Poetic Justice

by Limmet

Summary

When the time comes to pass sentence on Loki after the events in The Avengers, Odin decides to go for the poetic justice angle. For his attempt to enslave humanity, Loki has his magic and powers bound, and is sent back to Midgard and given over to Tony Stark to be his slave.

This was not a turn of events Tony had ever seen coming.

Eventually Tony/Loki.

Notes

When I got into this fandom, I was very surprised that I could find no stories based on this concept. To me, it just seems like the whole set-up calls for it – Loki did try to enslave Midgard and its humans, and it seems inevitable that somebody in Asgard should eventually stumble on the idea that, hey, guess what kind of poetic justice-like punishment would fit perfectly for a crime like that?

I originally requested this prompt on Norsekink, but since no one filled it, I decided to take it on myself, and this is the result. Hope you enjoy! :)

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Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/635514.

Rating: Mature
Archive Warning: No Archive Warnings Apply
Category: M/M
Fandom: The Avengers (2012), Thor (Movies), Iron Man (Movies)
Relationship: Loki/Tony Stark
Character: Loki (Marvel), Tony Stark, Other Avengers
Additional Tags: Slavery, Angst, Drama, Romance, Slash, FrostIron - Freeform
Stats: Published: 2013-01-12 Completed: 2013-10-18 Chapters: 142/142 Words: 311470
Chapter 1

Having a small entourage from Asgard showing up in his tower is not what Tony Stark pictures as a good start to his day. But apparently the universe doesn’t care about his opinion, because now four stoic Einherjer warriors clad in furs and armed to the teeth are standing before him, explaining their business to their reluctant host. It’s way too early in the day for this, and his throat is itching for a glass of brandy, a drink of scotch, or... anything, really. Anything that has alcohol in it.

“…you’ll be pleased to hear that the Allfather has now pronounced judgement,” says what Tony assumes is the leader of the little group.

Under other circumstances, those words would have been reassuring, informing him that Loki has been dealt with. Locked up in some Asgardian prison for the next few centuries. One irate god of chaos less for the planet to worry about.

Yeah, those words would have been reassuring, if the object of said pronounced judgement hadn’t been standing there in the middle of the Einherjers with his arms held in a bone-crushing grip.

Then why is he here then? The vexed question is just on the tip of Tony’s tongue, on the verge of rolling off. Why did you bring him into my fucking tower where he’s done enough damage already? But the commanding presence of the Einherjers – or perhaps rather the humungous swords at their belts – makes him hold back his probably premature enquiries. The guys not doing the talking don’t look like people who’d take kindly to someone interrupting their leader while he’s busy explaining important stuff.

Loki is just standing there while his guard talks, mercifully quiet for once, his eyes not meeting with Tony’s. Instead, his gaze is locked to a spot on the floor, as if it promises to reveal intriguing answers to unknown cosmic secrets.

So staring isn’t polite, but Tony was never one to let himself be restricted by niceties. His gaze scrutinizes the fallen god, up and down, and then up again. Loki is wearing rather plain clothes – by Asgardian standards anyway, even if he’d probably get a few stares walking down the main street of most any city in America. Gone are the armour, the sweeping cloak and that ridiculous helmet he wore during their last encounter. Good riddance. What’s left now is some green and black, a bit of leather. Nothing fancy.

But the change in attire isn’t the biggest change in the figure standing there on his floor, in his tower. In his home. No, somehow Loki seems smaller, like somebody threw him into the tumble dryer without reading the washing instructions first, causing subsequent shrinking. But that’s not it, really,
because he’s still towering over Tony with the same number of inches as before. Maybe it’s rather that the arrogance that has always clung to the trickster like a wet t-shirt is gone now, replaced by what can best be described as sullen resignation. He can’t see that much of Loki’s face – the god’s face is still down turned – but what parts are visible shows tautness and a rigidly clenched jaw line.

This god, who’s brought so much death and destruction to their world. And now he’s back here – albeit under heavy guard – and it makes Tony’s stomach feel like a smouldering pit of fury. He doesn’t want to see Loki again and hopes that the Asgardian warriors will soon take him back to their own realm where this joke of a god will face his well-deserved punishment. Whatever that will turn out to be.

“… after long considerations, and lengthy discussion with the Council, it was decided that only one punishment was sufficient to make amends,” the Einherjer drones on, oblivious to Tony’s impatience. Erik the Blabbermouth, he settles for calling him in his mind. He doesn’t know the guy’s real name, and frankly he doesn’t care. He just wants the big brute to come to the point and then escort the prisoner out of his house. Off the planet.

He stifles a yawn as Erik’s story derails into singing the praises of Odin’s wisdom and his sense of justice. What are they gonna do to Loki, anyway, he wonders, not really listening. Lock him up for a few centuries? Banish him to the deepest pits of Nifelheim? Turn him into a squirrel? He’s read up a bit on Norse mythology and found that the Aesir seem to have a penchant for some rather unsavoury punishments – ones that would rather classify as torture where Tony comes from – but he tries not to think about that. Torture doesn’t sit well with him. Not that Loki wouldn’t deserve the more creative forms of justice he’s read about, but… well. Besides, Loki is Odin’s son, albeit adopted. And surely that guy isn’t gonna let his own son…

“… serve as your slave.” Erik’s unexpected words startle him out from his little reverie and Tony’s eyes dart back to the Aesir warrior. Say what?

His tongue uncharacteristically fumbles for a few seconds before he manages to blurt out the resemblance of a full sentence.

“Uh, I don’t think I… really caught that last part. The one where you mentioned something that sounded suspiciously like the word slave. Care to repeat that?”

Erik’s face tightens. He’s obviously annoyed by Tony’s inattention as he’s addressing this grave matter, but he acquiesces and repeats his words more slowly this time, as if the other man is a borderline imbecile.
“Loki has caused much trouble and mischief in the past, and Odin has punished him in various ways for it, hoping for him to see the error of his ways and be set on the right path. Unfortunately, his punishments have always failed to have the desired effect. And now, Loki has inflicted great harm upon your realm.” The Einherjer makes a short pause, almost as if he’s feeling a little guilty on account of the perpetrator being a fellow Asgardian, before clearing his throat and continuing. “So this time, the Allfather has decided that some, as you Midgardians would put it, poetic justice is in order. Since Loki tried to enslave Midgard and its humans, it is only fair that he in turn will become a slave here in Midgard. And Odin has decided that this slave shall be given to you, Man of Iron.”

*Man of Iron. So Thor has passed on that cute little nickname of his to the rest of Asgard too, huh?*

And it’s ridiculous that he’s even thinking about that now, because of all that Erik has said in the last minute, this is by far the most insignificant piece of information. And that is precisely why his mind grabs onto it, because all that other stuff is just too much for him to wrap his brain around at the moment. It’s just too unreal. Like he’s on candid camera and a self-righteous, pompous asshat of a show host is about to break through his door with a microphone in hand, gloating over how the unsuspecting victim fell for their little ploy, fair and square.

Just in case, he casts a glance over his shoulder. But the door remains closed.

Suddenly, he wants that glass of scotch more than anything.

Erik continues, undeterred. “You are, however, not allowed to give him away to someone else. He will remain your slave, unless otherwise is decided by Odin.” He then falls silent, obviously waiting for Tony’s acquiescing acceptance.

Which he isn’t about to give.

“*Hey, wait just a minute now, where’s the part where I get a say in this?*” he asks – okay, yells, but he doesn’t care. “*How come no one’s bothered to ask me whether I actually want a crazy war criminal as my freaking…*” the word feels foreign in his mouth, and he pauses briefly, “…slave? You know, informed consent and all that?” Tony can feel his insides clenching with fury. He wants the god responsible for the wanton razing of Manhattan and for almost killing Coulson as far away from his own person as possible. Preferably in a deep dark dungeon somewhere.

He’s sounding like a petulant child, and he knows it, but he couldn’t care less right now. The Einherjer are only watching him impassively as he continues his righteous fuming. “And besides, there’s this little pesky thing called the law! We don’t allow slavery here in America. Not anymore. You can’t actually own another person, so that kind of defeats the whole purpose of this not-in-the-
slightest brilliant idea!” He gestures animatedly with his hands, as if that will somehow convince Erik and the rest of this little entourage. Judging by the unimpressed look on their faces, his efforts don’t have the desired effect.

“It is of no matter. The word of the Allfather is above Midgard law and the judgement is final. Loki is your slave. Do with him as you will.”

And with that, Erik turns to leave (just like that!), but then stops and adds, as if in afterthought, “Loki has had his magic and powers bound.” He gestures to the thin silvery chains circling the wrists of his charge. “For all intents and purposes, he is no more than a mere mortal and hardly a threat.”

“Hardly a threat?” Tony bristles at that, “Even a mere mortal can stab someone in the back or poison someone’s drink or…”

“You need not worry, Man of Iron. If Loki harms or kills another Midgardian, he will die. And he will not be given a quick and clean death. He has nowhere to run and if he tries, he will be found immediately.” The Einherjer’s voice is ice and fire and venom all at once as his hand – accidentally? – brushes the hilt of his sword, and Tony takes half a step back.

Yeah, remind me never to piss this dude off.

After a few seconds of silence, Erik nods his good-bye. “Farewell, Man of Iron. The Allfather will be pleased to hear of your cooperation in this matter.” And Tony thinks he hears a subtle threat in there, but he doesn’t want to probe further. He’s just too tired to protest and possibly cause a diplomatic conflict between his world and that of the Aesir. Somehow, he doesn’t think a disagreement like that will end with Earth coming out on top. And their planet has had enough outer-worldly problems to last them a while.

Erik’s warriors follow their leader, and the door closes behind them with a dull thud. A small part of Tony is grateful that they at least had the decency not to apparate – or whatever that thing they do is called – back to Asgard right here in his living room. He’s feeling nauseous enough as it already is. And he hasn’t even had his first drink for the day.

He stares at the closed door for a while. Why me, he wants to scream at it. Why not Steve or Bruce? Or Clint – that guy would have been delighted to be in his situation right now. Why did Odin pick him, of all the Avengers?
No answers are forthcoming despite his glaring; still, Tony doesn’t want to turn around and face the god, the man, the whatever, who is standing there behind him. His freaking slave.

But the door can only provide so much amusement. So finally, he turns.

Loki is standing where the guards left him, eyes still nailed to the same spot on the floor. He neither moves nor speaks. Like he’s a marble statue or something. With weird clothes.

*And just what the hell is he supposed to do with Loki now?*

The situation is freakishly surreal, and for a while Tony just stands there, too, neither moving nor speaking. Memories of Loki’s last appearance here on Earth are filling his mind; a scene in particular from Stuttgart, one where the god is ordering the scared and bewildered people in the square to kneel before him, smiling triumphantly as his orders are obeyed.

*Self-righteous bastard.*

The whim that suddenly comes rushing over him is just too great, too tempting. He can’t help himself. And besides, if this is to be the order of the day, he might as well make the best out of the situation. Play along with the cards he’s been dealt. He’s good at that.

“You know, I might be new to this whole slave-owning thing, but there’s one thing that I’ve picked up along the way,” he hears his own voice drawl, mocking and snide. “Aren’t slaves supposed to kneel before their masters?”

So he might be going to hell for this, but it would be so worth it, just to see the arrogant god forced to his knees in front of a mere mortal after the little stunt he tried to pull with world domination and all.

Loki lifts his head and looks Tony in the eye, just briefly, before looking away again. Even though the moment is quickly over, Tony can see the tiredness in the pale face, the dark circles under his eyes. Clearly, Loki’s jailors haven’t been coddling him. *Good.*

“If their masters command them to,” Loki says after a few seconds of silence, posture stiff and avoidant. The voice is taut, as if the god has to force the words out from a constricting throat. He still doesn’t move, though.
“Consider it a command, then.”

Loki visibly tenses and the hands at his sides clench. But nothing more than that happens, and as the seconds tic away Tony is starting to feel, well, stupid. Of course the pompous ass isn’t going to kneel before him, slave or no slave. What had he been expecting, really? And how is he even going to enforce a command like that if Loki refuses to obey? Tackle him from behind? Kick him in the knee caps? The whole situation is ludicrous.

Tony can feel his anger building up again; even now, in this position, Loki has the power to make his life difficult, to take away all semblance of control from him. A part of him wants to drive his fist into that pale face, send him crashing to the floor, just so he can see the arrogant god crawling at his feet.

Suddenly, there is a fluid motion of green and black and when Tony looks up, Loki is kneeling on the ground.

Whoa there.
Tony’s eyebrows dart upwards at the unexpected but oh-so-satisfying sight. Loki really is kneeling. Before him, no less. For a moment, he isn’t sure whether his eyes are playing tricks with him, and he blinks a couple of times, but the image doesn’t change or even flicker. No mirages or wishful thinking there.

Loki’s hands are still clenched into fists, and for some reason that makes a smile creep into Tony’s face. The god clearly isn’t enjoying this at all and Tony wonders if this is the first time he’s ever had to kneel before someone. Most certainly before a mere human.

Darn, he hadn’t expected that it would make him feel so good, seeing Loki like this. But there is a warm bubble of triumph in his stomach, and it’s growing bigger by the second.

*You decided to invade our world just so you could see humanity on its collective knees before you, huh? Well guess who’s now on the receiving end? How do you like it now, huh?*

And Tony knows that the inner harangue is merely his own brain trying to rationalize things – yeah, he’s justifiably pissed at Loki alright, because the guy attacked Earth, tried to lay the whole planet under his rule, brought an alien army to New York and killed a lot of people and all that. But still, the main reason for his ire isn’t that, not really. No, it’s way more personal than that.

Because last time Loki was here, he threw Tony out the window.

Just like that, he waltzed into Tony’s home like he was the one living there, threatened him, tried to take over his mind just like he did with Barton. And when that plan miserably failed, the enraged god simply put a hand around his throat, hoisting him up and disdainfully throwing him out the window like a useless rag doll.

Just like that.

And that’s what makes this whole thing *personal*. Sure, Loki isn’t the first one who’s tried to kill him, oh no, others have tried and failed. But fighting some super villain while in his Iron Man suit is on a whole other level of different. He’s been there, done that and never really felt resentment about it, because at least he had the means to fight and to protect himself, the playing fields were even. All a normal day in the job.
But Loki didn’t play by the rules. No, he decided to take the fight into the sanctity of Tony’s own home, catching him unprepared. Not only unprepared, but helpless. Powerless. He still remembers that crushing feeling of panic as he got lifted from the ground by the throat, unable to do a thing. And getting defenestrated hurt, to say nothing of the fear of falling to what he was sure would be his certain death. He still has nightmares about that, nightmares that wake him up with heart pounding and sheets drenched in his own sweat.

Tony’s skin is crawling, and he’s not sure if it’s the unpleasant memories or anger or something else. He notices that Loki is studying him warily, eyes narrowed. No doubt, the god is far from oblivious to the emotions playing out on Tony’s face, knowing full well that it doesn’t herald anything good. For him. Given that they’re both standing – alright, kneeling, in Loki’s case – in the very same room where the two of them had their little let’s-throw-Tony-out-the-window encounter, the god is sure to know exactly what kind of thoughts are going through Tony’s mind right now.

The knowledge that Loki, until now, has certainly not paid a second’s thoughts to all that since he waltzed out of Stark Tower without even an inkling of remorse, while Tony has relieved those terrifying moments more times than he cares to think about, grates him.

He wants to see some of that remorse on Loki’s face, though, however little. He deserves it. Though, Tony isn’t sure if the ‘he’ is supposed to refer to himself or to Loki.

So he walks behind the bar counter, which is lined with a haphazard row of bottles, some empty, others in varying states of fullness. But he’s not going for those – though heavens know he could sure use a drink. Instead he pulls out a drawer hidden under the counter, inspecting the contents.

After the whole Loki affair, he put the thing there, not wanting to be taken so damnably unprepared again. Not that the risk of him being surprised by another super-villain in the very same room as last time is particularly big, not to really motivate this, but still. Once bitten, twice shy and all that. Merely knowing it was there gave him back some of the sense of security that he lost after being attacked by Loki in his own tower.

He picks up the black stick, fiddling with it for a couple of seconds. The handle is smooth and oddly warm against his palm. He can’t really remember which country he had this imported from now, but it doesn’t matter, this particular model is used by some police force somewhere on whichever continent. Wouldn’t be allowed in American forces though, the voltage goes too high.

Smacking the end of it into his palm a couple of times, he can’t help but to notice how the sound makes Loki shifts slightly on the ground, shoulders tensing up. Making him all nervous, huh? Serves him right.
He walks up to the god again, only hesitating a short moment before placing the end of the shock stick under Loki’s chin, tilting his face upwards. The pang of satisfaction as he sees the god swallow makes his stomach flutter oddly. It’s obvious he knows exactly what the thing in Tony’s hand is, what it can do. Probably the guy made sure to do his homework before launching his attack on the planet and read up on Earth’s weaponry so he’d know what counter defence to expect.

Okay, so he isn’t really gonna turn it on, but Loki doesn’t need to know that. Let the bastard think he will.

“All right, princess,” he says, glad his voice sounds just as steady and menacing as he hoped it would. “Let’s make a few things clear from the very start, seeing as how you are most unfortunately going to be living under my roof for the foreseeable future.” He presses the stick harder into Loki’s chin as he speaks, hoping to earn at least a wince from the god, and is rewarded with a clenching of already tight jaws.

“Now, you will follow my rules, do as I say, and don’t even think about causing any trouble. You try to harm or even threat another human being again, or do anything that will put this planet into any form of danger, and I swear you will live to regret the day you were born.”

_Creative there, Tony, really creative. Especially that last line, truly worthy of an Oscar._

It irks him how his usual suave seems to have disappeared into thin air, leaving only enough wit for one of the most unoriginal threats he’s ever uttered, like something straight out of a shitty spy movie not even worthy of a B-rating.

But he pushes that thought away and instead lets the stick slowly trace its way across Loki’s jaw line as he continues to speak, voice dripping with icy coldness. “I’m sure you know what this thing does. And let me tell you, I’m this close,” he holds his thumb and forefinger out, a mere hair’s breadth between them, “to turn it on just so I can watch you squirm. As a little payback for the time you decided it would be a great idea to throw me out that window over there.” His hand gestures sharply to the glass pane behind them. “So you better not make anything that will tip me over that very, very thin edge.”

Loki is perfectly still, and Tony is sure the god is holding his breath. _Stewing a little now, are we?_

A strange sense of giddiness is enveloping him, making the room seem to spin a little. He has total power over this pathetic joke of a god, over that someone who fucked both him and the planet up their metaphorical asses. This arrogant, self-serving son of a bitch…
Maybe he should stop there, but he can’t, so instead he traces the stick down to Loki’s collarbone, and then back to under his chin, tilting it up even further, making the god look him into the eye again. He’s not done with him just yet.

“This little beauty goes up to 100,000 volts. Quite a bit more than what’s allowed in the police forces here in the States. If you’d like to try it out what it feels like, let me assure you that I will be more than happy to oblige. In your current, magic-liberated shape I’m sure you’ll feel all the pain that a simple mortal would,” Tony continues, pushing the stick harder into that pale skin.

And that’s when he sees it. Just a flicker at first, but then it’s slowly spreading until it’s painted all over Loki’s face.

_Fear._

And that’s when the sweet rush of power deflates, like hot air leaking out of a balloon. The room is no longer spinning and suddenly it’s just him standing there, holding a stick under the chin of a fallen and powerless god. The feeling of triumphant spite from only moments ago is fading away, leaving only an uneasy sense of hollowness in its wake.

He lets his hand fall.

And Loki seems to be breathing once more, slumping slightly as his chest starts to heave again.

A sudden desire to just walk out of the room and leave the god hunched on the floor comes over Tony, but he resists it. He needs to say something more, to finish off what he’s started.

“Do we understand each other,” he finally manages, but the question is too flat to actually sound like a question and not a plain statement.

A moment of silence. Then:

“We do.”
The words sound as tired and empty as Tony is feeling.
The door closes behind Loki with a soft click, Tony’s last words still ringing in his ears. Don’t even think about trying to leave this room until I say you can.

He waits a few moments while the footsteps are retreating, taking in his surroundings. From the looks of it, he’s been locked into one of Stark Tower’s guest rooms. It’s rather small, but comes fully furnished and with an attached bathroom and even a window. No doubt a lot better than the living arrangements he would have gotten had Tony been at all prepared for his unexpected house guest. But he supposes that no matter how well-equipped the tower is, it doesn’t come with a drafty dungeon.

The last echoes of the footsteps finally die down, and Loki sinks down on the bed in the corner, letting out a deep sigh as he buries his face in his hands. For a moment he just sits there as the tension slowly drains from his body and his breathing goes back to normal again. First encounter with Tony Stark and he’s still in one piece. For now. He supposes that’s got to count for something. Truth be told, he’d expected a lot worse.

Taking a deep breath, glad he’s still able to, he wills his tense limbs to relax. He’s so tired, the weariness nagging at his bones like little rats gnawing at him. The dungeons of Asgard don’t make for good sleeping, though he doubts he would have been sleeping much better these last few days in other accommodations. Not since Odin’s judgement was read out to him in court.

He’d expected death, torture, imprisonment, banishment, even some twisted combination of them all. But not… this.

Total, utter humiliation. To be turned into a slave of a mere mortal, his powers and magic sealed away and inaccessible. The blood was pounding so hard in his head that he had to concentrate to hear Odin’s vibrant, unwavering voice as it pronounced his verdict. Not death, not torture, but slavery. Which in the end wouldn’t rule out the other two options, of course.

And then followed Odin’s detailed justification for picking whoever was to be Loki’s master, more directed to the audience gathered for the trial than to the condemned, and even though Loki was listening in transfixon, he could only make out bits and pieces of it. It was all so unreal, hearing the Allfather (though, not Loki’s father) make his way through the list of all Avenger names until only one remained. Like sitting down at one of those human roulette wheels, not knowing which number the little silver ball would land on, but knowing either one would spell his doom.

Barton and Romanoff. Too vindictive and too vicious, respectively. Would put an arrow through his
head or slice his throat on sight and defeat the whole purpose of Loki’s punishment. Their leader, Director Fury. Would not consider Loki a slave, merely a test subject. Banner. Too uncontrolled in his berserker form. A Loki without his usual powers could be killed with one single punch from the beast. An embittered snicker escaped Loki’s lips at that perverse mock-concern for his welfare. As if they even cared. Rogers. Too firmly entrenched in the concept of Midgardian morals and frowns upon the concept of vengeance.

That only left one name.

Stark. The very man he’d thrown out of a window and probably had more reason to hate him than anyone of the others, except for Barton.

How swell. So he’d spend his future getting beaten and humiliated by the great Tony Stark, the Man of Iron himself. Why didn’t they just execute him right now and get it over with?

Then he became aware of a sudden silence all around him and he looked up from where he was kneeling in front of the court. All eyes were on him, as if they were expecting him to say something.

“I repeat,” Odin’s voice boomed, “Loki Laufeyson, do you accept your punishment?”

His nails cut into his palms as he balled his shackled hands into fists in anger. Accept it? What kind of ridiculous question was that? Were they only mocking him further? As if such a fate could ever be acceptable.

“You mean I actually have other options?” Loki spat out, trying to sound confident and condescending, but the words that came out were more bitter and resigned than anything else. He already knew the answer before Odin spoke.

“Your only other option is death.”

Of course. No lesser punishment for the traitor, the monstrous stranger in their midst.

Death, or life as Tony Stark’s slave. Though, the latter alternative might just turn out to be a slower, more drawn-out version of the first. He should throw it all back into their faces, spit at their self-righteous Asgardian court, choose death and laugh in their faces as he did.
Only that… in that moment, he realized that he actually wanted to live. Not that he had ever wished for death, but it was strange how this sudden desire to live manifested itself now when he was at his lowest point in life and about to be brought even lower. But as long as he was alive, there was still a chance of… of something.

If he didn’t accept, he’d lose everything, including his life. If he did accept, he’d lose everything but his life – his magic, his powers, his status, even his freedom. But at least he’d be… alive.

No, Loki Laufeyson didn’t want to die, and so it was with churning dread that he heard his own voice speak – whisper – the words that would damn him.

“I accept.”

The silence that followed was almost deafening.

The days after his trial are still a haze in his mind. Days spent in the dungeons waiting, enchanted shackles on his wrists, the terrible sensation as his magic was locked away, the unpleasant feeling of occupying the body of what was now essentially a mere mortal. The constant reminders – some stern, others more gleeful – that the enchanted chains around his wrists would allow Heimdall to keep track of him, and if he ever tried to escape his punishment or cause any trouble in the human realm, he’d be taken back to Asgard in no time and put to death. And the manner of execution would be neither quick nor painless, to put it mildly.

And then, one dreary morning, the guards opened the door to his cell, and he knew without them even speaking a word to him what time it was. Time for him to be taken back to Midgard, for his real punishment to start. The preparations were all done.

He had to admit, he was surprised to find out when they arrived at Stark Tower that the one person that hadn’t been informed about all this was Tony Stark himself. Then again, Asgard would only rarely send envoys to Midgard, so who should have told him? Thor had refused to be there at his trial, so the big oaf who otherwise flittered between the realms like a drunken butterfly couldn’t have reported the verdict to his Avenger friends.

And now… he’s here. As Tony’s slave, property, plaything, punching bag, whatever. Whatever Tony decides he will be.
The thought makes him feel ill. Whatever revenge Tony is plotting against him now is sure to be vicious. And involve a lot of pain on his part. So he tries to comfort himself with the knowledge that humans are impatient creatures with short attention spans. They quickly grow tired of novelties, no matter how enticing they may seem at first. Eventually, the chance to meet out vengeance will lose its appeal, even to Tony. How long that will take, though, Loki has no idea. Months? Years? A tendril of panic is moving in his insides at the thought, eager to crawl out and strangle him, but he pushes it back down, feeling it slowly subside. Panicking isn’t going to do him any good now.

Instead, he sighs and sinks back against the soft mattress of the bed, letting a heavy sigh escape him. The fabric beneath him is smooth, made from some material that doesn’t exist back in Asgard. His left hand fiddles around with it for a while as he lies there flat on his back, staring at the ceiling.

Unbidden, his thoughts wander back to his previous encounter with Tony. Despite his initial and rather surprising reluctance to accept Loki as his slave, the man had sure taken to the situation quickly. Quite predictably, his first order had been for Loki to kneel down. Not that Loki couldn’t sympathize with the desire to see one’s enemies lying broken at one’s feet, but it didn’t make the humiliation any easier to deal with. A part of him wanted to refuse, to remain standing tall like a true prince of Asgard, but in the end the reality of his situation triumphed. There was nothing to gain by refusing. He was a damned slave, because Odin had decided so. Whatever little useless pride a refusal might salvage, Tony would soon take that away from him anyway, one way or the other.

So he knelt. Like a good little slave, because he still wanted to live, despite it all.

The enjoyment on Tony’s face was obvious. Still, Loki was more incensed than anything else. Until Tony decided to shove that shock stick into his face; that’s when that incensement turned into fear. Intellectually, Loki already knew that he no longer held any godly powers, but it wasn’t until that moment that he truly realized the extent of his vulnerability and utter powerlessness. His body was no longer immune to what would have otherwise been slighter pains or trifling wounds. Those things that he would have merely shrugged off as inconveniences a few days earlier could now kill him, or at least severely injure him.

No resistance to pain, no healing powers, no bodily resilience, no nothing. Just a total lack of power. Power that now Tony Stark holds in his hands. And Loki has nothing, absolutely nothing to resist with.

He twists the smooth fabric in his hand, tearing at it with stiff fingers as the realization grinds inside him. He is totally at Tony’s mercy now and there isn’t a single thing he can do to protect himself from the man’s revenge.

Maybe he would have been better off choosing that other option at the trial after all.
Chapter 4

The whiskey produces a familiar sting as it slides down his throat and he relaxes a bit against the backrest of the chair, watching the ice cubes in his glass slosh against each other as he swirls the contents around with a lazy circular movement of his wrist. He then sets the glass down on the table, grabbing for the bottle next to it. It’s almost empty, though, the sad remains only filling the first half an inch of his glass as he turns the bottle upside down. And that’s with the ice. Darn.

Suddenly annoyed, he shoves both the bottle and the glass away. He has more pressing matters to think about than the all too meagre amount of alcohol in his glass.

Loki.

A god turned into a slave and sent to Midgard, the very realm he had once sought to enslave. Poetic justice indeed. Tony just wishes it wasn’t on his expense.

If this was to be Loki’s punishment, Odin could certainly have picked a better person to bestow the enslaved god upon. Tony’s never figured himself the outrageously vindictive type, not like some others he knew. Like Clint Barton. That guy would be cracking his knuckles by now, were he in Tony’s position, trying to decide where to land the first punch. To say nothing of all the innocent victims who’d suffered personally because of Loki’s quest for world domination.

Come to think of it, perhaps that is why Tony has been picked – if the Aesir wanted Loki tortured to death, they could have done it themselves. They sure knew how to, if you believed the myths. No need to hand him over to the humans for that.

Besides, how many other people are there whose living arrangements would be suitable to keep a dangerous war criminal confined and under constant supervision? Sure, the Einherjer guard assured him that Loki’s powers have been locked away, but Tony doesn’t believe that makes the god harmless.

He’s done far too much damage for that.

“Jarvis,” he calls out. “What’s our guest doing?” Doesn’t hurt to check. Of course, Tony’s already given Jarvis clear instructions about keeping Loki under strict surveillance at all times and report back to him if the god does anything out of the ordinary. But it never hurts to make sure when it comes to Loki.
“He is currently lying on his bed, sir,” the computer voice answers dutifully.

“Uh-huh. Let me now if he… you know, does anything.”

“Yes, you have already instructed me to do so,” comes the swift reply. “So far, Mr Laufeyson has done nothing out of the ordinary.”

That sets Tony’s mind at ease for the moment, at least. The door and window to Loki’s room are both electronically locked, and Loki won’t be able to open either of them unless he finds a way to disable Jarvis. Which, Tony supposes, wouldn’t be all too improbable, given the amount of chaos the god has proven himself capable of.

Putting the empty bottle in front of him aside, Tony stands up and picks another random one out from the insides of his trusty liquor cabinet. He critically scrutinizes his catch and then nods approvingly. One of the better brands. He definitely deserves it.

Sitting back down, he pours himself a generous helping of scotch, not caring about the remains of the previous drink at the bottom of his glass. The alcohol is sweet against his lips and throat as he sips at it, like a lover’s fingers, so he downs the majority of the contents in three big gulps.

As the scotch goes into his body, it pushes the tension out, letting it slowly drain away from him. Sighing heavily, Tony slumps in his seat, enjoying the feeling of relaxation that only a nice drink can bring. And then, a small, improbable burst of laughter escapes his lips. Not because the situation is funny, but because having been handed the god of chaos and mischief as his own personal frigging slave is just too bizarre and outrageous. So he just sits there letting the bubble of laughter expand until he’s cackling half-hysterically like a madman, one arm against the table to support his own body and prevent it from collapsing on the floor in a fit of paroxysms.

No, it’s not funny in the slightest, but he can’t help himself. He just doesn’t know what else to do. Right now, he has no other way to handle this ridiculous situation.

His laughter sounds strange, as if the walls are deflecting it and giving it an outer-worldly echo. Soon, it dies down and he’s left sitting there leaning against the table with only one thought left in his head.

Loki.
And just what the hell is he supposed to do with him now?

Keep him locked up in his room where he can’t do any damage and, as an added bonus, mercifully remains out of Tony's sight?

Kick him in the ribs a few times for good measure? Nah, that’s not his style, even though the idea does hold a certain appeal.

What *do* you do with a slave, really? One that also happens to be Loki?

Turn him over to Fury? *That* would solve a lot of his problems. On the other hand, that wasn’t part of the deal, if that’s what you can actually call it. The one-sided deal where Loki was dumped into his lap without Tony’s opinion being asked for at all. But Erik – or whatever the Einherjer leader’s name was – had been pretty clear that Loki was to remain in Tony’s, well, custody.

No handing him over to Fury, then. As tempting as the idea is, it’s not worth causing a diplomatic incident over it with Asgard. To say nothing of getting his skull cleaved in two by Erik’s sword as punishment for going against the decree of Odin almighty.

Slaves are supposed to be useful, but Tony can hardly see any use for Loki. Of course, that’s not the point either. Loki hasn’t been given to Tony for his convenience, it’s a sentence meant to punish Loki for his numerous crimes.

He wonders what the Aesir are expecting him to actually do with Loki, seeing as how he didn’t come with a slave-handling manual or any instructions. *101 ways to deal with a bat-shit crazy chaos god.* Wouldn’t that be something. Perhaps *he* can write that manual once he’s been through this ordeal.

Nope, no instructions other than not to hand him over to someone else. He thinks about some of the Norse myths he’s read about on the internet, feeling vaguely uneasy. If the Aesir think he’s gonna put a sewing needle to Loki’s face or pour acidic venom over his body they’ve got the wrong man for the job. He’s not gonna do that.

His thoughts drift back to his previous encounter with Loki, the obvious fear in the god’s face as Tony outlined the concept of sending a perverse amount of volts through his body. Somehow, he had expected to enjoy the sight of a fearful Loki a lot more.
Would Odin have approved of that, if he’d actually turned that stick on? Odin seems like quite the vindictive guy, so the answer is probably yes. Though, again, if the main intent of the Aesir was simply to torture their little wayward prince, they could have done it themselves. This slavery thing is probably more some sort of perverted poetic justice kind of thing, a way to humiliate the fallen god as much as possible.

Oh well. Though torture isn’t his forte, he can roll with humiliation. For someone as arrogant, conceited, and big-headed as Loki – who even had the gall to defenestrate him – he can definitely do that.

It would only serve the god right. And Tony can’t help it, he’s not wholly above the concept of revenge and vengeance and all those loveable little things in life. He never claimed to be an angel, did he now?

His hand goes for the almost empty glass again but he doesn’t bring it up to his mouth, instead merely sloshing the liquid around in its confines as his thoughts swirl around in his head. He has a couple of routine interviews with the media to attend to tomorrow, but he can give Loki a task to do in the meantime. Yes, he has an idea alright. He grins as his hand rotates until there is no longer the soft clang of ice against glass. Then, he sets the diluted, lukewarm drink down on the table and stands up.

Right now, what he needs more than anything is some sleep, and then he’ll deal with Loki again tomorrow.
Chapter 5

The mattress under him is surprisingly soft, and when he wakes up from his fitful sleep he isn’t sure at first were he is. His head is still cloudy with dream images of filthy dungeons, shackles and chains, and Odin standing before the court pronouncing his judgement…

Strange. This can’t be his cell down in the lowest level of the Asgardian dungeons. But then where is he?

He opens his eyes, and suddenly remembers.

He’s in Tony Stark’s tower.

Damn.

His stomach sinks. The dungeons would have been preferable.

Slowly, he sits up, rubbing the last vestiges of sleep out of his eyes. Though it is nice to wake up for the first time in far too long not wearing shackles, apart from the little silver chains circling his wrists, the fetters he’s in now are much worse. Because it isn’t simply his body that is shackled this time, but his entire self, as Tony Stark’s freaking slave.

Well, that’s a great start to the morning, he thinks bitterly to himself as he gets out of bed and stumbles off into the bathroom to wash himself off. He took a lengthy shower yesterday before going to sleep (didn’t take him very long to work the water mechanism out), figuring that he might as well use the available facilities while he could, seeing as how they could be taken away at any time. It was a relief after spending so much time in a cell where the chances to wash himself off were limited and far in between. Of course, he was allowed to clean himself up properly before being sent off to Midgard and to Tony Stark, but not quite as thoroughly as he would have liked. The dankness and filth of Asgard’s dungeons somehow penetrate into the very pores of a prisoner’s skin, clinging to it like a garment.

When he’s finished and dressed, he sits back on the bed again. It’s not like there’s anything else for him to do in here.

So he waits for Tony to summon him for whatever he’s planned for him today, not relishing the
prospect one bit. The idle nervousness is grating at his nerves, and so he stands up again and prowls around the room in circles, finally coming to a stand before the window.

It offers him a breathtaking view of the city, but he’s not in the mood to enjoy it. Especially considering that this is the very city he once tried to conquer, only to be defeated and sent back to Asgard in chains and disgrace. He’d never thought he would see it again.

His hand reaches for the handle. At least he can make us of the opportunity to breathe some fresh air again.

Then there is a voice speaking to him, sounding far too cheerful for someone not even human.

“I’m sorry, Mr Laufeyson, but Mr Stark’s orders are for this window to remain closed. If you choose to disregard those instructions, I will have to report your failure to comply, and Mr Stark will be most displeased.”

Loki’s hand falls back to his side. So this is the computer Jarvis that Tony mentioned that is supposed to keep him under surveillance, then.

It’s a pointless instruction, really. The floor is far too many levels above ground for any human or powerless god to survive a fall from. There’s no way he can use that window to escape.

Unless he’d opt for a more drastic route. But he has already been given that option at his trial. He could have chosen death back then if he had wanted to. And he didn’t.

At least for now, things aren’t so bad as to make that a possible alternative. Perhaps that might come to change, but then it will have to be a later concern. Now is now.

Then Jarvis’ disembodied voice speaks out again.

“I have reported to Mr Stark that you are awake and about. He requests to see you right away.”

There is a faint click from the door as the security mechanism unlocks itself. Loki only stares at it, not feeling in the least bit prepared to go face a Tony Stark who’s had an entire night to think about
appropriate ways to take revenge on an enslaved god.

“Right away, Mr Laufeyson,” comes the voice over the intercom again. This time, the door swings open, and Loki slowly obeys, heading out into the corridor leading into the main room, his stomach churning.

Tony is sitting at the table with a newspaper spread out before him, idly flipping through the pages when Loki enters. The menacing look from yesterday is gone from his face and now he just seems relaxed. Loki isn’t sure whether that’s a good or a bad thing.

He stops when he’s halfway into the room, wondering if Tony is expecting him to kneel in the presence of his master. Still, he remains on his feet. If Tony wants to see him on his knees again, he will first have to give him an expressed order before Loki will debase himself.

But it would appear that the man in front of him has no such inclinations for the moment. Instead, Tony folds the newspaper aside and gives him a grin as he takes in Loki’s appearance.

“Good morning, sunshine. Did you sleep well?”

Is that a trick question? Tony is highly unlikely to be interested in the quality of his sleep.

“I slept… adequately,” Loki replies warily, not sure where all this is leading.

“I’m glad to hear that your alien energy reserve levels have been replenished, seeing as how I have a little task for you to fulfil today.” Tony looks far too happy when he says that, and Loki has a sinking feeling. He’s not sure he wants to know what this little task is all about. Serve as a punching bag for the Hulk? Act as a moving target board for Barton’s archery practice?

Loki doesn’t offer a reply. What is there to say anyway?

Tony continues on, though, undeterred by Loki’s silence. “Have a seat, will you?” He gestures to the empty chair at the other side of the table, indicating for Loki to sit down. “No point in you standing around there all day like a mopey poodle.”
Slowly, Loki makes his way over to the table, dragging his feet behind him. Ideally, he’d prefer to keep as much distance between himself and Tony as possible in case the man decides to lash out at him, but that’s not an option at the moment.

Suddenly, Tony scoots his chair back and stands up as Loki is only a couple of yards away. Loki flinches and takes a step back.

Tony stops in his tracks and holds up his hands. “Whoa there, aren’t you a jumpy one, Rudolph,” he says, using another one of those ludicrous Midgard nicknames that mean nothing to Loki. “I was merely gonna get a few things from the kitchen. No evil intentions at all.”

He grins again, and Loki doesn’t believe him for a second. Still, he sits down and watches as Tony rummages around in the kitchen, opening and closing cupboard doors. Apparently having found what he was looking for, the man comes back and sets two rectangular and colourful packages down in front of Loki. Not sure what they are, he stares suspiciously at them.

“Breakfast, Reindeer Games,” Tony says, catching onto Loki’s confusion.

Breakfast? That wasn’t what he had been expecting at all.

Tony walks off to the kitchen cupboard again and returns with a bowl and a spoon that he places before Loki. And that makes him feel vaguely uncomfortable, because he’s supposed to be the slave serving on Tony, not the other way around. This turning of tables makes him suspect that Tony has something ominous planned, but he remains seated and merely takes a closer look at the things in front of him, frowning. The two rectangular boxes with strange pictures on them are supposed to be food? He knows that humans don’t eat quite the same things as they do back in Asgard, but this seems ridiculous. His stomach is growling at the idea of something edible, though, Gingerly, he grabs the smaller of the packages and turns it around in his hands, not sure how to tackle this strange kind of food.

“Oh for Pete’s sake.” The box is removed from his hands as Tony comes to stand next to him. “You’ve never seen a milk carton before?”

Tony does a couple of twists to the box and then tips it over the bowl. The white fluid that comes out does look like milk, though.

As the man starts to fiddle around with the other box, Loki absent-mindedly studies the bowl in front
of him; there are kittens painted along the side, kittens playing with yarn, licking their paws, or rolling around in the grass.

Tony pours some of the contents of the larger package into the bowl of kittens as well and hands Loki the spoon as if he was a small child. “Go on, eat. It’s not poisonous.”

There are odd little things swimming around in the milk, round shapes with holes in the middle. He’s never seen anything quite like it and prods at the shapes with the spoon, watching them slink away.

“Come on,” he hears a voice say over to his right. “Don’t tell me I have to spoon feed you as well?”

“I am fully capable of feeding myself,” Loki snaps before he can stop himself and then winces, expecting his insolent comment to earn him at least a backhand to the face, but nothing happens. Relaxing a bit, he puts a spoonful of the shapes into his mouth, chewing slowly.

The round things crunch between his teeth. The taste isn’t unpleasant, just very unlike the food he’s used to. It’s a lot better than what he expected to be served here, and given the sorry excuse for sustenance he had to make do with during his long stint in the dungeons, he can’t complain.

His marginally better mood takes a downturn again as he’s scraped the bowl clean and Tony reminds him again of the task he’s supposed to perform.

“Get over here,” the man beckons from where he’s gone to stand over in the kitchen area. Loki obeys, as slowly as he dares; the smirk on Tony’s face not encouraging him one bit.

There is a red bucket filled with water on the floor. Loki eyes it suspiciously, then looks up as Tony hands him something.

It’s a tiny brush with fine strands in blue and white at the end. He turns it around in his hands, not sure what it is for. “Oral B,” is says on the handle, whatever that means. He looks up at Tony in confusion.

“The floor needs cleaning,” the man says, reading the unspoken question on Loki’s face. He gestures to the bucket on the floor and then to the ridiculously tiny brush. “There’s the water, and there’s the brush. I want this kitchen floor scrubbed, and once you’re done with that, you can continue with the rest of the rooms on this floor.”
Not all that long ago, anyone with the gall to expect him to perform such menial tasks would have been smitten so hard into the ground that there would be nothing but a smoking hole left. But that was when he still had his powers, before he was turned into a slave. He wants to break the brush in two and throw the pieces into Tony’s smug, self-satisfied face, but he doesn’t.

*You decided you’d rather go on living. This is the price you pay,* a voice whispers to him in the back of his head. And as much as he hates it, he knows the voice is right. He’s made his choice, at least for the time being.

“Jarvis will keep an eye on you at all times, so no shenanigans. And just to make sure, I’ll have a live transmission feed directly to my cell phone so I can keep track that you don’t slack off. I expect you to be finished with the entire floor once I’m back here.”

Loki sags slightly as Tony cheerfully claps him on the shoulder as he walks past him on his way to the door. “Have fun, Reindeer Games, and I’ll see you again in the evening,” he offers as parting words.

Loki remains standing for several minutes after Tony has left the room, staring emptily in front of him.

*If you think that dying is preferable to submitting, you’re free to do so any time,* the little voice in his head whispers to him again.

But he’s not ready to die just yet. Clenching his teeth to control his simmering anger, he picks up the bucket of water, ignoring the splash of water that sloshes over the rim and drenches the leg of his pants.
Tony is having a blast. One of the media reporters interviewing him is a beautiful and voluptuous redhead who has a wedding ring adorning her finger but doesn’t seem to take her marriage vows all that seriously, judging by the way she is flirting with Tony – a couple of fingers resting innocently but still seductively on his arm, a tongue discreetly licking an upper lip, and feet brushing against his under the table.

“Well, Mr Stark, I’m sure all our female readers would just love to hear about how such a desirable bachelor spends his evenings,” she smiles at him, all freckles and curves and blue eyes. “Please do tell us.” Eye lashes flitter as a microphone is stuffed into his face.

Playing around with my new slave, a god famous for trying to take over the planet and bringing an alien army to New York. His name is Loki, by the way – you might have heard of him.

Okay, so he doesn’t actually say that, even though he’s kind of tempted. Instead, he gives one of those brainless-but-expected responses that don’t really offer anything of substance, but enough to keep the female admirers interested. When the interview is over, he discreetly sneaks away before the redhead can ask for his number or stuff her own into his pocket – pretty face and gorgeous body, but not worth being chased by a jealous husband over.

What has kept him in such a good mood all day isn’t mainly the flirtatious redhead, though. No, it’s the discreet glances he’s been throwing at his phone at regular intervals, screen showing a soppy Loki on his hands and knees, scrubbing the floors in the Stark Tower with a toothbrush.

Was there ever a more satisfying image than that, he wonders. Well, probably not.

He can’t help but feel ridiculously pleased with himself for this brilliant idea. The arrogant god is in serious need of some lessons in humility, and Tony is more than happy to provide.

Half an hour later he’s back in his car, driving home with AC/DC on top volume. Tapping his fingers rhythmically against the steering wheel, he whistles along to the blaring music, even though his rudimentary musical efforts are drenched in the over-the-top guitars and drums and shouts of TNT – I’m dynamite. All in all, it’s been a great day. Just one thing missing for it to reach perfection.

Taking a turn to the right, he parks outside a Chinese takeaway. Even the great genius Tony Stark needs to eat, after all.
His knees are aching from crawling around on the floor all day, and his fingers are cramping badly. The brush has switched hands numerous times already, but it doesn’t seem to do him much good trying to alternate. Right now he can’t really feel much of anything in his fingers, which is perhaps just as well. He’d really like to take a break, but Tony’s implied threat that he’d better not slack off and is expected to be finished once the man gets back home – whenever that will be – is enough to dissuade him.

Not that he will ever finish this monstrous task before that, though. It didn’t take him long to realize that, and no doubt that was Tony’s plan all along – find Loki an impossible task to do and then have fun punishing his slave for failing to do as he was ordered.

Great. Just great.

He dips the end of the brush into the murky water again. The bristles are broken and dirty by now, but he hasn’t been provided with any other cleaning equipment, so he places the sorry thing against the floor tiles again and starts scrubbing away.

Perhaps Tony thinks this is such a marvellous idea that he will make Loki clean the floors of the entire tower. He sure hopes that’s not the case, because he doubts whether his knees can take much more of this abuse. His pants are soggy, too, from sliding across the wet floor, but that’s the least of his problems.

Annoyed, he scrubs harder, ignoring the numbing pain in his finger joints. It’s so pointless. There’s no way he’ll be even close to finished before Tony gets back here, and…

As if someone above has been listening in on his thoughts, there’s the sudden whoosh of an elevator door opening and closing, followed by footsteps that he recognizes all too well. He freezes, but doesn’t turn around, just remains there on his knees on the wet floor, waiting.

How pathetic he must look, is the only thought in his head. He considers standing up, but decides against it. After all, he’s taller than Tony, and that might only serve to provoke the man’s ire even more, which is something he doesn’t need right now.

“Still at it?” Tony says reproachingly somewhere behind him and then smacks his lips in displeasure. Loki doesn’t look up or turn. It’s clear for any idiot to see that he’s not done. And it isn’t as if Tony
expected him to be, no matter how surprised he’s pretending to sound.

A pair of well-polished shoes walk into his field of vision and then come to a halt two steps away from him. Loki tenses, expecting one of them to connect with his ribs, possibly with enough force to crack at least a couple of bones.

As he waits for the blinding pain to explode in his midsection, a more rational, detached part of him wonders how humans make do in these fragile bodies, how they can at all live with them. Such a simple thing like tripping and falling from a few meters height is enough to cause crippling or even life-threatening injuries, as are a myriad of other things.

When he still had his godly powers, he healed quickly, just like all Asgardians. Pain was always something temporary and brief – unpleasant, yes, but only a fleeting thing soon forgotten once his body had mended itself.

Not so anymore. Injuries that for a god would disappear in a matter of minutes, or hours at the most, take weeks or even months for a human body to mend. Time during which the pain is constant, never relenting.

He knows, because the guards in the dungeons found Loki’s new and powerless status intriguing. Intriguing, as in fun to throw him a few punches or slam him into the wall and then come back the next morning and see the bruises still on his body and face. Like he was some kind of freak (well, even more so than before his powers were locked away), look at the misshapen thing that remains broken and hurt even a day later, who can no longer heal himself like a normal Asgardian.

*How do humans live with being so vulnerable and hurting so easily?* He wonders, but there is no answer forthcoming.

And they don’t even have to deal with being the slave of someone who’ll enjoy turning them into a broken and bloody heap as payback for past transgressions. He bites the inside of his chin, tasting blood. Broken ribs will take weeks if not months to mend, and if they don’t grow together like they should, he will still be in pain even after they’ve healed. He sincerely doubts that Tony is going to take him to one of those human healers to set any broken bones straight for him.

Again, he feels the sharp pang of fear that has grown all-too familiar in these last few days. The terrible feeling of powerlessness and vulnerability, feelings that he isn’t used to at all, but now has no choice but come to terms with.
Tony’s silence is making him even more nervous. Has the man been looking forward to dishing out Loki’s first beating so much that he is standing there trying to savour this moment for as long as possible? Is that why he’s taking his sweet time getting started?

Or is he perhaps hoping to see his hated enemy break down and beg? Is that what he’s waiting for? In that case, he’s not going to give Tony the satisfaction. At least not yet, though he supposes he might come to change his mind about that later, a treacherous, more pragmatic part of his brain points out.

Then, suddenly, the shoes move out of view.

“I brought some Chinese takeaway. Supposed you might be hungry,” he hears Tony’s voice say, well out of kicking distance. The words are followed by a dull thud as something is put down on the kitchen counter.

*Chinese takeaway?*

Loki looks up in just time to see Tony take a few silver-tinted boxes out from a white plastic bag and put them down on the table.

“Straight from Fat Lee’s kitchen, best Chinese in town,” the man continues. “Let me tell you, their Chow mein is to die for. Bet you don’t have stuff like that back in your magic castle in the sky, do you?”

He’s not quite sure what Tony is talking about is, but it does *smell* like food.

And all Loki’s brain seems to be capable of doing in that moment is wondering whether all human food comes in strange little boxes.
Chapter 7

When he wakes up, he immediately regrets doing so. His body protests wildly as he tries to roll over to find a more comfortable position and he can swear he hears his joints creaking ominously.

It feels like he’s taken a tumble down a ten-mile hill, the entire way down paved with strategically placed boulders. His knees are sore and his hands aching, and that’s putting it mildly. To say nothing of his poor, abused back.

Floor scrubbing is clearly not conducive to his health.

It’s only with the most heroic of efforts that he manages to get out of – or rather, roll out of – the bed and unsteadily get up on his two feet.

Stumbling to the bathroom, he sincerely hopes that Tony doesn’t have any more floors in need of scrubbing. He doesn’t think his body can take it.

Just like yesterday, once he’s finished he has nothing else to do than to sit around and wait before Tony decides to summon him. It takes a long time before Jarvis’ voice announces that Tony is waiting for him downstairs. Sighing, Loki stands up again, ignoring his body voicing its displeasure by sending sharp stabs of pain through his back and legs, and walks out.

Tony is sitting at the kitchen table, sipping on a cup of some brown liquid as Loki walks in. He raises an eyebrow at the god, critically scrutinizing him.

“Well, if it isn’t ol’ Reindeer Games! I hope the mattress isn’t too hard for you? ‘Cause you do seem to be walking a bit more stiffly than usual, if you don’t mind me pointing that out.”

_Well isn’t Tony the comedian._

“The mattress is perfectly fine,” he says as politely as he can manage, sitting down at his usual spot at the table after Tony has indicated for him to do so. There is already a bowl (the one with the kittens) and a spoon laid out for him, and he wonders why Tony even bothers doing that rather than having his slave set out his own eating utensils, and Tony’s as well, as would have been appropriate.
“Help yourself,” Tony gestures in the approximate direction of the milk cartoon and the bigger box with the round things that are standing on the table. *Cheerios*, it says on the side, but Loki doesn’t know what the word is supposed to mean.

Not like it matters. Silently, he pours himself some milk and then some of those other things and digs in, sighing contentedly. He’s positively *starving*.

“So,” Tony suddenly says, breaking Loki’s little moment with his food. “Are you finally going to tell me the answer to the one million dollar question? Because I’ve been kinda wondering, you know?”

*Huh?*

Loki looks up from the bowl, confused.

“I don’t understand,” he says quietly, sensing danger. “Which question would that be?”

Tony leans back into his chair, crossing his legs and scratching the back of his head as he gives the god a rather amused look.

“Come on, you’re smarter than that, Bambi. Those friends of yours that showed up here a couple of days ago – I’m sure you remember them, the guys with the huge swords and big beards – they never bothered telling me why Odin decided to gift you to *me* of all the Avengers. Not to say that I’m not flattered to have been thought of for such a gracious gesture, and from the Allfather no less, but it kind of makes me wonder – why not one of the other guys?” The facade of mock seriousness cracks as an impious smile tugs at his upper lip. “I’m sure Barton would have absolutely loved the opportunity to play Kunta Kinte with you.”

A few of the round shapes take the wrong way down Loki’s throat and he coughs, spluttering and hawking.

Tony shoves a glass of water in front of him, and Loki drinks, the gulps of water managing to suppress his coughing fit.

“Well?” Tony asks again once Loki appears able to speak again. “Why me?”
Of course, Loki has no choice but to answer. He doesn’t like it one bit though. *Better tread carefully now.*

“Odin decided that you were the most appropriate choice,” he says, already knowing before the words are out that this answer won’t do.

“Well *duh,*” Tony says and Loki can hear the sarcasm positively dripping from that short little statement. “Of course he did or you wouldn’t be here. What I wanna know is, *why* did Odin think I would make the best slave master out of the whole merry little team of Avengers?”

Memories from his trial flash before his eyes, and for a while it’s almost as if he can hear Odin’s voice booming across the room as the Allfather pronounces his judgement. Damning him to a life as someone’s property, and a mortal’s at that.

He keeps his eyes on the remainders of his breakfast as he answers. Somehow, he can’t really bear to meet Tony’s eyes. “Your leader, Director Fury, didn’t get selected because Odin realized that he would only ever have an interest in me as a test subject, and that wasn’t the point of my punishment, so…”

“That figures,” Tony interrupts him. “Quite a shame, though, because handing you over to Fury would have made my life a lot easier in so many ways. No offence, Rudolph, but if the universe would have asked me a few days ago what my most heartfelt desire was, a slave would not have made it into even the top one hundred.” He waves impatiently with his hand. “Alright, go on, what about the rest of them?”

“As for Romanoff, the court suspected that she might simply cut my throat on sight, so she was out. If they wanted me dead, they would have executed me right there and then and saved themselves the trouble.”

“Ah yes, dear Natasha. She was quite upset about you calling her a ‘mewling quim’, you know. Not many dare to speak to her that way, and those that do usually leave minus at least one body part.”

*Damn. He’d totally forgotten about that.*

He hopes that it isn’t another mark that will go onto Tony’s list of things that he will eventually be punished for, but there is a hint of amusement in his voice that makes Loki think that it might not actually count in his disfavour after all. Still, he finds it prudent to move away from the subject.
“Banner… was considered inappropriate to be left in charge of a slave, given that he sometimes turns into… his other form. As the Hulk, he’s too dangerous for someone without… godly powers.”

Tony chuckles. “Well, seeing the number the Hulk did on you a while ago, I hardly think the ‘godly powers’ part make much of a difference.”

Humiliating, but true. A prickle of anger stirs within Loki, but he knows better than to refute the comment. Instead, he quickly moves on to the next name.

“Odin didn’t believe that Rogers would have it in him to take on a slave. It would go against his Midgardian morals to do such a thing.” A little tweaking of the truth there; rather it had been Roger’s suspected qualms about taking revenge and treating Loki as badly as the Asgardian court was expecting their candidate of choice to do that had struck Rogers off the list, but Tony doesn’t need to know that. Doesn’t need to know that the court will surely only be the more pleased the worse Tony treats him.

Only one name on the list now, and he doesn’t want to go there, so he tries to evade.

“Thor was never a possible candidate to start with, seeing as he still considers himself my brother. So that only left you.”

“What about Barton?”

Of course, Tony takes note of the omission. And if there is one subject that Loki does not want brought up, it’s the man with the bow and arrows. Because if there’s one person who’d like to see him suffer until the end of the world, it’s Barton.

And what if Tony decides it would be a great idea to provide his trigger happy friend with a little loan in the form of an enslaved god of mischief?

It’s not a pleasant thought. Being left to Tony’s mercies is bad enough, but Barton would be even worse.

“Barton hates me enough to kill me on sight,” Loki says simply, hoping that is enough to dissuade
Tony from any such ideas. Yes, the court thought it was a bad idea to hand me over to him, and so should you.

“Uh-huh. Sounds like I got picked out by process of elimination, then. And here I thought I was all special.” Tony scoffs, feigning disappointment.

As the man says nothing further on the subject, Loki slowly releases a breath he hadn’t even realized he’d been holding in. If Tony is considering putting Loki on loan to Barton, at least he isn’t saying anything about it out loud.

There is silence again, and Loki looks down into his empty bowl. The meagre scraps thrown to him in the dungeons have left him starving, and he wonders if he should dare to go for another serving of the round little things. Tony did tell him to help himself as he sat down at the table, but whether the offer included a second serving wasn’t made clear. The prospect of more food is tempting, though, and he decides to risk it, making a grab for the garish package in front of him.

To his relief, Tony doesn’t ask him what the hell he’s doing or even seems to notice.

So he starts eating again, but there’s one thing nagging at the back of his head. He would feel much calmer actually knowing. And now is the perfect time to ask, given that the subject has already been breached.

Of course, he knows full well that slaves aren’t supposed to ask questions. It’s not his place, not in his current station, and he’s seen what happens to nosy slaves back in Asgard, but he can’t stop himself.

“May I ask… where are the other Avengers currently at?” he says, as politely and demurely as he can manage without choking on his own words. He had sort of expected that they would be hanging around in the vicinity, that he would run into at least a few of them here at Stark Tower, but so far there’s only been Tony.

If Tony thinks his slave is acting above his station by asking him such a direct question, he doesn’t show it. “Ah, missing them already, are you? Well, to tell you the truth, I don’t really keep track of their whereabouts. We only get together when the world is threatened by some demented super villain.” He gives Loki a piercing look. “Like that time when you tried to take over the entire planet.”

*Uh-oh. Dangerous ground.* Loki doesn’t need to be reminded of his failed attempt to lay Midgard
under his feet. And frankly, neither does Tony.

“Anyway, Romanoff and Barton are in South America on a mission, looking for some illegal weapons dealer or the other. Bruce spends his days in the lab, mixing stuff with other stuff in little test tubes. Steve is probably saving the world somewhere. And Fury, well, who knows. As for your brother, he’s off spending some quality time with Jane.”

“I don’t have a brother,” he retorts, reflexively. But that’s not important right now, what matters is that Barton is far away, on another continent. Hopefully not coming back at all.

“Well, Thor seems to think that you do. Unless you have some other fraternal relation I don’t know about.”

“He didn’t even show up at my trial,” Loki says. He doesn’t know why he’s even telling Tony that, but the words force themselves out by their own volition and he regrets them before they’re out.

“Can’t say I blame him.”

Another silence follows, and Loki is looking down into his empty bowl again. He’s still hungry, and seeing as how Tony didn’t comment on his helping himself to seconds, going for a third helping can’t hurt. Hoping there’s still some stuff left, he reaches out for the box again.

This time, Tony nails him with a quizzical look.

“Didn’t they feed you in prison?”
Chapter 8

The work on his new and hopefully improved suit isn’t going too well. There’s a glitch in there somewhere, and he can’t seem to find it despite having run numerous lengthy tests.

Annoyed, he taps his fingers against the tabletop as his eyes scroll down the screen, trying to find a pattern in the anomaly reports in front of him. But his brain isn’t willing to cooperate today, and no sensible interpretation of the data is forthcoming.

Sighing, he turns the instruments off. The screen beeps sadly before shutting itself off. Better deal with this tomorrow when he’s rested and his brain’s working morale has improved.

Closing the door to his workshop behind him, he heads out to the living room, deciding that plonking his body down on the coach and watching a movie sounds like an excellent idea. It’s too late in the day to get anything useful done anyway, and there is a slight throbbing somewhere behind his right temple, and his futile attempts to rub it away have so far proven unfruitful.

No, what he needs right now is some relaxation. Then the headache should let off.

As he steps into the living room, one hand still rubbing light circles around his temple, there is a figure clad in black and green standing at the bookshelf, his back to the door. Tony almost yelps in surprise at the unexpected sight, and then frowns.

Alright, so he did give Loki permission to roam around freely in certain sections of the tower (he figured that a restless god of mischief locked into a room all day would have far too much time on his hands to invent new plans for world domination) under strict and constant surveillance of Jarvis, so it’s not like Tony should be surprised to see him around. He just didn’t expect to run into him here in his own living room. For some reason, it annoys him.

Loki turns quickly at the sound of Tony’s footsteps. There’s a guilty look on his face, as if Tony has just caught him doing something expressly impermissible.

A book is clutched in the god’s hands, but he quickly puts it back into the empty slot on the shelf as he notices Tony eyeing his reading material.

The prickle of annoyance turns into a sharp sting of irritation, seeing Loki standing there putting his
long fingers onto Tony’s stuff, even if it’s just his books. Not that he’s told the god he can’t read them, but still…

“What you’re reading there, Rudolph?” he asks, feeling a slight note of satisfaction as Loki takes a step back when Tony takes one in his direction. The book that the god just put back sticks out a little from the otherwise symmetrical line, and his eyes sweep over the title printed with big blocky letters across the slightly dented back.

_The poetic Edda_. Huh. He had no idea he had that one in his collection, but it doesn’t surprise him one bit that the god went for that particular book. Loki’s vanity would succumb without a fight to the temptation that is the chance to read tales of his own exploits.

So perhaps Tony has just had a bad day, or maybe it’s his headache getting to him, but Coulson’s almost-murderer and Earth’s would-be-conqueror unexpectedly being here annoys him. It’s like a blotch on a white piece of paper, a fly in a glass of brandy, a crack in a mirror. The god’s tall and brooding presence makes Tony uncomfortable, to say nothing of the memories it drags up, of that time when Loki last showed up in his tower and the events that transpired afterwards. Mostly, the utter terror of falling to his death, only to be saved by his Iron Man suit in the nick of time when his nose was inches from scratching the pavement. It’s all too firmly ingrained in his memory.

Of course, Loki never offered an apology for that the next time they came face to face, merely asked for – _requested_ – a drink.

Arrogant, conceited, and self-important, like a true god.

Tony’s mood takes a definite downturn. There is still resentment and anger inside of him, and so what if it’s petty and he’s being conceited as well, but he decides then and there that he wants an apology. He _deserves_ one.

Maybe Loki is sensing Tony’s gloomy mood, or perhaps it’s showing on his face, but either way, Loki takes another step back, putting some distance between himself and Tony. Even if it might just be an instinctive reflex, it gives Tony a small sting of satisfaction seeing the god’s reaction, like a deer retreating before an attacking lion. A turning of tables, and now it’s Tony that’s managed to put the fear of the devil into Loki, not the other way around.

But what’s first and foremost on Tony’s mind right now is one thing – he wants an _apology_. Even if Loki doesn’t mean it, even if he would do it all again if he could get away with it, Tony still wants one.
Narrowing his eyes, he nails the god before him with a smouldering look. *Time for Loki’s humility lesson of the day.*

“So,” he says, trying to sound flippant and indifferent, like the matter isn’t at all important, just a spur-of-the-moment idea. “Come to think of it, you never *did* say you were sorry for smashing my window into pieces using my body as a battering ram. So I think it’s only fair that you offer me an apology for that.”

In the stillness, Loki’s sharp intake of breath is clearly audible.

*Not used to apologizing, are you? Never had to swallow your pride and ask someone for forgiveness before? Well guess what, buddy, you’re going to do it right here and now.*

He can almost feel Loki’s aversion shifting the air, like a barometer sensing a drop in pressure, and it makes it all the sweeter. Only one little detail is tarnishing the moment, though – Loki is taller than him, still looking down on Tony from several inches up.

Luckily there’s an easy way to rectify that.

“And to show how sincerely sorry you are, you will get down on your knees before you apologize,” he hears his own voice say, like it’s not actually him, but someone else speaking those words through his mouth.

And damn, where did all that just come from?

But it’s the same feeling as before, just after Loki’s arrival when he put that shock stick under the god’s chin – a giddy feeling of triumph that makes Tony oddly light-headed and not quite like his usual self. Like a heated flood of power is rushing through his veins, as if his bloodstream has been replaced by a strange mixture of alcohol and molten lava. And he does recognize it from another time as well, from a place very far away from here.

*Afghanistan.* The time when he blasted that terrorist cave into oblivion, taking his tormentors with it in a blaze of fury. The rush as he watched it all burn was intoxicating, a fusion of power and revenge for injustices suffered, oddly saccharine and bitter at the same time, but potent enough to make his blood boil and banish all traces of rational thought from his head.
He pushes the memories away, not wanting to think about that right now.

This time, Loki is quicker to obey his order to kneel. For some reason, Tony is almost disappointed.

But the sight is pleasing, nonetheless. Tony is the top dog now, while Loki has been reduced to one of those little lap dog breeds whose name he’s forgotten, but that fits snugly into the purses of old ladies.

“Well?” Tony prods when he thinks the silence has gone on for too long.

And Tony can see how Loki’s jaws are chewing on air, like the words have been stuck to his throat with super glue. After a little while of this, Loki finally mumbles something mostly inaudible to the floor.

_Not good enough, pal._

Closing the distance between them with two quick steps, Tony reaches down and grabs a fistful of black hair, tilting Loki’s down turned face up and forcing the god to look him in the eyes.

“No, now I didn’t quite catch that. Let’s do it once again, and a bit louder this time,” he says pleasantly, as if he’s asking the god to pass the table salt.

Loki’s face is pale and he looks more haggard than Tony remembers ever seeing him before. Though the god is trying to conceal it, there is a clear streak of fear across those pallid features, mixed with what looks suspiciously like… resignation, is it?

The tip of a tongue darts out to wet dry lips, and shoulders sag as a breath of air is expelled. Then:

“I’m… sorry for throwing you out the window.”

And there it is, the coveted apology in all its glory, spoken by a kneeling and powerless god on the floor of Tony Stark’s living room.
Perhaps it would have been satisfying if Loki hadn’t been looking so uncharacteristically resigned, like he’s had all the fight beaten out of him with a pointy stick.

Tony lets go of Loki’s hair as he feels the surge of giddiness dwindle and then die inside of him.

There is a bitter, unpleasant taste in his mouth. Slightly metallic, but mostly just acidic and tangy.

*So this is what humiliation, what defeat tastes like.*

Only a few heartbeats ago, Tony walked out and left him there on the floor after having received his apology, rather than hanging around to gloat, to watch Loki stew in his miserable patheticness.

His pride is broken and mauled, but there was no way he could have refused to give Tony what he wanted. Because he’s a slave, because he’s powerless, because Tony controls his life now, because he still has the threat of death-by-torture in Asgard hanging over his head, because… because of a million things.

Of course, he knew already when Odin read out the sentence that the defenestration *incident* would come back to bite him in the ass. Tony is still – understandably – pissed about it. At least the man settled for an apology this time, rather than deciding to beat the living daylights out of him. *This time.*

The day had started on an acceptable note, though – given the circumstances – as Tony was busy with his own work and Loki was free to wander around in designated parts of the tower, eventually finding his way into the living room with the bookshelves lining the far end wall. That he spotted the *Edda* was pure coincidence, but curiosity got the better of him, so he removed the book from its place on the shelf to have a look. It turned out to be a rather interesting read, seeing the myths of Asgard out of the eyes of the humans – some of it true to facts, other parts very much freely interpreted. But it was a welcome distraction, making him almost forget about his current position, if only for a little while.

Then Tony had entered the scene and reminded him of his place – at the very bottom of the ladder, without anything even resembling control over his own life. A slave thrown at the mercy of one of his worst enemies, to be ordered around as his master sees fit.
He supposes he should be relieved that at least the man wasn’t upset about having caught Loki flipping through one of his books. Back in Asgard, a slave making private use of his master’s property without express permission would have been whipped.

The book is still standing there in the bookshelf, red letters on gold, but even if Tony didn’t seem to care about his faux-pas, Loki’s desire to read the *Edda* is gone.
Chapter 9

Another day, and not much has changed since yesterday, or the day before that. The resentment at the indignity of his station is still burning in his chest, but he firmly keeps a lid on it, full well knowing there will be nothing to gain by doing anything else.

He glares at the heaps of shoes piled all around him on the floor, silently willing every single one of them to self-ignite and burn into a fried crisp. Not so much out of the desire to spare himself this humiliating task as for the satisfaction of seeing the exasperated horror on Tony’s face as he realizes his entire shoe collection has been reduced to ashes.

The shoe collection that Loki has been ordered to polish, like he’s some sort of servant boy. Of course, he if full well aware that his status is even lower than that, but that’s beside the point.

As it soon turned out, the man has more footwear than Loki thought possible for one single person to own. Even the court ladies in Asgard would be put to shame by Tony’s extravagances in the shoe department. He wonders if the man has even worn them all, or if they’re just another pointless diversion into which to channel a tiny stream of his riches. Loki’s known some men like this, who’d go to great lengths to obtain beautiful weapons or ancient books or other special items that look impressive on display, but never made much use of the remarkable things they so laboriously amassed. None of them ever collected shoes, though.

He isn’t sure if this task is more or less demeaning than the one he had to perform yesterday, when he spent a good chunk of his day cleaning up the grime in Tony’s workshop, after the man had given him very clear instructions not to tamper with any of the technical equipment or half-finished suits, or Jarvis would fucking tase him so help him god. He remembers the look of the place with abject distaste, like it hadn’t been cleaned in centuries with all the black grease and dirt and smears of unidentifiable substances staining more square inches of surface than not. How the man can at all stand to work in such abject filthiness, Loki has no idea.

He wonders how many more of these degrading chores that Tony is going to heap upon him before moving on to more... hands-on ways of meeting out revenge. But he supposes the delay makes sense upon closer consideration; Tony has all the time in the world, or at least the short life span of his own existence, to avenge himself and he clearly wants to have Loki thoroughly humiliated first by having him perform these debasing, menial tasks. The man’s not going to pass up on the enjoyment of reducing his enemy to the lowliest of the low, to pull his leash and order him around in the satisfaction of seeing him submit to servitude and bondage.

But he can’t scrub floors with broken bones, after all, or perform any other of these degrading chores; even Tony is aware of that and acts accordingly for now.
Knowing that, he works slowly in a futile effort to stave off the inevitable awaiting him.

Grimacing to himself, he remembers the words spoken to him when he faced off with the man in this very tower, back when he still held his godly powers, as he stood here and threatened Tony in his own home, the light of impending victory shining in his eyes and the rush of heady self-assuredness surging through his veins.

“... but it’s all on you. Because if we can’t protect the Earth, you can be damn well sure we’ll avenge it.”

In the end, they did manage to protect their planet. He isn’t naïve enough to believe that means that the ‘avenge’ part has been taken out of the equation, though.

There is only one sliver of hope left on the horizon for him; if he perseveres and gets through this, then eventually, some day, Tony might tire of him. And then... who knows. It’s not a great prospect, but it’s his best bet, his only bet. If he is patient and endures, his situation might be somewhat improved in the future. Perhaps he will even be able to find a way out of this somehow, though he doubts it. But as it’s the only hope he has, he stubbornly clings to it, refusing to let go. Spending the rest of his life like this is just too disheartening to consider, even though he knows that it is the most likely alternative.

Right now he doesn’t have any other choice than submitting, but hoping there might eventually be some change or a way out is what keeps him going and lets him accept all these indignities piled upon him as well as the prospects of even worse looming on the horizon.

At least he gets fed properly, though that’s about the only positive thing about his current situation, apart from the fact that he is still alive, though he isn’t sure just how long he’s going to keep counting that as something in his favour.

He looks down on his hands, knuckles whites from strain. The black grease he’s been smearing over the shoes is blotchy on his hands and all the way up to his wrists, turning his fingernails into dark half-moons. Under normal circumstances he wouldn’t have cared overly much about getting his hands dirty, but given the situation, it only adds further to his degradation.

There’s a slam of a door coming somewhere from the hallway to his right, and only moments later, a shirtless Tony Stark walks in. Judging by the towel slung over his shoulders and still wet hair and bare feet, the man has just stepped out of the shower. Loki can almost feel the dampness radiating
from his skin, and he can’t help but feel a sting of irritation, how his being all filthy and dirty in comparison only adds further to his image as a lowly slave.

Tony comes to a sudden stop a few yards from where Loki is sitting on the floor with his legs crossed and surrounded by an ocean of shoes, almost as if he’s surprised to see him there.

And Loki knows that he would be better off focusing on the task in front of him, to pretend as if Tony isn’t there and just keep smearing the dark, stinking polish on the shoe in his hand, but as Tony is standing there in front of him, he can’t help but stare.

He’s never seen anything like it before, the foreign object that is planted in the middle of Tony’s chest. Its white-blue light shimmers softly, casting a ghostly hue of brightness. The other-worldly colour is not one he’s seen before, neither in sky nor in ocean nor in winter’s ice, but it’s beautiful nonetheless. And he can sense it pulsating gently, creating little shimmers of undulating disturbances in the surrounding air, not entirely unlike being in the vicinity of another magic user weaving a spell.

But it’s not magic, he knows that. It’s a human invention, the mortal child of technology and science, created by some Midgardian, perhaps even by Tony himself.

His unabashed staring doesn't go unnoticed for long. “Oh, this thing in my chest?” Tony says flippantly, apparently used to inquisitive stares. “It’s an arc reactor and a little souvenir from my getting almost blasted to pieces in Afghanistan.” There’s a short pause as he taps a fingernail against the ghoulishly glowing surface. “And it’s also what caused your lamentable performance issues that one time, by the way.” Loki can almost hear the smirk underneath, and the reminder of his failure stings.

“I see,” he says flatly in response, not happy about being reminded of that miserable day. He’s not quite sure what the arc reactor is really doing in Tony’s chest, but he decides it might be unwise to prod further.

Tony regards him for a few moments, then pulls out a chair, turning it around so he can straddle it, arms resting on top of the backrest. “Don’t mind me,” he says to Loki with another one of those cocksure grins of his. “I just happen to enjoy watching other people working, so just continue as you were.” He waves his fingers at him, shooing him on.

Of course. No fun humiliating the fallen enemy unless you’re there to watch, is there?
Silently fuming, Loki clenches his teeth as to stop his tongue from rattling off a few select ill-advised truths at the smug man lounging over the backrest of his chair as if he’s about to watch a show with trained animals doing little tricks for the amusement of the spectators. Perhaps if he keeps ignoring him, he will tire and go away to play with his inventions and Midgardian technology instead.

So he scrubs the shoe brush against the dark leather in his hand, smearing the foul-smelling substance all over the piece of ugly, uncomfortable-looking footwear, trying to pretend Tony isn’t there.

Tony remains silent for a few merciful seconds, but it soon proves too much for him and he starts another round of inane blabbering.

“Actually, Reindeer Games, it’s nice seeing you doing some honest work for once. You know, as opposed to trying to take over the planet.” He eyes the shoes littering the floor and then bends down from his chair to pick one up, studying it with feigned interest. “You’re not too bad at it either, for an alien not used to this kind of stuff. But you clearly have talent, so perhaps I should start a small-scale shoe-polishing business here and rent your services to the good citizens of New York, how about that?” He drops the shoe back to the floor and strokes his bearded chin with one hand, as if in deep contemplation over philosophical issues.

Then he snaps his fingers and points at Loki. “I got it – Stark’s Shiny Shoes!” He grins again. “You like that name? Kinda snappy with the three identical initial letters combination, that sort of stuff psychologically appeals to people, you know.”

Unconsciously, Loki’s hand tightens around the shoe in his hand, crumpling the black leather until it creaks in protest at the ungentle treatment.

“Hey,” Tony snaps, snagging the shoe out of his grasp. “Don’t ruin my stuff. These beauties cost me over four hundred bucks.”

Midgardian currency means nothing to Loki, but he figures the footwear is expensive, high-class like most everything else in the man’s possession. Though, if the shoes are truly that superior, they should be able to withstand a little clenching. But what is to expect from Midgardian quality anyway?

Loki can feel a muscle in his cheek twitch in annoyance, pulling his lips upwards in a snarl. If Tony wants to tell him how to do things, then he might as well do them himself, and he’s really itching to tell the man just that.
Ever observant, Tony notices the little spasm of irritation. “You heard me, princess. Don’t ruin my stuff.” He motions with the shoe, punctuating the four final words with a downwards stab for each one before finally pointing the thing at Loki. “Got it?”

Loki gives him a glare, as frosty as he dares. “I got it,” he says, slightly wincing at the ill hidden animosity he can hear in his own voice.

Tony straightens in his chair, crossing his arms just below the eerie glow of his chest, obviously having heard it as well. “My house, my rules, buddy. Though, if you prefer, I’m sure we can arrange a transport back to Asgard if following a few simple rules is too much for you.” Brown eyes are boring into his. “Is that what you want?”

The threat makes a prickle of icy dread stir within him, and he lowers his gaze, shaking his head. No, he doesn’t want that, knowing the kind of justice that would await him there. Even Tony must surely realize this, though the man obviously relishes in the opportunity to force the choice out of him (as if he even has one), humiliating him by having him openly admit his preference for living under Tony’s yoke as opposed to getting sent back to Asgard for a long-winded execution.

And once more, he finds himself wondering how long he will be able to keep a lid on his simmering anger, how much more of this he can take before the kettle will blow and he will do something that he will sincerely regret for the rest of his miserable existence.
Chapter 10

There is one thing that Tony can’t help but wonder when he rummages through his closets, and that’s why he’s never bothered throwing away all the old stuff in here that he never uses anyway.

Under a layer of white T-shirts, he spots a gaudy Hawaiian shirt that he doesn’t even remember buying and most certainly has never worn. Then there’s that old jacket with a large tear along the arm that he likes so much that he hasn’t had the heart to get rid of it. And the hoodie that never fit him, but still looks cool. Baggy sweat pants ragged from frequent use. Black shirts sporting logos from various bands that he no longer listens to.

Perhaps he’ll clean his closets out one day, but not today.

Finally, he settles for a pair of long sweat pants and a T-shirt that is too big for him, along with some underwear.

That will have to do.

Satisfied with his find, he shuts the closet door and heads out into the living room, clothes draped over one arm.

“Jarvis,” he calls out, “have Loki get his ass over here.”

He doesn’t know where the god is currently skulking around at, and it’s not like he cares enough to keep track of him. It doesn’t matter. Jarvis is constantly watching him, making sure he doesn’t cause any trouble. Amazingly, so far there have been no reports of the god doing anything questionable.

“As you wish, sir,” comes the dutiful reply from his AI creation. Jarvis, always reliable and trustworthy, unlike certain other tower inhabitants he can think of.

A couple of minutes tick by, then there is the soft shuffling of feet against carpet as Loki enters the room. He comes to a halt a few steps before Tony, his entire demeanour showing that he’s not happy about having been summoned.
As if the guy’s got anything better to do than sitting around scratching his belly button and sulking over how his attempt at world domination failed.

He waves a hand at the little bundle of clothes that he has dispatched onto the armrest of one of those unsightly bulky wooden chairs that he doesn’t know why he even bought in the first place.

“Got some new clothes picked out for you, Bambi. Because frankly, you’re starting to smell.”

The look flashing across the god’s face is a mixture between disbelief and anger, but he quickly reins it in and adjusts it to a more neutral expression, though Tony is sure he can still see a muscle twitch somewhere near Loki’s left eyebrow. He’s willing to bet a hundred bucks and a bottle of his finest scotch that no one’s ever told the god the he smells. Not that it’s very noticeable as of yet, just the occasional whiff of murky leather and sweat when he’s in Loki’s immediate presence, but a few more days in those clothes and the faint odour will eventually turn into a reek. Might as well do something before it gets to that point.

He pretends not to notice the silent outrage. “I suppose we could just throw your stuff into the washing machine, but with all that leather I’m not sure the result would be stellar. So I think we’re better off finding you something else to wear, something that looks a bit more, well, Midgardian.”

Loki is suspiciously eyeing the clothes lying snugly across the chair. Tony is certain that the prospects of wearing human clothes isn’t endearing to him in the least.

“Don’t look so upset.” Tony picks up the clothing items, turning them around in his hands as if he’s inspecting the quality of the goods. “I’ve only worn these a few times, so they’re almost like new. They’ve even been washed since last time, though I suppose if you stick your nose into them and inhale deeply you’ll still be able to smell the cologne I used to wear back then. Scarlet Blue, it was called, though I don’t think they sell it anymore.”

He watches as Loki’s expression turns a few shades darker. Clearly, the idea of being forced to wear used clothes doesn’t sit well with him, a former price of Asgard. Especially not Tony’s, his enemy’s.

Oh well. At least he was nice enough not to pick that bawdy Hawaiian shirt, or the T-shirt that had the words ‘Sex god’ printed across the chest. Even though it does make for an amusing mental image.

Loki has still not made any move to accept the clothing that Tony is holding out to him, so Tony
makes an impatient gesture with his arm. “Go on. Take these and get changed.”

Of course, he didn’t mean for Loki to actually get changed right here and now, not on the very spot where he’s standing in Tony’s living room. When he said ‘take these and get changed’, what he really meant was ‘take these and go to your room and get changed’. It’s the sort of thing that’s implicitly understood, so obvious that only an idiot would need to have it spelled out for him.

That, and gods of mischief, apparently.

Because with one, no, two swift motions, Loki’s removes his clothing – unclasping a few straps, stepping out of his pants and pulling the shirt over his head, only to let it all fall into a crumpled heap on the floor. Just like that, the god undresses as if he didn’t have an audience consisting of one baffled Tony Stark, standing there gawking and gaping like an idiot.

Okay, so clearly being raised in Asgard comes with very different opinions on what counts as proper modesty.

Not that Tony is the modest type himself, and it’s not like he hasn’t seen his fair share of both naked men and women in his day, but the fact that it’s Loki, the fact that it’s so unexpected, the fact that it’s in his own living room and they’re standing only steps away from each other makes a slow blush creep into Tony’s cheeks.

And of course, he can’t help but look at the god in all his stark naked glory. As if moving by their own volition, his eyes slowly sweep down over Loki’s body – the lean chest, the sculpted arms, the flat stomach, down to…

Well I’ll be damned.

So not only is Loki a god, he’s clearly endowed like one too.

And Tony feels a faint, familiar stirring in his groin as his eyes take in the body before him. Loki is a bit thinner than expected, as if he hasn’t been fed properly for some time (which, Tony supposes, he probably hasn’t before his arrival here), but his body is still well-shaped with lean muscles rippling underneath the taut, pale skin. Like a fashion model, tall and handsome, straight out of one of those silly magazines that the more vapid types of women like to read. A rebellious, most inappropriate part of Tony wonders what it would feel like to run his fingers down that chest…
… and then he realizes that he’s still standing there like a moron holding Loki’s clothes as the god is giving him an odd look, in turn holding out his hand for the clothing that he has been ordered to put on but is for some reason still clutched tightly in Tony’s grip.

“Oh,” is all Tony manages as he almost shoves the items in his hand into Loki, who takes them without offering a word of comment. Something for which Tony is immensely grateful.

The god dresses himself almost as quickly as he undressed, and Tony still watches awkwardly, not sure what else to do with himself, though the southward stirring from a moment ago has thankfully disappeared. He notices that there are dull black and greenish remnants of old bruises on Loki’s body, and traces of scars only barely healed. Much too fresh to be leftovers from the battle in Manhattan and Loki’s subsequent encounter with the Hulk – no, someone’s obviously put them there after all that. The concept makes Tony feel uneasy. He thinks of Erik and his little team of Einherjers, and then wonders what the dungeons in Asgard are really like.

It would seem that prison guard brutality isn’t purely a Midgardian thing. He wonders if it’s officially sanctioned in Asgard, or something that’s done ‘on the side’ and under the radar of whatever counts as the authorities back there. Though, he’d rather not really think about that at all.

And then, Loki is fully dressed once more, standing before Tony in grey sweatpants and a slightly faded black T-shirt with the name AC/DC printed across the chest. It’s odd how a mere change of clothes can so drastically change someone’s appearance like that. Loki looks almost normal, almost human now, rather than like the demented, narcissistic megalomaniac that once tried to take over the planet.

The feeling from a few moments ago, Tony quickly banishes to the deepest recesses of his treacherous brain.

Being forced to exchange his Asgardian clothing for the Midgardian apparel hasn’t exactly put him in a better mood, and to say that it wasn’t all that cheerful to start with is an understatement.

Loki runs a finger over the grey fabric where he sits at a window sill, absent-mindedly looking out over the bustling city beneath. At least he assumes it’s bustling, from up here he can’t really see much of what’s going on down there at ground level, though the view stretching out into the distance is spectacular.
At first, he thought it was the unappealing idea of wearing Tony Stark’s old, used clothes that bothered him, but he soon realized that there’s more to it than that. His own clothes, plain and simple as they were, were all he had left of Asgard, of his old life. The last thing that connected him to the home that he has now been cast out of (the chains around his wrists, locking his magic away, don’t really count).

Of course, it’s a small trifle, a nuisance at the most. Given his current position, it should be the least of his worries. But it serves to reinforce the fact that for all intents and purposes, he’s little more than a simple mortal, wearing ordinary human clothing. No, he corrects himself, he’s even less, even lower than a simple mortal. He’s a *slave*.

At least the fabric is soft and the clothing comfortable, though it’s a small reassurance. What the word AC/DC on the shirt means he has no idea, but he suspects it’s one of those peculiar Midgardian things that have no equivalent back in his world.

Like Cheerios.

He leans his head back against the white-plastered wall, feeling the drafty chill from the window on his cheek. There is still another thought that keeps intruding, an unpleasant feeling that won’t leave him alone, even though he’s been trying not to dwell on it.

But even now, hours later, he remembers the way that Tony’s eyes were glued to him as he took his clothes off, not leaving his body for one second. For Loki, having been brought up in Asgard where nudity is considered a natural thing, getting undressed isn’t something that should cause anyone to stare under normal circumstances.

He shifts slightly, trying to find a more comfortable position on the narrow window sill, but the edge of the wall is starting to uncomfortably dig into his shoulder and no matter how he adjusts himself, he still ends up no better off than before.

Then again, he tells himself, Tony was probably just looking approvingly at his bruises. That makes sense; with all that’s happened, why shouldn’t Tony be revelling in the evidence of the harsh treatment Loki has suffered at the hands of vindictive prison guards?

At least that’s what he hopes Tony was doing. Because the other alternative is too disturbing to consider.
Chapter 11

The next time he runs into Loki is in the library. The god is flopped down into one of the brown leather armchairs, nose deep into a book, one foot drawn up under him. He seems fully immersed in the thing, which looks like it weighs at least a couple of pounds. More like a brick than an actual book.

Tony doesn’t come here very often. The books lining the shelves here are pretty old, many of them classics that everyone claims to have read but no one really has (including Tony), while his personal preferences rather involve the latest developments in science and technology. The idea of ploughing through *Macbeth* or *Ulysses* until his eyes are bleeding never held much appeal to him.

He leans against the door frame, watching the little scene before him. Loki is too engrossed in whatever it is he’s reading to notice that he has an audience, idly flipping a page every now and then. It doesn’t seem to be one of the *Eddas* this time, though, and Tony can’t help but feel a sting of curiosity. What would a Norse god of mischief be reading, really? Especially one as arrogant as Loki who would probably find anything written by a puny human unworthy of his notice.

Perhaps he should just leave Loki to his own devices and continue on to where he was heading – his DVD player and the coach where he was planning on plonking himself down to watch a movie.

But, as usual, curiosity gets the better of him and instead of turning around to leave, he unfurls himself from the door frame and saunters nonchalantly into the room, as if he has a planned errand in here and didn’t make a detour just because Loki happened to be around.

He sits down in the armchair opposite to the one Loki is currently occupying, making a show of stretching his limbs and yawning contentedly before settling himself into a comfortable position. The brown leather creaks as he adjusts his body, as if it is protesting the unwelcome intrusion.

Loki doesn’t look up but Tony can tell that the god has stopped reading.

“I see you have found something of interest in my humble library. Do pray tell, what human book title is it this time that has managed to catch a god’s attention?” The question comes out more mocking and condescending than he had intended, but whatever. “101 Ways to Subjugate the Human Race? How to Become a Ruler of Earth in Ten Quick Steps?”

Loki tenses, but the look he gives Tony is blank. “Crime and Punishment,” he answers simply,
folding the book cover so that the title becomes visible.

*Crime and Punishment, huh?* Not a book that has ever been on Tony’s reading list. It’s one of those heavy-ass Russian classics, but that’s about the extent of his knowledge. Though he thinks it has something to do with a murder, and Siberia and the Gulags. Or maybe that was some other book that he hasn’t read either.

“Fascinating subject, huh?” he can’t help but comment. “I venture that our human justice system differs quite a lot from the way that justice is dispensed in Asgard, doesn’t it?”

“It does,” Loki agrees blandly, not seeming like he has any inclination to discuss the subject further.

Tony doesn’t suffer from the same hang-ups, though. “Gotta give it to you guys, you really have creative ways of administrating justice, though in some regards a bit… quaint.” He taps his finger against his chin as in contemplation before continuing. “So do people often get sentenced to slavery over in Asgard? Like, I don’t know, for trying to overthrow the Allfather and that kind of stuff?”

“It’s been known to happen.”

“Uh-huh. Though I bet you’re the first one to be sentenced to become a slave of a mortal *Midgardian*.”

“I am not familiar with any other such cases,” comes the terse reply.

“So you’re a pioneer then, Reindeer Games, breaking new ground and all. But that’s alright, everyone’s gotta go down in the history books for *something*.”

The comment doesn’t provoke a response, so he decides to go at it again. He’s not really sure where he’s taking this, but it’s hard to pass up the opportunity to watch Loki squirm in his seat, like a cornered rabbit unable to escape. Or perhaps a viper would be a more appropriate comparison, one that Tony is prodding with a stick for the sheer amusement of it.

It’s not like Tony ever claimed to be a graceful winner, and sometimes you just got to rub it in a little. Especially when the loser is Loki.
“Seeing as how institutionalized slavery has been forbidden in the civilized parts of the world for quite some time, I’m kind of curious how this whole slave business works in practice. What is it that slaves are expected to do, really? Because frankly, I can’t see all that many uses for you,” Tony says, his comment making Loki shrink back a little.

The look the god gives him is suspicious, as if he is trying to find some hidden motive in Tony’s prodding. “They do what their masters decide that they’ll do,” he finally says, warily.

“And what would that usually entail on Asgard?”

“Any work that needs to be done in a normal household. Kitchen chores, taking care of the cattle, cleaning, serving at the table, preparing meals, and… other things.”

“Such as?”

Loki shifts in his seat. “Serving as bed slaves.”

*Bedslaves? As in…?* Now it’s Tony who is shifting in his seat. He sincerely regrets ever asking. Quickly, he looks for something else to say that will steer the conversation onto a more comfortable track. Anything at all.

*You were about to go watch a DVD before you somehow strayed in here,* his brain helpfully supplies.

*Yeah, that will do.*

“Seriously, that book looks helluva tedious. Why don’t I show you a more interesting kind of cultural entertainment that this planet has to offer? You’ve ever watched a movie, Rudolph?”

No, Loki has never watched a movie before in his long life, and frankly he doesn’t have any desire to be exposed to such dull human entertainment.
He would have liked to turn down Tony’s proposal, but his danger radar and self-preservation instinct both tell him that it’s probably a better option to agree. Suggestions made to slaves are usually nothing but veiled commands, after all. And a pleased Tony is better than a displeased one, especially if Loki is the one responsible for the displeasing part. So he follows Tony into the living room without complaint, three steps behind.

The screen hanging on the far wall is big, covering a substantial part of it. Tony nods in its general direction and proudly says something containing the words *brand new* and *inches* and *dollars*, but it doesn’t mean much to Loki. For all he cares, it’s a flat screen on a wall, so he only listens with one ear to Tony’s prattling.

Having finished his little monologue, Tony squats down on the floor and starts rummaging through piles of flat, box-like things, mumbling to himself what sounds like disapproving comments for every box in his hand that goes back onto the floor again. Loki remains standing, eyeing him at a safe distance. He supposes the boxes with pictures on them are movies, though Tony seems to have a hard time deciding.

After a few minutes of this, Tony looks up.

“Have a seat, will you? It’s kind of distracting, having you towering over there like a misplaced flagpole.”

There’s a couch behind him, but it’s not that big and probably wouldn’t seat more than four people squeezed in. He hesitates for a few seconds, not sure what’s expected. In Asgard, slaves are never seated at the same level as their masters, or other free people. If there aren’t any lower benches or chairs around, slaves will kneel on the ground, anything else would be above their station. True, Tony did have him sit at the same table as him during mealtimes, but it’s impossible for even a slave to eat from a table while sitting on the floor. A coach somehow seems different. He eyes the piece of furniture, but in lack of other guidelines, he sits down on the floor instead.

Besides, the more distance he keeps between himself Tony, the better. For various reasons.

“Coach not good enough for you?”

Okay, so it would seem he picked the wrong alternative.

“The floor is fine,” he says, but the disapproving look on Tony’s face is not difficult to interpret, so
he scoots backwards and hoists his ass up onto the couch, obeying the unspoken order.

The couch is actually rather comfortable.

Apparently satisfied, Tony turns his attention back to his previous activities. “So what kind of movies do you prefer, Bambi? Horror, action, drama… “ He shuffles a few of the boxes around in his hands, eyeing each critically before turning it down and placing it next to its already discarded comrades on the ground. “No, wait, I know!” He points a knowing finger at Loki. “You’re the romantic comedy type of guy, right?”

He isn’t sure if he’s supposed to deign that question with an answer, so he just replies that he has no particular preferences. Not like Tony won’t pick whatever he likes anyway, regardless of Loki’s input.

“You’re not helping me out here at all, Reindeer Games,” Tony chides him, having obviously preferred another answer.

Loki says nothing, just frowns slightly at yet another one of those silly Midgardian insults. Frankly, he is growing rather tired of them, though it goes deeper than mere annoyance. Tony has already taken Loki’s freedom, followed by the clothes that were his last connection to Asgard, and to top it off, the man won’t even grant Loki the use of his real name. Like he’s not even entitled to such simple acknowledgements anymore, like Tony has given his darndest to take everything away from him, including even his own name. Which is about all he has left, save his life, which doesn’t really count as it technically belongs to Tony now.

The man is more perceptive than Loki gives him credit for, though.

“Don’t like it when I call you ‘Reindeer Games’, Bambi?” Tony places a hand over his heart, pretending shocked insult. “And here I took such care to think it up just for you.” He smacks his lips in feigned sadness, shaking his head.

The usual mockery. Loki tells himself that he will not let it get to him. Maybe it’s a game Tony is playing, trying to provoke Loki to anger and then punish his slave for acting out of turn.

And Tony clearly is about to up it, as another one of those shit-eating grins comes over the man’s lips.
“But if you don’t like it, I’m sure we can arrange another deal. I’ll address you with your name – Larry or Lenny or whatever it is, I’ve forgotten – if you’ll address me as ‘Master’.” The look he gives Loki is smug. “How about it?”

Loki winces inwardly. Sure, if Tony were to order him, he wouldn’t have a choice, but addressing a mortal with such a title is more than humiliating for a god. Although, to be honest, he’s surprised that Tony hasn’t insisted on it already – it’s the normal title of address that a slave in Asgard would use, after all. Still, his mouth feels like it’s full of ashes merely thinking about speaking such a deferent word to Tony.

Tony watches Loki for a little while, and then shrugs as he turns away. “Well, I suppose no deal then, Reindeer Games.”

The man continues to rummage through the piles in silence, as Loki merely watches dully. Then, Tony suddenly raises a hand in triumph, showcasing his pick.

“Here we go – the perfect movie for the night!” He holds the box out to Loki so he can read the title.

Reindeer Games.

The look on his face must be amusing since Tony chuckles while he puts the disc into the player, then plops himself down on the couch next to Loki.

The movie is every bit as stupid and insipid as expected.

Still, it’s infinitely better than the alternative of being tortured to death in the dungeons back in Asgard.
Sometimes, parties are fun and interesting. This one, however, isn’t, so Tony leaves early, martini still in hand as he heads down the dwindling stairway, legs almost steady.

He gulps down the remaining drops of his drink before turning the beautifully carved door handle, putting the empty glass on a coffee table he passes on the way out while wincing slightly in displeasure. Not even the drinks at this godforsaken party are halfway decent.

As he steps out into the fresh open air, the garden is brimming with guests chatting and laughing politely at unfunny jokes. Even though his head is spinning a little – despite the weakness of the drinks they’ve been serving – he easily recognizes the usual fawning voices of social climbers trying to move up the ladder, the flattery from those looking for company for the night, and the braggarts spinning more or less made-up tales trying to impress their conversation partners.

A part of him feels vaguely disgusted. Though maybe that’s just the cheap alcohol.

He walks past the glimmer of fashionable dresses and the sharp black-and-white contrasts of stiff suits, having seen it so many times before. Sometimes, he’s not sure why he even continues coming to these events. So what if he’s a philanthropist and a genius and a hero, even they shouldn’t have to be subjected to this much shallowness, be it in the name of charity or not.

He’s not even sure for what noble cause this little event is held, and he doubts even half the people standing there gossiping and bragging under the colourful lanterns know. So it would seem he’s in good company. Which he’s about to leave.

“Going home so soon, Mr Stark?” a sultry voice says to his left, the words followed by a surprisingly strong grip on his elbow. He turns, and spots what he thinks is the hostess of the party. Miss Carter, or Crane, or something like that.

He smiles at the woman who must be over fifty but is eyeing him like she’s a hungry lion and he’s a piece of delicious meat, fresh from the kill. The woman smiles back, but all the botox pumped into her face makes it look like a stiff mask.

“I’m afraid so, Miss. I have important business to attend to early tomorrow,” he lies, bending down to kiss the back of her hand.
The woman titters stupidly like a schoolgirl. “Perhaps some other time, then,” she says hopefully.

“Perhaps,” he agrees. *No way*, his brain thinks.

Having finally disentangled his arm from the vice-like grip crushing his elbow, he signals for a cab, relieved to finally get out of this place that’s starting to feel like it’s suffocating him.

The ride back home is mercifully quiet. The man behind the wheel is un-talkative for a New York taxi driver, and merely makes some passing commentary on the scenery outside, and then says something about his cat being sick and needing to be taken to the veterinary.

Tony only hums in agreement, glad when the car finally comes to a halt outside his home.

Having received his payment, the driver takes off with tires screeching against the concrete, perhaps afraid that his customer is going to change his mind and demand the change back on that one-hundred dollar bill he just got.

A couple of minutes later, he steps out of the elevator and into his living room, Jarvis helpfully turning the lights on for him. Glancing towards the liquor cabinet, he wonders if he should grab himself a whiskey as consolation for the cheap drinks he was forced to endure at the party, but then decides against it. He’s too tired and his feet are hurting like crazy from standing around all evening in those new shoes that were perfectly comfortable when he tried them out in the store, but now feel as if they have shrunken at least two sizes in as many hours.

Abandoning the plans for a drink, he sinks down into the couch instead and with a contented sigh kicks his shoes off, glad to finally get rid of the toe-squeezing contraptions. Grimacing, he brings a foot up to his knee, gently massaging the aching sole. Shame Jarvis doesn’t do foot massages, because he could sorely use one now.

The thought gives him pause. So maybe Jarvis is suffering from an unfortunate lack of hands, but there is someone else who could assist Tony in this little endeavour, isn’t there?

Maybe it’s the alcohol in him talking now, but he still grins to himself. Why not? If Loki is going to be living here on his expenses, the guy might as well make himself useful and earn his keep.

Besides, another lesson in humility never hurt someone as conceited as Loki.
Not like the god has anything better to do. He’s probably just sulking somewhere in a corner anyway.

“Jarvis,” he calls, “send Loki over here, will you?”

“At once, Mr Stark,” comes the reply.

A couple of minutes later, Loki walks into the room. His hair is a bit dishevelled, and Tony wonders whether the god was sleeping when Jarvis called on him.

Oh well. Loki can sleep all night if he wants to, and all morning too, once Tony is through with him.

The god looks tired, like he hasn’t slept in days. Tony studies him for a while. Stiff and rigid posture, like a cornered animal ready to strike out in order to protect itself. Suspicion and distrust carved into fine-chiselled features. An air of broken pride around him. Still, not bad-looking for a god of chaos and destruction…

“You wished to see me?” Loki finally interrupts Tony’s private musings, apparently unnerved by the man’s silent staring.

“That’s right. I have a little task for you to perform tonight.”

The frown of suspicion on the god’s face deepens. “And what might this task consist of?” comes the wary question.

Tony raises a foot in Loki’s direction and wiggles his toes at him. “You see, I’ve had the misfortune of spending this evening standing around in way too small shoes at a charity event thrown by some lady who only cared about the opportunity to frolic around with the rich and mighty of this city. The food was terrible and the drinks weren’t even worth watering the plants with. And to top it all off, now my feet are killing me. So what I’d like right now, Reindeer Games, is for you to give me a foot massage.”

The look on Loki’s face is, of course, priceless. Tony can see how the god is trying his darndest to keep up his neutral, semi-humble facade, almost failing for a moment as his upper lip curls upward in
distaste, but he quickly reins it in and smoothes the grimace out, though his hands are still clenched into tight fists.

“A foot massage,” he repeats blandly, as if trying to gauge if he’s heard correctly without actually sounding like he’s questioning the order.

“That’s right. Glad you’re catching on so quickly,” Tony says pleasantly, wiggling his toes again as his stomach gives a little anticipatory twist. *Serves the bastard right for throwing him out the window. A foot massage is a small price to pay for that.*

A few seconds tick by, during which Tony bets that Loki is going through some serious internal struggle, but eventually overcoming the resistance. Without uttering a word, the god kneels down on the floor in front of the couch, taking Tony’s left foot into his long-fingered hands and lets the heel rest against his thigh while he removes the sock.

And Tony has to admit, as the god sets to work, that Loki is *good.* Which is pretty surprising, because arrogant jerks like Loki aren’t the kind of guys who would usually spend a lot of time giving foot massages. But the god’s fingers move deftly over the soles of his feet, thumbs pressing into all the sore spots and aches, and Tony lets a sigh of pleased contentment slip from his lips.

“Damn, you’re good at this, Rudolph,” he admits. “If I’d known you were this skilled, I would have made you do this long ago.”

Loki offers no response, merely continues to knead Tony’s feet, his head down and face concealed by dark strands of hair. Obviously, he is not enjoying this one bit.

Tony is, though. Loki’s hands are strong yet soft, almost sensual in their touch, and Tony lets his head fall back towards the back of the coach, enjoying the feeling of palms rubbing out the soreness. He’s tired, and even though the drinks he’s had were pathetically weak, there’s still some alcohol-induced fogginess in his brain. Letting his eyelids close shut, he gives in to the pleasant sensations, truly relaxing for the first time in the day.

It doesn’t take long before he’s drifting in and out of consciousness, the occasional pressure against a particularly aching spot pushing his mind back to the brink of clarity every now and then, but soon he half-slumbers again, head filled with haphazard images blending fantasy and memories with reality. The hands moving over his skin are deceptively soft, almost like a lover’s caress, and the dreamy pictures in his head mix with imagery of dark hair and green eyes into a swirling whirl stream of confusion. Beneath him, the coach seems to float away, leaving only the sensation of hands pressing against skin. And it feels so *good.*
He suddenly awakes from his little reverie with a startle, jolted awake by a stab of not entirely unpleasant pain as a thumb presses against a sore spot.

And that’s when he notices it.

He’s sporting an erection, and not a half-assed one either. No, it’s full-fledged, rock hard and straining against the front of his pants like a caged animal demanding to be let out.

_Oh fuck._

His eyes go wide. Just how long has he been in this state? His first instinctive reaction is to throw a look at the god kneading away at his feet, but thankfully, Loki is still in the same position with his head bowed down and doesn’t seem to have noticed anything out of the ordinary. Well, thank God for small graces.

Grimacing, he looks around for a pillow, a blanket, for _something_ that will hide his predicament. But there’s nothing within grabbing distance, and his pants are too tight and his shirt too short to hide his obvious arousal.

For a moment, he panics. What if Loki decides to take a moment to raise his head, to actually lift his eyes from the floor? There’s no way he’s going to not notice Tony’s current status – horny like a slavering hound dog, and all from getting a foot massage by the god of mischief himself.

Tony isn’t one to blush easily, but right now he can feel his cheeks burning hot like the Sahara desert. There’s only one way out of this – fleeing the scene like a criminal running from a cold-blooded murder.

Abruptly standing up, he pushes Loki aside, almost stumbling over the huddled figure in his eagerness to get his back turned to the god as quickly as possible. “I think – uh – that’s my phone ringing,” he manages before marching out of the room with brisk steps, leaving a still kneeling Loki behind him on the floor.

And Tony decides he _really_ needs to have a serious talk about certain things with his most precious body part.
Chapter 13

Few pleasures are greater in life than getting to sleep in without being disturbed by beeping alarm clocks or Jarvis making important announcements way too early in the morning. He digs an arm under his pillow, puffing it up into his face, not really wanting to wake up. He was having such a nice dream, and even though the jumbled and hazy images faded too quickly for him to actually remember any of it by now, the pleasant feeling lingers.

He rolls over onto his back, yawning and stretching stiff limbs that crack at the sudden movement. His sleepy mind notices that it would have been a much more pleasant morning if his feet hadn’t felt so uncharacteristically sore. That dull, throbbing ache is something he could have done without.

However, he really could do with a foot mass—…

And then the memories from last night come crashing down on him, like a huge wave washing over a careless tourist stupidly lounging too close to the seashore. He already got a foot massage yesterday evening from the moping god living in his tower, and ended up sporting an erection big enough to shame a horse.

He rubs a hand over his face, as if that will somehow help brushing the awkward image away.

What the hell is wrong with him anyway? Loki is a crazy megalomaniac who had him defenestrated, to say nothing of the damage the god did to New York city, and here Tony is reacting like a teenage boy getting his first kiss at a school dance, and all that merely from getting his feet rubbed.

Alright, so Loki might have a nice face and a well-toned body and whatnot, but he’s still Loki, goddammit. What on earth possessed his nether regions to react in such a preposterous way?

Ugh. He’s really starting to lose it. Maybe he needs to get out more. Preferably to parties that don’t suck, he amends after thinking about yesterday’s tedious charity event.

Better to just forget about his whole thing, this embarrassing one-time lack of good judgement.

Rubbing the last vestiges of sleep out of his eyes, he pushes the covers aside and gets up, wincing slightly as his abused feet take the full weight of his body. Ignoring the pain, he ambles into the bathroom, deciding a nice hot shower is exactly what he needs.
The warm tendrils of water are soothing, and he grabs one of the bottles from the shower ledge, popping the cap open and pouring a generous glob of gel into his palm. The yellowish substance soon turns into a thick, foamy lather as he rubs it into his shoulders and chest, and then further down over his stomach.

And as he stands there lathering himself up, a more feral and primitive part of his brain wakes up from hibernation and wants to play, and suddenly the hands moving over his body are not his own, but long-fingered and sleek, in the eye of his mind. They trail across skin warm from hot water and maybe something else, caressing and teasing as they explore.

His first conscious reaction is trying to shove the ridiculous images out of his mind, but the memory of a slender god standing in his living room all naked with his clothes in a heap at his feet gleefully inserts itself in his brain, refusing to be pushed aside, even though Tony tries to think about stock exchange indexes and baseball scores and where socks that disappear from the dryer go.

Despite his valiant efforts, his groin stirs, and even though his judgement should be better, Tony relents and gives in to his body’s baser needs. No one can see him standing here in his shower cabin anyway, and even if they did, they’d probably think him fantasizing about some buxom blond fashion model. And it’s not like he’s never had inappropriate fantasies about people he wouldn’t dream of touching in real life before, is it? No, it doesn’t matter. Surely it doesn’t matter. It’s just a fantasy, and a little bit of day dreaming never hurt anyone, did it?

His brain is trying to rationalize, to goad him along this slippery trail of madness, though an ever-shrinking rational part of him tells him to lay off the mental crack, because this just isn’t right.

Not that Tony has ever been one to care about what is considered right or not.

There is heat building down in his stomach, and it’s spreading further downward by the second. His cock is already hard, and so he grabs the wet shaft, slowly trailing his palm over the heated skin.

The sensation travelling up his spine is almost electrical, like a short and sweet pulse stirring up other things as well. So he strokes a bit harder, a little faster, letting a soft groan escape his lips.

Once more, his hand turns into that of another, another with green eyes and dark hair that is standing behind him with his fingers wrapped around his cock, squeezing, rubbing, and stroking. It’s forbidden, taboo, and perhaps that’s why the image is so oddly enticing, sending him into new heights of arousal. The imaginary body behind him is pressing against his back, sinfully slithering
and coiling against him like the folds of a snake, threatening to ensnare him. And he doesn’t want to get un-ensnared, only more deeply tangled into that exotic presence. The hand rubs harder and more insistently, fuelling his desire further.

His breathing is speeding up, but the water drumming against the shower cabin walls is drowning the sound out. He feels like he’s drowning too, in that enticing and vivid image his brain is conjuring, of something that can of course never happen but is tantalizing all the same.

Panting, he puts an arm up against the wall to support his trembling body, resting his forehead against the crook of his elbow. The water raining down on his back feels almost like caresses, soft but insistent, like his imaginary partner is touching him all over at once.

Waves of pleasure are rolling through him as he touches himself, feeling his cock twitch eagerly as the tension builds up to increasingly higher levels. Almost there…

A few more tugs is all it takes, and his body is wracked by shudders as he comes, shaking and moaning as he spurts over the glass of the cabin wall.

Then, he just remains standing there, head resting against the arm still propped up, as rivulets of water are flowing down his body and converging again on the cabin floor, swirling as they’re sucked down the drain. For some time, he only remains frozen, panting, watching as the clear water gets mixed with an opaque white as the spray from the showerhead cleans the wall off.

He draws a deep breath, running a hand over his face as he slowly pushes himself up from his hunched position. Damn, that was better than anything he’s had in months. And that’s counting real, actual sex, too.

His hands are still a bit unsteady as he turns the water off and steps out of the shower cabin door, grabbing one of the huge towels off the shiny chromium-plated rack next to him. Giddily, he wipes the soft cloth over his body, and then runs it through his wet hair, sending little droplets of water all around him like a rain-soaked dog.

Once he’s satisfactorily dry, he sloppily folds the towel in two and dispositions it back over the rack.

Then he stops, coming back to his senses once more as he finds himself standing there naked in the middle of the bathroom floor, hormones and adrenaline and horniness back to normal Tony Stark levels.
Did he just get off on a sexual fantasy involving Loki?

And a better question yet, what the hell is wrong with him?

Tony has seldom been one to be ashamed for anything sexually related, including his own fantasies, but this time even he is startled. It’s like he’s just engaged in something intrinsically shameful – which he supposes he has, in a way – a fancy that no normal person should consider touching with a ten feet pole.

The idea is so ridiculous – he’s just jerked himself off to a fantasy about the god of mischief, the very same god who also happens to be his freaking slave – that a small, crazed fit of laughter is threatening to well up in his throat, but he chokes it down, overcome by a wave of disgust and aversion.

So his body has just decided to take note of the fact that Loki might be physically attractive, but the guy is still Loki. Jerk, bastard, megalomaniac, crazy… and undeniably hot.

Alright, this is ridiculous; even though his body has never been one to suppress its own desires, this has to stop. There are millions, heck, billions, of sexual partners on this planet that are more appropriate than Loki.

Fine, so this was a one-time mishap, a far-fetched experimentation on his part, he tries to calm himself, attempting to appeal to the more rational part of his brain. Not the reptilian one that is only concerned with pleasure and lust and desire and that thinks that Loki makes for an excellent sexual fantasy.

So he’s experimented, and now he’s going to put that little daydream to rest. He’s Tony Stark – there are plenty of things he can fantasise about, or put into practice, should he so desire. There certainly isn’t a lack of willing partners.

Even if no one has quite the same mesmerizing greenish gleam in their eyes.

He shakes his head, as if trying to dispel the memories of this shower cabin incident, but all he manages is to add even more water to the puddles already pooling on the floor.
And the most ridiculous part is the thought of Loki somehow finding out about this.

The god would laugh himself to death, no doubt.
Chapter 14

As Loki wakes up, it is from a fitful sleep, sheets wrinkled from his body tossing and turning during the night. He’s been dreaming, but as he opens his eyes he has no clear memories of it, and only a lingering feeling of unpleasantness remains.

It takes a few seconds before he’s aware of his surroundings, and then he considers closing his eyes again, perhaps going back to sleep even though he’s not tired. What point is there in getting up anyway, when he doesn’t have anything of even the slightest importance to do?

But he’s too restless to remain lying on the bed, staring up into the ceiling. So he pushes the cover aside and places his bare feet on the floor, remaining on the edge of the bed for a few seconds while his stomach churns unpleasantly, before standing up and walking to the bathroom.

The cold water splashing against his face should feel refreshing, but it doesn’t. It just feels cold.

He stands there hunched and with head bowed over the sink, grabbing the edges of it with both hands as the water drips off his face. The previous feeling of unpleasantness is giving way to a stronger wave of nausea and he swallows, though his mouth is dry and his throat feels chafed. So he just stands there staring down into the bowl of immaculate white porcelain, trying to find something to focus his mind on.

After a little while, the worst has passed, and he raises his head to look at himself in the mirror. The face staring back is pale, haggard, and empty. He is overcome by a sudden desire to smash his fist into the glass, shattering it into a thousand jagged little pieces, but he thinks better of it, and lowers the hand already half raised in preparation for the blow. Tony Stark would not be pleased to have Jarvis report that his slave has been smashing up his bathroom fittings, after all.

Tony Stark.

The name makes the memories from last evening return with full force, and he almost feels sick again.

So his master had demanded a foot massage. It was humiliating, yes, but given his current position it was just another added layer of debasement and ignominy that he was forced to endure. Nothing good would come out of refusing, he knew, so he submitted to this degradation too, as much as it hacked away at the tattered remnants of his pride. It was all part of the role he had no choice but to
play, if he wanted to remain alive and breathing.

At first, that was all there was to it. Sitting there on the floor, doing his best to focus all his attention on the pure mechanical aspects – applying pressure, rubbing, kneading – in an attempt to keep at bay the pressing awareness of what he was really doing – massaging the bare feet of his master, like the lowly, simple slave he had been reduced to. But he preferred not to think about that, instead just concentrating on the movements of his own hands, letting his mind remove what he was doing from its humiliating context, like he was touching a mere object and nothing else.

But a careless glance upwards at the man lounging comfortable in the couch as his slave worked away at him, had given him pause. Though, given him pause was a mild way to put it. Rather made his throat constrict. He’d expected to be greeted with the kind of smug, self-satisfied expression that only the subjugation of a hated enemy would bring, but that’s not what he had seen at all. No, the man’s eyelids were closed and his head was thrown back, but what really caught his attention was the big, very noticeable bulge at the front of Tony’s pants, a sign of his obvious arousal.

For a moment, the world stopped turning. Surely Tony couldn’t…

But the proof was there, and only a couple of feet away from his own face to boot, much as he couldn’t – didn’t want to – believe it at first.

So was that it, was he to be turned into a bed slave after all, then?

He’d never expected that, not really. Not from Tony. The man just hated him too much for that.

But with frightening realization dawning, he supposed that it all made sense, now.

Every day since his arrival at Tony’s tower, he’d been certain that this would surely be the day that Tony would start to mete out his long awaited revenge. But apart from some threats and bouts of humiliation, accompanied by some smug and air-of-obvious-superiority-filled gloating on Tony’s part, there had been really nothing. No punches, no beatings, no broken bones, heck, not even as much as a slap to the face.

In a way, it was more unnerving because it was so contrary to what he had been expecting. And it didn’t really give him any relief, only a sense of impending doom, as it meant that Tony must surely be plotting a more sinister kind of vengeance, one that he wouldn’t spoil by handing out petty beatings in advance before laying down the royal grand slam.
Yet Tony had seemed so unperturbed, and Loki found that he had no way to read the man or figure out what he was up to.

Now, he supposes he knows, though.

And frankly, he would have preferred not to know.

The thought is too disturbing, too appalling. Too horrifying.

Of course, he knows that this is the fate of many slaves. If he’d been one in Asgard, it would most likely have happened to him too, sooner or later. But that doesn’t make the prospect any easier to deal with.

His stomach heaves again, and he finds himself gripping the edge of the sink once more, steadying himself as he turns away from the hollowed-eyed face that is his reflection staring back at him. In the fluorescent glow of the bathroom lamp above his head, it looks sickly and pale.

So Tony is planning on bedding him, then, using him like a lowly plaything. This has to be the royal grand slam the man is planning, to make his enemy suffer this ultimate degradation.

The final thing that Tony will take away from him, after having already denied him everything else – his freedom, his own clothing, his name. And now, Tony will rob him even of this.

And the worst part is, there’s not a thing he can do about it. If he were, by some off-chance, to slip under the radar of the multi-layered security systems that Tony has set up, including the ever-vigilant Jarvis, and escape from the tower and from Tony, he would still not be off the hook. Because Heimdall is watching him, the guardian of the rainbow bridge is keeping an eye out, and even if the human myths about Asgard aren’t entirely true – Heimdall can’t simultaneously see everything that goes on in all the Nine Realms, of course – the magic humming through the chains he’s wearing makes sure that Heimdall will easily spot his whereabouts whenever he decides to turn his attention onto Midgard. And recapturing the escaped slave will be a child’s game for the Aesir, with the magic beacons on his wrists broadcasting his position to anyone with even the slightest inkling of magical competence.

And he knows what kind of fate he will be taken back to, should he try to escape his punishment. He’ll be brought back to the dungeons of Asgard, where he will face gruesome torture, no doubt
with the prison guards including, on the side, that which Tony has in mind for him. Until it kills him, which will take a long time with his godly powers restored (which they would no doubt grant him back, to make the torture last).

Fighting is hardly an option either. *Harm or kill another human being again, and you will suffer the same fate as an escape attempt will bring.* Those words are etched clearly into his mind, spoken several times to him before he was sent off to Midgard, as if the court thought he was too dull to understand them the first time.

There is no way out of this, and it makes him feel sick and disgusted and appalled. And other things as well that he doesn’t want to put a name to, but that would have his fingers trembling, had they not been clutching the bathroom furniture in a firm grip.

Tony wants to make him suffer as he breaks him. Just like the unappetizing tales he’s heard on rare occasions shared around the campfire, whispered by warriors drunk on mead and on victory, of the more unsavoury things that sometimes would take place during the aftermath of battle. How it’s been known to happen that not all enemies are given the honour of a quick death from the blow of a sword. How it is sometimes more satisfying to humiliate and subjugate the enemy before granting him the final embrace of death.

Not things that one would dare mentioning in any sort of decent company, and very few ever admitted to such, but sometimes it still happened, when there was too much hate, too much desire for revenge. The ultimate vanquishing and subjugation, leaving the enemy broken and shattered.

And he should have known, should have realized it from the start that that was what Tony was planning for him. Especially after having noticed the odd way the man was staring at him that time when he undressed to put on the Midgardian clothing; he should have known just where that look would eventually lead. For someone who prides himself so much on his intellect as Loki, he should have seen it coming a mile away, rather than sticking his head into the sand, ignoring the possibility this would happen.

His insides make another little twist, churning miserably. Yesterday, it would seem that he was saved by the ringing of Tony’s telephone, but this intermission will surely not repeat itself next time.

The picture in his mind resurfaces again, the image of Tony languidly stretching himself out on the couch, his arousal mounting at the sight of Loki debasing himself at the man’s feet.

So this is how he will spend his days here, then, as Tony’s plaything, his little pleasure toy. And if he doesn’t submit, if he tries to fight, or escape, he’ll be sent back to Asgard to endure even worse. *No*
way out. Angrily, he pounds a fist against the mirror, but there’s not enough force in his swing to break it, so he only remains standing in that position with his clenched hand against the glass, forehead resting against his arm, eyes closed in exasperation.

No way out.

Only two seconds later, Jarvis’ calm voice is ringing in his ears. “Please refrain from trying to break the bathroom fittings, Mr Laufeyson, or I will be forced to report your doings to Mr Stark.”
Perhaps his situation would have been slightly easier to deal with if he had had something worthwhile to do, something to keep his thoughts off the down-spiralling roundabout that they’re currently taking, regardless of how much he tries to steer his mind into other, less destructive directions.

But his efforts have no effect; they keep returning to Tony, to what transpired yesterday evening and all that heralds for his near future. And all the things he’s been forced to endure since coming here; the humiliation, shame and disgrace of his position, the knowledge of what he has been reduced to. How he will have no choice but to suffer whatever Tony decides to heap upon his slave, the scorn, the retribution for past transgression, the constant debasement. To say nothing of the things to come that will no doubt be even harder to endure – becoming a toy, a plaything for Tony’s pleasure and personal gratification.

Like a silent and forgotten shadow, he’s restlessly pacing the living room – or rather, one of them, as Tony seems to have several of everything – back and forth, in circles as dark and dreary as those of his wandering mind. But at least it’s better than just sitting around and letting idle nothingness choke him.

The spacious, airy room is so perfect, so spotless and stainless, the furniture all so meticulously arranged and everything in its proper place. It seems to ridicule him in all its faultless appearance, making a mockery of the horrible, uncontrollable mess that his life has become. Where nothing is in order, nothing is as it should be, and everything is coming to pieces.

And there is something about that perfection that makes the potent cocktail of emotions swirling inside of him suddenly ignite. All the simmering anger and resentment and bitterness that he has kept a lid on until now as to not make things even worse for himself is suddenly blown off by the powerful pressure cocker beneath boiling over. It’s just too much to handle and he can’t take it anymore, not when fate, the universe, and even this very room are all mocking him, the fallen god, laughing at his pathetic-ness and helplessness.

The last piece of string holding his façade together is finally torn apart, and he snaps.

Engulfed in a rage that he doesn’t know quite where it came from, he grabs hold of the first thing within his reach. A blue and white vase of some kind, probably worth half a fortune here in Midgard, but he couldn’t care less. A second later, before his mind has even had the time to register what he is doing, the broken shards of porcelain lie shattered on the floor, some still nailed into the wallpaper in front of him from the forceful impact of china against concrete.
He pants slightly after the sudden exertion, though his quickened breathing comes more from the impulsive release of pent-up anger and boiling fury than any physical movements.

But it’s not enough, not even close to it.

With a howl of rage, his hand latches onto the next object within reach, hurling it with as much force as he can muster, not even noticing what it is. It doesn’t matter any longer.

He then strides up to the bookcase, the beautifully carved piece of furniture, another so fucking annoyingly perfect thing when his own life lies in shambles. Snarling, he rips out the dusty volumes, throwing them to the floor, scattering paper all around him as he tramples the books strewn all over.

And it’s like he’s released a monster, a beast hell-bent on destruction and annihilation. Nothing matters anymore, as long as he gets to tear everything around him to pieces and reduce it to the pathetic, broken tatters of nothing that is his own existence.

And it feels good; for the first time since being brought here, he can finally revel in at least the smallest inkling of control. He’s not the rag doll being pushed around, held down and played with for once; no, he’s the one to create chaos and disorder now as opposed to being the one subjected to it.

He steps on something that crunches under his feet. Probably one of Tony’s useless inventions, he doesn’t know and he couldn’t care less. He relishes it being crushed under his weight, now that he can get to break something rather than being the one broken.

And for a blissful while, that’s all there is. His existence has been compressed into this singularity of desire to destroy and demolish, lest he be the powerless victim yet again.

So he smashes and breaks, rips and tears, hurls and stomps, as his rage simmers within him, maddening and powerful.

Then, Tony is suddenly standing in the doorway, the well-known figure materializing like an apparition from out of nowhere, an angry shout on his lips.

“Hey, just what the fuck do you think you’re--”
That’s as far as he gets before Loki hurls the object clasped between his cramping fingers straight at the man’s head with full force. Unblinking, without thinking, without reflecting for the briefest of moments what he’s doing. He doesn’t even register what the thing in his hand is, he just reacts blindly, submitting to the swirling maelstrom raging inside his veins.

With reflexes quicker than any human should have, Tony ducks beneath the object coming at him, and it misses his head with only a few inches to spare.

Snarling in red-hot fury, Loki makes a grab for something else to throw at the man, but it is already too late.

In one moment of lucidity, in which the raging madness subsides to give way to a sharp, conscious clarity, he realizes what the man is about to do as he dives forwards onto the floor. And even though his mind registers it, he knows it’s too late for his body to react, despite how everything seems to be happening in slow-motion, like a dream where he is unable to move, but can still watch as a frozen statue as everything unfolds around him.

In that strange slowing of time, he watches, like he’s standing behind a pane of opaque glass distorting the world around him, as two hands make a grab for the rug that he’s standing on, pulling with a sharp, forceful tug.

And the ground under his feet is gone, ripped away from under him like it was never there at all.

Then the floor hits him as he lands flat on his back, and with that, it is as if the world has gone back to normal again; there is no opaque glass and no distortion of time. He gasps for air as the wind is knocked out of his lungs, coughing and sputtering.

And Tony is on him in a second, pouncing like a feline predator on its mewling prey, grabbing him and forcing him flat to his stomach. Loki hisses in anger and struggles against the hands, but it is useless; only a moment later the man has wrenched one of his arms behind his back and straddles him, pinning Loki down with the weight of his own body.

If circumstances had been different, Loki might have stood a chance against Tony, but not when lying flat on his face with the man on top of him.

It makes no difference. Growling, he tries to shake the weight off, struggling and fighting in
desperation like a wounded, cornered animal. He bucks in a desperate effort to loosen the arm locked into a vice-like grip behind his back, but to no avail. The body atop of him shifts but remains steady in place, and then there is a sharp pain in his shoulder as if the joint is about to be pulled out of its socket as Tony twists his arm.

But it isn’t the pain as much as it is Tony’s voice that finally stills him.

“Knock it off.” Three words only, but spoken in a low voice so deadly and deceptively soft; velvet just barely covering steel, a razor-sharp blade hidden by only the flimsiest of fabrics.

And that voice pierces through the howling anger swirling inside his head, commanding his attention like white-hot iron pressed against bare skin.

At that, the cacophony of fury and vehemence slowly dissipates, until the only sounds in his ears are those of his own panting breaths. He lies still as the rage abates and dwindles to nothing, draining him as if a plug has been pulled from a tub full of water, leaving him empty and spent, the previous all-consuming rage only a faint lingering memory.

It is only then, as his mind and senses are coming back to him, as they once more return to his control, that he realizes what he has done. The world grinds to a painful halt as icy dread fills his stomach and turns the blood in his veins into liquid frost.

The wanton destruction of his master’s property would have been bad enough, of course, but it pales against the fact that he just threw a potted plant at Tony’s head. And back where Loki comes from, a slave raising his hand against his master would be killed or at the very least flogged to within an inch of his life. What Tony is going to do to him now, he has no idea.

And with that, the last vestiges of fighting go out of him. His body goes limp, like it’s been drained of every last bit of energy. The bitterness grinds inside of him at the realization that once more, he is forced to accept that he is powerless and there isn’t a damn thing he can do about it; once again, he’s been reduced to nothing. The taste of resignation at the back of his throat is acidic and bitter, but he is unable to stop it from washing over him. In the end, Tony still owns his life and will come out on top, no matter what Loki does, regardless of what he tries, despite how much he might futilely struggle to change what can’t be changed.

And perhaps this was to be his last chance trying; maybe there won’t be any more chances left for him now. He closes his eyes, too tired and depleted to do anything else than resigning himself to whatever Tony decides his fate will be.
So he only lies there, unmoving, as Tony remains on top of him, a leaden weight on his back. And their relative positions, him lying flat on his face and Tony holding him down and straddling him, are so damnably mocking, so twistedly ironical that he shudders at the unwelcome reminder of the miserable, bleak outlook that is his immediate future. If he still has even that left now, after all this.

“Are you done?” Tony’s voice above him has slightly less of an edge than before, but there is still sharpened steel in it, ready to cut at a moment’s notice.

Loki only nods; he would have been unable to get even a word out even if Tony hadn’t been sitting on top of him.

Then the weight pinning him down eases off as the man straddling him lets go of his arm and stands up. An instant later, two hands reach down to grab hold of his collar, manhandling him as Tony roughly pulls his prone body up from the floor and on to his knees. The world tilts at this sudden change of positions and a second later, he is looking up at Tony’s face, the man towering over him like a vengeful angel of doom, mouth twisted into an angry snarl and hands digging into the tightly clenched fistfuls of cloth around his neck. Instinctively, Loki’s fingers curl around Tony’s wrists, trying to ease the pressure on his throat as he waits for the man’s rage to come down on him.

Out of the corner of an eye, he can glimpse the mess of the room clearly for the first time since he snapped out of his blinding frenzy – the porcelain shards littering the floor, the torn paper lying all over, the dirt and flowers from broken pots thrown to the ground in anger. Though all that soon melts away into the background, leaving only a fuming Tony filling his vision.

The man gives him a forceful shake that makes Loki’s teeth rattle, before bending down over his charge until their faces are only inches apart, all hard lines and narrow eyes staring down at him.

“I’ve just about had it with you going around wrecking my house,” Tony growls at him, eyes burning with barely contained fury. “You pull anything like this again and I swear I will have a fucking shock collar put around your neck.” Even though the words are angry, the voice is surprisingly even and controlled, and that only makes the menace all the more potent.

Loki holds his breath for what comes next. Maybe it won’t be his death after all, or Tony probably wouldn’t have wasted his time making threats.

With that, the man lets go of his collar and shoves him back onto the floor, and Loki falls on his ass with an ungraceful thud as Tony takes a step back. Then his hands go for the belt at his waist, with
one deft motion unbuckling it and pulling it out of the loops.

Loki bites the insides of his cheeks. So Tony is going to beat him up, then; no surprise there. He expected no less, of course, and probably even worse.

He tries not to flinch as Tony comes at him, belt held in a steady grip. It’s just pain, he tells himself, only pain, despite being in this weak, pathetic mortal body that can’t withstand anything. He’ll get through this without fighting back, without risking getting hauled back to Asgard for a drawn-out execution. So he remains on the floor, breath tight in his throat as he waits for Tony to tell him to strip or roll over or whatever, eyes fixed on the grim face glaring down at his.

“Give me you hands,” the man says after what feels like an eternity of silent staring, underlining his order with an impatient gesture.

Loki blinks twice in confusion, but slowly holds out his wrists. Tony grabs them and loops the belt tightly around them, finishing off by tying the loose ends together with a double knot. Then his arm is seized in a bruising grip as Tony none too gently hoists him up from the floor, and without uttering a single word half pushes, half drags his charge through the tower until they end up outside Loki’s room.

Kicking the door open, Tony shoves Loki inside and onto the bed, once more looming above him, though it seems like the edge of the man’s anger has been taken off by now.

“Alright,” he says, giving Loki another one of those stern glares as he reaches down to untie the belt around his wrists as he speaks. “You’re going to cool off in here for a few hours until you can handle being within a ten yards radius of a potted plant without being overcome by the urge to throw it at someone’s head. Particularly my head. Then you’re going to clean up this whole fucking mess and I’m sure as hell not feeding you again until you’re done.”

And with that, Tony turns on his heel and stomps out through the door which closes with a bang, lock automatically clicking into place, leaving Loki on the bed wondering why he’s still in one piece.

But the reason doesn’t matter. None of it matters. All he can think of right now, as dread churns inside of him, is how he’s just managed to make things so much worse for himself that he doesn’t even want to consider what the consequences of all this are going to be.

Having neither the physical nor the mental strength left to do much else, he curls himself into a ball and then just lies there on the mattress, trying, but miserably failing, to dispel the plethora of
disturbing images that are jostling for space in his head, each one depicting a more horrible near future for him than the last.
Chapter 16

It is several long hours later when the lock clicks open to reveal a stern-looking Tony standing in the doorway, hand still on the handle as if poised and ready to close the door shut in case Loki should do something drastic and ill-advised again.

But he doesn’t. He only remains sitting on his bed, legs drawn up and arms folded around his knees, barely looking up as Tony leans against the doorpost, contemplating who knows what as he gazes at Loki in silent assessment. Perhaps he should be glad he isn’t able to read minds; he isn’t sure he would have liked to know what is going through the man’s head right now.

Apparently, the appraisal must be that he is harmless enough, as the door is fully pushed open and Tony takes a few steps into the room, arms crossed in front of his chest. He regards Loki for a little while like this, then uncrosses his arms and beckons him to follow with a toss of his head and a grumbled, “come on,” as he turns on his heel and walks out without even bothering to check if his slave is obeying.

Slowly, reluctantly, Loki pushes himself up from the bed, his body protesting the sudden movements after so many hours of idleness. And his mind is protesting as well, yelling at him to remain in the relative safety of his room rather than following Tony to where he’s taking him to face whatever’s in store.

But of course, he knows better than to disobey the order. He’s already in deep enough trouble as it already is and can hardly afford to make things even worse for himself. Though, a part of him doubts whether it would really make that much of a difference now after everything, or whether it would just be degrees in hell. Still, he follows, limbs heavy and a cold lump settled into the pit of his stomach.

Their destination is apparently the living room, where Tony comes to a halt in the middle of the chaotic, litter-filled scenery, dirt and shards crunching beneath the soles of his shoes.

“Alright, Rudolph, get to it. Clean this fucking mess up,” the man orders impatiently, indicating the expanse of the living room with a totally unnecessary gesture of his hand.

So he gets to it. It’s not like he has any other choice. Gingerly crouching down on the floor, he starts picking up the broken shards scattered all around, carefully lifting them between two fingers as to not cut his hands on the sharp edges, and placing them in the big trash bag provided for the task. The pieces of porcelain clang sadly as they’re thrown in a jumble on top of each other, the forlorn sounds reminiscent of a strange, melancholic melody created for the sole reason of mocking his lamentable
Tony remains where he’s standing for a while, and then flops himself down on the couch, one leg nonchalantly sprawled over the armrest. Loki can feel the man watching him intently, but he tries to ignore the gaze that’s feeling like it’s burning smoking holes into his body. Despite his efforts to focus solely on the task at hand, picking up the broken remains and sweeping the floor clean, he is acutely aware of Tony sitting there mere yards away, following his every movement with rapt attention.

And he doesn’t want to know what Tony is thinking, though it no doubt revolves around the punishment that will be waiting once the living room is back in a satisfactorily pristine condition again.

In a futile effort to delay the inevitable, he works slowly and carefully, cleaning with painstaking diligence, knowing full well what is to come once the mess has been sorted out and there is no longer any need for him to remain in a state where he’s able to take care of messy floors.

After a while, as he’s emptying yet another load of dirt into the black plastic bag, Tony seems to lose interest in the proceedings and instead pulls out a colourful little cube that he starts to fiddle around with. It clicks and clatters as he twists it, back and forth, making the individual little cubes switch places with each other. Some kind of puzzle, obviously, and for some reason it only serves to make him even more nervous. As if the little clacks have turned into a bizarre kind of countdown for something terrible and dreadful.

Swallowing down all the unpleasant things churning in his stomach, he sweeps another helping of dirt and blue-painted shards onto the scoop clutched in his fingers, trying once more to focus on the work at hand but failing miserably. His brain is not cooperating at all, and keeps returning to its unwelcome speculations about whatever he will be made to suffer at Tony’s hands for his idiotic lapse of self-control.

Of course, the standard punishment for slaves in Asgard for most kind of offences would be a whipping. What would the severity have been for something like this? One hundred lashes? He doesn’t know, though he wonders if he would even remain conscious towards the end of such a punishment. Perhaps it would be just as well if he didn’t. And even if Tony might not have any whips lying around, it doesn’t mean he won’t be able to find a substitute. Perhaps the man is going to get… creative.

There is no point thinking about that, but it makes no difference. He does anyway, wincing inwardly for each time he tips another scoop of dirt and shards into the bag, bringing the room one step closer to its previous condition.
The Rubik’s cube in his hands always serves as a good distraction, something for him to focus his mind on. He makes another few twists, then stopping for a while, trying to figure out if there’s a way to solve the configuration in front of him in less than twenty moves.

At least it’s a better pastime than watching someone clean his floor. *And damn, did the god really go ballistic back there.* But he supposes he shouldn’t be surprised that the bag of cats finally flipped and threw a little hissy fit; it’s not like he was ever a schoolbook example of mental stability. He winces a bit at the memory; even though he has certainly imagined straddling the god several times before, the preceding circumstances in his fantasies were rather different, to say the least. Perhaps this serves him right for the idiotically inappropriate thoughts he’s been harbouring. *Be careful what you wish for,* and all that other moralistic stuff that comes back to bite you in the ass.

Though, right now the god seems surprisingly… docile. He’d half expected Loki to throw another little fit once he opened the door to his room a few hours later, after first having checked with Jarvis that Loki wasn’t busy in there ripping the bed sheets apart or smashing the furniture to pieces.

Still, he keeps an eye on the figure huddled on the floor, sweeping up shards of broken glass and porcelain, though there seems to be little need of any supervision. Whatever rage was let out before, it has apparently burnt itself out by now.

Just to play it safe, he decided to put on his bracelets before facing off with the god again, in case he should need to suit up quickly. Though, Loki doesn’t seem like he’s harbouring any plans of flipping anytime soon. He just works quietly, the only sounds being the clanks of broken shards and hisses of dirt being emptied into the garbage bag.

In the silence, the clicks from his cube are reminiscent of gun-shots.

He twists the cube a few times more, knowing he won’t finish it in less than ten moves, but hoping it won’t be more than fifteen.

He’s still a bit grumpy about the whole incident, although the look on Loki’s face as he’d finally calmed down had made Tony’s initial anger abate somewhat; the change in demeanour in the god was almost instantaneous, then, as if the bag of cats had suddenly transformed into a bag of puppies instead, like the god was shocked by his own blatant loss of composure and self-control. As if improper behaviour would actually be a big deal to someone who tried taking over an entire planet not very long ago.
Still, Tony has to admit that Loki is remarkably good at cleaning. Contrary to expectations, he’s not doing a half-assed job at all, but works diligently and carefully removes every stain and shard and smudge of dirt. Not bad for a spoiled prince who has probably not had to do a single menial task in his entire life before, to say nothing of sweeping floors. He might not be working very quickly, but at least the areas he’s taken care of are spotless, almost like new.

“Well, aren’t you good at cleaning, Bambi,” he hears himself saying, probably more as an attempt to fill the pressing silence with words than anything else. “I’m impressed. Makes me wonder what other hidden talents you have that could be put to good use.” Perhaps making sandwiches or omelettes. That would be cool; if the god had a knack for that. Then again, he doubts he’d want to eat something that Loki has cooked in the first place. Self-preservation instinct and all that.

The shocked affront his comment prompts is blatantly obvious on Loki’s face from the way the god tenses and stares at Tony, having apparently forgotten about the floor sweeping he was so absorbed in only moments ago.

Sheesh, is the god prideful and easily prickled. Tony rolls his eyes as a snort escapes him. “Come on, don’t give me that look. The least you can do is to earn your keep around here and actually be useful,” he shoots back, unable to stop a sting of irritation. The guy did wreck his living room and hardly has any right to act all haughty and snooty.

However, Loki says nothing in response, his gaze returning to the floor once more, though it takes him a few moments before he starts sweeping again. When he does, Tony can swear that his movements are remarkably slower than before. Perhaps it’s a silent rebellion kind of thing, trying to make a statement by being obstinate and pig-headed. Whatever, it’s Loki’s loss if he wants to drag this out. Tony’s not the one who will be spending the entire evening cleaning a messy living room.

It takes quite a while, but finally, after Tony has lost track of the number of times he’s solved the Rubik’s cube and has long since resorted to flipping through a stack of magazines, the god is finished. The room is spotless, shining like it’s been polished with butter.

About time.

Throwing his reading material on the table top, he gets up from the couch and walks up to Loki, coming to a halt at a distance that is a bit closer than what would constitute normal conversation distance.
“Okay, Reindeer Games,” he says, drawing himself up as he pokes a finger into the god’s chest, unsubtly but effectively emphasizing his words. “Time for a little talk.”

Loki clenches his jaws, but otherwise gives no sign of having registered the words. Obstinate, as usual.

“Now, here are some basic rules you’d do well to remember from now on.” He pauses, giving the god a narrowed glance before continuing, voice several notes harder. “So. Don’t fucking ever do anything like this again. I mean it. Don’t wreck my stuff, don’t throw things around, don’t break anything that belongs to me. And that includes my head.” He pokes his finger a little harder into the Megadeth logo in front of him, half expecting the god to slap the offending appendage away, but Loki doesn’t move at all. He just stands there, probably hoping that Tony is about to self-combust or something.

He sighs, half in annoyance and half in exasperation. “You know what? Here on planet Earth, if you’re going to give a pet to someone, it’s common courtesy to make sure it has been properly housetrained first. Doesn’t seem like the same thing holds true back in Asgard, does it?”

He doesn’t wait for Loki to respond to that. He doesn’t even want a response, just the opportunity to spit out a demeaning insult to compensate for the potted plant that missed his head with only inches to spare.

And he probably should deal out some sort of punishment at this point to discourage any repeat performances, but he can’t really think of anything appropriate, so he settles for making base threats instead. Probably, that’s just as effective.

“So, don’t fucking do this again. Ever. And if you’re ever overcome by the temptation to, you’d do well to remember that I still have my Iron Man suit that I can call on any time I want.” Yeah, when he’s wearing his bracelets, but Loki doesn’t need to know that. “And the thing I said about fitting you with a shock collar is still valid if you should even think about a repeat of this crap. So don’t fucking tempt me. Have I made myself clear?”

He’s half expecting Loki to roll his eyes or offer a disdainful sneer, but the god doesn’t.

“Yes,” is all he says, simple as that, though it’s probably the most sullen, sulking ‘yes’ Tony’s ever heard.
Oh well, it will have to do.

“Good,” he says, taking a step back. “Now, I have some real work waiting for me that doesn’t involve watching you clean shit up. So go back to your room and stay there where you can’t do any more damage.”

With that, he dismisses the god, glad to finally be able to focus on something else than this crap.

He’s back on his bed again, tired and drained, though not physically from cleaning up the mess in Tony’s living room. That was the easy part. No, the tiredness that’s dragging him down is something that has nestled deeper inside of him than mere bodily exhaustion could ever do, something that has seeped into his very mind.

One of Tony’s household robots brought him some food a while ago, though he can barely eat it despite the hunger clawing at his innards. He’s feeling sick again, and his stomach is in turmoil, as is his head, throbbing with swirling thoughts.

If there was ever any doubt to what’s in store for him, that tiny little piece of uncertainty has been obliterated now. It was sickingly obvious what ‘hidden talents’ Tony was referring to back there, as was his intentions to make good use of them.

The brutal punishment he’d expected hadn’t come, though, and as much as it had confused him at first, he soon realized that it makes perfect sense.

Of course, that’s what’s staving his punishment off for the time being – Tony wants him to be in a state where he’s still able to put those talents to use. No fun amusing himself with a slave that has been beaten senseless. That is something the man can take care of later, once Loki’s entertainment value has lost its charms.

It would seem that once again, both of these things have been postponed for a later time, looming like dark and terrible shadows on the horizon.

And again, he can do nothing but resign himself to another dreadful wait.
Chapter 17

Already the next morning, he has the misfortune of running into Tony.

And it’s such a bad coincidence, because he had been intending to spend the day in his room, venturing out as little as possible to avoid the risk of encountering Stark Tower’s other inhabitant. Of course, he knows that the man can call on him any time he wants to, but it gives him at least a fragile sense of security not having to be in his immediate presence. To have him out of sight. To be out of sight.

But after a while coped up in the confines of his room, the walls were starting to press in on him. Perhaps if he had been able to open the window to let some fresh air inside he could have handled it, but the window was still as firmly locked as the first day he came here. So he decided to get out for a little while before he choked on the throat-constricting combination of stale air and nervous thoughts.

It was just supposed to be a quick walk through the corridors, but he freezes in his tracks when a door to his right unexpectedly opens and Tony materializes in front of him like a nightmarish ghoul. Just woken up, it would seem, judging by the unkempt state of his hair.

He winces at the sudden closeness, hoping that Tony is going to keep walking to wherever he was headed. But, of course, he doesn’t.

“Well isn’t it nice to see you up and running,” Tony comments with a raised eyebrow as he eyes Loki. “Already back in shape after yesterday’s strenuous exercises, huh?”

Loki isn’t sure if he’s expected to deign that with an answer, so he keeps silent.

The man gives him a long look and then shrugs. “Well, if you have that much energy left to spare, then how about you get your ass in there and make my bed.” He gestures with a thumb over his shoulder, indicating the room he just exited from.

And even though Loki’s insides turn to sharp and jagged icicles at that, he wrestles down the part of him foolishly yelling at him to make a run for it, to get away from here – despite there being nowhere for him to run – forcefully silencing the urge. So with heavy feet dragging behind him in nervous trepidation, he walks through the doorway, and into Tony’s bedroom.
He’s never seen it from the inside before, and he’d been – futilely – hoping for things to remain that way. The room opening up in front of him is large and airy, huge window panes letting the sunshine in. Though for all Loki could care, it’s the dreariest place he could have imagined. Even his cell in the dungeons was less depressing.

And he sincerely wishes that all the man will want from him this time is what he said mere moments ago. Surely that will turn out to be a vain hope, but he clings to it anyway for lack of anything else.

There are some clothes strewn on the floor and draped across the furniture, as well as a whole collection of various other personal artefacts and useless trinkets. Though, the most notable object is without a doubt the humongous bed that’s standing in the middle of the room, large enough to host four people with room to spare.

Swallowing the bile rising in his throat, he approaches the opulent piece of furniture with its mess of wrinkled linen and tangled sheets. It looks more like a pack of lions have been fighting in it than a single man having spent the night in it. Perhaps Tony doesn’t make a habit out of making his own bed, and that’s why he’s taking the opportunity to have Loki do it for him. At least he hopes that is the only reason why he is at all near Tony’s bed this morning.

So he starts to carry out the order, his hands fumbling clumsily with the fabric as they try to pull the sheets and covers straight. The things are big and unwieldy, and despite his efforts, they refuse to align themselves properly. His own mind isn’t exactly helping, supplying him with disturbing pictures of him lying naked on top of the very sheets he’s pulling at, Tony’s equally naked weight pressing down on him.

And he can feel the man’s eyes on him as he’s working, tracking his every movement. The burning gaze is making his skin crawl like there’s an entire colony of fire ants taking a morning stroll across his back, but he resists the urge to rub at the unpleasant itch.

A few more tugs of sheet, and the bed is as good as he can possibly make it. Task finished, he straightens up and turns towards Tony, dreading what is coming next.

Tony is lounging in the doorway with an arm up against the wall, effectively blocking Loki’s exit. The eyes are still fixed on him, intently staring.

The sight makes a cold hand reach out with frosty fingers to grip at his throat, making him painfully aware of how there’s nowhere for him to run; he’s effectively trapped in here. Instinctively, he takes a step back, wanting to put some distance between himself and Tony. But as his leg hits the piece of furniture behind him, he realizes all his efforts resulted in was to bring him closer to the bed.
And Tony just keeps staring at him, gaze unwavering.

One of the things that Tony’s noticed when it comes to the god now living in his tower is that he has always had a pale complexion. And perhaps it’s only his imaginations, but he can swear that right now the shade looks more ashen and pallid than it usually does. Sickly, almost. Something that Count Dracula would have been proud of.

He really doesn’t remember Loki being that pale. Granted, he is unlikely to have seen much sunlight since his rampage in New York and subsequent incarcerations with SHIELD and then in Asgard, followed by his stay here, but still.

So while the god is busy making the bed, he watches in silence, trying to find out if there’s something wrong with him. Perhaps the guy is coming down with something? That would explain the pastiness, at least.

In that case, he sure hopes it isn’t serious and needs professional medical attention. That could prove… problematic. Then again, are Asgardians even susceptible to human diseases? Perhaps gods without their fancy superpowers-probably-including-immunity-to-all-possible-ailments would be? Could they get the flu, or a fever? Or do they contract their own kinds of nasty bugs and weird contagions?

Hmm…

Well, perhaps it would do Loki good if he got something to eat. That might improve things. He eyes the bed, grimacing a little at the unsatisfying sight. Making beds is clearly not one of Loki’s hidden talents, much as Tony had hoped that it would turn out to be.

Oh well.

“All right,” he says, giving the pallid god in front of him another prodding look. “Time for breakfast. You look like you might need a bit to eat.”
“Want some peanut butter with that? I swear, the stuff tastes a lot better than it looks.” He holds the jar out like an exotic offering, butter knife sticking out, but Loki merely shakes his head.

“Suit yourself, princess.” With a shrug, Tony removes the knife, which makes a soft slurping sound as it’s pulled out, and licks off the sweet substance still sticking to the sides.

Whistling to himself, he sticks the same kitchen utensil into the big jug of strawberry jelly to his right, digging up a big glob of gelatinous goo and smacking it down on top of the peanut butter already plastered over his slice of bread. Loki gives him a quick lop-sided look out of the corner of his eye, clearly of the opinion that Tony’s table manners leave many things to be desired.

Yeah, as if the gods in Asgard don’t chow down on their pork steaks using their fingers and smash their empty mead cups on the floor.

He starts to spread the strawberry stuff more evenly over the top of his sandwich, though he has a feeling that there’s a lot more gelatine and preservatives and chemical aromas in there than actual berries, despite what the pictures on the jug would have you believe.

“So,” he says, mouth stuffed with sandwich and red, artificially sweetened gelatine. “Got any particular plans for today? Sulk in a corner? Mope in your room? Brood under the bed?”

He doesn’t even know why he’s trying to make conversation with Loki. It’s not as if the god is showing any appreciation for his valiant efforts, despite not having had anyone to talk to besides Tony for quite some time now. Jarvis doesn’t really count.

Loki picks at his butter-covered sandwich with long fingers, not seeming to have much of an appetite. And despite Tony always having pictured Norse gods as fully capable of downing an entire pig and drinking a bathtub worth’s of beer in one sitting, Loki is now seated at the edge of his chair, fiddling with his food like a prissy primadonna whose tea and scones have been served five minutes too late and now has to make sure the world does not remain ignorant of her highness’ displeasure.

“Well?” he prompts, as no answer seems to be forthcoming.

“No, I don’t,” the god offers, then. Mechanically, eyes not leaving the sandwich.
If Tony didn’t know any better, he’d call that look apathetic. And to top the impression of miserable wretchedness off, Loki looks as if he has hardly slept at all.

*Hmm.*

He tries a few other comments, but they yield no proper answers.

“So the silent treatment, huh? And here I thought your mouth was always your greatest asset.” He smacks his lips. “I’m disappointed, Rudolph. I expected better from you.”

Loki looks at him like he’s a fly, buzzing around and annoying people.

Tony takes another big bite out of his sandwich, deciding to check out his previous suspicions, just in case.

“You’re looking a little on the pale side this morning, Bambi. You’re not getting sick or anything, are you?” he asks between chews. “I’d hate to think what sort of nasty diseases alien gods can come down with.”

“No.”

*Alright then…*

He gets up from his chair and heads to the kitchen counter, pouring himself a smoking hot cup of espresso, inhaling deeply. Ah, the smell of caffeine in the morning. Nothing beats that. Sighing in contentment, he takes a sip out of the still smoking cup, wincing as he scalds his tongue on the hot liquid. Yeah, so maybe patience is a virtue after all.

He gives Loki another furtive glance, noticing the restless, impatient way his fingers are still playing around with the sandwich. So perhaps the god is just suffering from sheer boredom. Maybe that’s why he flipped yesterday, like a teenage brat starved for attention trying to create a little drama for lack of other ways to amuse himself.

Well then. He has a board meeting and then another dull charity event to attend to, but if that’s the
problem, he figures they can sit down and watch some kind of movie when he’s back. At least it’s entertainment, some kind of a distraction. And watching movies certainly serves to put him in a much better mood.

His gaze flickers towards his wrist watch, which is probably about as good a conversation partner as the sulking god. And damn, he should probably be on his way already, unless he wants to be late for his own board meeting. Again.

“Bored, huh?” he asks, hoping to gauge whether he has nailed the root of the problem.

Loki gives him a blank look that looks very much like a ‘yes’.

“Well, don’t worry, princess,” he says, downing the remaining coffee in his cup. “I have some stuff I need to take care off today, but when I’m back this evening we’ll spend some quality entertainment time together, just you and I.” He flashes the god his sunniest smile. “How about that, huh?”

Loki remains sitting at the table long after Tony has left. His body feels numb, and he isn’t sure his limbs would have obeyed him, had he tried to move them.

So tonight, then.

Tony isn’t going to wait any longer. What he’s been dreading is finally about to happen, and there isn’t a thing he can do to stop it.

The sandwich in his hand makes a slurping sound as he squeezes it between his trembling fingers, as he reduces it to the useless, pathetic piece of jumble that is his own existence.

He’s not sure his nerves or his sanity can deal with another excruciating wait.
The Black Sabbath elevator music fades from his ears as the door closes behind him with a soft whooshing sound. His slightly off-tune whistling picks up where the well-familiar song got cut off as he saunters on towards the kitchen, desperate for a drink. No, charity events really aren’t the place to go if you’re looking for decent alcohol. Perhaps he should just stay away from them altogether, at least until they start serving decent drinks.

He kicks off his shoes off as he goes, grabbing a glass and a bottle from the liquor cabinet and then flops himself down on one of the kitchen chairs, one foot coming to rest propped up against the edge of the opposite seat.

Sighing contentedly, he pours himself a generous glass of whiskey, and downs it in one big gulp. Oh yes. He fills his glass again, but drinks it a more leisurely pace this time, savouring the feeling of the invigorating liquid sliding down his throat.

Unasked, his brain brings up the image of the god inhabiting his tower, and he grimaces, despite the alcohol already in his belly and the remainder awaiting him in the bottle on the table top. Loki’s mood from earlier was a bit odd, but with a bit of luck he’s gotten over it by now and stopped his pointless sulking.

Perhaps he should ask Jarvis what Loki is up to. If nothing else, it will make him feel slightly more at ease knowing the skulking god’s whereabouts.

“Jarvis, where is Loki currently at?”

“He’s in his room, sir.”

“And what exactly is he doing in there? Learning how to dance mambo? Painting his nails? Plotting world domination?”

“Nothing, it would seem.”

Nothing?
Somehow, that sounds even more suspicious.

And a part of him would be happy to let Loki stay in there, out of sight though perhaps not out of mind. The shower fantasy he indulged in a while ago is still far too fresh in his mind, and to top it off, he had a very wet dream last night featuring a green-eyed god wearing only what nature gave him, ending with Tony waking up in soaked underwear like a acne-riddled puberty victim.

The memory makes him wince, and with a quick swig, he empties his glass again to compensate for the unpleasant reminder.

And it’s stupid, of course, the whole thing. Loki is crazy, which he proved quite aptly just the other day, and Tony must be even crazier for feeling any attraction to such a loony bin. It’s like playing with fire, even though that fire seems to have burnt itself out after Loki’s little outburst, leaving only ashes in its wake.

Oh well. It doesn’t matter. It’s not like Loki will ever know his embarrassing secret, at least, no matter how much of a moron Tony might feel about the whole thing.

In that respect, it’s preferable not having to deal with the god, or be in his immediate presence. No point in being reminded of his own private indiscretions.

Still, he doesn’t much fancy the idea of Loki sitting in his room doing what appears to be nothing. Idle hands and devil’s plaything and all that. Or idle minds, in Loki’s case.

Yawning, he glances towards his wristwatch. Almost ten, which equals the perfect time to sit down and watch a movie. It’s become a sort of a habit for him lately, ever since Pepper decided to pack her bags after arriving at the realization that the things she at first found so endearing about him were now only irritations and nuisances. Although, to be fair, nuisances was a rather nice way to put it.

He still hasn’t managed to channel the sudden appearance of all that Pepper-free time
on his hands into a more productive endeavour, but that is fine for the time being. There are worse ways to waste your time than watching movies.

And he’ll make Loki sit down and watch too, if nothing else than to take the god’s mind off the bitter, vengeful grumbling that is sure to be going through his head. Nothing good will ever come out of it. His living room can certainly testify to that.
The thought makes him gulp down another drink. He hasn’t really been counting them, but he’s enjoying the soft lull of alcoholic dizziness that is starting to settle over his mind as he sets his glass down with a bang.

“So, Reindeer Games, any idea what kind of movie you wanna watch tonight?” he says as he seats himself on the other end of the couch. “How about "The 13th Warrior"? Should be right up your alley, with the whole Viking era thing.” He grins. “Not to mention, the guys in the movie have almost as bad taste in clothing as you do. Though they’re still a bit behind on the latest Asgardian fashion, seeing as how they all suffer from a pitiful lack of those funny helmets that seem to be so popular back where you come from.”

No reaction. Oh well.

“And he might be mistaken in his drunkenness, but there is something in that demeanour that gives Tony pause. Because he really doesn’t remember the god looking so resigned, so oddly… down beaten. Especially not when taking the whole little recent raging fit into account.

Loki only shifts his gaze towards Tony, but other than that, he makes no moves or other signs of acknowledging his presence. Though the eyes follow him cautiously and suspiciously as Tony moves across the room, like a predator tracking the movements of its prey. Or the other way around.

Always the paranoid type, our favourite god of mischief.

“Okay, so maybe fashion isn’t your forte, but I’m sure you’d love a little trip down memory lane to the good old days when there were still people worshipping you guys. I mean, it’s gotta be like almost a millennium since anyone here on Midgard cared about you and yours, right?”
Still nothing. No glint of ill-hidden irritation, no swell of anger, not even a twitching eyebrow.

“I mean, when was the last time anyone sacrificed a goat in your honour? Or hamster, or butterfly, or bilgesnipe or whatever animal species constitute your offering of choice?”

Loki still makes no reply. It doesn’t seem like he’s listening at all to Tony, like he’s lost in his own world and thoughts. Like the whole flipping out ordeal was so strenuous that it robbed him of all vestiges of godly alien energy.

And for some reason, that makes Tony want to grab the god by the shoulders and shake him until his teeth rattle, to make him snap out of this… apathy. Suddenly, he finds himself almost missing the old Loki and his snark. Well, missing might not be the word of the day, but it would be preferable to this resigned, apathetic figure who is nothing like the confident god he once faced off here at Stark Tower. As much as the god’s bluster had irked him back then, at least it would be more fun to trade wits with the old Loki who still had bite to him as opposed to this listless creature lounging in his couch.

Yeah, the god clearly needs something else to occupy his brain for a while. A movie should do him good.

Getting up from the couch, legs almost steady, he pops the disc from the “13th Warrior” box into the player, and then takes the opportunity to lie down on the couch and sprawl languidly over most of the cushions, seeing as how Loki seems content to keep to his corner.

“Alright, Bambi, you stay put here until the movie’s over,” he orders, just in case the god should decide he’d rather saunter off somewhere else and destroy other parts of Tony’s property. You never know with gods of mischief, after all.

He’s lying on his back on the bed, staring up into the ceiling. In the dim glow seeping in through his window from the night lights illuminating the city outside, the contours of the sparse furniture lining the walls are clearly visible despite the lateness of the hour. To his eyes, the nightly brightness is oddly jarring after having spent so much time in a dark dungeon where the only source of light was the flicker of sputtering, sooty torches sending strange shadows dancing on the murky stone floor. Waiting for sleep to claim him only makes him more restless, however, and he can’t help but wonder whether Tony is still sleeping or has awaken by now.
The man was clearly inebriated when he entered the living room. Loki wasn’t sure whether that was a good or a bad thing compared to a more sober state, but he decided that with his luck, it was probably the latter. But then again, drunkenness might bring with it certain… performance issues, as the man had once quipped, that could stave things off for another night.

However, it never came to that as the man dozed off a good half an hour before the movie was over, head tipping precariously to the side a few times, then bouncing back up again, before finally coming to rest at an awry angle against the puffy couch cushion behind him. Leaving Loki, for all intents and purposes, alone with the spectacle unfolding on the big screen, listening to the soft breaths from only a few feet away occasionally turn into deep snores.

Most of all, he wanted to sneak out and head back to his room, leaving Tony to his own devices, with his mouth hanging half open and one arm slung over the edge of the couch. It was tempting, oh so tempting.

But Tony had ordered him to stay put and watch this sorry excuse for a ‘movie’ and would not be pleased to wake up and find out that his slave had ignored those instructions and strolled off somewhere else.

So he waited impatiently for the movie to end or for Tony to wake up, whichever came first.

As it turned out, the end credits did.

And that’s when he slowly and carefully got up from the couch, careful not to disturb the snoring lump to his right, and on silent feet slipped back to his own room. At least Tony can’t blame him for leaving once the movie was over. He’d issued no specific orders as to Loki’s actions beyond that point.

And since then, he’s been tossing around on his bed, nervously awaiting the sound of Jarvis once more calling on him, to go tend to Tony’s… needs, such as they may be.

That’s what he’d been sure would happen a few hours earlier when Jarvis’ voice rang out from the ceiling, politely informing him that Mr Stark wanted to see him. So he’d ambled out with an icy knot in his stomach, steeling himself for the worst.

But what awaited him was another movie, making him wonder if that’s all the man ever does for amusement, apart from fiddling around with the plethora of technical apparatuses and devices down
in his workshop.

There were none of the expected overtures from Tony’s general direction, which he found confusing, but perhaps the man was still too intoxicated for such.

Perhaps after the movie, then.

But Tony fell asleep in his drunken stupor, and whatever additional plans he had for his slave didn’t come to fruition. Even now, knowing that it’s only a false pretence of security as Tony can call on him anytime he desires, simply being out of Tony’s sight and reach makes him feel marginally safer. A tiny comfort, but that’s about as good as he’s going to get.

There isn’t a relaxing position to be had on the bed tonight; it is as if someone has snuck into his room and stuffed the mattress full with pinecones while he was stuck in front of the screen with the moving pictures. He turns, coming to rest at his side with his back away from the window.

It’s still not comfortable, but at least the light bothers him less that way.
His wrists are chafed raw from desperately pulling at the shackles encircling them, taut chains suspending his arms above his head. The strained position is stretching his ribcage and makes it hard for him to breathe; even though his feet reach down to the floor and offer him some support, his aching shoulder joints still have to take far too much of his body’s weight. His breathing is shallow, and for each intake of air, he can swear he hears his joints creaking in protest.

Still, all that pales to mere nuisances in comparison to the burning agony that is his shredded back. He has no idea for how long this has been going on, it is as if his memory has short-circuited itself, so that he only remembers a long eternity of being strung up here in this place of torment. Like he’s been here forever, single-handedly paying for all the sins ever committed in the nine realms.

However, he knows he can’t have been here for more than, what? An hour? Half an hour? Time and location seem to have lost their meaning; there is only here and now, the past is far too distant to matter and the future reduced to a raging sea of never-ending pain and agony.

His head is slumping; the mere effort of keeping it upright seems like an impossible feat of strength. Strength that is no longer his to claim, strength that is bleeding out from him with the droplets flowing in rivulets over his naked body, staining the floor with awful red.

He tries to swallow, but neither his throat nor his tongue obeys him. Desperately, he wishes for a drink of water, if only a swallow, something to soothe the throat turned raw and hoarse from screaming. But he knows he will be offered nothing, not a single drop, nothing to ease his suffering. He is being punished, and will receive no such boons, nothing to alleviate his anguish.

The whip lashes against his back again – for what time in a row, he has long since lost count. Hasn’t it been forever, though? – and he screams as the leather cuts another stripe across his already abused skin.

For a moment, the pain is all-encompassing, blocking all other thoughts and impressions. His senses black out, and in that instant there is neither sight nor sound, just raw, undiluted agony.

It takes a while before he manages to breathe again, before the world is slowly coming back to him. Before there is once more sight and sound and not only excruciating pain. He’s been hoping he would eventually pass out, that blissful unconsciousness would come to claim him, but so far he has remained painfully awake and aware. Apparently, not even this small mercy will be granted him by the fates.
He can feel the drops of blood slowly making their way across his skin from the cuts criss-crossing his back, ass, and thighs, dripping onto the floor. He wishes he could collapse upon it as well, but he is strung up by the unrelenting chains, kept painfully upright, not given even a moment of rest from his torment.

And it hurts so bad, so awfully. Still, the whip continues to fall, again and again. Each lash taking a small piece of his sanity away, reducing him to a creature without word or thought or mind, just someone controlled by fear and pain and dread. And he only has one wish left – for all this to stop.

But maybe it won’t stop, not now, not ever. Maybe he’ll be strung up here for the rest of a red-tinted eternity, until his mind has left him completely, leaving only a bleeding, broken shell still hanging from those chains like a maddened and shackled beast.

And he knows he won’t be healing anytime soon, the pain won’t begin to subside, even if all this were to stop. He no longer has the powers he once held, the ones that would see to it that his flayed skin would be starting to knit itself up, slowly but steadily removing every trace of the agony he has suffered.

But no such relief will be forthcoming. He’s been reduced to inhabiting the body of a mortal, and made to suffer like one.

Another lash falls, and he cries out in anguish yet again. He managed to stay silent at first, but it soon became too much, and he realized quickly that the screams gave him a small amount of relief, taking a part of the pain with them, dulling the fire burning his skin. However, those reprieves are long gone, small and insignificant as they were. Now, those screams do nothing to ease the pain, if anything they make it even worse, but he is unable to stop them any longer. The tiny remains of pride that kept him stubbornly silent in the beginning was soon shredded to tattered pieces along with his back, and now there is nothing left of it at all.

The whip falls again, making another cry echo between the walls. He never knew pain could feel like this, like a cruel entity nestling within the very core of his being, utterly overpowering, like it has become a part of him. His back has been reduced to a field of fire and blood and pain, and it just hurts so much…

Have his crimes really been so grievous as to be deserving of all this? But it is pointless to ask, because he isn’t in a position to place judgement; no, there is only one man who is. He, who is standing there behind him, holding the handle of that whip, striking at him again and again. And he wonders how long he will have to pay, before that man has decided he has suffered enough and the price has been paid.
With fearful anticipation, he waits for the next lash that he knows is about to come, that will yet again send the flaming agony spiralling into new heights. But the whip doesn’t fall as expected; instead his tormentor languidly steps forward and comes to a halt before him, taking in the sight with a smirk on his lips and a glint of something unpleasant in his eyes. Something that makes his body shudder and then tense.

“You know,” Tony finally says, “‘submissive’ is a good look on you.” His gaze travels across the naked body strung up before him, critically examining it. He then leers. “So is ‘whipped bloody’.”

Loki tries to focus on breathing; a task which should be so simple, but somehow got so much more difficult once the man entered his view. His throat constricts at the sudden closeness, and his chest heaves a few times, as if he’s about to get sick.

Tony’s eyes are cold and calculating, not a trace of pity in them. “Well then. Are you ready to apologize?” There is a pregnant pause, as Tony’s mouth curls slightly. “Or would you rather prefer that we continue?” He flicks the whip in his hand, looking like he’s almost hoping for the latter.

“No…” Loki just barely manages through his chafed throat, hearing full well how pitiful and pathetic he’s sounding, but being far beyond the point of caring. “No. Please…” The word feels foreign and alien in his mouth, but it seems to satisfy Tony nevertheless.

Lifting his hand, the man slowly traces the whip over his chest in lazy lines, leaving red trails over his skin. Loki shivers, though he isn’t sure quite why. Perhaps it’s the pleased and contented look on Tony’s face at seeing his broken enemy beaten bloody by his own hand that causes his body to tremble, or maybe it’s the exhaustion, the pain, or something else entirely.

Then Tony’s hand drops, and his eyes harden.

“You didn’t sound very sorry last time you apologized for throwing me out a window,” he says in a harsh voice that promises further pain and hurt should Loki not live up to the expected standards. “So let’s try it one more time, shall we?”

Loki swallows, for a moment fearful that he won’t be able to get any words out of his abused throat, but his voice obeys, albeit reluctantly. “I’m sorry,” he whispers in a voice that he just barely recognizes as his own. And he really means it, though perhaps not for the reasons that Tony wants.
Tony lets out a distorted mixture of a laugh and a snort. “I have to say, you do sound quite a bit more sincere this time, Reindeer Games,” he mocks, spiteful glee painting his words. He takes a step back, regarding Loki where he’s slumping in his chains. “However, if you really want my forgiveness, you have to earn it.”

With that, the chains are loosened, and Loki unceremoniously falls to his knees on the hard floor, hissing in pain as his arms are suddenly released from the strain.

His hunched posture tugs excruciatingly at his cuts from the whip, and for a moment, the world goes a little blurry around the edges, before once again reverting back to normal. As normal as the world can be in its current state.

From his kneeling position, he is painfully aware of the bulge at the front of Tony’s pants. The man had been erect already when Loki was stripped naked and strung up in shackles and chains, but he has no doubt hardened considerably since.

His stomach churns unpleasantly, and he closes his eyes, trying to block out the disturbing sight, to pretend that it isn’t there in front of him. But not even this small respite will be his, because mere seconds later, a hard slap is stinging his cheek, making his eyes fly open. “Knock it off,” Tony growls above him, clearly not happy with what he obviously considers Loki’s little show of rebellion.

The handle of the whip comes to rest under his chin, tilting his face up so that his eyes meet with Tony’s.

He almost balks as he looks into them and is greeted with a warped and twisted blend of hate and glee and arousal, so intense that he can almost feel the heat radiating from it. “You better make good use of that famous silvertongue of yours or I’ll chain you right back up and we’ll continue where we left off,” he hisses, as if Loki isn’t already aware of what’s expected, what Tony is demanding of him.

And then, Tony unbuckles his pants, unceremoniously letting them fall to the floor. Against better judgement, Loki is overcome by a desire to turn his head away, but there is a pair of strong hands in his hair, firmly locking his head into place. He is far too weak to fight them, would he be stupid enough to try, so instead he merely acquiesces.

The hands are tugging painfully at his hair, as if they’re about to pull out the strands by the roots. However, he doesn’t struggle. He knows better. He has no choice.
No choice.

Tony groans his pleasure as Loki gets to it, and though he is on the brink of gagging, he proceeds as ordered. The unbearable pain in his back urges him on, quelling his burning desire to stop what he’s doing, reminding him what the consequences of refusing will be. The abject humiliation is worse than any he has ever suffered before, even worse than being brought back to Asgard in chains, but he just can’t take another whipping, so he continues.

As Tony forcefully thrusts into his mouth, he futilely tries to pull away from the hands holding his head in a firm grip, but Tony will have none of it, tugging viciously in response. “Already having a hard time coping, princess? Remember, this is just for throwing me out that window,” the man growls at him, voice breathy with lust and victory. “For what you did to New York, forgiveness will come at a higher price.”

The words are still ringing in his ears as he awakes with a startle and a scream, breath ragged in his burning throat and heart beating so hard in his chest that he’s surprised that it hasn’t punched its way out of his body already. For a long time, he just lies there, panting, as his blood is pounding like thunder in his ears, the terrifying dream images swirling like a raging storm in his mind.

Gradually, the dread gives way to overwhelming relief in the realization that it was only a dream – though a terrifying, horrible, far too real nightmare, far worse than anyone he can remember from feverish nights and uneasy slumbers.

Still, the memories are clear and vivid in his mind, and they fill his consciousness, refusing to disappear just yet.

Swallowing, he wonders if his dream is anything similar to what Tony is planning for him. Or will he perhaps do even worse? Once again, the dream-terror rears its ugly head full force, as the dreadful prospects of his future are once more making themselves known.

If he only knew, things might have been slightly easier to deal with.

But he doesn’t. He has no clue what Tony is going to do with him.

And in the end, he can only hope for the best, while dreading the worst.
It takes a long time before sleep claims him again, and when it does, it is fitful and full of nightmarish images, making him toss and turn between the sheets.
He’s standing in the middle of the room, his back still a patchwork of raw agony from the whipping he suffered a few days ago, while Tony is lounging comfortably in a chair, smug and conceited. This time the whip from their previous session has been replaced with a crop that he holds in one hand, smacking one end slowly and deliberately against his open palm as he regards Loki contentedly.

Something – perhaps it’s the man’s posture or the look in his eyes or the aura he’s giving off – suggests that his main intention this time isn’t primarily to inflict pain, though, but rather humiliation.

The crop stops its tapping, and Loki holds his breath.

“Strip,” comes the very much predictable order.

He has no choice, of course, so he lets his clothes fall to the floor. Seeing as how nudity is considered natural in Asgard, it shouldn’t make him feel uncomfortable like this, and yet he finds himself desperately wanting to shirk away from Tony’s gaze feasting upon his naked body.

“Kneel,” is the next word that comes out of Tony’s mouth, also expected.

