xE rre

by FelicityGS

Summary

Tony knows he should be a lot more bothered about the god that's started to appear in his tower despite no word that Loki has escaped from his punishment on Asgard. That doesn't mean he is, not when Loki is actually answering questions that he asks and there's so much he wants to know.

Notes

Hello all. Welcome back to past readers, and hello to any new ones.

This piece was entirely inspired by a combination of three things that melded in just the right way- this picture, reading about music and the brain (Musciophilia is an incredibly interesting book and I'll fight anyone who says otherwise), and revisiting the soundtrack (and thus lyrics and thus language Hymmnos) of the Ar Tonelico games. They just sort of blended together into this mess of a thing, I just hammered the plot out from there.

We will, many many thousands of words from now, see the picture take place in the story. Sort of. That's a ways away. For now, let's get started.
He has always heard music.

When he first spoke of it, Lady Eir explained that he was hearing magic, hearing its form and breath, that magic was simply the lifeblood of the universe and when he manipulated those melodies that he was telling the universe what he felt. That it responded to his emotion and enacted it. That he was very lucky.

He did not feel lucky.

He could control how loud the music was by engaging in other things, so he did. When he read or played with Thor, when he talked, the music dulled, would quiet to just background noise and he could think. Sometimes, Thor’s mere presence was enough to make the music quieten, or at least change into something softer. He began recognizing patterns, how everyone he dealt with had a leitmotif.

When he was eight and sick, some fever that made him burn and kept him weak and trapped in bed, coughing until he thought he might not have any lungs to cough with, he could not think, could not concentrate or focus on anything long enough to convince the universe he was too busy for its song. It pounded in his head, in his veins, made his heart stutter and thud with its whims; when people came to check on him their leitmotifs overlapped with what the universe sang into an unwieldy cacophony that made him weep in despair, which made him cough, which cycled into this spiral of wishing for silence, the silence his brother heard and took for granted. That they did, all of them, and for the first time he hated. Reached out and gripped and used his own voice to scream and tear and destroy, until his entire room burned; he did not know the universe’s tongue then, but he screamed anyway, for it to stop, to just get the music out of his head, until he could do no more and lay in the burning, destroyed wreckage and wept, too weak to move.

The music did not stop.

He eventually began to work with the music, to try to understand it. He created the languages and symbols to describe the universe’s sounds as he heard them; Lady Eir ever encouraged him, became a mentor. She knew, though she did not hear the same way he did, with the same depth—he knew that when he first showed her the alphabet he made, in how she looked at him sideways as he described the notations that indicated frequency and amplitude for each letter, the minute details each letter could convey. Understood, in crystalline detail, that she—the closest he had to mentor, the only one he could speak to about these things—could not pinpoint so precisely, that the words the universe spoke to her were derived and distilled into their own lexicon and language. So he did that next, made language and lexicon, grammar and dialect, so others could use his words.

When he first worked magic, he would have to speak, sing. He did not like being so restricted; he spent months and years honing it, making it so he only had to think, only had to reach out with his hand to conduct the sound of the universe into what he wanted. Sometimes, when he ached, when the world took from him (his son while he was gone, when he could do nothing, chained and sword digging into his jaws), when things reminded him of his never being king despite Odin's promises (Thor's shadow, Thor's "Know your place, brother"), when all he was was emotion ("So I am no more than than another stolen relic, locked up here until you might have use of me?!"), the words bubbled and welled in his throat and it was all he could do to not scream, to not unleash what welled up inside and let it out.

Odin knew. Knew that the music was there, tearing at him; knew if didn't necessarily understand that
the universe whispered to Loki in song, whispered and coaxed and hummed and tried to get him to express. Loki was sure of it, when Odin passed his judgment. Very few in that court who watched him knew, but Odin did; Lady Eir's stricken features and eyes that welled with tears despite all that Loki had done; Thor's step forward (Thor, who did not know or understand, only remembered Loki sick and screaming to make it stop). Loki only smirked at Odin and stayed unbent.

It has been a very long time since he has been so alone, trapped with only his mind's amusement and the universe's song.

They leave him in blackness (even the fall from Bifrost had stars). His hands are bound in silk, so he cannot conduct the universe to his whims, but they do not gag him ("admit you were wrong, apologize and mean it," as if he would apologize at all!). Despite being able to feel the wall at his back and the floor underneath where he sits, he sometimes forgets, grows disoriented, loses sight of where Loki ends and where everything else begins. He does not know how long it has been, not in days or time that will make any sense to anyone else. It has been eight hundred eleven times he has fallen from Bifrost. It has been seven-hundred and eighty seven times that he has killed Laufey and been embraced by Frigga after. He has lost count of how many times he has hummed the song that twines in the wood of the mistletoe dart he carves, hands shaking in hatred ("Frigga will enjoy grandchildren she can hold without fear of them biting, eh?" and a golden smile for a golden god), or felt the tug of thread and pain as his lips are sewn shut. Scars and scabs reopen, fresh pain, new pain, old pain, pain that the universe feels and its responding requiem washes out all thought, for a while.

He digs through his memories, tries to find something he can interact with before he becomes little more than a shell the universe sings through. Mussed brown hair and fearless brown eyes despite being the most vulnerable of all; chest with its blue glow through the shirt and a witty retort. Tension that hovered in the air and laced it with a tense sexuality and danger all its own. He hums, casts his spirit elsewhere, and ignores the universe for a while.
Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

Welcome back! Figured I won't be horrible and leave just a thousand words to figure out if you want to read or not. Have another 4,000 to make up your mind. Not going to be another update for a few days, sorry! All the chapters are ending up this long.

The first time Loki appeared, Tony was half inside one of his cars, toying with the engine and covered in grease. He did not panic, not at all, thank you very much, though his heart did speed up a bit. JARVIS didn't sound any alarms, so he figured he was okay. He leaned out from under the hood and watched Loki, and, yeah, he'd admit it, admired a bit too. Loki walked through the room with the same lazy grace as a panther and looked over Tony's garage casually, circled Tony like he was circling prey. Loki's eyes flashed when he finally looked at Tony, stood there a few yards away, hands behind his back.

"Aren't you meant to be in a dark room somewhere in Asgard?" Tony reached for the glass of scotch he had on the cart next to him, took an even sip.

Loki just flashed that oh so pretty grin, the one that was stuck in Tony's head ever since that conversation. The one right before he got thrown out a window. The grin that if he saw a glimmer of he'd drag a man home because of it. None of them fucked like he imagined Loki did, but then, he supposed it was unfair to be comparing them to a god.

"I mean, I get it, I'm irresistible, but it won't take two seconds for the others to come bounding down the stairs."

"Two seconds is plenty of time to kill you, if that is what I wished." Loki's voice was… strained. As if he was having to focus on the words, each one a chore to get out. It wasn't much, the way he paused slightly, the slight lag in words that, three months ago, would have been quick and slick. Tony looked him over; he looked thinner and exhausted. Green eyes watched him, criminally intense. Tony hadn't managed to find someone to fuck yet who looked close enough to Loki, and it was always the eyes that broke the spell.

"You mean, you could try. We saw happened last time. And you haven't done anything yet; performance issues still?"

The god's face twisted, alien and muscles drawn too tight over his face, spitting out a sound that ripped through him, made his knees give out and he leaned against the car, ears ringing and heart thundering; then it was gone. That sharp face and too bright eyes—eyes that Tony was only just now realizing were just barely managing to hold back the shattered mind behind them, pain and hatred and something dark that brushed against Tony late at night when it was just him, a bottle of scotch, and too many memories. Tony wasn't crazy, yet, but he recognized the rest, knew that pain as well as he knew his own.

"You've got a mouth on you, don't you?"

Loki frowned at him, clearly confused that he wasn't on the ground screaming, so he just grinned and got his knees back under him. He blinked and by the time he opened his eyes again, Loki was gone.
"Jarvis, I want to know what he said as of yesterday."

"Yes sir."

The second time was a week later, Tony by himself on the couch flipping through channels, something to put on in the background while he drank and worked on his tablet because Pepper insisted he not stay locked up in the lab. Sweet woman, he needed to get her something nice (was her birthday soon? He couldn't remember, he'd need to check that too), but he sort of resented her as he skipped over yet another rerun of Golden Girls. He took a swig of his drink and when he put it down, Loki was there, perched on one of the armchairs.

Tony was pretty pleased he didn't jump up and swear, but he did nearly swallow his tongue.

"Can't you just *knock* like a normal person?"

"Where's the fun in that?" Loki said, a smile spreading over his features. Tony rolled his eyes and returned his attention to the television. Maybe if he just ignored the god he'd be left alone; that would keep him from making any bad decisions. Like, oh, getting drunk and trying to fuck the god. He didn't want to go through the window again so soon.

Loki broke the silence first.

"What is this?" Tony flicked his gaze over to Loki gesturing at the television.

"TV. People make shows, we watch 'em. Well, when there's actually something good on, which there isn't. There never is." Tony paused, catching a glimpse of a tavern and Prince Hal getting ale poured into his face. "Okay, exception." He flicked the guide up, grinned a bit. "'*Henry IV - Part I'*"

"Shakespeare. You'd like him, he's good with words." Tony let the show play and went back to studying his tablet. Everything suggested the sound Loki had made last time shouldn't be physically possible, kind of lending a little more credence to that whole god angle. Jarvis was still churning through some of the information, but so far they'd managed to figure out the first syllable: 'che.' "So couldn't keep yourself away?"

"Don't flatter yourself." Loki didn't take his gaze from television.

"Okay. Say, how come we haven't got any thunderstorms rolling through? No one notice you missing? They must not be very good at punishing you." Tony watched Loki out of the corner of his eye, waiting to duck over the back of the couch. Loki didn't lunge towards him, which he found a little odd. With how cracked the god's eyes had been last time he figured that it would take very little to set the god off again. "I asked Thor what was going on; doesn't really sound like much."

"Indeed." Loki's voice was low with only the tiniest tremour. "Can it not wait? I wish to see what happens to this Prince Hal."

Tony glanced back at the screen, frowned a little. Ah. Right. He was willing to bet there were some daddy issues there Loki could relate to.

Retrospectively, Tony would recognize that the next few hours (as they went straight from Part I into Part II) were probably some of the odder ones he'd had, and he'd had a number. Loki didn't speak, didn't threaten (other than the occasional irritated glance when Tony tried to speak to him), just sat
and watched *Henry IV* as if it was the most riveting thing on the planet. When it ended, Loki let out a sigh, relaxing into the armchair with a stretch, and looked over at Tony once more.

"You get one question," the god allowed, lashes lowered.

"One, hey we just spent a bunch of time bonding over Shakespeare and I didn't even try to stab you in the back once. I think you owe me more than one."

"You still owe me a drink."

"Yeah, if I take care of that, do I get three questions?"

Loki studied him and Tony studied right back, cocky grin plastered on his face.

"Three questions, and you still owe me a drink," Loki finally said when Tony didn't back down.

"Score. Okay. Wait. I don't know what questions I want to ask." Tony paused, racked his mind. He was pretty sure he could figure out what the hell Loki had said last time (thank goodness for Jarvis having better than human hearing), and he had a million questions to ask the god but he wasn't sure 'how does magic work' would really go over well. At least not yet. Might press his luck a bit far, what with Loki not even trying to kill him this time. Guy liked Shakespeare, he couldn't be that bad (course, Hitler might have liked Shakespeare, he'd need to ask Steve next time he saw the Captain).

