent a threat to His dogma. However, I have chosen to try and convince you that it would be to your benefit to keep your heads down and be patient. Doom may have power beyond a god, but he’s still a human, and have you ever known any human ruler, no matter how rich or mighty, to last forever? It’s not even about mortality, they just don’t have the attention-span necessary for eternity. This will pass.”

Sylene and Dad-Loki exchanged a look and then turned their identical eyes back to Storyteller. “You’re looking to gather like-minded allies,” Dad-Loki said softly.

“You are not like Storyteller,” Perry broke in with a sneer. “He has evolved far beyond you.”

“Perry,” Storyteller sighed, glancing sideways at him for a moment and then back at Dad-Loki. “The ones who hurt or threaten me and mine, I give to Doom. The ones who are open to a... professional relationship, I keep for myself.”

“Hm...” Dad-Loki gave him an appraising look now, his anger finally faded and replaced with calculation.

“Although, I must admit, you two in particular are of much greater interest to me than most,” Storyteller said, eyes turning to Sylene again.

“And why is that?” she asked.

“Because I didn’t know I had an analogue,” Storyteller said and watched Sylene frown in confusion, then turned back to Dad-Loki who was now studying him more closely, a sharp wariness in his eyes. “She’s a copy, isn’t she? Forged of your own blood and sorcery and without proper matronage?”

“How dare you!” Sylene huffed. “My mother was the most beautiful, faithful and stalwart goddess in Asgard!”

“Sigyn?” Storyteller asked, picking up on the keywords ‘faithful’ and ‘was’. “But she died before Sylene was born. Didn’t she.” He stared hard at Dad-Loki, who was glaring back with ice-cold fury in his eyes, confirming the guess.

“... If your goal is to endear yourself, you make a very poor play of it,” he hissed.

“F-Father?” Sylene looked at him, brow knit.

“I’m sorry to stir up drama about it. I wasn’t trying to offend or denigrate,” Storyteller said, shaking his head and shifting to female form. “I’m just so curious about why she is. You must have created her for entirely different reasons than the Loki of my own world created me. You’ve raised her as a precious daughter, and that feels so foreign and strange to me. You have to understand, when the Loki in my world created me, he branded me with his own poisoned name, then killed himself and abandoned me to the mercies of Asgard... I’m sure you can appreciate just how merciful Asgard might be,” she glanced down and away.
Dad-Loki had gone silent, and when Storyteller checked, he was watching her. His gaze wasn’t warm by any measure, but it now lacked the venom and accusation that had previously been there. Sylene was staring at her knees and biting down on her lip, deep in thought. “Sylene is a perfect replica, just like me, right? But you’ve chosen to raise her as a child,” Storyteller mused, rising to her feet and performing a few gestures to dissipate the magical restraints holding the two. “... You were lonely?”

“My reasons are my own,” Dad-Loki replied coolly, standing.

“If you were able to convince Asgard that she was Sigyn’s, you must have done it immediately following her death?” Storyteller asked. “Or maybe, like me, you brought her forth as a child rather than an infant?”

“It is not your concern,” Dad-Loki growled.

“She’s curious. You’ve never once fantasized what it would have been like to have a father who actually cared for you?” Perry challenged with an inimical stare at Dad-Loki. “Storyteller wants to know if there isn’t a spark of love in your heart that our analogue from her world lacked.”

“And what are you to do with her? If her progenitor is dead, how are you connected?” Dad-Loki narrowed his eyes; he might have minutely warmed up to Storyteller, but he was still plenty cagey about Perry.

“I came from a different Earth,” Perry answered calmly. “There were no others ‘gods’ who grew to the same level of awareness as me. I thought I might be alone before Storyteller found me.”

“Oh? And what makes the two of you so ‘evolved’?” Dad-Loki challenged.

“The inheritance of Odin’s rune-magic and Frigga’s weaving-magic. We’ve found the combination, which is immensely greater than ‘the sum of its parts’,” Storyteller explained in easy, mythical terms before Perry could make it too existential and esoteric. “Which sounds great on paper, but first we had to be stripped of all our former powers and dignity, as well as everything we’d ever held any conviction in, and then put through a crucible before we could even begin to climb the learning-curve. I’m still a long way from mastery but studying hard. Perry has a few more years under their belt and takes a little more Zen approach to the whole thing.”