Again, he obeys. There’s nothing to gain by refusing. And kneeling is certainly nothing he hasn’t done many times already, so it hardly matters anymore.

The third order is not expected, though.

“Crawl over here,” Tony drawls as he beckons Loki with a lazy wave of his fingers. “On your hands and knees.”

He should, but his limbs refuse to obey. Something is holding him back, a tiny shadow of something he can barely recall, but still flickers in the back of his mind.

Yes, that’s right, he used to have pride once. The sudden memory keeps him frozen on the spot, unmoving and motionless as the seconds tick away, agonizingly slow.
Tony narrows his eyes in fury at this show of rebellion. Brusquely standing up, he walks over to Loki and, without speaking a word, brings down the crop over his abused back, making him cry out from the fiery pain suddenly flaring up. Relentlessly, the crop continues to fall, until he has lost count of the strokes raining down on him and the cuts from the far-too recent whipping are opening up again, blood welling up to run down his sides.

And the only thing he can think of as he lies there, consumed by the pain that is growing increasingly unbearable for every strike, is that there is no one to save him, no one who would lift even a finger to help him. He is utterly alone; the world has turned its back on him, indifferent to all his pain and suffering. Again, he wonders if he truly deserves all this. Does anyone deserve this? But it is of no consequence; Tony clearly thinks that he does, and here, his is the only opinion that matters.

When the beating finally stops, he’s lying face down on the floor, gasping for air that seems to have been driven out of his lungs, bitterly regretting his ill-considered disobedience. The pain is every bit as intense as last time, if not worse, making him queasy and nauseous.

Then Tony’s shoes move into view as the man comes to stand before him. He softly smacks his lips, and Loki is sure he’s shaking his head even though he can’t see it from his prone position on the floor.

“I thought you’d have learned by now that being recalcitrant doesn’t pay.” A foot ungently nudges his side, as if he’s a piece of discarded trash found littering the roadside. “So are you going to obey my orders from now on like a good little slave?”

There is only one possible answer to that. “Yes,” he whispers, the word hoarse from his raw throat.

Without warning, the crop comes down hard on his back again, and he screams from the sudden, unexpected pain.

“You forgot something,” he hears Tony’s displeased voice somewhere above him. “Namely your station. And above all, mine.”

What Tony wants from him is all too obvious. And as always, he has no choice but to offer it.

“Master,” he manages, the word like ashes in his mouth.
Tony lets out a satisfied grunt. “Better. Maybe you are learning, after all.” He pauses, and when he speaks again, his voice is several notes harder. “However, if you think this is at all acceptable behaviour, perhaps it’s time I taught you a real lesson. Maybe you’d learn your place more quickly if I handed you over to my Avenger friends so they can take their turns with you as well.”

No, he thinks, stomach turning itself into a knot, but he knows better than to speak the word out loud.

Tony continues, as unperturbed as if he had been talking about the weather. “Natasha would be delighted at the opportunity to have some fun with her knives. She isn’t very happy about you calling her a mewling quim, to say nothing of what you did to her boyfriend. Bruce Banner – or should I say the Hulk – is dearly missing his little plaything. As for Steve Rogers – well, don’t let his good-natured exterior fool you. You don’t want to know what’s lurking beneath that innocent façade. At the end of the day, he’s probably the worst of them.”

A pregnant pause. Then: “And Barton, well, I’m sure the two of you have plenty of lost time to make up for. In fact, they’ve all been asking me to let them spend some time alone with you. Barton, for one, has been particularly adamant in his demands, and I’ve been very tempted to indulge him.”

Loki shudders. Of course, all those Avengers still bearing grudges against him. And he can’t even handle what Tony’s been throwing at him.

The sound of footsteps is telling him that the man is moving away from him and into the direction of the chair. It is a tiny comfort, but certainly all he is going to get.

“So if you won’t appreciate the virtue of obedience, I might just decide to see if one of my friends will be better at teaching it than I am.”

He swallows, though his mouth is dry and there is nothing left to swallow but fear and trepidation.

Then Tony speaks again, voice harsh. “Now. Crawl.”

Yes, he used to have pride once, as difficult as that is to believe. But there’s nothing left of it now, not even a trace, so with an effort that makes his head spin from exhaustion, he pushes himself up from the floor and crawls on his hands and knees, slowly, over to where Tony is sitting, watching in pleased satisfaction.
“Stop there,” he demands when Loki has made it halfway. Loki halts in his tracks, sinking back on his haunches, not sure whether he should be relieved that he is still out of reaching distance from Tony. The man smirks as he looks him over, gaze critically examining the naked body before him.

“No, the pride he used to have is no more, the last shred of it long gone. Ripped out from his being and torn to pieces by the very man staring at him with hate and resentment etched into every line of his features.

Face flushing with shame, he grabs his limp shaft with trembling fingers, stroking his hand along the length. Of course, his ministrations have no effect whatsoever, produces no reaction at all. It’s just his palm kneading at unresponsive skin and tissue, and he can hardly remember being in a more abjectly un-erotic situation than this.

Tony laughs at his pitiful performance. “That’s the best you can do? How pathetic. I expected much better from you, Reindeer Games.” He snorts in spiteful amusement. “Put some effort into it, or I will seriously reconsider Barton’s demands.”

Another heated wave of shame washes over him, but he strokes harder, trying to concentrate. Of course, it’s useless and he doesn’t even get half-hard. So he closes his eyes, trying to shut the world out and bring up recollections of pleasures shared with lovers of the past, but the memories slip away and all that fills his mind is humiliation and fear and utter despair.

Then, there is a strange crackling sound, and when he looks up, Tony is gone. In his stead there is a vile creature crouched on the seat of the chair, a beast born of fire and brimstone, ember eyes gleaming and slobber running from jaws opening to reveal perfect rows of sharp, gleaming teeth. Teeth that want to rip and tear, maim and destroy until there’s nothing left.

It jumps at him, seemingly floating through the air, unbelievably graceful for such an ugly, brutish thing, landing with its front paws on his chest. There is nothing graceful about the impact, however, which feels as if a meteor crashes into him, and he smashes to the ground with angry jaws inches away, snapping at his throat. Just barely, he manages to get an arm up and out from under him to defend himself, trying to grab the snout about to rip his jugular artery in two.

And that’s when the face of the beast flickers, like the air itself boils and shifts around it, and when the strange mirage disappears, what’s left is a creature wearing a face far too familiar for comfort.
The grin is Tony’s too, but the fangs behind the lips are still that of the beast, sharp and pointed. He tries to shift his body away, to get a leg up and gain enough leverage to tip the heavy weight lumbering over him off to the side, but his efforts are futile; the beast weighs far too much and won’t budge.

One paw-like hand comes down hard on the side of his head, making his vision spin from the heavy blow, momentarily dazing him. When he comes to, clawed appendages are raking over his body, leaving deep, bloody scratches, ripping him to shreds.

And he screams, again, and again, as the beast tears away at him, until there’s nothing left to tear apart.

When he wakes up, it is with sweat dripping from every pore of his body, with crinkled sheets entangling his legs, and with a throat raw from screaming.

The dreams from last night won’t leave him alone. They remain stubbornly in the back of his head, like apparitions set on haunting him, refusing to give him even a moment of peace.

And the memory of what Tony had reduced him to in those dreams is still clear and vivid. Would it be possible for the man to do that; could he truly make Loki fall that far? Or a more disturbing question yet – perhaps he’s not very far from already being there?

Again, he’s prowling the tower, not knowing where to go or what to do with himself, but feeling like the beast is still skulking in the shadows, following mere steps behind. And there is no safety to be had from that monster, no place to hide, nowhere to escape. He’s trapped, as surely as had he still been sitting in that dungeon back in Asgard.

The wait is unbearable. Why hasn’t Tony called on him yet? What is he waiting for? Is this a sick, twisted part of the fun, making Loki stew in his own misery as he waits for the inevitable?

He has no answers to any of those questions.
So instead, he wanders, restlessly, in and out of rooms, through hallways and back, in endless circles, to and forth. Perhaps it is an attempt to drop his distressing thoughts off somewhere along the way, but his efforts prove futile; they refuse to be left behind, tearing and ripping at his consciousness with sharp claws and fangs.

He suddenly finds himself in the kitchen, a place he’s been many times before, but only once or twice without Tony present. For some reason, it feels oddly out of place being here alone, so he stops for a moment, briefly halting in his tracks. The area is light and spacious, and might under different circumstances have struck him as relatively pleasant, even relaxing. He takes in the shining chrome, the dark marble, the grey tiles, his eyes sweeping over it all.

Then, they meet with something else entirely, and remain there.

The collection of blank kitchen knives on the kitchen counter.

For a long time, he just stands there, frozen. Something is raging inside of him, and that something is getting louder and more insistent as he’s staring at the sharp utensils. Like it’s telling him to act, to actually do something rather than resigning himself to his miserable, terrible future.

As if someone else is moving his limbs, a shivering hand suddenly reaches out, fingers closing around one of the handles, slowly pulling the knife out from its holder.

It’s heavy in his grip, not anything like the light throwing knifes he’s more used to handling. The blade glints as light strikes it. Sharp. Blank. Metallic. He turns it around, weighing it, the handle smooth in his palm.

Yes, there is always that option.

After everything that has happened, after everything he has gone through and put up with, it would be such a failure to resort to this. To end by his own hand. It would be disgraceful and shameful… but certainly no worse than what he will have to face as Tony’s slave.

It would be quick, at least, and involve relatively little pain. Perhaps he should have chosen this option back at his trial instead. It would have been so much easier, rather than suffering through this drawn-out process with no end in sight, with no hopes for improvement, just an endless string of debasement and pain and even more horrible things to come.
Slowly, he lifts the knife, placing it against his own wrist. The steel is cold against his skin, but oddly comforting nonetheless. It could offer him a way out of all this. The only way out.

The chill of the blade is almost burning him, and he wonders if he’d ever be able to go through with such a thing. Could he? Does he even want to?

He imagines being Tony’s bed slave, enduring year after year of long suffering, of being used in all possible ways. How long would he be able to put up with that? Would he eventually go numb and not care anymore? Or would each time still remain as awful as the first?

Perhaps he’d be better off acting now, before Tony finally decides to claim him, but something is holding him back. Because he doesn’t really want to die, he still wants to live… just not like this.

He looks at the knife in his hand, the sharp, alluring blade. Just one flick of his wrist, and it would be over. So easy. All so easy.

But…

No, he decides. Not today.

Still, he doesn’t remove the knife just yet. Its presence is too perversely comforting, ensuring him that the option is still there. So he lets it remain against his skin, trying to draw some tiny vestige of safety and strength from its chilly touch.

The screen is bleeping dully, informing him that the final round of tests for his new prototype suit is finished.

About time.

He plonks himself down before the monitor, scrolling through the last few lines of text. No problems so far. Good. Then he can get around to--
“Mr Stark?” Jarvis voice is suddenly cutting through the silence. “I think I should report to you that Mr Laufeyson is in the kitchen and has just pulled out one of your knives.”

Tony’s hand freezes mid-air just as he is about to press the return button on his keyboard.

And suddenly, there are a million thoughts going through his head. Most of them containing the word fuck. And not the good kind.

So Loki has finally gone off his rocker and is about to go on a murderous rampage. And why the hell didn’t he put a shock collar on him after last time when he still had the chance? He should have known better, of course the lunatic was going to flip out again. He should suit up, and--

“What’s he doing, Jarvis? Where is he now?” he asks, in a state of half-panic.

And he could have imagined any number of answers to that, but not the one that Jarvis gives him.

“He’s still in the kitchen, sir. I’d say from the looks of it, it seems like he is contemplating slitting his own wrists.”

And Tony stops in his tracks on his way to snag his bracelets, freezing like a deer in headlights.

What the hell?
Chapter 21

The cold steel against his skin is cold no longer, having rested against his wrist for so long that it has acquired the temperature of his own body. Still, he is loath to withdraw it, removing himself from this flimsy reassurance of security the blade offers him. At least with the knife in hand, he still has an option, as opposed to being a powerless victim, time after time again.

Yes, he has a choice, for once. One that he is free to make, should his situation call for it.

He should have heard the quick footsteps approaching, of course, but he is too deeply absorbed in the alluring glint of the steel to notice much else. At this point, there is only him and the sharp knife in his hand. Until the two of them are suddenly joined by the sound of a well-known voice somewhere behind him, anger and rage simmering below the surface.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

Tony.

The knife in his hand falls to the floor, falling from suddenly drained and lifeless fingers, clattering dully against the marble tiles.

Reflexively, he spins around, finding himself face to face with the owner of that voice, who is looking at him which such vehemence that he immediately takes a step back, only to have the kitchen counter slam into his back, effectively stopping his retreat.

His hands grip the marble behind him for support as a sharp flash of fear slashes inside of him at the realization that Tony has just caught him red-handed holding a knife to his own wrist. And he knows full well that it is strictly and expressively forbidden for slaves to make any attempts at their own lives, to make violence on their masters’ property. It is considered a serious offence and is punished accordingly. Brutally.

He silently curses his own stupidity. After all his time here, how could he forget that Jarvis would notice what he was doing, and report it back to Tony? Why couldn’t he have stopped to think before pulling that knife out of its holder? He shouldn’t have done that if he hadn’t been ready and willing to make use of it.
The feeling of his stomach falling is sickening. He knows that this tiny sliver of comfort that was his for a few precious moments will be taken away from him now, the knives and anything similarly sharp will be placed out of his reach, where he can’t get to them. The only other alternative he had will be gone, and Jarvis no doubt told to be on extra alert for any similar future attempts.

Not only that, but to add insult to injury he now has another mark on the list of things that he will be punished for, either before or after Tony’s had his fun with him.

And if there is one thing he didn’t need, it was for that list to grow even longer.

Tony is only standing there, silent and unmoving, staring at him. Perhaps he’s waiting for an explanation, or perhaps for his slave to throw himself at his feet and beg. But Loki does neither. Because neither would make any difference, he is certain.

Then, rather than dishing out any immediate punishment, Tony brusquely points to one of the kitchen chairs. “Sit. The. Fuck. Down,” he growls rather than speaks.

Loki obeys without a word, glad his legs are still steady, and then watches as the man pours himself a glass of brandy and downs it in one big gulp. And then another, after which he slams the bottle down on the counter with unnecessary force.

Then he turns back to Loki, coming to a halt before him.

“Allright, princess,” he says, his accusing stare fixed on Loki. “Now I want you to tell me exactly what the hell you were doing with that knife?”

Panic bubbling up inside of him, he gropes around for an answer, finding none that is even remotely satisfactory. Of course, there are no acceptable replies, there is no way he’ll be able to explain this away, Silvertongue or not. What reasons are there for anyone to be standing around with a knife to one’s wrist other than the obvious?

“I wasn’t about to do it,” he finally blurts out, and it’s only half a lie. Not now, at least, he wasn’t. Even he can hear how weak and feeble the excuse sounds, and it is certainly not going to do anything to placate Tony.

He clenches his fists, nails digging into his palms; Tony is obviously furious at his slave for having
committed yet another serious offence. Once again, Loki has just managed to make things even worse for himself, to dig his hole even deeper.

And this time he didn’t even actually do anything.

The drink is still burning in the back of his throat and he itches to down the next one in one big gulp too, but he resists the temptation. Something is telling him that too much alcohol right now wouldn’t be a good thing, even if a glass or two would surely only improve the situation.

He just can’t believe this whole fucking mess that’s unfolding in front of him. Loki was contemplating offing himself? Regardless of whether he was planning on actually going through with it or not, there was no doubt that he’d been at least considering it. Why else would that knife have been in his hand when Tony rushed in here, blade resting at the thin pale skin of his wrist?

There is no other explanation, and he doubts that even Loki will be able to offer him one.

And he can’t understand why, because he sure can’t remember treating Loki that badly. He’s provided him with proper food, clothing, a bed to sleep in, even let the god read his books to pass the time. Not that Tony has ever made a field-trip to the dungeons in Asgard, but he’s certain that the living arrangements offered here are infinitely better than what the god had in his cell back home. And heck, it’s certainly a lot better than the conditions that normal convicts in this country are living in as well, so the god is hardly in a position to complain, prince or not.

No… it can’t be that. There must be something else that has driven the god to contemplate such an act of desperation. He gets a sneaking suspicion that he’s missing an important part of the puzzle somewhere, a lost piece that he’s struggling to find, but it keeps evading him. Because from where he is standing, things just aren’t making any sense. This is not like Loki, not like him at all. The god was always so smug and self-satisfied, like he believed himself the greatest thing since sliced boar, like the ground was unworthy of bearing his weight, always looking down on everyone else. Sure he’s been taken down a few hundred notches since his defeat in New York, but he is still Loki. Arrogant. Conceited. Superior. Not someone who would end his own life over… whatever it is that has been festering inside of his mind.

And despite his shocked confusion at this turn of events, he’s angry. Angry that someone should even consider such a thing here in his very tower. That anyone would stoop to such a pointless, senseless, utterly irrevocable act, even if that someone is Loki. There mere thought is revolting and
appalling in its meaninglessness.

‘I wasn’t about to do it,’ the god had said.

Yet another lie? There is no way for him to tell. Maybe it’s the truth, maybe it’s not.

And there’s only one thing he can do right now, as much as he doesn’t want to go there. But he has to get to the bottom of this, find out what prompted this shit. He might not like it, but he has a responsibility, despite never wanting it in the first place, and it’s up to him to deal with the fall-out.

One thing is certain though. No one is going to kill themselves on his watch, demented super-villainous god or not.

“Really,” he says, not even bothering trying to hide the stark disbelief in his voice. “Then what was that knife doing in your hand? Were you perhaps about to make a salad? Or practice Chinese paper cutting? Huh?”

Loki swallows. And instead of answering, he just sits there, brooding, like the weight of the world has been deposited on his shoulders, staring at a spot on the floor. So very un-haughtily. Un-cockily. Un-arrogantly. Un-Loki-ly.

Tony slams his fist on the table, making the god jump in surprise. “I said, what the fuck were you doing with that knife back there?”

Loki is still quiet. He twists uncomfortably as his mouth tightens.

Tony refuses to relent, “Speak up,” he pushes, refusing to accept Loki’s stubborn silence. “What led you to even consider this?”

Loki looks like he’s on the verge of saying something, but his half-open lips then snap shut before even a single word has left his mouth.

This clearly isn’t leading anywhere. Perhaps he should try another angle.
And he isn’t a therapist, not even close to it. In fact, he is utterly abysmal at most forms of interpersonal communication not involving sarcastic banter or technological information exchange. But he can’t back off, as much as he might want to. For a moment, he wishes Bruce were here; that guy would have known how to deal with a fucked-up situation like this, despite his shy and quiet demeanour. But he’s not, so Tony has to handle this on his own.

So he turns to the only comfort he can find, the glass in his hand, taking another sip, and then leans back against the kitchen counter as he fixes Loki with an unwavering glare. “You know, it hasn’t exactly slipped my notice how you seem to have taken a deep dive head first into the land of eternal doom and gloom lately without bringing a return ticket. Mind telling me what prompted that?”

There is only silence. An oh-so-long silence.

No, he isn’t a therapist. Of course his efforts will only be met with stubborn silence. And what the hell is he going to do if Loki won’t deign him with an answer? He can’t leave things as they are, not if he doesn’t want to risk tripping over a lifeless body next time he steps over a doorsill.

His mind is swirling. Usually, you admit suicidal people to special facilities or at least have them see some kind of mental health consultant, or whatever fancy name shrinks go by today, but he can’t do that with Loki.

Yeah, I have a suicidal demented alien god who tried to take over the planet a while ago and he needs some help. That’d go over swell. SHIELD would swoop down in a matter of minutes, and make Loki regret not having cut his wrists when he still had the chance. And Tony would get a visit from Erik and his little team of sword-wielding berserkers, demanding to know why Loki is no longer in his care, as decreed by Allfather Almighty.

Come on, give me an answer, any answer, just something to work with, he silently urges the clammed-up god.

Then, as if on command, Loki looks up to face him, green eyes boring into his.

“When do you intend to claim your rights to bed me?”

The glass in Tony’s hand falls to the floor and breaks into a thousand pieces.
Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

Just to avoid any possible confusion – when we start this chapter, the rewind button has been pushed to make a little jump back in time, so that the last scene from the previous chapter can be retold from Loki’s point of view.

“Really,” Tony says, obviously not buying his feeble excuse for even a second. “Then what was that knife doing in your hand? Were you perhaps about to make a salad? Or practice Chinese paper cutting? Huh?”

He has no answer to offer. None that matters, anyway. He swallows, willing the man away. Though, making people disappear into thin air was something he could never do, not even with his magic still intact. And certainly mere wishful thinking isn’t going to accomplish miracles of that magnitude.

Without warning, Tony’s fist slams down hard on the tabletop, and Loki jumps, startled. “I said, what the fuck were you doing with that knife back there?” the man demands, impatient and annoyed.

I was just revelling in having an alternative to submitting to you.

It would be the truth. But he can’t say that, of course.

“Speak up,” the man insists, refusing to take his silence for an answer. “What led you to even consider this?”

Loki almost laughs at that. It would have been a bitter, self-deprecating laugh, ringing hollowly and mirthlessly. What led you to even consider this?

Is Tony being serious? Does he really expect and want Loki to offer an honest answer to that question?

Because I can’t wait for you to make me your toy, to turn me into your little plaything.
And there is one question he is itching to ask Tony in return.

*What on Odin’s beard is it that you’re waiting for?*

But he holds his tongue, and dully watches a greyish stain on the floor instead.

The man takes another sip from his glass, and then nonchalantly leans back against the marble counter. “You know, it hasn’t exactly slipped my notice how you’ve taken a deep dive head first into the land of eternal doom and gloom lately without bringing a return ticket. Mind telling me what prompted that?”

Loki wrinkles his eyebrows. It is an odd question to ask, and he isn’t sure what Tony is playing at. Perhaps another one of his games, then, daring his slave to speak the truth so that he can then punish him for speaking out of turn.

And of course, he could say something else, make up whatever, give a non-committal answer. He’s Loki the Liesmith, Loki the Silvertongue and all those other things they give him credit for. He could think up an appropriate answer to Tony’s question that might not add another mark on his already long list of offences-to-be-punished-for.

Or he could opt for the truth. What does he have to lose? What is the worst Tony would do that the man hasn’t already planned for him?

And that’s when he decides that he’s had enough. Asking is surely better than this terrible state of not-knowing, of constant, mind-numbing worrying and wondering and waiting.

So Loki looks up to face the man leaning against the kitchen counter, meeting with a pair of unrelenting brown eyes.

“When do you intend to claim your rights to bed me?” he asks as Tony takes another deep swallow from his glass, a strange sense of relief washing over him now that the question is out. If the answer is going to be *here and now*, then so be it, at least he won’t have to walk around with this crushing weight of uncertainty on his shoulders anymore.

For a while, Loki wonders if Tony might be choking on that last gulp of alcohol, as he stands there frozen with eyes gone wide and mouth half-open in what looks like shocked agony, seemingly
unable to get a word out.

Then the stillness is shattered by the crash of a glass falling to the ground, shards and liquid spraying all over the floor.

And Tony sounds and looks like he’s still choking and gasping for air several long moments later when it appears he has gathered enough words to speak.

“What the heck did you just say?”

Yes, it was an inappropriate and ill-considered question, one he wasn’t supposed to be asking and will most likely end up getting punished for. Slaves aren’t entitled to request explanations from their masters, after all.

Still, he repeats himself. The question is already out, what harm can it do to speak it out into the open once more? He’s already going to be punished for so many things that it makes little difference now.

“I was asking when you will finally claim your rights to bed me?” It’s surprising that his voice can sound so calm and collected, in sharp contrast to what is simmering in the pit of his stomach – revulsion, disgust, and fe--. No, he futilely tries to assure himself, not fear. Revulsion and disgust.

However, instead of showing anger at the obviously improper question, Tony takes one – no, two – steps away from him, holding up his hands, palms facing out, eyes wide as saucers.

“Ookay, now, let’s just hold our horses here for a sec. Time-out. Time-out.” The last word is shouted rather than spoken as he makes slashing, horizontal movements with his hands. From where Loki is sitting, it almost looks as if a slight blush is creeping up Tony’s cheeks, but that must surely be a trick of the fluorescent light the man is standing directly beneath.

Then, Tony seems to slump, and draws a deep breath and runs a hand over his mouth, sounding like he’s mumbling something to himself, but the words are too muffled for Loki to hear. He then proceeds to say something in a more audible tone of voice, but apparently thinks better of it, as he cuts himself off before more than a few syllables are out. Finally, he expels a heavy sigh and then makes a new and more successful attempt at speaking.

“Now, I’m not familiar with Asgardian vernacular slang, but please tell me that ‘bedding someone’
has an entirely different meaning over where you come from. As in, not meaning *sex*. As in, not having anything whatsoever to do with the whole ‘insert tab A into slot B’ kind of thing,” Tony all but blurs out, looking like he’s just swallowed something bitter and unpleasant, something that he would just rather have spit out again.

Loki knits his brow in confusion. What else would he be talking about? Is Tony playing with him, making some sort of mockery out of him again?

The man doesn’t wait for him to answer, though. Instead, he runs a hand through his messy hair, forcefully, like he’s trying to rub away something sticky clinging to his scalp, and then continues to talk. Or, rather, sputter, as his face turns into a pained grimace.

“You actually thought I would…” he begins and then inhales deeply, strangely unsteady as if the floor under his feet is giving way under him. “Jesus Christ. That is so not gonna happen! Seriously, Rudolph, do I look like someone who enjoys sticking my finer body parts into places where they’re not welcome?” There’s a clear note of agitation in that voice, though it sounds like Tony is trying to fight it down, to remain cool and dispassionate but failing miserably. Finally, it appears he has given up and raises both his voice and his head as if he’s no longer talking to Loki but to the heavens above, palms held upwards in an appealing fashion. “Sheesh! Just what on god’s green Earth made you think I would ever do such a thing?”

Loki blinks a couple of times, trying to make sense of what Tony is saying, make it align with his notions of how his situation here in Stark Tower will inevitably play itself out, but it’s like putting together a jigsaw puzzle filled with mismatched pieces. It just doesn't fit together.

Somehow, he’s not so sure of things anymore.

But he wasn’t mistaken about one thing. And as Tony stares at him, expecting him to say something, he latches onto that.

“You seemed… interested enough that day I gave you a foot massage.”

“For crying out loud, if you haven’t noticed, I’m a *man*!” There is agitated exasperation in Tony’s voice, though Loki isn’t sure exactly what has prompted it. “Perhaps you gods have such perfect control over your bodies that you don’t ever get yourselves into situations like that, but I can assure you that we Midgardian males work on a totally different level. And that sort of thing happens to us in the supermarket check-out, at dinner with the in-laws, in the shower at the gym, everywhere! Some of us can hardly stand in the way of a gust of wind without it happening. Point is, it means nothing!”
It’s like tipping a jar upside down and then putting it back upright again with the contents all dishevelled and rearranged. Now Tony’s words have similarly tipped the world too, and Loki’s still trying to make sense out of this new arrangement that is the result.

So he asks carefully, because he’s not sure he can stomach it if it turns out that he has misunderstood and he receives the wrong answer.

“You… do not desire to bed me, then?” The question hangs in the air for a few seconds, teetering precariously like a raindrop on the tip of a leaf. Resolutely, he smothers the tiny, desperate flicker of hope threatening to well up; it is surely better to snuff it out now than having it extinguished completely a moment later.

Tony sighs as he leans heavily against the dark marble of the kitchen counter, shaking his head in consternation while making a grimace. “Look, princess, in case it hasn’t occurred to you, I’m Tony Stark – billionaire, genius, playboy, philanthropist, the freaking IronMan. Even one of those things would be enough to have more than my fair share of girls at any decent party blinking their eyelashes at me and clinging to my arm like superglue. Combine all of them, and that means more suitors than I can fend off with a pointy stick. I assure you, I have enough willing potential partners fawning at me. I don’t need any unwilling ones.” He fixes Loki with an inscrutable stare. “Besides, we have a word for that sort of thing here on planet Earth. And people who do that go to jail.”

And somehow, Loki gets the bizarre feeling of being suddenly able to breath properly again, despite never previously having noticed any respiratory ailments. Like there’s been a huge weight dragging him down that has now been magically lifted from his shoulders.

Then there’s a long silence, and Loki dares a quick look into Tony’s eyes and almost balks at what he sees.

There’s no hate, anger, or disdain, or any of the other emotions that ought to be there.

In fact, there is only one thing.

Pity.
Okay, so that was without a doubt one of the most embarrassing and uncomfortable conversations he remembers having in his forty-something years of life. *Ever*. Even worse than the talk – or lecture – his father had given him after that one time in second grade when Tony’s teacher caught him pissing in the gym bag of one of his jerk extraordinaire classmates (who totally deserved it).

He eyes the tools and various devices strewn across the scratched surface of his workbench; perhaps he should get the jumbled heaps sorted out. Some of the tools are even out of order, but he’s never bothered to sort the non-functional apparatuses out from the still useful ones, relying on his memory to tell him which ones work or not.

He grabs one of the most often-used pieces of the disorganized equipment. It’s an arc welder; he even built one of his first suits using this tool. Slowly, he turns it around in his grasp, letting his palm slide across a handle smooth but dirty from frequent use, remembering the early days he spent in his workshop welding and hammering, soldering and fitting sleek sheets of metal together. And even though he hasn’t forgotten how that particular time came with its own share of issues, just like all periods of his life seem wont to do, in hindsight they seem like luxuriously problem-free days.

Because back then, he didn’t have a god-turned-slave lounging around in his tower like an unwanted pet. Whom he, Tony, has the hots for, like he’s an at-puberty’s-threshold schoolboy lusting after the pretty, popular girl a few years his elder living right across the street.

To make matters even worse, the object of his attraction knows all about it. And Tony, always the suave and the self-confident, can’t help but feeling like a total idiot that his desire was so obvious. Like a neon sign on freaking Broadway, with a blinking arrow pointing right at him. *That’s him alright, the sex-crazed pervert, lookie here, everyone.*

Groaning, he runs a dirty, greasy hand through his hair, not caring about the grimy smears of oil his fingers are leaving behind. It will wash out. He can just go upstairs and have a shower, and oh yeah, why doesn’t he jerk himself off to the image of a naked Norse god too while he’s at it, huh, just for good measure?

*Ugh.* And here he thought that he had been discrete, acting all prim and proper around the god. But of course, there was that one little *indiscretion* (as in, a raging hard-on) thwarting his plans, and Loki had noticed, drawing his own conclusions about how things were about to play themselves out.

Simply thinking about it makes that flush starting to creep up his cheeks again. Annoyed, he snatches the welding mask hanging on the wall, accidentally bumping it into some other equipment that falls
to the floor with a loud clang, but he ignores it and places the protective gear over his head, fastening the straps securely in place. The murky, metallic smell has a certain familiarity to it that usually calms his nerves like oil poured onto stormy waters. He’s spent countless of hours behind this well-worn mask, immersing himself in his work when the outside world has become too much for him to deal with.

The glow of the arc welder takes up most of his field of vision as he turns it on, and despite his heavy gear, he can still sense some of the heat protruding from the white-hot flame only a foot away from his masked face.

So he sets to work on the half-finished pieces of metal left from the last session, bursts of embers spraying over his workbench as he fits two sharp edges together. The hard metal melts, yielding to the relentless onslaught of laser-sharp heat.

Usually, this kind of focused precision work would help take his mind of things, but today the little self-therapy session doesn’t seem to be working very effectively. His mind keeps drifting back to the conversation from an hour ago, the look that Loki was giving him, the fear and worry in his eyes.

No wonder Loki has been avoiding him for the last few days. He still can’t quite fathom that the god actually expected him to--

And then, Tony realises that he really has no idea of how things work back in Asgard. Sure Thor has given long-winded monologues about the marvels that are the realm of the Aesir, but those have all been tales filled to the brim with glorious battles and lavish feasts, of high adventure and magic and unearthly wonders. He’s never said much about the darker, the less pleasant sides of Asgardian society. Such as slavery, or the punishment of their criminals.

Somehow, Tony feels that such a highly developed race as the Aesir should have other ways to handle these things.

The arc welder is sending showers of glittering sparks around him, as if he’s getting his own little private firework display right here in his workshop. The two pieces of metal on the workbench have reluctantly melted into one, and Tony turns the arc welder off, leaving the still hot steel plate on the bench to cool off.

His face feels flushed as he removes the mask, and it’s not just because of the heat from the welder flame or from being enclosed in the stuffy headgear. No, it’s that unpleasant feeling of shame, something he rarely feels, mixed in with a fair helping of awkward discomfort.
So he’d be the first one to admit (well, to himself, anyway) that he’s spent more than one evening by himself wondering what it would be like to have that lean, muscular body writhing under his in ecstasy, hear that haughty but cultured voice moan his name, watch the fine-chiselled face contort with pleasure. But those were private fantasies, and he was certain they’d remain just that.

But now, Loki has called him out on it. He’s read Tony like an open book, exposed his desire like it was the most evident thing in the world, clear for anyone with half an eye to see.

That’s bad enough in itself, of course, but he could probably have lived with that. What makes this whole matter a tenfold worse, however, what is for all intents and purposes a jug of table salt poured into an open wound, is that Loki expected him to act on those desires using force.

And what makes it a hundredfold worse – those expectations had driven Loki to a point where he was considering putting an end to everything. There is a chill in his bones at the thought; what if it had gotten that far? What if Loki had actually cut his wrists open and bled out before Tony could stop it? Of course, then he would never have found out the reason for it, but still… even if Loki is a war criminal and a whole bunch of other things, the idea that he might have killed himself over his misguided expectations of what Tony was going to do to him is just too disturbing to even contemplate.

*Has anyone ever thought so low of him?* Sure, Tony Stark might be many things – self-absorbed, narcissistic, reckless, self-destructive, borderline alcoholic, lewd and lascivious, to mention a few things most often cited to his detriment – but he sure as heck isn’t a fucking rapist.

The whole thing is just on a whole special level of wrong, the magnitude of which he has never encountered before. More wrong than ketchup on ice cream, a swastika adorning the Capsicle’s shield, or going an entire week without alcohol.

He imagines, for what time around he isn’t sure, his hand sliding under Loki’s faded T-shirt, trailing across the abs, up to his chest, smooth skin against his palm, feeling the just barely discernible flutter of a speeding heart. His groin twitches at the mental image, and he feels a sharp sting of guilt. It’s wrong and inappropriate, in every sense of the word. The guy he’s mentally drooling over expected him to fucking rape him. Though he didn’t use those exact words, but the essence was still the same.

*Is that what happens to slaves in Asgard?* True, Loki had mentioned something about bed slaves, but he hadn’t really reflected much further on the subject, but sort of relegated it to the back of his mind. In hindsight, it was stupid and thoughtless of him to have done so, even if he had had no idea then of the consequences that would follow. Not even in his wildest dream would he ever have thought that Loki would have expected such things from him. Perhaps he should have considered that notion, but
it never even entered his mind, and because of his failure to at all entertain how things might be done in Asgard, he’d led someone to believe he would take advantage and abuse him in the worst possible ways.

Somehow, the glorious gilded halls that Thor has spoken so lovingly and appreciatively of seem like they have lost their shiny sparkle in the sinister shadows cast by recent events. And Odin, the ruler of these halls, willingly sentenced his son – adopted or not – to such a fate, rather than simply having him imprisoned or whatever it is that usually happens to Asgardian criminals?

And here Tony thought that the universe gave him a shitty dad.

His fingers absent-mindedly play around with a fastener lying forlorn and forgotten on the bench, trying to make the little piece of metal spin on its own axis like a top. But the thing is uncooperative and slips against the surface, skidding away over the edge and falls to the floor with a soft clang. He doesn’t bend down to pick it up.

The look in Loki’s eyes as he asked Tony his one-million dollar question still haunts him, like a stubborn ghost refusing to leave him alone. A volatile mixture of despair and disgust, incongruously coupled with weary resignation. And there was definitely fear in there, too, though Tony could see the god doing his best to hide it.

And no, he does not relish the idea of having to stand face to face with the god again, though he knows that he has no choice in the matter. Loki is unfortunately his house guest for an indeterminate future, so he can’t go around sneaking behind corners and tripping on his toes hoping to avoid the guy. The whole situation is just fucked up, and on so many levels it’s not even funny. And he’s not even sure what’s the worst part – how Odin is pinning for a ‘worst dad of the year’ award, his own messed-up fantasies of having his way with the green-eyed god in his charge, Loki knowing about Tony getting hard for him, being pegged for a rapist, his indiscretions having driven the god to considering offing himself – or the look he’d seen in Loki’s haggard eyes.

That… look.

And remembering that look, that’s when Tony comes to a decision – that despite everything, Loki has been punished enough.

It’s no fun beating on someone who has already been pummelled into the ground.
Once more, he sits there on the window sill, one leg restlessly dangling, the other drawn up to his knees. He wonders if the sky has always been this blue or if it just looks like it from up here. He never recalls paying much attention to it in the past, before his freedom got taken away. Perhaps it’s always looked like this, and he just doesn’t remember.

Perhaps it doesn’t matter.

He itches to go outside. But that’s not possible, of course, He is to remain here in this cage of glass and steel, locked away from the rest of the world. The world he tried to conquer, lay under his feet. No, there’s no way that Tony would ever let him venture outside of these walls, and why should he?

Tony.

The words the man spoke earlier are still vivid in his mind, as is the pity he saw pooling in those dark eyes. The sort of look reserved for weak, deplorable creatures not worthy of godly or even human dignity. Loki doesn’t want pity, he never did.

Though, he supposes it’s still preferable to certain other things.

But the previous sense of heady relief is still lingering, as if his body is floating rather than being the usual lump of mortal flesh and bone that he has slowly started to grow accustomed to. So it would seem that Tony has no intention of bedding him then, of claiming the rights that always come with the ownership of a slave.

The threat that has been hanging over him for so long, making him nauseous with dread, is gone, dispelled like childhood’s imagined monsters with the break of dawn. And all it took was a few words from Tony, a reassurance he’d never dreamed he would be getting. Because, what reason would there be for that?

Of course, there are still all those punishments waiting, but perhaps he can deal with them as long as he knows that this won’t be coming.

No, whatever awaits him here, whatever is still to come, at least it won’t be that.
It came fully unexpectedly, from out of left field while he was standing in the far right corner looking somewhere else entirely. And it made little sense, because what else use would he be to Tony? The man already has his computers and fancy technology to take care of most menial tasks usually handled by slaves in Asgard, so he doesn’t need Loki for that. But it would have been the perfect opportunity for revenge, for personal gratification and satisfaction – and yet Tony has decided to pass up on it for his own inexplicable reasons.

Perhaps it’s some kind of odd Midgardian sentiment, maybe it’s something else. He doesn’t know, but it doesn’t matter. No reason or explanation is necessary, as long as he won’t have to fear being turned into Tony’s bed slave.

The man is confusing, a strange enigma. Especially since there is one detail that Loki did take note of.

Tony never denied wanting to bed him.
The mouthful of Cheerios is growing in size for every time he chews, and it is only with a heroic effort he manages to swallow it down. Tony is sitting across the table, sipping from a steaming cup of coffee, not speaking a word.

The silence is making sharp prickles of anxiety sting all over Loki’s skin. Because normally, Tony is never quiet. He talks, all the time, constantly unleashing his well-filled arsenal of sarcastic wit upon his surroundings. No matter what, the man quips, mocks, jests, remarks, jabs. But he’s never quiet.

Expect now, he is.

It’s so uncharacteristic, and it surely can’t be a good sign.

Perhaps Tony is angry. Maybe even for something that he did. He sincerely hopes that’s not the case, though his brain is working full-speed trying to remember if he has done anything today that could have prompted such a reaction. Or not done something that Tony thinks he should have.

Nothing particular comes up, though.

There still hasn’t been any punishment meted out for his previous actions, and he wonders whether it’s a good or a bad thing that Tony is biding his time. He tries to tell himself that he should be happy about that, because the longer it takes, the more likely it is that the man’s anger and resentment have cooled down. Or, if he’s unlucky, the wait will only serve to make that anger and resentment fester even more.

He doesn’t know which alternative is closest to the truth, and he wishes he were better at reading Tony. Or that Tony were better at voicing what he’s expecting from Loki. Slave masters on Asgard tend to be very vocal when it comes to giving their slaves orders, making it abundantly clear what they expect them to do and how to act and what the consequences of disobedience are. But Tony hasn’t been much like that, instead seeming to assume that Loki will know what’s expected and act accordingly.

And he really doesn’t. He’s too unfamiliar with Midgardian standards, praxis and customs for that.

So perhaps he’s just crossed an invisible line, disregarded an unspoken order or something of the
sort. Perhaps Tony is waiting for him to realize his mistake on his own, slowly growing even more annoyed for every minute that Loki is giving no signs of being aware of his wrongdoings.

No, he has no idea, and it’s just feeding his anxiety even more.

Okay, so this easily counts as one of the top three most awkward breakfasts he’s ever had. After all, it only happens once in a blue moon that he is at a total loss for what to say.

And frankly, what do you say to someone who expected you to rape them?

He can’t think of anything appropriate that won’t come off as pointless and borderline idiotic, so instead he sips his coffee in silence, the only other sound apart from his soft slurping being the clangs of Loki’s spoon every now and then scraping against the bowl of Cheerios.

And there’s one uncomfortable thought that has been starting to intrude in his head, namely the realization that Loki is probably going to be here for the duration, much as he has tried not to think in those terms.

And that in turn brings up the question of what the hell he is going to actually do with him? There’s just no acceptable solution to the problem, much as he tries to turn the issue around in his head as if it were a Rubik’s cube that could be solved with a few tweaks and twists. A puzzle possible to work out with logic alone, not one imbued with all kinds of emotions and everyday practicalities and undesirable implications and god knows what other crap.

How could that high and mighty Council of Very Important People back in Asgard expect that he would be able to deal with all this? Do they even understand what mess they’re making of his life? Do they even care?

How could anyone have thought it a good idea to hand Loki over to him as his slave, to dump this responsibility onto him of all people? He’s not a responsible person, and never claimed to be one. Hell, he can barely handle himself, much less a god of mischief turned slave.

And Loki’s expectations… ugh. That’s the worst part of it all; the most fucked up thing of this extremely fucked up situation.
“You know, I never actually wanted you here,” he hears his own voice saying, punctuating the silence with the superfluous comment that he just had to make. There are a few heartbeats of silence as Loki’s spoon stops scraping against the bowl. Perhaps it’s the wrong thing to say, but a part of him is desperate to point out that this situation is none of his doing, he isn’t responsible for this shit.

Or perhaps it’s a way of trying to alleviate his own guilt for what his actions, no matter how unwittingly, brought Loki to believe and perhaps almost do.

Loki says nothing, and for that Tony is half-grateful, half-exasperated.

Loki’s fingers tighten around the spoon at Tony’s comment, as he stares at the round things floating in the milk in his bowl. So that’s what must have caused the man’s current foul disposition, then – being forced to put up with a slave he doesn’t actually want.

So in the end, it is Loki that has managed to put Tony into his bad mood, no matter how inadvertently and barring the fact that this tower is one of the last places he would want to be if he had even the slightest say in his own destiny.

He hopes that Tony isn’t going to blame him, or take his frustrations out on the slave that, when all is said and done, is the root cause of the problem.

But there is no one else here, of course. All the Aesir who had any influence in his sentencing are far away in another realm, and only Loki is here to answer to any accusations Tony might have in that regard.

Perhaps he will suffer for that too, either now or later. He grimaces. Being a slave is certainly bad enough, but being an unwanted slave is bound to be even worse. Particularly if Tony is going to hold him responsible for it.

And of course, in a way he is responsible. If it hadn’t been for his actions in New York, he wouldn’t have been here in the first place. It makes perfect sense that Tony is going to blame him for that. Furtively, he lifts his gaze from the bowl to briefly glance at Tony, searching for signs that the brewing anger is about to transform itself into sudden violence, but the man’s self-control seems intact for now.
Just to be safe, he decides to discreetly keep an eye on Tony, in case a fist should suddenly come flying his way.

The distrust in Loki’s face is all too obvious as the god glares at him across the table with suspicion written into every line of his features.

Then again, Tony can’t really blame him after what he made Loki think with his inappropriate reactions during that ill-fated foot massage. No wonder the god is sporting that sullen, accusing look, like Tony is a lesser form of being.

He probably deserves it too, for being such an idiot, lacking even the most basic sense of self-control and good judgement.

And he can’t help but think that perhaps he should say something more regarding that, but what is there to say, really?

Somehow, he gets the feeling that Loki isn’t interested in breaching the subject further any more than Tony is. And frankly, what good will it do bringing the topic up for conversation again? He’s already made it clear to the god that his dreadful misgivings weren’t going to happen in a million years, and what else is there he can say about it?

No, it’s better to just let this die down, and after a while things might become less strained and awkward. Bringing the subject up will only make that long and painful path to blissful forgetfulness start all over.

And heaven knows that it is embarrassing enough as it already is.

He can sense the man’s displeasure as he regards him, and it makes his skin crawl in dreaded anticipation of things to come. Despite knowing full well that Tony can’t stand him, he’s rarely felt it this sharply and clearly. Usually, the man keeps an impressively nonchalant façade, only occasionally letting his stark dislike for Loki breach through the surface.
But the displeasure that is emanating from Tony right now is nearly palpable in its conspicuousness, and it’s making him more nervous by the second. Because this time, there seems to be nothing specific he has done that has prompted it; instead, it is his mere presence, his sheer existence in this tower that has been putting Tony into such a bad mood.

Of course, it’s far from the first time he has displeased Tony, but the reasons so far have been fairly obvious, the cause and effect clear, what actions prompted the negative reaction possible to pinpoint.

Now, however, it’s not, and it’s just making him even more aware of the precariousness of his situation.

Tony could easily and quickly make things very unpleasant for him, should he decide to. And the man doesn’t even need a reason; Loki doesn’t need to have actually *done* anything. Arbitrariness and mere whims are just as valid, seeing as how slave masters don’t need rationale or cause for anything they decide to do to or with their slaves.

Biting his lip, he wonders if there’s anything he can do to put Tony into a better mood, any way to get into his good graces, however tiny they might be. Now that the threat of being turned into a bed slave has thankfully been removed, he finds himself more concerned about the other aspects of his immediate future that inevitably come with his position. And he has no idea just how harshly Tony intends to deal with him for all he’s done. The dreams from only a couple of nights ago resurface unbidden, and he shudders inwardly. Might there be anything that could improve the dreary outlook of his future, lessen the severity of the punishments that are still awaiting?

But a part of him is doubtful. He isn’t sure there’s anything he can do. He can’t even think of anything he’s ever done that has pleased Tony, all he ever seems to end up doing is to displease the man.

Then again, keeping quiet and staying out of Tony’s way is probably his best bet. Reminding him as little as possible of his existence, since that seems to be enough to prickle the man’s skin.

Fingers clenching, he scoops up another spoonful of his breakfast. In the silence, the clinking of metal against ceramic is almost deafening.
He swallows the last gulp of coffee down, glad to finally bring an end to this miserable breakfast featuring a Norse god of mischief eyeing him like he’s just admitted that he spends his evenings kicking kittens for fun. Putting his cup down on the crumb-littered tabletop, he scoots the chair out, getting ready to head down to his workshop to get some work done.

Of course, the pair of sullen, accusing green eyes on the other side of the table follows him closely, and he winces inwardly. Most of all, he'd just like to slink out of the room like a drenched puppy with its tail between its legs, but something tells him it would be a bad idea to simply leave Loki like this to stew and let his anger fester after everything that's happened. No, it would be better to give the god some sort of task to fulfil, something to keep his mind occupied and prevent him from inventing new plans for world domination to avenge himself on humanity for being idiotic dolts like Tony.

Though, he’s not so sure what kind of work a Norse god of mischief is really good for.

But come to think of it, there is one thing he could take care of; there’s still that newly washed heap of shirts in need of ironing. Sure he has Dummy to do that for him, but for all his bad-ass techno-skills, enabling him to build a suit that can fly and comes equipped with weapons exceeding the total firepower of many smaller nations’ armies, he still hasn’t managed to create a robot that can iron shirts as well as the average human. Heck, even he can do it better than Dummy, which is saying a lot, though he lets the robot handle boring stuff like that anyway. It’s worth a few wrinkles and creases.

And even a spoiled prince who’s no doubt spent most of his life being waited on hand and foot should be able to surpass Dummy’s lacklustre ironing abilities. Hopefully, he won’t burn too many shirts in the process before getting the hang of it.

“Alright, got another task for you,” he says, waving Loki along, who looks as sullen and pouty as ever.

Yeah, definitely a good idea to occupy the god with something, he thinks to himself as he takes in that look. He’s sure glad Jarvis is keeping a constant vigilant eye out, or he’d probably find his bed stuffed with thumbtacks or his shoes filled with super-glue, or whatever it is that indignant gods of mischief do.
“Okay, then,” Tony says, placing the iron on the board before him and wiggling his fingers at the smooth underside. “That’s the hot side. And there are the shirts.” He makes a toss with his head into the direction of a heap of crumpled clothing. “Any further instructions you need?”

Loki shakes his head. He recognises the concept; they have it in Asgard too. Slabs of iron heated on a grate hanging over a hearth of glowing embers, which, when hot enough, are pressed down on wrinkled cloth to even out the creases. The procedure is, of course, carried out mostly for court ladies’ finer dresses, but it hardly comes as a surprise that Tony would want this for his clothes as well.

It shouldn’t be too difficult. Not that he has ever done it himself, of course, but he’s seen others do it several times before as a child sneaking into the servants’ areas, standing on his toes and curiously peaking over the edge of the work bench to watch the proceedings taking place, while hiding from the consequences of whatever mischief he had caused moments earlier.

Yes, it should be a simple task, one he can handle without further instructions.

Besides, Tony’s terse manners are clearly informing him that the man has no desire to stand around here and explain simple servants’ tasks to his slave. Or to stand around in his presence at all. No, Tony surely expects him to be able to execute this order without lengthy instructions or demonstrations. And there’s no point in further provoking the man’s ire by being obtuse. He can figure this out, previous experience or not.

“Good,” Tony says in response. “I usually let Dummy handle this, but I’m sure you’ll do better.” With that, he turns and leaves, not wasting further time or words on his slave.

Loki remains standing in the middle of the room, one hand on the edge of the ironing board. For once, it would seem that Tony has given him a task that actually serves a primary purpose other than humiliating him. This time, Tony is expecting him to be useful, as opposed to a mere source of amusement providing him with the pleasure of seeing his hated enemy brought low.

Besides, he’s already unwanted here, as opposed to wanted, and it would serve him much better to be useful rather than useless to boot. Perhaps if he is, maybe Tony will to some extent let the benefits of having a useful – albeit unwanted – slave around take precedence over the satisfaction of meting out revenge, so that it won’t go beyond a point where that usefulness will deteriorate too much.

As much as the resentment is crawling in him at the thought, as much as it is making his throat sting with humiliation, he knows that his best bet is to make sure that Tony stays as content as possible, if he is at all to keep his nose above the water surface rather than drowning pitifully. And as disturbing
as the thought is, he will most likely be spending Tony’s entire life in this tower, and even though
that might not be very many years when taking his own life span into account, it will still be a
torturously long time if he has to live under the yoke of a disgruntled and displeased Tony, who
might not see any other uses for his slave than being a handy outlet for the man’s frustrations.

No, pride won’t do him any good anymore; truth be told, it’s probably one of the reasons that landed
him in this miserable situation in the first place. He has truly fallen, reduced to performing servants’
tasks at the behest of a mere mortal, but he’s also aware that it’s still full well possible for him to fall
even further. And pride would be the first thing to trip him up, to send him careening right over the
edge of that abyss yawning at his very feet. No need to jump into it voluntarily if he can avoid it.

His pride and dignity are still in there somewhere, and he decides to let them stay where they are,
hidden and locked away. Maybe someday, he’ll be able to bring them out again, as vain as that hope
seems right now.

But as things are standing, he has no choice but to swallow all this degradation down, trying not to
choke on it. His entire future here depends on Tony’s attitude towards him, the man who now
controls his entire life, every aspect of his existence.

And as horrible and loathsome as the idea of being turned into a bed slave would have been, it might
still have given him a flimsy amount of protection (though far too hard-earned to be worth it) against
other things, possibly ensuring he wouldn’t be hurt too badly. But now, his future depends solely on
how useful he can make himself, how pleased Tony is with him; that’s the only thing that will offer
him any form of safe-guarding, no matter how thin and weak the shield.

He eyes the iron, resting upright on the board, and then the crumpled shirts. Finally, his gaze drifts
back then the iron again. At least it should be an easy task, something he can perform adequately, if
perhaps not stellarly.

Bending down over the pile of Tony’s freshly washed clothes items, he pulls out a grey shirt with the
word ‘Aerosmith’ plastered across the front. Whatever that means. Spreading the shirt out on the
board, flattening it out with his hand, he picks up the iron and places it against the cloth, pushing
down to make sure there’s adequate pressure to smooth the wrinkles out.

However, it doesn’t take long before the sharp odour of something disturbingly burnt reaches his
nose.

Damn.
Quickly, he yanks the iron away only to discover, to his utter horror, a big, charred hole in the cloth beneath. His eyes widen in dread. He hadn’t expected that the iron would be hot enough to burn like this.

Panic welling up inside of him, he whirs around, half expecting an incensed Tony to storm through the door, demanding to know what the hell he is doing and why the fuck he can’t handle even the most simple of tasks.

The door frame is mercifully empty, though, and his tense limbs relax marginally. Biting his lip, he looks to the sorry thing on the board before him, miserably taking in the sight of the burnt edges framing the very much conspicuous hole. The shirt is ruined. Whimsically, he wishes for his magic; only a faint tendril of it, and he could have easily sorted this mess out, without leaving a hint that anything was ever amiss.

*And what is he supposed to do now?* Sneak the damning proof into the trash, hoping that Tony won’t notice that he’s one shirt short? Confess in the hopes that it might get him off a bit easier?

Tony will be absolutely livid; of this there’s no doubt. He eyes the hot iron, and then his bare arm sticking out of the sleeve of the T-shirt he’s wearing, swallowing.

Perhaps Tony will decide to give him a very much hands-on lesson about the effects that a hot iron will have when held against… non-heat resistant material for too long. His skin prickles in phantom pain. It would no doubt have been considered a fitting punishment in Asgard for such carelessness; surely Tony will be of no different opinion. And worse things have certainly befallen slaves for lesser offences than this.

And as he stands there looking at the ruined shirt, unable to do anything at all to rectify his mistake, he feels a huge wave of frustration washing over him. He can’t do anything right here. He's too unfamiliar with Midgardian customs and expectations and household appliances to make a good slave. Heck, not even in *Asgard* would he have made a good slave, having gone through life reliant on his magic to fix everything for him. But at least back home, he would have *known* what would be expected, known what sort of behaviour would be required of him.

Then again, he can pretty safely say that ruined clothing is most certainly not part of it, not even here in Midgard.

The fists at his sides are clenching. Uselessly. Impotently. Futilely. Such apt descriptions of his own
existence and pathetic struggles here, where he can’t do anything right, not even something simple like this. And all he ever does just seems to end up putting him into an even worse place than he was when he started.

He lets out a growl of frustration, desperately wanting to smash something but thinking better of it, knowing it will only make things worse. Oh, how the fates must be laughing at him and his pitiful attempts to cope with his impossible situation, ever-doomed to abject failure.

But in the end, no matter how many times his thoughts dizzily revolve around the mocking fates, Asgard versus Midgard, Tony’s wrath, and his own situation, there’s one fact that won’t go away, its presence ruthlessly staring him into his face – he’s still left with two alternatives, and he has to pick one.

Try to hide it, or confess.

In the end, he opts for the former, silently willing that Tony won’t notice the missing shirt.

It is only many hours later, when he’s lying in bed trying to fall asleep, that he realizes that Jarvis must surely have seen it all and reported his misdoings back to Tony.

It takes a long time for sleep to come to him that night, and when it does, his dreams are filled with hot irons and the sickly, nauseating stench of scorched flesh.
Chapter 26

Well, at least there’s one good thing in his life right now. The new beta-electro-transformer that has been riddled with a seemingly unsolvable glitch for so long has finally proved itself cooperative and fixable, and now that he’s past that very annoying speed-bump, he can get some real work done on it.

He readjusts a few of the cables lining its innards, the deft motions automatic and routine. The progress has been quicker than expected, to boot. Only a few more days, and he should be able to do the first test runs together with his suit.

Yeah, at least something good deigns fit to happen, something that works out the way it’s supposed to.

He tries to find some solace in that thought, while carefully doing his best not to listen too closely to that other quiet but insistent part of his brain that is whispering that all he’s really doing down here in his workshop is hiding. The transformer is just an excuse, given that he’s left that project on ice for months, not returning to it until just now.

Tony Stark, hiding from the awkwardness and embarrassment and guilty conscience awaiting him outside of the familiar safety of these four walls – who would have figured.

The concept is strikingly bizarre, because he’s never pictured himself as someone going to pains to avoid conflicts. Quite the opposite, he would often be the one to instigate conflict, at times taking an almost perverse pleasure in watching annoying people squirm as he blurts out uncomfortable elephant-in-the-room kind of truths or otherwise giving voice to what everyone is thinking but no one else than the uninimitable Tony Stark dares to say out loud. Because that’s just him – boisterous, basking-in-attention, ever-cocky and sure of himself.

No, conflict and awkwardness never bothered him much. Not until now, that is.

Which is of course ridiculous, because it shouldn’t matter what Loki, a bat-shit crazy war criminal, thinks of him. But somehow, inexplicably, it still does.

But really, he doesn’t want to go there. After all, it was all those improper thoughts and fantasies that started this crap that ended with him hiding in – no, scratch that, retreating to his workshop as to not have to stand face to face with the other counterpart so inextricably involved in all this shit. So
instead, he forces his wandering thoughts into another direction, one much more harmless. For the moment, his brain seems irritatingly unwilling to let go off the subject that is the green-eyed god living in his tower, but at least he can focus on more neutral aspects relating to that topic.

So yeah, he’s really impressed that Loki managed to ruin no more than one single shirt during his ironing stint, as Jarvis later informed him when he enquired about the results of the little task handed out. It had been tempting to tell the AI to bring up the recorded security feed showing the whole spectacle, because the image of Loki ironing would have made for quite a remarkable sight.

But in the end, he decided not to. The idea only held a vague appeal for a few seconds, because he knew that merely watching the god on a screen, at a safe distance many rooms away from his immediate presence, would still make all those embarrassing memories rear their ugly heads in his mind.

And it’s odd how, mere months ago, he would have paid good money for the opportunity of seeing the crazy Norse god ironing shirts, no less Tony’s own, but now the concept doesn’t seem the least bit funny. Just disturbing, because he knows that regardless of how little the idea appeals to either of them, Loki is stuck here indefinitely, and nothing they can do will change that. And he has no choice but to come to terms with the current circumstances that unfortunately involve him risking running into the god at any time and in pretty much any place in his tower.

So instead, he let himself be content with Jarvis’ report stating that Loki had managed to fulfil his job assignment for the day without burning either himself in the process or any of the other shirts after that initial mishap. No need for him to watch the proceedings for himself; Jarvis words were good enough for him.

And perhaps it would be a good idea for him to find the god some new task to occupy him, but something inside of him violently protests at that idea. Because he doesn’t feel up to confronting Loki again so soon; and the more time he spends alone in this workshop, effectively shut off from the world and the rest of his tower with only his equipment and technology for company, the more reluctant he feels about facing the good again. So maybe he could have Jarvis instruct him to do something, but he’s not sure what exactly. And besides, he’s not sure even Jarvis’ and Dummy’s combined efforts would make satisfactory replacements for a human instructor giving a run-down of what would for a god most likely be unfamiliar Midgardian doings.

No, it’s vastly preferable sneaking down here, where he can toil away undisturbed. Loki will never show his face in this place, so at least he can feel safe in this little sanctuary of his.

At that, a slash of bad conscience comes over him, because lately he has been taking most of his meals alone in his workshop, only pausing briefly in his work to wolf some food down, preferring to eat on his filthy, oil-smeared workbench just so he won’t have to sit across the god’s accusing stares,
the well-known pair of eyes boring into him like needles. So instead, he’s had Dummy deliver Loki
food to his room (it’s not like he’s going to let the god starve or anything). But he sure as heck isn’t
able to muster up even a shred of appetite sitting there with Loki’s suspicious gaze hovering all over
his airspace like a pissed-off chopper.

And if he is to be brutally honest, he’s certain that Loki vastly prefers this arrangement too. There is
no reason why he should want to spend any more time than necessary in Tony’s presence.

He fiddles with the electro-transformer in his hands. How much simpler it is to deal with the
dependable constants that are technology and science, where he knows his way around, where things
are reliable and act more or less as expected. They’re logical, predictable to a fault. Not like other…
situations, that only throw him into loops he can’t keep track of.

Again, he wonders if he should perhaps say something more to the god, but really, what is there to
say that hasn’t been said already? Oh, he can talk until he gets blue in the face, but that’s not going to
change a single thing. What’s happened has happened, and he can only deal with the fall-out the best
he can.

At that, a heap of jumbled recollections float to the surface, reminding him of certain off-hand
comments he’s let slip lately, entirely unaware how they might have been interpreted by Loki.

Most of all, there was that oh-so-innocent remark about quality entertainment time, forgotten until
now because at the time it wasn’t important, just another one of those endless comments being
delivered by the never-stopping conveyor belt connecting his brain to his mouth – the memory rises
unbidden, slamming into his awareness with full force. And he feels like a blithering idiot. How must
that have sounded to someone expecting to be taken advantage of?

Perhaps he should have seen those signs earlier. Like, a lot earlier. Interpreted that paleness, the
edginess, the wanton living room breakage, the non-existing appetite, as something else than mere
craziness and sulking and obstinacy, or whatever other explanations he had made up for himself.

Yeah, he had had a million rationalizations pre-packaged and ready, but none of them came even
close to the truth.

And he wishes that Loki had said something a lot earlier, too, before it got as far as it did. But he
supposes he can full well understand that the god didn’t. How do you even bring up a subject like
that, unless you’re prompted to?
So the god is still acrimonious and antagonistic, of course, which is only to be expected. The tenseness in his manners and the accusations in his eyes speak their clear language. He’s just surprised the god hasn’t said anything scathing to him yet, spewing forth all the disdain and vitriol that his godly haughtiness can possibly muster up.

Perhaps it will come eventually, once Loki has grown tired of merely eyeing him like he’s an ugly stain on the carpet. In some ways, it would probably be preferable, rather than this silent treatment that’s really starting to wear thin around the edges.

Oh well. Maybe it’s just as well that the two of them stay clear of each other for a little while, until this whole mess has sort of died down. Until it won’t be the first thing that comes to mind in either of their heads whenever they encounter each other.

Yeah, that is probably a good idea. Some things just can’t be rushed, after all. They have to settle in their own good time, right?

And by then, the images of a naked Loki lying in his bed might have stopped intruding in his head too.
His days pass slowly, in constant oscillation between bone-grinding boredom and aggravating frustration, between unwilling resignation and unrelenting fear about the punishments still hanging over his head that have for unclear reasons still not been meted out. For wrecking Tony’s living room. For throwing a potted plant at his head. For having contemplated harming himself. For ruining Tony’s clothes and – even worse – trying to hide the evidence. For his actions in New York. For throwing Tony out a window. And for whatever additional offences he might have committed since coming here that Tony thinks he should be punished for.

But somehow, the scales seem to have tipped, because now, he can swear that Tony is the one avoiding him, quickly retreating into his workshop to fiddle with his science and Midgardian technology whenever he isn’t leaving the tower for unknown business elsewhere.

Perhaps the man has grown bored with his slave, no longer finding any entertainment in the everyday fact that the degradation and subjugation of his defeated enemy has become by now. Maybe he’s come to the conclusion that he will be content simply dishing out whatever punishments are still in store, while forgoing further petty amusements in the form of humiliating his slave, at least for the time being.

Whatever Tony might be thinking, there is little point in him speculating – there’s nothing he can do about it anyway – so instead he just aimlessly wanders around in the tower, without any specific goal in aim. The restlessness is crawling under his skin, and he finds himself unable to sit down lest his straying mind takes over to lead him into places far too dark and dreary. So he prowls like a restless ghost, meandering through corridors and hallways and rooms, desperate for anything that will take his thoughts off their current downward spiral.

He’s not really thinking, merely allowing his feet to take him wherever they want to go. It’s not like there is any semblance of a purpose to anything for him anyway.

And without realizing where he’s been heading, he suddenly finds himself standing outside Tony’s workshop, not quite sure how he ended up there. There are noises drifting through the crack of the half-open door, and he lets curiosity get the better of him, gingerly peering inside.

As expected, Tony is in there, working in deep concentration at something or the other at his workbench. His back is turned to the door, but Loki gets the impression that he could have been standing right there in front of the man and he wouldn’t even have taken note of his presence for all he’s focusing on the little gadget he’s tinkering with. Most likely another one of his endless inventions.
Of course, he would be better off leaving the man to his own devices; nothing good will ever come out of lingering in Tony’s presence. So his feet start moving again, but instead of turning and walking back like they should, they carry on forwards, further into the workshop, as curiosity and boredom get the better of him.

Tony’s forehead is creased with deep lines of concentration, laser-sharp focus directed onto the gadget in his hands as he digs around in its innards with a thin metal tool. Loki has no idea what the device is or what it is supposed to do, but he stands there watching regardless. It’s not the usual flippant Tony sitting there, but rather the inventor, the scientist, and the shift grabs his attention. He’s not used to seeing him being so serious about anything, really putting his mind into crafting something else than his usual sarcastic remarks and conceited witticisms. And for some reason, that is drawing him in, though he should of course know better.

He takes another step closer, despite knowing he ought to walk out of here before Tony discovers him sneaking around in what must be the man’s most sanctified place in the entire tower.

And another step.

And then, there’s the sharp noise of something crunching and breaking under his foot, the crack ear-splitting in the focused silence hovering over the room.

The man at the workbench startles, and there is the unmistakable sound of something snapping as his hands reflexively jerk.

*Uh-oh.*

Not even a blink of an eye later, Tony whirls around to face him, annoyance written across every line of his features.

“What the *fuck* are you doing creeping up on me like that?” he snaps, darting up from his chair like a wolfish predator taken by surprise by a hunter. Not waiting for Loki to deign that with an answer, he gestures with the tool still in his hand at the broken remains of whatever lying sadly on top of the bench, punctuating his words with angry stabbing motions. “Do you have any idea how long I worked on this freaking thing? And now it’s all broken because you had to come sneaking around here like someone out of Spies Like Us!”

Letting out a gruff howl of frustration at his wasted work, he throws the tool down onto the grimy
And Loki feels that far too familiar lurch in his stomach as Tony turns to him, fists clenched and eyes narrowed in indignation. Why the hell did he ever think it would be a good idea to come here and look Tony over his shoulder as he worked? He should have known better than this and left before things went southwards.

Reflexively, he takes a step back. And another one. Then, his leg catches onto something on the floor, probably the very same treacherous gadget that he stepped on moments ago and caused this whole disaster in the first place.

He tries to regain his balance, but the perfidious thing on the floor thwarts his efforts and instead he ends up stumbling backwards and ungracefully falling on his ass.

Tony takes a step in his direction, hands still clenched into tight fists.

So that’s it, then; Tony’s finally had it and isn’t going to hold off any longer. The first of all those punishments that he’s been waiting for forever is finally about to rain down over him. And Loki knows full well he isn’t allowed to defend himself and fight back, not if he doesn’t want to risk getting dragged back to Asgard by a group of malicious and spiteful Einherjers far too eager to deliver him up for execution. But he can at least still protect himself, no matter how little good it will do him in the end, so he curls himself into a ball, legs drawn up to shield his ribcage, and raises an arm to cover his face.

And then he waits.

For a long time, nothing happens; it is as if time has grinded to a halt. Tony appears to be just standing there somewhere above him, waiting for who knows what.

Then there is a soft shuffle of feet and an even softer ruffle of clothes as Tony crouches down next to him.

“Hey, Reindeer Games,” a voice startlingly devoid of its previous anger says somewhere above him, and Loki slowly lowers the arm raised in protection of the impending onslaught halfway to meet with a pair of brown eyes, likewise devoid of anger. A hand lightly touches his shoulder, and he flinches at the unexpected nature of this physical contact. “I’m not going to hurt you. You can take that arm
down,” the voice continues, still as perplexingly not-angry.

And that makes no sense at all. So he just keeps staring emptily at the man, uncomprehending and confused, not offering a response.

“You understand what I’m saying? I’m not going to hurt you,” Tony repeats himself when the silence has gone on for half an eternity, sounding like he’s speaking to a frightened child rather than to a hated enemy. His fingers curl around the arm that Loki still hasn’t fully lowered yet, pushing it downwards, gently at first and then more insistently when there’s resistance. And Loki hopes the twitch he felt in his arm just now wasn’t a tremble.

“Why wouldn’t you,” he says reflexively, almost antagonisingly, bewildered at Tony’s contradiction of this surely the most natural thing in the world.

Tony shifts where he’s crouching next to Loki and rakes a hand through his hair, gazing at something at the far wall. For some reason he’s looking uncharacteristically lost and unsure, as if he doesn’t quite know what to do with himself. Then he sighs and looks down at his hands instead. “It’s a Midgardian thing,” he finally says. “We don’t go around beating up on people who aren’t able to defend themselves.” A short pause. “Well, not most of us, at least.”

The brown eyes then turn back to bore into his, contemplative and not entirely unkind. And there is no doubt about it; the anger from only a moment ago is definitely gone, now, having disappeared into thin air as if by magic. And Loki isn’t sure what to make of it; it is certainly no kind of magic that he’s familiar with.

And then, it is as if all those whirling emotions suddenly congregate once more, swarming together to form a massive, gigantic wave that comes crashing over him without warning, taking every semblance of tightly held control with it. Everything is swept away in that whirl stream of howling madness, just like that one time when he smashed Tony’s living room to pieces. All those terrible feelings of being powerless and helpless, the never-ending despair and hopelessness, all his old and current fears, everything is just too much to handle. Once more, the pressure gets too high and the boiling mixture beneath demands to be let out lest he explode.

He can feel how something within him snaps and breaks, but something is different from last time. Maybe it’s the relief brought by Tony’s unexpected reassurances, maybe it’s the lingering feeling of a hand gently touching his shoulder a few heartbeats ago, or maybe it’s the sight of those not-angry brown eyes looking down at him; whatever the reason, this time, the effect of the crashing wave is quite another.
A moment later, Tony’s hand is back on his shoulder again, the man mumbling soft nothings that Loki barely even registers as he lies there on the floor crying, his body wracked by sobs and his pathetic tears spilling over his cheeks and staining the mosaic concrete tiles beneath.

And in that moment he isn’t sure if he hates himself or Tony the most.

Himself, for showing weakness, or Tony, for showing pity.
Chapter 28

The beta-electro-transformer that he’s been working on for the last week is lying broken and forlorn on the workbench, but what’s on top of his mind at the moment is something else entirely, the disturbing image imprinted into his brain as if it has been burned there with laser.

The image of a certain god of mischief huddling on the floor like a dog expecting to be kicked by its master for pissing on the carpet. Only to then dissolve into a crying, sobbing heap, as Tony sat there and awkwardly tried to offer words of consolation and reassurance to stop the unexpected flood of tears, his hand rubbing slow circles on a shivering shoulder.

Eventually, as the tears finally dried up and the sobbing subsided, the god had slowly picked himself up from the floor and then walked out of the workshop without speaking a word. Tony didn’t stop him, realizing it was probably not the time. A few minutes later, Jarvis had informed him that Loki was back in his room, lying on his bed. And Tony figured the god could probably use some time to himself, so he hasn’t called him back yet.

And frankly, so could he.

Even now that it’s actually happened, before his very eyes no less, the mere idea of Loki of all people crying is one of the weirdest, most awkward concepts imaginable. Because how could such a haughty and prideful being ever break down and cry?

At that, he’s washed over by another wave of gut-wrenching shame. Because it’s not until this incident that he’s really understood what kind of treatment Loki must have been expecting from him all this time. And instead of addressing that, he’d acted like the whole thing was more like some kind of game than anything else, never realizing or stopping to think what terrible strain the god must have been under since coming here.

The concept is so alien and difficult to wrap his head around for someone like him who’s been raised on the whole concept of inalienable human rights, but of course, that’s obviously not how Asgard is viewing these things. And as Loki’s appointed master, Tony is technically allowed to do everything and anything to him, and yet he’s never reassured him until just now that he isn’t going to. No matter what Loki has done and what crimes he has committed, Tony should have done so. But he didn’t, instead letting Loki’s mind imagine who knows what.

No wonder the god finally broke.
With a grimace, he wonders how much of what transpired today was brought by Loki’s pre-made assumptions already in place when coming here, and how much was caused by those assumptions being fuelled by Tony’s own behaviour. Unbidden, the memory arises of the day of Loki’s arrival, when he forced the god to his knees and shoved that shock stick into his face, effectively threatening someone who had no means of fighting back.

And it’s not about whether Loki deserves it or not, but whether it’s right or not.

It had certainly felt good threatening him like that, in the heat of the moment, but now, looking back, he can’t say that it ever felt right. Not that he actually did intend to hurt Loki back there, he just wanted to watch him squirm a little, but the god had no way of reading his mind. Of course he had expected the worst. What reason did he have to expect differently?

And really, when delivered to his doorstep, Loki had in his mind still been the arrogant, prideful, and conceited god he had faced off with during the battle of Manhattan; he’d never considered that Loki might find his new situation… terrifying, as opposed to merely a grave insult to his pride. And he had wanted to take that conceited creature down to the ground without stopping to realize that he had already been smashed into it as soundly as that one time the Hulk had used him to remodel Tony’s floor.

For someone who pays lip service to the assertion that slavery is horrible and wrong, he had sure taken to the situation quickly. The Einherjer guards had barely left the room before he jumped on the opportunity to assert his power over someone who no longer held any.

For the first time, he tips the scales over in his mind, trying to imagine himself in Loki’s position. Having all the human rights he has ever taken for granted stripped away and every semblance of control over his own life taken from him, only to be thrown upon someone else’s mercy, someone who also happens to be one of his worst enemies. It’s not a pleasant thought.

And then, he realizes that he has already been in a position not unlike that, once. In that dark, dank, and miserable cave in Afghanistan. Of course, they had tortured and he hadn’t. So it was different.

Expect that it wasn’t. Because he had still taken advantage of someone’s helpless position, someone who was utterly in his power. In that way, he had acted little better than his former captors had.

Sighing, he rubs his palms over his face as unease and discomfort roil inside of him. He never knew that his own grasp on morality would turn out to be so fickle and easily swayed. Not that he ever considered himself the moral guardian of everything just and proper like Captain Spangles, far from it, but he never did see himself as someone who would stoop to threaten and belittle someone who
had already had everything taken from him either. Even if the concept of humiliating Loki did lose its appeal some time ago, he can’t deny his own actions when the god first came here.

Loki’s life, future, existence – it’s all in his hands now. And fuck, if that isn’t just one of the biggest and most unwanted responsibilities he has ever gotten saddled with. And he obviously couldn’t handle it, so instead he treated it like it was some sort of game – poking and prodding and provoking to see what reaction he would get, without taking the situation seriously. He never wanted this responsibility, but now he realizes he has no choice but to face up to it.

And he realizes then that Loki truly has nothing left, save his own life. Everything else, even including that very life, is at someone else’s discretion. Namely his discretion. Even inmates serving time in prison are entitled to certain rights, no matter what crimes they have committed, but Loki doesn’t even have that; the Asgardian court that sentenced him made sure of that when they dictated his current position as a slave.

It’s a sobering thought. And one he’d do well to take into account from now on.

The time for hiding is long past. Hiding and evading didn’t solve anything last time, and it certainly won’t now. Trying to avoid someone who will be living in his house for the foreseeable future is a futile pursuit, doomed to fail, and won’t lead to anything good in the long run, regardless of how much easier it might temporarily be.

No, for once, for the first time since the god’s coming here, he’s going to sit down and have a real talk with him and make those things clear that he should have a long time ago.

He’s back on the bed in his room, feeling like he’s been drained of every little speck of strength and power he had left. His body feels empty, almost like it’s floating from lightness; in comparison, his head feels like a heavy paper weight.

But while his body might be hollow, his head is all the more stuffed full with wandering thoughts.

Though, to be more specific, there is really only one thought in there right now – how he, a mere hour ago, had let himself be completely undone by… whatever it was that had come washing over him, causing him to so miserably lose all control of himself.
For once, there was no need for Tony to humiliate him, because Loki managed it all too well by himself. Not even Tony could have done it better. Like a mere child, like a pitiable wretch, he had broken down and cried in front of the man, wept and sobbed uncontrollably on the floor as the tears kept running down his face, unstoppable like water from a broken dam.

And if that’s not worthy of pitiful contempt, he doesn’t know what is.

No wonder Tony thinks him too pathetic, too pitiful to even lay a hand on. And perhaps the man is right in his assessment; he really is a wretched, deplorable creature, showcasing his weakness like that.

And he could feel the pity radiating from the man as he lay there mewling pathetically on the very floor of his workshop. In a way, it would have been easier to handle if Tony had simply laughed at him instead and mocked him for his disgraceful display; at least that would have been expected and understandable.

But instead, he got another helping of that stinging pity.

Though, he supposes that’s still preferable to being beaten into a pulp for unintentionally causing the destruction of whatever gadget Tony had been working on for so long.

Suddenly Jarvis’ voice sounds over the intercom, interrupting his musings. “Mr Stark would like a word with you, Mr Laufeyson. Please proceed to the living room with immediate effect.”

And really, he has no desire to talk to Tony, or even be in the same room as him, but he knows he has no choice in the matter. So he slowly pushes himself up into a sitting position on the edge of the bed, where he remains for a few heartbeats, breathing deeply to get rid of the exhaustion pressing down on him, before finally standing up and heading out the door with a sigh.

He’s not looking forward to talking with Tony at all.
He’s not looking forward to talking with Loki at all.

But he might as well get it over with, now that the god has had some time to cool off. Have a talk with him about the things he should have said a long time ago. If he had done that, this latest little incident that ended with a god of mischief crying in his workshop would most likely have been avoided. And, he figures, his living room would probably not be sporting its current lack of spiffy decorative things like china and potted plants.

True, he did say a lot of things to the god while he was busy sobbing on the floor, but he suspects that most of it didn’t really register in his brain if it even entered his ears; in fact, he didn’t seem to be in a state where most of anything would register.

Then there are the soft sounds of footsteps that he recognizes all too well by now, and a second later the familiar figure of a certain fallen Norse god is standing in the doorway.

Though, the level of familiarity has decreased somewhat. Loki looks remarkably tired and worn, like someone grabbed the god by his ankles and then spent the best part of the afternoon wringing him like a wet towel. Then again, Tony supposes lengthy crying spiels might have that effect, even on gods.

“Well enough?” he asks. It’s not meant to be derisive, just the best he can do for a conversion starter, because no matter how much of a chatter box Tony Stark might be, his brain always has major problems supplying non-sarcastic comments in serious situations. Still, Loki looks at him like he is trying to gauge whether the question is meant to mock him or not, and the taut look on his face suggests that he suspects that the former is intended.

“I am well enough,” comes the neutral answer, spoken in an equally dispassionate voice, carefully devoid of all those emotions that were raging so freely a mere hour ago.

“Well enough. Whatever that means. Well enough not to throw another crying fit? Well enough not to flip and unleash another round of home wrecking? Well enough to keep up appearances despite whatever shit-storm is brewing underneath?

“Glad to hear it,” he says in reply, indicating the couch with a toss of his head. “Have a seat, will you.”
Loki obeys, sitting himself down gingerly on the edge of the seat, stiff as a board and hands neatly folded in his lap. It’s hard to imagine that this is the same god that not long ago was a sobbing mess on his floor for all the controlled and collected demeanour he’s currently displaying.

Tony turns his chair around so he can straddle it, crossing his arms on top of the rickety backrest. If one of those psycho-babblers could see him, they would probably say he is using the backrest as a symbolic shield between them because he isn’t comfortable with the speech ahead of him.

And they might well be right.

“Alright, then,” he says, grimacing slightly. “Let’s make a few things clear here. I know that neither of us likes this situation, but since we’re stuck with it, we might as well try to coexist as peacefully as possible so we can avoid further incidents in the future.”

Loki tenses slightly at the word ‘incidents’, obviously knowing very well what Tony is referring to and no doubt being embarrassed about it. It’s a pretty far fall from trying to take over the planet to collapsing in a huge crying fit, he supposes.

“So, listen up.” He fixes Loki with what he hopes is an authoritarian stare. “First of all, I don’t know what kind of shit flies over in your Magic Kingdom in the Sky, and I’m not sure I even want to find out, though I believe I have a fairly good inkling judging by your expectations and what I’ve read of those Norse fairytales of yours. However, you seem to have missed that this is Planet Earth, and here we act like civilized people and not like medieval brutes. We have something called human rights here, and they apply to you as well, even if you might not technically be human.” And he feels like there’s a speech coming on here, so he decides to cut to the heart of the matter instead of droning on.

“So, contrary to what you might have been thinking, I don’t have any intention of beating you, hurting you, drilling holes into your skull, pouring acidic snake venom over you, or otherwise doing stuff detrimental to your health.” He can’t help but wince inwardly as he says this, well aware he should have done so from the very start when Loki first came here. “Are you clear on this?”

“Yes.” Loki’s gaze is resting somewhere on Tony’s chest as he replies, not meeting with his eyes, but at least he provides the correct answer.

“Good. Then, as for what I expect from you, it’s nothing you shouldn’t be able to handle with some effort – behave yourself, do as you’re told, don’t go out of your way to give me any problems or trouble. Don’t mess with my stuff, and if you don’t think I would approve of something, then don’t
do it. Simple as that.” He waits a little while for the words to sink in, hoping he hasn’t forgotten anything important in there, but the little run-down should probably cover most foreseeable situations. “Clear?”

“Yes,” Loki says again, almost mechanically.

He studies Loki’s face but as there seems to be no further crying fits looming on the horizon, he pushes on. “Like I said, I’m not going to hurt you, but if you do anything patently stupid you shouldn’t be doing – like wantonly breaking my house, throwing stuff at my head, trying to escape, plotting to take over the world again, stuff like that – I still have every means and every right to make the consequences of that unpleasant for you.”

And damn if he doesn’t feel like a parent laying down the rules and boundaries for a misbehaving kid here. But maybe that’s not all that far from the truth; if someone had done that to Loki in the first place, he probably wouldn’t have sauntered off trying to take over an entire planet. Though, that’s alien royalty for you, he supposes. “If nothing else, you should at least keep in mind that I still have plenty of floors left that could do with some scrubbing.”

There’s a small twitch in Loki’s left eyebrow at that, but it’s only just barely discernable. Perhaps he just imagined it.

He taps a finger against the backrest, intently studying the god’s face. “So, will you have any problems with this arrangement?”

“No.” There’s a slight sulk in the voice, but no more than that. Loki sits as still and unmoving as a statue, not even shifting his gaze from its fixed spot somewhere on Tony’s chest.

“Excellent. To give you the short version – you behave yourself, and in return I’ll play nice and won’t make your life any more difficult than it has to be.” He leans back a bit in the chair, hands gripping the top of the backrest. “And another thing. Next time you have a problem with anything here or any other concerns of any kind, speak the fuck up. You’re not going to be punished for speaking your mind, no matter how dirty and uncouth it might be. I’d rather have that than any more of my property smashed into pieces.”

Loki looks almost ashamed at that. Almost.

“It doesn’t necessarily mean you’ll get things your way, but at least I’ll hear you out. Fair enough?”
“Yes.” Another monosyllabic answer, devoid of anything that could be interpreted as emotion. Unless carefully constructed impassiveness counts as an emotion.

Yeah, so the god is clearly not in a talkative mood.

And frankly, neither is he. So perhaps he’d be better off cutting this conversation short.

“Anything you wish to add to that? Any questions, comments, anything?”

Loki licks his lips and hesitates for a moment before speaking. “What about... the punishments for my previous actions?” he asks, posture wary and guarded.

Tony frowns. “For what actions?”

Loki gives him a perplexed look. “For wrecking your living room,” he says slowly. “For New York. For--”

“Princess, New York is the reason you’re here, remember?” Tony interrupts him. “This is your punishment. As for any other stuff that’s happened since, we’ll forget about that and start with a clean slate from here on. Got it?”

The god nods, once.

“Good. Now that we’ve sorted all that out, I think your stay here will go considerably smoother from now on.”

He stands up, scooting the chair back in place. “Alright, lecture’s over, Rudolph. You’re free to go play.”

He remains sitting on the couch long after Tony has left the room, the numerous thoughts swirling in
his mind all congregating to arrive at the same harrowing conclusions.

He has no choice. He’s stuck here. He detests it, yes, but there’s really nothing he can do. It’s frustrating, it’s humiliating and many other things as well, but in the end, he has no choice.

Of course, Tony still resents him and would have preferred to see him gone, still considers him a nuisance, though clearly one too pitiful to even be worth harming.

He has truly fallen, being reduced to this.

But through all the shame, resentment and bitterness at his situation, there is still one other thing that stands out clearly – the stark realization that it could have been worse.

A lot worse.

He still sits there as the sun outside sets, dully watching the hands still neatly folded in his lap, not quite sure what to do with himself. Tired and exhausted, but his head still swirling too much for him to fall asleep any time soon.

The mortification at his recent lapse of self-control is still heavy on his mind, and he can’t remember being so embarrassed about anything in a very long time. Last time that tightly held control had slipped out of his grasp to dissolve into nothing at all, he had at least responded in a way that didn’t showcase laughable weakness, as futile and meaningless as the wanton destruction wreaked upon Tony’s living room had been. Even if his reactions back then had been… highly inadvisable for someone in his position, at least they hadn’t made him feel acute embarrassment like this.

And he wonders what had caused his reaction to channel itself into something so vastly different this time around when that same gigantic, unstoppable wave of swirling emotions came crashing down over him again. It makes little sense; he’s been living under the terror of all those awful expectations for so long, and never once did it make him break down and cry. Not until after hearing Tony’s reassurances did he actually do that.

It is then he realizes that it is precisely in this that the difference lies – in that mad, raging sea of despair threatening to pull him under, there had for the first time since his arrival here been something for him to cling to, a glimmer of hope that maybe things might not turn out so utterly terrible after all. A lifeline to hold onto to keep him from drowning.
And Tony had been the one to throw it out to him.
The replacement plants and pots for the ones that got smashed during Loki’s living room wreckage spiel have finally arrived, and the order neatly placed on his living room table by two sturdy-looking delivery guys, whose star-struck looks never quite faded as they carried their goods into the tower of the legendary Iron Man himself.

He eyes the assortment of green, leafy things in front of him – perhaps he’ll even bother learning the names of them someday. With two fingers, he picks up the little scrap of paper stuck into the dirt next to one of them. *Crossandra Infundibuliformis*. Whatever. Who the hell makes up these names anyway?

The luscious picture on the paper looks very little like the half-wilted greenery in front of him, though. Maybe the people at the flower shop got the species all mixed up and he got a *Wiltedus Leavus* instead. Oh well.

His gaze drifts on to the colourful piles of pots and the big bag of clay pellets next to them. Not that he’s an expert gardener or anything, but after many mishaps he eventually learned (from Pepper, who else) that those little pebbles are pretty good at protecting plants against over-watering – which is quite useful since he has Dummy taking care of that part. And a robot is only as good as its programmer, after all, which in his case isn’t saying much when it comes to plant-care.

But this should present the perfect opportunity for giving his house-guest another task, shouldn’t it? After all, Loki was the one who smashed all those old plants into mush, so it’s only fair that he gets to take care of this. Besides, he has more important things waiting for him down in his workshop, top on his list being his second attempt at a beta-electro-transformer. The gadget that Loki was also responsible for breaking into pieces, albeit unintentionally. He winces at the unpleasant memory of all that followed that incident.

Well then. Caring for plants is supposed to be good for the soul and the mind, if you believe the hippie crowd. And heavens know that Loki could need some of that Zen-stuff as opposed to going around wreaking havoc on other planets.

“Jarvis, call Loki over here, will you?”

Not long after, Loki enters, looking stiff and wary, but perhaps a note more relaxed than usual, unless Tony is imagining things. Well, perhaps it’s just wishful thinking.
“Okay,” he says, gesturing at the stuff on the table. “My new set of decorative vegetables just arrived and needs to get in order. So,” he grabs one of the ceramic outer pots, a wreath of white leaves emblazoned on the black glaze, “this is how you do it. You pour an inch of these things at the bottom of the outer pot,” he digs into the bag of clay pellets and pulls out a handful of the things, depositing them in the black pot, “which is supposed to help with drainage and stuff. And once that’s done, you place the little pot with the plant into the big pot with the pebbles. And you’re done. Simple as that.” He gives Loki a measuring glance. “Think you can manage that?”

Loki gives an affirmative nod.

Well, it’s not a difficult task by any means, one that even alien gods should be able to handle. Easier than ironing, and you’d have to be quite skilful in your own way to screw this up.

“Excellent. I’ll be back to check on your progress in a little while.”

And with that, he saunters off into the direction of his workshop, leaving Loki alone with the plants and the pots.

Yeah, he should be able to handle this just fine.

He eyes the plants, the pots and the bag of pebbles spread out on the table in front of him. At least it should be a simple task, not nearly as prone to failure as ironing. As long as he doesn’t drop and break something, there should be no way for him to get this wrong.

Gingerly grabbing one of the pots, he reaches down into the bag with his other hand, bringing out a handful of the little pellets, examining them carefully. It looks very much like dried clay. He thinks the royal gardeners in Asgard use something similar, but he’s not sure.

Tipping his hand, he pours the pebbles down into the pot, and then digs up another handful, disposing it on top of the first layer until it looks like it’s about an inch thick. Having finished that part, he picks up a plant with yellow and red-striped petals, placing it down on the bed of dried clay, then inspecting the finished product.

So this is to be his life here, then, he dully surmises, performing simple household tasks at the behest of a mortal. The thought makes an odd mixture of feelings stir inside of him; mostly resentment at his
position and relief that nothing worse than this will apparently befall him. He tries to ignore the part of him that hopes he can perform this task better than his previous one, so that Tony won’t withdraw the relatively good graces it would seem have been bestowed upon him despite everything that’s happened both before and after his coming here.

He repeats the procedure with a few more of the pots, placing the bag of pebbles to the side and out of the way. It’s only then that he notices the tear from which a trickle of clay pellets are pouring out, clattering hollowly as they fall onto the table.

Damn.

He fiddles with the bag for a second, trying to shift it to put a hold to the leakage. But instead, his efforts cause the whole thing to rip, and a shower of little pieces of clay come rushing out as the bottom tears open. He fumbles, futilely trying to stop the flow of pebbles as they’re spilling out, a pursuit doomed from the very beginning. The outpour is of course unstoppable, and a second later the entire contents of the bag are flowing out over the table, rolling further down onto the floor.

For a while, he just stands there and stares uncomprehendingly at the disaster, empty bag still clutched in his hands. He’s so tired and confused, his mind unable to think properly, his emotions still a wreck. All that exists in that moment are the little pebbles spilling forth on the floor, taking off in all possible directions – beneath the couch, into each of the four corners of the room, all over the rug. He never knew one bag like that could contain so many of them.

And it’s like he’s watching his own life, slipping between his fingers as uncontrollably as those tiny little clay balls rolling off in all and every direction while he is wholly unable and powerless to stop them, doomed to watch as the chaos and disorder unfold beyond his control.

And yet again, the unpleasant feeling washes over him that he can’t do anything right here, not even the simplest of tasks; even this he managed to screw up. His brain is locked onto this single thought as he scrambles down to his knees, trying to pick up the pebbles and put them back into the torn remnants of the bag. But there’s so many of them, all spread out, and he’s so tired.

Futilely, he picks at the pebbles in closest proximity to him, attempting to scoop them up while his mind and thoughts are starting to race again. So Tony did say he wasn’t going to beat him or hurt him, but what if he decides he’s had it with his constantly failing slave and can’t stand having him around anymore? Perhaps this was the last straw, maybe he’s screwed up one time too many for Tony to want to keep him around. Maybe the man wants a… break. And what if he decides to lend him to one of his Avenger friends for a while, perhaps even Barton? He certainly wouldn’t have any compunction about taking a more hands-on approach to revenge after everything.
The thought is like a bucket of ice water poured over him, and he can feel a cold sweat of panic breaking out on his forehead. He hasn’t put much consideration into that possibility for quite a long time now, having had enough with worrying about Tony’s plans for him. But now that it would seem like that threat is gone, this prospect suddenly rears its ugly head once more.

A couple of days ago, the thought wouldn’t have pulled the rug out from under his feet like this, because it would just have been another drop in the raging sea of terror he was already swimming in. But now that his mind has been lulled into alluring complacency after the promise of safety, being dragged out of his little bubble of imagined security makes the prospect even worse.

A note of panic is spreading inside of him as he makes another attempt at collecting some of the pellets, his shaking hands fumbling so badly that he drops half of them an instant later. His frayed nerves and mind just can’t deal with this emotional rollercoaster. Because maybe he’s not safe after all, despite Tony’s reassurances and promises, maybe Barton or someone else will instead do what Tony can’t be bothered to.

Why did he ever believe he was safe; he should have known better than clinging to such childish hopes. He stares at the wide-spread ocean of clay pebbles, himself kneeling in the middle of it all, futilely trying to clean the mess up while everything stubbornly keeps slipping out of his hands. There are so many of them and his hands are shaking so badly and…

… and suddenly there’s a crunching sound to his right, far too reminiscent of a shoe stepping on dried clay for comfort. He tenses and freezes, clenching his jaws tightly. He’s not going to break down in front of Tony again, he isn’t.

So he merely sits there waiting for Tony to voice his displeasure and annoyance, for him to finish it all off with a crisp statement that this is the last straw; one of his friends can take custody of him for a while and…

“Bambi?” comes the voice somewhere above him to his right, sounding both surprised and questioning. “What’s going on?”

“Th-the bag… ripped,” he manages, voice half-choked by repressed panic. It sounds like a terribly weak excuse in his ears, a desperate attempt of placing the blame elsewhere.

“Yeah, I can see that. It’s not what I asked,” Tony says, crouching down next to him. “You look like you’ve just seen a ghost or something. Seriously, you’re paler and sweeter than a survivor from a Friday the 13th movie, and that can’t be healthy.”
At this, his mouth springs into action faster than his brain. “Are you going to hand me over to Barton?” he blurts out, wincing at how the question sounds. So pathetic, so desperate, so… scared.

Tony looks at him with forehead creased in incomprehension, like Loki’s just said he’s going to marry a bilgesnipe. And why are his hands shaking like that, they shouldn’t be…

“I’m not handing you over to anyone, buddy,” comes the resolute reply after a stretch of silence. “What the hell made you think I would do that?”

Loki’s reflexive glance at the pebbles surrounding them is apparently answer enough, as Tony gives an exasperated sigh. “Sheesh, Rudolph. Shit happens. Dummy used to mess up worse on a daily basis after I first built him, and I still keep him around. Haven’t sold him for scrap value yet.” He rubs two fingers against his forehead, massaging a spot just over his eyebrows. “What I’m saying is that there’s not going to be any handing over of anything. You’re staying here in my tower, and that’s all there is to it. Got that?”

And he wants to believe that, he really does. But it’s not the words that convince him in the end, but the hand on his shoulder, the same one that was there when he was losing it on the floor in Tony’s workshop. A part of him wants to shrug its pitying presence off, but in the end it’s the other part of him that wins out.

So he merely nods, afraid his voice might not quite obey him.

“Alright then, let’s get this mess sorted out,” Tony says as he moves to stand up, raising an eyebrow in Loki’s direction. “Ever used a vacuum cleaner?”
Chapter 31

He’s huddled up at one corner of the couch in the living room, staring blankly into the wall, legs drawn up to his chest. Right now, he doesn’t feel like he has any energy left for much of anything; both his body and his mind are so tired, so terribly weary, as if he’s been drained of every last speck of strength.

Lately, his emotions have been in such turmoil, all the ups and downs having worn him down. And he has a hard time digesting it all; there are so many things for him to come to terms with. Fleetingly, he wonders whether his world is perhaps about to stabilize itself from now on rather than continue to rock wildly back and forth, jostling him so fiercely that he has to struggle to keep his footing.

The concept that his life might basically have consolidated itself at this point, reached some semblance of status quo, is both reassuring and disturbing.

Reassuring, because it means that his life in Tony’s tower is unlikely to get much worse than it currently is. Disturbing, because it also means that he will have no choice but to continue his pitiful existence like this. Like a slave.

The aversion churns inside of him at this prospect, but it’s a weak and feeble stirring; right now he can’t muster up much of anything; it’s like those recently raging feelings left a hole in their wake once they subsided.

He picks at the sleeve of his shirt, pulling at a loose thread. At least Tony is away on business, and the man’s absence brings him a certain sense of relief. After all, he’s still here under Tony’s sufferance, and it’s very clear that the man doesn’t want him here. To top it off, he’s still at a loss as to how to act around him, still confused as to what is expected. Sure, Tony gave him a brief outline during their little talk – behave, do as he’s told, don’t make any trouble – but those were only very general things, nothing detailed or specific. And of course, all that goes without saying, which makes it neither helpful nor informative. Given the strict and comprehensive rules governing the lives of slaves in Asgard, it’s not much to go by. To add to his confusion, Tony’s opinion of what constitutes proper behaviour doesn’t seem to have a lot in common with those of slave masters in Asgard, beyond the basics.

And Tony’s presence makes him uncertain, not quite knowing what to do with himself. Not long ago, he thought he knew what he could expect, and now that certainty has left a gaping void that he doesn’t know what to fill with. It’s like fumbling in the dark without a lantern to light his way and prevent him from stumbling on the uneven ground.
In Asgard, there are clear standards of conduct for everyone, be they a slave or a member of the royal household or anything in between. But here, there are none, or at least none that he can see, beyond the obvious. As bad as his former expectations were, at least he had thought he knew what to anticipate, and now that rug has been pulled from under his feet, leaving nothing to replace it.

First and foremost, slaves in Asgard would never have been left idle like this, would never have been allowed to lounge around the way he’s been doing during most of his time here. If their masters don’t have any work for them for the time being, they’d be hired out to perform labour elsewhere. Slaves don’t eat for free, after all.

But Tony has already told him that he’s to stay here, as opposed to being turned over to someone else’s custody. At times, it’s like he’s almost forgotten that he even has a slave around, like Loki is only part of the furnishing and beneath notice.

Of course, there is one type of slaves who aren’t usually required to do much work and mostly sit around the house for decoration and their masters’ pleasure, but it has already been made clear that Tony has no such intentions for him.

One thing is obvious, though – Tony is bound to be happier the less he sees of his slave, the less time he has to spend in Loki’s presence. Even though it would seem that he has mostly come to terms with the situation by now, despite his never wanting it, it’s obvious that he’s still not pleased with it.

His musings are interrupted by the hum of the elevator ascending through the duct, faint but clearly discernible in the silence. Unfolding his long limbs, he pushes himself up from the couch and heads for the library, just managing to clear the field before a soft ping and a whoosh of elevator doors opening reverberate through the air and Tony steps out into the living room.

There is one thought taking up most of his free brain capacity as he stands there in elevator, watching the little yellow light move up the number panel on the wall — he needs to find Loki something to do. And judging by the recent incident with the clay pellets, the god is more highly strung than a fine-tuned Stradivarius.

Yeah, leave it to a jittery god of mischief to make something as supposedly soothing as becoming one with nature through greenery care turn into a nerve-frizzing angst fest.

He sighs, raking a hand through his hair. He needs to make sure Loki’s occupied with something.
After all, being idle with nothing to do is the most sure-fire way to let your mind stray into all sorts of
dark and destructive directions. He should know, since his time in Afghanistan. After his return
home, he had spent endless of hours in his workshop during the long nights that followed, focusing
on some project or the other to prevent all those things eating away at him from totally devouring
him. Merely keeping his hands busy had proved the most effective way of keeping his negative
thoughts at bay.

So yeah, putting the god to some kind of work might help to put the cats in the bag a little more at
ease.

It’s not easy to think up something an alien powerless god might be useful for, but finally an idea
does come to him. Yeah, maybe there is something he can occupy Loki with for a while that is
simple enough for him to be able to handle just fine.

There’s a ping as the elevator comes to a halt with a slight jerk, and the doors open. Immediately, he
makes a beeline for the couch, tired after long hours of boring negations with stubborn clients.
Sinking down on the cushions with a sigh of contentment, he kicks his shoes off and lets his head fall
back, enjoying a moment of doing absolutely nothing.

It doesn’t take long before the feeling starts to creep up on him that something’s a little off, and it’s
only a few seconds later that he realizes what it is.

The couch is still warm.

Before he’s even made it halfway down to the library, Jarvis’ voice rings out from the ceiling,
stopping him in his tracks.

“Mr Stark would like to see you in the living room.”

So he has no choice but to go back to where he just left, though the prospect of sitting down with a
book is far more appealing than being in the same room as Tony.

The man is slouching on the couch as he enters, on the very same spot Loki was occupying only
minutes ago. He comes to a halt at a reasonable distance away, waiting for Tony to speak whatever
is on his mind.
“Rudolph,” Tony says as way of acknowledgement. “Just wanted to talk with you for a bit.”

There’s a pause as Loki waits for Tony to tell him to sit down, if that’s what he’s intending. Granted, Tony hasn’t insisted on the usual displays of deference owed by slaves to their masters – kneeling, gaze directed at the floor, the ubiquitous ‘master’ tacked onto the end of utterances, and so on – but he still thinks it might be unwise to seat himself down before Tony tells him to; slaves are of course supposed to wait until they’re given permission for such.

The pause stretches into a long silence as nothing happens. “In case it wasn’t obvious, that’s the cue for you to sit down,” Tony finally says as he waves a hand towards the non-occupied end of the couch.

Loki gingerly sits, and Tony watches him for a while before speaking again.

“Are you avoiding me?”

The blunt, almost ridiculously straight-forward question takes him by surprise. Really, what is he supposed to answer to that? If Tony’s noticed, there’s hardly going to be any point in trying to deny it.

“I assumed you would feel more… comfortable at a distance,” he manages as way of explanation. And most importantly, he would as well, but he isn’t going to say that out loud, of course.

Tony picks at his nails for a few heartbeats before replying.

“You know, we're going to have some really long years ahead of us if we’re gonna spend them trying to avoid each other, don’t you think?”

Well, his years are going to be long regardless, but that’s another fact he isn’t about to point out to Tony.

So instead, he makes no reply.
“I don’t bite, you know,” Tony says flippantly, though it sounds like there’s a hint of exasperation in there as well. “I thought you’d already gotten that memo printed out for you.”

Loki looks out the window over Tony’s shoulder, the greyish clouds spattered like dirty pieces of cotton in the rain-heavy sky. There’s a part of Tony’s previous talk with him that suddenly emerges, regarding something that slaves aren’t normally supposed to be doing – voicing their concerns.

“What is it you expect from me?” he says, his voice sounding strange in his own ears, like it’s a foreign, alien presence that doesn’t belong in here.

Tony raises an eyebrow. “Didn’t I make that clear last time? It’s simple, really – behave yourself and don’t cause any trouble.” He gives Loki another one of those searching gazes. “However, I suppose you’ve been a bit idle lately, so I’m going to put you up to doing something useful around here. There’s all these--”

He’s interrupted by a buzz on his cell phone. Grimacing, he digs the device out of his pocket with two fingers, throwing a brief glance at the display, and then sighs. “Alright, gotta pick this one up before I bring you up to speed on your task. Wait here until I’m back.”

And with that, Tony makes for the door, phone pressed to his ear. Loki can’t hear any of what the person at the other end of the line is saying, but he doesn’t miss the angry creases marring Tony’s forehead.
Chapter 32

“Alright, you bring me up to speed as soon as you have more information,” he tells the director on the other end of the line, thereby ending their unfortunate conversation.

The sharp click as he snaps his cell phone shut sounds angry. And he is too. From the looks of it, someone’s been embezzling money from Stark Industries. Sure, the amount is only a drop in the ocean compared to the enormous sums that flow in and out of the operation on a daily basis, but it’s the principle that matters. And what’s even worse, someone has also been trying to access restricted files, possibly with the intent to sell secret company information to the highest bidder.

Obviously, someone in the higher echelons is a fraud, but he has no idea which one of those guys with their pin-striped suits and artificially whitened smiles or those women with their high heels and hair pulled into facelift-tight buns is the perpetrator. Nope, no clue who it might be among them who is a traitor, a rotten apple that can’t be trusted.

Mr Anderson, always so brimming with new and creative ideas, but with a careless streak? Ms Tenhurst, who’s particular to a fault, but shows unmistakable signs of being a gold-digger with expensive habits? Mr Chen, who never shirks a responsibility, but has a fondness for drinking and gambling?

Only heavens know.

Fuck.

He massages his temples with his fingers. It doesn’t do anything for his headache.

Of course, Pepper would have handled this expertly, if she had still been his CFO. Heck, this entire mess wouldn’t even have happened in the first place on her watch. And even if it did, she would have sniffed the perpetrator out in the time it would have taken him to down a bottle of scotch.

He sort of misses Pepper. She was his steadfast anchor, the bright and shining light that always managed to pull him up from his moody stints and back into the world of the living. As well as the band-aid that could be applied to pretty much any fuck-ups in his life, and things would automatically sort themselves out. Until the day she just walked out on him.
And a part of him misses her still.

*Damn, he thought he was over that already.*

He sinks down into the nearest chair, head in his hands, feeling like utter shit. Why does his life always have to be like this, mess upon mess upon mess?

And speaking of that bottle of scotch, that seems to be the best available remedy to his problems. Short-term, at least.

Getting up from the chair, he rummages around in his liquor cabinet until he finds something passable. Not bothering with a glass, he unscrews the top and then drinks heavily in deep, soothing gulps.

Wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, he stares at the bottle in misery, and then takes another few gulps.

Pepper is gone, his company is going to the dogs without her, people he thought he could trust are betraying him once more, to say nothing of him being the butt of the joke that is Asgard’s justice system. Yeah, what other things are there that could possibly go wrong?

He sits there for a while, alternating between drinking straight from the bottle and feeling sorry for himself. Sometimes multi-tasking by doing both at the same time. Despite long and diligent practice, he’s beginning to feel a little queasy from the large amounts of alcohol he’s been consuming in this short amount of time, so he gets up from the chair, bottle still clutched into a tight grip, and saunters into the living room to find more comfortable seating arrangements.

*Perhaps it’s that smarmy Mr Hermann from his board of directors who’s been embezzling and trying to get his grubby little hands on sensitive information.* He can totally picture it, the chubby man with his beady, shifty eyes sitting there in front of the computer screen, tapping away at his keyboard, watching those numbers being directed into his own bank account while attempting to decrypt those encoded files…

“Fuck,” he yells at no one in particular, slamming the door behind him in anger. Why does shit like this always happen to *him*?
He almost startles as his gaze falls on Loki who’s sitting on the couch, still waiting. *Oh yeah, it was that little detail as well.*

And he really doesn’t feel up to dealing with that right now. It will have to wait until tomorrow.

So instead, he plops himself down on the couch, the contents of the bottle in his hand spilling a little over the brim. His mind only vaguely registers how Loki tenses up next to him, eyeing him warily.

Right now, he desperately needs something to occupy his brain and take his thoughts off all the current shittiness. His eyes meet with the DVD remote control on the other side of the table, and its promises of mind-numbing entertainment. *Yeah, a dumb-ass comedy, a brainless action movie, whatever.*

He reaches out for the remote, leaning over towards Loki’s side. At that, the god jerks, pressing himself back into the couch and away from Tony.

And the sight just grates him like a cheese grater rasping against his skin. Apparently it’s not enough that someone in his company, on a very trusted position no less, thinks he’s enough of a dim-witted idiot for them to get away with stealing a few million right under his nose while trying to nab company secrets to boot, or that Pepper considers him an insensitive jerk with a list of issues long enough to cover the distance from here to Paris. Nope, because now he’s being pegged for an abusive fucking asshole to top it all off.

“Would you stop that already?” he snaps at Loki, annoyance getting the better of him as his patience is wearing paper-thin, in places dissolving into nothing. What the hell did he ever do to merit such a shitty opinion from the god who is looking at him like he’s fucking Jason Voorhees himself? “I’ve already fucking said I’m not going to do anything to you!”

He tries to put the bottle still grasped in his fingers back on the table, but his hand-eye coordination is not quite up to par and he fails spectacularly. The side of the bottle slams against the table’s edge and breaks, causing shards and liquid to spill out over the floor.

*Fuck.*

He only barely notices, out of the corner of one eye, the quick movement as Loki gets up from the couch and hurries out of the room.
He is back on his bed, waiting apprehensively for… something. Tony is obviously angry; he doesn’t know exactly what prompted it, though it seemed to be connected to the earlier phone call. One thing is certain, though, he hadn’t served to improve the man’s mood. Quite the opposite.

And though it’s not the first time he’s seen Tony drink or being drunk, it has never been combined with a bad mood like this before.

Back in Asgard, there are many men with a taste for drinking. Some of them turn friendly and jocular with the sweet rush of alcohol in their veins, some sad and sentimental, and others yet vicious and brutal, the smallest provocation enough for them to lash out with violence.

He’s not sure which category Tony belongs to, but it sure didn’t seem like either of the two first ones. Not particularly wanting to find out the answer, he took the opportunity to sneak out when Tony’s concentration appeared to be more focused on the broken bottle than on his slave.

The nervous anxiety is eating away at him; he’s far from sure it was a wise decision to leave after Tony’s having told him to wait. Maybe the man will come back for him, even angrier now that Loki took to scurrying out of the room like that, without even bothering to clean up the mess of the broken bottle like it would have been expected of a slave.

So he waits with bated breath. A sober Tony might be somewhat predictable, a drunk one… not so much. Promises made while sober might not mean very much once alcohol enters the stage, pushing everything else out.

Warily, he listens for the sound of footsteps approaching, but there are none.

Still, he decides to stay awake, just in case.

He wakes up with a startle, his head spinning and his left arm soundly asleep. Grimacing, he pushes himself up from his decidedly uncomfortable position on the couch, the previous alcohol-induced buzz in his head having faded to a slight murmur. He isn’t sure how long he’s been lying here like road-kill, but at least he’s a few degrees more sober now than when he dozed off.
Something is nagging at the back of his head, and it doesn’t take long before bits and pieces of what transpired earlier start coming back to him in a mosaic of fractured images.

Damn.

“Jarvis, where is Loki?”

“He’s in his room, sir.”

“Is he still awake?”

“It would seem so.”

With a groan, he gets up from the couch and heads out of the living room.

His almost-steady feet come to a halt outside Loki’s room, and for a while he hesitates, hand hovering above the handle. Remembering his own recent behaviour, though, he thinks better of it. Sure it’s his house and all, but... So instead, he lifts his hand and knocks, three soft raps against the wooden panel.

There’s no answer, so finally he pushes the handle down, slowly letting the door slide open. Loki is sitting there on the bed, arms wrapped around his drawn-up knees and a wary look on his face.

“Hey, Bambi.” At least he doesn’t think he’s slurring. What amazing progress.

The shift in the form in front of him as Loki tenses is faint, but still impossible to miss.

Sighing inwardly, Tony pulls out a chair, sitting down opposite the bed. He suddenly feels very stupid.

Drumming a couple of fingers against his thigh, he fumbles around for something to say. And why is it that all his conversations with the god are awkward and weird like this?
“Okay, so… I got some bad news about my company and I wasn’t in a good mood,” he manages. “But all that stuff I said about not hurting you still stands. You know, just because I get pissy sometimes doesn’t mean I’m going to turn you into a punching bag or anything.”

And fuck, Loki’s eyes are so damn wide, like he’s a freaking puppy someone dropped off a thousand miles away from home. And that makes him want to—Alright, Tony, stop that line of thought right there.

“So just stop being so… jittery, alright? Seriously, you’re making me feel like I’m the biggest asshole that ever walked planet Earth. And I’m really not.”

Damn, he’s so fucking tired, and he desperately needs to sleep. And he doesn’t know what fucking else to say, not when Loki is looking at him like that.

Oh well. Perhaps things will be better and less awkward once they’ve both gotten some sleep.

“Anyway, as I was trying to say earlier before we got interrupted, I’ll set you up with a task tomorrow, and we’ll take it from there, alright?” He gets up from the chair, scooting it back into place, glad to leave the god to his own devices.

“So, I’ll see you in the morning, Rudolph.”
Chapter 33

He watches as Tony enters the room carrying a big cardboard box filled with something that must be very heavy, judging by the strained look on the man’s face and the loud thump as he sets his burden down on the floor. Groaning as if he has just performed a great physical feat, Tony straightens himself up with hands pressed against the small of his back.

Then he turns to face Loki who is sitting on the couch, watching the proceedings in silence. Tony summoned him here only minutes ago regarding that task he wanted Loki to perform, and from the looks of it, it involves the nondescript box on the floor.

“Alright, sunshine, here’s the task for today,” he says gesturing towards the bulky thing. Loki chooses not to comment; whatever is in that box he hopes that the contents won’t turn out to be too unpleasant if he’s going to have to deal with them.

Tony crouches down, opening the top flaps, and then digs deep into the innards of the box. His hands emerge holding a stack of documents, long lines of fine-printed text on white paper.

“These all need to be sorted.” Tony says, his thumb flipping through the stack as he speaks, making the flimsy things produce a flapping sound. “They’re documents relating to the great and awesome Stark Industries, which happens to be my company.” His gaze leaves the handful of papers and comes to rest on Loki, as if expecting him to comment.

“I see,” he says, eyeing the box with some dismay. There are a lot of papers in there.

“Now, usually Pepper would have taken care of these things when she was still unofficially running the company, but since she left… well, let’s just say that paperwork isn’t my style and I can picture a million different things I’d rather spend my time on.” He lifts the top sheet to take a look at the document beneath, humming quietly to himself.

Then his attention turns back to Loki again. “In her absence, all these papers that people for some reason keep sending me and that certain board members and managers are producing have been accumulating for quite a while.” He indicates the cardboard box. “But I think it’s about time they finally got sorted out.”

Paperwork. Loki sighs inwardly, half from the sheer boredom at the prospect and half from relief that that’s all there is to the task. Dull, but nothing he can’t deal with.
There are a bunch of black and grey folders lying at Tony’s feet and the man disposes of the stack of papers and picks up one of the folders instead. “Okay, each document goes into one of these. And there’s a system to it all, so listen up.”

Then follows a lengthy recourse about what should go where, according to what premises and in what order. The topic is tedious, of course, but Loki makes sure to register each detail of the sorting system in his mind. At least his memory has always been good, so he can easily recall long-winded instructions.

“You got all that?” Tony asks as his little exposé about the intricacies of paper sorting has come to an end.

“I got it,” Loki replies, quenching the sigh wanting to escape his lips.

“Good.” Tony says. “Then you should be set for the next few hours.”

And with that, the man is gone and Loki is left alone with the box and its papery contents.

Of course, there’s nothing else to it than to get to it, so he grabs the top handful of papers, making little piles around himself as he works. It’s dull, it’s boring, and he fails to see the importance of this, but he does it anyway.

After all that’s happened, he isn’t one to push his luck. After… things didn’t turn out the way he had expected them to since coming here, it would be foolish and unwise to tempt fate. Perhaps the Norns would think him ungrateful and unravel the threads already spun, deciding to turn his fortunes into something much more resembling what he only recently had been certain would be awaiting him.

He’s still confused about his unfulfilled expectations, not quite sure of the whys and hows behind it all. And it isn’t until now that it feels like the realization is finally starting to sink in, and he truly dares to believe Tony’s reassurances. As desperately as he had wanted to believe them, words only meant so much, after all. Especially yesterday, when Tony had come into his room, still not sober, he had been fearful that words were indeed only that—words. But all his worrying had been for naught, it had turned out.

Of course, even he can see from his very much subjective position that there has hardly been any revenge at all to speak of. And it’s in such stark dissonance with the vivid images of what would
happen playing out in his mind before, during, and after his arrival in Tony’s tower.

No, it would indeed seem that Tony has no intention of doing any of those things that Loki had feared. It is perplexing, because he was so sure that everything that transpired after his coming here, everything the man did and said, pointed in that direction… and yet, it didn’t.

How could he have been so mistaken?

In the end, Tony had even promised Loki not to hurt him, and he is still trying to get his head around that. Even if he should never have given Tony plenty of reasons to bear grudges against him, even if the two of them had never met before his arrival here, it still makes no sense. What reason could there possibly be for a master to promise not to hurt his slave? That is highly counterproductive, as the constant threat of pain as a consequence of undesirable behaviour is the easiest and most effective way of enforcing a slave’s obedience. Why would Tony willingly pass up on that?

No, he doesn’t understand, but regardless what prompted it, it would be unwise to give Tony any reason to think better of his decision, so he does his best to perform the task at hand as ordered. Dislike it as he may, he’s still smart enough to realize what course of action will make his life here easier, and it sure as heck isn’t being uncooperative.

In the end, when it all comes down to it, he still has no choice but to live with the humiliation and degradation inherent in his station, but it could, of course, have been so much worse than this.

It is several hours later in the evening when Tony comes back to check on Loki to see if he’s finished. By then, the god has fallen asleep on the couch, legs drawn up and one arm nestled beneath his head as a make-shift pillow.

Tony regards the sleeping form for a little while, and then turns to the box and the folders littering the floor. The box is empty, so apparently all the papers have been sorted. Well, what do you know.

Crouching down, he picks up one of the folders and slowly flips through the documents contained therein. It does look correctly sorted. Just to be sure, he checks another folder, and makes the same assessment after some further leafing through of formal and boring sheets of paper.

Of course, this was the one box, out of several in his unwanted collection, that contained the least
important kind of papers, nothing that the IRS would ever be asking for or anything, but still. Pepper would have taken care of this responsibility, if she’d still been a part of his life, but now it has fallen onto him. Too confidential to let just anyone handle, because trust is something that doesn’t come easy to him after everything that’s happened. The information is too sensitive, and even though most people wouldn’t be able to make head or tail out of them, he doesn’t want to run the risk of the documents ending up with someone secretly working for a competitor, like Justin Hammer. He could trust Pepper with his life, to say nothing of some measly papers, but he has yet to find someone he would be willing to let fill her position. And the recent mishap with the rotten apple in his company is proof of the wisdom of that decision.

He sighs, because now, Pepper has walked out of his life, and what has entered in her stead is the god of mischief-slash-slave now snoozing on his couch.

Pepper was the reliable constant that kept his life in order, made sure he didn’t slide too far off the beaten track. In contrast, Loki has only served to put everything into a state of disorder and turmoil, making a worse mess out of his life than he would ever have managed on his own. Sure he had his ups and downs with Pepper, but they were of a fairly predictable and conventional nature, whereas Loki has been taking him on a high speed roller-coaster ride without even allowing him to buckle up first.

And perhaps, he should just collect his folders and go dump them into the archive, but something is holding him back. Perhaps it’s the realization that he has never seen Loki asleep before, and something about the sight is grabbing a firm hold of his attention, refusing to let go.

There is one thing in particular that stands out like a sore thumb as he watches the sleeping god up close, and that is how peaceful and relaxed his features are. And it is only now, when he sees the god like this, that he realizes how extremely taut and strained Loki’s face has been during his stay here. The difference is striking in its conspicuousness, almost like the god on the couch and the one in his memory are two different persons altogether. They just look so dissimilar.

It isn’t until then that it truly hits home just how worried Loki must have been. How much fearfulness and anxiety that his situation must have been causing him. That Tony must have been causing him. That part has already been made more than clear enough, of course, but seeing his face like this really serves to drive the point home even more brutally.

At that, he feels another sharp pang of guilt. Sure he had wanted to make Loki stew a little when he first came here, but not anything like this mental torture that he’s been put through. That was never what he intended, not anything close to it.

A strand of hair has fallen down across Loki’s face, and Tony is overcome by an urge to reach out and sweep it away. Perhaps even to run his fingers along those fine-chiselled features, trailing over
the handsome face.

But he controls himself, forcing the urge back into the deepest pits of indecency where it originated in his brain. Given all that’s transpired recently, if there’s one thing he’s going to do from now on, it’s to keep his hands to himself as far as Loki is concerned. Because this isn’t anything like his usual self being drunk at a party, leering at a pretty girl, making an indecent comment or two, grabbing a body part that might well have gotten him slapped if he hadn’t been the famous Tony Stark. Because all those people would be in a position to say no; they would be free to turn his advances down, should they want to.

But Loki isn’t in a position where he is technically allowed to do that, in case Tony should have been enough of an asshole to decide to take advantage.

The idea is disturbing and wrong on far too many levels to even bother counting.

Of course, since the incident with the knife leading to Loki finally asking the million-dollar question that must have been eating him from the inside out, Tony has never breached the topic again, and neither has Loki, both content to let it lie where they left it. He’s glad of that; merely thinking about those horrible misunderstandings and the awkward conversation that followed is enough to make him want to go hide in a closet and never come out again.

No, he will make sure never to do anything that could cause any reason for the subject to be brought up again, be it directly or indirectly.

Throwing one last long look at the sleeping form, he picks up the sorted folders and walks out of the room, leaving Loki on the couch, the stray strand of black hair still hanging into his face.
Chapter 34

Tony sips on his cup of coffee, surreptitiously watching the god at the other side of the table stuffing himself with breakfast like he’s a starving village in Africa. Not very different from when he first came here, after the enforced diet during his stay in the dungeons in Asgard. And seeing him like this, it is only now that he realizes how little the god has been eating lately.

The all-too familiar feeling of guilt rises in his throat again. And damn, how many times is he going to suffer that pang of bad conscience in Loki’s presence? But it’s too late to do anything about that now, expect admit to himself that he should have noticed, should have paid more attention. Or at least attached an appropriate amount of importance to it, rather than disregarding his observations with feeble and half-baked explanations.

Of course, in hindsight, everything is twenty-twenty and all that. But looking back, it seems so obvious; he should have noticed that something was seriously off about Loki. True, he had certainly noticed that things weren’t right, but he hadn’t realized the extent of it, or the cause of his erratic behaviour.

And much as he is loathe to admit it, Loki is his responsibility. There’s no one else here to see to his health and general welfare. And considering how abysmally bad Loki has – understandably – been at communicating his concerns, perhaps Tony’d do well to be more attentive from now on, more on the lookout for any deterioration in health, be it physical or mental.

Loki has just finished gulping down his third bowl of Cheerios and looks content for now, absent-mindedly playing around with the spoon in his hand for lack of better things to do. And Tony has long ago finished his sandwich, and is down to the last dredges of lukewarm coffee. Well then.

“Okay, sunshine, I have another box of papers in desperate need of sorting,” he says, leaning back in his seat. “Ready to take care of it?”

A little resigned sigh escapes Loki’s lips, but there are no further protests than that as the god nods.

Well, perhaps peaceful coexistence is possible, after all, even with a would-be world conqueror and enslaver of humanity.
And so, there are papers again. Lots of them. The cardboard box is bigger than last time, but just like yesterday, he gets to it with inward grimace, combined with heady relief that it would indeed seem that Tony’s intentions for him are nothing worse than what he can handle, demeaning as it still is to perform these menial, simple tasks.

He works mechanically, on auto-pilot, thinking about nothing in particular as he sorts the papers into different piles, fleetingly wondering why humans place so much importance on these flimsy things. The work is monotonous and is making him drowsy, and after a while he finds himself blinking to keep his eyelids from falling shut, his head slowly dropping towards his chest.

Soon, the letters and numbers on the documents that he’s supposed to keep track off as to indicate in which pile they belong seem to be dancing across the sheets, mischievously switching places with each other, refusing to stay in place.

Yawning, he puts the pile of papers in his hands down on the floor to rub at his heavy-lidded eyes. He hasn’t been sleeping very well until just recently due to the torturous strain he’s been under, interrupting his sleep and keeping him awake until late in the night. Now that the strain has finally relented, though, the lack of sleep that has been building up is starting to take its toll and he feels devastatingly tired, his body numb and slow to respond.

He eyes the couch longingly. Perhaps he could take a little break, get himself a quick nap? Just for a few minutes, no more than that.

Though, he isn’t quite sure how Tony would feel about him taking a break before he’s finished with his work. Maybe he’ll end up having to scrub floors again if Tony finds out, if Jarvis tells on him.

Well, he can live with that, he supposes. The temptation to get some much needed sleep is simply too overpowering to resist.

Abandoning the heaps of papers on the floor, he crawls up into the couch, sighing in contentment as his head hits the cushion. Not even a minute later, he’s fast asleep.

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He’s back in the dungeons, in the dark and filthy cell he once occupied, heavy shackles around his wrists. One of the guards – a fat man whose name he can’t remember, and it’s not like it matters, when they only trade insults with each other anyway – has just delivered his only meal for the day, a bowl filled with some foul-smelling gruel that he throws rather than sets down on the floor.
“Meal time,” he says disdainfully, eyeing Loki with ill-hidden contempt. “Though I fail to see why good food should be wasted on the likes of you.”

Loki sneers, giving the guard a scornful glare. “You call this disgusting slop ‘food’? Perhaps for a lowly creature like you, this would count as proper food, but--“

“Watch your mouth, traitor,” the fat man hisses, taking a step towards him. Of course, Loki knows he’d be better off keeping quiet rather than baiting these primitive brutes serving as guards, but he can’t stop himself. Their taunts rankle him too much for that.

As expected, the man takes a swing at him, one that Loki just barely dodges, hampered by his chains. Growling in fury at his failed attempt, the guard makes another try, this time hitting Loki in the ribs, casing him to double over in pain, gasping for air. Mere seconds later, hands grab his shoulders, pushing him up against the wall, the rough stones chafing at his skin through his tattered prison garb.

He tries to fight the hands nailing him to the cold stone wall, but to no avail. The man is much heavier than him, and also has the distinct advantage of not wearing heavy shackles around his wrists. A knee comes up to forcefully connect with Loki’s already bruised ribcage, and he groans in raw agony, making a grab for the hands on his shoulders, trying to push the body away, shoving with all his might to get his assailant off him--

--and he tumbles off the couch and onto the floor, hands still clamped around those wrists, his opponent’s body pinned beneath him. An instant later, when the dream has faded and the real world has returned, he finds himself straddling a surprised Tony, pinning the man’s hands to either side of his head. The look meeting his is one of shocked confusion, not entirely unlike a deep sea fish someone just pulled out of the water and onto dry land.

And Loki’s stomach sinks like a brick of lead. No doubt he’ll end up scrubbing floors for this until his knees are bleeding – if he’s lucky, that is.

Lightening-quick, he scrambles off Tony and scoots away to a safe distance while the man quirks an eyebrow at him, slowly pulling himself together from the unexpected assault to stand up, brushing himself off.

“Are all you gods in Asgard this paranoid, expecting assassination attempts in your sleep?” he asks, surprisingly level for someone who just got thrown to the floor by his own slave.
“I… was dreaming,” Loki replies, warily, certain that this explanation won’t count as a satisfactory excuse. Even if Tony did promise not to resort to physical violence, he doubts the consequences are going to be pleasant regardless. Slaves do not attack their masters unpunished, of course, regardless of how unintentionally.

“Must have been quite some dream, then.” Tony shrugs. “But as I came here to tell you before I found myself right in the middle of a WWF wrestling match, it’s time for dinner. At least I assume you’re hungry.” Puzzlingly, the man doesn’t seem angry, neither because of the unauthorized break he’s been helping himself to nor his subsequent hurling Tony to the floor. If anything, he seems… amused?

Then, a hand reaches down to where Loki is still sitting on the ground, grabbing hold of his arm. “Get up, will you. You’ve done enough huddling on the floor as it is,” Tony says resolutely as he pulls him to his feet.

As if being able to tell what Loki is thinking, he shrugs. “No hard feelings, Reindeer Games. Shit happens.” A crooked grin comes over his face. “Though, next time I will make sure to have Jarvis wake you up instead.”

Once again, he’s sitting at his usual spot at the table, this time eating food from a box adorned with the words Bartelli’s Kitchen. And he’s still not sure why Tony is letting him eat the same food as him, as this would surely not have happened in Asgard. He’d be given scraps, leftovers, whatever the free members of the household wouldn’t see fit to eat.

Well, perhaps there aren’t many scraps and leftovers to be had in a household consisting only of Tony, especially not since most of the food he eats seems to come out of these pre-packaged, one-portion boxes. So the easiest solution is probably to get his slave the same thing, he supposes.

He struggles a little with the long, whitish strands in his box. Noodles, Tony had called them. Just like Cheerios, food that is unidentifiable and has no equivalent on Asgard, but still doesn’t taste bad.

The strands slip off his fork, stubbornly refusing to wrap themselves around the metal in the same effortless way they are doing for Tony. He goes at it again, feeling vaguely stupid at his unsuccessful attempts, but not particularly caring. There’s no one but Tony here to see him anyway.
“I take it you don’t have noodles in Asgard, do you?” He hears Tony’s voice to his right, just as the forkful of thin strands slide back into the box yet again.

“We don’t,” he answers, trying to picture the royal court sitting at the High Table attempting to wrap these flimsy things around their eating utensils. The image is oddly… discrepant.

“So what do you guys usually eat up in Magic Fairyland, then?” Tony asks, slurping loudly at his noodles.

“Meat, usually. Pork or venison would be the most common,” he answers, the question unwittingly making him think back on the innumerable meals he’s eaten in Asgard. It all seems like a very long time ago now. “Bread and cheese. Porridge, though that’s mostly for the lower classes. Fruit, whenever it’s in season. Some vegetables, but not in great quantities.”


“We don’t have anything like that in Asgard, no. Ingredients are not… mixed together as often as in Midgard.”

“What a shame. You know, while I sure don’t mind a nice steak every now and then, it would get pretty boring eating that kind of plain stuff after a while.” He elegantly twirls another helping of noodles onto his fork. “So tell me, what was your favourite Asgardian food, then?”

Loki blinks at the odd question. He can understand the interest in a foreign culture and its customs, especially for an inquisitive man like Tony, but there is no reason why he would be asking personal questions like that about Loki’s own preferences. Nobody in Asgard would ask a slave such things. Slaves’ opinions don’t matter, if they at all have one.

“Deer, I guess. And boar,” he says simply, not knowing where all this is supposed to lead.

“Ah, the wildlife kind of guy. You into hunting?”

Of course, it’s not like he can refuse to reply, but it’s strange and weird that Tony is asking him these things, and he isn’t quite sure how to react.
“Not really. I was more interested in practicing magic and reading books.”

Tony snorts, pointing his fork at him. “So, the nerdy type, huh? Yeah, I kinda figured that one out myself. You aren’t really cut out to be a jock.” He chuckles to himself, though the humour is lost on Loki. “So what kind of books did you read? Sappy romance? Horror? Agatha Christie?” He digs into his food again, chewing loudly.

No, masters aren’t supposed to be having normal conversations with their slaves, not beyond what is necessary to make sure that orders and commands are carried out correctly. Well, they might talk at them, but not to them or with them, and they certainly don’t expect answers in return.

Though, for some strange reason, Tony does.

So Loki can do nothing but answer dutifully, while his mind silently wonders if he will ever come to understand Tony at all.
This time, there are two cardboard boxes of papers in front of him, both a bit smaller than the previous ones. He’s almost made it down to the bottom of the first box – which Tony said contained minutes and records from board meetings, though the words mean little to him – and mechanically picks up the last few sheets of paper, sorting them out as well.

Tony, on his hand, is sitting on the couch some distance away, reading through some documents nestled on his lap as his hands absentmindedly keep fiddling with a little colourful cube. It clacks rhythmically as he twists and turns the sections around, changing the ever-flowing pattern of colours. He recognizes the thing, having seen Tony play around with it before.

Despite the specifics of his situation still being confusing and illogical, at least the current seating arrangements are something he can relate to and that make sense, given the differences in their social status – him on the floor, surrounded by a sea of papers and folders, and Tony lounging comfortably on the couch. That’s one of the few things so far that are as one could expect them to be, that would have been similar back in Asgard.

There is still precious little of his situation that makes sense, though, so when something actually does, it stands out in the ocean of bewilderment and unfamiliarity. But at least it would seem that his presence is tolerated now, no longer serving to routinely put Tony into a bad mood, like he all too well remembers how it used to do.

Perhaps the change in attitude has been brought by his finally being of some use and doing something that the man actually considers worthwhile.

It would be a logical conclusion. Because what master would look with anything but disapproval on a slave that isn’t useful? Feeding and clothing a slave who can’t contribute anything valuable would be distasteful to any master, of course.

He finishes with the last few papers in his hand, placing them into the correct folder, and is about to reach out for the second box still waiting for him when the sound of Tony’s voice makes him look up from his work.

“Done already, huh?” the man says, giving the pile of folders on the floor a scrutinizing glance.

“Yes,” he answers, eyes following Tony as the man gets up from his sprawled position on the couch
and saunters over to where Loki is sitting. Crouching down, Tony picks up the top folder, opening the front flap and slowly flipping through the pages with his thumb.

After a little while of this, he smacks the folder shut and gives Loki a brief nod. “Looks fine,” he says, as he puts the thing back into the pile. “Good job, Rudolph.”

With that, he stands up and walks back to the couch again where he nonchalantly arranges himself in a position that looks positively indecent, returning to his documents and his cube, leaving Loki to his second box of papers.

Loki throws a surreptitious glance at the man. He can’t remember the last time Tony voiced any approval for anything he’s done, as opposed to annoyance or exasperation, which seems to be the default emotions he’s evoked in the man for most of his stay here. And there’s a bubble of resentment rising up in him as he realizes that a part of him actually appreciates the approving comment, like a dog being petted on its head by its master. When did Tony’s being pleased with him ever matter to him beyond the mere practical aspects, to ensure that his life here won’t be any more difficult than necessary?

Perhaps he should have been fitted with a tail so he could wag it while he’s at it.

It shouldn’t make any difference what a mortal thinks of him, especially not when it comes to simple matters like paper-sorting. Truly, he must have fallen far when a comment like that from Tony can cause that little stirring of something that isn’t resentment or fear, or anger or desperation or any of the other negative, draining feelings he’s become all too acquainted with since coming here. Even if the previous roaring of those emotions has subsided to a dull murmur by now, there’s still been so precious little falling on the positive side of the scale for him that even this simple comment gets a welcoming reception in his mind.

And it’s not until now that he realizes how much he’s missed that, something that’s not just another expression of his being unwanted and unappreciated and failing to live up to expectations; sentiments that he’s already all too familiar with from his life in Asgard. Since his coming here, there have been so precious few good things – an absence of bad things isn’t really the same – and no matter how tiny and insignificant this might be, he still wants to hold onto it for a little while.

So for a brief moment, he lets himself enjoy that faint little stirring caused by Tony’s approval, basking in its tiny warmth, before resolutely shoving the blatant proof of weakness aside.

Because it’s ridiculous and unbecoming that he should care about any such, even for a second.
No, it should not affect him what a mortal thinks of him.

Stifling a yawn, he turns another page of the report in front of him. Not that he usually bothers with formal documents like this, but as this one contains a quick and dirty overview of the recent mishap in Stark Industries, he supposes he should take a look at it. At least the perpetrator has been found out, even though he managed to leave the country before the police could pick him up.

Mr Crawford, the unassuming Marketing Director, who wouldn’t stand out in a crowd of three. That had been quite the shock; he’d never suspected that guy of all people.

At least he didn’t get his hands on any of the secret information he’d been fishing for, though the three million of embezzled bucks are still gone. Oh well. That’s peanuts given the circumstances; he can live with that, even though his already dented ability to trust people has gotten another buckle after this episode.

Sighing, he makes another few flips of the Rubik’s cube in his hands, his fingers sliding over the well-worn surfaces and edges. The little clicks of the sections slipping into place are soothing in their familiarity, and even though the cube has long since stopped providing any real challenge, it’s still a pastime that keeps his hands busy while his brain is occupied with boring stuff. Like other people might doodle or twirl a pencil between their fingers when forced to plough through mind-numbing reading material.

But at least this issue has resolved itself, without the magic helping hand of Pepper. So perhaps his life can actually return to some degree of normalcy after all.

Well, as normal as it can possibly be when you have an enslaved god of mischief living under your roof. But then again, when was the last time his life was ever normal or uncomplicated? If it ever were, it’s so long ago that he’s forgotten about it by now.

He eyes Loki over the top edge of his wad of papers, watching as the god dutifully arranges the documents into different piles in accordance with whatever system he’s made up.

At least he isn’t making any trouble or protesting the paper-sorting task, or engaging in any form of passive sabotage.
He supposes that’s gotta count for something.

The non-stop, almost obsessive twisting of the cube and the little sharp clacks that accompany it are mildly distracting at first, and then oddly mesmerizing. Soon, he finds his attention straying from his papers to the cube in Tony’s hands as his eyes are inevitably drawn to it. He stares as the little patches of red and blue and green switch places, turning the different sides of the cube into a uniform colour, for a moment forgetting about his own duties.

Then, suddenly, Tony looks up and for a fleeting moment their gazes meet across the distance physically separating them.

He quickly turns away, breaking eye contact as he once more returns his focus to his papers.

“Want to give it a try?” he suddenly hears Tony’s voice say to his left.

He looks up just in time to see Tony draw his hand back and a second later lob the cube over to him in a lazy underhand throw. He catches the thing more out of reflex than anything else.

“Picked it up in Wal-Mart for ten bucks years ago, and it has offered me a higher quote of fun-to-money than almost any stuff I’ve ever bought,” Tony continues as Loki turns the cube around in his hands, then giving it a tentative twist.

“Anyway, the goal is to arrange the cube so that each side sports one and the same colour,” Tony explains as if it wasn’t obvious already.

His full attention is on the cube as he makes another few twists, trying to find the underlying logic to the puzzle. After a little while, things start to fall into place in his head, like an equation lining itself up, all ready and waiting to be solved.

He concentrates as he realigns the sections in accordance with the logic unfolding in his head, fingers working eagerly to solve the puzzle as time floats away in a haze. Another twist, and he wrinkles his
forehead in consternation as he realizes that he’s missed a turn. Quickly, he reverses the last few moves and then continues on the previous track, spinning the little cubes around, rearranging them to fit the images in his head.

Some time later, the puzzle is solved. He stares at it in satisfaction, then looks up at Tony who’s watching him with one eyebrow raised.

“I… believe this should prove an acceptable solution,” he says, trying not to sound too pleased with himself as he turns the cube around in his hand, displaying the uniformly coloured sides.

“Well, I’ll be damned,” Tony says with a quirk of his mouth. “Quite the smart one, aren’t you?”

Loki makes no reply to that; he’s too busy trying to quell the little surge that once more stirs inside of him at the unexpected compliment.
It’s getting late and he’s sitting on the couch reading a book, contemplating whether he should go to bed or finish the current chapter, when Tony suddenly enters the living room with a bottle in hand, in itself by no means an unusual sight.

What is unusual this time around, though – making Loki do a quick double-take – are the two glasses held in his other hand, one more than there should reasonably be. Surely Tony doesn’t expect him to…?

Whistling to himself, Tony puts the glasses down on the table and proceeds to pour an amber-coloured liquid into each of them. Without further preamble, he then scoots a glass over to Loki, as if it was the most natural thing in the world to offer a slave a drink.

He looks at the offering in confusion, but makes no move to pick it up.

“Come on, Reindeer Games,” Tony says, lifting his own glass. “Have a drink to celebrate that the slimy bastard who fucked around with my company has been found out.”

Loki eyes the glass hesitantly. He hasn’t been drinking all that much in the last few centuries, not like back in the day at all those lavish feasts held in Thor’s honour to celebrate some successful battle campaign or the other. And he remembers them clearly even now, how he’d emptied tankard after tankard, in the futile attempt at washing away the jealous bitterness inherent in the knowledge that no such would ever be held in his honour for all the increasingly difficult and complex spells he’d learnt to master over the years.

Perhaps it’s the memories of that time that has kept him away from heavier bouts of drinking lately, or maybe it’s the wish to keep his head clear as to not hamper his magic abilities. Whatever the reason, he has not indulged himself much in that regard since those days. Sure he’s been drinking beer and mead like everyone else, but only rarely in the amounts necessary to get intoxicated.

“Go on, try it,” Tony urges him, sensing his hesitation. “It’s not poisonous.”

Truth be told, the idea of drinking anywhere near Tony makes him feel a certain unease, because getting inebriated, not being at his full wits, is never advisable for a slave while in the presence of his master, even one like Tony.
Not that such a dilemma would ever be an issue in Asgard, because slaves would never be given alcoholic liquor to start with; they’re not supposed to intoxicate themselves for a number of reasons. Good liquor would never be wasted on slaves.

But of course, he can’t disobey the direct order. So he empties the glass in one sweep, the resulting burn almost forcing a little gasp from his lips. The drink is a lot stronger than he’d expected, and he blinks a couple of times as the smouldering in his throat slowly subsides.

Back home, liquor would usually not be strong and concentrated like this, but instead made so that it can be ingested in large amounts before the drinker gets to the point of inebriation. But he can already tell that’s not the case with Midgardian liquor, or at least not the variety that Tony favours. Then again, perhaps the alcohol is not really as strong as he thinks, his reaction instead caused by his weaker mortal body being more susceptible to intoxication than what he’s used to.

The warmth slowly spreading through his innards is not unpleasant at all, but it still makes him wary; relaxing too much around Tony might not be a very good idea, not if the alcohol will make him do or say things he wouldn’t have in a sober condition.

He’s not sure exactly why Tony wants him to drink with him, and he silently ponders the question as he watches Tony unceremoniously down his own glass. Sure he’s known many men who dislike drinking alone, always trying to procure some company whenever they’re about to engage in such activities, but Tony never seemed to be the type, judging by the number of times Loki’s seen him in close proximity to a bottle or a glass by now.

The man lets slip a satisfied sigh before setting his empty glass down. “Ah, not bad,” he comments with a contented look on his face, once more reaching for the bottle on the tabletop.

He’d really have wished for Tony not to be filling his glass again, despite the pleasant warmth that has now reached his limbs, but his hopes are quenched as it is once more filled to the brim with more of the yellow-ish liquid.

But it’s not his place to decline, of course. He has a feeling Tony would not like it if he did, and he has long ago come to the conclusion that a pleased Tony is going to be a lot more conducive to his situation than the alternative. And to be honest, it’s not like what’s expected of him this time is unpleasant in any way, far from it, and under different circumstances he might even have enjoyed it, despite the unaccustomed strength of the liquor. But still, he’s not comfortable about getting drunk in Tony’s presence.

At the other end of the couch, Tony empties his second glass and then looks insistingly at Loki.
“Don’t be shy,” he urges. “I think some relaxation would do you good.”

Well, Loki supposes he can’t really argue with that – and the feeling as the contents of his second glass of liquid amber slide down his throat is pleasant. Maybe a little too much.

But he’d be lying if he said there wasn’t a part of him enjoying it. Even if the previous torturous strain inside of him has dissolved by now, there’s still tension remaining, and getting some relaxing stress relief is not… unwelcome. So if Tony wants his slave to drink because he doesn’t feel like drinking alone tonight, he might as well enjoy it and make the best out of the situation.

“You have stuff like this in Asgard?” Tony interrupts his musings, leaning back into a more comfortable position against the cushions.

“Well, not really,” he admits. “Liquor is usually not stronger than it can be served in tankards. Like beer or mead.”

“Uh-huh. Seems like you have something to learn from us puny mortals, then.” And with that, Tony goes off on a long tangent about various liquors drunk on Midgard and their relative merits, but the designations are unknown to him. So he only listens patiently as Tony refills both of their glasses, his mouth never stopping to move for more than a second.

After a while, as another glass has been emptied, Tony’s voice is slowly turning into a soft droning, the individual words not fully discernible through the buzz in Loki’s head that keeps increasing in volume. But at least Tony is looking pleased, so that should be a good thing.

Then the words abruptly pierce through the haze clouding his mind, suddenly clearly discernible once more.

“Come to think of it, I did offer you a drink that one time you first showed up in my tower, so I suppose it’s only fair that I finally made good on that.”

Some of the tension that’s been slipping away little by little immediately returns at that. Even though he knows that Tony has decided to stay above things like petty revenge, he still doesn’t feel comfortable with the topic. It’s something he’d rather not have brought up at all, full well knowing that the man has of course not forgotten about the trip out of the window that had followed.
And he wonders if Tony is still angry at him because of that; he would really have wanted to ask, but it’s not like he ever actually would.

It’s only a few seconds later that he realizes that that’s exactly what he’s just done, the strong alcohol having loosened the bonds of self-control previously holding his tongue.

_Damn._

Tony watches him over the rim of his raised glass for a little while, an unreadable expression on his face, and then shrugs. “Nah. Not anymore. I tend not to bear grudges if I can avoid it. Besides, I’d think that you’ve more than paid for it with that slavery sentence of yours.” He drinks again, eyes closing in pure delight for a couple of heartbeats as the liquid makes it way down.

And Loki feels himself slowly relaxing again, despite his treacherous tongue having gotten the better of him.

There is silence for a while, but it’s soon broken as Tony start talking again, and Loki sinks back against the cushions, blinking a couple of times as the image of Tony filling his field of vision swims a little and then slowly separates into two.

He rubs his eyes, really wishing for some sleep, but he obviously can’t leave before having received permission to do so, so he resigns himself to the unrelenting barrage of words that wouldn’t have made much sense to him even in a sober condition. Slowly, he feels himself starting to drift off, before Tony’s voice once more cuts through his hazy mind.

“You know, I think it’s bedtime for you.” He grins as Loki opens eyes he wasn’t aware he had closed in the first place. “Seriously, I expected you Asgardians to be better at handling alcohol than this.”

With that, Tony stands up, grunting as he languidly stretches his arms above his head. “Come to think of it, it’s probably bedtime for me too,” he adds, a yawn following shortly behind the statement.

Gingerly, Loki makes to stand as well, glad to finally be allowed to make for the alluring bed awaiting in his room. His limbs are slow and reluctant to obey him, though, and the room seems to wobble slightly, as if he’s standing on a ship softly rocked by the waves of the sea.
He takes a step forward, but his foot catches on the edge of the rug lying snugly on the floor, causing him to trip and fall face first towards the table. Unable to regain his footing in his tipsiness, he can do nothing but brace himself for the impending impact.

Then, lightening-quick, there’s an arm around his waist, stopping his fall before the table does. And for a frozen heartbeat, Tony is standing there behind him, his body pressed flush against Loki’s as the man straightens him up.

The next heartbeat, the arm is gone, Tony having moved to stand at the edge of his field of vision. “Better watch your footsteps there, Bambi,” he says, and only another few heartbeats later, the man has walked out of the room.

He’s in his bed, trying to sleep, but it’s hard when the memory of Loki’s body pressed so tightly against his keeps intruding on his peace of mind.

So he turns, trying to find a more comfortable position. His attempts aren’t really making much of a difference, though; the mattress still feels as if it’s been stuffed with ping-pong balls.

His idea of arranging a little drinking get-together had been a pure whim, but seeing that the god was still tense, he had thought that Loki could do with some relaxation, and what better way to resolve that tension than with some alcohol? Always worked for him.

Well, almost always.

At least he had enjoyed it, and hopefully Loki had too, though it’s pretty hard to tell these things with the god.

Then, as they were breaking the party up, Loki had suddenly tripped, and Tony had caught him before he could hurt himself. And despite the long time – hours? – spent with the god in that evening, it’s those few seconds that are filling his mind.

Of course, he’d let go quickly, before his body could react in an… inappropriate way to the sudden closeness. That would surely have been the icing on the cake after what Loki had not terribly long
ago been convinced that Tony was going to do to him.

Again, he turns, and again, the resulting position is no better than the previous one.

And despite his attempts to think of the projects awaiting him in his workshop tomorrow, and then a million of other things as well, it’s still that fraction of a memory that lingers until he falls asleep, and then stubbornly follows him all the way into dreamland.
When he wakes up, it’s with a throbbing headache and an angry buzz inside his skull. With a heroic effort, he pushes himself up into a sitting position on the edge of the bed, grimacing slightly as he rubs his hands over his face. Yesterday evening is mostly a dim haze in his mind, but he does remember the glasses of alcohol he’d downed since Tony apparently didn’t feel like drinking alone.

For a while, he just sits there, debating with himself whether he should crawl back down under the covers again, but deciding against it. He’s feeling too restless for that, and lying there wide awake staring up into the ceiling, unable to stop his gaze from once more trailing along the faint cracks up there, despite the spider web-thin pattern being so firmly imprinted in his mind by now that he could draw a flawless copy of it.

So despite the queasiness and his aching head, he decides to leave the bed and promptly showers and dresses, following the same repetitive procedure as every morning.

Tony had mentioned yesterday during dinner that he would be out of the house today until evening, having to take care of some business or the other. Until then, Loki is all alone.

*Again.*

Opting to get himself some breakfast, he ambles out of the door and down the corridor, silently counting the steps out of habit despite already knowing exactly how many there are from his room to the kitchen. Tony has long ago made it clear that Loki is allowed to help himself to food whenever he’s away, so at least he doesn’t have to go hungry until the man returns home.

The sight that greets him as he enters the kitchen is the same as always – black marble, dark wood, and glistening chrome. He walks up to one of the cupboards, steeling himself for the customary high-pitched squeak he knows it’s going to give off as he opens it. He’s stopped wincing at it long ago, though, having heard it a multitude of times already.

At least he knows his way around the kitchen well enough by now to find everything he needs on his own. It’s not like anything substantial ever changes in here, or anywhere else in the tower.

A minute later, he’s sitting with his usual bowl and spoon and milk and box of Cheerios, all things that have grown so strangely familiar by now. The bowl has a little chip in it, and he still notices it despite all the times it’s been there on the table in front of him. The spoon has a darker spot at the end
where the metal has discoloured slightly, and in spite of his numerous attempts at removing this
offence to his sensibilities, it refuses to go away. But he can’t stop the reflexive act, as futile as it is,
so again his thumb rubs against the spoon, his efforts still leaving no visible effects.

Then he sits there at the kitchen table, staring into the same spot of the wall as always, listlessly
lifting spoonful after spoonful of the milk and Cheerios to his mouth, mechanically chewing without
really tasting. Swallowing without really enjoying any of it.

Once the bowl is empty, he remains in his chair for a while, not quite sure what to do with himself.
He knows there is more paperwork awaiting him, but that’s not going to take all day. Perhaps he
could read a book, like he so often does.

*Midgardian books, barely making half sense to him with their unfamiliar words and settings and
people and ways of acting.*

Unbidden, the thought of his books back in Asgard arises, those well-worn but alluring things. The
rustling parchment bound between graceful and elegant leather covers, the long nights spent reading
by the soft glow of burning candles, the heady excitement at all the knowledge awaiting at his
fingertips – it’s still so painfully vivid in his mind.

But of course, they’re not his books anymore. Slaves don’t own property, and whatever things used
to be his back in Asgard are bound to have been either disposed of or are now in the possession of
someone else.

The thought cuts like a knife inside of him, razor-sharp and cruel. Now he doesn’t own anything
anymore; not even the clothes on his body are his own, they belong to Tony.

*Tony.* One of the wealthiest, most affluent men this realm has to offer, that much he’s understood.
And one of their greatest heroes too boot. He’s not really familiar with Midgardian titles and
honours, but he supposes if Tony had been Aesir, he would have been considered a lord. If he hadn’t
been born one, he would have been made one, the title being granted to him at a boring but
grandiose ceremony. And in accordance with his station, he’d have had an entire entourage of
servants and workers and slaves to run his household and to wait on him. And despite that, there’s
only Loki here.

Well, him and the robot servants. But they don’t really count.
He watches dully as one of them cleans the floor of the kitchen, making quiet noises as it rolls along, leaving a moist trail in its wake. From the looks of it, even these artificial servants can do pretty much any of the chores that Loki is able to, and that just makes him feel even more useless. He supposes he should be glad that Tony is so wealthy, which means that feeding and supporting a slave who only contributes marginally to the household isn’t going to have any noticeable economical effects, at least.

In fact, it would seem that his usefulness is so little that one of the best things that Tony can find for him to do is to serve as company during drinking.

He massages his temples, hoping his efforts will ease the pounding in his skull, but his efforts are to no avail. So instead, he slowly cleans up after his meal, and then continues on to the living room.

Sitting down on his usual spot on the floor, he opens the cardboard box waiting for him, pushing the flaps aside. It doesn’t take long until he’s surrounded by the familiar piles of paper. Unenthusiastically, he keeps reaching down into the box, picking up stack after stack of documents that are all starting to look the same to him by now. It’s all just one long repeat of the days before, as if he’s stuck in a time-loop where everything is being endlessly replayed all over again.

He’s about halfway through when his stomach gives a complaining growl. The sound takes him somewhat by surprise, but since time has blurred into a haze during the monotonous work, any estimation of how many hours have passed since breakfast is impossible.

He might as well take a break, though, so he slouches back to the kitchen again, heading for the refrigerator; Tony always leaves behind a couple of those little boxes with food in them whenever he’s away. So he takes one out, throwing an absent-minded glance at the innards of the refrigerator before closing it. It’s mostly empty; not that he expected it to look any different from its usual state. As always, there are some bottles lining the shelves – some almost full, others with only dredges left at the bottom, enough for no more than a mouthful or two. Again, nothing that has changed since last time.

Closing the refrigerator door shut, he then sits down on his usual spot at the table. Tony once showed him how to use the microwave oven, as the device was called, in order to heat food. But he doesn’t bother with it; it hardly makes a difference anyway. Instead, he just eats the cold meal directly from the box, dully noticing the name on the lid. Bartelli’s Kitchen again; though the names vary, this is probably the most common one. Its flourish font looks out of place, even vaguely ridiculous, adorning something that contains something as simple as food.

He doesn’t have much of an appetite, and it doesn’t take very long before the fork in his hand goes from shovelling food into his mouth to poking at the remaining pieces, shuffling them around from one side of the box to the other, one of his elbows at the tabletop, cheek resting in his hand. When he
finally decides to bring his meal to an end, more than half of the food is left uneaten.

And so he returns to sorting the rest of the papers, fleetingly wondering how many of these boxes are left. He has no idea how much paper is generated by a large business such as the one that Tony is heading, but he’s not sure he wants to know.

Once the task is complete, he remains sitting on the floor with legs crossed, hands in his lap, staring at the sorted folders for lack of better things to do. Blue on black, a combination he has gotten so used to seeing by now. A part of him wishes the folders would at least come in different colours so he’d have at least this tiny little bit of variety in the otherwise unchanging monotony.

Reading a book doesn’t hold any appeal to him for the moment, and he really doesn’t know what else to do. So in the end, he crawls up into the couch, despite it not even being dark outside yet, opting for some sleep.

He isn’t quite sure why he prefers the couch to his own bed, but maybe it’s because it has less associated memories of fearfully twisting and turning in anxiety over Tony’s plans for him, or maybe the living room, being larger, feels less suffocating, less of a reminder that he’s stuck in these confinements. So he lies there, staring at the all-too familiar surroundings for a while, wondering how many years he will be trapped in here before finally being taken somewhere else.

But of course, there’s no point in thinking about that now. There is nothing he can do about it; everything in his life, his entire existence, is at someone else’s discretion, and will continue to be so until the end of his days.

So instead, he closes his eyes, trying to shut out the bitter reminder of his inescapable situation along with his surroundings. His mind is less cooperative, though, and still keeps on churning endlessly until he much, much later finally falls asleep.

He awakes with a startle, having to blink the sleep out of his eyes before once more getting his bearings – Tony’s couch.

Slowly, he removes the blanket lying on top of him that he doesn’t even remember covering himself with before dozing off, and slowly sits up.
“Good evening, sunshine; rise and shine,” a voice says to his right and he looks up to see Tony sitting in a chair a short distance away, tapping away at his laptop.

He takes in the scene for a little while, as he tries to make sense out of the illogical situation. It would seem that Tony has resorted to seating himself on one of the less comfortable chairs in the living room, as opposed to his usual spot on the couch.

And that makes no sense, why Tony didn’t just shake him awake and tell him to move out of the way.

Along with the confusion, he can’t help but feel a bit stupid as well; slaves aren’t supposed to be sleeping like that in the presence of their masters, even if they don’t have any outstanding orders to carry out. Sure, Tony might not have taken offence at his last sleeping stint on the couch, but he still winces inwardly at knowing he’s been caught at it again. Coming off as lazy and slacking to Tony will hardly do anything to improve his situation.

Again, he’s hit by the frustration how nothing makes sense here. He’s just so lost how to deal with everything – he doesn’t understand Tony, he doesn’t understand this realm, and he doesn’t understand his place here. Not that he would have preferred the treatment he could have expected in Asgard – no, never – but that would at least have been something he would have been able to relate to, amidst all the uncertainty that comes with being thrown into an alien world, at the feet of one of the mortals with the most reasons to hate him.

Now it feels like he's just drifting, without even the tiny semblance of control that a clear understanding of the situation would have given him – because slaves, enemies, criminals don’t get treated like this. And he’s already so totally without control that even a hint of steady ground beneath his feet would have been comforting.

But instead, he’s so stuck in this overwhelming confusion, stuck in this tower, stuck in this position… just plain stuck.

He looks out the window, but its dark outside and perhaps that’s just as well. Seeing the world outside – strange and alien as it is to him – would just be a further reminder of the reality of his situation.

He almost startles as Tony smacks the laptop shut. “Okay, it’s dinner time,” the man announces, and Loki has no choice but to follow the well-known sight of Tony’s retreating back into the kitchen,
despite not being hungry in the slightest.
Chapter 38

He’s sitting at one of the bay windows, in a slightly twisted and not entirely comfortable position that leaves his nose almost touching the glass, the fingertips pressed against the transparent material leaving smudgy prints. The pane is chilly, but it doesn’t bother him. It might be a poor substitute, but at least it’s a tiny, imagined taste of the outside.

He pretends that the cold against his fingers is the chill of the breeze fluttering on the other side of his prison wall, caressing his skin with cool evening air, a hint of refreshing dew in its touch.

Leaning his head backwards, he takes a deep breath, so drawn into his little fantasy that he almost feels disappointed when it turns out to be filled with the same room-tempered inside air he’s been breathing since coming here. The ventilation of Tony’s tower might leave little to desire, but it still feels as if his lungs keep regurgitating the same stale air again and again. Though if he closes his eyes he can for a brief moment almost imagine it; that he’s standing on a field beneath the open sky, unrestricted by walls, the horizon a blurry line in the distance.

He sits like that for a while, his eyelids closed shut, loath to open his eyes again and let the reality of his situation wash over him.

He longs to go outside. If only to taste a tiny sliver of the freedom that hasn’t been his in far too long. To get a respite from the long stint of imprisonment that started at the ungentle hands of SHIELD following his failure to conquer Midgard and continued with the damp dungeons and even more brutal guards in Asgard, and that has now come full circle as he has been returned to Midgard yet again, handed over to Tony Stark. Passed around, changing owners like tattered hand me-downs or a toy gifted to a younger sibling by an older one having outgrown its charms. The thought is too depressing to consider for very long.

Seeing the sky ought to be a welcome improvement after the glass bubble that was his cell during his stay at SHIELD’s headquarters and then the underground dungeons of Asgard, neither of which came equipped with windows to the outside. As the days of his captivity melded into a blur, he longed to gaze at the sky again, if only for a brief moment, like how a man dying of thirst would desperately wish for a drink of water.

However, now he wonders if this isn’t even crueler, dangling it in front of him like a precious treasure forever out of his reach. Sentenced to watch from afar, contained within the walls of his prison. He can’t even open the window to feel the air brushing his skin, because every time he tries, thinking that maybe this time will be different, that thrice-damned computer will gleefully inform that Mr Stark’s orders are for the windows and doors to remain closed.
Perhaps he shouldn’t complain. Perhaps it should be enough not being abused, beaten or starved, being spared most of the hardships that usually constitute a slave’s life, even free from having to perform hard and back-breaking labour. Perhaps he shouldn’t be greedy and wish for even more, already being in a situation that most any slave in Asgard would envy him for, but he can’t help it.

Because even slaves in Asgard run errands outside, work outside, are allowed outside. Despite everything, they are at least let out, ever-present watching eyes and the threat of severe punishment deemed enough deterrents to keep them from running off. They are not kept locked up like him all day, their usefulness to valuable to be wasted like that.

Of course, his own usefulness is marginal at best and there is no reason for Tony to let him out when he can be securely stowed away like this, the world safe from whatever the man suspects he might still be able to do in this lamentable state of his.

His mind whimsically conjures a little fantasy of him sneaking out of the tower, as impossible as it would be, going for a little stroll in the sunshine. No walls surrounding him as far as his eyes can see, nothing to stop or hold him as he walks on. Of course, it’s naught but a childish fancy; even if he were to get out of here, he has nowhere to go. To the world outside, he is an enemy, and he has no friends or allies here. Nor does he have any magic or powers to protect himself, like a wolf having had its fangs and claws pulled out and turned into a harmless lap dog at its master’s beck and call.

Besides, any endeavours to leave the tower would obviously be noticed and thwarted by Jarvis, who would immediately report his doings back to his creator, effectively landing Loki in a heap of trouble. Because Tony would no doubt consider that an escape attempt, and whatever freedoms and leeway the man has granted him until now would no doubt be revoked in an instant, his current circumstances being turned into something considerably less favourable.

He sighs. At least he has the freedom of the tower, as opposed to being locked up in his room all day, only to be brought out for whatever tasks that Tony wants him to take care of.

At that, his thoughts take a turn back to Asgard, where escaping slaves are more often than not executed when caught. And most are, few runaways ever managing a successful escape. Those that aren’t executed are often clapped into heavy chains and shackles to prevent similar attempts in the future, in the unlikely case their subsequent punishment after their recapture isn’t enough to dissuade them. There is no indulgence or tolerance for escaping slaves, the only offence considered more serious for a slave being raising a hand against his master.

Some slaves are wearing chains anyway, having been deemed too unreliable to be allowed the privilege of going without them. His wrists chafe in phantom discomfort at the thought; he had to wear shackles too during his stay in the dungeons, as if the stone walls and heavy locks and attentive guards weren’t enough to keep him confined. He got too well acquainted with them to ever want to
have his freedom restricted like that again, the movement of his limbs encumbered like those of a chained animal.

Something is telling him that Tony might perhaps not put him in chains if he were ever to try to leave the tower, but locked up in his room, yes, definitely. Then the man would be free from having to worry about further incidents of the kind, having his slave stowed away in a safe and secure place.

Still, the thought is too alluring to let go of just yet, so he plays around with the thought of somehow being able to evade the extensive security systems Tony has in place, passing unseen under the vigilant eye of Jarvis, Tony never finding out a thing. Not really escaping, because that is obviously impossible for someone with nowhere to go or to hide, but venturing outside for a while, returning later without his absence having been noticed.

But it’s a pointless fantasy, of course. There’s no way he could ever get out of here undetected. Or even detected, as Jarvis would no doubt instigate a full lock-down of the tower before he even got as much as a toe across the doorsill. Without his magic, there is no way for him to make it out of the house.

Besides, there’s always Heimdall, who might be turning his gaze to Midgard at any time. Though, most likely, the Watchman has more important things to bother with than watching a fallen god of mischief lounge around in a mortal’s tower. He’s not a danger anymore, having been rendered harmless, courtesy of the little chains around his wrists. There are far more pressing potential threats to Asgard, both within the realm and outside of it, to keep an eye out for. Loki, for all intents and purposes, is no longer a concern of Asgard.

The knowledge stings; who will even remember him in a few years’ time as anything more than a criminal that got gifted to a mortal? No doubt, he’s already forgotten, the only one still bothering being Heimdall who will dutifully continue to keep sporadic watch, to make sure Loki doesn’t break the stipulated conditions of his slavery.

His fingertips are starting to tingle from the icy chill of the window glass, but he doesn’t remove them just yet. Because this is as close to that beckoning outside as he will ever get in the foreseeable future, separated from it by a mere inch of transparent glass. Though, for all its unattainable-ness, it might as well have been a stone wall an arm’s length thick. There’s no way he’ll get out of here, not in his current magic-deprived, powerless state.

It’s not going to make him any happier, wishing for things that can’t happen. He knows that, and yet he can’t help himself.
So he presses his fingers a little harder against the glass, once more closing his eyes, imagining the walls around him fading and disappearing like smoke in the evening breeze.

The new beta-electro-transformer he’s been working on is coming along quite nicely. Luckily, he was able to salvage some parts from the first one that got snapped into pieces during that little incident with Loki in his workshop, so at least he didn’t have to start all over from scratch.

The memory of that day is still painful and disturbing, but there’s no use crying over spilled milk. What is done is done, and at least the god is aware now that his former expectations have no base in reality and that he can expect a life here that doesn’t piss all over the tenants of the UN Declaration of Human Rights and the Geneva Convention and whatever other important documents important people have penned concerning stuff like that.

He fastens another circuit board to the slowly developing transformer on the bench, the little click as it slips into place oddly satisfying.

And he has to admit that Loki has been remarkably well-behaved so far, surprisingly acquiescent and compliant for someone once equipped with world-conquering ambitions. A little nagging voice of doubt can’t help but wonder whether it’s a show the god is putting on for his benefit, to lull him into a false sense of security before… doing something. He’s not sure what someone in Loki’s position could possibly do, but he is the god of deceit and lies and whatnot, so if he’s planning something, chances are that Tony might not notice much before it’s too late.

Well, perhaps he’d do well to be a bit more attentive as far as Loki is concerned from now on.
Chapter 39

His slightly better mood from a few days ago is definitely gone, now, as frustration is eating away at him. And it’s disturbing, really, to what degree his pathetic situation has almost reached a sense of normalcy.

He looks out the window, and then down at the sheets in his hands again. Most of all, he would have liked to crumple them between his fingers and throw the box of papers out the window. The weight of the magic-blocking chains around his wrists is suddenly very tangible, despite his thinking he should have grown accustomed to them by now.

Chains, like those an animal would be wearing. Animals, and slaves.

He wonders what Tony will have in store for him once this task is finished, knowing that the boxes won’t last forever. But the man will probably find some other kind of work that will be simple enough for someone like him, laughably unfamiliar with the ways and workings of this mortal realm that has changed so much since the days he last walked among the humans.

Perhaps he should feel relieved that Tony has found him a task he’s able to do at all so that he can at least be somewhat useful, which should serve to put him in a better position and improve Tony’s disposition towards him, but right now he can’t muster up much of anything. Neither can he decide what’s worse – being in such mockingly close proximity to the window with its full view of the alluring freedom outside that won’t ever be his again, or the humiliation of sitting here performing simple chores for a mortal.

For a moment, he imagines turning the box of papers over, spilling its contents all over the floor and then walking out the room, leaving Tony to take care of the mess. But the fantasy is pointless, of course. Whatever short-lived satisfaction this rebellion would bring him would hardly be worth whatever consequences would follow. Even if Tony isn’t going to physically hurt him, there’s plenty of other ways for the man to lay down the law – withholding food, forbidding him access to the books in the tower, assigning him some degrading and unpleasant task to fulfil, or finding some more creative way of enforcing his obedience.

Listlessly, he fiddles with the papers, flipping them through with his thumb. Insignificant documents that mean nothing to him. Unable to stop himself, he looks out the window again, not sure which sight bothers him the most – the clear blue sky, reminding him of what he can’t have, or the papers in his hands, reminding him of what his life has been turned into. Being at somebody else’s beck and call, without his having a say in anything.
He decides the papers are less disturbing to look at, for the moment at least, and turns his gaze back to the finely-printed sheets.

His thoughts are drifting, back to Asgard, to his trial, to his attempt at conquering Midgard, to everything that’s happened and not happened since his coming here. It’s all such a jumble in his head, disjointed images of failure and disgrace and humiliation, weaving an unappealing tapestry in his head, painting a pattern that he doesn’t particularly want to look at.

Only half-unconsciously, his hands tighten around the papers in his grip.

“Reindeer Games?” he suddenly hears the man lounging in the couch saying. Startled, he snaps out of his little reverie and turns his gaze up to look at Tony, who’s eyeing him intently.

And suddenly, he’s acutely aware that he’s still holding onto the same wad of papers that’s been in his hands for probably the last five minutes. He isn’t quite sure how to interpret the searching way Tony is looking at him, but it’s not a long shot that the man has noticed his slave’s slacking off and isn’t pleased with it.

“Yes?” he answers plainly, relaxing the death grip around the papers.

Tony makes a beckoning motion with his hand. “Come over here,” he says, then pointing towards the other end of the couch. “Sit down.”

He doesn’t sound angry, at least, but Loki still steels himself for the bucket of displeasure about to be emptied over his head. The man might have let his unauthorized break slip without comment a while ago, but it’s doubtful whether he will be so tolerant of further displays of laziness from his slave.

He watches dully as Tony sets the technical device he’s been occupied with to the side, positioning himself into a half-slouching pose against the armrest.

“Is anything the problem?”

The question takes him by surprise; it is not what he had expected to hear from Tony, so he’s silent for a few moments while pondering his answer. Is anything the problem? Sure, he could make a list – a long one – of all the things that are wrong in his life: being as a slave, having to perform lowly chores, being at the beck and call of a mortal, being locked up in here, and a whole bunch of other
things as well. None of which he is about to tell Tony, of course.

“There is no problem,” he says, not looking at the man opposite him.

“Hmm,” comes the reply. “You looked quite… distracted there for a moment. A pretty long moment, I would say. Anything on your mind I should know about?”

Perhaps Tony has sensed his little rebellious fantasy, or his general distaste for his situation. Maybe he thinks that his slave is planning something undue that needs to be nipped in the bud. Whatever the case, it would not benefit him to admit to any resentful feelings, of course. No slave would ever give voice to any displeasure regarding his social status or situation before his master. Or before anyone else, for that matter. Complaining or showing dissatisfaction never lead to anything good for anyone in his position. Even though the man has been perplexingly tolerant, to an extent that would have been unheard of in Asgard, he has no doubt that even Tony has his limits.

“No. There is no problem,” he repeats, shaking his head for emphasis.

“Uh-huh. Then how come the last bunch of papers you were sorting – or weren’t sorting, I should say – has been turned into a crumpled heap?” Tony says lightly.

The man is observant, Loki has to give him that. Frankly, he’d preferred it if he hadn’t been.

“I am used to handling Asgardian parchment. It’s much sturdier than Midgardian paper,” he says, the lie sounding unconvincing and half-baked in his own ears.

Tony shifts from his position in the couch, one leg coming up to rest against the cushions. “If you say so. However, if there’s anything that is a problem, or if you have any concerns, go ahead and let me know. I know I’ve said it before, but don’t just let it fester if there’s something that’s eating at you. I’d rather not have to deal with the consequences of a problem later that could have been resolved earlier.”

And Loki thinks he can hear a warning in there, which would make perfect sense; of course Tony doesn’t want any further trouble than what he has already endured on behalf of his slave. But this isn’t a discussion he can bring up with Tony; frankly, it’s ridiculous that he’s even asking. Surely the man doesn’t expect him to spill his honest mind about his situation.
“There is nothing of the sort,” he says as neutrally as he can manage, hoping Tony will be satisfied with that so he can go back to his paper-sorting.

Tony sighs, not sounding like that was the answer he had been hoping for. “You know, this situation is new to me as well, so anything you can tell me that would help me out here would be appreciated. Seriously, I don’t know what slaves in Asgard are even supposed to do all day.”

“They do what their masters tell them to,” he says mechanically, a part of him thinking he has said these words to Tony before.

Tony confirms his suspicions a moment later. “Yeah, you already mention that. Isn’t terribly helpful, though.”

He makes no reply to that and as Tony doesn’t say anything further, he slips back down to the floor again, returning to his papers.

He left Loki alone with the box of papers a few hours ago, the god working away at a somewhat quicker pace than before and not seeming very inclined to do much talking.

And Tony is back in his workshop, making the final adjustments to the beta-electro-transformer that is just a few steps away from being finished.

But instead of feeling accomplishment at his soon-to-be completed creation, his thoughts keep returning to the god living under his roof. Of course, it would be silly to expect Loki to be happy about his situation, but it did seem like there was something a bit more off than usual, as if things were getting to him more than previously.

Though, for someone destined to spend the rest of his life – however long that will be – in slavery, Loki’s handling it relatively well. On the outside, at least.

And he can’t help but feel a pang of sympathy. What would it feel like, knowing you’re going to be a slave until the day you die, without any hope of a change of the situation? Despite all the crimes that Loki has committed, Tony is pretty certain they don’t merit this kind of punishment. To have all human rights stripped away and be turned into what is technically property.
He sighs, hoping they will both – for sanity’s sake – learn to come to terms with the situation, disagreeable as it may be. Because heavens know that he hasn’t yet.

And a part of him can’t help but wonder for how long Loki is going to remain as well-behaved without the imagined threat of physical abuse hanging over his head. But he supposes he’ll have no choice but to wait and see in that regard. Good thing he has Jarvis to watch out for him, at least.

His thoughts are interrupted by a sharp buzz from the doorbell, the unexpected sound making him startle enough for his hands to snap the little gadget in two.

A groan escaping his lips, he looks down at the broken thing in consternation.

Damn. Not again.
The papers for today are sorted and Loki sits at his usual spot at the bay window sill, fingers absent-mindedly trailing the white plaster, picking at a thin crack in the material. A small splinter breaks loose and falls on his lap, but he doesn’t bother brushing it off.