"I'm going to save the other two so you have to come back, but let's go back to the one I really want to know. How the hell is being stuck in a dark room punishment?"

The indulgent smirk on Loki's features vanished behind a smooth mask; he went from lounging to rigid in seconds. The god watched Tony; Tony kept his expression just as blank, ignoring the chill slowly crawling along his spine and making him want to shiver. He realized again that he was playing with a glass encased bomb, and when it went off he was going to be shredded meat; but what was life without a little risk? Tony used to make bombs, he wasn't going to be scared of the metaphorical one sitting in his living room. He quirked an eyebrow, made it clear he was still waiting.

"Shall I show you?" Loki held out a hand, palm facing up.

"Sure," Tony said, and put his hand on Loki’s against his better judgment. He felt ice and heat spread across his skin where he touched the god, and immediate blackness. Whispers and sound he couldn't understand surrounded him, edged against his mind—Fenrir, Baldr, blood on his hands, "No, Loki", second best, second best, shadows he can't escape, pain pain pain, Baldr Fenrir—and took up what space they could find. He didn't know which way was up, and when he tried to move his hands to cover his ears from the whispers and the noise that crowded around him, he couldn't. Silk twined and wrapped with a deceptive softness between his fingers, bound his hands together so that he could do nothing. Panic welled up in him, memories of caves and Yinsen and desert heat—

He was sitting in his living room. Loki was gone again. The hand that had taken Loki's was balled into a tight fist, and he felt something crunch inside. He opened his palm; there was a piece of scrap paper in it.

*Think of better questions, Stark.*

He chuckled uneasily, remembered the whispers that crowded and pushed his own memories to the surface.

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"What is the item in your chest, Stark?"

Tony paused and just held the screwdriver in his hand for a few moments. Deep breaths. He didn't look up from the machine he was working on; just went back to what he was doing once his heart stopped thundering away and he was pretty sure his hand wouldn't tremble.

Finding those tiny screws was a pain in the ass when they fell on the floor.

"Suit's power source."

"I gathered that," Loki said dryly. Tony spared him a glance; he was sitting cross-legged on the table, chin in one hand while he watched Tony work. Blood on his hands, second best—Tony cut the thoughts off and shrugged.

"What else is there to tell? You're not the one with a bank of questions saved up."

"If it were that simple, then everyone would have one and I would not have come so close to success as I did." Tony could feel the way Loki's eyes burned into his back and he grumbled, spinning around on his stool to look at the god.

"Yeah, well, I'm not everyone. Why didn't they just take your magic away?" Tony had a hunch, especially after that mess of noise, how they hadn't gagged Loki, the sound (xxxxxxeeeeteeeteee reeeeee white noise screech Jarvis had informed him just that morning there was no known meaning for).

"It's part of you," Loki said, eyes glimmering in understanding.

"Yeah, let's go with that. And forgive me if I don't want to spill how it works to a former enemy, thanks."

Loki looked thoughtful and instead of dwell on how that made him a bit uncomfortable Tony went back to work.

"Does it have a sound?"

"What?" Tony swung back around, brow furrowing in confusion. He clearly needed to drink more around Loki; he didn't remember the god being quite so talkative the past two visits.

"A sound. Does it make a sound in your head?"

"Uh. No."

Something jealous flashed in Loki's eyes, made his face soft and wistful. Tony wasn't quite sure if he'd actually seen anything with how fast Loki's features returned to guarded curiosity. He'd look over the security footage for it again after Loki left.

"Have you thought of another question?"

"How's it work?"

Loki raised an eyebrow.

"Your magic. Cause before you were captured, you never made a noise but Thor insisted we gag you. And whatever it was you said that first time, that 'chere' crap, that was magic. Why do you suddenly have to speak to use it? How's it work?"

"You understood that."
"Well, Jarvis did most the work, because I sure didn't. Even if I listen to the recording of it all I get is this 'eeee' and white noise; it shouldn't be possible to speak at a frequency like you did, not for a human anyway. Maybe Aesir or whatever you guys call yourselves can." Loki was staring at him, so Tony smirked. "You didn't tell me what I could and couldn't ask questions on."

"Indeed," Loki said slowly, a slow grin spreading on his features, as if whatever he had bet on was paying off. "Indeed, I did not. Next time, then."

"What, why not now?"

"I did not specify when I would answer your questions, did I?" And gone with a flash of that cocksure grin that made Tony weak in the knees.

Tony sighed and turned back to what he was working on again. He was really going to have to start thinking about how he worded his questions.

Tony woke up, clock politely informing him it was currently 4 am. He wasn't sure why he was awake, just grumbled and shoved a pillow on his face.

"xE rre."

He sat up, swearing blue enough to make the air curl. Even in the half light of the bedroom it wasn't hard to pick out where Loki leaned, arms crossed as he stared out of the window. He flicked too brilliant green eyes at Tony and Tony decided the pillow should stay in his lap.

"It is 4 in the morning, people sleep right now, can you not just phone ahead? Do you need a phone? I can totally get you a phone." Tony rubbed at his arc reactor, ignoring the way his skin crawled when Loki studied it. "And I know I'm sexy, but stop staring. It's rude. Didn't your parents teach you better?"

"You say that as if I have a sense of time. Dark room, or do geniuses need not remember anything?" Loki chuckled, returning his gaze back outside. Tony let out a breath he hadn't realized he was holding.

"Whatever." Tony's brain finally caught up with the words that had started him up in the first place. "'Che re?"

"Your pronunciation would make my rather inept brother flush in shame, and he never bothered to learn." Loki moved from where he was by the window, crossing the room silently, perching at the foot of the bed—but still out of arm's reach. Tony filed that away. "'xE rre,'" he repeated again, slower, more carefully. Tony wasn't sure how someone could pronounce a capital, but Loki made it sound pretty natural.

"'xe rre.' Better?"

Loki studied him, then smirked slightly.

"It will do."

"What's it mean?"

"Mean. Average?" Loki sounded confused, just briefly losing his focus on Tony, eyes inwardly searching, as if racking his brain for what Tony had asked, what it well… meant. Tony didn't know
what to say at the obvious confusion; he was pretty sure mean as average wasn't an Asgard thing.

"The words. In English, you know, what we're talking right now?" Tony didn't actually snark at him, feeling off that the word-smith had lost a word.

"Ah. Yes. That 'mean.'" Loki's gaze snapped back to Tony as if he'd never been interrupted. "It doesn't mean anything."

"Bullshit. That meant something, otherwise I wouldn't have gone weak in the knees."

"Perhaps," a slow smile and a glance at his nails, "you simply find my voice so attractive you cannot resist it."

Tony didn't give me a reply, mostly because the only thing between him and Loki was a blanket and a pillow, and he didn't want to risk Loki testing out if his voice did arouse him that much, because proof it did was half-hard between his legs right now.

"I suppose, if you insist, that fragment of a fragment meant… mmm. Right. You wanted to learn about magic, yes?"

"What? Yes. That's what I asked, and you gave me three questions. That's my second."

"Is the meaning of 'xE rre' your third then?"

"No. It's not."

"Then I won't tell you. You're quick enough, you'll figure it out. If you absolutely must. Now, shall we begin here, or would you prefer to attire yourself?"

"Loki. It is four in the morning. I went to sleep three hours ago."

Loki raised one perfect brow and his lips curved slightly, as if asking 'and?'

Tony rubbed a hand through his hair and sighed. He waved a hand at the door.

"I'll see you in the kitchen. Dammit."

He pulled on some gym sweats and a robe, stumbling his way to the kitchen. Loki followed along, clearly having not mapped the entire place out or pretending to have not—small comforts. Jarvis already had the coffee pot running by the time they arrived. When Loki tried to say something, Tony held up a hand and pointed to the pot he was watching. Once it dinged off, he poured himself a mug and sat down at the breakfast bar.

Tony curled protectively around the cup of pitch black coffee, eying where Loki stood. Loki walked around the space, studying things curiously, but he didn't touch anything. "You want a cup?" Tony asked grudgingly. Loki eyed the coffee mug in Tony's hands for a few moments, something flickering through his eyes, licked his lips and smiled politely, shaking his head.

They stayed in silence for a bit longer, until Tony finished his first cup and poured his second, starting to feel less like he'd been run over by a bus.

"Okay. You can talk now. I might actually even comprehend some of it."

"Indeed." Loki leaned against a counter so that he could see both doors leading into the kitchen, crossed his arms. "I take it your… beverage has helped then?"
"Coffee, Loki. It's called coffee, and it's the nectar of the gods. Well, apparently not, since you don't know what it is. Maybe you need to get on that. This stuff is fantastic. You sure you don't want a cup?"

"No." Tony noted the barest flicker at the edge of his eyes, a tightening of his mouth, and wondered if Loki knew he did it. "I'd rather save my drink you owe for a better time and different place."

"Suit yourself." Tony sat back at the breakfast bar.

"The energy that powers your tower, your machines, does it make noise?"

"Well, it hums. I guess. Not really much else, I suppose, but it's not something I've really paid attention to. Usually just turn on some loud music and get to work, you know. Why are you looking at me like that? Stop it, it's creepy." Loki blinked, looking away. "Thank you. Why?"

"You Midgardians are deaf, after all. And here I was suspecting otherwise."

"Huh?"

"Nothing." Loki shook his head, keeping his eyes closed. "The universe's energy is music. Magic is simply conducting it to suit your own emotions. That's all. It is fairly simple, in theory; the universe is constantly trying to find conduits for expression."

Tony took another sip of coffee, waiting. When Loki didn't look like he would continue, he sucked up his pride and asked.

"So what's the words got to do with it? Why didn't you have to speak before?"

"I…. It is difficult to explain."

Tony didn't speak. Loki moved from the counter, began to pace, always just out of reach. He was, Tony decided, incredibly aware of exactly how much distance was between them at all times. Interesting. He filed it away with how Loki's eyes tightened and the way he licked his lips. It wouldn't hurt to know.

"My hands weren't bound. I could use them to express what I desired. Now, I must return to… other means of expression, in which case is simply using the distilled sounds of the universe to communicate with it. My idle boredom in youth come to aid me again." A twisted thing that pretended at being a smile, and poorly at that. "However, I think they should do nicely in explaining." Loki stopped, looked around before noting Tony's tablet, left on the counter from dinner. It was within arm reach of Tony; Tony watched the god calculate; if he hadn't noticed the way Loki's eyes tightened earlier he would have missed it. Apparently some sort of decision was reached; Loki came closer, brushed a finger over it, and the screen lit up.

Tony resisted the urge to reach out and grab his wrist, especially when he saw the sudden and rapid spill of data over the screen. He decided to wait until Loki was done because he didn't recognize well over half the characters flying by; he didn't want to lose the chance to get a good look at it because he pissed the god off. Really, he was surprised Loki was being nearly so forthcoming about the topic. Remembered the dark and words again—maybe Loki was just bored.

When Loki was safely out of arm's reach again (casually, so it did not seem the god was trying), Tony slid the tablet over, flipped through the rather neatly organized… e-book? Really?

"You know what the hell an e-book is?"
Loki raised an eyebrow.

"Thor can barely operate a toaster, I didn't think you Aesir even knew what a computer was." Tony glanced over the table of contents. "I didn't know I was getting homework."