Dad-Loki looked intrigued, his rudimentary archetype attracted to the idea of untapped power. “... And what must one do to advance this track?” he asked, addressing the question to Storyteller. She glanced at Perry and gave the slightest shrug of one shoulder. Perry then took two quick, long steps toward Dad-Loki, who seemed torn between stepping back and standing his ground. “Get--” he started, as Perry grabbed his shoulder-guard and pulled them nose to nose, staring piercingly into Dad-Loki’s eyes.

“Dig deep within yourself, to your very core, to the oldest, rawest part of you. Dig until you can see through the haze and finally understand that you are not the liar; you are the lie,” Perry said with such intensity that it took Storyteller a moment to decide that it wasn’t their narration voice. Then they let him go and stepped back, relaxing their shoulders and effecting nonchalance. “It may take a while, but I found it to be worth the effort.”

“I used a more Darwinian approach,” Storyteller said with a shrug, noting that Dad-Loki was a bit shaken but doing a mostly decent job of hiding it. “The original Loki of my world, and then two more after that, gave their lives to advance us forward, until I was born with the strength to break through that ceiling. It was painful and terrifying and the middle-version of us was a walking identity-crisis.” She glanced down at her folded hands and bit her lip for a moment. “If you hold
much value for your responsibilities to Sylene, then you shouldn’t try that method. We let a lot of
people down during the course of things, what with the mental-illness and the repeated dying.
Perry’s way might be a better choice,” she shrugged.

“Actually, I also killed myself briefly,” Perry noted. “Not completely though, not like your
predecessors. I kept my psyche intact. I simply wanted to prove that Hel held no power over me.”

“You’re so metal, Perry.” Storyteller grinned.

“So what happens now?” Sylene asked, folding her arms. “Assuming we agree to ‘keep our heads
down’ and wait Doom out.”

“Oh good, you’re rational. That’s wonderful,” Storyteller let out a sigh and nodded. “All right, so I
need you to not stir up drama or draw attention to yourselves outside of your own domain. I mean,
while I can’t really expect you to hold yourselves prisoner, if you do go wandering around the rest of
Battleworld, don’t get noticed or we’ll all be in trouble,” she explained seriously. “But when you’re
at home, it’s basically business as usual. Doom doesn’t regulate domains’ internal politics, so long as
they don’t look like they pose a threat to Him. However, that being said...” she turned to look Dad-
Loki in the eye. “The Truce has been called. Do you answer?”

He raised an eyebrow. “... Who called it?”

“Anansi, and he speaks for his totem-siblings as well. Others have already answered,” Storyteller
said. “And if you want to be part of what’s brewing, whether you choose to support our effort or not,
I need you to respect the armistice.”

Dad-Loki’s frown deepened. “... Spider-Girl,” he growled darkly, clearly annoyed.

“What of her?” Sylene asked, looking back and forth between her father and Storyteller.

“She’s off-limits,” Storyteller explained. “She, and any other spider-totems, are part of a non-
aggression pact. Monkey, fox and raven-totems, as well as any other trickster gods could also be part
of it-- I’d probably go with a when-in-doubt-ask policy. But, and this is important, any spider is part
of the truce, even if they aren’t aware of it yet. Any attack on a spider-totem is going to turn you into
an enemy of the entire alliance, including me.”

“And him?” Dad-Loki asked, nodding toward Perry, his eyes narrowing with dislike.

“And me,” Perry agreed coolly.

“And of the spiders,” Sylene pulled it back as Dad-Loki and Perry resumed their glaring contest.
“You seem to imply that they are connected in some capacity.”

“Well, connection is their specialty, but now they’re also being organized by a primordial. Quite
probably the last primordial at this point,” Storyteller explained and noted Dad-Loki turning back
sharply to stare at her, his attention again snared. “He’s taken charge of attempting to reweave the
Tapestry and the spiders run his errands.”

“... Interesting,” Dad-Loki murmured.

“Interesting enough that you’ll play nice for a while because you want to see what happens?”
Storyteller asked.

Dad-Loki’s sour expression finally broke, and a small smirk appeared. “I will admit to some
curiosity,” he replied, and then gave a sharp nod. “Fine. Let us see what your spiders can achieve.
The Tricksters’ Truce is answered.”

“Your answer is heard,” Storyteller smiled and turned to look at Sylene.

The girl’s lips dipped into a confused frown, and she glanced at Dad-Loki uncertainly. “Father?” she asked in a quiet voice.

“You must answer for yourself, Sylene,” he said. “Your word and your honor are your own.”

She nodded slowly and turned back to Storyteller. “I answer,” she said, chin held high, voice strong and regal.

