When Silence Falls

by TheHatterTheory

Summary

In which Tony thrives on denial. OR. Where Tony dies a third time and gets back up. Sort of.
(on hiatus)

Notes

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This has been completely rewritten because Hats should never be allowed to post anything when she's been up for a couple of days. AKA jeebus that first version was bad. Feel free to re-read. My beta Man said this one worked.

Also, this is my first time writing for anything in the Marvelverse, AND the first time in awhile I've stepped out of IYFF. However, the idea took, and I'm already 10k into this bloody thing, so. Long story short, don't shoot me, don't sue me, and if there are
psychotically glaring errors, I would love to know.
Tony stared straight ahead, eyes squinting even as the visor tried to compensate for the glare, darkening so he could focus on getting a lock on Doom. Magic was scrambling the readings, making locating him impossible. Heat seeped into his skin through the armor from the summoned inferno. Tony ignored it, throwing himself deeper into the inferno, trusting the suit to protect him as he searched for the goat legged fairy fuck that had summoned it. The heat got worse, the further he went in, blindingly trusting sensors that weren't working all that well.

"Sir, the Mark V was not designed to take heat in excess of-"

"Shut it Jarvis, where is he?" Tony demanded, feeling himself sweating inside the suit, beads that were rapidly turning to rivulets. The fire around him was too strong for the suit, but it was all he had on hand, and damned if he was going to let Doom get away with incinerating a few square blocks and everyone that had been inside the buildings, walking the streets.

"I have a reading sir," Jarvis said. "It is in the center of the blast, where the heat is the highest."

"Cap, what's the ETA?" Tony demanded.

"Five minutes," Steve's voice told him.

"Jarvis, what's it looking like?" He licked the salt tang off of his lips and felt like he had a river running down his back and into his crack. He hated that feeling.

"By the time the others arrive, it is estimated a range of eighty blocks will be caught in the fire."

"Fuck that. I'm going after him," Tony shouted, following the pinpoint of green on the screen, forcing himself to run further into the conflagration. The heat only grew worse, and he could hear Jarvis warning him, again, but he would only be in for a minute. Just enough to find Doom and whatever magical toy he had pulled out of his ass this month. The green pinpoint grew into an outline, grew bigger as he pushed further in, ignoring that the visor went almost black to spare his eyesight.

One minute turned into three, turned into five. Tony could feel the sweat on his skin burning, boiling, felt like he was wrapping in tinfoil in the biggest fucking over he'd ever seen. His clothing was saturated with sweat and hot, hot like boiling water clinging to him and impossible to get away from.

"Sir, he is ten feet ahead."

"I got that Jarvis," Tony muttered, pulling his fist back even as he ran. The suit was slowing down, the metal groaning in protest to his movements. Metal connected with metal. Score then, he'd gotten a headshot.

If Doom was talking, he couldn't hear it. Not even the suit could pick it up for the sound of the fire. Eyes on the green outline that staggered and swayed, he threw another punch, then aimed his hand, readying the repulsor beam.

The blow wasn't unexpected, but he had hoped for more time. He felt himself go hurtling away, landing on his back. Pain jolted through him, the suit only cushioning him so much from the impact. It felt like his skin was bubbling and blistering, clinging to the inside of the suit and ripping with every movement, agony rippling through him with every fraction of movement. His hands
fisted as he tried to will the pain away, tried to ignore the blanket of needles pressed against, rudely shoved into his muscles and bones.

"Sir, the highest temperature of the fire is in his hands, much higher than the fire surrounding us. It appears to be the source. It is in an open box in his hands."

Wonderful, which meant if he could get the box closed, the fire would probably go out, or at least stop spreading, and maybe his body wouldn't boil quite as quickly.

Tony pushed himself to his knees and aimed himself, commanding a surge of power to all four repulsors and sending him barreling into Doom's chest like a bullet. He cursed something uncomplimentary about Doom's mother when he felt something in the suit buckle and tried not to think about it. Blood throbbed in his ears, pulsed in his forehead and neck until his head was pounding angrily, sweat pouring over blistered skin and stinging in the ruptures.

"Sir-"

"Task at hand Jarvis," Tony bit out, voice taut and sharp as he tried to ignore the way every movement felt like he was shoving a serrated knife into the bone and twisting.

"The box has been destroyed Sir," Jarvis told him, voice as calm and British as ever.

Shit. *Shit.*

"Jarvis, analyze it, " He commanded. "Visibility at fifteen percent."

"That will blind you sir."

"Ten percent!"

The dark began to fade and light poured into his helmet, making him blink again and again. Tony reached at the outline of Doom, saw that despite the inferno the supervillain was untouched by the flames and knew there was more magic at work. Growling again, he wrapped a hand around Doom's throat, holding tightly.

"How do I stop it?" He shouted, praying Doom could hear.

"You can't." Doom's voice vibrated through his helmet. Projection, more fucking magic. "The only vessel that could contain Surtur's Breath was just destroyed by you. How perfect." The tone was sardonic, almost pleased.

Tony had already known he disliked magic. Now he was sure he hated it.

"There's always a way," Tony shouted, still holding to Doom and refusing to let go.

"Sir, a disruption is necessary. The object's atomic structure is fragile."

"Protocol seven," Tony shouted as Doom clubbed his helmet, making his head ring as blood filled his mouth.

"Sir-"

"Do it Jarvis," Tony rasped, tongue swelling and blood and spit dribbling out of the corner of his mouth. The arc reactor began to whirl and hum loudly in his chest, vibrating through him. Faster and faster until it was a constant buzz that thrummed and pulsed, until he felt like a human tuning fork that had been hit with a sledgehammer.
"Sir, DUM-E says he will miss you."

Tony tried not to think about DUM-E.

"It's been a pleasure sir."

"Liar," Tony muttered as he licked his lips and took a shuddering breath. His chest felt tight, a spring that was coiling tighter and tighter until it would snap. Just a few more seconds.

Pepper, the team. Oh god the team, the building, the tech, the suits, the whirring shattering him apart as the heat scorched him through his suit, the smell of something burning and the red just outside of his visor, the blinding red that was nothing like his red.

A hand came sailing up to his face and grabbed, metal scratching against metal as the hand made contact and pulled. Soft, pliable metal crunched and bent.

"You will not take this from me," Doom shouted. Tony could barely hear him inside of his head, couldn't even hear the roar of the fire over the humming inside of his body, the sound waves ripping and pulling him apart.

His faceplate buckled easily, the heat compromising the integrity of the alloy. A flash of whiteredorange and then darkness. Tony didn't feel the heat searing his lungs or his face washed in fire because it was suddenly just there, transitioning so quick that the steam inside the suit vanished and he was boiling alive as Doom punched him. He could feel the metal of the glove coming away with flesh.

He didn't let go.

The whirring grew, intensified until there was nothing but the ungodly hum through him as his lungs collapsed, capillaries bursting, organs collapsing and cooking. Vision had more than failed him, but he could still see the red orange hate in his mind. He prayed for shock, prayed to die as he held on, Doom trying to rip the gauntlet from his flesh and failing.

Tony smiled, an awful, rictus smile where lips had burned away. In an awful, dark corner of his own heart, he found a joy in taking Doom with him, found a measure of peace that he was doing more than destroying another enchanted piece of whatever. He shouldn't have found such vicious satisfaction in it, shouldn't have found peace, but he did, and he hoped, though he couldn't tell anymore, that his hand tightened on Doom's neck.

_Click._

The whirring stopped so suddenly Tony felt his whole body spasm, felt the jerking stop of a hundred city buses at once, of hitting a tree in his father's prize car when he was only fourteen and drunk on scotch, of his first orgasm, his first punch. The darkness of his vision exploded and he felt himself shattering, breaking apart as the arc reactor splintered, raced through him, through Doom, through the piece of shit magical toy caught between them.

He didn't feel the explosion, didn't see the fire, didn't hear the hum or the screams. A beat throbbed in his skull as he fell away from the hateful, angry red orange that wasn't his, pulsed and echoed through him as forgiving darkness pushed up, surrounded, and swallowed him.
The funeral procession was attended by hundreds of thousands of people. A casket was walked through the streets, a coffin that held only bits of twisted metal in lieu of a body that had been incinerated. It was held up by two immortals, two assassins, a colonel, and a doctor. The procession was lead by a woman with red hair and eyes that could have been either blue or green, but tears made it impossible to tell their true color.

The casket was more than a physical weight, one they bent beneath, but did not break. They did not mourn publicly, the evidence of the depth of their loss almost impossible to find in the stern stoicism they wore as masks to hide any hint of weakness. If they shattered beneath the weight, it was not for the world to see. It would be when they were alone, when the whisper of loss is curving in their ear with a hellish 'what if' or 'too late'.

They marched into the cemetery, armed guards keeping the fans and impersonal paparazzi at bay. Through the peaceful green and rows of stones until they arrived at the grave already bedecked with flowers and pictures. The coffin was lowered onto it's stand, and the funeral service for a fallen hero started.

A eulogy was given by the woman with tears in her eyes, her face red and blotchy, ungraceful except for the way she held herself, shoulders bowing down and chin tilted high. The light caught the tears and proved them to be green, filled with every emotion she was trying to contain. A speech was given by a stern colonel who did not let his mask slip. He said very few things that were kind, but he said nothing that was untrue, telling everyone that his friend hated eulogies that were lies. But he smiled anyway, because even if his friend was not a paragon of virtue, he was a good friend, and he proudly told everyone that gathered. The team leader, the one with broken shards of soul and self in his eyes, took several moments to speak, throat thick around them. He told those gathered that Tony Stark was worth ten of him, and more.

A flag was folded while the sound of gunfire echoed. Thunder, out of place in the warm blue day, boomed above that, a refrain to each volley, pronouncing it, dulling it, making it more bearable as the team leader held the flag, fully folded, and presented it to the woman with the green eyes. She accepted it, a sardonic, hopeless smile on her face, murmuring about irony. The team leader tried not to flinch.

The coffin was lowered, dirt was dropped. ACDC began to blare from hidden speakers unexpectedly, startling laughter that cut the lips and tongues of those present. People began to filter out, one by one, then in groups, until only five heroes remained. Expensive scotch from the deceased's private stock appeared as if out of thin air, compliments of an assassin with a lock pick, and alcohol from another realm was also poured. A cigar stolen from a hidden stash made an appearance, and the smell reminded them only of workshop experiments gone awry. It stayed lit anyway.

Five heroes drank, got drunk. They did not cry. Instead, they told stories, recounted memories of battles and the hazards of being roommates, of a volatile personality with a sharp wit and more heart than was readily apparent. There were jokes, recollections, and even laughter. There were no tears, there were no sobs, although a quiet moment would descend on them from time to time before someone would speak, as if the silence would destroy them.

A thunder god that had seen much of war and much of death saw it as a fitting tribute, but he did not say so.
On The End

Chapter Summary

Tony wakes up. Several times.

Chapter Notes

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For those who didn't catch it, I rewrote the first part because Mana looked at it and told me I should stop thinking my insomnia ramblings are works of brilliance without editing. So. Rewritten. And here, a present, because this did go through editing from Mana and was approved, so why wait?

When Tony came to, the first sensation was pain and fire and agony. A cry erupted, something animal and bordering on the edge of sanity, wounded and uncomprehending. It was a sound that echoed through the marble halls, ricocheting off of the stone walls and startling those that had been ordered to watch over him.

His hand clutched his chest, looking for his heart, the broken, overloaded thing and found only smooth skin instead of a gaping hole, went to his face expecting the smooth bubbling of blisters because the fire was still so real, and found hair and eyebrows and a distinguishable nose where there shouldn't have been one. Lips moved wordlessly, gasps for air pushed against his fingertips.

The arc reactor was gone, his chest was healed over as if the gaping hole had never existed. Tony panicked, knowing immediately he was going to die, and he didn't have any idea where he was, or how he got there. Grunting as pain flared through his legs as he pushed himself out of the bed, he looked around the room, brown eyes blinking against the white and gold that seemed to be everywhere, dripping from everything and glistening with it's own light. The whole place reminded him of a picture book fairy tale, and it only incensed Tony further as he looked around for anything that could be used as a weapon. Nothing proved immediately useful, and he could hear footsteps outside of his door, along with the sound of voices. Unhappy, angry voices.

Knowing he had no options but not liking the alternative, he got back into the bed as the door opened and a harried looking dungeons and dragons wannabe rushed into the room, long tunic and hair rustling and flying, surprise and frustration clear in his expression. Two others followed him, similarly dressed.

"You should not be awake, it is too soon," The first said, voice quiet, condescending and reminding Tony way too much of Steve for his own comfort. The man leaned in, and Tony caught the tell tale glitter of something sharp and shiny, and okay, so knives were more Natasha's thing, but he didn't hesitate to snatch the gold blade from the belted sheath and roll off of the other side of the bed, pain flaring up his legs, fire licking the muscles as he fought the wave of vertigo that threatened to swamp his balance.
"You should be sleeping," The man said, voice still quiet. "You still carry the memories of the flesh."

Tony ignored that statement, eyes on the three men that were shimmering like a cliche in a tacky fantasy movie. The one that spoke, considerably older than the rest, was raising his hands slowly, sleeves dipping low, and the gold glow that glimmered around him as he moved gathered and concentrated on his palms.

"Fuck you," Tony growled, stumbling around them and running for the door. They didn't chase him, but they did call out, shouting loudly. Heart beating like a war drum in his chest and the fire was still burning, scorching his skin and bone as he ran down the hall, the sound of clattering armor behind him growing louder.

A larger set of doors loomed, and he slammed against it, his body pulsing hotly, screaming a static protest while he pushed against it. It opened easily, much more easily than he thought it would, silent on it's hinges as he slipped through the crack and into the light of day.

Gold and light and blinding, the world outside seared his eyes and made him blink even as he continued running blindly. Every step was like driving broken, molten glass deeper into his muscles, shrapnel tearing him apart, and he tried not to think about the bits of metal leftover from his vacation in Afghanistan and how close they were to his heart.

"Think," He growled, trying to gain his bearings. Think, don't panic. Panic dulled logic and made people useless, scurrying ants.

Except every time he looked around, he could see nothing, nothing but the red orange that echoed in the glint of the sun off of the buildings, a blossom of light that engulfed him until it was needling into his mind, clawing carelessly, relentlessly through his brain until he stumbled, knife falling, hands held to his eyes, palms digging in to try and blot out the light that burned even when he closed them.

"Man of Iron," A voice said, cold, so cold and soothing the fire that was licking his skin, wrapping around him and pulling him out of the heat. Familiar.

Groaning, he dropped his hands and blinked against the light. His eyes focused on the shadow, the darkness in the center of the gold that provided a moment of relief from the sensation of his eyeballs boiling in his skull.

"Loki," He rasped, getting to his feet despite the pain rippling through him as he swayed unsteadily. Goddamnit, of everything he could have encountered on his getaway, fucking Loki. Even in top shape he would have trouble facing his friend's brother, and he knew Loki was sizing him up, could see it, hell, he could feel the contempt rolling off of the god as he was observed and measured. Not a threat, obviously. Loki didn't even move forward to attempt stopping him or wave a hand to magic him into a pony.

"Welcome to Asgard," Loki sneered, head tilting so his hair, longer than Tony remembered it being, swayed against his shoulder, which had a book tucked beneath it, shielded from view aside from a peek of red.

Wait.

"What?" His voice was barely audible, a rasping creak more than a word escaping.

"You're dead."
It wasn't the brightest thing he'd ever done, but he was pretty sure he made some sort of list for punching Loki in the face on his first trip to Asgard. Even if he did end up flat on his ass with what felt like the mother of all hangovers and a hand that felt like it had been hit with a belt sander to show for it.

"Fuck you and your goddamn hat tricks," Tony muttered, trying to push himself up from the ground and finding himself retrained. The magic was cold around him, and he shuddered in relief as the heat began to dissipate. And unwanted side effect, unwelcome even if it did lessen the pain because it was Loki.

"Your keepers have arrived."

"Prince Loki," The man from before said, perfectly even. "Thank you."

"What the fuck-" Tony started, the arrival of the old man triggering his fight or flight response. He reached blindly for the dagger, hand barely able to move in the invisible (fucking magical) restraints.

"Sleep," The older one said, and Tony's last thought was how much Pepper would love to have that one.

When he woke up a second time, he was not alone. He was however, still in pain, still felt the heat in his skin and bones although not the intense, unforgiving heat of before. His whole body throbbed lightly, like he'd spent too much time in the sun with too much scotch in his hands.

"Greetings, Man of Iron," An old, quiet voice said, echoing around the marble room. Tony turned, surprised that the agony he had felt had lessened, although it hadn't disappeared completely.

"What-"

"I am aware you were introduced to your status less than gently by my son."

"Son?" Status?

"Loki."

Oh.

Oh shit.

"I'm really in Asgard?"

"You are."

Well wasn't Eyepatch Two-Point-Oh particularly forthcoming? Not that he should have expected anything different from the stories he'd heard. The eyepatch design was new, he wished he had mentioned something about it to Blackbeard before- before-

"I'm dead," He croaked.

"You were brought here, from Midgard by Gondul," Odin explained, looking only mildly sympathetic. It was hard to tell with the beard and the eyebrows.

"Gondul?"
"A valkyrie."

Tony remember the beat that had been more than a drum, more than the pulsing of his arc reactor.

"Wings," Tony murmured.

"I have watched the heroes of your realm closely as of late, as I have not in many years, but most especially those that have battled at my son's side. Despite the natural limitations of your race, you have found ways to protect your home." Tony couldn't tell if this was a compliment, but Odin didn't sound particularly impressed.

"Favoritism? Let it never be said nepotism isn't dead."

"Hardly. There have been very few warriors that have earned the right to rest here." Odin definitely sounded offended, although it was a brittle sort of offended. Tony knew that voice, had heard it often enough that he could pinpoint it perfectly. It only wanted to make him be more of a dick.

"You mean to be your soldiers for the end," Tony rebutted, knowing the stories. You didn't fight with one norse god and face down another without doing some reading. Most of it hadn't been favorable to Odin, and Tony had hoped that the stories had been nothing more than the imaginings of a culture that was morbidly obsessed with death and too much time on their hands because of the long, probably depressing winters. Hopefully most of them were simply that, stories. He wasn't eager to fight for someone he barely knew, friend's father or not. There would be even less of a desire if even a quarter of the myths turned out to be fact.

"Most, yes. Most of them will fight for me, for Asgard. You will not."

"Oh, VIP privileges?" He really had no ability to censor himself, but, he was dead. Theoretically it couldn't get much worse.

"Thor did not ask, he did not have to. If you were not worthy, Gondul would not have brought you here."

"Then why the special treatment?"

"You are Thor's friend. Should you fight, your place will be his to decide."

"So, what? I-" The sentence remained open. He was already trying to remember everything Thor had told him about travel between Asgard and Midgard, but Jolly Blond Blunderdolt hadn't been all that knowledgeable, saying that it was there, so why should he question how it worked. Tony wished he'd demanded to try it before.

"First your spirit will finish healing of the wounds inflicted upon your flesh. The healers were hard put to repair the damage."

"What now?" Because Tony was positive that he had been incinerated inside of his own suit.

"Your spirit retains memories of your death, and took that form. The memory will fade, given time."

"I'm a fucking ghost?" And goddamn, did that sting just a little, because Tony hadn't believed in an afterlife and sure as hell had never gotten around to asking Thor if he would end up in this position, because, well, fuck, he was not eternal guard of the afterlife material. Even if his drinking had slowed down and he was trying to do right by the team, Pepper and his company. Not to mention an utter lack of belief in afterlifes in general. That should have barred him from any version of
"You are Aesir now. The flesh has been born again."

"So I'm like Thor?" Not gaining any bonus points if the old man's expression said anything. He didn't feel dumber though, so maybe his brain had managed the ride intact.

"Closer than other einherjar, but no one equals my son." That was said with the arrogance and confidence of a father, not necessarily the scientific, non-objective analysis Tony had been hoping for.

"Can I go back?"

"No. Not for some time."

"Care to give me a ballpark on that?"

Odin looked at him, vaguely confused by his wording.

"Estimate of what 'some time' is," He clarified.

"Until those alive have forgotten you, and will not know your appearance should you be seen."

Shit.

"I'm a fucking ghost," Tony muttered. "Can I get drunk?" Because drunk sounded good, drunk sounded appropriate.

"You can."

"I would love a drink." A big one, a big, tall, asgardian drink, preferably strong enough to knock him out. Or kill him for good. Could he even get alcohol poisoning?

"There is a period of solitude allowed, to come to terms with what has happened."

To come to terms with dying. How the fuck was he supposed to do that?

"When can I see Thor?"

"He is in Midgard. In the wake of your death, there has been an increase of attacks. Until he feels that it safe to leave, he will not return."

Tony bit back the comment, tried not to think about the team being forced to fight more just because he had died.

"One more thing," Tony asked, eyes on the blankets covering his lap.

"Yes, Man of Iron?"

Tony was beginning to hate the way he shuffled the words around.

"Doom, did I take him with me?"

"He was somewhat protected by wards, though his survival is not the sort anyone would wish for." Fuck.
"He lived." Not a question, a statement. And shit, how embarrassing was it to die, to make a bomb out yourself, and not take out your target? Shitty life or not, Doom was alive and he wasn't. Sort of.

"If one can call his fate living. He is broken, within the prison of the ones you call Shield. He will not be able to escape for some time, if ever."

Tony said nothing, the crushing feeling coming down on him, compressing his chest and breaking each rib one by one.

"I will leave you to your thoughts."

Tony didn't say goodbye. He didn't even bother to wonder if Odin cared or not.

Dead.

"Fuck."

Days passed, nights passed. Tony didn't see any of it.

Dead.

The memories faded day by day, and it was the only thing he noticed on any sort of scale. Not the memories in his head, because those were vivid and bright, painfully so. He doubted he would ever forget what it was like to die, the jarring shock of his body ripping itself to shreds as the arc reactor went into overload. But the ghost pain, like an amputated limb, was an echo that had faded a little more each time he woke up.

"Amputated from my goddamn body," He muttered, fingers tapping his chest where the arc reactor had once protruded. Some habits never died. He missed the arc reactor, missed the white noise and the solid sound of his finger tapping metal.

Dead.

Tony didn't know how to grieve, he had never been good at it. Most of his grieving process skipped anger, bargaining, and whatnot and went straight to denial and then acceptance. Usually it involved a lot of alcohol and only moderate depression. However, despite Odin's assurance that he could still get drunk, he hadn't been allowed any booze yet. The healer in charge of him had said only that his flesh was still healing and that the stress of drink was ill advised. That hadn't made sense to Tony, and he hadn't wanted to ask.

Asgard was also short on tech. Long on magic, short on tech. The healers were good with potions and the glowing reiki bullshit, but there was nothing resembling technology. So he had nothing to tinker with, nothing to take apart. His room was bare of anything but the bed and a table. He didn't know how to ask for books, didn't particularly want to read books, especially since he might not actually be able to read him. The language barrier was something that concerned him, but he had no clue how he was able to understand anyone that spoke to him. He doubted that Asgard spoke english, or that the others spoke it for his benefit. The view had long since become boring, and he was having trouble accepting it anyway. Floating buildings and golden spires. Physics defying fuckery. Magic. Every time he saw it, he felt a flash if anger surging through him.

Dead.

He knew that coming to terms meant grieving for his life, for himself, but he didn't know how to grieve. He also couldn't figure out how to accept. Accepting the loss of a person had always been
difficult, but accepting the loss of everything, accepting that he had nothing left, it wasn't possible. Not for him.

Dead.

Would Thor tell the others? Would it make a difference? What was going on with his company, with Pepper, with Rhodey? What had happened to his suits, to Jarvis and DUM-E? Had they been able to keep the Tower for the Avengers, or had the company managed to gain control of it? Tony tried not to think about it, but the number of things that could and probably were going wrong made him wish he'd been more clear in his will. Details he hadn't considered, hadn't thought he would need to consider, nagged at him. Things he could have done to keep his tech and the others safe from the company and from SHIELD.

Dead.

But he was breathing, living, maybe not eating, but he would maim a bus load of nuns for a fucking cup of coffee. That had to be a sign of something.

He was still Tony Stark, and if he didn't get out of his room and out into whatever world he was in, maybe figure out how to get back to earth, he'd go crazy. Crazier, anyway.

"Setback," He muttered to nothing in particular.

Denial it was.

Tony had never met the Warriors Three or Sif, although he'd always imagined them being more...Thor-like. However, the only one that came close was Sif, who reminded him more of Jane than Natasha. Jane in ridiculous armor, and shit, did everyone wear armor all the time? His clothes had been replaced with a red tunic and dark brown pants that were some sort of soft hide. Boots had also been provided, and he felt like he should have been in a renaissance faire. Or a Shakespearean play. Or like a pirate, and that was uncomfortable, considering the unique relationship he'd had with eyepatched assholes in his life.

They were regarding him with as much curiosity as he had once had of them.

"We have heard much about you from Thor," Sif started carefully, eyes going over his form, obviously doubtful about what she saw. Death hadn't done him a lot of favors. He was still short, still had to shave, and his hair was longer than it had been in awhile. He felt like a hippie. A hippie that had eaten the bad acid.

"I've heard a lot about you guys from him," Tony said, hating the awkward feeling but not having a fucking clue how to get past it.

"It is not unusual to feel disoriented for a time. The All Father told us you were different from the others."

He could see the question and immediately felt like the spoiled rich kid all over again, first day in class and everybody judging him for something beyond his control. Except these guys were part of Thor's inner circle, so their lives couldn't have been that underprivileged. Friends of princes didn't want for much, if anything.

"I'm hungry," The fat one said. Tony almost thanked the god he didn't believe in for the predictability of gelatinous gods. He was reminded uncomfortably of Magneto's flunky the Blob.
"You're always hungry," Sif muttered, rolling her eyes. "Have you eaten, Starkson?"

"Stark is fine," Tony told them, feeling too much a stranger to them to allow them to call him Tony. "And I haven't, actually."

Sif walked next to him as the others lead the way. Tony could feel their questions and curiosity, felt small next to the lumbering of their height and, in Volstagg's case, their girth. The halls they walked through were bright, shining, and Tony could understand how Thor, who had been so out of place on earth even when he was dressed as a normal human, could be admired and loved in Asgard.

He felt out of place though, felt out of place and dark and small, like a shadow of something that was tainting the halls, a speck of dust interfering with the light scheme and throwing it off. Tony wondered if the others felt that way about him, a small, dark thing in a bright place.

"It is said you fought beside Thor against the Chitauri and Loki," The blond one said. Tony couldn't remember his name.

"Yeah. Few years ago now."

"I would like to hear the story. Thor does not often speak of it."

"He is soft towards his brother," Volstagg said, his voice as loud as he was fat. "Doesn't like remembering the day he had to take him down. Heard you got a good strike against the whelp when you came out of your healing sleep though."

"Right before the snake used magic to strike back," Sif muttered, saying the word like it was a curse. Tony decided he liked her a little more, even if she looked like brunette barbie playing something out of Wagner's story. He imagined her with the pointy cone bra he'd once seen at an opera and decided the not so subtly rounded armor was bad enough.

"I take it Loki's not real popular around here," Tony observed as they walked out into the open air. He'd gotten out before, looked around and decided he wasn't overfond of the built in lens flare. However, the others seemed to know where they were going, so he wasn't going to argue. He did blink several times, and wondered when his vision was going to adjust to a golden city that seemed to have all the right angles for reflecting the sun directly into his vision, no matter how he turned his head.

"He is a traitor, and should not be suffered to live," Sif bit out. "A serpent waiting to strike at all times. You should know this, after battling him."

"Seemed more angry than anything to me," Tony shrugged. "Not like he was born evil." And from what Thor had told him, he could understand the anger. Not the expression of the anger, because destroying or trying to rule worlds was generally frowned upon, and he hadn't been keen on the idea of flying out of a window without his suit, but the anger itself was pretty easy to understand. People just didn't seem to be able to acknowledge that it was justified, not that Tony was going to admit the late night musings aloud.

"He was," Hogun said, voice quiet. "Few are born evil, but he was. I know the stories of Midgard. He is the end of us."

"You mean you guys believe that? Okay, well, sure, I guess. I mean, that's why I'm here, sort of. And the others. Ready for the big bang or whatever. So why doesn't everyone just kill him and get it over with? Save the trouble of the apocalypse?" It was the only thing that had never made any
sense to Tony. If you had the bomb in your home and knew it was going to go off, why didn't you disarm it, or destroy it, or throw it in a corner of the ocean no one would ever think to look.

"The All Father will not commit filicide, by deed or order. It would bar him from the throne of Asgard."

Tony wondered if Thor's buddies knew about Loki's actual heritage, if it would matter, and decided not to push it.

"So aside from that-" Changing the subject, however obviously or awkwardly, would be amazing.

"Thor has told us many tales of your bravery in battle. Perhaps we might share stories." The blond one said, voice smooth as he dropped back to walk on the other side of Tony. "It has been long since we have had any new tales, or new ears to listen to our own."

Bragging. Thor had a habit of bragging, and Tony knew it was built into him, because space vikings apparently didn't have a lot to do besides get in some minor battles and wait for the Big One to come around. He tried not to begrudge them that he'd been saving his world a few times a year with a bunch of 'minor' skirmishes every other week.

"Sure," He said, trying to force a smile to his face. Apparently it did the job, because the fat one cheered, the blond one smiled a smile Tony knew too well, and Sif hummed approvingly. The quiet one only nodded an acknowledgment.

Tony decided, after several tankards of an ale that was nothing like the scotch he wanted, that Asgard needed a better quality booze. The mead they tried serving was sweet, sickly so, and he hated it. The ale was bitter and he was craving a stout by the end of the first tankard. No one knew what scotch or whiskey were, and he decided then and there he'd figure out some way to distill his own, if for no other reason than he wanted a hangover to be worth it.

He also decided that he hated bragging, which was something of a surprise. On Earth (and he kept calling it that, even though the others kept correcting him, like some stupid puppy that was rewarded with more booze instead of a paper to the nose) he hadn't minded it. He'd loved it, loved doing it and listening to it. But on Earth, everyone had been smart, mostly anyway. Even Clint, who most of the time seemed to be a teenage boy stuck in a body worthy of an olympic athlete had been intelligent and, in light of the stories he had been listening to, cunning. Creative, smart. That alone worried Tony, because no one should be able to make him look like that, especially warriors that had been alive for hundreds, if not thousands, of years. No one should make him miss the snarky little asshole either.

But he was. Because sometime into his second tankard, he realized that bragging, and that's all it was, was pointless when the people you were bragging to had no concept of technology and looked at you strangely when you mentioned flying or using repulsor beams. Plasma canons had gone completely over their heads, and they kept referring to his suit as simple armor. The idea of it being more than 'just armor' seemed to bewilder them, and he was past wondering and knew that he was probably going to go crazy, especially after they'd asked what his weapon was, and he'd told them his suit. The worst moment of the evening had been when he'd proudly owned up to designing and creating it, and been told that in Asgard, blacksmiths did that job for warriors, and he wouldn't have to worry about such busywork anymore.

They did however, latch on to tales of the Hulk, Thor, and Captain America. Not so much Widow and Hawkeye, and Tony wondered if the two would appreciate that, once again, their skills and talents were underestimated and under appreciated. Natasha said she loved blindsiding targets, and
Clint liked it because it allowed him to constantly fuck with people, but Tony doubted they'd be so appreciative if they knew they were dismissed not as useless, but uninteresting. That would certainly piss off Clint, and Tony knew Natasha either wouldn't care, or pretend well enough that he would believe she didn't.

He was pleasantly buzzed, not drunk, even though he'd had more than enough to get his old self drunk, when he decided to call it a night. Another awkward pause had descended, and Tony knew it would only get worse the drunker they got. The blond one, he still couldn't remember a name, offered to walk him back to his quarters in the healing house, but Tony declined, lying and saying he remembered the way. The moment he was halfway through the tavern he knew they began whispering, and knew they were whispering about him. Probably nothing kind, although probably nothing bad either, not that it helped.

It wasn't hard to decide to hate Asgard a little more, although it was so easy it worried him a little. In the night, and when had night fallen, had he really been listening to their bullshit that long? No wonder it had felt like eternity. The city was more tolerable at night, the moons (two moons, something he was ignoring) and stars bright, but not enough to catch the golden spires and blind him. It made his stroll slightly more enjoyable, and it seemed his ability to walk a straight line under the influence hadn't been affected. He sent a mental barb at the king because, while they had been rebuilding his body into some sort of almost bionic god thing, they hadn't added a few inches to his height. He was noticeably shorter than everyone he'd met so far, and he wasn't enjoying the feeling of being small and out of place. It felt like something dangerously close to vulnerability, and fuck that. Tony Stark was and had been many things, but vulnerable had never been a mainstay.

As he ambled along, following a road and then turning, following and turning again, he wondered if Asgard had seasons, or if it was in a state of perpetual summer. He'd been in his room for, according to Sif, somewhere along the lines of two months, mostly in a healing sleep. Two months dead, and he hadn't noticed a change in the weather except for the occasional rain. The streets were smooth, and there were several taverns he passed, each bursting with noise. Apparently all Asgardians, Aesir, whatever, were into the drinking and bragging thing.

"This is karma," He muttered to himself. "For being an egomaniacal prick on earth, and now you're surrounded by them." It hurt, for a moment, because he could hear Pepper's voice echoing the sentiment.

No one answered him, and he wished for the umpteenth time that Thor would go ahead and come back. At least then he'd know someone and that someone would not blink stupidly when his suit was mentioned.

Not to mention Thor might give him a map, or be less obnoxious while getting lost in Asgard. Really lost.

"This isn't as bad as Brazil at least," He groaned. He hadn't been able to triangulate anything in Brazil. The house of healing, and damn, they had a dozen foreign names for everything else, why did they name it something as lame and weary sounding as the house of healing, was a part of the castle itself, if not attached apparently. Ignoring the fact that the castle couldn't look forbidding even in darkness, he followed the looming hulk of spires that he could see over the tops of buildings from time to time, ignoring the sound from taverns, and goddamn were there a bunch of them, and the occasional rowdy group of drunks stumbling down the street, most of them with their weapons strapped to their sides or backs.

A man out of time. Shit, Cap would laugh his ass off if he could see him now. Or maybe not. Steve
was far too good to make fun of someone's feelings, especially if they struck so close to home. And he wasn't just out of time, but place. It was like he had regressed to an ancient civilization, except they had fucking magic and basic plumbing. Still no hour long showers, although that was the least of his problems. There were no machines, no circuit boards, no computers. No way to create unless he built those things, and he had no idea how to do it without the materials or even basic tools.

The large tree in front of the house of healing was enough to mark the place itself, and he followed a smaller stone lined path to get there, still contemplating his future, one he shouldn't have, and wasn't sure he was particularly grateful for. As an avowed atheist despite personally knowing gods, he would have been a lot happier with nothingness. He had been prepared for nothingness. Not this.

When he walked inside, he was greeted by one of the healers. He still hadn't bothered to learn anyone's name, and he wasn't sure he wanted to. He nodded in return, striding down the long hall and to his room. Ignoring the urge to just throw the clothing on the floor, he dropped it into the chair next to the table. The bottle that he had drunk from every night since waking waited, and without any hesitation he uncorked it and took a long swig, wiping his mouth before corking it and setting it back down. The effects were already beginning to take hold when he got into the comfortable bed and pulled the blanket over him. Feeling heavy and tired, he clung to the fervent hope that maybe he was in a coma, and this was all a coma dream he would wake up from.
We'll Paint It Red

Chapter Summary

Tony is caught out, a couple of times actually.

Chapter Notes

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When Tony woke the next morning, he was unsurprised to see that his clothes had been replaced. It was eerie, how people came in and out of his room when he was asleep, and made him rethink the mixture he'd been drinking. The healer had recommended it, and even if he wasn't a doctor, Tony saw the seriousness of his expression and figured it was better than laying awake all night thinking about where he was, and more prominently, where he wasn't. But laying in bed, staring at a white ceiling, he couldn't stop himself from wondering about Pepper, about the Avengers, how they were handling everything.

He'd been an idiot, to think he could live forever. He'd almost died more times than he could count, and was fairly certain he'd actually been dead twice, although neither time had lasted long, courtesy of Yinsen and the Hulk. But it had been so easy to pretend he was immortal, that he was untouchable. Even when he'd gone back to the tower with bruises covering most of his body, or concussions, or any other injury, it had been easy to forget he was mortal, because he'd been fighting with immortals inside of a suit that had made him almost invulnerable and given him strength and power. It crossed his mind that maybe Natasha and Clint felt the same, fighting beside the people they did, taking the chances they did. Jumping from the tops of buildings and taking on dozens of targets at once, impossible odds.

Super heroes. It implied that they were more than normal people, except Tony had forgotten that it wasn't true, at least not for him, not for Natasha or Clint either. Had they forgotten that, fighting madmen and magicians and aliens, they could die like anyone else? Even if they died fighting the bad guys, it didn't make them any different from people that died. From normal, mortal people, like the ones that had died while Tony tried to stop Doom, or during the Chitauri invasion, or Thanos, or Namor or Grey's psychotic breaks.

Except he wasn't dead. Maybe in name, but he was breathing, he could feel a heart beating, more surely than it probably ever had. The consolation of a new body wasn't comforting, not when he didn't even know what he could do with it, how to test it or quantify it. All of the data he'd gathered on Thor had been basic, and he wasn't like Thor, apparently. Wasn't like the Aesir that surrounded him, or the einherjar, who were apparently a breed all their own.

He missed Pepper, wished she was there to talk him down, to remind him that he was only human, even though he wasn't. He didn't feel like a demi god or an immortal, or even a spirit. He still felt human. Insane leap in alcohol tolerance aside (not appreciated, actually) he hadn't noticed anything different except for the lack of the humming from his reactor. It wasn't until he'd lost it that he
realized how meditative the white noise had been, rhythmic and barely discernible beneath the sound of his own breathing. The noise and the feeling of it in his chest left, ironically, a hole where they had been, filled up with something he instinctively knew shouldn't be there. Tony snorted at the pun that formed in his head, hating it and hating his brain for coming up with something so cliched and trite.

The worst irony was that he had been so close to figuring out the formula for a breakthrough that would have spared him all of that. Locked down tight in a server none of them would ever find were the equations and chemistry required for a science that would have changed the world, again. And now it would sit, useless and unknown, the discoveries he had made waiting for someone else to make, and they would, although it would take them years, maybe even decades. He regretted playing everything so close to the chest, keeping everything quiet from the others. Years of work and research would fade, and it was a shame that no one would get any use out of it.

Unless he could get back. Tony knew it was technically forbidden, but he couldn't picture Thor, pushover extreme, from barring him from Earth. And sure, he might have to deal with paperwork, coming back from the dead was not easy, as he knew from experience, but it wasn't impossible, and it wouldn't be the first time. Maybe people were even hoping for it. But Thor wasn't around, and he had no idea when he would be back. Odin seemed like a busy guy, too busy to ask about his son's return, and Tony didn't know who else to ask. The quartet of warriors from the day before didn't seem to know any more of Thor's comings and goings than Tony did, and briefly Tony toyed with the idea of an inter-dimensional telephone. If, when, he got back to Earth, he'd have to pick Strange's brain, maybe try and convince him to let him scan that crystal ball he always carried around.

There had to be other ways in and out of Asgard. Loki had used them, although Tony assumed that meant magic, and damned if he was going down that road.

Nothing would be accomplished in bed, and it was with that thought that he got out, running a hand through his hair and wishing for a haircut. The others he had seen so far had seemed well groomed, except Volstagg, who looked like he had crawled right out of some dark, unwashed place of history. Out of them all though, Tony liked him the most. He had seemed the most genuine, although that could have been because he was always genuinely hungry, and usually had his mouth too full to speak. He'd have to ask where he could get his hair cut, or, shit, what if he had to do it himself? His hair was going to get longer then, and he did not relish the idea of the curls his mother had loved so much making a reappearance after a good thirty years in hiding. A shave would be good too, and he had to learn to do that on his own without an electric razor, which would be a bitch. He wasn't even sure he remembered how to use shaving cream anymore.

Getting dressed, he was pleased that at least there wasn't any of the gold thread running through the red (either Thor had told them about him, or they were making assumptions about what color scheme looked good on him) but there was a gold buckle on the thick leather belt he wrapped over it, and he wondered how they had so much to waste on such petty bullshit. Pulling on the black boots that had been sitting next to the neatly folded pile, he pulled them on and wished, again, for sneakers. Or even oxford wingtips. Or those tacky tasseled shoes he'd always made fun of. Something with a more sturdy sole.

Feeling like a pirate (again) and trying to ignore it (again), he opened the door and stepped out without being summoned first for the first time since he had first woken up. Stepping out into the long, tall corridor, he looked around, hoping to spot one of the healers that seemed to live here just as much as he did.

"Hello?" He tried, eyes scanning the room, still unconsciously finding every possible place where
someone could be hiding, his body tensed.

"Starkson," A voice said quietly, coming up behind him. It was a credit to his composure that he didn't jump or turn around and deck the man for sneaking up on him like that. He did turn however, and tried giving one of his winning, charismatic smiles. It seemed to work, as the healer's worry faded.

"Hi. Is there, like, a public library or something around here? Some place where I can go learn more about-" He nodded at his surroundings. "All this?"

"There are no libraries that are available to the citizens of Asgard as such," The healer told him, a slight smile coming to his face. "However, your station is slightly different than most. The palace is open to you. There is a library there, one open to those living within."

"Station?"

"You are Thor's einherjar, Starkson."

"I know," Tony said, trying not to grit his teeth at the repeated butchering of his name. He'd given up on trying to explain that his name was Stark, not Starkson.

"You are his only einherjar."

Tony blinked.

"But, that doesn't make any sense."

"You were his war brother in life. Odin assumed that you would want to continue thusly."

"Well, I mean, I guess, but he doesn't have any others?"

"No, Starkson. All einherjar are either our Lord Odin of Lady Frigga's to command."

Tony didn't miss the word command, in fact, his brain latched onto it, examined it, and realized that if anything, Odin had done him a favor by 'giving' him to Thor. Thor was a pushover and would never make him do anything he didn't want, and would definitely never try to actually control him in any way. And if he did, he knew to expect a fight over it, which Tony would win, because Tony was smart and Thor wasn't. The big guy had heart, but brains were definitely lacking.

"So, okay. I'm, Thor's." That sounded weird coming from him, and he tried to ignore a multitude of implications that would have gone with that at another time, most of them uncomfortable to contemplate, some of them downright disturbing. "Which means I can go to the library?"

"Yes. I will guide you, if you would like to see it."

"I would," Tony admitted, still silently wondering over how he was different from the others, and on more than a physiological level at this point too. Was he like the four friends Thor had, allowed to come and go at their leisure (although Tony was positive they all followed Sif's lead) or was he something of an employee, like an assistant, or god forbid, like some sort of champion out of a fairy tale? Thor didn't need a champion, and he didn't want to be anyone's champion.

But the healer (he should learn his name soon) was walking down the corridor, past the white marble columns and past the too tall doors and into the light. Tony blinked several times, his eyes taking a moment to adjust to the glare that seemed to be a staple of asgardian life.
"Your eyes still trouble you," The healer pointed out in his ever (infuriatingly) quiet voice.

"Yeah. This place is full of lens flare. I thought the whole Olympus thing was bad."

"You have been to Olympus?" The healer asked, obviously impressed.

"No, wait, that exists? Never mind, of course it exists. No, just a movie."

The healer didn't seem perturbed by his statement in the least, and only nodded to acknowledge that Tony had spoken at all.

"It will fade, in time. The process of bringing flesh from the spirit was more difficult, given the circumstances of your death."

Tony was not dead, and it was eerie as shit to hear someone say that, not to mention the idea of bringing flesh from a spirit. While Tony loved the idea of a sustainable consciousness, he did not, and would never believe in souls. Just…No. But the healer seemed content enough to leave it well enough alone, or he was sensitive enough to pick up on the tic that Tony could feel jumping in his jaw.

The path from the house of healing to the palace itself was longer than Tony had thought it would be, given that he'd been told the infirmary (as he had decided to call it) was a part of the palace, an adjoining building that wasn't joined at all, it turned out. But the path was pleasant, if a little too plotted, to intentional for his taste. Trees and strategically placed gardens providing color and, to Tony's relief, a shield from the star burst shine that hurt his eyes. If it looked like someone spent millions of dollars in landscaping, he wasn't going to complain, not when the over bright sun was blocked.

When they finally came to a set of large, ornate, ostentatious gold doors, they were guarded by two men in equally ornate, ostentatious gold armor. Neither spoke as the healer pulled on the door, and Tony wondered if the healer was known, or he was already known, and allowed to pass without question. Hating the prickle of awareness that accompanied the feeling of being watched, he followed the healer through, surprise, gold and white marble halls. Tony wanted, maybe not irrationally, to throw buckets of paint haphazardly all over everything, if only to have a few splashes of color that weren't being worn by someone. Luckily, the guards were stationed sporadically, and they all stared ahead, eyes not moving as Tony was led through a maze of corridors, the white marble giving way to gold walls that looked as though they'd been made of smooth, rolled metal, layered and stacked to curve. The effect was disorienting, and Tony blinked as light from one of the torches caught a curve just so and flashed in his eyes.

"You came up from your healing sleep too soon," The healer sighed, and Tony swallowed the growl that almost escaped. Noticing was one thing, but he couldn't have become that transparent since arriving in Asgard. Even if it was the healer's job to notice things like that, Tony knew he was better at dissembling, and silently promised himself that if nothing else, he was going to figure out what his tells were and covering them up.

Two heavy doors loomed in front of him, a tree hanging in midair, it's branches bare of foliage but nine orbs suspended in it's branches. Tony recognized the symbolism, even if he hadn't seen the specific design before. He prayed the room inside wasn't bedecked in gold. If it was, he'd probably have to take books back to the infirmary, and that would get tedious. He opened a door and stepped inside, a sigh of relief escaping when he saw light woods and smooth stone walls. There was gold, he would have been surprised if there wasn't, but it wasn't nearly as prevalent, accents glinting in the corner of his eye.
"I will leave you to your studies."

The door closed behind him before he had a chance to thank the healer for showing him the room, and he shrugged it off, already walking over to one of the massive bookcases, finding an unconscious prayer answered. The books were bound, not scrolls like he had feared. Bound books were good, easier to go through. There was a problem, however.

Whatever had made it so that he could understand the language of the people present, it did not extend to reading. All of the books in the first case were written in a language he only vaguely recognized as old norse, and he only knew that because he'd come across them while doing cursory research on Thor and Loki. It had never occurred to him to try and learn it, not when Jarvis had been able to decipher them and translate for him. He would have been angry with himself if the language wasn't past death and in near extinction.

"There has got to be something in english here," He muttered, knowing even as he said it that the chances of finding anything in english were slim to none. English might be one of the most widely spoken languages on earth, but that didn't extend to other realms, especially not one where formerly popular gods lived. His put his luck on finding something in german or old english, maybe latin. While they wouldn't be easy to translate, he hoped to muddle through.

The room itself hadn't appeared large at first, but as he browsed, the smell of old books lingering in his nose, Tony realized it had to be three or four times larger than he thought it was. The massive bookcases had given the appearance of smallness from their arrangement, placed just so when he thought he'd reached the end, he turned a corner of one and there were more uniformly placed rows. There were very few desks that he counted, only a handful, and he wondered if anybody even used the room, or if the books had sat, untouched and perfectly preserved. Wasting.

And all of them were in the runic language that he couldn't hope to translate on his own. Nothing of the few languages he knew, nothing to even serve as a translating dictionary.

"Fuck," He muttered, eyes glossing over title after title he didn't understand. He was close to the other end of the room, he could see the wall, and he hadn't been able to find out a single thing.

"Hello," A voice said, earthy and rich. Tony turned, surprised to see a woman standing there. How did everyone keep sneaking up on him when the floors were made of stone and the popular mode of fashion involved creaking leather and metal?

"Hi," Tony greeted, giving her a tight smile and trying to mask his frustration. She seemed nice enough, expression serene. Her hair, rippled and curling, was gathered into a loose tail that had strays escaping, and a dress that made her look important, although Tony had realized that most people in Asgard dressed that way, and wearing gold didn't necessarily make someone all that important.

"You cannot read our language," She stated, voice calm, although not as quiet as the healer's voices, for which he was (stupidly, possibly) grateful.

"Nope. Any chance you guys have a translator's dictionary?"