"You asked, did you not?"

"I did, I did. I can't believe you just had this sitting around in your head. Heck, I didn't think anyone had this much crammed in their head that wasn't me." Tony sipped his coffee. Standard Scale, Cadenza, Hymn, Aleatory, notation, typical usage, duration, wave forms, lexicons… He didn't even know what half these things meant. He might need to dig out a dictionary, or just ask Jarvis. "This looks like it's even half-decently organized, that's not fair. I wish my notes were half this organized."

Loki chuckled. Tony glanced up at him before he got sucked into the information he'd just had handed to him.

"Any particular reason this is just sitting there, ready to be dumped out?"

"I had time to think." The words were emotionless despite the smirk on Loki's features. His eyes were, too, for that matter.

"You must be really bored."

A shrug and gone. Ah. So he'd hit the nail right on the head. He looked back at the tablet. Well, he was already up. It wouldn't hurt to read a little.

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He started, suitably enough, with the beginning. There was a little note, kind of snide, that suggested he start with Standard Scale, if only because it would be less confusing if he had a solid grasp of the basics. Tony almost skipped them to be contrary—well he tried, but quickly realized he had no idea what in the world Loki was talking about with frequency, amplitude shapes, or where the hell he was pulling meanings from.

Tony only grumbled a little.

"Tony, you've got a meeting. Put your tablet down."

"Mm."

He went, left the tablet. Told Jarvis to take a look through and store everything, sort through it and figure out what 'xE rre' meant for him and he'd come back to it.
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Was yea ra wael.

I am glad (and wish to remain glad) of this.

Chapter Notes

Wow! Thank you for the response everyone. :3 I'm so glad people are enjoying this and I'm not just being crazy self-indulgent in my love of linguistics/music.

First was intensity—was.

Because he would very much like to get to know Loki better, find out how his mind ticked, find out what was going on, why the sudden visits. Oh how Tony wanted, because the more he read, the more he saw glimpses of the being who wrote this. This first bit, on Standard Scale, all of it was written with the forced interest that Tony had used when writing scientific papers for high school and college. Done because he had to, not because he wanted to.

But the glimpses, oh the glimpses, oh so tantalizing, of the god would appear, a mind Tony suspected he could explain his inventions to without needing to stop and explain, without needing to dumb it down.

Loki visited (two months), answered his questions; why were there only six intensities?

"Because that's how many there are. Would you like to memorize more?" A devilish grin. "I can certainly add to it, if you'd like."

"Uh, no. That's okay. We're good." Tony glanced down at the fact he wasn't even close to part of the way through the e-book. He gave Loki a thumbs up.

"Excellent. Now. You said that there is some continuation of that Henry IV I watched?"

"Yeah. Recorded it for you." He put on Henry V and tried to ignore how Loki sat there, still and silent (and upside down, feet off the back of the armchair, what the hell), the way his green eyes flicked and absorbed what he saw, tried to focus back on his studies. Tried to not to glance up and take in the way Loki was thinner, looked more… ghostly? Less solid. Less real. Had been looking that way with every visit (too many visits and never enough).

Second was emotion, and there were so many to chose from, not like intensity, limited intensity. If Tony had been the one writing this language down he would have made sure there were many more to choose from; Tony was an intense person. (And maybe he should pay attention to this, that there were so many, that maybe Loki's issue was an excess of emotion while Tony’s was an excess of passion, but he threw it in the back of his mind with how he kept track of (three months) visits)
Yea—happiness. Happiness was when Loki showed up and smiled as Tony told him he should finish his sentences.

"Did you have your Jarvis tell you what it means?"

"Maybe," Tony allowed, because he didn't want to admit he hadn't done it himself. For the first time felt bad he'd let Jarvis do something when those green eyes looked a little disappointed in him. Loki wanted something, and Tony didn't know what. But he wouldn't ask, because Tony wanted too. Wanted to touch, wanted to understand, wanted to ask 'why?'

"Well?"

"You were really, really happy about something."

Loki chuckled, softly, and went back to watching the designs Tony was working on, how Tony's fingers flicked and twitched through them, creating. He was on the other side of the table, ever out of reach, a finger running over the surface.

"This… Unix. You said you have books on it."

"Oh, right. Yeah." Tony slid him a tablet across the table, made sure he didn't invade the god's space. "Don't break anything."

Devious flash of shattered green eyes.

Third was context, how long the thing should last. Tony was never good at the lasting bit. Neither, apparently, was Loki—six again. Just six words to describe all the various lengths and contexts in the universe, if Loki was to be believed that the words were simply stripped down mimics of the universe's voice.

Ra—he wouldn't mind whatever this was lasting a while.

Loki, arriving right as Tony was about to fall asleep. The flicker of concern, the quiet "ah, shall I go then?" and Tony forced himself to sit up, drunk as he was at the bar (because the visits were getting more and more spaced out and Tony wasn't worrying about that, thanks)(except he was)(four months)(seven months second best blood on hands) over how he wanted to do more with Loki than just fuck these days.

"You have been… you have imbibed alcohol."

"Drinking. You're looking for 'drinking.' And 'm not. At all." Tony blinked blearily at Loki, at how the god almost looked a shadow.

"Why?"

"M Tony Stark. If I feel like drinking and getting drunk then I will," he said petulantly. Tony went to take a swig of his beer, saw Loki whisper. There was something almost gleeful in Loki's features, something hurt and angry and spiteful, a trace of the god who had stumbled onto Earth and then tried to make them all kneel.

The beer tasted like mud and ash in his mouth; Tony gagged, spit it out on the counter and glared at Loki.

"What the fuck?!!"
Loki chuckled darkly.

"Fuck," the god said, smiling, and Tony forgave Loki the drink trick (envy)(has Loki eaten? drank?) because dammit one should be able to say one word so seductively. At least it wasn't violence and a shattered window.

In the dim light in the room, he looked paler, all sharp angles and shadows, eyes glittering brilliant as jewels. Tony could see the delicate line of his collarbone underneath the tunic he was wearing, could watch those hands flick magic all day. Wouldn't mind seeing them other places.

"Where have you been?"

"Here and there. Where." The god turned, twisted, stalked around the bar, paced, ran fingers over furniture but always maddeningly just out of reach. Tony followed him as best he could, something piercing his drunken brain that things were wrong. This was not the clever Loki who would sit upside down to watch Shakespeare, not the Loki that laughed at Tony's attempts to understand the language of magic Loki had invented, not the Loki that questioned Tony's designs and human invention. "And where will I wander, in the dark night, but here, there, where."

"You haven't been by," Tony said carefully.

"Here?" Loki paused, looked at Tony; Tony caught tightness of eyes, quick clench of fist, swirl of lost beneath the roiling surface of those eyes.

"Loki." He was drunk. He was not equipped to handle this. Hell, he could barely handle himself. "How are you feeling about this?"

"Nn yant ga," the words broken, then Loki straightened again, closed off, turned away. Tony shook where he sat, suddenly realizing that even if he learned Loki's languages he'd never be a mage, not in a million years—he might have power in his words but it wasn't the right sort. He couldn't tell if it was the drink or the words, but his heart was aching at the pain in Loki's voice, the fear, the recognition of despair, pain, make this end now, soon. It was the closest to a cry for help he was going to get out of Loki and he'd never have been able to hear it if he hadn't asked about magic four months ago.

"Sit." He made himself stand up, pointed at the chair. Loki slid away from him like a stray cat, and Tony moved towards him, tried to herd him though he could barely stay on his feet. "Sit, Loki." Loki eyed him, then sat on the back of the armchair, eyes flitting about the room, flitting to Tony. Tony let himself collapse on a sofa.

"Fit. Sit. Kit. Kittens. I rather like kittens, don't you?" The words spilled and tumbled, jostled Tony and made him open his eyes to watch. There, again, glimmer of fear, the impulsive clench of fist and lick of lips to indicate as much. "You should, they are… that one colour. You know. Colour of wet trees, like your hair. DlzNgoga wASSezodalspha—"

"Loki. Stop it. Listen. Listen." Suddenly sober, not able to tell if it was the fear from whatever Loki had just gone into, or the way the god was shaking, hands digging into his hair, looking like he was about to vanish. "Listen, Loki." Loki looked up at him and Tony kept going. "Listen. I will tell you a story. Do you want a story? Listen to me."

Loki was still shaking, but he was looking at Tony, wasn't getting lost in whatever words were swimming in his head and spilling out.

"It will be okay. Listen. Story. Story. Right. I don't think I've got one," he held up a hand,
preemptively shushing Loki, "no, don't, I'll think of one. Between the two of us liars we should be able to put a story together don't you think? Listen. You ever hear about Bluebeard? That's a good one. Teach you to be careful and clever if you're curious. Here, let me tell you. Once, there was a man with a blue beard…"

Tony had never spoken so fast in his life as he did that night, didn't stop even as Loki relaxed, slid into the armchair (upside down, one foot bouncing the tempo Tony spoke), even as the god's shattered glass eyes returned to some semblance of normal, as it was Loki watching him and not whatever crumbling god locked seven months in a black room. He kept talking, went from Bluebeard to Cinderella and then on to Little Red Riding Hood, spun the stories as best he knew how, even as he began to go hoarse, until Loki finally yawned and stretched and fell asleep. Vanished.

Was yea ra wael, he thought, when Loki was gone and he finally laid back on the couch, eyes weary and voice gone, remembering how Loki’s lashes had fluttered against his face as he fell asleep. I am very glad of it. Glad that it was me you came to, and glad I could help.

He was in decidedly deeper than he wanted.
"Did you invent these languages? Because if you did I have a bone to pick with you."

Loki blinked, licked his lips. Tony looked at him from where he was standing and working on a new design for his suit, quirking an eyebrow and waiting. He had a hunch Loki hadn't been expecting his appearance to be so… mundane by now; but looking at him, at how those green eyes were studying the designs hovering in the air, he realized maybe he was wrong. Maybe they both were used to this. He huffed and closed the design.

"Pay attention to me," he said petulantly, crossing his arms. Loki blinked and looked at him, grinned slightly.

"I invented nothing."

"Okay, then where the hell did all those words come from? And why isn't there one for saying hello?"

"Ah. Yes. Well, there is no saying hello—everything exists in the universe, so why would there be a word for hello? You act as if this is a language designed for conversation," Loki scoffed. "Where are you read to?"

"Cadenza." Tony moved to the bar in his lab to pour himself a drink. Loki started to play with his worktable, quickly figuring out how to get it to work, how to trace lines in the air, and began to create pictures, words tumbling in strange script. The playboy watched quietly while he took a sip of drink; he'd never seen someone grasp and use the design space so quickly without help and he wondered if that was why he was studying the god so fondly. That or Loki had seen him use it enough to put two and two together. Equally good as far as Tony was concerned. Loki paused, realized he was being watched, and looked over at Tony.

"Cadenza?" His eyes glazed a bit as he tried to figure out what that meant. "An improvised musical piece for a soloist? I was not aware you were studying classical music styles, Stark."

Tony took another drink to hide how he needed to swallow the sudden anxiety in the back of his throat, hoped Loki was far enough away not to see the cold sweat on his brow. "And where will I wander, in the dark night, but here, there, where" and hands tightly gripping black hair, shaking. It had been eight months since Loki was taken back to Asgard; Tony realized the length of time that was, Loki's excuse of 'a dark room' when Tony asked again why Loki couldn't just show up at a normal time, every time the god showed up in the middle of the night or early morning.