“I’m glad,” Storyteller said, smile widening. She took a step closer and reached out, catching Sylene’s hands. “It’s exciting just to know that you exist,” she said quietly. “Do you think we could... just hang out sometime?”

Sylene looked down, seeming suddenly embarrassed and flustered. “I- I suppose that would be acceptable,” she mumbled.

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Ben was singing about monkeys jumping on the bed and bouncing a hysterically laughing Benjy on his knee when Mayday walked into the room, feeling skittish and paranoid even though she knew her mother was still at work and nobody else was around. “Hey... Gruncle Ben?” she called hesitantly.

“What’s the word, little lady?” Ben asked, turning to her with a grin, which faltered and shifted to a concerned frown as he looked at her. “What’s wrong?”

Mayday glanced down, biting her lip and thinking for a minute, she heard Benjy stop giggling and start whining, upset by the change in the room’s mood. She took a breath and looked back up at Ben. “Welcome, weaver,” she said.

Ben’s eyes went wide and so did Benjy’s, they both stared at her silently for a couple of seconds, then Benjy stretched his arms out in her direction. “Up! Up up!” he demanded.

Mayday walked over and plucked him off of Ben’s knee, picking him up and hugging him as Benjy’s little arms wrapped around her neck and he nuzzled his face against her shoulder, babbling happily.

“... What was that?” Ben asked softly, watching her.

“I’m not sure,” Mayday shook her head, looking down again. “Something happened today. I met someone who--”

She and Ben both turned and gasped in shock as the air ripped apart and a large whole in space opened up a foot in front of the TV. “Benjamin Parker and Mayday Parker,” a voice called through it and a steampunk spidertaur in a creepy-ass mask appeared on the other side. “Your presence is requested.”

“... You... I know you...” Mayday whispered, staring at him.

The spidertaur nodded. “You do,” he agreed.

“I think... I think we need to hear what he has to say,” Ben said quietly, climbing to his feet.
“... Yeah,” Mayday agreed, hugging Benjy closer to her and walking toward the spacial anomaly.

Chapter End Notes

So, I think I've said this before, but MC2 is not worth reading. Seriously, it ranges from dumb to offensively bad (and also regular-offensive). Spider-Girl (now Spider-Woman) is the only successful-ish character/series from this universe, and also the one that spawned it during a What If story in 1998. The core of the universe started as "what if all the Marvel heroes we know were 15 years older and their kids were just coming into their heroing years" (this was when the Marvel-Universe had been on a longer timeline than it was recently reconned to, so actually about 20-22 years under the reconned ages. The reconned ages that make no sense with the established timeline and characters like Teddy remaining paradoxically unchanged... I think under the various new age-retcons, Bobby Drake had to have started college at 14. Well done, Bobby.) But since MC2 is spun off of basically a 90s status quo, none of the events from the 2000s that really defined what the main Marvel Universe is now (House of M, the Decimation, Civil War, Secret Invasion) ever happened in that universe, and so it's significantly different than a future timeline based off of the current 616 would be.

Sylene is one of the very few characters in this universe who is actually written kind of well, in that she has a couple interesting nuances, which I'm not sure if I'd attribute more to the writer or the artist. The thing that stood out to me was that when she disguised herself as a 'perfectly normal human don't pay any attention', she chose to look like a plain, elderly woman and not a pretty girl; unlike a typical female supervillain and/or goddess, vanity isn't her flaw. As far as villain-motivation, etc., pretty standard fare and not really given the time to have much depth/development, but it does tell us that she loved her father, which, for Loki's children... is not really consistent with 616-Loki-Prime (Fenrir sometimes does, depending on writer) so he is apparently a significantly better father in this universe, even though (in his very brief appearance in it) he seems to be the same scenery-chewing classic model that pre-2007 readers would remember.

Sylene as being a clone-baby rather than a normally-concieved-baby is pure head-canon I made up specifically for this fic, but look at the thumbnail and tell me that Ikol's character-design/outfit wasn't informed by Synene's. Her personality, vs Loki's, is also a lot more similar to Ikol, where she operates with more logic and less fury; she's still hurt and angry, but she's able to slow down and keep a cool head while she works. I delved into MC2 specifically as part of my research-reading for this fic (oh God, I would not have kept with it for any other reason) and both that character-design and the fact that who Sylene's mother was (and whether she even had one) is never mentioned, is what inspired me to use her this way.
Oh wait, almost forgot! The thing about Mayday knowing Perry: so, the... second (I think, maybe third) series in the Earth-X universe turned into this mutiverse crossover thing with a handful of characters from several other alternate universes wandering in, including Blood-Storm and... yeah, I can't actually be bothered to remember all of them right now. While I was reading, I thought the Spider-Girl who showed up was Mayday Parker, and that's what I had in my mind when I first conceived this part of the story. Turns out, when that Earth-X story-arc happened, Krueger and Ross must have been told they could use defunct AUs but not open ones, and since MC2 was still alive at that point in time, they created a basically-identical Spider-Girl to use, but she was actually Mayday Reilly, not Mayday Parker... Whatever, I decided to stick with my original plan because it was more fun.