"I am afraid not. Very few of our guests have been interested in our library, and those that are can read our script."

Tony thought he did very well by not cursing and keeping his smile, although he had to make a point to not show any teeth.
"However, my son is very gifted with languages. Perhaps-"

"I wouldn't want to bother anyone," Tony lied, swiftly switching from frustrated and annoyed to playful and charismatic in less time than it took to blink. At least that hadn't deserted him.

"I doubt it would be a bother," She smiled, an arched eyebrow expressing very clearly what she thought of his charm. Dialing it down, he offered an unrepentant smile that earned a smirk.

"Walk with me," She commanded, although her tone made it sound less like a command and more like a request, not that he was going to deny her, not when she could get him information he needed. He followed her through the maze of bookshelves, trying to walk as quietly as she did. It didn't work, his footsteps still thudded against the floor, the sole of his boots scuffing from time to time whereas she might as well have been floating. He wouldn't entirely discount the idea, and when they stepped out he waited patiently as she spoke to one of the guards and watched the man go in the opposite direction she decided to lead them in.

"You are the Man of Iron," She stated, eyes ahead of her as they walked the length of the hall before turning.

"News gets around," He murmured.

"You are the first chosen in many years, and Gondul rarely left Asgard for anyone even when a choice was more common. It is difficult to not hear of such a rare occurrence. But had your speech not given you away, your colors would," She informed him, her smile more genuine than it had been before.

"Colors?"

"As Thor's einherjar, you are favored with red clothing. It is the color of his banner."

Tony didn't want to hate red, even if it marked him in such a blatant way. As if it was that simple, he decided not to. It might even work out in his favor, if he could manage to get his hands on some shirts of different colors for an escape.

"I'm still learning about all of this," He admitted, deciding to opt for the slightly helpless, befuddled tactic. Women loved it when men asked for their help or advice, and he was positive that was something that translated realms well enough, given some of the other species he had encountered. "Thus the library."

"How are you feeling here?"

"It's-" He tried to think of something properly bewildered without giving away that he felt like someone had plucked him from earth and dropped him into what he had always imagined hell to be like, sans fire. "Bright."

"It is different from Midgard," She chuckled as she stopped in front of a door and opened it. Tony followed her out into a garden, one where the trees were tall enough to block most of the reflecting light. "But I think you will find your place here, in time."

"Hope so," He lied. The woman gave him a look that, for a terrifying minute, made him feel like she saw right through him and his act. But the expression faded back into serene amiability and Tony allowed himself to breathe as she continued walking along the path. Tony took note of the slightly more lush feel to the garden, and the different beds, some of which were carefully maintained, others that were left to grow almost wildly, the greenery spilling over the stone bordering them in. It wasn't meticulous, and Tony liked the garden more than the beds he had
come across on the way into the castle proper.

"Change is never easy, Man of Iron. But is will come regardless."

"S'not so bad," Tony joked. "Got to meet you."

"Stark, stop pandering to my mother."

Tony turned, surprised to see Loki glaring at him.

"Mother?" He asked, turning to the woman, who was smiling benignly.

He considered running, joking, pretty much anything, except for two things. One, he'd been flirting with the -very married to Odin- queen, and she was Loki's him 'a' son. He was positive Thor was not the one that had a gift for languages. Once again he cursed himself for not being more thorough when reading the myths, because he couldn't remember shit for their family tree, and whether or not there were more sons, possibly a son of linguistics, if he was lucky.

"Sorry, can't help doing what comes naturally. I see a beautiful woman and the charm comes out. Please forgive me," Tony said, bowing lightly to Frigga, who was giving him the same smirk she had given him before, and Tony was equally positive that he knew where Loki had gotten his smirk from, although hers held none of the maniacal glee Loki's did.

"Forgiven. I merely wished to get to know the friend of my son. Loki, the Man of Iron was going through the library, however, Odin's spell does not extend so far that he may read. You're very gifted with languages, included several of those from Midgard. Perhaps you will take the time to help our new citizen."

Loki looked ready to spit acid in Tony's face, and Tony could feel the lasers shooting from his eyes, even if he couldn't see them. Lasers that were probably mentally castrating him. He was almost tempted to turn up the charm. Caught out was caught out, and it would piss the little snake off. But. And the but was the crux of it all, but Loki could help him learn the language that would give him access to the books in the library. Books that held information he needed.

"Sorry about your nose, by the way," He added.

It shouldn't have been possible for Loki to look even more pissed off without his expression shifting one bit, but the god managed it quite easily. So easily that Frigga made a disapproving sound.

"Apology accepted, Stark," The god prince managed through teeth that may have been clenching. Tony wondered how he was supposed to be a god of lies when he could barely contain his anger.

"Loki, perhaps you would like to walk with us. I have not yet finished conversing with the Man of Iron."

"Stark is fine," Tony told her, flashing an easy smile that he hoped hid how uncomfortable it was to be with a parent and their child, between said parent in child. Parent child dynamics were something entirely lost on him, given that he'd barely had any contact with his own. And the way Loki was looking at Frigga let Tony know that he would rather spitshine Thor's armor than walk with them, or him, at least.

"You summons reached me in the middle of a translation for Odin," Loki said by way of excuse. Tony noted that Frigga was 'mother' and Odin remained Odin. Telling.
"The sun would do you well, and I doubt your father will begrudge you the time," Frigga said, voice still light. Tony didn't look at her, because he knew, despite the easy tone, that she was giving Loki a look. Or maybe he was just projecting Natasha onto her, remembering how the redhead would just look at people, her voice as light at the queen's had been, when she wanted something done. It had always worked, including on him, not that he was going to admit it aloud. Worse still, Loki looked ready to protest, except it suddenly died and his mouth shut with a definite click, forehead tightening and jaw working slowly before he schooled his expression into apathy.

Tony was positive of one more thing. He had never felt more awkward in his entire life, and that included the time his date had been mistaken for Natasha and gotten him an arrow in one of his lower cheeks.

"As you wish."

"I do wish. Perhaps Sir Stark-"

Tony made a choked sound that had both Frigga and Loki smirking at him.

"Just Stark is fine, please," He muttered. He wasn't british, and he sure as hell wasn't 'sir' to anyone but Jarvis. The thought sent another pang of homesickness rushing through him, and he carefully schooled his expression to hide it. Despite that, he had a feeling Loki, who was ever vigilant, had caught it, and Frigga seemed to sense something had been said, even if she didn't know what. At least neither of them knew why, and he gave her another charming smile as he offered his elbow. When in doubt, it was always easy to fall back on charming, egotistical Tony. That meant very little feeling and a lot of intelligent, witty anecdotes for answers. Nothing personal, nothing close. The smile and charm were like a second skin, slipped on with an ease born from years of practice.

Frigga took his arm, her face relaxing back into the amiable serenity it had been before, and Loki scowled at the linked arms before walking to Frigga's other side.

"Loki, perhaps you might tell us how you will aid Stark in his endeavors."

It was a quietly worded command, and Tony wondered if Frigga was trying to corner Loki into giving his word, something Tony was sure he wouldn't break if made in front of his mother, or if she was trying to give him some time to get back on an even keel. Ignoring his feelings, an easier task than it should have been, he watched Loki considering the proposal, ideas flicking back and forth behind his eyes. Likely it would involve something tedious or painful, and as little actual contact on their part as possible.

"It will be simple enough to enchant a translating dictionary. I will venture Midgard and retrieve one of theirs, and apply our own language to it."

"What?" Tony almost squawked, the declaration taking him completely by surprise. Loki grinned, a smirk that bespoke volumes of smugness.

"I have been returning to Midgard for two years, Stark."

Sonofabitch.

"I am aware of my son's past there, Stark," Frigga said, the dulcet tones of her voice betraying a hint of steel. "He was punished for his crimes, and will cause no further discontent during his travels there. Likewise, I am aware of your enmity. However, seeing as circumstances have changed, perhaps that past is best acknowledged as over."
There was no arguing with that voice. Ever. Tony nodded, eyes still on Loki, who still looked like a cat that had gotten the canary and the cream, and gotten away with feathers and milk on its face for good measure.

Smug little punk.

Tony searched for something to put the solid ground back under his feet, any control he could muster, and returned to the charm that had won companies and fortunes.

"I'm very grateful for the prince's assistance in my transition," He half lied, voice smooth. "I'm sure our past won't be an issue."

"It is well then, since you both will be sharing a wing."

Tony was proud of himself, because he didn't tighten his hold, and didn't break stride when really all he wanted to do was fling the woman from him and run away. To anywhere. The display of self control would have not only impressed the others, but it probably would have sent Pepper to her knees singing hosannas.

"Mother, I'm afraid I don't understand," Loki said slowly, cautiously.

"As Thor's Champion he belongs in the palace. As his friend and war brother, he belongs in the inner halls," Frigga chided lightly.

Tony decided Asgard was hell after all; that the flames were the almost constant glare that wouldn't quit, and that the devil was a soft spoken woman that could probably break him in half and intimidate him into saying thank you for it.

"I wouldn't want to impose," He began.

"It is no imposition, it has been well earned, Stark. You fought bravely, and saved many lives at the cost of your own. It is a rare gift, to care so."

Tony didn't say that he had started doing it to take revenge against a bunch of terrorists that had killed one of the only truly good men he had ever known, or that he had, however indirectly, been responsible for the deaths of more innocent people than he had saved.

"You seem tired," Frigga observed. Tony knew his expression hadn't faltered, felt transparent anyway, and hated it. Hated her, for seeing so much of what he wasn't revealing, and worried that she really could read his mind. "Loki will show you to the inner halls. A room has been waiting for you. Loki, Majhild will show you which one."

"Thank you," Tony replied, voice still smooth and charmed, smile still in place. But the place behind the mask felt empty, something echoing deep down in the darkness. The waves of whatever was held down there threatened to rise and shatter the composure he was holding to.

He hoped he didn't have to see more of Frigga. She seemed to notice, to read it from something he wasn't doing, which was improbable, but still. She knew, and he knew it.

"Good day, son, Stark," Frigga said, nodding in dismissal.

Tony didn't have a choice, he followed Loki, who had bid his mother a quiet farewell. Tony knew he said something automatic, all false charm before he was turning away. Once he was sure she couldn't see his face, he let the smile fall and tried to keep up with the quick pace Loki set, the prince's steps clipped and fast, giving away his irritation. Tony felt the pain shooting up his legs as
he forced himself to keep up, and he embraced the pain, clung to it because he was walking back inside, into the glare and it was shining in his eyes, pulling at the echo.

"Spoiled in Asgard as you were on Earth," Loki muttered. "Thor's Champion. Wonderful."

"I didn't ask for this. I'm going to have to sleep with my eyes open with you anywhere in the vicinity," Tony muttered, still walking behind him. Damn, was everyone in Asgard taller than him? Everyone seemed to move so much more quickly, and the pain was growing from pins and needles into the slow scald of too hot water pouring up his legs and seeping into his muscles.

"Then you should not have let yourself get killed by someone as weak as that half trained mystic moron. Must be a blow to your pride, not being able to take him with you."

"Do you ever shut up, or do I just catch you when you're on the rag? Nevermind, you're just permanently hormonal. Fuck. Off. I didn't want to die."

"All for the greater good. How heroic."

"Go ride your helmet. Might improve your mood. Or are you still problems with your wand?"

"Crude."

"And you're winning trophies for congeniality. Guess we're a perfect match."

They passed through another set of doors and Tony saw there there were no guards. Tony kept his eyes on Loki's back, positive the god was about to turn and quite possibly kill him, or at least attempt to. But Loki surprised him by turning once and pausing, hand in the air and fingers moving like he was tapping at the keys of a piano. After a moment of the movement, his hand dropped back down to his side and he waited patiently.

"Price Loki, Sir Starkson," A voice greeted from behind them. Tony turned as a woman with bright blond curls walked slightly past them until she was in front of Loki, chin tilted down. Tony wondered how many ways people would learn to butcher his name.

"The queen has had rooms prepared for my brother's champion. Please direct him, as I have more pressing matters."

Tony did not miss the edge of poison that crept into the words, nor did the servant, dressed in shades of bright blues and golds. More gold. Gold everywhere, even in this part of the palace, and while the opulence was astounding, he was past it, thinking of the dictators who collected priceless objects only to huddle them together in one room like little league soccer trophies. Tacky and bombastic, overblown and overcompensating.

"Yes, Prince Loki."

Loki was already walking away, back out of the door he had come from as the servant walked further down the corridor before pausing, obviously waiting for him. She was shorter than him thank god, and her pace was much slower, much easier to keep up with. Luckily, she was also quiet, which Tony didn't mind because his head had begun hurting somewhere between the garden and the doors into the inner halls. The glare wasn't as bad, muted, although why or how Tony couldn't tell. He didn't feel up to looking directly at the source to try and figure it out.

"These are your rooms, Sir Starkson."

"Thank you." His head hurt too much to bother correcting her.
The servant said nothing, merely walking away and leaving him to face the door alone. A door in a palace in the 'special' wing, and Tony wondered again about VIP privileges for Thor's friends. If he had somehow made it to Asgard, the others would have to. He was probably the worst warrior out of the group, and the least motivated. Everything considered, if Steve ever actually managed to die, Tony was sure Asgard and heaven, if there was one and he still didn't believe there was, would fight it out of Roger's soul. Natasha and Clint would probably weigh the pros and cons and still not be given much choice, since Tony was sure he hadn't had one, and the Hulk would probably never, ever die. Not for awhile anyway, and Asgard would probably short itself out and self destruct before Bruce did.

Forcing himself to not think about his team dying, he pushed the door open and stepped inside, at once grateful there was nothing lit to shine a maglight in his face while being unhappy that he could barely see anything. Grumbling to himself, he focused on the one light he could see, coming from around the outline of a door, and walked a straight path to it, bumping once into a table corner and ignoring the throbbing pain that burst into awareness while edging around it and keeping his eyes on the dim outline. The door didn't have a knob, as such, it had a handle, and he pulled at it, surprised that the dim light didn't turn into a searing glare.

It was soft lighting, revealing a table, a chair, a few racks and a stand that he recognized, having been forced to build one for Thor's armor when he stayed at the tower. It stood empty, as if waiting. Tony felt a wave of loss wash over him. New, improved body, but no suit, no Iron Man. Just an empty space where there should have been a reflection of something better than he was.

Needing to get away from that void, he went to the door across the room and opened it, happy to see a bed. A big, gold wrought bed covered in red blankets and pillows. Tapestries covered almost every inch of the walls, almost completely obliterating the gold with only a few small gaps that gleamed in the light. A door led to a noticeable balcony, and he had to know how the castle was built, because he was positive he was deep within the palace itself, and windows, much less balconies, shouldn't have been an option.

The headache was getting worse, the needling feeling like it was sliding slowly through his brain so he could feel every millimeter of the muscle shredding as it went deeper. Sitting on the bed, his bed, a bed that belonged to someone that shouldn't have been him, he pulled off the belt and the shirt and threw them on the floor, followed them with the boots, and lay on top of the thick blankets, pulling a pillow over his face to ignore the few glimmers that tried getting past his eyelids.

He dreamed that he was stuck inside the suit, put into a crematorium still alive, and everyone was saying goodbye, goodbye, no one weeping but staring at him as he went in, and the suit was dead and unresponsive. It was a coffin, holding him inside, holding him still so that he could only move his head from side to side, wrenching his neck painfully. He was shouting at them, telling them all he was still alive, still there, to bring him out, to save him. He could hear the gas lights start, could smell it filled the suit, filling up cracks that shouldn't have been there, could hear the flames below and then over and around him, everywhere, crawling the suit like the worst sort of lover, clinging close. Screams rasped his throat as the heat grew worse, as his skin began to blister, and the door was closing shut, closing all of their faces from view and leaving him alone with the red orange white glaring in his visor.

Slow roasting alive until he was igniting, his tongue first, all the way down to his stomach, lighting and searing and bubbling up like a balloon too full and-

He was awake, skin drenched with sweat and still prickling like his blankets had turned to needles while he slept. Needing the ward off the heat, to banish the sting from the too alive too aware.
nerve endings that still felt like they were reacting to the phantom heat, he got out of the bed and walked to the door on the far wall, praying it was some sort of bathroom. It was, and the shower there was enormous, clashing with the memory of the suit boxing him in, giving him the sort of disturbing inertia that made him wonder if he was still dreaming. Pushing the pants down around his hips he got in and turned one of the knobs, a hiss escaping when freezing water poured down on him. The cold wall felt like stone against his shoulder as he leaned against it, soaking in a cave like chill and trying not to think about caves and explosions and coffins and gas.

Blisters sunk down into flesh, disappeared beneath the cold. Scorched bone chilled and the searing pain in his muscles retreated. His stomach settled, the burning, swollen thing his tongue had felt like growing smaller, shrinking until it felt right in his mouth again. Nerves pulsed with the memory, like he had been briefly scalded by his coffee minutes before.

"Fuck," He pushed out, the word still coming awkwardly off of his tongue, as if it wouldn't quite work right. Teeth felt tight in his gums, his lips strained. Taking a deep breath and accidentally aspirating water, he turned the knob off, sensation bearable. Naked and dripping, he walked out of the shower, didn't care about the water sliding down his skin and leaving puddles of footsteps and trails that followed him back into his room. The sun outside was setting, if the amount of light present was anything to go by, not that he wanted to look outside his window, eyes still sensitive. Every flash of light caused his pupils to swell and contract so badly he was positive he could feel it, only making the lightheaded dizziness worse.

He was ready to fall back into the bed until he saw the outline of himself, the smears of sweat still staining the sheets in the outline of a man that had thrashed and twitched in his death throes. Looking away, he searched for his clothes, saw the red shirt on the floor and picked it up, pulled it on and felt like he was dragging sandpaper over his skin. It came off a second later, landing on the floor and staying there, damp and puddled and ignored.

It felt awkward, standing naked in his own room. Modesty didn't enter his mind, he just needed to move, moving stirred the air around him, barely noticeable currents brushing the water and chilling him. Pacing, he savored the chill, allowed his eyes to wander and take in details of the room, of the tapestries, the embroidery, the scenes depicted of hunting a giant boar and warriors killing monsters. Trees and forests, wild animals he couldn't recognize or name. Intricate lines that he would have laughed at but found comfort in, eyes following them until he was losing himself in the patterns of tiny stitches.

First one and then another, and another. Red and blue and green and brown and gold, always so much gold woven throughout it, like gold was Asgard's cheapest, most at hand thing, and suddenly he couldn't look at them anymore, remembering the flash of light on the gold armor of the guards. His eyes avoided the bed, looked at the small desk in the corner, something that would have been useful for anyone that wasn't him.

There were books on it.

Stalking over to it, he recognized the dictionaries as common ones from earth, easily bought from any bookstore. A paper was sticking up from the pages, as if it had been hastily shoved between them. Tony pulled it loose. The handwriting was neat, if completely without personality, at least to him. He could be wrong, since it was written in the language he had to read the books for.

"Asshole."

Tony threw the note, whatever it said, on the desk and grabbed one of the books, flipping it open to the first page.
"Clever asshole."

Besides each word was a translation of it into the old norse language that had been in the library, along with a definition. It was neat, organized, and some of the words didn't have translations, which wasn't entirely unexpected. But as a starting point, it wasn't bad. It gave Tony something to put his mind toward, something to take it away from the smell of gas that lingered in his nostrils. It never occurred to him that he was pacing, naked, while reading a dictionary. Despite dying, his mind had survived intact, immediately sinking into the pages and pulling everything from them. Nothing about syntax was provided, but the lexicon itself was good. Loki might not have been overly helpful, Tony would have loved notes on the lexicon and had it changed, the subtleties of meanings, but the dictionary was a start.

Learning was what he did. He was good at it. He would learn quickly, and find some way home.
After scaring Majhild with his disheveled appearance, Tony wondered if he should at least try to tone it down a little. He was unaware of any particular etiquette regarding meals, and he didn't particularly want to eat at a feast, but he didn't want to squander any possible good favor he could muster. However, it was with a quiet, monotone apology that Tony found out she had knocked and assumed he was asleep, since there had been no answer. That suited Tony fine, and he told the servant he wasn't hungry and didn't need a meal. The servant had looked appropriately horrified and told him she would fetch him something. Fetch. The word made him want to say something, although he hadn't been entirely sure of what he could say that wouldn't insult her function. Apparently people took their food seriously in Asgard.

The dictionary was slow reading, mostly because he was trying to find correlations between letters, but didn't have a basis. The other book had been a simple volume, and Tony had no real idea what any of it said because it was all written in the same runic script the note had been written in. A dictionary was fine and dandy, and he wasn't having problems memorizing it, but he was having problems actually translating.

While Majhild was off getting him food, he decided to go back to the library. It would take longer, but if he had a book to compare the dictionary against, he might be able to start piecing things together. If Loki had not been a smug, passive aggressive asshole, he would have arranged the dictionary to what rune came first. Instead he had kept it to the english alphabet, which would make finding the words a bitch and a half. Photographic memory or not, Tony didn't want to attempt memorizing a dictionary.

The guards were only slightly helpful, giving very vague, half-assed directions to the library, eyes still fixed straight ahead. Tony was reminded of the queen's guard in england, with their furry hats and seeming apathy. He was almost tempted to poke one and see if it would provoke them, like it had the englishmen, a lesson he had learned the hard way during a trip in his teenage years. Knowing that it would only cause trouble on his first day in the palace, he decided to save it for another time and, after asking several times, came to the doors covered in the world tree.

Once inside he grabbed the first book on the shelf and spun on his heel, grabbing the door before it had even fully closed and almost using it to propel himself outside, a sense of purpose giving him a half bounce to his step. The guards were equally unhelpful when he was trying to find his way back to his rooms, and by the time he got back, Majhild had already come and gone, leaving a tray of food on the table in the outer chamber. Grabbing it and balancing it on one hand, he held the book in the other and pushed the door open to the next room, purposefully ignoring it and the empty stand, and walked into the bedroom.

The food was barely touched, and he was pretty sure his meals in the infirmary had come from the
palace. It wasn't a cheeseburger, and it was harder to eat and work at the same time because he had to use a fork (sandwiches and burgers and doughnuts were better for work food, and he missed them) so he didn't give it much attention. Not even bothering to open the book and looking for the title in the appendix of the dictionary instead, which Loki had translated (a minor blessing). Despite that, it still took the better part of fifteen minutes for him to find the first word, which translated to 'troll'. Tony couldn't stop himself from thinking about the scandinavian movie that had come out and he'd had playing for white noise when he was working one night. While he hadn't read any of it as it had played, he had looked up from time to time and seen the monsters of the movie. It occurred to him that they might actually exist, if there was a book about them. Or maybe Asgard was just as full of shit as earth.

The second word took a little longer, and it translated to 'race'. There was no author name, and he didn't particularly care, since it saved him trying to look something up. An idle thought that crossed his mind, as he was memorizing the words, was how words that didn't have a translation into other languages sounded to the people he spoke to. The mechanics of whatever spell Odin has cast over asgard, or him, he wasn't sure and didn't want to examine too closely, because magic, were unclear. Maybe his mention of repulsors, a purely english word, might have sounded exactly like that, and the others had stared at him because it was a foreign word. Or maybe it was because it had translated into something funky, like belching fire pillars. He had no idea.

Food slowly went cold, and the ale, that bitter stuff they called ale and tasted like shit beer from a mass production plant, was only sipped when his throat was too dry for anything else. Occasionally he wished for a pen and paper, or a computer so he could write, because it would make it easier to remember, but his mental capacity hadn't diminished at all, and his mind held onto every symbol and word like a steel trap.

By the time he saw the sun coming through the the glass doors to the balcony, he had completed two paragraphs sans a few words he hadn't been able to find. The structure of the sentences wasn't entirely foreign, although it was still stilted in his mind, taking some getting used to as he worked the sentences over and over in his head. It would have helped to be able to speak the language itself, and hear it, instead of whatever spell had been worked to make everything he said and heard sound like english. He did well with total immersion, it was how he had learned german, losing himself in Germany for over a month for an extended Oktoberfest in the middle of summer.

Majhild knocked on the outer door, calling for him loudly enough that it broke his concentration. He walked out, ignoring the strange look she gave him. She asked where he wanted breakfast, and he asked her to bring it to his room, along with paper and pen, and then went back to his work in his bedroom. Ten minutes later breakfast, fruits he didn't recognize and something that smelled like pork, and a blank book and quill and ink were sitting on the table in the outside room. He left the plate and dishes from the night before on the outer table and took the new into his bedroom.

The day passed, and he transcribed the original paragraphs, words in columns, and their translations. Some spaces remained blank, some didn't make perfect sense, but he was getting a grasp more quickly than he had thought he would. He was also learning about trolls, a creature he had never once thought existed despite the fact he had fought against gods, alongside gods, and seen any number of aliens, mutants, and other magical creatures. It didn't stop him from suspecting Asgard might still be full of shit regarding that particular kind of monster. Whatever else had happened, he was still a firm believer in seeing is believing, and some of the descriptions were beyond absurd, flying in the face of his scientific mind.

No one bothered him except for Majhild bringing him food and drink for dinner, and taking the barely touched plates with her. Tony didn't attempt sleeping, and his new body seemed perfectly fine with that.
It took him five days to finish translating the book. By the time he had finished, he felt less than ideal, although he still wasn't tired, or not exhausted, at least. It was better than he would have felt if he had been human, a distinction he was trying not to make. He still felt human, and even if he was able to stay up for longer periods without feeling like he'd been put in a blender intent on self destruction.

ELECTING to take a shower before making an appearance in the library again, he ignored the hot water in favor of cold, feeling it seep into his muscles and wake them up after a long period of sitting down. He liked moving around, liked being active while he thought, but writing everything by hand interfered with that, and he felt like it slowed him down, made him feel as though he was even thinking more slowly. Shower done without much thought, he dried off and got dressed, a trunk at the foot of the bed filled with clothes, all red shirts (and wasn't there a joke about red shirts Clint had mentioned once, something about Star Trek) and different kinds of pants. He made a point of picking the least elaborate clothes, ignoring the addons and accessories, already feeling too much like a pirate or an escapee from Hamlet. Boots almost followed, until he decided against it. He was technically in his home, and the fucking things were annoying. And garish. And he couldn't actually make himself put them on. He ignored the belt too, tucking the shirt into his pants and using his fingers to comb his hair. It needed to be cut, he was beginning to curl more.

Trying from memory instead of asking the guards, he walked the halls, bare feet padding almost soundlessly as he navigated the seeming maze, taking turns and following his memory with ease. Surprisingly, he didn't get lost, finding the door with the tree and walking in. Replacing the book where he found it, he grabbed the first one from the shelf below it, not recognizing the words of the title at all. Mission accomplished, he was opening the door and paused when he saw not only Odin, but his wife as well, walking past and talking softly between themselves.

They paused, both of them looking at him staring at them. Tony suddenly really, really hated himself for decided barefoot and beltless was the way to go. As of the boots and belt had been the most important articles, he felt completely naked, caught out in his underwear in front of the king and queen.

"Hello Stark," Frigga greeted.

Did he say highness? Majesty? Sir or ma'am? Shit.

"Hi," He greeted lamely.

"It is good to see Loki's assistance has aided your endeavors."

"Uh, yeah. The dictionary helped, a lot. Went through a book on trolls. Are those, I mean, we don't have trolls on Earth-" He tried telling himself to shut up, but it wasn't working. His mind was far too aware that he looked like he was in his own home walking around barefoot and he might as well have gone shirtless too, except it wasn't his home, and it felt like being in his father's house during vacation, and that wasn't a good feeling at all.

"Trolls inhabit various realms, although most are on Vanaheim and Jötunheim," Odin answered, an amused expression making his beard look fuller, as if the smile made it poof out. Tony tried to avoid looking at it and making connections to Santa Claus. It was too tempting to ask if he had moonlighted as the original character, whoever that had been.

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"Oh. So they are real. Okay. Umm, sure. I'm just gonna go translate this-"

"It is good to see you settling in to your new role here. When will you begin your training?" Odin interrupted. Tony's mind stuttered, tripped, and skidded face first into one of the gold walls.

"Training?"

"You have not been trained as a warrior of Asgard. It would not do if Thor's champion did not know how to wield a sword," Odin responded. Tony knew by the way he said it that there was probably no wiggling out of it. Also, a note of incredulity there, however dignified, that he couldn't wave a sword around.

"Sure, yeah. Who would I see about that?" Tony asked. He didn't need a penis extension, but he wasn't going to say that to Odin's face, especially since the old man was famous for wielding a spear, the only weapon Tony could think of that was more phallic than a sword.

"Perhaps Thor's friends would be willing to instruct them. They are all keen with sword and ax," Frigga suggested. She looked sympathetic, and that made him worried. And uncomfortable.

"A wise suggestion. I will send for them tomorrow. They have little enough to do in these peaceful times."

"Thank you," Tony said, trying to make it sound genuine. He thought he succeeded, but Odin returned to staring at him, and Tony was positive his beard wasn't as fluffy as it had been before. Mood beard. He'd have to ask Thor about that, when he got back and got the fuck away from this planet. Or realm, or whatever it was.

"Come husband, there are other matters to attend to. Stark has his own affairs to look after."

Tony muttered a small prayer to her for giving him an out, a polite goodbye, and he was taking even, measured steps until he was around the corner and out of sight, opting to lengthen his stride and get as far away from the couple as he could. The eyes of the guards seemed to follow him all the way back to his room, and by the time he got there the book in his hand was half forgotten.

Training.

With weapons.

"Fuck."

Tony Stark only knew how to use one weapon, well, he could shoot, but he didn't like guns. He hated guns. He hated knives, swords, pick axes and broken bottles. Iron Man had always been his weapon, and granted he'd had the thing loaded down with everything from the repulsor beams to missiles, it had been a weapon in and of itself. Comparing it to a sword was like comparing a swiss army knife to a rock. How was he supposed to learn to use a sword? Or an ax. Or a bow. Shit, not a bow. After all of the shit he had given Clint, he was not going to step into his territory.

"Goddamn sonofabitch motherfucker," He added, just to make himself feel a little better.

And with the warriors three and Sif. He barely remembered going to the tavern with them as anything but a blur of conversation and awkward pauses. He didn't relish the idea of them trying to teach him something, even if they were good, because he didn't want to learn and because he didn't want to learn anything he couldn't learn on his own. Never in his life had he been good at learning from people.
Groaning, he walked back into his bedroom and sat at the desk, eyes on the book of thick paper he’d covered in his tiny, chaotic handwriting. Sometime over the course of the week he’d developed a writer’s callus, and it was slightly swollen from the quill being pressed between his thumb and finger. Ignoring the slight pinch, he picked the pen back up and got a fresh sheet of paper and opened the dictionary to the appendix.

Training tomorrow. Learning tonight. If he kept it up, he might be able to start browsing the title in a week or two. If Thor didn't come back, and he knew from experience the big guy didn't stay away from Asgard long. Hopefully he would come back the next day. Tony hated that his brain supplied 'god willing'. Apparently his experience (he refused to call it death because he wasn't dead) had made him more prone to shitty puns. It wasn't appreciated.

The knock on the outer door and Majhild's voice echoing off of the walls broke through the haze of words that were clouding his brain. Looking outside, he noticed that at some point, while he'd been busy translating the book on yet another strange species of extraterrestrial (fucking elves, why did elves have to exist?), the sun had come up. It was morning. Early morning. He got up and stretched, a few hours worth of sitting at a desk seeping out of his muscles, an almost pleasurable feeling sinking into his spine as it popped. Groaning, he walked to the empty armor room and into the outer chamber where Majhild was setting his food down. He thanked her quietly, growing used to the woman's presence if not the constant blue and gold of her clothes.

"I'm running low on paper and ink," He told her. "I don't mean to be a pain in the ass, but-"

"Tis no trouble, Sir Starkson."

Tony tried not to flinch, offering an absent minded smile instead.

"Thanks."

Majhild never tried to stay overlong, or even past hearing his requests and dropping off his food. She took the untouched plate from the night before and left, quiet in her apparent intent to be unobtrusive. Tony missed Pepper. And Jarvis. And everyone that would have come into his room and dragged him out, or attempted to enter the lab, or call him through the coms and telling him to stop being such a hermit and to get his ass in the real world. Except they weren't there, and the 'real world' didn't feel quite so real anymore. In the week that he'd practically locked himself in his room, he hadn't once been tempted to go out onto the balcony or to look out of the window except to look at the sky for a moment to gauge to the time.

It was worse than being Tony Stark, CEO, genius, billionaire philanthropist, playboy. He was in the famed castle of Asgard, the prince's personal what-the-fuck-ever, and no one wanted to bother him.

He shouldn't miss Clint's bullshit with crawling through the ceiling or shooting at (or near, supposedly, just to make sure he was paying attention) him with arrows, but he did. Or Steve using the big eyes that were just fucking impossible to not feel guilty about, or Bruce's, for that matter. Impossibly, he even missed Natasha coming down to smile at him, which was more terrifying than the prospect of the silent catholic/jewish mother guilt trips that were inherent in Steve and Bruce's eye tricks.
"Not a ghost," He muttered, grabbing the plate and taking it back to his bedroom. Not a ghost, even if he was beginning to feel like one.

The translating went more slowly than normal. On the peripheral was the moment where he'd be forced out of his comfort zone and into something he didn't want. Two urges fought in his mind, further distracting him. The overwhelming desire to tell all of Asgard, including its king and queen, to suck his metaphorical dick and leave him alone, and the compulsive need to remain Tony Stark and take it on, even if he didn't want to, just to say he could, to remain in control and to kick everyone's ass and make them look like idiots. Because that was what Tony Stark was good at. Usually.

Except Tony Stark had never been interested in swords or axes or any sort of amour outside of the armor he built.

He was still attempting to translate when Majhild knocked on the outer door and called for him. Silently he thanked whatever etiquette book the Æsir had for the small favor of privacy. If she had come in acting like Pepper he probably would have lost it. A quick peek through the crack revealed the blond looking slightly uncomfortable.

"Sir Starkson, Lady Sif is waiting for you in the main hall."

Tony wanted to know why the thus far (mostly) unflappable servant looked like she wanted to fidget.

"I'll be down in a minute, I lost track of time and need to get ready."

Majhild might as well have vanished in a cloud of smoke, she was gone so quickly. Tony closed the door and walked back into the bedroom, opening the trunk of clothing and looking down at it. Nothing screamed battle ready. Then again, none of it resembled armor, which shouldn't have made him happy, even though it did. Hoping for a light training day, whatever it turned out to be, Tony pulled out the simplest red shirt he could find and a pair of brown leather pants. He was truly beginning to hate leather. He didn't have the ass for leather, or the inclination to look like he was trying to fit in with some author's homoerotic vampire universe. The sturdiest pair of boots in the few pair he'd been given joined them, still feeling too flimsy for walking, much less fighting. A belt went on, and he was running a hand through his hair, reminding himself again that he needed a haircut as he walked through his suite and out into the hall.

Main hall. Which one was the main hall?

After being directed to three different halls (why the fuck didn't they just do what every other monarchy did with their castles and give them pretentious names?) he was directed to the correct one, if the presence of Sif and the three men were anything to go by. Sif looked impatient and less than pleased to be standing there.

"Hey guys. So I get to play with all the sharp bits today, huh."

"Starkson," Volstagg welcomed jovially. "Yes, the All Father has commanded us to help you find your weapon and train you!"

Commanded. Ouch. He was being baby sat by possibly unwilling sitters. Well, wouldn't be the first time. He just hadn't been sober for one of those occasions since he was thirteen.

"So where first?"

"There is the private training field," Sif said. "It is where we normally practice with Thor." Tony
didn't miss the possessive note in Sif's voice, it was difficult not to. It was even harder not to comment on it.

"Sounds great. Let's go."

Fandral and Volstagg both seemed excited by the prospect of training him, and were arguing over which weapon was more effective, the graceful sword or the mighty ax (their words, not Tony's). Sif and Hogun both seemed more than willing to be quiet, and Tony followed behind them, stuck between the blond and redhead, eyes on his surroundings so he wouldn't get lost on his way back.

But it changed when they finally stepped outside. The sun was bright, high in the sky, and the door itself led into something resembling the inside of an arena. Tony tried not to make the obvious connections, of gladiators and thumbs up or down. A rough, wooden table sat at one end, covered with weapons he had never seen outside of a history channel documentary.

"We will test your aptitude with each," Sif sad.

Tony couldn't stop staring at the morning star. How the fuck was he not supposed to kill himself?

"Bludgeon first. It's not hard," Sif sniffed. Tony decided he liked her a little less than he had before. He picked up the heavy bat looking thing, immediately thinking of modified baseball. He'd have to talk to Cap about that when he got back.

"Now what?" Tony asked. It was too quiet, disturbing the fuck out of him. Training was never quiet back at the tower. It was filled with bullshitting and name calling and instructions, but it was never quiet.

"Come at me," Sif commanded.

"No," Tony said flatly, seeing through the trap immediately.

"I am your instructor."

"You're a woman."

A sound escaped the two louder males behind him and he was sure it was the asgardian equivalent of children in gradeschool chorusing 'oooo'. He resisted the impulse to snap his fingers and waited for the blond to do it. He seemed the type.

"You think me weak?"

"I have a thing against hitting women. Ingrained into us in childhood. You don't do it."

"Ingrained into mortals. You are no longer on Midgard, Starkson. Women here are not so weak."

He imagined how Natasha would react to that, and remembered half a dozen times the woman had kicked the ass of everyone in the tower except for Banner, but including Thor. He let out a snort. Natasha loved to point out the psychological hamstring, and had kept up a three month long campaign to get them to hit her by pulling every dirty trick she was capable of, forcing them into corners they couldn't escape and kicking their asses when they wouldn't raise a hand to her. Tony knew it was because she wanted them to act instead of holding back, that it would save their lives, had saved their lives on more than one occasion.

'*If a lady hits you, she is no longer a lady.*' Unless it was a slap. Slaps didn't count since Tony was so used to receiving them, usually deservedly.
He swung suddenly, aiming for the head like Natasha taught him, but stopped in the last second, as Sif's hand was coming up, and dropped to his knees, aiming for behind her kneecaps instead of the front. He didn't know how long it would take for her leg to heal. Sif dropped, and and rolled away, pushing himself to his knees and then his feet. Sif was glaring at him, and Volstagg and Fandral were both staring on in wide eyed shock.

"I thought you were not adept with weapons," She growled as she got up.

"Learned a thing or two about close combat from a weak midgardian woman," Tony smirked, feeling the slightest bit smug.

"Quaint. But if this were war, someone else would have killed you while you were disabling me." She said 'disabling' with the same loathing she had said magic so many days before, and it didn't escape Tony's notice that her fists were clenched as she stood and walked over to the table. "We will try short swords next."

What followed Tony was sure Sif had thought he had earned by knocking her on her ass. He was good with the bludgeon because it was a quick, blunt tool. He was not good with swords, and the only reason he won each round was because he used disabling holds Natasha and Clint had taught him. Each time Sif was forced to drop the sword, he could see her getting more pissed off. Warrior she might be, but she was not Natasha, and even with a new body, Tony's mind remembered patterns. Movements that were ingrained slipped through muscle, forcing him to react. It did earn him more than a few gashes on his arms, the blessing of memory a drawback when he lost himself for a moment every so often and thought he still had his armor. He didn't pay attention to the blood splattering onto the ground, and Sif didn't ask him if he was alright.

The sun was high overhead when Sif called an end to sword practice. Tony hadn't hit her with his once, dropping it more often than not to disable her. His eyes hurt, and he could feel sweat pouring down his back.

"Did they not teach you to kill on Midgard?" Sif demanded, throwing the sword onto the table. Tony tossed his next to it, a flash of light reflecting into his eyes and searing his retinas.

"Actually, we're awesome at killing on Midgard," He retorted, knowing she didn't know, knowing she had no idea, but goddammit feeling that memory coming back to him regardless. "We can destroy entire cities with one bomb, incinerating people with light until there's nothing but an outline of ash. That's the efficient way, if you don't count the fact that nothing can grow in the area for centuries without coming up twisted. We can shoot, stab, and bludgeon people until they're nothing but smears on the ground. I designed and made weapons that killed millions of people, and that was before I turned coat and became a good guy. My death toll after that is probably higher."

He said it like it didn't matter, and he saw the men staring in awe, in fear, because they believed him. But Sif, Sif snorted in contempt.

"And yet you constantly seek to disable me instead of taking the chance to land a blow."

"You want me to actually fight you?" He asked, feeling angry and anxious and ready to finally be violent. "Because I don't need a weapon to do it." There was signature Tony, and he almost felt bad because he knew this woman wasn't Natasha, that it didn't matter that she was Æsir, that she had been training for thousands of years, or even millions, because no one was Natasha, no one was his team, and yeah, maybe arrogance played into it, except it had been earned. None of them had fought the Chitauri, or Bruce as the Hulk, none of them had faced Loki and offered him a drink. None of them had been frozen in ice, or experimented on, or had their heart pretty much replaced in a desert cave. Not a goddamn one of them knew what it was to grow up in an environment where
their value as killers and liars were more important than their virginity or their heart or their dreams. None of them knew what it was like to live with those people, to train with those people and see those shadows cast along the walls and deal with them, day in and day out. All of them had fought, but none of them had been tempered by horror and guilt and victories that felt like failures.

"You think so?" Sif asked.

"Grab a weapon. Any weapon," Tony told her, wondering if he had, too late, gained an understanding of Natasha he had never wanted. Was this how she had always looked at him, at Cap?

She grabbed a sword and shield, and he silently congratulated himself.

"Come at me."

"Ladies first," Tony retorted, and it was just enough to piss the woman off. Sif charged him, and he would give her points for grace and speed. Her sword was low, shield high, and he moved to the side effortlessly. Sif turned, and the shield came to push at him, her arm moving forward. He used the momentum, sneered because the shield was so much lighter than Cap's, and easily jammed it back and in, earning a sharp pained cry before the shield fell to the dirt. It was a dirty tactic, one he had learned to use on Cap to get his shield away from him, and the Æsir hadn't imagined he would go for it first, he could see it in her eyes. Ignoring the flush of pride that would distract him, even if he really, really wanted to gloat, he moved back, let Sif follow him, eyes on her sword arm.

Not Natasha, because Natasha fought like a woman should fight, like an assassin, a precision aimed scalpel with one purpose. Sif tried fighting like a man, like a warrior, a flail just trying to take out as much and as many at once as possible.

Assassin versus warrior. It was no contest. Forcing himself to remember Natasha barking orders at him on how to disable her, he darted past his opponent and grabbed her hair, the assassin's voice echoing in his mind as he wrapped the bobbing pony tail around his fist and yanked then let his fist collide with the skull, free hand going for her sword arm and wrapping around the flailing wrist, tightening as much as he dared.

Like the shield, the sword fell to the ground.

"This is what happens when people spend too much time trying to impress me," He told her, pushing her away. "You've spent the last hour trying to throw your balls around and show me you're superior. You're wasting my goddamn time," He snapped, turning away.

He heard the boots on the ground, heard the gasp of breath and turned, fist aimed for a stomach covered in armor. Sif fell back two steps, and his hand fucking hurt, but he was sure her pride hurt more. It wasn't as satisfying as he wanted it to be.

"I came here to train you," Sif snapped.

"You came here to prove how much of a man you are, and then maybe you'd train me. Grow the fuck up and stop pretending."

"You think I can't be a warrior because I'm a woman?" Sif hissed.

"I'm telling you that you can't be a man. I know a woman that can kick my ass all over Manhattan without breaking a sweat, same for Thor. Widow doesn't care about gender unless it gives her an advantage. Advantages you could use, but won't because you're too busy defending a dick you don't have."
"I am an honorable warrior," Sif snapped.

"And Widow has saved Earth a handful of times. What have you done with your life?"

Sif glared at him, mouth an angry slash of hate.

"Look, whatever. I don't care. But if you're going to sit here and pretend to teach me, teach me something else besides how superior you're not."

He walked past the silent group and back into the palace, eyes taking a moment to adjust to the inside of the building. Trying to remember which way they had come from, he began walking, hoping his memory was taking him in the right direction.

That could have gone better.

Then again, it could have gone worse.

"You seem to be fitting right in," A voice quipped behind him. Tony bit back the growl and raised his (still aching, possibly bruised) hand and made a fist. Then his middle finger lifted to stand salute.

"By the by, how are your studies going?"

"Fine, mother," Tony snapped. Loki did bring out the best in him. "Need to check my report card?"

"Your midgardian references hold no relevance here. Do try harder to be witty. The queen wishes to see you."

"Sent her personal messenger boy to pick me up for a date?" He hadn't forgotten Frigga had been the one to suggest Sif and the others for 'lessons'.

He'd felt like Natasha for a moment, and now he felt like Bruce, trying to find a calm and any chance of that being oh so delicately rent to shreds by the mere presence of Loki. Fuck. He just hated everyone.

"One would think such a victory would be invigorating. A man putting a woman in her place, how like a midgardian mind," Loki sneered. Tony followed him anyway.

What was it Bruce had always done? Tony didn't have ear buds or music. He just had half remembered breathing techniques he had never learned even though the scientist had preached them and practiced them regularly in his presence. He was feeling more like Natasha again, and wished for a knife to throw.

"Obviously you forgot about Widow. What did she do? Oh, yeah, she got you to reveal your plans and managed to trick you," Tony snarled. It was a half decent attempt, but his arm hurt, his hand hurt, and he didn't want to see the queen.

"Too late," Loki pointed out.

"And yet you're here not ruling my planet."

"Your planet?" Loki asked archly. Tony refused to give him a point for that one. When he didn't reply, Loki made a tutting noise, seemingly disappointed. "You're bleeding on the floor."

"Adding a personal touch."
"You were fond of red and gold, weren't you?"

Perceptive little shit. Tony knew he was still squinting. Barely, but he was. He didn't want to be that obvious.

Loki stopped in front of a set of doors and knocked. A voice called out for him to enter and he turned to Tony, green eyes bright with barely suppressed malice.

"Enjoy your chat, Stark."

And he vanished, leaving Tony no time to formulate a response, much less word it. Tony decided once he got back to earth he was going to design a machine to nullify magic, and then he was going to get Widow's help in sewing some into the clothing of every 'magician' he could find. He was still trying to decide if Loki or Doom would be first when he slipped in through the narrow crack in the door and into the room where Frigga was waiting.

"You look unwell," Frigga commented as he took a seat across from her. The room itself was another one decorated in tapestries, blocking most of the walls. He wondered if that was intentional and, grateful as he was, decided it was time to stop showing the bastards in residence any hint of the agitation light caused.

"Learning old and exciting ways to kill people." He smiled without feeling.

"Your methods will court no friendships."

"I think they'll be fine."

"The Æsir have longer memories than mortals."

Tony didn't point out that he could still recall specific chemical formulas and atomic structures while Thor couldn't remember how to operate a toaster he had used the day before.

"You can't make a laser into a bludgeon."

"It is the nature of war here, and warriors."

"Boring," Tony quipped.

"Straightforward."

"Inefficient."

"Personal."

"Lie," Tony said, feeling as though he'd gained some ground.

"Explain," Was all Frigga commanded, looking interested.

"Does anyone here know why the Jötunn are your enemy?"

"The Great War." Frigga said simply.

"People have wars and people have wars," Tony pointed out. "Nazi Germany killed millions of people and Stalin even more, but people still go to Germany and Russia."

"Shorter lives, shorter memories."
"Millions dead, and there are still supporters of it."

"Is there a point to this particular question?"

"None at all," Tony only half lied. "Besides, I'll probably find something in the library that's never visited except by transient geniuses." Frigga was staring at him serenely, as if he hadn't just put on stomper boots and tap danced all over the family secret. "Enough about me. You wanted to talk?"

"You will continue training, Stark," She told him, voice firm. "You will be armed, and able, should need arise."

"Sure." It was flippant.

Frigga got up from her spot, and Tony was sure he was in for a slap at the very least, her entire bearing screaming 'I am royalty, you are a peasant, and I will end you'. Instead, she grabbed his arm, the one Sif had injured three times with her oversized toothpick, and her nails sank into past the fabric, prickling dangerously. Warmth pooled in his arm, then static, as if it had fallen asleep. And then screaming echoed in his mind, welling up from some dark corner he hadn't known existed, a screaming so sharp and painful it was like shrapnel in his brain, a knife in his ear twisting and twisting until he couldn't hear anything but the vibrations of an echo, darkness swamping his vision and making him nauseous. Like a great ringing void he was inside of the sound, surrounded by it and curling into a ball, trying to block out the all encompassing feel of it sinking into his flesh and planting hooks that anchored into his bones, threading into the marrow. Fire raced through them, lighting up his muscles from the inside out, spreading through nerve endings as images flashed, too bright too fast to be anything but blurs of streaking color. The scent of blood filled his nose, blood and something like burning ozone combining and igniting.