Outside, the dull grey clouds hang ominously in the sky, heavy with rain waiting to fall, and there’s not even the weakest hint of a ray of sun breaking through. Just a vast expanse of colourless sky stretching out to the far edges of the horizon.

And still, that sky beckons to him, tugs at him, despite its empty dreariness.

*If only…*

But that is impossible, of course. He knows that. And yet…

He’s brought out of his musings by the faint sound of voices drifting through the crack of the closed door, and he tenses. To his knowledge, Tony has never entertained guests in the tower for as long as Loki has been here, so it is with nervous apprehension that he cocks his ears, trying to decipher the hum of spoken words floating in the air. His eyes narrow. Perhaps one of Tony’s Avenger friends has stopped by for a visit, a prospect that Loki doesn’t cherish much at all.

He can discern Tony’s familiar voice from the murmur, but that of his counterpart is louder, more insistent and even more familiar. And it’s a voice that he thought he’d never hear again – *hoped* he’d never hear again – and yet, here it is, drawing nearer by the sounds of it, as he can hear the accompanying footsteps too, as if someone is almost running, making a desperate dash for something in the mad hopes that it won’t be too late but fearing that it might be.

With a loud bang, the door is flung open with such force that it flies loose from its hinges, and there, in the suddenly door-less entrance, with red cape billowing behind him and scraggly blond hair flowing over his shoulders stands the muscular, bulky shape of someone all-too well-known, hammer clapsed into a tight, knuckle-whitening grasp.

*Yes, one can always count on Thor to make a dramatic entrance.*

“Brother!” is, quite predictably, the first word out of the man’s mouth, breathed rather than spoken,
as the hammer slips out of his grasp and he fixes Loki with a granite-hard gaze, as if daring him to not really be there, to only be a figment of the imagination about to evaporate into thin air the moment Thor moves at all.

Thor. Such a well-known, familiar sight. And so utterly unwelcome.

For a brief moment, the two of them only stand frozen at their respective spots, like a couple of statues staring at each other, unyielding and immovable. Thor is the first to snap out of the momentary petrifaction as he takes a step forward, arms slightly up and outwards as if preparing for an embrace, and Loki can feel a wave of swirling anger, resentment and bitterness welling up inside of him at that.

So rather than reciprocating the exuberant joy that is so ridiculously obvious in Thor’s eyes, Loki draws himself up and tightens his jaw, trying to muster up all the regal grace that is no longer his to claim, and throws the Thunderer the most disdainful gaze he can manage. Like he is looking at a crawling insect and not the man who still has the gall to call himself his brother.

“So, have you finally come here to gloat at my shame and humiliation, Thor?” he says, the words like daggers, sharp and meant to wound.

The vapid smile on Thor’s face falters slightly, but not entirely. And the venomous words aren’t enough to stop him from covering the distance between them with a few quick steps, to grasp Loki’s shoulders in a crushing grip. It’s not an embrace, at least, but the intimacy of the touch still feels like a foul perversion, and he twists, trying to avoid the unwelcome hands that have planted themselves firmly on his body.

However, the grip is too strong, and he doesn’t want to embarrass himself with futile struggle – his physical strength was inferior to Thor’s even when he was still equipped with godly powers and will certainly be as nothing now – so he settles for curling his lips in abject distaste.

If Thor is perceptive enough to at all notice the expression on Loki’s face, he doesn’t let it deter him. The hands remain on his shoulders, ever snug and comfortable, tightening even further as they give him a little shake and Loki winces, both from the pain and from the unwanted proximity.

And when Thor speaks, it is as if Loki’s daggers of words went right by him or through him, unacknowledged and forgotten.
“Brother,” he repeats himself, as if to ascertain himself that the figure standing before him slightly squirming under his grasp is indeed the same person as the one he has grown up with, “there are no words to express my joy at seeing you alive and well!” The fingers dig further into Loki’s flesh, a gesture radiating worry and relief at the same time.

Loki snorts. “The “alive” part I can’t argue with, though the “well” part is another thing entirely. Perhaps you have not yet been enlightened as to how things are standing,” the effort to speak out loud the words that will broadcast his shame is harder than he expected, but he pushes on, “but, thanks to the just and ever wise ruling of your father, my powers have been sealed off and I have been reduced to the station of a slave, property of your good friend Tony Stark.”

He sounds more bitter than he had intended to and he curses himself inwardly for this show of weakness, for inadvertently admitting that the situation is getting to him. But there is something about Thor, something about his presence here, that just makes all that resentment simmering inside of him come roaring to the surface with full force.

However, Thor, who always wears his emotions like a second skin, doesn’t even bat an eyelash at his angry tirade, but merely nods.

“I know of your situation already, Loki, and the sentence that preceded it,” he says solemnly, looking into Loki’s narrowed eyes with his own open pools of concern that he makes no attempt to hide, un-warrior-like as it is. “I found out what had transpired on my recent return to Asgard. And hearing of your sentence, finding out that you were indeed still alive, is the reason I quickly made my way back to Midgard again. Too see you.”

So his powers and most everything else have been wrenched away from him, but he still has one weapon left – his words.

So he takes aim and fires, intention to hurt. “Well, dear brother,” the word is spit out like an insult, “if you had bothered sticking around for my trial and my sentence, you would have known of my fate long ago. But instead, you chose to saunter off to Midgard and that little wench of yours, rather than subjecting yourself to a tedious wait for Odin’s decision.” He attempts a mocking smile, but it is more a bearing of teeth than anything else. “But I suppose you couldn’t be bothered with that, when the prospect of cavorting with her was so much more tempting than being in the presence of the traitor and monster you still pretend is your brother?”

The wounded look on Thor’s face is one he’s seen so many times before, reminiscent of a wet puppy that someone has kicked one too many times. And there is an inkling of guilt in those guileless eyes, a flicker showing that Loki’s words have hit their mark.
However, when Thor speaks there is a note of tense anger in his voice, the affront of someone unjustly accused of deeds most foul and treacherous. “It was not like that!” he all but shouts. “You misconstrue and twist the facts yet again to your own ends, without knowing the whole truth.”

“But you did leave, didn’t you.” Loki lets the statement – for it is a statement, not a question – hang in the air like an invisible barrier between them, invisible, but impenetrable all the same. The pang of betrayal shouldn’t hurt, after all, because betrayals from people you don’t care about shouldn’t have that effect.

Thor clenches his fists and looks away for a few seconds, and Loki is certain that if there had been anything within punching distance, it would by now be pulverised into fine dust through the force of one of the Thunderer’s mighty blows.

“Eventually, I did.” The admission is thrown out against the invisible barrier that Loki’s accusation has constructed, like a chisel trying to hack away at those high-wrought iron walls. Thor’s forehead is creased, with worry, with anger, with self-accusation – and Loki can’t help but to feel a tiny amount of satisfaction at the latter, but the wrinkles marring his brow smooth themselves out as the Thunderer gets his feelings under his rein once more.

“However, as you awaited your trial in your cell, I went to see the Allfather on your behalf, to entreat him, to beseech him to show mercy in his sentencing. To remind him that despite all your misdeeds, you were still his son.” Thor’s voice trails off, and Loki takes the opportunity to deal out yet another jab.

“And were you dim-witted enough to believe for even a second that Odin would let himself be swayed by such trifling circumstances? Really, Thor. You should know by now that the Allfather is not a sentimental fool like you, or he wouldn’t be sitting on the throne of Asgard.”

The look on Thor’s face changes to strangely sad, but unrepentant nevertheless. “As doomed an effort as it might have been, how could I not have tried, brother? Even if I would have been forced to travel to the deepest pits of Nifelheim to plead your case to Hela herself, I would have done it! Anything that could have saved you from being executed would have been worth the effort, no matter how small the chances of success.”

Loki crosses his arms in front of his chest, limbs a make-shift shield. Perhaps it’s another barrier that he’s putting up between himself and Thor if his words should falter; he’s not even sure himself.

“And do tell me,” he enquires disdainfully, “what did the Allfather say to you? Did he at all listen to your pleas and entreaties? Or did he for once close his ears to you, his dear son, who was always so
quick to earn his favour and good graces?”

The downcast eyes avoiding his are answer enough, as if Loki didn’t already know. Thor shifts his weight between his feet for a few times before he replies, as if the soles of his feet have been burnt, making it impossible to find a tolerable position.

“He told me to expect no clemency, no lenience on behalf of lineage. That you would be judged as harshly as any other Asgardian guilty of the same crimes,” he says softly.

“And you think the ruling is fair and just, don’t you?”

“No matter how much the consequences might grieve me, even I can understand that neither the laws of Asgard nor the Council would allow a king to play favourites in a trial like this,” Thor replies, sounding weary. “A ruler of Asgard can’t show leniency to those who have committed crimes of that magnitude since it would only encourage further attempts from others. Surely you can see that?” There is a hidden plea in there, like Thor wants Loki to understand, if only a little, even if it’s naught but the tiniest inkling of comprehension.

And of course, Loki understands. He wouldn’t have held Odin for any less. Had expected nothing else – a punishment of a criminal that will not dishearten others from following in his footsteps is useless. Examples have to be set, of course. Every ruler knows that. He wouldn’t have acted any differently, had he been king.

It wouldn’t have irked him so much if it hadn’t been for the fact that when Thor had gone off to Jotunheim on his ill-considered quest, his punishment had been a few days in Midgard without his godly powers. Not a life-time of slavery.

“Really. Then do tell me, Thor, what was your punishment after your little excursion to Jotunheim?”

Thor looks distinctly uncomfortable. “Your crimes were not solely aimed at another realm, Loki. You committed treason against Asgard as well. The Allfather and the Council could not let that pass so easily.”

He might even have accepted that, on some level, if he could have believed that was the only reason. But he has no doubt that his being a frost giant and a monster made sure that he got a much harsher punishment than Thor would ever have gotten. But his heritage is too sore a point to bring up, so instead he tries another angle to get at Thor.
“So when your father chose not to listen to your pleas, you decided to seek out the comforts of your Midgardian *companion* instead? Rather than wasting your time with a tedious trial?” Loki says, letting his words coil into a barbed whip that mercilessly lashes out.

Thor shakes his head, his mop of blond hair swirling from the sharp movements. “No, that’s not what happened. In the end, Father got so incensed with my endless entreaties that he commanded me to leave Asgard at once and forbade me to return until your trial was over.” Another flash of guilt passes over the chiselled face, but then disappears as quickly as it came. “I had no choice but to leave for Midgard, where I admit I sought solace in the arms of my beloved Jane. What else could I have done, brother? My grief was much too strong and heavy to bear on my own, certain as I was that your sentence would be execution.”

And Loki can’t deny that it was the one punishment he had held for most likely himself.

It seems that Thor is suddenly standing closer to him, like he has abridged the physical gap between them without even moving. Intending to rectify that, Loki takes a step back, retreating from Thor’s hulking form, lest he remain within reaching distance from the man who calls himself his brother.

“And yet you do not show up here until now,” he accuses. “Surely your *brotherly concern* about my welfare should have hastened your steps a bit more. But for someone who claims concern, you sure seem to have been in no hurry.”

“Loki, please.” Thor’s voice is exasperated, weary. Perhaps he is tired of having to defend himself from the barrage of accusations that Loki has been throwing his way, or maybe it’s his guilty conscience for not being here sooner that’s wearing on him. Either way is fine with Loki.

“You have to understand, I was certain you would be executed for your crimes,” Thor continues, pleading now. “So I lingered here in Midgard before finally mustering up enough strength to return to Asgard to hear of the completion of your sentence. I was convinced that what would await me on my return would be your cold funeral pyre and I was not prepared to face it. If I had known the truth… I would have been here much earlier, I swear it by the Nine Realms.”

The answer is strangely… acceptable. Not that it matters, of course, because the man giving it is Thor, and Thor is not his brother, never was and never could be. But still.

“And when I upon my return home found out about your sentence, I was overjoyed, and I wasted no time in…”
The hiss of anger leaving Loki’s lips is feral in its wrath, like the growling of a wounded animal. “Overjoyed, you say? Well, I’m delighted that someone can find it in them to be happy about my current situation as a slave! That I, a former prince of Asgard, has now been reduced to being the property of a mortal! Tell me, did you celebrate when you found out?” He gestures angrily at the clothes he’s wearing, t-shirt and sweatpants, nothing like his usual Asgardian apparel. “Does it give you satisfaction, seeing me like this?” The rage is welling up within him like a pool of molten, bubbling lava, hot and sizzling, and he makes no effort to contain it.

But Thor stands his ground, unaffected by the other man’s wrath like a slab of rock impervious to the onslaught of rough weather and lapping waves.

“As much as it saddens me, the truth is that you brought this onto yourself, brother,” he says simply, so infuriatingly simply, like only Thor knows how to. “You brought war to Midgard. You caused the death of innocent people. You led an alien army to this realm to conquer and destroy. You tried to put Midgard under your rule and enslave its inhabitants.” Thor’s stare is hard, unrelenting, and Loki can sense the tell-tale tingling of electricity in the air. “Be grateful a worse fate did not befall you.”

And of course Loki knows that Thor has a point, even he can see that, he just doesn’t want to hear it.

So instead, he turns his back to the thunder god, rage abating as it is replaced with ice-cold indifference. “Go, Thor,” he says in a low voice, “Get out. Leave me. I have no wish to talk to you.” A denial, a rejection as clear as any.

He expects Thor to protest, that the oaf will continue with his inane blabbering, but for once, he does not.

Instead, he can hear the footsteps of Thor walking towards the empty doorframe, and then, out of the corner of his eye, he sees the other man stopping briefly, turning around to face him once more. “I will speak to you later, brother, once you have calmed yourself.” And then, the Thunderer turns on his heel and walks out, leaving Loki alone to simmer in anger and resentment.
“Another pop tart, big guy? Always helps with the valley parts of those mood swings, or so I’ve heard.” Tony says, holding out the box of sugary goodness to the god hunched opposite to him, chin resting in his hands and elbows on the tabletop, the very picture of exhausted weariness.

Listlessly, but easily convinced nonetheless, a large hand mechanically reaches inside the box and then retreats with a piece of pastry clutched between strong fingers.

“Thank you, my friend,” Thor says, but doesn’t bring the pop tart to his mouth, only stares dully at it like it’s a foreign object of unknown use.

“Uh, so I take it the reunion with your long-lost brother didn’t go too well?” Tony says, knowing it’s bad manners to pry into other people’s personal business but not particularly caring. It’s not as if he can’t have Jarvis replay the whole conversation between the two gods once Thor has left the room, should he want to.

Thor’s eyes slowly drift away from the pop tart in his hand that is well on the way of being reduced to crumbs in his iron grip, and comes to rest at Tony’s face.

“All in all, it went better than expected. I knew before coming here what the nature of Loki’s accusations towards me would be, so it was nothing I had not already prepared myself for.” The pastry breaks in two and falls out of Thor’s hand, but he doesn’t seem to notice. “It still saddens me, however, to see my brother reduced to… this.”

Strangely, there is no accusation directed at Tony in those words, none at all that he can discern. Truth be told, he had been a bit worried when Thor came knocking without warning, requesting to see his brother, but there seemed to be no hard feelings on his part despite the situation. Not that Tony had had any say in Loki’s sentence or ever wanted a would-be world conqueror living in his tower, of course, but he’s still Loki’s master-slash-custodian-slash-babysitter or whatever you want to call it.

“Well, to be honest with you, Point Break, this isn’t my idea of fun and games either. Maybe I’m supposed to be flattered that Asgard decided to dump this little surprise gift on my doorstep, but I’m really anything but.”

Thor’s face is solemn, but understanding.
“I am sorry my father has caused you such trouble on behalf of my brother,” he says, sounding slightly guilty, as if this whole situation is somehow a result of his doings. “However, as Loki’s most grievous wrong-doings were committed against Midgard, Odin and the Council found it just that restitution for his crimes should be paid in your realm, and unfortunately there is nothing anyone of us can do to change it.”

Tony leans back, hands folded behind his head, tipping the chair so that it precariously balances his weight on only two legs. He is not in a particularly good mood, and Thor’s sort-of acceptance of the whole thing doesn’t sit right with him. In fact, the complacence irks him like a rusty spike sewn into his shirt, spiky end facing inwards.

“Well, didn’t you guys ever get the memo about slavery being all *fucked-up and wrong*?” he throws out, finally losing his patience. “And I don’t just mean ‘Conan the Barbarian remake’-wrong but ‘Conan the Barbarian wearing a pink skirt and joining the Salvation Army remake’-wrong. You guys are supposed to be the advanced race here, as opposed to us puny mortals scrambling around on the ground like confused ants, leading out our short and insignificant lives in deplorable ignorance.” He jabs his thumb at Thor, daring him to explain himself.

Of course he knows it’s not Thor’s fault, not any more than Tony is personally responsible for the torture and imprisonment without due process that is still commonplace in various places on planet Earth, but the awkwardness of sitting here having a conversation with the brother of someone who is technically his slave is just a tad too much, so he tries to shift the focus – the blame? – to somewhere else.

The fact that Thor doesn’t blame him, doesn’t hold anything against him is in a way even more disturbing than his pointing an accusing finger, announcing that it’s all Tony’s fault, would have been. And Thor’s acquiescing acceptance of his brother’s punishment is hard too fathom. In that moment, he realizes that for all of Thor’s eager, at times almost childish fondness for Midgardian manners and customs, the adaptation is only skin deep; there are still worlds lying between them, and not just in the physical sense.

“It is the Allfather’s ruling,” Thor replies sadly. “This is how Asgard’s justice system works.”

“Hate to burst your bubble, Flash Gordon, but the Allfather is a major dick, if he thinks sentencing his own son to slavery is anything even close to okay,” Tony prods, tipping the chair a bit further back.

Thor’s eyes narrow, and Tony can swear he feels the air around him grow heavy and humid, as if a thunder storm is approaching. “Be careful how you speak of my father, Man of Iron. I might be a
guest in your house, but I will not tolerate further insults like that.”

There is a tense silence during which Thor seems to calm himself, and the barometer pressure returns to normal levels before he continues. “I might not be happy about it, but Loki’s sentence is meant to be a punishment for his grave transgressions, and surely you mortals punish criminals and wrong-doers here on Midgard as well?”

“Well, duh,” Tony says, rolling his eyes. “Sure we do. We even have these special lovely resort facilities with barb wire around them where we keep those people, everything from teenagers enjoying a bit of Mary Jane to crazy mass murderers. Doesn’t mean we freaking *enslave* them, though. We do have *some* standards, and this whole revenge-thing and eye-for-an-eye doesn’t fly here.”

“At the heart of every punishment lies a desire for vengeance, a sense of retribution on behalf of those wronged,” Thor says gravely, and it makes Tony wonder when it was that Thor ever got interested in debating judicial philosophy. The Thunderer looks up from where his fingers are prodding the sad remains of the crushed pop tart lying forlorn on the table, and nails Tony with a steely, unwavering look boring right into him. “You speak as if the Aesir are morally inferior, as if you mortals never succumb to the lure of petty revenge. But tell me, when Loki was delivered to your doorstep, did you feel no personal gratification whatsoever at seeing him, the man who has so grievously wronged both you and your realm, subjugated and brought low before you?”

Okay, so *that* hits just a tad bit too close to home for comfort. Especially given that the god asking him that question is Loki’s own brother, which makes for a level of awkwardness that far exceeds what should be maximum exposure for one single person in a month.

It’s not only that, though, because Thor’s simple question makes a prickle of guilt stab at his innards as he remembers his own immediate reaction, and the first few days that followed after Loki was brought here. The satisfaction at seeing the god that had pulled so much shit on Earth that it wasn’t even funny kneeling at his feet, powerless and exposed… yes, there had been a heady rush surging through him like a potent mixture of adrenaline and alcohol and god knows what. Not something he can say he’s proud of, looking back on it.

“And perhaps that is precisely why handing people over to those they have wronged isn’t such a swell idea. Seriously, if I had been just a tad more vindictively inclined, I might very well have gutted him then and there, or at least bashed his head in with a big rubber mallet,” he throws out, hoping to make Thor realize what could have been the fate of his precious little baby brother under less favourable circumstances.

“And you would have been well within your rights, as much as the fact grieves me.”
Okay, not at all the answer he had been expecting. Especially not from Thor, who’s the poster picture of forgiveness and gracious second chances when it comes to Loki.

And it makes Tony cringe on the inside. For all he cares, Thor should be raging, fuming, calling forth black clouds of thunder as he canalizes his wrath into a fire show of lightning splitting the sky, but nothing of the sort happens. Because having grown up in Asgard, with their pre-packaged views on concepts like justice and slavery, apparently comes with a set of value dissonance that Tony can’t even begin to unravel. He realizes, then, that there is no point in continuing this discussion, no use trying to persuade Thor of his point of view.

So he decides to change the subject instead.

“Doesn’t Odin realize he’s kinda tempting fate here, placing an enslaved criminal in a single person’s custody like this? I know Loki’s got those pretty magic bracelets and all so he can’t turn people into cockroaches or turn all traffic lights green at the same time anymore, but what’s to keep him from sneaking off and heading for the hills?” Tony asks, cocking his head to the side.

“I mean, not that he’ll get past even the first layer of security in this tower, but I doubt that Allfather almighty has any clue about artificial intelligence and motion detectors and electronic locks and all that fancy stuff that will keep Loki from getting even his pinky toe across the threshold unless I want him to. Correct me if I’m wrong, but wouldn’t keeping a guy like Loki locked up in a dungeon be a lot safer option than placing him in someone’s house?” Not that the Aesir seem like the epitome of logical reasoning, but there’s gotta be some thought behind it all.

Thor shakes his head sadly. “They know he won’t try to escape. Heimdall is keeping watch.”

O-kay, so that clears it all up. Not. “And exactly who’s this Heimdall?” The name does ring a bell, though it’s one of those small, jingly ones rather than the kind that hangs in church towers.

“Heimdall guards the Bifrost, the rainbow bridge,” Thor informs him. “However, that is not all he does. He is also the watchman of Asgard, and he sees everything in the Nine realms that he turns his eye towards. He’s been given the task of keeping an extra watch on Loki, to make sure he does not escape or cause any further trouble in the human realm.”

Tony can’t help but smirk. “Wow, sounds like you’ve got quite the peeping Tom there, buddy. Who would have known that even the gods have such raging perverts roaming in their midst?” He scratches his goatee thoughtfully, thumb running across his cheek. Then he points a finger at Thor
and scoots forward, an eager expression on his face. “Hey, you’d think there’d be any chance he’d be willing to lend that power to me as a reward for my active participation in carrying out Asgard’s judicial rulings? I mean, there’s this really hot chick with legs a mile long who lives a few blocks away, and I’d love the chance to sneak a peek when she --”

“Please, this is no laughing matter,” the god interrupts him, holding up a hand for silence. “As I said, should my brother escape, it will come to Heimdall’s knowledge soon enough, and there would be a scouting party sent out to find him and bring him back to Asgard for execution.” The last word is spoken in a throaty whisper, as if Thor thinks that merely speaking it out loud will bring ill fortune.

And Tony isn’t sure he wants to know, but he has to ask anyway, or he wouldn’t be Tony.

“And exactly how would he be executed, should he try to escape?”

Thor tells him, and Tony can feel his face go at least three shades paler. These Norse gods don’t mess around. And they sure as hell don’t play nice either.

“So, uh, what’s wrong with just chopping his head off? It sure would be a lot less, well, messy for the cleaning crew,” he says, trying to sound flippant but knowing he’s failing when he hears the strain in his own voice.

Thor has that sad puppy-face back on again. “It is how things are done among the Aesir; however, I do not expect you to understand Asgardian justice, my friend. Sometimes I’m not sure that I… fully understand everything of it myself.” He shakes his head, as if slightly confused by his own admission.

Tony ponders this, but before he can answer it’s Thor's turn to abruptly change the subject. “Friend, I am tired and weary after my travels, and the hour is growing late. If you have a bed to spare in your abode, I would be most grateful.”

Sure, Tony has a spare bed alright. Heck, he even has a spare floor, if need be. Or several of them, to be exact.

“No problem, buddy, just squeeze yourself into the first room to the left down that corridor,” he points over his shoulder, rather glad for the conversation to come to an end. It’s been a long day.
"I thank you for your gracious hospitality," Thor says formally and inclines his head in appreciation as he makes to stand up, his bright red robe making a dramatic flutter, and Tony can’t help but wonder if there’s some kind of Asgardian spell or enchantment placed on those things that make them billow so heroically from even the slightest movement. If Thor’s pompous flair is at all any indication of what the Aesir are like in general, he sure wouldn’t put it past them. Perhaps it’s their version of Earth’s designer brand jeans or blingy gold teeth.

Then there’s suddenly a heavy hand squeezing his shoulder, pressing him down two thirds of the distance separating his face from the tabletop, as Thor comes to a halt next to him, ever not-mindful of the strength differences between gods and mortals.

“I also wish to thank you for my brother being in good health, despite the atrocities he has committed against your world and your people. You have treated him more kindly than what could reasonably be expected, and you have my gratitude, Man of Iron.”

For once in his life, Tony doesn’t really have a reply to offer.
When he wakes up, it is after a restless night full of strange and unpleasant dreams that he can’t quite remember, but the vague sense of unease lingers nonetheless. It’s still early in the morning, at least if you’d consult the Tony Stark circadian rhythm, but he doesn’t feel like going back to sleep – and isn’t sure he would even be able to – so instead he crawls out from under the covers and lumbers off to the bathroom for a nice hot shower.

Having made it into the shower cabin, he turns the temperature-regulating knob almost as far to the red side as it goes. Then he stands there, letting the heated water run over his body, futilely hoping it will wash off the unpleasant feeling clinging to him as well.

Truth be told, he really isn’t looking forward to a common breakfast with the two gods currently lodged in his tower. The situation is just too freaking weird. Sure he’s gotten used to eating with Loki by now, and he’s never had a problem eating with Thor, barring that annoying habit of smashing empty cups on the floor that got old very quickly, but having both of them at the table at the same time, given the situation? Not something he’d willingly sign up for, that’s for sure.

He grabs a bottle of shampoo off the shower rack, pouring a big glob of pinecone or pine needle or whatever-scented goo into his palm and proceeds to rub the stuff into his hair. Very thoroughly. For a very long time.

Okay, so he’s stalling and he knows it, but his insides are positively churning at the idea of eating breakfast with Loki and Thor. At the same time.

Actually, he has yet to even be in the same room as both of them. After big brother had had his talk with little brother yesterday, Jarvis had informed him that little brother went straight to his room, and Tony figured it would be a good idea to let him stay there without adding any commentary to whatever it was that Thor had said. He could imagine that Loki needed some time to himself having had his first meeting with Thor after… everything.
It wasn’t as if he had had any idea what to say to him anyway, and judging by his own conversation with Thor afterwards, Loki had been anything but happy to see him.

Well, not that he’d been all rainbows and sunshine before Thor’s surprise visit, but it sure didn’t seem like his mood had benefited from his brother’s presence, quite the opposite.

The shampoo has been rinsed off by now, so he pours another glob out and massages it into his scalp. Yeah, his hair could probably need it after his having spent so much time in his workshop lately; it’s not exactly the cleanest place in this tower to put it mildly. And it’s not like he’s stalling. Not at all.

He remains standing in the shower for a long time after every trace of the second shampooing has disappeared and his skin has turned bright red from the hot water. It is only then that he finally turns the stream of water off and reaches for a towel, very slowly and meticulously drying himself off.

He enters the kitchen with an ugly grimace, sighing to himself as he eyes the table in front of him, well aware of what it heralds.

“So where are our guest hiding, Jarvis?” he enquires, pretty sure that both of them are long since up and running.

“Mr Layfeyson is in the library, and Mr Odinson is in the living room, trying to work out how the TV remote works,” comes the reply.

Great. He hopes ‘trying to work out’ isn’t just another way of saying ‘picking apart’, but in Thor’s case, the two probably amount to the same thing. Then again, a broken remote would be the least of his problems right now.

“Would you tell them that it’s time for breakfast?”

“As you wish, sir.”

And then Tony can only wait while speculating who out of Chip and Dale will make it to the kitchen.
first. The sound of brisk footsteps reaching his ears only a few moments later tells him that it’s big brother.

“Good morning, Friend Stark,” Thor booms as he enters, his appearance complete with both cape and armour and boots despite the objective of his quest being nothing more dramatic than the breakfast table.

“Morning, big guy.” Tony says more casually than he feels. “Have a seat and breakfast will be served in a minute.”

Thor obeys and Tony proceeds to rummage through his cupboards and refrigerator for something that will constitute proper morning fare for a thunder god. He doesn’t usually keep a whole lot of breakfast-like food around, but he doubts Thor is going to be picky, given his usual food-is-food mentality.

Well, at least there’s enough stuff in here to make a few decent sandwiches, and then there’s always those Cheerios that Loki normally eats.

Speaking of which, there is suddenly another set of footsteps incoming, this time slower and more subdued as god number two shuffles into the kitchen, reluctantly taking his seat at the table, looking as sullen as Tony has ever seen him.

“Good morning, brother,” Thor rumbles, receiving an indistinct mumble in return.

Tony makes sure to busy himself at the cupboards. But as there are no further exchanges between the two, eventually he turns, placing bowls and cups and bread and Cheerios and various other stuff on the table. Out of the corner of his eye, he can see Thor watching him with a strange but unreadable look on his face. Tony isn’t sure exactly what the problem is, so he ignores it for now as he sets a jar of butter – whose expiry date he hopes isn’t too far back in history – and finally takes a seat himself.

It is only then he understands what the cause of that odd look from Thor is.

Tony is the one fixing the breakfast and setting the table. Not Loki.

And of course, that’s not the ways things are done in Asgard, right? No, it’s pretty safe to say that back there, Loki would have been doing all that, and, most likely, he wouldn’t even have been
allowed to sit at the table once he was finished.

The realization makes him freeze up – even if Thor wouldn’t have liked it, he had most likely expected it, that Tony would have Loki serve them, treating him like it would have been appropriate for someone of his station in Asgard.

The disturbing picture rises before his inner eye – how would Thor have acted if Tony had indeed ordered Loki around like a master would no doubt have done to a slave back where he comes from? Exactly how uncomfortable would he have been with that? Would he at all have said something, reacted in any way? Or just done his best to be a good guest and pretend as if nothing was wrong or out of the ordinary?

He really doesn’t know.

In an effort to stave off further thoughts of the kind, he gestures towards the food, clearing his throat that is starting to feel uncomfortably tight. “Okay, just dig in,” he says, trying to sound flippant.

Thor throws him a grateful glance as the puzzled lines in his face smooth themselves out, and eagerly clutches a piece of bread and some cheese. Somehow, though, Tony gets the feeling that the gratitude and relief on Thor’s face doesn’t have anything to do with the offer of food.

He makes a grab for some bread himself, and Loki goes for his usual Cheerios. And so starts another awkward and silent breakfast, despite Tony thinking he’s had enough of them to last him a lifetime. Well, he supposes it’s at least a few notes less awkward then it would have been if he had actually had Loki serve them instead of eating with them. And the question of how Thor would have taken that, how he would have reacted, still eats at him and refuses to leave him alone.

Somehow, the rather non-existing appetite he started out with seems to have left him completely as the bite of sandwich only grows in his mouth for every chew.

And then there is suddenly a much more unsettling thought rearing its ugly head in his mind, making his stomach do an uncomfortable somersault.

How would Thor have reacted if Tony had backhanded Loki across the face, right in front of him? What would he have said? Would he have said anything at all? Would he have gotten angry, upset, horrified, anything else? Would he have done anything?
He glances over at Thor who’s sitting there chewing on his food with what looks like more or less his usual appetite. Of course, Thor could easily stop him should he want to, but the question is – would he?

He swallows before the piece of sandwich in his mouth grows too big and he has too spit it out. Instead, he tries to think of something else – oh yeah, that beta-electro-transformer that Point Break was inadvertently responsible for destroying needs fixing – but his treacherous brain will have none of it. No, it decides to step things up a notch, taking the word ‘disturbing’ to entirely new levels.

What if he hadn’t stopped at a mere backhand to the face? What if he’d proceeded to give Loki a lengthy beating, right there in front of Thor? Would he have stepped in then? Or would he just have sat there watching with clenched jaw and fists, or perhaps looked away or left the room? Or would he actually have intervened, despite Tony exercising nothing more than what would be his rights, according to Asgard’s laws? Would Thor have spoken up, trying to persuade Tony to stop? Yeah, he probably would have, he can’t imagine anything else. But what if Tony had refused to listen? Would he have done anything else than offering further useless pleas? What if Loki had begged his brother to step in? Would Thor have done it then? What if Loki had gotten to a state where he wasn’t even able to beg Thor for anything anymore, would he have stepped in then, physically intervening?

And to be honest, he has no clear answers to any of those questions. He sure knows what he hopes the answers would be, but there’s no way of knowing for sure.

Grimacing, he looks down at his half-eaten sandwich. There’s no way he can eat any more of it. Again, he looks over to Thor, who doesn’t see to suffer from the same food-related affliction.

He watches as the god finishes the last sandwich and then proceeds to pick up some of the larger bread crumbs from the tabletop, munching them down too. Tony sighs. So the bread is gone, devoured by a ravenous alien, but he doesn’t want anyone, including ravenous aliens, to leave his table hungry, so he scoots the box of Cheerios over to the god.

“Try some of these,” he says. “Don’t want you to start chewing on my furniture because you’re starving.”

Thor eyes the box in confusion, then looks at Tony in further confusion, not speaking a word. And that makes Tony confused too, because while he does remember Loki being confused (and why is there suddenly so much confusion everywhere) about the box of Cheerios during his first breakfast here, Thor is used to modern-day food and its packaging by now, so it shouldn’t puzzle him. Especially not since he’s just seen Loki eating of them, so it should be perfectly clear to him how it’s done.
And that’s when he realizes that that’s the source of Thor’s confusion right there. *Loki* has been eating them, unlike Thor and Tony who have been favouring the sandwiches. And so, he’s naturally assuming that since Tony is serving them to Loki, the Cheerios must be a substandard kind of food. And of course, whatever slop you’d give a slave to eat in Asgard would never be something you’d offer to a guest.

And despite feeling less and less hungry by the second, Tony reaches out for the box, dragging it over to his side of the table. “You know, I think I’ll have some myself,” he says as casually as he can manage, pouring a stream of the stuff into his own bowl. The Cheerios clatter dully but audibly against the porcelain in the silence hanging over the kitchen table.

Then he scoots the box back over to Thor. “How about trying some?” he says way more cheerfully than he feels.

The look on Thor’s face is one of even more confusion, but this time mixed in with something else that makes his features light up a little, as he slowly grabs the garish box in front of him, pouring a generous helping into his own bowl.
Chapter 43

As soon as breakfast is finished, it is no great surprise that Tony excuses himself, leaving the kitchen with a curt comment that if anyone needs him, he’ll be down in his workshop.

And Loki is in the undesirable position of being alone with Thor again. Thor, who’s eyeing him across the table with those piercing blue eyes that he wishes would look at anything else than him sitting here in his humiliation, the mere slave of a mortal.

The confusion all but radiating from Thor during their breakfast had been obvious – why Tony would let his slave eat food fit for free men, why he didn’t have him serve at the table, why someone of his lowly station was even allowed to sit there and eat with them in the first place. He should know what Thor was thinking, of course, because it was the exact same things that had confused him too.

And if Thor wants to know the answer to those whys, he might as well ask Tony, because Loki doesn’t really have any answer to give him.

“Brother,” Thor finally breaks the silence, “I am truly relieved to see how many of my initial worries on your behalf were indeed unfounded.”

Of course, Thor and Tony are shield brothers, having joined to fight the same enemy – namely him – so obviously, Thor knows Tony and what the man is like, so his expectations of what Loki would have to face here had most likely not been nearly as terrible as what Loki had expected. But it is clear how Thor had nonetheless assumed that even if Loki might not be subjected to any overt cruelty or brutality, because apparently Tony finds no enjoyment in such things, he would still in other regards be treated more or less in accordance to what his station would have suggested.

While he’s glad that Tony hasn’t openly debased him in front of Thor, there is still humiliation in knowing how obvious it is what Thor is thinking, his surprise that Tony isn’t treating him the way a slave would be in Asgard. That he’s allowed to sit at the table as opposed to kneeling at Tony’s feet. That he’s being fed decent food rather than unappetizing scraps.

Every little detail of that would be obvious even to someone as oblivious as Thor. And he knows that’s what’s been on the Thunderer’s mind during the entire breakfast. In a way, it makes his station even more blatant, makes it stand out like a sore thumb, the many ways he’s not being treated as expected.
“Midgardians do many things differently,” Thor suddenly interrupts his thoughts. “You should count yourself lucky.”

And he can’t take sitting here with Thor, listening to whatever it is he has to say. He really just can’t.

It is only stalling, of course, but at least it will give him some small respite of not having to talk to Thor.

“You will have to excuse me, Thor,” he says as impassively as he can manage, the cool aloofness in his voice at odds with the abruptness with which he stands up, “but my master has work that he expects me to perform. I’m sure you would not wish to keep me from it.”

He enjoys the way Thor’s face falls a little as Loki turns on his heel and walks off, leaving him alone in the kitchen.

“Brother, please, at least try to make the best out of your situation as it is. Things could have been so much worse; surely you realize this. At least this way, you have another chance!”

Yes, and another day as well, and another attempt from Thor at making dull conversation.

Of course, Thor had walked in just as the box of papers had been sorted, as if he had known the exact moment that Loki was finished with his task. Probably, Jarvis had told him.

And Loki doesn’t want to hear any of it, he really doesn’t. So his eventual reaction to Thor’s endless prattle is to stalk out of the room with as much dignity as he can muster, but the other man simply traipses after him, his mouth not even ceasing to move as he trails in Loki’s footsteps, refusing to let him off the hook. Thor’s voice is pleading, insistent, and it grates at his ears. It’s telling him things he doesn’t want to hear, forces him to reflect over truths he doesn’t feel like considering.

So Loki freezes in his tracks, spins around and fixes him with a frosty glare, one that would have turned lesser beings into icicles.
“Another chance of what exactly, Thor?” he spits out, words laced with venom. “Another chance of humiliation, degradation, of being ordered around like a pet on a leash? What else is there possibly to expect from my current situation?”

Thor sighs, and his fists clench a couple of times, closing on empty air made thick with the animosity that’s hanging over the room.

“I’m just saying, Loki,” he mumbles softly, “that things could have been worse. You could have been sentenced to execution, but as it is, you’re still alive. Odin told me that at your trial, you were given the option of death, but you didn’t choose that, so at least —“

“Yes, because death is surely the benchmark against which to judge a situation as desirable or not,” he snaps back, eyeing Thor as if he is a dimwit. Which isn’t all that far from the truth, of course.

He has to reluctantly admire Thor’s persistence, though. Usually he would have driven the Thunderer to the brink of despair by now with his wringing of words and twisting of their meaning and semblance. But this time, his not-brother is refusing to be baited and keeps his otherwise short temper and frail patience under control.

But it’s all so pointless. There is nothing Thor can say or do that will change anything. The Allfather has already turned a deaf ear to his oldest son’s pleas, so words are useless and devoid of purpose. Loki has received his sentence, and that’s all there is to it, as far as Thor should be concerned. It would be better if he just ran back to his Midgardian lover instead of harping on about things that can’t be changed.

However, Thor takes aim anew, tries another angle and sneaks in at Loki from the sidelines.

“No, he’ll still live as long a life as he would have before all of this, provided that nothing kills him in the meantime. His life span is a part of his nature, of his very being and no magic can take that away, not even Odin’s. Of course, given the laughable fragility of his current body, there are still a million things that could end his life prematurely, even in this realm, and one of them probably will, eventually.
“And your point is?” He folds his arms, looking down his nose at Thor as if he’s a simple worm crawling pathetically on the ground and would be better off if someone stomped a heavy boot on him.

“My point is, what do you expect will happen when Tony is dead? He’s a mortal, and will be lucky if he lives to see a century,” Thor presses on.

And the question, so carelessly thrown out, is one that stings and gets under his skin like a spike pressed under his fingernails, and it’s something that he’s tried not dwelling too much upon. Despite his own long lifespan, his current circumstances make it hard for him to look further beyond the horizon than the next day; the thought that a century ahead, or even only a year from now, he will still be a slave is one he has still not come to terms with. Merely trying to deal with his life one day at a time is enough for now.

Bur what little consideration he has given the subject has merely boiled down to the assumption that it will be just like on Asgard – when a man dies, all his possessions, including any slaves belonging to his household, will be passed over to the heirs. Granted, Tony doesn’t have any children, but that could change, and if not, there should be other family members coming out of the woodworks to squabble over the inheritance. Rich men are seldom without heirs to claim the remains.

The thought is unnerving, to say nothing of the humiliation of being passed over like chattel, like property.

However, when he had first arrived here, his immediate attention had been on getting through his ordeal with Tony; whatever lay beyond that was something he thought he would deal with once he got there. And in his feeble attempts of grasping for even the slightest straw of hope, he had wanted to picture being passed over to the next in line as a small step up. A possible improvement, getting another master with fewer reasons to hate him, who might have no recollections or personal experience of his doings in New York. Someone he’s never thrown out of a window of any sort.

But now, he’s come to realize that the ‘beyond’ will probably turn out to be a worsening of conditions. After all, would a new master show him the same… lenience that Tony has, for inexplicable reasons, shown?

Most likely not.

“I’m sure there will be some other mortal in line waiting for me to be passed onto them for their petty amusements. What difference does it make? I will remain a slave regardless, why should it matter who holds my leash?” he shoots back, trying to take satisfaction in the crease of exasperation
wrinkling the space between Thor’s eyebrows.

Thor takes a step closer, and Loki moves an equal distance in the opposite direction. For quite some time, they’ve moved around in circles like this, Thor advancing and Loki retreating, like they’re trapped in a bizarre cosmic dance, forced to repeat the strange and meaningless moves for all eternity.

Obviously realizing he’s not going to get any closer to Loki, Thor makes a compromise and reaches out a pleading hand in his direction instead, urging him to listen. “Of course it matters. Tony has been a kind master, has he not? Perhaps the one after him will be as well. And the next one too. But eventually, along the line, there might be someone who is not as kind, and who might actually… hurt you.”

Loki turns his head away, looking out the window at the sky outside, still beautiful despite the gray thunderclouds gathering. And still out of reach for him, still an unattainable dream.

“And that’s supposed to make me feel better?” he snorts. “Seriously, just say what you came here to say, that I deserve this.” There’s a tremble in his voice that he’s not sure where it came from and he wills it to go away. “You and Odin and his Council and the rest of Asgard, you all agree – I deserve this. Frankly, I don’t see what you coming here to tell me the same thing as what everyone else already believes will accomplish. You’re wasting your time, and mine as well, even though I have precious little other use for it.”

Thor’s face softens at that. “No, Loki, that’s not what I came here to say.” He makes a short pause, weighing his words before speaking again. “What I mean is that such a fate might be avoided if you accept this as your penance. A way to redemption, if you will. Perhaps then, Odin will be willing to grant you a pardon, maybe put a time-limit to your sentence. If you show repentance, that you have learned your lesson, maybe you might have your freedom yet again.”

If his situation had been different, he would have been amused at the ridiculous look of childish hope and naïveté manifesting itself on Thor’s face. Does the big lout honestly believe that the Allfather will change his mind like men change clothes, that Odin will be so easily swayed?

“Are you truly that stupid, or do you have to make an extra effort in order to come off like such a fool?” The insult is uncreative and dull, but it feels good as it rolls off his tongue, like lifting the lid covering a kettle of boiling water to ease the raging pressure inside.

“Mind your words, brother.” Thor’s face darkens, and his voice is a notch lower, a clear sign of anger building up. “You are hardly in a position to accuse others of foolishness after your own thoughtless actions.” He crosses his arms, puffing his chest out. Whether Thor does that consciously
or not, Loki can’t tell, but he’s seen his not-brother assume that stance far too many times to count.

“Ah, so the great and mighty Thor speaks. Always belittling others and pointing out their faults in order to make himself look superior. You’re still the same as you were before Odin banished you to Midgard, aren’t you?” Loki snaps, not caring in the slightest that Thor is glaring daggers at him.

“Then it would seem I am in good company. Because clearly, you are still as conceited and self-destructive as when-- “

“Hey guys!”

Both Loki and Thor turn towards the third voice unexpectedly breaking into their little argument.

Tony is lounging in the doorway, an arm up against the doorframe, following the proceedings with a look of vague interest on his face. He flashes a grin at them, and Loki uncomfortably wonders just how long he’s been standing there.

“Well, nothing like a good old family argument to get the juices flowing, is there?” Tony says matter-of-factly, raising an eyebrow into an elegant arc. “Hate to break things up before they really get going, but pizza is here, and I’m sure as hell not going to eat it all by myself.” His fingers trail down to his side, grabbing at a non-existing love-handle. “Besides, I’ve already gained two pounds since last week; can you imagine that? It’s a travesty, I tell you!”

Loki and Thor throw another frosty glance at each other, but neither speaks further and merely follows Tony as he leads the way into the kitchen.
Chapter 44

Pepperoni and cheese. *Lots* of cheese. Tony grabs another one of the slices left in the greasy pizza box and bites into it, chewing loudly.

“Mmm, this stuff’s awesome!” he says, mouth full. “Come on, help yourself, the pizza isn’t going to eat it itself.” He scoots one of the boxes across the table to the two Asgardians sitting at the other side, both of them looking more like sulking children than gods.

Thor listlessly helps himself to another slice, but doesn’t stuff his face with his usual ravenous appetite, but puts the offered food into his mouth mechanically, as if he is feeding a machine. Loki merely nibbles on his slice, looking equal amounts confused and annoyed with the endlessly long strings of cheese his action produces.

“Hey, I thought you gods could eat an entire pig in one sitting. Never thought some pizza would be too much for you,” he jabs, trying to put a crack into the uncomfortable silence hanging over the dinner table. Heck, *someone* needs to say something.

“We are most appreciative of this fine food, Man of Iron,” Thor booms, ever mindful of the manners Asgardian customs no doubt demand of a guest, “but I fear the mood of me and my brother is not conducive to our appetites.”

Tony takes another bite, and then wipes his finger on the already grease-stained paper towel lying all crumbled up next to his plate. “Yeah, family spats tend to have that effect, I know all about it.” He nonchalantly waves the remainders of his pizza slice around in one hand. “So what’s the big deal, did little brother here want to play with your hammer and big brother told him that he couldn’t?”

Alright, so he did hear enough of their argument to get the gist of it, but whatever.

Thor shakes his head, slightly frowning and still as impenetrable to sarcasm as ever. “No, Mjölnir had nothing to do with it. What we were discussing was another matter entirely.”

Well, ‘discussing’ is a nice way to put it. Tony would personally have referred to it as ‘bickering’ or, more aptly, ‘bitching’. But he supposes that starting a debate about the proper terminology isn’t going to help things along here.
“I have already told you, the will of the Allfather will not be swayed on a mere whim,” Loki mutters, sounding like he’s repeating something he’s already said a hundred times before.

“Not on a mere whim, Loki.” Thor throws back at his brother, the poster picture of a sibling believing himself to be not only older but also wiser than his counterpart. “But if you were to show repentance and --“

Loki’s eyes narrow as he leans back in his seat, dropping the remainder of his pizza back onto his plate. “Why do you insist on feeding yourself these delusions, Thor? Even you should know better than to indulge such foolish notions.” He crosses his arms, staring the bulkier god down, daring him to object.

The air between them is heating up again, as old grievances and discontent flare anew.

“Why do you always have to make things so difficult, brother?” Thor all but shouts in frustration as he stands up and leans over the table, patience worn thin. “Why do you turn your back to the possibility, no matter how small it might be, that your sentence might be reduced? Do you want to spend the rest of your life in slavery?” A fist slams down on the tabletop, making the plates rattle.

“Why should it even matter what I want,” Loki throws back, on the surface more controlled than his brother, but obviously seething all the same, “when there is nothing that can be done that will change anything?”

“Alright,” Tony interrupts, trying to calm the situation down before it turns into a Jerry Springer-esque chair throwing family contest. “So what you’re basically saying here, Thor, is that you think there’s a chance that Odin might decide to let this slavery thing be a temporary phase and not a for-life deal? Kind of like getting out of prison early for good behaviour?”

He can see Loki watching him out of the corner of his eye, but pretends not to notice.

There are fine lines around Thor’s eyes, like he hasn’t slept in days, but he nods slowly and gingerly. “Even though I might not truly dare to hope for it, there could be a chance. I can… speak to the Allfather, see if there might be a way to convince him.”

“And it worked so well last time you tried to appeal to his good will, didn’t it?” Loki mutters, eyes dark as he regards his brother, apparently not impressed in the slightest.
Thor ignores Loki’s criticism as he speaks again, voice solemn. “Even if Odin will not listen, it is still worth a try.” He nods, clearly having made up his mind, sounding like he’s talking to himself rather than to any of the other two sitting around the table, but the note of confidence in his voice is unmistakable. “Yes. I shall go back to Asgard, and entreat Odin to consider my proposal. I am his son and regardless of his decision, he will at least have to hear me out on this.”

“Atta boy!” Tony cheers him on, one fist raised into an encouraging salute, and the other reaching over to slap the blond god on the shoulder. “You go tell your old man just where he can stick his sense of justice!”

Loki, on his part, only glares at his brother.

He’s surprised when Thor seeks him out shortly after the pizza boxes have been discarded, telling him that he is leaving for Asgard.

“Uh, you mean, like now?” Tony blurts out, taken a bit aback. Then again, he supposes he shouldn’t be too surprised – Thor only needs to do that apparating thing and he’ll be back home in no time. It’s not like he has to catch a plane or book any tickets or do any stuff usually associated with travel here on Earth.

“Yes,” Thor acknowledges. “Like I mentioned at dinner, I have to go see Odin and ask him to consider showing lenience in Loki’s sentence.”

“Yeah, I heard that. I just thought… you wouldn’t literally be leaving, like, ten minutes later,” Tony says, raking a hand through his hair. “I mean, not that you’ve got any stuff you need to pack before you go or anything, but I didn’t expect you to just jump on the next bus like that.”

Thor nods in understanding. “I am sorry to leave so hastily, but I must return to Asgard. As a prince, I have many duties to my realm that I have ignored during my long stay with Lady Jane here in Midgard. It was only the knowledge that those duties could wait no longer that eventually forced my step back to Asgard. Of course, I quickly came back again when I found out what had happened to Loki. But now, I can linger here no longer. Rest assured I will return, though,” he says solemnly, the words accentuated by a dramatic flutter of his cape that Tony hopes was caused by a nearby air conditioning vent.

“Looking forward to it, buddy.” Well, it’s by no means entirely a lie.
Then Thor turns serious, and he takes a step closer to Tony as he puts a hand on his shoulder, effectively ignoring any notions of personal space.

“I know it is untoward to be asking even more of you, but I cannot leave in good conscience otherwise,” the god says, his eyes boring into Tony’s with the force of a thousand suns.

The concern written into that face is so clear that there is no doubt just who Thor’s request will revolve around, so Tony only waits in silence for the specifics to be expanded on.

“Please make sure that Loki stays safe.” The words are so soft that they’re almost whispered. Then there is a short pause, during which Thor swallows audibly. “If he should escape and Heimdall finds out, he will not meet with a kind fate.”

Yeah, Tony already got that part loud and clear.

“Don’t worry, Hercules. I’ll make sure he stays put,” he reassures the god before him, patting the hand still on his shoulder in a way that he hopes is manly but feels more awkward than anything.

Relief washes over Thor’s face as he squeezes Tony’s shoulder a little harder. Well, quite a lot harder.

“Thank you, Man of Iron. For… everything.”

And it’s obvious that Thor isn’t referring to the pizza.

Though, to be fair, it was some really good pizza.

Sometimes he wonders if the window sill will start taking on the imprint of his ass for all the times he’s been sitting here gazing out through the window from he doesn’t know how many levels up.
It is a small consolation, but a consolation nonetheless, that Thor has finally left for Asgard on his fool’s errand. At least that means that Loki won’t have to listen to the lout spouting off his vain notions of how the Allfather might be persuaded to change his mind and actually grant some amount of clemency to his not-son.

As if *that is ever going to happen*. The only thing that Thor is doing, which he refuses to understand, just like he’s normally incapable of seeing reason and logic, is feeding Loki false hopes that will only be extinguished like a burning candle wick that someone effortlessly snuffs out between two fingertips. And truth be told, he *did* feel a flicker of empty, false hope inside of him when Thor brought that possibility up, even though his rational mind already knew that it was not to be, no matter how much he might yearn for it. Odin is not someone to second-guess his own decisions, nor is he one to show criminals leniency.

No, not in something like this, not when Odin has the entire Council to back him up on his ruling. And doesn’t he just remember the pleased faces of those Council members as his sentence was read out in court, how they were looking at him with ill-concealed contentment and satisfaction, probably already imagining all the humiliation and horrors he would have to suffer as a slave of one of his worst enemies in Midgard.

So in the end, Thor can plead and beg and beseech all he likes before Odin’s throne, even abase and prostrate himself, but that’s not going to change anything, Loki knows it already.

No, not even Odin’s favourite, the golden son who was always the apple of his father’s eyes, will be enough to sway the Allfather. For once, Thor’s entreaties will be met will indifference and coldness.

And Loki will remain a slave in Midgard until his dying day. There will be no second chances, no clemency for him.

But of course, Thor in all his self-righteous glory refused to see reason, and ventured off like a champion going out on a heroic quest, full of confidence and pomp, after speaking empty promises and dramatic words of parting.

In the end, nothing will change for him. He’ll stay Tony’s slave, only to eventually be passed on to whoever is in line to inherit the mortal’s riches, and then, later still, on to the next one, and the next…

He looks at the sky again; it’s a sharp blue with puffy clouds slowly moving across the vast expanse. Perhaps he will only ever get to stand beneath it, out in the open, when the time for a change of masters has come and he’ll be taken somewhere else.
It’s a sobering thought.

Of course, Stark Tower makes for infinitely better accommodations than the dungeons back in Asgard, but it’s a prison nonetheless. Spending his days inside the confines of these walls, performing the tasks that Tony tells him to, prowling the tower back and forth, only to return to sit on this window sill, is like having a choking snare around his neck, slowly but surely tightening its hold.

And having Thor come back here, a walking reminder of Asgard and his old life there, back when he was still free and not a pitiful slave, hasn’t served to make things any easier to deal with. It’s like an open wound getting salt rubbed into it, making it burn and sting like a thousand needles.

The sky beckons him, but all he can do is sit here and stare back at it. And that makes him want to scream and bang his fists bloody against the glass.
Chapter 45

As eager as Thor had been when he came here, he had seemed almost as eager to go back home again and try to convince his daddy that his little brother deserved better than spending the rest of his life as someone’s property.

And frankly, Tony sort of suspects that part of it might have had something to do with Loki’s behaviour. It hadn’t exactly been welcoming or joyful. More like accusatory and blaming, from what he’d seen.

As tempting as it had been, he hadn’t listened in on any of their private conversations, though. Sure, he had stood there for several minutes hunched over one of his monitors, debating with himself whether to tell Jarvis to bring up a live feed from the only other currently occupied room in the tower. He had been close, because Tony Stark is nothing if not a nosy bastard, but in the end he had decided not to. There was just something about the situation that had held him off.

Probably the fact that Loki is his slave, and as such not entitled to privacy or to anything whatsoever, according to Asgard’s way of doing things. And perhaps that’s why, in a roundabout kind of spite, he’d let the guy have his little family reunion without someone listening in on it.

Hundreds of years of family issues to work out, perfect fodder for any American talk show worth its name. And he’d rather not touch that with a ten-foot pole if he can avoid it. It’s not like his own family relations were ever stellar, so he’s hardly in any position to talk or offer advice to anyone else in that regard.

He looks down at the broken beta-electro-transformer, lying in pieces on the workbench in front of him where he left it after Thor unexpectedly came knocking, the only remaining reminder of his alien visitor.

Now, the god is back in Viking space land again, as quickly gone as he had come. And there are so many things that Tony had wanted to ask him, but had never gotten around to.

*What am I going to do with Loki now? What it is that Asgard expects of me? What do you expect of me?*

But he just couldn’t bring himself to do it. It was too awkward discussing the more… personal aspects of Loki’s slavery with Thor. Sure, he had no problem telling the guy exactly how fucked-up
he thought Asgard’s justice system was, or how much he didn’t approve of this situation, but he’d still been unable to bring up all those other things.

He remembers clear as a day that teetering moment, when he had found himself face to face with a flustered and yet oddly subdued Thor, right after the god had been given admittance to the tower. The grip on his arm, slightly trembling as Thor looked at him without speaking a word, face taut and gaze burning with emotions. The unspoken question in his eyes, the unmasked fear, the worry, the flicker of uncertainty crossing his features – all could easily be read in the god’s face before he had spoken even a word. And he could see the silent prayer, the unspoken plea that things would be alright, that there was no reason to worry, that everything was fine. The way Thor was desperately trying to decipher the look on Tony’s own face, hoping to see none of the things he was so obviously fearing, was painful to watch and made his throat constrict.

They had stood still like that for a few heartbeats as if time had frozen, looking into each other’s eyes, Thor’s hand on his arm, neither of them speaking a word. Seeing Thor like that just made his heart lurch. Of course, if there had ever been the slightest shadow of a doubt in his mind why Thor was here, it was gone the moment the god stood before him. It was obvious that he knew. He knew of Loki’s sentence, of his being here in the tower, of his having been made Tony’s slave.

And before Thor could bring himself to ask, Tony had assured him, said the words Thor had been hoping to hear, but fearing he might not. Your brother is fine. I haven’t hurt him.

Perhaps ‘fine’ was a lie, perhaps it wasn’t the truth at all. But he had the feeling that for Thor, merely the reassurance of Loki being safe would be enough for the moment. The other things could be dealt with… later.

He had thought, then, that perhaps he could talk more with Thor about Loki, about the situation, about… everything. Perhaps he just needed someone to talk with period. Thor would be the only one he could ever breach the subject of Loki with in any way, the only person who wouldn’t run screaming to SHIELD if they knew who he was harbouring in his tower.

It would have been the perfect opportunity to let some steam off, to just run his mouth off about the situation to someone who could finally listen to him vent his frustrations. Someone who might even have been able to, in some small measure, help him deal with the things that had been thrown upon him, or at least offered a few pieces of advice along the way.

But his tongue had refused to obey him. He had found neither the right moment nor the right words to say all the things he had wanted to say.
And soon after, while he was still trying to gather his thoughts into words and his concerns into sentences, Thor had announced that he was leaving with haste for Asgard.

And the moment, if there ever was one, was gone.

He’s still angry at himself for that, annoyed that he didn’t take the chance when he had it right there at his fingertips. Here, in his own home, had been the very person who knew Loki better than anyone, who had grown up with the now enslaved god and understood him. Someone who was familiar with Asgard’s culture and reasoning and behaviour and expectations, and could guide him along the rocky and thorny road.

He could have talked to Thor, could have asked him to help him out in all his confusion and uncertainty.

But in the end, he hadn’t.

Of course, Loki had had his chance as well, to talk to someone steeped in the same culture as him, someone who knew him, someone who could help him out. Who understood him in a way that Tony doesn’t, and certainly never will.

But from what he had gathered from seeing the two gods together, Loki hadn’t taken his offered chance either.

Nope, they had both let it slip between their fingers, the best chance either of them had had to get some outside assistance from perhaps the only person who might have been able to if not resolve things, then at least help them out a little bit on the way.

But Thor left, before any of that could happen, leaving them both stranded on square one. He curses his own stupidity. Perhaps Thor couldn’t have done much to improve the situation, but he might at least have paved the way for some alleviation of all this confusion.

And now he’s stuck with the same sullen, unhappy god as before, who’s trying to avoid conversation and looks as mopy as a wet poodle. Not long ago, he had actually thought he might be getting somewhere with Loki. That perhaps the god was starting to come to terms a little bit with his situation, loosening up a little. But now things seem to have regressed again.
Obviously, a discontented god of mischief and worse is not boding well. Like a ticking time bomb that might be planning who knows what. It’s not a pleasant thought at all.

Then again, from what he could tell, Thor’s visit had only served to put Loki into an ever crappier mood, so Tony isn’t sure just how much difference the thunder god could have made, even if Tony had talked to him.

And what should he have asked in the first place? *So, any particular movies you think your little brother might enjoy? You think he’d like it if I bought him a hamster to play with? Did you know that he expected me to rape him?*

He sighs, rubbing his palms across his face. Perhaps it’s just as well that he never got around to any serious talking with Thor. Somehow, he’s afraid it might eventually have come down to those unsavoury and unpleasant things – Loki’s previous expectations of him, his contemplating killing himself because of what he’d thought Tony was going to do to him.

And damn, that’s just something he can’t see himself bringing up with Thor. But in the end, perhaps it would have been impossible to avoid.

So in that respect, he’s relieved that Thor left before any truly uncomfortable and awkward questions could be asked. Even if the guy wouldn’t have held anything against him or accused him in any way, he’d still rather have to sit through a ten hour long session of the theme song to Spongebob Squarepants than breech that particular topic with Thor.

But still…

Sure, Thor had said during pizza that he was heading back home, but Tony hadn’t expected that it would be so soon. He’d thought he would have stayed around for a couple of days so that there’d be time to talk, not that he’d walk up to Tony and announce he was leaving *now*.

And he still remembers the way Thor had squeezed his shoulder, the look in his eyes, the heartfelt ‘thank you for everything’ that wasn’t really referring to Tony’s hospitality.

But in the end, he’s none the wiser now than before Thor came here, except that the importance that Loki doesn’t escape has been even more firmly imprinted in his brain. He’s promised the thunder god that much.
Oh well, at least he can do that – it’s what he’s been doing all this time up until now, and has every intention to keep doing.

After Thor’s visit, things are once more back to normal, everything as it was before he stopped by Tony’s tower.

And Loki is sitting on his usual spot on the floor again, sorting papers and documents, the supply seemingly endless.

His focus is interrupted by the sound of footsteps incoming. They come to a halt before him at talking distance, and Loki stops what he’s doing, letting the hands clutching the latest pile of papers fall down into his lap as he waits for whatever it is that Tony is about to say to him.

At first, there is only silence, and Loki just sits there staring straight ahead of him at the legs that are taking up most of his view, not looking up. He’s not sure what the man is expecting him to do, really – standing up as a sign of respect as opposed to lazily lounging on the floor, or remaining where he is, his lower position appropriate for a slave before his master.

He remains sitting. There are papers in his lap he would otherwise have to move out of the way, and if Tony wants him standing up, he’d say so.

Then, Tony suddenly crouches down before him, placing himself on equal eye level with Loki. The movement takes him by surprise, because it makes little sense why Tony would want to lower himself to the same level as his slave like this instead of just talking down to him, which is the way slaves are normally spoken to.

“ Well, Reindeer Games,” Tony says, his fingertips softly tapping against each other as he studies Loki. “Looks like there’s only you and me again.”

There’s a short pause, as if Tony is considering what to say next. “I talked to Thor before he left,” the man continues, gaze not leaving Loki’s for a second. “He told me what would happen if you should try to escape and Heimdall caught wind of it.”

He’s not sure if he’s expected to comment on that, but since he has nothing to add, he keeps quiet. In the end, it should make little difference, if any, whether Tony is familiar with the details of that or
“You sure do things differently in Asgard, don’t you?” Tony makes a disapproving grimace. “Quite understandably, your brother was very adamant that you should avoid that particular fate. And you really should be too, if even half of what he told me is true.”

Tony shifts a little bit where he’s crouching, adjusting his weight to a more comfortable position. “Anyway, I promised him I’ll make sure you stay put and don’t go venturing off anywhere you shouldn’t.” He points a finger at Loki, fixing him with an unrelenting stare. “So don’t even think about doing anything stupid like that, alright? Because you’ll break your poor brother’s little heart if you do, and my promise as well.”

And Loki’s heart sinks to the floor at those words, because he realizes what they mean – Tony will never in a million years let him leave the tower now, not after this. Not that there was ever truly any question about that, but whatever tiny hope he might still have entertained has now been effectively squashed.

His head sinks and he looks down to the floor as a wave of hopelessness washes over him and his throat constricts. No, he will never get to go outside now. There’s no way that Tony will risk it, not when he has promised Thor to make sure Loki won’t escape. He’s glad he’s already sitting down; he isn’t sure his knees would have been able to hold his weight up right now.

There’s suddenly a finger under his chin, tilting his face up until he’s looking Tony in the eyes again. He suppresses a jerk. The touch is light, not harsh or painful in any way, but the intimacy of the gesture still serves as another unwelcome reminder of his position. Had he still been free, no one would have touched him in such a way without his permission. But of course, slaves have no rights to personal space or to their own bodies and their masters are perfectly free to touch them in any way they wish.

And just like he has no say in that, he similarly has no say in whether he will ever get to go outside at all.

“All clear?” Tony’s voice echoes in his ears.

And it’s clear, all so perfectly, devastatingly clear.

“Yes,” he answers hollowly, feeling like the air above him is trying its best to squeeze him into the
ground.
Chapter 46

Another helping of papers has been sorted, and he stacks the filled folders into a passably neat pile on the floor next to the now empty box. Then, he merely sits there watching the folders for a little while, before his gaze inevitably drifts upwards to the window on the wall opposite.

The bright light assaulting him makes him blink a few times, but he doesn’t close his eyes. Instead, his longing gaze greedily feasts upon the sight of the blue expanse before him – endless and unrestricted, like a lucid dream.

And he knows it’s as pointless and futile as all those other times that he’s tried. The only thing it will result in is Jarvis’ voice once more haughtily repeating that Tony’s orders are for the windows and doors to remain shut.

And yet, he can’t help himself.

Slowly, he gets up from his hunched position on the floor and shuffles over to the window pane, not coming to a halt until his nose is almost flat against the glass. For what time in a row he doesn’t know – he has long ago lost count – his hand mechanically raises itself as if by its own volition, his fingers closing around the metal of the handle. At first, he just lets them rest there, imagining the window sliding open beneath his hand without protest, without Jarvis snapping to attention to inform him of the futility of his efforts.

After a few moments of this, he makes a little upward yank, in a desperate wish that this time, the voice will not be ringing out from its unidentifiable spot in the ceiling, though he knows better, of course.

At first, he wonders if he might be imagining things, if perhaps his confinement has addled his mind to such an extent that he’s hallucinating, projecting his burning desire onto relentless reality. Because this time, the voice is silent.

He freezes in confusion, eyes darting upwards as if he can somehow see Jarvis’ conspicuous absence manifested up there, but the AI makes no comment as the window slides impossibly open. The draft from the crack is a cool but sweet caress against his hand, and he shivers, though it’s neither from cold nor any other form of unpleasantness.

He’s about to push the window fully open so that he can feel that divine breeze against his face as
well, breathe that invigorating, wonderful air deep into his lungs, but then stops himself as another idea is gaining hold in his mind. It’s reckless and ill-considered, of course, and he really shouldn’t, but perhaps…

It’s far too tempting, and despite knowing better, he can’t resist the alluring possibility unfolding before him.

He knows his way around the tower by now, after all his endless prowling, so he doesn’t even need to stop to consider which will be the quickest route; he follows it automatically and immediately.

It’s only a few flights of stairs to the top of the tower, and he hurries up the steps, half-running in his eager haste. There’s a door on the top floor leading out to the roof, he knows. And if it was possible for him to open that window, then maybe, just maybe…

He reaches the top of the stairs in mere moments that feel like half an eternity despite their briefness. The door, for all its modest inconspicuousness, is filling his entire vision, and it is with trembling fingers that he grabs the handle, breath hitching in his throat as they push down…

… and the door slides open without protest.

The sweet rush of air washing over him is almost physical in its intensity. He hesitates, but then his feet finally bring themselves to move across the doorsill. Trembling from unidentifiable feelings, he steps out on the roof, marvelling at the sensation of the wind caressing his skin.

And he can’t for the life of him remember when he last felt so alive, as if life itself has finally come seeping back into his flesh and bones, filling him with something sorely missing until now. He doesn’t think of Tony, of his status as a slave, of Asgard, of the confining tower, nor of anything else.

He just stands there and breathes.

Tony is humming an off-tune melody that he suspects that nobody but him would ever recognize as Thunderstruck as he watches the screen in front of him, his fingers clacking away at the keyboard.
The de-bug of Jarvis was long overdue, and he has put it off for far too long, overburdened by too many other, more pressing concerns vying for his attention. Most of them related to the god of mischief currently living in his tower, everything topped off with a visit from that other god who also frequents this planet.

But now that things seem to be running as smoothly as they’re probably going to get, he has finally managed to summon up the concentration and mental focus necessary to fix this. At least there weren’t any major issues this time. A few smaller updates to the programming, but nothing extensive.

He makes a few finishing taps on the keyboard, completing the final update. The de-bugging process is as good as done; all that’s left to do now is a quick reboot of Jarvis so that the changes can take effect.

A couple of clicks later, the AI shuts itself down, screen flickering as the data refreshes and reloads into the system. Restlessly, he drums his fingers against the tabletop as he waits; perhaps he’s grown too dependant on his almost-sentient computer, because the short period of off-line time before the reboot is finished always makes him feel vaguely uneasy. Not that it’s very likely that Hydra will decide to launch a nuclear missile at his tower or something during the few minutes the upstart takes, but still. The soft beep that follows a successful reboot is always comforting nonetheless, dissolving the unpleasant feelings of vulnerability and exposure.

“Welcome back,” he says as that familiar beep tells him that Jarvis is once more on-line.

“Thank you, Mr Stark,” comes the polite answer, and Tony feels his world return to normal again.

Only to have its pillars shaken as Jarvis a second later speaks again. “I should inform you that Mr Laufeyson has made it out on the roof during my shut-down.”

*And just why can’t anything ever be easy when that infernal god of mischief is involved,* he wonders as he rushes to the stairs, not bothering with the elevator.

He stands there unmoving on the spot, enjoying the wind against his skin and the little illicit taste of freedom as he inhales the fresh air. Reality seems like a distant recollection – for him, there’s only here and now. And in that here and now, there’s only him, the sky, the endless horizon, and the breeze ruffling his hair. The moment is so perfect, and there’s really only one thing that could ruin it…
“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” comes an angry voice behind him, accompanied by hasty footsteps drawing to a halt a second later.

Tony. His breath hitches in his throat, and his fists and jaws clench tightly as reality comes crashing over him like a bucket of ice water tipped over his head.

Of course, it was too good to last. Still, he hadn’t thought that Tony would find out so quickly, had hoped that the moment were to last a little longer than this.

Biting his lip, he slowly turns around to face the man who is standing there with arms crossed and narrowed eyes. That he’s not at all happy with his slave’s doings is an understatement.

“Get back inside now!” he orders sharply with a toss of his head in the direction of the open door, voice level but something potentially dangerous brewing underneath. And Loki has no desire to challenge that brewing thing and lure it out into the open, so he obeys the command and heads back inside, hoping his little moment outside will have been worth Tony’s anger. Reticence and aversion coil inside of him at the thought of once more returning to his confinement, but he’s fully aware that he has no choice.

Tony follows and forcefully slams the door behind them, then walking around and coming to a halt before Loki, the air around him seeming to crackle with heat from the burning gaze that he directs at his slave.

“So, I put Jarvis off-line for a measly few minutes, and the first thing you do is to take the opportunity to fling the door open and waltz out.” It’s a statement rather than a question, accompanied by an accusing finger wielded not far from his face. And even though there’s definitely anger in that voice, it seems like it’s being overshadowed by… disappointment.

And that prickles him like a sharp needle.

Because he’s been a disappointment all his life. For showing little aptitude for battle. For showing all the more for magic. For not being an embodiment of all the martial values so highly treasured and cherished in Asgard. For not being more like Thor.

And even here, he’s continues to be a disappointment. He swallows, willing the unpleasant feeling away.
“I thought Jarvis had already made it perfectly clear to you that you're not supposed to open any doors or windows around here, or am I wrong?” Tony continues and then makes a pregnant pause, obviously expecting an answer.

And he has to admit, when put like that, things really don’t come out sounding to his favour at all.

“No. Jarvis has informed me of this,” he says quietly, knowing there is no point in trying to refute the fact. Tony has programmed Jarvis himself, after all.

“Alright then. You got anything to say in your defence as to why you thought it would be a good idea to piss all over that rule?”

And what is he supposed to reply to that? I wanted – needed – to go outside? To just get out for a little while? That sounds so needy, so pathetic. So weak. He doesn’t want to appear weak, so instead he just shakes his head, a clipped ‘no’ all that comes out of his mouth as he feels himself deflate a little. Of course, he’s disobeyed expressed orders, wilfully to boot, and will have to face the consequences, whatever they might be. He winces inwardly, trying to take comfort in the knowledge that at least Tony isn’t going to physically hurt him.

Tony regards him for a few moments, as if he’s excepting another answer, or for Loki to add something. But as the silence presses on, the man finally gives a slow nod.

“Okay, buddy,” he says sternly. “Consider yourself in house arrest in your room for the next week.”

Tony sighs as he sinks down into the couch, tension slowly draining out of his body as he forcefully rubs his hands over his face a few times. That god is going to be the end of him. If the alcohol doesn’t get to him first, that is.

Just when he thinks that one issue has been resolved and everything is settling down, along comes another thing shattering the status quo. And truth be told, he had been really freaked out by the sight of Loki standing out there in the open. The god who once tried to lay the planet under his rule, who smashed up a substantial part of the city stretching out beneath him, now stood there free and unrestrained, the world suddenly unprotected from whatever ambitions might still be simmering beneath that toned-down exterior.
So what if Loki was supposedly magic-liberated and powerless; it did precious little to dampen his shock at the sight. His brain was half-expecting the god to whip out some of that magic he wasn’t supposed to be having, transforming himself into a bird and flying off into the distance before Tony’s very eyes, bracelet restrictors notwithstanding. And Tony would be the one responsible for a would-be world conqueror being on the loose, with intentions he could only guess at.

He leans his head against the couch cushion behind him, sighing deeply. Just a few minutes of non-surveillance, and that was all it had taken. Like an opportunity-seeking missile, Loki had honed in on the first chance presenting itself. Just like that, as if he had a special knack, a sixth sense even, for telling when exactly the time was right.

Sure Loki doesn’t have his powers anymore, but that didn’t stop him from giving Tony a real scare, to say nothing of that unpleasant déjà vu feeling from that one time the two of them had faced off on the top of his tower, ending with him falling to his almost-death.

And most of all, he still remembers his promise to Thor – to make sure Loki stays safe. What if the god had somehow managed to make his getaway? What would he have told Thor? Uh, yeah, I let surveillance slip there for a little while, sorry about that.

Well, at least Loki is locked away in his room for the time being. Still, Tony needs to make sure there won’t be any further incidents of the kind.

And also, get a clear answer out of the god.
Chapter 47

The first day, he sits on the bed, staring at a faint crack in the ceiling. Of course, spending a week locked up is not a harsh punishment by any means, and in Asgard a slap on the wrist like this wouldn’t have been considered a punishment at all, but after having so recently stood outside for the first time in so long, the confinement is weighing heavily on his shoulders regardless. It serves as another cruel reminder of his inescapable situation, of the things he can’t have, of the sentence he will have no choice but to serve for the rest of his life.

There’s nothing in here, nothing for him to do. No books or anything else to keep his mind or body occupied. There’s only a clock on the wall, its hands moving slowly but relentlessly.

He’s familiar with the way humans tell time, and it would seem that they attach a lot of significance to it, breaking it up into its smallest possible parts. They’re so exact, the mortals, measuring time in tiny little bits and pieces like this. Tony even wears one of these time-telling devices around his wrist, apparently worth a small fortune here in Midgard.

They’re not as particular in Asgard. Midday, in an hour, in the evening – that’s usually specific enough, for most intents and purposes. Not like here, where every moment in time can be assigned its own specific set of numbers, giving it a clear and defined identity. He doesn’t know why that should be so important, and it feels like a travesty for someone like him condemned to spend perhaps millennia in slavery.

The first evening, he thinks back on his time spent in the dungeons. He’s glad he didn’t have a clock in there, because being so conscious of time just makes its agonizingly slow passing harder to deal with.

When dinner arrives, courtesy of the robot servant, he eats it slowly for lack of other things to do. Before he goes to bed, he hangs a shirt over the clock so he doesn’t have to watch the hands moving with excruciating slowness.

The second day, he sits in a chair by the window, looking out on the vast blue sky above.

The second evening, he avoids the window, not looking out of it even once. He can’t bear to see the sky outside any longer when locked up in here.

The third day, he doesn’t bother getting out of bed, but remains lying there until evening comes and
he once more falls asleep.

The fourth day, he fantasises that the door will open and that Tony will stand there in the frame. That he’ll talk to him, spouting off his usual lengthy ramblings. At this point, even they would be a welcome break in the silence and monotony.

When the door finally does open, he’s disappointed that it’s only the robot delivering his meal. The loneliness is eating at him; at least in the dungeons there were guards to bait, other prisoners to shout at through the bars, even the occasional visitor passing by his cell, and he finds himself missing someone to talk to. He’s never been locked up alone like this for days on end. Even in his cell at SHIELD, there had been guards stationed to watch him, agents to interrogate him, Director Fury to come by and threaten him. Back then, he’d wished for privacy and solitude instead, not for company.

He glances towards the door again.

It remains closed.

The fourth evening, Jarvis’ voice unexpectedly comes on-line.

“Mr Stark would like you to join him for dinner,” it says, pleasant and polite as ever as the lock to the door clicks open.

Well, perhaps this time, he’s going to get a better answer out of the god as to what he was actually doing out there on the roof. Or trying to do. Or hoping to do. Whatever.

Maybe Loki will lie. Maybe make something up. Maybe not say anything at all. But there’s no point in speculating. He’ll have to deal with the answer, of lack thereof, once he gets there.

He fiddles with the fork in his hand as he waits for Loki to join him at the table. He has to admit, his conscience has started to grow a bit guilty after his having kept the god locked up in there for several days.

Yeah, so Loki knew full well he wasn’t supposed to be opening any doors, but… what would Tony
They eat in silence. He wonders if Tony is still angry, though it doesn’t really seem like it, and if he’ll be sent back to his room for the remaining three days after the meal is finished.

“So what were you actually doing out there on the roof?” Tony suddenly asks without any preamble as he stabs a meat ball with his fork. “Why did you walk out there at all? And how did you even know that the door would open?”

Well, he supposes there’s no way he’ll be able to evade those questions.

“I could open a window for the first time since coming here. So I assumed the same might go for the door,” he says, answering the last question first, then reverting to poke at the food on his plate.

“Alright. And exactly what were you trying to do out there?” Tony repeats his question, not satisfied with Loki’s half-evasion.

He is silent for a while before answering. While he’s reluctant to admit to any weakness in front of Tony, he can’t ignore a direct question from him either.

“I just… wanted to go outside,” he finally says quietly to the fork in his hand, not meeting with Tony’s eyes, immediately regretting the words as soon as they’ve left his mouth. They’re sounding so pitiful, so weak, so desperate. And, even worse, almost pleading. He hates himself for sounding like that. It’s not like him, shouldn’t be like him.

A silence follows, and as it presses on, he slowly lifts his gaze from its resting spot on the tabletop. Tony has stopped eating and is regarding Loki with a long, contemplative look, and he’s not sure he wants to know what the man is thinking in that moment.

“You… wanted to go outside,” Tony repeats, as if he’s not sure he heard correctly the first time.

“That’s all?”
“Yes,” he admits, trying not to sound too pathetic, hoping the questioning session will be over with that.

“I see,” Tony says, still with that contemplative look on his face.

There are no more questions, and they finish their meal in silence, Loki still wondering whether Tony is angry at him.

Though, at least he doesn’t get sent back to his room again when the meal is finished.

Such a simple explanation, and yet not given until now. So simple that at first, it had been tempting to reflexively dismiss it as a lie, as a cover-up for something more devious and fit for a god of lies and deceit. But eventually, the more he thought it over, the less likely that interpretation had seemed.

Of course, Loki had no way of knowing that Jarvis had been taken temporarily off-line. If his opening of a window happened to coincide with those few minutes of non-surveillance, probability theory dictates that this was only one in a very long line of attempts that he must have kept making, despite getting his hopes crushed by the same answer from Jarvis each time. A quick check with Jarvis confirmed this; this incident was far from the first time Loki had been trying to open a window, though he’d obviously never succeeded until now.

And he has to admit, if Loki was putting on a façade back there during dinner, it was a damn good one.

To say nothing of the fact that Loki didn’t actually go for the main door leading out from the tower, only the one leading out to the roof.

Tony whistles as he steps out of the elevator, relieved to be home again after having attended another one of those tedious board meetings filled with self-important people who love to talk even though they have precious little to say. The kind of meetings that he used to neglect because Pepper would deal with them and cover for his absence one way or the other, but that he now has no choice but to attend, be it however sporadically.
Throwing his jacket off to the side he proceeds to loosen up his tie, and then stops in his tracks as he passes an open door and sees Loki sitting at a bay window like a silent shadow. The god is sloppily reclining in the corner, one leg up and one arm slung across the knee, head leaning back against the narrow white-plastered wall, eyes locked on the sky outside. Not that there is anything particularly strange about the sight as such, but what gives him pause is that the god is still hunched up in the very same spot as when Tony left the house to listen to a bunch of people in fancy suits telling him how he should run his company, which was over four hours ago.

And he is struck by how little Loki looks anything like the deranged maniac who tried to conquer the planet in what suddenly feels like a very long time ago, though it’s only been months. In fact, he only looks tired and dejected, like one of those pitiful animals at the zoo placed in cages far too small, reduced to doing nothing but prowling their confines in endless circles, back and forth. Though Loki doesn’t prowl, he just sits there, wordless and emotionless, gazing longingly out the window.

Tony stands there for a few moments and then turns on his heel, heading for his workshop. He has something he needs to finish down there.

And the sooner, the better.
Today’s sky is even bluer than yesterday, though it comes with fewer but larger clouds this time. In the distance, five dark specks, birds of some kind, move in perfect synchronism against the vast blueness, free and unfettered.

And he sits here, where he can do nothing but envy those little specks, no matter how small and insignificant they might be, as they take off towards the horizon.

Suddenly, there are the sounds of footsteps incoming, and Loki doesn’t need to turn his head to know who they belong to. He does anyway, though, his eyes trailing the man as he comes to a halt somewhere to Loki’s left. And he fervently wishes that Tony would go away, as the sight of him merely serves as another reminder of Loki’s own undesirable but unchangeable predicament.

“Hey, so what are you doing, Bambi?” Tony asks casually, though it’s plain obvious that Loki isn’t doing a thing. Undeterred, the man takes a step closer, leaning an arm against the wall as he pretends to curiously inspect the view the window offers, as if it is something novel and exciting he is seeing for the first time.

“Nice view of the city, isn’t it?” comes the superfluous comment, and Loki can feel a sting of irritation that he quickly pushes back down. It’s one of the last things he would like to hear at this point, being patently unable to go outside, being stuck in here because there’s no way Tony would ever take the risk of letting him set as much as a single foot into the city he once tried to conquer. Especially not after his little unauthorized venturing-out-on-the-roof escapade.

“It is,” he replies with as little emotion as possible, as if they are merely discussing the weather or a bland painting or something of equally low importance.

“Uh-huh,” Tony offers absent-mindedly, seemingly busy gazing at something indiscernible in the distance that requires his full concentration. Then the man draws himself up and lets his gaze drift back to Loki, intently studying his face.

“How would you like the chance to see it from the outside?”

The question is as unexpected as it is perplexing, and he looks at Tony in puzzlement, resolutely trying to quench the desperate, impossible flutter of hope suddenly welling up in his chest. Because surely there is no way that Tony would let him out, not after everything that has transpired. No, it
As if he can read the bewildered expression on Loki’s face, Tony gives a nonchalant shrug. “Thought a change of scenery might do you good. It looks like you could need it,” he says as if it’s the most natural thing in the world.

Immediately, his danger detection radar goes off, alerting him that something must be off, there is something missing that Tony hasn’t told him yet.

“And what is… expected from me in return for this favour?” The guarded question slips out of his mouth despite his knowing that it’s not his place to ask any such. But he just has to find the missing piece of the puzzle, because surely it can’t be this simple, it’s making no sense…

“Just one thing – behave yourself out there. Or you’re going to find yourself permanently grounded for the duration.” Not waiting for Loki to reply, Tony dig into his pocket and picks out some sort of metal contraption, throwing it over to Loki, who catches it more out of reflex than anything else.

It looks like a bracelet, made out of polished steel, with a clasp at the ends to fasten it. He turns it around in his hand, the smooth metal almost silky against his palm, and then looks up at Tony, eyebrows knitted in confusion.

“Just got finished putting it together,” Tony says as he snags the bracelet back from Loki’s hand, holding it up against the light as if it is a precious treasure and not a simple band of steel. “This thing has a tracker in it, which will monitor your position and tell me exactly where your Asgardian ass is situated at any given moment.”

He flips out yet another device from his pocket, this time one that Loki recognizes as one of those cell phones so ubiquitous among the humans. The man taps at the front with a fingernail. “I merely need to look at this screen to know exactly where you are.” He waves a hand at the little chains encircling Loki’s wrists. “Works pretty much like the flashy tracking jewellery you’re already wearing, only difference being that this one is firmly based on technology instead of fancy magic.”

With that, Tony hands him the bracelet back and Loki accepts it into his hands once more, letting his fingers roam over the surface as he studies the thing intently, trying to work out if there is anything more to it than what Tony is letting on. He can sense the magic humming in his chainlets when he makes an effort to, but Tony’s contraption feels just as dead and unresponsive as any other piece of un-tampered-with metal would. There shouldn’t be any adverse affects on him from putting it on, he surmises.
“I’m not letting you out the house without this, buddy,” Tony says, obviously having noticed Loki’s apprehensive examination of the bracelet, “so I suggest you just put it on.”

Without a word, Loki clasps the bracelet shut around his wrist. The little buckle smartly clicks into place, leaving a smooth band circling his skin, seam invisible. He sure hopes Tony has a way of unclasping this contraption, because the buckle won’t budge as he discreetly picks his fingers at it, testing its strength. Having another restraint placed on him like this is reminiscent of the fetters placed on an animal to keep it from running away, but what’s another chain when he’s already wearing two of them around his wrists?

And he can at least appreciate the fact that it’s a bracelet and not a collar.

“You won’t get it open,” Tony says, interrupting Loki’s little reverie. “Takes special tools to do that, and I’m not lending them to you, just so you know.”

Realizing that he’s still attempting to pry the thing off, Loki abruptly stops what he’s doing, folding his hands neatly into his lap, trying to get used to the feeling of the extra weight clamped around his wrist.

Tony makes a beckoning motion at him. “Come on, then, Bambi, let’s go.” He walks out the room without turning around to see if Loki is coming, and Loki follows suit, heart skipping in his chest and body feeling unusually light, like he’s floating.

They ride the elevator down without either of them speaking a word, though any attempts at conversation would have been severely hampered by the heavy music blaring from the speakers.

At the clothes stand at the door, Tony makes a halt, grabbing a black cap from a hanger and then rummages around in the chest of drawers next to it. Having found what he was looking for, he slams the drawer shut with his knee as he stands up with a pair of dark glasses clasped in his grip, unceremoniously shoving the stuff into Loki’s hands.

“Put these on,” he orders as he grabs similar attire for himself, pushing a pair of tainted glasses up onto the bridge of his nose and dons a cap with letters and numbers than mean nothing to Loki. “Can’t have anyone recognizing you out there. Even though I’m sure people were busier staring at your horns than at your face during your last visit, and nobody would expect to see you roaming around New York again after being dragged back to Asgard in chains, I’m not taking any chances.” He taps at the glass hiding his eyes from view. “You’ll be surprised just how effective these are at
repelling attention. Really comes in handy when you’re a billionaire superhero wanting to take an incognito stroll around the block.”

While he would have preferred not having to look at the world through a barrier of dark glass, now that he is amazingly enough allowed outside, he’s not about to look a gift horse in the mouth, so he says nothing, merely puts the shades on. The world takes on a dim hue, but it’s not nearly as bad as he had expected.

“All right, Reindeer Games, final rundown of instructions – you stay close at all times, don’t get out of my sight, and don’t do anything stupid, lewd or lascivious. Capiche, comprende, verstanden?”

Loki looks at him, eyebrows furrowed.

“Got it?” Tony clarifies.

Loki nods. “I will comply with your restrictions,” he says, trying to not sound as ridiculously eager as he’s feeling, but well aware he’s failing when he hears his own voice.

“Okay, then. You better not make me regret this, or you’re going to as well,” Tony says no-nonsense-ly before finally opening the door to the glorious world outside, stepping out, Loki at his heels.

And it’s like all his senses have suddenly been magically heightened, making him acutely aware of every little thing around him. As if he’s been living in a box until now, with muted colours and dulled sounds, only to finally be let out in the real world with its genuine, untainted perceptions.

The gravel crunches softly under his feet and he inhales deeply as a gust of chilled air caresses his face, as wonderful as cold water for a man dying of thirst. The plethora of sounds around him is almost overwhelming – screeching traffic, bustling people, a barking dog – but an oh-so welcome change from the pressing silence that has constituted most of his stay in the dungeons as well as Tony’s tower.

It’s amazing how vitalizing merely being out in the open again can be, unrestrained by walls pressing in on him. Like he’s actually living instead of merely existing. Even though his momentary freedom is only an illusion, it’s as good as he’s going to get, and he will take what he is offered.
There’s a strange, unidentified feeling stirring in him as he follows Tony down the street, taking in, *breathing* in, his surroundings. But he’s not sure he can quite identify it, so he ignores it for now.

The park is modest by Asgardian standards, of course, but it is of no matter. It’s beautiful and soothing all the same. Back home, he would often seek solace and privacy out in nature, where he could practice his magic undisturbed, away from the usual disapproving, critical stares. Though things are of course still a far cry from what they used to be like, his mood is far better than it has ever been since the unfortunate day he got so soundly pummelled into the ground by that green beast and all that transpired afterwards.

The only thing marring the moment is the never-ending talking of the man strolling next to him, chattering away as if his life depended upon the absence of silence. But it is of little importance, as long as he can enjoy these precious moments free from his usual confinement, Tony can talk as much as he wants to, as far as he’s concerned.

The words barely register anyway, as his mind is occupied elsewhere. On the sky, the wind, the trees, the ground beneath his feet. All things he had once taken for granted, never realizing just how much he would end up treasuring them. The odd feeling from before is still oscillating somewhere deep inside him, and he isn’t quite sure what to make of it. It’s not something he immediately recognizes nor can relate to.

Tony is undeterred by the silence meeting his long monologues, though. He keeps on talking, about his projects and boring board meetings, about girls he’s dated and the food you can apparently buy in a place called “Buns and Burgers”. He talks about attending a concert with something going by the name of “Whitesnake” and the time he encountered a couple doing dirty deeds just in that spot over there to his left. Loki doesn’t think he has ever met someone who loves the sound of his own voice as much as Tony. Even Thor is more modest in that regard and at least *occasionally* knows how and when to keep quiet.

It isn’t until the sun is starting to set, painting the horizon with a dashing display of red and orange and pink, that Tony says it is time for them to head back home.

And it isn’t until then that Loki realizes what that odd feeling is that’s been stirring inside of him during the entire walk. But maybe it’s not so strange it took so long for him to recognize it, because he hasn’t felt real gratitude for anything in a very long time.
He turns the shirt on the board around, flattening it out with his hand before pressing the hot iron down against the fabric. This is the first time since his abysmal failure when he managed to burn a hole in one of Tony’s shirts that he’s done any ironing, but he’s gotten the hang of it by now. It’s not a difficult task by any means, it just takes a bit of practice.

His thoughts are drifting away to the last time he stood here with the iron in a firm grip, trying to make the best out of the situation he found himself in, and ending up ruining the first piece of clothing he got his hands on. He winces at the painful memory, but at least he doesn’t have to fear any terrible repercussions now in case he should make the same mistake as last time. Which he, in any case, isn’t about to do.

It would be a blatant lie to say that he enjoys the chore, but it’s a break from the monotonous paper sorting, at least, and he’s glad to have something else to do for a while. Trying to go to sleep without having never-ending lines of black text on white paper dancing beneath his closed eyelids before his inner vision should definitely count as an improvement.

As he’s standing there, arranging and rearranging the pieces of clothing on the ironing board, he has to admit, as strange as it sounds to his ears, that he’s actually in a fairly good mood. Or at least as close to what could possibly count as it, given the circumstances.

However, the reason isn’t the welcome change of tasks, but something else entirely.

It’s the fact that just yesterday, Tony actually let him go outside.

And for the first time since coming here, he now has something to look forward to. Something to brighten his day, something to bring him at least a little a little slice of happiness. He’d never expected there’d be anything of the sort awaiting him here; at best, he’d thought he might eventually learn how to endure his situation, in the knowledge that it would at least be preferable to the non-improvable condition of being dead. And the only thing to keep him going would be his desperately clinging to the flimsy, futile hope that things would somehow change for the better in the distant future, while knowing that such a day would probably remain nothing but a desperate wish.

And he realizes that that’s what makes all the difference. Not that he can’t appreciate the lack of beatings and whippings and similar punishment since his coming here, but an absence of bad things isn’t the same as the presence of something good.
Because an absence of bad things can only offer a sense of relief, but the presence of something good can bring forth the genuine will to go on for another day, in the knowledge that there’s actually something worthwhile waiting around the corner. A small ray of sunshine, a little glimmer of light. Perhaps not much, but still enough to turn his situation from glum and dreary to something containing a much-needed sparkle of life.

Even if his current accommodations and circumstances would be considered luxurious compared to what slaves in Asgard normally have to make do with, and something that only the most pampered of bed slaves could ever dream of, it’s still a prison. Nothing will change that; a gilded cage is still a cage, but even a bird with clipped wings can appreciate being allowed to leave its stifling confinements.

Before all this, getting to go outside would have been a trifle to be taken for granted, but now it has been turned into a much-coveted luxury that he feared he’d never have again. And just standing out there in the open, temporarily released from his prison, had been so exhilarating, not quite unlike having the flow of magic rushing through his body again. For the first time in so long, he’d been able to walk around freely and unrestrained, and even though Tony’s little tracking device had been circling his wrist and the man himself had never strayed far, it was almost like being free again.

Yes, even if he’s stuck in an alien realm, in a world far apart from his own, inhabited by a strange and foreign people, it was still a sense of glorious freedom, no matter how small.

And now, it’s like the sun outside shines a little brighter than before, despite the stacks of grey clouds nesting around it. Like his body is no longer held down by the previous invisible but heavy weight that has been sitting on his shoulders for so long.

It’s still confusing why Tony would let him out like that after he wilfully disobeyed orders, as opposed to taking the necessary steps to ensure that his slave would be securely locked up to prevent further incidents, perhaps even put into chains to make sure there’d be no repeats. In hindsight, he can admit that it had been an idiotic, ill-considered whim to sneak out onto the roof like that simply because the opportunity had presented itself. But the temptation had been too great, because for all he knew, that might be the only chance he would ever get. And if he had passed up on it, he would no doubt have ended up regretting it.

Yet another of the many things about Tony that are making no sense, regardless how he twists the recent happenings around in his head. Slaves don’t get rewarded for disobedience, they get punished.

But then again, he supposes he will have many years ahead of him trying to understand whatever logic is driving Tony’s actions. Given the man’s obvious intelligence, there’s certainly nothing wrong in that aspect, at least. There must be other things at play, as difficult as it is to perceive them from where he’s standing.
Well, he should have time figuring it out, he supposes. Time that will evidently not be as unbearable and intolerable as he had once been certain.

He picks up the now wrinkle-free shirt from the board, folding it as neatly as he can manage, then reaches out for the next one in the pile.

As he turns back again, he catches a glimpse of the window behind him, and the sight is strangely comforting, a reassuring reminder that all is not dreary and bleak; there’s actually something now that he can look forward to. Seeing the sky outside is no longer depressing or fills him with despair, but offers a small sliver of hope.

A hope that maybe if he behaves according to expectations and doesn’t make any trouble, Tony will let him go outside soon again.

The clatter of forks and knives against dinner plates is occasionally interspersed by the soft slurps from the machine preparing Tony’s coffee, the ubiquitous brown liquid that the man drinks with almost every meal, as if his body depended on the stuff to function properly. He even had Loki try it once, but the taste was foul and bitter, and he can’t understand why someone would willingly drink such a concoction.

The smell is still rather nice, though.

“How’s the ironing coming along?” Tony asks from across the table as he inelegantly digs into the food in front of him.

Loki looks up. “It’s… mostly done,” he says, hoping Tony doesn’t think that he’s working too slowly.

“Oh-huh. Any burnt shirts so far?” the man says flippantly between mouthfuls, clearly not finding the possibility a very big deal at all, as strange as that is.

“No.” He still feels stupid about that old ironing incident, and he has no idea why Tony never brought it up when it’s obvious he knew about the ruined shirt. But he’s glad for it, though; not even
now would he feel comfortable having to explain himself in that matter.

“Figured you never did much ironing back in Asgard, did you?” comes the next question. Tony likes asking questions, almost as much as he likes talking, and as perplexing as the habit was at first, Loki has mostly gotten used to it by now.

He shakes his head. “No. There were servants around for that.” And slaves as well, of course.

His gaze drifts to the sky outside, visible through the window only a few arms’ lengths away from him. Yesterday’s stroll in the park is still lingering, a pleasant memory never far from his mind. Even now, he can vividly recall the fresh air in his lungs and the wind on his face and the sun warming his skin, things he’s yearned for for far too long.

“Shame you’re not technologically more advanced up there in alien Viking-land, or you wouldn’t have had a need for any slaves.” Tony comments as he gestures with his fork.

Whether it was intended or not, he can clearly hear the implication in there. For someone like Tony with a household full of robots and technology, a slave is bound not to be very useful. And he doesn’t like the unavoidable inferences that can be drawn from that, because such a state of the matter is doing nothing to improve his standing here, nor the chances that he will get to see that outside again anytime in the near future.

As Tony continues to talk, Loki’s eyes linger on the window. Not that he actually enjoys performing simple household chores or serving on a mortal – or on anyone, for that matter – but there’s one thing that appeals even less to him right now, and that’s lacking opportunities to gain enough of Tony’s approval to be let out of the tower soon again. Unfortunately, there are so precious few things available to him that will help him in acquiring the man’s favour, so he’d better make good use of whatever chances he can get.

The slurping machine on the kitchen counter beeps, signalling that the coffee is ready. Before Tony can do it, Loki stands up and walks over to the counter, taking the filled cup and placing two pieces of sugar into it from the nearby bowl, like he’s seen the man do so many times before. Then he returns to the table and sets the cup down in front of Tony before seating himself.

The man raises an inquisitive eyebrow at him.

“So, first-class service today, I see. Just the blond and buxom flight attendant missing for the picture
to be complete,” he says, voice pitched in a way that makes it sound slightly off, as he eyes Loki with a vaguely peculiar, lingering look. Then, he slowly lets a hand circle around the handle of the cup, and after a moment of silence takes a sip.

And Loki isn’t quite sure how to interpret that voice and that look, can’t tell whether they approve or not. But in the end, he decides for the former. Of course, it has to be the former, nothing else would make sense.

Granted, he’s having a hard time reading and understanding Tony, but there is no possible reason why the man shouldn’t approve of his slave serving him a drink. In Asgard, such a thing comes with the territory, and many from the higher nobility keep slaves standing behind their chairs during mealtimes merely for the convenience of having someone to fill their empty cups for them.

And as Tony continues to sip on his coffee with that unreadable look of his, the thought once more resurfaces that it would serve him well to behave more in line with what Tony would reasonably expect from him, to make sure he’s contented.

The man does hold the key to the outside, after all.
Another breakfast along the line; he’s long lost count of how many there have been since his coming here. Despite having eaten countless more back in Asgard, it still inexplicably feels like there has been a greater number of them in Tony’s tower than in all those preceding centuries.

His spoon is slowly stirring around in the bowl in front of him, only occasionally traversing the distance up to his mouth, his mind being occupied by other things. Tony’s voice is droning on as usual, creating a familiar background tapestry of sound. But he’s not really listening, because his eyes keep drifting to the window and the magnificent view of the sky outside. And he sincerely hopes he won’t have to wait too long before Tony will let him out again.

Absentmindedly, he lets his fingers twirl the spoon around, playing around with the little round shapes that are quick to slip away as the metal cuts meandering patterns through the milk. One thing is clear, though; if the man is in a good mood, particularly if Loki has a part in that, the chances that he will decide to once more grant such a favour to his slave should be significantly higher.

The dislike of having to cater to a mortal’s whims rustles inside of him, but the feeling still pales against the prospect of getting away from his stifling confines and the constant reminder of his inescapable situation, so he pushes it back down.

Apparently finding that the meal has dragged on for long enough, Tony suddenly scoots his chair back and stands up, eyeing Loki’s still half-full bowl with a crooked eyebrow. “Still at it, huh?” he asks before taking one final swig from his cup of coffee, then setting it down at the tabletop. “Well, if there’s anything, I’ll be down in my workshop, fixing up some things for my new suit.”

With that, he walks off, but after a few steps he seems to think better of his decision and halts in his tracks, turning back to Loki. “Oh, by the way, if you should find a document issued by Petersen Electrodrome, let me know,” he says. “They promised to send me some data I want to have a look at before upgrading my transmodulator. It should probably be lying around in today’s box of papers, so if you find it, bring it down to me as soon as possible, alright?”

Loki nods, and a few seconds later Tony is on his way to tinker with his inventions.

It doesn’t take too long before he’s finished the last of his Cheerios and cleaned up after the meal, eyes not leaving the window for longer than necessary. Then, he proceeds to the living room to deal with the papers waiting for him.
After perhaps half an hour or so he encounters the asked-for document among the piles of paper. Letting mild curiosity get the better of him, he flips his thumb through the sheets, but the data printed on them don’t mean much to him, so instead, he gets up from the floor and heads down to the workshop, document in hand.

The door is open when he gets there, and he peers inside before entering. As expected, Tony is in there, fiddling with something at the workbench at the far end wall, his back turned towards the door. Loki can’t see much of what the man is doing, but there are heaps of tools and equipment spread out all around him, even on the floor.

Gingerly, he steps inside, realizing with a wince that he hasn’t set his foot in here since… well, that time when he so shamefully broke down and cried right in front of Tony. It feels odd being down here again; so much has… changed since then. Of course, the memory of the desperation and fear that had been raging inside of him at the time is still vivid. But at least that’s all it is now – a memory, nothing more than that.

He comes to a halt in the middle of the room. There’s a dull but insisting buzz emanating from a nearby piece of machinery, so Tony hasn’t heard him entering, still fully focused on whatever is in front of him on the flat metal surface.

For a couple of heartbeats, he waits, but Tony doesn’t turn, and Loki realizes that he will have to call Tony’s attention. His thumb toys with a corner of the thin wad of papers in his hands and he chews hesitantly on his lower lip as he deliberates with himself. Despite having been here for so long, this is the first time he’s ever been in a situation where he’s actually had to address Tony. Up until now, he’s managed to get away without doing it. The few times he’s actually had to tell Tony something, the man’s attention had already been directed to him, and he’s never needed to do anything to get it.

Until now, that is.

Of course, he knows full well that there’s only one acceptable way for a slave to address his master, and that is making something unpleasant churn inside of him, the idea of speaking the fact of the matter out loud.

And really, it shouldn’t make a difference, because it’s not like it changes anything; it’s merely an acknowledgement of circumstances that are unchangeable and undeniable, so why is it that it’s still making him feel like that, as if his tongue has been transformed into lead? It’s not like it would be the worst humiliation he’s had to suffer since coming here. Nor the worst he’s suffered before coming here.
At the end of the day, it’s just a word, is it not? One tiny, measly little word, and yet it’s making his skin crawl like his aversion is demanding to manifest itself physically. Perhaps because it’s the last thing left to cement the undesirable truth, the final admission of the reality of what his life will be from now on.

But even if Tony, for whatever reason, has never insisted on it, the respectful address would of course appeal to him; that’s something obvious that goes without saying. And surely it would please the man even more to hear that particular word out of his slave’s mouth now that it’s not forced or ordered but instead offered voluntarily.

His hand grips a little tighter around the papers as reluctance claws inside of him, growing stronger by the second. Sure he needs to call on Tony’s attention somehow, but it doesn’t have to be with words, does it? He could cough or clear his throat, or even pretend to accidentally slam his foot against some of the metal equipment on the floor so that the resulting clang will alert Tony of his presence.

But neither alternative is any good – the first would be blatantly disrespectful, and the second too obvious, neither serving to impress Tony.

He winces. Maybe he’s just stalling in the hopes that Tony is going to turn around by his own volition, noticing Loki’s presence before he has to make a choice about how to handle the situation, thereby taking the unpleasant decision out of his hands.

And that’s when he remembers the view of the sky from the window during breakfast and the promises contained therein, and he realizes that his decision has already been made.

Yes, it’s a humiliating address to take into his mouth, but one word only. It’s a small price to pay, isn’t it? If it will serve to put Tony in a good mood and to improve the man’s disposition towards him, then it would mean that sky should once more be his for a little while. And truth be told, this is probably one of the best opportunities he’ll get in a long time to help him with that. There are so precious few other possibilities for him, being stuck in a realm where he understands little of how things are done and what is expected of him, where he’s unskilled at most of the tasks that might reasonably be assigned to a slave, where his usefulness is laughably small.

But this one thing is something he could easily do, one of the few actions he could take that would surely serve to put him into Tony’s good graces and increase his chances of getting to go outside again.
It’s like forcing a walnut through a needle’s eye, and the taste is bitter in his mouth, but the image of the sky filling his inner vision is like a soothing balm and makes the aversion possible to overcome and endure.

“Master?” he says, hoping Tony will hear him over the noise the first time so he doesn’t have to repeat himself.

The man at the workbench freezes like time has just grinded to a sudden stop.

Then, as if he’s thawing again, one body part at a time, he slowly and jerkily turns around to face Loki, who swallows. The look on the man’s face is one that doesn’t bode well.

And he feels that all-too familiar lurch of his stomach, knowing that something is wrong but not having any idea what it is, but having little doubt that he is the cause of it.

“What the hell was that?” Tony asks as he throws the tool still in his hand down onto the bench, his incredulous stare boring into Loki like needles. At least he doesn’t sound angry, but he’s obviously not happy either.

He hesitates, not quite sure how to tackle the unexpected reaction. Tony looks upset, as if Loki has done something very wrong, and once more there is that wave of confusion washing over him.

Not knowing what else to do, but feeling he should try to salvage the situation somehow, he holds the papers out in front of him, like a placating offering. “I thought you said… I should come here to give you these when I found them.”

Tony rubs a hand over his face. It leaves a smudgy dark stain on his cheek. “That’s not what I was referring to,” he says, making an ugly grimace. “I meant that word you just said.” A short, but noticeable pause. “Just… don’t call me that, okay?”

His face must be showing his befuddlement, because Tony lets out a deep sigh that comes off more like a groan. “Look, it’s not a term we use to address other people here.” He makes a face as his eyes roll skywards. “Yeah, well, unless you count some people who are into, uh, certain kinds of adult games, but I don’t think you’d want to go there. My name is Tony, it’s what normal people would use. Or Anthony, in emergencies. All clear?”
It’s not, but Loki nods anyway, since that should be the safest option, feeling himself deflate like a leaking balloon at Tony’s obvious disapproval.

So that hadn’t been the right thing to do, despite everything telling him the opposite. And once more he’s managed to displease Tony through his unfamiliarity with Midgardian ways and customs. Suddenly, the blue sky feels like it’s drifting further away from him, and he desperately wants to grab onto it, but he has absolutely no idea how to, and it’s one of the most frustrating feelings he has ever experienced. He can do nothing but stand there and watch as it keeps floating off out of his reach, him utterly powerless to stop it.

Then, as he’s certain he can’t handle the frustration and the strange mood any longer, Tony takes a step closer, reaching out a hand for the document that Loki had forgotten he was still holding, his face lightening up. “Oh, so there it is. Awesome! Glad you found it, Bambi; I really need this data.”

There’s even the hint of a smile there too as he looks at Loki, like the recent mishap is already magically forgotten.

And at that, Loki feels himself slowly relax. The sky suddenly doesn’t feel so far away anymore, having once more returned to reaching distance.
Driving home in his Ferrari Maranello is usually a pleasant experience – a ridiculous number of horsepowers at his fingertips, Deep Purple blaring from his speakers, and hardly any traffic to slow him down as he races down the street. Even the media interview he just finished went smoothly, much as reporters tend to annoy him these days. All in all, he should be feeling splendidly.

And yet he isn’t, because there is one disturbing thought that keeps intruding on his peace of mind.

It should have been a small thought, because it was only a small word. But it was also such an important word. And not in a good way.

It’s strange, really, how a short utterance like that can hold so many implications and connotations and god knows what imbued in two simple syllables.

Just yesterday, Loki had called him master, and damn if that still isn’t gnawing at him like a swarm of blood-thirsty gnats.

It’s not exactly helping things that he remembers making a thoughtless, ill-considered jab a long time ago about Loki addressing him as such. Despite no longer being able to recall the specifics at this point, he can still safely say that it hadn’t been funny at all. Just tasteless and tacky.

Of course, it’s far from the first time he’s ever made a tasteless and tacky comment, but his usual sexual innuendo-filled witticisms and sarcastic pointing out of other people’s flaws and faults for sheer comedy value totally pales against this level of wrong. And the worst part is, back then he would no doubt have found it amusing if Loki actually had called him that. But now that the god finally has, there isn’t the tiniest sliver of humour in it, nothing that could draw even the slightest of chuckles from him.

And who could ever have imagined that – Tony Stark finding a topic inappropriate to make jokes about. He’d thought there’d be a snowy or at least a slushy day in hell before that ever happened.

No, Loki calling him master was only disconcerting, not humorous at all.

Annoyed with himself, he stabs his finger against the forward button on the CD player a few times in rapid succession, a little harder than necessary, skipping a couple of tracks until he gets to a more
aggressive and blaring song, having had it with the previous half-sappy semi-ballad. Satisfied with his new choice of music, he pushes the gas pedal a few notches closer to the floor, speedometer making a little hiccup.

It does nothing to improve his mood, though.

To be honest, that was about the last word he would have wanted to describe his relation to Loki. Even jailor or captor would have been preferable. And it makes him wonder, what is he in that regard, when it all comes down to it?


He doesn’t really have an answer to that; all he knows is that it’s not the M-word. That’s just wrong on so many counts.

And that’s when the second, even more difficult-to-answer question rears its head in his mind – what is it that he wants to be in relation to Loki? But perhaps he needs to be able to answer the first question before he can answer the second. Or maybe it’s the other way around. He isn’t sure.

Of course, he knows what one insistent part of him would like to be, but that’s obviously not possible, so he might as well forget about it. It’s not going to happen, he’s known that ever since the first frame of his very much inappropriate imaginations regarding Loki materialized in his head, and it has only become even clearer since then.

But perhaps there’s something else he could be, something between those extremes of master and what his headstrong nether regions would have voted for. The regions that like to picture the god in his full naked glory, hands trailing over his own body as his smile turns into something playfully seductive…

The traffic light ahead of him turns red after a long stretch of green, and he steps on the brakes, tires screeching as the Ferrari comes to a sudden halt. A second later, the wail of Jack Black’s voice letting out a powerful ‘well, baby, you just better forget it’ from the speakers fills the interior of the car.

And Tony can’t help the groan that escapes his lips. Enough with the signs from the universe already – he isn’t going to go there – never planned to, never will, alright? So just knock it off. He knows he
won’t ever be anything more than that elusive *something* at best that he hasn’t even managed to define yet, and it’s not like he’s going to try to change that, okay?

The light turns green again, and he stomps down sharply on the pedal, taking off with another screeching of burning rubber.

Yeah, *something* is fine, as long as it isn’t the dreaded M-word.

As he takes the elevator up, the thoughts that have been swirling in his head during his drive home are still eating at him. And it’s not just the memories of how Loki had called him *master* that keep resurfacing, but what happened the day before, when Loki had served him that cup of coffee, without being asked or prompted to.

And Tony’s not stupid enough not to realize that the two are connected. Not so much to each other, perhaps, as to another occasion taking place shortly before. Namely, Loki getting to go outside for the first time since coming to his tower.

It’s obvious – so ridiculously, disturbingly obvious – why he’s been doing it. Clearly, Loki is under the impression that he has to earn the right of going outside, even if it means demeaning himself to behaving like how Asgard thinks a good little slave is supposed to.

Perhaps he should have said something already when Loki set that cup of coffee down before him. But he didn’t, because there had been nothing wrong with the act in itself. After all, he’s had plenty of other people voluntarily getting him coffee many times before – MIT classmates during those long hours of working in the lab, friends and colleagues… *Pepper*. Just like he’s done the same thing for them on other occasions. And it’s never been anything else than a simple gesture of helpfulness, the kind of little favours you do for people around you, never something to give him pause in any way.

Until Loki did it.

Then again, what should he have said as the cup was set down before him? *Don’t ever serve me coffee?* It wasn’t as if the act as such was degrading or humiliating or slave-like – it’s something that happens in offices and homes across America everyday, after all. No, instead it was the situation and their relative positions that made it disconcerting, but that’s nothing he can change, no matter how much he would want to.
So he had found no immediate way to articulate what made it wrong – at least none that Loki would be likely to understand – so he had played it safe and just made a flippant quip, letting it lie at that.

But now that the *master* deal has come up, something a lot more disturbing than being served coffee, he needs to have a talk with Loki. This really can’t continue, or he shudders to think where all this might eventually end up.

When the elevator doors open and he walks out into the living room, Loki is sitting on a chair by the window, reading a book. The god looks up briefly as he enters, and then returns to his reading material.

Well, he supposes he should be thankful for that, at least – that Loki isn’t showing any signs of being afraid of him anymore, not taking his presence as a reason for concern or wariness. Whatever else is wrong with the situation, he’s still feeling secure enough to immerse himself in a book around Tony, not finding it necessary to keep his attention on Tony and what he might be up to.

“All right, come over here, will you” he says to the reading god. “I want to talk with you for a bit.”

The words have barely made it out of his mouth before Loki puts the book down on the table and gets up from his chair, walking up to where Tony is standing and sitting down on the couch. Just like that. Without hesitation, without protesting, without dawdling, without even finishing reading the sentence he was probably in the middle of, Loki just *obeys*.

It’s disconcerting, disturbing, and many other things as well, how… compliant Loki is being, with this unquestioned following of orders and acquiescing obedience. It unsettles him and makes his skin crawl.

And as he pulls out a chair in front of Loki and straddles it, he realizes that he doesn’t really know how to express what his problem is or how to explain that he doesn’t care for this slave-like behaviour.

Yeah, what is he supposed to say, really? *Don’t obey*? Of course, he still wants and expects Loki to abide by the rules around here and not make any trouble. He can’t pretend that he *doesn’t* want Loki to follow instructions, because Tony has still been charged with keeping him confined and under supervision, and a recalcitrant god is going to make that a lot harder. But he doesn’t want this robotic obedience or this desperate clamouring to get into his good graces because Loki believes it’s required if he is to be allowed outside again.
But the difference is not something he really knows how to clothe into words, and perhaps it’s not something that can be put into words. Maybe Loki will simply have to learn that difference along the way, having had Tony to lay out the foundation for him.

So he draws a deep breath, trying to get started and at least say something.

“Yeah, so, about that going outside thing…” he begins, and then trails off as he isn’t sure how to continue.

At those words, he can see Loki immediately tensing up and a crease of worry appearing between his eyebrows. And he can read all too clearly in that concerned face what Loki is fearing is coming next – yeah, I’ve decided to withdraw the favour. There will be no more going outside, just so you know.

Damn, he should have thought it through how to say this before sitting down with the god for a talk.

“Just to make sure there aren’t any misunderstandings here, I wanted to point out that you don’t have to earn it or anything. It comes with the package, as long as you don’t do anything out there that’s blatantly stupid enough for me to consider revoking the privilege,” he says and then winces at the word ‘privilege’. That’s not what it’s supposed to come off like, as if it’s a reward granted for proper displays of servitude.

“I mean, it’s not actually a privilege,” he quickly amends, “just something you’ll have here regardless. This is America, and even convicts are allowed time outside, so that means that you will be too. Got that?”

And Loki looks so confused, so lost at those words that Tony just wants to reach out a hand to that face and…

But he doesn’t, of course.

And just like Tony already knew that Loki would do, the god nods in reply. Whether he has truly understood it yet is another matter, of course, but somehow he has the feeling that there is very little that additional words can do right now. Whatever understanding might still be lacking regarding this is best gained by Loki eventually realizing it on his own as he makes what Tony has said reconcile with reality.
At least the words should have taken away the main incitement for Loki to behave like this. It might not be perfect, but it’s a start, at least.
Chapter 52

If there’s one thing that Tony is good at, it’s confusing him. Once he thinks he’s gotten a decent grasp of the situation, the man says or does something that unsettles his already frequently rearranged worldview, forcing it to break up and reshuffle once more. Like a jigsaw puzzle taken apart and then having some of its pieces exchanged, so that once it comes together again, the picture it shows is something different entirely.

It’s just like that time when Tony promised he wouldn’t hurt him, thereby voluntarily throwing away the best means he had of enforcing his slave’s obedience and submission. And now, the man has willingly cut off the next best thing he could have dangled over Loki’s head to make sure his behaviour would be in line with expectations, telling him that the highly desirable favour of going outside would be granted regardless of whether he had done anything to earn it or not.

Again, the man is making no sense. Why would a master give anything to a slave that they haven’t proved themselves deserving of?

Before his inner eye, the illogical scene plays out again. He had been really worried there for a few disconcerting heartbeats as Tony had brought the subject up. Because he had been almost certain that it could only mean one thing, namely that the man was about to tell him that he had changed his mind about the arrangement. And there was certainly not a lack of possible reasons – maybe Tony didn’t want to waste his time taking his slave outside, or perhaps he had just decided that the risk of an escape attempt was too high, or maybe he simply thought that Loki hadn’t shown himself deserving enough to be granted any such.

Not that Tony would have needed to offer any explanation, of course, should he have decided to revoke the favour. It’s not like masters have to explain themselves to their slaves in any way, but still.

Maybe it’s that Midgardian sentiment again, that pity resurfacing once more, that has made Tony make such a decision. Or maybe it’s something else, he really doesn’t know.

He also isn’t quite sure what would count as “blatantly stupid enough” for Tony to actually do decide to put a stop to the outings, but most everything Tony tells him is vague or unspecific anyway, and so many times he just has to guess what it is the man means or wants.

And it’s strange, the way he’s removing every incitement Loki has for obeying, almost as if Tony doesn’t want him to behave and act like a slave is supposed to. Just like that time a couple of days ago when he had told Loki not to call him master, which should have been the normal and expected address, instead insisting that he use his name. An Asgardian slave presuming to address his master
in such a familiar and blatantly disrespectful manner would of course have been punished harshly, no
doubt about it. Well, not that any slave in Asgard would ever dream of doing such, but still.

Reflexively, his fingers go to the metal band around his wrist, something that they’ve already been
doing more times than he can count despite him only having worn the thing for a few days. As much
as he doesn’t like wearing it – it’s far too reminiscent of a shackle – it still serves as a welcome
reminder that Tony is indeed planning to take him outside again.

Slowly, his fingers trail along the metal, tracing circles around it for the sense of comfort the action
brings him, just like he’s done on so many occasions before.

The only difference is that this time, he notices a very thin groove that he hasn’t spotted before where
the ends are connecting, so minute that it has escaped his detection until now. It’s not even a hair’s
breadth wide, no more than a barely discernable faint crack in the material. So thin that it would take
something extremely flat to stick it in between to pry the ends open. Of course, Tony isn’t stupid, so
naturally he would design a bracelet that would minimize the risk for tampering and removal.

He fiddles with the metal band for a little while longer, his fingers focusing on the minute groove
intersecting the previously seemingly solid and cohesive material.

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Even for a place like New York, no one can call the current weather anything but exceptionally
shitty, the sky opening up to spew forth one of the most massive downpours he can ever remember
experiencing. The rain is smattering against the window panes in a sharp clatter, sounding more like
hail than water. Almost like another deluge is coming to town to drown the sins of humanity. Of
which he is probably responsible for a good half.

Well, sitting up here in his tower, he’d be about the last person the heavens would get to with those
outdated tactics, if that were to be the case. Still, it’s kind of cosy with the rain pouring and the wind
howling, while he’s sitting all snug and warm and dry inside, blanket draped over his legs and
computer perched on his lap and a cup of steaming coffee in his hands.

*Just perfect.*

And with everything that has happened lately, all the messes he’s had to clean up, he can use some
perfection, even if it’s just something small like this. But perhaps things have actually calmed down
for a while now; at least there hasn’t been anything major looming on the horizon lately. Sure there’s
always Loki who is an unpredictable wild card and a seemingly never-ending source of potential problems, but maybe the worst is indeed over now.

Granted, every time that very thought has presumed to enter his head, it has soon been refuted by some other exploding issue that he never quite saw coming, but he supposes even with Loki, these things have to run out some time, right?

Well, at any rate, the god should be under sufficient surveillance now with the tracker around his wrist, and the thought makes him feel a little bit more comfortable about the situation. Whatever problems and issues might still be brewing, that little safety measures should at least prevent Loki from making any ill-advised escape attempts or anything of the sort, which should mean one problem less for him to worry about, whatever else will be coming.

He sneaks a peek at the god sitting at the other end of the couch, his long fingers picking at a magazine, unsystematically flipping through the pages, eyebrows slightly knitted.

Probably, they don’t have magazines on Asgard, just those old, mouldy parchments. Still, he can imagine them coming with those fancy pictures like in Harry Potter, where the photos are moving, and now the guy’s all confused why the people in the glossy snapshots aren’t waving happily at him. Or something.

There’s a cup of hot chocolate on the tabletop in front of the god, mostly empty by now. He did have Loki try some coffee just the other day, but it was obvious that he didn’t like it one bit, not if his coughing and sputtering was anything to go by. The hot chocolate seems to work better, though. Probably something they don’t have in Asgard either, but in Tony’s humble opinion weather like this requires a hot drink of some kind, and if coffee won’t work, then hot chocolate will be the next best thing.

Another gust of wind rattles the glass panes and his gaze moves from Loki to the window. “Shame about the weather,” he says. “Or it would have been a perfect day to go for a walk in the park.”

And damn if he can’t see Loki perk up at that, his lazy, drifting focus suddenly snapping back to full attention. Like a cat when a can of tuna is being opened in the close vicinity. If he didn’t know any better, he’d call that endearing.

“I take it you liked the park, huh?” he asks with a raised eyebrow, despite already knowing what the answer will be.
Loki’s eyes hold his for a couple of seconds before he answers. “I did,” he admits, adding a slow nod for emphasis.

“Well, it’s a nice place if you don’t count all those joggers. I’m sure we can go some other day, though, once the weather lets up.” He takes another deep sip from his cup, enjoying the little tang of cognac he’s spiced it up with. Not even coffee is so perfect that it can’t be improved upon.

As he puts the cup down on the tabletop again, his gaze once more lands on the god in the couch. And he can see that Loki is actually looking sort of… happy? Well, whatever it is, Tony has to admit that he likes the look on the god.

_It suits him, and makes him look…_

And he resolutely pushes the rest of that thought away. Of course, his desire to bring Loki outside again has nothing whatsoever to do with that, it’s merely because it’s the Right Thing to do, and Tony is a decent guy who wouldn’t let anyone, not even someone who once tried to conquer his planet, suffer all locked up without ever getting the basic human need of going outside fulfilled.

Clearly, Loki has been looking less glum these last few days, not quite as doomy and gloomy as before. Like there’s a bit more colour in that pale face, having been upgraded to something that looks more human than vampire. So it’s a practical solution, because having a god with a history of emotional unbalance coped up in his house is just like keeping a dog from going outside to relieve itself – it isn’t a Very Good Idea and will inevitably lead to nastiness in one form or the other.

Of course, it doesn’t have anything at all to do with that look on the god’s face as Tony had taken him outside that he still recalls so vividly even now.

Much later, he’s back in his room again, thinking he should probably get some sleep. Still, he remains perched on the edge of the bed instead of crawling down beneath the covers; right now he isn’t in any mood for sleeping. Even if it’s late and long since dark outside, he’s not tired in the slightest, so he sits there listening to the patter of rain against glass, the sound oddly calming and soothing.

Once again, his hand goes up to the little tracker-containing bracelet circling his wrist. He runs a finger along the metal, smooth and cool against his skin, like a well-polished knife blade. Soon, it encounters the thin groove, undetected until just recently. But now that he knows where it is, it’s not
too difficult to find again.

For a while, he toys with the spider web-thin line in the metal, his finger nail trailing along its length. It produces a faint scraping sound against the hard material, just barely audible over the soft tap of raindrops, as it paints meandering flowing patterns across the bracelet.

Slowly, his gaze lifts to the window despite it showing nothing but darkness, his nail still scratching at the thin groove.
Despite Tony falling asleep yesterday night with the sound of rain smattering against window panels echoing in his ears, the morning after turned out to be as sunny and beautiful as one could possibly wish for. Sure there were still puddles of water on the streets, but otherwise it was as if the previous downpour never happened.

A perfect day for a walk in the park if he’d ever seen one.

They had headed out once breakfast was over and done with, strolling around among the trees and meticulously pruned lawns for the better part of the morning and even a fair part of the afternoon. Loki had seemed unusually at ease and content as he walked along the gravel-covered paths, apparently caught up in his own thoughts, as if he’d forgotten all about his current situation and the punishment he was serving, instead choosing to focus his mind on other and hopefully better things. That would definitely count as progress, if the god had indeed found it in him to disentangle himself from his previous gloominess and cultivate a somewhat more positive mindset.

All in all, Tony supposes he can’t complain. The day had turned out nicely, there had been no trouble, and his charge seemed contented and even border-line happy.

A part of him had been whispering that he’d better remain vigilant, because it was almost too good. But then again, he liked ‘too good’, so he pushed the suspicions away, because Loki hadn’t actually done anything to merit them. No, it was just Tony’s old misgivings and inability to trust people that were rearing their ugly heads again. It certainly wouldn’t have been the first time.

They even stopped for ice cream somewhere along the way as they were going back home. He’s still not quite sure why. Perhaps it was the stark incongruity inherent in the mental image of one god of chaos and wanton destruction licking away at a vanilla ice cream cone that made it impossible to simply walk by the vendor and his icy goodness without indulging his brain’s weird whims.

Loki obviously enjoyed it, too, though the look on his face was rather perplexed. Which was totally understandable, as the guy had probably never eaten frozen, ice cold food like this before, given that Asgard was most likely suffering from a pitiful lack of freezers, to say nothing of ice cream machines.

The weather turned bad again soon after, however, rain starting to fall in heavy droplets from dark grey skies. Only about fifteen seconds after the first drop landed on Tony’s nose, the sky opened up in a veritable waterfall, and suddenly people were running all over the place for cover, the lucky ones equipped with newspapers to shield their heads from the worst onslaught.
Usually, this would be the time when Tony would have signalled for a cab for a ride home, but the area they were in was a pedestrian zone only, and there was a stairway entrance conveniently placed only a few yards to the right with the word ‘subway’ plastered across the railing, so he pulled the god along down the steps and into the underground.

Yeah, the joys of public transportation is something he usually avoids, but this time it did seem like the best option. It was only a few stops from home, after all, and preferable to standing around somewhere for who knows how long waiting for the rain to cease.

So now the two of them are standing in a carriage choke full with people pressing up against them from all directions. And Tony can swear that someone grabbed his ass just moments ago, but he can’t turn his head and look the perpetrator in the eye unless he wants his face to make contact with the elbow of the grossly overweight man standing to his right, his arm holding one of the straps for balance. Totally unnecessary, as the carriage is so packed that even if the train should make a sudden stop, the throng of people would render a fall-on-the-face impossible. Tony makes a grimace, having no choice but to stand remain standing with the reek of a stranger’s unwashed armpit in his face.

Despite the unpleasantness emanating from that direction, it’s still easier to focus on that than on the person standing to his other side – Loki, all pushed into Tony from the pressure of people around them. He’s never been so close to the god for such an extended period of time before, and it’s oddly unnerving. Standing within licking distance to strangers without getting embarrassed or uncomfortable is something you learn quickly when living in New York, but when that someone isn’t a stranger but Loki, it gets harder to ignore.

He dares a look in the god’s direction. Loki is staring straight ahead, a blank expression on his face, but there is a tension in his posture belying his otherwise neutral features. Mot likely, he’s trying to will all the jostling people around him away who are effectively invading his private space. Just like ice cream machines, crowded subway carriages are probably unheard of in Asgard.

The train suddenly takes a curve with a bit more speed than optimal, rustling the crowd inside. Loki’s body presses harder against his, and Tony can feel the heat of it against his skin as he tries to don an undaunted deadpan expression, looking anywhere but at Loki.

At least he isn’t sporting an erection this time, though if the circumstances were a bit different, as in the carriage being exchanged for the privacy of his tower and the other people around him not existing, he probably would have.

It’s a relief when the train makes a halt at the next stop. The more impatient passengers are jostling to get off, and even though it’s not his stop yet Tony steps out of the doors to let the people behind him
exit more easily, glad for a chance to put some distance between himself and Loki. As the last persons are milling out, and Tony is about to step back inside, there is suddenly a hand brushing very briefly against his body, at chest level, far too intimately for it to be a mere accident.

Quickly, he gropes at his pocket, wanting to make sure his wallet is still there. The pocket is as empty as a rusty bucket turned upside down.

_Fuck._

He whirls around, only to see the outlines of a quickly retreating figure dart into the throng of people milling towards the exit.

_You little bastard._

With adrenaline shooting through his body and the sound of blood pumping in his ears, he dashes after the figure on pure reflex without thinking, about to push himself into the mass of commuters when the sound of doors closing cuts through his hormone-induced sprint of madness, bringing him back to reality.

_Double fuck._

He turns just in time to see the carriage with Loki still inside roll off the platform, leaving Tony there like some stranded whale, too stupid to navigate properly and about to be brutally eliminated by natural selection.

Suddenly, the stolen wallet seems like the least of his problems.

A surge of panic is threatening to well up inside of him, pushing his usual rational mind aside, but he forces it back, refusing to be overcome with raw emotion. It’s not going to do him any good now, only sensible thinking will.

Okay, so he just lost a war criminal in New York City, like a freaking penny that fell out of a hole in his pocket. No reason to panic, though, the tracking device is still firmly attached to Loki’s wrist and his location fed directly into Tony’s cell phone, so at least he’ll know the god’s whereabouts at any given time.
Yes, rational, sensible thinking. He leans against a graffiti-covered pillar for support, cold sweat running down his forehead as he draws a hand through his hair, mulling over what the chances are that it’s gone grey from this scarce and if it might be worth investing the spare change in his pockets in some hair dye. An elderly couple passing by give him an affronted look as they walk past, the man muttering something about drug addicts and withdrawal symptoms.

Alright then. He straightens himself up, exhaling deeply as he struggles to get a grip on himself. He did tell Loki when they stepped on the train that it would take them almost right to the doorstep of Stark Tower, but he never said which stop to get off at. So most likely, Loki will ride with the train until it reaches the end station, not knowing where else to get off but perhaps hoping that there will be something familiar along the way to let him infer the correct stop. That means a ride of about fifteen minutes. He looks at the time table hovering above his head where the number display just changes from an eleven to a ten. Okay, so ten minutes until the next one. Hopefully Loki will be smart enough to wait for Tony to come get him. Surely he will not be stupid enough to wander off on his own and do god knows what.

The wait feels more like an hour than merely ten minutes, anxious time that he spends transferring orders to Jarvis to block his credit cards and send requests for new ones, while staring at his cell phone and the little speck that represents Loki, wishing that he had had enough sense to equip the bracelet with a communication device while he was at it. Yeah, hindsight is twenty-twenty, alright. And a bitch, too.

When the next train finally rolls onto the platform, Tony squeezes himself through the doors before they’re even fully open, his grave breach of commuter etiquette earning him angry stares and muttered comments from some of the exiting passengers. He couldn’t care less, though.

For the duration of the train ride, his eyes are glued to his cell phone display, apprehension curling in his stomach like a snake when the application informs him that Loki has just stepped out at the end station.

Stay there, he silently wills the dot, don’t move from the spot until I come and get you.

The black speck on the screen mills about for a little while, but then ceases to move altogether, remaining on the same coordinates. Okay, good, from the looks of it Loki probably isn’t going anywhere until Tony gets there.

And then, the speck on his screen suddenly flickers, and a second later it is gone, leaving only an empty map with coordinates and street names printed across it.
Tony stares at the screen as if his intense gaze will bring the Loki speck back, but the black dot remains stubbornly absent.

His mind is swirling like a maelstrom as he stares at the empty spot that only moments ago was covered with dark pixels. Did Loki find a way to remove the tracking device? Granted, he would need some kind of tool to take that thing apart, but perhaps he had managed to pry the bracelet open somehow, if he’d gotten his hands on something hard and flat to stick into that thin groove where the ends connect…

Suddenly, Tony has a very sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach. And then, raw anger is stirring inside of him, lifting its ugly face and baring its sharp fangs.

Of course Loki would take advantage of any opportunity to escape. And Tony is a blithering idiot for trusting the god of lies and mischief, for aiding his getaway like this, for playing right into his hands. How could he have fallen so easily for it?

There is not only anger burning through him, though, but something else, something even more potent – a feeling of betrayal. He put his trust in Loki, and the god repaid him by using his gullibility against him, probably laughing inside as he stringed Tony along and then making his escape as soon as an appropriate moment presented itself.

He clenches his hands into fists. Oh, he’ll find the bastard one way or the other; he’ll get him back, and once he does, Loki is going to be one very sorry-ass god indeed.
Chapter 54

He’s staring at the empty screen in abject misery, anger swirling inside of him. Damn the sneaky bastard to hell for doing this to him, for using him like a pawn.

His head has turned into a battle ground for a million disturbing thoughts, all vying for his attention and every single one of them pointing out to him in no uncertain terms just how much he’s messed up. Crap, he’s such an idiot, seriously believing a simple tracker could contain the god of lies and deceit. Of course he would find some way around the device, merely biding his time until the perfect moment arrived, well away from the tower and Jarvis’ surveillance, dumping Tony off like excess luggage.

Like an ice cube in hell, the guy took to just disappearing into thin air, grabbing the opportunity with both hands as it presented itself. Exactly how Loki managed to get rid of the tracker he doesn’t know, but the specifics aren’t important; what matters right now is that he somehow did.

And of course, Tony had never taken into consideration that the two of them would get separated like this; when he’d designed his tracker he had been assuming Loki would remain close and in Tony’s sight at all times, so any tampering with the device wouldn’t have gone by unnoticed. Naturally, he had checked the bracelet before they headed out, just in case Loki should have done something with it in the meantime, but there had been nothing out of the ordinary, everything had appeared as it should.

He can’t believe he’s let himself be fooled this easily, being drawn in by the innocent façade Loki had put up, the picture made perfect by those puppy eyes. The god had known exactly how to play him, as if Tony were a well-tuned piano and Loki a professional pianist. And his plan obviously worked perfectly – make Tony feel sorry for him, pretending to be all harmless, goad him along while waiting for an unguarded moment outside, and then remove the bracelet and take off.

It had been terribly stupid of him not to take something like that into account. Loki could have found a number of items in the tower he could have easily snuck along when they went outside – perhaps a needle or something would have been equipment enough. It wouldn’t have been an easy feat to pry the bracelet open with such a primitive tool, but given a good undisturbed fifteen minutes on a train to work on the clasp...

After everything that’s happened, he should have learned by now not to put his trust in people, and just what did he do? Yeah, he went right ahead and put it in none other than the very guy who is the physical manifestation of lies and deceit and who has spent centuries perfecting his skills.
If this had happened to anyone else, he would have laughed at their gullibility. Even the naive morons falling for those Nigerian royalty email scams have better justification than him.

And now, he’s lost Loki in the middle of New York of all places. Not in Eastern Bumblefuck or Hicksville, but fucking New York with its eight something millions of people. The chances of finding him here is about as big as finding a piece of marble in a quarry. In other words, about as non-existent as a pink unicorn.

Then there is the very much unwelcome thought materializing in his head about what kind of uncomfortable questions SHIELD might want to ask him in case they should happen to stumble on the alien fugitive and find out the whole story. And damn if he can’t just picture Fury’s single eye glaring daggers at him as his disdainful voice demands to know why the hell Tony thought he would be qualified to contain a hostile alien master of deceit instead of contacting SHIELD to let them deal with the problem as soon as it got dumped on his doorstep.

And he wouldn’t even be able to offer a smart-ass reply to that since it would be laughably obvious from recent events that he wasn’t in the slightest cut for the job.

The grip around his cell phone tightens. Of course, the responsible thing would be to own up to his own dumb-assery and immediately call Fury to alert him that there’s a war criminal on the loose who might be up to who knows what. It would be embarrassing and uncomfortable and many other things as well that he doesn’t want to think about right now, but his own pride shouldn’t take precedence here, should it? As much as he would have preferred to find the god on his own, he would be much better off leaving it to the professionals, right?

Still, he doesn’t bring up his list of contacts. He just doesn’t have it in him to call Fury, because he knows – or at least suspects – what they’d do to Loki if they got their hands on him. And despite the god having betrayed his trust so gravely like this, despite the anger churning inside of him, he still doesn’t want him to end up in SHIELD’s not-so-tender care.

Besides, Loki doesn’t even have his magic or his powers – unless he’s found some way to get rid of those Asgardian bracelets as well while he was at it, but that’s something he doesn’t want to even consider right now – so whatever damage he could do should be negligible. Certainly not something you’d need to contact an organization like SHIELD for, who no doubt have their hands full trying to control much greater threats than powerless gods-made-mortals.

No, he will have to try finding Loki on his own. Though, how that’s going to happen, he really has no idea. Then again, he is Tony Stark, and he’s nothing if not a problem solver. He’s gotten himself out of much tighter spots than this and lived to tell the tale. Finding a runaway god should be a simple task in comparison, he tries to comfort himself. He still has his brain and wits and technical skills. He’ll figure something out.
But the first step is visiting the crime scene, to see if there are any clues there, something that might guide him along the way, even if it’s just the discarded bracelet lying forlorn on the floor of the subway station.

Sighing, he throws another glance at the cell phone still nestled in his hand when the screen unexpectedly recalibrates, and the map and coordinates on display all flicker and disappear, only to be replaced with a new and different set a second later. And, miraculously, the black speck that represents Loki is back. Tony blinks a few times in surprise as he realizes that the map image on his screen represents nothing else than his own tower.

_Huh? What on Earth just happened here?_

Okay, his utterly confused brain supplies, so Loki must have made his way from the station to his tower, somehow; that’s the only reasonable explanation for this weirdness. And that makes a huge wave of relief wash over him, the possibility that the god might not have tried to remove the bracelet and escape, after all, as much as everything was pointing in that direction.

Unfortunately, that is making little sense either, because even if Loki knew the way back home and ran as fast as he could, he wouldn’t have been able to make it there in the brief moment that has passed since Tony lost the reading on him at the end station.

The dots won’t connect in his head. So perhaps there was some temporary problem with the tracker, and he lost contact with it for a few moments, but how could Loki have gotten back to the tower so quickly? Did he freaking _teleport_ himself? That would at least have explained why the reading on the god had disappeared if he was passing through interplanetary Neverland or whatever intergalactic wormhole teleporters travelled through to get from here to there. He winces at the thought; Loki’s magic bracelets should be blocking his powers and make such a feat impossible. But maybe there was a glitch in the things, enabling the god to use select portions of his magic. If so, Tony should count himself _very_ lucky that this is all the god has been doing with it.

He groans, leaning his head back against the scrunchy seat. Why is it that this whole slave-deal just keeps getting more complicated? If Odin was standing here in front of him, Tony would have clocked him one in the face, god or not.

_Lucky_, his stop is up next and as the train finally comes to a halt, he once more pushes himself through the carriage doors before they’re barely open, sprinting off like an Olympic champion, glad that Stark Tower is situated only a few blocks away.
The first thing that greets him when he slams the front door open, out of breath and legs shaking from exertion, is the sound of Jarvis’ voice calmly announcing, “You have guests waiting for you on floor three, Mr Stark.”

Guests? What the hell? How did anyone make it past the security barriers? He makes a mental note to add a moat with underfed crocodiles along the perimeter. Perhaps some good old-fashioned intruder repellence will prove more effective if his high-tech solutions can be by-passed so easily.

“What guests?” he snaps, rushing up the staircase to level three, not bothering to wait for either Jarvis’ answer or the elevator. He doesn’t have a good feeling about this, none at all…

“They did not give their names, sir, merely said that they would like a word with you. They did, however, bring with them a certain--“

He reaches the third level and stops in his tracks at the sight that greets him, the rest of what Jarvis says not registering in his mind.

Because right there, in the middle of the spacious room, stands a group of people most definitely not from this planet. Unless they’ve come straight from some funny costume party, which, judging by the severe look on their faces, they clearly haven’t.

Four Einherjers, straight out of Asgard, complete with showy beards, helmets, shiny swords and armour, and smouldering gazes that could fry lesser beings. The air in the room seems to have dropped several degrees below its usual temperature and Tony feels a chill trace an icy finger along his spine.

Whimsically, he wonder if these are the same guys as the ones that showed up last time with Loki in tow; if Erik the Blabbermouth has made a dashing return, but there’s no way to tell as they all look the same with their faces half-hidden behind scruffy beards and well-polished helmets.

There’s a new addition to the little group this time, though, an older man who stands before the group preening like he’s their leader, looking like someone straight out of Harry Potter and who could give Dumbledore a good run for his money with the cliché white beard that is trailing all the way down to his waist. There is a sword at his belt as well, but it is shorter than those of his comrades and he wears lighter armour, so the geriatric geezer is probably a wizard of some sort. If that’s what magical men are called back in Asgard; Tony isn’t familiar with such nuances. Maybe warlock or conjuror or hocus-pocus guy would be a more apt title.
He supposes he should be the one to say something first, ask what freaking business they have here, because the tower is still his home, despite these uninvited visitors having helped themselves to it like Tony is only an accessory that comes with the package. But the geezer steps forward before Tony has a chance to open his mouth to let spill a frosty comment that probably isn’t going to be very conducive to his health, given the amount of blank weapons in his immediate presence.

“Greetings, Man of Iron,” the man says, voice just as pompous as the rest of him. “Please accept our apologies for rudely intruding in your home like this.”

Tony offers him an insincere smile. “It’s alright, I just hope you guys remembered to wipe your shoes on the way in; see, I had the floor cleaned mere days ago and I just hate the way mud stains look on marble tiles.” *Oh, and don’t you guys know how to fucking knock?*

If the old guy finds Tony’s reply offensive, he gives no sign of it. “Worry not, as we shall not linger longer than necessary. We merely come to inform you that we will be taking your slave Loki back to Asgard to face execution.”
Chapter 55

_Uh?_ Tony’s brain had temporarily stuffed Loki into the back office of his mind the moment he came face to face with the unexpected Asgardian intruders, but now the memory comes back full force.

_Loki._

“Execution?” he repeats dully, puzzled and alarmed by the turn the conversation is taking. “What do you mean?” His thoughts are racing and he is doing his darndest to make sense out of the whole messy situation. Did something happen to make Odin change his mind about this whole slavery deal? He does remember how Thor went off to Asgard to speak on Loki’s behalf before Odin, but converting the slavery sentence into execution was probably not the kind of clemency the Thunderer had in mind, though perhaps death was indeed a step up in Odin’s twisted little eye-patched head.

“Were the terms of the sentence not explained as Loki was given over to you?” the Gandalf look-alike says haughtily, white eyebrows wrinkled above a pair of questioning eyes, probably assuming that Tony has indeed been informed but his inferior mortal mind merely forgotten. With that, the old man turns and takes a step to the side, suddenly revealing what his body has previously blocked from view, and Tony lets loose a little gasp at the sight that greets him.

Between two of the Einherjers hangs a limp but very recognisable form, his head bowed so low that his tangled dark hair conceals his face. Judging by the figure’s hunched-over position, it’s only the steadfast, vice-like grip of the two Asgardian warriors to either side of him that is keeping him in any semblance of an upright position, as opposed to dropping to the floor in an inglorious heap.

And suddenly, it’s all making sense to him, or at least it’s _starting_ to. So Loki _did_ teleport back here, after all, though it wasn’t by his own devices. No, it was Gandalf and his little entourage who had come straight out of Asgard to nab the god at the subway station and then magiced them all back to Stark Tower. And it doesn’t take a genius to figure out that the brief moment they’d spent in some weird cosmic interstice or space fold while going from there to here would have corresponded to the time that Tony couldn’t get a reading from the tracker.

And he sincerely hopes there were no bystanders around to see them, or there could be some very uncomfortable questions eventually coming his way, but given that the end station is not frequented by many travellers and is usually deserted at this time of day, perhaps they had managed to perform their little appearing-and-disappearing act unnoticed.

And now, they’re planning to take Loki back to Asgard for execution.
Fuck.

“The terms were explained alright, but I think I must have missed the part where it said that Odin’s verdict could be arbitrarily turned into the death penalty.” His answer is snapped rather than spoken, full well knowing he doesn’t like where this is going. Most of all, he would have liked to go check on Loki, to make sure he’s not too badly hurt, but something is telling him that showing any concern for him in front of the intruding Asgardian audience would not go over well, and might even serve to make things worse, as bad as they already are. So he remains in place, willing Loki to be as fine and unharmed as possible.

Gandalf draws himself up, mouth a thin line as if it is beneath his station to stand here explaining himself to a mortal. “I assure you, this is by no means an arbitrary decision, Man of Iron.” His eyes turn to the god still slumped between his guards, and his gaze hardens. “Heimdall the Watchman has been instructed to regularly turn his far-seeing eye to where Loki is dwelling in the human realm, and report back any breeches of the terms of his sentence. And in the performance of this duty, the Watchman came across the sight of how Loki was no longer with you, but on a Midgardian vehicle of transportation, while you were pursuing him in obvious distress. And as clearly stipulated, an escape attempt means that the sentence will be converted—“

“I already told you, I did not try to escape!” Loki suddenly shrieks in protest, struggling against the strong hands that are holding him in an unrelenting grip. The note of panic in his voice is so painfully clear that it makes something twist inside of Tony, and it’s all mixed in with the raging frustration of a born liar who is used to people swallowing his falsehoods hook and sinker, but when he is for once speaking the truth, when it truly matters, no one believes him.

Okay, major misunderstanding here, guys. Tony is about to speak up in Loki’s defence, to offer the trespassing Aesir his side of the story, but one of the Einherjer guards is quicker.

“Silence, slave,” he barks as he draws a gloved hand back into a fist and lands a punch right into the midsection of his charge, who slips to his knees, gasping and doubled-over in pain.

And Tony sincerely hopes that wasn’t the sound of a rib cracking he just heard.

Hot anger flashing through him, he steps forward without thinking, grabbing the offending arm of the Einherjer before it has time to do more damage. The much larger man blinks in surprise at the unexpected intervention as Tony fixes him with an icy stare.
“Hey, Hercules,” he says, hostility dripping from every word. “Don’t touch my stuff.”

The room goes deathly quiet at that and Tony realizes that all eyes are suddenly on him – the four Einherjers, Gandalf, even Loki is staring at him, waiting for his next move. And the big brute whose arm he’s still holding onto is looking like he’s only inches away from gutting Tony where he stands, just barely being held back by some lofty Asgardian notion that probably forbids an uninvited guest to smite his unwilling host on the spot.

He lets go of the bulging, leather-clad arm, trying to calm down. The only sound is the ragged, uneven breaths coming from Loki, who is still on the floor clutching his midsection, the tension thick enough to be cut into bulky slices with a butter knife.

Okay, so that really got the party started, didn’t it.

“Look, I know this might come as a surprise to you all, but Loki is telling the truth here,” he finally manages, trying his best to pour oil on the troubled waters before something really nasty happens and someone loses a head. And that someone is unlikely to be either one of the Einherjers or Gandalf. No, getting anyone upset isn’t going to help things out here, especially not when his Iron Man suit is out of immediate reach.

Darn, why is it that that always happens to him whenever hostile Asgardians show up in his tower?

No one intervenes to add their own commentary to that, so he continues, struggling to control the anger still cursing through his veins. “Loki and I got separated by accident, because some little shit tried to rob me and when I chased after him the Midgardian vehicle of transportation that Loki was in, and that I was supposed to have been on too, took off without me. Mishaps like these are all part of the joy that comes with public transportation, though I suppose it’s not something you guys have to worry about in Asgard where you have your fancy horses and carriages and magic dragons to haul you around.”

Gandalf doesn’t look quite like he understands all the details with the way he’s narrowing his eyes and quirking his lips, as if he suspects that Tony is making shit up just to confuse him.

“Are you always this careless in how you handle your slaves?” he asks, clearly not approving of Tony’s way of doing things.

He is on the verge of shooting back the obvious reply – I’ve never had a slave before – but he realizes that might only serve to feed the geezer’s suspicions that Tony is patently unsuited to the task of having a slave in his care. And while that perception is probably very correct, admitting to it might mean a death sentence for Loki, so he keeps his mouth shut.
Instead, he points to the piece of metal circling Loki’s wrist. “See that little bracelet there? Yup, that’s the one. It contains a device that lets me keep track of Loki’s whereabouts, and that’s how I knew he was back in my tower and not at the station where you grabbed him.”

Five pair of eyes are studying the bracelet, some surprised, others more suspicious. One of the Einherjers standing next to Loki bends down to tap a prodding finger against the metal, but makes no further comment on it.

“Yeah, you guys aren’t the only ones who know how to make fancy tracking bracelets,” he says, crossing his arms in front of him in what he hopes is a show of authority and competence. “If you hadn’t gone ahead and beamed Loki back up here, I would have recovered him soon enough, no damage done.”

Gandalf’s look is still one of disapproval, but finally he inclines his head one or maybe two stiff degrees in reluctant acquiescence. “Very well, then. I see that there has been a mistake, and no breech of terms has taken place. We will take our leave and apologize for any inconvenience caused.”

Tony is glad to still be standing on his two feet, given the way his knees suddenly go weak with relief. So at least the old geezer can swallow his pride and admit when he’s wrong. Even though he looks like he’s just downed a bathtub full of vinegar.

With that, Gandalf urges the warriors along with a wave of his hand. “We will make our way back to Asgard without further ado.” He turns to Tony, almost as in afterthought. “I bid you farewell, Man of Iron.”

“Yeah, sure, happy flying or whatever it is that you guys do,” he mutters, glad to see them go. He can’t wait to get these Gladiator rejects out of his tower.

The Einherjers march past him without a word, all clinking steel and creaking armour, when one of them stops in his tracks, turning to face Tony with an icy glare. He thinks it’s the same guy who decided it would be a swell idea to turn Loki into a punching bag, but he isn’t sure.

“Your slave is disrespectful and insolent,” he booms, thundering voice strangely reminiscent of Thor’s. “You’d do well to have him disciplined more frequently.”
“Thanks for the maintenance instructions, asshole,” Tony snaps, though the last word is kind of mumbled. The Iron Man suit is out of his immediate reach, after all.

The blue shimmer of a teleporting fur-clad quintet hasn’t even faded before Tony turns to Loki, who is still slumped on the floor, a hand protectively clutched to his side. Air is expelled from his lips in short, ragged gasps, like breathing is an immensely painful activity.

Quickly covering the few steps between them, Tony crouches down next to the god, who slowly lifts his bowed head to give him an inscrutable stare. And that’s when Tony sees the purple bruises on the pale face and the split lip and the bleeding cut across the forehead that shadows and distance have kept hidden from view until now.

He winces at the sight. “Damn, those guys really did a number on you, Reindeer Games,” he says, unhelpfully stating the obvious, suddenly wishing even more fervently that he could have faced off with the intruders in his Iron Man suit.

Loki doesn’t offer him a reply. Which is no surprise; with the possibly cracked rib it probably hurts just to speak.

“Let me take a look at that,” Tony offers, reaching out a hand for Loki’s shirt. “Might be broken, if that nasty crack I heard was any indication.”

Loki’s face is strained and laced with pain, but he doesn’t swat the hands away as Tony lifts the hem of his T-shirt to reveal bruised and battered skin.

He’s relieved that at least there are no visible fractures jutting out under the skin, even though that doesn’t mean that nothing’s broken in there that might end up puncturing a lung or something. In any case, he’s no doctor, so he’s hardly qualified to make any judgement on the severity of Loki’s injuries.

He lets the cloth fall back, shielding the ugly bruises from view, and draws a heavy sigh. “Alright, I think we need to call on Bruce Banner here,” he says, not liking the idea but knowing he has no choice.

Loki’s eyes flash at that, and he instinctively scoots back a few inches before the resulting pain makes him freeze in his tracks. “I’ll-be-fine,” he croaks out, but it’s just pure stubbornness talking; there is very little conviction in that tense voice.
Ignoring the god’s feeble protest, Tony pulls out his cell phone, flipping it open and scanning through his list of contacts until he finds Bruce’s name in the list. He’s not leaving Loki unattended like this, no matter what the god might think of it.

Three signals buzz in his ear before a mild-mannered voice picks up at the other end.

“Hey, it’s me, Tony. Uh, I kind of need your help with something.” He pauses, grimacing to himself. “First I need to know, though, can you keep a secret? Like, a really big one?”
Chapter 56

Loki waits. Lately, it seems that his life has been comprised of long stretches of doing just that. Waiting in his cell at SHIELD for transport back to Asgard. Waiting in the dungeons for his trial. Waiting to be taken to Midgard to be given over to Tony Stark. Waiting for revenge that isn’t coming.

And now, he’s waiting again as Tony is giving Bruce the run-down of the situation, as the man delicately referred to it, in the room next to his. He can’t make out any words, only the soft murmur of voices, sometimes rising in pitch and volume, at other times so soft that they’re barely discernible at all. If moving hadn’t sent piercing shards of pain through his midsection, he would have snuck up and put his ear to the wall to get a gist of what they’re saying.

The two of them have been in there for a long time, much longer than Loki would think necessary to bring the doctor up to speed on the state of things. That is probably not a good sign.

He can hear agitation in Bruce’s voice, followed by what sounds like Tony ostensibly trying to get him to calm down. It’s not too difficult to get the gist of the situation, though he can’t hear a word – Bruce is no doubt expressing his unwillingness to offer his healing aid to the enemy, and Tony is trying to convince him otherwise.

Eventually, he gives up trying to overhear any of the conversation, the throbbing pain stealing his focus away. Right now, everything seems to hurt, including such simple tasks as breathing, swallowing and even blinking.

Gingerly, he presses the ice pack clutched in his hand a little tighter to his ribs, despite the resulting stab of pain. Of course, his injuries would have been mere inconveniences had he still had his powers and would have required no treatment, but in his current mortal body, that is a very different matter.

His thoughts slowly drift back to the frightening series of events that had led up to all this; even now, merely thinking about them makes the resulting fearful pounding of his heart almost drown out the dizzying sense of relief still rushing through his body.

And to think the day had started so well, with the long, relaxing stroll in the park. Even though the ride back home had been uncomfortable with the pressing throng of people, it had been a minor inconvenience, a mere detail in comparison to the delight of the hours spent outside.
Then came the shock when the doors to the carriage closed before Tony had gotten back inside, the vehicle taking off without him. For a seemingly ever-lasting moment, there had only been one thought in his head – what do I do now? He had never expected something like that to happen, and he had been so confused and bewildered, at an utter loss what to do. He had no idea at which stop to get off at, and even if he did, he wouldn’t find his way back from there to Tony’s tower.

As the worst shock had eventually abated, he had briefly entertained the notion of asking someone in the carriage – people in this city would surely be familiar with the high-rising dwelling of one of their mightiest heroes – but had quickly decided against it. After all, stepping out of his anonymity as a faceless traveller and having someone give him more than a passing glance might result in him being recognized as the one who had brought an army to this realm for conquest. And then things could really turn ugly.

No, it was better to remain in the carriage and hope that something might come along to give him a clue about what would be the right stop. And if that didn’t happen, then he’d just get off when the carriage finally reached its end destination and wait there for Tony to come and pick him up. The bracelet around his wrist broadcasted his whereabouts to the man, after all, so there should be no reason for concern.

The idea of escaping had never entered his mind; even without Tony’s tracker, there were still Heimdall – who might be watching at any time – and the Asgardian bracelets around his wrists, so any such attempt would be a futile pursuit doomed to fail. But despite the unease coiling in his stomach at being alone and utterly powerless in unfamiliar surroundings in a realm he knew little about and where he was considered an enemy, he had eventually calmed down. Even though he was currently among hostiles without whatever protection Tony’s presence would afford him, as long as no one recognized him, things should be fine. Tony would come get him, they’d go back to his tower, and everything would be back to normal again.

He had never considered Asgard. Because he hadn’t entertained the notion of escaping, hadn’t even stopped to think that his current situation might be interpreted in such a way if Heimdall should decide to throw a glance towards his corner of Midgard. So the possibility never occurred to him that there could be trouble coming from that direction.

Not until the Einherjers had suddenly materialized as he stood there in the deserted underground station waiting for Tony, like a nightmare coming to life before him. They were rough, despite his not resisting, full well knowing it would only make things even worse, especially given his current station. Still, he thought he should be able to clear it all up and speak his innocence, but they refused to listen, the conviction of his guilt already evident in their hard eyes and drawn faces. They had merely scoffed and told him to silence his lying silvertounge, so in the end, he had simply panicked, certain he would be brought back to meet his end, and all because of a pointless, random incident that wasn’t anything what it appeared like.
Luckily, the leader of the group had thought it courteous to stop by and inform his master that Loki would no longer be in his possession, because the contract was forfeit and his slave would be taken back to be executed. So after the ensuing teleportation, he had waited in shivering dread in Tony’s tower, his arms held in bruising grips as he slumped between the guards, barely able to stand up by his own devices after the beating he had suffered at their hands when his panic attack had been taken as resistance.

He had sagged in relief at the sight of Tony finally walking in – or running, as it were – truth be told, he had never been so glad to see anyone. Now there would be someone a lot more credible than him to corroborate the story that had only been dismissed at desperate lies from a condemned man, someone to deny the false accusations levelled at him.

Then, as another possibility suddenly reared its ugly head in his mind, his relief twisted into a choking tendril of fear instead – what if Tony decided that this would be the perfect opportunity to get rid of him, to have him taken back to Asgard? The man had never wanted Loki as a slave, and had expressed his dissatisfaction at this arrangement more times than he cared to remember at that point.

And all the man had to do was speak the words, he’s lying, and Loki would be hauled back to face a long, lingering and painful death. The amount of power Tony held in his hands in that moment was terrifying, and it would only take so precious little, like a razor-sharp scythe swooping down to take a head off by the mere flick of a wrist.

But the scythe never fell.

Because despite Loki’s uselessness as a slave, despite all the problems he has been the cause of, despite his never being wanted or needed here, despite so many things, Tony had for some reason still decided that he’d rather keep his slave than have him sent back and finally be rid of him.

The only question is... why?

His musings are interrupted by the click of a handle as the closed door swings open to admit a face he remembers far too well, that of Bruce Banner. Tony is there too, hovering in the background, as if he’s unsure of whether he should be there at all.

Loki steels himself. He is not looking forward to being treated by Bruce, who, naturally, will harbour no desire to aid him, but since the man is here it would seem that he has succumbed to what must have been Tony’s insistent persuasion attempts. Perhaps Bruce has agreed in recognition of old friendship, then, or as repayment of some debt or the other.
“Hello, Loki,” the man says in greeting as he walks in, placing the bag in his hand down on the table. He comes to a halt a step away from where Loki is half-sitting on the bed, for a moment looking like he’s not sure what to say to his enemy suddenly turned patient. But a couple of heartbeats later, he bridges that last step, with a note more confidence in his posture.

“I understand that you have sustained some injuries, and Tony has asked me to check you over, so I’m going to do just that. Are you… okay with this?” he asks, as if he is actually giving Loki a choice in the matter.

And Loki doesn’t – he really doesn’t – want the man who turns into that green monster anywhere near him, not the crude beast who smashed him into the floor like he was a child’s toy. Even back then, at the time of his defeat, when he was still in possession of his full powers, had Bruce managed to pummel him into a state of dazed oblivion. A similar encounter in his current state would of course end considerably worse.

Warily, he searches those eyes for a glint of green, any sign that the presence of his enemy is yet again drawing forth the beast; however, he can find none.

So he nods once, hoping to get this over with as quickly as possible.

In the end, Bruce has to cut his shirt open as lifting his arms high enough to remove the garment the normal way proves too painful for Loki, while Tony’s mutters something containing the words *Megadeth logo* and *cutting into pieces* and *blasphemy*. Then, as the remains of his shirt are being peeled off, the man excuses himself and leaves, vaguely mumbling about concepts of privacy and doctor-patient relations.

Loki apprehensively watches him go. Truth be told, he would have preferred if Tony had remained in the room instead of leaving him alone with the beast, since it would have made him feel safer. Which is a strange concept, that Tony’s presence should be accompanied by feelings of safety rather than fear, which would have been the default setting in a normal master-slave relation. But the man did see fit to step in between Loki and the Einherjer that had punched him to the floor, so hopefully he’d step in again, if Bruce should show signs of wanting to hurt him.

He watches Bruce dig into his bag and remove something out of its depths, and Loki strains to see what it is, suspicion coiling inside of him. The two little beads that the doctor shakes out of a can do look harmless enough as they lay in his palm, round and white, but as Bruce hands them over to him, he makes no move to accept them.
“They’re painkillers. They will take away some of the pain,” Bruce explains, calmly holding his hand out but not making any attempts to force the pills onto his unwilling patient.

Slowly, Loki lifts up his hand for these ‘painkillers’, and the other man tips his own hand, letting the contents spill down into Loki’s upturned palm. He doesn’t trust the doctor, but has no desire to do anything that might call forth the man’s alter ego again. Reluctantly, he brings the white pills up to his mouth and swallows them down, relaxing slightly as there are no immediate adverse affects.

Bruce works mostly under silence, keeping his comments to a minimum. After some uncomfortable prodding, he does mention that one of Loki’s ribs is cracked and instructs him to lean forward so he can wind some gauze around his midsection, something which makes for an unpleasant experience.

But the silence fits him perfectly; speaking hurts and he has no desire to waste precious words on this man whose only reason for helping him is out of loyalty to Tony.

It is only after he has dabbed at the cut on Loki’s forehead with a cotton swab drenched in something that makes Loki gasp at the unexpected sting and pull away, only to be rewarded with even worse pain in his midsection, that the man speaks again.

Bruce pulls off the gloves he’s wearing, throws them into the waste basket in the corner, and then gathers his other supplies and medical equipment strewn across the bedside table. As the last things have been placed inside and the bag zipped shut, Loki expects the man to leave, having fulfilled his promise of aid. But instead of acting as anticipated, the man pulls out a chair and plonks himself down next to the bed.

And then he just sits there for a few moments, glancing Loki over like he’s seeing him for the first time, bandages and bruises covering his body. There is something about that stare that makes Loki want to squirm, but he doesn’t, steeling himself for what comes next.

The doctor clears his throat, almost like he’s embarrassed, and pushes his glasses further up the bridge of his nose with the tip of a finger.

“So, how are you faring?” the man finally says, breaking the silence.

“I… am as well as can be expected under the circumstances,” Loki replies stiffly and warily, not sure what prompted the question. After all, the doctor has examined him and can no doubt draw his own conclusions from those observations. “But I will heal, even mortal bodies do eventually,” he adds,
not wanting to appear any weaker than he must surely already do.

Bruce fidgets a little where he’s sitting, like there are invisible spikes lining the seat of his chair.

“No, I meant with all of this.” He makes a vague gesture that is meant to indicate something not physically present in the room. “With being a… well, a slave.”

The question takes him by surprise. It was not one he had seen coming, least of all from the man who once pounded him into the floor without a moment of regret. There is no reason for Bruce to ask, and besides, Loki has no desire to discuss his position; breaching the subject with Thor was bad enough, but having his humiliation spoken of aloud with what is essentially a stranger would be even worse.

“Tony explained the situation to me,” Bruce continues, undeterred by Loki’s silence, “and even though I can’t say I’m pleased with the idea of one of my friends being what is technically a slave owner, I can understand that Tony didn’t have much choice in the matter. Just like you had none.”

Perhaps he would be better off keeping his mouth shut, but being fully aware that he’s a slave without power, without any control over his own life, without the luxury of making his own choices, without all the things he always took for granted before this, he says it anyway.

“I did have a choice. I could have chosen death at my trial instead.” Of course, it’s only a further degradation admitting to this; to divulge that he, no matter how unwillingly, consented to slavery, but at least it offers him the tiniest illusion of some control, some choice, as opposed to being a passive victim who has no say in his own destiny.

The doctor shakes his head, mouth drawn into a tight line. “You know, once Thor had brought you back to Asgard, we did discuss among ourselves what punishment would await you there. None of us really knew anything about Asgardian justice, so we just assumed you’d be imprisoned in one form of the other. No one thought… you’d be sentenced to slavery.”

Loki cocks his head. “It is not an unheard of form of punishment in Asgard. Not very common, no, but not extraordinary either.” Though, truth be told, it was not what he had expected himself.

“Hmm.” The doctor pauses, looking like he’s not sure what comment to offer to that. He then draws a sigh, looking at Loki with an unreadable expression on his face as he leans forward slightly, palms resting on his thighs. “Well, if you at all want to talk about it, I’m bound by professional secrecy, so nothing you’d say would leave this room.”
And talking about any of this is the last thing he wants to do. “There is nothing to be said that will change anything. My sentence still stands,” he replies, a slight quiver in his voice that he’s not quite sure just where it came from.

Bruce is quiet for a while, as if he thinks the brooding silence enveloping the room is going to break Loki into spilling his thoughts. If that’s the plan, it doesn’t have the desired effect.

“Well then,” Bruce finally says, making as if to stand, but then changing his mind before his backside has lifted from the seat, fingers picking at a strand on the seam of his shirt. “I assume that Tony has treated you alright?”

“He… has,” Loki says slowly, not even having to lie in order to offer the only acceptable answer to such a question. Though why anyone would ask a slave any of the sort is beyond him.

Bruce nods slowly. “You know, Tony has his share of faults like everyone else, but when it all comes down to it, he’s a good man.”

Loki doesn’t offer a reply to that, merely fiddles around with the cover of the bed, and a few moments later, the doctor excuses himself and leaves the room.

Whatever truth there might be in Bruce’s statement, there is one thing that is certain – if he had been a slave back on Asgard, his fate would have been a much harsher one.
Chapter 57

It’s odd how waiting has a tendency to stretch time into seemingly near-infinity. He doesn’t feel up to doing anything productive while Bruce is in there with Loki, so instead he plays around with his phone, thumb moving haphazardly across the screen.

A part of him wishes he had stayed in the room as Bruce was treating his patient, but it had somehow felt like an invasion of Loki’s privacy, so instead he had left. He isn’t sure he would have liked having someone around to gawk and gape at his injuries if he’d been in a similar situation.

Well, that, and being in the same room as an undressed Loki didn’t seem like a terribly good idea, given Tony’s previous history in that regard.

But at least it didn’t seem like the god was too badly hurt, if Bruce’s initial assessment was any indication. Even if it should turn out that he’s sustained a cracked rib or two, even that will heal in a few weeks, despite how painful such an injury would be. So as long as it’s nothing worse, he supposes he should be grateful, considering all the things that could have happened.

And he was really lucky that Bruce was in town, and able to stop by on short notice, so that’s another thing he should probably be thankful for as well.

Of course, as expected, the guy had been shocked and appalled once he arrived and Tony took him aside to explain things. He hadn’t told Bruce much over the phone, just informed him that it was an emergency situation that needed the utmost discretion, offering vague, non-committal answers to the prodding, uncomfortable questions that followed. And he wouldn’t be surprised if Bruce had assumed Tony was bringing him in to deal with the aftermath of some fetish sex game of his gone wrong or something, but it was probably better to let him believe that than to tell him the truth over the phone.

After his recapping of the day that the envoy from Asgard showed up on his doorstep with a shackled god in tow, and a quick and heavily censored run-down of the days that followed, ending with the mishap in the subway that led to Loki’s current condition, Tony had to endure a long lecture on just why slavery is a terrible violation of human rights and a plight on civilization. As if Tony didn’t already know that. He hated being guilt-tripped like that; as if he was some slavery abolitionist detractor who had been delighted about this arrangement.

For a frightening moment, Tony thought he saw a flicker of green twinkle as he locked eyes with the other man, and inwardly cursed himself for not thinking ahead. What if Bruce hulked out, too upset by this grievous affront to his ethics to remain in control of himself? Tony would have some serious
redecorating to deal with in the upcoming weeks, if he at all survived. But the gods were good, and Bruce calmed down from his agitated state, even apologized for his boorish behaviour and the words spoken in anger, and admitted that there was nothing Tony could have done to prevent the situation.

And Tony has sure heard a lot worse in his life – in fact, he does on an almost daily basis – so he graciously accepted the apology from the somewhat shame-faced, once again soft-spoken Bruce, who assured him that he would of course have no objections to treating Tony’s charge, as he delicately referred to Loki as, as if the mere word slave was enough to offend his sensibilities and bring forth the beast.

So all in all, given the situation, he supposes things turned a lot better than what he could have hoped for the moment he stood face to face with the intruding Asgardians and realized what was going on.

Then there’s a click from a door opening, and Tony puts his phone away, steeling himself.

“So how’s he doing?” he asks as soon as Bruce steps out of the make-shift hospital room, closing the door behind him.

“He’ll be alright,” the man answers in his usual soft-spoken voice as he turns to face Tony. “The most serious injury is a cracked rib, but it should heal in a few weeks. He’s lucky he didn’t sustain any worse damage, because those guys worked him over pretty badly. Besides the split lip and cut to the forehead that you’ve already seen, there are bruises and swellings all over his body, and he will be in pain for quite some time.”

Grimacing, Tony drags a hand through his hair, clutching at a patch at the back of his head. “Damn. Anything I can do to help speed the recovery process up?” he asks, though he doubts there is.

Bruce shakes his head. “No, his body will have to heal on its own; he just needs to stay in bed for a while and recuperate, and he should be fine. I left him a bottle of painkillers that should last him the duration. However, if there are any complications – which I don’t expect there will be – don’t hesitate to call me again, and I’ll do what I can.”

“I will,” Tony agrees. “Thanks for helping me – and Loki – out, and for keeping this between you and me.” Yeah, what would he have done without Bruce, really? As uncomfortable as the man might be with the whole situation, at least Tony can count on him to be discrete.

If this ever should get out, that he is harbouring a war criminal who wrecked massive havoc on New
York, he’d have a bloodthirsty mob outside his tower quicker than it would take him to down a glass of cheap scotch. Not even Pepper would have been able to salvage the situation, like she always used to do so expertly whenever he made a spectacle of himself in public, something that would happen with regular intervals.

To say nothing of how Fury and his SHIELD would come stomping down his door, dragging Loki with them to an underground cell somewhere where he’d probably be killed after they’d gained all the information and test results that they wanted. And then, there’d be a pissed-off delegation from the Magic Floating Fortress in the sky apparating in his house demanding to know why he, a puny mortal, has dared to cross the holy will of His Royal Dictatorship and give his bequeathed toy away to someone else when it was specified in the fine print that he didn’t even get to sign that no one else should get to play with it.

And considering the way Asgard deals with those that displease them, he really doesn’t feel like being on the receiving end of their wrath. He’s pretty sure his head looks better on his shoulders than it would adorning the gates of Valhalla.

However, that is certainly not the only reason.

No, merely thinking about Loki being handed over to a drastically shortened life as a test subject and what would probably be a fair bit of torture on the side, given the way Director Cyclops deals with people in his custody who aren’t as keen as him on the concept of cooperating, makes something twist inside of him. And not just because he finds the concept of torture and summary executions morally offensive and revolting.

“You know, I asked Loki how he was faring with this whole situation, and I think I should ask you

“No problem,” Bruce interrupts his thoughts. “That’s what friends are for. And besides, keeping the identities of my patients classified falls under the label of professional secrecy and is not information I would share with external parties.” He follows his comment with a shrug, as if it is an everyday occurrence for him to treat intergalactic war criminals stowed away in people’s towers.

“No, well, I owe you, buddy.” Tony slaps a friendly hand on Bruce’s shoulder, squeezing slightly in what is supposed to be a male bonding kind of gesture. “If you ever need some nano-calibrated spectral metal alloy or an allographic permutator voice steering system, you know where to ask. And hey, I’ll even throw in my complete A-team DVD collection for a long-term loan,” he offers. “But no scratches on the box, it’s special limited edition!”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” Bruce says with the hint of a smile. Then he gets serious again.

“You know, I asked Loki how he was faring with this whole situation, and I think I should ask you
the same thing,” he continues, crossing his arms in front of him. “So, how are you getting by with all of this? I imagine it must have been quite the… change for you.”

Tony can’t help but snort. “Yeah, that’s putting it mildly. Seriously, sometimes it feels like my entire world has been turned upside down, and my life put on a never-ending roller-coaster with this guy.”

Bruce regards him for a little while. “How long has Loki been here?”

Tony informs him. *Damn, has it really been that long?*

“I see,” Bruce nods. “So how are the two of you getting along, then?”