The two Avengers I didn't name in the text were Mainframe (an android Tony built to replace him when he retired) and Bluestreak (a speedster with zero backstory, but that same very-social-but-dangerously-ADHD personality that we give any of the millennial speedsters, as opposed to the impatient-and-rude personality that we give any of the silver and bronze age speedsters).
Storyteller seeks and gives advice.

Chapter Summary

“... Figured I’d be back, huh?” she asked in a subdued voice.

“If you hadn’t been there, or didn’t wish to come... There was a low probability that checking would do any harm,” Karn replied. “How are you?” That pulled her eyes to him. Somehow, despite not knowing him very well yet, she thought it wasn’t the sort of inquiry that came naturally to his mind or tongue.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Serrure was standing on a stool at the stove, pushing something around in a large skillet, while Loki sat at the kitchen table writing a report when Verity made her way into their house as evening began to descend. Loki’s pen was moving rapidly across the page; Verity left her to her work for a moment and she went over to check on Serrure’s meal prep. He was probably old enough to use the stove without somebody hovering over him, and it’s not like he was alone, but Verity’s responsible-adult instincts still said to go check. “What are you making?” she asked, setting a couple of cidars on the counter as she leaned against it.

“Cheeseburger casserole,” Serrure replied, pointing his spatula at a Hamburger Helper box on the counter.

“That’s basically macaroni and cheese with ground beef?” Verity asked.

“No, it’s cheeseburger with noodles,” Serrure corrected her, and he fully believed the distinction.

“Oh,” Verity nodded, and then glanced over at Storyteller. “She found another Loki today?” she asked. She was pretty sure this was supposed to have been a boy-day, but Loki seemed to be in girl-mode now.

“I think so,” Serrure said. “She’s been writing since I got home. I think she’s excited.”

“So you started making dinner all on your own?” Verity asked.

“Uhuh.” Serrure nodded, turning the gas off under his skillet and picking up a saucepan, in which the noodles had been boiling, then stepping down off his stool and carrying it to the sink. “I’m taking care of her,” he said, pouring the noodles out into a colander.

“You sure are,” Verity agreed, smiling at that. “Do you need any help?”

“You could... cut carrot sticks?” Serrure suggested, coming back to the stove and dumping the noodles on top of the beef crumbles.

“Okay.” Verity went to the fridge and pulled out a bag of carrots, bringing them to the sink while she listened to Serrure work behind her. After she’d pulled the cutting board insert across one side and started cutting them up, she heard Loki’s chair push back and glanced over her shoulder.
“Oh look at you two, being so domestic,” Loki said with a grin and sat down on one of the stools at the island.

“You’re in a good mood, so I guess this one wasn’t an asshole?” Verity noted, turning her eyes back to her chopping while she listened.

“Not ‘this one’, ‘these two’, Verity corrected.

“How many domains did you whirlwind through today?” Verity asked.

“Just one.”

Verity tilted her head slightly, but didn’t turn around. “Isn’t that a problem? Or is this a conglomerate domain?”

“No. No, Verity, it’s so much cooler than that,” Loki said with a note of glee in her voice. “There was a ‘real’ Loki, and there was a me.”

“A ‘you’? … Oh.” Verity felt her eyebrows lift up high, and then come together again. “Aren’t those mutually exclusive?”

“They don’t have to be, apparently,” Loki replied. “This Loki raised her as his daughter, not his replacement.”

“So… this is another good one then, I guess?” Verity asked, glancing over her shoulder at Loki.

“Uuum…” Loki tilted her head to the side and wrinkled her nose. “It seemed like they’re both ‘villains’ in their world, but maybe not murderous psychotics, just aggressively trickstery,” she said.

“But they were together? So they get along?”

“They’re quick to snip at each other, but there’s obviously love there,” Loki said. “So a pretty normal family vibe, I guess.”