When it stopped, he was still sitting, miraculously, where he had been before. Sweat drenched his forehead and stung his eyes. Every breath rasped in his throat like ground glass. Had he screamed?

"You are able, Stark."

Frigga turned, a swirl of fabric and rustling noise, and in five long strides left him alone in the room.

His arm was healed, but his hand was still bruised. Latching onto the physical pain, he tried to remember the screaming, but his mind wouldn't let him, as if the screams were smoke, spreading and thinning the more he reached for them.

"Fucking crazy bitch," He muttered, getting up and leaving the room. Frigga was already gone, no trace of sound coming from anywhere near him. Not even the guards were breathing loudly, if at all, and he ignored what felt like laser guided curiosity, stalking through the palace and towards the inner halls, only getting lost twice.

The next morning when Majhild called from the outer room, he was still attempting to translate a paragraph on the elves without using the dictionary. Only half of it had been completed, smatterings of blanks frustrating him when the sound of her voice broke his concentration and
made him toss the book onto the desk without bothering to close it. Halfway through the book itself, he considered asking for another just to be safe when he walked into the first room of the suite, apathetic to the fact that he had completely ignored the food sitting on the table. His memories of his former teammates had begun piling against the wall of control he'd been asserting, a restless whisper saying over and over that he wasn't doing as much as he should quickly enough to get back to them. The discomfiting sensation of understand Natasha was still lingering, and he'd gone back to feel like Bruce, something inside of him wanting to tear through and destroy the walls.

"You have guests awaiting you in the training field," Majhild informed him, nodding once and taking the still full plate of breakfast.

"What?"

The servant turned back, already halfway out the door (he reminded himself that he would have to tell Jarvis to be that efficient) and showed the first hint of feeling he'd ever seen from her since he'd asked where the kitchen was. Confusion.

"Lord Fandral and Lord Volstagg await you in the training field, Sir Starkson."

"Stark. And why?"

"To train." She said it like it was the most likely, comprehensible explanation on the planet. And it was. To her. Not to him.

Frigga's warning came back to him, and he bit back a growl.

"Thanks for letting me know," He told her, nodding a dismissal that she took with more haste than he was used to seeing her move with. Tapping his chest he considered just not going. There probably wasn't much anyone could do to him, considering he was Thor's whatever, and Thor wasn't around. Odin was probably too busy to deal with him, and Frigga wold just work whatever weird fucking magic she had the day before. People had threatened him all through his life, someone taking two minutes to show him what the third circle of hell felt like didn't particularly bother him. At least hell would have better booze, somewhere.

Which decided it.

Fuck training.

Feeling particularly pleased with himself, mostly because he felt slightly more in control and less Bruce or Natasha like and more like Tony Stark; asshole, genius, self proclaimed king of not giving a shit, he went back to his room and picked the book back up, eyes scanning the passage on what turned out to be ice elves.

Twenty minutes later he was startled from his studies when a puff of smoke, a goddamn magical puff of green smoke, erupted in his room and Fandral and Volstagg dropped onto the floor, cursing one another loudly.

"Thrice accursed son of a whoring bilgesnipe," Volstagg muttered.

"Would that be male or female?" Tony snapped, less than pleased (understatement) to have the pair in his room, his bedroom, while he was trying to work. Or at all. Ever. How the fuck did they get there?

"Loki," Fandral said, the name filled with a loathing Tony could only appreciate because so many
women and board members had said his name in such a manner.

"Wonderful. Nice prank. Now please do me a favor and get the fuck out of my room."

"If you had come down instead of sequestering yourself away like a-" Tony actually had no idea what the fuck the blond one had just said, but he doubted it was complimentary. "The queen would not have sent her son to see to the problem."

Tony decided that Doom could wait, and Loki would be the first one to have anti-magic bits shoved up his ass along with a muriatic acid enema to help the process along. Thor said the substance itched when he had spilled some in the workshop. Tony briefly imagined Loki itching internally and wanted the circumstances to occur all the more desperately.

"I'm sorry, I thought after yesterday Battle Ready Barbie would actually grow a pair and tell the monarchy to shove it."

"I do not understand the way you speak," Volstagg said, a groan as he heaved himself to his feet.

"Can we just not be in my bedroom? Whatever you want to say can be said elsewhere." Like Jötunheim, which sounded like a literally frozen hell filled with angry ice trolls that didn't like the Æsir.

But his tone must have actually gotten through to the two, or they were actually aware of being in someone's bedroom and that someone was two inches away from putting a quill through their eyes (flash of Clint there, making Tony mentally flinch). Both shuffled out rather quickly, and Tony slammed the book shut, promising himself that if nothing else he was going to find some fucking way to make Loki pay for dropping Tweedle Blonde and Tweedle Gullet into the only semi-personal space he had. Following them out, he closed the door, possibly more firmly than he should have, but his body was still somewhat new to him and fuck all else, the door should be able to take being slammed like that if it was made to exist in a palace of muscle bound giants.

"What do you want?" Tony demanded, teeth clenching together too tightly.

"You are supposed to be training," Fandral said, with as much matter of factness as Majhild had said it before.

"The All Father has commanded it," Volstagg added. "And Sif will no longer be present."

"Barbie get her balls in a twist?" Tony asked.

"The Lady Sif does not take losing to the uninitiated well," Fandral said carefully. Tony's eyes narrowed as he suppressed a snort. The smirk however, couldn't be held back, so he didn't try.

"I don't think she takes losing well in general. Whatever. Since Prancer is obviously involved, and his mother will probably keep him involved, let's just et this shit over with."

"Prancer?" Volstagg asked, looking confused. Tony missed Earth even more.

"Nevermind. Get out. I'll meet you at the training field after I get dressed."

"Your word, Man of Iron," Fandral told him.

"It'd be worthless to you," Tony told him, already walking back into his bedroom and closing the door behind him.
"Fucking funny," He said to the air, on the off chance Loki was still around, or listening, or whatever it was greasy magicians did to further learn how to annoy people. "Next time make them ponies and I'll be set."

The pair did not reappear in his room as ponies while he changed, and he took it as a bonus. Whether the bonus was that Loki was not waiting around while he changed (he might have stayed pantless for mooning purposes longer than he should have) or that Loki did not drop two shit machines into his personal bedroom, he didn't examine too closely. It was enough that there wasn't anymore magic being done in his fucking bedroom, and he figured it was enough.

Going back out, he saw that the others were not, in fact, waiting at the training field. Or the main hall. They were waiting outside of his rooms, like frat brothers that just wouldn't quit.

"Frigga put the fear of the almighty into you too?" He asked, smirk dancing on his features. At least he wasn't the only one the queen threatened.

"We were able to go no further," Volstagg grumbled, a nod from Fandral confirming the declaration.

"Meaning?"

"We could walk no further. Our feet became as leaden bricks," The blond explained slowly, as if Tony was a small child that had to be told everything twice.

"Walk," Tony commanded.

"We can't-"

"Try."

Volstagg and Fandral made it about twenty feet down the hall before they both stopped and turned, looking at him as if he'd lost his mind.

Fucking magic.

"Where's Loki?" Tony demanded.

"You expect us to know?" Volstagg huffed, obviously offended. Tony didn't care, already walking past them. Ignoring the yelp that sounded behind him, a decidedly unmanly, ungodly, un-whatever yelp, he blew through the doors and looked for the nearest guard, eyes catching the obnoxious gold glint and making a beeline for it.

"You wouldn't happen to know where Loki is, would you?" He asked, teeth grinding against one another.

"The Prince is in the House of Healing," The guard told him. "As he is every morning."

Suicidal. The Æsir had to be suicidal to be letting Loki anywhere near the house of healing. Who the fuck came up with that one?

"Which way there?" Tony snapped. The guard, looking mildly cowed, an unusual occurrence for the normal apathy, pointed and Tony went the direction the finger had pointed in, apparently dragging the two warriors behind him along on a magical thread.

"Starkson, I can lead if you will but wait a moment," Fandral called out, long legs eating up the
distance and reminding Tony once again, that he was a midget compared to the rest of them.

"Fine."

Fandral slowed his pace, allowing Volstagg to catch up, a creak of leather and rustle of too much beard before they were outside and walking one of the myriad paths.

"Don't see what this is going to do," Volstagg muttered as he lumbered just behind them. "Never listens to us."

"You guys, but I know things you don't." Like how Loki had been implanted in his floor. Or was scared of lightning. Possibly scared of lightning, that could have been a trick. But the Hulk incident still stood, and Tony was positive Loki didn't want that tidbit getting out, as much as Thor didn't like it being mentioned. Probably more. Fandral led them until he recognized the structure and began walking in longer, faster strides, determined to get ahead of them, if for no other reason than he was not Tony Stark, man led around by a blond with the fashion sense of Robin Hood.

Opening the door, he looked around, saw Loki standing with the oldest healer, both of them stopping whatever it was they were talking about to stare at him.

"You. Fucking fix it," Tony snapped, striding forward.

"Good morning Stark," Loki drawled. "We were just discussing that. Spay or neuter?"

"Cut the fucking leash."

"I don't think I will."

"I do not need to have magical handcuffs attaching me to these two. Or anyone. Undo it."

"The queen was concerned that you would not follow her orders. Consider this punishment for the attempt to disobey your monarch." Tony could hear him saying 'peasant'. He could hear it, even if Loki didn't say it. His face was screaming it.

"Sir Starkson, Prince Loki and I were discussing a possible method of correcting the remaining damage to your eyes," The healer cut in smoothly.

"They're fine," Tony snapped, not caring if he was being rude or lying. "I want to be able to walk away right now without dragging Strawberry Shortcake and Robin Hood along."

"The queen disagrees," Loki said, voice smooth even though his eyes were icing over, frozen, jagged green. "And has requested that the issue be resolved considering it's affects on your- Performance."

Skeevy son of a bitch.

"You said it would fade," Tony retorted, looking at the healer and attempting to ignore Loki entirely.

"It should have, by now. However, if there was magic involved, as the queen and Loki suspect there was."

"You guys don't know what happened?" Tony demanded, the littlest bit incredulous, because, shit, hadn't someone supposedly been watching?

"Gondul says nothing unless it is to her sisters, who keep her words in strictest confidence. It has
ever been thus."

"Gondul brought you?" Volstagg said, voice filled with as much surprise as Tony was feeling and refused to show.

"Like I was in a position to know. And why yes, there was magic involved. Doom got his hands on a crystal ball that farted flames. Something's breath, forgive me if I couldn't catch it all."

Loki cursed in a language Tony couldn't understand, and he couldn't help but wonder if the god was exempt from the language spell Odin had cast.

"Where is it?" He finally said.

"I destroyed it," Tony said flatly. "You know, self sacrificing heroic act that landed my ass in never never land." He ignored the choked sound coming from behind him.

"Not possible," Loki rebutted.

"Fragile atomic structure. All it needed was a good jolt to interrupt the energy running through it to make it shatter itself. Fuck magic, science will always beat it." Always. Even if it took him along with it.

"A jolt?" Loki asked, and for the first time, Tony was seeing Loki caught slightly off guard. And it was an amazing feeling he was going to treasure for the rest of his life, however unnaturally long that was going to be.

"What's the matter, did I break one of your toys?" He asked sweetly.

"One of the All Father's missing relics," Fandral said.

"A jolt. Would you care to explain that?" Loki demanded, voice dripping acid.

"Not particularly."

"Perhaps another time," The healer cut in, again. Tony was reminded of Steve coming between him and Clint. Except Clint was actually funny. Or had real grievances. Or was a tolerable intolerable pain in the ass. "For now, we have discussed the repair to be done, and come to a conclusion that is pleasing to all parties."

"Let me guess, removing my eyes?" Tony growled, looking back at Loki.

"Expedient, but the queen would be displeased," Loki sniffed.

"There are spells to banish the remaining magic, if there is any, as well as any memory of your death."

"No. Fuck that, fuck you, fuck this. No one is going to play around in my head, least of all a second rate Voldemort knockoff."

"Would that make you Harry?" Loki drawled.

"No. Cap's Harry, everyone knows that. I'm one of the obnoxious twins with all the fun stuff."

The healer looked duly confused, and Tony reeled back when he realized he had been bantering, however briefly, with Loki. Bile churned his stomach.
"Cut the leash."

"No. It would serve them well to learn how to follow a wild dog, or the dog will be served by being broken."

"You'd know all about that, wouldn't you?" A voice grumbled.

What happened next was too fast for Tony to see, but it ended with Volstagg on the ground unconscious, bleeding from an impressive wound on his skull and Loki stalking out of the doors, which slammed shut behind him with impressive force. The sound echoed through the building like a pinball shot out with the force of a canon.

"What the hell?"

The healer sighed, already helping Fandral gather Volstagg about his shoulders. Both gave him impatient looks and Tony grabbed the booted feet, grunting as they lifted him and walked into one of the rooms, the door opening for them on it's own. Why the fuck could they not float fatass in like that? Was it a mass versus energy thing, a punishment thing? Maybe the healer was just an asshole. Volstagg was on the bed for less than three seconds before the healer was already waving his hands, the gold that literally seeped from peoples pores beginning to glow.

"What the fuck was that?" Tony demanded.

"Loki is sensitive to mention of wild dogs," Fandral told him, face blank but voice catching. Tony added another thing to his list about the Æsir. None of them could lie worth a damn.

And then the realization hit Tony, and he looked from Volstagg, to the healer that wasn't paying attention, to Fandral, who was remaining a blank slate. Except for the tightened corners of his lips and the anger in blue eyes that couldn't be damped down.

"So that one's true then." It wasn't a question.

"I know not of what you speak," Fandral muttered, turning away. Tony gave himself a mental pat on the back for catching the arrested, unadulterated fear on the god's face.

"Fenrir."

"We do not speak that name," The healer said, gaze still on the unconscious god, but voice as tight as Fandral's expression. "By law of the All Father."

"Is there a corner I should go stand in?" Tony demanded. He didn't want to feel sympathy for Loki, but the feeling that Volstagg had gotten what he deserved persisted. Neither was a fun feeling, considering he didn't want to care about a murdering psychopath's feelings. Except-

"Your anger will better serve you in battle, not in a healing room. If you cannot control it, leave. Return on the morrow."

Tony didn't bother replying, half out the door as he was. Luckily, Fandral and Volstagg were not dragged out along behind him.

Chapter End Notes
So, I've realized that this one is going to be monstrously long, and with a fairly slow build up. Patience is a virtue and all that.
Tony didn't like being handed things. He liked being summoned even less. So when Majhild came the next day, a platter in her hands to replace the untouched one from the night before, he murmured a thank you, already out the door and walking down the hall, intent on another book. Something about elves just rubbed him the wrong way, and he wanted to stop reading about mythological races that he would hopefully never see. Maybe a different book would be easier, something about battles. He could handle that, and he should be able to pick the word out now that he had seen it repeated a few thousand times in the book and a half he had read.

But when Majhild called out his name, the butchered version that made him somehow think of Jarvis even if she wasn't nearly so droll, he stopped and turned.

"You have been summoned to the house of healing," She said, looking appropriately meek.

"Of course I have," He muttered, thinking to the day before. Yes, exactly what he needed, a pissed off Loki poking around his eyes. "Any chance you could tell Loki I have a headache?"

"It was the queen's summons, Sir Starkson."

Well shit. There was no real polite way to dodge that one via messenger. He began equating Frigga with Pepper, except, well, he didn't want to have sex with Frigga. That was just-no. Not that he had been having sex with Pepper either, but at least he didn't feel ill when he thought about the sex they had had, once upon a time.

Pepper was going to make him buy her a goddamn house or a puppy or something when he got back. She was going to be so pissed.

"Fair enough, I'll just drop this off at the library and head that way."

"Your breakfast-"

"I don't eat much. Take a break, hide from the all seeing eye or whatever. Eat my breakfast for me if your hungry," He called out as he continued, already trying to steel himself for a fight with Frigga and Loki. He'd meant what he said. No one was poking his brain with their over enthusiastic hands. The healer's could wipe something important, something vital, and Loki was more prone to leaving him a drooling mess on the floor, forever magically lobotomized. Or as a pony. He could see Loki turning him into Pony Stark and giggling at his own shitty alliterations.

The library was easier to find, the path becoming more memory than active thought, shuffled away into muscle memory. The book went back on the shelf and he began to meander. If he was late (he was intending to be) he could claim being lost. Not like the guards gave decent directions anyway.
And it gave him more time to think up coherent arguments to whatever the healers wanted to do to him. Pushy little bastards they might be, but they weren't SHIELD medics, and he had made more than his fair share burst into tears and hand in resignations. It couldn't be that much harder to deal with these guys. It would be Loki and Frigga, and Loki would do whatever Frigga told him to.

So Frigga.

He mentally crossed out intimidation, ignoring her, or flirting. But well placed charm and reason might get through to her. Logic. Logic would be perfect. Except it involved magic, and magic had never, not in the five billion fucking times he'd encountered it, been logical. It might have appeared to be, but there was nothing logical about orbs that shat flames or hammers that seemed to literally pull lightning down from the sky where there was none. Logic also didn't apply to pulling magic staffs from weird places, or controlling people's minds.

"Stark, how wonderful," A calm, overly sweet voice said behind him. Tony froze, recognizing that tone immediately. It was the same tone Pepper had used after he'd gotten arrested in Milan. He couldn't even remember what he'd done, but she had used that tone, and then proceeded to scream into his ear, which had been attached to his hangover ridden skull. Then she'd left him alone for two weeks and refused to take his calls.

What Frigga could do to him that would be that bad, he wasn't entirely sure. But she had centuries on Pepper, and had raised Thor and Loki. The woman could probably make him more miserable than he already was in ways he couldn't imagine.

"Sorry, got a little turned around in here. Big place," He offered as she walked up next to him.

"I supposed as much Stark," She smiled, and it was the same smile Pepper used. Suddenly it was difficult to dislike the woman. "I came to guide you." Her arm looped around his, giving him little option but to walk with her.

Oh. Queen sitting in on a personal healing.

"I don't need it. Whatever it is," Tony told her, trying to guide her away from the general direction of the house of healing. She seemed inclined to go with him, and he took that as a point. Maybe she would listen. "My eyes are fine, and they've gotten better. So, I mean, I can do without whatever it is they want to do."

"You forget Stark, I raised the one they call the God of Lies."

"Most parents would pick a different title for their bumper stickers, like honor roll student or something." Tony felt the arm twined around his tighten. Quite a bit actually.

"I have no control over what they call my sons, nor would I attempt to command such. My point, as I'm sure you can see, is that childish attempts at lying to me will result in nothing you desire."

"So what about telling the truth?"

"A gamble you have a chance of winning."

"I don't want people poking around in my head erasing shit."

"He will not."

"Wonderful, so why- wait. He? Which he? The white haired he, the short he, the pudgy he, the he that went to the market-"
"My son. Loki is the only one that has the strength or the delicate hand required to remove the last traces of magic from your body."

"I thought I got a new body when I came here. It shouldn't be a problem to begin with."

"It tainted your psyche, I suppose you would say. There are remnants there that we did not look for before because the destruction of Sutur's Breath had never been considered. I would offer my thanks, if it had not come at such a price."

"Thanks?"

"It was stolen from us, and hidden well from Odin and Heimdall both. The orb was deemed too dangerous and unruly for even Odin to control. It was not something one would want in the realms, and it was not something I wanted in my home, even in the vault."

"Wonderful. You guys have the flimsiest security ever. Might want to get that looked at."

"The Destroyer is our security."

"That thing? I saw videos. Not up to snuff. The Vasa of magic bots."

"Vasa?" Frigga asked, brow quirked.

"Nevermind. Look, I know I may have said that our past doesn't matter, and for the most part it won't, because Loki and I probably share the overwhelming urge to just not share the same breathing room. But it does if he's going to be playing around with my mind."

"Spirit," Frigga corrected.

And that just made it so much better. Tony wondered for a moment if he'd said that aloud when Frigga gave him a sharp glance that he couldn't miss.

"If it would put you at ease, we will proceed inside of the palace, and I will not leave," Frigga offered, as though it were a choice. Tony didn't take a measure of comfort in the fact that she would be there, because, once again, Loki. Loki was her son, her baby, and apparently the attempted genocide of not one but two planets was forgivable in the eyes of a mother. Maybe a longer lifespan gave them a different perspective, because Tony's mother had never forgiven him for DUM-E breaking her favorite crystal wineglasses. Tony was almost positive he didn't rate as high as planets or populations in the grand scheme of things, even if he had, in a few ego-maniacal moments, considered himself the smartest man in the universe, and king of earth in a very plutocratic, social sense.

"You're not going to budge, are you?" He asked, recognizing the big brick wall of 'fuck no' when he saw it. He didn't see it often, but he did recognize it.

"Your intelligence has not been exaggerated. It took both of my sons centuries to come to the same conclusion."

"You wouldn't happen to have a daughter by the name of Pepper would you?"

"No, I'm not fond of naming my children after seasonings." Tony bit back the characteristic defense that would have pointed out Frigga's own apparent parenting skills, naming being the least of the problem, because Pepper was his friend, and those were few and far between, so fuck Frigga and her little quips. Except he was about to be dragged into doing something he didn't want to do, didn't have a choice in, and was there any way to resist someone poking around his skull without
Magneto's nifty little helmet.

"My son will do nothing untoward, Stark. Calm yourself."

Fuck. You.

The thought might have slipped out, because the grip on his arm tightened and they were in front of a rather plain set of doors, and Tony realized he was supposed to open it for the woman. He did, all the while reminding himself that on Earth he probably would have gotten chewed out (or kicked, in Natasha's case) for showing that bit of common courtesy. Fuck chivalry too. And crazy women that weren't on his team.

"Send for my son," Frigga told the guard standing by the door as she walked in. "The rest of you, absent yourselves." Tony followed her, not missing the definite lack of warmth in her voice. Either she was going to let Loki kill him and didn't want witnesses, or he'd pissed her off. Or both. He reasoned that it was probably both. From what he had read, the Æsir didn't fuck around when they got pissed. While he hadn't read a lot pertaining to the queen herself, he was pretty sure anyone that could raise Thor and Loki after willingly marrying Odin (he hoped it was willingly, but then again, space barbarians) probably kept a battle ax under her dress.

That image made him make a sort of choked noise, and Frigga gave him an amused glance before walking over to one of the windows and sitting on the ledge, eyes on whatever was beyond the glass.

"I don't want to be here," Tony told her honestly.

"That is abundantly clear."

"I don't want to do this."

"I am not giving you an option."

"Why?" Tony demanded, anger spiking through him, hot and heavy and so loud, ringing in his ears and making him want to strangle something. Or someone. Frigga's head turned and her cool blue eyes rested on him, direct and full of shadows. Any trace of the benign, calm woman that he had met in the library was gone, replaced with someone he barely recognized, someone distant and cold and knowing.

"Because I am your queen, Stark, however much you deny your place here. Thor's Champion you might be, but all here are under my dominion as much as Odin's. Because I command it."

"I don't do commands very well."

"Few and far between will they ever be. But you will learn to heed such from me, Stark."

"Have I interrupted something?" A voice asked, droll and lazy, borderline apathetic. Tony turned to Loki, who was walking over to a chair, expression vacant.

"Nothing of importance. I was merely explaining the necessity of this venture to Stark."

"He could remain as such," Loki offered, seeming neither happy or sad about the statement. Not caring if he was either, Tony gave a smile to the ceiling and whistled two off key notes before shrugging.

"See? Wonderful, awesome, I'm going to go back to my book," Tony told them, wishing for
pockets to stuff his hands in as he turned on his heels and headed for the door.

"Both of you will do as your queen commands." Frigga's voice echoed throughout the room. Tony stopped, hand hovering over the door.

"If he's intent on ingratitude, let him be," Loki said.

"I'm graceless. Just take a peek into some of the old papers on Earth. They'll tell you not only am I ungrateful, but I'm a dick with no sense of class."

"You will comply with my orders, Loki, Stark."

Loki made a sound that could have been called agreement if someone didn't suspect that he didn't want to be there as much as Tony didn't want to be there, and that was a suspicion Tony was beginning to realize. Loki didn't look anything but blank except for the slight pinch to his forehead, as if he was doing his best to keep his expression relaxed and all of the tension was focused there. He'd never had a chance to really examine Loki live, but he'd gone over security footage again and again with Natasha and Clint just to try and take him apart. While he wasn't nearly the living breathing lie detector that Natasha was, he'd had some time to see a few of Loki's tells, which were few and far between but there all the same.

"Fine," Tony said, walking over to sit across from the god that was keeping his expression bland. "Fine. Whatever. Please resist the urge to lobotomize me," He added, giving Loki a cursory once over.

"I don't see how it would have much affect."

"Need everything I've got," Tony smiled, showing too many teeth.

"That you do. I will resist any such notion. The queen has made her command, and I can do little but obey."

"So what now? You pull out a clock and I pay close attention or use that spear- Actually, scratch that, you pull out the scepter and I'll shove it up your ass."

"Have faith," Frigga's voice said from somewhere behind him. Unable to contain it, the smirk that erupted grew and extended into a chuckle, then a full on guffawing, graceless laugh.

"That's rich."

"I fail to see what is so amusing."

"I'm an atheist."

"You're surrounded by gods."

"Aliens."

Loki looked only vaguely offended and mostly amused.

"Then have faith in a foreign life form," Frigga told him. "Neither Loki or I require your prayers or sacrifice Stark. Merely trust."

Tony almost said he trusted Loki to murder him in his sleep, but he didn't. Instead he leaned back and kept his mouth shut, waiting for whatever would happen. Loki rolled his eyes, the most emotion he'd seen from the god yet, and brought his chair closer, a heavy gold affair that looked
uncomfortable but was probably as comfortable as the one Tony sat in, which wasn't that bad, actually. Not enough for him to get drowsy in, but he figured he wouldn't need to be, if Loki's no so subtle disdain was anything to go by. When he was less than a foot away from Tony, in fact when their knees were almost touching, making Tony more uncomfortable than he was willing to admit, he leaned back and stared at the god, who looked, if possible, less pleased than he was to be sitting there.

"Remember Loki," Frigga said behind him. Tony almost turned, the words on his lips to demand an explanation for that vague, paranoia inducing statement when Loki's hands shot out and grabbed his head, forcing him to look forward.

"Don't touch me," Tony growled, trying to lean back. Loki's grip tightened, the pressure in his temples growing heavier, like the pulsing pound of a drumbeat in his temples.

"I don't want to," Loki replied, voice cold. "I have no choice."

Tony wondered why Loki looked so intense, so focused, didn't necessarily mind it, because someone was apparently dicking around with his psyche. Spirit. Fuck, he was not going to call it a soul. He didn't believe in souls. But he didn't want to end up blind because he distracted the god, and if he didn't have a choice, better to take note of everything happening.

His eyes did not get better. There was no blinking and suddenly the glare stopped affecting him, which he had sort of expected. Magic was shit, but it usually had instant results. But his vision didn't get better.

What did happen was he looked into the green of Loki's eyes, getting caught on the strange rim of red around them, like a halo of the hate and fury held inside of him, focused on it, because it was the red of his suit, the red of his favorite car, the red on the bottle of-

Humming started, low at first. His heart tripped, stumbled and fell into beat with it, the humming growing. Heat pooled in his veins, his blood warming uncomfortably. Sweat broke out on his upper lip as he began falling into the red, until it was the only thing he could see, the crimson hue blotting everything out as he was wrapped in it, blinded by it. Liquid stain dripped down from his eyes, soaked into his skin until he was breathing in the vibrant heat. Skin slipped, flowed away and revealed bone, revealed thought and memory and bared both to the heat as it grew, puddling warmth boiling over. Blood filled his mouth, hot and metallic, wet lips that were peeling back from his body, blood coursing down his throat to choke him as bones crumbled from the intense heat. Still the humming coursed through him, vibrating the pieces of him until he was like a snow globe encased within his suit, whirling manically trying to bring himself back together as hell opened itself up for him. A beat echoed, a pulse and he was shattering, losing himself as he choked around the ash of his own body swirling into his failing lungs.

"-pleasure-" A voice echoed. "-sir-"

Syllables blurred into one another the red growing brighter, branding his eyes in agony. His lungs struggled to inhale, the salt on his lip mixing with metal, the the ozone sparking, laced with the acid of bile. Red scorched, blighted, ignited in his vision until it was threading through his optic nerves, into his brain, his nose, his tongue and throat, until he was inhaling the blade sharp tendrils of fire that bloomed and bellowed from inside of it, expanding and contracting around them, collapsing. Tony felt like a star dying, expanding out until he was breaching the limits and scattering apart, every particle of himself exploding in flashpoint bangs, each one felt as intensely as the shards around his heart digging digging digging deeper into his flesh, the humming growing louder and obliterating any trace of sound but the godawful goddamned buzzing, a siren in his chest, in his skull, branching out into his bones until he thrummed and throbbed with it, vibrating
into ash.

Cold washed through him, an ocean wave that crashed against the fire, steam rising and still it persisted, the bellowing fury hateful as his body locked up. Extremes fought for dominance, the devouring conflagration consuming the cold, ice seeping in like fuses burning down to detonate in fracturing ruptures of frigid relief. Biting numbness ran through him, pulling him up, out of the never ending bright that flowed beneath him, sank him into shadows and silence. Then darkness, cold, relieving darkness pressed down on him, surrounding him, and he was falling up into space, down into the place he had been the second time he had narrowly avoided death. Stars dimmed, galaxies beckoned, and ice soothed the burns, froze and shattered flesh until his was nothing but his own mind falling in a thousand directions.

Blinking, Tony looked down, saw blue, saw red and black and blue, so much blue, soothing the red away until his muscles began to relax.

His hand was around someone's throat, clenched tight. A started rasp escaped as he threw himself away from the blue figure pinned beneath him, eyes wide in shock and black smearing blue skin in the shape of a hand. Red eyes stared at him in disbelief, in fury, in fear as a blue hand, blue with ice white nails like chipped daggers went to the black, cauterized flesh that still smoked, steam wafting into the air.

"That is why Odin had a personal hand in your making," A voice murmured, far away and muffled. Tony turned, shielding his eyes from the halo of glaring light surrounding the figure near him.

"What?" He rasped, trying to remember where he was, what he was doing. Pieces and parts of something, conversation and command came back, a sense of hate flavoring it with bitterness.

"Odin did this?" The figure hissed, blue skin fading into pale white. A livid bruise stood out on his neck. Tony looked at the figure, knew it, knew he hated it. Pushing himself away, he scrambled to his feet, vertigo threatening to send him back on his ass.

"Stark," The woman said.

"Where-"

"You are in Asgard, Stark," The woman told him, coming forward. He looked away, the light catching her hair and reminding him of that place deep below him, the flames reaching up for him. Everywhere he looked there were hints of that place, screeching whispers like nails on a chalkboard trying to tug him back. Closing his eyes he stumbled back, grateful for the support of a wall.

Asgard. Stark. He was Tony Stark. In Asgard. Not willingly, but without options. Words, so many words in an alphabet he didn't want to learn.

"What did you do to me?" He managed to croak out around the ball of broken razorblades resting on his voicebox.

"Nothing," Loki's voice said. Tony opened his eyes, disbelief only heightening the dizziness.

"That wasn't nothing."

"My son attempted to pull free the threads of magic embedded into your psyche. It cannot be done."

"Fucking dandy."
"The orb was destroyed, Stark. But the power contained therein was not."

"English."

"Basic midgardian science," Loki told him, walking over to a chair and practically falling into it, wide green eyes still on Tony. "Energy can be created, but not destroyed. It merely-"

"Changes," Tony finished. "It felt like I was dying." It wasn't an accusation per say, but Tony knew that there was no mistaking the intent of his words. Whatever had happened, he had not wanted to feel that particular sensation again as long as he lived.

"I was forced to recall your last moments as a mortal to better comprehend your current issue. It triggered a response."

"Warning would have been nice." The earth was becoming more solid under his feet, and he walked over to a chair on the far side of the room, opposite the windows, and fell into it much as Loki had fallen into his own. Muscles spasmed in pain, a flaring, angry protest to the sudden contact.

"I don't like you that much."

"Feeling's mutual."

"Loki, his eyes," Frigga interrupted. Tony was grateful, he didn't feel up to a sparring match of any sort, but especially one that required words. His brain still wasn't quite functioning correctly, too busy trying to shy away from the memory of that.

"Doom kept you alive," Loki said instead.

"Come again?"

"For a few moments longer than you should have been able to survive. He kept you alive to suffer."

"Scrap heap fairy fucking magic asshole. I hope SHIELD is using him as a pincushion."

"His eyes, Loki."

"A trick of the mind. The light here reminds him of the body's death. I can do nothing without removing the memory itself."

"No. No. Fuck playing with any of my memories," Tony told them, head drooping back and eyes clenched shut. "You two have done egoddamnough with my head today. Take your sense of civic obligation and inflict it on some other sap."

"If that is what you wish," Frigga told him, a rustle of fabric passing by him. A hand rested on his shoulder for a moment, warm, too warm for comfort because anything warm was uncomfortable.

"You will be allowed to surmount this obstacle on your own."

"I hate you both."

"As is your right, Stark. Loki will explain the events of this day to you."

The hand left, the memory of it still bearing down on his skin through the fabric of his clothing, which felt too coarse, too rough suddenly. The door opened and closed almost silently, but not enough for Tony to miss it.
"Few can speak to the queen in such a fashion," Loki said. He sounded tired to Tony, wearied and almost as raspy and Tony felt.

"The queen can blow me."

"Do not speak of her in such a way, or I will remove your tongue."

"You know what? Fuck you. And your mother. And the horse you both rode in on." The only reason he felt comfortable saying that, aside from the obvious of feeling it so deeply he couldn't keep it to himself, was because he didn't care if Loki attacked him and beat an imprint of his face into one of the gold walls. And possibly because Loki sounded about as worn as he felt, and probably wouldn't try to. Hopefully.

"You make very poor life choices Stark."

"I'm aware. Maybe I should have been more of a dick so I didn't end up in the magical land of the ass. How hard to I have to try to be unworthy?"

"Given the circumstances, you could probably take Odin's other eye and still not be killed."

"Contrary to ideals of self preservation, I don't like that sound of that. Circumstances?"

"You have the instincts of a lemming. Your form may have been improved upon, but your mind is still as mundane as ever."

"So you think I'm hot but stupid?"

"Hardly. You contain the energy that was once held within the orb. From what I gathered, your disruption of the energy and the destruction of the orb triggered a change in the structure of the magic holding it. The energy, such as it was, combined with what mortals commonly call a soul."

"I don't believe in souls."

"You are one of the few," Loki chuffed, seemingly amused by the declaration or the idea that people believed in souls. "In terms a midgardian might understand, the soul is an algorithm, a self replicating, slowly evolving matrix. In the process of attempting to destroy the orb, you released the enchantment and forced an evolution of your own consciousness, the coding, to put it crudely. A rare occurrence. In other circumstances the spell's structure would have obliterated any trace of you."

"You don't sound impressed."

"I'm not. Because it occurred, you are here."

"I'd have preferred nothingness. I was good with that idea."

"Ungrateful."

"I actually felt sorry for you yesterday. Remind me next time that that was a stupid idea."

"I do not require pity, Stark."

"Ungrateful."

Loki muttered something in the other language again, and Tony smirked, if only to himself. Point.
"So the blue thing, when I came to. What the hell was that?"

"None of your concern."

"Thor said you were-"

"Stark, silence yourself before I do it for you."

Tony managed to muster the energy to force his head upright and his eyes to open. The glare wasn't as bad as it was, the curtains having been drawn when he was busy doing his damnedest not to look at anything. Only slivers of light peeked into the room, casting shadows along the sharp edges of everything, streamlined curves becoming jagged in the chaos of slants and lines. Loki was sitting in the chair he had fallen into, head tipped back and eyes closed, barely visible in the shadows, a bolt of light stretching across the lower half of his face and revealing a jaw working slowly.

"Touchy subject?"

"It is none of your affair."

"Not feeling any regret for choking you anymore."

"Did you to begin with?"

"Possibly. Hard to tell when I came to feeling like I went streaking through the Pompeii eruption."

"You did not die easily. Doom did draw it out." Loki didn't sound particularly empathetic, but he did sound a little impressed. Fucking magician's admiring each other's handiwork.

"You must have enjoyed the show."

"I do not particularly favor the sensation of burning alive and then having a bomb go off in my chest."

"You experienced it?"

"Slowed down. Necessity to understand what occurred."

"Oh. Well. You probably deserved it."

"Perhaps as much as you."

Tony let his head fall back, the energy he had gathered drained. Assuming Loki was in a similar state and in no position to murder him, he allowed his thoughts to wander, eyes closing as he considered the god's words. Algorithms, matrices, codes, all fell under his realm of expertise. He had created artificial intelligence that had been coded and programmed to learn, to feel and think and develop independently, to be self aware. He'd taken every test of philosophy and turned it on it's head with his creations, so he understood the concept. The idea of being a biological machine had always appealed, and had figured into his projects. The philosophy had never interested him, or the ethics, to be fair. He didn't care if he was a self replicating matrix of code. That it could be altered wasn't a surprise. That magic worked similarly, if it did, and Loki hadn't said, was. That it could alter the coding of a human being to such a degree was, even if it shouldn't have been after some of the things he'd seen.

An update, a service package, a patch. A fucking virus.
"I'm different because of the coding," He said aloud, mostly to himself.

"Odin must have recognized the difference. The form of an einherjar would not have been sufficient to house the spirit. The All Father is ever fond of keeping his relics close." Loki answering surprised him, he hadn't expected him to still be there, or even willing to talk. Either the god was tired, or Frigga's command was holding him there.

Tony grasped at edges of things he mostly understood, trying to fit the pieces into the puzzle that was his new body. He still didn't quite comprehend how the magic could change his code with brute force, couldn't understand how his disruption hadn't just dispersed the structure of the spell, energy, whatever, instead of forcing it into himself. Even with the addition of the arc reactor something just seemed off. Logical progression and intuitive leaps aside, magic, and magic wasn't logical.

Odin hadn't told him what he was or why he was different, so he was probably hiding something else. Frigga and Loki might know, but he doubted they were going to tell him anything.

"I'm not magic, am I?"

"No."

He expelled a sigh of relief. At least there was that. Ignoring his protesting body, he pushed himself to his feet and began walking for the door, doing his best to hide the evidence of pain that lingered, pinprick needling of fire and ice still twining around one another in his bones and fighting to burn or freeze that place below, behind him, he opened the door, eyes squinting against the light playing over it' surface as it moved, and slipped out into the hall. The guards were still absent as he forced one foot to fall in front of the other.

Relic.

The more Tony walked, the more his body protested, the more he forced himself to pretend he wasn't hurting.

Relic.

Loki's voice had changed, altered subtly when he'd said that. Not much, but there had been enough of a catch to be noticeable, a derisive amusement.

Fuck that. He wasn't a tool, especially not Odin's tool. Not a golden goose or a golden egg (even if he was surrounded by fucking gold these days), not a container or a GI Joe in a metal suit for anyone.

It took him a short eternity to get to the inner hall where his rooms were, and when he walked in, he didn't miss the bottle sitting on the table. Grabbing it, needing something to quench the burn in his throat, he pulled the cork out with his teeth as he walked back to his room and spat it out carelessly before tipping the bottle back. It wasn't the ale or mead he'd had in the city, but something stronger, with more of a burn. It wasn't whiskey, but it would do, especially since it burned all the way down like whiskey should. Tasted like the ass end of a donkey though. Half the bottle was gone when he began to undress, the bottle on his desk by the dictionary and the slim volume that had accompanied it. It didn't escape his notice that his arm was bruised, probably from Loki trying to pry his hand off of his throat. Ignoring his bed, he walked into the shower and turned the tap on for cold water, shivering as the drops hit his skin like hailstones, each reverberating through him until the sensation of the multitude was all he felt, the sound of water striking skin drowning out the remnants of the humming and a voice he clung to, the last friendly words he'd
ever heard.

When he got out, he ignored drying off, needing the cold slipping down from his hair and back, trailing water behind him as he walked into his room, and pretended for a moment that he wouldn't have to get back into clothes he didn't like in a room that wasn't his. Jarvis's voice was still lingering, a clipped sigh of British drawl that made him feel sick, his stomach knotting when he thought about Jarvis, about Dummy and You and Butterfingers. Of all the people, and they weren't people but they were his, he had thought about, he tried not to think about them, because they were a little more than people, even if they weren't human. Going back over to the desk, he picked the bottle up as he sat down, taking a deep pull from it and looking at the volume on the desk. The words were already a little blurry, and he pushed it to the side, the note that had been in the dictionary rasping on the wood. Tony picked it up, trying to decipher what it said. The only thing he recognized was 'eyes'.

Probably something about his eyes from the queen or Loki.

Needing a distraction, something he could control and throw his mind into because he had nothing for his hands, he opened the dictionary to the appendix and began scanning words, looking for the runes that popped out at him. Through it all, he continued taking large swallows from the bottle, the words becking more and more blurry, the taste becoming indistinct until his tongue was numb and thick in his mouth.

When he finished, he uttered an earthly, anatomically impossible oath in Loki's general direction. ‘I thought you would sleep with your eyes open. Pleasant dreams.’

Crumpling the note, he tossed it over his shoulder and tipped the bottle bag, chugging the remaining contents and slamming it on the desk.

He barely made it into his bed before he was out, his last coherent thought was that he obviously hadn't had enough of a grip on Loki's neck.

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Tony blinked awake. There was no reason to be awake, not that he could see. It was dark outside, the two moons ever full and heavy against the backdrop of the sky, barely reflecting any light into his room. Shadows stretched across the floor and desk, wrapped around an empty bottle on its side. No hangover, a pleasant surprise, not that he was sure he could be hungover in his new body. Thor had never been hungover that he could remember, even after demolishing most of the communal bar in the tower and then heading for Tony's much more exclusive, expensive bar and drinking half of it.

Why had he woken up?

Something lingered in the back of his mind, but he couldn't remember. Worse than a dream, because he could remember those, he couldn't remember what, why, he'd woken up, only that he needed to wake up and get up and move. Restlessness made his muscles twitch uncomfortably, a sort of ache settling into his bones. Okay, so maybe, maybe he was a little hungover, although it was nothing on the knockdown taste of hatred lingering in his mouth and throbbing in his temples, so he could deal with that. Getting out of bed, he walked into the bathroom and pulled on the clothes he had been wearing the day before, his skin still sensitive to the heavy materials. Ignoring
the boots, he ran a hand through his hair, reminding himself to ask Majhild, because he did not want to end up with the sort of afro that only looked halfway appropriate on deadheads and stoners with hacky sacks. That only led him to wondering about pot and if Asgard had anything like it. Shire weed, like in the Lord of the Rings, even if Steve was adamant that it was not in fact, a drug of any sort.

The ache in his bones lingered, a restlessness he recognized as needing to move. He hadn't been doing that much lately, had he?

Going back for the boots, he pulled them on as he walked, cursing Asgard and it's prehistoric sense of fashion. Despite that, he wasn't going to get caught out without them, not after the sensation of utter unpreparedness from before. Fuck that, if anyone was walking the halls as late as he was, the last thing he wanted was for them to catch him wandering around like some sort of zombie without his shoes.

Like a persistent, annoying growing pain, the ache got worse as he got outside of his rooms and into the hall. No one was around, par for the course, and he strolled slowly, taking the time to actually looked at his surroundings now that the lights seemed to have been dimmed in deference to the time of day. The lights themselves looked almost like torches, except they were sconces with, well, bulbs, or something fluid but still bulb like sitting inside them. Curious, he walked closer, eyes squinting as he stared at the surfaces, reminded of the electrostatic machines from his college days, the ones that everyone had been fascinated with, until he had turned them into more than mild electroshock globes and left them scattered in different rooms at frat parties.

There was no obvious power source. So magic. Uttering a disgusted sound, he walked to the door and opened it, slipping through and immediately faced with the guards lining the halls. While none of them looked in his direction, or even so much as blinked, he got the eerie sensation that they were tracking his progress down the hall. Obstinate despite the crawling of his skin, he took his time, strolling slowly and looking around even though there wasn't much of anything to look at. Too restless to stay around other people, he took the first door out of the hall and followed a vague sense of memory, trying to reach the library.

Instead of finding the doors with the world tree on them, he found himself outside, wondering how the hell he had gotten there. He didn't feel drunk. Equally sure he had followed memory to the library, he wondered if the palace was prone to switching around like some sort of demented machine. Actually, he would be fine with that, that would be interesting, something to investigate. The night air was chill, welcoming against his still warm face, and the comfort decided him. Inhaling deeply as he followed a randomly selected path, he savored how his lungs expanded, filled and almost ached in their fullness before expelling the air. Continuing that pattern until it became an unconscious rhythm, he allowed himself to look up at the sky, at the two moons and the strange patterns of stars. None of the constellations looked remotely like the ones he would find on earth. They were brighter, more visible, and the patterns they formed could have been anything.

Or nothing. Asgard didn't have to make sense, didn't have to have stories for their skies like Earth did.

"You have a fair number of friends, Man of Iron," A voice said next to him. Tony jumped to the side, fists coming up as he looked around. There was nothing he could see, nothing to give away the presence of a voice or a person.

"Hello?"

Nothing.
"Fucking- goddamn Loki," Tony muttered, still ready to blame the last coherent, angry thought he'd had as he continued walking, eyes scanning the darkness around him.

"Loki is not here," The voice said, and this time Tony stayed still, didn't flinch at the sudden sound next to him.

"It's usually polite to let the person you're talking to see you."

"You are ever concerned with politeness," The voice said as a shadow became apparent, appearing from thin air before becoming solid, taking on details and color like the air bled a person into existence.

"Hi, Odin." Since the old man was aware of his general lack of etiquette, he figured he could forgo the title and normal pleasantries.

"Stark."

"Any particular reason you're joining me for a midnight stroll? Not that I'm not flattered, king of the gods and everything, but you're not really my type, and well, people talk."

"Very good, Stark. That is why I summoned you tonight."

"Summoned?"

"Indeed. Why else would you be here?"

"I dunno. Restlessness, insomnia."

"Drink is often a cure for both."

Tony huffed at the uncomfortable reminder that there were people in Asgard that could see everything, who had a job description of seeing everything and reporting to Odin.

"So what? Why summon me?"

"People talk, as you said. I have summoned you to ensure that does not occur."

"I'm pretty sure people are already talking."

"About your arrival, yes. A warrior chosen, the first in decades, perhaps longer, and by Gondul. Thor's Champion. Yes, word has spread."

"So what are you worried about?"

"All of Asgard except myself, and now my wife and Loki, assume you have been gifted with a stronger body because you were his war brother, because you saved your planet. I had intended to tell you the truth after you had come to terms with your death."

Lie. Tony knew a liar when he saw one, knew a lie when he heard it, knew self important blowhards that sad what they thought people wanted to hear.

"Surtur's Breath was lost, the life force of the spell itself bound with your own, one so intrinsic to the other that there is no hope of separation. Little of it's power remains."

Lie.
"The enmity between the Æsir and Sutur is a longstanding hatred, a blood feud that will end on the day of Ragnarok. They would not understand, should they become aware, why I have allowed one who has Sutur's magic bound within his own life force to live, much less as Thor's Champion."

Partial truth. Tony could spot a half truth and an omission with the best of them, and even if he didn't know Odin's reputation for playing things close to the chest he would be able to sense there something was being held back.

"And the moral of this story is?"

"People talk. It would be wise if you did not."

"So keep the bit about the magical breath of whatever to myself."

"Yes."

"From everyone."

"Yes."

"Even Thor?"

"Especially from Thor," Odin said, voice sharpening just a touch, enough to pique Tony's interest. "Thor is an exceptional warrior, and has the makings of a fine king, but he has yet to learn how to keep secrets."

"He kept Loki's secret."

"That is none of your affair, Stark. I would warn you-" Odin began, voice taking on a very cold, very calm edge, no less malevolent for it's quiet.

"Stay silent or you'll do it for , heard that today already."

"The Æsir would not understand."

"Sounds like they wouldn't understand a lot."

"We are a world of warriors, Stark. Not diplomats or scholars."

"Ever think change might be a good thing?"

"In it's time."

Tony added Odin to his 'can't lie for shit' list but otherwise remained silent as they walked.

"So, anything else?"