"The alphabet one, without the frequencies," Tony finally said. Loki just continue to stare at him, then understanding blossomed in his eyes, and he laughed—undercurrent of uneasiness beneath,
Tony knew that laugh, because Loki laughed whenever he was trying not to let on how his now frequent word slips and misplacements made him afraid.

"Cadenza, why didn't you say so." Tony did not comment he had. ",tsegaa taccab bJ sss, yes?" Tony could actually see the way the air trembled as Loki spoke the last bit, and didn't even panic—when had he stopped expecting Loki to hurt him? "I don't expect you to be fluent, by any means. What was the question, again?"

"Where are the words from?"

"Yes. The words are from Cadenza, which in turn is from Hymn—have you read anything about Hymn yet? Yes? How do you find it? Pedantic, isn't it? I have no idea what I was thinking when I wrote that down, but I suppose it couldn't be helped. Hmmm?" Loki stopped talking abruptly, stared at Tony.

"Cadenza is the sound of the universe put in a range that humans can speak? You speak that, and you just... sat there and started to add these letters together until you got all those words in that dictionary at the back?"

"Is this unusual?" Tony didn't like how pensive Loki looked, how intense his gaze was.

"Yes, it's unusual, people don't just sit around and create new words like that."

"I am hardly 'people,' Stark." Curve of lips and Tony didn't immediately think of how he'd like to have those on his skin. Loki went back to playing with the display, flicking letters around and looking amused. Tony eased out a breath and tapped at his arc reactor.

Eight months. He needed to see if there was anything he could do. He hated being witness to Loki's crumble.

XXXXXXX

"Thor, big guy, how's it going? Liking Earth? Eating lots of Poptarts? How's Jane?" Tony gave his biggest smile he could and clapped the god on the shoulder. Thor blinked his big blues at Tony before returning the friendly shoulder tap—Tony had to brace himself so he didn't face plant—and grinned back.

"Jane is quite well! We went to a theme park, it was quite novel. She says that on the morrow we shall visit a zoo, which has Midgardian animals." Tony guided Thor away from the others as they began to head inside the restaurant they were meeting at, giving Bruce a wave as the scientist eyed him.

"Yeah? That's great to hear. You'll love the zoo, plus the weather's been great this year, little hot, but hey, can't win 'em all. So, how's your brother."

Thor's smile vanished. Damn, Tony had been hoping the rush of words would blindside the god, and he wished Thor would stop looking at him like that; put Steve's sad eagle look to shame, really.

"You do not have to pretend interest, Tony."

"Hey, that hurts. Who said I was pretending? How long does he stay in lockup anyway?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Hey, isn't he meant to be the wily one? Just asking a couple questions. Curious." There was Steve,
which just left Natasha. He wanted Thor to hurry up and just answer the damn question because they didn't have much time left and the others were starting to get curious.

"He is unwell, but refuses to admit that he was wrong. It pains me, Tony, because while wrong, my brother was simply lashing out. He was hurting, and I cannot fault him, for I had my own hand in his pain." Thor paused, looking at Tony again. "You remind me of him, from before the Bifrost broke."

And there was Natasha's car.

"So how long does he have to be there?"

"Until he admits he was wrong."

"You sure about that? You guys got a book of law or something like that? Stop looking at me that way, do you or don't you?"

"Perhaps." Thor's brow was furrowed and Tony really didn't like the fact he couldn't figure out what Thor was thinking for once. It was Loki he was supposed to have trouble reading, not Thor.

"Yeah, well snag me a copy, would you?"

"I will."

"Fantastic, let's go eat." He clapped the big guy on the shoulder and then slid around him and bee-lined for the restaurant.
Thor stopped by the tower with the biggest and most ornate book that Tony had ever seen in his life. He hoped there was an index or a table of contents because he really didn’t want to have read everything about Aesir law just to find out how the sentences that were handed out worked.

“Thanks, bud, just set it on the living room table,” because Tony wasn’t sure he could pick the book up. Thor plonked it down where Tony pointed (table creaking ominously) and dusted his hands off on his pants.

“Why are you interested in this?” Thor asked, voice a quiet rumble. Tony almost didn’t answer him but when he glanced at Thor his heart twisted a little. No one should be able to look that quietly pained.

“Well, I… Look, I’ve been stuck somewhere dark and away from everything before and the dude’s got to be bored. You guys could have done so many other things—why didn’t your dad just send him to Earth like you? Who knows. Anyway, just wanted to take a look. That’s all.” He scratched his head; he wasn’t going to tell Thor that Loki was showing up at the tower, had been for nearly five months, and was consistently a little more ragged and a little more pale each time, a little more sanity chipped away and it was seriously starting to worry Tony, who did not really care about Loki exactly, but, well, if ‘sorry’ was going to get Loki out Tony totally got why Loki was still there because people like them (Tony and Loki) did not say sorry, ever, thanks.

“Do you hear music in your head as well?”

Tony stopped where he was running his hands over the book, drawn short and looked at Thor.

“No.” He hesitated. “Your brother, he asked me about whether my arc reactor made noise too. What’s going on there?”

“He did? When?” When Tony just shrugged, Thor’s face fell a bit but he continued anyway. “My brother… look, you must not tell him I told you this. It is not something he enjoys discussing. But this darkness, it is much worse than it at first appears; my brother hears music, constantly. Every being that he interacts with has a melody, and when he is tired or sick or both, he cannot sort them out—they begin to all play at the same time, and he says… said, explained, once, that there is also the universe constantly singing to him because it knows he can understand it.

“I don’t hear it. And I do not believe you do. But there are mages in Asgard that do, and there are musicians here—I have looked, I am not so slow or simple as you seem to think, Tony—but there are musicians here that experience the same to a lesser scale.”
“That… that’s torture. He must going mad.” Tony remembered shaking hands, spilled together words, sharp broken glass eyes. _Cadenza, aleatory, frequency, amplitude, tempo, allegro_, music woven into every word that Loki penned, a mad off-kilter rhythm in his every plan, (two-two-two-three)-eight drunken waltz time when the rest of them were moving to four-four.

“Going?” Thor said darkly. Tony only worried more, more sick twist of his stomach.

“Uh… Look. I’m going to take a look through this book, see what I can find. Thanks again.”

“You are welcome. Let me know if you need else.”

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Naturally, the Aesir had never even heard of an index. Tony ended up taking a stab and going to what looked like a promising section based off the contents. He was betting it was magic that let him read words that were probably not in English, because that would be the sort of thing the Aesir would do.

It was boring, dry reading. Good to know that law wasn’t interesting no matter what realm it was.

“What are you… words? Seeing words, comprehending.” Loki’s voice was quiet and rasping, like he’d been screaming for a very long time. When Tony looked up his eyes were darting about the room, sitting and looking nearly see through. For the first time (impressive, considering they were getting ever closer to month six of visits), he was in arm’s reach and didn’t seem to notice.

“Reading.” He waited, watching Loki, meeting those eyes. Something mad and dark and angry swam beneath the surface.

“Reading. I said that.”

“You did. It’s nothing interesting. You’ve been away a while.” He waited until Loki’s gaze snapped away, flicked elsewhere; waited till he was sure the god wasn’t looking and reached out and touched him. Or would have, if his hand hadn’t passed through the… what? Sending? Specter? He already had his hand back on the table by the time Loki looked back at him.

“I was distracted.”

“I bet. Must have lots to do there, don’t you?” Loki glared daggers at him, but Tony ignored it. He’d been wondering why no one came racing to find Loki whenever he showed up and now he had his answer. He wondered what Loki had to chant to be able to send himself like this, and how much he had to have his mind together. Wondered if the visits out were making the time alone worse. “Sorry. You’ve caught me at a bad time, that’s all. You want me to put the TV on?”

Loki eyed him warily. Tony tried smiling at him, but it probably came out closer to a grimace.

Loki vanished. There was barely a flicker of something swirling in his eyes before he was gone, a second of surprise and looking _lost_—slipped in his sending, then. Tony sighed, suddenly a lot more interested in Aesir law that he had been. Remembered the e-book sitting on his tablet full of years of Loki trying to grapple with the sounds he couldn’t escape, trying to put them to use. At least Tony had a choice of when he threw himself into his madness.
“You made it!”

Thor frowned at Tony. He was in his Asgard armour, all blues and red cloak, hammer hanging at his waist.

“Great, come on, you’re taking me to Asgard, I’ve got to talk to your dad.” Tony’s hair was sticking up every which way, and he looked like he was being fueled primarily on coffee and excitement.

“Look, you have to carry that book, it is way too heavy for my puny mortal limbs, I already tried and think I pulled something in my arm, hey, stop dallying, I’ve figured it out. We’re getting your brother out of there, let’s move move move.”

Thor just stared at Tony, mouth opening a little and a tiny ray of hope lighting up his eyes.

“Come on, look, you should really read more. It’s all right there, you could totally have done this a good five, nearly six, months ago instead of having him do that freaky mind thing and ghost himself around my tower. Let’s move.”

“You know how to… my brother has been here… what?”

“Let’s go Sparky, haven’t got all day. I’ll explain as we go. Now get the book.”

Thor got the book, and Tony grabbed hold of his cape.

“Okay, do that mojo so we get to Asgard. I’ve got plans and Pepper will kill me if I miss the charity dinner tonight.”

There wasn’t even a big audience. Just him and Odin and Thor. It was almost disappointing, really, but at the same time it meant he had a chance he’d get back before anyone noticed he was gone. He really didn’t want to upset Pepper, he was already on thin ice after blowing off a meeting that morning while he waited on Thor to show up, was going to be on thinner when she found out why he blew it off.

Odin didn’t even really put up a fight, single eye just glittering (and Tony was starting to suspect Odin had just been waiting on Tony to show up for a while now, wasn’t that a spooky thought) as he read the bit Tony had found about probationary periods provided someone would vouch (champion) for the one in trouble (Tony was vouching for Loki’s good behaviour, what was he thinking?). Only gave him one real stipulation—carry Loki out himself. Tony would have argued, but well, Odin was a big guy and Tony was not so much. He’d get Loki on his feet and haul him across his shoulders if he had to.

Which did not justify why he felt so damned nervous as Thor led him through the halls of Asgard, deeper and deeper until Tony was only ninety percent certain he knew how to get back out and the only sound was the two of them walking in the hallway, sounding too loud, too intrusive. Eight-nearly-nine months trapped deep inside Asgard, in the dark, not able to use his hands, with nothing but thoughts to eat him. They stopped in front of a door and Thor gestured for Tony to go ahead; the relief that had been on the thunder god’s face earlier was already tempered by the fear of what they would find.
Tony flashed the big guy a grin, pushed the door open, and swore.

"Loki, stop that, listen to me, listen. Shit, how do I say that? 'Was granme ra hyma mea' see look, listen, you can laugh at how I butcher your pretty language. Come on."

"I've got you, Loki, hush, come on, that was a bad idea, when was the last time you ate" world spinning and too bright and too much too much noise and motion and touching, burning “because I know I couldn't have done this before. Let's move, least this makes it easier to carry you out, right?”