“I’d never snip at you,” Serrure asserted with ironclad certainty.

“What if I told you you couldn’t have dessert for no adequately explained reason?” Loki countered.

“You’d never do that,” Serrure replied. “You love explaining things.”

Verity put down her knife, because it probably wasn’t safe to hang onto while she laughed that hard.

Storyteller stood in the doorway to the kitchen, staring blankly into the open space between her and the table, waiting. As the microwave clock flipped over to eight, a portal ripped open in the air. Right on schedule. She silently pushed away from the jamb and walked over, stepping through and out into the Web’s hall. “… Figured I’d be back, huh?” she asked in a subdued voice.

“If you hadn’t been there, or didn’t wish to come… There was a low probability that checking would do any harm,” Karn replied.

Storyteller nodded, biting her lip and not looking at him, feeling embarrassed, maybe a bit ashamed, of her meltdown two days prior.

“How are you?” Karn asked, and that pulled her eyes to him. Somehow, despite not knowing him
very well yet, she thought it wasn’t the sort of inquiry that came naturally to his mind or tongue. “Miss Parker believed that you seemed in good spirits yesterday.” Storyteller tilted her head at him, and Karn’s posture shifted, displaying anxiety. “I felt you make use of the stabilimentum. I wasn’t watching you.”

“Well, no, if you’d been watching me I don’t imagine you would have needed to ask after me,” Storyteller agreed. “… You asked her about me though?”

“… You were very upset when you left,” Karn replied quietly. Storyteller nodded. “… Somebody was at my house when I got home,” she said, lowering her head slightly and gazing at nothing. “Obviously it’s rather disturbing that some person-thing, whose identity I am really not very sure of, was able to just up and find my house like that… But they said they knew that the Third was alive and okay… and I think I believe them.”

“They wouldn’t tell you who they were?”

“No. And they wouldn’t tell me where the Third was either,” Storyteller shook her head. “It’s… frustrating. They read as some kind of trickster, and they semi-confirmed that, but they’re riddlesy as a sphynx. And they mentioned the truce, but they can’t be held to it without giving their name.”

“That does seem like possible cause for concern,” Karn said.

“Some of the things they said the first time they found me made it sound like they were an associate of Odin,” Storyteller said slowly. “But the way they said it, the way they talk to me… feels closer than that.” She sucked her lip in and chewed on it for a moment. “It felt familial.”

“Doesn’t Odin have a reputation for appearing in disguise at times?” Karn asked.


“I… apologize, I thought that was true,” Karn said uncertainly. “Perhaps it is so in some universes and not others.”

Storyteller bit her lip again as she considered that, staring at the floor and giving a shrug. “They don’t act like any Odin I know… They definitely couldn’t be the one from my world, so, potentially… another world’s Odin could be this different. But… that doesn’t really mesh with the way they mentioned him, like a separate party.”

“I’m not familiar enough with lore where it fails to concern spider totems,” Karn said apologetically. “Perhaps Anansi could provide some better insight to you. Would you like me to ask that he be available when you come next?”

“That- That might be helpful. Thank you,” Storyteller agreed, looking back up and giving him a smile.

“But this trickster has calmed your fears about your predecessor?” Karn asked.

“I’m not not -worried,” Storyteller shrugged and shook her head. “But… I think understanding the geo-threads better is going to help me sniff out the other Lokis. The sensations when I’m doing either feel related.”

“That’s very possible,” Karn agreed.
“Enter,” Stephen called in reply to a knock he recognized as Loki’s cadence, as he set aside the papers he’d been working on and pushed away from the desk. “I thought for today’s discussion we might visit the Shield,” he said as she walked into his office.

“Okay, but I have a report first,” Loki replied.

“Oh, excellent.” Stephen sat back down. “And as there was no arrest, I assume this one turned out to not be much trouble?”

“They were a lot of trouble before I got them calmed down and convinced I wasn’t there to kill them,” Loki corrected with a grin.

Stephen nodded. “I’m glad you were able to defuse the situation then. So was this was another androgynous one or a dual-aspect?”

“No, this was two, a male Loki and his daughter,” Loki corrected, her grin growing wider.

Stephen was somewhat mystified by the level of excitement she was displaying, though that in itself wasn’t unusual. “Alright. Offspring aren’t really part of your purview though.”

“Stephen. Stephen. She was a ‘Junior’. Like me,” Loki said, walking up and handing Stephen a manila folder, then pressing her palms against his desk and leaning forward. “It sounds like he must have told everyone she was Sygin’s, but she wasn’t really. She’s just like me, except he raised her as a child.”