When there was no reply, Tony looked to his side and saw that Odin had melted back into the shadows and, presumably, into nothingness.

Threats. Everyone was threatening him, telling him to stay quiet, to keep things to himself. He could do that, he could more than do that. Lying and keeping secrets were two of his best skills, even if he didn't have a digital fortress for people to navigate through.

Also, Odin either thought he was obedient or stupid.
"Fucking one eyed bearded blowhards," He chuckled to himself as he turned around and started back for the palace. Always, always underestimating him. Smirking, he felt a spark of curiosity, something he hadn't felt since his arrival, and the urge to really, truly piss someone off. But knowledge was power, especially in Asgard. The more he learned about the royal family, especially Odin, the more that became apparent.

No one bothered him as he walked inside, no one was there to do so besides the guards. Like vacant eyed statues they watched him pass in silence, not even breathing heavily, none of their armor moving to make noise. Nothing. It bothered him, the silence, and he wished for his mp3 player or his stereo as he made for the library, this time finding it without any problems.

The restlessness, the ache in his legs had vanished, but his mind had woken up. Opening the door, he ignored the rush of air or the sound of it shutting behind him. When he got to a shelf, he paused, his brain stuttering for a moment like an air bubble had swelled and burst.

He couldn't remember why he had come to the library at all.

Chapter End Notes

NB, your review made me unsure whether to find you and hug you or break down crying lol. It is sorta close. Tony is not Sutur 2.0, nor will the power ever be anything that is actually a superpower. It *does* play in much, much later down the road (because my muses are dicks and love piling plot on me like glitter on a drag queen). Also, no worries about techless Tony. I don't want to drive him completely crazy. Also, all of the people reviewing and leaving kudos. I love you. I do I do I dooooooooooooooooooo!
The Land Of Smash And Fairy Tale

Chapter Notes

Oh my shit, I'm so sorry this is so late. Between trying to get another story finished, getting my green room set up for bringing in plants for fall and burning the living shit out of my fingertips making caramel apples, this hasn't had as much time devoted to it. Length for apologies? Also, unbeta'd, so if there are glaring mistakes please let me know.

Also, a companion piece to this is Behind The Curtain, which is just oneshots of things going on elsewhere in the WSFverse if you're curious for different perspectives and info. Random plot things will go there, but nothing spoilery.
More notes at the bottom.

Three days and Tony had finished a book on different species of animals on Asgard. While it had been informative, it read like an eighties fantasy movie converted into a field guide sans glitter and mullets. Most of the descriptions had been unbelievable to say the least, and there hadn't been any illustrations aside from the overly flowery script, which was useless. Leaning back, he pinched the bridge of his nose out of habit and tried to recall the last time he'd been so frustrated. Since the attempt to heal his eyes, which hadn't gone well at all, he hadn't had contact with anyone but Majhild, and that was beginning the grate unpleasantly on his nerves. The only other options didn't appeal though, which left him antsy and restless, cagey and far too loud inside of his own head, voices and images lingering, making him want to talk, except he would be speaking into dead air with no hope of a reply. That would just make him feel crazy. Crazy compared to a floating civilization of alien Conans that practically looked forward to their apocalypse.

No.

After a quick, cold shower, Tony got dressed, needing to get out of the room and into the world. He was almost finished when a knock sounded in the first room. Hurrying to pull his shirt over his head he walked out, past the armor room and into the first room of his suite, unsurprised to see Majhild there, looking over him with a critical eye. It was the first such look from the woman, and Tony knew it didn't bode well for him.

"Need anything?" He asked.

"The prince has returned. You are expected in the great hall at sunset."

Tony immediately sensed a trap, the same sort of trap Pepper would talk him into when he was needed for a public appearance. The time gave it away, the wording. Expected. Sunset. How fucking archaic could they get? And knowing what he did about vikings, and the Æsir, he knew it was going to be a hundred times worse than receiving an award from the president. Thor had described more than enough feasts, celebrations, and regular get togethers for him to know that he did not, under any circumstances, want to be in the great hall at sunset.
"Can you tell me where Thor is?"

"The prince is speaking with the All Father."

"Will he be speaking all day?"

Majhild tilted her chin and looked like she wanted to sniff. The disdain was muted, but still present. Obviously she either didn't think much of him or his tone. "The prince has many pressing concerns."

"One of which is his war brother that he thinks is dead actually being here, living and breathing. Look, I just want to speak to my friend. I'm a stranger in a strange land and all that, and he's the only person I really know. Just, seeing him would make me feel a bit better about tonight," He tried, attempting to look apologetic and vaguely innocent.

"You're being officially recognized tonight," Majhild said, as if it was a great honor. And it probably was. Except Tony had trashed, given away, lost, broken, blown up, or on one or two memorable occasions, pissed on, over dozens of awards and plaques from recognition ceremonies he hadn't given one shit about. Just because it was Thor didn't mean he cared about this one, especially if it meant being recognized as an einherjar.

"And I have stage fright. Like, enormous, huge, mind crippling stage fright. So seeing Thor would help. A lot. Otherwise I'll probably hide in here."

"As you have been?"

Tony was about to make a comment but stopped himself when he saw the woman's utter mortification, which was by far the most entertaining thing he'd seen since arriving.

"I apologize, that was rude of me," She muttered, bending her head and spinning on her heels so fast her skirt twirled and showed her feet.

"Hold on," He snapped, reminded of every pandering twit that had worked for him before Pepper began. "Just hold on. I'm not pissed. Feel free to speak your mind here. I encourage it, even had a few mouthy serving types back home." Types he realized he was beginning to miss. "I don't really go for the subservience thing, so-" He said, bringing his hands up to quiet the protest forming on the woman's lips. "So you should just feel free to actually, you know, be a person around me."

"Sir Starkson-"

"Stark, please, for the love of go- Just Stark. And if I have to, I will command you to just be a normal hu-person around me."

Majhild was staring at him like he'd grown another head. Back to the matter at hand.

"Can you please find some way to tell Thor that I need to see him before tonight? I would appreciate it."

Majhild bobbed her head once. "If it will ease your mind Si- Stark."

"It would. And thanks."

The woman bobbed her head again and left without a word.

Tony smiled, walking back to his room and already planning his return speech. After all, the last
time (times) he had come back from the dead, his responses hadn't been so great, hadn't been witty. The first one had been a lament and a verbal confirmation of his intent to change things, the second had been a tactic to make the terrified people hovering over him smile and stop looking so concerned, because concern bothered him, the gazes like being forced into an ill fitting suit. But now he had a chance to prepare, which meant a chance to avoid the weeping (which would undoubtedly happen if Steve was anywhere close by) and the inevitable knife throwing and arrow shooting (because Natasha and Clint both had trouble expressing concern, not that it bothered him all that much so as it didn't leave scars). He was of half a mind to let the arrows and knives hit him, mostly to see them freak out when he wasn't hurt. Or, well, that hurt. After years of dealing with their stoic, stiff upper lip act, it would be gratifying to see them actually lose their shit. If shooting him after his return from the dead didn't do it, then he wasn't entirely sure anything could.

Pulling on his boots and tightening his belt, he was already walking back when he heard another knock. Surprised by the speed his friend had made getting to his rooms, he opened the door, smile still plastered on when he saw the three males standing on the other side. It was through sheer force of will that he didn't begin scowling.

"Sir Starkson," Hogun greeted quietly. The other two still looked sour, as if he had been the one to knock Volstagg out.

"Hi." No need for pleasantries, Tony knew he had a one way ticket back home and would hopefully never see Asgard or its inhabitants (aside from Thor) ever again.

"We've been commanded to take you to the armory."

"Why?"

"You must find a weapon that suits. The All Father has had several made for you to choose. It will be worn tonight at the ceremony."

More and more Tony wasn't liking the sound of the ceremony, and hoped Thor would not drag ass during the welcome home speech with his dad so he could get the hell back to earth before being forced to jump through antiquated, probably flaming, hoops.

"Don't I just get a sword?"

"There are several, Sir Starkson," Fandral interjected when Hogun's mouth became a flat line. "You must find the weapon the suits you, that feels right. A man's weapon is as important as-"

"I get it," Tony grunted, running a hand through his too long hair. "Let's get this over with."

Stepping out, he closed the door behind him and wished for a high tech lock suddenly. That the others could come to the inner hall and get him screamed invasive, adding to his already uneasy paranoia concerning private space. But the others walked ahead of him, seemingly content to let him trail behind. Whatever had happened since seeing the dynamic duo last had obviously changed things, if their straight backs and clipped strides were any indication. Any trace of ease was gone, leaving all three men like automatons, robots walking stiffly to lead him to the armory.

Which turned out to be not terribly far from the inner hall.

Gold was prevalent, of course. But so was silver, black, brown, a plethora of colors and shapes for weapons Tony didn't want to touch.

"So what now?"

"Hold them, one will pick you," Hogun said, voice cryptic. Suppressing a disbelieving snort, Tony
walked forward and ignored the feeling of being stared at. It was a feeling he should be used to, should have gotten used to a long time ago, except he never had, and becoming Iron Man had only heightened his awareness of being observed like some sort of prey. Picking up weapons at random, he hefted them in his hands, looked at the craftsmanship. All of it looked fancy, looked decorative and not functional in the least. Swords with elegantly wrapped pomels and blades covered in runes, double edged axes with inlaid jewels, giant war hammers with pointy tips and braided gold wrapping around them, bows with drawstrings that looked like they were made from precious metals, all of it practically glittered and screamed alladin's cave from disney.

He wanted the lamp and the genie and to get the fuck out of there. He'd even forgo a second wish and just set the damn genie free.

After half an hour he noticed that there was a distinct lack of spears. Maybe those were off limits as a royalty thing. Maybe Odin didn't want a former mortal aping him. Something about the god king made him want to do something exceptionally dickish, even if it meant picking the most obvious metaphor for a dick as a weapon, and Tony had a feeling the god king knew that. Weapon after weapon, and nothing 'picked' him, like the others said. Nothing was jumping out, nothing felt right in his hands because all of them were substandard, clumsy objects that weren't going to keep him safe. None of them could compare to the intricate work of the suit. And he hadn't made a single thing in the armory, which cinched it, because he wouldn't, couldn't, trust something he hadn't designed and created.

After going through over half of the room, he found a plain sword with a minimum of rune work and no gold and picked it up, immediately deciding that even if it didn't pick him, it was the one he wanted. Or at least the one he least wanted to hurl from the next window he saw.

"Are you sure?" Fandral asked, sourness gone and blue eyes appraising. Tony bit his tongue, just barely refraining from saying he was sure he wanted to shove it down the blonde's throat.

"Positive. So what now?"

"Armor has been made for you, it is being taken to your shield room now. You look ragged, by the by."

"Ragged?"

"You need to be groomed," Volstagg interjected indelicately.

Groomed. Like a show dog.

"Well, I'm used to that before public appearances. Who do I go to?"

"Your maid should be able to see to the process if you cannot shave yourself," Hogun said, voice still apathetic and calm. Despite that, it still sounded like a rebuke.

"A razor and shaving cream'll do me fine, if you guys have that stuff here. I'm more used to an electric razor, but I'm sure I can muddle through without slitting my own throat. Or do you guys use your knives to shave here?"

"Your servant will see to it," Fandral informed him, smiling genially. Tony wanted to know why it took three of them to guide the little field trip as he slid the sword into its sheathe and followed the others back into the hall. No one was speaking, once again quiet in the golden halls, not even the sound of boots on the marble floors or creaking leather and metal of armor to betray their existence. Tony began counting the minutes until night, because surely somewhere in between now and then
Thor would show up, so better to overshoot the mark and be pleasantly surprised.

One second, two second, three second, four-

"They've armed you," A voice said from behind them. Tony almost, almost felt thankful for the break of the silence, but it was Loki, so he couldn't quite hit the mark of gratitude. Mabe, maybe it was relief, and he'd have to tell the others that Loki was good for something, even if they would never believe him.

"Yup, for some silly reason they gave the caveman a pointy stick. I'm thinking I'll take a flint to it and see if I can't make fire or something."

Something flashed across Loki's face, there and gone again too quickly for Tony to properly decipher.

"Is that what the mighty inventor has been reduced to?"

"Mad. Mad inventor. And they'd probably skin me alive if I used something probably magical, named and rare to start a fire."

"That would be an interesting sight. Do give in to the urge to do foolish things with useless vessels," Loki told him, face reflecting a wry amusement that hinted at something Tony couldn't begin to comprehend.

"Vessels?"

"Odin will no doubt enchant the sword as a sign of his confidence in his son's champion," Loki said, continuing to walk past them as if there had never been any exchange at all.

"I truly hate him," Volstagg muttered, obviously still irate at Loki's prior treatment of him.

"I'm pretty sure he's not feeling the warm and fuzzies for you either," Tony snorted, looking down at the sword. "You don't think Odin will actually put some sort of spell on a sword, do you?"

"Oh, there is little doubt there will be some form of enchantment," Fandral said, cheering immediately. "It is a great honor."

Tony barely, only just barely, managed to keep from cursing in front of the others, biting the inside of his cheek until he tasted blood. The bite of copper in his mouth kept the comment back behind his teeth as they continued and until they parted ways. It was only mildly disconcerting that the torn tissue was already healed when he walked back into his rooms.

More. Goddamn. Magic. This time pretty literally too. He was beginning (or perhaps a few steps past) to hate Asgard. Tossing the sword onto the table as he walked past it, he considered how to try and find Majhild. Loki had just snapped his fingers, and while Tony had been an egocentric prick on earth (something he wasn't going to try and deny) he didn't snap his fingers at people unless they were dicks. And Majhild hadn't been a dick so far, and he didn't want her to start. So no snapping.

Fucking Asgard. Magic and sorcerers and not a single goddamn telephone or intercom system. Not even a magic mirror which, while potentially creepy, would have been acceptable for that instant. Turning back for the door, he poked his head out and looked around, hating how he didn't know what it was he needed to know to function like a basic hu-person, in the castle. He hated having to rely on other people for anything, and he almost made a promise to himself to at least figure out where the fucking kitchens were in the event that he wanted to feed himself at some point, until he
realized what he was doing and forcefully thrust that option from his mind.

"Majhild?" He called into the empty corridor, half expecting her to appear out of thin air. That didn't happen, which was something of a simultaneous disappointment and relief. She didn't come around the corner either. Muttering something under his breath, he closed the door and sat down at the table, not quite sure what to expect of the next few hours other than to see Thor. If he was lucky (and he deserved something besides the shit luck he'd been dealt with lately, didn't he?) he would get a one way ticket back to Earth. The only downside would be that he didn't have his suit or any tech whatsoever to get readings on the bridge, and if Jane ever found out, she'd probably brain him with her notebook somehow. But Earth.

It wasn't difficult to imagine, but he was already rolling lies around in his head, plausible lies that could explain the untimely end of one Anthony Edward Stark. The Avengers could know the truth, after all, Thor would be able to back him up, so it wouldn't matter. Steve would probably do that wibbling lip thing he did when he was trying not to cry, and Clint would crack a joke about there being some truth to dogs going to heaven, even mangy, half rabid ones likes Tony. If he was lucky, the fire would have left no trace of him behind. The armor might have survived, but between the arc reactor overloading and the fire from Doom's box, it would be in pieces. If his body hadn't been found, if there hadn't been enough, and he tried not to flinch at that thought, it would be easy to say the artifact had somehow magicked him somewhere else until he found Asgard or someone from Asgard found him. Not as easy to explain, given that scenario, would be the complete absence of the arc reactor. As long as Strange or the SHIELD medical team didn't get their paws on him, he'd be fine. Pepper could sign him back to life and life would go on.

A knock sounded on his door and he got up so quickly, so eager to see Thor, hoping it was Thor, needing it to be the golden haired god, that the chair fell over, the bang echoing through the room even as he opened the door, slightly disappointed to see Majhild standing there, brow quirked and a wooden box tucked under her arm.

"Well?" She asked, voice reflecting an undeniable no nonsense tone that it hadn't before. Tony stepped back, muffling the groan that wanted to escape. Not Thor, not even close.

"You get a chance to speak to Thor?" Tony asked conversationally, watching the woman put the box on the table and open it, removing various implements that looked like they were either grooming instruments of a very old, but well maintained kind, or more likely, torture implements because the whole of Asgard was aware that the moment he laid eyes on Thor he was going to high tail it back to his home planet.

"Sit. You need to look presentable for tonight."

Tony sat, willing to subject himself to presentable, hopefully a more modern sort of presentable than Thor. "So?"

"The Prince will be here before the celebration this evening. I can give no more than that."

"Can't, or won't?"

"It is not a servant's place to command a king or prince," Majhild said, voice gaining a sharp edge that made Tony back down. He supposed it was his own fault, first for telling her to be a little more personable with him, insofar as having a personality, at least, and for forgetting that people on Asgard showed Thor and his family deference, whereas in the tower Thor had been just another super powered alien that had problems operating a coffee machine.

Coffee. There was a thought. Tony recalled the taste as Majild stared him down, gaze considering.
"A haircut and a shave both. Is there any style you favor?"

Tony made lines around the growth of his beard to indicate the shape of his goatee, and she gave a decisive, approving nod. "And my hair's always been pretty short. I don't do curls."

"They do look quite dreadful."

"You will never know how much I value your honesty," He laughed, watching as she grabbed a pair of small scissors and came forward. There was no towel or smock to keep the hair off of him as it fell, and he resigned himself to another shower before Thor got to the room. Already he could feel the cut hairs falling down into his shirt and itching his skin. The one time he tried to raise his hand to scratch, Majhild had smacked it lightly and Tony had allowed her to continue unimpeded, more impressed that she was taking to the 'being a person' request with such ease than anything else. And she currently had scissors next to his ear. He liked his ear and didn't want to test out his healing capabilities with unintentional piercings.

That thought led to another, which was, could he actually maintain a piercing? Or a tattoo for that matter? Not that he wanted either of those things, but would his physiological makeup allow for those things now, or would they be rejected? It was a test he'd never thought to run on Thor, but it was enough of a puzzle to occupy his mind while he was forced to sit still not only through a haircut, but a shave with a straight razor, which was intimidating considering he didn't trust Majhild. He liked her a little more than he had that morning, but he didn't trust her. But she used a cream from a jar, not foaming or fluffy like normal shaving cream, if anything it felt like conditioner, to help ease the blade along his skin, making quick work of the scraggly thing that had been growing for the past few months, mostly untamed save for absentminded smoothing down from careless hands.

"You look about right," She said, nodding firmly and putting everything back in the box, cleaning the razor before dropping it in and closing the box itself with a click.

"Thanks," He said, and perhaps to his surprise more than hers, and hers was visible, it sounded genuine. With most of his face free of the beard and a noticeable difference with his hair, he actually felt more like himself than he had since he'd first woken up.

"You are quite welcome, Si- Stark. If that is all, I will leave you."

"Sure. See you later." Hopefully not, he added mentally, as she tucked the box back under her arm and left him alone in the room, the door closing almost soundlessly behind her. Getting up, he finally scratched the back of his neck and felt more hair falling down his back. Needing to remedy that as quickly as possible, he walked into the armor room and paused, not able to block out the sight of the armor on the stand on the far wall.

"Shit," He muttered, trying not to blush at the gaudy, intricate, incredibly ridiculous armor on the stand, arranged almost like a museum piece. It was silver, which was the only reason he didn't immediately grab it and pitch it from his balcony, although only just barely. Runes wound around the surface of the silver metal like inlaid ribbon, and the actual shape of the armor wasn't entirely unlike the armor worn by the guards littered around the palace itself. But the pièce de résistance was the helmet.

"No fucking way."

He'd thought Thor's helmet was bad enough. He'd secretly chuckled to himself about Cap's cowl from time to time. But this was worse than both, because at least Thor's wings looked like something manly, or at least as manly as giant metal wings on a helmet could look, and Steve's
cowl had the tiny wings inlaid and it looked like a logo. But this- It was beyond insulting. On the helmet, right above where the ears would be, two wings came out, small wings, tiny wings, that started as engraved, sloped up from the helmet like elf ears.

He was more than willing to lay his soul (for lack of anything else that he actually owned) down on a bet that Loki had something to do with the design. Christ. It was as if the world was mocking him, reminding him more and more that he was in the middle of Tolkien's probably drug induced wet dream.

If his heroic death had earned him any points with the powers that be (assuming those powers weren't asgardian in nature) then they would send Thor barreling into his rooms that second, ready to take him back for a game of kick the can with a crippled Doom. Even if he was normally above kicking someone when they were already down, the wings destroyed any and all concepts pertaining to 'morals' concerning the magician that had landed him there to begin with.

Thor did not come barreling into the room, and Tony was not immediately poofed back to earth or even sling-shotted over the rainbow bridge.

"My life is one long cosmic joke." Literally. He barely resisted the urge to test his new strength on the crushing the helmet like a beer can and turned away from it, reminding himself that Thor would let him go back home, that he wouldn't have to wear the damned ridiculous getup and play knight in shining armor to Thor's prince. Thor was the prince and knight in shining armor, and failing that he could only play one role, Cap would have been much, much more suited to the white knight bit. The wings were even appropriate. Pulling his clothes off as he went, dropping them on the floor carelessly, he was naked before he even got to the bathroom.

The cold water helped, soothing a heat that had been building in his chest, like a phantom pain of the arc reactor beginning to trip into overload. Tony leaned against the wall, soaking in the chill and relaxing, determined not to think about the armor. Instead he considered revisions to the Mk V to make it more heat tolerant. Actually, more tolerant in general. And how he was going to power the suits without the arc reactor. That would pose an interesting puzzle in and of itself. The first, simplest answer, was to make it smaller, more compact, and build them into the suits, making it easy to replace the cores. But making one smaller might actually compromise the output which wasn't high on his desirability list.

Equations scrolling through his head like text on a monitor, he barely realized he was bathing anymore, mind a million miles away while he went through the motions like an automaton, cleaning himself and drying off, getting dressed and absently drying his hair, which felt worlds better now that it wasn't curling against his neck.

A knock sounded beyond the door to his bedroom and he walked out, too caught up in the diagrams in his own mind to even remember that Thor was supposed to come see him, so when he opened the door, he was jolted back into the present and from his plans.

"Thor, dude, long time no see!" Tony joked, readying himself for an embrace. Thor looked hesitant for a moment, almost afraid to hug him, and not that Tony minded. Thor hugs were painful experiences. But, as if the god had heard his thoughts, and Tony wasn't entirely sure he hadn't, Thor swept forward, tears already welling up in his eyes and pulled him into a tight embrace, something like a shudder running through the god's frame and a noise suspiciously akin to a sniffle escaping. Tony allowed him approximately fifteen seconds, which was fourteen more than normal, because, well, he had died, and Thor was emotional. He did not, in any way, miss the familiar face of his comrade or the freely given, non-combative touch of another person. Nope. But when those fifteen seconds were up, Tony pushed away from the god, actually managing to dislodge himself,
an achievement of his new body no doubt, since it had never happened before, and gave his friend a winning smile.

"Miss me blondie?"

"Aye, you have been sorely missed, Tony Stark. When I heard you had been taken by a valkyrie, I felt such honor, knowing my war brother had been considered worthy," Thor said, face a wide smile beneath his beard, which was just long enough to begin poofing. Mood beard again. Tony tried not to think of Thor with only one eye and an array of fashion eye patches. The familial resemblance was eerie.

"Come on man," Tony told him, stepping to the side to let Thor, still impressively taller than him, inside. The god didn't seem to notice the room around him as he walked inside, not until he pulled a chair from the table and sat, his body suddenly deflating a little. Not much, Tony wasn't sure Thor could deflate, not when he had such incredible oomph to begin with, whatever oomph was, but it was still noticeable.

"Your dad said it was getting dicey on Earth," Tony observed nonchalantly, offering the biggest, most obvious hint he could. Even Thor, alien vikings bless his beautiful blonde brain, could not miss it.

But he did.

"News of your death spurred many of our enemies into action, thinking we would be weakened by the loss," Thor answers, looking as obtuse as always. "The battles have quieted. They now know that our strength has not diminished in our grief."

Tony, logically, could accept that they didn't need him. Hell, he had been a too human, too flawed man in a metal suit. Smart, rich, and as cutthroat as Natasha when it came down to it, but they wouldn't be crippled by his absence. Logically, he knew that. Emotionally, he was having trouble accepting it. Hadn't they been having at least a little trouble without him?

"That sucks," He replied lamely, not quite sure what to say. Especially not when Thor had missed the widest opening he knew how to give without outright saying it. So much for even a smidgen of subtlety.

"I am sorry," Thor finally said, just when the awkward silence was beginning to become highly uncomfortable. "I am sorry we could not reach you in time."

"No problem," Tony lied, because it would have been a huge fucking problem if he had ended up anywhere else. "Death apparently can't stop me, so no biggie. Besides, new and improved, and ready to kick some ass," He added. There. Open offer. Not even Thor could miss it a second time, especially not with the 'I'm more than game I am fucking armed and ready' smile he made sure to sport when he sat down across from his friend.

"There is little battle to be found in Asgard according to my father," Thor said, and Tony saw it, finally saw it.

Discomfort. Uneasiness. Blue eyes refusing to look into his own, darting up or down or to the sides or even over his shoulders but never directly at him. If Thor hadn't been wearing the goddamn cape, Tony was sure he would have seen posture earlier that would have immediately given away Thor's disquiet.

"What?" Tony asked, both hands coming up to the table in front of him and fingers lacing together.
A familiar position, an echo of stifling boardrooms and interviews he had never wanted to attend. One that he used when he wanted to lunge over a table and grab someone by the lapels and shake them.

"What?" Thor repeated, doing his best to look confused and failing so damn miserably Tony thought it was a wonder that the god had grown up side by side with the one the world called the god of lies without something rubbing off at some point.

"You're deliberately avoiding it. Thor. I want to go back to earth," Tony said, teeth clamped together behind his lips as he forced the words out. "Now would be awesome."

Thor was quiet, eyes on the top of the wooden table, hands coming to rest on the surface, balling into fists. Tony wondered, for a brief second, if he had offended Thor. After all, Asgard was his home, and he had wanted to bring the team to visit ever since the Loki incident. It had never been possible due to old laws that Tony hadn't particularly cared about. But now that one of them was there, maybe Thor would be offended by the less than kindly requested demand to leave. He was touchy about three topics. Family, honor, and Asgard.

"Thor, look buddy. Asgard is great and all, but I'm useless here. I'm not a warrior. I'm not even that good of a fighter. I don't belong here. I belong at home," He tried to reason, making his voice as soothing as he could. Thor looked up at him, killing whatever words he had been about to say because Thor didn't look angry, not in the least. Anguished, torn, and remorseful. It was a hell of a wallop compared to his normal ridiculous puppy dog eyes act, and it was like a knife in Tony's gut for a number of reasons, the least of which was that look meant his friend was experiencing some serious emotional conflict, and the more important, to Tony at least, was that that look meant he was not going to be seeing his home any time soon.

"Would that I could, I would give you this, Tony Stark, but I cannot allow you on earth until your memory has faded from the living."

A spark of hope lit up in Tony's chest, and he breathed a small smile of relief. "Well, that's not so bad. The world turns quickly. People will have forgotten me in a couple of years." Maybe shorter, he could do that, could convince Thor to let him go, because even a couple of years in Asgard would be enough to drive him straight up a wall and into the nearest vat of whatever swill they called booze.

"Tony, you cannot return until all those on earth that knew you have passed," Thor said, voice quiet and soft, the voice he used when talking about Loki for fuck's sake, and Tony wanted to scream, because damned if he'd ever be comfortable with being in that pitiable category.

"Thor-"

"I cannot, Tony. It is the law, do not ask me to break it." And the conflict, the guilt was so present in Thor's voice that for a second Tony actually considered granting the god his request. But only for a second. And then the panic exploded, crashing against any semblance of calm and scrubbling inside of his brain when it settled in that he might not see his home again, see his friends again, for decades, possibly centuries.

"No. Thor, no," Tony shouted, standing up so quickly the chair behind him, a heavy wooden affair, was not only knocked over but thrown back into the wall, skidding loudly on the floor before stopping with an abrupt crash. "I can't stay here. I don't belong here," He said, beyond caring how that might have hurt his friend. "I am not a fucking viking. I am not-

"A valkyrie chose you," Thor said, a grain of conviction giving his voice some strength, a minor
echo of the thunder it usually held. "Not even Odin can influence the choice of a valkyrie. You belong here."

"I don't care if Odin or a valkyrie or fucking Buddha decided I belong here. I don't. I don't belong here," Tony snapped, the heat in his chest unfurling and hurting, a rage so hot it was blinding him, obscuring Thor from vision, almost drowning out his voice because this just couldn't be happening. "I belong on earth."

"You have nothing left to belong to on Earth," Thor finally boomed, standing swiftly. "Humanity has mourned your passing. Even if I could grant you this, Odin would bring you back. How would those you love fare if you came to them, a spirit from beyond the grave for moments before vanishing? If you left for Earth, Odin would be forced to retrieve you and you would have little hope of ever returning."

"You're not even going to try," Tony accused, the betrayal making him want to strike out blindly, to land one good shot on Thor with his bare fist, as he had never been able to before. One solid blow and maybe he could break Thor's jaw. The thought would have been mortifying to him a few months before, but at that very second he couldn't think of anything in the world he wanted to do more except maybe go home.

"I belong here," Tony tried again, trying to force himself to sound less like he was whining and more like he was genuinely, truly desperate, which wasn't untrue in that moment.

"Gondul brought you here," Thor told him, eyes closing for a moment as he took a deep breath. As if the air had fortified him, his body stiffened, regained it's normal, commanding posture. Blue eyes opened, sure and bespeaking a steadfastness that had been absent before. "A valkyrie makes no mistakes."

"She did with me," Tony snarled, any memory of being friends with Thor completely lost as he inhaled raggedly, the taste of blood in his mouth stronger than it should have been considering his mouth was completely dry, lungs laboring as they tried to pull in air. The words had more than their intended effect, Thor's whole body jerking back as if Tony had slapped him. But the hurt was quickly swamped by compassion, and Tony didn't want compassion. He wanted a goddamn ride back home.

"There is nothing I can do," Thor told him, voice quiet but calm. Almost apologetic, not that it mattered. "The law stands. I cannot take you back to Midgard."

Thor left, turning and exiting more quickly and gracefully than a person of his size had any right to. Tony was left standing in the middle of the room, the door closing sounding like a death knell as the red cape disappeared and he was left completely alone.

His chance, his one chance, gone. And Thor, Thor of all people to know how important it was, and to still say no. Even if he had wanted to, and Tony wasn't entirely convinced Thor did want to take
him back, he wouldn't. Because of a pissant law from who knew when that said he couldn't go back until everyone he had known while he was alive was dead. And considering that Bruce and Steve were considered immortal for all intents and purposes, that meant never without even including the villains that had the timeless, ageless thing going for them.

Tony turned the facts over in his head, trying to examine them all from new angles, but not one of them offered a solution. Even if he did get back, Odin would bring him back. Maybe. Or maybe, if he was enough of a dick, if he pulled in favors from SHIELD- But no, Fury was willing to let Loki go, let Loki live after thousands of murders and an intergalactic war just to avoid pissing Odin off. Fury wouldn't toe the line for him. Thor obviously wouldn't, but the rest of the team would. He just didn't know if the rest of the team would make any difference against Odin.

An idea immediately sprang to mind, distasteful in his mouth.

'You are here.' Loki had said it like it was a particularly awful curse, a burden. Loki who had escaped, who didn't have to use the rainbow bridge or the tesseract to realm hop, who had been invisible to Odin, at least if Thor and Odin could be believed. If he could be believed. And Tony was desperate and willing to believe a lot if it could get him out of Asgard and back home. Out of everyone in Asgard, he would be the one willing to break laws and piss Odin off, and there was the added bonus that he didn't want Tony anywhere near him. It was almost fate, how perfectly it could play out.

Except it was Loki, and the last thing he wanted to do was ask Loki for a favor. Favors from aliens or gods, whatever they were, had never really worked out well for the protagonists of any story involving said gods. Loki would want something from him, either something nearly impossible or something that would come back to bite him in the ass somehow.

There had to be another way back, one that didn't require the bridge or Loki's help. Briefly he thought about the tesseract and filed that idea away for later. He'd seen what that thing could do to anyone wielding it, and it would be a last resort, one saved if even Loki couldn't (or wouldn't) help him.

Another knock sounding at his door made him groan. It wasn't loud enough to be Thor, even contrite, apologetic Thor.

"Come on in," He called out as he grabbed the chair and righted it, sliding it back beneath the table. Majhild stepped in, eyes on the floor and hands clasped in front of her.

"I have been asked to assist you with your armor," She murmurred, eyes on the floor. Tony wondered if she had heard the shouting match and figured she probably had, considering she seemed to been a constant presence in the inner halls. He didn't want to put on the armor, didn't want to deal with the ceremony or Odin, hadn't planned on even being around for it, already on the rainbow bridge back to Earth.

"Stark," She began, and Tony knew she was waiting for him to get up, to even acknowledge that she was there.

"Can I just get a few minutes?" He asked, looking over her shoulder so he didn't have to look at her. He saw her nodding in the periphreal and walking past him, into the room that held the armor. Apparently she was taking the 'few minutes' literally, which meant he would have to get up, go to that room and put on that ri-fucking-diculous armor.

No way out. Not now, not yet. Adrenaline that had been flooding his system like a drug, an anticipatory anxiousness was flooded with depression. It wasn't the first time he'd dealt with the all
too physical effects of such a hard emotional downturn, but the knowledge that he was going to have to wait to find a way back on his own and chance Odin chasing him down, had all the force of a physical blow. A Hulk sized blow, no less.

He thought about the dozens of space jumping people, aliens, humans and inbetween. That he'd come across in the few years he'd been an Avenger, and all of the ones he had learned about just by pillaging SHIELD's files. Some of them had required special items, or special powers, but not all of them. Which meant he could do it too, even if it did take some work.

And none of it required asking a favor from Loki, not that he could see at least.

"Setback," He told himself, saying the word again, trying to force the whole of his belief into the word as if it could make it true. "Setback." The second time sounded less like a denial and more like an honest answer, one he would give Pepper when the arc technology was glitching or when Clint's arrows did something they weren't supposed to. "Setback." Like magic, the third time he repeated the word, he actually believed it.

Slightly more at ease, although not by much, he walked into the armor room and saw Majhild already working on unbuckling the chest plate, readying it to put on him.

"So does this just go over my normal clothing?" He asked, watching her and memorizing her movements. If nothing else, he wanted to know how the hell to get out of the getup when he got back.

"It can go over your normal clothing, yes," Majhild muttered, obviously not having any patience with the numerous hidden buckles and straps. "Intricate stuff, this is."

"Too intricate. Think they'll let me make my own?" He asked, wanting to offer some help because, hell, he could barely stand watching her get more frustrated with the impossible knotwork of leather straps, and he barely knew her. It was almost painful to watch. Didn't vikings come born with the knowledge of how to deal with armor and the like?

"S'dwarves work," She muttered, finally succeeding in undoing three buckles at once which seemed to fall apart once she undid one. Not particularly comforting, seeing that, but Tony declined to comment. "As Champion, I imagine you'll be busy with weapons practice."

"I'd like to make my own," He admitted, earning a surprised glance from the servant. "I did back on Earth. I don't trust anything I don't make, personal experience."

"It's strange," Majhild admitted, going back to the buckles. "Most einherjar, their memories are wiped. They don't remember their time as mortals, mostly for the sake of their spirit, I think. I don't think I've heard of one that was allowed to remember life as a mortal."

That was interesting. Tony had no problem seeing why, he couldn't imagine everyone was particularly thrilled to find out they'd been drafted into someone else's war, no matter how far off it was. And, if he remembered correctly, valkyries only took the souls of men that had died in battle. What a raw deal, to die in battle and then get stuck training for another war, one where you would die, again, for a cause you probably didn't believe in.

Majhild finished with the chest plate and hefted it in her hands. Being as short as he was, there was no issue getting into it, although when she began strapping him in he thought about the night Pepper had sighed in relief when she'd taken her bra off and rolled her shoulders. He'd teased her at the time because a bra couldn't be that bad, really. Now he was starting to wonder.
"Thor probably didn't want to explain half of the inside jokes or something," He finally said. Majhild made a noncommittal sound as she continued pulling pieces from the stand and unbuckling them, each seeming to come undone more easily than the last. Most of it he didn't even know the names for, only the corresponding pieces of his own armor, and how different the fits were. What he was slowly, piece by piece, beginning to wear, wasn't uncomfortable. Different, but not uncomfortable in a physical sense. But it was Iron Man, and therein lay the rub. It fit right, but it didn't fit right at all, like a badly tailored suit that was made to measurement but didn't quite sit correctly.

"You're quiet," Majhild finally said as she finished buckling one of the leg braces into place. Tony imagined he was the Tin Man, completely frozen to the floor and in need of oil. Or getting the hell out of the heavy goddamned armor. Hopefully the set he was wearing was for show and not what he would be expected to wear ever, even into battle, if he ever had to battle. At least she hadn't tried to shove the helmet on his head.

He needed to get the hell out of Asgard.

"Just thinking," He said, voice mild. Majhild stepped back, gaze considering.

"It's not right on you," She finally said, her tone more mystified than judgmental. "Pardon."

"No worries sweetheart," He smiled, grateful that someone was willing to say something to the contrary of whatever or whomever had decided on his armor (probably Odin and possibly, most likely, Loki. Dicks.). "Just tell me this is the ceremonial suit."

"Ceremonial?"

"For show," He elaborated bluntly.

"I wouldn't know," She admitted. "This- All einherjar have always been the king or queen's. None have ever been gifted into the prince's service."

"How does it usually go for the other ones?"

"They wear similar armor when on duty."

When on duty, which meant there was a time they weren't. Mildly comforting. Tony was instinctively aware that he would not always be on duty, maybe would find himself in the position once or twice before hauling ass back to earth.

"So how long have I got before I have to find the great hall again?"

"Not long. Perhaps this would be the time to gather your thoughts."

"Any reason for that?" He asked flatly, almost positive he knew what was coming.

"You'll have to speak, I imagine."

"Wonderful," He muttered, bringing a hand to pinch the bridge of his nose. As least they hadn't tried to strap him into any form of gloves. That would have been a no no. Anything was bound to be cumbersome after the sheer flexibility of the suit's gauntlets. Majhild gave him a look that almost bordered on pity.

"You'll settle in soon," She promised, voice light.
"Go on," He told her, waving his hand and trying not to flinch at the feeling of metal plates moving against each other. Well articulated but not well enough, the sensation like nails on a chalkboard against his flesh. Majhild made a hasty exit, leaving him alone in the room. The helmet sat on the table, ready to be put on any moment. Was he supposed to wear it, or tuck it under his arm? No one had decided to school him on tradition or etiquette. Thor had probably been ready to, had probably been looking forward to it. Until he had asked to go home.

The gnawing guilt was easily washed away by the more significant feeling of betrayal, one he refused to examine too closely without a bottle of booze at hand. Maybe two or three.

It occurred to him that he could just not go. It wouldn't be the first time he had missed an important celebration being held in his honor. However, Asgard seemed to work a little differently, and the last thing he wanted was for Odin or Frigga to send Thor after him, or worse, Loki, who seemed to enjoy finding the most obnoxious solutions to every problem. The idea of being magically handcuffed to Thor or anyone else was infuriating on a whole other level, one he was, once again, not prepared to examine without the crutch of alcohol.

"Fuck this," He muttered, hands going under his armpit to look for the buckles of the suddenly stifling armor. It felt too tight, too hot inside. Every piece that clicked reminded him that he was wearing armor someone else had made, something he hadn't made, couldn't be sure wasn't perfect. Fingers finding a buckle, he pulled at the strap, fumbled with it and gave it a hard yank out of sheer frustration. When the leather gave, coming from the metal completely, he found another strap and pulled. Another followed that, and another, until one side was completely open and he was pulling the heavy chest plate over his head and tossing it on the floor with no regard to it whatsoever, already working on getting the gauntlets off.

What had taken the servant over an hour, possibly two, to do, he was undoing in minutes, hands ripping at hard to reach leather straps cleverly hidden, skin protesting the treatment as metal bit into his skin, even bent in his frustration. Sweat beaded on his neck, slid down between his shoulder blades as he bent and contorted in ways he hadn't been able to as a human, gripping and snapping the leather. Grunts echoed below the sound of metal falling and clattering on the floor, each piece allowing him further room to breathe, to exist as something besides the thing he had been since waking up in Asgard.

It wasn't the suit. It was a suit. A useless, graceless, ugly lump of metal hammered into something mocking grace. Ornate and outdated, disgusting in it's attempts at being more than it really was, in trying to contain him, protect him. Stifling him. He glared down at the substandard pieces, the heap of junk that still had the temerity to shine in the dim light. If he had the paint, he'd paint it black, or the tools, he'd melt it down into one big chunk and toss it, or give it to Richards to fuck with. But he didn't have those things, so he glared at it, ignoring the itch of sweat on his scalp.

He was Tony Stark, and damned what everyone else was calling him. Damn what everyone was expecting him to do. If they'd been too stupid to leave him with his memories, with his personality, then he'd face Odin and Asgard the same way he had faced presidents and diplomats.

"Balls and sass, Stark," He told himself, running a hand through his hair and walking from the room. He didn't spare the helmet a second glance. "Balls and sass."

Not bothering to check himself before leaving his suite, he walked out into the hall half expecting to see Majhild or someone else waiting to guide him to the great hall. When he saw that he was alone, he took a deep breathe and forced a smile to his face. Odin wouldn't kill him, he knew that much. Probably wouldn't maim him either, at least not in front of the court, or whatever constituted
a court in Asgard.

With surprisingly good directions for once, Tony found himself in a long hall that, apparently, preceded the Great Hall. Equally surprising, Thor and Loki were both waiting, both in full regalia, helmets and armor shining and capes looking especially voluminous.

"Stark-" Thor began, eyes widening at the sight of him. Tony gave himself a mental high five for getting one petty, incidental punch in before the proceedings began.

"Obviously the servant has been remiss," Loki mused, his gaze saying that he believed what he was saying about as much as he believed Thor was his blood brother. Which was to say, of course, not at all.

"Nope, she was cool, really patient."

"You're not wearing your armor."

"It's not my armor," Tony said, his smile all teeth. "It's armor made for someone else, obviously. And it's broken."

"Broken?" Thor asked dumbly, jaw going slack.

"Yeah, decided to test the structural integrity. It failed."

"Stark-" Thor began, voice full of warning.

"You should know me well enough that I have to test something before I'm comfortable wearing it," Tony said, pretending a playfulness he didn't feel. There was something vicious welling up beneath his words, something sharp he wasn't sure Thor even noticed, or could, for that matter. Loki was keeping a neutral, blank expression, giving nothing away. Tony had the uncomfortable feeling the god could see through him, and decided that he didn't care.

Balls and sass.

"If anything, you should be happy. Better to find out now than in battle," Tony pointed out pragmatically, shrugging off Thor's bemusement. "Besides, I figure if I'm getting drafted into a war I don't particularly care about, especially considering it's a given that everyone is going to die, the least your dad could do is grant me one, small, tiny, insignificant favor."

Thor continued to look less than thrilled and Tony was positive Loki made a sound, although whether it was a chuckle directed at his behavior or the soon to be thrill of seeing him shot down slash verbally flayed alive, he couldn't be sure.

On the other side of the door cheering boomed, and Tony wondered just how big the Great Hall was when the doors began to open, pulling apart to reveal a silver bricked path into an open atrium. The light alone was enough to make him want to squint, even though the sun was setting somewhere off in the distance. Resisting the urge, he reminded himself that an easy smile never hurt anyone's chances.

"Follow behind us," Thor commanded, voice a furious whisper. Tony shrugged again and walked behind them, not bothering to hide his curiosity as he scanned the still cheering crowd and then the atrium itself, the open roof crisscrossed with beams that led to pillars of gold. More gold. Thor wasn't the only one not sporting Asgard's most common color scheme, but he was one of the few with any form of armor that did. Tony didn't miss the incredulous stares of those he walked past, or the quietly contemptuous glaring of Sif and the astonished gazes of the warriors three. The sights,
such as they were, made the walk seem longer than it was, a thousand colors and sounds mixing into a roar that would be deafening under other circumstances, with anyone else. But he was Tony Stark, and crowds cheering for him or around him were a barely distant memory, something he had grown up with as easy to file into the background as so much white noise.

When Thor and Loki stopped and inclined their heads, he opted for staying upright and giving no acknowledgment that he was in the presence of royalty. Not yet, not until he had been directly addressed.

'Make them acknowledge you, make them make the first move.' Howard had never been a great parent, but he had been a killer strategist when it came to business meetings, and everything had been a business meeting to him. Tony refused to see this as anything else. His trademark smile in place, he waited for Odin to raise his hands and for the cheering to stop, which it did with an almost magical ease and speed.

"Many have already heard rumor of a warrior being recently chosen," Odin boomed, voice carrying through the atrium and over the crowd. Tony watched, appreciating the showmanship, if deciding that it was a little too vaudevillian, a little too old fashioned. Granted, viking culture and all that, but there was little that could be called subtle about Odin's speech, most of which went through his brain and was sifted out as unimportant. Terms like 'war brother' and 'champion' were applied liberally. His achievements on Earth, including Thanos but excluding the Loki incident entirely, were also listed, each one sounding more and more impressive and impossible. Just as his knees were beginning to lock from standing still for so long, Odin looked down at him and smiled, but it was a forced smile. Obviously the lack of armor had not gone unnoticed.

"Man of Iron, Starkson of Asgard, we welcome you to the Brotherhood."

That sounded purely ceremonial, because Tony knew he wasn't quite like the others, but he refused to let on, flashing another smile for everyone around them to see before giving a half bow to acknowledge the god king.

"My thanks," He said, slipping into the archaic speech as much as he could, hoping a little theatricality would take him a long way. "Despite the gifts already given, I would ask a boon." After a lengthy pause, a collective, drawn in breath of the crowd around him, he wondered if he had worded it incorrectly, if it had sounded stilted even to the people surrounding him.

"Ask," Odin finally rumbled, settling down on his throne. Frigga was watching him intently, a gaze he could feel baring down on the top of his head.

"I have no doubt I was not chosen for my strength, but for my intelligence," Tony started, hoping he wasn't laying it on too thick. "I know it is highly unorthodox, but some things transcend even mortal death. The armor I was provided was exquisite." It took no effort to tell the lie even though he was mentally sneering at the winged helmet. "But I have always made my own armor and my own weapons. I request that I be granted the opportunity to forge my own once again," He finished, voice reflecting a humility he didn't (and probably never had or would) feel.

The world had gone still around him, and he had the feeling he had just insulted the king in a bad way, at least if the narrowed eye was anything to go by. The beard looked like it was prickling too. Tony didn't bother to look at Thor, he could feel the disbelief radiating off of the god in waves. Loki, the bastard, was probably smirking and waiting for Odin to slap him back into place like a particularly ill fitting square peg into a round hole.

Most interesting, however, was that Frigga leaned over, whispering into her husband's ear. Whatever was said was too quiet to reach beyond Odin's ear, but whatever it was, Tony was sure
Frigga was demanding, in very plain terms, at least if her gaze was anything to go by. It was almost unnerving, considering she hadn't stopped looking directly at him as she spoke. Odin nodded once as the queen sat back, her gaze imperious.

"This request is small enough, Starkson of Asgard. You will be allowed to craft your own armor and weapons."

"Thank you," Tony said, eying both monarchs and putting as much feeling as he could muster into it, which turned out to be quite a bit. He hid his expression with a bow, knowing full well his smirk would ruin any effect of gratitude.

Setback, but not stalemate.

"Welcome your prince's champion," Frigga called out, voice clear and loud, echoing the command a woman of her power and position.

Tony allowed his smile free reign as he turned and bowed to the crowd with a flourish as roaring echoed through the atrium. Thor looked relieved, almost happy, and Loki looked blank, as blank as Odin appeared when Tony turned back to the throne to give another bow, this one so deep it could only be construed as ignorant or mocking.

Chapter End Notes

AN: This won't be one of those fics demonizing Thor. Sorry guys, but, well, I can't. Thor is like a cute, A.D.H.D labrador puppy that's trying to make everyone happy ALL THE TIME. I don't think anyone could stay terribly mad at him, even if he peed on the carpet.
'Balls and Sass' is from somewhere, but I cannot remember where. I just know the phrase itself isn't mine, so I'm disclaiming it to whomever wrote it. I just think it applies to Tony perfectly, and I don't see tony meeting anyone on terms other than his own.
This was a bit rushed, but I blistered my fingertips making caramel apples and my fingers hurt like a soab, and I wanted to get this out. Hopefully we can resume weekend updates after this since things are calming down here.
"You're very lucky," Thor told him, a smile on his face as they strode down the aisle of silver and back out of the doors. The moment they were through the smile faded and was replaced with something a bit more tired, a little more haggard.