“Right now… it’s going alright… I suppose…” he trails off, not sure what he wants to mention to Bruce and what he’d rather keep quiet about. This is the first time he’s had the opportunity to speak with an outside part about all this with the exceptions of Thor, if he at all counts as an outside part with his vested interest in Loki’s welfare. In any case, bringing the subject up for discussion with Bruce seems a lot easier than talking about it with Loki’s own brother. And who knows how long it will be before he gets a chance like this again, if ever?

“Jeez, this whole situation is just so *fucked up,*” he blurts out, his unperturbed façade suddenly falling to pieces. But it would be ridiculous for him to stand here and pretend that he’s okay with this situation, to technically be the owner of another human – alien – being, and all the implications that come with something like that.

Bruce says nothing, but his eyes urge Tony to continue, so he does.

“I mean, I’m supposed to *own* the guy, as if he’s freaking property. Heck, I could do anything to him that I like – except for losing him in the subway, apparently – and no one in Asgard would bat even an eyelash. He isn’t even allowed to defend himself or do anything. Seriously, how fucked up isn’t *that?*”

Though he doesn’t really want to, he says it anyway. “You know, when he first came here, he expected me to… hurt him.” *Yeah, unspecific like that.* It will have to do. He can’t bring himself to say all of what Loki had initially expected from him. “He was so afraid of me, and I… didn’t even realize it at first.”
“Don’t blame yourself, Tony.” There’s something oddly nerve-soothing about Bruce’s calm, non-judgemental attitude. “You told him you wouldn’t hurt him once you understood that, didn’t you?”

“Yeah, sure. But still. I should have realized it sooner.”

“None of us is perfect. This is an extreme situation to be thrown into, and let’s be honest here – how many people do you know that would have handled this kind of situation more proficiently than you have?” Bruce asks as removes his glasses and starts wiping them with the sleeve of his shirt. A couple of moments later, he puts them back on the bridge of his nose and gives Tony a long, searching look. “But you know what? I think Loki trusts you. After you left the room, he kept glancing towards the door as if he was hoping you’d come back.”

Tony raises an eyebrow at that. Then again, perhaps Loki had just wanted to keep his best option for an escape route in sight, if Bruce should Hulk out on him. And maybe he should have thought better of leaving Loki alone with Bruce, after what had happened the last time the two of them had met. Yeah, just another one of those times when he never considered things from Loki’s point of view.

Still, he hopes that Bruce is right. He would have liked him to be.

“Now, it’s true that Loki has committed serious crimes and should be punished for them,” Bruce continues, “but everyone deserves a second chance. And perhaps you can be the one to give it to him, if Asgard won’t.”

Truth be told, he really has no idea just what kind of chances he could possibly offer an enslaved god, but everything is sure sounding so nice and dandy and lofty when Bruce is the one saying it. He just wishes it would be that easy too once the man has walked out the door, leaving Tony to deal with this weird situation and his even weirder feelings.

He sighs. “You know, I used to think I was the living example of ‘the man who has everything’. Perhaps that’s why the universe thought it would be funny to dump a slave into the lap of the great Tony Stark just to prove me wrong for once.”

Bruce’s lips quirk upwards in an amused grimace. “I think you flatter yourself.”

“Hey, I’m doing my best.”
At that, Bruce turns serious again. “And no one expects any more of you than that, Tony. Keep that in mind.”

Well, in a way, he supposes Bruce is right. At least it’s good to hear it from someone else.

“You know, I suppose I should go check on Loki,” he says with a sigh, nodding towards the closed door.

“You do that,” Bruce says as picks his doctor’s bag up, preparing to leave. “If there’s anything, be it either in regards to Loki or to yourself, don’t hesitate to give me a call.”

“Thanks, Bruce.”

“Take care, Tony.” One non-assuming smile and one finger adjusting slipped-down glasses later, Bruce nods his good-bye, and Tony is left standing alone in the middle of the room, exhaling a deep breath and making a relieved grimace.

*Well, that certainly went above expectations.*
Chapter 58

He’s glad that Loki’s injuries didn’t turn out to be any worse than what Bruce could deal with given his make-shift impromptu doctor’s visit. If Tony would have been forced to take Loki to a hospital, that would certainly have complicated matters.

But as it stands, the god can recuperate in Tony’s tower, shielded from prying eyes and nosy questions. With Tony acting nursemaid. Another title he can add to his name, right after the whole billionaire genius playboy philanthropist line. Perhaps he should have his business card updated, just to keep it in the weird loop that his life has become lately.

He stares at the closed door for several long moments before tentatively reaching out a hand to push it open. It swings slowly to the side as he stands there in the doorframe, strangely hesitant to step out of the shaded cover the wooden panel offers and out into the open.

When he finally does, Loki is half-sitting there on the bed, sheets pulled up to waist level and bandages covering what would otherwise have been naked skin. Perhaps it’s the generous size of the bed that does it, but Tony is suddenly reminded of his first impression on that day when Loki was given over to him, how the god had somehow looked smaller than his usual self, like he had magically shrunk a few sizes overnight.

He has the same look now, and it makes Tony’s chest constrict a little. And he can’t help but feel a twinge of guilt at how his own immediate, knee-jerk reaction had been anger when he had lost his tracking signal on the god in the subway. He had been so certain that Loki had betrayed his trust by trying to escape, but instead, this was what had happened to him.

And all because Tony had rushed off without thinking, leaving him alone in that carriage. He hopes Loki isn’t angry at him for inadvertently causing all this crap, no matter how unintended it had been. The guy is already in a shitty enough situation as it is, he certainly doesn’t need to add any insult to injury. Or injury to slavery. Or whatever.

“Hello, Mumm-Ra,” he says in greeting, pushing the guilt aside in favour of his usual sarcastic wit as he walks into the room, but his valid attempts at feigned nonchalance are hard to keep up as he comes to a halt at the bedside. The patches of bruises visible on the god’s skin stand out in vivid contrast to the stark white of the sheets and the bandages wrapped around his frame, and it makes Tony uncomfortable, unsure of where to rest his gaze – on anything else in the room, and it would only make it all the clearer what he’s not looking at; on the body lying in the bed, and he has to see that ugly red and purple; on Loki’s face, and he’s met with that strange, unreadable look that he doesn’t know how to interpret but makes odd things stir within him.
So Tony does what Tony does best. He opens his mouth and **talks.**

“How’s it going? Bruce didn’t hulk out on you, did he? And he didn’t sew back any of the pieces in the wrong place? Like, I don’t know, a toe where an ear should have been or something like that? And hey, that’s some impressive bandages you’ve got right there; want me to sign them for you? I have really neat hand-writing, though no one believes me when I tell them.”

He knows he’s babbling and his words are spoken only to fill what would otherwise have been an awkward silence, but talking has always been Tony Stark’s way of remaining in control of a situation and there’s no reason to start changing that now.

The questions spilling from his mouth are many, and yet it is none of these that Loki answers when he finally speaks, instead asking one of his own.

“Why didn’t you let them take me back to Asgard? You had your chance to get rid of me; why you didn’t take it?” The question, despite being so softly spoken, fills the space between them, expanding like heated vapour until it takes up the entirety of the room.

And Tony isn’t sure what to answer, so in the end he shrugs non-committingly, offering a select part of the truth. “I’m not a big fan of the whole torturing to death or sentencing without a trial thing. You know, execution without due process and all that barbaric stuff.” If that is at all applicable to Asgard’s justice system, where it would appear that Odin acts as judge and jury at the same time, though he probably leaves the executioner part to someone else.

“I already got a trial,” Loki says, eyes searching Tony for whatever answer it is he expects to find.

“Yup, after which you ended up in my tower, and lo and behold, you’re still here, so I guess we’re back where we started.” He throws his hands out in a gesture meant to convey flippancy, hoping his casual unperturbedness will help alleviating some of the strange atmosphere in the room. Usually a large enough dose of levity will help breaking apart even the oddest of moods.

Though, Tony has to admit that this time his efforts don’t really have the desired effect.

So instead he does something he rarely does – he breaks the uncomfortable silence with something serious. The mood is already awkward, so it’s not like it’s going to make a huge difference anyway. And he knows he will have to say it sooner or later anyway, so it might as well be sooner.
“So, uh… sorry about what happened,” he offers with a grimace, just barely resisting the temptation to inspect his own feet as he says it, but managing to keep his eyes on the bruised and bandaged god in the bed. “I guess it was kind of my fault, rushing off like that, though I had no idea that it would lead to Asgard sending out an emergency SWAT team to pick you up.”

Loki doesn’t make any reply to that, he merely sits there in silence, his hands and eyes occupied with the hem of the bed cover, fingers fiddling, gaze not meeting with Tony’s.

He remains standing at the bedside for a little while, waiting for Loki to say something or at least look at him, but the god does neither.

*Oh well.* He’s not going to press the issue, but he *hopes* that means that the apology is accepted.

Eventually, after having made sure there was nothing too badly damaged about his slave, Tony left the room, telling him he’d bring Loki some stuff to read, and if there was anything else, he could always tell Jarvis.

And now Loki is alone, once more safe after his dreadful ordeal. He’s relieved that Bruce has left too, even if the man hadn’t shown him the animosity he had expected. In fact, it was hard to believe that it was the same monster that had once smashed him into the floor that had stood at his bedside examining and wrapping up his injuries as if the two of them weren’t enemies and had never fought against each other. He didn’t even behave like a warrior at all, and certainly not anything like the green beast he remembers all too well.

Perhaps it’s a bit like some of the berserkers he’s known in Asgard, men who might be friendly and calm enough in peaceful settings, but once they descend into battle, they turn into raging madmen, not caring about what or who stands in their way.

He picks at one of the gauzes, playing around with the end. And to think that he used to believe that there was no way he could ever be of any less use to Tony than he already was, given his unfamiliarity with the normal tasks performed in a Midgardian household and the way things are done in this realm.

But he was obviously very wrong about that. Now he can barely do anything at all, perhaps for as long as several weeks. Not that he could have been considered very useful before by any stretch of the imagination, but in his current state he’s hardly more than a burden and a liability to his master,
one of the most precarious positions a slave can find themselves in.

And yet, Tony had decided to keep him instead of letting the Einherjers take him back to Asgard.

Perhaps he’ll even understand why one day.

Yes, he is bewildered for many reasons, but right now there is another thing that keeps rising to the top in that inner whirl stream of confusion. Tony has indeed done many strange things since Loki came here, but this definitely counts as one of the strangest.

Just minutes ago, Tony offered what sounded suspiciously like an apology. Expect, that doesn’t make any sense. Masters don’t offer apologies or excuses to their slaves; the mere notion is absurd.

After all, slaves cannot be entitled to offer forgiveness; such a concept would be preposterous. If there is to be forgiveness, someone must first have been trespassed against, and for that to happen, it presumes the existence of rights, rights that have been violated one way or the other.

And everyone knows that slaves do not have any rights whatsoever.

So he didn’t know how to respond to it. What did Tony expect him to answer? Why had he even said something like that in the first place? Anyone in Asgard would have laughed, had they heard him.

So in the end, he had said nothing while hoping the man would move on to talk about something else. Anything that would make sense and not make him feel so awkward and confused, not quite knowing what to do with himself.

Sure, in a way it had been Tony’s fault, or at least he had been the cause of it. Not that Loki would ever tell him so, of course, and regardless, it wasn’t as if the man could have reasonably been expected to foresee the effects of his actions. Not even Loki had anticipated what had happened, despite Asgard and Heimdall no doubt figuring a lot more often in his mind than in Tony’s.

No, as Tony had uttered his perhaps-somewhat-sort-of apology, Loki hadn’t been able to bring himself to speak any words aloud in response, to acknowledge it in any way.
But somewhere deep inside of him, he can still hear the faint echo of what he might perhaps have said to Tony, if he hadn’t been a slave, if he had been in a position to say any such.

*You’re forgiven.*
The first night is uncomfortable, to say the least. It takes a long time for sleep to come to him, plagued as he is by throbbing pain and the disturbing memories of the day turning into vivid nightmares. He wakes up several times in the middle of the night, dizzily wondering if he was ever asleep at all.

When morning finally comes, he’s tired and bleary-eyed, feeling like he hasn’t slept in days.

Laboriously, he pushes himself up into a half-sitting position against the headrest, wincing at the stabs of pain shooting through him. Still, despite the acute discomfort, he’s glad to wake up and find himself still here; he’d dreamt of getting dragged back to Asgard in chains and thrown into a dank dungeon with guards brandishing various instruments of torture closing in on him.

The unpleasant mood of the dream is still lingering, but it’s slowly being replaced by the relief of lying here in bed, safe in Tony’s tower. The room is an unfamiliar one to wake up in, though; Tony didn’t bother taking him all the way back to his usual room after what happened yesterday, but instead put him up in a guest room closer nearby.

Still, there is nothing outstandingly different in this room compared to his old one.

No, wait, there is one thing that does stand out, one thing that is unusual, he notices as he turns his head to the right, taking in the sight of the bedside table.

There is a tray with breakfast on it waiting for him, and he blinks in surprise; he didn’t hear anyone entering. Though, he doubts Tony delivered the meal himself, most likely he sent one of his robots. Even if the man actually did do just that yesterday evening, that was surely an exception, seeing as how his robots must have been busy with more important tasks at the time.

Gingerly, he reaches out for the food, grimacing at the fresh pangs of pain that even this careful movement causes to flare up. He eats the meal slowly, since even swallowing is unpleasant.

Once he’s finished, he leans back against the pillows again, closing his eyes for a few moments. When he once more opens them, his gaze falls on the gauzes wrapped around what seems to be a good half of his body. He doesn’t even want to think about how terribly weak and pitiful he must look, all injured and bandaged, not even able to turn without wincing in pain.
He doesn’t like it one bit. He’s already powerless enough as it already is without being wounded as well.

His thoughts drift back to the day before. There had been another box of papers waiting for him in the living room that he would have dealt with once they came back from the trip in the park, but obviously things had played out very differently than expected, so he never got around to sort it. It’s not a task that he would look forward to under normal circumstances, and considerably less so now that he’s hurting all over, but he pushes his reticence away. He doesn’t want to lie here all useless and pathetic, after all.

Of course, if he had been a slave in Asgard, he would have been expected to work anyway, as long as he wasn’t wholly incapacitated, and if his injuries were deemed too severe for him to handle his usual tasks, he’d be assigned some lighter work for the time being.

Obviously, the tasks he has performed here haven’t been physically straining in any way, and surely something he would have been expected to continue with even now. He’s still able to move, after all, even if it causes him pain.

However, he’s not in Asgard, but in Tony’s tower, and there is this strange certainty inside of him that Tony isn’t going to make him sort any papers for the next few days. It’s a strange realization, because he can’t trace it back to any form of logical reasoning, or give any sensible explanation as to why he’s so sure of it. It definitely makes little sense, given that he’d still be able to, even in his current condition, no matter how uncomfortable it would be.

But the certainty is like a wedge firmly lodged inside of him. Somehow, he just knows, though he can’t say how he arrived at that conclusion.

Still…

So maybe Tony won’t demand it, but it still doesn’t mean that Loki wants to lie here like a pathetic wretch. And surely Tony won’t object to getting his papers sorted, even if he isn’t going to order Loki to do it.

He’s not looking forward to handling that task in this state, but lying here all weak and useless appeals to him even less, so he steels himself, and slowly pushes himself up from the bed and puts first one foot, then the second one down on the floor.
Having gotten up, he stands there for a few moments, breathing through clenched teeth as the worst stabs of pain slowly die down and the black dots dancing before his eyes dissolve. Then, wincing, he makes for the door, heading towards the living room.

He critically examines the blueprint to his new suit, eyes tracing the smooth lines. Perhaps it’s just him being vain, but he kind of doesn’t like the look. Sure it’s functional and all, modified to accommodate the new gadgets he wants to put in while still being aerodynamic enough as to not hamper his flying abilities, but its appearance could just be a bit… **sleeker**, somehow.

Or perhaps ‘cooler’ is the word he’s really looking for, after all. Whatever.

For a little while, he ponders the holographic image before him, trying to deduce how it could be modified for best effect, but his thoughts keep drifting away to the god lying all bruised up a few floors above.

Loki hadn’t looked much better today than yesterday, as Tony entered his room to deliver his breakfast. For a while, he had contemplated whether to wake the god up to tell him that food was being served, but had quickly decided against it. Loki needed his sleep, and in his current state he was probably lucky to get very much of it at all.

So he had simply placed the tray on the bedside table instead, content to leave it for Loki once he woke up. It wasn’t as if either the food or Loki was going anywhere, after all.

He expels a sigh through his teeth. It’s amazing how that runaway rollercoaster never stops when Loki is around, and how there is always another speed bump waiting just around the corner, leaving him with his kidneys shaken down into his boots. But perhaps things might indeed calm down a little after the recent scare, now that Loki will be confined to bed for at least a couple of weeks. And Tony will have to play nursemaid for a while, but he can deal with that, and besides--

“Sir,” Jarvis’ voice interrupts his trail of thought. “It would seem that Mr Laufeyson is on his way to the living room, even though my readings suggest that he would be much better off staying in bed.”

Tony sighs again. *Just why isn’t he surprised?*

“Alright, Jarvis, I’ll take care of it,” he says, getting up from his swivel chair.
What on Earth is Loki trying to do now? There is no reason for him to be up and running like this, not in his condition.

No, he doesn’t like this one bit, so he hurries up the stairs to the living room, intent on getting the straying god back to bed as soon as possible.

He steels himself for a few heartbeats as he prepares to sit down next to the box on the floor. It’s going to hurt, but he can handle it. At least he’ll be able to show – though he isn’t sure if it’s mostly for his own or Tony’s benefit – that he’s not as weak as he might appear, proving that he’s not entirely useless, despite his injuries.

Yes, it’s going to hurt, but he can do this.

“Reindeer Games?” he suddenly hears a familiar voice behind him, and he quickly quenches his reflexive reaction to whirl around to face Tony, just barely saving himself a world of pain from his midsection.

“What the heck are you doing walking around here? Why aren’t you in bed?” Tony asks as Loki slowly turns around and meets with the man’s incredulous stare.

Loki tries to straighten himself up a little, despite his protesting ribcage, as to not look quite as pathetic as he knows he must surely be doing, standing here shirtless and barefoot, wrapped in bandages and covered in ugly bruises.

“I was going to have the box of papers from yesterday sorted,” he says, giving a brief nod towards the thing on the floor.

Tony looks down in puzzlement as if he’s seeing it for the first time. Then he looks back up at Loki again, incomprehension marring his features. “You were going to do what?” he asks, as if he didn’t hear Loki the first time.

And why does he get the feeling that that’s not the answer Tony wants to hear? Nevertheless, he repeats himself.
“I was about to sort that box of papers,” he says. “I never got around to doing it yesterday.” The clarification is highly superfluous, but he adds it anyway.

Tony is quiet for a while as his eyes keep darting back and forth between Loki and the box. “No – just no. That’s not – I don’t even…” his words trail off as he gives Loki a very odd look, hand raking through his hair a couple of times. Then he exhales, fingers going to rub at his forehead instead.

“Okay,” he says as his hand finally comes down. “I think the two of us need to have a little talk.” He points towards the doorway. “While you’re in bed, the only place you belong right now.”

Of course, there’s nothing else to it but obeying, so he walks back, Tony following at his heels, and laboriously crawls into the bed as Tony pulls out a chair and seats himself.

“So,” Tony says, “now I want to hear why you thought it would be a good idea to sort papers – or do anything at all, really – in your current state.”

“I… thought you wanted to have them sorted,” he says hesitantly, thinking that should be enough, but all the same getting the feeling that it isn’t.

“Uh-huh. And what made you think I can’t wait a few weeks with that, considering that those boxes have been lying around for months before you started working on them?” Tony retorts, eyes not leaving Loki for a second.

“I’m not that badly injured,” Loki half-lies. “I can still work.”

Tony gives a sound that is half a snort, half a sigh. “I don’t think so. Seriously, Bambi, do you really think I’m such a tyrant that I’d force you to work when you got a busted rib instead of recuperating like you should?”

“No?”

No, he actually doesn’t, but…
“Okay, so I know you’re not actually a labour union member or anything, but that doesn’t matter. Injured people don’t work, that’s not how we do things here.” Tony points to where Loki is leaning against the headrest. “So you’ll stay right there in bed until you’re well enough to actually do stuff. Got it?”

And despite how the prospects of having to remain in bed like this vex him, a not insignificant part of him is relieved all the same. He certainly hadn’t been looking forward to doing any work in his current state, despite what his pride was telling him.

“I got it,” he answers, fingers picking at a bandage.

“Good. No one here is going to be happier because you’re pushing yourself to the point of breaking. I know I certainly won’t,” Tony says resolutely, as if…

... as if...

... as if he thinks that Loki somehow actually matters.
Chapter 60

He’s glad that there’s at least a window not too far away, even if he can’t really see anything more than the sky from his position in bed. It’s not much, but it's vastly preferable to having only a blank wall to stare into.

Distractedly, he lets his gaze drift from the window and back to Tony who is standing next to his bedside, placing another stash of magazines and books on the bedside table while making a comment about how he’d rather not have Loki go crazy in here from boredom or anything.

And even if Midgardian books are most often either dull or strange or both, Loki is still glad for the distraction.

Tony soon changes subjects and moves on to talk about some kind of invention or the other that he’s currently working on down in his workshop, while Loki lets his thoughts wander. After having already been exposed to more of these long monologues than he can count, he has long since concluded that Tony doesn’t really expect him to offer any comments on these foreign topics. The man just likes to talk.

The words are turning into a soft droning in the background as Loki adjusts his position against the headrest of the bed into something marginally more comfortable. After his run-in with the Einherjers, he’s still trying to mentally adapt to the most recent change in his situation. However, this time, the change is actually for the worse. And it’s one of the few times since his arrival here that his situation has actually deteriorated; truth be told, most changes so far have been for the better, starting with the realization that Tony wasn’t going to take advantage of him, and then continuing all the way up to not long ago when Tony had said he would let Loki go outside regardless of whether he had done anything to earn it or not. And perhaps even further up to that strange, illogical thought from yesterday...

But despite this assurance, he can’t help but feel a twinge of worry in light of recent events, a concern that has only gotten increasingly more pressing. At first, he hadn’t thought about it much, overwhelmed by relief at still being alive after having so narrowly escaped execution. But now, as that initial relief is starting to fade and is no longer obscuring the reality of his situation, the sight that greets him is disconcerting.

Because it’s obvious that none of this would ever have happened if Tony had never let him outside, if he had instead opted to keep Loki safely locked up in his tower.

And it's because of that, that Tony is now burdened with a slave who can’t do anything and is
nothing but a liability. The question is, how willing will Tony be to let him outside again, after all that has happened? What reason is there for him to want to risk a repeat of recent events, if they might once more leave him with a slave that will be bed-ridden for weeks?

Sure Tony had said that going outside would be a privilege he’d have regardless, but what if the man will change his mind after having gotten such a brutal wake-up call about what such frivolities might lead to?

Of course, it's not like he will be able to go anywhere for quite some time in his current state. But even though that knowledge makes something sharp prickle his insides, he could have dealt with that, just as long as he knew that he'd have the privilege back once he was in a well enough shape to make use of it again. As long as he would have that to look forward to, he’d be able to deal with being confined in here for a few weeks, if necessary.

But if not…

Reflexively, his hand goes to the tracker bracelet around his wrist. At least Tony hasn’t taken it off, so perhaps that should count as a good sign. Then again, maybe the man just hasn’t gotten around to removing it yet, but will soon enough, once there is no longer any point to it.

His fingers nervously slip beneath the space between metal and skin, trailing the underside of the bracelet. Up until know, the act has always been accompanied by a sense of comfort, reminding him that despite everything, there is at least the outside to look forward to, there is still something good in his life.

But now, for the first time, the sensation of the cool metal at his fingertips is accompanied by feelings of unpleasantness, suddenly making it very clear to him what he might not have anymore.

And that’s when he notices that the room has gone silent and Tony is no longer talking.

He quickly looks up, and meets with Tony’s eyes. The man is regarding him with one eyebrow raised, and from the look on his face, it’s obvious that he's waiting for Loki to respond to whatever it is that he has just said. And Loki didn’t even hear the question, deep into his own disturbing thoughts as he was.

Totally unacceptable behaviour for slave, of course, not listening when his master is talking. Had he been in Asgard, he could have counted himself lucky if all he got for his lack of attention was a
backhand to the face.

But this time, the uneasiness that always follows in the wake of his mess-ups in front of Tony – despite full well knowing that the man isn’t going to physically punish him for them – fails to make an appearance. Even if he can’t explain where it came from, just like yesterday when he knew that Tony wouldn’t force him to sort any papers in his current state, there is an inexplicable certainty suddenly rising inside of him that Tony isn’t going to be annoyed with him for not listening. No, the man isn’t even going to even care that his slave wasn’t paying him the undivided attention that his status as master should entitle him to.

The realization is both confusing and something else that he isn’t really sure how to define.

“I said, is the bracelet chafing at you or something? I guess I could always take it off, even if it would involve some tinkering,” Tony repeats his question, proving Loki’s hunch correct in that he doesn’t seem the slightest bothered by his slave’s inattentiveness, or even deigns to comment on it. As if it was of no consequence at all.

“No,” he quickly answers, shaking his head for emphasis. “It’s not.” Instinctively, he covers the bracelet with his hand, shielding it from view. He doesn’t want it taken off, because it would feel like being removed one step further from the already dangerously precarious promise of outside.

“Okay then,” Tony says, eyeing him contemplatively. “It just seemed like it was bothering you, the way you were fiddling around with it.”

He looks down at the hands in his lap, one of them still protectively circling the wrist with the bracelet. “It’s not bothering me,” he says, the words discordant in his ears from how he is uttering something like this before Tony, speaking like his feelings on the matter are actually of interest to his master…

However, there’s one thing that is bothering him in regards to the bracelet – namely the question whether he is going to need it at all from now on, or if Tony has had it with taking him outside after having been shown in no uncertain terms what consequences might follow.

Granted, Loki doesn’t think the same thing is at all likely to happen again. Even before he got carted off to Midgard, he’d been informed that there had been a group of Einherjers and a sorcerer assigned the task of bringing him back in case he would try to escape. And Heimdall would immediately inform them of any such breeches of the conditions of his sentence, so that they could be sent out without delay. However, they would hardly want to make the same mistake again, so next time they’d certainly be less quick to draw unfounded conclusions, in case he should get separated from
Tony again. Going on this errand to Midgard in vain once must have been annoying enough for them; they would not want to repeat that error.

However, Tony might not see things that way and rather decide that it’s better to be safe than sorry.

So no, it’s not the bracelet that’s bothering him, but something else. And in that moment, the vivid memory rises inside of him how Tony once told him he was free to speak up if there was something – anything – bothering him.

It feels strange, because of all the centuries in which he’s internalized the concept of what is acceptable behaviour for a slave and what is not, but he overcomes the inner resistance and looks up from his hands to meet with Tony’s eyes.

“Will you stop taking me outside after all this?” he asks, feeling something churn painfully inside of him as his fears are suddenly given a voice.

Tony raises an eyebrow at him. “Uh, no, I wasn’t planning to,” he says, sounding surprised at the question. He cocks his head a bit to the side, but the searching gaze never leaves Loki for a second. “Well, unless you don’t want to anymore, after all this crap.”

“No, I… still want to go outside,” he says, a wave of soothing relief welling up inside of him, and he feels his body relax against the pillows as the world once more tilts back into its proper place.

*Who would have known that it could be so easy?* A simple question, and the fears that had been weighing on him were dispelled only seconds later, like swirling mist with a gust of wind, as if they were never there at all.

He can’t help but marvel at the simplicity of it all. Just… *asking* had been enough. It hadn’t taken more than that, and the nagging worries were all gone.

And he was free to do it, too. So why hadn’t he realized it before?

“Are you not concerned that something similar will happen again?” he asks, blurtling out yet another question, unable to stop himself now that the invisible barrier has been broken. “That Asgard will… have the same reaction in case we get separated again?” He could have added ‘and you end up with a useless slave again,’ but he leaves that part out, because it’s understood anyway, and because…
well, maybe he’s just imagining it, but it somehow seems like Tony is strangely indifferent to his degree of usefulness.

Tony shrugs. “Well, in that case, Bambi, they’ll have to go through me first. And next time, I’ll make sure to have my suit within grabbing distance.”
Walking down the corridor, bowl in hand, he softly hums the chorus of a song whose name he can’t really remember, but that he thinks contains the word ‘fire’. Or maybe it was ‘burning’. Whatever. It’s not like it’s in tune anyway.

Of course, he could easily have his robots deliver the meals straight to the bed of Stark Tower’s resident convalescent, so it’s not like Tony has to do it to prevent Loki from starving.

But he does it anyway.

Last time he went to see Loki, he brought another helping of books and magazines, dumping them on the bedside table for Loki’s amusement – though he isn’t sure just how much benefit an alien god will get from titles like The Technophile or Classic Rock of America, but it’s the thought that counts – so it’s not like he has to start chewing his fingertips bloody for lack of other things to do, at least.

He pushes the door open and steps inside the room. Loki doesn’t move from his position in the bed, but he can feel the god’s eyes tracking him like a laser beam, unwavering and steady.

The bruises are still there, of course, but at least he’s gotten used to the sight by now, so they don’t bother him as much as they did at first. Perhaps they’ve even gotten a bit more yellowish around the edges, but that might just be his imagination. He realizes that since that rather memorable occasion when he offered the god some old hand-me-downs and Loki took that as an incentive to undress on the spot, Tony hasn’t seen him wearing anything else than a full set of clothes, not until he landed himself in bed blacker and bluer than the supporter stand during an Inter Milan soccer match.

At least the gauntness he remembers from that little flasher incident is gone now, having been replaced by a healthier, more natural slenderness.

He puts his offering down on the piles of books and flashy magazines littering the bedside table. It’s obviously a far too small gesture to make up for the recent disaster, but it’s something, at least.

“Ice cream?” he says, indicating the bowl with the spoon sticking up from it.

Loki furrows his brow, tilting his head slightly. “Ice cream?” he echoes Tony’s words with slightly more inflection.
Tony gestures to the bowl. “Correct, Rudolph, ice cream. You remember that cold and fluffy stuff we stopped to eat on the way back home during our last Midgardian field trip?”

The confusion in Loki’s face lets up at that, wrinkled eyebrows flattening out to be replaced by a look of understanding. “Yes, I remember,” comes the answer, as green eyes lock onto the bowl, curiously studying it. “But why… this?”

“It’s a Midgardian tradition.” Tony clarifies. “If you’re unwell and stuck in bed, you get to eat ice cream. It’s how we do things here.”

He then reaches out for one of the little white packages lying on the bedside table, tearing the side of it open. “And I should probably get that thing on your forehead changed too while I’m at it,” he adds, gesturing at the protective pad plastered just above Loki’s right eyebrow.

Loki doesn’t move as Tony sits himself down on the side of the bed, and then reaches over to carefully pull the pad loose from the skin beneath, the fingers of his left hand resting against the god’s temple. He’s careful not to touch the cut beneath, but it looks like it’s healing well enough.

Discarding the old pad, he carefully fastens the new one with some strings of tape, pressing down lightly to make sure the thing will stick.

“There you go,” he says, leaning back to admire his work. “As good as new.”

Gingerly, Loki raises a hand to touch his forehead, eyebrows slightly wrinkled as if he’s surprised by something, despite this not being the first time that Tony has put on a new pad for him. Whatever it was that gave him pause like that, the god doesn’t make any comment on it, though.

“Well,” Tony says as he stands up, bed creaking slightly as his weight is removed, “I have a boring and pointless meeting to attend, so I’m out of here. Don’t forget your ice cream, though, or it’s going to melt.”

Sure, the ice cream is a small recompense to offer for losing Loki in the subway and then having him pay the price for it, but it’s better than nothing.
Of course, that’s what he’s trying to tell himself, though the real reason for bringing it doesn’t have much to do with trying to offer recompense or with Midgardian traditions. It has more to do with remembering the look of contentment and delight on Loki’s face as he bit into that ice cream cone on a street corner somewhere between Starbucks and Pizza Hut.

Though he wouldn’t admit it to anyone but himself, he’s really glad for the little bottle of white pills that Bruce left for him on the bedside table.

His ribcage still throbs dully, like a persistent memory refusing to let go of past injustices, but it’s not the sharp, acute sting of a thousand needles anymore. As long as he doesn’t move around too much, the pain remains at acceptable levels, even though he can hear that his breathing is shallower, a bit more laboured than usual.

But apart from that, there is a more unexpected sensation occupying his sensibilities as well.

Though Tony left the room several minutes ago, his forehead is still tingling beneath the imprint of the man’s fingers on his skin. And it’s odd how such a casual touch can linger for such an extended time, long after the cause of it has left the room with a final enquiry to himself whether he should wear a nurse’s uniform next time.

But then again, perhaps it’s not so strange, given his unaccustomedness to gentle touches that aren’t meant to hurt, his long stint in the dungeons having habituated him to the brutal hands of the guards to such an extent that his body now reacts strangely to anything else.

Content with that explanation, he turns to the ice cream inexplicably left for him on the bedside table, greedily wolfing down every last spoonful.

“Okay, so does this look at all familiar?” Tony asks with a little bit of gloat in his voice, indicating the flat wooden board he’s just spread out between them on the edge of the bed and the plastic bag lying to the side, filled to the brim with little black and white pieces.

Loki studies the things, but his mind comes up blank. Whatever it is, it’s clearly of a Midgardian nature.
“No, I don’t believe it does. Should it?” he replies, a hint of piqued curiosity in his voice. Despite the books, he’s really bored in here and any break of the tedious monotony, however small, is welcome.

Tony’s face falls a little. “Well, it’s supposed to be some ancient Norse board game,” he huffs, looking affronted. “I came across it in some store earlier today and the salesman told me it was based on some old Viking board game. ‘Hnefatafl’ it was called, though I probably pronounced that at least twenty shades of wrong.”

Hnefatafl. Oh, now he sees it. Despite Tony’s atrocious pronunciation and the very different visual style of the board and the game pieces from what he’s used to, the similarities are clear to him now. Upon closer inspection, he can even make out the helmets and armour carved into the material of the pieces, vaguely resembling Asgardian Einherjers.

And Loki has played this game more times than he can remember, though sparsely in the last few centuries as he hasn’t had an opponent worthy of the effort. Even the mighty Thor wanted to learn the game once, smitten by the similarities of the game strategy and real battle tactics, but when Loki finally sat down to teach him, Thor’s lack of patience and understanding of the intricate rules ended with him turning the board upside down in frustration, stomping out to swing his sword on the training grounds instead.

This game is still played by the humans?

“It looks different, but it is indeed Hnefatafl,” he admits, rolling one of the white pieces between his fingers. A part of him is rejoicing at finally being faced with something that is familiar and that he can recognize, in this alien realm filled with so many things he’s unable to relate to. “Though I wouldn’t have thought that this was still remembered in Midgard.”

Loki’s words bring the previous pleased-with-himself look back onto Tony’s face, like it was never gone at all. “Well, the salesman did mention something about the rules of the game not having quite survived until modern age, so some of it’s been reconstructed.” He holds out a little folder with minuscule text written on it to Loki, who accepts it.

After half a minute or so, he puts the thin brochure down on the sheets, shaking his head. “The rules in here are all wrong. This is not how you play.” He should have expected it, of course, that the humans would twist the game into something unrecognizable.

Tony raises a quizzical eyebrow in his direction. “Well, are you going to teach me how it’s done,
It’s strange, because in a way it’s almost a little like being in Asgard again, like having a tiny slice of his old life back, even if it’s just temporary.

And all because of a board game.

As he sits there with the game pieces – foreign in their looks but yet so strikingly familiar – moving them around on the board to show Tony how it’s done, he doesn’t think about being a slave or being trapped here in Midgard. Not when he’s allowed to immerse himself in this well-known game, having all the feelings and memories associated with it wash over him, drowning everything else out.

For once, he gets to do something here that he knows how to, something that he’s actually good at. And not just that, but something that he truly and fully masters.

And as the rules have all been explained and they start their first game, he doesn’t even think about how slaves aren’t supposed to best their masters in anything, as he effortlessly corners and then outmanoeuvres Tony’s pieces.
Chapter 62

Absentmindedly, he flips through one of the magazines that Tony has left for him on the bedside table, turning dull page after dull page. There’s precious little in there that piques his interest; perhaps if he had been a Midgardian he would have appreciated it more, but most of it is too unfamiliar to him.

He stops his browsing as his eyes fall on an almost blank page, the empty whiteness broken by only a few lines of printed text.

There’s a pen lying on the table next to him, and reflexively, his right hand reaches out for it. A moment later, the point of the pen has left its first few traces on the almost-empty paper, merely dawdling at first, squiggly lines and flowing contours filling the available space. It’s not supposed to portray anything in particular, it’s only a distraction to keep his mind occupied. Or perhaps rather his restless fingers, now that they can’t weave their magic anymore.

Idly, he lets the pen move across the sheet, slowly marking it with black ink. It’s not until after a few minutes that he realizes what is taking shape before him – The Royal Halls, the home of the King of Asgard and his family, the place where he’s lived all his life until… well, recently.

He blinks in surprise at the image staring back at him, not sure where it all came from. But it is definitely the Royal Halls, complete with the spires and golden gates and runic inscription lining the outer walls.

A place he will never see again, and despite not having felt any fondness for it in many centuries, the knowledge still stings inside of him.

He has no idea why his fidgety, itching fingers decided on that very image, but it stirs up memories he has paid little heed to since his trial and his arrival here. There were so many other, much more pressing issues and concerns to deal with then, but now that those fears have slowly dissipated, the recollections poke at his attention once more.

Most insistent are the memories from his trial and his so-called family. Odin, his so-called father, damning him to a life as someone’s property. Thor, his so-called brother, whose far-reaching shadow was always looming over him, never far away. Frigga, his mother, who is surely the only one who misses him at all, with the exception of Thor. He recalls with a pang of sadness how she had cried as his sentence was read out. The only one in Asgard to let any tears fall on his behalf, of course.
He looks at the picture, sorely tempted to crumple it in his hands. Before his fingers have closed around the paper, though, there’s a voice just to his right, making him startle because he was too deep into his own thoughts to hear the soft footfalls of Tony entering the room.

“What are you drawing there?” the man asks, flopping down on the chair next to the bed, a hand reaching out for the sheet still clasped firmly in Loki’s grasp.

Most of all, he would have liked to pull the picture away and place it out of Tony’s reach beneath the pillow, or, better yet, tear it to tiny ribbons. But of course, he does neither of these things, merely letting Tony take the drawing out of his hands for closer inspection.

“Huh,” the man says after a few seconds of scrutiny. “So this is Asgard, right?”

“It’s the Royal Halls,” Loki says, not feeling particularly up to discussing the subject any further, hoping Tony will be content to leave it at that. Though, somehow he doubts the man is going to share his inclination.

Of course, he’s right.

“And that would be the place where you grew up?” Tony asks, turning the drawing around in his hands as if he’s expecting something to materialize out of it or perhaps turn into one of those Midgardian series of moving pictures shown on screen.

“It is.”

“Figure it must be one hell of a fancy place. Not anything like this, huh?” Tony says, making a sweeping gesture that’s probably supposed to encompass the entirety of his tower.

And while Tony’s tower might be spacious and outfitted with all kinds of strange and exotic amenities, it does lack the splendour and grandeur of the Royal Halls.

“I suppose it had its charms,” he says as neutrally as he can manage, giving a small, non-committal shrug.
“And all this is only for the royal family?” the man continues his questioning, gesturing at the drawing.

“And the entire royal household lives in the Halls, including all the servants, workers, attendants, and… the like.” As in slaves. But he doesn’t feel like mentioning that.

“And Thor is going to be the heir of all this, once Odin… kicks the bucket?” Tony whistles, sounding impressed.

“Yes. That was how it was always meant to be,” he says, wincing as he hears the ill-hidden bitterness in his own voice. So he tried not to let it show, but he clearly failed.

It seems that Tony has noticed it too, as he gives Loki a narrowed look. “Well, Thunderboy is the oldest son, isn’t he? From what little I know of royalty, that would mean he’s next in line to the throne.” There is a hint of a challenge in that, and Loki hesitates whether to take it up or not. It is tempting, but given his current station, it would hardly be fitting. Better to just let the topic die, especially if it is the case in Midgard that the oldest son automatically inherits his father’s titles, rather than the one most worthy and accomplished.

“He is.” Not that order of birth would have meant much in Asgard, of course, but there was still never a shadow of a doubt that Thor was the one preordained for the throne. But if Tony thinks that being firstborn is enough, then Loki will let him believe so.

“Well, your big brother is a pretty awesome guy, with his mighty hammer and Shakespearian talk and all that stuff,” Tony says, leaning back into his chair, drawing a leg up to rest on his thigh. “I’m sure he’ll make for a great king one day.”

Well of course. Everyone thinks that Thor is the special and exceptional one, why should Tony be any different? It is only to be expected. Thor commands respect and admiration and recognition wherever he goes, Midgard included.

Still, he feels a bitter sting of something at hearing that comment from Tony’s mouth.

Jealousy? No, his brain quickly decides; it can’t be that. Why should it matter to him what Tony thinks about any of that?
Annoyance, then? Yeah, that is probably more like it. Annoyance that even here in Midgard, he’s forced to endure the endless comments about how fantastic Thor is.

And of course Thor is the only possible choice for the throne. He’s always known it, and so has everyone else.

“Besides, Odin would never let a frost giant sit on the throne of Asgard, nor would anyone else.”

It’s only when he sees Tony’s puzzled expression that he realizes that he said that last part out loud. Damn. That was never his intention.

Clenching his fists, he steels himself for the inevitable barrage of questions that will be coming his way, asking him things he isn’t comfortable discussing.

“Frost giant?” Tony says, cocking his head to the side. “What do you mean?”

Before Loki has managed a reply, Tony speaks up again. “Oh, wait! Point Break did mention something about you being adopted…” He gazes curiously at Loki, as if he’s expecting him to sprout horns any minute after this revelation. “Is that what you mean? That you’re one of these… frost giants?”

Well, no one can accuse Tony of being daft or slow on the uptake, he supposes.

“That is so,” he says while silently cursing himself for letting that tidbit of information slip so carelessly. His heritage is something he would have preferred to keep to himself.

“So what’s up with these frost giants? Do they live in Asgard as well?” Tony asks, sounding genuinely interested, as if it’s actually a proper topic for everyday conversation.

“No, they live in a realm of their own, a place of eternal winter and coldness. Jotunheim, it is called.”

“Sounds pretty crappy to me, being stuck with the whole everlasting freezing one’s balls off,” Tony supplies, quirking an eyebrow. “Bet you got a better deal ending up in Asgard, then.”
He offers no reply to that.

“So why wouldn’t daddy dearest let a frost giant seat his ass on the throne?” Tony pushes on, refusing to let the subject lie. “That whole equal opportunities thing hasn’t made it to your side of the universe yet, or what?”

Such an obvious answer to that, and yet, Tony, in his Midgardian ignorance of these matters, is entirely unaware. “Frost giants are the sworn enemies of the Aesir. Countless of blood feuds and wars have been fought between our two races.” He looks at the drawing still in Tony’s hand, thinking about the time he let those frost giants into the weapons vault. “No one belonging to their kind could ever be a king of Asgard.”

“Hmm. Then why did Odin adopt you, if you hate each other’s guts that much?”

Yes, why indeed.

“He found me when I was a newborn, left in the snow to die, while he was in Jotunheim on a war campaign. Hoping to be able to use me for political purposes, he took me in and raised me alongside Thor.” He makes his summary as brief as he possibly can, because it stings having to admit to this, to being abandoned and left behind.

To being unwanted.

“Huh.” There is a moment of silence following that, before Tony starts talking again. “You don’t look very different, though. I figured belonging to another race and all, you would at least have fangs or fur or something like that.”

Yes, he could lie, of course. Tony obviously knows nothing about frost giants, nothing more and beyond that which what Loki has said today. Still…

“This isn’t my true form. What you see is merely glamour, a way of shielding that which sets me apart. Without it, I would look… different.”

At that, Tony leans forward, a bright spark of interest in his eyes.
“So can you…” he wiggles his fingers around, “you know… remove that glamour thing and revert back into your other form?”

Again, he could lie. It would be easy. Tony would never know, and it would be for the best.

“Yes,” he hears his own voice say. “I can.”

Tony flashes him an expectant look, almost like a child on his name-day eyeing all the gifts presented to him. “Then show me,” he says, and Loki feels something sink in his stomach.

Of course, he knew it would eventually come to this when the subject was brought up. And he can’t back out of it now that Tony has made it clear he wants Loki to showcase his Jotun form.

Obviously, Tony is a Midgardian and hasn’t grown up with moralizing stories about evil monsters lurking at the edges of the realm, waiting to steal misbehaving children away to eat them, nor do his people have any memories of being locked in bitter war with their kind. To Tony, his Jotun appearance will not mean the same things as to an Aesir, won’t evoke the same hate and animosity and malevolence.

It might still evoke disgust and aversion, though, this utterly alien and foreign form of his.

For a while, he hesitates. A part of him is loath to see that curious look on Tony’s face turn into one of repulsion, once he is confronted with Loki’s true appearance.

But, he can’t back out of it now.

So he lets the glamour slip, the protective shield he’s been wearing his whole life slowly disintegrating. Even now, with his magic sealed, he can still control this, because it is Odin’s magic that is shrouding him in this veil of normalcy, not his own.

His eyes are fixed on the tendrils of blue snaking up his arms and then further over his body, leaving a soothing cool in their wake. As that cool reaches his face, he clenches his jaws, knowing his eyes are now shining with unnatural blood-red, instead of their usual and normal green.
There is silence for a while, and he doesn’t dare to look at Tony, because he doesn’t want to see aversion on his face. So his eyes remain fixed at his hands and the travesty of cobalt and indigo covering them. It makes no sense that he should harbour this illogical and yet insistent desire for Tony to accept what’s in front of him, this aberrant and outlandish appearance.

“Whoa, dude, that’s some freaky shit,” he hears Tony’s voice breathe to his right after the silence has pressed on for too long.

Of the expected disgust and aversion, there is none to be heard, though, so Loki raises his gaze to look at the man at his bedside.

There are none of those things in his face either, only curiosity and interest, as if he's looking at an exotic and fascinating creature from a faraway land, and not a monster.

Then, Tony’s face slowly cracks up into an impish grin, as he leans back into the chair, folding his arms. “You know, that’s a pretty neat party trick. I bet not even your big shiny brother Thor could pull that off, huh?”

And Loki lets out a little breath he didn’t realize he had been holding, stumped by just why Tony’s flippant acceptance of his Jotun form should at all cause this sense of sudden relief to well up in his chest.
His fingers clatter mechanically against the keyboard as he watches the data flitter by on the screen. Just some routine business to take care off, which is probably a good thing, given his currently distracted state of mind.

Right now, it’s kind of hard to stop thinking about how Loki had done his little magic trick yesterday, turning into that smurf-blue version of himself right before Tony’s very eyes. Just the white cap had been missing, and the picture would have been complete.

Then again, he supposes that smurfs don’t actually have red eyes. Not to mention that they’re not nearly as… attractive.

Sure, he already knew that Loki wasn’t human, but he had still never expected the guy to have that hidden beneath. Granted, apart from the upgraded colour scheme, there hadn’t been much of a difference, just some bumps and ridges across the god’s forehead, like he had some dinosaur DNA or something. Weird.

Not to mention, that was probably the first time they had talked for more than ten seconds about a topic that could be considered really personal for Loki, about what his life was like before Stuff Happened. He still remembers the words Loki had spoken, frost giants are the sworn enemies of the Aesir. And he can’t help but wonder what that must be like, finding out you belong to the very kind that you’ve grown up to fear and hate. That everyone else has grown up to fear and hate. It’s not a comfortable thought. People have no doubt gone off the deep end for less.

Loki had sounded so bitter when he had spoken of Asgard and of Thor. Not that it had been an obvious in-your-face kind of bitterness, but the way it had slowly crept into his voice and wrapped itself around the words had been unmistakable nonetheless. And there had been jealousy there as well, jealousy towards Thor; that much had soon become clear too.

Well, he supposes with a brother like that, it would be kind of hard not to be jealous, but still…

Back there, Loki had reminded him of someone having gone through life desperate for approval, but believing it’s out of his reach because his sibling is standing in the way, blocking him out. That’s gotta suck, no matter whether it’s mostly in Loki’s head or not. He supposes the jury is still out on that, though.
Of course, Tony’s never had any brothers or sisters of his own – and growing up, he didn’t wish for any either – so he’s never had to deal with the joys of sibling rivalry. And he’s kind of glad for that. Trying to gain the attention and approval of his aloof father had been difficult enough, without having a sibling around to share in the parental good graces as well.

Still, Tony likes Thor. But he can imagine that growing up with the guy as a brother might not be easy on the self image, not even when you’re a god yourself.

However, there’s another thing he noticed yesterday regarding Loki – or at least *thinks* he picked up on – that is more disturbing than mere sibling rivalry or jealousy. As Loki transformed, he was pretty sure he picked up on a certain vibe of self-loathing from the god regarding his Jotun form. It was nothing Loki had said out loud or even hinted at, but Tony still read it into the way he had tensed as he shifted into his natural appearance, how he had kept his eyes downcast, not meeting with Tony’s gaze. As if he was ashamed, as if he feared what Tony’s reaction would be. As if he thought Tony would not approve, or say something demeaning or disdainful.

He’s not sure exactly what kind of reaction Loki had expected from him, only that it wasn’t a positive one. And perhaps that’s why he had so casually shrugged it off, as if it was an everyday occurrence for him to have people in his tower change colours like a bunch of chameleons.

Sure, compared to everything else that Loki is – god, alien, fairyland sorcerer – it’s a rather minor thing in comparison, but it had been unexpected nevertheless, seeing him transform like that. Perhaps not *shocking*, but definitely whoa-worthy.

But noticing Loki’s tense posture and downcast eyes had kept at bay his reflexive, more intense reaction wanting to spill forth. So instead, he’d pushed it back down, making himself act as if it was no big deal in any way. He had a feeling that Loki would take much better to a toned down, casual reaction like that.

Well, not that the god is likely to care much about what Tony might think in such matters, but still.

And when Loki had finally raised his eyes to look at him, he had spotted something in there that had tugged at his heartstrings. He’s not quite sure exactly what, and perhaps it was a mixture of several things – a fervent wish for acceptance, amazement that someone had reacted so casually to his Jotun form, whatever – but there had been *something* there. As if Loki wanted someone to accept him, to accept the skin he was wearing. Even if that someone was just Tony.

Oh well.
At least he’s finished with his little routine debug now, so maybe he should go get Loki something to eat. The guy is probably starting to get a bit hungry, after all.

Giving the keyboard a final few taps, he shuts down the monitor and heads for the stairs.

He’s glad when Tony shows up in the doorframe, balancing a tray in one hand, while his other pushes the door open. His stomach has been growling for a little while now, so the food is a welcome distraction.

Yes. The food.

“So,” Tony says as he puts the tray down onto the bedside table, “no instant-smurf act today? I’m disappointed. I was kind of expecting you to be blue already when I stepped in here.”

Loki doesn’t even know what a ‘smurf’ is, even though he supposes it’s some kind of Midgardian animal, but it’s not hard to infer that Tony is talking about his Jotun form.

“I am more used to my Aesir appearance, so that’s why I don’t normally revert into my other form,” he says in reply as Tony fiddles with the books on the table, shoving things aside to make room for the tray. Well, more comfortable with is really closer to the truth, but it doesn’t matter.

Tony doesn’t reply to that, but a few seconds later, the man is sitting on the edge of Loki’s bed, gesturing at his forehead. “Figure we might as well get that thing changed while we’re at it,” he says, hand going for one of the fresh pads littering the little table.

The procedure is no different from those other few times that Tony has plastered a new pad over his cut. Apart from one thing, he realizes; there actually is a significant difference that is standing out in his mind. Because it’s actually the first time that Tony is doing this since learning about his Jotun heritage. And Loki could think of several people back in Asgard who he’s sure wouldn’t even want to touch him at all, should they have found out about his true nature, be it out of fear, aversion, or animosity.

And yet, Tony is acting as if nothing has changed, as if everything is as before. And of course, to
Tony it is not such a momentous thing, since his Midgardian culture doesn’t come with a pre-prepared box for frost giants in which his mind can conveniently stick him, with all the less than pleasant connotations that follow.

But despite being aware of this, everything inside of him is screaming that Tony should be wary, cautious, reluctant, something, now that the man knows.

However, there is nothing in his demeanour – nor in his touch – that suggests that anything is different from yesterday. The fingers are still moving over his temple and forehead as unperturbed as before. And he’s glad of that – glad that nothing has changed because of his revelation, glad that there is actually someone who won’t be reluctant to bestow a simple touch upon him because of who he is.

So that’s why he’s closing his eyes as the fingers briefly move across his skin, even feeling a vague sense of disappointment as they’re removed.

“Well, I suppose it’s a good thing that I don’t have to wrap your head in a bandage or anything, or you would really have looked like a smurf back there,” Tony says as he throws the wrapping paper onto the table and stands back up.

And Loki still has no idea what a smurf looks like or what kind of animal it is – apart from apparently being blue-skinned – but he’s hoping it’s not some kind of pest or vermin or the like, at least.

Perhaps he’ll find out some day. He will be here for the duration, after all.

“Well then, enjoy your food,” Tony says somewhere above him, obviously preparing to take his leave.

Loki feels another little sting of disappointment at that. He had been hoping Tony would be interested in another game of Hnefatafl, but it doesn’t seem like it. Hopefully, the man hasn’t grown bored of it yet.

And even though he’s hungry and the food next to him smells really tempting, making his stomach do a little twist, he would still have preferred to play another game rather than eating. Longingly, his eyes drift towards the board lying folded up on the bedside table, balancing precariously on the edge. He’d really like to play again, but if Tony doesn’t want to…
Then there’s the rough scraping sound of a chair being pulled across the floor and when Loki looks up, Tony is sitting next to the bed, head cocked to his side.

“So, you’re up for another game, Rudolph?”

Another lost game of Hnefatafl, but that’s alright; at least he thinks he’s getting better. If nothing else, their games are taking longer to finish now, so that should probably count in his favour.

Truth be told, he hadn’t really been planning on staying for that – he had other things to take care of, after all – but he hadn’t failed to notice how Loki’s eyes had wistfully been drifting towards the board as Tony was about to leave, and the unspoken wish in those green eyes was hard to miss. So he had offered. It would be unkind and selfish to turn down such a simple wish from someone lying all injured in bed, right? Even if that wish hadn’t actually been spoken out loud.

And Tony might be a vain, self-centred, narcissistic playboy, but he’s still a Nice Guy at heart. Yup, that’s him, Tony Stark. Doing the Right Thing and all.

Though, a part of him is starting to get a little bit concerned on his own behalf, because as he had changed the pad on Loki’s forehead, he had almost believed that the god was leaning ever-so-slightly, ever-so-minutely into his touch, even if it had only been for a second.

He winces at the memory. He probably should stop spending so much time at Loki’s bedside, given how it’s obviously making his deluded brain twist reality into all sorts of harebrained scenarios it gets off on imagining. But in the end, it’s nothing but a futile dream, a whimsical flight of fancy that will never amount to anything.

Perhaps it would be a good idea to cut down on his Loki time before his wishful brain starts to twist things into something much less innocent than that.

And, worse, before he’ll actually start to believe in it too.
Again, he finds himself in bed playing another round of Hnefatafl with Tony. He can’t help but reflect on the strangeness of how this has turned into normalcy now, a slave sitting here playing a board game with his master, almost as if they’re equals. Who would ever have heard of such in Asgard?

It is clear that his opponent is losing again, but the man has still managed to hold his own for an impressive amount of time. Even though Tony has yet to win a single game, or even come close to a draw, he is very persistent. And he’s a fast learner to boot. Loki can’t remember ever having faced off with a player who has managed to master the underlying strategy as quickly as Tony, or who keeps improving so consistently.

He enjoys the distraction; it’s the perfect alleviation of the tedium that inevitably comes with spending most of his time bored in bed. After all, the provided reading material can only offer so much entertainment, and especially the magazines are strange and foreign to him, even if he’s starting to familiarize himself with certain concepts and recognize them from previous encounters.

So given the circumstances, it should not be strange that he’s looking forward to having Tony coming over to sit at his bedside for another game.

Though, there is another thought, a stranger one, that is starting to creep up on him, namely the realization that it’s not only the games as such, but Tony’s company that he’s looking forward to. Which is of course utterly bizarre, because what slave would want to spend more time in the presence of his master than necessary?

Well, perhaps slaves with masters like Tony.

He pushes the thought away, instead trying to focus on the game at hand.

A very long and very annoying strand of hair keeps falling into his face, and, absentmindedly, he tucks the offending thing back behind his ear for what must be at least the hundredth time today. He hasn’t had his hair cut since before getting thrown into the dungeons in Asgard, and by now it has grown quite a bit longer than what he’s used to.

“Hey, you’re kind of starting to sport that infamous hippie look,” Tony suddenly throws out, apparently noticing his hand movement. “I’d say it’s time we got you a haircut, or what do you
“Think?” he continues, almost making it sound as if Loki is actually having a choice in the matter.

“If you wish,” Loki answers mechanically while contemplating his next move. He could easily bring the game to an end within ten moves, but he could also opt to give Tony an opening so that he has a chance to get back on track. By now, the man should be skilled enough to know how to take advantage of it. Even though victory is already within his grasp, it would actually be more satisfying to prolong the game instead.

“No,” Tony interrupts his thoughts, the word a note sharper than his previous casualness. “I asked what you want.” At that, Loki raises his gaze from the board to look at Tony who quirks an eyebrow at him. “Your hair, your decision.”

He is silent for a few heartbeats before answering, slowly nodding. “Then yes. I would like it cut.”

Five minutes later, Tony’s hands are in his hair, scissors snipping away. And it feels nice, finally getting it back to its usual, more manageable length. Though, he realizes, not quite as nice as the feeling of Tony’s fingers combing through the long strands as he cuts and trims.

After a little while, Tony steps back to admire his handiwork, tilting his head to the side and smacking his lips. “Well, it might not be the best haircut in history, but at least you don’t look like Rapunzel anymore,” he says with a grin, eyes smiling.

It’s odd how he’s never noticed the playfulness in those eyes before. And as they regard him with that look still playing in them, it makes something even odder flutter in his chest.

Later, when Tony has left, he finds himself missing not only the fingers in his hair, but also the man at his bedside.

His recent resolution to stop spending so much time with Loki disintegrated before he could even set it into action. It just proved impossible to stay away like he had intended. And if someone would ask him just what it is that keeps drawing him to Loki’s bedside, he would have no proper answer to offer them. Probably not even a certified, licensed shrink would be able to make sense out of the entwined jumble of weird emotions in his head.

Of course, it’s stupid of him to feel encouraged by the fact that Loki seems to appreciate his visits,
obviously enjoys their games of Hnefatafl – that Tony has lost miserably every time, so far – and
looks like he isn’t too annoyed by Tony’s incessant ramblings about Midgardian stuff that makes
little sense to an alien god. It’s not like Loki has anything better to do to pass time, after all. Heck, if
he was in Loki’s position, even a visit from Justin Hammer would have been a welcome distraction.

But still, his brain is as happy as ever to provide him with the usual fantasies, letting the forbidden
scenes play out in his mind. The ones that begin with Loki, a wicked smile playing on his lips and
wanton lust shining in his eyes, grabbing the collar of Tony’s shirt to pull his face close for a heated
kiss brimming with wanting and needing.

And that treacherous, headstrong brain doesn’t seem to care in the slightest that there’s no way that
Loki would even be able to do the filthy and shameful things that follow with that busted rib of his.
To say nothing of how the god would never in a million years actually be willing to do them. Not
with him, anyway.

And that’s when he pushes the thoughts aside, relegating them to some dark corner of his mind.

Yeah, perhaps he should just leave well alone rather than keep running to Loki’s bedside like this, he
ponders to himself as he’s making his way down to his workshop. If nothing else, he still has other
matters to take care of, his prototype suit as well as other projects to work on. The god doesn’t need
his frequent visits, even if he doesn’t seem adverse to them.

Then again, he has to admit that none of those other projects are quite as appealing to attend to as
Loki is. Though, he should know better. At the end of the day, he’s doing nothing but pointlessly
fuelling his own addiction to those mesmerizing green eyes, an addiction that will have to remain but
fleeting fancies and private fantasies.

And really, it would be better to let things lie. Nothing will ever come out of it, of course. That part
has already been made abundantly clear.

It’s ridiculous that he can’t just let go of it. He’s Tony Stark. There’s an ocean of women and at least
a middle-sized lake of men out there that would throw their clothes off on the spot if he asked them
to, eager for the chance to trade body fluids with one of America’s most desirable bachelors.

Not like Loki, for whom the idea of suicide seemed an about as equally appealing prospect. Well,
perhaps that was not the only reason for that incident with the knife, but still.
The knowledge is like a painful pinprick inside of him. Okay, so he has been turned down a few times before, though never in such uncertain terms. And never by someone who has exerted such a compelling and powerful attraction on him.

He’s fully aware that he needs to watch his steps here. The ground he’s treading is one littered with mines, and he could easily set one off if he isn’t careful. He remembers all too well what happened last time the god thought that he was about to do things he wasn’t about to. Thought that Tony would take advantage of the situation.

Of course, it’s not like he’s actually going to do anything. But perhaps it’s still unwise to feed his… infatuation like this.

So every time, he promises himself that he will not stay and dawdle at the god’s bedside. Sure, he’ll still dutifully see to his ‘patient’ and make sure everything is in order, but nothing more than that. Once he’s checked on him, delivered his breakfast or whatever reading material he thinks the god might take enough interest in to stave off the boredom, he will leave Loki to his own devices and go invest his time in something productive, something that will actually result in a real outcome rather than remaining a hollow and meaningless daydream.

Yes, that’s what he thinks, every time his feet steer him into the direction of the makeshift hospital ward armed with whatever excuse he has for going there this time around.

But seeing Loki lying on the bed, bruised and bandaged, makes all those intentions fly right out the window. Because there is something about that broken god that irresistibly draws him in.

Then again, perhaps it’s not so strange. Being an engineer and all, he does have an affinity for fixing broken things.

It’s late in the night, but sleep won’t come to him. His ribcage is throbbing, as are some of his other injuries.

Though, it’s not the dull pain that’s keeping him awake. He’s gotten used to that already, and the worst of it subsided after the first few days anyway.

No, it’s the memory of those gentle hands combing through his hair that won’t leave his mind, that
keeps interfering with his attempts to get some sleep.

Turning restlessly between the sheets, he rakes a hand through his hair, its somewhat shorter length a strange, unaccustomed feeling between his fingers. Even though it should count as an insignificant trifle for someone in his position, he’s still glad that Tony never had his hair shaved off, despite it being a common practice in Asgard, a way for masters to mark their slaves as such, to make their station obvious and unmistakable in a society where most everyone wears their hair long.

A part of him is still taken aback that Tony offered him a choice about whether to have his hair cut or not. Slaves on Asgard wouldn’t be entitled to any say in how to look or dress; their appearance is for their masters to decide.

But then again, Tony isn’t like any master on Asgard that he has ever encountered.

And he’s very, very glad for that.
As has been the procedure lately, he takes his meal sitting in his bed, carefully eating the food on the tray nestled into his lap so that he doesn’t spill on the sheets. Tony mentioned the name of the dish, but he’s forgotten it already. It was a new and unknown word to him, and not something that has any equivalent in Asgard.

It doesn’t taste unpleasant, though. A lot of the food here came off as strange to him at first, but it would seem that his palate has gotten used to the unusual flavours and the seemingly illogical combinations of various ingredients by now.

However, he still hasn’t gotten used to the fact that Tony comes in here every time to serve him his food. Masters don’t wait on their slaves, or at least they never would in Asgard. They’d send another slave or servant to handle such tasks, assuming that a sick or injured slave, lying useless in bed, would get very much to eat in the first place. Obviously, there is no one else living in Tony’s household, but he still has his robots that could easily have taken care of that.

“Any good?” the man sitting to his right suddenly interrupts his thoughts, and Loki nods.

“It tastes nice,” he says. “It’s not similar to anything in Asgard, but it reminds me a little of the food in Jotunheim.”

“You’ve visited Jotunheim?” Tony asks, giving him a questioning look. “Okay, so I know you were born there and all, but I thought your two realms weren’t on speaking terms with each other, if what you told me the other day was anything to go by.”

“Well, relations between Asgard and Jotunheim have waxed and waned over the centuries,” he says with a shrug. “Most of our common history has been filled with deep animosity and hate, sometimes escalating into war, but there have been shorter periods of somewhat less strained relations. During those times, I wouldn’t say it was possible for just anyone from one realm to freely visit the other, but, well, I had my magic, so I could venture into Jotunheim without too much to fear. Being a prince of Asgard, they wouldn’t dare to harm me and cause a diplomatic catastrophe that would threaten the fragile peace.”

He halts the flow of words, debating with himself whether he should continue or not. Tony looks at him with all the interest that could be expected from someone with an inquisitive mind getting told about a realm he’s never visited and barely even heard of before, so that should be a cue for him to go on. But on the other hand, he doesn’t feel particularly comfortable with the subject, preferring to leave it be.
Before he can make a decision, however, Tony fires off another question.

“But you still dared to eat their food? I mean, someone with a real grudge towards Asgard could have tried to poison you in secret or something?”

“They wouldn’t poison us,” he says simply. “After all, we were… invited.”

“We?” Tony asks.

Loki sighs. Yeah, that old story from centuries ago.

“Yes,” he admits. “Me and Thor and a convoy from Asgard. It wasn’t originally…planned, though.”

“Oh?” An eyebrow shoots upward. “Do tell.”

“It’s a long story,” he says, hoping that will be enough to dissuade Tony. He doesn’t feel like digging those memories up again. However, Tony reacts by leaning back in his chair, not looking daunted in the least by this prospect.

“Well, I’m not going anywhere.” He gives Loki a pointed glance where he’s half-sitting, half-lying in bed. “And I don’t think you are either, for the time being.”

Loki studies the wall ahead of him before answering. “I… fell in with some frost giants on my first visit there, led by a man named Trym. I was a lot younger and more reckless back then, and to top it off I had been drinking far too much mead, so I made a thoughtless bet I shouldn’t have made.” He winces at the recollection, but Tony’s expectant look makes it obvious he wants to hear the rest.

“Trym had a dagger that was actually a magical artefact, imbued with very powerful and ancient magic. When he noticed my interest, he suggested a game of dice. If I won, I’d get the dagger, and if I lost, Trym would get Freyja’s hand in marriage,” he says, fiddling a little with the cover, the edge of it reaching up to his waist. “Freyja is a high-born Aesir lady, related to the royal family by blood,” he adds as he sees Tony’s questioning expression.
“Of course, I wasn’t actually authorized to promise something like that, but… alcohol makes you say some stupid things, I guess.”

Tony snorts. “Yeah, tell me about it. So what happened? You won the game of dice, right?”

The admission is pretty embarrassing. “Actually, I didn’t. I think the dice were enchanted somehow, but I couldn’t prove it.” Probably if he hadn’t been more sober, he would have managed, but he leaves that part out. “However, I hoped Trym wouldn’t collect on a promise made in drunkenness, but he showed up in Asgard mere days later, demanding his due in front of the entire Royal Court, saying they were obliged to honour a promise made by a prince of Asgard. And if they refused, he’d bring his forces down on Asgard to claim what was his.”

“Of course, Freyja was furious and absolutely refused to concede to Trym’s demands.” He makes a pause, remembering how the goddess’ ear-splitting angry shrieks had echoed through the Royal Halls. “And Trym, on his hand, threatened with war and the whole court was in an uproar, Freyja’s family calling for my blood unless I found a way to resolve the situation. But in the end, I did come up with a suggestion that was accepted after a lot of grumbling and deliberations.

“And that was?”

“I suggested a stealth attack, since Trym was a powerful foe and had a considerable army under his command, while our own available forces were not very strong at the time.” Too busy fighting elsewhere. “The plan was to sneak Thor into Trym’s halls armed with Mjölnir – its formidable powers would be enough to slay both Trym and his men when they least expected it.”

“And how did you pull that off? I suppose you couldn’t just waltz in there and hope that no one would notice?” Tony says, leaning forwards in his chair. “Thor does seem like the kind of guy that’s not easy to just sneak in. Doesn’t fit in a suitcase and kind of stands out in a crowd. He’d be pretty hard to miss.”

Loki cocks his head. “I suggested we dress him up as Freyja and send him over to Trym’s halls for the proposed marriage, and I’d follow as his bridesmaid. My idea was accepted, and in the end the plan worked as intended.”

Tony stares at him, incredulity etched into his face. “So you mean that big bad manly Thor was forced to dress in drag?”
He’s not familiar with the word ‘drag’, but he gets the gist of it nonetheless. “Well, as expected, Thor vehemently refused at first, but it was useless in the end. He had no choice but to go along with it.”

The look of disbelief on Tony’s face is slowly morphing into one of amusement, until a huge grin is plastered over the man’s features. However, Loki has to admit that he never found the incident amusing at all; quite the opposite – it had been a very serious situation. People had been furious at him; even those who weren’t on all that friendly terms with Freyja and her family had turned against him in anger.

Even the otherwise so peaceful and gentle Baldur had personally threatened to rip his entrails out – which figured, of course, as the fop had always harboured an ill hidden infatuation with the goddess. His doings had caused an outrage among the Aesir, and it hadn’t been humorous in the slightest. Only his wits and his quick thinking had saved the day and his own skin.

Of course, Freyja hadn’t spoken to him for decades after the incident, and Thor not for days, which in his case probably meant that he was even angrier than Freyja. No, it hadn’t been amusing at all, and he’d never imagined it could be viewed as such, not until seeing Tony’s reaction.

“Okay, I admit I’ve never seen any of your fair Aesir maidens, but I find it very doubtful that anyone of them looks even remotely like Thor,” Tony snorts. “Seriously, how could anyone buy into that?”

Loki shrugs. “We put a veil over his face.”

At that, Tony collapses into a heap of roaring laughter, a hand slapping against his thigh, almost falling off his chair in mirth. And even though Loki still fails to find the incident funny – it’s far too intimately entwined with words like disgrace and failure and disappointment – Tony’s laughter is still contagious.

There is suddenly a bubble of laughter welling up inside of him as well, demanding to be let out, and soon he finds himself laughing too. It might not be as boisterous as Tony’s, but it’s laughter nonetheless, and he makes no attempt to stop it as it washes over him.

The contractions of his still sore ribcage send a spasm of pain through him, but he ignores it, because he can’t remember the last time he has laughed like this. A real laughter that wasn’t painted with mockery or bitterness or self-deprecation.

Neither can he remember the last time someone made him laugh like this. But the feeling is pleasant,
almost intoxicating, and he realizes that he never knew until now how much he’s missed it, or how much he actually enjoys it.

Or, for that matter, how much he enjoys Tony’s laughter.

The mental image of the Thunderer himself, the epitome of masculinity, dressed in drag is just too freaking hilarious. He hasn’t laughed this much in quite some time, he surmises, as he wipes his eyes, rubbing away the moisture gathering in them with the sleeve of his shirt.

And the realization makes him wonder, with a startle, when the last time was that Loki laughed like this?

Or laughed at all since coming to his tower. The thought makes a little sting of something prickle inside of him and takes the edge of his amusement off.

He watches the god out of the corner of his eye, the joyful smile that has spread over his features turning his face from handsome to irresistible. Is this truly the first time that Loki has laughed at all since his coming here? The thought has never crossed his mind before, though he realizes it’s probably the saddening truth.

And in that moment, he promises himself that even though it might be the first time since Loki’s arrival in Tony’s tower, it’s not going to be the last.

He enjoys a laughing Loki far too much for that.
Chapter 66

He moves one of the game pieces two diagonal steps across the board, effectively blocking the impending attack from his opponent. The man makes a little grunt in response, no doubt dismayed that his plan was seen through and thwarted so easily. But he quickly recovers, only needing a few brief moments to come up with a new strategy as his hand moves one of the centre pieces off to the side.

Loki is not yet quite sure what Tony is trying to do, though he’s certain he will work the man’s new tactics out soon enough. Still, he’s impressed by Tony’s playing abilities, and his original assessment of them certainly hasn’t diminished as their playing has progressed. He’s already reached a point where Loki actually has to put in a bit of effort to win the game. Well, not that Tony is a real threat yet given his current skill level, but it’s amazing how quickly he is mastering the strategy.

And it’s not until now that he’s seen it in action that he’s realized how brilliant Tony’s mind truly is. Of course, Loki already knew the man to be very intelligent, a genius even, but not quite to this extent. And he isn’t really sure why that should matter, apart from the prospects of eventually being provided with a challenging board game, but he’s nonetheless glad for it.

Back in Asgard, there were not many who could ever match him, and the idea that Tony might be one of those select few is for some reason appealing.

He moves a piece of his own, intending to cut off Tony’s flank and force him to retreat towards the corner. Tony responds by daringly advancing instead. Perhaps a little too daringly this time. But then again, the man isn’t one to sit back and wait unnecessarily, at least not when it comes to Hnefatafl. His playing style tends to be forceful, but well thought out, and could easily have defeated a less talented player than Loki. It’s interesting, the way his attacks might seem reckless on the surface, and yet there is a clear strategy behind them that would not be immediately obvious to someone less familiar with the game.

Yes, Tony could no doubt become a master of this with enough practice.

The game continues for a few minutes in silence, Tony valiantly fighting and pushing onwards, but Loki – being the far more experienced player of the two – thwarting his efforts. Eventually, Tony lets slip a sigh and leans back in the chair he’s sprawling indecently in, his feet up and resting against the edge of the bed. Not the most comfortable position, perhaps, but given the rather awkward layout of the game set-up, board lying on the available bed space next to Loki and Tony perched on a chair to the side, it will have to do.
“Damn it, Bambi, guess you win this game. _Again, _” Tony comments the outcome, languidly stretching his body with a creak of joints snapping into place. One of his feet slides up towards the pillows from the movement, coming to a rest not far away from Loki’s head.

Almost immediately, Tony pulls his foot back, giving a crooked wince. “Ops, sorry about that. Guess you’ve had enough of having my feet in your face to last you a life-time, haven’t you,” he says, looking suddenly awkward.

_that old foot massage incident._ It feels strange to be reminded of that now, something that happened so long ago, almost like it was in another life, back when things were so very different. Back when Tony still resented him, harbouring anger and animosity towards him, and not… whatever it is that he’s feeling now. Well, not anger or resentment, at least.

Tony leans forward with a sigh, a hand raking through brown hair, back and forth. “Uh, yeah, about all that,” he says with another grimace. “I suppose I was a bit of an ass to you when you first came here… so, sorry about that.”

The words hang in the air between them for a while as Loki lets them sink in.

Again, Tony has apologized to him. Just like that time after he lost Loki on the train and the Einherjers had returned him in a less than stellar condition.

Well, perhaps not just like back then, because this time he actually raises his gaze from where his hands are fiddling with the hem of the bed cover to meet with Tony’s eyes. “It’s alright,” he says, and then there are all of a sudden other words gathering in his throat, wanting to get out. He makes no attempt to stop them. “And I… would like to apologize in turn for my transgressions against you during my last visit to Midgard,” he adds, a part of him wondering when the last time was that he honestly apologized for anything.

He can’t really remember when that was. He’s certainly offered a few fake apologies along the way; one even to the man at his bedside, for the very same things that he is apologizing for now, except back then he hadn’t meant it, forced from his lips as it had been.

But this one, he actually means.

“No worries, Reindeer Games,” Tony says with a little shrug. “I’ve had people do worse to me. Quite a lot worse, actually. But, I’m still alive and kicking, so it’s all good, even though it was a hell
of a flight you gave me back there.”

He’s glad Tony is sounding amused rather than resentful as he says that, and he’s also glad that Tony survived that fall. Contemplating the alternative makes him shudder.

Who would he have been handed over to if Tony had died? Barton? The thought makes him feel ill. Chances are he wouldn’t even have been alive at this point if the archer had been appointed his master. And even if he were, he would most likely have been in a similar physical condition that he is in now, though he wouldn’t have had his injuries treated or been left to recuperate in a nice bed.

Or maybe Bruce? Perhaps that wouldn’t have been so horrible, if his recent meeting with the man is anything to go by. Not as long as he remained in his human form, that is. But having the beast emerge just once would have been enough, and Loki would have been done for.

So no, he’s definitely glad he failed in his attempt to kill Tony, considering what his own situation would then have been like. Though, truth be told, that might not really be the only reason he’s glad for that particular failure.

They play another game that Loki wins too, even though Tony manages to slip a few pieces by his defences. Then the man takes his leave, having things in his workshop that he needs to take care of, and Loki is alone.

Restlessly, he takes the board back down from where Tony placed it on the bedside table as he left and folds it out on his lap, and then starts to arrange and rearrange the two sets of game pieces, white and black, playing out various strategies against an imagined opponent. It’s nice to immerse himself in the game like this, even though playing with Tony was a lot more rewarding than playing by himself.

And even if those Hnefatafl games have turned into a daily activity by now, there’s still a little surge of surprise in him every time that Tony shows up at his bedside to play. Sure he can understand why a strategic game of this kind with an opponent of Loki’s calibre would appeal to a man of Tony’s intellect, but he can’t help but whimsically hope that that’s not the only reason that Tony comes here to play.

Perhaps it’s a preposterous thought, but he can’t help it.

Because he wants to be more than just a slave in Tony’s eyes, he wants for Tony to see him as
something else than mere property.

He wants to...

He wants...

He sighs.

He doesn’t know what he wants.

Everything is still confusing, a disorganized jumble in his mind. And it’s strange, how much his associations to Tony have changed since his coming here – at first it was fear and humiliation and anticipated abuse that entered his mind whenever he thought of Tony, but somewhere along the line it inexplicably changed into gentle hands and ice cream and a promise of protection.

So many odd little jigsaw puzzle pieces floating around in his head that are still difficult to align properly, and perhaps he’s just being presumptions, the way a part of him attempting trying to piece them together.

Because really, why should a master care about a slave, especially one who once tried to kill him and conquer his planet? Why should he care about what a mortal thinks of him? Why is he laying here all pampered and taken care of, with strange thoughts swirling through his head?

So many whys, and so few clear answers.

He looks at the little carved piece of wood in his hand, turning it around in his palm. So alien, and yet so familiar. So full of contradictions, just like his current situation. Just like Tony.

Somehow, the man has been figuring in his thoughts increasingly often. Much more often than before. Which is not so surprising, perhaps, since he is the only other company Loki has in here, apart from Jarvis and the robot servants, but those hardly count.

Well, actually it makes perfect sense, when he considers it. His world has been reduced from freely travelling the realms to mostly encompassing this tower, so of course his current thoughts would
revolve around whatever is contained in here, whatever he encounters every day.

Like Tony.

Still, he remembers how there was a time when all he wanted from Tony was indifference, to stay off the man’s radar as much as possible, to be ignored. To be neither seen nor heard, like a ghost flittering unnoticed through the tower. That had been the most desirable outcome he had envisioned back then, the one thing he had been hoping for.

But that was then.

And things change, sometimes in the most unexpected of ways.

He lies awake for a long time that night, thinking about things he has never thought about before, things that not too long ago would have been unthinkable, but somehow don’t seem like such a terrible stretch anymore.
Chapter 67

Morning hits him like a sledgehammer, and he groans as he rolls over to peer at the clock on his bedside table.

Not even ten. Still early, then. Yawning, he rolls back to his previous position, trying to lull himself back to sleep. He stayed up far too late yesterday, trudging away on various projects in his workshop, downing quite a few drinks – or perhaps it was bottles – in the process.

He doesn’t really get hangovers that often anymore; his body seems to have acclimatized itself to his drinking binges over the years. But now it has obviously decided to protest against those habits rather insistently, leaving him with a pounding headache and a mouth that tastes like cat piss.

To top it off, he has another pressing problem as well, he soon notices. Not that it’s an unusual state for him to wake up in, though, especially not after he’s been drinking.

He deliberates with himself for a little while as to whether he should do something about the cock that’s straining rather uncomfortably against his boxers or let things return to normal by themselves, but eventually opts for the former.

In his current rather pitiable morning-after state, he deserves something of a more pleasant variety to get the day started, after all.

He kicks the cover aside and then rolls over onto his back, his hand idly reaching down underneath the front of his boxers. Pulling his half-hard length out, he gives it a slow, lazy stroke, trying to conjure up some appropriate fantasy that will speed the process up.

The first thing that comes to mind is that Playboy centerfold whose name he can’t quite recall, but that he thinks was Samantha or Savannah or something along that vein. Though, that’s probably not her real name anyway, and it wasn’t as if he ever bothered to ask. It was over a year ago that they met at some event that started with boring people making boring speeches and ended with the two of them fucking like crazy in a storage room down in the cellar.

Blond, buxom (though most of that was probably silicon), and legs a mile long, she was quite the sight to behold. Hazel eyes and a smile framed with thick, gorgeous lips that he pictures eagerly descending on his cock. At the mental image, he strokes himself indolently, trying to recall the feeling as those wet lips moved over him, tongue sliding over his erection as he breathlessly leant
back against a wobbly pile of crates, pants in a crumbled heap at his feet.

A moment later, the blond head is bobbing up and down on his cock and he presses the back of his head into the pillow as his hand tightens its grip. She was good, he remembers, though perhaps not one of the best he’s had. But she got an A for Awesome effort, at least, moaning like a seasoned porn star as she worked him over, taking him in almost to the hilt.

Another moment later, and that mop of hair is suddenly not blond anymore, but a deep jet black.

His breath hitches, but at this point it’s too late to call things off. The fantasy refuses to turn back to into the Playboy model, instead insisting on transforming until the kneeling figure at his feet is none but the god of mischief himself in all his glory.

A part of him already knew what his initial fantasy would eventually turn into, but he was still powerless to stop it, and now he doesn’t even want to.

Pushing away the guilt welling up inside of him, he watches before his inner eye as Loki sinfully licks over his length, green eyes staring up at him as they drink in the tell-tale signs of his pleasure.

His cock is glistening with wetness in the god’s grip, and he doesn’t know if it’s mostly precum or saliva, but it doesn’t matter as Loki’s tongue is swirling over his head, exerting delicious pressure on the tip.

The fantasy is so beautiful, so irresistible, and his hand is moving almost frantically, drawing bursts of pleasure from his aching cock. He’s so fucking hard, and not far off, so he moves his hand in unison with those imaginary lips, his pants echoing in his ears as he’s imagining Loki sucking him like a vice, putting all his godly efforts into making him climax.

And does he ever, spurting all over his stomach with a throaty groan while imagining coming into that skillful, outer-worldly talented mouth. The pleasure rushing over him is overwhelming, powerful waves undulating through his body as he bucks and trashes on the mattress like an animal while riding out his release.

And then he lies there on the rumpled sheets, staring up into the ceiling as the last vestiges of pleasure are fading away, his cock returning to its usual state. Finally, he sighs contentedly, reaching out for a wad of the paper tissue that’s stored on his bedside table, absent-mindedly wiping the stickiness off his hand and stomach.
Of course, he should feel ashamed of himself, jerking off to someone who is currently lying all injured and bruised up in bed, on top of everything else that is making Loki a very much improper fantasy. Though, right now those feelings fail to fully manifest themselves, dozing like lacklustre, half-hearted guilty consciences in the back of his head.

Heck, it’s not as if Loki is going to find out about his private indiscretions anyway or as if Tony is ever going to act on those fantasies, so what difference does it really make? At least, that’s what he’s trying to tell himself, though he can hear the lack of conviction in his own inner voice.

*Oh well.* What’s done is done, and what he needs more than anything right now is a shower, not a guilty conscience.

He rolls rather than pushes himself out of bed, stretching his limbs as he ambles towards the door, a swarm of evil headache fairies still swinging their little hammers inside his skull.

*Yeah, it will be really nice to soak in a hot shower for a while,* he thinks as he saunters down the short stretch of corridor leading towards the bathroom. It’s only a turn of corners and…

… and suddenly Loki is standing there in front of him, impossibly materializing out of nowhere.

They both freeze on the spot like deer in headlights. And then they remain standing there, neither of them moving as if they think that if they just keep perfectly still and pretend like nothing just happened, the last few seconds are going to rewind themselves and then play out in a much more non-embarrassing fashion. Preferably with all participants fully clothed.

And of course – Loki hasn’t been up and running since landing himself in that bed with bruises that would have made a blue-spotted salamander jealous, but Murphy’s law clearly dictates that he should pick the very moment to leave it when Tony is unashamedly prancing around in the full monty.

It’s totally one of those Kodak moments, if you by ‘Kodak moment’ mean Crowning Moment of Awkwardness.

Loki looks surprised, or maybe shocked would be a more proper description. And Tony can’t decide whether he feels more stupid or embarrassed, but it’s probably a fair toss-up.
Not that he normally feels self-conscious being naked in front of others, but when it’s *Loki* of all people... yeah, totally awkward. Probably the last person in the world he should be flashing himself for like this.

“Uh, just on my way to the shower,” he finally manages, quickly pushing past the god while feeling like an idiot. If *Loki* only knew what he’d been doing only minutes ago, what he had been fantasizing about, or why he’s even naked in the first place when he normally sleeps in his underwear…

He quickly covers the last few steps to the bathroom, glad to finally put a wall between the god and his own naked self. So apparently the universe or karma or whatever cosmic ass-holery that is running the show thought him too unrepentant for his illicit fantasies, and decided to punish him like this; that’s really the only explanation.

And it sure knew what it was doing, because he doesn’t think he’s ever felt as guilty about those fantasies as he’s doing right now.

He watches out of the corner of an eye as Tony disappears behind the corner, followed by the dull thud of a door closing, and then the sound of water being turned on. For some reason, his face feels flushed, like he’s been out in the sunlight for too long.

It’s the first time he’s seen Tony naked, and he has to admit that even though the sight was surprising, it was not … unappealing.

And he thinks there might be a part of him that wouldn’t have minded if Tony hadn’t left so quickly for the shower so he could have watched the sight for a little while longer, and the realization only takes him slightly by surprise.

He suddenly remembers the gentle fingers combing through his hair as it was cut a while ago, and with that memory comes the pondering whether the man is as gentle in… other pursuits as well. Somehow, the concept doesn’t seem so terribly foreign and alien anymore. And a part of him wonders if he, perhaps, might one day even want to find out the answer to that question for himself.

He stands there for a while, staring at the empty spot that Tony had been occupying mere moments ago, before continuing on to where he was going. Even so, the thoughts keep swirling in his head, refusing to leave him alone.
And he can’t help but wonder – what it would be like to touch Tony. How it would feel to run his fingers down that chest with the arc reactor embedded in it. If his neatly trimmed beard is soft or as scratchy as it looks.

That, and a million other things as well.
Chapter 68

After his too-long convalescence, it is an unaccustomed feeling to be serving himself food again, as opposed to having Tony bring his meal on a tray so he can eat it in bed. Still, despite the weeks that have passed, everything is in the same place as it used to be – the Cheerios, the milk, the bowl, the spoon. He places the familiar items on the table and then sits down to chew down another helping of the crunchy little things.

His gaze drifts around as he eats, trying to notice if anything has changed since he last set his foot in here, but nothing seems to be out of the ordinary. The kitchen table and the chairs, the crumpled mat on the floor, the sink and the cupboards, even the little brownish stain on the far wall – it’s all like he remembers it. And, of course, the Cheerios taste just like they always have.

He wonders if perhaps his mind is trying to latch onto all those familiar, unaltered things as to not have to contemplate what actually has changed since the last time he was sitting here eating at this table. It was weeks ago, but even then, those old feelings of fear and dread in regards to Tony had already dissipated. And yet, things had still been very different from… now.

He watches the spoon stir lazy, haphazard patterns in the milk while strange, inexplicable thoughts are in turn stirring inside of him. The image of Tony standing in the hallway is still lingering before his inner eye, and he doesn’t seem quite able to shake it. And he’s well aware that there was a time when he would have found Tony’s nakedness disturbing, even frightening, and this kind of encounter would have left him tossing and turning between the sheets the following night, dreading what would be in store for him. Even now, he still remembers the vivid and horrible nightly terrors that used to plague him about what Tony was going to do to him. Somehow, they seem very far away now, like those childhood nightmares about monsters and dragons and frost giants chasing after him, brandishing sharp weapons and even sharper fangs.

Under normal circumstances, an encounter like that should have been uncomfortable for someone in his position, it shouldn’t have stirred up… the images that it had. But of course, since he’s long ago stopped worrying about Tony exercising the rights always belonging to a master in regards to his slave, the absence of fear and worry is perfectly understandable and reasonable. But the natural reaction should in his case have been an absence of reaction, not that which had instead taken the place of the expected empty indifference. After all, nudity has never been a noteworthy thing in itself where he comes from, and strong and well-built warriors in particular would never be shy about displaying their naked bodies – some even enjoying the opportunity to show off their rippling muscles and proofs of virility.

And judging by what he saw today, Tony certainly has nothing to be ashamed of in that regard. Come to think of it, it’s actually rather strange that he hasn’t seen Tony unclad until now, considering that this is the man’s home which makes him free to be in any state of dress or undress that he likes.
Then again, from what he’s learned of Midgard during his stay here, it would seem that humans are quite a bit more modest in such matters compared to Asgardians. That would certainly have explained Tony’s strange reaction back there, how he had almost seemed embarrassed by someone encountering him in a naked state, and the way he had quickly slunk off to the bathroom, as if he was eager to shield his unclothed body from view as quickly as possible.

It still won’t explain his own, even stranger reaction. He twists in his seat, suddenly uncomfortable as he remembers the images in his mind left in Tony’s wake.

Because really, why should he entertain such thoughts about a mortal, about someone he once tried to kill, about someone who is now his appointed master while he has been reduced to the position of a slave?

Yes, why indeed should he entertain such thoughts about… someone who’s come to serve him his meals for weeks as he lay injured in bed, who has time after time sat at his bedside and played his favourite board game, who has laughed at a story of his and made him laugh in turn?

When did he ever start caring about such sentiment? When did someone ever show such sentiment on his behalf?

He can’t really answer any of those questions for now. Perhaps he will be able to eventually, but right now there seems to be more questions than answers.

He stands for a long time beneath the spray of hot water, doing his best to relax as the warmth is spreading through his body, loosening his tense muscles.

*Great going there, Tony, just great.*

Because that was surely the first sight that Loki wanted to greet him after finally making it out of the bed that he’s been stuck in for weeks. *Not.*

He’s glad that Loki had at least *not looked* terribly disturbed or concerned by the surprise nudity that had assaulted him in the hallway. And he supposes he should be grateful that he hadn’t sported a
hard-on too while he was at it – now wouldn’t that have been the icing on the cake.

He groans, a hand going up to the wall for support. Perhaps it was a good thing he had taken matters into his own hands before going for a shower, so at least he hadn’t been in that condition. And that he had also had the good sense to wipe the sticky residue off before venturing outside.

At that, he groans again, placing his forehead against the arm that’s resting against the cabin wall. Maybe the encounter wouldn’t have left him feeling so bad if his morning fantasies hadn’t been centred on him getting a blow-job from the god only minutes before almost walking into him in the hallway. Sure, Loki can’t read minds – not as far as he knows, anyway – but it had still felt as if his doings had been written all over his face. And how disturbed and disgusted wouldn’t Loki have been if he had known? Possibly even terrified, given his previous expectations.

_Yup, indeed great going there, Tony. Really considerate and sensitive._

He remains in the heat of the shower cabin until the enclosed space is so steamy that he can barely see his own feet. That’s when he finally shuts the water off and steps out, snatching the nearest towel from the rack.

Once he’s passably dry, he makes sure to put on a full set of clothes before heading out the door, or the universe will no doubt gleefully send an unsuspecting Loki right into his path again. He can’t really remember the last time he was so concerned about being clothed when having a houseguest staying over. Most of the time he would have pranced around in his boxers, having already showed everything off the night before.

Then, he pushes the bathroom door open, instinctively turning his head both right and left before stepping out. Next time he sees Loki he doesn’t want to be taken by surprise, or who knows what kind of stupid reaction he might have. He can at least _try_ to act normal and unperturbed, despite the recent awkwardness-inducing events.

There is no god of mischief lurking in the corridor this time, though, so he heads down to the kitchen, intending to grab some breakfast. Even if he often skips that particular meal of the day, in his experience, some food tends to help with the morning-after headaches.

He almost startles as he reaches the doorway to the kitchen, having not expected to see Loki sitting there at the table, munching away on his usual Cheerios. It’s a sight he hasn’t seen in weeks now, but that he has to admit is welcome nonetheless.
Despite that, a part of him would like to turn on his heel and leave to come back later, the recent embarrassment fresh on his mind. But he’s had enough of sneaking around in his own tower trying to avoid his unwilling houseguest, so instead he walks in, hoping he’s not looking half as moronic as he’s feeling.

He makes straight for the refrigerator where the leftovers of yesterday’s salami sandwich are waiting for him, and, having provisioned himself, he flops down at the table at his usual spot.

“So, already well enough to be up and running, huh?” he says as casually as he can manage, taking a big bite out of the sandwich in his hands.

Loki is sitting rather more stiffly than usual and it’s obvious that he’s still not back in his usual shape. Tony is glad he has already stuffed his mouth full with food, or something thoughtless like ‘don’t you still belong in bed?’ might have slipped out. Somehow, speaking the words ‘you’ and ‘belong in bed’ in the same sentence to Loki doesn’t seem… appropriate, not after what just transpired.

Loki swallows down the mouthful of Cheerios he’s been chewing on before answering. “I’m much better now,” he replies. “There is no need for me to stay in bed any longer.”

“Alright, just don’t do anything stupid and overexert yourself,” Tony says, quickly stomping out the light-hearted continuation – ‘unless you want me to tie you to the bed until you’re actually well enough to leave it’ – automatically forming on his tongue. Not an in the slightest appropriate or witty thing to say, given the circumstances.

Quickly, he takes another huge bite out of his sandwich, just in case his big mouth should decide to be uncooperative.

Tony leaves shortly after breakfast is finished, going out on some business errand or the other. And Loki is left sitting at the window, gazing outside.

Of course, he’s not really well enough yet to go for a walk, but he can at least watch the sky and the fluffy clouds drifting by. And it’s a relief to be out of bed, no longer being confined to a single room anymore but having the freedom of the tower again, even if he’s not going to be moving around overly much in the next couple of days.
Still, he would really have liked the opportunity to breathe some fresh air after having been copped up for all these weeks. Just a gust of wind on his face would have been… nice.

Not quite able to stop himself, he gets up from his chair and walks over the few steps to the window, placing his palm against the pane, letting the chill of the air outside seep into his skin. It’s a poor substitute, but it will have to make do for now.

A little sigh escapes his lips as he stands there, suddenly acutely aware of the four confining walls around him. Yes, he knows it’s only temporary until he gets better, but still…

Automatically, his hand goes for the window handle, fingers closing around it. How many times didn’t he use to do this, before Tony finally let him outside? Only to be met with disappointment every time, despite being fully aware of the pointlessness of his attempts.

And yet, his hand can’t help but make a little upwards tug, perhaps more out of habit than anything else.

To his surprise, the window slides open, fresh air suddenly rushing in through the widening crack, caressing his face with the sweet fingers of a lover. Cool and soothing like the sea on a hot summer’s day, invigorating and refreshing like a drink of water after a long stretch of strenuous work beneath the blazing sun.

He stands there at the open window for a long time, with the wind in his hair and fresh air in his lungs.

And, with a smile on his face.
Chapter 69

There is one thing that strikes Tony as conspicuous now that Loki is up and running again – okay, maybe he’s not exactly running, but at least he’s moving around without showing any obvious signs of discomfort. Perhaps it’s the memory of the recent embarrassing incident featuring him bumping into Loki buck naked that’s made him more aware of the concept of clothing in relation to the god, or maybe it’s once more seeing him not half-hidden by bed covers. Whatever the reason, he suddenly finds himself much more conscious of what Loki is actually wearing.

Of course, it’s the usual things that he’s been sporting for most of his time here: band shirts, sweatpants, old clothes that Tony once found in his closet. Nothing that fits the god too badly – he did pick the largest-sized stuff he could find – but it’s not exactly flattering either. While the clothes are not dirty or tattered or anything, and are in fact hardly any different from what Tony would be wearing on a normal, comfortable day at home, it still looks… cheap.

No, he corrects himself. Actually, it’s him, Tony, that’s looking cheap. Because he should have gotten Loki something else to wear by now, something that’s not just old hand-me-downs.

Sure, at first that had been the appropriate solution, seeing as how Loki had just arrived in his tower and Tony was unprepared for his new houseguest and trying his best (and failing) to come to terms with the situation. But he’s had a long time since then to actually improve on that and make up for the initial deficits, rather than continuing to let the god dress in what should have been a temporary fix.

He looks over to where Loki is sitting opposite from him at the breakfast table, lazily reading the text on back of the cereal package. The Deep Purple logo adorning his T-shirt is staring back at Tony; one he’s seen so many times, and yet never really reflected on. He never imagined that the mere logo of one of his favourite bands would ever bring forth any feelings of guilt, and yet there is indeed a stirring of just that bubbling inside of him.

Of course, he could have Jarvis take Loki’s measurements and then have something ordered. It would be the easiest and most straightforward way. But something is telling him that it might be more… appreciated if he stepped this up a notch, went one better than that, and let Loki choose something of his own.

To be honest, bringing up the concept of clothing is a little embarrassing considering the recent mishap, and a part of him wants to postpone it. But the prospect of being faced with that logo for another day as a reminder of his deficiencies appeals even less to him, so he whisks the discomfort away.
“You need some clothes,” he says bluntly and without preamble to the god, before his brain decides to veto his decision to bring the subject up.

There is a faint crease of confusion between the dark eyebrows as Loki looks up from his make-shift reading material. “I… believe I already have clothes,” he says in reply, a hand reflexively touching the hem of his shirt.

Tony shrugs. “Yeah, well, I meant you need some new clothes. The stuff you’ve got is pretty old and doesn’t really fit you all that well.”

Loki blinks a couple of times, but before he has the time to say anything in reply, Tony speaks up again. “I got nothing planned for the day, so we could head out to the store and buy you some new get-ups before lunch.”

Loki is quiet for a few moments, seemingly pondering Tony’s suggestion. Well, perhaps it’s not such a splendid idea, after all, considering that Loki got up from his bout of convalescence pretty recently and is no doubt still a bit sore.

“Of course, if you don’t feel up to it right now, we can wait a few days. There’s no hurry,” he clarifies. Guess he won’t have a choice but to be faced with that Deep Purple logo for a little while longer after all, then.

“No,” comes the soft but decisive reply. “I wouldn’t mind going today.”

“Alrighty,” Tony says, leaning back in his chair. “Then it’s all settled. Clothes shopping it is.”

They take the car, another thing that he realizes must be the first time for Loki, just like the clothes shopping.

He pulls in at a fairly down-scale clothes store, not because he’s being a cheapskate or anything, but because he wants to stay clear of the leech-like shop attendants lurking in the finer establishments, eager to sink their teeth into the first customer walking through the door, hoping to cash in on the juicy provision that comes with the successful sale of a nice Armani suit. In less fancy stores, the
sales people tend to just hover in the background, and he doesn’t want anyone to be paying too close attention to Loki, just in case. So a clothes store with more lazy, indifferent employees is very much preferable.

“Okay,” he says to the god as they enter through the automatic doors – another ubiquitous perk of living in a Midgardian city that he doubts Loki has encountered before – “this is a classic American clothes store. It’s where we mortals go to get our clothes.” He gestures towards the long rows and piles of clothing lined up in front of them as he notices Loki’s perplexed look. “So just pick out whatever strikes your fancy, and we’ll pay later when you’re done.”

At least it’s a good thing it’s a men’s clothing store only, so he won’t have to explain that as well. Given the flamboyant, over-the-top way of dressing that Asgardians seem to have a penchant for, he wouldn’t have totally put it behind Loki to go for something from the women’s section, thinking it appropriate clothing for a guy.

At that, another culture discrepancy suddenly strikes him. “Oh yeah, if you want to try anything out, the changing rooms are over there.” He points towards the back of the store. “That’s where you undress, not out here.” Yeah, better make that very clear, or things could get messy quickly. He certainly hasn’t forgotten the unashamed way Loki decided to strip on the spot last time he was offered some clothing.

“I see,” the god confirms with a nod.

They walk through the casual section first. Loki seems a bit lost as he strolls among the racks, curiously touching the garments in front of him, looking and looking, but not picking out anything. This goes on for quite a long time, as Tony trails behind.

“You don’t have clothes stores in Asgard, do you?” he finally says, starting to get where the problem lies.

Loki turns to face him, shaking his head. “Not really, no. Not like this,” he answers, gesturing towards a row of dark blue shirts. “Usually when you need something, you would see a tailor or a seamstress who’ll take your measurements and then sew according to your specifications and choice of fabric. Clothes aren’t… sewn before someone has actually ordered them.”

Tony shrugs. “Yeah, I kinda figured. The old-fashioned way.” He beckons Loki from where he’s just two steps away from straying into the children’s department. “Come on, I’ll help you out.”
He’s never seen so many clothes in one place before, and it’s a bit overwhelming being asked to pick something out from the endless rows of foreign attire. He really has no idea what to choose, with his lacking knowledge of Midgardian customs and usage, and the only thing he can think of is how odd it is that the humans’ finest clothing is so very plain. Not like in Asgard, where everyone would wear their most exquisite finery for festive occasions, marked with all the signs of wealth and titles and status of the wearer. So unlike these drab suits that he’s seen Tony wear before going out for some important meeting or convention, apparel that makes everyone look identical and anonymous.

He’s glad when Tony comes to his assistance, offering suggestions and pointing out examples of what would constitute appropriate clothing.

Mostly, he just follows Tony’s recommendations in choosing things, since his own cluelessness stops him from taking a more active approach, though there are still a couple of items that he picks out himself. One is a blue shirt that, despite its foreignness, reminds him a little bit of a tunic he used to wear as a boy. Not that such sentiment should matter now, of course, but his hand goes for it regardless and he doesn’t make any attempt to stop it.

As they reach the other end of the store, he has a small mountain of clothes in his arms, and he goes off to try it out while Tony waits outside the changing room area.

Once it’s all done, he stands a little distance away watching as Tony pays the man at the counter, then grabs the bag of clothes and walks up to where Loki is waiting.

“Your clothes,” he says, holding out the bag to Loki, who takes it.

*His* clothes.

And all he can think of as he’s standing there clutching the bag is how slaves in Asgard most certainly aren’t supposed to own property, and yet he’s just now been given something that belongs to *him*, something that he can call his own, even if it’s Midgardian and foreign.

He looks up from the bag to Tony. “Thank you,” he says. And he really means it, too, though perhaps not mainly for the clothes as such.

Tony claps him on the shoulder as he walks past him, making for the door. “You’re welcome,
As they’re back in the tower again, he sits on the couch in the living room, gingerly feeling the fabric of the garments spread out on his lap for closer examination. So unlike everything he’s worn on Asgard, strange and alien, but at least it’s his.

“You know,” comes Tony’s amused voice from across the room, “you should actually put it on, not just play around with it.”

So he does, picking a pair of black pants and the blue shirt, stripping out of his old apparel while Tony immerses himself in his hastily snapped open cell phone.

He stands around for a few moments, trying to get used to the feeling of the new clothes against his skin. They’re comfortable, though he has no doubt that he would find his own reflection strange-looking if he could see it.

“You look good in that,” comes Tony’s assessment and Loki looks up to lock gazes with Tony, who has stopped fiddling with his cell phone and is now looking straight at him.

He likes the comment. Not ‘that looks good on you’, but ‘you look good in that’.

And he also likes the way Tony is looking at him when he says it.
Chapter 70

When he walks into the living room, about to plonk himself down on the couch to watch his latest DVD purchase, he finds it already occupied by a sleeping god of mischief.

His lips curl slightly upward at the sight. Seems like Loki has sort of developed a thing for sleeping on his couch.

And even thought he should know better, he can’t resist the opportunity to remain standing there and admire the work of art that is the Norse god, while trying to soothe his guilty conscience with the notion that a sleeping Loki won’t be disturbed by his creepy staring.

As if moving by their own volition, his eyes go up to track every line of that handsome face, the black hair framing his features, the slightly parted lips, the high cheek bones, and the smooth skin. Unable to stop himself, his gaze travels downwards, over the pale column of his neck, the lean arms sticking out of the black T-shirt, the toned chest and stomach that he knows are hidden under that cloth. And that’s where he finally stops, for his own sanity’s sake. No point in tempting himself any further than this with things he can’t have.

So instead, he lets his eyes travel back the way they came, until they’re once more resting on the relaxed, symmetric features of Loki’s face, a strand of hair falling over his forehead and fluttering slightly for each breath he takes. Thankfully, the bruises are as good as gone now, only a slight discoloration on his cheek and at one corner of his mouth still remains.

At that, he feels a heated sting of anger at the Einherjer guards that were the cause of all that. He’d be more than happy to have a private talk with each and every one of them while in his Iron Man suit. He’d sure teach them a much-needed lesson or two.

As he stands there, his mind going into gory details about what he would have liked to do with those guards, Loki starts to twist and turn under his scrutiny, apparently having a bad dream. It’s only some slight twisting of limbs at first, but when it escalates into jerky, distressed movements. Tony decides he’d better step in. After all, he would sure have wanted someone to do that for him after his stint in Afghanistan and all the dreams that haunted him in the long nights following, bringing their own special brand of fear and terror designed just for him.

The memory of what happened last time he tried to wake the sleeping god up is still fresh on his mind, though, as is the lightening-fast acquaintance he had made with the floor. But at least this time he’s prepared and on the alert in case Loki should try another inverted double suplex on him.
So he bridges the short distance to the couch with a few quick steps, bending down to gently grab hold of Loki’s shoulders and shake him awake.

“Hey, Reindeer Games, time to wake up,” he says in a sing-song-voice to the body stirring in his grip.

Again, he’s back in the dungeons. A part of him thinks that is strange, because that’s not right and he shouldn’t be here, but the stone walls surrounding him speak their clear language, as do the glum light, the stale smell, and the drafty chill penetrating his too-thin clothing to nibble at his skin.

There are three guards in his cell, obviously bored and having decided to pass the time with taunting and jeering, some of it manifesting itself in a more physical way. They do that with prisoners sometimes, but most often with him. Perhaps his sharp tongue is the cause of their preferences, or maybe it’s the inherent fun in tormenting a fallen prince, or perhaps they’re driven by the primal, primitive anger that a traitor calls forth. He doesn’t know, and it doesn’t matter.

One of them, a man bulging with both fat and muscles, is holding his chains in a firm grip, effectively pinning his arms and preventing movement. He’s the leader of the little group as the other two are too stupid to do much on their own; they just go along, standing around grinning dumbly, occasionally giving him a sharp jab to his ribs, or a punch to his gut, or a kick to his shins. But for the most part, they hover in the background where they eagerly watch as their brave and fearless leader runs the show, sometimes laughing or shouting their support.

The breath of the main guard – Reidar, the only one of their names he’s bothered to learn – is foul on his face, smelling like rotten meet and mildew as he draws himself up, pressing in closer and pinning Loki between his own body and the jagged rocks of the wall. He squirms, flashing his teeth in a wordless growl of anger, but Reidar’s grip on the chains effectively stops him from slipping loose. Instead, his struggles are rewarded with a fist to his midsection that would have caused him to double up and fall over, choking and spluttering, if Reidar hadn’t been holding him upright.

Another tug of the chains, and the ugly face is only an inch away from his own, yellow teeth bared in an ugly grin. “Perhaps they won’t execute you after all. Maybe you’ll get sentenced to imprisonment instead,” Reidar hisses as he leans in further, and the foul gust of air from his mouth makes Loki want to gag and retch. “Then you’ll be ours.” He laughs, the sharp sound echoing hollowly between the slippery walls of the cell. “And we could have some real fun with you, huh?”
He shudders as the hands on his shoulders painfully dig into his skin, once more trying to get out of that grip, and once more failing.

Reidar is only amused by his struggles. “Just you wait,” he mocks. “We’ll have such a great time together, little prince.”

The fear and terror in his chest is like a trapped, vicious animal, thrashing wildly against its confines. It’s threatening to take hold of him, to spread into his entire being, pulling him under in its madness.

He wakes with a cry on his lips and fear and horror pulsating in his chest. For a while, he’s not sure where he is, but the shadows of the dungeon are still clouding his head. Strangely enough, there are gentle hands on his shoulders, and there certainly were none of those in the dungeons to alleviate his fears. Nor anywhere else, not since he was a small child and his mother would be at his bedside to wrap her arms around him as he awoke in fright from his nightmares.

And now that this long-forgotten comfort is unexpectedly there, he doesn’t want it to go away. The sudden desire takes hold of him, and in pure instinct he digs his fingers into the warm fabric in front of him, burying his face in it. It’s not until he’s fully awake a few seconds later that he realizes what he’s doing, and in horrified shock lets go of Tony’s shirt.

Blinking in surprise, he looks down at the god suddenly clinging to his shirt like a starved leech, only to then quickly let go as if he’s burned himself on the fabric, a look on his face that would best be described as utterly aghast.

Okay, so this is totally embarrassing. Totally.

“Uh, you seemed to be having a nightmare, so I thought…” he trails off, hoping his admission isn’t going to make the god drawn his own inferences about Tony having stood there watching him sleep like a fucking creep.

However, Loki only looks embarrassed, and frankly, Tony is feeling pretty damn awkward himself, so he desperately gropes around for something to say, something that will break the weird mood.
At first his brain draws several blanks, so in the end he just grabs onto the first thing that comes to mind.

“So, uh, you think Thor will be coming back soon with a decision from your daddy?” he manages. Perhaps not the most appropriate thing he could have said, but anything is better than this total weirdness.

Apparently, Loki must think so as well because he quickly plays along without blinking, pretending as if nothing out of the ordinary has just happened. Unperturbed to a fault, he merely answers the question as if it were a total natural thing to ask in this situation.

“I’m surprised it’s taken this long, given that the answer to his request will be a ‘no’. Of course, Thor has always been stubborn, though it’s not going to change anything. Not this time. No one is going to want me back there, so nothing is going to change. The sentence will not be mitigated. I am sure of this.”

And he gets the distinct impression that Loki is rambling, but he makes no attempt to interrupt the flow of words. Obviously he’s just as eager as Tony to put the recent bout of embarrassed awkwardness behind them.

“What makes you so sure?” he asks.

“I’m a frost giant,” Loki answers without hesitation. “And that is reason enough for the Council to let my… banishment to Midgard stand. They won’t be wanting a monster back into their midst.”

“Aren’t you being a little too hard on yourself?” Tony says, wincing at the words. “At least Odin wouldn’t care about your heritage; he was the one who took you in, wasn’t he?”

Loki is silent for a while before speaking again. This time he doesn’t look at Tony, but at the wall behind him. “It makes no difference. I always was a disappointment to Odin anyway,” he says, voice a few shades more subdued than usual.

And that comment awakens something within Tony and stirs those needle-sharp memories inside of him that he has long wanted to forget about. “What do you mean?” he asks, perhaps a bit more
forcefully than intended.

So maybe it’s Loki’s desire to dissolve the weird atmosphere still lingering, or perhaps there’s another reason entirely, but suddenly he breaks out into a long account of how he’s always been considered lacking for showing little aptitude for martial pursuits, for not being a bold and strong warrior, for not being more like Thor.

And for reasons he’s not entirely sure himself, once Loki’s words have finally run out, he suddenly hears his own voice talking about his always trying to impress his father and failing, the feeling of never living up to expectations, of never being good enough, of always standing in the shadow of someone else he never even met.

And Loki listens with rapt attention, his eyes looking a little wider than usual.

They go to bed late that night, and when sleep finally comes to him, he dreams of black caves and red-and-gold suits, and green eyes staring into his.
Chapter 71

The weather outside is beautiful, the sun shyly peaking out from behind a collection of small puffy clouds, bathing the breakfast table in light and making every speck of dust stand out clearly. Absentmindedly fiddling around with the now empty bowl in front of him, he gazes out of the window, only listening with one ear to Tony’s exposition about the apparently many advantages of having toilet paper hang over the roll as opposed to the vastly inferior alternative of letting it hang it beneath.

He’s not sure when it was that Tony’s endless monologues stopped grating on his ears. Even if the words themselves might be pointless, the voice is still a pleasant buzz in the background that he doesn’t mind listening to.

Some of the clouds in the sky drift apart a little, exposing another piece of vibrantly burning sun, the sudden brightness making him blink. He doesn’t remember the last time the sky was this blue.

There’s a sudden lull in the long harangue and his eyes drift back to Tony, watching as the man drinks deeply from his cup of coffee.

Tony did tell him to speak up if there was something he wanted, didn’t he?

He clears his throat, trying to sound impassive. “Is there perhaps any way that I… that we could, perhaps… go for a walk outside?”

The words hang in the air for a few seconds as Tony swallows the coffee down and then flashes him a grin.

“Sure buddy. All you need to do is ask.”

An hour later, they’re sitting on a park bench in the shade of a maple tree, the sunlight filtering through the fluttering leaves throwing a mottled, ever-shifting mosaic pattern on the ground. A gentle breeze is ruffling his hair and he tucks a loose-hanging strand back behind his ear, but the little gust of wind feels refreshing rather than chilly against his skin.
Even Tony is quiet for once as they simply sit there, watching people pass them by. Some are running in obvious haste, others merely strolling at a leisurely pace. An enamoured couple sits down on the bench on the other side of the gravel-strewn path opposite from them; not even a minute later, their lips are tightly locked together and their bodies so intimately entwined that it’s hard to tell which limb belongs to whom.

He watches them for a little while and then looks away, suddenly acutely aware of the man next to him who is busy picking at his finger nails.

A few seconds later, Tony yawns loudly and stretches his arms above his head, the movement causing his leather jacket to give off a series of sharp, ominous creaks. At this, Tony lowers his arms, wincing as he throws Loki an inquisitive look.

“Hey, you alien Vikings dress in leather all the time, don’t you? How do you stop it from creaking like a frog in heat? I certainly don’t remember your outfit ever doing that.” He grins innocently. “Though, I admit that my mind might have been slightly occupied with other things at the time to actually notice.”

Loki raises an eyebrow in his direction. “There are spells for that,” he says, slightly amused by the question. “At least for those who knew how to weave them.”

“Darn, I was afraid you’d say that.” Tony says, leaning back against the backrest of the wooden bench. “And here I was hoping you’d have a fool-proof recipe for some fancy concoction to put a definitive stop to that. Like boiled bat blood mixed with mashed lizards eyes or something. Guess I’ll have no choice but to whip out my trusty jar of yucky leather grease again, then.” He makes a grimace. “Yeash. Magic would have been so much more convenient and less nasty than fiddling around with that foul-smelling junk. I’m surprised your people do any work at all when you have magic to take care of all that boring stuff for you.”

Loki gives him a pointed glance.

“Magic has its limitations, like everything else. You humans still work even though you have your robots and machines to serve you, do you not?”

“Eh, fair enough, I suppose,” he admits, and then an impish grin spreads across his face. “Though if I had fairy magic, the first thing I’d do would be to create some really smoking hot models. An entire harem of them. In all hair colours, everything from scarlet red to bright blue.”
Loki can’t help but give an amused snort. If magic was truly capable of that, he’d know several
sorcerers that would never leave the house again.

They sit there talking for a while, Tony going on in detail about everything he would have done if he
had magic at his disposal. Most of which would of course have been wholly impossible, but Loki
doesn’t bother correcting him. It’s too enjoyable to listen as Tony’s imagination is running wild with
him.

Later in the afternoon, Tony takes off in haste to attend some meeting on behalf of Stark Industries.
Important business with some important client, he had huffed, one whose calibre and distinction
called for the presence of the almighty CEO himself. At least if his advisors were to be believed.

And Loki is alone, standing at the window for a while gazing out, thinking about nothing in
particular, before turning around and almost stumbling over that old box of papers that he never got
around to sort after what happened in the wake of Tony losing him on the subway all those weeks
ago. Granted, Tony has never mentioned the box since, and he could of course choose to ignore it,
but for some reason he decides he will have it sorted anyway.

But first, there’s something else he needs to take care of.

Frowning slightly, he glances up towards the ceiling. It feels strange and even a bit silly addressing
someone he can’t even see, but he can’t bring himself to care overly much. He’s done considerably
stranger things than that since coming here, after all.

“Jarvis?” he calls out, feeling almost as if he’s speaking to himself, not sure if the AI will at all
acknowledge him. Perhaps it only answers to its creator and ignores everyone else.

But his suspicions turn out to be unfounded as the disembodied voice, impeccably polite as ever,
rings out from the ceiling.

“Yes, Mr Laufeyson?”

And he realizes that this is probably the first time he’s addressed Jarvis since coming here, as far as
he can remember. So he hesitates for a few seconds, suddenly unsure of how to phrase his request,
before the words finally come to him.
A few hours later he’s finally back home again, very much sure he doesn’t like the pig-faced, smarmy director of Banefort Energy one bit. Next time he’s going to let his directors deal with the infuriating man on their own. What else is he paying them their ridiculously high salaries for, if they need him to hold their hands in business meetings like this?

Mildly annoyed, he kicks off his shoes and removes his tie, his suit and finally his white dress shirt, then rummages through his closet for something more comfortable to wear. He settles for a pair of jeans and a T-shirt proudly sporting the name Rush, even if it’s rather faded after having been washed one time too many. He’d been sorely tempted to wear an outfit like that for today’s meeting just to annoy his know-it-all advisors, whose constant hints that he isn’t taking the future of Stark Industries seriously enough are starting to wear a bit thin by now.

Just as he’s buttoning up his jeans, his stomach suddenly demands his attention by growling uproariously in protest, and truth be told, he hadn’t even noticed until now he was actually hungry. Probably too busy thinking up creative ways he’d like to put an end to that annoying, high-pitched giggle that kept spilling forth from Mr Banefort’s pudgy lips every other minute.

Oh well. Perhaps some takeaway would be a good idea?

There’s a new Indian restaurant just a few blocks away that he’s been wanting to try out. Loki likes Indian, doesn’t he?

He brushes aside the voice pointedly asking why it’s so important to him what Loki likes or not.

Yeah, Indian it is.

Grabbing his jacket off the clothes rack in the hallway, he heads out in the sunny weather, whistling as he strolls down the street, navigating expertly between strollers the size of small cars and reckless roller skaters and teenagers with headphones clamped over their spiky hair.

There’s a vague but persistent feeling that there’s something off, something that’s different than
usual, but he can’t quite put his finger on it, so he ignores it for now.

It’s only when he pushes open the door with a “Mombasa Kitchen” sign hanging slightly askew over the entrance that he notices that his leather jacket isn’t creaking any more.
Absently, he twirls a strand of hair between his fingers as he looks down at the board spread out on the table in front of him, waiting for Tony to make his next move. The man is perched on a chair opposite from Loki, his legs crossed and drawn up beneath him as he balances rather precariously on the piece of furniture, forehead creased in concentration. The two sets of game pieces have been arranged in complicated patterns, an outcome of intricate strategies constantly changing in response to the opponent eventually seeing through them, each shift adding another layer of complexity to the set-up.

Once, he had suggested that Tony open the game with five moves of his own before Loki got to make his first one, alternatively that Loki play with one or two pieces short to make the playing field more even, but Tony had flat-out refused any head-starts like that. Loki has to admit that he admires that in the man, his stubborn determination and genuine will to achieve mastery without resorting to simplifications and shortcuts.

Smacking his lips a few times, Tony eventually lifts a hand and moves one of his front pieces three steps over to the side, and then leans back in his chair with a contented grin. “How about that, eh, Bambi? Cut your planned little sneak offensive right off there, didn’t I?”

And there’s that word again – Bambi. One he’s heard so many times by now, along with the ubiquitous ‘Rudolph’ and ‘Reindeer Games’. He supposes he could have added ‘princess’ to that list as well, but it’s actually been a while since Tony last called him that, though.

And he doesn’t even know what ‘Bambi’ is supposed to mean or refer to, just that he would have liked for Tony to call him by his real name, even if it’s only once. He’s not quite sure why that should be important, he just knows that it somehow is.

Granted, that had used to prick him at first, the way it had seemed like another one of those many things denied him as a slave, along with his freedom and status and rights and everything else he had once had, as if even such a small and simple thing like his name was no longer his to claim. Somehow, it doesn’t actually feel like that any longer, like Tony is robbing him of one of the precious few things he could still lay claim to when he came here, but it doesn’t change the fact that he would have liked for Tony to actually speak his name.

Sure, he knows those are only inconsequential nicknames, and he’s heard Tony use similar addresses when talking to Thor and even Bruce during the man’s short visit in the tower, but still…

“So how are you planning to get yourself out of that one, huh, Rudolph?” comes Tony’s boastful
voice a few feet away, pulling Loki’s focus away from his little reverie and back to the game.

His gaze sweeps over the board and the white piece that is now snugly nestled in between two of Loki’s black ones. “I think I will recover,” he says, quickly deciding for a countermove that has Tony cross his arms, apparently trying to figure out Loki’s new strategy and how he should best respond to it.

As Tony ponders his next move, Loki’s mind sinks back into the previous whirl-stream of fleeting thoughts, wondering if Tony will ever put a hold to his nicknaming habit. Of course, in the big picture it’s not important and there should be a thousand more pressing issues for someone in his position. And yet, he realizes that no matter what the future might hold for him, right now, this is the most pressing issue for the time being, since all those other issues that should have been more pressing just aren’t there anymore.

And it’s strange how he’s been given so many epithets in his long life – Liesmith, Silvertongue, Deceiver, and worse still – without ever having cared overly much, and yet, all these Midgardian names, harmless as they are, bother him so much more.

Or perhaps it’s not the presence of those names as such, but the absence of his real name that is bothering him.

And maybe he’s making too big a deal out of something that really should be nothing.

But it still feels important, somehow.

Then again, it would be a trivial thing to bring to attention. Sure, it would of course have been unthinkable in Asgard, a slave presuming to tell his master how he would have liked to be addressed, but he’s not in Asgard and he knows Tony won’t take offence. Perhaps the man would even indulge him, but it’s still not an issue that he particularly wants to bring up. Because he would have liked for Tony to say his name without Loki asking him to. He would have liked for Tony to--

And that’s when he realizes something. He’s never called Tony by his name either. Not something a slave would ever have done under normal circumstances, of course, and such frivolities would have been swiftly punished by any master, but Tony isn’t any master and had even made it clear once that that’s how he wanted Loki to address him.

And yet he’s never done that. Not even once. In fact, he’s never addressed Tony as anything, except
for that one time when he had needed to call Tony’s attention in the workshop and had assumed that the expected standard address of ‘master’ would please the man.

It hadn’t.

And even if Tony had informed him of his preferences in that regard back then, Loki hadn’t been able to bring himself to actually call Tony by his name afterwards. It had felt too odd, too out of place, too incongruous, so he had opted for nothing instead. After a while, he had mostly forgotten about the issue, not having had any pressing need to directly address Tony since, and he had never thought much about it again until now.

But perhaps he should do just that? As alien and foreign as the concept of a slave doing such is, it appeals to him more and more the longer he thinks about it – to call Tony by his name. Not ‘master’, not some fancy title, but… his actual name. As if Tony isn’t his master, and Loki isn’t actually his slave.

He licks his lips that seem to have gone dry during his pondering.

“Tony?” he says, and oh, does it feel strange to speak that word to the man. But, he realizes, not nearly as strange as speaking the word ‘master’ would have been. Back in the workshop, it hadn’t felt out of place as he had forced the word past his lips, just unappealing and humiliating. But now, despite his and Tony’s relative positions, it wouldn’t really have… fit. And strange as it may feel, it also feels good speaking that name aloud for the first time.

At that, Tony raises his eyes from the board to look at him. “Yeah?” he inquires, eyebrows slightly raised.

“I was just wondering,” he says. “What does… ‘Bambi’ mean?”

Okay, that was not what he had been expecting Loki to say. Nope, in fact, he’d been expecting something along the lines of ‘I admit defeat’ or ‘you win this game’.

Alright, so he hadn’t actually expected that either, but it would still have been less surprising than what actually did leave Loki’s lips mere moments ago.
And fuck, how do you explain *that* to an alien god who doesn’t know the first thing about cartoons or Disney or Earthen wildlife?

“Uh… it’s a fictional character… like a cartoon, you know?” he offers. “As in, animated, moving pictures. So yeah, a character from a famous, eh, cartoon children’s story, with… horns. Or at least I think he has horns. Well, at least as an adult or something. Though, I’m not sure if he was ever an adult in the story. Or cartoon. But if he were real, he would have had… horns. Yeah.”

Wow, who would ever have imagined that the simple act of explaining a cartoon character would have him sounding like a babbling moron – the great Tony Stark who could give an eloquent lecture on the spot about advanced nuclear physics if someone were to wake him up in the middle of the night? And what prompted Loki to bring that up in the first place now that they are right in the middle of a Hnefatafl game?

“So, any further clarifications needed on that, Rudolph?” he says flippantly, moving a piece halfway across the board.

“No, I… see,” Loki says slowly as a hand reaches out and impassively scoots the nearest piece over a short distance towards the middle.

And Tony gets the distinct impression that he’s just said something wrong, but he has no idea what. Still, there’s no denying that clear look of disappointment on the god’s face, as if he had been hoping for Tony’s reply to be something different entirely. Maybe he didn’t appreciate the fact that Tony has named him after a character in a story for children. But it’s just a cartoon, after all, and there are definitely worse nicknames to be had, aren’t there?

They sit there for a while, continuing their game in silence, the only sound in the room being the faint click of the pieces being set down at their new positions on the board.

And it’s not until several long moments later that he realizes that there had been something different about this short bit of conversation compared to all their previous ones, something that he had failed to take note of until now, fully immersed in the game as he had been.

But this was actually the first time Loki has ever called him ‘Tony’.

Blinking in surprise, his head snaps up to look at Loki, but the god’s gaze is directed at the board
between them and doesn’t meet with his.

Well, there’s definitely a first time for everything.

And damn if this isn’t a billion times more preferable to that dreadful time that Loki had called him ‘master’. For some reason, the idea of his name from Loki’s mouth is oddly appealing, even if it was just spoken normally and not moaned in pleasure while Tony…

He squashes the thought as quickly as it came. Don’t even go there, Tony.

And maybe it’s a sign that Loki is feeling more comfortable around him now, that he has shed another layer of those fucked-up concepts imprinted into his brain of how it’s appropriate for him to act based on what is expected of slaves back in Asgard.

But regardless, it had been nice hearing his name like that…

And that’s when the realization strikes him like lightening from a clear blue sky, and it’s so obvious that he can’t help but feeling like an idiot for not seeing it immediately. Of course, Loki doesn’t care about who Bambi is, or whatever harebrained Midgardian story he appears in. No, he had asked because he had been hoping Tony would reciprocate and call him by his name in turn, as opposed to all these nicknames he’s been calling the god ever since he came here.

He also realizes, then, why such an ostensibly simple thing might be so significant for someone in Loki’s position. Not that Tony has any idea what slaves in Asgard are usually called, but maybe they’re not actually addressed by their real names, but merely as ‘slave’ or ‘you’ or ‘number thirty-seven’ or whatever Asgardian conventions dictate.

And as nice as he had found it to hear his name spoken by Loki, he doesn’t doubt that for the god, any such feelings on his part would be multiplied if Tony were to speak his in turn. A small token of recognition, perhaps, but pivotal nevertheless.

He can’t help but feeling like an idiot. How come he didn’t see this before, given how obvious it seems to him now?

His gaze drifts down to the board, then back up to the unmoving and silent god where it lingers for a few seconds before it returns to the board again. Then, he gives a broad smile.
“Loki?” he says, the grin on his face getting even wider as he reaches out and scoots forward a white piece. “I’m not sure if there’s an equivalent expression in this game, but here on Earth, this is the moment where we would have said ‘check mate’.”

The Hnefatafl game is long finished and Tony out of the tower again for some meeting, but the memories from their game are still lingering. For the first time, Tony had actually won.

Of course, his victory had only come about because Loki had totally lost his focus during the latter stages of the game, deep into his own mulling thoughts as he had been. The game hadn’t seemed important, then; all he could think about was Tony’s stubborn refusal to speak his name, even once, and even though Loki had only moments ago spoken his.

But then, Tony had suddenly broken the silence hanging between them.

‘Loki’, he had said, and he can’t remember his own name ever sounding so sweet to his ears.

And it’s amazing, really, how much power one single word can hold, because in that moment, he hadn’t felt anything like a slave, or like property, or like a thrall, but like…

… like Loki.
Chapter 73

An ear-splitting crack of thunder and a flash of lightning cleaving the blue sky in two is all the warning Tony gets.

Only minutes after the aberrant weather phenomenon, the God of Thunder himself is standing in Tony’s living room, callous hands grasping his upper arms in such a tight grip that he winces. *That* is going to leave bruises tomorrow.

“Man of Iron!” the god exclaims, happiness glowing on his face like he’s a little kid on Christmas that has just been gifted with a flamethrower. “I am most joyous to return to your abode once more!”

So the news from Asgard must be good, then. Thor, as always, emotes like a fourteen-year old girl, and there’s no mistaking that excited expression on his face. Tony feels himself relax a little bit, even if he doesn’t know yet exactly *how* good the news will actually be, if it’s great-good or just semi-good. Some of Asgard’s definition of… things seem to differ quite a lot from his own, after all.

“Yeah, it’s wonderful to have you, Point Break, really. Though, I would be even more of a gracious host if you’d stop squeezing my arms like they’re wet towels,” Tony says to the beaming god, who lets go and gives him a friendly slap on the back, the force of which, coming from any other person, would have counted as battery.

And then, Thor turns to Loki, who is standing with his arms crossed in front of him, a sullen look on his face.

Thor is not deterred, though. He braves the distance between his brother and himself with three mighty steps and wraps his arms around the more slender figure, who doesn’t make any attempts to free himself, but also doesn’t return the fraternal embrace.

“I come bearing hopeful tidings,” Thor beams at them once he’s let go of Loki, who looks like a moping kid more than anything else. Perhaps the brother of the boy with the flamethrower, who only got socks in his parcel.

Still, it looks like Loki’s ears peak up a little at that, but if there’s any other reaction to Thor’s words, he reigns them in, watching the Thunderer as if the god is about to tell them what he had for dinner last night rather than sharing news affecting Loki’s entire future.
Tony’s ears peak up too. Perhaps it really is great-good news, then, even if he’s kinda doubtful. “Alright, so what’s the deal, then? Don’t leave us hanging here, big guy,” he urges the thunder god. He wants to hear this now and he’s quite sure Loki does too, even if the god looks like he’s trying to pretend that he doesn’t.

“Well, my friends,” Thor speaks up, voice booming as he draws himself up to full height to make his important announcement, and Tony notices that Loki is leaning forward at that, if only a little. “I have put forward the plea for leniency on Loki’s behalf before the throne of Odin, and today the Allfather informed me that he has granted your request of an audience, Man of Iron, to speak further of this matter.”

Tony’s eyebrows shot upwards. That was not what he had been expecting. Totally, definitely not.

“Uhm, Thunderboy, I don’t remember asking for an audience in the first place,” he says, not at all sure he’s liking where this is going.

Thor opens his mouth to answer, but Loki interrupts him. “So that’s the best you’ve managed to come up with after all these weeks, Thor? An audience? And you really believe this is going to change anything?”

Thor gives Loki a calm look, blue steel meeting green ember. “At least the Allfather didn’t turn my plea down right away, as I had feared he might,” he says, lifting a hand towards Loki, palm out, in a placating gesture. “If he had been completely unwilling to reconsider your sentence, I am sure he would not have offered this audience in the first place.”

“And what did you answer him?” Loki asks, not sounding convinced at all.

Thor looks surprised, as if there was ever any doubt as to the nature of his answer. “Why, I told him that Man of Iron would be honoured to travel to Asgard and meet with the Allfather, of course.” He pauses, as if giving Loki a chance to object, but he chooses not to, so Thor continues. “Though there are no guarantees about the outcome, this is surely better than nothing. At least it is a sign of hope that Father is ready to listen to someone who wishes to speak in favour of clemency on your behalf.”

“Or an empty hope dangled in front of my face,” Loki retorts. “This will be nothing but a pointless waste of time, Thor. If Odin was truly considering showing any lenience, he would have--“

“Hello!” Tony’s voice cuts through the bickering, and as the two squabbling gods turn to him, he
waves his hands in their general direction. “Yeah, remember me, Tony Stark? I’m still here, and I suppose no one is going to ask me if I actually want to take an intergalactic trip through some space wormhole into another dimension? And get all barbequed by cosmic rays before getting ripped into pieces by time-space compression and all those other pesky side effects?” Okay, he might be a tech-geek and science freak and all, but he does value his life more than throwing himself into some magic space-hole that could easily dissolve his organic body into a swarm of freely bouncing molecules and atoms.

Thor smiles kindly, as if Tony’s a little puppy afraid of a butterfly that’s just landed on his nose.

“Have no fear, Man of Iron, you are far from the first mortal to visit Asgard. Even though human bodies are fragile in comparison to those of the Aesir, the journey itself is harmless and without adverse effects even for mortals.” The declaration is followed by a knowing nod, as if Thor has just provided the most basic information in all the Nine or Eight or whatever number of realms there are.

Well, that’s barely half-way reassuring. “And how many of these mortals arrived safely back on Earth again after their little Space Odyssey 2010?” Never hurts to check, does it?

“Why, all those who were sent back home arrived safely in Midgard,” the Thunderer assures him.

Tony takes a step back at that, squinting an eye at Thor. “Hold on there, buddy. Just what is the whole ‘all those who were sent back home’ supposed to mean? You mean there were people who didn’t get sent back?”

“Only a few. Some mortals created certain... incidents during their stay,” Thor says, foot scraping a little against the marble tires, looking like he’s regretting his previous choice of words. “They were unfortunately unable to be returned to their native realm.”

“That’s lovely. And it’s really making me warm up to the idea of this intergalactic space trip, you know.”

Thor looks distinctly unhappy. “Some mortals got into fights they should have stayed out of or provoked warriors who were not the kind to let challenges or slights pass by unanswered. But these mortals were foolish, and you are a wise man, friend, and know better than to invite such trouble.”

_Uh-huh. Staying out of trouble has always been Tony Stark’s forte. Not._
“Uh, so how about I just write my official statement down on some fancy roll of parchment instead and have it sent back with you? That should amount to the same thing, shouldn’t it? Or hey, even better – how about daddy dearest coming over here to see me instead of me waltzing over there to your far side of the universe?”

He would have laughed at the bewildered expression on Thor’s face if the circumstances had been different. Like Tony had just told him he was about to get married to his vacuum cleaner or begin a new carrier as a pole dancer.

“No, that’s not possible,” Thor finally says, voice insistent and firm, as if Tony is just being pig-headed and obstinate. “No one refuses an audience with the Allfather.”

And if it’s one thing that Tony doesn’t like to hear, it’s those words not possible.

“And what’s Allfather almighty going to do if I simply tell him ‘no way José’? Smite me with a flash of lightning? Make the ground split open into an abyss of fire and brimstone under my feet during my Sunday morning stroll? Huh?” Damn, he just hates it when people he hasn’t even met are trying to tell him what he should do. He gets enough of that as the CEO of Stark Industries as it already is.

He throws Loki a glance in the passing, and winces at the sight. The god’s face has fallen at Tony’s words, and there are bitter lines of terrible disappointment etched into his features, like he can’t believe what he’s hearing. His posture is slumping, as if the weight of his body has suddenly tripled. Most of all he looks like a drowning man clinging desperately to a life preserver, only to have the hand of god descend from the heavens above to rip the last chance of deliverance out of his desperate hands.

Tony sighs inwardly. Okay, so he wasn’t actually being serious about refusing, he just had to make a token protest, because he’s Tony Stark and because the idea of going on a magic field trip really does freak him out like there’s no tomorrow.

Loki’s mouth is opening as if he’s about to say something, but before the god can speak, Tony quickly cuts him off. And he knows he’s going to regret this one way or the other, but whatever.

“Can I at least bring my Iron Man suit along?”

Thor is beaming again, and all is well for a few seconds before the Thunderer answers. “Unfortunately, that would be inadvisable. Visitors from other realms are not allowed to enter
Asgard armed without having been granted special permission. You will not pass Heimdall the gatekeeper with your suit, I’m afraid.”

Tony is about to protest the idiocy of this no-bringing-weapons rule, before he remembers airport security on Earth. Okay, fair enough, then.

So he settles for a sigh instead, rubbing his palms over his face. “Alright, but I need to fix a Visa, and get some vaccinations first. Let’s see now – smallpox, rabies, the Black Death, cosmic measles,” he ticks each one off on his fingers. “Yeah, I think that should cover it. So when are we leaving for Narnia, then?”

“Why, we will leave on the morrow!” Thor declares pompously, as if he is making a speech before an assembly of loyal supporters.

Tony only groans.

He really is going to Asgard.
Just like when Thor was here to visit last time, Tony decides to go for home-delivery pizza – greasy, fattening, unhealthy slices of cheese, salami, cheese, meatballs, and cheese.

*Perfect.*

Of course, just like last time, neither of his guests apparently has much of an appetite, judging by the way they’re fiddling around with the food on their plates. Well, at least Thor is making a valiant effort to be courteous and eat his fill, even if he’s far from his usual gluttonous self, but Loki is barely touching his pizza, managing to look sombre and annoyed at the same time.

While Thor might have been in a bright and sunny mood when he came here, it’s obvious that Loki’s sullenness is starting to take its toll on him too, contagious like a bout of fleas. He wonders if Thor expected his little brother to be as beaming and cheerful as him upon hearing the news from Asgard, because in that case he’s been in for some serious disappointment.

Tony’s not sure what *he* expected Loki’s reaction to be – when it all comes down to it, it’s not a decision either way, and could end up swinging into any direction. Still, it’s better than a straight-out no, with no chance of any pardons or paroles whatsoever on the horizon. And if Odin has warmed up to the idea of hearing Tony’s opinions on the matter, well, that should count on the positive side, shouldn’t it?

Unless he’s been invited merely for the entertainment value – look at the Midgardian monkey with his hilariously deluded ideas of how punishment should work, now let’s all point and laugh from our seats of godly High-and-Mightiness. Or, alternatively, brought to the Royal Court of Asgard just to be set straight and told in no uncertain terms that Loki’s sentence has been carved in stone and don’t you puny mortals dare to presume to interfere or think you know better than us.

Then again, it seems a bit overkill to bring him all the way to Asgard just to tell him that, so maybe Odin is willing to give them *something*, to budge a little bit, even if it’s only an inch or two in their favour.

On the other hand, he doesn’t feel comforted by how it took so many weeks for Odin to reach his decision. Was it really such a difficult choice to make, letting someone come over to Asgard and speak in Loki’s favour? It’s not as if the guy is obliged to indulge Tony in anything he says, so if merely the audience in itself brought about all this hesitance, he has to admit that it doesn’t really bode well for the final outcome.
No doubt, the very same things are going through Loki’s head, the way he’s holed up into himself, seemingly lost in his own mulling thoughts. Suddenly, it must all seem so real, as opposed to the more distant possibility it had been during Thor’s absence. And now, the equally real possibility that Odin will let his sentence stand, and Loki will remain a slave for the rest of his long life, has also edged closer.

He tries to take some comfort in the fact that Thor had seemed considerably more positive and hopeful, but given that Tony has never met Odin, he can’t really judge which of the two outlooks has the most basis in reality.

He takes another big bite out of his greasy pizza slice, tearing a big chunk of crust off, and then chews loudly. The conversation around the table is going haltingly and Loki has barely spoken a full sentence since they sat down. Thor was initially performing better, but once Tony had brought up the incident with the Einherjers in the subway, Thor’s face had transformed into that patented sad and wet puppy look of his and he had not seemed very conducive to further conversation.

They eat in silence for a while, then Loki picks up his empty glass of water and walks up to the sink to fill it up. Despite all the months of living in Tony’s tower, he’s never gotten to like anything carbonated, instead preferring plain tap water with his meals. Thor gives his brother a brief glance, and suddenly Tony is reminded of the awkward breakfast they had shared during the Thunderer’s last visit and his surprise at seeing that Loki wasn’t being ordered to serve them, that he’d been allowed to sit at the table and have breakfast, that he had even gotten the same food to eat as the rest of them.

Tony finds himself distinctly grateful that Thor hasn’t shown any obvious such reactions this time, though he still hopes that Thor isn’t interpreting the water as Loki not being allowed the fine Midgardian draught known as Coke that he and Thor are currently enjoying. A part of him is itching to make a comment on that, to explain to Thor that Loki has chosen the water himself and is free to have the brown fizzy stuff if he wants to, but he just doesn’t feel up to dragging any of that crap up right now.

It’s just a drink anyway.

The splash of water from the sink is almost ear-deafening in the near-silence around the kitchen table, somehow bringing even more attention to the lacklustre social interaction. A few moments later the tap is turned off and silence would have reigned once more if it hadn’t been for Loki’s voice breaking it.

“Tony?” he says evenly, turning his head to look at him over his shoulder. “It seems that the drain to
the sink is clogged.”

Wonderful.

“Allright, I’ll have someone over to fix it.” he says, shrugging. “Jarvis, call a plumber and have him come here tomorrow. After our departure to LaLa-Land.”

“Very well, sir,” comes the AI’s voice, oblisiting as ever.

After that little exchange, Tony is about to resign himself to another silence when his gaze drifts over to Thor and halts right there.

The god’s mouth is hanging half-open in what could best be described as shocked surprise and disbelief as his eyes keep darting back and forth between Loki and Tony. For a while, Tony isn’t sure just what on Earth the problem is this time, but then, realization dawns.

Of course. That has to be it. Loki just called him Tony, and surely that is one of the things that a slave in Asgard would never do in a million years – calling his master by his name. And right now, Thor is probably struggling to decide whether he should be more stunned that Loki would presume to do such a thing in the first place or that Tony apparently couldn’t care less.

And damn, he doesn’t feel up to dealing with any of this now, but he can’t just let this shit slide either. So he turns to the Thunderer, giving him his most sunny, unperturbed smile.

“Yeah, I know your people are having some difficulties getting that part into your heads, but contrary to popular Asgardian opinion, my name is ‘Tony’ and not ‘Man of Iron’.” A short pause. “Nor is it anything else.”

He puts deliberate stress on the last two words, not wanting to take the word master into his mouth; it’s just to fucking ugly and foul-tasting. Thor is no doubt getting the point anyway, judging by the incredulous stare. But at least he keeps quiet and merely gives a brief nod, and for that, Tony is grateful. He doesn’t want to discuss any of that right now, especially not within earshot of Loki, so instead he returns to his food, and Thor follows his example.

Loki, however, does not. Instead, he merely sits there alternating between staring out the window and down on his plate, empty except for the left-over crumbs from the grand total of one pizza slices
Sighing inwardly, Tony reaches out for the nearest box of pizza, still half-full, and nudges it into Loki’s direction. “Come on, Loki, have another slice, will you. You have barely eaten anything,” he urges the reticent god.

Loki turns his faraway stare over to him and shakes his head. “I’m not hungry,” he says and then scoots his chair back, standing up. “Excuse me.”

And with that, he turns and walks out the door, leaving Tony and Thor and the pizza boxes to their own devices.

Tony sighs, out loud this time, rubbing a hand over his face. Okay, so Loki most definitely is not in a good mood. A part of him wants to stay here and indulge in whatever tiny comfort the pizza can offer him while trying to ignore all this shit, but another, more insistent part wants to hurry after Loki and make sure he’s doing alright, and that’s the part that wins out.

“Okay, big guy, just finish your pizza and I’ll be back in a minute,” he says as he gets up from his chair, about to head for the door to follow Loki, but a strong hand around his arm stops him short. He turns around to face Thor, who is looking at him with a crease between his eyebrows the depth of Grand Canyon.

“Please, Man of Iron, forgive my brother for his disrespectful behaviour,” the god says and damn if it isn’t the closest to pleading as Tony has ever heard from him. “He means no ill, I am sure, he is merely… distressed.”

And the vice-like fingers circling his arm fucking hurt, making him grimace as he tries to pull himself loose. Thor, quickly realizing what he’s doing, lets his hand fall to his side, the Grand Canyon frown deepening into the Marianas Trench.

One look at that concerned puppy face is enough to tell Tony exactly what it is that Thor is worried about – that Tony’s about to go off and have Loki punished for his un-slave-like behaviour that would of course have been unacceptable back where Thor comes from. And that just makes him want to scream at the skies in frustration – obviously Loki isn’t the only one with a ridiculously flat learning curve in these matters.

“For fuck’s sake, Thor,” he shoots back, annoyed and suddenly mentally queasy. “I’m just going to
He’s standing in front of the window in the living room, looking outside, a strange mixture of feelings swirling inside of him. Thor is back, they’re all going to Asgard, and there might be a tiny chance of his sentence being changed. Up until now, it had all felt so impossible, so far away, since he’d been preoccupied trying to deal with the here and now. Like a distant dream that would never come true anyway.

But now, he’s about to have his future unveiled and find out whether the faint little hope flitting inside of him will ever amount to anything, or just be squashed into nothing as he’s irrevocably doomed to having to spend the rest of his life as a slave.

Of course, his current circumstances hardly leave him room to complain, given the situation, but he’s not entertaining any delusions that his future masters will turn out to be nearly as kind as Tony. There are so many disturbing thoughts that come with that, and in the end it had simply become too much, so he had gotten up from the table and left, desperately needing a few moments alone.

There are suddenly footfalls closing in behind him, too soft to belong to Thor.

Tony.

With that, he’s suddenly hit by the realization of what he did mere moments ago – refusing Tony’s insistence of another slice of pizza, instead standing up and leaving the room.

A slave directly disobeying his master – and, to make matters even worse – making him loose face by doing so right in front of a guest. Any slave on Asgard could have expected a world of pain and hurt after a stunt like that. And yet, the thought didn’t even enter his mind as he refused the pizza and walked out. Not even now, as his head is clearer and Tony is standing right there behind him as a reminder, does he feel any trepidation about possible consequences to follow for his unseemly behaviour. Which should be strange, and yet it’s not.

“Everything alright there?” Tony says.
“Yes,” he replies, “it’s fine.” But even he can hear how his strained voice is belying his words.

Then Tony’s hand is suddenly, unexpectedly on his shoulder, gently touching. And it’s just like those times before – when he broke down crying in the workshop, and when he was terrified that Tony would hand him over to Barton after he had spilled those little balls of clay all over the living room floor – the hand is there on his shoulder, its presence soothing and comforting.

“Well, I’m sure your daddy will reconsider, or he wouldn’t have bothered with all this hullabaloo in the first place, right?” Tony offers.

“Perhaps,” he says, not sure how much truth there will be to Tony’s words, but they are oddly comforting nevertheless. As is the hand making a reassuring little squeeze, sending off a strange tingle of something along his spine.

And he finds himself wanting to lean into that touch, to let those arms wrap around him to offer more comfort still, and perhaps even--

“Brother, are you alright?” comes a booming, yet hesitant voice, interrupting his trail of thoughts, and the moment is gone.

“I’m fine,” he says curtly, crossing his arms, turning away from the man standing in the doorway. “Just leave me be, Thor.”

He doesn’t feel in the mood for talking to Thor right now. His mind is too occupied with the fact that he’s going to Asgard and all that that heralds.

But at least, Tony will be going with him.
Just a warning – I will be mixing Marvel universe with Norse Mythology, so not everything about Asgard is necessarily going to be like in the movie.

If Tony hadn’t known better, he’d say that Thor is nervous. Okay, so maybe gods of thunder don’t get nervous, but at least they *fret*.

“Now,” Thor repeats for at least the fourth time, “keep in mind that this is an unofficial visit and we will keep a low profile during your stay.” He makes a brief pause as his gaze sweeps over to where Loki is standing before it returns to Tony again. “The unfortunate truth is that my brother has, both through his acts of mischief over the centuries and his more recent doings, made a lot of enemies in Asgard, which is why it’s wise if as few people as possible are informed of his return now that he doesn’t have his magic or powers anymore. No one will dare to harm Loki in my presence, of course, but as a prince of Asgard I will have some official business to attend to during your visit. However, as long as my brother remains in my chambers with you around to keep watch over him while I’m away, he will be safe. We take guest rights very seriously in Asgard, and as long as you’re a guest under my roof, your… authority over Loki will be respected, provided that he behaves as it’s expected.”

Loki gives Thor a glare. “How about you not speak as if I weren’t present?” he snaps, sounding like he’s straddling a precarious ledge and someone is tugging him towards the gaping abyss below. The god is wearing his Asgardian clothes again, though they’ve been washed since last time. The green and black apparel looks strangely off on him after all the time spent wearing band shirts and sweatpants and T-shirts and slacks. Tony isn’t sure if it’s the alien clothing creating an illusion, but Loki somehow looks darker, more brooding than before.

Thor turns towards his younger brother, and there is steel flashing in his eyes as he grasps Loki’s shoulder in an unrelenting grip. “Please remember, brother, that once we have arrived on the other side of the rainbow bridge we will not be in Midgard anymore, or you might bring misfortune upon yourself.” Thor’s voice is as unwavering and insistent as the hands on Loki’s shoulder, and the younger god tries to twist away, but his attempts are unsuccessful.

The fingers dig a little deeper, and Loki stops his squirming to meet the insistent stare with his own sullen one. Thor gives him a little shake, as if to further accentuate the importance of what he’s about to say. “As much as it pains me to say it, you cannot go around acting like you have been doing here in Midgard. That kind of behaviour is not acceptable in Asgard, even if Man of Iron has allowed it until now.”
“I know that,” Loki snarls, tense like a rubber band pulled taut to the point of breaking. “You do not need to remind me of what will be expected of me in Asgard. I am well aware.”

Thor’s voice softens, a calm breeze in stark contrast to Loki’s edginess. “I am only telling you this for your own sake, Loki. I do not wish to see you harmed in any way. But you will need to be able to swallow your pride if you are to prevent worse things from befalling you.”

“I will manage,” Loki retorts, turning away.

Tony makes a grimace. No matter what Thor says, he really has a bad feeling about going to Asgard with Loki in tow. But as this seems to be the only way that Loki might ever have his freedom again, he can’t really refuse.

“Very well, then,” Thor nods as he looks his two travel companions over. “Are you ready to depart?”

“As ready as can be, Scotty. Just beam us up there.” Tony slings his duffle bag across his shoulder, even though Thor has already told him that it will not be necessary to bring luggage, as everything he could possibly need will be provided for him in Asgard.

However, Tony still thinks that if he’s going to stand before the Allfather himself, at least he wants to be wearing clean underwear. And he isn’t sure about the general hygiene level of a people who probably have neither running water nor central heating. Not to mention that Thor is always wearing the same outfit whenever he isn’t going incognito in Midgardian clothing, so Tony might as well bring his own stuff along. He sure as heck isn’t going to be wearing any of those extremely uncomfortable-looking Asgardian fashion statements, if that’s what Thor expects.

Thor tugs at the thin chain around his neck, bringing up a silver medallion from beneath his shirt – their combined travel ticket and transport to Asgard.

Tony eyes the thing suspiciously. Runes are carved all over it, and the entire piece is sure to be brimming with magic, even though he can’t feel a thing of it. For all he knows, it could have been one of those gothic pieces of cheap jewellery favoured by certain brands of angsty teenagers.

Thor catches Tony’s drifting, slightly suspicious glance. “I know it might not look very impressive, but this medallion has been crafted with my father’s most powerful magic, and will offer us all safe
transportation to Asgard and back. Have no worries, friend, I have used this to travel between our realms several times, and there have been no troubles or problems whatsoever.”

“Are you still sure it’s good for transporting all of us at the same time, though?” Tony waggles his fingers to indicate their little group. “I mean, you’re only one but there’s three of us now and the medallion might, I don’t know, drop someone on the way for exceeding maximum weight allowance?”

Thor smiles at him, the kind of smile that Tony remembers giving to little children asking him to explain how his suit works.

“The number of people is of no importance, Man of Iron. Father’s medallion will work, do not worry,” Thor says with the deadpan confidence that is typically displayed by people who have no clue whatsoever about how the things they’re talking about really work.

Still, Tony can’t find any further immediate objections for the moment, as much as he doesn’t like this one bit.

“Okay, then. At least I’ve paid my insurance fee, so what do I have to worry about?” He throws his hands out in a questioning gesture, not expecting a reply. At least Loki, who’s well-acquainted with magic on a personal level, doesn’t question their means of transportation, which is a lot more comforting than Thor’s empty reassurances.

“Gather around me,” Thor says, medallion in his hand, dramatically raised to the skies.

Tony and Loki shuffle closer and come to a stand in front of Thor. Loki is looking tense, taut like a bowstring, but Tony is quite sure that it has nothing to do with the intergalactic inter-dimensional trip in itself, but more with what lies beyond. After all, it’s his entire future hanging in the balance, when it all comes down to it.

Thor grabs hold of them with one mighty hand, clutching them both to his chest in what would have been an awkwardly intimate gesture from anyone else but the God of Thunder. His fingers close around the medallion in his palm, and for a while nothing happens. Tony is about to make a quip about empty tanks and gas stations, but then there is a faint hum in the air, followed by a strange bluish light emanating from Thor’s hand.

In one moment of compressed singularity, the hum turn into a loud crack and the faint light into a
blinding blue flash. The next thing Tony knows, his stomach *lurches*, like it’s being turned inside out, and there’s a sudden, violent jerk in no sensible direction, neither up nor down nor to any side. The world explodes in a kaleidoscope of lights and colours and little blinking pin-point stars in the distance before he’s enveloped by a compressing blackness, an empty void swallowing him up.

He’s spit out again in what feels like only a fraction of a second later, ungracefully falling to his hands and knees, his insides heaving and head spinning like he’s just stepped out of a cosmic roller-coaster.

Luckily, his breakfast makes the wise decision to remain where it is, albeit after some obvious hesitation. And he’s really grateful he didn’t have that bottle of scotch he’d been considering emptying before going on this intergalactic field trip, or it would probably have been somewhere else than his stomach right now.

But at least he can feel solid ground under his feet – okay, hands and knees – and slowly, he lifts his head, blinking, still a little wobbly.

And he almost falls on his ass in surprise at the marvellous, imposing sight that greets him as his eyes ascend from the ground. Holy hell, is that *Asgard*? Truth be told, despite Thor’s boasts, he’d been expecting something more along the veins of… a pimped up Viking village, not something taken straight out of a space-fantasy postcard.

*Woah.*

The place towering before him is enormous, spires and pinnacles reaching for the sky. His own tower would have looked like a stomped-down mole-hill in comparison to this alien Eighth Wonder of the World. Like a palace and a fortress and a futuristic metropolis all in one, the massive city glitters in the sun, like it’s been covered with fine-coated gold, basking in the splendour that is no doubt millennia of mysterious history and ancient magic.

As he gapes, Thor’s hand is suddenly on his shoulder, the unexpected weight nearly making him fall flat on his face again. “So, what do you think, Man of Iron?” he says with pride overflowing his voice.

“It’s, uh, a hell of a lot more, *epic* than I imagined,” Tony manages, not quite sure what to say that will do it justice. He manages to stumble to his own two feet, albeit unsteadily, trying to get his bearings and tear his eyes away from the majestic thing in the distance that is currently occupying his entire field of vision, stretching from one horizon to another.
It is only then he notices the odd... texture of the ground beneath his feet and he looks down, for the first time really noticing what he is actually standing on. To say nothing of that what is flanking him, which seems to be... nothing. Only a gaping void of emptiness opening up beside him, and he is standing on this flimsy bridge that doesn’t even--

“Bifrost, my friend,” Thor pleasantly informs him. “Or at least what’s been rebuilt of it so far. Bifrost,” he repeats, “the bridge spanning worlds and connecting realms throughout the void.”

And Tony gets that sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach as he can’t help but gaze into that mind-shattering, bone-crushing emptiness below. It seems to him a man could throw himself off this bridge and fall for an eternity through that shapeless, all-encompassing nothingness, and he shudders at the thought.

“Tell the construction workers that they should really put a railing up here. Someone might trip and fall.”

He can hear Loki make an incomprehensible sound somewhere behind him at that, a strange mixture between a snort and a choke.

“Let’s continue,” Thor urges them on with a wave. “There is no point in us dallying here.”

And Tony picks himself together, following after the retreating red cape sweeping before him as Thor walks toward the gleaming kingdom in the distance with decisive, brisk steps. Loki walks a pace behind, but where Thor’s steps are determined and resolute, his are unenthusiastic and reluctant.

The ground beneath Tony’s feet glitters like hoarfrost in the sun, its bright colours intermingling and blinking like stars a thousand galaxies away. It’s like watching a prism dispersing a million rays from the sun, only to concentrate them again a second later.

And it’s beautiful.
Chapter 76

The ground beneath his feet gleams and sparkles as he traipses after the red cape swirling a few steps ahead of him. Like coloured ice or shattered prisms it glitters, specks of light dancing across the bridge in that peculiar way that he has seen nowhere else but here.

*Bifrost.* He still remembers it so clearly, how he fell off it, or rather, how he just let go of all those childish notions and false pretence and let himself fall – unwanted and unneeded. A failure.

And so he fell from grace, from Asgard, from the realm that was no longer his. The realm he had once sought to rule, if only to finally surpass Thor in something, though he isn’t quite so sure why anymore.

After all, the throne did become his, during a brief intermission lined with failure and disappointment, and he didn’t get even one moment of satisfaction or joy from it. He should have felt delighted in the knowledge that Thor had been banished to Midgard, rendered powerless, and that he, Loki was now rightfully king, and yet, the anticipated elation had failed to present itself.

He isn’t sure what he had expected to gain, really, except for Gungnir and elevated seating arrangements. Because that seemed to be all he got from his new lot in life. Perhaps he had once been naïve to believe he would receive respect, deference, esteem, all that came so easily to Thor, but he soon realized that even as king, he would have no more of those things than he had had as a prince.

He well remembers the shocked and disbelieving looks from the Warriors Three and Sif when they understood that he had ascended to become ruler of Asgard. Their reluctance to kneel down – the slowness only a step short of open rebellion – the distrust shining in their eyes, the weak charade of loyalty that he didn’t buy for a second. It was all too obvious, how they thought him a usurper who had no business sitting on that throne at all.

It should have come as no surprise, of course, that none of these loyal followers to Thor would take well to seeing him presiding there, his presence a blotch staining the supposed perfection of the royal office. No, someone like him could of course never be accepted as king. He had understood that as he sat there, watching the four Aesir in front of him reluctantly kneel down, making a mockery of his title and station, turning it into a flimsy pretence, a child’s play at being king and ruler.

In the end, he was still as disliked as ever before. If anything, his ascent had only served to cement that opinion. The Warriors Three and Sif were not the only ones unable to come to terms with his new status; in fact, their reaction turned out to be the norm. The tension in the room, as newcomers
just having found out about the transfer of the royal title looked to each other, hoping that someone braver than them would protest the outrageous state of things or that someone of a more lucid mind would laugh and tell them that this was only a mirage, one of the trickster’s usual plays and games.

No, he knew there’d be no loyalty or devotion to be had; grudging, dutiful obedience the best he might hope for, if even that.

Of course, he should have expected it. And still, it had irked him like a sharp thorn plunged deep under the skin, prickled at him like a mattress made out of rusty nails.

No, there was not even one loyal face among the masses, not a single one who’d be willing to serve him as eagerly as they would have served Thor.

That abject dislike and distrust, and that was before the truth of his heritage became known.

How could he ever have hoped for anything else? The thought is ludicrous, preposterous. This realm is Thor’s, the golden warrior, the beloved prince. Not his, the magic-wielding, argr-practicing monster.

And in the end, not even Midgard, the realm of the mortals, would be his. Of course, it would have been a weak substitute, had he succeeded in claiming it, but at least he would have been the king of something, had something that Thor didn’t. A realm to call his own, even if he would have had no idea what to do with it, what satisfaction it would have given him in the end. Humans were, of course, weak and fragile, and being the ruler of such a world would have been a short-lived pleasure, but at least he would have been king where Thor wasn’t, the Aesir who never wanted him as a ruler all far away, their opinions of no matter as he ascended his surrogate throne.

However, his way of revenge, of proving himself, had proved rash and ill-advised. But there had been a lot of time to think in that abyss. To let his bitterness and resentment fester, to let the desire to prove himself push all other thoughts and needs aside. And then the Chitauri came along, giving him an offer he couldn’t refuse. It had made perfect sense, then – humans were small and insignificant, why shouldn’t he be allowed to rule a race like that? The weak were made to be ruled, after all – that was how it had always been, hadn’t it? What he had been taught his entire life – strength was all that mattered; just look at Thor, the embodiment of everything that was valued in Asgard: power, might, martial prowess. And if the humans couldn’t defend their world, if they were beneath whoever came to conquer them, surely they didn’t deserve the privilege of ruling for themselves, right? No, they’d be better off with someone stronger like him to take over, he had told himself.

But things had spiralled out of control, and in the end he had failed, had been brought to the end of
his wits and strength by these supposedly weak and feeble creatures.

Cast out of Asgard, made a slave in Midgard; neither of the realms would have him as their king. Certainly, everyone here is glad to be rid of him, glad he’s been given over to Midgard, where he could be expected to suffer an endless string of indignities and abuse and humiliation after his ill-fated attempt at taking over their world.

And now, he’s been being brought back here in disgrace for a second time – then, chained and muzzled; now, a slave.

Though, there is still something different from last time, despite the degradation. Because back then, he had entertained no hope whatsoever as he walked behind Thor, as always one step behind, seeing the gilded spires and towering buildings of Asgard rising in the distance, implacably drawing closer, and with them his doom.

This time, however, the hope is tiny and small, only a flicker, and he really should know better than to allow its continued existence and instead extinguish the preposterous thing himself before Odin does.

But despite the degradation of coming back to his homeland as a lowly slave, that little glimmer of hope still shines just brightly enough to dispel the dark and dreary shadow that returning like this casts over him. Because maybe, just maybe, there might be the chance of… something.

Not like the utter bleakness he saw in his future last time, when he had expected death, execution, to follow after the humiliating and totally unnecessary spectacle of a trial. Because what point would there be in holding one, when the outcome was already ascertained, when his guilt was already unassailable, other than as a further humiliation, putting him up for display for everyone’s amusement so everyone could point their fingers at the monster who fancied himself a king?

Though, he wonders how many would even recognize him this time, most people not expecting him to be here, and him not wearing his usual regal clothing. Thor, everyone would recognize no matter the situation, no matter what he’d be wearing, but not the second prince, the one that no one ever paid any attention to or ever noticed.

Well, not until his trial, that is, then all of a sudden it seemed like all of Asgard paid him all the attention he could have possibly wished for. All the interest and notice that had eluded him over the centuries suddenly came back in spades, as to make up for the previous negligence.
And he remembers it so well, the expectancy of the assembled rabble, the collective drawn breath, held in suspense, as his sentence was about to be pronounced. How the crowd had imperceptibly drifted closer to the stand, as not to miss one single word that the Allfather spoke.

But the one thing that had been first and foremost on his mind, then, burdening him with the weight of a thousand mountains, hadn’t been the sentencing awaiting him, as he had already resigned himself to the outcome.

No, it had been the fact that during the long, arduous trial, nobody had spoken up in his defence. No one had stood up for him, no one had offered even a word in his favour.

Nobody.

Not that he had expected anyone to, of course. And why should they? He already knew what they thought of him before all this – his disgraceful preoccupation with magic, unfit for a prince and a dishonour to his royal station – to think nothing of what they must think of him now. Traitor. Usurper. Disgrace.

But it still hurt, though he hadn’t wanted to acknowledge that sting of pain at the time. Because that would only be a weakness, a pitiful longing for things he couldn’t have, that would never be his.

Still, he tries to comfort himself with the thought that Frigga would surely have spoken up for him if she had been permitted to, but of course, close kin isn’t allowed to speak in the defence of criminals on trial, their judgement deemed biased and unreliable. So in the end, it was only him standing there before the assembled court, despite the throng of people so utterly alone. Unaided and without even the tiniest inkling of support to face the accusations, without anyone who’d reach out a hand to him.

No matter how pointless it would have been – his guilt was far too indisputable for it to make a difference – and no matter how much of a weakness it was to at all hope for and desire such a thing, he’d still wished that someone would have done that, if only a single word spoken up in that courtroom for his benefit. Not because it would have made a difference, but because…

But there was, of course, no one. Only a deafening silence. He was all alone. Just one word in his favour, even this little was too much for the good citizens of Asgard. Too much for someone like him to ask for.

He almost snorts in derision as he thinks back on it. So ridiculous, so preposterous to even imagine
such a thing, no matter how briefly and secretly.

Still, he really would have liked for someone to speak up for him.

But no one in Asgard would stoop to such a thing. He already knew it, so it shouldn’t have hurt as much as it actually did.

Swallowing down the bitter emptiness that’s threatening to well up at the memory, he dismisses the silly notions, instead hastening his steps so that he won’t fall too far behind.

Still, he had hoped that he would at least get to see Frigga again on his return here, but Thor had told him before their departure that she had left for Vanaheim on a personal errand some time ago. Hence she did not know that Loki would be coming to Asgard, or Thor was certain that she would immediately have cancelled her trip and stayed so she could see him.

Loki tries not to feel sad about that, or anything at all.
“Who goes there?” The voice booms across the bridge, carried as easily as sound across a still water surface on a quiet evening, and it makes Tony wonder if all Aesir voices ever do anything else than boom.

Thor stops in his tracks and holds up a hand, indicating for Tony to remain where he is. Loki has already stopped, arms crossed defensively.

“Greetings Heimdall,” the Thunderer exclaims. “It is I, Thor, son of Odin, along with my brother Loki and Man of Iron, a well-renowned warrior and hero of Midgard.”

Well, that’s one introduction Tony’s sure never heard before and a fresh breath of air given all the endless billionaire genius superstar variations he’s gotten over the years. Though, he sure hopes no one in Asgard will want to test the validity of the whole ‘well-renowned warrior and hero’ thing, not when his suit is still hanging in his workshop somewhere on the other side of the universe.

“Welcome, Thor.” Heimdall steps aside to admit them entrance to the splendid realm behind him. “Your arrival is expected by the Allfather, and so are those of your companions. You may enter.”

“Thank you, my friend.” With that, Thor waves them forward again, as he resumes his own regal striding, like a crown prince on his way to his coronation.

Heimdall eyes them impassively as they pass, silent and unmoving like a statue. Long red braids are sticking out from under his helmet on either side of his face. Tony can only barely make out where the hair ends and the beard takes over, but the eyes looking out from all that red fuzz are piercing blue steel, not unlike Thor’s own. He makes a mental note to ask Thor if the two of them are related; maybe he is the Thunderer’s half-uncle twice removed or something.

Tony offers the rainbow guardian a friendly smile as they pass by. Heimdall makes no sign of acknowledgement, but only stands there like a pillar of the Earth with his spear in one hand, its butt resting firmly against the ground.

_Pleasant guy._ Then again, if Tony had been forced to stand around guarding the same bridge century after century, he would probably have been feeling pretty crusty too. The guy obviously hasn’t gotten the best gig; when job descriptions were handed out Heimdall clearly wasn’t far enough ahead in line to snatch himself one of the cool ones like God of Thunder or God of War. Instead, he got
stuck with a rainbow.

Though, Tony soon gets other things on his mind as the walls of Asgard loom in closer, the city breathtaking in its beauty. As they pass through the gates, he can’t decide if he’s relieved or disappointed that no severed heads of the slain enemies of Asgard are adorning them.

He notices out of the corner of his eye that even though Loki has been dragging his feet so far, once they pass the gates he quickly inches up closer to Thor, as if the thunder god has a magic aura around him whose protection will extend to anyone standing close enough.

Which, Tony supposes, might not be all that far from the truth in Loki’s case. He’s sure glad to have Thor as company to make sure that Loki stays safe.

Inside the walls, the wide square stretching out before them is bustling with activity and Tony has to quickly side-step to avoid getting trampled by a column of Einherjers marching resolutely by, armour and weapons clinking in unison. On his other side, a bleating goat runs past him, a torn rope hanging from around its neck, and maybe twenty yards ahead, two deadly-looking warriors are locked in a round of mock-sword fighting, their weapons gleaming in the sun as they strike at each other, grunting and groaning. Or at least Tony thinks they’re mock-fighting, but he’s just guessing here.

And it truly is the kingdom of the gods, he realizes, straight out of the most pompous, overblown fantasy saga ever imagined. Everyone here milling around in the square is bold, beautiful and proud. Men and women both, they’re moving with confidence and grace, some with a touch more refinement, others with more brawniness, like they’ve all spent a life-time being worshipped and honoured, and have learnt to act according to their station. Regality in their bearings, pride shining in their eyes and faces, these Aesir are truly beings of myth and legend.

Then, from behind a corner, suddenly come two creatures that mar the dashing perfection like stains of red wine on a white tablecloth. It’s a man and a woman, though that’s not immediately obvious, given their hunched postures and carefully bowed heads. Whereas the other Aesir are clad in shining armour and fine fabrics, these two are dressed in rags, ill-fitting and fraying at the seams. Tony stares at them, not sure what to believe, even though no one else seems to notice the tattered beings, so unlike the proud and mighty Aesir he’s seen until now. The man and the woman move like silent shadows, as if they don’t want to be noticed, eyes directed towards the ground like they think someone will slap them were they to raise their gazes from the cobblestones even for a brief second.

It is only when the two wretched creatures have turned another corner and disappeared from view that the grinding realization dawns on Tony. These two are slaves.
Damn.

There’s a strange lump forming in his throat as he stares after their no longer visible forms. Suddenly, Asgard doesn’t seem like Shangri-La any longer, but more like something straight out of Planet of the Apes.

Revulsion churning inside of him, he casts a look at Loki; even though the god’s back is turned towards him, it looks like his shoulders are more tense, more drawn-up than usual.

Then Thor’s voice is calling to him. “Come on, friend, don’t drag your feet or I might lose you in the crowd.”

And Tony obeys. He most certainly doesn’t want to end up separated from Thor, because who knows what might happen if he does. Maybe some of these Aesir will snatch the weird alien in their midst off the street and sell him on some slave auction for some stuck-up noble’s amusement, if he’s unlucky.

“The Royal Halls are not far from here,” Thor says after a brief look on Tony’s face, totally misreading him. “I’m sure you must find this experience very overwhelming and exhausting, but once we are in my chambers you will have an opportunity to rest undisturbed.”

For once, Tony doesn’t really have much to say; the sight of the ragged couple still haunting his inner eye.

He has to admit, though, that the Royal Halls are indeed impressive. The jewel in the crown that is Asgard, gleaming even brighter and reaching even further towards the sky than the rest. Golden shields are lining the façade, as are inscriptions and runes in tasteful, thought-out patterns. Clearly, the Aesir have a penchant for dragons, judging by the meticulously carved representations of long, slithering serpents adorning the massive doors and windows.

And the inside of the halls is equally breathtaking. The St. Peter’s Basilica in the Vatican and all those other fancy places he’s never visited got nothing on this.

“Damn, you guys hired some really spiffy interior decorators for this job, didn’t you?” Tony breathes, eyes glancing over the life-like majestic statues of long-dead warriors and kings and heroes.
standing in long lines, each one wearing a full suit of armour and weapons. He sure *hopes* that these guys don’t come alive at night and compensate for being dead by going berserk in the halls. If so, he’s totally going to ask for a room with a bolted steel door.

“These are all mighty ancestors of the Aesir,” Thor explains, his face shining as he enthusiastically points to one of the statues with a brutal battle axe clasped in both hands. “This is Karl the Bloodaxe. He was a warrior who led many successful campaigns against both Jotunheim and Svartalfheim, heaping the realm of Asgard with much glory. And this,” he waves his hand towards the equally ferocious-looking statue next in line, “is Hjalmar the Ironbeard. It is said that--”

“I would think your guest has little interest in Asgardian history lessons,” Loki’s voice drawls to his right, but it sounds more tired and weary than anything. It’s the first words he’s spoken in a long time, having spent most of the journey in brooding solitude.

Thor’s face falls a little, but he acquiesces.

“Follow me, then. My chambers are not far from here.”

Tony and Loki fall in behind the blond god yet again, through meandering corridors and gilded halls with ceilings so high that ten men could stand on each other’s shoulders and still not be able to touch the beautiful runic inscriptions that someone somehow managed to place up there.

Thor’s definition of ‘not far from here’ soon turns out to be rather different from Tony’s, but that’s alright, the surroundings are breathtaking enough to make up for it. He can’t help but feeling like a tourist from Hicksville going on his first trip abroad, gaping and gawking at the magnificent sights presented before him. Just all those Japanese tourists with their ever-present cameras missing, or the picture would have been complete.

And the place just *breathes* magic and ancientness and mysteries. As they enter through some of the doorways, Tony can swear there is an odd prickle on his skin or a fleeting moment of dizziness, and he wonders if there are enchantment and spells that have been woven into the very structure of the building. As if old and powerful magic is brimming just under the surface, like a living entity that has been forced into servitude, bound to offer its protection to the ones entering these sacred halls.

And people thought that *he* was being all high and mighty and full of himself when he had the Stark Tower erected.
Chapter 78

After some further twists and turns through meandering corridors, they’re finally standing in what Tony supposes would count as the humongous equivalent of Thor’s living room. Not quite as grandiose as the Halls they’ve just passed, but for a living room it’s pretty fancy with pillars, ornaments and runic inscriptions all over the place.