Stephen nodded slowly. “Interesting,” he said softly. “And obviously you’re very excited about that.”

“I said to Doom a few weeks ago, when I was making my case for custody of Serrure, that there weren’t any analogues to me,” Loki noted, looking down at the surface of the desk, her grin softening a little bit. “But it turns out that’s not true.”

“Wouldn’t she instead be analogous to Serrure though?” Stephen asked curiously. “If she’s only one generation removed from the prime Loki?”

Loki shook her head. “Serrure is a half, he’s conjoined… I think the First meant for the Third to become a whole, but he got it wrong. The Third wasn’t able to successfully assimilate Serrure into himself, and he was never really complete, he was just… dragging around the metaphysical corpse of his dead twin. He was never able to move past Serrure’s death, because he was never a whole with Serrure unwritten.”

Stephen frowned softly, processing that and finding that he was missing a puzzle piece. “Then why is Serrure able to exist independently?”

“I don’t think he can. I don’t think he is,” Loki said.

Stephen stared at her for a moment and then groaned, rubbing his hands over his face.

“I can’t find him. I’ve been looking. Since I found Serrure, I’ve been looking,” Loki said, her voice dropping lower but picking up a note of stress.

“Loki…”

“You told me not to bring it up, Stephen,” Loki snapped, glaring. “You told me specifically not to talk about this sort of thing. It’s plausibly deniable until I mention it. You told me not to.”
Stephen sighed, feeling a bit queasy and very tired. “... You’re right. I did,” he agreed softly.

“If I find him—”

“Then be prepared with a better argument than when you brought Serrure before Victor,” Stephen hissed, leveling a serious frown on her. “No histrionics this time.”

“Yes. I- I got a bit overwhelmed last time,” Loki agreed, looking down again.

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Returning to Doomstadt after their third session in a row on the ethics pertaining to clairvoyance, predestination, and whether observation was causation as with box-kitties, Stephen excused himself and headed back toward his office while Storyteller took a walk along one of the garden walls to settle herself a bit. It was exhausting. The subject was exhausting. Trying to address it while dancing around why it had suddenly become such a relevant topic for her, knowing that Stephen could feel there was more to it than she said, but he didn’t press, was exhausting. Two hours of it had put her stomach into knots and given her a headache.

She gazed at the featureless sky and glanced now and again down at the children playing in the garden as she walked. There were half a dozen of them, Serrure and Franklin among their number, and Susan von Doom was in their midst, so much evoking Maria von Trapp that Storyteller wondered at the children’s movements not being better choreographed. She idly began wondering what Johnny was up to, when first she noticed that his sister was the one supervising afternoon shenanigans, and by the time she’d walked the perimeter and come back around to a door against the palace wall, she decided to go find out.

She made her way to the residence wing, carefully avoiding contact with anyone who might ask what the hell she was doing there, and knocked on the door of Johnny’s apartment. She waited for a minute or two, and had started to turn away in defeat when it opened.

“Oh, hey, what’s up?” Johnny asked, giving her a surprised look.

“Just seeing if you were busy,” Storyteller replied with a shrug.

“What would I possibly be busy with?” Johnny replied with a grin and stepped back, pushing the door wider. “You want to come in?”

“Thanks.” Storyteller followed him through the door and spotted Benjamin sitting on the couch in the front room. “Hello Mister Grimm,” she greeted.

Benjamin gave her a craggy smile. “Well if Johnny’s invitin’ girls back to his place, maybe it’s time for me to skedaddle,” he noted, pushing himself to his feet.

“Oh don’t let me put you out!” Storyteller protested.

“Nah, I was just about to leave anyway,” Benjamin said, shaking his head. “Got some stuff to take care of.”

“You’re sure?” Storyteller asked, feeling awkward at the possibility she’d disrupted.

“Always.” Benjamin paused and clapped her shoulder as he came near on his path to the door. “Hey, you seem like a nice girl. Not sure if I should be tellin’ ya to look out for this schmuck or take care of him,” he said with a grin.
“Wow, Ben, you are just firing on all awkward-cylinders today, aren’t you?” Johnny groaned, giving him a withering grimace.

“She’s a looker!” Benjamin declared, aiming a thumbs-up and a wink at Johnny.

“Go be someone else’s embarrassing dad now!” Johnny snapped.

“Yeah yeah,” Benjamin chuckled, and continued his walk to the door as Storyteller giggled.