"No, I'm smart," Tony told him, his smirk back in full force. "I know how to play diplomats in front of crowds. No one wants egg on their face. Especially not over something that small."

"It is not a small thing," Thor sighed. "Mother says you have been reading since you woke. Have you learned nothing of our world?"

"I doubt you're the one to school him on diplomatic matters, Thor," Loki sniffed, removing his helmet as he walked away. "After all, the dwarves hold very little love for you, much less any other race."

Tony looked from Thor to Loki's back, wondering what exactly Loki had said that made Thor look like he'd been kicked in the stomach.

"Come," The god said, breaking the silence after a too long awkward pause. "There is yet a feast to attend."

"Dwarves?"

"Those that craft our weapons and armor dwell on Svartálfaheimr," Thor told him, already walking away. Tony followed, having to hurry to keep up with the god's longer stride while he attempted to repeat the word, tongue twisting around it and failing miserably. "It is only the fire in their furnaces that can forge uru, that which can maintain Odin's blessing."
Tony’s eyes narrowed at the slip. The last thing he wanted, if he was even able to create what he needed, was for Odin, or any other magician, to 'bless' or otherwise enchant his armor.

"I'm still not understanding the problem. If it's about forging it myself, I know how to do it. I made the Mark I in a cave. As long as I can figure out replacement elements for the components I'm sure I can build something," Tony said, voice flat.

"It is not that," Thor told him, jaw setting as he stared straight ahead. "Though they make our weapons, craft our armor, there has always been tension between Æsir and dwarves. You might be less welcome than you think. No doubt my father will have to negotiate carefully for your privileges."

"Once again, drafted into a war that is guaranteed to kill me for no other reason than a millenia old grudge match. This doesn't seem like too big of a request," Tony reasoned, still feeling sharp around Thor, sharp and wanting to cut him, just a little. Attempting to affect an air of apathy, he cupped his hands behind his head and let it tilt back, body relaxing as they walked along. Thor sighed again, but Tony didn't try to prod him into further explanation. The thought of going to another realm, wherever it was, was enough to get the gears in his head turning. After all, it stood to reason that if he could visit one realm, or world, then he could get to another. Couple that with Odin being a god king and all of the business that entailed, he would eventually stop watching Tony, if he was at all. Which meant he could probably get away sooner than he thought, if he was patient. It wasn't something he was good at, there were a million incidents that pointed to the exact opposite, but he was even worse at knowing when to quit. If pissing off a few people was the price, well, it wasn't one he was unaccustomed to paying.

"So this feast, I can just eat a bit and then leave, right?" He asked as they turned a corner. He didn't even recognize the area of the palace they were in.

"It is being held in your honor," Thor said, brow furrowing.

"So were half a million others on Earth, and you never saw me stay for the whole party. I don't think you stayed overlong either, come to think of it," Tony reminded him.

"This is not Midgard," Thor rumbled, as if the suggestion that he would skip out was beyond offensive. "You cannot shirk your responsibilities any longer."

"What are my responsibilities?" Tony asked, giving his friend another easy smile, not bothering to make it appear genuine. "Everyone keeps saying champion like it's got specific duties, but so far all I've been asked to do is primp and do the pretty."

Thor’s expression darkened before he visibly forced himself to relax. "After your training, which I suppose will now be after you create your armor," Thor told him. "You will join me in battle, not on Midgard, but everywhere else," The god said, adding the second half of the statement on hastily, words rushing together when he realized what he was saying. Clearing his throat he cast a nervous glance at Tony, who was still determined to appear mostly blithe in the face of everything. "And go in my stead, when I am otherwise detained on Earth. There has been little unrest in the realms that requires the attentions of Asgard, but threats still exist."

"So I essentially fight with you or for you, depending on if you're on Earth?" Tony asked, careful to keep his tone light. "Sounds fair. So, what am I looking at? Dragons, elves, Jot-"

"It would be wise not to say that here, or in the presence of any Æsir," Thor snapped, and Tony couldn't help but feel a flicker of guilt for bringing up what was still an obviously very sore subject.
"You rhymed," He said, smiling and brushing off the spike in tension as if it had never occurred. "Warned you about that, Shakespeare." It was an old taunt, a friendly one that eased the flash of guilt with something comfortable, even if he still hadn't (and probably never would) forgive Thor for picking law over friendship. If nothing else, he had to pretend to be settling in, at least for awhile, until he could get the hell out.

"I still do not understand the significance of this Spear Shaker," Thor rumbled, a small smile on his face.

"You haven't asked Jane to take you to a play? Well, nevermind. Probably do better to watch a movie. I recommend Romeo and Juliet, the Laz Buhrman one." It had been one of the only ones that could remotely hold his attention on a very ill advised date. The black guy in drag had helped. And the speech might be vaguely familiar to Thor while the movie itself would probably confuse the hell out of him. He probably needed the drug talk anyway.

"We are almost there, Stark. I would warn you, your normal behavior at such events would not be tolerated here," Thor said, voice quieting. "The Æsir are quick to offense, and slow to forget."

"Your mom said something like that after I dropped Sif," Tony smirked.

"I have heard," Thor rumbled, tone laced with disapproval. "Just because they are not the Avengers does not mean they are incapable."

"Never said they were. I'm sure they've been training for war since they were old enough to walk. I just told Sif to stop defending a dick she didn't have."

"She has fought hard for acceptance in the ranks."

"Understandable. Patriarchal society and roles and everything. I get that," He said, brushing it off. "It will take time," Thor told him. But time for what, he didn't specify. Time to accept, to understand, to fit in? Tony didn't find the idea of any of the three choices appealing. "But for now, please, act in a manner befitting your station."

Tony looked over at Thor, an easy assurance that he would probably be lying about ready to roll off of his tongue. But Thor had the ridiculous puppy eyes thing going, big and shining and making Tony feel more like a dick than usual. When had he learned that trick from Steve?

"I think I've pushed enough buttons tonight," He said, managing to keep his smile. "I'll be on my best behavior mom, promise."

Thor's utter relief was apparent as they continued walking, finally stopping in front of two large doors.

"Tony-" Thor began.

"No emotional moments Thor. I'm a big boy," Tony told him, seeing the contrition reflected in Thor's gaze.

"I am sorry."

And Tony believed it. It didn't help him, couldn't take him back, but it went a little (minuscule) way towards soothing his anger. Besides, he'd figure his own way back, and Thor-

He'd try his best to keep Thor out of the inevitable crossfire.
"I know buddy."

Thor pushed one of the doors open and Tony was greeted with the sight of several dozen Æsir already rubbing elbows and drinking from gold goblets.

Even if the dress was medieval, the booze shitty and the food…the food was terrifying if he was being honest with himself, it was his element. Nothing could beat corporate galas for sheer boring, mind numbing falsity. And he was the master of navigating it, even when he was the center of attention. Especially when he was the center of attention.

The next morning Tony woke up to banging on his door. Not his bedroom door, for which he was mildly grateful, but on the door to the suite itself. The volume and force of the bangs were what confused him momentarily, because it sounded like it was coming from his bedroom door. Grunting an expletive, he got up and walked through all three rooms before opening said vibrating door, surprised it hadn't somehow buckled beneath the pressure of Thor's knocks.

"What?" Tony asked, still too bleary and foggy to muster anything resembling polite. He'd actually slept the night before, mentally exhausted from dealing with too much gold, too many inquiring minds, and the indelicate references to his death.

"Make yourself ready. We travel to Svartálfaheimr within the hour."

"What?" He repeated, the words blasting the cobwebs out of his brain.

Thor looked at him like he'd been dropped on his head a few times before being force fed paint chips.

"Your armor. Odin has already come to an agreement with the dwarves."

"Already?" Tony asked, blinking to try and clear the last vestiges of sleep from his eyes. "I thought there were delicate political issues or whatever."

"It seems the dwarves are interested in the Æsir that wishes to smith his own armor," Thor told him, his tone belying the incredible dumb luck associated with that curiosity.

"I was born under a lucky star," Tony smiled. "Let me get dressed."

"Hurry. I am to travel with you, and there is still more I must do this day," Thor told him. Tony nodded, closing the door in his face and resisting the urge to run to his bedroom. Getting dressed was only a problem insofar as all of his clothing was suitable for anything other than a forge of any sort. Going for the plainest clothing he could find, he was still stuck with a red shirt and pants that, under other circumstances, would have made him wonder how his ass was looking and if he was too old for leather.

Once back outside Thor gave him a speculative look before shrugging.

"So how are we getting there exactly?"

"The Bifrost. Heimdall has been informed that you will be traveling to Svartálfaheimr quite often in the coming seasons. Odin has another matter he must see to, so I will go in his stead."

"Does Asgard actually have seasons?" Tony asked as they walked through the halls. He had to take two long strides for every one of Thor's, and wondered again, somewhat resentfully, why he hadn't at least been made taller when they were rebuilding him.
"Yes, although all are mild, barely noticeable to most."

Tony saw that Thor didn't know much more about the climate so didn't bother to ask, mind already on plans for his suit. He'd have to learn more about the elements readily available, but he'd made enough arc reactors in his time that once he did find substitutes, putting one together would be a piece of cake. Without a computer to run the programs, everything would be more primitive than he'd like, but it was doable. Alternatives for the trigger system on the repulsor tech were already scrolling through his mind while he nodded at whatever Thor was saying as they walked outside and took a turn down a path he hadn't followed yet. It wasn't until they were in front of the stables that he stopped short, eyes on the already saddled horses that were waiting.

"We can't walk?" Tony asked, voice flat. The horse nearest him was eying him like it wanted to chew his hair.

"This will save time. Have you never ridden before?" Thor asked, head tilted in that way that showed just how confused he was by the notion that someone didn't ride.

"Yeah, it's just been awhile." Decades. It had been decades.

"This will save us time getting through the city. Besides, it will settle the minds of the people to see the new champion on a steed befitting his station."

More hoops to jump through. Tony wondered, not for the first time, if the position was mostly decorative, if he was only hanging around as the Champion because Thor would never have been content with him as another soldier wandering Asgard, fighting for Odin or Frigga.

"Stark," Thor said, already up in the saddle, staring down at him expectantly.

"Yeah, sure point break," Tony muttered as he walked over to the waiting horse, (a white fucking horse no less, could the disney references get any more obvious) trying to remember how to properly pull himself into the saddle. Thor watched patiently, and somehow Tony managed to pull himself up before the god felt the need to make a polite suggestion or offer any sort of instruction. It wasn't the most graceful of mounts, but it wasn't as bad as his last dismount either, which had been considerably less graceful.

"So, let's get this show on the road," Tony said, offering Thor a cocky grin that had the god smiling back and urging his horse on.

"So, this one doesn't have eight legs," Tony said, needing to distract himself from the wholly uncomfortable sensation of a horse walking beneath him. "Isn't that a thing here?"

"Only Sleipnir has eight legs," Thor said quietly. "It is why he is Odin's steed."

"So is it true he's Loki's-"

"It is ill advised to ask such questions," Thor rumbled, warning evident. "Or insinuate such."

Tony opened his mouth, ready to ask why, because no one gave a warning like that without reason, especially Thor, when he remembered the day at the healer's, how Fandral and the healer both had clammed up at the mention of Fenrir. His mouth clicked shut as he considered the insinuations. The silence, obviously enforced by something like law, official or otherwise, indicated shame. Which meant that Sleipnir and Fenrir were probably Loki's kids.

That thought sent sent a shudder through him. If there was anyone in the universe less qualified to be a parent than him, it was Loki. He made a mental note (those were piling up, each new one
reminding him of the five dozen others waiting) to research the genealogy of Asgard. If there was anything about it available in a book, and given the silence, he doubted it.

"So, anything I should expect with the dwarves?" He tried.

"They are tiny," Thor began, casting a sideways glance at him as they ambled past the gates and into the city proper. "Quick to anger, and slow to forgive. Their minds, their minds do not work like those of the Aesir."

"How?"

"I cannot explain. They just do not think as the Aesir do. Be careful of your manners with them, should you want continued access to the forge."

"So none of my normal sparking wit and charm?"

"It would be ill advised."

Thor was saying that a lot.

"So, what? Bow and scrape and be humble?"

"I doubt you could ever manage humility," Thor chuckled, smiling fondly. "But the pretense will probably do more good than bad."

Tony pulled his expression into one of shock, one hand going to his chest while the other kept a firm grip on the reins. "Is the honest, almighty, good prince god Thor telling me to dissemble? To lie," He gasped, trying and failing to bite back the smile. "Didn't think you had it in you."

"Loki has made me aware of my lack of diplomacy. It is something I have sought to rectify."

From what Tony could remember of Thor on earth, the lessons hadn't really taken, and the night before had been wine and song, not enough to give him a reliable baseline for the god's skills.

"I hear he's been making trips to earth."

"After his initial punishment, he was allowed access to the realms. There is little we could have done otherwise. So long as he refrains from war mongering and treason, he is free to come and go as he pleases."

"And how long has this been going on?"

"Perhaps a year, maybe a little longer."

Needing to think about anything but Loki wandering the earth, the universe in general, with no magic muzzles to keep his chaos contained, Tony looked around the city as they walked through it. The hustle and bustle of pedestrian traffic was normal enough, people going back and forth. The surrounding city of gold wasn't as hard to reconcile with a city of steel and glass as long as he didn't look up at the floating towers or the planets off in the distance. The clothing made it impossible to find any comfort in the quasi familiar sight, and the horse beneath him walked smoothly, but it was not a car.

What he was familiar with, and what was easy to ignore, was the feeling of eyes on him, the people stopping to watch he and Thor pass by. It wasn't too different from earth, the lack of camera flashes and women smiling flirtatiously notwithstanding. Hoops and fanfare without any fanfare. He
suddenly felt like he was part of a two man parade, out to make an announcement.

"They're curious," Thor told him, smiling brightly. It was the first genuine smile he'd seen since Thor had knocked on his door the day before. "It has been a long time since a warrior was chosen."

"Seriously? How does that even work? I'm sure there are probably a thousand other guys more honorable and strong and whatever than me that died in battle, and I get chosen? I mean, I know I'm awesome, but that just reeks of favoritism."

"Not possible. A valkyrie is above influence, including Odin's. I am unaware of how they choose, but that you have been chosen after so long, it speaks well of your character."

"No pressure or anything," Tony joked, inwardly flinching because he was pretty sure that meant everyone thought he was Thor's white knight. There was almost zero chance he could get away with being the same Tony Stark that had been Iron Man. Then again, if Thor and the warriors were anything to go by, he probably didn't have to check his behavior too much.

"Heimdall's observatory," Thor said several minutes later, a hand going to point out something in the distance. Tony looked, unsurprised to see a golden tower, or something like it, rising up from the distance. The tower tapered to a point, the tip appearing to rest directly beneath a star, like it was propping it up in the sky.

A sense of urgency hit Tony, with the bridge just ahead and the future suit just beyond his fingertips.

"So, can these things go any faster?"

"Faster than any of your mortal cars," Thor laughed, voice rich with his normal joy. It inspired a flicker of guilt, his future plans already forming in his mind. But Thor was urging his horse on, making him go faster as they got past the gates and onto a bridge. Tony kicked his heels into the horse and felt it jolt forward first into a canter and then into a full out run. Unused to riding, it felt like he was strapped to a missile that was rolling over a city's worth of speed bumps.

"In France they eat your cousins, hope you know that," He got out as a particularly harsh bump made his body jerk wildly. Careening down the bridge, he was still behind Thor as they traversed the distance. It wasn't until they were almost at the observatory, a dome like building with the pointed spire coming out of it that the horses came to a smooth stop, not skidding on the shimmering, rave themed bridge beneath them.

Already he was thinking about articulation, power sources, potential circuitry while vaguely wondering if horse steak was outlawed because one of them, however strangely mutated, was Loki's kid (and wow, what asshat for a grandfather would go around riding his grandson?). Like a kid on Christmas Eve he was jittery, anxious and ready for the sun to just rise already. The horses seemed less than pleased to walk into the domed structure, but Thor stayed astride so Tony forced his own far less tractable mount to follow. The inside of the observatory was the expected gold, but the dim light and pattern of circles and spheres kept it from being overbearing, giving the inside of the room a different texture than the rest of Asgard, something a bit rougher, a little less pristine, antiquated instead of fantastical. The edges had bronzed, as if time had left a patina to mark the passage of travelers.

Heimdall was not what he expected. For one, he had been aware that every ethnicity under the sun existed pretty much everywhere, he just hadn't expected an african american (or was it moor, shit he felt even worse now) as part of the pantheon. With bright gold eyes no less. Everything else fit in with the color scheme of Asgard though. Gold. Gold. More gold. Ornate, ridiculous helmet to
top the whole thing. He sent a brief prayer to a god that he was still sure didn't exist (judeo-
christian thankyouverymuch) that the dwarves didn't live in gold caves.

"My Prince, Champion," The gatekeeper said, inclining his head and giving both titles a
particularly capital first letter. "To Svartálfaheimr?"

"Yes, Heimdall," Thor rumbled, nodding at the veritable giant that stood almost as tall as their
horses.

"So how does this work?" Tony asked, watching Heimdall closely as he strode to the center of the
observatory and touched his sword to the pedestal.

"The sword is the key," Thor answered, nodding at Heimdall. Tony kept the obvious dick jokes to
himself, not wanting to offend the person that held the 'key' to his ride for the foreseeable future.
But the sword was key. Of course it wouldn't be a lever, or an actual key.

"Because of enchantments of it's an actual key?" Tony asked, eyes on the sword as Heimdall slid it
home, the room around them beginning to spin. The horses stirred uneasily, the metal on their
hooves clattering on the marble floor, combining with a hum that was growing louder. The lights
inside of the room grew brighter, too bright for his eyes. Clenching them shut to keep even a
fraction from penetrating the seam of his lids, he cursed whatever was keeping him from seeing
what he wanted, needed to see. The way the whole thing worked, the mechanism that got someone
from one realm, universe, whatever, to another.

Unpleasantly reminded of the ever increasing rotations of a much smaller device, he tried to tune
the humming out as it grew louder, sped up until it was like a whistle inside of his head,
relentlessly buzzing, shrieking. His horse, sensing his obvious discomfort, began to stamp it's feet
even more, a nickering noise weaving into the buzz and stabbing into his temples like glass. His
body lurched, stomach two steps behind his chest and brain six behind that, and the whistling
stopped.

Opening his eyes, he looked around blankly, seeing but not comprehending the surrounding stone
cliff faces on either side of him, the dark sky, only the chill air that offered minimal comfort.

Terror bolted through him when the thought occurred that maybe, since the whole thing was based
on fucking magic, that part of him had been left behind, leaving him feeling disoriented and shot
out. Opening his mouth, he tried to force words out, but nothing happened.

Unless he counted the surge of bile that rose so quickly he barely had time to snap his jaws shut
and swallow before making a fool of himself in front of his friend.

"The first time is difficult for most," Thor said, voice sympathetic but face etched with lines of
amusement. "Even I found traversing such a distance unpleasant."

Unpleasant. Sure, why not. Tony grimaced, the taste not quite washed away when he swallowed a
second time, or even a third. The unexpected bonus to the bitter taste in his mouth was that he
seemed to be coming back to himself, his mind quickly coming back to him, sensations other than
nausea and tunnel vision settling into a cohesive awareness.

"That was fun," He lied, releasing his death grip on the reins. The first aware breath of air went
into his lungs like the cold shock of winter into the bellows of a forge. Brittle and steaming, he
exhaled and inhaled deeply again, the cold stilling the remnants of chaos left over in the tell tale
tingle of magic.
"I should hope so, friend. You will be using the Bifrost quite often."

"If you give it a name, a more fun name, I mean, and some lights, maybe some seat belts, you could sell tickets, make a killing at carnivals."

Thor chortled laughter as he led his horse forward beneath the natural walls of the cliff faces, his breath steaming the air in small puffs. Tony exhaled again, surprised when his own breath appeared like smoke in the air. Chalking it up to his own over excitement and tells he had never had a chance to get trained out, he squeezed his knees and urged his horse on, taking in the almost desolate scenery.

"So, simply walking into Mordor?" He asked, words echoing off of the dark stone.

"There are no orcs here, but there are still rock trolls," Thor told him as Tony came up beside him. "The comparison is apt, however. The dwarves need the fires within this planet to forge uru, among other things."

Knowing a fair bit about the metal from the few times he'd had a chance to scan Mjolnir and a 'souvenir' piece Thor had given him, he knew there were few natural heat sources that could make the metal malleable. On earth, uru was harder to come by than adamantium and vibranium combined, and three times the bitch to work with when it held any sort of enchantment. But outside of earth it appeared far more often. Shit, maybe Doom's plating had been made of it. It would explain a lot.

"Cheery," Tony muttered as pebbles fell down the cliff face, clattering and chittering like something unholy in the dark.

"The dwarves are not known for their cheer."

"Are their names adjectives?"

Thor cats him a quizzical look, confusion evident.

"You know, Sleepy, Grumpy, Dopey?"

"I do not know. I have rarely had contact with them, and never the need for their names."

"Weren't they the ones that made your hammer?"

"Of course."

"And you don't know any of them personally?"

"Once, a few, but I doubt a one of them was involved in the crafting of Mjolnir."

"Sounds like a story."

"For another time. It is one I dare not recount whilst in their domain."

"Definitely something I want to hear later."

"It would be prudent not to ask them," Thor rumbled, another warning in his tone. "Should you wish to create and complete your armor."

"Gotcha. That kind of story." Which probably accounted for the delicate political situation. In turn, that lead to why the dwarves had been so quick to allow him access to their forges. Affecting a
note of caution for the potential threat of retribution through him, he stored the information away, no longer quite so eager to meet the dwarves.

The corridor ended abruptly, the walls of the cliffs falling away to reveal an open hole, like a meteor had struck. Honeycombing the jagged outcroppings were tunnel entrances, each a dark shadow smearing the stark landscape.

"Hail!" Thor boomed out, the noise so loud and sudden it startled Tony's mount, the distressed sound of the beast barely heard over the ever repeating echo of Thor's voice as it hit every curve of the wall below. "I am Thor Odinson, of Asgard."

A voice muttered several incoherent syllables that echoed in reply, too close to be anywhere but right next to them.

Tony's head barely swiveled as he tried to figure out where the voice was coming from. Left, right, down, up. No sign of a dwarf. Thor returned the greeting, if that's what it was, expression one of bemusement as he continued staring straight ahead. Tony took his cue from the god and kept his gaze fixed forward despite the temptation to mimic an owl and look everywhere for the source of the gravelly words.

The exchange continued for a few more minutes, Thor growing increasingly unhappy if his facial expressions were anything to go by, but his tone remaining even. For every volley of exchanges, each coming and going more quickly than the last, the niggling anxiety that he was about to be ripped from the horse grew until he was fighting the urge to fidget nervously in the saddle.

When the figures appeared in front of them, the air rippling until the forms of three very short, stocky, bearded men emerged from nothing.

They were glaring up at them. Glaring very angrily, resentment obvious, even if he couldn't understand the muttering that whispered between them, too low for him to hear.

"They'll lead you from here. There are other needs that I must attend."

"Yeah sure. Uh, hi guys," Tony said, smiling at the three dwarves. One of them garbled angrily at him, giving the impression of an insult, not that he could tell.

"Thor, buddy?"

"Yes?"

"I can't understand them."

"I do not understand them either, but it is their forges you must learn to work within-"

"No, like the words that are coming out of their mouths. I can't understand them."

The pure befuddlement that slackened the god's expression was not abnormal to Tony, but this was Svarterwhatever, his territory, sort of, his thing. He should know, well, if not everything, a decent chunk, right?

"All Speak. It's effects end at the borders of Asgard, I did not think- The spell is natural to me, so I have never noticed."

"All Speak. You mean the spell only works when I'm in Asgard?" Tony said, the unmistakable note of a whine pitching his voice. He was whining. Damn, this was...This was beyond bad. How
had he not been able to find a book on the dwarvish language? Why had he not considered it?

"I know not the spell, and I doubt the dwarves do either, they know little of enchantments."

"Which means-"

Thor ignored the open ended question and looked down at the dwarves again, who were growing increasingly agitated, all shifting from foot to foot and muttering more loudly, their words becoming clipped and hard. A string of syllables came out, cajoling in tone as Thor smiled the smile of 'oops' and tried to shrug the mistake off. If what little Tony could see of the dwarves expressions were anything to go by, they weren't thrilled with whatever the Æsir was saying.

Another series of volleys, the words completely lost on Tony and expressions mostly hidden by way too much facial hair didn't help other than to give him the impression that by not being able to communicate with them, he'd made some sort of grievous error. Thor grew increasingly exasperated, his voice growing more commanding and more pissed off with each exchange. When he finally leaned back in his saddle and looked to Tony, irritation pulling his features down and making his beard poof out.

"They say that it doesn't matter, since we never listen anyway," He muttered. "And that if you don't begin today, they will refuse you further access to the forges."

"You're shitting me."

"No. Stark-"

"No, it's fine. Can't be any worse than Germany." And if he was lucky, and yeah it was a long shot, they'd have beer. Lots of beer.

"Tony-"

"I got it buddy," He said, slipping down from the horse without tangling and tripping himself up in the stirrups. Plastering his best smile, oozing charm and confidence, he walked in front of the horse and extended his hand to the group, waiting for one of them to shake it.

Which was apparently not a thing on Svartlerwhatever, if the awkward silence was anything to judge by. Or maybe they just really didn't like him. His hand dropped back down to his side, although he forced himself to keep his smile.

"So where does the horse go?"

"I will take it with me," Thor told him, resignation making him sound tired. "I will return soon, Stark."

"Take your time. These guys probably have plenty to show me."

"As you will," Thor rumbled. Another volley of the foreign language and Thor nodded to them all, turning his horse and galloping off. The riderless mount followed, the sounds of galloping hooves moving further and further off. The outlines of his friend and the horses faded into the gray darkness until they were nothing, the sound the only thing to let Tony know that they did in fact exist.

Incoherent mumbling next to him forced him to look down. Not as far down as Thor was forced to look down, but he had a feeling he was going to develop a crick in his neck after awhile. The trio turned and began walking down some path they could obviously see that he couldn't, but he
hurried after, surprised at how quickly, how surely they moved along the rocky curve.

Within seconds he could decipher a curved path running along the basin, swirling around, lower and lower. Order became apparent in the chaos of tunnels, each lining up along the curve, further apart than appeared at a cursory glance. As they passed a first, and then a second, he thought he heard the sounds of clattering coming out from the darkness, muffled and indistinct. The muttering of the dwarves ahead of him muffled what little echo came out from the shadows.

Further down the spiral until they were in the deepest part of the basin, walking into a tunnel, the chill immediately lessening as warmth and humidity hit him like a wall in the dark. Immediately stifling the urge to flinch in the heat as it grew in increments, Tony followed quietly.

Contrary to popular belief, he was not claustrophobic, although most of the world had decided he was after his experience in Afghanistan. Who wouldn't be after a three month vacation in a cave? But he wasn't, couldn't be if he was going to survive in a suit that was considerably smaller and more restrictive than a cave. He'd never had a problem with small spaces, he just preferred open space, providing open room to think.

He wasn't overfond of darkness though. Lights were a sign of life, even the tiniest blinking a signal that some piece of tech was alive and operational. LEDs were a comfort he was uncomfortably aware of missing, the blinking lights as much a night light as everyone joked his arc reactor had been. In the current, almost absolute darkness, the lack was never more apparent. There weren't even torches on the wall to make it easier to navigate the rough hewn floor.

But he managed not to stumble or otherwise make a scene, not until the bloom of orange red in the distance appeared, a pinprick dot that demanded his attention, disorienting him when he looked away, remaining fixed in his vision. Chewing the inside of his cheek nervously, he looked ahead at the pinprick, the hole in the darkness, eyes sliding this way and that to try and avoid the almost painful contrast.

But the closer he came, the more oppressive the heat grew, the worse the light was. He could feel his pupils growing small, could feel sweat beading his forehead.

Red-orange-yellow

Phantom fire spiraled inside of his bones, coiling tight and blooming out at once.

Yellow-gas-light-blue

His vision blurred, shadows dissipated until there was nothing but light.

Chemical-blue-blinding-white

He could taste iron in the back of his throat, like flecks of metal mixing with the bile that surged up, acrid like smoke and cinders, filling his nostrils.

Something hit his leg, made him feel like it was breaking in half like a scorched twig as he fell to one knee, eyes still on the flickering colors just ahead. Sounds echoed around him, guttural and angry. Not Doom's rolling drrawl, or Jarvis's elegant clip. Not his own voice screaming inside of his head. Lights exploded in his vision, not the hellfire blaze that had been threatening to consume his vision, but the sudden explosion of bright lights that came with a sharp blow to his head, knocking him out of the fire and back into his own throbbing skull.

The angry, guttural cursing got louder, right in his ear like someone was shouting directly into it, spittle hitting his eardrum. Pushing at the source of the vibrations, he blinked rapidly, the two
sounds, the one in his head and the one outside of it, crashed against each other, leaving him stunned and stupid.

Ineffectual waving was ignored and a solid, meaty fist made contact with the back of his head, forcing him forward so that he had to catch himself with his hands.

The rock beneath him shuddered and the angry voices stopped completely. Gasping for breath, Tony remembered the chill air of the world outside of the tunnel and briefly considered making a run for the entrance before he let out a shuddering breath and inhaled. Silence circled him, on the other side of that the sound of fire and flames, or clattering and clanking echoed.

Iron Man. He was there to make his suit. He hadn't let a cave frighten him before, or a goddamn missile, or space. He was not going to let fire fuck with him now.

Pushing himself up, he got back to his feet and rubbed the back of his head, letting out a weak chuckle and shrugging at the dwarves, all of whom were watching him closely, dark, deeply set eyes glittering forebodingly in the flickers of light. None of them moved to hit him again, which he considered a definite plus the way his head was throbbing. His leg hurt too, a phantom blanket of needles in his calf that made him limp for the first few steps before he forced himself to ignore it. The dwarves began muttering again, hurrying to take the lead. He slowed, grateful to get behind them.

The tunnel opened, and Tony was ninety percent sure he had stepped into the inspiration for hell.

Clanks and clangs, the metallic sound of metal on metal echoed over the sound of the fire, which was just beyond the wide outcropping, just beyond and beneath, if his eyes were playing trick on him, although the light was so brilliant it was difficult to tell. The black stone glowed unnaturally in the orange and red light, rough, almost granite like stone forming steps above them, jagged spikes where more forges were housed.

Everyone on the level he was on had stopped their work to stare at him. Sweat dotted his forehead and back, slid down uncomfortably, itching his skin. Not daring to scratch, he gave a friendly wave and smile, careful not to show any teeth. The inside of his cheek was still throbbing from where he’d bitten into it and the pervasive smell or iron had only gotten worse.

"Hi guys," He managed.

The voices immediately started, mixing together into rapid fire baritone chatter that reminded him of foreign businessmen he’d charmed into deals almost as important as this one. Tracking facial expressions and tones the best he could given the abundance of facial hair and sounds of the forges, he watched and kept his smile firmly in place. The general consensus was that none of them wanted him there, and most of them blamed the oldest dwarf present, distinguished only by the fact that his whole beard and his hair were silver white, smudged with either black or coal, which he couldn’t tell. Odin's name cropped up several times, and even Thor's. But not his. Maybe they didn't even know his name. Hands flew in increasingly violent gestures as the volume of their voices grew, until the shouting carried over the din of the forges over them.

In other words, nothing was getting accomplished, which under other circumstances would have been hilarious. But not now.

Searching his brain for something, he crouched down, acutely aware that he was bringing his face to fist level of short, stocky men with chests like barrels and arms like decently sized tree trunks. Fingers light, he quickly scrawled out his approximation of the language he'd learned in Asgard, simple asking if they could read it. The oldest stopped, eyes zeroing in on the dirt (or soot) he was
writing in, the words obviously ill formed, but distinguishable. The others quieted, following the example of their 'leader'.

When he nodded, Tony continued, wracking his brain for words he'd memorized but hadn't used. Coding would come more quickly, but he stayed with it, taking a painfully long time to say that he knew they didn't want him there, obviously (which earned a few derisive noises) but that the sooner they got to it, the sooner he would be gone and everyone could go back to their normal lives. Taking them for a fairly straightforward bunch, he didn't bother with delicacy, hoping they would appreciate bluntness over tact, honesty over diplomacy.

The pause that followed was broken only by the shuffling of feet. He didn't try to stand, staying at their level while he waited for the oldest to act. It wasn't long in coming, the dwarf bending to use a gnarled looking stub of a finger to scrawl beneath his stilted writing. As words appeared, Tony's heart began to sink. Despite being unable to understand all of them, he got the gist.

'Splitlip is name. You will apprentice before allowed to touch an anvil. The bellows Asgardian.' Or something very much like it.

Well. At least the names were adjectives, although if they honest descriptions of the owners, he couldn't tell. Beards were really beginning to piss him off. Ignoring the resentment roiling beneath the surface of his smile, he wrote out a quick, informal thanks and stood, knees straightening without so much as a pop. At least he had that going for him. His new body didn't hint at any of the myriad injuries he'd accumulated on earth.

Splitlip snarled something at the others, who scattered as quickly as they had gathered. Tony watched them go back to their respective tasks, the sound of hammers striking metal quickly creating a resonating din that assaulted his ears and reminded him of the cave.

Yinsin would have been fascinated, and probably kicking his ass up and down the walls for getting killed.

Splitlip walked over to a giant bellows that looked too big for a dwarf to operate. As if to prove him wrong, he reached up and pulled it down, creating a rushing sound. Then he let it go and looked at Tony. Nodding despite the overabundance of resentment he was feeling, he took Splitlip's place and pushed the bellows down. Air rushed through it easily, taking no more effort than squeezing a squeaky toy from earth.

"Antiquated stress reliever," He said in a bright voice through a smile he didn't feel in the least. Splitlip ignored him entirely, seeming pleased after a few more pushes continued in a steady pattern and walking over to an anvil where a long cylinder of metal was waiting. Tony watched him, concentration almost completely focused on the dwarf as he continued to work the bellows.

There didn't seem to be a lot to it, whatever the dwarf was doing. Hammering and folding, the long cylinder smoothed out, he rolled it, hammered it, and rolled it again. The metal glowed red hot, making Tony's stomach roil dangerously. The indescribable heat of the forge itself was enough to make him want to cut and run. His workshop had been cold, freezing even to the people that weren't used to being in it. Even Natasha had commented on it. Cold was good for electronics, kept them from overheating. The forge was hell compared to that, reminding him uncomfortably of things he didn't want to think about, that his mind shied away from every time the memories came close.

'Armor. Armor.' It was a mantra he whispered in his own mind again and again as he watched Splitlip. Whatever the dwarf was doing appeared simple, but within several turns the cylinder became a smooth spear, a single piece of blade and tang that was more staff than tang. The dwarf
worked rhythmically, his whole body moving in time to the work he focused on, the hammer striking the metal without the tinny sound Tony had expected. The resulting reverberation was deeper, resonating through the forge like the baseline of a song. Too focused to take notice of the others, he let himself find a beat inside of that rhythm and continued watching, trying to figure out how the dwarf was shaping the hunk of metal, because between each turn it grew impossibly more ornate. Even lacking detail it was still a wispy cloud of quickly thinning metal curls, as though the spear blade was being teased out like cotton candy into some unfathomable fractal.

There wasn't any magic that he could see, but there had to be something, because the spear turned into a staff, burning red and malleable in the dwarve's hands as he worked, it's top a mathematical spiral that even Tony could spot the rhyme of, if not the reason for. Perfect in it's asymmetry, the equation he saw spiraling within the pathways was entrancing in it's complexity, a code he could almost grasp but not quite.

A puzzle that had obviously distracted him a smidgen too much if the sudden glare in his direction was anything to go by.

Splitlip shouted something at him, whatever had existed of the spell completely dashed on reality as he picked up the pace, working the bellows harder as he tried to see what the dwarf was doing next. But the little bastard had moved so that he was blocking Tony's view. Probably intentionally, the prick.

The fractal given form teased at his brain, the austere lines of orange red no longer burning his consciousness as he considered the twining, curving slopes. If he had seen the finished project, he would have only seen a uselessly ornate piece of shit, more show than use. But he'd watched it coming together, and somewhere between steps he'd fallen into it, seen something that had hinted at something, but whatever it was, he couldn't figure out. Steel trap that his mind could be (when he wanted it to) the lines were already fading, losing significance and becoming nothing more than filigree uselessness, nonsensical and theatrical.

Maybe he'd imagined it. It wasn't unusual to see patterns within any shape, was impossible for him not to, given that he'd been born to be an engineer, that breeding reinforced by a lifetime if study and work. But there had appeared to be purpose, something more than math and science but only just barely.

Shrugging it off as dwarven magic, something he probably couldn't learn and would never have the inclination to, he turned his gaze back to the bellows, the wood darkened by decades, possibly centuries of dirt and soot, the smudges almost obliterating any trace of the grain. Which was just as well, because any time he tried to focus on it his head began to hurt, and the only other options were Splitlip or the fires beyond the forge, which made his head hurt even more.

Breathe in.
Up.
Breath out.
Down.

It was the closest he'd ever gotten to intentional meditation, even though Bruce had attempted to coach him through a million different chants and exercises. It was a bitter irony that made him chuckle despite himself.

And when the dwarves put their hammers down, when Splitlip moved away and cast the staff into
water, steam rising like smoke from a wildfire, he barely noticed, losing himself in nothing was working so well.

Well, not nothing. Not exactly. But he supposed Bruce chanting in two three out two three didn't count as nothing, but it had been enough to lose himself in, to keep him calm and make him forget the oppressive heat that pressed in from every side, that threatened to smother as it seeped into his pores. The poke to his side was as abrupt and shattering as the strike to his head had been however long before. Looking down he saw Splitlip hold a wooden staff as gnarled as his fingers. The dwarf wrote something in the dirt, reading vaguely as 'done today go home'.

Nodding once he let go of the handles and realized he'd worked up enough of a sweat that his shirt was soaking and that his whole body hurt. Splitlip followed the other dwarves to a door he hadn't noticed before and, knowing better than to assume any sort of filial after work drinks, Tony walked for the single tunnel entrance he could see, grateful the moment he hit the darkness. Several degrees cooler than the forge itself, he pushed Bruce's voice away, no longer needing it even though he wanted it.

Best not to think about that.

The tunnel was an uphill slope going back, barely noticeable before but to his suddenly burning legs and heavy arms it was a ninety degree angle. Each step made him feel more and more like Sisyphus, wanting to give up and roll back down. Maybe he could just sleep under the bellows. It would save him the trip back on the Bifrost. And a ride on a horse. He wasn't sure which sounded more unappealing, debating with himself and creating a pros and cons list as he walked.

The horse was sort of smelly, having the undeniable animal scent that any animal had, apparently even in a land that thrived on magic. It took longer, made too much noise, had the potential to throw him (which was why he didn't ride on or in things he didn't have complete control of, mechanical bulls and human beings aside) and it was white, which he suspected had more to do with color coding to Thor than anything else.

The Bifrost was quick but made him feel like his brain was trying to catch up to him. And magic, which counted for three or four slots of cons all on it's own, really. He wasn't entirely sure how he felt about Heimdall either. Thor had mentioned him before, the all seeing all knowing eye of Asgard, which was damn uncomfortable now that he had met him and the watcher wasn't just some intangible name among a hundred others. What did all seeing mean, and did anyone actually have that sort of capacity? Dozens of philosophical, Thor inspired debates (because, christ, a living god in your living room playing video games was enough to either confirm or destroy the closely held beliefs of any atheist which almost all of the avengers were) about omniscience, omnipresence, omni-anything had led to the conclusion that if god in an ultimate, 'no others before me or I'll turn your world to ash' sense existed and there was any truth to the press, he was probably insane from sensory and information overload.

Tony was sticking with atheism. Thor's people were called gods, revered as deities, but they were aliens. Just like the skrull, like the silver surfer and a dozen other people he'd crossed paths with. But Heimdall was claiming powers uncomfortably close to the judeo-christian god he'd been accused of blaspheming with his science. While it didn't make him rethink his beliefs in the least, he couldn't stop wondering just how much the watcher saw, how he did, and how he managed to stay sane if he was aware of everything going on in the universe. Or universes. Whichever.

It was a psychological, theological puzzle, one he wasn't suited to at all, but it helped to wonder about someone else's insanity when he was dragging ass back toward the tunnel opening, savoring each degree of chill that soothed the heat in his muscles. They'd probably lock up on him because
of it, but he couldn't find it in himself to care. Not even when he felt the sweat chilling, sliding away to leave salt crusting in his clothes and on his scalp, itching uncomfortably could he find fault with the cold, allowing it to seep into muscle and bone and rid his physical body of the forge.

When the light at the other end began to come through, it was nothing like the hellish red that had been a vague threat, instead promising a cold shower and food in his future, horse and Bifrost be damned. Just about anything was worth crawling into the shower and getting the grime off of him. He'd probably burn the clothes too, fucking ridiculous for working in a forge anyway.

Once outside, he took a deep breath of truly fresh air, the cold settling into his lungs and making him smile. Any sense of being smothered vanished, the heat evaporating into nothingness.

"Hail, friend Stark!" A voice called from over his head, the unmistakable voice pinging around the basin in a series of echoes. Tony looked up, smiling at Thor, who was waiting at the top and waving down at him.

"Any chance you can get me up there Point Break?"

Thor, bless every blond hair on his head, took the hint and swung Mjolnir, following the hammer like a clinging afterthought. Tony accepted the outstretched hand, too tired to make a gay joke, and felt his arm almost pulled from it's socket. But the trip was short, and he was stumbling on his feet, landing face first in horse neck.

They really did smell.

"How was your day?" Thor asked as he swung himself into the saddle, all bright smiles and cheer.

"Split's got me working on the bellows for now," He groaned as he pulled himself up with decidedly less grace.

"Bellows?" Thor asked.

"Heating the forge."

"So you came to an accord?"

"They can read your language and I can write it, so we found a middle ground until I can speak their language," Which he would be finding some sort of translating dictionary for, or, shit, asking Loki for, the minute he could. Best to at least learn their damn language, maybe they'd think he was more than some jackass to work a bellows. "Say Thor?"

"Yes?"

"How long do dwarves live anyway?"

"I don't know."

He'd have to do more research. Hopefully an apprenticeship didn't last longer than a few weeks instead of say, a century.

"I want a shower," He grumbled, pulling at the shirt clinging to his chest.

"You need one."
So This Is What You Meant?

Chapter Summary

Tony is desperate. And bored, which is essentially the same thing.

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: I do not own characters or concepts created and owned by Marvel

Notes: I LIIIIIIIIIIIIIVE. Anywho.

Im sorry if this chapter is episodic. I tried to avoid it, but it really didn't want to be written. Just didn't, for whatever reason. But it gets the story moving along. So.

For those of you following BtC, the mystery woman was not Hel, although she shows up later (much...much later). So chew for thought or just ignore it until the later comes when mystery lady #1 pops up here.

And to all of the reviews and comments here and at tumblr I haven't gotten to, I've seen them, and you all are awesome and far more patient than should be. Thanks.

When he woke up Asgard was still dark, or as dark as it ever got, in the stages of early morning. Ignoring the balcony and the windows that looked out onto the city, he got dressed, missing the simplicity of jeans and band shirts. After pulling on his boots he walked through his rooms, seeing that the armor had been removed while he was either gone or asleep. Good riddance, and pity for the poor sucker that got bullied into wearing it.

Majhild was walking towards him, a platter in hand.

"Stark, your breakfast-"

"Just making a trip to the library, feel free to drop it on the table," He told her, offering a smile. "I'll eat when I get back."

"This is for the Prince, but I'll bring yours up in a moment. You spend an inordinate amount of time reading for a warrior."

"Knowledge is power," He winked, passing her and ignoring the feeling of her gaze boring into his back. He was hungry though, that he wouldn't bother denying, and he knew at least this morning he wouldn't skip breakfast. Compared to how Thor ate however, and apparently every other Æsir, he knew he didn't eat much. Whether it was from the pseudo stasis he'd been in, barely exerting any energy except to think, or because he was 'different', he wasn't sure yet. A few more days on Svartálfheimr and he'd probably have a better answer.

The library was deserted, giving him a small sense of freedom as he perused the titles, pulling down anything that hinted at the dwarves or Svartálfheimr. There was surprisingly little, given
that the race apparently fabricated all of their armor and a good deal of their weaponry. They weren't slaves, at least Tony didn't think so considering Thor had mentioned negotiations with them, but they didn't seem to be far from it, unless the Æsir just didn't think other races were worth writing about, which was equally possible.

By the time he finished, he had just over a dozen books in hand, most of them thick and heavy. Arms none worse for the wear after a day working a bellows, the weight wasn't bad, but it was awkward trying to carry them all and open the door at the same time. Just so, he made it out of the library and walked the halls, ignoring the odd servant here and there that quickly moved out of his way, almost hugging the walls as he passed.

Back in his rooms, a platter covered with food was already waiting, steam rising up from the meat on the plate. Dropping the books on the table, he organized them into two neat stacks and sat, opening one and grabbing his fork. The book was stilted, bad even for a history book (if that's even what it was) and the wording drove Tony a little crazy as he ate absentmindedly.

But it did cover quite a bit about Svartálfaheimr as a planet and the succession of dwarven kings. Not much up to date, so far as he could tell, but the origins of the truce between the Æsir and the dwarves was in there, a battle that raged on for years before exhaustion took its toll on both sides. The dwarves seemed to have gotten the raw end of the deal though, since their king at the time had agreed to craft armor for the warriors of Asgard as a gesture of trust and goodwill. What the dwarves had gotten out of it, Tony couldn't really tell, aside from the possession of a relic.

The word relic rubbed him the wrong way even as he was curious to find out what that meant. What relic would be worth centuries of virtual enslavement to Odin?

Devouring the too stilted description of the agreement of the truce, Tony tried to find any nuances that might give something away. But between the archaic language and the unfamiliar terms, he couldn't read anything between the lines. Taking a bite of something that tasted almost like an orange with a bit of apple thrown in, Tony flipped past several pages and paused when he came to a new chapter.

Sharing the realm were apparently elves and trolls. He decided Asgard lost the title of Tolkien Land to Svartálfaheimr. Elves. And trolls. And dwarves. Apparently not all of the realm was a barren rock tundra, although a decent portion of it was. There were also forested areas that the book said were in direct opposition to the mountain chain that ringed the planet like an equator. It probably was, Tony reflected, eyes on a diagram that showed different perspectives of the sphere. The more he read, putting one book aside and picking through another, and another, the more he was quietly impressed.

The forge was not unique, as he had initially thought, being one of a dozen scattered throughout the mountain ranges. The dwarves were also not just blacksmiths and miners, but a greater majority of them traders or warriors. The most brilliant were blacksmiths though, something Tony chuckled at until he remembered what he had seen the day before. Whatever Splitlip had been doing, he had been convinced it was magic. But from what he had gathered, the dwarves didn't have many magicians or sorcerers. Magic just wasn't natural to them, not like it was to other races. That the best and brightest went into the forges was something of a surprise until, once again, he thought about the way the staff had come into being.

If there was no magic involved, then there was skill and a natural mind for mathematics, like a Pollock painting in several dimensions. Far more impressive than 'looking pretty', that meant there was some sort of assumed functionality. But that's where his thoughts came to an abrupt wall, because he couldn't figure out what that functionality was. The suits he'd created had all been
designed to work within various parameters, each detail meant to enhance or cater to a certain need. Streamlined minimalism, smooth functionality with a little bit of color because that's just who he was. But the paint job didn't detract from the suit's overall function. The curves and spirals of the staff were intentional, precise, he was sure of it. He was sure they were made for something more than shock and awe factor. But what?

His thought process was completely derailed when a knock sounded on his door, the vague image of the fractal in his mind shattering into so much dust as he got up and opened the door.

Majhild was standing there, a basket full of clothes in hand.

"You needed new clothing for your time in the forge," She told him, voice prim when he only stared at the basket dumbly.