He can hear a heartbeat, thudding, thundering, and it is not his own, the hum of blue-white that is suddenly so much saaAwwulll FFffaaAamm teeCaAAssaaaaaaa sssSSSssyyyyy "Loki, quiet, Thor, put a finger on his lips or something, he is freaking me out" press against his lips, but not sharp, not like the needle and copper magicked thread and tearing, no venom this time, this voice familiar these shapes familiar and he closes his eyes and there is nothing but white light and hum of blue, small melody that whispers and twines in his hearing and its the closest he has ever come to silence.

"Was yea ra wael.

"Was yea ra wael, too, Loki. I'm glad too."
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Hello hello! Welcome back and enjoy! Thanks all you lovely people.

Loki will curl up on himself and cover his ears at any sudden noise.

But he weeps when the noise stops.

Loki will close his eyes tightly when there is any light greater than 'just slightly bright enough to not stub your toe on something.'

But he cries out when the light goes out again.

Loki will whisper and chant and spill words that hum with power when something brushes against him.

But he snags what touched him when it moves away.

And it is breaking Tony's heart, sharper and more piercing than the shrapnel will ever be, to see this god who can still destroy the world if he wants missing his cleverness, his calloused exterior and charming grin. He stays, when Loki grabs his arm, and he tells him stories in a whisper—and he can tell even that whisper is too loud for Loki, but if he goes silent Loki will open his eyes and look for him, squinting and clearly in agony because of it.

It feels like an eternity before Loki stops hissing when the light comes on, before he stops covering his ears, before he doesn't flinch whenever anything touches him. An eternity of letting Loki piece himself back together.

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"Sir, you should get to the kitchen." Tony grumbled and rolled around on his bed, clutching a pillow to his face.

"Idunwanna."

"Mr. Laufeyson is there, and is currently incredibly displeased by the coffee pot. I do not believe I will be ab—"

Tony was already up and out the door, racing into the kitchen in nothing but boxers. Loki was there, robe draped too loosely over his form, twisting to look at Tony. There was green fire in his hand and it took Tony about point two seconds to put together that Loki was about to destroy the coffee pot.

Loki sat down.

"I am not… one of those four legged beasts you mortals so enjoy walking." His voice was quiet, raw, and Tony did not immediately (externally) celebrate the first words Loki had spoken in two weeks. He pulled out the pancake mix, searched through the fridge for bacon, and started to set pans on the stove top. He hesitated, and added eggs. It was bad to eat so much after not eating at all, but Tony suspected god stomachs didn't work on the same principles as human stomachs. Loki would probably eat him out of house and home. Good thing he was a billionaire.

"Yeah? Then don't destroy my coffee pot, don't try to destroy my coffee pot, don't pretend to destroy my coffee pot." He turned around to look at Loki while he whisked the pancake mix with milk and eggs, stopped whisking to point at Loki. "Got it?"

Loki's eyes narrowed as he looked at the whisk.

"That looks vile."

"Don't even pretend you wouldn't eat this uncooked if I gave it to you. But it's okay. I'm going to fry it."

"Fry?"

Tony started some bacon cooking, then poured out two small pancakes into another pan, began to scramble the eggs.

"Oh man, you are going to love me. You've never had fried food. This is great."

Loki let him cook, and Tony glanced at him occasionally. The god looked tired and too thin and, well, a lot better than Tony thought he would look if he spent eight-nearly-nine months stuck in a dark room without anything but his thoughts. It'd only been two weeks (and three days) since he got Loki back to the tower, and to see him up, moving around, after the wrecked mess that had first arrived was impressive. And, if Tony was honest, incredibly cool.

He was kind of jealous. Also glad Loki was real and not some ghost anymore.

Loki eyed the plate that Tony set down in front of him a few minutes later, piled high with pancakes, bacon, and eggs. Tony got them coffee, grabbed the maple syrup and poured it all over his pancakes. He didn't comment on the way Loki watched him and then mimicked, just waiting on the god's reaction when he had his first bite of syrupy delicious fried goodness. Loki's eyes widened slightly; he didn't devour his food, just chewed it slowly, thoughtfully, hell, elegantly. (Tony was always impressed by people who made eating look elegant, because eating was not really an elegant thing at all)

"This is quite… interesting," Loki allowed before he went back to eating.

"Good. The word you're looking for is good."

Loki just shrugged and didn't speak again.

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Tony stormed in, tearing his tie off. Board meetings were going to be banned if he ever ruled the world. He bet Loki wouldn't have required board meetings and kind of wished he'd let the god win. He pulled his coat off—kept it on his arm, he thought this was one of the really nice one's Pepper would kill him if he mishandled it too much—and walked into the living room.
Just stopped.

Loki was laying upside down on the armchair, holding Tony's tablet in front of his face, using a finger to scroll through something or another. His pajama top—black silk button thing that Tony had dug out of his closet—was very slowly inching its way up pale flesh and towards his chest, leaving his belly exposed as his free hand drummed out an interesting little rhythm on bare skin. One foot was bouncing slightly on the back of the armchair, keeping tempo. His hair was spilling down, pooling a little on the floor; it had grown a fair bit while he was locked up, yet so far the god hadn't made mention of wanting to cut it.

Tony tried to remember why he had been so irritated as he watched shadows shift on Loki's stomach.

"See something you like, Stark?" Loki drawled, not looking away from the tablet.

"Sure do. Do all Aesir get to have such flat stomachs by default or is that a Loki-special?"

Loki stopped reading, moving the tablet aside so he could look at Tony, one hand reaching for his pajama top and tugging it back in place. It slid down a little again when Loki let go; Tony was pretty sure that the tiny sliver of white flesh peeking out was even more of a tease now that he knew what the rest looked like.

"You are strange," Loki finally said, breaking the silence and gaze; Tony would swear in a court of law there was a blush on Loki's face.

"I've heard that one before." Tony moved, sat down on the couch and tossed the coat and tie on the armrest and put his feet up on the coffee table. He closed his eyes and leaned his head back for a few minutes then opened them again to look at Loki. "Why are you using my tablet? What are you reading? Shit, Jarvis, there's nothing on there that's going to make me look bad is there?"

"No, sir."

"Oh." Tony breathed a sigh of relief. "What are you reading then?"

"I was seeing what you were so involved in." Loki waved the tablet at him a little. "You actually read this garbage?"

Tony blinked. Garbage? What was he reading that was garbage? Tony did not read garbage. He leaned forward and snagged the tablet away from Loki, saw symbols and comments about _session-four amplitude waves_ and general meanings represented by them.

"You wrote this. Are you saying you wrote something that's garbage?" He tossed the tablet onto the coffee table, out of Loki's reach, and looked at the god. Loki's lips twisted into what Tony could only call a pout, flicker of eye's tightening slightly. He almost looked _normal_ this afternoon, like when he'd show up just out of arm's reach at 4am to pick Tony's brain apart; had it really only been a week since Loki started eating breakfast with him? If not for the occasional stumble for words still, Tony wouldn't trust his own memory of carrying Loki in. Well, his memory and Jarvis' recordings.

"I desire food." Loki sat up, twisted around so that he was seated cross-legged in the chair. His hair was tousled around his face, but he didn't move to change it; Tony resisted the urge to reach out and run his fingers through it. Leaned back and closed his eyes and pretended to ignore Loki. He could hear the way Loki's pajamas rustled as the god shifted some more; it took roughly two minutes before Loki started to drum a rhythm with his fingers again, a tic that Tony was sure he hadn't displayed before all this; wondered if it was like himself and tapping the arc reactor when he was thinking, something to distract, to fill the silence. What if Thor was telling the truth and Loki really
did hear things all the time? Might explain a bit, wouldn't it? Didn't know silence, so why the finger
tapping—couldn't fill a void could it? Unless it was just habit, outwardly expressing the magic
running through him, not even noticing it because he'd be alone for so long and had needed
something outside himself, something that said 'I exist, I exist, hear me, listen.' Or maybe not. Who
knew, with Loki? He didn't, bag of cats inde—

"Stark."

Tony's eyes flew open, darted to Loki's face; the god was watching him, brilliant green eyes like
shattered glass. There was a note in his voice, in the line of his tense shoulders, that let Tony know it
wasn't a joke anymore. He didn't comment on it or the way Loki relaxed as Tony looked at him, but
he's seen that panic when something reminds him of Yinsen and Afghanistan. Stupid; he was meant
to be a genius and he didn't think that for all his physical health, for all his patching himself back
together, that Loki was really okay underneath that glass shell did he? For the five-nearly-six months
in the tower with him prior, Loki had been nothing but a ghost, probably was worried he was again,
unsure he was not in the dark and alone.

"How's Thai?" Tony asked, a peace offering. He knew Loki didn't know what Thai was, but he
didn't really care either. With how the god loved spice, he was pretty sure he'd like Thai. Loki
watched him carefully, exterior sliding back into place so Tony only had the slightest of tells to go by
again.

"Acceptable." Loki sniffed, grabbed the remote, and started to flip through the channels.

XXXXXX

It was later, after they've eaten—peanut noodles, Tony noted mentally because Loki had gone
absolutely nuts over those—that he finally went back to Loki’s comment.

"So why is it garbage?" He used his chopsticks to point at the tablet.

"Hymn is functionally useless to everyone who isn't me."

"How come?"

Loki stopped where he was running his fingers over one of his own chopsticks, laying on his back,
one of his feet just barely brushing against Tony's leg (and Tony would never comment on it to Loki,
because even if they were just reminders of existence for Loki, Tony loved them).

"I mean, yeah, I get it, it's at a frequency no one can really hear that isn't you or one of the other big
magic players on Asgard. But why's that make it useless to write down?"

"Because." Loki sat up, turned away, and reached for the remote to turn the television back on.

"Jarvis, kill that." And man could Loki still glare daggers when he wanted to. Wow. It really
shouldn't arouse Tony that much either. "Consider it my third question."

"It is a stupid question." Loki moved to stand and Tony grabbed his wrist, tugged him back down.
Well, guided. He knew that Loki was already way stronger than him again. Tony threw an arm
around Loki's shoulders.

"You didn't say they have to be smart," letting his breath brush right up against Loki's ear. Was he
sober? Tony was pretty sure he was sober. He'd only had, what, two glasses with dinner. Wait, was
that a blush on Loki's face? Already gone. Tony would have to bug Jarvis about that later, see if the
AI caught it on camera for him to analyze and crow over later (especially as that would make
twicenow). Tony Stark—maker of godly flushes. The title was going to need some work.

Loki wasn't trying to pull away or avoid answering the question anymore, so Tony chalked up another victory. Wondered if Loki was just letting him stay this way because the god craved touch, outside contact, reassurance that he was not alone in the dark anymore and just an incorporeal being projecting himself into the tower of an ex-enemy. Frenemy? (Tony secretly hoped friend and maybe more)

"Tell me, Stark—"

"Tony," Tony interrupted, because he'd really like to hear what Loki's voice would do those two syllables.

"Stark. Tell me, are you familiar with Midgardian musical scales?"

"Sure."

"Truly?"

"Well, okay, I know a little. I could probably name some notes if you gave me a little context, like figure out where they are in relation to each other. Haven't really done anything other than listen to music in years."

"Mmm. Here, then, is C." Loki hummed, the deepest and richest hum, like honeyed chocolate, that Tony had ever heard in his life.

"C, got it." He glanced down towards his crotch, glad that it wasn't obvious he was half-hard. Shit, Loki could have just sang and they would have knelt if that was all his hum did. Wait, when did he begin to joke about Loki's attempted invasion?