“He’s just being a jerk and trying to make it weird,” Johnny sighed as the door closed, shaking his head.

“Is it weird?” Storyteller asked, looking back at him. “Is that because of the gender thing?”

Johnny shrugged and gave a little smile. “I don’t know, not really? I don’t feel like the gender thing throws me that much. Unusual’s not really the same as ‘weird’. he reasoned. “And you are literally ‘divinely’ pretty, so who could complain?”

“But you’re not interested,” Storyteller interpreted with a nod to herself as she walked over and settled on the couch.

Johnny paused as he was about to sit and tilted his head at her. “I didn’t think that’s where we were at. That’s where you’re at?”

Storyteller sucked in her lip and pulled it across her upper teeth a couple times, considering. “… I seem to keep having these conversations about where I’m at,” she noted.

“Sorry. I didn’t-- I’m not being mean, I just seriously got the wrong message,” Johnny said, sitting down.

“No, you didn’t,” Storyteller shook her head. “I was never trying to give any kind of message. It’s just that he sort of brought up the subject, and then... I don’t mean to imply that I was looking for something here, I just want to understand your response, and whether it’s meant to be a hard shutdown. I just want to understand clearly.”

“It’s not a hard shutdown. I just hadn’t thought about it,” Johnny shrugged, looking a bit uncomfortable and worried. “You are pretty, and you know music better than anyone around here.”

“But?” Storyteller asked.

“There isn’t one. Just listing some facts,” Johnny said. “So now I’m thinking about it, now we seem to be talking about it, is this when we take a vote?”

“I…” Storyteller looked down at her knees, frowning. “Like I said, I just seem to keep having this conversation... The first time was easy enough, or at least I didn’t really have to do anything, because I got a hard shutdown right away. The second time I explained my situation, and the ‘no’ decision got made for me again…”

“Do you actually want to talk about this?” Johnny asked, a concerned tone in his voice. “Because if you don’t, it’s okay.”

Storyteller bit down on her lip for a moment before trying to articulate her vague sense of unease into a clear concept. “… My body is mature, and my mind is full of knowledge, but I’m a new soul. It puts me in a strange position, because my body feels adult sexual desires, and I understand it all in- in a technical way, I guess… but I don’t think I understand it emotionally.” She paused, biting down on
her lip and sighing, before adding, “Stephen says I read as having ‘early adolescent’ maturity. I think that’s accurate on some levels, but it’s too complicated to sum up so easily.”

“So, at this point I just feel like it needs to be pointed out that being an ‘adult’ doesn’t mean having unlocked the ‘true meaning’ of love and life and whatnot,” Johnny said. “You’re not ‘behind’ just because you’re not ready to get married right this second.”

“I know,” Storyteller nodded, looking down. “I think, for now, while I’m still trying to get a handle on who I even am… I don’t think I should pick sexual playmates from people I couldn’t avoid if I messed up and things got awkward.”

“That’s totally legit.”

She glanced back up at him. “You’re sweet, and I like you.”

“But it’s a ‘don’t shit where you eat’ thing,” Johnny said with a nod.

“I suppose so,” Storyteller agreed, and then smirked. “Besides, if we dated, Doom would probably be all like ‘WHAT IS THIS NO STOP YOU’RE BOTH FIRED!’”

Johnny burst out laughing. “Well that’s a solid argument in favor,” he said.

Storyteller’s smile pulled a little deeper and she felt it all the way up to her eyes now. “I know you’re joking, but I’ll never put you in His crosshairs,” she said and glanced down again. “You may be the in-law, but He gets weird paranoias. I don’t want—”

“He does not get to decide something like that,” Johnny broke in, his voice suddenly somewhere between a growl and a hiss and ragged with fury. “He does not get to tell me or anyone else who to be and who to love. If he tried—”

Storyteller clapped her hand over Johnny’s mouth and pinched her fingers and thumb on either side of his jaw, locking him in. She stared at him for a second, feeling numb, mind racing as she fought panic and tried to put together some reasonable placation. She leaned in and put her mouth next to his ear. “Be patient, Johnny,” she pleaded. “Somebody has to keep Battleworld in one piece, and right now, Doom is the only one strong enough… But Franklin will be grown up before you know it. And he needs you. He needs you so much. You’re the one who has to remind him that fun is essential to life. Just be patient a little while. Be patient and make sure that he becomes the kind of god you’d want this world to have.”