"Oh, awesome. Thank you," He said, taking the basket from her. "Not to knock the clothes or anything, but no one seems to know what dressing for work is," Tony joked, doing his damnedest not to slam the door in her face and begin exploring the contents of the basket. He couldn't see one tiny flash of red, and that was more than enough to recommend it to him.

"You ruined your other clothing, can't take the heat of a forge. That's not fit for royals-"

"Which is good, since I am most definitely not a royal, or even particularly noble," He promised. She gave him a look that reminded him very much of an unimpressed Pepper, inciting a wave of homesickness that was just barely held back by relief. At least someone in Asgard wasn't a kowtowing brownnoser.

"It's plain, but it'll do. Tell me when it falls apart."

"Yes ma'am," He said, unable to resist the urge to salute. It earned him a sideways glance but nothing more before she turned on her heel, not even a good bye or a good day to allude to politeness. Tony decided then and there that he definitely liked her, if only because she wasn't a mindless little robot for Odin. Closing the door, he turned around and dropped the basket on the table, digging through folds of what felt like rough cotton, the sort of handmade stuff he would have expected of a viking society. Everything was cloth, no leather to be seen. There weren't any boots, but the ones he had would fit over the new pants easily. Black clothing mostly, a few white shirts thrown in. Everything still had long sleeves, but it was all lighter than what he had been wearing. That none of it had any decoration or embellishment to be seen was the best part of all.

None of Thor's colors, nothing to mark him as the champion, or even exceptional. He could probably walk through the city without being noticed at all, which had a plethora of positive implications.

Ignoring the books and the last of his breakfast, he took the basket to his room and dropped it on top of the chest holding his other clothes and changed, tossing his discarded clothing haphazardly on his bed. As he tugged everything on, he immediately noticed that while it didn't feel as soft as the clothes he'd been wearing, it didn't feel as heavy either. Like a ten year old that had just gotten his christmas list dropped in his lap, he felt more awake than he had before, energetic and ready to stop sitting.

It was still early when he walked outside, but definitely morning, any darkness gone as he bypassed the stables completely and opted to walk down the path and towards the gates. People passed him without a second glance for the first time since he had woken up, and the anonymity was the third greatest thing he'd ever felt. Once past the gates, there were more obvious signs of life, people moving to and fro. Unlike the day before, no one looked at him, no one pointed or whispered. No
one cared. Whistling tunelessly, he took in more of the city from a considerably shorter angle. Keeping his eyes on the ground, it wasn't entirely bad. There were kids, which he should have expected, but hadn't thought of. Apparently the Æsir were born and grew, not created in Odin's magic cave and hatched in adult form.

Through the main road through the city, he noticed things he hadn't the day before, some of it recognizable, some of it not. Mostly it looked like merchants opening shops for the day, too busy to notice a stranger walking past. There was the oddball warrior that was armed, either patrolling or on some small mission of their own. Almost bucolic in it's peace, Tony wondered how Asgard was a nation of warriors when it didn't appear much different than any medieval European city. At least it had decent sanitation, the smell he associated with war torn and third world countries he'd visited noticeably absent.

Where the city ended, the bridge began at the simple, almost plain gate. Upon closer inspection it inspired little faith, translucent like crystal and hinting at rainbows. The fact that it had supported him, Thor, and their horses the day before didn't resolve any of the anxiety as he stepped onto what he had considered Jane's little fascination. Briefly he wished he was more of an astrophysicist because the equations she'd spouted at the drop of a hat had always sounded more theoretical, and he wasn't comfortable walking on 'theoretical'.

But he did, surprised that it felt more like smooth stone than the slippery ice it reminded him of. Smooth but not slick, every step was steady, the structure beneath him solid. Growing more assured with each step that didn't crumble beneath him, he watched the colors flashing beneath his feet. It really did remind him of light running through a crystal, maybe if he'd taken some acid to enhance the flashes of color. Thor had mentioned it being broken before, by Mjölnir. Briefly he considered asking about pieces, because there had to have been pieces if it was broken. Maybe something to take back to Jane when he left. But Thor would want to know why he wanted it, and there was no equipment present to test it. He didn't know enough about the equipment he would require to create it either, so saying he wanted to examine a piece would be a bad idea. Something else to think on, file away as he considered the composition.

A disturbance at the end of the bridge drew his attention away from the bridge itself. The observatory was spinning, glowing like a small, contained star that grew brighter with every rotation. The bridge itself remained solid, steady, as if the observatory's movements didn't disturb it in the least. Looking away when the light grew too bright, Tony watched the colors along the bridge grow brighter, moving almost in time to the sound of the observatory turning, like a pulse ran through it in time to the observatory itself. When the colors began to slow he looked back to the end of the bridge and saw that the light had dimmed, the spire coming to a stop at the top.

Unsure of what, or who, to expect, Tony started walking, keeping his head down as he pretended to study whatever lay under the bridge, which was nothing except the waterfall of an ocean that was just sort of there, no rhyme or reason at all to it's existence. The darkness was not entirely unlike the night sky, the patterns of stars in the distance too different from anything he'd seen to place as something from his own galaxy. That the waterfall crashed into space and disappeared wasn't comforting, reminding him too keenly of a dark place filled with a floating belt of dead, broken planets and the chittering of things better left unimagined.

But when the boots came into view, an obvious limp dragging one slightly behind the other, Tony looked up and bit back the initial shock that tried to numb his tongue.

Loki, bruised and looking like he'd lost a fight with a few Hulks, continued walking, still bleeding chin held high.
"Good morning princess," Tony greeted in an overly cheerful voice instead of asking what the hell had happened to the god to make him look like that.

Loki didn't say anything, but the fact that Tony found himself on his back seeing stars in a very cartoon sort of way was more answer than he had really wanted.

"You're still a prick. Good to know some things never change." He called out to the retreating form.

There was no more violence, magical or physical, in retort to his comment, which was just as well because it felt like someone had knocked him in the head with Mjolnir.

After most of the cartoon stars had faded and he was able to see the normal ones that were just barely visible in the daylight, he pushed himself up and ran a hand through his hair, already walking back towards the observatory. Heimdall was waiting, sword tip resting on the bridge and hands resting on the pommel looking for all the world like he was staring through Tony at something much more important. Which he might have been. Or he might have been mentally channel surfing Asgardian porn.

And he could probably read minds, if the gold gaze zeroed in on him like a magnifying glass over an ant meant anything.

"Are you going to tell me you can read minds?" Tony tried.

"No," Heimdall told him, his voice giving nothing away, including an irritation Tony was sure he felt. If even Odin could be pissy with him, then surely Heimdall wasn't immune to feeling at least a little bitchy.

"No, you can't read minds, or no, you won't tell me?"

"Neither."

"I know you can say more than one word at a time."

"I can, Champion, I simply do not wish to. To Svartálfaheimr?"

"Yeah. By the way, how do I get back? Or are you going to be looking for me?"

"Call my name, I will hear it."

"So all hearing too?"

Heimdall didn't deign to reply, walking to the pedestal and pushing the sword into it. The room spun, speeding up, and while it was still bad, it didn't feel as disorienting as the day before. Instead of his brain being a good few yards behind it, it felt like it was coming right along, if maybe spinning like a top inside of his brain pan. Svartálfaheimr was chilly, chillier than it had been the day before, but not bad at all, the cool sinking past the lighter clothing and feeling more refreshing than annoying.

"Wonder if he ever takes a break," Tony questioned aloud as he started walking, seeing the tracks the horses had left the day before. Obviously not a well used path, he supposed there wasn't a lot of reason for anyone to visit the mountain chain itself. From what he had gathered, anything made in the forge was handed off to traders to deal with. Probably another reason the dwarves hadn't been too keen on his presence, they probably didn't deal with other people, or other races, invading often, if ever.
Preparing himself for another day at the bellows, he wasn't terribly disappointed when, after walking what felt like a good mile or so and then following the spiral down to the bottom of the crater, Splitlip only pointed to the bellows without even looking at him. No one else was either. Bracing himself, he ignored the flickering red orange that threatened just beyond the outlines of the smiths and focused on the bellows, attempting to steal glances at Splitlip's work. The dwarf however, seemed to know his intent and blocked his view every time.

"This is bullshit," Tony muttered, stalking across the rainbow bridge and into the city proper. Another day at the bellows, the latest of countless many, had left him feeling surly and ready for a fight. It had been over two months and the dwarves were still ignoring him, Splitlip always pointing to the damned bellows when he walked in every day before blocking any view he could have gotten of what they were making.

Completely oblivious to the statues of giant warriors holding up the arched gold ceiling above him, he didn't even bother making eye contact with those around him as they moved to get out of his way. He felt sweaty and hot, the slight breeze only serving to remind him that he had been sweating and salt was literally crusting his skin. The closer he came to the palace, the fewer people he saw. Sentries watched, for all the world appearing like gilded statues with glass eyes. It still unnerved him, when he bothered to think about them, how easily he could have become one of them. Majhild had explained all of the sentries were einherjar, and the best were relegated to guarding the stronghold at the heart of Asgard.

He was almost to his rooms when he saw the last person he waned to see, but one of the few (only) he needed to speak to.

"Loki," He called out, forcing all of the frustration from his tone.

The prince didn't turn, didn't even acknowledge his presence as he continued walking.

"Loki," He tried again, hurrying to catch up with the god's long legged stride. Was it him, or was Loki walking faster? "Damnit, Loki, hold up."

An exasperated sigh just barely filtered into the air to be heard before the prince stopped and turned, green eyes giving him a barely discernible once over before his lip curled in a sneer of obvious disgust.

"What, Stark?"

"I had a favor to ask," He said, finally closing the distance between them.

"A favor. You? Of me?" The taller áss asked, brow quirking in haughty amusement. "No."

"Just a small one," Tony tried, his smile wide as he turned up the good old Stark charm in an attempt to appear civil. "Tiny, really," He added, holding up his hand and pinching his fingers closely together.

"Any favor for Thor's Champion is too big," Loki sneered before turning on his heel. Determined to speak to the lesser of two evils (and Loki really did seem the lesser when compared to Odin) Tony lunged forward, caught Loki's elbow and held fast. The prince turned, green eyes blazing with cold fury as he glared down at him.
"Do not think to touch me," He snarled, pulling his elbow away and shaking it like Tony's touch was a physical taint he could rid himself of.

"Look, I just need another translating dictionary, for dwarvish. There's nothing in the library for it," Tony tried, hand dropping to his side. "Nothing big."

"I would sooner hang myself with my own intestines."

The visual was enough to make Tony blanch, remembering some of the stories he'd read a little too clearly for his own tastes. It was enough to put him off trying, stomach roiling when he wondered if that had actually happened.

"Sure, thanks," He muttered, turning on his heel and beginning to walk in the opposite direction, not even caring that it was taking him further from his room and the shower that practically had his name written on it.

"Why not ask the king?" Loki said, voice barely raised but carrying well.

"He's a bigger prick than you are."

An amused sound echoed behind him, derisive and hollow. Steps echoed off of the walls, the sound of hard soled boots heading away from him.

So much for that. Pricks, all of them.

Taking the long way around, he didn't attempt speaking to anyone in the halls, not even Frigga when he saw her walking along, eyes distant. Disliking her almost as much as Loki and Odin, he kept to his side of the massive hall and was so intent on ignoring her that he barely noticed she looked completely oblivious to his presence. Chalking it up to the insanity inherent in inbreeding royalty, he gratefully turned the corner and was out of sight. Once back in his rooms, he stripped as he walked, clothes falling to the floor haphazardly as he headed for the shower.

Cold water felt like heaven, or as close as he was ever going to get, apparently. Tony relaxed, increment by increment, as the heat of the forge began to seep out of his bones and muscles. It felt like he always carried it out of the mountain, the oppressive heat that made his blood too hot. The light still bothered him from time to time, less so now than it used to. But the heat never dissipated, not until he was under cold water, savoring the foreign chill before even considering washing away the grit and grime of work. The cold afforded him respite, his eyes closed to block out light. The respite offered him time to think, time to plan without anything nagging at his senses and interfering.

He would have to speak to Odin. Or maybe Frigga. Even if the queen wasn't his favorite person in the world, she was a damn sight better than Odin, who still gave the impression of being an owl, one that was considering whether he was worthy of being a meal or not. Frigga hadn't spoken to him since the night he had been presented to the Æsir, and hopefully two months had been long enough for her to forget that he'd behaved like a dick.

Wondering if Majhild could help him, Tony quickly washed all of the sweat, dust, and grime inherent in even entering a forge and got out, towel drying off and walking back into his bedroom. Before he could get dressed, a neat stack on his desk demanded his attention.

Three dictionaries, massive in size, dominated the workspace. A note stuck out from the pages, written in a language Tony suspected was dwarvish.

"Well, whatever," He muttered, expecting another quip and crumpling the ball up, tossing it to the
corner of the desk before getting dressed in loose, baggy clothing. He took the books out to the main room where he could spread them out and sat down, eyes scanning each volume’s title. The first two books were set up in the same scattered way as the english-asgardian dictionary had been, and he didn't have anything in dwarvish to compare them against, so that wouldn't happen for him this time. But he was around the dwarves, so at least he would learn to speak the language. And better yet, there was a phrase book, the third volume and the smallest of the three, that would hopefully help him start.

Instinctively knowing he would butcher the language because, shit, the dwarves spoke like they’d spent their childhoods swallowing gravel and gargling broken glass with the tar from a carton a day, but he would at least be speaking in a language they could understand. It had to count for something.

Settling down with the phrase book, he nodded a quiet thank you to Majhild when she came in with his dinner and mostly ignored the food in favor of reciting the phrases aloud, jumping back and forth so he could quiz himself on meaning. By the time he was actually tired, he felt he had a decent grasp of the language.

Tony walked to the forge feeling better than he had in some time. Hoping for something besides the monotony of enforced silence, he walked past Splitlip, not even bothering to see where he pointed as he waved and said hello. Not bothering to see if the dwarf was surprised or pleased, he immediately began work on the bellows, turning the phrases over in his mind. Most of them were standard, the sort of things you would say if you had just met someone, not if you’d been working with them for months in a forge. But if he said something, anything, at least it would prove he was making an attempt at some sort of integration and respect.

Hours passed, the same movements repeated. He worked purely off of muscle memory, mind turned inward as he tried to combine phrases, followed paths and attempted to compensate for the lack of knowledge.

When Splitlip's voice boomed and the others began to pull away from their work, Tony let go of the giant bellows and wiped the sweat from his face, wishing for damn air conditioning and a lab instead of a forge.

Calling a casual farewell, he strode past the others, determined not to make a big deal, to not pander to them.

Until he felt something hit the back of his head, black dots immediately hazing his vision. Turning on his heel, forced smile in place, he saw the dwarves gathered together, looking every bit as pissed as he felt.

Splitlip began snarling angrily, a gnarled finger pointing and waving, movements jerky as he continued on whatever diatribe he was spouting.

"I don't understand," He tried in dwarvish, wondering if he had butchered the language that badly. But that only made things worse, Splitlip's already red face going puce and spittle flying as his voice rose, carrying through the forge. Added to that, the dwarf was walking forward with purposeful strides, coming closer to Tony. Not afraid of the dwarf in the least, he stood his ground, refusing to back up when there was only a couple of feet between them. The shouting continued,
harsh, guttural syllables echoing in his head as he looked down at Splitlip, wondering what the fuck he had done wrong.

Something came out of nowhere, a dark blur that was gone in a flash, but Tony felt the strike against the side of his head even as his teeth rattled in his mouth and his brain blanked entirely. Clutching his head, he wasn't ready for the solid blow that connected with his stomach, forcing him to bend and bringing him to eye level with the blacksmith.

Pure, unadulterated fury made eyes set deep in a wrinkled, leathery face shine, and Tony knew that he had royally fucked it up.

Then he was being pushed on his ass, watching as the smith walked away as fast as his short legs would allow. The others were already turning away, walking to the door that led to god only knew where. One by one they filed through, not a one of them turning back to look at him before the door slammed shut.

It didn't take long for the ringing in his ears to fade, and the realization that he'd been had and humiliated by, of course Loki, didn't come long after that. Spitting the name as he pushed himself to his feet and walked back up to the surface, he considered all of the ways the Æsir had punished him and began to make up a few of his own, most of them more creative and precise, at least to his thinking.

By the time he shouted Heimdall's name, he was reengineering the magic muzzle they'd put on him before shipping him off, making it more akin to a shock collar. He was so involved in his own revenge fantasy that he barely noticed the familiar lurch before he was standing in the observatory.

"You seem displeased," The áss said, tone neutral.

"Dandy, as always."

"The prince is fond of pranks."

Tony spun on his heel, pride smarting more than his stomach did.

"What the fuck did I say anyway?"

"You implied that their mothers were employed in a brothel and their fathers were trolls."

"I-"

"The dwarves take lineage very seriously. And they are prone to react violently when their families have been so grievously insulted," Heimdall added, tone apathetic, although Tony would swear the gatekeeper was smiling.

Tony ran a hand through his hair, flinching when he hit a tangle.

"Shit."

Heimdall said nothing, not that Tony was expecting much. Certainly not condolences. Groaning and turning away, he didn't even see the guardian smiling at him, already trying to figure out how to mitigate the damage.

He could blame Loki, but he didn't think that would go over well. It had been his own damn fault for trusting him in the first place. He should have known better. But he had asked Loki, and he had to accept that he had screwed up. He also had to figure out how to apologize without getting
brained by whatever it was the dwarf used to hit him. The little fuckers could move fast when they wanted to, and he was actually pretty impressed that with all of his newfound strength, the old blacksmith had put him on his ass so quickly. Surprise counted for something, but still, he had packed a hell of a punch. His stomach still hurt, and if he could bruise, he was pretty sure there would be one when he looked.

"Damage control," He muttered to himself. Except that had always been Pepper's department. He'd rarely made apologies for himself, and somehow, he had to figure out how to do with with people he couldn't even understand.

The first thing he noticed when he entered was that no one looked up at him. The second thing he noticed was that they were not looking at him very carefully, as though it required effort to keep their eyes on their work. Knowing that Splitlip was the leader, and that if he was going to make amends, it would have to be to him first. The others followed the elder's lead, and damned if he was going to waste even more time.

Striding purposefully to the older dwarf, who was working a flat piece of red hot metal, he sat the book in his hands down next to the forge, the note he'd written in the Asgardian language peeking from between the pages of the prank translating dictionary. Not even bothering to wait for a response, he gave a respectful nod the smith probably didn't even see, and walked away.

Even though he kept a calm, collected facade, he was mentally praying to the abstract, maybe-there-most-likely-not christian god (because screw the Æsir, he was not going to pray to Odin) that the apology was accepted. He didn't do humble well, but he'd tried. Damn had he tried. That he was doing it in a letter only made it worse, but he had no other way to explain that he'd been an idiot, which is exactly what he had said. Admitting that he'd allowed himself to be duped by Loki to a bunch of guys that probably thought he was a moron anyway was almost too much for his ego. But the suit, and Earth, and the Avengers, he'd kept all of them in mind. There was no feasible way to get home without access to the forge. And to access the forge, he had to admit to being a moron, something he wasn't used to doing with any degree of seriousness to anyone but himself.

The chill air felt thinner in his lungs as he escaped the tunnel, cold and sharp in his lungs.

"I was pretty shit as a human being," He says, looking up at the sky. "But I wasn't all bad. So maybe, just maybe, you could give me a little help here."

As expected, there was no answer. Also absent was the hope for intervention, the sudden appearance of Splitlip calling out for him and using whatever hand gestures to tell him to get his ass back in the forge. Obviously he had used up his magical movie script moments when he'd died and woken up in fucking Asgard.

"I hate this place," He muttered. At least hell would have had better entertainment.

Tony, arms loaded down with the thick volumes on dwarvish history, passed by Loki on his way back to the library. He was doing a damn good job of ignoring him from the moment he came
around the corner, and would have continued doing so had Loki not stopped and smiled at him, the indulgent, mocking sort of smile that Tony remembered from childhood and business meetings. Condescending, his brain finally called it. It was Loki's default expression.

"Quitting so soon?"

"Read all these, need to see if the library has anything useful."

"You could always ask them."

"You know, I could, but Splitlip's not too keen on distractions. Good work ethic and all that," He said, sidestepping the obvious jibe. Loki's eyes narrowed minutely, his smile never faltering even as his gaze grew considering.

"Tell me Stark, how did it feel to be brought low by a dwarf?"

"Dunno, I'm still processing it. But hey, maybe we can form a club. Asses kicked by a lesser species anonymous," He returned cheerfully. Loki's eyes widened, glare frosty as his mouth opened to retort. Ignoring him, Tony barreled on, false bravado and cheer hiding how desperately he wanted to punch the godling in the face. "Too long, right? But think of it, AkbalsAnon. Or just Akbals. Sounds like we're choking on hairballs, which works, I think. We could drink coffee and tell each other how it was a fluke, and hold hands and assure each other it wasn't our fault, really. The whole thing can conclude with group hugging and a prayer to Odin."

Loki sneered down at him, but said nothing. When he turned and stalked away, his cloak flared impressively behind him.

"Does everybody have a goddamn mood something here?" He muttered, continuing on to the library.

He didn't bother putting the books back in any sort of order, he wouldn't be able to remember where he got them even if he wanted to, and he didn't particularly care. Almost a week of waiting and the dwarves hadn't gotten back to him, which meant reading on them was useless, at least for the time being. Book after book was jammed in to where it could fit until he was too frustrated to stay, remembering Loki and wishing he had something better, anything, that could have made the asshole shut his trap and poof into a cave somewhere to cry. Temper quickly getting the better of him, he gave up trying to fit the books anywhere and stacked them on top of other books, reasoning that there was a librarian somewhere.

Expletives still ringing in his head, he left the library behind him. Maybe he could learn on his own. Books had to be available. He could do the training thing, earn some cash, and hit the market. It would take longer, but it wasn't as if he didn't have time. As long as he pretended to at least play ball, Odin had to stay off of his ass, and with some luck, he'd never have to deal with Frigga again, at least not directly.

"Let me be that lucky," He muttered to no one in particular. The door to his room slammed shut behind him, the only hint to how well and truly pissed off he was.

Faced with nothing constructive to do, he wrote a quick note and left it on the table, Majhild's name prominent at the top so she would see it when she dropped off his food. That done, he began shedding his clothing. A shower was the only thing that seemed mildly comfortable, it was one of the only places he could think anymore, ironic given that he'd let himself fall into smelly funks when his mind had been obsessed with other, more important things.
Cold water almost burned, ice against his skin. Shuddering through a heavy exhale, he gave in to the shivering that wrecked his frame, focused on each muscle moving of it's own accord. He had known his body once, had to get used to the feel of a changed heart, skin that felt too tight. He still didn't know this one, not well. The muscles were the same, placed, the same, but the bulk felt different, the weight of them still spastic twitch provided new insight, a distraction from his current problems.

The whirring was gone. He still woke some nights, hand clutching his chest because the sound was gone and he startled into wakefulness sure he was going to die, reliving Obidiah removing the core with a leer changing into Odin or Loki, even to Thor or Frigga. Each had a different smile, a different expression but they still took it, and it crumpled in their hands, a flickering light that died as the alloy bent into a ball, like a beer can in their hands.

Sleeping had always been difficult, but it had been mostly dream free before he'd died. The nightmares did nothing to dispel the notion that he really had landed in hell.

"Fuck." He wasn't paying attention to his body anymore, lost in another trail of thoughts that didn't lead anywhere he wanted to go.

The moment of peace ruined, he got out of the shower and dried off. His legs felt restless, his mind refusing to settle on one specific thing, instead touching on one thread before jumping to a completely different one. Settling on his day being equally ruined, he grabbed some of the clothing Majhild had given him for the forge, pulling it on and finger combing his hair as he walked back into the outer room.

The note on his table was gone. For a moment he wished he hadn't written it. It was a white flag, and the last thing he had wanted to do was give ground, no matter what his intentions were. A strategic retreat was still a retreat, and it wasn't in his nature to give. Mumbling under his breath, he left the room behind him, hoping to get to the market district and watch the people a bit, scope out the shops he'd been ignoring during his so called apprenticeship. Maybe he could find out more about the materials available to him there, or at least find a starting point for his research. Thor had mentioned magic and science being one and the same, so there had to be similarities somewhere.

"Please don't let it be with a cult," He asked no particular deity as he walked the halls. Once out of the inner wings, he ignored the guards, ignored everything, legs aching like he had run for miles but still hadn't run enough.

Ten minutes later he realized he was lost, which was almost funny, except he had no clue where he was, and there weren't any guards stationed in the halls, which seemed prevalent only in the places people inhabited, in turn making him wonder if he'd stumbled into the area where the royal bedrooms with capitals were located. The idea of Odin sharing a bed with anyone was enough to make him want to turn around, but the aching increased, and he feet refused to move the way he wanted.

Magic, fucking magic cast on him.

"You can stop any time now," He snapped impatiently, refusing to move at all.

A door opened at the end of the hall, though no one stepped out to greet him or ask why he was talking to thin air. "Fucking cheap theatrics," Echoed off of the walls as the ache in his legs grew until it felt like they would break. Giving in, he walked towards the door and into the room. The door closed behind him, moving of it's own accord.

Frigga sat on a simple chair with no back, a loom in front of her.
"Hi," Tony muttered, eyes moving over the room so he didn't have to look at one of the last people he had wanted to see.

"Greetings, Stark. I received your note."

"My note?"

"In Thor's absence I oversee the needs of his einherjar," Frigga informed him quietly, fingers still working the loom. She hadn't even tried to look at him.

"Wonderful," He muttered sourly. "So what now? I find Sif and the others?"

"If you wish, although Heimdall recently received a message from Svartálfaheimr, one for the palace. You might wish to read it before making any decisions."

"Intercepting my mail?" He huffed. "Very big brother of you."

"I know many things, Stark. I had no need to read the message to ascertain the contents."

"Then you know Loki duped me into insulting the dwarves."

"My son is known for tricks, Stark. The message is over there," She gestured with her right hand, the left never pausing in it's work. Ignoring her constantly moving hands, Tony walked over to the small table that held rough parchment rolled into a tube. Breaking the seal, he unrolled it and examined the words.

"They said I can come back," He murmured thoughtfully.

"Despite the insult given, perhaps they understand it was a mistake made in the attempt to learn."

Tony was going to retort, a snappy comeback about Loki, but a flash of light caught a thread in the tapestry and forced his attentions.

"The pattern looks like it's changing. Trippy." It was all he could think to say while her hands smoothed and plucked at threads, the shuttle of the loom forgotten as her fingertips explored the fabric. Something about the pattern made it look like it was changing, shifting slightly. It was just enough movement to make his eyes hurt, squinting at it, before he blinked and looked away. A headache was beginning to form behind his temples, the light brighter than he remembered it being before.

"It is ever thus, Stark. You have your message. Make your choice."

"Why are you so interested in this?" Because Frigga was interested, almost, possibly, invested, which assumed implications Tony didn't want to contemplate.

"I am queen Stark. Am I wrong to be interested?"

"Curious would be one thing, but you've been more-" He stopped, unsure of how to say what he meant.

"Present?" Frigga wondered aloud, answering when he foundered. "I suppose I have, Stark. Perhaps it is only that I understand the natures of the warriors that call this place home."

"Even me?"

"Even you. You are not so unique as you think, Stark. Although, perhaps the most stubborn of any
Asgardian that ever lived," She added with seriousness that belied the observation. "I think it will do you in good stead to remain so."

"You just want Odin to kick my ass."

Frigga huffed, the first sign of amusement Tony had noticed since entering the room. Her hand smoothed over portion of the tapestry, pausing before she answered.

"One day you and Odin will come to blows. But not for a long time, Stark, a long time even to our race. Be content with that," She told him, voice sober, any trace of amusement gone.

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"Good day Stark." It was a command more than anything, and Tony knew he wasn't going to get anything else out of her. Rolling his eyes, he left the room, letter clutched in his hand. Any promise of getting in a fight with Odin, however near or far off, was lost to the realization that he wasn't completely screwed as far as the forge was concerned.

He could go back, which was what he had been hoping for. The language was too stilted to read much into it, and he figured it was because the runic languages the Æsir used was a second language to Splitlip, one he didn't use often. If there was something in the tone or between the lines, he didn't know what it was, but he could go back. At worst they would laugh at him, at best shrug it off to his stupidity and let it go.

And maybe, if he was lucky, they would stop forcing him to work at the bellows.

"You seem in good spirits," A voice observed dryly.

"Just got back from your mom's," Tony replied, voice airy and smile firmly in place. He didn't even bother looking behind him, although from the sounds of it, Loki was quickly gaining on him. Damn long legged assholes. "Apparently the dwarves accepted my apology and have welcomed me back."

"My mother spends this day at her loom," Loki snipped, voice dry. "She takes no visitors."

"About that, she used fucking magic. The damn restless leg syndrome spell? Yeah, about that. It sucks. And the loom, yeah. Really psychedelic. She could make a killing on Earth selling at burning man."

"You lie," Loki snapped and Tony paused midstep, head turning to look at the god, smug smirk firmly in place.

"Your job. What, mom never let you into her sewing room?"

The dark expression that pulled itself over Loki's face before disappearing completely was enough to answer the question for him, and Tony, unable to stop himself, widened his smile and shrugged. "Guess she must like me after all."

That he found himself on his ass, again, sporting a headache to rival all headaches, didn't stop him from smiling as he listened to Loki stalking down the hall.
Tony walked into the forge, expression carefully bland when he noticed everyone staring at him. As if nothing had changed, Splitlip gestured for him to go to work at the bellows. Determined not to screw up his second chance, he nodded, smiling benignly, or at least as much as he could muster, and went to work.

At first he tried to focus on the meditative state he sometimes reached, the time away from the forge obviously diminishing his resistance to the almost overbearing light and stifling heat. Breathing in a hot, dry gust of air he settled into the movements, timing them with the rhythmic sounds of hammers striking metal.

Metal. Metal was home. Even if the forge was hot, and he hated the heat, even if the light was like that light, he could hear the sound of metal being pounded and shaped, he could smell burning chemicals, heated beneath brute force, a slightly familiar scent, one he'd missed.

Back in a cave, deep down in the planet (because earth apparently didn't apply as an adjective or noun when you weren't actually on it), the realm, whatever it was. Contrary to what everyone assumed, he wasn't claustrophobic. If he had been, being in his suit would have been the equivalent to one of the lower circles of hell. He wasn't claustrophobic, didn't even mind caves. Yinsen's voice drifted back as he worked a sheet of alloy into something resembling a bucket, a helmet, the memory more real than it had been in years. His hands moved in time to the sounds, muscle memory as he lost himself to that time and that place, nowhere near the forge.

By the time Splitlip called an end for work, his sweat had soaked through his shirt and pants, though he didn't feel any worse for the wear physically. More than eager to get the hell back to Asgard where cold water waited, he was already at the entrance to the tunnel when he heard Splitlip's voice shouting something incoherent. Turning back, he saw the dwarf gesturing for him to follow the others through the door.

Not wanting to give the elder time to change his mind, he had to keep from bolting for the door, half worried that it was a joke and the dwarves would slam it shut in his face as recompense for the prior slight, however unintentional. Thor had given the impression that the dwarves didn't forgive easily and had memories longer than any of the Aesir.

But the door stayed open until he was through, even though he had to bend to get through. The
ceiling was at a comfortable height for him, once he was past the entry however, allowing him to straighten and observe. Already the others were throwing leather aprons and other gear onto a rough hewn table, revealing slightly less stocky bodies, although the impression of barrel chested didn't disappear. Voices spoke in the guttural language he didn't understand, voices blending until he had trouble discerning who spoke in what tone. Splashes began to sound, water from previously unseen buckets sloshing as they passed them around, cooling themselves by wetting their hands and faces.

Feeling too tall and too conspicuous, he watched the others as they finished and left the room through another door. Splitlip remained, eying him critically before nodding to the bucket. Feeling out of place again, Tony splashed water on his face and let the forearms of his sleeves soak in some of the cold, savoring the contrast before setting the bucket down and following the dwarf through to the other room where the others were already drinking what looked like beer and talking amongst themselves, seated at a rough wooden table sided by benches.

Splitlip left the room for yet another entry, and not wanting to push his luck, Tony sat at the far end of the table, reminded uncomfortably of boarding school lunches where he'd sat alone. The feeling of alienation was all the more complete for the lack of a mutual language and the curious stares he felt as much as saw cast in his direction. It wouldn't bother him under other circumstances, but he knew he couldn't play people he couldn't communicate with, at least, not when they were so dead set against him.

Something thumped heavily on the table in front of him, shattering his concentration as dust flew into his nose and set off a sneeze he couldn't stop. Hand over his mouth, he looked from the dusty tome to Splitlip, who was at eye level since he was sitting. The dwarf was holding several thick pieces of paper and two sticks of what looked like graphite. Tony waited patiently while the elder sat himself with a groan and fumbled with the papers. The book was pushed to the side so he could begin writing, the same scrawl from the message before appearing on the page. Once finished, the dwarf pushed it across the table for Tony to read.

A rebuke for not asking a dwarf to teach him the dwarvish language, written in the Asgardian text. Tony looked up and nodded, watched while Splitlip pulled the paper back and began writing again. The second message was question, asking him why he wanted to learn.

Accepting the graphite, Tony tried to quickly write that he wanted to learn, and learning required communication. Not adding any more than that, he gave the paper back, noticing that the room had gone quiet, the others watching the two of them likes hawks. Splitlip considered the message before quickly jotting down something else. Resigning himself to literary tennis, Tony turned the page and almost smiled, keeping his expression in check because the weight of the others watching only heightened his awareness of how easily he could blow his chance. The question was an understandable one, why learn the dwarvish language when they already had the Asgardian one in common. The answer was easy enough, Tony scrawling it with little thought. After all, they seemed to value honesty and bluntness over diplomacy, and that was one of the few things he excelled at socially.

When the dwarf read the line, he actually unbent enough to laugh, although a normal human being wouldn't have called the creaking bark a laugh. Tony allowed the first hint of a smile to twitch at the corners of his lips, eyes still fastened on the smith.

Instead of another message, Splitlip only nodded. He seemed more amused than approving, but it was a definite start. He tapped the book twice before pushing it at Stark. He then pointed at the door, which Tony understood implicitly. And even though he wasn't allowed to stay while the others drank and talked about whatever, he didn't mind. Like he'd admitted in the note, he didn't
Want to push his luck.

Feeling inordinately pleased with himself, he left the forge behind and took a visceral pleasure in the cold air that began to seep into his damp sleeves. Once clear of the tunnel itself, he opened the book, reading it all the way down the path.

It was an older translating dictionary, one the dwarves had devised for dealings with the Æsir. Tony wondered if it the traders were given one, and why when the Æsir all seemed to possess one charm or another that gave them Allspeak. Filing that question away for later, he flipped through pages, soaking in the format. It wasn't made for someone that initially spoke or read asgardian, and there weren't even concrete definitions of words, merely word to word translations. Resigning himself to playing with the Asgardian translating dictionary, he couldn't stop what he knew what a shit eating grin as he came to the arrival point and called for Heimdall. The book snapped shut just as he felt himself tugged forward.

"You seem in better spirits on this return," The guardian pointed out, already pulling the sword free of the pedestal.

"Could be," Tony smirked, already walking for the observatory entrance.

"I would not boast to the prince of your bounty."

Tony paused, head turning so he could see the asgardian. Heimdall, ever impassive, didn't even blink at what had to be a dour, displeased expression.

"Any specific reason I can't point out that his fucking prank actually got me exactly what I wanted?" Tony promised himself he didn't sound like a five year old being denied the pleasure of saying 'In your face'.

"It would not be unusual if he sought to rectify his mistake."

The meaning wasn't lost on Tony, and for the millionth time since he had woken in Asgard he damned magic.

"Thanks for the heads up," He finally said, turning back for the entrance. Heimdall didn't reply, although Tony was getting more used to the half conversations the man offered. And the advice was invaluable, considering Loki could probably wave his fingers at the book and switch everything around.

It raised a more interesting question though, when he considered it. The odds were clearly against him, as long as Loki had magic. There wasn't much he could do that would piss Loki off, not when actually getting close enough to do something would probably get him knocked out or worse. The lack of tech was disheartening, without it he didn't have much to work with at all. Almost everything he did focused on the suit, and he didn't want to give Loki any ground to exploit that.

Conversely, Loki didn't seem to have a lot of weak points he could exploit. Obviously the adoption thing was out, given that the only people that knew held the title of monarch, and multiple things rubbed him the wrong way about using someone's race against them. There was an unspoken rule about the child, or children, and Tony knew even he wasn't enough of a dick to use that against the bastard. There was the obvious disdain the warriors three and Sif held for magicians, although Odin was a prime example of favoritism, something that Tony still wondered at.

The only obvious thing involved two people, one of which was mostly absent and the other he wasn't particularly fond of.
"Fuck it," He sighed aloud, telling himself it wasn't worth it. While keeping his head down wasn't his strongest suit, he'd done it before, and for people almost as batshit insane as Loki. The stakes were higher this time, too. Survival and revenge were afterthoughts, minuscule compared to the goal.

"Get back home," He reminded himself. He couldn't afford distractions.

He didn't get invited back to the rooms beyond the forge the next day, or the day after that. Unsure if his patience and manners were being tested, or if they were waiting for him to prove he'd been studying the book as promised, he didn't push it. Instead of attempting to show off, he worked the bellows and kept to himself. The only difference he noticed was that Splitlip no longer tried so hard to hide whatever it was he worked on each day. The crumbs of what could be acceptance were enough for him at the moment, his mind still watching the dwarf shape metals into everything from blades to overly elaborate cups. Most of it was easy, although one of two pieces mimicked the first staff he'd seen, the lines weaving together as he watched, but he looked away when the math began to slope and curve into places he couldn't comprehend.

The queen didn't ask to see him again, and he spent half of his time in Asgard in the shower, washing the detritus of the day away. The other half was spent either in his rooms, reading over the translating dictionaries and memorizing them, or in the city, people watching and learning what he could about trade, since science and magic both seemed beyond the understanding or care of the people living there. Most people were warriors, some had families, but all of them seemed to take the touches of magic and science in their lives for granted, focusing on other, more imminent tasks.

Several fountains dotted the area, all of them marked by statues of the gods that resided in Asgard. The fountains implied there was running water of some sort, although whether it was from plumbing or magic, Tony couldn't tell, and the one time he'd tried asking someone, they'd stared at him as though he was losing his mind. But the amount of people carrying buckets to fetch water also implied that at least some houses didn't have running water, which seemed out of place, given the grandeur of Asgard. The fountains themselves were ostentatious, on par with any city art piece of prominent figures. Odin was prominent, as well as Frigga, but there were others he didn't recognize. He didn't bother to ask, comparing the statues against memory. The æsir were big on symbolism, and from what little he had read on mythology (or had Jarvis read to him) he was able to pinpoint a few different names. Thor made a few appearances, and there was even one of Loki, although it was in an out of the way place, accidentally stumbled over when Tony had gotten lost.

As with the assumed lack of running water in places, likewise he noticed that there were people that looked tired. Not everyone was happy, although there was none of the mutinous fury that lead to rebellions. Figuring that not even heaven was a utopia, Tony shrugged the weary gazes off. Everyone had to work, and not everyone was suited to their work, fair enough. That wasn't uncommon in any society. The only ones he saw that looked perpetually happy on the streets were either children or warriors presumably off duty, weapons still strapped to their backs or sides.

The one thing he did notice, and that did bother him, was that he didn't see other races in the marketplace district, which he assumed would have been a given, considering Asgard didn't seem to have many natural resources. If the dwarves mined and forged for Asgard, what other races and realms traded with them? And more importantly, how did they travel between worlds? Tony had been watching the Bifrost, and it almost never activated, the tower of light impossible to miss from any part of the city.
But the only people in the market district, indeed, anywhere in Asgard, were the æsir. In the weapons shops where the owners boasted of dwarven forging, elvish craftsmanship, or giant parts (something he didn't want to consider overlong) there were only Asgardian traders. What few imported foods came in were promised to hold the flavor of whatever lands they'd come from, but it was an Asgardian behind the stall. Even the artisan stalls were owned and worked by æsir despite claiming imports from exotic places he had trouble pronouncing.

And there was nothing, nothing at all from Earth. Tony knew that whatever was made on Earth would hold up and sell well compared to anything else in the market, which begged the question of why there was absolutely no sign of Earth's presence in the myriad items being hocked in stalls or shops. And the closer he looked, the more he noticed a distinct lack of technology of any sort. As an Avenger and the general go to guy for tech information in Shield, he'd been allowed to examine alien pieces of tech, and he couldn't find a trace of it among the scattered baubles.

Assuming Asgard did trade with other planets or realms, that meant they that it was only with those few, with no sign expansion at all.

The more he examined, the more the idea was driven home until he was in his room, eyes on the ceiling as he contemplated the closed society.

Odin obviously knew about the outside worlds, about aliens. Frigga and Loki too, even Thor was aware. But the general populace wasn't. A percentage of their population came from earth, but there was no sign of earth present, possibly not allowed. But there were items, at least, that came from those other places. The gauntlet that had caused them no end of problems on Earth had been in Odin's possession before, if Thor was to be believed.

The library hadn't offered anything on commerce between realms. Which was why he was waiting, for once.

On cue, the door opened and Majhild came in, eyes disapprovingly zeroed in on his feet resting on the table. Dropping them down to the floor, he pushed his books aside and let her set the platter down before asking what had been bothering him.

"Who oversees commerce here?"

The question obviously took the woman off guard, her brows pinching together in a decidedly unattractive expression before she shrugged. "I do not understand."

"Who makes the trade agreements and policies on imports and exports?"

"The All Father," She answered easily, as if it was obvious. "Although his son has long taken over most of the duties."

"Thor?" Tony asked, mental fingers crossed.

"Prince Loki," Majhild corrected.

"Thanks," Tony sighed.

"You do not like him."

"I knew him in my former life," Tony said slowly, unsure of how much the servant knew, if anything. "We didn't exactly get along."

"Funny that," Majhild snorted. "You two seem much alike."
It was only the fact that Loki was a Prince that kept his mouth shut. Servants talked, he knew that better than anyone, it was one of the reasons he'd worked so hard to get Jarvis up and running in the first place. And speaking badly of Loki, their prince, would only make his life harder, he knew it. So he didn't respond in the multitude of ways he could have, wanted to, in fact.

"Thank you?" Despite his best efforts, it still came out sounding like a question. Majhild's only response was an indelicate snort before she turned and left him alone. The moment of silence after the door closed behind her was broken by a string of colorful, inventive words that would have made Pepper smack him with a stack of contracts.

He didn't ask Loki about commerce between realms. Instead, Tony redoubled his efforts to learn. It was almost like being at MIT again. No one understood him, and he didn't really care to talk to anyone. He felt like he was surrounded by idiots and morons, people that couldn't see past a limited perception of the world. The only difference, aside from the obvious, was that he didn't have alcohol or music. He absolutely refused to call the harp and horn blowing shit he'd heard before music, and the alcohol had been filed away under 'What prison mash tastes like' and 'Not that desperate'.

Learning though, was what he did best, especially when left alone. The lack of teachers didn't bother him, and if he lacked direction, he was able to set himself straight after the first few false starts. Nightmares woke him up when he tried to sleep, and in turn he began midnight strolls to the library.

If there was a discernible change to the seasons, Tony didn't notice. Rarely looking at the sky, the only thing he kept an eye out for in Asgard was the light from Heimdall's observatory. Everything else slid past his awareness unless Majhild brought it to his attention, which wasn't often enough to be of any note.

It was a monotony. To keep himself sane he sketched diagrams and blue prints from memory, starting with the arc reactor and moving on to the iron man suits, each one laid out in perfect detail. His thoughts and worries about his new physiology figured into notes and plans, necessary alterations so that the suit could support him. Monotony was hell, and boredom was the same as stagnation and stagnation was death. He even stooped to terrifying the healers a few times, asking for books on æsir anatomy and physiology. They hadn't existed until Tony asked, and even then he'd forgotten by the time the oldest healer had written a couple for him.

So it was less a pleasant surprise and more a shock to his routine benumbed mind when Splitlip gestured for him to follow the dwarves back through the honeycomb of rooms in the mountain. Tired from sleepless nights and continuous work at the bellows, he couldn't muster enough eagerness to appear overeager. If anything he had to rally strength for something akin to a genuine smile as he followed the others back and dunked his head in the cold water, the heat of the forge retreating just beneath his skin to settle into his muscles. Shaking his head like a dog, he ran his hands through his hair and followed them to the room and sat at the end of the table, head braced in his hands and dripping water onto the table.

A mug was set in front of him, filled with frothy beer from the look of it. Looking from the mug to the person across from him, he noticed Splitlip settling himself down, a similar mug in front of him and a piece of paper and graphite.

A long sentence formed on the page before it was pushed at him. Tony smiled, accepted the graphite and easily answered that he had finished the dictionary but still hadn't learned to speak the
language, as it was based on learning to speak Asgardian, not dwarvish. Splitlip nodded sagely as he took a long pull from his mug. Careful of the taste, Tony took a pull from his own and was surprised when a decent stout settled heavily on his tongue. A good, chewy beer, if a little left of normal, and he immediately loved it. Not bothering to look at Splitlip he drained half of it before setting the mug back down. The older smith was staring at him, obviously suspicious. Tony grabbed the graphite and quickly wrote his opinion of Asgardian ale and how it was nice to find a decent beer off of earth.

It wasn't the easiest form of communication, and even though they kept to niceties it took forever. But it was a step forward, and he would take everything he could get.

That day Tony began learning how to speak dwarvish. Apparently his accent was appalling but hysterically funny, and everyone wanted to help, if only because he had the novelty of a talking parrot.

When he finally called for Heimdall, he might have been a bit drunk, and smiling like a moron. When he slept, he didn't dream.

Tony was reading through a book on various metals when Majhild came in, an unladylike noise of disapproval breaking the silence just behind his head. Automatically his feet dropped from the table and he tilted his head back. It didn't feel like dinner time, and he noticed she wasn't carrying the normal platter.

"This is a disgrace," She mumbled, crossing her arms under her bosom. From Tony's angle it only looked weirder, like something out of a cartoon.

"Reading?" He tries, because he knew exactly what she was talking about, they'd only covered it a dozen times and no, he would not organize his papers and books just to make someone feel better about a room they didn't live in.

"This mess. You should let me put order to it, at least. Ever since you chased the maid out-

"She was touching my stuff," Tony defended lightheartedly, giving his best charming smile. Majhild was having none of it, possibly because the maid had apparently been crying, honest to god bawling, when she'd gone to Majhild for guidance on the whole thing. He might have been a touch overzealous, but the actual sight of someone, a physical someone that was not him or Majhild in his rooms had set him on edge. The invasion of privacy had felt like a physical violation, his own marginally safe place compromised for the sake of order, of all things.

"Your stuff," Majhild muttered, rolling her eyes to stare at the ceiling. The lengthy pause was probably her counting to ten, knowing his luck. He couldn't remember making anyone else cry, so he was hoping she just hated his mess. "Stark, the prince has returned. There will be a feast tonight, one I have been told you are to attend."

"I'm sick," Tony answered automatically, which it was. It was the same excuse he gave every time a feast, banquet, or other official elbow rubbing sort of shindig was mentioned.

"Frigga says that excuse will not work tonight," Majhild harrumphed. Tony knew the queen would never buy it, he didn't even know if the Æsir could get sick. But she'd let it slide before.

"I'm not fit for public consumption at the moment."
"And yet you must at least pretend to be."

"You are absolutely no fun and no help." But he was a little proud that she didn't try to assure him that he was people friendly.

"You're not the one that pays my wages."

"Why Majhild, you conniving, sneaky-"

"Careful Stark, I am also the one that brings you your food."

"I could always start sneaking back into the kitchens."

The servant made a dismissive sound, plosive enough to sound like a laugh. "After last time?"

"In my defense I wasn't there to attack or anything. I just needed something sweet. Night time cravings and all that." And had gotten a face full of something that resembled a dead chicken. Smelly little bastards, whatever they were. And all he'd really wanted was a couple of twinkies, maybe a starcrunch. He'd never ask a kitchen maid for help finding 'something sweet' ever again.

"You're still going, you know."

"Fine," He groaned, and noticed Majhild took his petulance as well as Pepper did, perhaps better. She wasn't berating him or giving him a list of what to do and what not to do. "So Frigga?"