"Now, Stark," and Loki was right there, so very very close, a glimmer of amusement in his eyes, but Tony kept his best poker face on, "pretend I can very selectively not hear the note C. Describe it to me."

Tony blinked, cocked a brow at Loki. The god didn't answer, just leaned his head back over Tony's arm, closed his eyes, and waited. The smug smile just made Tony want to answer the question more, prove Loki wrong, but he really didn't know shit about music. Well, he supposed he could draw a chart or something, he'd never really paid attention to what it sounded like; he wasn't sure if C evoked a particular emotion—oh. Oh. Loki's words from what seemed like ages ago, about musicians or something, how he thought Midgardians could hear the universe. Musicians got it, or some of them did, didn't they?

He'd draw a chart, create a picture of a frequency, of amplitude shapes that no one could conjure a sound from by looking at them.

"I can't," Tony admitted quietly.

"Neither, amusingly enough, can I."

"Huh. Could you try?"

"I suppose that the e-book sitting on your tablet is not 'try' enough for you?"

"I mean actually. Like, with words. Now."
Loki opened his eyes, pulled away from Tony, stood swiftly. Wrong thing to say, there was something raw on Loki's face the god was trying to hide. Tony couldn't move fast enough and didn't dare try to pull Loki back down. They hadn't talked about what Tony found, or the first two weeks when Loki was a shattered wreck; they hadn't talked about the stories or how even now Loki would occasionally 'accidentally' bump into him. Tony felt a stab of pain like then, knowing Loki was hurting.

"I do not sing, Stark, not if I can avoid it. I am going to bed."

Tony just sat there surrounded by the take out boxes and looked around. He hesitated, then pulled the tablet over, flicked it open. Skipped past the rest of Hymn and into Aleatory.

Loki hadn't said Aleatory was garbage; as he got to the opening description of it there was actually a definition. None of the other ones had a definition.

*Aleatory: A solo used to demonstrate skill, complicated spontaneity; composition which leaves only a suggestion at performance such that it will not necessarily be performed the same way by two different artists; self-indulgent misuse of English terms because you mortals cannot seem to make up your mind on what this term should mean.*

Tony chuckled a little. How startlingly Loki-like; none of the other words so far have had the voice that Tony had come to associate with the god in them except in brief flashes. Jarvis had mentioned he'd discovered what Loki was saying in this section, but Tony had been a good boy, resisted the urge to skip ahead. Wise, because already he was finding that it referenced back to Standard note and what was different. Like, apparently, a sentence in a single word. A word that was just a string of characters and periods.

Jesus, Loki. Self-indulgent indeed.
Chapter Notes

One more chapter to goooooo~~

Thank you everyone for the reviews, subs, kudos, favourites, whatever you do. I do so appreciate it. :)

We've bumped rating up to mature, which you'll see why once this chapter is done.

Warnings: non-explicit sex

Loki was gone one morning. Tony hadn't seen him at all, had finally gone and knocked on the door to the room Loki stayed in, waited patiently, opened it and found Loki just… gone. Bed rumpled and unmade, a dresser drawer half open. He stared for a few minutes at the door, then walked around, went to the bathroom, but the god wasn't there either. Just a note left on the bathroom counter—Thank you, Anthony.

"Don't blow up anything," he whispered, hoping Loki heard him wherever he'd went.

He tried to ignore how empty and quiet his home was without Loki's rhythms tapping on counters, walls, skin.

Tony buried himself in work, redesigned the suit all over again. Joined the rest of the team for lunches and dinners more often. He saw Pepper's mouth drop open when he showed up suddenly at the office and actually volunteered to sign paperwork that needed to be signed.

"Tony, what's wrong?"

"Nothing," flashed his million watt smile and left again. "Just bored, Pep, can't a guy be bored?"

"Tony," but Tony ducked back out of the office and started working on refining his large arc reactor designs for mass production. When the silence got to him, he'd finally go to his tablet, start reading, imagining Loki's voice reading the words.

Never let himself read too much at once, because it was all he had left of Loki, for now (he had to believe Loki would come back again, had to, no matter how irrational it was, he remembered how Loki curled around him those first two weeks).

As needed, insert the appropriate emotion vowels into the bank spaces, in order of depth of your emotion towards the subject. When particularly bored, arrange them according to what subjects you wish to address. Yes, x. is also an emotion verb, though it is special and use strictly to indicate how you feel about whatever you happen to be speaking of if a single verb is not good enough. Yes, you are meant to do this as you go—what you think people actually write down their compositions anymore? This is intuitive, Stark.

A, I, U, E, O, N - strength, pain, sadness/caring, happiness, anger, negativity/relaxing. I sense that you will approve of there being so many fewer this time-your complaining over how many emotions Standard Note has did not go amiss.
"Hupapsye," Tony whispered. That was kind of satisfying, being able to say that he was thinking of Loki, missing him, in one butchered word. It didn't make it hurt less.

Every time they assembled, he worried it was going to be Loki. He wasn't sure when it happened, but eventually he stopped.

"Well, why don't I play wounded bird? That would be a pretty good lure, wouldn't it? Plus, I'll get a chance out to test out that new toy, make sure that it works. Having every magic user know where I am because of the arc reactor is a way big hazard, and I'm surprised no one's thought of it sooner."

The rest of the team looked at him in silence before Steve started to speak.

"You'd be suitless. That would be dangerous."

"Because whatever plan we come up with won't be?"

"He's right," Natasha cut in. "Tony's the least dangerous of us when he hasn't got the suit. Amora won't be able to resist; she's noticed how Thor goes out of his way to defend him, and we all know that's who she's really after."

"That settles it then."

"What, no. No it doesn't. Tony, this is incredibly reckless," Steve said.

"What do you think?" Tony asked the others, ignoring Steve. "Bait and switch. I get in, she thinks she's got me, bam. You guys get her from behind. Thor's got her pretty much set up for this, even if no one was planning on it."

"It would work. She is obsessed with Thor." Bruce twisted his hands. Natasha just nodded, and Clint followed soon after. Thor frowned at Tony before nodding his agreement as well.

"Democracy in action. You're outvoted," Tony pointed at Steve. "So let's get this done tomorrow. Set up, bait and switch. Natasha and me can hang out, you guys can pin down our magical girl and we'll bring her in."

They went back and forth over details for another hour; Tony got up and tried to get out the door and away before Thor could catch him to ask how Loki was doing. Thor, however, seemed to have realized sometime in the last month Tony was avoiding him.

"Tony," the thunder god said, frowning at him. Tony grinned.

"Howdy, Sparky. How can I help you?"

"How is he?"

"Oh, you know. Zipping around somewhere, speaks in complete sentences again. You know he likes Thai food? Pretty great."
"He has left then?" Thor didn't look even vaguely surprised. Tony made his grin wider and tried to ignore the way his stomach twisted.

"Yeah. Big surprise, right? He hasn't blown anything up though, so you guys can't have him back."

"Do not fret so, Iron Man. He shall return. You have done him a great good, have put your faith in him when no one else would." Thor patted him on the shoulder, the first time he'd done so without making Tony's knees feel like they would give out. Thor walked past him and Tony leaned against the wall, watched the thunder god go. He wanted to believe him, he did, but it hurt so much.

"What was all that about?" Clint asked, peering at Tony. Tony shrugged, made himself walk away. He didn't have the words to talk about it.

Tony moved around some more wires in DUM-E, trying to figure out what exactly had the poor guy’s arm sticking when it moved. Everything looked great, everything was perfect—because Tony had made it, of course it would be perfect—but it was like someone had put some damn gum somewhere that just barely caught whenever the robot moved a certain way.

"Nnoi crown touwaka arsy e yor."

Tony started up as the voice hit his ears, smooth and sliding down his spine—honeyed chocolate. Loki was standing on the other side of DUM-E, features smooth and the flicker of a smile on his lips. Jeans and a button-up shirt, top button left undone and showing off his collar bone; one hand held two wine glasses by the stems, bottle of red wine in the other. Tony sat there and drank the sight in even as he tried to keep his face blank. He was not going to jump up and crush the other man in a hug. No.

"You'll have to speak English. I'm out of practice," he drawled instead of 'hApEpsYE.' Loki didn't need to know how much he was wanted. Loki's smile only widened.

"A glass of wine, Tony?"

Tony frowned, raised an eyebrow. Loki moved around DUM-E, offered him a glass. He would not forgive Loki for suddenly disappearing and taking his rhythms with him. Tony took the glass, brushed against the rough skin of Loki's fingertips and told his sense of indignation to go fuck itself.

"Well, I usually prefer scotch, but I suppose I can make an exception."

Loki pulled the other work stool over and sat down next to Tony before he opened the wine. He poured them both generous glasses, set the bottle by their feet. Tony sniffed, decided he still knew nothing of wine, and took a swig. Loki, meanwhile, just look refined. Jerk. He found himself mimicking Loki's smaller sips and was reminded of pancakes and syrup. Extra double dose of jerk. He stared at his wine instead of the way Loki's adams apple moved as he swallowed.

"So," Tony started and stopped. What could he possibly say?

"So," Loki said amiably. Tony could feel those green green eyes on him, waiting.

"You didn't blow anything up."

"I did not. I thought you would approve?"
"Uh." Tony glanced up quickly at Loki, that smirk still hovering on those lips. "Yeah. Yeah, I do. Other people blew stuff up for you." He ran a finger around the rim of the wine glass and nearly broke the fragile thing when it sang out a note. Crystal, right, of course Loki would go for crystal. Loki's chuckle did things to Tony, about like his hum did, his voice, his, well, everything. He watched, waited for Loki to start tapping a rhythm against something, but the god was still, just enjoying wine and watching Tony back.

"So," Tony started again, "does this mean I owe you two drinks?"

"I see no reason to refuse a second drink." Loki wasn't giving any of his usual tells and it was infuriating, made Tony want to reach out and tear him apart, see what was going on behind the mask. Instead he just drank more wine.

"What? No, that's not fair. You should owe me." Loki snarled at him.

"Mmm, yes. Why did you come get me?" There—eyebrow twitch, tightness, slightest tensing of his fingers, all the signs Tony had been looking for. Goody, he wasn't the only one freaking out about all this.

"You're interesting. I've been there. Not like that, not like you, but I've been through similar." He gestured towards the blue glow through his shirt, the closest he'd come to telling Loki what had happened. "Seemed like the right thing to do." Okay, so there were his cards on the table, most of them minus the one about how he lo—liked to watch Loki, how he lo—liked to hear Loki's music he wasn't even aware he was making. When Loki looked him in the eyes, he didn't blink or look away, just felt a jolt of fear and electricity run up his spine like it had nearly a year and half ago when he confronted Loki suitless and offered him a drink while the world tried to end outside.

The silence dragged out between them and Tony willed himself not to sweat, not to blink first. Tried to read what was going on behind the shifting storm of those eyes. Took a deep breath and decided he might as well take a chance. Not like there were any windows down here to be thrown out of.

"Hapepsyec.

Loki's eyes widened ever so slightly, an expression crossing over his face faster than Tony could follow, then thin lips were pressed against his, he was drowning, crushed, elegant fingers digging into his hair. It was all teeth and passion and Tony pushed back, hard, because he had wanted this for longer than he'd like to admit; heard crystal shattering on the lab floor and that was going to be a pain—fuck, Loki's hand sliding under his shirt, digging in and nails drawing blood and Tony decided right then this wasn't fair, that he should be getting stripped and Loki still have all his clothes on.