And not very *private*, given the constant trickle of servants passing through, carrying stuff, harrying about, running errands or whatever it is people in their line of profession do.

Tony raises an eyebrow. “Is your place always this busy?”

Thor wrinkles his brow for a few seconds as if he doesn’t understand what Tony is referring to, as if the servants busying themselves or passing by on quick and silent feet are all but invisible, mere ghosts or shadows not worthy of notice.

Which, Tony supposes, is probably the truth for someone like the Royal Son of Odin who’s grown up with seeing people like this as part of the furnishing.

“You know, all these *people* running around.” Tony gestures to a servant carrying a bucket of water in each hand, striding quickly and briskly towards one of the smaller doors that are no doubt only used by servants and the like.

“Oh,” Thor says, blinking, as if he is only seeing them just now. “You mean the servants. Well, you may not realize, Man of Iron, but as the crown prince of Asgard, I have not only a large number of Einherjer warriors in my service, but also skilled people employed in various other trades. It takes many workers and valets and servants to run such a large household, but you will only see but a few of them here. Most have duties that make them occupied elsewhere.”

Tony cocks his head to the side. “Sounds like you have quite the little empire running here, buddy. But there’s really only one guy I came here to see, and that’s your dad. So when are we meeting him?”

“When the Allfather decides to summon you. I will send word to him that we have arrived, in case Huginn or Muninn haven’t done so already,” Thor says.
“You mean I have to sit around and wait until your daddy feels up for a chat? Don’t I at least get a fixed time slot or something?”

Thor frowns slightly. “Odin is a busy ruler. He will send for you when he is ready.” And that’s final, Tony can hear loud and clear between the lines.

Okay, it’s not like he has never made people wait in his lifetime, deliberately or not, so he supposes he doesn’t have that much room to talk here.

“Well then,” the Thunderer says, happy to take Tony’s silence as acceptance. “I am afraid I must take my leave for the time being as I am to meet with a delegation from Alfheim to discuss a trading agreement between our realms.” A streak of bad conscience mars Thor’s pleasant features, the god clearly having preferred not to leave his recently arrived Midgardian guest to his own devices like this. “However, you shall not lack for anything in my absence; the servants will bring you refreshments while you wait for my return, and if there is anything you should crave, do not hesitate to ask for it. Before my departure to Midgard, I made sure to inform my household of your imminent arrival to our realm, so they all know that you are an honoured guest in my house and that I expect you to be treated as such.”

“Well, that’s splendid, Thunderboy.” Tony grins. “You think I could have one of those pretty Asgardian maidens hand feeding me grapes while I recline on a futon? Preferably a blond, but I’m not picky.”

“I am afraid we do not have this thing you call ‘grapes’ in our realm,” Thor says, as usual missing the funny. “However, if there is anything else you should wish for, please feel free to tell the servants here, and they shall provide it if it is within our means.”

“Alright, then,” Tony agrees. “We’ll just wait around here, then, chilling out, until you’re back.”

“Again, I am sorry I have to take my leave so hastily after your arrival, but a crown prince has many duties to fulfil on behalf of the realm,” Thor apologizes once more with that patented wet puppy dog of his.

“No problem, Hercules. I’m a big boy, I think I can manage.” He throws the god a friendly don’t-you-worry kind of grin. At least he gets to sit around and wait in the coolest space-alien building that he’s ever set his foot in.
Thor nods, before turning to Loki with a solemn, serious face, all official business and no play. “Please, remember to behave according to what’s expected, or you will invite serious trouble for yourself.”

Loki’s lips curl at the words, but he doesn’t argue. “I already said I will act as appropriate,” he mutters, looking none too pleased about Thor’s reminder.

The blond god locks gazes with his brother for a moment during which the air between them seems to crackle with intensity, and then Thor draws a sigh, probably realizing that nothing he says will have much of an affect. Instead, he turns and walks out, after having offered a parting, ‘Until later, then.’

Tony wrinkles his eyebrows at the little exchange, feeling vaguely uneasy. He glances furtively in Loki’s direction, noticing the strain in the rigid figure, the tenseness marring his features, like he’d rather be anywhere but here.

But then, a servant comes along carrying a tray loaded with a couple of mugs, a pitcher of water, and a jug of beer, rich and fluffy foam overflowing from the rim. Probably the beer is meant for him and the water for Loki, but fuck if Tony is going to care about any of that.

The servant nods politely at Tony and unloads his burden on top of the table with a flowery ‘please drench your thirst to your behest, Man of Iron’, and Tony finds himself grinning again, unease momentarily forgotten. Beer. He can roll with that.

Especially considering that he hasn’t had a single drink since yesterday.

So here they are, in Thor’s chambers, back in Asgard despite Loki once being sure that he would never set his foot in this realm again. And even if Tony’s visit might not turn out to make a difference in the end, it’s still a chance, no matter how infinitesimal. His only chance of not having to spend the rest of his life in bonded servitude.

Still, he can’t help but feel exposed like a target at an archery practice field, his skin crawling from the disdainful gazes the servants are throwing in his direction as they pass by, though they smile politely at Tony, Thor’s honoured guest. And oh, how it’s all so obvious in their faces as they hurry past, pretending not see him, acting as if he’s a shadow, a mere flicker of the imagination – the resentment, the dislike, and the anger. If he’d still had his powers, there would have been fear in
those gazes as well, he is certain. Fear of the monster, of the traitor, of enemy of the realm. The one who never belonged here in the first place, who has now committed sins and transgressions too grave to overlook or forget, trespasses against the people who was never his to begin with.

Though he is pointedly ignored by all – who would pay attention to a slave anyway? – he still senses how they privately revel in his degradation, in the humiliation of the punishment brought upon him.

He watches impassively, out of the corner of his eye, as a servant glides up to the table carrying beer, and Tony’s pleased reaction as there is alcohol within grabbing distance. Grinning, the man flops himself down on one of the chairs at the table, stretching his limbs as if he’s just run a ten-mile race, before reaching for the precious golden nectar and then settling for an arrogant lounge, legs spread wide.

And Loki knows – oh, he knows – that there is only one acceptable position for him. Here, in the Royal Halls, it is the rules and traditions of Asgard that hold sway, and having grown up here he is all too familiar with their dictate. He cannot refuse; his position here is already precarious enough as it already is without compromising it further.

Forgoing the chair, he kneels down beside Tony’s seat, the only appropriate place for a slave next to his master, swallowing the sting of degradation burning at the back of his throat. It had been so nice to not have to think about any of this, to forget about the things normally demanded of a slave as he had eventually done back in Midgard, instead acting almost as if his status wasn’t that of a slave but rather Tony’s equal. But now, having been brought back here, it’s like all of that has just been him playing a make-believe game, allowing himself to be caught up in an illusion brought by his own wishful thinking, because here in Asgard, he can no longer ignore the actual state of things.

But nothing can change how real it had all still felt.

And no matter what, he likes to think that the make-believe game, the illusion, is not how he’s been acting around Tony in Midgard, but how he has to act here.

Tony’s nose is already half-way down into his mug of beer, but as Loki sinks down next to him, the mug stops its slow upwards descent and Loki can sense the man freezing for the split of a second. Then the mug is set down on the table and Tony’s head turns to look at him like he just grew a pair of antlers.

“What the heck are you doing down there?” he asks with one eyebrow raised, as if it isn’t obvious. “While I agree these fancy chairs are more showy than cosy, there’s no way the stone floor can be more comfortable.” He pats the seat of the chair to his side, palm tapping insistently against the
Loki clenches his teeth. This would have been easier to handle if Tony hadn’t decided to make a deal out of it; if he’d just accepted things as they are.

“It would be… untoward,” Loki says in response, avoiding meeting with Tony’s eyes.

“More untoward than crawling around on the ground? I don’t think so. Use a freaking chair like normal people.” Tony gestures towards the piece of furniture again, sounding as flippant as ever, but there is still a note of strained discomfort in his voice that seeps out between the words.

It is clear that Tony has little concept of how things are done here. But even more untoward than a slave sitting on a chair would be for him to argue his master’s order within earshot of other people. So he relents, gingerly seating himself on the chair next to Tony, noticing the displeased looks from two nearby servants at this inappropriate raising of his station.

He sighs as Tony fills the second mug with beer and pushes it into his hands, not really hearing the offhand comment that follows it, clearly an attempt to smooth the situation over, to pretend like what just transpired never happened.

So he takes a sip from the mug as Tony’s mouth is running off at top-speed yet again, spilling flippant commentary and diverging into far-fetched speculations, all topped off with absurd questions that he expects no answer to. Loki only listens with half an ear; his attention is focused on the servants and workers passing through, fully aware that most of them would only be too pleased at seeing him degraded, far too eager to see him humbled and demeaned.

And he knows that his stay here is unlikely to be a pleasant one.
Chapter 79

The fire crackles quietly in the large stone hearth, sending long shadows dancing across the ornamented walls, the grey figures twisting and turning in odd, mystic patterns. He watches them meander for a little while, and then returns to studying the people passing by.

For a bunch of servants, they do look like quite the haughty bunch. Despite many of them appearing to be in a hurry, they don’t walk, no, they *stride*. Like pride is something that comes with birth for these people and runs as naturally through their veins as alcohol does through his.

Well, unless you happen to be a slave, that is. He still recalls that tattered couple that he saw earlier in the market square, feeling that vague prickle of unease again. He’s glad that at least there doesn’t seem to be any slaves running around here; he isn’t sure he could have dealt with that.

Okay, scratch that, there is one unfortunate, notable exception.

He glances at Loki out of the corner of his eye. The god is as rigid as he’s ever seen him where he sits perched on his chair, eyeing people with mistrust and wariness, like he expects them to sink their fangs into his throat if his vigilance slacks for even a second.

But no one approaches the god or does anything more than glaring, so Tony takes that as a good sign. Since they obviously consider Loki his property, that should keep them from actually doing anything to him, just like Thor had said. Even if the god is not well liked here, Tony is supposed to be an honoured guest, and at least where he comes from, you don’t mess with stuff that belongs to honoured guests.

Though he winces inwardly at the whole ‘property’ concept. Especially since it would seem that in Asgard it’s considered appropriate for property to be seated on the floor like freaking dogs. The image of Loki sinking down to next to his seat is still haunting his inner vision, and he tries to sweep the discomfort away, but the feeling is lingering nonetheless.

And he can’t help but think that he should perhaps say something about that, as distasteful as the whole thing is to him. But he still wants some reassurances, if nothing else.

“Uh, so about the… seating arrangements,” he says, hating that this is even an issue. “Should I expect anyone to come up to me and challenge me to a duel for… not making you comply with them or something?”
Loki glances up at him from his mug of beer. He is silent for a while before answering, from the looks of it not enjoying this conversation any more than Tony.

“No,” he says quietly. “We are in Thor’s chambers and you are his honoured guest. You’re not endearing yourself to anyone here with this, but the only one really entitled to bring forth any grievances towards you in this matter would be Thor, given that we’re under his roof.”

“Alright,” he shrugs, “guess I can live with people here not lining up to get my autograph.” He looks the god over, once more noticing the tenseness in his posture. Time for the other, even more uncomfortable side of the coin, then. “Next question – would anyone bother you about it?”

And damn, if Loki says something that is not a ‘no’, what is he going to do then? Being a weak and puny mortal without his suit and surrounded by beings wielding freaky super-powers, he won’t be able to do shit to protect Loki if anyone should decide they don’t approve and want a hands-on solution to this offence to their sensibilities.

Should he tell Loki to just get back on the floor like a dog, then, after having spent so much time and effort trying to get him to not act like a slave? The prospect leaves a foul taste in his mouth. Loki’s dignity or safety - you’re free to pick whichever of them you prefer, Tony Stark.

But Loki shakes his head, looking away. “No. Not as long as the… seating arrangements were on your orders. But slaves do not seat themselves on any furniture without first having been given permission to do so. And very few masters would ever allow any such.”

Urgh.

The whole conversation is just making him feel bad, and he can imagine how shitty this must all make Loki feel, given that he’s just learnt to passably behave like he’s not a slave, and now he’s been thrown into this crap head first. And he can recall all too clearly how despondent Loki had once been, how hesitant and unsure he’d acted around Tony, only to slowly come crawling out of that cocoon he had hidden in as he eventually came to realize that Tony didn’t expect or want any slave-like conduct from him. But now, Asgard expects him to revert back to those old behaviours.

His thoughts are interrupted as a large, beautifully adorned door swings open with a bang to admit a bulky man, long black hair flowing over his shoulders, who proceeds to briskly stride into the room as if he owned it. The newcomer is tall and broad-shouldered, wearing his armour like a second skin, equipped with both sword, whip, and dagger all hanging at his belt. A born and bred warrior, his
face hard and eyes unforgiving. Tony watches him quietly; unlike most of the others, this man is no simple servant. In fact, it looks like he eats barbed wire for breakfast and then goes off to wrestle dragons for a living.

When the man catches sight of Loki, he stops dead in his tracks, foot almost comically frozen an inch above ground. His already sour, hard face turns several shades darker, and his mouth twists into the kind of snarl most people would reserve for rotten food or dog shit smeared under their shoes.

For a moment, it looks like he is going to make his way over to where Tony and Loki are sitting, but then thinks better of it, ignoring the visitors as he continues on his way, boots stomping angrily against the stone floor.

“So who’s Mister Grumpy?” Tony asks, turning to Loki who is disdainfully watching the man’s retreating form.

Loki shrugs. “That’s Fjalar,” he says, making the name sound like an insult.

“Doesn’t seem like he’d be the president of your fan club any time soon,” Tony points out as he takes another swig of his beer.

His comment earns him a slight mirthless smile. “We have some… history together,” comes Loki’s cryptic answer.

“Do elaborate.” He senses some sort of story there and wants to hear it, if nothing else than to give his mind something to focus that is not the still lingering feeling of discomfort.

Loki plays around with the mug in his hands for a while before speaking again, but when he does, there is a tone of far-away reminiscing in his voice. “Fjalar is the kind of person that has always relied on his strength and thinks that all problems can be solved through force, and if not through force, then through violence.”

“Huh. How come I’m not surprised.”

“Fjalar only respects physical prowess and skills in battle,” Loki continues. “And he holds very little regard for those who wish to excel in… other pursuits.”
“Such as?” ‘Other pursuits’ is a pretty broad concept, after all, and Tony has little idea of what the Aesir do in their spare time when they aren’t busy splitting each other’s skulls out on the battlefield.

“Skaldic arts, craftsmanship, intellectual pursuits, everything that doesn’t involve swinging a giant sword around. But most of all, magic.” Loki’s voice is flat, but there is still ill-hidden resentment in there punching little cracks into the smooth surface.

“So that’s why the guy just gave you a look like he was choking on a bucket of vinegar? Just because he doesn’t like magic?” Fjalar must be one of those easily offended types, then, the kind of people that Tony never got along well with.

Loki gives him an inscrutable look, and then there is that special mischievous glint in his eyes, the little sparkle of sincere amusement that makes something tug at Tony’s heart. “Well, that, and the fact that I once put a hex on his neither regions to make them take the appearance of a snake during a war campaign when he was off to take a piss.” The sparkle turns into a bright flash, followed by a broad smile. “He might not look like it, but Fjalar screams like a girl.”

That makes Tony snort into his mug of beer, and he puts it down, wiping his mouth with the sleeve of his shirt, a burst of laughter escaping from his lips. “Oh heck, I would have paid a fortune to see that!” Chuckling, he slaps Loki’s back, shaking his head in disbelief. “Aren’t you something, huh?”

And maybe it’s just his imagination running away with him, but Loki looks really pleased at that. As if he’s not used to someone complementing his magic. Like he enjoys getting approval for it for once in his life.

Tony leans back into his chair once more, grin still on his face, as a haughty woman walks them by, long brown braids trailing after her, chin raised and nose scrunched-up as if she considers the world beneath her notice. He glances after her retreating back not entirely without approval; she’d easily rate a nine if she just got rid of the attitude.

Loki follows Tony’s gaze, looking amused. “That’s Sigrid, by the way,” he informs him. “Pretty as she might be, it is said she once castrated a man with a kitchen knife because she didn’t approve of the way he was looking at her, though that might just be a rumour.”

The beer goes down the wrong way, and Tony coughs and splutters for a good ten seconds. “Damn, are all Asgardians this fucked-up, or just some of you?” he finally manages, still croaking.
The god looks amused. “I’d say most, if not all.” He nods at a bearded, bulky man carrying a huge load of wood in his arms. “And that would be Harald, who suffers from the unfortunate affliction of being dumb as a board.” He smirks. “Plus, he also involves himself in inappropriate relations with sheep.”

Tony laughs out loud at that. So maybe Loki is just making shit up, but that doesn’t matter. Sitting here with the god, having what is a real, normal conversation again, apart from the fact that it’s dealing with fairyland magic and alien space-gods, is quite nice after the bout of quiet reticence that Loki has suffered from since Thor made his appearance in Tony’s tower.

And the unfortunate little incident with Loki kneeling beside his seat also seems forgotten by now, as if it never happened, like things are back to how they used to be between them in his tower. Like they’re not master and slave, but… something else.

“And that fat guy over, there,” Loki’s voice conspiratorially drawls, indicating another Aesir with a nod, “you know what he likes to do when he thinks no one is watching?”
Chapter 80

Chapter Notes

Just FYI, the guy going by the name of Arnulf in this chapter is supposed to be the servant featured in that deleted scene in Thor, where Loki turns the wine-about-to-be-served into snakes. ^^

Sitting here with his beer and a talkative Loki, Tony finds himself hoping that Thor will spend some time yet in that diplomatic meeting with the hobbits from Svartalfheim. He has a feeling that once the Thunderer returns, his presence is going to make Loki revert back into the quiet, taciturn self he has displayed since Thor showed up in Tony’s tower.

Perhaps it’s Loki being back in a familiar environment, or maybe it’s the beer loosening his tongue, or maybe it’s something else entirely, but the god has spent a good amount of time sharing stories with Tony of his life in Asgard. Not only the adventures he’s been on and the battles he’s fought, but everyday little occurrences that are only really important to the person who has experienced them.

Whenever someone else comes within hearing distance, though, Loki’s voice falls a few notches, or he makes a pause until the person has walked by, but Tony tries to ignore that, pretending that it’s just for rhetorical effect. It feels better that way.

He enjoys listening to Loki’s smooth voice as the god talks, watching his restrained but yet expressive body language, seeing the long, graceful fingers move in intricate patterns as he describes a spell thrown or an enchantment woven. An insistent desire to run a hand down those fine-chiselled features suddenly comes over Tony, but he keeps his limbs to himself, well aware that such overtures would be neither welcome nor appreciated. He prides himself on his show of will power, especially considering the amount of beer he has been drinking.

Speaking of which, the mug in his hand is now gaping emptily, the last contents of the beer jug having been gulped down only moments ago. Sadly, he plays around with it for a while, remembering Thor’s affinity for forcefully depositing empty drinking vessels on the floor. Perhaps that would alert one of those servants to his dire need of more drink in his glass.

In the end, he decides against it, though. Even if it’s considered proper behaviour here in Narnia, the Midgardian taboo against breaking a host’s household utensils wins out. Instead, he opts for the less drastic route of wiggling his empty mug at a man currently busying himself with feeding logs into the fireplace.
Seeing Tony’s distress, the man nods and hurries off, only to come back a moment later with a large, sloshing jug in his hands. So the servant is middle-aged and pudgy and a far cry from those deep-décolletaged dirndl-wearing girls at Oktoberfest, but anyone carrying alcohol in his direction is a welcome sight, so he isn’t complaining.

“Thanks, buddy,” Tony says, offering a friendly smile.

“You are welcome, Man of Iron,” the servant replies as he sets the jug down on the table, a little trickle lapping over the rim.

Tony is about to help himself to some more of that totally awesome stuff they call beer around here, but tastes more like a mixture of sweet honey and liquid gold and exotic spices. After this taste of heaven he’s not sure he’ll be able to drink the bland slush that goes by the same designation back home again.

However, the servant’s sharp voice halts Tony’s hand midway as the man turns toward Loki, a scowl on his face.

“Don’t sit around there like a useless dolt, slave,” he scoffs. “Serve your master.”

And with that, the jovial atmosphere from only a moment ago is gone, as surely as if it never existed at all.

Loki looks up, green eyes glimmering, and Tony prays that he isn’t going to leap off his seat and throttle the obnoxious man before him. Luckily, the god remains where he is, merely taking an audible breath as he clenches his jaws.

“Uh, guys,” Tony says, raising a hand for attention, “I can serve myself perfectly fine. I’m not that drunk yet, regardless of what it might look like.” Neither Loki nor the other guy seems to hear him, though, as they just keep staring at each other, their little battle of wills fought on what might as well be another planet for all that Tony concerns them.

And just then, as Tony is about to add another, probably inappropriate, comment to contain the situation before it explodes into something neither of them can handle, Loki slowly stands up, eyes still on the servant.
“But of course, Arnulf,” he grinds out through clenched teeth. And Tony can see his hands trembling with what is no doubt anger and indignation at being ordered around by a servant as he reaches out for the jug of beer, quickly snatching it up with white-knuckled fingers.

Without another word, he pours some of the beer into Tony’s mug. But the hands holding the decanter are too unstable with emotion, and it slips out of Loki’s shaking grip, clattering to the floor as it spills its contents all over. Some of the fluid splashes onto the legs of Tony’s pants, and the only thing he can think of is that he’s really glad he brought a few changes of clothes, because he sure as hell doesn’t want to stand before the Allfather smelling like the alcoholic that he is.

The sudden commotion has drawn the eyes of every single person present, and slowly, they’re all coming to gather around in a wide, loose half-circle with the servant, Loki, and the dropped decanter in the middle, like pedestrians hungry for a good show congregating around a street performer.

“You clumsy oaf!” Arnulf scolds angrily. “What kind of slave doesn’t even know how to serve beer properly?” And just as the words have left his lips, there’s a malevolent, scornful grin slowly making its way across the man’s face as he regards Loki. When he speaks again, it is in a calm tone of voice, more directed to the gathered audience than to Loki as he pointedly looks towards the chair that Loki was sitting in moments ago and the mug filled with beer instead of the expected water. “Though, perhaps it’s not so strange that you are unfamiliar with such basic tasks, given the kind of services that you are no doubt called on to provide for your master.”

The group snickers in amusement, and Tony blanches, wanting to speak up but not getting a word out of his constricting throat. But one look at Loki makes it clear that he needs to defuse this situation, and quickly so, before things get out of hand. The god’s chest is heaving as if he has just run a marathon and he looks like he wants to strangle someone with his bare hands. Most likely that Arnulf guy.

“Okay, cut the crap, everyone,” he half-shouts, trying to cut through the chatter. “Let’s just forget this ever happened and move on with our lives, alright? It’s just some freaking beer!” And really, he would have liked to say quite a few select words more, but he figures that wouldn’t go down well, and the situation is bad enough as it already is without him screwing it up further and Loki somehow ending up paying the price for it.

No one pays any attention to him, however. He might as well be invisible for all they care, or one of those fancy statues littering the hallways.

“And have you really forgotten your station so soon?” Arnulf continues disdainfully. “You sullied the clothes of your master through your clumsiness, so how come you have not yet apologized properly?”
“Look, let’s just all calm the fuck down and--” Tony tries again but his protests are drowned in the shouts of agreement prompted by Arnulf’s demand. It makes the hairs on his arms stand on end; it’s almost as if there’s a riot brewing, or, worse, a lynching. The people here are eager for something, though Tony isn’t sure just what that something is.

He sincerely wishes Thor were here. He would have handled this; one bellow from the Thunderer and this little mob would slink away with their tails between their legs. But no one seems to listen to Tony – honoured guest, perhaps, but still a puny mortal.

“Well, what are you waiting for?” comes Arnulf’s voice again over the commotion. “Don’t shame all of Asgard with your behaviour. Offer your master a proper apology.”

Making another attempt to get his voice heard but once more miserably failing, Tony finally realizes that he’s not getting through and that there’s a possibility that he might in fact even be making things worse for Loki by voicing his protests. And as much as he doesn’t like this, it’s just an apology, nothing more than that is demanded. Better to just get this shit over and done with, before something much worse happens, like Loki actually getting hurt.

And then, Loki turns to him, between two breaths reigning in the emotions battling on his face until there is only a blank, expressionless façade left. And with one smooth, fluid motion, Loki kneels in front of Tony, bowing down until his forehead is touching the floor. “My sincerest apologies for my clumsiness, Master” he says flatly, voice emotionless and carefully controlled.

And that was most definitely not the kind of apology he’d been expecting.

“Oh for crying out loud,” Tony chokes out, overcome by exasperation and revulsion. “This isn’t fucking Wayne’s World and I’m not Alice Cooper, okay? Enough already!” What the hell is wrong with these people?

Loki slowly gets up, his eyes glistening with broken pride and anger and bitterness and a million other things.

And then, like the sun suddenly breaking through the clouds, the atmosphere eases up. The little show is over, the audience having gotten what they came here to see – the humiliation of a disliked and disgraced prince. One by one, the people in the crowd scatter, returning to their chores and duties that they abandoned in favour of this little spectacle. Even Arnulf turns on his heel and walks off, having milked the situation of its full potential.
Loki isn’t looking at Tony as he sits himself down at the table again, resentment at the public degradation still drawn into every line of his features. The relaxed atmosphere from earlier is gone, and Tony winces at the uncomfortable-ness, rummaging his brain for something to say.

“That Arnulf guy is a total ass, isn’t he?” he finally manages. Not his best line ever, but it will have to do.

“He’s a thrice-damned impotent ape who cavorts with pigs,” Loki mutters under his breath, voice unsteady with suppressed anger.

The mood for engaging in further conversation is gone, perfectly ruined, so the two of them just sit there in silence, each lost in his own thoughts.

Tony has no idea what to say after all this and Loki has once more reverted into his previous taciturn self, offering no words about whatever he is thinking, but it probably involves various instruments of torture and Arnulf.

And all Tony can think of is the time Loki first came to his tower and he forced the god to kneel before him.

The silence continues to hang heavily over the table like a cloth drenched in water. Even the beer seems to have lost its alluring taste, and Tony merely plays around with the mug in his hands, letting the remaining liquid slosh around in slow circles. His feeble attempts to start up some kind of conversation with Loki again have not yielded any results that could be classified as anything but piss-poor, so eventually he decided to just give up.

Not knowing what else to do, he finally reverts to digging around in the duffle bag he brought with him to pull out his favourite kind of stress reliever – his trusty Rubik’s cube, perfect for playing around with under the table during long meetings or when he just needs some time-out.

Juggling the cube around in his hands a few times, he enjoys the tangible familiarity of the edges and ridges pressing against his skin. Right now, he needs something well-known and controllable, rather than all this messed-up stuff. Leaning back into his seat, the world around him slowly fades away as he starts to twist and turn the blocks around until there are only those colourful little patches before his eyes, and equations and mathematical formulas in his head, banishing all other thoughts.
After a while of fiddling in silence, he notices that he has an audience. About a dozen of Aesir or so are standing at a respectable distance, watching in fascination as he slides the sections of his little cube around.

Glancing at the gathered audience, hoping they’re not momentous asses like the previous spectators, Tony nods at them. “Wanna give it a try, guys?” he asks, waiving the cube in their direction. Trying to get on the good side of at least some of these people and work up a little goodwill probably won’t hurt. Who knows when they might need it. “It’s real fun, once you get the hang of it.”

He needn’t have asked twice. The Aesir are all over him in a second, jostling each other as they fawn over his little toy, turning it around in eager hands, laughing and smiling at the exotic object at display. And it’s not just the servants and simple workers either, but other people as well, including a couple of Einherjers who should probably know better. One brave soul spins one of the outermost sections of the cube around, and that sets the whole little group into a frenzy of comments and suggestions of how this puzzle should be solved, hands eagerly grabbing and poking.

And Tony can’t help but think, as this little Kodak moment unfolds, how bizarre it is seeing perhaps thousands of years old Aesir fawning like little children over something so simple. Their amazed reaction is what would have been expected if he’d travelled back in time to the Stone Ages and presented a lighter to the bewildered natives.

The excitement is quickly drawing more people in, all curious and awed by his little toy. It’s ironic, for all the fancy magic and spacy stuff so commonplace here, that such an everyday object from his planet can be the source of such amusement and interest.

And they are supposed to be the evolved ones, being gods and all. Tony can’t help but wonder what would have happened if he had brought his laptop along. Perhaps that would have been too much for the local populace to take and he would have been burnt on the stake for being a witch or something.

He notices that even Fjalar is hovering in the background, as if these shenanigans are beneath his notice, but he still doesn’t want to miss out on anything important.

“Where does this marvellous object come from, Man of Iron?” one of the Aesir asks, turning towards Tony.

“It was crafted by a mighty Midgardian lord named Rubik,” Tony says in reply. A little embellishment of the truth never hurt, he supposes, especially not with this crowd. He might as well
play along and take this opportunity to increase his popularity with the locals here. Never know when that might come in handy, after all, especially not after the shit he’s come face to face with so far.

The Aesir look impressed at this, nodding in awed admiration.

“And this Lord Rubik gifted this amazing thing to you?” another asks.

“Eh, well--” Tony begins, but is interrupted by a pretty young girl, who is gaping at him like he’s some sort of hero.

“Thor told us you are a famous warrior and hero in your realm. Tell us, did this lord bequeath such an item to you in appreciation of some mighty deed?” she asks breathlessly, all blinking eyelashes and admiring eyes and flushing skin, a hand clutching her braid.

Tony smiles at the young girl, who blushes. “Well, sweetie, let’s just say it used to belong to a powerful empire whose borders I crossed in order to liberate this particular treasure from the hoards of riches where it was being kept.”

Okay, so that’s just a fancy way of saying he bought it at Wal-Mart, but these people will probably favour the interpretation that he ventured into an enemy realm to storm the fortress of some big-shot lord and pillage his belongings.

As suspected, his audience looks even more impressed at this suggestion of unlawful breaking and entering, and the ensuing battery and grand theft following in its wake.

And he can’t help but roll his eyes inwardly at that. *Charming people, these Aesir. Real charming.*
Chapter 81

He is relieved when Thor finally returns, and for more reasons than one. Tony’s little fan club reluctantly but seamlessly slips away to resume their duties as to not be seen slacking off now that their prince is back. Loki only spares his brother a quick glance and then looks away, mouth drawn into a thin line.

After one look at Loki, Tony decides not to mention the Arnulf incident, much as he’s tempted to. The god has been humiliated enough as it already is without having his brother find out about it as well; at least Tony can offer him that small dignity. If Loki wants Thor to know, he will tell him; it’s not up to Tony to make that decision for him. But at least now the Royal Prince is back, so any similar incidents brewing can quickly be averted with some princely authority to back it all up.

“Nature’s calling, big fellow,” Tony says as the blond god comes striding over. “Care to show me to the men’s room or the nearest ditch or whatever it is you guys use here?” Not the most charming way to greet someone, perhaps, but Thor hasn’t been away for that many hours.

“Of course,” Thor nods. “The nearest facilities are just down one of the corridors, but I should have shown you the way to them before I took my leave. My apologies for this omission.”

Tony stands up and then turns to Loki who is busy looking into an entirely different direction than him and Thor. “Maybe it’s best if you came along as well,” he says. “Not sure it’s a good idea to leave you alone here with this crowd.”

Loki gives him a brief look, but then shakes his head. “I will be fine. I’d rather just wait for you here,” he says, then looks away again.

Tony is not entirely sure as to the wisdom of that, so he glances at Thor for guidance, but the blond god merely shrugs. “You are an honoured guest here, Man of Iron. No one will dare to harm Loki while he is here in my chambers, provided that he behaves as expected.”

A part of Tony wants to protest, but his bladder is not really amenable to long discussions in its current state, so he relents, since both Loki and Thor seem fine with it.

Though, his bladder is not the main reason, because right now, the last thing he wants is to order Loki to do something that goes against the god’s own expressed wishes, to actually make use of the rights afforded to him as a master. Yes, he could order Loki to obey and go with them, acting just
like any Asgardian master, but having received a first-hand demonstration of how slaves are treated here, it suddenly feels more important to him than ever before not to buy into any of that crap and to grant Loki at least that small amount of freedom. It’s not up to him to make decisions for Loki that the god is fully capable of making himself.

And besides, it will just be a few minutes anyway.

“Alright, lead the way, then, big guy,” he says with a nod to Thor.

After having taken care of business and the two of them are making their way back a couple of minutes later, Tony reflects that he is probably the only living human who can lay claim to having taken a piss together with a god. And to be honest, he doesn’t compare all that unfavourably, taking Thor’s divine status into account.

As they are only a few steps from the doorway leading back to the common room, the noise of a sudden commotion reaches them, followed by the unmistakable sound of flesh hitting flesh.

Uh-oh.

Tony doesn’t doubt for even a second that whatever is going on in there, Loki is somehow involved. And why was he stupid enough to leave the god alone, even if it was just for a few quick minutes? He should have known better than that.

Rushing in, Thor on his heels, he is greeted with the, perhaps not entirely unexpected, sight of Loki sprawling on the ground and clutching his cheek, and it doesn’t take a genius to figure out that there is a bruise forming beneath that hand.

And towering above the god stands the hulking form of Fjalar, his viciously imposing appearance somewhat diminished by the fact that he is currently in the state of being as dripping wet as a soaked puppy.

Tony bites his lower lip, trying to push down the panic welling up inside of him; he can unfortunately puzzle together what just transpired here before anyone speaks even a word of clarification.
Of course, Fjalar is quick to inform him anyway, as he whirs around to face Tony, his expression a contorted mask of offended outrage that anyone has dared to cause offence to His Magnificent Arrogant Conceitedness. He points an accusing, gloved finger at Tony, as if all this is somehow his fault.

“Your slave threw beer in my face, Man of Iron,” Fjalar seethes through clenched teeth, slowly and pointedly enunciating the words as were they indignities in themselves, the outstretched finger trembling with anger and indignation.

“Yeah, and I’m sure you didn’t do anything at all to provoke him, right?” Tony shoots back, before almost tripping over from being shoved to the side as Thor pushes past him.

“Please, Fjalar, still your rage. I’m sure we can settle this somehow,” the god booms, sounding as regal as ever. Fjalar, however, looks unimpressed, and instead turns his attention back to Tony as if Thor isn’t important.

The man draws himself up, crossing his arms in a show of authority. “True, I did speak my peace to this slave, but slaves should be able to suffer a few harsh words in silence. But instead, this wretched creature responded by throwing beer at me, and I demand that you, as his master, have him punished for assaulting a free man.”

More like assaulting a full-of-himself arrogant jerk, but Tony isn’t going to argue that particular point right now.

“Alright, alright.” Tony holds his hands up in a placating gesture, making a momentous effort to be as affable as he can, though he’d rather just clock Fjalar in the face for being a major dick. But he controls himself; no use making this spiral out of control anymore than it already has and jeopardize Loki’s position any further. “I’ll have him sent to bed without supper, okay?”

Fjalar’s eyes narrow to furious slits. “Do not make light out of this, mortal,” he hisses, and Tony is glad he isn’t standing closer to the fuming Aesir or he would have been nearly as wet as Fjalar from being sprayed with spittle. “Your slave has committed a serious crime and should be punished accordingly!”

And Tony gets that sinking feeling again, like he’s taking a morning stroll across a field of quicksand. Being stripped down from ‘Man of Iron’ to ‘mortal’ doesn’t exactly signify an improvement of the situation; this guy must be pretty damned well pissed if he thinks nothing of
addressing Thor’s ‘honoured guest’ in such a condescending way.

Before Tony has the chance to offer a retort, however, Fjalar resolutely reaches down to unhitch the whip hanging at his belt, and, having crossed the distance between them with two decisive steps, shoves the ugly thing into Tony’s hands.

And the sinking feeling in Tony’s stomach turns into a free fall. *This can’t be happening*…

Fjalar calmly takes a few steps back, seemingly more composed as he regards Tony with hard, unforgiving eyes. “As I said, he assaulted a free man. *This* is the only appropriate punishment for such a grievous wrong-doing.” He gestures towards the coiling leather in Tony’s hands, a disgustingly expectant look on his face.

*Really, what sick fuck walks around carrying a whip at his belt anyway?*

“And it looks like you assaulted him in turn, so I’d say that evens things out,” Tony says through clenched teeth as he nods at Loki, who is still sprawled on the floor, and the angry red bruise now visible on his cheek as the hand covering it has been removed.

“Are you *refusing* to carry out your responsibilities as his master?” Fjalar asks, indignation making his skin colour turn from an ugly sallow to a flaming red.

“Sorry, buddy,” he says, trying to sound flippant, though not really succeeding, “but I’m not really into the whole SM thing. Sure I’ve experimented a bit, but--“

Fjalar ignores his comment, voice hard and dangerous as sharpened steel. “Fifty lashes. Or I will take this matter to court.”

*No fucking way.* Tony glances to his side, hoping to rally some support. *Okay, Thunder Boy, where are you? Some of that brotherly concern would really be appreciated right now.*

As if on cue, Thor speaks up yet again, but his voice is less booming this time and more pleading as he tries to reason with Fjalar. “I understand your grievances, and I profusely apologize that you should have to suffer such indignities under my roof, but surely there must be some other way to recompense for this slight?”
“No,” comes the decisive reply, almost before Thor’s last words have left his lips. “Like I said, I will have the punishment carried out as specified, or I will take this to court.”

“Please, Fjalar, let amends be made some other way,” Thor tries again, pain evident on his face. “I can offer you--”

“I have spoken my peace, Thor. This matter is of no concern of yours; this is solely for me and Man of Iron to settle between us. And if you should try to interfere again, I will demand an additional ten lashes as recompense,” Fjalar interrupts him. “And now, it is up to Man of Iron which way he prefers to do this, if we settle this here or in court,” he continues haughtily, as if either way is just fine with him.

And then there is silence. Fjalar waits, and Thor looks devastated. Loki’s face is hidden in shadows and whatever emotions are playing themselves out there are concealed from view. Tony hesitantly lets his gaze wander between the three of them, not sure what has just transpired.

So he looks to Thor, who’s fallen uncharacteristically silent. “Okay, I think now would be the time to invoke your princely authority, Point Break,” he prods, not seriously believing that Thor is going to stand for this shit.

As Thor turns back to Tony, his face is drawn and haggard, hue several shades paler. If he’d clenched his jaws any tighter, he’d be in need of a really good dentist.

“You will have to go ahead and carry out the demanded punishment.”

Say what?

“Uh, Thor, think you could repeat that, because I’m sure you didn’t actually mean that I should re-enact the Passion of the Christ on your brother here?”

Thor looks like he’s debating whether to throw a huge crying fit or pulverize something with his bare hands, but in the end, he settles for neither. “Fjalar is right,” he says quietly, averting his gaze from Tony. “If a slave assaults a free man, that man has the right to demand punishment. If the master should not agree to it, the victim is entitled to seek restitution in court, where an appropriate punishment will be decided. It will then not be carried out by the master but instead by someone appointed by the court.” Thor’s trembling hand clenches into a fist, and he looks at Tony with an
almost pleading look in his face. “Loki would no doubt be sentenced to a whipping for this and he can’t take that kind of punishment in his mortal body from someone with the strength of an Aesir. If he should have any chance of making it through, it has to be you carrying it out, Man of Iron.”

“He’s your brother,” Tony snaps, suddenly overcome by disgust and revulsion for how things are done here. “And you, good sir, are a prince. How about you lay down some of that royal authority and tell Ivan Vanko here just where he can shove that fucking whip of his?”

“My hands are tied,” Thor replies, sounding more weary and worn than Tony has ever heard him before. “Not even a prince stands above the decisions of the court. Such are the rules of Asgard.”

And with that, it is as if the whole matter is settled; no one utters another word. Fjalar looks eager and expectant, Thor like he’s going to be sick but holds it in nevertheless. And Loki…

For a brief moment, Tony’s eyes meet with the god’s, and the mixture of emotions he sees there hits him like a fist in the stomach, a gut-churning blend of resignation, dread, despair, and a million other things he doesn’t even want to think about.

Then the god averts his gaze, and Tony can see a hand trembling, ever so slightly.

And he just can’t believe this is happening. Not even on the first day when Loki came to his tower would he have even dreamt of doing anything like this, as much as the god had incensed him back then. And now, with all the water and whatnot that has passed under the bridge since, it’s even more unimaginable.

*He can’t do this, he just fucking can’t…*

But he doesn’t have a choice, does he?
Chapter 82

As cliché as the notion is, the tension in the room can most definitely be cut with a knife, as everyone’s rapt attention is focused on Tony and what he is going to do. His palms are slick with sweat, one of them still holding the accursed whip, and his innards are in turmoil. There’s just no way he can go through with this; it’s fucking wrong. It’s fucking torture.

“Well?” comes the smug, drawling voice from Fjalar from a mile away. “Are you going to punish your slave, or will the court have to appoint someone to do it for you?”

Oh, he wants to strangle the bastard, coil the leather of the whip around the throat of that obnoxious prick, but he knows it’s not going to help things, as tempting as the idea is.

And really, what the hell is he going to do now? He’s always figured himself the smart, the crafty, the creative thinking-on-his-feet kind of guy, but now his brain seems to have short-circuited itself. There are just no viable alternatives; Thor might very well be right that Loki might not even survive a whipping carried out by an Aesir, but how is Tony going to bring himself to do something like this?

Fuck, why did he ever consent to going to Asgard in the first place; he should have known better than to traipse along on this intergalactic space-trip like he’s fucking Arthur Dent, and just have written down a statement for Thor to take back to his daddy instead.

And for all his shock and horror, Tony finds that he’s terribly angry – angry at Fjalar for being a sadistic jerk, at Thor for not snapping his fingers and somehow stopping this, at himself for letting Loki out of sight, at Asgard for being medieval brutes, but most of all at Loki for not being able to keep his temper in check and bringing this shit storm onto them both.

And now it’s come down to this. Either beat Loki into a bloody heap or have someone else do it even worse, quite possibly killing him in the process.

Loki, why couldn’t you just let Fjalar’s shit slide? Why did you have to bring us into this god-damned mess?

“So,” Fjalar’s voice cuts through the haze that is his mind once more. “Have you reached your decision yet? Shall your slave be punished by your hand or by someone else’s?”
Tony looks up to face the other man, knowing that if looks could burn, the creep would be a heap of smoking, smouldering ashes on the floor right now.

And as he looks into those beady eyes, there is suddenly an idea taking shape in his head. Perhaps it’s idiotic, and maybe Fjalar will only scoff at him with scorn and derision, but it’s worth a try. Anything that might salvage the situation would be worth it.

Clenching his teeth, he reaches into his bag for the Rubik’s cube lying in there, pulling it out and holding it up to the light as if he’s showcasing a costly treasure.

“Alright, Fjalar,” he says, trying to make his voice sound as authoritarian as possible, though to his own ears it sounds more like it wants to unleash a generous helping of death and destruction. “How about this – I will offer you my Magic Cube of Many Colours, and in return, you will seek no further restitution on behalf of my slave’s actions today.”

Wow, he sure must be acclimatizing quickly seeing as how he’s already starting to talk Shakespearian like these guys.

And Tony can practically see something shift in Fjalar’s face as he watches the toy, the all-encompassing lust for revenge suddenly being challenged by the newcomer that is hungry desire.

Come on, you greedy fuck…

And finally, after an endless moment of the two emotions battling for dominance, it is the challenger that emerges victorious.

Fjalar snatches the cube from Tony’s fingers, clenching it in his fist. “Very well, Man of Iron, I will accept this offering as sufficient recompense.” He narrows his eyes into slits, regarding Tony like a snake would gaze at a mouse. “However, you would still do well to teach your slave proper respect, or I’m sure someone else will be more than happy to.”

And with that, the man turns on his heel and walks off, back still taut with anger, and cube clutched in a ham-like hand. Tony isn’t the least sorry to see him go and hopes he will never have to be within a ten mile radius of the intolerable asshat ever again.

Before he’s even finished the thought, he is nearly punched into the ground as Thor’s hand slaps
down on his shoulder, only to be crunched into a bone-splintering embrace a second later.

“My friend,” Thor’s voice rumbles mere millimetres from his ear, and it sounds like it’s on the verge of tears for all the big and fancy warrior the Thunderer is supposed to be. “I cannot thank you enough for this. You saved my brother, and you have my eternal gratitude.”

“Alright, alright,” Tony says, trying to extract himself from the mighty embrace as he feels wetness pressing against his cheek. There’s only so much male bonding he can take in a day, after all. “No big deal, big guy.”

Thor slowly lets go, but still lets a hand linger on Tony’s shoulder. “Let me at least repay you for the precious item you gave up on my brother’s behalf,” he offers, face misty-eyed, but still in a strangely manly way.

Tony shrugs at that. “I paid ten bucks for it at Walmart. No need for reimbursements, Hercules.”

Thor only beams happily at him. “Then let me know if there’s anything else you want, anything else I can do for you, my friend.”

Yeah, actually, there is.

“I’d like a word with your brother,” he says, throwing a glare towards the dark-haired god still sitting on his ass on the floor with legs half-drawn up, hands behind him for support. Loki’s eyes meet with his and their gazes lock for a few moments, Tony feeling his face draw into a mask of anger as he regards the god. Loki is the first to avert his eyes.

“In private,” he adds.

Thor nods at that. “Very well. I will show you a suitable area, then.”

Slowly and on unsteady legs, Loki starts to get up from the floor but is hauled up by Thor who bestows a crushing embrace on his brother before he’s even gotten up on his own two feet, murmuring words in his ear too soft for Tony to hear.
Then Thor reluctantly lets go and nods at Tony to follow.

Thor guides them through a corridor to a small, sparsely furnished room that looks like a servant’s quarters, though it’s currently not in use by anyone. “I hope this shall suit your needs for privacy,” he says, gesturing at the cramped space.

“It will be fine,” Tony replies without taking his eyes off Loki.

Thor gives the two of them another misty-eyed glance, but then leaves them alone without another word.

And Tony grabs the handle of the door and slams it shut as forcefully as he can muster, the bang sounding like a gun shot in the silence and the slab of wood almost falling from its hinges, but he couldn’t care less. He’s just so fucking pissed right now.

He can see Loki flinch a little at this uncharacteristic show of anger, but otherwise the god doesn’t move an inch, though he bites his lower lip.

Walking over to stand in front of Loki, Tony positions himself several inches closer than what would count as normal conversation distance, drawing himself up to his full height.

“Allright, I want to hear a really good explanation for this,” he says, voice soft but fury brimming underneath. “Don’t fucking tell me you actually did what that fuckwit claimed you did?”

The god licks his lips, not meeting with Tony’s eyes. “It is as Fjalar said. He insulted me and I threw beer into his face.”

“He insulted you, huh? And getting back for a few nasty words was worth all the fucking crap that followed?” The fury is coiling inside of him like a poisonous snake, its tail twisting and lashing, sharp fangs scraping at his insides.

“Fjalar is a lowly vassal, and he accused me of argr,” Loki says, but there is no real conviction in his voice. Instead, the god looks unusually pale and hesitant, as if the enormity of what he’s done and the possible consequences are just now becoming clear to him.
“I don’t even know what the hell that argr shit is and I don’t care,” Tony fumes at him, “but there is one thing I’ve realized very quickly after spending not even a day here, and that is that Fjalar being a lowly vassal still puts him several steps above you on the pecking order around here, doesn’t it?” Perhaps it’s a cheap-shot bringing that up, but he couldn’t care less right now.

Loki offers no reply to that, his head bowed and eyes downcast like a scolded schoolboy.

The god’s silence does nothing to dissipate Tony’s anger. “And you knew what would happen when you threw that fucking beer into his face, didn’t you?” The sound level of his voice has reached shouting by now, but the number of decibels still keeps increasing for every word. “Yeah, fine, so I’m the alien mortal monkey who barely knows jack shit about how things are done here and I’ve probably embarrassed myself a hundred times already, but you’ve grown up here, you knew what kind of punishment is given to slaves that do shit like that to free men, and you still did it?”

Damn, he’s just so pissed at Loki for what the god almost forced him to do back there. Just because he couldn’t keep his temper in check, not thinking about the consequences of his actions for even a second.

“You realize what you almost had me do? And all because you had to act like a brainless idiot!” he yells, unable to stop himself, hands grabbing hold of the god’s shoulders, giving him a shake. “Do you understand what would have just happened back there if Fjalar hadn’t accepted that cube as compensation for you acting like a moron? Huh? I’d been forced to have you turned into god-damned minced meat!” His fingers dig into Loki’s shoulders, unable to let go as they only clutch harder, tense and shaking.

Loki only observes him for a little while in silence with a wide-eyed, deer-in-headlights look gleaming with remorse and regret.

There is silence for a few moments. A tongue darts out to wet dry lips, and then Loki finally speaks, voice soft. “I did not intend to cause you distress through my actions.” He swallows. “I am sorry.”

At that, the hands still clutching the god’s shoulders finally drop to Tony’s sides, as his anger runs off him like water from a slab of butter, leaving him dizzy and unsteady on his legs. It feels like he’s just waking up from a bad dream, heart racing and limbs shaking, reality crashing down on him once more. Closing his eyes for a moment to give himself time to ground himself in some degree of normalcy again, he draws a deep breath, taking a step back as he’s trying to clear his head.

“Alright, it’s fine, I just… I didn’t… fuck it,” he manages, suddenly taken aback by the fierceness of his own reaction. He hadn’t really meant to fly off the handle at Loki like that, but it had been so
goddamn close, what had almost happened back there. If the scales had just tipped a little differently, he would have been forced to really hurt Loki. For real. And he couldn’t have fucking lived with himself after doing something like that.

“Okay, I think I need to sit down,” he mumbles to no one in particular as he drops down onto one of the chairs lined up against the wall, glad to no longer have to rely on his legs for support. Elbows resting on his thighs, he rubs his hands over his face, as if everything was indeed just a bad dream that he’s trying to wipe away.

After a few heartbeats, Loki slides down onto the chair next to him, and they sit in silence for a little while.

“Are you… okay?” Tony finally asks, not sure what he’s supposed to say, because it’s not as if words will make a difference anyway, but it must have been a hell of a scarce that Loki has just gone through.

“I am fine.” Loki says quietly.

Well, physically unharmed, at least. Though, if he’s even in half as much shock as Tony, it’s probably going to take him a long time to forget about this.

He lets his head slump back, coming to a rest on top of the backrest of the chair. “Alright, I didn’t mean to get pissed at you like that, it was just that…” His words trail off slightly before he finds them again. “I mean, it was so fucking close what happened back there, and, well…”

He makes a pause, hating the words he’s about to say next, but he can’t leave them out after this. As much as he’d been hoping to avoid it, he just can’t take any chances after having gotten such an appalling demonstration of how things are done here. He had thought he wouldn’t have to play along when he came here, because he’s fucking Tony Stark and since when did he play by the rules, but who knows what might happen to Loki if he steps too far out of line? Or if Tony unwittingly makes him step too far out of line?

“Look, I guess I didn’t fully comprehend all the shit that goes on here regarding slaves, but I sort of do by now,” he says staring at the arched ceiling above his head. “And I realize that this isn’t the time or the place to play around. I don’t like this any more than you do, but from now on just… act like it would be expected from you as long as we’re here and there are other people around, okay? I might not know exactly what’s expected here, but you do, so just play along with it enough so that no one important will make an issue out of it. Because I really don’t want to risk any repeat performances of this kind of crap.”
He turns his head slightly to glance at Loki, who nods, his own eyes directed at the floor. “I will do that.”

And then there is silence again.

“Come on, let’s head back,” Tony finally says. “I can sure use another drink after this. Or ten.” With that, he stands up and makes for the door, desperate for some air after the staleness of the small and cramped room.

Before he can push the handle, he hears Loki’s voice behind him.

“Thank you for standing up for me.”

The words are soft, barely discernible, but they’re still there.
Chapter 83

Chapter Notes

Just to prevent possible confusion, the two scenes of this chapter are supposed to take place simultaneously. ^^

As darkness falls, the fire crackling in the hearth paints flickering shadows dancing on the walls, the ephemeral figures growing longer and darker as the sun sets. The leftovers from the grandiose meal they’ve eaten – in a thankfully much more private chamber than before – have been cleared away, and the entertainment for the evening has been taken over by Thor who is eagerly leaning forward in his chair with his forearms resting on the table, telling a story of an adventurous quest from a time long ago in a place far away. His thunderous laughter rolls across the room as he recounts amusing incidents along the way, and his voice rises to dramatic heights as he describes battling with dangerous monsters in foreign lands, only to lower conspiratorially when the glorious sword fights give way to dramatic suspense.

But Tony barely hears a word of it. Right now there is only one thing on his mind – the image of Loki on the ground before Fjalar, helpless despair shining out of his eyes, about to be subjected to a cruel and unusual punishment for a mere trifle.

He still feels a distinct nausea at this. At how it’s okay to treat people like that in Asgard. Or, more precisely, people who are standing low enough on the social ladder.

Loki had acted like a brainless moron back there, of course. Pride and temper aside, he should have known better. Unlike Tony, the god has grown up here, lived as good as his whole life in this realm, and must be well aware of how slaves are expected to behave and the consequences that follow when they don’t.

Not that he supports the idea of Loki crawling in the dirt like a worm or an insect, far from it, but there’s a difference between that and simply keeping one’s mouth shut and swallowing one’s pride when the situation calls for it. The god should have had at least that much of a sense of self-preservation. Throwing beer in someone’s face is never a good idea, and even a man back home might very well find himself getting beaten up for it; of course the outcome would be considerably worse for slaves doing the same thing in a society that denies them all semblance of basic human rights.

The horror of what would have transpired had Fjalar not accepted that cube has been tearing at the edges of his consciousness ever since. He is still not sure whether he would have been able to go
through with it, despite knowing that the consequences would be even more severe if he couldn’t bring himself to carry out the demanded punishment.

A part of him is still surprised that he had reacted so strongly in the aftermath when he was alone with Loki, that his anger had risen to such heights once the danger had passed. But there’s no way he could have lived with himself if he would have been forced to hurt Loki like that. Or even watch the god get hurt like that, impotent to do anything to stop it.

Because he honestly and sincerely cares about Loki.

And when darkness has fallen and the fire burnt out, and the room left in silence after the closing words of Thor’s final heroic tale, the thunder god says the hour is growing late and it’s time to retire for the night.

As darkness falls, the fire crackling in the hearth paints flickering shadows dancing on the walls, the ephemeral figures growing longer and darker as the sun sets. The leftovers from the grandiose meal they’ve eaten – in a thankfully much more private chamber than before – have been cleared away, and the entertainment for the evening has been taken over by Thor who is eagerly leaning forward in his chair with his forearms resting on the table, telling a story of an adventurous quest from a time long ago in a place far away. His thunderous laughter rolls across the room as he recounts amusing incidents along the way, and his voice rises to dramatic heights as he describes battling with dangerous monsters in foreign lands, only to lower conspiratorially when the glorious sword fights give way to dramatic suspense.

But Loki barely hears a word of it. Right now there is only one thing on his mind – the image of Tony standing before Fjalar, offering the man his little toy to save Loki from the punishment that his reckless actions had brought down on him.

Of course, after all the time spent in Midgard, Loki knows that the colourful cube is as good as worthless, but that’s not the point.

The point is that Tony did it for his sake.

It had no doubt been a stubborn, ill-considered choice in the first place to not follow Tony and Thor to the latrines, despite Thor being right in his assessment that no one would have dared harming him here, as long as he didn’t step out of line. But after what had recently transpired with Arnulf, it had
seemed important to him to stay behind as the others went. As a slave, he might be at the bottom rung of the ladder, but he could at least put up this small show of defiance for the rabble, show everyone that he wasn’t afraid of them, that he still dared to sit alone in Thor’s chambers without the protection of his master and his royal brother. He would not let himself be cowed or intimidated by them; they had not managed to scare him into submission or take away his pride.

It had all gone southwards, though, when that brutish fool Fjalar sauntered over to where he was sitting and started to heap filthy slurs and insults all over him, even using that hated word *argr*, goading him in the assumption that Loki wouldn’t dare to retort. And then, his nerves still being strung up after the Arnulf incident, something had just snapped inside of him.

Even as his hand made for the jug of beer, he knew that he would end up regretting it. Slaves didn’t throw beer into the faces of free men without being severely punished for it. And yet, he was unable to stop himself; it was as if an outer force had taken control of his limbs. His anger was too overpowering, the sting of his wounded pride too painful; it drew the last semblance of conscious thought and reason away from his mind. It was as if the whole world grinded to an almost-halt, then, as his hand moved in a daze, and the beer slowly splashed all over Fjalar, his face contorted in shock and fury that a slave had dared causing him such indignity.

Then the world started revolving at a normal pace again as Fjalar’s hand lashed out and struck his cheek, the force of the blow felling him to the ground. An instant later, Tony, with Thor at his heels, came rushing into the room and Loki knew then that he was done for. There would be nothing saving him now, not even Thor’s authority would be able to help him, not even a prince was above Asgardian law.

Fjalar would demand punishment for this, only too eager for the chance to get revenge for past slights. And if wouldn’t be a mere slap on the wrist, that he knew with gut-churning certainty. The subsequent request of fifty lashes as recompense hadn’t surprised Loki in the least; it was expected, and not that much more than anyone else in Fjalar’s situation would have demanded.

And barring Thor’s futile attempts that were already doomed to fail, nobody would stand up for him or lift a hand to help him out of the hopeless situation that his impulsive rashness and lapse of self-control had landed him in.

Nobody, expect for Tony.

Tony, who refused to do what many in Asgard would no doubt say he should already have done to his misbehaving slave long ago. Instead, he reached down a hand and pulled Loki up from the mile-deep hole that he’d dug for himself.
For once in his life, someone had actually stood up for him. Not like at his trial, when no one would speak a word in his defence, surrounded by uncaring and indifferent faces as he had been. No, Tony had done something that no one in all of Asgard had done during those long days as his trial played out – he had spoken up in Loki’s defence.

True, Tony had done something similar when the Einherjers had been about to take him back to Asgard after thinking he had tried to escape, but that had been different, because then he had actually been innocent, had done nothing wrong. This time, however, he had done exactly what he was accused of, and yet, Tony had defended him, despite being a stranger and an alien in this realm with no allies to guard his back except for Thor.

Later, Tony had been furious at him. He’d never seen the man display such anger before, not even that one time when Loki had smashed his living room to pieces in a bout of uncontrolled rage. But this time, the cause was Loki’s ill-considered actions almost having forced the man to severely hurt him. And he could tell from the concern so clearly painted in Tony’s face just why he was so angry.

It was just like that incident from his childhood when he had been carelessly taunting a straying bilgesnipe, thinking he was at a safe distance, when the vicious animal suddenly came charging straight at him, moving quicker than should be at all possible for such a hulking beast, cornering him against a boulder. Luckily, Frigga had been close enough to come running and in the last moment save him by throwing a rock at the creature’s highly sensitive snout, distracting it enough so that Loki could slip away, white-faced and trembling.

And Tony had reminded him of Frigga back then – so terribly angry, yelling and shouting at him what an idiot he was as the hands on his shoulders were shaking him hard enough to make his teeth rattle. And even though her anger had made him cry, he had known why it was there.

Because she cared.

As Tony similarly stood fuming before him, there was no mistaking it – there was true concern in those brown eyes. Concern, whereas no one else in Asgard, save for Thor and Frigga, could have cared less about his fate.

Tony, who had somehow found it in him to show him kindness and compassion, despite all that Loki had done to him and his world. Tony, his erstwhile enemy, who had now even stood up for him despite his past wrongdoings, unlike his fellow Asgardians at his trial, his supposedly own people.

And he realizes, then, that, unlike what he believed when he launched his attack on Midgard, mortals cannot possibly be lesser beings, if they are capable of something like this, if they are able to show
kindness to and even to stand up for someone who has so grievously wronged them, something that his own people would not. Weaker, perhaps, but not lesser; how can they ever be when they are capable of such?

No, he knows now that he will never again consider humans to be beneath him.

And paradoxically, the one thing that made him realize that wasn’t being disempowered and forced into bondage under a mortal, it wasn’t his being a slave, nor was it his being treated like one.

It was Tony’s not treating him like one.

And when darkness has fallen and the fire burnt out, and the room left in silence after the closing words of Thor’s final heroic tale, the thunder god says the hour is growing late and it’s time to retire for the night.
“I will have a servant show you to your chambers,” Thor says, rising resolutely from the table as if he is about to embark on another heroic quest. “You must surely be tired and wish for some rest by now.”

Yeah, a descent night’s sleep is exactly what Tony needs after all of today’s crap. Slowly, stomach full of food and head full of beer, he follows Thor’s example and gets up from his seat, grimacing slightly as the kinks in his body are suddenly making themselves known. Somehow, he had expected chairs in a magic kingdom to be a bit softer.

Thor leads the way out and once they’ve made it back into the common room again, Tony’s brain takes note of a tall, armour-clad man standing there watching them; unlike the few servants still around at this hour, he is apparently not doing anything of significance, unless lounging in a doorway counts as important. The stranger observes them for a while, and then entangles himself from the doorframe and walks over.

“Greetings, my friends,” the man says with a polite incline of his head. The smile on the weather-beaten face is insincere, and Tony doesn’t trust him as far as he can throw him. Which wouldn’t be any distance at all, given the heavy armour and plated steel he’s wearing. Short-clipped beard, expressive eyes, and a broad chin, he probably counts as fairly handsome, but there is something beneath the pleasant exterior that makes a note of discomfort creep over Tony’s skin.

Sensing possible danger, he throws a quick glance towards Thor, but the god shows no sign of heightened alertness.

“Greetings, Geir,” Thor replies. “What can I do for you?”

“Actually, my business is with the Man of Iron,” the man named Geir intones as he turns his eyes onto Tony, regarding him with a fixed stare. “I was wondering if I may have a few quick words with you?”

And really, he’d like to tell Geir no, especially considering his interactions so far with the local natives, but he’s also aware that he’s a guest here and it might be considered very rude to refuse a simple request like that without even hearing the guy out. And pissing people off is hardly going to be conducive to having things run smoothly during his stay here. He’s had enough problems since coming here to last him a life-time. And since Thor seems to know the man, or at least his name, he can see no immediate reason for turning it down.
“Sure, buddy,” he says, glad he’s not slurring just yet. One or two more beers, though… “Just shoot.”

Geir makes a slight jerk of his head, indicating that he wants Tony to follow rather than continuing their conversation where they’re standing. “Please, I would prefer if we could handle this a little more privately.”

“Yeah, well, I’m not sure it would be polite to traipse off just as my gracious host was about to show me my accommodations for the night,” he says, not really feeling up to this at all.

“Ah, I don’t mean we have to go far, just down the hallway where we can talk undisturbed. It won’t take long, I assure you,” Geir insists.

Tony shoots Thor another glance, in case the god is having second thoughts about him wandering off with this guy, but he looks fully unperturbed at Geir’s suggestion.

“Do not worry,” Thor assures him, “I will wait here until you have finished your business with Geir.”

Well, if Thor sees no problem with it, then fine. He nods his consent, hoping he won’t regret this.

He follows the armoured man into the hallway, where Geir stops and turns towards Tony with a smile reminiscent of a viper.

“I am sorry for intruding so rudely upon you,” he says, but the apology doesn’t sound the least bit sincere. He leans against the wall behind him, steel scraping against stone, as he considers Tony. “However, you have something in your possession that is of interest to me.”

Tony shrugs. “Sorry, no more magic cubes. You’ll have to ask Fjalar about that, he got my only one.”

Geir wrinkles his eyebrows in confusion, then, a second later his face lights up again and he laughs, the sound like sandpaper against granite. “Ah, no, you misunderstand. I care not for such trinkets,” he says, waving a hand in disdain. “They might please simple men like Fjalar, but I have something
“different in mind.” He leans closer to Tony, all gleaming eyes and sharp white teeth.

“Allow me the use of your slave for the night, and I will pay you handsomely for this favour.”

And really, he should have seen this coming. With all the shit that has happened, Geir’s suggestion should have come as no surprise at all.

And yet it does. For a few moments, Tony Stark finds that he is all out of words, as he stands there gaping in disbelief.

“He’s not for sale,” he finally manages to spit out after the silence has gone on for far too long, employing every bit of self-restraint he can muster as to not add a ‘go to hell and don’t ever come back’ to that.

_You sick bastard._

Geir’s eyes narrow slightly at the flat-out refusal, but his tone is as polite as before. “Ah, so you wish to keep him for yourself, then.” The smirk curling his lips shows not so much mirth as indulgence with a child wanting a precious toy for itself. “I can’t say I blame you, though I think your unwillingness to share your good fortunes is quite a shame.”

Something akin to bile is rising in the back of Tony’s throat. “Yeah well, no deal. I think I should get back now. Thor is waiting for me.” The effort not to put his fist to the guy’s face takes every ounce of self-control that’s left in him. _If only he had had his suit…_

At this, Geir puts an arm up against the wall, effectively blocking Tony’s retreat. He does it so smoothly, so carelessly that it almost looks as if it’s coincidental and not something done to purposely stop Tony from leaving just yet.

“I heard that you refused to have him whipped despite him having assaulted that fool Fjalar. You must really treasure your slave, or perhaps should I say his _abilities._” The lecherous face is far too close for comfort for Tony, but he refuses to step back and show weakness in the presence of this creep. “Though I can agree it would be a shame to mar such beauty with lash marks.” The distance shrinks further, and it is all Tony can do not to clock the bastard in the jaw. “Tell me, is he as good as he looks?
And Tony has had enough. Good manners be damned, he shoves past Geir with a ‘fuck you’ and walks off, not bothering to deign that shit with an answer.

He can hear Geir’s dry laughter behind him. “If you change your mind, let me know.”

Tony neither replies nor turns. Once he’s back, Thor gives him a concerned look, clearly sensing that something’s off.

“If you don’t mind me asking, what was it that Geir wanted from you?” he queries.

“Something that’s not for sale,” Tony snaps, more gruffly than he had intended.

Thor regards him with a creased brow for a few moments, but when Tony doesn’t elaborate, he asks no further questions.

“Very well, then.” Thor beckons one of the servants, a tall, wiry man with a squirrel-like face. “Ingvar, would you show Man of Iron and my brother to their quarters?”

The servant hurries over with a flustered, “Of course, my prince,” and Thor turns back to Tony again.

“I hope you don’t mind sharing accommodations with Loki.” The god looks slightly apologetic at this. “Even if no one would dare harming Loki without provocation, it would still make me feel safer knowing that Loki won’t be staying in separate quarters, in case something happens.”

“It’s fine. I’d be less concerned for his safety if he were to stay in the Overlook Hotel than keeping him in a single room here,” Tony replies with a shrug. Nope, he most definitely wants Loki where he can keep an eye on him.

They wish each other a good night, and a moment later, Tony and Loki are following the servant to the guest quarters.

Tony doesn’t take much notice of the gilded halls or magic-enhanced interiors they pass, stunning as they might be; he is far too absorbed in his own swirling mind to pay attention to his surroundings. It
is a sobering thought, equal amounts shocking and horrifying to truly realize what life for a slave here in Asgard is like. What Loki’s life would have been like if Odin had made him serve his sentence here instead of being sent over to Midgard and to Tony.

And as has been made obvious after not even one day here, that life would have been an endless cycle of humiliation, beatings, of being used for sexual gratification. Slavery in Asgard is no joke, and it sickens him what the poor wretches at the very bottom of the social ladder have to endure here.

With this realization also comes another pang of shame for the flippant attitude he’d displayed towards Loki’s slavery at first, if this was the sort of treatment the god was anticipating when coming to his tower. If he’d known about all of this, how things are done in Asgard, he would have acted… differently. But he never really stopped along the way to think much about what Loki might expect from him. He always fancied himself the good guy, and even if he never believed in the whole hero concept, at least he figured himself to be some kind of make-shift facsimile sort-of-hero type. At least as close as you can get in an age far removed from Camelot and Mount Olympus and all that other spiffy mythological stuff.

And as a sort-of-hero, he wouldn’t of course sink to violent abuse and all that other human rights strangling-and-stabbing-in-the-throat stuff that the villains of the story so cheerfully dish out. Back then, the idea never crossed his mind that Loki wouldn’t be aware of that, having been raised in a culture with very different views on how it’s okay to treat others, and criminals and enemies in particular. To say nothing of slaves.

The realization that Loki had assumed that Tony would take advantage of him in that way had been a major what-the-fuck moment for him at the time, the god’s blunt question in an instant turning his world upside down from the sheer surrealism of it. But now, in hind-sight, having personally witnessed the shit that flies here, the assumption makes perfect sense. Especially after having been approached by that Geir guy and being personally queried about his goods like he’s some fucking pimp.

The mousy servant stops outside a heavy door with silver ornaments on its panels. The hinges creak slightly as he pushes the handle open. “If you please,” the man indicates with a curt bow, showing them inside.

“Thanks, pal,” Tony mumbles absent-mindedly, still partly lost somewhere in his own thoughts, though he snaps out of it enough to give his new surroundings a quick check over.

Spacious and extravagantly furnished and decorated, the room leaves little to be desired, even to demanding guests used to luxury. Well, perhaps air-conditioning and a mini-bar is out of the deal, but other than that it looks like quarters fit for a king.
It is only when the servant has bowed again and taken his leave, that Tony realizes that there is only one bed.
Alright, so this is definitely awkward. He stares at the bed-big-enough-for-two, whimsically hoping it’s been enchanted with some kind of Harry Potter-esque magic that will grant people their innermost wishes and subsequently transform the lumbering thing into two separate entities.

Of course, nothing happens. The bed stubbornly remains in its current state of one-ness.

A quick look around makes it clear that there’s nothing else that could serve as decent make-shift sleeping arrangements either; sure there’s a couch-like thingy lining one of the walls, but it’s too narrow and curved for a person to sleep in unless they wouldn’t mind waking up with a stiff neck on the floor fifteen minutes after falling asleep.

Great.

And he doesn’t want to even consider the underlying implications of the bed, doesn’t want to touch the inferences that could be drawn with a ten-mile pole as to why these particular sleeping arrangements have been offered.

Or maybe, he tries to tell himself, Loki is expected to sleep on the floor because he’s a slave, and the bed, big as might be, is meant just for Tony. And it’s saying quite a lot that that is actually the least disturbing interpretation he can think of.

Grimacing, he throws a glance at Loki, who is occupied studying a garish painting on the wall.

“Uh, so… which side do you prefer? Left or right?” he asks, trying to be flippant to ease his own discomfort, like this is totally normal. But there’s no way he’s going to have Loki sleep on the floor, as awkward as this will be.

Loki cocks his head to the side, as he turns to look at Tony. “I don’t have a preference; either side is fine.”

And as Tony eyes the bed in front of him, he is suddenly struck by how easy it would be for him to take advantage of this situation to… do things to Loki. And he desperately hopes that the god isn’t harbouring any such concerns, given who he’s going to have to share a bed with, even though he doesn’t look worried as far as Tony can tell. He did make it clear to Loki that one very embarrassing
time that he wasn’t going to do anything like that, but since then he hasn’t breached the subject again.

And to be honest, he has no desire to breach it again and bring the whole awkward deal back into the light when he’s been trying to let it die of negligence, what with him getting horny over a simple foot massage performed by the god of mischief himself and all that followed. Rather, he’d prefer to act as if that little incident never happened, and that Loki never made those subsequent assumptions about how things were going to play themselves out between the two of them.

Still, he should say *something*, reassure the god in *some* way, while preferably touching on those events as little as possible.

“Allright, then,” he says, hoping he’s sounding casual. “Since we’re going to be sharing a bed, there needs to be some rules and restrictions drawn out. I don’t want any flailing limbs in my face or nightly kicks to the stomach, so you keep to your side and I’ll keep to mine, okay?”

Stepping forward to the foot end of the bed, he places a finger on the middle of the mattress edge, and then leans over to trace a line towards the head end, as far as he can reach without falling over. The pressure of his finger leaves a shallow indenture in the cover, indicating their separate territories.

It is of course no real barrier at all, but an imagined one is at least better than none.

He straightens up, pretending to admire his little handiwork, the dent in the cover temporarily splitting the bed into two equal halves.

“That’s the line right there,” he says casually with a wiggle of his fingers, “and don’t you even think about crossing it. I want a peaceful night’s sleep without being disturbed by straying elbows or drifting knees or wandering feet.”

As if that’s really the issue at stake, given his previous reaction to Loki. But it should hopefully serve to set the god’s mind at ease, if he should harbour any suspicions that Tony might consider taking advantage when presented with such an excellent opportunity, being among people who would only think he exercised liberties rightly belonging to him. He’s indirectly made the situation clear without actually addressing the embarrassing subject that made it all necessary in the first place, and the underlying point should be obvious – there will be no crossing the line separating the two bed halves, and that includes Tony.
“Point taken,” the god says, and it even looks like he’s smiling slightly, which is a good sign. “I will keep to my side.”

And Tony lets his mind settle with that, glad no further assurances seem necessary.

Rummaging around in his duffle bag, he digs out his toothbrush and toothpaste and starts brushing away, relived to move on to more prosaic things. Loki, on his hand, forgoing such petty hygiene procedures, begins to undress for bed, as unabashed as ever. Tony casually turns his back, pretending to be looking out the window though for all he can see in the darkness there might as well have been a piece of black cardboard covering the glass pane.

As he stands there, swishing the toothbrush around, his wandering thoughts once more return to churn through the previous events of the day. He’s still in a pretty foul mood, and revisiting those memories isn’t exactly helping. It still disgusts and angers him how slaves are treated here, what is expected that their masters will do to them, to say nothing of the creepy fuck Geir’s propositioning. At least he’s glad the bastard never made his suggestion within earshot of Loki. Luckily, Loki hasn’t asked him what Geir wanted, and he sure as hell isn’t going to tell him. If he asks later on, he will just make something up. He just can’t believe how shit like this can be acceptable, and among a race that considers itself to be above humanity, no less.

Having finished his dental care, he heads back to the bed. Loki is sitting up leaning against the headboard, cover drawn up halfway to his chest, eyeing him pensively.

“Are you still upset because of my actions earlier today?” he asks as Tony grabs the hem of his shirt, about to undress for a good night’s sleep.

Suddenly realizing his shoulders are drawn up to what must be at least a couple of inches higher than normal and his jaws clenched like he’s trying to crack a walnut between his teeth, Tony wills himself to relax.

“Upset, yes,” he admits. “But not because of your actions. Because of everyone else’s actions. How this… crap can be okay.”

“It’s what happens with slaves who don’t act like they’re supposed to,” Loki says evenly, not looking at Tony.

He rubs his hands over his face. “Yeah, so I’ve realized. And I said it before, but I’ll say it again – if
there’s a risk of you getting into trouble again by not adhering to the way things are done here, then just fall in line with whatever Asgard expects. Just... for show.”

Loki nods, and Tony sure hopes that tomorrow will be a more glorious day. Looking back on low-water mark that has been today, it’s hard to imagine it getting any worse.

He sighs in contentment as he crawls down between the sheets after what must be one of the longest days of his life. The bed is soft and inviting and he’s half asleep before he has even managed to pull the cover up.

Tony might have dozed off the instant his head hit the pillow, but Loki is still awake, listening to the man softly snoring somewhere behind his back.

He could tell how taken aback Tony had been at the sight of the large single bed, intended to offer him the choice of either having his slave sleep on the floor or sharing his bed, depending on his wishes for the night. As if it hadn’t quite yet sunken in how things are done here in Asgard, despite all that had transpired.

He doubts that Thor at all considered this when he asked Ingvar to show them to a proper room. The Thunderer is just too thoughtless to think twice about bedding arrangements. Loki, on his hand, had seen it coming from a mile away, of course, even though it had taken Tony by surprise.

Tony. His mind travels back to the earlier events of the day, but this time it isn’t the incident with Fjalar, but the scene of Geir pulling Tony aside to discuss a ‘private’ matter.

Of course, Loki knows exactly what Geir asked of Tony. He knows the man, knows the way his tastes run, and has even been propositioned by him twice, even if it was a couple of centuries ago since last time. Again, Thor was totally clueless, but Loki was well aware just what the glint in the man’s eyes meant as he stepped out from the shadows to approach Tony.

He already knew without even the slightest of doubts that Tony would turn down the man’s proposal, so he was never worried as the two walked off, despite the lurch of disgust that settled in the pit of his stomach. No, Tony would never let someone take advantage of or hurt him in any way. He wouldn’t, because he... cares.
Behind him, he can hear Tony starting to move around in his sleep, slowly at first, but then more insistently until he’s practically tossing between the sheets. He’s apparently having some kind of dream, and just what kind is clear from the grinding movements and the unsubtle moans escaping the man’s lips.

Between those moans, Loki can hear the sound of his own name.

An instant later, the sleeping lump that is Tony rolls over and comes to rest against Loki, an arm automatically wrapping itself around his body.

And Loki doesn’t mind that.

As the body behind him shifts, he can feel Tony’s erection pressing against him.

And Loki doesn’t mind that either.

A few breaths later, Tony moans softly again, grinding himself a little into Loki’s back.

And Loki can feel something stir in his own groin.

_He’s having a dream, and it’s one of those dreams where you’re almost aware that you’re dreaming, but not quite._

_There is a body tightly pressed against his, their limbs entwined._

_And so, he reaches out and runs a hand through dark hair, letting the surprisingly soft strands slip between his fingers._

_In response, a pair of arms reach out to wrap around his waist, and then hands are wantonly stroking along his sides, over his back and chest. He gasps at the sensations, pulling the other body closer to his, desperate for further, even more intimate touches._
As if reading his lustful thoughts, a hand slips down to his groin, wrapping around his erection and stroking it insistently. He bucks up and into the touch, groaning in heady pleasure.

They tumble, wrapped into each other, and when they come to a stop, he is on top. Drawing his breath in at the sight of the attractive, lean body pinned beneath his, he leans down to run his tongue down the toned chest, across the flat stomach and further downwards still, following the thin string of soft, dark hair beneath the navel...

He awakes with a startle, at first not sure where he is, but then slowly remembering.

He’s in Asgard.

It’s dark in the room, the fire having gone out what must be hours ago. Tony’s arm is still wrapped around him, his body pressed tightly against his back, the man himself soundly asleep and softly drooling on Loki’s shoulder.

Lying still for a few moments, listening to the breaths in the otherwise silent room, Loki places his palm atop the hand loosely resting on his chest, intertwining their fingers.
He’s pulled out of Dreamland by the sound of a soft knocking on the door, and he groggily rolls over onto his back, just about to call for Jarvis to handle the visitor. It doesn’t make sense that someone would be knocking on his bedroom door, but his sleep-muddled brain is not yet in a state to reflect much further on that anomaly.

Then, the memories flood back and he suddenly remembers exactly where he is.

Oh. That’s right. Asgard.

The knock is repeated, a little harder this time but still sounding patient enough. He groans, wondering if it’s acceptable behaviour here in Magic Wonderland to open the door dressed in your underwear or if he should put on a pair of pants first. But before he can make up his mind, there’s a shuffle to his right and Loki crawls out from under the covers. Standing up in one fluid motion, as if he doesn’t need any recalibration time going from fast asleep to wide awake, he makes for the door, opening it to admit the visitor.

Not wholly unexpected, it’s another one of the ubiquitous servants, judging by the bland, simple clothes he’s wearing.

“Good morning, Man of Iron,” the man says with a courteous bow. “I hope you have slept well.”

“Morning, James,” he responds with a yawn, pulling the cover up just a little bit further. He can’t help but feel a bit awkward at having a stranger enter his bedroom like this when he’s still newly awoken and undressed, but yeah, Rome and Romans...

The servant doesn’t look the least bit perturbed by the state of things, though, which probably figures. The guy must have years of experience of helping lazy noblemen bathe and dress and probably wipe their asses too because they can’t be bothered to do it themselves, so barging in on men still half-asleep in bed is no doubt standard procedure for him.

“Thor sent me to express his apologies that he is unfortunately unable to join you for breakfast as he would have liked, but he was called on to deal with a matter that demanded his urgent attention. Until he can join up with you again, he invites you to explore the Halls as you wish, but would strongly advise that you do not leave the premises,” the servant says, demurely clasping his hands before him. “Now, your breakfast meal is prepared and ready to be served, whenever you wish.”
Food. Despite the lavish meal he’d eaten yesterday evening, he’s actually a bit hungry already, however impossible that sounds.

“Well, I guess now is as good a time as any,” he says with a shrug. “Don’t think I’ll be able to go back to sleep now anyway.”

“Do you wish to take your meal outside in the dining hall or have it brought here into your room?”

At that, Tony glances over at Loki, who hasn’t moved from the spot, half-hidden in the shadow cast by the open door, face expressionless. Like he’s trying to draw as little attention to himself as possible, like he’s part of the furnishing, like he’s… a slave.

“I’d rather have it sent here, thank you,” he says resolutely, a bit harsher than intended, as he tears his gaze away from Loki. There’s no way he’ll opt to have breakfast in a semi-public place if he can avoid it, given how Loki is expected to behave whenever other people are around.

“Very well,” the servant says with another bow. “Your meal will be brought shortly.”

With that, he turns and leaves, and Loki closes the door behind him.

“Damn, do people always barge into your bedroom like that around here?” he asks as the god makes it back to the bed and sits down on the mattress with a dull thud.

“It is expected by the servants that they see to the needs and wishes of those they have been tasked with serving. Having them enter like this is not seen as an invasion of privacy as it might have in Midgard,” Loki replies, leaning back a little. “But don’t worry, they will always knock and wait before entering chambers of a more private nature.”

Well, at least that’s something. Then he can trash the mental image of himself soundly asleep and sprawling on his back on the bed with a raging hard-on, cover having slipped down onto the floor, while a bunch of stealthy servants are busy dusting the furniture around him.

They dress in silence and Tony has just finished shaving when there’s another knock on the door.
This time, a whole procession of servants enter the room, carrying an assortment of plates and trays and pots and carafes. They set their burdens down on the table and fuss around a bit with the table setting, before bowing and taking their leave again, reminding Tony of little pre-programmed robots.

But the food smells delicious. Curious as to what aliens eat for breakfast, he walks up to the table, lifting the lids and peering inside. Some things are recognisable – freshly baked bread, slabs of creamy butter and various cheeses, cooked eggs, peeled fruit in neat slices. As well as a plate of hot, sizzling steaks. Huh. Other things are less identifiable, various stews and pots smelling of spices and aromas unfamiliar to him, but they make his mouth water nevertheless.

“Anything to your liking?” he hears Loki’s amused voice behind him.

“You bet,” he says as he lifts another lid to investigate the contents. “But seriously, there’s no way even a sumo wrestler back home could eat even a quarter of all this without exploding. Is the cook going to be offended or something if the servants have to take most of this stuff back?”

Loki gives a little chuckle. “You’re not expected to eat everything, or even most of it. This is merely so you can have the choice of whatever you prefer. The servants will eat whatever is left.”

“Good to know. I’d hate to insult whoever took the time to prepare all this stuff.” He peeks down into another pot, and wrinkles his nose. Unlike the rest of the dishes, this doesn’t smell nice at all and looks more like something you’d feed the pigs with. Some sort of colourless, texture-less slab of gruel that would make a cheeseburger at McDonalds look inviting.

“Is this some sort of Asgardian specialty?” he asks Loki, who is watching his examination with mild interest. “I mean, I know a lot of exotic so-called delicacies around the world are actually pretty gross to outsiders, like monkey brains or cheese with maggots or whatever, so maybe this is supposed to be like a godly hors d’oeuvres or something?”

“That particular dish is not meant for you, Tony,” Loki says evenly.

And as the words sink in, Tony’s suddenly not feeling so hungry anymore.

“They expect you to eat this crap?” he says with no small amount of offence, his own no doubt incredulous stare meeting with Loki’s calm one.
“Yes.”

“But you ate the same stuff as me and Thor yesterday evening?” he tries, not liking this one bit.

“Well, Thor is free to do as he likes in his own private chambers.” He gestures towards the pot. “But this is still standard fare for slaves, what they’d be served under normal circumstances.”

Yeah, of course. He looks down at the gruel again, making a grimace at the sad sight.

“So the servants would expect this pot to be empty when they come to clean the table?”

“Yes,” Loki says again. “They would.”

“Fine.” He picks up the pot and walks over to the window, fiddling a little as he tries to open it with his only free hand. Then, he turns the thing upside down, letting the bland, non-descript contents spill down into the greenery below.

“This is probably more useful as fertilizer than as food anyway,” he remarks as he closes the window again and puts the empty pot back onto the table. The almost symbolic gruel purge makes him feel a little better, and a part of his previous appetite is starting to return.

Loki doesn’t comment, but his eyes are still on Tony.

“Alright, I guess it’s finally mealttime, then,” he exclaims and rubs his hands together in an attempt to put the previous unpleasantness and unwelcome reminder of Loki’s slave status behind them. He’s about to pull out the chair to his side and sit down to indulge in the feast before him, but then becomes aware that this is the only chair at the table.

Blinking, he scans the room for another one.

Only to quickly realize that the room is as lackingly equipped when it comes to chairs as when it comes to beds. For all its lavishness and fancy decorations, there is only one measly, single chair in
the entire room.

He makes a double-take, not wanting to believe this. Surely there’s has to be something that could serve as proper sitting material?

But there’s nothing, not even one of those hideous bean puffs. Sure, there’s that couch-like something, but it’s a lumbering beast, too heavy to drag around for some temporary furniture rearrangement, just like the massive oak-and-gold table in front of him.

“How come there’s only one freaking chair in here?” he groans out loud in frustration, and then immediately regrets it. He knows the answer to that already.

Loki answers him nevertheless. “Slaves are not supposed to sit on chairs or on other furniture, whenever there is a floor available.”

Yeah, which obviously is equivalent to ‘never’.

And it’s making his annoyance and irritation rise up again. So perhaps he can’t do much about the expectations of a master and his slave in this place, but he had still been sure that at least in here, where no one else is around to see, he would be able to act as he damn well please, not having to acquiesce to any of that crap. But now, even the furniture is rallying against him and his Midgardian ways, trying to force him to adapt to the local customs he’s been seeking to avoid.

He takes a deep breath, trying to compose himself. Okay, so maybe they can’t sit around the table and have breakfast together, but that in no way means that Loki has to sit on the floor, like it’s expected here. There are a number of other, more palatable solutions, after all.

They could take turns eating – even though that would kinda suck; fancy meals like this are meant to be shared. They could both stand and eat – something that he’s spent enough cocktail parties doing to learn just how awkward and impractical that is. They could grab a plate of food each and then sit down on the weird-looking couch – even though it doesn’t look in the slightest designed for eating and they’d risk food stains on the pretty gold-inlaid fabric, but that would probably be the best solution.

Or they could…
He can’t help but snicker a little at the mental image. *Yeah, why the hell not?* Sure you might not normally do these things indoors, but there’s definitely room for it, and the bed cover has that perfect checkered pattern already...

Deciding to go with it, he walks over to the bed and resolutely pulls the cover off, bundling it up into his arms. Then he carries it over to the middle of the room and spreads it out on the floor, patting the fabric in satisfaction. Having taken care of that part, he heads back to the table and grabs the basket of bread and one of the lidded pots, placing them down onto the cover.

As he stands up to retrieve the next food items in line, he meets with Loki’s inquisitive stare and raised eyebrows, and gives the god a cheeky grin.

“What, don’t tell me you guys have never heard of picnics in Asgard”?
The breakfast is every bit as delicious as it looks, fresh and juicy and crisp in all the right places. Still, he can’t help but to think that the best part of it is not the food in itself, but the way it’s being partaken.

It’s not particularly comfortable, of course, nor is it very practical, sitting here cross-legged on the bed cover, balancing a plate on his lap, but it doesn’t matter. To be honest, he wouldn’t have cared that much even if he’d had to eat the bland gruel intended for him.

Coming here, he’d been fully aware that he’d be expected to take his meals sitting on the floor rather than being seated at a table, and he had not been looking forward to the humiliation of it. And yet, Tony has managed to make a mockery out of that practice with the way they’re sitting here, like little children, eating breakfast on the make-shift blanket, throwing proper etiquette right out the window.

He can only imagine the reaction of any of the Aesir should they happen to come across the little scene. A master sitting on the floor together with his slave, lowering himself to his level, as if it was the most natural thing in the world. Even he, despite having spent all these months slowly getting used to Tony’s behaviours and ideas, all of them so contrary to what he once took for granted, can’t help but marvel at the notion.

A master bringing a slave up to his level would be astonishing enough in itself, but for him to willingly lower himself to his slave’s level when the first option is unpractical is on a different magnitude altogether.

He basks in the feeling. Even if this can obviously not last – even Tony has realized that now – it will make it easier to submit to whatever is still awaiting during their stay here. Then he can at least indulge in the memory of this little moment of a breakfast shared together like equals, a cool oasis in a scorching desert.

“How come most of you guys manage to look so damn fit when you eat like this every day?” Tony suddenly inquires as he grabs another leg of chicken. “Heck, you even have beer with your breakfast!”

“Most Aesir men, except for the servants, engage in long and hard weapons training during a large part of the day,” Loki explains. “Any breakfast they’ve eaten, they work off soon enough.”
“Yeah well, remind me to get on the treadmill once we get back home, or I’m going to be looking more like a bag of blubber than the muscular and well-toned hero I’m supposed to be,” Tony says between chews, chicken leg in one hand and mug of beer in the other.

Well, there’s hardly any risk of that happening, not for someone with Tony’s… pleasing physique. He feels a sting of heat as he remembers the night before, the arm wrapped around him, the muscular body pressing into him, to say nothing of the big--

“So what do you think big brother is up to?” Tony interrupts his ponderings, continuing on another trail of thoughts entirely. “I mean, what could possibly be more important than spending quality time with the two of us?”

Loki lets go of his little mental indulgence, somewhat unwillingly. But there will surely be more time for that later, he tells himself. Perhaps even tonight?

“Most likely a dispute between noble families about land or inheritance or rights of some sort,” he says with a shrug. “It happens quite often and can quickly escalate into more serious hostilities unless there is some timely royal intervention. You’d think noblemen have better things to do than squabble like little children.”

“Yeah, but I guess rich people need something to pass the time as well, huh?” Tony shrugs, discarding the neatly clean-picked chicken leg onto his plate with a flick of his wrist and then nails Loki’s gaze with his own. “So, you think what Thunderboy said is advisable? I mean, with us going around prowling the Halls, where there might be like, you know, other people?”

And while Loki has to admit that he doesn’t look forward to running into anyone in his current station, the idea of spending the day locked up in here doesn’t sit well with him either. Besides, the prospect of giving Tony a tour of the Halls is appealing to him. He knows the man would enjoy it, and so would he. Even if he has to bow and scrape, it’s just a show, nothing but a game he’s playing. What’s real is what’s between him and Tony, like sharing breakfast on a blanket on the floor. What does he care about the others here?

“It will not be a problem,” he says. “While… expected behaviour is advisable, no one would dare to hurt anyone of us unless we have first given them good cause to. You are the honoured guest of the crown prince, and, provided that I act accordingly, that protection also extends to me since I’m… your slave.” He can’t help but notice how discrepant those words suddenly sound in his ears. Not that they’re technically untrue, of course, but the statement just feels so off.

“Well, that sure didn’t stop Conan from smacking you yesterday.” A crease of anger mars Tony’s
forehead at that, and Loki can see his knuckles turning white as his fists clench.

“Yes, after I had thrown beer into his face. That would count as ‘good cause’. Not even Fjalar would have dared doing something like that unprovoked, or he could have been in serious trouble.”

“Then what about that Arnulf incident? That didn’t seem like a very pleasant situation if you ask me. I was worried they were going to have you fucking lynched or something.” Tony counters, still not sounding convinced.

Loki sighs. “I should have apologized immediately after dropping that flagon of beer. That would have been the expected course of action.” Yes, he obviously should have done that, but he’d been too incensed, too angry at Arnulf because of the man’s behaviour and comments. “But no one would have dared to hurt me for such a lapse, that would have been up to the discretion of the master.”

Tony’s face twitches a little at that, but he doesn’t offer any further protests, something that Loki is glad for; as much as he dreaded going to Asgard knowing how many people here resent him and that he would be forced to act like a proper slave, the worst of those concerns have faded into the background by now. After all, he’d rather walk those familiar Halls again than being coped up here like a scared little rabbit hiding in a hole.

“Alright,” Tony acquiesces as he nabs the last slice of apple. “But if there’s any trouble or other shit brewing again, we’ll head back here and don’t stick our heads out again until big brother gets back, okay?”

Walking through the Halls with Loki as his guide is quite the experience. The god is weaving a rich tapestry of words as he tells about the long history of Asgard that has played itself out in these halls, vivid myths and legends and sagas filled with more action than the average Van Damme movie. Sure it’s not the first time he’s been on guided tours like this at whatever fancy tourist attraction, but instead of having to listen to the usual regurgitations of some college history student trying to make a little extra cash, his guide is actually someone who has personally seen and lived through the very history he’s talking about.

It’s amazing, really, all the things hidden in seemingly insignificant details that he would have overlooked if Loki hadn’t pointed them out to him – a different-coloured rock in the floor marking the interred bones of the artist that painted the magnificent ceiling, a jack in a door telling of a failed assassination attempt, a runic inscription hiding a powerful ward that makes Tony’s fingers tingle when he touches it. Small things, so easy to overlook but exciting nevertheless.
And then there are the big things, of course. The ones that are *impossible* to overlook.

He eyes the humongous mural painting spanning the far wall in a room so big it would probably have taken him almost a minute to stroll from one end to the other at a leisurely pace. The colours are vibrant and the artwork seems eerily real, like the people in it are about to jump out any minute and crack his skull open with whatever weapon they’re brandishing. Though, from the looks of it, they’re too busy fighting each other to have time for any of the sorts.

It’s obvious that one of the warring parties is supposed to be the Aesir – warriors strong and bold, with bulging muscles and flowing mantles, gleaming weapons and determined faces. Some of them are quite reminiscent of Thor, especially one of the guys right to Tony’s left with his flowing red cape and--

*Wait just a minute.*

“Hey,” he blurts out, pointing to the familiar hammer clasped tightly in the figure’s grip. “Is that *Thor*?”

Loki turns to where he’s pointing, and then nods, a corner of his lips tugging slightly upwards. “It is indeed.”

He eyes the painting again, taking in the dramatic pose of the two-dimensional Thor, the enemies closest to him who are falling theatrically to the ground like card houses in a storm, and the none-too-subtle awe in the eyes of his comrades as the Thunderer saves the day.

*Wow.* Maybe he should hire an artist to draw a huge-ass painting of himself in his Iron Man suit fighting a horde of doom-bots right on the wall of his living room, wouldn’t that be something? With Captain Spandex and the Hulk gaping at him in admiration, of course.

*Then again, maybe not.*

“Did Thor have this ordered?” he can’t help but asking. He just has to know.

Loki laughs. “No, not even Thor was ever that conceited. Actually, he was quite embarrassed about
it at first, even taking detours around the Halls as to not have to see this thing. I suppose I can understand him – it’s not exactly subtle.”

“Heh, that would be the understatement of the day,” Tony agrees, throwing one final long look on the almost hilariously obvious hero-worship covering the wall.

They continue on through one of the corridors to their left, Loki resuming his stories and expositions. And as fascinating as the alien history lessons are, Tony has to admit that the part he finds the most interesting is actually Loki recounting his own memories from his life here. Everything from how he would use to sneak through the supposedly secret door hidden right under the staircase when trying to shirk some unpleasant chore as a child, to how the missing earlobe on a lumbering statue is the result of one of his spells misfiring in his youth.

He’s glad they’re not encountering very many people as they wander through the corridors and chambers, and those they do run into are content to merely offer him a polite nod or verbal greeting, though they all ignore Loki as if he were nothing more than Tony’s shadow silently trailing after him.

That’s also one of the things he’s noticing – that whenever someone else is near, Loki falls behind, leaving Tony’s side to instead walk a couple of paces behind.

Because it’s *expected*.

And as much as he hates it, there’s nothing he can do about it, because he most certainly doesn’t want to do anything that might risk jeopardizing Loki’s safety again.

But he makes no comment on it, somehow sensing that Loki prefers it that way. It’s almost like they’re playing some kind of game – Loki turning silent and falling behind whenever there are people within eyesight and earshot, only to then walk up at Tony’s side and continue talking just where he broke the sentence off, as if nothing has happened.

And he can’t help but feel some satisfaction in the way they’re picking up their conversation right where they left off after whoever has passed them by. Like it’s all beneath their notice, not worthy of even a comment, something to merely shrug off rather than letting it interfere with their day, like a temporary inconvenience. In the end, just a play for the rabble they have to keep up, but nothing more than that.
They turn a corner and continue on into a wider corridor – or maybe it’s actually a room, Tony isn’t sure which definition is more suitable. Three long columns of pillars extend through the corridor-room and it’s impossible to discern the point where they come to an end. For all he knows, the forest of pillars might stretch on forever.

He eyes the structures with interest – each one is broad enough to need the arms of at least five men to fully encircle it, and as most everything else here, ornamented with runes and meandering lines. Probably, the things are there for a decorative purpose rather than offering necessary support, given that he’s passed through rooms bigger than New York Square fully lacking similar reinforcements. Again, it’s probably magic responsible for keeping the ceilings from caving in.

“Well,” Tony says as he pats one of the grey stone pillars, the rock cool against his palm. “I guess this place would be the perfect spot for playing tag if you’re a kid.”

Loki glances at him from the corner of his eye. “Actually, that’s exactly what me and Thor used to do during our childhood.” Another little tug of lips. “Though, he didn’t think it was very fun anymore after I started to learn the art of teleporting.”

“Ha! Isn’t that cheating?” Tony inquires, taking a few steps around the pillar, trailing his finger along its circumference. The other side looks exactly the same. Well, who would have guessed.

Loki merely offers an innocent shrug to that.

They’ve walked past maybe ten identical such rows of massive stone, and Tony is just about to ask if there’s any purpose to them, when there is suddenly a flash of movement, and a tall and athletic man steps out from the dark shadow cast by the rightmost pillar just a few rows ahead of them.

And as a chill passes through his body, the first thought on Tony’s mind is – was the guy standing there waiting for them?
Chapter 88

Chapter Notes

For those of you wanting to check out some fanart for this story (and you know you do!), just head over here: http://archiveofourown.org/works/859057

Featuring absolutely lovely artwork of Loki and toothbrush. ;)

Thanks to LePeru for drawing and KYH_bc for commissioning! :)

Tony would be the first to admit that he has next to no clue about Asgardian ranks and titles and status, and yet he’s immediately struck by one thought almost bordering on certainty – this guy is a noble.

Even from a distance, he can tell that the clothes the man is wearing are expensive and exquisite, or at least what is visible of them from beneath the well-polished armour covering large parts of his body. Tony’s eyes linger on the sword hanging at his belt for a couple of seconds – despite its shortness, it’s no doubt an effective and deadly melee weapon, and from the way the guy is handling himself, he clearly knows how to use it. He tries to take a small amount of comfort in the fact that the man’s hands have not yet made any obvious grab for it.

And Tony finds himself painfully aware of just how vulnerable and exposed they are here. There are no windows in the room-corridor, despite the dusky light somehow still flooding it, and there is no one else in sight. Sure, this is far from the first person they’ve encountered during their little sightseeing, but all the others have been ordinary servants or workers – and even Tony has to admit that he’s sort of stopped paying much attention to them after a while.

Heck, even Fjalar the Snake-dick and Geir the Pervert had, as far as he could tell, been ordinary warriors without any obviously special rank or status, their get-ups looking like they had been designed merely with the practicality and usefulness in the field of battle in mind. Not so this guy. Even from where he’s standing, Tony can see the artful ornamentations and insignia on the armour plates, though he has no idea if they’re meant to show the status of their bearer or if they’re actually some kind of magical protection. There are fine gold inlays in the metal as well, which even Tony in his Midgardian ignorance can tell are merely there to look pretty and don’t serve any practical function.

The man himself is handsome with long and slightly curled, blond hair, and looks like he’s in his late twenties, though he’s probably older than dirt. From his shoulders flows a blue-grey cape that appears as if it has been imbued with the same ever-billowing spell as Thor’s, judging by the way it dramatically sweeps around the man’s body as he moves.

And of course, Tony is hoping that the imposing stranger is going to turn the other way and walk off, because while petty servants might let their dislike for Loki manifest itself in some sour glares and up-turned noses, a guy like this equipped with a possible grudge and a fancy title and an ego to match might deicide to… well, who knows.

But of course – no such luck.
As the man leisurely starts walking up to them, lithe and agile like a panther, his leather boots soundless against the marble floor, Tony turns to Loki, hissing as to not be overheard. “Who’s that guy?”

“That’s Lord Frey,” comes Loki’s whispered answer.

Lord Frey. Well, that doesn’t tell him anything, expect confirming his suspicion that the guy is indeed a noble like he had first assumed. Still, he’d been hoping for a much more useful answer – like, is this guy a hostile, did Loki ever do anything to piss him off, should they be running screaming down the corridor-room back the way they came, or what?

And he’s about to whisper to Loki to offer some instructions on how to handle the situation, or at least give him fair warning if there is any danger lurking, but before he can get a word out, Loki is no longer where Tony expects him to be, instead having sunken down to his knees on the floor.

Tony’s stomach twists into a hard knot at that, worry and resentment churning in equal amounts. Worry at the unnerving uncertainties – he doesn’t know what proper protocol is for dealing with nobles and who knows if Loki might somehow be the one who will suffer for it, and neither he can’t gauge how dangerous the situation is, if this guy bears a grudge against Loki and is now sniffing out an opportunity to get revenge; resentment at seeing Loki kneeling on the ground like the slave Asgard expects him to be, the first time he’s ever seen the god assume that position for anyone else than him. Despite their having agreed that Loki would act as expected to stay out of trouble, Tony still wants to shout at him to get up on his two feet, but the god just might decide to obey him and give this nobleman what counts as ‘good cause’ to have Loki punished for not showing him the respect he’s due, so he holds his tongue.

Instead, he merely glances towards Loki again, hoping to be able to pick up some clue what to do, but the god’s head is bowed and his eyes directed towards the floor, not meeting with Tony’s.

And Tony is on his own, fervently wishing he had his Iron Man suit at the ready. Now he doesn’t have even a butter knife to defend against that sword blade that for all he knows might come swooping down any second to send Loki’s head flying.

The man comes to a halt right in front of them, giving Tony a courteous and flowery bow, his fist going up to his chest in salute. “Greetings, Man of Iron,” he says as he straightens up again, the long blond curtains of his hair parting to reveal a handsome face with a short-clipped beard.

And why can’t these guys just shake hands like normal people? Is he supposed to reciprocate the bow with one of his own? He resents the idea, but maybe refusing to bow to a noble is punishable by having to pay some kind of fine, and the only coin he has here that is worth anything would be… yeah. His eyes travel down to Loki, who hasn’t moved an inch, his gaze still at the floor. Who knows, maybe that was the guy’s plan all along – look, the insolent mortal refused to pay me proper respect, so now I am entitled to claim his slave for myself as compensation.

Even he can hear how ridiculously paranoid he’s sounding, but already after his first day here, he can’t help it.

What makes him relent in the end, though, isn’t his brain’s paranoid ramblings, but the sight of Loki from out the corner of his eye. Because if Loki has to demean himself like that, what is a measly bow in comparison?

Pushing aside the little voice inside of him telling him that he’s looking like a moron, he imitates the flowery bow presented to him moments ago as passably he can manage, though in comparison to the well-practiced elegance of Chris Jericho here, he probably looks about as graceful as a baby seal
“Greetings… uh, Lord Frey,” he says, hoping that is the appropriate address.

“I’d like to wish you a belated welcome to Asgard, my friend,” Frey says with a smile showing two rows of perfectly white teeth. If he finds Tony’s attempts at politeness poorly executed, he makes no mention of it. “I heard you arrived here just yesterday. So, please do tell me, how do you find your stay in our realm so far?”

Oh, he could write a doctor’s thesis on that.

“It’s been… interesting,” he says curtly. At least that’s not an outright lie. “Though, I was not quite prepared for the culture clashes that I’d encounter along the way.”

The smile widens slightly. “I can imagine. Surely there are many differences between our two realms, and it has been a long time since a mortal last visited us,” Frey remarks casually as he leans back against one of the ubiquitous pillars in a borderline arrogant pose, crossing his arms while regarding Tony with cool blue eyes.

And if this guy is about to make the same proposal as Geir, Tony can only pray that he will remain in control of himself enough not to send a fist flying into that pretty face.

But Frey’s eyes remain on Tony, not having deigned to give the kneeling figure on the ground more than a brief, passing glance, and maybe even that was entirely coincidental. Still, Tony moves a step to his right, not caring that it probably doesn’t look casual in the slightest, resolutely placing himself between Loki and Frey. Of course, it’s no protection at all if Frey decides he wants to hurt Loki, but it makes him feel marginally better, and he likes to think that maybe it will have the same effect on Loki too.

Frey can’t have missed Tony’s highly unsubtle movement, but he makes no comment on it. “Of course, not very many mortals have business in Asgard, to say nothing of having been called upon by the Allfather himself,” he simply continues, as if he hasn’t noticed Tony’s suspicion.

“Yeah, since the Allfather didn’t fancy making a trip to my place, I had to traipse over here instead, though it wouldn’t have been my first choice of vacation destination,” Tony replies, then sensing how Loki shifts slightly behind him.

Perhaps he was being too crude to speak of Odin like that, and he bites his tongue belatedly. Mr Handsome here might be one of the royal lackeys, after all, and any disrespect Tony shows towards Odin Almighty might influence the chances of procuring any leniency on Loki’s behalf.

“Well, I mean, not that I actually mind,” he quickly back-pedals. “You have some… uh, really awesome beer in this place.”

Frey’s mouth curls minutely upward, but other than that his face betrays nothing. “So, I understand you are here to speak on Loki’s behalf?” he says matter-of-factly, making it sound like a question though he no doubt knows the answer already.

“Yeah, I am,” Tony replies, unable to let a little note of challenge creep into his voice. What of it?

One of Frey’s hands goes up to sweep a strand of blond locks out of his face, the motion accompanied by soft clinking of armour. “I must admit I am intrigued. Not very many people here in Asgard would be willing to speak in Loki’s favour, and having a Midgardian do so is… quite surprising.”
Tony doesn’t like the direction this conversation is going, and even less so the way it’s being carried out as if Loki isn’t hearing every word of it, and he wonders if there’d be trouble if he’d ignore Frey and walk out of here with Loki in tow. Perhaps he’d get impaled by that sword or something. In any case, the idea of turning his back against someone with both an unknown agenda and a blank weapon doesn’t appeal to him in the slightest, so he remains where he is.

As if hearing Tony’s thoughts, Frey turns slightly away. “Walk with me, Man of Iron,” he indicates with a wave of his hand. “I’d prefer if we’d continue our talk in somewhat more privacy.”

“I’m not leaving Loki out of sight,” Tony counters a bit harsher than he had intended. Right, as if he’s going to trapse off with some stranger, leaving Loki to fend for himself.

Frey arches an elegant, perfect eyebrow; Tony wouldn’t be surprised if the guy plucks them every morning. Then his face splits into another friendly – perhaps a bit too friendly – smile. “Oh, I didn’t mean we have to go far. Just a little way down the hall, where you would still be perfectly able to keep an eye on Loki.”

Reluctantly, Tony acquiesces and follows the graceful figure as Frey turns on his heel and strides off, steps lithe but powerful. True to his word, he doesn’t go far, just past a few rows of pillars, out of earshot from Loki, before coming to a halt, one elbow resting in his hand, the other thoughtfully stroking his bearded chin.

Decisively, Tony positions himself so that Loki is well within his line of sight. The god is standing up again now that Frey is out of his immediate presence, and that makes Tony feel a little bit better, though not much.

“I hope this is an acceptable distance?” Frey says with what sounds like a tinge of amusement, and Tony isn’t sure if there’s some condescension in there as well, so he only gives a brief nod in reply.

“What do you want?” he blurts out, feeling slightly braver now that Loki is out of beheading distance.

“Well, as I’m sure has come to your attention by now, Loki is not exactly well liked here in Asgard,” Frey says without preamble as he once more leans back against the nearest pillar, his cape fluttering from the movement. “Not everyone is happy with you coming here to speak in favour of leniency before Odin and his court. And, I daresay, there might be those who will try to… unjustly influence that,” the man continues in a voice a few notes more hushed than before.

Tony can feel a chill creep over his skin at that. Should he be expecting an assassination attempt lurking in the shadows? And to think that Asgard wouldn’t even let him bring his suit along in defence…

“So what you’re saying is that I better watch my back unless I want a knife in it, huh?” he asks, clenching his fists as he keeps a steady eye on Frey. He’s seen far too many movies featuring some villain offering the hero a solemn and seemingly heartfelt warning regarding the advisability of being careful, only to be the one to pull a gun on him an instant later.

But Frey only throws his head back and laughs, the silvery sound echoing eerily as it’s being reflected back and forth between the pillars. “No, no, nothing as drastic as that, I assure you,” he says as his laughter has died down. “You have no need to fear for your safety. Harming a guest invited by the Allfather himself is too serious a crime to be worth the risk.”

Then, Frey leans in over Tony, a bit too close for comfort. “No, I’m talking about much subtler means. As in, magic.”
And that’s another M-word right there that Tony doesn’t like one bit.
Chapter 89

Perhaps Frey thinks that is going to reassure him, but it only serves to make him feel even worse. As poorly as he would be able to defend himself against an assault of a physical nature from alien super-beings, his chances against magic are for all intents and purposes non-existent.

“So you mean next time I turn a corner some Asgardian Merlin or Gandalf might be lurking in the shadows waiting to turn me into a frog or something?” Great – Tony Stark, genius billionaire playboy philanthropist frog.

Again, Frey laughs as if Tony is some sort of comedian sent here for his amusement. “Such crudeness would not be necessary, even if magic were truly capable of performing human transformations like that,” he replies with a wave of his hand, no doubt meant to dismiss Tony’s silly Midgardian notions.

However, he quickly gets serious again and takes another step closer to Tony, who resists the urge to move an equal distance in the opposite direction.

“When you stand before Odin and his court, there will be a truth geas in effect, courtesy of the Allfather’s magic. You will be unable to speak anything but the truth, and all you say will be taken as truth, or at least the truth as far as you know it.” Frey says and then makes a little pause, studying Tony as if to see what effect his words are having on him.

And Tony feels a coil of unease at that. There are a million different questions he wouldn’t be comfortable being asked when magically compelled to tell the truth. Sure, most of them might not have anything to do with Loki, but he could certainly think of a few of those as well.

“I’m listening,” Tony says in response, not sure where this is going. Though, now that Frey mentions it, he does remember Thor saying something about a truth-magic-something the evening before they headed off to Asgard, but he’d been too distracted by his own wildly swirling thoughts to reflect as much on it as he probably should have.

“The geas has been crafted by the Allfather’s magic. That is, Aesir magic,” Frey intones, as if that is supposed to mean anything particular to Tony. “As such, it is very powerful and nigh unbreakable by Aesir sorcerers, which makes everyone trust its validity. However, there are also… other kinds of magic. Most importantly, that of the Vanir.”
“The Vanir?” Tony repeats dully.

Frey nods. “Yes. The Vanir, from Vanaheim, another one of the Nine Realms. The Vanir have their own form of magic, which is in some ways different from that of the Aesir. While a skilful sorcerer would normally be able to sense and even neutralize spells performed by a lesser magic user, that is not always so when the sorcerers in question practice different forms of magic. So in other words, not even Odin himself would notice certain Vanir spells even if they’re performed right in front of him, provided that they are weak and unobtrusive enough.” Frey taps his fingertips together as he looks at Tony from under his brows. “And as it is, there happens to be a couple of members on the Council with Vanir ancestors, most notably Njord.”

“So there’s not only Aesir living here in Asgard, huh?” he asks, hating how clueless he is about everything here. Damn, how many of these alien species are there really? Well, he guesses nine, if the number of realms is anything to go by. Okay, eight, not counting blissfully normal and everyday humans.

“Interrmarriage between the two races has been known to happen. I have Vanir ancestors myself,” Frey says with a shrug.

“You know magic too?” Tony can’t help but asking.

He can see Frey’s eyebrows draw together at that, eyes narrowing as if Tony has just insulted him. “Of course not,” he says curtly. “I’m a warrior, not a sorcerer.”

Okay, then.

“In any case,” Frey quickly continues, apparently preferring not to dwell on the subject, “for various reasons, Njord has kept it a well-hidden secret that he knows some smatterings of Vanir magic. Not even the Allfather knows, and Njord prefers for things to be kept that way.”

“How come you know, then, when not even Odin Almighty does?”

“Njord is my father,” Frey smiles. “These things are hard to keep from your nearest family.”

Oh. Tony isn’t sure if that’s supposed to make him feel better or worse.
“Now, you should know that while there are spells forcing people to speak nothing but the truth, there are also spells forcing them to speak things that are not true. It’s a specific sort of Vanir magic, unaffected by Aesir truth geases, and Njord knows how to perform such spells.”

And Tony can sort of see where this is going. “Isn’t that obstruction of justice? How can a guy like that be sitting on a freaking Council?” he blurts out. He’s already pissed off enough with Asgard’s justice system as it is, and this information does squat to redeem it.

“Oh, it’s not nearly as bad as it sounds. Njord magic powers are very weak, which is why he’s been able to keep them hidden from all but his nearest family. It’s not generally something that’s considered appropriate for warriors here, knowing how to perform magic,” Frey explains. “However, different races have varying resistance to magic influence, and Njord’s spells would be too feeble to actually have an effect on any of the immortal races. Mortals however, are more susceptible, and Njord has learnt that even his weak powers are enough to affect them since from back when he visited Midgard some thousand years ago.”

Susceptible. As if he was talking about the catching the freaking flu.

“So, in short, he is not nearly a skilful or powerful enough spell caster to influence any of those coming to speak in court, except if they happen to be… mortals,” Frey says, giving Tony a pointed look. “And you should be aware that my father hates Loki with a passion. He would not hesitate to use his magic against you when you stand before the court, and you wouldn’t even notice it, believing you had said everything by your own volition.”

And Tony feels that familiar free fall of his stomach again as it drops to the ground. “You mean he would make me say things to Loki’s detriment, so there won’t be any chance of a pardon?” The air around him suddenly feels a little heavier to breath.

“Something like that, yes,” Frey nods.

“Then why don’t you take all this to Odin instead of me and have him throw your dad off the Council?” Tony asks the obvious.

“I could do that. However, Njord is my father, and that would be disloyal,” Frey says with a shrug.

“Why are you even telling me this, then?” Tony asks, crossing his arms. Even he can hear the
suspicious note in his own voice, but he can’t stop it.

Frey studies his fingernails. “My whole family hates Loki, and my father particularly so. It’s an old grudge that goes back to an incident where Loki almost caused my sister Freyja to be married off to a frost giant.” He looks up from his fingernails to lock eyes with Tony. “And I suppose I should be angry about that as well. But as it is, Loki saved my life in battle once, and we Asgardians do not forget easily, either about slights or favours owed.”

Hmm, that old story. He remembers thinking it was funny when Loki had told it to him, but now it seems everything but.

“Then I assume there’s nothing stopping me from running straight to Thor with this information so he can make sure Odin gives your dad an early retirement, if you won’t tell Odin yourself?” Tony asks, quickly changing the subject.

Yeah, like hell he’s going to let this Njord guy destroy Loki’s chances of becoming a free god again, no matter how infinitesimal those chances might be to start with.

Frey shrugs. “Nothing is stopping you. But you should keep in mind that my father is a very powerful lord with a lot of political clout, and if he gets thrown off the Council, it would be a terrible humiliation and disgrace for him. And chances are he will blame it all on Loki and machinate in some other way to affect the outcome of this appeal, perhaps by trying to influence or sway the other members of the Council. Such attempts would very hard to pinpoint and protect against, if not impossible.”

Ugh. Tony knows there was a good reason he always hated politics. “And this magical mind-control thing isn’t?” he remarks, annoyed by how complicated this is suddenly turning. The whole magic thing just isn’t fair.

“Not if you know how to,” Frey says cryptically with that intense gaze of his boring into Tony as he shifts and moves back a little, the dull light causing strange shadows to dance over his face, turning it into an eerie-looking mask. Tony isn’t sure he likes that particular visual effect.

Then, Frey quickly glances over his shoulder, as if he’s expecting someone to be spying on him, before his hand reaches beneath his shirt, rummaging around in some hidden fold or pocket. Tony resists the urge to take a step back, hoping the guy isn’t about to stab him or something.
When Frey withdraws his hand a moment later, there is a small item clasped in it, metal gleaming, but thankfully not in the shape of a sharp blade. He slowly unfolds the fingers wrapped around the thing, showcasing it in his open palm.

It’s a string of leather with some sort of medallion attached to it, round and flat, runes running in a spiral all the way to the centre. In the dull light, it seems to glow with a radiance of its own. Other than that, it looks like one of those brooches Tony’s grandmother used to wear.

He looks up at Frey with a questioning expression.

“Vanir magic, my friend,” comes Frey’s smooth voice. “This will deflect any Vanir geas someone tries to place upon the wearer.” A short pause. “You keep this on you during the audience, and whatever attempts Njord will make to influence your words will amount to nothing.” He lets the medallion travel elegantly across his knuckles as he speaks, like a street performer playing with a coin before his admiring audience. *Show-off.*

And Tony knows there’s a catch somewhere, a stipulation that Mr Fancy-Hair is just waiting to tell him of, some kind of payment or the other he’s looking for. And he doesn’t even have any guarantee that the thing will work as purported – maybe Frey has simply borrowed *his* grandmother’s old brooch to fool the gullible Midgardian, maybe the magical mind control is just some crap he’s made up, maybe it’s all a convoluted ploy for the guy to get his hands on Loki one way or the other. More subtle and intricate then Geir to be sure, but the intent could still be the same.

But Frey says nothing more, merely waits with raised eyebrows for Tony to comment.

So he does.

“Allright, you might as well tell me. Where’s the catch to all this? What do you want in return?” he asks, deciding that it’s better make that clear before anything else.

Frey cocks his head to the side, his fingers ceasing their medallion-twirling. Then he smiles broadly, flashing teeth whiter than a toothpaste commercial. “Are all of you Midgardians this suspicious? There is no catch. The amulet is an offer free of charge,” Frey replies as he holds his hand out to Tony, urging him to take the item with a spread of his fingers.

At Tony’s obvious hesitation, he chuckles. “It’s not going to bite you, Man of Iron, so you might as well accept.”
Slowly and reluctantly, Tony’s hand goes for the blank metal, taking it from Frey’s open palm. At least there’s no shock or stab of pain shooting up his arm at the touch. Truth be told, there’s nothing at all, as if the thing is indeed just someone’s grandmother’s old brooch and not an item supposedly imbued with mighty magical powers.

“Why would you give this to me without expecting anything in return?” Tony asks, not sure he’s trusting this guy one bit. After what he’s seen of Asgard so far, any offer to help Loki seems more likely to be just a disguised attempt to do exactly the opposite.

“I already told you,” Frey says, crossing his arms. “Loki saved my life once, so I am merely repaying that debt.” His lips tug minutely upward. “Though, if you don’t mind, I’d like it back after you’re done with it. It’s a rather precious item and I doubt you’d have any use of it in Midgard anyway.”

The metal feels oddly cool against his fingers, as if it’s not affected by petty outward influences like body temperature. And he knows he has no idea whether this medallion will help him as stipulated, have no effect whatsoever, or even work to his detriment, perhaps doing exactly what Frey is claiming the thing will guard against. Maybe this is even a ploy of Odin’s, sending one of his lackeys with an alluring offer that will only come back to bite Tony and Loki in the ass.

Well, the best thing he can do right now is to accept the medallion and then have a talk with Loki about it and let him gauge whether Frey is to be trusted or not. Even if Loki doesn’t know the guy well, he at least knows of him.

“All right, thanks for the warning and your help. I appreciate it.” Tony says, trying to sound sincere. No point in being impolite or refusing to play along, after all; it’s his best bet at the moment.

“You’re welcome. And good luck with your audience,” Frey says with another smile and a bow before smiling and walking off, his long cape swirling behind him.
Chapter 90

Having retold his conversation with Frey, Tony intensively hopes that Loki will be able to give him some clear answers regarding whether Frey is telling the truth and whether his offer is genuine or not.

No such luck, however.

“I don’t know,” Loki says as he turns the medallion over in his hands, studying the runic patterns inscribed in the metal. “If I had still had my powers, I might have been able to tell what kind of magic this has been imbued with, even if it’s Vanir in nature, but as it is, I have no way of assessing that.”

Damn.

“Isn’t there anyone else who could help out, then?” he suggests, despite already knowing the futility of it.

Loki shakes his head. “There are no Vanir sorcerers around here that I’m aware of. And out of the Aesir ones, few but Odin would be skilful enough to decode another form of magic, and I would trust none of them in this.”

“Okay, so no way to tell whether the medallion is the real deal or not,” Tony comments as he runs a hand through his hair. “But would you trust Frey, then? Or do you think he’s only trying to mess things up for you? I mean, this guy is accusing Njord of planning to mind-control me, but maybe that’s exactly what this bling will do instead?”

Loki is silent for a while before speaking. “The inscriptions do look like ward runes, but that doesn’t necessarily mean there can’t be other magic inside as well. I can’t tell what this amulet might or might not do.” He licks his lips, giving a soft sigh. “As for whether Frey is trustworthy or not… I’m afraid the answer is the same – I don’t know.”

At that, Tony feels like groaning in frustration and shaking his fist at the sky. “But how would you describe your relation to this guy back in the day? Were you on friendly terms at all or would he have spit in your beer while you were off to take a piss?” Tony asks, hoping to get at least some kind of clue.
Loki looks into the wall behind Tony as if deep in thought, but then shakes his head minutely. “We never associated much. While Frey never acted disdainfully around me unlike some other people, he also never sought my company out. And he’s never been one of Thor’s close comrades either, again unlike some others who’d never miss a chance to ingratiate themselves with the crown prince and king-to-be. But Frey’s family always preferred to keep to themselves, rather than associating much with others.” He shrugs. “Maybe it’s because they’re of Vanir blood, feeling themselves to be apart.”

“So is there anything you can tell me about this guy that would be at all useful?” Tony asks in exasperation, frustrated how there is apparently little to nothing to go by. “Is it at least true what he said about you saving his life once?”

At that, Loki nods. “That much is true, yes. It was many years ago in a battle with the Svartalfar. Frey had fallen and was about to get skewered by the enemy captain’s sword, but I managed to conjure a protective shield around him in the last minute, so he lived.”

Okay, that’s good. One point for Trustworthy Frey, then.

“Then again, shield brothers save each others’ lives in battle all the time,” Loki continues, effectively managing to take away most of that hard-won point. “It’s something that comes with the territory and does not incur any life debts, or every warrior would soon find himself hopelessly entangled in a complex web of debts owed both to himself and to others. So the fact that I once saved his life may not truly mean anything to him, regardless of what he claims.” A short pause. “Plus, there’s also the old incident where I almost forced his sister to marry a frost giant. That did not endear me to her family, to put it mildly.”

Yeah, there was that little detail too. “So you think this is just a play to get back at you, then? One that even Frey’s whole family might be in on?”

“I wish I could give you a more conclusive answer,” Loki replies, looking tired and weary, “but I really can’t say.”

Tony lets his fingers trail over the strangely cool metal, hating how everything just keeps getting more complicated. “Well, was he right about what he said about this Njord guy having some fairy powers, even if they’re really tiny and pitiful?”

“I have never gotten inconclusive evidence for it, but I have long suspected that might be the case,” Loki says slowly, rubbing a hand over his eyes. “But if so, Frey’s assessment should be correct – his powers could be enough to influence a mortal in such a way, but not one of the immortal races; it takes a fair amount of both power and skill to do that which Njord would be lacking, having not
received any formal training. But I don’t doubt that he’s still angry enough with me to use those powers to my detriment during the audience, if he can.”

“And what would happen if we told Thor about all this?” Tony asks, putting forth the obvious for consideration. The idea to just defer judgement to someone else and let the Thunderer handle this crap is really tempting right now, despite Frey’s warning not to.

“As Frey said, if there was any truth to it, Njord would get thrown off the council and I don’t doubt for a second that he would place the blame on me for that kind of public disgrace. And who knows what kind of meddling he would be willing to engage in to get revenge and make sure there will be no clemency in my judgement, or that the hearing is disrupted in some other way? Njord could make a very dangerous enemy. He holds a lot of political sway in the council, and it wouldn’t vanish just because he’s been taken off it. His disinclinations against me are already strong enough as they already are without feeding fuel to the fire,” Loki answers, not looking happy at the prospect.

Well, that leaves two options – either wear the necklace, or don’t. To trust Frey, or not.

He dangles the medallion between his thumb and index finger, watching it swing back and forth. If nothing else, it could serve most excellently as a hypnotist’s pendulum.

“So could this bling actually… help doing what Frey is claiming it will protect against?” he asks, hoping Loki can at least give him a conclusive answer to that. “As in, enabling Mr Grudge-of-the-Day to force me to say stuff I don’t want to, if he’s not powerful enough to do it on his own?”

“Possibly,” Loki says. “But on the other hand, while objects meant to facilitate and strengthen magic can make spells more powerful, such objects also tend to be harder to use and control for an inexperienced sorcerer than just plain magic on its own would be.”

He looks again at the still swinging medallion. “Any chance this could harm me in any way if I put it on?”

Loki slowly shakes his head. “Few magical artefacts have directly manifested powers; usually they’re designed to work under certain circumstances only, such as protecting against specific dangers or threats. And as such, they’re not going to have any effect unless you’re in the kind of situation that they have been intended for,” Loki answers.

_Alright then._
“Then let’s try this thing out.” Before he can think better of it, he slips the string of leather over his head and lets the piece of metal come to a rest against his chest, just below the arc reactor, and then holds his breath.

Nothing happens. There’s not even a tingle. He’s almost disappointed, but only almost.

“Well, this was anticlimactic,” he comments with a raised eyebrow. “Not even a dramatic flash of lightning or pretty sparkle.”

Before Loki can give him the ‘magic doesn’t work like that’ that he can see is forming on the god’s lips, he continues. “Okay then, so let’s assume for a second that Frey is telling the truth but I’m mistrustful enough to show up at court without this thing on, and subsequently gets doused with a spray of magic mind-control pollen. Wouldn’t it be, you know, kinda obvious to me afterwards once my brain is clear again that I said stuff I wouldn’t have said under normal circumstances?”

“Well, that sucks,” Tony mutters. “And I suppose magic doesn’t leave, uh, traces that can be seen or tracked somehow?”

“Not necessarily,” Loki says. “There are ways to alter perceptions and memories related to what is said under such magic persuasion. You would not think there was anything strange about what you said, but believe it was what you intended to say. The effect will normally wear off eventually and if you think back on it you’ll realize you said strange things, but by then you will probably be back in Midgard and it would already be too late. It would be hard to prove there was magic involved as opposed to you just changing your mind and wanting to retract your statement.”

Loki looks unhappy. “Well, if you want my opinion, I say wear it. If nothing else, even if the artefact has been imbued with magic that will influence you in an untoward way during the audience, it would be a dangerous plan highly prone to discovery to directly give you such an object. If Frey’s intentions were dishonest, he ought to have gone for more subtle means rather than exposing himself like this. A magical item with Vanir magic written all over it would point right back at him and his family, and he knows it.”
Fair enough. Then another thought hits him.

“Is Frey on the Council?” If so, he wants to know.

“He stands in occasionally, when the attending members are even in number and need a deciding vote,” Loki answers with a small nod. “He is next in line for a permanent position on the Council, once one of the current members dies or is otherwise taken off it.”

“Were you ever on it?” Tony can’t help but ask.

“No, I was not. And neither was Thor,” Loki says. “The seats are reserved for the nobility, not the royal family. The purpose of the Council is to balance the power of the royal family, which already holds claim to the highest position of the King of Asgard.”

“Alrighty.” He has no idea if it’s a good or a bad thing that Frey is on the Council, even if it’s only part-time. But if the medallion has a nefarious purpose and Frey plans to make use of it during the audience, Tony will sure be leaving himself wide open if he’s wearing the thing.

They continue to discuss their options for a little while longer, back and forth, but soon their arguments are going in circles, limited by the scant information, and Tony’s head is starting to pound, not entirely unlike having a stubborn hang-over.

“Yeah, well, guess I have to think this through for a bit,” he finally concludes, effectively ending the discussion. “I don’t think I can offer a definite ‘yay’ or ‘nay’ as it is.”

Loki only nods his understanding, and then there is silence.

“So, how about we just continue with the sight-seeing for now?” Tony suggests as the silence has stretched on for a while, desperate to get something else to focus on. Maybe then he’ll be able to get some perspective on all this after having lifted his nose up a little from the ground.

“If you wish,” Loki says. “There is still much we haven’t seen yet.”
They continue through the Halls, Tony listening with only half an ear as Loki resumes his storytelling and expositions, a little less animated now that he’s no doubt noticing that Tony isn’t paying full attention, his brain occupied with other things. But he’s a good sport anyway, as he guides them on through vaulted rooms and gilded halls and decorated chambers, each more impressive and breath-taking than the first.

Still, Tony’s mind is swirling from all the uncertainties and unknowns. So many risks and dangers, whichever way he decides to play this. Unable to stop himself, he keeps turning the arguments over in his head again and again, weighing the pros and cons, trying to see things from all possible angles, no matter how crooked they might be.

*Should he trust Frey or not? Is the guy telling the truth, or lying through his teeth?*

He puts his hand into the pocket of his pants, fiddling around with the medallion, the metal still as cool to the touch as before. *Weird.*

*Is it better to be paranoid or gullible? Which would have the worst consequences, if it turns out he made the wrong call? Is there any way to be certain, or is he just guessing here, despite the deep dive analysis of the situation that he’s telling himself that he’s making?*

So many questions, and so few clear answers.

But what in the end tells him to trust Frey is not logic or reason or rationale, but how he was the first one in Asgard save Thor to refer to Loki by his name and not by the word ‘slave’.
Tony lazily eyes another ubiquitous overblown mural picturing battling Aesir and gleaming swords, all painted in vibrant colours that don’t seem to have eroded the slightest by the touch of time. And it looks more or less like the one they passed only minutes ago, though the artist seems to have been a little less generous with the splatters of fake blood in this one.

Truth be told, even a place like the Royal Halls starts to loose a bit of its splendour and impressiveness after having walked around in it for what must amount to several hours by now. His feet are beginning to feel a bit sore and to top it off his stomach has been giving a couple of angry growls, protesting the recent lack of attention.

And as cool a tourist attraction as this might be, it unfortunately doesn’t come equipped with the usual overpriced restaurants and cafes and ice cream shops normally sprinkled around places like this. Perhaps they should head back to their room so he can have the servants bring them something nice to eat, and they can rest up for a little bit. Smiling to himself, he wonders if it would be possible to have that Arnulf guy sent over to give him a foot massage while he’s at it, but then he figures it might not be such an advisable idea after all, tempting as it might be.

“You know, as awesome as this is, both my stomach and my feet are screaming for a break, so I think we might as well call it a day for now and head back, or what do you think?” he says, hands massaging at the small of his back.

“It sounds like a good idea,” Loki agrees. “I’m starting to get hungry as well.”

They turn back again, Loki leading them through another maze of corridors and rooms and hallways, most of which Tony isn’t sure they’ve already passed before or not. He really has no idea how far they are from where they started out – it could be half a castle away or just around the corner for all he knows. He’s long ago lost all sense of direction.

As they turn a corner and head into a hallway, he can quickly tell that this is one area they haven’t walked through yet, though. The corridor is almost ridiculously broad and spacey, as if meant for an entire army of soldiers to march through, side by side. He makes some comment on that, and Loki raises an eyebrow into his direction.

“Actually, we’re just outside of Asgard’s weapons vault right now, passing it by on the left-hand side,” he says with a toss of his head to the wall on their left and whatever lies beyond.
“The weapons vault?” Tony asks, his interest piqued once more. “You mean where you guys keep all your fancy dragon-slaying swords and armour and stuff?”

“Yes, among other things,” Loki nods. “The armoury is large enough to equip all of Asgard’s fighting forces in case there should be an attack on the realm by enemy forces.”

The protests of Tony’s feet and stomach are quietening down all of a sudden, and as a huge double gate comes looming into view, they’re all but forgotten. Obviously, the armoury is housed behind those humongous doors that are more ornamented and gilded than any doors he’s encountered so far.

And damn, he really wants to see this. After having come face to face with endless overblown paintings and stern-looking statues and ornamented furnishing, he’d love to get a look at the combined weapons collection of an entire alien army. If there is even half as cool stuff in there as Thor’s mighty hammer or Loki’s pretty glow stick of destiny, he’d never forgive himself if he passed this one up. It would be like going to Paris and skip out on the Eiffel Tower, only a hundred times worse.

“How can we go inside?” he asks, feeling a twinge of excitement at the prospect.

Loki shakes his head. “I’m afraid not. Citizens of other realms are not permitted to enter the vault.”

And Tony feels a sharp twinge at disappointment at that. “Why not?”

“Well, I would not think that you Midgardians allow outsiders access to your armouries either, even if it’s just to have a look, do you?” Loki says with a raised eyebrow.

Okay, so the god has a point. Still…

He comes to a halt as they reach the impressive gilded gates and studies the inscriptions lining them. Not that he can understand a word of the beautifully carved runes, but they’re nice to look at.

“And what would happen if an outsider like me were to enter the vaults anyway? Would I get zapped by some fairy magic spell or something?” he asks, curiously studying the runes. Maybe they’re not just there to be pretty.
He thinks the soft sound he hears is a sigh escaping Loki’s lips, but he’s not sure.

“No, Tony, you would not get ‘zapped’. While the wards placed on the vault will prevent unauthorized removal of weapons or other equipment with rather forceful means, they will not stop anyone from merely entering. Wards are complicated things and will not be crafted without good reason,” Loki explains, eyeing the gates with a thoughtful expression, making Tony wonder if maybe the god himself has once helped placing those ward-things on this place. But before he can ask about it, the god continues.

“It’s very unusual to have guests from other realms walking around the Halls unaccompanied, so the risk of an outsider trespassing has not been deemed big enough to merit any wards to protect against such an occurrence. But it’s still prohibited for non-Asgardians to enter,” he says, this time looking right at Tony instead of the lumbering doors.

“So why aren’t there guards posted outside, then?” He automatically pictures the heavily armed and highly trained guys that would be guarding a place like this back home.

“As it is, the protective wards prevent anyone from steeling from the vault. No guards are necessary. However, there is still a number of guards patrolling certain sections of the Halls, and they might come by here any time,” Loki answers, shifting a little where he’s standing.

“And what would happen if a guard were to… come across someone in there who wasn’t supposed to be there? Would they get like beheaded or something?”

“It depends on their intent,” comes the answer.

And he can’t help it – he just has to ask. “Okay, so what would happen if I got caught in there? I mean, considering that I’m an honoured guest and all?”

This time there is definitely a sigh escaping Loki’s lips. “You would be thrown into the dungeons until Thor comes back to vouch for you and can assure the guards that you had no ill intention to the detriment of Asgard and are to be set free.” he says, lips pursing into a discontented grimace.

“That’s it? I’d have to sit in some dungeon for a couple of hours until Thor gets back, and then I’d get off scot-free?” Doesn’t sound like a too-terrible prospect.
“Yes,” Loki confirms, but he doesn’t look happy in the slightest. “But spending time in the
Asgardian dungeons is not something I would recommend, not even to an honoured guest.”

“Eh, it wouldn’t be the first time I’d gotten my ass thrown into jail for a few hours,” Tony says with
a shrug as he steps up to the gates, a fingertip trailing over a band of runes. “I think I could handle
it.”

Loki takes a step forward as well, a crease of concern marring his forehead. “Tony, the dungeons are
not a nice place. Believe me, I know. Even if there most likely won’t be any guards in the vault right
now, it’s an unnecessary risk to take.”

Well, since when was he someone to let himself be intimidated by the puny word ‘risk’?

“So tell me, would you get into trouble in any way if we were to waltz in here and be spotted by a
guard?” he asks, wanting to make sure.

“No,” Loki says quietly. “Slaves wouldn’t be expected to question their masters, even if they’re
doing something that’s not permitted. No one would place any blame on me for that.” He makes a
pause, then speaks more forcefully. “But you do not want to spend time in the dungeons, Tony, even
if it’s just for a few hours, so please reconsider this.”

“I’ll risk it,” he says. “I’m just going to take a quick peek, and then walk out again. Nothing more
than that, alright?”

Before Loki can offer any further protests, he pushes the handle down, being rewarded with a soft
creak and a slow opening of lumbering doors. He doesn’t even have to use force, the doors just slide
open as if by their own volition; he suspects that there’s some magic involved in that but he’s not
even going to ask this time.

He blinks at the sight that greets him as the gates part, the sharp gleam of blank armour piercing his
eyes. And it’s even more impressive than he thought – along one of the walls hang perfect rows of
sharp swords stretching out as far as the eye can see, the well-polished metal glittering like the
summer sun reflected on the surface of the sea. Each of them looks like they could skewer a lion in
half. Or a dragon. Or anything, really.

Above the swords hang similarly long and perfect lines of pointed spears, creating a forest of jagged
metal. He can just imagine a front line of soldiers turning that on the advancing enemy, making them
run into a wall of merciless, deadly metal. Like in Braveheart, but a hundred times more badass.

Along the opposite wall, there are full bodies of armour, some of them so full that they give the impression that there are actual soldiers beneath all that steel standing there at attention, waiting for the enemies of Asgard to strike so that they can grab the nearest sword and march right into battle. He can’t help but wonder how heavy all that stuff must be to wear. Not like his own suit that moves by its own volition as opposed to hanging off him like normal plates of metal would.

A bit further away, there are other weapons as well, though he can’t fully discern them from this distance, but they look bigger and more dangerous than the swords and the spears. And he wonders if they’re meant to be used against anything at all human or Aesir-like, or for creatures of an entirely different kind.

And before he even realizes it, he’s already stepped inside the humongous vault, as if his feet are moving by their own volition. But he can’t help it – he just has to go inside and see this stuff up close.

He can hear Loki follow him on silent feet, though his steps are hesitant and reluctant. “Just a quick peek, you said,” he all but whispers, cautiously looking around.

But there are no guards to be seen, so Tony steps forward, undeterred, to the closest sword hanging on the weapon racks, and lets his fingers trail over it. It’s a magnificent piece of work – no, a piece of art – the hilt gleaming with golden inlays, beautifully carved into the shape of a dragon’s head. He doesn’t dare touching the blade, it looks so sharp that he’s afraid he would cut himself even touching just the flat of it, but he curiously closes his hand around the hilt, feeling the cool metal against his skin.

**Wow. Maybe he should have his suit fitted with a retractable version of this. Now wouldn’t that look awesome, and he could even--**

Then, without warning, there’s suddenly a rough voice booming to their left, the sound echoing eerily between the metal items on the display.

“Who goes there?”

And Tony can feel his entire body freeze up at the sound.
But whereas Tony is frozen to the spot, Loki is not. In the flash of a second, he moves, quick as a viper. With one swift movement, he has pulled off his own shirt and discarded it on the floor, then grabbing hold of a flabbergasted Tony and pushing them both up towards the wall, twisting so that he ends up with his bare back scraping against the rough stones, arms pulling Tony into a tight embrace, their bodies pressed flush against each other.

And Tony is still far too confused and shocked to even speak a word as the smart clicks of steel-plated boots come to a halt right behind him. He can only turn and stare as he slowly disentangles himself from Loki’s arms and pushes himself up from where he has braced himself against the wall on either side of the god, whose arms slowly let go of him and fall to his sides.

The very much bearded and helmeted head of a guard is staring him right into his face, the look on the man’s features reflecting every bit of the shock and confusion that Tony is feeling. His hand is on the hilt of the sword at his belt, but at least he’s made no move to draw it yet.

“Man of Iron?” comes the incredulous exclamation as he blinks at Tony, no doubt recognizing him by the very much un-Asgardian clothes he’s wearing. Well, that and Loki’s company too, he supposes.

“Oh yeah, that would be me,” he manages.

“What’s the meaning of this?” the man barks, sounding angrier now. “No outsiders are allowed inside the weapons vault and you are trespassing without permission! Explain yourself at once!”

But before he has a chance to speak up, Loki’s smooth voice cuts him off. “Please forgive my master, Halvar,” he says with a courteous bow of his head. “He was being very… ah, anxious and didn’t wish to… hold off. I am afraid this was the nearest secluded place, as inappropriate as it obviously was for such activities.”

And it’s like it’s only then that the guard is really seeing Loki, but as his gaze roams over the god, taking in his half-clothed appearance, there is a nasty grin spreading across his face.

“Oh, I see,” he says, the previous anger having been replaced with obvious glee, before he takes a step back, his hand dropping from the sword hilt. “Well, then. I will let your trespassing slide this once, but don’t ever come in here again. Leave at once and take your business elsewhere.”
And Tony wants to say something, to protest – *it's not what it looks like* – but before he can get his lips to move, Loki snags his shirt up from the floor with one hand and grabs hold of Tony’s nearest arm with the other, discreetly pushing him towards the exit without a word.

And Tony meekly follows, feeling like the biggest idiot in all of Asgard.
Chapter 92

He half expects the guard to change his mind and call them back as Loki pushes him out through the exit, but he doesn’t. Only silence follows them.

Once they’ve made it out safe and sound, Loki carefully slides the gates behind them shut, the creaking of the hinges ear-deafening in the stillness.

And Tony can barely look at Loki as the god puts his shirt back on again, smoothing it out with a brush of his hand down the front. Despite having been locked into a tight embrace with him mere moments ago, Loki’s bare skin pressing against him, it hadn’t been arousing in the slightest. Not under the circumstances, not when Loki had pretended that they – that he had been about to--

And the lecherous, pleased grin on the face of that guard as he drew the obvious conclusions – it makes bile rise in his throat and his hair stand on end. He doesn’t know what to say, what to do, how to salvage the situation.

“Why did you do that?” he finally blurts out for lack of something more eloquent to say. “You didn’t have to… pretend anything like… that.”

Loki shrugs, a surprisingly unperturbed look on his face. “If I hadn’t, that guard would have sent you straight to the dungeons for trespassing.” A short pause. “And believe me, not even for an honoured guest are the dungeons a pleasant place by any stretch of the imagination. The guards down there are not nice people, and are not expected to be. Hence, it was better this way,” he says, as if that settles it. As if there is nothing else to it.

But there is, and a lot at that. He clenches a fist, feeling his nails dig into his palm. Despite the vastness of the corridor they’re standing in, the air around them suddenly feels stuffy and difficult to breathe.

“And now that guard is going to think that we’re… that I’m… “ He can barely bring himself to say it, but pushes over the threshold nevertheless “That I’m – using you in that way.”

Loki looks down on the floor for a while as if contemplating what to say next, and then looks up at Tony again. “It makes no difference,” he finally answers. “That’s only what people here already believe anyway.”
And Tony’s throat constricts to the point of pain at those words; yeah, sure, he definitely got some unwelcome hints about the state of things just yesterday, but he had thought it was just the assumptions of some, not that the general view of him here would be that he was a rapist. Even if no one would actually call it that, but instead think he was merely exercising rights fully belonging to him.

As if Loki can tell what Tony’s thinking, he continues. “You heard Arnulf’s words yesterday – they were not merely a mean-spirited insult, but what he took to be the truth – and you were later asked by Geir to let him use me for the night, weren’t you?” Loki asks with a gaze boring into Tony like needles.

And Tony finds himself gaping like a fish flushed onto dry land at those words; he’d never imagined that Loki actually knew what that freak had wanted.

“How – how did you find out about Geir?” he manages, feeling his cheeks heat up with embarrassment and emotional turmoil. It had certainly been bad enough being asked, but to have Loki know about it too…

“It was not difficult to figure out,” Loki says softly. “Considering the expectations, what else would he have asked you?”

Yeah, so maybe he should have seen that coming. But still…

“And just what makes everyone so fucking sure?” he half-yells, hands grasping his own upper arms in a tight hold. Perhaps it’s a make-shift shield he’s trying to put up to distance himself from the unpleasant truth staring him into the face. “I haven’t done anything to give them those ideas,” he insists, voice oddly shrill in his ears. “Why would they believe that?”

Loki eyes him for a few heartbeats before slowly answering. “Because of many things – such as your lenient and indulgent treatment of me, the absence of bruises, how you haven’t had my hair shaved off, among other things. These would all be signs pointing towards a slave gaining his master’s favour by serving him well in bed.”

Goddammit. How is he even going to be able to look people in the eye here if they think that of him? Even if they don’t see anything wrong with it.

And there’s another thing that baffles him as well.
“Doesn’t that bother you?” he asks, waving his hands in exasperation at Loki’s seemingly indifferent attitude in the face of such an appalling matter. “That people here believe that kind of shit? That they think you’re…”

Loki shrugs and lets a soft sigh escape his lips. “It makes little difference,” he says. “People here already consider me to be argr anyway; this hardly changes anything.”

And there’s that word again – argr – that had made Loki flip his shit at Fjalar despite knowing the consequences that would follow.

“What does that even mean?” he asks, feeling he has to know. “This… argr?”

Loki looks away at that, ostensibly studying an inscription on the wall, a finger nail travelling over the withered stone. “It is a word that has many connotations, all of them highly negative,” he says, gaze still nailed to the indented writing. “And if you were to call a free man by that word, he would be expected to either retaliate on the spot or demand holmgång, or his honour would be forfeit. There is really no worse insult than that.”

“But what does it mean?” Tony presses on, not willing to let the topic go just yet. Given that he was merely inches away from having to whip Loki into pieces because of that word, he should at least be entitled to know the meaning of it.

“It means that you call the manhood and honour of that person into question, that you consider him a coward. That you do not believe him to be a real man. And there are certain things that would automatically make you argr in the eyes of most people,” Loki says, glancing at Tony out of the corner of an eye.

“Such as?”

“Such as practicing magic – or letting other men take you as if you were a woman,” Loki answers, voice even, but with an undercurrent of something darker beneath the smooth surface.

Shit.
“And Fjalar called you argr then because he believes that we – that I…” Oh fuck.

But Loki slowly shakes his head. “No,” he says, “that’s not the main reason. I was already thought to be argr before being sent to Midgard, due to my… proclivities. Only difference is that back then no one would have dared calling me that to my face when I still was a free man and a prince and had my magic powers. But that has changed now, of course.”

And Tony can hear the bitterness lacing those words; even if Loki is trying to keep it out of his voice, the resentment is still seeping through. And he can’t help but wonder what Loki means by ‘proclivities’. Was he only referring to his use of magic, or to… other things as well?

But there’s no way Tony is going to ask him, it’s none of this business and it’s not like it matters anyway. He’d never pry into Loki’s personal business like that no matter what.

Discomfort and awkwardness washing over him once more, he decides to put the subject behind them, and the quicker, the better. After he’s said what he still needs to be said, of course.

“Well, then,” he manages to mumble, wincing. “I’m really sorry for… pushing you into that situation back there, regardless of whether it will affect what people think or not. It really wasn’t my intention to be a dumbass like that.” And he can’t help but feel that he would actually deserve getting thrown into the dungeons after this. It had been idiotic of him, of course, and in the end it had been Loki who had ended up paying the price for Tony’s recklessness.

“It’s alright,” Loki says. “It was a small thing considering what you did for me yesterday.”

“You know, next time, you should just let them drag me off to the dungeons instead and have me suffer the consequences of my own idiocy. But… thanks for helping me out,” he says, still feeling like a moron.

And he wonders what the dungeons in Asgard are really like if Loki thought demeaning himself like that in the eyes of that guard was worth paying Tony back for saving him yesterday. He’s not even sure he wants to know.

The food brought by the servants has been eaten, and the leftovers cleared away. Loki is haphazardly flipping through a book and Tony doesn’t seem like he’s up to doing a whole lot, instead settling for
lounging on the couch in their room, playing around with the crystal ball that had been resting undisturbed and peacefully on a bookshelf before it had grabbed the man’s attention. Its vibrant colours are shifting continuously as he angles the item against the light, glittering in a way that is not entirely unlike the Bifrost. He remembers amusing himself with such items when he was a child, never ceasing to be mesmerized by the varying patterns of colours and light, ever-shifting and never displaying the same appearance twice.

And judging by the way Tony is peeking and poking at the thing, it’s obvious they don’t have fire crystal back on Midgard.

Seeing Tony fiddling with the colourful ball reminds him of all the times the man has been holding that equally colourful, but now relinquished, cube in his hands instead, and it makes his thoughts once more trail off to what transpired yesterday and then back to the incident in the weapons vault. Perhaps he should have been angered by Tony’s thoughtlessness, but after everything that’s transpired, Loki can’t find it within himself to be mad at him.

Of course, he hadn’t been surprised in the slightest when Tony had insisted on seeing the vault from the inside. It wouldn’t be like him to pass up on something like that, despite knowing full well that he should just leave well enough alone.

It had been a stroke of bad luck that there had been a guard present just then; normally they would be patrolling other parts of the Halls not protected by such strong wards as the armoury, just occasionally making their rounds in that direction to make sure everything was in order. It wasn’t as if it was possible to steal anything from there regardless.

And yet, they had entered at an ill-chosen time, had been taken by surprise by one of guards who had decided to pay the vault a dutiful visit. And of course, he knew in that instant as he heard the guard’s voice booming behind them that Tony, honoured guest or not, was about to be dragged off to the dungeons for trespassing, and there was no way Loki would let that happen if he could stop it.

Yes, it had been a demeaning display to put up, pretending as if Tony was about to ravish him right as they were interrupted, but if he knew the guards right, they would be sufficiently pleased with encountering such a sight that they would let the trespassing offence slide. They’d let Tony off, rather than locking him up in the dungeons until Thor came back and could vouch for him.

Of course, it would only have been for a few hours. But even so, he’s too well acquainted with the dungeons after his own long stay in them and he knows exactly what they’re like. It’s like a world of its own down there – a very, very unpleasant world, with rules of its own. The cells would be dark and cold and dank, and the guards rough and vicious and crude. In fact, he can think of very few places more objectionable than the Asgardian dungeons.
And the last man he would want to have to spend time down there would be Tony.
Chapter 93

It’s afternoon already when Thor finally returns, all apologies for having had other duties to attend to and being unable to assume the role of a more dutiful host.

But Tony just whisks the apologies away; he has more important things to talk about with Thor.

“By the way, we ran into some guy named Frey as we were walking around the place,” he says, eyes not leaving Thor for a second as he’s trying to gauge the god’s reaction to that name. “You know him?”

There is very little emotion playing out on Thor’s face at the mention of the name, though. “Of course. He’s the oldest son of one of the noble families of Asgard.”

“A friend of yours?”

Thor shrugs, not seeming terribly interested in discussing the topic. “I wouldn’t call him a personal friend or someone I would seek out to share a flagon of mead with, but I have no quarrels with him either.”

“So what do you think of him? Nice guy?” Tony asks, trying to sound casual, as if he’s just trying to make conversation without any specific goal in mind. If Frey was indeed telling the truth, he doesn’t want to make Thor suspicious and have him ask uncomfortable questions in turn.

“I don’t know him very well,” Thor answers, steel blue eyes resting on Tony. “He and his family don’t associate as much with the royal family as most of the other nobles. But I can still vouch that Frey is an able warrior and loyal to the throne of Asgard.”

As in, loyal to Odin? Tony isn’t sure if he likes that at all.

“So, the trustworthy and upright kind, huh?” he comments.

“Yes. I have never encountered any disloyal conduct from him,” Thor answers. “How come you are asking?”
“Eh, no particular reason, just trying to find out a bit more about the natives around here, you know? Behavioural study and all. We like that kind of academic stuff back in Midgard.”

Thor creases an eyebrow, seemingly a bit perturbed by the questions. “He didn’t threaten or otherwise treat you in any way unfit for a guest, did he?” he says, eyes narrowing slightly at the prospect.

“Nope. Not at all,” Tony quickly assures him. “He was courtesy itself. I was just wondering, is all.”

Well, it would seem that he’s not going to get any useful information out of Thor, at least. Damn. Looks like he’ll have no choice but to judge his own intuition in this, which, admittedly, has led him astray more than once before.

“So when is this big audience going to happen?” Tony asks instead, trying to change the subject. “How much longer is your daddy going to make me wait around here?”

“I’m sorry that you have been made to wait, but the members of the council are still gathering,” Thor says solemnly. “There are some that have not yet assembled for the audience, but everyone is informed and is expected to arrive soon.” There is a short pause as Thor draws his breath. “Quite possibly even tomorrow, but I assure you that word will be sent out as soon as it’s time.”

And he really hopes that Thor is right, because he sure as heck doesn’t want to spend any more time in this place than he has to. And he has a feeling that Loki would agree on that account.

He’s about to ask why all those council members can’t all just teleport into place when Thor speaks up again. “Actually, there was another matter I wanted to discuss with you,” he says, crossing his arms. “I have been briefly meeting with Lord Hallgrim, and he would like to extend an invitation for you to join him in his halls for dinner this evening.”

Tony almost snorts at that. Yeah, right, as if he’s going to spend the evening wining and dining with some stuck-up nobleman he hasn’t even met. No way.

“Forget it Thor, I’m totally not going. There’s a million other things I could think of that I’d rather do instead – like, sit around here and watch the stone walls wither, one atom at a time.”
Thor’s shoulders heave a little as if he draws an inaudible sigh, but he doesn’t sound annoyed as he speaks, just tired. “I understand if you would prefer to pass on this; however, you should be aware that turning down an invitation to share an offered meal without a good reason is considered very rude in Asgard, especially so when the host is of high birth. Lord Hallgrim would be sure to take grave personal offence to such a refusal.”

Tony rolls his eyes at that. “Yeah, as if I’m going to loose sleep over some Lord Helsing getting all grumpy because I didn’t show up at his party.” He’s pissed off more important people in his day than he can remember, often enjoying it immensely too, what’s one more guy to that count? “Give me one good reason why I should care in the slightest what some random noble thinks of where I spend my evening.”

“Lord Hallgrim is the brother of Lord Ragnvald, who so happens to be one of the members of the Council assembled for the audience. And the two of them are very close,” Thor says without missing a beat. “It might make no difference in the end, but if Hallgrim should speak his indignity over your behaviour before Ragnvald…” the words trail off somewhere in the distance, the implications loud enough to be heard regardless.

Well of course. There’s always a catch, isn’t there?

“It would not be conducive to the outcome we want, huh?” he finishes Thor’s sentence off, groaning in frustration. So Asgard is just like home in that regard – butter up the right people, don’t piss anyone important off, and you might just get one step closer to where you want to be. And if you don’t play by the unspoken rules, well, you’re screwed.

Fuck.

“You do not have to stay long,” Thor tries to reassure him. “The important thing is that you show up, after dinner is over you can excuse yourself with the explanation that you’re tired after spending a long day in a foreign realm. Everyone will understand that. But not coming at all would be insulting.”

And damn, he doesn’t – he really doesn’t – want to go to this dinner, but if not going will somehow negatively affect Loki’s chances of clemency – well, there’s only one option.

He sighs, throwing his hands out in surrender. “Alright, fine, I’ll go. But you’re going to have to look after Loki while I’m gone, okay?” he says, pointing a demanding finger at Thor.
Thor’s shoulders slump a little as the god deflates. “I’m afraid that’s not possible as I have further duties to attend to this evening that I cannot hold off on. Loki is going to have to go with you,” Thor says, that apologetic look once more painted all over his face.

*Double fuck.*

“You know, I don’t really think--” he begins, but is interrupted by Loki, who has kept silent during the conversation until now, merely watching them from where he’s seated on the armrest of the couch lining one of the walls.

“You should go,” the god says evenly. “Thor is right – refusing this invitation would be unwise. It is better if you – we – attend.”

There’s an unpleasant feeling churning inside of Tony as he watches Loki, realizing that whatever aversion he might be feeling towards going, it must be a hundred times worse for Loki.

“You sure?” he says sheepishly, hating this Hallgrim guy already for exposing Loki to this. Maybe that was his intent all along, though Tony sincerely hopes not.

Loki nods. “Yes. Hallgrim and his brother are indeed very close. Offending him would not be prudent, considering… the stakes.”

“*Fine,*” he agrees again, though it’s not fine at all. But if both Thor and Loki agree on something – and when was the last time that happened? – it’s probably for the best to go along with it, considering that they are the experts on the local customs, whereas he is as knowledgeable about them as he is about the mating behaviour of the dung beetle. If he antagonizes someone important who might have some sort of influence, no matter how small, in what happens to Loki – well, better not think about that. It could be what tips the scales, after all.

“But why did this weirdo invite me in the first place? I haven’t even *met* him, for crying out loud!”

“Hallgrim has a penchant for the exotic,” Thor informs him, voice more relaxed now that Tony has accepted the invitation. “He enjoys conversing with visitors from other realms and often takes the opportunity to invite foreign dignitaries whenever they are visiting Asgard. You only need to humour him and his inquiries about Midgard, and he will be satisfied.”
Okay, it’s not as if Tony doesn’t have a wealth of experience when it come to making dull conversation with people he doesn’t even want to be in the same room as.

“Wonderful. I’ll play the Midgardian monkey, then. Maybe I’ll even do a little dance to amuse everyone,” he mutters. “Though, I think a crash course in proper dinner etiquette in alien wonderland would be advisable, because I can see at least a few hundred ways I could screw this up and make things worse than if I hadn’t shown up in the first place.”

“There is no need for concern, Man of Iron,” Thor says, patting a supposedly comforting hand on Tony’s shoulder. “You only need to act polite and courteous like it would befit a guest back in your own realm, and that will be good enough. No one will expect you to be familiar with the intricacies of our customs, and your host and his guests will be indulgent with any such unintentional breeches.”

“So I’m not going to get publicly beheaded for inadvertently using the salad fork for the roasted dragon?”

“Worry not. We do not even eat dragon meat in Asgard.”

He’s not sure if Thor is trying to be funny or not, but he lets the topic die as another thought hits him. “So, Thor – you said before that it wouldn’t be advisable for us to leave the premises – so how are we going to reconcile that with traipsing over to this guy’s place?”

Thor merely holds up a hand. “Hallgrim is an esteemed advisor of the Royal family; as such he has been fitted with his own chambers in the Halls, so you will still remain within the castle,” he clarifies.

“Well, small favours, I guess,” Tony sighs, feeling a headache coming on. If it were up to him, he’d really like to spend the evening simply sprawling on the couch.

And just as he thought that this could not get any worse, Thor somehow manages to bring it on yet again.

“But there is one thing that should be considered,” the Thunderer says, as if in passing. “When attending as a dinner guest in Asgard, it is seen as polite and as a sign of respect to wear traditional Asgardian clothing.”
Yup, the closet in their room is filled to the brim with fancy alien clothing alright, he realizes as he opens the snakehead-handled door, gingerly peering inside. Leather and furs and garish fabrics in constellations that would make a renaissance fair enthusiast turn green with envy, could they at all see him.

There is a plethora of frilly shirts, hooded cloaks, fur-lined jackets, embroidered coats, all the kind of stuff you wouldn’t see at your local clothes outlet. Nothing that looks normal or ordinary by simple Midgardian standards, by any stretch of the imagination.

And damn, he’s actually expected to wear this stuff?

He takes out a green shirt with long, puffy arms, holding it out in front of him to regard it with a blank expression. Wow, he’d look like a freaking pirate captain wearing this. Jack Sparrow would be proud.

No, not that. Instead, he pulls the next item in line out – a red jacket with so much gold embroideries decorating it that there’s almost more gold than red visible.

*Circus ringmaster.*

Sighing, he brings out another couple of get-ups from the closet, but the immediate associations he gets are ‘Satanist cult leader’ and ‘pimped-up Robin Hood’, respectively, so he quickly hangs them back inside again.

“Uh,” he mutters dumbly. “Think you could help me out here, picking something out that would be appropriate? I mean, I don’t want to accidentally put on some women’s stuff or whatever,” he says to the god standing some bit behind him, watching as he haphazardly flips through the items hanging on display in the closet.

A few seconds later, Loki is at Tony’s side, deft hands rummaging through the garments, pausing at some to give them a quick but no doubt qualified evaluation. It doesn’t take long before the god has picked out a few of the items, folding them over his arm and holding them out to Tony.

“I believe these would be suitable,” he says with a nod.
Hesitantly, Tony accepts the bundle of clothing, critically examining it. Most definitely not what he’d wear back home, that’s for sure. Even in New York, he’d get some really strange looks walking down the streets in this. Even during Halloween. But at least it’s not as bad as the circus ringmaster or the Satanist cult leader getups.

There’s a pair of pants that he first assumes are made of some sort of black fabric, but upon closer inspection it turns out to be leather, surprisingly soft against his fingers. Next in line is a blue shirt with some lacing at the top – undoubtedly the most straightforward piece of clothing of the lot – a short dark grey jacket that he isn’t even sure how he’s going to squirm his way into, and finally the ubiquitous cloak, also blue in colour. It billows softly from where it’s draped across his arm.

Looking at the items, he gets that overwhelming deja vu feeling, remembering the clothes Loki had worn during their first encounter, with the numerous belts and straps and buckles.

“You should try them on and make sure they fit, or we will have to find you something else,” Loki says somewhere at his side.

He sighs. Yeah, he should. Though eyeing the clothes, he’s not really sure how to.

“Damn, how do you guys even dress yourselves in the morning with all this… extra?” he asks, fingers plucking at one of the countless straps.

“That’s why there are servants around to help,” Loki says as his shoulders bob upwards in a shrug. “Clothes worn for festive occasions aren’t made for easy dressing; you are supposed to have servants assist you.”

“Well, guess I’ll have to make do anyway,” Tony says with a dismissive wave of his hand. “I’m not going to have some old fat guy come in here and dress me up like I’m some mannequin, alright?”

He briefly considers going to the bathroom to get changed, but then decides not to. Given everything that’s transpired, it would only look daft – they’ve already stripped down to their underwear in each other’s presence the night before, even slept in the same bed in that very same state, and will no doubt be repeating the procedure tonight, so acting like the straight-laced prude that he’s really not would just be silly at this point.

Throwing the garments over the clothes stand right next to him – at least he assumes that the
dramatically outstretched arm of the man-shaped metal figure on the floor is supposed to serve as clothing holder, though maybe it’s really just another statue – he quickly strips out of his shirt and his jeans, dispensing of them on the floor. Then he grabs the leather pants, stepping into them and pulling them up to his waist.

Okay, that was the easy part, then there’s the straps and buckles that he isn’t sure what goes where. He fiddles with a few of the loose ends for a while, trying to solve the unfamiliar puzzle with rather unsatisfactory results.

“Here, let me help you,” Loki says as he with two quick steps breeches the distance between them. Before Tony can protest, the god’s hands are grabbing at a strap and a buckle, deftly slipping the leather into the piece of blank metal, pulling it tight, before making short process of the rest of the dangling ends.

Then Loki crouches down next to him as his fingers go to the leather at Tony’s right side, starting to work on the lacing running the entire way along the leg, adjusting and tightening it.

And damn if this isn't totally awkward.

“You know,” he says, being on the verge of swatting Loki’s hands away as they’re fiddling at his thigh, “I actually think I can manage this just fine by myself.”

“In that case, I think we would be here for a long time. Even an Asgardian noble used to this would have trouble dressing himself in these kinds of clothes without a servant to assist him,” the god says, stopping only briefly to look up at Tony, before continuing to tug at the lacing again.

“You mean you had people helping you dress every freaking morning?” Tony asks as Loki works away. Somehow, he has a hard time imagining that.

Loki’s lips tug slightly upwards at the question. “No. I had my magic to help me; servants were not necessary. Still, few would wear clothes this impractical with any regularity; usually, it’s just for occasions when you want to look your best. Even nobles would generally prefer to be seen in clothing fit for battle when they’re not attending festive activities.”

And he wishes the god would be finished with the lacing-up already, but from the looks of it, he’s not even halfway done yet. Trying to dispel some of the weirdness, he gropes around for something to say, something to keep the conversation going so that the focus won’t have to be Loki’s fingers
running down the side of his leg.

“So, what is this Hallgrim guy like?” he asks. “Any quirks I should be aware of?”

“He’s a loud and boisterous man, and often you can hear him coming long before you see him,” Loki says, his fingers not missing a beat. “He likes to eat and drink, and, like Thor said, he takes an interest in the other realms and enjoys conversing with foreign visitors. Just humour him, and he will be happy.”

“Does he… have a quarrel with you?” Tony says, not sure he wants to hear the answer.

“Not that I know of,” Loki replies, shifting slightly where he’s crouching as his fingers move lower to the vicinity of Tony’s knee. “Not more so than anyone else in Asgard, at least.”

“Should I be concerned that someone will… try something?”

Loki shakes his head. “You are an honoured guest, not only of Thor’s, but for the evening also of Hallgrim’s. As long as neither of us provokes anyone, there should be no need for concern. And besides, Hallgrim enjoys merriment and gets cross if he has it spoiled with strife or discontent. His guests are well aware of that and can be expected to act accordingly.”

“So is this going to be like a big hoopla with lots of guests attending?”

“There will likely be quite many people there. Hallgrim likes having guests in his Halls to enjoy food and drink with him, and the more, the better,” Loki says as he finishes the lacing on Tony’s first leg and then moves over to start working on the second. “There will probably be some dancing as well after the dinner is over, and if a lady comes up to you and asks you for a dance, you should not refuse her; it would be very impolite.”

Wonderful.

There is silence for a while. Then another thought hits him. “And what are you supposed to be doing during the evening?” Another thing he’s not sure he wants to know, because he has an inkling already.
He can feel Loki tense slightly at his side. “Like all other slaves brought along to attend to their masters during the dinner, I will be kneeling by your seat, filling your cup when it’s empty, assisting you with whatever might be needed,” comes the taut reply as the god stands up and goes to fetch the shirt from the clothes stand, handing it to Tony.

“And let me guess, slaves don’t even get to eat anything, huh?” he says as he takes the offered shirt and pulls the fabric over his head. He hates this dinner with a passion already, and it hasn’t even started yet.

“They do not,” Loki answers, stepping behind Tony to fasten something at his back, pulling the fabric a bit tighter around him.

*Figures.*

Well, at least the clothes are his size so far, he would have hated having to spend more time than necessary trying to find something from this freaks’r’us clothing department. Small graces, and all that.

“But their masters are still free to feed them morsels during dinner if they should feel so inclined,” Loki continues, holding out the weird-looking jacket to Tony for him to stick his arms into.

Like feeding a dog treats at the table. A wave of unease washes over him at the demeaning concept.

He says nothing as Loki once more starts to work on the straps and the buckles, letting something click into place on top of his shoulder, and then pulls at some leather cords beneath his arms, tying them together.

“So… are you okay with coming along to this Hallgrim guy?” he asks, feeling he at least needs to poise the question, even if they don’t have a choice in the end.

“I will not be enjoying the evening ahead of us, no, but it will still be preferable to the possible consequences of offending Hallgrim. At least these will be nobles, and as such they have more class than simple servants or soldiers. Most would consider it beneath their station to at all notice or comment on the presence of a slave, even if that slave happens to be… me,” Loki says, and then looks inside the closet again, obviously searching for something.
“Well, that’s wonderful.” He lets slip a sigh as he waits for whatever weird item Loki is about to pull out next, not sure he wants to know.

And when Loki turns back to Tony again, his eyes go wide as he stares at what’s cradled in Loki’s arms – a leather belt with a big-ass sword attached to it.

“Uh, are you sure that’s necessary?” he says with a toss of his chin at the medieval weapon, feeling like an idiot. “It’s not like I know how to use one anyway.”

“People would think you look half-naked without one. It’s not how you should attend a dinner,” Loki says simply as his arms reach around to circle Tony to fasten the belt around his waist.

Tony instinctively holds his breath at that, feeling a sense of relief when Loki is finished and takes a step back. The sword is an unfamiliar weight at his side, pulling uncomfortably at him, and he resists the sudden urge to draw it, deciding it’s for the better to leave it in its scabbard where it belongs. He’s no doubt looking silly enough already without brandishing a sword when he’s just barely able to tell which end is the pointy one.

“Oh, and by the way, if I should say or do something inadvisable during dinner, could you, like, I don’t know, poke my leg or something to make sure I shut up? I’ll try to be on my best behaviour, but I might inadvertently insult the host’s mother by holding my glass the wrong way or whatever, so some discreet pointers might be needed,” he says as he watches Loki get the last item from the clothes stand – the still billowing cloak.

“I will do that,” Loki says as he fastens the cloak to something on Tony’s shoulders, then letting the long fabric fall freely towards the floor.

Well, that’s it, he supposes. Now he looks just like one of them, like an extra that has just walked out of the set of Lord of the Rings. He dreads stepping around to look into the mirror blocked by the still open door to the closet, instead turning towards Loki for the first evaluation.

“So, how do I look?”

He’s half expecting Loki to laugh or at least snicker at the no doubt discrepant sight, but the god doesn’t, merely lets his eyes travel over the display in silence, before his gaze finally looks up to meet with Tony’s, his face straight and serious.
“Like a true Lord.”
Chapter 95

Loki was right – Hallgrim is loud and boisterous alright, his voice rising high above the chatter as he tells a joke or anecdote, laughing so loud that Tony’s ears are almost ringing and it’s all he can do not to wince. But he pulls through; after all the cocktail parties he’s been an unfortunate participant of, he’s used to people like this.

Hallgrim himself is what the PC crowd would call big-boned, his red livery bulging over his protruding stomach, but no doubt there is a good bit of muscle underneath that blubber too, and like most other men here, he wears a sword at his belt whose hilt looks well-worn enough to not just be there for decorative purposes. Long reddish-brown hair and a bushy beard to match, Hallgrim would make a perfect Santa Claus in a few centuries’ time when he’s sufficiently older and grayer around the edges.

“And so, I told Ragnvald that if the girl wasn’t pretty enough for him, then maybe he should just buy himself that old horse instead!” Hallgrim hollers the big finale of his latest tale, almost doubling over with laughter, roaring and slapping his thigh in amusement. Tony offers a polite smile, just wide enough not to offend.

He has to admit that so far, things have been going better than expected. Tony has managed to be all non-offending courtesy and politeness – handing over his token gift of appreciation to the host provided to him by Thor, offering his thanks for the gracious invitation, and then spending the rest of the time patiently listening to Hallgrim telling bawdy anecdotes while alternating between slapping his own thigh and Tony’s shoulder, stomach heaving from the bouts of hearty guffaws.

As Hallgrim unblinkingly begins another story, Tony half tunes out, instead letting his gaze discreetly sweep over the surroundings. The dining hall they’re standing in is large, with an impressive U-shaped table in the middle, and filled with people currently busy doing the Asgardian version of mingling, conversing politely as the table is being set by a group of servants, all wearing the same red and black clothes, like it’s some kind of uniform. Perhaps the colours of Hallgrim’s house, or maybe the guy just likes that particular combination. The rest of the room has been decorated with the same colour pattern as well, drapes and carpets and tapestries all sporting the theme of the day, but otherwise it looks the same as the rest of the Halls. A couple of statues, some runic ornaments, heavy wooden furniture with golden inlays – the usual stuff. Maybe he’s gone blasé already.

The guests are all dressed to the teeth, so at least he doesn’t have to feel out of place in his own silly renaissance garb, as awkward as the get-up makes him feel. Though, he has to admit that the cloak is starting to grow on him with the way it’s stylishly sweeping behind him as he walks. Maybe he can sort of understand why these guys are so fond of them.
While Tony’s exchanged some polite greetings with a few of the other guests, Hallgrim has more or less been monopolizing his foreign visitor ever since the second he stepped in here. And it seems like everyone is aware of their host’s penchant for exotic aliens, because they all patiently indulge his desire to have Tony for himself, keeping a respectful distance.

Not that Tony is complaining, truth be told, it’s easier having this guy stake his claim on him for the evening than have to worry about figuratively stepping on a whole bunch of other tender and sensitive noble toes by blurt out something he shouldn’t. So far, Hallgrim has been doing most of the talking, which suits Tony just fine. His only concern is to get things over with as quickly and smoothly as possible, getting both himself and Loki out of here in one piece.

However, there’s one particular part of the room that he finds utterly disturbing, and he’s glad it’s not directly in his line of sight – the corner where the accompanying slaves are waiting for the dinner to start or for their masters’ demands to be attended to, whichever comes first. All of them conveniently pushed off to the side where they’re out of the way, but still close enough to be called upon if their services should be needed.

And, to his knowledge, these are the first slaves he’s seen here, apart from that ragged couple that passed him by in the market square when he arrived. At least these ones look to be in a somewhat more decent shape, better dressed and cleaner, though he supposes that they wouldn’t have been brought along in the first place if they hadn’t been reasonably presentable.

Still, these slaves are pulling off the act of being silent shadows just as well as those other two, as if they’ve spent their whole lives learning how to be as unobtrusive as possible and melt into the background like chameleons. And it just seems so wrong – they should be talking among themselves, chatting a bit to pass the time now that they’re not having any duties to fulfil for the moment, but they’re all keeping silent, looking demurely at the ground, as if they were merely part of the furnishing.

Some of the slaves have their heads shaved, whereas others do not. Unbidden, Loki’s previous comment about unshaved hair on slaves resurfaces, how it suggests that they are bed slaves, and his stomach squirms in unease. Frankly, it’s be better not to think about which of them are used in such ways by their masters – maybe it’s all of them, or maybe no one, he really can’t know for sure, hair or not.