"Knows her son will wish to see you. And you spend far too much time in your chambers. I think everyone has forgotten the prince even has an einherjar." It was a fairly common admonishment, one he had quickly grown inured to. The woman was obviously confused about why a famous, honored soldier didn't cash in on the perks that came with said fame and glory.

Tony never said that was all for the better, because Majhild hadn't hit him. Yet. It could still be coming. The past couple of months she'd really begun to come out of her shell, personality wise, and he was smart enough to know she could probably still surprise him.

"So I have to wear the fancy duds and brush my hair?" It came out sounding like a petulant whine, and he even tried to pout, although he knew it probably looked insincere and awful. She didn't put up with genuine manipulation, and he had batted around the idea of her being Loki's babysitter. God only knew how jaded someone would get after looking after the prick when he'd still been a knee high brat. But his obvious, over the top attempts seemed to amuse her and kept her mood light, which was all for the best since every other servant in the Odin family stronghold acted like their emotional wiring had been permanently shut off.

"It would be advised."

"Yes ma'am," He mocked, although there was no bite to it. Majhild didn't smile, but he had the feeling she was sort of doing it anyway. Deep inside. Beneath the stoicism.

"If only the prince was so tractable as you."

"Thor's always been pretty easy going."

"Not that one."

"Oh."

"Make yourself ready. I won't have it on my head if you're late." And like that she was leaving,
customary swish of skirts her own metaphorical puff of magic smoke before the door closed and he tilted his head back upright, a slight crick announcing itself.

A feast. Lovely. And the volume on metals was one of the first genuinely interesting books Split had given him, a next step into his apprenticeship. An eye opening step that actually made him feel like he was making progress. The metals in the book were all worked in the forge at some point or another, and the variety was mind boggling. And heartening. Somewhere there had to be decent replacements for the arc reactor. The book was thorough enough he might not even have to do much experimenting to find them. If he could find time to read it.

Smile, make nice, do the pretty, all while thinking about getting back to work. So, same as always.

"At least some shit never changes."

It was an audible, grudging acceptance and his personal signal to get up and stretch before heading into his bedroom and changing. The clothes he wore into the forge had become his normal attire. Majhild, initially scandalized by it, had given in and found him more, though not without much disdainful sniffing and not so covert glares.

Thor's Champion, Tony Stark, once playboy, millionaire, genius, philanthropist, running around in what was considered pauper's clothing. Craftsmen's clothing. Not so different from his tennis shoes and band shirts, he guessed. Pepper would accept it with a smile and everyone else would play it down to him being eccentric. Or obstinate.

No one ever thought about being comfortable.

Knowing that feast meant 'formal formal' instead of just 'royal casual', Tony pulled on the most understated shirt he could find, resigning himself to the leather pants and vest, even to the strange jacket Majhild had dropped in front of him, saying it had been a commission as a gift from the queen. The unspoken 'be grateful' had hung in the air. He hadn't gotten around to writing a thank you note, possibly because he was still figuring out all the fucking buckles on the damn thing. All in all, it was worse than a rubiks cube. Those he could solve in a matter of seconds. Or create a program to solve them for him if he was feeling especially lazy.

Once everything sat right, he ran his hands through his hair and then smoothed his goatee down. It was brushed, in his opinion. A quick look outside showed it was still late afternoon, probably too early for anyone to show. Dressed up with no place to be for awhile yet, he went back to his table and bent over his papers, grabbing the thick volume on metals and cracking it open to where he'd left off.

He made notes when he read anything promising, and there was a lot that looked promising. Despite himself and his opinions on the subject, he even read the parts about their reactions to enchantments, whether they held magic, absorbed it, amplified it, were shattered by it, or, most importantly, nullified or repelled it. Useful information he never thought he'd care about that was suddenly filling pages of his notebook with an absentminded, english scrawl. The graphite he used, what he favored over quills, covered the side of his left hand as it moved across the page or rested over it.

It wasn't until his door opened and Majhild was clearing her throat that he looked up from the book he had been reading.

"Time to go?" He asked, closing the book and standing. That his back didn't pop when he stretched was a testament to his new body, an unfamiliar ache taking it's stead.
"A little past, but you can still be there within a respectful time if you hurry."

Respectful, not respectable, he didn't miss her meaning at all.

"Thanks, sorry I got caught up. See you later." It was impossible to miss her giving him a once over and nodding in approval, as if to say 'today, today you look like a noble' or some other such thought he didn't feel like commenting on. Tony didn't give it any thought when he stepped out, wishing instead that she could at least walk him to the banquet hall, since he really had no idea where it was. But the caste system in place didn't allow him, the great and powerful Oz, to associate freely with servants. Or so she'd told him, more or less.

The guards were about as helpful as always, and Tony made it into the hall when half of the seats were empty.

Devious, smart Majhild, telling him he was late. Smiling at the tactic (it had taken Pepper three years to come to the same conclusion) he spotted Thor at the table and headed that way, noticing the empty seats next to him.

The booming echo of his name when Thor spotted him was at least 'Stark' and not 'Starkson', which was a definite improvement. Tony gave his best charming smile and took a seat to Thor's left, immediately offering his fist for a first bump, which Thor actually returned without any hesitation.

"Been awhile Point Break. How's kicks?"

"Many villains, many battles," Thor said, his voice reflecting the smile he was wearing. Tony didn't have it in him to press for details, to bring up their mutual friends. Maybe later, when there was nothing around Thor could bludgeon him with.

"Sounds fun," He hummed agreeably.

"Indeed. And you, how is your armor coming?"

"Funny thing. Haven't started it yet, still studying the materials," Tony answered easily. Thor's expression fell, just a little, but enough for Tony to notice. "I don't want to blow myself up in the process of making it," He added for the god's benefit.

"It would be such a loss," A new voice said, and the hair on the back of Tony's neck stood on end. Loki was walking behind them, pulling the chair on Thor's other side out and sitting down gracefully, as though he wasn't wearing two tons of leather and metal, outfit more elaborate than Tony's by a decent margin.

"Brother!" Thor boomed, the greeting filled with an affection that had been muted when he'd greeted Tony. Watching carefully, Tony saw Loki stiffen briefly, only relaxing when it was obvious Thor would not move to touch him. A moment of silence strained the air with a tension even Tony, self centered, insensitive jackass that he was prone to be, could feel.

And abruptly shattered when Thor's name was called out by several far too cheery, far too loud voices. Tony hid his wince by shifting his chair slightly and looked up at the ceiling, saw that it was glass and that the two moons were closer than normal. A double moon eclipse coming, maybe?

Chairs scarped on the floor, hellos and welcome backs and tell us everything sounded over the table, obliterating the sound of the other guests entering the hall.

Nothing official occurred, there were no toasts or announcements. Horns didn't blare when Odin
and Frigga walked in, side by side. But the room was devoid of speech, the sounds of people chattering replaced by the sound of chairs scraping as everyone stood. Not wanting to attract undue attention, Tony stood with them, eyes on the golden table.

He wanted a beer. Dwarf beer. Make, not size.

When Odin and Frigga sat, everyone else sat. Food was brought out, and everyone politely watched Odin.

Odin ate.

Frigga took a sip of mead.

Step-two-three.

The noise resumed.

Thor listened to his friends talk, all of them recounting hunting ventures and comedic mishaps. Tony ate a little, drank sparingly, and appeared to look interested.

As the night wore on and Thor fell deeper into his cups, he began telling stories about earth. Tony didn't mind hearing 'Midgard' repeated over and over, but he did mind that Thor spoke so sparingly of his teammates. Hydra attacks, the Mandarin, several 'accidents' involving Reed Richards dicking around with science he shouldn't have, the stuff Tony remembered. From Thor's perspective, it almost sounded like a child's game, not life or death. He didn't talk about the team's rhythm, how they fell into battle like a dance and managed to keep each other alive. But then, maybe that was because he didn't operate on the assumption that he could die (but then again, Tony hadn't either). There was a lack of depth to the stories, and Tony knew it wasn't because of him. Thor was barely aware of anyone but the warriors sitting across from him, expressions rapt as they asked questions or made sounds, nodded and congratulated at just the right times. Living laugh tracks.

Tony watched it all silently, not responding when the others did.

It wasn't until Sif excused herself that the tone of the conversation changed. Suddenly Tony was a part of the group, the quiet anticipation of something making him curious.

"Time to go," Fandral said as he stood up. "We've made merry long enough under your parent's eyes."

There was a round of agreement and Thor shouldered him, a drunk, happy smile on his face. "Come, Stark. There is much of Asgard you have not yet seen."

He really wanted to get back to his book, but the easy smile and possibility of more information regarding the Avengers made him nod and get up, following the tipsy prince out of the banquet hall. Valstagg, Fandral and Thor all listed slightly ahead of him, Hogun falling back to follow them, keeping pace with Tony. Glancing over at the warrior, Tony tried to place his origins. Maybe he was originally from Asgard, born and raised and all that jazz. But he hadn't seen any asian flavored warriors running around. None. Maybe he was an einherjar.

Tony was still trying to figure out what the polite way to ask someone if they had died or not when they walked out of the palace and into the night. A stiff breeze had picked up, brushing against Tony's nape to chill the heat that he hadn't realized was stifling him. Wishing for his plain clothes, he started violently when three loud, drunken voices suddenly started singing. Off key and half tuneless, the song was a slightly bawdy jingle, more limerick than anything. Even the ever vigilant Hogun seemed to relax as they walked away from the castle, the voices growing louder and louder,
and shit, had they been hiding being that drunk?

Tony had to reevaluate Thor's acting skills. It was either that or he was completely oblivious of himself, which was just as likely.

The whole thing made Tony feel conspicuous, and he hated that feeling. Once they reached the city proper, people began to take notice of them, heads turning to watch the drunken trio stumbling, arms over one another's shoulders and singing one ribald ditty after another. But no one seemed to mind, no one glared or gave the slightest indication that the behavior was inappropriate. They probably recognized their prince and his friends.

The further into the city they get, the more it looks like they're leaving the housing district and walking a block that has a few bars and inns. That anyone would need an inn in Asgard was mystifying. Even more strange was that Thor stopped in front of one, pausing to take a drink from a drinking horn, and where the fuck had that been hidden this whole time?

"Fortify yourself Thor, it's been some time. I'm sure the women have missed you!" Volstagg laughed, and it was a laugh that sounded vaguely like the bellows in the forge, heaving wind and pressure.

It only took a moment for the warrior's meaning to become clear to Tony.

"I take it this isn't an inn," He said flatly.

"No, friend," Fandral laughed, face tinged pink and eyes far too bright, drunken bright. Tony didn't correct him on the 'friend' bit. He had willpower, he assured himself. "The finest courtesans reside here. Midgardian women won't be able to compare."

Tony looked from the trio in front of him to the plain, if well kept facade of the building. A brothel. An unassuming brothel.

The other plain, quiet buildings that appeared to be inns were probably the same thing. It was almost funny, he thought with a touch of hysteria, that he hadn't considered the warrior class having a pleasure district. Obviously they had to do something besides fight and drink. Fight, drink, and fuck.

He'd slept around. A lot. And he'd done a lot of questionable things. But he'd never paid. Sure, women had followed the scent of money and glamor, and maybe there wasn't much of a difference, but there was still a line, one he had set the moment he'd known what fucking was. He had been, was, Tony-Fucking-Stark. And he didn't need to give a woman money to get a blowjob.

"Ah, you know, guys, it's been fun, but gotta jet," He told them, shrugging the statement off with a smile as he stepped back, away from the building.

"You have never been hesitant before, Stark," Thor said, consternation apparent despite his too obvious drunkenness. "Come, make merry."

"Not really in the mood tonight man, working on a project." That, Thor would understand, because Thor had walked in on him working on a project and been miraculously, impossibly ignored. "Maybe some other time, Point Break. Go have fun- merry making."

Too drunk on mead to notice what had to be obvious, Thor smiled and nodded, turning back to the building with his friends, who were already walking inside. Even Hogun slipped in, the door closing behind them, as though leaving it open too long would let the secrets of the people inside slip out.
Trying not to think about Jane, because that wasn't his relationship to worry about, Tony quickly made his way out of the pleasure quarter, taking note of his surroundings so he could avoid it in the future.

"You don't have a moral horse to ride," He muttered to himself. And he didn't. He'd been the epitome of every derogatory name in his prime, the post Pepper breakup marathon stunning even the news and the team. But he'd never paid, was reminded too much of who he was when the question of money came up. And maybe his name and notoriety had been a different form of currency, one he hadn't considered before, and hated considering now.

"Let it go, Stark," He growled to himself, wondering why it was such a big issue.

The walk back to the palace was mostly quiet, interspersed with moments of noise, the sound of people on the streets either closing their shops or ambling along, from one place to another. Warriors walked, there were even a few groups as drunk as Thor's had been, walking along singing loudly of battles and women and whatever else it was that the æsir found glorious and honorable.

His leisurely stroll brought him back to the palace. Knowing the way to his rooms, at least, he ignored the other guests that were also strolling through the corridors, obviously staying for the night. Despite that, he could still feel the curious stares as he navigated the golden halls, eyes shying away from the flashes of glimmer of lights hitting metal. Not particularly inclined to meet more æsir when he was feeling particularly aware of his status, he quickened his pace, leaving them behind before any had a chance to call out the butchered name most æsir seemed so fond of.

The door to the inner halls that housed his rooms opened just as he was reaching for it. Stepping back to avoid being hit in the face with a metal door with numerous sharp edged details, he saw Loki walking past, an amused sneer twisting his features.

"Back so soon?"

"Yup," Tony told him, already moving to walk past him.

"Pity that the transformation did nothing to increase your stamina."

"Keeping tabs on my love life now?" He asked, forcing a leer he didn't feel.

"Simply an observation," Loki scoffed, amusement keeping his tone too light.

"Incorrect, you're assuming. An observation would be that I'm not drunk and I don't smell like the inside of a brothel."

"Neither of which would occur in such a short time." That Loki's smile grew thin was the only thing that kept Tony there, curious about that hard line, why it looked so brittle.

"I don't pay for sex, not my style."

"Everyone pays, in one fashion or another."

"Oh, bitter. Let me guess, screwed and then screwed over?"

Teeth that were blindingly white and suspiciously sharp looking appeared between lips pulled into an approximation of a grin, a vicious one at that. Tony saw the chink in the armor and went for the throat, something in him wanting to strike out at the little bastard that had been nothing but a pain in the ass since he'd first woken up.
"Bad divorce? Cheating? Bitter custody battle-"

Tony felt his head striking the metal wall before he heard it, which was strange because it shouldn't have taken a seven second delay before church bells starting ringing inside of his ears, echoing into his skull. Loki's eyes, wide and furious, were beginning to go red. Strange. Christmasy. And he was as tall as Loki now. Had Odin finally decided to give him something mildly useful? And why the fuck had Reindeer Games decided to start-

Oh.

He was about to apologize, because the kid thing, yeah, he knew that was a fucking terrible thing to say, and if he had actually thought about what he was saying, it never would have come out, because even he had lines he wouldn't cross and because (however contrary his actions seemed) he had self preservation instincts. Except Loki didn't seem keen on giving him a chance because his head was thudding against the wall again, a sharp cracking sound resonated through his brainpan. It felt like it took longer, the second time around. Maybe he'd made a dent. After this he was never going to worry about falling out of buildings again, not when his head had gotten three times harder. His only thought after was that Pepper would weep for the terror that his skull had become miraculously thicker after dying.

The church bells rang in his head, clanging in dissonance when the back of his head made contact with the wall. Each strike of contact felt like a bolt of lightening robbing him of breath.

And then he was sliding down, down the wall into a heap on the floor, the black boots disappearing from his field of vision in the space of a blink.

Several minutes later, when the clattering rings had begun to lessen the tiniest bit and were accompanied by a throbbing pressure, a familiar blue skirt entered his line of sight. Eyes going up, he saw Majhild's horrified stare and forced his best imitation of a smile he didn't feel in the least.

There was blood in his mouth, and maybe it was all over his teeth because if anything she seemed to look even more worried.

"Don't worry, pretty sure I deserved it."

Accepting the hand she held out to pull himself up, he couldn't find it in himself to be surprised when she muttered something about bleeding all over his coat.

"Gives it character," He assured her, grunting when she threw his arm over her shoulder. From the front, he probably looked drunk. From behind, he almost hoped for a zombie headshot sort of wound, something that would fucking destroy any hope of cleaning the leather.

"Dare I ask what you did to deserve it?" She said as he leaned against her, fumbling with the door. It took him a moment to remember that it pushed in instead of pulling out. Tilting away from her to press his face into it, it was only because of her (surprising) strength that he didn't fall flat on his face in his room.

"Might have traded words with Loki," He groaned as she eased him into his chair. The world tilted back and forth beneath his feet, and his vision was blurring in and out, as if his eyes couldn't decide whether or not he was going to be blind.

"It's no secret you two can't tolerate one another, but it's never come to this," She admonished, and he felt her fingers probing the area gently. Something wet ran down his neck. Petulantly, he hoped he left a bloodstain on the golden wall, only to have the feeling turn immediately to guilt when he realized someone would have to clean it up. Clean up sucked, he knew that from experience.
Especially blood. Not to mention it would be hard to explain, and fuck if he wanted to have that conversation with a single member of Loki's family, because he knew he would probably end up as target practice for that fucking spear he'd heard so much about.

"It might have skirted near or around the topic of children," He finally admitted, flinching when she pulled hair from inside the wound.

He expected her to go silent, to gasp from sheer terror, whatever it was that the æsir did when the 'unspeakable' was mentioned. Instead, he got cuffed smartly on the back of his head, right where the wound was the worst. The church bells started all over again and his vision went from blurry to black with rapidly bursting stars on various colors.

He had known she was going to hit him sooner or later.

"You're right, you did deserve that," She muttered. But she didn't stop working at the wound. Water sloshed somewhere in the peripheral and then he felt her cautiously wiping blood away from the area.

"So it's true."

"It's not spoken of."

"Just tell me Odin didn't actually force one to kill the other."

Majhild's hands went very still, and she said nothing at all to assure him that, no, Odin had not forced one child to kill another. The bile that had been a faint suggestion of taste in his throat from having his head bashed into a wall turned into dizzying nausea, and he stumbled out of the chair, through the rooms until he was in his bathroom, not even making it to the toilet but to the stone basin of a sink, emptying what little he had eaten into it, then dry heaving when nothing was left.

"Fuck." He shouldn't feel sorry for Loki, of all people. Loki that had killed thousands of people, that had tried to take over the world with a creepy alien hoard. Loki that had almost killed Coulson, and all just to get back at his brother. Nothing could excuse the countless lives lost in the battle in New York, nothing. Tony had read the numbers in the death toll, he'd thrown funds at hospitals and clinics and construction companies. He'd toured the wards in the armor and out of it and seen children with missing limbs or eyes, had seen the memorials and graves for just as many and he wasn't supposed to feel sorry for the fucking person that did it.

But he was, and that was the bastard of it all, because whatever happened didn't excuse the graves and candlelight vigils. Nothing could erase the names of the dead that appeared on a memorial inside of the tower. Nothing. But it made it understandable, and Tony had never wanted to understand what could have caused that. He had never wanted to give reason to something that couldn't possibly have a reason.

Unsteady on his feet, he stumbled into his shower, hand barely reaching the knob to turn it before he was sinking to the floor, not even aware that he was fully dressed. The cold did nothing to soothe the heat just beneath his skin, like a bad sunburn that lingered.

"Fuck."

He closed his eyes, tried not to see the plaque inside the entrance to the Avengers Tower, tried not to see two children fighting, dying. He failed miserably, his mind coming up with a hundred different possibilities, each worse and more vivid than the one preceding it.

When something tugged at his arm, he finally opened his eyes, saw Majhild there, staring down at
him with something suspiciously akin to pity. Pity for him, pity for Loki. Who knew? Giving in to her insistent tugging, he let himself be pulled up and stripped of his clothes. Her touch was impersonal and perfunctory, medically so. Instead of dressing him, she handed him dry clothes, the clothes he preferred wearing. Pants and a shirt were pulled on with numb fingers before she let him out, water from his hair soaking the top of the shirt.

The table in the antechamber had been cleared of his books and notes, a bowl of water and a sewing kit laid out. Forced to sit down, he let her work. As she worked, she began to speak, voice distant, hollow.

"Odin did not make Vali kill Narvi," She told him, voice so quiet it was hard to hear. "But he was the catalyst. Vali heard the whispered stories of his older brother, and began to take the form of a wolf. He was still so small then, no threat at all. But he attacked Odin, perhaps thinking it merely a play at something. I think if it had not been in front of so many, when his rule was still tenuous after the war with the dwarves, it would have gone unremarked."

She stopped probing the wound and reached onto the table, grabbing a threaded needle. Tony wondered if he would really need it with increased healing abilities, but didn't bother protesting. Someone was saying something, finally, and he needed to hear the story. A foolish, stupid part of himself hoped for some sort of goodness in Odin, that he hadn't killed a child by proxy.

"But it was too close to the visions seers had been gifted with, of the All Father's death. I suppose he felt he was letting the child off easily. Maybe in time he would have freed him, after the child had learned a lesson."

The needle didn't register. Tony barely felt the thread sliding through, or the flesh being pulled together. Everything was just numb, the tugging registering more than pain.

"The prince was forbidden from changing his son back. I think he tried, despite it. His magic seemed to fail more often than not when he was asked to use it for any other purpose, which was unusual, even then when he was still so young. Vali stayed a wolf, and in time, grew more into the mind of one. I don't know how it happened, or why, but one day the children were playing. Narvi never left his brother if he could help it. And then there was screaming. Everyone," She paused, and he could hear the shudder that made her breathing hitch. "Everyone went to see what had happened. By the time I arrived, Lady Sigyn was holding Narvi to her. He was gone."

Tony felt a brief pressure and then nothing. Majhild's hands fell away and he leaned his head back, eyes still closed as he tried to process the information.

"The crime of fratricide is abhorrent in Asgard, and always comes with swift and severe punishment. Despite the prince's wishes, Vali was banished to the Iron Wood by Odin. Lady Sigyn broke ties with the Prince after that, and he left Asgard, for a time. When he came back, he seemed himself again."

Tony didn't, couldn't miss the 'seemed' even if he had wanted to. And he wasn't sure whether he did or not. Small wonder the guy had gone insane after finding out about his heritage. Any number of things could have been going through his head.

"The others, those stories true?" He asked, not really sure he wanted to know.

"The prince has sired five children, and birthed one. All have been taken from him."

Fuck. Tony knew he didn't know anything about children, about being a parent, being part of a family. But he knew, on some level instinctual level left miraculously unfucked by his parents, that
family was sacred, that children were supposed to be sacred.

"And the rule about not saying names?"

"It is the All Father's decree."

"Shitty decree," Tony muttered.

"Perhaps it is the only way he can offer condolences to his son."

Tony decided he had officially resigned as the Prince of Daddy Issues in favor of crowning Loki. Because fuck. It wasn't at all like the stories had made it out to be. It wasn't any better either, though.

"Thanks for sewing me back up." Subtle change of subject. He didn't care if he offended anyone anymore, even her.

"You need all the mind you've got, Stark."

"Very true," He agreed. A moment of tense silence fell between them, an uncomfortable one. Tony couldn't help but wonder what she really thought of everything. She seemed sympathetic, but he probably wasn't in any place to judge, not to mention she was talking about her employer, one who, if rumors could be believed, had more than one watchdog. No wonder no one mentioned the whole thing. Heimdall and whatever else was keeping an eye on Asgard would probably tell the king so they could be flayed alive.

"Hey, got a question, sweetheart."

"I'll answer, if I have one."

"How do you apologize to a powerful, angry prince for being an insensitive prick?"

"I have no answer for that Stark," She sighed. "Perhaps your supposed genius can sort it out."

"You're a saint, calling me a genius right now."

"I said supposed," She corrected.

A swish of skirts and the door opened and closed, and he was alone.

Tony didn't want to pity Loki, because he would be feeling sorry for a mass murdering psychopath. Everyone had problems, and not everyone attempted genocide to solve them. But he did pity Loki, even though he couldn't forget the plaque on the wall, the newspapers reporting the death toll, pictures of broken buildings and decimated streets peppering the statistics. Worse, he figured, was that he understood Loki. And more than pitying him, he didn't want to understand, had never wanted to understand.

Remembering the single minded hatred he'd felt, Tony could empathize with Loki. Loki had lost all of his children, from what Majhild had said. His children and his wife. He'd lost one person that was worth a damn, one person he'd barely known, and he'd taken the warpath and never looked back. The only difference in how he'd handled his loss was that it had been considered 'acceptable' to kill terrorists. Even Obidiah had been considered an acceptable target, once pertinent information had leaked to the press. But it was still killing.

He'd never considered himself a hero, not when he knew the costs. Not once had he deluded
himself into believing that he was, deep down beneath the booze and sex and snark, a truly good person. He was too self aware to think he was anything more than a weapon. The point had always been that he was a weapon under his control, and no one else's. But the first few months, he'd been reacting instead of thinking. It hadn't been about peace or morality, it had been about the vendetta, the need to fill the void with something, anything. If asked, he knew he had acted like a psychopath. A socially acceptable psychopath, but a psychopath nonetheless. Once the initial rage had burned out, he'd found a new acceptable target. And another. And another.

Fuck. Empathizing with Loki. Fuck Asgard. He hated them. All of them, Loki included.

Deciding to drag himself to his bedroom, he was grateful the world had stopped bobbing like a cork in water and made his way back to his bed, falling face first into it, eyes clenched shut so he couldn't see the world surrounding him, a golden fucking castle that might as well have been the universe's most obnoxious, expensive cage.

Apologizing seemed like the right thing to do, but then again, apologizing rarely made anyone feel better, and it didn't really solve anything. Loki wouldn't magically forgive him, and it might only agitate the crazy that was part and parcel of Loki's brain. On the flip side, Tony wondered if anyone had ever apologized to Loki about anything concerning his children, even if it was just condolences. If Odin had decreed a ban on mentioning the whole thing, how could they have? Loki had left Asgard, maybe just to get away from the people that stared and knew his loss, but didn't say anything, just stared, and fuck all if Tony didn't know that feeling a little too intimately.

He wanted a drink. Preferably whiskey. A vat of whiskey he could drown himself in. The craving was his signal to give it up for the night, otherwise he would start drinking the swill they called ale just to get the bitter taste out of his mouth.

"I should have stayed at the whorehouse."

When he finally fell asleep, he dreamed of fire and explosions, of trees made from his suits, iron trees that twisted the graceful angles of the armor into gnarled, demented husks that bled onto ice covered ground.

Chapter End Notes

I feel the need to put this out there. I'm not a Loki apologist. I don't think 'poor bby oh let me hug it away' when it concerns his actions in the movies. I don't believe being hurt gives someone the right to hurt other people. I do, however, have sympathy for the devil, so there's that.

And yes, I retconned mythology for my own devious purposes. If I have offended you, I apologize. Also, if it does offend you, stop reading. Because I'm going to be doing it more a bit down the road. (have been doing it in BTC a bit lately too.)

Anywho, hope you enjoyed.
When Tony woke up the next morning, his head was throbbing and his mouth tasted like he'd been sucking down toxic waste. A heavy pounding echoed through his room, and it took him a minute or two to realize it wasn't actually his head that was pounding. Someone was knocking on his door. His bedroom door. And Majhild always did her covert cleaning thing when he wasn't around.

Half dragging himself off of the mattress, he stumbled over to the door and pulled it open rudely, not caring what he looked like.

"Thor?"

"Stark. My brother has left Asgard."

Tony tamped down the urge to flinch, wondering if Loki had spoken to his brother before going off to do whatever it was he considered therapeutic. What did Loki do to vent that rage? Destroy planets, galaxies? How the fuck did he cope? Drinking binges, killing sprees? Primal screaming?

"And?"

"Mother says you both converse. I thought perhaps you would know where he has gone."

Thor looked so hopeful, so innocent and lost, a puppy waiting for someone to take him home. And Tony knew if he told the god the truth (and it was readily obvious Thor didn't know), he'd have worse than a head injury. Thor could be vicious when it came to Loki, and Thor now technically owned him.
He couldn't hide the shudder that ran through him at the sudden, very sobering realization that his situation could, in fact, get so much worse than it already was.

"Sorry buddy, no clue. Loki and I talk, but it's mostly to trade sarcasm."

Thor's face fell and Tony felt Majhild hitting him in the head all over again.

"But he probably won't be gone too long. Anyway. I've got to get ready to go to work."

Thor nodded silently, shoulders visibly drooping as he turned and began walking away. Tony, for his part, resisted the urge to demand that Thor never come into his rooms without knocking, because even though it was Thor, he was possessive of his space. It was probably unhealthy, how territorial he was, but he didn't particularly care. He didn't like being reminded that it was not his home, not really, not his space. And he despised that it meant that anyone of sufficient rank felt they could just walk in whenever they wanted.

Closing the door before Thor had even made it to the antechamber, Tony leaned against it, one hand going to the back of his head to assess the damage of the night before. The tissue had already started knitting together, although there was a discernible ridge that fucking hurt when he traced a finger over it. The textured lines of thread stood out, neat stitches he would have to remove later, or ask Majhild to remove for him. Given everything that had occurred, he wasn't sure if he wanted to bring the night up at all, or remind her of it. He didn't even want to remember. And he doubted she did.

Ignoring the urge to crawl into the shower and never come out, he got dressed and pulled on his boots.

Gone.

"Guess that strikes out the apology," He said to the air, and when nothing responded he remembered that his conscience wasn't boxed up in an AI anymore, at least not where he could get to it.

"Stark, get the hell out of here," Splitlip snapped, glaring at Tony. Elbows braced on the table, beer in hand, Tony looked up from the book he'd been reading saw the dwarf glaring at him, dark eyes almost invisible for the set wrinkles and massive eyebrows.

"Can I just, you know. Stay?"

"You've stayed late for the last two weeks. Some of us have better things to do than watch you."

"Then go do it. I'm not going to cause any problems sitting here reading."

"You haven't eaten."

"I'll be fine," He assured the dwarf, eyes already going back to the book. He did not, under any circumstances, want to admit that he'd been avoiding Asgard. Loki hadn't returned, and Thor hadn't stopped looking for him. Or asking Tony if he knew where Loki had gone. Every morning the same thing, as if 'trading sarcasm' had been secret code for 'best buddies'. It felt like waiting for the other shoe to drop, and since old habits did not die upon actual death, Tony was doing what he had
always been amazing at. Avoiding being around when it decided to come down.

"We're supposed to feed you now too?" Splitlip muttered, leaving the room, thick, heavy door slamming shut behind him. Tony didn't pay it any mind, too used to Splitlip's gruffness to take any exception to it. Taking his absence as permission though, he continued reading about one of the forging processes used, mind turning over a foreign concept and finding similarities. It stuck out particularly because it could work for shaping and charging vibranium, which meant he could create the higher yield core. If he could find some, which, while more prevalent off earth, didn't mean it was any more readily available. It wasn't even called vibranium by people outside of Earth, but the characteristics were too similar for it to be anything else.

Puzzling through the conundrum, he jumped when a wooden platter dropped onto the table, the food on it bouncing before a potato rolled off. Catching it in his hand before it could hit the floor, Tony put it back on the platter, more surprised than not to see Split sitting down.

"You seem puzzled."

"Can we synthesize materials?" Tony asked, watching Splitlip take the loaf of bread and tear in half. He accepted the offered bread and watched the dwarf take a bite and chew thoughtfully.

"It would not be impossible, but why would you want to?"

Tony slid the book around, finger tapping on the page.

"The metal that absorbs vibration, it's part of the base of the suit. I don't need to make a lot, but I need it to be shaped and charged."

He began eating, surprised by the flavor of the chewy bread, tasting honey. Splitlip stared at the book, not seeing what was written, probably because he'd memorized it eons ago. But he was thinking, eyes flicking back and forth. Absently they both ate from the platter, Tony not really paying attention to the tastes of what he did eat. Far too focused on Splitlip to care if he had grabbed coal instead of another chunk of bread, he kept an eye on the minute, changing expressions of the dwarf.

"Have you ever created metals before?" Splitlip finally asked. Tony nodded enthusiastically.

"But I had to build a small particle accelerator. I'm not sure I could without my lab equipment." Or Jarvis. Jarvis had kept him from blowing himself and the rest of Malibu into a crater.

"Explain this thing to me," Splitlip commanded.

Tony tried, he really did, but he wasn't used to explaining anything to anyone, much less anything technical, scientific, or both. The explanation itself grew more and more elaborate, all the while losing the important details because he couldn't think in a linear sequence.

"Let me just," He started, opening one of his blank notebooks and reaching into his travel bag for one of the scattered graphite sticks. Quickly sketching out the machine from memory, making it as simple as he could, he turned the book towards Splitlip, who glanced over it.

"You made this thing?" At Tony's nod, he closed the book and stood up. One giant, gnarled hand grabbed the platter and the other held the notebook. "Come with me."

Scrambling from the bench and following the smith, Tony tried to quell the trill of excitement that ran through him when he saw that he was being led past the last door.
Or what he had thought of as the last door. It led only to a corridor, small at first, but growing exponentially in width and height. Other tunnels branched off, from time to time, paths curved up or sloping down to lead into darkness, giving no hint of where or what they led to. The temperature began to noticeably drop as well. By the time they reached a large, metal door, easily as big as one of the doors in Asgard's palace, the corridor had easily doubled Tony's height and the chill was a balm to the heat stored in his muscles. Splitlip pushed at the door as though the thing weighed nothing, gesturing for Tony to walk through before following and closing it behind him.

"You'd best stay close, no wandering off," Splitlip commanded gruffly. "Not many care for an Asgardian walking about down here."

Tony was too busy staring to say anything, nodding dumbly as he looked around him.

An underground world stretched out in front of him, reminiscent of the anasazi ruins he'd seen back on Earth, only carved into dark stone, teeming with lights and life. If Asgard was gold, this was slate, though no less elaborate. Each arch echoed the architectural grace of cathedrals, hints of light softening the edges into a blur while casting shadows that stretched into corners, giving them a fathomless, almost forbidding depth. Dwarves moved, completely unaware of him, a whole city alive and tied together by the had lines of stone ledges and too fragile looking rope bridges. He heard the sound of water and searched for the source, unable to see that far down into the darkness.

"You look a bit queer."

"I didn't read anything about this," Tony admitted, wondering how long it had taken to engineer the city.

Split made a dismissive sound. "The æsir don't much care how we live, long as we can supply them with weapons," He grunted, walking past Tony. Wanting to stop and stare and comprehend, Tony hesitantly followed, head turning in every possible direction to get a feel for the place.

"This is, this is impressive," Tony told him. He didn't imagine the shape of the beard changing, hinting at a smile as Splitlip nodded.

"The cities are the heart of Svartálfaheimr. We've got farmer's above, but down here is home, 'specially for the smiths."

"Are all of the forges connected?"

"No, would weaken the world to do it. Each city has it's own mine and forge," The dwarf explained as he led Tony past an open, unguarded door into one of the buildings carved into a cliff face. "We do most of the work for Asgard, the others focus on commerce and trade, or creating weapons for our own."

"So it's a system," Tony asked, wondering where Asgard's blacksmiths fell on the hierarchy.

"'Tis. Now here," Split said, opening another door. It opened to a large room with a few tables against the wall and a few sitting benches. "Is a proper workroom. This one's been empty since Sindri's time. It's yours if-" The dwarf said with emphasis. "If you prove you're smarter than you look."

"Got any paper?" Tony asked, not bothering to curb or hide his enthusiasm. It wasn't the first time he'd heard the challenge, although it was probably the first time he wasn't accepting one with malicious intent.

Split dropped the platter and notebook on the table and sat down, waiting for Tony to sit next to
him. Giving up any pretense of hesitation, Tony opened the book, pulled the graphite pencil from where it had smeared while the book had closed and turned to a new page.

He drew what he knew best, the thing he'd created over and over, tweaked for one purpose or another. It didn't take long, even making diagrams and giving explanations for each piece. Splitlip didn't say anything, didn't give a hint of approval or disapproval. Not sweating the silence, Tony gave information on output, hoping the dwarf would recognize terms but not bothering to add explanations for those. It was comfortable, drawing it out bordering on meditative.

When he finished, he slid the book over and sat the graphite down, then reached for one of the potatoes, realizing he was still hungry.

"This is a good piece of work," Splitlip said, nodding thoughtfully.

"My dad made the prototype, inefficient, large. I miniaturized it, put it to use."

"Haven't seen much like it. Even Eitri hasn't brought around something like this, and he's one of the best of us. Travels sometimes too, and if he'd found anything akin to this, we'd have all seen it."

"So do I get my own room?"

"Tell me," Splitlip said instead. "Why'd you decide to use it."

Tony froze, the words settling in his throat. Sure Split was probably the closest he had to a friend off Earth, but he'd never told anyone beyond the bare minimum, and he wasn't sure the dwarf would accept just that.

Several minutes passed, Splitlip saying nothing but staring thoughtfully at him. Tony was reminding himself that it was no longer a part of his body, a secret to keep buried deep down for the sake of survival.

Except it was still survival, still secret. And Split felt friendly, but then, Obie had too.

"I was dying. I had bits of metal near my heart. That," He said, tapping the paper. "Powered an electromagnet, that kept it in place."

"And this armor you keep mentioning?"

"It was a power source for it."

Splitlip nodded thoughtfully again, accepting the bare truth and apparently not caring for much more.

"You're not as stupid as most æsir."

"Thanks," Tony said, a wry chuckle escaping.

"You still have to learn the basics before I'll set you loose trying to make summat like that," He told him, pointing at the arc reactor. "Figure you'll be able to find your way on your own after a bit of practice. Do that tomorrow, maybe the day after. I've got to let the others know, so they don't cave your fool head in for wandering in. Get some tools for you too. You'll need 'em."

"Sounds awesome," Tony said, already impatient.

"Until then, get your ass back to Asgard. Don't much blame you for avoiding it, but you can't stay here. I'll see you back."
And like that he was up, expecting Tony to follow. Hesitantly, regretfully, Tony followed him back into the corridor, through the building and back into the open heart of the mountain. They didn't pass by anyone, and Tony wondered if the smiths stayed separate from the rest of the dwarven population, or if it was just a workspace for them so they could plan their creations in relative peace.

"Why do you guys hang out in the forge after working?" He finally asked, as they walked through the door separating the entrance to the forge from the rest of the city. It was the only path he could see leading to the forge itself, cut off from everywhere else except the building his new workshop was located.

"Transition sickness. The temperatures change too much, and we're not built to take it. Get sick otherwise."

That made sense. Tony loved the abrupt chill, how it sank into his skin and combated the heat, but he was also different from the dwarves on a physiological level. And he hadn't tried to go from one to the other abruptly either.

Once back in the small commons room, Splitlip gave him a quiet nod, possibly moving his chin only to direct Tony back through the forge. Shouldering his pack, Tony gave a genial nod and reminded himself that attempting to sneak back in after Splitlip was gone would probably end in the loss of the workroom.

The walk back was quicker than he remembered, Heimdall's name falling thoughtless from his mouth as he turned back to stare down the pass, wishing he was back in the workroom. His workroom, something that didn't belong to Asgard. Maybe not his in a complete sense, but he had a feeling the dwarves would respect his space more than the æsir had thus far. And he could stay there as much as he wanted.

The ground lurched and he spun, stomach twisting in the familiar knots before he was on his feet again, steady and sure. Heimdall nodded impassively, not even a hint of a smile to give away that he had seen everything. And Tony knew he had, the gatekeeper seemed more aware of his movements than anyone, including himself. Giving a halfhearted wave, Tony didn't bother with greeting or farewell. Walking out into the night, the night still too bright to be true night, Tony considered everything he would need, what Splitlip was offering him.

Most of all he thought about how Splitlip hadn't just admired the arc reactor, but understood it, comprehended it. On a good day some engineers could keep up with the impossible ideas presented without their brain attempting to melt into a puddle of ooze. More importantly, Splitlip understanding the arc reactor meant it could be created in the forges. It might take a bit more work, but it was possible, even if he wasn't entirely sure how yet.

A world of possibilities opened up, exciting because of the novelty. The dwarves didn't use computers, didn't have AI, and that meant a new way of doing everything. And even if it was inefficient, it was better than attempting to create everything, AI included, from the ground up.

Wrapped up in his personal bubble of curiosity and itching fingers, Tony made it through the city and into the palace like a zombie, startled out of his reverie when a strong hand grabbed his shoulder.

Fight instincts won over flight, and he was grappling with Thor suddenly, swinging the Asgardian away and into the wall, forearm held across his throat and adrenaline kicking in a moment too late. Bewilderment gave way to a surprised smile, the corners of Thor's eyes crinkling in amusement as Tony let his arm drop, perceived threat passed.
"Few have managed to surprise me so," Thor admitted, not a sign of humility present. There was a genuine pleasure stretching his lips in a boyish grin, blue eyes lit up with equally childish excitement. The comment itself was the equivalent of praise, some of the highest Thor could give, and Tony wasn't entirely sure how to take it, caught off guard by the fact that he had moved Thor, the Asgardian he hadn't been able to elbow to any effect unless he'd had the suit.

"Right back at ya Point Break."

"I was just on my way to speak to you. Perhaps-"

"I have no clue where he went," Tony snapped testily, interrupting Thor before he could ask again.

"I know," Thor rumbled, looking pleased with himself. "But before I depart for Midgard, I wish to see him again. Perhaps you would join me?"

Tony was ready to shoot the offer down immediately, except his brain, for once, acted more quickly than his mouth. Thor looked like a puppy, eager to please and excited, feet shuffling to give away his own restless energy. The Asgardian had always wanted to show the Avengers the other realms, but hadn't been able to. Inter-dimensional travel was entirely off limits to everyone but the Hulk, and Bruce had shot down Thor's puppy eyed request with a an almost panicked swiftness.

Travel meant escape, at least for awhile. And going to find Loki meant that, if Thor found Loki, he'd be able to speak in his own defense. If he was at least present to defend himself, he might manage to escape the whole situation without leaving blood smeared on anymore walls.

He didn't want to deal with Loki again, possibly ever. But logic dictated he go, if only to get a better view off Asgard. And he'd barely had any time alone with Thor since first starting his apprenticeship.

"Sure. Just let me drop off my stuff."

"I shall meet you at the stables then!" Thor boomed, excitement making his voice rise and ricochet off of the golden walls of the corridor. He was striding away, cape snapping and Tony nodded before the word stables crashed down on him with all the subtlety of, well, Thor.

"Fucking horses," Tony muttered, hurrying to his rooms and stowing his things. He wanted to shower, even going so far as to strip down for a quick rinse before discarding the idea and splashing water on his face and arms before opening the trunk. Automatically reaching for the clothing on the top, he pulled it on, lamenting the loss of the lighter clothing he normally wore. But Thor had remarked on the clothing before, as if confused by the idea of wearing anything simple and lacking at least half a dozen buckles and straps.

Not giving himself anytime to second guess his decision, he made his way through the palace. Thor was waiting for him by the stables, staring down at Sif. The woman's head was tilted up, expression grim and mouth moving through the exaggerated shapes that belied anger. Armored shoulders were tense, and one fist was clenched around the reins of Thor's horse.

She looked ready to punch Thor, or, being denied that by the simple inconvenience of height, the horse.

"Hey, you ready?"

Brown eyes zeroed in on him, filled with equal measures of exasperation and disgust.
"You cannot think to go with only him," She snipped testily.  

"Be at ease, Sif. These are peaceful times," Thor assured, none of his earlier joviality diminished by Sif's too obvious anger. Tony wasn't sure how to take the comment, considering Thor hadn't assured her Tony could take care of himself, at least. "Stark, your mount" His friend added, smile bleeding through into his voice as he jerked his chin. The white horse was waiting, saddle ready. Tony walked past Sif, cavalier smile firmly in place. Pulling himself up with considerably more grace than he had managed before, he made eye contact with the angry goddess for a moment before looking back at Thor.  

"Where to?"

"Vanaheim."

"Lead the way."

"Thor, I would advise against this," Sif tried, but the reins were pulled from her hands and Thor's booming laughter answered as he waved goodbye. Tony didn't bother with a farewell, although a petulant, childish part of himself overruled any notion of maturity, a smirk firmly plastered on his face as he stared straight ahead, Sif's brown hair bobbing briefly in his vision before it was gone altogether.  

Night as Asgard knew it was falling, the habitual warriors and carousers walking the streets, children and vendors notably absent. Thor fell back, matching pace with him.  

"Vanaheim is different from Asgard, Stark," Thor began, excitement adding an impatient edge to his words. "Asgard is the most beautiful of all realms, but for the hunt, not even our forests can compare." Thor continued on while Tony listened, half remembering stories about hunting Thor had brought up in the past. He'd mentioned Vanaheim, but Tony had thought of it as a part of Asgard. Apparently he hadn't done enough research into mythology, not that what little he had done was doing him any good.  

Catching the pause when Thor stopped talking to breathe, Tony cut in with the question that had been niggling at him since seeing Sif in the stables.  

"Why doesn't she want you going alone?"

Thor shrugged, obviously not thinking much of Sif's concern. "There are those that would call the Æsir and Vanir uneasy allies, but it is nothing. The war is long past, and we have forged stronger bonds for it. Sif only knows stories and her distrust."

A sidelong glance at the thunder god proved that he believed what he was saying, not a shadow of concern or doubt crossing his features.  

"So Loki's been hanging out with them?"

"There is an Asgardian there, Mimir the Wise. If Loki is on Vanaheim, Mimir will know where he is, although he will most likely be with him."

Not questioning Thor as they left the city behind and moved down the path of the Bifrost, Tony let him go on and on about Mimir, brain filtering out the useless information and catching what stood out. The adjectives were ignored in favor of the historical bits Thor let slip. The end of the war between the Vanir and Æsir, negotiations, and hostage exchange, and that was exactly what it sounded like. Good faith collateral, no matter how nicely Thor dressed it up. It was only diplomacy if a war didn't hinge on anyone dying.
Which begged the question of who in Asgard happened to be Vanir. There weren't any names that jumped out at him, although he wondered if Frigga was Vanir, if she had been a part of the peace treaty.

Heimdall greeted them with a nod, already turning to walk into the observatory. The horses ambled in easily, tails swishing as the room began to spin. Only angry nickering marked their passage before they were standing on solid ground again. Tony looked up, surprised by the thick canopy overhead blocking light, allowing only scattered beams through to the forest floor.

"Welcome to Vanaheim, Stark." Thor chuckled, smiling like a child showing his friend a secret.

Tony didn't see anything terribly special about the place. Not much different than a forest on Earth, sounds were muffled by the thick carpet of fallen leaves and scattered undergrowth. The only exceptional thing was the height of the trees, towering far above him, almost dizzying when he looked up to catch an open spot where light beamed down to break the shade.

"It's day here."

"It is," Thor answered, voice amiable.

"So, Vanaheim runs on different time than Asgard and Svartálfaheimr?"

"All experience time differently," Thor told him, but didn't bother elaborating beyond that. Too curious about his surroundings to press the issue, Tony followed behind, eyes scanning the forest, seeing nothing more than, granted profuse, undergrowth and occasional fallen trees.

More used to silence than he would like, he wasn't perturbed by the quiet. Slowly he began to notice the scents of rotting vegetation stirred up by the horses, leaves composting down, and damp, as if it had recently rained. Green dominated the scenery, even beneath the canopy where, by all rights, there should have only been a scattering of it. But new trees were growing, unusually shaped leaves green and healthy. Scattered shrubs and vines were vivid splashes of color against the dead and decaying browns and blacks. Moss, brighter green and eyecatching, crept along the fallen logs and up the trees like snakes. Flashes of what he assumed to be blue fungi clung to scattered trees, distracting and only provoking a mild curiosity.

Thor remained silent, leading them through the forest without offering any more stories or memories. As unusual as it was for the god to remain silent for longer than a few minutes, Tony didn't attempt breaking through the quiet. The horse, smarter than he wanted to credit, followed without any direction on his part.

There were only hints to other life he could catch, sounds that filtered through his perusing of the forest. Thor was probably catching more of whatever it was that hunters looked for. The bestiary he'd read months before had given descriptions of different fauna for Vanaheim, but nothing in the way of visual aid, and he was a little disappointed when they came to the edge of the wood and saw the spread of a village opening up to them.