When they stood, it was Loki who tripped over the bottle of wine, sent it spilling across the floor; Tony took the momentary off-balance of it to rip Loki's shirt open, buttons going everywhere, pushed Loki against the nearby worktable, and just feasted on that pale flesh, nipped and nibbled at that perfect collarbone, dug his fingers in and traced over ribs, along his spine, Loki's groan just making him want more, more, now, fuck.

He didn't even know when they ended up in the bed, him between Loki's legs, the god looking beyond decadent, swath of inky hair spilling over Tony's pillows, all pale flesh and smooth cut lines, those hands, those goddamned hands. He bit into Loki's shoulder when the god said, groaned, pleaded his name—"Tony"—and saw stars, vision going dark around the edges and rich tang of blood filling his mouth.

The room was dark and they laid there in a tangle of limbs for a while. Eventually, Tony moved first, got them a towel and they cleaned up a little before he sprawled on his back and Loki curled into his
side. Loki's fingers drummed a little rhythm on the metal edge of the arc reactor as he studied Tony, eyes half-closed.

"Like what you see?" Tony quipped, running his fingers through Loki's hair, fighting to stay awake longer than the god.

"hEpEpsYE." The word hung in the air, hovered, full of all the emotion that Tony imagined the letters were meant to convey, the inflection Tony couldn't quite get right (not that it seemed to matter to Loki, Loki who recognized what Tony was trying to say, Loki who could follow his thoughts and words, Loki who got him). He moved his hand, squeezed Loki's shoulders, kissed his forehead.

Suddenly, it wasn't so hard to stay awake.

He watched Loki as he slept, how slack and tired the god looked in sleep. How worn. Defenses gone, Loki looked a lot how Tony felt some days. Ran the way Loki said the word in his head again, felt his stomach knot. Tomorrow, he was going to throw himself right in front of Amora, fake his own being wounded, and of course Loki had chosen now to show up, of course Loki had chosen now to say what he thought of Tony (and Tony was willing to admit that it was his fault, that he started it, because he knew Loki never would have said anything of the sort, would have just shared a glass of wine if Tony hadn't made the first move, right? Right.)

Fuck.
Chapter 7

He woke up before Loki and blamed it on the fact that Loki looked like he hadn't slept in nearly a month. Maybe he hadn't, Tony didn't know how much gods actually needed sleep. He started to get himself out of bed, untangle himself from the way Loki had curled around him in sleep, when Loki's eyes opened part of the way (lucky, that Loki's eyes were so green, made it obvious any time he opened them). Loki made this little inquisitive noise in the back of his throat that very nearly got Tony to crawl right back into bed but the last thing he needed was one of the Avengers coming in to drag him out of bed and finding Loki there. Like Steve. Or, heaven forbid, Thor.

"Work stuff. Us mortals have to do that," he said with a grin. He pulled the blankets up around Loki, kissed him on the forehead and those green green eyes slid closed again. The god moved a little, curled around the pillow that moments before Tony had been sleeping on and lay still again. Tony watched him and wished that he could just stay and keep watching him.

Not, you know, throw himself in the thick of things without his suit as bait and hope Loki didn't catch sight of it.

When he arrived at SHIELD, the only other person there was Clint. Well, presumably Natasha was here, too, but probably doing whatever super secret spies did in the morning to look totally imperturbable and hot all day. Tony actually bothered to check his watch as he sipped his coffee. Seven thirteen. He couldn't remember the last time he'd woken up so early on his own.

Clint didn't say anything, just half-raised an eyebrow at him.

"You're here early." Hill and Natasha walked in, and Tony figured he should try this early thing more often with the way Hill double-taked and nearly ran into a chair. That was pretty funny.

"Oh, you know me, love it when I get to throw myself in harm's way and hope for the best. Chop, chop, early bird gets the worm and all that. That's why Clint was here first." He grinned at Clint's dagger glare.

The rest of the team filed in, and every last one of them had to glance twice when they saw Tony was already there. Tony just rolled his eyes, drank his coffee, and studied the route he was going to be taking once again, absorbed it. Ran over it in his head, checked and double checked that it was no where near his tower. hEpsYE, echoed throughout his mind, the way Loki's voice had sounded last night, that flash of something right beforehand. The wine. Inquisitive half noise. Fuck fuck fuck.

"Tony?"

He blinked and gave an eye-cock. The rest of the team was staring at him. He ran over the last few minutes in his head, but pulled up nothing. He couldn't even tell if they'd been talking. hEpEsY.

"Tony," begging, pleading, coming apart underneath him.

"Are you okay? Did something happen?"

"No, I'm good. I'm good. Are we ready to start this party? We need to talk some more? Let's just get this done and over guys, dinner by six, yeah?" Tap tap drum against the edge of his arc reactor. He stopped when he realized he was mimicking the rhythm Loki had drummed last night (this morning? He had no idea).

"We can think of something else," Steve offered.
"Nope." Tony stood, checked and discovered somewhere in all this he'd ran out of coffee. How about that. "Natasha and me are gonna be great buds, I'll get pointers on how to do some cool kicks, find out what it's like to be suitless *and* sober."

"Well, if you're sure…"

"Yes." Tony walked out on them.

XXXXXX

It was raining when Loki woke. He lay in the bed, surrounded by warmth and texture, breathed in scents of sex and Tony, let his eyes run over the room in the gray half-light and simply basked for a few moments. A half-smile curved his lips as he remembered Tony's butchered attempt at speech the night before. Sorted through sound and scattered thoughts until he recalled "work."

Avengers' matters then.

He padded into the bathroom, showered, and paused to examine himself in the mirror. Touched the bite mark on his shoulder that was already blossoming with deep purple bruising. A thread of a thought unfurled, wondering what the mortal saw, what had sparked his coming to get Loki, and then he discarded it as he closed his eyes and reveled in the sound of the city. Followed the delicate veins of traffic and noise that made up the streets, listened to the peculiar music of offices coming to life and phones beginning to buzz, the low grade joy and irritation that threaded through people as another day started. He mapped the sound of New York as he had each morning since Tony had carried him back, until the image of the city was a sound-picture in his mind, until he found the familiar blue-white song that was strictly and purely Tony's, the burst of energy and passion that was more than just the little mechanical heart that kept him alive.

Steady, proud, energetic emotion that threaded into the immediate area and brought with it's own sort of joy, and even if the mortals could not hear it they reacted to it. Firmly placed the sound in the back of his mind as an anchor to return to.

He opened his eyes and left, found there was yet some coffee left. Made himself a cup, plenty of milk (whole milk—it looked as if Tony still kept things stocked as if Loki lived there; it brought a small smile to his lips), and let his thoughts drift elsewhere.

He did not, as a rule, take lovers. Ah, but Tony, with his clever mind and clever mouth, who desired to learn, who had asked for the first time in ages how magic worked and then tried to understand Loki's lexicon, his tongue, tried to understand what he heard, tried to understand him. Who trusted despite everything before, who listened when Loki spoke and treated him as worth something.

He thought of melodies, of songs he could sing. Sorted through words and sounds and wondered if he would, perhaps, gift the mortal with one. He did not, as a rule, sing. Not any longer, when he had other methods of enacting his will, of showing the universe what he desired.

*Hapepsy* whispered as he turned on the television and sorted through channels, curious to see if there were any Shakespeare on, or perhaps something else, one of those animated cartoons; it made him smile without noticing at how Tony could not pronounce the emotion but tried anyway. He left the television on and wandered elsewhere, ended up on the roof. He sipped his coffee and simply watched. Listened.

XXXXXX

Tony gasped, hunched and curled in the dark and abandoned building. He could hear Amora as she
walked through the hallways, cursed a bit as some sweat and blood got in his eyes and wiped it out of the way.

"Come out, come out, little pet," Amora called, *purred*. Tony stayed exactly where he was, waiting. Bait and switch. Wasn't he just a genius?

"En route, Tony," buzzed in his ear; apparently Amora caught the noise and a blast tore through the wall where he was. Tony scrambled, darted through the hole and to the other side of the building, raced down stairs. Genius, he reminded himself.

"Thor is *really* not going to like this, Amora. I mean really!" Tony babbled, his voice echoing through the PA system. It didn't seem to be slowing her down much either, but at least it did a little. Who'd have thought noise was all you needed to throw off a magic user? Loki wasn't totally crazy (or he was, but at least so far all the magicians had been crazy the same way and it really made him appreciate how much Loki could pick out sound because he had a feeling a loud PA wouldn't have slowed the god down at *all*). "I mean, you want in his pants, right?"

A shriek, and another chunk of wall missing. *Wow* that was close. He heard thunder outside, too fast thunder—Thor was here. Amora had noticed too, based off how she'd stopped stalking around for a few minutes.

"Ready." Tony grinned and darted from where he was hiding. "Hey, bitch, come on." Amora whipped around, snarled at him, and magic slammed into him. Not aimed to hurt—though he sure did slam into the wall hard enough to hurt—but it did leave him stunned. He heard Hulk's roar at the same time as Amora did and saw her eyes narrow. Tony shook himself and waved a bit. "Bye!" He still couldn't see straight, but that didn't mean he couldn't get up and wobble drunkenly away as Amora vanished, trying to get away from the green giant that plowed through the wall towards her.

"I will *destroy* you!" Amora shrieked from somewhere. Tony ignored her, hobbled towards the back door. Stupid toy, Tony's tech always worked, except when it didn't, and he *clearly* needed to hit the books (or book, as there was only one he had) on how magic worked again. He glared at the watch/energy silencer on his wrist as he stepped out into the rain and saw Natasha.

That was about when the building shuddered and then Tony was on his knees, hands over his head. A rock pinged off the watch, but that was the worst of it before he glanced around. Oh good. He wasn't destroyed. Not like the building, which was currently a pile of brick, concrete, steel, and above it were Thor and Amora. The Hulk was climbing out of the wreckage, snarling, already climbing up another building to get to them. Clint was somewhere else, arrows helping to keep Amora from moving too far away, above them. Excellent.

Natasha helped him stand.

"I am *never* volunteering to go suitless again," Tony informed her as she threw one of his arms over her shoulder and they started away from the conflict. He felt delirious, buzzy, something itching at the back of his neck and on his wrist. Glanced and saw the little 'silence' light had switched on. "Seriously? All I had to do was bang it against a wall?"

Natasha glanced at it and something like a laugh escaped before she could stop it.

"No laughing. Just proves my stuff always works."

XXXXXX

Blue-white song winked out.
A wave of energy swirled out and knocked Tony and Natasha down. Tony tried to get his brain to unscramble, to stop seeing triple and more. He really needed to wear his suit more; managed to glance over his shoulder. Loki. Oh right. Loki was the one who had pointed out the whole arc reactor energy in the first place, however incidentally. \textit{hEpsYE}.

"What is he doing here?!" Natasha hissed, grabbed Tony and dragged him out of the way. He tried to get his tongue unstuck from the roof his mouth, to explain, well, Loki was here because \textit{he}, Tony, had just vanished off the magic map and, see, he \textit{really} hadn't meant to but he and the god had totally had wild sex last night and Loki seemed to be pretty partial to Tony for some \textit{weird} reason. But he couldn't. Something had broken between that last knock to the head and his tongue.