He avoids looking at Loki; it’s too disturbing having the god grouped together with these poor, wretched beings whose reason for existence has been reduced to being at the beck and call of their masters, without a purpose of their own.

But at least no one here has spoken to Loki, or even made a comment about him, so he tries to take some comfort in that. After all, it’s better to have everyone here ignore him than make rude or gleeful
commentary in his presence.

Even Hallgrim had acted as if Loki was invisible, offering no remarks whatsoever, not even raising as much as an eyebrow upon seeing who was accompanying his alien guest. Tony isn’t sure if he dislikes or likes the guy for it – dislikes, because the way he treated Loki as if he was nothing more than empty air; likes, because he didn’t gloat or make any deal out of the state of things.

He thinks he can see the occasional furtive glances in Loki’s direction from some of the assembled guests, but nothing more than that, for which he is immensely grateful.

His gaze travelling back to Hallgrim again, he lifts his prettily carved mug still half-filled with beer, suppressing a yawn as he takes another restrained sip. It’s as delicious as any of the beer he’s tasted here so far, but he’s firmly committed himself to not drinking very much tonight. Given that he’s here with Loki in a place that is not Thor’s, he wants to keep his full wits about him.

“So of course, we told the dwarves that they were free to come along, but only if they could…” Hallgrim’s voice drones in the background.

He patiently nods his head at appropriate intervals during the exposition, pretending to be listening intently while watching the servants as they hasten back and forth on quick and nimble feet, carrying an assortment of pots and trays and baskets. Though the aromas reaching his nose are all wonderful, they really do nothing to help with his non-existing appetite. At least he made sure to have some food sent to his room before they left so Loki wouldn’t have to sit through dinner being hungry, because there’s no way he’s going to feed him scraps at the table like a dog.

Eventually, the stream of servants trickles off until there are no longer any red and black uniforms running to and fro. Hallgrim’s gaze goes from Tony to the set table, a satisfied grin on his face.

“Ah finally!” he exclaims, voluntarily interrupting his own story. He claps his hands together loudly, the smacks of his palms as loud as the rest of him as the conversations around him die down. “Dinner is served, my friends,” he booms. “Please seat yourself!”

Obeying the wishes of their host, the throng of people disperses around the table, reminding Tony of preening peacocks with their fancy and colourful costumes. Unsure if there’s a system to the seating arrangements that he’s supposed to follow in order to avoid dirty looks or worse from the assembly, he waits for whatever chair will still be available when the rest have sat their well-dressed asses down, but Hallgrim grabs his upper arm, a ham-like hand pushing him forwards.
“Here, this seat over there is intended for you, Man of Iron,” the big man indicates with his other hand, pointing across the table. “It would please me to have you close to my own seat so we can continue our conversation where we left off.”

*Oh well.* Tony obliges, making his way around the table and seating himself down on the indicated oaken chair. Not too comfortable, but he’s not planning on staying long anyway.

Hallgrim sits down in the chair opposite from him, looking immensely pleased with himself as he eyes the food and the assembled guests. Including Tony, his little exotic trophy on display for the evening.

Speaking of exotic things, he can’t help but notice the decorations placed at regular intervals along the centre of the table – crystal balls about the size of both his fists put together, gleaming with strange lights and colours. Intrigued, he reaches out for the nearest one glittering with a pretty blue, blinking a couple of times as he studies it. It looks like there is a maelstrom of water swirling inside of it, powered by an unseen force.

“Ah,” Hallgrim says, noticing Tony’s piqued curiosity. “Those are magic crystals, a small piece of one of the elements tamed by a sorcerer and put inside the glass. The one currently in your hand contains the element of water, as you can no doubt see.”

“Peachy,” he says, juggling the ball between his hands, feeling its weight. “We do try our best to tame the elements back home as well, but not quite in this form.”

Hallgrim nods to another one of the crystal balls; a light purple one occasionally lit up by little white flashes from its insides. “Have a closer look at that one.”

Tony obeys and reaches out for the indicated ball, but immediately withdraws his hand as the thing crackles ominously and gives him a painful sting the moment he touches the surface. “Ouch!” he mutters as he cradles his hand to his chest, wanting to add something else too, but having the feeling that it might not go too well over with Hallgrim.

His host laughs heartily at Tony’s reaction. “And that one, my friend, contains the element of lightning. You should be glad it’s confined within the crystal, though, or you would have found yourself in a lot more pain than a mere sting!” he chuckles in amusement.

*Funny guy.* He wonders if Hallgrim likes to pull this trick on all his foreign guests or if Tony is just
A movement out of the corner of his eye catches Tony’s attention, and he looks up. The group of statue-like slaves seem to have awoken from their previous petrifaction and are making their way over to the table, silently and unobtrusively taking their place next to their masters.

He clenches his jaws as he watches the first of them kneel down by the seat of a bulky, muscular man dressed in a dark green cloak, the rest of the slaves quickly following suit.

And of course, Loki is there at his side too, gracefully slipping down onto the floor next to him without a word. And it’s all Tony can do not to just stand up and declare he’s leaving in this very instant.

But he controls himself, pressing a fist against the underside of the table, trying to get a hold of his aversion and anger.

“I hope you do not find our Asgardian food too strange for your Midgardian palate?” Hallgrim suddenly asks somewhere from a mile away, pulling Tony away from his dark thoughts.

“Huh? Oh, not at all. I like your… barbequed steaks,” he says, mostly on auto-pilot. “And your beer.”

Hallgrim laughs at that, his thunderous bellows rolling in waves over the assembly as he slaps a hand against the table, making the nearest beer jugs jump in fright. “Of course! Asgard is famous across the realms for its beer! I have yet to meet anyone who doesn’t think ours is the best – isn’t that right, Björn?” he says to the gaunt man sitting to his right, jabbing an elbow into his side.

The man smiles faintly at that, thin lips moving just barely in an upwards motion, as if anything more is too much of an effort. “That is indeed so,” he answers politely. “There is nothing that can compete with Asgardian beer.”

“Tell me about it, my friend,” Hallgrim boasts and then launches into a long story about how a casket of Asgardian beer apparently had saved his life once, if Hallgrim is to be believed, when he ran into trouble with some Svartalfar. The guy named Björn nods and a-hems, no doubt having already heard the story before, and probably more than once.
And Tony’s mind starts to wander again, looking the assembly over as he unenthusiastically loads some roasted meet and unidentifiable vegetables and freshly baked bread with cheese onto his plate. But what holds his gaze is not the nobles in all their finery and splendour, but the unassuming men and women kneeling by their seats, demure and silent with their heads respectfully bowed. Despite how everything about their looks and behaviour is no doubt supposed to be as inconspicuous as possible, they still manage to catch his eye like a red spot on a white canvas, standing out like sore thumbs.

Still, far from everyone around the table has brought a slave to attend to them. Less than a third, he estimates, but still more than enough. He tries to take comfort in how that makes Loki stand out less, makes him somewhat less eye-catching among all the others in the same position.

And he’s really glad that Hallgrim is one of those that don’t have a slave with them at the table.

Swallowing, he throws a glance at Loki, but the god’s head is bowed, his gaze directed at the floor.

And he desperately wants to say something to Loki and reassure him in some way, maybe tell him that this whole thing fucking sucks, but he can’t do that here and now. He has no choice but to play along with this charade. Just like Loki doesn’t have a choice. Neither of them really does.

So instead, he grabs the fork next to his plate and inelegantly stabs one of the vegetables with it, offering some dull but polite comment to whatever Hallgrim is going on about, resigning himself to the inevitable.

Then, his gaze falls on a stout man sitting near one of the ends of the table, a young woman kneeling at his side. Her dark and glossy hair flows long and freely over her shoulders, and he doesn’t want to consider what that may hint at. He watches as the man picks something up from his plate and holds the morsel out to the woman, who leans forward to take it from his fingers with her mouth, her tongue playfully flicking out.

A few seconds later, she’s sucking on the outstretched fingers still held out and the man chuckles in amusement, rubbing his thumb against her cheek. She smiles and giggles at the touch, but it sounds terribly fake and insincere in his ears. He watches as she proceeds to lay her head down into the man’s lap, nuzzling her face disturbingly close to his groin area as he trails greasy fingers through her hair. Disgusted, he looks away, his stomach in turmoil.

And he has no idea how he’s going to get through this dinner without getting sick.
In all honesty, Tony is having a real hard time believing the assertions about this Hallgrim guy supposedly having a huge interest in the other eight realms. So far, he’s been doing most of the talking himself. About himself.

Not that Tony is complaining, though.

But on cue, as if hearing Tony’s thoughts, Hallgrim suddenly leans back in his seat with an expectant look at his guest, the backrest of his chair creaking slightly as it takes his weight. “Ah, it would seem I have rudely been talking all the time here,” he says, for the first time showing some sense of self-awareness. “So, Man of Iron, would you please humour us with a heroic tale from the mighty battles you have fought in Midgard? We have heard so much of your prowess from Thor, and we would be delighted to hear even more of it.”

His mighty battles, huh?

Oh well, he can take some random fight against whatever super-villain of the day, add and detract a little from what really happened, and Hallgrim should be satisfied. Since this is what he has been invited here for in the first place, he might as well make an impression and leave his host happy and with appreciative words to his Council-sitting brother.

“Of course,” he grins, trying to look sincere. “Though it’s definitively not easy to pick just one, since we Midgardians are constantly faced with many dangerous enemies that are in serious need of defeating,” he points out, trying to play his role of well-trained Midgardian monkey like it’s expected.

Hallgrim looks pleased at this, adjusting his position as if preparing himself for a long evening of story-telling. “I’m sure whichever one you choose, it will be an interesting and riveting tale,” he offers as encouragement.

Tony leans forward a little and draws himself up for best effect, about to lay it on thick, when he is cut off by Björn on the other side of the table before he’s even gotten the first word out.

“How about telling us of the battle in which you defeated Loki and his army?” the gaunt man drawls as he regards Tony through half-lidded eyes. “I, for one, would sure like to hear all about that.”
And Tony feels himself freezing in his seat like a snowman. This fucking *dolt* expects him to tell the tale of Loki’s defeat when the guy is right there having to listen to every humiliating word of what lead up to his current position as a slave? While expecting him to keep silent and not speak a word? *No fucking way.*

And of course, it’s such a dastardly insidious way for someone who holds a grudge against the god to get back at him and revel in his lowly position. So much more subtle and clever than either Arnulf or Fjalr who had resorted to petty insults, this guy is nonetheless able to demean Loki just as effectively, while still acting all noble-like as he hides behind the prim and proper cover of merely wishing for a story.

Yeah, the perfect solution for a prissy highborn – humiliating Loki without having to lower himself to acknowledging his existence, something that would no doubt be unbecoming for someone of a noble station, at all paying attention to the presence of a slave who should be beneath his notice. But the guy can still have his little revenge; no need to go crude and rude like a simple servant or soldier.

He wonders if it’s considered acceptable here to strangle a fellow guest with his bare hands, but he thinks that Hallgrim might have something to say about a guest ruining his party like that. Probably in front of his brother too.

At his side, he can sense rather than see how Loki is shifting where he’s kneeling on the floor, the soft sound of carefully controlled breaths reaching his ears, and he knows that he’s not the only one who would love to put his hands in a chokehold around the neck of this bastard.

*No, he just can’t agree to this crap.*

“You know, I really don’t think—” he begins, giving Björn his best freezing cold Arctic stare, but then Loki’s hand is suddenly on his thigh beneath the table, giving it a soft but insistent squeeze.

He startles at the unexpected, surprisingly intimate touch, almost dropping the fork still clutched between cramping fingers. Damn, he told Loki to *poke* him if he was about to say something stupid, not freaking squeeze his *thigh*.

But Loki’s message is clear enough. *Don’t argue. Hallgrim doesn’t like discord in his halls.*

And he feels his heart sink. He really doesn’t want to be a part of this; having others do it is bad enough, but taking an active part in the humiliation himself, no matter how unwillingly, is even
But then, Hallgrim speaks up. “Ah, we have heard it all already, both from Thor and in the days of the trial that followed,” he waves the suggestion off. “No, I say let’s hear some other heroic tale of yours, Man of Iron. I’m sure you have plenty of them in store.”

And as hairy and ugly as Hallgrim is, Tony could kiss him right there. On the mouth, even. With a little tongue, if necessary.

Relief washing over him, he quickly launches into a detailed exposition about one of his fights against Victor Doom and a group of doom-bots before anyone can protest. His host looks appropriately impressed, offering loud exclamations and even making little jerky movements in his seat during the more dramatic parts, as if imagining himself participating in the battle.

Björn listens for a little while, his hand impatiently playing with the ends of his light blond and very lanky hair, but he quickly looses interest and instead turns to converse with the man to his other side. Tony isn’t sorry about that for even a second.

“That must have been a marvellous battle indeed,” Hallgrim offers excitedly once Tony’s long-winded exposé comes to an end. “But you must tell me more about your magnificent suit of armour. Is this kind of equipment commonly worn by warriors in Midgard?”

“I wouldn’t say that,” Tony answers with a shrug. “Most of our weapons are a bit more… prosaic than that.”

But he obliges Hallgrim’s wishes nevertheless, offering a passably detailed description of his suit and its weapons. He’s not sure how much the guy really understands, but it’s not like Tony cares.

Having just finished giving an explanation of the suit’s thrusters, he makes a short break to down the last contents of his mug of beer, throat having gone dry from all the talking. Just as he’s about to reach out for the large pitcher in front of him for a refill, Loki quickly gets up, smoothly grabbing the decanter and pouring some of its contents into Tony’s mug.

*Damn, this is totally awkward.*

A moment later, Loki is once more kneeling at his side, as if he had never moved at all.
Trying to hide his embarrassment he fiddles with a clasp on his cuff that has unhooked itself and fallen loose, letting the thing slide back into place with a metallic click.

When Tony looks up again, Björn is studying him from across the table, his eyes travelling to Tony’s adjusted cuff and then continuing to seemingly incidentally sweep over Loki. “Ah, the satisfaction of putting things into their right place where they belong, huh?” he says casually with pointedly raised eyebrows, and it’s oh-so-obvious how he’s not referring to that cuff clasp at all.

With a momentous effort, he ignores the comment, while imagining having a nice and long chat with Björn while wearing his Iron Man suit. However, he can feel how Loki is tensing up next to him, stiff and rigid as a statue with shoulders drawn up, and it doesn’t seem as if his state of agitation is subsiding.

It’s just an impulsive whim on his part, but Loki is so close to him, his face merely inches away from Tony’s leg, so no one will be able to tell. So he furtively, as discreetly as he can manage, reaches an arm behind the god and gently rubs what he hopes is a soothing hand along Loki’s back, trying to offer some small amount of reassurance. The muscles are taut like bowstrings drawn a hair’s breadth from the point of snapping, but he can feel them relax as the strain slowly fades away beneath his touch.

It’s strange how a mere touch can be so soothing and comforting, drawing all the tenseness out of his body.

He’s disappointed when the hand moves away again, but the touch still lingers.

As much as he would have loved to strangle Björn with his bare hands for his comment, he’s glad that Tony didn’t cause a scene, instead continuing to humour Hallgrim and his interest for Midgardian warfare and weapons, as if nothing had happened.

The degradation of having to kneel on the ground and act the part of a humble slave has been burning at the back of his throat and clawing inside his stomach ever since the dinner started. Still, he tries to console himself with the thought that if he absolutely has to kneel by someone’s seat like this, he’d rather have it be Tony’s than anyone else’s.

It didn’t take long for him, however, to find out that the best way to distract his mind from his current
situation is with the memory of the breakfast he had shared with Tony this morning, recalling every little detail he can remember – the way the corners of Tony’s eyes had wrinkled when he smiled, the faint smell of his cologne that was noticeable even over the aromas of the food, and the way the muscles had played beneath his skin as his arm reached out to grab a leg of chicken. The room around him fades as he indulges in the memory, leaving only him and Tony together on a blanket.

He’s glad when the dinner is finally broken up in favour of the usual dancing to round the evening off. As boring as it is to watch a room of nobles dance with each other, at least it means he can stand at the sidelines again instead of having to kneel at the table.

Tony looks like he’s on the verge of calling it a night, about to head over to Hallgrim to take his leave, but he’s caught mid-step by a young woman who even Loki can see from where he’s standing is being quite insistent in her request for a dance. And Tony acquiesces, heading Loki’s previous advice that turning down a lady would be very impolite.

He watches the couple as they move across the floor, Tony unfamiliar with the steps but quickly picking up on them nevertheless. The woman laughs, her long skirts flowing as he spins her around, and as they converge into their original position again, her body is pressed a little closer to his. When the dance finally comes to an end, her cheeks are flushed, and clearly not only from the physical exertion.

Tony has barely let go of her and executed a little courteous bow before he’s approached by another woman who wants her turn with the Midgardian guest. She’s voluptuous, her décolletage low-cut, and more forthcoming than the first woman judging by the way her hands are seductively gripping his arms, a lot more firmly than the light resting of fingertips expected from a female dance partner. She leans in, whispering something in Tony’s ear that makes him laugh, and she offers him her most dazzling smile in return.

There are more women in line eager to share in the fun with the handsome foreigner, each seemingly more flirtatious then the previous. Most of them are married women, Loki knows, but jealousy is not an Asgardian thing. With marriages and unions expected to last for hundreds and even thousands of years, few would deny their partners a little innocent enjoyment of the charms of another, as long as it doesn’t go any further than that. Their husbands, if they are at all noticing, are letting them have their fun, instead entertaining themselves on the dance floor with the other female guests.

Still, he can’t help but feel a little sting of that jealousy as he watches Tony and the eager women clinging to him and fluttering their eyelashes, the man smiling back at whoever happens to be in his arms, charming as ever.

And Loki finds himself imagining that smile turning onto him instead, not caring in the slightest how anyone would consider it a preposterous idea that Tony, dashing and handsome, fawned over by a
horde of the most beautiful women Asgard has to offer, should direct his attention to a slave instead. It’s strange to recall how there was once a time when the last thing he would have wished for was any such attention from Tony, and now…

“Well, if that isn’t a pretty face,” someone suddenly slurs right next to his ear, the shock of the unexpected presence having sneaked up on him causing Loki to startle, his breath catching in his throat.

And he doesn’t like the lustful undercurrents in that voice one bit.
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He looks up to find himself face to face with a leering noble leaning into him with a grin that makes it all too clear what kind of mood he’s currently in. Instinctively, Loki retreats a step to put some distance between them, and it has nothing to do with the foul, alcohol-reeking breath assaulting his nose, nausea-inducing as it is.

*Njal*, he remembers, from one of the lesser noble houses. Always one with a drinking problem, never knowing when he’s had enough. Loki can recall several instances when the man had landed himself into trouble or at least embarrassment due to his improper actions after having consumed too much beer. He’s surprised that he’s been invited here at all, given how much Hallgrim dislikes having his dinners spoiled by fighting or strife.

And Njal is clearly drunk tonight, but he nevertheless manages to quickly and smoothly move a step into Loki’s direction, off-setting Loki’s attempt to put some distance between them.

“Going somewhere?” Njal asks with another breath of stinking air. “How about staying here so we can get better acquainted with each other instead?” A hand shoots out and grabs hold of Loki’s shoulder, not hard enough to hurt, but firm enough to keep him put.

Loki curses his mortal weakness; in his current condition it’s obvious that he can’t even hold his own against a drunkard here in Asgard, his own strength negligible in comparison to Njal’s.

“I’ll have you know that my master is not fond of sharing,” he says, gritting his teeth. “It would be better if you unhanded me this instant.” He makes the threat clear but subtle; a slave isn’t supposed to threaten free men, of course, and arousing Njal’s anger is not going to work in his favour.

He glances over to the dance floor, hoping to alert Tony to his predicament. If Tony were to come over, even Njal in his drunkenness would surely think better of it and leave things be, realizing how rude and offensive he is being. Even though it is known to sometimes happen, imposing on slaves without the permission of their masters is not acceptable behaviour, especially not at finer occasions like this. Not even Njal would have done any such in a sober condition, Loki is sure, but the man was always unpredictable after a few beers too much, tending to forget all about proper decorum and manners.

But his eyes can’t seem to find Tony as they sweep across the preening nobles; Tony is lost in a sea of crimson and gold and cerulean livery and dresses and cloaks. He strains his neck, trying to catch sight of a flicker of blue and grey, but there is none to be seen.
The grip on his shoulder hardens, and the strong fingers are forcing him to take half a step closer to Njal.

“So where is your master, then?” he asks, leaning closer. “Why isn’t he here to protest if he has a problem with any of this?”

Loki tries to twist away from the fingers digging into his shoulder, but it’s useless. Again, he looks towards the dance floor, trying to catch sight of Tony, but there is no Tony to be seen.

*Where is he?*

A note of panic is starting to coil inside of him. *Tony wouldn’t leave him like this, would he?* Or did he find the graces of one of those pretty young ladies appealing enough to forget all about Loki and making sure he stayed safe?

*No, no, he couldn’t have…*

“Don’t be so shy,” Njal leers at him. “How about a kiss, huh?” he slurs, his face looming closer at an alarming speed. Loki only barely manages to turn away to avoid the pair of lips trying to lock onto his; instead, they land on his cheek, causing Njal to give a displeased groan.

“Don’t be like that,” he mutters as he shuffles and proceeds to lick a sloppy trail over the side of Loki’s face and then down across his throat, arms wrapping around Loki’s torso to hold him tighter.

Squirming, he looks towards the dancers once again, hoping that perhaps someone else will notice and step in – Njal is overstepping the boundaries by far, and even if no one here would butt as much as a toe in on his behalf, surely they would do it on Tony’s behalf, to prevent him from having his exclusive rights to his slave violated in his absence, and ensure that the respect he’s entitled to is upheld.

But no one seems to notice; the guests are all caught up into the dance that has progressively been getting more intense and wilder as the evening has progressed, fully focused on the merriment playing out to the sound of the skilful musicians entertaining for the night. He considers shouting, making some sort of noise to alert the guests to what is happening, as inappropriate as it would be for a slave to interrupt and disturb free men like that, but he knows that it wouldn’t be heard over the blaring, thumping music and the boisterousness of the dancing men and women.
Then there are a couple of hands sliding beneath his shirt to inch their way upwards, touching him in a foul caress, roaming over his skin like two poisonous snakes. “How about we go somewhere more secluded?” Njal mumbles into his ear, giving the lobe a little nibble. “This is much too public a place for my tastes.”

“No! Unhand me!” Loki yells at him, raw panic welling up inside of him. “You are not my master; you have no right to!”

But the only response he gets is a laughter muffled against his neck and two fingers roughly pinching an inch of skin under his shirt. He twists and squirms, struggling to get loose, but it’s impossible.

No, no, this can’t be happening. Where’s Tony?

“Hands off, fuckface,” there’s suddenly a voice next to him, and as Njal looks up in surprise, a fist smashes right into his face.

And the grip on him relents, causing him to stumble and fall to the floor. Blinking, he looks up at the furious man now facing Njal with brown eyes flashing with rage.

Tony.

His fist is hurting from the impact and his knuckles feel as if he’s just punched a steel wall, but he couldn’t care less right now. He’s just so fucking pissed off at this asshole and he would want nothing more than pummel him into the ground where he stands, turning him into a wet spot on the marble tiles. How fucking dare he…

“How dare you!” the weasel-like man in front of him yells, echoing Tony’s own thoughts, eyes wide with outrage as his hand goes to his jaw with what seems to be more disbelief than actual pain. There’s no blood from what Tony can see, and his puny mortal punch probably hurt his own hand more than that drunken-red face, but even so, he’d gladly throw another ten of them right into that foul-smelling mouth.

He looks at Loki, who has gotten up to his two feet. “You alright?” he asks quietly, getting a brief,
wide-eyed nod in return.

Good. Then he can get on with dealing with this fucker.

“I assure you, I’d dare a lot more than that,” he growls as he takes a step closer, full well knowing that his mouth is writing checks that his mortal strength can’t cash, but being far beyond the point of caring. “You have no fucking right to put your filthy hands all over my slave,” he half-yells, brandishing his fist in the air. “No one touches him, and that includes piss ants like you!”

He suddenly realizes that his voice is suddenly the only sound in the room as the music is no longer playing and the guests have stopped dancing and talking to stare at the unexpected happenings unfolding. Slowly, the crowd drifts closer, some looking angry, others confused or concerned, and yet others interested in what they no doubt consider to be the new entertainment for the evening.

But Tony couldn’t care less about any of them right now, as long as he can put his hands around the neck of this little weasel and squeeze slowly…

The man before him opens his mouth as if he’s about to say something, but then his attention is caught by a plump form moving through the throng, pushing the guests aside, stomach heaving under red livery and bushy hair standing on end. He breaks through the last line of bystanders and comes to stand before them with a livid look on his face, the air around him sizzling with fury.

“Njal! Man of Iron! What is the meaning of this?” Hallgrim roars, the previous good-natured Santa qualities all gone.

The weasel – Njal – sneers as he turns towards Hallgrim. “You should ask Man of Iron that. He’s the one who punched me in the face,” he says, haughty as a prissy primadonna, despite his obvious slurring from the alcohol.

“Oh yeah? I think you left out the part where you fucking molested my slave,” he shouts back, throwing a glance towards Loki, who has retreated towards the sidelines, looking at Tony with wide and terrified eyes, making little hand gestures that probably mean that he should back off.

Like hell.

“You know, I might not be very familiar with the local customs around here, but from what I
understand, you don’t mess with stuff that’s supposed to belong to honoured guests, and I would think I was full well within my rights to clock this freak right in the jaw for this!” he grinds out through gritted teeth. “Heck, Mister Touchy-Feely should be glad I didn’t ram my sword down his throat while I was at it. I would think I would have been more than entitled to!” And somehow, even if no one cares about what’s done to Loki, he actually thinks quite a few people around here would agree with him.

Njal’s eyes are narrowed in fury, and Tony is sure it’s not so much the pain of the blow – which he probably barely even felt – as the disgrace of being bitch-slapped like that.

“You think you can get away with punching me, Njal, son of Vidar?” the man hisses and makes a clumsy grab for the sword at his side, but two men close to him rush forward and stop him before any blank steel can be drawn.

“Enough!” Hallgrim bellows, face almost as red as his livery. “I will not have any boorish brawling interrupting the celebrations in my halls!”

Njal stumbles between the two men still holding him, but he quickly straightens himself up again. “Oh, there will be no boorish brawling here, I assure you, Hallgrim,” he says, and then turns towards Tony, wrenching loose an arm to point at him. “Because I challenge you, Man of Iron, in the presence of all these witnesses, to a formal duel to settle this matter, here and now,” he spits. “And let it be known that if you refuse to fight, your claims to the rights to this slave can no longer be taken seriously, if you will not stand up and defend them like a man.”

A chill passes through Tony at that, and he quickly glances around at the crowd gathered around them. No one seems to refute Njal’s words, as if that is actually the way things are done here. Which, he realizes, it probably is. If you’re not willing to fight for your rights when challenged, you’ll lose them in the eyes of other people.

The only one offering any protest is Hallgrim. “I want no killing or bloodshed here in my halls,” he barks, still fuming. “It is not why I had this feast arranged.”

“Ah,” an old man in the crowd, beard almost to his navel, waves the complaint off with a hand as he steps forward. He’s richly dressed, even in comparison to the others, and the way everyone turns respectfully silent as he speaks indicates that he’s important. “Let them fight. Clearly, both participants consider themselves wronged by the other. It would be unfair to deny them the chance to regain their lost honour through a duel.”

Several people in the crowd murmur their agreement, nodding sagely. Hallgrim seems to calm down
a little, but he still looks highly displeased at the turn of events.

“It does not have to be a fight to the death,” the geezer with the beard continues. “No, let it be a duel until first blood is drawn; that should suffice, and honour and order will have been restored.”

“Fine,” Hallgrim huffs, sounding none too happy but acquiescing nevertheless. “If they wish to fight, then let them.”

“Njal? Man of Iron? Do you agree to these terms?” the geezer turns to them, making Tony wonder who died and made him boss around here.

But damn, why the hell should he agree to fight a duel with this piece of shit? He doesn’t even have his suit, just a fucking sword at his side that he doesn’t know how to handle any better than he would a goddamn oboe.

But Njal reminds him of why a second later.

“Fine,” he spits. “Until first blood.” He leers at Tony, demeanour confident despite his drunken swaying. “And if you’re enough of a coward to refuse, I will assume that your slave is free for the taking.”

*That fucking settles it.*

“I’ll accept,” he says with as much steel and ice as he can muster, just barely aware of Loki’s sharp intake of breath and ‘*no, don’t*’ somewhere behind him.
Chapter 98

The onlookers are murmuring among themselves, but no one is protesting this sudden turn of events, which makes Tony wonder if having people fight duels after dinner is a common occurrence around here. Only Hallgrim looks outright displeased, arms crossed over his barrel-like chest and bushy eyebrows drawn together in obvious ire at having his party crashed like this.

Tony winces inwardly; from the looks of it, his host would probably have been more positively inclined towards him right now if he’d refused the invitation with the excuse that Hallgrim smells and looks like a dog, and had never shown up at all.

And not only has he managed to piss off Hallgrim – even if everything was that fucker Njal’s fault to start with – to make matters worse, now he also has a goddamn duel he has somehow agreed to fight. Maybe he should have just grabbed hold of Loki and walked out of here the moment things turned sour, but there was that thing Njal had said about how refusing to fight would mean that he didn’t take his claim on Loki seriously… And if that should somehow cause some people to consider Loki free for the taking, there’s no way he’s going to acquiesce and let others infer that they’re free to help themselves to the god in his charge.

He glares at Njal who looks infinitely pleased with himself, confident in his impending victory despite his drunkenness. Well, perhaps this will turn out to be his most stupid, ill-considered decision ever, but since when was he ever one to withstand his impulses and play it safe? At least Njal is inebriated, swaying slightly where he’s standing, and while the man is still perfectly able to form complete sentences, the alcohol has muddled his speech. His reflexes and coordination are bound to have been considerably affected as well, and even though Tony surely wouldn’t last three seconds against the guy were he sober, his current intoxication level should significantly even the playing fields.

Besides, Tony has quick reflexes and is pretty agile all around, and he’s used to engaging opponents from his Iron Man hero stint. He only needs to get a scratch in on this guy, put a gash into his skin, and victory will be his. So what if Njal has spent centuries perfecting his sword skills, in his state most of that should have gone right out the window. Tony will still be the fastest moving of the two; it shouldn’t be too hard to stay out of his opponent’s reach and get behind him in an unguarded moment to give him a slash. Or two. Or ram his sword through his ribcage, but that might not be prudent considering how the stipulation was until blood is drawn, not until someone looses a head.

He pushes down the flutter of unease in his stomach as Njal smiles crookedly, like a wolf regarding its pretty.

“Very well,” the voice of the old geezer rings out, who is for some reason now running the show. “Njal and Man of Iron have both agreed to the terms, and this duel will be fought until blood has
been shed, but no further than that. Whatever the outcome, the dispute between them shall with this be considered to have been dealt with. Each opponent will use his sword, but no other weapon is allowed.” He holds up a hand, gazing over the assembly. “And neither is anyone allowed to interfere until the duel is over.”

As if on cue, the other guests start to slowly retreat, spreading out to leave the expanse of the floor to the main act. Hallgrim lingers, but eventually draws back with a huff to join the others lining the walls. Tony swallows; somehow the whole thing doesn’t seem like such a terribly good idea anymore.

But it’s too late to back out now, and heck if he’s going to just stand back and more or less tell everyone that they’re free to molest Loki at will.

“You may draw your swords, but do not use them until the signal has been given,” the geezer says, giving each of them a brief nod.

Clenching his teeth, Tony reaches out for the hilt of the sword to his side, feeling vaguely moronic as he pulls the weapon out of its scabbard. He’s never held a pointy stick like this in his entire life, and he’s suddenly acutely aware of that fact. The grip feels off in his hand, like it’s somehow crooked, and he has no idea how to properly brandish the sword without looking like an idiot. No doubt he’s doing it all wrong and already showcasing to both the audience and his opponent that he hasn’t got the slightest idea of what he’s doing.

But he holds the sword out anyway, trying to recall how people in those swashbuckling movies would pose in similar situations. At least it’s lighter than he had expected, despite how it’s been tugging at his side all evening.

The old man leans over to him, speaking in a soft voice. “Worry not, Man of Iron, I have one of Asgard’s most skilled healers in my employment and I will be happy to lend you her services after the duel, in case you should need them.”

Wow, if that’s not the opposite of a vote of confidence, he doesn’t know what fucking is.

Tony grumbles a ‘much appreciated’ without taking his eyes off Njål who slowly draws his own sword with an annoyingly elegant arc of his arm, the move calculated and deliberate. Suddenly, the man doesn’t seem so drunk anymore, as if the familiar weight of the weapon in his hand has made the last five or so beers he’s been drinking magically evaporate. The blade looks disturbingly sharp, as does Njål’s teeth as he bares them in a vicious grin.
“Are you ready?” comes the voice from the old man, ringing hollowly in his ears.

He merely gives a rough grunt in reply, and so does Njal. At that, their self-appointed referee takes a few steps back. “Very well. You may begin.”

And with that, there’s only Tony, a weak mortal without his suit, his only defence a weapon he’s never used before, facing off with a being with superpowers who has no doubt spent centuries practicing his skills with the very same kind of weapon. Why is it that he always manages to get himself into situations like this?

His sudden moment of clarity is interrupted as Njal advances on him, sword poised for attack. Tony sees the blow coming and sidesteps it, and the blade rushes past him without taking off even a hair, but with less margin that he had been expecting.

Njal quickly turns and sweeps at Tony again, aiming for his stomach, and Tony stumbles backwards, almost tripping over his cape. Damn the thing, why didn’t he think to take it off before agreeing to participate in this madness? Fat good its billowing powers are going to do him now. But somehow, he has the feeling that it’s too late to call for a time-out to divest himself of it.

Not caring about Tony’s predicament in the slightest, Njal swings again, driving Tony further backwards, and he’s starting to realize that his own planned tactics aren’t going to work here. Even if Njal’s movements are slow and sluggish, allowing Tony to see them coming early enough to dodge, they are not nearly as slow as to allow him to simply dart behind his opponent and attack from behind.

Fuck.

And there’s of course no way he’ll be able to meet an attack full-on from Njal either. If they had been fighting without weapons, he should have been able to utilize speed and agility to win, quickly diving below the guy’s guard to clock him in the face, Njal too slow to react in a timely fashion. But the reach of his sword effectively cancels out any advantage in speed that Tony might have; he can’t get in and then out again with three feet of deadly steel added onto normal fistfight reach.

Njal, sensing Tony’s predicament, laughs. “Are you not going to attack? As amusing as it is to watch your efforts, you should realize that this is a battle and you are no longer on the dance floor.”
“Just waiting for the right moment,” Tony hisses out between gritted teeth, trying not to let the mockery get to him. An experienced swordsman like Njal has no doubt long ago noticed that Tony has no idea what he’s doing, and finds the playing around amusing, like a cat toying with a rat before it bites.

He realizes that he quickly needs to change his tactics as Njal’s sword swings past him once more, his own dodges appearing to be narrower for each time. The other man is in no hurry, though, and he’s expending far less energy for his blows and slashes than what Tony is doing in his efforts to avoid them. Even if Njal is too drunk and slow to hit him at this point, if they keep this up, Njal will eventually win when Tony is too tired to move as fast as he needs to. Or Tony will misjudge his opponent, jumping into the slash instead of away from it. He sure hopes that healer is as good as promised.

Another round of hacks and jabs, and Tony can hear a couple of people in the audience snicker, obviously at the daft display he’s putting up. However, right now he couldn’t care less about how he looks; the only thing on his mind is trying to figure out a way to get to Njal who is taking his sweet time, probably trying to draw this out as much as possible for the sheer amusement value.

Then, he sees it – Njal stumbles in his inebriety, one of his feet catching on the other, and he inelegantly struggles to regain his balance. Not even stopping to think, Tony lunges forwards, sword out and ready. Just a nick, a tiny scratch is all he needs, just one droop of blood, and victory will be his.

But, he underestimates his opponent. Still swaying, Njal’s hand darts out, perhaps on pure instinct, but the blow is brutal nevertheless; Tony only barely manages to raise his sword up to block the brunt of it. There is a harsh, dissonant clang of metal biting into metal, and then he finds himself flying through the air from the force of the impact, coming to a halt as his left shoulder smashes into a pillar standing right in the path of his ungraceful trajectory. Groaning, he slides to the floor with stars dancing before his eyes, and scrambles to scrape himself up from the marble tiles before the blade comes at him again, missing him with what can’t have been more than an inch.

He stumble backwards, panting, shoulder throbbing and heart beating in his ears like claps of thunder. Fuck, if he only had his suit right now. He’d pay a fortune for it right now.

“Your efforts are as futile as they are amateurish. A child would put forth a better performance,” Njal mocks as he smacks his lips in a condescending manner. “You don’t stand a chance.”

“Fuck you,” is all Tony gets out in reply before the sword swings out, forcing him to move. It is as if Njal’s attacks are getting more coordinated, less clumsy, or maybe it’s just him that’s getting more tired. He’s still clutching his sword, having somehow managed to hold on to it, but with his non-existent skills, it’s about as useful to him as a lollipop.
Panic threatening to well up inside of him, he fumbles in the deepest recesses of his brain for a new strategy. Dodging and evading is not going to cut it, nor are amateurish attacks. He needs to think, find something, anything, to use against Njal…

Then it hits him. It’s a long-shot to be sure, and maybe it won’t work at all, but it’s worth a try, isn’t it?

“Getting tired already? We’ve only barely gotten started,” Njal sneers at him, flicking his sword nonchalantly before launching another attack.

Tony withdraws several steps further, daring a quick look over his shoulder. The edge of the dinner table is almost at his back, halting his retreat. Not hesitating for a second, he jumps up onto the tabletop like an awkward mixture between Robin Hood and Zorro, glad the servants have already cleared the dishes away.

Njal looks displeased at Tony having suddenly gained the higher ground, and he advances slowly, but no less certainly. “That’s not going to help you,” he snorts in disdain, teeth bared in an ugly grimace.

Tony glances around, trying to find his bearings as Njal saunters over, only slightly unsteady on his feet now. Damn, how did the fucker sober up so quickly? He moves a couple of steps to the left, adjusting his position.

Njal slashes, putting a hack into the oaken table in the process, prompting a choked sound from someone in the audience, most likely Hallgrim displeased at the disregardful treatment of his furniture.

_No, not good enough. Too far off to the right._

“You call that a swing?” Tony calls out. “You couldn’t kill a fly with that!”

Annoyed, Njal aims another mighty blow at him, going for his feet, but Tony sees it coming and jumps over the blade. Njal slashes again, more clumsily this time, but only manages to hack the edge off Tony’s cloak before putting another jack into the tabletop.
Close, but still not enough. Tony shuffles a little to the side, hoping his position is accurate, but it’s hard to tell when he barely dares to let his gaze leave his opponent’s sword for even the fraction of a second.

But as Njal lifts his sword over his head to make his most unsubtle attack yet – a two-handed downwards swing no doubt intended to cleave Tony in half from head to groin – he knows he’s in exactly the right spot. Rolling to the side to avoid the blade, cursing as his bruised shoulder hits the tabletop, he gets up just in time to be greeted with exactly the sight he’d been hoping for.

Njal’s sword comes down on the very spot where Tony had been standing a moment ago with his feet planted to either side of the purple crystal ball Hallgrim had fooled him into touching during dinner. The one that he had claimed harnessed the power of the lightning.

The force of the blow splits the ball in two, the two halves neatly falling to either side. There is a sharp crackle and a bright flash as the little sparkle inside hovers in the air and an instant later expands into what looks like bluish-white barbed wire shooting up the length of Njal’s sword, coiling around the steel. And Njal howls in agony as the released force of nature envelopes him as well, his entire body spasming for several seconds before it limply falls to the floor with a dull thud where it continues to shudder sporadically.

Njal barely appears to be conscious, his face pale, and clothes and hair singed. His sword has fallen onto the floor and skidded off several yards, and he just lies there, eyes staring in mute shock at the ceiling. His chest is heaving, so apparently, he’s still alive. Not that Tony really cares.

There is utter silence in the room, only interspersed by the faint tapping of boots against marble as the occasional spasm goes through Njal’s body. Tony leisurely picks up the sword that he let go off as he executed his daring roll and jumps down from the table and casually saunters over to the prone body. The room is still enveloped in silence.

Regarding the sight for a few seconds, he extends his sword towards his fallen opponent, placing the tip of it against Njal’s cheek and slashing a line of red right across it. Blood wells forth from the wound, staining the edge of his blade.

First blood.

He raises the red-tipped sword into view of the still silent onlookers, brandishing the proof of his victory for everyone to see. No one utters a word, not even a whisper; and the mere drop of a pin would have been ear-deafening in the all-consuming stillness. It is as if time has come to a halt; there is neither movement nor sound for several long heartbeats.
Then, the silence is broken by the roaring laughter of Hallgrim, his howls of amusement rolling like thunder across the hall.
Chapter 99

Chapter Notes

Oh, and I got more fanart! :D Drawn by NessunDorma345 over at http://nessundorma345.tumblr.com/post/55778759467/fanart-for-limmets-poetic-justice; go check it out - she’s made some nifty sketches from various scenes of this story! ^^

Tony exhales a deep breath of relief as the door to their room closes behind them, blissfully shutting the rest of the world out. Not wasting a second, he walks over to the bed and sits down on it, letting the strain slowly fade from his body as he rubs his hands over his face.

As utterly abysmal as the evening had looked there for a moment, at least things did shape up towards the end of it – he won the duel, and Hallgrim was back in the same high spirits as before, his amusement making it clear that he had forgiven Tony for how his dinner party had turned sour. ‘This tale will be told by the skalds in many centuries hereafter,’ he had grinned as he had slapped Tony’s back, highly entertained by the unconventional manner of Njal’s defeat.

And right now, all he wants is to get some fucking sleep; it’s like every ounce of energy has been wrung out of him as if he were a dish rag. Clumsily, he fumbles with a strap on his jacket, wincing at the stab of pain shooting through his sore shoulder.

Then, Loki is at his side, his hand on Tony’s forearm halting his movement. “Let me help you undress,” he says, as if it was the most natural thing in the world.

Tony’s stomach squirms in unease at the offer – having Loki help dressing him was awkward and weird enough, but having him actually take his clothes off suddenly seems a thousand times worse. He looks up at the god standing beside him, about to protest, but Loki interrupts him. “Getting out of those clothes isn’t really going to be much easier than getting into them; it will go much quicker if I assist you.”

With a sigh, he acquiesces. He really doesn’t want to spend half an hour getting all this junk off before crawling into bed, and he sure as heck doesn’t want to sleep in it either. As he stands up, his sword, still at his side, clank against the edge of the bed in an unpleasant reminder of recent events.

At least Loki had assured him that he was alright as they had made their way back from Hallgrim, despite the disgusting creep that had been groping him all over. He almost regrets not slitting Njal’s throat when he had the chance. Fucking bastard…
As he’s imagining doing all sorts of painful things to Njal, Loki walks around him and comes to a halt behind his back, deft hands going up to his shoulders to unfasten his cloak. He then steps over to hang it across the single chair in the room, and Tony can’t help but stare at the ragged corner where a large piece of fabric is missing, having been slashed off by Njal’s sword.

“Good thing cell phone cameras aren’t in vogue here, because I must have looked like an idiot trying to fight that fucker,” he mutters as the god unclasps his sword belt next, making Tony feel at least ten pounds lighter.

Loki turns to look at him, his face entirely serious. “No, you did not,” he says, not batting as much as an eyelash.

Tony snorts. “No need to spare my feelings, Loki, I do have a basic sense of self-awareness. Heck, I could even hear some people snicker as I was darting around like a moron just barely avoiding getting skewered.”

Loki puts the sword away and then returns to working on the complicated straps and bindings on Tony’s jacket. “The display as such might have looked humorous to people who are used to seeing duels fought in more direct manners, but I can assure you that they were all impressed.” Then, a little softer, “We were all impressed.”

This time, Tony laughs out loud. “Impressed by what? Me stumbling and almost falling on my ass? Or me getting my cloak sliced into two? Or perhaps my glorious flight into that mighty pillar of doom?”

Loki’s fingers don’t stop working for a second, running over his back and sides with dexterous movements. “By agreeing to fight Njal in the first place. It was obvious to everyone in that room that you had never held a sword in your hands before, and yet you didn’t hesitate to take on Njal’s challenge.” There is a clatter of metal as buckles come loose and clang against each other. “It is one thing to agree to a duel when you know you stand a fair chance of winning, and another when you do not. Despite your lack of skills with a sword, I can assure you that there was not a single person who watched who did not admire your bravery.”

The jacket comes off, Loki sliding it down his shoulders and arms. “Not sure if it was as much bravery as foolhardiness and… other things,” he says, tensing up a little as Loki’s fingers take to fiddling with some straps or the other on the back of his shirt. Without the thicker fabric of the jacket between his skin and Loki’s fingertips, the soft touches are so much more noticeable, sending little tingling pulses along his spine. Luckily, whatever has been tightening the shirt up soon comes undone, making the fabric fall into loose folds over his torso.
“And should I be worried that I will have other assholes lining up to challenge me now that I’ve made it painfully obvious that I barely know which end of the sword to stick into my opponent? I thought I was supposed to be an honoured guest and wouldn’t have to deal with shit like getting challenged to duels, or have… my so-called ‘property’ molested.” he says to the ceiling instead of to the god who is now crouched down next to him, occupied with undoing the lacing running up his leg.

“You are an honoured guest,” Loki says evenly. “Njal overstepped his bounds by far with the way he behaved. If people had noticed what he was doing to me, they would have stepped in on your behalf to stop it. Honoured guests are not treated like that; it is a disgrace to all of Asgard. Njal greatly shamed himself through this, and not primarily because he lost the duel. I am sure not even he would have behaved like that if he had not been drunk.”

“But it was still okay for him to demand a duel from me? Even though he was the one who acted like an ass in the first place?”

Loki’s hands have made it up to his knee, and Tony tries to think of something else.

“Duels are something entirely different,” the god says, not taking his eyes off the lacing. “Anyone is free to challenge another if they feel they have been offended, but it’s not something that should be done lightly or over mere trifles.”

“That’s wonderful,” he says, rolling his eyes. “So if I had lost, anyone and everyone would have been free to… do stuff to you?”

“No,” Loki shakes his head, hands moving up to Tony’s thigh now. “The important part isn’t to win, but to fight in the first place, to show everyone that you are willing to stand up for yourself when your rights are called into question. Even if you’d loose, people would still respect you. By refusing to fight, many would brand you a coward, perhaps even go as far as to call you argr, and such men are not held in high esteem, and their rights, including those to their property, would not be as highly respected. But you have proven yourself, so no one will dispute your rights again.”

“Well, isn’t that a relief,” Tony mutters, glad that Loki is finished with his first leg and is now moving over to his other one. At least it seems like the undressing part is going a lot quicker than the dressing part. “Don’t you have freaking laws against this or something? You know, to prevent people from challenging you over whatever whenever they feel like it?”
“Duels of honour only concern those involved,” Loki says. “It is not a matter for the court to deal with.”

“Huh. I’m really glad I live in Midgard, then.”

Loki makes no reply to that, merely finishes up the last of the lacing on Tony’s pants, then continues to undo the straps and buckles precariously close to his groin area, causing Tony to hold his breath from sheer uneasiness. And if Loki is going to try to pull down his pants for him as well, he’s sure as heck not going to let that happen.

“Okay, I think I can manage the rest myself,” he says as the last buckle comes undone, taking a step back to pull off the shirt hanging loosely on his frame. He winces from the movement, his tender shoulder protesting as he lifts his arm.

Loki immediately notices his discomfort. “Are you wounded?” he says with wrinkled eyebrows.

“Nah, nothing bad,” he waves it off. “Just my shoulder being a bit sore from engaging in intimate knowledge with that big pillar without sufficient protection.”

He feels a little aching sting inside of him as he moves behind Tony and the man’s discoloured shoulder comes into view. Even if nothing is broken in there, it does look sore and painful.

“We should call for a healer to take a look at it,” he says, though he has the feeling that Tony will be stubborn enough to refuse.

Tony looks up, shirt still in hand. “No thanks, no magic hocus-pocus going into my body. I’ll just let things heal the normal, standard way. It’s worked perfectly fine for me during all these years.”

From the tone of his voice, it’s clear that nothing is going to convince the man to change his mind. “Then let me at least rub it in with some healing ointment,” Loki says. “There is a jar of it in the bathroom; it should help with the swelling.”

“You mean magic healing ointment?” Tony asks suspiciously.
Loki shakes his head. “No, it’s just herbs. There’s no magic involved.”

Tony looks like he’s debating with himself for several long moments before acquiescing. “Okay, fine,” he agrees, throwing the shirt over the armrest of the couch and then sitting down on the edge of the bed, right hand on his sore shoulder as he rotates the joint a few times.

Before Tony can decide to change him mind, Loki hurries off into the bathroom to get the jar of salve. Even now, he’s still agitated and tense after the disturbing events of the evening. He had been so worried; it was as if a lump of lead had settled into his stomach. Tony could really have gotten hurt, and he had shouted at him not to accept the challenge, earning him several angry and displeased looks from the spectators. However, if Tony had at all heard him, he hadn’t listened.

Even if Njal was drunk, even if it wasn’t a fight to the death, he really couldn’t see this end well. And it was obvious that Tony had never wielded a sword in his entire life when he had drawn his weapon, holding it gracelessly in an awkward grip, like a child at his first weapons training session.

He had almost not dared to look as Njal had started to hack into his opponent, fear and trepidation churning inside of him. *If anything happened to Tony…*

But Tony had proven cleverer than his adversary, outwitting him with his brain instead of utilizing brute strength. His knees had almost buckled with overwhelming relief as Njal’s sword had cleaved that crystal ball in half, and the power of the encased lightning had been let loose and led into his body. And mixed in with that relief had also been a strange swelling of pride at the way Tony had shown such remarkable astuteness and quick thinking.

Still, on the whole, it had been a truly frightening experience.

Trying not to think of what could have happened, he rummages through the cupboard, and, having found what he’d been looking for, heads back out again. Tony is still waiting on the bed, hunched over with forearms resting on his leather-clad thighs.

Gingerly, Loki climbs onto the bed, the mattress dipping beneath his weight as he crawls over to kneel behind Tony’s back. Again, he feels a little pang of something as he sees the man’s shoulder up and close; it is bruised and swollen, the skin marred by an ugly, blotchy purple. The injury doesn’t appear to be serious, but is bound to be painful nevertheless.
Not wasting any time, he unscrews the lid of the jar, recognizing the faint aroma of the familiar healing herbs that have been ground into the concoction. The salve is soothing and cool as he sticks his fingers into it and scoops up a handful.

For a couple of seconds, his hand lingers above Tony’s skin just inches away, frozen in mid-air. Then, almost in reverence, he slowly places his fingers on the shoulder of the very man who has just fought a duel with a far superior opponent on his behalf. For his sake. He swallows, and, as gently as he can manage, starts spreading the sticky substance with soft, careful motions.

Tony sits absolutely still as Loki’s fingers trace circular patterns over his shoulder, the skin covering the purple swellings hot to the touch. He can feel the contours of the hard muscles underneath, tense at first but slowly relaxing as the salve begins to take effect. There is a sharp pang of anger and disgust inside of him as he remembers the foul touches that Njal had forced upon him earlier. It had been so wrong. It should have been Tony touching him like that, Tony’s hands inching their way beneath his clothes to roam over his body…

He takes a deep breath, overcome by the sudden desire to place his palms and lean his forehead against Tony’s back, skin against skin, and just inhale the scent of the man, but he resists the temptation. The least he can do for Tony is to properly care for his shoulder before doing anything else. So instead, he continues to spread the salve over the bruised areas, his fingertips tingling at the soft touches.

Having finished, he picks up the discarded lid and screws it back onto the jar, about to put it down onto the mattress so his hands will be free to trail over Tony’s back again, but for an entirely different reason this time. But before he can get to it, the man abruptly stands up in one quick motion, making Loki drop his half-outstretched hands back into his lap.

“Thanks,” Tony says, proceeding to take off his pants and dispose of them on the floor. “Damn, I could really use some sleep right now after all this crap.”

Loki scuffles backwards as Tony grabs the cover and proceeds to crawl down beneath it and huddle up at the edge of the bed with his back turned. “Good night,” he mumbles with a yawn, sounding like he’s half asleep already.

And Loki can’t help but feel a twinge of disappointment as he sits there almost sheepishly, left to merely imagining running his hands over what’s still visible of the hard muscles beneath the cover. But if Tony is tired and wants to sleep, he’s not going to impose, of course. After today’s events, he can’t expect Tony to feel up for other activities, no matter how pleasurable they might be. And the man certainly deserves a good night’s rest.
“Good night, Tony,” he says with a resigned little sigh, removing his own clothing and then lying down on his side of the bed. “And… thank you.”

“No need to thank me,” Tony mumbles into his pillow. “I only did what was right.”

From the sounds of it, Tony is fast asleep only moments later, his breaths rising and falling in a regular, calming pattern. But Loki is still awake, his mind swirling with images from the day. Mostly of Tony.

The man had been so handsome in those Asgardian clothes, and despite his being a mortal, they had still looked like they had been custom-made with him in mind. Not that he wasn’t handsome in his usual clothing, but the new attire had just added something extra and showed off his physique in an eye-catchingly flattering way. And somehow, he had managed to look so much more lord-like than most of the actual nobles in Asgard.

And when he had fought Njal, who was far stronger and more skilled with a sword than Tony, he had seemed every bit the hero of those old sagas, striking and remarkable in every way. But it wasn’t so much about who he had fought, as who he had fought for.

And Tony had fought for him.

He falls asleep with the image of Tony in his Asgardian garb before his inner eye, and the comforting sound of the man’s soft breaths in his ears.
The next day starts out just like yesterday, with breakfast-picnic on the floor. Thor once more had some princely duties to attend to during the morning, but had promised to return later and spend the rest of the day with them.

Oh well. It’s not like he and Loki won’t be able to pass the time on their own until then. At least there are no fancy dinners with duels for dessert to attend to for today.

He cuts a slice of cheese and pops it into his mouth, chewing slowly. It’s creamy and rich and with a hint of something that he can’t quite place, and tastes quite nice overall, like most other food here.

Reaching out for a leg of chicken next, he casts a gaze over towards Loki, who has already finished eating and is now sitting with his legs crossed on the blanket with Frey’s medallion in his hands, intently studying it. His brow is creased in concentration as his fingers are trailing slowly over the runes engraved in the metal.

“So, any breakthroughs on that thing?” Tony says between mouthfuls, gesturing towards the piece of jewellery.

Loki looks up, blinking a couple of times as if he had forgotten about Tony being there, and then shrugs.

“Nothing inconclusive. The runes on this are Vanir in nature and as such only fully interpretable to Vanir magic users,” he says, shifting back a little. “While there are some superficial similarities between these runes and the ones used by Aesir sorcerers, there are more differences still.”

“So no clues, hints, or indications of any sort? It doesn’t have to spell out ‘evil mind-control’ or ‘benevolent protection for puny Midgardian’ word for word, but you know… something?”

Loki lets escape a soft sigh. “I never studied Vanir runology; partly because such knowledge would be of little use to me without access to the magic used by their kind, and partly because like sorcerers of all races, Vanir sorcerers are careful about keeping their magic a secret from others, which means that such information is not readily available, especially not in another realm like Asgard.”
“Uh-huh,” Tony says, letting the beer in his mug slosh around with a circular motion of his hand. “I guess it’s not like the Midgardian golden age of the all-knowing Internet where you can just type a few words into Google and get more information than you can shake a stick at, huh?”

“No, detailed knowledge of that kind is reserved only for the initiated,” Loki says, looking a little wistful.

“Nothing in the Royal library?” Tony asks, fully aware that he’s grasping for straws since Loki would no doubt have thought of that already if there was any hope to be had there, but whatever. “No books on… foreign rune magic, or whatever?”

“Unfortunately not. I have studied all the books in the library that deal with magic in any sort or form, and there is nothing about Vanir runology in there,” Loki informs him.

Figures.

“Then again, there are some runes here that slightly resemble some Aesir ones that are used for placing wards of protection, so perhaps that counts as a positive sign,” Loki continues, holding the medallion out between his thumb and his forefinger. “And at least none of these hold any direct similarities to the ones Aesir sorcerers would use for more nefarious purposes, for whatever it’s worth.”

“But that’s still no guarantee they won’t do Bad Things, right?” Tony says, gulping down the last dregs of beer.

“No, it’s not.”

Well, looks like they won’t get any further with this subject either way. For now, he’ll go with trusting Frey, unless he gets a reason not to. If there is any weirdness during the audience, at least it should be easy to trace it back to the culprit, being that they’re as Vanir as the medallion.

Content with that, he stretches out his limbs with a huge yawn, stomach full of food and beer. At least he can’t complain about that part of his stay here, as much as most other things utterly suck.
He sprawls on the blanket for a couple of minutes before rolling over to his side, watching Loki who has returned to studying the inscriptions on the metal. “So, what do you say, should we go for another little sight-seeing stroll as opposed to being locked up in here until the Royal prince gets back?”

Another day, another batch of fancy chambers lined up for his viewing pleasure. He’s really starting to wonder whether most of these are used for anything constructive at all, or if they’re just there to impress visiting foreign dignitaries and dazzle them with the might and power of Asgard, just in case any of them should harbour any plans of conquest.

It’s wasted on him, though. It’s not like Earth would be sending off any conquering armies to Asgard in the foreseeable future anyway.

The beer he’s spent a good part of the morning drinking is starting to make itself known, a pressing reminder that maybe he shouldn’t have gulped down that entire jug. But what’s done is done, and it’s not like he’s slurring or stumbling or anything.

“Any bathrooms in the immediate vicinity?” he asks the god at his side. “I think some of that breakfast beer has just about had it with my presence.”

Loki nods. “There’s one here just below that staircase over there.” He points at a small door, so inconspicuous that it’s just barely visible. “It’s normally only used by the servants, but if you don’t mind some simpler facilities…”

“It’s fine,” he says with a wave of his hand. “Trust me, I’ve taken a piss in places far worse.”

The bathroom – though he uses that term very loosely in this case – is indeed tiny and cramped, but whatever. He squeezes himself inside, glad not to have to trail back the long way they came to relieve himself. Though, there was always that big golden urn conveniently placed in the far corner of the room… he grins at the mental image. Whatever servant would come around to dust that thing would have been in for a surprise. He pictures it being Arnulf, and it makes his mood lift a few notches.

Buttoning up his jeans again and washing his hands under the strange water-contraption attached to the wall, he pushes the door open and squeezes himself out the way he came, about to give Loki a few useful tips about how Asgard could easily improve on their sanitation solutions by taking a leaf
out of Earth’s book.

He stops before the first word has left his lips, looking around the room in confusion. Where is Loki?

“Hey, Loki?” he inquires, hoping that the god has just traipsed off somewhere around the corner to contemplate some painting or the other, but there is no answer.

And the flicker of unease in his stomach grows into a wobbling earthquake.

“Loki?” he asks again, considerably louder this time. “Hey, this is no time to play around! Seriously, you’re freaking me out here!”

There is only silence meeting him, except for a faint echo of his own words being reflected back at him.

Fuck fuck fuck.

He spins around, trying to gauge if there’s any place the god could have gone off to, but it’s just the big room opening up before him, no obscuring pillars or crooked alleys where he might be huddling out of sight.

His heart is beating like a thunderstorm in his ears as he’s standing there like a misplaced statue, frozen and unmoving. Loki is not here. What is he supposed to do now? What happened? Did someone take Loki away? There’s no way he could have sauntered off on his own, is there?

“Loki!” he yells, the panic in his voice transforming the word into something shrill and piercing. And yet, there is no answer.

No, no, no…

He can’t believe it; it was just a short couple of minutes, it couldn’t have been longer that he was in that bathroom, and there was no one else around as he went inside. How could this have happened?
His fists are clenching and unclenching in frustration. Loki had assured him that they would both be safe as long as they didn’t break any rules around here, and especially after the little show Tony had put up yesterday, no one would question or disrespect the rights entitled to him again like Njal had done in his drunken stupor. Had that still not been enough?

Someone took him. Someone fucking kidnapped him. That’s really the only explanation.

He curses himself, hands going up to pull at his own hair. Why the fuck did he drink all that beer? If he hadn’t, Loki would probably have been safe and sound at his side instead of… wherever he is now.

A myriad of thoughts are swirling in his head, each more disturbing than the other. What are they doing to him? Is he in pain? Is he scared? Is he even alive?

No, he can’t think like that. Not yet. Maybe there’s a simpler explanation to this. Maybe… maybe there was some misunderstanding, some mix-up, maybe Loki is waiting for him back in their room…

He swallows down the panic threatening to well up inside of him, only partly succeeding. Thor. He needs to get Thor. That’s his first priority right now. Of course, he has no clue where Thor is, just that he’s minding whatever princely duties, but his servants should know where he’s at, shouldn’t they? If he tells them it’s an emergency, they would take him straight to Thor, right?

Yes, that’s his best bet. Thor will know how to handle this, or at least he can send out some sort of search party or whatever. He needs to get back to Thor’s chambers at once and get hold of some servant there and demand that they take him to their prince.

There is no one in the vicinity to ask, but he remembers at least the last few turns they made on their way here; hopefully he’ll run into someone along the way who can guide him back.

Giving the room one last long look, he takes off in a sprint, fear and dread churning inside of him.

Once he’s made it back to Thor’s chambers, after a number of wrong turns and who knows how much time wasted on the way, he immediately runs off to his and Loki’s room, not caring in the slightest about the puzzled looks the servants are throwing him as he rushes them by. And he knows
it’s futile, but he can’t help it; it’s the last tiny shard of hope left and he’s not willing to let it go until he’s made certain with his own eyes.

Having reached the familiar door, he flings it open with a sharp jerk, praying that he will be greeted by the sight of a god of mischief reclining on the couch, raising an eyebrow in Tony’s direction while asking what took him so long.

The room is empty, the dishes and leftovers from the breakfast having been cleared away, but otherwise there’s no sign of anyone having entered here.

Feeling his legs about to give out beneath him, and not just from fatigue after his sprint, he sinks down onto the bed, the last hope he had entertained of finding Loki back here crushed into bits. For a few heartbeats, he just sits there with his head in his hands, unable to do much else as a coil of despair is wrapping around his neck, feeling like its cutting off his air supply.

No Loki… Not that he had really expected there to be, but…

He has to get in contact with Thor, grab hold of the nearest servant he can find and demand that they take him to the Thunderer at once.

As he’s still gathering enough strength to stand up from the bed on his still shaky legs, there’s a soft knock on the open door, and he looks up, startled.

There is a servant standing in the doorway, hardly more than a boy. He looks hesitant as he notices Tony’s obvious distress and retreats half a step before executing a deep bow and clearing his throat.

“I’m sorry to disturb you, Man of Iron,” he says as he scrapes his foot slightly against the floor, voice cracking in that telltale way of someone having just entered puberty, “but I was sent here by Ulfgrim the dungeon master to inform you that your slave is in the dungeons for theft.”

Chapter End Notes

Well, you guys are probably going to hate me for this, but I’m going to be busy with other stuff for the next few days and have limited Internet access, so the next update will take a bit longer than usual.
“Man of Iron wishes to see his slave,” the servant boy says timidly to the two men clad to their teeth in armour who are standing outside a door that looks exactly like Tony imagines a door leading to the dungeons would.

“Very well,” the guard to the left rumbles, and with an inscrutable look at Tony reaches down to unhook a huge ring of keys hanging at his belt. If the situation hadn’t been so serious, he would have snickered at the cliché-like image.

Three keys turned in as many different keyholes as Tony impatiently taps his foot, wishing he could speed up the process somehow but suspecting that any such efforts will only have the opposite effect, so he keeps silent. He only barely notices as the servant boy quietly excuses himself and sneaks off, probably eager to leave in case Tony is about to ask him to accompany him any further.

As with most doors in this place, its hinges squeak loudly as it swings open, having obviously not been oiled in a long time. And as anxious as he is to proceed, he still takes a step back and recoils from the unpleasant smell that is filtering out from below.

*Damn, did they really have to make the whole dungeon scenario that classic?*

“Follow me,” the guard says curtly.

Taking a deep breath, Tony obeys, feeling his stomach churn as he watches the staircase stretching out before them, spiralling off into the darkness and continuing for who knows how far.

The door closes behind them with a sharp bang, and he tries not to feel apprehension at the knowledge that he’s currently locked inside some prison in an alien realm so far from home that he can’t even begin to comprehend it. The steps are slippery beneath his feet, but there is no railing to hold onto, so he walks as carefully as he can. The guard, clearly used to this route, is marching on as unperturbed as if he were taking a Sunday stroll in the park, and Tony has to make an effort to keep up with him.

They walk in silence, the dusk interspersed by torches placed into holders bolted to the walls with regular intervals. The flickering flames are casting huge, eerie shadows across the stone, giving the illusions that their descent is being followed by monsters lurking in the dark. His foot slipping on something wet, Tony’s hand goes up to the wall for support, but he immediately yanks his fingers
away as they sink into some kind of slime, and he rubs his hand against his jeans with a disgusted grimace.

The temperature is dropping as they continue to descend, the chill working its way beneath his clothes and his skin and he suppresses a shudder. He has no idea how far underground they are, and he isn’t sure he wants to know; he can already feel the weight of the rock above pressing down on him enough as it is.

The sound of their footsteps are echoing between the walls, and he tries to focus on that regular rhythm as his own swirling thoughts are pounding a much more frenzied beat inside of his head. When the servant boy had informed him that Loki had been put into the dungeons for theft, he had been flabbergasted. There was no way that Loki could have stolen anything – would have stolen anything – surely there had to be some sort of misunderstanding.

He had pressed the servant for more information, perhaps a bit harsher than he should have, but he had quickly assured Tony that he didn’t know anything more than what he had already told him – his slave had been taken to the dungeons for stealing, and the boy had been sent off to deliver the message to their Midgardian guest.

And perhaps it would have been better to send for Thor and wait for him to arrive, but he didn’t have the luxury of wasting any time. What if Loki was being fucking tortured down there or something? There’s no way he would sit in his room and fiddle his thumbs while waiting for Thor to come back and handle things. So instead, he had simply demanded to be taken to the dungeons immediately, and the young servant had acquiesced, hurrying off on quick feet as Tony followed on his heels.

The steps suddenly come to a halt before another lumbering door with several keyholes, and Tony holds his breath as the guard tinkers with his key ring, half expecting to see the prone figure of Loki lying on the floor as the door swings open. But there is only another staircase slowly spiralling further downwards, and he can do nothing but quench a sigh of exasperation as he follows the guard through the doorway and on through the darkness.

Not long after, they enter through another pair of heavy bolted doors, and Tony is starting to wonder if there is at all an end to the staircase before them, or if it just continues on for all eternity. Maybe these Asgardians are just playing him for fun and laughs, betting among themselves how long he will last before finally giving up.

He has still not made any sense of the charges of theft levelled against Loki. There must have been some sort of misunderstanding or, worse, a set-up. There is no way that Loki would have stolen anything. He has no reason to.
Then it hits him – *the medallion*. Could that be it? It is only now that he remembers that he had left the thing in Loki’s care; since the god had been busying himself trying to make sense out of the runes, it had seemed like the natural thing to do. So maybe Frey had sent some guards, telling them that Loki had stolen that necklace from him? Maybe it was all just a ruse to get Loki accused of a crime, to besmear him and paint him as an unrepentant criminal to make sure there would be no leniency for him?

But it makes little sense; Tony would of course refute the accusations with the truth and it would be his word against Frey’s. Furthermore, how would Frey even know that Tony had entrusted the thing to Loki instead of keeping it in his own pocket?

“Exactly what is it that Lo— my slave is supposed to have stolen?” he finally asks, his words ringing hollowly in the stone chambers.

“Dunno,” the guard grumbles, three steps ahead of Tony. “I only stand guard; it’s not my job to keep track of the misdeeds of whoever gets sent to the dungeons.”

*Friendly guy.*

“Are we there yet?” he asks instead, unnerved by the silence.

“Soon,” comes the clipped answer.

*Whatever that means.* He resigns himself as the guard opens another heavy door, expecting another staircase to stretch out before him.

But this time, there are no more stairs, but instead a blissfully flat corridor ahead of him.

He feels a swirl of dread as he follows the burly man in front of him, trying not to think too much about what might have happened to Loki. They wouldn’t hurt someone without a trial, would they? They still do consider Loki his property, so that should stop them from doing anything bad to him, right?

He tries to comfort himself with that thought, but his mouth is as dry as sawdust and his nails are digging into his palms as he follows the guard into the corridor.
He hugs his drawn-up legs tighter to his chest, trying to preserve what little warmth he still has left, but it does little to stop the shivers racking his body. The moist and dripping walls seem to be drawing every ounce of heat out of the cell, leaving it dank and dreary and drafty. He had never thought he would find himself back here again, in the very place where he awaited his trial all that time ago, but the dungeons are every bit as unpleasant as he remembers them.

And so are the guards.

“Never expected that we would get to see your pretty face in here again,” a burly, brutish man leers at him through the bars, obviously finding great enjoyment in the situation. His fingers are gripping the steel, and Loki is glad the man is still on the outside, not having deigned to open the door yet to torment him in a more physical way, like how they used to do during his previous stint here.

He merely looks away, not bothering to offer any answer to that. Provoking the guards will only make things worse, and he has been on the receiving end of their wrath more times than he cares to remember during his last time here.

“So the Silvertongue is quiet,” the man drawls, leaning against the bars as he takes in the sight of the prisoner. “Perhaps your Midgardian master has truly managed to tame that sharp tongue of yours, then.” He grins. “Wish I could have been there to watch it myself as he taught you your place.”

He ignores the taunt, shifting in a futile attempt to make the shackles clamped tightly around his already raw wrists and ankles chafe a little less. They are heavy, even more so than he remembers them, and the chains just barely long enough for him to be able to stand up. The metal clangs ominously as he moves, the sound harsh in his ears.

It had been a stroke of bad luck and unfortunate circumstances landing him in here. As Tony had gone off to relieve himself, Loki had pulled out Frey’s medallion, still in his pocket, for further inspection, hoping he might be able to connect some of the foreign runes to a hitherto overlooked piece of magic-related knowledge.

He had been so focused on the inscriptions that he hadn’t paid any attention to the clang of a door opening behind him, thinking it was merely Tony coming back out, when there was suddenly an unfamiliar presence behind him and a hard grip on his shoulder and a harsh voice growling in his ear, ‘what is that necklace in your hand, slave’?
And he had looked up find himself face to face with one of the palace guards staring him down, catching him in just the wrong moment. What were the chances of that, really? But perhaps he shouldn’t have been so surprised. The guards always had an eerie knack for doing just that; even when he was a child, they would often show up at the most inappropriate times, catching him right in whatever mischief he was up to.

Some things never did change.

‘I said, what is that necklace doing in your hand?’ the man had growled at him again, giving him a rough shake. It was obvious what he was assuming – Loki had stolen it.

And of course, he could have protested that, provided the obvious answer – it belongs to my master, I’m merely keeping it for him – but the guard would surely have wanted to verify that with Tony. And there would have been some uncomfortable questions arising – why would a Midgardian be in possession of this kind of magical object clearly not of a Midgardian nature?

Tony might be quick enough to make something up, or he might not. If the man had found himself in a similar situation on Midgard, Loki doesn’t doubt that he would have managed to talk his way out of it with a well-spun lie, but being in an unfamiliar realm with unknown customs, he could easily trip up and make it obvious he was being untruthful. In the worst case, Tony might even implicate himself as a thief.

Besides, the ever-cold metal of the necklace was a tell-tale sign that the object was magical in nature, something the guard would be sure to recognize, and Tony would have a very hard time making up a believable lie how he would have come across such an item. Sure, there was always the age-old ‘I just found it lying here on the floor and merely picked it up’, but magical artefacts were never handled with such carelessness; the lie would be far too thinly veiled to be believed by a jaded guard who had no doubt already heard all possible excuses and evasions from wrong-doers in his line of work.

And of course, the truth was no good either; if it would be furthered investigated into, the whole deal with Frey and Njord might come into light, and things could spiral very quickly downhill from there. Besides, the medallion might not even belong to Frey personally, but to his family, and he had merely ‘borrowed’ it for the occasion, which wouldn’t exactly simplify matters.

No, better then to have the guard believe that he really did steal the necklace; in that case it would be up to Tony, his master, to deal an appropriate punishment. Which, of course, would not even have to be carried out.
So he had not protested as the guard had resolutely dragged him off to the dungeons; sure, he had told him that his master was in the privy beneath the staircase and suggested that they wait for him, but the guard had only told him to shut up. Clearly, he thought that it was only fair that Tony would have to suffer the inconvenience of having to pick up his slave in the dungeons, seeing as how he, as the master, was to some extent to blame for Loki’s actions.

And as unpleasant as it is down here, at least he knows that someone will make sure that word is sent about his predicament, and Tony will come for him.

Yes, Tony will be here for him soon. He lets that thought comfort him, and he is only half-aware that one of his hands has slid over to his opposite wrist, his fingers trailing the thin band of metal circling it – the tracker bracelet that Tony had placed on him before taking him outside for the first time. In what feels like another lifetime, now, it used to be an automatic gesture he’d taken to, to remind himself that there was at least the promise of outside, there was still something good in his life he could look forward to. Not all was bleak and lost, despite his situation. It used to be what carried him through the day, the prospect of getting to go outside again.

And even though it’s been a while since he’s relied on that promise to make it through another day without being overcome by hopelessness and apathy, he realizes that the bracelet still serves as a reminder, even down here. Not of the blue sky or of lush trees or of the wind against his skin, but of Tony. Of the man himself.

Perhaps he ought to view the band of metal as merely another layer in the objective of keeping him constrained and confined, but he can’t really bring himself to, because the ultimate reason why Tony had made it in the first place had not been as a means to keep track of him and ensure he didn’t escape, but to alleviate the distress he had been suffering from while being locked up, thinking he would never be allowed outside again. In the end, Tony had done that purely for his benefit, the man himself had stood nothing to gain from the arrangement.

And he knows that Tony will be here soon, he will come for him. He will not leave him here.

So as the guard outside the bars is throwing another jab his way, annoyed by his prisoner’s lack of reaction, he lets the taunt fade into the distance, along with the chill and the painful chafing of his chains and the stench of rot and the throbbing of his bruises. He doesn’t even feel the cold hardness of the rock against his head as he leans back against the wall, closing his eyes. Even the distressing memories from his last stay here that are gathering on the edges of his consciousness, trying to inch their way inside, are kept at bay as he lets his fingers close around the thin metal.

Yes, Tony will be here for him.
Chapter 102

The corridor is more or less like the stairwell, just without the stairs. The moist walls are made of the same grey stones, and so is the floor, and the torches still intersperse the darkness at regular intervals.

He swallows down a wave of disgust at the stench of rotten straw and other things reaching his nostrils, much stronger down here. The chill is more pronounced as well; he can see the guard sweeping his coat a little tighter around him, and he finds himself missing the cloak he had worn at Hallgrim’s dinner just yesterday.

Damn, Loki must be freezing down here in his thin clothes…

He suppresses a shiver as he eyes the doors suddenly coming into view on either side of him. They are heavy and bolted and solid expect for a small window with bars covering the opening. He has no idea if there are people behind those doors or if the cells are empty, and frankly, he finds that it is best not to know. At least there is silence, for which he is suddenly grateful; he’s not sure he could have taken any moaning and pleading and cursing from the unlucky souls trapped in here.

A few steps further ahead of them, an obviously bored guard is leaning against the wall; he barely even looks up to acknowledge them from where he’s busying himself picking his nails with a knife. Apparently, working in a dungeon environment does nothing to improve one’s social competence or politeness.

“Arne, go find Ulfgrim. Our newest guest has a visitor,” the first guard says, and the guy apparently named Arne scampers off with a huff, clearly not pleased with having his important pastime interrupted like this.

They stand around waiting in a silence broken only by the soft hiss of burning torches, Tony struggling to get a hold of his nervousness. After what feels like a small eternity, there are footsteps approaching, two sets of them. Apparently, Arne has found his man and brought him back as ordered.

Tony suppresses a grimace as the new man comes into view; he’s built like a brick house and his face looks like he got hit with one, and more than once to boot. He’s dressed entirely in differently coloured leathers that have been roughly sewn together, making out a patchwork kind of garb fit for someone in the starring role of some bad horror flick containing either the word ‘butcher’ or ‘massacre’.
“Man of Iron,” he greets, making a small incline of his head, but forgoing the polite bow Tony’s seen from most other people around here. “I am Ulfgrimm, the dungeon master. What a shame you should have to mar your stay in our realm with a visit down here.”

“Yeah, I’m not too fond of it myself, but here I am,” Tony says in a forced display of casualness to hide his discomfort about the man before him who could probably strangle a pig with those ham-like hands of his. And he’s just about to put fourth a no-nonsense demand to see Loki this instant, but Ulfgrimm pre-empts him with a wave of his huge hand.

“Come on, then. Your slave is in a cell not far from here.”

Not having to be told twice, he follows Ulfgrimm, trepidation stirring inside of him. He has to get Loki out of here, he can’t leave him in a shitty place like this.

They turn a corner, and find themselves in a larger room, a number of dingy cells to the right-hand side without the bolted steel doors of the previous cells, but with bars instead, providing full insight to what lies within.

And in the first one, there is a well-known figure huddled up against the wall, chin resting on his drawn-up knees and arms wrapped around himself in what seems to be a futile effort to preserve body heat. There are chains around his ankles and wrists, and even from where Tony is standing in the duskiness he can see that they are too tight for comfort. There is no furniture in the cell, not even a bench to lie down on; the only thing protecting from the cold stone floor is a paltry amount of dirty straw raked together into the corner that Loki is sitting in.

Ulfgrimm bangs a fist against the bars, making them clang and rattle in an awful cacophony of sound. “Hey, slave, your master is here for you,” he roars, as if Loki isn’t sitting just a couple of yards away.

The figure on the ground startles and looks up, green eyes meeting with Tony’s.

And Tony wants to say something right there, run up to the bars and reassure Loki that he’s going to get him out, but the careful, pointed look on Loki’s face is telling him that he needs to play this right, he can’t show any concern or things might spiral further downwards. So he remains where he is, quiet and unmoving.
“So,” Ulfgrimm says, turning towards Tony again. “It would seem that your slave has committed theft.” He digs around in his pocket, pulling out a very familiar object dangling from a leather string. The medallion looks tiny in Ulfgrimm’s giant fist, like a child’s toy.

“Does this item – apparently of a magical nature – belong to your possession?” he says, obvious doubt shining through in every word.

Tony dares a quick look at Loki; surely the best option here would be to say ‘yes’ and absolve Loki of any suspicions, regardless of what uncomfortable questions might follow. But the god gives a tiny, almost imperceptible shake of his head, his eyes never leaving Tony’s.

He hesitates, unsure, but Loki repeats the minute movement and he realizes that there’s really no other option than to trust him in this. After all, he has very little clue about how anything works here, so he’d better follow whatever advice he can get.

“No,” he says, hoping he didn’t misinterpret Loki, but the god seems to relax slightly at this answer.

“I thought so,” Ulfgrimm says with a knowing nod, as if he hadn’t even considered there might have been another answer. “That clarifies the guilt question, and we have a motive too. Of course a former sorcerer divested of his powers would want to get his hands on a magical item like this in lieu of the powers he no longer has access to. Now, Man of Iron, do you know who this object belongs to?”

Another quick glance at Loki, taking in the faint bobbing of his head.

“Yeah,” he says, trying to sound confident. At least it’s not a lie, providing that Frey didn’t steal the damn thing in turn. “I do.”

“Good.” Ulfgrimm says, to Tony’s surprise holding the medallion out to him for taking. “Then I trust you will settle this with the owner of this item and have your slave punished appropriately.” His eyes drift over to where Loki is still huddling in the corner of his cell, and Tony follows his gaze.

And Loki curls up further in his corner at the mention of punishment, giving a soft whimper that makes Ulfgrimm laugh. “Yeah, you’ll get yours alight, you little traitor,” he snorts gleefully, his ugly face crinkling up with an even uglier smile. “Your master will no doubt take really good care of you after this.”
Tony clenches his jaws as bile rises in his throat, but he realizes exactly what is required of him here – just play along. Play the part of the angry master as to not arouse any of Ulfgrimm’s suspicions so they can get the hell out of here.

“Be quiet,” he forces himself to say in what he hopes is a properly incensed tone of voice. “You’ll have plenty of reasons to snivel later once I’m done with you.”

He can see the huddled form of Loki giving a shiver, and he likes to think that it’s the god suppressing a bout of laughter at the stupid little scene they’re acting out, but it makes him uncomfortable nevertheless.

Licking his lips in uneasiness, he watches as Ulfgrimm opens the door with one of the keys hanging at his belt and then enters the cell to bend down over Loki and undo the locks around his wrists and ankles as well. Loki feebly rubs his hands over his freed wrists, but otherwise doesn’t move.

Ulfgrimm turns to Tony, who is still standing outside, unsure of whether he should remain where he is or enter the cell as well. “If you should want to, you’re free to have him punished here. It might be less… messy for you. We have all the necessary implements you could possibly ask for,” he says, sounding hopeful.

_Bastard._

“Thanks for the offer, but I’d rather handle this in private,” Tony replies, having to bite his cheek as to not add a very creative insult involving pigs after that.

Ulfgrimm merely shrugs. “As you wish,” he says, a note of disappointment in his voice, but he makes no further insistences.

Loki is still cowering in the corner, having not stood up despite the chains lying on the floor next to him. Maybe he, Tony, is expected to do something here.

Sensing what it is, he walks into the cell and positions himself resolutely before Loki. “Get up,” he says with as much command as he can muster, reaching down to grab hold of Loki’s arm. “Or you’re going to make things even worse for yourself.”

At that, Loki looks up, a perfect mask of terror plastered on his face as he tries to dig himself further
into the wall behind him. “No, I’m sorry,” he whimpers, “please, Master, don’t…”

“Shut up,” he says, pulling Loki up to his feet, hating the display before him but glad to have a firm grip of the god. It makes him feel marginally better, holding him securely like that.

A quick glance towards the pleased face of Ulfgrimm is enough to tell him that the show is convincing enough, and he feels himself relax a few notches.

“Well, then. I will leave him into your no doubt capable hands,” the man says with a dismissive nod, then turning to the guard still lounging nearby who has watched everything play out with a clear look of boredom on his face. “Hadar, escort Man of Iron back, will you.”

The man offers no answer, merely turns on his heel and Tony follows quickly, still clutching Loki’s arm tight in pretence of dragging his fearful slave along to be punished, determined not to let go of the god before they have made it safely out of here.

Loki lets himself be pulled along as they make it up the winding stairs, even though he lets slip the occasional whimper and soft pleading that he’s sorry, so sorry. And damn, even if Tony knows it’s just an act they have to keep up, it makes him feel almost nauseous. How often do similar scenes play out here in Asgard, with defenceless slaves cowering in fear before whatever punishment their masters are about to met out? He prefers not to think about it at all, instead muttering another muffled ‘shut up’.

The guard doesn’t turn around even once as they’re making their way back, but Tony keeps the god close at his side anyway, never letting go off his arm. At least Loki looks largely unhurt, though he can see a number of bruises on his arm and marks from where the heavy shackles have already chafed red lines against his wrists. His skin is cold and clammy against Tony’s and he looks a couple of shades paler than usual, though it’s hard to tell in the dusky light of the torches.

So that’s what the dungeons of Asgard are like. And, he realizes, what Loki had saved him from the other day. There’s a little sting of something inside of him at that, and even though he’s still not convinced it was worth it, he can’t say that he doesn’t appreciate the thought nonetheless.

When they reach the final door to the outside, it feels like an eternity before the guard has gotten his three keys into their respective locks and turned them, and Tony nearly groans in relief as the door slides open and the painfully bright light of the room outside assaults his eyes.
The guard doesn’t say a word as the door closes behind them, merely resumes his place next to his remaining colleague, and Tony is glad for it. Speeding his steps up slightly, afraid that someone will call at them to stop at the last minute, he pulls an ostensibly reluctant Loki with him, the god limping half a step behind with his head bowed as if in dread of the fate awaiting him.

And Tony doesn’t care where they are going, as long as they get away from here and out of sight of the guards and they can put this deplorable charade to rest. He makes for the nearest door and flings it open, half-pushing, half-showing the god through the doorway. Loki makes a final pitiful whimper, and then the door closes blissfully behind them.

All strain going out of him with the fore of a steam hammer, Tony’s legs give way beneath him and he slides down to the floor, back against the wall and hands going to his head as he lets slip one of the biggest sighs ever. *Fuck, that must have taken at least a year off his life.*

“You… alright?” he hears Loki’s voice above him, devoid of the scared and pathetic note it held only a moment ago, having returned to its usual timbre.

And he can’t help it, he just *laughs.*

“You’re asking me, Loki?” he manages between shuddering paroxysms. “You just got locked up into a fucking shithole with a bunch of asshole guards, and you’re asking me if *I’m* okay?”

Loki makes a little shrug. “It wasn’t my first stint in the dungeons. I’ll live. It’s not like I’m badly hurt or anything. It’s just a few bruises from rough handling, nothing worse.”

At that, Tony stops laughing, taking in the sight of the pale god and the purple marks on his arms visible beneath his sleeves. Eyes narrowing, he gestures angrily at them.

“Why did they do that shit to you when they didn’t even know if you were guilty or not?” he asks, feeling hot anger well up inside of him to replace the heady waves of relief.

Loki’s shoulders bob upwards in another shrug. “It doesn’t matter. The guards down there are free to run things as they like, within certain limits.”

*Urgh.* He doesn’t even want to know.
“So what happened?” he asks, hand going to his pocket to fish out the medallion, twirling the ill-fated thing between his fingers. “A guard found you with this when I was busy with nature’s call and assumed you had stolen it?”

“Yes,” Loki nods. “I had taken it out to study the runes again, and was surprised by a guard. My timing could not have been worse.”

“Why didn’t you just say it belonged to me? It would have saved us both a lot of trouble.”

“Or gotten us into further trouble. The guard would surely have wanted to know from where you had gotten this kind of magical object, and there would be questions you might not be able to answer without either implicating yourself or revealing the truth, one way or the other. And if Frey was telling the truth about the amulet and his father… that could have unfortunate repercussions, if Njord’s alleged plans came to light.”

And even though Tony doesn’t really believe it – because it doesn’t make any sense – he still has to ask. “You think Frey set this up in any way? To hand us his bling and then accuse you of having stolen it to smash your chances of getting a parole by having you end up in court for another crime?”

Loki is only quite for a heartbeat before he shakes his head. “No. No one is going to care about a slave stealing some necklace other than his master and the person that it was stolen from; it is entirely a matter to be settled between them. Free men would have been taken to court for it, but a slave only so if the victim of that theft couldn’t agree with the master on a sufficient punishment. Besides, there would be no way for Frey to know I was the one carrying it and not you, would there?”

Yeah, his line of thought exactly.

“So…” he says, feeling he has to ask. “Could you really have done anything with a magical object like Mr Scary down there claimed, even if you have no magic powers of your own?”

Loki looks wistful for a few seconds, but then sighs, looking away. “I wish. Ulfgrimm knows nothing about magic. Such artefacts are of no more use for a sorcerer divested of his powers than for someone who never had any magic in the first place, regardless of what some might think.”

And Tony doesn’t really know what to say after all this crap, nor is he sure he could handle another scarce like this. But one thing’s certain – he can’t fucking wait to get back home to Earth again.
And damn, he can’t believe that Loki is standing there looking so unperturbed after what just happened, even if he had known from the very start that he’d be let off with having Tony ‘punish’ him for his ‘crime’, while he is sitting here leaning against the wall for support, all sweaty and shaky.

He clutches at the stones behind him to prop himself up, making a feeble attempt at standing but not really succeeding, and lets himself fall back again. “Weren’t you worried at all while waiting down there?” he asks instead, the nastiness of the dungeons still lingering in his mind.

Not missing a beat, Loki reaches out a hand to Tony to pull him to his feet, shaking his head.

“No,” he says. “I knew you’d come for me.”
Chapter 103

Before Thor’s return, they manage to dig out a long-sleeved shirt from the closet for Loki to wear as to hide the bruises on his arms and prevent his brother from asking whatever awkward and uncomfortable questions might follow. Luckily, the Thunderer accepts the vague responses to his inquiries about what they’ve been doing all day, then insists that all three of them take a relaxing stroll together in the Royal Park.

And Tony can’t disagree with that suggestion, realizing that he hasn’t set his foot outside the Halls since coming here. Well, not that it would be unusual for him to spend days at a time inside his workshop without venturing out into the world of the living, but a breath of fresh air after the stifling confines of the dungeons is welcome nevertheless.

As expected, the Royal Park is as fancy as the rest of Asgard. Tony can’t help but wonder if there’s a small army of gardeners marching out here every day in the early morning hours to meticulously sweep the flagstones of the meandering pathways immaculately clean, since there’s not as much as a single piece of stray grit littering them. The edges of the almost fake-looking green lawns are similarly perfect, as if someone has trimmed them with a ruler and a pair of nail scissors. And then there are of course the endless rows of impossibly tall trees, the carefully pruned bushes, and the overflowing and resplendent flower beds, though upon closer inspection Tony suspects that most of the greenery doesn’t have any exact Earth equivalents.

Even out here, there are statues lining the pathways, stern warrior figures in full battle regalia watching the visitors pass them by from up high on their marble podiums. He smirks a little at the mental image of himself sneaking out here in the middle of the night to dress up one of the serious-looking statues in his Black Sabbath t-shirt. But he’s not sure what the punishment around here is for defiling a war hero, so he quickly pushes the thought away.

Thor talks almost endlessly as he guides them through the area, perhaps in an attempt to make up for his previous absence, and Tony soon finds himself surprised at how much war and battle history a freaking park that should be soothing and tranquil can actually hold.

Beyond the whitewashed walls surrounding the area, Tony can make out several buildings rising in the distance, no doubt all architectural wonders far beyond anything that his own planet has to offer. He squints against the sun as he’s trying to discern the top of the impossibly tall twisted spire rising up into the heavens above, realizing with a sting of dismay just how laughably two-dimensional his own tower would look in comparison.

As they continue on, there’s the soft rippling sound of water to their left and Tony turns his head, expecting a fountain with the usual water nymphs that would be traipsing around in the middle of normal fountains back home. But it’s two ugly dudes instead, fighting it out knee-deep in the clear
water, one wielding a huge sword above his head, and the other a battle axe.

*Of course, he should have expected that.*

Then, the tranquillity is suddenly interrupted by a sudden flurry of pitch black feathers, a cawing, and a flapping of majestic wings.

And a second later, the biggest and ugliest raven that Tony has ever seen descends from the skies above to land upon Thor’s shoulder, cawing and croaking as its sharp claws scratch against the armour. Folding its impossibly wide wings together, it perches itself calmly upon the shining plates, apparently considering Thor’s shoulder to be its personal throne.

Then follows another loud, self-important caw, as if the huge raven is calling its loyal subjects to attention.

“Uh, Thunderboy,” Tony says hesitantly. “You’ve got something on your shoulder.”

Thor lifts a hand to pat the hideous beast on the head, and the raven accepts his ministrations with a cocking of its neck and the emitting of another one of those hideous caws.

“Ah, yes, this is Muninn,” Thor says as he strokes an affectionate fingertip along the vicious beak, apparently not overtly concerned about the importance of keeping a full set of digits.

“You mean the thing has a name?” Tony asks with a grimace, only slightly surprised.

Loki snorts somewhere to his left and Tony gets the feeling he isn’t overtly fond of the creature either. “He’s one of Odin’s little spies,” the dark-haired god says in explanation, remaining at a wary distance. “He used to sneak around me whenever I was practicing magic in my younger years, and then report my doings back to the Allfather.”

Thor gets that pained look on his face again that he so often gets when he’s dealing with his younger brother. “Please, that was a long time ago. Our father only wanted what was best for you, as you were trying to master spells you shouldn’t even have--”
Sensing another ancient family spat brewing, Tony quickly steps in to avert it. “Daddy’s little pet, huh?” He takes a step closer, peering inquisitively at the black bird. “So what’s wrong with a cute canary bird or a parrot?”

The beast cocks his head at this, turning a beady black eye on Tony and regarding him with suspicion. Tony grins, pointing at the pitch black creature. “Hey, I know a great pet shop just two blocks from where I live, I could get your dad a--”

The raven snaps at his outstretched finger, beak closing a mere inch away.

“Ouch!” He snags his hand away, protectively curling his fingers against his chest. “I don’t think he likes me.”

“Don’t feel singled out,” Loki says, a mirthless grin tugging at the corners of his lips, “Muninn doesn’t like anyone.”

“My apologies,” Thor booms, placing a protective hand in front of the raven’s beak to prevent any further incidents, “but Muninn has a short temper and isn’t very fond of mortals. Still, he’s friendlier than Huginn, his brother, who is--”

“Whoa there, Hercules, you mean there are actually two of those things?” Tony interrupts him. “You know, now I think I’m starting to understand why you guys are wearing those weird helmets all the time, if you have these things flying around your heads.”

Just to be on the safe side, he glances up into the sky to make sure there aren’t any impending aerial attacks from over-sized magpies looming at the horizon, but all seems clear for now.

“Huginn and Muninn are my father’s messengers both. They carry news to him from all across the Realms,” the Thunderer says as he affectionately pats the feathered head, and the raven acquiesces and leans in to the touch, looking oddly like a cat being petted, purring in delight.

Well, cat or raven, Tony sure as hell isn’t going anywhere near that beak again.

“Bet he’d still like to pick my eyes out at the first opportunity,” he mutters, not trusting the heap of feathers one bit. “So he usually comes to sit on your shoulder to cuddle?”
Thor lifts his steel blue gaze from the bird and turns it onto Tony. “The Allfather sends for you,” he says simply. “That’s why Muninn is here.”

And Tony’s stomach makes a little back flip at that. Yeah, that’s right; there was that one little audience with an alien space-god that he was supposed to have. With all that’s happened since his coming here, that part had almost sort of faded into the background what with his having had enough on his hands to make sure that Loki stayed safe and out of trouble. And despite having spent a good part of the night following Thor’s declaration of their departure to Fantasyland trying to figure out what to say and how to best present his case, suddenly it seems like everything has flown right out of head, leaving it pitifully empty.

He can sense rather than see Loki tensing up next to him, as if the reality of the situation and the reason for them being here in the first place is suddenly catching up to him too.

“Oh, you mean, like now?”

Thor nods, “Yes, now, Man of Iron.”

At that, the beast on his shoulder flaps his wings twice and then takes off with another ominous caw, leaving two tar black feathers fluttering in the air as they slowly float towards the ground.

“Oh, okay then,” Tony says, looking down at his jeans and T-shirt. “I sure hope sufficient time to get changed is included, at least?”

“Oh, of course,” Thor nods. “We will make our way back at once so that you can dress appropriately before you present yourself before the court.”

“Splendid. Though, is a normal suit-and-tie get-up going to fly here? Or does Odin almighty expect me to wear one of those funny helmets and a fancy, billowing curtain to fit in with the crowd? Wouldn’t want to offend anyone important by appearing in simple Midgardian garbs here or anything.” His ramblings are only half-intentional; the other half brought to him courtesy of his fluttering stomach and rapidly beating heart. Not so much out of nervousness about standing before one of the most powerful beings in the universe – in his line of work he’s already faced off with plenty of people considering themselves worthy of that title – but because the outcome of this might very well determine Loki’s entire future.
And really, he doesn’t want his own screw-ups and short-comings resulting in someone having to spend the rest of their lives in slavery. Particularly not when that someone is Loki. He can deal with sabotaging shit for himself, he’s done that more times than he can count already, but when Loki’s entire future is hanging in the balance… well, that’s a different matter entirely.

“Your own Midgardian outfit will be fully acceptable. You do not have to wear Asgardian garb like you did yesterday,” comes the answer.

Well, small graces, he supposes.

Then Thor speaks up with the regal, booming voice he favours whenever he’s saying something important. Or anything at all, really. “Remember to show proper respect and courtesy at all times. The Allfather is not someone to be trifled with, and neither are the other members of the court.”

“Yeah, I kinda figured that one out by myself, but thanks for the tip.”

The pointed look Thor gives him speaks volumes, as does the hand that suddenly grabs hold of his upper arm in an insistent, almost pleading gesture. “I realize that you might not approve of how… certain things are done here. But please, keep in mind that a foreign visitor criticizing the ways of the Aesir before those who seek to uphold those very ways will not be appreciated.”

For a second, the thunder god’s eyes drift towards his brother, worry and concern marring his features.

Then Thor averts his gaze to the ground as his hand falls to his side. When he speaks again, his voice is softer, almost at a normal decibel level.

“And it won’t do Loki any good either.”
Chapter 104

Okay, so he really is having an audience with an alien space god. The single thought keeps running on repeat through his head as he trails after Thor’s sweeping, red cape, Loki walking another step behind.

An alien space god who is Stalin and Genghis Khan and Snake Plissken all in one.

After what feels like an eternity of wandering through long corridors and gilded halls, Thor finally comes to a halt before a pair of massive oaken doors, ensorcelled with long, meandering bands of silver runes. Tony almost crashes into him face first, not prepared for the sudden stop.

There are two guards with crossed spears standing in front of the doors, as unmoving and still as the statues they’ve passed during their walk. But as Thor approaches, they smartly retract their spears in one smooth, synchronized motion, allowing him entrance.

“The way to the throne room,” Thor informs him curtly, a hand raised to the gate to push it open. Before he does, though, he turns around to look at Tony, jaws tight and with lines of concern written into his face.

“Please act respectful and courteous. This is the king of Asgard, the Allfather, and he should be approached accordingly.” The warning in Thor’s voice is clear as the sky on a blazing summer’s day and Tony grimaces. Yeah, he gets it already.

“Don’t worry, I’ll be on my best behaviour,” he waves the Thunderer’s concerns away, flashing him what he hopes is a comforting grin.

Thor only nods once in confirmation, and then, with a mighty shove, pushes the creaking doors open and steps inside, Tony and Loki tight on his heels.

The gates open up into another corridor that branches off into several directions. Thor leads them down the first one to the right, and soon they’re standing in front of a second set of looming doors, even more ominous-looking than the first.

And Tony can feel something squirm inside his stomach, like a frightened animal desperately scratching and clawing to get out.
“Loki will have to stay here,” Thor says. “I will follow you inside, and then I will take my leave and wait here with Loki until you are finished. I am not allowed to stay during the audience, only the Allfather and his Council are to be present.”

At Tony’s displeased look, he quickly continues. “But do not worry. No one else is allowed beyond the gates we just passed for the duration of the audience, so Loki is safe here.”

“Fine,” Tony says, knowing it’s pointless to argue. Besides, it’s not like he’s fond of the idea of having Loki in there among the very people who sentenced him to spend a life-time in slavery anyway.

“Are you ready?” Thor says, a note of nervous strain in his voice, so unlike the mighty Thunderer.

“I guess,” Tony says, throwing one long look at Loki. The god is pale and his face taut, jaws clenched tight, looking like he hasn’t slept in days.

And Tony thinks he should say something appropriate before going inside to face whatever is coming, but no bold or fancy statements come to him, so instead, he merely reaches out and squeezes Loki’s arm, hoping to convey some amount of reassurance, no matter how tiny. Perhaps instil whatever confidence and certainty in the god that Tony wishes he himself would be feeling right now.

“Hey, I’m sure it will work out fine,” he manages as Loki meets his gaze, the god’s eyes wide with worry and concern.

And most of all, he wants to stroke his hand down that face, or, better yet, take the god into his arms to comfort him, but instead, he settles for merely patting the tense arm. “Well then, see you in a bit, Bambi.”

There is the faintest hint of a smile on Loki’s face at that, and that is probably all Tony can ask for right now.

With a sigh, he turns to Thor who nods and pushes the majestic doors open, and they step inside.
The hall opening up before them is spacious with a ceiling disappearing somewhere far above Tony’s head, but not all that different from the other halls he’s seen so far. Perhaps the ornamentations are a bit more elegant and maybe the gold inlays slightly shinier, but the major difference is the dais at the far end of the room, holding a large, impressive throne fit for a god. Two massive spears are crossed behind the backrest, and even from where Tony is standing he can see how the edges of the blades sticking out to either side glint menacingly in the light. Too few pointy ends to be the Iron Throne, but still a great Management by Fear tactic.

There is a figure perched on that throne, and though he can’t make out any details from this distance, there is no doubt who that is. *Yup, the one and only Allfather himself.*

There are two rows of grandiose chairs lining the space right before the throne to each side, six to the right and seven to the left, each one occupied by what must be a member of the Council. They are conversing mutedly among themselves, but the sound of their hushed voices dies off as Tony and Thor approach, their footsteps echoing between the walls.

And he can feel all eyes turning onto him as they’re making their way towards the dais, and even though being at the centre of attention normally comes to him as natural as breathing, he still feels a strange nervousness at being in the spotlight that he hasn’t felt in many years, if ever.

As they walk, Tony tries to take in as much information about the situation and the surroundings as possible. First and foremost in his line of vision is the tall, commanding figure – Odin himself – perched upon the lumbering throne, his bearings royal and haughty. Radiating from him is a powerful and dangerous aura reminding Tony of a lion waiting to strike more than anything else.

Furtively, he glances to the sides and the assembled Council members, wondering which one of these guys is Njord. The medallion hanging around his neck is cold against his skin, its chill penetrating even through the shirt, and he suppresses a shiver.

From the extravagant way they’re dressed, it’s clear that they’re all nobles, and as stuck-up as they come. Stiff postures and blank faces, they regard him without even a hint of emotion as he approaches. His gaze sweeps over the expressionless masks poised above the ram-rod backs, wondering if they’re planning on remaining like that during the entire audience or actually act as if they’re living beings.

Out of the corner of his eye he notices that one of the figures is sitting a note more relaxed than the rest, not quite as statuesque with the way he’s leaning back slightly in his seat with legs spread a little wider than what seems to be the accepted standard among the assembly. Not much by any stretch of the imagination, but still enough to stand out in this crowd and give off a faint air of nonchalance.
He gives the figure a closer look and then his eyes go wide for a split second as he recognizes the face.

_Frey._

The man offers him a tiny knowing smile as their eyes meet, winking discreetly. Tony ignores it, looking away, more out of surprise than anything else.

_So Frey is here._ He should have been prepared for that. But seeing him here makes a disturbing thought rise inside of him, and he can’t believe that he’s never considered it before – was Frey one of those who had a hand in sentencing Loki to slavery? Did he actually _approve_ of this? And does he still think that it’s a proper sentence that shouldn’t be changed in the first place?

The medallion against his chest suddenly feels several degrees colder, and he’s not at all certain whether he made the right decision to wear it, but he’s not sure if he can back out of it now, or if he even _should._

Before he can consider this any further, Thor comes to a halt before the steps leading up to the dais and respectfully falls to one knee, his right arm crossed over his chest in salute.

Tony isn’t really the kneeling type, but the old adage about Rome and Romans seems quite apt in this situation, so he adapts a similar pose, swearing he can see the some of the tenseness ease off from Thor’s taut shoulders at the dull thud of Tony’s knee making contact with the marble floor.

“Allfather,” Thor acknowledges, voice respectful and solemn. “I have brought Man of Iron here to speak before you and your Council.”

“Thor. Man of Iron,” Odin acknowledges, his voice less thunderous than that of his son, but certainly no less commanding. “Rise.”

They obey, Tony with a heady sense of relief that he won’t have to remain in such an uncomfortable position until the audience is over, because his knees might have had something to say about that.

“Wait outside, my son,” Odin intones, and Tony winces inwardly; from now on, he’ll be on his own with no ally to smooth over any social blunders that might unintentionally or intentionally slip from his mouth. He can’t help but glance upward in unease – the blades of those spears _do_ look pretty
freaking sharp.

“As you wish, Allfather,” Thor acquiesces, turning away but stopping for the tiniest fraction of a second as he walks past Tony, the silent plea in his eyes impossible to misinterpret. *Please don’t step out of line, for Loki’s sake.*

As the thunder god walks back out, Odin’s hands grab the imposing armrests as he raises himself up from the throne, standing to his full, impressive height. Like everyone else of importance in this realm, he’s wearing a long fluttering cloak, dark grey as the rest of his outfit. His long beard and hair are grey as well, though a few shades lighter. Despite the lines on his face marking him as an old man, there are no signs of the god’s age in his bearings. Instead, his movements are characterized by strength and power, and Tony finds himself wondering whether even Thor would be a match for this guy in a fair fight, be it with or without weapons.

There are vambraces covering his wrists and lower arms, adorned with sets of runes in symmetric patterns, but something about the markings makes Tony suspect they are not only there for decoration. Perhaps they’re imbued with some sort of magic that affords the wearer protection against enemy weapons. If so, he’d really like a pair himself.

The single eye staring down at him is as steely as those of the god’s oldest son, although there is more grey than blue in it. And the eye keeps staring as if it is looking straight through Tony, rummaging through all his inner secrets and memories and thoughts, turning each and everyone over for consideration and evaluation. And Tony isn’t sure he wants to know the final verdict.

“Well then,” Odin finally says, raising a hand as if for calling for silence, despite how no one but him out of all those assembled in the throne room is speaking a word. “We are all gathered. Let the Council’s hearing on the sentence of Loki Laufeyson begin.”
“So, Man of Iron,” the powerful voice booms from the dais. “You have brought grievances.”

_Grievances_. Yeah, he supposes that’s one way to put it.

And then he realizes he has no idea what the correct address is for a god of Odin’s calibre when you’re a puny mortal. Your majesty? Your godliness? Your epicness? Darn, he should have checked that with Thor before coming here. Well, probably Thor _did_ inform him at some point, but he was too distracted to pay attention. So he settles for ‘Allfather’; it’s what Thor used moments ago, so it can’t be all wrong.

“Well, Allfather,” Tony says, hoping his voice is sufficiently polite and respectful. Crawling before authority was never his style, but he’s well aware that this is neither the time nor the place for token obstinacy. “I am not… satisfied with Loki’s sentence. So I am here to ask that it be changed, or at least given a time limit.”

He can hear some of the Council members shift along the sidelines, but he pays them no heed. They have already faded into the background as far as he’s concerned; convincing this guy in front of him is his number one priority since he’s the one running the show around here.

Odin regards him without much of an expression of anything showing in his bearded, eye-patched face. “After all Loki did to your world, you would still stand here before us to plead his case?” he asks, almost impassively.

Valid question, Tony supposes. “Yes, I do,” he replies, trying to make his voice come off as strong and decisive as possible.

“Why is that?” comes the next question, clipped and curt.

Tony draws a deep breath. “Well, I don’t consider a life-time of slavery to be a fair sentence regardless of the crime, and it’s not how I believe that justice should be dispensed. It’s simply too harsh a punishment.”
He realizes that he’s probably stepping on thin ice already, tripping on the edge of criticizing Asgard’s justice system – the most integral part of which clearly consists of the god in front of him – but it is hard to make his case while acting as if he’s okay with slavery, which is something he doesn’t want to pretend regardless.

“You are free to speak your opinions to the court, whatever they may be,” Odin intones from his dais. “However, you are far from the only victim of Loki’s crimes. Hence, my question is – would the rest of your fellow Midgardians agree with your claim that the sentence is unjust? Are you speaking for the majority of your kind, as opposed to merely offering the court your own personal convictions?”

Tony suddenly remembers the truth geas that is supposedly preventing him from lying, but he is certain that even if there might be a select few weirdos out there who would disagree, most people back on Earth would definitely not be okay with a slavery kind of punishment, so answering in the affirmative should not be a problem.

He’s about to open his mouth to offer a resolute ‘yes’, but he startles as he can suddenly feel a strange sort of foreign, commanding force closing in on him, pushing against and tugging at him at the same time. It wants his lips to form a ‘no’ instead of the intended ‘yes’, and he finds himself suddenly unable get a word out, his body frozen in place.

What the…?

The medallion, his brain screams at him. The medallion is doing this to you, you fell for it, you fell for that prettyboy’s lies, it was a mind-controlling device after all, how could you have been so gullible? You of all people?

As his mind is wrestling with the strange foreign power, trying to tear loose from its hold with all its might, he forces himself to look towards Frey, his eyes apparently the only part of him currently able to move.

The god is still doing the borderline casual lounge among his more straight-backed peers as he regards Tony with a thoughtful expression, thumb and index finger slowly trailing across his bearded chin. He can discern the hint of a smile half-hidden behind the man’s hand, and more than anything Tony wants to drive his fist into that face and that fake smile and---

But then he’s not so sure of why anymore, and he remembers that he has a question to answer. And the answer is ‘no’, isn’t it? Because surely his fellow humans would believe that Loki’s sentence is just and consider it the perfect punishment; what Tony is speaking here is merely his own opinions
that only a select few back home would agree with, right?

*Yes, that’s right. It seems* right, at least. So curiously, peculiarly *right.*

He is just about to give in to that lulling voice whispering in his head, when all of a sudden it is as if another foreign presence slips beneath the first. It spreads to form a protective shield around him that pushes that initial and insistent force away, holding it off at an arm’s length distance.

And Tony snaps out of his momentary stupefaction, the veils clouding his mind falling away like curtains pulled aside at the theatre. He can still sense the alien force outside the edges of his consciousness as it claws at him in frustration, trying to regain its previous hold, but it’s not longer affecting him as the newcomer is holding its ground, refusing its opponent access.

*Holy fuck.*

So that’s what it’s like getting doused with a spray of fairy magic.

He’s suddenly aware that the medallion is burning ice cold against his chest, as if its imbued powers are rushing out all at once to fight, and his hand automatically goes up to claw at the metal, but in the last second he manages to pass the movement off as him merely scratching at an itch.

*Damn, if he hadn’t been wearing the thing…* he tries not to think about it; the outcome is too disturbing.

His gaze meets with Frey’s and the god’s perpetual smile widens minutely as he watches Tony with his head languidly cocked and an eyebrow raised in mild interest. Tony can’t for the life of him tell if Frey is at all aware of what has just played out, but he wouldn’t be surprised, judging by that smug and self-satisfied look the god is sporting.

Tearing his gaze away, he tries to get a hold of himself and get his panicked breathing back to normal, as the strange force field still struggles futilely at a distance away, but no longer having any effect on him.

“*I repeat,*” Odin’s voice drones above him. “Do you speak for the majority of Midgardians when you say that Loki’s sentence is unjust?”
“Yes,” Tony manages, voice not as steady as he would have liked, but at least it’s the correct word leaving his mouth.

To his left, he can see one of the Council members tense up and open his mouth in surprise at Tony’s affirmative statement, his hands going up to clench the armrests of his chair.

So that’s the fucker Njord.

Bastard.

“I see,” is all the comment Odin offers to that.

A silence follows, during which Tony has to endure another scrutinising stare from that steel grey eye. Odin crosses his arms in front of his chest, thick muscles bulging, and Tony finds himself whimsically wishing that he will be even half as fit when he’s that guy’s age, or whatever the equivalent would be in human years.

“Loki tried to enslave humanity, so he has been made a slave in turn,” Odin eventually says. “Why is it that you do not find this just?”

Tony draws a deep breath, having passably grounded himself again after the recent scarce, though he’s seriously hoping there won’t be any similar attacks again, protective medallion or not.

“Well, you see,” he says, voice finally back to normal, “back home we have a rather different view of what counts as justice, and slavery does not factor into that. We’ve pretty much abandoned the whole ‘an eye for an eye’ when it comes to punishing criminals. While I admit the concept has probably been a guiding light through a lot of the history of humankind, it’s not our way of doing things anymore. We kinda prefer the reformatory stance nowadays.”

He hopes that Odin won’t take offence at the eye metaphor, but political correctness towards people with disabilities is probably an unknown concept here in Asgard anyway.

“I mean, sure it’s fair to have Loki punished,” he continues, “but I – and no doubt most of humanity would agree – still think it’s way too harsh to have someone spend the rest of their life in slavery,
regardless of their crime. I think there are other and better ways to handle this.”

Slowly, Odin descends from the dais, walking down the stairs until he comes to stand on equal ground with Tony, who resists the urge to take a step back. The god offers a brusque *hmph* to acknowledge Tony’s probably unsatisfactory explanation before speaking again.

“While what goes on in Midgard is of little concern to us Aesir, we do wish for Asgard to be on good terms with the other realms, including that of the humans. And since you were wronged by one of us, we have given you appropriate restitution by offering Loki as a slave to your kind – or more specifically, to you, Man of Iron, and to those who will come after you – to do with as you see fit. Is this recompense not satisfying to you?”

“Yeah, well, the problem is that slavery is not a popular concept in Midgard anymore,” Tony counters, not sure if anything of what he’s saying is really getting through to Odin. So finally, he just launches into a long and detailed exposé, trying to explain the concept of human rights and the long history that has brought about Earth’s modern opinions on slavery.

The Allfather listens without interrupting or commenting, though he makes no show of understanding or sympathizing, and Tony figures it’s probably no different than trying to explain the joys of capitalism to Karl Marx. He really has a mind to say a lot more than he does, but he knows it’s not advisable so he keeps his comments as neutral and non-judgemental as he can manage. Those left-wing cultural relativists would have been proud.

“It would seem, then, that humans have changed since I last walked among you,” Odin says slowly when Tony has finished talking what feels like an hour later. “When I last set foot on Midgard, slavery was a concept still alive and well.”

“I’m sure.” He runs a hand through his hair, searching for words that might sway this powerful being with a set of morals that would make most people back home cringe. “It used to be how we did things too. And perhaps a life-time slavery sentence would be considered appropriate here in Asgard. But Loki will live hundreds, if not thousands, of years yet. Someday, all the victims of his actions in New York will be dead, and there will be no one around clamouring for his punishment anymore. But Loki will still be suffering for what he did to people who are no longer even alive.”

He makes a pause, sighing, “I suppose what I’m trying to say is that humans have short lives and short memories, so we really have no time for being rancorous. No one will be happier because Loki is serving time as a slave a thousand or even a hundred years from now. At some point, there will have to be forgiveness along the way. There is no point in holding onto grievances forever.”
Odin has retreated a few steps towards the dais during Tony’s long speech, his face half-hidden in dark, dancing shadows but the single grey eye burning as brightly as before. “I hope you are aware, that in Asgard most would call such sentiment weakness,” the Allfather intones, voice harsh and cold as a winter’s snow storm.

“You know, you’re probably right,” Tony says. “We humans are weak. We are not like you Aesir; we hurt and die easily. And perhaps our society and values reflect that. But it’s what we humans are like, it’s what our society and values look like, and a lifetime of slavery just… doesn’t fit into how we do things.”

And wow, he never knew he would turn out be such an excellent speaker on the subject of human rights. Perhaps the UN should hire him to do speeches in third world dictatorships once he gets tired of his Iron Man shtick.

“And then what would you, as a Midgardian, consider a fit punishment for crimes of this magnitude?”

Okay, he has to tread carefully here. After having seen what the dungeons are like in Asgard, he sure as heck doesn’t want to risk sending Loki back there and exchanging his lifetime of slavery for a few centuries or millennia in that stinking place. “Well, I think finding some way for Loki to make reparations for the damage he’s caused would be a lot more conducive than just damning him to a life of being someone’s slave. It doesn’t benefit anyone, really.” He draws a deep breath. “And if you guys don’t want to release him from his slavery sentence just yet, I’ll accept keeping him under my… supervision on Midgard, but once I’ve thrown in the towel – in maybe fifty years or so, if I don’t screw things up – I kinda think that Loki has served his time, especially if he’s been able to make some sort of reparations one way or the other. We can work on that latter part. But merely enslaving him or locking him up isn’t going to change anything for the better, neither for Loki nor for Midgard.”

Odin turns his back without comment, cape billowing as he walks the few steps back up to the lumbering throne where he seats himself again, royal and regal as ever, and Tony gets the feeling his audience is coming to an end. The Allfather watches him in silence, the shadows hiding his face deepening until Tony isn’t sure whether there’s really a face up there or only a mask staring down at him. Finally, as the silence has grown uncomfortable, the god speaks again.

“Very well, Man of Iron. You have spoken your piece. Is there anyone in the Council that wishes to ask something further?”

There is only silence following that, and Tony can’t help but wonder if the Council members are just puppets there for show, or if his speech has simply stunned them all into silence. Furtively, he lets his gaze travel over the assembly; the faces are still as hard and emotionless as before, revealing nothing. Well, with the exception of Frey who is still sporting that patented sly half-smirk of his.
“Well, then,” Odin finally says as he turns his attention back to Tony again. “The Council will gather in the days ahead to discuss amongst ourselves whether there will be any changes in the sentence of Loki Laufeyson. We will take what you have said today into consideration and inform you once a decision has been reached.”

Tony feels like groaning in frustration. Still no clear decision either way, which means that they have no choice but to resign themselves to another wait.

But at least it’s something. He’d been worried that Odin would flat out refuse any form of reconsideration on the spot, throwing Tony out on his ass before he’d finished even his opening sentence.

He’s about to utter some pompous Shakespearian equivalent of ‘thank you for your time’, but before he can open his mouth, Odin speaks again.

“The court will take a five-minute break. Then we will hear Loki Laufeyson.”

Chapter End Notes

If any Berserk fans recognised the part in Tony’s speech about “you’re right, we humans are weak, and we die easily,” as having been snatched from the first volume of the manga where Guts makes his little speech before killing that snake-guy Apostle – well, you get an endless supply of Internet cookies. ^^
“Man of Iron?” Tony hears a semi-familiar voice behind him as he’s making his way towards the exit, relived to leave the throne room behind.

He stops and turns, finding himself face to face with Frey, the man having detached himself from his peers who are still sitting on their chairs at the other end of the room, conversing with each other in muffled voices.

“I take it the amulet worked like it was supposed to?” Frey says with a little toss of his head meant to sweep some long locks of disruptive blond hair out of his face.

Right. There was that little thing too; he’d almost forgotten about it in all the excitement, but it’s still resting against his chest, its touch every bit as chilly as before.

“Uh, yeah – it did,” he says, reaching up to dig around at his neck for the leather string. Having made sure that he’s hidden from view by a large pillar, in case the others in the room should look their way, he pulls the necklace over his head and hands it over to Frey. He can’t help but feel a bit sheepish as he does so. “Though, I have to admit that at first I kinda thought that--”

“That it was the amulet trying to take control of you?” the god interrupts as he flashes a smile of perfect white. “Ah, I should have warned you about that. Magic such as this takes a moment to respond; the effects are not instantaneous.” He takes the medallion from Tony’s grip and nonchalantly tosses it up and down a couple of times. “And besides, I suppose the amulet is getting old and the magic is kind of fading, but not so much that it won’t easily outmatch my father’s lacklustre powers,” he grins.

“Well, thanks a lot,” Tony says. “I really appreciate it. I don’t really want to think about how all this would have gone otherwise.” No, he really doesn’t.

Frey shrugs. “Like I said, Loki saved my life once, I’m merely repaying that debt. No thanks are necessary.” He sticks the medallion into his pocket and then gives Tony another dazzling show of teeth. “Well, then. I wish you a safe return back to Midgard, Man of Iron, and enjoy the rest of your stay here in the meantime.”

And with that, Frey walks off with a confident swag, whistling softly to himself, leaving Tony with a million questions burning on his tongue.
So how did I do? What did everyone think? What did you think? How big are the chances of Loki’s sentence being changed?

But he knows that he will have no choice but to wait for those answers.

Sitting around waiting has never been Tony’s forte. His fingers are idly fiddling and tapping, dearly missing the little Rubik’s cube he always kept around for times like this. In his mind, he pictures Fjalar’s grubby hands twisting the thing back and forth in endless frustration and wonders whether the guy will ever manage to solve the puzzle. Probably when pigs fly.

For what time in a row he doesn’t know, his thoughts wander back to what transpired in the throne room. He really has no idea of judging how well any of that went or how much that actually got through. But he’s said what he came here to say, and without resorting to any blatant insults or disrespectful comments, so there’s not really much else he could have done.

He’s still hardly any wiser than when he came here regarding what the outlooks for Loki getting some lenience are. But at least Odin didn’t flat out refuse his appeal, and Tony is sure that the god cares little about diplomacy when it comes to a mere mortal – had he decided then and there to turn Tony’s request down, he would have said so without pretending they would first discuss things among themselves.

At least, that’s what he hopes.

Again, he casts a glance at the pair of massive oaken doors at the other side of the corridor. Loki is behind them, talking to Odin and his Council about who knows what. A part of him would have liked to stay, another is glad he wasn’t allowed to.

Right now, he’s alone waiting. Thor had been pacing the corridor nervously at first, which he had most likely been doing while Tony was in there too, but had eventually concluded that he needed a minute to get some fresh air. And to be honest, Tony thinks Thor looked like he could seriously use it, given the unhealthy greyish pallor on his face, so very uncharacteristic of the thunder god.

He shifts, restlessly. None of the chairs he’s sat on in Asgard have been very comfortable, and this one is no exception. Aesir asses must be made out of a lot sterner stuff than those of mere mortals. He finds himself sorely missing his soft and comfy couch back home. And seriously, he can’t wait to
sit down on it again, not least because it means he will be back *home* again.

Before he can reminisce any further on the joys of his living room furniture, the oaken doors creak open with a harsh, ear-splitting sound from protesting hinges that clearly haven’t been oiled in centuries. And a moment later, the familiar figure that is the god of mischief steps out.

Without speaking a word, Loki makes his way over to where Tony is lounging and sits down on the chair next to his, leaning his head against the top of the backrest as he expels a soft sigh, staring out into open space like Tony isn’t even there. For a long time, he doesn’t say anything at all, like his conscious self has wandered off and gotten lost somewhere in the deep dark woods of his own thoughts.

Tony observes him for a little while and then whisks his hand in an up-and-down motion before the god’s eyes. “Hello? Someone still in there?”

Slightly startled, Loki turns towards Tony, almost as if he’s surprised to see him there.

“So what did you guys talk about in there? I suppose you and Odin didn’t reminisce about joint Christmas dinners or family vacations or anything, did you?” Tony asks as Loki has yet to say anything.

For a long time, Loki doesn’t offer an answer, and the silence stretches on until Tony is sure that he isn’t going to get a reply. Then, the god finally speaks.

“Odin wanted to know if I have learnt anything from my punishment.”

“Well, have you?”

Another silence.

As he waits, Tony tugs at a loose seam sticking out from the embroidered armrest. The cloth rips. *Oops.*

“I have,” Loki says, then, still with that distant look on his face.
“You mean anything apart from what kind of food pizza is and what sort of movies they show on the Playboy channel?” Tony asks, overcome by the sudden need to lighten the gravity of the situation a few notches.

Loki gives the ghost of a smile at the comment, then he turns serious again.

“I know it won’t change anything,” comes the soft reply. “But I do realize I was wrong trying to subjugate Midgard and its people.” He makes a pause, and when he speaks again, his voice is sounding as if it’s coming from a thousand miles away.

“I was jealous of Thor, because he was always excelling in everything and living up to the expected standards whereas I was not. As the years went on, I grew bitter and resentful, thinking it was all his fault. And I wanted some way to prove myself so I wouldn’t have to live in his shadow anymore, to show that I could be just as good as him, even outdo him.” He sighs, looking down on the floor, fingers intertwined. “I should have found some other way to do that. One that didn’t involve innocent people getting hurt and killed.”

There is another silence following that, and as it becomes clear that Loki won’t say anything more, Tony speaks up. “You know what?” he says, placing a hand on Loki’s shoulder. “You’re not the first person to try to take over the world, nor the first one to fail in those endeavours, but I’m quite sure you’re the first would-be world conqueror to express any regret over it, so that’s gotta count for something.”

They sit in silence for a while longer before Tony suggests that they should make their way back; Thor can catch up with them later.

As they walk, Loki is as quiet and taciturn as he was when they first came here to Asgard, even if the quality of that silence seems different now. But Tony decides not to prod further. Knowing that Loki has indeed come to regret his actions is enough for him, whatever it was that provided him with those insights.

And if there was ever any doubt of it, it’s obvious that it won’t be the same god returning to his tower that was sent to him all those long months ago.

He can’t help but marvel at how he’s already grown accustomed to having the comforting presence
that is Tony lying next to him, despite it only being the third night they’re sharing the same bed. But the regular sound of his breathing feels so natural, like it’s always been there.

Earlier in the evening, Thor had told them that they are going back to Midgard tomorrow, and Loki is very much looking forward to returning. It’s such a sharp contrast to the last time he was about to be sent over there; at the time, he had only felt fear and trepidation of what lay ahead, but now he’s feeling a heady sense of relief.

For a little while, he watches the figure who is fast asleep under the covers next to him and then scoots over the distance separating them to nuzzle up at his back. The man’s skin is warm against his, and as he admires the body pressed close against his he can’t help but run a hand over the arm and the chest, letting his fingers trail softly and carefully as to not awaken Tony. After a few minutes of this, his hand finds its way downwards and ghosts over the man’s crotch, already half-hard from the faint touches.

Reluctantly, he pulls his hand away, realizing that he will probably wake the man if he continues, and Tony surely needs his sleep after the long, strenuous day he’s been through, topped off with his audience with the Allfather. And to be honest, after the hearing before Odin and the Council, he’s not really that much in the mood for such activities himself.

At that, his thoughts drift back to earlier in the day and how he had been speaking before Odin, though this time it was all so very different from the last time, when he received his sentence. Because this time he faced the Allfather with the knowledge that he was indeed guilty of the crimes he had stood accused for. The time for excuses and denial was over. In the end, the choice to invade and conquer Midgard had been his, and no one else’s, and the blame was his to bear.

And so, he had offered no justifications for his crimes, no questioning of the unlawfulness of his actions, nor any denial of his guilt.

‘I realize I was wrong. My actions were wrong. I regret them and the suffering they have caused.’ Those were the words he had spoken as he was kneeling before the throne of Odin, whereas last time, it had been a firestorm of ugly curses and vicious insults.

Odin had said nothing, then, not for a long time. Merely watched him in silence, his single eye glowing out of the shadows enshrouding the royal throne.

‘It would seem that you have indeed learnt something during your time in Midgard, then, have you not,’ Odin finally concluded. It was not quite a question, but Loki nodded all the same. Yes, he had indeed learnt things. Most importantly, how one of those mortals that he had tried to enslave had
found the capacity to show him compassion and kindness after all he had done to him and his planet.

But Odin didn’t ask further, instead letting things lie at that as the single eye bored into him, perhaps reading all his secrets without Loki having to speak a word of them. What the Allfather was thinking, then, Loki had no idea. Odin gave none of it away. He rarely did.

Perhaps there will be no clemency for him. In the end, perhaps he will still have to spend the rest of his life without his magic and his powers, in servitude and bondage to the humans.

If so, no matter how much the prospect makes his throat constrict, he can’t say it would be undeserved.
For the first time since their arrival, Thor is actually having breakfast with them instead of being forced to tend to the many duties that comes with bearing the title of Asgard’s crown prince. However, Loki can quickly tell that his appetite is not quite up to par and that there is something bothering him. Thor is not usually as subdued and solemn as this, and his responses to Tony’s never-ending chatter are tense and curt.

Loki quickly dismisses the most obvious explanation – that it’s the hearing and what may or may not come out of it that’s weighing heavily on his mind, because when they had talked about it yesterday evening, Thor had not seemed nearly as glum. Yes, he had been serious and at times even solemn, but he had still tried to maintain his optimism, stubbornly clinging to the hope that the outcome would be favourable and at least provide Loki with some form of leniency.

But the tautness in the limbs as Thor reaches for his mug of beer had not been there yesterday, and neither had the deep lines on his forehead nor the shadowed look in his eyes. Those are all new additions as of today, having been brought by something else.

However, Thor gives nothing away of what is troubling him as they devour their lavish breakfast, but Loki takes note of the furtive glances thrown into his direction as if Thor is searching for answers of one sort or the other, though Loki is not even sure what the questions are.

“You seem tense, Thor,” he finally says, once those long looks get to be too much for him. “Is something bothering you?”

Thor pauses, hand halting in mid-air, still clutching a half-eaten slice of bread. He is silent for a few heartbeats before he drops the bread onto his plate, and reaches out for more beer instead. “We will speak of it later,” he merely says in response, then proceeds to drink deeply from the mug tightly clutched into his hand.

Loki raises an eyebrow at that. So there is something eating away at Thor, then; it was not merely a figment of his imagination.
But Thor seems reluctant to speak further on the subject, despite Tony’s unsubtle prodding that the Thunderer can say whatever he wants to around him, because he won’t tell a living soul a thing, so cross his heart. The man’s insistencies have no effects, though, as Thor stubbornly keeps his silence.

It is only when their breakfast is finished and done with that Thor once more turns towards Tony, who is sprawling in his chair, both hands resting on his full stomach, and looking like he’d rather roll than walk away from the table.

“If you don’t mind, Man of Iron, I would like some words with my brother in private,” he says in a voice that makes it clear that despite the polite wording, it is an order that he expects to be obeyed without objections.

Tony is quiet for a few seconds as his gaze flickers between the two of them, and then he laboriously heaves himself up from the chair and onto his own two feet. “Brother-to-brother talk, huh? Sure, no probs. I’ll just excuse myself and go brush my teeth, then. With a toothbrush.” He crumples the napkin in his hand into a tight ball and disposes of it on his plate as he makes to leave. “Actually, that’s one thing I think you guys should consider adopting. It’s a totally neat invention, and does wonders for your dental hygiene.”

Thor meets the suggestion without a comment, despite his usual eagerness to discuss Midgardian customs and inventions. Finally sensing that Thor is not in the mood, Tony offers a ‘fine, see you guys later, then,’ and heads out the door, leaving the two of them alone.

At that, Thor turns towards Loki, the creases on his brow deepening as he looks him over, gaze oddly prying and inquiring. Loki on his hand merely waits, not sure what it is that Thor wants to speak about. It doesn’t seem like it’s going to be anything pleasant.

“I have heard rumours,” Thor eventually says, letting the words hang in the air as if he’s waiting for Loki to snatch them up.

So he does.

“Well, the servants always talk,” he replies with a shrug, leaning back into his chair as he crosses his arms. “What is it about this time?”

Thor’s jaws are moving as if they’re trying to grind a piece of rock into dust before he finally opens
his mouth to answer. “It concerns the nature of the… relation between you and Man of Iron,” he says, the beer mug in his hand deforming a little beneath the pressure exerted on it. “About him… exercising the full rights of a master in regards to his slave.”

And a part of Loki had sensed this might be coming, but he’s still glad he doesn’t have any food or drink in his mouth, or he would probably have spat it right out at hearing this from Thor’s lips.

Of course, it would make sense that such rumours would eventually reach even the ears of the Thunderer himself, but Loki hadn’t expected it to happen so soon. After all, even the servants with the loosest tongues would be too cautious to let slip any such within earshot of the royal prince. And after so many centuries of living in the Royal Halls, Loki is well aware that most of what would be simmering and bubbling among the servants are not things spoken of openly, even if such talk has a propensity to eventually trickle up the ranks.

But somehow, this has now made its unfortunate way even to Thor’s ears, and on the face before him Loki can now see scepticism and the conviction that it’s just an ugly rumour mingle with the unavoidable fear that it might still be true.

“Is there any substance behind this talk?” Thor demands at Loki’s stunned silence, more hotly this time, his fist having let go of the now ruined mug but still clenching tightly as if it is imagining gripping the hilt of Mjölnir itself.

And of course, he should immediately assure Thor that no, there is no truth whatsoever in those rumours, Tony has never done any of the sort to him, nor would he in a million years. But still, there is something inside of him that wants… confirmation. Because this is his brother who claims to love him above all else, who once made a solemn promise, still remembered, to always protect him back when they were little boys and a very proud Thor had just received his first wooden training sword. Maybe he should not push it, maybe he should leave well alone – but he still wants to know.

“And what would you do if these rumours were true, Thor?” he says evenly, holding his breath as he dreads the answer, watching the shift in the well-known face of the man before him.

No, maybe he shouldn’t have asked such a question, because both of them know that Thor has no rights no interfere, not even a prince of Asgard would have any say in what a master does to his slave.

Thor’s voice is like the sharp blade of a sword on a crisp winter’s night. “I’d make him stop, somehow,” he says without even a moment of hesitation. He lifts his fist still clasping the imaginary Mjölnir. “Even if it meant--”
“Despite him merely doing what would be fully within his rights, as granted to him by Asgardian law?” Loki pushes on, unable to stop himself.

“Yes. I would.” Thor looks positively miserable now, as he leans forward, grabbing hold of Loki’s arm, pulling him closer. “Tell me, is this appalling rumour true? Has Man of Iron forced you to…?”

And he needs no further confirmation. Thor has said it all. All he ever needs to know. And the feeling welling up inside of him at those words is the same as that one time so many centuries ago that Thor had brandished that silly but treasured wooden stick of his, assuring Loki that if any of those frost giants ever breeched the gates of Asgard and tried to take his little brother away and eat him, Thor would chase them all off with his mighty sword.

“No, it’s not,” he hastens to reassure Thor, putting emphasis on every word. “Tony has done nothing of the sort, and he never would.”

And Thor slumps back in his seat, the relief spreading across his face flattening those creases of worry out, as he expels a heavy breath of air, his eyes closing for a few seconds.

“You actually believed those mean-spirited rumours, Thor?” he says, eyeing the Thunderer’s boneless form in front of him.

Thor slowly opens his eyes again to look him into the face. Then, he shakes his head. “No, I did not. But I had to make sure regardless when I encountered them this morning. I could not sit idly by and let such vile things happen to you.”

“And you never considered until now that my appointed master might actually decide to take advantage of my position in that way?” Loki asks him, cocking his head.

Thor blinks a couple of times. “I admit, the idea that Man of Iron would do such a thing never entered my mind. I cannot imagine him dishonouring a captive enemy like that. Not until I heard the whispers travelling the Halls did I at all consider it,” he says, looking away with a clear flush of shame on his face.

A flicker of annoyance piercing him, Loki finds himself on the verge of pointing out that he wishes that he could have shared that same conviction when he was sent to Tony’s tower, because that would sure have saved him a lot of torment and anguish, considering what he had come to expect
would happen to him in Tony’s custody. But in the end, he holds his tongue, because he realizes it will only serve to pain Thor if he finds out about the suffering Loki went through, and he finds that he actually doesn’t want to make Thor feel guilty for any of that. It’s not like it was his fault, and there is no point in telling him now; all that is long in the past, and everything has changed so much since then.

Thor reaches out to him again, both hands grabbing Loki’s forearms this time. “And whoever might come after Man of Iron, my assurances still stand. No one will treat you like that, slave or not. I will not let it happen, Loki. Please believe me when I say that.”

Loki nods his understanding, the previous flicker of annoyance melting away to give way to a fuzzy ball of warmth spreading inside of him at Thor’s expressed willingness to protect him from the worst possible consequences of his slavery. Perhaps Thor won’t succeed in the end, but at least he will try with all his might; of that, Loki has no doubt. Yes, Thor is still willing to protect him, despite everything Loki has done to him and all the innumerable ways in which he has wronged him.

He looks up at Thor – no, his brother – meeting with those familiar steel blue eyes, realizing there is something still needed to be said, and he might as well say it now, because who knows how long it will be before he might get a chance to next time?

“I’m sorry, brother,” he says. “For… everything.”

Thor merely stares at him, his mouth closing and then opening again a few times as if he can’t believe the words he’s just heard. Then, the Thunderer gets up from his chair, which tips and falls over with a crash, and makes his way across the table to where Loki is sitting. A second later, a pair of strong arms are pulling him up from his seat, wrapping themselves around him in a tight embrace.

“You are forgiven, little brother,” Thor mumbles into his ear, voice thick and heavy. “And whatever I might have done to drive you into such darkness, I ask forgiveness for it in turn”

“There is nothing to forgive,” Loki says, returning the embrace, marveling at how good it actually feels to be close to Thor, to be pressed against his chest like this. “You have done nothing wrong.”

He doesn’t know how much time has passed when they finally break free of each other, but when they do, Thor is smiling like the sun itself, looking anything but like how his title God of Thunder would imply.
As they’re making their way back to meet up with Tony, Loki can’t help but let his thoughts drift. And he wonders what Thor would think if he knew about the attraction that has developed between him and Tony, despite neither of them having really acted on it yet.

Thor had known about some of his old dalliances in the past, of course. It was an implicitly understood but not openly spoken of fact, the direction in which Loki’s tastes in such matters ran. And he knew full well that Thor’s opinions of such relationships were the same as the rest of Asgard. Such was unfit for a prince – for a man – willingly making himself argr like that, but despite his obvious disapproval, Thor had never said anything out loud, preferring to pretend as if wasn’t happening. Which was probably just as well.

Thor would surely not approve of him and Tony engaging in any such any more than he had those other times. But there would also be no reason for him to approve any less either, as long as Loki was a willing participant and Tony didn’t demand something that Loki did not want to give.

Of course, if Tony were to order it, Loki would be left with no choice but to acquiesce to his wishes, just like any other slave. But he knows that such a thing will never happen. Tony would never demand any such, he’d ask and make sure it’s what Loki wanted before proceeding further. And if Loki were to tell him no, Tony would accept and respect that. Not like a master, but like how a real… lover would.

Not that he would say ‘no’ now, obviously. There could only ever be a ‘yes’ to that.

At that, his brain suddenly sees fit to provide him with a very detailed image of himself lying naked on Tony’s bed, Tony’s hands exploring his body, Tony’s tongue tasting his skin, Tony’s hard length pressing into his hip…

“Come to think of it, you actually… got one bed, didn’t you?” Thor’s sheepish words suddenly interrupt his thoughts.

“Yes,” he confirms, letting the pleasing mental image slip away with a little sigh. His brother never did have good timing. “What else would we have gotten?”

“Why didn’t you tell me? I could have had something else arranged.”

“It doesn’t matter. The bed was big enough for both of us.” And it’s not like he minded at all. “So
are we leaving for Midgard now?” he quickly asks before Thor can say anything further, trying to steer the topic of conversation away onto something else.

“We will soon. I merely wish for Man of Iron to try something out before we depart,” Thor says, as usual easily derailed.

And as they reach the door to their room, Loki can’t help but marvel at how lucky he is. Because despite all his wrong-doings, there are still somehow two men out there who are willing to look out for him and do everything in their power to protect him.
A groan of pleasure escapes his lips as he lets his head fall back against the polished, rounded stones behind him. The water lapping against his skin is delightfully hot, and the elevated temperature is doing wonders for his stiff muscles and the tension still remaining from all that’s transpired during his visit in Asgard.

Tony lets himself slip further down into the heated goodness, seating himself on one of the lower steps that are leading down into the bottom of the basin so that the water reaches all the way up to his chin before closing his eyes for a few seconds. It’s an almost tangible sensation, how the strain is draining away from him, and all from simply submerging himself into a pool of steaming water.

So they don’t have real showers here in Asgard, but a hot bath is definitely the next best thing, if not even better. He’s glad he eventually let Thor convince him to try out the Asgardian baths before their departure back home, despite how much he had wanted to just get the hell out of here.

Feeling giddy, he lets his hand break the near-still surface, making little waves and splashing water over the rock-covered wall encircling the hollowed-out depression serving as hot tub. The only thing missing for the picture to be complete would be a yellow rubber duck.

There are several little pools and basins in the bathhouse, but he’s the only one here, and he really cherishes the opportunity to be alone for a few moments. Thor is currently keeping a watch out on Loki, allowing Tony some well-deserved time off.

He remains sitting on the bottom step for a few minutes, enjoying the feeling of having his entire body submerged in the steaming water. Even though he has a hot tub back in his tower, he rarely uses it, usually preferring a sizzling but much quicker shower. He makes a mental note to start using it more frequently, though.

After perhaps ten minutes of this, he slowly scoots his ass upwards, planting it a few steps higher so that the water is lapping at his waist. Whistling, he reaches out for the little hollow to his left containing a bar of soap, rubbing the green, sweetly scented thing between his palms until his hands are covered by a rich lather.

Just then, there is a slight creak behind him. He turns, just in time to see the door open and Loki slip inside, his feet soundless against the wet floor as he makes his way to the basin where Tony is sitting.
Tony’s brows wrinkle at the unexpected sight. *What's Loki doing here? He should be with Thor.*

“Wasn’t your brother supposed to be keeping an eye on you?” Tony asks with a voice slightly harsher than intended. Having Loki wander around on his own with all the weirdos and freaks running around in this place is not a thought that appeals to him in the slightest, not after everything that has happened.

Loki gives him a non-committal shrug, slender shoulders inching upwards for a second. “I told him I’d take the opportunity to use the baths while you were in here.” He comes to a halt at the side of the basin, a few yards away from where Tony is sitting, hands still covered in foaming lather that’s starting to smell like an entire meadow. “Thor escorted me here, and is currently waiting in the library right across the hall.”

With that, he grabs the hem of his shirt, pulling it over his head in one graceful motion and lets it fall on the little raised stone podium to his left apparently serving as clothes storage area for visiting bathers.

He can hear Loki removing the rest of his clothes too, but by then Tony has already turned his head away and is staring straight ahead of him. A few splashes to his left inform him that Loki is entering the pool, sitting himself down on one of the upper steps.

Of course, he makes a valiant effort not to look, to act as if the green-eyed god isn’t sitting in all his naked glory a few yards away, but his endeavours are thwarted only moments later, as his uncooperative eyes, as if moving by their own volition, rake the lean body up and down. Several times.

He can’t help but to notice the bruises on the god’s arms from the dungeon incident, and he finds himself distinctly grateful that there is no one else in the bath, or they would probably have thought Tony responsible for putting them there. Not that anyone here would have been likely to hold that against him – he suspects they’d sooner applaud him than scold him – but still.

“Asgardian baths are quite relaxing,” Loki says, reaching for the bar of soap. “I trust you agree?”

Yeah, they’re relaxing alright. It didn’t take long lying around in this pool before his entire body went limp. Although, it now appears as if there’s one treacherous body part of his that is well on its way to recover from its state of softness. Even though he’s spent several nights with the god lying *almost* naked right beside him in bed, he had made sure to turn his head whenever Loki got undressed, and whatever physical reaction he might have sported had been safely hidden beneath the bed cover. Now, he doesn’t have that protective luxury any longer.
“Uh-huh,” he mutters, feeling like an idiot.

At least he’s in to his waist, the steaming water offering him at least some semblance of cover. Hoping to hide the embarrassing state that is growing worse by the second, he slips deeper into the water, praying that Loki isn’t going to notice anything out of the ordinary. He’s already been through this one time too many.

Of course, he didn’t bring any bathing trunks, not expecting that a hot bath would be part of the all-inclusive stay. He sincerely regrets that now. Thor, however, had only laughed heartily, slapping his thighs in amusement as if being told a funny joke, when Tony had questioned the appropriateness of bathing naked in public. Why would anyone want to wear clothes while bathing? Perhaps it is a strange Midgardian custom to remain clothed during such activities, but it is an unheard of practice here. The Thunderer even had to wipe his eyes after the worst laughing fits had subsided, his vision clouded by tears.

And since he didn’t particularly feel like becoming the laughing stock of all of Asgard, if Thor’s reaction was anything to go by, he had let it at that. It wasn’t as if he had anything to be ashamed of that couldn’t stand a few admiring gazes.

Loki, on his hand, obliviously remains sitting on the step with water up to his waist, rolling the bar of smelly soap between his palms a few times as he works up a rich lather. Then he plops the bar back in the little hollow as he proceeds to rub the foamy substance over his arms and down over his chest and stomach.

And Tony is trying to look away, he really is, but the sight is too mesmerizing and the grip on his self-control far too loose. His eyes are glued to the little unintentionally erotic scene unfolding before him, stuck to it as surely as had they been fastened with an army of staples and nails and super adhesives.

So he only sits there and watches in transfixon as Loki lathers himself up like he’s the star of some amateur porn movie, hands and long fingers deftly moving over his own body.

Tony swallows. Suddenly his throat and mouth feel as dry as the Sahara desert.

And he realizes that he’s still sitting there with girly-smelling foam on his hands, looking like a moron.
So he brusquely rubs the stuff into his own chest and arms, not out of any sudden desire for cleanliness, but in the vain hopes that the foamy soap will muddle the water around him, making it murky enough to prevent his obvious arousal from showing, in case Loki should accidentally throw an eye into that direction.

Having finished lathering himself up in that inadvertently obscene way, the god slips down to dunk himself in the water, rinsing the soap off his body and out of his hair. Wiping the water off his face, he then hoists himself back up again, seating himself on what is probably two steps higher up than last time, unabashedly revealing body parts that would have him arrested were he in a similar establishment in America. Rivulets of water are running down his naked, glistening body, and Tony shrinks further down into the water as his cock greedily twitches at the magnificent sight.

Then the god turns his head towards Tony, watching him as unperturbed as if they were sitting fully clothed on the couch in his living room and not butt-naked a mere few yards away from each other. “Do you want help soaping your back?” he asks, like it’s the most natural thing in the world.

*Oh hell yes,* his mouth wants to say.

“No,” is what it actually says, though. “I’m a big boy. I can wash myself, thank you.” He can hear that his voice is more strained than usual, but he hopes the god doesn’t notice the sudden tenseness. *Relaxing, my ass. Fighting Victor Doom is more relaxing than this goddamn bath.*

Loki watches him unwaveringly in silence for a few moments, as if he’s pondering something deep and important.

Then, in one fluid motion, the god slips down next to him, his body moving smoothly and quickly like he’s some alien mermaid and the breath hitches in Tony’s throat at the sudden, unexpected closeness.

“Then perhaps there’s something else I can help you with?”

Before Tony has the chance to react, to even croak out a word from his restricting throat, a hand slips under the water surface and goes for his now painfully erect groin. The shock at the intimate touch makes him freeze like a deer in headlights at absolute zero temperature. And during the endless moment that passes before his body can move again, a million swirling thoughts have already passed through his muddled brain.
But what stands out the most is something that’s only all too painfully clear – Loki is doing exactly what Tony told him to do – *acting like it's expected of a slave in Asgard*. And as he’s been shown with painstaking clarity, it includes *this* too. Pleasing his master, serving him in bed. Or in the bathhouse, or whatever.

It was never his intention to include this part, of course, but he never stopped to think that Loki might not have realized that. And apparently, he chose a more literal interpretation, and now the god’s hand is wrapped around his cock and Loki is leaning into him and-- *fuck*.

Finally released from his paralysis, he grabs Loki’s wrist in a vise-like grip, pushing it away from his body. “Stop it,” he says, though it sounds more like a feral growl than anything else. “I didn’t ask you for this.” Well, perhaps he inadvertently did by framing his previous request for Asgard-approved behaviour the way he did, but he sure as hell didn’t *intentionally* ask for it.

The look of confusion on the god’s face would have been comical under other circumstances, but now it’s not funny in the least.

“Oh, I know this counts as appropriate here in Asgard, but it sure as hell doesn’t where I come from, so don’t *ever* do anything like this again,” Tony snaps, more angry at himself than at anyone else. He should have known better, should have chosen his words more carefully. He knows very well by now what’s expected of slaves in Asgard – even if Loki hadn’t explained it to him, it would still have been clear enough from the insinuations from both Arnulf and Geir about Tony using his slave for sex, the large bed presented to them without question, to say nothing of Loki’s own assumptions when he arrived in Tony’s tower. There is no doubt as to what is expected from a slave here, and he told Loki to act like that not only once, but twice, since coming to Asgard. How could he have been so stupid, so thoughtless?

“I thought that--” Loki begins, sounding hesitant, incomprehension marring his features.

“Well, you thought wrong.” Tony interrupts him, not wanting to hear what Loki actually thought. He knows it already, and it makes him sick to his stomach.

Loki looks like he’s on the verge of saying something else, but then relents, his half-open mouth snapping shut.

Tony lets go of the wrist he realizes he’s still holding in a bruising grip and Loki’s hand falls to his side like a dead weight. “My apologies, then,” the god intones stiffly, formally. “It was not my
intention to upset you.”

And really, the one apologizing should be Tony, not Loki, but he just can’t bring himself to do it right now. “Just… get out,” he mutters instead, not sure he can stand another moment in the god’s presence. “Go back to Thor.”

Loki obeys without question, splashing Tony with water as he abruptly stands up and steps out of the basin, just barely stopping to pick his clothes up and dress himself as he makes for the door, not turning around as he walks out, leaving Tony alone in the room.

Damn.

He totally fucked this up. And here he had been so sure the worst had already passed, that there wouldn’t be any more of these… misunderstandings between them. That Loki had long since realized that Tony didn’t expect any sexual favours from him, slave or not, and yet, he’d still been metaphorically punched right into his face like this.

He sighs, slipping further into the water until he’s entirely submerged, feeling like a total imbecile. His erection has already shrivelled and died, his cock once more as limp as it was before the god made his entrance.

The unease in his stomach is like a coiling snake, and it’s making him feel almost ill. And it doesn’t help that he just then remembers the very vivid dream he had about Loki last night, featuring the god nuzzling up to him as they were lying in bed together, slowly trailing his fingers over Tony’s body, a hand even going down to sweep over his crotch.

And the memory of just how good Loki’s hand had felt around his cock only moments ago sure doesn’t help either.
“That was quick, brother. Did you enjoy your bath?” Thor asks him as he walks into the library, hair still wet and clothes askew from his hasty, impromptu getting-dressed-while-walking.

“It was… relaxing,” Loki replies non-committingly, shrugging. He doesn’t even have to lie; it was relaxing, until Things Happened.

It’s odd to see Thor sitting at a table surrounded by books; the thunder god rarely has neither the patience for nor the interest in such pursuits, instead favouring more hands-on activities, usually of the sort that involves sharpened steel.

Lifting the heavy volume spread open on the table so he can showcase his pick to Loki, Thor grins contentedly. “I found this book sitting all forlorn on one of the shelves and I’ve been studying it while you were in the baths. It deals with war strategies, and there is a really interesting chapter right here about offensive tactics against enemies superior in numbers,” he says as he gestures to the yellowish pages in appreciation.

Loki only listens with half an ear. He has other things on his mind right now. “So exactly when are we to return to Midgard?”

“We only wait for Man of Iron to finish his bath and get himself ready, and then we will depart.” He makes a short pause, gaze resting on Loki. “I would assume you are… eager to leave?”

He sighs. “As it is, I would rather be in Midgard, yes.”

Thor looks at him with an unwavering gaze. “I understand that. But I will miss you dearly, brother, though I will endeavour to come visit as often as I can.”

Loki only nods in response and then flops down on one of the stuffy chairs not littered with parchments or books, one leg slung across the armrest, returning to his own meandering thoughts.

Tony just refused him.
Right now, there is a hollow pit where his stomach should be, because Tony shouldn’t have done that. And it fails to make any sense whatsoever, no matter how he twists the recent events around in his mind, no matter how much he turns his head to look at them from different angles. What should have been a simple equation just doesn’t add up.

He hadn’t originally planned for things to proceed into that direction. But as he knew that Tony had gone to try the baths, leaving him alone with Thor, he had eventually started to entertain the idea that he might as well take the opportunity to visit them too. After all, anyone in the household would be free to use them, including the servants and even the slaves as long as they didn’t have any other duties to fulfil or weren’t in the way. But at this time of day, there were bound to be few, if any, other people in there expect for Tony.

So why not relax in a steaming hot bath rather than merely sit around waiting for Tony to come back? He could certainly do with some relaxation after all the disgrace and debasement that he had had to endure since his return to Asgard, and revel in a welcome respite from all that.

The more he thought about it, the more appealing the idea seemed – he had missed the public baths, having only used a shower since coming to Midgard. But the prospect of sinking down into a pool of hot water, letting the stress and strain from recent events drain out from his body and mind suddenly seemed very attractive.

In a way, coming here had been like getting thrown into a basin of ice cold water after sitting in front of a warm, crackling hearth. Despite being well aware of just what slavery entails in Asgard, he hadn’t been fully prepared for the heavy toll it would exact on him after having lived under Tony’s leniency all this time. It had been a ruthless and cruel wake-up call for him, Asgard’s harsh demands and expectations of someone at his station being dumped upon his shoulders with full force. Managing that weight had been difficult, and he had stumbled quite badly beneath the pressure during the first day, even though Tony had been there to catch him when he lost his footing completely, stopping him from falling down into the yawning abyss opening at his feet.

In light of all that, the opportunity to loosen up his stiff muscles and soothe his tense mind was simply too appealing. So he had told Thor he’d join Tony in the baths, and his brother couldn’t see any reason to object.

At first, he had no other plans than that. However, all that had soon changed once he found himself in the close proximity of one naked and very erect Tony Stark.

It was quite obvious, as Loki was sitting there on one of the upper ledges of the stairs leading into the pool, lathering himself up with over-scented soap, what kind of reaction his personal care was having on Tony. So he had played it up, deciding he might as well give Tony a little show while he was at it, enjoying the way the man’s eyes were glued to him as he worked himself over.
It didn’t take long before he was overcome in turn by the desire to touch that body so temptingly close to his, to caress the smooth skin, and to engage in other, far more intimate things as well. Being faced with Tony stark naked and up close like this, every angular line and toned muscle at display, he was simply unable to resist, despite knowing that Thor was waiting for them.

And he was certain that Tony would be unable to resist too, considering the obvious desire he had harboured for Loki in turn for so long. Of course, he knew very well that the man did not want any unwilling bed partners, but he would obviously not refuse him now, not when Loki freely and willingly came forth and approached him.

So he had offered to soap Tony’s back, already relishing in the opportunity to get to run his fingers across his skin, and then slowly continue to explore other, even more tantalizing territories on the lean, muscular body. Fantasizing about doing this had been pleasant enough, but now he longed to put those fantasies into practice.

But to his surprise, Tony had refused the offer.

Perhaps his overtures were too subtle, then, for a man like Tony. After all, he was the epitome of blunt, almost painfully straightforward at times, so maybe it was to be expected that he would interpret an offer of soaping his back as being simply an offer of soaping his back, but nothing more than that.

And while Loki usually preferred subtlety and grace, he could certainly be blunt and straightforward too, when the situation called for it.

So he slid over to where Tony was sitting with only his head and shoulders sticking up above the water surface, and reached down to take him in hand, smiling inwardly as he did so.

It felt right.

He wanted Tony. Tony wanted him. What else was there to say, really? It would be the most natural thing in the world for both of them to give in to their desires here and now, instead of continuing to hold off while waiting for a better moment. This was the perfect moment.

Tony was hard as granite as his hand closed around the thick shaft, and that only fuelled his own desire even further. So he leaned in, pressing his own body closer, revelling in the close proximity to
the man next to him.

There were many possible responses he would have expected from Tony then – hips bucking up into his hand, lips locking hungrily against his mouth, arms wrapping around his waist, fingers intertwining in his hair – his mind was already picturing them all. All, but the one response he actually got.

Tony – impossibly, illogically – refused him.

Despite his obvious arousal, Tony pushed him away, telling him to stop.

The man was making no sense. There was no logical reason why he should so resolutely turn Loki’s advances down, not when he was obviously in the mood for such activities and the object of his desires was offering himself up like this, all eager and willing. He knows that Tony wants him. If the man had thought the moment was badly chosen for whatever reason, he could just have said so, and instead suggested that they pick it up later.

The words that followed are still etched into his mind, ‘Yeah, I know this counts as appropriate here in Asgard, but it sure as hell doesn’t where I come from’.

He’s already turned that sentence around a thousand times in his head, trying to decipher it, searching for the hidden meaning behind the words that can throw some light on Tony’s erratic behaviour. And he knows that where Tony comes from, there are few restrictions on willing participants engaging in sexual activities, so that can’t be what he’s referring to. No, something else must be the key.

Furrowing his brow in contemplation, he fiddles with the old, moth-eaten cloth covering the armrest of his chair, removing small pieces of lint with his fingers. And then, he suddenly realizes what Tony must have been getting at. Of course – the baths were too public a place for the man to feel comfortable initiating such activities. Even if there was no one else around for the time being, free access was granted to all men and women in the household, meaning that anyone could step inside at any time.

And he’s learnt by now that humans are a lot more modest and conscious about their naked bodies and sexual activities than the Aesir, for whom nudity is considered a natural state, not something to be ashamed of. That had been all too clearly illustrated when Tony had initially questioned the appropriateness of bathing naked, the only natural and practical way of bathing, instead making the droll suggestion to Thor that he wear some sort of garment while in the baths. Also, Tony was unlikely to be aware that the baths were a common place for people in Asgard to initiate sexual liaisons, and there were even secluded spaces in connection with the facilities where enamoured
couples could slip off for a moment in private. It wasn’t as if they were supposed to rut in the pool where anyone entering could see them.

But given that Tony has grown up in Midgard with their comparatively prudish opinions on what counts as acceptable public displays of sexual behaviour, it is perhaps no wonder that he would consider what Loki was doing highly inappropriate and react accordingly.

Well, then. If Tony feels so strongly about it, he’s not going to press that particular issue. Instead, he’ll wait until a more appropriate time arises when he and Tony are somewhere more private again, without risking getting walked in on by others.

Then, Tony will surely appreciate and be fully receptive to his advances.
Due to time restrictions, I might not be able to reply to reviews as frequently as before, but I hope you will still continue to comment and let me know your thoughts. :D

As he shows up before Thor and Loki, hair still wet and with duffle bag in hand, he feels like the biggest moron that has ever walked the planet. He can’t bring himself to look directly at Loki, but instead resorts to throwing a quick glance at the god when it seems like his attention is directed elsewhere.

To his surprise and relief, Loki looks surprisingly carefree and unembarrassed, as if the awkward incident in the baths earlier in the morning never happened. As if he’s already forgotten about how he grabbed hold of Tony’s hard-on like it was the most natural thing in the world. Which, as has already been made painfully clear, it actually is in Asgard, given their relative positions.

Maybe the god is only pretending, maybe it’s just a show he’s putting on, but if so, Tony is grateful for that much, especially considering that Thor is nearby. Because what would Thor have thought if he knew? If he had any idea of what had transpired in the baths? What his own brother had assumed and what actions those assumptions had driven him to?

“Ready to depart, my friend?” Thor says, interrupting Tony’s thoughts. If he at all notices that Tony is looking tense, he makes no comment on the state of things. Probably, he has chosen to interpret it as mere apprehension in the face of the nausea-inducing dimension-skipping trip back home that’s still ahead of them.

“Yeah,” he says, glad he’s able to produce at least that much of an answer, even if it’s monosyllabic.

“Very well,” Thor nods. “Then we should get moving. We need to be standing on Bifrost in order to make use of Father’s medallion for transport; it has been crafted as to have the rainbow bridge as its only Asgardian teleportation point in order to make sure that all travellers have to pass Heimdall.”

Without any further ado, they head off, Tony and Loki following the Thunderer as he leads the way out of the Halls and out into the surrounding city.
Even though it’s only been three days, it still feels like an eternity has passed since he arrived here. So many things he had never expected have occurred, and it’s probably a good thing that he didn’t see them coming, or chances are he would have flat-out refused at Thor’s first mention of any alien world visits. But at least it’s a huge sense of relief to finally get to leave, not so much for his own sake as for Loki’s. The god has had to deal with enough humiliation and trouble in these last few days to last him a lifetime.

He can’t help but discreetly throw the occasional glance over his shoulder at Loki as they walk. Because despite the impressive and bustling surroundings they’re right in the middle of, it’s the familiar sight of the dark-haired god who’s trailing a short step after them that’s drawing his attention. He tries to take some comfort in the fact that at least it doesn’t seem as if Loki is trying to keep any more distance between them than usual or otherwise behaving any differently in Tony’s presence. But still, his thoughts keep churning as they’re walking past sky-piercing spires and fierce-looking warriors and stunning golden monuments, his brain only briefly registering their presence.

It’s disconcerting how far they’ve slipped after everything seemed to be going so well between them. That Loki would think so little of him, even after all this time. And as uncomfortable as the prospect is, he knows that he needs to sit down and have a talk with Loki as soon as they’re back home, and make it clear that these services are not part of what he expects from the god. Well, not that he expects anything, really, but most certainly not that.

The idea of bringing up the subject with Loki makes him wince. Because even though Tony Stark is a world champion when it comes to filling the silence with sarcastic remarks and witty one-liners and idle chatter, he’s never been good at actually talking when it comes to these things. Important things.

And how do you even start a conversation like that? Oh, by the way, you remember that one time in the hot tub when you grabbed hold of my dick? Yeah, let’s talk about that.

But at least Loki must have taken the hint already, given how Tony had immediately clarified matters, telling him that he did not want Loki to do any of the sorts. That has to be the reason he’s looking so relaxed and unconcerned right now, relieved in the knowledge that he was never expected to perform any of these duties, regardless of how thoughtlessly Tony worded his request that Loki act like a slave in Asgard is supposed to.

So hopefully, this will soon be just like that foot massage incident and all that followed – an embarrassing memory to be sure, but nevertheless only a memory. At least this time, he has made his position on the subject clear, and Loki has obviously understood it too, which is a lot more than what could be said about the time when the foot rub happened.
But still, he knows that before he can allow the incident to become that mere memory, he needs to clear the air with Loki first.

*So, once they get back home,* he promises himself. *Once they get back home, he’ll talk about it with Loki and say the things that still need to be said.*

There is a shiver of something unidentifiable tingling down his spine as he recalls the body pressed against his like a wet T-shirt, the hot breath on his cheek, shimmering green eyes boring into his, and the hand that--

Angry with himself, he pushes the mental image away. Perhaps it’s no wonder Loki had assumed what he did, when Tony’s one-track mind is constantly running away with him like this, letting his baser needs take the front seat. Surely he had immediately noticed Tony’s physical response to him in the baths, and acted like an Asgardian slave was supposed to when faced with his master in such a state. And as neither his mind nor his body seems to be even in the slightest cooperative when it comes to the god, maybe he should be grateful that he didn’t have one of those wet dreams too and started rutting against Loki in his sleep while he was at it.

Eventually, they reach the looming city gates, and as they pass through, Tony breathes a sigh of relief. Even if they’re not back home yet, there is at least a massive wall separating them from all those people here that would want nothing more than to hurt Loki, to demean and humiliate him and see him suffer. And instil such fucked-up beliefs in him as to make him think he’s supposed to offer Tony sexual services.

But in spite of his disturbing thoughts, the sight of those walls safely behind him makes him feel a little bit better, turns his mood a few notches towards the sunny end.

It doesn’t take long before they’re once more standing before Heimdall, who looks as if he hasn’t moved an inch since last time they passed him, frozen in time and place. Thor exchanges a few words with the rainbow guardian, and he stands aside as they all pass beneath his watchful eyes.

Bifrost itself glitters and twinkles with a million colours as they stride out on the bridge, Tony meticulously avoiding looking into the gaping abyss below. He is about to ask Thor if it would be possible – or at all advisable – to chip off a tiny little piece of the sparkly material and bring it back home with him for research, but before he can open his mouth, Thor brings his medallion out from beneath his shirt and pulls Tony and Loki tight with one mighty arm.

There’s a flash of blue and a terrible lurch of his stomach, and then the brilliance of the golden city of Asgard is gone, leaving only a fading afterimage on his retinas.
The journey back is every bit as stomach-flipping and gut-churning as it was the first time, and at the end of it Tony finds himself on all fours on the floor of his own living room, heaving and coughing like he’s choking on his own inner organs.

It probably takes a good two minutes before he’s able to stand up again, glad he hasn’t coughed up a lung, coming face to face with two unfairly unperturbed gods staring at him like he’s a curiosity at display at some freak show.

Tony pointedly wipes his hands on his clothes before smoothing down the front of his shirt. “Yeah, okay, so I’m a puny mortal not used to being turned inside out and then back again courtesy of this intergalactic space-travelling thing. Stop looking at me like I’ve suddenly grown a pair of antlers, okay?”

Thor unhelpfully responds by dunking a big hand against his back, almost felling Tony right back to the floor that he just go up from. “Do not worry about it, friend. This is a normal reaction among mortals and nothing to be ashamed of.”

“Yeah, and if I’ve gotten any ruptured organs because of this little world-hopping, I’m sending the hospital bills straight to Asgard,” he grumbles, trying to go for his usual flippant self as long as Thor is still present. He really doesn’t want any questions from the god if something is the matter apart from the obvious.

Thor, however, merely clasps Tony’s shoulders in a tight, distinctively manly grip. “I must thank you for making this trip on my brother’s behalf, and for pleading his case before the Allfather,” he says solemnly.

It looks like the big guy is almost on the verge of tears again, and Tony grimaces. He doesn’t need any crying gods of thunder in his tower, not if he wants to risk having a violent storm of lightning crashing down over his head.

“No problems, Point Break, thanks for being a generous host and all that. And I realize now that Midgardian beer really does taste like horse piss in comparison.” Well, at least he can grant Asgard that much.

Tony steels himself just in time before the Thunderer crushes him in a mighty embrace, and he can
swear he hears his ribs cracking ominously from the ungentle treatment.

“I shall return as soon as I have news of my father’s decision,” he promises as he, after what feels like half an eternity, lets go of Tony who is immensely grateful for his newfound ability to breathe normally again.

Thor then turns to his younger brother and bestows a similar bone-crushing hug on him as well. For once, the dark-haired god doesn’t wince or try to evade his brother’s physical displays of affection, and Tony can even see how Loki’s arms are moving upwards to wrap around Thor in a comparatively more cautious embrace.

Well, what do you know.

“Be safe, brother,” Thor mumbles in his ear. And Loki’s lips are moving as if they’re saying something too; Tony can’t make out any words from where he is standing, but it looks like Thor squeezes a little tighter in response.

Then the goodbyes are over and done with, and Thor prepares to depart to Asgard once more, looking resolute as he reaches for his magic amulet. The three of them stand in silence facing each other as the rune-covered talisman in Thor’s hand starts to pulse with a blue light, spreading until it’s enveloping the god in a glowing ghostly hue. A sudden bright flash follows that forces Tony’s eyes closed, and when he opens them again, the place the thunder god was occupying only seconds ago is empty.

And Tony merely stands there staring at the blank spot on the floor, exhaling deeply, as the strain of what feels like a whole life-time slowly runs off him.

Yeah, he really could do with a vacation after all this.
Loki is sitting in the couch leaning against the armrest, a book spread out in his lap, just as Tony is about to enter the living room. The god is back to wearing his normal clothing again – at least what would count as normal on this planet – the Asgardian apparel having already been discarded of.

It’s strange seeing such a familiar, well-known scene before him again, when mere hours ago, they were still in Magic Fairyland. And yet, now everything looks exactly as it did before they left, just like he’s gotten used to before Thor came to pay them his second visit – Loki reading in the couch with his legs drawn up, looking neither like a god nor a slave, just normal, the earlier tenseness in his face having faded, leaving nothing that hints at any of the recent happenings in Asgard.

It feels almost uncanny how things can so quickly return to normal again after everything.

At least if outward appearances are anything to go by. But of course, not everything is really the same, because he has seen too much of what flies in Asgard, encountered too many disturbing things along the way, and made realizations too unsettling to believe that all can automatically revert back to exactly how it was before.

He watches the god, who is too engrossed in his book to notice Tony as he’s standing in the doorway, feeling his stomach coil in unease. So many things that have become crystal clear to him now, putting Loki’s previous expectations of him into a different light entirely.

A very sallow and sickly light.

Of course, even if it was a long time ago that he found out about those expectations, having actually seen for himself what had helped create them in the first place makes the unease float up to the surface again. Like old wounds being reopened, despite his thinking they had long ago healed. But now they’re itching and aching again, demanding to be taken care of.

And worst of all is that one time in the baths. He still can’t believe that Loki had actually done that,
had interpreted Tony’s words to act as expected of a slave to include providing him with sexual services as well. He had been so certain that Loki knew him better than that by now and felt safe in the certainty that Tony would under no circumstances take advantage of his position, and yet…

Then again, perhaps it’s not so strange, and there is actually a less disturbing explanation behind it. When it all comes down to it, Loki has lived almost his whole life in Asgard, a life longer than any human could possibly envision, all the while being indoctrinated with Asgard’s ideas of how slaves should act in relation to their masters. And despite that, Loki has never done anything similar here in Tony’s tower, not even back when he still believed that Tony had no compunctions about hurting him. Offering himself up sexually at that point as a way of placating and pleasing an ill-disposed master, as a means of self-preservation, would actually have made logical sense, as opposed to doing it when already full well knowing that Tony wouldn’t be abusing him in any way, either physically or sexually.

But the fact that it took Loki being back in Asgard to approach Tony in such a way indicates that it was most likely some kind of mental short-circuitry on Loki’s part, the extreme situation including the abject humiliation and the threat of severe punishment serving to muddle his mind and rational thinking processes, resulting in a bizarre outcome like this. The harsh reality that someone in his position would inevitably be faced with in Asgard had come crashing down on him hard and mercilessly, the distress of it all automatically bringing that pre-programmed behaviour out.

It’s not a pleasant thought, but it makes sense. After all, it’s a natural human reaction, under extreme circumstances when logical thought fails, to simply fall back on well-known standard protocols, even if they are totally inappropriate for the situation at hand.

So no doubt that had been a one-time occurrence, born in the temporary confusion and desperate attempts to regain his footing, caught as Loki had been in the clash of Asgard’s and Tony’s non-reconcilable expectations.

That conclusion is a lot more appealing and palatable to him than the alternative – that Loki had actually believed that Tony expected sexual favours from him and acted accordingly.

But even if that had been his initial interpretation of the bathhouse incident, the more he considers it, the less likely that explanation seems. No, after having gotten frighteningly close to becoming a victim of the brutality that is so obviously unleashed on Asgardian slaves that don’t follow protocol, Loki’s brain must have switched into self-preservation mode, and some fucked-up psychological reaction that no doubt has a long, unpronounceable scientific name had automatically caused him to revert into expected slave behaviour, even when it was not needed or even wanted.

Still, he can’t in good conscience just disregard this and pretend like it never happened. He needs to make it clear that he does not expect sexual favours from Loki, nor any of the other shit expected of
slaves in Asgard. It’s probably not necessary, now that they’re far away from the surroundings responsible for drawing forth that behaviour in the first place, but he remembers full well those other times when he’d erroneously assumed that everything was okay, as well as the consequences that followed in the wake of his own negligence.

And he’s not about to take any such chances anymore, as unnecessary a precaution as it might be and as awkward as it might feel to bring the subject up. If there’s anything he’s learned by now, it’s that it’s much better to be safe than sorry.

“Hey,” he says as he pushes himself up from where he’s been slouching against the doorframe and saunters into the room. “Everything alright?”

The god gives him a slight smile as Tony settles himself on the nearest cushion, the two of them facing each other at opposite ends of the couch. “Yes,” he replies. “Though, I must say I’m very much relieved to be back in Midgard again.”

Tony snorts as he makes a little eye roll, doing his best to act normal and relaxed around the god. “Yeah, tell me about it. That thing they say about the best part about going away is coming back home again – I don’t think it’s ever been as true as now.”

Loki grabs the book still in his lap and places it on the table, and then lets his arms loosely rest on his drawn-up legs as he looks straight at Tony. “Thank you for making this trip on my behalf and speaking in my favour before the Allfather,” he says. “I really do appreciate it. I know it might not have been… an entirely pleasant experience for you.”

He shrugs. “Eh, I’ll live.” An uncomfortable stay it might have been, but there is no doubt that Loki was the one who got to bear the brunt of it; he, Tony, got off easy in comparison. “If anyone has any room to complain, it’s you. I can’t believe that kind of shit is actually acceptable where you come from, to treat people like that.”

Loki offers no response to that, but merely looks contemplative.

And damn, he’d been hoping for Loki to say something right there, to stave off what he’s been dreading to say but of course has no choice but to address.

But no such luck.
He squirms a bit in his seat, a hand going up to run through his hair, nails scratching against the scalp.

“Yeah, speaking of that – I know you... did things back there that you didn’t actually want to, simply because that’s how slaves in Asgard are supposed to act.” As in, grabbing hold of Tony’s erect cock. And damn if he still doesn’t remember the feeling of that hand wrapped around him, sending a shivering tingle down his spine and--

*Enough, Tony. Get a hold of yourself.*

“But I’m sure you’re aware that you don’t have to do any of that shit here in my tower, no matter how things are done back in Asgard?” he quickly continues, trying to get this over and done with as quickly as possible. “That I don’t want you to do any of that shit?”

*Ugh, this is really fucking embarrassing.* But at least Loki doesn’t look discomfited, so he tries to take some comfort in that.

Loki nods slowly. “Yes, I understand that. Even if some things were not necessary, it has been very deeply ingrained in me what constitutes appropriate behaviour for a slave, and so, I automatically fell back on it. I would not have acted like that here in Midgard.” He makes a short pause, looking directly at Tony. “I am fully aware you would not have wanted it.”

*Yeah, that’s exactly the kind of answer he had been hoping to hear.* An automatically triggered response. And he feels a crushing wave of relief at that, knowing that his hunch was right, that Loki didn’t actually believe Tony expected any of... that. It had merely been a pre-programmed behavioural pattern automatically taking control, nothing more than that.

“Good, I’m glad to hear it” he says, relieved that all appears to be well again after Loki’s momentary brain-freeze back in the baths. Amazing that the topic could be so swiftly dealt with, and with comparatively little embarrassment to boot. It feels almost *too* easy. But perhaps he’s gotten so used to these awkwardness-inducing incidents and talks by now that they no longer make him feel the same utter mortification they once did.