She let his face go and drew back just a little. They stared into each other’s eyes silently for a minute or two. “... Do you really believe that? That Battleworld needs to be held together?” Johnny whispered.

Storyteller nodded. “It’s sick. Battleworld is sick.”

Johnny’s expression darkened again. “And you don’t think he’s the reason?”

Storyteller shook her head. “I’ve gone over the data myself,” she told him. “My best field is magic, but I have a fair grounding in the major sciences too. It was already sick, it was being ripped apart, when Doom put His foot down and made it stop… He’s not strong enough to fix it though. I think it takes almost everything He has to just stop it from deteriorating.”

Johnny pursed his lips and was silent for a moment, eyes glancing away, before he murmured, “And you think when Franklin grows up, he’ll be able to do more?”
Storyteller leaned in to whisper next to Johnny’s ear again. “Understand that this is apocryphal, perhaps even blasphemy… Franklin is stronger than Doom was at his age. I have faith in him. Do you?”

She heard Johnny’s teeth grind against each other as she shifted back again to look at his face. “…Franklin and Val shouldn’t have to grow up with the wrong shit Doom says. How can they turn into good people if they’re listening to him? ”

“Because they’ll have you. Teaching them to look for the beauty in simple things and to listen for the music in everything,” Storyteller said. “Don’t jeopardize your chance to do that.” She took a deep breath and looked down. “Maybe it feels passive, but we need to wait and tolerate… For right now, it’s by Doom’s grace the sky says up and the earth stays down… I want this world to stay whole, I want all of us to survive long enough for a better option to be viable.”

Johnny looked down and away. “… Why do you think the world would fall apart without him?” he asked softly.

“Johnny, I’m sorry, but I don’t think I can teach you ten years worth of intensive mystical theory right this second,” Storyteller said, shaking her head. “Do you trust me?”

Johnny sighed and forced a small smile. “How can I not? Nobody else around here knows the lyrics to Smells Like Teen Spirit. Or can even understand them while it’s playing.”

“Well, obviously teaching Franklin to understand Nirvanese should be high on your priorities list,” Storyteller replied.

Chapter End Notes

Karn’s reference to Odin being known as somebody who wears a lot of disguises is true for the Odin from our world’s Scandinavian mythology, however I haven’t really seen much evidence of it being the case in the Marvel Universe. Apparently the 616 is a universe in which Odin isn’t a trickster. Or, if you consider the Fear Itself storyline, it's one where he formerly fit some plot-points for a trickster-archetype, but buried everybody’s memory of that fact and has pretended to be a non-trickster so long it became sort of true. Except that he was still a dirty, hypocritical liar until somebody who knew better showed up to out his lies. Boo, Odin. Boo. Stop being mean to Loki for reminding your own secret shame.

While in modern US-English, an 'apartment' refers to a complete private residence, in old-timey parlance, an 'apartment' would have been somebody's personal suite of rooms within something like a palace. Why you don't just say 'their room', is because it would probably be at least four rooms: bedroom, bathroom, dressing room, sitting room. There would not be anything like a kitchen inside of a traditional apartment, because the kitchen is in servant territory.

So, I'm mad and want to state for the record that I hate Spider-Geddon. The only thing I could potentially call positive from it was Otto getting some character-growth, but even that didn’t really feel earned, it felt more like a switch got flipped in him halfway through and he was suddenly a more well-adjusted person. As for the rest... ungh.

Dan Slott lovingly crafted the original Spider-Verse out of the foundations laid by J. Straczynski and Brian Bendis; he and his team put a lot of continuity-research into it and
referenced basically every canon AU with a Spider-Man in it, from Marvel v Capcom to Exiles, and they added a couple dozen fun/interesting ones into the mix to bolster the epic feeling. Slott built on a decade and a half of the previous spider-book creative teams' works for the 616, 1610 and 982, using and expanding canon his predecessors had created in a very excited-to-be-a-team-player way.

And now the sequel, Spider-Geddon, comes off as Christos Gage either (best-case) phoning it in because he didn't particularly care, or vindictively breaking all of Slott's canon to say "See, his story wasn't that great if I can render it completely pointless with a few lines!" It left me disgusted and angry, because it felt cheap, lazy storytelling, and also because it seemed like Gage was on a specific mission to undermine Slott, which is gross. His cheap deus ex Machina ending, and the exposition-dump to explain its logic, turns the entire original Spider-Verse conflict into a senseless slaughter completely devoid of any meaning. Writers who make it their primary mission to discredit their predecessors really make me angry.

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