And it was definitely a village. Everything he'd expected of Asgard he found laid out in front of him. It looked like something out of a documentary, a reconstruction of history. The buildings looked sturdy, clean, with none of the detritus of everyday life clinging to the walls to darken the light grain of the wood. People passed by in almost normal clothing, more normal than Tony was used to seeing on Asgard at least, and none of them looked at Thor and him at all. It was intentional, the not looking, not seeing them, and Tony was reminded of 'uneasy allies'. Maybe Sif had been right.
Thor led them to one of the smaller buildings, sliding off of his horse with practiced ease. Tony followed suit, eyes darting back and forth, unable to stop himself from evaluating the threat level. And there was, however minute, a feeling of threat in the obvious 'you're not wanted here' not-staring that might have been worse than open gawking. Not bothering to knock, Thor stepped inside, Tony only hesitating for a moment before stepping into the house after him.

"Prince," A low, smooth voice murmured. Tony followed the sound to the far end of the longhouse, where an old man sat at a table, food laid out across it. Dressed in rustic, simple clothing, with long white hair pulled back in braids, he looked every bit the old viking sans beard. Light shone in through the window next to him, cutting across his face and revealing intricate strands of dark ink that started at his hairline and worked down his face and neck.

Loki was nowhere to be seen.

"Mimir. How fare you?" Thor rumbled, obviously happy to see the other Asgardian.

"Well, as always, Thor. You have brought company."

"This is Stark, my war brother from Midgard," Thor declared, easy joy doubling in the span of the statement as his arm swept to Tony, as if presenting him, and he probably was. Tony gave a nod, not sure if he was meeting a diplomat or a prisoner. The house looked nice enough, well furnished and clean. But it was small, and in Tony's experience, diplomats liked to remind the locals that they were Very Important People. Nothing about Mimir marked him as an Asgardian away from home.

"Now of Asgard, or so I hear."

"Via crazy explosions and magic," Tony answered amiably. "Lots of pretty lights, no angelic choirs though. Bit disappointed about that, to be honest."

Mimir, with his long white hair pulled back from his face in a tangle of braids and beads, only looked amused, as though he got every reference Tony had just made. His wizened face was wrinkled into a smile, the almost disconcerting lack of a beard refreshing, his expression open.

"Asgard has no angels, merely valkyries. And their music is not something one wants to hear more than once."

"The drum and bass number?" Tony replied easily, and it was kind of fun, talking to someone that at least pretended to understand his references. But Mimir looked caught off guard by the casual remark, as if Tony had said something truly astounding. A quick glance at Thor showed that the Asgardian looked equally uncomfortable. "What?"

"It is a rare thing, to remember their song," Mimir said slowly. "Have a seat, Thor, Stark."

Both sat at the table, Tony staring at the place settings. Four of them. Four wooden plates and goblets. Obviously they had been expected, and someone else was still coming. He made an idle wish, hoping it wouldn't be Loki. Maybe some other god, or hell, a fairy. It seemed like a world for fairies to live on.

"You've come for your brother."

"I have. I return to Midgard shortly. I wish to see him again before I take my leave."

"He is currently out on the land, though he should return by day's end. Tell me of Asgard, Thor. Your brother says little."
"I know barely more than you," Thor admitted sheepishly. "Though much remains unchanged."

Mimir nodded thoughtfully, reaching into a pocket and pulling free a pipe that could not, by any natural laws, have been inside of said pocket. A pouch emerged next and he opened it, quickly packing a mixture of something into the bowl, tamping it down with his thumb. "And have you any stories to tell of Asgard, Stark?" The god put the pouch away and blew lightly on the bowl, a flame licking at the dried herbs and blackening them. He blew it out and stuck the pipe in his mouth, blue eyes moving to pin Tony down.

"I don't spend a lot of time in Asgard."

Brows rose, an indication of surprise that seemed disingenuous at best. A puff of smoke that smelled like flowers and something else unknown tainted the air with a gray cloud. "And where do you spend it?"

"Svartálfaheimr."

"With the dwarves?"

Tony nodded, waiting for the typical look of slack confusion, but it never came. Mirmir nodded slowly, seemingly impressed.

"They don't take kindly to most of us. You are a blacksmith, then."

"Stark is an honored warrior," Thor rumbled, a quick defense that sounded lame even to Tony's ears.

"I was an engineer on earth. I fight best when I make my own armor and weapons."

Mirmir didn't look any more impressed than he had before, but there was an air of approval.

"I have heard much of Midgard. Tell me what it is like, within the forges of the dwarves. I am sure much has changed since Sindri's rule."

Tony knew the dwarves weren't keen on any of the æsir, and he had no idea how they would feel about him blabbering about the forges.

"Hot." Thor made a disapproving sound at the short answer, but Tony didn't give in to the wordless reprimand.

"Which city boasts your forge?" Mimir didn't seem fazed at all, continuing to puff away at his pipe, entirely zen about the whole thing. Tony wondered if it was the vanic equivalent of pot. It would explain a lot.

"I-" Tony paused, mouth hanging open before he slammed it shut. That Mimir knew about the cities was a little surprising. But what bothered Tony was that he had no clue what city the forge was attached to. "No clue, actually. I only got my own workshop today. Yesterday," He corrected, wondering if it was actually correct at all. Mimir only nodded that knowing, contemplative smile while smoke puffed into the air. Tony was reminded of Pepper's perfume for a moment, something floral triggering the memory of hugging her, the last hug they'd had, the break up, 'no, you go be happy, I'm happy for you' hug.

As much as he'd hated it then, he'd do a considerable amount of damage to just about anyone to get another one.
"You didn't mention this," Thor rumbled, obviously at a loss.

"Didn't seem important. Just a workspace. Split said the training wheels are coming off though. I get to start working soon."

"An asgardian esteemed in the eyes of the dwarves is not unimportant," Mimir chuckled. "They hold little love for us, unsurprising given everything that once transpired, long before either of you were born."

Tony didn't want to consider how old the god sitting across from him actually was. Splitlip was old, ancient, and the war had been before he was born. Christ, how slowly did the æsir age?

"Go me?" He finally asked, voice flat. Mimir smiled at him gamely.

"You are a rare individual Stark. I would hear more of your tale."

"I doubt he would need invitation to speak of himself," Loki said from behind them.

"That hurts," Tony said, hand going to his chest even as he twisted to face Loki. "You make me sound like some sort of narcissist."

"It is the most complimentary thing I could call you, Stark," Loki snapped. He looked mostly unrumpled, hair tied back and asgardian leathers eschewed in favor of something more norse-themed, similar to Mimir's almost rustic clothing. It was startling, the difference it made, the lack of a power suit (whether it was the leathers or the magically tailored to fit number from Stuttgart) made him look more approachable. Almost, Tony thought to himself with no small amount of irony, human.

Most of all, he didn't look like he wanted to beat Tony's head into another wall, not a trace of red in his eyes to be seen.

"You've returned early. And you errand, did everything go as smoothly as hoped?"

"As well as can be expected, though it is complete," Loki replied, a sense of indifference at odds with the tensing of his shoulders.

Thor didn't stand, but he was smiling at Loki, and it was almost painful to watch, from Tony's perspective at least. How Thor managed to continue smiling like that when Loki coldly ignored him was a mystery, and not for the first time Tony thanked the powers that be that at least his life had been spared the sibling angst.

"I did not know you came to Vanaheim for a working," Thor said, so eagerly curious Tony wondered at him.

"Because I did not bother telling you," Loki replied, voice chill as he sat across from Thor, automatically reaching for a green, polished apple. Thor, either oblivious to or uncaring of his brother's disdain, continued on, latching onto the 'working' and asking several questions at once. Loki let them all pass him by completely, a dagger appearing in his hands so he could begin carving the apple into quarters, and then eighths. The slivers of core were easily discarded onto one of the wooden plates before Loki began eating. Thor's questions stopped, but Loki continued to eat with a single minded efficiency.

"You always were starved after a working," Thor finally said, voice fond with a hint of nostalgia.

And whatever had been hidden in that statement was enough for Loki's eyes to narrow and lips to
thin. Something angry and almost hateful flashed across his expression before Mimir cleared his
throat, looking thoroughly unconcerned by the sudden increase in tension.

"Your brother is behind on Asgard's events, Loki. Perhaps you could tell us all, considering neither
I nor Stark seem to spend much time there either." It was said with a hint of a smile, completely at
odds with the quiet command Tony heard threaded through the words.

Tony waited for Loki to say something along the lines of 'Stark had a wonderful time dredging up
the thought of my dead or stolen children', but it never happened. Loki apathetically recited current
events in Asgard, offering no commentary when Thor and Mimir made their own observations.
Throughout the discussion, Loki ate, although Tony couldn't actually recall seeing the god lift food
to his mouth more than half a dozen times. But the food on the table quickly vanished, and even
though he hadn't had a chance to eat, Tony didn't bother with taking his chances reaching for
anything, fairly certain he'd end up with a knife through his hand.

Loki made a point not to look at him, or even speak to him. An hour, maybe two passed, and it was
almost masterful, how easily Loki only said a few words every now and again but appeared to lead
the conversation. By the time all of the food was gone and Mimir was packing his pipe again, true
night had fallen and the conversation had become forced, almost awkward. Thor tried pushing and
Loki resisted, either having nothing else to say or refusing to say anything beyond a syllable or two.

"You two go for a walk. The practice field should do. You're making the air antsy."

Tony wanted to say something about that, wanted to keep Loki and Thor right next to him, because
the minute they were out of sight, he was pretty sure any chance of explaining what had happened
went with them.

Loki looked ready to protest, mouth opening, but Thor was standing so quickly his chair almost
fell and striding for the door, all billowing cape and general good cheer. Mimir jerked his chin at
Thor, and like magic (and damned if it wasn't magical) Loki did as he was told. Once the door was
closed, Tony turned to Mimir with something akin to awe. For a moment he even forgot about the
impending beatdown he'd be receiving from Thor.

"They don't even listen to Odin that well." He didn't even bother trying to hide the note of
admiration in his voice.

"I've known those two as long as they've known their father," Mimir told him, shrugging as if it
wasn't a big deal. And maybe it wasn't. Loki was at least cordial with Mimir, if not friendly. But
there had been something like deference in Loki's actions, and he'd only ever seen that with Frigga.
"Doesn't matter. You, I'm very curious about you, Stark of Asgard."

"Everyone seems really big on the geological locations," Tony quipped.

"They matter to most. I rarely give such assignations such weight as others do. But you're a
different case altogether."

"How so?"

"You are the first einherjar that does not belong to the king or queen," Mimir began, lighting his
pipe. "And you retain the memories of your mortal life."

"I take it that's a big deal?"

"It is almost unprecedented. Few have been allowed into Asgard with the memories of their mortal
lives intact. Most have been in Asgard so long they have forgotten those memories." Mimir paused
long enough for the statement to sink in, to become uncomfortable in it's insinuation. Even as Tony tried to assure himself that he would be back on Earth soon, he wouldn't be 'mortal' anymore. Would he forget what that was like someday? Would he be able to stay 'Tony' after centuries of life? Or would he turn into Thor, who loved humanity but still considered himself a superior species?

"Loki says Gondul brought you to Asgard," Mimir added thoughtfully, after the pause had stretched into an eternity of apprehensive quiet. "Those that know of her, know she only chose sorcerers and magicians, though she rarely picked at all. She chose fewer still, after it was realized that those spirits were made into healers."

"You're kidding." What a waste. Odin used magic, Loki used magic. Frigga did, and he was sure the other gods, at least, used it occasionally.

"Not at all. Magicians and sorcerers may die in battle, but they do not have the same spirit, the same mindset as traditional heroes, at least, so it is considered. Their true power lay within their magic. And human magics are fickle, and require energy outside of one's self. It's almost useless compared to the magic that the Vanir command, and einherjar are more often than not unable to learn it. So they are given a pittance of power, and learn only how to heal the damage done to Asgard's warriors."

"What about the æsir, since there seems to be a distinction?"

"There are asgardians that can learn magic, but few are inclined to."

"Despite the fact that Odin uses magic?"

Mimir chuckled, a cloud of smoke escaping at the same time. He leaned back in his chair, relaxing instead of tensing at the question. "The All Father is not as others, Stark. A king must be willing to use all tools at his disposal."

"So, I mean, if you don't mind me asking, why is everyone so touchy about Loki using magic? He's a prince, so logically, him using magic wouldn't be that unusual."

Puffing thoughtfully, Mimir's eyes flicked briefly, chasing one thought, and then another. He took his time before finally answering. "To the æsir, magic is a woman's tool, for the few that can learn it. Odin, the All Father, taking up it's use is seen as necessity. In war, it is Gungnir that he uses, not magic. The people do not see him using magic, at least not often. Even his blessings appear as nothing more than the benevolent wishes of a father rewarding his children. Loki has always shown a preference for magic, whether obvious or sly. And it is that blatant preference that gives the æsir pause. When I last explored Midgard, they called poison a woman's weapon."

The segue caught Tony off guard, and he tried to correlate the two, failing miserably because magic was nothing like poison, nothing like the creeping, hidden slowness he'd experienced.

"It was because a woman could not readily take up a sword or shield, could not fight in honorable combat. It implied that a woman must be sly, must lie and cheat to accomplish their own ends. Magic is much like poison in the eyes of a bred warrior, slipping past the established rules of honor."

"Sounds more like efficiency to me," Tony answered easily. "After all, why go to war when you can kill the king with his own dinner? It seems more honorable and all that to spare a bunch of men the experience of dying over a bunch of bullshit."
"And yet Asgard is a world of warriors who spent their lives fighting, hoping to die in battle."

Tony withheld the sarcastic comment ready to leap out of his mouth in favor of a raised eyebrow and a long, hard stare. Mimir, damn him, seemed unaffected. At any rate, he didn't expound any further on the topic, switching gears abruptly and finding the thread of their previous topic with ease.

"You are not a sorcerer, not a magician, yet Gondul brought you to Asgard. It's strange, to say the least. That you remember your mortal life raises it's own questions. I was there, when the first were chosen. They came out of their deaths wild, crazed. None died easy deaths, and those memories were too much for their minds to handle. A mind that remembers the body's death is a broken one, at least, in most cases. Odin was forced to erase the memory of their deaths, and then, after more tribulation, their memories as mortals altogether."

"So, what? I'm a special case?"

"Perhaps Odin knew his son would remember you as who you were, and acted accordingly. One rarely knows with Odin. It is a puzzle, that he would chance such, given prior results."

Tony eyed the god shrewdly, surprised by his candor. Several somethings weren't adding up, but damned if he could figure out which 'something' to start with.

"You don't come off like a lot of the Æsir I've come across."

"Time and distance do wonders for perspective," Mimir replied without pause, though however lightly said, there was a sense of rancor Tony caught, a hint of bad blood not entirely forgotten. Feeling like he'd toed across the line without realizing, he plowed ahead anyway, because that's what he did, and Mimir was the first nonthreatening, if Yoda-like, Asgardian he'd met.

"You refer to Asgardians as 'them'."

"I made my choice long ago, Stark. Everyone makes a choice of where they belong, sooner or later. Even you will, when the time comes. I think your memories will allow nothing less."

"You make it sound so promising."

"It rarely is, especially for one who challenges the established order. Although it is rarely dull," Mimir chuckled wryly, and for the first time since meeting the god, Tony had the impression of a grim, dry humor. And he liked it.

By the time Loki and Thor returned, neither looking worse for the wear physically, aside from a black eye swollen shut (Thor, obviously), Tony felt half relaxed with Mimir, not at all like he was talking with an Asgardian. If anything, it felt like he was talking to Gandalf. A Gandalf with no beard and a dash of Strange's dry humor, but none of the condescending priggishness. And it was Strange they were discussing. Tony was listening to a truly classic case of bad timing concerning the Sorcerer Supreme's last visit to Vanaheim while drinking a vanic wine that pulled free easy laughter in the haze of a light, pleasant buzz.

Loki looked distinctly nonplussed, Thor appeared grim, and Tony remembered at that exact moment that Loki had probably told Thor about the breaking of Odin's decree. His smile fell immediately and the slight buzz from the wine evaporated, leaving him instantly sober.

"I think it best to take our leave," Thor rumbled. Tony saw that Mjölnir was strapped at Thor's side and wondered if he was going to wait until they were in the woods, alone. No one would point fingers at their prince to begin with, much less when it was Asgard's resident newbie, out in
another world for the first time. Thor could say he'd gotten lost, that he'd gotten separated. Or he could even use the tension between the two worlds, blaming the Vanir for doing any number of things. Things that wouldn't really be worth starting a war over.

"Stark, are you coming?" Thor urged, obviously more than ready to depart, as though he'd never been excited about showing Tony Vanaheim at all.

'No,' Tony thought with a touch of hysteria, but nodded anyway, turning to Mimir, who was watching the proceedings with something akin to amusement.

"Nice meeting you man. It's been real."

"You are welcome on Vanaheim," Mimir told him. There were no handshakes, and it was about as formal a farewell as the situation warranted. Or maybe the ultra rigid formality of Asgard was starting to skew his sense of formal and informal to begin with (and that thought was damn uncomfortable). But he got up and passed Loki, who was already making for the table, face set in a mask of apathy.

Tony stepped out, surprised to see that it was like night on Earth, a true night, not the edge of dusk night that Asgard experienced.

Thor, uncharacteristically silent, pulled himself astride and waited for Tony, but only barely. He was off just as Tony got into the saddle, navigating his way through the darkened village without even looking back.

Dread coiled in Tony's stomach, churned with nausea, pitched and rolled and knotted all at the same time. A thousand excuses sprang to mind, all of them involving Loki being a dick in some form or fashion, which meant they'd be ignored, most likely.

Christ, the silence was killing him, the waiting for a reaction, something, anything, from Thor. His pulse was tripping into overload, thumping in his ears and he was sweating.

It wasn't until they'd reached the spot Heimdall had dropped them at that they were side by side, and Tony could barely discern Thor's expression in the dark. However, Thor didn't immediately call for Heimdall, which either meant he was too lost in thought to, or he didn't want to return to Asgard yet.

"Hey Hammertime, you alright?"

Thor's head tilted, an outline in the darkness and little more, what scant moonlight filtered through the canopy above hitting his hair. It was an eerie picture, if nothing else. And not in the least bit reassuring.

"My brother will not return to Asgard, even though his task is finished," Thor finally managed. Tony could hear teeth grinding together and couldn't help but silently question how a hammer to his bare skull would feel in comparison to Loki and a metal wall.

It wasn't that he was suicidal. The pressure was just too much, the feeling of walking on eggshells too foreign to his own nature. He didn't like the thought of perpetually waiting, constantly on guard for what could be coming. And if provoking Thor's temper was the only way to just get it over with, then that was the way to go. "He give any reason why?"

"No."

Tony started, surprised. He'd been sure Loki would have sold him out the minute he'd had the
chance. But he hadn't.

"Heimdall!" Thor's voice boomed, like thunder striking the earth. Obviously he was pissed, the barely held fury making his voice resonate through the darkness.

The spinning lurch was more disorienting for the sudden light, nauseating as it enveloped and blinded him. The observatory was still slowing to a complete stop when Thor urged his horse to the exit. Tony followed, too absorbed in his own thoughts to notice if the gods exchanged any words in passing or not.

A brief glance up showed Thor looking down at his hands, his entire body sagging beneath a weight Tony couldn't see and didn't understand (didn't want to understand).

Fuck. He had done this. Before he'd opened his mouth, Loki and Thor had at least been talking, tolerant of each other. And now-

He risked looking up ahead at Thor, making no move to catch up.

Instead of relief, the oily taste of guilt sat on his tongue, caustic and unrelenting.
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

There are some things Starks just don't do, and some things they've come to be very good at out of sheer necessity.

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: I don't own the rights to characters or concepts created by marvel (or Tolkien and Skyrim since I shamelessly borrowed a few names of metals and a dwarf city). Anywho.

Episodic chapter is short and episodic. Sorry.

Thor did not return to earth. Actually, Thor made several hunting trips to Vanaheim. Tony only knew this because Heimdall's observatory seemed to be working overtime, the bright light of the bridge opening flashing consistently even when Tony was back in Asgard. And because Thor had invited him, several times, to go hunting for 'warrior bonding', something Tony had gracefully turned down, not particularly keen to step into that series of accidents waiting to happen. He did however, wonder who Thor thought he was fooling.

Splitlip held to his word. He got the workshop, and the dwarves seemed more at ease around him instead of less. The library, if it could be called that, was nothing like Asgard's library, similar only in that books were bound. But even the texture of the paper was different. Thicker, less delicate, and the writing was thick, the letters written in a heavy hand, bold lines against the off color of the pages. The library was nestled into the same building that housed the workshop, and Tony wondered how separate the blacksmith's were from the rest. If it was a matter of status, of if their work for Asgard somehow lowered their social standing within the hierarchy. He never remembered to ask, and he was never keen to explore.

When he was first allowed to start working on an anvil, Split had given him a base metal, something akin to steel but stronger, and commanded he make a gauntlet. No size measurements, nothing, just the hasty command before the dwarf had moved over to his own anvil and begun work.

Tony began making tools instead. Files first, which were easy to shape. Splitlip had shaken his head and muttered, but hadn't stopped him. He spent time in his workshop scouring neat, precise lines into the smooth surface, and then letting them pile up haphazardly on the table.

Splitlip kept tossing metal at him when he first walked into the forge every day, and he continued making tools. Screwdrivers, big first, then smaller and smaller. Wrenches, pliers, clamps, hammers. The list went on. Most of it came almost naturally. Everything he would need to create a simple suit of armor. Split didn't comment.

If Tony was honest with himself, he was almost worried by how naturally it was coming to him,
how easy it was to make everything from scratch. He had an engineer's mind, sure, but everyone should hit a stumbling block at some point, and he hadn't. That it came so easily didn't necessarily mean that it was a good thing. Maybe he just wasn't challenging himself enough.

Which was why he was pouring through books right now. After Thor had returned, shoulders sagging and expression bleak, what had been 'guilt' decided to become, well, he wasn't quite sure what it was. It wasn't shame. Shame was a foreign and utterly mortifying concept to him.

It was guilt. And he knew guilt. And even if it was because of Loki, well, he felt more guilt for Thor. Because Thor hadn't gone back to earth yet. Thor was going into town more and more often at night with his friends. Thor was going hunting on Vanaheim. Thor was everywhere but where he was supposed to be. And Tony felt bad about that, because Thor looked like shit when they crossed paths, and was back to asking him about Loki at every opportunity.

So he felt a little bad about driving Loki off. But he felt more bad about Thor. And he knew the only way to really fix either situation was to apologize.

Therein lay the rub.

Apologies were almost as foreign to his nature as shame. He just didn't do it. Apologies were for people that genuinely regretted their actions, and he couldn't ascribe genuine regret for pissing Loki off. Because it had been an accident. But he was more annoyed with the consequences than anything. Loki had caved his fucking skull in. So he'd already been punished. He shouldn't have to apologize. Except Thor. Damnit.

So he was doing what he did best. Because he couldn't verbally say 'I'm sorry', Starks just didn't fucking do that, especially not Tony Stark, he was figuring out how best to make Loki at least tolerate his existence and stop pissing on other people for what he'd done.

All in all, between his notes and help from Majhild, who'd actually approved his idea, he thought he was doing pretty well.

He just had to get Split to show him where the materials were kept.

"Oh, so now you want to make somethin' useful," Splitlip muttered.

"I was making useful things. Besides, I learned more making those things, so I won't screw things like this up."

"And what is this? I see a decent sketch and nonsense."

"It's not nonsense. I even did research," He stressed the word just so Split would know that he didn't normally go that route. "They're perfect, and it'll work for what I want to do."

"You still haven't told me what you're trying to do."

"That's so it looks more impressive if I pull it off, and not dumb as shit if I don't."

"Looks dumb as shit anyway."

"I'll make a deal. You let me try this, and if it fails, I stop being an insubordinate fuckhead and
make whatever it is you tell me to make. I manage it, and you let me keep learning how I learn."

Splitlip looked more than tempted by the offer, eyeing him steadily, one eye almost shut. Tony waited patiently, not bothering to smile, even if their tone had remained light throughout the conversation. It wasn't a light decision. He had a feeling he had unintentionally screwed up somewhere along the way, and no one had taken the time to tell him. Or maybe he just hadn't noticed if they had. And he knew he was more than capable of missing 'hints'.

"Fair enough deal, Stark. Be interestin' to see if it works." That the dwarf didn't think it would work unspoken.

And like that, he was being led from the room behind the forge and down the tunnel to an open entrance that led down, instead of up. It veered away from the forges, down, curving slowly. The dim light from Split's lantern was insufficient for his height, and the tunnel was low enough that he felt his hair brushing against the top, forcing him to stoop a little just to be safe. The further in they went, the colder it became, and Tony found the quiet unsettling. There was nothing but the sound of their feet on the stone and the darkness that swallowed it.

He sensed the abrupt widening of the cave as much as saw it's edges in the dim light. As Splitlip walked through the room shadows glanced over dozens of sharp angles, growing and retreating, sliding over angle after angle. Within moments the light grew, although dim still, but the cave began to take on more solid proportions. The moment he saw the back wall, he began to understand. Splitlip continued lighting various lanterns while Tony remained oblivious, eyes on the neat stacks of metals. Shelves had been carved into the walls to hold chunks of varying sizes, the smallest on the top, biggest at the bottom. The further down the light reached, the smaller the bigger pieces became, the metals further from the entrance of the cave either being more precious of heavier mass, or possibly both. Tony went over what he had learned and figured it was both, some of the metals being too heavy even for the natural shelves of the cave.

"Get what you need, and only what you need."

No indication of what materials were what. Tony shrugged, figuring Splitlip was testing to see if he even had an inkling of what he was doing. As though he wasn't being carefully watched, he walked past the different shelves, mentally naming the different ores and memorizing locations. Without asking about a ladder (and there had to be one somewhere, how else did the short bastards get anything down?) he used the shelves as a ladder and found the first, noting the almost tarnished sheen on it. Galvorn. It was lighter than he thought it would be, and he hoped the chunk he pulled down was enough. Dropping down and landing on his feet, he continued looking for the other metal. It wouldn't be in raw chunks like everything else, couldn't be if what he'd learned was true, so he easily skipped over shelf after shelf until he saw a shelf of hand made metals. From marble sized orbs to large, thin sheets of red and green, the dim light seemed to seep into the metal. Two thin sheets of the green (Loki had a pretty obvious color scheme) and he was done. When he turned back to Splitlip, he saw the dwarf was watching, expression neutral.

"Well, waitin' for my permission boy?"

Taking that as much as he would ever get, he walked past Split and back for the tunnel, careful to keep his head down, not so much to avoid hitting it, but to hide the grin he could feel itching at the corners of his lips. Shit eating, Clint had always called it. He was probably right, and Tony had a feeling Splitlip would only hit him if he managed to see it.
"Damn."

Tony didn't bother hiding his grin this time as he watched Splitlip examining the vambraces. They weren't one hundred percent completed yet, but the finishing touches didn't count towards construction. And Splitlip would probably brain him if he saw them.

"Took awhile, but I figured it out. Had to borrow a couple of small pieces just to test my theory before working with those," He answered, nodding at the gauntlets. Forging had been harder than he had initially anticipated. The two metals had opposing natures, and getting them to flow together with nothing but brute force had been damn near impossible, as though they recognized their opposing natures, like magnets trying to repel each other. And it was only that analogy that had kept him from skirting too closely to the uncomfortable, magic based explanations that had more readily available in the library.

Reaching for a mug of beer, Tony thanked whatever faceless dwarf kept his workroom stocked. He wasn't sure if the dwarves even drank water anymore, the only uses for it he'd seen thus far for cooling off either metal or themselves.

"Wouldn't still have those pieces, would you?"

"Feel free," Tony answered easily, grabbing the small, flat disk off of his table and tossing it to the smith. Splitlip caught it easily, eyes running over the textured surface. The gauntlet was sat on the table, forgotten as the dwarf turned the disk over to inspect the smooth side. It was smaller, rougher, granted, but maintained the same pattern as the gauntlets. The galvorn and tilkal were braided together, but more than that, each blended into the other. Tony wasn't sure if the combination worked as anything other than theory, but given the research he'd done, he'd bet dollars to donuts (not that he had either) that it would.

"Fine work." It was as close as a compliment he was going to receive, he knew it. And damn if he didn't feel a smidgen of pride to hear it, coming from Splitlip. He tried not to, didn't want to, but couldn't really stop it.

"Does that mean I get to be an insubordinate prick and keep doing this my way?"

"Maybe, if you show me how you accomplished this bit."

"More than willing. After I deliver those."

"Never did say who they're for."

"Does it matter? It's one of the áss, and you hate them all." The only answer was a grumble, though Tony knew it well enough to know it was an agreement.

"Long as it's not for Odin."

"Fuck no. Old One Eye won't get anything from me. Doesn't appreciate genius when he sees it."

"True enough. I'll leave you to it then," Split told him, turning on his heel and exiting the workroom. Tony didn't bother to comment on the fact that he'd taken the disk with him. Grabbing one of the gauntlets, he picked up the burin he'd fashioned earlier, specifically for this project. He'd murder for a dremel, but he hadn't gotten that far into making his own tools yet, though he had his heart set on figuring one out.
The inside of the gauntlets were flat and smooth, a minor miracle he'd barely accomplished. The colors blended more noticeably, the green and black, both more vibrant after being worked and polished some, twined and twisted around one another. Carefully he began to etch, free handing the words. That the letters were made of nothing but straight lines helped. He'd decided against any ornamentation, remembering that Loki didn't seem to favor it as much as Thor, or any of the other Asgardians for that matter.

Words he memorized slowly began to appear. Despite the ease of writing, he paid careful attention, spacing everything perfectly, blowing away the almost dust like particles that came free. When he finished, he picked up a polishing cloth, wishing desperately for Jarvis and his multitude of machines. Although, he admitted to himself as he watched the metals come to live, supple in his hands, he hadn't done a bad job. Not a bad job at all.

"Fuck."

He was lost. In a forest. In another realm. Or on another planet, possibly. Why, why did everything have to look the same. And why, goddamnit, did it have to be getting dark?

Heimdall was probably laughing his ass off.

The horse beneath him blew out a gust of air, obviously as impatient as he was. Or bored.

"Quiet, or I'll force feed you a gps," Tony snapped impatiently, eyes still scanning the forest for any sign of a path. There was nothing, not even a sign that anyone had walked through the forest recently. And turned around as he was, he had no clue which way to head to get to the edge of the wood to find whatever village Mimir lived in. He somehow doubted showing up in the wrong one asking for the Asgardian would be received well, not if the attitude he'd seen before had been any indication of how the Vanir as a whole felt.

For lack of any better options, he picked a direction and urged the horse on, thanking whatever horse deities around that the horse seemed to be able to see well enough despite the quickly growing darkness. Eyes on the canopy above, he tried to gauge what time it was back in Asgard. He'd probably be late to the forge. Hopefully Split wouldn't hit him with whatever it was he normally hit him with. He still hadn't managed to see it, but had the feeling it was something like a mini flail. That's what it felt like at least.

As the horse continued and the shadows turned into complete darkness, Tony wondered how exactly he was going to give Loki the gauntlets. A verbal apology was pretty much out. He didn't really know how to make one, knew he couldn't fake it, and was positive it would only piss Loki off more. The gauntlets should speak for themselves. But Loki was also a prick, and would probably try to drag something out, if only to make him uncomfortable.

An errant prayer slipped out. Please let Loki not be there. He could just drop them off with Mimir and get back to Asgard. Sleep was pretty scarce these days anyway, so he'd skip bed and just head for the forge. Life would hopefully return to normal, and Thor would stop skulking around like a puppy that had been yelled at.

"You know, you're heading the wrong way," A kindly voice called out. Tony immediately recognized it and turned around in the saddle, not able to spot where Mimir was.
"Over here Stark." A spark, and then a steady ball of glowing blue light rose from Mimir's hands to hover over his head. Slipping down from the horse, Tony took the reins and walked over to the Asgardian, a gusty exhale of relief making itself known.

"Got turned around when I first headed into the forest," He admitted. No point in lying if Mimir had felt it necessary to come find him.

"One of the children saw you earlier," Mimir acknowledged. "When you didn't arrive, I supposed you didn't remember the way."

"Not used to the woods."

"And yet here you are."

"Got a delivery for Loki."

"Oh?"

"Not much." He really didn't feel like explaining everything to Mimir. Mimir seemed like a pretty likable guy, and he didn't want to come off as a complete jackass. Time for that after making sure he didn't get banned from Vanaheim. The blue light made it easy to avoid fallen logs and the profuse undergrowth that would have otherwise tripped him. The horse was doing well enough, completely at ease. The reins were slack in his hands, and he was sure if he let go it would probably just continue to follow placidly.

"You've come a long way just to deliver a package. Thor has been on Vanaheim several times." He could hear the unspoken question and wondered what he could get away with saying.

"Personal. Ish. Besides, came almost straight from the forge. Hit the stables in Asgard and headed back for the observatory. And it's Raldbthar, the city." A change of topic would be amazing.

"Second only to Sindri's forge, from what I remember. Not a bad place to undergo an apprenticeship."

"The guys are nice enough. Haven't been able to see much of the city though."

"I suppose not. So, a gift for the prince from Raldbthar. Have you moved forward in your training?"

"Could say that. Split gave in and let me try out an idea I had. It worked, so I think I might actually be allowed to start working on what I want instead of the training assignments."

"Unusual. Dwarves are rarely moved to break patterns, especially those concerning the forge."

"I'm stubborn," Toy chuckled.

"Indeed. It seems to be doing you in good stead."

Nothing more was said as they moved through the forest. Tony noticed Mimir walked completely silently, as though he was hovering above the ground, whereas he made more noise than a stampede, breaking twigs and crunching leaves beneath his feet. Feeling more clumsy than usual, he attempted to lighten his steps only to fall behind within minutes. A mental reprimand and he caught up, not looking at Mimir to see if the god was amused by his antics.

The forest ended abruptly, opening into the village. There were still people moving through, and
even a large fire going somewhere behind one of the other buildings. Tony could hear music and singing, and even the occasional loud burst of drunken laughter.

"I'm not interrupting anything, am I?"

"Not at all. Two children were born yesterday. Births are rare for long lived races such as ourselves, and the Vanir celebrate new life. For two to be born is a great cause for joy."

"Oh. Congratulations to the new mom. Or moms," He added thoughtfully.

"I will be sure to tell them. Loki is in my home, over there," Mimir pointed out.

"Not joining me?"

"Perhaps later, Stark. I have been asked to give my blessing to the newborns."

Huh. Tony realized Mimir must be closer to the Vanir than he thought if the locals were asking him to bless babies. Or it was a perfunctory thing, some sort of diplomatic hand shaking. Nodding as Mimir strode away, long legs carrying him closer to the fire, Tony walked over to the house and tied the reins to the post outside, shifting his pack experimentally.

He still hadn't thought of what to say.

Forgoing any prayers in the event that someone could read his mind and decide to fuck him regardless, he pushed the door open and walked inside, not entirely unsurprised to see the table set for three, Loki sitting there calmly reading a book and eating.

For a minute he considered dropping the pack on the table and leaving. But that would be giving ground, and he'd given enough by even making the gauntlets. Strolling over, he took the seat across from Loki, sliding his pack off of his shoulders and letting it rest on the table.

Loki ignored him, eyes fastened on the book.

Tony waited.

Loki continued ignoring him.

Quickly growing bored and antsy, Tony reached for one of the green apples and bit into it, the loud crunch echoing through the room.

Loki continued ignoring him, but Tony was positive he saw Loki’s jaw clench for a moment before relaxing completely.

Each bite of the crisp apple seemed to be louder than the last. Loki’s face was a study of relaxed apathy.

Once the apple was finished, Tony threw the core past Loki and into the hearth where fire immediately began to consume it.

"I know I'm the low man on the totem pole and everything, but you can usually muster up an insult or two for me."

The book closed with a snap and Loki's green eyes moved to rest on him, barely leashed impatience obvious.

"What, Stark?"
"I come bearing gifts."

"I doubt you could procure anything worthy of being called a gift."

"You're probably right. Good thing I made it."

Loki's sneer was enough to spark his own temper. He was trying to, in a roundabout, very Stark way, apologize. Opening the pack, he pulled out the gauntlets and dropped them on the table in front of the god.

"Quaint," Loki sneered, not even bothering to look at them.

Okay, enough.

"Look, I was trying to apologize for being a dick. You hate me, fine. But stop pissing on Thor because you're mad at me."

Loki actually looked confused for a moment, but Tony wasn't sure if the expression was genuine or pure artifice.

"What are you talking about Stark?"

"You. Avoiding Thor and Asgard. Thor looking like someone took mjolnir away. Sulking puppy faces. Him asking me, of all fucking people, if I have any clue what you're up to and when you're coming back. Because 'trading sarcasm' is apparently code for 'Loki's Buddy'," Tony snapped.

Loki didn't bother with sneering, his expression breaking into unbridled amusement, laughter echoing through the room. It was genuine laughter, and Tony thought that might actually be worse than the mocking, smirking kind he was used to seeing from the god. But the laughter died down quickly, but the raised brow was enough to make Tony feel like a moron. God he hated how some people could do that. One minute change of expression and he knew he was silently being called a dumbass. Fury had perfected that.

"You overestimate your own importance," Loki replies, voice cool. "To think something so small would keep me from Asgard. I have no want for an apology, and no desire to aid you in your childish attempts to absolve your own guilt."

"Wait-" Tony snapped, face going hot as realization dawned. "Are you telling me you haven't been avoiding Asgard because of what happened?"

"As I said, narcissist. My own actions do not hinge on you, Stark. I have my own affairs to attend to."

Tony stared in slack jawed disbelief, face shamefully hot because-fuck, Loki was right.

"Then why didn't you tell Thor? You obviously had a chance."

"My business is my own, Stark. I do not need Thor to come to my aid at every slight."

Well damn.

"Fine. Since you do admit there was a 'slight', take the fucking things. I'll get out of your hair."

"What makes you think I would accept so trivial a gift for such offense?"

"Because," Tony snapped, finally comfortable with the normal rancor Loki inspired, pity gone. "It's
not 'trivial'. Those are a work of art, and I know that. Not my problem if you can't spot good fuckin’ work. Should have known."

"Oh yes, so masterful. You braid colors very prettily."

"Fuck you. You try blending galvorn and tilkal."

"Impossible."

Tony couldn't stop himself. The grin bloomed before he could stop it as he pointed down at the gauntlets.

"Take a good look Rock of Ages." The air had a weighty feel to it, tense from his own anticipation to prove that impossible was possible. The apology was the furthest thing from his mind, his eyes and easy slouch providing all the challenge he needed.

Loki's eyebrow didn't lower in the least as he picked up a vambrace and eyed it shrewdly. There were several minutes of tense silence as Tony watched him examining it, obviously looking for flaws. When he turned it over to examine the blending lines of green and jet, Tony didn't miss the minute widening of his eyes. However, aside from the flash of recognition, there was nothing else evident in his expression.

The first was laid carefully on the table, the second examined just as carefully. Loki's gaze lingered on the back, and Tony noted how Loki moved, his free hand coming up to trace one of the letters or names, or possibly just the blend of the two metals. Tony reminded himself that Loki was manipulative, that Loki was an act, and that he wasn't hiding a secret sensitive side. But for a minute it was suicidally easy to believe that Loki might just have a bit of a sentimental streak in him after all.

"These are acceptable," He finally said, sitting the vambrace down and looking Tony squarely in the eye. Despite the intense regard, Tony couldn't guess what Loki was thinking, the god's face a study in neutrality. Any thoughts of sentiment vanished, dying more easily than they had been born. Tony reminded himself that Loki was artifice, Loki was a lie, and that any and everything could be and probably was an act. The heaviness in the atmosphere tightened. It broke on his shoulders with a careless shrug.

"Coming from you, I'll take that as a compliment," He smirked, getting up and grabbing his pack.

"You may tell Thor I will return within three day's time, Stark."

Tony stopped, slightly surprised by the sudden accommodation. Suspicion quickly smothered it.

"You're setting me up again."

"You are painfully ignorant of our ways, Stark. The giving of a gift, even as reparation, requires the return of one. Consider us even."

Tony couldn't help but be suspicious of Loki's intentions. "Fair enough," He shrugged, pretending an easiness he didn't feel. "Peace and all that jazz."

Loki didn't offer anything else as he left the longhouse, door swinging shut quietly behind him. Tony untied the horse and wished for Mimir's magic ball of light as he pulled himself up and headed for the treeline. Unsure how well the Vanir would take the very obvious light that came with every pickup so close to their village, he allowed the horse to pick it's way through the growth without direction, examining the brief exchange now that he was away from Loki.
He felt a little smug, if he was completely honest with himself. If for no other reason than he'd surprised Loki with the alloy that had been created between the blurred lines of the two metals. He somehow doubted Loki was surprised often. Which counted for two moments in history he had been able to pull it off. And Loki hadn't been entirely unaffected by the names inscribed inside the gauntlets. That had been a 'sentimental' touch. Thor had once told Tony Loki wasn't the type for 'sentiment', the word sounding personal the one time Thor had mentioned it. Tony didn't quite get the history the word obviously held for the thunder god, but it obviously wasn't true, or else Loki would have gutted him for doing it to begin with.

Acceptable. He could deal with that.

The 'gift' Loki had given in return felt far more suspect. He'd have to ask Thor if the gift giving thing was true before mentioning it. In the grand scheme of things, it would be a petty joke if Loki was lying. Thor wouldn't be angry with him, not even disappointed. Everyone was used to Loki tricking people, and it was probably common knowledge that he had it out for Tony. If it was a trick, it probably wouldn't even register on Thor's radar. And while Loki could be petty, Tony doubted he would be petty when it involved Thor.

Shaking himself, he stopped trying to discern Loki's motivations. A quick question would solve it regardless, and he could stop worrying about him completely. Maybe, if he was lucky, they'd have the same sort of 'uneasy alliance' the Vanir and the Æsir experienced. No outright hostilities, just silence. He could deal with that, more than deal with that if it meant the servants weren't reduced to pulling dents out of the walls and buffing bits of gray matter out.

"Heimdall!" He shouted, figuring he had put enough distance between himself and the village. "I'm lost. Help a guy out!"

There was only a moment between his shout and the light blinding him, the familiar lurch of the Bifrost. Swallowing the surge of bile and clenching his eyes shut, he opened them again when the horse took a tentative step forward.

"Welcome back, Stark." Heimdall's face was as impassive as ever, but the greeting was new.

"Thanks," He muttered. "Any idea if Thor's stateside?"

"If you mean to ask is he on Asgard, then yes. He returned from hunting this morning."

"Thanks," He repeated, already walking out of the observatory and down the bridge. Urging the horse to go faster, he realized it was midafternoon. He'd be late to the forge. Hopefully Splitlip would just laugh when he explained he'd gotten lost on Vanaheim. Hopefully he wouldn't ask why he'd been on Vanaheim.

After leaving the horse with the stablemaster he considered getting cleaned up and changed before finding Thor. He hadn't taken the time the day before to shower and change out of his working clothes, but he was more than eager to get back to the forge before Splitlip considered changing his mind about the free reign access to work. He was striding quickly through the halls, heading for the wing that contained his rooms when he saw Frigga.

"Hi," He greeted gamely.

"Hello Stark. I had thought you would be on Svartálfaheimr."

"Just dropping by. Seen Thor by any chance?"

"He is currently on the practice field with his friends."
"Thanks."

"How is Mimir? It has been a long time since he and I had the chance to converse."

Her question stopped Tony short, and he chewed on what to say. Mimir didn't seem overly fond of the Æsir, and it was the first time anyone aside from Thor had mentioned the displaced Asgardian.

"He's doing pretty good. Was happy last time I saw him." Frigga nodded, smiling softly at the admission. Tony wondered why she bothered asking him since she obviously knew he'd been on Vanaheim. Surely she'd know how he was doing.

"It is well. My thanks."

Tony nodded and almost started walking when he stopped again, wondering if he was about to sound stupid and figuring Frigga couldn't have much lower of an opinion of him anyway.

"Someone mentioned something about gift giving. Is it true the Æsir have to exchange gifts?"

"Do you mean, must a gift be returned when one is given?" At Tony's nod she nodded. "It's considered polite."

"So it's not required," He intoned, voice flat.

"It is considered extremely rude to accept a gift and offer nothing in return. Has someone given you a gift, Stark?" Frigga seemed genuinely curious, and having her regard turned on him like that felt like having a cat watch him, a study in contrast to Odin's owl stare. Tony didn't feel like a mouse, but he wasn't stupid enough to believe she didn't see him as one.

"I gave one," He admitted slowly.

"Then why the cause for concern?" Her expression was one of honest bafflement.

He eyed her shrewdly, wondering if she was fucking with him again. She seemed over fond of it.

"Hard to trust information when the one giving it is considered the god of lies."

Frigga didn't even bother trying to look insulted by the blunt statement. "Loki would not return a gift with a lie, Stark. It is ingrained in him that all gifts are precious. He remembers it more than most, in fact." She admonished, as though he had done a disservice to question the nature of the information he'd been given.

"Thanks." Tony nodded, not bothering to mention that where Loki was concerned, Frigga appeared to have rose tinted glasses.

"Loki's gifts are rarely simple, Stark. But if you were the first to broach the subject, then whatever he offered is trustworthy," She added, tone resolute. With that she didn't even bother with a polite goodbye, walking away and leaving him standing alone in the corridor.

Gift giving was obviously serious business on Asgard. And Frigga had been adamant about it. That, combined with the assurance that Loki wouldn't stoop to pettiness concerning Thor, Tony shrugged and figured it had a decent chance of being genuine. Asking for directions from one of the guards, Tony was surprised he was actually able to remember the way there, for the most part. Silently congratulating himself for not getting lost for the second time in twenty four hours, he walked outside into the sunlight and stopped short of the sparring pair.
Sif was smiling the sort of smile Tony was used to seeing on Jane's face. Tony wondered if Thor was aware of her feelings, feelings that were painfully obvious as she teased and attempted to provoke a smile from Thor. Thor was obviously still wrapped up in his depression concerning Loki. The warriors three were watching the fight, too wrapped up in calling out directions or taunts to notice him. Five minutes in and Thor finally saw him, darting away from Sif and dropping his shield.

"Stark."

"Hey. Got a message for you from Vanaheim."

Tony prayed it wasn't Loki being a dick when a slow, almost hesitant grin stretched Thor's features.

"Good tidings?"

"Three days. Now I gotta get the hell out of here, Split's gonna have my ass for being late."

He was already turning to walk away when Thor's hand grabbed his shoulder, forcing him to spin.

"Thank you, Stark." It was said with the same level of depth a thank you for saving the world would. Tony shrugged and smiled.

"No problem. No go have fun getting your ass kicked by Barbie."

"Aye. Easy travels Stark." And Thor was practically skipping back to his shield. Tony waved absently to the others and ignored their pointedly curious stares before walking back inside. Any sense of guilt absolved, he focused on getting the hell out of Asgard.

Tony felt, impossibly, at home. The others were paying rapt attention as he explained the process of folding the two metals. Their natural opposition had actually worked for him, in the end, forcing the repelling energy into doing half the work for him. Splitlip was nodding approvingly, and the others remained quiet, expressions radiating curiosity and grudging respect.

"Had to go to the lower level to get the heat I needed to get them to melt together," He finally finished.

"S'fine work," Hathgar admitted. "Wish we'd thought of it."

"Not much use for anyone but those that got magicians workin' with 'em."

"Still, s'good technique," Splitlip reminded them. "All knowledge is worth knowin'."

That was definitely praise coming from the gruff dwarf.

"So. Stark and I made a deal. He succeeded with this, he gets to start real work. What think you?" Splitlip asked the room at large. The dwarves went quiet, eyes on the scattered papers with his notes on them. The small disk lay on the table, testament that he had actually pulled the experiment off.
"He doesn't seem like to blow the forge to shit," Hathgar pointed out. Tony wasn't entirely sure that it was a positive endorsement, but given his previous experiments on Earth, he couldn't entirely blame them. The others began nodding, one by one, in agreement. Hopefully that meant what he thought it did.

"Good enough. I suppose that means you'll be working on that armor of yours now," Splitlip said, breaking through the quiet.

"I need to make some more tools first, refine my designs. If there's something else I should work on-"

"Now you're wanting to listen to me?" Split snorted. "Nah. Stubborn ass, you are. But smart enough. Figure your armor out. Should be plenty of entertainment for us."

"I get an audience?" He smirked. Obviously they trusted him, but apparently not as much as he'd thought.

"Oh, I'll be overseein' your work," Splitlip assured him. "Never know what fool thing you might try next."

"Hey, it worked out," Tony defended, voice light. Splitlip nodded.

"Never know when it won't though."

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