“Because I don’t want you to act like a slave in Asgard is supposed to, okay?” he repeats, just to make sure there are no misunderstandings. “All of that is just plain *wrong*. And I want things between us to... be free of all that stuff.”
“So do I,” Loki says, and then there is silence again, and Tony suddenly feels a pressing need to bring up another uncomfortable topic.

“You know,” he continues with some hesitance, another sting of that old guilt welling up inside of him again, “I never really realized until our field trip just how shitty slaves are treated back in your home world. If I had, I would have… acted differently when you first came here.”

Okay, so he already has apologized for being an ass like that, but somehow he still feels the need to mention it again, now that he’s visited Asgard and found out for himself what kind of treatment slaves can expect. To make it clear to Loki that he wouldn’t have acted like that if he had known what he knows now, because he really, really doesn’t want Loki to think badly of him.

“I know,” Loki says, and those words make Tony’s chest feel so much lighter, hearing that Loki actually realizes that. “There is no need for you to feel guilty about anything.”

“Yeah, well--” he begins, not sure he’s quite agreeing, wincing a bit as he remembers his behaviour early on, but he is interrupted by Loki as the god shifts and leans over towards him.

“You have shown me great kindness, do not ever think differently.” With that, Loki reaches out a hand to grab hold of one of Tony’s, bringing it up to his lips and placing a chaste kiss on the knuckles. “Thank you, Tony. Whatever my fate will turn out to be, I will never forget all you have done for me.”

As the fingers clasping his hand let go, his arm falls bonelessly to his side and he stares at Loki for a while not quite knowing what to say in response. He’s gotten all sorts of thank-yous in his life, but none of them ever involved hand kissing. But it’s probably an Asgardian thing.

“Uh… don’t mention it,” he eventually manages, hand strangely prickling. “I’m just trying to do the right thing here, that’s all. No thanks necessary, it’s just common decency.”

And the mood is freaking weird, or at least he thinks it is, so instead of continuing to squirm under that green-eyed stare he says the only thing he knows of that has the power to salvage most any situation.

“So… you’re up for some pizza? Those ubiquitous pork chops and lamb steaks grew kinda old on me already after the first day in Narnia.”
He lies awake for a long time that night, waiting for sleep to come to him. As glad as he is to be back here in Midgard and Tony’s tower again, there is one thing he’s actually missing and that’s having Tony’s sleeping form lying next to him in bed.

Now he’s all alone again, since Tony unfortunately didn’t suggest they continue with their previous sleeping arrangements. He had been on the verge of proposing it himself, but had then decided against it. After all, he could imagine that Tony might want some time to himself to mentally process and digest everything that’s happened since they left for Asgard, and he doesn’t want to intrude on the man’s need for solitude.

Their talk earlier in the day is still fresh on his mind, and his mind keeps returning to it. Tony’s discomfort at his behaviour in Asgard had been obvious, but not very surprising, given that he’s learnt by now that Tony doesn’t want him to act like a slave or do any of the things normally required of one.

Still, he hadn’t expected Tony to bring it up for discussion, because surely he would realize that Loki kneeling by his chair, calling him ‘Master’, walking a few steps behind and all those other little tokens of humility and servility were all things he had done merely because it was expected in Asgard? That even Tony had eventually realized were advisable for him to stick to during their visit? Had he really thought Loki would continue with that now that they were back in his tower again, despite how clear Tony had already made it that he didn’t want any of that from him?

But he supposes he had put on a rather convincing display there, so maybe it makes sense that Tony wanted to make sure there would be no more kneeling or any of those other things, just in case. It would be very much like him, to be… concerned like that, after all.

And he is fully aware that perhaps he did go a bit overboard there; not quite everything he had done had been wholly necessary. Tony was his master, after all, and even if Loki had not shown him the full respect and deference normally owed by an Asgardian slave, it would have really been up to Tony to deal with. But he had stuck to the expected behaviour nevertheless, trying to ensure that no one would have grounds for complaints or reason for causing a scene that might lead to nastier things. If nothing else, he had seen how distressed Tony had been when he had landed himself into trouble that time with Fjalar, and did not want to see the man upset again.

He lets himself be content with that, and falls asleep with the memory of Tony in the Asgardian baths at the forefront of his mind.
Chapter 112

If there’s one thing that Tony has missed during his stint in Asgard, it’s sitting in his familiar workshop, playing with his precious technology and inventions. And it’s wonderful to finally be back down here again, catching up on all the things he had planned to do before Thor showed up with an express ticket to Magic Wonderland.

Loki is sitting in a chair next to him, intensely observing as Tony is trying to explain what he’s doing. He had figured the god could be of help with some of the simpler, more manual things while he ran a few tests, though it ended with him giving Loki a thorough rundown of what he’s trying to achieve, what the device he’s working on is supposed to do, and a short version of the underlying science.

And Loki watches and listens with interest, sometimes even asking questions of his own. It’s obvious that he doesn’t comprehend everything, but he’s making an impressive attempt.

Tony’s never been a team player, never one to enjoy working together with others, always the stereotypic loner opting to solve problems on his own. Still, he can’t help but appreciate the presence of the god as he works, like a benevolent shadow watching him with rapt attention and fascination, as if he finds what Tony is doing really interesting. It makes him feel strangely… giddy inside.

He likes that look on Loki’s face. It suits him so much better than the old dejection and resignation and who knows what else that he still remembers all too well.

And once again, he’s grateful they’re back in his tower, glad that Loki doesn’t have to be subjected to any more of the degradations he had to face in Asgard. The mere thought of what would have happened to him had he been made a slave in his own realm instead of here on Earth makes Tony’s throat constrict and unease creep over his skin.

Though, the unease disappears as he looks into the face of the figure hunched over next to him, brow furrowed in concentration as he’s trying to make sense out of the readings on the screen before them.

“Seems like it’s calibrating properly so far,” he offers as explanation, waving a hand at the messages scrolling by.

Then there’s a soft ping, and the lines of text come to a halt.
“No anomalies. Perfect.” He presses a button, causing the screen to reboot.

Loki blinks a couple of times and then turns his head to give him an odd glance. “What did you just do?” he asks, eyes narrowed in confusion.

“Well, I just activated the hopefully improved hadron-transmitter prototype to my new suit.” He presses another button, making more lines of text pop up.

“I can… feel that,” the god says, hand slowly rubbing across an arm.

Tony looks up from the screen, meeting the green eyes staring inquisitively at him.

“What do you mean?”

Loki leans back in his chair as he taps his fingers against his chin in contemplation, apparently searching for the correct words. Tony can’t help but to be fleetingly reminded of himself whenever he’s trying to explain his inventions to someone who’s lacking even the slightest inkling of technical competence.

“I mean that I can feel whatever it is that this device is giving off. It’s some kind of force field, isn’t it?” Loki throws a glance at the hadron-transmitter, though he makes no move to touch it.

Tony regards the god, mulling his words over to understand the implications of them. “Yeah, there’s a special kind of electromagnetic field it gives off. It can be measured with the right apparatuses, but it’s not something you’d actually feel.” He makes a pregnant pause. “Well, if you’re a human, that is. Though I suppose it might be different with you Asgardians and your six or seven or whatever senses you come equipped with.”

Loki shakes his head slowly. “No, most Aesir would not sense this either.” He raises a hand towards the device and moves it around in circles, as if feeling the air above it. “This force field it gives off… it’s a bit like… magic.”

The last word is spoken at a lower volume than the others, and there is a tinge of something Tony can’t quite interpret in there.
He quirks an eyebrow at the god. This just got interesting.

“Magic? You mean there’s like… hocus-pocus stuff in this transmitter?” He wiggles his fingers a little, not sure how he feels about that idea. His inventions are rooted firmly in science, not in fairyland magic.

“Not exactly,” Loki replies thoughtfully. It’s just that the … force field it gives off resembles the disturbances in the air that a sorcerer would feel whenever someone who has not learned to conceal their spell-casting is using magic in close proximity.”

“Which means?” Tony prods.

Loki shrugs, cocking his head. “Well, magic is a kind of force field, and using it is all about manipulating those fields. I suppose it is not unreasonable that a device such as yours could emit something that resembles that.”

“Hmm.” He takes a step forwards and picks up the transmitter, rolling it around in his palm, concentrating. But despite his efforts to sense anything out of the ordinary, it feels like any piece of metal, dead and unresponsive.

After a few moments, he puts the thing down on the table again, feeling vaguely stupid. Really, feeling for force fields like he’s some kind of new age hippie getting turned on by the magic healing capabilities of crystals and special powers of geometric patterns, when he’s a scientist.

“So can this transmitter actually do anything?” he asks, shoving the feeling of dumb-assery away. “I mean, with this magic type of force field?”

Loki taps a finger at the device, his nail softly clicking against the metal. Then he shakes his head. “No, a device in itself can’t really do anything; it takes a magic user to manipulate those force fields into something active. This is just a passive field, doing nothing but simply existing.”

“Oh.” Despite his doubts, Tony feels slightly disappointed at that. Wouldn’t that have been something, imbuing his inventions and his new suit with their own brand of magic. Maybe he could have made himself invisible, or turned into a T-Rex or something cool like that. Not that his current suit isn’t awesome, but a little… upgrade wouldn’t have hurt either.
Loki’s hand has shifted from merely poking at the thing to turning it around in his palm, closing his fingers around it, brow furrowed deep in concentration. “It’s odd,” he says. “This field is remarkably similar to that given off by the chains around my wrists blocking my magic. The frequency is slightly different, but not much.”

That makes Tony’s ears perk up. “Really? You mean this thing might have been able to block your powers if you hadn’t already been wearing those magic suppressors?”

The god gives him a small grimace of exasperation. “The force field that the magic in the bracelets is creating interferes with that of my own, blocking it out and rendering it impossible to use. The signature of this particular field is different, though. Perhaps it might have dampened my magic somewhat, but not shut it off completely.”

And then, a sudden thought hits Tony, and he almost falls of his chair. But he catches himself and leaps up to his feet instead, coming to a stand before the god, leaning over with an arm on the table top for support. “Hey, do you think it would be possible to change the force field signature from the transmitter?” he asks, excitement growing as the implications of such a possibility suddenly becomes clear. “So that it resembles the one from your bracelets?”

A faint crinkle of annoyance mars the space between Loki’s eyebrows. “I assure you, the bracelets are working as intended. There is no need for you to create your own devices to block my magic; it has already been safely sealed off,” he says curtly.

Tony waves the sullen accusation off with a wave of his fingers. “That’s not what I’m talking about. I was thinking if it would be possible to create a force field like the one in your bracelets, then perhaps we would have found a way to incapacitate Victor Doom!” There’s a twinge of excitement inside of him at the possibilities opening up before him. “If we could create some sort of huge magic-dampening amplifier and bring it along next time we fight the guy, Doom-Boy would be as threatening as a dragon facing off with the united forces of all of New York’s fire squads.” Now wouldn’t that be something.

Loki gives him a puzzled look. “And who is this Victor Doom you speak of?”

“Ah,” Tony grins at him. “Just another one of those super-villains with world ruling ambitions. This guy’s a little different from the rest, though, since he likes throwing those fancy Magic the Gathering spells around his person.”

Yeah, if they could take that annoying fucker out of commission, the world would be a much better place indeed.
“You think that would be possible?” he asks again, eyes boring into the god.

Loki seems to think this over for a little while. Then he shrugs, cocking his head to the side. “I don’t see why it wouldn’t be. If you can manipulate the frequency, it should be doable.”

“Ha!” Tony says, a victorious fist already in the air. “And whoever was it that said that magic couldn’t be a good thing? Well, it sure as hell wasn’t me!” Oh well, maybe it was at some point, but that’s not important now.

He reaches out to take Loki’s wrist into his hand, inquisitive fingers prodding at the slim chain circling it, his mind already figuring out ways to go about doing this. *Wouldn’t that be freaking awesome, if he could properly test and analyze these little bracelets thingies…*

Though, he knows that before he can do any of that, there’s another thing he has to ascertain first. He looks up to meet with green eyes curiously regarding him.

“Uh,” he says, making an awkward grimace. “Would it be okay if I could study these things? Like, run a few tests on them and stuff? And maybe have you sit in as a sort of test subject, to tell me if the force field frequency is getting there?” A short pause. “Would you agree to that?”

The green pools aren’t leaving his eyes for a second. Suddenly his throat feels very dry.

It’s like he is sinking into those depths, drowning and sputtering. And he didn’t even think to bring a life vest along. *Damn.*

Then, Loki slowly nods. “Yes, I would,” he says. “If it will be of help to you.”

It is only then he notices that his hand is still firmly encircling Loki’s wrist. *Oops.*

He lets go, clearing his throat. “Awesome. I’ll just get some things up and running first, and then we’ll start the testing as soon as possible, okay?”
Five minutes later, his palm is still burning from the lingering touch.
The equipment that Tony’s been preparing has now been all set up and a substantial part of the day spent getting ready for, and then running, the first few tests. Though, to be fair, the test session mostly just consisted of various sorts of calibrations, Tony mumbling to himself as he turned a knob here or flipped a switch there, or making some other kind of adjustment. But there was at least a sliver of progress made, even though everything was still very much in the early stages, and the session had been finished off with Tony expressing steadfast confidence that the results he was hoping for would eventually see the light of day.

And now they’re lounging on the couch in the living room, getting a well-deserved break, Tony with his laptop, and Loki with a book in his hands.

It’s been a long day and he’s starting to feel pretty tired. Tony’s sleeping schedule is not quite similar to his own, and even though the man seems to have no problems working late into the night and even well into the morning hours, Loki is more used to the Asgardian practice of going to bed early and rising at dawn with the first rays of the sun.

He yawns, rereading the last sentence again since the words seem to be moving of their own accord across the page. The prospect of getting some sleep is getting increasingly alluring and he supposes he should just call it a day and head off to bed, but the couch is feeling unusually comfortable, so instead he puts the book down on the tabletop and curls up into the corner, head resting on the cushion. Just a few minutes, then he’ll go back to his room for some sleep.

It doesn’t take long before he starts dozing off, the world around him slowly drifting away to the sound of Tony clacking away on his keyboard, until he’s soundly asleep.

However, his sleep is anything but restful. Perhaps it’s the recent visit to Asgard that’s been triggering those memories from his time spent in the dungeons as he awaited his trial; he doesn’t know – all he’s aware of is his dreaming mind being filled with scenes of those prison guards stopping by his cell to kick and punch at him, while hissing ominous threats of much worse to come. Detailed description of what they’ll do to him, should his sentence be imprisonment.

He wakes up with a cry on his lips, his body shivering and cold sweat covering his skin. Tony is there, right next to him, concern shining out of those brown eyes as they’re boring into his.

“Hey, are you alright?” the man asks, a hand lightly gripping Loki’s arm.
He’s not sure what to say to that, but he’s glad that Tony is there.

Damn, the god is paler than an anaemic ghost and shivering worse than a blob of Jell-O during an earthquake. Whatever he’s been dreaming, it must have been really shitty stuff.

“So, uh, it’s okay,” he tries as Loki offers no response to his question, not really knowing what else to say at that shell-shocked look on the god’s face. “It was just a nightmare,” he adds dumbly, then realizing with a sting of concern that this is not the first time he’s caught Loki in the throes of bad dreams. Recurring nightmares is something he’s unfortunately all too familiar with on a personal level, so he knows full well that there might be more to them than that.

“You know, sometimes it helps to… talk about it,” he offers, wincing inwardly while trying to keep a straight face. He sure as heck isn’t a qualified therapist or shrink and isn’t good at handling stuff like this. But Loki has no one else than him, of course, so he will have to make do.

At first, he doesn’t think that Loki is going to say anything on the subject; experiences resulting in nightmares tend to be pretty personal, after all.

But suddenly, as if a faucet has been turned on, the words are flowing forth like water as Loki is telling him about the guards tormenting him as he awaited his sentence in the dungeons, how they would amuse themselves with beating and hurting him. And then, as these pleasures started to wear old, they decided to spice them up by threatening to do things of another nature entirely. Horrible things, that luckily never came to fruition as Loki got carted off to Midgard instead, but the memories of the fear and desperation still linger.

While Tony can even now vividly recall the dark bruises marring Loki’s body as the god first came to his tower, he’d never known about the appalling threats, and it makes him really fucking angry, enough to want to smash whatever object happens to be the closest into tiny little pieces. But even more than that, he just wants to comfort the god, because he’s looking so impossibly lost and vulnerable like Tony can’t even believe it.

There was a time when he wouldn’t have even dreamed of doing this, but something inside of him is telling him that at this point, Loki won’t take it for anything else than what it’s meant to be.

So he scoots over the short distance separating them so that he ends up right next to Loki. After only a second of hesitation, he leans over and wraps his arms around the god, pulling him close into a
comforting embrace, hands on Loki’s back. Because despite what Tony might have pretended and whatever prideful facades he had wanted to uphold back then, he knows that he sure would have liked someone to do this for him all those nights when he woke up drenched in a cold sweat after coming home from Afghanistan.

“It’s alright,” he mumbles, not really knowing what to say, but feeling he should probably say something, no matter how daft and inane. “You’re safe here.”

Loki is still as a statue at first. Then a pair of arms, slowly and hesitantly at first, snake upwards to wrap themselves around Tony’s neck, pulling him tight.

The strong arms encircling him bring with them feelings of comfort and safety, so he greedily leans into the embrace as it becomes clear to him how much he’s yearned for these things.

He doesn’t want to let go – doesn’t want Tony to let go – so he pulls the man tighter as his heartbeat slows down and his shivering limbs relax once more. The warmth and closeness of Tony’s body is like oil on troubled water, like solid ground during an earthquake.

They sit there for a while, wrapped in each other. The intimate embrace is making the disturbing memories melt like ice in the sun, until it feels like they’re only distant fragments that the erosion of time will soon turn into nothing but dust.

Maybe it’s weakness taking a firm and unrelenting grip of him, and maybe he should be ashamed of himself for acting like this, to openly display such neediness and patheticness. But he can’t find it within him to care about any such. When it all comes down to it, Tony already knows his embarrassing weaknesses and insecurities; he’s told the man of the disgraceful things eating at him for so long – his frost giant heritage, his being considered argr, his failure to live up to Asgard’s expectations – and yet Tony hasn’t turned his back or mocked him. He’s seen Loki at his worst, and has still responded with acceptance.

And as he sits there in that frozen moment, revelling in the closeness, he can tell that his emotions are slowly starting to shift into another territory. Imperceptibly at first, but it gets more and more impossible to ignore as the moment draws on.

He isn’t sure whether it’s the warm patches of skin against his, the smell of the man’s cologne, or the stubble scratching his cheek that constitutes the prime driving force for his thoughts, but he finds
himself eagerly hoping that the hands on his back are about to do something more than simply resting there. That they will start roaming over his body, inch their way beneath his clothes, touch him in a far more intimate way than they currently are.

Coupled with those desires comes the wondering what Tony is thinking of right now; surely his mind must be heading down the same path as Loki’s own. After their time together in the Asgardian baths, Tony obviously knows at this point that his own desire is fully reciprocated, and being here in his tower, shielded from the public eye, he will have no reason to let himself be held back by his Midgardian notions that all and any sexual displays of affection must take place in private, like he had last time.

It would be the ideal opportunity, now that they’re so close already. The perfect occasion to let things progress naturally from here. So he inches a little bit closer, his forehead resting at the crook of Tony’s neck as he’s breathing in the pleasant smell of the man, certain that Tony won’t be able to resist for much longer.

But the hands still do nothing of the sort that he’s hoping for them to do; they just remain innocently resting on his back.

As a very vivid image of Tony taking him right there on the couch starts to unfold in his head, he’s just about to take matters into his own hands and offer the little push necessary for things to start moving. Let his teasing fingers start exploring Tony’s body, or perhaps pull the man in for a kiss. The specifics don’t matter, as long as it’s something that will inevitably turn the picture in his mind into glorious reality instead of letting it remain an enticing wish.

But in the end, he doesn’t, because he realizes then that Tony’s unspoken decision is right – this isn’t the time for it. And he wants his first time with Tony to be… special. He doesn’t want the moment to be marred with lingering memories of bad dreams, of dark dungeons and brutal guards and terrible threats. It deserves better than that.

No, it can wait. After all, they’ll have plenty of time for intimacy later on; none of it has to happen here and now.

So he resists the temptation, deciding to hold it off for some other, more appropriate time, knowing it will be for the better.

And that’s when he reluctantly lets go of the man whose arms are still embracing him, as he feels his previously calming heartbeat once more starting to speed up, though for entirely different reasons than before.
At that, Tony lets go too, pulling back a little as they disentangle themselves from each other. “You alright?” he asks, face slightly flushed but his eyes not leaving Loki’s for a second.

He nods. “I’m fine. Dreams are only dreams, after all.”

“Perhaps. But what’s causing them might not be something that should just be ignored like that, though,” Tony counters, apparently not willing to let the subject go quite yet.

“Nothing can change the past,” he says in reply, giving a shrug.

“No, nothing can,” Tony agrees. “But there’s still something that can make it easier to deal with. I found that out myself after being a prisoner in Afghanistan.”

And even though Barton has already told him bits and pieces of that, during a time that now seems very far away, hearing Tony elaborate on it in his own words – the imprisonment, the torture, the constant fear, the nightmares that followed – is another thing entirely. He never realized he could relate to it so much, and it makes him ache inside that Tony had to go through all of that.

Much later, as the harrowing story reaches its conclusion, Loki is silent for a while.

“And… what made it all easier?” he finally asks, unable to resist the temptation. Because he still wants to know.

Tony offers him the hint of a smile, cocking his head. “Something we both just did – simply talking about it.”
Once again, he’s sitting in Tony’s workshop as the man runs his tests, from the looks of it making at least some kind of progress. It’s been a long day, and the analyses have been numerous and drawn out, but Loki isn’t complaining. He enjoys watching the man work, as another part of him is fantasizing about them doing something far more interesting than sitting here surrounded by monitors and beeping instruments and technical equipment.

He’s tempted, then, to suggest to Tony that they take a little break and do things of a more exciting nature, but he doesn’t want to disturb Tony’s laser-like concentration on his work, so he decides that such a proposal is better left for later, once they’re finished for today.

In the meantime, he lets his mind play freely, makes it conjure its own erotic fantasies and daydreams as Tony fiddles with the bracelets and types away on his keyboard, humming to himself and occasionally offering some brief comment or humorous quip. It isn’t difficult to feed those imaginations when the man is so close to him, providing him with all kinds of alluring mental images.

The picture of Tony sitting in the bath in Asgard, naked and wet, resurfaces, and his inner eye delights in the image, taking in every detail and revelling in the memory – the muscles playing beneath the skin, the chiselled arms, the attractive profile, the unruly hair. He wants to touch them all, feel them under his fingers as they eagerly explore the well-toned body.

The only thing marring the memory is how it ended, with Tony forcefully removing his hand, telling him to leave. But since he understands why – Loki’s unrestrained actions had been a grave breach against Tony’s Midgardian sense of appropriate public conduct – he can deal with that. At least the man will surely be fully amenable next time Loki approaches him, now that they’re alone without the risk of prying eyes watching them. Or perhaps Tony will actually be the one to initiate things, though Loki doubts it, given how the man has been so utterly drawn in by his new workshop project that he’s been focusing all his time and his attention on it, to the exclusion of all else.

Impatiently, he hopes that today’s testing will be finished soon. His crotch is starting to strain beneath the desk, and he’s itching for release.

So he decides to ask, carefully, without hinting at the reason for his question since he doesn’t want to disrupt Tony’s focus on his work too much.

“Are there still a lot of tests left to run today?”
Tony looks up from his monitor, looking almost surprised that there is someone else in the room with him.

“Huh?” He blinks, half confused. Then: “Oh. No, not that many. Actually--” He glances at his wristwatch, and then darts up from his seat like it just caught fire. “Damn, I’m late for the inauguration ceremony at Town Hall! And I’m supposed to make a speech there… *fuck!*”

Disgruntled, he quickly dismantles the test equipment and pulls out a few cables, groaning to himself. “Got a little too caught up in things there. I’m afraid we have to cut this short and pick up where we left off tomorrow, because I won’t be back until late tonight.”

“I see,” Loki says, swallowing down his disappointment as Tony rushes out of the workshop with a quick ‘see you later’, leaving him alone with the plethora of machines and technical devices.

*Well, that’s a shame.* He had been hoping they could have rounded the testing session off in another way entirely.

His groin is still straining uncomfortably against the front of his pants, refusing to accept that the object of his desire is suddenly out of both sight and reach, and probably halfway out of the building at this point, judging by the speed with which Tony took off.

He sighs, restlessly drumming his fingers against the table top. Looks like he’ll have no choice but to take matters into his own hands, then, much as he would have preferred some *assistance*.

A few minutes later, he is back in his room, sinking down on the bed with his back propped up against the wall, head brimming with images of Tony in all sorts of compromising positions. Not wasting any time, he unbuckles his pants, pulling them down to his ankles, and then takes himself in hand. Giving the shaft an experimental first languid stroke, he exhales through parted lips at the pleasurable feeling the touch ignites.

He strokes again, a bit harder, leaning his head back as he indulges in the sensation. Then he closes his eyes, imagining that the hand wrapped around his length isn’t his own, but Tony’s. The man is there, sitting next to him, touching him, his breath hot on Loki’s face.

Whimsically, he can’t help but wonder if Jarvis is watching him. The concept is strange and gives him pause for a few seconds, even if he knows that the creation isn’t really sentient or even alive.
Doesn’t Tony feel like he’s under constant surveillance with Jarvis recording everything he does, observing him like an invisible but all-seeing eye?

Then again, maybe it’s not so different from Asgard, after all, with Heimdall the Watchman keeping a look-out on the Nine realms, fully able to turn his gaze anywhere he wants to, at any time. Of course, Heimdall doesn’t speak of what he sees to anyone but the King of Asgard, and he never hints or alludes to anyone what he might have spotted them doing. The things he sees are meant for the Allfather's ears alone.

Besides, after so many centuries of being all-seeing, the charms of spying in on people’s private affairs are bound to have worn off long ago.

But the idea that Jarvis might be watching him won’t let him go. So he imagines that the AI creation is recording what he’s doing, and then showing the footage to Tony as he returns home. Or, even better, sending it directly to Tony, to one of his portable technical devices that enable him to watch the proceedings as they happen.

The thought makes his groin twitch, and he groans as he slides himself down the wall, into a half-lying, half-sitting position. His hand clamps a bit tighter, increasing the sweet pressure.

He imagines Tony, wherever he is at the moment, watching in satisfaction as Loki touches himself. Maybe even reaching down to touch himself in response.

And really, he would like to have seen that. So he pictures it in his mind – Tony sitting there half-naked, just like him, hand wrapped around his own shaft, eyes squinted shut and face contorted in pleasure. The image is mesmerizing, beautiful, even, and he licks his lips as his fingers stroke over his head, squeezing insistently.

Though he has never seen Tony in a situation like this, he can picture the man being someone to indulge fully in his own desires, someone who’d give in to them without putting up even an inkling of resistance. Neither holding back nor allowing himself to be held back. Just letting himself be guided by pure, unadulterated lust, without shame or false modesty marring the moment or his enjoyment of it.

So he watches with his inner eye as Tony pleasures himself, his hand moving in forceful, rhythmic tugs over his own length. At first, the man’s eyes are closed, but then he suddenly opens them, staring straight into Loki’s, the raw desire pooling in them hitting him with full force.
Groaning, he bucks upward, pushing into his own hand. With a strenuous effort, he slows the pace down a little, desperately wanting to draw this out. The fantasy is too alluring, too pleasurable to end so soon, despite the insistences of his eager body.

Then, Tony is sitting in the chair next to his bed, watching him, telling him exactly where and how he wants Loki to touch himself.

And he does, spreading his legs for Tony’s benefit, arching his back and bucking, allowing the man a full view of his body as he works away at it, teasing, prodding, and exploring. Trying to take things slowly, despite the burning desire that’s building up in his lower stomach.

And Tony tells him that he looks fucking hot like that, and that the display is making his own cock so hard that he could come any goddamn second from merely watching.

His hand tightens its grip as it starts to move at a faster pace, the touch sending waves of pleasure through his body. And it feels so good, the way it’s spreading through his being, reaching into his very essence, as he looks into those brown eyes that are gazing hungrily at his body, drinking in every movement and facial expression.

Then the mental image shifts, and he finds himself lying on his back on the bed, Tony hovering above him on all fours, hands splayed on either side of Loki’s shoulders and knees nudging his thighs. He’s wearing those black leather pants he had worn that one time in Asgard, but nothing else, the big bulge at the front impossible to miss.

Tony reaches out a hand to cup Loki’s face, thumb trailing over his cheek. “Tell me Loki,” he says, voice dark and husky. “Tell me what you want.”

And he tells him – in exquisite detail – how he wants Tony naked, how he wants Tony’s hands to touch every inch of his body, how he wants to feel Tony inside of him.

And the man grants him his every wish, until, finally, Loki is on his hands and knees, Tony behind him, pushing inside. A whimper escapes his lips as the man’s length enters him and then turns into a throaty moan as Tony starts moving, thrusting in and out of him with hard, fast strokes.

Kicking off the pants still nestled around his ankles, he lets his other hand move down to grab hold of his balls, squeezing them softly in his palm. He imagines Tony’s hand reaching around to close around his shaft, stroking just as hard and fast as he is thrusting.
He slides further down the wall still, hips bucking, a glistening film of sweat covering his body. The fantasy is so wonderful and feels so tantalizingly real.

Then, he’s lying on his back, legs over Tony’s shoulders, ankles locked behind the man’s neck. Tony’s face is only inches away from his, and he growls as he pushes himself in all the way to the hilt, sending spasms of pleasure through his body. It feels so good, and he’s not far from climaxing, but struggles to hold it off for a little while longer, as he pictures Tony thrusting again and again, forcefully, but tirelessly.

His hand is moving faster now; he’s almost there and the pressure beneath is growing unbearable. So he tightens his grip, imagining Tony spending himself inside of him, head thrown back as his release washes over him. A few more tugs, and he is there too, crying out as he comes, warm fluid spilling all over his stomach as his body shudders and trembles.

For a while, he just lies there, panting heavily. It takes several minutes before his breath has returned to normal speed, and then he closes his eyes and lets his head sink back into the pillow, imagining a hand softly stroking his hair.
Chapter 115

Chapter Notes

This chapter might seem like a filler, but it’s actually important for things-to-come.

“So how did your speech go yesterday?” Loki asks the man sipping on his ubiquitous cup of steaming coffee on the other side of the breakfast table while absentmindedly flipping through the paper spread out in front of him.

Tony shrugs at the question and waves a hand as he looks up from his reading material. “Meh. Done better, done worse. But at least I was sober this time.” He grins crookedly, as if the comment has prompted a memory of a particularly amusing event.

“Anything exciting that got inaugurated?” Perhaps trying to learn a little more about Midgardian culture would be a good idea since he’s most likely going to be staying here long-term. Finding out what things are considered important among the humans and what feat would merit a celebration like that couldn’t hurt, after all.

“Not really,” Tony says, a blasé taint in his voice. “They finished digging some tunnel or the other that will be taken into use next week. Will make traffic flow a little smoother, I suppose, and make all those commuters spend a few minutes less of their precious time in their cars every day.”

Well, that doesn’t sound very exciting, he has to admit. “Something like that is considered worthy of a ceremony here in Midgard?” he asks, not sure he understands the reason. In Asgard, official ceremonies like that would not be held for such plain and mundane things like infrastructure, but for successful battle campaigns and the like.

Tony raises an amused eyebrow in his direction. “Okay, it might not be like over in Magic Kingdom where people have to slay fire-spitting dragons in order to merit hoopla like that, but it’s still pretty dangerous work, I guess, digging around in and blasting away all that rock. I sure as heck wouldn’t wanna do it.”

“Well, I assume you have slaves to perform that kind of work, do you not,” he says, realization dawning a second later that this is the first time he has ever brought up the subject of slavery here in Midgard with Tony. And even though it’s not an enjoyable topic of discussion, perhaps it would be to his benefit to find out a bit more about it, given that he might very well be here for the duration. To learn what kind of work slaves are used for here, what is generally expected of them, and how much
of a difference there is between Asgard and Midgard in these regards. It would seem that there is quite a lot to be sure.

Tony gives him a very odd look as the cup in his hand comes to a halt halfway to his mouth before he sets it down without drinking. “You know, I’m going to pretend I didn’t hear that, because I’m sure that since your being express-delivered to my doorstep, there’s just no way that I could have failed to mention that slavery is not allowed here anymore.”

And of course, he does remember an unhappy and displeased Tony telling Loki’s guards, on the very day he arrived here, that slavery is indeed an outlawed practice in Midgard. But he had still assumed that despite it being technically outlawed, there would still be people – either rich and powerful enough to be above the law, or shady and disreputable enough to slink beneath it – that would be keeping slaves anyway.

Because at the end of the day, laws never prevented people from doing things. He can personally testify to that, with all the Asgardian rules and regulations and decrees he has broken over the centuries, sometimes getting caught, sometimes getting away scot-free. It’s the way of the world – whenever there is a prohibition, there will always be someone around to break it. Sure there are bans in Asgard on certain magical artefacts, and some seidr-practitioners (himself included) would still create and use them; laws against theft, and still the set of golden dinner plates in the royal household has to be supplemented every year to make up for the parts that have gone “missing”; as well as strong social taboos against sleeping with another man’s wife, and yet single combats are being fought over such matters on a semi-regular basis.

Besides, a general ban on keeping slaves would make perfect sense if such commodities were in short supply, ensuring that the few slaves available could all be directed to the government and other official bodies for their use, or to the higher classes in Midgardian society. That would have made sense; allowing powerful people to keep them, though it would not be spoken of or admitted to openly, despite everyone knowing of its existence.

“You have mentioned it,” he agrees, unwilling to let the subject go just yet. “But I fail to understand why this should be so. Because who among your people will then do all the dirty and hard and dangerous labour that no one else wants to take on?”

Tony makes a grimace. “Uh, we have machines, robots, technology for that. And if not, people are paid to do it. You know, if you wave enough money around, you’ll find takers for even the shittiest jobs imaginable. You don’t have to enslave people for that.”

And it’s strange, because the last time he had visited Midgard before his more recent stint, almost a millennia ago now, there had certainly been slaves. He had travelled the realm of the mortals then, from one end to the other, exploring the lands in the hopes he would come across some useful
knowledge worth taking back with him. But Midgard had seemed so… dull and hopelessly behind back then, and he had quickly lost interest and left. There were other realms that had considerably more to offer.

“Then what about captured enemies?” he asks, brow furrowed. “You still wage plenty of wars here in Midgard, after all, perhaps even more so than we do in Asgard.”

Tony looks surprised by the question. “Uh, yeah, see, we don’t actually *enslave* them,” he says, fiddling around with the cup in his hand. “We just, you know, keep them locked up in guarded camps to stop them from fighting and killing us anymore. Besides, we have this fancy agreement called the Geneva Convention nowadays that prohibits stuff like that. Well, in theory at least. You might want to have a look at it some day, might be an interesting read for you.”

Perhaps he will, some day. But right now, he wants to hear this from Tony.

“Why did you stop keeping slaves? Were they no longer considered useful, with all the machines you’ve built to serve you?” Before the question has left his mouth, he knows that can’t be the answer. After all, machines can’t serve as bed slaves, nor could a machine ever be as versatile in its uses as a living person.

Tony is silent for a while before answering, as if he’s grasping for words that aren’t quite coming to him, which is probably a rather unusual experience for the man. Finally, he leans back in his chair, raking a hand through his hair. “Well, as I think I may have mentioned before, we have something called human rights. A pretty recent concept, I give you that, considering the long history of mankind, but it means that you can’t do shit to people like enslave them or randomly kill or hurt them, because there are standards as to how people can be treated. Like you can’t torture them or subject them to cruelty and stuff like that. Or take away their rights to make choices for themselves as opposed to having them forced upon their heads by other people.” He throws Loki a surreptitious glance. “Might be hard to understand if you haven’t grown up with values like that, because I’m not sure it’s even possible to explain them in words. You have to sort of just… get them.”

“I… see,” he says, pondering Tony’s words for a few moments, twisting them around in his head so that he can look at them from every possible angle. Trying to get them to realign with everything he’s learned of Midgard so far. Everything he’s learned from Tony so far. And perhaps there is an explanation in there that does make sense, after all.

“So you made these laws, then, in order to ensure that even those who are weak and powerless or otherwise unable to claim any rights for themselves can still have them?” he finally asks, after the silence has stretched on for a while.
Tony turns the gaze that’s gone straying back to him, a hint of surprise in his face. “I guess you could say that, yeah.”

Again, they sit in silence for a while.

And perhaps, after all his time here, after all that has happened, he can actually understand what Tony is getting at. Though it’s so counterintuitive, because it’s not how things are done in Asgard, not at all what he’s used to. Not terribly long ago, he would have said that this Midgardian concept felt wrong, that it only showcased weakness – isn’t that what anyone in Asgard would have said? – but now it just feels like… something he should be able to grow accustomed to.

“So according to your Midgardian system, even I as a slave would be entitled to these… rights?” It’s a foreign concept, hard to wrap his head around, that a society would grant rights to slaves beyond those which their masters choose to give them and that can of course be taken away at any time.

Tony offers him an exasperated look. “Yes. But you’re not actually a slave. Not here, anyway. To be honest, I don’t know *what* your status is, really, but regardless of what Asgard might think, you’re not a slave on this planet, at least. Stop thinking of yourself like that. If nothing else, our laws forbid slavery, and even if they didn’t, I still wouldn’t think of you as one.”

He considers that for a little while. And he likes the idea, that despite what Asgard thinks, at least here in Midgard he would not be considered a slave, and not only by Tony.

And one thing is clear – Tony certainly hasn’t been treating him like one.

And perhaps that is what truly matters.

Tony can’t help but feel a little stupid as they’re cleaning the breakfast table off, him wiping the breadcrumbs to the floor with a quick swipe of his hand. Dummy will take care of them later anyway.

After all his time here, it had still not gotten through Loki’s skull that slavery is indeed not practiced here in the States, not even on the side?
Or perhaps more importantly, if he’s going to be a little self-critical here, it also hadn’t sunken into his head that Loki hadn’t quite realized that little detail, still being stuck on how things are done back in Medieval Disneyland. And really, why should he, given the relatively limited experience the god has had with current Earth and its practices so far?

But perhaps there was indeed something that had clicked during their little conversation today. At least that was the impression he had gotten, having almost been able to see the cogs turn inside of Loki’s head. As stuck as the god had once been in his old concepts he’d brought with him from Asgard, he’s now obviously able to look at things from another point of view and has acquainted himself with another way of thinking.

And it’s interesting, despite Loki not having grown up with any concepts of human or alien rights, he had still seemed to grasp the idea quickly enough. Enough to understand by now that Tony doesn’t consider him his slave and would never treat him like one.

And perhaps that is what truly matters.
Tony suppresses a yawn as the end credits are finally rolling by on the screen before him; he should have realized beforehand that a movie containing both the words “ultimate” and “vengeance” in the title would turn out to be shitty.

He reaches for the remote, something he should have done a long time ago, but for some reason he still decided to sit this sorry excuse for a movie out until the bitter end, despite being on the verge of falling asleep more than once.

Speaking of falling asleep, there’s someone else right next to him who has obviously done just that. Someone who has imperceptibly drifted closer and closer, until his head only a moment ago came to rest on Tony’s chest like he’s some kind of fluffy pillow.

He looks down at the mop of black hair, wincing. It's an awkward position to fall asleep in to be sure, and he should just rustle Loki awake even if the god will no doubt be terribly embarrassed finding himself like this, and he groans inwardly at the awkwardness that is bound to follow.

Though, if he’s lucky, maybe he can gently push Loki upright without waking him and arrange him into a proper sitting position so that the god will be none the wiser when he wakes up.

He reaches out a hand for Loki’s shoulder, hoping he can carefully disentangle their bodies before Loki realizes what has transpired. A part of him is protesting this action, wanting to first take a moment to revel in the illusion that Loki is indeed very much awake and aware, having wilfully nuzzled up to him like this and sought the close proximity out by his own volition.

*If only.*

And just then, Loki stirs. Not much, just a slight shift in the body pressed close against his, but it’s enough to startle Tony who is a mere fraction of a second away from pushing Loki off with perhaps a bit more force than necessary, when he freezes, unable to move at all.

Because there is suddenly a hand travelling up beneath his T-shirt to languidly trail over his abs, a smooth palm rubbing over his skin in a gentle caress. And it’s not just any casual touch, but one undeniably and decidedly seductive, as the body leans in a little closer, snuggling up to Tony like a cat.
For a moment he can only sit there in horrified disbelief, too taken aback to move. So Loki still thinks that Tony expects this shit from him, despite his having made it clear, and more than once, even, that this is most definitely not in the contract? This is so many shades of wrong, and it stirs up all those feelings of revulsion and horror he remembers so well from Asgard when realizing just what kind of lives slaves are living there; what kind of degradations they have no choice but submitting to. What Loki had expected Tony to do to him when he came to his tower. As if all that was okay. As if things like that could ever be okay.

And for some fucked-up reason that he can’t even begin to unravel, Loki still seems to believe that he owes Tony this.

*God-fucking-damnit.*

His temporary paralyzes lets up, then, and he snaps like a spring suddenly released. More forcefully than he intended, he grabs hold of Loki’s wrists to push them away, the sudden movement making them both loose their balance and tumble over so that Loki ends up flat on his back, Tony pinning the god’s wrists down to either side of his head and straddling the lean body beneath his own.

And damn, that was not the position he had been aiming for.

He blinks a few times, not quite sure what just happened. Mere seconds ago, he was lying comfortably snuggled up against Tony, about to move onto more interesting things, when the man suddenly grabbed him and pushed him flat onto his back, pinning his wrists down.

Looking up into the brown eyes hovering above his, he can immediately tell that they’re not pleased in the slightest, as if Loki has done something Terribly Wrong rather than inviting something he knows that Tony wants from him. And he can’t for the life of him make sense of that reaction, because he is fully aware, without the shadow of a doubt, what it is that Tony desires. And he doesn’t like it one bit; he thought he had come to understand the man by now after so many misunderstandings.

Tony quickly lets go of his wrists and sits back up on his haunches, still not looking happy. “In case you haven’t noticed, we’re not in Asgard anymore,” he says sharply with animated hand gestures to underline every syllable. “You don’t have to act out this fucking facade any longer. And just what part of this isn’t expected from you was it that you didn’t understand when I explained it to you last time? *Huh?* Why do you keep doing this?” The last few words are almost yelled in apparent frustration.
And as Loki gingerly scrambles himself up into a sitting position, realization dawns. Suddenly, it is all making sense as the far-strewn pieces of the puzzle are finally congregating, clicking into place.

Tony thinks he’s merely pretending interest, because this is how slaves are supposed to behave in regards to their masters. Somehow, Tony has failed to pick up on what Loki had assumed was fully obvious and far beyond doubt at this point – that Loki actually desires him. All those clues so liberally sprinkled, and Tony had in his preconceived notions managed to miss out on every single one of them. The absurdity makes a bubble of laughter rise in his throat, but he pushes it back down. He gets the feeling that laughing is not the proper reaction right now.

The idea that Tony somehow should believe that Loki doesn’t actually want him, that it’s all a show he’s putting on, is almost farcical, but it definitely puts things into a new perspective that makes a lot of things suddenly make sense. Yes, it all comes together now – the incident in the Asgardian baths, Tony’s indifference to him when they had shared a bed, his failure to pick up on Loki’s unspoken desire that they proceed further.

And throughout all of this, Loki had been so sure that he had interpreted the situation correctly, and now it turns out that Tony had been totally oblivious all along to what Loki had been feeling and attempting. Oh, the irony.

He studies the man sitting there, his posture and expression oddly reminiscent of a wet poodle. Most of all, he would have liked to whisk that sad expression off with a caress of his hand, but he is well aware that such an action might not go over well right now and he would be better off using his words this time.

“I see now. You are under the impression that I am merely pretending all this, that I do not harbour any real desire for you and it’s all a show I’m putting on,” he says, and the look on Tony’s face makes it perfectly clear that his assumptions are correct. Well, he figured that much.

“Let me I assure you, then, that nothing could be further from the truth,” he continues, leaning back against the armrest, amazed that he actually has to spell things out like this. He doesn’t remember any of his previous partners ever being so slow on the uptake when he had showed an interest in them. “Because I do desire you greatly, Tony. Why do you at all think I decided to touch you so intimately in the Asgardian baths, full well knowing you would not want an unwilling bed partner? Did you really think I merely did so because it was what a slave was expected to do? That I did not do so fully out of my own volition when seeing your naked body displayed before me like that?”

As his words sink in, he can almost see something visibly shift in the man’s face, as if a possibility that he has never even entertained is suddenly brought out for evaluation and careful consideration.
And suddenly Tony doesn’t look so certain anymore, like there has been a seed of doubt planted in his carefully laid out model of how the world works, or at least how he thinks it is supposed to work.

And Loki is determined to let that seed bloom out into a fully grown tree.

It’s like his whole world has been turned upside down in an instant, and all from a few words from the god before him. Truth be told, he had never even considered this, not even once entertained the possibility that Loki might feel any sort of attraction towards him. Not after all that has happened, not after his initial expectations, not after… everything. It just couldn’t be possible. He had sure imagined it – lots of times, even – but never deluded himself into thinking that those daydreams were anything more than mere fantasies. But now Loki is sitting here right in front of him telling him that…

A part of him – a part far below his brain – is rejoicing, whispering to him, isn’t this what you’ve always wanted, but his bigger head cannot acquiesce so easily. It just can’t happen, there is no way Loki could have any such feelings for him, it’s just not possible.

No. Loki even contemplated killing himself over those expectations of Tony… doing things to him. Of course, it was a long time ago, and surely everything has changed to be unrecognizable in comparison to the sad state of things back then, but still…

But could it truly be as Loki says? That he does desire Tony? There is no discernable reason for the god to lie, nothing for him to gain by pretending. But the thought is staggering – had he really grown an attraction to Tony somewhere along the way, ending with him coming onto him so no-nonsensely in the bath house, while Tony had been so certain that the god would shudder at the mere idea of touching him in any sexual way whatsoever?

That doesn’t make sense, does it?

“But you even said so yourself, when I asked you about it, right after we came back to my tower,” he manages, voice sounding choked and flustered in his own ears, “that when you… touched me back then it was only something you did because it was ingrained Asgardian behaviour?”

Loki stares at him in silence for several long seconds, and then his face shifts as if there is some kind of insight coming to life inside of his head.
“I never said any of the sorts,” the god counters decisively. “I thought you were talking about the general aspects of how I had been behaving as would be expected of a slave in Asgard. Not what happened in the baths.”

“Oh.” The dumb-founded syllable sounds as stupid as Tony is feeling.

“But why? Why… me? Why would you feel any attraction to me?” he asks, and it’s so bizarre hearing those words from his own lips. Never before has he questioned why someone would be attracted to him. No, not him, the great Tony Stark, with more admirers than he could shake a pointy stick at. Desire levelled into his direction had always been something he had taken for granted, never stopping to consider it further. But hearing such a statement from Loki’s lips is just unfathomable.

“Why not?” Loki asks, moving slightly closer. “You have shown me kindness, concern, consideration, compassion, thoughtfulness, anything anyone could ever ask from a partner.” A short pause, during which Loki’s lips tug upward in a smile. “And as if all that was not enough, you are also highly… pleasing to the eye, even by the standards of a god.”

Whoa. Well, he can’t really argue the last part, and he supposes the first part is sorta true as well. He does care for Loki, very much so, and despite the miserable start they got off on, he likes to think that he has made up for his deplorable and careless behaviour since.

But be that as it may, there is still something else, an unchangeable state of things. And that is what’s holding him back, why he can’t just simply accept this, much as he would have liked to.

“I can’t say that I’m not… flattered,” he manages, knowing it’s a stupid word to use to describe his feelings, but it will have to do. There are more important matters to address here. “But there’s still the not-so-little detail that you’re technically my slave, Loki. And major power differences like that generally don’t make for free and unaffected decisions. Or good… relationships. How could I possibly do something like this in good conscience? You know, I might not have gone through life with very many inhibitions or second thoughts when it comes to sexual stuff, but this is just on a totally different scale. Because no matter how you choose to look at it, you’re still my freaking slave.” Maybe he’s rambling, but whatever; he couldn’t care less right now.

Loki doesn’t move from the spot, but he cocks an eyebrow into Tony’s direction.

“Well, that’s strange, because I remember very well how you told me the other day that you didn’t consider me your slave? That you would never look upon me as if I were?” he challenges, voice even and yet pointed.
Tony grimaces at his words coming back to bite him in the ass, twisting in his seat. “Well yeah, but…” True, he doesn’t consider Loki his slave, but… there’s always the ‘but’.

As his words trail off, Loki pushes on. “And you also said that here in Midgard, everyone is free to make choices for themselves, as opposed to having them forced upon their heads by other people.” He makes a slight pause, watching Tony’s face. “So consider this to be my choice. You are my choice. And if you truly meant all the pretty things you said to me about your Midgardian rights, if they were not merely empty words without substance, if you truly do not see me as a slave, then you will let me have this choice – the choice of a free man.”

And wow, is the Silvertongue ever back in action. Making him look like a hypocrite, saying one thing but not really meaning it when push comes to shove.

“When, Loki?” he asks, knowing he has to hear the answer. “When did you start to see me… in this way?”

Loki looks away for a while, as if reminiscing. Then, his gaze returns to Tony again. “I guess it grew slowly. I’m not even sure when it began. But I can say with certainty, when we were sharing that bed in Asgard, and you rutted against me in your sleep, moaning my name as you did, I did not feel any discomfort whatsoever, only desire.”

Tony can feel his eyes growing wide as saucers as his mouth falls open. “I did what?”

Loki grins, a twinkle of amusement in his eyes. “You seemed to be having a very, should I say, pleasurable dream. And not long after, it turned out I had one myself, with you in the starring role.”

Oh fuck. His groin twists at that, and his mouth has suddenly gone very dry. Loki, harbouring that kind of dream about him?

“You’re serious about this, aren’t you?” The question hangs in the air for a while, so oddly discrepant. Loki, desiring him, wanting him, dreaming about him… He barely even notices the nod that Loki gives in response.

And maybe he shouldn’t, maybe it’s not right, but so help him all the powers of the universe, he can’t stop himself. It’s like his body is moving by its own volition as it slowly leans forward until their faces are only inches apart. But as he can feel Loki’s body heat radiating from his skin, he
freezes in place, as if intercepted by an invisible wall, hesitant to go any further.

It’s Loki who closes the remaining distance between them, as he brushes his lips against Tony’s in something that is almost too soft to be called a kiss, but it doesn’t matter. It makes his whole body shudder nevertheless and tingles of electricity shoot across his skin.

And as they kiss again, Loki’s arms reaching up to encircle his neck, he can’t help but think of that old cliché about how something that feels this good could never truly be wrong.
Chapter 117

Loki tastes like wine and earth and desire, all merged into one powerful blend of exhilaration. It’s like getting drunk, only better, and without the hangover too.

And if there will indeed be one pounding his head to pieces tomorrow, he couldn’t care less. He is vaguely aware of hands in his hair, grabbing, stroking, pulling him closer, and he gives into them, unable to do anything else.

After an endless moment that is far too short, when Tony realizes that his lungs are screaming at him for air, he pulls away his mouth from Loki’s, gasping, though not only because of a lack of oxygen. The eyes meeting his are glittering and dark with lust – and Tony has had enough partners in his life to recognize true, honest desire when he sees it. And it’s all there, pooling in Loki’s eyes to the point of overflowing. Desire for him.

The god’s lips are parted, and Tony can see the tip of a tongue resting against lips wet from their shared kiss. Pulling his gaze away is impossible; he stares into the mesmerizing face unable to look elsewhere.

“You’re beautiful,” he breaths, hearing how inane the words are sounding before they have even left his lips, but Loki doesn’t laugh. Instead, he smiles like it’s a well-crafted compliment straight out of those skaldic poems his people favour and not something a fifteen year old love-struck kid would say on his first date.

“So are you, Tony,” the god says in reply, reaching up a hand to let his fingers trail along Tony’s cheek, his chin, and up his other cheek, and then back the way they came.

And he startles at that, because he seriously doesn’t remember anyone ever calling him beautiful before. Good-looking, attractive, hot, a sexy beast, America’s most desirable bachelor, and innumerous other things, yes, but never beautiful.

But the god is looking at him like he’s admiring a painting, a work of art, as his fingers explore Tony’s face. The tingles of the feather-light touches are sending shivers up his spine, and make his entire body shiver in imagination of the what pleasures would await him under those skilful fingers. Loki’s eyes never leaves Tony’s face, even though his eyelids snaps half-shut as Tony raises a hand to cup the god’s cheek in turn.
Loki suddenly pushes into him, and they topple over on the couch, bodies pressed close. It’s odd how it’s possible to be so aware of someone else’s presence, they way they smell, the heat radiating from their body, the sound of hastened breaths in their throat. In that moment, it is as if everything else around him has ceased existing, and the universe has been reduced to a swivel of black hair and a pair of green eyes and a sinfully slithering body. His thoughts and mind are gone, leaving only his five senses, filled to the brim with the impressions of the god beneath him.

And so, he pulls up the hem of Loki’s shirt, plunging his hands beneath the cloth. He can hear the sharp intake of breath from the god as his palms make contact with the smooth skin, caressing it with long, eager strokes. A heartbeat later, Loki’s hands reach down and pull the shirt of with one swift, forceful motion, and Tony thinks he hears the sound of a seam ripping.

Then the shirt is gone from his view to be replaced with a vast expanse of perfect, pale skin. The view is gorgeous, almost breathtaking. In awed fascination, his fingers run over the toned chest, callous thumb brushing over a nipple that stiffens in response to the touch.

He sits up, removing his own shirt, tossing the totally unnecessary thing to the floor, glad to be rid of it. Loki is looking up at him in his half-undressed state in a clear display of admiration, as he lifts a hand towards the arc reactor in Tony’s chest, his lips parting.

Fingers brush over the metal, trailing along the edge. The light from the reactor reflects on Loki’s fingers, making them look as if they’re glowing with magic, blue and mysterious, like they belong to another world entirely. He never remembers his own fingers doing that whenever they touched the damn thing.

“You know,” Loki says with a whisper, “I can feel this too. The power that runs through it, the way it’s pulsating, the force field surrounding it.”

“And how does it feel?” he asks, curious despite the question kind of ruining the moment. The stubborn scientist in him wants to know.

“Like magic,” Loki answers with a quirk of his lips. Then he leans forward until his face is almost pressed into Tony’s chest. A second later, his tongue flickers out as he licks over the reactor with slow, deliberate moves. And Tony just sits there, watching in fascination as Loki’s tongue slithers across the glass and metal, eyes brimming with lust and desire, his lips occasionally brushing against the blank surface as he laps away.

And even if Tony can’t feel a thing from it, it’s still hot as hell. His cock gets hard just watching this display of the god of mischief licking his chest like he’s the embodiment of wanton lust and sinful
desire, his gaze eventually lifting to meet with Tony’s again.

And damn, if the look in those eyes doesn’t make him almost come on the spot before he’s even gotten his pants off.

Loki returns his face to his chest, but this time he doesn’t go for the arc reactor; instead his tongue seeks out a nipple, circling around it with slow movements. Tony hisses, and the tongue starts moving downwards, trailing across the muscles in his chest, teeth lightly nibbling as the mouth moves over heated skin, leaving a trail of steaming wetness in its wake.

The tongue reaches his stomach, and a breath hitches in Tony’s throat. Loki’s hands are moving over his sides, caressing, touching, hot on his skin like burning ember. It is as if electricity is tingling up and down his body, and all from some simple touches. If he hadn’t known better, he’d say the god was still full of all his fairy magic.

“You have a god of sex up there in Asgard?” he asks, voice throaty in his ears. “Because if you don’t, I’d nominate you for the title.”

Loki stops and grins at him, chin still resting on his stomach. “No, but we do have a goddess of love. And I hear she’s worthy of her title,” he says with crooked grin, a hand lazily trailing over Tony’s side.

He pulls the god up and on top of him, burying his face in the crook of Loki’s neck, for a moment content to only breathe in the husky smell of him. He smells like sex and desire and wanton lust. So Tony nuzzles the soft skin, inhaling deeply, enjoying the way the god’s body tenses above his and the little squeak escaping his lips.

A moment later, they’re kissing again, a greedy meeting of lips and tongues, exploring, teasing, tasting. And Loki tastes just as good as he smells. So Tony sticks his tongue even deeper inside the wet heat, pushing harder as the god’s tongue similarly pushes into him. His arms wrap around the lean frame already pressed close to him, pulling Loki even tighter as his hands move over the arching back.

As their lips unlock, Loki is panting like he’s just run a marathon and the colour in his eyes seems to have deepened several shades, from gleaming emerald into the dark hues of a pine forest. One of Tony’s hands reaches up to rake through Loki’s hair, about to pull him in for another kiss, but then stopping. *Maybe it’s a stupid question, but…*
“You think Heimdall might be watching?” And fuck, wouldn’t that be the weirdest shit ever, having a thousands of years old god watching him having sex with another thousands of years old god.

Loki laughs, and it’s like summer breezes and silver and rustling leaves all in one. “Then let him. He always was a sex-starved old pervert anyway.”

“You think he would report it to the Allfather?” Best to ask, because he really doesn’t want any form of... incident, after all.

Another laugh. “He would not. Should Heimdall happen to lay his eyes on us, he will be most content to watch, I assure you.” He pulls Tony in for another kiss, laughter still on his lips.

Then a hand trails down to the front of his pants, giving the growing bulge a light, teasing squeeze. Reflexively, Tony bucks upwards and into the body sitting in his lap, straddling him.

Oh yes.

Fingers are fumbling at his belt, and the faint click as it unbuckles is strangely beautiful. The buttons are next; one by one, they are undone to release him from the straining confines that are his pants. It’s almost unreal, that this is truly happening, that Loki is doing this to him, all wanton and willing...

And he’s so fucking hard that he can’t help but bucking into that hand that’s removing his clothes, desperate for the promised touch of those long-fingered hands. Somehow, he still manages to lie down on his back and lift his ass as his jeans are slid off, to be followed by his underwear.

Loki’s eyes are locked onto his, not leaving his face for a second, like they’re drinking in the sight as it contorts with pleasure, confining it to memory. And the hand that wraps itself around his cock is even better than he remembers from that one time in the Asgardian baths. He grinds against it before Loki has barely even closed his fingers around him, knowing he’s acting like a virgin teenager, but not caring in the slightest.

The first, slow stroke is languid and sensual, drawing a breathy moan from his lips. Then the hand lets go to let a finger move along the length of his shaft, from the hilt and all the way to the tip, then teasing as it caresses light circles around the head.

It’s torture, beautiful torture, and just about as he can’t take it anymore, the hand closes in a firm grip
around his cock again and starts moving with hard, decisive strokes. And it feels so good.

“Ah…” he moans, hands gripping the couch beneath him. “Loki…”

“I take it you like that, then?” Loki says huskily as he looks up from his ministrations, amusement twinkling in his eyes.

“Damn, where did you get so good at this?” he pants, not really expecting an answer, but getting one anyway.

“I’m two thousands years old, give or take a century or two. You tend to pick up on a thing or two after having lived so long,” the god whispers seductively.

Fuck, that’s so hot.

And Loki is sitting there still with his pants on, which isn’t acceptable at all. So he pushes himself up into a half-sitting position, hands eagerly grabbing for the waistline of the god’s sweatpants. He’s distinctively grateful he isn’t wearing jeans; he isn’t sure his hands would have been able to handle obstacles like buttons and zippers in their current unsteady state.

Loki lifts his hips as Tony shimmies his pants and underwear down with one decisive motion, revealing a hard, already glistening erection. Not wasting any more precious time, Tony’s hand reaches out for the glorious sight, revelling in the feel of hot, soft skin as his hand closes around the thick shaft.

As he starts to stroke the god, Loki’s head lolls backwards and he hisses, almost like a cat. The animalistic sound is tantalizingly erotic, and his hand rubs harder, feeling the shaft swell under his ministrations. He could probably come from this alone, rubbing the god’s cock while watching him writhe in pleasure.

But Loki has other ideas. Before Tony can finish him off, the god pushes him off, though it looks like it takes a monumental effort for him to do that. “Lie down, Tony,” he says instead, two hands pressing down on his shoulders.

And Tony obeys, unable to deny those hands anything.
Loki is towering above him, moving a leg over his body so he can straddle him. A hand grabs his hip, and another his cock. A second later, Loki’s head is bent down over him and a tongue is swirling over his head, lapping at the glistening wetness already leaking out.

It’s like his entire groin has been ignited with dancing fire. Unable to control himself, he grabs hold of Loki’s head and hair with both hands, pressing him down. Loki willingly obliges and takes all of Tony into his mouth, greedily sucking on the shaft as he lets him slide in, impossibly deep. The simultaneous press of a tongue along his length is almost too much, as the god sucks him with an intensity like he’s waited his entire life to do just this one thing on Tony’s couch.

He would have asked Loki if this is where his epithet Silvertongue comes from, if it hadn’t been for the realization that it’s probably one of the oldest jokes in Asgard, and the fact that he doesn’t think he would be able to get anything out of his mouth other than wordless groans right now.

*He’s almost there, only a little bit more…* and Loki pulls Tony out of his mouth to look up at him, lips wet and open and fucking sexy.

“I wouldn’t mind continuing, but I’d rather have you finish… elsewise,” he says in a voice that makes Tony’s breath constrict and his cock harden like there’s no tomorrow.

*Oh yes.*

He has to swallow before he’s able to speak, and then it’s only with an effort he manages to get the words out. “Just let me get… some lube. I have it… right over here.”

Tony is nothing but prepared when it comes to such important matters as sex, and it’s not the first time his couch has been used for similar encounters, so in the lowermost drawer right behind them there is a little jar waiting to be used for happy occasions. He takes it out, and unscrews the lid, fumbling slightly. Loki is already looking at him expectantly, legs spread, as Tony sits down on the couch again.

His fingers wisp around in the jar of lube, coating his fingers with a generous amount of gooey stuff. Then he leans over the god, one hand splayed next to him for support. Fingers slick, he rubs against Loki’s opening, carefully slipping a finger inside. He is rewarded with a moan and a bucking of hips. Slowly, he caresses the god, preparing him, and then slips another finger in. Loki positively mewls as the second finger enters him, and Tony slides them even deeper inside, all the way up to his knuckles. With a patience that his cock isn’t feeling, he moves his fingers around, coating the
bucking and hissing god.

“That’s fine,” Loki finally breathes. “Just… enter me.”

And damn, he doesn’t need any further encouragement than that. Quickly smearing another slab of lube over his straining cock and spreading it across the shaft with three hasty strokes, he kneels between the god’s wantonly spread legs, and pushes his hands under the taut buttocks, lifting Loki’s hips upwards. Panting, he positions himself at Loki’s opening, pushing as gently as he can though his cock is screaming at him to just plunge in.

Loki gives way as he enters, tight heat enveloping him. And it’s glorious.

Unable to hold himself for a moment longer, he draws back, pushing in again, being rewarded with a sinful shudder from the body beneath. Loki’s legs are on his shoulders, rubbing against his skin and pressing against him. Again, he withdraws and then enters the god all the way to the hilt, and sets up a slow pace that quickens as his breath works up to speed.

Loki is moaning inarticulately beneath him; Tony isn’t sure if it’s Old Norse or some other foreign language altogether or just gibberish, but it doesn’t matter. The sounds of it just make him harder, fuelling him to move faster in and out of the god mewling on his couch.

And Loki is so fucking tight, squeezing him like a vise. He increases his pace as one of his hands reaches down to wrap around the straining erection rubbing against his stomach, stroking up and down with rapid tugs.

For a blissful moment that might have lasted only seconds or maybe an eternity, the entire world is reduced to black hair and pale skin and tight heat wrapped around him. He closes his eyes as his release draws near. With an almost feral growl, he pushes in deeper, and the legs over his shoulders tighten in response. He strokes the twitching shaft in his hand harder as an explosion of pleasure and heady bliss comes over him in a swirling maelstrom. He is vaguely aware of Loki screaming and spilling in his hand moments before his own release washes over him, sweeping his awareness of everything else away as waves of pleasure come rolling over him, his entire body shuddering.

Then, it is over. He collapses on top of the pale body beneath where he remains for several long moments, only barely noticing the hand that reaches up to rake through his hair with gentle fingers.
It’s late in the morning when he wakes up, blinking at the annoying sun rays beaming right into his eyes through the big windows.

He stretches and yawns, then suddenly becomes aware of the fact that he isn’t in his bed but instead lying on the couch, and there’s another body right next to him. And with that, the memories of the evening before come rushing back to him, first in bits and pieces, and then in full force.

Wow, he’s just had sex with none other than the god of mischief himself.

And he can’t help but being overwhelmed by a massive wave of the-day-after guilt; like getting drunk out of your skull and waking up in bed with the girlfriend of one of your best friends soundly asleep at your side the next morning. Even if he had been technically sober yesterday, he had still been drunk on something, the way he had just acted out of pure desire and want without barely stopping to think for a second about what he was doing and its possible consequences.

What if he really had taken advantage in some way by agreeing to this? He had just allowed himself be dragged along by that maelstrom of lust, irresponsibly throwing himself into it without even bothering to look around for a life jacket first. Maybe he should have stopped to consider what he was really doing before letting his cock lead the way, despite Loki’s insistencies that he was all willing and wanting.

He looks at the attractive, angular face next to his, swallowing. Maybe he shouldn’t have agreed to this. A kiss was one thing, perhaps, but perhaps he should have called it off at that point before it went any further, before letting things progress into something different entirely. Perhaps he had been wrong to take Loki’s word that he truly wanted this, and wasn’t just… confused.

As if on cue, Loki opens an eye and peers directly at him, the corner of his mouth creasing in a faint smile as he takes in Tony’s facial expression. “Don’t worry, Tony, we did not do anything yesterday that I did not very much want. I can’t believe you would still lie here and worry about that after everything.”

So the god can read minds as well, or at least what is close enough to it.

“Well, yeah, I was just…” Tony starts, feeling stupid, but is cut off by Loki.
“I am a fully grown adult perfectly capable of making my own decisions. Though, I must say I’m disappointed to hear that my performance yesterday apparently wasn’t good enough to convince you of my sincerity in this matter,” he says, grin widening as he stretches long, agile limbs. “Up until now, I have received no complaints about lacklustre performance, and I am rather shocked that the first time I would hear any such would be from a mortal with much less experience to draw from than a god.”

Loki is clearly teasing him now, and it’s making him feel a bit better about the whole thing, less uncertain and unsure. But he still needs to ask.

“So… if you hadn’t wanted something of what we did yesterday, you would have said no, right?”

Loki laughs out loud this time, clearly amused. “Apart from making decisions for myself, I am also perfectly capable of speaking a simple two-letter word, should I want to. And at no point yesterday did that word ever cross my mind, I can assure you. So just let your ungrounded concerns go and stop worrying so much.”

“I just don’t want to take advantage, is all,” Tony mumbles, still not willing to let it go just yet. “Because according to Asgard’s way of doing things, you wouldn’t have the right to say no to any of this, would you?”

The comment earns him a snicker. “True, but as you are so fond of pointing out – this is not Asgard,” he says with an elegantly raised eyebrow. “Perhaps it should be me adopting that line from now on, to remind you of the fact?”

Then the amusement fades from Loki’s face and he turns serious, perhaps sensing Tony’s unease. “Believe me, Tony, if I should ever change my mind about this, I would tell you so. But I desire you; more than I’ve ever desired anyone before.” He reaches out a hand to lightly trail patterns over Tony’s side and chest. “And if you were to turn me down now that I’ve finally had you, I would be very, very much disappointed.”

With that, he leans back into Tony, nuzzling the crock of his neck, gently nibbling on the sensitive skin.

And damn, if Loki doesn’t know exactly how to send his mind onto an entirely different track with just a few touches. Unable to stop himself, he reaches out a hand and snakes his arm around Loki’s waist, pulling the god close to his chest, enjoying the way the god smells – partly sex, partly something else, something dark and husky.
At that, he remembers the lust he had seen pooling in Loki’s eyes yesterday as he had looked into them. There had not been a trace of anything not entirely genuine in there, nor in the way the god had kissed him, touched him, bucked into him, or spilled into his hand…

“So how about breakfast?” he asks as the silence has gone on for several long moments, feeling he should say something.

“Breakfast,” Loki purrs into him. “I like the sound of that.” But he makes no move to get up or move his weight off Tony, suggesting that there are other things he might like even better right now.

And Tony can’t help but let his eyes rake over the naked body nestling close to his, the long legs, the tight buttocks, the lean back, the black, unruly hair, and the finely featured face, delighting in every part. Automatically, his hand starts to move over Loki’s chest, trailing across the skin, teasing a nipple as it goes. The god tips his head backwards and inhales sharply, turning to expose his long neck.

He bends down to place atrail of kisses along the white skin as the caresses of his hand turn more insistent, more demanding. Lightly, he bites a shoulder, earning him a small gasp in return. There is a strange dizziness in his head; probably all the blood in his brain already rushing southwards.

He moves his hand further down towards Loki’s hip, gently rubbing as his fingers explore the smooth skin, just about to move even lower, but his advances are interrupted by the insensitive grumbling of his protesting stomach, taking the most inappropriate moment to loudly demand food.

That kind of ruins the mood. Loki pushes himself up from where he’s leaning into Tony and snickers. “I thought you said something about breakfast?” he queries, voice amused but not without that faint note of huskiness Tony remembers so well from yesterday. “Perhaps we should get something to eat?”

\textit{And damn, if he can’t hear the unspoken ‘first’ ending that sentence.}

“Okay, you win,” he says, getting up from the couch as he looks around for the underwear that was so quickly discarded yesterday. “Breakfast it is.” He is pretty hungry, after all, and sexual pleasures are better enjoyed without a stomach growling of hunger.

A few minutes later, they’re sitting at the table in the kitchen, sloppily dressed and with morning-
messy hair. The smell of freshly brewed coffee is hanging in the air and Tony takes a deep breath; ground coffee beans smell *almost* as good as sex, after all.

And perhaps he should feel totally weird and awkward about this situation and how their relation has all of a sudden shifted into this kind of territory, but the weirdness that usually comes with realizing you’ve had sex with someone you only the day before had another kind of relationship with entirely fails to materialize. Because somehow, it just feels… *natural*. Like there’s really nothing that has changed between them, apart from the fact that they’ve had sex with each other. Like it was merely the next, natural step along the way of whatever has been growing between them on the winding and rocky road they’ve found themselves embarking on together.

And something inside of him is telling him that it actually was.

There’s a soft *ping* from the espresso machine on the kitchen counter, and he stands up to retrieve his finished cup of caffeine goodness. Loki is pouring himself a bowl of Cheerios at the opposite side of the table, his eyes not leaving Tony as he walks over to the counter.

Steaming blue mug clasp in one hand, he can’t help but place his other hand on Loki’s shoulder as he walks past the god and give him a quick caress. Loki reacts instantly, his fingers coming up to grab hold of his, halting him in his tracks. A moment later, Loki lifts Tony’s hand to his lips and lets a wet tongue trail over his fingers, sucking and nibbling. And the look in those eyes as they gaze up at him with the intensity of a thousand suns is just too much for a mortal like him to handle.

The cup in his hand is set down on the tabletop with a clang, a splash of coffee spilling over the rim. But fuck coffee, he has more important things on his hands right now.

Loki has gotten up from his chair to face him, arms slithering around Tony and pulling him close. Tony’s breath hitches in his throat at the sudden nearness, and he leans over the god, hungrily pressing his mouth against lips already half-open.

The kiss is warm and wet and wanton, everything a proper kiss should be. He plunges his tongue into Loki’s mouth, tasting him, and Loki presses back at him, sucking at his lower lip.

His hands are already sliding under the god’s shirt to stroke over his back and sides. Loki bucks into him, and Tony can feel that he is already hard.

“Damn, are all you gods this horny?” he asks as their lips finally unlock, allowing him to breathe
“Some of us,” Loki says with a snicker playing over his lips. “Are all you mortals this horny?”

That draws a laugh from him. “Nope. Just me.”

Loki reaches down to grab hold of his hips, grinding their bodies together. Tony’s own erection is already straining against his jeans, and the god’s wanton readiness is only fuelling his desire further.

“I think you should go get that lube now,” Loki whispers seductively into his ear. “Because I don’t think I will have as much patience for waiting as last time.”

It is only with the utmost self control that he manages to disentangle himself from the arms ensnaring him long enough to hurry off to fetch a bottle of lube. Luckily, those things are never very far away in this tower. He is Tony Stark, after all.

When he returns, Loki is standing with his back against the edge of the kitchen table and hands behind him on the tabletop, leaning back as he eyes Tony expectantly. And he’s naked, having apparently made good use of the brief interruption.

Unable to control himself for a moment longer, Tony steps out of his own clothes, cursing slightly as he hops around on one foot, struggling to get his other foot out of the leg of his pants, just barely managing to step out of them before loosing his balance. Fumbling, he coats himself with a generous helping of lube, quickly smearing the cool stuff over his eager, almost painfully straining cock.

Loki looks down for a brief moment, lips parting at the sight. Then, he turns around, bending down over the kitchen table and looking over his shoulder with a pointed grin.

Tony swallows. If that isn’t one of the hottest sights he’s ever been presented with, he doesn’t know what is.

There’s still some lube on his fingers. So he grabs hold of Loki’s ass with one hand, using the other to slide a finger into him. The god whines and writhes slightly. Another finger, and the sounds from the god’s lips increase in volume. Panting with the effort to control himself, he works his fingers in and out, stretching the opening in preparation as Loki softly yelps.
Finally, he pulls his fingers out and takes his cock into his hand, positioning it against Loki’s opening and pressing in, enjoying the welcome heat immediately enveloping him.

Loki presses back at him as Tony starts to move at a steady but decisive pace. The sight of the tight, firm ass is arousing, as is the way the god is moaning and bucking against him.

So he starts to move at a harder, almost aggressive pace, reaching out to take hold of a shoulder to support himself. And damn, it feels so good moving in and out of the god like this, plunging deeper and deeper for each stroke. The pressure in his balls is building up and he pounds harder, panting from lust and exertion.

Whimsically, he wonders if gods have prostrates. At least it would seem that Loki has one, if those mewling moans are anything to go by.

He pulls out and pushes in again, vaguely aware that Loki is groaning his name, voice thick and throaty. Whereas their love-making yesterday was slow and intimate, this time it’s more fuelled by raw lust and a burning desire needing to be quelled immediately. The god is pressed flat down over the tabletop and one of his hands is stroking his long, thick shaft, tip already glistening with wetness.

Removing a hand from where it’s locked on Loki’s hips in a firm grip, Tony reaches around to cup his palm around the god’s balls, fondling and rubbing. His ministrations cause a shiver from the body under his and he squeezes a little harder in response.

He’s almost there. A familiar heat is building in his stomach and travelling downwards to his pleasantly aching groin. He gives in to it as it washes over him, pounding into the god as his whole body shudders. He comes with a shout on his lips that he isn’t quite sure what it is, but he thinks he can hear Loki’s name somewhere in there as waves of maddening pleasure are rolling over him. A few more pushes, and he’s all spent, collapsing over the back of the body squirming beneath him.

Still dizzy from his orgasm, he notices that Loki’s hand is still stroking his own cock, so he reaches around to push the god’s hand away, replacing it with his own. It twitches at his touch, and he tugs firmly at it as Loki whimpers. A few strokes is all it takes for him to reach completion and the god comes with another moan, spilling all over Tony’s hand.

And then it’s over, the only sound in the room being their laboured breaths, heaving almost in unison. Carefully, he pulls himself out of Loki and into an upright position; Loki slowly pushes himself up from the table as the weight of Tony’s body is removed. He looks a little bit unsteady on
his legs, but he turns around to regard Tony with one of those glances that make Tony think he could go crazy just thinking about.

Two arms are coming up to wrap themselves around his neck as hot lips press against his, surprisingly soft. He pulls Loki close, enjoying the feeling of skin against skin as they just stand there for a while, revelling in each other’s closeness.

And Tony can feel a smile creeping up his face as the god’s arms pull tighter around him. Ever since Loki got sent over to his tower with that slave designation metaphorically tacked onto his forehead, he never even once actually considered Loki as belonging to him in any way, despite Asgard’s insistence that the god was his lawful property. But now, for the first time, he actually finds himself entertaining the idea of Loki as being truly his.

Yes, Loki being his, and not in that fucked-up slavery kind of way, but because he wants to be Tony’s. And he, Tony, being Loki’s in turn.

And the thought is enough to make that silly smile spread even further across his face.

Then Loki shifts in his arms and lifts his head from Tony’s shoulder, looking straight into his eyes.

“So, how about breakfast, then?”

Tony only grins.
Chapter 119

Tony’s bed is almost ridiculously comfortable, and he’s glad to have made its acquaintance, though not so much for the bed as such, as for what lies in it. And it’s big as well, but they’re not making use of even half of it, the way they’re lying tightly snuggled up against each other in the middle, Tony dozing in his arms.

Before they started getting intimate and he took to sleeping in Tony’s bed at night instead of in his own, he had only been in the man’s bedroom once. That was way back when he was still certain that Tony was going to take advantage of him, and even now, despite how much time has passed since, he still remembers the scene clearly. Tony had told him to make his bed for him, and so he had stood in here rearranging the uncooperative sheets with a churning lump of fear in his throat, fear that Tony would order him to get into the bed once he was finished making it.

So long ago, and looking back on it now he finds it hard to comprehend how he could have ever expected that from someone as caring and compassionate as Tony. Of course, things were very different back then, and Tony had certainly not been fond of him during those early days, but still – there’s a mile of difference between not being fond of someone and being cruel and abusive to them.

Then again, perhaps Loki isn’t the only one who has changed since he was sent here to Midgard. Maybe Tony has changed as well. And maybe it’s a preposterous thought, but he likes to think it’s the truth – that his presence here has somehow made Tony find or develop something within himself that might not have come as easy or naturally to him before.

He remembers the threat that Tony had made during his first day here, how he had ordered him to kneel before him, and the belittling comments and derogatory jabs Loki had been forced to endure during the early part of his stay. All of it perfectly understandable, of course, considering what he had done during his last visit to Midgard. But still, he can’t really see Tony acting in the same way if he ever found himself in a similar situation again. No, he thinks that there is something inside of the man that has changed, something that has grown in him since then.

At least he has changed since those days, he is very much aware of that. Though, whether it will be enough for Odin and his Council to reconsider his sentence, he can’t tell. Maybe his crimes are too grave to merit a pardon in any form, and he will have to remain a slave for the rest of his life to pay for his crimes.

The thought makes something churn inside of him. As long as he remains Tony’s slave, it will not be a harsh fate, of course. But what will lie beyond that is not something he wants to consider in too much detail. Obviously, Tony would never willingly bequeath him to someone that might treat him badly, but what of the person next in line? And the one after him? Somewhere along the way, there is bound to be a harsh or even cruel master awaiting, who will have no qualms about treating him in
the worst possible ways. Someone who will not let Midgard’s morals and laws stop him from doing what he wants.

Disconcerted, he hugs the body next to him a little closer, trying to draw some comfort in that softly snoring presence. As for now, there is no point in speculating or worrying about what may or may not come, not until word is sent from Asgard and he will know for sure what his fate will be. It is out of his hands, and he will find out soon enough. Until then, he can only make the best out of his current situation, and be grateful that he has Tony.

The man stirs a little in the tightening embrace, but makes no further protests. And Loki is glad for the proximity of the man next to him; having Tony close always seems to comfort and calm him, the man’s presence a soothing influence on him.

And, he can’t help but notice as a tingle stabs at his groin, a more carnal kind of influence as well.

Absentmindedly, he traces a finger over the arm nestled over his, reminded of the love-making session that ended not even an hour earlier. Tony is truly remarkable, knowing exactly how to arouse the most exquisite pleasure in him, like they’ve been lovers for many years already. No matter if they go slow and sensual, or quick and rough, he always manages to ignite Loki’s body with wonderful sensations. And despite having fantasized about it before it happened, imagining Tony touching him and taking him in all possible ways, reality had turned out to be even better.

His hand moves lower to Tony’s stomach, playing around with the thin trail of hair leading from his navel and downwards, recalling the exhilarating feeling of having Tony inside of him, thrusting in and out. At that, his hand edges lower still, stroking along the inside of the man’s thigh, the touch drawing a little muffled moan.

“Mhmm.” Tony turns slightly in his arms, fingers reaching out for his. “Already up to play again?” he mutters sleepily, but not sounding like he disapproves in the slightest.

Loki gives his ear a little nibble. “Anytime you are,” he challenges, feeling his insides heat up already as he lets Tony’s fingers intertwine with his.

He can sense rather than see the grin on Tony’s face. “Then show me what you’ve got,” the man drawls huskily. “Make it worth losing an hour of sleep over.”

He grins back, even if Tony can’t see it. Despite what he’s pretending, he already knows that the
man needs no further convincing. He never does; any and every little sexual invite or hint from Loki is enough for him to drop whatever he’s doing and get right down to it.

And he loves that, knowing that Tony finds him just as desirable and irresistible as Loki finds him.

So he disentangles himself from the body in his arms and pushes Tony right onto his back, and proceeds to straddle him on all fours. Even in the darkness of the room, the light of the arc reactor is enough for him to make out Tony’s look of appreciation of the way he’s taking command.

He bends his head down, licking a long strip over Tony’s chest, circling the glowing reactor, before proceeding to place a trail of demanding kisses along his neck. At that, two hands come up to grab hold of his hips, fingers kneading and massaging. The touches soon move upwards, over his sides and shoulders, until they encircle his neck to tug him up for a kiss.

Loki acquiesces and lets the hands pull him close enough for their lips to come into contact. Tony’s mouth is half-open in anticipation already, so he greedily claims it with his own and lets his tongue push inside. The man raises his head from the pillow to meet him, his chin scratchy against Loki’s own. For some reason, he’s really grown to like the feeling of that neatly trimmed beard prickling his skin.

He reaches out for the hands that are still encircling his neck, removing them from where they’re tussling at his hair and pinning them to either side of the man’s head. Tony grunts a little, but lets Loki hold his wrists down, instead bucking his hips upward in a demand for even more physical contact.

Mouth not leaving Tony’s for a second, Loki sits back on his ass on Tony’s stomach, glad they’re still naked after their previous session, having not bothered to dress themselves before crawling down beneath the covers. He likes having Tony’s warm skin against his, his sides pressed against Loki’s thighs, so he clenches his legs together a little tighter, securely locking Tony into place.

It doesn’t take long until he can feel Tony’s length rising up against him, as usual not needing much time to awaken. So he scoots back down a little, seating himself on Tony’s thighs instead so he can let their erections touch. With his right hand, he takes a firm hold of both of them, grinding their lengths together while Tony moans in pleasure beneath him. He loves hearing those sounds from Tony; he’s so responsive and quick to let him know of his pleasure, igniting Loki’s own lust even further.

He stops to let his thumb rub over Tony’s slit and then circle the swollen head, slowly teasing along the rim. The skin is almost burning to the touch, and he continues to stroke along the man’s full
length in more rapid motions, all the way from the base to the tip.

Then he lets go and instead reaches down to knead the balls beneath, pressing a fingertip at the base just above Tony’s opening. His ministrations earn him a shudder, and he squeezes a little harder as he lets his fingers prod and press, the skin amazingly soft against his. After a few minutes of this, he’s just about to return his attention to the erection straining against Tony’s stomach, when two hands suddenly shoot out to grab hold of his wrists, and a second later he’s been flipped onto his back with Tony towering over him in a mirroring of the position they had occupied only a moment ago.

Tony lets slip a pleased little chuckle at how he managed to take Loki unaware before he even knew what hit him. Rolling his eyes, Loki considers putting up a bit of token resistance and turn the whole thing into a little wrestling match, but he quickly relents and instead lets himself fall back against the pillows, all fight going out of him as Tony’s head suddenly move downwards to his throbbing shaft.

And then, there is wetness lapping at the head, a tongue swirling over the tip and dipping into his slit. Reflexively, he reaches out to grab hold of that brown mop of hair, in case Tony should all of a sudden think differently and turn his attentions elsewhere. No, he wants Tony like this, he wants the man’s hot mouth firmly wrapped around him, his tongue sweeping over his hard length, his lips moving over him in a steady, unwavering rhythm.

It takes a while for him to realize that the moaning sound is coming from him as Tony’s mouth comes down on him in earnest and he starts to slowly, oh-so-painfully slowly, suck him like a vise. His needy keens only seem to spur Tony on, as both the pressure and the pace increase, sending him into new heights of pleasure.

Oh yes. Far from all of his Asgardian lovers have been willing to do this to him, but Tony doesn’t seem to have any such inhibitions the way he’s going on about it, lips and tongue eagerly working him over.

So he pushes back, letting his hips follow the pace that Tony is setting up, trying to push as much of himself into that talented mouth as is at all possible. The sensation is making his entire body tingle and he lets himself fall into the heady chasm opening up before him, where nothing else exists but the pleasure rushing through his body. That, and the hands grabbing his ass in a firm hold, and his own hands clamping equally tight onto brown, unruly hair.

An endless moment later he comes with a garbled cry and cramped fingers digging into sweat-soaked sheets. Tony doesn’t stop for even a fraction of a second, but continues until Loki has ridden out his release, trembling and panting as his body goes stiff and then relaxes bonelessly against the mattress.
As his senses slowly start to come to again, the next thing he becomes aware of is an almost boastful voice next to his ear. “You liked that, I take it?”

“Mfph.” As inelegant a reply as that is, it somehow seems like all he’s capable of right now.

Tony laughs, clearly pleased with himself. “Spoken in the words of the Silvertongue himself. Translated into common Midgardian, I think it means, ‘oh, Tony, you’re a real beast in bed.’”

Loki can’t help but laugh at that. “You do think rather highly of yourself, don’t you?” he grins as his fingers come up to rest against the arc reactor, but he doesn’t refute Tony’s claim.

“And you know I’m right, baby,” Tony counters as he playfully pinches a nipple.

Loki responds by pulling Tony down to him, grinding his body against his, and lets Tony’s still straining erection rub between their stomachs. They kiss, Tony’s arms fondling his back and sides as their tongues press against each other.

“Mmm, Loki,” he can hear the man moan against him, clearly not too far from the edge.

Full well knowing what Tony wants, he gives the man’s firm ass a little squeeze, and then rolls up onto his hands and knees, turning his head to the side to give Tony an inviting look across his shoulder.

Almost instantly, he can hear Tony fumble with something at the bedside table, and a heartbeat later there is a slick finger prodding at his entrance. He inhales in anticipation as the finger slowly slides inside and starts moving, carefully stretching him in preparation of things to come.

He clenches his jaws as another fingers joins the first, moaning softly as he presses back, trying to force them to go deeper. It feels so wonderful having those fingers inside of him like this; Tony knows exactly where to press and push to make little stars dance before his eyes. *Still, it doesn’t feel quite as good as…*

He keens as the fingers leave and something much bigger lines up against his opening. The feeling as Tony enters him is as glorious as ever, and he spreads his legs wider, letting his head rest against the
forearms pressed flat against the mattress. And for a wonderful moment that might have lasted a minute or an hour, there is only Tony thrusting in and out of him, until the man comes with a muffled cry, spilling himself inside of him.

And then, Loki gathers the sweaty, panting form of Tony up in his arms, pressing a soft kiss against the man’s forehead as they lie together beneath the covers, neither of them caring in the slightest about the soaked sheets beneath.

Yes, whatever is to come, at least he has Tony for now.
“Okay, so what about this?” Tony flicks a switch, and the monitor before them beeps, endless lines of numbers and readings flickering by on the screen.

Loki closes his eyes, trying to focus on the force field emanating from the little device on the workbench. He lifts a hand towards it, fingers slowly wiggling through the air. There is no doubt something different about it now; the transmitter doesn’t give off quite the same vibe as last time they did this.

He concentrates on the faint undulations tingling on the receptors of his skin, comparing them to the ones given off by the bracelets around his wrists. After a little while of this, he opens his eyes again, turning to Tony, who is watching him with an expectant look.

“It feels a bit more akin to the field blocking my magic now,” he nods. “The frequency is still not quite the same and the field itself is less dense and compact, but it’s definitely more similar this time, yes.”

“Really?” Tony lights up like a little child who has just been given a bottomless bag of sweets, clenching his hands into fists in delight. “That’s freakin’ awesome!” Triumphanty, he plonks himself down before one of the many screens, almost manically typing away on his keyboard. “I think we have a real breakthrough here! The adjustments I made to the transmitter really are having an effect on this weirdo force field. Even if the frequency still isn’t correct, I can make some further modifications, like in the amplitude of the electromagnetic current and some other stuff, and we should get there eventually!”

He demonstratively presses a final key and then spins his chair. “Haha! Doctor Doom, prepare to meet your doom!” he announces dramatically to no one in particular as he revolves in his swivelling chair.

Loki watches the man’s little outburst of elation with a little smile on his lips. The tests he’s been sitting through are pretty dull and repetitive, but he endures the sessions for two reasons.

He gets to be of help to Tony. And he gets to be close to Tony.

Well, three reasons, actually.
He also gets to see Tony’s face light up with joy.

The days pass quickly. A lot of their time together is spent working on the magic blocker in the workshop, running tests and analyzing the new modifications that Tony has made. That, and having sex, rutting like pink little bunnies, and then cuddling like Care-bears.

And if there’s one thing that Tony has learnt during these last couple of weeks, it’s that Loki is a vocalizer. Or a screamer, or a moaner, or whatever you want to call it. And damn, if he doesn’t approve of that.

And right now, that vocalizer is sitting perched on his couch, flipping through a magazine of some sort, his back against the armrest and one leg drawn up beneath him. As if he can sense Tony’s hungry stare raking over his body, he looks up from the glossy pages with a wicked smile on his face, meeting with Tony’s gaze as he very discreetly, but still very pointedly, lets his legs fall open slightly in a way that looks innocently casual but is most certainly not.

Tony is about to get up from his chair and make his way over to those invitingly spread legs, but then, without warning, an ear-deafening clash of thunder cuts through the silence, followed by the pungent, acrid smell of ozone.

Only seconds later, the God of Thunder himself materializes right in the middle of Tony’s living room, complete with red cape billowing from his shoulders and mighty hammer in a tight grasp. And a grin on his face that would put the Cheshire Cat to shame. Tony swallows, finding himself distinctively grateful that Thor didn’t apparate in here ten minutes later, or that joyful smile would probably have turned into a grimace of abject horror instead, considering his depraved plans for the Thunderer’s little brother.

“My friends,” Thor booms before the blue glow from the medallion clasped in his non-Mjölnir-holding hand has even faded. “I come bearing fantastic tidings from Asgard!”

And the tidings must be fantastic indeed if Thor doesn’t even wait with this announcement before having first greeted them both with his usual vise-like embraces, to say nothing of materializing directly into Tony’s living room instead of outside where he can knock on the door like a normal guest. Tony holds his breath for what is coming next, and he can see Loki freezing in his spot on the couch, like a rabbit cornered by a predator, afraid to move for fear of what might happen if he does.
But Thor beams like the sun itself.

“The sentence has been changed, Loki!” Thor joyfully exclaims, eyes shining. “It has been decided that you will spend two more years as a slave in Midgard before being given your freedom back, on certain conditions and with a number of restrictions.” Thor fumbles beneath his shirt and then pulls a parchment out, Tony whimsically resisting the impulse to tell the god to invest in a man-bag for the next time he’s going to be transporting important documents. “However, before being allowed to return to Asgard again after those two years are over, you must find a way to make proper amends for your crimes against the human realm. The details of the ruling are all outlined here!” he says, waving the formal-looking piece of paper around.

And Tony’s heart is skipping like mad in relief. So Loki will be free again, not having to spend the rest of his life as someone’s freaking property. It’s like a heavy stone has fallen from his chest, or rather like the Rocky Mountains, knowing that Loki will actually be allowed to have a real, proper life again.

Granted, two years isn’t a very long time to make up for being responsible for the deaths of so many people, but considering how many innocent lives his own weapons have taken over the years, Tony figures he isn’t really one to talk. At least the outcome of his own doings was a few billion dollars in the bank, not two years as a slave.

He has no idea how the amends deal is going to work, but they can figure that one out later on. The important thing is that the slavery part will be revoked; that’s really all that matters right now. Everything else can be worked out later.

The look on Loki’s face as he takes the rolled-up parchment out of Thor’s hand to carefully un-scroll it and read the carefully scribbled runes makes Tony’s throat constrict – it’s a heart-wrenching mixture of disbelief, happiness and dawning hope.

Thor regards his little brother with overflowing benevolence, eyes moist. “The chains around your wrists will still have to stay on until you have proven yourself worthy of having them removed, but your magic will be returned to you gradually after those two years are over, as long as you abide by the stipulated conditions.”

And then the Thunderer can’t control his powerful emotions any longer, but reaches down and more or less lifts Loki up from the couch to cover him with his powerful arms in an all-encompassing hug filled with that famous brotherly love and concern; Tony almost winces. It sure looks painful, even though Loki isn’t complaining.
“What do you say, brother?” Thor asks, voice cracking slightly. “Isn’t this wonderful?”

“It is,” Loki says quietly, sounding dazed, like someone just being told they’ve won ten million dollars on the lottery, like he can’t believe this is really true. Probably, he barely can. Heck, Tony can hardly believe it either, not after having faced off with that tough-guy Odin who looked like he would rather stick his other eye out than going back on a decision already made.

“Wow, that is totally awesome,” Tony says, and he really means it too. “The Mediaeval slavery deal will be off soon enough, and then there’s just the tiny detail of keeping this little arrangement under SHIELD’s radar, and we’re all set.” Considering that he’s kept a shitload of stuff away from their nosy selves over the years, he should be able to pull this off as well.

Thor turns into Tony’s direction, slowly and reluctantly letting go of the god clasped firmly to his chest. He looks slightly more subdued, now. “Actually, that was the next part I was about to tell you. Director Fury has already been informed of this. I was at SHIELD’s headquarters only moments ago delivering the very same message to Fury before I came here.”

And Tony feels something within him freeze like the goddamn Arctic. “What the hell did you just say, Thor?” he sputters, hoping he really didn’t hear that shit correctly. “You’ve told Fury about this? Are you fucking kidding me?”

“Yes,” Thor nods. “I did so on Odin’s explicit orders. As the leader of your world, Fury was to be the first one to be informed about this arrangement, to make sure he would have no direct objections against Loki being let off with such a lenient sentence after his crimes against Midgard.”

That’s just wrong on so many levels. And just when the hell did Fury get upgraded to the position of Leader of Planet Earth? Though, the assumptions probably makes sense; it figures that a god of war coming from a Might Makes Right kind of society would naturally assume that the leader of Earth’s strongest and mightiest warriors would also be the Leader of All Humanity.

And if Tony can totally picture the self-satisfied look on Fury’s face at that title. And coming from a god, no less.

“Damn,” he finally manages as the world around him is coming apart in broken little shards. “Fuck.” How the hell is he going to get Loki out of this now?

“While I was concerned about the Director’s reaction, I am glad to say that he did not voice any
immediate objections after hearing my words and having read through the written message from Odin that I personally delivered to him,” Thor says, crossing his arms as he draws himself up in what seems to be a subconscious gesture of authority.

“Really now. And do pray tell, what exactly did he say, then?” Tony half-yells, worry and concern swirling inside of him. “Did smoke come out of his ears? How many veins did he burst? How many pieces of furniture got thrown out the window? Huh?”

“Actually--” Thor begins, but before he gets any further, his reply is interrupted by a buzz on the intercom.

_Great. Just great._

And Tony doesn’t need to answer that buzz to know the one-eyed glare that will be greeting him on the screen, demanding to be let into his tower.

He turns to the dark-haired god who is still clutching the parchment in his hands as if it were a costly treasure.

_There’s no way he’s going to let Fury take Loki away. No way in hell._

“Okay, Loki,” he says, trying to sound confident. “I think you’d better go to your room and remain in there while I sort things out with Director Cyclops.”

He sits there quietly on his bed, parchment still tightly clutched in his hands after having read it through at least ten times already, wanting to make sure that the words contained therein haven’t morphed into something else, or that he has somehow misread them.

But he has not. The message inside is clear. Two years, and he will be given his freedom back.

Of course, there were conditions and stipulations in that parchment, too. Lots of them. And the chains would not come off for a long time after those two years, but the enchantments woven into them would be undergoing step-wise modifications, each one allowing another piece of his magic to
return to him, as long as he kept proving himself trustworthy and reformed.

There is something fluttering in his stomach at the thought of once more being able to access his magic. It’s one of those things that he’s tried not to think about since receiving his sentence; becoming a slave was bad enough and all he was able to focus on at the time. The concept of never being allowed to use magic again was something he had shoved away into the deepest and darkest corners of his brain, as it was simply too much to deal with on top of everything else.

Two years. For someone like him who has been alive two thousands of them, it’s a negligible period of time. And it will certainly be as nothing with Tony as his master.

Of course, he will also have to find some way to make amends for all the suffering he has caused in Midgard, one way or the other. But he has two years to consider that; he will think of a way to offer what recompense he can.

Though, there is a pang of unease in his stomach at the thought of Director Fury sitting out there with Tony, discussing his fate and his lessened sentence. While Thor did say that Fury did not voice any direct objections when he passed the message from Odin onto the man, that doesn’t mean that he will be content or won’t make trouble.

And if Fury wants to take him away from Tony and into SHIELD custody... He grimaces; he’s already spent enough time as their guest after his failed invasion, and it isn’t an experience he cares to revisit.

But hopefully Tony will be able to convince the man otherwise.

He sighs, looking down at the parchment again, once more rereading the carefully scribbled runes outlining the conditions.

Two years.

It’s much better than what he had ever dared to hope for.

And if he’s to be honest, surely a lot better than what his crimes would merit.
Chapter 121

Having a scowling Fury glaring at him from across the table is not the way Tony would have chosen to spend his afternoon. Not even close to it.

At least there’s only Fury, though; after Tony’s adamant insistence and some wheeling and dealing, the guy finally agreed to let his SHIELD agents wait outside the tower, though he did of course not fail to point out that it would be fully within his rights to have his men storm the whole place if he should deem it necessary. *As if they’d actually get past Jarvis and the various security measures in place.*

But in the end, Fury had relented, perhaps realizing that getting on the bad side of the Iron Man wouldn’t be the best of moves, and that a forced entry into the home of a well-known national hero wouldn’t be very good for the public relations that SHIELD at least pretends to strive to uphold.

Even though they’re far too many levels up to see much of what goes on there on the ground, Tony has no doubt that his dear tower is now sporting a tight ring of black-clad SHIELD agents. Probably with weapons drawn and at the ready, like they’re extras in a fucking action movie.

Loki has been locked into his room for his own safety; no one gets in or out. Still, Fury hasn’t demanded to see the god as of yet, but seems content to speak his mind to Tony for now.

If the situation had been less serious, Tony would have laughed at the sour expression on the face of the man sitting opposite from him. Though now it rather makes him wince more than anything else.

After a terse silence, during which Tony can almost hear the seconds ticking away, Fury finally leans back in his seat and crosses his arms in his usual look-at-me-I’m-important manner. His leather trenchcoat creaks slightly, or maybe that was just the sound of the guy’s face drawing itself into another scowl.

However, the first words the scowling man speaks are not directed to him but to the blond god standing to the side, stiff and rigid, watching the proceedings with a mixture of concern and resoluteness. “Alright, Thor, I want to speak to Stark and hear what he has to say for himself. So I’d appreciate it if you would stay out of this conversation until we’re finished.”

Thor doesn’t look too pleased, but acquiesces nonetheless. “As you wish, Director,” he says. “I shall let the two of you speak without interruption.”
Having settled that part, Fury turns back to Tony.

“Well then, Stark,” he says as the single eye burns itself into Tony, who can’t help but thinking he’s had enough of one-eyed people staring him down to last him a while. “Care to explain to me why you haven’t told me anything about having the war criminal Loki in your custody?”

Tony throws the man the most charming smile he can manage, though Fury remains as unimpressed as ever. Perhaps honesty is the best weapon this time.

“Ah, you see, the Asgardian posse that brought him here made it pretty clear that I was not allowed to hand Loki over to someone else, by order of Odin the Allfather himself.” He throws his hands out in a gesture meant to convey innocence. “You know, that other one-eyed guy in the universe who figures himself kind of important.” Perhaps he should know better than to make jabs like that, but whatever. Pretending to be anything else than his usual suave, sarcastic self might only serve to convince Fury that Tony actually doubts whether his actions of keeping SHIELD out of the loop were at all appropriate.

Fury glares. “Go on.”

Encouraged by the fact that the man hasn’t thrown him over the table and put him in handcuffs yet for threatening national security or whatever, he continues. “And knowing the rather old-fashioned kind of justice Asgard serves to those who break their laws and goes against the will of Odin dearest, I really didn’t fancy myself being on the receiving end.” He leans over the table, trying to appeal to Fury’s practical sense. “Because that might very well have ended with your little team of Avengers being one Iron Man short on the next occasion it’s time to save the world again. Which neither you nor I would have liked much, right?”

Fury doesn’t deign that with an answer. Perhaps that is just as well, as Tony isn’t sure whether it would have been in the affirmative or in the negative.

Oh well.

“And see, I just knew what would happen the moment you got word of all this. You’d stomp right into my tower and drag Loki off into SHIELD custody, leaving me to explain my failure to comply with Odin’s instructions to a team of sword-wielding and bloodthirsty Conan wanna-bes. After all, I was entrusted Loki as my, well, charge, and I didn’t really feel like betraying the trust extended to me by a king and a god.”
“You mean your *slave.*” The voice is level but still like razor-sharp barbed wire, and Tony winces. He really would have preferred it they could all stay away from that particular word. He’s had enough of it to last him a life-time.

The single eye narrows as Fury taps the parchment in his grip against the knuckles of his left hand, slowly and deliberately. And Tony itches to know just what the message in there says, fully aware of the inadvisability of accidentally saying something that contradicts whatever it is that Odin has scribbled down.

Before he has the time to say anything else, the man speaks again.

“So, Stark, do pray tell. What, exactly, did you do with Loki during all this time that he’s been in your custody as your *slave*?”

*And damn, is it really necessary to rub that word in?*

“I made him scrub the floors with a toothbrush and polish my shoes?” He knows that it’s the wrong answer even before the words have left his mouth, but hey, honesty always wins out in the end, right?

To his credit, Fury doesn’t bat an eyelash at that, even though there is a slight twitch near his right temple. Perhaps it’s a vein on the verge of bursting, or maybe it’s just a muscle spasm.

“You mean to say you had Loki in your custody, and you had him clean your property,” Fury says flatly and very slowly, like Tony is an idiot. And it’s not even a question, the way he says it; merely a statement of the very obvious and the very stupid.

And Tony has to admit it *does* sound pretty stupid when phrased that way.

*Oh, and I’ve had sex with him too. Totally mind-blowing sex at that.* Perhaps he should add that as well. Though Fury would probably approve even less of that piece of information.

Sensing the shit storm brewing, Tony holds his hands up in a placating gesture. “Actually, we’re working on a magic blocker that we might be able to use on Doctor Doom. And I’m pleased to say
that it’s coming along quite nicely.” Okay, so they’ve been doing that for like what, a couple of weeks now? Well, not that Mr Trenchcoat needs to know that.

For what feels like the first time since getting nailed with that angry glare, Fury looks away from Tony’s face and instead turns his attention to the document in his hand. His eye narrows as he regards the roll, and Tony gets the distinct impression that this is exactly what the man looks like when he gets orders from his superiors that he isn’t keen about following, but really has no choice but to obey.

“We will talk about that part later,” he says, “and you can describe this magic blocker to me in detail and how you intend for it to work. However, right now Doctor Doom is not the super-villain of the day, but rather the alien god residing in your tower. Though, it would seem he’s not much of a god right now, is he?”

“You are correct,” Thor agrees from the sidelines, ignoring Fury’s instructions to keep silent. Tony is impressed the guy has managed to comply as long as he has. “My brother is not a threat to your world; not only has he deeply regretted his actions against Midgard, but his magic and powers have all been sealed away, turning him into what is basically a mortal. There is nothing for SHIELD to gain by taking him into custody.”

Fury offers an unimpressed hmph as he turns towards the Thunderer. “I would strongly argue against that notion,” he challenges, not drawing back in the slightest despite Thor tensing up before him. “However, it has come to my understanding that there are also other matters that need to be taken into consideration.” Another series of faint, rhythmic tapping of fingers against parchment.

It’s clear that Fury isn’t happy with whatever he’s about to say, and Tony hopes that is a good thing.

“It seems that Odin was rather particular about the conditions of Loki’s punishment. And rather… insistent too.” He frowns at this, his fingers clenching slightly around the roll in his hand.

Thor nods sagely, as if this is beyond discussion. “Of course. Going against the word of the Allfather would be a highly inadvisable course of action,” he says, confident like a kid telling his playmates that his dad can beat up everyone else’s dad.

Though, in Thor’s case it’s probably the truth.

And Tony can tell that it’s obvious that Fury is also well aware of that.
“So what you’re saying is that you don’t think it’s advisable taking Loki into custody?” He asks, cursing himself for the unsuitable but obvious eagerness he can hear in his own voice at this prospect.

Luckily, Fury seems too deep into his own thoughts to notice. “As I said, Odin was rather clear as he outlined the conditions and terms of Loki’s punishment.” Fury’s face curdles like he’s just swallowed an entire bucket full of lemons. “And as much as I would like to get my hands on him after all the shit he pulled in New York, it would be quite unwise to risk… diplomatic problems with a realm as powerful as Asgard.”

“Really?” Tony asks, giddiness swirling inside of him. _Loki is safe. Loki is safe. Loki is safe._ “You mean you don’t fancy bravely facing off with a bunch of Einherjers dispatched to Planet Earth to avenge the breach of Odin Almighty’s personal decree?”

Another angry glare in his direction. Oh well, he can take a thousand of them, as long as it means that Loki can stay here with him.

Fury draws himself up to stare at Tony down his nose, looking like he’s had another mouthful of those lemons stuffed in. Really unripe lemons.

“I am only going to say this once. The parchment makes the inadvisability of questioning Asgard’s decision very clear. And we’ve had enough problems with aliens to last us a while. The safety of this country, of this _world_, is priority number one, and other considerations will have to take the backseat this time.” The man’s coat creaks as he speaks, as if even the leather is voicing its protests. “Now, I wouldn’t mind Loki’s head decorating my desk as a pretty paper weight, but it’s not worth a conflict over Asgard with. So, he will have to remain in your custody as Odin has decreed.”

And Tony feels himself almost melt into his seat with relief.

“However, Stark, Fury half-growls, glaring daggers at Tony, “we will still need to keep a lid on this as it is imperative that the public does not find out. It could quickly escalate into certain… situations and reactions that might be hard to contain if word got out. We would not want a good part of America clamouring for a punishment we are not able to give. I trust I can rely on you to keep this under the radar of anyone outside of SHIELD.”

“But of course, Nick,” Tony quickly assures him. “I am nothing but discreteness itself. You know that.”
Fury scoffs, looking once more at the parchment and then back to Tony. “It would seem that Odin is no longer under the impression that Loki’s original sentence of a lifetime in slavery is in accordance with our Midgardian sense of justice.” The gaze narrows. “Whatever made him think differently.”

So Fury doesn’t know about Tony’s little intergalactic space-trip that he made in order to appeal for clemency for the guy who levelled half of New York? It really doesn’t say in there that Tony was the one who got Odin thinking in those terms?

He looks towards the blond god to his left, trying to communicate one single silent thought across the distance between them, one that sums up his currently most ardent desire.

Shut up, Thor.

“Yeah, good question, whatever could have been responsible for that?” Tony says guilelessly, face innocent and clueless. Perhaps Fury already knows, or maybe he doesn’t, but Tony isn’t going to be telling him regardless.

Luckily, Thor holds his tongue, not bringing up the subject of Tony’s field trip into magic space land.

“So, you’re actually okay with handling things like this?” Tony asks, trying to change the subject. “And here I kinda thought you would be running my tower down in your eagerness to have Loki all chained up and dragged back to SHIELD.”

Fury crosses his arms in front of him. “I will still want words with Loki about certain things. Though, I will be content to deal with those matters here rather than in SHIELD headquarters.”

Well, the instructions in that parchment must have been pretty insistent, then. Curiosity suddenly gets the better of him, and he leans across the table. “Hey, can I see that?” he asks, not waiting for permission as he reaches for the parchment in Fury’s hand.

However, Fury pulls the document away and safely out of Tony’s reach. “Forget it, Stark. The information contained herein is a matter of national security, and hence not something I would dream of entrusting to you.”
“Furthermore,” the man continues, “I will send a trusted agent to live in your tower for a period of time to keep an eye out and report back to me.” He fixes Tony with an icy glare. “Someone to make sure there is nothing suspicious going on, and that Loki is truly as harmless and reformed as Odin claims.”

Tony winces; he really doesn’t feel like having any strangers running around in his tower, especially not if they’re on Fury’s pay check.

Though, he supposes it’s a small price to pay for having Loki safe and out of SHIELD’s hands. For having Loki stay here with him.
The handcuffs locking his wrists together are tight and restricting his movements, but Fury had insisted on them for security reasons. And Loki is well aware that he is hardly in any position to protest, so he holds his tongue, despite his dislike for the cold metal circling his wrists.

Thor had not been allowed to be present during the interrogation, and despite his initial, very insistent protests, he had eventually relented, realizing that some concessions were probably fair now that Fury had agreed not to take Loki into custody but instead let him serve his sentence as decreed by Odin.

At least Tony is here, though. Fury did not seem to consider that such a big issue, even though he had at first scowled at the man’s demand to sit in. But he had acquiesced, after having given Tony the curt instructions to sit still and shut the fuck up. And Loki is glad of that. Tony’s presence makes him feel secure; being alone with Fury would not have been comfortable, particularly not after his unpleasant stay in SHIELD custody after his defeat in New York.

The black-clad man is sitting at the opposite side of the table, perpetually glaring. For what must have been the better part of an hour, he’s been answering the man’s never-ending stream of questions about the Chitauri that he was already asked last time he was under Fury’s interrogation, about their army, their strengths and weaknesses, and the possibility that they will return to Earth. To the last question he answered that such a thing will not happen – the Chitauri might be a warlike race hell-bent on conquering, but while they are intelligent, they are also single-minded and do not have capability for emotions like humans or gods do. Desire for revenge is an unknown concept to them, a race only concerned with gaining victory and avoiding defeat. They’d have no reason to once more attack a superior enemy who has already proven capable of so thoroughly decimating their forces.

Fury seems to doubt this, though, and he keeps repeating his questions, trying to pull even the tiniest and most unimportant details out from his interrogation object.

After what feels like an eternity of asking and answering, the man finally leans back in his seat, hands reaching behind his neck to serve as support for his head. There is silence as he obviously mulls something over, face impassive.

“So the Chitauri might not be coming back, as you claim, but what guarantee do we have that you won’t make another attempt to take over the planet again if we let you run around here, as opposed to throwing your ass into a deep dark cell somewhere?” he finally asks, voice harsh.

Tony leans forwards as if on the verge of saying something, but Fury raises a pre-emptive palm in his
direction. “Shut up, Stark, I wasn’t asking you,” he grumbles, before even the first word has gotten a fair chance to leave Tony’s lips.

And Loki can understand the concern inherent in that question, even if he doesn’t like the accompanying hostility and suspicion. Or the man himself. So he answers as politely and neutrally as he can manage, trying to keep his dislike out of his voice and his choice of words. “As I have already assured you, Director, I have seen the error of my ways. I deeply regret my actions against your world and my previous intentions to rule it are no more, and I intend to make amends for what I’ve done, as stipulated. There is nothing you and your people have to fear from me.”

“So you have told me. As has Odin.” Fury’s voice is laced with distrust, thick and overbearing. “However, in my line of work, simply taking someone’s word for something isn’t conducive to a long career. Or a long life, for that matter.” The single eye is observing and searching, trying to find a kink that will expose the lie suspected to be hidden beneath.

“That might be so. And I realize there’s probably nothing I can say that will convince you otherwise. However, if you will not take my word for it, then rest assured that the chains on my wrists are effectively preventing me from using my magic. And even after these two years are over, they will likewise prevent me from using what magic I have regained for ill intent.” He lifts his bound wrists, displaying the chains circling them, though they are partially obscured by the gleaming metal of the Midgardian restraints. “I would not be able to harm your kind, even if I wanted to.”

Fury scoffs. “And I am supposed to take comfort in the knowledge that all that stands between our planet and your desire to rule it would be two flimsy little wristbands?” he intones slowly, pointing his chin at the chains.

“Magic wristbands,” Tony points out somewhere to his right. Fury doesn’t deign that with an answer as his eye is still lingering on the magic bindings.

“They have been imbued with Odin’s own magic,” Loki says, quenching a sigh. “And the Allfather is the most powerful sorcerer in all the Nine realms, his skills surpassing even those of my own. There is no way for me to break free of these bonds.”

Fury suddenly stands up, and Loki tenses as he walks around the edge of the table and comes to stand beside him. Out of the corner of his eye, he can see Tony tensing up as well, posture alert and ready for whatever comes next.

But the man does nothing more than reaching out a hand to tug at one of the chains around Loki’s wrists, as if he’s testing its strength, suspecting it might snap under his ministrations. Of course, the
binding is thin and doesn’t look very sturdy, but the enchantments make it stronger than any other metal or material could ever be.

“Hmm.” The utterance is more than a snort than an actual word. Fury’s fingers continue to poke around for a few moments, trailing along the cool metal as if he expects some kind of proof of the power contained within to manifest itself. Loki knows the man won’t sense a thing, though; only those with magic powers are able to. To Fury, the material will be as dead and unresponsive as any other piece of metal.

“And these supposedly block your access to your magic?” the man asks, as if that part hasn’t been made clear multiple times already. “Every bit of it?”

“They do,” Loki replies, wondering if the question is merely Fury’s way of basking in the evidence of his enemy’s powerlessness, but refusing to be baited and respond with anger or annoyance. “I can wield no more magic than you can, Director.”

Another ‘hmm’, and another tug at the slim band. Then Fury removes his prodding fingers, drawing himself up to his full height next to Loki, fixing him with an expressionless stare.

And then, Fury strikes without warning, quick as a viper. Loki is fully unprepared for the sudden attack and has no time to raise even a hand in defence before the man’s arm is pulled tight around his neck and he is roughly pulled up from his seat, his back pressed into the body behind him.

Tony’s reaction is immediate. He flies up from his seat, chair falling to the floor as he gets to his feet. “What the fuck are you doing? Let him go!” he shouts angrily.

Fury calmly takes a few steps back from the table and away from Tony, dragging Loki with him. “Stand back, Stark, or I will snap his neck. Same thing goes if you call for Thor or Jarvis.”

Loki claws desperately at the arm constricting around his throat, effectively cutting off his air supply, but the awkward angle, the handcuffs and the gloved hand gripping the chain between them make his struggles ineffective and futile.

He gulps for air as the arm cruelly twists, tilting his neck to a point so painfully close to breaking that even one too deep a breath might be enough to make it snap. He stills his thrashing and concentrates merely on breathing shallowly and remaining as unmoving as possible, despite the increasing pain in his neck and his throat. The world seems to be slipping away from him inch by inch, and his limbs
don’t seem to be obeying him anymore, leaving him limp and unresponsive in Fury’s grip.

There are dark spots dancing before his eyes, but he can still make out the frozen figure that is Tony, as well as the note of panic in his voice as he tries to reason with Fury. And it’s not angry anymore, but pleading.

*That’s odd,* his brain dully registers. *Tony never pleads.* The man is cocky, self-assured, and brash. Not even that one time an eternity ago when Loki faced off with the man, wholly defenceless without his suit, did he plead. No, instead he threatened, he boasted, he made light, despite knowing that Loki could kill him any second. Still, he never pleaded.

And yet, now he does.

“Please, Fury, for fuck’s sake,” Loki can hear the man imploring through the distant haze that is all that remains of his conscious, slowly slipping, mind. “Just… let him go. Please.”

He isn’t even afraid, though, now that death has finally come to claim him. Just... sad. Sad that now that he has finally found something so precious after all his long years of life, it is to be taken away from him. And he from it.

In that moment, he fervently wishes that the last thing he will carry with him from this world wouldn’t have to be the panicked sadness of that voice. It’s more than he can bear, leaving Tony like this.

“Stop it. Just don’t. Please.”

And then, impossibly, the hard floor makes contact with his knees, and then with the rest of him as he is unceremoniously dropped to the ground. There’s a sharp stab of pain as sweet air suddenly rushes through his sore windpipe, and he realizes that he can breathe again. He coughs and splutters, manacled hands reaching up to his bruised throat.

And then there’s the sound of moving feet and Tony’s voice speaking again, though this time it’s furious. *“You fucking bastard,”* he roars. *“What the hell do you think you’re playing at?”*

A split second later, there’s the unmistakable snap of a gun being cocked, followed by the moving feet coming to a sudden halt.
“Stay back, Stark.”

There is silence for a while, interrupted only by Loki’s ragged breathing as he pulls himself up into a sitting position, leaning against the wall with a hand still at his throat as he takes in the scene before him.

Fury is standing with his arm out and gun raised, still and unwavering as a statue. Tony is perhaps two yards away, equally frozen in his spot by the muzzle pointed at his head. His fists are clenched and face drawn into a snarl, reminiscent of a predator eager to rip its prey apart. The tension between them almost makes the air sparkle, as if a conjuror is weaving his spells, creating little ripples and bursts of energy around him.

And he wants to speak up, wants to tell Fury to put the gun down and away from Tony, but right now he can’t make even a word come out of his abused throat, so his efforts only turn into a hoarse rattle.

After what feels like an eternity, the gun is slowly lowered, but not completely. It still remains in Fury’s hand, half-pointing towards the floor, poised to be brought up again in an instant should circumstances so demand.

“You goddamn--” Tony begins, his fists clenching and unclenching, but before any further insults can spill forth, he is interrupted by Fury.

“Calm down,” the black-clad man says, unruffled as if nothing out of the ordinary has taken place, as if they were still all sitting around the table talking borderline-civilly like they were mere minutes ago.

Tony doesn’t look like he is about to calm down anytime soon, but the gun is still in full view, and he makes no move other than glaring. “Alright, care to explain why the hell you just decided to strangle a restrained and unresisting prisoner?” His voice is soft but there is no mistaking the sinister-ness underneath, threatening pain and hurt and vengeance. “This isn’t SHIELD headquarters. Don’t bring your shit into my tower. I have fucking standards here.”

Fury’s mouth curls into a tight smile. “Prisoner? I thought Loki was a slave.” The sardonic mockery is almost tangible, but his face soon reverts into its usual serious scowl as he fixes Tony with a one-eyed glare.
"You really think I would take the word of a hostile alien, who is also known as the god of lies, along with that of his father that these magic-blocking chains are working?" Fury shakes his head, as if the mere thought is laughable. "That Loki hasn’t managed to find a way around these bindings to access some parts of his magic again and use it for nefarious means? You know me better than that, Stark. Of course it was necessary to test the truth of that claim. And what better way to reveal any hidden powers Loki still had than a hands-on threat to his life?"

He looks to Loki who is still huddled on the floor, their glares meeting for a moment before he turns his attention back to Tony.

"It would seem that my doubts regarding the effectiveness of Asgard’s bindings were unfounded, though," he says flatly, not sounding sorry or repentant in the least.

Tony bristles. "Great plan, Mister Cyclops, really great plan. And what if it turned out that your suspicions were right and Loki still had some of his powers? He’d probably have fucking *killed* you right there and then! And he would have been well within his rights to!"

"Then my agents waiting outside would have killed him in turn," Fury replies matter-of-factly, as if these turns of events would have been no particularly big deal. Then his face turns several shades darker. "Now, you listen up, Stark. Like I said, there will be an agent sent over here to keep a watch on things for a while, and if there is anything suspicious, anything at all, I don’t care what Odin said in that parchment, I will take Loki back to SHIELD, no further questions asked."

With that, the man calmly places his gun back into its holster and turns to leave. "I’ll find my way out on my own. When you have a plan for the amends part of the sentence, you will report back to me for approval."

"Yeah, and don’t let the door hit your ugly ass on the way out," Tony snaps at him.

As Fury’s hand is on the door handle, he turns back to Tony and throws him the keys to the handcuffs that Loki is still wearing. Tony catches them one-handed. "You better keep your pet on tight leash, or else he won’t remain your pet for long," he says with another scowl.

And with that, Fury is gone with the fluttering of a black cape, and Tony is at Loki’s side in an instant, the man’s arms wrapping around him. "Fuck, are you alright?" he breathes, face pale and eyes wide.
Loki only nods and lets Tony pull him tighter and cradle him in his arms as Loki nuzzles into his neck.

Yes, as long as he has Tony, he’ll always be alright.
Chapter 123

Thor stays for a few days, a substantial part of which he spends voicing his ice-cold anger over Fury’s treatment of Loki, air around him crackling with electricity. And if Fury hadn’t been the leader of Midgard and they weren’t dependant on his goodwill and support in the matter of Loki’s reduced sentence, Thor would have paid the man a visit to teach him a hands-on lesson about the inadvisability of bestowing violence upon those weaker than himself.

Tony, on his hand, doesn’t even bother pointing out the irony in that.

He also doesn’t bother correcting Thor’s mistake about Fury’s job description. As much as Tony would have enjoyed seeing Thor carry out his threat, he is sure that Loki will be the one paying the price should the Thunderer do something ill-advised like raining down godly aggression on the Director of SHIELD, so that course of action will have to be discarded. But maybe Tony can hack SHIELD’s network later on and change everyone’s desktop to some photoshopped, embarrassing picture of the Director himself. Perhaps one showing him wearing pink and frilly women’s underwear or something.

The thought makes him grin.

Still, even though it’s quite nice to have Thor around, especially considering that Loki seems happy to have him, it unfortunately also means that he hasn’t been able to barely even touch Loki in these last few days. But having his godly brother constantly hovering nearby during the day and sleeping only a few doors down the hall at night, Tony’s hasn’t dared doing anything that might hint at the state of things. Given the whole *argr* issue, he has no idea how distasteful and unacceptable Thor would find the idea of another man sleeping with his little brother. Especially a debauched and shameless mortal like him.

Plus, Loki has been a bit on the bruised and battered side since Fury allowed his little asphyxiation fetish to have free reins, so it’s probably just as well to let things rest for a while. Thankfully, the only remaining after-effects of that episode are the bruises still marring Loki’s throat, but nothing more serious than that. Then again, Tony grudgingly has to admit, Fury no doubt knew exactly what he was doing and didn’t inflict any more damage than he considered necessary.

It’s a sunny Tuesday morning when Thor finally leaves, after having spoken many long and flowery words of departure, including repeated reassurances that he will be back to visit as soon as he can, though he now has other duties in Asgard awaiting his attention.

“And here I was starting to think that my dear brother would never leave,” Loki says with a pointed
grin once Thor has apparated his way out of the tower, courtesy of his fancy magic amulet, a faint, lingering blue glimmer the only proof the thunder god was ever there.

Before Tony has the chance to offer a reply, Loki walks up behind him, snaking his arms around his waist, pulling their bodies close.

“I’ve missed you,” the god purrs, and maybe it should be a funny thing to say, since Tony has been here all along, but it’s perfectly clear what he means.

“Missed you too,” Tony says, leaning back into the embrace. “A lot.”

“You know, I’m really glad Fury didn’t drag me off to SHIELD,” Loki’s voice whispers into his ear. “I’m not sure I could have handled many more days apart like this.”

“Hey, I’d let Fury take all my suits and even Jarvis before I’d ever let him have you,” Tony says, and he really means it too.

For a while, they just stand there in silence, Loki’s mouth a mere inch from his ear, breath hot on his cheek. Tony reaches up to place his hands on the god’s lower arms still circling him, softly stroking the skin, enjoying the closeness he’s sorely missed in these last few days. Loki nibbles at his earlobe in response, and a few moments later, a tongue darts out to trace along the sensitive skin of his neck, turning it into a field of little goose bumps.

“You do realize we’re going to have to put a hold on all of this as long as that agent will be staying here?” Tony sighs, already cursing Fury inwardly. Yeah, making that photoshopped picture seems like a really good idea right now. And totally fair too.

Loki makes a displeased sound, pulling Tony a little tighter. “Must we?”

“Well, if the agent finds out, it’s a safe bet it will make its way over to Fury’s ears as well. And considering his paranoia, he might think it’s your way of manipulating me. Like, I don’t know, trying to get access to my suits to do some damage now that you don’t have your magic, or whatever.” He puts his palm on top of Loki’s hand, intertwining their fingers. “And who knows if whatever it said in that parchment will then be enough to keep Mr Permanently Grumpy convinced that following Asgard’s Royal Decree of Indisputableness is still the best course of action?”
Wow, Tony Stark, once again turning down the prospect of sex. What is becoming of him, really?

Or maybe he’s just come to realize that there are more important things than sex.

“I see your point,” Loki replies, not sounding very happy. “I shall endeavour to keep my hands off you, then, though it will not be an easy task.”

A hand is suddenly edging up beneath his T-shirt, languidly caressing the skin beneath.

“But if we will have to refrain from such activities soon, we might as well make good use of the time we have until then, wouldn’t you agree?” Loki asks, his voice having now changed quality into something seductive and husky.

And Tony can’t find a single argument to the contrary. Especially not when there are deft fingers moving over his stomach and a pair of lips placing a long string of soft kisses along the side of his neck.

“Couldn’t agree more,” he breathes in reply as those fingers take to circling his navel before moving upwards to playfully caress the arc reactor. A few strokes along the metal and glass embedded in his chest – which Tony, regretfully, can’t feel at all – and they travel further along to tease over a nipple, thumb stroking it to hardness. The other hand soon follows the first and it doesn’t take long until everything seems to have dissolved into a swirling turmoil of fingers and hands moving over his torso, his chest, his stomach, his sides, caressing every inch of available skin.

With a sigh of pleasure, he leans his head back against the god still standing behind him, and Loki eagerly continues to nibble and lick over Tony’s neck, his tongue leaving a trail of warm wetness in its wake.

Unable to take it anymore, he twists around, turning so he comes face to face with Loki. He only needs a short moment to look into those eyes to see the desire pooling in them, coupled with something else, something much more tender than mere lust. Then, the eyes close shut as he pulls Loki in for a kiss, gently pushing his tongue between those soft lips.

Loki’s tongue meets his, the taste of it as sweet and intoxicating as alcohol, only better. And more addictive. His hands go up to circle the god’s neck, letting his fingers tangle in the dark strands.
There is a soft moan in his ears, and Tony isn’t sure who it’s coming from, but he thinks it’s Loki. Not that it matters. All that’s existing right now is the body pressed up close against his, effectively obliterating any remaining space between them.

The hands are still digging beneath his shirt, but this time pushing it up over his head, only to then dispose of the hindrance on the floor. A moment later, Tony returns the favour as he divests the god of his shirt in turn, exposing an ever-expanding stretch of pale skin for each button that is undone.

As he has finally worked his way down the far too long row of buttons, Loki wrenches the shirt off with a twist of his arms, and Tony runs his fingers over the naked skin, letting them roam over every square inch, revelling in the feeling of a ribcage fluttering from a hastened pace of breath. He swallows, feeling his head almost starting to spin. Loki is so beautiful and hot and sexy and god knows what else. It’s not fair that one man or god or whatever should make him lose all composure like this, like the rug on the floor has been yanked away from under his feet.

But he gives in to it all anyway, there’s no way he can withstand it or even bother making an effort, as he indulges in the god in front of him with hands and lips and tongue and fingers.

Then Loki pulls away, slightly, from his grasp, and Tony moans in disappointment as he’s nuzzling the crook between neck and shoulder, only to look up and meet with amusement playing in a pair of drop-dead gorgeous eyes.

“Let me have this one, Tony,” he says, smiling in what looks like eager anticipation.

He’s not sure what Loki means by that, not until there is suddenly a pair of hands at his belt buckle, snapping it open in a second, only to continue to undo the buttons of his jeans, one by one, excruciatingly slowly, his eyes never leaving Tony’s.

Then, nimble fingers are tugging at the waist of his jeans, pulling resolutely downwards. The pants come down, and Loki follows them, slithering downwards until he’s on his knees with Tony’s cock only inches from his face.

Oh god yes.

A warm hand closes around the base of his shaft, tugging once, and Tony shudders. Loki lets his gaze travel up to met with Tony’s for a heartbeat, another one of those pleased smiles playing at the corner of his lips, before he leans forward to lick along the length. From base to tip, so agonizingly,
so unbearably slowly. As the wet tongue finally reaches the swollen head, a light growl escapes him because it just feels so damn good. And that magic, wonderful tongue keeps swirling over the tip, massaging and playing, lapping and teasing like it’s all it’s ever done in its long existence.

His cock twitches under the ministrations. It’s sweet torture, and most of all he just wants to push himself inside that hot, teasing mouth, but with a monumental effort, he controls himself, breath coming hard and fast.

Unperturbed or perhaps spurred by Tony’s glorious suffering, Loki nibbles along the side of his shaft, tongue trailing languidly along a throbbing vein. As he reaches the head again, he lets his tongue trace the ridge in slow, lazy circles, and Tony moans in frustration.

“Loki…”

The god snickers, ceasing his ministrations for a few seconds. “Don’t they say here in Midgard that patience is a virtue?” he asks innocently, throwing Tony an amused look as he affectionately rubs his cheek against the cock in his hand.

Before Tony can answer that, Loki dives down over him, taking the shaft into his mouth. Slowly, oh-so-slowly, sliding his lips towards the base, and then back up.

Oh yes.

And then, that mouth starts sucking him like a vacuum cleaner on steroids, making a million stars and suns explode before his eyes. Groaning, he leans back against the wall, hands behind him for support, to stop his knees from buckling at the overpowering rush of pleasure as Loki is working on him in earnest.

The god’s tongue – and damn, is it really as long as it feels? – is rubbing along his length as he sucks, playfully teasing. And he takes him deeper than Tony remembers anyone ever doing before. One of the few still rational parts of his brain wonders how it’s at all physically possible, how Loki even manages to do that. But then again, the god has like what, two millennia’s worth of experience in these matters under his belt. Somehow, the idea makes Tony feel strangely… inadequate.

The pace that Loki sets up is steady, and the pressure of his lips wonderfully tight. One of his hands has reached up to grab at Tony’s ass, the other is nestled at the base of his cock, brushing against his balls.
Panting heavily in pleasure, he stares at the god kneeling before him in mesmerized awe. And for a moment, Loki looks up at him, lips slightly twitching in what would have been a grin if he hadn’t had his mouth full of Tony’s cock, clearly enjoying the way he’s making Tony come totally undone.

He can’t stop himself, so he grabs hold of Loki’s hair, pushing his head closer, half expecting the god to protest (in his experience some tend to do that), but Loki doesn’t. He just sucks impossibly harder, taking Tony all the way into that glorious mouth.

And it feels so amazing, like he’s just getting the mother of all blowjobs, the standard against which all else pales. He throws his head backwards as the pressure in his balls builds up, glad for the support the wall offers. The sloppy, wet sounds from his cock sliding in and out between Loki’s tight lips is only making him even harder, and he imagines coming into that perfect mouth, moaning in pure, raw pleasure.

The world has been reduced to those lips moving over his length, the tongue swirling over his head and the mouth encasing him like a vice. And for all he cares, the world can remain like that until it ends, as long as he can keep pushing himself into that wet, tight heat. He’s not really sure anymore if Loki is the one moving over him, or if he’s the one thrusting himself into him, or perhaps a combination of both – it’s not like it matters. He tightens the grip on the tuft of black hair in his hand; he’s on the brink, only a precious little more now--

-- and he comes, the power of his release washing over him like a tsunami, ripping every semblance of control from his being. He shouts, shuddering and bucking, spilling into the god before him. For a blissful moment, nothing exists but the all-encompassing, roaring wave of pleasure washing over him. Neither his senses nor his mind register anything but the explosive force of his climax as he moans and shivers, unaware of anything but the almost painfully intense moment of here and now.

A few moments later, all strength goes out of him, and he slides to the floor like a limp rag, finding himself face to face with a still kneeling Loki. There’s moisture glistening on his lips and lust shining in his eyes and he’s just so goddamn beautiful that Tony would have pulled him in for a devouring kiss if he still had any strength left.

Loki looks at him, an eyebrow quirked. “Did you enjoy that… Tony?” he purrs, voice husky and breathless, as if he was the one that just got the most amazing blowjob on this planet.

And his name on Loki’s lips is just beautiful, a sweet caress in his ears. He doesn’t think there’s any way he could ever grow tired of hearing it spoken like that.
“If I’d enjoyed it any more, I’d be dead,” he manages, laughter bubbling up inside of him. “Where the hell did you learn that stuff? Do they give special classes on this back in Asgard or something?”

Loki only chuckles in reply as Tony wraps his arms around him, pulling him into a tight embrace.

And the world is so perfect in that moment. Loki is safe, Fury won’t be taking him back to SHIELD. He gets to stay here, with him.

There is only one thing that nags at the perfection. The promise of that agent that Fury is going to send. Because he sure as heck doesn’t want any of Fury’s little lackeys living in his tower, especially not with Loki around.
The agent turns out to be Steve. Not many days later, he’s standing there in the middle of Tony’s living room with duffel bag in hand, way too early in the morning, as out of place as a punk rocker at an opera concert in Town Hall.

The good Captain looks equal parts uncomfortable about intruding and equal parts all business and duty, his jaw stoically clenched, clearly determined to fulfil even this no doubt unwanted assignment like a real trooper.

And Tony, on his hand, isn’t sure whether to be relieved that Fury picked a guy that he knows and is as straight-laced as a tight corset, or annoyed for more or less the same reasons. A part of him is convinced that Fury decided to go with Steve for precisely that very reason instead of one of his usual black-clad clone-like little lackeys. After all, the two of them never did have the most sparkly personal chemistry imaginable, something that Fury would be well aware of. And right now, Mr Dark and Scary is probably rubbing his hands together in glee at knowing how much the Captain’s presence in his own tower is going to prickle him.

Then again, given the number of SHIELD agents he’s had the misfortune of meeting that seem to fancy themselves a mixture between James Bond and Jack Bauer, he supposes this is preferable, even if he has to sit through daily sermons about morals and decency and proper behaviour. Aspects in which he’s already well aware that Stars and Spangles believes him to be sorely lacking.

Oh well. At least no one can accuse him of not being a gracious host. So he steps up to Steve, effectively invading his personal space just a little – but who cares, the guy is a soldier and takes his showers together with other naked men, so something like that isn’t going to make him even blink – and gives him a friendly clap on the shoulder.

“Well, if it isn’t good old Capsicle,” he exclaims cheerfully, as if Steve is a long lost friend suddenly recovered. “This is unexpected, seeing your granite-chiselled face in here. Frankly, I thought Fury would send someone a bit more… ominous.”

“Director Fury considered me the best choice for the job partly because you and I are already acquainted,” Steve answers, somehow managing to maintain the impression of a rigidly clenched jaw despite being busy talking. “He expressed confidence it would make things run a lot more smoothly that way as opposed to sending someone in who’s fully… inexperienced in that regard.”

And Tony isn’t sure if that’s supposed to make him feel flattered or insulted, but he settles for the former.

“Isn’t that awesome!” Hey, he’s almost sounding sincere, too. “I can’t wait to hear all about who won the World Series in ’43 and how great Betty Grable was in her latest movie. And in return, I can show you how to work a water closet and take you for a ride in one of those four-wheeled vehicles that have now replaced horses and carriages. We’ll have such a great time together,” he says pleasantly, bestowing another slap on the rock-hard shoulder.

Well, if he’s lucky, perhaps his patented Tony Stark manners will have the man cutting his visit bearably short, taking his holier-than-thou attitude with him, along with the blue spandex. Which he thankfully isn’t wearing today. Small favours, and all.

Steve doesn’t deign that with an answer. Instead, his eyes shift to focus on something over Tony’s shoulder. Despite already knowing what the other man is looking at, Tony turns, following the
Captain’s gaze to Loki, who is sitting on the couch behind them with a forgotten book still in his lap, watching the proceedings with wary interest.

“Loki,” Steve acknowledges, stiff and formal.

“Captain,” Loki returns with a slight nod of his head.

“Oh yeah,” Tony interrupts them, “sorry for my bad manners, not making formal introductions. But as you’ve already met, I think I can skip my little speech of ‘Steve, meet Loki, alien god-turned-temporarily-mortal, and Loki, meet Steve, self-proclaimed champion of all that’s right and just.’ He gives a flippant shrug at the two gazes, green and blue, that are now firmly locked onto him, as he holds up his hands, palms facing out. “Okay, it’s totally not necessary, guys, I know.”

Then there’s a silence that not even Tony can describe as anything else than awkward, so he grabs hold of Steve’s upper arm – and damn, is that seriously the man’s bicep or some extra steel-plated padding he’s sewn into his shirt? – and ushers him forwards.

“Alright, then, I’m sure the two of you will have plenty of time to get to know each other later on. Even if you probably won’t stay all that long, right? Of course, not that you’re not welcome to stay long, but I would figure there’s only so many days that the world can manage without their dashing protector and guardian to fend for it, right?” he rambles into Steve’s tight face. Probably, the guy doesn’t like this anymore than he does.

“So, why don’t I show you to your room?” he quickly continues. “Should make a nice change from those three-level army bunk beds you’re used to, I think. Just make yourself feel right at home, though I’m afraid we don’t have any of those communal showers, but I’m sure you’ll manage.”

Steve isn’t protesting as Tony leads him out of the living room and into the hallway, steering him on towards the guest room area. He’s going to put Steve up a little bit away from him and Loki; because he doesn’t want him too close. Not too far away either, because that would probably just make the guy suspicious; just at a safe, comfortable distance.

“I’ll show you the gym later, but I’m sure you’d like to freshen up a little first, get your nose powdered and that kind of stuff,” he quips over his shoulder to Steve who is walking one step behind.

“Thank you, Stark,” comes the reply, stiff but polite as ever.

“Okay, here we are,” Tony indicates with a flowery hand gesture as he stops outside a door to his right, pressing the handle down and stepping inside. “Your humble accommodations for your little stay.”

Of course, the room is not very humble at all – nothing in the tower really is, but whatever.

Steve follows him through the doorway and deposits his duffle bag on the middle of the floor. There are a few seconds of silence before the man draws himself up to his full height, his arms crossed in front of his chest. His big arms. And his rock-hard chest. And no, Tony’s not jealous at all.

“Alright, so what have you been doing to Loki after he got handed over to you?” Steve demands to know.

Tony cocks his head. “What I’ve been doing to him?” Sure, he could go into some very vivid details about that, but he’s pretty certain that’s not what Mr Freeze would be interested in hearing. “What do you mean?”
“Regardless of Asgard’s designation of his current station, Loki is a prisoner and should be treated accordingly,” Steve says, smoothly avoiding the word ‘slave’.

Tony waves a hand at him. “Yeah, yeah, human rights and all that. I know, I’ve had that little talk with Loki already. And I’ve done nothing terrible to him, so don’t you worry.”

The look he gets in return is doubtful and sceptical as the other man eyes him intently, blue steel piercing the distance between them.

“I know your morals are rather loose in certain matters, Stark, and I just hope you haven’t abused your position of power in any way,” Steve says like he’s a teacher admonishing a misbehaving student. “We’re supposed to be the good guys, the ones with moral standards, and not lower ourselves to their level.”

Tony lets his eyes do an impressive full roll. “Aww, come on, Capsicle, you saw the guy sitting on the couch when you waltzed in here. Seriously, did he look like I had just pulled his nails out or electrocuted his balls or whatever it is they do in those torture camps?” he shoots back, crossing his arms in a not-quite as imposing imitation of the good Captain’s posture.

“For someone who’s been through torture himself, I’d think you shouldn’t speak so light-heartedly of it.”

Oh great, so the Capsicle is in a preachy mood today. This could get long-winded if he doesn’t quickly do something to stave it off.

“Look,” he says, widening his stance to put more authority behind his words, still acutely aware of how small he is compared to Steve. “Loki’s fine. Don’t believe me? Ask him yourself. I haven’t done anything bad to him that would make your precious moral code run off screaming in horror, so just relax, okay?”

Alright, some very liberal stretching of the truth there. But at least those things were consensual, so they don’t really count.

“I think I will do just that,” Steve answers simply.

Alright then, good. Now it’s time for him to get some answers of his own.

He regards Steve’s all-American face and poster-boy good looks for a couple of seconds before speaking. “So, exactly what were Fury’s orders? What it is that you’re supposed to do around here, to be more specific?”

“My mission is to confirm that Loki is indeed as harmless as Director Fury has been given reason to believe, and assess whether there is any need for SHIELD to intervene,” comes the reply.

“My mission. Spoken like a true soldier.

“Well, given that he’s already been here in person to check up on our resident god of mischief, Fury sure is a paranoid one if he finds it necessary to send you in as well,” Tony says, relaxing his pose as he takes a few paces towards the window, nonchalantly leaning against the pane.

“And with good reason,” Steve counters, ever-loyal towards his superior officers.

“Okay, Mr One-Eye isn’t here and he can’t hear you, so you can stop the brown-nosing already.”

Steve’s eyebrow gives a slight twitch. “I would think that after everything that’s happened, Director
Fury is doing well to be wary and not let his guard down.”

Yeah, yeah, whatever.

“And how long are you planning on staying in Casa de Stark?”

“For as long as it takes until I can give a reliable report to Fury.”

Tony suppresses a wince. Damn. That could be any time.
Chapter 125

He watches in silence as the good Captain downs his fifth sandwich and then reaches out to make another one. *Damn, how is it even possible to eat that much and still remain as fit and toned, even with a metabolism faster than that of a humming bird?*

Definitely, totally not fair.

The conversation around the table is going haltingly, to put it mildly. Not even *he* is feeling up to doing much talking at the moment; he’s still too busy trying to figure out how he’s going to be able to put up with a prune like Steve hovering over his shoulder all day. Sure, he can work with the guy if need be – to be honest, there are few people he’d rather have at his side in a fight – but that doesn’t mean he’s going to enjoy living under the same roof as him.

He glances over at Loki, who looks pretty unperturbed for someone who’s just gotten a personal probation officer assigned to him. At that, Tony can’t help but silently speculate how everything would have played out if Loki had been handed over to Steve instead of to him. Well, apart from Mr America’s moral compass going haywire and exploding from the total breech of his sensibilities and ethics.

And he wonders if Steve would at all have cared about the implied threat from the Einherjer guard of consequences to follow if he didn’t accept the compulsory offer of a personal slave. Knowing the Captain, he would most likely have refused, causing a big scene ending with him giving one of the longest speeches ever of his uptight life. And then, once the space Vikings had grown tired of listening to him talking and proceeded to dump Loki off at his doorstep anyway and apparate back home before Steve was even halfway through with his morality sermon, he’d probably have called Fury faster than he could down one of Tony’s sandwiches.

Well, he has to admit, in that regard, Odin sure knew what he was doing when he didn’t pick Steve for the doubtful honour of becoming a slave owner. And as much as he remembers initially wishing that Steve (or anyone, really) had been chosen instead of him, right now he’s very glad things didn’t happen that way.

His gaze drifts away from Loki back to Steve again, and the bulging biceps peeking out where the T-shirt sleeves end. Does the man *really* have to wear shirts that tight as opposed to simply opting for one size bigger? Then again, maybe thrift stores don’t usually carry XXXXXL sizes.

His own sandwich and coffee are already finished, and he knows that Steve wants to have a private conversation with Loki, so he might as well leave them to it. It’s going to happen sooner or later.
anyway, and sooner is no doubt the better option.

Scooting back his chair and standing up, he looks briefly at each of the two in turn, then makes a toss of his head in the direction of the door.

“Alright, I’ll be down in my workshop if you need me. Until then, enjoy each other’s company.”

With that, he heads out the doorway, leaving Loki and Steve alone.

“So,” Steve begins, twisting uncomfortably in his seat, but seemingly determined to carry on nonetheless. “Director Fury has already given me a thorough run-down of the situation, but I’d still like a few words in person with you about certain things.”

“As you wish,” Loki says, tilting his head. He’s not sure exactly what the Captain wants to talk to him about that he doesn’t want to say in front of Tony, and he has to admit he’s a bit curious. It’s clear that the man isn’t comfortable about the situation, but Loki can sense no obvious resentment or anger emanating from him. Then again, if Steve had been harbouring any animosity towards him, he’s sure that Tony wouldn’t have left the two of them alone for even a second.

Steve leans forward, resting his lower arms on the tabletop, a crease on his forehead. “You know, first of all, I’m aware of what the situation is like and that there is nothing to be done about it, but I have to say that I don’t understand your kind at all. For a people so supposedly advanced, you should have realized by now that slavery is wrong and inhumane.” He makes a small pause, during which he intently studies Loki. “And I certainly don’t see how becoming a slave could help anyone reform.”

Well, Steve obviously isn’t familiar with the way justice is dispensed in Asgard. A way that Loki has by now learnt is so very, very different from how things are done in Midgard.

“The main purpose of Asgardian punishments isn’t primarily to be reformative, but to actually be punishments meant to work as deterrents,” he answers simply.

“It’s barbaric,” comes the determined reply as Steve crosses his arms before him in what is probably an unconscious defence mechanism.
Loki gives him a little smile. For some reason, he just can’t help himself. “If you think that’s bad, then you should hear about our execution methods.” Well, they’re generally quick, but it’s not like Steve would know.

The look he gets in return is disapproving. “I doubt I would agree with any of those either, or at all understand how your culture works,” he says. “Nor do I understand why Stark of all people got chosen for… this task.”

“How so?”

Steve looks almost like he would have preferred to take his words back, but then he relents. “I simply do not see him as well suited for it, given his way of living and general morals.” He makes a hand gesture to indicate their surroundings. “While this tower does have all the security measures anyone could possibly ask for, I would still not have considered Stark an appropriate choice for taking on this kind of responsibility.”

Loki quirks an inquisitive eyebrow in his direction. “You mean to say, then, that you would have been more suitable – or perhaps appreciative – of the honour, Captain?”

Steve looks at him with a wrinkled brow and a set jaw, as he lets a quiet sigh slip. “That’s not what I meant. My point is that the correct thing to do would have been to have handed you over to the proper authorities to stand trial for your crimes here on Earth.”

He stands up and starts pacing slowly across the room. “At least then you would have gotten a fair sentencing and not… this.” He turns to give Loki an intense stare, as if there’s faintly printed text on his skin that the man is doing his utmost to decipher.

From his current vantage point, Loki is very much certain that such an outcome wouldn’t have been an improvement of his situation by any definition of the word, but the Captain still means well, he supposes.

“Anyway, I hope that Tony hasn’t been… treating you badly or violated your rights in any way? If you have any complaints about your treatment here--“

“I assure you, Captain, I have no complaints whatsoever,” Loki interrupts him. “And I can say for certain that my treatment here would be very much preferable to SHIELD’s tender hospitality.”
Steve looks unconvinced, but doesn’t voice any further protests or doubts, just nods slowly in silence.

And Loki can’t help but marvel that Steve should at all voice any concerns on his behalf. Then again, Bruce Banner had asked him similar questions during his visit here, obviously wanting to make sure nothing bad had been done to him, something that had confused him at the time.

As strange as it is, he knows at this point that this is not an isolated aberration, but something born out of Midgardian sentiment. Humans are indeed very different from Asgardians, who would have called it weakness, but as paradoxical as it might sound, he’s come to understand that it’s actually one of humanity’s strengths.

Looking into the hard-chiselled face in front of him, he decides to ask Steve a question of his own.

“You don’t like Tony very much, do you?”

Steve draws himself up a little, looking uncomfortable. “I didn’t say that. But we are very different,” comes the rather clipped reply.

And that is a very interesting thing to say, because that’s not Loki’s own impression of the two men, regardless of what Steve might say and Tony probably would too. No, there’s something about the Captain that actually reminds him very much of Tony. Not physically, of course, because the two of them are obviously very dissimilar in that department, but there’s something else there. Something that is responsible for making both of the men what they are.

Perhaps like a sword and a hammer, neither looking anything like the other, having vastly different appearances and uses. But when taking a closer look it would become obvious that each has been forged from the same material, each one made of the same steel that shaped the other, sharing their inner essence.

“But you’re still comrades in arms,” he says. “Or ‘shield brothers’, as we would have said in Asgard.”

Steve stops his pacing for a little while, placing his lower arms on the backrest of a nearby chair, leaning forwards a bit. “I trust Stark on the battle field, but it doesn’t mean that we have great chemistry in private. We have too little common ground for that.”
It is interesting indeed, because the more Steve talks, the more he reminds Loki of Tony. Not in any way that immediately meets the eye, no, but if you dig a little deeper, the similarities are definitely there. Both men are passionate and driven, though each in their own way. They both have convictions that they firmly stand by and are probably not too different, not at their core.

The outcome of all that might vastly differ, but not what lies beneath – heart, soul, kindness.

Of course, he is sure that if he were to give voice to any of this, both Steve and Tony would vehemently deny any resemblances, so he decides to keep his observations to himself.

“If you say so,” he concedes with a shrug, letting it lie at that. “And how long are you planning to stay here to keep an eye on me?”

“As long as is necessary.” He gives Loki a searching stare. “However, I do hope that you will prove yourself reformed as claimed and aren’t planning on reverting to your old ways. In that case, I will have no choice but to report the state of things to Director Fury, and I’m sure you realize what will happen then.”

“I guess that would mean I get to enjoy SHIELD’s hospitality for an indeterminate amount of time,” he replies, throwing his hands out, palms up. “Worry not, Captain. I can assure you that I very much regret my previous actions in Midgard and I harbour no plans whatsoever to the detriment of your realm or its people. And I intend to make what amends I can as recompense for my crimes.”

“I hope so,” Steve says, giving a curt nod. “I believe in second chances, so don’t waste the one you’ve been given.”

“I won’t, Captain. Trust me.”

Steve relaxes a little bit. “Glad to hear it. Then I’m sure we should be getting along just fine.”

“I’m sure we will,” Loki agrees.

He has to admit that when meeting him like this, he actually likes the Captain, despite the two of them getting off on the wrong foot in Germany.
He seems nice. Kind, even.

Like Tony.

And like Tony, he’s pleasant to look at as well.
Chapter 126

Steve hovers in the background as they’re back to running the tests for the magic blocker in Tony’s workshop. After everything that’s happened lately, what with Thor’s visit and Loki’s reduced sentence and Fury’s resulting stopover, those things have been put on hold for a little while since there just hasn’t been any appropriate time for it.

Now, however, there’s no point in holding it off anymore, quite the opposite. If he can show Steve that they’re taking the work on the magic blocker for Victor Doom seriously, the guy is surely going to mention that in his report to Fury. And that can only be a good thing, helping to clear any doubts Mr Trenchcoat might harbour about Loki doing more good in Tony’s tower than in a cell at SHIELD.

Of course, it’s not like Steve has any clue whatsoever what they’re really doing in here, what button does what, and whether those numbers flashing on the screen actually mean something or are just a collection of the winning national lotto numbers for the last three decades.

But it’s makes little difference. He’s learned long ago that the less people know about science and technology, the more they tend to be impressed by complicated words and data and devices. And, usually, the fewer questions they tend to ask, since they realize that they won’t comprehend the answers anyway.

And truth be told, he really has no desire to go into lengthy explanations for the benefit of the Captain, given that the man won’t understand any of it anyway.

He turns a knob, adjusting the frequency just a little bit. “Any changes there?” he asks Loki, who is sitting in the chair opposite from him, a crease of concentration on his forehead.

“No, none that I can tell,” the god says after a few heartbeats of slowly curling his fingers through empty air, as if he’s searching for something tangible. It’s making Tony insanely curious – again – what it is that Loki is actually feeling from those force fields, because he sure as heck can’t sense a thing.

He makes a mental note to ask the god more in depth about that some time, if it’s more like a tingle or a pressure or something else, that sensation he’s registering.

“Alright, then,” he says, his hand reaching out to the control panel. “I’m going to amplify the
magnetic resonance until we get it to synchronize with the secondary Brokker fields; that might decrease the gamma fluctuation a bit."

If he’s totally honest with himself, he’s not saying all that just to satisfy his own narcissistic leanings that enjoy the sound of his own voice, or even for Loki’s benefit. No, he’s intentionally using as much techno-babble as he can possibly fit in, just to annoy the good Captain who’s sitting a little bit away, watching the proceedings like a hawk. As if he would ever be able to make sense of anything they’re doing in here.

He isn’t sure exactly what it is about Steve’s presence that irks him so much, but it’s really freaking annoying having someone sitting there staring at you as you work, despite having no clue whatsoever about what’s going on. Tony could be building a nuclear bomb for all anyone cares, and Steve wouldn’t be able to tell before he saw the resulting giant mushroom cloud forming on the horizon.

Well, that, and also having to grow up with the never-ending litany grating on his ears about how freaking-amazing-and-fantastic Stars and Spandex was.

Oh well. At least the guy isn’t scribbling down notes like a fucking psychiatrist; Tony is quite sure that would have frayed his nerves to flimsy ribbons, apart from just having been terribly distracting.

He makes some further adjustments and then types up a couple of commands on the computer screen. “Any difference now?” he asks Loki, watching the god tense slightly as he half-closes his eyes in concentration, focusing on those elusive sensations that are totally off-limits to Tony.

“I’m not quite sure,” the god says with some hesitation. “Perhaps a slight shift to the positive, but it’s hard to tell.”

Tony nods. “Okay, we’ll wait for a few minutes until the frequency oscillations get more regular, then it might be easier to spot any difference.” He watches the amplifier, then lets his gaze drift to Loki’s hands and the long slender fingers that are now back to resting on the top of the workbench. It is with some effort he fights down the urge to reach out and touch those hands, slowly letting his fingertips trace their way up across those lean arms and further still onto even more interesting body parts. Heck, they’d probably have enough time for it while waiting for the amplifier frequency to stabilize.

But of course any such activities are out of the question when Captain Spangles is sitting there within spitting distance, his presence effectively ruining Tony’s chances for any fun and games.
He sighs. Nope, no bending Loki over the workbench and having his wicked way with him, or any of the other million things his inner eye could see them doing right now. Instead, he has to sit here in his sexual frustration with Mr Spandex’s morally righteous face looming over the proceedings.

Again, he’s seriously hoping the guy isn’t going to be staying for terribly long. He’s had enough with all the blue-balling he’s endured since Loki came here, and now that he’s free to indulge in the god with his full consent, he really doesn’t fancy having to hold off again just because of his unwelcome guest who, despite his ninety-something years on Earth, probably still has yet to get laid.

Oh well. If the guy wants to turn his own sex life into a barren desert, it’s his problem; Tony just wishes it didn’t have to affect his as well.

But he stoically keeps his hands to himself, despite the temptation to just scoop Loki up in his arms and press his lips against the god’s, and his eyes on the little frequency indicator on the control panel, watching it slowly but surely slow its oscillations.

“Okay, let’s try it again,” he tells Loki as he flips a switch, watching the god go into his focused mode again. “Anything now?”

“Yes, there is something,” Loki says with some hesitation, but then nods with more conviction. “It’s not a huge difference, but there’s definitely a change.”

Tony is about to make some further adjustments when Steve interrupts. “So Loki is the only one who can sense any of these… force fields?” he asks, eyeing the equipment on the workbench as if expecting to see a physical manifestation of whatever it is that Loki is picking up on. “How come neither of the two of us can feel anything? I find it a bit strange, to be honest.”

Tony rolls his eyes inwardly. Okay, perhaps he accidentally did it outwardly too, if the tensing of that square jaw is anything to go by. So the guy might be built like a brick house, but he still doesn’t know jack shit about science. He’s about to give a dismissive reply, but Loki pre-empts him.

“Then why don’t you come over here and feel for yourself, Captain?” he inquires, gesturing to the empty chair to his right. “Who knows, maybe you do have a trace of magic in you that would allow you to feel the force fields, after all.”

Steve looks vaguely uncomfortable at the mere suggestion that there might be anything magic-y
about him beyond those super-soldier chemicals swirling around in his bloodstream.

Loki crooks a corner of his mouth at Steve’s wary reaction. “It’s not dangerous, so how about giving it a try?”

Steve hesitates for a few seconds, and Tony is convinced he’s about to decline the offer, but then he gets up from his chair next to Tony, walks around the edge of the workbench and sinks down in the seat next to Loki instead.

“Alright,” Steve says, looking comically out of place amidst the plethora of devices and cables and technology. “What do I do now?”

Loki inches a bit closer to the sceptical Captain, taking hold of one of his hands. “Just hold your fingers out in front of the amplifier like this,” he explains as he moves both of their hands into position before the prototype device.

Tony watches the two of them in silence, Steve’s face scrunched up in concentration or suspicion or a combination of both, Loki’s slender hand still holding onto the Captain’s more square and callused one.

“You feel anything now, Captain?” the god asks, an eyebrow raised in inquiry.

“No, I don’t,” Steve replies slowly, sounding more relived than disappointed.

Loki shrugs, giving a brief smile. “Well, I do,” he says, hand still on Steve’s. “It tingles.”

“Alright, Stars and Spangles,” Tony interrupts, a bit harsher than intended. “How about you get your hand out of the way so we can continue with the testing here? I’m quite sure there’s not a single trace of fairy magic in a straight-laced guy like you anyway.”

“Well, don’t let me hamper your research, Stark,” Steve replies as he leans back into his chair, withdrawing his hand. “I’m just here to observe, after all.”

“Yeah, you do that,” Tony mutters, holding the other man’s gaze for a couple of seconds before he
redirects his attention to the monitor again. There are a few adjustments that need to be made, some rewiring to be done, and then they can pick things up again. He taps on his keyboard, bringing up the latest data and test results, trying to find the pattern that he is certain should be there.

As usual when he’s working on a complex problem, the world around him slowly fades away, leaving only what’s right in front of him as his brain sets to work, structuring and analyzing and solving. He’s only vaguely aware of Loki and Steve striking up a conversation across the table, their words turning into a soft droning without any individual syllables really registering in his brain.

*Perhaps he can connect another alpha circuit board to the amplifier. It might strengthen the field, even though it might also disrupt the signal from the magneto-resonator. He could give it a try, he supposes. Or maybe add a bit of palladium into the mix, that might be the catalyst needed to speed things up a little.*

“Not at all, Captain,” he suddenly hears Loki’s voice through the soft background droning. “I, for one, have to say I think it’s nice to have a visitor around.”

Tony looks up from the monitor, the equation in his head splitting up and falling into pieces, his concentration broken. Loki’s fingers are resting lightly on Steve’s arm, his upper body leaning forwards. And Tony can swear that those fingers linger on that swelling bicep for longer than is really necessary.

He frowns, but then pushes the vague feeling of disquiet away. Surely that is just his brain overreacting and misinterpreting things.

*Right?*
Chapter 127

Truth be told, there are few activities that Tony can see the three of them engaging in together for relaxation, so when dinner is over and done with, he ushers his two lodgers into the living room, sitting them down to watch a movie. He’s not in a terribly good mood, so doing something that involves a minimal amount of talking, such as staring at a screen, would be preferable, or he might end up saying something rude.

Steve and Loki both obediently sit themselves down on the couch without comment, Steve to the left, and Loki in the middle.

“So, let’s hear it, people. What movie preferences do you got?” he asks with as much cheer as he can muster, clapping his hands together where he’s standing in front of the screen, eyeing the discrepant couple on the couch.

“Loki – The Vikings or Erik the Red? How about you, Spangles?” He makes a show of eyeing his impressive DVD collection, a finger tracing one of the rows as he wrinkles his brow in feigned consternation. “Nope, I think you’re all out of luck there. No Charlie Chaplin or Greta Garbo. Guess you’ll have to make do with something in colour, I’m afraid. Hopefully it won’t hurt your eyes too much.”

“I think it would be easier for all of us if you just picked a movie, Stark,” comes Steve’s rather tired reply. “As you’re well aware, neither me nor Loki are at all familiar with modern-day movies.”

Well, not that he’d ever trust Steve to pick the entertainment regardless.

In the end, he settles for some mindless action flick, turning the cover over in his hands as he’s trying to remember if he’s ever watched it before. Oh well. It will have to do.

Having plopped the disc into the DVD player, he flips himself down next to Loki, at the last second quelling the automatic habit of putting his arm around the god. Instead, he passably covers up his aborted movement by pretending to yawn and stretch his arms over his head.

They watch the movie in silence, a plethora of explosions and screeching tires and smart-ass one-liners all that fills the room. After about half an hour of this, Tony turns to the gathered assembly of two. “Anyone up for some popcorn?” Not waiting for an answer, he stands up. “Well, I want some, at least. Be right back.”
A few minutes and two popped microwave oven bags of popcorn later, he returns with a bowl in hand, placing it on the tabletop. “Help yourself,” he says with a sweep of his hand as he sits back down on the couch, grabbing a fistful of corny puffiness before his ass has hit the cushions.

He never bothered pressing the pause button on the remote before he made his way to the kitchen, but he sincerely doubts he’s missed anything important. Maybe an explosion or two at the most.

Half-bored, he chews on the popcorns. Too little salt, but he can’t be bothered going back to the kitchen again.

Loki tentatively takes a few of the offered snacks between his fingers, biting into them slowly. First time he’s eaten any popcorns, Tony reckons, and he doesn’t seem terribly impressed. Steve is less hesitant, though, digging out a big helping with his shovel of a hand and proceeds to stuff his face with it.

He has to admit, though, the popcorns aren’t very good. But his usual brand of choice was all out, so this is what he got instead. Clearly not a stellar choice.

In the end, it’s just Steve eating the popcorns, mechanically shuffling handful after handful into his mouth as the movie plays out on the screen, bathing the living room in florescent light.

Tony draws a leg up, leaning back against the cushions, preparing himself for a long evening. He can see the mop of black hair next to him out of the corner of his eye. And he’d really want for it to be leaning against his shoulder right now, but of course that’s not going to happen as long as the good Captain is anywhere in the vicinity. He’s made it clear to Loki, after all, that they would keep all that personal stuff under the radar of whatever agent Fury would be sending. He really doesn’t want that reported back to the good Director who’s already mistrusting both of them enough as it is. No need for him to think that Loki is trying to take over the world again by making a detour through Tony’s pants, winding him around his little finger as he goes.

Alright, so maybe Loki already has managed that last part, but it’s not as if Tony’s protesting, and right now, there are few things he would have wanted more than pushing Loki onto his back, disposing of every single article of clothing the god is wearing. His mind drifts for a while, enjoying an illicit mixture of delightful memories and free fantasies of the two of them doing things that the fifth wheel in their midst probably hasn’t even heard of.

A sulking part of his brain – okay, so maybe it isn’t really his brain, but whatever – demands to
know when Steve is finally going to end his mission and go back home, but he placates it with another vivid volley of sinful and sexy images. So much more interesting than the lacklustre movie playing out on the big plasma screen.

Loki on his knees, mouth half-open and glistening wet; Loki on his back, legs wantonly spread; Loki on his hands and knees, his ass on perfect display; Loki in a whole bunch of exotic positions that would have made the author of Kama Sutra scratch his head in confusion. And, then, simply Loki all cuddled up in Tony’s arms.

Eventually, he pushes the alluring fantasies away, though, as they’re starting to have certain physical effects that he really doesn’t want to be sporting in the presence of the Captain. So he reluctantly lets the images dissolve and returns his focus to the movie, drawing his other leg up as well to make sure than nothing untoward is observable.

He throws another longing glance to his left, to the god at his side. And then he frowns slightly. Maybe it’s just his imagination running away with him, but from where he’s sitting, it looks as if Loki is leaning over towards the Captain, his head resting mere inches from the man’s shoulder. But that must surely be a product of his imagination.

Right?

He clenches his jaws. Yes, definitely his imagination.

Dinner next day is eaten in the living room in front of the TV, another movie on display that none of them is really watching. He digs into the pasta on his plate and twirls the strands elegantly on the teeth of his fork, something that he’s learned to do by now, as much as the flimsy food didn’t want to obey him at first. Furtively, he sneaks a glance over towards Steve, whose appetite could almost have rivalled even Thor’s. It still feels a bit odd having someone else sitting at the table other than Tony; so far that’s only happened those times when his brother visited.

And even if the moment is a bit spoiled by the excitable tenseness the Captain’s presence seems to call forth from Tony, he has to admit it’s quite nice having him around.

It doesn’t hurt that the man is attractive; not like Tony, of course, but still. He’s well built and strong, looking every inch like a warrior straight out of Asgard; just a change of clothes and some longer hair, and there would have been no visible difference. And from what Loki has seen of Steve – even
experienced first hand, all that time ago – his fighting skills, though markedly different, are certainly on par as well.

What’s even more noteworthy, though, is that despite all that, he exhibits none of the arrogant bluster and conceitedness that is so common among Aesir warriors. No, Steve is strong and confident in a modest way, without looking down on those who are weaker and obviously less skilful in combat.

He likes that.

And so, he can’t help but to flirt a little with the man. Just a few little hints, some equivocal words here, a light touch there. Only small things, and yet is seems like the man blushes and gets flustered merely from these innocent displays. It amuses as well as fascinates him. For that no-nonsense guy he once fought back in Germany, it’s such a stark contrast. He’s never seen that among any of the experienced, skilful warriors in Asgard, their behaviour as brash and rambunctious as their prowess in battle. He can’t imagine that any of them would be fazed by a little flirting.

If he didn’t know any better, he’d call it cute, despite Steve being a capable warrior able to defeat probably almost any man in Midgard, and, even more impressive, hold his own against many of Asgard’s own swordsmen, despite being a mortal.

He smiles inwardly. Midgardian men sure are different from their Asgardian counterparts, and he has to admit that he approves of that.

Of course, he doesn't actually mean anything with the little jokes and casual compliments. He wouldn’t have proceeded further even if the Captain had been willing; Tony is more than enough for him. It’s just a way to have a little bit of fun, to pass the time while Steve is here and until Tony will once more bestow his favours on him again.

He glances from Steve over to Tony, who’s chewing mechanically, making lacklustre conversation with Steve between mouthfuls. There’s an obvious sulkiness in his voice, and Loki wishes he could reach over and do something that he knows from experience would put Tony into a much better mood.

But he doesn’t, since Tony has made it clear that they’re not to show off any of those parts of their relationship to whatever agent Fury would send over, just to be on the safe side. So he’s not going to do anything to contravene that, as much as he’d like to.
Still, Tony hasn’t touched him at all since Steve came here, and even though it’s fully understandable, it doesn’t mean that he has to like it. So until the current circumstances change, he might as well amuse himself a little, play around for a bit. Seeing the Captain blush and bluster is funny, and it’s not like he would ever go any further than that.

Also, he has a feeling that the Captain might not actually be into men, but that just makes it even more fun. And it’s not as if he hasn’t been able to bed a few men in Asgard back in the day who were laughably certain that they were only ever interested in women.

Well, he’s not about to go there with Steve, so instead he just sits there watching the very much unrealistic and exaggerated fighting scene playing out on the screen before them. Not that anyone in Asgard would ever have asked his advice for anything battle-related, but even he can see the ineffectiveness of the odd techniques on display.

“Surely this is not how men in Midgard usually fight?” he can’t help but ask when the travesty has gone on for long enough. “Nobody would ever win a fight employing techniques like that.”

“It’s only a movie,” Steve answers patiently. “It’s not supposed to portray how anyone fights in real life. I can assure you, neither I nor anyone else who knows the first thing about fighting would ever use any of these moves, they just wouldn’t work.”

Loki turns his head to him and smiles. “Oh, I never thought that you would, Captain. No doubt a man like you would know better and carry himself much more impressively than this.”

And he can’t help it, but he does enjoy the slight blush he gets in return.
He runs into Tony just as he turns a corner, and they both abruptly halt in their tracks as to not walk into each other. Before Loki can continue on his way, though, a hand is curling around his upper arm, effectively stopping him.

Tony doesn’t look very happy as Loki meets his gaze, and it’s all too obvious that there’s something bothering him.

“Is there anything wrong?” he asks, despite already knowing that the answer will be a ‘yes’.

The hand on his arm falls away as Tony gives him an unwavering stare. “Yeah. As a matter of fact, there is,” comes the cool reply, the brown eyes not leaving him for a second.

He blinks, frowning. “What is it, then?” Sure Tony hasn’t been delighted about Steve’s presence in the tower, but that’s not something that Loki can do anything about, so there has to be something else weighing on his mind.

“You don’t think I’ve noticed?”

“noticed what?” he asks, uncertain where this is going, but already knowing he doesn’t like it one bit; obviously he’s done something that Tony strongly disapproves of, but he can’t figure out what that could possibly be.

It wasn’t the right thing for him to say, however; he can tell by the darkening look on the man’s face.

“The way you’ve been throwing yourself at our visitor since the day he walked in here, like you’re trying to get into his pants or whatever you’re playing at! Seriously, you think I wouldn’t notice any of that shit?” Tony throws out, ostensibly growing more agitated for every syllable leaving his mouth.

Loki stiffens at the harshness of the words, wanting to open his mouth to reply, but nothing comes out in his confusion at Tony’s brash reaction.
“So, do tell me, what is it about Mr Spangles that you can’t resist?” Tony continues, jaw clenched, and eyes frosty and narrowed. “Is it his humongous biceps? His smooth pretty-boy face? Or his baby-blue eyes of baby-blue steel? What is it, huh?”

And Loki feels himself go ice cold at that. Though he’s certainly seen Tony angry many times before, it was a long time ago since any of it was being aimed at him. But now, that anger is being fully levelled into his direction, raw and accusing and bitter.

And he doesn’t understand, because how could Tony possibly be upset because of nothing but some innocent flirting? In Asgard, a little flirting means nothing. No one would care about any such, except perhaps for the most extremely possessive and controlling kind of partner. Of course, it would be impossible to expect somebody to go for what might be several millennia wholly ignoring the beauty and charms of everyone who is not one’s spouse or partner. Showing appreciation for others is a way to keep things interesting and prevent relationships from stagnating once the weight of a few centuries or so comes weighing down. It’s all part of the fun and games, as long as it doesn’t cross certain lines. Lines that he never intended to cross, of course.

And faced with Tony like this, he can’t help but feeling a hot seed of anger in his stomach too, coupled with a sense of betrayal and other very unpleasant things too.

Because he still remembers so well that one time when Tony had told him he was free to make his own choices, despite his being a slave by Asgard’s designation. The man had made insistent promises, then, that here in Midgard, Loki would be granted the rights to his own decisions, regardless of his current station.

Or was all that merely empty words? Could it be that Tony is suddenly having second thoughts, when those choices go against what he wants? Does he nevertheless seek to control Loki when it actually matters, despite everything? He’s never considered that before, and it doesn’t seem like Tony at all, but the mere possibility makes something cold and hard ache deep inside of him, despite his knowing that by Asgard’s laws, he would of course have no claims to any rights whatsoever. And he wants to ascertain whether that was true or not, whether Tony truly meant and still means those alluring words he had spoken.

And perhaps he shouldn’t, but he can’t help himself, so he gives the man before him a challenging stare as he draws himself up, staring him right into his face.

“Well, you’re free to order me to stop, then,” he says, a stab of ice in his voice. “You’re the master, after all, aren’t you?”
And Tony just stares at him as his face falls and his shoulders slump, his entire body deflating as if it were a leaking balloon. For a moment, he seems shocked, at a loss for words, but then he slowly shakes his head as he visibly swallows.

“No, that’s not my call to make,” he says, looking away, the anger gone, now, having been replaced by something else. “It’s your decision, not mine. You don’t have to choose me if you’d rather have someone else. It’s… up to you, like it’s always been.”

The words sound honest, but the man still looks positively miserable, like his world just fell apart and all the happiness went right out of him.

And that’s when it all dawns on him. Despite how illogical is seems, Tony is truly just jealous because of some little innocuous flirting. He can hardly believe it, but seen in that light the man’s reaction actually makes sense.

It must obviously be very different in Midgard, then, if Tony is behaving like that after nothing but some comments and a few glances. But perhaps it’s not so strange now that he considers it; given humans’ much shorter life spans, they might not have the same need for such, and might even consider that kind of behaviour, as normal as it might be in Asgard, wrong and upsetting.

And suddenly, he feels like an idiot, needlessly hurting and upsetting Tony like that. And for a second even suspecting that Tony didn’t actually mean the precious words he’d been saying back then.

He swallows. “I… believe I owe you an apology,” he manages, mentally berating himself for his careless presumptions. “I have clearly misacted, not realizing it is not considered acceptable to flirt with others in Midgard. There is nothing improper about doing such in Asgard, so I assumed this was normal behaviour here as well. Had I known it was not, I would have refrained from it.”

Tony watches him in silence, but his eyes are urging Loki to go on, so he does.

“I assure you, whatever I might have said or done to the Captain means nothing,” Loki hastens to assure him, fully aware of what Tony wants to hear. “It was merely for the fun of it; I do not feel any real attraction to him. Not anything that could ever compare to what I feel for you. And believe me, whatever Steve might have going in his favour, you outshine him in every single aspect.”

And suddenly, Tony’s eyes turn hopeful again, like whatever leaked out of him moments ago is
“You sure about that?” the man says, still sounding a bit sulky. “Because you were kinda laying it on pretty thick...”