Everyone else had stopped. Loki was dressed casually, the way Tony had gotten used to seeing him—green dress shirt, black jeans, barefoot. He had his hands in his pockets, and was studying the ruined building before him. Thor moved towards him, Clint had started to swear and babble in their ears; Loki held up a hand and silence descended once more. His eyes were closed. He was listening, searching.

Tony tried to sort his head out enough to say \textit{something} because the rising pressure, the twitch of Loki's hand clenching into a fist, Loki's eyes opening and focusing on Amora told him that if he didn't Really Bad Things were going to happen. He glanced at Amora, saw she was getting it too; there was a sudden swirl of her gathering magic as she went to teleport away and Loki's voice snapped across the air, roiled with power.

"\textit{Ma num ra gyusya yor!}" There was a twisted snarl on Loki's face. "\textit{RrhaAAAAAA ki raa ruinie!}"

Amora slammed into the the ruined building underneath her. It didn't take her long to scramble to her feet, reach for something as Loki slowly paced, clearly disinterested in her again.

"You you \textit{Jotun} bastard! My magic!" Amora shrieked

"Guys, get out of there," Natasha said calmly into the comm. Apparently nobody had to be told twice. She went to help Tony up and Tony pushed her away, tried to get to his feet by himself. He needed to stop Loki. "Tony, we need to go," she said quietly. Tony stared as Loki paused, took his hands out of his pockets and held his arms out and leaned his head back in the rain, then Natasha was yanking him around the side of the building into a side street and he couldn't \textit{see}.

"Brother! \textit{No!}" Thor shouted, landing on the ground and moving towards Loki. "Stop this! He isn't dead!"

How on earth had he and Natasha managed to get so far away from the building? It was something like three blocks now.

"Tony?" Tony staggered to his feet, leaned against a not-collapsed building. Loki was saying something to Thor, quiet, too quiet to hear from so far away.

"We need to stop him!" Steve's voice over the comm. Tony took the comm out of his ear, leaned back around the edge of the building.

Thor was talking to Loki, and Loki snarled suddenly, a twist of hand and Thor was thrown back into the street. Loki held his arms out again, leaned his head back, and roared; sound and white noise filled the air. The ground shuddered and cracked beneath the god before a literal wave ripped through the earth and outward. Buildings collapsed and as the dust settled again Tony realized that
Loki was probably going to end up killing him if this kept this up. Jesus. He glanced at Natasha, who was staring with her mouth partly open.

"I need to get to him. Like, now. No time to explain."

"Later," she said, already supporting him.

"xE rre qoga." The words ripped through Tony, and he could feel Natasha shaking and gave her all the mental points he had for not turning tail and fleeing. The ground shuddered beneath them again, worse this time, spreading out farther than this abandoned section of the city. Thor was climbing to his feet, readying Mjolnir and looking like his world was crumbling before him.

"We need to hurry, 'qoga' means 'the end,' he's going to end everything, why is he so happy about that shit shit shit. " Natasha didn't even glance at him, just helped him stagger faster. More words, and these Tony didn't know, just knew that they weren't good words, not with how the ground was shifting underneath them. Loki was chanting and singing and no wonder he didn't sing, Tony twisted an ankle on a piece of concrete sticking up and swore a blue streak in the air. Literally—the magic rippling out from Loki was making every sound start to take on colours and smells and textures.

"Loki!" he shouted, but it didn't get through; Loki with his eyes closed and turned inward, pulling the sound in his head out and singing it into reality. "Goddammit, Loki!"

"Was nyasri ga nozess en kil yora!" Deep cracks appeared in the ground, exhaling heat and steam into the rain. Tony let go of Natasha and sprinted the last distance, hating every ache and pain in his body, hated everything that had gone wrong, hated himself for thinking that something like this wouldn't happen. Tripped and slammed into Loki, wrapped his arms tightly around the god and stood there swaying.

Silence.

Tony heaved a breath as the ground stopped shuddering, as all the tenseness in Loki's form melted. He didn't let go, but he leaned back a little. Loki was staring at him, eyes shattered glass, raw and agonized. Loki's knees gave out and Tony let himself go to his knees too, just so he could keep his arms around the god, pulled him close again.

"I'm here," he whispered, voice shaking.

Hands dug into him, pulled him close, and he felt wet warmth that wasn't rain soak into his shirt. Tony glanced up, saw the others coming closer. Thor looked relieved, but the rest looked various stages of unimpressed. Tony looked back down at Loki and decided they could wait a while.

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Tony sat in the chair in the debriefing room and just leaned back. He felt drained. Glanced at his watch—finally realized, duh, he could have just turned it off and avoided this whole mess, but hey, he'd had three knocks to the head in short order, who would be thinking straight in that kind of situation?—and decided that he needed a very long vacation after this. Somewhere warm. Maybe go to his home in Malibu for a while. Loki had vanished as soon as the other Avengers tried to take him into custody; when Thor said Loki would cause no further trouble, Tony had backed him up. After all, Tony wasn't planning on dying or getting smashed by a super villain in the next twenty-four hours.

"You can head home."

Tony spun around in the chair and looked at Natasha. She had her arms folded and was leaned next
to the door; he wondered how long she'd been there.

"So you and Clint aren't going to skin me alive? Man, I'm impressed. I thought for sure Clint would." It sounded tired even to his ears.

"It's familiar, what you're doing with him. Clint sees it. He doesn't like it, but he's been in your shoes before. He'll bet on you, even if he doesn't like who you're vouching for."

"Huh." Tony was pretty sure that was the most he'd ever heard Natasha say about her and Clint's relationship. How about that.

Natasha left. Figuring there wasn't anything keeping him there, he left, too.

XXXXXX

Loki wasn't at the tower when Tony arrived home. He waited a week, figured Loki could find him if he wanted, and flew out to Malibu to crash for a while. Realized somewhere in there he had forgotten his tablet with the e-book and shrugged. Loki would show up again, and Tony would just pick the god's brain instead. Split open his watch-slash-silencer and found the stupid piece of dirt that had gotten lodged and kept it from functioning right the first time.

He was sitting flipping through channels when he saw Henry IV - Part I was on and stopped. Let it play in the background. He wasn't really surprised at all when he looked up from his spare tablet and saw Loki sitting on the other end of the couch, upside down (he wondered why the god liked doing that), one foot kicking the air slightly and eyes following the show.

He couldn't help it. He slid closer and reached out to touch one of Loki's arms. He was real. Still real. Loki's eyes flicked away from the television and up to Tony, an eyebrow arched; Tony felt the tension drain out of his shoulders. He left his hand on Loki's arm, drummed one of Loki's endless rhythms on the bare forearm.

"Want some Thai?" Tony asked.

Loki smiled.
Chapter Summary

In which I kind of sperg about Hymmnos for you.

And that's a wrap! This chapter is strictly a big nerd explosion.

But before the nerd explosion, I want to thank everyone for reading. Again. Most of my stories I'm fairly confident about, but this one is wrapped up in a lot of my own thought processes and emotions, and so I was very nervous. I couldn't tell if it was interesting, too pendantic, or what, because it was so close to me; the response that it got and how much you all loved it really means a lot to me.

The language used in this story is an actual (made-up) language named Hymmnos. It's orginally from the Ar Tonelico series of games (which I'm not sure I would recommend, though I do love them dearly. At the very least Ar Tonelico 2, as it's the best one and my personal favourite). How it functions and works is a bit different from how I described magic; what I really did in this story was take a language that I've learned fairly well and simply used it for my own ends.

If you'd want to learn more about Hymmnos, I'd recommend two sites:

The [Conlang wiki page](#) which has structures, grammars, and a lexicon.

And [Hymmnos Server](#) which is easier to search through and has general theory about how Hymmnos functions in Ar Tonelico

Hymmnos primary grammatical 'thing' is the expression of emotion. Each of the dialects I describe are, in fact, dialects of Hymmnos. Standard Note is Standard note in Hymmnos, Aleatory is the Pastalian Dialect (my personal favourite), Hymn is Ar Cielian (another favourite), and Cadenza is Carmen Foreluna. Each of them works differently, and technically all of them are descended from Ar Ciel.

The two major dialects, Standard and Pastalian/Aleatory, function differently in how they express. Standard is focused around expressing length and general state of being of an emotion, while Pastalian is focused around expressing as much of that emotion as possible (and thus cannot describe how long a particular emotion lasts). They have different uses and do different things. They also have wildly different grammars and structures.

Ar Ciel/Hymn is the language of the earth in Ar Tonelico, and functions at frequencies beyond human (actually most things) hearing. For the sake of simplicity, I didn't bother trying to garble it up when writing. It did, however, seem incredibly well suited to being the main and first language that Loki would hear, and then have to distill into something most people could use.

There are a great number of songs that are in the games in the language, and I pretty much just listened to the soundtracks on repeat while working. The song, however, that started it all was Despair, which celebrates the ending of the world and the creation of a new.

Now, onto translations.
xE rre - does not mean anything. It indicates happiness regarding a specific subject. (rre is an object identifier, kind of like this particular thing)

Nn yant ga - (reluctance over emotion)(fear)(desire to stop); basically expressing 'make this stop', but not technically a complete sentence

DlzNqoga wAssEzodalspha - technically two separate things, and semi-corrupted at that. d.z. means 'die' -this means "i (fear) death and end.' The other half is w.s.s. meaning 'praise' - (I feel strong and happy) praising the death of the world. (Spha is the first half of the word sphaela, which means world/universe).

Was yea ra wael - (Very much)(happy)(desire it to continue) I am very glad of it.

tsegaa taccab bJ sss - I pray for the destruction of this world and the creation of a new one through great power.

Rrha ki ra hymme vonn - (trance-like)(focused)(continue) In a trance I sing darkness

Ma ki garuinie - (discretion)(focused)(stop soon) destruction (incomplete sentence)

Rrha yea ra gfowi - (trance-like)(happy)(desire to continue) suffering (incomplete sentence)

YYeeeeeaaarH ZZZZaaaactaaaaiiiiiiiT sssSSSSSS - ar ciel;

fIrUlO - to be frightened; emotions: i fear, i am sad, i am angry

qNgNsI - to end, finish; emotions: I do not care (but I am a little scared)

zIzOxNNNN - to despair; emotions: I am afraid and angry and calm

Was granme ra hyma mea - (Very much)(desire to protect)(desire to continue) Please listen to me.

saaAAwwulll FFfiaAamm teeCaAAssaaaaaa sssSSSSSSyyyyyy - ar ciel; I can feel your sadness

h. - to care/think about someone; when used, it varies between various emotions that Tony feels or wishes to express.

Nnoi crown touwaka arsy e yor - I would share a glass of wine with you.

Ma num ra gyusya yor! - (discretion)(nil/nothing)(continue) I will control you!

RrhaAAAAAA ki raa ruinie - I shall ruin you.

xE rre quoga - I am glad of this end.

Was nysri ga nozess en kil yora - (Very much)(sad/despair)(end soon) In this sadness, I will destroy and kill all of you.

And holy wowza that was a lot. Hopefully it's readable to those who were curious.

Now we're really done. :) I'll see you next story!

Works inspired by this one

xE rre (podfic) by qwanderer
Works inspired by this:  
**Xêtre (podfic)** by qwanderer

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!