“It meant nothing, Tony. And I will stop my behaviour towards the Captain, now that I understand that it bothers you.” he says, feeling something in him melt at the sight of those puppy-like eyes. “Believe me, I’d pick you over Steve any day, any time. It wouldn’t even be a question of it.”

Tony is silent for a while before speaking, but when he finally does, he shuffles his feet, looking uncomfortable. “You know, I’m sorry for lashing out like that. I was just afraid that you... didn’t want me anymore. That you’d rather have Steve instead of me.”

Wow, he really messed this up, didn’t he?

“Don’t worry about it, it’s fine,” Loki assures him. And it actually is, because how would he have reacted if he thought that Tony had discarded him for someone else? Certainly no better.

Tony seems to consider for a while. “So another case of Asgard-Midgard culture clash, then, I guess.” He huffs a little. “How the heck can you guys be so casual about the whole flirting with others in front of you partner thing? I’ve gotten slapped more than once for doing stuff like that.”

Loki cocks his head, glad Tony is sounding more like his usual self again. “Well, if you’re expected to stay married to the same person for what might be a few thousand years, you need an outlet like that, if you’re not made of stone and ice. Hence, flirting is fully accepted, as long as it stays at that.” He regards Tony for a little while. “So you mean to say that you humans never flirt with each other, if you are involved with someone else?”

“Not in front of our partners, at least,” Tony answers, blowing out a little puff of air between his lips.

“No?” he says, raising an eyebrow. “Then how else do you keep them interested and alert?”

This time, Tony snorts, definitely sounding like his old self, now. “Rest assured, I could show you a few ways.”
“Oh?” Loki grins, feeling the tenseness between them dissolve along with the idiotic misunderstanding. “In that case, I would suggest you put your money where your mouth is.”

Unable to stop himself and eager to fully close any remaining rift between them, he walks up to Tony and pulls him in for a deep kiss, despite knowing that they’ve agreed not to do any of this while Steve is still here. He half expects Tony to push him away any second, so he enjoys the closeness while he can, drinking in the delicious scent and taste of the other man. Whatever flimsy appeal Steve might have exerted on him is swept away in the rush of desire for Tony that crashes over him as two hands grab onto his sides and a tongue pushes into his mouth, demanding entrance.

After a blissful moment of headiness, they break the kiss, but Tony’s arms are still wrapped around him, obviously not about to let go of him any time soon.

He pointedly looks down at the arms circling his waist, and then back to the man’s face, cocking his head. “I thought you said we shouldn’t be doing any of this with Steve around?”

Tony grins as he leans in, giving a little nibble to Loki’s neck before answering. “Don’t worry, our favourite hero left the house a little while ago for some meeting with SHIELD. Said he would be gone for a few hours.” A hand is dexterously navigating beneath the seam of Loki’s shirt, and he shudders at the light touch of skin against skin, sorely missed.

“We’ll have plenty of time for some fun and games until he gets back,” Tony breathes into his ear, then grinds his hips into Loki who can feel the man’s growing hardness through the fabric. “Though, to be honest, as much as I want to make use of every minute, and as much as I usually pride myself on my stamina, I’m afraid the foreplay might have to be cut a little shorter than usual. I’m starving here.”

Loki laughs. “That would be perfectly alright by me. I see no reason to… drag things out more than necessary.”

Before he has even finished speaking, Tony’s other hand has found its way beneath his shirt as well, roaming over his skin. The touch is almost electrical, the way it’s tingling down his spine and igniting sensitive nerve endings.

Loki reaches down to grab two fistfuls of cloth, pulling his shirt over his head and discarding it on the floor. A second later, his back is pushed up against the wall as Tony is hunching down, tracing his tongue in hot trails over his chest, one hand on his waist, the other kneading at his groin.
No, Tony clearly isn’t going to go slowly tonight. He smiles at the prospect as he bucks into the touch, one hand cupping the back of Tony’s neck, fingers raking through the brown mop of unruly hair.

The tongue roaming over his torso finds its way to a nipple, swirling in greedy circles around the hardening knob. He lets himself enjoy the feeling for a while as he leans his head back against the wall, then proceeds to summarily deal with Tony’s shirt as well, fiddling for a few moments before getting the fabric off the man who seems to have transformed into all hands and fingers and tongue.

Loki lets his fingers rake along the exposed, muscled back, then pulls Tony up for another kiss that is warmth and closeness and need all mixed into one.

As they finally separate, he throws a glance over his shoulder towards the living room visible through the doorway to the side.

“The couch?” he whispers, almost breathless with lust.

“The couch,” comes the throaty reply.

The couch is neither terribly big nor very comfortable for the activities ahead, but he couldn’t care less. It’s a lot closer than the nearest bed, and that’s about the only requirement that matters at this point.

They stumble down onto the cushions, landing in a tangled heap of intertwined limbs, neither of them bothering to disentangle.

Damn, he’s horny.

His hands are groping until they find the waistband of Loki’s pants, and he tears them rather than pulls them off, grateful the god is wearing easy-to-remove sweatpants.

And Loki is already so fucking hard it’s amazing, and he’s just about to--
“Sir, may I remind you that you still have that phone call that you promised to make today to Mr Anderson about the palladium alloy?” Jarvis’ voice suddenly rings out from the ceiling.

Tony almost growls in exasperation. “Jarvis, can’t you see I’m getting laid here?” he manages, making a mental note to himself to change the AI’s programming to shut the hell up whenever he’s engaging in anything sexual. “Don’t bother me for the next half an hour, okay?”

“As you wish, sir,” comes the unperturbed reply.

Beneath him, Loki chuckles, his fingers busy groping Tony’s ass.

*Speaking of which, why is he still wearing pants?*

Straddling Loki’s legs, he fiddles with the buttons to his own jeans – and damn, why does there have to be so many of them – temporarily forgoing the temptation of grabbing hold of that straining cock lying just inches away, just waiting for his attention.

*Alright, just one more button to go now, he can handle this…*

And then, there’s suddenly a garbled sound coming neither from him nor from Loki, making him freeze like a deer in headlight. Automatically, his head whips around to face Steve who is standing in the doorway, looking like he’s just seen the end of the world. Which, perhaps, isn’t too far from the truth.

*Oops.*

“Hi there, Capsicle,” he says smoothly, flashing the other man a toothy grin. “I take it your meeting finished a bit earlier than planned?”

Steve doesn’t deign that with an answer as he quickly stomps off, red as a tomato.
He doesn’t encounter as much as even a whiff of spandex from the Captain until the next day, when Steve corners him in the kitchen, the look on his face reminiscent of that of a parent about to give a wayward teenager a long speech about socially acceptable behaviour. It’s almost comical, the way he’s all business and duty, though his discomfort with the situation can be spotted from miles away.

And it’s pretty clear that the guy is upset as well, the way he’s looking at Tony like he’s done something really Bad and Naughty. He steels himself for an unpleasant lecture, not particularly wanting to hear what Steve has to say, because he can imagine most of it already. Truth be told, much of it he would probably have agreed on himself, if he had been on the outside looking in on someone in a similar situation. Because really, having sex with someone who is technically – at least by the definition of Someone Important – your slave, doesn’t really come off as the epitome of consensual.

“Oh, good morning, Spangles, did you have sweet dreams?” he says cheerfully, putting on his best flippant I-don’t-care-because-everything-is-fine-and-dandy façade, trying to act as if nothing is out of the ordinary.

He doesn’t get a reply to that, as Steve – masterfully, as if he’s been doing nothing else in his entire life – draws him up to his full height, fixing Tony with a steely glance. “Don’t you have any shame, Stark?” comes the stern inquiry, and he can’t help but wonder if the man has practiced the up-coming speech beforehand, or if he’s about to go down the improvised route.

“Shame? Oh, sure I do.” He shrugs. “I even felt a little bit of it that one time I was caught naked outside of--”

Steve cuts him off, apparently not in the mood to listen to embarrassing anecdotes. “You’re taking advantage. You’re using the situation. And what’s more – you’re using someone who’s not in any position to say no.” A finger is raised for every infraction, as if keeping tabs on his transgressions. “I really thought you were better than that,” he intones with that annoyingly righteous voice that only Steve knows how to pull off.

And despite being well aware of how understandable it is, the accusation still rankles him. Especially considering how long he walked around with balls bluer than a freezing smurf without doing jack shit to Loki because he wouldn’t dream of forcing himself on anyone like that.
Sure, he might have done some other things to the god early on that he’s far from proud of in hindsight, and there are no doubt issues that he could have handled better even after those initial weeks when whatever grudges he had held against Loki had eventually dissolved into nothing. But if there’s one thing that no one can accuse him of, it’s taking advantage. He could have, of course, and Loki might even have acquiesced in the belief that he had no choice, and yet the thought had never even entered Tony’s mind.

The sting of irritation grows into a vicious stab. Of course Steve would get offended by him having sex with a former super-villain turned slave. Or by him having sex with another man. Or by him having sex with someone he’s not married to. Or by him having sex at all. Or by anyone having sex at all.

Perhaps he should keep this on a more, well, civilized level, considering that his conversation partner is a scrunched up prune like Steve, but his annoyance quickly wrestles his rational calm into submission.

“Taking advantage, huh? Is that what it looked like to you?” he lashes out, ill-hidden anger in his voice as he meets that chilly stare with one of his own. “That’s funny, because while you were standing there in the doorway going all Peeping Tom on us, I would have thought you should have noticed one little detail. Or, should I say, not so little. Namely that raging hard-on Loki was sporting. You ever seen one of those before, huh?”

And oh, how he can see Steve tensing up at that, whether it is because Tony used a Dirty Word or because it reminds him of the indecent sight that greeted him the evening before. But he couldn’t care less. “In any case, I think something like that would be kinda hard to miss, and also a pretty good gauge of someone’s willingness, don’t you think?”

Steve is looking positively crimson, but still not willing to give up. “Loki is your slave, at least according to Asgard’s designation of him. How can something like that not be taking advantage?” he asks, the muscles in his arms tightening a little in indignation.

Tony sighs, his previous ire defusing a little. In a way, yes, he can definitely understand Steve. Probably, it would have been pretty much anyone’s knee-jerk reaction – anyone who hasn’t been through these weird months in the weird life of Tony Stark and personally experienced all the bizarre twists and turns along the way.

“Perhaps because I haven’t been treating him like a slave,” he says. “Loki is free to make his own choices. And if he wants to stop, we’ll stop. I assure you, everything we’ve done has been with his full consent.” He hesitates for a moment, because he isn’t sure he wants to bring up any details in front of Steve, but he does it anyway. “In fact, it was Loki who instigated all this. Not me.” And if he can’t just see the doubt manifesting itself on the Captain’s face at that in the form of narrowing eyes...
and tightening mouth and wrinkling eyebrows. “Yes, that’s right, you heard me. Loki came on to me, not the other way around, alright?”

“Even so,” the Captain acquiesces, though he still looks unconvinced. “It was still ill-considered of you to take him up on such an offer. Someone in his situation might well take this as an opportunity to get himself into the good graces of the person who holds absolute power over him. Ever considered that? That what you interpreted as willingness was just an act of self-preservation from someone trying to improve his own position?”

At least Steve is sounding a little less angry now, but still far from satisfied. And he still doesn’t like the accusatory tone in there, as if Tony is enough of an amoeba crawling around on the very bottom of the moral ladder of evolution that he would use something like that to his own benefit. But how could he ever hope to explain everything to Steve – the misunderstandings, Loki’s initial expectations, the miscommunication, and then the slow but steady development between them, the growing trust and affection, and how he’s come to actually care about Loki?

But there aren’t words to express any of that, even if he were to give a detailed account of everything that’s happened since the god got dropped off on his doorstep like a mis-sent package without a return address. Steve won’t understand, can’t possibly understand – Loki’s trust in him slowly unfolding, delicate and vulnerable like a sparrow held between one’s palms, a thoughtless squeeze enough to crush it; the hesitant confiding and opening up, telling each other secrets few had ever had the privilege of hearing before; so many little but important things. For someone who has not experienced all this firsthand, it would be impossible to truly comprehend.

And he feels his anger run off him like water from a greasy raincoat. Because in the end, he supposes that he can’t blame Steve for his assumptions, not really. The Captain is a good-hearted guy, showing concern for Loki’s well-being like that, even though he has nothing to gain from it or any further reason to care other than it being the Right Thing. Certainly a lot more good-hearted than Tony had initially been after Loki came got dumped off at his tower.

He studies Steve’s face, seeing the still lingering doubt. So he says the only thing that can really be said in this situation. “Trust me, this is nothing that Loki has been pressured into or doesn’t actually want. Don’t believe me? Then go ahead and ask him yourself.”

Steve looks almost like he’s on the verge of turning on his heel and doing just that, but if those were his intentions, they’re halted as Tony speaks up again.

“Are you’re going to put this in your report to Fury?” he asks, wincing inwardly at the prospect. Explaining himself to Steve is bad enough, but Fury would be even worse. And, unlike Steve, the ever-suspicious Director’s main concern would not be whether Tony was taking advantage, but whether Loki was trying to use sex as a means of manipulating him for whatever diabolical plans a
powerless and magic-deprived god might still try to pull off.

Steve turns another shade of red darker. “No,” he manages, half choking on the word. “I do not consider this any business of SHIELD’s.”

And Tony feels himself relax a little bit. Okay, thank god for small graces.

There is an awkward silence following, and that’s when Tony decides to bring up the matter that’s been lingering in the back of his mind these last few days. The conversation is already uncomfortable enough as it already is, so he might as well speak up now that the awkwardness is at top levels.

“You know what the deal with Asgard is in regards to Loki’s sentence, right?” he throws out, not waiting for an answer. “He’s to spend two years as a slave before being upgraded to free person again.”

“I’m aware,” Steve acknowledges with a nod, seemingly relieved for the topic to change. “Why are you asking?”

Alright then. Here goes nothing.

“Because in case something should happen to me in the next couple of years – I don’t know, like me getting kidnapped and dissected by aliens, or my Iron Man suit gaining a consciousness and violently rebelling against its master, or me getting stampeded to death by a horde of hot models desperate to gain the favours of America’s supposedly most desirable bachelor – I don’t want Loki running the risk of ending up with someone who might take his current status as an excuse to abuse him.” He makes a pause, but if there’s any understanding dawning on Steve as to where all this is going, he’s giving no sign of it.

Alright, guess he has no choice but to lay down the final grand slam by himself, then.

“So I want to put it in my will that if I kick the bucket before Loki’s sentence is up, he will be passed over to you.”

And Steve’s eyes turn wide as saucers. Giant saucers. “Me?,” he sputters, almost choking on the word. “What… why – why me?”
Not the most elegantly poised question Tony’s ever gotten, but predictable nonetheless. And the answer he gives is brutally honest, because there is no reason for anything else.

“Because I can think of no better person for that than you, Steve,” he says simply.

_and really, he can’t._

“But I… I can’t possibly…” The incredulity is dripping from every word as Steve struggles to express what he wants to say. “There must be others who… who could shoulder such a responsibility.”

Tony shrugs. “Let’s be reasonable here. How many people do you know that you could entrust with something like that? That you’re certain would never do anything bad to him or abuse him in any way? And for the sake of argument, let’s say it was a family member or a friend of yours instead of Loki, and you had to pick someone that would have unlimited power over that person, who would you feel comfortable picking for that assignment?”

Steve is silent for a while, but that’s alright, because Tony knows his answer already. _Nobody._

“Yeah, that’s what I’m saying here, Captain. There is really no one. Except you. I would trust you for this.”

He watches Steve’s Adam’s apple bob as he swallows. “You know, I don’t think a will like that would even be valid here in America in the first place. You can’t just… sign someone away to another person like that,” he says, stating the blatantly obvious.

“It’s not for the benefit of our American laws. It’s for Asgard – they’re the ones who are running the show regarding this. So no, I don’t mean a will signed and approved by America’s finest lawyers, but a pretty parchment for Thor to take back to Asgard, to make my intent clear and make sure that Loki gets to where he’s supposed to be and not taken to SHIELD’s dungeons to be tortured and experimented on. I’m sure Asgard and Thor would see to it that my decision is honoured, even if not a single person on this planet would care about it,” he explains.

Steve looks pale, biting his lower lip.
Tony steps forward and gives him a friendly clap on the shoulder. “Don’t worry. I have absolutely no intention whatsoever of throwing in the towel in the next fifty years at least, so all this is probably moot anyway. Just a safety precaution, that’s all.”

He locks his gaze onto Steve, their eyes meeting. “So what do you say, big guy? If you truly are that concerned about Loki not being abused or taken advantage of, this is your perfect chance to put your money where your mouth is and make sure it won’t happen,” he presses on, knowing the battle is won when he sees the resigned look on the other man’s face.

There is a heavy sigh, but then Steve slowly nods. “Very well. Put me up as Loki’s… keeper, then, if the need should ever arise.”

Tony flashes him a broad grin. “Awesome. Knew I could rely on you, Capsicle.”

Chapter End Notes

And just in case someone is wondering – no, that agreement is of course never going to actually come into play. ;)


He’s sitting in the living room reading a book when Steve enters, clearing his throat to get Loki’s attention. At that, his gaze lifts from the pages in his lap.

“Yes, Captain?” he says, tilting his head slightly to the side. “Can I help you with something?”

It’s obvious that Steve wants to talk to him, and given the red-tinted colour on his cheeks that are growing darker by the second, it’s not hard to guess what the matter revolves around.

“Mind if I sit down?” Steve manages, indicating one of the chairs opposite the couch on the other side of the table.

“Not at all.”

Steve sits. Then he twists awkwardly for a few seconds, looking as if he’s trying to find a comfortable position on a seat littered with thumbtacks.

“About yesterday…” the man finally says, once more clearing his throat as if something has gotten stuck in it.

“Yes?” Loki replies, vaguely amused by the discomfited efforts to bring the subject up for discussion.

“Well, first of all I wish to apologize for, ah, intruding during such a… well, private occasion, because it was certainly not my intention.” The handsome face turns another shade redder as the Captain fidgets in his chair, like there are ants crawling beneath his shirt.

Loki nods encouragingly. “No need to worry. It’s not the first time something like that has happened to me.”
And really, it’s not.

The other man tenses a little bit at the admission, but chooses not to comment on it. “I didn’t mainly come here to apologize, though,” he says instead, and then there is an awkward pause, during which Steve is obviously searching for the right words. “What I was going to say was that I really don’t consider what Stark has been doing to you is… acceptable, given the circumstances.”

Of course, that’s what has been bothering the Captain. It wasn’t difficult to see it coming, considering Tony’s own hesitation when Loki had made his initial advances, and how the man had thought that someone in Loki’s situation would be unable to make his own choices regarding who he wanted to have sex with. Well, of course, in Asgard slaves wouldn’t be free to decide such for themselves if their masters wanted differently, but they’d still no doubt be well aware of their own attractions and who they would have liked to sexually involve themselves with or not.

In a way, it’s almost ironic how Midgardians consider even slaves entitled to the rights afforded to free men and yet won’t trust their abilities to recognize such a simple, obvious thing as who they would like to share a bed with. As if he’s a confused, blushing virgin who has never known a man before.

And to be honest, he’s a little bit amused too.

“You’re right, Captain, what Tony has been doing to me cannot be considered acceptable by any stretch of the imagination.”

It looks like a storm of thunderclouds is moving in over Steve’s face at that, and his mouth opens in preparation of what will no doubt be an outraged tirade, but Loki cuts him off. “In fact, it would be an insult to his talents to merely call it ‘acceptable’. I believe ‘mind-blowing’ or ‘incredible’ would be more appropriate terms,” he clarifies, smiling sweetly.

Steve’s mouth remains open, though no words come out of it for several long moments.

“Well,” the man finally manages, clearly flustered and taken aback by the unexpected answer, “I think it’s clear that Stark is not aware of what he’s doing and its implications, what the situation is like, and…”

“Let me assure you, Tony knows exactly what he’s doing,” Loki continues where Steve’s words seem to have trailed off and not finding their way back. “I have had many partners who have been
much less aware and whose performance has been far less impressive.”

Steve looks like he’d rather be in the middle of a herd of stampeding bulls than remaining in the living room any further, but, being the brave soldier that he is, he still pushes on.

“It is true that Stark might not see any problems with it, because he has little compunction when it comes to… sexual liaisons. But even he should know that this is wrong, despite having such a… dirty mind.”

Loki raises an eyebrow. “Well, I can certainly agree on the dirty mind part, having been the lucky recipient of it. Not that I’m complaining, mind you.”

Steve’s hands are gripping the armrests, his knuckles whitish. But he’s not giving up yet, and Loki just likes him all the more for it.

“What I mean is, Stark is the kind of man who is no stranger to indiscriminately engaging in… carnal pleasure without considering the percussions,” Steve says as if he hasn’t even heard Loki, staring at a point a few inches to the side of his face. “Even the media has caught wind of and reported on his numerous… sexual conquests in the past. And I realize that someone who’s had far too many partners already might not stop to reflect further on the circumstances, but what I’m trying to say is that it still doesn’t make it right.”

Loki smiles innocently, amused at the Captain’s obvious difficulties in taking any words even remotely related to sex in his mouth. “You know, I am over two thousand years old – want to take a guess at how many partners I’ve had in my day?” He chuckles. “I don’t think Tony comes even close, even if he would have spent his whole life in pursuit of nothing else.”

Then he turns serious, deciding that he’s had his fun with the blushing man as he looks him in the eyes. “Captain, I do appreciate your concern, but I assure you, it is entirely unfounded. It was me who first came on to Tony, not the other way around. I have every opportunity to say no if I want. And the thing is – I don’t want to, nor did I ever. I’d much rather continue our activities together, because I enjoy them immensely.”

A silence follows during which it looks as if the man is trying to process Loki’s words, but not quite succeeding. “Well, I’m not saying that he has any ill intentions. But still, Stark isn’t thinking, he’s not realizing that he’s using your relative positions,” Steve says slowly, but he doesn’t seem nearly as sure of himself anymore. In fact, he’s sounding as if he’s just arguing for the sake of it, as if abandoning his viewpoint would be a grave insult to his own precious moral standards.
“Our relative positions?” Loki says, amusement tingling in his voice. “Are you sure you want to go there? Don’t you think that’s a little too much detail?”

At that, Steve has finally had enough, and he stands up so quickly that the chair almost falls over as it scrapes against the floor, backing a few steps towards the doorframe. “Very well, I understand,” he manages in a strained voice. “However, if you do… have a problem in these matters, let me know and I will do my best to help you out.”

“My thanks for the offer, Captain,” Loki says with a broad smile. “Though, I’m sure it won’t be necessary. Tony is perfectly adequate for my sexual needs and we make do just fine; we have no problems that require a third part to help us out in the bed chamber.”

At that, Steve has finally had enough and flees the room.

Loki chuckles to himself. And he has to admit – Steve is sweet, he really is. But he’s definitely not Tony.

Still smiling, he returns to his book, yet again immersing himself in the exotic Midgardian story in his hands.

And perhaps he should be feeling a bit guilty for embarrassing the Captain like that, but he can’t help but think that if you’re a god of mischief, you should be entitled to have a little good-natured fun on other people’s expense once in a while.

Shortly after Steve has left the room, Tony saunters in and Loki gives the man a long, undressing stare. His previous talk with the Captain has stirred up quite a few thoughts in him, and he’s still not happy at how they got interrupted yesterday. After all, they never even got to finish, as the mood was ruined and Tony was, in his own words, too weirded out to continue.

Though, it doesn’t seem like Tony has any such intentions for the moment, so he quenches the little sigh of disappointment wanting to escape his lips, instead waiting for the man to tell him what’s on his mind.
Tony sits down on the same chair that Steve was occupying only minutes ago, placing a leg across the other and lazily leaning back.

“I take it Stars and Spangles has already had his little talk with you, if I correctly interpreted the tomato look his face was sporting when I ran into him a couple of minutes ago,” Tony says, the corner of his lips twitching slightly.

Loki grins back. “Yes, we had an… interesting chat,” he concludes. “Somehow, the Captain seems to be under the impression that slavery has made me unfit to make my own choices as far as whom I would like to share a bed with.”

“Yeah, I can imagine,” Tony says with a shrug. “Though I suppose I can’t really blame him. The situation is kinda weird, after all. At least for us humans who have laid off the slavery business quite a few generations ago.”

He drums his fingers against his knee for a few seconds before speaking again. “Actually, there was something I wanted to ask you, to make sure you’re okay with it.”

“And that would be?”

“Well, in case… something lethal should cross my path in the next two years, I want to put it in my will that you will, well, be passed over to Steve instead.” Tony looks distinctly uncomfortable, the concept obviously disturbing him. “Would you be alright with that?”

And despite how he’d rather not even think about the prospect that something might happen to Tony – and not primarily because of how it would affect his own position here in Midgard – he can’t help but feel a little tingle of warmth, that Tony cares enough about him to want to safeguard against such an eventuality and make sure that nothing bad is going to happen to him.

“I don’t know of anyone in Midgard that I’d rather see filling that position, though I truly do hope it will never come to that,” he says slowly, nodding his agreement. “But I’m rather curious what Steve’s response to such a request would be. Have you asked him about it yet?”

“Yeah, I have. And he wasn’t too thrilled with the idea, but eventually he agreed.”

And Loki feels another warm tingle inside his chest as he looks at Tony. “I guess the issue is settled,
then. Thanks for… making these arrangements on my behalf.”

“Hey,” Tony says, holding up his hands. “Of course I would. There’s no way I would risk you ending up with someone who might hurt you. Steve might be as fun as a board, but at least he’s a good guy that can be trusted. He’d be the last person on Earth – well, expect for yours truly – to do anything bad to you.”

“I know.” Loki smiles, the tingle spreading as he looks at Tony, the most amazing man Midgard surely has to offer. Not even Steve could ever hold a candle to him.

Chapter End Notes

Well, I guess the god of mischief is really back now. ;)}
The prospect of finally getting Loki back in his bed for the night instead of having the god sleeping in his own room in order to keep facades up is wonderful; he’s really missed it during these far too long days that Steve has been here.

He watches as the god undresses – his movements slow and deliberately provocative, obviously fully aware of Tony’s hungry gaze watching his every move – and then languidly crawls over to where Tony is already lying on top of the covers, positively drooling at the sight.

He grins as the pale form presses up at his side, a vast expanse of skin against his, so wonderfully close. “Missed me?” comes the seductive whisper as an arm pulls him tighter, and a delightful shudder travels down the length of his spine at the promises inherent in that voice.

“More than alcohol after a week of sobriety,” he admits, giving the earlobe hovering an inch from his mouth a little nibble, enjoying the minute tremble in the god that follows. He lets his hand travel over Loki’s side, stroking in slow and lazy movements as his fingers move over the god’s torso.

Loki’s head falls back at the touch as a heavy sigh of contentment escapes his lips. Encouraged, Tony moves his hand further down over the sharp jut of the god’s hip, making a little detour over his ass, before continuing to the hard muscle of his thigh. How he’s missed feeling that smooth skin beneath his palm, the sensuous touch like a soothing balm on an annoying itch.

A moment later, Loki rolls over onto his back and stretches to his full length as he closes his eyes, like he’s melting into the mattress, exposing his whole body to Tony’s touch. The sight is enticing, and Tony stifles a groan.

At that, Loki slowly opens one eye, peering at him from beneath a few unruly strands of hair. “Just touch me, Tony,” he purrs enticingly, as he raises a hand to his own chest and lets his fingers stroke the skin, mimicking what he wants Tony to do. “I want to feel your hands on me. On all of me.”

Damn, Loki knows exactly what to say and do to turn him on like there’s no tomorrow. And of course, Tony’s not one to deny the god a wish like that.

So he gets up and straddles the naked body next to him, sitting down on his lower stomach, Loki’s
hardening cock brushing against his ass.

“Your wish is my command, sweet cheeks,” he proclaims and places his palms on top of the pale chest, gently caressing. Loki rolls his eyes at the nickname, but if he was intending to offer any verbal complaint, it is immediately pushed away by the soft moan escaping his lips.

He continues to let his hands roam over Loki’s torso, over his chest and sides and stomach, the soft touch amazingly pleasurable after having gone without it for so many days. And it’s a special kind of sensation in itself, merely sitting here stroking and caressing Loki’s body like this, purely focusing on the feeling of skin moving across skin and the tingling sensations and softness and closeness. In a way, this simple nearness is even more intimate than distinctly more sexual acts would be, the way it’s making him so acutely aware of the god’s presence.

Loki bucks beneath his weight, making the most delicious little sounds as Tony works him over, stretching his body out, hands going up above his head to grab at the metal bars of the headboard.

Heartbeat speeding up, he leans over the form breathing audibly beneath him, his touches trailing back up over Loki’s outstretched arms until they reach the hands still holding onto the headboard, fingers gently closing around the god’s wrists as he first nibbles, and then kisses the neck, his lips and tongue massaging the soft skin.

It’s not until he sits back a little, gasping for air, that Loki opens eyes that have been closed until now, giving him a positively wicked smile.

“So, Tony…” he intones, tongue briefly flicking out to lick at his lips in a sinful display of lust and desire, as his hips grind upwards. “Want to chain me up?”

The comment makes him freeze for a couple of seconds in surprise. That was so not what he had expected. He blinks as the world around him returns to its normal state again, once more containing those mundane things that aren’t smooth skin and breathless touches and Loki. And then he realizes that his fingers are still closed around the god’s wrists, holding him in a firm grip with hands pinned above his head.

He lets go of the wrists, hands slowly retreating to his sides.

Loki obviously senses his hesitation and laughs, amused. “Never played around like that before?” Another little grinding of hips. “Don’t tell me that the renowned Tony Stark has never done this
before? Because if you do, I’m not going to believe you.”

Of course, Loki is right. Sure he has handcuffs lying around, having played around with them with other partners at times, but for some reason, he just didn’t expect that Loki would…

“Uh,” he manages, a part of him wondering when the last time was that he ever felt uncertain about something in the bedroom. Well, before Loki, that is. “You sure about this?”

Loki gives a small sigh of exasperation, clearly finding his concerns ridiculous. “I assure you, I wouldn’t have brought it up if I didn’t want to. And it’s nothing I haven’t done before; only difference this time is that I won’t be able to magic my way out of the restraints.” He cocks his head to the side, giving Tony an intense look. “As I’m sure you’re well aware, this is all about trust, and I fully trust you not to do anything I don’t want.” He pauses a few moments to let the words sink in. “So, what do you say,” he asks as he pointedly clasps and then unclasps his fingers around the metal bars a few times.

Truth be told, he’d be seriously lying if he said he didn’t find the mental image extremely hot. And his cock definitely seconds the motion, twitching eagerly in response.

Well then. Since when did Tony Stark ever turn something down that would spice his bedroom games up a little?

“Alright,” he acquiesces, rolling over to the edge of the bed, then reaching out an arm to dig around in the lower drawer of the bedside table. His fingers brush against metal that has scooted off to the farthest corner of the drawer, and he pulls his finding out. Just in case, he checks so that the key is still there, or it might make things a little awkward later on.

The handcuffs are cold to the touch, but Loki doesn’t protest as he snaps them on, just responds with that devious grin of his and then tugs at his bonds, ostensibly testing them out. They clang softly against the metal of the headboard, and Tony stifles a groan at the sight of the god lying there all exposed and waiting for his touch.

“So, uh,” he manages to gets out. “Just tell me if you want them off and I’ll get you out. Say the words ‘banana pie’ and I’ll unlock you.”

The look Loki gives him in return is amused. “Your Midgardian practices are definitely strange. I’m sure I could articulate my concerns the normal way, should I wish to, without resorting to naming an
exotic dish.”

Tony is about to make a retort to that – or at least ask him what kind of safe-words gods would use – but then thinks better of it. There are much more interesting things awaiting him, after all.

Getting up on all fours over the bound god, his knees and hands splayed to either side of him, he starts at the crook of Loki’s neck, just where he left off a few minutes ago, flicking his tongue out to taste the skin, delighting in the exhilarating mix of sweet and salty flavours.

Agonizingly slowly, he works his way downwards, licking, kissing, nibbling as he goes, covering every patch of skin he encounters with his lips. Reaching a nipple, he swirls his tongue around the knob, as Loki tenses beneath the soft touch, the handcuffs clinking from his movements. He retains his focus on the hardening nipple for a minute as one of his hands reaches down to grope at Loki’s ass, cupping and kneading the firm cheek.

Moving further downwards still, he nuzzles the god’s abs, clearly visible beneath the stretched skin. His tongue dips into the shallow indenture of Loki’s belly button and then continues to explores every chiselled contour of muscle as Loki’s stomach moves in rhythm to his quickening breath, coming as fast as his own, now. His hand clenches a little harder around the ass cheek still in his hand, fingers shamelessly digging and groping.

Continuing downward, he suddenly stops to hover just above Loki’s groin, and the shift in his body is palpable, the hitched breath a soft caress in Tony’s ear as the god waits in anticipation for his next move.

Unperturbed – okay, so he’s anything but, but at least he’s pretending to be – he forgoes the hard cock waiting for his attention, and instead moves his head down to the inside of a thigh. Above him, Loki whines in frustrated disappointment while the clacking of metal against metal accompanies his little moans.

Instead, he gives the thigh a long, slow lick, starting at the base of the knee and then coming to a halt where the leg attaches to the hip. His other hand moves away from Loki’s ass and instead starts working away at the other thigh as his fingers trail feather-light meandering patterns all over it, stopping just before they reach the groin area.

Another displeased moan from the god, and he tries to inch his body downwards to make his cock come into contact with Tony’s mouth, but the cuffs put a definite stop to his progress, and finally he just resorts to a breathless and insistent, “Tony…”
Well, at least that’s what it sounds like anyway, though it’s kind of hard to tell the way Loki is having a hard time articulating properly between his quick breaths.

And damn, he loves it when Loki sounds like that. So he licks along the thigh again, stopping half an inch higher up than last time, but still not quite getting there as Loki writhes and moans beneath him. And he continues to tease, his tongue moving closer and closer, without ever touching where Loki so obviously wants him to.

It’s almost like it’s turning into a competition in his head – to see who will give in first. Either Loki will finally beg him to bestow his tender affections on his cock, or Tony will be unable to hold himself off from it any longer. For some reason, he wants to win, to show that he can hold out for as long as Loki can, thousands of year old god or not.

“Yes, darling, is there anything you want?” he asks with as much feigned innocence as he can muster, raising his head from where his tongue has been lapping away a mere inch from Loki’s erection to regard the bucking and moaning god. His voice is not nearly as steady as he had been hoping; to be honest, it’s sounding suspiciously close to trembling, but whatever. It’s not like Loki is in a more coherent shape. His cock is leaking already, leaving a trail of glistening wetness on his stomach.

Another frustrated groan, and then Loki finally relents. “Just… suck me, Tony,” he pants, making another futile attempt to guide his cock closer to Tony’s mouth.

God, he loves this, hearing Loki beg for his touch like this. And the lusty plea finally snaps the fine threads, made of nothing but obstinate stubbornness, that have just barely been keeping his self-control together until now.

“Your wish is my command,” he manages to get out before grabbing hold of the hard shaft, then bowing his head to lick slowly from the base and all the way to the tip. Loki shudders as Tony swirls his tongue around the head already wet from pre-cum before finally descending in full, taking the cock into his mouth and sucking for all he’s worth.

A string of garbled words follow his ministrations. Spurred on, he sucks a little harder, pressing his tongue against the shaft as it moves in and out between his tightly pursed lips. So he might not be a deep-throater like Loki, but he should still be able to take the god for a ride.

He can already tell that Loki isn’t going to last very long. But he takes that as a compliment as he
increases the pace, the sloppy wet sounds of the cock moving between his lips and Loki’s inarticulate cries filling his ears.

And the god comes with a cry, his entire body tensing for a few heartbeats beneath Tony. He continues at a languid pace as Loki rides out his release, swallowing the warm fluid down, and then sits up to look at the still panting god with what he’s sure is a very self-contented grin.

“Ooh…” is all Loki manages for a little while. Then, his eyes taking in Tony’s straining cock, he spreads his legs in a wordless invite as his body goes all limp against the covers.

And Tony isn’t late to take him up on the offer. A glob of lube later, and two of Tony’s fingers are inside of Loki’s ass, preparing and stretching him. Loki moans softly as they move in and out of him, and damn if the god isn’t already, impossibly, getting hard again.

Wow, are all gods like that? If so, he wishes he were one.

A few heartbeats later, he slides inside that tight, welcoming heat, groaning with relief. And then he’s not aware of much else until he finally comes, except for Loki getting hard under his thrusts and coming in the hand Tony didn’t even realize he had wrapped around his cock. How that is even possible, he’s not sure, but gods must clearly have a very different design than humans.

Or maybe he’s just that good, making a god come twice in quick succession.

He’s still pondering the thought several minutes later as he’s lying beneath the covers with Loki’s arms wrapped tightly around him, both of them comfortably snuggled up next to each other.

And then, just as he’s on the verge of entering dreamland, Loki’s voice interrupts his pleasant, boneless bliss.

“It bothers you about Steve, doesn’t it?” the god asks, a hand softly stroking along Tony’s back.

“That he’s still here? Yeah, kinda. But he won’t stay forever,” he mumbles, hoping this isn’t going to turn into a long conversation. Really, he’s not too keen on talking about the Captain after having just engaged in awesome sex.
“That’s not what I meant,” Loki replies, shifting against him. “I mean it bothers you that Steve considers you to be selfish, lust-driven, and immoral, concerned more with your own pleasure than whether you’re taking advantage.” A short pause. “Does it not?”

_No, definitely not._

“No,” he refutes, with a little more emphasis than necessary. “Why should it?”

He can feel rather than see Loki shrug. “It just appeared that way to me. So why don’t you talk to him and clarify what the situation is like?”

“What would be the point of that? I don’t care what Steve thinks,” he says, wincing as he can hear the childish obstinacy in his own voice. “And besides, it’s not something I feel like discussing with him. If he’d even believe my side of the story, that is.”

“You want _me_ to talk to him?”

“No,” he repeats with even more emphasis. “It’s none of his business.”

_And it’s not like he cares what the great Captain America, what his dad’s big hero thinks of him or not in the first place._

“Alright, then, as you wish,” Loki answers with a yawn. A short pause. “Sweet dreams, Tony.”

“Yeah, you too,” Tony mumbles into his pillow, pushing away the intruding, annoying thoughts that have somehow entered his head, trying to forcefully return to his previous contentment.

_So, where was he? Yeah, he just made a god come twice in quick succession. Because he’s Tony Stark and he’s awesome, no matter what Steve might think._

Chapter End Notes

_Poor Tony, it’s not easy for him. ;)_
Chapter 132

He has to admit that the mood down in the workshop is a bit weird, as the three of them are gathered around the workbench, watching as he turns a knob to increase the tertiary alpha field. Granted, Loki seems fairly unperturbed, unlike the Captain, who’s sitting there with his arms crossed and a faint crease between his eyebrows. The guy’s been pretty curt since the incident, and whether it’s mainly because of embarrassment or because he still suspects that Tony is a lascivious low-life who thinks only of and with his dick, he can’t tell. Probably, it’s a combination of the two.

But whatever, it's not like it matters what Steve thinks of him anyway. What does he care? As long as Steve is not going to report his and Loki’s private activities to Fury, it makes no difference. There are already far too many people out there to count who consider him either an ass, a bastard, a self-obsessed narcissist, or all of the above for him to bother what Captain freaking America thinks. He’s used to people not approving of him and what he does, so why should he care?

That’s right, he doesn’t.

So he immerses himself in the scrawlings on the piece of paper lying before him on the desktop, probably wholly unintelligible to anyone else, full of equations jostling for precious space. It’s good that Steve’s disapproval is serving to keep the man quiet, so Tony can focus on his work, not having to waste his time answering ignorant questions.

Yup, this way he can use all parts of his brain to work out the next step in the experiments at hand without any unnecessary mental distractions draining his cognitive capacity, vast as it might be. Steve can think what he wants to; it matters little. It’s not like it affects him in any way. Totally not.

He blinks as his hand’s automatic scribbling reflexively comes to a halt. The equation before him doesn’t add up; there’s apparently been some error along the way.

Muttering between his breaths, he scans the paper, trying to spot where he went wrong. It doesn’t take long for him to catch the omission, a simple beginner’s mistake that would have made his old professors back at MIT ashamed of their former student. With a grumbled curse, he crosses the faulty equation out, reaching for another piece of paper to start fresh.
He’s interrupted by Steve’s voice, however.

“Stark, we’ve been sitting here for over six hours now,” the man says, sounding haggard. “I would think a break is in order. I’m sure we’re all starting to get hungry and would appreciate if we might have a bit to eat before we continue.”

Tony looks to the Captain, and then to his watch. Damn, how did time pass so quickly? Then again, that always seems to happen whenever he’s immersing himself in a project down in his workshop, loosing track of time and then being surprised when it’s suddenly past midnight already.

Of course, he doesn’t miss the underlying insinuation in that voice, whether it’s deliberate or not – how typical of Tony Stark, selfishly thinking only of himself and his own enjoyment, not stopping to consider the impact his behaviour has on other people, as long as he’s happy. And after the recent little incident, he’s certain that whatever Steve was thinking of him before he came here, those assumptions have only been fuelled further.

But what does he care?

“Alright, fine,” he says, trying to make his voice sound causal. “It’s officially dinner time for everyone! So let’s all head back upstairs, kids!” With that, he stands up and leads the way into the elevator, Loki and the Captain shuffling after him.

The ride back up to the living area floor passes in silence. He can sense Loki’s gaze lingering on him, but the Captain is looking away, eyes fixed on a spot on the wall. When he looks back at the god again, Loki has taken to picking at his fingernails with a bored expression.

Wow, lively in here.

As the doors open with a faint whoosh, not a second too early, the Captain steps out first, followed by Loki, who is still focused on the nails on one of his hands. At bit too focused, it turns out, as his foot catches on the little gap between elevator and floor, and he stumbles, falling to the ground with a surprised yelp, a hand immediately going down to clutch at his ankle.

He’s at Loki’s side in an instant, crouching down next to the god in concern. “Hey, are you okay?” he asks, instinctively reaching out at hand for Loki’s shoulder, hoping it’s nothing worse than a sprain.
Loki nods, biting his lip with a wince. “I’m fine. Just my ankle that got twisted. It’s nothing serious.”

“We’d better put some ice on that to minimize swelling,” Steve pipes up next to them, ever the helpful hero.

“Yeah, I’ll handle it,” Tony replies, not particularly wanting Steve to butt in; he can take care of Loki by himself. Carefully, he helps the god up into a one-foot standing position, holding one of his arms tightly for support. “Can you put any weight on the ankle at all?” he asks, glad that nothing seems to be broken, at least.

Tentatively, Loki puts his other foot down on the floor, a pained expression fluttering across his face as he shakes his head. “No, I’m afraid not.”

Okay then.

He only hesitates for a second. After all, he’s wanted to do this to Loki for a long time anyway, and he couldn’t really give a fuck whether Steve is watching or not. So he reaches down to hook one arm behind Loki’s knees, the other supporting his back, and then he hoists the god up in a classic bridal style position.

Loki gives a surprised little squeak, but he doesn’t offer any protests, merely wraps an arm around Tony’s shoulders for balance.

He ignores the gaze from Steve that he can feel burning at the back of his neck as he carries Loki off to the couch and carefully deposits him on the cushions. “I’ll go fetch some ice,” he says, pushing past Steve who’s been following right behind them.

At least he thinks there’s some in the freezer, so he hurries off to the kitchen and after a bit of rummaging, he re-emerges in the living room with an ice pack in his hand.

Loki’s face is tense, but he makes no sound as Tony kneels down and places Loki’s foot on his lap, carefully peeling the sock off.

“At least it doesn’t look swollen,” Steve superfluously comments somewhere above Tony’s shoulder. “Though I figure the ice can’t hurt.”
Tony makes a non-committal sound as he applies the pack, trying not to move the foot around too much. Then he looks around for something that could serve as a suitable footrest, forgoing the temptation to ask the Captain whether he would like to fill in, instead opting for a low chair lining the far wall. He pulls it back towards the couch, helping Loki lift his sore foot onto the seat, hoping that will do for now.

Carefully, he eyes the god sprawled on the couch, trying to judge whether Loki is in more pain that he’s letting on. Even if the ankle doesn’t appear swollen, it’s gotta hurt quite a bit if he can’t put any of his body weight on it.

“You doing alright there? Want me to get you some painkillers?”

Loki shakes his head. “I’m fine. Don’t worry about it. I just need to rest my foot for a while and I’m sure it will get better soon enough.” He offers a sheepish smile. “Sorry about ruining the prospects of any further research for today, though.”

“Eh, we got plenty of time,” he waves the concern off and then gives Loki’s shoulder a gentle pat – or squeeze – before suddenly remembering that Steve is still in the same room.

Reluctantly, he pulls his hand away.

“Alright, I suppose it’s dinner time, then.” He gives a pointed glance at Loki’s propped-up foot. “Hope no one minds dining out here in the living room.”

He sets a plate stacked with food down onto the tabletop before the god in the couch, along with cutlery and a glass of water. With ice.

*Maybe he could take on a job as a waiter if he ever fell on hard times.* He sure knows what kind of tip he would have liked to receive as a show of appreciation from his current patron.

Well, not that that’s going to happen with Steve sitting right across the table watching them with a never-wavering stare. And perhaps not for some time to come either, if Loki’s foot turns out to be too sore for that kind of activities. If he didn’t know any better, he’d say there’s someone up there who’s
doing everything in their power to prevent Tony Stark from getting laid.

But he’s had the unlucky foot meticulously wrapped in pretty bandages, at least, so he’s done all he can for now. Hopefully, it will soon heal up.

As usual, the conversation around the table is going rather awkwardly, but he’s kinda gotten used to it. Even though Loki doesn’t seem to find the situation particularly tongue-tying, as he’s telling some Asgardian anecdote to a semi-disbelieving Steve. So Tony concentrates on his food instead, glad that Loki is taking care of the conversational stuff. Because why should he even be interested in talking to someone who only considers him an insensitive jerk anyway?

Once dinner is over and done with, and the dishes have been all cleared away, he’s about to go get his laptop, deciding he might as well get some work done, but then halts and turns towards Loki instead.

“You want me to go get some books for you?” he asks the god still sitting in the couch, for obvious reasons not having moved an inch from his previous spot.

“I’d really appreciate it,” comes the answer, accompanied by a little nod.

So Tony dutifully heads off to the library, picks up whatever books are spread out on the table with little bookmarks sticking out of them – obviously in the process of being read by someone, and it’s not him – and returns with his catch to the living room, dumping the heavy stack on the tabletop.

“There you go.” He gives Loki’s knee a little discreet pat, the touch hopefully obscured from view of the Captain. Despite it not being a secret anymore, it still feels weird showing off any physical evidence of their relationship to their spying visitor.

“Thank you,” the god replies, grabbing hold of Tony’s hand and stroking the back of it affectionately, clearly not caring in the slightest that Steve is oh-so-obviously watching everything like a hawk.

“Don’t mention it,” he shrugs, trying to ignore the feeling of Steve’s gaze sticking to him like a wet T-shirt.

Then, they all just sit there for a couple of hours, him tapping away on his laptop, Loki immersed in
his books and Steve in a newspaper. And that’s when his throat is starting to itch with that very familiar feeling.

“Okay, I’m definitely getting a drink,” he proclaims, pushing his laptop aside. “You want something, Loki?”

“No thanks, I’m fine.”

“No aspirin?” he coaxes. “There are no extra points awarded on Midgard for needlessly suffering in silence, you know.”

Loki shakes his head. “I’ll manage. It’s just a simple sprain.”

“Alright. Then what about you, Spangles?” he asks, turning towards Steve. “I know alcohol is wasted on you, but maybe a glass of milk or whatever it is you drink for recreation? Apple juice? Carrot smoothie?”

“Some apple juice would be nice, thank you,” Steve replies, slowly lowering the newspaper that’s been obscuring the lower half of his face.

As Tony makes for the kitchen, Steve stands up and follows, as if he doubts whether Tony is capable of pouring even a simple glass of juice without assistance and needs someone to oversee the proceedings. He chooses not to comment on it, though.

A few minutes later, Tony is making himself a martini, as Steve lounges against the kitchen counter, sipping on his glass of fruitiness while watching Tony with an indecipherable expression. Trying to dispel some of the tension, Tony wiggles the half-empty bottle in his hand at the other man.

“Sure you don’t want some in that apple of yours?” he offers lightly. “There’s nothing in this world that doesn’t improve with a little bit of added alcohol.”

Steve clears his throat at that, drawing himself up a little. “I suppose I owe you an apology,” he says slowly, ignoring Tony’s question. “I mean, jumping to conclusions like that about the state of things, believing you to be uncaring and selfish. It would seem I wasn’t… correct about that.”
Tony can feel his eyebrows shoot up into his hairline. *The great Captain America, apologizing for believing him to be an egotistical jerk concerned with nothing but his own dick?*

“Meh, it’s fine,” he waves it off, deciding then and there not to hold it against the good Captain. “I’ve been accused of worse, believe me.”

And it’s not like it matters what Steve’s opinion of him is; that little sudden trickle of warmth inside of him is just from the alcohol sliding down his throat as he takes a big sip out of the drink in his hand.

“Well, regardless,” Steve insists, clearly uncomfortable. “I shouldn’t have simply… assumed things.”

“Just forget about it, big guy.” Truth be told, he’s never particularly enjoyed hearing people apologizing to him in the first place, and he’d rather have it over and done with. “So, BFF?” he asks, holding out his hand as a peace offering.

Steve doesn’t bother asking what the no doubt unfamiliar term means; he simply nods curtly and gives Tony’s hand a firm, manly shake.

And Tony takes another sip on his martini, enjoying how it’s making the previous tenseness inside of him ease up, like the loosening of a too-tight knot.

_**Yup, a really good brand, this one.**_

When Steve has finally excused himself and retired for the night, Tony slaps his laptop shut and turns to the reading god at his side.

“So, what do you say, bedtime yet?” Even if it might not be an option tonight, they can at least cuddle, now that they don’t have to sleep in separate bedrooms any longer in order to keep up appearances.

At that, Loki leans back, carefully laying down his book on the cushion. “Sounds like a good idea to me,” he answers with a cock of his head, his gaze lazily raking over Tony’s body. “I am fully in
support of the suggested course of action.”

Tony makes a little nod towards the chair where Loki’s foot is still propped up. “Well, unless things have considerably improved in the last few hours, I suppose we have no choice but to repeat the previous transportation exercise,” he says with a grin, moving around the table with the intention to pick the god up and carry him to bed.

Loki raises an eyebrow, his face unreadable. “You know, I don’t think that will be necessary.” And then, he stands up without further preamble, unperturbedly taking several steps in Tony’s direction without showcasing even the slightest trace of a limp.

Tony blinks.

“Hey, when did you get your speed-healing powers back?” he asks, wrinkling his forehead in surprise. “You couldn’t even put any weight on that foot just a few hours ago!”

Loki gives him a look so innocent that it’s obvious that it’s anything but, as he raises his foot a few inches off the ground and wriggles his toes. “You know, come to think of it, I don’t think there was anything wrong with it in the first place.”

And Tony gapes, the implication of the words slowly sinking on. “You mean you faked the whole thing?” he stutters, utterly confused, now. “But… why?”

The corners of Loki’s mouth make a little upwards twist. “Well, I figured the good Captain ought to see the caring and considerate side of Tony Stark that I have the privilege of experiencing every day. And since you were too proud to explain the state of things to Steve or even let me do it, I figured a little demonstration was in order to make him reconsider his rather base assumptions of you.” The little tug of lips turns into a contented smile. “And my plan worked, didn’t it?”

It takes several long seconds before Tony manages to find any words, or even snap his still gaping mouth shut, for that matter. “Why you devious little…” he finally gets out. “I can’t believe you actually planned the whole damn thing!”

“Sometimes a little deviousness can achieve great things. Or simply nudge someone’s perceptions into the right direction,” Loki retorts, not looking contrite in the least.
At that, Tony bursts into laughter, unable to stop himself. “And here you had me fawning and waiting on you hand and foot all evening.” He reaches over to give Loki’s backside a little smack. “You naughty thing.”

“God of mischief,” Loki offers as explanation, still all feigned innocence. Then, a positively lecherous grin starts spreading across his face as he leans closer, breath hot on Tony’s cheek. “And you’re free to have me punished for it to your heart’s content. We’ve got all night,” he drawls into Tony’s ear in a seductive whisper, and then pulls back a little, contemplatively eyeing Tony from head to foot.

“But first, however, there’s something I’ve wanted to do for a long time now.”

Before he can ask what that might be, Loki slides an arm down the back of his legs and tips him backwards, and a second later, Tony finds himself carried off bridal style in a beeline towards the bedroom.
Chapter 133

For once, he’s the first to wake up in the morning. Usually, it’s Loki doing that and then busying himself snuggling until Tony is aroused from his sleep by a straying hand or a soft pair of lips. But this time, Loki is still asleep, spooning against Tony’s back with an arm loosely hocked around his waist.

Carefully, he turns to face the sleeping god, watching him for a little while before letting a finger trail across his cheek and over the slightly parted lips, tracing his features. Loki is so beautiful like this, and he can still hardly believe his luck, having someone like that right here next to him.

He pulls the god closer and presses a light kiss to his forehead. At that, Loki stirs, and a second later, two green eyes are staring into his.

“Morning, hot stuff,” he says, grinning.

Loki smiles back. “Good morning, Tony,” he replies, nuzzling up against the crock of Tony’s neck with a yawn. For a while, they say nothing else, but simply lie there and enjoy each other’s presence.

At least they’re on their own now. Steve left the day before, having obviously arrived at the correct conclusion that he’d stayed long enough, politely thanking Tony for his hospitality and apologizing for intruding, ever mindful of his manners. Of course, Tony had prodded him about what he was going to write in his report to Fury, and whether Loki had passed the test of proving himself reformed from his world-conquering ways, and Steve had curtly responded that he’d seen nothing that indicated the contrary, so that was what he would be reporting.

And Tony had felt a huge wave of relief at that. If Steve had decided to write anything else, it could have spelt serious trouble for him and Loki both. But now his worries concerning Fury and SHIELD have all been dissolved, and it’s like a huge weight has been lifted off his shoulders.

“Feel like going out to the park today?” he eventually asks. “I got nothing planned for the day, and I figured you might wanna get out of the tower for a bit?”

Loki’s hand ghosts over Tony’s hip as he responds. “As much as I like the park, don’t you have any… wilderness on Midgard? Something that is not so structured and pruned and orderly?”
“Uh, you mean, like nature?” Truth be told, he’s never been very fond of nature. It’s generally muddy, too hot or too cold or too wet, and too unpredictable to boot. As well as pretty damn boring.

Loki raises an eyebrow at him. “Yes, like a forest, or a lake, or mountains. Something not shaped by human hands. I have missed that since coming here.”

Okay, not his choice for the day, he has to admit, but if Loki wants to… It does sound kinda important to the god, after all.

“Alright, then. Not that we’ve got anything like that right here in the middle of New York, but we can go for a drive somewhere. Where there’s, you know, trees and mud and bugs and all that nature-y stuff.”

Then, a thought suddenly hits him.

“And tell you what, since we’re going to be spending time out there in this nature, why don’t we take the opportunity to make it a good one and have a real picnic too while we’re at it?”

He has Jarvis order some express delivery picnic food, and not long after they’re off. It’s a bit of a drive getting there, so at least he has that pleasure before the more dubious outdoors stuff awaiting him. And really, he always thought those hikers and campers were a bit weird, but he supposes that when you come from a society like Asgard where there are no movies, TVs, computers or other forms of digital entertainment, maybe reverting back to nature is a bit more understandable.

The last leg of their drive is slow and bumpy, and given the narrowness of the road, he’s glad there isn’t any oncoming traffic, or his Ferrari might have been sporting some really ugly paint scratches right now.

They pull up at some clearing to the side of the road – if it can even be called a road at this point. It’s not exactly a parking lot either, but probably what counts as it out here.

“Alright,” he says as he turns the engine off. “Here you go. Forest.”
Loki gives him an amused look. “You don’t like forests?”

“Hey, I’m a city boy. I prefer places where there’s Starbucks and MacDonallds within spitting distance. Makes me feel more at ease and not like I’m about to get mauled by a wild boar any second.” He peers suspiciously at the trees looming outside. “Besides, it’s not like there’s anything to do out here,” he adds, making a little grimace.

“You don’t need to do anything,” Loki counters, pushing the car door open. “Just being is enough.”

“Sounds very New Age-y to me,” Tony mumbles, not convinced. “So can we at least eat first? I’m kinda getting hungry here.”

At least Loki doesn’t offer any protests to that.

So he brings the picnic basket out of the trunk and then trails after Loki who has already taken off on some path leading off between the trees. He sure hopes the god doesn’t plan on going far; he has no particular desire to get lost in the untamed wilderness. Luckily, Loki doesn’t, though, instead stopping at a little clearing, taking in his surroundings.

“Okay, perfect picnic place,” Tony quickly chimes up before Loki says it’s not good enough and decides to head off to heavens know where. “Let’s eat right here.”

Loki nods his approval, so Tony gets to unpacking the basket, its contents still wrapped up in all-consuming plastic. Heck, he didn’t even know there were companies specializing in his kind of stuff, but it’s the full mounty, meeting every picnic-y cliché including the grapes, a bottle of wine, and a chequered blanket.

A few minutes later, they’re sitting on that very chequered blanket, eating food out of little jars and boxes, sipping on a mug of wine each.

“It’s nice, isn’t it?” Loki says, chewing on a piece of bread with cheese.

“Yup, Tony agrees, swallowing down another gulp of wine. “Though the food is better than the wine.”
“I wasn’t primarily referring to the food and drink,” Loki says with an amused expression, his gaze going upwards to indicate the forest around them. “Just… this. The trees. The peacefulness. The calm surroundings.”

Tony’s gaze follows Loki’s, taking in the sight of the trees looming over them. They sway and creak slightly in the breeze. “You know, if any of those things fall on my car, I’m going to buy every acre of this land and have it razed to the ground. And then cover it all with concrete.”

Loki laughs. “Come on, Tony, just be quiet and listen for a while.” The god scoots over to him, and places a pair of fingers on his lips to silence him. Reluctantly, Tony acquiesces, shutting his mouth as Loki leans against him, once more gazing up into the trees with a content look on his face.

So they simply sit there for a while, Loki’s head against his shoulder, and Tony trying to listen to the, well, silence. There’s the faint background noise of leaves rustling around them and an occasional chipper from a bird, but little else. He closes his eyes, feeling the soft wind against his cheek, and the warm body lying bonelessly against him. Truth be told, it actually is rather relaxing. And somehow, it’s making him more aware of Loki too; the slow heaving of his chest, the warmth of his skin, the faint smell of shampoo and something else. It’s… nice, the way his mind and senses are being filled with impressions of the god, having been emptied of most everything else.

He leans back on his elbows, mind drifting until he’s half-dozing, almost lulled to sleep by the momentous effort of being one with nature. It’s Loki who finally breaks their little slumber party up.

“Let’s go for a walk,” he says, slowly getting to his feet.

Tony quenches a little sigh wanting to escape his lips.

“Do we have to? I’m almost starting to like it here.”

Loki responds by holding out a hand, pulling Tony up into a standing position.

“Okay,” he relents, “but if I get assaulted by a grizzly bear or a piss ant crawls up inside of my pants and bites me in the balls, I’m holding you responsible!”

“Don’t they say here in Midgard that exercise is good for you?” Loki says, apparently having little sympathy for Tony’s position. “I would think that walking counts too.”
They stuff the remainders of the picnic back into the car, and then proceed to walk down a nature trail marked with an arrow that is probably supposed to mean something. Tony still isn’t sure how he feels about this nature thing, but he does like the hand that has seamlessly snuck into his somewhere along the way, fingers entwined with his own. It’s… nice. Kinda like being back in high school again. Or probably more like junior high school in his case; he was already far past the hand-holding stage as a high schooler anyway. But it’s remarkable how such a simple thing can in some ways feel more intimate than actually having sex.

Then again, he supposes the number of people he’s held hands with doesn’t come anywhere close to how many he’s slept with. Maybe that’s what’s making it feel more special. That, and the way Loki smiles when their eyes suddenly meet, the sunlight striking his face just the right way and the breeze ruffling his hair in that playful manner.

Okay, so maybe nature isn’t that bad after all.

“It’s beautiful, isn’t it?” Loki says at his side as they’re standing on the flat rocks, looking out over the lake before them. And it’s a perfect picture indeed, a blue expanse of water stretching out beneath an equally blue sky, the little lake framed by lush trees and smooth cliffs.

“Uh-hub,” he agrees. “Not bad at all.”

The hand in his suddenly lets go, as Loki takes a step forward. “How about going for a swim?” he asks, looking expectantly at Tony.

“How about ‘no’?” Tony replies, wincing. “It’s far too cold for that.”

“You don’t go for swims in Midgard?”

“Well, not at this time of year we sure don’t. Not most of us, anyway.”

Loki shrugs in reply and then his hands go up to the collar of his shirt, pulling it over his head. “Well, I do,” he says as he proceeds to divest of the rest of his clothing. “Sure you won’t join me?”
“Quite sure.”

He watches as a naked Loki walks down the few steps to the shoreline and then plunges fearlessly into the water without batting an eyelash. *Oh well, at least it’s making the pretty picture even prettier, having a naked god swimming around in the middle of it.*

He stands there for a while with his hands in his pockets, getting lost in his own thoughts, until there is suddenly a splash of cold water in his face. Startled, he looks down to meet with Loki’s mischievous grin, the god standing at the shoreline with water lapping at his waist.

“Hey!” he protest at this indignity, taking a step back as Loki’s hand darts back beneath the surface, ostensibly to send another volley of water his way. “Don’t even think about it!”

“Don’t be such a landlubber,” the god teases. “Join me.”

“You know, I’m quite sure that skinny dipping counts as indecent exposure,” he mutters, digging his hands even deeper into the pockets of his jacket.

“There’s no one else around to see,” Loki points out, and then he grins toothily. “And here I thought the Man of Iron was made of sterner stuff than that, being deterred by a little bit of cold water.”

*Alright, that does it.*

“You’re getting back for that splash of water, just you wait,” he threatens as he quickly strips, throwing each item of clothing on the ground with a pointed motion before stepping down into the lake, trying not to wince at the cold water meeting his skin. The only reply Loki offers is another splash of water right into his face.

And then, the battle is on. For a long time, there are only shrieks and ice cold water and laughter and stolen kisses in between, followed by a swimming competition to the other side of the lake and back – that Loki wins – until they’re lying on the rocks, wet and panting and out of breath but smiling.

He’s utterly exhausted, as much from laughing as from the physical exertion, and it feels as if he could lie here until the morning comes, if it hadn’t been for the fact that he’s freaking *cold.*
Rolling up onto his elbows, he looks at the clothes still strewn out all around hem, and then back to the god at his side.

“You didn’t bring a towel, did you?”

Loki snickers. “I’m afraid I didn’t. How about we make a fire instead to dry ourselves?”

“Ever the boy scout, huh?” He collapses onto the smooth rock surface again. “I’m not even sure it’s legal to light up like this – you know, forest fire risks and all.”

“I thought swimming naked wasn’t allowed either?” Loki pointedly remarks before resolutely getting up and starting to collect pieces of wood lying around, gathering it all up into a neat little heap.

“There we go,” he says once the pile is big enough for his liking, as if making fires is something he does on a daily basis. “Just need a spark, and we’re set.”

And from the way Loki’s eyes are searching the ground, Tony gets the distinct impression that he’s looking for a couple of sticks or whatever nature-immersed people use to make fires. And there’s his tolerance limit for boy scout antics right there.

“Got a lighter in my jacket,” he says, pointing towards the crumpled heap of cloth to his side. “No need to go all Palaeolithic here.”

It takes a few attempts to get the fire going, but a few minutes later their collective efforts lead to triumph and a warm, crackling fire.

“Hey, look at that,” Tony says contentedly as he eyes the burning wood. “I might earn my Eagle award just yet.”

They sit naked around the fire long after they’re already dry, Loki nestled up into his arms. With the heat from the little bonfire and the god warming his skin, clothes seem superfluous anyway.
As they sit there they talk, Loki about growing up in Asgard and Tony about growing up in New York, Loki about doing magic and Tony about doing science. And it’s strange, he reflects, as Loki recounts how he had eventually learnt the difficult and complex art of teleportation, how they’re both naked, not a thread on either of their bodies, and yet, he doesn’t feel any particular desire to have sex. Well, not any more than usual, at least. It’s as if sitting here with Loki in his arms and running his fingers through the god’s hair while listening to him as he speaks is perfectly enough right now, like it’s somehow even *better* than sex.

*Wow, what’s happened to him, the great playboy Tony Stark, when sex isn’t the one thing first and foremost on his mind?*

And then he suddenly hears his own voice, refusing to remain silent any longer, interrupting the god as he’s describing an embarrassing teleportation mishap.

“I love you,” he says, and Loki’s words are cut short in the middle of a sentence as if his vocal cords just got snapped off.

But the silence doesn’t last for long.

“I love you too, Tony,” comes the breathless reply, soft and almost trembling.

The kiss they share a moment later is sweeter than any sugar or alcohol he’s ever tasted.
Chapter 134

Well, I should probably mention here that this story is starting to reach its end… As it is, there will be five more chapters after this one, and then some epilogue-y bits. In any case, hope you’ll enjoy the remaining chapters too! ^^

He wakes up before Tony does, blinking at the sunlight seeping in through the window. For a while he just lies there in contentment, watching the still sleeping man right next to him who is lying on his stomach with his arms snugly nestled beneath the pillow.

He smiles to himself, remembering yesterday and the precious words they had exchanged by the fire; merely thinking about them makes him feel all warm and giddy inside. And even if they were really just the final verbal acknowledgement of something they have both no doubt already known for quite some time now, he was still touched and delighted that it was finally spoken out loud.

Yes, Tony loves him. Kind, wonderful, brilliant, and very much attractive Tony.

And he can’t imagine any words he’d rather have heard from that mouth, or anyone else’s, than those particular three.

Still smiling, he lets his gaze sweep over the sleeping form at his side, enjoying the sight. The cover has already been kicked off during the night, a good part of it dragging on the floor below the foot end of the bed, leaving Tony’s naked body in full view.

Unable to resist the temptation, he reaches out a hand and gently caresses the man’s back, tracing the curvature of his spine. Tony shifts a little as a soft moan escapes his throat, but ostensibly remains asleep.

So Loki moves his hand further up, running his fingers along Tony’s neck all the way up to his hair. For a few minutes, he combs through the unruly brown mop, marvelling at its softness. He really likes it, especially in the morning when it’s all messy like this.

His fingers then trail down to the side of Tony’s face and the touch causes the man to stir a little again, but still not enough for him to wake up. Contemplative, he lets a fingertip follow the sharp
contours of Tony’s beard. It’s so markedly different from Asgardian men who usually wear full beards, even if they might crop them to a shorter length. A few might not have facial hair at all, opting to shave it all off. But no one ever wears it… designed into such elaborate patterns that Tony does.

He likes that too.

The strands are coarse against his skin, but he enjoys the feeling of them anyway.

Slowly, his hand trails back the same route as it came, tussling through Tony’s hair, then stopping to knead softly at the base of his neck before tracing down the curve of his back. It doesn’t stop where it started, though, but instead continues steadily downwards, until it reaches the two hard mounds constituting Tony’s ass.

He lets his palm rest against the soft skin there for a little while, lazily painting haphazard patterns with pale fingers outlined against Tony’s darker skin tone. Just touching him like this is arousing, and it’s making him want more.

**Much more.**

Tony’s legs are sprawled, so he lets a finger dip down between the cheeks to the man’s opening, teasing and massaging, but not entering. The digit is joined by a second one not long after, slowly circling the tight entrance.

At that, Tony suddenly looks up and rolls over to his side so that he comes face to face with Loki, who slowly withdraws his hand. Already, the man is half-erect. Perhaps he wasn’t quite as asleep as Loki had assumed.

Tony yawns loudly, languidly stretching his arms over his head. Then, having performed his little awakening ritual, he turns his gaze back to Loki, letting it briefly sweep over his groin, taking in the hardened state.

“So… you feel like doing things differently for a change?” he asks casually, cheek resting in his hand and elbow propped up on the pillow as he fixes Loki with an intense stare.

Loki raises an eyebrow at the question. “What do you mean?”
“You want to be on top?” comes Tony’s reply as his other hand scratches at his stomach. “It kind of seemed you had an interest in that, judging by the nature of your little morning groping.”

His other eyebrow joins the first. And for all he can remember, this is the first time that he has ever had a partner freely offering any such as opposed to Loki having to ask – cajole – for it.

And he can’t help but marvel at how casually Tony seems to view the whole thing. It’s such a sharp contrast to how it would have been back in Asgard, where anyone would have been utterly aghast if they knew that Tony would let his slave do any of the sorts to him. Such would be totally unheard of; in any such sexual relations, the master would always, without exception, be on top.

Obviously, Tony couldn’t care less about any of the expected standard master and slave behaviour, but still, all that aside, it doesn’t change the fact that it would be extremely difficult to find a man in Asgard who would be willing to let another man do such a thing to him, thereby making himself argr. So usually, it’s been Loki assuming that role. With his practice of magic, he is already considered argr anyway – as much as he hates the term – so what difference does another such offence make, really? And though he doesn’t mind taking that position in the slightest, even prefers it, he does like to change things around and be on top every once in a while.

However, such opportunities have always been far in between. Last time was probably several decades ago, if he remembers correctly.

“Well, do you want to or not?” Tony’s voice interrupts his little reverie. “Because if you’re going to take much longer deciding, I think I might just flip you over and have my wicked way with you while you’re busy making your mind up.” His hand reaches out for Loki’s length, giving it a playful little tug.

“Yes,” he manages, a shiver of pleasure tingling in his stomach at the touch. “I’d like that. Very much.” Merely the thought is enough for him to harden considerably. It’s been so long since last time, and even then, he had to coax and sweet-talk for quite a long time before his partner had finally acquiesced, despite it not even being his first time taking that position.

“That’s what I thought,” Tony snickers. “Can’t say it’s my preferred position, but I can swing both ways if necessary. As they say, variety of the spice of life and all that.”

His heart makes a little flutter of excitement, and he leans over the other man and kisses him on the lips, pressing his tongue inside. Tony quickly accommodates him, opening his mouth and pushing
back with his own tongue.

Mere seconds later, they’re fully entangled in each other, limbs entwined, hands roaming and touching. Fingers prodding and teasing. Tongues licking and playing. Lips tasting and nibbling. Bodies bucking and twisting.

It’s like he’s drowning in Tony, his senses overloaded with impressions. His eyes roaming over the beautiful sight of Tony’s muscled body, his ears being filled with the delicious moans slipping from the man’s lips, his nose taking in the heady musky scent, his mouth savouring Tony’s arousing taste, and his skin tingling with the touch of those skilled hands moving over him, seeking out the most sensitive spots and teasing them mercilessly.

One of Tony’s hands is cupping his balls, massaging and fondling, as a finger exerts exquisite pressure at their base. He groans from the sensation, and the sound turns into a keen as the hand moves up to wrap itself around his cock, pumping a few times until it’s reached full hardness.

And then the man lets go of him as he reaches out for the bottle on the bedside table, lid already unscrewed, and throws it over to Loki. “You better lube up, sweetheart, because it’s probably been a few years since last time I did this.”

With that, he gets up on his hands and knees, legs slightly spread as he waits for Loki to prepare him.

He swallows at the sight, and quickly pours out a big glob of the sticky substance into his palm and proceeds to coat his fingers with it. Then he grabs Tony’s hip with one hand, and rubs a finger around the opening. After a little while of this, he slowly and carefully presses in, feeling his breath sped up in excitement as his finger starts stroking the man from the inside, stretching him in preparation for what is coming.

As Loki inserts a second finger, Tony shifts a little, but still offers no protest, so Loki continues, as gently as he can possibly manage. Even if Tony hadn’t mentioned it, he can clearly tell that this isn’t something that Tony has been doing on a frequent basis, so he takes his time, ignoring the demands of his own throbbing shaft.

Eventually, he pulls his fingers out and grabs for the little bottle again. With a quick few tugs, he covers his own length in the substance and then sits down on his haunches behind Tony, who hasn’t moved an inch from his position.
“You… ready?” he asks, voice breathless.

“Go for it, cupcake,” Tony answers with a little wiggle of his ass.

With one hand on Tony’s lower back and the other holding his own shaft, he positions himself at Tony’s opening and gently begins to push inside, as slowly as is at all possible.

A grunt meets his efforts and there’s definitely resistance there, so he stops before anything more than the tip of his length has entered so Tony has time to adjust. It’s obvious that the stretch is painful and he hesitates, wondering if he should pull out; the last thing he wants is to hurt Tony. Loki isn’t small by any definition of the word, so for someone not used to this, it’s bound to hurt.

But before he can ask Tony whether he wants to stop, the man tells him to continue, having apparently taken note of his cautious pause. So he does, slowly sliding himself in, inch by inch, as carefully as he can manage.

And then he’s inside, being magnificently and gloriously squeezed by Tony. He’s missed this feeling so much, being inside a lover like this. For a moment, he wonders if it might even be possible for him to come without moving at all, by just remaining inside like this.

But that would be a waste, of course. So he pulls back, and then slides in again, alert for signs that Tony is experiencing too much discomfort for them to continue. But he seems to be coping, so Loki makes a few more cautious thrusts, gasping at the sensations travelling up and down his entire length.

“You... alright?” he manages between clenched teeth, half-surprised that he’s able to even form words at all.

“Everything is fine on my side,” comes Tony’s voice, a bit more strained than usual, but not sounding too discomforted. “Feel free to get started any time. And if I at any point want you to stop or pull out, don’t worry, I’ll let you know.”

And so, he begins, thrusting slowly at first, held back by the desire both to be careful and to draw this out as much as he can. Eventually, the pace increases, though, as his breathing is starting to come in ragged moans and his fingers are clutching the hips before him almost as if in desperation, but he barely notices any of that. There is only that wonderful embrace enveloping his length and sending spasms of pleasure through his entire body until he thinks he’s going to explode from sheer bliss.
The friction as he moves in and out of Tony is amazing, and he can’t remember it ever having felt so
good with any of the precious few lovers in the past who’ve agreed to let him do this. It doesn’t take
long before he’s lost all track of time, but that’s okay because simple trifles like time don’t matter
anymore, if they ever did. So there is nothing but that overpowering pleasure sweeping his body and
mind away until he finally comes, spilling into Tony with a shuddering cry, before half collapsing
over the man’s toned back, like his bones have all been turned into water.

For several long moments, he just remains on his knees panting, before remembering that he’s still
inside Tony. Slowly, he pulls out, his senses tingling as they’re slowly starting to return back to their
normal state.

He flops down onto his back in a sprawling heap, staring up into the ceiling that seems to be
twinkling with a colourful assortment of stars and suns. Blinking the vision away, he slowly rolls
over and turns to face Tony, who’s watching his undone state with a grin on his lips.

“I take it you enjoyed it the experience?”

Loki only nods. It’s not like words would do any of it justice anyway.

That’s when he notices that Tony is still hard, having obviously not climaxed during their coupling.
And there is of course no way he would leave the man in a state like that, especially not after all the
heady pleasure he’s received, so he reaches out and pushes Tony onto his back, the man easily
acquiescing, and then straddles his legs before letting his mouth descend on the hard length.

His ministrations earn him a grunt of approval, and it spurs him to take the shaft even deeper,
enjoying the feeling of having Tony in his mouth. There are hands in his hair, clenching and
unclenching, and it doesn’t take many seconds before the man violently bucks his hips upwards as he
comes, the sound of his own name echoing in Loki’s ears.

A few moments later, the hands pull him up toward the headrest, until the two of them are lying face
to face, mere inches away from each other, Tony with another big grin on his face.

“You’re fucking amazing, Loki, you know that?”

Loki smiles back. “So are you, Tony,” he says breathlessly. “So are you.”
The prototype for the magic blocker has been finished some time ago, and is currently sitting on Tony’s workbench waiting to be taken into action. He hopes it’s going to work as intended, if nothing else than to keep Fury happy and content. Or at least content. He’ll have it dumped off at SHIELD’s doorstep one of these days, so they can run their own tests and try the device out the next time they’re up against that Doomsday freak.

But he still has Loki with him in the workshop, helping out as his… assistant, is it? Because despite not having anything what would count as a scientific education by Earth standards, Loki is actually quite useful. And not just for handing Tony stuff or serving as company or a never-tiring victim of Tony’s long-winded techno-babble. No, even though Loki doesn’t know what a down quark is or how a electro-permutator works, he’s still able to contribute, partly because of that weird magic sixth sense of his that allows Tony to get readings that his instruments can’t pick up on, and partly because of his even weirder explanations of how matter and energy work from a magic-user’s perspective.

He supposes that makes up for the sharp down-turn in work efficiency brought by those frequent interruptions when his body’s baser attractions win out over his mind’s scientific endeavours, and the two of them engage in things very much removed from technology and science.

Then again, perhaps it could still qualify as biological sciences. Because what else would you call making a deep-dive study into the anatomy of a member of an alien species?

His current little project isn’t going all that splendidly for the moment, however. The synchronization of the radiation from the two different hydrogen isotopes that he is aiming for is still failing to materialize, the screen before him bleeping dully as opposed to giving that successful ping he’s been waiting for.

Loki is sitting across from him, chin resting on arms crossed on the table as he stares at the little canisters containing the two isotopes, eyes glued to them as if he’s watching an exciting movie and not a couple of glass tubes that aren’t doing jack shit.

And that’s when he starts to consider whether he – they – should perhaps do something else for a little while, take a quick break and get down to things of a more physical nature. After all, he’s barely even touched Loki all day, and this omission surely needs to be rectified.

He’s about to sneak an arm across the table and grab hold of whatever body part is the nearest, but before he can get to that, Loki reaches out a hand in turn – not for him, though, but for one of the innumerable knobs on the instrument panel hooked up to the canisters. A slight turn to the right, and
the long-awaited *ping* from the monitor suddenly echoes through the room.

Tony looks up, lecherous thoughts temporarily stuffed into the back of his head. “Whoa there, what did you just do?” he asks the god who’s sitting there with an unmistakably pleased look on his face.

Loki grins contentedly. “I could sense that the two force fields weren’t aligning, and from what I’ve learned from observing your Midgardian science, adding a little extra dose of this… *alpha ionization* seemed like it would change the fields into the desired direction.” He shrugs. “Though, I’m sure there are other words for it that you Midgardians would use.”

Tony stares at him. Actually, he’s not sure there even are words for whatever it is that that fairy magic Loki doesn’t even have anymore is still allowing him to sense. He finds himself almost desperately wishing he was… well, *sensitive* or *receptive* to whatever it is that Loki is picking up on. But in the end, he just settles for shaking his head in amazement. “Wow, I don’t even know what it is you actually do, but damn, if you’re not the best research assistant a scientist could ever hope for. Seriously, not even a double doctor’s degree in applied nuclear physics and electro-technology would come even *close* to being this helpful.”

And damn if he can’t see Loki grow an entire inch from that, despite the god still being lazily hunched over the table, head leaning against his arm.

“Well, I’m glad I am able to provide services outside of the bedroom as well,” Loki says with a grin. Then, his voice turns a note darker and huskier. “Though, I must admit that the bedroom activities are quite a bit more… pleasant.”

Tony grins back, and then an idea pops into his head. Perhaps it’s just a formality, but still… it feels *right* doing it.

“You know what?” he says, meeting with Loki’s lingering gaze. “I’m hereby officially appointing you as my research assistant and putting you on the payroll of Stark Industries.”

That draws a silvery laugh from Loki. “You usually take those on your payroll to bed?”

“You wouldn’t be the first one, sweetheart,” he replies with a cock of his head. “Though, I have better warn you, I’m a really tough boss, so don’t expect any significant salary increases any time soon,” he teases.
Loki’s eyes glitter, and oh, how well Tony knows that mischievous look.

“I see,” the god drawls, eyeing him with a bemused expression. “Is there perhaps anything I can do to convince you to be more… generous, then?”

And whoa, the way those eyes are roaming over his body, making all the blood in his head rush southwards, and that only from a mere gaze. Yeah, the god is pure magic alright, bracelets notwithstanding.

“I can think of a few things,” he breathes, feeling several body parts already tingling in anticipation.

At that, Loki’s lips quirk into a wicked smile as he slides off his chair and disappears under the workbench, and… oooh.

Once the god emerges again, Tony is slumping in his chair, head spinning and stars still dancing before his eyes. And he be damned if it doesn’t feel like Loki’s tongue is getting longer for every time he’s doing this…

Loki watches him in amusement with an eyebrow raised, snickering softly as he’s taking in the undone, still panting mess that is Tony Stark.

“To be honest, you don’t really look much in a shape to be doing scientific research for the moment. How about we go for a walk outside instead? I’m starting to feel a bit cooped up in here, and you could probably do with some fresh air to get your head cleared out,” Loki says with a content, rather self-satisfied expression on his face.

Well, Tony supposes he can’t argue with that. He’s neither in a mood nor a state to be dealing with equations or data. A walk outside, though, would be nice. If nothing else, some physical movement might make all that blood flow back to his head again.

Laboriously, he gets up from the chair, faint tendrils of pleasure still tingling at his spine. “Can’t really argue with that, cupcake,” he agrees. “Outside it is.”

Loki pulls himself up from where he’s leaning against the desk and languidly heads for the door, giving Tony’s chest and stomach a light caress as he walks by. And Tony is suddenly reminded of something he’s been intending to do, but hasn’t gotten around to yet.
His hand shoots out, grabbing hold of Loki’s wrist and halting the god in his tracks. Loki turns and regards him with an inquisitive stare. “Already up for round number two, huh?” he asks with a soft smirk.

Tony laughs, shaking his head. “I wish, but I’m afraid I’m not seventeen anymore, much as I would have liked to.”

He tugs gently at the wrist still in his grip, indicating for the god to come closer, and Loki acquiesces.

And really, he should have done this much earlier, considering that he’s already had the tracker bracelet around Loki’s wrist removed not long after they came back from Asgard, as a show of good faith. But better late than never, he supposes.

He turns to rummage around in a drawer until he finally finds what he’s looking for and hands the object over to Loki, who accepts it, curiously inspecting the foreign device.

“Well,” Tony says, slapping his shoulder. “I figured that being here on Earth and all, it’s about time you learned how to use a cell phone, in case you get lost or something.” He snatches the thing out of Loki’s hand, flipping the screen open. “Here, let me show you how it’s done.”

As always, leisurely strolling around with Loki is a relaxing and pleasant way to pass the time. True to his habits, the god is inquisitively scrutinizing everything of interest in his path, stopping with irregular intervals to study whatever it is that has caught his eye. Tony halts in his tracks as he notices his companion having strayed from his side again, having stopped some distance away to gaze at the trinkets at display in some shop window.

Tony waits patiently for him to catch up, his gaze lazily drifting. The sidewalk isn’t very busy – a group of teenagers, an elderly couple, a mother with her young daughter. The child is amusing herself with a ball, bouncing it again and again against the pavement as her mother distractedly looks at some dresses hanging in a window. He watches the ball, almost in transfixedion, as it traces perfect sinus curves in the air.

Then, it happens – the girl misses a bounce and the ball slips out of her hands and rolls out into the incoming traffic, its owner running right after it.
There’s a panicked scream of “Jeannie!”, and as Tony’s body automatically poises to run after and grab the girl, he knows it’s already too late; he’s too far away to make it in time.

Loki, however, is not. Quick as lightening, he lunges, and just a fraction of a second before tragedy strikes, the girl is pulled kicking and screaming back into safety, honking car rushing past with only inches to spare. And Tony expels a heady sigh, feeling his knees go weak with relief. Damn, that was close.

If it hadn’t been such a serious situation, he’d call the current look on Loki’s face almost comical. The god just stands there so utterly confused as he looks down at the crying bundle in his arms, as if he’s still not really understanding what has just transpired even as he hands the girl over to her similarly crying mother, who hugs them both. And Loki looks so hesitant, so uncertain of how he suddenly found himself in this situation, not quite knowing what to do with himself.

Other people are gathering around them in a loose circle, shocked but relieved at the happy ending to the drama that has just unfolded before their very eyes. “Boy, you’re a hero!” an older man announces, clapping a still dazed Loki on his back, and the small crowd isn’t late to shout its agreement.

And that’s when Tony steps in; not that he wants to deny Loki his little well-deserved moment of glory, but in case someone should recognize the alien that tried to conquer their city or decide that they want their picture taken with the hero of the day and then have them uploaded on the Internet… well, things could get messy rather quickly.

He carefully pushes into the little crowd, tugging at Loki’s arm. “I think we should get going,” he mumbles, and Loki isn’t late to heed that suggestions, letting Tony pull him along and away from the throng of people.

They head back, Loki still with that odd look on his face. As they stroll down the sidewalk, Tony puts his arm around his shoulders, hand gently squeezing. “You know, usually it’s my partners who are saying stuff like this, but I guess now it’s finally my turn to get to be the proud boyfriend of a hero,” he grins.

And perhaps it’s a cheesy thing to say, but he says it nonetheless. “And what this shows, sweet cheeks, is that everyone can be a hero in their own way. You don’t need a fancy suit or bad-ass superpowers for that. Heck, contrary to many people’s expectations, you don’t even need to blow things up.”
Loki doesn’t offer a response, but his face is solemn and thoughtful nonetheless.
It’s raining outside, big drops of water smattering against the window panes. He’s sitting with a book in his hand, though his eyes keep drifting towards the grey, rain-heavy sky. He remembers a time when he used to sit at the window like a silent statue, longingly gazing outside, certain he would never get to stand beneath that sky as long as he was staying here in Tony’s tower.

It’s strange how something that is no further away in the past than to still be counted in months can still feel like an eternity ago. Almost as distant as his childhood in the Royal Halls and the memories of how he would chase his brother through the corridors or sneak on silent feet through the supposedly secret pathways of the Halls, exploring and discovering.

However, what’s on his mind this time, as he gazes through the window, is the vivid recollection of what had played out the last time he ventured outside the tower. Everything had happened so quickly, like in a disjointed dream. He hadn’t even stopped to think or deliberate, he had just reacted. It had been so close, too; another second and the little girl – and probably he as well – would have been hit by that oncoming car. Of course, the old Loki – the one who tried to conquer Midgard – would never have done something like that, would never have risked his own life for a mortal.

But he’s not the old Loki anymore. He’s not sure exactly when it was that that changed, only that it did somewhere along the way.

And he still remembers how the woman had smiled at him as he handed her her child back, squirming and crying as it had been in his arms. How she had hugged not only the daughter that had just been snatched from the jaws of death, but him as well. Despite the smile on her face, there had been tears running down her cheeks, wet against his own as she had held him tight.

He had thought, then, that he should say something to her, but he was at a loss for words. Not even the Silvertongue could find anything to say in that moment, the situation being one he had never found himself in before in his long life. So instead, he had just resorted to awkwardly pat the woman on the back, her daughter still squeezed in between their bodies.

Even now, he can still recall her face, every line and feature of it, looking at him in a way that he never remembers anyone looking at him before. And he realizes that he doesn’t know anything about the woman, not even her name. Perhaps she had a loved one that got killed during his attempted invasion of Midgard. Maybe even her husband, the father of the little girl he had just saved. He doesn’t know. Nor will he ever.

And perhaps that is just as well.
He also recalls how that old man – as much a stranger to him as the woman – had called him a hero, and how the people around them had shouted their agreement.

*A hero.* No one has ever called him that before, despite his having been called so many other things in his life. Nor did he ever fancy himself to be one. Sure he had read all those stories and sagas and myths when he was a child, nestled up in bed beneath his blankets with a book almost half the size of him as company. And he had breathlessly delved into the exploits of Asgard’s heroes, of Karl the Bloodaxe and Erik the Victorious and Hjalmar the Ironbeard and all those other legends so heralded in Asgard, hoping that perhaps one day, he could be like them too. Fearsome in battle, glorious in victory, brave in the face of death. A warrior. A conqueror. *A hero.*

But those whimsical childhood fantasies had soon faded, only to be replaced by stark and bitter reality. He would never be the kind of man that the skalds would weave poetry and songs about. Not Loki Liesmith, the Silvertongue, the god of chaos and mischief. Not him. Not like his big brother Thor, who even in his younger years embodied all the values that were so treasured among their people.

He had been so certain of it – he just wasn’t cut out to be a hero.

And yet, those strangers in the street had called him exactly that. It had been a strange experience, with even stranger feelings swelling inside of his chest. Was this how those heroes of old had felt when they had returned home after a successful quest or battle, receiving the praises and adulations of the people?

What had been even more amazing was that Tony had called him the same thing, as they had made their way home. Tony, one of the greatest heroes Midgard has surely ever seen, and even *he* had thought that Loki was worthy of such an epithet.

And it’s odd, because in his mind, that had never been what heroes did. They performed great deeds – they killed enemies by the dozens, they valiantly defended their realm from its foes, they emerged from the field of battle covered in blood and glory. They never did… small things like saving the life of a little child.

Though, perhaps they are not so small after all, not when they result in a stranger’s arms around him and the wetness of tears against his cheek.

The mortals have such a different concept of what it means to be a hero. But, he realizes, he likes
theirs better. It even allows someone like him to be one. Anyone, really, no matter how weak and small they might be. The idea is peculiar and foreign, but appealing nonetheless.

And he knows that he has a lot to make up for. So many people in this realm died because of his misguided quest for glory and power, fuelled by his petty jealousy and desire to prove himself. Innocent people, who had done no more wrong than being at the wrong place at the wrong time. There are no words to express how much he regrets those actions. If there was any way to undo all the suffering he has caused, he would do it in a heartbeat. But, of course, there is nothing anyone can do to change the past. What is done is done.

Or as someone once told him – nothing can ever be done for the dead, only for the still living.

And that’s when he makes up his mind. There is a long way for him to go before he’ll be restored to his full powers and allowed to enter Asgard again, and once more considered worthy to bear the name Odinsson; the conditions and restrictions outlined in the parchment from Odin had been long and extensive. But most importantly, he needs to make amends for what he’s done. However, that prospect doesn’t daunt him in the slightest; there are still so many things he can do, so that the next time he returns to Asgard, he can finally be a hero in his own right. Not from war or conquest or the like, but from other things. Things that actually matter.

After all, he got another chance, and from Midgard no less. It is only fair that he should give the same thing to its people in return.

When he walks into the living room, he spots Loki sitting by the window, apparently deep in thought. So deep that he doesn’t even turn around when Tony enters, as if he hasn’t actually heard him.

He comes to a halt in the middle of the room and regards the god, whose eyes remain glued to the view outside.

“Penny for your thoughts?” he says, watching Loki startle at the sound of his voice. So he really hadn’t heard Tony enter, after all.

Loki turns, slowly, but remains silent for a while before answering. “I was just thinking about… things,” he eventually replies, sounding as if his thoughts are still somewhere else.
Well, that’s enlightening.

But before Tony has the chance to ask any further, Loki continues by his own volition.

“Mostly about all the human lives that were lost due to my actions. And how I can make amends for the damage I’ve done, once these two years are over,” he says, voice a few notes more decisive than before.

Tony raises an eyebrow. Though it’s clear that Loki is harbouring regret for his world domination spiel and its consequences, it’s not a topic that has really been brought up for discussion like this. And he’s never prodded Loki about it either, because after his own stint as the Merchant of Death, he knows that everyone needs some time to try to come to terms with things for themselves before talking about them with other people.

“Well, you can continue working with me in my lab,” he offers. “With your assistance, I’m sure we could advance the frontiers of science at least a few decades, thereby helping--”


Alright then. Tony waits patiently as Loki picks distractedly at one of the chainlets around his wrists.

“I was thinking, there are many diseases and ailments here on Midgard, some of which are incurable,” he eventually says. “And I know there’s really no way to make up for what I did, but… I could help with that, at least. Even if my healing abilities were never the strongest part of my magic, I can learn and get better. I could still do something.” A short pause. “I could… help the people of this city.”

Well, Tony has to admit that he never really did see that coming. He pulls out a chair and sits down next to Loki.

“You mean, like magically heal them?” Somehow, when framed like this, it seems like such an obvious idea that he’s surprised that he, super-genius and all, didn’t even think about that possibility.

“Yes,” Loki replies. “You think that would be doable?”
“It’s an awesome idea. Though, it might complicate things a little that some unenlightened souls might not take all that well to instant magical healing and that sort of stuff.” He gives Loki a scrutinizing look. “You got any plans for how you would practically go about doing it? I mean, I don’t think it would be great if people were to recognize you, after everything.”

Loki cocks his head to the side. “With my magic back, or at least some of it, I can use glamour to make myself look different, just like how my frost giant appearance is currently shielded from view. No one would recognize me if I didn’t want them to. Also, the effects of healing spells can be delayed and slowed down, so I could make it appear like a natural healing process if I want to. I just need to spend enough time in the proximity of a sick or injured person, and I could weave the spells necessary. They wouldn’t even notice me doing anything, if I were to postpone the onset of the spell.” He makes a short pause before continuing. “So… could I trust in your help and support for something like that? To make that happen, to help me make amends? I do realize my familiarity with your Midgardian ways and society are quite limited, so I would have to rely on someone of this realm to make things work out.”

*His help and support.*

And suddenly, his brain is teeming with ideas, some more ridiculous than others. *A little hacking, and Loki could have a doctor’s degree from any university of his choice and be set up with a private practice. Or Tony could offer the nearest hospital to fund a new radiation wing, on the condition that they hire his newly immigrated friend as a janitor, providing Loki with access to as many sick and injured people as he could possibly handle. Or maybe the two of them could travel the country as a couple of new age healers complete with funny hats and silly capes and…* He snickers at the mental image. *Actually, that might really be kinda fun.*

Then he notices the little crinkle between Loki’s eyebrows, the god obviously having no idea what he’s finding so funny.

“Sorry, Loki,” he says, still grinning. “Just a silly mental image I got. But of course, I’ll support you. Not sure yet exactly how we’re gonna do this, but we’ll work something out. We still have a couple of years to think up a plan of action, don’t we?” He reaches out a hand and pats Loki on the shoulder, enjoying the pleased look on the god’s face.

“Thank you, Tony,” Loki says in response, eyes glittering.

And really, he’s happy that Loki has found his own way to make amends. Tony, on his hand, was able to use his technological expertise to become Iron Man after realizing what damage his own weapons had been causing, so it seems fitting that Loki would similarly be able to use his magic – his heart and soul – in the service of Good.
So he tells Loki that. And the already pleased look on the god’s face turns even more so at Tony’s obvious approval.

They talk for a while, him about how he had mainly used his technology and smarts to make money and a name for himself before turning his life around, Loki about how he had mainly used his magic for deceit and mischief and trickery.

Then, much later, as their words are starting to run out, Loki reaches out a hand and puts his palm right on top of Tony’s arc reactor, spreading his fingers. “You know, once I get my magic back, I can fix this too,” he says. “Remove the pieces of metal from your chest and have it heal up again, so you won’t need the arc reactor anymore.”

Tony feels his eyes go wide. “You could do that?” he asks breathlessly, feeling something inside of him flitter, like a whole swarm of dizzy butterflies suddenly let loose. He never expected that anyone could ever do… well, that.

Loki nods. “I could. If you want to, that is. I’m afraid it might not be an entirely pleasant procedure, but—“

His words are cut off as Tony’s lips suddenly look onto Loki’s with full force.
He takes another gulp out of his cup, enjoying the calming feeling of hot, caffeine-rich liquid sliding down his throat. Loki is sitting on the other side of the table, fingers fiddling with his glass of water, and from the look on his face, there’s clearly something important going through his mind. Tony is about to ask what it is, but Loki pre-empts him as he looks up, as if sensing the questioning gaze lingering on him.

“You don’t have any books about human diseases and ailments, do you?” the god asks. “I was going through your library yesterday, but I couldn’t really find anything on the subject matter.”

Tony puts his cup of steaming coffee down on the tabletop, wrinkling his eyebrows a little. “You mean… you need books in order to perform that healing thing? Isn’t it enough with, well, magic?” His fingers trace a little meandering pattern through the air, accentuating the last word.

Loki shakes his head. “Mending broken bones and torn flesh should not prove much more difficult with humans than with the Aesir, since you have similar bodies. However, as far as diseases go, it’s a different matter. There are rather few such afflicting the immortal races, but in order to heal them with magic, you need in-depth knowledge of the disease itself, and how it affects the body and its organs and functions. Otherwise, not even a skilled sorcerer can do much to help, and even healers on Asgard have to study and undergo specific training before they can be of use.” Loki makes a short pause, his long fingers drumming rhythmically against the glass. “So I was planning to use these two years to gain the knowledge needed in order for me to understand and counteract the diseases I will come across here in Midgard.”

Tony scratches his head. “Huh, and here I thought you could just wave that mojo of yours around, and voila, problem solved. Not that easy, huh?”

Loki gives him a slight smile. “Not quite, no.”

“Okay then, I suppose I could order you some nice and shiny books, maybe the local med school reading list or whatever. There should be lots of material out there for you to read about cancer and infections and evil viruses and what have you.” Perhaps a little too much, even, since he’s not sure what would actually be of use in this situation, given his own lack of knowledge in the field. He makes a little grimace. “Though, I’m afraid I’m pretty clueless what books would be the most useful to someone with your background and aspirations; never was one much interested in the medical sciences. But I guess we’ll have to wing it and see what we can find.”

And then, a thought suddenly hits him. Steve had mentioned it off-handedly during his stay in the
Tower, and even though Tony hadn’t paid it any particular mind at the time, now he finds himself grinning as he remembers.

“What is it?” Loki asks, giving him a curious look.

Tony leans forward across the table, gaze holding Loki’s. “You know, I just remembered Steve mentioning that Bruce Banner has moved back to New York, deciding to finally go back to his roots or something after having flitted around the gutters of the world. If you want, I can ask him for a list of book titles geared towards your specific needs.” He makes a pause, gauging Loki’s reaction. It doesn’t seem too adverse, or even adverse at all, at the mention of Bruce, so he continues. “Or, better yet, how about asking him yourself?”

There is a look of apprehensive surprise on Loki’s face, but it only lasts for a brief second. “You mean, you’ll arrange for him to come over here?” the god asks, voice painted with something Tony can’t quite interpret.

“Sure, why not?” he replies, throwing his hands out in a sweeping gesture. “I figured the two of you could compare Asgard’s versus Midgard’s medical techniques, and he could give you some basics and help you get started.” He takes another sip of coffee, realizing that there’s actually another potential benefit to be had. “Plus, I figured it’d be good for you to get to see another face other than mine, as handsome as it might be. So, what do you say?”

Loki fiddles a little with his glass. “You don’t think Bruce would mind?”

“Not at all,” Tony assures the hesitant god. “I’m sure he’d be delighted for the chance to discuss everything from the common flu to flesh-eating bacteria with a smart and knowledgeable guy like you.”

Loki is quiet for a while, as if lost in contemplation. Then, he nods slowly. “In that case, I’d be happy to meet with Bruce again and learn what I can from him.”

Tony grins at him. “That’s the spirit! I’ll call him and ask him to take some time out of his no doubt non-busy schedule for some intergalactic, cross-cultural exchange.”

It’s a strange feeling being in the same room as Bruce again. It’s as if an eternity has passed since he
last met the doctor, given all the things that have changed since then. At the time, he’d been wary – if not afraid – of the man, and that also feels strange to him now, how he could ever have been so distrustful of the unassuming man before him, the complete opposite from his other, berserker self.

He watches as Tony and Bruce exchange pleasantries and the standard Midgardian mutual inquires about health and life in general. And he realizes, then, that he isn’t even sure how much Tony has told Bruce about the situation. Granted, the man had recounted their phone conversation to him, but he had been too distracted and aloof at the time to really listen, his swirling mind occupied with all the questions he would be asking the doctor, all the things he had to learn, and the amends he would be making. Whatever details Tony had told him, they’re forgotten now.

And that’s when Bruce turns to him, who’s been watching in silence from the sidelines.

“Nice to see you again, Loki,” he says, holding out a hand in greeting. “I’m glad to see that you’re looking a lot better than last time we met.”

Tentatively, he reaches out a hand of his own, grasping the doctor’s. “I’ve healed,” he says. “Not just… physically.” And really, he must have cut a quite sad and pathetic figure back then, for more reasons than one. No doubt, he’s coming off as very different now, or at least he’s hoping that he does.

Still, he can’t help but feel oddly bashful in the doctor’s presence, not at all like when Steve had been here. He’d felt comfortable and relaxed around the Captain, whereas Tony had been the tense one. Now, however, the tables have turned; Tony being all unperturbed, while Loki is the one feeling awkward and not quite knowing which way to look.

With an effort, he whisks his meandering thoughts away, because there’s still something that needs to be said before all else. So he looks into the eyes of the man before him, steadfastly holding his gaze. “I never thanked you back then for tending to my injuries,” he says, seeing Bruce’s face shift ever so slightly at that, be it in surprise or something else. “So I’ll do it now instead.” He inclines his head a little. “Thank you, Doctor.”

Bruce gives a small smile. “No need to thank me, Loki,” he answers, ever unassuming. “It’s my job. It’s what I do.”

“Nevertheless, I appreciate it.”
“Alright, you guys,” Tony pipes up behind them. “Now that proper introductions and everything’s been taken care of, who’s up for a beer?”

He never much liked Midgardian beer, but he sips dutifully at it anyway, swallowing the cool liquid down as Tony’s voice occupies most of the available audible space, filling it with anecdotes and humorous quips. Surreptitiously, Loki throws the occasional glance towards Bruce, wondering what’s going through the man’s head as he’s sitting there, if he at all wants to be here, and what he thinks of Loki wanting to see him.

He’s deep into his own thoughts when an empty beer can smacks against the tabletop as it is set down. A second later, Tony stands up, rolling his shoulder joints a couple of times as if to get the circulation going. “Okay, I’ve got some stuff to see to down in my workshop,” he announces. “So I’ll see you in a bit, and in the meantime, have fun. Oh, and there’s plenty of more beer in the refrigerator if anyone would like some.”

And with that, Tony heads for the door, leaving him and Bruce alone on opposite ends of the couch.

For a few moments, there is silence as Loki isn’t quite sure where to start or what to say, feeling uncharacteristically tongue-tied. It strikes him as odd voicing a request like this, considering his and Bruce’s previous history, and he doesn’t know how best to frame it.

It is Bruce who speaks first, though. “I understand that you’d like some help in where to start your studies of human medicine?” he asks, hands neatly folded over one of his legs.

There is a droplet hovering on the edge of his beer can, and he traces his finger along the circular rim, sweeping it away. “Yes,” he affirms. “So that I can make amends for my actions here in Midgard.”

Bruce nods in understanding. “As stipulated in the ruling from Odin. Yeah, Tony told me about it, and the accompanying terms.”

“It’s true that Odin has stipulated it, but… I would have wanted to do it anyway,” he hears himself saying. *And it’s true, he would, even if it hadn’t been a required part of his sentence.*

Bruce gives him a long and searching, but not unkind, look, urging him to continue.
“I want to make up for what I did, insofar as it can be done,” Loki adds. “To actually help people instead of hurting them.”

“Well, that’s certainly a commendable change of heart. If you don’t mind me asking, what made you come to the conclusion that you wanted to help people?” Bruce asks, but there is no suspicion in his voice, only curiosity and interest, now.

So Loki tells him of the incident with the little girl in the street, and even of the thoughts that had followed in its wake.

“I see,” the doctor answers slowly. “So saving that child was what brought it about, huh?”

He’s about to say ‘yes’, but then realizes that it isn’t actually true. “No,” he says instead, “that incident only made me realize how I could go about making a difference, but it wasn’t what changed me. What really did was… Tony.”

“Tony, huh?” Bruce looks even more interested at that. “Forgive my curiosity, but how did he manage that?”

And it’s a very good question, really, because Tony never did preach Midgardian morality or rebuke him for the error of his ways. Truth be told, he never made any active attempts to get Loki to change his outlook – neither lecturing, chiding, reasoning, or coaxing – and yet, he still somehow managed to.

How indeed. But he knows the answer already.

“He… didn’t actually treat me like a slave,” Loki says distantly, suddenly overwhelmed by the sheer number of memories from those earlier days washing over him. Looking back on them, it’s really hard to see how he could have held such mistaken views of Tony, expected such terrible things from him.

“I would have been very surprised if he had,” Bruce replies. “Tony’s a good guy, although I think I already told you something to that effect last time we met.”
“You did,” Loki agrees. “Though it took me a while to realize just how good.”

Bruce looks vaguely amused. “He really grows on you, doesn’t he?”

And how.

And he can’t help but reflect on how surreal the situation is, sitting here discussing Tony and his merits with Bruce – or, for that matter, with another person at all. But he enjoys it nevertheless. Even if the topic had been addressed with Steve as well, the Captain had been suspicious and disbelieving, so it hadn’t really been the same thing. Bruce, on his hand, seems to trust in Tony’s good qualities, though, and he also has a special aura around him, one that invites trust and confidences and makes him relax in the man’s presence. Of course, he’d been too tense last time to notice it, but now it’s strikingly obvious.

“I guess that’s one way to put it,” he concurs. “I must say, Midgardian men are very different from their Asgardian counterparts.”

Bruce makes a little snort. “I can imagine. To start with, I would think us mortals generally aren’t quite as keen on the whole war-and-glorious-fighting thing that you gods seem to go for.”

“True. But it’s certainly not just that,” he says, his tongue freed from its initial constraints, now, as it enthusiastically continues to speak what’s on his mind. “I mean, Tony is the most amazing man I’ve ever met, and I want—“ And as he can see one of Bruce’s eyebrows dart up, he realizes that he’s said too much, his mouth has run off with him, lulled into safe complacency by the doctor’s relaxed and inviting manners.

He snaps his mouth shut, cursing himself. He should have kept quiet, rather than blurting things out that could lead Bruce to draw his own conclusions about the state of things. Bruce doesn’t need to know, especially not after how the revelation had gone over with Steve.

“Is that so?” Bruce asks, his other eyebrow going up to join the first.

“What I mean to say is…” Loki begins, then trails off as his brain is searching for the best way to save the situation, but the other man interrupts him before he can continue.

“You and Tony are… an item?” comes the surprisingly direct question, but there is no immediate
judgement in that voice, although there’s clearly surprise to be heard.

And of course, being a healer, it figures that Bruce would be highly perceptive and quick at connecting the dots with only scant information at his disposal.

He’s about to deny it, to tell the doctor that he’s misunderstanding, but for some reason, he finds that he doesn’t want to lie to Bruce, not when those calm, intelligent eyes are boring into his, as if they’re reading every word and every truth that Loki isn’t speaking. So there’s only one thing left to say, really.

“We are,” he relents, hoping he isn’t making a mistake by admitting to it, willing that Bruce won’t take offence and think badly of Tony the way that Steve had done. “But I was the one who instigated it,” he hastens to add. “Not Tony. He didn’t coerce or pressure me in any way.”

Bruce doesn’t even bat an eyelash at that. “Of course not,” he says. “Tony isn’t the kind of guy who’d do that.”

“You don’t consider it upsetting or inappropriate?” Loki blurts out, surprised at how Bruce is seemingly taking this revelation in stride. He had expected at least some kind of negative reaction, even if it wouldn’t have been as strong as Steve’s.

There’s the hint of a smile on the doctor’s face, now. “Under somewhat different circumstances, I probably would have. But I remember, even now, when I was here tending to your injuries, how concerned Tony had been about you and your situation. It was clear to me that he honestly cared about you.” Bruce leans back in the couch, his gaze still focused on Loki. “And people who honestly care about someone would be very unlikely to take advantage of them.”

“Oh,” he manages, unable to stop himself from feeling vaguely stupid that he hadn’t realized it back then, given that it had been so obvious to Bruce, and all that only from one short visit. But it’s nice not having to explain either himself or Tony, since the doctor seems like he understands anyway. There’s no judgement, no questioning, and Loki is very grateful for that.

But, for some reason, he feels a sudden urge to explain anyway. Maybe it’s the man’s calm demeanour, the glint of intelligence in his eyes, or the way he cocks his head in interest as he’s regarding Loki; whatever it is, suddenly he finds himself telling Bruce about his stay in the tower, and the gist of what transpired during that time. Not the details and nothing really intimate or overly revealing, but enough so that Bruce can truly understand. And it’s quite pleasant, really, to sit here and have a relaxed and open-hearted conversation with someone who for once isn’t Tony, and he’s long lost all sense of time as the conversation much later starts to drift off into other topics, naturally
and seamlessly, as if he’s known Bruce for a long time already.

He doesn’t realize how late is actually is until Tony suddenly comes sauntering back into the living room, throwing a look at the discrepant couple on the couch.

“Well, I don’t know about you guys, but I’m starting to get really hungry here,” the man proclaims. “So unless anyone has any objections, I’m going to order us some Chinese.”

There are none voiced, so Tony saunters back out again to place his phone call, as Loki’s stomach slowly and unpleasantly sinks. Here Tony had gotten Bruce to come over so he could help Loki get properly started with his studies of Midgardian medicine, and they haven’t even touched the topic yet, what with him getting carried away and using that precious time to chatter about a million other things instead.

He looks down at his hands, a little sigh escaping him. “Ah, I… didn’t realize how much time had passed,” he says dejectedly. “It wasn’t my intention to squander it all away like this, rather than using it as intended.”

Bruce offers him a sympathetic smile. “No worries, Loki. It certainly hasn’t been a wasted evening,” he replies and then reaches down into his pocket, bringing up a device that Loki knows well by now.

“Are you familiar with how cell phones work?”

At Loki’s affirmative answer, the man continues. “Well, tell you what, then. How about you give me a call when you feel up to it, and I’ll make sure to gather some of my medical books for you to start out with, and then we’ll meet again?”

Bruce left shortly after dinner, but Loki is still sitting on the couch, fiddling with the little electronic appliance in his hand. Once again, he opens his address book, smiling as he looks at the screen.

Before, there was only one number in it – Tony’s – but now there are two of them, another name showing on the screen.
And it’s strange, really, how such a small, seemingly insignificant thing as seeing that one additional name in his address book can make him feel so happy inside.
Lazily, he flips through the magazine in his hands, eyes skimming over the glossy, shiny pictures of the newest and flashiest car models just out on the market. *Maybe a new Jaguar would be nice, or a Porsche, or...*

*Nah, maybe not.*

He yawns, sliding further down in the couch into a position that would have most physiotherapists cry tears of blood could they see him. With a flick of his wrist, he throws the magazine back onto the table, and it skids across the surface and comes to a halt just before tipping over the edge and falling onto the floor. Perhaps he should go get some actual work done instead of dozing around here.

Before he can get up, though, there’s a sharp buzz on the doorbell.

*Visitor, huh?* Well, if he’s lucky it’s that new lab-tech he ordered the other day, although such a speedy delivery seems rather unlikely.

“Who is it, Jarvis?” he asks, hoping it’s not someone he can’t stand.

“It’s a woman, but my facial scan yields no matches, sir,” comes the answer.

*Alright, then.*

He saunters off to the nearest monitor and turns it on, connecting it to the live feed from the camera hanging over the front door. The facial image of a perhaps forty-something woman he doesn’t recognize pops up a second later and he sure hopes it’s not some nosy reporter or an old one-night stand here to tell him that he owes her fifteen years’ worth of child support.

“Tony Stark’s door answering service,” he says through the speaker. “How may I help you, madam?” Better to ask before admitting entrance, he’s had enough weirdos come knocking on his door to take any chances.
The woman blinks a couple of times at the sound of his voice, looking around with furrowed brows as if she isn’t quite sure where to rest her eyes before speaking.

“My name is Frigga and I come from Asgard,” she answers in a polite but decisive voice. “May I come inside?”

Asgard? His eyes widen in surprise. To his knowledge, there are no newspapers or dingy nightclubs going by that name, so it’s pretty safe to say he’s got another alien visitor right outside his door.

He winces, chewing on his lower lip. Granted, the woman is alone and doesn’t look dangerous, but he’s learned all about looks and deceit the hard way by now. Then again, if she wanted to enter his tower, she could probably do so anyway, courtesy of her freaky magic powers and all. At least he assumes she has them in spades, or she probably wouldn’t have travelled alone to another realm without any armed guards in tow to protect her from possibly hostile natives.

Did Odin send her? Or did she come here by her own volition? Is she here to see him, or Loki? And what does she even want in the first place? There are a million questions dancing in his head, but having a question-and-answer session with an alien standing outside his door doesn’t seem like a terribly swell idea.

He shuts the speaker off for a few moments. “Jarvis, where is Loki at?”

“He’s in the library reading, sir,” the AI dutifully supplies.

Alright, good. He decides not to inform Loki of the visitor before he’s found out what she wants and has assessed her threat level. Not that he really thinks she’s dangerous or anything, but it never hurts to be careful, in case the woman isn’t one of Loki’s fans.

He turns the speaker function back on. “You’re welcome inside… uh, my lady.”

Not even a minute later, he’s standing face to face with the visitor in his living room, as they quietly assess each other for a couple of heartbeats. The name ‘Frigga’ does ring a bell somewhere, but he can’t quite place it, so he studies her physical appearance instead, looking for clues to her identity.
The woman before him is clearly not a warrior, unlike his previous Asgardian visitors-slash-intruders, but looks regal in her bearings, proud and dignified. She isn’t carrying any weapons – not that he can see anyway – and is wearing a dress with long, flowing skirts. Not that he’d lay any claims to being an expert on Asgardian fashion and clothing customs, but it does look fancy and expensive, no doubt something only a woman on the higher echelons of society would be wearing, with fine gold threads woven into the fabric. She’s not exactly young, but attractive nonetheless.

*MILF*, his mind supplies, and he quickly pushes the thought away. There’s no way to know if this woman is equipped with freaky mind-reading powers, and he’d rather not offend powerful aliens with unknown agendas.

He is acutely aware of how the woman is regarding him in turn, her eyes not leaving his face for a second, scrutinizing him as if her gaze is able to tell her more truths about him than straight-forward asking ever could.

Then, as the silence is on the verge of getting uncomfortable, the woman finally speaks.

“I apologize for intruding in your home like this without prior notification,” she says, polite to a fault, “but I had to come here. I hope you do not have any objections to my visit.” She makes a pause, obviously expecting him to say something.

“Ookay, I don’t mean to be rude here,” he replies, holding up his hands palms out, hoping he won’t come off like a dolt, “but it seems you already know who I am, but I’m not quite sure… who you are. I mean, besides being ‘Frigga of Asgard’?”

The woman inclines her head in apology. “Forgive me for my lack of proper introduction. I forget that unlike the other eight realms, Midgard is not generally familiar with the names of Asgard’s royal family. But to answer your question, I am the wife of Odin and…the mother of Loki.”

Tony’s eyes grow wide. Oh, *that* Frigga. That neatly answers his question why he recognized the name from somewhere but still didn’t make the connection, because even though Loki did mention her name to him at some point, whenever he would talk about her he had always referred to her as ‘Mother’, not ‘Frigga’. So he had simply thought of her as ‘Loki’s Mom’. And he makes sure to banish the MILF designation suddenly popping up again to a very, very far corner of his mind.

“Oh, well of course I know who you are, I just kinda… forgot,” he manages, feeling like a total dumbass. Loki’s freaking *mom* is standing here before him and he didn’t even realize it until just now. “I really didn’t expect you to be quite so…” his hand makes a vague gesture but he lets it fall again as the words die on his tongue. *Shut up, Tony.*
Frigga doesn’t seem offended by his remark, though, despite being the High and Mighty Queen of the Realm of Almighty Gods, but there is what looks suspiciously like a faint smile on her face. It disappears as quickly as it came, though.

“I cannot stay very long,” she says, a hand going up to her neck, fingers wrapping around the necklace hanging there. “No one from Asgard is allowed to visit here, except for Thor, so to shield me from Heimdall’s gaze, I am wearing an enchanted amulet. Its protection will only last for a short time in this realm, though.” Her chin juts out minutely, as if in defiance. “But I wish to see my son, if you will allow him a visitor.”

“Of course,” he says, feeling vaguely uneasy at being asked to oblige a request that should have been a given, and by a goddess no less. “Just follow me, your… uh, Highness.”

He leads her on through the hallway towards the library, wondering what she would have done if he had refused her request – if she would have remained as polite and composed, or brandished the metaphorical sharp steel that he senses is lurking beneath the agreeable surface. Something is telling him that this woman is not one to be trifled with, pleasant appearance notwithstanding.

“AAlrighty,” he says, coming to a halt as he points down the hallway. “You’ll find him in the library, first door to the left.”

Frigga gives him a curt nod. “Thank you,” she says as she strides past him with a rustle of skirts, hems sweeping softly over the floor.

A part of him would really have liked to stay and listen in on the conversation ahead, but he doesn’t want to intrude on a private moment like that, so instead he turns and walks back, letting mother and son have their little moment shielded from eavesdropping ears. He can be a nosy bastard some other time.

He’s crawled up in a leather armchair, one of the books that Bruce has lent to him flipped open in his lap. Next to him on the tabletop, there is a whole little pile of them, books picked out by he doctor himself.

Because he had indeed called Bruce, after a few days of initial hesitance, during which Tony had rolled his eyes and told him to stop his ridiculous fretting. Still, he’d been anxious, because what if it
turned out that the doctor didn’t have the time to – or didn’t particularly want to – meet with him again? But, to his relief, Bruce had been friendly and forthcoming once Loki had finally given in and called, assuring him that he’d be happy to see him and help him with his studies.

And when Bruce had arrived at Tony’s tower again, it had been with his car to pick Loki up and drive him back to his own apartment, saying it would probably do Loki some good to get a change in scenery. It had been a nice afternoon, too, with Bruce patiently explaining the foundations of Midgardian medicine to him in the peculiar serenity of his living room, as Loki had curiously eyed the odd little trinkets and decorations on display. Apparently, they were from a Midgardian place called India, where Bruce had spent considerable time helping the poor and the desolate.

He had enjoyed listening to Bruce’s stories about his stay in India, especially those related to how he had been using his healing skills for those in need. It made him feel all the more inspired to excel in his own studies, so he could one day do the same.

And after having spent so much time in Tony’s tower, he had been certain that he knew all there was to know about Midgardian food. But, it turned out, he did not. *Tofu,* Bruce had called it. It was… a strange dish, something he doubted that Tony would have liked, but it was interesting nonetheless, and made him realize how much he still has to learn regarding Midgard. But he’s looking forward to it.

As Bruce had taken him home again, he’d told Loki to call him back when he was finished with the first stash of books and needed more. Or if he just wanted to talk to someone who wasn’t Tony. Or for whatever reason. No, in fact Loki didn’t even need a reason. He could just call.

The thought makes him smile.

And then, he’s brought out of his pleasant reverie by the sound of soft footfalls approaching. At first he assumes it’s Tony, but they are far too light to belong to him. Surprised, he’s about to turn his head to see who the unexpected visitor is, but a familiar voice reaches his ears first.

“Loki?”

His body freezes in shock, because surely it can’t be…? *Not here, not in Midgard, how could it ever possibly be?*

But it is, he sees as he can finally bring his head to move and face the visitor who is standing there a
few steps inside the room, like a golden apparition, a beautiful but impossible mirage.

“Mother?” he says, but it comes out as a croak more than anything else as he stands up, the book falling to the floor without his barely even noticing. For a fleeting second, he's afraid – afraid that her face will cloud over, that she will no longer acknowledge him as her son. And it would have been so ironic, when she was the only one he had never denied his familial ties to, like he had done with Odin and Thor; she had always remained ‘Mother’ in his mind.

But he has not had the chance to talk to her since his fall from the Bifrost, or find out what she thinks of him now that she knows of all he has done. He does remember how she had cried at his trial as the sentence was read out, but maybe those were the tears of a mother grieving for the loss of a son she could no longer acknowledge as hers, who was no longer worthy to be called her son?

He feels a lump of ice in his stomach at that, but it dissolves as Frigga quickly covers the few steps between them much quicker than it behoves a queen and a pair of arms wrap themselves around his frame. He lifts his own arms to return her embrace, hesitantly at first and then more insistently, pulling her close.

“My son,” she says, her voice like a caress in his ears. “I am so glad to see you alive and well.”

And there are so many things he could have said, that he wants to say, but it all solidifies into two small words.

“I’m sorry,” he whispers. And he could give a very long list of all the things he’s sorry for, but any further expansion is halted by Frigga’s voice.

“It’s alright; let’s not speak of that now. I only wanted to come and see you, to make sure you were well.” A hand reaches up to stroke his hair. “Unfortunately, I cannot stay for long. Freyja provided me with an enchanted amulet to shield me from Heimdall’s view, but its spell will not last for long this far removed from Asgard’s branch on Yggdrasil. If I had known that you were coming back home that time on Odin’s behest, I would not have left for Vanheim, and I was grievous to hear that you were already in Midgard again upon my return. So I had to come here instead, now that I couldn’t see you in Asgard.”

“I’m glad you did,” he murmurs, the previous lump nestling in his stomach having now moved up to settle in his throat. “I’ve missed you.”
The grip around him loosens as Frigga takes a step back to look him in the eyes, hands coming up to rest at his shoulders. The gaze is long and searching, as if she’s looking into his very soul, and he can’t help but squirm a little at the sharp scrutiny. Then she seems to relax and gives him a slight smile. “I’m glad to see you back, my son, after your fall from the Bifrost. Odin said you had returned, but I wanted to see it with my own eyes.”

And Loki knows that she isn’t taking about his return in the flesh.

“I will make up for everything,” he promises, and he really means it too.

“I’m sure you will,” Frigga replies, her smile widening a little as she ruffles his hear, just like she used to do when he was a little boy. “I understand that Man of Iron has treated you kindly during your stay here?”

He only nods, not really finding any words to express all that Tony has done for him.

“Your sentence truly terrified me at first, but now I’m only glad not to have to see you languish in some dreary prison cell,” she continues. “As much as I was certain of the contrary at first, I realize this punishment is much preferable to the alternatives.”

Then there’s a flicker from the necklace around her neck and she sighs wistfully. “The spell is fading, being so far removed from its source. I must take my leave, much as I would have liked to stay longer.”

“I’m glad you came, Mother,” he says as they hug each other again. “Thank you.”

“Take care, Loki,” she says and then, with a final smile, she turns and walks out the door, leaving him with the lump still in his throat.

But at least it’s a happy lump, and not a sad one.

Tony is waiting outside, out of hearing distance, when the door to the library opens and Frigga walks out. He doesn’t know what the two of them have been talking about in there, but at least she looks
content and happy enough, so he relaxes a bit.

“Everything alright?” he says, feeling he should probably say something.

He doesn’t get a reply to that as Frigga strides up to him, and he startles as she places her hands on his shoulders and then leans forward to kiss his cheeks, first his right, then his left.

“Thank you, Man of Iron.”

“Whoa, what was that for?” he asks, eyes widening in surprise as one of his hands goes up to his cheek.

“For bringing my son back.”

Before he can reply, the light from the amulet around Frigga’s neck makes a weak little flutter, and her hand goes up to close around it. “I must make my return to Asgard at once,” she says. “I bid you farewell, and may the blessings of the Norns be upon you.”

And with that, she takes a couple of steps back and closes her eyes.

“Okay, well, feel free to come back and visit any time,” he says just as a blue light envelopes her from head to foot, and a moment later she is gone, leaving only a faint shimmer. And all he can think is, damn, did he just get kissed by a goddess?

Then again, given what he’s been doing with a certain god residing in his tower, perhaps it’s really not much to write home about.

Chapter End Notes

Some nifty fanart for you guys to check out in case you haven’t already:

http://silverstorm666.deviantart.com/gallery/
Courtesy by Dany. ^^
Even though this is technically the last chapter of the story, there will be a three-part epilogue following, so please stick around for it, since there’s Really Important Stuff still to come. ^^

Warnings for story-unconventional POV which I’m sure will confuse some people, but I decided to use it anyway since it fitted with what I was going for with this chapter.

The end theme to Star Wars is filling the living room where they are sprawling in the couch, Tony leaning against the crook of the armrest and the backrest, and Loki snuggled up between his legs, the god’s back against his chest.

“So, what you think, huh?” he says to the mop of black hair resting just below his chin. “One of the most epic sagas the human realm has ever created.”

Loki half-turns in his arms to twist around and look at him “It was… intriguing,” he replies, “though I must say I find that whole brother-sister thing a bit disturbing.”

Tony laughs. “Yeah, you’re not the only one. I think there was a collective ‘yuck’ echoing across the planet as this originally screened.”

“I can imagine,” Loki nods, a finger trailing lightly over Tony’s own, raising goose bumps in its wake.

“And by the way, speaking of family,” he says lightly, “I like your mom.”

Loki raises an eyebrow in his direction. “Oh?”

“Yeah, she’s cool.” An impish grin comes over his face; because really, he can’t help himself. “How come you never told me she was smoking hot?”

The finger on his arm comes to an abrupt halt, and a split second later one of the couch pillows has
made direct contact with his face. “Don’t even go there, Tony,” Loki warns. “She’s my mother.”

Tony’s grin widens. “You mean you smoking hot mother,” he teases, poking his fingers right into the middle of Loki’s stomach, and the god hisses and twists under him. Ticklish as ever.

In the next instant, there’s an arm around his waist and he finds himself ungracefully flopped down onto his back, so he snatches up the nearest pillow and smacks it into the back of Loki’s head, but the god grabs his wrists and pushes them down to either side of his head, securely pinning him down.

He bucks, but the weight above him refuses to budge, and he is greeted with a wicked smile that he knows all too well by now. Spurred on, he grinds his hips along with his growing erection into the body above.

Loki laughs. “Already in the mood, love?”

“I’m always in the mood, baby. You should know that by now,” he shoots back, making another little bucking motion to accentuate his assertion.

Loki lets loose a little snicker at that. Yes, he knows that very well by now. And he loves it. “Perhaps we should do something about that,” he says, fingers slipping beneath the hem of Tony’s T-shirt and slowly inching their way upwards against warm skin, his thumb digging into the man’s belly button.

“You have my whole-hearted support,” Tony agrees as he reaches up to grab Loki’s hips, kneading insistently and then pushing in a forwards and downwards motion. He obliges, leaning down over Tony until their stomachs and chests are pressed flush against each other, their faces mere inches apart. Tony’s cranes his neck upwards, his mouth gently nibbling at Loki’s lower lip.

Again, Loki obliges, bowing his head so that their mouths can lock into a kiss, soft at first but growing more heated by the second as their tongues explore each other’s mouths. Tony tastes like mint and salt and something untameable and it’s making him want more.

“You are wearing too much clothes, I think,” he murmurs as he draws away a little, sitting up to straddle the man still lying on his back.

“Couldn’t agree more on that point,” Tony concurs. No further encouragement needed, he pulls the
shirt over his head and makes a grab for Loki again, but Loki shakes his head as he smacks his lips.

“Still too much,” he waves impatiently at the still buttoned jeans. “We need to get rid of these too.”

“Anything you say.” Tony’s fingers are already fumbling at the front of his pants, and a few seconds later he kicks them off along with his underwear, leaving his body fully exposed to Loki’s ministrations.

“Mmm, much better,” he hums seductively in that sinful voice that makes little tingling shivers shoot all over Tony’s spine.

He lets out a muffled groan as Loki’s mouth descends on his stomach, tracing his abs in meandering little patterns. Maybe he’s writing something in runic with his tongue – most likely ‘mine’ – but Tony doesn’t bother asking. It’s not important. He just waits in anticipation as the god continues to lick and nibble over his skin, occasionally giving a little bite along the way.

One of his hands goes up to the black hair that’s framing Loki’s face like a dark, exotic curtain. He enjoys the way it curls in that impish, rebellious kind of way. It makes the god look like a cute, fuzzy little alien pet. Not that he’s going to tell Loki that, though; he’s already rolling his eyes enough at all the nicknames that Tony’s been busy giving him in bed.

The tongue starts to move towards his chest – which is unfortunately the wrong direction, but he can live with that – passing to swirl briefly over the arc reactor before Loki’s wide grin is right in his face.

“What do you want, Tony?” he asks seductively, licking his lips in a show of anticipation.

“Further southwards?” he says with a raised eyebrow and a little grinding of his pelvis into Loki’s leg, trying to get at least a little friction going in the right places.

“Very well.”

Loki smiles inwardly as he traces a slow trail of licks over Tony’s heated skin, starting from his collarbone, and then stopping to tease at the little hard knob that is the man’s nipple.
“A bit further southwards?” comes Tony’s needy groan from somewhere above.

“As you wish,” he says, moving down to the little hollow of Tony’s belly button instead, prodding the tip of his tongue into the depression. “Is this better?”

“Still a few inches off, baby.”

A hand is insistently pushing at the top of his head, trying to get him into the desired position. And what that is is not hard to guess, the way Tony’s erection is already poking him in the throat.

“So needy,” he comments with a shake of his head before acquiescing, taking hold of the hard shaft in one hand, and licking a long, slow strip all the way up to the slit. Tony twitches in his grip, and, deciding to get to work in earnest, he lets his mouth descend over the head, taking in the first inch and slowly sucking.

“That’s better… much better,” Tony breathes softly as Loki takes him deeper, relishing in the feeling of the hard but yet smooth erection tucked in between his lips. He can feel his own groin hardening at having Tony in his mouth like this, but he pays his own bodily needs to heed for the moment, instead setting out to give Tony as much pleasure as he can manage.

Descending further – a trick that all those lovers who’ve been on the receiving end of have greatly enjoyed – he swallows Tony down all the way to the hilt, pushing him past the barrier where most people would have already stopped. Then, he sets up a quicker, steadier pace, letting his tongue slide over the length as he works it over.

No matter how many times the god does this, Tony never gets tired of it. It’s such a stunning sight seeing him taking his cock into his mouth like that, swallowing every inch of it down. And there are quite a few of them to swallow. Better than any magic fairyland trick.

And the feeling of that tongue moving over him… and those lips wrapped around him… it’s truly divine. It’s in moments like this, when he’s lying all panting and yet breathless and shivering and yet unmoving that he can really believe that Loki is a true god. A god of sex and lust and desire and all that’s good and awesome.

And, even better, he’s all Tony’s.
As Loki does something with his tongue on the tip of Tony’s cock that he isn’t quite sure what it is but that causes a burst of pleasure to shoot straight through his groin, he can’t help but let slip a moan. Loki’s otherworldly talented mouth has almost driven him to the point of completion, but he doesn’t want to finish like this this time. No, he wants to see Loki straddling him, taking him in all the way in another way entirely.

With the greatest of efforts, he grabs hold of Loki’s head, and gently lifts it off his cock. It makes a cute little plopping sound as it leaves the god’s mouth.

“You should get undressed,” he manages to grit out, his abandoned cock making a little unhappy twitch at the rudely disrupted activities. “Like, now.”

He almost stifles a little laugh; Tony is so eager, so impatient to get down to other things.

And he loves it.

So he seats himself on Tony’s stomach, divesting himself of his shirt with a slow stretch of limbs. Licking his lips, he bores his eyes into Tony’s and trails his hands over his own chest and stomach, letting his head loll backwards as his mouth falls open. He can see Tony positively drooling at the display, and a second later fingers are inelegantly fumbling at his waist to get the topmost button of his pants open.

He takes mercy on them, reaching down to undo his pants and quickly pull them down. Eager hands have already found their way beneath his underwear to grope at his ass, so he wastes no time to get out of them too, letting his straining erection spring free.

Hovering on all fours over the man beneath him, he grinds his own length into Tony’s before bending down to claim those still beautifully half-open lips with his mouth. Tony returns the kiss with eagerness and heated passion, pushing Loki down to sprawl flat on his body.

A slick finger is massaging at his opening, making him wonder just when Tony managed to stick his hand into the jar of lube; he didn’t even notice it. But he spreads his legs wider, allowing the digit access, moaning a little as it enters.

“I… need you, Loki. Now,” the man breathes into his ear as the finger inside of him plunges deeper, finding the exact right spot that makes his whole body suddenly go rigid. And how he loves hearing those words from Tony’s mouth, hearing how the man needs – yearns – desires him. Like water or
air, impossible to live without. It’s making his own erection throb in delight where it’s firmly pressed between their bodies.

He lets another finger press inside, not missing the resulting tensing of the pale body draped over him or the sharp intake of breath. So after a little while, he lets a third finger carefully join the first two, pressing against that spot that he knows from previous experience will get the god to mewl in pleasure.

“Ah… Tony.”

How he loves the sound of that voice, especially when it’s moaning his name like that. Loki is already pushing against his fingers, following the pace that Tony has set up, little squeals spilling from his lips whenever the fingers brush against that magic spot. It’s tempting to continue, because damn if Loki doesn’t look totally delicious like that, but he wants something more. Preferably now.

Withdrawing his fingers to the sound of a displeased moan, he pushes Loki up from his chest and into a sitting position. Then, he bucks his hips upward, letting his hard cock prod into Loki’s back.

“Come on, baby, get on top of me,” he breathes, and Loki, his eyes not leaving Tony’s for a second, heaves himself up and positions himself right over Tony’s groin, and then – oh so laboriously slowly – lets himself descend on his cock, inch by inch, eyes half-lidded in pleasure and chest heaving in quick breaths.

The feeling as Tony slides inside of him is as glorious as ever. He remains sitting for a few heartbeats, letting himself adjust to Tony’s girth, before slowly raising himself up and then descending again, his thighs smacking against Tony’s hips. As he starts moving in earnest, Tony’s hands come up to grab a firm hold of his ass, guiding him as he moves. He angles his hips, making sure that the length inside of him is hitting exactly where it should, feeling his own breath speed up as the pleasure inside of him is mounting.

And Loki is so beautiful like this, the way he’s sitting there impaling himself on Tony’s cock, his face contorted in pleasure, riding him like there’s no tomorrow. Unable to hold himself off any longer, he grabs hold of Loki’s erection, stroking it with hard, rhythmic tugs, matching the pace that Loki is setting up.

He groans, the simultaneous pleasures of having Tony inside of him and the hand wrapped around his length almost enough to make him come on the spot. He’s twitching in Tony’s grip and there are little stars dancing before his very eyes at the way that a thumb is rubbing over the head, putting delicate pressure on the sensitive tip.
He’s almost there, driven to the edge by the sight of the god moving on top of him and the feeling of being squeezed inside of that tight, slick heat. *Fuck, it’s so amazing and Loki is so perfect and…*

He’s almost there, driven to the edge by the sight of the man writhing beneath him and the feeling of the length moving inside of him. *By the Nine, it’s so amazing and Tony is so perfect and…*

They come at the same time, Tony spilling into Loki as Loki comes over Tony’s chest and hand, both of their cries echoing in the room as a testimony of their shared pleasure.

For a while, there is nothing but heavy, laboured breaths as they lie intertwined on the couch, limbs entangled.

“*You know,*” Tony finally says with a grin, interrupting the silence. “*I think we can make those two years pass pretty quickly.*”

Loki only smiles and snuggles closer.
He’s standing on the landing outside his chambers, one hand resting on the balustrade as he enjoys the cool breath of the evening air on his face. The gleaming city spreading out below makes for a magnificent view, reaching to the horizon and beyond. But it’s not the city he’s looking at, but the velvety sky above, painted with the bright red and orange hues of the setting sun. Somewhere beyond that sky, beyond the pinprick stars, beyond the void that fills the space between the branches of Yggdrasil, is his youngest son. In the realm of the mortals, Midgard.

He draws a heavy sigh; sometimes he’s truly feeling his years all the way to his bones. And that’s when he wonders, yet again, if it might soon be time to consider relinquishing the throne and the crown to Thor, to bestow upon him the burden of kingship that has been awaiting him for so many centuries. Still, he is reluctant; being a king is not easy and the weight of that position can be heavy indeed, something he has known all too well since that day when Thor returned to Asgard with Loki in chains.

It had been a trying time full of sorrow and hardship. Loki’s crimes were both great and numerous, against Asgard as well as against Midgard, and the true extent of them only became disturbingly clearer as his trial progressed. And of course, should a member of the royal family be put on trial for crimes of this magnitude, the laws of Asgard were clear, as some members in the Council had been quick to point out to him. For once, the Allfather, the King himself, did not have the right of sentencing, but the Council was to decide upon the punishment. An old law, from the time of their old ancestors, instituted to make sure there would be no bias or favouritism extended from a King to an accused family member, no undeserved leniency granted because of kinship.

And he knew full well that there was only one punishment that Asgardian law considered fit for crimes of that enormity. Execution. Death. He had known it from the first day of the trial, and there could be no way around it. The Council members all agreed. Nothing but execution would be enough to pay for such heinous acts.

So he had sat there and listened, as they talked about the execution of his youngest son, how it was the only viable alternative. Even so, he had tried to argue for the option of imprisonment, but no one had been in favour of it. Loki is unrepentant, so the argument had gone. He has shown no remorse for his actions – you all heard him during the trial. You all saw the hate and hostility burning inside of him. What if he were to break free of his imprisonment and wreak similar destruction upon the realms once more? We cannot risk it, the stakes are too high.
In some of the faces around him, there was sympathy hidden beneath the grave expressions, but nonetheless a firm conviction that imprisonment would not do. Loki was unrepentant, and his crimes too great. No leniency could possibly be given. Such was their reasoning, even if it saddened them to have to sentence the son of the Allfather to execution.

But not everyone. Some were positively gloating, as much as they tried to hide it. Those who did not have justice or the safety of the realms at the forefront in their minds, those who merely held a grudge against Loki for all the mischief and trouble he had caused them over the centuries, all the embarrassment and anger he had made them suffer. They would finally have their revenge and were only glad and eager to sentence his son to death as they pretended concern, even if he could easily see through the fake façades.

Of course, whatever the reasons, they didn’t truly matter – Asgard’s laws were clear enough on what punishment was stipulated. Execution. And yet, he was still desperately searching for a loophole, something that could sway the Council to vote for a more lenient sentencing. Something that might save Loki from certain death.

And then the idea came to him, loathsome as it was. It was a punishment not often in use anymore, but more common in the days of old. And certainly, it had never before been passed on someone of royal blood. Not only was the concept detestable, to have his son turned into a slave, but also the knowledge that he would have to seek support for his suggestions from those who most eagerly craved Loki’s death, those who cared not primarily for justice but for revenge. Those who wanted to see him suffer. But he knew he had no choice. And so, he had put forth his suggestion before the Council – slavery to one of the Midgardians Loki had wronged most grievously. Poetic justice.

Of course, he knew what none of the others did. Those others, who had not been to Midgard in many centuries, perhaps never even set their foot there, those who did not have ravens to come sit on their shoulders every evening to tell them of what had transpired in the Nine Realms. They did not know – there was no longer such a thing as slavery in the mortal realm, the humans having abandoned those old customs in favour for another kind of society altogether.

Perhaps that would be Loki’s saving grace. Perhaps he could trust the humans to show his son some of the mercy and compassion that was so inherent to their kind, to not treat him too harshly, despite all he had done. That was what he hoped, at least. Slavery was not an easy sentence, not even under the comparatively lenient circumstances he was hoping would be awaiting Loki on Midgard.

As expected, some Council members were horrified and disgusted – those who wanted justice and not revenge – as he laid out his suggestion, as impassionedly as he could manage. It would not do if they thought he was taking Loki’s side or came off as a concerned father who was only trying to save his son. Then he would never have gotten the support he sought if they thought he was doing
this for Loki’s sake. No, instead he had to play the part of the infuriated and disappointed king and father, angry enough with the son who had so greatly shamed his family and all of Asgard to want the worst outcome for him. To truly have him punished in the harshest possible way.

And oh, how he had seen the faces of some of the Council light up at the prospect of making Loki a slave, and all it entailed. They almost rubbed their hands together with glee as the idea was proposed, their previous concerns about Loki escaping and doing perhaps even worse suddenly evaporating into nothing.

Those members constituted perhaps half of the Council. In the faces of the other half, however, he could see disgust and disbelief at this idea. And he knew he had disappointed them in showing such cruelty and callousness in regards to his own son. Clearly, he had lost esteem and standing among them by even suggesting such a sentence. But it was worth it, any chance that might save Loki’s life would be worth it, no matter what it would cost him. He did not care.

There was a heated debate going on for many days about the merits of executions versus imprisonment, but eventually, all the arguments had been spoken and counter-spoken, and so they voted.

It came out even. Half in favour of execution, half of slavery in Midgard. Normally, a full Council would mean an uneven number of votes, but this time, Asgardian law did not allow the Allfather his usual vote, due to kinship to the accused.

In the end, they had to seek out Frey, the stand-in who was not yet fully on the Council, but would still be called upon when not all members could be in attendance and they needed a deciding vote. And so, he had stood before Frey, explaining to the young Lord what the situation was, telling him about the two alternatives and the even number of votes. How the law stipulated death, but he had suggested slavery on Midgard as a possible alternative.

As his account came to an end, Frey was arching one eyebrow, giving him a long, measured look. *You would have your own son sentenced to slavery, Allfather?* he said, an undercurrent of both disapproval and disbelief in his voice.

And all his fears came roaring up inside of him at that – clearly, Frey was not in favour of what he considered too cruel a sentencing, he would vote for execution instead. His well-laid plans were coming apart, making all his efforts amount to nothing. But this was his – Loki’s – last chance. He had to throw caution to the wind; there was nothing left to lose.

So he leaned close to Frey’s ear, disguising it as a casual movement while pretending to rub a hand
over his beard to hide the movements of his lips, and quickly, quietly whispered so that no one else could hear, there is no such thing as slavery in Midgard anymore.

There was a fleeting look of confusion on Frey's face as he wrinkled his forehead in bewilderment, but it disappeared as quickly as it had come, and there was no longer any emotion to be read in that face. I see, then, was all he said, neutrally and impassively.

They had voted again. The result was the same as before, but with one added vote in favour of slavery.

And so, to the chagrin of some, and the joy of others, it was settled, and the only thing left to decide was who should be appointed as Loki's master. It would have to be one of the Avengers, since they had all been wronged by his deeds and were powerful enough to be trusted to keep Loki in check.

Of the Midgardian heroes, no one knew more than what Thor had told them. But Odin had his ravens, his trustworthy and dependable Huginn and Muninn. And so, he had sent them out to the realm of the humans, telling them to gather as much information as they possibly could about every one of them. And in the evenings, they returned to sit on his shoulder to tell him their stories, while he listened intently.

It soon became clear that there was only one viable choice. The assassins would probably have Loki killed, either sooner or later. The unassuming healer would not, but the same could not be said for his berserker self. The soldier might have been a good choice, but would be unlikely to accept Loki as his slave in the first place, thereby ruining his carefully laid plans.

That only left the Man of Iron, also knows as Tony Stark. The ravens told him all about the Midgardian – he was vain, self-absorbed, reckless, and many other things as well, but that was not all he was. There were other qualities too, enough to make him dare to hope that Loki would not have to suffer so terribly under him. Yes, it would have to be Tony Stark.

None of the council members had much to add or detract to that suggestion, since they knew little of the mortal heroes, having never met any of them. To them, it mattered little who was chosen – the outcome would be the same.

Reading out the sentence in court had to be the most difficult thing he had ever done, acting like this was all sanctioned by the King and the Allfather himself, even going as far as denouncing his son by addressing him as ‘Layfeyson’. But he kept his unperturbed and callous mask firmly in place, never letting it slip for even a second – if anyone suspected what he was trying to achieve, that he was working to get Loki off as easy as he could… But, to his relief, no one said anything.
He knew his son would surely hate him for this, but at least it would mean he would be alive to do that. Still, the Council had also decided Loki should be offered a choice – death, if he preferred it. The half of the Council that had voted for execution, along with Frey, had agreed on that, and they were one vote in favour over those eager to see Loki made to suffer as a lowly slave. And to his immense relief, Loki had chosen to live as opposed to dying.

And so, Loki was sent off to Midgard, two lies accompanying him. The first that an escape attempt would mean a long and torturous execution. It would not; the execution would be swift, but the Council members had thought that such a threat might serve to dissuade Loki from any thoughts of trying to escape and wreaking havoc again. The second one was the subtle threat delivered to the Man of Iron from the Einherjer guards – accept this man as your slave, by order of the Allfather, or suffer the consequences.

Of course, there were no consequences to suffer; Odin knew he held no authority on Midgard. But he could always act as if he did, because if Midgard would not accept Loki as recompense, the Einherjers would have to take him back to be executed instead. It was an ugly, underhanded tactic, but he could not afford having Tony Stark refuse. He was Loki’s last chance, after all.

And so began a long and arduous wait. He never asked Heimdall what was happening or how his son was faring, as to not arouse suspicion by being seen caring for the convicted son that he had so callously cast off and denounced. Someone might see through his ruse and realize why he had wanted to send Loki off to his current fate. Heimdall might be loyal, but the Council had ears and eyes everywhere, something he had quickly learned during all the millennia as King. Not even Thor he dared to ask much as he returned from Midgard, in case the wrong words would make it to the wrong people.

But no one understood his ravens or the words they spoke to him, uttered in a strange and arcane language, undecipherable to the untrained ears of the other Aesir.

So he sent Huginn and Muninn out, day after day, always with the same destination, and they always returned with the same answer – Loki had not left Tony Stark’s tower; hence, they could not see him and tell how he was faring. The windows of that strange building were all blackened from the outside and could not be seen through.

Then, one day, Muninn came back and told him he had seen Loki and Man of Iron walking in a park together. Loki did not appear to have been harmed, nor did he seem to even be afraid of his master. His relief had been immeasurable at that – his judgement and faith in the Midgardian had proved correct.
But before that, Thor had requested an audience on behalf of Man of Iron to plead Loki’s case in court and ask for leniency. The Council had been called together to confer – the decision was in their hands, just like Loki’s original sentencing had been.

And eventually, a decision was reached. If the mortal would come here to speak on Midgard’s behalf, and if Loki showed himself repentant, then leniency would be considered. Again, it was the execution-favouring half of the Council, plus Frey, who had voted in favour of that. The rest had voted against.

It was a game of chance to be sure – perhaps Loki had not changed a bit, maybe he would only doom himself by speaking in court and set his own sentence in stone, but it was at least a chance. Perhaps the only one he would get.

In a way, it felt almost farcical sitting there asking the questions during the hearing, as Tony Stark stood in the throne room to plead Loki’s case. Despite what it looked like, he had no say in this, this was all in the hands of the Council. But Asgard was always very adamant about showing a strong, united front, both internally and externally – and the King was the most important symbol of Asgard’s power, its central figurehead. The facade that the Allfather’s word was always the law must be upheld, especially to foreign visitors, so he played the part.

Of course, there was a truth geas in effect during the hearing. That way, they would know if Tony Stark was telling the truth with his claims that Midgard – the realm mostly wronged by Loki’s actions – considered the punishment too harsh. However, most importantly, the geas was there because of Loki.

And to his utter amazement, Loki had shown repentance on that day, expressed true regret for his actions. Unlike what everyone had believed would be possible, Loki had shown honest remorse. Odin could hardly believe his ears – the burning hate and the all-encompassing anger, the viciousness that had been consuming his son during the days of his trial were gone. And gone was also the snarling creature that had once been dragged into the courtroom, spitting curses and insults and vitriol and wishing doom upon all of Asgard. Instead, there was his son, somehow, impossibly back.

And the Council decided – Loki should be shown leniency, their votes falling as before, one in favour. The Man of Iron had spoken of amends, so they had settled on that, along with two further years spent as a slave. Two years, and Loki would be free again, even if his powers and magic would only return to him gradually.

Even now, he can hardly believe it.
There are suddenly soft footfalls interrupting his thoughts, and he turns around.

“Good evening,” he says to the approaching figure. “I have not seen you today; it would seem you have been away.”

Frigga walks up to him and takes him by the arm, joining him in watching the sky stretching out before them. “I had an errand to run,” she replies evenly. “The sky is beautiful tonight.”

He hums in agreement, not pushing the subject further. Of course, he knows exactly what she has done, that she has secretly visited their son in Midgard, despite how it’s not allowed. But he says nothing. It amuses him, how she still thinks that after all these millennia, she can keep secrets from him.

“I wish Loki were here to enjoy the sunset with us. But I’m glad he will be, some day,” she says, leaning into him. Then she continues, voice softer. “The Council judged wisely, thanks to your… guidance.” The hand on his arm squeezes a little tighter.

And that’s when he realizes – she knows. Not that he’s sure how she’s figured it all out, but she somehow did. He can’t help but smile – perhaps he should know better, too, after all these millennia, than to think that he can keep secrets from her.

He puts his arm around his wife’s waist, pulling her close. “Our son will return to us, one day.”

In fact, he thinks that their son has already been returned to them, even if he’s still in Midgard.

Chapter End Notes

Well, let’s just say I’ve been waiting for a loooong time to post this part of the epilogue. Even since before it was actually written. :)


Epilogue 2

Chapter Notes

More lovely fanart can be found at http://archiveofourown.org/works/1006082, courtesy of Ellandra. ^^

And with that, on to epilogue number two… ^^

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

He’s leaning over the railing of the balcony, his forearms resting on the top of the marble barrier, as he’s looking out over the bustling city below. It is a beautiful day, and for a while, he merely stands there watching the throng of people milling about – children playing, servants gossiping, warriors marching out to the training fields, women carrying baskets filled with goods fresh from the market.

The scenes are all so familiar, just like the weight at his side from the heavy weapon tugging at his belt. However, there is one familiar thing missing, one that should also have been at his side.

His brother, who is in Midgard, still a slave. His absence has left an aching emptiness at Thor’s side. His brother, whose presence was once as natural and taken for granted as that of his own shadow, hasn’t been there for quite some time now. It’s strange how that spot still feels empty. He should have gotten used to it by now, but he really hasn’t.

Of course, he knows that he has no reason for concern. Man of Iron would not – has not – harm his brother in any way; Loki is safe with him.

Down in the square below, he can make out a conjuror performing little tricks before a group of mesmerized children, making blue wisps of smoke rise from his hands and frogs jump out of his hat. He has no idea if there’s any real magic involved or if it’s all just sleight of hand, but the show reminds him of Loki nevertheless, from those days when his magic was never used for anything worse than mischief and tricks. Though, he’s certain that those days are now back again, and Loki will never again try to use his spells to harm or to hurt, to cause destruction and wreak havoc, once it is returned to him.

He’s glad that Loki will have his magic restored eventually; he knows how much it meant to his brother, and it would be hard for him to go through life without it, even as a free man.

The thought makes a little flutter of happiness stir inside of him. Because Loki will be free once
more; he will not have to bear the terrible burden of slavery on his shoulders for the rest of his days. No, only two years, the verdict had stated, and he would have his freedom again.

At that, there’s another thought stirring inside of him, one that has begun to rear its head whenever he’s been reflecting on how Loki will eventually be free of his bonds. Namely, all those others who will never have that chance to be free, who will have no choice but to spend their whole lives as slaves, never being allowed even a sliver of freedom.

Of course, he’s never thought a lot about the slaves before. They had never been around much when he grew up, nor are they now. Given how it’s not considered proper for slaves to serve directly on members of the royal family, there had instead been highly trained and skilled servants around to perform such duties. Hence, he had never really considered them much or paid attention to them, whenever he had seen them. They had just been… there. Just something taken for granted, but never truly reflected on. It was just how things were, and so, he had never stopped to think much about the slaves.

Not until his own brother was made one.

Granted, his first reaction upon finding out about Loki’s sentence had been relief, since he had been certain his brother had been executed. Even something like slavery had seemed like a step up, and a much preferable option to the alternative.

And clearly, Man of Iron had not treated Loki like a slave. Not that Thor had expected his Midgardian shield brother to be cruel or brutal – it wasn’t really in him to act like that towards someone who had no means of defending themselves – but he still hadn’t expected all the rest. Like how he had allowed Loki to eat with him at the table and address him by his name, and all those other things that would never have happened in Asgard. How he had treated him like an equal.

Even during his last visit to Midgard, he still couldn’t help but to marvel at that, how Man of Iron acted like Loki was a guest of his, even a friend, and not a slave. There was nothing in his behaviour – nor in Loki’s – that suggested any difference in their social positions. Perhaps some of it could be attributed to the two of them having an intimate relationship with each other, though he’s quite sure that’s not the entire reason; there’s more to it than that.

It had been a rather shocking thing to come to terms with, and it was not obvious to him at first, but at some point he did realize that Loki and Man of Iron were indeed engaging in such. Clearly, they were doing their best trying to act as if nothing of the sort was going on whenever he came to visit, but he’s not dense enough to miss something like that. He knows his brother and has seen the way he’s been acting around his previous lovers in Asgard. It was not hard to infer from the subtle glances and unspoken words passed between the two of them, the telling behaviour even more obvious this time than ever before.
Yes, it had shocked him at first, but it was still clear that Loki was participating willingly; that much could easily be concluded from the way he acted around Man of Iron. He had seen his brother infatuated before, even in love a few times, and this was just the same, only so much more pronounced. No, it was obvious that Man of Iron had not forced him into any of the sort; this was happening with Loki’s full consent.

Still, he doesn’t approve of it. He still considers it wrong for a man to let another man lie with him like that, to willingly make himself *argr*. But nevertheless, he accepts Loki’s choice in the matter. He never did speak up about all those other trysts that Loki was involved in back on Asgard, since it was not his business. And so, he will say nothing about this either, as long as Loki engages in it by his own free will, as long as he is content and happy. It is Loki’s choice to make, not his brother’s.

But even if his unease at the sentence was assuaged as he visited Midgard and saw how well his brother was faring despite his circumstances, it began to increase all the more for him back in Asgard. Because whenever he would see a slave toiling away or scurrying by, their hair and faces and bodies would suddenly shift in appearance so that it was no longer them, but Loki that he saw in those ragged clothes. It might as well have been his own brother in that unenviable situation, and it surely would have been, if it hadn’t been for Man of Iron’s compassion and kindness that stopped him from treating Loki in such a way.

But most slaves were not as lucky as Loki, to have a master like that. And it was strange, how those slaves had never been more than passing shadows to him, someone working in the background, but now, for the first time, he truly *saw* them. He took in the sight of their ragged clothes, their gaunt bodies, and, at times, even the bruises on their arms and faces, and it made something squirm uncomfortably inside of him. How come he had never *noticed* these things before?

Of course, he’s not King yet, and perhaps won’t be for centuries to come. And he knows that when it comes to something monumental like that, the Council will first need to approve. It is not a decision even the King is allowed to take without their support. But he thinks that maybe, some day, things can change. The *humans* have changed, so perhaps they can, too.

Many on the Council are old men. They have old ideas. They would not want to think in new terms, but prefer for things to stay unchanged, to remain the way they have always been. Maybe there will be no way to persuade them, but they will not remain on the Council forever. One day, they will be replaced by younger men who might be more amendable to change, who could be made to think differently. Men who are not as stuck in the old ways and customs.

Perhaps stagnating is dangerous. The humans have done anything but that. Midgard has changed so much since the millennium that has passed since he would visit it with any regularity. Many Aesir did, during those days, before it was decided that Midgard should be left to its own devices. They
had once, before Thor’s time, fought off the frost giants threatening their realm, and been worshipped as gods in return. But the Allfather had not been sure that the Aesir’s presence was entirely beneficial to the humans, and so, in the end, he had decided that they should sever their ties to Midgard and let the humans find their own way. Visits to their realm were no longer allowed.

And when Thor had made his unwilling return, during his banishment, he didn’t recognize the realm at all. For a while, he had been almost certain that there had been a mistake somewhere and he had ended up somewhere differently. Because this was not the Midgard of old that he remembered, with ways and behaviour and a society that he could relate to. No, what had now taken its place was something completely different.

The humans had developed so much; they had learnt so many things and invented so many marvellous new devices. Because they were able to let go of their old notions of how things should be done and were willing to think in new directions and see things from other perspectives. Perhaps that’s what they, the Aesir, need to do as well.

The humans might be weak and ephemeral, but they’re still an admirable species. With so many new people born every day to replace the old generations, novel ideas can easily grow and flourish. That is surely one of humanity’s greatest qualities – their inherent ability to change and reinvent themselves.

The Aesir don’t have the same ability with their long lives and slow generational turnover. But change can be slow too; it doesn’t have to be as quick as for the humans.

And there is another thing that has become clear to him – not everyone in Asgard was feeling entirely comfortable about Loki’s punishment upon his brother’s return. Perhaps they thought it fair and just when the sentence was meted out and was to be served in a realm far away, but once Loki came back again wearing the clothing of a slave, acting the part, it had been jarring to some people. Primarily, it was Hallgrim’s party that had been the cause of it. Many nobles had been in attendance, and even though no one had of course pretended to – because it was considered beneath someone of a noble standing to be shown paying attention to a mere slave – they had all noticed Loki, even been acutely aware of him kneeling at the table and acting like a slave was supposed to. And then Njal had tried to molest him – once Thor found out, he had made sure to fully accidentally break his arm the next time he faced off with him on the training field – which had unsettled several people. Some were indifferent, or even slightly amused, but not all. No, others had seemed pensive, even thoughtful, as the subject was brought up. As if it somehow put things into another perspective now when it was Loki being in that position and it all happened before their very eyes, not on some faraway realm most of them had never visited and never would.

As if it had suddenly become real. As if they hadn’t quite realized until now that this happened to
actual people. Because as much as they might dislike – even hate – Loki, they hadn’t grown up seeing him as a mere shadow in the background, like the other slaves. No, he was a real, actual person they had all known in some way or the other; they had talked to him and interacted with him before he was given his slavery sentence. They had not seen him as a slave before, and now, all of a sudden, he was one. And that made it all the more real, it seemed, as well as disturbing. As if it was something that had previously been happening on the sidelines and out of sight, but had now been brought out into the open and put right in front of them.

Yes, it had seemed like some people were actually reflecting on the state of things.

Perhaps enough so that some of them might be able to see things differently when it’s time for him to ascend the throne and shoulder the responsibilities and duties that comes with being Asgard’s King.

One day, not that long ago, he had run into Frey in the Halls. The man had let slip some comment about Loki that he can’t recall exactly now, but there had been something in there that, the more he thought about it, had made him believe that Frey did not approve of slavery. Frey would want it changed.

And Frey will be a full member of the Council some day.

And surely, there will be others like Frey, eventually. Enough so that he can one day get the support needed in the Council to have slavery outlawed in Asgard.

Yes, one day, he will make that happen, once he is King.

Because if Loki is to be granted his freedom, then so should all the other slaves.

Chapter End Notes

And for the final instalment of this story, we will of course return back to Midgard and see how our favourite happy couple is doing. ^^
Epilogue 3

Chapter Notes

Alright, so this is the final instalment of this story. And it feels *really* weird after having worked on this story for a whole year now… so there’s definitely quite a bit of mixed feelings for me posting this. On the one hand I’m glad to have it finished, and on the other, well, you know. ;)

Anyway, this story wouldn’t have been what it is if it hadn’t been for all your wonderful comments and suggestions and feedback, so thank you so much for reviewing and commenting so generously. It’s been such a pleasure and inspiration hearing from you guys! :D

And if anyone should feel inspired to write their own take on Loki-gets-sent-to-Midgard-as-a-slave-as-punishment, please do feel free to, because I’d love to read it! ^^ No need to ask me permission or worry about making it too similar to this story or anything, though I would appreciate it if you post a comment on here when your story gets posted so I won’t miss it. ;)

Well, then, here we go – final instalment of Poetic Justice!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

He tinkers with the micro-chip that’s supposed to go into the new and hopefully improved beta-electro-transformer, edging it a little towards the right. It’s dreadfully precarious precision work, making the small thing slide into place, and the tools he’s using for the job are just a tiny bit too big to be ideal. But he couldn’t find the ones he’d been intending to use – they seemed to have disappeared in the chaos of the assorted jumble littering his workshop – so he had to settle for the second best.

His mind is wandering, not fully focused on the little chip beneath his fingertips – the last few days have been pretty eventful, after all.

And he has to admit that he had really expected something… more when Loki’s magic was finally returned to him the other day. Okay, so it was just a small portion of it, but still. There should have been pretty sparkles or fireworks or something obvious like that. Instead, there was just a wide-eyed ‘oh’ from the god, as he made a face like a stranger had just grabbed his ass on the subway.

And that was really it – the first tendrils of Loki’s magic were back. Tony didn’t even have to ask, since it was pretty damn obvious what was going on, as Loki had sat there staring ahead of him with a weird look on his face. True to Odin’s words, a small amount of those fairy powers had now been returned.
The slim chains circling Loki’s wrists are still there, but the enchantments interwoven into them have changed, enough to let bits and pieces of his magic be channelled and utilized, for whatever purposes are allowed. Loki had given him an explanation of what he could and couldn’t do at this stage, but it sounded mostly like mumbo-jumbo to Tony; he was just happy that Loki was happy. The god had been rather tense in the week preceding The Big Day, as if he didn’t truly believe that he’d get any of his magic back, despite what that parchment from Asgard had stipulated.

But, luckily, his worries were unfounded, and finally Loki can Do Stuff again, even if it’s still not close to what he was once able to. But damn if he hadn’t looked like a little boy on Christmas being given a puppy anyway.

And now, Loki’s spent the last few days playing with his newly returned powers, doing silly little things that he had probably learnt centuries ago when he was a kid, but seemed fantastic to him nevertheless after having gone for so long without being able to do as much as a card trick.

So Tony has let him play, trying not to laugh at the look on the god’s face as he made a pencil hover a few inches above the table or made a bud on Tony’s Chrystanthe-whatever spring out in full bloom. They had sex later that day, and damn if it wasn’t some of the most mind-blowing sex he’s ever had. He doesn’t know if Loki was using his magic somehow – even if Tony has a feeling that that’s not what the Allfather primarily intended with giving it back – or if it was just the god’s mood that made him more, well, inspired. His groin still tinges just thinking about it.

But there’s another thing that Loki did that wasn’t just awesome sex or stuff that could have been passed off as simple street magicians’ tricks. For the umpteenth time, his gaze drifts down towards his chest, still oddly taken aback at not being greeted with the familiar blue sheen of the arc reactor that has for so long been a part of him.

But now, it’s gone. And all that’s left is a faint, pinkish circle of scar tissue, the bone and muscles beneath having knitted themselves together. He’s whole again. Complete. He wonders if that’s how Loki is feeling right now, once more having his powers at his fingertips. The hole in Tony’s chest might have been of a physical nature, but the hole left by the loss of Loki’s magic was certainly no less felt.

Even now, he can hardly believe he’s actually rid of it. Granted, as Loki had warned him, it hadn’t been a pleasant procedure in the slightest having the shrapnel removed from his body, and the mending of bone and tissue had been even less so, but it hadn’t been nearly as bad as having the thing put in.

And now, it’s finally gone for good.
He’s abruptly pulled out of his thoughts as there’s a sudden buzz from the doorbell, making him startle at the unexpected sound. The transformer he’s working on gives a little insolent snap as his jerking hands accidentally break it into two.

_Dammit._

He looks at the neatly broken pieces in consternation, giving a tired groan.

*Oh well, third time’s a charm, isn’t it?*

“Jarvis?” he calls out. “Who’s our esteemed visitor?”

“Facial scan yields no matches, sir,” his AI supplies.

“Okay, at least tell me if they look like an insurance salesman or a Jehovah’s Witness,” he says, throwing the useless metal onto the workbench. “In that case, you can tell them they owe me a new beta-electro-transformer.”

“No such similarities noted, sir. A more apt description would be a participant at a costume party with a Viking theme.”

He freezes. *That* can only mean one thing – another of those alien visitors. And it’s obviously not Thor; Jarvis has plenty of data on that guy.

“He’s not wearing an eye patch, is he?” *Better check that first, just in case.*

“He is not, sir. Though, he is sporting a rather strange-looking helmet and an unusually long beard.”

“Where’s Loki?” he asks quickly, wanting to make sure. There’s probably no reason for Asgard to send anyone hostile over to his tower, but it coincidences too well with Loki’s powers having been brought back to be just a, well, coincidence.
“He is currently in the shower, washing his hair. With almond and pine shampoo, for extra volume.”

“Bring up a view from the intercom, would you.”

The nearest monitor springs to life in a second, showing him a rather old man holding a carved wooden box in his hands. From his clothes, it’s obvious that he’s a long-way visitor. Very long way. But at least the guy’s alone; there are no sword-sporting, angry-looking Einherjers with him, so that should count in the positive.

Well, he’s not too keen on letting the stranger into his tower, but if someone can transverse the space separating Earth from Asgard, the wall to Tony’s tower isn’t going to stop him if he wants to enter. And it’s not like he’s going to let a guy dressed like that stand in full view outside of his tower until Loki has finished his shower.

He draws a heavy sigh. “Alright, Jarvis. Let him in.”

“Well, I hope your trip went well. No jet lag or anything? I hate that when travelling. Kinda ruins the whole day,” he babbles at the old man standing in his hallway.

“Oh, by the way, you want a drink or something? Loki is sort of inconvenienced for the moment, so I’m afraid you have to wait for a bit to see him,” he continues. “And speaking of which, I don’t think I quite caught why you came here to see him?”

One of the bushy grey eyebrows gives a little twitch. “I have not yet been given the chance to explain my purpose here. However, Man of Iron, I did not come to Midgard to see Loki, but you.”

Him?

“Me?” he says, blinking in surprise. He didn’t see that one coming.

He holds up his hands in a show of acquiescence. “Okay, fine, if you want my autograph because you’ve heard all about my badass defeat of Njal during my visit to your world, I can have it arranged. No problem at all. I’m used to scribbling my name on all kinds of weird stuff for adoring
fans."

The man ignores his comment. “I bring you a gift from the Allfather.” With that, he lifts the wooden box in his hands a little higher, obviously expecting Tony to take it. “This is presented to you as a show of gratitude for your integral part in the carrying out of Loki’s punishment.”

Okay, he didn’t see that one coming either.

“Uh, that’s neat,” he replies, only hesitating for a few seconds before accepting the box, curiously giving it a little shake. “So what is it? All seven seasons of Game of Thrones on DVD? Okay, I know all the books aren’t even out yet, but, you know – the Allfather. Or maybe a new--”

“Loki can explain to you in detail what this object is,” the man interrupts him, obviously not in any mood for chit-chat. Which figures, he probably wants to get right back to his potion brewing in the Slytherin dungeons that the Allfather interrupted in order to use him as an errand boy. “I recommend that you hear his words before you make use of it.”

And with that, his alien visitor bids him goodbye and a few moments later he’s gone, leaving only Tony and his gift in the hallway.

The box in his hands has been beautifully carved from what seems to be one single piece of wood, the usual runic ornaments adorning its sides and top. Curiosity getting the better of him, he makes to lift the lid off the box, but it doesn’t budge, held down by a number of elaborate clasps he didn’t even notice before. Fiddling a little, he undoes them, and flips the lid open and peers inside.

He’s not sure what he expected, really, but he’s pretty disappointed.

An apple.

So that’s what he gets for being an upstanding pillar of Asgard’s judicial system?

At that, he hears soft footfalls behind him, and he turns around to come face to face with Loki, hair wet and dripping.
“Did you have a visitor?” the god asks, his eyes darting around the hallway. “It sounded like you were just talking to someone.”

“As a matter of fact, I did. But he just magiced his way back to Asgard like ten seconds ago,” he answers, watching Loki raise his eyebrows in surprise. “Some old guy I haven’t seen before, and he didn’t bother introducing himself,” he continues in response to the unspoken question he can see forming on the god’s lips.

But Loki’s attention is turning towards the box still in his hands with an inquiring look, clearly more interested in that than in the visitor.

“Oh, and he also gave me this.” He holds the box out for inspection. “Apparently, it was a gift from the Allfather himself because I’ve been nice and played along with their little justice shtick. The guy said I should ask you what it was before using it. By which I suppose he means eating it, unless there’s some other fancy way of using apples on Asgard that I’m not aware of?”

His eyes widen in surprise as he takes in the sight inside the box, recognising it immediately. It is a gift that only a handful of humans, if even that, have been presented with before. And those have not just been any mortals, but those who have been considered worthy.

“Do you know what this is, Tony?” he asks, lifting his gaze to the man before him.

“An apple?” Tony says, cocking his head. “A magic apple?” he tries again after seeing the unimpressed look on Loki’s face at his first try.

“It is one of Idun’s apples. The Aesir eat them to stay young and not age so quickly.” He makes a short pause, feeling his heartbeat speeding up. “If a mortal eats them – it would give them the life-span of a god.”

Tony makes a little whistle. “Whoa there, hold on for a second. You mean, like immortality?”

“Not quite immortality; even gods do not live forever,” he clarifies. “But perhaps to a short-lived race like the humans, it amounts to almost the same thing.”
“I’ll be damned,” Tony says, voice a little more subdued than usual, as he stares at the apple, not making any move to pick it up. “So if I take a bite out of this, it would mean I’d live a few thousands years, give or take a few centuries?” he asks, sounding half-sceptical, half-something else.

“Not exactly. One apple will give you an extended life of perhaps half a century. Then, you would need to eat another apple, or you would start aging normally again.”

“Huh. I see.” Tony’s voice is oddly even, and Loki isn’t sure how to interpret it. “Well, I suppose I should be flattered that the Allfather thinks my contributions merit another fifty years or so, at least.”

Loki licks his lips. They have suddenly gone uncomfortably dry. “No. If the Allfather has once deemed a mortal worthy of Idun’s apples, he will continue to receive them for as long as he wishes to make use of them. If you eat this, Odin will see to it that more apples are sent. This is not a temporary gift.”

Tony seems to mull this over. “Uh, so would there be any way to... reverse the process?”

“Well, if you stop eating them, you will eventually revert back to your normal aging speed,” he explains. “Even the Aesir grow older considerably quicker without them.”

Tony says nothing, merely watches the bright red apple in the box.

And Loki watches Tony in turn, clenching his jaws.

This is a subject he has thought about a lot, despite not wanting to consider it. Tony is a mortal and as such, he will only live a few further decades. By accepting the apples, he would live as long as a god. But would he want to?

As it is, Loki is not allowed to return to Asgard yet. He still has amends to make, that he and Tony have already all planned out, with the reluctant approval of Fury and SHIELD. They even turned Tony into his first patient, as Loki removed the embedded metal pieces and made his chest knit itself together. Unsurprisingly, his healing powers were part of the magic that he first got back, even if much of it is still inaccessible.

But, once it is deemed that he has made sufficient reparations to Midgard, there will come a day when he can once more return to his old home. Of course, he will do that to see his mother and Thor
– who’s still visiting more or less regularly – and even Odin. There are still many things they need to say to each other. But after that, he’d been thinking he’d… come back. To Tony. His tower feels more like home now than Asgard. And once he has his full powers back, he can easily travel between the realms; he can visit his family whenever he wants, but he’d rather… stay here. With Tony.

Of course, such an arrangement can’t last for very long with Tony’s current life span. And he’s been dreading it, but not wanting to think about that not-so-distant reality that he will one day have to face. It’s so ironic, now that he’s been given all of this, how, as he’s known from the very start, it is bound to be taken away from him soon, only there to be cherished for a short time.

But now, there’s a golden red apple in Tony’s hand, and with that the guarantee of a life-long supply to follow.

But would Tony want to? It’s a huge step for a mortal, not something to be taken lightly. Even just one apple would mean an additional half a century. Which is more than half the life-span of an average human. More than what Tony probably has left in his current mortal state.

And as much as he wants to, it’s not a decision he should push Tony into. Humans might have fantasized about immortality for as long as their kind has existed, but it doesn’t mean that they would be willing to embrace it, should it be offered to them. Just as scary and difficult to come to terms with to become a mortal with a mortal’s life span would be for Loki, just as scary and difficult it would be for a mortal to be faced with thousands of years of existence, when you have lived your entire life on the assumption that the length of your existence will be about the same as that of your peers.

He looks out the window, feeling wistful.

Of course, he desperately wants for Tony to eat the apple and embrace the life-span that will come with it, but it’s not Loki’s choice to make. He shouldn’t push Tony into anything that the man might come to regret. He will have to think it over, of course, and all that such a choice might entail.

Because as great a gift as a long life might seem, it doesn’t mean it will be easy, not when you live in a world where few even live to see a century.

And if Tony turns it down, he’ll understand it. He won’t blame him. It’s Tony’s choice, not his. No one can make a choice like that on behalf of someone else, and he shouldn’t even try to.
His nails are digging into his palms, but he barely notices the resulting sting, his mind frozen as there is only that apple in front of him, blocking out all else. That one apple, that could change… everything.

_But of course, it's not a choice to be made lightly, as much as he is desperately hoping, and it's not even--_

His thoughts are interrupted by the sound of a brisk crunch. As he sharply looks up, gaze snapping into focus again, he’s greeted by the sight of Tony, chewing thoughtfully on a piece of apple.

As the man notices his gaze, he swallows, and then waves the apple in his hand in Loki’s direction.

“‘You know what I was thinking?’”

Loki only manages to shake his head, temporarily speechless.

Tony flashes him his trademark impish Tony grin. “This thing is really juicy. What do you say, should we take the rest and go make an apple pie together?”

Chapter End Notes

And then they lived happily ever after. :D

And for those of you wondering, yes, Tony will of course continue to make use of his life-long supply of magic apples. ^^

Well, that’s it, people, I hope you’ve enjoyed this story; I’ve certainly had a lot of fun writing it and reading all of your lovely comments. Thank you for sticking with me all the way, and, if you will – please review. :D

Works inspired by this one

Artwork for Limmet's story _Poetic Justice_ by LePeru (Nizah), _Here, let me help you_ by Ellandra, _Then, and Now_ by Ellandra

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!